Telegram from the British embassy in Moscow to the Foreign Office, 27 April 1946

FROM MOSCOW TO FOREIGN OFFICE

Mr. Roberts

No. 1565

27th April, 1946

Your telegram No. 1091[[1]](#footnote-1)

[1.] I regret that I have little solid information to add. It may, however, be useful to attempt to bring my earlier appreciations up to date in the light of recent developments.

2. It has become increasingly clear that, insofar as security considerations are concerned, the Soviet Government are now mainly concerned with their southern frontiers. During the past two months, and more particularly in connexion with the five-year plan and with the Churchill controversy, it has been publicly stated that although Russia has achieved her security aims and her old frontiers in the west and east, she has not yet done so in the south. This means that pressure on Persia and Turkey will be maintained.

3. As regards Persia, the Soviet Union has now achieved her immediate aims of an oil concession and a friendly government, although she has suffered some loss of prestige through the way she has handled her case in U.N.O. She will presumably want to consolidate her position at Tehran and in the northern provinces, now that Soviet troops are being withdrawn, before contemplating any new forward step in Persia.

4. In fact the time would now seem to have come for her to turn to Turkey (see paragraph 7 of my telegram No. 1092). Although the Russians have recently been putting out feelers to the Turks (e.g. in Ankara, Kabul and Cairo), and seem in recent weeks to have damped down public criticisms here and pressure for territorial changes in the Caucasus, they do not seem to have modified their main requirements in the Straits (please see paragraph 4 of my top secret letter of April 9th to Sir. O. Sargent)[[2]](#footnote-2). Article in today’s official Izvestiya, on which I am reporting separately, suggests that the Soviet Government may now intend to raise the Straits question, perhaps in Paris[[3]](#footnote-3). Before however, the Straits question can be revived by the Russians with any hope of obtaining international agreement to their demand for a base it seems essential to neutralise the Americans, who have been provoked by Soviet behaviour in Persia and elsewhere into giving unexpected support to Turkey. A propaganda campaign seems to be proceeding to this end, in which Senator Pepper[[4]](#footnote-4) features prominently and the latest recruit to which is Mr. Ingersoll (see my telegrams Nos 1529 and 1530)[[5]](#footnote-5). In particular the visit of the “Missouri” to Istanbul (Constantinople)[[6]](#footnote-6) is being discounted.

4. [sic]. Although the anniversary of the Afghan Treaty[[7]](#footnote-7) passed without any surprises, probably Soviet policy towards Afghanistan has been disclosed in the New Times article summarised in my telegram No. 259 Saving[[8]](#footnote-8). This suggests that the inhabitants of the northern provinces should be reunited with their neighbouring Soviet kinsmen and that Afghanistan should be compensated with the Afghans now within the frontiers of India. There have not however been any other signs that the Russians regard the moment as ripe for a forward policy in Afghanistan, and their timing will no doubt depend upon their assessment of the internal situation there.

5. The campaign against British interests in the Arab world has been maintained and even increased. The main line seems to be to secure the removal of British troops. This has been achieved in the Levant States, and the Russians are now turning their attention to Egypt and Iraq. We have been criticised for attempting to turn Palestine into an armed base. But the most bitter criticism of all has been directed against our treaty with Transjordan and, to a lesser extent, against the recent Turkish-Iraqi pact[[9]](#footnote-9). The Russians seem to fear the creation of a Middle Eastern bloc under British influence based upon the Hashimites, which might engulf the Levant States, upon which the Russians seem to be at present setting their main hopes for defending Soviet influence in the Middle East. Generally speaking, while Soviet pressure has been maintained there now seems to be some fear and irritation lest we may be on the way to overcoming our own difficulties e.g. through the settlement of the Syrian question, the Egyptian Treaty negotiations, and the Transjordan treaty[[10]](#footnote-10).

6. Recent despatches from Beirut and Cairo have suggested that Soviet activities in the Middle East are based upon Beirut. In this connexion you will be in the best position to judge whether there is any foundation for the story of secret treaties between the Soviet Union and the Levant States, to which I referred in my letter of April 9th to Mr. Baxter. In this connexion please see also my despatch No. 310 sent by bag on 27th April reporting a conversation with Dekanozov[[11]](#footnote-11) on the situation in the Lebanon and commenting on Soviet policy there. There also seems to be signs of Soviet intervention in labour disputes, and other anti-British activities in Egypt, but I cannot usefully comment on this from Moscow.

7. Soviet interest in India has developed since my despatch No. 30[[12]](#footnote-12) was written. Soviet propaganda, however, runs on well-worn themes. It is clear that the despatch of the Cabinet Mission and Mr. Atlee’s statement of British policy were not welcomed here, and that the Russians will not be sorry if the conversations in India fail[[13]](#footnote-13). Recently the Indian Communist party has been encouraged to make statements hostile to the Cabinet Mission.

8. Generally speaking, although Soviet policy has developed faster in the Middle East than might have been expected, the general conclusions in the last sentence of paragraph 15 and in paragraphs 23-25 of my despatch No. 30 I think still stand. While Soviet policy aims everywhere to a greater or lesser extent at weakening the western democracies, its present purposes in the Middle East are to achieve in turn additional Russian aims and to ensure Russian security. In the generous Soviet interpretation of that conception, suggested in my despatch No. 189, we must be prepared for constant Soviet infiltration against our interests in the Middle East as elsewhere. The Middle Eastern countries with their backward social conditions, underdeveloped economies and minority problems offer a particularly fertile field for such penetration, which Soviet propaganda is specially adapted to exploit. In paragraph 6 of my despatch No. 190[[14]](#footnote-14) I stressed the need for ensuring so far as we can that these countries should be politically and economically healthy; and I agree with Mr. Grafftey-Smith’s statement in paragraph 3 of Jedda despatch No. [grp.undec.][[15]](#footnote-15) that we have a high strategic interest in the well-being of the labourers and fellaheen whose grievances are a most effective weapon against us[[16]](#footnote-16). The less we achieve in this direction, the easier it will be for the Soviet Union to undermine our position in these countries.

9. On the other hand direct attack upon us in the Middle East remains unlikely. Insofar as we have to stand firm against constant encroachment and as one concession will only to pressure for another the nearer to the Soviet Union and the further from the Suez Canal we make our stand the better. Fortunately as long as we can rely upon American support, issues between us and the Russians are likely to remain at most, trials of strength without developing into open conflicts, therefore by taking our stand as far away from the Suez canal as possible we should not be incurring excessive risks[[17]](#footnote-17).

[TNA, FO 371/56832]

Keywords: post-war USSR, post-war Middle East, inter-allied relations, Iran, Turkey

1. A Foreign Office telegram of 20 March (See: TNA, FO 371/56831), it is a reply to Roberts’ telegram №1090 (See the telegram of 20 March). About this, see: Barker E. The British between the Superpowers 1945–50. London, 1983. p. 42–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Turkish leadership were not planning to abandon their position either. In the course of extended discussions with Vinogradov on 9 March, Saraçoğlu announced his readiness to restore friendly relations with the USSR, but only on condition that ‘the Soviet government withdraw questions of territory and bases’. In respect of recognising the proposals advanced by Molotov in June 1945 as a basis for new talks, ‘while he [Saraçoğlu] lives … there can be no talks’. (AVP RF. F. 06. Op. 8. p. 60. D. 1005. Ll. 1–6; cited in: Kochkin N.V. SSSR, Angliia, SShA i “turetskii krisis” 1945–1947 gg. // Novaia i noveishaia istoriia. 2002. №.3. S. 69). A little later, in May 1946, President İnönü declared the non-recognition of Soviet territorial claims. ‘Kars is the military key to the eastern defensive installations of Turkey; it controls the route out of Turkey into the Soviet Union … Kars was separated from Turkey by the Tsarist Government in the previous century.’ The information was reproduced by TASS and deposited in İnönü’s personal file. See: RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 266. D. 45(1). L. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Roberts appears to have in mind a critical article by N. Vasilyev ‘Turkish News Sensation’ which was devoted to the visit of the battleship *Missouri* to Istanbul. See: Izvestiia. 27.IV.1946. S. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pepper, Claude Denson (1900 – 1989) – U.S. statesman and politician, Senator (1936 – 1951), liberal Democrat from Florida, head of the Congressional delegation that visited the USSR in September 1945. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ingersoll, Royal Eason (1883 – 1976) – U.S. Admiral, Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet (1942 – 1944), Commander, Western Sea Frontier (1944 – 1946). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The American battleship *Missouri* arrived in Istanbul in April 1946 with the remains of Mehmet Munir Ertegun, the Turkish Ambassador in Washington who had died there in 1944. The main purpose of the visit was to demonstrate support for Turkey as she opposed Soviet pressure over the issue of the Straits and territorial claims. Later, in November 1946, in a speech at the open winter session of the Majlis, President İnönü particularly emphasised that ‘our ties and mutual-relations with the USA are broadening on the basis of mutual efforts, which, with each day, strengthen our friendship more and more with this great and glorious democratic country of the New World.’ See: RGASPI. F. 495. Op. 266. D. 45(1). L. 207. In the assessment of the Soviet Ambassador to the USA N.V. Novikov, the dispatch of the battleship was ‘a military-political demonstration against the Soviet Union’ (quoted in: Kochkin N.V. Op. cit. S. 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Apparently Roberts had in mind the fact that the Soviet-Afghan Treaty of Neutrality and Mutual Non-Aggression (1931), which was extended earlier in 1936 (until 29 March 1946), had been prolonged again for another term. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. During spring and summer 1946, the *New York Times* turned its attention several times to the activities of the USSR in Afghanistan, reporting, for example, on the significant staffing of the Soviet Embassy in Afghanistan (around 600 people) and the involvement of Soviet officers in the training of the Afghan armed forces. See, for example: New-York Times. June 14, 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Refers to the Turkish-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Neighbourly Relations of 29 March 1946, which, according to some scholars, contained a secret addendum addressing the event of combined action against the Kurdish national movement. See: Jwaideh W. Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development. Syracuse, 2006. p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The London Treaty (22 March 1946) recognised the independence of Transjordan; Abdullah of the Hashemite dynasty became its King. Great Britain kept its military bases and continued to subsidise the Arab Legion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dekanozov, Vladimir Georgievich (1898 – 1953) – Soviet statesman and party figure, diplomat, Deputy People’s Commissar (Deputy Minister) for Foreign Affairs of the USSR (1939 – 1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dated 25January 1946, it illuminated Soviet policy in both the Near- and Middle-East. For more detail see: BDFA. Pt. IV. Ser. B. Vol. 2. Frederick, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The reference here is to the special Cabinet mission (by the Secretary of State for India and Burma F. Pethick-Lawrence, President of the Board of Trade S Cripps and First Lord of the Admiralty A. Alexander) that went to India on 23 March 1946 to conduct talks with representatives of the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League. The instructions for the mission defined its aim as ‘to secure agreement amongst the Indian leaders as to the method of arriving at the new constitutional structure of India and the setting up of an interim Executive’ (C.P. (46) 96, Memo by Pethick-Lawrence, 07/03/1946 // TNA, CAB 129/5). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is dated 18 March. Roberts considered that flourishing organisations, which the British needed to create in various parts of the Commonwealth, Empire, Near-East and Western Europe ‘would act as the champions of a dynamic and progressive faith and way of life with an appeal to the world at least as great as the Communist system of the Kremlin’. Cited in: DBPO. Ser. 1. Vol. VI. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Grafftey-Smith, Laurence Barton (1892 – 1989) – British diplomat and civil servant. Member of Levant Consular Service (1914 – 1951), Minister to Saudi Arabia (1945- 1947), High Commissioner to Pakistan (1947 – 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See also Eden’s note of 17 July 1945. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Brimelow took a still harder line in respect of the USSR in his memorandum of 9 September (TNA, FO 371/56835). M. Kitchen characterises the fundamental ideas of the memorandum in the following way: ‘He did not concur with Frank Roberts that it might still be possible to reach limited agreements with the Soviets. The Soviets were building up their armed forces and strengthening their hold over bordering states. Any attempt by the Western powers to resist this would confirm the Soviet belief in the inevitability of conflict between the capitalist and the communist worlds and would thus strengthen their determination to build up their armed forces and avoid any concessions. On the other hand, if the West made concessions this would convince them that their confrontational policy was paying off.’ (Kitchen M. Op. cit. p. 124). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)