Memorandum from E. Bevin, Foreign Secretary, to C. Attlee, Prime Minister, concerning British policy in the Middle East, 9 January 1947

TOP SECRET

PRIME MINISTER

The following are my comments on the memorandum about the Middle East enclosed in your Minute N 15/47. You will note that I have not dealt with the strategic side of the question, though I am not convinced that you have really met the Chiefs of Staff’s case. But even without the strategic arguments, the political arguments against your proposals seem to be overwhelming.

I. What you propose is a reversal of the whole policy I have been pursuing in the Middle East, with the assent of the Cabinet, since the Government took office. As you know, I called home our representatives in the Middle East and discussed with them a programme for the economic development of the area. This was to include in particular the development of irrigation and food production. My whole aim has been to develop the Middle East as a producing area to help our own economy and take the place of India, which henceforth will absorb her own produce. I therefore aimed, by means of the British Middle East Office, to build up the economic development on the basis of independent states.

2. This was all on the assumption that we should be playing the main part in coordinating the defence of the area and should take the land in any U.N.O. regional defence scheme for the Middle East that might be set up. My view is that this could be done with minimum man-power from this country; and when we have settled Egypt and Iraq and if we settle Palestine, there really will be very little British manpower involved. We should get local manpower properly trained, especially in the air, who grouped round us would be able to defend the Middle East.

3. Is this all now to be thrown over?

II. I will now try to answer the arguments in your paper.

1. Your main argument is that our position in the Middle East, even though it is defensive, will seem to the U.S.S.R. the preparation for an offensive.

1. This is not necessarily the case. We have been in the Middle East for a long time, long before we could be supposed to be preparing for an offensive against Russia. Furthermore, as the Russians can see, we are withdrawing our troops from Egypt and reducing our strength throughout the area.
2. Moreover, even if they do make this deduction, there is no reason for us to confirm by our withdrawal that we shall never be able to mount a counter-offensive against them if they do attack us.
3. The argument that we must drop any policy that might be seen to the Russians a preparation for an offensive is a dangerous one. Wherever Great Britain turned to make a friend, she would be subject to attack on the ground that it was aimed against Russia.

2. You say that the countries in the area are weak and a poor investment.

1. This may be so, but if we evacuate the area, we should make a gift to Russia of the manpower of the region and of the oil. This would make a difference of 100 millions in the balance sheet and possibly a great difference in our future dollar earnings.
2. Moreover, though the countries are poor now, it has been our policy, as I have said, to assist them in their economic and social development. This was once a rich region and could be made so again with good government and modern methods. If we help it to build it-self up, it can become economically prosperous and a valuable market for us.
3. Your criticisms of the internal regimes of these countries may be valid, but you will remember the same things were said about Abyssinia in 1935 and 1936 by those who opposed sanctions[[1]](#footnote-1).
4. You point out that the Middle Eastern countries are a fertile ground for communism. This is indeed the case, and this makes it all the more certain that we if we leave the Middle East, the Russians will move in.

3. Your suggestion is that we should to reach an agreement with Stalin. I understand that you have in mind an agreement by which the Middle East would become a neutral area in which we would neither of us exert a predominant influence. In paragraph 12 of your paper you put various questions, on the answers to which depend the chances of success in such a negotiation. I will answer these in order:

1. I think we must accept the fact that the present rulers of Russia are committed to the belief that there is a natural conflict between the capitalist and communist world. They also believe that they have a mission to work for a communist world. But they would naturally prefer to achieve this by infiltration without an armed conflict between the Soviet Union and the capitalist states if this were possible. If we disinterest ourselves in the Middle East, they will take it over by infiltration, which they would naturally prefer to having to conquer it by war. I believe that it would be as idle to place reliance on gaining our own security by large-scale one-sided concessions to Russia as it was with Hitler. For there is no suggestion of a corresponding retreat by Russia from the countries she has seized since the war, such as the Balkans and Poland.
2. Even if by reducing ourselves to impotence, we convinced the Russians of our pacific intentions, they would remain suspicious of American intentions to use these islands in a war against Russia.
3. There are better prospects of change with Russian neutrality if it becomes clear to the Russians that her plans will not come to fruition of themselves. Improvements in her internal situation will make her more and not less aggressive, as is shown by the published intentions of her Five Year plans to strengthen her military and industrial potential. Russian propaganda at present is doing everything possible to keep alive the bogey of capitalist war. A surrender of the type you suggest would only encourage the Russian leaders to believe that they could get their ends without war and would lead them into the same error that Hitler made of thinking that he could get away with anything by bluff and bullying.
4. If the Russian leaders hold the belief that war with the United States of America is inevitable, as I think they do, it will not be possible for us to disillusion them. Only the Americans can do that, if it can be done at all.

Thus, I do not think that there are successful prospects for a negotiation of a kind you suggest. But there are many further objections to a withdrawal form the Middle East.

1. It would be Munich[[2]](#footnote-2) over again, only on a world scale, with Greece, Turkey and Persia as the first victims in place of Czechoslovakia. If I am right about Russian ideology, Russia would certainly fill the gap we leave empty, whatever her promises. Whatever we may think of the internal regimes of the Middle Eastern countries, they are all passionately attached to their national independence. If we speak to Stalin as you propose, he is as likely to respect their independence as Hitler was to respect Czechoslovakia’s and we should get as much of Stalin’s goodwill as we got of Hitler’s after Munich.
2. The effect on our relations with the United States of America would be disastrous. We are to a large extent dependent on them economically, and without their help we cannot maintain the standard of life of our people. We are hardly less dependent on them militarily. With great labour, we have at last succeeded in persuading them that their strategic interests are involved with the maintenance of our position in the Middle East. If we now withdraw at this moment, I should expect them to write us off entirely.
3. The United Nations Organization would be imperiled if Russia created a further batch of satellite states in the Middle East. The organization would be discredited through its inability to preserve the independence of the countries concerned, and would be difficult to work owing to the addition in the Russian voting power.
4. After our abandonment of India and Burma[[3]](#footnote-3), a retreat from the Middle East would appear to the world as the abdication of our position as a world power and encourage India to gravitate towards Russia.
5. It would be useless to undertake a treaty to protect Egypt against aggression, and if she were unprotected she would soon fall under Communist control, in which case our position in the Sudan would become untenable. The effect would be felt throughout Africa, and our project for a base in East Africa and any prospect of holding North Africa would be threatened.
6. The effect on the Dominions would be incalculable. South Africa would thoroughly dislike the prospect of the Russians in Africa, and the Pacific Dominions would hardly welcome them on the Indian Ocean.

4. In your paragraph 13 you raise certain further points -

1. We can probably get an agreement about oil rights in Persia, but there is no need to abandon our whole Middle Eastern position to this end.
2. We and the Americans have proposed amendments to the Dardanelles regime in the Russians’ favour but the letter make it quite plain that this is not what they want. They want exclusive control[[4]](#footnote-4).
3. We are trying to deal with Germany as you suggest on the basis of our mutual interest in preventing a revival of German aggression. The object of the Moscow meeting will be to take it further[[5]](#footnote-5).
4. We have been trying hard to work out economic co-operation and unity in Europe, against stiff Russian resistance. There have been slight signs of easing in this respect recently.
5. Surely only the Americans can undertake the task of trying to dispel Russian illusions about themselves.

5. Assuming that our present policy in the Middle East is maintained, you have asked whether we can in fact afford to carry it out.

1. We are, of course, doing everything in our power to cur our commitments there. We are withdrawing from Egypt and shall soon be withdrawing from Greece[[6]](#footnote-6), and then we shall only have troops in Palestine.
2. In proportion as the Americans realise the importance to them of this area, we can expect them to bear a great part of the burden.

6. To sum up, I feel that the effect of withdrawal from the Middle East would be disastrous to our position there, in the neighbouring countries in Europe and the World. It would lead the United States to write us off. It would weaken the United Nations Organisation. Even if we do not believe that the Russians have plans for world domination, I am certain that they will not be bale to resist advancing into any vacuum we may leave.

Your proposal would involve leading from weakness. Our economic and military position is now as bad as it ever will be. When we have consolidated our economy, when the economic revival of Europe which you mention has made progress, when it has become finally clear to the Russians that they cannot drive a wedge between the Americans and ourselves, we shall be in a position to negotiate with Stalin from strength. There is no hurry. Everything suggests that the Russians are now drawing in their horns and have no immediate aggressive intentions. Let us wait until our strength is restored, and let us meanwhile, with American help as necessary hold on to essential positions and concentrate on building up U.N.O.

(Sd.) ERNEST BEVIN

[TNA, FO 800/476]

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1. Economic sanctions were introduced following a decision by the League of Nations on 18 November 1935, which declared Italy an aggressor in the war against Ethiopia. A number of countries, including the USA, Germany, Austria and Hungary, refused to support sanctions. See *A History of the Second World War 1939–1945* (Moscow: 1974), vol. 2, pp. 16–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Munich Pact, an agreement signed after a conference held by leaders of four states (the UK, France, Italy and Germany) on 30 September 1938 in Munich, which opened the door for the dismemberment and occupation of Czechoslovakia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. India and Burma became independent in 1947. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On 7 August 1946, the Soviet Government presented Turkey with an official note ‘On the Montreux Convention on the Black Sea Straits’ arguing that the control of the Straits should be exercised only by the states whose sea exit was via the Straits (Turkey, the USSR, Romania and Bulgaria). The proposal was rejected by Turkey. The ensuing proposal for a new conference on the Straits was not supported by the Soviet side. As a result, the question of the Straits was frozen. See Sotnichenko, A. A. Prologue to the ‘Cold War’. Turkish-Soviet Antagonism 1945–1950 under the Conditions for the Formation of the Yalta System of International Relations. Proceedings of the Faculty of History of St Petersburg University, 2010, No. 2, p. 226–227. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The fourth session of the Council of Foreign Ministers was held in Moscow from 10 to 24 April 1947. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On 24 February 1947, the British Government informed the US Government that it was no longer in a position to provide assistance to Turkey and Greece. This triggered the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine. Ulanyan, A. A., *A Political History of Modern Greece from the Eighteenth Century to the Ninth Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Moscow, 1998), p. 200; 56 – Special Message to the Congress on Greece and Turkey: The Truman Doctrine. March 12, 1947 // The American Presidency Project. URL: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=12846>.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)