

World War II British Strategic Planners Contemplate the Future Middle East (1943)

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WAR CABINET

ANNEX

M.S.C. (42) 3

POST-WAR STRATEGIC REQUIREMENTS

MIDDLE EAST

1. Our post-war strategic requirements in the Middle East cannot be formulated conclusively until a study confirming our strategic and economic requirements has been made and until some progress at least has been realized to corresponding strategic studies of areas adjacent to the Middle East, particularly in the Mediterranean Basin.

It is also necessary to proceed on the basis of certain assumptions:-

- (a) In the Far East, as a result of the defeat of Japan, the British Commonwealth will remain substantially unaltered from what it was before the war, but its ties with the

United

States, Russia, China and the Dutch East Indies will be closer.

- (b) We remain in Burma, and under the Treaty with India we assume for some years responsibilities in the defence of India.

- (c) The economic requirements of the British Commonwealth from the Middle East, especially as regards oil, are not diminished compared with those in 1939.

- (d) To fulfil our pledges to restore France to her pre-war position with her overseas territories intact.

- (e) Our long-term policy is to restore our former friendly relations with Italy.

It will be seen that certain of the above assumptions tend to augment, while others tend to decrease, our strategic requirements in the Middle East.

The General Nature of Military, Naval and and Air Facilities which will be required in the Middle East as a Whole.

2. The Middle East is a focal point in our Imperial communications on the security of which our world strategy must be built. Our particular interests in the Middle East may be defined in general terms as communications and oil, though it is probable that other important economic interests might be brought to light as a result of the further studies referred to in paragraph 1. For the purposes of the present appreciation, our interests will, however, be considered as being confined essentially to communications and oil.

Communications

3. The following require consideration:-

(a) Mediterranean Route and the Suez Canal

The Mediterranean route to Egypt, India and the Far East is a strategic link of the utmost importance in the overseas communications of the British Commonwealth, and its security is a paramount necessity.

Under modern conditions the protection of the Mediterranean route is by naval action and by air cover operating from land bases. The problem of providing this protection throughout the

Mediterranean is outside the scope of the present study, except in the Eastern Mediterranean which must be considered as forming part of the Middle East. In this area it will be necessary to have air bases in Cyrenaica. Moreover, in order to reduce the necessary scale of defence for Egypt the Dodecanese Islands must no longer be available as air and naval bases for Italy. It is assumed that the return of the Greek Islands to Greece will be one of the essential conditions following on the defeat of Germany and Italy. But even if these two requirements are fulfilled it will still be imperative to retain the right to use Alexandria as a naval base (with facilities at Port Said and Suez), and to establish airfields in the Eastern Desert, together with the ground troops necessary for their local protection.

(b) The Nile Valley and Red Sea Routes

The control of these routes is required to safeguard communications between Egypt, on the one hand, and East and South Africa on the other. The continued occupation of the Sudan, Aden and British Somaliland will be necessary for this control. If, as assumed in paragraph 1, Italy is a friendly Power, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland could be left to her, though safeguards in the form of demilitarization of certain areas, or the reservation to us of certain rights, will probably be necessary.

(c) The Persian Gulf

The protection of this route is required for the passage of tankers to India and the Red Sea. Such protection would remain of importance, even if, as highly desirable, a pipeline were laid to connect Abadan with Haifa or Suez.

It will be essential to retain existing treaty rights with the various Sheikdoms, even they amalgamate into larger entities. The right to lease air bases along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf and to garrison troops there would be highly desirable.

(d) Communications between Egypt, the Levant and Iraq, Persia

In the future these routes may be extended through Iraq and Persia to Russia, and across Persia to Baluchistan.

The above communications are required as alternatives to long sea routes through the Indian Ocean.

The communications to be protected are:-

The sea communications between Egypt and Palestine (and Syria, assuming a friendly France)

The Qantara-Haifa railway

The pipeline Haifa-Kirkuk

The Haifa-Baghdad road, which could be further developed.

Possibly the the development of and alternative route from Aqaba through Transjordan to connect with the Haifa-Baghdad road.

The strategic requirements in communication with the above are:-

The use of Haifa as a fleet base

The provision of air bases in Palestine and Transjordan, and almost certainly in the Suez Canal area for the direct protection against air attack.

The retention of existing air bases in Iraq allowed under the Treaty.

Ground forces will be required to protect the above, particularly in areas where experience has shown internal unrest to be likely to occur and where it would be unwise to rely upon local levies, e.g. Palestine.

(e) Communications between Persian Gulf and Russia

These are necessary to maintain contact with our Ally as an alternative to the Mediterranean and Black Sea route should the latter be closed.

The main communication is the Transpersian Railway from ports at the head of the Persian Gulf to the Caspian. Supplemented by the road system now being developed, and with railway links to the TransCaucasian system and possibly to the TransCaspian line.

In view of the treaty with Persia, existing garrisons must be withdrawn six months after the cessation of all hostilities between Great Britain or Russia and other Powers, or on the conclusion of peace with these last, whichever is the earlier.

It would be desirable for any subsequent agreement with Persia to provide for the right to re-establish such garrisons in the event of the alliance between ourselves and Russia being invoked under Article IV of the Anglo-Soviet Treaty 26th May, 1942.

(f) Rights to the Use of Communications

The rights under the treaties with Egypt and Iraq will be required. It will also be necessary to have the right to use communications in Palestine and TransJordan (and paragraph 3 (d)), in the event of a change in status of these territories.

Oil

4. As indicated in the letter from the Petroleum Department at Appendix A to Annex I, a comprehensive economic plan for the exploitation of these oil areas is required, and until this is got out, our strategic requirements can only be given in very general terms.

There are however some future developments which it is possible to forecast with confidence. The importance of the oil supplies in the Middle East is likely to increase still further in the fairly near future for the following reasons:-

(a) The potential capacity of the Middle East oilfields is far above the present output.

(b) The growth of Russia's internal requirements, which in the decade before the war was greater than the growth in production, so that by 1938 oil exports were negligible.

(c) A similar condition to the above may well occur in the United States which may, within a relatively short period, become an oil importing country. This would limit the amount of oil available for export from South America to the Eastern Hemisphere.

The above are long-term trends and are unconnected to the relatively short-term stimulus to production in the Middle East which will be caused through the destruction of oilfields in the Dutch East Indies, Burma and Southern Russia.

It is therefore clear that we shall continue to require oil concessions in Iraq, South Persia, the Persian Gulf and the Egyptian oil area.

(a) Iraq

To secure the protection of our oil interests in Iraq we shall require the continuance of our full rights under the existing Treaty, and the right to protect the pipeline to Haifa.

(b) South Persia

The protection of the South Persian oilfields will require the right in case of necessity to establish air bases and garrison troops in approximately the area we at present occupy. As stated in paragraph 3(e), it would be desirable for such a right to be exercisable in the event of a situation arising entailing mutual help under Article IV of the Anglo-Soviet Treaty. At the same time, the right to occupy the oilfields might be desirable to control the economic life of Persia and thus prevent her from falling too much under Russian

influence. To provide for this latter right would be to throw doubt on the stability of our alliance with Russia, and it would only become urgent if Russia encroached gravely on Persian territory.

(c) Arabia and Egypt

As regards the oilfields on the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf and on the Gulf of Suez, the strategic requirements for their position would be identical with those given in paragraph 5 for the defence of Egypt, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

5. Annex I to J.P. [Chiefs of Staff Joint Planning Committee -editor's note] (42) 456 (O) also refers to certain general problems and we therefore give our views on their strategic aspects below.

(a) The Defence of the Arab States

As the protection of our own interests will involve us in defending a great part of the Arab world in the Middle East, we should not hesitate to extend to them guarantees against aggression by foreign powers, although we shall not do so against aggression by their Arab neighbours. If we assume commitments in this latter respect, this would entail the provision of large numbers of scattered air forces and military garrisons for the purposes of frontier defence and internal security quite unconnected with our strategic needs.

The amalgamation or absorption of States in the Arabian Peninsula would not in itself imperil our strategic interests unless the underlying motive were a consolidation of Arab policy against foreign influence in Arab territories. Should there be a danger of such a movement arising, it would be necessary to review our defensive requirements. The disintegration of an Arab State might result in a condition of lawlessness which would call for intervention to defend our interests. But unless it is possible to foresee how, when or where such political movements may come about, we cannot say at present what defensive measures would be necessary.

(b) The Cession to Turkey of Aleppo and Parts of Northern Syria

The lateral railway line Aleppo-Mosul would be of first class importance to any power harbouring designs against Syria and Iraq, particularly when the connection to Dinbahr is completed. The danger therefore in ceding this area to Turkey lies in the possibility that, either for reasons of her own or through failing under the influence of a power hostile to us, she might pursue an imperial policy against the Arab states and thereby threaten our vital interests.

On the other hand, our strategic position in Palestine, TransJordan and Iraq would be greatly strengthened if we succeeded in getting on our side and maintaining a friendly Turkey, in which case the danger referred to should not arise. But such a cession would be strongly opposed by France. The ideal to be aimed at would be to conciliate Turkey without offending France.

(c) Our Interests in Syria and Lebanon

From the above it is clear that it is not possible to say whether the presence of the French in the Levant States will help us strategically. The answer in fact depends on the future strength of France and her foreign policy. So far as the Levant and our relations with the Arab states are concerned, it will be easier for us to pursue a consistent policy toward the latter if Syria and the Lebanon become really independent and French political influence were entirely removed.

But if France regains her former position after the war and aligns her foreign policy with our own, the situation will be a different one, and it might be then considered in the light of all the circumstances whether a military understanding for mutual support of our respective strategic needs might not be desirable.

If, on the other hand, France remains weak, a mutual understanding might embroil us in Syria with no corresponding advantage elsewhere. In this latter hypothesis of a weak France it would be better for us to undertake no commitments with regard to Syria and Lebanon, but to be ready to act with strong forces and to occupy Syria and such portions of the French empire at once, in the event of Metropolitan France again collapsing.

6. In the light of the conclusions of the preceding paragraphs, we now give the answers to the questions in the three annexes to the J.P. [Chiefs of Staff Joint Planning Committee – editor's note] paper. Where strategic needs are stated they should be understood to be the minimum, though no attempt has been made to

express them in terms of military, naval or air strengths.

ANNEX I

Question (a)

What are the military, naval and air facilities which His Majesty's Government will require in the Middle Eastern area as a whole?

(It is suggested that the answer to this question be drawn up on the assumption that it is likely to be politically improbable to induce the Iraqi Government to agree to grant us more extensive facilities than those set forth in the existing Treaty of Alliance).

Answer

The main strategic requirements are the protection of the routes through the Mediterranean and the Red Sea; along the Nile Valley and the Persian Gulf; the communications between Egypt, the Levant and Iraq, Persia, with possible extensions to Transcaucasia and Baluchistan; communications to Russia from the Persian Gulf; the oil supplies in Iraq, Southern Persia, the Persian Gulf, Egypt, with their pipelines and refineries. The strategic facilities are those stated in paragraphs 3 and 4.

Question (b)

If TransJordan is to be granted independence, what facilities shall we require in order that our strategic requirements may be guarded in that country?

Answer

Facilities will be required to protect the Haifa-Baghdad road, the Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline, and possibly communications from Aqaba to link with the Haifa Baghdad road.

This will entail air bases and military forces for protection against external incursions and internal risings.

Questions (c)

Similarly, what would our strategic requirements be in Palestine in the event of a change in the present regime in that country?

Answer

Palestine will be required to protect the relevant sections of the Haifa-Baghdad road and the Haifa-Kirkuk pipeline and the oil installations at Haifa; to develop a fleet base at Haifa; to control the Qantara-Haifa railway.

The above will entail air bases and the necessary troops for protecting them, the base at Haifa, and for maintenance of internal security. This last is likely to remain a heavy commitment. Questions (d)

What is the importance of maintaining the British military position in the Persian Gulf States and Southern Arabia in the face of any tendency among Arab nations to develop closer relations between themselves?

Answer

The importance of maintaining the British position is explained in paragraph 3 (c) and (b). The protection of our interests in the areas may require the presence of British troops, should closer relationship between the Arab states be accompanied by an anti-British attitude, as described in paragraph 5 (a). Forces here should also be suitably located for rapid intervention in Southern Persia, should this become necessary.

Question (e)

To what extent may it be desirable for His Majesty's Government to undertake military commitments, in defence of the Arab States, in order to exclude other powers?

Answer

See paragraph 5 (a) above.

Question (f)

What would be the military implications of acceding to Turkish demands for Aleppo and other territorial demands in Northern Syria?

Answer

See paragraph 5 (b) above.

Question (g)

Would Anglo-French cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean be likely to possess any military advantages?

Answer

See paragraph 5 (c) above.

ANNEX II

Question 1

Would the incorporation of Persian Azerbaijan in the Soviet Union represent a serious strategic menace to British interests in the Middle East?

Answer

The incorporation of Persian Azerbaijan in the Soviet Union would not in itself represent a serious menace to British interests in the Middle East, unless such incorporation were intended to promote some further penetration or exertion of pressure. These might take the form of:-

- (a) Penetration towards the Persian Gulf with the primary object of securing ports or oilfields.
- (b) Pressure against Persia to interfere with our oil supplies in Southern Persia, (c) Similar pressure against Iraq to interfere with our oil supplies at Kirkuk.

Incorporation of Persian Azerbaijan would probably be considered a menace to Turkey, and it would double the length of her frontier with Russia. Turkey might then seek to secure her position by establishing closer relations with our late enemies, at the possible price of affording them facilities which would threaten some strategic interest, e.g. our oil in Iraq.

Question 2

If the Soviet Union were to encroach in Northern Persia to an extent which would seriously menace British interest, is there any counter-measure (such as occupation of part of Persia) which His Majesty's Government ought in their own strategic interests be ready to take?

Answer

A Soviet encroachment as far south as a line through Kermanshah and Hamadan might be considered a serious menace to British interests:-

- (a) It would bring Russian forces to the Iraq frontier with good lines of advance towards Baghdad, the oilfields and pipelines of Kirkuk, and south of Khaniqin.
- (b) It would bring Russian forces to within a little over 200 miles of the South Persia oilfields.
- (c) It would almost surely foreshadow a subsequent attempt to gain possession of the TransPersian railway and the ports at the head of the Persian Gulf and the South Persia oilfields.

To meet such an encroachment, it would be necessary to invoke our rights under Article 4 of the Treaty with Iraq [1930 Treaty of Iraqi Independence which reserved British base and wartime transit rights – editor's note], and to dispatch forces to Southern Persia, Basra, and the area Kirkuk-Khaniqin-Baghdad.

Question 3

What precautionary measures, if any, might be taken in advance for the defence of British interests in the Persian oilfields in the event of:-

- (a) anti-British measures by the Persian Government: or

(b) Breakdown of the Central Government in Persia?

Answer

(a) Precautionary measures might include; the holding ready of airborne troops in Baluchistan or the threat to bomb military objectives in Persia, assuming we have the right to maintain troops in India. It should also be possible to impose a naval blockade on Persia. Other measures might include the infiltration of 'tourists', etc., on the German model, and the provision of arms and militarily-trained officials to defend the oilfields.

(b) Precautionary measures would include all those under (a) and, if necessary, the dispatch of troops and air forces to protect our interests in the oilfields from attack by lawless elements. There would be many precedents for such measures.

ANNEX III

Question (a)

Could a solution to the military problem of the defence of the Suez Canal be found by developing British military and air bases in Cyrenaica and the transferring to those bases of forces previously stationed in Egypt?

Answer

(i) Forces in Cyrenaica could not defend the Suez Canal against attack from the North or East.

(ii) Forces confined in Cyrenaica would have to be strong enough and to have available formidable defences in order to hold out against a sudden attack pending the arrival of reinforcements.

(iii) The forces in Cyrenaica, if compelled to withdraw, would be faced with internment when they reached the Egyptian frontier, unless the right of transit had been safeguarded.

(iv) Assuming an attack from the West, i.e. Tripoli or the Mediterranean, and the transit across Egyptian territory were not possible after the lapse of the present Treaty, our communications to Cyrenaica would be mainly by sea, either through the Mediterranean or round the Cape. In either case well-developed and defended air bases or harbours would be essential but there is no harbour there comparable to Alexandria.

The conclusion is that whilst the development of British military and air bases in Cyrenaica would greatly strengthen the defence of the Suez Canal provided Egypt could be used as a base, without such use the defence of the Suez Canal would be dangerously prejudiced.

Question (b)

Will it be regarded as essential to obtain the use of Alexandria as a naval base (say for 99 years on the analogy of the United States bases in the West Indies)? Answer

Even if it were possible to develop a naval base in Cyrenaica comparable to Alexandria, this would require several years, and meanwhile Alexandria would have to be retained. Moreover, as stated in reply to (a), the defence of the Suez Canal would be seriously compromised if Egyptian territory were not available for use by our forces if attacked. Whether we should seek a lease on Alexandria, on the analogy of the United States bases in the West Indies, is a matter which will require further consideration.

Blurb:

During World War II, a British wartime committee comprised senior civil servants from various government departments engaged in Middle Eastern strategy, policy, and planning. These included the Admiralty, Air Ministry, War Office, Foreign Office, Colonial Office, India Office, Dominions Office, Treasury, and Board of Trade. On occasion, the Ministry of Supply (responsible for war materiel) and the Ministry of War Transport also contributed. The committee's reports were submitted to the War Cabinet

and its ministerial sub-committees to aid in the formulation of high-level policy.

One such document, “Post-War Strategic Requirements: Middle East”, emerged at a pivotal moment in the war. Following the decisive Allied victory at the Second Battle of Alamein in November 1942, coupled with the Anglo-American landings in North Africa (Operation TORCH), the Axis position in the Mediterranean and Middle East was severely weakened. Simultaneously, Soviet gains at Stalingrad and the stemming of Japanese advances in the Pacific signaled a turning tide in the global conflict. With the Allies now confident of ultimate victory, serious consideration could be given to Britain’s post-war position as a dominant global imperial power.

The British Imperial Framework in the Middle East Before World War II

Before 1939, Britain’s post-First World War Middle East neo-empire had in Iraq, in 1930, and Egypt, in 1936, been reconstructed under treaties with those countries which, although acknowledging their independence, preserved military-base, financial, economic and advisory rights which continued to provoke nationalist opposition. Other former Ottoman territories, Palestine, Transjordan (and Iraq until 1932, when the treaty became effective) were administered as pseudo-developmental League of Nations Mandates, with Syria and Lebanon having been similarly parceled out to France in 1920, in the first instance largely to assuage American anti-colonialist misgivings.

Since then, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Palestine had all experienced nationalist uprisings, in the latter case aggravated by British favor towards Zionism.; despite severe repression, restive popular undercurrents remained in each territory. In the 1930s, revisionist powers Germany and more-so Italy sensed corresponding opportunities, causing Britain considerable anxiety. Meanwhile in Iran, British economic domination, notably over oil, was challenged by the new, aggrandizing regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi, who seemed attracted to Germany, although like the neighboring Turkish Republic, motivated as much by anti-Soviet fears as anti-British resentments.

The Middle East Under British Wartime Control, 1940-1942

All told, the Middle East, while essential to British imperial security, remained subject to manifold uncertainties of which, ironically, the Second World War offered potential resolution. Italy’s declaration of war and France’s surrender and defection to the Nazis in 1940 gave Britain carte blanche; in 1941, on grounds of strategic security, it invaded and occupied Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Iran (the latter in tandem with the Soviet Union), and in 1942 forcibly replaced Egypt’s government with one compliant to its interests. The region overall came under the oversight of a Cabinet-ranked British Minister of State, based in Cairo, economic direction by a central Middle East Supply Centre, with offices and regulatory powers in all regional states, while at their peak British empire forces, stationed throughout the region, numbered more than a million personnel.

Although ultimate outcomes depended on military success against Axis forces in the Western Desert, by late 1942, this seemed assured. At last, Britain seemed able to plan for the future.

British Post-War Strategy: The 1943 Middle East Committee Report

Returning to our document, in its consequent meetings, the Middle East (Official) Committee posited the region’s twofold importance: for oil, and as “a focal point” in “Imperial communications on the security of which our world strategy must be built.” The issue of oil was compounded by wartime disruption to

Southeast Asian and Soviet Caucasian supplies and the United States' probable emergence from the war as a net petroleum importer, constricting South American exports to the Eastern Hemisphere. British-controlled facilities, chiefly in Iran, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf emirates, served by pipelines and refineries terminating in Palestine, and routes transiting the Suez Canal were therefore more important than ever. The document is multiply curious: first in the scope and number of naval and air bases required, from Cyrenaica (eastern Libya) through to Alexandria, the Eastern Desert and Suez Canal in Egypt, then Haifa, as a fleet base and oil entrepot, Transjordan, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf, covering corridors to Indian Baluchistan and northward to the Soviet Union; moreover, in Eritrea, Somaliland and Aden, governing Red Sea trunk routes to Eastern and Southern Africa, India and the Far East. Despite envisaging such huge undertakings, the paper ignores prospective post-war limits on commensurate British human, material and financial resources. Furthermore, its geo-operational assumptions imply continuing Second World War military technologies, no jets, missiles, nuclear force-components, nor counter-insurgency and security-intelligence aspects, but numerous short-range aircraft, large fleets and ground-forces, ranged against rival imperial powers, necessitating overlapping bases within an indisputable strategic imperium expanding and consolidating that acquired after the First World War. Italy is foreseen as a friend-client, the Turkish Republic desirable as one, but potentially revisionist, as in 1922, with Lebanon and Syria, which Britain took from Vichy in 1941, better with French influence "entirely removed." In these ways the document is as paradoxically retrospective as future-orientated, seeing in the Second World War a consummation of longstanding British grand designs rather than a threshold of relative decline in a context set by American and Soviet super-power and revolutionary global nationalisms.

Finally, although the committee acknowledges possible loss or expiry of treaty rights in Egypt and Iraq, Transjordan's independence, and future changes in Palestine's status, these are not taken as cumulatively systemic rejections of British hegemony. The closest acknowledgment to any but external great-power challenges is in allusions to Arabian Peninsular states' "amalgamation or absorption," though this would be a threat only if entailing "a consolidation of Arab policy against foreign influence." On one hand, this implies indifference to parochial Saudi-Hashemite or other smaller-state adjustments, but on the other, it presages dogged antipathy towards pan-Arab nationalism, as later, in the 1950s-60s, advanced by Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The precedent, however, was set earlier, in Iraq during the Second World War, under Rashid Ali al-Gailani, whose anti-imperialism ultimately pushed him toward the Axis, and to consequent expulsion after Britain invaded that country in May 1941.

Iran is also viewed Janus-like, with Soviet annexation of its Azerbaijan province seen as not vitally threatening, implying that for the sake of preserving wartime accord, a rehash of Anglo-Russian spheres of influence agreed in 1907 might be acceptable. However, further-reaching Soviet expansion towards Turkey and Iraq would require counter-action and "throw doubt on the stability of our alliance" with Moscow. Moreover, as in 1941, when pre-empting German penetration, the paper anticipates Britain seizing the southern oilfields "to control the economic life of Persia and thus prevent her from falling too much under Russian influence." British intent in two global cold war crises may therefore be foreshadowed; the 1946 Anglo-American confrontation with Stalin over Azerbaijan and Kurdistan and 1951-1953 Anglo-Iranian oil nationalization crisis, where the Truman administration initially discouraged British military intervention, only for the succeeding Eisenhower administration to enact a British-designed coup, 'Ajax', against nationalist prime minister Mohammed Mossadeq.

The missing factor in this paper from early 1943 is nonetheless the United States, perceived by the British as having an economic presence but lesser military-political role in the post-war Middle East, and thereby postponed in related considerations to the future economic phase of policy-definition. By mid-1943, as scholar W. Roger Louis has shown, this absorbed an increasing share of British diplomatic attention.

Connected Source

War Cabinet, Annex, M.S.C.(42)3, 'Post-War Strategic Requirements: Middle East', 15 January 1943 *The National Archives of the United Kingdom, CAB 95: Official Committee for Questions Concerning the Middle East. CAB 95/1 British War Cabinet: Middle East (Official) Committee.*

Contributed and annotated by Simon Davis.

Additional Readings

Simon Davis, "The Middle East," in Thomas Zeiler, ed., *Blackwell Companion to the Second World War* (2012)

W. Roger Louis's *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-51: Arab Nationalism, the United States and Post-War Imperialism* (1984)