



RESEARCH PAPER

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS

OF THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST PROJECT

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This paper examines the historical roots of the Greater Middle East Project, from the emergence of the term “Middle East” in Western political literature at the beginning of the 20th century, to the evolution of Western thinking on the establishment of a regional project in the Middle East, shaped by American and British strategic, oil, and commercial interests in the region, as well as by the objectives of ensuring the success of the project to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine and safeguarding it, and by the Soviet threat to the region.

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The Term “Middle East”

The term “Middle East” began to appear in Western literature at the dawn of the twentieth century, reflecting the West’s tendency to define eastern regions according to their geographical position relative to Europe. The term “Far East” was applied to regions farther east of Europe and bordering the Pacific Ocean, while “Near East” referred to regions closer to Europe, encompassing the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, Southwest Asia, North Africa, and, at times, the Balkan Peninsula. The “Middle East,” meanwhile, originally referred to the regions lying between the Far East and the Near East, encompassing the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia.¹

While the terms “Far East” and “Near East” came into widespread use with the European voyages of exploration that began in the early fifteenth century, driven by the search for a route connecting the West to the sources of trade in the East—a quest that reached its culmination toward the end of that century²—the term “Middle East” did not enter political literature until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Alfred Mahan, the prominent American naval strategist, is considered the first to have used the term “Middle East,” applying it to the region between India and the Arabian Peninsula, centered on the Arabian Gulf. He anticipated that the region would become the arena of a strategic confrontation between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia. Mahan introduced the term in an article published in the *National Review* in September 1902, at a time when Russia was seeking to penetrate the region in order to gain access to warm waters³, while Britain regarded it as the strategic hinterland of the Indian subcontinent, its most important colony in the East.

The term “Middle East” also appeared prominently in the pages of the London-based *The Times*, which, between the fall of 1902 and the spring of 1903, published a series of articles by Valentine Chirol—the British diplomat, historian, and journalist who served as *The Times* correspondent in Tehran—on the “Middle Eastern Question.” These articles formed the basis of a book in which he examined the future of the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia against the backdrop of the economic and political transformations taking place in Russian society, which heralded the emergence of a new power that would pose a strategic challenge to Britain in the region. The book was published in 1903 under the title *The Middle Eastern Question or Some Political Problems of Indian Defence*.

When Lord Curzon—one of the most active British politicians to serve the British imperial project in India and Egypt, having held the posts of Viceroy of British India and subsequently British Agent in Egypt—used the term “Middle East” during a session of the British House of Commons in 1911, he was referring to the geographical region encompassing Iran, the Gulf, and Turkey. With the outbreak of World War I, Britain established what became known as the “Middle East Forces” to defend this region. In the aftermath of the war, Winston Churchill, then British Colonial Secretary, established a department within his ministry known as the “Middle East Department” to oversee the affairs of Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq.⁴

The War and the Expanding Geographical Scope

The geographical and political scope of the term “Middle East” expanded with the outbreak of World War II to encompass the regions to which the term had been applied in 1902, in addition to the Near East. Britain and its allies anticipated that this broader region would become one of the war’s principal theaters following Germany’s invasion of Eastern Europe, the opening of a war front with Russia, the outbreak of hostilities in the Far East, and the Soviet Union’s growing need for a supply route through the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and Iran after transport across the Mediterranean had been disrupted. At the same time, tensions were escalating along the Egyptian-Libyan border between Britain and Italy.

This prospect appears to have prompted Britain to devise a mechanism to ensure the provision of essential supplies to the peoples of the region and thereby maintain stability during the war. Accordingly, in early 1941, Britain established the Middle East Supply Center, which the United States formally joined on April 30, 1942. The Center regulated trade across a vast region extending from Morocco in the west to India in the east, and from Turkey in the north to Ethiopia and the southern Arabian Peninsula in the south. Its purpose was to enable the countries of the region to achieve self-sufficiency in food supplies, provide Allied forces with food, and meet the needs of surrounding areas for essential supplies whose delivery to the theaters of war might be delayed by wartime conditions. It also sought to reduce the region’s dependence on external sources, thereby freeing up shipping capacity for vessels whose passage to the region could be secured to transport military supplies. This became particularly important after Britain lost control over transportation across the Mediterranean in 1940 following the fall of France in the war.

The United States’ participation in the Middle East Supply Center, coupled with the Center’s success in managing wartime

crises across the countries of the region—Morocco, Libya, Ethiopia, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and India—brought it widespread recognition and contributed to the increasingly frequent use of the term “Middle East” in both Western and Eastern media.

By the end of World War II, British political circles had defined the Middle East as encompassing the territories surrounding the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the eastern Mediterranean. American political circles, however, did not begin using the term “Middle East” with any frequency until the onset of World War II, when the United States dispatched a mission to assess conditions in the region. Its mandate covered the Arabic-speaking territories of the Near East: Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

in addition to Iran and Turkey. However, the American definition of the Middle East remained fluid until the early 1950s. While the Associated Press reported that US officials interpreted the term “Middle East,” as used in the Eisenhower Doctrine, as referring to the region extending from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Arabian Sea, US Secretary of State Dulles defined the Middle East as encompassing everything from Libya in the west to Pakistan in the east, and from Turkey in the north to Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Ethiopia in the south.

Despite the lack of agreement over the geographical boundaries of the Middle East, there was a general tendency among the Western powers active on the international stage after World War II—the United States and the United Kingdom—to extend the region westward to encompass territories that had previously fallen within what was known as the Near East. This did not, however, mean that the term “Near East” disappeared from Western political literature. Rather, it continued to be used at times as a synonym for the Middle East and, at others, to denote a region either distinct from or incorporated into the Middle East.

Anglo-American documents, particularly those relating to the informal talks between the United Kingdom and the United States

on April 28, 1944, underscored the strategic importance of the Near and Middle East to the interests of both countries. During these talks, the two delegations collectively defined the geographical scope of the two regions as encompassing Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Transjordan, the Levant States, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the Arabian Gulf, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Similarly, when informal Anglo-American talks were held in Washington in 1947 to address pressing economic and social problems in the Near East and devise a joint mechanism for resolving them, the term “Near East” was used either as a synonym for the Middle East or as part of it, with the region referred to as the “Near East (Middle East).” This indicates that the geographical boundaries of the Middle East had expanded westward to encompass the entire Near East.⁵

The expansion of the Middle East during World War II to encompass the sphere of British and American interests previously designated as the Near East was driven by wartime pressures and the establishment of the Middle East Supply Center to serve the region and help it overcome wartime conditions and their repercussions. This became particularly important after the war had isolated the region from the global market to such an extent that it risked fueling further discontent and political unrest, threatening the interests of both countries as well as their forces stationed in the region.

The West, Regional Integration in the Middle East, and Oil Resources

The regional and international transformations brought about by World War II prompted the United Kingdom and the United States to embark on efforts to establish a Middle Eastern regional entity, as part of their adoption of a policy of blocs and alliances that became an integral component of their postwar strategy. This policy was intended to contain the Soviet Union, deny it access to warm waters and to areas of Western influence, and safeguard Western oil and strategic interests in the Arab region, while providing the West with an opportunity to establish the State of Israel on Palestinian territory.

Western thinking on the creation of a regional entity encompassing the countries of the Middle East emerged following the success of the Middle East Supply Center and its branches across the region in forging economic integration among these countries during the final two years of World War II. This integration played a significant role in sustaining Allied forces deployed across the region's theaters of war and surrounding areas, while also protecting its populations—particularly in the Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Gulf—from the threat of famine after the war had isolated them even from the nearest Asian markets on which they depended for their most basic necessities.

The Center succeeded in establishing a form of regional economic integration that contributed to self-sufficiency among the countries within its remit by encouraging food production throughout the region. This was achieved either through the establishment of new irrigation projects in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, which expanded cultivated areas and crop production; the introduction of new crops in certain areas; or the expansion of land devoted to food crops at the expense of cash crops such as cotton in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Sudan. The Center also sought to increase industrial production in several parts of the Middle East, including Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. At the

same time, it established a system for pooling food crops and distributing them among the countries of the region.⁶

The Middle East Supply Center's success in fostering regional integration among the countries under its remit prompted the United Kingdom and the United States to consider establishing a Middle Eastern system that would transform the region into a single regional entity resistant to penetration by any power hostile to either country. This thinking was reinforced by their recognition that their growing and converging interests in the region made its security fundamental to their own security and to world peace.⁷

Several factors prompted Britain and the United States to formulate a regional project for the Middle East aimed at grouping its countries into a single regional entity despite the considerable disparities among them. Foremost among these factors were the growing British and American interests in the Middle East and the increasing strategic importance the region assumed for both powers in the aftermath of World War II. The region lay astride the principal transportation routes linking the West to areas of vast wealth in the Indian Ocean and the Far East, while its proximity to the Soviet Union made it possible to use its territory as a key base from which to launch a counteroffensive in the event of a confrontation. In particular, forces stationed in the Middle East could reach vital Soviet targets in Asia and Eastern Europe that would be difficult to strike effectively from elsewhere.⁸

Britain and the United States also had substantial oil interests in the Middle East. For Britain, these interests dated back to the discovery of oil in Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century, whereas US involvement came later, after World War I. The war had demonstrated the importance of oil as a source of energy for both military and industrial purposes, at a time when American experts were forecasting the eventual depletion of domestic US oil reserves.⁹

The United States consequently sought access to Middle Eastern oil at a time when Britain and France were coordinating efforts to monopolize most of the region's oil resources. This brought the United States into conflict with both powers and led it to denounce their policies in the mandated territories of the Middle East, which it regarded as a violation of the principal principle

adopted in Paris in 1919 and by which Britain and France were required to abide in administering their mandates. The United States called on both countries to reverse these policies, adopt an open-door policy, and include it in any negotiations concerning oil concessions in the region.¹⁰

In response to these objections, the mandatory powers wielding influence in the Middle East, particularly Britain, agreed to conclude agreements with the United States that opened the way for it to secure oil concessions throughout the Middle East, including in the mandated territories. In return, the United States recognized the mandate system and supported Western demands that Turkey relinquish its claims to the Mosul vilayet.¹¹

While these agreements enabled Britain to secure US support—or at least US neutrality—in its dealings with Turkey at the Lausanne conferences and in confronting the unrest that swept across the Middle East, particularly in territories that Britain had promised independence but subsequently failed to grant it, they also opened the way for American oil companies to operate in Middle Eastern oil fields. The US government continued to encourage American oil companies to take advantage of the open-door policy and secure as many oil concessions as possible in the Middle East.¹²

Although American oil companies succeeded in gaining access to most of the Middle East's oil fields—in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia—alongside British companies, Britain continued to dominate the region's oil production until the beginning of World War II. In 1937, it retained control of approximately 80 percent of the region's total oil output, while the US share stood at only 15 percent in 1939. Britain's predominance was attributable to its continued adherence to agreements and treaties that prohibited the Gulf sheikhs from granting oil concessions to any other country without the approval of the British government. Britain also used the Red Line Agreement to place tactical obstacles in the way of American companies seeking to expand their oil operations in the region, effectively preventing them from securing oil interests in Iran, which remained a British preserve until the end of World War II.¹³

With the outbreak of World War II, rising demand for oil to sustain the war effort—particularly as dropping every ton of bombs on Berlin required

five tons of gasoline—prompted Britain and the United States to intensify their focus on Middle Eastern oil. Britain, aware of its importance to the sterling area and its impact on the country's balance of payments and trade balance, sought to continue oil exploration in Iraq, southern Iran, the Arabian Gulf, and Egypt's oil-producing areas. These efforts were undertaken in anticipation of a potential postwar oil crisis resulting from rising domestic oil consumption in Russia and the United States, which could curtail their oil exports to Western European countries. The latter's oil imports were also expected to be affected by the destruction of oil fields in the Dutch East Indies, Burma, and southern Russia.¹⁴

The United States, meanwhile, had been compelled by wartime circumstances and the closure of the Mediterranean to provide more than 70 percent of the energy used in the war on the European front. It therefore sought to safeguard and expand its oil interests in the Middle East so that it would be in a position to supply oil for future wars and address growing concerns that its oil resources in certain areas might prove insufficient to meet its needs. This appears to have been behind the United States' insistence that Britain repay the American oil it had received during the war with equivalent quantities of crude petroleum after the war.¹⁵

The United States therefore capitalized on its extensive military presence in the Gulf during World War II to bolster its oil interests in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq, which received greater US attention during the war than other Middle Eastern countries because of their oil fields. The United States also accorded particular importance to Saudi Arabia because of its location and its vast oil resources and reserves, which American officials sought to protect by stationing US military forces in the Kingdom, establishing an American legation in Jeddah, and providing Saudi Arabia with financial assistance to contend with wartime conditions.¹⁶

While some British officials were concerned about the expansion of US activity surrounding Middle Eastern oil during World War II, others expressed no objection to the United States acquiring further oil interests in the region, which they did not regard as conflicting with Britain's fundamental interests there. They reasoned that while the United States had acquired economic

and strategic interests in Saudi oil, Britain possessed comparable interests in Iranian oil, while the two countries shared oil interests in Iraq, Bahrain, and Kuwait, among the region's richest oil-producing areas.¹⁷

Britain also agreed to enter into negotiations with the United States over Middle Eastern oil, culminating in an agreement on September 24, 1945, under which the Red Line Agreement was formally abolished. Britain had used the agreement to constrain American oil concessions until World War II, but it had effectively become inoperative with the outbreak of the war and the strengthening of the US position in the Middle East.¹⁸

Britain's acceptance of expanding US oil interests in the Middle East during World War II reflected its recognition of the realities on the ground after it became apparent that Britain could no longer manage Middle Eastern affairs on its own. Growing Russian threats to the region and the prospect of Russian regional expansion convinced British officials that the price of securing US cooperation in the Middle East would be commensurate with what Britain stood to lose from the growing Russian advance into the region.¹⁹

American efforts to secure control over a substantial share of Middle Eastern oil during the war increased the US share of the region's oil production to 42 percent by the end of the conflict, while Britain's share declined from 80 percent before the war to 28 percent in its aftermath.²⁰

The expansion of the US share of Middle Eastern oil during the war at Britain's expense prompted the United States to pursue further oil concessions across the region, particularly in Iran, which emerged after the war as an important source of Middle Eastern oil for the United States. At the same time, American oil companies succeeded in securing oil exploration concessions in Afghanistan, Cyrenaica in Libya, Yemen, and subsequently Ethiopia, in an effort to identify an alternative source of oil should instability engulf the Middle East.²¹

The American drive to increase the US share of Middle Eastern oil in the aftermath of World War II can also be attributed to the low cost of oil production in the region, which amounted to as little as one-tenth of production costs in the United States itself. This was due to the abundance

of oil wells, low labor costs in the region, reduced transportation costs, and the modest royalties paid by oil companies to oil-producing states, which ranged from 13 to 15 cents per barrel.²²

US control over the greater share of Middle Eastern oil would also enable it to maintain its influence over oil prices in global markets, given its position as the world's largest producer and consumer of oil, while curbing Britain's future control over a substantial share of global oil resources. Britain's dominance over the Middle East and the Gulf had reinforced this control, particularly through its integration of oil-producing countries within its sphere of influence into the sterling bloc, enabling it to consolidate its control over Middle Eastern oil production and marketing policy.²³

Beyond their oil interests in the Middle East, Britain and the United States also had significant commercial interests in the region. These were facilitated by the region's agricultural potential, which enabled it to produce numerous food and cash crops that were in high demand in British and American markets, including dates, figs, coffee, and long-staple cotton. The latter was used in the manufacture of high-quality textiles, and the British textile industry's reliance on it played a major role in increasing Britain's dollar earnings, given the strong demand for these textiles in the dollar area.²⁴

The United States and Britain also found in the region a thriving market for their manufactured goods, one that continued to expand as the region's oil production increased. During World War II, the United States sought to gain greater control over this market while Britain was preoccupied with meeting its domestic and military requirements. To this end, US officials working at the Middle East Supply Center were instructed to collect data on the region, enabling them to acquire extensive knowledge of its markets. The United States also utilized the institutions of the Lend-Lease program in the region to advance its trade interests there. At the same time, the US government continued to dispatch trade missions to countries across the region to expand its commercial interests and encouraged local commercial enterprises to act as agents for American companies.²⁵

Western Control of Regional Commodity Markets

The United States also exploited the economic difficulties facing the Middle East in the aftermath of World War II to expand its control over the region's markets at Britain's expense. This occurred amid growing regional demand for a wide range of consumer goods and the materials needed for postwar reconstruction and development to address needs that had accumulated during the war. At the same time, European industries, including those of Britain, were unable not only to regain their position in Middle Eastern markets but also to recover their standing in global markets. British industry, in particular, struggled to meet essential domestic demand, finance imports of raw materials and foodstuffs from the Middle East, and cover the sterling debts that Britain had accumulated to countries in the region during the war.²⁶

Despite the steady expansion of US commercial influence in the Middle East in full view of the British, Britain retained its remaining commercial interests in the region alongside the United States. British policymakers recognized that the complete loss of the Middle Eastern market would reduce British export earnings by approximately £150 million annually.²⁷

Alongside their strategic, oil, and commercial interests in the Middle East, Britain and the United States shared another major objective: ensuring the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and safeguarding it. While Britain had openly championed the project since issuing the Balfour Declaration, the Zionist lobby in the United States and members of the US Congress continued to press the US government to urge Britain to fulfill its commitment, particularly after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, launched his campaign against the country's Jewish population, and Britain issued the 1939 White Paper. These developments prompted the United States to take a greater interest in the Jewish project in the Middle East.²⁸

Britain's determination to create an entity in the Arab region that would prevent Arab unity and preserve fragmentation in a manner that safeguarded British interests lay behind its decision to issue the Balfour

Declaration in November 1917. The Declaration was intended to preclude the establishment of a unified Arab state under Sharif Hussein, undermine the internationalization of Palestine envisaged in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and instead place Palestine under British influence. Once the Balfour Declaration became an international commitment through its incorporation into the Mandate for Palestine, Britain was obliged to implement it before the League of Nations. It therefore opened Palestine to large-scale Jewish immigration, enabling the Jewish community, within a relatively short period, to proclaim the establishment of its state following World War II—a state that the United States recognized without delay.

The declaration of the new state ignited conflict in the Middle East, raising concerns in both the United States and Britain over their interests in the region and the security of the newly established state. Consequently, the two countries agreed on the necessity of supporting it, believing that it had been established to endure and that abandoning it would lead to its disappearance.²⁹

To avoid jeopardizing their friendships and interests in the Middle East through their support for Israel, Britain and the United States sought to reconcile these objectives by promoting friendly relations and good-neighborly ties between Israel and the Arab states, while making efforts to establish peace in the region. They had come to regard peace as an urgent requirement for safeguarding both Israel and Western interests in the Middle East.³⁰

It is noteworthy that the US and British pursuit of peace between the Arab states and Israel was viewed as a step toward the creation of a unified Middle East in which Israel would emerge as the region's sole dominant power.³¹

Israeli Ambitions

As the Israelis looked to the West and regarded themselves as responsible for advancing Western influence in the Middle East, given that most of their activists had come from Europe, British officials believed that efforts should be made to curb Israel's Western aspirations so that Israelis would come to regard the Middle East as their natural place within the region. At that point, embracing a Middle Eastern orientation would become imperative.³²

The West also considered it necessary to persuade the Israelis that their state should not be Western so much as an Eastern state with Western leanings. They should therefore seek to establish their place in the Middle East as the secure environment in which Israel should live and expand. Sharett went so far as to argue that Israel would be an "Oriental state," that its activities should be more closely connected to the East than to the West, that it should become increasingly Eastern over time, and that its ties to the West should be material in nature, particularly since the West was prepared to support it in this regard.³³

Western efforts to curb Israel's Western aspirations were intended to prepare it for integration into a Middle Eastern regional grouping in which it would play a role in defending the region against the Soviet Union, ultimately enabling it to dominate the regional order and assume responsibility for safeguarding Western interests within it.³⁴

Western advocates of a Middle Eastern regional order believed that Israeli dominance of the Middle East should begin with economic penetration, which would pave the way for eventual regional hegemony, as economic leverage could be used to achieve political dominance. Sharett accordingly argued that Israel should penetrate the Middle East with the aim of gaining control over it and establishing political dominance through the use of economic power.³⁵

To enable Israel to penetrate the Middle East economically, the West sought to provide it with economic assistance, particularly as Jews

throughout the British Commonwealth supported Israel's Middle Eastern ambitions and were prepared to bear any risks arising from them.³⁶ American Jews likewise continued to raise funds for the Jewish state, totaling approximately \$100 million in 1949.³⁷

To facilitate Israel's efforts to penetrate and dominate the region through a Middle Eastern regional system, advocates of this approach emphasized the need to dismantle the idea of Arab unity, arguing that the greater the divisions among the Arabs, the easier they would be to penetrate and control.³⁸ This was to be achieved by incorporating the Arab states into a broader Middle Eastern regional framework at the expense of any exclusively Arab grouping.

Thus, one of the objectives of the Middle East Project was to undermine the aspiration for Arab unity by establishing a Middle Eastern system encompassing all states of the region, including the Arab states and the Zionist entity. The latter was envisaged as using its full capabilities, with Western support, to penetrate the Middle East economically as a prelude to ultimately establishing political dominance over the region.

The Soviet Threat to the Region

At a time when the United States and Britain regarded the Middle East as a sphere of influence and interests, the Soviet Union sought to extend its influence over the region, which appeared to offer its only outlet to warm seas and global trade routes and a means of overcoming the prolonged winter freezing of the waters along much of its extensive coastline. This geographical constraint was compounded by Turkey's control of the straits governing access from the Soviet coastline on the Black Sea to warm waters. Russian interest in territories that later came to form part of the Middle East had deep historical roots. Peter the Great, who ruled Russia from 1682 to 1725, urged the Russians to advance toward India and Constantinople, convinced that whoever controlled the two would hold sway over the world. He believed that achieving this objective would require waging continual wars against Iran and Turkey.³⁹

The Soviet Union therefore capitalized on the circumstances of World War II and its emergence from the conflict as a powerful state to establish interests in Iran, Turkey, and Greece that would enable it to overcome attempts to encircle and contain it. Accordingly, after the hostilities of World War II had subsided, Moscow delayed withdrawing the forces it had deployed to Iran during the war, despite the agreement reached among Britain, the Soviet Union, and Iran. At the same time, it continued its efforts to secure oil concessions in northern Iran and territorial concessions in the area of the Turkish Straits, while supporting communist insurgents and guerrilla warfare in Greece. It also threatened to continue directly mobilizing communist insurgents and organizations against the Iranian government along their shared border should the Iranian parliament refuse to ratify the Soviet oil concession in Iran's northern provinces bordering Soviet territory.⁴⁰

At the same time, the Soviet Union sought to exploit the deteriorating economic and social conditions in the Middle East

in the aftermath of the war to advance its strategic objectives in the region by persuading its peoples that revolution was indispensable to achieving progress.⁴¹

The Soviet Union's strategic objectives in the Middle East centered on gaining control over the region's oil resources, thereby alleviating its own oil shortages while denying those resources to the West in a manner that would weaken it economically and militarily. Soviet control over the Middle East would also enable the Soviet Union to encircle Europe and isolate it from the Old World and its vast economic resources, deny Europe access to Middle Eastern military bases that could be used against the Soviet Union, and open the Indian and Atlantic Oceans to the Soviet fleet.⁴²

In any event, Soviet ambitions in the Middle East raised serious concerns in the United States and Britain. Both powers believed that Soviet control over Iran, Turkey, or Greece, and the realization of its ambitions in the region, would not only threaten their interests in the Middle East—particularly their oil interests in the Gulf, to which the Soviet Union would then be in close proximity—but would also weaken their broader strategic position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union elsewhere in the world.⁴³

Dimensions of the Middle East Regional Project

To ward off Russian threats to the Middle East, safeguard its strategic, oil, and commercial interests, and facilitate the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, the West considered creating a Middle Eastern regional system dominated by the United States and Britain and directed toward serving their interests both within and beyond the region.

Britain began contemplating the establishment of a Middle Eastern system during World War II, when it realized that its grip on the region was beginning to weaken. It therefore sought a new policy that would enable it to retain an appropriate measure of its former standing in the region. Wartime conditions had exposed the weakness of Britain's economic, political, and military position in the Middle East to such an extent that it could no longer maintain its dominance over this vital and turbulent region of the world on its own. Moreover, as some British officials acknowledged, British policy in the region no longer enjoyed the support of its populations. Britain consequently sought to replace its policy of dominance with a new approach based on cooperation with the countries of the region within a regional framework, rather than dealing with them individually, particularly after British officials recognized the difficulty of preserving Britain's strategic and economic position in the region without engaging with it on a regional basis.⁴⁴

While Britain envisioned a unified Middle East as a means of restoring some of its prewar influence, the United States considered the same concept as a means of protecting its growing interests in the region. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt viewed safeguarding the Middle East against unrest that could pave the way for greater Soviet influence as contingent on encouraging the region's governments to establish a unified "Middle East," whose countries would cooperate to promote regional stability and improve their economic systems, including the distribution of wealth.⁴⁵ The objective was to prevent the countries of the region from turning to the Soviet Union for solutions to their economic and social problems.⁴⁶

Aware of the difficulty of establishing a Middle Eastern system in a region historically beset by unrest—whether among states as a result of national disputes

or within individual states because of minority issues—the West considered it necessary to foster common objectives shared by the peoples of the Middle East and Western countries.⁴⁷

This was to be pursued through a long-term plan aimed at shaping the national future of the region's states along democratic lines, thereby linking them to the democratic nations of Western civilization rather than to Eastern dictatorships. The West regarded the success of this long-term plan to democratize the Middle East as dependent on the scale of economic and social assistance it could provide to the region's countries, believing that delays in providing such assistance could expose the region to unrest with significant repercussions for its security and stability.⁴⁸

The American and British conviction that a Middle Eastern regional system was necessary to safeguard their interests in the region prompted Britain to court the United States, which World War II had propelled to the status of a major power with extensive interests in the Middle East from the outset of the conflict. Britain sought to forge a unified policy with the United States aimed at protecting Anglo-Saxon interests and maintaining stability in the Middle East⁴⁹, particularly in light of the success of their earlier cooperation in the region through the Middle East Supply Center.⁵⁰

The British government therefore invited its US counterpart to enter into talks before the war had ended to discuss the future of the Middle East and devise a formula for reconciling their respective policies in the region, particularly with regard to future economic cooperation. This included an effort to preserve the Middle East Supply Center, which had succeeded in establishing a regional economic system that spared the region from unrest that would inevitably have affected their interests. Britain believed that the Center's continued operation could help alleviate social unrest and poverty in the region after World War II.

The Middle East Supply Center's success in laying the foundations of what came to be known as the Middle Eastern regional system, safeguarding British and American interests by containing popular discontent in the region, and alleviating social unrest prompted Britain to act at the highest level, even before the war had ended, to preserve the Center or establish an alternative regional organization.

As Allied forces approached victory in World War II and Britain entered into informal negotiations with the United States in 1944 over the future of the Middle East, the

British side was particularly keen to discuss the future of the Middle East Supply Center. Britain expressed its desire to cooperate with the United States to preserve the Center, ensure its continuation, and expand its activities so that it could promote the economic and social advancement of the region's countries and establish an economic union serving the common objectives of all United Nations countries in the Middle East, without discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, or creed.⁵¹

In the aftermath of the war, Britain sought US approval for the continuation of the Middle East Supply Center, with a view to its gradual development into a “regional organization” known as the Middle East Economic Council. The proposed body would assist the countries of the region in addressing the economic problems arising from the severe inflation caused by the war—problems their governments were unable to tackle independently—and in restoring their conditions to prewar levels. So determined were the British to secure US support for the project that the Middle East War Council regarded obtaining approval for the establishment of the Middle East Economic Council as one of Britain's objectives in its engagement with the United States.⁵²

The United States approved the proposal to establish the Middle East Economic Council, provided that it operate as a “regional organization” in which all countries of the region would participate, with the Anglo-American role confined to providing technical advice.⁵³ However, when the proposed Council failed to replace the Middle East Supply Center following its dissolution at the end of 1945, Britain established the British Middle East Office in Cairo to provide expertise to the countries of the region across a range of fields. This step came as British political circles, following Bevin's appointment as Foreign Secretary, had become convinced of the need to address the Middle East's economic problems on a regional basis.⁵⁴

Britain's establishment of the British Middle East Office to replace the Middle East Supply Center in guiding the region's economies did not diminish its desire to involve the United States in establishing a regional economic organization for the Middle East that would steer those economies in a manner consistent with Western interests. This was particularly the case as Britain had become convinced of the need to promote economic and social development in the Middle East to address the region's pressing problems in a manner consistently aligned with Western ideas and concepts, which, in turn, was expected to exert a positive influence on the political orientation of Middle Eastern countries toward the West.⁵⁵

The Concept of an Economic Organization

Britain therefore used the 1947 Anglo-American talks in Washington on the Middle East as an opportunity to revive the proposal for establishing the Middle East Economic Council. British representatives once again presented the proposal to their American counterparts, who questioned the Council's usefulness if the Soviet Union were to participate in it.⁵⁶

While Britain and the United States were exploring a framework for a Middle Eastern regional economic organization, they opposed the establishment of other regional organizations that would not be under their direct control. Thus, when United Nations bodies responded to Egypt's proposal before the General Assembly to establish an Economic Commission for the Middle East, modeled on commissions created in other regions of the world, including Europe, Britain and the United States objected to the creation of such an organization.⁵⁷

Britain and the United States likewise expressed concern that the League of Arab States might establish an Arab economic organization that could encourage restrictions and discrimination and pursue political and economic objectives they regarded as undesirable. Their opposition went so far as to emphasize the need to resist such a course. At the same time, however, they expressed their willingness to strengthen and support the Economic Committee of the Council of the League of Arab States and cooperate constructively with it, provided that it relied on Western experts and advisers. The United States, in particular, preferred strengthening the League's economic mechanisms to incorporating the Middle East into an economic mechanism affiliated with the United Nations, since any Middle Eastern economic organization emerging within that framework would include Soviet representation.⁵⁸

The emergence of various initiatives to establish regional economic organizations in the Middle East, whether under the auspices of the League of Arab States or the United Nations, led to the establishment of the official Middle East Committee in the late 1940s. The Committee

focused on studies of regional economic and social development in the Middle East, seeking to assess conditions in the region, determine the costs and time required for its development, identify the most suitable projects to be promoted, and explore the potential participation of Britain, the United States, and the World Bank in such projects in light of the resources available across the region.⁵⁹

At the same time, the World Bank, in which the United States and Britain held the majority of the capital, sought to consolidate the economic dimension of the Middle East Project by linking its activities in the region to the establishment of regional projects. These included a chemical fertilizer plant in Iraq, where the conditions necessary for its success—namely, the availability of natural gas and gypsum in Kirkuk—would enable the production of nitrogen fertilizers at a significantly lower cost than elsewhere in the world. The Bank also proposed establishing oil refineries to meet the needs of Jordan, southern and northern Syria, and Lebanon. Nevertheless, some remained convinced that implementing such regional projects, particularly those involving oil, would prove difficult for political reasons, notably the reluctance of regional governments to approve the integration of oil projects.⁶⁰

Britain thus sought to reach an agreement with the United States on a framework for a Middle Eastern regional economic organization that would build on their successful cooperation through the Middle East Supply Center. Such an organization would steer the region's economies in a manner consistent with Western interests while addressing its economic and social problems to a degree that would contribute to regional security and stability. Although these British efforts did not ultimately produce a specific framework for a Middle Eastern organization, Britain and the United States remained in agreement on the need to resist the emergence of any regional economic organization in the Middle East that would not be under their control.

While Britain sought US cooperation in establishing a regional economic organization for the Middle East, there was also a parallel drive to establish a regional organization for the defense of the Middle East, encompassing all countries of the region, including Israel following its establishment.

Building Defense Systems to Prevent External Domination

While the establishment of a Middle Eastern regional economic organization was intended to address the region's economic and social problems along Western lines, thereby curbing growing discontent and social unrest and preventing penetration by powers hostile to the West, the creation of a regional defense system was intended to protect the Middle East from falling under the domination of those same powers. This objective assumed particular importance as the Middle East had become an area of vital interests for the United States and Britain, prompting both powers to pursue policies designed to prevent the emergence of international or even inter-Arab rivalry over the region.⁶¹

The United States and Britain therefore agreed that the security of the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean was vital to their own security and to world peace, and that safeguarding it was a shared responsibility of the United States, Britain, and the countries of the region. Neither Washington nor London, they believed, could pursue a policy capable of preserving Middle Eastern security without cooperating in the region's defense, strengthening its security, and avoiding rivalry between themselves. The countries of the region would also need to cooperate with them, since, as US President Truman observed, they lacked the strength, whether individually or collectively, to withstand a major act of aggression.⁶²

Despite their conviction that a Middle Eastern defense system jointly involving the United States, Britain, and the countries of the region was necessary, the Americans showed no willingness in the immediate postwar period to assume military burdens in this part of the world. Instead, they confined themselves to helping Britain preserve its strategic position and strong military presence in the Middle East, while reserving the right to establish bases in the region in the event of Soviet aggression against any part of it.⁶³

US acceptance of Britain's retention of its bases and facilities in the Middle East stemmed from the conviction that key strategic positions had to be maintained in the region as a foundation upon which regional defenses could be built in the event of war or the threat of war.⁶⁴ Accordingly, during the 1947 Anglo-American talks in Washington on the future of the Middle East, the United States proposed converting British bases in the region into joint Anglo-American bases.⁶⁵

Within this framework, the United States sought to assist Britain in retaining the strategic facilities necessary to secure the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, Cyrenaica, and Iraq, while also helping it restore its strategic position in Sudan, Aden, and Cyprus through US diplomatic support both within and outside the United Nations.⁶⁶

Given Egypt's importance to the Middle Eastern regional defense system—stemming from its location astride the principal transportation routes between East and West and its value as a natural base for ground and air forces in the Near East—the United States used its political influence to persuade Egypt to reach an agreement with Britain granting the latter the right to return to the Suez Canal Zone in the event of an emergency, should the two countries reach an agreement on the withdrawal of British forces from the Canal Zone.⁶⁷

Given the strategic importance of the area in which Egypt was situated to the Middle Eastern regional defense system, the United States proposed preparing Cyrenaica and Tripolitania as an alternative base to Egypt. Such a base could be used for the rapid deployment of forces across the region in the event of war and for conducting air operations to defend Palestine and Egypt, including the Suez Canal, should Britain fail to secure military facilities in Egypt and Palestine.⁶⁸

Just as the United States sought to support Britain in securing strategic facilities in Northeast Africa, it also sought to assist it in obtaining similar facilities in Iraq, whose oil resources and reserves, together with its geographical location, positioned it as one of the principal pillars of the Middle Eastern regional defense system. Iraq's strategic importance to this system was such that the United States supported Britain's retention

of forces there and proposed developing Kuwait as an alternative base to Iraq—just as Cyrenaica and Tripolitania had been proposed as alternatives to Egypt—should efforts to build mutual trust between Britain and Iraq fail. This was particularly significant given the American and British conviction that the security of the Middle East, the safeguarding of oil supplies, and the protection of transportation routes through the region could be ensured only by stationing forces in Iraq or in a neighboring Arab territory.⁶⁹

The United States also explored with Britain the possibility of securing additional bases in the Middle East to protect the Gulf and the Red Sea, thereby safeguarding the region's oil resources and the transportation of oil to India and Western Europe via the Red Sea.⁷⁰ The two powers consequently agreed on the importance of Saudi Arabia's strategic potential, which the Middle Eastern regional defense system was expected to benefit from given the strong US influence in the Kingdom. They also recognized the strategic importance of the southeastern Arabian Peninsula, where leasing air bases along the southern coast of the Gulf was proposed. They further emphasized the need for Britain to retain military bases and forces in Sudan, Aden, and British Somaliland; to place Italian Somaliland under British or American trusteeship; and to seek to persuade Eritrea to integrate with Sudan and Ethiopia. Ethiopia, in turn, was to receive assistance in strengthening internal security and developing reform and development programs. These measures were intended to prevent Russian domination from extending into these areas and threatening the security and stability of the Middle East and world peace.⁷¹

While the United States and Britain sought to reinforce their presence around the Gulf and the Red Sea, they also moved to encircle the Soviet Union with a group of Middle Eastern states whose defenses they sought to strengthen. They believed that Soviet control over any of these states would enable Moscow to penetrate the region, weaken US and British defensive capabilities in the Middle East, and threaten their interests not only within the region but elsewhere in the world. British and American policymakers therefore recognized that Soviet control over Greece, Turkey, Iran, or even Afghanistan would endanger their own security, that of the Middle East, and world peace. Conversely, preserving the independence and

territorial integrity of these states would strengthen US and British defensive capabilities in the Middle East and safeguard regional security, as these countries constituted a strategic barrier to Soviet expansion toward the Mediterranean and the Middle East.⁷²

Since preserving Greece's independence and territorial integrity was seen as essential to safeguarding the security of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, thwarting Soviet attempts to outflank Turkey from the west, north, and east, and preventing threats to navigation in the Mediterranean, the United States considered it in its interest to maintain British forces in Greece until alternative bases could be established in the region. It also sought to remove obstacles to the deployment of US forces there and assist Greece in developing its military establishment along modern lines.⁷³

The United States and Britain likewise emphasized the need to secure military bases in Turkey, preserve its independence and territorial integrity, and provide financial and technical assistance to build and train Turkish forces according to modern military standards. These measures were intended to enable the West to safeguard its strategic interests and maintain strong defenses in the Middle East, particularly given Turkey's geographical position as a natural barrier to any Soviet advance toward the eastern Mediterranean and the countries then known as the Near East, including the Arab region.⁷⁴

Given that Iran and Afghanistan lay along transportation routes to India and the Far East and constituted an important barrier to Soviet expansion toward Southeast Asia, in addition to Iran's substantial oil reserves, the United States and Britain agreed on the need to safeguard their independence and territorial integrity and support them against any direct or indirect Russian aggression. The United States went so far as to decide to deploy US forces to southern Iran to join British forces there in protecting the oil fields and Iranian and Afghan territories from Russian threats, which it believed, if left unchallenged, would endanger the security of both countries and the Middle East as a whole.⁷⁵

Following Pakistan's independence from India, the West—Britain in particular—sought to incorporate it into the Middle Eastern regional system

and its defense framework, further isolating the Soviet Union from areas of Western interest in India and the Middle East and preventing its access to warm waters. This came as the West increasingly sought to use Pakistan to assuage the concerns of Muslims worldwide and as a base for the Islamic countries of the Middle East in place of Egypt.⁷⁶

The United States also supported retaining Cyprus as a British naval and air base in the eastern Mediterranean, contributing to the security of the region and the Middle East and to world peace, pending a future reassessment of its status.⁷⁷

Thus, in the aftermath of World War II and with the onset of the Cold War, the United States sought to help Britain retain its bases and forces in the Middle East as a foundation for establishing a Middle Eastern regional defense system designed to safeguard their interests in the region and protect them against growing Soviet threats. These threats prompted the two powers to establish a strategic belt along the Soviet Union's southern flank—comprising Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Greece—to absorb the impact of Soviet pressure and prevent Soviet penetration of the region.

As Soviet interest in the Middle East intensified with the escalation of the Cold War in the late 1940s, the United States and Britain moved to reassess their defense plans for the region with a view to establishing a robust Middle Eastern defense system encompassing all countries of the region, including Israel. The United States and Britain believed that full cooperation and coordination should be established between Israel and the regional states.⁷⁸ This became particularly significant as the Arab states appeared reluctant to join the regional defense arrangements advocated by Western powers in response to Soviet threats, recognizing that the principal threats to their countries stemmed not so much from the Soviet Union as from Israel and Western imperialism, particularly after the United States recognized the State of Israel immediately following its proclamation in 1948 and extended unequivocal support for Zionist settlement and expansion in Palestine.⁷⁹

It is noteworthy that the Middle Eastern regional defense system that the West sought to establish as the Cold War intensified was intended to incorporate Israel, on which Western powers placed considerable hopes for

playing an important role alongside the Arab states in repelling any Russian aggression against the region. The establishment of such a system would also enable the West to ensure Israel's security and safety, safeguard Western interests in the region, and curb growing Arab hostility toward the West, thereby making it more difficult for Russia to draw closer to the region's peoples and penetrate the Middle East.⁸⁰

The United States and Britain were therefore keen to involve Egypt in their secret talks on the Middle Eastern regional defense project in the late 1940s. Western military officials went so far as to regard Egyptian participation as essential to the success of both the negotiations and the proposed Middle Eastern defense system, convinced that no joint Anglo-American plan for the defense of the Middle East could be implemented effectively unless Egypt served as its base and the plan was formulated with Egyptian participation. When Britain and the United States realized that Egypt's involvement in the talks without King Abdullah would provoke his displeasure, they made arrangements for Transjordan to participate in part of the tripartite Anglo-American-Egyptian talks, viewing this as an opportunity to encourage Egypt and Transjordan to enter into negotiations over Palestine.⁸¹

The West's determination to establish a Middle Eastern defense system encompassing both the Arab states and Israel was such that it regarded the "Arab Collective Security Treaty," signed on April 13, 1950, by Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Yemen, as an initiative directed against Israel and a threat to its security and future. The Western powers affirmed their readiness to intervene to halt any aggression by Arab states across the armistice lines with Israel, whether within or outside the framework of the United Nations. At the same time, preparations were underway to propose the establishment of a "Middle East Command," headquartered in Egypt and open to accession by the countries of the Middle East.⁸²

The proposal to establish a "Middle East Command," put forward by the United States and Britain and co-sponsored, at their invitation, by France and Turkey, was formally presented by the governments of the four countries to Egypt on October 13, 1951. Egypt had been selected as the headquarters of

the proposed command because of its strategic location, the presence of the Suez Canal on its territory, its standing within the League of Arab States, and its considerable influence among the Arab states. The sponsors anticipated that Egypt's acceptance of the Middle East Command would encourage the other Arab states to follow suit, while its rejection would have the opposite effect. The proposal therefore linked Egypt's acceptance of the project to the abrogation of the 1936 Treaty. It stipulated that, in return for terminating the 1936 Treaty and withdrawing from Egypt those British forces not assigned to the Middle East Command, Egypt would provide the Command, in peacetime and in the event of war, the threat of war, or an international emergency, with all necessary assistance and facilities, including access to bases, airfields, transportation networks, and communications facilities.⁸³

Following the presentation of the Middle East Command proposal to Egypt, the United States and Britain issued a statement on October 14, 1951, inviting the Arab states and Israel (84)—whose cooperation, at least to some extent, they had come to regard as indispensable to any coherent plan for the defense of the Middle East—as well as countries outside the region, including South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, to participate in the Command and place their armed forces, military bases, ports, transportation networks, and facilities at the disposal of the Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Command.⁸⁵

The Middle East Command proposal came after the Arab states had signed the “Arab Collective Security Treaty,” which the West regarded as directed against Israel. The proposed Command sought to incorporate the Arab states, foremost among them Egypt, into a Middle Eastern defense system controlled by Western powers in the interests of Israel and their own interests in the region. It was also intended to contain the Arab-Israeli conflict in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War and prevent the outbreak of another war in the region. Egypt therefore rejected the proposal on the same day that the Arab states were invited to join the Command, given its reservations about involvement in alliance politics at a time when Arab public opinion was not prepared to enter into any alliance in which Israel was a participant.⁸⁶

The rejection of the Middle East Command proposal by Egypt and the Arab states did not lead the United States to abandon it. On November 10, 1951, Washington announced that the project would continue and that its four sponsors—the United States, Britain, France, and Turkey—would proceed with its implementation, while membership would remain open to the countries of the Middle East. Nevertheless, the project remained effectively dormant until the United States attempted to revive it in May 1953 during Secretary of State Dulles's visit to the region.⁸⁷

Thus, the United States, in cooperation first with Britain and subsequently with France and Turkey, sought to establish a Middle Eastern regional defense system encompassing all countries of the region, including Israel, by invoking the Soviet threat. Through this system, the United States and Britain sought to bind the Middle East more closely to themselves, thereby safeguarding their interests in the countries of the region and ensuring the security of the Israeli state, whose survival they maintained depended on their unequivocal support. They also sought to prevent the Soviet Union from exploiting growing Arab hostility toward the West to draw closer to the peoples of the region, particularly as the Arabs increasingly perceived a clear Western bias in favor of Israel—a factor that ultimately contributed to the failure of successive regional projects for the collective defense of the Middle East.

Thus, beginning in the mid-1940s, even before World War II had ended, the United States and Britain made numerous attempts to establish a Middle Eastern regional framework encompassing both Arab and non-Arab countries, including Israel, over which they would exercise control. These efforts reflected their conviction that the successful creation of such a regional entity would help promote security and stability in the Middle East while safeguarding their interests there.

Since the Soviet Union and communism were regarded as the gravest threats to the security of the Middle East and to British and American interests in the region, one of the principal objectives of establishing this regional framework was to ensure regional security and stability while keeping the Soviet Union and the threat of communism at bay.

The Middle Eastern defense system that the West sought to establish was intended to develop the military capabilities of the region's countries to a level that would enable them to maintain internal stability, preserve their territorial integrity, contain communism, and confront the Soviet Union. Particular emphasis was placed on the countries of the northern belt—Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Greece—which the United States and Britain sought to support financially and strengthen militarily so that they could absorb the brunt of Soviet pressure⁸⁸ and drain Soviet power. At the same time, the arrangement would allow the United States and Britain to retain military forces in the region for its defense until the countries concerned had completed the modernization of their military institutions along modern lines.⁸⁹

Just as the Middle East regional project had political and defense dimensions, it also had an economic dimension aimed at improving the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the region's peoples while safeguarding Western strategic and political interests. The West had become convinced that preserving these interests in the postwar period required not so much the continued presence of occupying military forces as economic influence, control over investment, increased purchases of raw materials, long-term plans for capital development—including irrigation projects, flood control, and transportation infrastructure—as well as control over the composition of the region's imports and the flow of expertise into the region. Britain and the United States therefore regarded cooperation between them as essential to establishing a regional economic organization capable of promoting economic and social development and economic integration in the Middle East in the service of the shared objectives of both countries and their allies.⁹⁰

Economic Development and People's Conditions

To reconcile their interests and influence in the Middle East with improving the economic and social conditions of its peoples, Britain and the United States stressed the region's need for economic development commensurate with its potential and with British and American objectives.

Britain and the United States agreed that development plans in the region should remain consistently aligned with the Western model and exert an influence on the political orientations of the region's countries. They even expressed a willingness to intervene in the development strategies of countries whose priorities did not correspond with British and American objectives in the region and to redirect them toward projects that were consistent with those objectives and with the development of the countries concerned.⁹¹

While regional economic development in the Middle East was intended to restructure the region's economy and integrate it more closely with the Western capitalist economy, particularly those of Britain and the United States, it was also intended to raise living standards among the region's populations, thereby expanding the Middle Eastern market for capital goods. Demand for such goods was expected to increase substantially as development plans expanded, with most related contracts expected to be awarded overseas.⁹²

Economic development in the region was also expected to raise living standards among the peoples of the Middle East to a degree that would deter them from embracing communist ideas or seeking assistance from the Soviet Union.⁹³ This was particularly significant given the British and American view that the deteriorating economic and social conditions in the Middle East after the war provided fertile ground for the spread of communism and subversive activities, thereby threatening their interests in the region. They believed that insulating the Middle East against such influences required direct measures to improve living standards and socioeconomic conditions across the region.⁹⁴

Regional economic development in the Middle East was also envisaged as focusing on modernizing the agricultural sector and harnessing the region's vast agricultural resources to meet its food requirements while generating a surplus to help meet the needs of the global market.⁹⁵ So keen were Britain and the United States to capitalize on Middle Eastern food production that they sought to assess the potential and contribution of each country in the region to the global food supply. In Egypt's case, they concluded that rice was the only crop through which the country could contribute to it.⁹⁶

Regional economic development in the Middle East was also expected to address the Palestinian refugee problem by absorbing the refugees into the neighboring Arab countries to which they had fled from Palestine, to the benefit of the Israeli state. This approach reflected the conviction that failure to resettle the refugees in the Arab countries to which they had fled would result in their continued concentration in densely populated communities, creating conditions conducive to the growth of Palestinian resistance against Israel. Their continued presence would also sustain international pressure for their return to their homes.⁹⁷

It is noteworthy that, from the outset of Jewish migration to Palestine following the Balfour Declaration, Jewish planners sought to depopulate Palestine of its Arab inhabitants and transform their cause into that of a refugee population whose problem would be resolved in a manner serving the interests of the Israeli state then being planned, at the expense of the Middle East, particularly the Arab countries. In 1940, Joseph Weitz, one of the officials responsible for Jewish settlement in Palestine, asserted that it should be clear that Palestine could not accommodate both peoples and that independence could not be achieved if the Arabs remained in the country. He maintained that the only solution was to empty Palestine—or at least western Palestine, west of the Jordan River—of its Arab population by transferring them to neighboring countries.⁹⁸

This plan may have been behind the United States' assertion during the closing years of World War II that the proposed solutions to the Palestine question—partition and depopulation—would lead to further conflict and bloodshed, paving the way for domestic political unrest and widespread

discontent in the Near East, unless their implementation was accompanied by substantial financial assistance to promote development not only in Palestine but also in neighboring countries.⁹⁹

Since water constituted one of the principal prerequisites for the development required to resettle Arab refugees in the Middle East, Mr. Greenhill, one of the leading British negotiators in the 1947 Anglo-American talks in Washington on the Middle East, emphasized that future developments in Palestine would require a significant form of international organization for the use of the region's water resources. Such an arrangement would facilitate development efforts that could contribute to resolving the Arab refugee problem.¹⁰⁰

Following the emergence of the Arab refugee crisis with the establishment of Israel, and as Jewish militant organizations continued their violence against Arabs in an effort to force them to leave Palestine after the Arab defeat there in 1948–1949, the United States moved toward resettling the refugees outside Palestine after abandoning the United Nations resolution of December 11, 1948, which stipulated that the refugees should be allowed to return to their homes at the earliest possible opportunity and receive compensation for their property.¹⁰¹ Refugee resettlement was subsequently pursued either explicitly under that designation, as part of the Point Four Program, or as an independent initiative for the broader development of the Middle East.¹⁰²

US and British interest in resolving the Arab refugee problem in the Middle East was such that the issue was raised during their 1949 negotiations on the region's political and economic problems. During these talks, they emphasized the need to continue exerting pressure—as advocated by Mr. Bevin—on the Syrian government to resettle between 200,000 and 300,000 Palestinian refugees in northern Syria and to work toward resettling the remaining refugees in Transjordan, following the successful resettlement of approximately 40,000 refugees in the Jordan Valley.¹⁰³

To ensure the success of plans to absorb Palestinian refugees into the Middle East, Britain and the United States emphasized the need to promote economic and social development across the region, particularly in the

Arab states neighboring Palestine. Indeed, in a study dated May 14, 1949, examining the prerequisites for development in the Middle East and the general principles that should guide it, the official Middle East Committee concluded that the economic development of Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon represented the most effective solution to the pressing Palestinian refugee problem¹⁰⁴, despite the difficulties impeding development efforts in some of these countries.

Jordan, which the West acknowledged to be small in area, arid, and extremely poor, was nevertheless regarded as important for the resettlement of Palestinian refugees and for other significant purposes. Its development, however, required external financial assistance and interest-free loans to initiate projects utilizing the waters of the Jordan River as a first step toward development and refugee resettlement, pending future revenues from oil and from the Trans-Jordanian British Company's development of phosphate mines.¹⁰⁵

In Syria, where UNRWA had offered substantial facilities for the resettlement of a large proportion of Palestinian refugees, Middle Eastern development plans focused on accelerating the country's economic development after it became apparent that refugee resettlement could not be implemented effectively without accompanying substantive development projects beyond UNRWA's capacity to undertake. These included the Yusuf Pasha Dam project, which was expected to provide water for the irrigation of approximately three-quarters of a million acres—an English unit of land measurement slightly smaller than the Egyptian feddan—as well as the Ghab Project, whose implementation required Syrian-Iraqi cooperation to make effective use of the waters of the Euphrates River. According to the World Bank, which expressed its willingness to extend loans of up to £30 million to Syria, such projects would constitute substantive development initiatives and would be ideal if the Palestinian refugee problem were resolved.¹⁰⁶

Just as regional economic development in the Middle East was intended to address the Arab refugee problem at the expense of Palestine's Arab neighbors and to the benefit of the Israeli state, another objective of establishing a Middle Eastern system was to incorporate Israel and its Arab neighbors into a single Middle Eastern regional framework. This became

particularly significant after the United States and Britain came to regard Israel as the instrument they had sought to fragment the region and undermine attempts to establish Arab unity, which could threaten the interests of global imperialism in the region.

Thus, Britain and the United States advanced the idea of establishing a Middle Eastern regional system in the closing years of World War II, following the success of the Middle East Supply Center in fostering regional economic integration among the countries of the Middle East during the war. Through this framework, the Center contributed to managing the region's economic and social crises arising from the war and from the Middle East's emergence as one of its principal theaters, isolated from the global market.

The proposal was closely linked to British and American efforts to safeguard their converging strategic, oil, and commercial interests in the region, as well as to support the Zionist state, at a time when these interests were perceived to be threatened by communism and Soviet ambitions in the Middle East.

Britain and the United States therefore sought to approach the region on a regional basis and establish two regional organizations, one economic and the other defensive, encompassing all countries of the region, including Israel. The economic framework was intended to address the region's pressing economic and social problems through regional economic development aimed at raising living standards, resolving the Palestinian refugee problem, expanding regional markets for Western capital goods, increasing the region's contribution to meeting global demand for food supplies, and ultimately reducing the likelihood that the region's peoples would turn to communist ideas.

The success of the Middle East Project would also have meant the continued effectiveness of the policy of containing Russia and threatening its security through the military bases planned for establishment across the region, from which strategic sites within Russian territory could be reached.

Furthermore, the success of the Middle East Project would have meant thwarting attempts to establish an Arab regional union, settling the Arab-Israeli conflict in favor of imperialist and global Zionist dominance, and transforming the Zionist entity into a regional power encompassing the Arab world and controlling its resources and destiny.

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