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THE PRESENT SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA

Major George Fielding Eliot

Admiral Smith, Gentlemen:

I have been asked to talk today on the situation in the Mediterranean and Middle East—and what I shall give you is pretty much of a reporter's story. I have recently been there and have seen a good many of our military, naval, and diplomatic people—and many local personalities as well. I'll give you as objective a survey of the existing situation as I can.

You all know of the strategic importance of the Middle East. Any European power seeking to expand into either Asia or Africa must pass through the Middle East. The Soviet Union is already in Asia, but access for large military forces or commerce from Soviet Asia to the rest of Asia (the inhabited portions of India, China and Southeast Asia) is not easy. The normal route is by air. There is an overland route through the Persian Gulf Area, and an important sea route from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal. All these lines of communication (including a network of cables linking Europe and Asia) are controlled by the Middle East.

Another fact to consider is that under the span of this great area lies the world's largest known reserves of petroleum—the life blood of modern war and modern industry. Oil pipe lines run from the oil fields of Iraq through Syria to Haifa and Tripoli. Other lines to carry Persian Gulf oil to the Mediterranean are projected and some partially constructed.

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Because of its strategic location and its wealth in oil, the Middle East has become vitally important to us. It has always been vital to the British Empire. For more than a hundred years the British pursued a policy of propping up the Ottoman Empire which included what is now Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the area down to Arabia. This policy caused the British a great deal of trouble both at home and abroad, but the strategic necessity of the situation compelled them to undergo this criticism and continue their support of the Turks against the Russians. This policy caused the Crimean War and brought Britain to the brink of war in 1825 and again in 1877. In the latter instance it was the Congress of Berlin which was organized by British, German and other European statesmen that put a stop to Russian aggression without resort to war. Europe enjoyed peace for about thirty-five years thereafter.

Whether a similar solution can be found now remains for the future to disclose but it is clear that the problem is the same. The British, however, due to financial and economic difficulties resulting from the war, are no longer able to support this policy and we have stepped into the picture slowly, step by step, without a clear picture of what we were doing, but nevertheless with objectives very similar to those that have inspired the British policy for more than a century.

I should say that our objectives in the Middle East are first of all, to keep the USSR from expanding into this vital land-bridge; secondly, to preserve communications which are vitally important to us commercially and strategically; third, to preserve our very considerable oil interests, commercial and otherwise; fourth, to preserve a strategic position along the southern flank of the USSR from which a certain pressure can be exerted against a Soviet advance; and finally, as a minor and highly emotional issue, to secure a

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satisfactory solution to the difficult problem of Palestine which at one time threatened an actual break between the British and ourselves.

I should think the objectives of the USSR in this area are; first, to get advance positions from which their ground forces could over-run areas which could be used as bases for hostile air power (e. g. - Turkey) ; second, to get possession of the Dardanelles and thereby insure control of the gateway to the Black Sea; third, to gain access to additional oil supplies; and finally, to further their political ideas. They haven't done as much among the Arabs as people seem to think, but in Greece they have tried very hard to undermine the government in an effort to make Greece part of their Balkan coalition.

Now our own policy in the Mediterranean has not been as consistent nor as much a part of a considered pattern as the Russian policy; it has grown bit by bit. We came into the Mediterranean originally to seize a position in North Africa from which we could eventually move on to Italy and thereby advance the bases of our air power to strike more effectively at Germany.

The extent of our operations and commitments in the Mediterranean I think perhaps were unforeseen in the beginning. Now we find ourselves deeply committed in the whole area. Even while we were negotiating treaties with Italy and the Russian satellites many people in the area felt that we would soon withdraw. The announcement by the Secretary of the Navy that we would maintain a considerable naval force in the Mediterranean as a permanent part of the naval establishment had great effect. I happened to be in Vienna at the time and Tito had just shot down a couple of our planes. The stabilizing effect of this announcement was of almost inconceivable magnitude. The idea that we were actually

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going to stay in the Mediterranean with a strong naval force produced an electric effect.

Then in January 1947 came the British announcement of their intention to withdraw from Greece followed almost immediately by the announcement of what has been called the Truman Doctrine—United States assistance to Greece and Turkey. To show you how little the nature of the problem was understood, you may remember that when the bill was being considered by Congress there was a very strong feeling (especially in the House) that we should specifically exclude all military aid. And yet well over half the appropriation has been spent for military purposes. It is now clear to everyone connected with our Greek policy that order must be restored in Greece before the economy of the country can be revived.

Finally we come to the cold war—the acceleration of the cold war—the extension to Iran of our military assistance and advice—the tightening tension between the United States and the U. S. S. R. in Western Europe—and the creation of American air bases in the Azores and North Africa as a means of augmenting the carrier air power already in the Mediterranean. All of these segments of American policy are gradually crystallizing into a whole. They haven't crystallized as yet because they do not yet form a part of American policy for the Mediterranean-Middle East Area as a whole, much less a part of a combined Anglo-American policy which must come.

Now perhaps we can usefully examine for a moment some military aspects of this area. The key to our whole policy of resistance to the Russian advance is Turkey. That is because the Turkish soldier is the only military asset in this part of the world which will give us a return on our money; he is the only boy we

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are sure will fight if we give him the wherewithal to fight. The Arab is worthless, and we are afraid the Iranians under present conditions are not much better. The Greeks are pretty well tied up with their local troubles which are certainly to be deplored. The Turk, however, is a soldier with whom something can be done.

We have a mission in Turkey called the "American Mission for Aid to Turkey" and headed by Ambassador Wilson. It has three military groups—Ground Force, Air Force, and Navy—which work together under the senior officer who at the moment is General McBride. He acts as coordinator and reconciles differences of opinion which occur especially between the Ground and Air Force Groups and the various military and naval missions. Inter-service difficulties are bad enough in Washington, but they are very bad indeed when they are conducted more or less openly in a foreign capital.

In view of these questions it is perhaps the more remarkable that the missions are doing a first class job and are beginning to rehabilitate the Turkish armed services.

I don't suppose I could find words to do justice to the tact, energy, good nature, and patience exhibited by all grades and all branches of our Armed Forces in dealing with Turks, Iranians, and Greeks. It isn't an easy thing to go into a country like Turkey, for example, which has a fine military tradition of its own, and a very considerable amount of pride, whose army is headed by very senior generals of long service who tend to look backward on past glories rather than forward to new horizons and who are suspicious of foreign influence in any case—it isn't easy to tell these old boys that in many cases they are all wrong and they have got to do things this way. I'll give you one example. The anti-tank armament of the Turkish Army is based on the 37 mm. gun. Well, against modern

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tanks you might just as well use a pea-shooter. But try to convince the Turkish General Staff; try to make them see that time and money spent on this weapon are just thrown away; that while we couldn't give them as many new guns, we would at least give them a gun (the 76 mm. self-propelled gun) that would stop any Russian tank that came along. It was awfully hard to make them see it. It meant getting down to battalions and telling Turkish Majors they couldn't have something they already had. I give you that as an example of the innumerable difficulties that are constantly being met and constantly being overcome in whole or in part by the officers assigned to these various missions.

Another example is the old *Yavuz*—an old German battle cruiser which the Turks now have in their navy. She is a museum piece; she has no radar, no anti-aircraft, and not even a proper fire-control system for the guns she does carry. She's an absolute waste and expense to the Turkish Navy—and yet they insist on keeping her because they say she's an emblem of national power; they like to look at her. They keep 1100 men on board her who could be used to man several destroyers or submarines. It is very hard to point out that this is not the way to build up a real ability to defend themselves at sea.

However, a great deal of progress is being made. This is only the beginning. Nobody can go in and take an army of 600,000 men and rearm and re-orient it overnight. It is not hoped to rearm all the Turkish divisions at once but to build up a striking force of highly mobile infantry divisions with a certain amount of armor attached. It is thought that in a year the Turks will be able to do a good deal in the way of a delaying action.

In regard to the Turkish Air Force, it is hoped to give the Turks a tactical air force which can give some cover to their

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ground force operations. The Turks, like every other country, began by asking for strategic aviation—big bombers. Again, it was very difficult to explain that strategic bombing is a very expensive operation which can be conducted much better by a big power than by a small one; that their best contribution to strategic bombing is to provide air bases from which our heavy bombers could operate.

Next to Turkey is Iran which also has a frontier with Russia. Fortunately, the interior communications in Iran are not as good as those in Turkey. I say fortunately because if Iran becomes an avenue for Russian pressure, the Russians won't be able to go as fast nor as far through Iran as through Turkey. It is also fortunate because there is very little prospect of building up in Iran any military force comparable to that which we are building up in Turkey.

The Iranian Army could be disintegrated overnight. The individual soldier is supposed to be brave and of great endurance, but the officers are not good troop leaders, and the record of the army is not encouraging. For example, when the British and Russians invaded Iran in 1941, the Regent Shah decided to make at least a show of resistance with his crack first division—the Teheran Division. According to a British officer in Teheran, the day after this division was informed that it was going out to fight, the division commander and the faithful few who remained with him (one Greek intelligence officer, one regimental sergeant major, and three privates) were going around the bazaars with whips driving reluctant soldiers back to their units.

Now that may not be a wholly fair comment on the worth of the Iranian Army, because, after all, every soldier knew that some of the senior officers were intriguing with the British and some with the Russians. They all had political connections. Soldiers

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don't have much confidence in officers of that sort and can't be expected to fight under such leadership.

We have a military mission in Iran—in fact we have two; one with the Army, and one with the Gendarmerie. They are doing the best they can. They are putting in a certain amount of equipment which I don't think is thrown away. It does encourage the government to stand up to Russian pressure and it does make the average man feel that he has a friend somewhere on whom he can rely. That feeling was accentuated in the Azerbaijan deal when we stood up for Iran against Russia in the United Nations.

Then the question of oil. There is in Iran very considerable oil properties. Abadan, at the head of the Persian Gulf, has the largest refinery in the Middle East—if not the largest in the world. There has been a great deal of talk about the Russians taking it by means of an airborne drop. They might try it and there is no defense except the Iranian troops. There are no British troops there and none could be taken in except by air. The whole area is pretty open and the Iranian General Staff and our American military mission think in terms of a withdrawal from the Russian frontier which flanks and controls the railroads and access to Iran. That is a possibility provided the Iranian Army had a staff and command set-up capable of planning and executing a withdrawal under enemy pressure. From what I saw of the Iranian Army I don't believe it could be done.

Perhaps the best hope for Iran is the able and courageous young Shah. He is surrounded and hampered by some rather bad advisors and is constantly clashing with various political chiefs. He has ideas of his own and lots of determination. Eventually he may be able to get his army on a paying basis but it seems a long way off.

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Far away from Iran at the head of the Adriatic Sea is Trieste—another spot where the cold war is being fought. The free territory of Trieste was created as a compromise between Italy and Yugoslavia. Its economic and political future are very dim. It is now divided into two parts: one part occupied by Yugoslavia which our boys call “Lower Slobovia” and which to all intents and purposes has been incorporated into Yugoslavia in violation of treaty stipulations; the other part occupied by British and American troops, 5000 of each. The American troops there are some of the finest I have ever seen. Just the sight of the 351st Infantry Regiment delights any soldier’s heart. The appointment of a governor has been held up because the big four cannot agree. In other words, no candidate can be produced who is satisfactory to the United States, Britain and France on the one hand and to Russia on the other. Thus Trieste hangs in a sort of state of suspended animation.

Not too long ago I stood with the Chief of Staff of the American troops on an observation post overlooking Trieste. The Light Cruiser Dayton was lying down below. The Chief of Staff told me that our warships really worried the “Jugs”. They come and go all the time and the poor “Jugs” never know when they are coming nor how long they will stay. It is an example of the long arm of the United States and it makes the natives feel uneasy. They think we have thousands of them.

Well those are the cold war areas; now we have two hot wars—one in Greece, and one in Palestine.

The war in Greece started as an attempt by Greek Communists to take over control of the government with the blessing of Moscow and the adjacent states of Albania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. These states supplied the Greek resistance forces with

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weapons—not their own weapons, but British and American weapons given to Yugoslavia in the last war, and captured German and Italian equipment.

As long as there was a good deal of support all over the country for the guerrilla movement (you don't say *guerrilla* in Athens—the proper word is *bandit*), it was difficult to make any progress. Now our people have worked out a formula that was developed in World War II. In effect this formula consists in surrounding an area on all four sides—then closing in to the center killing or capturing all bandits discovered. This was tried on a small scale last April. We used 30,000 troops but killed or captured 2500 guerrillas at a cost of only 150 Greek National Army casualties. The Albanian frontier is a larger replica of this same device using seven divisions and requiring a great deal more time because it is necessary every so often to pause, re-group, and bring up supplies. Remember that when you go off the road you are entirely dependent on what men can carry or what mules can carry. After you have pushed forward for two or three days from your road-head, you just have to stop and build more roads before you can go ahead again. It is hard fighting—but we are getting somewhere.

We come now to the other hot war which is in Palestine. As you know the trouble in Palestine is not closely connected to the cold war. It is a local trouble between the Jews, who wish to establish an independent state, and the Arabs who are trying to prevent such a move.

The General Assembly of the United Nations finally decided to divide Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. The Jewish state consisted of three parts: a piece of Galilee; a coastal strip along Tel Aviv which is the heart and strength of Jewish power in this part of the world; and an inland area connected with the sea

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by a narrow corridor. The Arab state likewise has three sections—the central section, the coastal area, and the west of Galilee.

There are about 750,000 Jews in Palestine who are fairly well organized along military lines. In 1936 the British began the organization of police forces, both Arab and Jewish, on a large scale in the hope of ending Arab resistance to Jewish immigration. The British fought the Arabs from 1936 to 1939 without much result except that they did develop a considerable force of local Jewish police which became the nucleus of the Haganah, or Jewish National Army.

Then came the White Paper of 1939 in which Britain cut Jewish immigration to 1500 per month. This was resisted by the Jews and after World War II they began illegal immigration on a very large scale, the pressures resulting from which had a good deal to do with the British withdrawal. At the same time there developed two underground organizations—the Irgun Zvai Leumi and the Stern Gang. These were terrorist organizations in every sense of the word. They fought against the British by every means of assassination and otherwise.

The Arab protest to this continued Jewish immigration resulted in the formation of the Arab League composed of the states surrounding Palestine.

The only army in the Arab League that can be called an army in our sense of the word, is that of Trans-Jordan. Under King Abdullah, this army—the so-called Arab Legion—has been organized and trained by British officers right down to the company level. When the fighting broke out in Palestine this army and one weak brigade from Iraq were the only people who took an active part. The other armies in the Arab League were either occupied with police duties (Egypt) or too weak to be of any assistance (Lebanon, Syria).

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The Jews on the other hand had an excellent force of highly organized and well disciplined troops. The results of the fighting could scarcely have been different. The Jews quickly captured the whole of western Galilee. The Arabs concentrated on Jerusalem. King Abdullah had only thirty days of supplies for his little army and he planned only to capture the Arab area of central Palestine which he wished to add to his own dominions. There was considerable fighting done in the Jerusalem sector, but the net result was to make clear that the Jewish State had been established and was able to maintain itself against any possible Arab power.

The Arabs had made comparatively few gains. However, King Abdullah had done some creditable fighting—but at the same time had shot his bolt. Since the other Arab states had contributed next to nothing, he was able to say to them, “Well, you started this war with Palestine against my advice. I went in and did my best with my whole force. I gained some military credit. Where were you boys when this was going on?”

It is clear that the British and American Governments have come to the conclusion that a combined Anglo-American policy must be agreed on. And the Arabs are being told that no matter how much they dislike these very unpleasant beans, they’ve got to eat them.

The necessity of viewing the Mediterranean situation as a whole has been sufficiently emphasized. The British have considerable forces in the area—and we are increasing our forces. Just as a combined Anglo-American policy is necessary in Palestine—so a combined plan is essential for the defense of the Middle East—an area that for the future as for the past will remain the crossroads of the world.

Note: This is a digest of the transcribed remarks of Major Eliot.