BRITISH STRIVE TO KEEP THEIR HOLD ON MID-EAST

By CLIFTON DANIELSpecial to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

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Attitude on Palestine Is Linked to Retention of Strategic Role

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LONDON, May 29—British diplomacy was striving mightily this week to prevent the British system of Middle East defenses, so laboriously contrived and so painfully defended during the past thirty years, from being shot to pieces overnight in Palestine.

During the week A. V. Alexander, Minister of Defense, told the House of Commons that "the withdrawal of British troops from Palestine reduces our local commitments but does not affect our strategic interests in the security and stability of the Middle East."

That incidental sentence provides the key to Britain's recent policy in the Middle East and an explanation of what she thought the United States' attitude should also be. British commentators have remarked repeatedly that the "strategic interests" of the United States in Middle East security were certainly as great as those of Britain. They add that the need for cooperation in defense of those mutual interests transcended any temporary advantage that might accrue to one country or the other from pursuing an individualistic policy.

"It is their common interest," said The Times of London, "that the entire structure of international security in the Middle East should be saved from the peril which now threatens it."

Stake in Mediterranean

Britain's interest in the eastern Mediterranean countries has not altered materially since the Suez Canal was opened in 1869 as a short-cut sea route to the Far Eastern portions of her empire.

In 1882 British forces occupied Egypt for the purposes of protecting the canal, restoring internal security and establishing financial order. British troops are still there occupying the Suez Canal zone under the terms of a disputed treaty with Egypt.

Far from surrendering Cyprus, the British Government has lately proposed a new constitution for the island that would prevent the Legislative Assembly from discussing accession to Greece, which is the aim of the Cypriot Greek Nationalists. With the British evacuation of Palestine, Cyprus is to become a more important air and land base.

In the first World War the Turks were evicted from all the Arab lands lying around the Mediterranean and British forces are still present—although in reduced numbers—in all of those that were assigned to Britain by peace treaties. Britain also administers temporarily three former Italian colonies acquired during the recent war.

Threefold Interest

Britain's interest in Suez and other Mediterranean territories is threefold:

(1) For Britain the Middle East is a valuable source of food, raw materials and overseas earnings, particularly from oil, whose importance is too well known to need emphasizing. The United States' share in Middle East oil has lately come to equal or even to exceed that of the British and, if the political situation allows, production is ultimately to be increased.

(2) Aside from its importance as a link between the parts of the British Commonwealth, the Mediterranean is one of the world's busiest avenues of commerce, affording access to oil pipelines on both the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. The advent of the air age has increased the importance of the Mediterranean route, as can readily be seen by examining a map of the British Overseas Airways and noting the number of Royal Air Force stations in the Mediterranean area. American military and civilian air lines parallel the British, but in lesser number.

(3) The Mediterranean and the countries on its shores constitute a great sea and land mass lying between potential aggressors and British dominions in Asia and British colonies in central Africa. This geographical mass serves as a buffer, a base for defense and a springboard for a counter-attack.

Protection for British dependencies in Africa has assumed a new significance since the war, as the United Kingdom Government has earmarked the equivalent of more than $1 billion for colonial development and intends to promote colonial resources to the maximum as a contribution to European recovery and a solution of Britain's own financial crisis.

British strategists do not think of the Mediterranean solely in the nineteenth century sense of being the "lifeline of empire." In the late war it was disastrously proven that this narrow inland sea could not be kept open to traffic under determined attack from planes and ships based on its shores.

British military men also have no illusion that in a war of atomic bombs and supersonic rockets the Suez Canal would long be available to British shipping. These facts, however, do not diminish the need for British bases around the Mediterranean.

Strategic Bases

Whitehall has given numerous indirect hints that Britain wishes to retain control in Cyrenaica, eastern province of the former Italian colony of Libya, which has obvious use as a platform for aircraft on the western flank of Egypt. Zionists and their friends, aware of Palestine's value to Britain, cannot bring themselves to believe that the British really intend to surrender the Holy Land entirely and forever. They suspect some dark design to keep possession of bases in the Negeb, Palestine's wasted southland. No official indication of such intentions has emerged here. However, some British generals certainly would be glad of base facilities in the Negeb if they should be offered by any Government in possession of the district.

Being uncertain of what bases may be available in the future and convinced that Egypt ultimately must be evacuated, the British authorities have taken the precaution of starting the construction of military depot areas in Kenya, deep in the African Continent.

These areas could still be reached by sea if the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal were closed and could be linked to populous British colonies on the west coast of Africa. This east-central African system of bases, supporting and supplying outposts around the Mediterranean bases, and the central Africa rear area are not contradictory conceptions but complementary.

However, central Africa is so primitive and underdeveloped that its defense in depth will take years to organize.

Along the shores of the Mediterranean, British policy dictates that if Britain herself cannot acquire and hold bases they must be denied to other potentially hostile powers. This policy, with powerful American support in Italy, Greece and Turkey, has so far kept communism from coming down to the waterline, except in Yugoslavia.

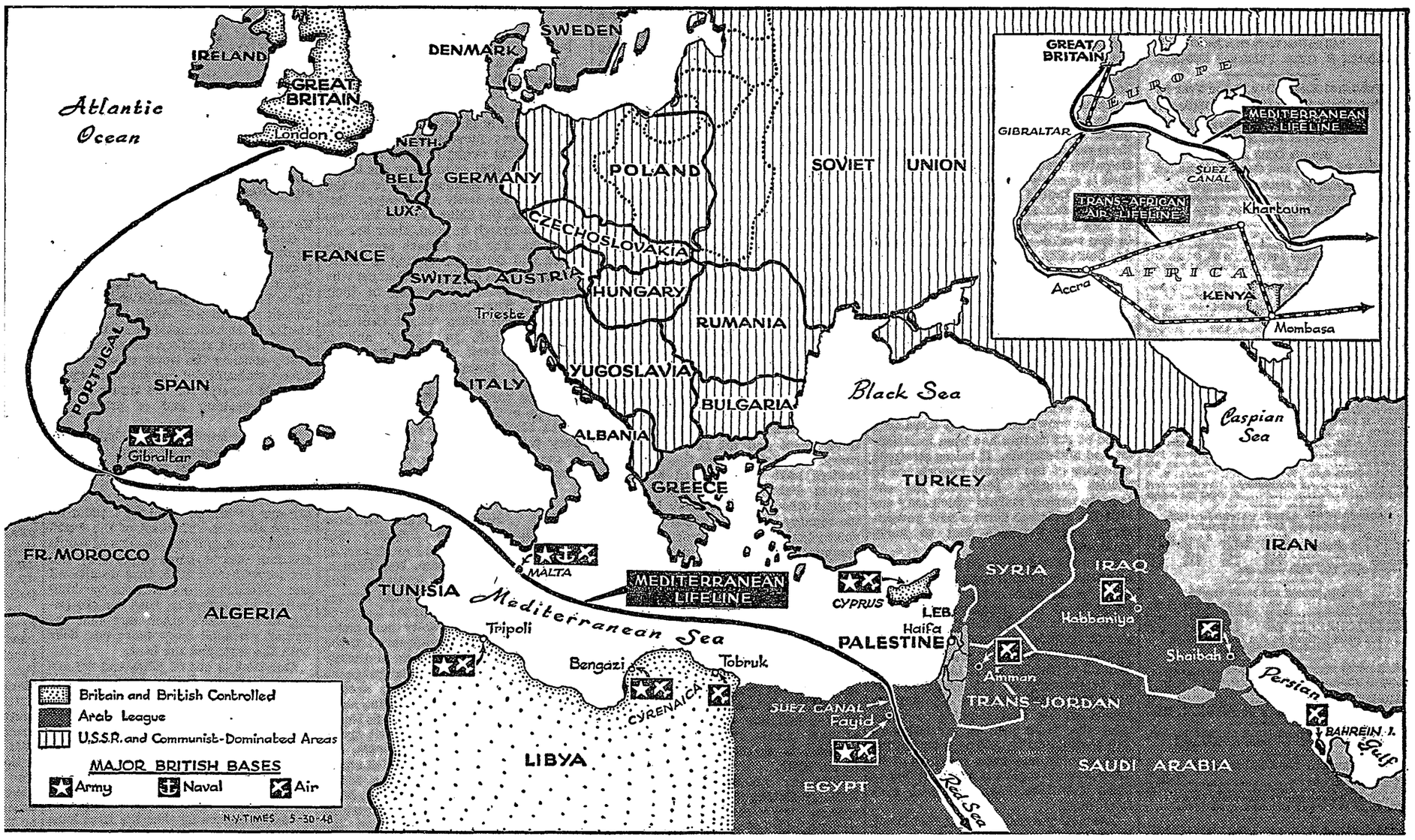
Defense System

In the Mediterranean territories that Britain held in the inter-war years she built up a defense system that consisted of British-trained and British-equipped local forces to maintain internal security and a chain of British bases to guard those territories against external aggression from a major power such as Germany. These arrangements are gradually, and with great difficulty, being adjusted to the demands of renascent and vociferous Arab nationalism, but Britain's conception of them remains fundamentally the same.

This system of alliances with Iraq, Trans-Jordan and Egypt, despite some weaknesses, enabled Britain to beat back the Axis from the Middle East during the late war and the British Government has no wish to junk it hastily simply because of the Arab states' involvement in the Palestine war.

Moreover, there is a genuine fear among officials here that the establishment of a Jewish state under partial Soviet sponsorship might open a new door to Communist activity throughout the Middle East.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA IN BRITAIN'S DEFENSE SYSTEM



Until August 1, Britain will use facilities at Haifa for the evacuation of air, sea and army units.

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