

## **BRITISH ATTITUDE TOWARDS TURKEY'S POLICIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST (1945-47)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article focuses on the British attitude towards Turkey's policies in the Middle East in the period between, 1945-47. At the start of the Cold War Turkey faced an obvious threat from the Soviet Union directed against her independence and territorial integrity. She at first asked for British and later American help to thwart this danger. Turkey, simultaneously, tried to establish a security zone around her borders with the Arab states closest to Britain. In this context, therefore, the article deals with Turkey's efforts to improve her relations with the regional states. It then goes on to examine how Great Britain and the Soviet Union reacted to the Turkish political and strategic attempts in the Middle East. The paper argues that Turkey adopted a narrow bilateral line with the Arab states rather than a broad regional approach. The main reasons for this approach were: first, Turkey, under the rule of President İnönü, was reluctant to go too far in engaging in Middle Eastern affairs; second, London took a hesitant attitude towards Ankara's policies in the region; and last, Moscow strongly reacted to Turkey's political steps with the Arab states.

### **KEYWORDS**

Turkey; Middle East; Britain; Turkish Foreign Policy; Transjordan; Iraq.

The article focuses on the British attitude towards Turkey's policies in the Middle East in the period between, 1945-47. This paper represents a regional study which examines Middle Eastern politics within the global context in the Post-Second World War era known as the 'Cold War'.

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The paper argues that Turkey adopted a narrow bilateral line with the Arab states rather than a broad regional approach. The main reasons for this approach were: first, Turkey, under the rule of President İnönü, was reluctant to go too far in engaging in Middle Eastern affairs; second, London took a hesitant attitude towards Ankara's policies in the region; and last, Moscow strongly reacted to Turkey's political steps with the Arab states.

Though a great deal of research has been done by the researchers on the various aspects of British policies towards the Middle East (e.g. David Devereux, Peter Hahn, W. Roger Louis, Rubin Barry, Elizabeth Monroe, etc.), a few works have been produced on Turkey's Middle Eastern policy during the early years of Turkish Republic. No major work has however come up on Turkey's foreign policy in the region for the 1945-50 period, except few articles.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, relatively better research has been conducted on Turkey's Middle Eastern Policy in the post-1950 period.

This paper is based on archival sources obtainable at the Public Record Office (PRO) in Kew, UK, as well as secondary sources

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<sup>1</sup>For a major work comprehensively examined this period; see Mustafa Sıtkı Bilgin, 'Anglo-Turkish Relations In the Middle East: British Perceptions, 1945-1953', Unpublished PhD Dissertation, The University of Birmingham, July 2001.

both in Turkish and English. Before examining the topic it will be appropriate to provide some general information about the political situation in the Middle East and Europe during the immediate Post-Second World War era.

### 1. General Political Situation in the Middle East

During the immediate post-war era, known as the 'Cold War', the situation in the Middle East was not the same as it had been before the war. In the inter-war period Middle East was under the British and French domination and the Americans had only limited commercial interests in the area. From the Turkish point of view, Turkey enjoyed the confidence of both Eastern and Western powers. While in the West it had a Treaty of Alliance with Britain and France, in the East she managed to establish an independent Eastern Block with which it was regarded as the leader of the Eastern world.<sup>2</sup>

However, the above picture greatly changed by the end of the Second World War. The war proved a disaster for the pre-war Europe's great powers, namely for France, Germany and Britain. At the end of the war, while Britain lost seriously its political and economic power, France and Germany were heavily devastated. Russia

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<sup>2</sup>*Report by Foreign Office*, 10 December 1939, FO 195/2685. The term Middle East was an ill-defined geographic and politic term and it was described in a different formulations by the many scholars and authors. It was first used by an American historian A.T. Mahan in 1902, and since then it has been used for different purposes. In the broadest sense, it contains the region between Morocco and the Atlantic Ocean in the west, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east, Turkey in the north, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt and the Sudan in the south. On religious grounds, the area is made up by a Muslim states system with the exception of Israel, while on the ethnic grounds it includes different races. For the purposes of this study it covers Turkey in the north, including the northern part of the Arab states (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan), Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east, and Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Sudan in the south. See, *Minute by Bowker*, British Embassy, Cairo, 10 December, 1946, FO 141/1122; Ann Williams, *Britain and France in the Middle East and North Africa, 1914-67* (New York: ST Martin's Press, 1968), p.1; Magnus Persson, *Great Britain, the United States, and the Security of the Middle East: The Formation of the Baghdad Pact* (Sweden: Lund University Press, 1998), p.26.

on the other hand, had emerged from the war as the most powerful country in Europe. With the apparent expansionist aims, the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), became the most imminent threat to the western interests both in Europe and in the Middle East. Under the heavy financial burden, Britain tried to secure its economic and strategic interests in the Middle East against the possible Soviet aggression. As Britain had swiftly realised its inability to face the Russian danger alone it decided to obtain American support and worked hard to gain it.<sup>3</sup>

The political situation in the Middle East itself was not safe and it was steadily worsening. While the Levant states including Transjordan were preoccupied with obtaining their independence, the already independent states of Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were busy with their respective unity plans. This resulted in more confusion and complications in the area. The question of sovereignty in Palestine and the rising indigenous forces of Arab nationalism which clashed with the interests of west in general and that of Britain in particular were among the other issues in the area.

Within this general context, this article explores the position and the motivations behind Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East and how Britain reacted to it. In this period, according to official Turkish view, the Soviets embarked on a policy to pressure Turkey from two directions; first, it employed a direct menace to Turkey by threatening its independence; second, it employed an indirect approach, by provoking the neighbouring states, namely communists in Greece, Bulgaria and Syria, to force Turkey to give way to Russia.

## 2. Turkey's Difficulties With the Levant States

The major problem between Turkey and the Levant states (Syria and Lebanon) at the time was the question of Sanjak of Alexandretta

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<sup>3</sup>In June 1944, the British Chiefs of Staff (COS) concluded that the USSR would emerge from the war as the strongest land power in Asia and Europe and hence they recommended that Britain should seek American assistance to frustrate possible Soviet threat to the British interest in these areas. See COS (44) 527 (0) (PHP), War Cabinet, COS Committee, 15 June 1944, CAB 119/126.

(Hatay). According to article of the Turkish National Pact (Misakı Milli) of January 1920 this area was included within the borders of the new Turkish State. However, owing to the circumstances of the time, namely the military weakness of Turkey, she had to abandon the province to the French Mandate in Syria under certain conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey's main concern was to protect its security against any threat from the Mediterranean region and France rendered its consent with the Turkish conditions.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless the question of sovereignty over Hatay was to continue until 1936 when France planned to turn its mandate into a treaty with Syria. Meanwhile, Turkey, bearing in mind the possible Italian threat from the Mediterranean, insisted on Hatay's independence. When this matter was not resolved, it was referred to the League of Nations by the end of 1936. Not long after the League of Nations' involvement in the issue, the province of Hatay eventually joined Turkey under the regulations by the League. However, Syria did not accept this process and protested the League in June 1939.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ismail Soysal, Seventy Years of Turkish-Arab Relations and an Analysis of Turkish Iraqi Relations (1920-1990), *Studies on Turkish Arab Relations*, Annual-6, 1991, p. 30. A number of works have been produced on the Hatay (Alexandretta) issue. Article written by Avedis K. Sanjian in 1956 is one of the earliest works, containing one-sided views and lacking adequate archival materials. See, Idem, 'The Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay): Its Impact on Turco-Syrian Relations, 1939-56', *The Middle East Journal*, Vol.10, No. 3 (1956). Some of the articles produced by the Turkish scholars are based on Turkish sources and reveals the Turkish views on the issue. See; İsmail Soysal, 'Turkish-Syrian Relations (1946-99)', *Turkish Review of Middle East Studies*, 1998; Soysal, 'Seventy Years of Turkish-Arab Relations'; Kemal H. Karpat 'Turkish and Arab-Israeli Relations', in Kemal H. Karpat (ed.), *Turkey's Foreign Policy in Transition, 1950-1974* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975); Abdülhat Akşin, 'Türkler ve Araplar', *Ortadoğu*, Vol.4, No.34 (1965); Celal Tefik Karasapan, 'Güney Komşumuz Suriye', *Ortadoğu*, Vol.1, No. 15 (1963); Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Hamit Pehlivanli and others, *Türk Dis Politikasında Hatay (1918-39)*, (Ankara: ASAM, 1991). It is however beyond the scope of this study to examine entire history of the Hatay question. This article only deals with the issue as far as it relates with the topic in the period specified by this study.

<sup>5</sup>Edmond to Clutton, 3 June 1944, FO 371/44188.

<sup>6</sup>Soysal, 'Seventy Years of Turkish-Arap Relations', p.37.

During the Second World War Britain granted independence to the Levant States in June 1941. With this action Britain aimed at satisfying the forces of Arab nationalism by driving the French out of the area.<sup>7</sup> For this reason the British Foreign Secretary, A. Eden, on November 1944, instructed the British Ambassador in Ankara to inform the Turkish Government that Britain wished the Turkish approval of the independence of the Levant states.<sup>8</sup> However, Turkey at the time was unable to recognise the independence of the two states, Syria and Lebanon, owing to her difficulties with the former.<sup>9</sup> This was because Syria, under the Soviet instigations, demanded from Turks the return of Hatay, and Lebanon supported the Syrian demand. These two states embarked and carried out their hostile campaigns over Hatay from mid-1944 until the beginning of March 1946 and hence no agreement was reached between the two parties.

### 3. Turkey's Relations With Iraq

From mid-1945 onwards, Turkey began to face an imminent Soviet threat to her independence and territorial integrity. At this time Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, demanded from Turkey cession of bases in the Straits and return of some eastern provinces. The Turkish reaction was to reject immediately these demands and seek to obtain British and American support against the Soviet pressures. But, initially, the support came only from Britain. Unlike the United States, Britain felt that its most important strategic and economic interests in the Middle East would be in great danger if Turkey fell into the Soviet orbit. That is why, with losing no time, Britain, diplomatically and politically, began to back Turkey against the Soviets.

At this time the Soviet Union conducted a two dimensional policy towards Turkey. The first approach was a direct Soviet threat that focussed on crippling the territorial integrity of Turkey; the second one was an indirect threat that aimed at encircling Turkey by establishing a group of hostile states around her territory such as

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<sup>7</sup>Abdulhat Akşin, *Türkiye'nin 1945'ten sonraki Dis Politika Gelişmeleri, Ortadoğu Meseleleri* (İstanbul: B. Kervan Matbaası, 1959), pp. 75-76.

<sup>8</sup>Peterson to Eden, 25 November 1944, FO 226/292.

<sup>9</sup>Minutes by HM Minister in Damascus, 29 January 1945, FO 226/292.

Communists in Greece, Bulgaria and Syria and thereby forcing Turkey to give way to their demands.<sup>10</sup> Within this context Turkey tried to counteract these plans by establishing a security zone around her borders. For this purpose, the first Turkish step was to approach Iraq to sign a political treaty of friendship. It was the closest Middle Eastern country to Turkey. Iraq, itself, also felt the threat from the Soviet troops stationed in Northern Iran. In addition the USSR had already set troubles in Northern Iraq by helping the Kurdish rebellion under Mollah Mustafa Barzani.

Iraq hardly suppressed the uprising with the help of Britain in the spring of 1945. Facing these external and internal threats, Iraq was also looking for a possible collaboration with Turkey for its own security. Moreover, its prominent leader, Nuri al Said, was known to have long cherished ambitions to unite the northern part of Arab states under the crown of Iraq. However, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria had strongly objected his plans. Nuri Pasha wanted to reinforce inter-Arab position of Iraq, and in order to do this, he needed the Turkish support as she was the strongest state in the region. Moreover, both of the countries were the founding members of the first independent Eastern pact namely the pact of Saadabad in 1937.<sup>11</sup>

Under these circumstances President İnönü invited the Regent of Iraq and Nuri Pasha to visit Turkey to discuss regional and international issues related to the interests of the both parties. This visit took place on September 1945 and ended with an agreement to prepare a draft treaty of Alliance between the two sides.<sup>12</sup>

While Nuri Pasha wanted to establish an extensive scheme of Middle Eastern pact to compete with Iraq's rival, Egypt, in the Arab League, Turkey was reluctant to materialise such a comprehensive plan. Turkey only wished to conclude a bilateral treaty with Iraq for two main reasons. First, she thought that the realisation of such extensive pact was not possible but believed that a treaty of friendship

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<sup>10</sup>Gerald De Gaury, *Three Kings In Baghdad: 1921-1958* (London: Hutchinson Ltd., 1961), p.131.

<sup>11</sup>Lord Birdwood, *Nuri al Said: A Study in Arab Leadership* (London: Casell & Company Ltd., 1959), p.199.

<sup>12</sup>A.K. Helm, Istanbul to Bevin, 20 September 1945, FO 195/2488/644.

with Iraq was more feasible; second, by concluding a treaty with Iraq Turkey aimed at restraining Syria to cease its hostile campaigns against her. Turkey had already know the existence of Iraqi ambitions to annex Syria.

Britain however was reluctant to support this Turkish initiative because it believed that the Turkish action might irritate the USSR. Britain at this time was still careful not to provoke Russia as the Labour Government had continued to have its hopes of reaching a compromise with Moscow.<sup>13</sup> As a result, when Turco-Iraqi discussions took place in September 1945, Vinogradov, the Russian Ambassador to Ankara warned both Britain and Turkey that the Soviet Government was not happy about the recent Turco-Iraqi political contacts. Thereafter Britain informed Turkey that it would only give its consent if Turkey concludes a cultural and commercial but not a political treaty with Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

Even though these constraints were imposed by Britain and Russia, Turkey and Iraq were able to conclude a broad treaty on 29 March 1946 containing cultural and economic as well as political articles.

#### 4. Turkey's Relations With Transjordan

Turkey's Middle Eastern policy was based on the establishment of close relations with the Hashemite states of Iraq and Transjordan. This was because these countries had ambitions over Syria. Thus, Turkey's collaboration with the two states could constrain Syria. Moreover these countries had strong political ties with Britain with whom Turkey had relied on for its support against the Soviets. Therefore, in Turkish mind, having close relations with the Hashemite states would further contribute to Anglo-Turkish collaboration.

After Transjordan gained independence from Britain in March 1946, a Turkish delegation under Feridun Cemal Erkin visited the country to convey Turkish President's congratulations for the occasion

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<sup>13</sup>Helm to Bevin, 19 March 1946, FO 371/52408.

<sup>14</sup>Helm, İstanbul to Bevin, 20 September 1945, FO 195/2488/644.



of Jordan's independence in December 1946. Turkey also offered a treaty of friendship to Jordan under the similar terms with the Turco-Iraqi Alliance. The Turkish delegation also invited the King to visit Turkey. It was agreed that when the King arrived in Turkey, the terms of the treaty would be discussed between the concerned parties.<sup>15</sup>

About this time, after securing Transjordan's independence, King Abdullah began to promote his 'long cherished' union scheme on 11 November 1946 by declaring that 'Greater Syria' was a standpoint on Transjordan's foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> This statement received strong reactions from the Lebanon which stated two days after the King's statement that it opposed firmly to that policy.<sup>17</sup> Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Parliament as well, expressed their hostile attitude to the proposed scheme in the following months.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, inter-Arab relations were getting tense because of the attitudes of anti-Hashemite states of Egypt and Saudi Arabia towards the 'Fertile Crescent' or 'Greater Syria' projects in the Arab League. In the beginning of 1946, King Abdullah proposed Iraq to withdraw from the League as Egypt and Saudi Arabia strongly reacted to the King's project at the League meetings. Nuri Pasha also shared the view of the King of Transjordan. Nevertheless, the constraints imposed by Britain which saw this attempt as destructive to the unity of the League, and the policies pursued by the nationalist government of Iraq prevented this action.<sup>19</sup>

As a sequel to the visit paid by Erkin to Amman, King Abdullah accompanied by his son and foreign minister arrived in Ankara on a state visit on 8 January 1947. This was followed by the signature of a treaty of friendship between Turkey and Transjordan on January 11. At the signing ceremony, both İnönü and Abdullah referred to Turkey's

<sup>15</sup>Sir A Kirkbride to Foreign Office, 3 December 1946, FO 371/52936.

<sup>16</sup>*Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter quoted as *FRUS*), 1947, Vol. V, pp.742-748, 752, 758; Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, p.13.

<sup>17</sup>British Legation Amman to Bevin, 5 December 1946, FO 371/52936.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*, *FRUS*, 1947, Vol. V, pp.738-740, 742-745.

<sup>19</sup>Jerusalem to Cairo, 14 January 1946; Baghdad to Cairo, 1 February, 1946, FO 141/1084; Michael Eppel, 'Iraqi Politics and Regional Policies', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 28(1), 1992, pp. 110-113.

friendly relations with Iraq and the Lebanon, but neither of them mentioned anything about Syria.<sup>20</sup>

The treaty was consisted of the following areas: perpetual friendship and peace; the exchange of diplomatic representatives; judicial matters; matters related to travel and residence. Disputes were to be settled by pacific means in accordance with Article 33 of the UN Charter. Jordan, however, did not agree with a particular Turkish proposal that each party should support the other in the event a dispute with a neighbour. Also, Turkey consented to exempt Transjordan from the application of the treaty whenever it conflicted with the obligations of the Arab League.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, after the signature of the treaty, the Soviet Government was quick to accuse Britain as promoter of the treaty which “would serve to British imperialism”.<sup>22</sup> Britain as well became uncomfortable with this Turkish action. In December 1946 Ernest Bevin, the British Secretary of State, instructed Sir David Kelly, the British Ambassador to Ankara, that Britain had strong reservations on any type of political treaty between Turkey and Transjordan that could be interpreted as directed against Syria. The main motive behind the British attitude was to keep Syria away from the Soviet orbit by gaining its sympathy. Turkey, on the other hand, assured Britain that the proposals were organised under the articles of the UN Convention and it contained no articles which could be interpreted in any other way.<sup>23</sup>

### 5. Turkey's Relations With Egypt

Turkey's relations with Egypt started in a good manner just after the end of the Second World War. The both countries after exchanging consultations with each other declared war on the Axis in February

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<sup>20</sup>Weekly Political Summary by Foreign Office, 15 January 1947, FO 370/1432.

<sup>21</sup>Weekly Political Summary by Foreign Office, 22 January 1947, FO 370/1432.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>British Embassy, Ankara to Foreign O, 20 December 1946, FO 371/52936.

1945 in order to take their places in the newly established UN Organisation.<sup>24</sup>

In the beginning of 1946, the Egyptian Prime Minister, Nokrashi Pasha planned to have a treaty of friendship with Turkey. Turkey's Foreign Minister, Hasan Saka spoke to the Egyptian Minister in Ankara on the line that Turkey would be happy to sign a treaty with Egypt. Simultaneously, Anglo-Egyptian relations were getting tense due to Egypt's demand of complete British withdrawal from its soils.<sup>25</sup> The British Chiefs of Staff, strongly objected to the Egyptian idea with a view that Egypt had a cardinal importance to the security of British interests in the Middle East and even to that of Britain itself. They, therefore, concluded that Britain should firmly maintain its position in the Suez Canal region.<sup>26</sup>

These views were also strongly supported by Turkey which thought that Egypt itself could not provide the security of Canal area against the Soviet encroachments as she was also under the shadow of the Soviet expansionism. Turkey therefore was convinced that a firm British presence was necessary in the Canal Zone. Thus, Egypt's national interests clashed with the interests of both Britain and Turkey. This led to Turco-Egyptian estrangement from the mid-1946 onwards.

## 6. Conclusions

When the Second World War ended Turkey felt an imminent Soviet menace from two directions: one was a direct threat which concentrated on her territorial integrity; the other one was an indirect threat which aimed at encirclement of Turkey by provoking its neighbours against her. The Turkish immediate measure to counter these threats was to search for Anglo-American support to its security. In addition to this, Turkey developed its own plans in the Middle East as a complementary to Britain's support to thwart the Soviet danger around her borders.

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<sup>24</sup>COS Secretary's minute, 21 February 1945, AIR 9/471.

<sup>25</sup>Cabinet Defence Committee, DO (46) 14, 24 April 1946, CAB 131/1.

<sup>26</sup>Kelly to Foreign Office, 7 June 1946, FO 371/53421.

As İnönü revealed the essence of Turkish Middle Eastern policy to King Abdullah, when the latter was in Turkey, perceiving that its security was dependent on Britain, Turkey sought to form political alliances in the Middle East with the Arab States closest to Britain.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in Turkish mind, it was believed that this policy would further contribute towards an establishment of additional bond with Britain.

The general nature of Turkish policy was to focus on bilateral relations with the Arab states rather than to concentrate on regional combinations. It showed no interest at all in reviving the Pact of Saadabad (or Sadabad) or leading for an establishment of an Eastern block as the Iraqi leader Nuri Said Pasha had long suggested. This could be ascribed due to the Turkish fears of Soviet reactions, and to Britain's reluctance and the Turkish statesman's indifference towards the regional schemes.<sup>28</sup> This policy under İnönü's rule, in fact, represented a recession from Atatürk's broad regionalist approach to narrow bilateral understanding which only limited to the states of Iraq and Transjordan.<sup>29</sup>

The Syrian issue showed a degree of Turkey's isolation in the international scene to the extent that she hardly coped with such small problem with a weak state of Syria that had just gained its independence. As the Turkish main concern was to establish a security zone around its borders with the states closer to Britain, Turkey embarked on a policy of tightening its relations with the Hashemite states of Iraq and Jordan. By following this policy, Turkey first, aimed

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<sup>27</sup>British Legation Amman to C W Baxter, Foreign Office, FO 371/67304.

<sup>28</sup>Minute by J G Ward, Southern Department, 12 December 1945; British Embassy, Paris to Bevin, 10 October 1945, FO 371/48765. In his conversation with the British Ambassador in Paris, Menemencioglu, the former Turkish Foreign Minister and the Ambassador at the time, expressed his views to the former that 'an alliance between Turkey and those-states [Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt] would be a source of weakness to Turkey so long as those states were themselves feeble, divided, and quarrelling both with Great Britain and with France'. These views in fact reflected the general Turkish approach to the Arab states.

<sup>29</sup>For a detailed information on Atatürk's Arab policy see Bilgin, 'Anglo-Turkish Relations', pp.62-70.

at breaking its international isolation. Secondly, Turkey planned to force Syria to stop campaigning against herself by means of collaboration with the Hashemite states, as Syria had deteriorated relations with Iraq and Transjordan because of the two states' long ambitions over Syria.

Britain took somewhat a hesitant attitude towards Turkey's relations with the Arab states for two main reasons: First, London was very careful not to provoke Moscow as it put pressure on Turkey to force her to sign cultural and commercial treaties, but not political one, with the Arab states. The USSR often warned both Britain and Turkey on the line that they would regard any political treaty as a hostile action against themselves, and Britain seriously bore this in mind. The second reason was that Britain did not like Turkey's selective approach towards the Arab states as it believed that the Turkish action would further contribute to the region's instability. In British mind, the best course for Turkey was to seek better relations with all the Arab states especially with Iraq, Egypt and Syria. Britain attributed special importance to Egypt as it possessed the most important strategic area, the Suez Canal Zone, in its territory.

At the time, when Turkey took steps for having closer relations with Iraq and Jordan, the Arab League states had already been divided into the two blocks: One was the Egyptian-Saudi faction, including the Levant states of Syria and the Lebanon and the other group was the Hashemite bloc of Iraq and Transjordan. As Egypt had long been claimed the leadership of the whole Arab World, it recently became the leader of the Arab League in March 1945, and this position was accepted by Britain and by the majority of the Arab world with the exception of the Hashemite states.