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Comment on "The Soviet Challenge in the Near East" - Princeton, June 2, 1951  
Dr. Stephen B. L. Penrose.

The presentations which Dr. Black and Dr. Ireland have made represent a rather academic approach to the question of Soviet interest in the Near East. It is perhaps curious that a professional educator would accuse others of being academic, but I am speaking as one who comes directly from the firing line rather than as an educator.

The American University of Beirut was during the past year the specific object of Communist efforts to provoke internal disturbance and to upset the effective operation of the institution. Fortunately I was given advance warning of their intention and was in a position to take vigorous action as soon as the trouble showed signs of breaking. As a result we were able to dislodge a Communist cell which had been established among certain students in the University, mainly Iraqi and Palestinians. In the process I became fairly intimate with the methods and lines of approach of Soviet propaganda and I am in a position to take issue strongly with those who may hold that Soviet propaganda efforts in the Near East are neither strong nor effective.

It is essential to emphasize that Communist ideology, or Communist doctrine, is unimportant in the Middle East. There is no strong drive toward party organization nor is there much attempt to convert to Communism the masses of the Arab people. It is these facts which may account for the superficial conclusion that Soviet propaganda is neither strong nor effective. However, no conclusion could be more mistaken.

As a matter of fact in the Middle East the Russians are emphasizing their "democracy" as opposed to the "imperialism" of the Western powers. They pose as the true democrats who believe in the welfare of the common man and who emphasize the right of every man to an expression of opinion, whereas the Western imperialists block the attempts of the common man to achieve social justice and even block his efforts at freedom of expression. Until the Western powers develop among themselves a clear concept of what they mean by democracy, which has become one of the most ambiguous and most completely misused terms in the world, they will continue to remain on the defensive while the Russians utilize against them their own strongest argument for support in the struggle with Communism.

I might illustrate what I have just said by an experience with one of the Communist Iraqi students with whom I had difficulty last fall. When I told this cocky youngster that he was obviously out of sympathy with the purposes of the American University of Beirut and could therefore go to the Treasurer's Office and collect his fees before departure, he turned to me and said, "Is this democracy in education?" He did not know what he meant by the term "democracy in education" but it was one of those phrases which he had learned which is being taught to students all over this part of the world and which is emphasized over and over again regardless of its lack of meaning. To his question I replied, "No, this is discipline which is something you know nothing about". But I know that nothing I could say would have changed his view that he was talking to an imperialist rather than to a democrat.

Dr. Black has listed certain Soviet objectives in the Middle East and I have no quarrel with his analysis except to say that he has emphasized only the very long-range objectives which are not the immediate Soviet purpose. I would emphasize, however, that the long-range objectives should not be forgotten and I would call once more to your attention that curious phrase in the Nazi-Soviet protocol of 1940 which our own State Department has published in its interesting document entitled "Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939-41". On page 259 is found the statement that "The center of the aspirations of the Soviet Union lies in the region south of Batum and Baku in the general direction of the Persian Gulf." The Soviet, in the person of Molotov

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were insisting to the Nazi that this area of the world must be allocated to them as their special sphere of influence in the division of booty after their joint success in the war.

But there is an even more important short-range objective which the Soviets seek and this has been overlooked. Soviet Russia can consider that it has achieved a great victory if it succeeds in denying to the Western powers the economic resources and strategic positions now available to them in the Middle East. The Russians do not need the territory nor for a considerable period could they enjoy the fruits of Middle East oil production themselves. But to prevent the Western powers from having access to them would represent a considerable triumph to the Soviet. We are all aware of the importance of Middle Eastern oil to the European economy together with the secondary fact that its availability to Europe relieves American oil production of a tremendous burden. For Russia to deny that oil to Europe would constitute a terrific blow at the economy of the Western powers.

It should be clearly understood that such a denial is not dependent upon Russian military occupation of the Middle East. All that they need to do for the achievement of their end is to arouse sufficient antipathy and bitterness toward the West among the peoples of the Arab world as to provoke them to sabotage and resistance. The pipe lines which stretch for more than 1000 miles across the desert can readily be sabotaged and cannot be protected. Their security depends upon a friendly population in the areas through which they pass.

Soviet propaganda is being actively pushed throughout the Middle East. It stems from offices of WOKS which are established in Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad, and probably in Egypt. Certainly Soviet propaganda efforts are very strong in Israel where the major propaganda center for clandestine Arabic distribution is located.

It is not always easy to recognize Soviet propaganda as such, for without depending upon Communist party organization the propaganda line promotes xenophobia, capitalizes upon the natural ambitions of underdeveloped countries for economic and social development, and it even gives aid and support to opposing political groups, many of whom may not in themselves be in the least degree sympathetic to Communism. For example, the former Syrian popular party (Hizb el Kaumi es Suriyya), the now outlawed "Fertile Crescent Union" party, is without much question receiving Soviet assistance in the hope of reestablishing itself so that it can overthrow its persecutor, the present national government. Likewise the Baath party of Syria, another exceedingly conservative group, has been showing signs of close association with the Communist party, although their ideologies are wide apart. Soviet support would be given to almost any rightist splinter group whose activities might result in the disorganization of present governments, emphasis upon conflicting popular interest with resultant chaos and possible civil war.

The political blunders of the Western powers are continually used as a base for creating discontent. Arab bitterness toward Israel and particularly toward the powers which brought it into being is played upon continuously. The frightful condition of the Arab refugees from Palestine is played up as being the result of the action of Western imperialism. Active efforts are being made among the refugees themselves to create the belief that in Soviet Russia alone lies any hope of a restoration of their property and their human rights. American efforts to provide funds for economic development of underdeveloped countries and American loans to Europe and to Middle East countries are labeled as the efforts of the Western imperialists to buy friendship, which of course cannot be bought. Finally, the Soviets emphasize ad nauseam the fear of economic and political exploitation which is endemic in the Arab world, subject as it has been throughout centuries to control by outside powers. When it is

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explained to Arabs that the American oil interests in the Middle East are private interests and not government-supported, they simply reply: "Yes, but wait until America gets into a war and then watch them force us to fight on their behalf". As a recent propaganda leaflet clandestinely distributed in Beirut put it: "The Western imperialists are forging new chains for the Arab world, seeking to enslave the Arab peoples and forcing them to fight on their behalf against the peace-loving nations of the world, at the head of which is the Soviet Union".

It is apparent from the above that the Soviet propagandist is not cursed with the necessity for consistency. He may be expected, and he continually seeks, to play both ends against the middle without any sense of responsibility for the outcome. This may be typified by his handling of the subject of Israel. For obvious purposes in the Arab world, Israel is publicly declared to be the tool of Anglo-American imperialism, the obvious implication of which is that the Arab countries should look to Soviet Russia for a reestablishment of their territorial rights. At the same time, Russia buttresses her position in Israel by providing arms and equipment to the Israeli army as she did during the fighting in 1947-48, using bases in Czechoslovakia and Russia itself as sources of supply. Continuing support is given to the Mapai section of the Histadruth, the potent left-wing section of the Israeli labor movement. Israel is the only country in the entire Middle East in which Communism is not outlawed and in which it exerts a considerable influence on the course of government. This fact permits the Russians to utilize Israel as a base of propaganda and espionage efforts directed against the Arab world.

The Western powers and the United States are in grave danger of having their influence in the Middle East destroyed if they do not speedily realize what is being done to them. The Russian position is certainly vulnerable to attack if a concerted effort were made to expose it, but to the present moment nothing effective has been done along this line. But even counter-propaganda will be relatively ineffective unless our policies begin more closely and more consistently to coincide with our oft repeated expressions of principle. We have heretofore been held in highest regard by the Arab peoples but we cannot continue to win or deserve their admiration unless our policies are inspired once more by the ideals so frequently publicized which the Arabs had come to admire.

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