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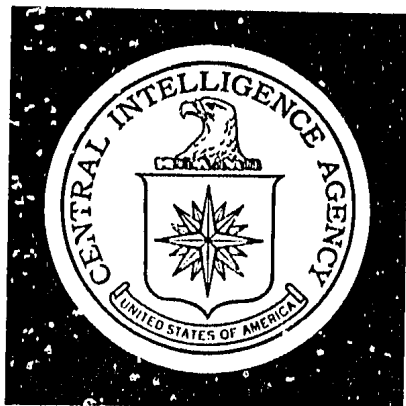
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BOARD OF  
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

# SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

Strategic and Political Interests in the  
Western Indian Ocean

Secret

No. 3-67  
11 April 1967

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

11 April 1967

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 3-67

SUBJECT: Strategic and Political Interests in the Western  
Indian Ocean 1/

A. Introduction

1. The islands of the western Indian Ocean, 2/ though well removed from the main arenas of contention among the great powers, are gradually assuming some importance for the US. In part this is because space tracking and monitoring installations there are important to the forthcoming Apollo program. In addition, the islands offer possible substitute

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1/ This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence and the Office of Research and Reports in the Directorate of Intelligence.

2/ See map attached.

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sites for US installations in Africa whose tenure is increasingly uncertain. There are also strategic considerations which may lead to construction of new US military or logistic bases on UK-owned islands.

2. Generally speaking, the area is fast becoming something of a power vacuum.

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The French, too, maintain a military presence, though their interests are limited. As yet, the Communists have only a few discernible interests in the area, but these may develop in the next few years.

3. Whatever role the US adopts in the Indian Ocean, it will have to cope with the interests of other powers, the sensitivities of the African and Asian states on the periphery of the ocean toward "foreign bases" and the emerging nationalism in the islands, complicated by serious domestic problems.

B. Major Power Interests in the Area

4. The US. By far the most important US installations in the area at the moment are NASA and USAF facilities in the

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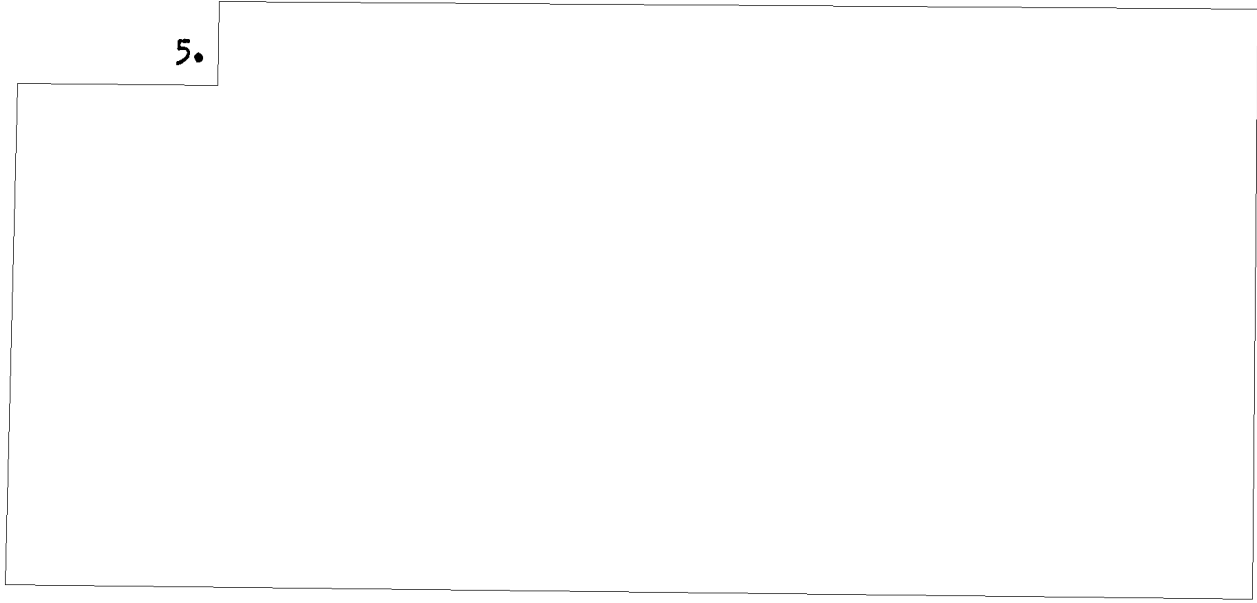
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Malagasy Republic in support of the space programs. Madagascar is useful in connection with space launches from Cape Kennedy and Vandenberg Air Force Base. The recently re-equipped NASA satellite tracking station near Tananarive is the largest such facility outside of the US. There is also under construction at this site a USAF tracking station containing C-band radar apparatus, similar to one now in operation in South Africa. During the forthcoming Apollo lunar landing program the USAF intends to use airfields on Madagascar and Mauritius for search and rescue and for airborne instrumentation missions. The USAF also maintains a satellite tracking station on Mahe Island in the Seychelles, which is supplied by small air and naval units based on Mombasa, Kenya.

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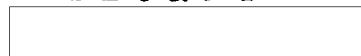


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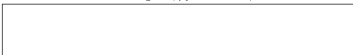
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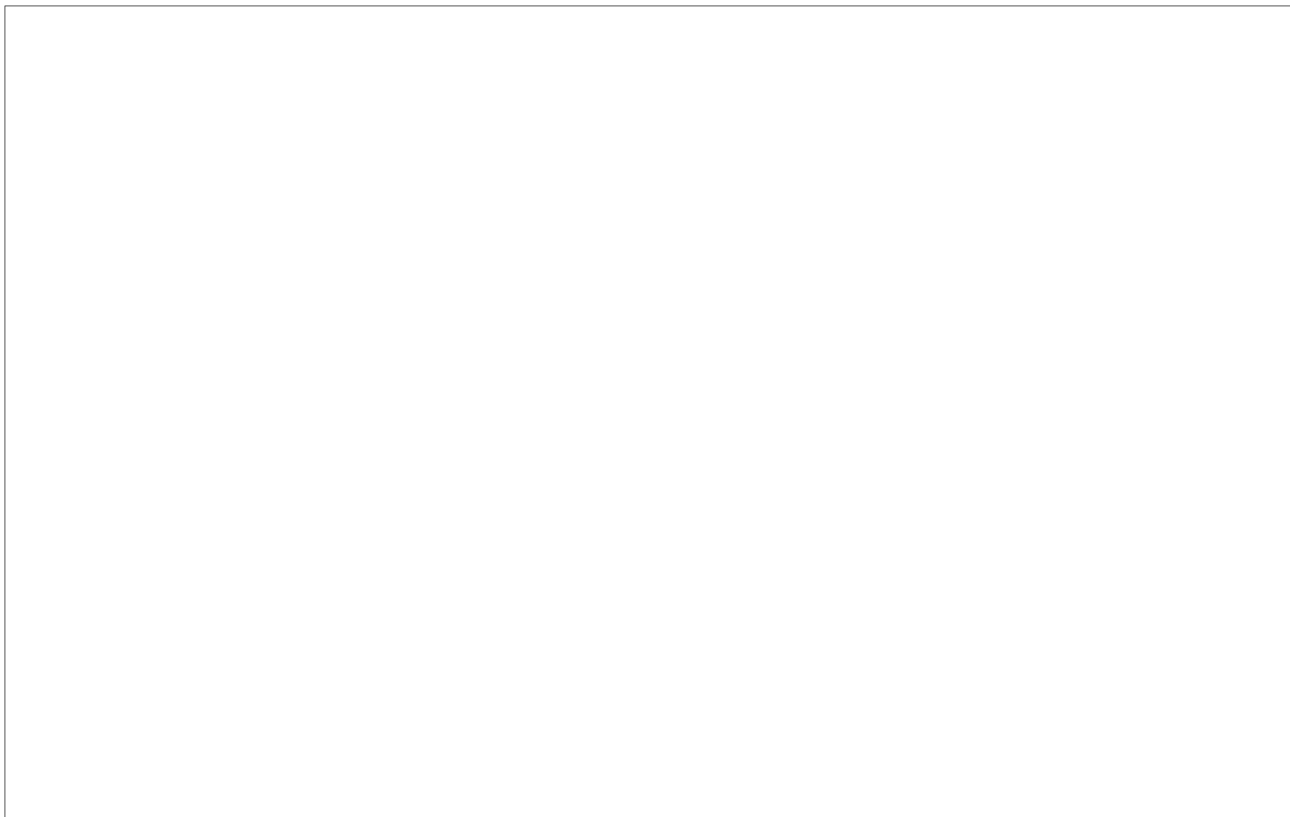
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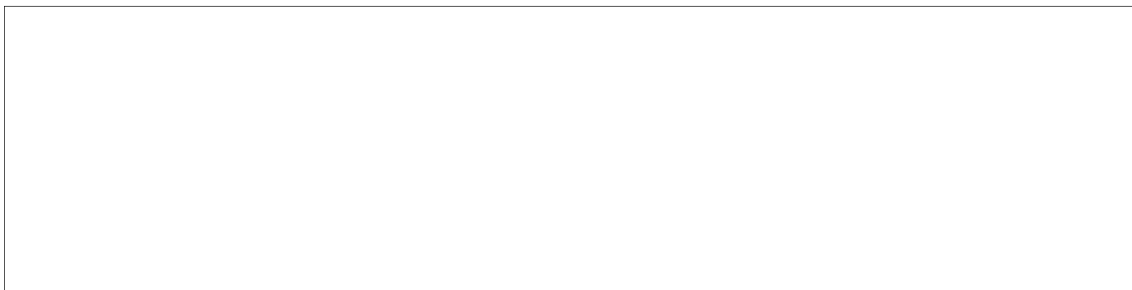


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7. France. France retains Reunion Island as an Overseas Department, the Comoro Islands as an Overseas Territory, and it has a privileged position in the independent Malagasy Republic. The military forces which France maintains in



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Madagascar, Reunion and the Comoro Islands give it a presence in the Indian Ocean. Tananarive and Diego Suarez are, respectively, the headquarters of French Overseas Defense Zone Number Three (the Indian Ocean area), and the Flag Officer of the small French Indian Ocean "fleet." French forces on Madagascar indirectly support the Malagasy government, and conduct joint maneuvers with the largely French-officered Malagasy army. De Gaulle was irked by President Tsiranana's willingness to grant use of Majunga to the UK, and now seeks to reinforce France's powerful influence there by the appointment as ambassador of a tough, highly-regarded African specialist with an intelligence background.

8. The Communist Powers. Neither Moscow nor Peking has as yet evidenced an important interest in the western Indian Ocean area. However, the Soviets are building political and military influence in Somalia, and they may consider it a suitable location, politically as well as technically, for a facility to track and communicate with satellites and space vehicles. Peking maintains a modest presence in Somalia, exerts some influence in mainland Tanzania, and enjoys considerable standing in Zanzibar and Pemba (there are about

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136 Chinese technicians and military instructors on these islands). The Chinese may find that the most satisfactory test range for ICBM's will be into the Indian Ocean and they may soon become interested in establishing some sort of instrumentation facility in that area. Plausible sites would include the French-owned Kerguelen Islands in the far southern reaches of the Indian Ocean, or the tiny French-owned Amsterdam, St. Paul, and Crozet Islands. They might, however, choose to employ ships for this purpose. In this case, the availability of facilities in Zanzibar or Dar es Salaam would be of key importance. As yet, however, there is no evidence to suggest that they have requested such facilities in the islands or in East Africa.

C. The View from the Islands

9. The islanders are preoccupied with their own parochial concerns and are only occasionally aware of changing interests of outside powers. But their internal problems are likely to affect, and be affected by, the presence of the outsiders.

10. Madagascar. In terms of Western interests, Madagascar is currently by far the most important of the islands in the

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region. By African standards, the Malagasy regime is remarkably stable and staunchly anti-Communist, though its stability depends largely on elderly, ailing President Tsiranana. However, the highlanders of Polynesian and Melanesian origin (Merinas) who ruled the island in precolonial days, dislike their political subordination to the relatively backward, but more numerous coastal peoples. This is not to say that the departure of Tsiranana would necessarily lead to political instability. His heir-apparent is likely to use harsher methods in dealing with Merina or other disaffection and would probably maintain control. The Malagasy have a reputation for political apathy, but they can be roused to violence as in the bloody 1947 revolt, in which some 80,000 were killed before the French were able to put it down. On balance, we think that the US installations on the island on which the Malagasy look with favor, if only because of the economic benefit they derive from them, will be safe over the near term.

11. Mauritius. The situation on Mauritius is far less serene. Indeed, the island is a Malthusian nightmare. The population (750,000 on an island of some 720 square miles) is increasing at the rate of 20,000 a year, with almost no

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prospects for economic growth, substantial emigration, or a significantly reduced birth rate. Virtually all food is imported, and most arable land is devoted to sugar, with little hope for increased or more varied production. Unemployment is rising rapidly, and the colony's finances cannot cope with welfare needs. Furthermore, racial divisions among Indians, Creoles (mulattos), and Chinese, and religious antagonisms between Muslims and Hindus complicate all else.

12. These adverse conditions coupled with a recent political history of strikes, civil disobedience, and communal violence, suggest that the future of the island is likely to be turbulent. Mauritius is slated for independence in late 1967 or early 1968, but must first hold a general election. The incumbent premier, a Hindu of pro-Western inclinations, is supported by the bulk of the Hindu laborers' (some 50 percent of the population). Other political parties follow racial or religious lines, and some sort of coalition will probably be necessary to form a new government. Communists of both Moscow and Peking persuasion have been building strong positions in labor and youth movements and forming front organizations. In the likely event that socio-economic conditions continue

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to deteriorate, or if communal violence again erupts, local pro-Communists might be able to establish a dominant position.

13. Reunion and the Comoros. Reunion suffers from many of the same ills as neighboring Mauritius; it is overpopulated and dependent upon a sugar economy. But ethnic and religious divisions are less stark. A wave of strikes and rioting in 1965 was quelled by the arrival of French troops who thereafter remained to garrison the island. Few seek independence, but some, including a sizeable Communist Party, demand greater autonomy within the French community. The Comoro Islands, midway between Madagascar and Mozambique, are overpopulated with a Negro-Arab mixture, roughly akin to the Zanzibaris. Paris provides about 80 percent of the operating budget, and appears willing to subsidize the territory for some time. Some of the 25,000 Comorians residing in Tanzania clamor for independence of their homeland, and their "liberation" movement is funded by the African Liberation Committee of the OAU, but French control is not seriously threatened.

14. The Seychelles. The Seychelles Islands were until recently politically apathetic. However, a young, energetic

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Seychellois, returning from the London School of Economics, has gained control of the labor movement, including the workers at the USAF tracking station, and organized a political party. In 1966, the islanders signalled their emergence into the twentieth century by conducting a strike which led to some violence and eventually intervention by British troops. The UK envisages a new constitution allowing for limited self-government. But the outlook for the economy is dim; already troubling population pressures are certain to increase; and the islands are likely to experience some political tension and occasional violence over the near term.

D. The Outlook

15. While the islanders grapple with their own domestic difficulties, their area is certain to become even more of a power vacuum. During the next year the UK withdrawal from Mauritius, coupled with the evacuation of the Aden base, will substantially diminish the Western position in the western Indian Ocean area. This may inject new impetus into plans for exploiting the BIOT. A US decision to do so would bring forth scant criticism from the islanders; even the labor radicals

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hope to benefit from the jobs which the bases would create for their followers. But many of the Afro-Asian states are disturbed by prospects of foreign bases in their general vicinity. The Somali press, for instance, responded angrily to a recent Economist article on BIOT, and the African Liberation Committee urged OAU member states to protest alleged, but probably unfounded, French plans for a military base in the Comoros. Furthermore, as the number of colonies continues to shrink, the UN Committee on Decolonization (the Committee of 24) will almost certainly pay more attention to the remnants of empire in the Indian Ocean, and can be counted on to alert its parent organization to "neo-colonial" designs. And the USSR and Communist China will play on Afro-Asian sensitivities to oppose military construction in the area.

16. Almost certainly there will be instability and unrest in the African and Middle Eastern lands adjacent to the Indian Ocean, but it is doubtful whether additional military sites in the Indian Ocean could be used effectively to meet these problems. Nonetheless, some UK officials consider the BIOT base scheme in terms of possible emergency evacuation of their citizens from troubled areas. US interests in the area

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will depend greatly on the evolving needs of space programs and communications and considerations of national security over the next few years. These are difficult to forecast. Some observers maintain that in a major war a string of bases across the Indian Ocean would be invaluable in linking US bases in Europe and Libya to bases in Australia or Thailand. Probably the principal unknown factor is the degree and nature of future intrusions in the Indian Ocean by the USSR and Communist China. In view of these uncertainties, some claim that US exploitation of BIOT sites would serve an anticipatory purpose, in the expectation that eventually the Communist powers will expand their interests in the Indian Ocean. They liken it to Seward's purchase of Alaska, not necessary at the time, but valuable as world conditions change.

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Basic Data on Selected Islands of the Indian Ocean

<u>Island</u>	<u>Governing Power</u>	<u>Area in Sq. Miles</u>	<u>Pop.</u>	<u>Ethnic Composition</u>	<u>Main Exports</u>
Madagascar	Independent (the Malagasy Republic)	230,000	6,200,000	Merinas (Malay-Polynesian) 25% Coastal People (basically Negro, with Arab, Merina strains) 75%	Coffee, vanilla, sugar, cloves, sisal, tobacco
Mauritius	UK (self-governing crown colony)	720	750,000	Indians 67% (Hindu 51%) (Moslem 16%) Creole 29% Chinese 3% European 1%	Sugar and molasses
Seychelles	UK (crown colony)	156	47,000	Mulatto (French and Negro)	Copra, coconuts, vanilla, cinnamon
British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)	UK	N/A	Negl.		Coconuts
Reunion	France (Overseas Department)	969	350,000	Mulatto, Negro, Indian, Malay, Chinese, French	Sugar
Comoro Islands	France (Overseas territory)	863	200,000	Negro-Arab	Vanilla and flower essences.

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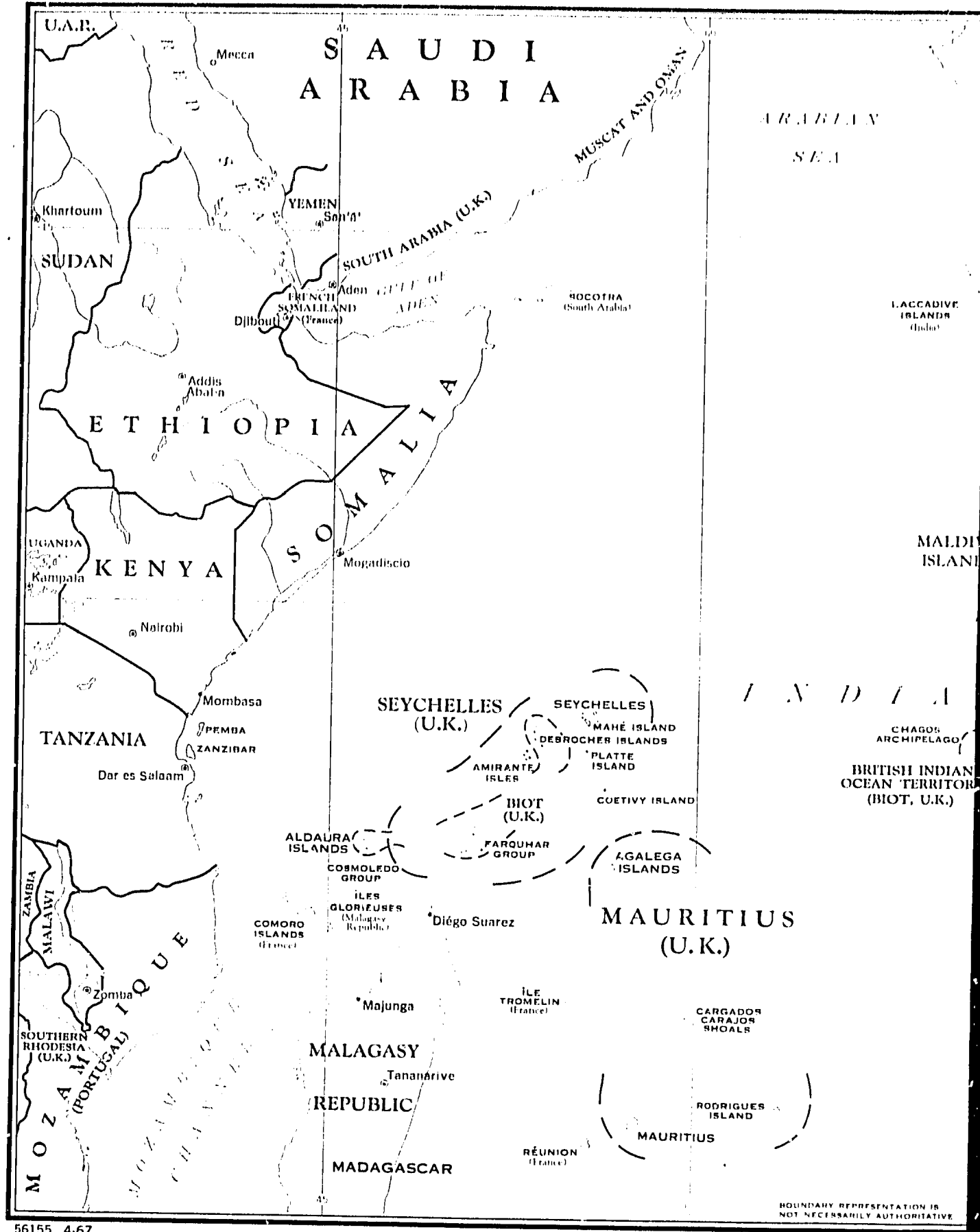
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