

THE MIDDLE EAST

When Secretary of State Dulles saw President Eisenhower yesterday in Denver we can presume they discussed the Middle East as well as Germany, disarmament and the other topics to come up at the foreign ministers' meeting in Geneva next week. A long way off, in the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem, Premier Sharett ended a two-day debate on foreign policy by asking: "What are the Soviet plans in the Middle East?" That is exactly what Mr. Dulles would like to know.

The area is tense. It is charged with the electric hostility of Egypt and Israel, the bitterness between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus, the nationalist ferment of the Moslem peoples in North Africa. Colonialism, nationalism, religious strife, social conflicts, economic troubles, a population "explosion"—there seems to be no end to the woes that betide the Middle East in this critical period.

It stands to reason that Russia should seek to profit by this state of affairs. Indeed, one can only wonder why she waited so long to throw in her lot with the Arabs and thus set in motion the fears, hatreds and rivalries that have been there ever since the State of Israel was formed. On a cold, calculating basis the Soviet Union always stood to gain more than she might lose by taking the Arab side. The whole Moslem world—and that means all the way from Morocco on the Atlantic Ocean to Indonesia on the Pacific—is sympathetic with the Arabs against the Israelis. The only country left in the world, besides Israel, that has a great Jewish element is the United States and we were already lined up against Russia. The fear that Moscow would move into the Middle East has been at the back of the mind of every Western statesman for years. And now it is happening.

Secretary Dulles tells us that he raised the subject twice when Mr. Molotov was in New York last month. What started the issue was the Czech (i. e., Russian) offer of arms to Egypt which Premier Nasser accepted. As was feared, this is setting an arms race in motion, for Israel has an edge today and intends to keep it. Arms races in the past have tended to end in wars. There is nothing more dangerous than fear, and Israel and Egypt are afraid of each other.

International politics has often been likened to a game of chess. In this case Moscow moved its Czech pawn into an unguarded opening and now Messrs. Dulles, Macmillan and Pinay are seeing what they can do to counter the move. But Russia has always been moving pawns and knights and bishops into the area we used to call the Near East. As early as Peter the Great, Moscow was reaching for the Dardanelles. Ever since she emerged as a great power from the Napoleonic wars Russia has pressed downward and westward—toward India, toward Persia, toward Turkey. All through the nineteenth century the great power that blocked Russia was Britain. In 1955 is it to be the United States?

This is a question whose answer opens up tremendous possibilities—and rather frightening ones in some respects. How far would we be willing to go? Is there not room for Russian as well as Western influence in the Middle East, or must we exclude each other? Perhaps the basic question is this: How much does the Middle East mean to us?

And again we get back to the question Moshe Sharett asked yesterday: "What are the Soviet plans in the Middle East?" This is one question that time will soon answer for us even if Mr. Dulles does not get the reply in Geneva. Events are moving at dizzy speed in the Middle East and neither Russia nor the United States will have much leisure to ponder over that question.

We say that the peace must be kept, that Egypt and Israel must not fight each other, that there should not be an arms race, that the Arabs are letting in a Trojan horse if they start dealing with the Russians. Secretary Dulles can well say to Mr. Molotov: "Do you really want a relaxation of tensions? If so, hands off the Middle East!"

Quite possibly he has already said something of the sort to the Soviet Foreign Minister. However, we await the Geneva talks starting next Thursday. That is when and where results can be obtained—if they are going to be obtained.

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