

CRITICAL WEEK IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Increasing pressure on Israel to withdraw

FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT

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This promises to be a critical week in the Middle East, with the Israeli withdrawal complete except from the Gaza strip and points in southern Sinai controlling access to the Gulf of Aqaba.

Meanwhile a tug-of-war is going on throughout the Arab world over the attitude to be adopted to the Eisenhower plan for the Middle East. The plan has been denounced by official spokesmen in Syria and by the Egyptian press as implying improper interference in an area which refuses commitments to East and West. In the communiqué announcing Saturday's agreement between Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan on the provision of financial aid to the latter to replace the British subsidy the four Governments opposed the Eisenhower plan, though the initial reactions in both Jordan and Saudi Arabia were not unfavourable.

More isolated

The pact would be ineffective until ratified by the four signatories, but it is almost certain to lead to negotiations for the abrogation of the treaty between Britain and Jordan under which Britain pays Jordan £12 millions a year and maintains three bases in Jordan. The renewal of the subsidy would be due in March and the Jordan Government is likely to press its Arab allies for something on account before burning its boats by refusing further British contributions.

The abrogation of the Jordan treaty will leave Iraq more isolated than ever as the only Arab state whose defence plans involve commitments to and by Britain.

The "pact of Arab co-operation," it is styled, was described by Cairo Radio, quoting the Syrian Premier, as a slap in the face for imperialists. But if it assures Jordan's solvency while saving the British Exchequer £12 millions a year, this will be a false judgment. The treaty with Jordan, whose aim was the buttressing of Hussein's uncertain little kingdom, lost after the Suez adventure what little value it retained for Britain. British bases in Jordan were useless, indeed almost besieged during the critical days of November, while the British subsidy only bought the illwill of the Jordanian people.

The ending of the treaty will remove one encumbrance to British Middle East policy which certainly needs all the help it can get these days. For Jordan the results of the abrogation might be less satisfactory. If and when the pact of Arab co-operation is ratified, Jordan's finances will be less secure than they were under the British guarantee; and the ending of the treaty means Britain will no longer be committed to the

support of Jordan against an Israeli attack. Egypt's showing in the Sinai campaign is unlikely to commend her in Jordanian eyes as an equally valuable protector.

Unfortunately the fact that Britain appeared to the Arab world to support the Israeli attacks makes these arguments academic, and whatever the Jordanian leaders feel in their hearts about the wisdom of putting themselves in the hands of Colonel Nasser the pressure of public opinion in favour of ending the British connection is likely to be decisive.

The Eisenhower plan could provide a way out of this difficulty, and King Saud, who left Cairo on the next stage of his journey to Washington, is likely to discuss the problem with the American President and Mr Dulles. The main subjects under discussion during King Saud's visit will be the tenure of the American base at Dhahran and a settlement of the Suez Canal question, which is of acute interest to King Saud because the present blockage cuts into his oil royalties.

But if Saud who is believed to be favourably disposed to the Eisenhower plan can get the Americans to underwrite a pact of Arab co-operation, Jordan's anxieties may be allayed while the façade of Arab solidarity is preserved. For America the problem is one of timing and method, for Britain's Suez adventure has heightened the old suspicions and complicated policy-making for Britain and her friends.

Talk of "filling a power vacuum" has not helped, for Arabs, though aware that a vacuum exists, prefer not to recognise it—or their own inability to fill it. In the Lebanon, which is only technically an Arab State, the facts are seen more clearly than elsewhere in the Middle East, and the newspaper "Al Amal" writes that for the moment the Arabs "are content to fill the vacuum with resounding speeches, patriotic songs on the radio, and newspaper articles." But it says that what they have to face is not a balancing game but a choice of civilisations. Remarking that one civilisation respects the individual while the other mistrusts him the newspaper asks in which one does Egypt wish to live?

King Saud and his backward autocracy would seem an odd vehicle for the furtherance of trans-Atlantic democratic ideals in the Middle East—but apart from the Lebanon (whose far-seeing Foreign Minister, Mr Malik, is in New York now) and Iraq (whose Crown Prince Abdul Illah follows King Saud to Washington) Saudi Arabia has the strongest reasons for co-operating with the Americans since her oil industry, under American management, provides almost her entire national income. And King Saud's regime has for the moment the advantages of being unassailable Arab and relatively secure.

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