

# ARABS AND THE WEST

## SYRIAN POLICY AS A REFLECTION OF BITTERNESS

From Our Middle East Correspondent

The key to the heart of the Arab States is armament. From Beirut to Damascus and Amman the traveller hears the same story. It is another way of saying that the mainspring of the Arab States' policy is hatred and fear of Israel. The Arabs' enemy, said a high Syrian official, is Israel, not Russia. If Russia comes to the Middle East it will be to make war on "democracies." The Arabs' concern must be to make their frontiers safe against Israel.

The Lebanon, Syria, Jordan are, of course, the countries most exposed to what is regarded as the inevitable Israeli attempt to expand. It is natural for a military régime like Colonel Sheshekly's, in Syria, to over-emphasize the external danger—though indeed it has some better claims to the support of the Syrian people. But all three countries have been madenervous by a succession of frontier incidents. They doubt the value of the tripartite declaration of 1950, which pledged western action to defeat any attempted violation of frontiers or armistice lines in the area. And they have lost some confidence in the administration of the truce.

### MIDDLE EAST DEFENCE

This preoccupation with the Israeli danger does not, however, close Arab minds to the possibility of cooperation with the west for defence of the Middle East against Communism. It is not doubted that, pact or no pact, the Lebanon has made up its mind to give the western Powers all the facilities they may need in the event of war. The Jordan Government's policy necessarily reflects dependence on Great Britain for the means of existence as an independent State, though the Palestinian element of the population is embittered against the west.

Syria, also an important link in the line of communications of a Middle East command, is a more uncertain quantity. She is in a position to take a more independent line, and her attitude more truly reflects the deep and bitter resentment of all Arabs against the United States and Great Britain for their role in bringing Israel into being. This resentment is, of course, kept burning by the existence so long after the Palestine war of more than 800,000 Arab refugees scattered over the Middle East. Western diplomats in Arab countries recognize that a solution to this problem is a first and indispensable step towards a *rapprochement* between the western Powers and the Arab world.

If Syrian foreign policy does not give free rein to popular feeling it will be in the main because she can see no way other than cooperation with the west of gathering the military and economic strength to keep Israel out. But her Government intends, it seems, to make the western Powers pay handsomely. Put bluntly, Syria's price consists of equipment of the most modern type for one armoured and two or three infantry divisions, an air force of up-to-date machines, and a naval arm; and, in addition, \$200m. for the development of her rich natural resources. Her bargaining position is not weak. France has supplied her with lend-lease Sherman tanks and other still useful equipment in quantities that are, by Syrian standards, substantial. She has recently ordered from the Gloster Aircraft Company a small number of British Meteor jet fighters, and some of them have already been delivered.

### RELIEF FUNDS

The General Assembly of the United Nations has voted \$250m. for relief and resettlement over a period of three years. Most of the money will be contributed by the United States and Great Britain. It is in under-populated Syria, or nowhere, that the great mass of the refugees can be established as self-supporting communities again. Jordan, indeed, may be a competitor if the Yarmouk River irrigation and hydro-electric project goes through and if it justifies the hopes of its Point Four sponsors that it can provide the means of integrating all the 400,000 refugees in Jordan. But pending further engineering and soil studies in the Jordan valley other experts are sceptical. There is also a question whether the economics of the project

might not turn on Syria's willingness to buy electric current at a price which might or might not suit her.

So Syria's bargaining position is still strong. She makes the point that if Syria is to help the western Powers to clear up the refugee problem which they, not Syria, created the Syrian Government must be enabled to set on foot a parallel development programme which is obviously for the benefit of its own people. The condition is not necessarily prohibitive. As the United Nations Relief and Works Agency is understood to calculate, if Syria were to take 125,000 families from Gaza, the Lebanon, and Jordan the amount of resettlement funds to be spent in Syria would be \$170m. Of that it is a reasonable estimate that \$100m. would be spent, not on housing and equipping refugees but on irrigation, industrial and communications projects which would advance Syrian economic development.

In addition Syria can hope to obtain \$25m. from the International Bank for the construction of Latakia port and other projects. Should Syria reach a refugee agreement with U.N.R.W.A. she might become credit-worthy for another \$25m. from the Bank. And if she could bring herself to accept mutual security aid and Point Four Syria would be in sight of the \$200m. target. It is a great deal of money, but, as Syrians might argue, a bargain price compared with what has been spent on settling Jewish refugees in Palestine.

### DELICATE QUESTION

The resettlement of the Arab refugees is a delicate political question for any Arab Government. Colonel Sheshekly may be realistic enough to see that to let so much Arab man-power run to waste strengthens Israel rather than the Arab States. But the resolutions of the United Nations relating to partition and to the repatriation and compensation of the refugees are the only political lever in the hands of Arab Governments to obtain revision of the frontiers of Israel. They may not be able to work together in the Arab League for any constructive purpose, but they remain conscious of the importance of a united Arab front in regard to Israel and against any attempt by the western Powers to impose defence plans which they may not want. Moreover its justice is so self-evident to Arabs that the internationally acknowledged right of the refugees to return to the lands and homes from which they have been separated has become part of the gospel of Arab nationalism. Sooner or later the General Assembly may admit that its recommendation is impractical. Until then it is difficult for any Arab Government to abandon the principle of repatriation without falling foul of public opinion on a sensitive issue.

Observers hope they can rely on the refreshing concern which Colonel Sheshekly shows for the real interests of his country and on the ability of a ruler with no parliament at his elbow to take public opinion in hand. But they have to admit that there are contradictions in the policy of the Government on which so much depends. Colonel Sheshekly takes tentative steps towards defence cooperation with the west, but his domestic policy is imbued with suspicion of foreign influence in any field—his Government, for example, refused Point Four aid rather than have a swarm of American experts in the country.

It is, of course, not unusual for an Arab Government to pursue two contradictory policies at the same time. But on the whole the outlook and spirit in this part of the Middle East are less discouraging than they were. There was a time when it seemed that the Arab States and peoples were determined to expiate what they regard as the disgrace and disaster of Palestine in a collective suicide. It is perhaps sensed now that oil and the airways are moving the centre of gravity of the Middle East back from Suez to the more ancient trade routes of Syria and Lebanon. When the Arabs begin to appreciate that they have a future as well as a past there can be some hope that relations with the west will be adjusted satisfactorily on the basis of vital common interests.