

MIDDLE EAST RIVALRIES

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PEACE WITH ISRAEL DELAYED BY
ARAB DISUNITY

From Our Special Correspondent in the Middle East

Since the signing of the armistice agreements with Israel last year, the Arab States have passed into a kind of limbo between peace and war. In spite of the warlike speeches of some Arab politicians, and declared Israeli fears of an arms race—which have provided the desired stimulus to fund-raising in the United States—there are no signs of active preparation for war. On the other hand the tentative meetings of Israeli and Jordanian representatives have given no cause for hopes of an early formal peace. Yet there are few regional factors preventing Israel from realizing its ambitious immigration programme, or Jordan from completely integrating the remnants of Palestine under the Hashemite crown, or, for that matter, deterring the Syrian army from engineering another *coup d'Etat*. Each country is more or less free to work out its own salvation without regard for late enemies, especially since the declaration by Britain, the United States, and France, guaranteeing the Palestine armistice lines.

The deliberations of the Arab League do not vitally affect the peoples of the member nations. They occupy the professional attention of the politicians and fill a certain amount of newspaper space, but the merchant in Beirut, the landowner in Aleppo, the Beduin officer in the Arab Legion, the farmer of the rich, red, rolling plains of northern Syria, and the rattle-brasher in Damascus are now less concerned with Israel. Even the educated Palestinian refugees—especially the young ones—have since the opening of the new Jordanian assembly turned eastwards and see their future with Amman, and not in the wake of an avenging army. For many Arabs Israel could easily be in another continent except that geographically it separates Egypt from Arabia.

NO WAR PARTIES

During recent journeyings through the Arab countries and Israel, from Cairo to Aleppo, from Tel Aviv to Damascus, there was no evidence apparent to your Correspondent of even a desire to resume hostilities. Recent supplies of military equipment under the terms of treaties have not produced a war party anywhere. In the Arab countries this hopeful if still negative development springs from a variety of factors, chief among which are the healing effect of the passage of time on wounded national pride, interest in internal affairs, and rivalry between governments.

The Egyptian Press has proved adequately enough for most of its readers that the Palestine war was not lost by the inefficiency of the army command or the lack of enthusiasm of its troops but because of the profiteers who supplied the forces with unserviceable equipment. Little effort appears to have been made to punish the offenders; it is apparently sufficient to transfer the responsibility of defeat. The commanders of the Syrian army—or the Noble Army, as it is called—have already forgotten the inactive part it played during the war and may be regarded as a band of armed politicians. The Lebanese, the world's oldest trading community, are far too busy enriching themselves in currency exchange, trade, and the growing and processing of *hashish* to bother with unprofitable martial adventures. Jordan has made known its peaceful intentions, and Iraq has indicated its willingness to support it. Certainly no Arab agitator at present could arouse public opinion or town mobs to demand revenge by war.

REFUGEE DEADLOCK

All these factors contribute to bringing about a kind of equilibrium. A formal peace with Israel is not regarded as an immediate necessity: it is easier for Arab leaders to allow the present situation to continue undisturbed. It is argued that a formal peace would bring no advantage for the Arabs unless Israel accepted the return of the Palestinian refugees. This it is obviously not prepared to do, or even capable of doing. The denial of direct access to the sea through Haifa has increased the communications problem of landlocked Jordan, but King Abdullah himself has declared that Jordanian routes to the sea must be through Arab territory. Beirut merchants and transport owners naturally applaud this decision. Some trade in food exports to Israel is lost but it is not considered serious. The Arabs assure themselves that there are other markets; it is believed that only a small rise in the standards of living would absorb the present surpluses. That little effort is being made to increase the standards of living does not weaken this argument for most Arabs.

Internal affairs and rivalries have also diverted attention from Israel. The alliance of Egypt and Saudi Arabia against Jordan is well known. It divides Arabia and reduces the Arab League to a tottering façade supported only by the endeavour and compromises of the secretary-general, Azzam Pasha. In the north the compelling geographic, racial, and cultural oneness of Syria, Iraq, and Jordan which conditions the minds of many to think of the future in terms of federation or union raises the violent

opposition of politicians who have a vested interest in particular governments and administrations. It would appear that the Damascus politicians and soldiers have a greater hatred for Jordan than for Israel. Certainly it was easier for your Correspondent to cross from Israel into Jordan than from that country into Syria. This disunity has, of course, weakened the military potential of the Arab countries to such a degree that at present they would have less chance of successfully prosecuting a war against Israel than they had in 1948.

SYRIAN NATIONALISM

Political rivalry has increased instability in many countries and encouraged national introversion, especially in Syria. The three *coups d'Etat* of last year did not solve any problems, although the situation is much clearer. The fears reported after the last election have proved to have been only too well founded. The army is in control, although not overtly at present, and it does not intend to relinquish its power. The present Government, formed by the People's Party, which polled the largest number of votes, is in office on sufferance. The Prime Minister, Nazim Kudsi, admitted as much recently in the Constituent Assembly—which has just converted itself into a Chamber of Deputies. Whether the Government will remain in office is considered doubtful, and Akram Hourani, the late Minister of Defence and the latest "strong man," has stated that the dissolution of the Assembly would be the best solution for the recent crisis. Hourani, who founded a Fascist organization called the National Socialist Party, is violently opposed to any form of union with Iraq or Jordan. This forms the common bond with the army, the officers of which are mostly from the middle class, strongly Republican, and anxious to preserve their jobs. Whatever happens in Syria during the next few months the army and its attending politicians will do their utmost to prevent union, and in so doing will prolong the disunity of northern Arabia.

Trade between the northern Arab States has been brought almost to a standstill. For a truck to pass from Beirut to Amman is a frustrating adventure dependent upon the moods of Syrian frontier guards and Customs officers. Every driver has to carry a manifest as long as that of a large cargo ship and wasted time and slow turn round of vehicles have increased costs. One ton of cement landed at Beirut at £6 sells for £18 in Amman. Much of this glowering obstructionism springs from an understandable resentment of Lebanese *laissez-faire*. For many years Beirut has in effect controlled Syrian economy, and taken an unfair share of the profits. There will almost certainly not be a return to the old economic and monetary union, although Damascus is prepared to negotiate an agreement.

TRADE DIFFICULTIES

Israel has small hope of reviving trade with the Arab States. Recently in a confidential report entitled *Principles for the Revival of Economic Relations between Israel and the Arab States*, the economic advisers of the Israeli foreign ministry came to the conclusion that Israel is in no way dependent on supplies from the Arab countries, and that the Arab markets are of little importance for the Israeli export industries owing to their "specific character." In other words Israeli goods cannot compete on the open market because of their high prices and indifferent quality and design. Declaring that Israel does not want to remain an economic enclave, the report states that the Jewish State has little to offer towards a general economic rapprochement between the Middle East countries except technical skill (which can be secured elsewhere), and superior purchasing power.

Arab countries (according to the report) stood to gain much more than Israel. It was estimated that £5m. of cotton, oil-cakes, minerals, and chemicals could be imported from Egypt every year, whereas Israel could hope to export only £350,000 worth of goods in return. From Syria and the Lebanon about £2,350,000 worth of cereals and fruit could be bought, but little or nothing could be sold in return. Jordan could sell about £850,000 of food, but Israel's exports in return would amount to less than £75,000. All these commodities could be purchased by Israel from elsewhere, although freight charges were higher, and the Arab countries could also find other markets for their surpluses.

Thus even the advantages of mutual trade are considered insufficient to persuade the Middle East governments to negotiate a formal peace. Israeli initiative is suspect, and most Arabs choose to regard it as purely political and as an attempt to destroy so-called Arab unity. This division of the Middle East is unnatural, and could be dangerous if it were not for the three-Power guarantee of the armistice lines. For strategists and those people with tidy minds it is annoying, but unless the present deadlock can be broken, it may have to be accepted for many years to come.