

British Mideast Strategy Looks to Palestine Peace

Need for Bases Nearer Than Kenya Is Due to Play Part in Future Compromise Move

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PARIS, May 19—Certain British officers are now admitting privately that Kenya would not be a practicable military base for protecting Britain's Mediterranean interests. Kenya could serve only as a fount for aerial and airborne striking power. It requires more men than the United Kingdom possesses to support an individual airborne trooper as compared with an infantryman. Therefore Kenya is not a satisfactory base.

Starting next month the British forces in the Suez region based on Ismailia, will be thinned down to the figures provided in the Anglo-Egyptian treaty—around 10,000. This is not a heavy protective force for the extensive British Mediterranean interests.

Britain's Mediterranean foreign policy has often been described as one of "protecting the lifeline of the Empire." By "Empire" was meant, basically, India, British interests in India have now changed, but British policy in the Mediterranean is essentially the same.

Its main concept could more accurately be described as seeking to prevent the creation in the Mediterranean or Middle Eastern area of a vacuum that could be filled by the influence of a power potentially hostile to Britain. That power in the nineteenth century was Czarist Russia. After the first World War it became Italy. Today it is Soviet Russia.

Britain Wants Two Bases

There are certain indications that Britain would definitely desire to retain within her zone of influence two bases nearer to Mediterranean shores than Kenya. One is the Negeb area of Palestine between the inland sea and the Gulf of Aqaba—an area now known to contain petroleum. The other is the Cyrenaican part of the former Italian Libya.

These military thoughts obviously must play their role in Britain's future policy in the Palestine war. King Farouk of Egypt is believed to be aiming his troops at the Negeb in hopes of establishing a rule there by fait accompli.

The State of Israel has consistently desired the barren but oil-bearing Negeb in order to make the founding country economically viable. But with the antipathy of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Trans-Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, a strong factor and one that might remain permanent because of the Oriental "face" involved should Israel's armies hold out, Israel's military defense of the Negeb would be almost impossible.

King Farouk of Egypt had been in a bad way, as far as internal political position goes, when the Palestine war started. The Government was unpopular. The economic situation was bad. Even state bodies, such as the police, had been mutinous.

Farouk wants the Negeb. Already the entry of his troops into Palestine has consolidated his position at home, where martial law reigns. The conquest of the Negeb would be a big feather in his cap. One may expect that he will seek it.

The British would certainly prefer to have Abdullah's Arab Legion (British officered) take the Negeb. Abdullah has always been well

paid by and friendly to Britain. But if Farouk's forces get established there first, it will be hard to oust them.

On these bases of military strategy and traditional foreign policy one might venture a guess as to what Britain's future desires may be.

To the west of Egypt, Britain has managed to hold on to its official excuses for maintaining an interest in Cyrenaica on the grounds that Anthony Eden, former Foreign Secretary, promised the Grand Senussi it would never again come under Italian rule. That question must eventually be resolved among the Big Four powers but Britain's chances have not dimmed.

To the east of Egypt the present chaos in Palestine presents a possible future occasion for establishing a base in the Negeb—if King Abdullah conquers the desert part before King Farouk.

Certainly the British, who are fed up with the whole Palestine venture, would like to use their good offices for a compromise settlement when the time is ripe in Palestine and in the United Nations. Some British authorities figure this way. King Abdullah and Moshe Shertok, Israeli Foreign Minister, are known to be rather cordial to each other and, on the sly, saw each other fairly often before the crisis started.

The British may well seek to encourage a compromise settlement when the battle fronts have hardened. Such might be sought along federative, greater Syria lines. British good offices through Amman would certainly be effective. Should King Abdullah obtain the Negeb in a final settlement, it is certain the British would be accorded base facilities there if they desired them.

Pipeline Project Linked

At present the Desert of Negeb has no port or communications. But at one end is Aqaba, which could be developed—far as it is from the Mediterranean by sea. Furthermore, Gaza or a potential but at present nonexistent port could be developed on the Mediterranean—north of the Egyptian border—if the Arabian-American Oil Company could be persuaded to terminate its projected pipeline from the Persian Gulf at any selected spot in the region. The pipeline construction project is at present dead.

Obviously military strategy for the future and traditional policies of the past affect every big power's view of the tragic Palestine war. Some British experts believe that if the two sides are left to themselves—provided they both have some access to munitions—the war could last as long as three years.

But they believe that because of the "face" involved and the difference in numbers, the Arabs under such circumstances would eventually win. Therefore, they believe that a compromise must be fostered at the proper moment. Furthermore, they conceive that such a compromise is possible, if properly timed, because of Israel's recognition of her own difficult position and because of London's influence on King Abdullah.