Islam in Ferment

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Deep Concern for West

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower has said of the Middle East: "As far as the sheer value of territory is concerned, there is no more strategically important area in the world."

The Middle East forms the center of the Moslem Crescent that swings from Gibraltar in the West, across North Africa, and on to Iran and Pakistan in the East. This vast area of 4,800,000 square miles and 180,000,000 population is a vital region to the security of the Western Alliance.

Its military importance is obvious from a glance at the map. The Middle East is a bridge linking Europe and India. Its southern edge lies along the Red Sea and the Suez Canal—one of the most strategic sea lanes in the world, through which $1,000,000 tons of shipping pass yearly. Beyond Suez, strung along the rim of North Africa, the West has air bases which control the Mediterranean Sea. In event of war with Russia, bombers from these bases could strike the Soviet Balkan satellites and reach deep into Russia itself.

The economic importance of the Middle East is no less than the strategic. Beneath the sand of Iran, Iraq and Arabia lie pools of oil that form 46 per cent of the world's known reserves. Before the Iranian Government shut down the British-owned wells and refinery in Iran, Europe got 75 per cent of its oil from the Middle East.

Turbulent Week

Last week Western statesmen were confronted with problems of increasing gravity in this area. In Egypt there was bloody fighting between British troops and Egyptian police in the Suez Canal zone and wild rioting in Cairo. Yesterday the Cairo Government imposed martial law throughout the country. In Tunisia French soldiers were trying to put down nationalist disorders. In Teheran, Premier Mohammed Mossadegh was finding new ways to bedevil Anglo-Iranian relations. Moscow, for the first time, was intervening in the turbulent Middle Eastern scene, urging the three Moslem states to throw off the yoke of "Western imperialism."

With the situation steadily deteriorating, it was imperative that the West evolve a common policy. Three weeks ago President Truman, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden held lengthy discussions on the Middle East. At the conclusion of their talks, they reported agreement. But events last week revealed how complicated the problem is, and how difficult it will be to get concerted action by the West.

Three Trouble Spots

The Moslem world is like a vast echoing mosque. Trouble in any part sets reverberations rolling throughout the Islamic Crescent. This is especially true in the super-heated atmosphere of nationalism that now exists. Violence feeds on violence and multiplies. This was illustrated last week in the three principal trouble spots—Egypt, Tunisia and Iran.

EGYPT

This is the situation: There has been a diplomatic deadlock since last October when Cairo abrogated her 1936 treaty with Britain and demanded that the British withdraw their troops and abandon their air fields, naval depots, repair and supply bases at Suez. In the face of Britain's firm refusal to budge—a refusal backed by armed might and legal treaty right—the Egyptian Government has been powerless.

But tension and terrorism have mounted in a dangerous crescendo. Egyptian students and workers have staged wild anti-British demonstrations; Egyptian "liberation battalions" have been sniping, ambushing, throwing grenades from windows. Britain's strategy has been to seal off the Canal Zone, reinforce its troops, and clamp down hard on terrorists.

Early last week, after the slaying of an American-born nun—Sister Anthony—on the steps of a convent in Ismailia in the Canal Zone, British troops began a house-to-house search for weapons, herded Egyptian workers into barricades and searched them.

Battle in Ismailia

Last Friday the lid blew off. At dawn in the heart of Ismailia there began the fiercest battle between Britons and Egyptians since the British first occupied Egypt in 1882. The battle started when 1,500 British troops with tanks, armored cars and Bren gun carriers moved up to Egyptian police headquarters where 800 to 1,000 auxiliary police were stationed. The British demanded that the auxiliaries surrender their arms on the ground that the police had been helping the terrorists. The police defied the order and opened fire. All morning the battle raged. Just after noon —their headquarters in flames, their barracks littered with bodies of wounded and dead — the Egyptians surrendered. The toll was forty-three Egyptians and three Britons killed.

The repercussions were violent. In Cairo yesterday mobs ran wild, attacking and setting fire to British, American and French business places —including Shepheard's Hotel. In some areas the mobs were joined by police shouting "Long live Russia, friend of Egypt!" By evening a pall of smoke hung over the whole city. Sixteen were killed; eighty wounded. During the terror the Egyptian Cabinet met in emergency session. Cairo sources talked of "drastic action" against the British—possibly a rupture of diplomatic relations.

In London Friday and yesterday the British Cabinet met with the Chiefs of Staff. The Foreign Office issued a statement that Britain's decision to disarm the Ismailia police was taken only after the Egyptian Government had refused to control their terrorist activities. The Admiralty announced that British warships had steamed out of Malta — evidently bound for Suez to reinforce the British position. What lies ahead in Egypt is a question of grave uncertainty.

TUNISIA

This is the situation: Tunisia, a French protectorate for seventy years, has a population of 3,300,000 native Moslems and 300,000 Europeans, half of them French citizens. The Europeans, most of whom are old settlers, control half to two-thirds of the agriculture, 90 per cent of the industry, and virtually all of the commerce in Tunisia. Real control of the government rests with the French. Since the war the French—under pressure from nationalist groups—have instituted reforms looking toward self-government, but a French Resident General with the right of veto still wields the final authority.

Leading nationalist groups are impatient. They want self-rule now. They want an all-Tunisian parliament elected only by native Tunisians, an all-Tunisian government and complete control over internal affairs, but they are willing to let the French handle foreign policy. The French government has stalled.

Two weeks ago Tunisians began street demonstrations in the cities. The Resident General ordered police and security troops to halt the demonstrations. He arrested the nationalist leaders. The violence spread. In the past ten days about forty Tunisians and six French soldiers have been killed, hundreds have been wounded. The Tunisian disorders have intensified nationalist demands in French Morocco and Algeria.

In Paris last week the new premier, Edgar Faure, said the strong measures would continue until order was restored. The Cabinet approved reinforcement of the Tunisia garrison by 20,000—as many as were there before the outbreaks began.

IRAN

This is the situation: For six months Iran's dispute with Britain over oil has been at a diplomatic standstill. The oil industry is nationalized; the Britons who once operated it have been driven out; the flow of Iranian oil to world markets has been cut off. Premier Mohammed Mossadegh has steadfastly resisted every Western proposal for resumption of production. Instead he is using the dispute as a domestic political weapon. Last week he made two new moves to prove to Iranians that he is the country's leading nationalist and anti-British statesman.

First he closed down nine British consulates, on the ground that they were essentially propaganda stations. Second, he publicly announced that he would not accept Robert Hankey as British ambassador to Teheran to succeed Sir Francis Shepherd. The reason which Premier Mossadegh gave was unprecedented. He said Iran would accept no chief of mission from London who had ever served in Iran or in a British colony. The new standards reflected the obsession Iranians have about being treated as a "colony" of Britain.

The U. S. Dilemma

The Soviet Union has had a ladle in this steaming pot, and last week it was stirring the pot briskly. Over last week-end, the Secretary General of the Arab League threw a fancy dinner in Paris for Andrei Y. Vishinsky before the Soviet Foreign Minister departed for Moscow. The principal Arab guest was the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Mohammed Salah el Din Pasha. Mr. Vishinsky was pleasant and effusive. Over the *sole chateaubriand,* he scoffed at the idea that Russia could ever be a threat to the Moslem nations. What country, he asked, was now bloodily suppressing the Tunisian nationalists? What country was committing aggression against Egypt? On Friday the Russian press began a major propaganda campaign directed at Egypt. Pravda said that it was only natural that the Egyptian people, "fallen into misfortune under foreign occupation," should now turn their eyes "to the Soviet Union, to Moscow, to Stalin."

Washington is not happy to have the Russians mixing in the Middle East troubles, but it does not believe that Communism is presently a very large issue there. The French, U. S. officials point out, are impressed by the fact that the Communists are calling for the same things as the nationalists, and Paris therefore draws the conclusion that the nationalists and the Communists are kittens out of the same litter.

U. S. officials reject this easy assumption. They argue that Moslem nations are intent upon the national aspirations that other nations satisfied long ago, that the basis of the nationalism is the economic inequality in the Moslem world. Looking around for someone to blame, U. S. officials point out, the ruling class has hit upon colonialism and Western imperialism as obvious scapegoats to distract the masses from their economic misery.

The West Moves

Although the situation is in part due to the ineptitude of the West and the lack of a common policy, the West has been trying for several months to take measures to alleviate the tension. The U. S., Britain, France and Turkey have offered Egypt a full partnership in a Middle Eastern Defense Pact. Under this pact the British treaty would be supplanted, and an international force would take over the protection of the Suez Canal. So far Egypt has rejected this offer, but last week two Middle Eastern states—Iraq and Saudi Arabia—were trying to mediate the dispute. They sent to London and Cairo a variation of the Middle East defense plan, which would give Egypt somewhat larger powers.

Washington has offered Iran both military and economic aid for 1952. Dr. Mossadegh has so far refused military aid because he will not sign the pledge which is required under the Mutual Security Act, in which the recipient nation promises to support the free world. Last week he did finally accept $23,450,000 in Point Four aid, but without signing the technical agreement. He merely sent a letter, professing his support of U. N. principles. Washington and London still hope that Premier Mossadegh may finally agree to a plan for getting oil flowing under auspices of the World Bank.

The feeling now in Washington is that the West must go much further than it has gone in its approaches to the Moslem nations. But in trying to work out a concerted policy, the State Department is confronted with a most ticklish problem in diplomacy. U. S. officials set forth that problem in these terms:

Because of the more intimate connection of France and Britain with the area, the United States does not have freedom of action in the Middle East. American diplomats, in this regard, are confronted by a major dilemma, and one for which no immediate solution is in sight: while the United States must support its allies in the big struggle against Communist aggression, it feels at the same time that its allies—particularly France—have been slow in handling the rising nationalism.

France's Policy

France, it is felt, has been especially laggard in its dealings with Tunisia and Morocco. The State Department has only one course open to it, but it is a difficult one to follow; it must not openly dispute French policy, for all the world and the enemy to see, but it must at the same time exert all reasonable pressure on France to modify, to modernize its attitudes toward the new expressions of nationalism in North Africa.

France, American officials believe, is trying to play U. S. military objectives in North Africa against U. S. political objectives, insisting that only the French know how to handle the native populace in a way that will protect United States strategic interests there. The U. S., to the contrary, feels that it is of supreme importance to its strategic interests there to preserve the friendship and goodwill of the natives. At the present time the U. S. is still respected by the local citizens in North Africa, and this is regarded as a big asset.

What the French don't realize, one source put it, is that colonialism is *in extremis.* Another has remarked that "it's dead but won't lie down."

As for Britain, the U. S. is publicly and privately on the English side in the Egyptian dispute, but it feels the Iranian oil crisis might have been averted if the British had taken at the outset a more conciliatory attitude.

In Washington last week the feeling was growing that the situation could only be retrieved if the West took bold steps. The first step, U. S. officials believe, is to demonstrate that the West is ready to recognize the legitimate national aspirations in the Middle East. The second step is to inaugurate long-range programs of technical and economic aid that would help alleviate the depressing poverty in the Moslem nations. On Friday President Truman in a Roosevelt Day message said:

"We must work with people; we cannot boss them. We must help them to help themselves * * *. This will mean the breaking of old barriers. It will mean breaking the shackles of unjust land tenure which now retard production and keep millions of people impoverished."

AS MOSLEM NATIONALISM MOUNTS — THE CRITICAL AREA AND A FOCAL POINT OF TENSION

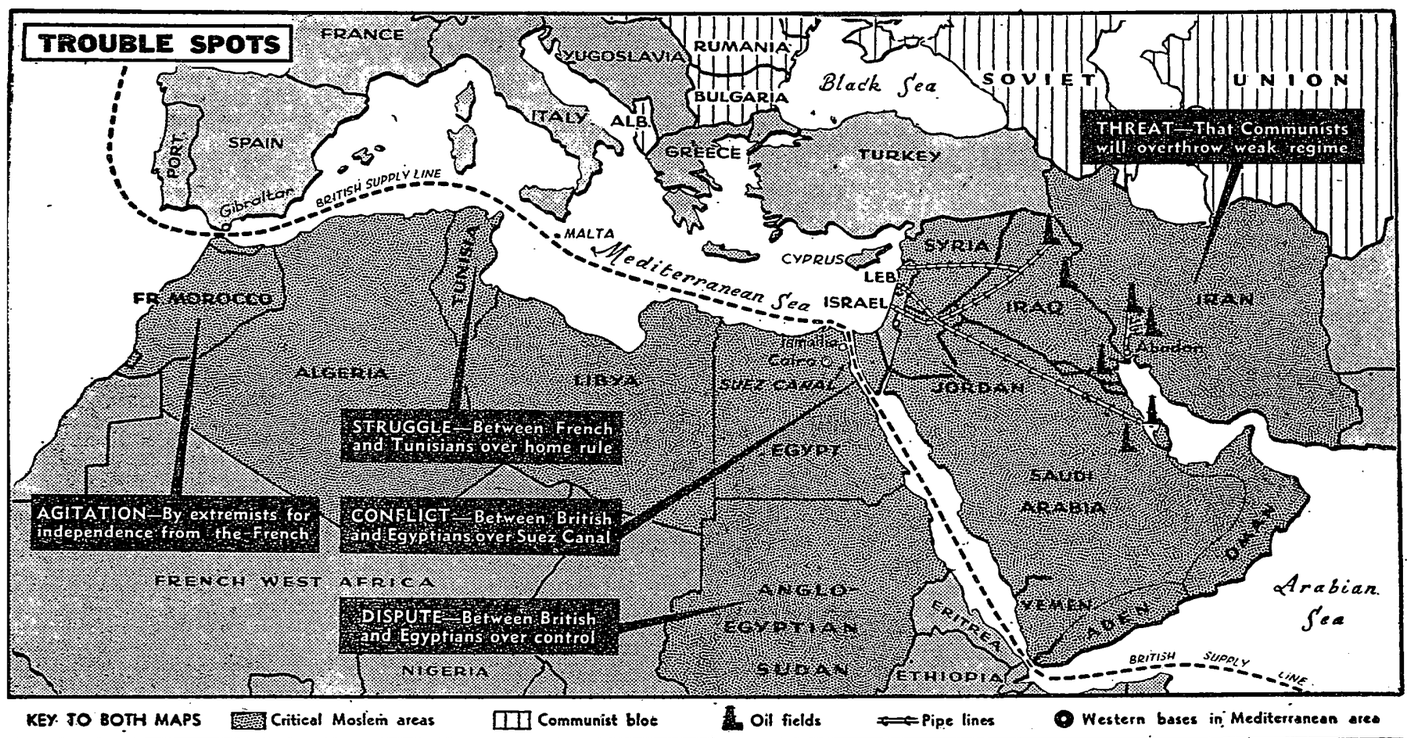




Photo at right shows British soldiers manning a barbed wire roadblock at Ismailia in the Canal Zone where British and Egyptian forces clashed last week.

European

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