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In a Calm Mood Arab States Weigh Neutrality Against Western Ties

By ROBERT C. DOTY
Special to The New York Times.

CAIRO, Jan 15 — The Middle East, one of the world's chronic trouble spots, is in a state of abnormal quiescence as the new year begins.

From Tripoli to Teheran the Arab world is at peace at home and abroad, but for the persistent tension between Israeli and her neighbors that is neither war nor peace. Even along the Arab-Israeli truce lines the cycle of local aggression and retaliation is stilled, at least temporarily.

The reason for this happy state of affairs is that the leaders of the important Middle Eastern states are engaged quietly in their own "agonizing reappraisal" of foreign policy, apparently wavering between the poles of neutralism and cooperation with the West. The stage was set for this reassessment by the crowded events last year that modified greatly the traditional bases of their outlook on the world.

Suez Withdrawal

The most far-reaching of these was the British agreement to withdraw troops from the Suez Canal Zone by spring of next year, thus restoring to Egypt unqualified independence for the first tme since 1882.

The second major change affecting Arab foreign policy was the abandonment by the United States of the attempt to form a regional defense organization in the face of uncompromising Arab resistance to any form of cooperation with Israel. Washington set its sights instead on the more modest goal of encouraging the conclusion of bilateral pacts, such as the one between Turkey and Pakistan, and of offering arms aid to states that showed a tendency to favor such a solution.

This was one of two alternatives facing the Middle Eastern leaders in formulating a new attitude in international affairs. It was the one chosen this week by Iraq in initialling a defensive alliance with Turkey. Iran is moving in the same direction, albeit more cautiously because of internal difficulties. Similar invitations were to be extended soon to Syria, Lebanon and Libya.

Jakarta Parley

The other solution was that held out by India's prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and his co-sponsors of an African-Asian conference to be held near Jakarta, Indonesia, in April. It was expected that the sponsors of the conference would propose the formation of a loose grouping of African and Asian states uncommitted to either the East or the West in the "cold war."

Egyptian policy has been an equivocal one. In public pronouncements, Egyptian leaders proclaim their complete reliance on the Arab collective security pact, which has yet to be translated into an effective instrument, and their rejection of any bilateral or multilateral arrangements involving the participation of non-Arab states.

Egypt's Evasions

At the same time, Lieut. Col. Gamal Abdul Nasser, Egypt's premier and acting Chief of State, and others of the ruling military junta, have sought to convey to Western diplomats and correspondents the impression that their public position is tailored to fit what they conceive to be the current state of public opinion, but that privately they await only an opportune moment to declare their resolute anti-communism and willingness to consider proposals for joint defense.

It is unlikely that this conflict will be resolved prior to the Jakarta conference, to which all middle-Eastern Moslem states have been invited.

The Iraqi initiative tends to undermine Egyptian pretensions to leadership of the Arab world. The first response of Egyptian spokesmen to the news of the Baghdad agreement was a reiteration of Egypt's determination to reject any alliance outside the Arab League and to hint that she was still capable of influencing other members of the league to maintain the same policy.

Status of States

In fact, the number of uncommitted Arab states is rapidly dwindling. Egypt herself has undertaken to let the British forces return to the canal zone to help repulse an attack on any Arab state or Turkey. Libya has granted air and land bases to the United States and Britain, and is currently negotiating with France. Jordan and Iraq both have defensive alliances with Britain, and Saudi Arabia has granted the United States use of the air bases at Dharhan.

Thus the only simon-pures in the Middle East are Syria, Lebanon, Yemen—and Israel.

Preoccupation with internal economic matters is also a contributing factor in the prevailing calm in the Middle East. In Egypt and Iran, the survival of the existing regimes depends on the degree of success they achieve in improving the conditions of life for the depressed masses.

Iraq has earmarked almost $100,000,000 annually—70 per cent of her oil royalities—for a broad development program covering health, education, agricultural and industrial improvement. Lebanon and Syria have resumed their perennial discussions of economic union.

Egypt had her hopes pinned on construction of a high dam across the Nile near Aswan in Upper Egypt which would provide abundant power for industrialization and permit irrigation of some two million additional acres of land, increasing the area under cultivation by one-third. Negotiations were under way for loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and from other foreign and domestic sources to raise the estimated $600,000,000 to pay for this ambitious project.

Jordan Development

Within the next few weeks a new attempt will be made by Eric Johnston, special United States Ambassador, to obtain the assent of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Israel for a program of joint development of the water resources of the Jordan Valley river system. Approval of this scheme could vastly improve the economic outlook for all the countries involved and create new opportunities for the absorption of many of the 850,000 Arab refugees from Palestine now vegetating in camps in Arab countries.

Both Israel and the Arab states rejected the original United States plan drafted with a view to the optimum development and use of Jordan Valley water without regard for political considerations. Last spring the Arab Governments submitted counter-proposals designed to insure a greater measure of Arab control of the essential works and a greater share of the power and water.

This concession represents the furthest advance the Arabs have made toward collaboration, even at one remove, with Israel. Conceivably it could be the first step toward a gradual slackening of tension in Arab-Israeli relations.

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