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TENSIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By M. PHILIPS PRICE, M.P.

A lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, February 8, 1956, Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, G.B.E., K.C.B., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Your Excellency, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Philips Price has kindly come to talk to us this afternoon on "Tensions in the Middle East," a most apt subject at this time. He needs no introduction to most of those present; he has spoken to us often before. But for the benefit of those who have not had the pleasure of meeting him previously, suffice it to say that he is a Member of Parliament, a journalist, a writer of distinction and a lecturer; also he is a great traveller of wide experience, and he is shortly going to publish a book mainly about his journeys. We are fortunate to have him here today. Mr. Philips Price.

ON previous occasions when I have had the honour of addressing this society I have generally described a journey that I have made in some part of Asia in which the society is interested.

On this occasion I am not describing a journey but making a general survey of the M.E. and trying to unravel some of the thorny problems that are now presenting themselves. I am conscious of the difficulty of this task and of the fact that in process of doing this I may tread on someone's toes.

The title of this lecture is: "Tensions in the Middle East." These have increased greatly in recent months. A new phase in the history of this part of Asia is opening up, and very heavy responsibility rests on this country with its decade-long responsibilities and interests here. I need only remind you that oil in the Persian Gulf is 60 per cent. world oil resources and that oil now heavily supplements our coal for industrial purposes.

The old Middle East, as many of us once knew it in the days of our youth, is gone.

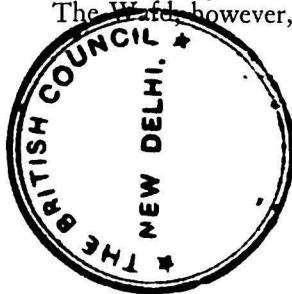
Those of us who served in India in the Army and the I.C.S. in Egypt and the Sudan, or fought in the war against the Turks in 1914-18, or once travelled like me in the old Ottoman Empire and in the Persia of the Qajars, have seen a completely new M.E. rise before our eyes over the last twenty-five years.

It was bound to come about that national consciousness of the people between the Caspian and the Mediterranean should wake at last from medieval slumber.

What the Reformation brought us in Western and Central Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—when the national states of this continent as we know them today began to take shape—came to *Eastern Europe* in the latter part of last century and the beginning of this.

The delayed influence of the French Revolution spread to the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. Serbia became independent; Rumania, Greece and later Bulgaria followed suit.

But through all this time there was little stirring in the Middle East. The *Wafd*, however, formed in Egypt, an Arab national movement spon-



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sored by Arab dynasties, grew underground in Asiatic Turkey and blossomed forth under the leadership of Lawrence after Turkey joined the first world war.

Then the ancient Kingdom of Persia in 1909 was convulsed by revolution. One Shah abdicated and another granted a constitution.

At the end of the first world war we saw a number of Arab kingdoms and republics created under French and British protection. Persia and Turkey threw off various attempts of European powers and of Russia to establish protectorates over them.

Then Turkey under that really great man, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was at this stage the only country which completely succeeded in abolishing its old regime and in founding a republic with every prospect of adopting the European social and industrial system and passing from dictatorship to a system of civic liberty and of parliamentary government for its citizens.

Yet even Turkey has not fully reached that stage as the stresses and strains within that country in recent months have revealed. But it is fast moving along this road.

Turkey's age-long hostility to Russia, at whose hands she has suffered encroachments ever since the time of the Empress Catharine, has brought her right into the Western camp.

When the Russian revolution created a Communist social and political system over one-sixth of the earth's surface, the cold war in its various stages began in Europe and Asia. The struggle against Russian imperialism is not new. It has gone on since Peter the Great's days. But it is made more dangerous now by the ideological inspiration of Communism behind it. So there has begun a struggle between the Western free way of life and the Communist totalitarian way of life. And the national consciousness of the Middle East is now mature enough to choose between these two ideologies.

In S.E. Europe when the national movements became mature early this century there was no challenge of Communism confronting these countries. It was parliamentary democracy and civic freedom which the young states of S.E. Europe (Serbia, Greece, Rumania, Poland) could choose as against feudalism and foreign imperialism of the past. But today the countries of the Middle East can choose either a Western way of life or the Russian system. There is a new choice—not there before.

There are three great racial linguistic groups in the Middle East, and they roughly correspond with three political systems: the Turkish Republic, the Arab States, Persia.

Turkey has chosen her course. Persia, with some hesitation, seems to be choosing at least alliance with the West—but there are complications to which I shall refer later. The Arab countries are divided and hesitant.

Many are seeking to join Mr. Nehru in creating a neutral world between the Western and the Russian camps. Nationalism has among the Arabs a strong anti-Western trend. It is the fear of people that have for so many centuries been under foreign Western domination that conditions their thinking, and also the fear of a people who are not sure of themselves. Turkey has been for centuries free and independent and the centre of an Empire. Therefore she could pass easily through the revolution which

created the modern European type of state and come out into the Western camp and way of life.

The transition was easy because Turkey's nationalism had not been really suppressed at any time.

Even the much weaker Persia held together in a national unity in spite of most critical times after the first world war and during the second world war. The revolution of 1919 and the creation of the Pavlevi dynasty headed by Riza Shah laid the foundation of a much stronger Persian nation with a central government, though, unlike Turkey, Persia still retains many social and economic weaknesses.

The battle to keep Persia in the Western camp and lay the foundations of a healthy society and a strong economy is in full swing. Recent developments seem to show some success for the Western Powers in helping Persia to come along with them and keeping her outside the Russian camp. I think in this respect a lot is due to the young Shah, who realizes, as many do not, the importance of social reform in Persia.

But the outstanding feature about Persia, to my mind, is that, in spite of social and economic weaknesses and great inequalities of wealth, national consciousness, patriotism and solidarity remain strong. It is the result of centuries of independence and a great historic past.

But it is the Arab countries about which the greatest uncertainty exists.

The Arabs have always been great fundamentalists. According to the Arabs of the old school, man is made to conform to laws and customs which do not alter. It was Arab fundamentalism which created the Sheriat law.

Under this law the lives of men, both spiritual *and* temporal, are regulated. Man renders to God not only the things that are God's but also the things that are Cæsar's.

This philosophy, of course, is slowly breaking down now and a reformation is coming to Islam. But Arab fundamentalism takes other forms today, and is seen in a refusal to compromise or to find the practical way out of a political problem.

It has also been difficult to get Arabs even to combine among themselves. Feuds between the rival Sheikhs, the Hashemite and Ibn Saud dynasties continue and now have the smell of oil. The Arabs have not got a strong political sense because they have throughout the centuries had few periods of self-government or real independence.

The Arab tribesmen who followed Mahomed and created the armies of Islam soon came under foreign political influence. Under the Ommeyyid Caliphate the Greek influence was strong. Under the Abbasid Caliphate it was the Persian influence. Then came the disaster of the Mongol invasion and the sack of Baghdad, and the Arabs finally came under the rule of the Turks.

Socially and economically the Arabs are very diverse; cultivators of the soil in the "green belt" of the Mediterranean coast, the irrigated lands of the Nile and in the Tigris and the Euphrates watershed. But large numbers are still primitive nomads.

Thus the social and educational gap is wide between the Bedouin of the Hedjaz and the educated Arab of Damascus and Cairo. Except in the

larger towns of Arab countries, society is patriarchal, *i.e.* the rule of male head of family. Sheriat law, with its provisions about division of property among children, has made a system of property inheritance difficult to apply in the modern world. But changes are taking place. The Arab world is slowly passing over to a modern European social system of families in which each member has his rights, not subjected to will of patriarchal head. But now at this moment when Arab society is in a state of critical transition there has burst with full force into this country between Mesopotamia and the Libyan desert the disruptive force of Zionism. And thus the injection of an alien fully-fledged European system into M.E. was bound to create violent reactions. The creation of the political state of Israel has introduced a foreign element into the complex political system of the M.E.

It has resulted in intense embitterment of the Arab nationalist movement, which might have been kept within bounds and have become ready to co-operate with the West. But now there has been let loose a wave of xenophobia and a readiness to see European powers trying by underhand means to re-establish their imperial power over the Arab countries once more. A wild emotionalism has been let loose, driving out all reason. Arab fundamentalism has been redoubled. *The creation, in other words, of the state of Israel has been an unmitigated disaster for the M.E.*

The interpretation which the Western Powers and America allowed to be put on the Balfour Declaration—a vague document—by the Zionists, has resulted in the estrangement of the whole Arab world.

We have sown dragons' teeth in the M.E. and the swords are now coming up.

During the 1914-18 war we made contradictory promises to defeat Turkey. We told the Jews they would have a national home and we did not define it. We told the Arabs by the Sykes-Picot agreement that the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire would go to Arab states under French and British protection.

By the MacMahon agreement with Emir Hussein of Hedjaz we gave the land from the Arabian desert to the east Mediterranean to Arab rulers—no mention of "national home for Jews."

Arabs remember this—and Arabs, like Irish, do not forget or compromise. Arabs are not, like British, always ready to forgive and compromise. And, unlike the tolerant Turks, wrongs rankle.

So today we have tensions in M.E., and Russia is always ready to exploit these tensions on her borders or anywhere in Asia. This is a source of danger to M.E. countries and to Western powers with their oil interests, for Arab nationalism is now embittered and the intrusion of Zionist state in M.E. has caused Arabs to regard danger of Russian Communist imperialism to be a matter of little importance to them compared to danger of Western imperialism, which they think has forced a Jewish state on them.

Some of them therefore are adopting a neutral attitude in cold war and even, as the recent arms purchase from Egypt shows, are ready to blackmail the West in order to destroy the state of Israel.

But, just as Arabs have never been united in the past, so today there has been a certain divergence in the matter of tactics over the attitude to

Israel and Russia. They are all united in hatred of Israel. But the Arab state nearest to borders of Russia, Iraq, has always tended to see the need for defence against Russian southward expansion and to seek Western aid for this purpose.

Also, Iraq, while supporting Egypt in her demand that the British withdraw from Canal Zone, has always been ready to see in Britain a potential ally against Russia, and even to overcome the ingrained Arab distrust of Turkey in interest of defence of M.E. against Russia.

Thus there has come about a divergence of policy among some Arab states. This came to a head when in 1955 Iraq joined the Turco-Pakistan Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation. This has blossomed out into the Baghdad Pact which Great Britain has now joined. This pact roused resentment in Egypt. First of all, it showed that some Arab states were prepared to act independently of Egypt and undermine Egypt's leadership of the Arab world. Secondly, it showed that Iraq in fact regarded Russia as a danger as much as Israel, or perhaps greater. This was heresy because the Arab states that follow Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria regard Israel as the sole enemy and Russia as a potential instrument that can be used to blackmail the Western powers.

The key to the situation seems to me to be in Egypt.

Can Egypt be got to at least hold to her neutrality and make it benevolent neutrality towards the West without exacting blackmail?

I think it unwise to regard Egypt as an enemy of the West, although her behaviour would justify that assumption.

We must keep our heads in spite of provocation. What are the facts about Egypt?

As I see it she is being subjected to many internal stresses and strains.

She is ruled by a military dictatorship, but one which is the most efficient, progressive and, by Middle East standards, the least corrupt than any regime in that country since Cromer's day.

Consequently the regime has its enemies among the corrupt politicians and plutocrats of the Wafd and among the adherents of the late King of disastrous memories.

Moreover, Egypt has suffered a reverse in the Sudan where she overplayed her hand, and the Sudan consequently rejected her overtures for a "link" with Egypt and adopted a policy of Sudanese independence.

The military regime in Egypt is under pressure therefore to show its people that it has a forward foreign policy and is out to make Egypt the dominant power in the Middle East.

But Egypt has an Achilles heel. Her population is rising fast. Irrigation works of great cost are needed, and only foreign finance and technical aid can give this to her. The Asswan High Dam will solve the problem for some years of averting starvation in the Nile valley.

Here is where the Americans and to a lesser extent we can come in. But there is no use attaching political strings to our aid or Colonel Nasser will run off to Russia for the money. We, on the other hand, cannot abandon the Sudan, which claims that the Asswan Dam would rob her of certain Nile water reserves which are her due.

A most delicate situation is thus created and we must exercise the utmost

tact to try and keep Egypt benevolently neutral in the cold war, give her economic aid without sacrificing our security or the rights of the Sudan or our oil interests in the Persian Gulf and without letting Russia into a key position in the Middle East.

We shall not succeed in this if we try to hector Egypt, or any other Arab state for that matter, into leaving her neutrality and joining the Baghdad Pact.

All this means that we run a risk. But nothing in foreign affairs is gained without running risks. In the long run our most powerful aid is our reputation for justice and fair play to see us through.

"To our own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
We cannot then be false to any man."

We can rely, too, on the fact that culturally the Arab world is nearer to us than it is to Russia. Islam and Christianity have much in common, and neither has anything in common with Communism. Moreover, we have taught the Arab world something of the value of justice and civil liberty.

Yet the hard fact remains that the situation on the Palestine front is dangerous and explosive. We must seek a long-term solution of the Arab-Israel conflict by getting both sides to sit down and talk. Years may pass before a solution is obtained. In the end both sides must give way something.

Meanwhile a short-term policy must be to prevent an Arab-Jewish war from breaking out again. Along with the United States and France we must work out a system whereby the Tripartite Pact is strengthened and Western air and ground forces are ready to intervene to stop a fresh outbreak.

What about the other Arab states? Syria I have always regarded as even more hostile and bitter towards the West than Egypt. No doubt this is partly due to the poor show the Syrian army put up in the Arab-Jewish war.

I do not think we can count on Syria in (1) trying to settle the Arab-Israel conflict, (2) trying to build up a defence system against Russia under the Baghdad Pact. Indeed, one can look forward to nothing but obstruction from Syria in getting oil from the Persian Gulf across Syrian territory to the Mediterranean coast by demands for unreasonable transit dues.

This raises the question whether we would not be well advised to try and arrange with Iraq and Turkey for the construction of a new pipe line from Kirkuk and Mosul through the vilayets of Diabekr and Gaziantep to the Mediterranean coast at Iskanderun, an all-Turkish route.

Also road and rail communication between Iraq and Turkey needs developing so as to avoid having to cross over or go too near to the Syrian frontier. For vital supplies of oil for the Western world and Turkey and for military communications between Turkey and Iraq it would be foolish to rely on co-operation from any neighbouring Arab state except Iraq.

The other Arab state much in the news of late is Jordan. We all know the delicate set-up there and the artificial economic state of the country

dependant on outside subsidies. Also its geographical proximity to Egypt and Saudi Arabia and liability to pressure from these quarters.

It is therefore unwise to press Jordan to join any group which would subject it to pressure from its neighbours. It would not be wise for her now to join the Baghdad Pact. Jordan is not like Iraq, near to Russia. She is near to Israel and she has the largest number of Palestine Arab refugees of any Arab state. Therefore wisdom would suggest that Jordan be left alone. I would even go so far as to agree that the Arab Legion be put direct under the Jordan War Office instead of being semi-autonomous as it is today.

I now come to Iraq. Iraq is the only Arab state on which a considerable degree of reliance can be placed. Her proximity to Russia and her long distance from Israel makes her see things more in line with the Western powers. The P.M., Nuri Said Pasha, is a known Anglophile and Turcophil.

Yet there are weaknesses in Iraq which we would be foolish to ignore. Nuri Said is not interested in social questions. They bore him. He can manage his sheikhs, he can cajole the powerful merchant families of the chief bazaar towns. But can he manage the intellectuals and professional classes that are springing up in these towns and which have liberal ideas on social questions and want to see agrarian reforms and an improvement in the status of the workers and peasants?

Two years ago the government of Jamali consisting of young Arabs and two Khurds showed signs of being able to work out a policy of this kind, but it fell because it got no support from the elder statesmen and Nuri Said's regime treats these social questions with indifference.

Iraq has not shortage of money. A large part of the oil revenues are going to a Reconstruction Commission for capital development schemes. But one fears that some of the money will not go for the objects for which it was originally intended. The intellectuals and professional classes of the towns seeing this may gravitate towards Communism as the only way out. This is the danger, but one must not exaggerate it. As long as Nuri Said lasts his prestige should suffice to keep things on an even keel. When he goes there are possibilities that a government of the progressive type of Arab and Khurdish youth like the last government of Jamali will be formed. It should be the duty of our diplomacy to help to bring this about.

As regards the defence of Iraq it can be stated that the Baghdad Pact is not just the creation of Nuri. Something like this had been in the air for some time. When I was in Iraq in 1953 I spoke with the then P.M. Jamali and I remember he emphasized the need for defence against the North and rather criticized us for not giving Iraq more military aid. Public opinion in Iraq is in fact attuned to the idea of Western aid against infiltration from the North.

Yet the question remains what value has the Baghdad Pact. Is it worth the upset caused by creating the hostility of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria and throwing half the Arab world into the neutral camp? Is it worth adding to hostility of Mr. Nehru by seeking military allies among the smaller M.E. states.

For my part I think it is worth while incurring the displeasure of Mr.

Nehru if something valuable can be attained by the Bagdad Pact. Mr. Nehru after all can afford his neutrality and his flirtation with Russian Communism because he has the wall of the Himalayas and the buffer of Pakistan between him and Moscow. Egypt, as I have shown, too, is far away from Russia and can afford her form of neutrality.

But Iraq has the vulnerable frontier of Khurdistan with only Persia and a weakly-held Azerbaijan between her and Caucasus. Here, too, are Khurdish tribes with whom the Russians are constantly intriguing. Here we ought to think out the kind of military aid that Iraq should receive under the Baghdad Pact.

I should say decisively that aid should not be based on the assumption that a full-scale atomic war or even a war with conventional weapons will be waged by Russia against Iraq. To induce the Iraqis to build themselves up into an armed camp of this nature would be wasteful, unnecessary and provocative. It would arouse the suspicions of Nehru and his neutral satellites, who would feel that it might bring war nearer to them.

Moreover, it is not the kind of war that is likely. A Russian offensive in these parts would be an offensive of infiltration through disaffected tribes, like Khurds and Kashgais. An air force and mobile units with appropriate weapons for rough country is the kind of defence needed for that situation.

And that is the kind of tactics that Communism adopts in these countries. The Baghdad Pact would justify its existence if it affords Iraq means of defence of this kind.

It will justify its existence still more if it hastens the economic advancement of Iraq. Financially the country is strong with its oil revenues, but its primitive social structure and low educational standards prevents rapid economic development. Iraq lacks even elementary education and is very short of skilled workers and technicians. The supply of European teachers and instructors with salaries guaranteed from funds set up under the Bagdad Pact is probably the best contribution to this problem that can be made. It will be slow but sure and will lay the foundation of a strong Arab country in a vital area of the Middle East with the oil resources so much needed in the West.

To sum up then I should say that the following things are vitally necessary :

1. To stop the danger of war between Israel and the Arab states.
2. To take preliminary steps to get the Arabs and Israel to discuss a long-term settlement.
3. Not to attempt to induce any Arab state to join the Baghdad Pact, except Iraq, which is now a most important link in it.
4. Rely on Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and as far as she can, Persia to organize resistance with Western aid to Communist infiltration into tribal areas in the territories north and north-west of the Persian Gulf.
5. Organize economic aid wherever possible, and in Iraq particularly the provision of educational facilities for training skilled workers and technicians.
6. Tell the public of the Middle East what we are doing and how we want to help the Arabs to help themselves. Tell them that the old imperial-

ism is gone, but let our case not go by default because we are too proud to reply to the miserable vapourings of corrupt Arab politicians, the bribings of the King of Saudi Arabia and the moral sermons of Mr. Nehru.

Our task is hard, but we can rely on our reputation of justice and fair play.

If we persevere I believe that we can make a vital contribution towards the task of relieving the "Tensions in the Middle East."



