

CHAPTER 2

Nationalism and the Arab League

Until the termination of World War I the Ottoman Empire of Turkey ruled the Middle East from Persia to the Sudan, uniting it again under foreign rule. This time, however, as had not been true under the Romans, conqueror and conquered shared a common religious faith and, to a large extent, many common aspects of cultural life. Under the despotic rule of the Ottoman Empire, cultural and commercial centers of the Middle East declined as trade and commerce shifted to the Bosphorus and Constantinople.

Little distinction was made in terms of any national boundaries within the Empire. The distinctions that remained were in terms of local tribal chiefdoms and heads of leading families who through inherited religious office maintained control of important religious centers, as for example, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem or the Sherif of Mecca.

The exception to this situation was found in Egypt which managed to retain identity as a national entity. The French occupation under Napoleon at the end of the eighteenth century brought with it a new scholarly interest in the past glories of Egyptian civilization which was not without its long-range effect in reawakening Egyptian self-consciousness. Furthermore, British military and economic control in the nineteenth century, together with Egypt's location in relation to the Suez Canal, served to enhance Egypt's position as a strategic area and bring its people to national awareness.

Egyptians were also Moslems, however, and the Moslem religion can be called to account in part for the degree of unity as well as fatalism with which Ottoman rule was accepted. It must be remembered that the Middle East is a harsh environment. Peoples isolated for centuries continued in isolation throughout the Ottoman period. The Ottoman rulers interfered rarely with internal tribal affairs. Commercial centers with their classes of tradesmen and merchants felt the foreign rule most strongly, but the fatalism inherent in the Moslem faith and the fact that the rulers shared this faith made the situation more palatable if not thoroughly acceptable.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic nationalism began to appear, first as an organized movement in greater Syria, spreading thence throughout the southern Middle East. This movement envisioned release from Ottoman rule and the establishment of some sort of autonomous Arabian polity. Opposed by several leading Arab families and without strong leadership of its own, the movement constituted no great threat to Turkey until World War I. Under stimulus from French and American mission schools throughout the Middle East, deeply disappointed in a rebellion in Turkey itself which resulted only in increased "Turkification," and heartened by vague British references to an Arab State, the Middle East Arabs rallied to the allied cause in World War I, helping in the defeat of Turkey and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The Arabs had not reckoned with European politics, however, and the close of World War I found Britain involved in commitments to France and the Zionists. France was granted control of Syria. Concessions were made to Zionism (see page 41 ff) through the Balfour Declaration. Arab visions of a great Arab nation became swamped in the embroilments of European politics, and the Middle East was divided into a series of British and French protectorates under mandates from the League of Nations.

Nationalism to this point had been twofold: British-inspired Pan-Islamic in the south and French-inspired libertarian in the north. At the close of the war, Faisal of the Hashemite family ruling the Holy City of Mecca, who had been cooperative and sympathetic to the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine, entered Damascus and declared himself king of Greater Syria. Britain, fearing loss of her Middle Eastern power, could not support such a move. By 1920 Faisal was forced to surrender his power to France and the partitioning of the Middle East began in earnest. Faisal was pacified by the British and given the kingship of Iraq. His brother Abdullah was made regent of Transjordan in order to put down a Bedouin revolt against French-held Syria.

In 1925 the King of Hejaz and Sherif of Mecca, father of Faisal and Abdullah, was overthrown by Ibn Saud, a former chieftain of a small and humble tribe who, with British help, was establishing himself as supreme leader over all the Arabian peninsula. A bitterness which has been the basis of much insecurity in the Middle East developed between Saud's family and the Hashemite family. It was not surprising that the Hashemites felt that Saud was in illegal control of a land rightfully belonging to them, while Saud for his part feared that the Hashemites might some day command enough power to dethrone him.

Over a period of years Faisal and Abdullah advanced Greater Syria plans, sometimes in cooperation with and sometimes opposed to plans for a Jewish national home—but always with a view to restoring the Hashemites to what they considered their rightful throne in the Arabian peninsula. The success of any Greater Syria plan would undermine Saud's security; even control of southern Palestine by Jordan would threaten both Saud's power and the security of Egypt.

In 1949, when the Syrian army took control of the Syrian government, relations with Jordan were severed, the borders were closed and the announcement was made that not only did Syria reject categorically all plans for an Abdullah-led Greater Syria but threatened to annex Jordan and warned Iraq against interference.

In 1951, Abdullah was assassinated, reportedly by agents of the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem. The ex-Mufti, alternately pro-Nazi or pro-Soviet, was desperately bitter over his loss of influence when the British established Abdullah as king in Jordan. Abdullah, a commanding personality with a strong following, occupied a highly strategic position as king of Jordan. Toward the close of the Second World War events surrounding the establishment of a Jewish national home had often waited upon the political movements of this man. His violent death precipitated fears of invasion from Syria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, thereby upsetting the delicate balance of power in the Middle East. Britain stepped in to fill the power gap, promising aid to Jordan if attacked. Abdullah's son Talal took the throne and made overtures to end the long feud with Saud, leaving Britain fearful of the loss of her alliance with Jordan. In 1952, Jordan's parliament deposed Talal, an ineffective man, harrassed by ill-health, and set up in his stead his young, English-educated son Hussein. Anti-British elements, pro-British elements, and pressures from Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt all contributed to a complex, politically unstable situation for Jordan's young king. The spring of 1951 brought another threat of invasion by Syria and Saudi Arabia to the little kingdom and again British intervention protected Hussein's throne.

The establishment of the League of Arab States introduced one more factor influencing Arab relationships. The Arab League, while seemingly representative of Pan-Arab unity, in reality based its strength on its success in redirecting internal rivalries and bitterness outward against any foreign intrusion or intervention in Arabian affairs.

In 1942, the prime minister of Iraq, fully supported by Great Britain, proposed an Arab federal union of Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, afraid of such united strength, violently opposed

the plan. Nahas Pasha, prime minister of Egypt, suggested instead and won support for the formation of an association of sovereign Arab states which was then formally established in Cairo in 1945 (see Doc. 9). Although first plans envisioned the League as a prior step toward an eventual Pan-Arab polity, the final form specifically called for "respect for the independence of these (member) states." The League in its initial organization became Pan-Arab not Pan-Islamic. It allowed for limited association with Palestine, provided for association with nonindependent Arab countries, pledged every nation against any undertakings thought to be to the detriment of the whole, and specifically warned against any outside intervention in the internal affairs of any member nation. Contrived by Egypt with the blessing of Great Britain, the leadership of the League fell to Egypt and a campaign designed to secure its position of leadership was inaugurated at once—a campaign committed to the promotion of intense nationalism, heightening the fervor against "Western imperialism" and "foreign domination."

The League might well have collapsed for lack of strength in its earliest months had not Britain and the United States intervened in its support in the League's first trial. In 1941, Syria and Lebanon had been pronounced independent by France but France continued to exert pressures to control their internal affairs. By 1945, Syria and Lebanon severed relations with France in spite of French armed advances. The Arab League accordingly issued warnings of armed protest to France. Since the League was in no position to supply either arms or men in support of Syria and Lebanon, France ignored the warnings and undertook military occupation. Britain, with the support of the United States, then sent troops to Syria to enforce a cessation of hostilities and support the Arab League demand for the removal of French forces. Largely due to this intervention the League emerged from her first trial with added strength and support.

There were points of both strength and weakness in the League's secular, individual sovereign approach. It was probable that cooperation among these widely divergent governments, hostile and suspicious toward one another, could not have been achieved on any ground other than individual member sovereignty. But such a concession meant a continuance of rivalries between nations and hostilities within the League itself. Certainly the failure of the League in the 1948 war with Israel was largely due to a compounding of these tensions.

On May 14, 1948, with Israel's declaration of independence, the Arab World presented a strongly united front in its apparently unanimous decision to "drive Israel into the sea." This was, in reality, an enforced

unity, made necessary because of the hatred existing between the Arab nations themselves. Each nation, deeply suspicious of all its neighbors, could not afford to let any one other nation invade Israel alone on the risk that it might win Palestine and thereby increase its own power sufficiently to dominate other Arab nations. The only self-defense in this situation became, paradoxically, a united war against Israel. Even Lebanon, predominantly Christian and benefiting enormously from trade with the Palestine area, found it necessary to send a token force into the war. (See page 49.)

In 1950, in an attempt to strengthen the League and, incidentally, Egypt's position of leadership in the Arab World, Egypt proposed a joint defense and economic treaty (see Doc. 12) and by 1952 won total ratification of the treaty. In addition to pledging the military assistance of the whole League to the aid of any attacked member nation, the treaty provided means for enhancing economic and cultural cooperation. The hope that such a treaty would open the arms embargo and allow free shipments of arms from Western democracies without restrictive commitments was frustrated in 1950 with the announcement of the tripartite agreements between France, Great Britain, and the United States (see Doc. 13). According to the terms of these agreements, arms would be shipped to Israel and Arab nations provided assurances were given that such arms were to be used nonaggressively.

Frustrated in the arms agreement, embittered by the power struggles of Western democracies over control of Arab lands, and finding it impossible to live with the pro-Israel sentiment of these same Western democracies, some individual member nations began more and more to flirt with Soviet Russia for economic and military aid (see Doc. 17).

It must be remembered that among Middle East nations all but Egypt owe their national existence less to efforts of their own than to the political maneuverings of the great powers of Western Europe. Their leaders had come to recognize the insecurity of weak peoples, too long exploited by the political ambitions of stronger nations, but they had come to realize too that their continued existence depended, in part at least, upon the support of stronger powers. National independence had been achieved in large part in an atmosphere of violent hatred for former colonial powers and "Western imperialism." Israel became in Arab minds another attempt at Western imperialism in the Middle East. Once having produced this state of hysteria, it became increasingly difficult for Middle Eastern leaders to deal with Western powers or seek their support without cries of "traitor" arising from other Arab nations, or from their own people. In the

view of the leaders, Soviet Russia became the logical and "safe" power from which to seek aid.

The Arab League achieved a real measure of economic and cultural cooperation by uniting these insecure, suspicious nations, each individually aspiring to influence and control within the Arab world, each alert to prevent any neighbor from accomplishing any similar ambition. In turning the great part of the internal fear and resentment outward into resentment of foreign intervention, in defining Israel as another Western scheme for further imperialism, the League managed to produce a substantial measure of political unity. It has become a focal point for intense Middle Eastern nationalism and as such constitutes an ethical and attitudinal position not to be overlooked or treated lightly, even though this "unity" is precariously balanced and easily disrupted. The importance of the Arab League was manifested in its resolution, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in August, 1958, breaking the deadlock on the Middle Eastern issue then before the Assembly (see Doc. 48).

The unity of the Arab League was seriously disrupted by the Middle East Treaty Organization, or the Baghdad Pact (see Doc. 16), an alliance of Great Britain, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq—the so-called "northern tier." This alliance, initiated by Great Britain with the approval of the United States, attempted to halt the erosion of British and Western power in the Middle East, form a stronghold against Russian intrusion, and provide a nucleus for a general Middle East defense system.

Hopes that the Baghdad Pact would be a rallying point for other Middle East nations were soon dashed by the creation of a "southern tier" military alliance among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria with the support of Soviet Russia and in direct opposition to the Baghdad Pact. True to earlier Egyptian aims, President Nasser aspired to Egyptian supremacy in the Arab world (see page 57 ff). The northern coalition presented serious obstacles to such an ambition. Bitter riots and demonstrations against the Baghdad Pact, accusations of Western imperialism and of pro-Israel sentiment in the Baghdad Pact countries breached the tenuous unity of the Arab League. Even British-created Jordan was torn by violence and its government seriously shaken by rumors that it considered joining the Pact. The change in government in Iraq as a result of the July, 1958, revolution in effect leaves the Pact without a single Arab member nation and its usefulness in the future is in serious question.

The United Arab Republic was formed in February, 1958 (see page 5) at the height of the Middle East Treaty Organization Council meeting held in Ankara. Both President Nasser's opposition to the Baghdad Pact

and his aspiration to Arab leadership were manifest in this union of Syria and Egypt under his personal leadership. In his installation speech President Nasser invited all Arab states to join the United Arab Republic in a Pan-Arab polity. The immediate response of Jordan and Iraq, in obvious mistrust of the Syrian-Egyptian alliance, was to join together in the Arab Federation. The Arab Federation, like the United Arab Republic, also urged other Arab nations to join with Jordan and Iraq in Arab unity.

Again the old rivalries and suspicions among Arab leaders resulted in the development of opposing factions in the Middle East. The Hashemite dreams of a great Arab kingdom with its center in Damascus and the Egyptian drive toward a Pan-Arab polity centered in Cairo met squarely in troubled Syria.

At the time of its union with Egypt, Syria was rocked with internal violence. The army, under strong pro-Soviet leadership, was threatening the moderate nationalist government of President Shukri el-Quwatli. Observers in Syria expressed the opinion that Quwatli accepted Nasser's control as a means of dealing with the unruly Communists in Syria, since Nasser, while carefully courting Soviet economic and military aid, had severely suppressed the Communist Party within Egypt. Shortly after the formation of the United Arab Republic, Nasser flew to Moscow for extended talks with the Soviets which resulted in a joint pledge of friendship and cooperation, and an extension of Soviet economic and military aid to the newly formed union.

With their hopes of a Greater Syria now thwarted and under pressure from Syrian and Egyptian agitation, Jordan and Iraq found the resolution to their dilemma in the union of these Hashemite kingdoms. The treaty of federation stipulated that neither partner would be committed by the other's prior alliances nor would the union abrogate alliances of either partner.

This did not prove to be a solution to the growing nationalistic, pro-United Arab Republic fervor in Jordan and Iraq, for on July 28, 1958, the government of Iraq was overthrown, King Faisal and Premier Nuri were killed, and a republican government was installed under the leadership of Brigadier Abdel Kerim el Kassem. Revolutionists, encouraged by the turn of events in Iraq, posed a serious threat to the governments of Jordan and Lebanon. In response to requests for aid the United States sent troops to Lebanon and Great Britain sent troops to Jordan (see Docs. 46 and 47).

Again the Middle East became the source of a major world crisis. Anti-Western elements charged the West with imperialism and intervention in violation of the United Nations Charter. The Western powers responded

that Iraq had fallen prey to "indirect aggression" from the United Arab Republic and that Jordan and Lebanon were likewise severely threatened. The Western nations contended that they had acted in compliance with the United Nations Charter since they had entered these countries at the request of their official governments. Russia threatened not to remain indifferent to these "acts of aggression" near her borders and the matter was referred to an emergency session of the Security Council. A Western proposal to remove the troops as soon as a United Nations police force could be empowered to protect the sovereignty of Middle East nations was vetoed by the Soviet Union and the issue was referred to the General Assembly. On August 21, 1958, the General Assembly adopted a resolution drafted by the Arab League plus Tunisia and Morocco which in its two main clauses:

1. called on members of the Arab League to observe the pledge of noninterference in one another's internal affairs contained in the League Pact,

2. requested the United Nations Secretary General to uphold "the purpose and principles of the United Nations Charter in relation to Lebanon and Jordan . . . and thereby facilitate the early withdrawal of the foreign troops from the two countries." (See Doc. 48.)

Despite the advantage of geographic contiguity and strong family ties between two leaders, the Arab Federation has dwindled to an ineffectual status. On the other hand, the United Arab Republic has apparently surmounted the severe disadvantage of geographic separation, deriving its strength from increasing military and economic aid from the USSR, control of the Suez Canal, and control of the oil pipelines that run through Syria. Problems of economic and political adjustment, however, still face the United Arab Republic. Yemen's membership, for example, raises serious questions of political relations with this independent oligarchy.

The many difficulties facing Lebanon and Israel have been increased now that they have become obstacles in the path of geographic union between Syria and Egypt. In Lebanon, the disruption of the delicate balance of power through intense agitation and violence inspired by pro-UAR elements led to an armed rebellion in May of 1958.

The revolution was led by extreme nationalists who were opposed to the government's acceptance of United States military aid and were angered by reports that President Chamoun would seek a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for a second term. The introduction of United States troops in late July did not prevent the revolutionists from continuing their activities against the government. In September of 1958,

Chamoun surrendered the presidency to the newly elected president, General Fouad Chebab, a man who is more popular with the nationalists than Chamoun. Nevertheless it is unlikely that the tensions resulting from the presence of foreign troops and continued revolutionary agitation will be resolved without further turbulence.

King Saud of Saudi Arabia, tentatively pro-Western, but at times given to outspoken support of President Nasser's ambitions, has encouraged both the United Arab Republic and the Arab Federation while remaining apart from commitment to either. By acting thus he hoped perhaps to strengthen his own role in Middle Eastern affairs. The transfer, however, of the principal reins of power to his half-brother, Faisal, suggested a significant measure of support for Nasser.

Although these two unions involved a recurrence of old rivalries, it must be remembered that both are steps toward strengthening the political unity of the Middle East. President Nasser's ambitions do not stop with the Middle East. His vision of an Arab union includes the troubled Arab nations across the whole of North Africa.

Our newspapers will continue to carry news of turmoil in the Middle Eastern states. Often these tensions do not involve Israel, or, for that matter, the Suez Canal, but instead reflect both the political maneuverings of the Cold War and the interfamilial suspicions and hatreds between Middle East leaders themselves.

The nationalistic fervor would seem to suggest that we should cease "meddling" in the affairs of the Middle East, but the Western World will continue to pursue its interests in the face of this adversity. Abandoning the Middle East might well mean abandoning it to Soviet Russia. Our moral commitment to democracy as well as the strategic location of the Middle East forbids us this option. And to this already volatile brew we must add the ingredient that most uncomfortably gives flavor to the Middle Eastern charge of foreign imperialism—oil.