

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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IN the concert of nations, the British Commonwealth is charged with a formidable and peculiar responsibility arising, on the one hand, from its unique combination of potential strength in unity, and on the other, from the vulnerability inherent in its scattered structure. Wherever and whenever the Security Council should decide to order coercion, one or more of the members of this great family of nations is certain to become at once a base or a direct theatre of operations. Therefore, when we discuss the strategic importance of part of the British Empire, we should keep in mind that, with every single member of the British Commonwealth of Nations an ardent supporter and participant of UNO, any domestic problems become of vital interest to the entire world. A true friend of the British Commonwealth is in virtue of that fact, the British say, a friend of world peace, and therefore he will feel vitally concerned for the well-being and contentment of any and every community.

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British Empire defence is based chiefly on three main zones: The Eastern edge (Burma, Malaya and the outpost of Hongkong with Australia as indirect support base); second, the Western Edge, which is Western Canada, and of course those mutual defence arrangements which already exist or may be established between Canada and the United States of America; third, the centre or the Middle East. It is important to realize this, and not to think that because the United Kingdom is the mother country, and the source of tradition and the cradle of some of the most fundamental spiritual and even technical achievements, it is therefore the present strategic centre. It is easy to be misled on this point, especially with our memory of the Battle of Britain, of its near result and its awful significance. Greatly as the fall of the United Kingdom might hurt the Empire, seriously as the loss of its industrial potential might affect the whole Commonwealth system, these losses would not have meant the end. On the other hand, the complete loss of the Middle East would have dislocated this Empire Defence system, since it is not possible to see as a practical proposition any substitute for this linking centre. We might look for it somewhere to the south, either in the Sudan or even

further south in British East Africa, but there climate and geographical conditions prohibit it. Thus we are confined to the Middle East alone, and the inadequate attention hitherto paid to this sector suggests that its importance has not been recognized. Certain it is that through a series of errors our enemies have failed to take advantage of this open weakness.

During World War No. 1. the comparatively small section of the Adriatic Coast in the hands of the Tripartite Powers did not suffice for them to embark upon large scale operations against the Middle East, whilst the German-Turkish attempt to overrun the defences of the Suez Canal failed because the enemy forces were totally inadequate. The Berlin General Staff had indeed the right plan, but hopelessly inadequate means. Besides, Lieutenant-Colonel Franz von Papen, who had just left Washington a military attaché discredited by his carelessness in exposing his own trickery, had now left German intelligence documents behind him in Jerusalem for Allenby's men to find when they took the city. The result was, of course, to make more complete the disaster than overtaking the German forces in that sector. In this way British good fortune in brilliant leadership like that of Allenby combined with German blundering and the preoccupations of the Western Front to obscure a great potential danger. So the danger persisted, and was never more acute than during the years immediately preceding 1939 until Rommel's final defeat. Mussolini's grandiose plans against Abyssinia hardly sufficed to expose fully this ungirt loin of the British system and arouse us from our apparent lethargy. Gradually, the constant reinforcements poured into Tripolitania by Mussolini, which at one stage reached the remarkable figure of almost 300,000 men, with artillery and tank forces larger than those under active service anywhere in North Africa, did stir the British and French authorities, and defence plans were agreed upon with France by which the French would remain on the defensive and construct the Mareth Line so that they could pass most of their North African divisions to the European Continent in the event of war. This part of the agreement was not only sound but would have meant the military salvation of France, had their General Staff realized that these divisions, saved and brought over to France, could have been used there as the mass of manoeuvre necessary to stop any break through at the Maginot Line. Such a scheme, it should be recalled, was strongly advocated by General de Gaulle when Military Under-Secretary in the *Ministère de Guerre*, but was over-ruled by higher authority

still held inactive by the tradition of static warfare. Nevertheless, Britain's share in this plan remained, regardless of the use made of these immobile French divisions, and that share provided for an offensive from Egypt should the conflict with Italy break loose. The small but highly efficient garrison in Egypt was reinforced and supplied with what little armour could be spared from the home forces. That this plan was sound, was proved when it was seen that even the collapse of France did not bring down with it the offensive power of the two allies. Italy's entry into the war, therefore, did not materially change their plans, or not until it became quite obvious that under the Pétain regime France would remain neutral to the extent that the Mareth Line became practically useless and that the Pétain government would even comply with the German-Italian demand that these fortifications should be destroyed. Then at once an unforeseen burden was thrown upon the British Commander in Chief of the Middle East, then Sir Archibald Wavell.

Since then we have seen the three battles in Libya, the Battle of Egypt, the Tunisian campaign and the gigantic efforts that had to be made to nullify the advantage won by the enemy's ambitious foresight and now well supported plans. We shall always remember for our future protection how thin was the thread upon which the military fate of the Empire depended at Alamein, for we cannot be sure of having always a leader of General Alexander's calibre. It is easy to be seen that our repeated reverses in the Middle East considerably prolonged the war, and delayed operations for the opening of the Second Front. It was not so obvious to those in Britain and all over the allied world who clamoured for "A Second Front Now," for an earlier invasion of the European Continent as early as 1942 and 1943, that their public organizations, not least their own parliamentary forces, should have made that earlier invasion possible by assisting the Government of pre-1939 days to create a larger striking force not only at home in Britain but in the Middle East. Only so could Wavell have been given that margin of superiority by which he could have cleared North Africa of the enemy in 1941 or early 1942.

We must not forget, of course, the enormous difficulties which a large scale force in the Middle East would bring with it. The desert dictates a type of warfare which is not only the most costly in material, but requires original and lively intelligence and ability in all ranks, from the Commander-in-Chief down to

the last trooper. For even the elaborate technical training of the modern rifleman cannot prepare him at home for the hourly changing difficulties of the desert. Secondly, the allocation of transport and raw material from Britain for a really sufficient defence in the Middle East would be a serious handicap in the reconstruction programme of which Britain has urgent need, whether governed by a Labour or Conservative or any other political party. We have to find a plan of defence that will take account of the extremely disconcerting possibility that in the future there may be no British troops stationed in Egypt.

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There can be only one solution: we must be able to rely on the local population. Since it is impossible to contemplate the up-rooting and resettlement of a few million Englishmen or any other members of the Commonwealth, for strategic reasons alone we must find a source of strength in conditions on the spot. So we come to Arabs and Jews, and there we have one of the gravest problems facing the British Commonwealth and the world to-day.

Let us examine the Arab case first, and from a strategic point of view only. The standard of intelligence and education amongst Arabs is so low that their usefulness in any sphere that requires more than muscular effort, like armoured fighting or the local production of armoured vehicles and all other means of modern fighting, is negligible. They have scarcely reached the machine age, and the prospect of raising the standard of civilization above that of the nomad is not helped by their adherence to the feudal system of government. Their contact with Jews in Palestine, with the working of modern conveniences constantly under observation, has had some effect, it is true, in Palestine, and we must suppose that this advance will continue, however slowly. Yet the borderline between the one community and the other is still marked by method on one side and neglect on the other. In another matter more vital to our subject there is no such hopeful sign of Jew and Arab growing together. This is the matter of loyalty to the Crown and Commonwealth. The broadcasts made by the Grand Mufti from Italy when our men stood with their backs to the wall at El Alamein should be enough to show the danger from the enemy within the gate, but the case against the Arabs on this count will surely be graver when the files and records of the Nazi Party Department for Foreign Relations come to light, and the full story is told

of the training centres for young Arabs near Stuttgart under Gauleiter Bohle. The young sons of sheiks and chieftains of Arabia did not, one fears, pay visits to Nazi Party officials, accept hospitality and receive military training for the benefit of the British Empire Defence.

It is an uncomfortable truth for the Arabs, but nevertheless a truth and one that should not be easily forgotten. Forgiveness might play a large part in politics, and certainly in the ethics of our religious life, but has little room in the field of military consideration. This Arab attitude is well borne out in the so-called active help to Britain during this war. Take the example of Palestine alone: of over one million Arab population only 8000 joined the British Army, and of those some 4000 deserted, mostly with their arms. In addition their enlistment was anything but enthusiastic, and they had to be forced literally to join either by economic circumstances or by the gentle pressure of some sheiks who thought that it would be as well if some Arabs put on khaki. In contrast to this, the Jewish population of 550,000 produced volunteers up to 26,000 for the British Army in the Middle East, in addition to 5,790 who joined in the Palestine Home Guard. It is well to remember that when some 300 Arabs fell into German hands in Greece, 200 volunteered for the German Army with much greater enthusiasm than they showed on their enlistment into the British army to which they had originally sworn an oath of allegiance. During this war, somewhere in the United States there was a prisoner of war camp containing over 1000 Arabs who had voluntarily enlisted into the German Army! As we assess the Jewish contribution in the general war effort it has to be taken into account that all Jews knew what a German victory would mean to them, and that consequently their eagerness during World War II reached its peak in Palestine. It would be a mistake, however, to deduce from this that, in any other conflict which might involve the Middle East, Jews would be less eager to take up arms in the defence of Palestine. In addition, nothing is more important than the industrial potential of the country in strengthening transport resources. In this respect the figures of World War II are important.

In 1945 some 1850 factories and over ten thousand small workshops were engaged in industrial enterprises, employing 20% of the Jewish population and producing \$125,000,000 worth of goods. This meant that 36,000 Jews were employed in industry, whilst another 9000, or about five per cent of the pop-

ulation, were engaged in transportation and communications. Another 3,800, or 2 per cent, were employed in the regular police and in security work in the country. Most conspicuous in its direct help to the war effort was the production of over three million anti-tank mines, and this in a country which did not know the term "shadow factory," and where rapid conversion to war industry was impossible owing to the lack of government support.

The question of loyalty of the Jewish population must not be judged by superficial appearances. Recent disturbances arose from the passionate desire of the Jewish population to see the remnants of their people on the European Continent brought "home" (as they felt it to be) to Palestine. They are unable to comprehend the conciliatory attitude of the British Government towards certain Arabs who have proved beyond doubt that their sympathies during this war lay anywhere but with Britain, a fact that must have been known always to the British Government. The degree of loyalty in the Jews toward the British Government cannot be measured in the latter's steps to permit renewed immigration, though that factor has its influence, and it is certainly wrong to impute to the Jews the crude bargaining attitude: "If you, the British Government allow immigration, we the Jews, are willing to play ball." The attitude of the Jewish people is largely influenced by the fundamental assumption of British liberality towards oppressed peoples. It is in virtue of this tradition that an invisible bond of friendship exists between British citizens and Jews, whether they live within the British Empire or not, a bond sometimes unconscious but revealed in the constant recurrence of Jewish support for democratic movements all over the world. Witness the strong pro-British attitude of Jews whether they live in the Argentine, Sweden or Bulgaria. But for this, the reaction of some Jews to the stoppage by the British Government of immigration into Palestine would have been much more violent, for the first full reports about the true state of affairs of the Jews in Central Europe, illustrated by photograph, film and broadcast, must have been almost intolerable. Whether they live in Palestine or in other parts of the world, Jews simply cannot believe that the British Government will persist in a policy that is not only detrimental to British security in the Middle East, but represents apparently some form of "appeasement" towards the threats of some half a dozen Arab potentates.

Perhaps, the best illustration of the great problem was given

by the late Lord Tweedsmuir, when Governor-General of Canada, in an address at Montreal in 1936:

Over most of the Continent of Europe we have seen recurring waves of anti-Semitism and social prejudice. What has been the result? The Jew has gained great power in finance, in the press, in politics, but it has had to be subterranean power, and therefore dangerous. They have remained an undigested part of the body politic. With us the Jews have also attained great power, but it has always been in the full light of day. Their success has been won as loyal British citizens.

I have long been a student of history, and there seems to me to be one lesson to be learned from the study of the past. Whatever nation has persecuted the people of Israel has sooner or later paid the penalty. Whatever nation has protected them, has always won its reward. I confess that I am jealous that this great tradition of my country should be sustained, and that the British Commonwealth should win the blessing of those who seek the peace and felicity of Jerusalem.

These prophetic words are needed to-day. The student of the military problems of the Middle East has reason to remember them, and to see in them a basic truth which bears on one of the weakest points in Commonwealth defence.