

# The War for the Middle East

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IN A RECENT speech, Mr. Churchill referred to the imminent conflict in the Middle East as "probable" in the winter months but "certain" by the spring. Both Britain and the Axis are feverishly massing troops and material in that sphere.

Before the war of 1914-1918 German Imperialism was extending its power eastwards from the Baltic to the Persian Gulf. This expansionist drive and increase of German influence in the Middle East cut across the aim of British Imperialism which was the annexation of the Arab territories, with their rich oilfields around the Eastern Mediterranean, so that the Middle East gateway to India and the Far East would be dominated by Britain. This was one of the basic causes of the last war.

Victorious British Imperialism, with its French ally, achieved its aim. It added large stretches of territory in the Middle East to its Empire. But the second Imperialist war has now raised for the second time in 25 years, more sharply than ever before, the question of the domination of the Middle East: whether British or German Imperialism should exploit the wealth of Africa and the Middle East (which produces about 20 million tons of oil annually); control the strategic gateway to India and the Far East; and dominate and exploit the tens of millions of colonial peoples in that area.

Thus, this imminent and inevitable conflict is, as Churchill said, but the continuation of the last war.

Two distinct phases can be traced in the present struggle for the Middle East.

The first phase, beginning with the outbreak of war and ending with Italy's entrance into the war and the collapse of France, was one where Anglo-French Imperialism was busily preparing the Middle East as a theatre of war. A huge army was assembled under General Weygand. Anglo-French Imperialism aimed at cutting Germany off from her vital oil and grain supplies in the Balkans. But the main objective was to open up a new front from which to attack the U.S.S.R.

With the help of the pro-British Iraqi and Egyptian governments, Britain aimed at seeking allies within the upper classes of the Moslem world. With the help of these governments the Mufti and the old Palestine Arab Higher Committee, who previously were in the pay of the Axis, were swung over to the side of Britain. In Syria the "moderate" nationalists, like the late Dr. Shahbander, were swung over towards the Allies. In Iran, the most reactionary landlords and capitalists, closely connected with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co., were also roped in. In Turkey, the pro-British section of the ruling class was able to influence the Turkish Government to support the anti-Soviet aims of Chamberlain and Daladier. The aim of the Anglo-French Imperialists was to create a bloc of reactionary Moslem landlords and capitalists,

whose job was to rally the Moslem world in the Middle East behind Anglo-French war aims.

The initiative during this phase lay with the Allies. Axis penetration and influence had suffered a check. Fascist agents in the Middle East were to a large extent arrested or expelled from Palestine, Syria, Egypt and Iraq.

Militarily and strategically, domination of the Middle East lay in Anglo-French hands, in that the Eastern Mediterranean littoral, stretching from Suez to the Bosphorus, was under Allied control.

## II

With Italy's entry into the war, followed by France's collapse, began the second phase in the struggle for the Middle East. France's defeat torpedoed for the time being the anti-Soviet aims in the Middle East of the British Imperialists. Britain (with American backing) was left to fight on her own. It was now the turn of the Axis to take the initiative in the life and death struggles of the conflicting Imperialisms. Unable for the time being to gain a decision against Britain in the West, the Axis is seeking this decision in the Middle East.

Militarily and strategically, the drive of the Axis in the Middle East is in the form of a three-prong movement. Its aim is a thrust through the Balkans, to occupy Syria; while the Italian forces under Graziani in North Africa have already begun the campaign against Egypt. At the same time, by attempting to drag Spain into the war, the Axis aims at closing the Western Mediterranean to Britain. British imperialism would then be completely squeezed out of the whole Mediterranean.

Syria, under French mandate, constituted, with Palestine, the gateway protecting Britain's oil resources and overland route to India. *Now it has become a dangerous breach in Britain's position in the Middle East.*

Italy's occupation of Syria would enable the bombing of the oil wells in Kirkuk and the Mosul-Haifa pipe-line. Further, it would serve as a base from which Egypt could be attacked (through Palestine) from the north, while in North Africa, Graziani could attack Egypt from the south, thus bringing the Middle East gateway between the Axis pincers and cutting Britain off from her important oil resources.

It is highly probable that the Italian pause in the Western desert has taken place in order to wait until the Axis has made Syria into a base so that the attack on Egypt can be waged simultaneously from north and south.

In the meantime Axis intrigues and disruption go on in Syria, preparing the ground for occupation. The Italian Military Commission sent to Syria is disarming the French Forces. It is trying to get the large stores of war material which Chamberlain and Daladier had hoped would be used against the U.S.S.R. The Axis is also seeking political control of Syria.

Nevertheless, the military and strategic plans of the Axis have been complicated by a powerful political factor. This is the peace policy of the U.S.S.R., its aim to maintain cordial relations with its neighbours, and its striving to limit the sphere of the war. This policy and the knowledge of the might which stands behind it, has acted as a deterrent to the warmongers of both camps. But it is also an inspiration to the working peoples of the smaller nations who are neighbours of the U.S.S.R. They know that their safety and independence is bound up with their governments drawing closer in bonds of friendship with the U.S.S.R.

## III

The drive towards Syria could have been a direct thrust through Bulgaria and Turkey, either militarily, or, more probably, by threats and bludgeoning, as in the case of Rumania. Yet the Axis has taken the more difficult "round-about" path of striking through Greece for the occupation of these Greek islands in the Aegean Sea which could act as the springboard from which to occupy Syria.

That Bulgaria and Turkey have not hitherto been drawn into the war is due to their relations with their neighbour, the U.S.S.R. In spite of the reactionary character of the Bulgarian ruling class and the pro-Nazi orientation in its military circles, the mass feeling of the Bulgarian people for good neighbourly relations with the U.S.S.R. has forced the Bulgarian Government to conclude cordial relations with the Soviet Union.

This is also the case with Turkey. Here, too, there exists a mass feeling for peace and friendly co-operation with the U.S.S.R., as well as a strong sentiment against allowing their country to become a battlefield. The Turkish people know what support the U.S.S.R. gave to their national revolution and their struggle against becoming colonial slaves. This, too, is understood by a powerful section of the bourgeoisie which was represented by the late Kemal Pasha.

Turkey's industrial development, however, has not yet produced a fully developed national bourgeoisie with Imperialist aims. But a section of Turkey's bourgeoisie had already become linked with Anglo-French capital. This element is violently anti-Soviet, and was prepared to see Turkey become the spearpoint of Chamberlain's and Daladier's contemplated anti-Soviet campaign last Spring. This element, as Molotov pointed out in his speech to the Supreme Soviet, was responsible for the Turkish Government being drawn into the anti-Soviet machinations of Anglo-French Imperialism.

But the breaking of the Mannerheim Line came as a shock to these gentlemen. Even they became chary of becoming embroiled in the plans against the U.S.S.R. of Chamberlain and Daladier (although they pocketed the British bribe—in the form of a loan of £90 million). This, as well as the strong feeling of the Turkish people for closer relations with the U.S.S.R. has, for the time being, acted as a "corrective" on the Turkish government. Hence the reference to the cordial relations between Turkey and the U.S.S.R. in the Turkish President's recent speech.

This Soviet policy has also had its effects at the other end of the Middle East. As Molotov pointed out, the ruling classes of Iran and Afghanistan have also not turned a deaf ear towards the anti-Soviet intrigues of Anglo-French Imperialism. But the strength of the U.S.S.R. as well as the mass feeling of the peoples for closer economic ties with their great neighbour has also acted as a "corrective" on the Iranian and Afghanistan governments.

The drive of the Axis towards Syria and the Middle East, therefore, has gone through Greece whose ruling class had not learned the lesson that good and peaceful relations with the U.S.S.R. is the surest guarantee against being dragged into the war.

## IV

In spite of the limiting effect of the Soviet Union's rôle on Axis strategy the military and strategic position is adverse for Britain. Whitehall fully appreciates the danger of an Axis occupation of Syria.

So demands have been made for the occupation of Syria.

*The Evening Standard* has pointed to Syria as a possible source of disturbance in an area which should be indisputably ours. We must be ready if need be to close that gap and re-establish our common frontier with Turkey.

Throw everything into Syria—wherever the Germans are.

(Major General Fuller, *Sunday Pictorial*, 5.11.40.)

It should be noted that prior to Italy's attack on Greece, similar demands were made for a strategic occupation by Britain of Greek bases.

The more cunning and astute Imperialists, however, are resurrecting the stale promises of the last war, namely, the granting of Arab independence for support of British aims. "We should appear in Syria as liberators and offer the Syrians their independence," said Mr. Hore Belisha in a speech in Parliament on November 5th.

This refrain is taken up by Brailsford. "Revive that promise (of Syrian independence—I.R.) and guarantee Syria her freedom if she will join us against the Axis." (*Reynolds'*, Nov. 3, 1940.) It has not occurred to Brailsford that those who talk so glibly about giving independence to the Syrian Arabs refuse to give independence to the Palestine Arabs, or to any of the colonial slaves of British Imperialism. Instead, he peddles around the stale Imperialist promises of the last war which the British Imperialists have resurrected, promises which would be spat upon by any self-respecting Arab.

Side by side with the military and strategic line-up and jockeying for positions, goes the propaganda barrage among the Moslem peoples from both Imperialisms. France's defeat and the capture by the Italians of British Somaliland has struck a big blow at British prestige. The Axis has taken advantage of this. New propaganda centres have been opened up in Teheran. And the spread of Fascist propaganda among the Arabs has intensified.

The Axis has been able to rope in a number of Moslem notables, renegades and traitors from the liberation movements of the Middle East. Prominent among them is the Mufti.

In the spring of this year it was reported that Whitehall was toying with the scheme of restoring the Khalifat as a means of gaining the spiritual adherence of the Moslem masses. The Mufti, then a "keen" supporter of the Anglo-French "cause" and having expressed his satisfaction with the then new Palestine Land Decrees, aimed at getting the job of Khalif. But Whitehall still distrusted him, in spite of his new-found "loyalty" to Britain and "abhorrence" of the Axis. While other members of the old Arab Higher Committee were allowed to return to Palestine the Mufti was not allowed to do so.

With the change in the situation in the Middle East the Mufti appears to have gone back to his old masters. Recently, in a cable to the *News Chronicle*, he expressed strong opposition to the new Palestine Land Decrees, while the Italian broadcasting stations are calling upon the Arab world to support the Mufti, hailing him as the "leader" and "liberator" of the Moslem world from British Tyranny.

Another Moslem notable in the service of the Axis is Amanullah, ex-king of Afghanistan, whom the Italians, it is reported, are sending to North Africa to agitate among the Moslems for support of the Axis.

The propaganda offensive of the Axis, which is going hand in hand with the military offensive against British Imperialism is being countered by a

British propaganda barrage to the Moslem world. Through its own Moslem puppets, Britain is calling to the Moslem world for a "holy war against Fascism". *The Times*, September 26th, reports that the Grand Mufti of Egypt, the Emir Abdullah of Transjordan and other pro-British chieftains have laid a curse on the Axis and have called upon all devout Mussulmen to a "Holy War" against Hitler and Mussolini!

Thus, on the basis of this analysis, the balance of forces in the Middle East, militarily and strategically, cannot be said to be too favourable for Britain. The *Daily Telegraph* is compelled to admit that "in Egypt and in the Middle East generally the margin of safety is none too large".

## V

This battle for the Middle East has had catastrophic effects on the economy of the countries concerned, as the following notes indicate.

*Egypt.* Particularly has this been the case in Egypt. At the beginning of the war Britain, with the object of tightening her hold on that country, forced the Egyptian government to break off commercial relations, first with Germany, Norway, Denmark, Holland and Belgium, then with Italy and France. In normal years, trade with these countries amounted to more than  $\frac{1}{3}$  of Egypt's total overseas trade and more than the total trade with Britain.

Cotton is the backbone of Egypt's economy and export trade. Since Britain was able to cut off such a large slice of Egypt's export markets, Britain last season bought cotton at very low prices.

Conditions this season are even worse. The Cotton Exchange has been closed since May. So the farmers can get no advance on their crops and are unable to buy fertilizers and other agricultural necessities. The cotton situation has an overriding effect over other agricultural commodities, so that wheat prices are about 60% of last year's prices.

For the peasants and workers this has meant suffering and hardship on an enormous scale.

Air raids and evacuation from military zones have aggravated the situation. Thousands of families have evacuated to the countryside where the people are faced with absolute starvation.

In the towns, the almost complete cessation of navigation in the Mediterranean has ruined thousands of small business men, while tens of thousands of port, cotton and other industrial workers have lost their jobs. In Alexandria alone 20 to 30 thousand have lost their jobs since June.

The cost of living has risen sharply. According to the *African World* "certain categories, including essential medical requirements and men's outfitting, are up by 30%, boots and shoes 25%, hardware and textiles over 50% . . ."

This terrible suffering of the Egyptian people caused by the war is the *basic* reason why Whitehall, in spite of tremendous pressure, has been unable to make Egypt declare war on Italy and get the Egyptian Government's full support for the war. Within government quarters there was sharp opposition to Britain which reflected itself in the resignation of Egypt's Chief of Staff, Aziz el Masry.

On June 24th, Ali Maher was compelled to state in the Egyptian Chamber that Britain had asked him to declare war on Italy and had used "obsolete means of pressure". Appreciating the anti-war sentiments of the people he

stated that Egypt would not declare war unless Italy attacked military objectives in Egypt.

Thus the Ali Maher Government was not pliable enough for Whitehall. So it was sacked, and a new government led by Hassan Sabry Pasha, strongly pro-British, was put in office. *But even this government was unable to declare war on Italy* in spite of tremendous pressure from Whitehall and the strongly Pro-British Saadists (an offshoot of the Egyptian Nationalist Party, the WAFD) who demanded an immediate declaration of war. When Hassan Sabry refused the Saadist ministers resigned from the Cabinet.

*Palestine.* In Palestine economic conditions go from bad to worse. Building is practically at a standstill. Citrus cultivation, the mainstay of Palestine's economy, on which tens of thousands of Arab and Jewish workers depend for their living, and which was already badly hit before the war, is now in a parlous state.

This season's position is even worse. The *Palestine Review*, August 30th, reports that "the whole citrus crop is not expected to exceed some 9 million cases, but the disposition of even this small crop presents tremendous difficulties". This sharp decline means that large numbers of orange groves "have been completely neglected". This has meant a sharp increase in unemployment as more and more Arab and Jewish workers in the citrus groves lost their jobs.

There has also been a sharp rise in the cost of essential commodities. The index of wholesale prices tells the following story:

From August 1939 till July 1940 prices have increased by 30% on the average. Grains and meat underwent an increase of 34% in the same period, other food supplies including fruits and vegetables climbed only by 16%.

(The Jerusalem journal *Hamassad*, August 30th.)

*Syria.* Syria is on the verge of economic collapse, while the people are undergoing great hardships.

Thus the shortage of food supplies in Syria is becoming more and more acute and is causing real hardships in some districts. (*The Times*, September 26th, 1940.)

. . . at this moment she (Syria—I.R.) is poorer than I have known her in twenty years. For her gold was taken in exchange for wartime francs and this paper money of course deteriorated until discontented shoppers and market men affirm they have been robbed by France of three-quarters of their wealth. To-day, in spite of what has become military occupation backed on occasions by martial law, the bazaars are empty. Syria is too poor to buy. She has nothing to sell.

(Rosita Forbes in *Illustrated*.)

This is what this war has already brought to the peoples of the Middle East. Now their countries are to be devastated by the Imperialist robbers in the name of war for "democracy" and the "freedom of nations".

## VI

What effect has this war had on the people and the liberation movements of the Middle East and what perspectives are opened up for them in this rapidly developing situation? In assessing the future possibilities a number of important factors must be considered.

First and foremost, consideration must be given to the relative industrial backwardness of the Middle East, backward even when compared with the restricted industrial development which takes place in an Imperialist colony. This backwardness is due to the paucity (apart from oil) of natural resources. This has been responsible for the relative backwardness and immaturity of the liberation movements. As a result, no strongly organised Trade Unions, and workers' and peasants' parties have arisen. This has meant that the leadership of the movements have been in the hands of the upper semi-feudal and bourgeois classes.

True, the policy of Imperialism of thwarting the industrial development of the native bourgeoisie, as well as the powerful anti-Imperialist up surge from the workers, peasants and urban petty-bourgeoisie, have driven these upper class elements into the anti-Imperialist struggle; but only up to a certain stage. These elements have always tended to compromise with British Imperialism and sell the national liberation struggle. And with the drive of the Axis into the Middle East before the war, with its "peaceful" penetration, a section of these classes has sold out to the Axis imperialists in the hope that from them they may get more concessions than from their British masters.

In Egypt, the national independence struggle is now on a higher plane as compared with the neighbouring countries and is steadily rising as the masses are gradually seeing the link between British Imperialist domination and their misery, and economic and political degradation.

The palace clique, representing the semi-feudal landlords, will not fight for genuine Egyptian independence. Their power is buttressed by British rule. Within this clique there are elements sympathetic to the Axis.

At the same time the native bourgeoisie tends to be pushed into the anti-Imperialist struggle. Britain, pursuing her policy of throttling native industrialisation and keeping Egypt as a backward agrarian country within her Imperialist sphere for obtaining food and raw material, has turned down such projects as the building of a light arms factory, the developing of iron ore deposits, the production of artificial manures, and the electrification of the Assan Dam. This policy has created starvation and suffering for the workers and peasants, since without a developing industry Egyptian agriculture alone cannot support an increasing population.

The Egyptian nationalist party, the WAFD, represents the Egyptian bourgeoisie. Up till the spring of this year the WAFD was prepared to support the war provided Britain would allow it to participate in the peace negotiations after the war, guarantee it better cotton prices, revise the status of the Sudan, and withdraw British troops from Egypt after the war. These demands were categorically refused. This, too, as well as the strong anti-war sentiment of the people, is responsible for the WAFD refusing to support the Hassan Sabry government and the war.

Thus the Egyptian bourgeoisie can, in the last resort, only be a temporary ally in the anti-imperialist struggle. Only the Egyptian workers, allied with the peasantry, can lead this struggle to a final victorious conclusion. But as yet the Egyptian labour movement (and peasant movement) is in its early infancy. There is not yet a strong organised alternative leadership to the WAFD.

In Palestine and in Syria the national liberation movements are even more backward. With the exception of the powerful Histadrut (Jewish Federation

of Labour) in Palestine which could, if it threw off its reactionary pro-Imperialist leaders, play a leading part in the liberation movements of the Middle East, only the beginnings of Trade Unionism and peasants' organisations exist among the Arabs. This has definitely been a retarding factor on the liberation movements of the Middle East.

Another retarding factor has been that just prior to the outbreak of the war the Middle East was experiencing the ebb of a revolutionary anti-Imperialist wave which had burst out in 1936 with the Palestine revolt and the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty.

Nevertheless, in spite of all this, there are increasing signs that the peoples are on the move. Among the Egyptian workers the class struggle, which is the basis of the anti-Imperialist struggle, is sharpening. On May 20th, 900 tramway men in Alexandria went out on one of the biggest strikes ever experienced for a 30% wage increase, in spite of the military ordinances and the appeals of their leaders for them to return to work. In one of the spinning mills in Alexandria, workers went out in a two-hour protest strike and were granted a 10% to 15% wage increase. The number of these strikes is increasing.

*Anti-British feeling is also growing. And to the extent that the Egyptian working population begins to see more clearly that British domination is responsible for their terrible conditions, so will these strikes take on more and more an anti-Imperialist character.*

In Palestine, sporadic anti-Imperialist struggles have gone on since the outbreak of war. The Middle East correspondent of the Associated Press, Ladislav Farrago, writing in the April number of *Asia*, declared that in September, 1939, 25,000 to 30,000 persons were arrested and that guerilla warfare still continues; while new detention camps have been set up in Palestine and in the neighbouring countries. Those Jewish and Arab workers who are increasingly striking for better conditions are, in the main, not yet fully anti-Imperialist. But they, too, as the situation worsens for them, will see the real cause of their suffering; and Jews and Arabs will go forward unitedly against their imperialist masters.

In Syria, deep uneasiness and unrest, because of the concentration of large numbers of troops, existed even before France's collapse. To-day, with conditions worsening, the Syrian people are neither for de Gaulle nor for Vichy. This is reflected in a statement made by Monseigneur Avida, the Maronite Patriarch:

The Maronites (a Christian Sect—I.R.) were deeply attached to their independence, and although they were bound to France by traditional friendship, they had always resisted her policy when it took on an Imperialistic colour. They certainly did not intend to allow themselves to be treated as a political pawn and to be bartered from one hand to another. (*The Times*, October 26, 1940.)

All this indicates the deep ferment and unrest among the peoples in the Middle East. It is still sporadic and not yet strongly organised. But their conditions are inexorably driving them against British Imperialism. Neither are they unaware of the rising anti-Imperialist movement which is taking place in India.

The growing crisis of the capitalist world with its Imperialist war has driven the Imperialists of both sides to seek a decision in the Middle East. The peoples of the Middle East, however, will have the final say.