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Liberty, January 8, 1944

The Powder Keg of Palestine

BY ERIKA MANN

The Holy Land trembles as Jew and Arab arm secretly for a coming showdown. Can pledges to both sides be redeemed without an explosion?

I WAS there when the fierce searchlight of the world's attention was once again switched on Palestine. The sensational trial at whose end the accused, two Jews, stood convicted of having stolen large amounts of weapons from the British Army was covered by the international press and the dangerous Jewish-Arab situation was once again brought into the spotlight. This unfortunate incident serves to remind us of a problem of great urgency for the United Nations. It involves the Jewish question in its entirety and concerns the whole of the Arab world. Unless a solution can be found, the Middle East may be plunged into strife.

The presence in strength of Allied troops may prevent the outbreak of hostilities for the duration, but the peace this war has brought to Palestine must deceive no one. The chasm deepens between the two camps and nationalism thrives hotly. Both parties are known to be in a state of preparation. According to private estimates, the Arabs have hidden some 80,000 rifles and a large supply of ammunition, machine guns, hand grenades, and mortars. The Jews are said to have 30,000 rifles and revolvers, 2,000 larger weapons, and much ammunition.

The situation is the more dangerous because both sides feel themselves on firm ground morally.

Jews have been living in Palestine for more than 2,000 years. Even when, after the final destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, Jewish history ceased to be the history of Palestine and the great diaspora began, the children of Israel refused quite to abandon the land of their fathers and the Messianic pledge remained ever present in their minds. One day, they maintained, He would come and lead them home to Zion. Each Easter they comfort each other with the words of promise, "Next year in Jerusalem!" For there they conceived the idea of one invisible God. From there they gave to the world what they believed to be His Commandments. There, they feel, lie the roots of their strength.

The stubbornness with which the Jews clung to their faith kept them alive as a people. But it also hampered their complete assimilation in their new homelands. They were different, they did not belong, and their different



Palestine Arab and Palestine Jew.

habits provoked the wrath of the intolerant. The pogroms and persecutions are bloody history.

Finally, in the last half of the nineteenth century the Dreyfus affair in the west and the Russian pogroms in the east started the Jews on another diaspora. Most of the new émigrés wandered westward, but many made their way into Palestine. No longer was Palestine only the spiritual home of the Jews and a place of pilgrimage for the faithful; it was also to become their physical domicile. The movement became known under the name of Zionism. Its founder was Theodor Herzl of Vienna.

For 1,300 years Arabs have been living in Palestine. Of the great Arab empire, poor barren Palestine formed but a tiny part. Yet the rebuilt Jerusalem ranked higher in the Arab world than even Bagdad or Cairo. Here stands the mosque where Mohammed is reported to have conversed with God, and from the rock which once bore the Jewish temple the Prophet is said to have taken his flight to heaven. So when Arab might decayed, and during the long sway of the Ottoman Turks, Palestine's population continued overwhelmingly Arab and it remained the Arabs' home and the birthplace of their faith.

The defeat of the Turks in World War I delivered the country into Allied hands and the League of Nations gave Great Britain mandatory power over it. Freed from Turkish domination, both Arabs and Jews felt themselves right-

ful owners of the soil. Two conflicting nationalisms swept the land. Encouraged by a somewhat vague promise in the British Balfour Declaration issued in 1917, according to which "a National Home for the Jewish people" was to be established there, Zionists from all over the world began to stream into Palestine. The Jewish population increased from 55,000 in 1918 to 550,000 in 1939.

Did this sudden influx prejudice Arab interests? On the contrary, according to the best available account, the Palestine Royal Commission Report, presented to the British Parliament in 1937 by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Arabs profited from Jewish wealth, enterprise, and labor. Their industries expanded, employment increased. Arab patients were treated in Jewish hospitals. But they resented a development that hurt their national pride and threatened to dispel their dream of Palestine as an independent Arab state.

Infuriated by what they considered their betrayal by the British, they revolted repeatedly. And when organized resistance against the British proved to be in vain, they sought to terrorize the Jews into submission. The Jews defended themselves as best they could, but chiefly they looked to the Mandatory Power for protection.

By 1939 this power was committed to a general policy of "appeasement." The British White Paper on Palestine, issued in May of that year, presented a substantial concession to the Arab

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aggressor. For five years to come, Jewish immigration would be allowed to proceed at a rate that would bring the Jewish population up to approximately one third of the entire population of the country; no further Jewish immigration would be permitted thereafter unless the Arabs acquiesced. The Jews were bitterly disappointed. This seemed to annul the Balfour Declaration, and it came at a time when they were more desperately than ever in need of "a National Home."

Here matters rest for the moment. The British content themselves with keeping a watchful eye on a situation which, they realize, is open to change. But it may be an explosive change.

Is there a solution?

It was to explore the possibilities of such that I departed for Palestine. Nowhere in the world have I found people so eager to speak.

Mr. Auni Bay Abdul-Hadi, prominent lawyer, chairman of the Independent Party and leading Arab Nationalist, told me that British policy toward Palestine was dangerously vague. Unless the Jews were made to understand once and for all that this was not their country, there was little hope for a lasting settlement. "It will not be peaceful, but awful!" It was a grave injustice to the Arabs, he said, that so many Jews had been permitted to come here. But now the measure was full. Any further increase through immigration would meet with stiff Arab resistance.

"Armed resistance?" I inquired.

He smiled a shrewd Asiatic smile. "We are not armed," he said. "You know that!"

I, too, smiled. Mr. Abdul-Hadi shrugged his shoulders. "Some individuals," he admitted, "may have bought a few weapons here and there. But that's their own business and has nothing to do with Arab policy. This policy is essentially peaceful. We rely on our righteous cause to prevail. Yet if we have to, we shall fight to defend ourselves, and the whole Arab world will be with us."

BUT hadn't the Arabs profited from Jewish enterprise? Why was he so violently opposed to further Jewish immigration?

"Because," he said quickly, "we want to remain masters in our own house. Because we don't want to become a minority. There are more than 1,000,000 of us now—some 875,000 Moslem and some 125,000 Christian Arabs—as against more than half a million Jews. That's the limit. It must be—lest we be doomed to live under Jewish domination. That's why. I could give you other reasons—more practical ones, if you wish. On the whole, we are a nation of cultivators; but the Jews have bought up so much of our land that there's hardly enough left for us to cultivate. And as for our industries, they cannot even now really compete with the Jewish. They'd surely have to close down if Jewish industries were permitted to expand further. Apart from all this, however, we simply do not want any more Jews in Palestine. That's all. It ought to be enough."

I talked next with the chief secretary of the Mandatory Government, Mr. Macpherson, a keenly intelligent man. It

was lamentable, he said, that the two parties could not be brought together to consider a negotiated peace. There were, he said, a number of Arabs and Jews who were eager for a just compromise. But while some of them enjoyed the highest esteem individually, they had not until now succeeded in enlisting the support of organized public opinion. As for those in both camps who at present rejected the very thought of compromise, he knew many of them well and believed he understood their attitude. It was hard not to—but even harder to visualize a solution before at least a basis had been found on which to build. Perhaps I'd better go and see for myself.

I did.

Under the laws of the Mandate, neither Arabs nor Jews may have their own government. For most practical purposes, however, the Supreme Moslem Council on the one hand and the Jewish Agency on the other function as governing bodies side by side with the Mandatory Government.

In the building owned in Jerusalem by the Jewish Agency I talked with the head of the Political Department, Mr. Moshe Shertok. Was there any compromise solution he might be willing to accept?

Vehemently he shook his head.

*****★*****

Here's a combination blackmail, collection letter, and literary gem all rolled up in one: "If you don't pay me what you owe me, I'll tell your other creditors that you did."

*****★*****

"Look here!" he exclaimed. "This is no matter for bargaining. This is a matter of life or death for our people. Why, even if I wanted to, I couldn't possibly sign away their rights. Even if I did, Jews would continue to come to Palestine. The absorbing capacity of this country is far from exhausted. In order to exploit all possibilities, we'll need more people; and, as matters stand, more and more Jews will need to come here. Just how many Palestine will be able to absorb I could not say. Perhaps two million, perhaps four—"

"But the Arabs?" I ventured.

"Indeed!" he said. "The Arabs! They keep fighting against the very nature of things. And why? We have done nothing to alarm them. None of their rights has been injured. Nor would we ever prejudice any of their legitimate interests. This they ought to know, since we've always scrupulously avoided exploiting our skills to their disadvantage. We've been trying, not without success, to teach them how to run their own business effectively and to the benefit of the whole. So what are they afraid of?"

"They are afraid of your nationalism."

"Nationalism! There are many kinds of it. Ours is young and supple. It has got to be fed well if it is to mature. Like any young nation, we need a certain amount of healthy nationalism, and by nature—or on account of our history—we have rather too little of it!"

The Arabs, he went on, were good nationalists themselves. The Jews were quite willing to help them establish a Pan-Arab federation. Even now the fact that Palestine was completely surrounded by Arab countries was the best guaranty of Arab security. The Arabs might eventually be the minority

in Palestine, but they would still be part of a huge majority. And they could not overlook the services that a Palestine fully developed economically would be able to render to the Arab world.

Palestine is no longer an exclusively agricultural country. A number of major industries and a great many smaller ones have been established. The war has accelerated a development that started long before 1939. Army orders and the increase in civilian demands have stimulated production. By now Palestine supplies most Middle Eastern markets with the products of its highly developed orange chemistry, such as jam, juice, concentrated juice, alcohol, vitamin C, and a variety of oils. The Dead Sea, with its abnormally high content of magnesium chloride, feeds the country's pharmaceutical industries, which produce on a fairly large scale. Much will depend on Allied trade policy after the war.

I visited some of the collective farms and communal settlements of the Jews. What has been done there is astonishing. There is neither grass nor water to be found in the stony hills where they have set up one of their exemplary dairy farms. Every drop of rain must be collected, and grass for the cows has to be brought from some thirty miles away. The energy it must have taken to turn this piece of barren wilderness into the garden landscape I saw is all but inconceivable. Yet they have done it wherever you look. And while outside of Palestine the Jews are known as clever business men, doctors, or lawyers rather than peasants or workers, here they have become pioneers.

PERHAPS the most impressive figure I encountered was Mr. David Ben-Gurion, labor leader, chairman of the executive committee of the Jewish Agency and virtual Jewish Prime Minister. He was ill in bed when I visited him. He had been described to me as "the Jewish John Lewis," but was more like a proletarian Einstein.

"Look at me!" he exclaimed. "I came here on a visitor's visa which entitled me to stay for two months. That was thirty-four years ago and I've stayed here ever since—illegally, if you wish, although I wouldn't call it that. There's something like natural legality and inalienable right. Nobody on earth can deprive us of our natural rights in Palestine. No matter what happens now, in the end we shall conquer!"

"Our rights!" How often had I heard the phrase. Arabs of all stations—students, guides, politicians—agreed that it was their right to keep the Jews from becoming a majority; their right to stop all sales of land to the Jews; their right to halt Jewish expansion. The Jews were equally persistent in alluding to their rights, although they were richer in practical arguments and their very achievements spoke in their favor.

No, it will not be easy to arrive even at a temporary compromise, let alone a lasting solution. Such a solution must combine the greatest possible measure of justice with the greatest possible measure of practicability. To the neutral observer, it seems certain that Palestine cannot yet be left to herself, but will have to remain a mandated country for some time. That Great Britain should continue to exercise considerable influence appears both logical and desirable, but many Palestinians hope that the United States will join with Great Britain to work toward an ultimate settlement. The United States, it is argued, could not be suspected of

imperialist interests, nor would it have cause to appease either party. Moreover, the British might find it less difficult to break the deadlock created by the White Paper of 1939, since America's interest would justify any change the United Nations might deem advantageous.

Among the numerous policies that might be adopted, these are the five most seriously discussed:

1. Palestine might become an independent Arab state.

2. It might become an independent Jewish state.

3. The country might be partitioned.

4. It might become an independent binational state wherein the Jewish population would either be kept at its present strength (approximately one third of the entire population) or be allowed to increase up to 50 per cent.

5. Palestine might become an independent binational state wherein immigration would be limited according to economic considerations only.

Obviously, solution number one would be unacceptable to the Jews, while number two would be rejected by the Arabs. Number three has been thoroughly investigated; but in the opinion of impartial specialists—such as the members of the British Partition Commission—Palestine is too small and too poor a country to be partitioned. Neither part would be able to live alone. Solution number four, reasonable as it may sound, has already proved unsatisfactory to both parties. The Jews will not acquiesce in what they call "arbitrary limitation of immigration." Continued illegal immigration on their part would cause the Arabs to go on "defending themselves." Warlike disturbances would chronically hamper the country's development, and Palestine, far from becoming an asset to the United Nations, would remain a troublesome liability.

Realistically speaking, solution number five seems the most promising, and, from the point of view of justice, it is quite defensible. A binational state, with equal rights for both parties, would appear to be the logical answer to a country inhabited by two nations.

There exist a number of outstanding individuals, joined in the B'rith Sholom (League for Peace), who advocate such a solution. One of the most prominent among them is the American Dr. Judah L. Magnes, honorary president of Hebrew University.

THE binational state would permit both Arabs and Jews to move freely into Palestine until the country's power to absorb was exhausted. The Jews, it is true, would take full advantage of this permission. But the Arabs would profit economically rather than suffer from increased Jewish immigration, and the religious ties that bind them to the land of the Prophet would remain intact.

Indeed, the advantages offered by solution number five are substantial. It would give the Jews the National Home they desire so badly—and the sufferings our Fascist enemies have inflicted upon them might entitle them to a measure of aid and comfort. It would help make Palestine a going concern, a partner we could do business with, a stabilizing element in the Middle East.

Politically and militarily, such a Palestine would be wholly reliable; it would be an ally that could be counted on by the United Nations.

THE END

JANUARY 8, 1944