THE RESTLESS NEAR EAST

By A. VOLLHARDT

Nobody knows yet where the decisive battles of this summer are going to be fought. But a poll of public opinion would probably show that most people expect them to take place either on the German-Soviet front or in the Near East.

This magazine has repeatedly dealt with the problems of the USSR. We now present an article on the Near East. It is to furnish a background for the events which many expect soon to take place there. With great losses in East Asia and Europe, with India refusing to co-operate, and Australia practically lost to America, the Near East has become to Great Britain the one remaining link of her disintegrating Empire, without which this empire would lose its meaning. This is the reason why Great Britain is doing her utmost to hold the Near East, in spite of the long and inconvenient supply routes around Africa and in spite of the urgent need for men in other parts of the world.

The author lived in Jerusalem from 1938 up to a few weeks before the outbreak of the European war as the representative of a news agency. He made use of this period for extensive journeys throughout the Near East. When the war broke out he was on the island of Rhodes and is now a foreign correspondent in Tokyo.—K.M.

As my thoughts turn to the Near East, I remember the last impressions I gained there shortly before the outbreak of World War II. It was in the summer of 1939. The Arab insurrection in Palestine, which, except for a few interruptions, had been going on for almost three years, had stamped the Holy Land with discord, terror, and great suffering. Wherever one looked one saw traces of this struggle. Gradually one's senses had become dulled, and one had become used to the military state of emergency, the curfews lasting for weeks at a time, the daily attempts at bombing, the executions, and the waves of arrests.

One had become tired, one wanted to get away from this country where people were murdering each other every day. One wanted to see happy faces again, a city, a country where there was peace.

JOURNEY THROUGH THE DESERT

So I decided to travel with a few friends by car from Jerusalem to Cairo via southern Palestine, the desert of Sinai, and Suez. Equipped with three different special permits from the British military authorities we started on our trip. On all roads leading out of the towns and villages of Palestine
there were barbed-wire entanglements, watchtowers, barricades, and Tommies with fixed bayonets. Wherever one went, the strictest military control. And if one doubted that this could really be the "Holy Land," one had only to look around the most sacred place in Christendom, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which we passed on our way. In its outer court the British had established a sort of military camp. On trucks and behind sandbags stood soldiers with machine guns, and even on the roof of an adjoining monastery one could see a machine-gun post. The police station and the post office across the street had been stormed a few weeks before at night by the Arab rebels. Taking along the weapons they found there, the insurgents had withdrawn after a short battle.

A few miles beyond Beersheeba we entered the desert, which stretches from here to the Suez Canal like a barrier between Asia and Africa. The rainy season, lasting in these parts from November till April, was over, and there was no danger now in crossing the wadis, the dried-out rivers. The desert road was not as bad as we had believed it to be, although here and there a bridge had been washed out and at frequent intervals the road had been torn up during the rainy season, mute testimony to the force of the sudden downpours in the desert. On such occasions the wadis with their hard-baked river bottoms swell to rushing torrents which carry away everything in their path. That was why the road often had to be closed for days or weeks at a time.

**STRATEGIC WILDERNESS**

Now and again a well appeared at the side of the road, surrounded by a cluster of miserable tents. The Bedouins came from far off to fetch their water here. From the time of the Great War there were remnants of stone-built Turkish military camps to be seen. Fighting between British and Turkish-German forces had taken place along this road.

In the evening we reached the Egyptian border. The first thing the Egyptian officials did there was to seal our cameras. We could not imagine what there might be in this dreary vastness worth photographing, but we were told that the Sinai desert was a prohibited military zone. Furthermore, while driving on to Cairo we were not allowed to deviate from the road. Later some Bedouins told us that wells were being drilled and surveys made, and that military bases were being constructed at numerous points. This was probably true, for another strategic road was being built between Egypt and Palestine. It was already being laid out in such a way that it could be used throughout the year, without danger in the rainy season. Moreover, it was the shortest route between the continents.

The impressions of this last trip through the Near East confirmed those gathered on my many previous travels through this area. Everywhere there was unrest and tension. The entire strip of desert on the western border of Egypt, next to the Italian colony of Libya, had long been under special laws. For years maneuvers had been held and military preparations made here. In the harbor district of Haifa a huge, expensive oil-refining plant was hastily being built. It was the same wherever one looked.

**UNHURRIED PREPARATIONS**

Hence when the war broke out it was only a short time before British military plans were realized. By the end of 1939 the new road between Egypt and Palestine via Ismailia (the old road leads via Suez) could be handed over to the British military authorities. Almost at the same time the oil-refining plant was put into operation, and it has since then been supplying the British naval and land forces in the Mediterranean with their oil requirements. As Italy did not enter the war immediately, and the Mediterranean area was thus hardly touched by the war for a whole year, the British were in a position to con-
continue the preparation of their defenses in the Near East and Egypt almost undisturbed.

Some time ago there were reports of a new railway having been completed between Haifa and Tripoli. This gives the British an unbroken railway line from the Turkish border to Egypt, via Aleppo, Homs, Tripoli, Haifa, and Gaza; thence on to the Libyan frontier on one side, and down to the Sudan on the other. Even if this railway can be easily interrupted, as was shown in the Palestine insurrection, the British still have excellent roads at their disposal in these territories. So, by using both this road network and the railway, they can rapidly move troops and materials over land in the entire region between Turkey and Libya.

On the other hand, the British fleet possesses in Haifa and Beirut two important bases in addition to Alexandria and Port Said, so that, with the aid of Cyprus, it controls the entire coast of the eastern Mediterranean. With the occupation of Syria and Lebanon, the British have done away with the threat to their flank from the territory of their former ally France, and, moreover, they now control the desert road leading from Damascus to Bagdad. On the other hand, this has made them direct neighbors of Turkey. And no one can doubt that at the present moment Turkey, who has always maintained a claim to the districts of Aleppo and Jezirah in northern Syria, holds, or could hold, a certain key position for further developments in the Near East.

**VITAL LINK**

With the progress of Japanese operations, which have already had far-reaching effects in the whole of the Indian Ocean, the Near East has gained a new and decisive importance. For the British, maritime communications with India are now hardly possible, or at least only under the greatest difficulties. In practice this means that they can only reach their Indian Empire by land or by air.
In view of this development, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and Iraq have gained in significance to the British, as they form a vital link with India and the Middle East. Britain possesses numerous air bases in this area, such as Cairo, Lydda, Maan, Basra, Karachi, which enables her to reach India in easy stages. Furthermore, since the occupation of Iraq and Iran there is an unbroken land connection, controlled by England, from the Mediterranean coast to India and Russia. Although the British position in this area may not be particularly strong and the conditions for communications are difficult, this fact should not be neglected. Experience in general, and especially in the China conflict, has shown that large spaces may also represent a formidable weapon.

Britain has had plenty of time and opportunity to prepare herself for the military events in the Near East and Egypt. And the entire development there indicates that she has made use of that opportunity. She has concentrated strong forces in that part of the world, and if Japan and her European allies should join hands in Suez it would mean the loss of the entire British position in North Africa as well as the Near and Middle East.

**FOOD RIOTS**

Besides military questions, the British here have many other problems to worry about every day. A short time ago it was reported that a large crowd attempted to force its way into the British Embassy building in Cairo. Sir Miles Lampson, the British Ambassador and former High Commissioner, must have felt distress at this incident, for he knew the reason for it and was aware of the fact that the mob was composed of hungry men, women, and children. Similar hunger demonstrations have been reported from Damascus and Beirut. There are no more grain ships from Australia, and the fighting forces must be fed. And now the rice shipments from India are also becoming rare owing to Japanese naval operations.

This is indeed a difficult problem, as almost all parts of the Near East are dependent on these supplies. Although the Arabs are frugal eaters, they cannot in the long run live only on olives, onions, and goat-cheese. They are accustomed to having their pilaff and their flat wheat-cakes and need them as an important part of their diet.

But it is not only the imports that have ceased almost completely; there is also hardly any remaining export of native products. In Palestine the oranges are rotting on the trees, and in Egypt cotton need no longer be grown, as the old stocks have not yet been sold.

**ARABS, JEWS, AND THE BRITISH**

Almost equally disturbing for the British is the domestic political situation in these parts, the tremendous tension which from time to time leads to explosions of various natures. We need only think of the latest military events in Iraq and the years of rebellion in Palestine. Since the Great War, these countries have never known peace. Strong national, political, and religious forces have been roused which are demanding an outlet. Palestine is the most obvious example of this process of fermentation. Since the Great War, Arabian, British, and Jewish interests have been conflicting there, causing constant bloody clashes. The reason for this is to be found in the fact that, during the Great War, the British pledged Palestine to the Jews, and at the same time promised the Arabs a free and independent Arab country in return for their support. Their own interests were mainly of a military nature, as Palestine and adjacent Trans-Jordan are of great strategic importance, and, moreover, the main oil pipe line from the Mosul area ends there. Especially in the period from 1938 up to the outbreak of the war, the revolt of the Arabs took on such sanguinary forms that there was growing nervousness in London.

On the other hand, the British military in some ways may have welcomed this development, for it justified England, on the basis of the Mandate
conditions, in further increasing her fighting forces there. Thus at the outbreak of the war there were altogether about 20,000 men in tiny Palestine alone. A British officer once said that it would be regrettable if the rebellion should end, for this was the only possibility for practical training of the troops on a war footing. This idea was widely current in leading British military circles. Another interesting fact was that at that time a regular exchange of fighting between England and the Axis powers in the Near East, the feeling of the Arabs towards the British will certainly be noticeable. The Arabs, in Palestine especially, have had years of experience in guerrilla warfare, which will doubtless flare up again once they see that they are getting outside help. For the Arabs of Palestine it is not only a question—as it is for their brothers in adjacent Syria, Iraq, and Trans-Jordan as well as for the Egyptians—of finally gaining their freedom and independence. For them it is also a question of solving the Jewish problem in one way or another. Quite aside from the existing anti-Jewish feeling among the Arabs of Palestine, it is also very much a matter of economics. In a total population of about 1.3 million, the number of Jews in Palestine has risen during the last few years through legal and illegal immigration to ap-

JEWS IN PALESTINE

It would be wrong to overestimate the insurrection in Palestine as a military factor. Should it, however, come to
proximately 400,000. Furthermore, the Jews have succeeded in acquiring a large part of the fertile areas of Palestine, especially along the coast and southeast of Haifa. In this way the Arabs were pushed back further and further into the dry and mountainous districts. It is obvious that this alone is reason enough for the Arabs to desire an early "change."

The Jews being only too well aware of this, they immediately offered their full support to the British as soon as war broke out. Even before, that is, during all the years of the Palestine insurrection, the Jews had semi-military formations which were well organized and fairly well equipped. They were mostly made up of long-standing residents, since types such as the intellectual Jew from Germany were rejected. They have already been or are still being enrolled in the British forces and are used as Home Guards, although, of course, from a purely military point of view these Jewish formations are of no great importance.

JEALOUSY AMONG ALLIES

Conditions in adjoining Syria and Lebanon, the former French Mandates, are quite different. By occupying this territory after the military collapse of France, the British have not only won a new zone of operation and done away with a possible threat to their flank, but at the same time achieved a long-desired goal of the Colonial Office in London. For a bitter struggle, hardly known to the public, had been going on for these territories between England and France since the Great War.

Since the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which divided up the Near East among the Allies, the French had feared that they were being betrayed by the British. In Syria there were constant revolts among the individual tribes, which were at least in part to be ascribed to the activity of the British Intelligence Service. In fact, even during the time of crisis in the autumn of 1938, at a moment when England and France should have been closely collaborating, the ever rebellious Druses in southern Syria were secretly being supplied with British weapons. In the summer of 1938, the British worked out a plan by which the Arab territories of Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and Syria (then French) were to be united in an Arab kingdom under Emir Abdullah of Trans-Jordan, a British puppet. At any rate, it was better at that time not to talk to the French officials in Syria about their friendship with England.

On the other hand the revolt in Palestine found all possible support in Syria, and the Mufti of Jerusalem fled from the British to French Lebanon. Hence as a journalist one could often gather better information in Beirut and Damascus about the revolt in Palestine than in the territory of the revolt itself. In Palestine there was strict military censorship of telegrams, letters, and telephones. I remember that the British chief of the press department in Jerusalem rang up his French colleague in Beirut on several occasions and protested against uncensored and detailed reports being sent from there about the events in Palestine. However, his protests did not help. His representations were always politely rejected.

SITTING BACK

Toward the present events the population of Syria, three quarters of which are Mohammedans, is probably adopting a wait-and-see attitude. In contrast to Palestine, the state of Syria as well as the Lebanese Republic have for some time had a certain life of their own in so far as both French mandate territories already possessed their own governments and parliaments, although in practice they were still under French control. Nevertheless, the first forming of individual states of a national nature can be discerned here.

The Syrians being for the most part good nationalists, as is shown by their numerous rebellions to gain independence, Syria could, without too much difficulty, begin an independent national life with its own government.
and administration. The same is true of Lebanon, although, in contrast to its neighbor Syria, there is no pronounced fighting national spirit. The majority of the Lebanese are Christians, and they more or less personify the type of the Levantine.

**STRANGE HAPPENINGS**

The British are in a difficult position in Iraq. Although they have succeeded in occupying the entire country by force, with the help of a superior army and modern equipment, there is likely to be further trouble in a country like Iraq. The national forces are stronger there than in almost any other place in Arabia. This is shown by the history of the country, which has continued to struggle for its independence from the British with the greatest tenacity, an independence which it actually did achieve. Of course, this meant that the relations between Baghdad and London were never unclouded. It began with King Faisal, who had been deprived of his Greater Arabian Empire and the throne of Damascus, demanding the freedom of his country a little too insistently for the British. While he was in Europe, he died very suddenly and mysteriously. A cup of coffee is supposed to have disagreed with him.

In 1938 his son, King Ghazi, was involved in a curious motoring accident in which he was killed at once. The British had no great affection for him, as his governments often steered a course that could hardly be called pro-British. His Prime Minister, Bekr Sidki Pascha, whose anti-British attitude was well known, was assassinated in Mosul in August 1937. Shortly before that the British Consul in that city had been killed in an anti-British demonstration. These and numerous other instances show the nature of the relations between the countries. Here, too, military events will start the ball rolling. The latest reports indicate that the British are preparing defenses in the oil regions of Mosul towards the north, that is, in the direction of the Caucasus.

**AN EMIR DREAMS**

On the east bank of the Jordan, in Trans-Jordan, Emir Abdallah rules a country, created artificially by the British, of 300,000 inhabitants. He even commands what is known as the “Arab Legion,” which, however, in practice is under the British. But this feeling of a certain dependence is compensated for by the British in the form of a monthly cheque for a considerable sum. The Emir has good use for this, as he has no other income worth mentioning. Abdallah is even at war with the Axis powers. Perhaps he hopes through this to see his old dream come true one day, namely, to rule all Arabs in the Near East. He is a member of the ancient Hashemite dynasty and thus a descendant of the Prophet. He nourishes a special grudge against King Ibn Saud because the latter drove his father from the Hejaz by force after the Great War, and made himself king of what is today Saudi-Arabia. There is another long-standing quarrel between the two for the town of Akaba on the north coast of the gulf of that name, which today belongs to Trans-Jordan but which is constantly being claimed by Ibn Saud. The British on their part are not altogether displeased by these strained relations and have hitherto managed to play off these two Arabian rulers against each other.

**IBN SAUD**

Of the two, Ibn Saud is by far the greater personality. He enjoys the highest respect among the Arabs of all countries, especially among the Mohammedans, as his country contains the holy places of Islam, to which every year tens of thousands of believers make a pilgrimage. Ibn Saud showed great diplomatic talent in the creating of his empire. In spite of their strong influence at his court, the British have so far not succeeded in persuading him to abandon the neutrality he has maintained since the outbreak of the war. Yet it was the British who had helped him to mount his throne. Now the Americans are
apparently trying to win Ibn Saud over to their side. Alexander Kirk, United States Ambassador in Egypt, has gone to the Hejaz to present his credentials to the King.

**PAN-ARABIAN SCHEMES**

Much has been said and written about the Pan-Arabian idea. More often than not, however, this term is used only as a slogan. Several years ago Emir Abdallah of Trans-Jordan was asked by a German journalist about his opinion on this movement within the Arab world. "We firmly believe," the Emir declared, "that one day an Arabian Bismarck will arise who will unite those countries just as Germany was once united. The uniting of Arabia will come to pass, of this we are convinced!"

Doubtless the Emir was serious in this pronouncement. The idea of a Pan-Arabian federation or bloc was supported and fostered in many circles in all Arabian countries, especially in the years before the outbreak of the present war. It is above all the youth of Arabia which has been enthusiastically fighting for this idea. Everywhere there are national associations and even secret organizations. Great impetus was given to the idea by the revolt in Palestine, which was followed with intense interest by the entire Arab world and by the Arabian rulers. Contributions were sent from all parts. Arabs from Trans-Jordan, Syria, and Iraq fought shoulder to shoulder with their brothers in Palestine. It is of interest in this connection that the rebels were composed almost exclusively of Mohammedans, and that Christians were constantly turned down. One must not overlook the tremendous influence exerted by Islam on the revolt in Palestine as well as on the Pan-Arabian idea. In these Arabian countries, religion and nationalism are most closely interwoven. The religious dignitaries, the ulemas, play a decisive role. The revolt in Palestine, too, was led by a religious head, the Mufti of Jerusalem. Even after he was forced to flee, he continued to a certain extent to lead the revolt from Beirut and Bagdad. In this he was aided not a little by his great influence with the religious heads of the various Arabian countries.

The British have at different times, most recently a year ago, attempted to form a so-called Arabian bloc of British stamp, to which all states of the Near East were to belong. By this England wished to create a uniform and more handy tool. But all these efforts have failed completely. There is still too much tension within this area, and there is still too much to be smoothed out before the idea of a Pan-Arabian Federation can be realized in the Near East. One need only think of the enmity between the Hashemites and Ibn Saud’s dynasty or of the not exactly friendly relations between the Mufti of Jerusalem, now living in exile in Europe, and Emir Abdallah of Trans-Jordan. To this must be added the fact that the existing states of the Near East are with their present frontiers more or less artificial structures created by the Allies after the Great War.

There can be no doubt that great changes will take place in the Near East. The fate of these peoples, however, is most closely bound up with the events of today and will be decided by the result of this war, which may be extended to that region too.