PALESTINE AND ARAB UNION

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Even sooner than might have been expected the political future of Palestine is becoming a matter of immediate concern.

The British Government has been wise in hesitating to define its "peace aims" too precisely. The chief "war aim", i.e. winning the war decisively and completely, must first be achieved. Moreover, the premature announcement of political peace aims may be apt to stir up controversy among the allies themselves. The secret treaties of the last war were a basic cause of the loss of the peace and of the present deadly struggle.

Yet events sometimes require the formulation of peace aims as a factor of immediate importance in helping to achieve victory. This brought about the historic offer — alas, too late — of English-French political union. Moreover, events require above all things that the conquered peoples of Europe verily believe that Britain is sincere in her desire to build up a truly democratic and free New Europe upon the ruins of the old. A first step towards deepening this belief was the conference in June 1941 of the exiled Governments of Europe together with the Governments of the British Commonwealth in which they declared in general terms that the New World must be built upon foundations of social and economic security. These general terms will, as time goes on, have to be made more and more specific in order that the conquered peoples may be moved to risk their lives in revolt against Nazism and in favour of new and more inspiring social and political forces.

Just such political statements of grave importance dictated by the need of winning battles were the pronouncements of Mr. Eden and of General Catroux.

Mr. Eden declared at the Mansion House on May 29, 1941, that Britain had "no designs of any kind against the independence of Iraq", and the generous and wise terms of the armistice in Iraq a few days later gave proof of this; and in reaffirming the British Government's sympathies with Syrian aspirations for independence, Mr. Eden added the significant words "that H.M.G. would support fully any generally approved scheme for a greater degree of unity among the Arab peoples."

General Catroux's proclamation on June 8, 1941 of the abolition of the Mandatory regime, and of the freedom and independence and sovereignty of Syria and the Lebanon, to be guaranteed by treaty, was supported on the same day through a declaration in the name of His Majesty's Government.
As I write, Damascus has been taken, and the announcement has just been made of the outbreak of war between Germany and Russia. This extension of the war would seem to remove Palestine from the scene of immediate hostilities. Yet this capital event will doubtless affect Palestine and the Arab world ultimately. In this most lightning and surprising of wars, it is necessary to exercise caution in trying to predict the future.

But whatever be the course of events, this promise of freedom and independence to Syria and to the Lebanon can hardly be expunged. Nor should it be expunged. This freedom and this independence are natural and are right. They were promised during the last war, and it seems that the promise may now be kept.

In addition to the firmer independence of Iraq and this promised independence for Syria and the Lebanon, Egypt's strength as an independent state would also seem to be growing, and Transjordan, too, has acquired a new prominence through her opposition to the Rashid Ali revolt in Iraq, and her help in the campaign for Damascus.

With all of this going on in the Arab countries round about, Palestine can hardly remain unaffected.

The problem here is of course difficult and complicated as the past twenty years have shown. But that is all the more reason for the British, the Arabs and the Jews to consider things together now, not necessarily with a view to "solving" the Palestine question by fiat or proclamation, quickly and in toto, but rather for the purpose of canvassing the field, of bringing some of the best minds of the three peoples together for discussion and for preparatory work. Without an understanding between these three factors the situation here will continue intolerable and fraught with danger. Let it not be contended that the attempt must be postponed until the peace conference—if indeed there be such. That is the equivalent of saying that this thorny question is to be kept for some kind of hit-and-miss answer, not through a meeting of minds, but through the pressure of propaganda and the unstable successes of diplomacy. In that event whichever side wins, Palestine loses.

No better formulation could be found for the general background of attempts at understanding than the words with which the Faisal-Weizmann agreement of January 1919 begins: "mindful of the racial kinship and ancient bonds existing between the Arabs and the Jewish people, and realising that the surest means of working out the consummation of their national aspirations is through the closest possible collaboration in the development of the Arab State and Palestine..." The agreement itself could not, unhappily, be implemented, but the spirit of it as expressed in the words just quoted was sound and sane and the question is, cannot this sound, sane spirit now be recaptured despite all that has happened in the intervening years?
It is my deep conviction that it can be, that it must be. The key is in the hands of the British Government. If this is not to be another instance of "too little and too late", but if a beginning be made cautiously, methodically now, there may be some hope for the future. A beginning at cooperation can hardly come from any other quarter.

Mr. Eden’s declaration as to Arab union, together with the proclamation of Syrian independence, furnishes the new starting point. If the Palestine problem remains solely the problem of Palestine it remains almost hopeless. The country is tiny, the passions it engenders are enormous. But if it can take its place within the framework of a larger Union, or Federation as it is loosely called, it assumes a more hopeful aspect. Within a Union or Federation of neighbouring countries the Palestine problem is lifted on to another plane in at least two ways: First, the Arab fear of domination by the Jewish National Home is mitigated by reason of the political security which the wider and more powerful background of Arab Union affords, and second, the Jewish yearning for opportunities to settle refugees from persecution could be met more generously. Jewish-Arab cooperation would thus be helping to establish an equilibrium in Palestine, and be helping to establish and strengthen the Arab Union. At difficult periods and in many lands, Jews and Arabs have achieved a high civilization together. They are the living descendants of that ancient Semitic world whose impact upon mankind’s spirit has been so fateful. Why should they not work and be creative together again?

This is, of course, a simplification of a complex situation. The problems involved are of great intricacy. A Union or Federation presents political, economic, military, nationalistic, religious issues that require much study for their clarification, and statesmanship and large means to resolve them. A bi-national Palestine as an autonomous unit within a larger Union is the direction in which thinking should be done, and now that this larger framework is more than ready for discussion, there may be a chance of approaching the Palestine question, as one of its factors, with some degree of success. All three peoples fighting against a common enemy may now find it possible to devote themselves to planning constructively for a happier future.

The better way would be, of course, for Jewish leaders and Arab leaders to get together and make joint proposals to Government. This would surely be welcomed by Government, and one might reasonably expect that such joint proposals would be put into effect. But unfortunately there are no signs that the leaders of the two peoples are ready thus to take advantage of this historic moment.

In view of this, will not the Palestine Administration, will not His Majesty’s Government take the initiative — now?

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