

THE WAR DRIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By I. Rennap

The Arab countries of the Middle East are spread over an area which contains some of the most decisive and key points in the struggle for world mastery that is now going on. There are oil wells in Iraq, Iran and Egypt. Egypt controls the Suez Canal and the sea-way to the East. Syria and Palestine control the land routes (both road and rail) to the East and to the Persian Gulf. Through Egypt lies the road to the Sudan to the strategic Red Sea and for an assault upon the East African Colonial Empire of Great Britain.

With the fall of France and the cessation of land warfare in Western Europe German Imperialism, now joined by its junior partner, Italy, in the struggle for the re-division of the world, has turned its attention seriously to the Middle East, to the oil fields, to the closing of the Mediterranean to British shipping and the seizure of the vital imperial communications. The capitalist press leaves no doubt as to the life and death importance of retaining British control in Egypt and the Middle East for the preservation of the Empire. Egypt is not another Somaliland, a stretch of sandy desert which was not worth defending.

With the prospect of the next stage of the war being fought out in the Arab countries, both sides are concentrating upon winning the support of the Arab peoples for their cause. An intense barrage of pro-British and pro-fascist propaganda is being unleashed upon the Moslem world. Since, however, imperialism by its very nature has little contact with, or appeal to, the masses, the imperialist propaganda mainly consists in utilising the various feudal leaders, chieftains, and religious notables to "issue a call" to the people. Along these lines Great Britain has succeeded in getting the Supreme Moslem Council in Palestine, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, and the Emir Abdullah of Transjordan to declare a "Holy War against Fascism." All have laid a curse on the Axis in the name of Allah and have exhorted all devout Moslems to rally to the support of Britain.

Fascist activity amongst the Arabs is increasing daily. A veritable army of fascist agents has descended upon Syria and literature in Arabic is being distributed everywhere. In Teheran (Iran) and in Iraq propaganda centres have been set up by Grobbo, once German Minister to Iraq. The Axis, too, has its puppets, peddling around amongst the Arabs the "glory of Arab independence" under the "protection" of the Axis. Amanullah, ex-king of Afghanistan and an old enemy of the British, appears to be the latest recruit for the cause of the Axis, and it is reported that he is being sent to Africa by the Italians to rally Moslem support. Haj-amin-el Husseini, once Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, has also thrown in his lot with the Axis, thus reverting to the fascist pay-roll, which, on the outbreak of the war, he left in order to side with Anglo-French imperialism. After having exhorted the Arab world to support the Allies, it appears that now, after France's defeat and the changed situation in the

Mediterranean, he has returned to his old masters. The Italian broadcasting stations are calling upon the Arabs to follow his leadership in their struggle for liberation from British rule.

According to *The Times* of September 16, great importance is to be attached to the arrival of the Italian Armistice Commission in Syria, which aims at "securing the most effective possible disarmament of the French forces," but which will also take the opportunity of establishing an Italian base, air military and naval, against Britain. The Italians are demanding the surrender of the ". . . most recent types of French aircraft as well as the dismantling of all artillery and tanks."

The strategic importance of Syria in view of the battle for the oil and communications of the Middle East is beyond question. The Cairo press alleges that the Italians aim at establishing air bases in Syria which will be in easy raiding distance of the Kirkuk oil wells. All fascist internees have been released and Axis propaganda centres have been re-opened. The negotiations leading up to these developments have been conducted in great secrecy by M. Paux, High Commissioner of Syria, and the new Commander in Chief, General Fougère, both representatives of the Vichy Government.

Britain watches the Axis drive that is being made in Syria. For apart from the immediate threat to the oil wells of Iraq and Iran, an Italian base in Syria would facilitate the development of the campaign in Egypt and Palestine for the control of the Suez Canal. *The Times* accordingly condemns Italian colonial policy as "ruthless and violent," and asserts that "Arab nationalism would be speedily strangled if Syria, one of its strongholds, were to become a part of Mussolini's Roman Empire."

The dilemma of British imperialism lies in the fact that it desires to control, while inciting, the revolutionary movement for liberation in the colonial countries of the enemy. Not only are these movement uncontrollable by any imperialism, but in the Middle East the movement in Syria, for example, is inseparable from the Arab liberationist movement. Hence the threadbare expedient of calling for a Holy War against fascism; British imperialism does not propose to make the mistake, made in the last war, of professing to fight for the national independence of the Arab peoples.

The Times is merely deluding itself when it argues that, apart from anti-Axis feeling in Syria, the economic deterioration of the country will drive the people into support of De Gaulle and a link-up with the British Empire. For all the Arab countries equally are suffering from acute economic distress; and this distress will be increased when the war in the Middle East breaks out in full force. In Syria, it is true, there is now an acute shortage of foodstuffs and a danger of economic collapse. But the frantic attempts that have been made to negotiate trade agreements with the neighbouring Arab countries under British influence, have failed to achieve their end.

In Egypt, as in the other Middle East countries, conditions are going from bad to worse because of the war.

The Government changes simply reflect the deep uneasiness of the Egyptian masses at the prospect of the world war being fought out over their bodies. As regards their loyalty to Britain there is little to choose, as shown by *The Times* editorial of September 24,

between the Egyptian Premier Hasan Sabry Pasha and Ahméd Maher Pasha, leader of the Saadist Party who recently resigned from the Cabinet along with other Saadist ministers.

In Palestine economic conditions also are deteriorating. The future of the Citrus industry, the backbone of Palestine's economy, is not a bright one. Last season proved to be a disastrous one, exports being only 50 percent of the previous year; and the coming season shows no prospect of being any better since the fruit can no longer be sent along the old route through the Mediterranean, but has to travel all the way round the Cape of Good Hope. This extended journey makes refrigerator boats necessary, but they are not easily obtainable. The *Jewish Chronicle* gloomily asserts that, in view of the difficulties, even last year's "meagre showing" will not be attained.

Unemployment in Palestine, already wide-spread, will increase, for a large proportion of both Jewish and Arab workers are dependent upon the citrus industry. The Jews and the Arabs who have enlisted in the British forces have done so less in response to the chauvinist appeal of the Zionist and Arab leaders than out of sheer economic necessity.
