

CHAPTER VI

THE ARAB ATTITUDE

1. The Committee heard a brief presentation of the Arab case in Washington, statements made in London by delegates from the Arab States to the United Nations, a fuller statement from the Secretary-General and other representatives of the Arab League in Cairo, and evidence given on behalf of the Arab Higher Committee and the Arab Office in Jerusalem. In addition, sub-committees visited Baghdad, Riyadh, Damascus, Beirut and Amman, where they were informed of the views of governments and of unofficial spokesmen.

2. Stripped to the bare essentials, the Arabs case is based upon the fact that Palestine is a country which the Arabs have occupied for more than a thousand years, and a denial of the Jewish historical claims to Palestine. In issuing the Balfour Declaration, the Arabs maintain, the British Government were giving away something that did not belong to Britain, and they have consistently argued that the Mandate conflicted with the Covenant of the League of Nations from which it derived its authority. The Arabs deny that the part played by the British in freeing them from the Turks gave Great Britain a right to dispose of their country*. Indeed, they assert that Turkish was preferable to British rule, if the latter involves their eventual subjection to the Jews. They consider the Mandate a violation of their right of self-determination since it is forcing upon them an immigration which they do not desire and will not tolerate—an invasion of Palestine by the Jews.

3. The Arabs of Palestine point out that all the surrounding Arab States have now been granted independence. They argue that they are just as advanced as are the citizens of the nearby States, and they demand independence for Palestine now. The promises which have been made to them in the name of Great Britain, and the assurances concerning Palestine given to Arab leaders by Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, have been understood by the Arabs of Palestine as a recognition of the principle that they should enjoy the same rights as those enjoyed by the neighbouring countries. Christian Arabs unite with Moslems in all of these contentions. They demand that their independence should be recognised at once, and they would like Palestine, as a self-governing country, to join the Arab League.

4. The Arabs attach the highest importance to the fulfilment of the promises made by the British Government in the White Paper of 1939. King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, when he spoke with three members of the Committee at Riyadh, made frequent reference both to these promises and to the assurances given him by the late President Roosevelt at their meeting in February, 1945. His Majesty made clear the strain which would be placed upon Arab friendship

* We have not felt it necessary to enter into the historical arguments based upon undertakings given by the British Government to the Sharif Hussein of Mecca and others during the last war and interpreted by the Arabs as promising among other things that Palestine would become an independent Arab country. These undertakings, the most important of which preceded the Balfour Declaration, form an essential part of the Arab case and were examined by an Anglo-Arab Committee in London in February, 1939. The report of this Committee, containing statements of both the Arab and the British point of view, is to be found in British Command Paper No. 5974. The documents under examination were printed at the same time in Command Papers Nos. 5957 and 5964 (all of 1939).

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with Great Britain and the United States by any policy which Arabs regarded as a betrayal of these pledges. The same warning was repeated by an Arab witness in Jerusalem, who said that "Zionism for the Arabs has become a test of Western intentions."

5. The suggestion that self-government should be withheld from Palestine until the Jews have acquired a majority seems outrageous to the Arabs. They wish to be masters in their own house. The Arabs were opposed to the idea of a Jewish National Home even before the Biltmore Programme and the demand for a Jewish State. Needless to say, however, their opposition has become more intense and more bitter since that programme was adopted.

6. The Arabs maintain that they have never been anti-Semitic; indeed, they are Semites themselves. Arab spokesmen profess the greatest sympathy for the persecuted Jews of Europe, but they point out that they have not been responsible for this persecution and that it is not just that they should be compelled to atone for the sins of Western peoples by accepting into their country hundreds of thousands of victims of European anti-Semitism. Some Arabs even declare that they might be willing to do their share in providing for refugees on a quota basis if the United States, the British Commonwealth and other Western countries would do the same.

7. The Peel Commission took the view that the enterprise of the Jews in agriculture and industry had brought large, if indirect, benefits to the Arabs in raising their standard of living. Though a very large part of the Jewish purchases of land has been made from absentee landlords, many of them living outside Palestine, it is probable that many Arab farmers who have sold part of their land to the Jews have been able to make use of the money to improve the cultivation of their remaining holdings. The improvement of health conditions in many parts of the country, while due in part to the activities of government and in part to the efforts of the Arabs themselves, has undoubtedly been assisted by the work of the Jewish settlers. It is also argued that the Jewish population has conferred substantial indirect benefits on the Arabs through its contribution to the public revenue. On the other hand, the Arabs contend that such improvement as there may have been in their standard of living is attributable solely to their own efforts, perhaps with a measure of aid at some points from the administration. They assert that at least equal improvements have occurred in other Arab countries, and that the action taken by the Government to assist Jewish industry and agriculture has reacted unfavourably on the Arabs. Import duties for the protection of Jewish industries, for example, are said to have confronted Arab consumers with the necessity of buying high-priced local products in place of cheaper imported goods. In any event the Arabs declare that, if they must choose between freedom and material improvement, they prefer freedom.

8. In exasperation at the disregard of their objection to Jewish immigration, the Arabs of Palestine have repeatedly risen in revolt. A substantial number of them still declare their allegiance to the exiled Mufti of Jerusalem and are satisfied with his policies. In the second world war, Palestinian Arabs were on the whole spiritually neutral. As Jamal Effendi el-Husseini stated in his evidence before the Committee: "The Grand Mufti in Germany was working for the interests not of the English who were warring with the Germans, but for the interests of his people who had no direct interest, at least, in the controversy." They felt that it was not their war and that the Mufti was right in taking such steps as he could to do the best for Palestine whoever might be victorious.

9. The White Paper of 1939, and the drastic limitation of Jewish immigration and of land sales to Jews which followed, met the Arab view only in part. The Arabs would have gone much further. The demands voiced by their leaders are for immediate independence, for the final cessation of Jewish immigration and for the prohibition of all land sales by Arabs to Jews.

10. So bare an outline gives only an inadequate picture of the passion with which Arabs in Palestine and in neighbouring countries resent the invasion of Palestine by a people which, though originally Semitic, now represents an alien civilisation. Even the Moslems of India have made representations to the Committee in opposition to Zionism.

One witnesses in Palestine not merely the impact of European culture upon the East, but also the impact of Western science and Western technology upon a semi-feudal civilisation. It is not surprising that the Arabs have bitterly resented this invasion and have resisted it by force of arms. The Arab civilisation of Palestine is based on the clan; leadership resides in a small group of influential families, and it is almost impossible for the son of an Arab fellah to rise to a position of wealth and political influence. Arab agriculture in Palestine is traditional, and improvement is hampered by an antiquated system of land tenure. The Arab adheres to a strict social code far removed from the customs of the modern world, and he is shocked by innovations of dress and manners which seem completely natural to the Jewish immigrant. Thus, the sight of a Jewish woman in shorts offends the Arab concept of propriety. The freedom of relations between the sexes, and the neglect of good form as he conceives it violate the entire code of life in which the Arab is brought up.

11. The Arabs of Palestine are overwhelmed by a vague sense of the power of Western capital represented by the Jewish population. The influx of Western capital and the purchase of modern equipment for agriculture and industry excite in the minds of the Arabs a sense of inferiority and the feeling that they are contending against an imponderable force which is difficult to resist. This feeling is accentuated by the fact that they realise that the Jewish case is well understood and well portrayed in Washington and London, and that they have no means comparable in effectiveness of stating their side of the controversy to the Western world. They have particularly resented the resolutions in favour of Zionist aspirations, adopted respectively by the United States Congress and by the British Labour Party. Although the Arab States have diplomatic representation and five of them are members of the United Nations, the Arabs of Palestine feel nevertheless that they have not succeeded in making their case heard. The Western countries have many Jewish but few Arab citizens, and Arabs are less familiar with modern methods of propaganda. They feel that their case is being judged and their fate is being decided by mysterious forces in the Western world, which they do not understand and which do not understand them.

12. The period since the first world war has been marked by a rising wave of nationalism in all Arab countries. Palestinian Arabs share this sentiment, and they are strongly supported in their demand for independence and self-government by all the States of the Arab League. No other subject has occupied so much of the attention of the Arab League or has done so much to unite its membership as has the question of Palestine.

13. Those members of the Committee who travelled in the neighbouring Arab countries found that hostility to Zionism was as strong and widespread there as in Palestine itself. They received from H.R.H. the Regent of Iraq a

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copy of a letter in which he had told President Roosevelt that "all the Arab countries . . . will unite against any danger that the Arabs of Palestine may have to meet." Moreover the Governments and peoples of the neighbouring States believe that a Zionist State in Palestine would be a direct threat to them and would impede their efforts towards a closer Arab union. The chief delegate of Syria at the General Assembly of the United Nations told the Committee in London that "Palestine in alien hands would be a wedge splitting the Arab world at a most vital and sensitive point." The same witness expressed the further fear of the Arabs that a Zionist State would inevitably become expansionist and aggressive, and would tend to enter into alliance with any Power which might, in the future, pursue an anti-Arab policy. "The Middle East," he wrote, "is a vital region in which all the Great Powers are interested. A Zionist State in Palestine could only exist with the support of foreign Powers. This would not only mean a state of tension between those foreign Powers and the Arab States, but also the grave possibility of dangerous alignments and manœuvres which might end in international friction at the highest level and possibly disaster."