

# Egypt and the Middle East Crisis

by GEORGE AUDIT

NO promise has been given more often by Britain than the promise to evacuate Egypt. Nehru, writing a decade ago, counted nineteen promises made since 1882. It might almost be said that the promise to leave Egypt, always made when expediency demanded, has been one of the main foundations of the sixty-four-year-long Occupation.

For generations of imperialist statesmen, from Kitchener to Killearn, it has been an axiom that the control of Egypt is the *main key* firstly to the domination of the Middle East, and secondly to the defence of the empire against colonial revolt and aggression from outside. It was clear, immediately after Attlee's promise in March to evacuate Egypt, that as *The Times* said (May 16), the decision must lead to "the attempted readjustment of

imperial strategy in the whole Middle East."

The main alternative base is Palestine. It will be recalled that it was in 1916-1921 that the British tactic of setting Jew against Arab in Palestine took shape. It was in that same period that the Egyptian national liberation movement in its mass form came to birth, with the struggles of the Wafd. This development added both to the difficulty and the importance of continuing the Occupation. It was the fear that Egypt would get out of control, and the desire to check the developing Arab unity against imperialism, which led to the building of the alternative base in Palestine, behind the shield of the policy of the Jewish National Home.

Egypt is the richest, most economically advanced, most populous and

most influential of the Arabic-speaking countries. The winning by Egypt of real independence and real sovereignty is the most important issue for all the Middle East peoples. Today, as in 1919, the mass independence movement runs more strongly there than in the other countries. After the war there was a brief British attempt to ride out the storm, but the great Independence demonstration and General Strike of February 21 swept away the openly "collaborationist" Government of Nokrashy Pasha, and revealed the strength of the popular demand for independence and sovereignty. In March Attlee told the House of Commons that the Government had decided to evacuate "freely and without conditions." Morrison said that if Britain did not give this promise a revolution would break out.

The old promise had been repeated. Was it once again merely a move to appease Egypt in order later to bind her chains tighter? Or was this indeed a statesmanlike and progressive act of a Labour foreign policy, aimed at guaranteeing peace and security in the Middle East by winning the friendship of its peoples? The history of the negotiations since March, in which the two delegations have been working out the conditions on which this "free and unconditional" evacuation is to be effected, have given the answer. The halo with which Bevin decked himself ("They (*the Tories*) did not agree with me on Egypt") has vanished. The demands, raised during the negotiations, for a five-year evacuation period, for a special regime for the Canal, for the retention of British military advisers, for a Joint Defence Council which would be nothing but GHQ Cairo in an Anglo-Egyptian disguise, and the refusal to discuss the question of the Sudan, have shown that British policy still follows the basic Tory line, and will evacuate Egypt only in exchange for a treaty of alliance which keeps the

real control of Egypt in Britain's hands. The rejection by the British delegation of the Egyptian reservation that the alliance will only come into effect if Britain is attacked and not if Britain is the aggressor, and the British amendment of the phrase "bordering countries" to "neighbouring countries" in the article providing for mutual aid in case of a crisis—thus embracing such countries as Persia, Iraq, and Turkey—also show the unchanged imperialist motive of the British negotiators. Unconditional evacuation was a fraudulent promise. One must remind Mr. Bevin of his own remark at a U.N.O. session dealing with Iran, that "it is a cardinal point of my policy" that you cannot negotiate with a country while your troops are in occupation of that country.

Light on Mr. Bevin's own attitude to Egypt and the Middle East was shed by a speech he made on November 1, 1945, to the Anglo-Egyptian Chamber of Commerce:—

I began when I took office to tackle this problem of the Middle East, and may I say that I have approached it as an entity. . . . I have seen indications of rising nationalism in Egypt, but I beg you not to overdo this nationalist business. A United Nations organisation, you know, presumes a sacrifice of a certain amount of sovereignty. . . .

We do not want to dominate Egypt. I would like to see our defence built up, not on a basis of our protecting you, but on joint co-operation, a partnership paid for and manned by both of us on a common basis of partnership between the Middle East and ourselves (where does the "United Nations" come in? G.A.).

In that way I can see the mutual interests, mutual character, and great design of that area contributing not only to its own security and prosperity, but contributing a great example to wider regions of the world by its mutual understanding and common effort.

Stripped of the sickening cant, Bevin's words about the Middle East "great design" mean one thing only—

the resolute attempt to defend imperialist control of the Middle East peoples against all comers, and especially against the peoples who are "overdoing this nationalist business."

Three main trends within this "great design" have become clear, particularly during the last six months: The first has been to stall on the decision to evacuate Egypt, the second to organise an alternative system of bases, and the third to give increased support to the most reactionary and anti-Soviet forces within the Arab League.

The alternative system of bases is centralised in Palestine. New bases have been added since the war (Tobruk, Benghazi). The treaty granting so-called independence to Transjordan gives Britain unlimited garrisoning rights. New bases are under construction at Gaza and at Famagusta in Cyprus. It is the pressing need for a new main base (Palestine instead of Egypt) which has produced the latest public appearance of the monstrous imperialist project for the partition of Palestine, in order to make solid and permanent the military base in Transjordan by linking it with Haifa, terminus of the Iraq oil pipeline and main naval port—after Alexandria—in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Here the chief obstacle, apart from the opposition of Jews and Arabs to partition of their country, is the reluctance of the U.S.A. to underwrite such a policy either morally or materially. American reluctance to do the dirty work involved in the protection of imperialist rule, while at the same time taking a bigger and bigger share of the plums (viz., the "agreement in principle" announced in August that the new pipeline from the Saudi Arabian wells will end in Alexandria or Port Said, instead of Haifa, thus strengthening U.S. influence in Egypt) provokes Churchill to threaten, "If the U.S.A. will not come and share the burden of

the Zionist cause, we will return our mandate to U.N.O., and evacuate Palestine within a specified period. At the same time we should inform Egypt that we stand by our treaty rights and will by all means (*i.e.*, by force) maintain our position in the Canal Zone."

The third trend culminated in the arrests and repressions which occurred simultaneously in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan, Iraq, and even Saudi Arabia, early in July. These arrests showed that the official Arab leadership was bent on developing Arab unity, not against imperialism, but against the democratic, trade-union and progressive movements. In Egypt the repression had an obvious and direct connection with the negotiations. Since March the popular independence movement, in conditions of mass unemployment, ceaseless strikes for better conditions, and persecution by the Sidky Pasha Government of big capitalists and ultra-Conservative landowners, grew steadily in strength. The Government, whose main basis is the Egyptian Federation of Industries, representing foreign monopoly capital interests in Egypt, was eager to reach a compromise with Britain, but could find no way of putting the deal across the Egyptian people. It finally launched its notorious "Communist Plot" scare on July 10-11-12. Arresting over two hundred writers, journalists, trade unionists, leaders, students and foreigners, and suppressing eight newspapers, including the official Wafdist daily *Al Wafd Al Mysri*, Sidky announced the discovery of a Communist plot to subvert the social order and sabotage the negotiations on the instructions of a foreign power. Word went round that the treaty would be signed very soon. But at the moment of writing fresh difficulties have arisen, and it seems doubtful whether Sidky's brand of the bolshevik bogey will help in any way to make Egyptian public opinion accept any treaty with Britain

which does not secure speedy and unconditional evacuation.

Another indication of the growing unity of policy between Britain and Arab reaction is the dropping, perhaps temporarily, of the Greater Syria Plan, threatening the independence of the advanced and progressive Lebanese states, and of the plan for the union of Transjordan and Iraq. These favourite schemes of six months ago are too fruitful of dissension between the Hashemite and Wahabite groupings and their respective British and American backers to be proceeded with at the present moment. The following quotation from *Akher Saa*, organ of Egyptian Palace circles, shows, however, that the threat to the independence of the Lebanon—that keypoint in the struggle of the Middle East peoples for their national liberation—has now taken another form:—

Sidky's campaign against the Communists will have repercussions all over the East. Indeed, the Governments of Damascus, Beirut and Bagdad have taken similar measures . . . now that the principle of common Arab nationality has been approved, and that passports will be abolished, it is not right that Communists should continue to enjoy full liberty in the Lebanon while in other Arab countries they are being prosecuted.

It is clear that the support now being given by British policy to the worst Arab reaction is intended to obtain as a *quid pro quo* the Arab leadership's acquiescence in the "strategic readjustment" of the area in the interests of Anglo-American imperialism and its war preparations against the Soviet Union in this most vital of all strategic areas.

But the real independence struggles of the Middle East peoples, their fight for sovereignty and independence grow stronger daily, and it is with them that the "strategic readjustment" brings Britain into full conflict. As a result of this policy, Labour today is faced with the prospect, not of voluntary evacuations followed by the establishment of independent and sovereign states, but of bloody work of repression in Palestine, Egypt and perhaps soon elsewhere. The recent despatch of troops to Basra in order to terrorise the workers in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's fields, with its threat of aggressive intervention in the internal affairs of Iran, shows that the effort to preserve monopoly capital and its allies in the Middle East, is not only a dishonour to the Labour Government, but also a serious threat to peace.

The pledge to Egypt must be fulfilled. An independent and sovereign Palestine state must be constituted. And if any special international arrangements are necessary in relation to the Middle East countries—arrangements in the interests of international security, and not merely aimed at the continued enslavement of the area to unrestricted exploitation by British and American monopoly capital, then the United Nations and not any self-appointed Anglo-American Committee, is the only body with the right and authority to decide them. Any other course leads in the Middle East only to increased violence and anarchy, discredit for the Labour Government, deeper hatred of Britain and increased danger of war.