

A LOOK AT THE



Wide World

By Russell S. Hibbs

THE AREA COMPRISING LEBANON, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran is often referred to as the Middle East. This is not a concrete definition and "Middle East" and "Near East" are often nebulous terms. The defined area is geographically one of contrasts. The fertility of the Nile Valley and the Fertile Crescent is contrasted by the aridness of the greater part of the land. The surface of the Dead Sea 1,286 feet below sea level is in sharp contrast with the mountains of over 5,000 feet altitude yet only 30 miles distant. The area is obviously of interest to the geologist. Perhaps less obviously, but to no lesser degree, it is a treasure land for the archeologist, anthropologist and student of religion.

Nor should its historical richness be forgotten. The littoral plain bordering the Mediterranean from the Gulf of Iskenderon on the north to the Sinai Desert in Egypt has been the route over which countless

armies of history have marched. Hittites, Alexander the Great, Crusaders and Ottoman Turks poured through the mountains on the north to pass this way. Alexandretta (Iskenderon), Turkey reserves the name if not the exact location from the Battle of Issus where in 333 BC Alexander the Great defeated Darius and the numerically superior Persian army. Before advancing further to the east, Alexander swung south along the Mediterranean segment of the Fertile Crescent. After a 7-month siege of Tyre, he overcame this fortress and proceeded to secure Egypt before retracing his steps north and then east. After winning the Battle of Gaugamila in 331 BC, Alexander controlled the Tigris and Euphrates Valleys, making his control of the Middle East complete.

It is important to understand the significance of these rivers in the time of Alexander and their equal importance today. The Tigris and Euphrates, along with the Nile, are

the life blood of the area. Even the littoral plain of Syria, Lebanon and Israel is dependent upon the rich deposits of the Nile which form this narrow but fertile strip.

The muddy waters of the Nile color many square miles of the blue Mediterranean when the river is at flood stage. Between the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates once "hung" the gardens of Babylon. Little remains of this once famous city. German archaeologists excavated this site and shipped most of the important tablets and statues to the Berlin Museum prior to WW I. These treasures are now probably in Moscow.

In the 19th Century [Mameluke] forces of Egypt marched as far north as Aleppo (Syria) and threatened to overthrow the Ottoman Empire; however, intervention of the "Great Powers" prevented this.

Napoleon also used the route. After conquering Egypt, he employed some 10,000 camels to transport his light guns and supplies across the Sinai Desert. His heavier guns were sent to Acre by sea only to be captured by the British and later were used to defeat him. Napoleon's military campaign in Egypt was a fiasco, but the lasting French influence which the following short period of French domination imparted is difficult to appreciate without visiting Cairo or Alexandria. Here one finds French names, French books, a French speaking middle and upper class, *et cuisine française*.

Concrete evidence of the historical importance of this route is visible at the Dog River Site. Lying about 15 kilometers north of Beirut, Lebanon, the pass of Nahr el-Kalb has seen conquerors from Ramses II in the 13th Century BC to Gen. Gouraud in 1920. Each has left a record of his conquest in the form of an inscription, making the rocky hillside an open-air museum. Unfortunately some smoothed the inscriptions of others to chisel proof of their own achievement. No less than 19 inscrip-

MIDDLE EAST

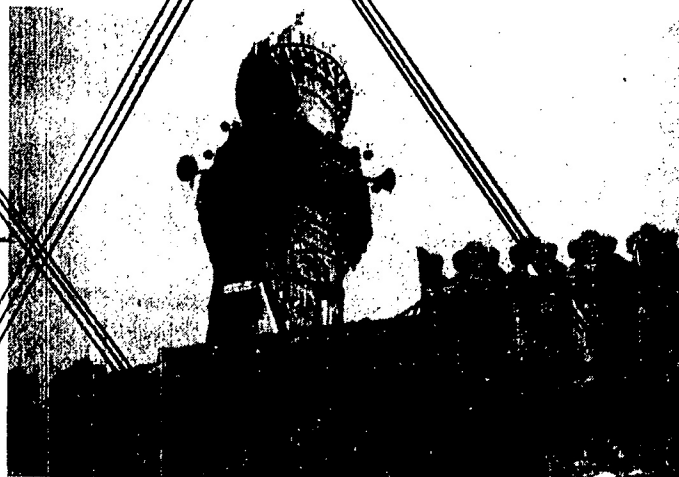
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tions remain within an area of a few hundred yards.

What generality of current value may be deduced from these historical facts?

First, the strategic location of the area. The Middle East has been a battlefield of armies and ideas. It is a land bridge linking Europe, Africa and Asia. Not only was it of importance in ancient history but

*Al Azhar Mosque,
Cairo*



Hibbs



Hibbs

*Dog River Site, crossroad of history
(here inscription by armies of Napoleon III)*

has remained so in our generation. Significant battles took place here between the Allies and the Ottoman Turks during WW I. During WW II Rommel was stopped 60 miles short of Alexandria. Iran served as an important supply route to the Soviet Union. In 1943 the *London Times* stated: "The whole course of

the war has brought home the importance of the Near East . . ."

The present Communist vis a vis West conflict has amplified the area's importance. Control of this area by the Soviet Union would destroy the usefulness of the Suez Canal and provide Persian Gulf bases for Soviet submarines to harass shipping off the

entire coast of southern Asia and eastern Africa. In Red hands it would increase the Soviet air capability over Greece, Turkey and North Africa.

The area's second claim to importance is based on its petroleum resources. The Middle East contains over one half of the world's proven

oil reserves and accounts for 18 percent of the world's total output of crude petroleum (outside the USSR for which exact figures are not obtainable). The western European nations with a population of nearly 300 million people are dependent on Middle East oil. Approximately 97 percent of the petroleum consumed by Western Europe comes from the Middle East. If this supply of oil were shut off, the effect on Western Europe's economy and defense capabilities would be felt immediately. Even the United States imports substantial quantities of Middle East oil. This allows the partial conservation of domestic sources for emergencies when Middle East petroleum may not be available.

(Ed: The author submitted his manuscript to the GAZETTE many months before the Suez crisis arose. Thus, his view of the effect of this on Europe's oil supply is based on foresight rather than on accomplished facts.)

In spite of recent atomic energy developments, petroleum is, and will continue to be for some years, one of the most essential commodities to an industrial nation.

The importance of petroleum resources to the countries of the Middle East themselves is difficult to exaggerate. This is the one resource which provides the Middle East a substantial financial credit. Saudi Arabia's wealth is a familiar story. Less obvious is the importance of oil to Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Israel. The large sterling credits provided by the Kirkuk oil fields of Iraq are being used to finance the country's agricultural, communication, transportation and school development. These are items which will be of value after the supply of petroleum is possibly depleted. A Development Board has been formed for this purpose. This Board takes 70 percent of oil revenues and spends them on development schemes. It is believed that irrigation projects being developed will increase arable

land 5 fold. Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, although not having large oil reserves, receive revenue from the pipe lines which cross their territories. The oil question in Iran was the principal reason for the coup d'etat of Mossadegh and his subsequent fate.

The third basis of the Middle East's importance may be termed, "its strategic diplomatic position." This term is in itself meaningless. Any strategic diplomatic position is a result of other factors: military strength, strategic location, industrial capacity, natural resources, or technical knowledge. None of these aforementioned factors, except strategic location and natural resources which have been discussed, are responsible for the Middle East's strategic diplomatic position. Two abstract, yet important, ideas are the mainstays of this position: 1) The area is the historic center of the Islamic-Moslem world. 2) The area has the role of a representative of the underdeveloped countries of North Africa and Asia.

Islam has been a dominant factor in the Middle East since shortly after the birth of Mohammed in 570 or 571 AD. He was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, of a respectable but not prominent family. His real name is not certain, Mohammed meaning exalted or comforter. Little is known of his youth; he did not begin his religious mission until the age of 40. He became the Arabs' prophet and gave them a religion in their own tongue. (Jesus spoke a dialect of Syrian).

Mohammed's main concept was the oneness of God. Since Mecca was the trade center of the Arabian Peninsula which embraced paganism, there was much opposition to Mohammed. This opposition forced him to flee to Medina. His flight, or *Hegira*, took place in 622. In this manner Medina became the second most holy Moslem city.

In Medina, Mohammed's problems were ones of state as well as of

religion. His preachings became more practical in nature and lost some of their previous poetic form. Ten years later, his following had spread throughout the entire Arabian Peninsula. His last conquest in 630 was Mecca, the city that had driven him out.

The Koran, meaning recital, is the Moslem holy book. It differs from the Bible in that it is considered by Moslems to be the word of God dictated by God to the Angel Gabriel and by him to Mohammed. Since it is the word of God, it cannot, and has not been challenged by Moslems on a scientific basis such as the Bible is subjected to.

Mohammed died in 632. The reckoning of Islamic time uses this date as its origin. To truly understand the Middle East and the Arab, a knowledge of Islam is necessary. *Mohammedism* by H. A. R. Gibb, Oxford University Press, London, 1953, is recommended for serious reading on the subject.

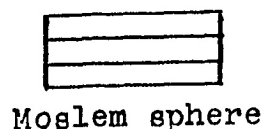
Today, the binding force of Mohammedanism embraces one of every 7 persons on the earth's surface. All of the Middle East, with the exception of Lebanon and Israel is predominantly Moslem. Lebanon is approximately half Moslem, half Christian. Israel's population is over 90 percent Jewish. In addition to the Middle East countries, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, North Africa, parts of Malaya and the Philippine Islands as well as Indonesia are Moslem. The Islamic faith commands about 400 million people. Under the motivation of Islam, the Arabs overcame the Byzantine and Persian Empires and extended their control as far as Spain in a brief 85 years (632-717). This spiritual force even gave birth to a counter force, the Crusades.

It is questionable that the Ottoman Empire could have controlled the Middle East from 1516 until 1918 were it not for the fact that the Sultan of Turkey was also the head of the Moslem world.

Mohammedanism has been a unifying force in the past and remains so at present. Although all Moslems are not Arabs nor all Arabs Moslems, the heartland of Islam is the Middle East. It is in that direction that the Moslem world looks for leadership.

One of the acts of worship or pillars of Islam is the pilgrimage to

Prior to becoming a civilian research analyst with the Air Force, **Mr. Hibbs** spent 9 years as a Regular Marine officer. At the time he left the Service, in 1954, he was with G2, FMFLant. It was during his tour there that he attended a Near East Seminar at Beirut, Lebanon and gathered the material for this article. His primary interest being in the intelligence field, he attended the Russian Language School, the Officers' Intelligence Course at Ft Riley and served in Europe before going to Korea where he was also with G2 at Division level and KMCs.



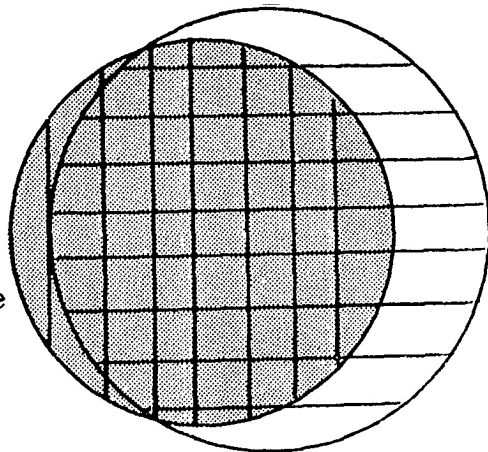
Moslem sphere



Arab-Moslem sphere



Arab sphere



Mecca. Every Moslem must make this trip once during his lifetime if possible. This factor focuses attention on Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia contains the two most holy Moslem cities, Mecca and Medina, the "Rome" of Islam is Cairo. Al Azar Mosque is less impressive to the eye than other mosques in Cairo, but none in the world is more important. Over 20,000 students from every Moslem country study the Koran and Mohammedan principles under the supervision of 2,000 professors. This mosque-university is the molder of Islamic law and faith.

With all of the Moslem world of 400,000,000 looking toward the Middle East, the importance of this area and its strategic diplomatic position is obvious.

Cairo (Al Qahira the Victor) is many other things than the location of Al Azhar. It is Egypt's capital. Numbering over 2 million inhabitants it is the largest city of the Arab world as well as of the African Continent. It may rightfully be called "*le Paris Oriental*." Cairo pulses with French restaurants, night clubs and horse races. To the tourist, all of Egypt may appear to have the glitter of Cairo and Alexandria or the glory of Luxor. Unfortunately this is not the case.

Egypt's total cultivatable area is inadequate for her teeming population of over 20 million persons. Considering the several crops per year which some of the land is able to produce, only .44 acres of land per person are available for the production of food. The fellahin, peasant, of Egypt lives in a poverty second to none, including India. To a lesser degree these same conditions of poverty are prevalent throughout the Arab Middle East.

There is a constant battle for existence, the struggle of the underprivileged. As the center of gravity of the underprivileged class of North Africa, the Middle East and a portion of Asia, this area gains a strategic diplomatic position. India has long "enjoyed" such leadership and prestige. With the struggle between Pakistan and India being no closer to settlement than before, with the United States' greater attention to Pakistan, and remembering that Pakistan is Moslem; it may be said that the Middle East's influence in Asian matters will increase rather than decrease.

The countries of the Middle East are trying to help themselves. Iraq has formed her Development Board. Syria, Jordan and others have made some progress, but it is a long struggle in an area whose state of development has not yet reached that of the Industrial Revolution.

The battle can't be won without aid from without. The United States is aiding these backward countries financially and through the Point Four Program. The latter provides teams of experts to give needed technical guidance. Unfortunately, financial aid and technical assistance alone are not the complete solution. Material progress is blocked by the Arab psychological approach xenophobia. This distrust of everything foreign has transferred the blame for many of the area's own shortcomings to the foreigner. Americans may be liked as individuals, but collectively they are the "haves" versus the underprivileged.

This xenophobia is not completely unfounded. The Great Powers of Europe played an international game of chess, often with the Middle East as a pawn. During WW I the British promised sovereignty in exchange

for aid against the Ottoman Empire. T. E. Lawrence's book, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, gives a most interesting account of this period. At the close of WW I, it was decided to place the heartland of the Middle East under a system of mandates. France and England were designated the mandate powers. Lawrence was so shocked he changed his name to Shaw in an effort to escape his shame.

The pattern continued: Egypt was a British protectorate until 1922. Iraq achieved her independence in 1927. Lebanon and Syria were freed in 1944. Jordan became independent in 1946.

Prior to the end of WW II, the United States was regarded by the peoples of the Middle East with great respect. Their impression of this great power beyond the seas was based upon contact with American missionaries or archaeologists. The role of a world power is not always an easy one to play to the satisfaction of all. When the United States assumed this role, her prestige in the Middle East went down. The one factor that hurt the United States' position the most was her part in the formation of Israel. This is a complex, emotional question. In spite of which side is right or wrong, the fact remains that until Arab attention is diverted from Israel the formation of any organization such as MEDO, Middle East Defense Organization, will be extremely difficult.

The Middle East has always been an important area because of its position as a land bridge linking Africa, Europe and Asia. It is no less important today.

The Middle East is important because of its large petroleum resources. Western Europe is largely dependent upon this source of oil. Atomic energy will not obviate this need for petroleum for many years.

The Middle East has a strategic diplomatic position as a result of its leadership in the Moslem world and as a leader of the underprivileged classes of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

The Middle East is suffering from xenophobia. We must be certain that the area's struggle for a higher standard of existence, in which we wish to aid, is not transformed by xenophobia and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union into hatred for the West.

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