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Jewish Agency, 1944.

SUPPLEMENT XI TO DIGEST OF PRESS AND EVENTS

THE "GREATER SYRIA" PLAN AROUSES OPPOSITION IN SAUDIA - by E.S.

Under the above heading, the following article, summarizing the Arab Unity talks in Cairo, appeared in the Hebrew daily "Hazman" of March 27, 1944.

Last month, Mustafa el Nahas, the Egyptian Prime Minister, completed the preliminary talks with the representatives of the Arab countries on the plan which he calls the plan for "Arab unity". The following Governments participated in these talks: Iraq, Transjordan, Saudi-Arabia, Syria, the Lebanon and Yemen. On more than one occasion the Egyptian Prime Minister announced that he would invite the Arabs of Palestine, too, to send their representatives to Cairo to discuss their political demands. A month ago, when the Egyptian trade delegation came to take part in the Trade Conference in Jerusalem, its members stressed this point in speeches made on the occasion of receptions in their honour by Palestine Arab leaders.

The Egyptian Prime Minister and the various delegations which have participated in the talks have endeavoured to preserve complete secrecy as to the nature of the discussions. They have contented themselves with general statements - in the press or in their respective Parliaments - to the effect that complete mutual understanding has been reached and that all parties have agreed to the convention in Cairo of an inter-governmental Arab Conference which would consider and decide on a plan of "Arab unity". In recent months newspapermen have often asked the heads of the Arab Governments what precise meaning attaches to this term "Arab unity". The reply has invariably been that it means the creation of a system of cooperation between the Arab countries in all spheres - political, social and economic. However, they have added that whatever the scope of this cooperation may be it will not be such as to interfere with the independence and existing regimes of the Arab countries. Thus a small country like the Lebanon, with its small population and its republican regime, will be able to cooperate with monarchist Egypt, with its large area and population, without surrendering any degree of its independence.

Not one of the Arab Prime Ministers or members of the various delegations - and they have emphasised this on several occasions - is of the view that it is possible in present circumstances to establish a Union, Federation or Confederation of Arab countries. It is recognised by all that such a plan is unworkable in the existing political and social conditions prevailing in the Arab countries, and any attempt to apply it would encounter enormous obstacles both in these countries themselves and outside. On the other hand, all are agreed that a limited cooperation between the Arab countries is attainable, especially in the sphere of foreign policy. Thus if a foreign power were to have designs on the independence of the Lebanon or Iraq, for example, all the Arab countries should come to their aid. And if one of the Arab countries were to make a certain demand of the United Nations or the Peace Conference, it should be supported by all the others. As to economic cooperation, this should concentrate on preference being given by every Arab country to the produce of its neighbours over foreign produce, and on similar measures.

However, while there is general agreement that it is impossible to establish a general federation of all the Arab countries, there are those who believe that a federation on a smaller scale is feasible, and in particular a federation of four neighbouring countries, namely: Syria, the Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan. In their view the union of these four countries is essential, and will be of advantage to the countries themselves and to the Arab world as a whole. In the days of the Ottoman Empire these countries were united, and their subsequent partition was "artificial", affecting them adversely in every respect, political, economic and social. The Arab world would also benefit: today it is divided into 8 distinct countries, while after such a union it would comprise 5 large states: Greater Syria (the union of the above 4 states), Egypt, Iraq, Saudia and Yemen. In this way a solution would be found for numerous problems arising inevitably out of the existence of small states incapable of maintaining themselves and thus providing foreign powers with the excuse for intervening in the internal affairs of the Arab world.

Iraq and Transjordan are the countries primarily concerned with this plan of four-fold union. Iraq hopes that its implementation would result in her securing advantages, such as an outlet to the sea at Haifa or Tripoli, and that subsequently she would join the Federation as an integral part of it, or unite with in a wider Confederation. This is an old plan on the part of Iraq, and King Feisal was working for its accomplishment as far back as 1932. If Palestine and the Lebanon remained divided, and if the breach between the Jews and the Arabs and between the Christians and the Moslems is not healed, Iraq will be unable to secure her outlet to the sea or to depend on her southern neighbours in her endeavours to extend her power and defend her boundaries.

As far as Transjordan is concerned, it is the ambition of the Emir Abdullah to become the head of the proposed United States as King, President of the Republic or President of the Supreme Federal Council. He is therefore keen on the proposal being implemented. He believes that his country too, would benefit, for in its present economic condition, and with its existing small population, it has no prospects of progressing even if England, America and the Arab countries extend assistance to it. Transjordan is a backward country, destined forever to remain under tutelage, without strength or influence in the Arab world.

These are the motives which lead Iraq and Transjordan to recognise certain rights for Jews in Palestine and Christians in the Lebanon. But for the same reasons they support any plan which restricts Jewish development in Palestine and Christian development in the Lebanon. The White Paper, which aims at curtailing the growth of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine and, in the course of time, to make it a subject element, appeals to them more than every other plan. The present regime in the Lebanon, with the Moslem nationalist Riadh al Solh at the head, if it continues in power for a long period, is calculated to convert this Christian country into a Moslem country and put an end to the independent existence of the Christian population. Thus Iraq and Transjordan support the present Lebanese Government and extend all possible help to it.

As to Syria and the Lebanon, which more than any other country should be interested in the problem of the proposed federation, for they are directly concerned - today only their Governments are free to speak, and not their peoples. And the Governments of these countries consist of extreme nationalists who, since Ottoman days, have worked for the unity of the Arab East. Many of them were persecuted and imprisoned by the Turks for their work in this direction, and subsequently by the French. Now that both these countries have attained independence

which has been recognised by Britain, American and Free France, one might have supposed that their present Governments would now proceed to fulfill this dream, or - if that be not possible at the moment - at least to achieve a union between Syria and the Lebanon themselves. Yet the fact is that the very contrary is the case. Not only are they not working for union, but are proclaiming that the time has not yet come for such a union, and that it is to the interest of Syria and the Lebanon that they retain their independence and merely cooperate with each other economically and culturally. This change of front however, does not mean that these nationalists have abandoned their old dream or that they think it incapable of realisation. It means simply that they recognise that the ground for union must be prepared, and that at the present stage the independent status and government of their countries must be consolidated before they can think of uniting with other Arab countries or of absorbing other countries. They must at least attain the stage of internal and external strength as independent countries of Iraq and Egypt. And if the four-fold Union plan is to be realised, they must, to begin with, ensure that the position in the countries which they want to unite should be stable and orderly. This is not the case in the Lebanon nor is it the case in Palestine.

The Christians in the Lebanon have, indeed, agreed today to make concessions to the Moslems and to cooperate with them; but they have adopted this attitude under pressure from Britain, America and the Arab world. They were at pains to insist on a prior condition of such cooperation, namely the maintenance of the absolute independence of the Lebanon within its present boundaries. Even if the Arab world uses force against them, they will not easily weaken their insistence on this point. It may well be, however, that this insistence will weaken should they come to believe that economic conditions require it and if the Arabs in Syria and the other neighbouring countries convince them of their "good intentions" and of their desire not to swallow them up, but to cooperate with them. The Syrian Government understand this position and is doing all it can to work in accordance with it. But even if she succeeds with regard to the Lebanon, the position of Palestine is quite different. The Palestine problem is complicated, and it cannot be supposed that it will be solved in the near future in such a way as to satisfy both the Jews and Arabs at the same time. The time has not yet come for the consideration of any plan of union between Syria and Palestine, and, the present complications in Palestine being what they are, the consideration of any such plan would only be a disadvantage to both countries alike.

Moreover the union of Syria and Palestine is dependent not only on the Jews, the British and the Palestinian Arabs; it is also conditional on the agreement of a number of Arab Governments. If we can assume that Iraq and Transjordan agree, this is not the case with Saudia. Before the latter will give its consent it must ensure that the Government of the United States would not pass into the hands of a member of the Hashimite family or of the Egyptian Royal family, and that its neighbours - Iraq and Egypt - would not be given political or economic power over it. Otherwise the present balance as between the Arab countries would be disturbed. Thus Saudia is strongly opposed to Iraq receiving an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea through these countries, or that the markets of the latter be opened wide to Egyptian and Iraqi produce. It is for this reason that Saudia has recently raised anew the problem of the repair of the Hedjaz Railway which connects it with Palestine, Syria and Transjordan. If this railway is put into service Saudia's influence in these countries will grow, and she will be able to compete against Egyptian and Iraqi influence in them. And Saudia today is able to obstruct any political scheme in the Arab world which does not appeal to her, for since the discovery of her oil resources and the signing of an agreement between her and America for their exploitation, her strength and influence have grown.

In order that it should not be thought that her attitude is based solely on self-interest, even at the expense of the general interest, Saudia's putting forward her opposition in a roundabout way, and has seized hold of the Palestine problem as a cover up for her real designs. Thus she is insisting that the Palestine problem must be solved before anything else is done. Saudia is not alone in this attitude. Yemen, with its population of 4-5 millions, sides with her, as do all those elements in Palestine, Syria and the Lebanon who oppose the appointment of a Hashimite or Egyptian Emir at the head of the proposed Union. These latter elements number more than two million; chief among them are the "National Bloc" and its supporters in Syria, the Husseinis and their supporters in Palestine and Riad al Solh and his supporters in the Lebanon. If we add the population of Saudia and Yemen, we find that a total of 9-10 millions support Ibn Saud's attitude, or more than two-thirds of the population of the Arab countries excluding Egypt. And as far as Egypt is concerned, for all its population of 17 millions, she cannot today compete against Ibn Saud's influence in the Arab world. Egypt is still regarded as foreign, and as being not entirely Arab, and her efforts for "Arab unity" are interpreted as being the result of British pressure or her own private interests.

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