

ISRAEL AND WESTERN IMPERIALISM

By Walter Zander

THE Suez affair has brought both gain and loss to Israel. Foremost among the gains is a great improvement in her military position. Ever since the autumn of 1955, when Egypt concluded her extensive arms deal with Czechoslovakia, the balance of power between the Arabs and Israel had begun to turn in favour of the Arabs. The guerrilla activities of the Egyptian commandos had begun to prey on the nerves of the Israeli population; and the sense of danger was heightened when a unified command was established over the armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, closing in the country by an enemy ring. The conquest of the Sinai Peninsula has now cut through this threatening situation - at least for the time being. In a brief and exceedingly well-prepared campaign on the 'Blitzkrieg' pattern, Israel has demonstrated the efficiency of her fighting forces. It will take the Egyptians a long time to make good their losses in men and material, and the fighting revealed that training in the use of modern weapons is a longer process than they had supposed.

So Israel has a breathing space. What is more, she has broken through the blockade - if not in the Suez Canal at least in the Gulf of Aqaba. Israeli naval units have entered for the first time the harbour of Elath on the Gulf, and an oil pipeline has already begun to be constructed from Elath to Beersheba, linking the Red Sea with the Mediterranean.

In addition to these immediate gains, the out-break of hostilities has achieved something for which Israel has been striving for years; it has impressed on the world the burning need of a settlement of the Israel-Arab conflict. It is, too, more widely understood how deeply Israel has been provoked. There is a general feeling, now, that a return to the organized guerrilla raids into Israeli territory can no longer be tolerated. Although the United Nations has demanded that Israeli forces should evacuate the Gaza strip, world opinion seems to be prepared to bring this contentious area, and also the two islands which control the entry into the Gulf of Aqaba, under the administration of the United Nations instead of returning it to Egypt. This would certainly ease Israel's situation. In addition, a United Nations Force stationed between the Egyptian and Israeli armies is bound to reduce the danger of further conflicts.

All these are great and unquestionable gains, but they have been won only at a heavy cost. Israel, in spite of the provocation she had suffered, has been declared guilty of a breach of the United Nations Charter, by the vote of an overwhelming majority of the nations. Many of those who have shown the greatest sympathy towards her in the past are now alienated. In England there has been severe criticism of

the Israeli action by the Labour Party. The friendly attitude of the United States has distinctly cooled; all American aid under the Point Four programme has for the time being been suspended. This applies to the supply of surplus food, the grants-in-aid which had only recently been promised, and there is even talk of a possible interruption of remittances from the United Jewish Appeal upon which Israel's economy largely depends. At the United Nations Israel finds herself almost entirely isolated at present, and this is particularly serious since she owes her very existence to a decision of the United Nations.

The intervention of British and French forces also created difficulties for Israel, in spite of the obvious military advantage. If Israel had been able to secure victory unaided, the present régime in Egypt might well have been brought down with unforeseeable consequences. As it is, the military issue between the two combatants is still inconclusive, and both sides are arguing as to what would have happened had the West not interfered. In spite of Israel's initial successes, the Egyptians claim that they would have been the victors; they feel, in any case, that to have been driven back by the overwhelming power of a joint British-French force can scarcely be counted as a defeat-certainly not a moral one. Thus the intervention has strengthened Nasser's régime politically, and probably outbalanced the shock created by the evacuation of the Sinai Peninsula and the losses which Egypt sustained there.

All this would have been true even if the intervention had been undertaken by a completely disinterested party. But the fact that it was Britain and France, of all nations, who joined forces with Israel, has an additional significance of the utmost importance in Arab eyes. For their action was partly inspired by motives of their own. The intervention was an attempt to enforce a solution of the Suez question and to ease the French position in North Africa. In all probability the plans had been prepared immediately after the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company when the first French forces moved into Cyprus-and quite apart from the Egyptian conflict with Israel. The British-French action therefore linked Israel and the local conflict with other far-reaching issues between the Arab world and the West.

Afro-Asian Nationalism

The troubles in French North Africa and the nationalization of the Canal Company are, of course, expressions of the movement for independence among Asian and African peoples. This struggle for national freedom stretches from the West coast of Africa to the Pacific Ocean. It is perhaps

the most significant movement of our times, reversing the contrary trend of Western expansion which has dominated world affairs for as long as four hundred years. Naturally, it is encouraged and exploited by the Soviet Union, but it is in essence independent of her, and its leadership - as the Bandung Conference showed - lies less with Russia than with China. For Israel to be entangled in the issue of Asian and African independence is most dangerous.

In fact, Israel has been so involved ever since the Balfour Declaration linked the age-old longing of the Jewish people for a return to Palestine to the imperial interests of Britain. The implications of this association could hardly have been clear in the beginning to the Jews of Eastern Europe. To the religious-minded among them, the Balfour Declaration seemed like an act of divine intervention, opening the way to the return from the Babylonian exile. To the modernists it was the opportunity to build a new society free from exploitation. The problems of Western imperialism were utterly remote, and very few knew of the rise of an Arab national movement. Palestine under Turkish rule appeared not only in decay, but empty of population. 'The Land without a People to the People without a Land' was a favourite slogan among the early Zionists; and when the Arab problem was considered at all, they were convinced that the Jewish return would work to the general benefit.

On the British side, too, strategic advantages were by no means the only consideration; deeply felt humanitarian and religious motives played a great part in supporting the Jewish restoration. But to the Arab and Asian world, the dominant fact was the association of Israel with Western imperial interests. This impression grew even stronger when British military power had later to be used to protect the Jewish National Home against Arab opposition. Gandhi certainly expressed the feeling of most Asians and Africans when he wrote in 1946: 'The Jews erred grievously in seeking to impose themselves in Palestine with the aid of America and Britain.' Thus it was that when in November 1947 the United Nations recommended the establishment of the Jewish State, every nation which had at any time, either directly or indirectly, been the object of colonial policy, voted against it.

In reality, the alliance between Israel and Western imperialism was no more than an historical accident. The longing for a return to Palestine is older by far than the Western states themselves, and Israel, as a democratic and partly socialist state, has no colonial ambitions. Indeed, enlightened opinion in the West is no longer concerned with restoring an out-dated colonial system; its objective is to create a new relationship with the peoples of Asia and Africa, on the basis of equality. It was, after all, Britain's voluntary renunciation of power in India which marked the turning-point in Europe's relations with Asia. How unfortunate it was, then, that the Western intervention in Suez expressed so different a spirit, and thus appeared to the once-colonial peoples as an attempt to turn back the wheels of history. Was it surprising that the association of Israel with this attempt seemed to them as conclusive proof that the Jewish State had always been a tool in Western hands?

A New Relationship

Israel is not unaware of these smouldering thoughts. She has made many efforts in recent years to build up a better relationship with the Asian peoples, and to secure a deeper understanding of her problems among them. The Suez campaign has administered a severe setback to these efforts. Israel may feel that in the autumn of 1956 she had no choice but to act as she did. In any case, it is hardly possible to hope for a settlement of the Arab-Jewish conflict until a new relationship can be established between the West and Afro-Asian nationalisms as a whole in the spirit of equality and mutual trust.