

# THE MIDDLE EAST POWDER KEG

Seim, H B

*Marine Corps Gazette* (pre-1994); Jul 1956; 40, 7;

*Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines*

pg. 42



Wide World

IN MARCH THE DEPARTMENT OF the Navy revealed that a reinforced Marine battalion with its associated amphibious shipping was being sent to the Mediterranean. This was in consonance, it was implied, with a policy that had been followed since the close of World War II to deploy elements of the Fleet Marine Force to the Sixth Fleet for training and for familiarization with the area.

Although the Navy treated the movement as a routine affair, there is undoubtedly much speculation as to the relationship of the deployment to the increasing tension in the Middle East. Certainly no one can deny that the addition of the Marine battalion considerably enhances the capability of the Sixth Fleet to act quickly and effectively in the event of trouble.

More and more the United States finds itself intimately concerned with the unfolding Middle East story—politically and ideologically, eco-

nomically and militarily. The military aspects of the situation are of direct interest, not only to the deployed battalion, but to the rest of the Marine Corps as well. Most critical of the military problems in the Middle East is the threat of open warfare between Israel and her Arab neighbors. The Soviet bloc deal to supply arms to the Arab nations has tended to upset the precarious balance of power and to inject East-West issues into the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Open fighting anywhere in the Free World is inimical to our interests because war and its aftermath tend to provide a fertile breeding ground for the growth of Communism. Poverty and misery, death and destruction create the unstable climate in which anarchy and despotism thrive. This is true even when the matters at issue are unrelated to the East-West conflict. But when they begin to take on such

a connotation, the possibility of open warfare becomes even more threatening to Free World interests. This is the case in the Middle East at the present time.

The Middle East is one of the few remaining "soft" areas in the world into which the Communists are penetrating. In the past decade the free nations of the world, prompted by a growing recognition of Soviet pressure, have shaped NATO in Europe and SEATO in Southeast Asia to resist the encroachment of Communism. Confronted by stiffening resistance in these areas, the Reds shifted their attention to softer targets like the Middle East. Although a regional defense arrangement has recently taken form in the Middle East, it is young and unsure of itself. Four nations in the area closest to the USSR—Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan—have banded together with the United Kingdom to create the Baghdad Pact organization as a military and economic bulwark against Soviet expansion. However, the Pact finds itself not only under heavy Soviet pressure, but also subject to severe criticism from the neighboring Middle East countries to the south, particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Ironically most of this criticism is motivated not by considerations pertaining to the East-West conflict, but by a belief that the Baghdad Pact is being employed to weaken and divide the Arabs in maintaining a united stand in the Arab-Israeli dispute.

The Soviet bloc has not been slow to exploit this situation. By giving arms support to Egypt, the Communists make a twofold gain. First, the possibility of war in the Middle East has been considerably increased, and with it the consequent possibil-

# C O U N T R Y K N O W L E D G E

ity of producing a more favorable climate for the growth of Communism in the area. Second, the Baghdad Pact as a defensive bulwark against Soviet expansion is threatened with neutralization by the leap-frog technique. A survey of the strategic significance of the Middle East area indicates that this twofold gain can be of great advantage to the Reds.

For the purposes of this survey, we can consider the Middle East to include Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. This bloc of nations stands astride the traditional land routes which from ancient days bound together the Orient and the West, Africa with Europe and Asia. The extension of Red domination into this area would not only provide a gateway into South Asia and Africa but would also shear the Free World sea lines of communication from the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. Communist possession of the area would threaten the southeastern flank of NATO. The vast oil resources of the Middle East would be denied to the West and would be available for Red exploitation. It is obvious that the region must be very attractive from the Soviet point of view. It is of equal strategic significance to the West. The area has been significant throughout the recorded history of mankind.

One has but to go to the rocky promontory near the spot where the Dog River runs into the Mediterranean a few miles north of Beirut, Lebanon to find impressive visible proof. For over 4,000 years conquerors passing this vantage point have left their marks by carving inscriptions in the rock. Rameses II in the 13th Century BC recorded his expedition against the Hittites on 2 tablets; some three millenia later Napoleon III obliterated one of them to chronicle the French cam-

paign in Syria in 1860.

This is only a sample of the abundance of evidence which testifies to the historical importance of the area. Great empires rose to extend their sway over the Middle East, only to recede again in the never-ending tide of history. The Sumerians were probably the first of which we have any record. Later came a bewildering array of conquerors—Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans. In the 7th Century AD the Bedouin burst out of the Arabian desert for a brief but spectacular conquest which carried Islam from Spain to India. Although this expansion was motivated largely by the religious fervor of Mohammed and his followers, the extension of Islam was also accompanied by the spread of the Arab tongue, Arab culture and Arab philosophy. Arab political domination soon came to an end, but Islam continued to flourish and expand, eventually to China and Indonesia. Arab philosophy and the Arab language endured in large areas even though the Bedouin political control was gradually eroded away by the conquests of Christians and Turks.

Thus 2 worlds, one considerably more extensive than the other, remain as a heritage of the Bedouin: the vaster Moslem world and the smaller Arab world. The Arab world of today includes that chain of countries stretching from the Atlantic seaboard of North Africa along the southern shore of the Mediterranean to the border of Iran in the east. The Arab countries of

the Middle East are Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. Turkey and Iran are not included in the Arab world, but are members of the larger Moslem community. Most of these countries lie in the vast desert belt which dominates the Middle East.

This Middle East desert zone extends from north-central Syria and Iraq southwards through Arabia and Egypt. The great expanse of desert is interspersed by areas of fertility wherever water is available, either in the form of rainfall along the Lebanese littoral or in the northwestern portion of Syria, or as water carried into and through the desert areas by great rivers such as the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates. These last 2 rivers, the twin rivers of Mesopotamia, create the famous Fertile Crescent stretching in a gentle curve from the Levant coast through the steppe country of Syria and then along the banks of the twin rivers to the Persian Gulf.

In addition to the vast desert areas, the Middle East is characterized by mountainous terrain. The Taurus and Antitaurus Mountains cover a considerable portion of Turkey. Along the northern border to Iran the Elburz Mountains extend along the shores of the Caspian Sea. The Zagros chain forms the boundary between Iran and Iraq. Between these 2 ranges lies the Iranian plateau, a high basin with its floor more than 5,000 feet above sea level. Since the rain which falls here cannot escape except by evaporation,



Everyone has a superficial knowledge of the Middle East from the newspaper headlines. However, **Cdr H. B. Seim** gives us a detailed study of the current problems and some keen insights into their background. He participated in a Mediterranean cruise and Fleet exercise in 1954. Then for 3 months he participated in the State Dept's Near East Program under its Foreign Service Institute at Beirut, Lebanon and in other Middle East countries. Cdr Seim is currently attached to Command and Policy Branch, Strategic Plans Division, OPNAV. In view of its timeliness this article should be of special interest to members of the 2d Mar Div.

this inhospitable basin is dotted with salt lakes and saline mud deposits and even mountain domes or plugs of solid salt. Far to the west along the Levant shore is Lebanon with its two mountain ranges running parallel to the coast and the fertile and productive Bekaa valley between the two. The extension of this rift or valley in the south forms the basin of the Jordan River terminating finally at the Dead Sea — 1,300 feet below sea level. Still further south lie the barren mountains of the Negev and the Sinai peninsula. The great Arabian desert is essentially a high mountain plateau which drops precipitously to the shores of the Red Sea on the southwestern side, but shades more gradually to the Persian Gulf coastline on the other side.

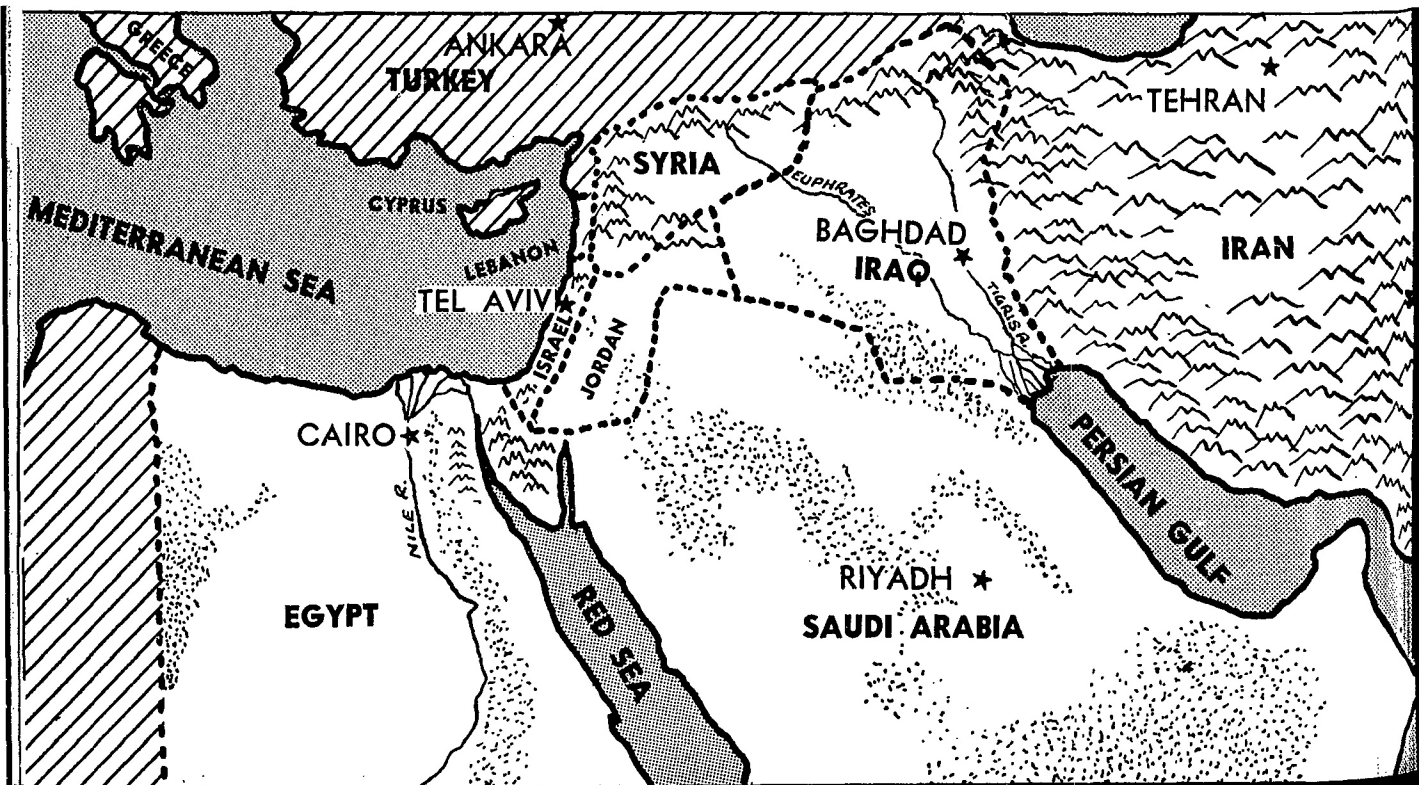
This combination of desert and mountain throughout the Middle East area not only greatly reduces the agricultural potential of the area, but also severely restricts ground transportation. As a result, highway and railroad networks are very meager, and much of the area is inaccessible to modern means of land transport. The historic pattern of commerce in the Middle East has been essentially along narrowly restricted caravan routes and coastal waterways. This factor has influenced to a considerable degree the economic and political development

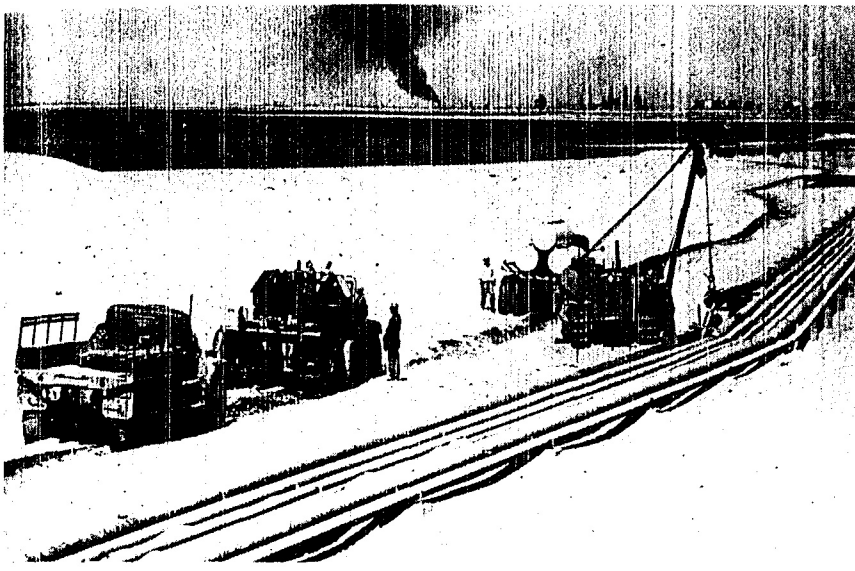
of the area; it has also played a significant part in the pattern of military operations. It has been possible in the past for control of relatively large areas to be gained through the possession of a few focal points in the transportation network. By the same token, it has been possible for the defeated factions to retreat into the desert or into the mountains to escape annihilation. In spite of the advances in military technology which are available to modern armed forces, the grim realities of geography in the Middle East still demand the full respect of the military planner and the field commander.

Climate too must receive careful regard. In the mountains and plateaus of Turkey and Iran winters are severe and intensely cold with snow remaining in many places until late spring. The Iranian plateau is characterized by hot, dry summers. A relatively narrow belt of the Fertile Crescent encompassing Lebanon, Syria and the northern portion of Iraq enjoys a typical temperate climate. It is interesting to note that the mountain resorts of Lebanon are renowned for their excellent winter skiing facilities. As one moves further south into the deserts, however, the climate becomes harsh and forbidding. Although there are brief rains in most desert areas during the winter months, the rest of

the year is marked by hot, dry weather. During the summer the sun glares down from a cloudless sky and it is not uncommon in many places such as Baghdad or along the shores of the Persian Gulf for the thermometer to reach temperatures of 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, day after day. The Red Sea is claimed to be even hotter. Under these conditions a man's performance is significantly reduced, as anyone who has been stationed in the Persian Gulf area will testify. In spite of the forbidding climate, a steady stream of tankers plies year 'round between the Gulf and the Western World.

The key to this persistence is the vast treasure of oil which lies beneath the Middle East sands. A few figures serve to measure this. In 1920, oil reserves in the area were estimated to be about 6 billion barrels. 1956 guesses run as high as 230 billion barrels and petroleum engineers believe that more than two thirds of the world's untapped reserves are hidden under the Arabian deserts. Although the Middle East did not begin producing oil until 1925, its present rate of annual production exceeds the total world output for that year. All of this oil is handled by Western companies—about 60 per cent American, 30 per cent British and the rest French and Dutch. Approximately 80 per cent





Wide World

### *Middle Eastern oil—lifblood of the Western World*

of Western Europe's petroleum is furnished from Middle East sources.

Oil has been important to the peoples of the Middle East as well. Western technology has invaded the area. Large scale development programs financed by oil revenues have been undertaken in Iraq and Iran and to a lesser extent in Saudi Arabia. Much remains to be done in this regard, however, particularly to find the means to spread the benefits to those less fortunate nations in the area who have no oil resources. The standard of living and the per capita income of most peoples in the Middle East are very low. The economy is largely agricultural (including the "camel" economy of the Bedouin), most of it on a subsistence level. Industrial potential is limited by meager raw material resources, lack of actual or potential power supply, and a dearth of skilled or semiskilled labor. Development of the area is further complicated by national rivalries and, of course, by the Arab-Israeli dispute.

The present-day State of Israel had its beginnings in events that occurred in the last part of the 19th Century. In 1896 Theodor Herzl, an Austro-Hungarian journalist, published a small pamphlet entitled *Der Juden Staat* (The Jewish State) which gave impetus to Zionist aspirations to, "establish a publically and legally assured home in Palestine," for world Jewry. It is interesting to note that England was ready in 1903 to offer land in East

Africa for a Jewish National Homeland when Herzl's scheme to establish a settlement in the Sinai peninsula failed. This offer was not taken and Zionism continued in its efforts to realize Herzl's dream, even more intensely after his death in 1904. The problem was difficult because the Palestine area was at that time included in the Sanjaq of Jerusalem and the Vilayet of Beirut which were part of the Ottoman Empire ruled by the Turks. During World War I the Allies, particularly the British, conducted military operations against Turkish possessions in the Middle East. They found ready allies in the Arab tribes who were equally desirous of throwing off the Ottoman yoke. In 1915-16 a series

of secret notes were exchanged between the British and the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein, by which the British, in return for active Arab support against the Turks, agreed to recognize Arab independence and control over the Arabian peninsula and some of the contiguous territory. These notes were ambiguous and subject to differing interpretation insofar as the disposition of Palestine was concerned. Hussein was under the impression that the Palestine area was to be included in the new Arab state.

The British on the other hand had other plans for Palestine. On 2 November 1917 the British Foreign Secretary, Mr. A. J. Balfour, issued an official statement of British policy concerning the Zionist aspirations regarding Palestine. The Balfour Declaration (as the statement came to be known) stated that "His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country." It should be noted that the British pledged support of a "home" for the Jews "in" Palestine. Churchill reiterated this in 1922 in a memorandum which said that the creation of a "wholly

### *Mountain and desert combined make a rugged combination*

Wide World





Wide World

**Israeli Reserves — 250,000 strong under Swiss-type mobilization**

Jewish Palestine" was never contemplated.

The post-war settlement at the San Remo Conference in 1920 awarded the British a mandate for Palestine which incorporated the Balfour Declaration. The period between the close of World War I and the early 1930s was one of readjustment and development, reclamation and expansion. From the beginning the building of the Jewish National Home went on in the face of openly expressed Arab opposition. Although there was evidence of increasing Arab unrest, there was no serious deterioration of the domestic political situation until the effects of Nazi anti-Semitism began to be felt. Immigration of Jews to Palestine jumped from about 5,000 per year in 1931 to over 60,000 per year in 1935. In the succeeding years the Arab population rebelled against the British failure to restrict immi-

gration and to halt the transfer of land to Zionist interests. The Jewish element, which at that time was a minority in Palestine, countered by bringing increasing pressure to bear on the British to resist Arab demands. This 3-cornered struggle gained in intensity until the outbreak of WWII exacted a temporary truce.

Just prior to WWII, however, the British had produced a new statement of policy, embodied in the White Paper of 17 May 1939, which envisaged the establishment within 10 years of a bi-national (Arab-Jewish) state. During the 10-year transitional period both Arabs and Jews were to be given increasing responsibility by joint participation in their government. In addition, land sales were to be restricted to curtail further acquisition of land by the Jews, and immigration during the 5-year period from 1939 to 1944 was to be

limited to 100,000 and thereafter there would be no more except by consent of the Palestine Arabs. This solution was unacceptable to both sides.

After WWII the friction between Arab and Jewish factions was greatly intensified by further large scale immigration of Jewish refugees. The matter was referred to the United Nations which established a commission to inquire into the Palestine situation and the Jewish refugee problem. The commission turned in a split report with a majority view which advocated partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, and a minority plan which contemplated the establishment of an independent federal state containing both Jewish and Arab enclaves. On 29 November 1947 the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into 2 separate states by 1 October 1948, with Jerusalem to be essentially an international zone administered by a governor appointed by the UN. Great Britain abstained from voting on this issue, but shortly thereafter she announced that she would give up the Palestine mandate and withdraw by 15 May 1948.

On the eve of the British withdrawal the establishment of the new Jewish State of Israel was proclaimed and on the 15th of May 1948 Arab armed forces from Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon launched an attack on the one-day old nation. A brief but bitter war ensued with Israeli forces gradually gaining the upper hand. By the time the armistice agreements were signed between Israel and its 4 Arab neighbors in 1949, Israel held the greater part of the former Palestine mandated territory. These armistice agreements are still in effect today, since no permanent peace settlement has been made.

Since 1949 the United Nations and the United States in particular have been trying to bring about a settlement but to no avail. The bitterness and rancor which have been welling up in the Arab for decades as he watched the growth of Zionist power in Palestine were finally sharpened and crystallized by the creation of the Jewish State of Israel. Military reverses at the hands of Israeli troops cannot be easily forgotten nor for-

**Czech arms in Egyptian hands — the match to light the fuse?**

Wide World



given. So it is not surprising that the possibility of a second round looms large and threatening. Recent estimates by military analysts in the press give an indication of the military strength of the possible participants.

Egypt is the strongest of the Arab states with a standing army of about 80,000 men. The army is said to be organized into 7 infantry brigades; 1 machine gun brigade; 2 armored battalions; a reconnaissance battalion; 5 field artillery battalions; 2 antitank battalions; 3 anti-aircraft brigades; 1 coast defense brigade plus supporting engineer and signal components. Reported troop equipment includes more than 200 Sherman tanks, 38 British-made Centurian tanks, and British 17- and 25-pounder artillery, in addition to unknown quantities of Soviet heavy arms such as tanks and artillery. The Egyptian air force is reputed to have about 80 British jets and a larger number of Russian MIG-15 fighters and IL-28 jet bombers. The navy is composed of 2 destroyers, 4 frigates, 2 corvettes, 7 minesweepers and 6 motor torpedo boats. It has been rumored that 6 submarines are on order from Czechoslovakia. Soviet bloc equipment is still being received, and it is probable that a number of months will be required for Egyptian forces to assimilate the newly acquired material.

Iraq has an army of 2 divisions and supporting troops making a total of about 40,000 men. It also

has a small air force, and a navy consisting of a river flotilla. These forces are equipped with modern British arms and are reported to be well-trained and effective. Only a relatively small proportion of the Iraqi armed forces could be deployed and supported in action on the Israeli front because of the logistic problems involved.

The Arab Legion of Jordan, consisting of approximately 20,000 men, has the reputation of being the best-trained of all of the Arab armed forces. It is equipped with British infantry weapons, artillery and medium tanks in moderate numbers. However, it has been predicted that the effectiveness of the Arab Legion will deteriorate in view of the ouster of Glubb Pasha (LtGen John Paget Glubb) and other British officers who were largely responsible for the high state of its organization and training.

Syria has an army of about 20,000 men equipped with light infantry weapons and artillery, but with almost no armor or air support. Lebanon has a force of approximately 5,000 with equipment similar to the Syrians. Saudi Arabia could make only a token contribution to the Arab side.

The combined armies of the Arab League are estimated at only a little more than 200,000 men and not all of these could be brought into action in the event of Arab-Israeli hostilities. However, Communist arms now being supplied to Egypt



Wide World  
**Israeli Mustangs—has the balance swung to the Arabs?**

will increase Arab capabilities, particularly in the air.

To counter this threat, Israel is said to have a standing army of about 50,000 men organized into 3 brigade groups, which can be rapidly expanded in about 48 hours into an army of about 250,000 under Swiss-type mobilization. The Israeli reserves are well-trained and effective. The armed forces are said to be equipped with a motley assortment of arms, to a large extent from WWII surplus stocks. They possess modest amounts of artillery and armor. The Israeli air force consists of both jet and propeller aircraft, with British and French types predominating. The navy is small, consisting of 2 destroyers and several patrol craft.

Most observers estimate that the Israelis would have the edge over the Arab forces if fighting breaks out in the near future, but many predict that the balance will gradually tip in favor of the Arabs as the Soviet arms are assimilated. The Israelis themselves have pointed this out and have requested arms assistance from the West to counteract the delivery of Communist weapons to the Arabs. There is much conjecture on whether Israel will initiate open fighting while it still holds an advantage; speculation also grows concerning the possibility that the Arabs may open a second round when they feel they have gained military superiority. Most of all, a gnawing fear continues that increasing tension and the friction of border incidents may flare up into full scale fighting without the deliberate intent of either side.

US & MC

### **Saudi Arabia—contributes only a token to the Arab Forces**

Wide World

