

THE MIDDLE EAST

by R. M. SAUNDERS*

STUDENTS shouting and demonstrating against foreigners in the streets of cities—Cairo, Beirut, Tunis; patient peasant farmers toiling along the slopes of age-worn mountains; rich black oil flowing across miles of sun-baked deserts in tensely guarded pipe-lines; guns bristling at strategic spots and airplanes patrolling. This is the Middle East, cross-roads of the world, pulse of power politics, barometer of peace; whatever you wish to call it, one of the most crucial areas on the earth's surface.

To go to the map and point to the Middle East is at first thought an easy task. There it is reaching down from the Black Sea in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south, stretching from the Nile Valley and the eastern end of the Mediterranean to Afghanistan and the border of Pakistan. True enough, but the name "Middle East" did not always cover this area. Once it was limited to the eastern part of it, while Asia Minor and the Arabian peninsula were called the Near East. During the Second World War the name Middle East moved westward and came to include the whole area described. But that did not end the transition. Both names are still in use. Also, there are writers, usually Middle Easterners, who suggest that the name should designate the whole Arab-speaking world. They want it used for all of North Africa from Egypt to Morocco; while still others want to extend it to the whole Islamic area, which would bring in Pakistan and much more of Africa. Such uncertainty about usage is in itself symptomatic of the ferment in the Middle East. It is a sign of a new age, an era of mounting self-consciousness, of seething nationalism. It is quite possible that the term will come to designate a rather broader area than it now does, but for our purposes we must stick to our first definition.

Importance

Cross-roads of the World

Once long lines of camels struggled laboriously across the sands of Middle Eastern deserts with the goods of the Indies swaying on their backs. Today, automobiles speed from Baghdad to Damascus and Aleppo. Countless vessels dot the crowded shipping lanes of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, all bound for Suez, the man-made gap between Asia and Africa. Yet for untold ages before the Suez Canal sailing boats landed their cargoes in Arabia and Egypt to be transported overland and re-shipped. Today aeroplanes course the skies above the sea and the deserts — British, American, Dutch, French — bound to and from the East. In other words this region is now and always has been one of the great cross-roads of the world.

Historic Battleground

For this very reason the Middle East has ever been the scene of imperial conflict. Here it was that Egypt and Assyria clashed; here Alexander the Great engaged the armies of Persia, where after him Roman emperors took up the struggle. Saracen and Crusader battled all along the western edge of the area whilst the Ottoman Turk swept in from the east to threaten Europe itself. It is little wonder that once again the Powers of the world, today Russia and the West, should face each other across this battle-ground of the ages.

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