THE ARAB AWAKENING

by ABBA EBAN

His Excellency, The Honorable Abba Eban, is the Ambassador from Israel to the United States

IT HAS become common, especially in the United States, to ascribe the present tensions in the Middle East to the suppression of the natural impulse of national liberation which now convulses the Arab and the Moslem worlds. It would be utterly incongruous for the State of Israel to approach the national movements, which now agitate our area, with anything but a basically sympathetic spirit. Our own people, which has just won its liberty after an arduous struggle against colonial rule, would be false to its own experience and to its own destiny if, having acquired its own liberty, it were to take a grudging attitude to the efforts of the neighboring peoples to achieve their independence from foreign control.

Yet, it is necessary to enter a reservation against a tendency in many quarters to accept with uncritical eulogy this concept of effervescent Moslem nationalism. Not everybody who assassinated his prime minister, not every student in Cairo who throws a stone through the window of a foreign establishment, is necessarily the spiritual descendant of Thomas Jefferson or of Robespierre.

Does an attitude of grievance and of rancor really become the Arab world?

Has history in its broad lines of movement dealt harshly with that section of the human race?

Four decades ago every Arab, I might almost say every Moslem upon the surface of the inhabited globe, lived in subjection, either under the rule of the Ottoman Empire or under the direct domination of colonial powers. There was not a free Arab or a free Moslem anywhere upon the surface of the inhabited globe. The great Moslem and Arab cultural traditions were nowhere the basis or the center of independent political and economic life. What a vast and astonishing transformation has come over the scene within such a brief span of time!

Today, eight sovereign Arab States extend over a continental expanse of a million and a half square miles, embracing all the centers which owe their historic fame to their connection with the Arab and Moslem traditions. Cairo, Bagdad and Damascus, the scenes and the centers of the Caliphate, Mecca and Medina, the holy cities of Arabia, the sources and origins of the Moslem faith are today all capitals or centers of independent Arab societies. The imagination falters at the magnitude of the constructive opportunity which has suddenly, almost overnight, been presented to the liberated Arab peoples. And this unexampled good fortune in their political evolution has come to them less as a result of their own sacrifice and effort than as a consequence of the intervention of international influences in two world wars and, more recently, as a consequence of the vast revival throughout the world of sympathy for the expression of national sentiment.

This concept of Arab nationalism as a movement which has acquired almost unprecedented good fortune, is essential if we are to understand the moral and ethical basis of the relationship between the Arab world and Israel and between the Arab world and the West.

The West, which has many things to apologize for in the past, has no need to stand in an attitude of defensiveness when it confronts the Arabic speaking world. It is true that for four centuries, under Western control or indifference, the Arabic speaking world fell behind the best levels of modern political and technological progress.

As far as the Arab world was concerned the French revolution might never have occurred. For the new revolutionary doctrines of political equality and social justice, which spread like wildfire throughout Europe and later across the Atlantic, have made no impression whatever upon the dark hinterlands of Arabia which continued to organize its life upon medieval, feudal and totalitarian patterns.

Similarly, as far as the Middle East was concerned, the industrial revolution might never have occurred. The great developments in human technology and discovery which had revolutionized the horizons of material progress, made no impress upon the squalor and suffering of the teeming millions who dwelt in the sub-continent between the central Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

Thus, if we were to strike the balance sheet at the end of the 19th century, an attitude of grievance and injury by the Arab world towards the West would have had ample historic justification. But all this has been swept away by the bounty and the breadth of the liberation which the West, both through the actions of individual powers and through those of international organs, has now bestowed upon the Arab world.

The first of two 1952 ACPC Study Tour groups visited Egypt, Jordan and Israel in April. They are shown above at the Pyramids in Egypt. Below, some of the members stop at the Third Station of the Cross, along the Via Dolorosa, in the Old City of Jerusalem, Jordan.

One of the Study Tour participants, Roger Baldwin, Chairman of the Board of the International League for the Rights of Man, writes: "The ACPC Study Tour gave us the satisfactions of contacts no individual traveler could possibly make, and insights he would have taken far longer to achieve. The group stimulated that; it was a superior lot of people with informed minds and serious purposes. I believe we will, out of even such brief weeks, offer some compensation to American liberalism in what we say, write, and do on our return. For my own work, no better time or places could have been chosen, and I return with a realization not otherwise possible of the complexities and obstacles that beset international cooperation in relation to the Middle East."