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THE ARAB LEAGUE IN CASABLANCA

Trends in the Arab League as Revealed by
Its 32nd Meeting

by Charles F. Gallagher

Tangier

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Phillips Talbot
Executive Director

At the close of the 7th century 'Uqba ibn Nafi, the Arab general, led the vanguard of his conquering Islamic armies in a raid across North Africa as far as the Atlantic shores of modern-day Morocco and there planted his banners in the surf, regretting only that there were no more lands to the West to be conquered in the name of God.

From that time on the Maghreb, the Western Island to the Arabs, was progressively Islamized and arabized as part of a continuing process that has continued even under the rule of a European power which has brought in a host of Westernizing influences during the past century.

Probably the simplest statement that could be made about the thirty-second meeting of the League of Arab States held in Casablanca earlier this month lies in this context. It was one of a continuing series of efforts, within the current renewal of ties and rediscovered common sentiments and aspirations, aimed at bringing to life the ancient concept of Arab unity stretching, as it did in the first years of the Ummayyad Caliphate, from the Persian Gulf to the Atlantic.

But once having suggested this, important qualifications should be attached. For soon after

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the original conquest of North Africa ending in 710, heretical and secessionist movements followed so repeatedly and successfully that the greater part of the Maghreb led at most times thereafter an existence quite independent of the Eastern part of the Arab world. An Islamic tradition rooted in a unique underlying racial stock and embellished by regional individuality shaped the culture of North Africa in the intervening centuries.

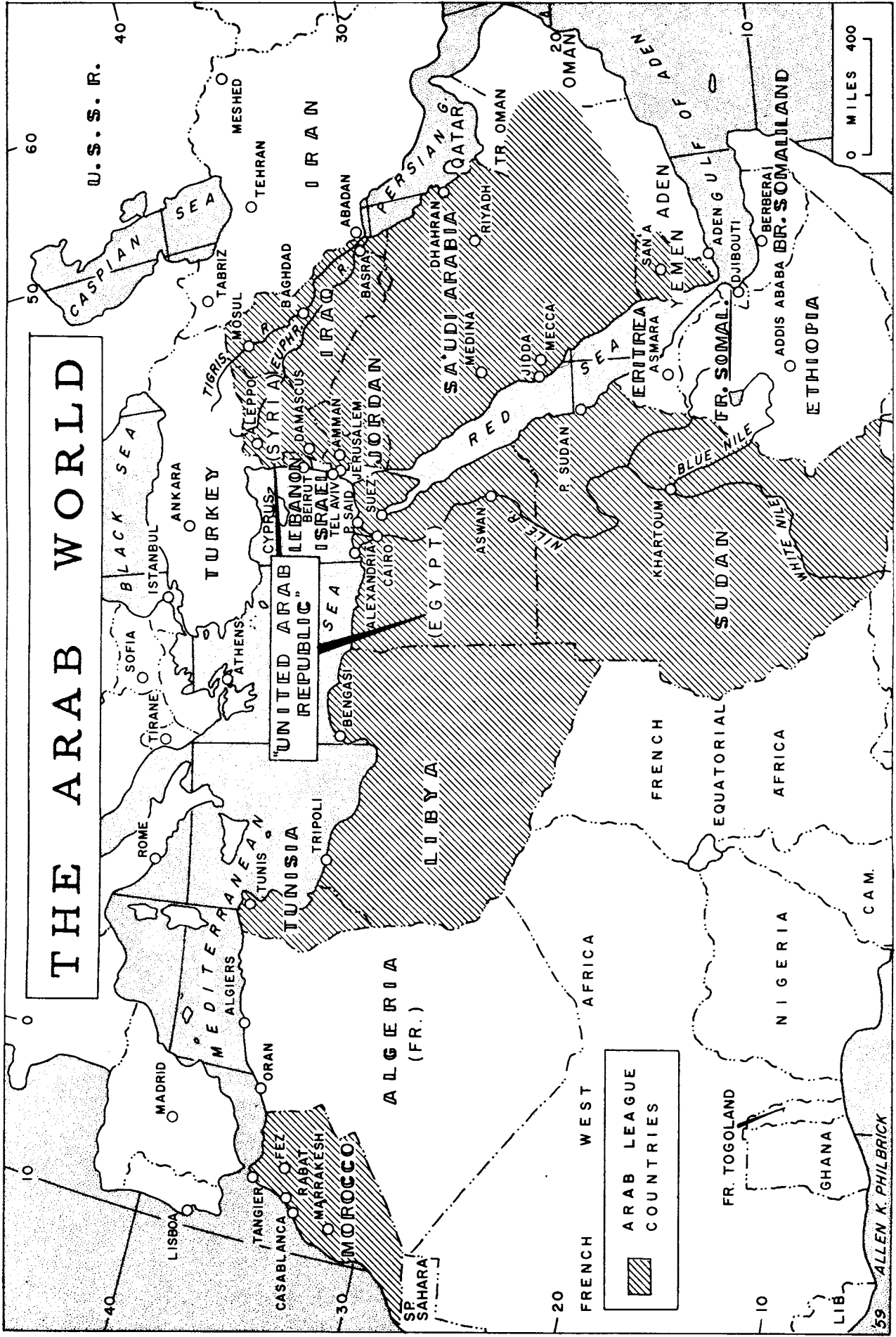
And it is still the centrifugal force of Maghrebian regionalism--which has of course been strongly reinforced in recent times by a contact with Europe quite different from what took place in the Middle East--which is vying with the central tradition, the ideal of a united Arabo-Muslim community. The contest today seems to be unequal in that the highly vocal forces for unity have outshouted their rivals; indeed, it is difficult to find an outspoken rival because the concept of unity--and here is meant only a spiritual and psychological closeness and not an organic political unity--has no open opponents.

No one is willing to stand against Arabism, and it would be wrong even to suggest that any responsible leader wants to. But there are nuances within Arabdom everywhere which are important, just as among the European countries which have found new common interests or even within the Communist bloc states. They make for a difference of approach and outlook which is inevitable when dealing with such a large number of states covering an immense geographical area with considerable diversity within the unity. The problem is less one of trying to be different within the same cultural straitjacket than seeking to achieve harmony without too greatly distorting the social and historical personality of the individual country or region. The difficulties involved were clearly shown at this meeting of the Arab League.

The 1959 Arab League is a very different affair from the original organization established in March 1945. That was a grouping of seven states: Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. One of these, Syria, has

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THE ARAB WORLD



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ALLEN K. PHILBRICK

ceased to exist as a nation through its union with Egypt, and another, Yemen, is in a nominal and very loose federation with the new United Arab Republic. Transjordan has become, with the annexation of parts of what was Palestine, the Hashemite Kingdom of the Jordan. And since 1945, four new countries have become League members: Libya (1953), Sudan (1956), Tunisia (1958), and Morocco (1958).

A glance at the map is revealing. At its inception six of the seven original members were Asian countries, Egypt excepted. They were the cut-up states of the Arab heartland and were peopled, except on the northernmost fringe of the area, by what one might call pure-blooded Arabs, of race and language. All four of the newcomers are African states and they have moved the geographical center and the sensible focus of the organization westward and a bit southward.

The size and balance of population has changed, too. Originally around thirty-five million persons were included in the seven League countries in 1945. Now the League represents over seventy million, of whom twenty-five million are in the new African countries, twenty-five million in Egypt, and a bit over twenty million in the Arabian-Fertile Crescent area. The effect of this has not been absent from recent Arab world politics. One need consider no more than the space given in the Moroccan press to the "Cameroons liberation struggle," the influence of Bourguiba on the leaders of the Mali Federation, Prime Minister Ibrahim's reception in Conakry, and the complicated relations of Egypt with Ghana and Nigeria-to-be to realize that it is a far cry from Lawrence of Arabia and Glubb Pasha. The French once liked to think of their protectorate, Morocco, as a kind of California boomland; that dream has faded but within the Arab world at present Morocco is beginning to have something of the weight that California carries on the American political scene, and externally it is creating new frontiers of Arab policy just as California gave America a Far Eastern policy after 1850. Nothing could have underlined the new orientation more than the appearance at the opening-day ceremonies in Casablanca of the Minister of National Economy of Guinea as an unprecedented guest speaker.

One visible result of the westward drift was seen in the East-West confrontation at the conference. In the words of one expert observer, the meeting "brought Palestine to North Africa and Algeria to the Middle East." This analysis is hard to agree with completely because Palestine--in spite of Moroccan official acts such as adhering to the Boycott Office and just recently suspending postal communications with Israel--is not a burning issue in the Arab West. But the point should not be overlooked: the two problems are at least of equal importance on a governmental level and official Arab policy is to treat them as such. If anything--and perhaps because of the hope of a more reasonably immediate settlement--more attention is being given Algeria at the moment.

This change is startling in itself, for the Arab League, so to speak, was born to the Palestine problem and grew up with it. It has dominated its existence from 1945 down to now. And while it is not any the less urgent for the Arabs--it is important not to misunderstand that--the preoccupations about Algeria, the last large Arab area under foreign control, have come to rival it.

The contrast in the handling of the problems was noticeable at the conference itself, in the sessions to which representatives of the Provisional Algerian government were admitted as observers, and in the hotel corridors where FLN ministers were buried in a frenzied activity commensurate with their position at the meeting. It was clear that the Algerians had a brassy self-confidence--they had, after all, an established government recognized by 17 countries, possibly the best organized and trained fighting force in the Arab world, and their territory was not coveted or partially occupied by their neighbors. The FLN spoke for itself, the Palestinians were spoken for and about by friends and relations who were not always in agreement. [How clearly the Algerians are masters in their own house-in-exile was revealed after the Arab League meeting in their response to the De Gaulle proposals for auto-determination. The Cairo press was suggesting, and pressing for, an outright refusal, the Tunisians counseled moderation and an all-Maghreb conference before a decision was taken. Neither of these FLN-host countries was completely satisfied with the answer as made, but both, and all other Arab states went down the line in support after the announcement. The Algerian problem is probably the only one about which Baghdad and Cairo and Tunis are in even limited accord at present.]

The League's internal difficulties were made manifest at the start by the absentees at roll-call. Missing, for reasons that had something in common, were Tunisia and Iraq.

Tunisia joined the League along with Morocco in 1958, but it was no sooner in it than it walked out in dudgeon. At the October meeting last year in Cairo, the Tunisian representative brought up the delicate issue of United Arab Republic support of Tunisian opponents-in-exile to the Bourguiba Government and presented what the Tunisians charged was proof of Nasserite attempts to overthrow their regime. This breach of protocol got them no support (even the Moroccan Ambassador was mildly reproachful at their lack of "tact"), a motion of censure was passed, and Tunisia left the meeting and, in effect, the League. It did not resign but it has taken no part in subsequent activities.

A few days before the Casablanca conference, Secretary-General Hassouna of the League visited Tunis and apparently thought he had gotten a verbal agreement to attend; at least he was issuing optimistic statements on arrival in Morocco. But on September 1 no Tunisian delegate appeared. The embarrassment caused by Iraq's absence, already taken for granted,

was doubled. In a burst of penance the minutes of the previous meeting dealing with the censure motion were erased and excited telephone calls were made to Tunis to inform Bourguiba of the change of heart. But if a bit of revenge was sweet, Bourguiba felt he now had the U.A.R. on the run and a formal apology, plus disavowal of the refugees in Cairo was demanded. The price was too high and after 24 hours of great expectations, the conference shuffled along without Tunisian participation.

Iraq's absence was occasioned by deeper causes, although the ostensible reason was League rejection of the Baghdad Government's request to hold the meeting in the Iraqi capital. Iraqi policy shows a continuity in many fields which transcends questions of regime, and the new republic just as the old monarchy, considers the Arab League and everything that stems from it as too much under Egyptian domination. (League headquarters are in Cairo, the Secretary-General has always been an Egyptian, and two of the three Assistant Secretaries are Egyptian.) And in private delegates from other countries will often agree to this; certainly complaints on this score were heard in Casablanca. A proposal to revise the statutes of the League, with the goal of making it a body more accessible to the smaller states was amply discussed, as it has been before, but it has already run up against a good deal of quiet opposition.

In practical terms the accomplishments of the meeting were no more than modest, although not to the extent suggested by a Western diplomatic observer who asked drily, "Was this conference really necessary?" The

King Muhammad V entertains delegates of the Arab League at dinner; on his right, Secretary-General Hassouna.



answer to that is yes, for the reasons suggested above. But the resolutions on Palestine, repeating those of yesteryear and rejecting the so-called Hammarskjold project for integrating Arab refugees in the countries where they are now in refuge, were uninspired. Thoughts of creating more formal organizations, such as a Palestine government in action and in residence perhaps in Jerusalem, ran up against the usual opposition from Jordan and Lebanon. Those on Algeria were mild, so much so that it was suspected that the FLN was disappointed. But the League subsidy to the Algerian government was voted, even though between vote and payment there is a long step. And discussions on Algeria were muted not only because the Algerians, although grateful for moral support, are convinced that it is their own efforts which in the long run will be decisive, but because the shadow of De Gaulle's impending public statement lay over the conference.

To some extent the conference was overshadowed by the trend of world events, too. The coming Khrushchev visit to the United States was a subject of great interest, and one feels that gradually the Arab world is recognizing that it cannot have the best of both sides in the cold war while decrying it and trying to live, as it has for the past decade, in a vacuum as far as the great power system is concerned. Any sort of detente among the superpowers would have enormous repercussions in Arab politics, and a good many delegates had this possibility much on their minds. Finally, the example of the larger powers certainly influenced the proposal of King Muhammad V, made in his welcoming address, that a summit meeting of Arab heads of state be held in the near future. If there are incompatibilities, take it to the highest level.

In success or failure, however, the conference reflected prismatically upon marginal events throughout the Arab world. The two voluntary outcasts, Tunisia and Iraq, have been almost compelled to draw more closely together, in spite of their international political posture; several signs indicate that each now feels the other a useful counterbalance in the complications of Arab politics, even though this in itself marks how thoroughly the personality of Abdel Nasser still dominates the scene. One certainly cannot yet speak of a "bloc" within the Arab world, but the recent rapprochement of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.R. on a neo-Islamic, anti-Communist basis was strengthened in Casablanca. And the host country, Morocco, gained as much or more than any participant. The Moroccans would have much preferred, they said, to have the Tunisians at the session. In their absence Morocco showed itself off as a force for stability and good neighborliness not only in North Africa but throughout the Arab world, a position which the projected state visit of Muhammad V to Cairo this winter will do much to reinforce.

Nothing could sum up better the complex of crossroads at which the Arab League and its members find themselves than the King's words themselves:

"Morocco is ready to assume all its responsibilities and play within the Arab League the role which has befallen it, for the preservation of peace in the framework of a regional institution provided for by the Charter of the United Nations. It is ready to co-operate in the accomplishment of the mission of the Arabs.

"Morocco thinks that the time has come to work toward making the Arab League capable of responding to the necessities and problems of the hour. The Arab League was created fifteen years ago under particular international circumstances in a geographically limited zone, and for specific objectives. Since then the Arab world has taken great steps toward progress and a renaissance, and several states in its western wing have been liberated. The world has undergone profound changes in technical, economic, and political spheres. Hence it is necessary to re-examine the role of the League of Arab States in the light of these events."

Charles F. Gallagher

Crown Prince
Mulay Hassan
reads the
welcoming
address
of the
King of Morocco
at the
opening-day
ceremonies
of the Arab
League meeting.

