

IN THE FORWARD LINE

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With the guns of the Israeli army of occupation on the Golan Heights, seized from Syria in 1967, constantly trained on Damascus, and with air battles between Syrian and Israeli planes fought over Lebanon—the latest at the end of August—Syria today is truly a front-line state.

A victim of aggression, Syria is incessantly on the alert. Yet it is working for peace, for a just and durable settlement in the Middle East, which for Damascus means above all the solution of the Palestinian problem and the return of all Arab lands occupied by Israel in 1967, including the eastern part of Jerusalem.

Syria is an active advocate of Arab unity as basic to success in countering the aggressor and curbing his expansionist ambitions. It plays a leading role in the Arab Front for Steadfastness and Confrontation, of which Algeria, Libya, South Yemen and the Palestine Liberation Organization are also members. It is held in Damascus that the political union of Syria and Libya—the idea originated in Tripoli—could greatly strengthen the Front.

It is also fully realized in the Syrian capital that a genuine settlement in the Middle East—not the Camp David ersatz Washington is trying to impose on the Arabs—will make it possible for Syria to channel all its resources to social and economic progress.

The valley of the Barada River meanders amid a chaos of brownish-grey hills, and, as if breaking out of their grip, spreads out in a wide expanse of green into the Ghutah Oasis. This fertile valley feeds not only Damascus but other towns as well. New farms on what was formerly desert land have appeared in other parts of the country. The Euphrates Dam in the north of the country has brought water to thous-

ands of hectares of land and electricity to hundreds of settlements. Vast land holdings expropriated from the feudal owners have been turned over to peasants. The size of the land allotments ranges depending on the quality of the soil and the amount of water available for irrigation, from 15 hectares per family in Ghutah, for instance, to 300 hectares in the arid eastern provinces. The land reform has not yet been completed. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, there still are over 50,000 landowners and rich peasants who use hired labour or lease out land. The number of landless peasants and agricultural labourers is estimated at 110,000.

A co-operative movement designed to free the Syrian peasant from the shackles of age-long dependence on rural exploiters is under way. Through co-operatives, which already unite over a quarter of those who till the land themselves, the peasants receive credits, seed and cement.

A public sector in agriculture has also come into being and big hopes are pinned on it.

The peasantry comprises the largest section of Syria's population, constituting 60 per cent of the work force. Agriculture accounts for about 25 per cent of the gross national product and some 40 per cent of the country's total exports.

The fourth regional congress of the

(uling Arab Socialist Renaissance (Baath) Party held in 1968 set a course towards strengthening and expanding the public sector with a view to its eventually assuming the leading role in the country's economy. In the period between 1963 and 1976 its basic capital rose from 170 million Syrian pounds to 5,500 million. It now receives over 75 per cent of all budget allocations. The state fully controls the mining and power industries, two-thirds of the total industrial production and 70 per cent of foreign trade.

Despite the unceasing resistance of the bourgeois strata, the public sector has proved viable and is becoming the backbone of the national economy. In this, as in many other areas, co-operation with the countries of the socialist community, the Soviet Union in particular, has been of much benefit to Syria. The Euphrates hydropower development, electrification, expansion of the railway network, and oil extraction are among the branches where joint effort is being applied to mutual advantage. The London Financial Times observed last year that the Soviet Union was "the firmest of Syria's friends."

When I first arrived in Damascus from Cairo in 1966, the taxi driver remarked on hearing my Egyptian accent: "You are better off in Egypt. You have only one leader—Gamal Abdel Nasser, while we have 150 leaders and each of them thinks he is a Nasser."

True enough. Until 1970 Syria was known as a "country of coups."

Bedouins are still roaming the deserts of Central and Northern Syria.

TASS photo



Indeed, there were a dozen of them after the proclamation of independence in 1943.

The Left wing of the Baath Party, which came to power in 1966, and particularly the Corrective Movement of November 1970, headed by Syria's present President, Hafez Assad, succeeded in stabilizing the situation. Political stability lasted up to 1979, when the country's firm anti-imperialist course and opposition to Camp David agreements prompted Washington and its Middle East allies, Cairo and Tel Aviv, to take action.

As the events of the summer of 1979 showed, Syrian "Cains," lavishly paid from across the ocean, staged a fratricidal slaughter in the northern town of Aleppo. Three plotters from the clandestine Moslem Brotherhood shot down in cold blood cadets of an artillery school assembled in a classroom by a false alert signal. Fratricidal clashes in Latakia and terrorist acts in other towns followed.

It soon transpired that the activities of the Moslem Brothers in Syria were directed from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and its Israeli counterpart, the Mossad. In September last year the Beirut weekly Al-Kifah al-Arabi quoted a well-known Tel Aviv commentator, M. Shekard as saying that "Syria must be made" to join the Israeli-Egyptian talks. This, he said, should be done by "giving a stimulus making the prospect of joining the talks attractive for Damascus, by repeated threats, and by creating a situation that would induce the Syrians to change their strategy." In connection with the events in Syria, the Beirut Al-Sharq cited the U.S. President's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski who said that the problems arising from religious strife would show the Arabs that there existed other dangers both internal and external, to neutralize which would be more important than the fight against Israel. Religious unrest in the Middle East would induce all the countries in the region to search for ways of achieving a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict, he said. How typical of the way the American and Israeli secret services

On September 28, 1979, the National Progressive Front, consisting of the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party

and other parties and organizations, the Communist Party included, published a statement which knocked from under the Moslem Brotherhood the social ground on which they hoped to base their anti-government propaganda. The programme of measures to stabilize the situation included: launching a campaign against the parasitic bourgeoisie, against red tape and bribetaking among the civil servants, and strengthening the role of the People's Council (Parliament) and of the National Progressive Front, as well as of trade union and other public organizations.

The attempts of the Moslem Brotherhood to intensify its activity in the spring of 1980 proved abortive. In his radio and TV address on March 8, President Assad made it clear that the actions of the reactionaries and the religious extremists were directed not only against the authorities but against the social gains of the working people. It was decided to form armed detachments of workers and revolutionary youth to fight the terrorists. Patriotic committees made up of members of the ruling Baath Party, the Communists and other progressives, were set up in many towns.

Early in July the People's Council passed a law making membership in the Moslem Brotherhood punishable by death, but declaring an amnesty for those who publicly renounced their membership within one month. The deadline was later extended to two months. By the end of August more than a thousand "Brothers" gave themselves up to the authorities, according to the Damascus Tishrin. Resolute action against the remnants of the terrorist bands was also urged by the 13th Congress of the Baath Party held in August.

The latest clash with the imperialist hirelings has led to the consolidation of Syria's links with the countries that invariably rendered it support in its hour of trial. "We have resolved to transform our present friendly and strong relations with the Soviet Union to an even higher stage," President Assad said at a youth rally in the Damascus Sports Stadium. This line has been reaffirmed by the 13th Congress of the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party.

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COMMENT

THE OLD PATTERN

Japan's Foreign Minister Masayoshi Ito has completed a trip abroad in the course of which he visited Thailand, Burma, India, Pakistan and China. It was the first diplomatic voyage of the head of the Japanese Foreign Ministry since the formation of the new government in July. The trip was publicized as a first step of the Suzuki Cabinet "towards making Japan the leader of the Western world" in Asia.

However, the results of the trip indicate no marked change in Tokyo's approach to Asian problems. As before, Japan demonstrates complete solidarity with the United States' expansionist plans in South-east Asia and is ready to increase, at Washington's bidding, its "contribution" to the "defence of the interests of the West." More, Ito virtually undertook to act as the mouthpiece of Washington's and Peking's anti-Sovietism. In his utterances in Asian capitals he kept harping on the NATO and Peking propaganda theme about the "aggressiveness" of Soviet foreign policy and clamoured for "unity" of Asian countries in order to "blockade" the U.S.S.R. These calls were accompanied by promises of lavish aid.

Tokyo is particularly generous towards Bangkok and Islamabad, which have already received billions of yen in "gratis aid" this year. A considerable part of this money is intended for the Pol Pot cutthroats being sheltered in Thailand and for the Afghan counter-revolutionaries operating from Pakistani territory. Ito's demonstrative visit to camps of these "refugees" is highly illustrative of Tokyo's approach to the settlement of the Kampuchean and Afghan problems.

The guest's views were not favourably received everywhere. According to Mainichi, the talks in Delhi, for instance, have shown that India and Japan "completely diverged in their assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and Kampuchea."

In Peking, however, which was the final point in Ito's itinerary, Tokyo's policy received full approval. The Chinese leaders used the talks with him to heap fresh abuse on the policy of the Soviet Union and Vietnam and to bring new pressure to bear on Japan. Conspicuous in this connection is Ito's agreement with his Chinese counterpart Huang Hua that Hanoi and Moscow "must pay" for their support of People's Kampuchea and Afghanistan.

As we can see, Japan's policy remains out of touch with the realities in Asia and beyond.

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