

June 18, 1921.

MR. CHURCHILL'S eloquent and interesting speech on the Middle East in the House of Commons on Tuesday reminds us of a phenomenon familiar in the regions with which he was dealing. The weary traveller toiling over the stony desert sees in the distance an oasis, verdant and cool, with palm-trees that cast a grateful shade over a crystal spring. He takes an involuntary pleasure in the sight, contrasting so vividly with the barren wastes around him, but he knows that it is only a mirage—an optical illusion which will fade as he advances. It is in this spirit that we regard Mr. Churchill's oratorical enchantments. He summons up visions of an Arab State in Mesopotamia, managing its own affairs peacefully, while Southern Kurdistan enjoys Home Rule, and of the nomad or semi-nomad tribes of Arabia from the Jordan to the Euphrates and the Persian Gulf accepting the supervision of the British Mandatory. Furthermore, he suggests that the cost of guiding the Arabs in the way in which they should go and of protecting them from external aggression is to diminish rapidly, and that the British garrisons may be withdrawn at a comparatively early date, leaving Arab forces trained by us to defend Arab liberties. The speech reads well, but our instinct warns us that it is based on theories and assumptions as intangible as the desert traveller's vision.

Mr. Churchill said that, having accepted a Mandate for Mesopotamia and Palestine, we could not light-heartedly repudiate our undertakings. We are, in effect, trustees for these regions, and we "must endeavour to do our duty in a sober and honourable manner." Whether a Cabinet which has just repudiated its whole agricultural policy, sanctioned by an Act not nine months old, is justified in regarding the Middle East Mandates as immutable and sacrosanct, is not very clear. We may stress Mr. Churchill's admission that the obligation was not unlimited and that "a point might be reached when we should have to declare that we had failed and that we were not justified in demanding further sacrifices from the British taxpayer." He went on to say that, "if we were to avoid the shame of failure, the only key lay in the reduction of expenditure on these countries within reasonable and practicable limits." These are important conditions restricting the terrible responsibilities of the Mandates which the Government so thoughtlessly accepted, without stopping to count the cost. The question is whether Mr. Churchill's new project is likely to limit our commitments in Mesopotamia and to give that country a stable government. No one, not even Mr. Churchill himself, can confidently affirm that it will.

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His plan is to hold Irak, from Basra to Baghdad and perhaps to Mosul, with a garrison of twelve British battalions, and eight air squadrons. All the Indian troops have been or are being sent home. An Arab army is being formed under a melodramatic hero named Jaafer Pasha, who fought for the Turks and against the Turks with equal zeal, and is now Secretary of War at Baghdad. There are also some Arab levies in our pay, who have not yet earned much commendation. Provided that the river and desert tribes and the Kurds in the hills do not rise in insurrection, and provided that the Turks and the Bolsheviks from the north and Ibn Saud from the south do not invade Mesopotamia, this military provision may prove sufficient. Mr. Churchill hopes to avert any fresh rising by setting up an Arab Government. The people are to elect a National Assembly this summer, and the Assembly is to choose a ruler. Mr. Churchill's nominee for the post is the Emir Feisul, son of the King of the Hedjaz. Mr. Churchill admits that he does not know whether the people of Mesopotamia, who are rent with tribal, sectarian, racial, and economic feuds, will choose the Emir Feisul. If they do, Mr. Churchill thinks that they will make a wise decision. But here again we are confronted with a mere hypothesis. It is well known that Ibn Saud, the head of the Wahhabis in South-eastern Arabia, whom Mr. Churchill described as the most militant Puritans of Islam, is an open enemy of the King of the Hedjaz and his family. Mr. Churchill thinks to curb his ambitions by a subsidy of £5,000 a month, paid on evidence of his good behaviour during each month, but Ibn Saud may not be able to restrain his fanatical followers. Mr. Churchill admits that the success of his whole plan ultimately depends upon the conclusion of peace with the Turks who, through the ineptitude of the Allies, were given time to recover from utter defeat and are now almost as bellicose and impudent as ever. Thus when we analyse this attractive project we find that it consists almost entirely of assumptions which may be falsified. There is no real substance in it.

The Colonial Secretary's claims to have effected great economies are no more convincing. What we know is that the Middle East is going to cost us £27,250,000 this year. It is, of course, comforting to find that the original estimate of £35,000,000 has been reduced, but the comfort is illusory. When Mr. Churchill talks of saving money, he reminds us of the lady who came home from a shopping expedition and told her husband that she had saved ten guineas. It turned out, of course, that she had coveted a twenty-guinea hat and that she had afterwards found a ten-guinea hat which pleased her just as much. In buying the cheaper hat she appeared to save money, but the husband, stupid

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fellow, could not see it. All he knew was that he was ten guineas poorer. The Colonial Secretary, with all his clever explanations, cannot disguise the fact that the British taxpayer, who is at his wit's end to know how to pay his Income Tax of six shillings in the pound, is contributing this year £27,250,000 towards the administration of Mesopotamia and Palestine, for which he will get nothing—not even thanks—in return. When some of our American friends complain that we have got profitable Mandates and that they have got nothing, they little know what a Mandate means. The American Government were shrewd enough to decline the Mandates that were offered them, though they could afford such a luxury far better than we can.

We must return on another occasion to Mr. Churchill's very grave and cautious remarks on Palestine. "The only cause of unrest in Palestine," he said, "arose from the Zionist movement, and from our promises and pledges in regard to it." That is a significant truth on which our readers will do well to ponder. But for the Zionists we might have administered Palestine with a corporal's guard. The Turks never had any trouble there, except perhaps at the Easter festival at Jerusalem, and we should have been equally fortunate. But the Zionist movement and the violent religious animosities that it has stirred up have made the once peaceful little country a veritable hotbed of discontent. Fortunately, Palestine is small; its inhabitants number barely three-quarters of a million. But though the military problem of preserving order is not serious, the political problem raised is exceedingly important and affects the whole Jewish and Moslem world. Mr. Churchill declared on the one hand that Jewish immigration must be carefully restricted, and on the other that "there was really nothing for the Arabs to be frightened about." He tried to soothe the parties with fair words. But so long as the Zionists claim political domination in Palestine, and appear to exercise it indirectly through a Jewish High Commissioner who, as Mr. Churchill said, is "a most ardent Zionist," there will, we fear, be a continuance of the unrest.