

# Mr. Nixon and the Arabs: A Risky Trip?

The Arab world is now tilting toward the United States. So by his present visit, President Nixon visibly identifies himself, in the very midst of his impeachment troubles, with what looks like a success.

But underneath the Arab tilt there is a disruptive process almost certain to put poor Arabs against rich Arabs in the near future. The real question, accordingly, is not whether this trip is necessary, but whether it isn't risky.

The basic current now running in the Mideast is a transition from international tension to economic development. Egypt and Syria have moved to settle their dispute with Israel. The Syrian agreement opens the way to arrangements engaging Jordan and the Palestinian Arabs.

The United States, because of its contacts with Israel and the skillful diplomacy of Henry Kissinger, was able to play a useful role in easing the tension between Jews and Arabs. On his present trip, Mr. Nixon will be basking in the success of Dr. Kissinger's efforts.

But even as the Arab dispute with Israel recedes, a new conflict comes forward. It is the conflict of interest between the few thinly populated Arab states, enriched by oil, and the other Arab states, which are impoverished by demography. A few numbers tell the story.

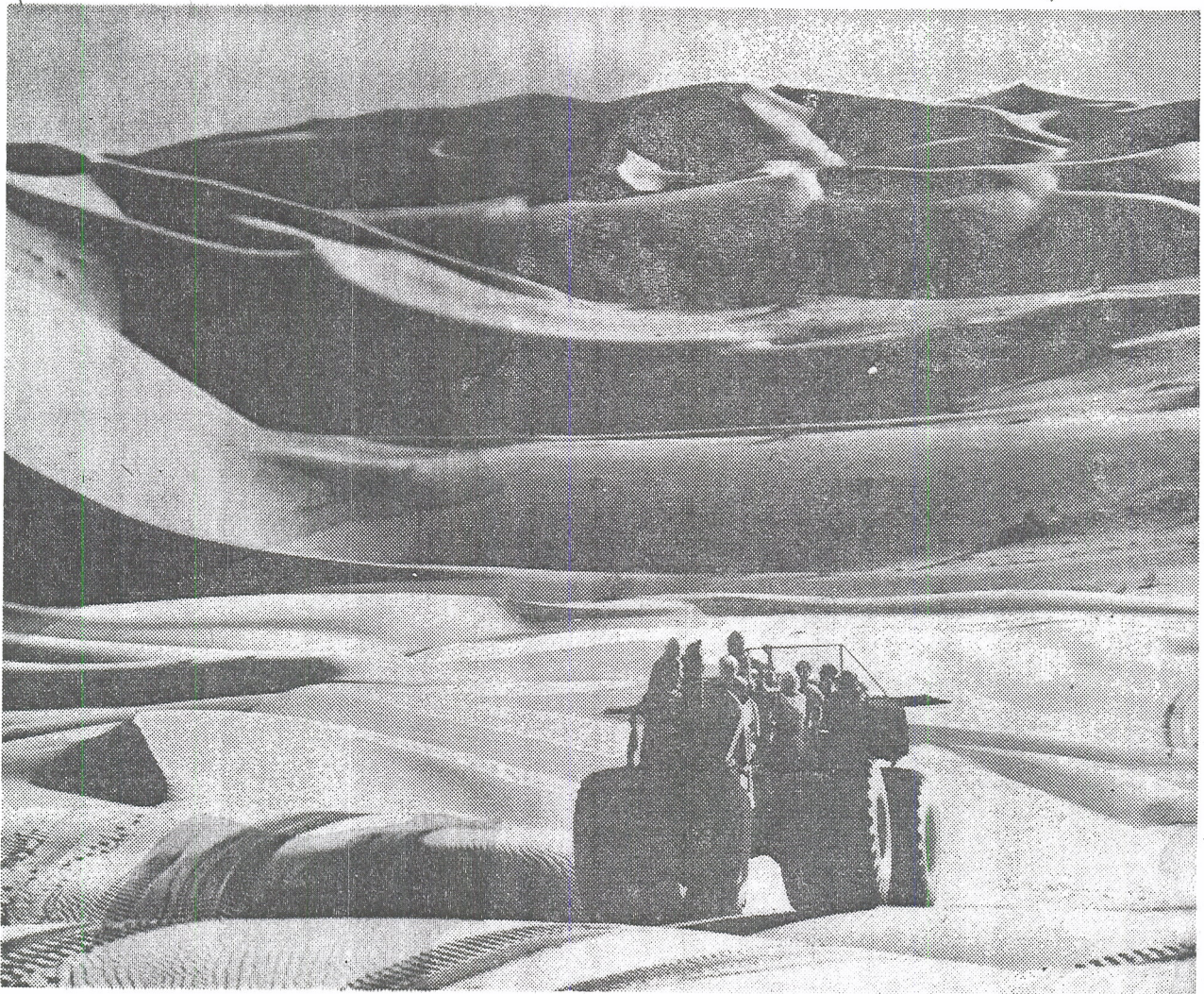
On the low side of the scale, there is Egypt. It has a population of 35 million. But its income per person, or per capita gross national product, is reckoned about \$220 annually. Syria, with a population of about 7 million and a per capita annual income of about \$290, is in the same boat. So is Jordan, with a population of 2.5 million and an annual individual income of \$260.

All three countries, moreover, are increasing their national product by only 2 to 3 per cent annually. Since their population is rising at the same rate, personal income is virtually standing still.

In dramatic contrast, there are the oil-rich countries around the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia, with a population of about 800,000 persons, now has an annual per capita income of about \$800 a year. That is expected to soar to \$2,000 before the end of this decade.

Kuwait, with a population of about 800,000, enjoys an annual per capita income of nearly \$4,000. That is expected to rise to \$6,000 by the end of this decade. Qatar, with a population of 80,000, has an annual per capita income of \$2,700. By 1980 that is expected to reach \$6,000 annually.

The numbers show that while a small group of rich Arabs are getting



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richer and richer at a rapid rate, a much larger group of poor Arabs are standing still in misery. Explosion is sure to occur unless some way of softening the disparity can be found, and here again the United States has a role to play.

The leaders of the rich Arabs, notably King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, are among the most conservative investors in the world. Their idea of a wild plunge is to put money out at interest in the banks of New York and London for periods of 60 to 90 days.

But if the United States came into the picture, as an ultimate guarantor of loans and security, their outlook might change. With an American presence, the cautious leaders of the oil-rich countries might be prevailed

upon to shoulder some of the burden of helping their fellow Arabs.

The poorer countries know this full well, and have already adjusted their policies. President Sadat is going ape for America, at least partly to entice investment funds from the Saudis. Syria is interested in firming up relations with the United States for the same reason. On his present visit, President Nixon is going to be subjected to some highly seductive talk about the enormous bounty that will come with an expanded American presence in the Mideast.

But does the United States want to play middleman between the rich and poor Arabs? Does this country want to expand commitments in the Mideast? Does it want to be aligned with outmoded regimes apt to be forced out

anyway? Isn't there a danger that a prominent American role will bring in the Russians in a new competition for the Mideast which Moscow might not lose? Wouldn't it be better to arrange for the transfer of funds from the rich to the poor through multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund?

No one knows the answers to those questions. One sure thing is that this country needs time to think about its future role in the Mideast. Certainly the United States ought not to be rushed into new commitments by a desperate President. So there is reason—even apart from its obvious impeachment implications—for everybody to be wary of Mr. Nixon's barnstorming.