CHAPTER 2

M I D D L E E A S T E R N S E T T I N G

WORLD INFLUENCES

Because of its geographical position as a land bridge between Africa, Asia, and Europe, the Middle East has participated in world movements originating in all three continents. The region has served as a base for Empires -- Phoenician, Persian, Arabic and Turkish -- that have extended far around the Mediterranean and into the land mass of Europe, Asia and Africa. The Middle East has, in turn, been the pawn of empires -- Greek, Roman, Mongol, and contemporary -- of which the primary strength lay elsewhere.

The Middle East was restored to the central stream of world politics, at the very end of the eighteenth century, by rivalries over the weakened Ottoman Empire. In 1798 Napoleon conquered Egypt and marched up the Palestine coastal plain to Syria. Britain seized the initiative to draw the Sultan into an alliance against Napoleon.

A tangled thread of Middle Eastern policy runs through Franco-British relations from then to this day. It made France the patron of the Lebanese Christians and inclined British support to the fiercely anti-Christian Druses. It brought Britain to Acre to defeat the forces of the insurgent Mehmet Ali, the great Pasha of Egypt, and to prevent the collapse of Ottoman rule. It brought the France of the Second Empire, in the role of guardian of the Roman Catholic ecclesiastics in the Holy Places, to war in the Crimea against a Russia posing as the guardian of Orthodox rights.

After a long series of agreements, throughout the nineteenth century, designed to avoid the problems that would arise from a Turkish collapse, the War of 1914-18 found Russia, Britain and France joined in plans to partition all but the central heart of Turkish territory -- with a few scraps provided also for Italy and Greece. Russia, however, eliminated herself voluntarily from the benefits of these plans by the Revolution and her separate peace