

Beirut's five modern airport buildings must soon be extended or modified to cope with the expansion of Lebanon traffic. There are now a thousand aircraft movements a month at this busy terminal.

## Middle East Airlines Spreads its Wings

By A. T. PUGH

# Under the Cedar Tree

**A**T the eastern end of the Mediterranean, where the mainland of Turkey overhangs the island of Cyprus and branches of the Egyptian Nile thrust their way through the Delta into the sea, lies the flank of coastline of the Biblical lands. In the cockpit of the countries accredited with the genesis of civilization (Damascus is reputed to be the oldest town in the world) tiny, prosperous Lebanon boasts a political stability not always enjoyed by its Syrian, Israeli and Turkish neighbours.

Long ago, the traditional economy of the district was the export from the ancient ports of Tyre and Sidon of cedar trees gathered from the slopes and mountains around Mount Lebanon; and the civilization and culture of the country were expressed by the temples of the Phoenician city of Baalbeck, in the plain between mountain ranges that was the granary of the Roman armies.

The outward signs of a modern economy, which is largely based on banking and commerce, are a capital that is as cosmopolitan as any in the world and a fine airport serving the needs of the 34 airlines which use Beirut. Viscount services, with stops at Rome, Zurich and Athens, have put the Lebanon a comfortable 12 hours from London, as I recently had the opportunity of discovering for myself on a sample Middle East Airlines flight between L.A.P. and Beirut International Airport.

A short stop at Athens—in the dark little more than a collection of lights and one more international airport selling national souvenirs in the transit lounge—gave me an insight into the determination of Mr. Onassis to make Olympic Airways a first-class airline; and all the indications, from the turn-out of the DC-3s and 6s to the size and smartness of the ground installations, are that Olympic will be ready for their DC-8s when these are delivered in 1960.

From Athens to Beirut is 1,146 miles, and after 2 hr 30 min we arrived over the lights of the town stretching far up into the hills. Mediterranean lights have, I think, a distinctive appearance quite unlike either the lights of British towns, which are white or sodium-yellow and sometimes softened by mist, or the harsh intensity of American coloured lighting. They are smaller and yellower, with multi-coloured neon signs around the hotel and night club areas and unexplained coloured pinpoints in the hills.

Surprisingly enough, since Beirut International Airport (the locals copy our own abbreviating processes to refer to it as B.I.A.) has only been unserviceable through bad weather for three hours in the last seven years, we were stood-off for ten minutes; but with 34 airlines using the airport and a thousand movements a month, traffic intensity can become very considerable. Because of the facilities and communications available at Beirut, and the stability of conditions in the area (rather like Switzerland, three-language Lebanon is valuable to itself and its neighbours as a non-partisan

State), more and more airlines are using the airport. Both Beirut and Damascus give flight information on request, although neither is actually a Flight Information Centre (the nearest one, which is to be opened very shortly, is at Nicosia in Cyprus). B.I.A.'s fair weather (there have never been any diversions and the cloudbase has never been less than 500ft), gives it a claim to become the F.I.C. for this area and the matter will be among those discussed at the I.C.A.O. EuMed meeting in Paris next year.

Facilities and equipment, as the airport personnel were very ready to show, are rapidly being expanded; V.O.R. is being installed and radar will be added later. By summer next year the teletype service should include a direct link with London. In the matter of runways B.I.A. is adequately equipped for present needs, and plans are already well advanced for extension of the north-south runway to 9,000ft (and eventually 19,168ft) and the NE/SW runway to 10,500ft. A 1956 American mission to the Lebanon which proposed the method of runway extensions estimated that 9,400ft would be sufficient for a fully-loaded DC-8 at standard temperature, and that the 10,500ft available on the NE/SW runway would be sufficient at maximum listed temperature—a forecast which seems optimistic when Beirut's maximum temperatures of about ISA +27 deg C are considered. (These maxima are, however, of short duration.)

Any first-time visitor to Beirut must inevitably be surprised at the contrasts the town presents. The predominant languages are Arabic and French, the cars large and mostly American (my taxi was a Cadillac Eldorado, but one night outside my hotel bedroom—air-conditioned and with American-style private bathroom—there were a Jaguar 2.4, a Mercedes-Benz 300 SL and an Alfa-Romeo Guilletta Sprint); the streets are narrow and constantly blasted by the horns of passing drivers. The robed and veiled rub amicable shoulders with the suited and the hatted, and in poky shops in narrow alleys, where coffee is sometimes offered by the proprietor, there would be the largest size deep-freeze as well. In the cool of the hills, contrasts are even more marked; I was surprised to find myself drinking thick sweet Turkish coffee, smoking a hookah—and listening to rock 'n' roll.

Later, when I had an opportunity of meeting Mr. Fouad Chader, the director of Civil Aviation, and heard from him something of the Lebanese plans for civil aviation, I asked him about the economy that made such extensions possible. Through an interpreter, he replied by an anecdote. "Quite recently," he said, "we employed a very eminent Dutch economist to study our national livelihood, and make a report and recommendations to keep us from the perils of inflation, slumps and national debt (we have none at the moment). He studied us for three months and

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The rapid growth of Middle East Airlines has largely been due to the Viscount. Below is one of their 754s, finished in red-and-white with a green cedar tree. During July, M.E.A. achieved utilizations of 9.5 hr per aircraft day and increased the passenger-carrying on their Beirut-Dhahram route in the first eight months of Viscount service by 78 per cent. On the right is M.E.A.'s chairman and managing director, Sheik Najib Alamuddin. He is a member of the I.A.T.A. executive.

