

THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

1978-11-27, Assad, Iraq, CIA Report

National Intelligence Officers

NFAC #5333-78  
27 November 1978

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

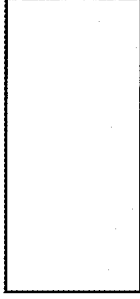
VIA : Acting Director, National Foreign Assessment Center *rw*

FROM :  Assistant to the National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE

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SUBJECT : Appraisal of Soviet Attitude on Syria-Iraq Rapprochement

Attached is a memorandum responding to your request for a paper for Secretary Vance appraising the Soviet role in and attitude toward present trends in Iraqi relations with Syria and Iran. This memorandum was prepared with major inputs from the USSR and Middle East Divisions of ORPA.



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Attachment:  
As Stated

The Soviet Role in the Iraqi Posture  
Toward Syria and Iran

The Impetus Behind Syrian-Iraqi Reconciliation

In late October, following a decade of harsh rhetoric and occasional efforts at mutual subversion, an Iraqi-Syrian reconciliation agreement was signed. The reconciliation was instigated by Baghdad which is making an effort to end its prolonged, self-imposed isolation in the Arab world and to this end has moderated its previously intransigent line. Iraq did not demand that Syria abandon its acceptance of UN Resolution 242 and join the ranks of the rejectionists; and, at the Arab summit meeting in Baghdad in early November, Iraq not only played a restrained role, but signed a communique containing a reference to conditions for a "just peace" with Israel.

It is too early to tell how far the Baghdad-Damascus axis will develop, but it definitely has some momentum. Thus far there has been an absence of the woolly rhetoric which so often marks such Arab endeavors. And Iraqi leaders Bakr and Saddam Husayn reportedly will visit President Assad in early December to review the work being done by economic, military, and political committees to enhance bilateral cooperation.

Of all the issues being discussed by Iraq and Syria, it is the relationship of the two rival wings of the Baath Party which generates the most heat. It is not out of the question that the National Commands of the two Party splinters might be placed under some single formal umbrella. Nevertheless, at best any such move toward Party unification is likely to be tenuous and precarious, and we think it unlikely that we will see a revival of the pan-Arabist dogma which was the hallmark of Baath Party thought in the 1950s. The regimes in Damascus and Baghdad are nationalist in orientation; this is especially the case in Syria, where President Assad is considered a "venerable Baathist." The Iraqis are somewhat more committed to old-style Baathist rhetoric, but when the chips are down they will put Iraq's national interest above pan-Arabism.

25X1C Many key Syrian leaders, including the President's brother Rifaat, are not enthusiastic about the reconciliation with Baghdad. 25X1C

[Redacted]

ourselves are inclined to suspect that the current Iraqi line toward Syria We

is not solely contingent upon the Shah's difficulties, but rather is part of a broader, long-term effort to exploit Egypt's isolation in the wake of Camp David and carve out for Baghdad a major Arab leadership role.

#### Iraq-Iran Relations

We agree, however, that the events in Iran have given Iraq added reason to improve its Arab ties. The violence and instability seen in Iran in recent months have created grave worries for Iraq's leaders, largely because of the possibility that such instability will spread. Nevertheless, they may see partial compensation for these dangers, since the weakening of Iran, Iraq's traditional rival in the Persian Gulf, may be viewed by some in Baghdad as providing greater room for the expansion of Iraqi influence. From Iraq's perspective, the optimum outcome of Iran's troubles would be for the Shah to retain his throne and bring violence to an end, but to be completely wrapped up in domestic problems and unable to project Iranian power outside its own territory.

Relations between Iraq and Iran have been quite good since March 1975, when the Shah agreed to terminate his support to Iraq's rebellious Kurds. In return, Baghdad accepted Tehran's solution to their long-standing border dispute.

There is no evidence that Iraq has meddled in Iranian affairs in an effort to take advantage of the Shah's predicament. Iraqi caution was exemplified in their unwillingness to permit Ayatollah Khomeini to take an active political role during the period when he maintained his sanctuary in Iraq.

There are several reasons for this Iraqi caution. Iraq may feel that interference would prompt renewed efforts by Tehran to pump up the Iraqi Kurds. In addition, the Shah is a known quantity and Baghdad may feel it would have little to gain from the end-of-the-Pahlavi dynasty and perhaps much to lose. Baghdad fears that if the Shah falls he might be replaced by either a radical Islamic regime or a leftist government linked to the USSR. More than 50% of the Iraqi population is Shia, and Baghdad has little interest in seeing a government in Iran which might encourage a reactionary sectarian resurgence in Iraq.

While in principle the prospect of a leftist regime in Iran might be more appealing to Iraq provided that it were not tied to the USSR, in practice the Iraqis may fear that such a regime would in fact gravitate toward the Soviets and be used by Moscow as a local counterweight to Iraq. The Soviet Union's role in the Horn of Africa, developments in South Yemen, and the coup in Afghanistan have all made Iraq nervous about Soviet intentions in Iran. In spite of its own dependence on Moscow for arms and economic development assistance, Baghdad has no desire to see Iran become part of the Soviet camp. Iraq is concerned that Moscow might then see Iran as a more attractive client and that it might play off Iran-Iraq ambitions to further its own strategic interests in the Gulf.

Iraq has long wanted to be the major player in Persian Gulf affairs, however, and, in the past, has tried to spread its influence -- without much success -- by military threat, subversion, and aid to local radicals. Iran has acted to keep Baghdad in check. Thus, Baghdad has probably concluded that for the foreseeable future Iran will be forced to focus on its own problems, giving Iraq an opportunity to make gains in the Gulf. Baghdad may revive plans for a Persian Gulf security pact, a goal which requires a cooperative approach and may deter Iraq from resorting to its traditional heavy-handed tactics.

#### The Soviet Factor

Soviet reactions to the existence of good Iran-Iraq relations and the current development of a Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation are undoubtedly mixed -- as is the more general Soviet perception of Arab nationalism and pan-Arab or pan-Islamic sentiment. The Soviets are likely to feel that under present conditions, these concepts fundamentally conflict with the USSR's ability to advance its own ideology and influence in the area. Although the anti-imperialist aspect of Arab nationalism has worked to Soviet advantage in the past, its strong emphasis on independence and freedom from outside influence currently works as much against Eastern encroachment as Western.

The Soviets' attitude toward specific manifestations of Arab nationalism or inter-Arab-cooperation varies in practice with their perception of its effect on their own position. They are, of course, concerned when they believe that the resulting policy or grouping will harm Soviet interests or prevent the USSR from playing a meaningful role in the region's affairs. They have been negative, for example, toward close Saudi-Egyptian ties and concerned by what they perceive as an Egyptian-Saudi-Sudanese design to turn the Red Sea into an "Arab lake." At the same time, they are quite willing to endorse Arab coalescence in cases when they believe it may work to their short-term advantage. Even in such cases, however, they may have some difficulty balancing immediate benefits against longer-term dangers to their interests.

The current Soviet effort to encourage Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement is a case in point. While Moscow apparently has reservations about the utility of a long-term or significant improvement in relations between the two countries, it believes that the formation of a united eastern front in opposition to the Camp David accords is desirable. Military delegations from Syria and Iraq arrived in Moscow during the week of 20 November, and President Assad will reportedly meet in Moscow with Iraqi leader Saddam Husayn on 1 December. Moscow's efforts to facilitate the current reconciliation is thus obvious.

While the Soviets have encouraged the rapprochement, it is unlikely that they have had much influence either on its inception or its development. It seems clear that this was an Iraqi initiative, taken for primarily Iraqi purposes. It appears equally clear that the Soviet ability to influence the future course of Syrian-Iraqi relations will be very limited.

Moreover, despite their tactical support for an improvement in those relations as a riposte to US policy in promoting the Camp David 25X1C  
 [redacted] the Soviets [redacted] have reservations under several headings about possible undesirable effects of a prolonged Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation.

25X1C -- They are [redacted] worried that Iraq might try to transmit its harsh anti-Communist policies to Syria. Assad has up to now maintained a less stringent attitude toward the Communist Party of Syria than Baghdad has to its communists. For analogous reasons, the Soviets were concerned about the consequences for the Syrian communists when Nasir promoted the temporary unification of Egypt and Syria two decades ago, and were relieved when the UAR broke up.

-- At the same time, they are likely to be concerned that despite Iraq's show of moderation at the Baghdad Summit, Iraq might eventually influence Syria to move toward rejection of UN Resolution 242 and the Geneva Conference. Despite Soviet private suggestions that Camp David has "dug the grave" of the Geneva Conference, there is no evidence that Moscow is ready to abandon support of the Conference as a central tenet of its Middle East policies.

25X1C -- Finally, the Soviets are [redacted] unenthusiastic about the possibility of Iraqi units moving into Syria to form a united front against Israel. They are concerned that this might increase the level of tension, possibly leading to an unsuccessful war with Israel and certainly further undermining the chances of reconvening the Geneva Conference. [redacted] the Soviets had been similarly concerned in 1976 to head off an Iraqi proposal to station forces in Syria, an idea which was then linked to an Iraqi plan to renew hostilities with Israel which Moscow regarded as both highly-dangerous and futile.

The Soviets' view of close Iran-Iraq relations is less mixed and more negative. They were unhappy with the Iran-Iraq accords of 1975 which came as a surprise to them. And they have consistently viewed with concern the possibility that these two nations might cooperate in the Gulf region to the detriment of Soviet interests.

On the other hand, while the Soviets are probably well aware that Iraq's current hands-off policy toward the disruptions in Iran is partially motivated by fear that Soviet influence could be implanted there, there is no evidence that the Soviets have opposed Iraq's policy. They themselves have thus far maintained a fairly cautious posture with respect to Iran, and therefore have little cause to criticize Iraqi caution. Should circumstances change to the point of inducing the Soviets to consider a more forward posture in exploiting Iran's difficulties, one factor which Moscow would have to consider would be a probable negative Iraqi reaction.