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CONDITIONS AND TRENDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AFFECTING US SECURITY



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CONDITIONS AND TRENDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST¹ AFFECTING US SECURITY

THE PROBLEM

To identify the major forces and trends in the area, to assess their origin, relative strength, and probable development, and to estimate their effect on the Western and Soviet positions in the area, in the absence of general war.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In addition to its objective of contributing to stability in the Middle East, the West has a specific and basic concern with the extensive oil resources and strategic location of the area. Denial of these assets to the West would constitute a serious setback to it in the struggle with the Soviet Bloc, even if the area did not come directly under Communist control.
2. Patterns of authority are being undermined by rising discontent among nearly all social groups. This discontent is finding expression in growing demands for elimination of foreign influence and for internal social, economic, and political reforms.
3. Attainment of stability is obstructed by the ineffectiveness of Middle Eastern governmental and political institutions, by inadequate development of economic resources, by Arab-Israeli hostility, and by inter-Arab rivalries.
4. The USSR will continue to encourage disorder and anti-Westernism and to exploit the substantial opportunities for creating friction among states of the area, between them and the West, and among the Western Powers. Soviet rulers may estimate that the area can be effectively denied to the West without being brought under direct Communist control and without forcing the USSR prematurely to accept full responsibility for supporting Communist regimes in the area.
5. Local Communist parties, except possibly in Iran, are not likely to develop the strength to seize and maintain control of Middle Eastern governments during the next few years. However, Communist influence will probably grow, the principal danger being that without formally assuming control Communists will exercise an increasing influence on non-Communist governments.

¹This estimate deals with Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, and the principalities of the Arabian peninsula. Conditions in Turkey and Israel, and their relations with the West and the Soviet Bloc, differ in so many respects from those in the rest of the Middle East that they will be treated only insofar as they affect developments in the rest of the area.

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6. However, except for Iran, Middle Eastern states do not feel immediately threatened by the USSR and they fear that acceptance of Western support would lead to Western domination. In particular, the acceptance of US influence is seriously hampered by the Arab conviction that the US is responsible for maintaining the state of Israel, and by US association with the former colonial powers — the UK and France.

7. Although we do not believe that a breakdown of authority is imminent, except possibly in Iran, the over-all situa-

tion with respect to stability is deteriorating.

8. In the foregoing circumstances, governments will probably rely increasingly on their armed forces to retain power. Although such authoritarian regimes offer hope of arresting the drift toward disorder, they will be beset by many internal problems. They will also have to find a solution to the problem of establishing relations with the Western Powers which will be acceptable to nationalist aspirations at home, but which will permit them to obtain Western military and economic aid and advice.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

9. In addition to its objective of contributing to stability in the Middle East, the West has a specific and basic concern with the extensive oil resources and strategic location of the area. Denial of these assets to the West would constitute a serious setback to it in the struggle with the Soviet Bloc, even if the area did not come directly under Communist control.

10. The Middle Eastern states do not have the strength to stand alone in the modern world or the capacity to cope with their own internal problems. In past years, the presence of British and French power in the area contributed to stability, even though it also provided a focal point for nationalist opposition. Ineffective governments and inadequately developed resources still make outside support essential to Middle Eastern stability. Yet these states, jealous of their independence, fear that acceptance of Western support would lead to Western domination. The question, therefore, is whether a new relationship can be established between the Middle Eastern states and the West which will on the one hand mollify Middle East suspicions of the West, and on the other

permit such Western advice and support as will enable Middle Eastern states to maintain internal conditions generally favorable to themselves as well as to Western interests.

Basic Forces

11. Patterns of authority are being undermined throughout the Middle East by rising discontent among nearly all social groups. The traditional ruling classes — landlords, tribal leaders, and wealthy merchants — while struggling to maintain their privileged positions, have shown little ability or disposition to solve growing social and economic problems. There has been a rapid growth of educated and semi-educated elements in the cities — students, government workers, professional classes, junior army officers, small businessmen — whose aspirations for improved economic and social status are frustrated. These elements are being aroused by agitators offering varied and often conflicting programs — religious fundamentalists preaching a return to true Islamic practice; secular reformers advocating such programs as land reform, the elimination of corruption, and the extension of democratic government; proponents of authoritarian rule along fascist lines; and finally, the Communists. Urban

industrial workers are not yet numerous or well-organized, and the large peasant class is in general still politically passive. Both groups, however, are becoming more responsive to political agitation.

12. Each country is at a different stage of social change and political development. In Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where no political parties exist, the tribal monarchies are in firm control. In Jordan, political activity outside the court and tribal leadership is just beginning to take form, and is being fomented by educated elements from West Jordan. The old guard is still in control in Iraq, but the advocates of change are growing in strength. Although secular reformers are in control in Egypt and Syria, attainment of social and political stability is by no means assured. In Iran, the National Front's insistence upon pursuing an anti-British policy, regardless of the effect on the nation's economy, may lead to further political and economic disintegration from which only the Communists could profit.

13. Throughout the area, many proponents of change have a similar negative and emotional attitude. There is a general disposition to eliminate the powers that be, with little regard or thought for what comes after. The two basic forces that motivate the proponents of change are:

a. A desire to eliminate foreign influence. The Middle Eastern governments and people are basically suspicious of Western motives and tend to become increasingly nationalist and neutralist.

b. A growing demand for internal social, economic, and political reforms. Few of these reforms, however, have been cast as positive programs.

Obstacles to Stability

14. Attainment of stability is being blocked by a number of problems not capable of easy or quick solution. They include ineffectiveness of the instruments of government, serious economic problems, and rivalries among the states of the area.

15. Existing political institutions and governmental machinery are inadequate in the present situation. Many legal and political forms have been copied from the West, but have not been adapted to Middle Eastern needs. In addition, there is a shortage of trained personnel, and a tradition of responsibility and integrity in government is lacking. Governments are further handicapped by the facts that the formerly dominant class is inflexible and resistant to change and that the proponents of change frequently offer programs incapable of rapid or practical implementation. Any government efforts to execute reform programs encounter strong resistance from special interests.

16. Growing pressure for economic improvement adds to the problems facing Middle Eastern governments. Except for oil, the area has few economic resources. Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon are overpopulated in relation to arable land and known resources. Although Syria, Iraq, and Iran have much land which could be brought under cultivation, development of this potential would require many years and large-scale investments. Government efforts to develop the resources of the area are handicapped by inefficient economic procedures, untrained personnel, and resistance to new methods.

17. Israel and the related Arab refugee problem constitute a major obstacle to stability in the Middle East. Arab hostility toward the new state and fear of Israeli intentions have aggravated the difficulties of the Arab states in tackling pressing internal problems, have burdened them with high military budgets, and have prevented the development of an expanded area economy. Although Syria has broken the solid Arab front against resettlement of Arab refugees (totalling 800,000) by signing an agreement with the UN for resettlement in Syria of 80,000 refugees, final solution of this problem is a long way off. No progress has been made toward solving other Arab-Israeli difficulties. The Arab states fear an Israeli attempt to conquer additional territory under the pressure of overpopulation and lack of economic resources, particularly water. Conversely, Is-

rael fears that a growth of Arab strength will lead to a war of revenge.

18. The stability of the area is also weakened by rivalries among the Arab states. The Arab states have a common cultural and religious heritage which some religious and political leaders have hoped to make the basis for area cooperation and unity. The psychological and political significance of this common heritage has been overshadowed in the recent past by petty dynastic quarrels, narrow nationalistic politics, religious differences, and differences of economic interest. These have made disunity a characteristic of the Middle East and have interfered with efforts to solve common problems. Effective leadership for the area as a whole has not been forthcoming. Egypt, which is regarded as the state most likely to provide such leadership, dominates the Arab League, but has had little success in achieving positive united action. Attempts by Turkey, Pakistan, and others to promote unity in the area have evoked little response.

Obstacles to US Influence in the Middle East

19. US association with Israel is a continuing irritant in US-Arab relations and the major obstacle to the acceptance of US influence in the Middle East. The Arab world is united in its belief that the US is primarily responsible for the establishment of Israel, which it interprets as an act of ruthless anti-Arab imperialism. Moreover, many Arabs believe that US partiality in the Arab-Israeli dispute is further demonstrated by US failure to press more vigorously for enforcement of UN decisions on Arab refugees, on delimitation of the borders of Israel, and on the internationalization of Jerusalem. The US faces the dilemma that Israel cannot survive without foreign aid and that US aid to Israel deepens Arab resentment against the US.

20. US alliance with the UK and France, the most important former colonial powers in the area, also arouses Arab distrust. Demands in French North Africa for greater independence are strongly supported in the Middle East. Most Middle Eastern countries will al-

most certainly remain determined to weaken if not abolish British influence and special privilege. On the other hand, the UK, for reasons of prestige as well as of economic and military security, feels that it cannot afford to relinquish its still substantial military and economic positions. US efforts to bring the two parties together run the risk of (a) encouraging each side to be less inclined toward compromise in the hope of eventual US backing; and (b) evoking charges of favoritism from both sides. Finally, a too rapid abandonment of British positions would leave a military vacuum which the US would have difficulty in filling, and which would accentuate insecurity and create further opportunities for Soviet or local Communist exploitation.

21. The US is also handicapped by the fact that the Arabs do not feel immediately threatened by the Soviet Union or recognize an immediate personal stake in the East-West struggle. They are far more apprehensive of Israeli aggression, and they suspect that Western interest in the area's defense is merely a camouflage for strengthening Western influence at the expense of their independence.

Soviet Capabilities and Intentions in the Middle East

22. The USSR has so far carried on relatively small-scale overt political activity in the Middle East. Soviet rulers probably estimate that Western influence is declining, that economic and political deterioration will continue, and that the general situation will become steadily more favorable to the expansion of Communist influence. Soviet rulers may conclude that the area can be effectively denied to the West without being brought under direct Communist control and without forcing the USSR prematurely to accept full responsibility for supporting Communist regimes in the area. The USSR will continue to encourage extremism of many kinds, particularly anti-Western and nationalistic, and to utilize opportunities to embarrass the relations of the Western Powers with each other and with the states of the area. Conditions in the Middle East, particularly the

Arab-Israeli dispute, offer the USSR many opportunities for increasing these activities and for winning Arab good will.

23. Although the Moscow-directed Communist Parties are small and illegal and are not now, except in Iran, a major political factor in the Middle East, Communism contributes to and profits from unrest in the area. The Communist program holds out a ready solution attractive to dissatisfied groups, particularly the educated class. The Communists can exploit the widespread hostility against the Western Powers and the ruling classes without too openly revealing Soviet imperialist motives and goals. Communist agitation among workers and peasants is increasing, and Communist influence is likely to grow as these groups become more insistent upon improving their lot. The principal dangers posed by the Communists are: (a) that they will infiltrate government and military services to the point of seriously interfering with the exercise of authority; (b) that progress toward reform and economic improvement will be so slow that radical groups will become discouraged and turn to Communism; and (c) that non-Communist groups, particularly the nationalist and reformist elements, will become divided, Communist-infiltrated, or willing to cooperate with the Communists, to such an extent that small, disciplined Communist parties can exercise a decisive influence on governments of the area even without formally assuming control.

PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS

Political Developments in the Arab States

24. We do not believe that a breakdown of authority in the Arab states is an immediate danger. Their security forces, if given effective leadership, are capable of maintaining internal control. None of the Communist parties is likely during the next few years to develop the strength to take over the governments by peaceful means or by force. Nevertheless, the over-all situation with respect to stability is currently deteriorating.

25. In this situation, governments will probably rely increasingly on their armed forces to retain power. Military reformist regimes are already in power in Egypt and Syria, and further regimes of this type may emerge. Although such authoritarian regimes offer hope of arresting the drift toward disorder, they will be handicapped by their lack of experience in dealing with economic and social problems; by the difficulties of implementing reforms which produce quick and tangible benefits for the people; and by opposition from vested interests, extreme nationalists, Communists, and possibly religious fundamentalists. If they are to succeed, such regimes will have to provide the people with some prospect of participation. They will also have to find a solution to the problem of establishing relations with the Western Powers which will be acceptable to nationalist aspirations at home, but which will permit them to obtain Western military and economic aid and advice.

Political Developments in Iran²

26. Iran presents a more pressing problem than that existing in the other states of the area, owing in part to the proximity of the Soviet Union and the strength of the Tudeh Party, and in part to the more immediate danger of social, political, and fiscal breakdown. The longer present trends in Iran continue unchecked, the more difficult it will become to prevent a breakdown of government authority which would open the way for at least a gradual assumption of control by Tudeh. Although such a breakdown appears unlikely during 1953, the Iranian situation contains so many elements of instability that it might occur at any time. The loss of Iran to Communism would be a blow to US and Western prestige and would increase the vulnerability of the remainder of the Middle East and of the Indian subcontinent.

² See NIE-75/1, "Probable Developments in Iran through 1953," published 9 January 1953.

Economic Developments

27. The Middle East's basic economic difficulties are not likely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. It is improbable that local action can correct the low and, in some places, declining standard of living, technological backwardness, and foreign trade problems. Middle Eastern foreign trade, except possibly that of Iran, will probably continue to be principally with the Western nations. The most important foreseeable economic developments will relate to oil and to foreign aid programs.

28. Anti-Westernism and nationalism are growing threats to Western oil interests in the Middle East. However, the Arab states are unlikely to attempt to nationalize their oil industries unless they become convinced that Iran is profiting more as a result of oil nationalization than they are under existing contracts. Saudi Arabia and the small Arabian principalities are generally aware of their inability to produce and market oil without the assistance of major Western oil companies. Nevertheless, the states of the area, particularly Iraq, may be expected to exert greater pressure for an increased share of the oil revenues, for a reduction in the privileged position of the Western oil companies, and for greater local participation in their management. Refusal of the Western oil companies to make some adjustments to these pressures would increase Arab hostility toward the West and might eventually lead to further nationalization of Middle Eastern oil resources.

29. Oil revenues are an important source of revenue for government operations and potentially a source of capital for economic development in the Middle East. The oil companies provide important technical and educational services. Although fear of losing oil revenues acts as a deterrent to the adoption of extreme anti-Western policies, such rational self-interest cannot be counted upon in the present emotional political climate in the Middle East.

30. As pressures increase for economic and social reform, the governments will be under

increasing compulsion to turn to the West for assistance. The granting of such assistance may influence the evolution of the area and offer Middle Easterners hope of a solution to their social and economic problems. Nevertheless, there are formidable obstacles to a successful aid program in the Middle East. Western supervision of such aid will be handicapped by the sensitivity of the governments of the area to any signs of Western interference in local affairs. Demands for aid will probably be large and for projects which the nations of the area are not ready to use effectively; US refusal to meet these demands will create disappointment which may increase anti-US sentiment.

Military Developments

31. Middle East armed forces are incapable, individually or collectively, of effectively resisting attack by a major power. The availability and usefulness of manpower for military and military support purposes is limited by prevailing inefficient agricultural techniques, physical disabilities, a high rate of illiteracy, and lack of technical and mechanical training. None of the states of the Middle East has the resources or industrial base to support modern armed forces, and nearly all countries are already allocating disproportionately large shares of their resources for military purposes.

32. Accordingly, defense of the Middle East against Soviet Bloc aggression will ultimately depend on employment of Western armed forces. At present, local forces are not even capable of manning and maintaining adequate bases for quick and effective use by Western forces in the event of war. Efforts to strengthen Middle Eastern defenses against aggression are confronted by obstacles already noted. The Middle Eastern states, except Iran, do not feel immediately threatened by the USSR. They are apprehensive of a renewal of Western domination. Hence, there is a growing demand in most of the area for elimination of existing Western bases and removal even of existing Western military forces.

33. On the other hand, the emergence of regimes relying largely on the support of local armed forces will stimulate demands for Western assistance in the training and equipping of those forces. But here again, this opportunity for Western influence is limited by the deep Arab-Israeli antagonism. Any aid given to one side will arouse resentment in the other.

34. It is possible that the desire for military assistance will be strong enough to induce the Arab states to join with the Western Powers in a regional defense organization, particularly if Egypt should take the lead. The success of such an organization would depend largely upon the extent to which the states of the Middle East could be convinced that they were participating as equals with the Western Powers. Even so, it is unlikely

that participation in such an organization would quickly lead the Arab states to agree to the stationing of more Western troops in the area or to the allocation of their own forces to a command organization. However, such an organization would provide a mechanism for coordinating Western military aid and advice to the Middle East states and for carrying out some preliminary defense planning. It might also have some beneficial political and psychological effect and would give the West an opportunity to reduce Middle East suspicions of Western "imperialist" designs. Such an organization is not likely to develop sufficient military strength in the Middle East during the next few years to cause the USSR to consider itself seriously threatened. Soviet rulers, however, would be particularly sensitive to any Western military moves in Iran.