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# ARAB NATIONALISM AS A FACTOR IN THE MIDDLE EAST SITUATION

## THE PROBLEM

To estimate the present status of Arab nationalism as a factor in the Middle East situation.

## DISCUSSION

### I. PRESENT SITUATION

1. With increasing rapidity over the past three years, the Western-supported conservative governments of the Middle East have seen their influence and authority slip away. The revolution in Iraq brought the strongest of the conservative Arab states into Nasser's radical Pan-Arab camp. This left its partner in the Arab Union, Jordan, so unstable that even the presence of UK troops may be insufficient to maintain King Hussein on the throne. Lebanon, once the Arab state having the closest connections with the West, has experienced an insurrection, the outcome of which appears almost certain to be the adoption of a position of neutrality and of accommodation with Nasser. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Feisal, now the dominant figure in the regime, is moving toward closer relations with the UAR as the result of his own Pan-Arab inclinations and his belief that to swim with the tide is the best means of preserving the Saudi dynasty. Nevertheless, the likelihood of a political upheaval in Saudi Arabia is considerable. The Ruler of Kuwait, aware of the popular feeling toward Arab nationalism and Nasser in his own state and desirous of reaching an accommodation with these forces, is seeking a formula which would permit both closer Arab ties and the retention of a relationship with the UK. The governments of

both Libya and the Sudan, which have been friendly to the West, are threatened by increased Egyptian subversion and radical nationalist *coups*.<sup>1</sup>

2. US and UK intervention in Lebanon and Jordan brought a degree of temporary stability in those countries and may have served to deter Nasser and his supporters from encouraging immediate revolts elsewhere in the area for fear of becoming involved with Western forces. However, the net result of the Iraqi revolt and other recent events has been a strengthening of the radical Pan-Arab position.

3. Moreover, the long-continuing opposition between the radical nationalist regimes and the Western-backed conservative regimes has opened the way for the USSR to secure steadily expanding influence in the area by backing the radical regimes.

### II. ARAB NATIONALISM — AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

4. Arab nationalism is a movement of long standing, with great emotional appeal, aimed at a renaissance of the Arab peoples and the restoration of their sovereignty, unity, power,

<sup>1</sup> The problem of Arab nationalism in North Africa has been discussed in SNIE 71-58, *France and North Africa*, approved 29 July 1958.

and prestige. Since World War II it has been stimulated and encouraged by the drive among the people of underdeveloped areas throughout the world against "colonialism" and for self-determination. Both the older, conservative nationalists and the supporters of the new radical movement led by Nasser have proclaimed the goal of eliminating Western "imperialist" influence and have made common cause against Israel. The conservatives, however, in fact often accepted Western support and cooperated with the West, despite the incubus of Western association with Israel, partly because their commercial or cultural interests lay with the West and partly because they needed Western support in order to stay in power. The radical nationalists, on the other hand, were far more distrustful of the West, more determined to eradicate the remaining Western controls over Arab political and economic life, and far more serious about achieving (rather than simply praising) the goal of Arab unity. In addition, the radical nationalists added a doctrine of social revolution and reform to the older tenets of Arab nationalism, and thus came into conflict with the traditional upper classes and social and economic systems of the Arab world on which the conservatives' power rested. Finally, unlike the conservatives, the radical nationalists sought and received Soviet Bloc support in their conflicts with the Western Powers and with the pro-West Arab regimes.

5. Arab nationalism has always been identified with loyalty to the Arab "nation" as a whole, rather than with allegiance to one or another of the existing, often artificially-created Arab states. In practice, however, the nationalist movement's ideal of Arab unity was until recently blocked by the strength of conservative leaders and overshadowed by basic economic, geographic and cultural variations in the Arab world, as well as by clashes between rival states and leaders. Political and cultural incompatibilities divided Egypt from the Fertile Crescent region to the north, where Egyptian pretensions to Arab leadership were challenged; and the conservative Islamic culture of the Arabian Peninsula found little in common with that of the more

secular, advanced states of the Mediterranean seaboard. In the past two years, however, the vigor of the radical nationalist movement and the weakness of the conservatives in the face of it have reduced the significance of these divisive obstacles. This upsurge has been coincident with and in large part dependent upon the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser as its symbol and leader. Soviet support has contributed substantially to Nasser's prestige and capabilities. Under his aegis, steps have been taken toward a degree of Arab unity which seemed highly unlikely two years ago.

6. The ideal of unity has thus demonstrated itself to be a formidable force with wide appeal throughout most of the Arab world, and one with a momentum not likely to be lost in the near future. We do not believe, however, that a welding together of the Arab states into a centralized and unitary empire is possible in the foreseeable future. There exist in the area certain conditions and attitudes which would militate against the ultimate success of a centralized Arab state once Pan-Arabism had achieved its main goal — the elimination of foreign domination. Despite certain ethnic and religious similarities, there are considerable nationalistic, cultural, commercial and economic interests which would serve as serious divisive factors in any Pan-Arab unitary state, or indeed in any type of federation. Syria and Iraq, for example, have more in common, in terms of commercial, economic and various other interests, than either has with Egypt; and in time these natural affinities may either work against the acceptance of Egyptian primacy or revive fears of Egyptian "imperialism." Many makers of the Iraqi revolution may be unwilling to accept Cairo as the ultimate and sole source of authority in Iraqi affairs, and conflict between them and the Nasserites may develop. Furthermore, even though some of the oil-rich countries may consent to share some of their profits with the other Arab countries, conflicts of interest are certain to develop over this issue.

7. We are convinced, however, that the various divisive factors in the area will for some time to come be overshadowed by the powerful

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emotional appeal of the Arab unity movement, particularly as long as parts of the Arab world remain under Western control or influence. Moreover, the existence of Israel will continue to exert a strong cohesive influence on the Arabs.

8. *The Role of Nasser.* Nasser gained his position as the popular Arab nationalist hero as a result of a series of events in which he won, or at least appeared to win, victories for Arab nationalism against its opponents, e.g., his success in acquiring Soviet arms, his nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, his recovery after the Israeli, British, and French attack in late 1956, and the union with Syria. He has also increased his influence in the area through his skillful and ruthless use of subversion and propaganda. These are the natural weapons of a revolutionary movement, and, regardless of the state of his relations with the West, he is unlikely to forego their use as long as his revolutionary aims are unfulfilled. He and the majority of his followers regard most of the national boundaries of the area and all the conservative governments as artificial creations of outsiders and are therefore unimpressed by arguments for preserving them. Furthermore, Nasser is convinced that the West, and the US in particular, is engaging in extensive subversive and propaganda activity against him in the Arab area.

9. Even with his power and position, however, Nasser's control over the radical Pan-Arab movement, at least outside of Egypt and to a lesser degree, Syria, is not absolute. In respect to the internal affairs of the separate states of the area, his power is far from complete, and there is room for considerable dissension. We believe that his influence rests more on the emotional appeal of his program, on his personality, and on the effectiveness of his propaganda than on any organization, subversive or otherwise, that he commands.

10. Nonetheless, we believe that for all practical purposes it is necessary to think of Nasser and the mass of Arab nationalists as inseparable. He has become so clearly identified with the greatest successes of Arab nationalism that no rival is likely to challenge him unless he suffers a series of defeats. There

are no indications that any significant anti-Nasser group exists within the Pan-Arab movement. Furthermore, even in the event of Nasser's disappearance, the Arab nationalist movement would be unlikely to exhibit fundamentally different characteristics, since Nasser is probably as much the instrument of the movement as he is its leader. Indeed, a successor might be less capable than Nasser of exercising restraint upon the Arab nationalists and might be less cautious about Arab relations with the Soviet Bloc.

11. *Nasser's Objectives.* We believe that Nasser's position and his objectives are essentially as he has stated them. He intends to eliminate all vestiges of special foreign positions and to bring the resources of the Arab world completely under Arab nationalist control. He aims at uniting the entire Arab world with a common foreign policy and a common program of modernization, development, and reform. We believe that Nasser, in pursuit of these objectives, will continue to use the instruments of propaganda, subversion, and assistance to local forces of Arab nationalism. We do not believe that Nasser has a precise schedule or a detailed blueprint for the unified Arab state toward which he is working. We believe that he will wish to avoid direct conflict with Western, Turkish, or Israeli forces and will probably be prepared to accept a considerable degree of local autonomy in states which may affiliate with the UAR and UAS.

12. The aims of radical Arab nationalism are not invariably in conflict with US interests. Thus, the Arab objectives of maintaining independence and of utilizing the profits of Arab oil are compatible with two crucial US interests — denial of the area to Soviet domination and maintenance of Western access to Middle East oil. Other US interests, however, such as the preservation of Israel, appear to be in irreconcilable conflict with the goals of the Arab nationalist movement. So also are the maintenance of Western control over (as distinguished from access to) the oil of the area, and the use of military bases. Moreover, Nasser's ambitions are not confined to the Arab world. He intends to try to elimi-

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nate European control in parts of Africa and to bring them into his neutralist bloc. There is likely to be a continuing clash of interests due to the impact of Nasser's revolutionary influence in other areas of the Moslem world — the Sudan, Libya, North Africa, other parts of Africa, and Iran. In the longer run he probably plans to create an independent power center based on Egypt and raise himself to the position of an Afro-Asian bloc leader.

13. We do not believe that Nasser is a Communist or sympathetic to the Communist doctrine. He opposes Arab Communists because

they are a challenge to his own authority. He regards the Soviet Union as a great power with interests and policies in the Middle East which happen at this stage to coincide with his own. He will continue to look to the USSR for support and to be responsive to Soviet allegations against the West. We believe that he continues to hope that the integrity of the Arab union he is trying to create will be protected by a balance of Soviet and Western influence in the Arab area, despite the events of the past three years which have certainly deepened Nasser's suspicions of the West and probably reduced his distrust of the Soviets.