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September 13, 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR:

[Redacted]

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FROM:

WILLIAM B. QUANDT

SUBJECT:

Critique of Studies on Syria and Iraq

In thinking about these two studies on Syria and Iraq, I have reached a few general conclusions that may be of some use in doing future policy analysis and estimating:

--For some countries with which we have minimal relations and about which we know relatively little, the main purpose of a NIAM or NIE is to give a general sense for the broad evolution of the country's policies and, if possible, a feel for the political style or political culture. We simply do not know enough to make useful predictions about regime changes, policy shifts and so forth. It is probably enough if the reader is left with a reasonably accurate sense of political and social life in the country, with the aim of overcoming cliches or assumptions derived from our own political style and institutions. I would have different expectations concerning a study of Israel or Jordan than I do with respect to Syria and Iraq.

--Estimates, in the sense of predictions of the future, can be done with considerable care and vigor in military and economic areas, but with less certainty when dealing with politics and foreign policy. In these latter areas, one should not try for consensus as much as a description of realistic choices open to the regimes, the pressures to move in certain directions, and the evidence that would tend to confirm movement in one direction or another. This is especially important to bear in mind in dealing with Middle Eastern countries and their policies, since nothing is fixed, ideology is largely meaningless in western terms, no bridges are ever fully burned, and few statements should be taken at face value. What one needs is a sense for the possible, the advantages of different courses of action, the pressures working in different directions, and the likelihood of success of various options.

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Turning more precisely to these two studies, my overall judgment is that the NIAM on Syria is quite well done, provides just about the amount of detail needed for background, gives some sense of political dynamics, but is overly cautious in speculating about future directions in Syrian policy. By contrast, I found the study on Iraq to be virtually worthless, containing little useful information, no sense of how the political system functions, and an excessive amount of concern with issues that are not necessarily central to Iraqi political life. I can think of little less useful than the Annex to the Iraqi study, in contrast to the very good Annex to the Syrian study.

Now for some specific problems with the two studies:

Syria

--It probably makes little sense to use left-right, moderate-radical categories in analyzing Middle East politics, although we all do this. Nonetheless, some effort should be made to find a more useful descriptive vocabulary. Page 5 is a case where this should be changed.

--Do we really know so little about Syria that we cannot judge who might succeed Asad? Certainly the Beirut rumor mills are filled with such speculation, and at least a few names and biographical facts might be included. (Page 5)

--On page 7, the judgment is offered that Syria would probably denounce an Egyptian-Syrian settlement. Obviously this would depend a great deal on context and cannot be taken for granted.

✓ --On page 7, pfr. 3 makes a good point, but it should be broadened and brought into the text. Syria's feel, for historical reasons, that they have inherited a rump state, whose natural borders should extend to include Lebanon, Transjordan and Palestine. There is, of course, a strong historical justification for such a view, and any Syrian over the age of 50 has lived in a Greater Syria that included some of these areas. This helps explain Syria's involvement in pan-Arab issues, in the Palestine conflict, in anti-colonial groupings, in pressures on Lebanon. Present day Syria is simply not a natural political unit, and this is at the root of a good bit of Syria's foreign policy orientation and its internal difficulties of the past. The new development of interest is that, despite its artificiality, Syria within its current borders is developing into a nation-state with a distinctive Syrian identity.

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--An excellent book on Syrian politics in the 1950s, Patrick Seale's The Struggle for Syria, painted a picture of Syria caught up in a web of relations with Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia that had a great impact on domestic political developments. In fact, domestic and foreign policies were virtually indistinguishable. None of this comes through in the present study, and I'm not sure this is because it is no longer true.

--On page 11, the judgment that Syria and Iraq will remain rivals is probably accurate for the short term, but it isn't too hard to think of circumstances in which that relationship might be strengthened, to the possible advantage of the Soviet position in the area. Here is an example of where a prediction is less useful than an analysis of the forces that might work in the direction of Iraqi-Syrian rapprochement.

Iraq

--Virtually no sense for the social basis of Iraqi politics is given. This is a very serious fault, since the political dynamics which are so poorly described in this paper flow precisely from the social base--the ethnic makeup, regional rivalries, village solidarity, and rural-urban differences. Iraq is probably the only state in the Middle East in which the majority of the population, the ~~Shiites~~ occupy the bottom of the social ladder in terms of status, and where the politically dominant, high-status Sunni group makes up less than one-quarter of the population. Just a bit of reading in the books of Dann or Khadduri, articles by al-Mazzas, and the three-volume work in manuscript by Batatu could give a richer sense of political dynamics than this study. History, after all, is not totally irrelevant. Iraq may be more usefully studied through open sources today .

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--If one cannot say anything about Baath-Army relations in Iraq, there is little hope of understanding the key to political life. This should be dealt with more explicitly in the study.

--Iraqi nationalism and the way in which Iraqi politicians define national interests is totally missing in this analysis. Iraqi foreign policy objectives are not discussed in sufficient detail. The role of significant outsiders in Iraqi political life is unexplored.

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✓ --Iraq's oil resources and their significance for the future are not discussed; nor is Iraq's considerable agricultural potential. Iraq is one of the few Middle East countries that is not overpopulated, has oil, water and adequate land, and enough skilled people to make a going concern out of the country if political stability and planning could be assured. Iraq has paid a very high price in the last 15 years for its internal political upheavals, but there is no reason to believe that this pattern will persist indefinitely.

--The recent INR study on "USSR-Iraq: The Lines of Tension" was considerably more useful than the CIA study.

I don't know if these remarks will be of much use to you, but they are a candid appraisal of the two studies. In my academic role, I would give the Syrian study an A- and the Iraqi one a C+.

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