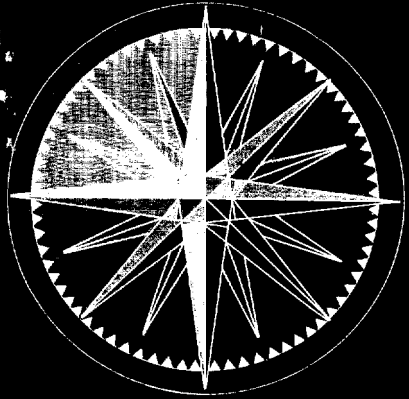


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Release 2006/11/06 : CIA-RDP79-00927A004200040003-1



27 September 1963²⁵

Copy No. 66

SPECIAL REPORT

THE BAATHIST REGIMES IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE

MORI/CDF



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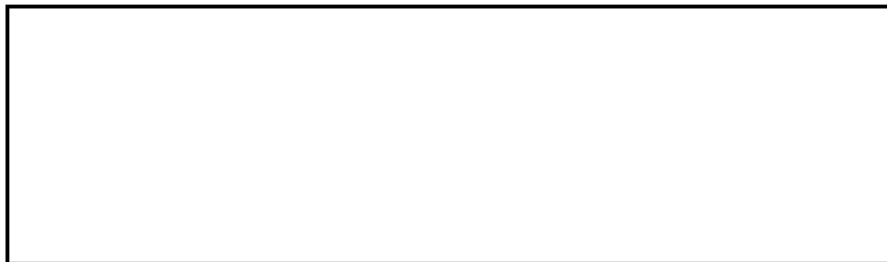
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THE BAATHIST REGIMES IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

The Baath Party's seizure of power in Iraq and Syria last February and March appears to have drastically transformed the struggle for Arab unity. Nasir's primacy now has been challenged by a well-organized power group located in the center of the Arab world, and his moves to counter it have thus far made little headway. At the same time, some of the Baath's strengths and weaknesses have been revealed to the Arab public, as well as to the party itself, especially the gap between Baathist theory and practice. Certain significant differences in internal policy, moreover, have developed between regimes in Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless these two countries now are more closely entwined than at any time since the Ottoman Turkish period.

Differences With Nasirism

Baathism might be termed "Nasirism without Nasir," although the Baath Party antedated Nasir's rise to power by ten years. Both stand for Arab unity, "Arab socialism," and the elimination of Western influence from the Arab world. Nasirism stresses the positive role of religion while Baathism's emphasis is strictly secular, but both advocate a secular state and "republicanism." Their quarrel arises over the question of whether Nasir will share leadership of the Arab unity movement with the Baath.

Nasirism envisages a unity movement led by one man--Nasir--whose charismatic qualities will spur the Arab masses to overthrow their feudal rulers and bring their countries under his leadership. Nasir has stated that the army rather than the party is the revolutionary vanguard.

The Baath, on the other hand, is the only non-Communist international Arab political party with an ideological basis. It has long expounded on the virtues of democratic government, and does not depend on a single dynamic leader. Its founder, Michel Aflaq, is a theoretician who expounds his theories in writing and whose halting speech lacks the fervor to whip up Arab masses.

Heavily influenced by Marxist philosophy, Aflaq has taken a page from the Communist book and organized the Baath along Communist lines in cells and with a supreme international council directing the various national branches in the Arab countries. Although holding no official position in either Syria or Iraq, he maintains influence throughout the Middle East by virtue of his acknowledged leadership of the international Baath.

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The Iraqi Experience

The Iraqi coup of 8 February brought to power a small and closely knit group of young, inexperienced and ambitious men. Several members of the new government had shared cells in Qasim's jails, and similar experiences of this nature apparently has given the party leadership a sense of cohesion and of collective identity. Suspicious and inbred, the party leaders moved quickly to consolidate their hold on the state.

The regime immediately threw its full weight against its only organized opposition, the Communist Party. The swift and harsh measures taken appear to have crippled the party in Iraq. Its cell network has been disrupted, its leaders have been jailed, and party activity has largely ceased. An attempted coup on 3 July organized by Communist elements was easily crushed and led to a new spate of arrests and to a series of swift executions. Sporadic arrests continue.

As a consequence, relations between Baghdad and Moscow sharply deteriorated until August, when the regime apparently concluded that it had moved so far from the Soviet camp as to open itself to the charge--serious in the Arab world--that it had abandoned neutralism. Talks in Moscow and Baghdad quickly led to the resumption of interrupted Soviet arms shipments, and propaganda attacks on both sides fell off sharply, although Moscow still maintains



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a drumfire of clandestine broadcasts castigating the regime.

The Baath government last June moved against the rebellious Kurds in northern Iraq in an offensive which has been far more ruthless and far more successful than any under Qasim. In contrast to the campaigns under Qasim, the war as the Baathist regime has conducted it is generally popular both in the army and in the Arab south, where Arab nationalist attitudes prevail. Deployment of larger numbers of troops, greater tactical flexibility, and the use of Kurdish irregulars who oppose Kurdish rebel leader Barzani--and who have in fact borne the brunt of the fighting--have allowed the army to drive to within a few miles of the Turkish border.

The regime appears to believe that indiscriminate bombing, weight of numbers, and the

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army's overwhelming firepower will eventually sap Kurdish morale and cause a breakup of Barzani's fighting tribal coalition, as occurred in previous Kurdish rebellions in Iraq. Although Kurdish morale is far lower than during the fighting against Qasim, there have been no major defections from the rebel forces thus far, and Barzani has managed to keep the bulk of his fighting force thus far intact.

Suppression of Opponents

In dealing with its other domestic opponents the regime in Iraq has shown some of the ruthlessness of its moves against the Communists and the Kurds, and also considerable deviousness. It has continued to mouth the slogans of democracy and broad Arab nationalism that Baath theory calls for, but in fact its main concern has been the protection of its power base. Political activity other than that of the Baath itself in effect has been banned and newspapers are tightly controlled by the regime.

In power the party has continued to employ some of the techniques of a conspiratorial group. To protect itself from opposition penetration, it took in no new members for several months after the coup. At the same time it has effectively and thoroughly penetrated virtually all opposition parties and groups and carefully monitors their activities. These parties are themselves small, weak, and for the most part clients of Egyptian

intelligence--a fact which the Baath has exploited. In late May it announced it had uncovered a "foreign plot" and used the occasion to remove from office the only pro-Egyptian in the cabinet and to arrest a number of prominent anti-Baath politicians, some of whom it later released. Thus far there have been no executions of non-Communist opposition elements.

The regime is also making an attempt to weed out opposition elements from the government machinery--in particular the Ministry of Interior--and from the army, replacing them with trusted Baath Party members. However, many non-Baathists still hold responsible positions, particularly in the army, and the rumors of coup planning that have been endemic in Baghdad for several months are probably in part an attempt by the regime to smoke out plotters. The Baath has also created a paramilitary national board as a partial counterweight to the army and to serve as a party security force. In addition, Baath officials who are army officers appear to give primary allegiance to the party rather than to the military.

At the same time, the regime has appointed several nonparty technicians to important posts and has attempted to recruit "independent" Arab nationalists unaffiliated with the opposition parties into the government. In this it has had little success, for those whom the regime approaches recognize

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that effective executive power remains exclusively in the hands of the Baath party. In an attempt to overcome this objection, the government has proposed the establishment of an "advisory council" of prominent figures having some of the functions of a legislature but little real power. This idea has yet to be implemented.

Baghdad's Economic Policy

The Baath's advocacy of socialism, and statements by Deputy Premier Saadi shortly after the February coup, gave rise to fears of rapid wide-scale nationalization and a consequent further stagnation in business activity. However, the regime has made no move in this direction and has in fact made a number of gestures of reassurance to the merchant community--a class which Baath theory regards as the "natural enemy of the revolution."

As a result of these gestures and of army successes against the Kurds, business activity has markedly improved in the last two months. In the field of agrarian reform--which bogged in chaos during most of the Qasim era--the government has thus far made little or no progress, while moves toward a resolution of the Iraqi quarrel with the oil companies appear to have petered out. Apparently the regime plans to demonstrate that it has the capacity for survival before it attempts to implement Baath social and economic theory into practice.

Baghdad and Arab Unity

In dealing with the question of Arab unity--a cardinal aim of Baath theory--the regime has used a more subtle approach. The talks which the Baath initiated last April in Cairo to bring Egypt, Iraq, and Syria into a new United Arab Republic were in form a public demonstration of the party's sincerity on this issue, while in substance they were an attempt to secure from Nasir terms that would allow the Baath to retain its power base in Syria and Iraq. There is no indication that the party actually expected Nasir to acquiesce to these terms, and its subsequent actions in this field have been not more determined moves to implement unity, but rather a series of maneuvers designed to saddle Nasir with responsibility for the stillbirth of the tripartite unity idea.

In this maneuvering the party has shown itself far more adroit than any previous opponent of Nasir. Throughout this period Iraqi relations with Egypt have remained correct, if not cordial. Nasir has appeared to be reluctant to engage in a head-on confrontation with Iraq, where pro-Egyptian sentiment is far less strong than in Syria, although he has maintained clandestine contact with anti-Baath groups plotting against the regime.

Baath Role in Syria

In Syria, on the other hand, the Baathist regime has been under almost constant pressure by

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pro-Nasir elements since shortly after its seizure of power on 8 March. The Syrian coup was a new demonstration of Baath strength in the Arab world, but the Syrian leaders, more experienced but more faction-ridden than those in Iraq, as well as subject to far greater Nasirist pressures, were less securely in power. Subsequent moves toward unity, undertaken by Iraq in concert with Syria, have been designed to reduce Nasirist pressure on Syria and to maintain the Baath in power there.

In early April while a Syrian delegation was in Cairo conducting unity negotiations, the Egyptians made direct propaganda attacks on the Damascus regime and instigated violent demonstrations. The Baath strongly resisted these pressures and crushed a pro-Nasir coup attempt in mid-July.

Partly as a consequence of this steady pressure and the existence of a considerable pro-Nasir following in Syria, the regime has resorted to harsh internal security practices and has deviated widely from its past publicly proclaimed policies. Once having seized control, the Baathist leadership instituted an unprecedented and sweeping purge not only of Nasir sympathizers in the army and civil service, but of old-line political civil servants as well. Apparently, Syrian Baathist leaders believe that their social revolutionary goals cannot be suitably carried out by executives who lack Baathist sympathies.

The Syrian regime has jailed many opponents, and executed over a score. This willingness to execute opponents when it is in power distinguishes the Baath from Syria's traditional politicians.

The Syrian Baath, like the party in Iraq, has carried out its policy of opposition to Nasir with some skill. While maintaining an outwardly conciliatory posture toward him, it has methodically undercut his bases of support through purges of the government administration, the press, and other pro-Nasir groupings. As in Iraq, the party created a National Guard as a force directly subject to its will. Conservative forces have been removed from the political scene.

Attitude Toward Communists

Syrian Communists--decimated during Nasir's rule--have been little molested by the Baathist regime, probably not so much out of consideration for the Soviet Union as for their strong anti-Nasir attitude. However, there has been no repetition of Baathist-Communist cooperation so prevalent before the union with Egypt. Should the Baath feel that the Communists were becoming a menace there is little doubt that they would be as ruthlessly suppressed as the country's pro-Nasir element--and as they have been in Iraq.

Syrian relations with the Soviet bloc took a turn for the worse after the Baath seized

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power, but never have reached the depths that Iraqi-Soviet relations did at the start of the campaign against the Kurds. Soviet support of Syria in the UN in early September against Israeli charges have in fact raised Soviet popularity in Damascus considerably. A Syrian economic-military delegation is in Moscow now, apparently negotiating new agreements.

Internal Differences

Although the Baath is a civilian political party, its base of power in Syria--as is the case with Nasir's Egypt--is the army. The regime's ruling body, the National Revolutionary Command Council (NRCC) includes both civilians and military men. When the Baath came into power last March, the Syrian Army was as factionalized as it had been in the past--conservatives, pro-Nasirists, Baathists, and non-political officers all were vying for control. Since then purges have left the Baath dominant, even though a considerable residue of pro-Nasir officers and noncoms remains.

Within the NRCC, reports indicate that there is disagreement on a number of basic issues, notably over the amount of socialization to be carried out. The present army strongman, Gen. Amin al-Hafiz, is believed to lead a pragmatic group which insists on no compromise with Nasir and a de-emphasizing of the Baath's social theories. The party's secretary general Nur al-Din Atasi

sides with Hafiz. The doctrinaire Baathists under the leadership of Prime Minister Bitar--supported by Col. Umran, who controls the key 70th Armored Brigade--are said to favor full implementation of Baathist theory. The position of the party's international leader, Michel Aflaq, is not known, but may be presumed to lie with Bitar, who is his long-time colleague. So far, it appears that disagreements have been confined within the ruling body.

Despite the disagreements, Baathist socialist doctrine has been carried out to a considerable degree. Socialist measures were speedily instituted partly to ward off possible criticisms from Cairo, as well as to gain a measure of popular support within Syria. The regime has nationalized all banks, reimposed and extended existing agrarian reform laws, and imposed foreign trade controls--largely because of a shortage of foreign exchange. The state may yet take



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over direction of foreign trade and much internal commerce, and possibly nationalize Syria's few industries not previously taken over, especially the large cotton textile industry centered in Aleppo. Baathist control of the press is tight--no anti-regime papers are allowed.

The Goal of Unity

As the idea of unity with Egypt has faded, there have been indications that Syria and Iraq might move toward bilateral union. Iraq placed its air force and part of its army under Syrian command in a propaganda gesture of support during the recent Syrian-Israeli border crisis, and the communique issued after Iraqi President Arif's visit to Syria during August discussed closer economic relations between the two countries and of a joint military command.

However, the two regimes have moved in this direction with great circumspection; while economic relations between them might become closer, the two governments have thus far been reluctant to fling down the gauntlet that joint military command or true political union would represent to Egyptian interest. In the fields of party activity--both in Syria and Iraq and in clandestine activity in Jordan and North Africa--and of intelligence and countersubversion the two regimes work in closest concert.

The Baath's successes in Iraq and Syria have greatly



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heartened its sympathizers in the other Arab states and have alarmed rulers in these countries. King Husayn felt it necessary to place Jordanian party leaders under preventative arrest. Libyan authorities have expressed alarm at Baathist penetration of the government--although there is no evidence that such fears are warranted. Several Yemenis in important official positions are reported to be Baathists, a fact which causes the Egyptians considerable distress.

Syrian and Iraqi students in Egypt were expelled recently, and the Baath has threatened to carry its struggle to Nasir's homeland. The longer the party remains in power, the more it will become a rallying point for young nationalists throughout the Arab world. Recognizing this, Nasir has moved to create a counter party--a united Arab nationalist movement--to give his adherents outside Egypt organizational strength. This maneuver has made almost no headway thus far.

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