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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

17 April 1957

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
SUBJECT: The Soviet Position in the Middle East

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1. When the Soviet offensive in the Middle East began two or three years ago, many observers feared that it would overrun all the neutralist states of the area and at least partially negate Western efforts to strengthen the stability and defensive capabilities of those countries already committed to the West. With the actual unfolding of the Soviet campaign, however, the threat has become more specific and, at least for the present, more limited. The USSR has gained important lodgments in the area, but in the process it has alienated various of the neutralist states, reinforced the anti-Soviet outlook of most of the pro-Western countries, and generally reduced its freedom of action in the area.

Advantages in the Soviet Position

2. The Soviet Union has been accepted as a friend and collaborator by Egypt which occupies a key role in the Middle East, and has also developed profitable ties with Syria and Yemen. Soviet material sup-

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port and encouragement to these countries in their efforts to exclude Western influence from the area has facilitated the consolidation of Egypt's de facto control over the Suez Canal, the tacit scrapping of the Suez base agreement, and the elimination of British military forces and bases from Jordan. It has also greatly strengthened the indigenous pressure against the remaining Middle Eastern redoubts of Britain and France in the Persian Gulf and North Africa.

3. In its support of Nasser and his allies, the USSR has become a champion of Arab nationalism in its opposition to Israel and the West and has almost certainly impressed all elements in the area with the value of its support. Even if Nasser and other leaders presently cooperating with the USSR should be overthrown, the powerful currents of ultranationalism in the area would continue to provide the USSR with important opportunities for continuing in this role.

4. The new situation in the Middle East, which the Soviet Union has helped create, has for the first time given the USSR "big power" status within the area and has at the same time weakened Western unity both within the area and on a broader international level.

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Disadvantages in the Soviet Position

5. The USSR's success in developing special ties with Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan has alienated regional rivals and created fears of Communist domination both in the countries concerned and in the area as a whole. King Saud's suspicions of Egyptian and Soviet intentions and his desire for US friendship have increased sharply. He has also moved toward closer cooperation with Hashimite Iraq and thrown his weight against the leftists in Syria and Jordan. Lebanon, Libya, and Tunisia have reacted to growing Soviet-Egyptian pressures and influence by publicly announcing their intention to stand with the West. The Baghdad Pact nations' opposition to Nasser has grown proportionately to the Egyptian leader's success. Even Afghanistan, oldest and most pampered of the Soviet targets, has officially accepted the American Doctrine and moved toward a rapprochement with Pakistan.

6. The clear-cut association of Soviet "big power" military strength with the leaders of militant Arab nationalism has encouraged a new assertion of direct American interest in the area, of which the USSR has already shown itself deeply apprehensive. The US declaration that Communist aggression in the area will be met by force has reduced the future effectiveness of the Soviet technique of

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threat which (in the eyes of the Arabs at least) was responsible for halting the British-French-Israeli intervention in Egypt last November.

7. Finally, the Soviet effort to win the confidence of Middle East governments has necessitated the avoidance of proselytizing activities on the part of Soviet technicians and similar circum-spection in support of local Communists in many cases. While the influx of Soviet goods and personnel into the Middle East has led to increased acceptance and sympathy toward the USSR and has provided an expanded basis for future Communist penetration it has not as yet led to major increases in current Soviet subversive capabilities. Thus for the present, at any rate, the USSR's position in the area is largely dependent on marriages of convenience with movements and individuals over which the USSR has no real control. Arab nationalism is an emotional and often irresponsible force which has as yet developed little internal cohesion or steadiness. At times the governments which espouse it probably provide almost as many headaches to the USSR as they did to the West in the latter's previous attempt to cooperate with them. Additional threats to the USSR's position are contained in the latest conflicts of interest between the Middle East states accepting its aid and in the continuing presence of internal opposition to these governments and their pro-Soviet policies.

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Summary

8. On balance, therefore, it appears that the USSR has found in extremist Arab nationalism a dynamic instrument which could make Moscow's influence decisive in the whole Middle East. At the same time, however, the Communist-Nationalist alliance has provoked a reaction which could eventually undercut the ultranationalist position and reduce or wipe out present Soviet gains. This reaction, significantly, is centered in those countries which contain the Western-controlled oil resources and military bases or alliances which are Moscow's primary targets.