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OUTLOOK FOR THE SYRIAN SITUATION

Submitted by the

DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the

INTELLIGENCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

on 16 November 1956. Concurring were the Special Assistant, Intelligence, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Director of Naval Intelligence; the Director of Intelligence, USAF; and the Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the IAC, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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OUTLOOK FOR THE SYRIAN SITUATION

THE PROBLEM

To assess the situation in Syria with particular reference to possible moves by:
(a) the USSR; or (b) one or a combination of the following powers: the UK, France, Israel, Iraq, Turkey.

DISCUSSION

Syria's Present Position

1. The highly unstable but strategically located state of Syria has long been both a major target and an active arena in the power struggles in the Middle East. While previously Soviet influence in the area was exerted chiefly through Egypt, the USSR is now focusing direct attention on Syria as well. Soviet efforts are enjoying a large measure of success, primarily because the USSR is able to cater to the desire of key elements in the army and government, backed by widespread popular opinion, for support against Israel, Iraq, and the West. Sentiment in Syria in this respect has become even more intense as a result of the attacks on Egypt by Israel, the UK, and France.

2. The latter three powers, in turn, have long been troubled — not altogether for the same reasons — over Syrian trends; and the frustrations they have recently experienced in the Middle East, taken with the USSR's current forward policy in Syria, have added substantially to their concern. Their fears are shared by Turkey and Iraq in particular. In

various ways, each of these interested parties has in the past urged upon the US the need for action to correct the situation in Syria, and the quickening tempo of Middle East developments in the past two weeks has intensified their fears. (e. g., Turkey has made urgent representations to the US within the past few days.)

The Present Internal Situation

3. Those Syrian groups which lean toward the West were on the defensive even before the British-French-Israeli action in Egypt, and are now increasingly overshadowed by leftist-oriented, extreme nationalist, anti-Western politicians and their counterparts in the Syrian army. The action in Egypt appears to be solidifying control of the army — the locus of power — in the hands of the pro-Egyptian "little RCC" officer group led by Lt. Colonel Sarraj, head of Syrian intelligence, and the army followers of the leftist-oriented Arab Socialist Resurrection Party (ASRP) and the Communist Party. Despite dissension within the ASRP, the pro-Soviet elements

are still in the ascendant and appear to be moving toward consolidation of their control over the government. The latter are now using their power to maintain a strict censorship of news media and to exclude all but extreme nationalist and pro-Soviet propaganda. A purge of antileftists from positions of influence may be in the making.

4. The relatively pro-Western parties — notably the Populists and Nationalists — are divided, not well-organized, and plagued by weak leadership. Although nominal conservatives hold major offices in the government, some of them, including the president and prime minister, are currently riding the leftist wave. Others are intimidated by the ever present threat of an army coup, of antigovernment demonstrations and strikes by the leftist-controlled "street" and labor unions, and by the dangers of appearing to be agents of the West or traitors to "Arabism." Rightist army elements are not well-organized and their ranks have been weakened by dismissals, imprisonment, and transfers from positions of influence. However, a number have recently been recalled to service in the face of the Israeli threat. There are also certain regional groups that are dissatisfied with the present policies of the Syrian government, particularly the Druze minority in southern Syria which has been receiving arms from Iraq.

5. Syria represents an extremely promising target for Soviet efforts — military, political, and economic — in the Arab world. A continuation of the present trend would give the USSR a number of advantages, e. g.:

a. It would be in a position to encourage and aid Syrian blackmail and boycott tactics and further physical sabotage against Western-owned oil pipelines transiting Syria from Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Especially as long as the Western Powers are denied passage through the Suez Canal, this would be of critical importance to the USSR as a strategic and economic weapon against the West.

b. A more pro-Soviet government in Syria would further weaken the military position of the Baghdad Pact countries and raise the prospect of Turkey's being encircled.

c. Stronger Soviet influence in Syria would open up greater political and subversive opportunities in the Arab world.

d. Further Soviet influence over Syria would provide additional means of exacerbating Arab-Israeli tensions which the USSR can exploit in pursuing its pro-Arab, anti-Israeli, and anti-Western policy.

Probable Soviet Policy Toward Syria

6. The USSR probably regards present trends in Syria as favorable for the development of its policy in the Middle East. Any open demonstration by the USSR of control over the Syrian government would entail several serious disadvantages for the USSR. It would tend to demonstrate that the USSR was playing its own selfish ends in the area and to discredit its pose as defender of the Arab cause against the Western Powers and Israel. It would alarm many non-Communist elements in the Arab world, even within the Nasser government. It might precipitate an Israeli attack, in which the Soviets would find it difficult to intervene effectively in support of the Syrian regime. Above all, the Soviets might estimate that it would lead the US, in renewed concert with its allies, to initiate a counterstroke which might very quickly develop into a general crisis.

7. The USSR will continue to provide diplomatic, propaganda, and military assistance to the pro-Soviet elements now in the ascendancy in Syria. Such support will almost certainly include additional military equipment, technicians, and some "volunteers." Particularly if the British, French, and Israelis appear to be defying the UN, the USSR might send "volunteers" in larger numbers.

8. In the event that Britain, France, Iraq, Israel, or Turkey — singly or in some combination — attempted to intervene forcibly to alter the present Syrian regime, the USSR would probably give what aid it could to support its adherents in Syria, though probably not to the extent of committing regular Soviet units. The USSR would align itself with UN action against aggression, and seek to play the same role it did in the case of the attack

on Egypt, in the hope of reaping similar benefits in the Arab world.

9. The USSR would probably estimate that open and forceful intervention by the anti-Communist powers in Syria would offer disadvantages to the parties involved: to Britain, France, and Israel by increasing their isolation in world opinion and marking them more clearly as aggressors; and to the Nuri regime by further isolating it from the Arab world and probably increasing its internal problems. The USSR, on the other hand, would be in a position to increase still further the number of its adherents in Arab countries.

10. Aircraft and armor have been furnished by the Bloc to the Syrian government.¹ We have no firm evidence to support reports that large quantities of Soviet air and armored equipment and personnel have arrived in Syria. In fact, no significant quantities of assembled aircraft had been introduced by as late as 12 November. However, deliveries of unidentified military equipment are continuing.

Probable Action of Other Interested Parties

11. There is a greater likelihood of drastic overt moves to influence the Syrian situation by one or more of the directly interested powers other than the USSR. For varying reasons, the UK, France, Turkey, Israel, and Iraq all have strong incentives to intervene to retrieve the situation in Syria. While all of them would welcome US participation and support in strong measures to check or counter the leftward trends in Syria, they might, individually or in some combination, seek to deal with the problem by themselves if US support for a solution does not appear to be in prospect. In such an event, there might again be efforts to conceal essential preparations from the US and other nonparticipants.

¹ These include an estimated 20-25 MIG-15 fighters — delivered in Egypt; 130 T 34 tanks; and more than 200 armored personnel carriers.

12. Whether or not one or more of these states intervenes in Syria will depend in part on: (a) the shifting judgment and moods of the various national leaders (and of their respective public opinions) in a still highly fluid situation; (b) the feasibility of less drastic courses of action; (c) their estimates of the probable reaction of the US and the USSR; and (d) the degree of success obtained in organizing and holding together the disparate Syrian elements whose support would be needed. In general, we see the following as the principal possibilities of major non-Soviet intervention in Syria:

a. The Nuri government in Iraq, with covert support of the UK, might seek to organize the overthrow of the present leadership in the Syrian government and army, perhaps using Iraqi troops to support an ostensibly indigenous coup. France, acting through Shishakli, might lend covert support to this action. In such an event, Turkey would probably exert military pressure along Syria's northern frontiers but would probably not intervene overtly. We think it unlikely that such a coup could succeed.

b. Israel, with French encouragement, might attack Syria on its own. However, in their present state of international isolation, the Israelis probably feel it best for the time being to avoid acts which would bring renewed pressures from the USSR, the US, and the UN.

c. Syrian noncooperation with respect to repair and future use of the oil pipelines might eventually cause the UK, Iraq, and France to employ force as a last resort, but they are unlikely to do so at this stage.

d. In the event of a serious Soviet military buildup in Syria, the UK, France, Israel, Iraq, and Turkey might, in some combination, attack. Under such circumstances, the powers concerned would almost certainly seek and expect to obtain US support.

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