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IRAQ AND SYRIA

THE FERTILE CRESCENT

The Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri Said, is concerned about the situation in Syria. If gentle means of improving it fail he would like to intervene in Syria, if necessary by force. His idea seems to be that the Iraqi Army should march into Syria and occupy the country until a plebiscite could be held to give the Syrians the choice of complete union, a looser form of association under a single crown, or some kind of federation or permanent contractual relationship which would ensure that Syria was for ever friendly to Iraq. It will be noted that all Nuri's alternatives imply the complete or partial extinction of Syria's independence.

2. The purpose of this paper is to enquire whether union between Iraq and Syria is desirable, and if so in what form; whether its achievement is practicable, and if so by what means; whether it would last, and what would be its consequences if it were brought about suddenly and soon, with British encouragement. I have consulted no previous reports on this subject, whether prepared in London or in the Middle East; and the opinions I express are purely personal.

DESIRABILITY OF UNION

3. Closer ties, or a union, between Iraq and Syria would be a very favourable development for British interests. It would be easier to assure the flow of oil from Iraq to the Mediterranean and it would be possible to rely on military communications, both land and air, between Cyprus, Persia, Iraq and the Persian Gulf. It would result ultimately in a union or federation of all the northern Arabs and thus produce a power strong enough to counterbalance, and sooner or later outweigh, the influence of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

4. This is an attractive prospect. But ~~it~~ we ought to remember that it rests on a number of assumptions, among which the following are important:-

- (a) that the destruction of Egyptian hegemony in the Arab world is the correct, or inevitable, policy;
- (b) that such a policy can succeed;
- (c) that Iraq will remain stable and well-disposed to us and that Iraqi influence would predominate in a union or federation with Syria.
- (d) that sometime during or not too long after the achievement of the Union the Arabs will either make a settlement with Israel or acquiesce without bitterness in the existence of an Israel guaranteed by the West;

- (e) or, as an alternative to (d), that the Western powers abandon Israel to some extent.

I am making the first three assumptions at any rate. That being so, we should build up our friends and, above all, ensure that Iraq, by whatever means, wins the fight against Egypt for Syria. If Egypt wins, she wins the Arab world and any policy that is to succeed will have to work through Egypt. In theory the surest way of ensuring that Iraq wins would be complete union; and in theory therefore union is most in our interests.

SUPPORT FOR UNION IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

5. Whatever device might be used to promote union, its initial success and, to an even greater extent, the chances of its lasting, would depend on the degree of support the idea commands in the two countries concerned.

Iraq

6. In Iraq the possibility of taking over Syria has often been put forward, but as far as I know its only advocate who is at once passionate, consistent and responsible, is Nuri Said. He is the old-fashioned kind of Arab nationalist whose main grouse (apart from Palestine) was that the Western imperialists had divided the northern Arab world that should have been one - that, incidentally, is why Nuri dislikes the French so. I think we may also assume that a merger with Syria would be popular with the Iraqi royal family: the Crown Prince indeed has often been suspected of entertaining viceregal ambitions in Damascus.

7. What does the rest of Iraq think? My impressions (which may be out of date - I draw on no recent evidence) are as follows. The Army would probably welcome the opportunity to intervene in Syria: they would be confident of success and glad to enhance their prestige. Most senior officials, most northern politicians, and the Sunni Arabs of the north generally, would view the prospect of union with Syria favourably. But I should expect the Shi'ite Arabs of the south, and the Kurds, to be more cautious. The Kurds, if they took any interest in the matter at all, might fear that in a greater Arab state their interests would be consulted less than they are now. In the past, at any rate, the Shi'a were not enthusiastic: they realised that in a full merger with Syria their growing power in Iraq would receive a setback. But if they felt that Bagdad would dominate Damascus and that they could retain their position in Bagdad, or if the aim was nothing more than a loose federation, then they would favour schemes for a closer association with Syria. It is also probable that the growth of Iraqi nationalism and Pan-Arab sentiment is diminishing the force of sectarianism in Iraq. The extension of Iraqi power could not fail to attract Iraqi patriots, and many of the young would see in the accretion of Syrian strength a repetition of the achievements of Saladin and his immediate predecessors.

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When Saladin could draw on the united strength of Syria and northern Iraq he began the destruction of the Crusading states; and a twentieth-century "anschluss" could be the prelude to the destruction of Zion. On the other hand, if union had to be fought for, it would be repugnant to many Iraqis, who would ask why Arabs should fight Arabs when they had their common enemy in Israel.

8. Economically, some Iraqis fear Syrian penetration. Others, I suspect, would wish the new oil wealth to be spent on the reconstruction of Iraq before it is spread out over Syria too.

9. My conclusions are:-

- (a) that Iraq as a whole is less enthusiastic for union with Syria than Nuri Said himself, but
- (b) that if Nuri found a good pretext to intervene in Syria, most of the elements that now wield power in Iraq would be behind him;
- (c) that, short of complete Iraqi domination, the loosest possible form of association that ensured unity of purpose would be the most likely to find widespread and continuing support in Iraq in the near future.

Syria

10. I have always understood that the main support in Syria for a closer association with Iraq comes from the mercantile community, and particularly those in Aleppo. They believe they would do well out of the change, for they would find more scope for their enterprise and would expect to outwit their Iraqi competitors, especially now that most of the Jewish merchants have left Iraq. There may also be some support amongst various professional classes, who would expect a similar enlargement of their opportunities.

11. I do not think, however, that it has ever been suggested that there is a majority in Syria in favour of union with Iraq. Among its enemies I think we must count the following: the Army, which has recently been the arbiter of power in the land; most Government officials; Arab "nationalists" (Syrian type) who are apt to regard Iraqi Governments as composed of British stooges, and many of whom are in receipt of Saudi money; those with a Western, and particularly a French education, who have been brought up to suspect Iraqi (and, though the Iraqis, British) designs. Syrians in general are apt to regard the Iraqis as ruffians, whilst they are jealous of Iraqi wealth. Nor are the Hashemites an advantage to Iraq in the struggle for Syria. Finally, there is an ancient rivalry between Damascus and Bagdad, heightened in modern times by the imposition of a French tradition on the one and a British (and Anglo-Indian) on the other.

12. I conclude therefore:-

- (a) that there is not at present a significant movement in Syria in favour of closer association with Iraq;
- (b) that those who hold power, and especially the Army would oppose it;

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- (c) that the Syrians would not long tolerate Iraqi domination;
- (d) that the loosest form of association would be most likely to survive the first shocks, if it should ever come about.

13. On the other hand the structure of the Syrian state is weak and could easily be upset, from outside as well as from within. There are probably many of the ruling classes who would rather call in Iraqi assistance than submit to a left-wing coup d'état. And if it were not for Saudi gold, there might well be a majority, outside the Army, who would prefer Iraqi influence to Saudi and Egyptian penetration.

ATTITUDE OF OTHER COUNTRIES

France

14. The fertile crescent idea is anathema to the French. They will use all means in their power to prevent its achievement, and to upset it if it should come about. I see no hope of inducing them to change their minds.

15. The French attitude perhaps needs some explanation and illustration, for it is not based on material calculations. The French have always regarded the Levant as a natural sphere for their influence and they felt they earned their position there. They regard the Crusades as virtually a French enterprise, they were the first in the field from Western Europe to attempt to penetrate the Ottoman Empire, they claimed protection of the Latin Christians. They sent Bonaparte to Egypt, they were behind the construction of the Suez Canal, and finally they acquired what soon became their favourite "outre-mer", Syria and Lebanon. But they were always denied the full fruits of their enterprise by British intrigue; and this process was crowned when the British helped to eject them from the Levant in 1945. No Frenchman, however pro-British, is quite rational about that; and the worst of it is, they always said it would happen. Such habits of thought die hard; and the French still cling to an independent Syria and Lebanon, which if they are no longer French, at least are not submissive to British influence. One blow yet remains to be delivered: that British intrigue, working through Iraq, should extinguish the individuality of Syria and Lebanon and thus erase the last symbol of the "présence française".

Turkey

16. The Turks are very sensitive to the impertinence of the Syrians and would secretly like to chastise them. They may also have an uneasy conscience about the way they acquired the Sanjak of Alexandretta. Atatürk's doctrine forbids expansionism in Asia, but it is a little diluted nowadays; Turkey is strong, and her present leaders ambitious. It is possible therefore that if the status quo in Syria was altered she might lay claim at least to Aleppo and the duck's bill. She could be relied on to co-operate in co-ercing Syria, but she would have to be fully consulted before any action was taken.

Israel

17. Israel greatly fears the possible union of Iraq and Syria, and with justice. She would do her utmost to prevent or upset it. Nothing short of a Western guarantee would console her, and even that might not suffice. Genuine and lasting Arab unity means the ultimate defeat of militant Zionism, whatever the West may say.

The Soviet Union

18. Russia would also oppose union, except under her own aegis. She would expose it as an imperialist move and work to upset it.

Other Arab States

19. In a divided Arab world Egypt, as always, must try to control Syria. Union between Syria and Iraq would meet with strong opposition from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who would work to upset it and adopt more hostile policies towards Iraq and Britain and perhaps also (to embroil the Iraqis) Israel.

20. Jordan and Lebanon would be suspicious but perhaps neutral. It would depend on the degree of unity and the manner of its achievement. A successful union would dominate them both, and the Lebanese Christians would probably find this distasteful.

The United States

21. No action could be taken without American encouragement, or at least acquiescence. The Americans will be cautious for fear of reactions in Israel and Saudi Arabia. I have a feeling also that discussion of the fertile crescent will arouse their suspicions of some deep British intrigue. But if Egypt goes on behaving badly, and Iraq well, they may be more favourably disposed.

POLITICAL AND PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES OF EARLY ACHIEVEMENT OF UNION

Overt Iraqi intervention without proper pretext

22. This is what Nuri Said seems to be thinking of. It must be ruled out, at any rate for the present. There would be appeals to the United Nations and perhaps even counter-action. We could not support or condone Iraqi aggression.

Iraqi intervention at the request of the Syrians

23. The ideal situation would be for a legally constituted Syrian Government to declare for closer association with Iraq and call in the Iraqi Army to achieve it. This is unlikely to happen out of the blue; but it might happen in the face of a left-wing coup d'état, provided that the régime about to be overthrown contained enough pro-Iraqis. The difficulty in this case might be the time factor. On past form a coup backed by the Army would succeed very quickly and find support by exposing its predecessors as traitors before the Iraqis could move. Only if the Army were split and there could be a short civil war could the Iraqis take advantage of the situation.

24. Another possibility would be a pro-Iraqi revolution, allegedly set off in opposition to the growth of Communism or a startling increase in Egypto-Saudi influence. Such a situation would not be easy to engineer. If the revolution were immediately successful its authors, however pro-Iraqi, would probably believe themselves to be self-sufficient and would not invite Iraqi forces into Syria. Without such forces the revolution would not be safe. Syrian régimes are inefficient at security as at everything else; and there would be no lack of conspirators and paymasters of conspiracy. Again, it is difficult to imagine a Syrian coup d'état either succeeding or lasting without support from the Syrian Army itself, which is not pro-Iraqi.

25. The conclusion seems to be that the right situation for Iraqi intervention is unlikely to be produced until:

- (a) part at least of the Syrian Army has been subverted by Iraqi agents;
- (b) more support for Iraq can be found in Syria;
- (c) a revolution can be brought about in such a way that its success and permanence depend on Iraq.

Practical Problems

26. Let us look at the question from another angle. Are we sure that the Iraqi Army is capable of effective intervention in Syria? The Iraqis are more numerous and tougher, and probably better trained and equipped, than any force the Syrians could oppose to them. They would win any battles. But that is not the point. It is a long way from Bagdad to Damascus, further to Aleppo and Latakia. Unless their moral effect were sufficient to cause a general collapse (it might be: but that would be a gambler's judgment), or unless they were received as liberators everywhere (which is not likely), the Iraqis would need a better organisation than I conceive them to possess if they were to carry out the distant, swift and complex operations necessary to ensure success. This again goes to show that they must be assured of powerful allies within Syria, and particularly in the more distant provinces.

Outside Opposition and support for Iraqis

27. For the purpose of this paper I discount the possibility of active British or American support. The only other source is Turkey. The moral effect of Turkish support would be considerable, and the Turks could smuggle arms to pro-Iraqi forces in Aleppo, Latakia and the East. But overt Turkish intervention and, even more, Turkish claims on Syrian territory, would discredit the whole operation. The Turks would have to be content with the prospect of a more friendly Syria.

28. Egypt and Saudi Arabia would wish to take counter measures. These could be rendered ineffective (though it is possible that token forces, especially aircraft, might reach Syria) by the neutralisation of Jordan, Lebanon and Israel. Jordan and Lebanon present little difficulty. Israel would have to be kept neutral for different reasons (even Nuri can see this); and it would not be easy (see paragraph 17 above).

CONSEQUENCES OF A SUDDEN CHANGE IN THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN IRAQ AND SYRIA BROUGHT ABOUT BY IRAQI ACTION

29. We should have to face serious difficulties with the French (see paragraphs 14 and 15 above), who could not be consulted in advance. Our general relations with France might even be affected. In the Middle East certainly the French would both try to restore the status quo in Syria and intrigue against us elsewhere.

30. We should also have trouble with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, ranging from subversion in Syria to rashness in the Gulf, the Sudan perhaps, or the Canal Zone, or alternatively the creation of embarrassment in the United Nations. The Middle East generally would be unsettled for some time, and the temptation to Israel would perhaps be irresistible. In these circumstances it would not be easy for the Iraqis, or for a pro-Iraqi Syrian Government, to control Syria. It would need great nerve and confidence and skill. Nuri may measure up to the task, but Nuri is old. If he goes, are we confident that anybody else in Iraq or Syria can succeed? Is it not likely that in present circumstances a union of some kind brought about by Iraqi action would soon be sundered? Do the Iraqis possess the political administrative and military resources to maintain it?

CONSEQUENCES OF ABORTIVE IRAQI INTERVENTION

31. I have tried to show that present circumstances are not favourable to Iraqi intervention. It would be a gamble. What would happen if Nuri muffed it? First, he would not last long in Iraq; and the chances are that he would be succeeded by a government of Anglophobes. Secondly, Iraq would be discredited throughout the Arab world and in particular in Syria, where we could expect the growth of communism and other influences inimical to us. Stability and development in the Middle East would have received a serious setback, and Israel would be sorely tempted to exploit the situation.

CONCLUSIONS

32. On the assumptions set out in paragraph 4 above, I conclude that we must find some way of ensuring a pro-Iraqi régime in Damascus and that some kind of union between Iraq and Syria would be the best way; but that we must for the present rule out the idea of bringing this about suddenly through overt Iraqi action, since

- (a) there is not enough support for union in Syria;
- (b) it is unlikely that a situation could soon be engineered which would provide a suitable pretext for Iraqi intervention;
- (c) it is doubtful whether the Iraqi Army is capable of the job;

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- (d) the opposition in the rest of the Middle East would put the retention of Syria beyond Iraq's powers - we must beware of overrating Iraq and of thinking that our will to strengthen her is the same as present strength;
- (e) we ourselves are not yet ready to face the consequences, whether of success or failure, with confidence.

33. The loosest kind of federation would be the most likely to survive the initial shocks; and the looser it was the better and safer it would be for us. In a complete merger there is a danger that Syria would penetrate Iraq.

RECOMMENDATIONS

34. We cannot idly watch Syria go over to the other side. Whatever the odds we might one day have to encourage Iraqi intervention to avoid worse. We should therefore make a more thorough study of the possibilities in consultation with Bagdad, Damascus, the Chiefs of Staff and the State Department.

35. With American agreement, and if possible participation, we should as soon as possible discuss secretly with Nuri ways and means of extending Iraqi influence over Syria. These would include everything from straight economic assistance to the subversion of the Syrian Army. [We could also discover whether Nuri has any realistic plans for taking over Syria.]

36. We should also discuss with the Turks what action we can take to halt the spread of Communist and other undesirable influences in Syria.

37. In the last resort we should be prepared to coerce or disrupt Syria. Meanwhile we and the Iraqis should try to prepare the ground both for gradual association and the possibility of swift action. This can be done in the following ways:-

- (a) Bribery in Syria, by or on behalf of Iraq. The Syrian Army should be the main target.
- (b) The rapid build up of the Iraqi forces. This will have two objects: first to improve Iraq's ability to take action against Syria, should it ever be necessary; and secondly to make closer association with Iraq and the West more attractive to the professional soldiers of Syria.
- (c) Propaganda in Syria in favour of Iraq, designed especially to bring home to Syrians the economic advantages to be derived from friendship with Iraq.
- (d) As a follow-up to (c), efforts to subordinate

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- ✓ Syria's economy to Iraq's, e.g. by an Iraqi loan to Syria.
- ✓ (e) Measures, overt and covert, to counter Saudi influence in Syria.
- ✓ (f) Propaganda designed to bring home to the Iraqi public the importance to them of a stable and friendly Syria.

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