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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

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IMPLICATIONS OF SYRIA'S SECESSION FROM THE UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC

ABSTRACT

The Syrian army coup which resulted in the secession of Syria from the United Arab Republic has dealt a serious blow to Nasser's prestige, has opened the way for a renewal of intense partisan strife in Syria, has exacerbated the controversy over Arab unity, and probably will make Syria again a focal point of inter-Arab rivalry.

The conservative regime that emerged from the coup faces the difficult task of reorienting Syrian policy away from Nasser's state socialism while convincing the workers and peasants that the essentials of the gains they made since 1958 will be preserved. The regime will also have to contend with mounting communist pressures as the Communist party seeks to regain the position of influence it occupied before the formation of the UAR. Its most serious economic problems will be in the field of finance.

Although Syria's defection has not had any immediate serious repercussions in Egypt, the regime may be weakened by disputes as Nasser seeks to put the blame for the Syrian fiasco on some of his lieutenants, notably Marshal 'Amir. In inter-Arab politics the rivalry between Iraq and Egypt is likely to be intensified, with Syria as the most important objective in the struggle.

Increased instability in the Arab Near East and greater opportunities for communist subversion in Syria will present the US with considerable difficulties. However, while it may have new opportunities in Syria, the USSR also will encounter new obstacles since Nasser resents the early communist support of the new Syrian regime and the Bloc's recognition of it without consulting him. Furthermore, intensified Egyptian-Iraqi rivalry will increase Soviet difficulties in maintaining good relations with both and in preserving intact the gains it has made in the Near East since 1956.

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I. Syria

A. The Revolt - On September 28 a small number of Syrian troops seized control of Damascus with very little opposition. This force was led by the commanders of the Damascus garrison and the Desert Force, essentially non-political figures, backed by other officers whose identity as yet is unknown. The commander of the Desert Force, however, is a relative of Ma'mun al-Kuzbari, head of the rebel civilian government. The initial goal of the military appears to have been to secure from Nasser redress of grievances rather than to break away from the UAR. Only when this failed did the rebels decide on secession. Support for the revolutionary movement, styled the Supreme Arab Revolutionary Command, snowballed. The Egyptian military commander, Field Marshal 'Amir, was returned to Cairo and by nightfall the Syrians, virtually without violence, had regained control of their country, in effect breaking apart the United Arab Republic.

The Revolutionary Command on September 29 asserted, as is standard with Arab military coup leaders, that the army was not pursuing narrow interests, either its own or those of any other Syrian group, and "invested Ma'mun al-Kuzbari with the power of issuing special decrees and forming a Cabinet." Prime Minister Kuzbari, a conservative sympathetic to the West, promptly named ten ministerial colleagues. This "transitional Cabinet" was made up largely of upper-middle class professional men, generally moderate, and in some cases supporters of the former conservative parties. Two of them are Christians. The new government, as is customary on such occasions, promised parliamentary elections soon - within four months. It pledged itself to restore civil freedoms, not only to retain but to expand benefits for labor, to maintain progress in agrarian reform, and to stimulate individual business enterprise and encourage private investment, industrialization, and investment of foreign capital. It affirmed its adherence to the concept of Arab unity and offered to cooperate with all the Arab states on a basis of equality. It expressed adherence to the charter of the United Nations and declared that it would follow a policy of non-alignment in foreign affairs.

The military leaders of the coup withdrew somewhat into the background with the appointment of Major General 'Abd al-Karim Zahr al-Din, a Druze who had no particular political affiliation, as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Other changes were made in key security and intelligence positions. Former UAR Vice President and Syrian security chief 'Abd al-Hamid al-Sarraj was arrested. While some political prisoners have been released, Communists jailed by the former regime have remained in custody. The new regime has been expelling Egyptian military and civilian personnel, but has been careful not to cause fear for their safety. While making clear its profound dissatisfaction with former Egyptian rule, the Syrian regime's propaganda attacks against Nasser

and Egypt were

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and Egypt were largely in response to Egyptian denunciations, which had been constant and vitriolic. As the Egyptian tone has moderated, so has that of Syria.

B. Reasons for the Revolt - Syrian resentment of Egyptian control over Syrian internal affairs had been widespread for many months. While Nasser's popular appeal probably remained at a high level, his policies of binding Syria politically, economically, and militarily closer to the authority of Cairo became increasingly distasteful. He gradually alienated and discarded the great majority of Syrian leaders, who withdrew from governmental activity. Surface calm was maintained largely by strict security measures administered rigorously by Sarraj, who split with Nasser only two days before the revolt.

It appears that the principal factors that caused the revolt were: 1) Nasser's administrative reorganization in August that envisaged greatly increased Egyptian political control over Syria; 2) his introduction in July of measures that would have imposed a socialist economic system; 3) a solidifying of dissatisfaction with police repression, and significantly 4) a crystallizing of anti-regime sentiment in the Syrian officer corps, which bitterly resented the arbitrary treatment it was receiving from the suspicious Egyptian high command. Muslim religious leaders, concerned at Nasser's secularist tendencies, had been alienated by his deposition of the Mufti of Syria in August. Christian elements had long been worried by Nasser's pretensions to Islamic leadership and important segments of other minorities felt repressed. Less concrete but no less important, however, was a general feeling that Nasser was attempting to annihilate the individual personality of Syria.

C. The Outlook

1. Political - The revolt has increased greatly the opportunities for diverse political and social forces in Syria to resume the conflict that led to Syria's taking refuge in union with Egypt in 1958. The sudden sweeping away of unpopular Egyptian rule has also removed the rigid restraints Nasser had imposed on Syrian military participation in politics; the civilian political groupings, in expectation of similar freedom, gave widespread support in the initial period. Support for the regime will tend to be strengthened and its non-partisan character prolonged in proportion to the amount of pressure exerted against Syria by the Egyptians.

In its efforts to hold popular sympathy and control the Communist and socialist political factions, the Kuzbari government is handicapped by its relatively conservative outlook. To overcome this drawback, the regime has stressed from the outset that it will strive to further the interests of the workers and the small cultivators as well as those

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of private business and commerce. While the regime needs to promise early elections in order to win support, the present leadership will almost certainly try to avoid bequeathing power to radical successors. For this reason it has continued the ban on the Communist Party and has announced that the election would be a contest of individuals rather than parties. In addition, the new regime will be required by the realities of the Syrian political scene to keep from being too patently dominated by the army. Many rightist army officers dismissed since 1955 are likely to be recalled to service, but an effort probably will be made to exclude the leftists.

The Syrian political parties and groups suppressed during Nasser's rule all have the overriding aim of acquiring paramount power by one means or another. To this end they are working at reconstituting their organizations and placing their adherents in key government positions, particularly in the army and the security services. The militant, rightist Syrian Social National Party (SSNP) is resuming its activities in Syria. The Syrian Communist Party, after some hesitation, has hailed the revolutionary movement and called for the establishment of "national democratic rule." It is working to gain as much freedom as possible for expanded activities in Syria and will turn against the regime if it continues to be repressed. The Party, however, will have the problem of overcoming the widely-accepted view that Arab nationalism and communism are incompatible. The leftist Ba'th Party supported the coup only after a period of soul-searching and may become one of the regime's principal opponents.

The possibility of renewed political turmoil looms again as a major threat to Syria's stability. Another is presented by probable Egyptian attempts to undermine and eventually overthrow the regime. Nasser has been deeply angered and humiliated by his defeat in Syria and has been considering various means of striking back. Although he has abandoned, at least for the time being, the idea of using military force, he probably will engage in subversive operations against the regime. Nasser's potential in this field is considerable and he may be aided by internal disillusionment as the new regime fails to come up to expectations. It is doubtful, however, that Nasser would be able to resume his former control of Syria even if the secessionist regime lost power, but a looser form of association between the two countries eventually might result.

2. Economic

a. Syria's reassertion of economic independence - The readjustment of economic policies and institutions resulting from Syria's separation from Egypt should pose few serious problems since

the degree of

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the degree of integration actually achieved under the UAR was much less in the economic than in the political sphere. Some adjustment will have to be made in the UAR-wide and state-owned petroleum authority, airline company, and maritime shipping firm. Other steps taken toward economic unity, such as the unified budget for the UAR and the general abolition of customs duties on intra-UAR trade, are relatively easy to adapt to the independent status of Syria.

A similar situation exists with regard to the Syrian Government's resuming its former independent role in domestic and international economic affairs. Under the UAR the Syrian Region had always maintained its own currency, central bank, foreign exchange reserves, and regional budget. Neither the Syrian nor the Egyptian currency was freely convertible and both regions controlled the volume of inter-regional trade and restricted exchange and currency transactions. The Syrian Region's customs duties and taxes were assessed differently and collected independently from those of the Egyptian Region. There was also no significant degree of labor and capital mobility between the two regions. In its international economic relations Syria used its own central bank, budget, and government agencies rather than those of the UAR in Cairo for carrying out trade and payments arrangements and foreign economic aid programs. It was not until 1961 that separate agreements for Egypt and Syria began to be replaced by over-all agreements for the UAR, and even in these there were separate provisions for the two regions. It is also noteworthy that Syria retained its own membership, quota, and drawing rights in the International Monetary Fund. Technical assistance and economic aid agreements were generally concluded separately for each region by the UAR so that projects, activities, and terms were readily identifiable by region. This was true of the PL 480 agreements concluded by the US for supplying Syria with surplus agricultural commodities and of the September 1960 protocol to the Soviet-Syrian aid agreement of 1957. Except for the June 1961 Euphrates Dam project agreement with West Germany, Syrian officials did all the substantive negotiating preceding the final approval by UAR President Nasser.

b. Economic Program - The new Syrian regime is committed to a private enterprise system within the framework of a social-welfare state. This represents a middle ground between Nasser's state socialism and the laissez-faire system that prevailed in Syria prior to its union with Egypt. According to the announced intentions of the regime, programs of land reform and economic development are to be continued within the framework of a balanced budget. Two of Nasser's reforms that appealed to lower income groups -- a progressive income tax and the sharing by workers in the profits of private firms -- will be retained in some form. Nationalized businesses will probably revert

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to their former owners and private investment from Arab countries will be encouraged.

In the foreign field, the "transitional cabinet" probably will pursue the following economic policies: 1) the restoration of a freely-convertible Syrian pound, 2) the retention of import quotas and heavy customs duties, 3) the continuation of foreign governmental aid for key development projects, and 4) the creation of conditions favorable to private capital investment from abroad. Until flight capital returns and confidence is fully restored, Syria will endeavor to replenish its foreign exchange reserves by seeking foreign loans. Syria will be in need of foreign credits at least until next spring, when foreign sales of the 1961 cotton crop may bring about a balance in its foreign transactions.

c. Economic Outlook - Syria's economy is recovering from three successive years of drought. The 1961 wheat crop was again smaller than normal and, partly because of hoarding, some imports probably will be needed. Another record cotton crop is expected, which will be a boon to Syria's export earnings.

The most serious economic problems faced by the new regime lie in the field of finance. Public revenues have lagged behind increasing government expenditures, particularly because of large military and development appropriations, thereby adding to the inflationary effect of an expansion of credit to the private sector of the economy. Although foreign exchange reserves are now slightly more than at the beginning of the year when exchange controls were imposed, they are still minimal and some imported products have been covered by private credits from abroad. The foreign trade picture, however, has improved thus far in 1961. Nevertheless, the trade deficit during the first six months of 1961 still amounted to \$30 million; however, a portion of this deficit consisted of US PL 480 surplus agricultural commodities that were obtained without any outlay of foreign exchange. Because of its minimal reserves of convertible foreign exchange, Syria is under pressure to use substantial credit balances accumulated with the Sino-Soviet Bloc for financing Bloc imports.

II. Repercussions in Egypt

The Syrian defection is a setback to Nasser more serious than the Sinai defeat in 1956 or the failure of Iraq to associate itself with the UAR after the 1958 revolution, because it represents an Arab repudiation of a step toward unity already taken. Nasser's attempt to use his standard technique and attribute Syria's secession to "imperialist" machinations has had little success, since Syrian disenchantment has become too obvious.

Despite the

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Despite the importance of the blow to Nasser's prestige, there has been no immediate serious effect in Egypt. The regime is thoroughly entrenched and makes effective use of both public media and the secret police. While identifiable anti-regime elements are quietly pleased, there has been no evidence that Nasser's control has weakened significantly or that organized action against the regime is to be expected in the immediate future.

In view of the implication of failure on the part of the military, however, there may well develop considerable stress and strain within the country's leadership. The radical shifts in Nasser's initial reaction to the Syrian coup may be evidence of divided counsel and uncertainty in Cairo. It is known that Nasser had become steadily less inclined to consult his close advisers, but in this debacle he probably will assign major blame, at least privately, to Field Marshal 'Amir and other of his top aides. Dissension can be expected to grow among members of Nasser's inner circle as the search for scapegoats continues. Members of the elite group may also become targets for criticism on the part of second-echelon supporters of the regime, particularly in the army. Nasser's ability to prevent or contain any dissatisfaction in the army will be crucial.

The economic effect of the breakaway of Syria is that of a potential rather than an immediate loss. Syria on the whole has not been an economic asset to Egypt. On a long-term basis, however, Syria could have provided a controlled source of foodstuffs and short-staple cotton for Egypt and a guaranteed market for Egypt's expanding industries, with which Syrian industry may now compete.

III. Repercussions in the Near East

The Syrian revolt probably will have an unsettling effect in the Near East for some time to come. Old rivalries have become inflamed, and conditions have suddenly become favorable again for expression of anarchical tendencies inherent in Arab politics.

The Syrian break with the UAR does not represent a rejection of the ideal of Arab unity, but a reaction against Nasser's idea of the basis and form of such unity. The greatest weakness in Nasser's approach was that it ignored the reality of regional national feeling in the Arab world and attempted to create unity by fiat and compulsion. Syria now advocates a federation rather than a union of Arab states, a view that has attracted a growing number of supporters in the Arab Near East since 1959. It therefore can be anticipated that Syria will provide

increasing competition

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increasing competition to Nasser in the regional controversy over Arab unity. A principal point of weakness in the Arab federation concept, however, will continue to be the compulsive tendency of one faction or leader to dominate the others. Nasser himself is a prime example of this tendency and it is doubtful whether he could accept any program for Arab unity that did not acknowledge his dominant role. In the meantime, the efficacy of the Arab League, the only surviving organizational manifestation of Arab unity, will be further undermined by factionalism among its members.

Nasser, in trying to consolidate the UAR, during the past two years had to play an essentially constructive role. Henceforth, however, his desire to build Arab unity is likely to be offset by the urge to prevent his enemies from profiting from his misfortune and by his need to take revenge on those who seek to do so. The leaders of the various Arab regimes understand this and, with the exception of King Husayn, have been careful in this delicate situation not to antagonize Nasser.

An independent Syria almost certainly will revert to its classic position as the major bone of contention in the Arab world. Arab leaders will be as much interested in denying it to their rivals as in bringing it within their own sphere of influence. King Husayn, for whose Hashimite family Syria has been a terra irredenta since 1919, is the major contender in this field. He is aware that he is a prime target for Nasser's retribution, but he counts on Western support and Israeli hostility to Nasser as countervailing forces. Nasser will regard Iraq as the most dangerous potential contender for his lost position in Syria, and he will take any measures he believes necessary to prevent Syria's falling into Iraq's sphere of influence.

The Syrian issue points up the growing significance of secession and irredentism as dynamics in inter-Arab relations. A number of Arab states are involved in actual or potential controversies of this nature and their stand on inter-Arab disputes has been increasingly conditioned by this factor. Iraq's cautious stand regarding the recognition of Syria's secession probably is due to the fact that Qasim has both separatist and irredentist problems on his hands. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia need Nasser's support against Qasim's claims, and neither Morocco nor the Yemen is apt to applaud the example set by Syria's secession.

Lebanon will be in a particularly difficult position. As a traditional neutral in inter-Arab rivalries, it will want to remain uninvolved in the contest over Syria. Yet the ill-concealed satisfaction of Christian leaders with Syria's move is apt to cause resentment on Nasser's part. However, with his base in Syria gone, Nasser will not be able to give the Muslim community, from which his main support has

come in the past.

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come in the past, the backing and aid he could have given it earlier. Because of its traditional policy of political as well as economic laissez-faire, Lebanon will become even more of a battleground between contending Arab regional factions. In particular, Nasser will use Lebanon as a base for conducting his covert campaign to undermine his enemies in Syria and Jordan, and this is bound to increase Lebanon's difficulties, both internally and in its relations with other Arab states.

The effect of the Syrian revolt on the Palestine question will be at least a temporary weakening of the Arab military position, owing to Nasser's loss of control over the Syrian army. Heightened rivalry among Arab leaders, however, will increase the chances that one or another of them will seek to bolster his position by flaunting his intransigence toward Israel. The Arab refugees initially probably will cling to Nasser as their main hope for an eventual return to their homes, and they will be an important weapon for Nasser against King Husayn in particular. Nevertheless, the rift in the UAR may eventually have a discouraging effect on the hopes of at least a portion of the Arab refugees and make them more amenable to other solutions. Israel will closely watch developments in Jordan and will be prepared to counter any threat it feels to its security.

IV. The USSR

The initial Soviet reaction to the coup in Syria was restrained and cautious. Although it is almost certain that the USSR welcomed the dissolution of the UAR, Moscow probably avoided early support for the new Syrian regime partly out of consideration for its relations with Nasser.

Only when Nasser appeared to have given the green light did the USSR and Bulgaria recognize the regime on October 7. An indication of the Bloc trend, however, was given by the Syrian Communist Party's support of the regime a few days earlier. The Bloc's caution was due also to the conservative and possibly anti-communist character of the Syrian Government. Scattered indications of these attitudes have come from non-governmental communist sources. A clandestine communist broadcast to Turkey and the Belgian communist newspaper endorsed the end of "dictator" Nasser's rule in Syria. A Prague broadcast and a parenthetical comment by Pravda referred to the new Syrian leaders as "bourgeois politicians."

While the USSR attempts to ingratiate itself with the new Syrian regime, the Soviets will also pressure it to permit freedom of action for the Communist Party. This is apt to be the main source of conflict

between Syria and

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between Syria and the Bloc, and one in which Syria will be supported by Arab nationalist opinion in general as well as by the West. The fact that the USSR recognized Syria before the West and without consulting Nasser is not likely to increase the Bloc's popularity with Nasser. Arab communist support for the secession is apt to warm up Nasser's anti-communist campaign, and it can be anticipated that this will be reflected in Nasser's relations with the Bloc. While the USSR probably will continue to deal with Nasser as before, it is not likely that it would fail to associate itself with any anti-Nasser movement in Egypt that had the appearance of succeeding.

V. Implications for the US

The US probably will face renewed difficulties in maintaining good relations with Egypt and other states in the area simultaneously during a period of increased political maneuvering and controversy among the states themselves. Any appearance of involvement on the part of the US in this family quarrel will be resented by one competitor or another. A continuing problem will be the strong tendency of the Arab leaders and politicians to attribute Arab disunity to "imperialist" intervention.

Before Syria handed over to Nasser the conduct of its foreign affairs in early 1958, there was strong anti-Western sentiment in the country, and communist and other radical elements were becoming increasingly influential. The situation now appears more favorable to the West for the immediate future, at least. The transitional regime, while proclaiming a policy of non-alignment in foreign relations, has given indications that it intends to avoid leftist positions. While the regime has pictured itself as only a temporary one and has stated that it hopes to be able to transfer power to an elected government within a few months, it probably will be able to play an important role in influencing the elections in favor of non-communist candidates. In the meantime the Communist Party will use any assets it can develop, including covert Soviet assistance, to try to frustrate restrictions against it. If there are signs that the communists' tactics are succeeding, the regime might welcome discreet assistance from anti-communist sources.

In the larger Arab picture there are both negative and positive implications for the US. The bitterness between Nasser and King Husayn will cause difficulties in US relations with both Jordan and Egypt. Increased friction in Lebanon may also disturb US interests in that country and affect US relations with Nasser. On the other hand, Arab Communist support of the secession and early Bloc diplomatic recognition

of it should

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of it should counteract any resentment felt by Nasser at the quick recognition of independent Syria by pro-Western states in the area. Israel should now feel less threatened by concerted Arab action and hence should be less inclined to pressure the US for support. Finally, it seems likely that Nasser will be less inclined to devote a large share of his energies to his "anti-imperialist" activities in Africa and Latin America.

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