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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

10 October 1966

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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM [REDACTED]

SUBJECT: Syria's Radical Future*

SUMMARY

In the past two decades, Syria's conservative and middle-of-the-road political elements have been rendered powerless, and the army, dominated by radically-oriented officers, has emerged as the sole arbiter of politics. The present radical military regime is unstable, as any foreseeable successor is likely to be. The prospect is one of a succession of extremist military governments, and there is some chance of domestic rebellion by minority groups.

On the whole, we doubt the Communists will come to dominate Syria. We think it more likely that, over time, there will emerge in Syria an ideology that combines communism and many of the accepted tenets of Syrian nationalism.

Syria will probably try to maintain its good relations with Moscow, but the latter, while finding Syria's radicalism on the whole favorable, will be careful in its dealings with erratic and unstable Syrian regimes.

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* This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence and the Office of Research and Reports in the Directorate of Intelligence.

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DISCUSSION

1. The unsuccessful attempt by Syrian Commando Chief Salim Hatum to seize control in Damascus early in September marks the latest in the long series of coup attempts which have enlivened Syria's two decades as an independent country. When his move failed, Hatum, a member of the Druze minority of southeast Syria, fled with thirty or more associates to Jordan. [REDACTED] in press interviews, Hatum asserted that Syria had become a Soviet satellite. Some support for his assertions can be drawn from the extreme left radical tone of the Damascus government, from the actions of a Syrian labor organization in ousting "anti-revolutionary" personnel from state-owned businesses, and from strong Soviet propaganda support of the Damascus regime. In fact, however, the situation is far more complicated than a confrontation between Communists and anti-Communists, with Major Hatum on the side of the angels.

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2. Hatum was a prominent member of the military junta which seized power in Damascus on 23 February 1966. The junta

represented the radical wing of the Baath party,* which had itself mounted a successful coup d'etat early in 1963. Though originally a civilian political organization, the Baath by the late 1950s had come to the conclusion that the use of military force was the only feasible route to power. But this meant extensive reliance on army officers, thus facing the Baath leadership with the problem of maintaining party discipline over military figures who had the force to contest the party's wishes.

3. The period from the first Baathist coup in March 1963 to the second in February 1966 was a time of constant struggle for dominance between the moderate and radical factions of the party. On the whole, the moderate faction predominated. It included party founders Aflaq and Bitar, the military strongman Amin al-Hafiz, some other military officers, and probably the majority of the civilian party members in Syria. These men recognized the

* The Arab Socialist Resurrection (Baath) Party has a pyramidal structure with lesser organizations electing higher ones. Party elections are normally free, and open discussion of issues is permitted, but members are expected to abide by policy decisions reached by duly constituted party bodies. The party is pan-Arab; each Arab country is considered a region of the Arab nation, and the party therein is headed by a Regional Command. These are in turn subordinate to the National Command. The latter is elected at general party congresses, but has traditionally been dominated by Syrians. The present National Command was elected in 1965 and consists of 6 Syrians, 3 Iraqis, 2 Lebanese, 1 Jordanian, and 1 person from the Arabian Peninsula, probably a Saudi.

dangers and difficulties inherent in implementing the Baath's socialist doctrines, and hence moved very slowly in enforcing nationalization, especially in agriculture. The radical wing, composed principally of activist army officers, urged rapid and complete socialization and centralization of economic affairs. It gained control of the Syrian region's party organization in late 1965. The moderates, in control of both government and National Command, then dismissed the radical-dominated Regional Command. The latter's response was the February 1966 coup.

4. Once in power, however, the radicals themselves proved torn by factional rivalry. Even before the shooting stopped on 23 February, Hatum became convinced that his colleagues had withheld support from him in the hope that he would be killed in the fighting with President Hafiz's bodyguards. These maneuverings owe little to ideological differences [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED], something to animosities between Syria's various religious sects -- Sunnis, Alawites, and Druzes,* -- and a great deal to personal rivalries

* Syria's population is 70 percent Sunni (Orthodox) Muslim. The Alawites account for 11 percent and live in the mountainous coastal area. The Druzes of southeast Syria are about three percent. Various minor Muslim and Christian communities make up the remainder of the population.

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and lust for power. The regime continues to style itself Baathist and to insist that it is the legitimate Arab resurrection movement, but in fact, it is a military regime.

5. During its first six months in power, the radical government moved on several fronts to broaden its base of support. It tried to speed up the pace of agrarian reform; it endeavored to win moderate Baathists to its cause; and it allowed increased freedom for the Syrian Communist Party. It also sought support from the USSR. It had little time, however, to devote to these pursuits, as its major energies were spent on factional intrigue and maneuvering for greater power.

6. The events of 1966 appear to have ended an era which began with the first coup d'etat in 1948. In these years, conservative and moderate power has been progressively debased and the army has emerged as the sole arbiter of politics. The traditionally powerful landlord-merchant families were largely finished politically by 1956 or so. The moderate politicians who were given a chance at governing Syria by the army after the breakup of the UAR showed little ability and leadership. In sum, both conservative and middle-of-the-road political forces have been rendered powerless, if not wiped out.

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On the more radical side of things, the experience of the Baath itself has been that the military establishment will ultimately control the party. In practice, the military has shown itself increasingly radical in outlook.

7. Developments in Syria's basically agricultural economy have lagged behind the radical trend in political matters. Although they were displaced politically, the traditionally powerful great families kept a measure of economic influence for a time. More importantly, a merchant-entrepreneur group of less prominence continued to control much of Syria's agriculture and trade, and to prosper from it. Sporadic efforts to transform the economy from private enterprise to socialism started during the UAR period with the confiscation of the largest agricultural holdings and continued with the nationalization of industry and most of the export trade after the Baath came to power. These measures were tempered by the influence of a core of conservative administrators, who remained in control of the central bank, and by the government's reliance on former landholders and industrial managers to run their former properties and businesses. As a result, the economy has come through the past decade in remarkably good shape; economic growth has been interrupted mainly by the effect of the region's notoriously fickle rainfall.

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8. The radicalism which is in the ascendancy in Syria is a disjointed sort of thing. No single party political grouping can be said to represent it. That portion of the Baath party in Syria which supports the present regime probably numbers only several hundred people. The Communist party is larger, but available evidence indicates that it is ill-represented in the Syrian military establishment. The junta's members are for the most part in their thirties and early forties, products of the postindependence military system. [REDACTED]

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The Outlook

9. The question in regard to Syria's future then is not whether it will be moderate or radical, but what will be the kind and intensity of its radicalism. In the first place, the longevity of the present regime is dubious. There are serious animosities existing among some of its principal figures, almost any one of whom might seize an opportunity to assert his primacy.

In addition, there are almost certainly Baathist officers loyal to the ousted pan-Arab (National) Party Command who are conspiring to restore "legitimate" Baathist rule. Also, despite the Baath's efforts to purge the Syrian Army during its years in office, there are probably pro-Nasserists and other potential opposition elements within the Syrian Army with their eyes fixed on the Presidential palace. [REDACTED]

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10. In any case, it seems likely that no successor regime would be much more stable than that presently in office. It is conceivable that a strong man might emerge at the head of the Syrian government and hold office for an extended period, but the army is split into so many factions that the chances of such a development are poor. The prospect, therefore, is for a series of military governments succeeding one another at irregular intervals. There is some possibility that maneuverings and purges in the military establishment may serve to trigger internal rebellion by, say, the Druzes or the Alawites. The former, in particular, have traditionally been willing to resort to arms. Again, we cannot discount the possibility that the rank and file of the army may lapse into indiscipline and unreliability,

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although this is highly speculative in view of our very limited knowledge of enlisted men's attitudes. All things considered, however, we think the chances are against Syria sliding into a state of anarchy.

11. Some radicals prominent in the present regime have announced their intentions to reshape Syria's economy along more socialistic lines. In particular, they are pushing for the distribution of land to peasants and the replacement of "anti-revolutionary" managers in industry. In its effort to mobilize domestic support, the present regime might embark on just such a hasty program of socialization, which could inflict serious damage on the economy. However, it is at least as likely that political maneuvering will keep the regime so occupied that the economy will continue to operate largely on its own as it has in the past. While shortages may appear and unemployment probably will increase, economic troubles probably will not be critical for the government of the day.

13. Internationally, Syria will probably improve its already close relations with Moscow, on which it depends for all its military supplies and for substantial economic aid. The strident anti-Western positions which are a feature of Syria's public

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posture will almost certainly continue; they will in the great majority of instances be parallel with those of Moscow. The Soviets will probably find Syria's radicalism on the whole favorable to their interests, but they will probably exercise caution because of the erratic and unstable nature of prospective Syrian regimes.

13. Such conditions offer obvious opportunities for the Syrian Communists. While the present military junta in Damascus is likely to be chary of granting much leeway to any political organization not under its control, the Communists will probably win favors by giving it needed support. In these circumstances, the Communist Party of Syria (CPS) is likely to grow in size and influence. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Its leaders may come to believe that the party could, on its own, seize control of the government and make an effort to do so. They will certainly endeavor to infiltrate the army in any case. On the other hand, the Syrian Communists may pursue a strategy of supporting any regime in Damascus which espoused a generally radical point of view, while resisting too close an identification with such a government, believing that it probably

would not last long and would eventually discredit itself and all its backers. Thus, the Syrian Communist Party would try to establish ties with willing leftist listeners, and to attract as much popular sympathy as possible. In time, this could result in the development of a local ideology in which Communism and many of the accepted tenets of Syrian nationalism had become identical. The net effect of this development would be a nationalism more noisily pro-Soviet than before, a general willingness to adopt social and economic schemes based on Communist models, and a growing emotional identification with the Communist Bloc.

14. It is too early to say whether the CPS leadership has chosen either of these alternatives. On balance, however, we believe they are more likely to follow the latter course than to make an overt effort to seize power. They probably do not have enough members in the army or the government well enough placed to make a Communist coup feasible. [REDACTED]

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15. In 1958, Syria sought to encounter growing Communist strength by seeking and getting union with the UAR. The experiment failed, but Nasser still retains a measure of popularity among Syria's lower classes. There is some possibility that similar fears in the future might stimulate an effort by anti-Communist officers to reconstitute the UAR. [REDACTED]

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