Is Iraq About To Go Communist?

Alarmist reports that Iraq is going Communist are based on a fantasy picture which disregards the basic ethnic, religious and political facts of Iraq.

Ever since July 14 the myth has been accepted in the US that there was great pressure for immediate union with Nasser's UAR from the mobs of Baghdad. When pro-UAR former Deputy Prime Minister Col. Abdul Salim Aref was jailed, the near-universal conclusion was that Premier Qassem had had to placate the Communists to obtain the support of the mobs. Since then, all events and individuals have been judged on the basis of a pro-UAR Nationalist-Communist struggle. Defeat of the Nasserists is interpreted as a triumph of the Communists.

In point of fact, there was never any chance of Iraq's joining a Cairo-capitaled UAR. More than one quarter of Iraq's population is non-Arab and does not speak Arabic as a native language. The largest non-Arab group are the Kurds of northern Iraq. Of the Arab Moslems, well over half belong to the Shia sect. Half the population of Baghdad and all of southern Iraq is Shia. The Sunni Arabs make up less than 30 percent of the population.

The conflict and perpetual discord of the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam is vital to Iraqi politics, both foreign and internal. Other than in Iraq, there is no significant Shia group in the Arab world except in southern Lebanon. To be reduced to a powerless minority in an enlarged UAR would be as intolerable to Iraq's Shias as it would be to the Kurds or to Lebanon's Christians.

The inept and irresponsible Col. Aref's demand that Iraq unite with the UAR was supported largely by the Iraqi branch of the Syrian-based Ba'ath Party. There is some evidence that post-July 14 they received substantial financial support from Nasser, as they were able to found and publish the largest circulation newspaper in Baghdad by August. There is no reason to believe that Ba'ath had any substantial backing in the Army or among the street mobs (which are primarily Shia) of Baghdad.

In fact, the Revolutionary Government of Iraq has been very careful to show both the Shias and the Kurds that their position would be respected. The first act of the Revolution was the formation of a three-man sovereignty council with a Sunni Arab, a Shia Arab and a Kurd. The principal reason that Iraq did not denounce the Baghdad Pact, but left it to wither, was to stress Iraq's special relationship to Shia Iran.

Other evidence of Communist penetration of the Government is equally unconvincing. Ibrahim Kobby, the Minister of National Economy, has negotiated a number of commercial treaties with Soviet-bloc countries. He maintains that true neutrality lies in dealing with all countries on the basis of Iraq's best interest. Other Iraqi officials who have been called Communists or fellow-travelers include the Director-General of Police and Qassem's aide-de-camp and the Director-General of Propaganda. In all cases these men depend on Qassem for their positions, and in no case is there any hard evidence that they are allies of the Communists. His position depends on the Army. All indications are that he has the support of the Army, which has given no sign of being even leftish, let alone Communist.

Affirmative evidence of the moderation of the government is that it has recognized, with no opposition, the oil concessions and a role for the foreign oil companies. Secondly, the foreign contractors for the Iraqi Development Board have, within the last week, started to receive payments which had been suspended after the Revolution pending investigation of the contracts.

Qassem said in his first speech, on November 26:

We are an independent sovereign and peace-loving republic. We shall cooperate with all Arab States without expectation of reward, and shall cooperate with foreign nations on the basis of mutual benefits. Iraq will go along with the Arab caravan silently and with wisdom.

Iraq has not made the critical decision that will determine its future relations with Nasser and the UAR, whether, how much and under what conditions to contribute to the Arab Development Institute—the regional development bank project of the Arab League. Iraq holds the key not only to its own contribution but to how Kuwait will invest its surplus.

Kuwait has a population of 200,000 and an oil revenue of $375 million this year. The surplus, after all the expenditures for a super welfare state and lavish living for the Sheikh, will be better than $200 million in 1958. The Sheikh of Kuwait has already indicated a willingness to contribute to an Arab Regional Fund if the other oil rich states also contribute. While British bonds may be a better investment than Arab League bonds, he would rather be Sheikh of Kuwait with investments in bad bonds than not to be Sheikh and have his money in London. Therefore, if Iraq contributes, Kuwait will also contribute. If Iraq does not contribute, Nasser will have to depend on US and British pressure to obtain Kuwait's contribution.

Nasser, Qassem and the Russians are aware of the dynamics of Middle East oil. If Qassem had wished to reach an accommodation with Nasser, he could at any time have agreed to contribute a part of his oil revenues to the Arab Development Institute. He has not. Instead, while Qassem has purged pro-UAR elements in Iraq, the Arab Oil Congress has been postponed from November to April.

The preoccupation of Washington with Communism and Nasserism is such that it cannot conceive an Arab state independent of the West, Nasser and Soviet Russia. Suggestions have already been made that we back Nasser unconditionally so that he can overcome the Communists in Iraq. Such a course would, in fact, force Premier Qassem to rely entirely on the Soviet Union.

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