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M/E PRECARIOUS ROLE OF THE IRAQI COMMUNISTS

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The Soviet Union's efforts to consolidate its relations with the Iraqi Ba'athist government have received fresh impetus following setbacks to its influence with other Arab "progressive" States. The nature of Soviet interest in Iraq was outlined in the communiqué following the State visit of President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr to the Soviet Union from September 14-19, 1972, which ranged over "bi-lateral relations between the two countries, the existing situation in the Arab world, questions of struggle against imperialism and Zionism and other persistent questions of the present international situation" (*Moscow Radio and Baghdad Radio*, September 19). One perennial obstacle to an improvement in Soviet-Iraqi relations has been the position of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP); but now that this has a limited role in the government there are signs that the Russians' support for it may be sacrificed to their wider ambitions in the area.

While the discussions during the President's visit appear to have concentrated primarily on foreign policy and economic questions - notably the situation in the Iraqi oil industry following nationalisation, where the Soviet Union will have had to define its limited ability to help the Iraqis in marketing their oil - the problems of the ICP and of the Ba'ath's relations with the Kurds were also undoubtedly reviewed. The Kurds, despite Soviet mediation, have accused the Iraqi Government of endangering the peace achieved under the March, 1970, agreement, but according to the communiqué the Soviet side expressed "satisfaction" with the steps taken to fulfil the agreement.

The ICP's prospects improved soon after Prime Minister Kosygin's visit to Iraq in April to sign the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The following month, two members of the party's Central Committee were appointed to ministerial posts in the government as a first stage in the creation of a National Front government including the Ba'ath, the ICP and the Kurdish Democratic Party. Their positions are relatively insignificant: Mukarram al-Talabani became Minister of Irrigation and Amer Abdullah, Minister of State. However, the Soviet agency *Tass* said on July 14 that, with the participation of Kurdish Ministers, this "offers a good basis for the unity of the national forces of the entire Iraqi people".

The two have been very active in office. In August, Talabani led an agricultural delegation to Hungary and Bulgaria, and returned to Bulgaria for further talks in September. Amer Abdullah led an important

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delegation to Czechoslovakia and the USSR in July-August, during which a trade agreement and a protocol on economic cooperation (including provision for the sale of 2,250,000 tons of Iraqi oil) were signed in Prague. In the Soviet Union, Abdullah discussed the development of the Rumaila oilfield, possible purchases of oil and the repayment of Soviet loans in crude oil. Clearly, their participation is not merely intended to be symbolic, though the question must arise whether Talabani and Abdullah can best serve the interests of their party by becoming prominent personalities within a still overwhelmingly Ba'athist government. Public office might bring them closer to the position of "independent" Communist sympathisers such as Aziz Sharif (formerly Minister of Justice and now Minister of State) and give them a personal stake in maintaining ICP support for the Ba'athist government whatever its policy. On the other hand, a further deterioration in the government's relations with the Kurds could present them with a conflict of loyalties.

All three major parties involved in the Front have expressed conditions and fundamental differences clearly remain. Mohammed Mahmoud Abdul Rahman, KDP Politburo member and Minister of State in the government, told the Cairo newspaper *al-Gownhouria*, on August 10, that his party saw the future of the Front as being "completely linked with the solution to the Kurdish question and the implementation of the provisions of the March 11, 1970, peace declaration". On the same day, the newspaper published interviews with Amer Abdullah and with the Ba'ath Assistant Secretary-General, Shibli al-Aissami, which indicated that the Ba'ath believed progress must be made gradually - presumably because it is anxious not to weaken its hold on the government. Aissami admitted basic disagreements with the other parties on the role of the Front in the armed forces. The ICP's conditions, however, principally concern the "liquidation of persecution of the masses and their political institutions" and the "granting of democratic freedoms" - in other words, a situation which would give the party the maximum freedom of manoeuvre and propaganda, probably with the ultimate aim of harnessing popular support.

Warning to Front members

Abdullah discussed the ICP's role in Iraqi politics in an article in the French Communist weekly, *France Nouvelle* (June 6-12, 1972). He alleged that attempts were being made by some groups to undermine the National Front, and said that a considerable part of the discussions would be devoted to combatting them, as "in our opinion, any attempt by one of the parties in the front to substitute its party programme for that of the charter to which they have agreed will have the effect of paralysing the efforts that have been made". Referring to a previous article, he denied having suggested that the "national bourgeoisie" should be allowed to take part in the discussions: only the "progressive" section of the "national bourgeoisie" would be allowed to enter the front.

The Soviet Union, for its part, appears to be less interested in the position of the ICP than in its plans to reconcile the rival Ba'ath Parties in Iraq and Syria, in order to form a pro-Soviet alliance in the eastern Arab world. On September 17, *Moscow Radio* reported Igor Belyayev, Deputy Director of the Africa Institute in the USSR Academy of Sciences, as saying:



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"I would like to emphasise particularly that relations between the CPSU and the Iraqi Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party are now developing more and more extensively. This is something new in relations between the political organisations of the Near East countries and our party. I feel that the Moscow reception of Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr in his capacity as Secretary-General of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party will promote the further rapprochement between our CPSU and the progressive political parties and organisations in the Arab countries. This is a very important and salutary process which helps to weaken the position of imperialism and strengthen the anti-imperialist progressive front throughout the world".

In this perspective, the ICP may become at best an anachronism and at worst an embarrassment to Soviet efforts to develop relations with the Ba'ath.

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