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NON-RULING CP's:
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SOVIET MEDIATION HOLDS SYRIAN CP TOGETHER

Summary: Following a recent trip to the Soviet Union by leaders of its two dissenting factions, the Syrian Communist Party has announced an agreement designed to end the split which has threatened the Party in recent months. The following report examines this agreement, concluding that it is a stop-gap measure which leaves the basic issues untouched.

After several unproductive attempts at arbitrating a settlement to the power struggle which has crippled the Syrian CP for more than a year, Soviet mediators appear to have met with limited success in their latest meeting with their Syrian comrades. According to reports from Damascus, (1) the SCP Central Committee recently approved unanimously an agreement reached between the two party factions during a visit to the Soviet capital in late July. At the same time, indications are that a maximum of Soviet pressure was necessary to produce a minimum of Syrian "agreement," and that the accord represents an institutionalization, rather than a termination of the party split.

Split Runs Deep

The story of the Syrian CP's factional struggles has been told in detail elsewhere. (2) It will suffice for the present to recall the bitterness of the inner-party conflict and the basic issues upon which it has been fought. One of the major question relates to the integration of the SCP into a National Progressive Front, dominated by

the Baath. SCP Secretary-General Bakdash, for decades a leading figure in Arab Communism, and his followers have run into considerable opposition within the SCP to their enthusiasm for the Soviet-approved Front, following years of disapproval for any political constellation which would tend to reduce the role and identity of the Syrian Communist Party at the national level. In a series of declarations and counter-declarations (the first of which was issued by Bakdash on 3 April of this year), the pro-Bakdash faction blasted its opponents for anti-Sovietism, deviationism, sabotaging the Front, etc., while the latter accused Bakdash of pursuing Stalin's policy of the personality cult and misrepresenting their position on participation in the Front. The split within the SCP gained such ground that by late spring rival party organizations had been set up in many districts, and the leadership bodies of the national party were clearly divided into pro- and anti-Bakdash factions. Indeed, all appearances were that the venerable Arab Communist leader himself was in deep trouble, as the majority of the party leadership cadres appeared to be joining the "opposition" ranks.

Soviets Keep Eye Out

The Syrians' problems were not going unnoticed by their comrades in Moscow; indeed, CPSU and USSR delegations had met on several occasions with SCP representatives in an attempt to quell the dissension within the Syrian Party. (3) The Soviets' interests were clear enough. Apart from a general desire to keep the peace within its client parties (a significant number of which are or have recently been embroiled in embarrassingly public inner-party struggles), Moscow must have been particularly interested in keeping communist party feuds from imperiling the fledgling Syrian National Progressive Front, something which was becoming a definite possibility. (It should be recalled, for example, that the two leading figures in the Party dispute, Bakdash and Daniel Ni'mah, are also members of the Front's Central Command.) The deterioration of the Soviet position in Egypt was also likely to have provided a certain sense of urgency to Soviet attempts to put the house in order in Syria.

Finally, in late July, the Soviet Central Committee succeeded in getting the two warring factions together around the negotiating table in Moscow. On 21 and 25 July, with such Soviet luminaries as A.P. Kirilenko and Boris Ponomarev presiding, talks were held in what was described as a "warm and friendly atmosphere." (4)

From the reports on the meetings published in Pravda, one might not have suspected that the Syrian Party was having any intra-mural difficulties at all. The only reference to Syrian party affairs was a bland mention of the "ideological and organizational work being performed by Syrian Communists, which is aimed at strengthening the SCP's unity." (5) Otherwise, the communique concentrated on the necessity for Arab unity and on the progress being made in building a modern Syria, "on the Baath Party's initiative" (!).

Back From The Brink

Yet there is little doubt that much transpired in Moscow which did not immediately meet the eye. Shortly after the Syrian delegation's return to Damascus, the rival factions announced their intention to hold talks to restore party unity. According to at least one report, the two factions had already reached a "preliminary agreement" during the Moscow meetings on ending the differences which had been dividing the party. (6)

A recent article by the chief editor of the Egyptian Al-Ahram, Muhammad Haykal, (7) sheds some light on the manner in which this agreement may have been worked out. Writing under the title "In Moscow, Too, an Objective Pause with the Friend," Haykal turns to the dispute in the Syrian Communist Party and Moscow's role in its solution:

It was finally decided to take the matter to the Soviet Communist Party on the basis that it is the main pioneer party in the world communist movement. The Soviet Communist Party formed two committees to study the matter, a committee of theoreticians in the Central Committee and a committee of politicians. This was ordinary so far but then the whole thing became serious when the two committees -- the Soviet theoreticians committee and the Soviet politicians committee -- formed by the Soviet Communist Party expressed their views on the [Syrian party's] draft program. Some of these views were strange and astounding.

Haykal cites such examples as statements to the effect that "there is no such thing as an Arab nation," that the Syrian CP's draft "gives more attention to the Palestinian question than necessary," that "the slogan of liquidating Israel is not correct in tactic and in principle," and that "Arab unity is not the principle target of the communists." Instead, the goal, according to Haykal's version of the Soviet document, is in a word, "socialism." As the Syrian National Progressive Front, under the leadership of the Baath Party, is a) allegedly pursuing this goal and b) in power, the implications of the Soviet analysis for the Syrian communists is clear enough: accept Bakdash's approach and get down to the business of organizing the Syrian state.

On August 10, the SCP Central Committee then issued the decisive announcement that unanimous approval had been mustered for what it called "the Moscow agreement." (8) Overflowing with gratitude, the CC statement expressed the Party's

appreciation for the true and sincere efforts exerted by the CPSU for its support in helping the Syrian Communist Party overcome the difficulties facing its struggle and in strengthening its unity.

The accord was described as a "strong foundation for closing the ranks and further strengthening" party unity.

At the same time, the communique made an oblique but significant reference to the spirit of the agreement, the purpose of which was "to confine the dispute within the narrowest scope to prevent outsiders from exploiting it for defamation or for liquidation purposes." [emphasis supplied] Thus, it would appear appropriate to refer to an institutionalization rather than a termination of the SCP feud. Nor would this be a unique remedy to the problem of inner-party dissent: the Finnish Communist Party, for example, turned to almost identical methods -- following Soviet mediation -- to cope with the split which had threatened within its ranks in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. (9) As in the Finnish case, the Syrian agreement provides that parallel organizations be dissolved, that provocative declarations by the warring factions be withdrawn, and that a panel be set up to review the events which led to the split and supervise the implementation of the cease-fire.

Most observers will agree that this sort of institutionalized agreement to disagree has failed to provide a solution to the problems facing the Finnish Communists. The reason most frequently cited for this failure is the omission in the agreement of a genuine attempt to debate openly the real (ideological) issues underlying the organizational dissension. The same omission appears to have been committed in the case of the Syrian "Moscow agreement." Nowhere is there evidence of provision for debate on the questions of dogma and political policy which ultimately led the Syrian Party to the brink of total schism. Moscow's mediation may thus have hastily patched the facade of Syrian communist unity; but the eroding foundations have yet to be restored.

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(footnotes)

- (1) Middle East News Agency, 10 August 1972.
- (2) See Kevin Devlin, "Syrian Communist Party Split," CAA Research Report No. 1378, Radio Free Europe Research, 13 April 1972, and "Syrian CP Struggle Intensified," CAA Research Report No. 1436, RFER, 7 June 1972.
- (3) Op. cit.
- (4) Pravda, 29 July 1972.
- (5) Op. cit.
- (6) AFP, 31 July 1972.
- (7) Published on 18 August 1972 and reported by Middle East News Agency on the same day.
- (8) Reported by Middle East News Agency, 10 August 1972.
- (9) See Kevin Devlin, "Finnish Communists Reach Agreement But Not Unity," CAA Research Report No. 0432, RFER, 9 January 1970, and lg, "Disunity Prevails as Finnish CP Convenes 16th Congress," RFER, 30 March 1972.