

RUSS - MOSCOW SEEKS INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

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Visits to the Soviet Union by President Sadat of Egypt from February 2 to 4, 1972, and by the Vice-Chairman of Iraq's Revolution Command Council, Saddam Hussein, from February 10 to 17, have underlined the major effort Moscow is making to consolidate its uneasy position in the Arab world. Saddam Hussein, who is also Secretary-General of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, went at the invitation of the Soviet Communist Party and was accompanied by a high-level party and government delegation qualified to cover the whole range of Soviet-Iraqi relations - political, military and economic.

Saddam Hussein was saluted as "comrade" and indeed the Ba'ath now seems to receive at least the formal courtesies usually reserved for "fraternal" parties. It was made clear that the Soviet Union hopes to conclude a friendship treaty with Iraq similar to the Soviet-Egyptian treaty signed last year; and the communique after Hussein's visit said that it was intended "to consolidate and embody in treaties the relations established between the two sides and raise them to a new and higher level". Libya, however, through its Ministry of Unity and Foreign Affairs on February 23, condemned "this trend which is being followed by sisterly Arab countries" of signing such treaties with the Soviet Union, seeing it as a revival of "imperialism" and as a contravention of the Charter of the Arab League (Article 2 of which states that the League's object is to preserve the independence and sovereignty of the member-countries).

The Libyan attack, made on the day of the arrival in Moscow of Libya's Deputy Prime Minister, Abdul Salam Jallud, at the head of a government delegation, illustrates one of the difficulties faced by the Soviet Union in its deteriorating relations with the Arab States. The communique issued after Sadat's visit stressed the need for greater inter-Arab cooperation, the Soviet side hoping no doubt to see an end to Iraqi-Egyptian rivalry, and in particular to Iraq's uncompromising hostility to a political solution in the Arab-Israel dispute. But the treatment accorded to the Iraqi delegation suggests that the Soviet leaders also see Iraq as a possible ally in the event of a further worsening of their relations with Egypt. During 1970 and 1971, the death of President Nasser and the counter-coup in the Sudan made them aware of the fragility of their links with the Arab "progressive" States; and 1972, which has already seen the Czechoslovak Communist Party's volte-face on events in the Sudan, may

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be marked by a determined Soviet attempt to reinforce its position in the more peripheral "revolutionary" countries, regardless of previous misgivings on aspects of their internal and foreign policies.

An improvement in relations with Iraq requires Soviet recognition of the authority of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party and the seal appears to have been set on this by Saddam Hussein's visit and by the arrival on February 22 of an Italian Communist Party (PCI) delegation under Gian Carlo Pajetta. On March 26, 1971, Pajetta, writing in the PCI weekly review Rinascita, had deplored the state of Ba'ath-Communist relations in Iraq and said that "the problem of relations with local Communists is also a measure of revolutionary maturity and of ability to lead political action". The French Communist weekly France nouvelle, in its issue of August 23 to 30, 1971, reported "how the present authorities in Baghdad persecute and torture the Communists, democrats and nationalists in Iraq" and said that "it is not possible to remain indifferent before these acts of terrorism without once more raising an indignant protest". In fact, both the French and Italian parties were taking their cue from an article in the Soviet newspaper Sovetskaya Rossiya (reported by the Soviet news agency Tass on February 11, 1971) making similar charges of "persecution of democrats" in Iraq.

When the Ba'ath came to power in August, 1968, it expressed its determination to form a government composed of all progressive political forces in the country, including the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). A number of Communist exiles were invited to return home and in December, 1969, Aziz Sharif, an Iraqi member of the Soviet-dominated World Peace Council who has close links with the ICP, was appointed Minister of Justice. But ICP-Ba'ath cooperation never materialised and while the Ba'ath claimed that the Communists were making impossible demands for a "national front" government, the ICP alleged that Communists and other "progressives" had been arrested and tortured. In October, 1971, Muhammed Mahdi al-Jawahiri, a poet and Vice-President of the Iraqi-Soviet Friendship Society, fled to Egypt and sought "permanent residence" there.

Meanwhile economic relations between Iraq and the Soviet Union developed at an unprecedented rate, both in trade (the Soviet Union is now the second largest exporter to Iraq) and in cooperation in the development of the Iraqi oil industry. Saddam Hussein's visit ended with an invitation to Soviet leaders Brezhnev, Kosygin and Podgorny to attend ceremonies in April marking the start of oil production at the Rumaila oilfields, where drilling has been undertaken with Soviet aid. As the Soviet economic stake in Iraq increased, the Russians put pressure on the Ba'ath to normalise its relations with the ICP - and no doubt also on the ICP to take a more conciliatory attitude to the Ba'ath. On November 15, 1971, President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr announced the government's Charter of National Action, appealing in principle for all "progressive forces" to cooperate with the Ba'ath in a national front.

Although the initiative remained completely in the hands of the Ba'ath, and the Charter promised little more than the regime had offered on coming to power, Soviet commentators gave it cautious approval and the

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ICP expressed its general acceptance of the proposals. A commentary in the Soviet party organ Pravda, on November 21, 1971, said that "on the whole, Iraq's democratic circles assess the Charter positively, believing that the implementation of its provisions will improve the situation in Iraq and remove barriers which hinder the progressive development of the country". Kosygin, speaking at a luncheon for Saddam Hussein on February 11, praised "the efforts of the Ba'ath Party and other progressive parties and organisations of Iraq to set up a national front of all progressive forces in the country", and said that they would "undoubtedly facilitate the advancement of the Iraqi people along the path of progressive socio-economic reforms, the advancement of the national economy, culture, science and the improvement of its material well-being".

#### Prospects for ICP

The Soviet leaders realise in fact that the immediate prospects for more than token ICP participation in the Iraqi Government are negligible and they are not at present interested in advancing the political cause of the ICP. If they are to consolidate their position in Iraq, they must accept the integration of the ICP within a Ba'athist-dominated administration and convince the European Communist Parties that the Ba'ath is no longer persecuting Iraqi "progressives and democrats". The visit of the PCI delegation under Pajetta - the second PCI visit in the past two months - would suggest that the latter aim has already been largely accomplished.

In exchange, the Soviet Union may have to make some concessions to Iraqi views on Arab issues. On Palestine, the policies of the two sides are incompatible; but with regard to the Gulf, there is greater room for manoeuvre. So far, Moscow has been unwilling to become involved in this question, because it does not wish to damage its "good-neighbourly" relations with Iraq's chief rival in the area, Iran. The Soviet Union has not emulated East Germany, which has openly attacked Iran and expressed its "complete support" for the Iraqi position and the communique issued after the visit to Baghdad of the Soviet Defence Minister, Marshal Grechko, in December, 1971, omitted any mention of Gulf affairs. At the end of December, however, Iraq's Acting Economics Minister, Abdul Khaliq Sumarra'i, led a major government delegation to Peking, after stating that the Gulf would be one of the subjects under discussion. The visit ended without any firm Chinese statement of support for the Iraqi position, but with increased promises of economic and technical aid.

The Soviet Union is worried by China's attempts to gain a foothold in the Arab world. A commentary on Moscow's Radio Peace and Progress on February 20 alleged that the Chinese "have lately stepped up their activities in Iraq with the aim of undermining the unity of the Arabs and the Kurds in that country". Unlike the Grechko communique, the one issued after Saddam Hussein's visit did include a clause expressing "full support for the struggle of the Arab States and peoples in the Persian Gulf area

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for the right to determine their own destiny, for the liquidation of imperialist domination and of all foreign military bases", and condemning "the intrigues and plots of imperialism in this area" (Pravda, February 18) Pajetta, on the other hand, openly cited "Iran's role in achieving the ambitions of imperialism".

Thus with the problem of Ba'ath-ICP relations temporarily shelved, and in exchange for a slightly more positive commitment on the Gulf, the Soviet Union hopes both to neutralise the improvement in Sino-Iraqi relations and to counter growing resistance to its policies elsewhere in the Arab world. To maintain contact with the rival Ba'ath Party in Syria, a delegation of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) and Government arrived in Damascus on February 21 on a visit which the Pravda correspondent, Boris Orekhov, described as a "new step in the development of Syrian-Soviet friendship". He said that "the CPSU and the Ba'ath Party ... have established firm inter-party ties" and that "mutual visits of statesmen and party figures of both countries play an important role in the strengthening of friendly relations between our peoples".

Because of the ideological and political rivalries of the various forces in the area, however, and the open hostility of Libya (a member of the proposed Federation of Arab Republics) to closer Soviet-Arab political ties, the Soviet Union is engaged in a series of delicate manoeuvres which are more likely to aggravate tensions than to appease them.

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