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M/E -- IRAQ: WHERE MOSCOW STANDS TO LOSE

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The deterioration in relations between the Kurdish minority in Northern Iraq and the Ba'athist government is threatening the Soviet position in the Gulf, which had been strengthened following the March, 1970, agreement ending the fighting in the North. The Russians had attempted, earlier this year, to mediate between the two sides, securing assurances from Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa al-Barzani that the Kurds would meanwhile refrain from any action which might worsen the situation; but Soviet mediation has apparently failed and the Political Bureau of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) threatened on July 31 to resume hostilities unless further steps were taken to implement the 1970 agreement.

The agreement, which was probably concluded partly as a result of Soviet pressure on the Iraqi Government, removed one of the main obstacles to Soviet-Iraqi relations and these had begun to improve rapidly. Both the Soviet Union and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) have a long-standing commitment to the Kurdish cause, and although this was reduced after the 1958 Revolution from a demand for autonomy to one for a more limited recognition of Kurdish national rights within the framework of the Iraqi State, neither the ICP nor the Soviet Union had been prepared to sacrifice support for the Kurds in the interests of better relations with Baghdad.\*

The agreement has also opened the way for the creation of a united front government in Iraq. When it came to power in 1968, the Ba'ath Party announced that it would work towards this end, the ICP and the KDP being the other major parties involved. Little progress was made because of the fighting in Northern Iraq but at the end of 1969 Aziz Sharif, a political figure who has close links with the ICP and the Kurds, was appointed Minister of Justice. He played an important role in achieving the settlement, as a result of which Kurdish Ministers were appointed to the government, the Kurdish newspaper *al-Ta'akhi* was allowed to appear and the KDP was accepted as a potential partner in the proposed "national" government.

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\* In 1969, however, the clandestine Kurdish radio attacked East Germany for changing its line on the Kurdish movement, apparently as part of the price of diplomatic recognition.

(PTO)

In November, 1971, the Ba'ath published its Charter of National Action, which promised freedom for political parties and announced that "the alliance between the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and the Kurdish Democratic Party, which forms the corner-stone of the national coalition, is a revolutionary alliance both in its starting-point and in its long-term objectives". In April, 1972, Baghdad signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union (similar to those previously concluded by the USSR with Egypt and India), and in the following month two members of the ICP Central Committee were appointed to the government.

Moscow's comment on the Iraqi situation has emphasised the importance attached to the national front proposals and the Kurdish agreement. *Moscow Radio* said on July 17:

"The internal war in Northern Iraq ended. The Iraqi people have gradually regained their national unity. The importance of this to Iraq is inestimable. For many years, the splitting of Iraq's progressive and patriotic forces had been the source of disastrous events and a cause of political unrest in the country. ... The ruling Ba'ath Party took another important step. It announced its intention to establish a national front and introduce a permanent constitution of the republic".

Setbacks in other parts of the Arab world have strengthened the Soviet desire to maintain stable relations with Iraq and to see the steady development of ICP participation in Iraqi political life. A renewal of the fighting in the North would face the ICP - particularly those leaders of the party who have advocated cooperation with the Ba'ath - with a dilemma: if it continued to support the government, it would sacrifice its relationship with the KDP while alienating many party members who sincerely support the Kurdish cause; if it opposed the government it would lose its position and become liable to sanctions. The problems facing the Soviet Union would be similar; because of the possibility of a national front government, Moscow has during the past year been actively cultivating its relations with the KDP. A Kurdish party delegation was invited to the 24th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1971\*, and talks have been held with the Romanian and Bulgarian Communist Parties. KDP members are sometimes included in discussions when Soviet delegations visit Iraq. Moreover, the Kurdish branch of the ICP became inactive some years ago and its members seem to have been absorbed in the KDP.

#### Vulnerable position

The Soviet failure to mediate in the present crisis demonstrates the vulnerability of Moscow's position. Ba'ath-Kurdish relations have deteriorated because of Kurdish allegations that the government was implicated in attempts to assassinate Barzani and was also trying to go back on the 1970 agreement. The Russians blame the situation on "reactionary forces" in the Ba'ath and on "imperialist" plots, notably the Western oil companies: according to *Pravda* correspondent Pavel Demchenko, on November 11, 1971, "political strife, a conflict between Arabs and Kurds, suits [the oil companies] best of all, since it allows them to preserve their positions in the Iraqi economy and the profits they get from Iraqi oil". Demchenko gave no evidence of this, and failed to

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\* *Moscow Radio* of August 21 said a KDP delegation would arrive in Moscow on August 22 at the invitation of the Central Committee of the CPSU to hold talks on strengthening relations "between the two fraternal parties".



explain why the oil companies should threaten the flow from the rich oilfields of Mosul and Kirkuk by encouraging a resumption of hostilities in Northern Iraq. Even if it were true, it is difficult to see how the KDP and the Ba'ath, both of which are accepted by the Soviet Union as left-wing and "progressive", could allow themselves to be manipulated in this way.

Demchenko also alleged that "right-wing, reactionary forces" were attempting "to change the regime in the country and come to power", thus aggravating the tension between Arabs and Kurds. This view, however, ignores the long history of conflict and mistrust in Kurdish relations with successive Iraqi Governments, in particular with the Ba'ath Party. In fact, the Soviet Union's position with regard to Iraq is threatened not because of "reactionary" or "imperialist" plots, but because of its own involvement in an internal Iraqi dispute. No one would benefit from a resumption of hostilities in Northern Iraq; but the Soviet Union, being more directly involved than any other foreign Power, has most to lose.

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