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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Research
Memorandum

RNA-6, February 14, 1969

To : The Secretary
Through: S/S
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *Thomas L. Hughes*

Subject: Iraq: Internal Stresses and the Search for the Bogeyman

The Iraqi government has recently launched an intensive campaign to rally public support behind it by playing up the subversive and military threat from Israel. Integral parts of this effort are the spy trials and executions in Baghdad and Iraqi emphasis on the danger of a major Israeli attack. This paper examines briefly the charges that have been raised and the situation of the Iraqi Jewish community. The paper also reviews the deterioration of the Ba'thi regime since its return to power last summer and analyzes the internal political crisis which has led the regime to engage in the current spy hunt and to adopt an increasingly provocative stance toward Israel.

ABSTRACT

The current spy hunt in Baghdad and Iraqi predictions of an Israeli attack on Iraq's forces in Jordan are largely motivated by the Ba'thi regime's extreme insecurity and its fear of imminent overthrow. The Ba'this are seeking to exploit genuine Iraqi apprehension of Israel's subversive activities within the country for the purpose of mobilizing popular support for the regime and discrediting all opposition elements as agents of Israel. More important, the Ba'this hope to dramatize an Israeli threat sufficiently to unify the Iraqi army behind the regime, whose vulnerability to a coup is increased by internal factional disputes.

Of the fourteen persons hanged as spies in Baghdad on 27 January, nine were Iraqi Jews, and fears have been expressed for the safety of the remaining Jewish community in Iraq. Israel has hinted that it may take drastic action,

*See RNA-4, "Legal Aspects of the Iraqi Espionage Trials," February 11, 1969, (CONFIDENTIAL/NO FOREIGN DISSEM).

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should further harm befall the Iraqi Jews. The Iraqi regime, for its part, seems almost to be wishing for Israeli action, either against Iraq's troops in Jordan or against Iraq itself, to demonstrate that the alleged threat from Israel is real.

The Ba'th party in Iraq has disappointed early hopes that its rule would be an improvement over the Arif government which it ousted in July 1968. During their seven months in power, the Ba'this have discredited themselves by inept leadership, factionalism, duplicity, and repression--and in the process have alienated virtually every significant political and ethnic grouping in Iraq. In their effort to extend their control over the Iraqi army, the Ba'this have replaced many senior officers, thereby antagonizing others, and the threat exists of a military reaction such as put an end to the 1963 Ba'thi regime. The deteriorating internal security situation has been marked by reports of attempted coups and by arbitrary arrests and random acts of terror by Ba'thi security gangs, which often seem to act on their own authority. There has also been a rising current of anti-Americanism and a frantic search for scapegoats. In December 1968, soon after an Israeli reprisal against Iraqi positions in Jordan, the drumbeating and ~~any~~ hunting began in earnest. While the Iraqis may have been momentarily checked by unfavorable international, and Arab, reaction to the recent hangings, the survival of the regime is at stake, and the campaign can be expected to continue. Given its narrow political base, dissatisfaction in the army, and the general instability of the situation in Iraq, the present tactics are unlikely to save the Ba'th government for long-- unless there is indeed a major Israeli attack.

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Shaky Ba'this Attempting to Mobilize Support

The Iraqi government is engaged in a faltering regime's classic ploy of psychological mobilization against an external threat. It asserts that Israel, abetted by its mainstay, the US, is the source of Iraq's current difficulties and that Israel and the US are conspiring to bring about the downfall of the revolutionary regime. To be effective, such a conspiratorial thesis must be supported by at least some evidence, which the Iraqis have attempted to produce and publicize through the spy trials. Though Israel may well have covert assets in Iraq, the Iraqi Jews, with their movements restricted and under constant surveillance, would make poor recruits for any Israeli espionage or sabotage net. Nonetheless, in the recent trials they and others have served as credible scapegoats to dramatize Iraq's struggle against sinister forces.

Underlying the trials is the insecurity of the regime and its frustration at being unable to develop widespread backing or to achieve decisive control. Nothing has worked for the Ba'this--conciliation, terror, or packing the civil administration, army, and security forces with Ba'th party members, all have been unsuccessful. The regime is still unpopular, weak, and internally divided. Even more unsettling to the Ba'this, who were thrown out by the military in 1963, is uncertainty about the attitude of the army, raising the specter of another military coup, perhaps, as in 1963, with the connivance of disgruntled members of their own regime.

By extending the alleged Israeli conspiracy to take in various dissident elements in the country, the regime seeks to portray domestic opposition as treason to the Arab cause and to justify its own repressive measures as needed protection for the country. The Ba'this have evidently also concluded that their own internal factionalism and the potential disaffection of the army can only be overcome within the framework of a confrontation with Israel--with Iraq in the vanguard. Iraqi drumbeating in Jordan and show trials in Baghdad both highlight Iraq's "exposed position" and the necessity of all Iraqis to rally behind the government. To prove their point, the Ba'this seem to be almost deliberately inviting a major Israeli response.

Show Trials in Baghdad

On January 27, 1969, fourteen Iraqi citizens, including nine Jews, two Christians, and three Moslems, were hanged in Baghdad as Israeli spies. They had been convicted by a three-man revolutionary tribunal whose president announced on January 28 that another espionage trial would follow, in which the defendants would be charged with spying for the CIA. The new trial may have been delayed by the international outcry which greeted the results of the first trial. Not only were the hangings deplored throughout the West, they were received with pained silence and even some criticism in the Arab countries. Cairo's semi-official newspaper al-Ahram chided the Iraqis for the untimeliness of the executions and for the carnival atmosphere surrounding them. The best that most Arab commentators could find to say was that the Iraqis were entitled to deal with their own citizens and internal affairs as they saw fit. Israeli sources assert that in the next trial there will be 35 defendants, of which 13 are Jews, and that this group will be charged with spying for Israel, as well as with sabotage and with organizing the defection of the Iraqi pilot who flew

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his MIG-21 to Israel in 1966. Probably in response to the unfavorable world reaction, Iraqi President al-Bakr has told an interviewer that all those in the next group to be tried are Iraqi Moslems. Moreover, about two dozen Iraqi Jews arrested prior to the Ba'thi regime's takeover in July 1968 reportedly have just been released from prison. This apparent amnesty, however, is not known to have been extended to those arrested in Ba'thi security roundups since July 1968 or during the current spy scare.

Over 60 Iraqis are believed to be awaiting trial on various charges. The two most prominent individuals among them are Dr. Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz, a highly respected former diplomat who served as Premier in 1966-67, who has been a rallying point for Iraqi moderates, and Major General Abd al-Aziz al-Uqaily, a somewhat apolitical retired officer of strong personality and great prestige among the Iraqi military, who has been repeatedly mentioned as a potential President or Premier and who served as Defense Minister in the 1966 al-Bazzaz Cabinet.

The essence of the government's case can be gathered from confessions made by two of the defendants in the recent spy trial and broadcast over Baghdad radio and television on December 14. The first of these statements described an alleged Israeli espionage network that gathered information on the Iraqi military and conducted sabotage training for Jewish youths. The persons named in this confession were among those executed on January 27. The second confession vaguely linked the Israeli spy ring to an elaborate clandestine plotting group which included members of the pre-1958 regime, members of the Iraqi Christian and Jewish communities, wealthy Iraqi businessmen resident in Beirut, Kurdish rebel leader Mulla Mustapha Barzani's Beirut representative, and Lebanese Christian politicians such as ex-President Camille Chamoun and Henry Farun. The organization was to furnish military and political information on Iraq to CENTO and "certain neighboring states," who were backing the group. The Kurdish rebellion was to be reactivated to tie down the Iraqi army and prevent it from doing its part against Israel. The group's objectives allegedly were to overthrow the Ba'thi regime, abolish socialism, make peace with Israel, and form a government of Arabs and Kurds which would be supported by CENTO members "headed by the United States." General al-Uqaily was to have been Defense Minister in the new regime, and Dr. al-Bazzaz was said to have been aware of the plan and to have supported it.

Concern for the Iraqi Jews

Israeli and world reaction to the recent executions has centered on the fact that nine of those hanged were Iraqi Jews. Fears have been expressed about the fate of the remaining Iraqi Jewish community--once totalling over 100,000 persons, but now reduced, mainly by emigration to Israel, to about 3000. The Jewish community dates its beginnings in Iraq from the Babylonian Captivity, and its remaining members are believed to feel no allegiance to Israel. Some have complained that they might have continued to lead a good life in Iraq, had it

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not been for antagonisms generated by Israel's emergence as a state. Nevertheless, Israel's claims to be the homeland of Jews everywhere has had the effect of turning the remaining Iraqi Jewish community, in the eyes of the local authorities, into a potential fifth column, and the Arabs' feeling of humiliation at Israel's hands has also been taken out on the local Jews. The Iraqi Jewish community thus has for some years led an increasingly circumscribed existence, with restrictions imposed upon its members' property rights and freedom of movement, and they have been subject to greater harassment since the June 1967 war.

Israeli Premier Eshkol, in denouncing the executions, told the Israeli Parliament that nothing stands between the Jewish communities and annihilation but "Israel and her strength." In an interview over Baghdad Radio after the hangings, Baghdad's Grand Rabbi Sasson Khaddouri denied that the trials had been aimed at the Jews and stated that the world-wide outcry on this basis against Iraq was "unjust," that "Iraqi Jews, like people of other religions, enjoy complete freedom to carry out their religious rites and normal work." Rabbi Khaddouri's carefully phrased statement was doubtless intended to offset such remarks as Eshkol's, which would confirm the Iraqis in their view that the local Jews were instruments of Israel. Indeed the Iraqi Jews feared that any intervention on their behalf by Israel might unleash a pogrom in Iraq.

The Present Ba'thi Regime

The Ba'thi regime in Baghdad, which came to power through a coup d'etat, sees itself beset by plotters on every side. Its fears are no doubt justified because it has progressively alienated virtually every other significant political and ethnic grouping in Iraq. Moreover, the Ba'this are threatened by internal schism and the possibility of a coup attempt by one of their own factions against another. During their seven months of power, the Ba'this have been so preoccupied with trying to shore up their position that governmental decision-making has been at a relative standstill, and it is unclear who speaks with authority for the regime. The Ba'th has set up an extensive internal security apparatus as an instrument of party control, but this apparatus seems to be operating semi-independently, and its unruly and violent actions have only served to discredit the regime. More important, despite a determined effort to fill key military posts with at least nominal Ba'this, the regime is unsure of the loyalty of the army. Ba'this still brood over the fact that the last Ba'thi government in Iraq, in 1963, was unseated after nine months by the Iraqi military (including some nominally Ba'thi officers like Hardan Tikriti) because of the excesses of the radical elements of the regime.

The Ba'th returned to power in Iraq on July 17, 1968, when the so-called Right-Wing Ba'thi group, made up of some of the more moderate members of the 1963 Ba'thi regime, joined with several young officers in a bloodless coup against the Arif government. Within two weeks, however, on July 30, the Ba'this ousted their less politically experienced military colleagues from power and assumed full control.

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At first the re-constituted, by now wholly Ba'thi regime sought to broaden its narrow political base. It entered into contacts with Kurdish rebel leader Mulla Mustapha Barzani, it called for a coalition of "progressive forces" under Ba'thi leadership, and released many political prisoners, including Communists, as a token of good faith. Meanwhile, to offset their numerical weakness, the Ba'this set out to appoint Ba'th party personnel to as many key administrative and internal security posts as possible. The regime also recalled to active service many Ba'thi officers who had been eliminated from the army when the Ba'th was overthrown in 1963.

Ba'thi Factionalism

A basic policy difference soon emerged over the question of how to consolidate the regime. The more moderate faction urged cooperation with non-Ba'thi elements, especially among the military; the leader of this group was Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Hardan Tikriti, who was believed to have close ties with non-Ba'thi officers. A hard-line faction, led by Interior Minister Saleh Ammash, called for excluding non-party elements from key posts--especially in the military and internal security forces. The Ammash group warned that the Ba'th had collapsed before because it had equivocated on this point. A third prominent figure in the Ba'thi leadership, Party Secretary General Saddam Tikriti, evidently endorsed the hard-line approach, but seemed to have a personal following of his own. President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr did not enter the factional strife. He was believed to incline more to the moderate approach, but seemed mainly concerned with his own survival in office.

Potential allies of Hardan Tikriti's moderate faction are two fellow members of the ruling Revolution Command Council (which also includes President al-Bakr and Saleh Ammash)--Brigadier Sa'dun Ghaidan, now the commander of the Baghdad Garrison, and Lieutenant General Hammad Shihab Tikriti, who recently was made Iraqi Chief of Staff. These two were members of the young officer group which cooperated with the Ba'this in Arif's overthrow; they evidently soon became Ba'this by convenience and assisted in the elimination of their non-Ba'thi colleagues from the regime. The validity of their Ba'thi credentials, however, remains in question.

Ba'thi Troubles with the Kurds

The five year Kurdish rebellion, led by Mullah Mustapha Barzani, had subsided following a cease-fire agreement arranged in 1966 under the Premiership of Dr. Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz. The Iraqi government failed to implement the agreement's provisions, however, and a renewal of hostilities threatened. The Ba'this established contacts with Barzani in August 1968 in an apparent effort to reach a settlement. This effort was soon nullified by a Ba'thi decision to support the "progressive" rival Kurdish group of Jalal Talabani in a rather crude divide-and-rule campaign designed to undermine Barzani, who reacted strongly to the regime's duplicity. In a series of skirmishes, Barzani's numerically superior forces inflicted losses on Talabani's followers, despite

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Palabani's indirect support from the Iraqi army. Hostilities seem to have been suspended by winter weather, but the Kurds expect the struggle to be renewed on a larger scale in the spring.

The Plots Thicken

Meanwhile, rumors of plots have proliferated. In late September, the regime claimed to have foiled a coup attempt by a combination of Nasserists and Left-Wing or Syrian-oriented Ba'this, reportedly encouraged by Damascus. Several persons were arrested, but there was speculation that, whatever the dimensions of the actual plot, the regime had used it as an excuse to round up a number of potential dissidents. Among those jailed was a former Agriculture Minister, retired Major General Abd al-Hadi al-Rawi.

October and November were marked by a growing number of beatings, shootings, and arbitrary arrests carried out by members of the Ba'thi security forces, who often seemed to be operating independently of government control. The Chairman of the local Coca-Cola bottling company was killed during interrogation by security men. A former Iraqi Foreign Minister and Ambassador to Washington, Dr. Nasr al-Hani, was abducted and murdered one night, reportedly by members of the security forces. Some observers felt that the murder of al-Hani, a leading moderate, might have been intended as a warning to other Iraqi moderates, who had turned out in force at the Baghdad airport a few days earlier to welcome the return of former Premier al-Bazzaz from a long stay in Beirut.

Despite the apparent effort by the regime to woo the dominant faction of the Iraqi Communist Party, communist leaders were outraged when security men reportedly fired on a demonstration previously authorized by the government on the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, and several demonstrators were killed or wounded. In another such episode, striking communist workers were shot down at a Baghdad factory.

On December 11 reports reached Beirut that the Iraqi regime had put down a coup attempt by officers associated with the long-defunct monarchy. On December 27 the Iraqis reshuffled several top military posts, including that of Chief of Staff. Non-Ba'thi incumbents were dismissed and replaced by men considered more loyal to the regime. The regime broadcast telegrams of support from key military units, but the event bore all the hallmarks of a narrowly averted military coup.

The Anti-American Campaign

The regime had already begun a campaign of harassment of American educational institutions in Iraq. It expelled the American faculty members of the Jesuit al-Hikma University and American personnel of the American Philanthropic Society in Northern Iraq, a Protestant group which had run a girls' school in Baghdad for many years. In December, the anti-American campaign intensified, and other hitherto untouched elements of the resident American community became targets.

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An American technician and his wife, on assignment with the Iraq Petroleum Company, were arrested and kept under detention for several weeks on suspicion of espionage. Their release was finally obtained by considerable US diplomatic pressure through third countries. In January, several American wives of Iraqi citizens, plus the American wife of a British UN official, were detained without explanation. In mid-January the American workers at an oil refinery were ordered to leave the country without an explanation being given for their expulsion. Throughout this period, a steady outflow of government propaganda has pictured the US, in alliance with Israel, as the relentless foe of Iraqi and Arab aspirations.

Discovery of a Fifth Column--Iraq in the Front Lines

On December 4 the Israeli Air Force attacked Iraqi positions in northern Jordan in retaliation for Iraqi artillery fire on Israeli settlements in the Jordan valley. The Iraqis offered little effective defense and suffered a number of casualties. This was the first time Iraq had received a major Israeli blow since the June 1967 war, and the reaction was electric. In the resulting pandemonium, an Iraqi soldier was mysteriously shot in Baghdad. Also on December 4 a train was allegedly attacked and robbed in northern Iraq by the Kurds. The Iraqi regime chose to discern a pattern in these events. On December 5 President al-Bakr addressed a mass meeting in Baghdad and charged that while Iraq was facing the enemy on the Arab-Israel front, a fifth column of agents of Israel and the US was striking from behind. The two confessions, broadcast on December 14, provided the theme. In early January, rumors began to sweep the Arab countries predicting an imminent Israeli assault, probably aimed at the Iraqi troops in Jordan. These rumors seemed to originate with the Iraqis who were also the only ones to take them very seriously. Although the attack has not yet materialized, the Iraqi regime seems almost to be trying to provoke one--whether in response to its bluster in Jordan or to the trials in Baghdad--as proof that Iraq is now Israel's principal target and adversary.

Conclusion

The next set of spy trials in Baghdad can be expected to develop further the theme of a beleaguered Iraq, striving at home and abroad against the Israeli/Imperialist menace. Although the Iraqis may have been somewhat taken aback by the mildly unfavorable Arab reaction to the recent executions, they will not be deterred in launching further trials by concern for what Israel might do. An Israeli blow against the Iraqi troops in Jordan would demonstrate only that Iraq was in the front lines and that the threat from Israel was not imagined. (It should be noted that the Iraqi troops in Jordan may be in a sense expendable in that they have often been described as a convenient dumping ground for military elements that the Iraqi regime does not trust to have at home.) On the other hand, an Israeli action directed against Iraq might unleash a pogrom there and would certainly be pointed to by the regime as proof that the local Jews were in fact creatures of Israel. In either instance, Israeli action would confirm Iraqi fears and tend to rally the country behind the regime.

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Although the present campaign of psychological mobilization may buy the Ba'this a little time, their long range prospects will not be improved. Like their rivals in Syria, whom they increasingly resemble, the Ba'this in Iraq may totter on in defiance of gravity somewhat longer. However, their inadequacies and internal flaws remain and their collapse is inevitable--as a result either of factional infighting or a military coup.

A successor regime is unlikely to be much more lasting or secure, however. As long as factional intrigue and demagoguery remain the rule in Iraq and the military is the final arbiter of power, such regimes will rise and fall quickly, keeping the political scene in continuous turmoil.

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