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During a recent call on Michel Sassine, Deputy Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament and companion of Prime Minister Saeb Salam on the latter's six-day official visit to Iraq February 14-21, 1971, he made the following comments on the situation in Iraq:

The Present Regime

Sassine believes the present government of Ahmad Hasan al Bakr is becoming increasingly confident of its ability to remain in power. In conversations with Iraqi dignitaries, Salam and Sassine both had the impression Vice President Salih Mahdi 'Ammash is emerging as Bakr's right hand man and the regime's strongman (gabaday). The former gabaday, Saddam Husayn at Tikriti, who played a leading role in bringing about the March 11, 1970 settlement with Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani, was conspicuous for his absence at all official gatherings throughout Salam's visit. Sassine noted that Saddam's name was never even mentioned during the six-day visit. (The IPC representative in Lebanon gave a

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similar assessment of the current Iraqi regime to the DCM recently. He said that IPC officials in Baghdad have been able to develop a good relationship with 'Ammash, whose star seems to be ascending.)

Sassine believes the emergence of 'Ammash will enhance the authority of the relatively more pragmatic military wing of the pan-Arab leadership of the Baath Party. Sassine was also favorably impressed with Foreign Minister 'Abd al Karim Shaykhali whom he found to be an intelligent, articulate, and effective civilian collaborator with both 'Ammash and Bakr.

Iraqi-Soviet Relations

Sassine was particularly impressed by the current regime's almost fanatic "anti-communism". Iraqi officials told him that the GOI has been quietly encouraging Numeiry's campaign against the Communist Party in the Sudan. 'Ammash and Shaykhali told Sassine that the GOI is at the same time anxious to improve its ties with the West, especially the U.K., to counter-balance the Soviet position in the country. For example, the GOI is now trying to obtain a number of British professors for the faculty of Baghdad University. It would also like to have greater Western European and even American participation in certain industrial development projects. The GOI has not been pleased with the quality of Soviet Bloc project assistance, many of the factories and other installations having turned out to be duds. (The Westinghouse representative in Baghdad, one of the few remaining Americans still working in Iraq, also commented to the reporting officer this week that the Director General of the Ministry of Industry had been "picking his brain" to solve some of the basic technical problems which have arisen in various industrial development projects throughout the country. He mentioned particularly the chemical fertilizer plant at Abu al Khasib, the paper factory at Hartha, the new refinery at Basra, the sulphur extraction plant at Kirkuk, the cane-sugar factory at Majr al Kabir, and the woolen textile mill at Kut.) *Insight*

Sassine added, however, that he detected no indication that the regime's hostility to USG policy vis-à-vis the Middle East is any less bitter.

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Iraq-Arab Relations

Sassine believes the GOI is anxious to improve relations with Syria, Lebanon, and the UAR in order to end its relative isolation from these "natural allies". While Iraq remains as adamantly opposed to a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israel conflict as ever, it nevertheless wishes to appease the UAR. Sassine believes Bakr might even modify the present government to include some non-Baathi elements, perhaps along the lines of the coalition put together by Hafiz al Asad in Syria. 'Ammash, in conversation with Salam, encouraged Lebanon to exercise its traditional role of Arab mediator and to use its good offices with Sadat to facilitate an Egyptian-Iraqi rapprochement. Sassine also anticipates an improvement in Lebanese-Iraqi relations and that Iraqi tourists will return to Lebanon in large numbers this summer.

COMMENT: Sassine's remarks add to the mounting evidence that the present government in Baghdad is continuing to consolidate its position. As for the relative positions of 'Ammash and Saddam at Tikriti, available information is contradictory. CAS for example, has reported that 'Ammash and Bakr have put aside their longstanding differences in order more effectively to counter the stronger position of Saddam after the downfall of former Vice President Hardan at Tikriti in October. On the other hand, some of our press contacts who have been following closely the situation in Iraq tell us they are convinced Saddam's position is virtually unassailable. They also see the UAR and Syria working behind the scenes in an effort to bring about changes in Baghdad to align Iraq more closely with the mainstream of Arab politics. One observer, for example, challenged the thesis that 'Ammash's position relative to Saddam's has improved, noting wryly that 'Ammash now makes news only on the sports page (he is head of Iraq's Olympic Preparatory Committee).

While it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from the conflicting evidence available, we are inclined toward the view that the present government in Baghdad is likely to be around for some time. While some changes in the cast of characters cannot be ruled out, we suspect they are likely to be more cosmetic than

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meaningful. As far as the Jarring peace mission is concerned, we are confident that the Arab governments directly involved in conflict with Israel will have little difficulty in convincing the GOI to go along if a settlement is obtained.

BUFFUM

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