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67409

STATE:

SUBJ: Situation in Iraq

1. During call on Asst. Sec. Sisco on April 19, Ambassador Van de Kerchove, Belgian Ambassador to Iraq, characterized internal situation in Iraq as one of relative stability. However, rivalries continue within Baathist Party leadership. Soviet influence is increasing, particularly in commercial area. Soviet political influence, on other hand, is not strong. At/moment relations between Iraq and Soviet Union are strained, flowing essentially from Soviet unhappiness with continued Iraqi persecution of Communists. Also Soviets are unhappy with Iraq's negative attitude toward a peace settlement.

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APPROVED BY:
NEA - Joseph J. Sisco

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2. Sisco inquired whether, as is currently case in certain other Arab countries, there is a QTE loosening up UNQTE in attitudes? Ambassador thought not. ~~XXX~~. Sisco asked whether Ambassador said his Soviet presence is considerable. ~~XXX~~ Soviet colleagues were almost invariably critical of Iraqi Government, both with regard to government's persecution of Communists as well as with respect to difficulties Soviets are experiencing in working with Iraqis in implementing economic projects.

3. Sisco asked whether Ambassador would characterize regime as totalitarian. The Ambassador replied in affirmative with important exception that Kurds are permitted freedom of expression. Kurdish views are expressed in particular in daily Kurdish newspaper al Ta'akhi. But, Ambassador emphasized, this is only form of freedom permitted in Iraq today.

4. In response to Sisco's question re Iraq's attitude ~~was~~ toward peace settlement, Ambassador said that Iraqi Government would not openly support peace settlement, but it would do

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nothing to prevent ~~one from occurring~~ ^{achievement}. Among other things, lack of a common boundary between Iraq and Israel affords Iraq luxury of dissociating itself from settlement.

5. Sisco inquired re Iraqi Government's attitude on Pales-
tinian movement. Ambassador replied that while Iraqi Government gives fedayeen QTE theoretical support UNQTE, Government as practical matter does very little to help fedayeen movement. For one thing Iraqi ~~regime~~ ^{regime} is apprehensive regarding potential rivalry from a strong fedayeen movement. Ambassador agreed with Sisco's observation that Iraqi Government has now turned inward.

6. Ambassador noted that Iraq is taking an increasing interest in Persian Gulf but said it has few assets to work with in this connection. Iraqi Army is weak. Sisco asked whether Iraqi Government has made issue over ownership of Islands of Tunbs and Abu Musa. Ambassador replied that, to his knowledge, subject

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are not really interested in Jordan now, perhaps in part because of increased Iraqi preoccupation with the Gulf.

9. Sisco inquired about Iraqi relations with Iran. Ambassador said that five months ago relations with Iran were bad, but they improved during recent OPEC oil negotiations in Tehran. He expected, however, that relations between two countries would again deteriorate.

10. In response to Sisco's question re economic situation, Ambassador said that last year was a bad one for Iraq from an economic standpoint. ~~It~~ had an unfavorable balance of trade, and there had been a drought. This year seemed to be slightly better in both areas. Additional oil revenues resulting from recent agreements will help situation.

END

ROGERS

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