

Political and Security Council Affairs Reports (Protitch Reports)

Syria - Egypt - Proposed Union

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DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND
SECURITY COUNCIL AFFAIRS

Confidential

30 January 1958

NOTE ON

SYRIA AND THE PROPOSED UNION WITH EGYPT

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1. The negotiations which have for a while been taking place between the Syrian and Egyptian leaders for the purpose of linking the two countries with still stronger ties than the existing alliance seem to be rapidly approaching their first stage of an agreement on principles. The activity displayed by the Syrian leaders, civil and military, and denoting a genuine anxiety to reach such an agreement instantly, gives rise to the question of the possible reasons for this sense of urgency on the part of Syria.

2. Syria has long entertained very strong aspirations to be the initiator of the movement towards Arab renaissance carried by a unified Arab State. In the inter-war period, she was vocal in decrying what she thought to be the failure of Britain to fulfil her promises to help King Hussein I to achieve one part of the desired Arab unity. She looked at the institution of the Mandate system by the League of Nations as a disguised instrument to effect the distribution of zones of influence in the Arab East between France and Britain, thus creating artificial divisions to stand eventually as strong barriers against the achievement of Arab unity. She developed a sense of frustration which, through her experience with the Mandate, led her to look with suspicion at the Arab policy of any great Power. This state of mind accounts for her seemingly paradoxical opposition to the unification efforts made by the late King Abdullah of Jordan with a view to realizing the project of Greater Syria and to the various attempts of the Iraqi statesmen to achieve the project of the Fertile Crescent. In both cases, she suspected a British move to expand the British zone of influence.

3. As soon as Jordan began in 1956 to dissolve her treaty links with Britain, Syria viewed with enthusiasm a possible Jordanian-Syrian unity. However, she regarded the turn of events since April 1957 as representing a reversal of the Jordanian independent policy, and her enthusiasm quickly disappeared. Now, to her mind, Egypt stands as the Arab State most actively following a policy of Arab emancipation. She is bound to think, therefore, that she should rapidly seize this opportunity to take a definite step on the road of Arab unity beginning by uniting Syria with Egypt regardless of the consequences or the repercussions of such a union.
4. These emotional predispositions, in the present circumstances of the internal political situation of Syria and her external relations, are at the root of the urgent desire to achieve results without any further delays.
5. The strong economic ties recently created between Syria and the Soviet Union have alarmed her northern neighbour, Turkey, and made continued co-operation between Syria and some Arab States difficult. But for friendship with Egypt, Syria would have found herself isolated from the other Arab countries. Determined as she is to pursue, on the one hand, her particular policy of "positive neutrality" and, on the other, to maintain her position of relative influence among the Arab States, she sees as the only alternative to isolation the strengthening of her ties with Egypt beyond possible hazards of friction. This could be assured only if the relationship of the two countries became a permanent feature of their existence -- i.e., if they were bound together in one or another form of a solid union.
6. Thus, the immediate anxiety of Syria about her future security is deeply permeated with the concept of her destiny as the dynamic part of an independent

Arab unified state. If Syria were concerned exclusively about her territorial safety, she could not have a better guarantee than to rely exclusively on one of the two great Powers. But this would have entailed the loss of her fundamental Arab character.

7. This overriding concern has silenced any hesitation or opposition based upon the consideration that, while the material advantages which may accrue to Syria from a merger with Egypt would be rather limited, the problems this merger may give rise to would be numerous and hard. It is admitted that the economy of Syria, which at present enjoys a relative prosperity, may be adversely affected if absorbed in a much larger but fundamentally penurious economy. More important, however, is the political future of Syria if it develops, considering its size, geographical position and its population of 4 million, a sense of complete reliance, in the financing of her development projects, upon one great Power. The conviction thus prevailed that the indefinite postponement of any step towards union for mere consideration of the problems it raises will in the end reduce the Arab aspirations to unity to utopia. Rather than seeing in them a cause for despair, it was felt, positive efforts should be made to solve them. The immediate obstacles should be tackled prior to the proclamation of the union, while the details of organization can be taken up later, in view of the length of time necessary for their completion.

8. This Syrian sense of urgency is further accentuated by an internal factor. The term of the present parliament is about to end. The constitutional provisions for the early issuance of the electoral lists are imperative. From the point of view of political parties, the electoral campaign --

with all that it entails in terms of activities, alignments, compromises and above all expenditures -- cannot possibly be delayed further, if the elections are to be held. Only a fundamental change in the constitutional structure of Syria will remove the prospects of elections. An electoral campaign at this time might heighten inter-party friction in the present governmental coalition. The parties of the opposition, on the other hand, are reluctant to face the electorate, for reasons of their own. They are apprehensive that, under the present circumstances, the absence of adequate guarantees for a truly free ballot may lead to their defeat or indeed to their complete elimination from the political picture. They further believe that the merger of Syria with any other stronger Arab country would have the salutary effect of eclipsing the ten-year-old interference of the Syrian Army in politics. Their alleged past connexion with Iraq's attempts to effect an Iraqi-Syrian union makes them now more vocal in urging a union with Egypt. They are anxious to demonstrate that they do not have any allegiance to Iraq or to any of the Western Powers and thus to silence once and for all their rivals who have so often thrived on such accusations.

9. The Baath Socialists are urged by more fundamental motives to spur the union with Egypt. "One Arab State, for the fulfilment of an eternal mission," is not merely their slogan but constitutes the essence of their doctrine. They are under heavy pressure from the rank and file of their own party to give account of their achievements in the field of Arab unity, now that they have been participating in Government for about two years. They dare not face the electorate with empty hands. The tribute for obtaining the economic assistance from the Soviet Union goes rather to the influential

leader Khaled El Azm, present Vice-Premier, Minister of Finance and Acting Minister of Defence, while this assistance has also enhanced the prestige of the Communist Party. A union with Egypt would therefore justify the continuance of the leadership of the Baath Socialists and might possibly increase their strength. President Nasser's conception of Arab nationalism is deeply permeated with the Baath resurrectionist doctrine.

10. The Nationalist Party of Premier Assali alone does not constitute a viable unit. Its chances for influence always lie in a successful alliance with other parties. Its cooperation with the Baath Socialists in government has resulted in strengthening the ties of the two parties which now adopt the same views towards the major lines of policy.

11. This quasi-unanimity leads to a race among the parties where each is anxious to bid higher than the other. Thus, a confederation between Egypt and Syria is considered too short of fulfilling the "popular wishes", a federation inadequate to meet these wishes and bearing in itself the germs of possible secession. Nothing short of a complete merger of the two countries united under "one President, one Parliament and one Army" is acceptable.

12. Such a race for complete union with Egypt, entailing as it does the eventual abolition of the existing political parties in Syria, is not to the liking of Khaled El-Azem, who only recently was planning the setting-up of a "progressive party" and who was counting on quick tangible improvement of the economic conditions in Syria resulting from the Soviet economic assistance, which might increase his chances of success in his campaign

for Presidency when Quwatly's term of office came to an end.

13. The Communist Party has stated its attitude as one favouring closer ties with Egypt but preserving to both Syria and Egypt their respective identities and characteristics. It may be noted that the Communist Party, which is suppressed in Egypt, is very active in Syria and is anxious to continue its expansion.

14. To what extent these two forces, Khaled EL-Azem and the Communist Party, separately or together, may divert the bulk of opinion from pressing ahead with this idea of a completely unified state depends in the last analysis on the attitude of the leaders of the Army. No sign is available to indicate that the Army is opposing the general trend. On the contrary, the visits of General Bizri and Colonel Serraj to Cairo would suggest that the Army is actively participating in the current negotiations for union with Egypt.

15. While the reasons for Syria's anxiety to reach rapid results have been indicated above, other aspects of the proposed union, such as the Egyptian point of view and the possible repercussions of the union, will be dealt with separately.

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND
SECURITY COUNCIL AFFAIRS

Confidential

31 January 1958

NOTE ON

EGYPT AND THE PROPOSED SYRIAN-EGYPTIAN UNION

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1. As indicated in the previous paper, union of Arab states is a long-cherished slogan in Syria; the choice of union with Egypt as the first step is the logical outcome of the recent political orientation of the two countries, and the urgency of Syrian efforts to consummate the union was dictated by certain internal and external considerations which have arisen during the last few months. Egypt, however, had been a hesitant suitor whose consent to the union was apparently not forthcoming even a few days ago.

2. As late as March 1957, President Nasser was thinking more in terms of strengthening the existing League of Arab States rather than of establishing a federation which he regarded as a remote possibility. He was even apprehensive that discussion of a concrete constitutional structure at this stage might give rise to antagonisms rather than advance the ideal of Arab nationalism. In an interview with an Indian editor, he said:

"I am not thinking in terms of any federation or confederation or such constitutional formula at all for the present. They won't help our cause so much as unity of thought and faith in Arab nationalism will. In fact, such constitutional frames can only create antagonisms to the Arab ideal and become weapons in the hands of our enemies to sabotage it. ... I feel that once foreign influences are removed, Arab unity will follow automatically. ...

"I would prefer the final organization to evolve from the hearts and minds of the Arab peoples themselves, naturally and normally, without any sort of imposition from above or any artificial stimulus. For if we seek to hasten or press such processes, they would create opposition which our enemies will exploit to their advantage. In the meantime, I would prefer organizations like the Arab League, for instance, which has not been functioning quite effectively, to become strong and formidable links between Arab States."

3. The change in the attitude of Egypt to the proposed union has thus

come about within the last few months as a result of events which have taken place in the relations of the Arab States among themselves and with the big Powers.

4. The events in Jordan in April 1957 and thereafter drove home the realization in Egypt of the extent to which individual Arab States are susceptible to external influences or pressures. The removal of the Nabulsi government in Jordan came as a serious setback to the Egyptian position in the Arab world. This was particularly grievous at a time when Egypt was endeavouring to prepare the ground for settling the questions outstanding from the hostilities of the fall of 1956 and to mitigate the consequences of the Eisenhower doctrine which appeared to involve attempts to isolate her from other Arab countries.

5. Egypt also saw in the alleged "conspiracies" against the Syrian Government in July 1957 evidence of an attempt to isolate her from Syria.

6. Syria's decision to approach Moscow for assistance in solving urgent economic problems and in ensuring security served notice on Egypt that, while Syrian leaders were attached to Egypt, they were free to forge other external links if Egypt failed to render effective assistance. The Soviet statements during the Syrian-Turkish crisis indicated to Egypt that the Soviet Union might be assuming a role of protector and not merely a source of assistance to Syria. The despatch of an Egyptian contingent to Syria, implying a commitment to participate in the defence of Syria from external attack, was regarded as a means of strengthening inter-Arab solidarity as distinguished from external support.

7. The most recent development which left its impact on Egypt's thinking was the emphasis placed on the current efforts to revitalize the Baghdad Pact. Once again to Egypt, the meeting of Foreign Ministers in Ankara implied an effort to weaken the inter-Arab organization and to bring further pressure on Syria. While the danger of an external attack on Syria appeared to have diminished, the fear of a forcible change in government continued to be present in the minds of Egyptian, as well as Syrian, leaders.

8. In the light of these recent events, when Syria took the initiative, for reasons particular to herself, to bring about complete union with Egypt at this time, the hands of Egypt were to some extent tied. The choice appeared to Egypt to be between working out an early union with Syria or letting events drift. An early union would have the greatest psychological effect in the Arab world and would meet the immediate problems of Syria. As for Egypt, the welcome received by the Egyptian parliamentary delegation in Syria, the sponsorship of union by all the Syrian political parties and, finally, the agreement by most of the Syrian leaders to set up a National Union along the Egyptian example, convinced her that union was a practical political proposition. On the other hand, further delay in giving concrete form to the proposed union might have not only led to frustration in Syria with all that it implied but would have constituted a serious setback to general Arab aspirations.

9. The internal problems and external repercussions of the union between Syria and Egypt will be dealt with separately.

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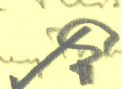
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