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Mideast Events Came as a 'Surprise'

U.S. Intelligence Blamed for Foul-Up

Washington. — When the clouds of crisis first began gathering over the Middle East, a senior American intelligence official pooh-pooed the significance of Egyptian troop convoys moving through Cairo.

It was, he said airily, just "another show" by President Gamal Abdel Nasser, designed to placate the anti-Israeli feelings of Syria and other Arab states.



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"Nasser's probably just marching them up and down the hill again," he said.

Fourteen hours later, the world was electrified by Nasser's demand that the UN peacekeeping force on the Israel - Egypt border be withdrawn immediately. The next day, Egyptian troops began occupying UN positions "on the line."

Poor Performance

The episode serves to illustrate to White House officials how poorly the U. S. intelligence community has functioned in the Middle East crisis.

But it only hints at the chagrin and surprise in the White House when President Johnson first heard the May 31 news that Jordan's young King Hussein, one of his few Arab "friends," had signed a military pact with Nasser that pledged Jordan's assistance in the anti-Israeli campaign.

For reasons apparently not known even to itself, the Central Intelligence Agency appears to have been caught completely offguard by Nasser's military and diplomatic coups in recent weeks. And the Defense Intelligence Agency, Secretary Robert S. McNamara's streamlined, unified military counterpart to the CIA, fared no better.

Excuses Offered

Excuses being given by CIA and DIA, according to knowledgeable sources, fall into two categories. One is that American agents in the Mideast and elsewhere were so accustomed to anti-Israeli propaganda in the Arab countries that they assumed Nasser once again was only crying wolf. The other alibi is that the British and French intelligence services were taken by surprise, too.

The President's key advisers can understand the second explanation. Britain and France have been in low repute among Arab leaders ever since they permitted the establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948 and fought against Egyptian forces in the Suez crisis of 1956.

The British, whether in government or business, are regarded with enmity because they once were the colonial masters of Arabia. The French fare no better, primarily because they are the economic and military suppliers for hated Israel.

Prior Relations

But Administration leaders anticipated that the CIA and the DIA would have a finger on the Arab world's pulse because of U. S. food shipments that have gone to Egypt, military assistance that has gone to Jordan, plus the vast American oil interests in the Middle East. Such relationships with any country are traditional havens or "covers" for intelligence agents.

Where the American intelligence community fell down, however, was not only in the field, but apparently in Washington.

Agents in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel reportedly advised Washington, somewhat belatedly, that signs of troop movements and the attitudes of Arab leaders indicated that Nasser might be preparing for his long promised showdown with Israel.

Field Data Rejected

But the CIA Evaluations Board, which prepares a daily intelligence summary for Mr. Johnson, and the Pentagon's DIA chose to regard the field data as not particularly alarming. The opinion that Nasser was staging another show was an opinion formulated in Washington, not in the field.

The result of the intelligence breakdown has been to give the Administration major problems it did not count on.

Jordan's King Hussein, the beneficiary of millions in U. S. military aid, had been expected to be at least somewhat neutral.

But Hussein's domestic political pressures and Jordan's ties with Islam were totally under-rated, and seemingly have been for a long time.

U.S. 'Hardware'

The President faces the prospect of Jordan's American jets and tanks and the American-trained Jordanian Army — the best in the Arab world — will be used against Israel if war comes.

And with Hussein over in the Nasser camp, White House officials are skeptical of intelligence reports that Saudi Arabia's King Faisal will stay on the fence.

The last straw in the intelligence foul-up may have been provided by the Russians, who are openly on the Arab side. The Soviet Embassy in Cairo reportedly knew in advance of the secret Nasser - Hussein meeting, because Soviet agents in the Jordanian capital of Amman, Washington hears, felt Hussein might be ripe for plucking.