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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

16 September 1957

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: LIKELY SOVIET REACTION TO VARIOUS FORMS OF PRO-WESTERN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

ASSUMPTIONS

A. That military action in the cases considered would be taken only following provocation by Syria, involving border incidents or recognizable subversive acts by Syria inside one of the neighboring states.

B. That Israel does not intervene in the conflict.

*File  
Memorandum  
2 to DCI*

JOB NO. 79R00904A

BOX NO. 4

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THE GENERAL SOVIET REACTION

1. By its recent warnings against pro-Western intervention in Syria, especially its latest note to Turkey, the USSR has adopted a strong public position on this issue. The USSR would be fearful of the loss to its prestige if a government it openly supports were overthrown, with the resulting setback to its newly won position in the Middle East. There is also cause for concern in Khrushchev's likely sensitivity to any major external setback so soon after he had consolidated his leadership.

2. We believe, therefore, that forcible pro-Western intervention in Syria would produce a major international crisis. The USSR would make great propaganda play of alleged Western instigation, make threatening military gestures, undertake some sabotage and subversive actions and promptly send such limited technical and logistical support to Syria as it could through available channels. Beyond this, it could choose among three broad courses of action (not wholly mutually exclusive):

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- (1) overt military intervention directly against the states involved;
- (2) overt aid to Syria ranging from sending as many Soviet "volunteers" as feasible to flying in Soviet aircraft to operate from Syrian bases; or (3) attempts to secure immediate UN and great power intercession to halt the conflict or possibly to provide justification for subsequent Soviet intervention.

3. A key factor in the Soviet choice of countermoves would be the estimated reaction of the US. We do not believe that the USSR would desire to let the crisis reach such proportions as to involve grave risks of general war. Zhukov and the Soviet military would probably advocate caution in this respect. But the Soviet leaders would probably believe that their own deterrent capabilities would enforce similar caution on the Western powers and leave the USSR considerable maneuverability.

4. The Soviet leaders are well aware that it would be extremely difficult for them to bring substantial forces to bear in Syria -- overtly or covertly -- without violating the frontiers of

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US and UK allies, with the attendant risks involved. We also believe that they would be sensitive to the repercussions on their prestige, their position in the Middle East, and perhaps even more their position in Eastern Europe if they accepted what appeared to be a major test of Western-Soviet strength, particularly one involving Soviet forces, and then had to back down. Finally, they would probably estimate that a reverse in Syria would be only temporary, since Western chances of establishing a stable pro-Western regime would seem limited at best.

5. In these circumstances we believe that the USSR would see major advantages in appearing as a peace-loving opponent of aggression by an immediate appeal to the UN. Whether or not the intervention was portrayed as being provoked by Syria, the USSR would label it as clearly Western initiated, and might expect that the aggressor would be condemned by a substantial majority in the UN, particularly the Afro-Asian nations. By acting through the UN, the USSR would avoid the risks and difficulties of extensive military countermoves. Soviet success in getting UN intervention

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would greatly enhance Soviet prestige and inevitably appear as a defeat for the US. Moreover, by itself playing a major role in UN or great power intercession, the USSR would help to achieve one of its major objectives, that of securing a recognized voice in great power action on Middle Eastern issues.

6. The duration of the crisis might significantly affect the Soviet reaction. If the initial intervention were rapidly successful, the odds against extensive Soviet military support to Syria would be increased. But if the crisis dragged on and UN action were delayed, the USSR might step up its support of Syria, especially if growing world condemnation of the intervention appeared to support this. However, the USSR's estimate of the likely Western reaction would remain the key factor in any such Soviet decision.

7. The USSR and Egypt have extensive capabilities for sabotage, fomenting strikes, and demonstrations, and otherwise stirring up trouble throughout the Middle East. In particular they and Syria could extensively disrupt Middle East oil supplies. In event of

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fighting in Syria, the USSR and Egypt would probably carry out various of these actions. Some interruption of oil movements would almost certainly occur, and subversive activities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq would probably be stepped up. Moreover, the USSR might make threatening gestures outside the Middle East, as a diversionary action.

CASE A - LIKELY SOVIET REACTION TO INTERVENTION BY  
IRAQ ALONE, OR TOGETHER WITH JORDAN AND/OR  
LEBANON

8. Unless the Soviet estimate of Iraqi-Lebanese-Jordanian military capabilities is higher than our own, the USSR would probably think that they were unlikely to succeed in their designs, and, with US/UK and Turkish forces not directly involved, it is almost certain the USSR would not intervene directly. Instead it would attempt by threats and intimidating military moves to deter subsequent Turkish or US/UK support to the invaders, and to warn the states concerned that the USSR might be compelled to intervene if they did not withdraw.

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9. The USSR would almost certainly press immediately for prompt UN intervention to enforce a cease fire. It would label the US, UK and Turkey as being the real behind-the-scenes aggressors, and seek to make the test of their denials their willingness to support strong UN action. The USSR would threaten that unless the UN acted, it might have to intervene. Alternatively, it might call for great power intervention and mediation with Soviet participation.

10. Meanwhile, to enhance Syrian resistance, the USSR would strongly urge Egypt to send troops and planes to Syria's support. Though Soviet aid would be channelled largely through Egypt if time permitted, some degree of direct Soviet technical and logistical support to Syria would also be likely. However, the USSR probably would not risk broadening the conflict (at least initially) by sending in numerous "volunteers". The USSR would employ sea lift, if feasible, and probably clandestine overflights over Iran and Iraq, despite their Baghdad Pact status; some overflights of SE Turkey might be undertaken, but the USSR would seek to limit the risks of Turkish reaction.

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CASE B - - LIKELY REACTION TO MILITARY INTERVENTION BY  
TURKEY ALONE OR TOGETHER WITH THE ABOVE  
ARAB STATES

11. In our view the USSR would feel compelled to react much more strongly and immediately in this case, because of the increased prospects of early Western victory. It would almost certainly adopt a highly threatening posture, including partial mobilization along Turkish and perhaps Iranian frontiers.

12. But we believe that the USSR would still see great initial advantages in diplomatic and UN action for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal. In the case of Turkish intervention alone it is unlikely that any alleged provocation justifying the intervention would be convincing to the world. In this case the USSR could expect support from most Afro-Asian States, and many abstentions from other countries. The Soviets would probably estimate that a condemnation-withdrawal resolution could be obtained in a very few days, unless the US vigorously opposed, and that in this event the US would be very seriously embarrassed. If the Turks had been joined by one or more Arab states, the Soviet chances of a majority would be less but the USSR would still expect a large number of favorable votes.



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13. We believe the attractions of this course would be such that the Soviets would almost certainly make it their initial move. Should they do so, they might continue troop movements and other threatening gestures, as being likely to promote rapid UN action rather than the reverse. However, the Soviets would probably limit their military help to Syria, at least during this initial period of UN consideration, to technical and logistical support. The Soviets would also encourage active Egyptian support of Syria, as well, of course, as sabotage and all possible disruption and subversion in the capitals of any Arab States joining with Turkey.

14. If a UN resolution brought a halt to the Turkish action, the USSR would move to participate as actively as possible in the settlement and to insure a pro-Soviet government. If, on the other hand, the Turks persisted notwithstanding the UN resolution and, as is probable, appeared likely to overthrow the present Syrian government and occupy Damascus, the USSR would be confronted with the choice between major military action and acceptance of this result.

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15. If the Soviet leaders considered that the prevailing climate of opinion would sharply inhibit Western countermoves, and that Syria could be effectively assisted they might risk sending "volunteers"; they might even risk some overflights of SE Turkey where Turkish air defenses are weak and the chances of a clash limited. In fact, the USSR might estimate that such actions would influence the Western powers to accept a cease fire. However, we believe that the USSR would be reluctant to take the risks of extensive military intervention in Syria. The Soviet leaders, conscious of their limited capabilities in this connection as compared to those of the Western powers, would regard such intervention as difficult to carry out and of dubious effectiveness against the Turks. It would also entail substantial risks of US-UK countermeasures. Finally, if a UN resolution were in existence, large scale Soviet intervention would be an inappropriate response.

16. As to direct military action against Turkey itself, we believe that such action would be highly unlikely, but we cannot exclude it altogether, especially if the UN were to go on to a Korea - type resolution calling for action by member states to

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defeat the "aggression". We believe that, in the absence of contrary indications, the USSR would probably believe that a Soviet attack on Turkey would be taken by the US as invoking NATO obligations, and hence would create grave risk of general war; even if the Soviet action were under a UN resolution, the Soviets would probably regard the risk as substantial. Moreover, in deciding whether to accept this risk, the Soviets would probably calculate that the Turkish success would be short-lived. Even if Turkey had been joined by one or more Arab states, the USSR would expect a widespread Arab reaction against Turkey (and the US as its apparent sponsor), which could subsequently be turned to major Soviet advantage in the Middle East. Hence, despite some short-term loss of prestige, the Soviets would not consider themselves confronted with a serious lasting setback.

17. While the above reasoning seems to us to weigh heavily against any Soviet resort to direct military action, we repeat that we cannot exclude such action wholly, having in mind particularly Khrushchev's personal stake in avoiding even a short-term personal defeat.

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CASE C - LIKELY SOVIET REACTION IN THE ABOVE CONTINGENCIES  
CONTINGENCIES IF THE US AND UK GAVE  
SIGNIFICANT LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

18. Since the USSR would regard any intervention in Syria as being US/UK instigated and supported, we believe that it would expect further significant US/UK aid to Turkey and/or its Arab partners once the intervention had begun. Assuming that such aid was demonstratable, the USSR would use it to back up its diplomatic and propaganda efforts to label the Western powers as the real aggressors and to secure UN intercession.

19. The USSR might also regard such overt US/UK aid as permitting the USSR to justify publicly similar Soviet support of Syria, in more open fashion than otherwise. It might resort to such open assistance as sending "volunteers", or Soviet planes and pilots to operate from Syrian bases. On the other hand the fact of such US/UK support would be additional evidence of their determination and might reinforce Soviet caution. On balance we consider that the USSR probably would remain unwilling to

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take the risks of extensive military counteraction for the reasons given in Case B above.

CASE D - LIKELY SOVIET REACTION IF LARGE SCALE SOVIET EMPLOYMENT OF VOLUNTEERS, FOLLOWING TURKISH INTERVENTION IN SYRIA, LED TO US/UK OR POSSIBLY NATO INTERVENTION IN SUPPORT OF TURKEY

20. By this time the crisis would already have reached a stage of acute tension; the initial series of moves and countermoves would have resulted in a direct confrontation of Soviet and Western forces involving grave risk of miscalculation leading to general war. The immediate issues in Syria would be overshadowed by great power maneuvering on a broader scale.

21. If the USSR had already gone as far as to send numerous "volunteers" to Syria it would mean either that the USSR had been confident that doing so would not lead to such strong Western counter-moves or that it was willing to take such a risk. In either event the momentum of the crisis would have carried the USSR to a point where backing down would be very difficult. But by this time, unless other

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factors emerged to affect their estimate, we believe the Soviet leaders would see grave risks of general war in the light of demonstrated US/UK or NATO unwillingness to retreat. Three broad alternatives would be open to the USSR: (1) to initiate general war; (2) to continue the local conflict, presumably at a serious disadvantage, or to attempt to broaden it by other local actions; or (3) to seek a way out through such means as a cease fire, UN mediation, or a great power conference.

22. We believe that if the USSR had not become engaged to a greater extent than a large scale volunteer force and some overflights, it would seek to avoid general war. Despite the loss to its prestige if it appeared to back down, the USSR might even see considerable advantages in being the power which proposed a peaceful solution to the impasse.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

*Sherman Kent*  
SHERMAN KENT  
Assistant Director  
National Estimates