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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

7 April 1959

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Kurdish Problem

1. In view of recent increased interest in the Kurds as a potentially troublesome element in the Middle East, we invited Kurdish specialists from OCI, DDP, State, and the services to meet with us to discuss the problem on 2 April. Although no attempt was made to reach formal conclusions, there appeared to be general agreement on most key issues.

2. The principal substantive points made at the meeting are summarized below for your information:

a. There is little likelihood that an independent Kurdistan will ever be established or seriously attempted.*

* The Kurds are the predominant element of the population in an area embracing southeast Turkey, northwest Iran, and northeast Iraq. Some Kurds are also found in northeast Syria and in the USSR. Although reliable population estimates are lacking, the Kurds of the area are estimated to number over 3 million, divided roughly as follows: Turkey: 1½ million; Iran: 500,000; Iraq: 800,000; Syria: 250,000; USSR: 100,000; (Soviet Armenia).

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Despite continuing efforts by exile groups and some of the younger urbanized elements in Iraq to stir up Kurdish nationalist feeling, the Kurds have never been politically united and they lack any real sense of nationhood. Such ethnic, linguistic, and religious cohesiveness as does distinguish them will probably continue to be outweighed by inherent inhibiting factors - narrow and often divisive tribal and sub-tribal loyalties, varying degrees of identification with the states in which they live, and widespread indifference as to who controls the political machinery so long as the individual's tribe is left alone. Over time, the Kurdish martial tradition and the cause of Kurdish separatism are likely to be further weakened by detribalization, settlement, and related social changes.

b. Nevertheless, the Kurds will continue to have considerable nuisance value as rebels - or potential rebels - at least for some years to come. As a traditionally warlike and still largely nomadic or semi-nomadic people who occupy relatively remote areas and have a long history of bad blood with the civil authorities of their host countries, the Kurds could fairly readily be aroused if

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given arms and funds from outside. Even in the absence of an acknowledged over-all leader, enough tribes might be stirred up to make considerable trouble for a weak host country, especially if it had other security problems to contend with at the same time.

c. The security problem posed by the Kurds is minimal in Turkey, where the government and army have long exercised firm control and have had some success in encouraging assimilation. In Syria the relatively small Kurdish minority has been settled for years and offers little trouble to the government. It thus has little special potential as a vehicle for Iraqi subversion against the UAR.

d. However, the situation is different in Iran, where the government's policy is one of general neglect punctuated by fine promises on the one hand and efforts to repress the Kurds and put them in their place on the other. At the same time, the government in Tehran exercises only limited effective authority over its Kurdish areas. Although there is presently wide-spread acceptance of the

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status quo and even some genuine loyalty to the crown among Iranian Kurds, they might cause a serious diversion of Iranian internal security resources if sufficiently aroused.

e. Iraq is currently the scene of most significant developments respecting the Kurds, who comprise some 20 % of the population. The Qassim government seeks to play down traditional Arab-Kurdish animosities by placing Kurds in high government posts, inviting Mulla Mustapha and his followers to return, proclaiming Iraq a republic of Arab and Kurds, and broadcasting extensively in Kurdish. Especially if the Communists continue their effective drive toward power in Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds will give them a significant weapon against Iran and perhaps Turkey. At the same time, Kurdish-Arab animosities will continue to present problems of control to any Iraqi government.

f. It was pointed out that the USSR, which aside from its cooperation in returning Mulla Mustapha and his followers to Iraq* has maintained its agitation and

* An FI report from Baghdad indicates that the shipment of some 800-900 Kurds reported by the press as transiting the Suez Canal en route to Basra is made up of Mulla Mustapha's followers.

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propaganda among the Kurds at a relatively low key. There appeared to be considerable support for the view, which we share, that the USSR, while not neglecting to build up its assets among the Kurds, would view the Kurds primarily as a means of harassing and undermining Iran and probably in conjunction with or following other moves to create trouble for the Shah. It was also pointed out that the USSR would probably not want to rock the boat with matters going so well in Iraq and that, in fact, the threat of Kurdish trouble would provide the USSR more nuisance value vis-a-vis the Arabs and the West than would an attempt to stir them up at this time. So far as concerns any Soviet desire to establish a "land bridge" between the USSR and the more outer parts of the Persian Gulf, it was felt that pressures were less likely to be brought direct from the USSR than through the Kurds of Iraq after Soviet influence in that country had become controlling.

g. It was generally agreed that Turkey and Iran would be unwilling to use Kurdish nationalism as a weapon against the Arabs for fear of stirring up trouble at home and that

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Nasser's identification with Arab nationalism would make it extremely difficult for him to woo the Iraqi Kurds.

3. We do not believe, on the basis of our discussion, that there is need or demand for a formal estimate on the Kurds at this time. However, there was general agreement that the Kurdish problem should receive continuing close scrutiny by all agencies represented at the meeting, with particular emphasis on getting fuller reporting on conditions and attitudes.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

[Redacted Signature Box]

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