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THE SOVIET THREAT TO IRAN  
AND THE CENTO AREA

*Submitted by the*  
**DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE**

*The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, The Joint Staff, and NSA.*

*Concurred in by the*  
**UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD**

*on 5 October 1961. Concurring were The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Intelligence), Department of the Navy; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF; the Director for Intelligence, Joint Staff; the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations; and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.*

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# THE SOVIET THREAT TO IRAN AND THE CENTO AREA

## THE PROBLEM

To estimate Soviet intentions toward Iran and the CENTO area generally, vulnerabilities of the Middle Eastern CENTO members to Soviet threats, and likely reactions to certain possible developments in that area.

## THE ESTIMATE

### I. SOVIET POLICY TOWARD THE CENTO AREA

1. During the past month or so, coincident with rising East-West tensions over Berlin, the USSR has stepped up its campaign of intimidation against the Middle Eastern members of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). The increase in propaganda and diplomatic pressure has been greatest against Iran and least against Turkey. Although in different contexts, Iran and Pakistan have each been threatened with Soviet military intervention. The Soviet campaign has not succeeded in disrupting the alliance, but has led to heightened concern in these countries, particularly in Iran.

2. The USSR has sought to weaken or destroy CENTO (and its predecessor, the Baghdad Pact) since its formation, and Soviet propaganda has consistently charged the alliance with hostile intent. The present Soviet campaign has centered on the exploitation of Baghdad Pact papers which, according to Moscow, document CENTO's aggressive intentions toward the USSR and its disregard for the life and welfare of the inhabitants of the regional CENTO countries. These papers are alleged to prove, among other things, that Baghdad Pact plans for nuclear attacks on the USSR would involve an "atomic death zone" in Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The Soviets have also charged that CENTO

plans call for the partition of Afghanistan between Iran and Pakistan, an accusation intended mainly to aggravate already tense relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to reinforce Afghan suspicions of the US.

3. Soviet pressure has been most severe toward Iran. The USSR has consistently asserted that certain provisions of the Soviet-Iranian Treaty of 1921, initially designed to enable Russia to take action against any counterrevolutionary forces which might establish themselves in Iran, gives it the right to intervene against any "foreign aggressive forces" in Iran. The Soviets have, accordingly, told influential Iranians that the USSR might intervene in Iran unless Tehran withdraws from the CENTO Alliance, and have come close to threatening the government itself with military intervention.

4. We believe that the Soviet threats against CENTO should be considered primarily as part of a general Soviet policy of intimidation attending the present period of heightened East-West tension, the primary pressure point of which is Berlin. It should be noted that certain of the documents which the Soviets are now exploiting are authentic and have almost certainly been in their possession for several years. The current level of world tension enables Moscow to increase its pressure on a number of target countries without

seeming to resort to special provocation. We do not believe the Soviets want the West to conclude that an ultimate worldwide showdown is at hand. Therefore, while the Soviets may feel that application of severe pressure on a broader front would be useful in reducing the will and ability of the West and the regional CENTO members to resist we do not believe that the currently intensified Soviet pressure against CENTO portends an intention to open another area of critical confrontation at this time.

5. The USSR's longstanding campaign against CENTO arises essentially from Soviet political ambitions in the Middle East, rather than from concern over the alleged military threat of CENTO. The Soviets believe that the dissolution of CENTO would facilitate the extension of Soviet influence by undermining confidence in Western commitments, and thereby encouraging the replacement of Western-oriented governments with neutralist or leftist regimes. We believe that the Soviets consider that their chances are best in Iran, and will attempt to exploit the weakness of the Shah's regime regardless of the existence of other crisis situations.

## II. SITUATION IN THE CENTO NATIONS

6. There are limitations on Soviet ability to intimidate the Middle Eastern members of CENTO short of using outright force. These limitations are greatest in Turkey and least in Iran. In all three countries the local Communist parties are presently weak, but in Iran and to a much lesser extent in Pakistan there is some discontent that the USSR can exploit. Economic relations between the USSR and the CENTO members are not extensive enough to provide the Soviets with significant leverage. The leaders of the countries are convinced that yielding to Soviet threats would at best bring only a temporary respite, although the Shah of Iran—whose country is the most exposed to the USSR and whose government is the weakest—is less resolute than the Turkish or Pakistani leaders.

7. Turkey, protected by NATO and strongly anti-Russian by tradition, is unlikely to be affected by the Soviet intimidation campaign.

The people as well as the government leaders are convinced from centuries of experience that the only way to deal with threats from their northern neighbor is to stand firm. Despite this consensus, Turkey is presently passing through a difficult period as the military regime prepares to hold national elections and to return the government to civilian hands. This transition may not take place smoothly, and political stability may suffer as a result. Such a development would not weaken appreciably Turkish resolve to resist direct Soviet pressures. However, it probably would lessen Turkey's ability to provide strong and active support for Western positions in other areas.

8. Pakistan's pro-Western posture is also unlikely to be abandoned in the face of Soviet threats. Pakistan has potentially serious internal weaknesses and neutralism appeals to many Pakistanis. Nevertheless, the Ayub regime's firm control of the country limits the present Soviet ability to stimulate and exploit whatever discontent exists.

9. However, Pakistan's dispute with Afghanistan—now at a very acute stage—offers the USSR the opportunity to play a more active role in the area. The closure of the Pakistan-Afghan border and the increased prospect of fighting between the two countries, which offer the USSR the chance to make Afghanistan almost completely dependent on it, have been a major factor in the reversal of the trend toward an improvement of Soviet-Pakistani relations which took place earlier this year. The Soviet threat to provide massive support for Afghanistan is unlikely to cause Pakistan to yield on the Pushtoonistan issue, although it probably will inhibit the Ayub regime from taking serious military action against Afghanistan. However, faced with a deteriorating situation in its relations with Afghanistan and with India, Pakistan would at this time hardly be likely to loosen its ties with the West which, although not always effective from the Pakistan point of view, save it from complete isolation in a hostile regional environment.

10. Iran is the most vulnerable target for a Soviet attempt to undermine CENTO. The Shah's regime is faced with discontented minorities and growing opposition from nationalist reform groups. Although some possibility of subverting such discontented minorities as the Kurds, Azerbaijanis, and the Arabs still exists, the power of these groups relative to the central government has declined in recent years and we believe that they do not presently constitute a serious threat to the central government's control.

11. The Iranian Government is more vulnerable to opposition from nationalist reform elements. The moderately-reformist Amini government, installed in May 1961 in an attempt to reduce the growing opposition of these elements, has made only modest progress to date in carrying out its reform program. Nevertheless, while Soviet propaganda activities against the Shah's regime may cause some increase in nationalist opposition, they are not likely to be decisive. In addition, the Tudeh (Iranian Communist) Party has been hard hit by the Iranian security organs, and with almost all of its leaders in jail or exile it can play only a minor role in Iran. (However, in the event of a nationalist upheaval, Tudeh capabilities might be speedily enhanced.) On balance, the Shah's regime does not appear to be threatened in the near future.<sup>1</sup>

12. In any case, the Shah will find it difficult to maintain a firm position in the face of continued Soviet threats. He is under considerable pressure from conservatives as well as nationalists to revert to the traditional Iranian policy of neutrality. Soviet charges that the regime's present course will lead to Iran's destruction probably will increase such pressures on the Shah. Any conviction on the Shah's part that the US was reducing its support for Iran would, of course, increase the chances that he would seek an accommodation with the USSR. He is convinced

<sup>1</sup> For a basic assessment of Iranian prospects see NIS 34-61, "The Outlook for Iran," dated 28 February 1961. A discussion of the prospects of the Amini government is available in SNIE 34-2-61, "Short-Term Outlook for Iran," dated 23 May 1961.

that alignment with the West offers the best hope for maintaining Iranian independence—as well as assuring his dominance within Iran. Nevertheless, he has periods of recurring doubt as to whether the West in general and the US in particular will provide what he regards as adequate support to counter Soviet pressures. As long as the Shah believes essential Western support is forthcoming, he will remain aligned with the West, though he will continuously seek additional military aid and new assurances of US support.

### III. REACTIONS TO US MOVES CONCERNING CENTO

13. Any significant strengthening of the US commitment to CENTO, such as agreeing to the establishment of a command structure and the designation of a US officer as military commander, stationing US combat forces in the CENTO area, or joining CENTO would encourage the Shah and his government to resist Soviet pressures. However, such activities would probably increase the vigor of the radical nationalist opposition. A strengthened US commitment would also remove doubts on the part of other regional members of CENTO as to US willingness to maintain the alliance.

14. Moscow's reaction to any such extension of US commitments—short of stationing US troops in Iran—would almost certainly include an intensification of its threats and propaganda attacks on the alliance as a whole and on its individual members, particularly Iran.<sup>2</sup> The Soviets probably would step up their efforts to bring down the Iranian regime and might provide increased covert support to left-wing and radical nationalist opposition elements. However, we do not think the USSR would go so far as to take military action against Iran.

15. Soviet reactions would be more serious if the US should station combat forces on Iranian soil, or if the Soviets came to believe

<sup>2</sup> We do not believe that the Soviet reaction would be substantially different if the commanding officer were British rather than American, as the Soviets would regard such action as a result of a US-UK decision.

such action was imminent. Historically, the Russians have been alarmed by the presence of any "hostile outsiders" in Iran; in the present situation, the Soviets have apparently been confident for some time that they could forestall a Western attempt to "occupy" Iran. Moreover, the Soviet leaders would probably see such a US military move—particularly in view of the Berlin crisis—as a blow to Soviet prestige, and also as a potentially serious threat to the security of the USSR on a new front. They would almost certainly feel compelled to respond by some action in the same area. Their specific reactions would depend on the Soviet assessment of the strength and nature of US forces involved and might even include an occupation of a portion of northern Iran.

16. In Iran itself, the stationing of US combat forces would be opposed by a wide range of nationalist opinion as constituting "foreign occupation" and as being designed to perpetuate the Shah's rule. In addition, many Iranians would fear that such a move would provoke USSR military action. However, these attitudes would be modified if the Iranians felt that there was an imminent threat of Soviet invasion and that the US had moved solely to forestall such a threat.

17. The reactions of other Middle Eastern and Asian states to a strengthening of CENTO would follow two general lines. US allies and other pro-Western governments would welcome such a development as an indication of US determination to resist Communist pressures, and that the US was not downgrading its friends in favor of the neutrals. The neutrals, on the other hand, probably would react unfavorably, arguing that any strengthening of CENTO was provocative and would further increase the danger of war at a time when tension was already high. Afghanistan particularly would be disturbed and would probably see such a move as a further indication of US support for Pakistan. Similarly, India would look at any military strengthening of CENTO as an unfriendly act if they felt that it strengthened Pakistan for a possible conflict with India over Kashmir.

18. Any move which the Soviets interpreted as a decrease in US support of CENTO, unless clearly counterbalanced by other actions demonstrating US determination to maintain a position in the area, would at this juncture be regarded by the USSR as a sign of weakness, and the Soviets would probably press any advantages which they considered flowed from such a situation.

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