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February 5, 1971

State Dept. review completed

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Harold H. Saunders

SUBJECT: Saudi Effort to Overthrow South Yemeni Regime

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE
INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

You are aware that the Saudi government is planning an effort to overthrow the regime in South Yemen (the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen -- PDRY). As you know, this is the subject for intense discussion between State and CIA. You have asked for my views.

The Saudi operation. The nature of the operation would be for the Saudis to support two sets of South Arabian dissident forces, one operating into the eastern provinces of South Yemen from Saudi territory and one operating into the western provinces above Aden from the Yemen Arab Republic (north Yemen).

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The issue. Since the Saudis have not asked for cooperation and seem bent on going ahead on their own, the issue in some respects boils down to the question of whether we just keep hands off or whether we help the Saudis to minimize chances of failure which could backfire on the stability of the Saudi regime. Ambassador Thacher initially suggested trying to dissuade them but changed his position when he realized how far along and how determined they are.

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State position. Our embassy in Saudi Arabia has made two main arguments: that the operation was almost certain to fail and that there was a good chance of provoking the Russians to play a more active role in South Yemen. The embassy's latest telegram indicates that the embassy sees greater evidence of possible Saudi effectiveness than it initially did. The embassy is inclined to believe fighting will drag on in "typical tribal rebellion style" and the Soviets will face a serious decision whether to move with major support of the PDRY regime. The embassy assumes the Soviets will feel compelled to provide at least some aid. In view of the Saudi determination to go ahead, Ambassador Thacher now recommends that we refrain altogether from comment.

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My conclusion is as follows: There seems little chance -- according to most judgments -- that this operation can actually change the government in South Yemen. There also seems little difference that we could make in changing that outcome at a realistic level of involvement. Those being the case, I have difficulty finding a strong argument for U. S. involvement, especially since even the suspicion of clandestine U. S. involvement would encourage further Soviet involvement.

The one argument made for the Saudi operation is that over an eight-year period of tribal warfare the Saudis did succeed in forcing a fairly moderate solution in Yemen. The same could happen in South Yemen.

The counter to that, of course, is that the 1970's will probably be the decade of change in Saudi Arabia with Faisal going and internal dissidence quietly increasing. Since a protracted operation without decision could cause the Saudi regime to be blamed for failure, the possible gain is uncertain enough to be outweighed by the possibility that the Saudi regime itself would be weakened.

In short, I do not see much advantage in U. S. involvement.

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