

WXPost

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Soviets' 'Grand Plan' In Central Asia

BAGHDAD—Bitter recriminations within the Iraqi government over Soviet complicity in the Arab-Israeli cease-fire produced an astonishing series of veiled editorial attacks on the Ba'Athist government in the Moscow-dominated Communist Party press here.

The dispute is important for one reason—as evidence that Moscow, despite vast investment in arms development and influence here, is trying to rope a wild stallion beyond its control. Yet Iraq is central to long-range Soviet ambitions in central Asia.

With perhaps a mere thousand active members in the Communist Party, the party operates, both above and below ground, as a legal party, with a daily organ that reaches an estimated 40,000 or so regular Iraqi readers. Stung by the anti-Soviet impact of the government attack on the cease-fire, the party organ struck back in several editorials.

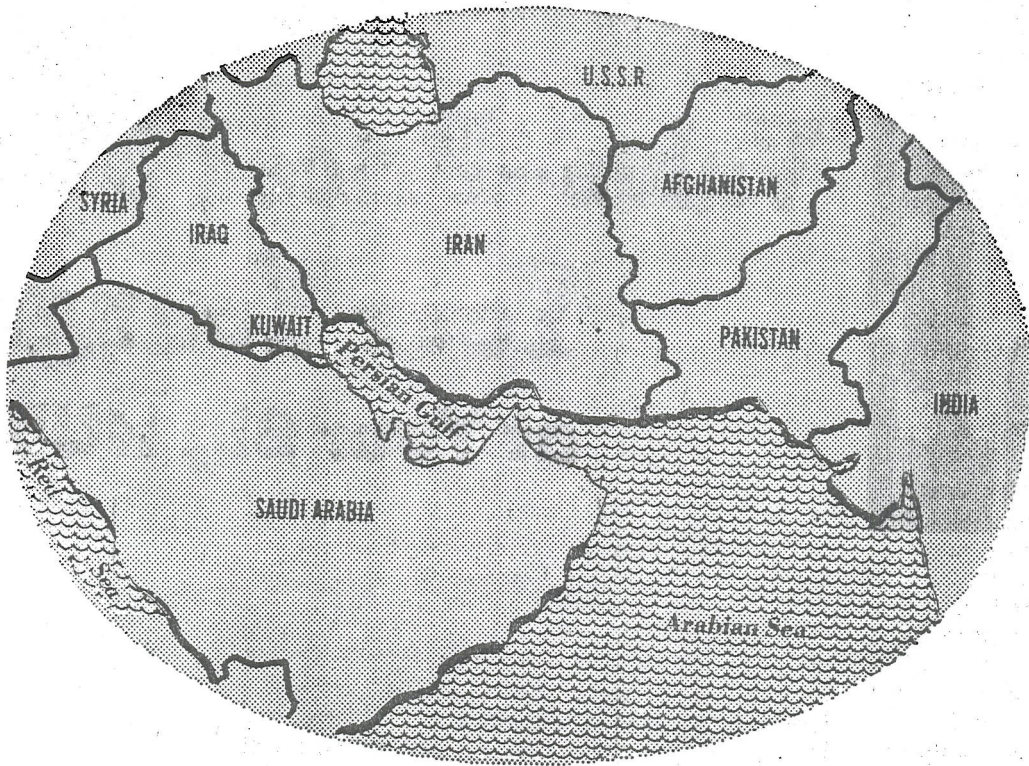
The Communist newspaper began with the surprising admission that the Israeli invasion of the west bank of the Suez Canal "threatened the supply line of the (Egyptian) Third Army,"

compelling President Anwar Sadat to make "persistent requests that Moscow act to guarantee the cessation of Israeli aggression." It next challenged the claim of the Ba'Ath government here that Arab "masses" will never accept the cease-fire, by maintaining, to the contrary, that a truce is "in harmony with the aims and aspiration of the people."

Considering Washington's eager propensity neatly, and often incorrectly, to pigeonhole such countries as Greece (ostensibly a gallant ally) and Iraq (ostensibly a Moscow stooge), the Baghdad-Moscow dispute is worth serious study for its bearing on Moscow's far more important ambitions in central Asia.

When the Soviet Union first took an interest in Iraq, after the assassination of pro-West Premier Nuri al-Said in 1958, its ever-increasing investment was seen as a hedge against the possible future loss of Moscow's influence in Egypt. But today the Soviet effort here hints at objectives quite different from that and quite beyond the obvious desire to gain a trump card to play in the

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By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

oil-vital Persian Gulf where Iraq is an ever-larger exporter of oil.

The vast playing field of this more ominous Soviet game stretches from Iraq on the west with its Persian Gulf outlet, balanced economy, ample water and oil-financed industrial development to India on the East.

In between is Afghanistan where a new Soviet-backed regime headed by a radical princeling of the royal family is already raising suspicions in Iran and Pakistan. A Soviet-built all-weather road through Afghanistan to the border of dismembered Pakistan near Quetta threatens western Pakistan where demands for independence by Baluchistani tribes are being fanned by Moscow.

With Iraq as the western anchor, the Soviet game seems clear—first, to use its Asian “zone of peace,” to fence in China from access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf through its ally Pakistan; second to promote further dismemberment of Pakistan aiming to unhinge western Pakistan and provide Arabian Gulf access to the Soviet Union itself.

It was partly to counter such

schemes that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger risked political fury at home to “tilt” toward Pakistan in the 1971 India-Pakistan war. The U.S., Iran, Pakistan, and for the time being China, all have a common interest in opposing the so-called Asian “zone of peace.”

Iraq is the western key to Soviet success in this largely hidden intrigue and India the eastern key, just as Iran is the key to American efforts to resist it, with Pakistan a major ally. Thus Iraq, designed by nature as the most independent, unpredictable and potentially richest Middle Eastern state, occupies a critical position not only in the Arab-Israeli struggle but in the unfolding future of central Asia.

But to take advantage of growing political tensions between Baghdad and Moscow (which Baghdad is at pains to play down), the U.S. first must accomplish Kissinger’s mission of ending Israeli occupation of Arab territory. If he can achieve that, Soviet exploitation of Iraq to advance its larger designs will suddenly become far more difficult.

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