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DEVELOPMENTS IN THE AZERBAIJAN SITUATION

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DEVELOPMENTS IN THE
AZERBAIJAN SITUATION

SUMMARY

Although the collapse of the pro-Soviet "Azerbaijan National Government" in mid-December of last year relieved much of the international tension centering in this strategically situated province in northwestern Iran, Azerbaijan's present unstable internal condition and persistent Soviet activities and ambitions in this region continue to make it a potential source of international friction.

While progress has been made in the re-establishment of order since the restoration of central authority over the province, the situation continues to be unstable owing to the opposition of heavily armed tribes to the army's program of forceful disarmament and because of dissatisfaction caused by excessive corruption practiced by both the army and civil administrations. The Prime Minister, despite strong army opposition, has been making efforts to secure a peaceful settlement with the tribes, and Azerbaijan's Governor General has given evidence of a desire to improve the local government. Serious fighting between the tribes and the army may be expected if the army attempts to carry out its disarmament policy, and discontent among the vocal sections of the non-tribal population may be expected to grow if excessive corruption and malpractices continue unabated.

Although tribal unrest and maladministration have long existed in Iran, they enhance the chances for successful Soviet subversion, which has recently taken the form of encouragement to dissident tribes to resist the army and of propaganda broadcasts designed to undermine the government. Moreover, the similarity in race and language among the populations on both sides of the Soviet-Azerbaijan border makes the infiltration of Soviet agents into Iran an easy matter.

Azerbaijan's position on the eastern flank of Turkey and Iraq, its nearness to the Caucasus oil fields, and its usefulness as a gateway to the whole of Iran give impetus to the Soviet will to control this province which contains one-fifth of Iran's population and produces nearly one-quarter of its wheat. Because of its strategic geographic position, its manpower, and its agricultural productivity, the loss of Azerbaijan would threaten Iran's independence.

Having incurred the strong censure of world opinion as represented in the United Nations for encouraging an autonomous regime in Azerbaijan, and having failed to arouse sympathetic response to communist doctrine among the local populace, the Soviets may be expected to

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limit their efforts in Azerbaijan for the time being to economic penetration and subversive activities. The USSR, however, will not abandon its ultimate objective of controlling Azerbaijan, and eventually all of Iran. To this end, the Soviets will doubtless bring much pressure upon Iran for oil concessions and air rights. The Iranians, encouraged by their success in regaining control of Azerbaijan and relying upon UN and US support, will resist Soviet domination and will probably reject the present Soviet demands for concessions. If these concessions are not granted, the USSR will probably intensify its efforts to create serious disorders in Azerbaijan, possibly as a pretext for subsequent unilateral Soviet intervention, maintaining in the United Nations that Soviet security was in jeopardy. It is yet doubtful whether the Iranian Government can take effective steps to counter such Soviet subversive activities. Azerbaijan, therefore, will probably continue to be a trouble spot in world politics.

Further discussion of the Azerbaijan situation is contained in the Enclosure hereto.

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ENCLOSURESTRATEGIC POSITION

Control of Azerbaijan by a foreign power would place that power in a position to dominate Iran because two lofty mountain ranges fan out from the province, forming a "V" which opens the rest of Iran to easy conquest. Azerbaijan is especially well placed geographically for penetration and military operations from the USSR. Tabriz, its capital, is but 62 miles from the Soviet border, which is 480 miles long and impossible for the Iranians to defend. Conversely, the Soviets would regard control of Azerbaijan by an unfriendly government as a serious threat to their rich Caucasus oil fields, which produce approximately three-fourths of the Soviet petroleum supply. Baku, key city of the Caucasus oil area, is but 125 miles distant from the Azerbaijan border. The possession of Azerbaijan by a power friendly to Iraq and Turkey is important to those countries as protection of their eastern flanks. Azerbaijan borders 202 miles on Turkey and 70 miles on Iraq, whose valuable Mosul-Kirkuk oil fields are 125 miles from this frontier. Although the rugged mountains between Turkey and Azerbaijan discourage extensive military action in that quarter, the border farther south presents a better military route into northern Iraq, which in turn offers access to southern Turkey.

A description of the geography and economy of Azerbaijan is contained in Appendix "A" hereto, while its ethnic composition is described in Appendix "B".

HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDPrior to World War I

During the past 120 years, the history of Azerbaijan has been intimately bound to that of an expanding Russia. The present border between the province and the USSR was established in 1828 when, after two disastrous wars, Iran was forced to cede areas which are now a part of the Soviet Socialist Republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Not only did this forced cession deprive Iranian Azerbaijan of territory which had for centuries been an integral part of the province, but it also divided the ethnic-language group composing much of the population. The Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907, which provided for zones of Russian and British influence in Iran, was used by Russia as justification for intervening in Azerbaijan's affairs in 1908. Russian troops were sent to keep order in Tabriz (the capital) during upheavals accompanying the Persian Revolution, were subsequently maintained in the province, and were used to quiet further internal disturbances in 1910.

World War I to World War II

Azerbaijan was a battleground for Russian, Turkish, and British armies during World War I, and during the subsequent two years suffered from famine and insecurity. With the advent of Riza Khan as army chief of staff in 1931, strong efforts to re-establish Iran's authority over the area were encouraged by the favorable terms of the 1921 Soviet-Iranian Treaty of Friendship. Under the terms of this agreement the young Bolshevik Government renounced extraterritorial rights and all concessions and holdings gained in Iran during the Czarist regime (including the Julfa-Tabriz Railway) with the exception of Soviet interests in the Caspian Sea fisheries. The USSR did, however, reserve "the right to advance her troops into (Iran) for the purpose of carrying out military operations necessary for its defense" should a third party threaten the frontiers of Russia through this area and should Iran be unable to meet such a threat after having been once called upon to do so by Russia.

Riza Khan took advantage of Soviet preoccupation with internal matters to reduce Iran's economic dependence on the USSR and to extend his firm control over dissident elements in Azerbaijan. The Kurdish rebellion of 1922, part of a larger movement for Kurdish autonomy originating among Turkish and Iraqi Kurds, was decisively crushed. During his reign as Shah (1925-1941), Riza Khan endeavored to strengthen Iranian solidarity by requiring the exclusive use of the Persian language in schools and in official correspondence, by choosing administrators largely from Tehran, and by fostering an economic development program in which many neutral experts, particularly German nationals, were employed.

During World War II

Following the opening of German-Soviet hostilities, both Great Britain and the USSR demanded that German agents throughout Iran, including many in Tabriz, be expelled. As a result of the Shah's failure to orient Iran toward the Allied cause, it became strategically expedient for the Allies to occupy the country. Soviet columns crossed into Azerbaijan in late August 1941 at the same time that the British attacked Iran in the south. Every important city in Azerbaijan was occupied within four days, and "cease fire" orders were immediately forthcoming from Tehran. Riza Shah, the keystone of strong central authority, was replaced by his young and politically weak son, Muhammed Riza Pahlavi, and Azerbaijan entered a period of complete foreign occupation. The Tripartite Treaty of January 1942, in which the USSR and Great Britain guaranteed Iranian sovereignty and territorial integrity and agreed to the withdrawal of all foreign troops within six months after the end of the war, did little to restrict Soviet activities in Iran to matters of military necessity.

The familiar pattern of Soviet political penetration became quickly evident in Azerbaijan as imported agents began agitation through the pro-Soviet Iranian Tudeh Party. Disregarding treaty obligations, the USSR prevented the moving of additional Iranian security forces into Azerbaijan in 1943 and blocked the supply and movement of troops already there. Aided by Soviet intimidation of the opposition, the Tudeh Party was able to elect two deputies from Azerbaijan to the Majlis (Parliament) in the spring elections of 1944. In October of that year, oil concessions covering 216,000 square miles in northern Iran, including most of Azerbaijan, were demanded by the USSR of Prime Minister Sa'id's government. The decision not to grant any concessions so long as foreign troops occupied Iranian soil led to Soviet-inspired anti-government demonstrations and to the fall of Sa'id's cabinet in November 1944. The five succeeding cabinets have found Azerbaijan and Iranian-Soviet relations their most difficult problem.

The Autonomous Movement

Following the war, the USSR, instead of preparing to withdraw the garrison of approximately 60,000 Soviet troops in Iran, increased it by 15,000 soldiers with the heaviest addition assigned to Azerbaijan. The motive for this action became quickly apparent. In September 1945, a new "Democratic Party", an outgrowth of the Tudeh Party, began to clamor in Tabriz for autonomy, and a similar movement with Soviet backing was initiated among the Kurdish tribes in southwestern Azerbaijan. Democratic partisans took over the Azerbaijan government the following December, called a "National Congress", and installed the Soviet-trained Iranian, Jaafar Pishevari, as president. Meanwhile, a Kurdish Republic was set up at Mahabad under Qazi Muhammed, a Kurdish leader who had received direct encouragement from Soviet diplomatic agents in Azerbaijan.

Central Government garrisons disintegrated, and for a year the autonomous regime held sway. Because of the similarity in race and language between the inhabitants of Iranian and Soviet Azerbaijan, it was a simple task for the USSR to export Soviet nationals and former Iranian subjects to stiffen the Azerbaijan People's Army or to act as secret police and political leaders in the movement. Under mounting pressure from world opinion shaped by Iran's appeal to the United Nations, the Soviet garrison in Azerbaijan was finally withdrawn in May 1946, two months after the deadline set by the Tripartite Treaty of 1942. Agents of the USSR remained, however, and were reported to number at least 5,000 during the greater part of the "Democratic" regime.

Meanwhile, Ahmad Qavam, astute elder statesman, had been appointed Prime Minister of Iran in January 1946.* In June he succeeded in reaching a basic agreement with the Tabriz Government whereby Azerbaijan would enjoy limited autonomy and could anticipate increased representation in the National Government. Disagreement over details, however, delayed implementation of the agreement, and in October, negotiations were broken off by the Azerbaijan Government in protest over Qavam's dismissal of Leftists from the Tehran Government. The Shah then demanded that Qavam allow the use of troops to take possession of the area; and finally in December 1946, despite Soviet intimidation, the Government ordered direct military action. The failure of the USSR to give active support to the "Democrats" and the weakness of the Azerbaijan army enabled the Iranian forces to occupy the province within a matter of days. The disintegration of the Soviet-inspired regime was swift and complete. Qavam, the army, and above all the Shah, were widely acclaimed as liberators, and all three enjoyed unprecedented popularity.

CURRENT SITUATION

Corrupt and Oppressive Rule

Five months have elapsed since the Central Government's troops marched into the province to depose the "Democrats", many of whom poured into the USSR along the 480-mile Azerbaijan-Soviet border. Within this time the enthusiasm with which the population welcomed the return of Iranian authority changed to widespread dissatisfaction over government maladministration and army corruption. Since the fall of Azerbaijan, the army has conducted a virtual military occupation of the province, which is still under Martial Law. It filled the jails not only with political prisoners but also with persons who resist its venal practices. The execution of collaborationists unable to buy their freedom, although temporarily suspended during the recent Majlis elections, has now been renewed.

Public declarations by Qavam and the appointment of Ali Mansur, a former prime minister of wide experience in government service, as the province's new governor general encouraged the hope that a more enlightened, progressive administration would be provided for Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, wealthy landlords were permitted to abuse

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- * Shortly after his appointment, Qavam went to Moscow in an attempt to ease Iran's strained relations with the USSR. The trip proved fruitless. In April, however, he and the Soviet Ambassador in Tehran reached an accord providing that (1) the Central Government would seek a peaceful settlement of its differences with Azerbaijan; (2) an agreement covering the formation of a mixed Soviet-Iranian company to exploit Iran's northern oil resources would be presented to the Majlis for consideration; and (3) Red Army troops would be withdrawn from northern Iran, including Azerbaijan.

the peasants in extorting crop shares for the past year, the collection of which had been specifically prohibited by Prime Minister Qavam at the time central authority was restored. Subordinate officials of dishonest reputation re-entered the local government; now, however, the government is screening Azerbaijan's civil and gendarmerie officials in an effort to improve the provincial administration.

Disturbances in Western Azerbaijan

The western part of the province, predominantly a Kurdish area containing many well-armed tribesmen, has been particularly unsettled. The number of rifles and machine guns in Kurdish hands is variously estimated to be between 25,000 and 100,000; and although the tribes generally have expressed a desire to cooperate with the Central Government, continued mutual distrust, engendered by long years of oppressive measures by the army and excesses on the part of both the tribes and the government, makes them obviously a potential source of trouble. The Iranian Army has thus far been unable to carry out the administration's program for disarmament, and while leaders of the principal Kurdish tribes manifest some acquiescence in partial disarmament provided protection and fair treatment are promised them, little more than a token surrender of arms is anticipated.

The western area has also suffered from extensive looting and pillaging, which followed the fall of the autonomous regime in the province. Furthermore, the Iranian Army has had great difficulty in subduing certain tribesmen who had collaborated with the "Kurdish Peoples Republic" (established under Soviet aegis in February 1946 and terminated along with the autonomous government). These tribesmen include renegade elements indigenous to the area and the Barzani Kurds, who fled from Iraq to Iran in 1945 after the Iraqi Government had condemned their leaders for rebellious activities. To evict the Barzanis from Iran, Central Government military leaders found it necessary to augment their force of 10,000 troops in southwestern Azerbaijan with heavily-armed loyal tribesmen--a clear indication that the army alone is unable to effect tribal disarmament.

Soviet Complicity

The broader implications of the deteriorating situation become evident in the light of the USSR's proximity to Azerbaijan and in view of the common Soviet practice of capitalizing on local difficulties. When the autonomous regime collapsed, livestock, goods, and arms were transported into Azerbaijan SSR by the discredited "Democrats" who are still being harbored in adjacent Soviet territory, ready tools for future penetration of the unsettled province. Broadcasts from Soviet

stations and underground radios are directed toward increasing the discontent among the population. Moreover, Soviet diplomatic representatives are reported to have encouraged leaders of the Barzanis and other dissident elements in their resistance to the Iranian Army. Economic pressures are constantly applied to Azerbaijan; the Soviets continue to operate an illegal airline between Tabriz and Tehran, and they have maintained demands upon the Central Government for exclusive air rights covering Azerbaijan as well as other northern Iranian provinces. Moreover, they are applying increased pressure to secure Parliamentary approval for the formation of a mixed company to exploit the oil resources in five northern provinces including most of Azerbaijan, tentatively agreed to by Prime Minister Qavam in April 1946.

Internal instability facilitates Soviet intervention in Azerbaijan's affairs as a first step toward including Iran in the fringe of satellite governments it considers essential to Soviet security. The loss of Azerbaijan, which would deprive Iran of one-fifth of its population and cut off the source of almost one-quarter of its wheat, would threaten Iran's independence. All these circumstances focus attention on an area which possesses many elements of international dissension and which has long been subject to Russian interference.

PROBABLE FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Azerbaijan's future will be greatly influenced by the attitude of the Tehran Government toward the province's semi-nomadic tribes and sedentary agrarian population, but it will be largely determined by the relationship of Iran with the USSR.

The Direction of Soviet Activities.

From a military point of view, the USSR will continue to be able to reoccupy Azerbaijan at will. The weakness of the Iranian Army, attributable as much to low morale as to inadequate equipment, indicates that, important as Azerbaijan is to Iran's independence, the government cannot organize the province's defenses to offer even a delaying action against direct Soviet attack. In the face of strong US foreign policy, however, there is little likelihood that the USSR would risk the possibility of disrupting the United Nations by taking unilateral military action against Azerbaijan at present. Having encountered the strong censure of world opinion when they delayed withdrawal of Red Army troops and having failed to rally popular support to their puppet regime, the Soviets will, for the time being, probably restrict their activities in Azerbaijan to economic pressure and political subversion. If the Soviet oil agreement, as proposed, is approved by the Majlis, almost all of the province will be open to exploration and development by Soviet petroleum

technicians, and the USSR will undoubtedly use these privileges to further its efforts to gain hegemony over Iran. Similarly, if the persistent Soviet demands for air rights in northern Iran are granted, Azerbaijan will receive an additional influx of Communist agents in commercial guise. If these concessions are not granted or are ineffectual in gaining Soviet aims, the USSR will probably intensify its efforts to create friction or even warfare between tribes and army, or similar serious disturbances which might, at an appropriate future time, provide the Soviets with an excuse to intervene unilaterally, thus presenting the United Nations with a fait accompli based on a claim that Soviet security was in jeopardy.

The Iranian Course of Action

The prevailing sentiment among deputies-elect to the Majlis is to refuse the USSR any and all concessions. The unpopularity of the recent autonomous regime with an estimated 90% of the population does not preclude the possibility of another Soviet-inspired regime's gaining power in an Azerbaijan subjected to intense subversive activities among its dissatisfied tribal and non-tribal elements. Iran's best defense against such activities would be to provide a better administration, stimulate employment, and pursue a rational tribal policy. While it is doubtful that sufficient action will be taken to improve the government of the province, Tehran will undoubtedly attempt to implement its economic development program, which contemplates extensive public works improvements. Prime Minister Qavam and influential tribal leaders will continue to work for the adoption of a moderate tribal policy, but will meet strong opposition from military leaders, who favor disarmament of tribes by force and who have great influence with the Shah. Unless the Shah can be induced to support peaceful settlement of the tribal problem, the army's "blood and iron" policy is likely to prevail. In such event, the relationship between tribes and government will further deteriorate, probably developing into serious conflicts abetted and encouraged by the Soviets. Although the tribes may relinquish a portion of their less serviceable weapons to the army at this time, they will be in a position to oppose the government with strong force as soon as the present heavy military concentration in the area is reduced for the purpose of disarming the Qashqais and other southern tribes. It is more than likely that serious fighting will then, if not before, break out in the Kurdish area, where the tribes will undoubtedly be supported covertly and possibly openly by the Soviets.