

British promote Syrian strife

In the wake of the Aleppo massacre, the British press has jubilantly heralded what London sees as the emergence of "religious discontent" in the Arab world to block the consolidation of an Arab alliance against Egypt, Israel, and Iran. Following are excerpts from two major British assessments.

The Guardian, June 26, 1979: "*Divisive Rulers Threaten to Send Syria Along the Road to Civil Strife,*" by David Hirst.

The massacre of more than 60 Army cadets in Aleppo has blown the lid off a deteriorating situation which the ruling Baathist regime has long sought to hide....

Syria has not escaped the religious revivalism that is sweeping most of the Moslem world. It has its roots in much the same discontent that exists elsewhere, the same disillusionment with ideologies and institutions, borrowed largely from Western experience, to which the Moslem world has been unable to adapt....

The regime has announced that it will smash the Moslem Brotherhood. If the iron fist is its only response, it will get nowhere, for its inability to track down the perpetrators of earlier killings is notorious....

The iron fist will only breed more recruits to terrorism. ... The propaganda campaign against the Moslem Brotherhood is so crude and strident that it will antagonise the rapidly swelling ranks of the religious-minded.

President Assad's regime is besieged.

The London Observer, June 24, 1979: "*Arab Anti-Sadat Front Is on Point of Collapse*" by Patrick Seale.

Three months after banding together to condemn President Sadat for his peace treaty with Israel, the anti-Egypt front looks as if it could well collapse under its own internal contradictions. Today Sadat seems in better shape than his opponents.

Latest evidence of their weakness was the failure last week of Syria and Iraq to bring about their much-heralded union. There is rejoicing in Cairo at this setback.

An effective, institutionalised union of Iraq and Syria—a potential grouping 20 million strong, underpinned by oil revenues of some \$8,000 million and fielding armies of about 400,000 men—would have been a credible alternative to Egypt's natural predominance.

But it was not to be....

The main stress comes from the brutal ending of the honeymoon between the Islamic revolution in Iran and its Arab neighbours. In the last month, relations between Iran and Iraq have worsened to the point where Tehran Radio calls for a mass uprising against the Baghdad "gangsters and tyrants" and their replacement by a "rule of divine justice."

The fallout from events in Iran has caught the Iraqi Baathist regime in a pincer movement: Kurdish guerrilla armies are on the warpath again in the northern mountains, while in the south Iraqi Shias ... are being stirred to frenzy by the charismatic Khomeini across the border. Faced with such formidable problems, Iraq is in poor posture to take on either President Sadat or Israel.

The fragile sheikhdoms of the lower Gulf, which also contain large, increasingly restless Shia and Iranian communities, have been shaken by the revival of ancient territorial claims against them, made in recent weeks by prominent Iranian divines.

In a trice, revolutionary Iran—both fervently nationalistic and militantly pan-Islamic—seems a good deal more dangerous to Iraq and the Gulf States than the secular Shah ever did, for all his geopolitical ambitions.

If Iraq and the Gulf are understandably preoccupied with Iran, Syria has its anxious gaze on Lebanon, where its 30,000-man Army suffers constant humiliation from Israeli raids against which the Syrians dare not retaliate.

At home, prominent Alawis—the sect to which the Syrian President belongs—continue to fall to hit-and-run assassins, generally believed to be Islamic activists. Last week's massacre in Aleppo of 32 army cadets is a clear indication that Assad faces a serious terrorist threat from these Muslims.

It is the internal trouble plaguing both Syria and Iraq which prevent them embarking on unity and presenting a credible alternative strategy to Sadat's.

Saudi Arabia, the third major ... partner in the anti-Sadat coalition, is less immediately threatened than Iraq or Syria, but it also has its problems, of which perhaps the most important is the division in the ranks of the ruling princes....

For the moment at least, there is little on the Arab scene to shake President Sadat's confidence that he is on the right lines.