

The 'Preferred Plan': The Anglo-American Working Group Report on Covert Action in Syria, 1957

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Taking as its central focus the contents of the September 1957 Anglo-American Working Group Report on Syria, this article examines the background to the covert action plans that were drawn up to topple the incumbent regime in Damascus. By drawing on the contents of the report, it shows how US and British officials hoped to stir up unrest within Syria and instigate border incidents that would provide a pretext for armed intervention by the pro-Western governments of Iraq and Jordan (with possible Turkish support). The article also brings to light the fact that the 'elimination' of named Syrian figures was included as a recommendation in the report. The article concludes by explaining why the report's so-called 'Preferred Plan' was never implemented and reflects on the 'special political action' culture that still prevailed in SIS during the latter 1950s.

In the several accounts we have available of the Syrian crisis of August–October 1957, where the United States and Britain worked closely together to forestall the apparent growth of Communist influence in Damascus, there is a tantalizing and understandable gap in the historical record when it comes to the specific way in which Western intervention might have been triggered.¹ That the Western powers considered various forms of covert action during 1957 in order to displace the incumbent Syrian regime is widely known, and often referred to in the literature dealing with Anglo-American involvement in the Middle East during this period.² The restrictions of official secrecy have hitherto denied historical analysis of the Syrian crisis any real detail about how it was believed this could have been accomplished, and what role would be played by the Western intelligence services in the process. However, documents have recently come to light among the papers of Duncan Sandys, the Minister of Defence at the time, that reveal some of the thinking of London and Washington at the most crucial point in the crisis,

and the extreme measures that were contemplated in order to expunge left-wing elements from the Syrian state.

More specifically, it is now possible to consider the contents and conclusions of the Anglo-American Working Group Report on Syria of September 1957, a very sensitive document whose circulation was restricted (on the British side at least) to a few senior ministers, and selected officials at Downing Street, the Foreign Office and in the intelligence services. Beside involved discussion of its 'Preferred Plan' where a pretext for outside intervention in Syria could be staged, is the advice contained in the report that key figures in the Syrian regime would need to be 'eliminated' (the word employed in the text), if Western aims were to be fulfilled. This article therefore attempts to take the new material that is now available and place it into the context of existing historical scholarship on the Syrian crisis of 1957 in order to gain a fuller picture of the intentions and plans of London and Washington, as well as to consider what this suggests about the more general attitudes towards covert action in the 1950s.

As much of the writing on post-war Syria has emphasized, the state has frequently been the scene of clandestine intrigue and activity as internal factional struggles have meshed with the involvement of outside intelligence services, from both other Arab powers and the West.³ Syria's important strategic position astride oil pipelines and overland lines of communication linking the Persian Gulf with Turkey, the most easterly member of NATO, has given it a special place in the calculations of Western policy makers concerned with the balance of power in the Middle East. The regional ambitions of the Hashemite dynasty, encompassing the control of the 'Fertile Crescent' of Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, that had formed such a feature of inter-Arab politics since the 1920s, and the way these clashed with the very different vision of pan-Arab unity that emerged from Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the mid-1950s (with leadership centred on Cairo, not Baghdad or Amman), were also an essential part of the context that gave Syria such prominence. Within Syria itself, following the departure of the French in 1946, a pervasive sense of insecurity, fuelled by bitterness and frustration at the presence of Israel to the south after 1948, and internecine domestic rivalries created the conditions where coups and the use of violence became ever-present features of the turbulent political scene. Syria was not only home to an indigenous Communist Party, led since 1932 by Khalid Baqdash, but was the birthplace of Ba'thism, with its goals of Arab 'unity, liberation and socialism'. Aside from the more traditional National and People's Parties (representing the rivalry between notable dynasties, and the centres of Damascus and Aleppo), was the quasi-fascist Syrian Social Nationalist Party, with an elitist view of creating a modernized and secularized Syrian state.

In August 1955, after a succession of military coups in Syria, and unsuccessful periods of civilian rule, presidential elections saw the return as head of state of Shukri al-Quwalti, a weak and nominal figurehead. Factional struggles within the army remained central to the direction of Syrian politics, and with Ba'thist influence on the steady increase, the US administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower became ever more worried over the anti-Western tenor of Syrian foreign policy and the possibility that a Communist-dominated Syria might eventually emerge.⁴ The response of the British to this situation was to press the pro-Western government of Iraq to step up their involvement in Syrian politics, for which little encouragement was in fact needed. This British strategy was the genesis of Operation 'Straggle', the attempt by the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to undermine the Syrian regime, and ultimately organize a coup in Damascus, for which high-level approval was given in March 1956.⁵ This venture in Anglo-American intelligence collaboration collapsed in late October 1956, when the coup was foiled by the Syrian authorities and the main conspirators within the country arrested. At the same time, the Anglo-French-Israeli attack against Egypt brought general disharmony to relations between London and Washington over how to handle the Middle East and the dangers that radical Arab nationalism posed to Western interests.

By the spring and summer of 1957, having received a cool, and in many cases hostile reception in the Middle East for its announcement at the start of the year of a new doctrine justifying Western intervention in the affairs of the region, the Eisenhower administration was demonstrating concern once again over the further ground that was being gained in Syria by figures apparently harbouring pro-Communist views in the government and army.⁶ There was a particular focus on the role of Colonel Abd al-Hamid Sarraj, the head of Syrian military intelligence (the Deuxieme Bureau), who had close links with the Egyptian intelligence service, and used his covert operatives to intimidate and assassinate the regime's right-wing opponents who had been driven into exile in Jordan and Lebanon.⁷ Sarraj had, moreover, frustrated the Western intelligence agencies in October 1956 by his exposure of 'Straggle' and arrest of those implicated in what the Syrians called the 'Iraqi plot'. Patrick Seale wrote of Sarraj as 'the sullen young man with the square jaw and the perpetually puckered brow [who] had become the eyes and ears of beleaguered Syria. Not an ant moves but Sarraj knows about it, the people said.'⁸ With fears now growing in Washington that Syria was intent on destabilizing its pro-Western Arab neighbours, on 6 August 1957 an agreement was signed with Moscow providing for Soviet economic and technical aid to Damascus. Having seen the capabilities that the CIA could successfully deploy to further the aims of US foreign policy in Iran, where in 1953 the Americans (with some British assistance)

famously engineered the coup that toppled the Mossadeq government, the thoughts of the administration in Washington had already turned to mounting a similar operation in Syria, and to revive the work that had been disrupted in 1956.⁹

The efforts of the CIA station in Damascus to contact possible conspirators in the Syrian army who could be induced to mount a coup against the regime were, however, soon compromised when the Deuxieme Bureau turned one of the officers involved. Before anything could proceed too far, in mid-August 1957 Sarraj moved to arrest those implicated, while Howard Stone, the station chief, and another CIA operative, Frank Jeton, were expelled from the country (the Syrian Ambassador in Washington was declared *persona non grata* in reprisal).¹⁰ In the aftermath of the discovery of what was referred to by Syrians as the 'American plot', Nizam al-Din, a pro-Western figure, was replaced as Army Chief of Staff by Major General Afif al-Bizri, regarded as a Communist by the State Department, and who soon moved to purge the senior ranks of the army.¹¹ Sarraj extended his reach by posting his officers to all government ministries, and a Soviet intelligence officer was used to overhaul the Syrian security services.¹² The apparent temerity of the Syrian government in embarrassing the Americans led to more agonizing in Washington over how to deal with the situation. The US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, felt that recent Soviet political and propaganda activities, culminating in the inroads made in the Middle East 'clearly indicate an intensification of the cold war, and . . . signify a period of the greatest peril for us since the Korean War ended'.¹³

Harold Macmillan was also alarmed by the danger to British interests in the Middle East that a Communist-aligned Syria could pose. The Prime Minister was anxious both that Syria not fall into what he described as 'the throttling hug of the Northern Bear', and that the oil supplies running through the country (25 million tons a year from Iraq, and 12 million tons a year from Saudi Arabia) not be interrupted.¹⁴ Moreover, Macmillan was eager to work closely with the US administration in an effort to repair the breach in Anglo-American relations opened up by the Suez crisis of the year before. Concerting policy with Washington over Syria might also open up the chance of agreeing on a general approach as to how to handle Nasser's pan-Arab challenge to the Western position (evicting the current Syrian regime was certainly seen by London as one way to set back Nasser's wider hopes for spreading Egyptian influence in the region).¹⁵

Thinking in both London and Washington began to coalesce around the idea of encouraging Syria's pro-Western neighbours to take armed action to intervene and overthrow the regime in Damascus. With Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon increasingly restless about the subversive threat that Syria presented, and also home to many Syrian opposition groups and individuals,

they could clearly be offered more active assistance and their efforts coordinated, and in late August, Loy Henderson, a senior US diplomat, was despatched to the region to sound out local opinion. Henderson found the Turkish government eager to take active steps against Damascus, with the Iraqis talking of instigating a tribal uprising in Syria. Meanwhile, Dulles and Macmillan had begun a close correspondence, marking the start of an intensive phase of Anglo-American consultation over how to tackle the Syrian problem. Sharing Washington's fears about Soviet gains in the region, Macmillan saw an opportunity to build on the intelligence relationship already forged during previous efforts to subvert the Syrian government. Having proposed joint evaluation of an 'operation' to evict Soviet influence from Syria, possibly led by Iraq, in early September the Prime Minister sent his Principal Private Secretary, Frederick Bishop, to Washington in order that a fuller understanding over liaison could be established.¹⁶ Excited by the possibilities for joint action, Dulles told Eisenhower that over Syria there had been, 'genuine, intimate and effective cooperation, stemming directly from Macmillan – this is the first instance in his service as Secretary wherein we have had anything like this attitude'.¹⁷

Shortly after Bishop's visit a secret Working Group was formed in Washington, where staff from the British Embassy could meet senior US officials from the State Department and CIA to exchange intelligence, review developments and make recommendations relating to the situation in Syria. The CIA's chief representative on the Working Group was Kermit Roosevelt, a veteran of the Iranian operation in 1953, and though beyond the Ambassador, Sir Harold Caccia, the identities of other members of the British contingent are unclear, some SIS representation must be assumed (John Bruce Lockhart was then Middle East Controller of the service, and effectively Roosevelt's opposite number). The final Working Group Report was produced on 18 September 1957, and with several repetitive segments bears the hallmarks of hurried drafting.¹⁸ The Report was prefaced by a preliminary section (dated 13 September) that outlined the general agreement of the Working Group that the present situation was 'unacceptable from the national security standpoint' and that a 'Preferred Plan' should be developed which involved military action by Iraq, perhaps with help from Jordan, coupled with an insurrection within Syria. The Report emphasized the crucial need to execute any such plan quickly, before political enthusiasm for action of Syria's neighbours faded or Communist control in Syria could be consolidated, but in addition mentioned that adequate time was also required for preparations for insurgent action within Syria. With the arrival of unfavourable weather by the end of October, it was felt that the operation would have to be completed within the next six weeks. This led to the conclusion that, 'No

reasonable prospects for reversing the situation within the period deemed essential exist without the use of outside military force' which should also be 'combined with insurrection within Syria'. Internal action was felt to be a prerequisite as Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon did not possess the short-term military capability to overcome anything above token Syrian resistance. Moreover, Turkish military support would have to be on hand to provide assurance of success for the operation, but unilateral action by Ankara (in view of the political repercussions in the Arab world) could only be considered as a last resort.¹⁹

The general outline of the Preferred Plan involved promotion of unrest within Syria, followed by border incidents between Syria and Iraq or Jordan to serve as a pretext for Iraqi/Jordanian military action under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter (providing for self-defence); which in turn would serve as a trigger for a tribal uprising within Syria. Turkish assistance would be requested by Baghdad and Amman if any serious Syrian resistance was encountered. Two lines of action were recommended in the preliminary report for immediate implementation: a psychological programme using both overt and covert information media to make the governments and peoples of the area aware of the dangers posed by Syria and to counter pro-Syrian propaganda; and internal disturbances in Syria 'including sabotage and *coup de main* operations (in order to harass Syrian regime, prevent appearance of normality in Syria and to lay ground for future action)'.²⁰ One very striking feature of these preliminary conclusions is the faith that was placed in the possibility of triggering an internal rising that would be powerful enough, if Syria was also subject to external attack, to bring about the collapse of the ruling regime. In this sense, the Syrian operation can be conceived of as a combination of the 'popular rising' instigated by the CIA and SIS in Tehran in August 1953, and the use of outside pressures seen in the CIA's Guatemalan operation of 1954. Given the short time scale in which the Working Group had to operate it is also not surprising that the Preferred Plan bore a close resemblance to many of the features of 'Straggle' and the previous methods thought expedient in bringing about a change of government in Syria.

The overall objectives of the Preferred Plan were elucidated in a further section of the report agreed by US and UK officials on 17 September. These were to remove the Soviet-influenced government in Syria, but 'not to bring about any change in Syria's independence or integrity'. If sentiment was then to emerge in Syria for a form of association or federation with Iraq and/or Jordan, this was to be encouraged. An ideal successor government would 'not be a Western puppet', but would not be hostile to the West and would be firmly anti-Communist, and reject any alignment with Egypt. However, it was recognized that any such government could not, at least in its early

stages, command wide popular support; it would therefore have to be accepted that 'it would probably need to rely first upon repressive measures and arbitrary exercise of power'.²¹

The third section of the report dealt with the role the Western intelligence agencies could play in preparing the way for implementation of the Preferred Plan. 'Once a political decision is reached to proceed with internal disturbances in Syria', it was noted, 'CIA is prepared, and SIS will attempt, to mount minor sabotage and *coup de main* incidents within Syria, working through contacts with individuals. The two services should consult, as appropriate, to avoid any overlapping or interference with each other's activities.' No formal approach on these subjects were to be made to the Jordanian and Lebanese authorities, though 'SIS may approach Iraq on a secret official basis.' As for the level of 'noise' that it was hoped might be created, the report recommended that, 'Incidents should not be concentrated in Damascus; the operation should not be overdone; and to the extent possible care should be taken to avoid causing key leaders of the Syrian regime to take additional personal protection measures.' The meaning of this final phrase was soon to become clear.²²

The Working Group felt it was 'impossible to exaggerate the importance of the "psychological warfare" aspects of the present exercise', in that an appropriate climate for Arab military action against Syria had to be created for success to be achieved.²³ For Iraq and Jordan, military intervention had to be made to seem 'not only justifiable, but emotionally acceptable to their governments, armies, and to a significant segment of their populations'. The Syrian regime had to be

made to appear as the sponsor of plots, sabotage and violence directed against neighbouring governments. Credibility will be enhanced if the Syrian and Egyptian radio and press can be manipulated or goaded into aggressive attacks upon neighbouring regimes. CIA and SIS should use their capabilities in both the psychological and action fields to augment tension between Syria and her neighbours.

More specifically, special operations ascribable to Syria would be mounted in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, taking the form of 'sabotage, national conspiracies and various strong-arm activities.' Both services would mobilize their press assets in the region, while British short and medium wave clandestine transmitters were already in action, and a 300 watt 'black' transmitter could be activated in Turkey immediately; within two weeks a further two 3,000 watt short wave transmitters, one in Turkey and one in Jordan, could also be established. CIA could provide personal protection advisers to the leaders of Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon.²⁴

The creation of an incident along the Syrian–Jordanian border was seen as the most promising scenario to spark outside military intervention. King Hussein’s cooperation and influence could be enlisted to induce one or two of the Bedouin tribes residing in southern Syria to stage a rising of sufficient scale to provoke a Syrian army counter-attack. Tribal elements might then withdraw across the border into Jordan, pulling Syrian units after them in hot pursuit, which the Jordanian Army could then engage. An alternative would be to enlist Druze elements to strike at a Syrian government target in the Jebel Druze, and then conduct a fighting withdrawal southwards towards Jordan. In addition, SIS and CIA should gather Syrian opposition groups together in Jordan under the aegis of a ‘Free Syria Committee’, while ‘Syrian political factions with paramilitary or other actionist capabilities should be prepared for execution of specific tasks suited to their talents’. Funds and material assistance would be furnished to this rag-bag of groups, and it was envisaged that Aleppo would become the initial seat of the Committee. Once outside military intervention had begun, efforts would be made to sponsor internal tribal uprisings (by the Druzes in the south, and the Alawites in Latakia) and free the political prisoners held in the Mezze prison; in addition, the Muslim Brotherhood’s potential for generating civil unrest in Damascus could be exploited. There was also the chance of tribal infiltration into Syria from Jordan for sabotage purposes, while it was thought ‘helpful’ if Damascus Radio could be silenced.²⁵

The final section of the covert action part of the Working Group Report was headed ‘Elimination of Key Figures’, and is best conveyed in a direct quotation:

In order to facilitate the action of liberative forces, reduce the capabilities of the Syrian regime to organize and direct its military actions, to hold losses and destruction to a minimum, and to bring about desired results in the shortest possible time, a special effort should be made to eliminate certain key individuals. Their removal should be accomplished early in the course of the uprising and intervention and in the light of circumstances existing at the time. Those who should be eliminated are Sarraj, Bizri, and Khalid Bakdash.²⁶

Taken with the earlier comment that minor sabotage staged by the CIA and SIS in Syria should not be such as to increase the personal protection measures of key figures in the government, it seems clear that US and British officials were suggesting the killing of particularly troublesome individuals in the upheaval surrounding the removal of the regime. Only the previous year SIS officers (most notably the deputy head of the service, George K. Young) had indulged in intricate coup plotting against Nasser, some of which

included discussion of the assassination of the Egyptian President, and the fact that such blunt and brutal recommendations found their way into the Preferred Plan was merely a reflection of the same kind of ethos.²⁷ It is worth recalling, however, that the Working Group Report was not an exercise confined to SIS and CIA alone, but involved the participation of senior US State Department officials and British diplomats from the Washington Embassy. The report also received the endorsement of the most senior political leaders in the US and British governments.

The Working Group Report presented two alternatives to its Preferred Plan. The first was simply military action by Turkey alone, an option already discarded as likely to alienate the majority of Arab opinion. The second alternative was described as 'Containment Plus', and accepted that immediate and rapid action against the Syrian regime was impractical, but would sanction continued external pressure and internal harassment and uprisings. Only when the right political and psychological environment had been created would outside military intervention be forthcoming. Containment Plus 'could also be considered a continuation of the previous "Straggle" operation', and would be adopted if the Arab states were not prepared for military action. The Report concluded with its major recommendation of the Preferred Plan: 'The U.K./U.S. Working Group considers that the best course open to us is to attempt to bring down the present Syrian regime by internal action and action by Syria's Arab neighbours, aided if necessary by Turkish military support, before the onset of the autumn rains (i.e., before 1 November).'²⁸

With the Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, in Washington for intensive talks with Dulles at this time, the Soviet Union heightened the sense of crisis surrounding the Middle East situation by issuing a warning that Turkish troops were massing on the Syrian border and that a similar concentration of Soviet forces on the Bulgarian-Turkish border might be Moscow's chosen response.²⁹ Writing in his diary on 22 September, Macmillan recorded receiving what he called 'a most formidable report from Washington – the very secret report of the Anglo-American working party on Syria and the Middle East'.³⁰ He was understandably wary about the circulation it received in Whitehall. The Prime Minister's Office passed a copy to Sandys on 24 September, with the injunction from Macmillan that it be seen by no one else at the Ministry of Defence except the Permanent Secretary, Sir Richard Powell.³¹ While hoping to solicit his views on the contents of the report, Macmillan was especially keen that Sandys not allow the Chiefs of Staff to see a copy, 'as the Services have a way of chattering about these things with their colleagues in other countries, which may be very dangerous'.³² The Minister of Defence proved very much in favour of measures along the lines of the Preferred Plan, avowing that, 'If we are ever going to make a stand in

the Middle East, the present, in my view, is the time for action. I consider it of the greatest importance to encourage the U.S. in the interest she is now taking in the Middle East and to support the President and the Secretary of State in their proposals for direct military action.' Nevertheless, Sandys did not think that a plausible border incident could be engineered and doubted that Iraq and Jordan would prove resolute enough to follow through with the Preferred Plan unless subjected to strong pressure from Nasser.³³

In the final days of September, just as enthusiasm for the Preferred Plan had gathered momentum in both London and Washington, Anglo-American hopes for united Arab action against the supposed Syrian menace quickly faded. Attracted by the notion of acting as a mediator in the inter-Arab dispute, King Saud of Saudi Arabia visited Damascus on 25 September; the same pilgrimage was soon also made by the Iraqi Prime Minister, Ali Jawdat al-Ayubi. This was a show of Arab solidarity that incensed the Turkish authorities, and was greeted with disappointment in London and Washington, considering the private expressions of hostility to Damascus that had been coming from the Iraqi government at the beginning of the month. Already behind the pace of inter-Arab diplomacy, on 27 September Selwyn Lloyd signalled the Washington Embassy, 'In view of Iraqi lethargy [the Iraqis had been talking of needing 4–5 months of military preparations], I wonder whether it is wise to delay the approach to Jordan until greater progress has been achieved in planning with Iraq. All the evidence suggests that there is little chance of achieving any progress with the present Iraqi Government . . . King Hussein, on the other hand, seems to be full of fire; and although he can clearly do nothing on his own, he might provide the spark to get the Iraqis to move.'³⁴ At the morning meeting of the Working Group held on the same day in Washington it was reported by the State Department representative that any military action by the Arab states was looking increasingly unlikely. With the Working Group's Report having highlighted the problems of any unilateral Turkish action, alternative approaches began to be sought, Caccia advising that, 'It therefore looked as though we were being driven back towards the policy of "containment plus",'³⁵ Lloyd, nevertheless, was still keen on the Preferred Plan, and hoped that the Jordanians could be pressed to take the lead. Meanwhile, another *ad hoc* Anglo-American committee was formed in Washington which had the task of coordinating propaganda output in the Middle East, indicating that at least the first recommendations of the Working Group Report were being implemented.³⁶

However, by early October 1957, the reports he had received on inter-Arab diplomacy finally convinced Lloyd that the Preferred Plan would have to be sidelined in favour of Containment Plus, a policy now to receive the full attention of the Syria Working Group in Washington.³⁷ Efforts would continue to bolster a united Arab front against Syrian subversion, and the

pressure from exiled opposition groups maintained against Damascus; this was certainly a field in which Anglo-American propaganda could play a large role. Two further developments in October spelt the end of any serious chance of taking forceful action to remove the Syrian regime in the way the Working Group had envisaged. Firstly, in a fashion that eclipsed Saud's diplomatic initiatives to defuse the crisis, on 13 October Egyptian troops landed at Latakia in northern Syria and took up position alongside Syrian forces to face the threat of Turkish attack. Nasser's bold move of pan-Arab solidarity was followed soon after by the Syrians taking a case to the UN, complaining about the Turkish build-up on their border, where they received support from the Soviet Union.³⁸ This also gave a chance for Arab delegations to show they did not regard themselves as subject to any kind of imminent threat such as to warrant the kind of action that Turkey might be contemplating. With all sides having a chance to express their feelings, at the end of the month, Moscow and Ankara began to mend their fences, and the Syrian crisis came to a rather lame conclusion. Both London and Washington gradually came to accept that they had exaggerated the prospects of Syria falling entirely under Communist domination.³⁹

While the Syrian crisis had given a further boost to Nasser's credentials as a pan-Arab leader, his role and stature in Syria (and the growing links between the Egyptian and Syrian armed forces) suggested to several alert Americans that he could act as a useful counterweight to Soviet and Communist influence in the country. Growing signs of Egyptian-Soviet rivalry over Syria led Eisenhower to dispatch a note to Dulles in November 1957 asking: 'do you think there would be any percentage in initiating a drive to attempt to bring back Nasser to our side?'⁴⁰ Little ultimately came of this enquiry, the Americans being unwilling to upset their relations with King Saud, their preferred surrogate in the Arab world, but it was one more indication that there were other, less controversial ways to fulfil Western goals in the Middle East than working through covert means for the overthrow of unfriendly governments.

Over the next 18 months, the working group format became the favoured method for London and Washington of cementing their cooperation and policy coordination in a number of regional settings, and where sensitive intelligence matters might also be involved. At the high-level meetings held between Eisenhower and Macmillan in Washington in October 1957, following the shock of the *Sputnik* launch, it was agreed that the Syria Working Group would be adopted as the model for how the Anglo-American relationship could be institutionalized and regular contact between officials working on common problems established. During the Anglo-American covert intervention in the Indonesian Outer Island rebellion, in December 1957 a working group was again formed in Washington where State

Department, CIA, Foreign Office and SIS officials could meet under conditions of tight secrecy to exchange intelligence and reach agreement on the policy options available, and where each state might best use its particular resources.⁴¹ The original Syria Working Group had its remit extended during 1958 into looking at Communist penetration elsewhere in the Middle East, and was a forum where propaganda and psychological warfare approaches could be coordinated. By the spring of 1959, so close had much Anglo-American cooperation become in many of these areas, and such were the limitations of the working group method (with many decisions having to be taken at a higher political level), that most of the groups created in 1957 were finally allowed to lapse.⁴²

It might seem reasonable to suppose that after its frantic and fruitless attempts in 1956 to organize the removal of Nasser from power in Egypt, SIS would have emerged chastened from its experiences during the Suez crisis, with its reputation in the covert action sphere tarnished. The Working Group Report on Syria suggests instead, that SIS, with Foreign Office and ministerial approval, was still the fertile source for ideas, proposals and plans for the ousting of governments. Indeed, it seemed ready and eager in September 1957 to flaunt its 'actionist' capabilities in front of an American audience, as the Macmillan Government sought to show the usefulness of Britain as an ally in the confusing and dangerous world of Middle East politics. Alongside SIS contacts in the region, perhaps best exemplified in their claim to be able to mobilize friendly 'tribal elements' in both Jordan and Syria, the British could also help the Americans with intelligence gathering on the developing situation (where GCHQ had an ear pointing at the Middle East from its listening posts on Cyprus), as well as experience with propaganda techniques and materials for an Arab audience. With both London and Washington agreeing over the need to react to the gathering Soviet subversive threat in the Middle East, it was possible for both governments to reinforce each other's convictions, and appear ready to employ the 'strong arm' methods mentioned in the Preferred Plan. In addition, the latter's call for the 'elimination' of named individuals in the Syrian regime demonstrates again that the spirit of the wartime Special Operations Executive, with its assassination capabilities, was still very much alive in the Special Political Action section of SIS during the latter 1950s. Targeting of Colonel Sarraj, it might also be noted, gave CIA and SIS a chance to settle old scores with an individual who had thwarted their plans in the past, was regarded as a linchpin of the regime and had been responsible for the arrest (and hence imprisonment or execution) of some of their most valuable Syrian collaborators.

The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary do not appear to have had any particular reservations when considering the Preferred Plan; Macmillan later remembered that Dulles, in his new enthusiasm for Western intervention in

the Middle East, 'seemed ready and even anxious to consider measures which a few months before he would have denounced as shocking and immoral'.⁴³ In his memoirs, Macmillan recounted a meeting of 13 October 1957 with the Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell, along with Aneurin Bevan, where they told the Prime Minister that the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party had received a letter from Khrushchev complaining about the West's campaign against Syria. More specifically, Bevan explained that on a recent trip to Moscow, Khrushchev had:

asserted that he had full evidence that Loy Henderson's visit to the Middle East in September had been in order to organize a political *coup d'état* in Syria. Sabotage and wrecking operations such as cutting of the pipelines would be arranged as a pretext for invoking support from the surrounding Arab countries and from Turkey.

Macmillan, with typical insouciance, wrote that he had 'assured [Gaitskell and Bevan] that so far as I knew there was no truth in this story'.⁴⁴ As we have seen, Khrushchev's allegations were very close to the kind of covert action detailed in the Preferred Plan that Macmillan had read only three weeks before, and that had been Lloyd's favoured route before being forced down the road of Containment Plus by Arab reluctance to conform to the desires of London and Washington.

Although the Anglo-American plans of 1957 against Syria were never executed, the Working Group Report represents a fascinating insight into how the Western intelligence services envisaged they could manufacture the fall of the Syrian government through internal pressures and outside military intervention. The Report demonstrates a continued reliance on covert and clandestine means to counteract a perceived Communist threat in the Middle East, and the brandishing by both CIA and SIS of their exaggerated 'actionist' capabilities. It also serves as a reminder that following the breach opened in Anglo-American relations by Eden's overt use of force against Egypt in late 1956, the relationship between the intelligence services, never entirely severed during the height of the Suez crisis, played a very significant part in repairing ties between London and Washington. During 1957, this was a point that Harold Macmillan came to appreciate and value as he strove to reconstruct the 'special relationship' that he saw as fundamental to preserving Britain's influence on the world stage.

NOTES

1. See especially Nigel John Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser: Anglo-American Relations and Arab Nationalism, 1955–59* (London: Macmillan 1996)

- pp.122–39; Stephen Blackwell, 'Britain, the United States and the Syrian Crisis, 1957', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 11/3 (2000) pp.139–58; Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945–1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986).
2. See, e.g., Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949–1961* (London: Tauris 1995) p.141; Douglas Little, 'Cold War and Covert Action: The United States and Syria, 1945–1958', *Middle East Journal* 44/1 (Winter 1990) pp.51–75; Alistair Horne, *Macmillan, 1957–1986* (London: Macmillan 1989) pp.41–2; Stephen Dorril, *M16: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Fourth Estate 2000) pp.655–6.
 3. As Rathmell has put it, 'For many Syrians, the history of the 1950s is one of foreign conspiracies', see *Secret War* (note 2) p.6.
 4. *Ibid.* p.104 and *passim*.
 5. See Anthony Gorst and W. Scott Lucas, 'The Other Collusion: Operation Straggle and Anglo-American Intervention in Syria, 1955–56', *Intelligence and National Security* 4/3 (1989) pp.576–95; also Wilbur C. Eveland, *Ropes of Sand: America's Failure in the Middle East* (New York: Norton) pp.171–3.
 6. On the Eisenhower Doctrine, see Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser* (note 1) pp.107–13; and Thomas G. Paterson, 'Threat to the Middle East? The Eisenhower Doctrine', in *Meeting the Communist Threat: Truman to Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press 1988) pp.159–90.
 7. On Sarraj's use of the Deuxieme Bureau outside Syria, see Rathmell, *Secret War* (note 1) pp.125–7.
 8. Seale, *Struggle for Syria* (note 1) p.281.
 9. On Eisenhower's attitudes to covert action by the CIA and the Iranian operation of 1953, see Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (London: Allen and Unwin 1984) pp.109–12, 129–30; Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press 1998) pp.219–20.
 10. The CIA's inept role in the abortive August 1957 conspiracy has been outlined in Wilbur Eveland, *Ropes of Sand* (note 5) pp.253–5, and Little, 'Cold War and Covert Action' (note 2) pp.69–72.
 11. See notes of the Secretary's Staff Meeting, 19 August 1957, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1955–1957, vol. XIII: *Near East: Jordan–Yemen* (Washington: US Government Printing Office 1988) p.639. Bizri had also been president of the military court that in February 1957 had tried, convicted and passed death sentences on many of those arrested in the aftermath of the exposure of the Iraqi plot, see Seale, *Struggle for Syria* (note 1) p.279.
 12. Most informative on these internal Syrian developments is Rathmell, *Secret War* (note 2) pp.139–40. For US views on the membership and outlook of Syria's ruling group, including Sarraj's important 'behind the scenes' influence, see Special National Intelligence Estimate 36.7-57, 'Developments in the Syrian Situation', 3 September 1957, *FRUS, 1955–1957, XIII* pp.674–80.
 13. See memorandum of a conversation with the President, 7 September 1957, *ibid.* p.686.
 14. See Harold Macmillan, *Riding the Storm, 1956–1959* (London: Macmillan 1971) p.278.
 15. See, e.g., Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser* (note 1) p.127.
 16. See Horne, *Macmillan* (note 2) pp.41–3; and Macmillan, *Riding the Storm* (note 14) pp.279–81.
 17. See memorandum of a conversation with the President, 7 September 1957, *FRUS, 1955–1957, XIII* p.686. For satisfaction on the British side at this state of affairs, see Washington (Caccia) to Foreign Office, No. 1846, 14 September 1957, PREM 11/2329, Public Record Office.
 18. 'Final Report of the Joint U.S.–U.K. Working Group on Syria', 18 September 1957, Duncan Sandys papers (DSND) 6/35, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge.
 19. 'I. Preliminary Report', 13 September 1957, *ibid.*
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. 'II. Objectives', 17 September 1957, *ibid.*

22. 'III. Internal Disturbances in Syria including Sabotage and *Coups de Main Operation*', 17 September 1957, *ibid.*
23. 'IV. Psychological Program', 17 September 1957, *ibid.* An intriguing aspect to the internal make-up of the whole report is the frequent switching between US and UK spellings.
24. 'VII. Covert Actions in Support of the Syrian Operation', n.d. (but c. 17 September 1957), *ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. 'G. Elimination of Key Figures', *ibid.*
27. See, e.g., Tom Bower, *The Perfect English Spy: Sir Dick White and the Secret War, 1935–90* (London: Heinemann 1995) pp.185–8, 190–95, 219–20.
28. 'Final Report of the Joint U.S.-U.K. Working Group on Syria: Conclusion', 18 September 1957, DSND 6/35.
29. In one message to Macmillan from Washington, Lloyd mentions the fact that he will shortly be discussing the working group report with Dulles, see Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser* (note 1) p.130.
30. Macmillan diary entry, 22 September 1957, Macmillan MSS dep. d.30, Bodleian Library.
31. Macmillan minute for Sandys, M.480/57, 24 September 1957, DSND 6/35.
32. Macmillan minute for Sandys, M.486/57, 26 September 1957, *ibid.*
33. Draft Sandys minute for Macmillan, n.d. (but c. late September 1957), *ibid.*
34. Foreign Office to Washington, No 3867, 27 September 1957, *ibid.*
35. Washington (Caccia) to Foreign Office, No 1949, 27 September 1957, *ibid.*
36. See *FRUS, 1955–1957, XIII* p.717 n.6.
37. Foreign Office (Lloyd) to Washington, No. 3956, 4 October 1957, DSND 6/35. The Foreign Secretary felt that Ali Jawdat al-Ayubi's visit to Damascus was 'going to make it twice as difficult to persuade Arab opinion anywhere that there is any harm in Syria'.
38. See Seale, *Struggle for Syria* (note 1) pp.300–304.
39. See Rathmell, *Secret War* (note 2) pp.142–3; Ashton, *Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser* (note 1) p.131.
40. Quoted in *ibid.* p.132.
41. The role of the Indonesia Working Group is explored in Matthew Jones, "'Maximum Disavowable Aid': Britain, the United States and the Indonesian Rebellion, 1957–58", *English Historical Review* CXIV/459 (November 1999) pp.1179–216.
42. A history of the working groups, and their significance in this period, is set out in Matthew Jones, 'Anglo-American Relations after Suez, the Rise and Decline of the Working Group Experiment, and the French Challenge to NATO, 1957–59', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14/2 (March 2003) pp.49–79.
43. Macmillan, *Riding the Storm* (note 14) p.278.
44. *Ibid.* p.284.

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