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SIC U2G
IN MODUK FOR DI ROW A1B

OUR TELNO 166: SYRIA: ATTITUDE TO IRAQ/KUWAIT CRISIS

SUMMARY

SYRIA CONTINUES TO SUPPORT THE WESTERN VIEW OF THE CRISIS IN THE GULF. BUT THERE ARE SIGNS THAT THE REGIME IS OUT OF STEP WITH POPULAR SENTIMENT.

DETAIL

2. I CALLED YESTERDAY EVENING (21 AUGUST) ON MOHAMMAD KHUDR, THE HEAD OF THE WESTERN EUROPEAN DIVISION IN THE SYRIAN MFA, TO SEEK AN UPDATE ON THE SYRIAN VIEW OF THE CURRENT CRISIS IN THE GULF.

3. KHUDR'S COMMENTS WERE IN LINE WITH THOSE OF FOREIGN MINISTER SHARA' TO A TROIKA GROUP OF EC HEADS OF MISSION ON 9 AUGUST (OUR TELNO 166 REFERS): SYRIA CONTINUED TO SUPPORT MOVES TO RESOLVE THE CRISIS WITHIN AN ARAB CONTEXT, AND BELIEVED THAT A SINE QUA NON FOR ANY SOLUTION WAS THE COMPLETE WITHDRAWAL OF IRAQI FORCES FROM KUWAIT AND THE RESTORATION TO POWER OF THE AL-SABAH REGIME. IN ADDITION, KHUDR DREW MY ATTENTION TO ARTICLES IN THAT DAY'S PRESS, WHICH QUOTED AT LENGTH OBSERVATIONS MADE BY ASSAD DURING THE EMERGENCY SUMMIT IN CAIRO, TO THE EFFECT THAT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CURRENT CRISIS SHOULD BE ASCRIBED TO SADDAM HUSSEIN ALONE, AND NOT TO THE WEST'S REACTION TO THE IRAQI INVASION OF KUWAIT: 'THE EVENT CAUSED FOREIGNERS TO COME AND IT IS NOT THE FOREIGNERS WHO BROUGHT ABOUT THE EVENT. IF WE WANT TO DRIVE THOSE FOREIGNERS OUT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, LET US FIND A SOLUTION FOR THIS EVENT...LET US REMOVE ANY PRETEXT THEY MAY USE'.

4. I ASKED KHUDR ABOUT SYRIA'S POSITION VIS-A-VIS UN SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAQ. HE SAID THAT SYRIA FULLY SUPPORTED THE RELEVANT SCRS, ALTHOUGH HE HAD THE GRACE TO ADMIT THAT THERE WAS VIRTUALLY NO TRADE

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BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES TO BE AFFECTED (EXCEPT SOME SMUGGLING WHICH HE DID NOT BELIEVE ANYONE COULD REASONABLY HOPE TO CONTROL). ON THE QUESTION OF SANCTIONS-BUSTING, KHUDR SAID THAT SYRIA WOULD SUPPORT MOVES TO ENFORCE AN EMBARGO WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF AN SCR.

5. KHUDR ASKED FOR DETAILS ON THE POSITION OF OUR EMBASSY IN KUWAIT. I BRO

KUWAIT. I BRIEFED HIM ON THE LATEST SITUATION. HE SAID THAT THE SYRIAN AMBASSADOR IN KUWAIT WOULD ALSO BE STAYING PUT AFTER THE 24 AUGUST DEADLINE.

6. OVERALL, KHUDR CONFESSED THAT HE FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO BE OPTIMISTIC IN THE PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES. HE SAID THAT AT PRESENT HE COULD NOT CONCEIVE OF ANY EASY WAY TO RESOLVE THE CRISIS.

COMMENT

7. KHUDR'S COMMENTS ACCORD FAIRLY CLOSELY WITH WHAT WE UNDERSTAND ASSAD HAS BEEN TELLING A STREAM OF HIGH LEVEL VISITORS OVER THE LAST WEEK, INCLUDING JOHN KELLY (US UNDERSECRETARY OF STATE FOR ME AFFAIRS) ON 14 AUGUST, FRANCOIS SHEER (DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE FRENCH MFA) ON 15 AUGUST, AND MIKHAIL SETENKO ('ROVING AMBASSADOR' IN THE SOVIET MFA) ON 16 AUGUST. TO JUDGE FROM WHAT FRENCH AND US COLLEAGUES HAVE TOLD ME ASSAD ADOPTED A BULLISH ATTITUDE WITH ALL THREE, PARTICULARLY SHEER, WHO APPARENTLY SET OUT TO EXPLAIN FRENCH CONCERNS ABOUT ENFORCING A NAVAL BLOCKADE AND TO DEMONSTRATE UNDERSTANDING FOR THE PROBLEMS MANY ARAB GOVERNMENTS ARE FACING WITH PUBLIC OPINION, AND WAS SOMEWHAT TAKEN ABACK WHEN ASSAD RETORTED THAT PUBLIC OPINION MATTERED NOT A JOT AND T A E FU

S SUIPORTED
FIRM ACTIVE MEASURES AGAINST IRAQ.

8. WHATEVER ASSAD'S COMMENTS ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION TO SHEER (HE APPARENTLY ADOPTED A MORE REASONED TONE WITH KELLY ON THIS SUBJECT), THE GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF THE QUESTION OF DEPLOYING TROOPS TO SAUDI ARABIA DOES SEEM TO SUGGEST A DEGREE OF CONCERN ON THIS ISSUE (OUR TEL U/N TO MODUK OF 20 AUGUST AND OUR 168 OF 22 AUGUST - NOT TO ALL). AMONG SYRIANS I HAVE TALKED TO THERE IS A GOOD DEAL OF SYMPATHY FOR IRAQ AND EVEN FOR SADDAM HUSSEIN PERSONALLY (I MYSELF HAVE WITNESSED A GROUP OF YOUTHS CHANTING HIS NAME IN PUBLIC). THERE

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SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN LITTLE SYMPATHY HERE FOR THE KUWAITIS (OR OTHER GULF ARABS) AT THE BEST OF TIMES AND EVEN IF MANY (NON-OFFICIAL) INTERLOCUTORS DO CONDEMN THE INVASION AND ANNEXATION, THEY ARE EQUALLY FORTHRIGHT IN CONDEMNING THE WEST'S REACTION AND IN PARTICULAR THE MOVES TO ENFORCE A NAVAL BLOCKAGE IN ORDER TO (AS THEY SEE IT) STARVE THE IRAQIS INTO SUBMISSION.

9. ACCORDING TO ARAB DIPLOMATIC COLLEAGUES THERE IS A CLEAR AIR OF CONFUSION AMONG OFFICIALS IN THE MFA OVER THE GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH TO THE CRISIS. THE OFFICIAL LINE FROM THE TOP FOR INTERNAL CONSUMPTION SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN THAT SADDAM HUSSEIN MUST GO, BUT THAT SYRIA MUST DO ITS BEST TO PRESERVE THE STRENGTH OF IRAQ AND ITS ARMY FOR ANY FUTURE CONFRONTATION WITH ISRAEL. HOWEVER, OFFICIALS APPEAR TO BE AT A LOSS TO EXPLAIN HOW THIS TIES IN WITH SYRIA'S PRESENT (APPARENT) SUPPORT FOR THE WEST, AND HOW THIS IN TURN TIE IN WITH ASSAD'S TRADITIONAL POLICY OF STANDING AGAINST THE US AND FOREIGN DOMINATION IN THE REGION.

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