

Saddam Husayn Prepares for an October Confrontation

Jul 22, 1998



Brief Analysis

On July 21, Iraq's ruling Revolutionary Command Council "strongly warned that it will not allow any party . . . [including] the United States or UNSCOM [to] prolong the embargo." This developed a theme introduced in Saddam Husayn's speech on the July 17th anniversary of the 1968 Ba'th revolution. The July 17th speech, the most important of the year by the Iraqi president, are usually lengthy, but this year was somewhat of an exception: the speech lasted for only 55 minutes. It carried essentially two intertwined messages: Iraq is losing its patience with trying to accommodate the UN in order to win the lifting of sanctions; and the Palestinian issue is suffering a major setback due to Arab subservience to the United States. To the latter problem, Saddam offers the Arabs a solution: Iraqi leadership of the Arab world.

Future of Sanctions: At the opening of the July 17th speech, Saddam defines his 30 year old revolution as "the new model revolution in Arab and human life". In the shadow of this great revolution, he promises, his people will find "brilliance [and] prosperity." This, however, is not going to happen overnight. The embargo, he explains, will not be removed by a UN Security Council Resolution [apparently because the United States will veto it]. Rather, it will erode. In fact, he discloses, it is eroding already. The time frame for the more "serious erosion" is not very clear -- "this year, and the years to follow" -- but Iraq will not tolerate the present situation for much longer.

Saddam tells his listeners that the Regional [Iraqi] Leadership (RL) of the Ba'th Party and the Revolutionary Command Council's (RCC) communique of May 1, 1998 is not only a cry of protest, but in effect "an alternative strategy should other methods fail." He also promised that soon these two institutions would meet again to decide on a plan of action. Indeed, four days later the RCC and RL issued their new warning. Any efforts "to obstruct the lifting of the embargo . . . will be dealt with firmly." More importantly, and very unusually, the Iraqi leadership announced that it would "remain on continuous alert to follow up on the situation and take the appropriate measures." Iraq's Vice President, Taha Yasin Ramadan, for his part announced that "the Iraqi leadership and people are not willing to wait for more years . . ."

> To sum this part up, while the tone is threatening, Iraq's intentions are not fully disclosed, nor is the time-table for action elaborated. This part of Saddam's speech should be seen as a warning shot before the October 1998 UNSCOM report and UN Security Council debate regarding the sanctions. As the Iraqi strategists see it, they still have a window of opportunity to lift the embargo or seriously erode it until the semi-annual report and debate in New York in April 1999. After that, the election campaign in the United States will make it impossible for the Administration to show any leniency towards Baghdad. However, by not exposing his plan, Saddam is allowing himself some flexibility and is keeping his rivals guessing. It is quite possible that he is keeping his friends, the French, Russians and others, guessing too.

Saddam Wraps Himself in the Palestinian Flag: In his July 17th speech, the Iraqi president exposes an important aspect of his strategy if he decides on a crisis in the fall: most of the speech is dedicated to the Palestine question. In a fashion reminiscent of the way in which he tried to fuse the Kuwait issue with that of Palestine after Iraq conquered Kuwait, Saddam Husayn again resorts to the same technique, in the hope that the present stalemate in the peace

process will guarantee him support among the Arab masses.

Referring to reluctance in certain Arab circles to invite Iraq to the next Arab summit, Saddam magnanimously agrees to stay out of it, even though he admits that this will anger the Iraqi people. In a paternalistic style, he explains to the Arab leaders what should be the next summit's spirit in order to advance the Palestinian cause.

> His main message is that those Arab leaders who have been trying to appease the United States, hoping that their pleading would advance the Palestinian cause, have failed completely. An Arab summit can succeed in that respect only if it adopts a proud and confrontational stance. Saddam refers nostalgically to the Khartoum Summit Conference in 1967 which decided on the "Three No's" -- no peace, no recognition, no negotiations. Such a stance will be respected by all the world's nations, and even the "Zionist Entity" will understand such language. In fact, this "entity" can understand only this kind of language. It will also be necessary to present the "Zionist entity" and its allies with a credible military threat in order that they make the necessary concessions. A credible threat may achieve its purpose, and this would avoid bloodshed.

Such a threat, argues the Iraqi president, must include the Iraqi armed forces due to their tremendous military experience and credibility. Likewise he is very proud of a 1990 Iraqi-Saudi joint decision that broke the back of the Israeli effort to turn Jerusalem into its internationally-recognized capital. The reason for that success, he says, was that it was very clear to all the states that if they confronted Iraq and Saudi Arabia over the Jerusalem issue, they would pay dearly for it, because there was a strong-willed intention behind the threat. On the other hand, the partial Arab summit in Cairo in 1996 failed to move the international community to act in favor of the Palestinians because there was no will-power and no dignity behind it. Saddam repeats time and again the fact that Jerusalem, the third holiest place to all Muslims, is still under foreign occupation and that those Muslim leaders who ignore it are ignoring the sentiments of the Arab and Muslim "man in the street," to their own detriment.

> Finally, Saddam attacks some Arab leaders [apparently Arafat, Mubarak, and even Syria's Asad] for attempting to "dwarf" the true strategic nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict. They are trying to depict it as a "disagreement over policies," or "differences between some Arab rulers and Netanyahu over some minor issues." The true dimensions of the conflict as Saddam sees them are "over major strategic and crucial issues that concern the entire [Arab] nation."

Saddam seems to imply that the Arab-Israeli conflict is, in reality, over total Arab existence versus Israeli existence. (A year ago his flamboyant son, Udayy, complained in his newspaper Babil that the slogan of "throwing the Jews into the sea" is erroneous, because some of them may be able to swim.) Saddam's evocative language is reminiscent of radical nationalist rhetoric used by Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Ahmad Shukeiri and the Syrian Ba'th of the 1960s. This suggests Saddam may use Arab nationalist slogans to complicate any U.S. efforts to compel Iraq to comply with the relevant UN resolutions and may achieve some success in this regard.

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