

Saddam Husayn Conquers Irbil:

Causes and Implications

Dec 10, 1996



Brief Analysis

While U.S. officials were in London on Friday evening, resting between mediation sessions with representatives of both main Kurdish factions, Saddam Husayn ordered his panzers into Irbil. The few Kurdish and Iraqi National Congress defenders of Irbil were overwhelmed by the more than 40,000 members of the three Republican Guard divisions that rolled into the INC administrative capital and stood no chance of repelling the invaders, but since Saddam's tanks had been stopped in their tracks by Ayatollah Khomeini's pasdaran in September 1980, Saddam takes no chances. Looking backward on the event of this week, it appears that the Iraqi invasion into territory heretofore controlled by Jalal Talabani's Popular Union of Kurdistan was triggered by a series of developments relating to challenges to Saddam's power-base, rivalries between Kurdish warlords, and important shifts in inter-regional politics.

The Role of the Republican Guards: A key rationale for Saddam's move northward was to provide his most loyal troops -- the Republican Guards -- an opportunity for an easy military victory against a poorly armed Kurdish militia as a way to stamp out growing discontent within the ranks. Signs of that discontent have emerged from several sources within the past year. In February 1996, three prominent Iraqi defectors returned to Baghdad after receiving a promise of a pardon; two days later General Husayn Kamil and his two brothers, along with their father and possibly two sisters and their families, were dead -- murdered by, among others, members of their own clan upon Saddam's "suggestion." According to reports, these killings fueled deep resentment in the tribe of al-bu Nasir, the president's main power-base and a key source of Guards officers and personnel. While difficult to confirm, reports suggest that Saddam has shown increasing signs of worrying about a deterioration of support within his own tribe. His perceived complicity in the deaths of the Kamil brothers and their relatives breached the Iraqi (and Arab) tribal code according to which blood-revenge within the clan is forbidden. One sign that Saddam may in fact be wary about the implications of breaking with tradition is the recent arrest and lengthy interrogation of one of the most prominent members of the president's tribe, Lt. General (ret.) Hamid ShaCban al-Nasiri, retired commander of the Iraqi air force. ShaCban was not involved in any plot against the president; his only crime was to have his name mentioned by would-be revolutionaries as a suitable candidate for the presidency, once they managed to remove Saddam from power.

> Indeed, the foiled coup attempt by army officers against Saddam earlier this summer gave him another cause for worry. Though it never reached an operational stage, it was substantial enough to cause a serious fright; the officers involved were not from the highest ranks, but they were well placed to undertake a coup. They came mainly from three units: the air force, which has long been a source of concern to the president, and more surprisingly, from the Republican Guard and the Special Republican Guard, the two main pillars of the regime's internal security system. Participation by Guards officers -- captains, majors and colonels -- was a new, shocking development which surely sent alarm bells ringing in Saddam's palace.

> These factors -- the suspicion of disloyalty in elite units and anxiety within the ruling tribe -- provided the

background to Saddam's move. A campaign against a hapless Kurdish group would provide a major diversion that would engage his forces and deliver them with an ego-boosting victory. In the process, it would help burnish his image and discourage thoughts of renewed coup plotting. As the Iraqi president apparently sees the situation, a military-political success in Kurdistan that would return it "into the lap of mother Iraq," as the regime puts it, would force any would-be plotters to freeze their plans.

The Iranian Angle: Iran's growing assertiveness in northern Iraq was an additional development which prompted Saddam to act. For the past several months, Iranian Revolutionary Guards, soldiers from Iran's Badr division (Iraqi expatriates who serve in the Iranian forces) and Iranian intelligence agents have been roaming the Talabani-controlled areas of Kurdistan along the Iranian border. Not only did they provide some support and training to Talabani's forces but, according to reports from the Barzani camp, Iranian artillery also supported Talabani's troops in their internecine battles. While there have been at least two previous incursions by Iranian troops, their presence in August -- with up to 4,000 men -- was more audacious than ever before. For Saddam, who fought an eight-year war with Iran in the 1980s, this was the proverbial red-cape-to-a-bull. In contrast to Turkey, which periodically sends its troops into northern Iraq to attack PKK bases but never lingers once its immediate mission is complete, infiltration by Iran into Iraqi Kurdistan is a major challenge and bold provocation. Inaction, Saddam may have reasoned, could further have eroded his control over his own power base within the military.

UNSC 986 and the U.S. Response: Clearly, Saddam was willing to sacrifice a freeze on implementing the "oil-for-food" arrangement just accepted by the United Nations (i.e., Security Council resolution 986) as the price for an invasion into Kurdistan. Perhaps he believes his actions will be soon forgotten; perhaps he believes that the "Arab street" will continue to push for implementation as a way to help the Iraqi people; equally likely is that Saddam believed the terms for implementing UNSC 986 -- with its international monitors and tight controls of food disbursement -- were too onerous and intrusive. In any case, the invasion into Irbil does show that Saddam does not lack for the means, including financial, to undertake significant military maneuvers. Such operations always take precedence over rations for this people.

> While Saddam could never be sure of the extent of the U.S. military response to his actions, he took care to cultivate two regional partners whose role would be to limit the danger of a massive U.S. retaliation. First, his alliance with Masud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party -- which apparently "invited" Saddam to help fight Iran and the Iranian-supported PUK -- split the Kurdish opposition and provided with a veneer of legitimacy which complicated Washington's strategy. (This alliance dates to February 1996, when Saddam recognized that Barzani's control of the Kirkuk pipeline would be an important factor in negotiating an "oil-for-deal" with the UN.) Though Saddam has again resorted to using force against his own people, the Barzani alliance makes it more difficult to cite Saddam for violating the human rights of his Kurdish citizens, along the lines of UNSC 688. This points out the sad reality of Kurdish politics -- to both Barzani and Talabani, winning the intra-Kurd battle for supremacy (even at the expense of unholy alliances with Baghdad or Tehran) seems to be more important than Kurdish unity in the face of external foes.

> Second, the key regional factor that limited the risk of massive U.S. retaliation was an apparent understanding between Baghdad and the new government in Turkey. In recent weeks, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan and other Turkish officials have sent signals of their interest in seeing a restoration of Saddam's control over Kurdistan. For Erbakan, a strong Turkish nationalist as well as an Islamist, Saddam provides a sure guarantee against further PKK incursions from safe havens in northern Iraq. Even under secularist leaders, Turkey has proven a difficult ally to the West, repeatedly threatening to cancel Operation Provide Comfort operating from the Incerlik air base that helps enforce the "no-fly zone" above the 36th parallel. In the wake of Saddam's invasion of Irbil, Turkey reportedly denied Washington the use of Incerlik for attacks on Iraqi troops, thus limiting U.S. options in northern Iraq and sending the

focus of U.S. efforts toward the southern "no-fly zone." Turkey is comfortable with Barzani, but at daggers drawn with Talabani. This is the background to the Ankara-KDP-Iraq triangle.

Forecast: Based on past behavior and current opportunities, Saddam Husayn's grand design seems to be to conquer the rest of Talabani-controlled Kurdistan, probably starting with Sulaymaniyya, the Kurdish town south of the 36th parallel where the remnants of the INC have taken refuge. Once firmly in control there, he could let Barzani administer the regime under an autonomy scheme that Barzani has previously been keen to negotiate with Saddam. With Talabani removed from the scene, Saddam will have little difficulty in dictating terms to Barzani and if the latter proved too independent, he too may be dispensed with at a late date. Either way, with or without Barzani, Kurdistan will have returned to the lap of "Mother Iraq." Saddam is likely to want to complete this plan by late November, when winter sets in, but he can also wait for the spring. From his perspective, the incursion northward has already achieved a major success, reasserting his ability to use military force, regaining important territory, bolstering his stature among his troops and further fracturing the Gulf War coalition. Once again, Saddam has shown that national pride, Iraqi sovereignty and Iraq's territorial integrity are more important to him (and to most of his officers) than procuring food and medicines for the Iraqi poor. The relative isolation of the United States gives him hope that international pressure would prevent Washington from pushing him back to square one.

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