

King Hussein in Washington:

View from the Iraqi Opposition

Mar 5, 1996



Brief Analysis

With U.S. diplomats focused on ways to buttress the Arab-Israeli peace process amid a wave of anti-peace terrorism, a key Arab partner -- Jordan's King Hussein -- arrives in Washington today for talks with President Clinton. Terrorism, however, will occupy only part of their discussion. According to reports here in London, where King Hussein met with leaders of the Iraqi opposition, the chief item on the Jordanian agenda will be the escalating threat from Iraq, especially in the wake of last month's killing of two Iraqi defectors who returned to Baghdad after six months sanctuary in Amman.

Stopping here en route to Washington, the Hashemite monarch resumed his contacts with leaders of the Iraqi opposition, both to exchange ideas on how to hasten political change in Baghdad and to promote a more cohesive opposition front. In addition to meeting with Ahmad Chalabi, president of the Executive Council of the Iraqi National Congress, King Hussein spoke with Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who had just arrived from northern Iraq the previous day. Reportedly, Talabani relayed to the King a message from the leader of the main Shi'ite group, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq's (SAIRI) Muhammad Bakir al-Hakim, with whom Talabani met in Tehran days earlier, to the effect that SAIRI would fully cooperate in any action against Saddam's regime. In addition, King Hussein also held two meetings with Mohsen Dizayee and Hoshyar Zibari, envoys of the leader of the other main Kurdish group, the Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) Mas'ud Barzani.

King Hussein's London meetings underscore his renewed commitment to play a decisive role in ridding Iraq of Saddam's regime since the savage killings of Saddam's sons-in-law, Hussein Kamil and Saddam Kamil, just two days after they returned from Amman to Baghdad. In a sign of the King's determination to work more closely with the Iraqi opposition, Jordan's new prime minister Abd al-Karim al-Kabariti announced last week that the main opposition groups will be allowed to open offices in Jordan to escalate their anti-Saddam political activities.

Since his first round of meetings with Iraqi opposition leaders last November in London, King Hussein has made significant efforts to warm relations with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt -- key Arab countries that have long blamed Jordan for its neutralist position during the Gulf War. In addition, Jordan has gone to great lengths to consult with Turkey, which is critical to any anti-Saddam effort because of its proximity to the largely Kurdish autonomous zone in northern Iraq and its support of Operation Provide Comfort there. Jordanian Crown Prince Hassan bin Talal paid a one-day visit to Ankara in January, during the holy month of Ramadan, and explained details of his brother's Iraqi initiative to President Suleiman Demirel. King Hussein now plans to visit Turkey himself and hold further talks on this issue.

Jordan's Predicament

Against this backdrop, many Iraqi opposition leaders believe Jordan cannot balance too long on the high-wire of avoiding Saddam's wrath while calling for a regime change in Iraq. They say Saddam Hussein is in a vengeful mood, noting recent Iraqi statements indicating that Saddam holds Jordan responsible for the Hussein Kamil episode and

the enormous damage it did to Iraq's position (e.g., forcing revelations about Iraqi programs of weapons of mass destruction and setting back for months efforts by some Security Council members to ease the UN sanctions regime on Iraq). Moreover, in expressing concern about Jordan's vulnerability to Saddam's revenge, they note that Iraq has conducted terrorism in the past against numerous Middle East states, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Mauritania and the United Arab Emirates.

Additionally, King Hussein arrives in Washington at a time when Jordan remains economically dependent on Iraq. Jordan still relies on Iraqi oil to provide essential fuel, and key sectors of Jordan's economy -- like transport and industry -- rise and fall on access to and support of the Iraqi market. Here, Jordan is hamstrung by the slow pace of improvement in relations with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. King Hussein visited the Saudi kingdom last month for the second time since the Gulf War and, for the second time, left without an audience with King Fahd; similarly, Kuwaiti officials have remained decidedly cool to Jordan's entreaties to improve ties, with a Kuwaiti minister publicly disparaging Jordan's anti-Saddam efforts in a speech to The Washington Institute just last week. Without substantive improvement in relations with these two states -- especially in the economic realm -- King Hussein will remain caught in the awkward position of calling for a change of regime in Iraq while still relying on Saddam for his country's economic well-being. This is only worsened by the deep freeze into which Syrian-Jordanian relations have fallen, with Damascus posing the most serious obstacle to Jordanian efforts to effect change inside Iraq.

The U.S. Factor

Some Iraqi opposition leaders believe that King Hussein's strategy hinges on a U.S. commitment to a more aggressive, assertive policy on Iraq. Hitherto, U.S. policy has focused on efforts to use UN sanctions to contain Saddam. An unspoken goal of this policy was to create the environment in which rebels from within the ruling circle might undertake a "palace coup" to overthrow Saddam. However, since Desert Storm, a cautious Saddam has maintained the singular objective of foiling just these sorts of plots.

Indeed, the futility of relying on a "palace coup" against Saddam was underscored by the Hussein Kamil episode. Hussein Kamil arrived in Amman last August as an ideal candidate for architect of a "palace coup" -- he was a close relative of Saddam Hussein, from the same village, who served a key role in the organization of Iraq's Republican Guard and the country's weapons of mass destruction programs. However, when he met with senior U.S. and British intelligence officials following his defection, his main suggestion for overthrowing Saddam was to arm and fund an army inside Jordan to move against Iraq with the support of allied air strikes. In other words, Hussein Kamil's message was that even he lacked any significant assets to orchestrate a coup against Saddam from within Iraq itself.

According to accounts by those with whom he met in London, King Hussein has learned an important lesson from the Hussein Kamil experience and reached the conclusion that change in Iraq cannot be brought about by a "palace coup." Instead, he is apparently committed to pressing Washington to provide political and material support to the Iraqi opposition and to undertake a diplomatic campaign to forge a regional consensus on Iraq's future. King Hussein has offered his own approach -- a pluralistic, confederal system accommodating Iraq's Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurdish communities within a single, unified state -- but he is less committed to any specific idea than to the need to act forcefully and speedily. Apparently, he is now convinced that only direct action, including from northern Iraq, can topple Saddam.

While recognizing the uphill battle necessary to convince the Clinton Administration to take any initiative on Iraq at a time when sanctions remain firmly in place and Iraq seems to pose no imminent threat, King Hussein intimated to his interlocutors from the Iraqi opposition that he was determined to force the issue with his U.S. hosts. He is ready even "to shout" at Clinton, said one Iraqi opposition leader. The King apparently believes Jordan to be Saddam's prime target for revenge. And with UN weapons inspectors acknowledging that Saddam almost surely retains a wide range of banned weaponry -- probably including SCUD missiles with warheads armed with biological weapons --

Jordan's fears may not be misplaced.

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