

# The Future of Iraq:

## A New U.S. Approach

Jan 8, 1996



### Brief Analysis

In the run-up to today's fifth anniversary of the Gulf War, the United States took an important step toward redefining its Iraq policy when Secretary of Defense William Perry, speaking in Amman on January 7, openly endorsed King Hussein's ambitious ideas for a post-Saddam regime of reconciliation and national unity. "We strongly support the initiatives King Hussein has taken relative to Iraq," said Perry. "King Hussein's actions are intended to try to help the people of Iraq achieve their destiny. And we strongly support them."

In the near-term, neither UN sanctions against Iraq nor Baghdad's ability to continue flouting the international community seems likely to collapse. However, Perry's statement could have a profound impact within the Arab world, which is engaged in what the London-based al-Hayat newspaper has called a "veritable war of strategies" over Iraq. In general, Arab media and governing circles have entertained four options for Iraq's future: the replacement of Saddam by another Sunni Arab strongman (the "son of Saddam" scenario); the disintegration of Iraq into Kurdish, Sunni, and Shi'ite regions, perhaps with each enclave gravitating toward a regional mentor (for the Kurds, Turkey; for the Sunni Arabs, Syria; for the Shi'ites, Iran); the creation of a decentralized, federal Iraq with Kurdish/Sunni Arab/Shi'ite autonomy replacing the Baghdad-focused state that existed prior to the Gulf War; or the redemption and rehabilitation of Saddam himself, after winning the test of wills with the international community.

### Jordan and the "Federal Option"

The most innovative of these ideas is the "federal option" floated by King Hussein, who has boldly broken with his erstwhile Iraqi ally. (See POLICYWATCH No. 180, "King's Hussein's Iraq Gambit and the Iraqi Opposition," by Kamran Karadaghi, January 5, 1996). Although the details of the federal plan are fuzzy, it is best characterized by what it is not -- i.e., neither a continuation of Sunni Arab dominance over Iraq's non-Sunni Arab majority nor the dismemberment of the Iraqi state with neighbors gobbling up ethnic satellites. Into this mix, one must add possible Hashemite ambitions in Iraq, ranging from the restoration of some form of Hashemite rule (as was the case from 1921-1958) or a less ambitious scheme to offer a Hashemite umbrella for the bickering Iraqi opposition.

So far, the king has publicly forsworn any interest in playing a role in Iraqi domestic politics; given the unease of some Jordanian power centers (e.g., the business community) toward alienating Iraq, his ideas have been couched more as a "Hashemite" plan than a "Jordanian" one. After dismissing the king's ideas for months, regional capitals are beginning to take it more seriously. Last week, for example, Iraq's foreign minister lambasted Jordan for interfering in Iraq's domestic affairs -- a sure sign that it is worried about the feasibility of the plan. Indeed, of all Arab leaders, Hussein does have the deepest ties to Iraq's various ethnic communities and political institutions. First, as scion of the family of the Prophet Muhammad, Hussein's Islamic credentials pre-date the schism between Sunnis and Shi'ites, giving him a special connection to Iraq's largest religious grouping. Second, Amman has for years maintained good relations with Kurdish leaders. And third, fifteen years of close military cooperation between the Jordanian and Iraqi armies and intelligence units has given Hussein strong ties to those key institutions.

Jordan has not yet persuaded other Arab states to back the federal option, with only Kuwait hinting that federalism might be an acceptable alternative to either protracted rule by Saddam's henchmen or the disintegration of Iraq. But Perry's endorsement will boost the king's regional image. His statement of support may be just what Hussein needs to succeed in efforts to organize a conference of Iraqi opposition leaders, many of whom are controlled by competing regional powers, like Syria or Iran.

#### Egypt and Syria -- "Federalism Equals Disintegration"

Although federalism may be a way to avert the break-up of Iraq, opponents like Egypt and Syria have turned the idea inside-out, painting federalism as the first step toward Iraq's disintegration. Moreover, both of these key Arab states distrust Jordan for its warmth with Israel and mock the king as a minor player on the Arab stage who has the audacity to act as a major power-broker. Cairo and Damascus, it seems, could both countenance Saddam's "redemption," though Syria's clear preference would be for a weaker, Sunni Arab leader who would keep Iraq unified but vulnerable.

In thinly veiled criticisms of King Hussein, Egypt has denounced the federal idea: for example, in an interview last month, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amre Moussa referred to [unnamed] "covetous eyes...being cast on Iraq and plans being promoted to dismember it." Egypt has even taken the lead in hinting at Iraq's rehabilitation. As Moussa said on December 7: "It is time Iraq rejoined Arab ranks. Iraq is a major Arab state. Its absence from the Arab scene is undoubtedly dangerous and its return is undoubtedly important." In Egyptian statements, references to Iraq's requirement to fulfill UN resolutions read as an afterthought, a worrying sign for a new Security Council member.

For its part, Syria has accused Hussein of helping to execute "a Zionist plan to fragment Iraq into three states and then link them with Jordan in a new Israeli-led bloc policing the Gulf oilfields." More generally, Damascus has vacillated between undermining Saddam and living with him. If the August 1995 defection of Hussein Kamel was the catalyzing moment for King Hussein, anti-Saddam rioting by the influential Dulaymi tribe in June 1995 was the trigger for greater Syrian activism on the Iraqi front. Since then, Syria has strengthened its alliance with the million-man Dulaymi tribe, who in turn were allied with Iranian-backed rebels in southern Iraq. In the event of further erosion of Saddam's internal position, Damascus seems to be counting on its connection to the powerful Dulaymis to provide it with a lever to influence the shape of a post-Saddam regime. These steps have not prevented Damascus from making soothing noises to Baghdad even now, however. (This includes the recent conclusion of a border agreement). Perhaps this aspect of Syrian policy is a way to remind both troublesome ally Iran and irksome neighbor Jordan that Syria has more than option on the Middle East chessboard.

#### Saudi Arabia -- An Unknown Quantity

Saudi policy toward the future of Iraq is uncertain. In the short-term, Riyadh has an interest in maintaining the "status quo," which keeps millions of barrels of Iraqi crude oil off global markets. The Saudi government has stated it has "totally lost confidence in the existing Iraqi regime" but has taken few steps to bring about Saddam's ouster. Its posture can best be characterized as defensive and reactive, working with the United States to deter Iraqi aggression but not aimed at altering the Iraqi political map. So far, Riyadh has not commented publicly on Hussein's federal option. On the surface, one should expect Saudi opposition, if not derision, at any Hashemite re-connection with Iraq; Saudi-Hashemite dynastic rivalry remains alive. But instead, Saudi Arabia has warmed toward Jordan in recent weeks, dispatching both its foreign minister and a resident ambassador to Amman for the first time in five years and offering to renew economic ties (including oil trade). While this may reflect years of U.S. importuning, these signs could also suggest the al-Saud ruling family is covering its bets, holding out the option that "federalism" might avert even more calamitous outcomes in Iraq. (These include the potential use of weapons of mass destruction against Riyadh as revenge for the Saudi behavior during the Gulf crisis or, alternatively, the emergence of Shi'ite irredentism in eastern Saudi Arabia in the event of Iraq's disintegration.) An expected visit by King Hussein to Saudi Arabia at the

end of Ramadan may provide the key signal of Saudi intentions on this critical issue.

## Conclusion

With Saddam outlasting many of his Gulf War adversaries, discussion about Iraqi "endgames" is only that -- talk. But it is nonetheless important to begin planning now for the future of this strategic Middle Eastern country. For the new policy articulated by Secretary Perry to have regional impact, advocates must move actively on two fronts -- affirming this as the uniform approach of the disparate foreign policy arms of the U.S. government, where there remains great unease about promoting specific Iraqi "endgames," and winning support (or at least defusing opposition) among America's key Middle East allies, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These could be the next two battlefields in the long-running Gulf conflict ❖

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