

# King Hussein's Iraqi Gambit and the Iraqi Opposition

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Brief Analysis

Just a year after forging peace with Israel, King Hussein of Jordan has embarked on what many observers consider a "mission impossible" -- uniting the Iraqi opposition against Saddam Hussein, Jordan's pre-Gulf War ally and the king's erstwhile personal friend. In outlining a post-Saddam vision of reconciliation among Iraq's major ethnic divisions and a political path to achieve that goal, Jordan's monarch has taken upon himself a number of risks -- failure, reprisal, and the discontent of those Jordanians still loath to break with Saddam -- yet he seems determined to pursue his mission. An Iraqi acquaintance of the King, who visited him in Amman recently, tried very hard to make him reconsider his decision. After listening patiently, the king firmly told his guest that he had made his mind up, no matter what obstacles lie ahead.

## Jordan and Iraq: The Hashemite Connection

As the Hashemite monarch, King Hussein is no stranger to Iraq. His grandfather's brother, Faisal I, was the founder of modern Iraq in 1921 and served as its first king. His cousin Faisal II, the last Iraqi king, was killed in Baghdad during the military coup of July 14, 1958. Hussein himself was technically heir to the leadership of the Arab Union between Hashemite Iraq and Hashemite Jordan that collapsed with the Iraqi coup. In his major speeches on Iraq, Hussein consistently rejects any role for himself in the country's future, yet there are hints that he has ideas for a role in Baghdad for the Jordanian branch of the Hashemite family. Prince Ra'ad, the current Royal Chamberlain in Amman, is the son of the late Prince Zaid, the youngest brother of King Faisal I. In 1995, King Hussein twice deputized Prince Ra'ad to act in his name during his absence abroad. Some palace watchers took this to be a message to a London-based pretender to the Iraqi crown, Sherif Ali bin Al Hussein (the son of the late Princess Badi'a, an aunt of Faisal II) that in the event of a restoration of the Iraqi monarchy in some form of "national unity regime," the "real" pretender will be a member of King Hussein's own household.

More than a direct appeal for a Hashemite restoration, however, the King's desire to involve himself directly in Iraq's affairs amounts to an offer of patronage to the Iraqi opposition. This was first expressed after the defection to Jordan last August of Saddam's son-in-law, General Hussein Kamel al-Majid, regarded as the mastermind of Iraq's secret armaments programs, including the effort to develop weapons of mass destruction. King Hussein used the defection to announce a formal change of position on Iraq that had, in fact, been brewing for some time. With Jordan's growing ties with the United States, facilitated by his peace with Israel, Hussein's regional role was evolving dramatically, but a major obstacle to a renewal of ties with the Gulf states was Jordan's lingering relationship with Saddam's pariah regime.

The Hussein Kamel defection provided an opportunity to overcome that obstacle. Shortly after the defection, the King escalated his criticism of the Baghdad regime, stating openly that a new approach is needed to prevent the dismemberment and disintegration of Iraq. He expressed willingness to help establish a new order in Iraq on the basis of "national reconciliation" between Iraq's Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurdish communities, the three major components of Iraqi society, and he proposed the idea of a federated Iraq as a means of preserving the country's political unity and territorial integrity.

## Turning an Idea into Reality

In November 1995, King Hussein sent two of his closest advisers to London to establish contact with the Iraqi opposition. One of these, Mustafa al-Qaisi, head of Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate, met Professor Hassan al-Chalabi, member of the leadership of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) and elder brother of INC chairman Ahmad al-Chalabi, who was in northern Iraq at the time. The other envoy, Abdul Ilah al-Kurdi, number three in Jordan's GID, spent ten days in extensive meetings with other opposition leaders. In all these meetings, the envoys told opposition leaders that Hussein planned to convene a conference of opposition groups in Amman to discuss the future of Iraq and that he was fully prepared to assist the opposition in its efforts to overthrow the Saddam regime.

Days later, the King himself visited London and confirmed this message in person. According to opposition figures who attended these meetings, Hussein said he wanted to "play a decisive role to rid the Iraqi people of Saddam Hussein and the likes of Hussein Kamel." From his residence in London he spoke by phone with Bakr al-Hakim, the Tehran-based leader of the Shi'ite opposition group, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI). He also spoke, via satellite phone, with INC chairman Chalabi, and the leaders of the two main Kurdish groups, Jalal Talabani (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and Mas'ud Barzani (Kurdish Democratic Party), who were all in northern Iraq.

As leaders of the four main groupings in the Iraqi opposition, the King needed to win their support before proceeding with efforts to convene the conference. However, there was immediate agreement only from Chalabi and Talabani. In a recently published statement, the PUK's leadership officially endorsed the King's initiative; via Crown Prince Hassan, there is a measure of coordination between the Royal Palace and Chalabi. But much has still to be done to convince Barzani and al-Hakim to go to Amman. Barzani, who recently received a personal invitation to visit Jordan from the Crown Prince, is concerned about negative reaction from Syria and Saudi Arabia. Iran is also pressuring both organizational leaders to stay away from the King's plan.

As King Hussein has come to realize, disagreements are rife within the Iraqi opposition, reflecting not just their organizational conflicts but the competing interests of regional powers as well. Though King Fahd was apparently willing to receive Hussein before his stroke upset the schedule, Saudi Arabia has no enthusiasm for the idea of a Hashemite ruler becoming a major player in deciding the future of Iraq. Egypt's President Husni Mubarak has denounced the concept of federalism in Iraq as a threat to the country's unity, an implied barb at King Hussein and the latter's ambitions to an enhanced regional role. Damascus has been virulently opposed to the King's ideas, accusing him of colluding with Israel to bring a weak and divided Iraq into an Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian confederation. From Syria's point of view, this turn of events would be catastrophic: not only would it allot Jordan an over-sized role in the Middle East politics but it would undermine Syria's own claim to dominance in whatever new regional order emerges from the Arab-Israeli peace process.

### A Role for Washington?

Despite the growing warmth of U.S.-Jordanian ties, Washington has not lent its public support to the king; many Iraqi opposition figures are bewildered that the United States does not seem as yet to accord Jordan's initiative the seriousness it deserves. But the issue is still in play and many are hopeful of a sign of U.S. support for Jordan's important initiative. In the meantime, a vital U.S. contribution would be to intensify efforts to broker a truce between the two main Kurdish parties in northern Iraq. Should a PUK-KDP accord take hold, that would be a critical step toward ending intra-opposition conflict, pacifying northern Iraq, and opening up new avenues for cooperation -- perhaps under the umbrella of King Hussein's bold plan for a post-Saddam regime.

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