

King Hussein's Iraq Speech: Opportunities and Challenges

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Brief Analysis

In his televised address Wednesday, King Hussein defined a new policy toward Iraq that underscores his connection to the Iraqi people and armed forces, puts him at the forefront of the anti-Saddam coalition, and lays down a clear marker to Saddam that one false move would trigger the shutting down of Jordanian import of Iraqi oil.

Among the most notable aspects of the king's speech are the following:

Shifting blame: Hussein stated categorically that blame for all the misery that has befallen the Arab world since 1990 belongs to Saddam Hussein. "All the repercussions and the results that followed until today were the result of this invasion," he said. This statement -- which meshes with Kuwaiti and Gulf Arab sentiments -- is a sharp departure from the previous Jordanian view, which had many parties sharing blame for Arab catastrophes. Indeed, this view contrasts with the authoritative Jordanian White Paper issued during the Gulf crisis, which accused Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and other Arab leaders for condemning the invasion precipitously, thereby preventing an "Arab solution" to avert war.

Praising Husayn Kamil: The King appeared unequivocally to back Husayn Kamil as his candidate for Saddam's successor. Calling himself Kamil's "uncle," the king expressed personal affection for Kamil and regard for his skills and integrity. Husayn Kamil, he said, "tried to effect reforms at every opportunity...until he despaired of any success;" the defector not only has "conscience and honor," but also widespread support, representing in the king's words "millions of Iraqis."

Between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia: In his speech, the king went far toward mending torn relations with Kuwait. In addition to the affixing of blame, Hussein cited two key provisions of UN resolutions that pertain to Kuwait: the need to account for missing Kuwaiti soldiers and the demarcation of the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border. Indeed, by terming that demarcation "perhaps the only good that came from all [the warfare]," the king unambiguously endorsed a new Iraqi-

Kuwaiti frontier that is much to Kuwait's advantage. There is, in contrast, little in this speech targeted to appeal to Saudi sensibilities. For Riyadh, Hussein's monologue on the historical Hashemite connection to Iraq is likely to overshadow his stated rejection of any Hashemite claims to Iraq. The Saudis continue to loathe and, to a surprising degree, fear the Hashemite dynasty: indeed, many observers believe that a key element of the Saudis' anger at Jordan over the Gulf crisis was their belief that King Hussein hoped to use Iraqi might to regain Mecca and Medina and divide up Saudi territory with Iraq and Yemen. Moreover, the King's speech evinced little sympathy for Saudi suffering during the war (noting only that, in addition to hitting Israel, Iraqi SCUDS "also landed in sisterly Arab cities") and almost no recognition of the Saudis' fear that, along with digesting Kuwait, Saddam had his eye on them, too.

Appeal to all Iraqis: As a descendant of the Prophet, Hussein has special standing to speak to the mosaic of communities that comprise present day Iraq and he took advantage of the opportunity. First, Hussein has always felt a special link with Shi'ites, deriving from the fact that his connection to the Prophet predates the Sunni-Shi'ite schism. In that tradition, this speech makes special appeals to Iraq's majority Shi'ite population through references to Shi'ism's revered figures (Imam Ali, his sons Hassan and Hussein) and the fact that, like the Shi'ite martyrs, the last Hashemite king of Iraq was also martyred in the Shi'ite holy place of Karbala. Second, the king not only made special reference to Iraqi Kurds, who maintain their own self-administered authority in northern Iraq, but he also adopted much of the language employed frequently by the oppositionists, including the need for the development in Iraq of a "harmonious pluralism in which no element of the national fabric will dominate and in which no human right will be harmed, in an atmosphere of freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights." Third, and perhaps most striking, Hussein not only lavishly praised the Iraqi military, he also claimed a special Hashemite role in its origins and a claim on its present-day loyalty. In a thinly-veiled warning to Saddam not to threaten Jordan, he said he is "confident" that the "Iraqi army, which hailed from the [Hashemite-led] Great Arab Revolt [of World War I]," would refuse any order to "violate the strong bond dictated by this immortal Iraqi-Jordanian brotherhood."

Opportunities and Challenges: To mix metaphors, the King's speech opened the door to tightening the noose around Saddam in a number of ways. First, by warning Iraq that "influential international powers" would use their power to retain the embargo until Iraq complied with all UN Security Council resolutions -- including UNSC 688, on human rights inside Iraq -- and not just those concerned with weapons of mass destruction, Hussein provided political cover for the U.S. and its allied efforts to "move the goalposts" in declared policy toward Iraq. Second, by acknowledging his search for "precautionary alternatives" to replace Jordan's current importation of Iraqi oil, Hussein is declaring that Saddam's reliance on the access that Jordan provides to the outside world is greater than Jordan's reliance on Iraqi oil. Indeed, in stating that these alternatives could be triggered in "any emergency situation that could threaten at any time," Hussein put Saddam on notice that any wrong move -- perhaps ranging from suspicious military maneuvers to a report about terrorist action among the 30,000 Iraqi expatriates in Amman -- would lead to a cut-off and shift to Kuwaiti or other Gulf oil suppliers. Third, by rejecting any plan to close the Iraqi-Jordanian border and deny the Iraqi people "food and medicine," Hussein may have been hinting at his willingness to curtail trade in all the other goods that reportedly pass over the border on a daily basis. And fourth, by terming Jordan the "safe haven of oppressed freedom fighters throughout history," Hussein seemed to offer Jordanian territory as a sanctuary for defectors and potential home of Iraqi oppositionists.

But implementing these moves will not be simple. Hussein may have done a service by passing along to Iraqis a message regarding Washington's insistence on implementation of all UNSC resolutions, but this is sure to draw statements from France and Russia focusing solely on the WMD provisions as triggering the end of the oil-export restrictions. Second, Jordan's economic relationship with Iraq is complex and multi-faceted; to shift oil suppliers from Iraq to the Gulf actually involves a fundamental re-orientation of the Jordanian economy. Oil is not the only ingredient in the Iraqi-Jordanian relationship; two other key factors are employment and trade. To compensate Jordan for the loss of the Iraqi market would require long-term, guaranteed commitments to keep tens, if not

hundreds, of thousands of Jordanians, especially those in the trucking fleet and agriculture, employed in moving goods from Jordan to the Gulf. Lastly, swallowing a role for Hussein Kamil, the man who built the Iraqi chemical weapons program and who reportedly led the crackdown on the Shi'ite rebellion in 1991, is likely to be the price Iraqi oppositionists will have to pay to take advantage of Jordan as a "safe haven."

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