

# The Helicopter Tragedy in Northern Iraq:

## The Political Context

Apr 18, 1994



### Brief Analysis

Last week's "friendly fire" incident over northern Iraq occurred in an environment of steadily increasing tensions, created by Saddam Hussein, that may have contributed to the accident. How far Saddam intends to take this round is unclear. Recent incidents testify to his extreme frustration at his inability to get sanctions lifted quickly, even as the sanctions regime seems to be eroding over the longer term.

### Saddam Hussein and the Los Angeles Earthquake

Saddam seems to have begun new campaign against the United States and the UN early this year. On January 16, the third anniversary of the Gulf War's start, Saddam gave a speech in which he warned, "For all evildoers, masters [America] and slaves [Saudis, Egyptians, et al], we reiterate that . . . the punishment of the criminals is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The next day a mammoth earthquake hit Los Angeles. Baghdad television ran footage from CNN's coverage of the earthquake all day long. The Iraqi media portrayed the earthquake as God's answer to Saddam's call, warning that "the curse of Iraq will chase every criminal and aggressor."

The immediate impact of Saddam's bellicosity was reflected in the value of the Iraqi dinar, which fell overnight from 145 to 165 to the dollar, before dropping to 250 when the Security Council reaffirmed its intention to maintain the sanctions regime.

### Iraq's Good Cop/Bad Cop Routine

Prior to the UN Security Council's March 18 sanctions review, President Clinton sent congress a letter reviewing his policy toward Iraq. The president's tough line infuriated the Iraqis, as did Anthony Lake's article in the Spring issue of Foreign Affairs, "Confronting Backlash States," which prominently underscored Iraq's rogue status. Tariq Aziz charged that it reflected "a rancorous, hostile, colonialist attitude."

As March 18 approached, two lines emerged in the Iraqi press. One was associated with Tariq Aziz and other Iraqi officials. It stressed the need to cooperate with the UN weapons inspectors and work with countries like France to maneuver the Security Council into lifting sanctions over American opposition.

The contrary line was expressed in Babil, the newspaper belonging to Saddam's son Uday. Babil attacked those who had advocated making concessions to the UN, like accepting Resolution 715, which provides for long-term monitoring. Babil claimed they were ceding Iraqi sovereignty while getting nothing in return, and threatened a new course if the U.S.-backed UN sanctions regime were not lifted immediately.

Saddam himself gave the clearest expression of that line in a March 13 speech marking the end of Ramadan. Tariq 'Aziz was headed for New York to lobby the Security Council for the mid-March sanctions review, and Saddam warned that,

If ['Aziz] returns without obtaining the Security Council's agreement to meet its obligations and if there is no hope that the injustice will be lifted from the Iraqi people, the Iraqi people and their leadership can do nothing else but

decide what they believe will give them hope, God willing, in the direction they believe is sound.

#### The March 18 Sanctions Review: A Mixed Bag

The March 18 sanctions review revealed that France is prepared to bolt from the coalition. Two major French oil companies, Elf Aquitaine and Totale, have contracts to lift Iraqi oil on concessionary terms, pending the lifting of sanctions. Additionally, Baghdad has promised preferable terms for debt repayment and access to its markets for those ready to champion its cause now. Paris took the lead, and Moscow and Beijing fell in behind.

France promoted the idea that the Security Council should note the "progress" that Iraq had made in complying with UN weapons inspectors. The United States, backed by Great Britain, successfully resisted, at least for now. After all, it should be obvious that after Iraq is allowed to sell oil, Saddam will have no incentive to work with the weapons inspectors or abide by their monitoring schemes. When the inspections regime collapses, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to reimpose the oil embargo, because of the many commercial interests involved. At that time, a dismaying truth will become all too apparent: Security Council Resolution 687, which provides the framework for Iraq's disarmament, is as unenforceable as the Versailles Peace Treaty's provisions for the disarmament of Germany after World War I.

In the end, while the Council voted to maintain sanctions, cracks in the allied coalition have never been more evident. No wonder that upon Tariq 'Aziz's return to Baghdad, the line emerged that the Security Council meeting had been a success for Iraq and the lifting of sanctions would be imminent.

#### Saddam's Lethal Twist

Iraq's modest success in New York has not stopped Baghdad from initiating a new campaign of retaliation for continued sanctions, aimed at the easiest targets: Westerners in Northern Iraq. On March 14, a car bomb injured two Swedish journalists. On March 26, an Austrian serving as a UN guard was wounded while escorting relief supplies through Mosul. On April 3, the Agence France Presse correspondent and her Kurdish driver were killed, and two days later, a Danish UN guard was seriously wounded. In addition, on April 12 Talib Suhayl, an Iraqi with links to the opposition, was killed in Beirut. Lebanese police arrested the Iraqi cultural and commercial attaches, while a third suspect took refuge in the Iraqi embassy.

Saddam is making progress towards lifting sanctions. The question, therefore, is why he is also now engaging in the kind of behavior that causes others to become fed up with him. He is under tremendous pressure internally, causing him to lash out erratically, even though it undermines other steps he is taking to erode the sanctions regime. He thus pursues two inconsistent goals simultaneously.

#### Next Steps

As House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton remarked in response to the accidental downing of the helicopters, "This incident reminds us that we still have a lot of unfinished business, as far as Saddam Hussein is concerned." The situation is not viable over the long term, and a mid-May sanctions review will highlight the continuing rift among the allies.

However, the administration has an easy option to significantly increase the pressure on Baghdad: find an alternative supplier of Jordanian oil needs, in order to deprive Amman of the rationale for continued purchases of Iraqi oil, which is currently valued at about \$500 million annually. If Saudi Arabia continues to balk, then presumably some Gulf sheikhdom could be induced to supply the oil. After all, those countries would be living under Saddam's boot were it not for the American role in Desert Storm. Another reason to cut off the oil supply is that the overland oil tankers have been used for smuggling contraband from Jordan to Iraq.

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