

Iraq Deserted

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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

Today's summit meeting between the leaders of Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Sudan highlights an important trend emerging in the Gulf crisis: support in the Arab world for the U.S.-led anti-Iraq coalition is growing, while Iraq finds itself increasingly deserted.

Pro-Iraqi demonstrations have dwindled; the cheers for Saddam Hussein have died away. A few months ago, Western correspondents visited one Arab capital, Amman, and reported that "the Arabs" were wholeheartedly supporting Iraq. If the United States continued on its course of confronting Saddam, these reports implied, it would be facing the wrath of the entire Arab world, sparking anti-Western revolutions from Morocco to Oman.

Iraq's Crumbling Coalition

Now the situation seems quite different. The countries that seemed most likely to help undermine economic sanctions -- Sudan, Libya, Jordan and Iran -- are doing little or nothing to smuggle goods into Iraq. Iranian authorities speak openly about the need to defeat Saddam. The prime minister of Qatar, a small Gulf state which often serves as a front for Saudi initiatives, went so far as to insist that Iran, as a "friendly country," be included in any post-crisis Gulf security system.

Jordan has steadily reduced its shipments of goods to Iraq, encouraged to do so by a U.S. naval cordon off its Red Sea port of Aqaba. There have been no major demonstrations in Amman supporting Iraq in recent weeks. While Palestinians and Islamic fundamentalists in Jordan still express support for Saddam, they are doing little about it. Early in the crisis, there were dramatic stories about thousands of Jordanians lining up to fight for Iraq, but no actual recruits have appeared in Baghdad's million man army.

The mercurial Libyan dictator, Muammar Qadhafi, has switched from the pro to the anti-Iraq camp. Qadhafi is influenced by his political instincts, not ideological imaginings. To escape his own isolation, he needs a rapprochement with neighboring Egypt, a pillar of the anti-Saddam coalition. Qadhafi also seeks Western technology and spare parts for Libya's oil industry, another incentive for cooperation. Moreover, his healthy respect for American power, inspired in part by the 1986 U.S. bombing of Libya, makes him assume Washington will emerge victorious in any confrontation with Baghdad. Finally, Qadhafi is jealous: he views himself, not Saddam, as rightful leader of the Arabs.

Perhaps the most telling new development was Algeria's decision to throw up its hands at Iraqi intransigence after recent efforts to forge a diplomatic solution. The Algerian president and foreign minister criss-crossed the region trying to get a negotiation going, only to find no takers. At the conclusion of this effort, the foreign minister proclaimed that Iraq must withdraw from Kuwait, and only international pressure would force it to do so, although Algiers still favors a peaceful, and preferably Arab, solution.

During the early part of the crisis, leaders of two major PLO member groups talked about aligning with Saddam's cause. George Habash, of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and Naif Hawatmeh, of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), complained that Syria was siding with imperialist, pro-Israel America against an Arab brother, Iraq. They talked of closing down their Damascus headquarters and throwing in their lot with Baghdad. Months later, however, the PFLP and DFLP have stayed put, supporting Iraq in words, but remaining in Syria, less likely to become the target of U.S. warplanes.

Even Sudan, whose Islamic-oriented government and desire to oppose big neighbor Egypt made it supportive of Iraq, has backed off: earlier this week, Sudan's foreign minister condemned Saddam's invasion of Kuwait for the first time. Now, the country's leader will attend a summit meeting with Egypt to discuss the crisis. Desperately in debt, Sudan is realizing it cannot afford to sacrifice the good will of the big, wealthy Gulf oil exporters.

Saddam's Growing Isolation and the Slide Toward War

Saddam is left, then, with just two reliable supporters: Yasser Arafat and Yemen. These also happen to be the weakest forces in the Arab world, with little or no assets to offer him.

This pessimistic assessment, though, does not yet appear to be having any effect on the Iraqi leader. His aides, no doubt, give him more hopeful information. As a result, Saddam is increasingly acting toward the United States like Egyptian President Nasser treated Israel in 1967. He wants to avoid war but, through his statements and actions, is maneuvering himself right into a battle. If Saddam does not underestimate America's military power, he continues to underestimate its will to fight.

If war comes, no one knows if the result will be as one-sided as the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. Still, whether or not the sight of American planes bombing Baghdad inspires more anti-Western terrorist acts and pro-Saddam demonstrations, it does not seem likely to bring Iraq more help from the existing Arab governments.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notable, Revolutionaries* (Policy Focus #12, 1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics* (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming *Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO*. ❖

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