

The Prospects for an Iraq-Israel Confrontation

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Brief Analysis

Saddam Hussein's explicit threats against Israel have drawn renewed attention to the prospects for an Iraqi-Israeli confrontation. Though this cannot be ruled out, it seems unlikely that Israel and Iraq will become engaged in hostilities early on in a conflict because neither country would find fighting the other to be in its interest - Iraqi posturing to the contrary.

Israel Will Not Preempt

It is almost inconceivable that Israel would preempt against Iraq. The U.S. has asked Israel to take a "low profile." Israel has accepted this approach so long as it is not attacked by Iraq. Assuming that Israel would welcome the destruction of Iraq's long-range and unconventional weapons capabilities, its greatest chance lies in supporting American efforts rather than in undermining President Bush's coalition. If Israel takes action against the expressed intention of the U.S., it could put the alliance at risk. This is most unlikely.

The only case in which Israeli preemption is a reasonable possibility would be if Israel had knowledge of an Iraqi attack and was unable to persuade the United States to take action.

Iraq Unlikely To Attack Israel

Saddam's rhetoric to the contrary, it does not make sense for Iraq to initiate hostilities against Israel. Iraq faces a difficult military situation today with one serious opponent; it would be extremely foolish to open an Israeli front. Saddam may have doubts about the will of the United States to use force against Iraq, but he can have no doubt that Israel will respond forcefully to Iraqi aggression. Moreover, given the U.S. pledge to respond to a strike on Israel, Saddam has reason to believe that attacking Israel could bring war with the U.S.

While Iraq is unlikely to initiate hostilities, it could attack Israel once it was clear that defeat was near. Such an attack would be a desperate effort to win Arab support, and would be designed to preserve Saddam's place in Arab history. But it could have little effect on the course of a war.

The Coalition Will Not Crack

Even if this analysis were incorrect and Saddam's threats to Israel could be taken at face value, the expected Israeli response to Iraqi aggression would be unlikely to crack the anti-Saddam coalition. Saudi Arabia and Egypt may publicly condemn Israel, but will secretly applaud its action. Syria, which contributes little offensive power to the coalition, may posture forces against Israel, but it too understands Israel must retaliate for Iraqi aggression, and would be loathe to fight Israel or abandon its new alliance with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Assad also remembers that no Arab state came to his aid during the 1982 war which he fought with Israel in Lebanon.

The major problem would be an Israeli-Jordanian confrontation, assuming that Jordan would oppose Israeli overflights. But Jordan is not a member of the coalition; if it is punished for supporting Saddam, this is unlikely to affect Saudi Arabia or Egypt. For its own reasons, Israel would prefer to avoid a fight with Jordan. Its missile test last weekend may signal that Israel would respond to Iraqi aggression with long-reach weapons systems that it has not

employed to date.

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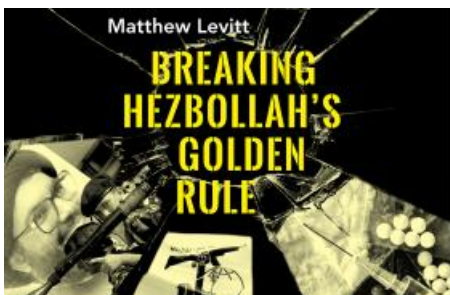
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