

Iraq Thinks It Has Already Won

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Brief Analysis

In London a few days ago, Iraqi officials approached two bankers who have previously done business with Baghdad, seeking to arrange future ventures. "But," asked the British financiers, "what about the crisis and the embargo?"

"The crisis is already over," replied the Iraqis. And, they insist, Iraq has won. To an American, such an exchange seems bizarre, but this actual event reflects current thinking in Baghdad.

Consider the current state of the crisis from the Iraqi point of view. President Bush, they think, clearly does not want to go to war. Domestic opposition to fighting a U.S.-Iraq conflict is reportedly on the rise. For Iraqis, who live in a society where no public dissent is permitted and democracy is very poorly understood, Bush seems to be facing something approaching an internal revolt. Every demonstration and critical speech is shown on CNN and seen in Baghdad, where there are receptors for that station in the Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Information, and Presidential Palace.

The United States, says Iraqi propaganda, is a soft, flabby democracy. Baghdad insists that America is the America of retreats from Vietnam and Lebanon, the country which deserted the Shah. Iraq is the Iraq of steadfastness, of the life-and-death struggle against Iran.

Saddam Hussein, visiting journalists and diplomats are told, is ready to sacrifice tens of thousands of lives. Do these interlocutors really believe that Bush is ready to do the same? No, say the smiling Iraqi officials, this is not likely.

This is the public propaganda of Iraqi radio stations and newspapers and the statements of ministers and ambassadors. There are also the words whispered to visiting journalists in the hope that they will repeat conversations said to be confidential. Even if these statements are not used in their stories, the message will go through. The purpose is to undermine American confidence and U.S. credibility in the eyes of its allies. But if this is propaganda, it is not unusual for Middle Eastern dictators to believe their own claims.

The Iraqis do have some evidence for their position. Why do the Soviets urge them to compromise? Why is the United States considering making concessions on the Palestinian question? Are the British and French, the Egyptians and Saudis, really willing to fight? How could Bush call Saddam another Hitler and reject negotiations until after an Iraqi withdrawal, and then agree to talks at the highest levels?

Those trying to save Iraq in spite of itself are faced with the problem, common in international affairs, that these efforts are taken by Iraq as a sign of weakness on the part of its adversary. The old techniques which have served Saddam so well in the past -- intimidate your enemy, force him to surrender by refusing to concede, make clear the high price you will pay for what you want -- are being used yet again.

It is often repeated in the West that Iraq will eventually settle for a portion of Kuwait, some oil fields and some islands perhaps. But in surveying Iraq's media and leaders' statements it is virtually impossible to find any of them saying this.

Once again, the belief that moderation will prevail reflects American rationality, not Middle East realities. It is the same kind of reasoning as that which said that Islamic Iran wanted to rebuild relations with the United States in 1979; which maintained that Jordan's King Hussein was eager to enter peace negotiations with Israel in 1982 or 1985; which insisted that Syria wanted a face-saving way out of Lebanon in 1983; that claimed the PLO was irreversibly committed to abandoning terrorism and making a deal for a West Bank/Gaza state in 1988; and that, most recently, guaranteed Iraq wanted to rebuild from its disastrous war with Iran and had no interest in invading Kuwait in 1990.

This is not to say that Middle East leaders are stupid, fanatical, or irrational. But the rulers of Arab states and Iran are guided by their own logical set of considerations, including ideology, ambitions, perceptions, rivalries among states, life experiences, and domestic politics. To follow these factors seems to be most sensible; only if they ignored such points would Arab leaders, or their closest subordinates, think themselves insane.

Major miscalculations have been made before by Arab leaders, including Saddam. In 1980, he concluded that he might win an easy victory over Iran. A decade later, he believed that the United States would do nothing if he took over Kuwait. Even afterward, Saddam greatly overestimated the amount of Arab support he might muster. And, after all, he survived these miscalculations. He defeated Iran; he holds Kuwait in his grasp today. The events which unfold in the next few weeks, however, may record his final, fatal error.

Like a driver heading at high speed toward another car, Saddam may think that he can always step on the brakes at the last minute. Perhaps he plans to send Tariq Aziz off to Washington in late January or offer at the last minute to talk about a deal. In Washington, too, it seems inconceivable that a head-on crash will take place. But political confrontations, like road accidents, can reach an unstoppable velocity.

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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