

Allies Nervous Over U.S.-Iraq Talks

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Brief Analysis

Much of the Middle East is reacting with anxiety and confusion to President Bush's proposal for top level talks between the United States and Iraq. Whatever rationales Washington has for taking this step, many in the region perceive it as the beginning of U.S. concessions to Saddam Hussein.

As soon as the U.S. offer came for Secretary of State James Baker to meet Saddam in Baghdad while Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz would see President Bush in Washington, Iraq claimed a victory. As Iraq's official radio explained, the United States had continuously rejected the idea of negotiations as long as Iraq remained in Kuwait. Now, however, America was prepared to enter unconditional talks while Iraqi troops still occupied Kuwait and Saddam maintained his annexation of that country.

Iraq also claimed it had forced President Bush to back down from inviting some of his regional allies from taking part in the Washington talks. This exacerbated the concern on the part of these local partners that the United States might neglect their interests in a bilateral arrangement.

While President Bush may see his offer as arising out of a U.S. position of strength, his initiative is interpreted differently in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwaiti exile circles, and in Israel. There is serious concern in all these places that Bush's step reveals a sense of weakness and undercuts the credibility of U.S. threats against Iraq. The United States is so concerned about the costs of war, goes the argument, that it is now looking for an excuse to back down. Even if this is a mistaken assessment, it is one which will nevertheless affect the actions of other actors in the crisis.

Iraqi Strategy

Until now, Iraq has stalled for time without offering any concessions, convinced that the United States is not willing to take military action. On the one hand, Baghdad cites as precedents the U.S. withdrawals from Vietnam and Lebanon; on the other hand, Iraq speaks of its own steadfastness and willingness to suffer high casualties during its eight year war with Iran. If an American attack can be avoided until March -- when hotter weather, Islamic holidays, and Saudi demoralization are expected to set in -- Saddam calculates that he will be safe at least through the rest of 1991.

As it approaches the diplomacy of the coming weeks, Iraq now has two very effective strategic options. First, it can use its exchanges with the United States and others to delay, believing that U.S. public opinion and American allies

will not permit war to start while there remains some hope of a peaceful solution. Second, if the first strategy fails, Iraq could make an offer to pull out of Kuwait, excluding certain oil fields and strategic islands, in exchange for large amounts of Saudi payments.

Unless steps are taken now by Washington and its partners to deal with this contingency, such an offer by Saddam could divide the anti-Iraq alliance and throw U.S. policy into confusion. Any gains made would markedly enhance Saddam's image at home and in the Arab world.

Regional Reaction

Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt all have somewhat different reactions to this latest development. The Kuwaitis are adamant about a complete Iraqi withdrawal. They also want the United States to destroy Saddam's regime, since otherwise they will never feel secure in the future. In referring to President Bush's initiative, they have stressed their refusal to give up any territory to Baghdad.

Saudi Arabia would also like to see Saddam defeated since his continued rule of a large army and growing stock of unconventional weapons also threatens them. They are more restrained than the Kuwaitis about saying so publicly since -- like it or not -- Saddam may continue to be their neighbor.

The immediate Saudi reaction to Bush's proposal was as close as the kingdom could come to criticizing the move. After all, only a week ago, King Fahd had categorically ruled out any such talks as those the United States is now planning. Subsequently, the Saudis have stressed that the only purpose of the U.S.-Iraqi meetings can be to present Saddam directly with the ultimatum to get out of Kuwait or face immediate destruction.

Obviously nervous, Riyadh seems to have resigned itself to the U.S. strategy. But if it gets any sense that a deal is in the offing, Saudi Arabia will hurry to get in on the ground floor.

Israel's main concern is more with the possibility that Saddam and his military machine will survive the crisis than with any deal over Kuwait. Jerusalem worries that Washington will be content to settle the Kuwait issue, leaving Israel to handle the future threat from Iraq's nuclear, chemical, biological, and missile armaments. There is also real fear that the United States might be tempted to make Israel pay for any Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait with concessions over the Palestinian issue.

Egypt's position is slightly different. Being further away from the Gulf, Egypt is less concerned about the details of any settlement in Kuwait or about Saddam's survival. It continues to prefer a peaceful resolution to war, provided that Saddam is demonstrably chastened. Thus, Egypt's reaction was one of cautious approval for President Bush's proposal.

Still, the overall regional reaction is one of great concern about the administration's new diplomatic strategy. Underlying this response is a growing question among local actors over how well President Bush and his advisors actually understand how politics works in the Middle East.

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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