

The Primakov Mission to Baghdad and Washington:

What Happened?

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Brief Analysis

Last week's meeting between President Bush and Yevgeny Primakov, Mikhail Gorbachev's special emissary to Iraq, generated much speculation about a possible Soviet diplomatic initiative to end the Gulf crisis. Those expectations were overblown. While Primakov provided Bush a first-hand account of his discussions in Baghdad with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and floated some ideas for a political solution, he reiterated Moscow's readiness to back the U.S. diplomatically in whatever course of action it pursues. In the end, the message Primakov took with him afterward was far more important than the message he brought: President Bush rejects any proposals for a settlement that appear to reward Iraq for its aggression.

In separate interviews in Moscow, two Soviet officials who accompanied Primakov to Baghdad dismissed suggestions that the Soviets were drifting out of the anti-Iraq coalition and positioning themselves as mediators offering Saddam a face-saving compromise. Primakov's trip had been undertaken after close consultations with the United States, most evident during the UN session in late September/early October, when Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and Secretary of State Baker met on a daily basis. One official stressed there was "no need for nervousness about the Soviet Union doing anything to undermine the U.S. position." The other insisted that "no one should be worried that the Primakov mission was a separate Soviet initiative that was meant to solve the crisis behind the backs of the United States and the international community." Both claimed that Gorbachev was forwarding a letter to Bush concerning the trip. Whether the Primakov-Bush meeting substituted for this letter is unclear.

Primakov went to Baghdad with two priorities in mind:

- To deal with the issue of the fate of Soviet citizens in Iraq, as well as with the broader question of Western hostages.
- To persuade Saddam to change his stance and allow the Security Council resolutions to be fulfilled.

Soviet "Hostages"

The immediate impetus for the trip was concern about Soviet citizens in Iraq. Just prior to Primakov's mission, newspapers ran letters from worried parents complaining that their sons were not being allowed out of Iraq. Deputies in the Soviet and Russian parliaments received similar letters from constituents asking why the government was not acting to protect its citizens. The day before Primakov left, a government spokesman

acknowledged that thousands of Soviets wishing to depart from Iraq were being denied exit visas.

The Primakov-Hussein discussions were said to have been "very difficult." Saddam simply refused to allow all of the approximately 5000 Soviets to leave. The pretext is Iraq's insistence that existing employment contracts be fulfilled. The Soviets argued that conditions in Iraq present a situation of imminent danger, in which contracts can legally be declared null and void. Saddam simply denied that any such situation existed. Eventually, it was agreed that 1500 Soviets could depart Iraq before the end of 1990. The remaining 3000-4000 must stay until their contracts expire. Saddam stressed that Iraq had no political motive for keeping Soviet citizens; their situation was purely a matter of economics and bore no similarity to those of Western hostages. In response, Primakov reportedly told Saddam that Iraq's position was unacceptable for a civilized country.

In Moscow, Primakov spoke publicly about the positive results of his trip. This statement was targeted strictly at a domestic audience and referred only to his success in arranging the return of the 1500. In subsequent interviews with the Soviet media, members of Primakov's delegation focused entirely on this issue. They did not talk about the fate of the remaining Soviet specialists; nor did they comment on whether any progress had been made in convincing Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait.

A Political Solution

On the issue of Iraq's invasion, both Soviet officials claimed that Primakov's mission was designed to give Saddam a direct read-out on the Soviet and international position. This was the first chance any Soviet had to speak with Iraq's president face to face; Saddam had refused to see the Soviet ambassador. These officials suggested that Saddam's advisors are not known to give him accurate information for fear of his reaction to bad news. Moscow was therefore concerned that Saddam may have been confused about its position. Primakov's purpose was to clarify it by insisting that no solution was possible until Iraq unconditionally withdrew from Kuwait and released all hostages. Primakov also stressed Iraq's international isolation and the dangers it confronted if it persisted in its intransigence. Reportedly, the Gorbachev letter that Primakov delivered to Saddam was in the form of an "ultimatum," warning that time was running out on a political solution.

While Saddam's response contained no dramatic alterations in Iraq's position, the Soviets felt something had changed. On the two visits to Moscow by Iraqi representatives earlier in the crisis, Iraq's position had been summarized as follows: Iraq has restored its historical rights in Kuwait, which had no right to exist as an independent state; Iraq's decision on annexing Kuwait was decided once and for all with absolutely no grounds for alteration. As a result, no Kuwait problem exists. During Primakov's talks, Saddam suggested he was prepared for a political settlement which includes at least a partial Iraqi withdrawal. Saddam reportedly said he is ready to make concessions if the international community meets him half-way, taking measures which allow him "to preserve his authority in Iraq." Both Soviet officials said they thought that Iraq's leaders are starting to come to grips with the full extent of its international isolation and the impact of economic sanctions. They are just starting to realize that the invasion may have been a gross miscalculation. There is some chance, therefore, that they are also beginning to look for a way to back down which, it was suggested, will take time but should be explored.

In Washington, Primakov detailed these new signals from Saddam and suggested ideas on what a possible compromise political solution might look like. President Bush responded in very strong terms that any compromise formula was unacceptable and that the United States remained fully committed to achieving its declared objectives in the Gulf by whatever means were necessary. While Primakov repeated the Soviet preference for a political solution, he also indicated that the USSR would give the United States diplomatic support for whatever it decides to do. In the end, he suggested, the Soviets knew that a choice between Iraq and the United States was no choice at all: Moscow's interests now lie with the West.

John P. Hannah, a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, was the deputy director of research at The Washington Institute until March 1991. He was the visiting Bronfman Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow, from September 18-October 12, 1990, and is the author of the 1989 Institute Policy Paper [At Arms Length: Soviet-Syrian Relations in the Gorbachev Era](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=82) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=82>). ❖

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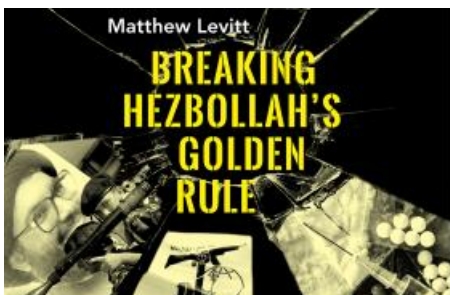
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