The Threatened Anti-Iraq Coalition

Oct 17, 1990

Brief Analysis

In the Persian Gulf today, as so often in international affairs, keeping one's options open seems an attractive alternative. In the long run, however, this is really an illusory choice since the course of events may be determined by decisions taken by others or unforeseen complications. To govern, as the title of a book by Leon Blum proclaimed, is to choose. The crisis created by the Iraqi invasion of the Gulf is quickly becoming such a situation. The pros and cons of each potential course of action -- to continue, indefinitely, with the embargo; to attack Iraq; or to seek a negotiated settlement -- have been hotly debated in public and, no doubt, within the government. The stakes are so high in terms both of foreign policy and of popularity at home, and the penalties of failure so great, that reluctance to be irrevocably committed to one option or other is natural and comprehensible.

One of the main considerations cited for and against different choices is the effect of U.S. action on Arab or Moslem Middle East states which have taken up an anti-Saddam stance in cooperation with the U.S. These are, principally, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt and Turkey. Either a victory for Saddam Hussein or a long, unresolved crisis -- perhaps ending in a concession bought by compromises to Iraq -- could be disastrous for these states. When Nasser enjoyed a U.S.-procured triumph in the 1956 Suez affair, this led to a growth in Nasser's strength allowing him to foment a civil war in Lebanon, merge and meddle with Syria, and stir trouble in Jordan. The monarchy in Iraq, compromised by its ties with one of the losers at Suez, namely Britain, sustained a shock which proved fatal. The loss of an Egypt friendly to the United States would be nothing short of a disaster.

The justification for sending U.S. troops to the Gulf was the defense of Saudi Arabia against Iraqi military attack. It was, presumably, fear of such an attack that led the Saudi government to agree to U.S. troops being stationed on its territory. The fear was triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Should a settlement of this issue take the form of a compromise between Iraq's annexation and the UN resolutions demanding the undoing of this annexation, the Saudi government is likely to find itself in a difficult position. Such a compromise would remove the justification for U.S. troops to stay on Saudi soil, and yet would leave Iraq with the ability to attack or coerce Saudi Arabia in the near future. Unable to stand up against the Iraqi military threat, the Saudis would have to seek protection by other means. These means boil down to two: either to somehow appease Iraq and become, in a manner of speaking, its satellite; or to seek long-term protection from an Arab anti-Saddam coalition. Either alternative is full of drawbacks and its success would be most doubtful. It would also create new difficulties for the United States in the region.

The Saudis would also be under pressure should the embargo continue indefinitely. They would be subjected to criticism and attacks mounted by Iraq and its friends -- who, sensing success, would become more numerous -- in the Arab world, and they might come to fear the domestic effects of the accusation, reiterated week after week and month after month, that it is a Trojan horse used by Western imperialism to re-establish itself in the area. It is conceivable that they may feel the pressure to be such that they would have to ask U.S. troops to leave the country.

There is an analogy here with Kuwait in 1961, when Iraq's dictator threatened to invade. Kuwait called for British troops to provide protection against Iraqi ambitions, but then thought it better to replace British protection with that provided by contingents of Arab troops -- an Arab solution. I do not know, of course, if the British in their then

defeatist mood, would have been willing to extend the period of their stay in Kuwait. Kuwait also seemed gratified to have its new independence supported by concerted Arab action. The consequence of that preference took a very long time to appear, but it did at last on August 2, 1990.

For Syria, long bitterly opposed to Iraq under its fellow Ba'athist regime, the U.S. reaction to the invasion of Kuwait and its involvement in the coalition was a welcome opportunity. It has already brought a pay-off in the takeover of what remains of the Maronite heartland in the Lebanon, and possibly in increased subventions from Saudi Arabia. Whatever happens thereafter in the confrontation between Iraq and the U.S., Syria will be well able to take care of itself, nor is it a pressing U.S. interest to safeguard the present regime in Syria. Yet if Iraq is deemed to have come out the winner -- or a long-term stalemate develops -- the Damascus government is more likely to rethink where its advantage lies. Moreover, a victorious Iraq, or one ruled under an unbowed Saddam Hussein, might be better able to destabilize Syria or to take advantage of that country's internal troubles. Another ticklish situation may be created if Iraq sustains a defeat in the present conflict. This would present Syria, freed from the threat of rivalry of Iraqi power, to pursue an activist policy in the region, perhaps, but not necessarily, in conjunction with Iran. The analogy here is with Iraq after Iran had shown the white flag in 1988 -- an event which enabled Iraq to claim victory and to turn to other ventures judged to hold a prospect of much profit.

Egypt is an entirely different case from either Syria or Saudi Arabia. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Egypt is not so directly threatened by Iraq's military; unlike Syria, Egypt has not sought to play, since Nasser's death, such an activist role or destabilizing role in the region. Nonetheless, Egypt is still locked into its peace with Israel and important links to the United States. And Egypt remains the most important single country of the Arab world whose ambitions have been on the increase. It was by no means inevitable, however, for Egypt to take, so unambiguously and emphatically, a stand against Saddam Hussein. In doing so, it has shown courage and decisiveness. If the conflict with Saddam is long drawn out or ends in a compromise that could be represented as an Iraqi victory, there might be perilous consequences for a regime which has staked everything on the American connection and which is also looking to Saudi financial support. Thus, like both Syria and Saudi Arabia, a long continued crisis or perceived defeat for the anti-Iraq side could threaten Egypt's stability. Egypt is economically under great pressure and there are Islamic fundamentalist movements with a large popular following. If Mubarak is shown to have chosen the wrong, i.e. the losing, side in the Gulf conflict, the regime will be shaken, with perhaps fatal results.

Turkey is a NATO member and of the greatest strategic importance. President Ozal has been courageous in throwing in his lot with the United States when he could have remained passive. He is under increasing attack by an opposition which can exploit inflation and other economic problems, some resulting from the crisis. Now that the Soviet threat has receded, many influential voices would, in the event of a U.S. setback in the Gulf, question the value, or indeed the necessity of the alliance. The growing Islamic sector argues that Turkey has no business consorting with non-Moslem or even anti-Moslem powers.

The longer the crisis continues, the more likely are these pressures -- which, incidentally, have little or nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict -- will be felt. And if Iraq seems to have gained from its aggression, there will be more voices calling for imitation or accommodation than for resistance.

Elie Kedourie is the 1990-91 Koret Fellow at The Washington Institute and professor of politics at the University of London. He is the founder and editor of Middle Eastern Studies and the coeditor with Sylvia Haim of Palestine and Israel in the 19th and 20th Centuries (Cass, 1982) and Zionism and Arabism in Palestine and Israel (Cass, 1982). ❖

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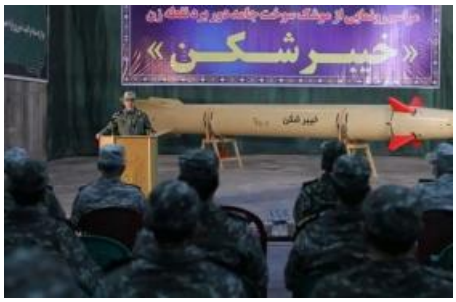

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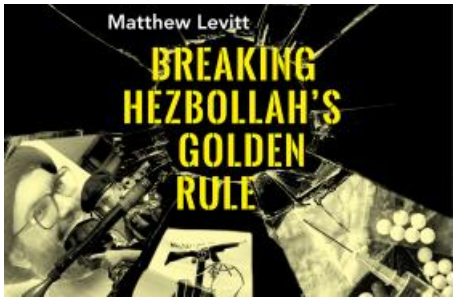

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