

Measuring Saddam's Arab Support

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Brief Analysis

The recent violence in Jerusalem has again raised fears that Iraq can utilize the Arab-Israeli conflict to break the coalition opposed to its aggression. An accurate assessment of Saddam Hussein's support among non-Iraqi Arabs is critical to understanding this question, as well as the impact of the Gulf crisis on regional stability and the Arab response to American actions. Saddam Hussein and many Western pundits seem to overrate his support among Arabs. These assessments may contribute to Saddam's confidence that he can successfully annex Kuwait.

Public opinion polls in the Arab world are neither accurate nor permitted. Instead, the Western analyst or journalist must rely on personal knowledge and comprehension of its political culture and sociology; newspaper articles; statements by leaders; private conversations; and anecdotal information. To make sense of frequently contradictory information, one must understand some basic principles.

The first principle is that the "Arab street" is of secondary importance to political outcomes. Mass sentiment has never overthrown an Arab regime. Moreover, Arab public opinion is not so independent as many Westerners seem to think. It is not just that, as in other countries, the rulers, not the masses, make policy. In the Arab world, the rulers have far more influence on public opinion and the mass media than in the West. What is important is not what a taxi driver says about how Arabs feel, but the fact that many Arab states have deployed military forces in opposition to Iraqi aggression.

Second, the formal, public importance of pan-Arab nationalism, Islam, and support for the Palestinians has a relatively narrow impact on actual viewpoints and policymaking. Public, on-camera, interviews produce the "proper" social response, fulfilling what one might call a "ceremonial" function. However, in private discussions Arabs provide far more negative views of Iraq, the PLO, Libya, and other controversial actors. The willingness of Arab states to punish the PLO for supporting Iraq indicates their view -- with the significant exception of Jordan -- that such action has little effect on domestic opinion.

Arabs states like Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia understand that linkage between the Gulf crisis and the Arab-Israeli conflict is an Iraqi ploy to distract attention and stall for time. Focusing attention on this issue would undermine America's position, push Iraq to the forefront as the defender of the Palestinian cause, and deflect attention away from Kuwait -- all undesirable outcomes. While pushing for symbolic resolutions at the United Nations, they will resist pressing the Arab-Israeli conflict to the front burner today. Neither will an Iraqi attack on Israel alter their

orientation to the Gulf crisis, as they will not be pulled into an Arab-Israeli conflict to save Baghdad.

In distinguishing between the formal, public point of view and real Arab sentiment, one should also remember that there is, to put it politely, a strong tendency toward exaggeration in Arab speech and writing. Stories about tens of thousands of Jordanians "volunteering" to fight for Iraq make a great impression, but these coffee house heroes will not turn up on the front lines. Similarly, demonstrations supporting Iraq have generally, even in Jordan, been surprisingly small, consisting of hard-core activists.

Third, the opinion of individuals and masses are conditioned by which state they live in due to both the repressive apparatus and "local" patriotism. Obviously, a citizen in Baghdad will support Saddam Hussein, while a Syrian in Damascus will probably oppose Iraq. As long as Jordan expresses sympathy for Iraq's position, Jordan's citizens will feel free (that is, permitted by the regime) to take a similar position. Amman-based Western reporters should resist extrapolating what they hear to other Arab states and situations. While some may see "hypocrisy" in these differences among Arabs, they should understand such differences reflect as much loyalty to local rulers as the system can generate. Indeed, over time, Syrians are becoming more Syrian, Iraqis more Iraqi, Egyptians more Egyptian, and Saudis more Saudi. Saddam may call for overthrowing Arab governments, but few will listen. It was hard enough to generate genuine pan-Arab action in the 1940s and 1950s when all could remember a time before many of these states existed. Over the decades, each state has developed its own history, economic system, political culture, and set of experiences which diminish a wider sense of identity. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia's request for U.S. troops exemplify the fact that each state acts in its own interest.

Fourth, the main exceptions to this tendency to back one's own country are interest groups. These limited groups provide Iraq's main constituency. For example, in Jordan those most supportive of Saddam tend to be either Palestinians hoping Iraq will liberate Palestine or Islamic fundamentalists hoping Saddam will undermine Jordan's government. By contrast, East Bank Jordanians, the elite, and the army support King Hussein and mistrust Iraq and the Palestinians. Some tribes have historic (and financial) links inclining them toward Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, where local nationalism is strongest, there is broad support for President Mubarak's policy because he is the leader who must be obeyed, and because Iraq is seen as a competitor for Arab leadership. Mistreatment of Egyptian workers by Iraq also creates popular anger. Islamic fundamentalists are a minority whose pro-Iraq sentiments are dulled by Saudi subsidies.

Fifth, measurements of public opinion and support depend on the yardstick one uses. Thus, the observer's predispositions and prior expectations affect what he observes. An average American might be astonished that anyone supports Iraqi aggression, and would consider any expressions of support significant and newsworthy. By contrast, many students of the Middle East, weaned on stories of Arab solidarity and opposition to alliances with the West might have expected far more support for Iraq. How could the Saudis dare call for American forces to protect them? How could Egypt, Syria, and Morocco dare join hands with the "imperialist, pro-Zionist" camp?

Sixth, genuine opposition to America's presence in the region should not be confused with support for Saddam. Many Arabs fear that the United States intends to recolonize the Arab world, seize the oil fields, and occupy Moslem holy places. Since the U.S. has no such intention, it may be able to overcome these concerns with the eventual reduction of American ground force presence.

Seventh, there is a strong tendency in the Arab world to support the winning side. The motivating factor here is not love -- of Iraq or the United States -- but fear. Thus, Arabs will be constantly assessing whether the United States will stand up to Saddam Hussein or whether Saddam may prevail.

Saddam Hussein overrates his support in the Arab world. It would be a mistake for the United States to join him in this miscalculation.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notables, 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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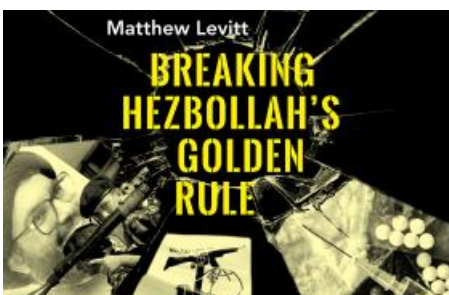
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