

Who Lost Jordan?

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Brief Analysis

By the time Washington finishes arguing about who lost Kuwait, a new debate may have to be joined about the failure of U.S. policy toward Jordan. The Kuwait crisis is drawing King Hussein into Saddam Hussein's orbit with profound consequences for the stability of the Middle East heartland and the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

For the moment, Jordan serves as the barometer of the balance of power between Iraq and the U.S.-led, anti-Saddam coalition. Too weak to tip the scales itself, the current direction of Jordan's tilt is an ominous indicator of the King's assessment that Iraq is the stronger player. But as the crisis continues, the tilt towards Iraq erodes Jordan's role as the stable buffer state between powerful Syrian, Iraqi and Israeli neighbors, with grave potential for a Balkans-style conflict. In the process, Jordan's potential role as the indispensable anchor for a stable settlement between Israel and the Palestinians is in danger of becoming little more than wishful thinking.

Aware of the stakes, U.S. policymakers find themselves on the horns of yet another Middle East dilemma. If they apply too much pressure on the King to join the campaign against Saddam, it may actually precipitate the collapse of Hashemite rule in Jordan. But if the U.S. does nothing to arrest Jordan's drift into Saddam's camp, the collapse may come anyway -- produced by the explosive combination of economic collapse and a radicalized Palestinian population.

For the moment, Washington has decided to tolerate Jordan's high wire balancing act in the belief that any alternative to the Hashemites will be far worse for American interests. Meanwhile, however, the King's tilt towards Saddam grows and the U.S. finds it increasingly difficult to provide the safety net should he fall.

The past week alone provided disturbing evidence of this trend:

- The Royal Convention Center in downtown Amman played host to a rally for the Arab world's radicals with the PFLP's George Habash and the DFLP's Nayef Hawatmeh guests of honor. King Hussein gave tacit endorsement to their denunciations of U.S. policy and threats of stepped up terrorism by receiving them at the palace (Since their forced eviction in 1970, these gentlemen had hitherto been refused permission even to enter Jordan). By week's end the event was repeated with some 6,000 local Palestinians rallying in Amman in support of Saddam Hussein.
- The King engaged in yet another failed mediation effort, this time to persuade Morocco and Algeria to join him in offering Saddam pieces of Kuwait, financial compensation, and American withdrawal from the Gulf as inducement for an Iraqi withdrawal.
- The King and Crown Prince Hassan took their case to the American people via a media blitz which blamed the Bush Administration for undercutting Jordan's diplomatic efforts, alleged that war was being imposed on the region from outside, argued that the U.S. was now occupying Islam's two holiest shrines and should quickly withdraw its forces, expressed sympathy for Saddam's claims against Kuwait, and supported Iraq's demand for a redistribution of Arab wealth.
- Saudi Arabia's tolerance for the King's behavior ran out. Previously, the Saudis had rejected Secretary of State Baker's entreaties to provide financial aid to Jordan. Now, they implemented a punitive trade embargo, suspending

the oil supplies that had been providing almost 50 percent of Jordan's requirements and blocking the export of Jordanian produce to the Gulf (its third largest market after Iraq and Kuwait). For good measure, Saudi Arabia also expelled most of Jordan's diplomats.

- The Bush Administration, increasingly frustrated by King Hussein's behavior, expressed dismay at Jordan's hosting of terrorists and disappointment at its flaunting of UN sanctions against Iraq. In public statements, the administration tried to put the best face on the King's behavior but no longer mentioned Jordan in the list of frontline countries requiring economic assistance because of the crisis.

This sequence of events was hardly what King Hussein and President Bush had in mind when they met at Kennebunkport in mid-August. The President was led to believe that Jordan would comply with the UN embargo and the King was led to believe that the U.S. would secure compensation for the economic hardship imposed by such compliance. Yet instead of committing Jordan to the anti-Saddam camp, the King responded to Saddam's popular appeal in Jordan, and his own fear of Iraq's retaliation, by attempting to be all things to all men. He pledged support for the embargo while keeping the border open to trucking; he criticized Saddam's occupation of Kuwait while offering an Arab solution that would reward Saddam's aggression; he expressed friendship for the United States while playing host to America's Arab radical enemies.

The balancing act might have worked if the crisis had proved short-lived or if the King had succeeded in launching a viable Arab mediation. But Saddam's absolute insistence on retaining Kuwait and the hardening of the international consensus against his occupation combined to eliminate the King's room for maneuver. The prolongation of the crisis has worsened Jordan's economic plight to the point where, by Jordanian estimates, the crisis will cost it \$2.1 billion or 50 percent of its GNP this year. Meanwhile the King's prevarication has made it impossible for the U.S. to mobilize the economic assistance that would help stave off economic collapse. As the rest of the world turns its back on the King, he will find himself increasingly left with only one audience -- an Iraqi-led, radical mob that would just as happily see his performance end in a fall.

Throughout his almost four decade rule, the King has periodically faced similar challenges. His response has always been to stall and then finally to act decisively at the last possible moment. Today the King still retains the ability to jump down on our side of the fence. However, he will only do so if he is finally convinced that his throne is threatened, that he has no other choice and that the safety net will actually hold him. The elements of this safety net are: European markets and credits, Japanese grants, Saudi oil and aid and U.S. security guarantees.

In the interim, the challenge for U.S. policy is to construct the safety net and the challenge for Jordanian policy is to find a more convincing way to help.

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