

The Mood in Baghdad:

Arrogance and Fear

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

Saddam Hussein's threats to attack Israel or Saudi oil fields if sanctions begin to strangle him must be taken seriously by defenders of those purported targets but are most likely bluffs to forestall the mounting pressure on Iraq and raise his subjects' morale.

It is not clear that Iraq has the ability to strike these intended victims, at least to inflict any serious damage. But even a single missile or bomber would, Saddam must expect, lead to a full-scale U.S. offensive.

The key element in Iraqi decision-making is Saddam Hussein himself, surrounded by yes-men and profoundly ignorant of the outside world. Such top officials as Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz and Deputy Foreign Ministers Sa'dun Hammadi and Nizar Hamdoun are used mainly as technicians rather than advisors. Those to whom Saddam Hussein delegates some power, like Taha Yasin Ramadan, are former Ba'ath party revolutionaries whose world view is close to that of Saddam himself.

Iraqi Strategy

Iraq's prime objective seems to be to avoid having the U.S. military launch an attack on it. Baghdad cannot be sure whether the United States is bluffing, but it does not underestimate American might and the capacity of U.S. bombing to do extensive damage to Baghdad and the regime's modern economic sector.

This analyst considers an Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia to be extremely unlikely. Rather, Saddam Hussein seeks to stall, looking for ways around the embargo and believing in his country's ability to out-wait the Americans. The fact that he withstood eight years of war with Iran and emerged victorious is a factor heavily influencing the Iraqi leader. Even an optimistic assessment on the efficacy of sanctions indicates that they would take almost a year to work. Saddam is willing to wait that long and longer.

Both sides in this confrontation are faced with strong ironies. For the United States to avoid war and secure an Iraqi withdrawal, it must convince Iraq of its readiness to attack. For Iraq to deter a U.S. offensive, it must try to convince the Americans that such an effort would be futile at worst and costly at best. That is why Saddam constantly voices public threats to escalate.

There is, however, plenty of room for miscalculation in this game of threat and counterthreat. Saddam himself referred to this danger in his speech yesterday. The temporary Iraqi occupation of the French embassy, for example, stirred Paris to send military units to Saudi Arabia. The Iraqi Government later called its own incursion an error. The slow release of most Westerners has both bought time and defused a potentially explosive hostage crisis for Iraq.

Iraq's behavior in Kuwait gives every indication that Baghdad is determined to stay there. The number of Iraqi troops is rising and they now total 350,000 men. More and more Iraqi officials and citizens are being sent into the country. Moveable economic assets have been looted; repression is increasing against the Kuwaiti resistance. In many cases, Kuwaitis are being encouraged to leave the country though some men are forcibly retained, perhaps to serve in labor battalions.

Iraq's Options

While stalling for time, Saddam Hussein is seeking all possibilities of escape from his dilemma. These efforts include bypassing the embargo by air, negotiations with Iran, keeping open lines through Jordan, and taking every other opportunity to split the anti-Iraq coalition.

He does not need to make Iraq's economy function at usual capacity but merely to stretch rations or equipment for 18 months, two years, or long enough for the Saudis to lose heart, seek negotiations, and ask the Americans to leave. The melting of mountain snows, the Moslem holy month of Ramadan, and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca -- all occurring in five to seven months -- are among the factors he hopes will undermine U.S. staying power.

Saddam has a wide range of options. If he wishes to raise the heat, he could sponsor terrorist attacks on U.S. or anti-Iraq targets. To do so, however, would risk providing a pretext for a U.S. counterattack. It is safer to try to stir Arab and Islamic anti-Americanism even if that effort brings few results in the short term. As a believer in pan-Arab nationalism, Saddam may exaggerate his prospects and his yes-men overstate his popularity.

Saddam's final card would be to offer to negotiate, even on ridiculous terms, in order to divide and delay his adversaries. Allies and domestic public opinion would make it very difficult for the United States to attack if there was a dialogue going on, no matter how uncertain its prospects for success.

The Politics of Iraq's Army

While lacking any direct military training (despite his frequent wearing of a field marshal's uniform), Saddam has tried to control the army directly in the field. This interference may stir resentment among officers but those who merely show an excess of talent or independence have often died in "accidents." The best example was Defense Minister and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces General Adnan Khairallah.

Thus, nepotism, favoritism, and extreme centralization make the regime more secure, but also handicaps an army fighting in the field. This is especially true for a force engaged in maneuver warfare, something Iraq rarely did during the Iran-Iraq war but would be certain to occur in a U.S.-Iraq war. If communications lines are cut, headquarters bombed, and messages intercepted, Iraq's army could be severely disrupted.

Another weakness of the regime is that it seems to expect a direct attack against Iraq or even Baghdad, while it is more likely that the main thrust on the ground would be directed against Kuwait. No matter how many articles on this subject appear in U.S. newspapers, Saddam is not likely to believe that the real plans could be so freely published.

As long as Iraq is sitting in Kuwait, however, it is arguably in control of the situation and the assets in dispute. Saddam probably believes that time is on his side. The best of unattractive options for him is to wait at least until his food and economic situation are really pressed to the wall. He may prove able to win by pursuing that plan.

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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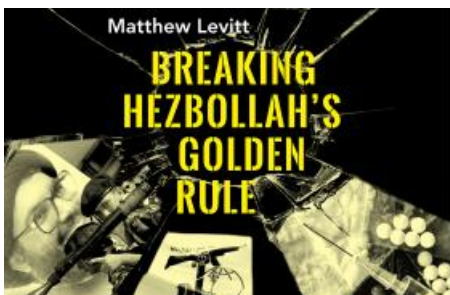
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