

Meeting in Amman: The Perils of Negotiation

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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

As UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar begins diplomatic contacts in Amman with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, the Gulf crisis moves, at least temporarily, into a phase of negotiations. But negotiations can be as dangerous as battle -- leading to escalation, defeat, or even disaster.

U.S. policy must be flexible enough to win Iraq's retreat from Kuwait but strong enough to avoid concessions resulting in an Iraqi victory. It has to counter Iraqi propaganda and prevent Baghdad from splitting the international alliance that supports economic sanctions and Kuwait's restored independence.

There is still no sign Iraq has any interest in serious diplomacy. International sanctions have not hurt Baghdad enough to force concessions. There are still enough countries evading sanctions -- including Jordan, Yemen, and Libya -- to let Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein think he can survive them.

Saddam also hopes the United States will tire and the alliance split. He is stalling to out-wait the impatient Americans as Hanoi did in the 1970s and Syria did in Lebanon in the 1980s. Iraq dispatched missions -- so far unsuccessful -- to weaken the resolve of countries like the USSR and Turkey. It has been experimenting with releasing hostages in exchange for their breaking sanctions or withdrawing military forces. Meeting Perez de Cuellar may be another such maneuver.

There is not the least sign that Saddam Hussein has any intention of restoring Kuwait's independence. He renamed Kuwait city "Qadhima," declared Kuwait an Iraqi province, and divided it into three districts. The Iraqi dictator extended Basra city's boundary southward into Kuwait and named the new area for himself. These are not actions of a man planning to pull out. Saddam may be making an error usually associated with PLO leader Yasser Arafat: demanding so much that he gives no one an incentive to bargain with him at all.

The bottom line of Iraq's position: Saddam thinks he can keep Kuwait as long as he promises not to invade Saudi Arabia. In exchange for a promise to settle for current gains and release hostages, Iraq thinks it can obtain a U.S. withdrawal from Saudi Arabia and an end to the sanctions. This is clearly unacceptable to the United States and its Arab or European allies.

Iraqi refusal to negotiate on withdrawing, presents the United States with difficult problems. It might have to take military action; it will have to wait for weeks or months for diplomatic and economic pressures to take effect.

But if Iraq does eventually bargain, there are other problems. There is a "neutral" bloc of Arab forces operating on Saddam's behalf. And even some of those opposing Baghdad may be tempted by a bad compromise. The "soft on Saddam" camp consists mainly of Jordan, the PLO, Tunisia, and Yemen (with Algeria and Libya playing supporting roles). Their proposal has variations but basically boils down to finding some face-saving way for Iraq to appear to give up Kuwait while really keeping it. They suggest Iraq might withdraw in exchange for a protectorate over Kuwait, with no return to the pre-invasion regime.

These countries put stress on removing the U.S. troops from Saudi Arabia through replacement of American forces with a UN command or a prior U.S. pull-out followed by inter-Arab talks.

None of these ideas are likely to be acceptable to the United States, Kuwait's government-in-exile, or Saudi Arabia. These forces insist on an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal and restoration of Kuwait's government. Wanting to regain their country and fearing Saddam's revenge, respectively, the Kuwaitis and Saudis go even further than the United States in demanding the Iraqi regime's overthrow. They are totally uninterested in any linking of the issue to Lebanon or the Palestinian issue.

The most powerful Arab state, and the potential "swing state" in this crisis, is Egypt. Mubarak is still holding firm, but there are hints Egypt may suggest a compromise in which the Saudis and Kuwaitis buy an Iraqi withdrawal, paying Saddam a ransom for Kuwait, and Kuwait would yield leases to two strategic islands in the Gulf. Sources close to Egypt's leadership also hint elections might be held for a new Kuwaiti regime.

Again, it should be stressed that Iraq has shown no interest in even its friends' proposals, much less the kind of trial balloon Egyptians are suggesting. Yet any softening of terms might persuade Iraq that it can still escape by remaining intransigent. Baghdad could also exploit these differences by toying with their promoters.

The problem of a negotiated settlement on these lines would be not only Saddam's survival in power but his strengthening in regional politics. He would go back to work on crash programs to perfect his chemical weapons and missiles while acquiring nuclear and bacteriological weapons. An equally problematic outcome of a negotiated settlement might be a general feeling among the Arabs that Saddam Hussein is a winner. His support in the Middle East -- currently quite limited -- would grow to the point where he would be even more formidable and troublesome.

Iraq, however, has little to offer those breaking ranks. Even France has rejected a separate deal on hostages. The embargo stops it from exporting oil to buy friends. In contrast, Saudi Arabia and other oil exporters are keeping up supply and holding down prices by increasing production. Along with Japan and West Europe, they are offering to pay for Jordanian and Turkish losses.

The Bush Administration has at least three or four months to let sanctions work and let Iraq weaken. Avenues for diplomatic progress should be explored and the Bush Administration wants to avoid war. Yet any sign of capitulating to Iraq or persuading it that endurance will allow it to keep Kuwait permanently could lose the struggle against Iraq's aggression.

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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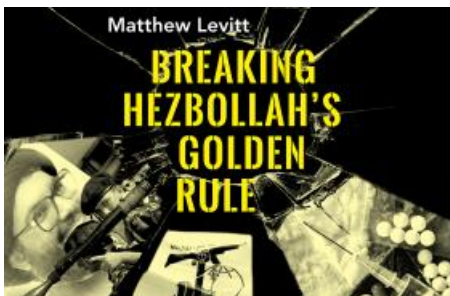
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