No Love Lost:

Solutions from a Past Mideast

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Articles & Testimony

Dozens of statesmen turned out for the 1999 funeral of King Hussein of Jordan. Few will be present at the funeral of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, regardless of whether the Iraqi president's death comes as a result of Phase II of the war against terrorism, or two decades from now. King Hussein may not have been a democrat, but he will always be remembered for his moderation and genuine desire to advance his nation. President Hussein will always be remembered with disdain.

At a decrepit hotel near the Abdali bus station in Amman, Jordan, hangs a large picture of King Abdullah II, and a smaller photo of the late King Hussein tucked in the corner of the frame. While shop owners must hang pictures of the current king, their adoration for the late king is genuine. "We have a lot of problems, one student said, but if it weren't for King Hussein and Prince Hasan [the late king's brother], we'd probably have torn our country apart like the Iraqis did." Jordan and Iraq were once quite close, both ruled by different branches of the Hashemite family. Both monarchies sought to distance themselves from the nationalist and political forces tearing apart the region. The Jordanian monarchy was successful, skillfully navigated through the Nasserism of the 50s and 60s, Palestinian terrorism of the 70s, and five decades of Arab-Israeli conflict. The Iraqi monarchy was less so.

The elderly man shuffled down the icy street last winter in as-Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, just down the street from the university. People nudged each other and stared. A colleague of mine from the University of Sulaymani grabbed my hand and introduced me to General Mustafa, an elderly Kurdish Communist. As we continued on our way, my colleague told me, "You just met the man who killed the king."

July 14, 1958, is a date most Iraqis wish to forget. Just after dawn, soldiers stormed the presidential palace. While General Mustafa denies his responsibility, locals say that he entered the room where 19-year-old King Faisal II sat with his family. When he left the room, the bullet-ridden body of the young king and his family lay lifeless on the floor. Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qassim became head of government. In the heady days of Nasserism, the Iraqis masses were not entirely upset that the monarchy had ended, but the violent death of the young king engendered great sympathy. "He was just a young boy. He didn't need to die," a retired Iraqi schoolteacher told me.

Qassim's government brought neither stability nor prosperity. The next decade saw fighting in the streets, massacres, assassination attempts, several changes in government, and finally, on July 30, 1968, a coup by officers of the ethnically chauvinist Arab Socialist Baath party. Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr became president, while his young protege, Saddam Hussein, took the reins as deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council. Iraq's subsequent history is well known. Saddam Hussein consolidated power beyond his position, finally seizing the presidency for himself in June 1979. Within one month, 500 top-level Baath officials -- seen by Saddam to be possible competitors -- lay dead. Little more than a year later, Saddam invaded Iran, a war that culminated in stalemate after one million men lay dead. Saddam turned inward and attacked his own people. In a 1988 orgy of violence, Saddam killed perhaps 182,000 Iraqi Kurds and other non-Arabs, many with chemical weapons. Less than three years later, Saddam was at it again, pillaging Kuwait and ultimately bringing death and destruction down upon

Iraq.

Today, most Iraqis are fatalistic about their recent history. Chatting over tea in Sulaymaniyah's main market, one merchant simply explained, "Saddam is God's curse because the Communists killed the king." Life may not have been perfect under the Iraqi monarchy, but compared to Iraq's subsequent history, the kingdom represents the golden era. Eating at a palace-turned-restaurant in Zawita, three different people proudly told me that Jordan's prince Hasan used to spend his boyhood summers there.

Iraqis are not alone in looking back fondly upon bygone royalty. Iranians old enough to remember the Shah used to visualize their society as European, on par if not superior to Spain, Portugal, and Greece. But after more than two decades of theocracy, they see themselves continuing their headlong dive into the Third World. It is no surprise that Reza Pahlavi, son of the late Shah, has arisen seemingly out of nowhere to become the leading opposition figure not only among Iranians in Los Angeles, but among Iranians still living under the mullahs in Tehran. The Islamic regime has taken notice, especially given the reconciliation role former monarch Zahir Shah has been playing in Afghanistan.

Middle Eastern dictators should be nervous, and bureaucrats in the state department and the foreign office should take note. Instead of looking for "moderate Taliban" in Afghanistan, as Secretary of State Colin Powell once suggested, or "engaging" the mullahs in an increasingly unpopular Islamic republic, or maintaining Saddam in power in Iraq, a nonsolution for which American diplomats apparently wish to settle, a clear alternative exists.

In Iraq, in particular, the time may be ripe. Rather than proclaim that regime change in Iraq is risky because of fear of the alternative, the U.S. government should look toward moderate reconciliation figures popular both inside Iraq and throughout the region. A role for royals in Iraqi reconciliation would assuage the governments of the neighboring Persian Gulf states, while at the same time compliment the work of opposition leaders like Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmad Chalabi. Next door in Amman, home to the remaining Hashemites, is a model of the alternative, where royals and statesmen -- many intimately connected to Iraq and already enjoying a degree of respect and legitimacy throughout the Middle East -- wait in the wings to rebuild the Middle East from the ashes left by dictators like Saddam. ❖

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