

Iraq:

A Blast from the Past?

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Brief Analysis

By participating in the Arab summit that ended yesterday, Iraq made a giant step towards ending its political isolation; it had been frozen out of pan-Arab meetings since 1990. Importantly, increasing international cooperation with Baghdad is by no means the product of any Iraqi moderation. To the contrary: Iraqi president Saddam Hussein has been unusually bellicose recently.

Against this background, reports that Iraq has moved several divisions to west of Baghdad-- on the road to Jordan and Syria-- have to be worrying. Saddam has numerous ways in which he could cause mischief. For instance, by demanding that his troops be allowed to cross Jordan to the Israeli border, he could press Jordanian King Abdullah II to be tougher against Israel and more distant from the United States; is it a coincidence that after the Iraq troops moved, Jordan canceled the long-standing international inspection of goods bounds for Iraq, designed to enforce the UN sanctions? Or Saddam could move in other ways, such as halting oil sales long enough to upset oil markets.

Iraqi BellicosityAfter being out of the public eye since February, Saddam has made a series of especially aggressive statements in the last three months. In his August 8 speech on the anniversary of the end of the Iran-Iraq war-- a war he blamed on "international Zionism, imperialism, and the wicked Jews in the occupied land and in their accursed freak entity"-- he said of the Saudis and Kuwaitis, "May evil befall them!" On September 14, Baghdad went on to accuse Kuwait of stealing Iraqi oil by drilling at a slant along the border. On September 25, Saddam complained, "Why are the Saudi and Kuwaiti rulers bombing Iraq?" He warned, "Everyone should bear his responsibility because things have exceeded the acceptable bounds [vernacular: balagh al-sayl al-zuba]. If confrontation really becomes the option, we know who they are...If another country faced what we had faced, it would have attacked them without notice."

A truly provocative action was Saddam's September 10 speech to "a number of officials from the nuclear energy sector," broadcast on Baghdad television. He started out, "The battle is your battle" and then went on to explain, "I am not trying to raise your resolve now, but I am trying to clarify its historical dimension...They ["those who came across the Atlantic"] will be defeated when their losses will be as huge as the gains they had hoped to achieve... The Nuclear Energy [Association] has a big duty in this field." This speech raises doubts about the conviction, often

expressed at the United Nations, that Saddam's nuclear program is well contained and not subject to the same uncertainties as those surrounding his biological, chemical, and missile programs.

His fury has been particularly directed against Israel. In an October 3 speech to university professors, he said, "The great people of Iraq are ready to put an end to Zionism [layada' haddan lilsahiyuniyya] from this moment...Let them give us an adjacent small piece of land, and let them only support us from afar, and they'll see how we can put an end to Zionism in a short period of time." He has returned to the theme of Israel's evils repeatedly since; for instance, on October 17, he said, "Palestine can only be restored through jihad, the mobilization and rallying of the resources of the Arab nation."

The last time Saddam was so belligerent was in the months leading up to the invasion of Kuwait, when he threatened to burn half of Israel and to make Kuwait pay for stealing Iraqi oil. At the time, Arab leaders and most analysts thought he was just using tough talk to boost his image.

Saddam's Behavior Pattern Besides being bellicose, Saddam's behavior over the last year has been rather odd. He had a Koran written with his own blood—deeply offensive to many traditional Muslims who regard human blood as religiously impure. In his August 8 address, Saddam imparted fifty-seven lessons (e.g., "when you take a decision, do not regret it") that are now being taught in all Iraqi schools, reminiscent of Libyan leader Mu'ammar Qaddafi's bizarre Green Book in the 1970's. When Saddam thinks that he has immortal lessons to offer all Iraqis about how to conduct their lives, that is a sign that his megalomania is getting worse and feeds worries that his behavior may become more erratic.

While not as bizarre as these actions, Saddam's schedule has been strange. For many months-- from February to July-- he was basically out of sight. He did not make an appearance at his birthday in April, usually celebrated in style. There were extremely few public appearances or scenes of Saddam on Iraqi television, and those could have been done by one of the body doubles of whom he is so proud. By contrast, in the last three months, he has been frenetically active. In one October week, Saddam chaired a meeting of the ruling Revolutionary Command Council and two sessions of the cabinet. A man obsessed with security (which is why he sent his vice-president in his place to the Cairo Arab summit), he has broken his usual pattern by addressing groups. He has been acting like a man trying to live life at double speed.

What all this means is unclear. Perhaps Saddam suffers from cancer as speculated in the Arab press, and his disappearances are during periods of chemotherapy, while his bizarre actions are designed to secure his place in history. However, there is no solid evidence to back up these widely circulating rumors. Or perhaps he is as well as ever but just more idiosyncratic-- which would be almost as concerning, because it would mean he could act rashly, in ways that analysts would not predict.

Policy Implications Permitting the reintegration of Saddam into the international community is a risky proposition at best, and more likely a grievous error. Saddam has good reason to be bellicose: his position at home is improved when he can present himself as a world-class figure commanding the attention of the world's only superpower. Weak as his conventional forces may be, Saddam could still wreak havoc. For instance, UNSCOM thought he still had six to sixteen Scuds, in an unknown state of readiness. If Saddam were to fire at Israel just one with a chemical or biological warhead, many in the Middle East would applaud, and the United States would face problems in mounting any substantial military reprisals since Iraq's neighbors might well hesitate at cooperating. Both the peace process and the containment of Saddam would be dealt a severe setback.

Containment can only be sustained through strong U.S. leadership. The international community cannot be expected to react to Iraqi provocative statements or even behavior. If Saddam looks like a winner, his behavior-- no matter how threatening-- will be ignored by many. In the event of Iraqi aggression, a coalition will not form itself;

someone has to take the lead.

Containment has been slipping in the face of Saddam's campaign to relax the UN sanctions. Saddam has benefited from misplaced humanitarianism--misplaced because, without the sanctions, Saddam would be free to use his oil income as he wishes rather than on humanitarian aid. But besides humanitarianism, there is also crass commercial interest. Saddam has used Iraq's increasing oil income to buy support. According to UN data, under the oil-for-food program, Iraq has bought a total of \$6.2 billion worth from France, Russia, and China, which are Iraq's three largest suppliers. Iraq has bought from these three more than ten times as much as it has from the world's three largest exporters, i.e., Germany, the United States, and Japan. By contrast, the global pattern is that France, Russia, and China sell one-third as much as the big three, not ten times as much.

The United States is poorly placed to call attention to the dangers Saddam represents because it has cried wolf too often. The challenge for Washington is to combine a measured evaluation of the risk with a firm, credible, unambiguous, loud, and oft-repeated statement of U.S. resolve-- including a willingness to use massive force if sufficiently provoked. This message must come across to Iraqis, to people throughout the Middle East, and, not least of all, to Americans.

In addition, this is a good moment to state the U.S. vision of its hopes for the Iraqi people and the support it would offer for post-Saddam Iraq, to remind the second-level of Iraqi leaders that the future could be bright were Saddam replaced.

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