

Desert Talk -- The New Offensive against Iraq

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Sep 20, 1999

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Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's meeting today with leaders of the Iraqi opposition is part of a vigorous diplomatic confrontation between Saddam's regime and the United States, tied to maneuverings at the UN. For the next several weeks, the arguments of Baghdad and Washington are going to be deployed and challenged in a manner arguably as potentially crucial as open warfare.

Washington got in an early blow last week with the publication of a 14-page review entitled "Saddam Hussein's Iraq" unveiled at a press conference. While surveying the whole issue, the report concentrated on describing the impact of sanctions, namely, how Baghdad was to blame for the failure of the ordinary Iraqi people to receive adequate food and medical supplies. The humanitarian aspect of current U.S. policy is most vulnerable to the criticism of international public opinion, particularly in the Arab world, where fear of Saddam by the rulers is balanced by anger of ordinary citizens at the economic suffering of fellow Arabs (their political suffering at Saddam's hand generates less concern).

But Iraq also had been able to score a point a week ago when it chaired (on routine rotation) an Arab League foreign ministers' meeting in Cairo. Avoiding the temptation of placing the issue of sanctions against it on the agenda, Baghdad handled the agenda well. It also sent as its emissary the comparatively suave foreign minister, Mohammed al-Sahaf, rather than a personality that either Kuwait or Saudi Arabia could associate directly with the 1990 invasion.

Saddam, of course, would like to see the end of sanctions, even though Iraq is already allowed under the oil-for-food program to export just over \$5 billion every six months. For its part, the United States is backing a British-Dutch draft of a Security Council resolution which would allow Iraq to export oil freely if the system of weapons inspections were renewed and the inspectors received full Iraqi cooperation. Officials of the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China met in London last week for talks on this and other formulae, and negotiations are expected to continue at the ministerial level in New York. But even if the oil embargo were removed completely, restrictions would remain on Iraq's use of oil revenues and what it could import.

The opposition is more united. The Iraqi opposition in exile is now capable of putting together a more united front than it has been for several years. The Iraq National Congress (INC), the main umbrella group, is joining with the smaller Centrist Democratic Movement, to send a joint delegation to lobby at the UN General Assembly. They are due

to meet European and Arab delegations as well as Secretary Albright. While such people are their main targets because they represent the opposition's core diplomatic support, the delegation is also hoping to meet representatives of Russia, China, and France, the three permanent Security Council members whose stance implicitly backs Saddam Husayn. The representations of Iraqi exiles could play a crucial role in preventing weakening of the sanctions regime.

The immediate challenge for the opposition is to conduct the first meeting of the parliament-in-exile, the Iraq National Assembly, since 1992. The United States argued against holding it in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq which are outside Saddam's control. The United States preferred holding the meeting in Europe (The Hague and Vienna were mentioned). The INC wanted a more high profile event, preferably in the Middle East. After extensive back-and forth, the INC announced last week that the meeting would be in New York in late October. U.S. officials are hoping that the occasion will celebrate, and enhance the current unity of the Iraqi opposition.

The Pope's challenge. The "millennium bug" of U.S. policy on Iraq is the planned visit to the region by Pope John Paul II. While trips by the leader of the world's Catholics to Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Areas, Jordan, and Syria can, in the light of recent progress in the Middle East peace process, now be viewed as boosting a diplomatic conducive atmosphere, his desire to visit Iraq is problematic. The religious argument of needing to include the site of Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, is difficult to counter. But Saddam is almost sure to use such a visit as a way of legitimising his rule to the Iraqi people and gaining applause from those parts of world opinion that regard the whole issue as some weird diplomatic spectator sport.

The Pope himself is thought to be disdainful of the need to fit his itinerary in with U.S. foreign policy and is said to be determined to include the Iraq leg of his trip. But his advisers might be more conscious of the possible damage to the Catholic church caused by yet another instance of too close an association with a dictator, especially one who shows no hint of reform.

Saddam's coterie feels the pressure. Attempts to indict Saddam Husayn and some of the key members of his Ba'athist coterie are gathering pace. The deputy chairman of Iraq's revolutionary command council, Izzat Ibrahim, left Vienna in August shortly before a move to have him arrested by the Austrian courts could be attempted. The deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, who travels widely and comparatively freely on diplomatic missions, cancelled a trip this summer to a Rome conference after the Italians, responding to international pressure, advised against it. Although Saddam himself rarely leaves the country, the notion that one of his close associates might be incarcerated like General Augusto Pinochet must concentrate the minds of the Iraqi elite. (The former Chilean dictator is under house arrest in Britain awaiting potential extradition to Spain on torture charges.)

Saddam's calculus for success or failure is difficult to gauge and usually impossible to witness. But in the last few months he has made more speeches than is usual. The number and the subject areas give the impression that he is less sure of himself. Pictures of an opposition delegation being received diplomatically could possibly infuriate him, especially if the diplomacy at the UN plays against on sanctions. Constraints on the Pope's visit would be an additional setback.

Conclusion. Although the coming weeks will lack the drama of television clips of military action, the diplomatic maneuverings are an important test for the U.S. policy of "containment-plus." With the new cohesiveness of the opposition, there is a chance the overall policy on Iraq might show some net progress during the next few months.

Simon Henderson, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is the author of *Instant Empire: Saddam Hussein's Ambition for Iraq* (Mercury House, 1991).

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