

Saddam Husayn's Rage of Fury: Impact of the Bombing Campaign

Jan 11, 1999



Brief Analysis

This weekend's threatened resolution by the Iraqi parliament to rescind its recognition of the border with Kuwait -- a key element of the original Gulf War cease-fire resolution -- is the latest in a series of rash actions suggesting that last month's three-day bombing campaign succeeded in unnerving Iraqi president Saddam Husayn and shaking the confidence of his regime.

Understanding Saddam: Saddam's propaganda warfare against moderate Arab states, the most bellicose since the end of the Gulf War, is just one aspect of his response to the Anglo-American strikes. In recent days, he has repeatedly challenged U.S. and British airplanes in the two no-fly zones over Iraq and threatened to stop most, if not all, cooperation with the United Nations humanitarian agencies and international and Arab non-governmental organizations implementing the "oil-for-food" program. Together, these actions suggest that the bombing campaign has had a lingering impact of far greater significance than previous, more limited strikes. They indicate that Saddam believes it is necessary to take steps to remind his power base that he remains firmly in charge and capable of mounting challenges to America and its supporters.

Viewed from afar, Saddam's tactics seem irrational. His attacks on Arab leaders have hardened the opposition of some and infuriated others who had, at one time, been sympathetic to Iraq's plight; his cat-and-mouse games in the no-fly zones only serve to keep U.S. and British forces on alert for further action; his threat to revoke Iraq's recognition of Kuwait would, if carried out, be perhaps the one issue that would silence the anti-American criticisms of France and Russia. Yet, policies that seem irrational from the outside make more sense when viewed within a domestic Iraqi context. After suffering humiliation, as was the case during the December air campaign, Saddam puts high value on the need to demonstrate to his bodyguards, troops, and tribal supporters that he has not lost his pride and manhood. Being surrounded largely by young Iraqis of tribal backgrounds, he is particularly vulnerable to considerations of manly honor.

War Against the Arabs: On January 5, 1999, one day earlier than expected, Saddam delivered his annual Army Day speech to the Iraqi people and the Arab world. In this unusual address, the culmination of an intensive Iraqi media campaign against moderate Arab states, Saddam called upon the Arab masses to rise in revolt against the ruling regimes either to force them to change policy or to topple them altogether.

Although Saddam did not mention any country explicitly, his diatribe could easily be understood as directed against the Kuwaitis, the Saudis, the Egyptians, and the Jordanians -- in that order. He accused the Saudis and Kuwaitis of being third generation British and American stooges. The Egyptians were "accomplices" of the enemy and "silent devils" who must "leave [office] or else be fought with swords and lances." For Jordan, whose crown prince had adopted an unusually pro-Kuwaiti position during the December bombing campaign, Saddam offered a milder form of criticism: King Hussein and his fellow Hashemites were "feeble-minded Arab rulers, who have become hostage to their whims. They, too, need popular protests to [make them] disavow some of their humiliating obligations towards the foreigner." Saddam even implied that the Arab masses should take the path that East Asian protestors had taken

in the past: to "burn themselves in public" as part of the campaign to bring down regimes that failed to support Iraq in word and deed.

This barrage of incitement against Arab rulers followed a decision by Esmat Abdul Meguid, Arab League secretary-general and former Egyptian foreign minister, to postpone a proposed meeting of Arab foreign ministers to discuss Iraq. Although no Arab capital, save Kuwait City, publicly endorsed the bombing campaign, official Arab criticism of the Anglo-American action was generally viewed as lukewarm and pro forma. Baghdad apparently interpreted the postponement as an attempt to avoid any discussion of the bombing campaign and thereby allow the Arab street to cool even further, allowing moderate Arab leaders to stave off Iraqi demands. In response, the Iraqi media attacked Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in unusually harsh tones, provoking a response from Mubarak himself to the effect that "the ruling regime [in Iraq] is the cause of all problems." The vitriol against all the other Arab moderates then began to flow in earnest.

Focus on Jordan: Until the Iraqi parliament turned its sights on Kuwait, raising the specter of a renewal of sovereign claims on that oil-rich emirate, the most interesting aspect of the Iraqi propaganda campaign was its attacks on Jordan, a country with whom Iraq had just signed a new oil and trade protocol. During an emergency meeting in Amman of the Arab Parliamentary Union, an Iraqi parliamentarian harshly criticized Crown Prince Hassan's speech. Then, Iraq's speaker of the parliament, Sa'adun Hammadi, excoriated Jordan for not breaking the UN embargo to assist Baghdad and to confound the plans of Washington and London.

Last Thursday, January 7, the sparring with Jordan heated up when Iraq welcomed to Baghdad the most popular and vocal domestic critic of the Hashemites, former Islamist member of parliament Layth Shbaylat. Shbaylat, who just two years ago was pardoned by King Hussein for incitement against the royal family, spoke on Iraqi satellite television one day after the monarch visited President Clinton and left for further convalescence in Europe. In that interview, Shbaylat denounced those Arab leaders "who conspire publicly with the Americans and conduct joint exercises with them." After saying he could "mention at least ten points showing that my government [in Jordan] failed to honor its obligations toward [the Jordanian people]," Shbaylat lambasted leaders of other regimes when he called for all Arab and Islamic leaders to be tried for their complicity in the war against the Iraqi people. The result has been to bring Iraqi-Jordanian relations to their lowest level since the aftermath of the Husayn Kamil defection four years ago.

Impact on Saddam: For U.S. policy, having Saddam focus his attention on the need to reassure his core supporters is a welcome outcome of the air campaign. Whereas actual bombing damage assessments are still unclear, it is apparent that the strikes succeeded in pushing Saddam into making a number of moves that greatly damage his position on the international and even military level. Already, the negative impact on Iraq's Arab relations is extensive -- an important point, considering the extent to which oil-for-food and the bombing campaign itself were designed to limit affronts to Arab and Muslim sensibilities. If Iraq reduced its cooperation with the important work of the UN humanitarian effort, it may turn the tide in the public relations battle over who bears responsibility for the tragic plight of the Iraqi people. Finally, the repeated attempts to down an American or British airplane have so far ended with human casualties and material damage only to the Iraqi air and ground-to-air missile forces. Saddam can ill afford this for a sustained period, given that smuggling more such missiles into Iraq is extremely difficult and training soldiers to man these units will be almost impossible without a generous supply of training missiles for new crews. Saddam may see a silver lining in the renewed international attention on the no-fly zones and Washington's deepening isolation at the United Nations, but this may be just partial consolation.

Evidently, the need to demonstrate defiance remains a very high priority for Saddam. This is an indication that his core supporters in the Special Security Organization, Special Republican Guard, General Intelligence, Military Intelligence, General Security, and other such bodies may have been angered by the regime's decision to roll over

and play dead throughout the aerial campaign, leaving barracks, offices, palaces and command and control positions vulnerable to pounding by U.S. and British forces. Lashing out at the world -- and paying a high cost for it -- so as to safeguard his internal situation is a traditional way Saddam deals with troubles at home.

In conclusion, one can state that the bombing campaign has already had important political benefits, having compelled the Iraqi leader to embrace policies that are highly detrimental to his long-term interests. This may suggest that Saddam's system of control and intimidation is less impregnable than previously feared -- certainly strong yet capable of being shattered. The next test of Saddam may come soon. Next week marks not only the Muslim feast of Eid al-Fitr, which concludes the holy month of Ramadan, but also the expected arrival in the upper Gulf of the British aircraft carrier Invincible.

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