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SADDAM COULD TRY AGAIN

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Saddam's Grand Design / The Iran-Iraq War: The First Gulf Crisis / Saddam Draws World Support / The Second Gulf Crisis / The Aftermath of the Crisis: The New Order / Muslim Fundamentalists: The Ultimate Victors?

[Editor's Note: This was written just after the allied suspension of hostilities in the Gulf War.]

Thomas Carlyle once remarked that "the history of the world is but the biography of great men." As dynamos of history who can trigger events of world scale and significance, even great men of evil count in this category: Stalin, Hitler, Saddam, and the list is long. Men of this sort serve to remind us that the "End of History" is nowhere in sight. These kind of men are possessed by megalomaniac dreams of unlimited boundaries, are driven by limitless ambition, and are apt to maneuver between their rivals and enemies, domestic and foreign; to make alliances and break them; to advocate one position and its reverse; to cajole and threaten; to aggress and pose as victims; to lie shamelessly and accuse others of deceit. They act ruthlessly, are bound by no commitment to anyone

or any value, and are held in awe, even admiration by their subjects, as long as they score gains. Under such men very little dissent is allowed, anyone who raises his head is likely to lose it; anyone who dares to take from the limelight of the leader or partake of his glory is considered a threat and eliminated, either openly as an "enemy of the people," or covertly in some mysterious accident.

Saddam's Grand Design

Whatever the psychological reasons underlying his ambitions, it is evident that Saddam has been a patient and visionary planner. Already in 1975, as Vice-President but the strong man of Iraq, he realized that in order to attain grandeur commensurate with his view of himself, of Iraq and the world, he had to tread the long-haul path, and to adopt a series of sine-qua-non measures, step by step.

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First, he had to unify his country around him by pacifying internal strife and providing national symbols attractive enough to rally his people behind his personal leadership. In 1975, at great political "sacrifice," Saddam signed an agreement with the Shah of Iran which recognized Teheran's rights in the eastern half of the Shatt-al-Arab Waterway, in return for which the Iranians pledged to end their support for the Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq. Saddam also pacified the traditionally downtrodden Shiite majority in the south, by speeding up economic development and by opening up some of the avenues of power to some of them.

Then he turned to his image-building. Saddam cultivated his heroic stature by appearing in public in military attire, always armed with a revolver at his waist; by posting increasingly larger portraits of himself in all public places in towns, villages and public roads; and by orchestrating massive demonstrations of support for himself. This campaign of self-aggrandizement, the like of which survives only in today's North Korea, culminated in the inference that Saddam was akin to Hammurabi, his great Babylonian predecessor, who had held in awe the entire ancient Middle East from his Mesopotamian Empire. The trappings of grandeur did not simply suggest the parallel between two great men, but were calculated to lend historical depth to Saddam's new dreams of hegemony in this area. The ubiquitous larger-than-life posters showing Saddam also carried in their background a sketch of Hammurabi, suggesting continuity: the glory of 4,000 years ago is being revived, the Iraqis of today are the inheritors of the ancient Babylonians, and Saddam is but the present link in the apostolic chain of glorious great men.

Saddam's cult of personality was motivated not only by his own urge to compensate for his deprived youth and his anonymity in years past, but also by his attempt to contend with the Shah, his rival, who had squandered untold amounts of money to revive Persepolis and the past

glory of the ancient Persian Empire. Whatever the Shah could do, Saddam could do better. In pursuit of his megalomaniac dreams, he eliminated physically, some say at his own hands, anyone who dissented from this view of the leader, or anyone who was suspected of aspiring to leadership or of trying to pick up some of the crumbs of glory that the leader left in his trail.

Second, Saddam undertook to erect the cornerstones of power: the military, a technological infrastructure, economic development, and making good use of his enormous oil wealth. Although there was no threat against Iraq following the 1975 agreement with Iran which resolved the border problem between them, Saddam's military build-up was undertaken very vigorously and resulted in a 450,000-man standing army, equal to those of Syria or Egypt that stood on the front line of confrontation with Israel. Concurrently, a massive effort was exerted to establish a high-technology military industry that could produce missiles as well as nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. All this was attained via collaboration with European and South American private firms and governments who preferred to overlook Saddam's growing threat and to channel their industrial, military and technological products to him in return for oil.

Third, Saddam had to express his newly grown might in the circle where it counted most -- the inter-Arab arena. President Sadat of Egypt, who until the mid-1970s had retained his country's leadership of the Arab world, born out of Cairo's leading role in the conflict with Israel, had "defected" in 1977 following his peace settlement with Israel. Indeed, following the Camp David Accords of September 1978, and the Peace Treaty of March 1979, Iraq took the lead of the Rejection Front, convening the first and second Baghdad Conferences. As a consequence of these two events, he rallied all the Arabs against Sadat's "treason," boycotted Egypt for its peace initiative and ousted it from the Arab League, was instrumental in transfer-

ring the headquarters of the Arab League from Cairo to Tunis, and vowed that no compromise and no reconciliation with Israel were in the offing. By so doing, he snatched the leadership from Egypt, or at least contended for it. His military build-up gave him as much credibility as Syria, which had an equally formidable army arrayed against Israel, but his wealth lent him an edge over his main rivals in Damascus who had to beg for financial support from the Soviet Union and rich oil-producing Arab countries.

The Iran-Iraq War: The First Gulf Crisis

Saddam needed a way to maintain those attributes of power that he had built up, as well as the enhanced stature that he enjoyed in the Arab world as a result. If he was to be credible, Saddam realized, he had to act and to seem to act in the Arab interest, not only in the interest of his self-aggrandizement or of Iraq's primacy in the region. The Khomeini revolution in Iran provided him with the opportunity. Merely eighteen months after the new regime settled down in Teheran, and fearing that the revolutionary passion of the Shiites might spill over into his territory, where Khomeini was remembered and revered since his fifteen year exile among the Shiites of Iraq (1963-1978), Saddam decided to move. His objectives were four-fold:

1) He eyed the adjoining province of Khuzistan which, although Iranian-dominated, was populated by Arab-speaking tribes. His coming as a "savior," he hoped, would be not only welcomed by those Arabs, but the entire Arab world would rally behind him in this struggle to regain Arab lands from Iran, the traditional arch-foe of the Arabs.

2) He was advised that a move into Khuzistan would be an easy walkover due to the turmoil engendered by the revolution and the purges in the Iranian army that had left it leaderless and weakened. Such a move would also demonstrate to his Shiites at home that the Khomeini revolution was no more than a "paper tiger," and

that they stood to benefit from supporting their hero-leader who acquired fame and glory for their country.

3) Taking over that patch of land would double, overnight, Iraq's already fabulous wealth in oil production and reserves, allowing him to outstrip even Saudi Arabia and to take over the leadership of OPEC with its corollaries: a determining voice in oil prices, and global political and economic clout.

4) Moving into Iran at a low cost would give him, for the first time since Iraq's inception, a seashore of a few hundred miles, the lack of which had theretofore inhibited the build-up of Iraqi naval power in the Gulf. Such a territorial acquisition would give Iraq a secure boundary away from the threatening Iranian lines, would ensure Basra's growth into a formidable naval and industrial base free from Iranian threats, would give him total and unlimited control of the Shatt-al-Arab Waterway, and would enable him to build more deep-water ports on the Khuzistan coast.

Furthermore, conditions seemed right for Saddam to achieve his goals. First, due to the excesses of the Iranian revolution, there was hardly any country, least of all in the West, that would shed a tear over Iran's plight in the war. Second, the rich monarchies in the Gulf felt directly menaced by the regime in Teheran which vowed to export Islamic fundamentalism to their lands. Third, while Iraq was well-supplied by the Soviet Union and some Western countries, Iran faced a world arms embargo which incapacitated her in the long run.

Thus, all Saddam had to do was tear up his 1975 agreement with the Shah and reclaim Arab, that is, his, sovereignty over the entire Shatt-al-Arab Waterway, his only outlet to the Persian Gulf, now renamed the "Arab Gulf." Within a matter of weeks, Saddam was in control of much of Khuzistan and his war aims seemed at hand at an amazingly low cost and high speed. But he had underestimated the ideological and patriotic zeal of the Iranians. They fought back with vengeance, substi-

tuting human waves for the equipment that was dwindling and never fully replenished. The Iranian stand at Khurramshar, their equivalent of Stalingrad, marked the beginning of the end of Saddam's venture. True, Iran had neither the firepower nor the military hardware to threaten Iraq in any direct way, but neither was Saddam able to deliver the quick coup-de-grace that he had relied upon. The war of attrition went on for eight years, in the process allowing Iraq to field-test its awesome arsenal of missiles and chemical weapons.

Saddam Draws World Support

All this while, Saddam was not condemned by anyone. On the contrary, he drew support from all quarters: the Americans, Europeans, Soviets and Chinese sold him weapons, facilitated economic credits, and came to regard him as a bulwark against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism that everyone feared. The Arabs, out of the same fears, continued to pour billions in "loans" into Saddam's dwindling treasury, knowing full well that he would never be able, let alone willing, to repay them. Indeed, he repaid them with lip-service, declaring that this was a second Qadisiyya, a repetition of that glorious battle in the seventh century when the Arabs defeated the Iranian-Sassanian Empire and spread Islam into Persia. That meant he stood in the forefront of all Arabs in his bid to defeat that most dangerous and long-standing enemy of the Arabs, and therefore they owed him their unconditional support.

Desperate to win military and diplomatic support in the U.S., Saddam even veered back toward Egypt which he had humiliated in 1979, reestablished diplomatic relations with Cairo, and edged closer to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. By making up with the "moderates" of the Arab world, he hoped both to isolate his arch-rival, Syria, which supported Iran in the Gulf War, and to gain access to the U.S. He and his new Arab allies created the image of a moderate Saddam who

"really wanted peace," both in the Gulf and in the Arab-Israeli conflict. He emitted noises that were interpreted as signals that he was in favor of an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement and that he was seeking equidistance between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, his long-standing supporter. The Arabs who toed his line, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, began echoing the blame against Iran as the "aggressor" and the praise of Saddam as the "peacemaker." He wanted peace, they said, only the Iranians were intransigent and refused his peace advances. They, together with the rest of the world, conveniently elected to forget who had started the war in 1980 and who had used the most atrocious means of warfare on the battlefield.

Saddam's ploy had succeeded. He had abstained from opening a second front against Israel, which could have cost him his regime, in spite of Israel's devastating attack on his nuclear facilities in June 1981, which was universally condemned the world over. His reasoning was very sound: not only could he ill-afford a confrontation with Israel while he was stymied in the Iranian quagmire, but if he should do so, he would be deprived of two lifelines that he had painstakingly erected during that long war. One was the access he had gained to the West, especially to the American administration, that thought it was cultivating a new moderate ally who would ultimately be lured away from the Soviet camp. Secondly, he feared the loss of his only supply line via Aqaba in Jordan, which was at the mercy of Israeli guns two miles away.

When he emerged from the war with Iran in August 1988, Saddam claimed that he was victorious, whereas in fact he had gained only some insignificant patches of Iranian territory, but by no means attained his initial war aims. He had paid a terrible price: 200,000 casualties, a crushed economy, huge debts and a country to rebuild. But he had the aura of a victor, his stature was intact, and his credit in the West was so high that even his barbarous attack against his own Kurdish

citizens in Halabja in 1988, and his systematic destruction of hundreds of Kurdish hamlets and villages, won him little censure on the part of the world. Instead, he won praise for his "moderation."

Saddam immediately began reequipping his million-man army which had been battle-hardened during the eight years of war against Iran, and engaged in a vigorous diplomatic push geared to advance his position in the Western and Arab worlds. His repression of the Kurds at home, instead of being understood, as in 1975, as a preparatory move to free his hand to gain Lebensraum across his borders, was left uninterpreted because it came to be regarded by the world as a domestic affair.

Having terrified dissidents within Iraq, he turned outward: on the one hand, he began reminding Israel that her 1981 attack had not been forgotten, and threatening that he had the capacity to use his missiles and chemical weapons to "burn half of Israel" (he never said what he would do to the remaining half), thus assuming again his position as the champion of the Arab and Palestinian cause. His huge army, which he continued to maintain despite his armistice with Iran, was enough of a guarantee to ensure the credibility of his menace and to turn him into a hero figure in Arab politics.

On the other hand, he entered into a series of alliances in order to keep Syria isolated and to render irrelevant her bid for "strategic parity" with Israel that was designed to ensure her role of leadership in the confrontation with Israel. His quadripartite alliance with Egypt, Jordan and Yemen was calculated not only to tighten the noose around Syria, but also to enhance his own image as a moderate and pragmatic Arab leader who put his faith in constructive inter-Arab diplomacy. His hatred of Syria was so great that he declared his support of dissident General Aoun in Beirut who kept the Syrians busy in Lebanon.

The Second Gulf Crisis

Although Saddam had been severely bruised in the protracted war against Iran,

he had emerged unscathed politically and psychologically. As the "victor" in that war in which he arguably defended the Arab cause, his aura was brighter than ever before. American senators, including Robert Dole, who had visited him in the Spring of 1990, came out charmed with his "reasonable, pragmatic and moderate" personality. Saddam also calculated that events in Eastern Europe were preoccupying the West, itself made up of "soft regimes" that had lost the will and the capacity to fight for their interests overseas.

Saddam's need of more oil and access to the sea remained his constant obsession. Iran had proven too unyielding to fulfill those necessities, therefore he must look elsewhere. Probably following Hitler's scheme, he evaluated the geo-political situation around him: Like Czechoslovakia, Kuwait was a small and weak country, easy to swallow and digest. It would also fit his need for more oil and sea access. Jordan to the west, his closest ally, was the ideal candidate for Anschluss, since both countries had been ruled by the Hashemite family and felt intimately close to each other. There was a formidable enemy to the east, Iran, but better join it than fight it. So, replicating the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty, he thought that, if and when necessary, he would rather appease that enemy in the east in order to concentrate all his power where it was needed -- in the south, first in order to "return" Kuwait to the fold of Iraq and then, if all went well, to sink his teeth into Saudi Arabia, another weak and rich "sister" Arab country.

Saddam was very much concerned by Israel's military power, but he rightly estimated that Israel was too distant and had neither the means nor the interest to become involved in the Gulf region. Like Hitler, Saddam created an artificial argument with Kuwait over oil prices and the Rumeila oil fields, spread around assurances that he had no aggressive intentions against Kuwait, and vowed to his allies, including President Mubarak personally, that he would seek a peaceful solution to the "conflict." After all, he owed many

billions of dollars to the Emir of Kuwait who bailed Iraq out during her war with Iran. How could he be so ungrateful as to reward such help with aggression?

On August 2nd, Saddam struck militarily in a blitzkrieg which baffled his foes and friends alike. He was condemned by most Arab countries, each for its own reasons: Syria was as frightened of the growing power of Saddam as it was delighted to partake of an all-Arab revenge against him. Mubarak, personally hurt that he had fallen into Saddam's net, had to admit that his alliance with Iraq and his intimacy with Saddam had been an act of naivete on his part. Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, shaken and scared for their lives, hastened to embrace any possible means to arrest Saddam's advance. The West, bewildered by Saddam's astuteness and aggression, humiliated at being outmaneuvered and outwitted by him, and fearful of the consequences of leaving in the dictator's hands an aggregate (Iraq and Kuwait) 20 percent of the world's oil reserves, decided to move with much hesitation, as Saddam had calculated.

The U.S., which was the most likely to move against Saddam, was distant and irresolute. Unless it decided to act immediately with missiles or air strikes before Iraq entrenched herself in Kuwait, it would take many months to assemble a military force equivalent to that deployed in Vietnam at the peak of the war there, namely some 500,000 troops. Besides, the Americans would find the desert conditions unbearable: heat, dust, Islamic puritanism, hostile Arab-Muslim environment, lack of alcohol, and uncertainty as to the end of the conflict.

Saddam immediately seized upon these difficulties to gain time. He began to ridicule the American war aims: defending a monarch and his family who had systematically "robbed" his people's resources for private purposes. Was that the norm of democracy that America championed? America did not come to Kuwait to "defend legitimacy," as it claimed, but to keep down the price of oil. Otherwise

why did they not interfere when Indonesia invaded Timor, Libya attacked Chad, or Israel the West Bank? Was it worthwhile for young Americans to fight and die for oil prices? The demonstrations in the U.S. against war and for the "return of our boys" home vindicated Saddam's calculations and played into his hands.

Moreover, he was confident that the Arab-Muslim countries would ultimately succumb to the pressures of their masses who loathed the presence of Westerners in Arab lands and especially their proximity to the Islamic holy places. Saddam discounted the role of the Arabs who rushed to help the Saudis, realizing very well that they were there not to help their American allies but to ensure their share of Saudi wealth should the aftermath of the war bring about the final demise of the Kuwaiti house, followed by the Saudi ruling princes. After all, a direct Syrian threat on Iraq's border would have been far more effective than transporting Syrian troops to the Saudi desert, if the real target were Baghdad.

Intent on holding fast to his Kuwaiti prey, Saddam put forth his most moderate posture when addressing the outside world: he wanted negotiations, he said, not war; he was seeking a peaceful settlement, he assured, if the oil fields and the islands of Bubian and Warba were left in Iraqi hands; he was prepared to release all of the foreign "guests" taken hostage if he was assured that no attack would be mounted against him. His foreign minister traveled around the world affirming the peaceful intentions of his leader, and his message was heeded in some quarters. A procession of senior statesmen came knocking on Saddam's door: Willy Brandt, Edward Heath, Yasuhiro Nakasone, all coming to beg for the release of their hostages, but at the same time satisfying the dictator's lust for the international limelight and his feeling of self-importance.

To his people and to the Arabs, however, Saddam had a different message: steadfastness of the Arabs/Muslims against the new Crusaders who were scheming

against the Arab homeland and the Islamic holy shrines. He incited the people of Saudi Arabia to rise up against the exploitation of their egotistic and privileged rulers, and the people of Egypt and Syria to rebel against the collusion of their rulers with the West. Indeed, some of his agents were arrested in Egypt for plotting against the regime.

Saddam's macho defiance of the West and the U.S. won him tremendous popular support in the Arab and Islamic world. In Jordan, massive demonstrations in his favor by both Arab nationalists and Muslim fundamentalists became daily routine, and King Hussein, probably Saddam's best friend and salesman, did nothing to blunt them. The Palestinians heralded him as a new Saladin, ironically the Muslim Kurdish hero of the Middle Ages who had reunited the Muslims and extirpated the Crusaders from Palestine. The Mufti of Jerusalem delivered a sermon to the "believers" upon the eruption of the crisis calling upon all Muslims to lend a hand to Saddam in his struggle against American neo-imperialism.

To his people, who seemed to support him in spite or perhaps because of the squeeze of the international trade embargo, he pledged victory and a horrible defeat of the Americans who would be busy "counting their corpses as soon as the war begins." He urged his people to "eat dates and drink water," thus mocking the Western-imposed embargo on food. He encouraged his farmers to be self-sufficient, his urban population to consume less, and his soldiers to become battle-ready. Somehow, they refused to read the danger looming around them; they remained confident in their leader's leadership.

The Aftermath of the Crisis: The New Order

If Saddam survives, what then? During his eleven years in power, Saddam's vision of himself, of Iraq under his leadership, and of the regional order he wants to put in place have not changed. He may be pragmatic in his means but he never loses sight of his aims. He is in his early 50s,

is healthy, strong and popular, and is in no hurry. What he cannot accomplish today he will try tomorrow. He tried against Iran ten years ago, but although he did not succeed, he emerged strengthened enough to try again. Stopped in Kuwait by the West and then forced to retreat, he cannot attack Saudi Arabia for now and will continue to deny that he ever had any designs against it. Fearing reprisals from Israel who is not eager to have him as a neighbor, he put off his Anschluss of Jordan. When he was hard pressed in the south at the start of the crisis, he made peace with his arch-enemy, the Iranians, and even ceded to them the meager fruits of his eight-year war. But given the right opportunity, he will not hesitate to move.

What will be the future in a post-crisis Gulf? With regard to the Gulf War, he has used the big lie technique to proclaim victory, claiming to have held his own against the world, with the forces of 30 nations including the number one world power pitted against him. He has indeed withdrawn from Kuwait, but then, what? The Americans and others will withdraw, and Saddam will not hesitate to strike again, assuming that the foreigners cannot play the costly and lengthy deployment game over and over again. There is no alliance of Arabs capable of threatening him, not only because infighting among Arabs is very unpopular among the masses, but also because any Arab troops strong enough to contain Saddam within his borders would constitute a menace to the very countries (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates) that would host them. The reality is that the imbalance and the inequity between the strong but poor Arab countries that might station their forces in the Arabian Peninsula and the rich but weak monarchies needing protection is too deep and too obvious to be sustained in the long run.

From Saddam's viewpoint, his army is tenacious enough to absorb a combined Western-Arab attack and to survive it. Even if his industrial and technological base is demolished, he can rebuild it with

his oil income over a period of ten years. Post-war Germany and Japan serve as hopeful models to him. Moreover, a war of this sort might rally the masses more tightly around him as long as he remains firmly in power.

What if Saddam flees Iraq? If the Americans and their allies allow him to survive, even at the price of relinquishing power, he may well try, like Napoleon on the island of Elba, to one day recapture his empire.

Muslim Fundamentalists: The Ultimate Victors?

It is evident that the Middle East in the post-Gulf crisis era will be a vastly different place. If Saddam retains his power, he will try again and again to reassert himself in order to attain his strategic aims. But even if he falls, it is not certain at all that a more malleable pro-Western regime would replace him. Lacking a tradition of democracy and rule by the people themselves, it is quite possible that he will simply be replaced by a new dictatorship, one that continues to contend for Arab hegemony and for the same long-term strategic goals. Another possibility is that Islamic fundamentalism, led by the Shiite majority in Iraq, might manifest itself, with or without collaboration with neighboring Iran. In view of the current experience in Jordan, Algeria, the West Bank and Gaza, where relative freedom of expression has given rise to strong Muslim fundamentalist movements, it is quite probable that if the Iraqis are left to themselves to choose, they might opt for such a regime. Public sentiment could well shift to a strong identification with Islam if the icon of Arab nationalism headed by Saddam is finally shattered.

The two Gulf crises have taught us that, paradoxically, stability in the Middle East is possible only in traditional authoritarian societies which crush any manifestation of democracy: regimes like Nasser's Egypt, Assad's Syria, Saudi Arabia and other monarchies. But these regimes, which sadly depend on the whims of one man and his inner group, can also wage

war and take other destabilizing initiatives without any domestic public opinion to restrain them. It is a fact that in the twentieth century nearly all wars were provoked by autocratic regimes of one kind or another, while democratic countries were drawn into these conflicts in self-defense. Unfortunately, however, grassroots democracies do not seem to appear, for the time being, as viable alternatives to these dictatorships, and therefore not much hope can be pinned on stability through democracy.

In this light one can understand the terrible problem of legitimacy that nearly all Arab leaders face. The Saudi King gave himself the title of "Curator of the Two Holy Shrines" (Khadim al-Haramayn), Saddam raises the banner of Jihad (holy war) against the West and Israel, his ally King Hussein of Jordan harks back to his descent from the family of the Prophet, and Assad stands as the "champion of Arab nationalism"; and all of them profess support for the perennial Palestinian cause. But they all know that they represent nobody, and no one has elected them or approved of their power. If they should embark on a process of gradual liberalization within a discredited system, they will lock themselves into an inexorable process that would end in their removal. If they are removed, the Muslim fundamentalists are most likely to replace them since they are probably the best organized and most popular movement in the Arab world. That prospect, which may be triggered by the "new order" in the post-Saddam era, is not necessarily what the U.S. and the West are most in need of.

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