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THE IRAQI-PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI TRIANGLE

Ofra Bengio

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The joint American-British attack near Baghdad on 16 February 2001 prompted President Saddam Husayn to announce an immediate threat, not against the attacking powers, but against Israel. In two speeches he delivered shortly after the attack, he declared his intention to create the "Jerusalem Army" of 21 divisions that would help liberate Palestine "from the river to the sea" and rescue it from "Zionism and its accursed deformed entity" -- Israel.

Saddam's reaction was predictable, consistent and logical from his own point of view. Concentrating on Israel serves various Iraqi ends: diverting Iraqi public attention from hardships at home and the leadership's inability to relieve them; appealing to the Arab countries and especially the Arab masses with slogans and symbols that have great resonance; choosing a target for Iraqi vengeance which is much "easier" and more "rewarding" than the United States and Britain; and finally, and most importantly, leading the radical Arab opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process and presenting an alternative to it.

Despite the fact that Iraq has no common border with Israel, it has always stood at the forefront of the Arab campaign against Zionism and Israel. In this way, Iraq acted like the core countries in the

conflict -- Egypt, Jordan and Syria -- and not like the countries on the periphery, such as Saudi Arabia or Morocco. Indeed, Baghdad took an even more radical position than did the core countries in the sense that it never signed an armistice agreement with Israel and it rejected UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

The second *intifada*, which erupted in September 2000, provided Iraq with the opportunity to reassert its radical line with greater vigor. Baghdad sought to use the *intifada* as a lever to promote several important aims:

1. to avenge the decade of sanctions and the suffering of the Iraqi people by targeting Israel, the regional "alter ego" of the United States;
2. to thwart the two pillars of American policy in the region: dual containment and the Arab-Israeli peace process;
3. to bring about the complete erosion of the sanctions on Iraq
4. to end Iraq's regional and international isolation and accelerate its return to the Arab fold;
5. to lead the radical Arab line on Palestine, in opposition to Egypt's moderate stance;
6. to goad the Palestinians in Jordan to press their government to adopt a pro-Iraqi and anti-Israeli line; and
7. to strengthen further Iraqi-Palestinian ties.

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Iraq pursued its objectives by word and deed. Saddam Husayn escalated the anti-Israel rhetoric by calling on all Israeli Jews -- Ashkenazi and Sephardi alike -- to leave the country forever. His declarations, like others in the Iraqi media, were also increasingly peppered with anti-Semitic themes, including quotations from the Qur'an referring to the "ugly" Jew. At the same time, Saddam moved five Iraqi divisions close to the Syrian border, declaring that if the Iraqi army were given access, it would be able to defeat Israel all by itself. This move had the added motive of impressing upon the young and inexperienced rulers of Syria and Jordan the fact that the balance of power in the region was in Iraq's favor.

Saddam used the *intifada* to mobilize popular support. The Iraqi case in this respect is unique, since there is "harmony" between "the street" and the regime on the Palestinian issue. Consequently, the regime can lead the radical line rather than being forced to respond to popular pressure, as is the case in Egypt, Jordan or even Syria. Saddam enlisted more than six million "volunteers," including two million women, to fight for the Palestinian cause. He has also provided material support to the Palestinians, the most dramatic example being grants of \$10,000 to the families of martyrs. This drives home the message that Palestinians and Iraqis are one people, and that despite its own severe financial problems, Iraq is willing to sacrifice for this cause as no other Arab country has done. The fact that Saddam sends the money through his own agents allows him to circumvent the Palestinian Authority (PA), infiltrate the Palestinian street, and increase his popularity.

However, Iraq's magnanimous behavior toward the Palestinians stops at the border. Its treatment of resident Palestinians is among the worst in the Arab world. The percentage of Palestinians in the total population is lower than in any other Arab country. In 1975, when Baghdad opened its gates

to all Arabs and provided them with full citizenship, it excluded the Palestinians from this offer. During the Iran-Iraq War, when it welcomed more than one million Egyptian workers, it still excluded Palestinians. The same was true after the Gulf war, despite the fact that the Palestinians had supported Iraq in its conflict with Kuwait. Until recently, Palestinians in Iraq were forbidden to purchase a house or a car or even to install a telephone line. (Now they are permitted to buy these things, but not to inherit them).

But if Palestinians are aware of this duality in Iraq's attitude toward them, they do not allow it to influence their own attitude toward Saddam. For them, he is an authentic Arab hero, the one who dared challenge the only superpower in the world and survive its massive assault against him, the one who boosted their own morale by launching missiles against Israel and sending its residents scurrying to the shelters. The *intifada* and the most recent events in Iraq have further strengthened these common bonds.

With the advent of the new Bush Administration, Iraq's long-term goals are likely to be the following: lifting the sanctions *de facto* and *de jure*; breaking its isolation and renewing diplomatic, economic and political ties with other countries; bringing Iraqi Kurdistan back into the fold; and improving its outlet to the sea by again bringing pressure to bear on Kuwait. Saddam Husayn believes that the best way to achieve these goals is through simultaneous confrontation with the U.S. and Israel on the Iraqi and Palestinian fronts. Hence, he will do his utmost to obstruct the Arab-Israeli peace process and keep the flames of the Palestinian *intifada* alive. Thus far, the hopes he pinned on the *intifada* have been fulfilled.

N.B. Because of a computer error, the previous transmission of this Note included parts of the concluding sentences of Tel Aviv Note #13. This transmission contains the correct version and we apologize for the error.