

How Arafat helped Saddam

Professor Laurie Mylroie, an expert on Iraqi affairs, perceives a 'dovetailing' of Arafat's posture with Saddam Hussein's policy, with the PLO plotting with him to squeeze Kuwait

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IT IS WIDELY believed among a variety of Arab parties that Yasser Arafat coordinated with Saddam Hussein in the invasion of Kuwait. The evidence is still circumstantial and unclear. But, given the gravity of the charge and its far-reaching implications, it deserves serious attention and further inquiry.

In retrospect, it is obvious that since the beginning of the year, when Saddam Hussein first called for the U.S. to leave the Persian Gulf, he sought to raise tensions with Israel and the West in order to intimidate the Gulf states, while polishing his nationalist credentials to provide the most transparent of rationales for eventually invading Kuwait. When Saddam threatened to burn half of Israel, the little sheikhdom, not Jerusalem, was the object of his bellicosity.

In the same period that Saddam was preparing his invasion, Arafat was contributing his share to the area's problems. Along with King Hussein, Arafat raised the incessant cry that Soviet immigration was leading to war. Privately, Jordanian authorities admitted that they sought to pressure the Gulf states into giving more aid to Amman.

What about Arafat? Of course, he too sought money from the Gulf. He also sought to mobilize Arab support for the PLO. But was there a point at which Arafat's motives blended with Saddam's and he became a collaborator in invading Kuwait?

Arafat had already shifted from the Egyptian camp toward the Iraqis, even before the May 30 raid of Palestine Liberation Front chief Abul Abbas on a Tel Aviv beach seemingly forced Arafat's hand and eventually ended the U.S.-PLO dialogue. When Arafat appeared at the May 25 UN Security Council session in Geneva, convened in response to the tragic slaying of seven Palestinians in Rishon LeZion, Washington promised Arafat that if he showed the same moderation as in his last appearance before that body, he would be rewarded.

But Arafat was not interested. Among other things, Arafat charged that a map on a new Israeli coin demonstrated that Jerusalem claimed vast territories in the Middle East. The coin was old, the "map" was in fact a rock, and Arafat's claim was vintage nonsense. But Arafat's bombastic bluster dovetailed with Saddam's own efforts.

Arafat provided key services to Saddam in the period before the invasion. Playing up supposed Israeli dangers to Arab countries, he repeatedly called for meetings of the Arab League. Those meetings became occasions for Iraq to press and intimidate Kuwait. At the May 28 Baghdad summit, for example, Saddam Hussein complained behind closed doors of overproduction of oil by Opec member-states.

He proclaimed that war by "economic means" was no different from the real thing, preparing what would become another flimsy rationale for invading Kuwait. At the summit, Arafat joined with Iraq against Egypt and the Gulf Arabs in calling for the use of the oil weapon to pressure Washington.

ARAFAT'S SERVICES to Saddam are most suspect in the context of Iraq coercing money from Kuwait. At the summit, Saddam demanded some \$12 billion from Kuwait. The Kuwaitis reportedly responded by trying to put the Iraqis off, telling Saddam that they did not have that kind of money on hand. They could not turn their assets into liquid funds so quickly. A month later, at the end of June, Iraq's American-educated Deputy Prime Minister Sadun Hammadi visited Kuwait.

Publicly, Hammadi was there to press adherence to Opec's oil production quotas. Privately, however, he pushed Iraqi demands for cash, bringing with him a detailed list of Kuwait's financial holdings to refute the Kuwaitis' claim that they could not pay Iraq. Kuwait's foreign assets are not public information. It is widely believed that Hammadi's list was prepared by Palestinian elements under the influence of the PLO in positions of trust in the highest echelons of Kuwait's banking and financial institutions.

They supplied the information to Arafat, who passed it on to Saddam. Moreover, it is reported that Arafat promised Saddam that, if he took over Kuwait, Palestinian employees in Kuwait's banks and investment authorities would work with him to secure control of Kuwaiti assets abroad.

Yet another Arab League meeting was convened at Arafat's behest in mid-July. Arafat joined with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz to criticize Egypt, while the Iraqi minister presented Iraq's demands on Kuwait, for the first time in public, marking the countdown to the invasion two weeks later.

Saddam took over all of Kuwait rather than just its northern areas over which there is a territorial dispute, because he wanted Kuwait's \$100-billion-plus holdings. Yet neither he nor Arafat understood well the working of international finance. The immediate, unprecedented worldwide freeze imposed on Kuwait's foreign assets prevented the transfer of Kuwaiti funds to Iraq.

Yet if the PLO didn't deliver Kuwait's assets, it has played an important role in helping consolidate Iraqi control in that country. In the first week after the invasion, the British press reported that the PLO had provided Iraqi forces with critical intelligence, including the names, addresses and telephone numbers of key personnel in the Kuwaiti population. Palestinians sympathetic to the PLO

have constituted an informal intelligence network, helping Iraqi troops find and arrest foreigners and Kuwaitis, including police officers and military personnel.

The PLO has also supported Iraq in a variety of other ways since the invasion. At the August 10 Cairo summit, Arafat sought to deflect attention from Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, raising, among other issues, Afghanistan and Kashmir, provoking the public ire of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The PLO, along with Libya, voted with Iraq at that summit. Abul Abbas has sent his forces into Kuwait to help police the sheikhdom, as have George Habash, head of the PFLP, and Nayef Hawatmeh, head of the DPFLP. Although Fatah forces have not entered Kuwait, Mohammed Milhem, a senior aide to Arafat, has publicly threatened terrorism "everywhere" in support of Iraq.

THE "PEACE" plan that Arafat peddled after the invasion in the name of Arab solutions to Arab problems has been highly advantageous to the PLO. One of the Iraqi army's first moves in Kuwait was to take the nationality records back to Baghdad. Baghdad planned a "transfer" operation from the start; and, last month, Belgium's foreign minister charged that the PLO was working with Iraq to resettle Palestinians in Kuwait. Were Arafat's peace plan - which makes no mention of the return of the al-Sabah regime - to succeed, the PLO would gain a territorial base, something it has lacked since its expulsion from Lebanon.

King Fahd of Saudi Arabia snubbed Arafat at the Cairo summit, and has refused to meet with him since or take his phone calls. Saudi Arabia has suspended its financial support for the Palestinians. Qatar expelled the PLO envoy there on three days' notice, and ordinary Palestinians have been expelled en masse from the Gulf states. In early September the United Arab Emirates halted media coverage of the intifada.

The Egyptian press openly calls the PLO a fifth column and reported that Arafat asked Palestinians in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to collect information.

Clearly, Saddam seeks to fuel the intifada to bring Israel into the picture in order to divide the Arab coalition opposing him, without running the risks entailed in military confrontation with Jerusalem. The strong possibility that Arafat collaborated with Saddam in seizing Kuwait, throws the present PLO-Iraqi cooperation into a new, far more reprehensible light.

Professor Mylroie, a frequent contributor to The Jerusalem Post, is co-author, with Judith Miller, of Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf, recently published by Random House/Times Books.

Of blood and other libels