

December 15, 1983

**Report of the Hungarian Embassy in Iraq on the
emergence of an internal crisis in the top Iraqi
leadership**

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Summary:

This report issued by the Hungarian Embassy in Iraq describes the debate by the Iraqi leadership over two main options on how to proceed regarding the Iran-Iraq War and the possibility of a regime change.

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Subject: inner crisis ripening within the highest Iraqi leadership 0000 00

Recently it has been suggested by several signs that there are significant differences of opinion within the highest Iraqi leadership as to the issue of "how to proceed" now that the third year of the war between Iraq and Iran has passed. The opinions converge on two possible positions:

- one position acknowledges the failure of several initiations aimed at a peaceful resolution of the conflict, accepts the existing balance of forces and takes it as a fact that the war will be a lengthy one with a lot of bloodshed and intends to take comprehensive measures to prepare for further casualties;
- the other position is afraid that a protracted war might result in the fall of the regime and urges further military actions in order to force the resolution of the conflict at any cost, even accepting further severe casualties.

Both positions derive from Iraqi reality, both are represented by followers of the Baath party system and both give priority to saving the existing regime. However, the latter position, or the methods that it advocates, may easily result in the elimination of the regime despite of its contrary intention, or at best in its significant weakening and modification. Advocates of this position propose a double system of arguments to defend their views:

- Iraq has already withdrawn its troops from Iranian territories and accepted every peaceful initiation or mediation for peace.
- Iran is free to use its waterways in the Persian Gulf to export its oil and import arms, while Iraq has been deprived of the same possibility. In the long run this would upset the existing economic and military balance of forces.

On the basis of both arguments Iraq may feel entitled itself to deal Iranian economic facilities a heavy blow by using all its available military force and prevent Iran from using the Persian Gulf for trading. They are fully aware that if such a step is taken, the Strait of Hormuz will most likely be shut down, and as a result the great powers of the world will intervene, thereby putting an end to the war.

Adherents of this position also believe that Iraq is likely to make significant concessions in order to create the necessary conditions for peace (and, above all, in order to preserve the regime and its own position), even going as far as removing the present president. There are some who maintain that it is the president himself that is the main obstacle to making an agreement with the Iranian regime.

It has to be noted here that such a position would have been totally impossible two years ago. However, the conditions that make such a position possible today are not merely the direct result of the war, and for this very reason it is all the more dangerous from the point of view of Saddam Hussein's personal power.

This phenomenon derives from the fact that in the past three years it was exactly the president who initiated far-reaching changes in the power structure of the regime both in its organization and in its staff. Representing the interests of the civil wing of the Baath Party the president radically replaced supporters of party president Bakr, removed the old military officers who constituted the backbone of the party and filled these posts in public administration and the commandship of the army by young, militant party cadres brought up by the Baath Party. However, the dragging war and the worsening situation made them realize that propaganda was used to conceal the facts, and some of them even recognized that the president and the regime were not the same thing, the regime is viable even without the president and Saddam Hussein would have to make a sacrifice, even by resigning, if the existence of the regime were to depend on it.

This view could not surface under the present circumstances of severe, even cruel control and supervision, and most likely it was only some members of the presidential family who had the courage to suggest that the president should, at least temporarily, stand aside for the sake of the regime and his own security. Several sources say that this idea – the preservation of power within the family – was already brought up for the first time last year, and proponents of this view include, among others, the then minister of health care and several other members of the government. As is well known, the minister of health care was quickly liquidated, while others disappeared without a trace. Thus there seems to be quite a lot of support for the rumor spreading in Baghdad that the president's three half-brothers who had previously held high positions were “written off” for their similar views (more on this issue in our report on domestic policy).

True, the president has thus far been able to withstand these rather hasty attempts, and as in many other critical periods he has managed to turn the events to his own benefit with an exceptional gift. He takes propagandistic measures to prove that Iraq is a democratic country, while cleansing is underway in the secret service and the state administration. He takes a tight rein on party organizations and by making various concessions and promises he rallies all the former Baath Party officials on his side who were transferred back to civil life from the military. In the spirit of this tactics his official policy is a complex mixture of conciliatory gestures, wait-and-see and military threat, in precise daily doses, as required by the current situation.

For the time being it is not justified to draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of these disputes and differences of opinion. However, it is already obvious that thawing has already started at the “tip of the iceberg”, and the dissenting attitude of his brothers and their subsequent shelving involve a serious warning for the absolutistic president, even if the concrete measures were not taken by him. It also demonstrates that the forces that might attempt to overthrow the president, if it ever comes to take place, may not come from among the Kurdish or Shi'ite opposition, but rather from among his own people who are so committed to the regime that they will be able to bypass him for the sake of saving the regime at any cost, if the need arises. Most likely Saddam Hussein has properly understood this message, as reflected in his various statements that include a far more realistic evaluation of the current internal

and external situation as well as in several of his most recent measures and the obvious signs of settling down for a lengthy war. However, it remains to be seen which position will win the battle. It largely depends on whether it will be possible for the regime to create the necessary conditions for holding out in the war for a long time before the country reaches a level that it can no longer tolerate.

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ambassador