

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, OCTOBER 12, 1990

Saddam's Palestinians

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Is it really just coincidence that the bloodiest incident in the 23 years of Israeli occupation of the West Bank has occurred at the same time as the siege of Kuwait? Or did Yasser Arafat seek to trigger a massively violent incident to revive the flagging *intifada*, while taking the pressure off Saddam Hussein?

Since the beginning of the year, Mr. Arafat and King Hussein of Jordan have been stoking tensions in the Middle East. They predicted ominously that the immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel would lead to war. Jordanian authorities are willing to admit that they raised the temperature in an attempt to extract more aid from the Gulf states, but King Hussein may also have had some glimmerings of knowledge of Saddam's intentions toward Kuwait. Certainly Mr. Arafat did.

Mr. Arafat appeared before the United Nations Security Council in Geneva on May 25, to charge that a map on a new Israeli coin showed that Israel claimed vast territories in the Middle East. The coin was old, the "map" was in fact an engraving of a piece of rock, and Mr. Arafat's claim was vintage nonsense. The tensions generated by Mr. Arafat's bombastic bluster helped create an atmosphere in which Saddam could better intimidate the Gulf states, while polishing his nationalist credentials to provide the most transparent of rationales for invading Kuwait.

Mr. Arafat provided other key services to Saddam in the period before the invasion. Playing up supposed Israel dangers to various Arab states, he repeatedly called for meetings of the Arab League. These meetings became occasions for Iraq to press and intimidate Kuwait. At the May 28 Arab summit in Baghdad, for example, Saddam Hussein complained behind closed doors of overproduction by OPEC member-states and proclaimed that war by "economic means" was no different from the real thing.

Arafat's Key Service

Mr. Arafat's services were particularly helpful to Iraq as it coerced money from Kuwait. At the May 28 summit Saddam reportedly demanded an immediate \$12 billion from Kuwait. The Kuwaitis 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, Mr. Hammadi was there to press adherence to OPEC's oil production quotas. Privately, however, he pressed Iraqi demands for cash, bringing with him a detailed list of Kuwait's financial holdings in order to refute the Kuwaitis' claim that they could not pay Iraq. Mr. 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 Mr. Arafat, who passed it on to Saddam Hussein. Mr. Arafat promised Saddam Hussein that if Iraq took over Kuwait, Palestinian employees in Kuwait's banks and invest-

secure control of Kuwait assets abroad.

Yet another Arab League meeting was convened at Mr. Arafat's behest in mid-July. There Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz presented Iraq's demands once again—for the first time in public.

Saddam invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2. But while he got the country, he failed to get its money. Neither he nor Mr. Arafat understood well the workings of international finance. The unprecedented world-wide freeze imposed on Kuwait's foreign assets immediately after the invasion prevented the transfer of Kuwaiti funds to Iraq.

If the PLO failed to deliver Kuwait's assets up to Iraq, it did play an important role in promoting the consolidation of Iraqi

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control in Kuwait. Palestinian elements sympathetic to the organization have helped Iraqi troops find and arrest foreigners, along with key elements in the Kuwaiti population, including police officers and military personnel. Palestinians serve as functionaries within the government, facilitating the work of the Iraq administration in Kuwait. Mohammed Milhen, senior aide to Mr. Arafat has publicly threatened terrorism, "everywhere" in support of Iraq. It easily follows that Mr. Arafat would seek to try to rescue Saddam by precipitating some terrible clash with Israel that would again bring the Palestinian issue to the fore.

According to the respected Israeli newspaper Haaretz, the PLO tried to inspire an attack on Jewish worshippers at the Wailing Wall similar to that which actually occurred on the Jewish holy day of Sukkot on the even holier day of Yom Kippur, 10 days earlier. Knowing that the earlier demonstration had failed to come off, and fearing that the presence of large numbers of police near the Moslem holy place adjacent to the Wailing Wall might be provocative, the Israelis stationed just 40 policemen—with sad consequences.

Even if events in Jerusalem were, improbably, some tragic coincidence, Palestinian activism offers Saddam a way to square the circle—to bring Israel into the conflict in order to divide the Arab coalition opposing him without running the risks entailed in military confrontation with the Jewish state. Saddam and Mr. Arafat are likely to continue to manipulate the Palestinian issue in order to divert pressure from Iraq. Palestinian provocations in the occupied territories may well rise. The PLO's Central Council is reportedly debating formal approval of the use of firearms in the *intifada*. (To date, stones have been the Palestinians' weapon of choice.)

The Arafat-Saddam alliance poses a

fortunately, the administration shows little sign of coming to grips with it. It already began to slide on a slippery slope last week, before the bloodshed in Jerusalem, when President Bush, following France's President Mitterand, needlessly raised the Palestinian issue in his speech to the U.N. General Assembly. That error was infinitely compounded when Mr. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker condemned Israel alone for the recent tragedy, without even a hint that Palestinian casualties may have resulted from deliberate provocations.

Saddam Hussein can always outbid the U.S. on the Palestinian question. No reasonable degree of American concessions will satisfy the PLO, while any concessions on the issue now will be seen as the consequence of Saddam's actions. That will enhance his standing and prestige—and his ability to maintain his hold over Kuwait. That is why the U.S. must make completely clear that it will not address the Palestinian issue until after Saddam is out of Kuwait.

Arab governments, particularly in the Gulf, do not want to see any linkage between the Palestinian and Kuwaiti questions, even if they say the opposite in public. They know that such a linkage buys time for Saddam. As the Secretary of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Abdullah Bashara, a Kuwaiti, explained on American television after the events in Jerusalem, "We cannot accept linkage. Linkage is a tactical diversion."

Iraq's Torture Chambers

Yet Arab governments have flogged the Palestinian issue for so long that their populations are not prepared to comprehend the Saddam's greater barbarities. Saddam's victims include not only Kuwaitis, but many Palestinians. Palestinians too lost their savings when Saddam announced that the Kuwaiti dinar (worth \$3 and fully convertible) would henceforward be equivalent in value to the Iraqi dinar (worth 25 cents on the black market): A lifetime's accumulation of, for example, \$240,000 would be reduced overnight to \$20,000. And some Palestinians may be among the victims of Saddam's torture chambers. American refugees from Kuwait told a congressional committee Wednesday of seeing men's eyelids forced open and burning cigarettes touched to the eyeball, of seeing daughters and wives raped in front of their husbands and fathers who were then shot, of seeing men brutally castrated. Nearly half the Palestinians formerly resident in Kuwait have fled, refugees once again.

Arab and international opinion is readily caught up with the plight of the Palestinians, but in no way do their sufferings compare to the horrors that Kuwaitis have endured at the hands of the Iraqi army. The international community must not be distracted from the plight of Kuwait, lest the PLO and the Iraqis be encouraged to incite even further violence in the West Bank and Gaza.

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