

Opinion

The ins and outs of a one-way ticket for Saddam: wishful thinking?

The Turkish prime minister, Abdullah Gul, denied it after meeting with the Syrian president, Bashar Assad. He did so again after meeting with President Mubarak of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan. No, Gul insisted, he and his Arab interlocutors had not discussed a plan to propose exile to Saddam Hussein.

That's hard to believe. A priority of Gul's, and of the Syrian, Jordanian and Egyptian leaders, is to maintain a united Iraq which really means preventing the Kurds from developing an independent or autonomous entity that inspires their brethren next door. The best way to do so is to avoid war, and the best way to avoid war at this stage is to get rid of Saddam.

Until someone gets within firing range of the Iraqi leader, "getting rid of Saddam" means his peaceful departure from Baghdad. The Arab states may not be publicly talking of exile, but it is there under the surface. With the Americans burnishing their post-invasion plans for Iraq, and Saddam accusing UN weapons inspectors of spying, the scheme may be the last chance to avoid war.

With this in mind, a group of Arab writers and lawyers have penned a statement calling on "public opinion in the Arab world to exercise pressure for the removal from power of Saddam Hussein and his close aides in Iraq, in order to avoid a war that threatens with catastrophe the peoples of the region, foremost among them the Iraqi people." Among those behind the proposal are the writer Elias Khoury and Chibli Mallat, a lawyer involved in a legal battle in Belgium to have Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon indicted for war crimes.

Their statement argues that "the immediate resignation of Saddam Hussein, whose rule over three decades has been a nightmare for Iraq and the Arab world, is the only way to avoid more violence." It also calls "for the rule of democracy in Baghdad, and for the stationing across Iraq of human rights monitors from the United Nations and the Arab League, to oversee the peaceful transition of power in the country."

The statement leaves consciously vague what happens to Saddam once he vacates power. Even if he finds tenants willing to offer him lodgings, Saddam and his men will not be able avoid being pursued for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, notably for the Anfal campaign in the 1980s, which led to the death of upward of 100,000 Kurds.

The luminaries in Arab civil society would do well to subsequently release another statement endorsing legal action against former Iraqi officials after their exile.

Hopefully the Arab world will see how important it is that Arabs themselves take such an initiative, through a special tribunal like that for the former Yugoslavia, to show the US and Europe that the region's neuroses do not mandate shielding mass murderers.

Few would wager on Saddam's leaving Iraq. However, the exile scenario is the best the Arabs can offer today, and the best Saddam can hope for. If there's one thing on which the region's leaders can agree, it's their aversion to the Takritis. Even Bashar

Assad has told Syria's National Progressive Front that his regime stood by "the Iraqi state and people, not the regime and opposition."

The US and the Europeans should consider an exile plan of their own, which can be implemented in conjunction with the states in the region. Everything in their attitude suggests that they, too, would favor Saddam's leaving Iraq. This creates an opening for the Arab regimes if they can stomach the idea of an autocrat relinquishing power to urge Saddam to take whatever he is offered.

There may be a difficulty: To make their proposal succeed, the Arabs might offer the Iraq leader guarantees after his departure. Last September Saddam sent Ali Hassan al-Majid, the gasser of the Kurds, to Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, to see if governments there would provide asylum to Iraqi officials. Reports suggested that Saddam was not seeking sanctuary for himself, and would stay in Iraq. Yet the appeal of any exile plan is that Saddam would be included. The least of his demands would be protection from possible prosecution.

That is why the statement released by the Arab writers and lawyers, while valuable in building a consensus on Saddam's departure, must not be hijacked to offer Saddam a sweetheart deal. Nor should the statement's section on Iraqi democracy be played down: a democratic Iraq cannot begin with a bloodbath, hence the importance of UN and Arab League human rights monitors, who can provide a wedge for international supervision during a transitional period.

Those Arab intellectuals demanding Saddam's departure rightly wish to avoid a war in Iraq and the chaos that may follow. Their statement restates the very plain objective of a US-led war, regime change, but without granting Washington occupation rights in Iraq. What should come next is an Arab effort to build up an Arab and American consensus to present Saddam with a way out.

Nevertheless, this must surely not be accompanied with guarantees that he and his partners in crime will escape prosecution. For Saddam the only suitable final place of exile is a prison cell. His only alternative is, of course, death.

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