Iraq’s Invasion of Kuwait Exposes Political And Social Contradictions in The Arab World

BY ELIE CHALALA

Some Western reporters and commentators seem puzzled by the Arab states’ division in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, expecting that the Arab world would always act monolithically. Thus, when 12 of the 20 Arab states voted last August to send forces to Saudi Arabia along with the U.S., some Westerners perceived a mystery demanding an explanation.

The Arabs are indeed divided, but this is not new. Even prior to the invasion of Kuwait, the Arab world has been divided into three quite visible blocs: the Arab “haves” were grouped in the equivalent of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar; the “have nots” joined the ACC (Arab Cooperation Council) which consists of Iraq, Yemen, Jordan and Egypt. The North African states, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, and Libya, joined a third alliance, the MCC (Maghreb Cooperation Council). Excluding Libya, this alliance is predominantly made of poor nations. Among those left outside these three organizations are Sudan, Syria and Lebanon.

Although these alliances as cohesive units disintegrated after Iraq invaded Kuwait, policies on the Gulf crisis still reveal a division based on rich and poor nations. As anticipated, Saudi Arabia, the Kuwaiti government in exile, the United Arab Emirates and other small sheikdoms – all members in the GCC – condemned Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, approved of the August 10 Arab Summit resolutions which impose sanctions against Iraq, and accepted the presence of Western troops on their territories. Joining them were non-GCC members like Egypt, Morocco, Syria and Lebanon. The rest of the Arab states voted against the resolutions directly and indirectly: Iraq, Libya and the P.L.O. (Palestine Liberation Organization) voted against the resolutions; Algeria and Yemen abstained; Jordan and Sudan expressed “reservations;” Tunisia was absent. This fragmentation process reached its peak when only 13 out of 21 states attended an Arab League meeting on August 30, thereby reinforcing the division in the Arab world and ending a tradition of unanimity vote by the Arab League on all important issues.

What seems enigmatic is the nature of the division. In the past, Arab consensus was realizable but only insofar as Israel was concerned, and even on this issue unity was merely rhetorical rather than substantive. Perhaps what is puzzling is the increasing

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saliency of the social, economic, and political dimensions of inter-Arab relations.

The reactions of the Arab states to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the positive and the negative, are neither the result of Saddam Hussein’s charisma and the model presented by his country’s political and economic development, nor any admiration for his opponents, Arab monarchs and republican rulers alike, not to mention Western powers. Instead, the invasion has been a catalyst which exposed contradictions and released frustrations inside Arab countries, and uncovered conflicts among them that were overshadowed by the conflict with Israel. The reaction, therefore, reflects many of the problems which afflict the Arab world rather than an endorsement of either the Iraqi or the Saudi position.

II

The Egyptian and Jordanian positions toward the invasion are similar in one respect, although the two countries went in different directions: their policies enjoy wide popular support. Yet this similarity has a tragic dimension that was highlighted by Mahmoud Riyad, a former Egyptian foreign minister and secretary general of the Arab League. Manifesting itself in the insulting reception with which Egyptian migrant workers were met in Jordan while fleeing Kuwait and Iraq to their homeland, this is the first time a division in the Arab world takes place at the popular level.

These countries share another similarity: economic considerations underlie both Egypt’s strong support of the U.S. role in the Gulf and Jordan’s reluctance to condemn Iraq. Both countries have been suffering from severe economic problems whose disastrous consequences have been halted only by foreign aid, namely the $2.3 billion in U.S. aid to Egypt and Jordan’s trade with Iraq, amounting to 40 percent of its total. Jordan is almost totally dependent on oil imports from Iraq at below the market price.

Egypt’s economic problems, wrote Tony Walker in the London-based Middle East Economic Digest, are “almost too numerous to catalogue.” Egypt’s foreign debt is $40 billion; half of its food is imported; 7 percent of its labor force in 1988 (or half a million) are under 12 years old; and much of the agrarian reforms of the ‘60s have been rolled back, thus favoring the upper middle classes and leaving 70 percent of farming families living below the poverty line.

The Egyptian leadership has sought short-term political remedies for deep social and economic problems. Earlier, under the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat, Egypt offered its services to the U.S. as a regional policeman and was willing to provide military facilities. These policies continue under President Hosni Mubarak. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Egypt was once again willing to buy off its economic problems by political means. As the most populous Arab country (54.1 million people), and with the largest Arab military machine after Iraq, it sent 14,000 soldiers to the defense of Saudi Arabia. As expected, the White House asked Congress to write off Egypt’s $7 billion military debt, and Saudi Arabia promised at least $800 million in economic aid.

The Jordanian counterpart: Few people in the Arab world take King Hussein’s rhetoric seriously, yet, surprisingly, some Palestinians do. The king’s
“Machiavellianism” – actually his cunning and conniving – amount to an ability to sell himself to the highest bidder, to the powers that could secure his throne. King Hussein’s journey of alliances goes back to the days of British dominations, then to the Nasserites during the ’50s, back to the British, then to Nasser again, and finally to a different kind of alliance with the Americans, who – in collaboration with the Israelis – contributed significantly to his survival in 1970. Shifting gears to Saddam Hussein in 1990 is a surprise, but given the stakes – the viability of the Jordanian economy – one need not be amazed.

Jordan almost reached the brink of famine two years ago, causing price riots in April 1989. These riots – led by leftists and Islamicists – later forced the king to void the law of “combating Communism” and allow a free election. They were directed at the government’s compliance with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in order to pay its $8 billion foreign debt. In the past, the Jordanian economy was kept afloat by aid from the Gulf states, whose wealth the king suddenly wanted to “distribute” to the have-nots, and by Western aid, primarily from Britain and the U.S.

Other Jordanian sources of revenue include trade, a sizable part of which is conducted with Iraq (it consists of agricultural and light industrial products), and remittances sent by Jordanian migrant workers in the Gulf (the country’s only source of foreign exchange). Deteriorating economic conditions caused a drastic drop in Jordanian living standards.

The king himself does not deny the link between Jordan’s economic problems and its pro-Iraqi policy. But instead of admitting that his country was dissatisfied with the amounts of aid from Gulf states and that this frustration led him to support Saddam Hussein, the king and his entourage offered the argument that the sanctions would harm Jordan more than Iraq.

When the Saudis faced him in the Arab summit conference and told him of their willingness to help him if his reluctance to condemn Iraq was economic, King Hussein argued that cutting the size of Iraq’s military machine would not serve the Palestinian cause and would make Israel even more intransigent, since Iraq would cease to exist as a credible deterrent.

Palestinian frustrations, which were manifest in popular demonstrations in Jordan and the West Bank, are genuine. It is hard to imagine the Palestinians siding with the coalition against Iraq, since the U.S., the leader of this coalition, has just severed contact with them and seems increasingly inattentive to their plight. For King Hussein, today the Palestinians bestow a moral legitimacy on the Jordanian policy, a legitimacy that reached its zenith when the leaders of the two Marxist factions (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) of the PLO were received by the king.

Like Mubarak of Egypt, King Hussein opted for exclusively political solutions to solve economic problems.

III

If Egypt and Jordan are similar in certain respects, Syria and Sudan resemble each other in the authoritarian nature of their regimes, where foreign policy decisions are
made at the top and with little input from genuine democratic institutions. But the factors crucial in the Syrian and Sudanese decisions toward the Iraqi invasion are distinct. Syria, which opposes Hussein’s invasion, is influenced by its two-decade power rivalry with Iraq, while Sudan, which supports the Iraqis, has on its mind its civil war in the south and the need for friends and material assistance for its fundamentalist and dictatorial junta.

Syria’s economic problems are also severe, ranging from the lack of hard currency, low productivity, and an inefficient public sector (See ITT, Sept. 12-18, 1990). Syria has been a major recipient of Gulf aid, and it was more than mere coincidence when Saudi Arabia approved $500 million for Syria as a means to boost her shattered economy. Yet to argue that siding with Saudi Arabia and sending about 12,000 Syrian soldiers and 270 tanks for the defense of the kingdom cannot be explained by economic factors alone.

While Syria’s Hafez al Assad is willing to provide military and political assistance for the right price, not all services are for sale. The survival of the Baathist regime cannot be traded since such transaction amounts to suicide. In defending their regime in the past, Syrian leaders went to extremes unprecedented under any of their predecessors. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, Syria supported “Persian” Iran against Arab Iraq, never mind that the Iraqis are ruled by the same party, although a different faction. When Arafat and his PLO tried to escape Syrian influence over their decision-making, Assad launched a relentless war against him in Lebanon. When Lebanese Muslims and a coalition of leftists – including some of Assad’s own party – came close to seizing power in Lebanon in 1976, he robbed them of their victory. After Iraq invaded Kuwait, Syria was quite willing to assist Saudi Arabia and the U.S. to accomplish their goals. Each of the aforementioned policies neither enjoyed popular support in Syria nor was considered consistent with either Baathist or pan-Arabist ideology.

While the factors underlying Syria’s support of Saudi Arabia and the U.S. are rather complex, those behind Sudan’s support of Hussein are straightforward: the Sudanese policy is strictly based on regime maintenance. Sudan, which is ruled by a military junta, is isolated regionally and internationally. In the Iraqi invasion, it found an opportunity to gain recognition and assistance for its inhuman civil war against the non-Arab and non-Muslim south.

Myth of Popular Support: The notion that the Arab “masses” support Hussein seems to have gained credibility from the scattered demonstrations in Sudan in support of the Iraqi regime. In fact, these were orchestrated by the dictator Lt. Gen. Omar Hassan al-Bashir, who 15 months ago overthrew the democratically elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi, and who rules with the support of a Muslim fundamentalist militia (Jabhat al-Qawmiyya al-Islamiyya). Al-Bashir intends to continue the legacy of former dictator Gaafar al-Numeiri by building a narrow religious Islamic state and imposing its laws on the south, which is 95 percent animist, 5 percent Christian.

Sudan’s economic problems are immense when compared with those of Syria, and even Egypt. As recently as October 5, a press report indicated that Sudan is on its way to the worst famine in six years. Two years ago, famine claimed 250,000 lives. As
a result of the ongoing civil war, two million people fled the fighting and settled on
the outskirts of the capital, Khartoum. Refugees die daily in the most inhuman
conditions. The al-Bashir government and its Muslim fundamentalist supporters
have sabotaged both a solution to the war and the channeling of aid to those threatened
with starvation.

They overthrew the Sadiq al-Mahdi government simply because it reached an
agreement with Sudan’s Peoples Liberation Army to build a secular and democratic
state as a substitute for the fundamentalist state laid down by Numeiri in 1983. And in
order to win the war against the south, they prevented food shipments from reaching
that region, thus inviting the U.S., West Germany and Britain to halt food shipments.

Absurd as it may seem, the Sudanese dictator appears to have hoped that a
victorious Iraq would help him defeat the southern resistance. And incredible as it is,
an October 5 New York Times report indicates that Western officials “suspected that
the [Sudanese] government had traded up to 300,000 tons of sorghum, the basic food
staple, with Libya and Iraq in exchange for war materiel this year.”

IV

A third group of Arab states – Algeria, Tunisia and Yemen (including South and
North Yemen, which were united into one state on May 22) – have relatively liberalized
their political processes. While they do not approve of the invasion and the annexation
of Kuwait, they either abstained from condemnation or showed some reservations
about sending troops to the defense of the Saudi kingdom, as well as accepting a U.S.
military presence in the Arabian Peninsula.

There were pro-Iraqi demonstrations in Algeria, Tunisia and Yemen. Generally
speaking, it is not surprising that a majority of the Arab population, which is
predominantly poor, sympathize with “enemies” of the super-rich classes of the Gulf.
But Arab states’ foreign policies rarely derive from popular sentiment. Algerian,
Tunisian and Yemeni positions appear to be influenced by more specific factors, two
of which can be identified: the recent process of democratization in these societies,
which paved the way for a diverse public opinion; and the vulnerable domestic
positions of these states, which force them to outbid their domestic opponents by
either embracing the opposition’s platform or by taking more extreme positions.
Thus, they ended up jumping on the bandwagon of Hussein’s “Arabism” and “Islamism”
almost inadvertently.

The Algeria position is a case in point. As in most Arab countries, Islamicist
movements are not monolithic. While all proclaim allegiance to Islam, their political
practice varies from one state to another. The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan had
been allies with the king, and enjoyed his protection for some time; those in Egypt
had been at odds with the state for more than four decades. Islamicists in Algeria,
however, have great affinity to Saudi Arabia. The Algerian Islamic Salvation Front
(FIS), which recently scored an important victory over the ruling National Liberation
Front (NLF) (see In These Times, Aug. 12), took a pro-Saudi position due to the close
financial links with Saudi Arabia. The NLF saw the chance, therefore, to refurbish its
nationalist and “anti-imperialist” credentials at the expense of the FIS by refusing to join the Saudi-American coalition.

The Tunisian case illustrates a different tendency: the state, despite a set of political and social reforms, remains vulnerable and thus attempts to strengthen itself by preempting the opposition and endorsing its platform.

**Breaking Away:** This is exactly what Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia’s president, did after overthrowing in 1987 Habib Bourguiba, the country’s senile president for life. On one hand, Ben Ali released political prisoners, abolished the infamous state-security court, allowed Islamic fundamentalists and other opposition groups to work more freely and introduced a new constitution that abolished the president’s right to hold office for life. But he also broke away from Tunisia’s well-established tradition of secularism by invoking “Allah the compassionate and merciful” to justify his coup d’état, and he went even further by having himself filmed at prayer in mosques and making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

When the elections took place on April 2, 1989, Ben Ali’s party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally, emerged with a strong majority, 99.3 percent of the 2.1 million votes cast. Still, the legacy of Bourguiba – corruption, repression and a whole array of social and economic problems – remains unresolved. Ben Ali’s decision to abstain from the vote to condemn Hussein for his invasion surprised many observers but can be seen as part of his strategy since 1987. His position on the Gulf crisis has little to do with nationalistic and anti-Western sentiment and more with a cynical attempt to defuse discontent and pull the rug from under the reformist Islamic Tendency Movement.

Yemen’s abstention can be understood in the strained relationship between today’s Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Unlike the popularized image painted of Saudi Arabia by its public-relations agents in the U.S. and Europe, Saudi Arabia often paid little respect to the sovereignty of its neighbors. The Saudis had a border dispute with former North Yemen that culminated in border skirmishes and Saudi attempts to buy the allegiance of some tribal chiefs. The Saudis also used their great fortune to found a spy network and train mercenaries for acts of sabotage against formerly socialist South Yemen. As recently as this year, the Saudis showed their displeasure with Yemeni unity – especially for its multiparty system and representative institutions – by supporting Islamicist groups who waged a relentless campaign against the two Yemens on the grounds that integrating with the south’s “Marxist” and “atheist” views would pose a threat to Islamic traditions.

Saudi Arabia also may have played a role in aborting Kuwait’s dynamic experiment with parliamentarianism (1963-76, 1981-86). These sources indicate that Saudi pressure was applied even this year, when the Kuwaiti government was in the midst of a struggle with the opposition on the future of its parliament. It was said that the Saudis criticized the reluctance of the Kuwaiti government to crack down on the diwaniyyaa (popular political meetings in private homes), primarily because these activities were feared by Saudi Arabia’s rulers.
Instability in the Middle East is caused by a multiplicity of factors. The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is one, and nothing better illustrates this than the recent killings in Jerusalem, which Iraq has tried to exploit. But Middle Eastern conflicts cannot be dealt with by mere “remote control” diplomacy from Washington.

The solutions do not lie in more arms sales and regional defense arrangement, a legacy of the Cold War War. These policies serve U.S. military industries, not poor Arab countries. They take away resources desperately needed for regional development and a truly just and new “world order.”