

14 September 1983

BRINGING REAL MUSCLE TO BEAR AGAINST SYRIA

Summary:

Syria at present has a hammerlock on US interests both in Lebanon and in the Gulf -- through closure of Iraq's pipeline thereby threatening Iraqi internationalization of the war. The US should consider sharply escalating the pressures against Assad through covertly orchestrating simultaneous military threats against Syria from three border states hostile to Syria: Iraq, Israel and Turkey. Iraq, perceived to be increasingly desperate in the Gulf War, would undertake limited military (air) operations against Syria with the sole goal of opening the pipeline. Although opening war on a second front against Syria poses considerable risk to Iraq, Syria would also face a two-front war since it is already heavily engaged in the Bekaa, on the Golan and in maintaining control over a hostile and restive population inside Syria.

Israel would simultaneously raise tensions along Syria's Lebanon front without actually going to war. Turkey, angered by Syrian support to Armenian terrorism, to Iraqi Kurds on Turkey's Kurdish border areas and to Turkish terrorists operating out of northern Syria, has often considered launching unilateral military operations against terrorist camps in northern Syria. Virtually all Arab states would have sympathy for Iraq.

Faced with three belligerent fronts, Assad would probably be forced to abandon his policy of closure of the pipeline. Such a concession would relieve the economic pressure on Iraq, and perhaps force Iran to reconsider bringing the war to an end. It would be a sharp blow to Syria's prestige and could effect the equation of forces in Lebanon.

Syria continues to maintain a hammerlock on two key US interests in the Middle East:

- Syrian refusal to withdraw its troops from Lebanon ensures Israeli occupation in the south;
- Syrian closure of the Iraqi pipeline has been a key factor in bringing Iraq to its financial knees, impelling it towards dangerous internationalization of the war in the Gulf.

Diplomatic initiatives to date have had little effect on Assad who has so far correctly calculated the play of forces in the area and concluded that they are only weakly arrayed against him. If the US is to rein in Syria's spoiling role, it can only do so through exertion of real muscle which will pose a vital threat to Assad's position and power.

SECRET

SECRET

Such a threat must be primarily military in nature. At present there are three relatively hostile elements around Syria's borders: Israel, Iraq and Turkey. Consideration must be given to orchestrating a credible military threat against Syria in order to induce at least some moderate change in its policies.

This paper proposes serious examination of the use of all three states -- acting independently -- to exert the necessary threat. Use of any one state in isolation cannot create such a credible threat.

IRAQ

Saddam Husayn is fighting for his life. It is only Iraqi desperation in a losing economic war of attrition that has caused Iraq to consider the extremely risky option of internationalizing the war in the Gulf, potentially leading to closure of shipping there.

The US should consider urging Iraq to take the war to the other key source of its predicament: Syria.

Iraq is already fighting a one-front war and will not readily wish to open a second front against a militarily capable rival. But Syria is also already fighting a one-front war in Lebanon and can ill afford to broaden its conflict. Syrian troops are heavily involved in the Bekaa, on the Golan Front, and inside Syria itself keeping order over a population which detests the regime and has broken into rebellion repeatedly during the past five years. If Israel were to increase tensions against Syria simultaneously with an Iraqi initiative, the pressures on Assad would escalate rapidly. A Turkish move would psychologically press him further.

Although Iraq may be fearful of committing any ground troops against Syria, it has more than enough airpower to devote up to one half of its air force against Syria in a series of air strikes.

Iraq would publicly declare that Syria, through keeping the pipeline closed, is conducting a grave act of war against Iraq that will be answered in military terms. Iraq's sole goal would be to ask Syria to reopen the pipeline.

By demanding such a step, Iraq -- already perceived to be increasingly desperate for options in its struggle against Iran -- would receive the sympathy and support of virtually every Arab state except Libya. Its cause, in Arab terms, would be just. Syria has already attracted widespread -- but tacit -- Arab criticism through its trampling of the PLO and intransigence in Lebanon. All the Gulf states greatly fear internationalization of the Gulf conflict more than anything else.

Iraq would not be striking against the vital interests of Syria. Far more important to Damascus are maintenance of the Syrian regime internally, and preservation of the Army and Syrian interests in Lebanon. Can Syria afford to go to the mat on the pipeline under such serious military pressures?

Although opening of the pipeline will not solve all US problems in the Middle East, it would relieve Iraq financially and largely eliminate risk of

SECRET

closing the Gulf to shipping of oil. Equally important, it would be a sharp blow to Syria's winning streak in the region by forcing it to back down under military pressure against a relatively united Arab support for Iraq. Syria's prestige and authority would sustain significant damage which could affect the equation in Lebanon as well. Iraqi success in the venture might also persuade Tehran that it no longer has the decisive edge in the war and had best devote its efforts to growing domestic problems.

ISRAEL

Israel does not wish to court war with Syria. It could, however, considerably escalate tensions with Syria in Lebanon enough to preoccupy Assad considerably in raising the stakes. Assad might be willing to face this Israeli threat in isolation; it would be different if he faced potential or real attack from the East and North as well.

Israel to date has seen Iraq as a major enemy in the region [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] Israel should welcome the 25X1
chance to humble Assad, however, who is by far Israel's greatest problem.
Iraq does not pose a serious threat to Israel now. [redacted] 25X1

TURKEY

Turkey is embittered against Syria because of Syrian support to :

- the Armenian terrorist organization ASALA;
- Syrian support to Kurdish guerrillas in Iraq near Turkey's border; and
- Syrian support to Turkish terrorists operating out of camps in northern Syria against Turkey.

Turkey has considered undertaking a unilateral military strike against terrorist camps in northern Syria and would not hesitate from using menacing diplomatic language against Syria on these issues.

Turkish concerns are particularly heightened with Turkish elections coming up on 6 November [redacted] 25X1

Iraq is the key. Iraq will have two major concerns which the US would have to meet:

- fear that the US would entrap them into a two-front war with the intent of totally weakening them. Iraq cannot afford to let down its front with Iran; and

SECRET

- fear that Iraq might be perceived as a Zionist cat's paw in taking on Syria simultaneously with Israel. The legitimacy of Iraq's grievance in Arab eyes would help overcome any such charge Syria might make.

Iraq could be somewhat reassured, however, if:

- it perceives that Turkey and Israel will be moving simultaneously against Syria; and
- that the US in effect will be tilting towards Iraq at this juncture, possibly providing intelligence to Iraq to assist in moves against Syria.

Iraq is an essential participant in that

- it alone has the greatest need to do something to salvage its sinking position;
- is internationally perceived to be desperate and seeking peace with Iran; and
- would be seeking reasonable, limited goals from Syria. It would largely have international support in such a move.

[redacted] encouragement to Iraq in this venture would to some degree violate US long-stated positions of absolute neutrality in the Gulf war. In view of possible longer range Iranian victory over Saddam, however, the US may wish to reconsider automatic continuation of scrupulous US neutrality. Is such a policy entirely consistent with US interests?

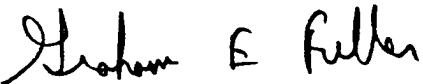
25X1

THE USSR

The Soviet Union itself has repeatedly asked Assad to open the pipeline to assist Iraq, with whom the USSR enjoys good relations. The USSR will be in a serious dilemma if two states friendly to it move into a state of belligerency. Moscow might have to make some hard choices or stay uncomfortably neutral. Moscow would not readily be in a position to criticize Iraq's limited war goals, despite the resultant blow to Syrian prestige that would emerge.

Syria, in response could always blow up the pipeline, but Iraq's goal would remain the same: restoration of the pipeline or face military pressure -- airstrikes at the least, from Iraq.

This proposal talks to Syria in the language of real power and muscle -- something Assad has not really faced so far. It stands a good chance of tempering Assad's ambitions in the area.


Graham E. Fuller

SECRET

SECRET

Addendum:

Bringing Iraq In

The most difficult aspect of this plan is to enlist Iraqi cooperation. As noted in the paper, Iraq will fear involvement on several grounds:

- Concern that it cannot spare any forces to a Syrian front for fear it will weaken Iraq's posture against Iran.
- Fear that it would not fare well against Syria if any actual fighting arose which could further weaken Iraq.
- Suspicions that the US was merely manipulating Iraq into taking on more Arab enemies, or that the US actually hoped that Saddam might fall through overextension.
- Fear that the USSR might cut off arms supplies to Iraq.
- Concern that Iraq would be seen as working in tandem with Israel as an Israeli-American surrogate.

These concerns can probably be overcome only as part of a reorientation of US policy toward Iraq, involving closer relationships than currently exists. It could involve increased assistance to Iraq, some relaxation of a policy of strict neutrality in the Iran-Iraq war, thereby enabling Iraq to purchase more militarily related items from the West. It could include more active US participation in supplying hi-tech items to Iraq's modernization efforts. It might involve greater support to Iraq in UN forums on the war.

- This would represent in part a gesture of good faith, but also an indication that the US does not wish to see Iran prevail in the war -- the more likely outcome over the long run.

The US may in fact need to review more generally its position of several years of its standing of neutrality in the war. This neutrality was based among other things on the accurate perception that Iran is ultimately the more important country of the two to the US, and that any support for Iraq would even further alienate Iran. Iraq was, of course, the original aggressor.

The argument can be made that there is now much to be gained by a slight tilt towards Iraq. The US wishes:

- to prevent a major Iranian victory over Iraq;
- to encourage current Iraqi rapprochement with Egypt;
- to encourage current Iraqi moderation towards the PLO and Arab-Israeli issues;
- some greater voice in Iraq to help discourage Iraqi support of terrorism -- much curtailed in recent years;

SECRET

SECRET

- to encourage Iraq to take a moderate role in defense of the Gulf, dropping its support for the Ba'thi revolutionary movements which it encouraged there in the past; and
- The Soviet Union has already made its decision that it cannot make gains in Iran for the foreseeable future and therefore can afford now to make hay with Iraq in the interim. This means that the US can also improve its relations with Iraq without fear that this will automatically push Iran into the Soviet lap. The US need not abandon Iran forever, but needs to realize that real gains in Iran -- for either superpower -- are further down the road.

One can argue that Iraq -- after concluding a war with Iran -- will revert to its old hardline radical ways. This is open to debate. Although Iraq will then be less vulnerable, it will still need to remain on guard against Iranian influence and power throughout the Gulf. It will still wish to challenge its rival Syria.

With signs of a shift in policy from the US, Iraq could be encouraged to join in a regional threat against its enemy Syria. Although Israeli involvement is not appealing to Iraq, Iraq knows that Syria has few Arab sympathies these days. Even the mere perception by Syria that the US was improving relations with Iraq, talking of some assistance, and that regional military forces -- Israel, Turkey, Iraq -- were gearing up against Syria it could have major impact upon Syrian ambitions. At this stage Syria has no one -- except possibly Israel -- to challenge it effectively in the region.

SECRET