

Arab Nations Changed, Shaken by the War

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Among the factors which the United States and Britain mis-evaluated, in preparing their war in Iraq, is the power of resistance, not only of the Iraqis but of the entire Arab world. In the year before the invasion Lyndon LaRouche repeatedly warned that it would rapidly undermine the governments of neighboring Mideast nations, inflaming the Arab masses, leading to mass demonstrations; those governments which were either supporting the war, or not explicitly opposing it in words and deeds, would be threatened with overthrow.

As the invasion entered its third week in early April, just such a process of regional destabilization had begun. Protests and demonstrations were growing daily Egypt and Jordan, the two most important Arab “moderate” allies of the United States. Both Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdallah II have been placed under unprecedented public pressure, and have had to “correct” their positions. Similar popular dissent has been witnessed in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; despite repression, it continues to simmer. In such a crisis, governments must represent the will of their people, who are rightly opposing an unjust war, or they will be thrown overboard.

War planners in Washington and London must be asking themselves how could this happen. Since it did not require a Middle East specialist to foresee such developments, the real question is: Why didn't they foresee this?

The People vs. the Regime

With the outbreak of war, masses poured into the streets of Cairo, Amman, and other Arab capitals. Governments responded initially with brutal police repression and mass arrests. Egypt jailed up to 1,000 demonstrators, including two leading independent members of Parliament. They were released only on March 31. Although the authorities tried to prevent students from marching out of the university campuses onto the city streets, protesters broke through the cordons, and demonstrations swelled in number and intensity. Particularly painful for the United States, the American University of Cairo was among the vanguard campuses in the protest. It is not Islamist radicals, but the leading families of Egypt's intelligentsia who send their sons and daughters to study there.

President Mubarak, prior to the war, had warned of its consequences, including regional destabilization. He tried to pragmatically adapt to circumstances once the bombardments



Destabilization of Egypt's President Mubarak (left) and Jordan's King Abdallah was a foreseeable consequence of the war. Iraqi resistance has triggered a widespread mobilization of Arabs.

began, and issued a statement placing the responsibility for hostilities on Saddam Hussein's government. The chief editor of the government-linked daily *Al-Ahram* had echoed the same line.

The response was more and bigger public protest. On April 1, reflecting the pressure of the street, Mubarak shifted gears. In an address to the officers of the Third Field Army, he stressed that Egypt "has adopted a clear-cut standpoint of rejecting the war option and refusing to participate in any military operations by the coalition forces against Iraq." Speaking to army commanders, Mubarak warned that the war would create hundreds of bin Ladens. "The armed confrontation in Iraq between the coalition forces who are seeking to overthrow the regime and the Iraqi armed forces who are defending their territory . . . is resulting in an appalling human tragedy with victims on both sides and the destruction of a people," Mubarak said. "I fear this war will have enormous consequences and lead to an increase in terrorism. When this war ends, there may be 100 bin Ladens, instead of just one. The war will have political, economic and social consequences that will be difficult to face."

Mubarak also responded to appeals that the Suez Canal be closed to warships—a leading demand of 15,000 students demonstrating in Cairo—by saying that the Constantinople Convention of 1888 forbids closure of the canal to any nation with which Egypt is not at war. Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher told BBC on April 3, that the Egyptian government and people were "in the same boat" regarding developments in the situation in Iraq. He cited Mubarak's urgent call to end the war, to avert a regional catastrophe. To explain the "state of frustration in the Arab streets," he pointed to the double standard used towards Iraq and Israel, regarding implementation of UN resolutions.

In Jordan, the confrontation took an utterly unprecedented form. Although the Hashemite Kingdom is not part of the "coalition," reports have it that American troops are in the country's East, on the Iraqi border, and also coming in from the Red Sea port of Aqaba. These are reportedly elite troops, estimated at 10-12,000. Furthermore, Jordanian sources report that from Jordan, the attacks on the Iraqi airfields H1 and H2 were launched and forces were sent towards Baghdad. The government has denied any U.S. presence—or has stated they are there to prevent Iraqi attacks against Israel (not a popular objective in Jordan).

All Jordanians are opposed to the war. King Abdallah is under massive pressure, and "there are those who are armed," as one source put it. In short,

there is the fear that the King could be assassinated. Key people in the regime have therefore been telling King Abdallah that his government is endangering the Kingdom. He has been given the choice: either stand with the Jordanian people, who are completely in opposition to the war and in support of the Iraqis; or on the side of the Anglo-American invaders. The former chairman of the House of Deputies, Abdulwahab Al-Majali, warned explicitly that if the war continued, the King and the royal family may be overthrown.

On March 31, ninety-five prominent personalities delivered a petition to the King, urging him to "declare the illegality of the aggression against Iraq." The letter demanded that Jordan should at least join other nations, such as France, Germany, Russia, and China, in condemning this war; and called on the King to declare that Jordan would not accept its political or legal outcome.

The petition represents an unprecedented move, uniting figures across the spectrum of political life from former government figures to the leading Islamist opposition figure of Jordan, Laith Shubeilat, who launched the initiative. Shubeilat, who had been condemned twice for *lèse majesté* and once given the death sentence, was joining with those established political forces who had opposed him, now in the interest of national security. As the official government daily, the *Jordan Times*, reported: "Anger at the U.S.-British campaign on Baghdad has brought together popular figures who have historically belonged to opposite sides, analysts and signatories point out. This explains why a maverick Islamist, twice jailed for *lèse majesté*, and the veteran leader of the once-underground Communist Party put their signatures beside those of former top intelligence officers and chiefs-of-staff."

Jordan's Fate at Stake

In the petition, they had written: "The current tragic circumstances, with a brotherly Arab state that has always been a loyal supporter of its fellow Arab countries, is facing an aggressive war and its people are threatened by occupation, death, and humiliation, urge us to turn to Your Majesty. The moral, national and legal duty oblige all Arab governments, including Jordan's, to clearly denounce the illegitimacy of the aggression on Iraq. We honestly believe that Jordan's interests require such a strategic stand." Signers included former Prime Ministers Mudar Badran (1980-1984 and 1989-1991), Ahmad Obeidat (1984-1985), Taher Masri (June-November 1991), and Abdur Ra'uf S. Rawabdeh (King Abdallah's first premier, in office from March 1999-June 2000). Former Royal Court Chief Adnan Abu Odeh, who also served as political advisor to both King Abdallah and his father, the late King Hussein; the former head of the anti-corruption unit at the General Intelligence Department; Sen. Samih Bino; former Deputy Prime Minister Ayman Majali; and scores of former ministers and deputies of different ideological and professional backgrounds also signed.

Motivating the petition was not only concern over the fate of Jordan, but much more. As one signatory, former Deputy Prime Minister Ayman Majali, said: "I differ with the Iraqi regime. But we are now talking about the future of the Arab world, because this war will not stop within the boundaries of Iraq."

As for Jordan, the perceived menace is clearly to the King's personal safety, threatened by a revolt from angry Jordanians, or probably through a provocation from Israel. This was clearly expressed by former Chamber of Deputies Chairman Al-Majali, also one of the open letter's signers, who told AFP: "We want the King to express a clear position against the aggression, because we know the King's capabilities to move internationally to make an effort to stop the war." Al-Majali asked the government to make a move "identical to that of the Jordanian street to support the Iraqi people, before [Israeli Prime Minister] Sharon manages to carry out his plans to invade Jordan in a few hours, and expel the ruling royal family, and to establish his declared alternative homeland" for the Palestinians.

King Abdallah did not hesitate to respond, albeit indirectly. In an interview with the Jordan News Agency Petra, on April 3, the King said his position "rejects war and calls for resolving the crisis by peaceful means and through the United Nations," and recalled his own warnings that the war would have "devastating effects, not only on Iraq but on the entire region as well." He articulated Jordan's position vis-à-vis regime change and more: "The Iraqi people are the only people that have the right to choose their leadership. Because we believe in democracy and the right of peoples to choose their leadership, we cannot imagine that people would accept the outside imposition of a leadership against their will." The King added that Jordan has insisted and continues to insist

"that weapons of mass destruction should be removed from all states without any exception, so that the Middle East becomes an arms-free zone and the peoples of the region can enjoy comfort, security and stability."

Asked point blank about "rumors" of Jordanian (pro-"coalition") activity in the war, he flatly denied that Jordanian airspace was being used, or that American or Israeli troops were on Jordanian soil. Asked about the petition, the King replied: "I have read several documents and I respect their points of view but I wonder if all that we have done and are doing for our brothers in Iraq differs from what these documents indicate. I am a Muslim, an Arab, and a Hashemite. No one can outbid my concern for my people and nation." He defined what is "common ground agreed to by everybody, . . . the condemnation of war and the keenness to preserve our national unity." He concluded, that "in these difficult circumstances that are prevailing in the region and our country, the most important thing is the solidarity of our internal front." This, indeed, was precisely what the petition sought to establish.

Revival of Arab Pride

The mood among Arab intellectuals and masses has changed significantly since the last Gulf War. In the interim, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has assumed barbaric proportions, and against it no one, apparently, dared to lift a finger. Now, with the U.S.-U.K. assault on Iraq, in defiance of the UN and world public opinion, the frustrations with an obvious double standard, in dealing with Israel and Iraq, have reached the boiling point. Just the sign of Iraqi resistance would trigger the explosion. That resistance, unexpected by the Washington and London war planners, has changed the face of Arab politics, regardless of the military outcome of the war. After years of humiliation and defeat, they have rediscovered in this resistance the courage to stand up and fight for justice. This is something the allies "have not grasped," as one regional expert put it. Volunteers are streaming in from Syria, Jordan, the whole Arab world. The character of this mobilization is such that it transcends support for the Iraqi government as such. If that government were defeated, it is likely that those now fighting would continue to do so.

The Iraqis "undressed Bush," Laith Shubeilat commented. "All he has left is his underwear. The most important thing is, the Iraqis are fighting. Regardless of the outcome, we can walk through the streets of Europe and be proud to be Arabs." The worldwide anti-war mobilization has also proven crucial for Arab morale, a point underlined by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in acknowledging the critical role of Pope John Paul II in sparking that mobilization. "After Sept. 11," Shubeilat said, "we feared a Clash of Civilizations, but the demonstrations show that people do not hate people; they love one another." Iraq has become the "rallying point for the anti-imperialist drive."