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Arabs ask Hussein to go quietly

A secret Saudi visit to Iraq last month may signal a plan to coax its leader into exile.

By Nicholas Blanford | Special to The Christian Science Monitor

BEIRUT - Saudi Arabia is spearheading an Arab initiative to persuade Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq voluntarily to avert a potentially devastating Middle East war.

A senior Saudi official visited Baghdad in secret last month to assess whether Mr. Hussein would be willing to step down and live in exile, according to Arab diplomatic sources.

With American forces in the Gulf expected to double in the coming weeks, Arab leaders hope to stave off an apparently inevitable conflict with Iraq that could have destabilizing repercussions on their own countries.

But among Arabs and diplomats who know the Iraqi leader, a secret Saudi visit to Iraq last month may signal a plan to coax its leader into exile. There is little optimism that the 11th-hour bid will succeed.

The Saudi official, a senior Army officer attached to the Saudi Interior Ministry, traveled to Baghdad after a mid-December meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Qatar, sources say. The official was scheduled to hold talks with Hussein, but the results of the meeting are unknown.

Last week, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said Arab leaders have urged Saddam to seek a peaceful resolution, but he would not confirm that an initiative to offer the Iraqi leader exile is under way.

"Communication is continuing on levels announced and unannounced, but all the Arab countries are involved in preventing any military action against Iraq," he said.

The disclosure that a senior Saudi official has visited Baghdad underlines the importance Arab leaders are attaching to resolving the Iraq crisis peacefully.

Last August, Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jasssem al-Thani, visited Baghdad for talks with Hussein that newspaper reports said included an offer of exile for the Iraqi leader in an undisclosed country. Qatari and Iraqi officials denied the reports.

Officials in Washington have welcomed the idea of Hussein leaving power without force being used against him, but Washington denies it is actively engaged in coordinating such a deal with Arab leaders. "I think Secretary Powell and Secretary Rumsfeld have both said that it's an opportunity [Hussein] should take advantage of. But we're not behind those proposals," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Monday. "But - let's remember reality here - he hasn't indicated any desire to do so and nothing in his past behavior would make you think he would."

The pressure to defuse the crisis was underscored Tuesday as UN experts launched their first aerial inspection within Iraq. Inspectors used helicopters to fly to suspect sites in a hunt for weapons of mass destruction. Teams from the UN have stepped up their weapons searches before reporting to the Security Council by Jan. 27.

Qatar last month called for an emergency Arab summit to discuss the crisis with Iraq, raising speculation that the tiny Gulf state's hopes to win backing for Hussein's peaceful departure. The 22-member Arab League has yet to set a date for an emergency session, although a regular meeting is scheduled for March in Bahrain.

Proposed havens for Hussein include Syria, Libya, Egypt, Iran, Russia, and Belarus. Last week, the Iranian newspaper Entekhab reported that German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer had told his Iranian counterpart, Kamal Kharrazi, that the US intended to overthrow Hussein without a "war, bloodshed, and heavy military expenditure," and that Iran and Russia were possible choices of exile for Hussein.

Mr. Kharrazi dismissed the media speculation as "groundless rumors."

It is not only Arab leaders that are pushing for Hussein's peaceful ouster. A group of Arab intellectuals have compiled a petition calling on Hussein to step down to avoid a "catastrophe" in the Middle East.

"The immediate resignation of Saddam Hussein, whose rule for over three decades has been a nightmare for Iraq and the Arab world, is the only way to avoid more violence," reads the petition, which is due to be made public this week.

It also calls for the deployment of human-rights monitors from the United Nations and the Arab League to oversee a peaceful transition of power in Iraq.

"There has been a tragic silence on the fate of the Arab world by the Arab world," says Chibli Mallat, a Lebanese professor of international law and one of the signatories. "Our lives are at stake with all these chemical weapons - so we had this sort of reaction that we should do something."

Yet many Arab and Western diplomats and analysts believe that Hussein will not leave Iraq voluntarily.

"They are dreaming if they think this man will leave," says Abdullah Bishara, head of the Diplomatic Center for Strategic Studies in Kuwait. "He will bring down the walls like Samson."

Joe Wilson, a former diplomat in Baghdad and the last American official to meet Hussein, said that the Iraqi leader was the "epitome of *L'état c'est*

moi.' "

"In his own mind he is Iraq. He would not easily give that up, if at all," Mr Wilson says. He adds that Hussein would fear being extradited from his country of exile to face charges of war crimes, like former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

"Far more likely is that he will try to manage the crisis to survive and if that is not possible, to go down as a martyr in the Arab struggle against Israel and the recurrent humiliations inflicted by the West," Wilson says.

• *Staff writer Howard LaFranchi contributed to this report from Washington.*

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