

THE WHITE HOUSE
CORRESPONDENCE TRACKING WORKSHEET

CO 072

INCOMING

DATE RECEIVED: SEPTEMBER 26, 1991

NAME OF CORRESPONDENT: REVEREND RAYMOND G. HELMICK S.J.

SUBJECT: OFFERS HIS OBSERVATIONS ON THE IRAQI
OPPOSITION; ENCLOSURES A COPY OF HIS RECENT
LETTER TO CHAIRMAN ARAFAT

ROUTE TO: OFFICE/AGENCY (STAFF NAME)	ACTION		DISPOSITION	
	ACT CODE	DATE YY/MM/DD	TYPE RESP	C D
JOHN SUNUNU	ORG	91/09/26	NAN	@ 9/10/08
REFERRAL NOTE:				

DJ

COMMENTS:

ADDITIONAL CORRESPONDENTS: MEDIA:L INDIVIDUAL CODES:

CS MAIL USER CODES: (A) (B) (C)

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*ACTION CODES:      *DISPOSITION          *OUTGOING          *
*                   *                   *CORRESPONDENCE:  *
*A-APPROPRIATE ACTION *A-ANSWERED          *TYPE RESP=INITIALS *
*C-COMMENT/RECOM     *B-NON-SPEC-REFERRAL *           OF SIGNER *
*D-DRAFT RESPONSE    *C-COMPLETED        *           CODE = A   *
*F-FURNISH FACT SHEET *S-SUSPENDED        *COMPLETED = DATE OF *
*I-INFO COPY/NO ACT NEC*                   *           OUTGOING *
*R-DIRECT REPLY W/COPY *                   *                   *
*S-FOR-SIGNATURE     *                   *                   *
*X-INTERIM REPLY     *                   *                   *
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JESUIT COMMUNITY BOSTON COLLEGE CHESTNUT HILL MASSACHUSETTS 02167

September 21, 1991

Governor John Sununu
Chief of Staff
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

THE CHIEF of STAFF
has seen

Dear Governor Sununu,

Christ's Peace!

Quite some time ago I told you I would be writing a few reflections in the aftermath of the Gulf war. Now that Iraq is back in the forefront of people's minds I should follow through on that.

I'm especially glad to see that the Iraqi opposition have been invited to Washington to talk with State Department officials in October. I understand that Jalal Talabani will be here, and Mahsoud Barzani represented by his London spokesman, whom I know as a very competent representative. Jalal and Mahsoud have been working very carefully at maintaining unity and a common policy between their two groups, and understand the importance that unity has for the Kurds. They do have very substantial agreement on most things, and in particular on how little the Kurds can trust Saddam Hussein. Ironically, the one thing that keeps threatening their unity is their assessment of how far the Kurds can trust the United States, or whether the United States is so little reliable for their people's safety that they can only survive by making some chary settlement with Hussein, thereby conferring on him some appearance of legitimacy that they have no desire whatever to allow him.

What is more significant, though, is that these Kurdish leaders come to Washington as part of a joint delegation with the rest of the Iraqi opposition, including both Shi'ites and Arab Sunni, and that the close collaboration among these groups, seen in their February meeting in London and through their Beirut conference in March, is coming to renewed importance; after having been endangered in the interval precisely by the Kurdish negotiations with Hussein.

I haven't talked directly with the Kurdish leaders in some time now, so the details of their policy decisions are a bit more remote from me than usual. My own best advice to them in those circumstances, which I keep relaying to them, is that they keep in mind that Saddam Hussein, their adversary and persecutor, is a passing phenomenon in their history, but that the permanent element in their life is that they will always live in the midst of Arabs, Farsi, Turks and many other peoples, with Shi'ites as well as Sunni. They need to accommodate all these peoples, build cooperative relations that will foster their living together, and above all not allow themselves to be used, by Saddam Hussein or any other, in ways that these other peoples around them will subsequently see as betrayal.

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And that insight is really at the heart of what I have wanted to convey to our American Administration. It has seemed to me that our President and his close advisers have operated, since the winning of the war in Kuwait, out of perplexity about Iraq, a perplexity about what is there apart from such a distasteful dictatorship as Saddam Hussein's that could hold the society together. The inclination appears to have been to put one's bets on a hegemony of the Sunni Arab minority, effectively driving them into continued support, or at least tolerance, of the Baathist system, despite the fact that there is in Iraq substantial Sunni Arab opposition to the Baathist dictatorship and its suppositions. I expect that some serious leaders of that Sunni Arab opposition will be in the delegation that comes to Washington soon.

I've spent much of this last year reflecting on the Arab unity theme, as it is expressed in its most extreme form by the Baathist theorists, and on the relations of Arabs to the other peoples of the region. I've been looking for what could serve as major premises of a sensible American policy toward them. I found myself greatly helped by Samir al-Khalil's book on Iraq, The Republic of Fear, which details how much of Baathist Pan-Arabism is shibboleth and sham, and a mere instrument for the inculcation into Iraqi society of the fear that is the real hallmark of the regime. Knowing Mohammed Kanan Makia himself, a most keenly intelligent and humane Iraqi Shi'ite and graduate of our Jesuit Bagdad College back in the days before Hussein threw us Jesuits out of the country, has been much further help. Patrick Seale's basically sympathetic book on Asad (he prefers that English spelling of President Assad's name) was also helpful. But the book that most illuminated all this matter for me was Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi's House of Many Mansions. It's a book that only Salibi, whom I regard as a friend of many years, could have written. He gives, essentially, a critique of the rival partisan interpretations of their history by the various Lebanese factions -- demythologises a lot of Maronite history, deals with great realism with the Druze mythology, but for my purposes here he was most interesting in dealing critically with the Arab Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'ite, and their concept of the community and its history.

What comes through to me as insight from this and a lot of other reading, discussion and reflection is that there has not been a single Arab polity or nation except for one very brief moment of history, at the beginning of Islam. Almost immediately, even then, Islam itself burst the bounds of the Arab community, so that even the Umayyad Caliphate was preoccupied with its relation to and governance of non-Arab Muslims, and it was the factor which broke that dynasty's hold and gave their essential character to the Abbasid Caliphate and all subsequent polities of the Muslim umma. Before that short burst of a pan-Arab polity, which was in fact more Muslim in character than Arab, and also during all the fractionalized periods of Arab experience down to the present, the consistent tendency has been toward the rise and fall of locally autonomous regimes and polities within a picture of close cultural inter-relation.

I had puzzled for a long time over what made a person, a country or a culture Arab: whether it was descent in some form from people who had come up out of Arabia, basically in the conquering armies of early Islam, or whether it was simply the common language, which spread with Islam all the way across North Africa but failed to spread into Iran or anywhere to its East. The common descent from Arabians doesn't get very far. The armies of the conquest have to have been

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a minor element in a Syrian, and Iraqi or an Egyptian population, which is mainly, to this day, descended from the peoples who were there before the conquest. And the language community, if that were all there were to it, should hardly be of more significance than the English-speaking language community left over from the days of British Empire.

What Salibi cues me into is that there has been, from very early times, a community of inter-communicating cultures over a territory that surrounds the great desert that extends from the whole center of Arabia up into Iraq and Jordan and Syria. This desert area had its fringe areas of high civilization: one along the hill country of Yemen and the Hijaz, right along the Western coast of the Arabian peninsula; another in the Mesopotamian valley; and the third along the hill country and coast of Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Over this whole area, there was a common language from quite ancient times, not in fact Arabic but Aramaic. The urban and agricultural cultures of the fringe areas were all in constant contact with each other through the wandering nomadic peoples who moved all over the area, and the strong communication of cultures persisted from those distant times right through the Arabic-speaking periods. The desert is the key. Ancient Israel was part and parcel.

All this, in all normal times, without any one central polity. And around the outer edges there were the foreign cultures with which this inter-communicating Aramaic/Arab culture always maintained contact: Egyptians, Farsi, Hittite, and from very early the Kurds (or Medes in the early literature).

Not to spin this out too finely, what I find is that it is mistaken to take the pan-Arab dream of a single polity too literally or seriously. It has been very damaging where it has ruled, as in Iraq, and a source of a good deal of silliness even in Syria, where a less doctrinaire form of Baathism has stuck with the ideology of an Arab Nation running from Bagdad to Morocco. The North African countries and cultures, from Egypt on West, have a different and looser connection to Arabism than the countries of the great desert and its fringes, but they have entered, by adopting the language, into the general culture. That Arab cultural area deserves respect and fostering, but is not helped by any cultivation of the mythical Arab Nation or any pretence on the part of the rest of us to take it seriously. A more serious common bond is Islam, and for the good of Islam itself it is important for its public to enter into relations of equality and serious 'communication and sharing with the non-Muslims among and around them.

I find that our American regional policy for this part of the world has been mesmerized by the pan-Arab myth, largely out of deference to the Saud family, who fear having their apple-cart upset if their American quasi-allies did not pretend to believe in the Arab Nation. That's left us without any imagination of how such a country as Iraq can work on its own pluralist terms.

What I conclude is that we ought to be thinking in terms of a regionalism analogous to what is developing in the European community now, and dealing with the countries of the region in such a way as to foster cooperative inter-action among Arab, Farsi, Turk and Kurd, paying less attention to the separate aspirations of states than to the common good of an inter-cultural region, much as we do with Europe where, as the importance of states recedes, it becomes all the more necessary to treat the separate regional cultures with deference, but with the expectation of their developing common interest.

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It's in a regional cooperation pattern like that that you can really begin to visualise the economic, technical and political development of the peoples of this part of the world, and their productive interrelation with the rest of the world. The Israelis, mind you, have their place in this kind of regional cooperation, estranged as they are from everyone else around them. But there is a price of admission, namely a genuine reconciliation with the other cultures of the region. Given that, they would contribute enormously to the whole development of the region, and gain from it most significantly themselves. I think it's from the lack of any such over-riding vision of the region as this that our American policy in the region has been floundering for so long.

Just in this morning's papers I ran across a Jeanne Kirkpatrick Op-Ed piece asking: where is the drive for democracy in the Middle Eastern region. Her answer is the stock one: in Israel and in Israel alone. I don't find much insight in that answer. What answers the question better, in my perception, is that there is the aspiration for democracy in Iraq, a very concrete quest for democracy by a serious coalition of the different cultures that has been going on all this year in the face of massive repression from Saddam Hussein. Mohammed Kanan Makia (by pseudonym Samir al-Khalil) argues that the Iraqi democratic opposition needs all sorts of technical help in the construction of the democracy of their aspirations, and I'm sure he is right on that. But our American response, ever since last March, has been to disbelieve that these disparate peoples in Iraq can be anything but separatists. I'm firmly convinced that they are most serious in their effort to build a common polity of freedom, and that helping them, with as much technical assistance as is needed, far from being a destabilising process for the region, can be the first important building block for the kind of cooperative and liberating regionalism I describe.

This is a lot more abstract than the things I normally write to you or any of my other correspondents. I hope there is some intelligibility to it -- I know what I mean by it, but it is so unfamiliar as a way of looking at this region that it may be very obscure to people who have fixed habits in thinking about it. What seem to me to be very muddled ways of thinking about and formulating policy for this region have had terribly, cruel results for the peoples of the region. I think we can do better, and need to go back to such rudimentary considerations about the character of the region as these.

With all best wishes,

in Christ,


Raymond G. Helmick, S.J.