

From a conversation with the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Iraq, Tariq Aziz

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I welcome you to Moscow. We see the goal of this conversation as finding out whether any new considerations have emerged from the Iraqi leadership that would facilitate the search for a political solution to the dangerous crisis in the Persian Gulf. And we wanted you to come on the eve of the meeting with Bush.

...The initiative for the Helsinki meeting belongs to Bush. We agreed to it with the understanding that it would be useful. We persistently bring up to the Americans - and we intend to do so in Helsinki - our assessment of what is happening in the Persian Gulf region, as well as the course of action that we consider to be the optimal one in the current conditions.

With regard to Iraq, we have cooperated with you in the past and would like to preserve this cooperation. Our interest in this is clearly manifested in the fact of today's meeting. In addition, it is quite clear that if Iraq participates constructively in political efforts to untie the tight knot of problems that have emerged in the Persian Gulf region, then there will be one outcome. If there is no such participation, then everything may end badly.

Taking into account our relations in the past and present, I would like to say quite frankly that the outbreak of conflict carries great danger. You can say that, supposedly, this assessment stems from the insufficiently courageous position of the Soviet Union. We don't think so. Our position is strong enough. But I cannot say that about the position of Iraq.

The last thing we want would be to lose everything that has been created in our bilateral relations over years of cooperation. That is why, even in such an acute situation, we are in favor of dialogue, for Iraq to participate in the search for a settlement.

In a recent speech, I noted that the course of action of President Hussein is unacceptable for us. But for us, a massive, prolonged presence of U.S. troops in this area is also unacceptable. We are advocating a return to the original situation with the provision of the necessary security guarantees to all parties involved in the conflict. Of course, it would be preferable for us if the process of finding political solutions took place with the active participation of the Arabs. However, it has become increasingly clear that the Arab states are unable to agree among themselves.

What are you going to tell me? As your friend, I advise you to move as quickly as possible to the search for political ways out of the crisis, because in the international arena, voices are ringing out more and more loudly, urging that "harsh measures" be applied to Iraq. It is clear what is meant by this. Are you comfortable with this? I cannot believe that the Iraqi leadership would be willing to abandon its people to the mercy of such a cruel fate.

I have considered President Hussein's statement that the underlying reason for the conflict represents the collision of the strategic interests of the West, Arabs and other states in this region of the world. We see it. That said, this method of solving problems is completely unacceptable for us, even if they really exist.

Now three possible scenarios have moved to the foreground. The first is the military path. In our opinion, the one who makes the choice in favor of it is dangerously mistaken. It does not matter who we are talking about - President Bush, Prime Minister Thatcher, who have made many statements on this topic, or President Hussein.

The second option is associated with the preservation, and most likely also the tightening, of the blockade of Iraq, which, of course, will place the heaviest burden on the Iraqi people. Ultimately, it is inhumane, and indeed simply cruel towards the Iraqis, to whom it offers bitter suffering. Even if the sympathies of the Arabs will trend more and more in favor of Iraq, even if the Arab countries view the victims of the Iraqi people with sympathy, this path is extremely difficult, and most importantly, it does not contain structural elements and does not lead to a way out of the crisis.

In short, it is realistically only possible to speak of the third option, which involves a serious search for a political solution. This alone, in our opinion, meets the interests of Iraq.

We will persistently, including in Helsinki, argue against a military option, and convince Bush of its danger and futility. However, frankly speaking, this requires constructive, realistic steps on your part. It was about these that we had expected to hear when we approached President Hussein with the question of whether there were new developments in the Iraqi position. Do you have any new proposals?

The Americans do not want us to take on a mediating role yet. We told them that the process of finding solutions does not exclude the use of mediation missions, although we did not specify whose missions we were referring to.

We appreciate that our dialogue with Iraq continues, despite the severity of the situation. We do not wish ill upon Iraq. However, there is the logic of history, the logic of development, with which both you and we must agree. You should take such a factor as public opinion into consideration. Our public opinion is very alarmed by the events in the Persian Gulf. And we must admit that there are grounds for concern. In the future, it will be much more difficult for us to placate this anxiety.

What do you say? What did you come here with?

Aziz: I am very grateful to you, your excellency, both for the content of your statements and for the form with which you expressed your thoughts.

... We have no right to demand that the Soviet Union accept our point of view on the Kuwaiti issue without a thought, that [the Soviet Union] agree with us on everything. We are not trying to do it. However, as old friends we would like for you to show more understanding. [...] If one was to characterize today's situation, its essence is that there is a confrontation between

the United States, their NATO allies, and certain Arab regimes on the one side, and Iraq, Arab states and popular masses on the other. I state with full responsibility that neither the Iraqi leadership, nor the [Iraqi] people are afraid of this confrontation.

... We in Iraq are fully confident of our strength and do not fear a confrontation with the Americans. At the same time, we know that such confrontation could lead to an extensive conflict along all the lines, consequences of which would affect not only our Arab region, but the entire world. However, such a prospect does not scare us. The Americans are deceiving themselves when they talk about a possibility of conducting a so-called "surgical operation" against Iraq. If they decide to undertake something like this, then as a result they will get a long and a very bitter conflict, which could turn everything upside down in this region of the globe. We, on our part, as revolutionaries, naturally, are not afraid of such an outcome and are prepared to make sacrifices. However, if it was possible to avoid such a prospect, we would do everything for it. Peace for us is a sacred goal. We are talking about peace in which our security would be guaranteed. Today, however, we are threatened with war.

Life itself put the entire complex of problems on our agenda and we should resolve them together. I have in mind the Palestinian problem and the Israeli occupation of the Arab lands, suffocating economic conditions in which many Arab states found themselves, a scandalous gap between the rich and the poor in the Arab world, the tragic situation in Lebanon and a mass of other problems. The entire Arab world, from Iraq in the East to Morocco in the West, is seething. Arabs are no longer able to wait.

... Our political course is based on the initiative put forward by President Hussein on August 12. You know about it.

Gorbachev: Yes we are familiar with it.

Aziz: The West rejected it on the spot. Moreover, Washington [rejected] it literally two or three hours after it was made public. The motives of U.S. behavior are very clear to us. [...] On the Soviet side, my esteemed friend E. A. Shevardnadze said that in Moscow they saw positive elements in that initiative. However, the Soviet side stopped at that and did not develop its reaction to our proposal any further. [...] We understand the conditions in which the Soviet Union is acting, what determines the choice of the position that they are taking. We are not counting on the Soviet Union to defend Iraq. We can do it ourselves.

[...] Yes, we are saddened by how the Soviet leadership reacted to the events in the Persian Gulf. However, we will never change our positive attitude to your country. Moreover, regardless of what political stance the Soviet Union would assume, we will never doubt its benevolence and sincerity of intentions toward Iraq.

Gorbachev: ... We have been persistently looking for many years for a key to solving the most important problems of the Middle East, particularly the Palestinian problem and the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, and the complicated entanglement of the Lebanese crisis. However, a way out has still not been found. Now, after the actions committed by Iraq, the task has become a great deal more complex. Finding a solution to the region's problems has become even more difficult.

In essence, you gave very strong arguments to the Americans for building up their military presence in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. American troops won't just leave the area. We see that Japan and Saudi Arabia are already joining in their funding. So, the United States has achieved its goal.

... The fact that Kuwait was occupied, and then ultimately declared the nineteenth province of Iraq, gives an additional reason for the strengthening of the American military presence in the land of the Arabs, for the entanglement of the Western partners of the U.S. in this.

... The United States is also using the fact that Iraq promised President Mubarak not to commit military action against Kuwait, but broke this promise and deceived the Egyptians. The Americans are now saying that Iraq cannot be trusted.

Aziz: On my part, I can practically verbatim quote the words of President Hussein that he said to Mubarak, and then to King Hussein [...]

“I will not undertake, said the President, any action in regard to Kuwait before the Iraqi-Kuwaiti meeting in Jeddah on July 30. However, I am asking you, brother Mubarak, not to reassure the Kuwaitis.”

You understand that not a single Arab leader can say to another openly that he is compelled to start military action against an Arab country. But any sane person had to be able to understand what he was talking about.

We have no military intentions in relation to Saudi Arabia. [...] Nobody can even think to assert that Iraq has any rights to the Saudi, or let's say, Syrian, territory. And just the opposite—all of Iraq is convinced that Kuwait is its constituent part.

Gorbachev: ... In this case, it is not clear why, after the invasion, you announced the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait and demonstrated on television how your tanks were leaving Kuwait's territory.

... It is unrealistic that after all that has happened, after the adoption of five UN Security Council resolutions, after the deployment of a large U.S. military contingent to the Persian Gulf region, it would be possible to talk about negotiations without showing a readiness to withdraw Iraqi troops from Kuwait. If you could formulate appropriate proposals, then it would be possible to talk about replacing U.S. troops with inter-Arab or international forces. When you assert that Kuwait is part of Iraqi territory, the very subject of negotiations disappears. What can we speak about in this case?

And if you link everything – the Palestinian problem, the liberation of Arab lands, and Lebanon – then this position is constructed in such a way that no one can wrap their mind around it. And then the U.S. remains on Arab soil permanently, and the blockade ring around Iraq will constrict even more, and you will find yourself in a difficult situation. The likelihood will grow that the Iraqi leadership, with the expectation of the solidarity and sympathy of the Arabs, will escalate the situation, in an attempt to break out of the grip of difficulties. As a result, a major

explosion could occur, and control over the situation would be lost. Even if you don't lack the courage, it's worth thinking for whom such a prospect might be attractive.

Aziz: We are looking ahead without pessimism. We can see clearly that the United States are trying to frighten us, but their efforts are futile. We are defending our land, and they are staying there as aliens. I already talked about the reserve of hatred accumulated among the Arabs. Psychologically, the Arabs are ready to have a decisive confrontation with the United States and this readiness will last for one hundred years.

Gorbachev: ... There is another explanation for what you were talking about. It has been suggested that internal problems have been aggravated in Iraq, it has become clear that the envisaged development plans cannot be implemented. Hence the Iraqi leadership decided to take this step. If everything worked out, then Iraq would have received additional funds, if not, then at least it would be able to divert the population's attention from internal problems to external ones.

Aziz: We did not have political problems in the country. Our regime is strong and enjoys popular support. We did, indeed, have economic problems. The spending for the war with Iran ran into tens of billions of dollars. And Kuwait was in large part to blame for these difficulties. By intentionally flooding the world market with oil, the Kuwaitis drove the price, which was set by OPEC at 18 dollars per barrel, to 11 dollars. Therefore, our actions are connected with this reason as well. But this is not the main thing: there exists an historic reality about which I already spoke.

We are convinced that the present confrontation between Iraq and the United States will bring us success in the end. We, naturally, do not expect that the Soviet Union would, without another thought, join our side. We are only asking that the USSR not make our situation even more difficult, adhere to a balanced approach and give us an opportunity to prove what we are capable of ourselves.

Gorbachev: ... We are familiar with the position of Iraq, about which you spoke. You have repeated in a lively manner what I already knew. Of course, it would be preferable to hear something new.

I fear that not everything will be as simple as you envision. From our experience we know that something that can be done today will often turn out to be difficult to achieve tomorrow and will cost far more.

In this regard, the year 1967 comes to mind, when we had to save President Nasser's regime, literally to bail him out with all possible means. We know that you have enough decisiveness. But this does not exhaust all the complexity of the situation. You cannot build a political position on the basis of readiness for sacrifice and hardships alone; you cannot find a solution to real existing problems. In order to do that, you need deep analysis, serious consideration of all issues, development of a balanced line of behavior.

Aziz: Under no conditions do we want the Soviet Union to suffer any harm because of our actions. We do not intend to shift any political, military or economic costs onto your

shoulders. We are only asking you to abstain from speaking the same language with the United States. [...] And the main thing—do not put too much pressure on us, leave us at least some “small window.”

Gorbachev: I cannot agree that we speak the same language with the Americans about Iraq. This way you can accuse anybody of speaking a foreign language: the Chinese speaking our language, and us speaking somebody else’s language. In regards to what has happened in the Persian Gulf, the entire world is speaking approximately the same language. Frankly speaking, you did not leave us any other choice.

We really would not like to see Iraq in total isolation, and we are taking this into consideration in our practical steps.

It is possible that you receive instructions from the Supreme Being, but I would like to give you some advice, and it is up to you to decide to use it or not. We believe that we must not give up the search for a political solution on a realistic, constructive basis. So far, I feel, you are not ready for this. But it would be wise to consider that in the future the situation will only get worse. There is a limit beyond which the people will no longer be able to bear sacrifices, suffer adversity and hardship. Then it might present a bill to its leadership. I think that this is not the result you aspire to.

There is a play by Shatrov—“The Brest Peace”—that is playing now in the Soviet Union. In that play, the director used the following scene: Lenin, trying to persuade the head of our delegation at the negotiations in Brest—Trotsky—to conclude the peace treaty with the Germans, says that he was ready to practically plead on his knees. It was a critical moment of our history, when they had to save our revolution. Later, they had to conclude the peace treaty anyway, but with much harsher conditions. Lenin even called that peace treaty “bawdy.”

...We had a lively exchange of opinions. I cannot say that I am satisfied with what I heard. It would be preferable if the Iraqi side came up with new approaches. You only presented the known positions. That is why we have different assessments of this meeting. But we are not rejecting the contacts. Give President Hussein my greetings.

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