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RECEIVED IN REGISTRY No. 10 30 DEC 1969 NEO 11



BRITISH EMBASSY
BAGHDAD

153

20 December 1969

CONFIDENTIAL

Re WMM 31/12
An interesting account
I have marked the copy
to be in Ellingworth's
in Hinshelwood's
Enter *29/12*

Dear Peter,
(152) Saddam Hussain

My telegram No. 1032 (on the IPC series) summarised part of the conversation I had with Saddam Hussain on 18 December. In it I said I would be reporting further by bag.

2. Since Saddam's emergence into the limelight last month as Vice-Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council and recognised heir-apparent of President Bakr, I have naturally wanted to get at him - not least since the Soviet Chargé told me that he at any rate had succeeded in doing so and had found him a "fanatical Ba'athist" without the four-square peasant sincerity of for instance Izzat al-Douri. This seemed encouraging.

3. After no more than a fortnight's prodding in Protocol Department (which is pretty good by local standards for audience even with lesser lights) an appointment came through. My main object was simply to form a first-hand impression of this previously inaccessible Gray Eminence and ascertain, if I could, his personal attitude (which some believe to have decisive weight) on major issues; but since the appointment came up at an interesting stage in the IPC delegation's second visit here, and since IPC affairs were bound to crop up in our conversation (as they unfortunately do in all conversations with leading Iraqis), I discussed with Sutcliffe and Ensor the previous night how far I should associate myself, as it were, with their activities.

4. Saddam's initial demeanour, when he received me (alone) in his modest office in the Presidential Palace, was singularly reserved - perhaps because the species was unfamiliar to him. Indeed, he said nothing at all for about five minutes, fixing me with an impassive stare while I spoke. I told him I was grateful for the opportunity of clearing my mind about one or two aspects of his Government's policy. My impression, I said, was that the present régime had now established itself firmly and confidently in power; and it seemed legitimate to assume that after eighteen months' experience the main lines of their policy would have taken definitive shape. On this assumption, it would help me to present to my Government an

/accurate

J.P. Tripp, Esq.,
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Foreign & Commonwealth Office,
London, S.W.1.

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accurate picture of Ba'athist thinking if I could have a description of it from the horse's mouth (not the expression I used). In the first place, I was anxious to know how he viewed Iraq's position in the East/West context. Judged by public postures and publicity media, his Government seemed to be veering far over towards the Soviet bloc. Did this represent their real sympathies or their understanding of where their country's interests lay? According to my reading of the published works, Ba'athist social philosophy was in fact much closer to the social philosophy of my own Government (istaghfar Allah) than to that of the Communist world; but his Government seemed bent on giving the opposite impression. I knew of course that the Soviet handling of the Palestine problem had a bearing on the Iraqi Government's attitude to the bloc. I needed no reminding of this and would be glad to take it as read. It was on other issues, perhaps even more important to Iraq in the long term, that I hoped he would give me the benefit of his views.

5. Saddam then broke his silence to say that this was a fair question and he would do his best to answer it. He assumed I was not looking for diplomatic courtesies. He was, despite his recent public appointment, a Party man first and foremost and would like to talk as such without beating about the bush. Firstly, then, it was no good trying to separate the Palestine problem from others since by now it coloured the thinking of all Arabs on all subjects. Britain and the West could not wholly escape the burden of history. Yet France, though its past standing in the Arab world could not compare with Britain's, had by a few simple gestures (for that was all that was required) acquired the friendship of the Arab world. He would welcome the restoration of warm and meaningful relations with Britain (and with America too for that matter) which would follow if we could only bring ourselves to show a little greater determination over Palestine. Secondly, we were totally wrong if we believed Iraqi Ba'athists to have any natural affinity with the Soviet bloc. Ba'athism had nothing to do with Communism. He well knew that the long-term aims of the Soviet Union were to communize the world and subject it to Muscovite domination. He was aware of the risks involved in Iraq's present close association with the Soviet bloc, which was forced upon it by the central problem of Palestine. He heartily disliked the presence in Iraq of a Communist Party sponsored by Moscow; Western countries did not nowadays try to promote political parties in Iraq in this way. His Government had repeatedly told the Russians that, whatever its relations with the Eastern bloc, it had no intention of turning its back on the West.

6. But as far as Britain itself was concerned, it was not only over the Palestine issue that the Iraqis hoped for a change of heart or at least a fresh initiative. There was an internal issue, of equal importance to Iraq, where he hoped we would prove more helpful. This was over oil and the IPC. In answer

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to my enquiry, Saddam confirmed that he was well aware of the delegation's current proposals in this field and that the Government was studying them closely. The next part of our conversation was reported fairly fully in paragraph 3 of my telegram under reference; its burden was that he was not yet persuaded that the Company's proposals offered Iraq the most advantageous way of handling their oil affairs or that they definitely represented a concession (tanazul) of substance as well as form. He himself bore no grudge against the IPC and readily admitted that Iraq had profited greatly from its activities; but suspicions were widespread. Many people in Iraq believed that if the British offered you an apple it would prove to be the desert variety (the bitter colocynth). He also said that, the political climate being what it was, if two equally good tenders for a job were put on his desk (one from a British firm and one from, say, Bulgaria), he would opt for the Bulgarian. And he used a number of other metaphors to illustrate the point I assume he was seeking to convey, i.e. that the IPC proposals would have to prove demonstrably better, on close scrutiny, than any possible alternative before the Iraqis would opt for a settlement. I have little doubt that what was in his mind was the risk to which any government in Iraq must now be exposed if it makes a deal with the IPC, namely that the deal would be seized upon by their critics at home and abroad and used as a stick to beat them and unhorse them with. None-the-less, I drew the impression that he was by no means opposed to reaching agreement with the IPC, provided its terms (on the sort of lines now proposed) could be dressed up in such a way that the régime could defend itself against any charges of going back on its word or of yielding to imperialist monopoly pressure. I pointed out that acceptance of the Company's offer would not entail renouncing Soviet bloc participation in oil affairs. There was room for them too, if that was what Iraq wanted.

7. Saddam then reverted to his earlier theme (the train of thought was undisguised) and repeated that Iraq had no intention of throwing in its lot with the Soviet bloc. Well before this stage, I ought to explain, his earlier reserve had quite vanished and he was leaning at me over the corner of his desk talking with great warmth and what certainly seemed sincerity. Amongst other expressions he used the familiar proverbial equivalent (the conversation was in Arabic) of frying-pan and fire; and I urged him to stick to the frying-pan. I then made a few observations on the extent to which Iraq had already put itself in pawn to the Soviet Union, and I quoted their total dependence on the latter in respect of military equipment. "It's not quite as bad as that" was Saddam's rejoinder. By

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now we had long exceeded the half hour officially allotted to me. He walked with me towards the door repeating in earnest terms his hope that Anglo/Iraqi relations would take a real turn for the better, and when I said my final piece (as reported in my telegram) about oil, he stood still for some time nodding his head with that peculiar air of concentration which, it had seemed to me throughout our talk, set him apart from most of his colleagues. Indeed, he struck me as a much more "serious" character than other Ba'athist leaders; and his engaging smile, when he deployed it, seemed part and parcel of his absorption with the subject in hand and not, as with so many of the others, a matter of superficial affability. I should judge him, young as he is, to be a formidable, single-minded and hard-headed member of the Ba'athist hierarchy, but one with whom, if only one could see more of him, it would be possible to do business. It may have been an "act"; but if so, it was a skilful performance for someone with so little experience of the outside world.

8. I enclose a spare copy of this letter in case Oil Department would like one and I am also sending copies to Her Majesty's Representatives at Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Tripoli, Kuwait, Tehran, Jedda, Moscow, Washington and the Political Resident, Bahrain.

Yours ever

H. G.
(H. G. Balfour Paul)

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