

Bush Is Backing Exile for Hussein

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LA Times
January 31, 2003

A meeting with the Saudi foreign minister fuels speculation about a possible deal. Some analysts dismiss the idea as wishful thinking.

WASHINGTON -- President Bush said for the first time Thursday that he would welcome exile for Saddam Hussein, and a meeting between the president and a top Saudi official touched off a flurry of speculation that a credible effort is underway to offer a haven to the Iraqi leader.

There was no indication that Hussein or his sons would accept exile, and some analysts continued to dismiss the idea as wishful thinking. Nevertheless, the high-level discussions, and comments by top Bush administration officials, suggest that an exile plan advocated by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states is being actively pursued.

Saudi Arabia reportedly has overt or tacit support for the idea from a number of other nations, including Egypt, Turkey and Syria, and Bush's endorsement was seen as essential for such an offer to have any credibility with the security-obsessed Iraqi leader.

For Bush, who spent most of the day lobbying other world leaders for support on his Iraq policy, declaring support for exile was also an important political signal to the anxious Arab world that he is still open to last-ditch peacemaking efforts.

"Hopefully, the pressure of the free world will convince Mr. Saddam Hussein to relinquish power," Bush said. "And should he choose to leave the country, along with a lot of the other henchmen who have tortured the Iraqi people, we would welcome that, of course.... The use of military troops is my last choice, not my first."

Details of the exile package envisioned by Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal were not released. Presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer said, "The less said, the better."

Saud, who is understood to be spearheading the effort, insisted that the subject of exile never came up in his meeting with the president. Saudi Arabia and other Muslim neighbors of Iraq, which held a recent conference in Turkey on the exile option, have refused public comment and maintain that they do not meddle in the internal affairs of other countries.

But Bush and other administration officials were talking openly about it.

"Certainly, if Saddam Hussein were to leave, and his son stayed behind and his son had weapons of mass destruction, the world would be just as much at risk," Fleischer said. Any successor regime would have to be dedicated to peace and disarmament, Fleischer said, but he wouldn't speculate on how many members of Hussein's family or entourage

would have to leave the country in order to meet the U.S. demand for a changed regime.

Earlier this month, Iraq's ambassador to Moscow, Abbas Khalaf, dismissed the prospect of Hussein going into exile as "nonsense."

"He is one of the leaders who will never leave his country and will fight till the last drop of blood," said Khalaf, who denied reports that Hussein was considering going into exile in Libya.

Former U.S. diplomats with Middle East experience said that Saudi Arabia, or possibly Egypt, would be the most likely country to offer to host Hussein.

Both countries are eager to head off a war they feel would be highly destabilizing, both have good security, and both have good relations with the United States, a key factor in reassuring Hussein that he would not face immediate assassination by U.S. agents or Predator aircraft once he left Iraq.

The Saudis in particular would be delighted if they could repair battered relations with the United States by brokering a peaceful solution to the Iraq crisis, the diplomats said.

The Muslim world has a tradition of offering refuge, leaving it to God to judge wrongdoers. Saudi Arabia is still hosting Idi Amin, the notorious former dictator of Uganda. Amin, who fled in 1979 after a blood-drenched eight-year reign of terror, is now 77 and living near Jidda.

Rather than offering exile, the Bush administration would probably prefer to encourage members of Hussein's inner circle to depose him, if such a group would commit itself to destroying Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, said Edward S. Walker Jr., a former U.S. ambassador to Egypt, Israel and the United Arab Emirates who now heads the Middle East Institute in Washington.

Hussein's legendary security precautions have always thwarted would-be assassins and coup leaders. But as the threat of U.S. military intervention grows more credible, the likelihood increases that some of the Iraqi leader's generals will prefer to try to overthrow him rather than face U.S. occupation, Walker said.

Arab countries are considering an international undertaking to offer amnesty to all but 100 of Hussein's top aides, to encourage the others to overthrow him without fear of subsequent prosecution for his atrocities, the Associated Press reported Thursday.

But Bush administration support for exile as a last-ditch alternative, first enunciated by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and backed enthusiastically this week by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, appears to be growing.

"There may be a bit of grasping at straws here," Walker said. But "there isn't a country out there that doesn't see it as easier and more convenient for them if there isn't an

invasion and Saddam just disappears."

Although the host state could face protests and demands that Hussein be handed over to a successor government or a world tribunal for prosecution, "the Saudis would say it's a small price to pay for saving lives and preventing war," Walker said.

"The Saudis are capable of very brave acts when they think it's in the interests of the region, or in their interests, or in the interests of trying to help the United States," said Wyche Fowler Jr., who served as U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 1996 to 2001.

The specter of U.S. involvement in an exile deal for Hussein, even though such a result could save thousands of lives, raised the hackles of human rights advocates, who want to ensure that there is no haven for political leaders who commit atrocities.

"It would severely undermine any future ability of the United States to argue for the prosecution of war criminals, and it would also send a very powerful signal to current and future war criminals that there is a way out of their accountability," said David Scheffer, a former ambassador at large for war crimes under President Clinton who is now at the U.N. Assn. of the U.S.A., a New York think tank.

The concept of exile has changed over the last decade with the strengthening of international law that recognizes no statute of limitations on atrocities or jurisdictional havens for war criminals, he said.

Powell's comments Wednesday that if Hussein and his family and aides would agree to leave Iraq, "we would, I'm sure, try to help find a place for them to go," were particularly objectionable, Scheffer said.

"It's one thing to acquiesce in the exile of Saddam Hussein and not to resist it," he said. "That could actually be a good policy. But it's quite another thing to then sanction that exile with any guarantee or assurance whatsoever that he will escape justice.

"How can we possibly argue that Osama bin Laden must be brought to justice if at the same time we're giving a free pass to Saddam Hussein, whose crimes actually exceed those of Osama bin Laden?"

The issue, though of great political and moral importance, could prove moot. The intelligence community, and students of Hussein's personality, have consistently predicted that the Iraqi leader is more likely to fight to the death than accept exile.

"As far as I can tell, nobody has put the proposition to Saddam," a senior State Department official said. "We'd love to see it, but we're not putting a lot of faith in it because he's not that kind of a guy."

But some analysts see Hussein as the quintessential survivor, a view that leaves exile as a possibility, however slim.

Walker said the exile package would have to include haven for Hussein, his two sons, and his immediate family, in what would amount to house arrest. It is unclear whether the sons, Uday and Qusai, both of whom have extensive political roles, would agree to follow their father. "It would depend partly on how golden the cage was," Walker said.