

Iraq emerges as new Mideast power

If the Gulf War is truly near an end, then the curtain is going up on a new act in the ever-fascinating Mideast drama. Enter, centre stage, Iraq's tough leader, Saddam Hussein, smiling fiercely.

Thanks to massive support from the U.S., USSR, France and the Arab oil monarchs, Iraq has outlasted Iran by a whisker in their eight year war of attrition. Iran will likely retire to lick its massive wounds. Not so for Iraq. The little known and less loved Saddam Hussein now emerges as one of the most important Mideast leaders.

To be sure, Iraq will also have to rebuild and somewhat pay off its huge \$80-100 billion war debt. But Iraq sits atop the world's third-largest oil reserves and can eventually restore its finances.

Saddam will probably leave mundane economic matters to his technocrats. His real interest is to become the dominant personality in the Arab World. Most leaders of Arab states are military men. Ironically, Saddam, a civilian, is the only one to have lately won a war.

The land today called Iraq has historically vied with Egypt for supremacy in the Mideast since the wars of the pharaohs with the Assyrians. This is an age-old conflict between "wildmen of Baghdad," as Gamal Abdel Nasser called Iraq's leaders, and the urbane and quite unifier Egyptian. Potentially wealthy Iraq, with a battle-hardened army of 700,000 men and a secure regime, will now challenge Egypt's present dominance of the region, and so upset the ever-tippy Mideast applecart.

First to feel the heat of Iraqi anger will be Syria, whose President Asad is a bitter personal and ideological foe of Saddam Hussein. Syria has been a close ally of Iran in the Gulf War. Iraq is thirsting for revenge.



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Look for military tensions to rise on their long border. Saddam wants Asad's head.

Iraq will also emerge as the new champion of the Palestinians, who may move their headquarters to Baghdad. Israel, as noted in my Thursday column, will fret mightily about the new threat posed by Iraq. At the same time, a good portion of Israel's nuclear arsenal is targeted against Iraq, a danger keenly felt in Baghdad. As much as Saddam might wish, the army of Iraq is not about to put Tel Aviv to the sword.

But an invigorated Iraq will certainly rekindle active Arab military confrontation with Israel, providing yet another good reason for Jerusalem to make peace with its rebellious Palestinians before another major Mideast war erupts.

As for the rich but feeble oil monarchs of Arabia, their fears about militant Iran will be replaced by worries about a muscular and hungry Iraq. Not so long ago, Iraq was pressing claims to ownership of Kuwait. Saddam's soldiers could quite easily motor south to Kuwait and then overnight to the Saudi oilfields near Ras Tanura. Being nice to Saddam will become an Arabian priority.

Being horrid to the rebellious Kurds of northern Iraq will also become a priority for Baghdad. Expect Kurdistan to feel the full weight of Iraqi anger, possibly in concert with the Turks, who also wish to liquidate the irksome Kurds on their side of the border. Feel sorry for the Kurds whose mountain home tragically sits smack in the middle of other people's countries.

Look also for seismic waves to sweep across the unstable Mideast. The downcast, morose Arabs, who can't seem to make much of a go of their nations or societies, are thoroughly disillusioned with their leaders, whether firebrands or conservatives. Economic problems are mounting and there are too many young people with nothing to do. Military failures follow political fiascos. The listless Arab World is waiting for another Nasser to show it the way.

Will Saddam become this new guide? A second Nasser or a new Atatürk? I think he will try. As a leader who has executed enemies with his own pistol, Saddam has the guts to deal with his fractious fellow Arabs. He also has the brains, political skills and raw energy to turn the Arab World's inertia into movement.

Saddam has suddenly emerged from the bloody morass of the Gulf War as a dramatic figure, a strongman who stands out sharply among the Mideast's colorless leaders. What a tonic success can be. Now it's Baghdad's turn to rally the Arabs.

Iraq must rebuild and guard the border with Iran. Still, watch Saddam. As one Arab said to me: "Ah, Saddam! Just his smile can make twenty Israelis faint with fear."

No one is swooning yet in Tel Aviv but no one is smiling either.