

Do Tyrants Heed Their Minions? Putin and Saddam

By Daniel Pipes

Three days before Russia’s President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine, he [assembled](#) his top security staff for a televised charade. At it, he quizzed each in turn if they approved of his plan to recognize two areas of eastern Ukraine as independent states. Squirming and sometimes fumbling, they dutifully all bowed to their supremo’s will.

But it need not always be like this when an absolute, brutal dictator meets his advisors to discuss a major issue, especially if the conference takes place in private. In such a case, they might speak their minds and influence his decision.

We know this because a rare, if not unique, recording of such an encounter exists. The event took place in July 1986 in Baghdad under the auspices of Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein. [Amatzia Baram and Ban al-Maliki](#) recount it in a recent *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* article, “Speaking Truth to Power in a Dictatorship: Secular Ideology versus Islamic Realpolitik—A Fierce Dispute in Saddam’s Iraq.” No Middle Eastern regime, they note, “left us such a detailed and lively document of a cardinal debate, at the very heart of a ruling regime, over such a crucial topic.”

At this point in Saddam’s rule, the authors explain, “discussions [among] the top leadership could still be sometimes almost free.” As a result, “senior party members could still speak truth to power behind closed doors.” The discussion illustrates, as Baram and Maliki write, “the tension between ideology and practice in an ideology-oriented dictatorial regime, and the surprising degree of freedom of speech.”

The issue at hand was a fundamental one. The Ba'th party, in whose name Saddam ruled, insisted on secularism in public life. But by 1986, Islamism had won such wide support that Saddam felt an urgent need to address this challenge by launching a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt and Sudan. He convened the 1½-hour-long meeting for his aides to endorse this shift. The presence of an aged Michel Aflaq, a Christian co-founder of the Ba'th party, made the discussion the more delicate. Aflaq, who carried nominal power and real prestige, of course wanted secularism to remain dominant.

The event's high moment of drama came after Saddam had explained his proposed initiative with the MB. At that point, Tariq Aziz, his Christian foreign minister, joined the discussion. Aziz heard arguments agreeing with Saddam but was unaware that Saddam himself had earlier raised the idea of dialogue. So, Aziz blithely jumped in, devoting a 14-minute-tirade to arguing against such a shift. He even deployed the ultimate rhetorical weapon, quoting Saddam's words, to inveigh against accommodation: "Comrade Saddam had talked clearly"

The authors report:

Except for a brief, four-second interruption, no one said a word as he went on. The participants were frozen in disbelief and fear as they must have understood that Aziz did not know that he was attacking the boss. They were also aware of Saddam's finely-honed sense of honor: opposing him in such a forum was risky to say the least. ... Aziz might easily make a dangerous mistake.

How far would he go?

Remarkably, Saddam responded to this disagreement not by shooting Aziz on the spot but by deferring to him and his two allies (one of them being Aflaq). As Baram and Maliki explain: "Eventually, the three oppositionists forced Saddam to compromise. ... with Aziz's assault on his proposal, Saddam realized that the discussion had entered a potentially perilous phase. He understood that if he

did not act quickly his comrades might suspect that he was about to forsake core Ba'th principles." Taken aback, he modified his earlier suggestion, accommodated his critics, and downgraded dialogue with the MB.

Three years later, when the MB took power in Sudan, Saddam supported it, rendering his 1986 concession short lived. Still, that his subordinates exerted as much influence on him as they did shows how a despot sometimes heeds his advisors. The recording reveals a Saddam "at variance with the widespread perception of an unchallengeable tyrant unable to tolerate any dissent and making his decisions arbitrarily and unilaterally."

Returning to the present, Putin's televised set-piece may have been preceded by a similarly genuine debate in private over Ukraine policy. We do not know that he is as isolated and as capricious as he seems. Putin could be just the leader of the pack.

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