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Saddam and High-Ranking Officials Discussing Khomeini, the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict, the Potential for Kurdish Unrest, and the Iranian Economy

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Summary:

Transcript of a meeting between Saddam and some Iraqi diplomatic personnel dated 20 February 1979. The meeting's main issue was Iran and Khomeini. One of the attendants asked Saddam if there is any possibility of turbulence in Iranian Kurdistan due to the internal chaos of the Iranian government. And if so, how would it affect Iraqi Kurdistan. They talked about the Iranian economy and the Iranian army. They said that the Iranian air force contains mostly American jets and it was built on American experience. Secondly they had a discussion about Eritrea and the diplomatic relationship between Iraq and Eritrea.

Original Language:

Arabic

Contents:

- English Translation

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Key: UM = Unidentified Male Speaker

Translator comments, clarifications, and additions are italicized in brackets

[This audio file is, more often than not, of poor quality. There is much distortion in the sound and a sharply fluctuating volume.]

Saddam Hussein: *[Recording begins mid-sentence]* and we did not try with all that we have. We can destroy them, not with boastfulness, but with rational calculations and justifications. However, we will never offend any side respecting our sovereignty and policy. We declared this many times, but Iran has been sinking in its own blood for an entire year and from a practical perspective, this is all we can do for the sixteen thousand martyrs and injured soldiers in this situation. However, it is not possible – it is not possible, they *[the Iranians]* committed a mistake and corrected it with the March Agreement and that's all. They only care about their interests. An Islamic, progressive, and religious ruling regime, this is a matter that concerns their people only, and we should deal with anyone *[inaudible]* in power based on the principles we mentioned. We should not look at any party with sensitivity whatsoever. We should not engage in any comparison or give preference to any of the parties that we mentioned. Let them fight one another. We will deal with the one who achieves success. Now we deal with those who are here on the basis of the principles we mentioned in the memorandum that was published. Moreover, we certainly worry about the instability of Iran because there are always possibilities raised about it. That is, the powerful countries showed an increasing interest in the region and lie in wait ready to capitalize on Iran. How then are they going to handle this issue? I hope they will handle it, but it seems that this is going to take long years of conflict that might end up, in the worst case, dividing Iran. Their stability and unity will be something positive for us if Iran is not hostile to the Arab nation. But if Iran as it has declared up until now is an ally to the Arab nation, this will be a big achievement and an important accomplishment. The Arabs generally should, whenever possible, implement policies that will make Iran sympathize with the Arab nation and not be against it. Of course, Khomeini got angry because these old men wearing turbans want to be prominent figures. A man of seventy-six years old certainly does not understand the meaning of our policy, and how to act is up to him. This is our method. We respect those who implement their policy without harming us and offend those who behave in a way that harms us. Whether they are liberal, revolutionary, narrow-minded or right-winged, this does not make any difference to us. When they start attacking us, we have no option except the military option. This, in brief, is our perspective and policy in the Party. Yes?

[Time Stamp: 00:04:10]

UM1: Comrade Deputy, it seems that the situation in Iran is calming down. Maybe it is a relative or temporary calmness. As long as the situation has not completely materialized *[been figured out]*, there are some parties whose identity is not recognized yet, and we do not know exactly what the left-wing's stance is. We believe that there is a breakup within the army, especially since Khomeini is not a statesman with the thinking and mentality, as Your Excellency has mentioned, of 86 years. Is it possible that some initiatives may appear in Iranian Kurdistan because of the anarchy and instability that takes place now and will probably occur in the future? What is its influence on Iraqi Kurdistan? Thank you, Mr.

Deputy.

[Time Stamp: 00:05:27]

Saddam Hussein: The situation in Iran does not have only one possible outcome. You can put not hundreds of possibilities on the table, but tens and they all appear to be the same great possibility to us. I mean we just cannot decide on the most probable one, because up to now there is no one statesman elected by consensus as the leader. Moreover, there is no single organized party, which is a subject of consensus. Everyone is against the other, and of course, Khomeini has more support from the population. But we are people of experience; we know that the first phase is different than the other phases. To what extent he can succeed in remaining a symbol for the first phase and at the same time be able to manage the politics of all the other phases, we cannot say he will succeed or fail in this. All these parties agreed unanimously upon overthrowing the Shah and he was brought down. And now the approach of these parties has not been identified yet, but it seems that each party wants something different from what the other parties want in regard to the management of the policies. A short while ago, there were statements in this direction. The Shah is finished but there are still signs of a split within the parties. Not between who is with the Shah and who is against him, but among the same big group that worked and agreed upon overthrowing the Shah. Of course, Iran is a country of five nationalities, bordered by the Soviet Union, a country rich in oil and that built a lot of big facilities, but it is only big because there is a difference between something that is great in size and something that is of high quality. I once communicated this to the comrades and said this is like a hunter who shoots the wing of a bird with one bullet. It is not the bullet that kills the bird, but it is the fall of the bird to the ground that kills it. This means our patience is an ordeal to him in this situation.

The Iranian economy has big projects being prepared, and the Iranian army was largely built and based on American expertise. Aviation, for example, is mainly controlled by the Americans. Gaps in social class have dominated Iranian society since the regime emerged and destroyed the people, [*inaudible*] this might help him. As a result, they led him to ground zero. A country this big and based on this big construction that we described; how will it rearrange itself and rehabilitate its people, especially when people in Third World countries do not have enough patience to wait for improvements that need another four years before they begin [*to be effective*]? People will stand this situation for six months or one year, but at most a year since there will not be any extra bread or cheese or a house for those who do not have a house. We experienced all of this from 1958 to 1968 and from 1968 until now. We are not worried about the current state of Iran, but rather the unpredictable outcome of the different phases in Iran. We are seeking an Iran that is united, developed, a good neighbor, and not hostile to the Arabs. Can this be achieved? We cannot say yes or no with certainty.

We learned from previous revolutionary experiences that the assessments of the first phase appear later on. The first phase assessment of our revolution did not reflect the situation as it is now. Abdel Nasser's revolution [*former Egyptian President*] was not assessed in its first phase as it was in the second and the final phases. The Castro revolution was not assessed in its first phase as is its situation now. Therefore, the first phase is not enough to

issue a final judgment about what may happen later on. It may last and may become one among other phases. Forgive me, I exhausted you.

UM2: No, Sir, not at all.

[Time Stamp: 00:11:54]

Saddam Hussein: Anyone want to say something? Yes, Comrade Jasim.

Comrade Jasim: Thank you, Mr. Deputy. In fact, I have a question about a different subject which is related to the events in the Horn of Africa last year. Indeed, the Ogaden and Eritrean issue used to trump all other international problems, and the Palestinian cause. Now these are relatively less intense. The existence of international forces in the region was the subject of a big debate between politicians and military officials as they had direct concerns about these issues. So, is there any explanation for the Eritrean revolution and the existence of Cuban and Soviet military forces in the region?

Saddam Hussein: Of course, the Eritrean revolution has become weaker than its previous state. When Ethiopia was preoccupied with Ogaden [*An Ethiopian region that was the subject of conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia*] in Somalia and when Somalia failed to provide quick advice to the Eritreans, we told them [*the Eritreans*] before they rearrange themselves and since they have not recovered yet from the events [*inaudible*], as an assessment of them in this phase. But they did not listen and continued in their ways. We do not expect the Eritrean revolution to end in a complete victory or full retreat in a short time because it became a part of the international equation [*dynamic*] with different parties, ethnic groups, and trends fighting each other. We do not have something intrinsic in our analysis to our stance or position, but it can be summarized by saying that their position is weaker than before. They are not expected to achieve victory in a short period or to be defeated in a short period because it has become a part of the international equation. What makes it easier on them, of course, is that the discussions have become broader, where their position is based on the Soviet weight in Ethiopia. Now, Africa and the events in Iran have become more interesting than Eritrea for the Soviet Union, which is more interested now in events in Indochina than Eritrea. This is an issue that depends on the orientations, interests, and points that have priority in the agenda. Sure, the Soviet weight is going to ease on Eritreans through Ethiopia, but I do not believe that the Eritreans are capable of achieving an imminent victory or have the power to defeat them soon. But their position is weaker than before. Comrade Sa'doun, do you have other remarks about this subject, the subject of Eritrea?

[Time Stamp: 00:15:51]

Comrade Sa'doun: Yes.

Saddam Hussein: Of course, our support for them is constant, and in the same approach without delay, either with weapons, money or political and media support. It is hot in here let them open some windows for some fresh air.

UM3: Sir, it is fresh air.

Saddam Hussein: Fresh?

UM3: Yes.

Saddam Hussein: This is the heat of enthusiasm. Yes, Comrade [*inaudible*].

UM4: Yes, Sir. Concerning the subject of Eritrea, my question is about the stance of Cuba, especially since Your Excellency visited Cuba. Of course, the main reason of your visit was not to discuss the issue of Eritrea, but because the diplomatic body tried to find out information, considering that issue is one of Iraq's interests. As for the information, of course, this is the question I have for Your Excellency. But regarding the issue of Eritrea, and because of the location of our job and contact, we have the right to be interested in this issue. The result is, as Your Excellency predicted, even in the meeting of ambassadors last year, that if the Eritrean revolution continued this way, it would never achieve anything. We also, based on our reports from our site there, predicted the same result, but the new change is that Mengistu Mariam [*leader of the New Ethiopian Government in that period*], who is in control, is ready to disagree with the Soviet Union, as we learned, and Cuba regarding the Dossier of Eritrea. He retracted the idea he raised at the beginning to grant autonomy to Eritrea.

Saddam Hussein: Definitely.

[*Inaudible, multiple individuals speaking at once*]

UM4: Now the situation is tougher, but he [*Mengistu*] wants, in a different way depending on previous experiences, to form revolutionary commissions, republics, popular guards, and farmers' cooperatives so that if he grants autonomy to any part, he will be responsible for setting it up. However, even in this area there was a clear disagreement between Mengistu Mariam and the Soviet Union. This information may be 90% correct. He was very obstinate in this position. Moreover, I believe the Arab reactionary countries failed. I mean the Eritrean revolution, instead of being the power depicted there, which is the role played by Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and other parties that tried to make the Eritrean revolution full of arrogance that Your Excellency mentioned, in a way that it will not adopt our advice or even the objective advice of Libya in that phase. That is to accept and keep the status quo and leave the rest for the future. This is what I heard officially from President Gaddafi [*the President of Libya*]. Therefore, this is what happened because of the reactionary countries that also did not want the Eritrean revolution to succeed. And now they started to -- [*Interrupted*]

[*Time Stamp: 00:19:55*]

Saddam Hussein: Neither the reactionaries [*the Arab countries mentioned*] nor the Americans wanted that. [*Inaudible*] neither the Soviet Union. Neither the Americans nor the

reactionaries want Ethiopia to win, nor was the Soviet Union able to implement Marxism-Leninism [*Communism*] in Ethiopia.

UM4: I would like to add one more thing here. It seems that there will be a disagreement sooner or later between the Ethiopian regime and the Socialist countries or the Soviet Union initially. This disagreement is about the party they want to form in Ethiopia. Moreover, there is no trust, as Your Excellency mentioned, in the second phase of Mengistu Mariam's line of approach that aims for a privileged position in Africa. So, is there any possibility for rescue, I mean the possibility to exploit this situation of disagreement so as to save the stance of the Eritreans through the Arab role [*Arab intercession*]? Especially with countries like Iraq and Syria which have good connections with the Eritrean revolution on one side and also Algeria which has good relations not only with Eritrea but with Ethiopia as well, so that the progressive Arab countries play a role in helping both parties achieve something because I might have a different opinion and say that one of them will be destroyed.

Saddam Hussein: Not in the near future.

UM4: No, Mr. Deputy, practically, each one [*inaudible*]. Practically, what has been announced is not -- [*Interrupted*]

Saddam Hussein: Not true.

UM4: Frankly, not true and it is issued by exterior offices and is not the basis for -- [*Interrupted*]

Saddam: [*Inaudible*] they exist.

UM4: Yes, they exist, but they will be destroyed. What I wanted to say is that this movement cannot be destroyed or fully terminated! I believe that the Soviet Union or the Socialist countries are ready to help, if they see an Arab alliance, to find a solution in the form of the Ethiopian union that does not accept, of course, the means of separatism and so forth; they are ready, as it was officially declared in Baghdad and Moscow, to help. Even Mengistu Mariam, even if through his former secretary whom he detained because of his support for Iraq, and whom he used to tell directly that they accept Iraq, and only Iraq, as mediator at the beginning of the situation in general, although there were no previous diplomatic relations between us. Thank you.

[*Time Stamp: 00:23:04*]

Saddam Hussein: Affairs with the Cubans started before the visit of Mr. Taha Ma'ruf, the Vice President of the Republic, to Cuba. [*They started*] when I met two officials of their command and urged them to rationalize and explained to them our point of view concerning the subject of Eritrea. The Comrade Minister of Foreign Affairs met them at that time and the discussion went in the same direction. We told them clearly that if they are really eager to maintain good relations with the Arab world and the Arab countries, they have to know

that the way we see Eritrea is different than our view of Ogaden. Eritrea is a people who claim to be Arab, leave the Pan-Arabism issue aside, and who struggle for particular rights. We do not instruct them on what they want and it is not our right to advise them on their choices, rather we support them in what they choose. If they choose integration or unity, we will not be against that. If they choose autonomy we will not stand against it. Anything else, as long as they carry weapons, we will be with them. We will provide them with weapons, money, and support. In addition, during the visit of Taha Ma'ruf to Cuba, they told him clearly, "We will never have any military presence in Eritrea, unless another foreign force enters Eritrea. We will support Ethiopia and Eritrea in that case." And they committed to what they said up until now. In our visit to Cuba, we confirmed this standpoint or position and told them, "If you can advise the Ethiopians to find a peaceful solution between them and the Eritreans, then try," and they assured us that they would try. Of course, we asked them a very specific question, "Is Mengistu Mariam a general only or a revolutionary general?" They said he is a revolutionary general. According to our information, he was not affiliated with any political movement before he became what he is now. That's why the conflict inside Ethiopia about the role of the Marxism-Leninism party is expected. There were problems where even the Secretary General of the Ethiopian Communist Party ~~resorted-defected~~ to one of the embassies and there was a problem spread in the news.

UM5: A disagreement with the Cubans.

Saddam Hussein: Yes, a disagreement with the Cubans, but of course now the capability of Eritreans to put pressure and reach a solution is less than any time before. The comrades want to take a break? Okay, thank you and I wish you good luck. However, I want you to be reassured about your revolution more than the way it was one year ago, two years ago, one day ago, one week ago, or six years ago; more than at any time before. Be reassured that colonial powers will never be able to find any gap in this revolution, neither in its command, nor its services, nor its message.

[Time Stamp 00:27:55]

UM5: Just one remark, in fact [inaudible] a decision from the political leaders. Now the United Nations General Assembly [inaudible] a country every year. And of course, this is what gave value [inaudible]. Many countries that are less important than Iraq got this post Iran and other Asian countries submitted their candidates to the General Assembly and now Iran cancelled its candidature [inaudible], either from the political leadership or any other party. This issue has become almost urgent, to gather some Arab countries and allied countries to submit their candidature.

Saddam Hussein: As of next week, I want you to start moving toward the [inaudible] directly. [Inaudible] Why should we be courteous? [Inaudible] I would not say it out of courtesy, but it is hard for [inaudible] current world order?

UM6: I am sorry for [inaudible] like Iran.

UM5: Iran withdrew its candidacy, and it did [inaudible].

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[*Inaudible*]

[*Time Stamp 00:31:01*]

Saddam Hussein: Okay. Thank you.

[*End of Recording*]