

# Iraq Strategy Review: Options for U.S. Policy

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson), [Kenneth Pollack \(/experts/kenneth-pollack\)](/experts/kenneth-pollack)

Jul 10, 1998

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

---



[Kenneth Pollack \(/experts/kenneth-pollack\)](/experts/kenneth-pollack)

Kenneth Pollack is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

---



## Brief Analysis

On July 7, 1998, Patrick Clawson, research director at The Washington Institute; Andrew Parasiliti, director of programs at the Middle East Institute; and Kenneth Pollack, research fellow at The Washington Institute addressed a Special Policy Forum marking the release of [Iraq Strategy Review \(templateC04.php?CID=144\)](#), an Institute study outlining the different possible U.S. policy approaches toward Iraq. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Future crises with Iraq are highly probable. Saddam Husayn maintains ambitions for regional hegemony, countries like Russia and France want to see an easing of the constraints, and Arab opinion is concerned about the suffering of the Iraqi people. In addition, there are questions about the resolve of the international community to maintain the existing policies for dealing with Iraq and its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) while at the same time the international sanctions regime is becoming less stringent.

In this context, the Washington Institute sponsored this study to examine the ways in which the United States could take the initiative and be in the position to set the agenda rather than allow Saddam to control the situation. The study has not produced any recommendations. Any decision about a policy would depend, among other factors, on an evaluation of how much of a threat Saddam's regime poses to others, the importance of this issue vis-a-vis other issues (both foreign and domestic), the longevity of Saddam's regime, and how important maintaining broad international support is for U.S. sanctions.

The actions required to carry out each option are described in detail, along with an analysis of what would be the goals and what are the risks. The options considered are:

**Broad Containment** The current U.S. policy -- which is to rely on a broad coalition of countries to contain Iraq on a

broad array of issues -- rests on four main pillars:

- the UNSCOM inspection regime,
- sanctions,
- the no-fly and no-drive zones in northern and southern Iraq, and
- the threat of force.

While this policy has proven more successful than some may have expected, sustaining the policy will require strengthening each pillar. First, the inspection regime could be bolstered by including more non-Anglo-American members on the teams, while keeping UNSCOM as non-political as possible. Second, the sanctions could be strengthened by tightening restrictions on Iraqi imports and closing the loopholes on oil exports through Iran, Turkey, and Jordan. Third, the no-fly and no-drive zones could be extended in the event of provocations by Saddam. Finally, the United States should develop and announce a credible policy on when and how it will use force.

**Narrow Containment** Assuming that the current system of broad containment is being eroded, the U.S. could narrow its focus to concentrate on the most important aspects of containment, namely, restricting Iraqi military capabilities -- both WMD and conventional -- and its diplomatic influence. Rather than relying on the U.N. Security Council, containment would be based on a more narrow coalition which would necessarily include Kuwait, hopefully other of Iraq's neighbors, and most likely Great Britain and Japan. To maintain the more narrow containment, the United States would be prepared to compromise: to move to monitoring Iraqi WMD rather than inspections, to support ending the economic sanctions against Iraq, and to make trade-offs outside of the region.

**Deterrence** Based on the premise that the current policy cannot be sustained, deterrence suggests that rather than focusing on restricting Iraq's military capabilities, efforts should instead be concentrated on preventing Iraq from using force. Iraq would be de-emphasized in U.S. foreign policy. Unlike narrow containment, deterrence assumes that sustaining containment of Iraq is not worth the trade-offs on other foreign policy issues that would be necessary. Therefore, rather than trying to sustain a special WMD policy for Iraq, concerns over Iraq's WMD programs would be handled by existing international conventions. A regional security regime could be built among U.S. Gulf allies and perhaps a more moderate Iran. This policy would be backed by the United States showing the will and capability to respond to Iraqi violations of explicit "red lines" with disproportionate force. This option would relieve some tension between the United States and its Arab allies by allowing them to take the lead role on Iraq.

**Supporting the Opposition** The United States could shift its policy to supporting the Iraqi opposition. This could be done in different ways for different reasons and goals. A key distinction among options is whether to give the opposition enough support to take over power itself or to simply foster insurgencies to pressure and weaken Saddam in the expectation that someone steps to the fore to take over.

**Undermine:** The United States could provide modest aid (money, arms, and trainers) to a rebuilt Iraqi opposition so that it could conduct hit-and-run operations inside Iraq, with U.S. Air Force cover. Perhaps the opposition would expand its operations further, helped by a safe haven. At the least, Saddam's rule would be weakened. While an opposition victory is unlikely, instability might lead to a coup. This policy assumes that the United States would be in a better position were anyone but Saddam to rule in Baghdad.

**Overthrow:** The overthrow option assumes that the United States is willing to commit all resources needed by the opposition for it to replace Saddam. It envisions an armed ground campaign by the rebuilt opposition, trained by U.S. forces, and offensive involvement by the U.S. Air Force. One challenge to this policy is that it must defeat Iraqi

armored attacks almost entirely by air power. Plus, the Iraqi Republican Guard divisions will have to be cracked, something which was not accomplished during Desert Storm.

**Liberate:** A different analytical framework assumes that there is already a well organized opposition (the Iraq National Congress), Saddam's army is weak compared to that of the opposition, and this armed opposition could easily defeat the regime. Based on these assumptions, modest material support and strong political support from the United States would permit the INC to take over the border regions, establish a provisional government, and cut-off Saddam from his oil and its revenues. The INC would eventually be able to use the oil revenues and defectors from Saddam's army to liberate Iraq. This is an extremely risky policy option: if the assumptions upon which it is based are correct, the United States wins a major triumph by having a pluralistic, pro-western government in Iraq. If the assumptions are wrong, however, it would be a major debacle for the INC and for U.S. interests in the region.

**Invasion** Given the difficulty of obtaining the necessary domestic and international support for an invasion and occupation, this option would have to be a response to a serious Iraqi provocation. The military side of the operation is highly feasible: the force would be half the size of the Gulf War with a short build-up time and relatively low casualties. The more difficult part of this strategy is the diplomatic side of the equation coupled with the ensuing occupation. Iraq is a fractious, ethnically divided nation with each subgroup having disparate views of what a future Iraq will look like and willing to actively pursue these interests. In addition, Iraq's neighbors, the United States, and U.S. allies will try to influence the nature of the future government.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Adam Frey. ❖

Policy #326

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



## Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

#### TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)

#### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)