

Responding to Iraq: Crises and Opportunities

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Brief Analysis

On Wednesday, Iraq announced that the American inspectors of the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) had one week to leave the country. For good measure, Baghdad demanded that UNSCOM cease using American U-2 spy planes as part of its efforts to enforce the dismantling of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Baghdad's latest actions are yet another step in its campaign to obstruct, evade and annul the UNSCOM inspections program. A determined U.S. response to these Iraqi provocations could reinvigorate a faltering sanctions regime; a weak response will likely doom it to extinction.

The Method to Saddam's Madness. Although Iraqi motives are never obvious, Wednesday's decision appears to be another effort to test the international community's commitment to the sanctions regime. Over the last six months, the international community has shown little resolve whenever Iraq has refused to cooperate with UNSCOM. In June, Iraq blocked four UNSCOM inspections and the Security Council did nothing more than threaten half-hearted measures—a travel ban on some high-level Iraqi officials—in four months if Iraq did not begin to cooperate by then. Earlier this month, when the United States and Great Britain urged the Security Council to impose these sanctions immediately in response to continued Iraqi non-compliance, the Security Council would only agree to enact them in six months if Baghdad were still refusing to cooperate at that time. Against this background, at least 60 foreign companies have lined up at Baghdad's door ready to sign deals to buy Iraqi oil and sell all manner of goods as soon as the sanctions are lifted. France and Russia, in particular, have barely concealed their desire to see the sanctions lifted so that they can jump back into the Iraqi market. These trends appear to have convinced Saddam that the international community was so divided over the issue of continued enforcement of sanctions that he could move to undermine UNSCOM at little risk.

A Crisis and an Opportunity. Saddam's newest threat has the potential to become a crisis for U.S. policy toward Iraq, but it is also an opportunity. Saddam has demonstrated once again that he is his own worst enemy. In the past, whenever it appeared that the international community was growing weary of enforcing sanctions on Iraq, Saddam took some action that was so egregious that it restored the Security Council's determination. In 1993, Saddam tried to assassinate George Bush; in 1994, he threatened to invade Kuwait again; in 1995, he murdered his son-in-law, Husayn Kamel Hassan al-Majid, who had earlier defected to Jordan and forced Iraq to reveal the extent of its efforts

to mislead UNSCOM; and in 1996 he attacked the Kurdish-controlled city of Irbil. This week, Saddam has once again demonstrated more persuasively than the most eloquent U.S. diplomat that he is unrepentant, aggressive, and has no intention of complying with Iraq's obligations to the U.N. unless he is forced to do so. By overstepping yet again, Saddam has created the opportunity for the United States to bolster the fraying international consensus behind sanctions and enact new measures that will turn up the pressure on Saddam to comply.

The willingness of the United States to act unilaterally-including the use of force-in the event of an inadequate international diplomatic response will be crucial. Iraq's flouting of Security Council resolutions threatens vital U.S. interests in the Gulf, and therefore Washington cannot allow the Iraqi challenge to go unanswered. If the Security Council is unwilling to commit to new sanctions that will make clear to Saddam he will pay an unacceptable price for actions such as this, the United States must be prepared to act alone. What's more, only the clear determination of the United States to take forceful, unilateral action is likely to convince the other members of the Security Council-particularly France and Russia-to support new sanctions as a way of heading off an American military move against Iraq. Without confidence the United States will act unilaterally, the international community could opt to do nothing, handing Saddam a major victory and inviting further Iraqi obstructiveness.

Options for the United States. Unfortunately, Washington and the Security Council are going to have to work hard to come up with a suitable diplomatic response to the latest Iraqi moves. The existing sanctions on Iraq are so comprehensive that there are few remaining Iraqi privileges the U.N. can suspend. Moreover, it is important that additional sanctions on Baghdad avoid compounding the suffering of the Iraqi people: U.N. Security Council Resolution 986, which allowed Iraq to sell limited amounts of oil to pay for food and medicine, was an important step in the right direction and the U.S. must be careful not to undo its positive impact. Nor would simply enacting the proposed partial travel ban on high-level Iraqi leaders be an adequate response at this point. Given how provocative his own actions were, Saddam would probably consider such a weak measure a further sign of wavering resolve in the international community, and would likely be emboldened.

Nevertheless, there are a number of diplomatic measures the international community could take that would have a real impact on Baghdad. These would include the imposition by the U.N.S.C. of rather harsh temporary measures to compel Iraq to restore the full prerogatives of UNSCOM. For instance, Iraq could be suspended from participating in all U.N.-sponsored international forums, such as the Conference on Disarmament and the U.N. Human Rights Commission (where Iraq is represented by Saddam's half-brother and chief "banker" Barzan al-Tikriti), and Iraqi nationals could be prohibited from serving as officials in U.N. and U.N.-related organizations. The U.N. could place tight limits on the size of Iraq's diplomatic missions around the world, as it has considered doing to Libya and Sudan. Iraq could be effectively suspended from the U.N. General Assembly, as South Africa was during the Apartheid years. The U.N. could even forbid member states from issuing visas to bearers of Iraqi passports until Baghdad has agreed to cooperate fully with UNSCOM. Even if some of Iraq's neighbors did not comply in full with an Iraqi passport ban or similar measures, it would be a humiliating slap to Saddam, it would be yet another clear sign of Baghdad's international isolation, and would not be likely to hurt the average Iraqi since only the wealthy and those with close ties to the regime have the money to travel abroad.

Probably the most important diplomatic move the United States could take at present would be to secure a Security Council statement that Iraq is in "material breach" of the Gulf War cease-fire, authorizing a unilateral U.S. military move against Iraq. The Security Council is only likely to accept meaningful new sanctions on Iraq if its members are convinced that the United States will employ force in the absence of a suitable international diplomatic response. Consequently, laying the diplomatic and military groundwork preparatory to a strike may be needed to support U.S. negotiating efforts. Military preparations are also probably justified to ensure that the U.S. is ready to employ this option in the event the Security Council again proves a disappointment

In such an event there are numerous Iraqi facilities that would make suitable targets for a U.S. military strike. Highest on the list are the garrisons and arsenals of Saddam's regime-protection forces, the Republican Guard and the Special Republican Guard-which are also responsible for hiding much of Iraq's proscribed weapons of mass destruction. Visiting serious damage on these units not only could limit their ability to defend Saddam against a coup, but might even convince elements of the Guard to move against Saddam themselves. Other potential targets could include facilities belonging to Iraq's intelligence services or suspected hide-sites for Iraq's remaining weapons of mass destruction. Regardless of which target is hit, however, the U.S. will have to make a concerted effort to inflict real damage on Iraq, rather than simply lob a single salvo of cruise missiles at an empty building, as it has in the past. Both Saddam and his military remember well the ferocity of the Coalition air campaign during Operation Desert Storm, but only a determined U.S. military effort would re-awaken those fears and convince Iraq to back down.

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