

Target Iraq's Republican Guard

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Articles & Testimony

America's inability to devise an effective response to Saddam Husayn's recent reassertion of government control over parts of northern Iraq has spurred calls for a reassessment of Washington's policy toward Baghdad. Some analysts call for the breakup of Iraq, to end the threat Saddam poses to the region and to his own people. Others advocate a revival of the balance-of-power approach in the Persian Gulf, using Iraq to balance Iran or vice versa, thereby rendering unnecessary a U.S. presence in the region. Still others call on the United States to stay the course of containment, despite the increasingly manifest limitations of this approach.

A survey of these three options makes clear that there is presently no viable alternative to containment; indeed, a more active containment policy, one that includes intensified efforts to remove Saddam Husayn from power, may be the only way for the U.S. government to achieve its objectives in the Gulf.

Dismember Iraq?

Some analysts have argued that Iraq is a failed state that binds together mutually antagonistic communities in a hostile embrace, producing instability and repression at home and aggression abroad. For this reason, they argue, the breakup of Iraq is in the interest of the United States, its allies, and even the people of Iraq.¹

America has no compelling interest in the unity of Iraq per se; but it does have a vital interest in preserving access to the oil resources of the Persian Gulf at reasonable prices. The breakup of Iraq thus matters only insofar as it impinges on U.S. access to Persian Gulf oil. While Saddam threatens the oil resources of the region (he attacked Iran's oil-producing region in 1980 and burned Kuwait's oil wells in 1990), the breakup of Iraq and turmoil in the oil-rich south of that country could likewise disrupt oil exports. It is not at all self-evident whether the unity or breakup of Iraq better serves U.S. interests.

Moreover, Iraq is unlikely to disintegrate on its own as long as Saddam remains in power. He appears to have enough income from 100,000-200,000 barrels per day in oil sales (both authorized and illicit), plus cash reserves, to maintain a firm grip over the areas he now controls. (It is possible, however, that if Saddam were killed by an assassin or in a coup, turmoil might follow as members of Saddam's family and senior army commanders fight over the succession.)

If Iraq is unlikely to collapse on its own, can the U.S. government hasten its breakup? It could arm Kurdish and Shi'i opponents of the regime in the north and south of the country, but Washington has steadfastly refused to do so since 1991 and is unlikely to start now. Moreover, Turkey, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia would almost certainly oppose such a venture, thereby denying the United States crucial staging areas. Further, neither the Kurds nor the Shi'is of Iraq actively seeks the breakup of the country. Kurds may dream of seceding but recognize that all neighboring states oppose their independence, so they seek autonomy in the framework of the Iraqi state. Most Shi'is simply want a political voice commensurate with their preponderant demographic weight.

Were Iraq somehow to break into three pieces--Kurdish, Sunni, and Shi'i--the result would be further instability. The largely Sunni center would inherit the most capable units in Iraq's armed forces, its residual nonconventional

weapons capability, and nearly all its military-industrial infrastructure, and would almost certainly try to resurrect Iraq to gain control of the country's oil resources and the means to bring oil to market (i.e., ports and pipelines). Such efforts would likely push the Kurdish and Shi'i entities into the arms of rival powers--especially Iran--for self-preservation.

To keep Iraq apart, Washington would have to assume an open-ended commitment to keep Baghdad out of the north and the south, and to keep Tehran from intervening. That would not be an easy task; America's major allies in the region--Turkey, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia--would probably welcome Baghdad's return to the north and south as a means of keeping Iran out, while Tehran has surrogates to do its bidding--such as the Badr Brigades (the military arm of the Tehran-based Iraqi Shi'i rebel group -- the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq). Washington would thus find itself taking on the probably unattainable task of hemming in Baghdad without the help of its regional partners--and perhaps in the face of their active opposition. Would the United States ultimately be able to prevent Baghdad from restoring its control throughout the country when its allies clearly favor this? Recent experience suggests not.

Were Iraq to break up, however, it would probably not fracture into three pieces, but three hundred, with local warlords emerging as the main power brokers in the country. The Kurds are divided into two warring parties, though the situation on the ground is more complex: peshmerga militia commanders often exert great local influence throughout the north of the country and are not always responsive to party discipline. In many Sunni and Shi'i areas, tribal identity remains so strong that tribalism would likely emerge as a main organizing principle in the event of the country's breakup. Such circumstances create opportunities for Iranian influence in the north and south of the country, as competing warlords seek aid against their rivals. The likely result of Iraq's breakup would be chaos, not coherence; Afghanistan, not the former Yugoslavia, signals the future of a divided Iraq.

Thus, even if the United States could somehow engineer Iraq's breakup, this would perpetuate instability, strengthen Iranian influence, produce severe strains with allies, and thus create as many or more problems than it solves. Policy planning should therefore focus on how best to deal with the problems posed by a unitary Iraq.

Balance of Power?

During the 1970s and 1980s, Washington tried to create a balance of power in the Persian Gulf as a means of maintaining peace and stability in the region. In the 1970s, it built up Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to serve as the Gulf's "policeman," an effort that came to grief with the 1978-79 Iranian revolution (which also had the unintended consequence of bequeathing a large, modern military to the new Islamic Republic). In the 1980s, it indirectly helped Iraq in its war against Iran, seeing Baghdad as a bulwark against Iranian expansionism. However, the U.S. failure to diminish support for Iraq following the end of the Iran-Iraq War emboldened Baghdad and probably contributed to its decision to invade Kuwait in August 1990.

The 1991 Kuwait war, America's first major conflict since Vietnam, led to a change in approach: the United States no longer depends on aggressive, unreliable regional powers to maintain the balance in the region. Rather, since 1991, Washington itself has emerged as the keeper of the regional balance of power.

It would clearly be desirable for regional powers to maintain the balance without a U.S. presence, and this should be Washington's long-term goal. In the short term, however, this is unrealistic. So long as Persian Gulf oil remains key to America's economic future, and Iraq and Iran are ruled by aggressive regimes, a policy predicated on building up Iraq or Iran to balance the other is untenable.

Build up Iraq? Why not ease sanctions on Baghdad or even rehabilitate Iraq to counterbalance an ascendant Iran? This is the line Baghdad takes but it is a bad idea, for several reasons.

First, Iran's military build-up is much less rapid and extensive than widely believed. The quantitative balance of

forces currently favors Iraq and the slow pace and narrowly focused scope of the Iranian build-up mean it will be many years before Iran can achieve rough numerical parity with Iraq--if ever.

Secondly, Iraq is not at all well-suited to serve as a counterweight to Iran. The main threats from Iran are its nonconventional capabilities (chemical, biological, and potentially nuclear), its capacity for subversion and terror, and its navy.² For Iraq to balance Iran in the nonconventional arena would require permitting Saddam to rearm--perhaps with nonconventional weapons--thus undoing much of what was accomplished since 1991. Moreover, Iraq can contribute little to counter Iranian subversion and terror, which can only be addressed through deterrence by the West, more international counterterrorist cooperation, and promotion of political and economic development in the Middle East.

Thirdly, Iraq is primarily a land power with virtually no navy to speak of, and due to geography its access to the Gulf is easily throttled. This makes it ill-suited to serve as a naval counterbalance to Iran. Lastly, experience shows that Saddam would almost certainly use his strength to menace the states that participated in the 1991 Kuwait war--the very states he would be expected to protect. In brief, only the United States can offset the Iranian military threat without actively promoting a dangerous revival of Iraqi military power.

On the contrary, removing Saddam Husayn is the best way to further constrain Iran's freedom to maneuver. The status quo in Iraq serves Tehran well; Baghdad cannot sell much oil, it is militarily contained, and it is isolated. A change in regime would likely lead to the relaxing or lifting of sanctions, and Iran would again have to worry about Iraq as a military threat, the impact of Iraqi oil sales on its own oil income, and the possibility of a rapprochement between Iraq and the Gulf monarchies. The overthrow of Saddam Husayn--not his rehabilitation--is the best way to contain Iran.

Build up Iran? The opposite strategy is equally futile.³ First, Iran would be as difficult to manipulate as Iraq. Rather than use its power to protect Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from Iraq, Tehran would probably use it to menace Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, where it has historic territorial claims.

Secondly, the United States and Iran have no realistic prospect of reconciliation any time soon. Washington remains open in principle to establishing a dialogue with Tehran, but the domestic politics of both countries make this unlikely. The Islamic Republic's revolutionary legitimacy rests on hostility to the "Great Satan" and keeping America at bay, so its leaders will go to great lengths to prevent the resumption of friendly contacts (even though many ordinary Iranians like Americans and admire the United States and what it stands for). Anyone advocating this option can expect to be harshly denounced and accused of endangering the major achievement of the revolution by opening the door to American influence.

Thirdly, arguments against using Iraq as a military balance to Iran also militate against using Iran as a military balance to Iraq. The threat posed by Iraq comes from its nonconventional weapons arsenal and the threat its ground forces pose to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. For Iran to counterbalance Iraq would mean retaining or expanding its existing nonconventional capabilities--a development clearly counter to U.S. interests in the region--and permitting it to serve as protector of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Neither Kuwait nor Saudi Arabia, however, wants Iran to play such a role, nor are Iran's relatively weak ground and air forces capable of protecting these Gulf kingdoms.

The most powerful argument against America's using Iraq or Iran to maintain the regional balance is a very simple one: the United States is a status-quo power, Iraq and Iran are anti-status quo powers. The interests of the United States are diametrically opposed to those of Iraq and Iran under their current regimes. There is no way to get around this fact. Accordingly, the United States appears destined to remain the keeper of a balance of power in the Persian Gulf for years to come.

Containment?

This leaves containment--which relies on economic sanctions to curtail Saddam's troublemaking potential while creating the conditions for his overthrow. Containment has been relatively successful in the short term, though its inherent contradictions have proven increasingly difficult to manage.

Efforts to overthrow Saddam have clearly failed. The U.S. government may have played a role in at least three unsuccessful attempts to foment coups (in July 1992, March 1995, and June 1996). Saddam's recent conquest of Irbil makes him more secure: not only was it the base of a CIA operation (now in disarray) to overthrow his regime but Saddam's success somewhat restored his aura of invincibility and enhanced his standing in the armed forces, making a coup less likely.

In contrast, efforts to curtail Iraq's troublemaking potential have had reasonable success:

- The ban on arms transfers has prevented Iraq from rebuilding its conventional forces by replacing war losses, modernizing aging equipment, or acquiring spare parts.
- The ban on trade has prevented Iraq from acquiring parts and materials to restore its industrial base, keeping military production far below prewar levels.
- The imposition of a no-drive zone in southern Iraq and a no-fly zone in the southern and central parts of the country have increased the margin of early warning available to parry future threats to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.
- The general atmosphere of privation and hardship in Iraq has contributed to the widespread demoralization of the armed forces, leaving only the Republican Guard and a few regular divisions to be relied on in case of war.
- The armed forces suffer from critical shortcomings that inhibit their ability to engage in sustained combat: poor maintenance, severe deficiencies in the logistical system, a lack of spares, and low morale. None of these problems will likely be rectified as long as sanctions remain in place.
- The prospect of sanctions' being eased or lifted has caused the Iraqi authorities to cooperate grudgingly in the dismantling of nonconventional weapons programs.
- The ban on oil sales has denied Iraq the funds for equipment needed to resume large-scale production of nonconventional weapons (though Iraq's residual capabilities in this area--particularly relating to biological warfare--remain significant).
- The dramatic increase since 1991 in prepositioned materiel and forward-deployed forces in the region enables the United States to deter Iraq from foreign adventures.

It must be recognized, however, that sanctions impose severe hardships on the Iraqi people, and many hold the U.S. government partly responsible for their suffering. But an easing of sanctions would help prolong Saddam's rule and with it the repression of the Iraqi people. Moreover, Saddam's continued rule holds out the possibility of new military aggression against Iraq's neighbors, in which chemical or biological weapons might be unleashed, leaving tens or hundreds of thousands dead and injured. The moral argument therefore cuts both ways.

If the moral dimension presents a dilemma, America's national interest is clear: sanctions should continue as long as Saddam remains in power and Baghdad is not in compliance with UN resolutions, because these greatly diminish Iraq's ability to threaten peace and stability in the region.

There is another dilemma: embargoing Iraqi oil furthers the U.S. goal of peace and stability but it diminishes access to the region's oil. In this case, America's interest in peace and stability--which enables other Persian Gulf countries to pump oil unhindered--overrides its interest in preserving access to Iraqi oil, so long as the resultant shortfall can be picked up by other producers without dramatic increases in cost.

Thus, while no approach offers an optimal means for dealing with the security challenges posed by Iraq,

containment offers the best way to achieve U.S. policy objectives in the region: peace, stability, and access to (non-Iraqi) oil. While containment has its drawbacks, the alternative approaches--dismemberment and balance of power--have greater shortcomings. U.S. policy toward Iraq should therefore remain more or less as is, with the exception of the changes recommended below.

The Need to Remove Saddam Husayn

Recent events show that containment is increasingly difficult to sustain. First, France, Russia, and China seek the easing or lifting of sanctions so that they may resume trade with Iraq. To fend off these pressures, the U.S. government sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 986 ("oil for food"), which allows limited sales of Iraqi oil to generate income for food and medicine for the Iraqi people. Even if this income is kept out of Saddam's hands, the arrangement enables him to divert funds now used for food and instead build up his military and pay off his secret police. (Implementation of this resolution was suspended, at least temporarily, after Iraqi forces retook Irbil.)

Secondly, fissures within the U.S.-led coalition are increasing. It was assembled to deal with a specific problem--Iraqi threats to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia--and on this matter, a consensus remains. On other issues, however, such as Iraqi actions in northern Iraq, there is no agreement. Furthermore, America's allies are increasingly wary of its approach to dealing with Iraq--Turkey for economic reasons, Saudi Arabia for domestic political reasons. As a result, U.S. freedom of action has much diminished since 1991.

Thirdly, growing tensions in the Arab-Israeli arena could create fertile ground for Iraqi efforts to rally Arab opinion to ease or lift sanctions and reintegrate it into the Arab mainstream.

These factors make it more difficult for the U.S. government to preserve the international coalition and maintain sanctions against Iraq, making the removal of Saddam more urgent than ever before, at a time that prospects for success in this endeavor are less favorable than at any time in recent years. Washington must therefore intensify efforts to oust him from power.

Some analysts have stated that the perpetuation of Saddam in power is a U.S. interest, since he is a convenient enemy who makes it easier to maintain sanctions, preserve the coalition, and thus contain Iraq.⁴ If this were ever true in the past (and that is debatable), it is unlikely to remain so in the future, as pressure grows to ease or lift sanctions and reintegrate Iraq into the family of nations. While it is impossible to know exactly what changes the removal of Saddam would bring, there could be few outcomes more dangerous for world peace than a rehabilitated and rearmed Saddam.

And while any probable successor to Saddam may not be much of an improvement over him, he is unlikely to possess Saddam's burning desire to avenge his defeat and humiliation during the 1991 Kuwait war. At any rate, whether Saddam stays or goes, Iraq will pose difficult challenges for U.S. policy for years, and perhaps decades, to come.

Target the Republican Guard

What does the U.S. government do next? The main obstacle to overthrowing Saddam is not the military's lack of will to get rid of him (there has never been a shortage of aspiring coup plotters) but the efficacy of his regime's protective apparatus. As long as the Republican Guard, the Special Republican Guard (a praetorian unit that rings Baghdad), and the secret police remain intact and loyal, coup attempts are likely to fail.

American military action is required to set the stage for action by Saddam's domestic opponents. This ingredient has thus far been missing from U.S. policy. Attacks on the Republican Guard--not air defense facilities--are a necessary condition for a successful coup d'état against Saddam.⁵

Moreover, Saddam should be substantially worse off after a strike than before it. For this reason, overwhelming force

should be used. Military strikes that are predictable and proportional (in other words, limited) allow Saddam to calculate outcomes and reduce the risk of brinksmanship. Further, flagging international support for American policy means that Washington must make every military strike count, choosing targets for maximum effect. It must not squander political capital by hitting inconsequential targets.

Thus, future provocations by Saddam should prompt retaliation against the three or four Republican Guard divisions that constitute the main pillar of his regime and the backbone of his offensive might. This will not be easy. The operation might last several days and require the use of several hundred aircraft--many more than are normally located in the region. That means winning support from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, where U.S. combat aircraft are based. Those allies must be convinced of Washington's commitment to eliminate Saddam; in addition, Turkey will need financial inducements. And hitting the Republican Guard may not be so easy. What if Saddam tries to save his Republican Guard divisions by hiding them in populated areas after the first few days of air strikes? The desired results may therefore require not just one but repeated strikes, and this will probably make it more difficult for Washington to convince its allies of this option.

At the very least, however, striking the Republican Guard will reduce Iraq's offensive military potential, and thus its ability to threaten its neighbors and domestic opponents. At best, it could create the conditions under which efforts to topple Saddam and his regime may succeed.

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Notes

(1) Daniel Byman, "Let Iraq Collapse," *National Interest*, Fall 1996, pp. 48-60; J. B. Kelly, "Why Iraq?" *National Review*, Oct. 14, 1996, pp. 20, 22. (2) Iran has spent most of its available funds in recent years on procurement for its navy, at the expense of its ground and air forces. For details, see Michael Eisenstadt, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996). (3) Advocates of this approach include former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, cited in Elaine Sciolino, "Casting a New Iran in the Old Role of a Friend," *New York Times*, Sept. 22, 1996, p. E4, and Jacob Heilbrunn, "The Case for Iran," *New Republic*, Sept. 30, 1996, pp. 11-12. (4) Fareed Zakaria, "Thank Goodness for a Villain," *Newsweek*, Sept. 16, 1996. (5) Moreover, the United States should provide incentives to potential coup-makers, including cash bounties for whoever kills Saddam, and offers of assistance to a successor regime to help rebuild the country.

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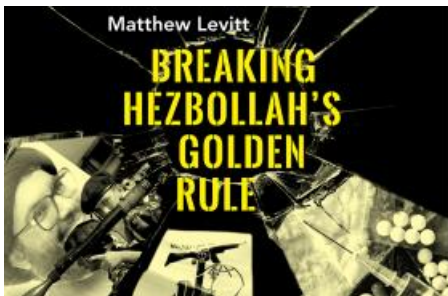
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