

Saddam's Iraq:

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Future Challenges

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Brief Analysis

In terms of domestic political opinion in Iraq, Saddam won a significant victory in the recent operation in northern Iraq. His prestige is greater than it has ever been since the Gulf War, and he has positioned himself well for at least the next year. In about a year's time, however, a stagnating Iraqi economy could catch up with Saddam and create a situation potentially destabilizing for him. For now, however, he faces little in the way of a real threat to his regime.

His Family and His Tribe

Saddam Hussein's extended family is generally unhappy. Although Saddam's family members continue to fill key positions in the Iraqi security apparatus, they no longer hold powerful, high-profile political positions, and they are perturbed at being removed from the public eye where they had been able to accumulate great wealth. Furthermore, Saddam has permitted the state-controlled press to criticize them, publicly accusing them of corruption. Saddam does not trust his family, and he will continue to watch them closely to keep them in check.

His family, however, is not posing a serious threat to Saddam. And Saddam is not as some have alleged assassinating family members to quell a threat. In fact, the assassination of Hussein Kamil was the exception, not the rule. For Saddam, the Kamil incident was ingenious because although it infuriated much of his family, it did not trigger a response from Saddam's family. Being apparently more scrupulous than Saddam, they probably will not violate the traditional tribal taboo against shedding the blood of a member of one's own khams (a five-generation family unit), even to avenge the murder of another member within the same khams. (They would violate this taboo if they shed Saddam's blood to avenge the Kamil family.)

Saddam's tribe, al-Bu Nasser, is the main source of manpower both for his himaya (palace guards) and less so for the Special Republican Guard and the Republican Guard. For unknown reasons, though, Saddam has a conflict with the Bayt Nida clan within his tribe, and like his family, he does not trust it even though most of the tribe is loyal.

The Coalition of Tribes

More generally, Saddam has been re-tribalizing Iraqi society since 1979. Mainly since the late 1980s, he has showered (primarily Sunni) tribal leaders with land, money, weapons, and honors, and in 1982, he began recruiting and promoting tribal soldiers as an alternative to less traditional and less tribally-ideological urban ones. Saddam considers these tribal soldiers of primarily Bedouin, rural roots to be more Arab, placing a greater emphasis on honor and ferocity in war than do non-tribal, urban ones.

Saddam has also been relatively successful in securing tribal support in the countryside. He gives gifts to tribal sheiks to ensure they stay away from opposition activity. Furthermore, he has succeeded in persuading tribal chiefs to betray members of their own tribes that pose threats to Saddam's regime. Through these methods, he can rely on the tribal leaders themselves not his internal security soldiers to police within tribes.

Furthermore, he has ensured that the only avenues through which tribes can create problems are an open tribal revolt or more clandestine conspiracies among tribal elements within the security forces are logistically impossible. Tribes do not have the necessary weapons and ammunition to revolt successfully. And no one tribe has enough control of any one security branch to undermine Saddam. But Saddam is on questionable terms with at least three tribes: Jubbur, Ubayd, and Dulaym and he does not feel that he can trust them. Out of necessity, however, he continues to employ members of these tribes in the security forces.

The Ba'ath Party

After the Shi'i intifada of 1991 in Iraq, the Ba'ath party in the south was completely destroyed, and Saddam severely castigated it despite many of its members' efforts to defend the party against the uprising. In 1995, Saddam basically reversed his assessment of the party and gave it glowing praise. Still, Ba'ath members continue to harbor resentment for being overworked, underpaid, and forced to accept ideologically heretical ideas (e.g. being forced in spite of Ba'athist secularism to study Qu'ran). Also, they resent the high-profile role given tribal sheiks.

The major problem with the party is that the ranks of the leadership are impenetrable by younger members. In fact, almost all the current leaders were born between 1936 and 1944 and are extremely distrustful of members who entered the party after its rise to power in 1968. Therefore, they refuse to relinquish the party's reins of control. Yet in the short run, this stagnation in the ranks of party leadership does not appear to present a serious problem for Saddam. Most likely, the party will continue to support him.

The Army and the Republican Guard

The army is very demoralized. The quality of food is bad, there is little money to grease the wheels, and the quality of arms is diminishing relative to the quality of arms of the Republican Guard. Among the field units, the rate of desertion may, in fact, fall between 20 and 30 percent. But army officers will not threaten Saddam as long as the Republican Guard stands in their way.

Saddam has, however, been distrustful of the Republican Guard of late. He has spent the last three to four years devising measures to ensure the loyalty of the Guard. Last June, he radically escalated the severity level of these measures by executing a few senior Guard officers. Also, Saddam is concerned about the loyalty of the air force, and recently he lowered standards for entrance into the air force out of concern for the loyalty of cadets. Finally, Saddam is upgrading a militia he seems to want to check an even more elite force, the Special Republican Guard.

UNSC Resolution 986: The Oil-for-Food Resolution

The implementation of UNSC Resolution 986 might be effective in destabilizing Saddam in the long run; however, in the short run its implementation can only help Saddam. In the long run, the increase in supplies for Iraqis now would result in elevated expectations in the future, and Saddam's inability to meet these future demands could precipitate domestic unrest that might undermine his regime. In the short term, however, the deal would enable Saddam to divert funds now earmarked for food to other projects and ensure the loyalty of his internal security apparatus.

Possible U.S. Approaches to Saddam's Iraq

For the recent U.S. attacks on Iraq, there are several reasons why President Clinton did not receive the international support that President Bush did in the Gulf War. No international border was crossed in the recent dispute; many European countries have much greater economic stakes in Iraq than does the United States; Massoud Barzani invited Saddam into Iraqi Kurdistan; and most Arab governments were against American military action. Nonetheless, the ongoing conflict with Iraq is costly politically, militarily, financially, and strategically and it threatens the United States with further political embarrassments. If the United States wants to get rid of Saddam, it must attack at the heart of his power base the Republican Guard and other sensitive assets and sites. Attacking at the

fringes will never achieve the desired result.

Some have suggested using a newly empowered Barzani as a platform from which to topple Saddam. Even if it could swallow its pride and work with Barzani in the wake of one betrayal, Barzani's forces are probably deeply infiltrated by Saddam's agents, and if he even hinted at betraying Saddam, Saddam would quickly dispose of him. Finally, the U.S. intelligence network in northern Iraq has been essentially dismantled, further complicating the logistical success of such an operation.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Greg Saiontz. ❖

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