

Avoiding American Complicity in the Coming Kurdish Massacre

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Brief Analysis

Yesterday John Chancellor bitterly concluded that, "George Bush is supporting Saddam Hussein." The New York Times explained that: "President Bush has decided to let President Saddam Hussein put down rebellions in his country . . . rather than run the risk of splintering Iraq."

The situation in Iraq today is very clear, and poses a terrible dilemma of profound consequence for the United States. There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein will soon massacre the Kurds. Civilian deaths in the south have already reached the tens of thousands. Many, many more will soon be slaughtered in the north.

U.S. Acquiescence

As the killing proceeds, the United States government is doing nothing -- apart from predicting Saddam's overthrow and planning America's withdrawal. Critics compare this to Hungary in 1956, when the U.S. also urged a population to overthrow its government and then did nothing. But in 1956 the U.S. did not have overwhelming military superiority. Now, the U.S. stands like the Red army outside Warsaw watching the slaughter of the Polish resistance.

The implications of U.S. inaction will spread far and wide. We are watching the undermining of a central principle that helped end the Cold War -- that governments should not be free to suppress the will of their populations. If the United States says nothing about the situation in Iraq, why should it protest when the Soviet Union suppresses dissent in the Baltics or within Russia? Why should China be concerned about further Tiananmen Squares? And how can the Israelis take seriously American criticism of the expulsion of four Palestinians when America -- the dominant military power in the region -- tacitly accepts the annihilation of tens of thousands.

Saddam has learned little about us, and we have not learned enough about him. He capitulated on February 26 because the U.S. had overwhelming force and demonstrated that it would use it. He senses that the U.S. will no longer act. He tests and probes, and when he gets no response, he defies the U.S. and its President. NBC reports that the U.S. military has evidence that chemical weapons were used at Karbala. The Iraqi commanders deceived General Schwarzkopf about their intended use of helicopters, probed U.S. intentions, and as soon as it was clear that the U.S. would not attack them, Saddam launched a massive helicopter assault around Kirkuk.

The debate over the wisdom of a hands-off U.S. policy has been joined. The fate of the Kurds is an urgent issue. If the massacre is allowed to occur, then the question of U.S. policy will be increasingly academic, one, as General Schwarzkopf seems to understand, for the historians to decide.

There is no guarantee a coup against Saddam will occur. His facility for survival is an unremarked surprise of this war. The idea that Saddam will suppress the rebellions against him and then the army will remove him is a hope, not a policy. Moreover, no one knows if the army officer the U.S. hopes for will be friendly when he finally appears, if he ever does.

Is this the only approach available to the United States that will keep the U.S. from overentanglement in Iraq? Clearly not. As William Safire has pointed out, the United States can constructively influence the situation in Iraq without

settling for its Saddamization or Lebanonization.

What Can the U.S. Do?

1. Don't let the massacre of the Kurds occur on America's watch. It undermines too much that is important in U.S. policy globally and it will turn many stomachs to see it happen. While the U.S. has air superiority, warn Saddam against the worst atrocities. If he defies those warnings, then use air power to attack the units committing atrocities. If that is not possible, retaliate with air strikes on other targets. Indeed, Turkey's president, Turgut Ozal has already criticized the decision to let Saddam's helicopters fly.

Such a policy -- based on air power, which has already proved its unique decisiveness in this battlefield -- would not affect the situation of American ground forces in southern Iraq. They can be withdrawn as scheduled.

This is not choosing sides in Iraq's internal affairs. It is enforcing America's global human rights policy, which, strangely, has been suspended in the case of Iraq -- no administration official has condemned specifically the massacres in the south.

2. Stop favoring Saddam over the rebels. International relief aid is being sent to his regime, while the rebels are getting nothing. And they need food urgently.

3. Talk to the opposition. As unbelievable as it may seem, U.S. policy today still prohibits contact with Iraqi opponents to Saddam Hussein -- Kurds, Shi'ites, Sunnis, and liberal democrats. There is and can be no satisfactory explanation for the ban. Every major member of the allied coalition is talking to them, except for the U.S.

4. Start planning; Stop hoping. The U.S. lacks the means to insure that a coup against Saddam will occur. A military force exists in northern Iraq, led by Massoud Barzani, head of the Kurdish Democratic Party. He has never been hostile to the United States. He has pursued a policy of moderation aimed at neutralizing and winning over dissident elements among the regime's forces. If he were to succeed in attracting significant numbers of disaffected Arabs from the Iraqi army, a military force that transcended Iraq's sectarian divisions would come into being.

Even if the United States withdrew its ground forces, but exploited its air power to limit the atrocities, it would tacitly promote the creation of such a force. With American air support, a mixed Kurdish-Arab force might be able to repel Saddam and eventually march on Baghdad. America's role in the liberation of Iraq would create the basis for friendly relations with the new regime.

This policy appears far superior to America's current approach, which tacitly supports Saddam and watches the slaughter proceed. Hoping for Saddam's ouster will not make it happen. Sitting out Iraq's civil war will not guarantee stability, but will only encourage others like Iran and Syria to fill the vacuum.

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