

Iraq's Withdrawal Announcement: Beginning of the Endgame?

by [John Hannah \(/experts/john-hannah\)](/experts/john-hannah)

Feb 15, 1991

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[John Hannah \(/experts/john-hannah\)](/experts/john-hannah)

John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

IRAQ'S STRATEGY

by Laurie Mylroie

Today's Revolutionary Command Council statement accepting UN Resolution 660 represents the first time that the Iraqi government has stated the conditions under which it would leave Kuwait. It is also the first time that it has explicitly mentioned the word "withdrawal," although notably, the word "Kuwait" remains absent.

Saddam Hussein is under pressure. Baghdad is feeling the results of the stepped-up allied air attacks on Iraqi forces in Kuwait. Saddam hopes to abort the imminent allied ground offensive. That is a major departure from his established strategy, which was to absorb allied air attacks, hold the ground in Kuwait, and inflict sufficient casualties during an allied offensive so as to cause the allies to break off their attack.

However, UN Resolution 660 calls for an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. The Iraqi cease-fire proposal is weighted with conditions. Some of them are seeming bargaining points, others are more important to Iraq. Among the most important are those that address the problems which precipitated the invasion in the first place, those that address Iraq's economic situation, including the "abrogation" of all "boycott and embargo decisions" taken before August 2, 1990, an apparent reference to U.S. sanctions, and a demand for financial support in Iraq's reconstruction.

The tough RCC statement partly aims at maintaining morale at home, in order to avoid the perception of a complete collapse. But there is more. Saddam Hussein does not believe that he can win by totally losing -- that he can portray an unconditional withdrawal as a victory by virtue of Iraq's having fought the United States for one month. Without something to show for the invasion of Kuwait, Saddam will have to answer tough questions at home. If he does not "break even" -- come out of Kuwait no worse than he went into it -- his situation will be even worse. Although the regime is exceedingly repressive, Saddam has already faced at least 11 assassination or coup attempts since assuming power, and there is much evidence to suggest that the fall of the Eastern European governments last autumn shocked Saddam, caused him to see that the same thing could happen in Iraq, and precipitated the invasion of Kuwait seven months later.

Some parties currently involved in promoting a cease-fire may be tempted to seize on the Iraqi acceptance of Resolution 660 to press for a cease-fire with "face-saving" concessions for Saddam. That, however, could be

precisely what saves him from his present, very serious predicament.

AMERICA'S STRATEGY

by Martin Indyk

President Bush's rejection of Saddam's communique as a "cruel hoax" and his own declaration that the United States will continue efforts "to force compliance" point to U.S. strategy at this potential turning point in the war. It is to use the threat of imminent destruction of Iraq's armed forces to persuade Saddam that withdrawal must be complete and unconditional. That is the minimum requirement; the President's call on the Iraqi people and army to remove Saddam clearly indicates the preferred outcome. It will not be easy to maintain this posture. Calls for a pause in the fighting to test Saddam's willingness to withdraw are bound to proliferate. George Bush will be cast in the role of "bad cop" to Mikhail Gorbachev's "good cop." The United States will be seen as inflicting further destruction -- perhaps unnecessary destruction in the minds of growing numbers -- on an Iraq that has after all said it is willing to withdraw. And the international community has not endorsed the objective of removing Saddam from power.

Yet it took massive destruction to bring Saddam Hussein to the point where he is actually prepared to utter the word "withdrawal." And even now, Iraq's communique is so loaded with conditions that it can only be regarded as an opening gambit designed at least to stay the sword of Damocles hanging over the Iraqi army and at best to allow Saddam to emerge from the conflict with some "achievement" for the Arab masses. Thus the only way to persuade Saddam to drop all his conditions and depart Kuwait forthwith is to keep up the military pressure. And the only way to encourage the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands is if they come to understand that Saddam cannot save them. Unfortunately, if it took the loss of one-third of his forces to get Saddam to this stage, it will probably take the loss of one-half of his forces to get him to the stage of unconditional withdrawal or the Iraqi people to the point where they would dare challenge him.

The United States, however, has one major advantage in pursuing this strategy. Our Arab partners in the coalition will be deeply threatened by a Saddam Hussein who emerges from this conflict with much of his military intact and some concessions on the Palestinian issue. Already he is playing for hero status in the Arab world. Fahd, Mubarak and Assad cannot allow him to succeed and would certainly prefer him removed. Therefore they are likely to remain more committed even than President Bush to the minimum strategic objective of unconditional withdrawal -- and the more damage to Iraq's army in the process, the better from their vantage point. This is also likely to hold true for Turkey and Iran, who do not wish to see "the wounded snake" snatch political victory from the jaws of the "mother of all defeats."

The biggest challenge then will be to keep the Soviet Union committed to the UN resolutions even as the allies press their military advantage.

THE SOVIET ROLE

by John P. Hannah

The Soviet Union is now positioned as the key third party -- the mediator -- in the complex U.S.-Iraqi diplomatic game to end the war. Iraq's withdrawal announcement, which went out of its way to express appreciation for Moscow's peace efforts, came on the heels of Soviet envoy Yevgeny Primakov's trip to Baghdad. And it precedes a flurry of diplomatic activity centered in Moscow that culminates Sunday with the arrival of Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz. The question of how the Soviets will play their new role is now a central issue that could have important implications not only for ending the war, but also for the post-war situation.

It seems probable that the Soviets will continue to try and walk the fine line between calling for the full implementation of UN resolutions while distancing themselves from U.S. military action, thereby establishing the

Soviet Union in the eyes of the world -- especially the Arab world -- as the leader of peace efforts in contrast to America's leadership of war efforts. Thus, the Soviets will welcome Iraq's announcement as an important positive development (and no doubt seek to take full credit for it, a claim that may not be entirely unjustified; Moscow has important contacts in the Ba'ath Party and Iraqi military that could have pressured Saddam to issue today's statement). But the Soviets are likely to insist that any withdrawal must be unconditional and not formally linked to other issues. In addition, as stated in the recent U.S.-Soviet joint communique on the Gulf, the Soviets will probably tell Iraq that any cease-fire will depend on its taking concrete steps to get out of Kuwait.

However, at the same time, the Soviets may press the United States to offer, in return for Iraq's withdrawal, certain guarantees Baghdad is seeking that will leave it in a far more powerful post-war position than the allied coalition optimally desires. Already the Soviets have said this includes assurances that Iraq will not be attacked after withdrawal. It is not inconceivable that Moscow will also urge that economic sanctions be dropped, that all foreign ground forces leave the region, that Iraq have a major role in future regional security arrangements, that an international effort to reconstruct Iraq be initiated, and that the UN recommit itself to settling the Palestinian problem once the war concludes. All of these issues, even if not explicitly linked to an Iraqi withdrawal, pose problems for the U.S. and its allies because they allow Iraq to claim some victory from the war. But, politically, they will be hard to resist. However the diplomacy plays out, the Soviets could emerge winners. Claiming full fidelity to UN resolutions, Gorbachev hopes to limit strains that might emerge in relations with Washington. At the same time, acting as the main broker to end the allied onslaught against Iraq, he also improves his standing with domestic and Arab critics who have complained that he was too closely aligned with the United States. He also builds a strong case that the Soviet Union, as the region's "diplomatic superpower," must have a major role in any post-war regional arrangements.

MILITARY IMPLICATIONS

by Marvin Feuerwerker

President Bush's rejection of the Iraqi offer is not only politically sound, but militarily wise. If the United States and its coalition partners were to agree to a cease-fire before receiving assurances of full Iraqi compliance with UN resolutions, they would be lessening the pressure on Iraq and possibly lengthening the war. Saddam could exploit even a short pause to improve Iraq's military position considerably. In the first place, he could resupply his forces in Kuwait and southern Iraq with food, water, and ammunition -- the basic necessities of military life. From all indications, conditions throughout many parts of the theater have become unbearable, making the Iraqi military a far less effective fighting force. A pause would at a minimum allow an improvement in the morale of Iraq's forces. Allowing their recovery from bombardment could lead to a high cost in American lives.

Second, a pause could allow Saddam to reconstitute command, control, and intelligence for his forces. This would provide him accurate information about the battlefield, once again making the Iraqis a more effective military. It could also allow a much-desired break from bombardment for Iraq's Scud-based missile forces, raising the threat to civilians in Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Third, a pause could make it more difficult for some members of the coalition to resume strikes against Iraq.

With this said, Saddam's offer indicates that he may be beginning to entertain the possibility of compliance with UN resolutions. While the coalition will want to maintain the air campaign -- particularly revisiting high-value targets for Iraq's unconventional weapons production -- it may be willing to hold off on a ground offensive until it becomes clear whether the Iraqi offer is merely a "cruel hoax," or the prelude to surrender.

Laurie Mylroie is a 1991 visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and a Bradley fellow at Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. She is the author of *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf* (Times Books,

1990).

Martin Indyk is the executive director of The Washington Institute and an adjunct professor at The Johns Hopkins University Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. He visited Saudi Arabia and Israel from January 3-12, 1991.

John P. Hannah, a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, was the deputy director of research at The Washington Institute until March 1991. He was the visiting Bronfman Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow, from September 18-October 12, 1990, and is the author of the 1989 Institute Policy Paper [At Arms Length: Soviet-Syrian Relations in the Gorbachev Era](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=82) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=82>).

Marvin Feuerwerker is the senior strategic fellow at The Washington Institute and the principal author of the 1991 study Restoring the Balance: An Interim Report of The Washington Institute's Strategic Study Group. He previously served as deputy assistant secretary for policy analysis at the Department of Defense. ❖

Policy #68

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

TOPICS

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