

Prosecuting the Gulf War:

Refuting the Myths

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Brief Analysis

Three dangerous myths concerning the Gulf war require urgent examination and refutation:

- The removal of Saddam Hussein from power would end the war and the threat Iraq poses to the region.
- The anti-Saddam alliance must be careful lest Iraq's collapse destroy the regional balance of power.
- Iraq is likely to disintegrate as a state.

Removing Saddam

The regime in Baghdad is a ruthless dictatorship which rests on a system and not just one man. It is true that Saddam has increasingly taken all power into his own hands, but Iraq is no banana republic one-man dictatorship. Control of the state apparatus rests on the Ba'ath party and a variety of secret police, paramilitary, and mass organizations. Even if Saddam were to be killed or overthrown by his colleagues the regime could continue.

Iraq's long-term ambitions to control the Persian Gulf and rule the Arab world go back to the 1930s, when Iraqi ideologists began portraying their country as the Prussia of the Middle East. Saddam has built on -- not created -- an attitude already inculcated into the elite and the people. He has tried to create a specific Iraqi nationalism in order to unite the country's disparate population -- Sunni and Shi'a Muslim Arabs and Kurds.

Nonetheless, Saddam is the motivating force behind Iraq's ambition and aggression during the last decade. A post-Saddam Iraq -- like the post-Stalin Soviet Union and post-Khomeini Iran -- would have very different, more cautious, policies. The allies' ability to remove Saddam would give the new Iraqi rulers incentive to be more careful, while the damage of the war would make them weaker.

Iraq is not about to become a democracy, even in the best possible outcome of the war. Nor will it abandon its long-term ambitions. However, these goals would be set back a number of years. Furthermore, there would be no Iraqi leader who could claim to have defeated America or who would have popularity outside his own borders. Therefore, the removal of Saddam's rule is both a necessity and a partial solution to some current problems, but would not make Iraq either moderate or pragmatic once the immediate material and political damage is repaired. Iraq, unlike post-1945 Japan or Germany, will not entirely change its ways

The Post-War Regional Balance

Iraq's defeat will not have a major destabilizing effect on the balance of power in the region. However the war ends, Iraq's geopolitical weight will still be considerable. It would remain the only Arab state combining a large population and enormous oil wealth. Baghdad will still enjoy a relatively advanced workforce and infrastructure.

Moreover, at least in the short term, there is no local state likely to become a dangerous successor of Iraqi aggression, taking advantage of a power vacuum. In the Soviet Union, the growing domestic power of the army and security forces is a real concern. But, pre-occupied with internal turmoil and memories of the Afghanistan debacle, the USSR will be hardpressed to reassert any militaristic ambitions in the Gulf. Iran, for the time being, remains too weak militarily to take advantage of an Iraqi defeat. The same applies to Saudi Arabia. Syria has severe domestic problems and needs Saudi financial aid. Most important, it is the United States, if anyone, that will be the prime regional power maintaining a balance.

The idea that the allies should exercise great restraint in attacking Iraq's military might because its defeat would be counterproductive is seriously mistaken. This also builds on the false premise that the West's interests in the Arab world require it to demonstrate magnanimity with radical Middle Eastern states. In fact, the need is to demonstrate the overwhelming power of the United States so that regional radicals will -- as Libya and Iran have already done -- seek to avoid confrontations.

The Future of Iraq

The partition of Iraq is extremely unlikely. Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait have no claims on Iraqi territory. Only extreme rightist fringe groups have raised such ideas in Turkey, which hardly wants to acquire a larger Kurdish minority by adding the population of northern Iraq. At most, Iran might attempt to take a very small fraction of Iraqi territory -- border areas contested in their long war. Iran as well as Turkey would oppose carving a Kurdish state from Iraq, lest it subvert and inspire their own Kurds.

In short, the war is unlikely to change regional boundaries and far more probable to enhance the balance of power in the Persian Gulf. As for Iraq, merely liberating Kuwait at this point is insufficient. But changing the regime in Baghdad to something qualitatively different is too ambitious. Either Saddam's party colleagues or army generals will remove him in order to survive, or the alliance will be forced to continue fighting until the regime itself is brought down.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notable, Revolutionaries* (Policy Focus #12, 1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics* (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming *Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO*. ❖

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