

# Negotiating with Iraq: Changing the Balance of Risks

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Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.

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## Brief Analysis

**W**hen Secretary of State James Baker meets Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz in Geneva on Wednesday, hope remains that Iraq will finally agree to withdraw from Kuwait. But throughout the Gulf crisis, Western observers have tended to underestimate Saddam Hussein's willingness to go to war and overestimate his willingness to back down. What these observers fail to appreciate is that, from Saddam's standpoint, there are worse things than war, and retreat is one of them.

### The Risks of War: Saddam's Calculations

In calculating the risks of continuing to confront the United States, Iraq's leadership has three main lines of argument:

- The United States may not go to war. President Bush may be bluffing, Congressional opposition and domestic public opinion could restrain him, and the objections of the European and Arab allies can deter him. By stalling for time, Saddam may believe he can outwait the Americans altogether. In short, Iraq can risk war without necessarily having to go to war.
- Even if war breaks out, Iraq may not be decisively defeated even though it would suffer severely. After all, Saddam survived an eight-year long war with Iran. He is a great believer that victory eventually comes to the side willing to suffer most. It is not unreasonable -- even if mistaken -- for Iraq to assume that it can hold the U.S. and allied ground forces in northern Kuwait or southern Iraq. The war will bog down and drag out, heavy casualties will be inflicted on the United States, and there will be no decisive triumph for Washington. In this case, Saddam can expect a negotiated settlement that will leave him with part of his gains and a great deal of prestige in the Arab world.
- Even if Iraq is driven from Kuwait by force in short order, Saddam will be able to sue for peace and survive in power. In this event, Iraq will lose Kuwait. But this, after all, is the price being demanded of it now, prior to any test of arms. In short, Saddam may calculate that a military defeat may only cost Iraq what it is being asked to give up anyway. Of course, there will be other costs, of lives, resources, and infrastructure, but this does not concern Saddam. And again, even if he loses, he would become the Arab world's hero for defying and fighting the superpower.

Saddam may realize that a war could also end with the destruction of his regime and his death, but he does not yet see this as a likely outcome. One of the three scenarios outlined above seems far more probable. And compared to these, a unilateral retreat from Kuwait does not look attractive at all, especially if Saddam reasons that the Americans will attack him in any case, leaving him without Kuwait and economically vulnerable. A unilateral withdrawal could also bring Saddam's regime under increased internal threat. Opponents of the government may decide that if Saddam lost his nerve with the Americans, he might be vulnerable if challenged by them.

Thus, in Saddam's mind, the most likely alternative to refusing to compromise and being willing to risk war is to be proven a coward, to be weakened at home, and to invite another stage of international pressure that will further undermine his regime and forever sacrifice his ambition to dominate the Arab world.

### "Pragmatism" and the Middle East

Western miscalculation has often led to a misunderstanding of the nature of Middle East pragmatism. Arab leaders are practical, generally speaking, being guided by self-interest rather than fanaticism. Yet their interpretation of self-interest and the objective circumstances is often quite different from what outside observers perceive.

This applies to Yasser Arafat and Hafez al-Assad as well as Saddam Hussein. Westerners consider it "pragmatic" for Arafat to give up his larger ideological ambitions and do what is necessary to make peace with Israel and win a Palestinian homeland. But for Arafat it is also very practical to take into account the complaints of militant PLO members and splinter groups, the pressures of Arab states, and the demands of rank-and-file constituents. Pragmatism is in the eye of the beholder.

Similarly, Assad might be expected to moderate his policies in order to receive Saudi subsidies, Western aid, and American approval. Yet he must also take into consideration domestic, elite, and inter-Arab politics as well as geopolitical factors that inhibit him from moderation.

This kind of misperception is what made many American observers conclude that Iraq would moderate its policies in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war. To many it seemed inevitable that Saddam would have to scale-back his army, concentrate his resources on domestic reconstruction, and try to maintain good relations with his rich neighbors in the Gulf.

But none of this happened. Saddam remains the same man who ruthlessly imposed his rule on Iraq, invaded Iran, gassed the Kurds, and seized Kuwait. He knows how to retreat, as he proved in his abortive effort to appease Iran in the wake of the Kuwait crisis. But he only backs off when he has a clear, logical reason to do so. Such a rationale is still lacking in the current confrontation with the United States.

Perhaps the only U.S. option then, short of war, is to make it clear that a war will cost Saddam not only Kuwait but also his rule within Iraq. Only this threat, coupled with the determination to carry it out, will give Saddam sufficient incentive to back 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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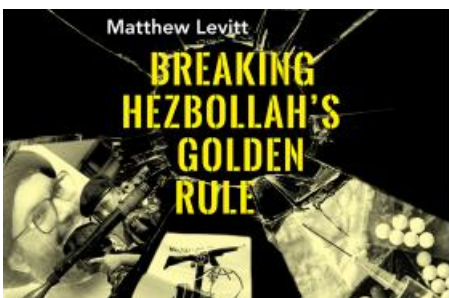
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