

The U.S.-Iraq Talks: Dealing with Saddam

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Brief Analysis

The upcoming U.S.-Iraq talks on the Gulf crisis pose a real challenge to President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker. Paradoxically, the more eager the United States appears for a peaceful solution to the crisis, the less chance there is of achieving the objective of Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait short of war. Saddam Hussein is a tough, but realistic, negotiator. The point is to convince him that his being tough now is totally unrealistic.

Saddam's Strategy

Since the beginning of the crisis, Saddam has acted as if he believes that America will not fight and does not have the stamina to continue the confrontation for very long. This explains why he is playing for time. As each month goes by, Iraq reasons, it is harder for President Bush to hold together his international alliance and to hold off domestic opposition to war.

Furthermore, as U.S.-Iraq talks begin, Baghdad is already seeking a separate deal with Saudi Arabia. The Saudis, worried that the Americans are giving ground, are thus tempted to begin making concessions themselves before the United States abandons them to the wrath of Saddam.

Despite all the enthusiasm in the West for the talks and competing scenarios of a quick, peaceful settlement, there has been no sign in Baghdad that Iraq is actually willing to withdraw from Kuwait. This wishful thinking may play into Saddam's hands, allowing him to buy time and get beyond the United Nations' January 15 deadline for Iraqi withdrawal.

Saddam's aim is to keep Kuwait and avoid war. At the moment, he seems to think this is possible. The only way to change his mind is to convince him -- and everyone around him -- that if Iraq does not withdraw the result will be the destruction of its armed forces and its industrial infrastructure. The fact that the United States has more airplanes than Iraq is irrelevant. The real question is: does Saddam believe the United States is prepared to use them?

Iraq's actions indicate that it wants to drag out negotiations for many months -- beginning this psychological warfare by getting the United States to break its own deadline for military action. This is not just a case of tough bargaining

on Iraq's part but a disinclination to bargain at all and to emerge, ultimately, with a total victory in keeping Kuwait.

Aside from a continued hope in total success, Saddam and his regime have another incentive to avoid a complete withdrawal from Kuwait. A great deal of the regime's legitimacy rests on intimidation, both of its own citizens and of its neighbors. The Iraqi public's awe toward the ruling elite -- a necessary component in the regime's survival -- will be shattered if Saddam appears cowardly. Avoiding this outcome may be more important for him than avoiding the destruction of his military machine.

A Peaceful Resolution: Two Options

Thus, Iraq remains uninterested in negotiating a withdrawal from Kuwait except on terms that allow the regime to emerge as stronger, domestically and internationally, than it was before invading Kuwait. This could happen if Saddam can claim victory by obtaining territory, money, strategic islands, and U.S. concessions on the Palestinian issue. The "small" border changes and leases which Iraq might accept amount to twenty to thirty percent of Kuwait's territory. Furthermore, negotiations could split the alliance since terms acceptable to Egypt would be passionately rejected by Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and even Iran (which will be threatened by an Iraqi military presence on the disputed islands).

If Iraq obtains this booty, Saddam will be even more of a threat to the United States, the Gulf Arabs, and Israel. His increased prestige will make him an Arab hero, prompt Saudi Arabia and its neighbors toward future appeasement, and perhaps make inevitable a future Iraq-Israel war.

If the United States gives Iraq large concessions to obtain a quick settlement, this route may well be successful in avoiding war. Even then, however, Iraq would draw out the process in the hope of outwitting the United States. And Iraq's Arab neighbors might outbid Washington in a spiral of retreats which could only end with the collapse of the anti-Iraq coalition.

Even if this strategy succeeded in gaining Iraqi withdrawal from part of Kuwait, it is only buying trouble for the future. Having learned nothing from this experience -- or only concluding that it was profitable -- new Iraqi advances will come quickly. In a few years, Iraq will almost certainly possess nuclear weapons no matter what non-proliferation efforts are taken by the West.

The alternative strategy for getting Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait peacefully is to confront him with such overwhelming force and the will to use it that he can retreat without seeming to be a coward. The ruling elite and substantial sections of the Iraqi people must feel that their survival is at stake and Saddam is acting to save them. In this case, minimal facesaving for Iraq will not provide material advantages that can be the springboard for new aggression.

The choice for the United States need not be war against Iraq, but it must be a process of extremely tough bargaining on tight deadlines. Wishful thinking about Baghdad's flexibility must be subordinated to convincing Saddam and his people that withdrawal is their only option.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notables, 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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