

# Iraq's Endgame Strategy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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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.



## Brief Analysis

**H**ow to respond to the growing threat of war emanating from the United States presents Saddam Hussein with one of the major decisions of his career. It seems logical, but not inevitable, that he will now try to stall for time by offering to negotiate about a possible Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. Talk of an Arab summit sponsored by Morocco and other feelers may be indicating Iraq is preparing a new diplomatic strategy.

So far, Saddam Hussein has chosen to believe that the United States is bluffing about fighting him. Economic sanctions and political isolation are causing Iraq some pain, but it has not been hard for Baghdad to sustain this pressure. Iraq could easily continue under these conditions for a year or more. In this context, the Iraqi leadership thought that it could out-wait and outwit the United States. After all, Washington lacked staying power to fight conflicts in Lebanon and Vietnam. Iraq, in contrast, can argue that it sustained a terrible eight-year-long war against Iran and in the end emerged victorious.

But with the latest U.S. troop build-up, along with open talk about a possible American attack in January, it is harder -- though not impossible -- for Saddam still to hope he can outwait the anti-Iraq coalition. Other danger signs for him include Soviet warnings that Moscow might come to support the use of force; more troops being sent by Egypt and Syria; the continued unity of the U.S.-led alliance; a sharp decline in Jordan's willingness to break sanctions; and the lack of any help from Iran.

## Iraqi Alternatives

Essentially, Iraq now has three options to respond to this situation:

### 1. Lash out at its enemies and create diversions

Iraq has a range of instruments for striking its enemies. It might launch missiles at Israel or Saudi oil fields, seize the U.S. embassy in Kuwait, injure or kill Western hostages, support terrorist attacks, or try to destabilize Jordan. The viability and appeal of these options, however, are often exaggerated in the Western media. For example, Iraqi missiles are neither accurate nor carry large warheads and thus could inflict little damage on Israel. Iraq, however, would have to expect ferocious Israeli retaliation. Arab support for Iraq's position has, at best, peaked. There are relatively few demonstrations and no one has defected from the anti-Saddam side. Most important is the probability that any major provocation would produce and justify a U.S. counterattack. This is precisely the danger Saddam is

trying to avoid. Moreover, none of these offensive measures would rescue Iraq from its current dangerous position. Consequently, unless a U.S. attack already appears imminent, Iraq will probably refrain from such extreme acts.

## 2. Continue the stalling policy

This is a more attractive option for Saddam than the idea of launching an offensive. Iraq would continue to try to divide the coalition against it by selective release of hostages and by hinting at a willingness to negotiate. To avoid a U.S. attack, Saddam could go on making threats of mobilizing the Arab and Islamic world against the United States. He could warn of his ability to inflict heavy casualties on any attacking forces. There will be talk of new Iraqi super-weapons, particularly bacteriological and nuclear arms, that would severely punish any assailant. Saddam expressed these ideas in his most recent major speech, November 3: The enemy may "occupy this or that chunk of Iraq . . . They may be able to occupy a stretch of land of [Iraqi] Kuwait. But you must know that we have staying power in battle."

Iraq will also continue to talk of its eagerness for a diplomatic -- preferably Arab solution -- and demand a prior withdrawal of Israel from the West Bank and Gaza and of Syria from Lebanon. But, most importantly, Saddam will not change his policy of refusing to talk about an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait under any conditions. The purpose of this policy is not to attain a negotiated settlement but to keep Kuwait.

## Dangling the Bait

### 3. A real diplomatic initiative

If Saddam Hussein feels that there is a serious and imminent danger of a U.S. attack, he could launch a diplomatic initiative. The key element of any such action must be that, if certain conditions are met, Iraq might withdraw from Kuwait. It must be stressed that no previous official Iraqi statements have ever suggested this outcome. Even such an offer would not mean Iraq is really willing to bargain about a retreat from Kuwait. This action's real purpose could well be to buy time or to split the anti-Iraq coalition. Iraq's terms might be too extreme for anyone to meet.

Iraqi officials expressed some concern that their enemies might not be satisfied with a mere withdrawal from Kuwait but will only be content if the regime is overthrown. The anti-Iraq coalition will have to decide whether to continue putting the emphasis on frightening Hussein -- "Withdraw or be destroyed!" -- or in trying to soothe these concerns -- "We only want to free Kuwait!" But given the international turmoil and media headlines Iraq already created by the slightest indications of flexibility, such an offer might be effective at stalling or splitting its enemies. Many European and Middle East countries can argue: How can the United States attack when there are ongoing talks and there is a chance for peaceful settlement?

Such a situation could be devastating for U.S. policy. With growing costs, domestic criticism, and the upcoming need to rotate troops, an Iraqi diplomatic option could block military action by the United States. With the Islamic holy month of Ramadan starting in March, followed by summer heat and then the pilgrimage to Mecca in June, Saddam might buy enough time to hold onto Kuwait for another year.

The main hope of avoiding this outcome is that either Iraq does not realize the cards it is holding or might be so intimidated as to be seriously considering a compromise solution. In that case, it will have to decide its price in territory (oil fields, strategic islands) and money for yielding at least part of Kuwait.

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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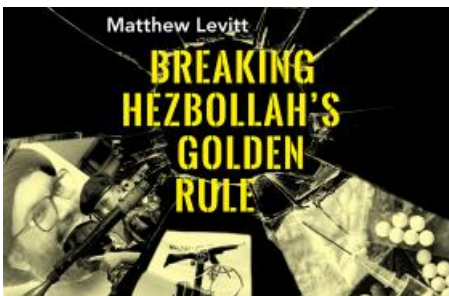
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