

# Is the United States Vulnerable to Saddam?

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Brief Analysis

**A**s the United States enters the third month of its deployment in the Persian Gulf, there is increasing concern about what Saddam Hussein could do to undermine American will or reverse Iraqi diplomatic isolation. Given the array of forces against it and faith in an ability to outlast the world, Iraq appears unlikely to risk action that could lead to a military confrontation. Yet Saddam's belief that he might succeed in splitting the coalition against him -- enhanced by French and Soviet peace feelers -- may be making him dig his heels more deeply into Kuwait's soil. The United States and its coalition partners could be vulnerable if Iraq tried to split the coalition by offering negotiations. The most apparent tools of violence Saddam could use -- to exploit the hostage situation, to involve Israel in the crisis, and to unleash terrorism against American or allied targets -- look less promising for him.

## Real Dangers

The United States does face some real dangers to coalition unity and domestic support in its confrontation with Iraq. If Saddam made a genuine offer to negotiate or began to withdraw his forces, it is likely that some European and Arab allies would press for face-saving concessions to Saddam. Once a negotiating process began, it could continue for a long time, allowing Saddam to strengthen his hold on Kuwait and exploit differences in the international coalition and within the United States. Realization of this danger has been behind the Bush Administration's constant theme that Iraqi withdrawal must be unconditional and not subject to negotiation. President Bush's UN speech may have contributed to this problem by lessening Saddam's perception of the will to use force.

The other danger to American support is the prospective impatience of the American public with the human costs of Operation Desert Shield should full-scale fighting break out. Of course, this is one of the central reasons why American policymakers prefer to give diplomacy a full chance to work. But if Saddam wishes to test this vulnerability, he will have to assume enormous risks to his nation and his regime. For one of the lessons that American policymakers have drawn from the Vietnam experience is that in order to avoid the loss of public support for a war, the U.S. cannot afford a slow escalatory process. Instead, should a war break out, the U.S. will have to use overwhelming force decisively and quickly.

## Use of Hostages

From the outset, Saddam Hussein has attempted to use hostages to undermine American will and split the coalition of nations assembled against Iraq. So far, however, this effort has probably strengthened the international forces against Iraq. The United States has taken the position that its policy will not be affected by concern about the fate of the hostages. In the wake of the 1979-81 Iran hostage crisis and the decade-long experience with American hostages in Lebanon, this policy appears to enjoy domestic support. The American public appears to support a tough line, accepting the argument that concessions would both undermine U.S. policy and encourage future hostage-taking. As long as this policy is followed, it provides American policymakers with a degree of invulnerability to Iraqi attempts to exploit the hostages. Moreover, if Iraq shifts its policy and begins to take direct action to harm the hostages, it is likely to lead to a military response that Iraq prefers to avoid.

Iraq has had somewhat more success with respect to other nations. The Soviet Union has retained some military advisors in Iraq partially because of fears about Soviet civilian hostages. Some have speculated that French President Mitterand's UN initiative was geared to win Iraqi concessions on French hostages. But Iraqi gains have been minimal while the nations involved have continued to support international efforts against it.

#### Shifting Attention to Israel

Iraq has frequently tried to shift the locus of the current dispute from the Persian Gulf to the Arab-Israeli conflict, leading to fears that Iraq might take military action that would bring Israel into the fray and break the back of the anti-Iraq coalition. Among the possibilities raised are Iraqi terrorist action against Israel or Israeli targets; Iraqi missiles or aircraft attacks; or Iraqi troop movements into Jordan. In each of these cases, Israel would likely retaliate against Iraq. Many analysts fear that this might convert the current crisis into an Arab-Israeli conflict and erode Arab support for the anti-Iraqi coalition.

However, on careful examination it appears that Iraq could suffer far more damage from such action than the forces arrayed against it. First, Iraq has every reason to believe that a direct strike against Israel would lead to a devastating Israeli retaliation. After experiencing the destruction of the Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, Iraq undoubtedly believes in the effectiveness of Israeli military action. Second, while an Israeli strike against Iraq might galvanize some popular Arab support for Saddam, it is extremely unlikely that this would have a significant impact on the regimes who oppose him -- Saudi Arabia has explicitly rejected this possibility. They will not cooperate with Iraq in an Arab-Israeli war and if he tries to drag them into such a dangerous conflict Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia would probably become more eager to overthrow him. Third, the United States has explicitly indicated that it would respond to an attack on Israel and that it would come to Jordan's assistance if requested. Thus, an Iraqi move into Jordan or attack on Israel might bring about the very military confrontation which Saddam currently seeks to avoid.

#### Terrorism

Another commonly stated fear is that Iraq will unleash terrorism against U.S. troops, leading to a Beirut-style incident and ensuing U.S. withdrawal. An alternative set of targets would be oil production, processing, or shipping facilities. While it would be unwise to underestimate the possibility of terrorism, it would be more unwise to overestimate its strategic effectiveness.

Unlike the situation in Beirut, the United States has made a huge commitment of forces to the Persian Gulf in defense of what are commonly perceived as truly important American interests -- particularly protecting the free flow of oil from the Middle East. The administration has indicated that any such attacks linked to Iraq would lead to massive retaliation, not surrender, by the United States.

Thus, while Iraq has a number of options, the most promising one is to seek to outwait and divide the international coalition. Baghdad is stressing its determination to keep Kuwait while entertaining those offering it concessions for withdrawal.

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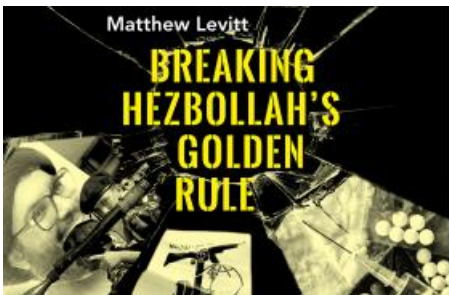
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