

The End of Saddam's Regime

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Brief Analysis

"Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end" -- like Shakespeare's quintessential villain Richard III, Saddam Husayn is being toppled by a combination of forces he called into existence through his own evil actions. Unlike Richard, Saddam's final act will lack heroic qualities. Clearly, the regime's disintegration is accelerating; all that is left is for the final act to be played out.

The Regime's Downward Rush

The freedom of action enjoyed by coalition ground forces is now approaching that of its air forces. Iraq's cities and countryside are open to pretty much any operation the coalition desires, with the primary limitation being the number of troops available. This limitation will be largely erased with the deployment of combat elements of the 4th Infantry Division. Although local resistance and some attrition can still be expected, coalition combat forces can go where they want to go and do what they want to do. The highly disproportionate casualties inflicted on Iraqi forces during operations in Basra and Baghdad over the weekend are evidence of this fact. Basra has basically fallen and Baghdad seems not far behind.

The pillars of the regime -- the Republican Guard, Special Republican Guard, Saddam Fedayeen, and Ba'ath Party -- are experiencing an accelerating collapse as well. All of these organizations have been specially targeted and heavily damaged by coalition operations. Much of this has been done through the precise application of air power, but ground forces are increasingly adding their weight. The heavy casualties inflicted by elements of the 3rd Infantry Division on its first excursion into Baghdad proper, along with the highly successful British operations in Basra, are both indicative of the unmatched firepower and skill that the Iraqis face. Since the beginning of the campaign for Baghdad, the Iraqi defenses have gone from brittle to shattered. Surrenders are increasing, and regime elements now control only the ground they stand on. Increasingly, they are taking cover in shrines, hospitals, and schools -- "no-strike" areas for the coalition -- but this hardly represents the basis for a coherent defense.

Indeed, Iraqi tactics have proven increasingly futile. Piecemeal counterattacks, static defense, kamikaze trucks, and suicide bombers have all failed to alter the grim tactical and operational realities for the Iraqis. On the contrary, these tactics are serving to kill regime diehards in some numbers, a potentially important element for postwar stability.

In a very positive sign, Iraqi civilians are helping the coalition uncover both evidence of the regime's crimes and those responsible for them. For example, elements of the regime have systematically used schools and hospitals for military purposes, including in all likelihood the interrogation and torture of prisoners.

Members of the regime also appear to be seeking avenues of escape. Civilian and military officials have reportedly been fleeing toward Syria with money and valuables. Ordinary citizens are fleeing Baghdad and Basra as well, indicating how the general public may perceive the situation. Similarly, the departure of the Russian ambassador and his staff attests to their assessment of the regime's ability to defend itself. These actions suggest that the regime could collapse at any time due to the effects of several factors: the mounting toll of military operations; an uprising in the Shi'i areas of Baghdad; a military coup; or leadership casualties and flight. Some of these mechanisms appear to have been at work in Basra as well.

Attrition of regime leaders seems to be on the rise and approaching important levels. Ali Hasan al-Majid, known as "Chemical Ali," is apparently dead. A senior Republican Guard commander has been killed, and many other leaders in the regime's key forces have likely been killed in the towns and cities where resistance has been strongest. Several such figures have been captured. Moreover, coalition Special Forces are reportedly hunting key regime figures, and as defenses in Baghdad become more disorganized, their chances for success increase. Even without the capture or killing of the most senior leadership, losses among the lower cadres weaken both the regime's ability to resist and its hold on the Iraqi people.

Underlying all of these aspects is the fundamental failure of Saddam's strategy. The international community, including the UN, did not prevent the coalition of the willing from going to war to change the regime. Low casualties among both coalition forces and the Iraqi civilian population have prevented issues of attrition, morale, and public opinion from becoming a real factor in limiting coalition operations. The speed of coalition operations has not allowed time for external forces -- the Arab street, European opinion, and diplomatic intervention -- to take effect. Such precision execution has also kept the image of the war largely, although not completely, under control.

So what is left for Saddam and his henchmen? The regime still exercises some hold over its forces and the people. Despite the terrific pounding it has taken, the regime carries on in some important ways. It still has a presence in the media. There is still the possibility of serious city fighting in Baghdad; the result of that fighting is not in doubt, only the costs. The United States has ruled out anything but unconditional surrender, and neither France, Russia, nor the UN are likely to change that stance.

The End Game

Saddam has avoided actions that would be tantamount to regime suicide, leaving much infrastructure in place, refraining from causing ecological disasters, and avoiding massive retaliation by the coalition or others for the use of weapons of mass destruction. These "non-actions" suggest that he planned to be around after the war. But what role is he playing now? Publicly the regime has mounted a "theater of leadership," presenting Saddam in videotaped meetings and addresses, messages read by regime officials exhorting the people to fight, and staged public appearances. All of these measures have had an aura of unreality about them. Assuming he is still alive, Saddam's role is in reality a "false-heroic" one. Despite his titles and military imagery, he will not die leading the defense of Iraq, Baghdad, or anything else. Because he is a survivor above all else, attempted flight or, in extremis, surrender, seem more likely. The regime is manipulating loyalty and fear to keep its supporters fighting, allowing Iraqis to die in some numbers so that the leadership will be able to choose one of these options. Saddam and others may already have positioned themselves for a getaway, with Syria being the most likely exit route.

Saddam's escape, perhaps even his capture, would not be healthy for the postwar situation. His end must be conclusive and public. The same applies to other key regime figures. The coalition must demonstrate to all the

participants in, and audiences of, this war that the regime and its principal figures are gone, for good. There should be no remaining figures to serve as rallying points for postwar opposition and resistance. Similarly, if there is no clear-cut end, no "surrender," restoring order in Iraqi society could prove difficult, even if the coalition is able to end organized resistance; this possibility makes the creation of a credible regime in situ an important step. Moreover, even if the regime ceases to exist, a substructure of its cadres could live on in post-Saddam Iraq. Hence, people and organizations associated with the regime must be thoroughly purged after the war.

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