Fighting the War to Win the Peace in a Post-Saddam Iraq

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Brief Analysis

As the coalition prepares for the decisive phase of the war against Saddam Husayn's regime, it is crucial that combat operations set the conditions for achieving U.S. war aims and -- just as important -- winning the peace afterward. The principal war aims are: 1) eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD); 2) achieving regime change; and 3) setting the conditions for the emergence of a stable, broad-based post-Saddam government. Moreover, prospects for winning the peace will be greatly enhanced if the coalition moves quickly to improve postwar living conditions for the largest possible number of Iraqis; to establish a modicum of stability in the country; and to create conditions wherein coalition forces are viewed not as occupiers, but as partners for building a new Iraq. How should the coalition fight the war in order to achieve these objectives?

Achieve Decisive Victory

The coalition must decisively defeat the regime and its forces, leaving them bowed, broken, and incapable of resuming operations against coalition forces or subverting a new Iraqi government. Paradoxically, a difficult war could improve prospects for an easy peace. A rapid collapse of the regime during the first days of the war could have prevented the coalition from achieving such a decisive victory and created problems down the road. The progress of the war to date, whether slower than expected or "on plan," is allowing the coalition to defeat the regime comprehensively and inflict heavy losses on its most hardcore elements. If coalition forces can finish the campaign without large numbers of civilian casualties, they will create more favorable conditions for postwar policy successes.

Keep the War Short

The longer the war lasts, the more likely it is that coalition forces will make missteps that generate antipathy among the Iraqi people. Paradoxically, while time is an ally in efforts to decisively defeat the regime, it is an enemy in efforts to minimize harm to civilians, win Iraqi "hearts and minds," and limit the impact of the regime's efforts to stir up passions in the Arab world against the coalition and the established regional political order.

Eliminate Key Members of the Regime

The coalition must do everything possible to kill or apprehend senior members of the regime. Nothing will more quickly establish U.S. credibility and break the barrier of fear that holds the Iraqi people in thrall than the demonstrable demise of Saddam Husayn and his chief lieutenants. In addition, the coalition must pursue key members of the Iraqi security services; due to their temperament and training, such individuals could lead a postwar resistance against coalition forces and subvert a post-Saddam government.

Seize and Secure WMD

The coalition must, to the greatest extent possible, prevent the diversion of Iraqi WMD to elements of the regime that may be planning an insurgency against coalition forces or a comeback after the regime has been toppled. It must also prevent the leakage of WMD or personnel with knowledge of how to produce or weaponize related materiel to neighboring states or terrorist groups. Toward this end, coalition forces must apprehend officials, scientists, and industrialists involved in Iraq's WMD programs in order to break up the intellectual basis for such programs and prevent these individuals from seeking similar reemployment elsewhere.

Gain the Confidence of the Iraqi People

Gaining and keeping the confidence of the Iraqi public will be necessary if the coalition is to succeed in the reconstruction and political transformation of Iraq. Many Iraqis are wary, if not outwardly hostile, toward the coalition, partly out of fear of Saddam's regime, but mostly due to bitterness over their perceived abandonment by the United States in 1991, the impact of sanctions, and suspicions regarding U.S. motivations (i.e., fears that Washington covets Iraq's oil). The coalition will have to overcome this legacy of mistrust. Coalition forces must avoid heavy-handed behavior toward Iraqi civilians, even though Iraqi tactics (e.g., use of soldiers in civilian clothes and suicide bombers) will make this difficult and coalition security measures will likely be perceived as onerous and objectionable. Coalition forces must also continue to adhere to significant restrictions on targeting in order to minimize collateral damage. Moreover, the coalition must commence large-scale humanitarian assistance operations as soon as is feasible, in as many areas as possible, in order to begin changing Iraqi attitudes. Although it may not be possible to win the hearts and minds of many Iraqis, it may be possible to establish a productive partnership founded on shared interests in Iraq's reconstruction and transformation.

Prevent Retribution and Score Settling

One of the legacies of Saddam's rule is deep enmity across virtually all elements of Iraqi society. Tribal, sectarian, and ethnic antagonism and suspicion have been fostered by regime policies and have left a web of old scores to be settled and outrages to be avenged, on both the individual and group levels. Preventing violence will be critical to achieving stability in Iraq; preserving the country's civilian infrastructure; preventing the reopening of old wounds and the creation of new ones; and facilitating a transition to effective local rule. This requirement will place severe demands on coalition administrators to identify, head off, settle, or suppress communal violence while adroitly avoiding the appearance of favoritism toward any particular group.

Deter Intervention by Meddling Neighbors

Iraq's neighbors have a significant stake in the outcome of the war, and some may be tempted to influence its course or aftermath. Washington has publicly warned Syria and Iran against troublemaking. Syria has reportedly provided military equipment to Iraq, allowed Arab war volunteers to transit its territory, provided refuge to the families of senior Iraqi officials, and accepted Iraqi WMD-related materials for safe-keeping. Doubtlessly, Iran is employing intelligence and special forces personnel along its border and inside Iraq to obtain information and influence events in Iraq. The injection of Iranian-backed Shi'i forces -- the Badr Corps -- into what promises to be a fragile and volatile postwar situation in southern Iraq could be a major challenge for the coalition. In the north, Turkish intentions

remain unclear. Beyond its decision to deny access to coalition ground forces, Turkey has avoided actions that would further complicate coalition operations. The Turks are most concerned that a war could result in autonomy or independence for Iraq's Kurds. An expanding coalition presence in northern Iraq could make it more difficult and expensive for Turkey to intervene, but might not suffice to deter such an eventuality.

Conclusion

The coalition faces difficult challenges as it tries to fight the war in a way that enables it to win the peace. A quick defeat of the regime could lead to an unstable peace. Conversely, a comprehensive victory could establish the preconditions for a more stable peace, but getting there would take time and would likely exact a higher toll on the Iraqi people, possibly engendering resentment against the coalition. It could also provide the regime's propaganda machine with additional opportunities to incite the Arab street, with unforeseeable long-term consequences for the stability of friendly regimes in the region. How the United States fights the remainder of the war will determine how these contradictions are resolved, and will have profound implications for the outcome of the war and the nature of the peace that will follow.

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