

The Complexities of a Military Coup against Saddam

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



Brief Analysis

There has been much speculation that under certain circumstances -- either just before a war or in the early stages of a coalition operation -- some elements of the Iraqi military would move against Saddam Husayn and his regime. A coup against Saddam would in fact be a highly complex event with uncertain benefits for the coalition. Whether or not such an action were to begin before or after the onset of war, specific requirements would have to be met and serious obstacles overcome in order to achieve a successful end result. The history of failed coups against Saddam suggests just how uncertain the prospects would be for such a result.

Requirements

There must be some motivation for taking the enormous risks inherent in a coup. Self or group interest, revenge, nationalism, honor, or morality are all reasons Iraqi commanders might decide to move against Saddam's regime. Most likely, commanders would be motivated by a mixture of these elements, for example, the hope of improving their own survival prospects in a post-Saddam scenario, combined with deep feelings of moral opposition to the regime.

The conspirators must have some measure of agreement on an objective: to replace Saddam and his inner circle, to sweep the entire regime away, or to simply ward off defeat and occupation.

Secrecy must be maintained. In plotting against such a formidable system, there is an inherent tension between the number of complicit plotters and the security of the plot itself; having too few in the loop risks ineffective coordination and execution, while having too many risks discovery. Tension also exists between the time needed to plan and prepare a coup, and the opportunity for detection. Coup plans long in the making are more likely to be either betrayed or discovered.

Coup forces must have adequate combat power to engage whatever military and security elements remain loyal to the regime and to secure the apparatus of state control. In the Iraqi context, this is a particularly steep requirement because of the extensive set of military, paramilitary, and security forces that Saddam could activate to counter a coup, as well as the large and overlapping organizations of the state that would have to be brought under control.

There must be an opportunity to act. Some contexts are better than others for a coup, and -- if Iraqi history is any guide -- minimal prospects will present themselves unless the regime is shaken, as it was in 1998 during Operation

Desert Fox. On the other hand, once the regime is under attack implementing any plan may prove more difficult. For example, "shock and awe" may affect those intending to move against the regime under the cover of coalition operations. In this context, the location of leaders -- the principal targets in any coup -- may also become more uncertain, military movement and communication more difficult, and regime authority less centralized, all making it more difficult for a coup to proceed smoothly and rapidly.

Key players -- individuals or units -- in the coup must be close enough to the centers of power to act rapidly. Minimizing the warning and reaction time of the regime and, if coalition operations are underway, minimizing exposure to attack, will be important. There could actually be a "race" between coup forces and coalition forces advancing on Baghdad.

Related to proximity is the requirement for mobility. Coup leaders and forces must be able to move quickly and coherently toward important targets. They must have tactical mobility and be able to move under fire, implying that armored or mechanized force will be needed. Of course, the movement of such units will also draw the most interest from, and potential attacks by, the coalition.

Coup plotters face formidable knowledge requirements. They must know who and what to secure and where the key leadership targets will be at the time of the plot's execution. They must know where key personalities and organizations stand relative to the regime, as well as what these elements are likely to do during the coup: join, wait, or fight on the side of the regime.

Coup forces must be organized for the mission, have a coherent plan for the operation, and achieve coordination with appropriate military, political, and possibly external elements.

The conspirators must be both decisive and cold-blooded. They must act at the precise time with the necessary initiative, carrying out the likely requirement -- killing -- in order to accomplish the mission. Unless coup participants can match the determination and ruthlessness of the regime they will probably fail. Ruthlessness is not lacking among Iraqi military commanders, but decisiveness and initiative are rarer qualities.

Obstacles

A coup that meets the above requirements for success will still face formidable obstacles, some obvious and others more subtle.

Security forces loyal to Saddam must be neutralized. But the existence of large and overlapping security, military, and paramilitary organizations close to the regime makes it likely that at least some of these forces would resist. This could mean serious fighting with an uncertain outcome. The security services themselves represent a special problem in the current context, in that they have been alerted to the danger of a coup and are doubtlessly meticulous in their search for conspiracies.

The personal security measures for Saddam and other senior leaders -- multifaceted and sophisticated even under normal circumstances -- will likely be enhanced in a war context, making it even more difficult to fix leadership locations and anticipate movements. Failure to rapidly secure the top leadership will doom the coup.

A coup will have its own psychological environment in which issues of loyalty, fear, honor, and Saddam's personal psychological dominance will play out. Even at the last minute, circumstances can change and plotters can alter their commitments, depending upon individual risk-taking preferences. How individuals react at the decisive moment will be unpredictable.

Implications

The complexity of conducting a serious military stroke against Saddam Husayn's regime suggests certain implications. First a "staff coup," or a move by headquarters personnel or elements, is unlikely to be successful. Staff

officers can plan, organize, and even launch a coup, but they cannot sustain it against organized and disciplined regime forces. Combat power is needed, which must come from units close to Baghdad. This suggests that only Republican Guard elements can realistically serve as the basis for a robust coup. Some combination of staff -- possibly from Republican Guard corps headquarters located north and south of Baghdad and from one or more of the Guard divisions in central Iraq -- would have the best chance. Combat forces below the division level would likely be too small, and regular Iraqi armed forces are too far away.

For the coalition, a coup attempt -- whether before or during an operation -- could prove embarrassing. With a coup underway, the coalition would be challenged to determine exactly what was going on, who was involved, what chances there were for success, and what to do about it. All of these determinations would have to be made in a compressed timeframe -- such as the July 1944 failed coup attempt against the Nazi regime in Berlin, which lasted only about twelve hours -- without much time for intelligence collection, decisionmaking, or implementation.

Finally, at the end of the day, someone unattractive could emerge as the winner. In this scenario, the coalition might face a successor loudly proclaiming the end of Saddam but still highly complicit in the crimes of the regime. Who that someone might be and what might happen as the coup progresses is a subject for follow-on analysis.

Jeffrey White, a retired U.S. government intelligence analyst specializing in Iraq military and security affairs, is an associate of The Washington Institute.

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