

# How to Build a New Iraq after Saddam

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Sep 1, 2002

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is the Morningstar Senior Fellow and Research Counselor at The Washington Institute.



In-Depth Reports

## INTRODUCTION

Whether changing the regime in Baghdad is a worthwhile U.S. policy depends in no small part on defining the shape that Iraq would most likely assume following Saddam Husayn's removal. Among other central objectives, any strategy for regime change should include the long-term goal of creating a stable and friendly Iraq. Toward this end, the five essays in this monograph explore the most urgent challenges that a post-Saddam Iraq would likely present. Although this study is not predicated on any one assumption about the possible mechanisms of regime change, the authors do address many of the special problems that would arise if Saddam were removed by means of a U.S. invasion. They also discuss measures that could be taken to reduce potential future threats from Iraq.

### Territorial Integrity

Despite their many serious concerns about how Iraq will fare after Saddam, the authors seem to agree that preserving Iraq's territorial integrity should not pose a major challenge. This view flies in the face of a frequently heard argument in the West, where many analysts warn of the serious danger that a post-Saddam Iraq could split into three parts along ethnic lines: Kurdish, Shi'i Arab, and Sunni Arab.(1)

One reason why Iraq is likely to remain intact is that it is entirely dependent on oil income. Control of Iraq's oil income means control of Iraq itself; it is a powerful glue holding the country together. This factor would become all the more important if Iraq were able to increase oil production to at least six million barrels per day within the first decade after Saddam's removal; even at the modest price of \$15 per barrel, this production level would generate nearly \$33 billion in annual revenue. None of the three major Iraqi ethnic groups would be willing to forego a share of such revenue by seceding.

For example, the most obvious candidates for independence are the Kurds. Yet, even those who call for an independent Kurdistan insist that any such entity be granted control over the oil fields near the present Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq -- a scenario that the rest of the country would never accept.

Moreover, if non-Kurdish Iraqis were too weak and divided to prevent a Kurdish bid for independence, the Kurds would still face the insurmountable opposition of Turkey. The broad consensus among the Turkish public and elite

is that an independent Kurdistan carved from northern Iraq would destabilize Kurdish-majority southeastern Turkey, rekindling the violence in which 30,000 Turks and Kurds died during the 1990s. Even in the unlikely event that Iran and Syria acquiesced to the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey would almost certainly use military force to prevent the breakup of Iraq, with strong political support from the Arab world.

Given these factors, Iraq's territorial integrity would probably remain unaffected in the wake of Saddam's removal. In fact, Iraq's heavy dependence on oil suggests that the country would continue its modern tradition of strong central governments, much like other oil-dependent countries worldwide. Unfortunately, oil-rich states are typically run by authoritarians who use oil income to preserve their undemocratic rule; modern Iraq is no exception, having seen one strongman after another ignore representative institutions. Moreover, the central role of oil does not necessarily bode well for political stability; immense oil riches are such a tempting prize that various groups may contest for control over the state.

### Maintaining Stability

In fact, political instability is a much more substantial threat than the division of Iraq into ethnic ministates. Most worrisome is the prospect of revolving-door governments; after all, Iraq experienced a succession of bloody coups from 1958 until Saddam consolidated power in the late 1970s. After his removal, the cycle of coups could resume for a number of reasons (e.g., the strong tribal influences among the army officer corps or the highly competitive relationship between the major tribes). In the worst-case scenario, Iraq could perhaps come to resemble 1960s-era Syria, where coups were so frequent that the government ceased to function effectively, while foreign forces meddled by backing different groups of officers. That would be a tragedy for the Iraqi people and a source of instability for the entire region, not least because Iraq would become ripe ground for radical movements promising to resurrect the country's greatness.

Revolving-door Iraqi governments would pose a host of problems for U.S. policymakers as well. These problems could prove even more challenging than those that would arise if the United States were to occupy Iraq in the style of post-World War II Germany and Japan. Planning for potential occupation does not necessarily cover the worst-case scenario that could emerge following regime change. In fact, the problems posed by successive coups would be vastly different from those posed by a lengthy Allied-style occupation and, in their own ways, just as complicated.

For example, an initial coup could occur during the course of U.S. military operations. That is, once U.S. forces degraded the Iraqi Republican Guard (RG) and Special Republican Guard (SRG), commanders in the regular army could seize the opportunity to topple Saddam before the United States destroyed them as well. Such a circumstance would put Washington in a difficult position. For instance, these commanders could prove unwilling to surrender Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which so many in the Iraqi military see as the principal means by which their country was saved from conquest by Iran during the 1980s. Alternately, a group of generals could announce that they were taking charge at a time when Saddam's whereabouts were unknown and when significant military forces were still fighting on his behalf; in this case, the United States would have to decide whether or not to provide military support to potentially unfamiliar new leaders.

Even if a new regime were established after, rather than during, a U.S. military campaign, the first government to replace Saddam could falter quickly if U.S. forces did not intervene to prevent coups. Faced with vaguely similar situations in Korea and South Vietnam in the 1960s, the United States chose an unsuccessful policy of standing aside during coup attempts. If such a policy were adopted in Iraq, a coup could produce a successor regime that renounces commitments made by an initial, more favorable post-Saddam government (e.g., to give up WMD). For this reason, even if the first new regime were imperfect, the U.S. military would face strong pressure to protect it from coups.

In such a case, however, the United States would in effect become responsible for how well the new Iraqi government

functioned, since American forces would be propping it up. Moreover, given the currently widespread support for democratization, Washington would likely be called on to push Baghdad toward more representative governance. Such an assignment could enlarge exponentially, with the United States eventually attempting to remake Iraqi society into a fully functioning Western-style democracy, as it did during its postwar occupation of Japan.

Short of full occupation, however, U.S. forces would be constrained by the need to respect the sovereignty and authority of a new, imperfect Iraqi government. This constraint would complicate the already difficult task of remaking Iraq, magnifying the potential for nationalist resentment against the U.S. presence. A full occupation would be bad enough in the eyes of the most ardent Iraqi nationalists; an Iraqi government nominally in charge but in practice dependent on U.S. support could fare even worse, particularly if it faced constant U.S. pressure to remake the country along American lines. In short, occupying Iraq would be a challenge, but preserving Iraqi stability and friendship without occupation could prove even more difficult, unless some way were found to minimize the threat of successive post-Saddam coups.

### The Iraqi Military

Just as territorial integrity is not the principal problem that a post-Saddam Iraq would face, so the country's ethnic groups are not necessarily the key social actors to watch. If the risk of successive coups is paramount, then the key actor is the Iraqi army.

Focusing on the role of the army in a post-Saddam Iraq may at first seem unwarranted; after all, Saddam would most likely be toppled by overwhelming U.S.-led military action, which would in turn destroy much of Iraq's own military. Yet, military planners should distinguish between the RG/SRG and the regular Iraqi army when outlining potential campaigns against Saddam. Given their history, the RG and SRG would likely proffer intense resistance in order to preserve Saddam's rule. For example, they continued to fight resolutely in 1991 even after it became readily apparent that Iraq was destined for a crushing defeat at the hands of the U.S.-led coalition. Moreover, soldiers in these units appear to have been carefully selected and trained to ensure their loyalty to Saddam. They have benefited personally from his rule and would have reason to fear bloody reprisals against them in the wake of his removal.

The regular Iraqi army is a different story altogether. Although the United States has ample cause to destroy the RG and SRG, U.S. military leaders may want to spare Iraq's regular army, if for no other reason than the fact that it is a much less potent military opponent than the RG and SRG. In fact, the regular army could decide to stay on the sidelines of a conflict with U.S.-led forces, and many of its soldiers could in turn desert. The United States might even be able to persuade Iraqi brigade or division commanders to defect, especially if Iraqi opposition elements and U.S. Special Forces operatives could assure them that they would be protected from the retaliation of units loyal to Saddam. Although defecting units may have little to offer in the military sense, they could play other important roles in a post-Saddam Iraq.

In fact, few Iraqi institutions would have more potential value in the immediate aftermath of regime change than the regular army. If Iraqi army units were left intact following a U.S.-led military campaign, they could play a key role in maintaining order. Moreover, because much of the Iraqi public still respects the regular army, generals could become important figures in a new government, even if that government were largely civilian and designed by an internationally sponsored reconciliation summit similar to the 2001 Bonn conference on post-Taliban Afghanistan. As a well-regarded, functioning institution in a country whose civil society has been decimated by Saddam's totalitarian regime, the regular army would have much to offer a new government.

Yet, the army could just as well become a den of coup-plotters, with officers from each major tribe seeking control of a post-Saddam central government. Those shaping a post-Saddam Iraq would therefore face a difficult task: taking

advantage of the army's assets while forestalling power bids by its officers. The authors in this study offer several different ideas for solving that problem. Good arguments could be made for placing the regular army under strong civilian leadership, yet there are equally cogent arguments for assigning the army a prominent role in a new government. In any case, this is an especially important issue that requires careful consideration.

### The Advantages of Liberation

Although achieving battlefield success against the Iraqi military would not be easy, ensuring a stable and friendly post-Saddam Iraq would pose even greater challenges. Therefore, this more difficult task should guide the formation of military strategy. A strategy that ensured victory over the Iraqi military would be of little value if it prevented the United States and its allies from achieving their larger goal—stability and responsible leadership for Iraq. Military planners should therefore devote special attention to the potential influence that their operations could have on a post-Saddam Iraq.

As discussed in the previous section, a strategy that targeted the RG and SRG while bypassing the regular army could prove to be of enormous value, despite its risks. An even more ambitious strategy, however, would be to give Iraqis themselves as much credit as possible for the defeat of Saddam's forces, allowing them to feel greatly responsible for his overthrow—in other words, a strategy of liberation rather than occupation. The more pride that Iraqis felt about removing Saddam, the more likely they would be to identify with the government that replaced him. Such a government would have much stronger nationalist credentials than a government imposed by outsiders. For example, consider the role played by French Resistance forces during the Nazi occupation of their country. Although they had little military impact on the eventual liberation of France, their postwar sociopolitical impact was considerable.

A liberation strategy would in part be a matter of presentation, that is, of assigning credit to whatever Iraqi forces participated in the fight against Saddam, even if their role were actually marginal. Such a strategy suggests that the U.S. military role on the ground should be kept as small and discreet as possible, with significant attention devoted to encouraging the defection of Iraqi army units. Those who argue for minimizing the participation of U.S. ground forces have been accused of favoring a cut-rate approach to regime change, as opposed to committing a larger force that would presumably guarantee success. Some adherents of this minimalist strategy may in fact be motivated by cost considerations. Others, however, seem to be concentrating on winning the larger war rather than simply achieving battlefield success. In their view, victory entails the Iraqi people taking significant credit for liberating their country, which would in turn maximize the chances that they would embrace their post-Saddam government.

Whatever the weaknesses of a liberation strategy, it has one vital strength: it concentrates on the most difficult problem of all, that of putting Iraqi society back together after Saddam. Any strategy for regime change should begin with an explanation of how it would deal with this greater challenge and, from there, discuss the best means of replacing the present regime.

Note:

1. The split between Shi'i and Sunni Arabs is about social background, not religious beliefs, so it is more appropriate to view it as an ethnic rather than a religious division; an example of the latter is the division between moderate Muslims and radical Islamists.

•  3 Pages

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Ongoing Debates over Water and Electricity Privatization in Morocco](#)

May 1, 2024



Soufiane Elgoumri

[\(/policy-analysis/ongoing-debates-over-water-and-electricity-privatization-morocco\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Why Israel Should Declare a Unilateral Cease-Fire in Gaza](#)

May 1, 2024



Dennis Ross,  
David Makovsky

[\(/policy-analysis/why-israel-should-declare-unilateral-cease-fire-gaza\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Understanding the IRGC's Past, Present, and Future Use of Syrian Tribal Militias](#)

Apr 30, 2024



Abdullah Hayek

[\(/policy-analysis/understanding-irgcs-past-present-and-future-use-syrian-tribal-militias\)](#)

## TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)