

Military Options Regarding Iraq

Jul 15, 2002



Brief Analysis

In his June 1 West Point address, President George W. Bush announced a policy of using preemption against countries that support terrorism and can deliver weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The preeminent such case in the world is the government of Iraqi president Saddam Husayn. The United States can no longer tolerate that regime and must take action in order to succeed in its broader war on terrorism. A U.S. campaign against Iraq should have four objectives: 1) remove Saddam Husayn and his supporters from power, 2) install an Iraqi government based on democratic principles, 3) rebuild the Iraqi economy, and 4) eliminate Iraq's WMD.

Two principal strategies for accomplishing these objectives have surfaced lately in Washington. First is a massive military campaign along the lines of Operation Desert Storm. One such scenario suggests a classic military intervention using 200,000 ground troops, which would occupy Iraq following an invasion. This sort of operation could require six to nine months to launch, considering that it takes a month or longer to transport each of the five divisions that would be needed, and then more time to move all of the necessary support groups. Moreover, such a war would leave the United States with the responsibility of running Iraq for an indeterminate period after hostilities ended, which could be a considerable commitment.

War of Liberation

A second strategy is a war of liberation: that is, having Iraqi opposition leaders present Iraqi unit commanders with the choice of destruction by U.S. air forces or defection and cooperation against Saddam. Given that choice, and considering how little love the regular army has for Saddam, it is reasonable to expect that a considerable portion of the Iraqi armed forces would defect and work with the United States to overthrow Saddam. Otherwise, they would have to confront U.S. air forces that have benefited from tremendous advances in precision weaponry since 1991, when only 8 percent of the munitions used in the Gulf War fell under that category. Using mostly precision weapons, the United States could conduct a blitz war from the air, wreaking havoc on Iraqi units loyal to Saddam while leaving other Iraqis untouched. Such a campaign would include 30,000-50,000 U.S. ground troops and about 50,000 additional forces for air operations.

This alternative would allow the Iraqi people to participate in their own war of liberation, maximizing the chances for a legitimate and stable post-Saddam government in which defecting Iraqi army commanders play an important role. This approach would also minimize the harm to the Iraqi people and the country's infrastructure, making it easier to restore Iraq to prosperity and normal governance once the military operation was completed and increasing the likelihood of a stable and friendly Iraq.

The most important support for a war of liberation would come from the Iraqi people and the opposition forces. U.S. forces would provide most of the military punch -- i.e., air operations in conjunction with special forces and other limited ground forces -- so it would not matter much if the defecting Iraqi forces lacked significant military capability or had training that was incompatible with that of U.S. forces. The intelligence and strategic support that the Iraqi opposition forces could provide would be more important to the United States than their actual military capability. Such intelligence would certainly increase the ability of U.S. forces to find and destroy important targets.

For example, WMD and related materials can be hidden underneath civilian locations such as hospitals, which would make it politically and morally difficult for U.S. forces to simply destroy these locations from the air. But Iraqi opposition forces could perhaps convince Iraqi army officers that they would be tried as war criminals if they resorted to using any WMD. There is no guarantee that such a strategy would work, but it could effectively defuse any Iraqi WMD capability. After all, Iraqi opposition forces know which Iraqi officers would be in charge of WMD: they have served in the army with them in the past, and some of them likely even grew up together in the same tribes. At the very least, the opposition could advise the United States on which Iraqi officers to worry about and what can be done about them.

The United States may hope for the best in war-of-liberation scenario, but it should also prepare for the worst. If few Iraqi forces defected, the United States would have to greatly increase its own forces, and much violence and destruction would ensue before it could accomplish its military objectives in Iraq.

Weighing the Options in Light of Recent Experience

It is important to bear in mind how difficult it has been for U.S. forces to conduct operations in Afghanistan. Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan is difficult to reach militarily by air or on the ground: it is landlocked and surrounded by countries with which U.S. forces had not worked much in the past. Even so, U.S. forces have provided the main military muscle in the ongoing campaign there. The Northern Alliance opposition forces never really had to fight a major battle against the Taliban, largely because once the United States began its precision strikes on Taliban forces, these forces quickly understood that they would be killed if they stayed in the field, so they fled instead. The same phenomenon can be expected in Iraq as well.

Recruiting coalition partners for any operation against Iraq is also important. The war-of-liberation scenario may facilitate such recruitment, partly because of the small U.S. presence that would be required. Although many of the governments in the region support regime change for Iraq, they have severe political reservations toward a large U.S. ground presence. Launching a Desert Storm-style campaign would require active support and involvement by countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Turkey has a very capable army that serve as part of a coalition of ground forces operating from the north, and Turkish airbases could be a very useful resource for U.S. military operations. Securing cooperation from Saudi Arabia for large-scale operations may be difficult, however, particularly since Saudi Arabia does not necessarily have a strong interest in bringing democracy to Iraq. As for Israel, U.S. forces can on their own do all that can be done to stop Iraqi missile attacks against Israeli territory, so while Israel might wish to get involved in a military campaign against Iraq, it is not clear how much Israeli forces could actually further such a campaign.

Whatever scenario it pursues, the United States will need to convince the Iraqi people and regional states that it is planning a long-term commitment to Iraq after the military campaign is over. International support could be particularly significant in the post-conflict stage. It would be easier to build a stable post-conflict government in Iraq than in Afghanistan, largely because Iraq has long had a strong central government. That said, rebuilding Iraq would be much easier if the war-of-liberation approach were used; such an approach would do less damage to Iraq's infrastructure and would leave the Iraqi army intact enough to play an important role in rebuilding the country.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ayca Ariyoruk.

Policy #635



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