

Post-Saddam Iraq: What Follows a U.S.-Led Intervention?

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Brief Analysis

Among the many advantages of an Iraq without Saddam Husayn, the first clear one is the removal of an unacceptable threat to the Iraqi people. Saddam has shown that he is prepared to put the nation and the region as a whole at risk. At the very least, an Iraq without his regime would be much more friendly to America, and -- given Iraqi oil reserves -- could even lessen American dependence on Saudi oil.

Overthrowing Saddam and the Aftermath

A U.S.-engineered campaign to overthrow Saddam is quite feasible. One helpful factor is that there are many within the regime who despise him and are willing to share intelligence. Part of the success of the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq was that it was able to uncover a wealth of information regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and other facets of the regime by talking with individuals who had firsthand knowledge of such matters. Even measures such as placing a reward on Saddam's head may prove effective if they are accompanied by military action.

If and when Saddam is removed, however, the regime will not crumble immediately. Many Iraqis have invested in the success of the regime, including killing and torturing on its behalf, and they believe their lives depend on Saddam's survival. In addition, Saddam possesses great foresight and has planned for the worst, including U.S. invasion or occupation. In the event of military action, Saddam's army would fight, but since so many of his soldiers are unwilling to wage an extended war on his behalf, the fighting would not last long. Saddam's Republican Guard would fight longer, but they could be defeated easily. Inside Baghdad, however, engagements with Saddam's Special Guard and bodyguards would likely be fiercer and more costly to U.S. forces.

After Saddam is defeated, his special security forces will still pose serious problems. Much of Iraq's WMD arsenal is in the hands of Saddam's Special Security Organization, whose members would likely be among the most determined fighters against U.S. forces. Clearing the country of WMD would require months of scouring possible storage facilities, from hospitals to schools to desert locales. The next step would be to establish a monitoring system, which could itself take a long time. Moreover, even defeated Iraqi security forces may pose a problem; after being forcibly retired, they may become involved in heavy criminal activities in a post-Saddam Iraq.

The Post-Saddam Government

Many different political scenarios could take place during and following a U.S. military intervention. Such intervention could spark a coup d'état by the Republican Guard, with officers seizing all or part of Baghdad and proclaiming themselves the "new kings." This would set the stage for an exclusively military leadership, which would not be desirable. If such a scenario does occur, U.S. troops should march peacefully into Baghdad in order to cement friendship with the new regime and involve additional elements in running the country.

Another option is that no one in Iraq takes the reins of power, in which case the United States would have to fill the vacuum by constructing a new, fairly broadbased Iraqi regime. This strategy offers the best chance of ensuring that

the post-Saddam government is representative and thus reasonably democratic, even though it may not initially be an elected one.

The importance of such efforts becomes clear when one looks at Iraq's history: since 1921, there have been at least forty uprisings in the country, pitting peasants against landlords, tribes against the state, tribes against tribes, and Sunnis, Shi'is, and Kurds against each other. Tribes have become an increasingly important part of Iraqi society in recent years. Today, even those Iraqi citizens without a tribal background often turn to neighborhood shaykhs for representation or assistance with the government. The next government must include representatives of the important tribes -- as well as all the other aforementioned factions -- if it is to represent the Iraqi people accurately.

While internal Iraqi coordination with a U.S.-led effort is important, the prospects that the external Iraqi opposition -- including groups such as the Iraqi National Congress (INC) -- could topple Saddam's regime on their own are dim. Nor would they be likely to start a revolution on their own in southern Iraq; that would begin only when the people there believe that the regime in Baghdad is crumbling. Only then can the opposition's underground activity have a meaningful impact.

The opposition would be crucial in the post-Saddam phase, however -- that is, in rebuilding the country and its institutions. When the time comes for this phase, all involved parties must ensure that the rebuilt institutions of Iraq have a composite structure, drawing on the INC, former Iraqi army officers, and expatriate groups that held power in Iraq at one time or another in the past. The opposition will be crucial to the long democratization process. Moreover, retired army officers with a clean record will play a key legitimizing role. The army is still the most respected Iraqi institution in the eyes of the people; given its considerable problems, however, the army should constitute only one part of the post-Saddam jigsaw. Credible and moderate representatives of the Shi'a community are essential, as are leaders of the Kurdish community. Putting all of these groups together will require great coordination. The major foreseeable problems that should be avoided include blood feuds, official corruption, crime, and the transformation of legitimate, limited tribal autonomy into anarchy. Any new regime must avoid a major crisis of expectations resulting from inflated promises, a mistake made by Saddam in 1988.

Worst-Case Scenarios

Although the best-case scenario for a post-Saddam Iraq -- one that includes a government composed of different segments of Iraqi society -- is feasible, there are also several possible worst-case scenarios. For example, Iraq could experience territorial disintegration due to weak central government. This is not very likely, however, because Baghdad is the center of the country, home to 5 million people and the major infrastructure of industry, services, and government administration. Since Baghdad is 70 percent Shi'a, southern Iraq will need the city as its political and economic center. Thus, both the Shi'is and the Sunnis want a united Iraq.

Although there may be fears that the Shi'is will choose to ally themselves with Iran, nonfundamentalist Shi'is tend to see themselves as Iraqis first and foremost. In other words, they may have good relations with Iran without being subservient to Tehran's interests. Even the Shi'a Islamists in Iraq do not want to unify with Iran. Nevertheless, this latter group may work toward another negative post-Saddam scenario -- that is, an Islamic fundamentalist regime, which would represent only a slight improvement over Saddam's regime.

Certain unique aspects of Shi'a society deserve special mention in any discussion of a new Iraq. Shi'is should be allowed to run their autonomously funded religious and educational systems. If they are to receive government support, however, they should be required to teach history, science, and other general subjects in addition to religious studies. Finally, the new regime must guarantee that citizens of all communities have equal opportunities to participate in military and government service.

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