

How to Free Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

On September 11, the world changed -- or at least some of it did. Iraq did not. While the rest of the world mourned, or at least nominally condemned the terrorist attack, Iraqi president Saddam Husayn gloated. It is no surprise that Saddam would revel in the suffering of Americans. In doing so, he reminded the United States that Iraq remains a potential haven for terrorist networks, and a potential source of terrorism itself. Moreover, Saddam has assets the Taliban do not: he can leak sophisticated chemical and biological weapons to terrorist clients, or at some point deploy them himself. As the U.S. government debates how far to take the "war against terror," it should not lose sight of Saddam, a man whose rage runs as deep as Usama bin Ladin's. His removal is not only desirable; it may be more feasible than ever. True, more than a decade after the United Nations imposed sanctions on the Iraqi regime, Saddam still rules. But Iraqis who are beyond the grasp of Saddam -- particularly those residing in the north of the country in areas protected by the U.S. and British-enforced no-fly zone -- are not without hope. Indeed, they believe that removing Saddam from power may not be as difficult as many media commentators and State Department bureaucrats seem to think.

That sentiment is based on growing evidence for the demoralization of the Iraqi military. In December 2000, Iraqi troops invaded the northern safe haven, surrounding the town of Baadre, halfway between Dahuk and Irbil. According to residents of Baadre, when U.S. or British warplanes flew low over the Iraqi lines, 138 Iraqi troops threw down their weapons and surrendered.

The Baadre incident was not the first, nor will it likely be the last, to expose poor Iraqi military morale. In April 1995, Saddam dismissed Iraq's army chief of staff after a mass defection of Iraqi soldiers to the opposition. According to recent reports out of Iraq, when Saddam ordered compulsory military training camps for children on summer vacation from school, many families tried to hide their sons. Such problems are usually cloaked by Saddam's complete control over Iraqi media, and it is not easy to pinpoint sources of discontent. But many more Iraqi soldiers would be prepared to defect or lay down their arms -- if they had a guarantee of safety. They certainly will not defect if it means facing a firing squad because the United States either refuses to support an opposition or fails to provide a strong guarantee of protection for the safe-haven in northern Iraq.

In short, the emergence of cracks in the Iraqi army will depend to a large extent on U.S. willingness to show Iraqis the kind of resolve they have come not to expect from Washington. Restoring American credibility will not be an easy task. But in my own conversations with Iraqis, especially during nine months spent in northern Iraq, my interlocutors may have expressed disillusionment with U.S. policy, but few had despaired. Winning their confidence is still possible, but it will require concrete steps against the regime in Baghdad. Any and all of the following measures could effectively lay the groundwork for a policy that has become an imperative: the removal of Saddam, before it is too late.

I. Impose a No-Drive Zone

Perhaps the clearest and most visible red line that the United States could impose upon Iraq would be a "no-drive zone" to supplement the existing no-fly zones. In theory, a no-drive zone has existed in southern Iraq since 1994; it

was announced after a deployment of Iraqi ground forces to the Kuwait border. In practice, however, the United States does not enforce such a zone. The result is that while Washington insists there are clearly defined red lines, Iraqis I interviewed simply do not see them.

The no-fly zones themselves are actually quite limited. The northern no-fly zone encompasses the region north of the 36th parallel, or only approximately half of the area under Kurdish control. Even there, the no-fly provisions technically only apply to fixed-wing aircraft. In theory, Saddam would be free to use helicopters and tanks against his own people in the region, just as he did in 1988, 1991, and 1996. The creation of no-drive zones simply would state that the Iraqi government may not use tanks, armored personnel carriers, or other vehicles of war in both northern and southern Iraq, where the Baghdad regime has used them previously to murder civilians. While analysts debate the accuracy of air strikes against armor, there is no doubt that air strikes can degrade it. While estimates vary, during the air campaign over Kosovo, approximately 9,700 air sorties dropped bombs that destroyed between 30 and 40 percent of Serb tanks. The success rate would be considerably higher in southern Iraq, where it is more difficult to conceal tanks than in Kosovo. While some will argue that Saddam could simply hide his tanks, hidden tanks cannot be used to massacre civilians. Ideally, the coalition could expand the no-fly and no-drive zones into military exclusion zones in which Iraqi soldiers could not operate.

If Saddam's control is removed from the borders of Iraq, not only will he pose less of a threat to his neighbors, he will also have considerably less access to income derived from smuggling. In turn, his ability to buy the loyalty of key officials will decline. At the very least, even if Saddam retains control of Baghdad, the scale of the humanitarian tragedy he could precipitate will be greatly reduced. No-drive or military exclusion zones would also provide a safe haven for humanitarian groups and the United Nations (U.N.) to distribute food and medical aid directly in the predominantly Shi'ite cities like Basra and Nasiriyah, which are suffering because of Saddam's refusal to distribute food or invest in water purifiers.

Of course, enforcement of effective no-drive zones would require additional commitments of U.S. assets in the region. The United States currently stations aircraft at Incirlik airbase in Turkey and in Saudi Arabia. Washington would have to get the approval of Turkey and Saudi Arabia for further expansion (though the latter is less crucial because U.S. planes could operate from the Persian Gulf). President Bush's war against terrorism could provide an opportunity to secure this expansion, provided the United States demonstrates its firm resolve.

II. Back an Insurrection

There is no quick fix for Iraq. While a coup might at first blush seem an easy way to get rid of Saddam, few Iraqis interviewed in the safe-haven felt that it would have any chance of success. Senior officials of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), as well as commanders in the peshmurga (Kurdish militia, literally, "those who face death") repeatedly indicated that Iraqi command control makes a coup d'etat impossible. To move any Iraqi division requires approvals not only from the military commander, but also from the Ba'th party political commissar and the intelligence chief. Even if the division receives permission to move, ammunition is transferred separately. Iraqis indicate that an insurrection would be successful, so long as real safe-havens existed into which defecting Iraqi soldiers and civilians could flee. The Kurds have a strong history of resistance. One senior Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader explained, "We can fight against soldiers, tanks, and even helicopters, but we can't fight poison gas." While some opponents of U.S. policy on Iraq insist that sanctions actually strengthen Saddam by allowing him to buy support with smuggling income, the reverse is equally true. Both the PUK and KDP are able to buy assets in the intelligence services and Ba'th party apparatuses in Saddam-controlled cities like Kirkuk, Mosul, and Baghdad.

If the U.S. government decided to arm the opposition with tanks and heavy weaponry (and perhaps provide air support), Iraqi opposition forces could likely sweep through most of the country. The chief obstacle would be Saddam's elite, well-fed and well-equipped Republican Guard. However, the Republican Guard is deployed

backwards to protect Baghdad and can be neutralized with precision bombing, just as in 1991. While coalition forces flew 40,000 strike sorties in thirty days during the Kuwait war, action required against the Republican Guard would be considerably more limited, as the objective of neutralizing the elite units is much narrower in scope than the war aims of one decade ago. With tanks and heavy weaponry, Iraqi opposition forces could likely sweep through most of the country.

Washington must also not shy away from providing lethal assistance. If opponents of U.S. air action complain that airpower alone is not able to defend Iraq's civilian population against Iraqi government tanks, then the U.S. government should supply and train Iraqi opposition forces in anti-tank weaponry. In any insurgency, Iraqi lives will be on the line, and so Iraqis should have the means to defend themselves. There is also a precedent for providing lethal assistance. In the wake of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the United States has made public its assistance to Afghanistan's Northern Alliance. Like the Northern Alliance, the Iraqi opposition is fighting against a dangerous and unpopular regime with a demonstrated capability to wreak havoc. As with the Iraqi Kurds, the Northern Alliance has a sorry history of internal division. But in view of the more important objective, the United States has decided to make life difficult for the Taliban. Washington should do no less for Saddam, through support of the Kurds.

III. Support Unity

If the United States decides to commit itself to freeing the Iraqi people from the yoke of an oppressive dictatorship, then it should support a united Iraqi opposition.

Surprisingly, this has long been a bone of contention in policy circles. There is great division over who should lead such an opposition. Ahmad Chalabi is the head of the Iraqi National Congress, an umbrella organization of diverse opposition groups. Some State Department and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials treat Chalabi with disdain. They argue that he has no popular legitimacy and allege past financial impropriety. It is true that in Iraqi Kurdistan, few persons expressed support for Chalabi, but when asked why, the response was often "because the U.S. does not support him." In an interview I conducted with Jalal Talabani (see page 19), he indicated that the opposition read the CIA's failure to back Chalabi as lack of faith in the opposition itself.

Allegations against Chalabi and other opposition figures should not disqualify them in Washington's eyes. Simply put, a perfect ready-made opposition does not exist, nor is it wise to wait for one to appear. Saddam has used chemical weapons against his own people, and killed 182,000 civilians in an orgy of violence in 1988 alone. He has started two wars. Compared to that record, should the State Department in effect maintain Saddam's regime because of quibbling concerns over propriety? Likewise, some argue that no real, mature opposition exists which could absorb and leverage U.S. support. The skepticism is unwarranted. Before the United States, Britain, and Turkey created the northern safe-haven in 1991, neither the PUK nor the KDP had ever demonstrated an ability to govern. Once given the chance, however, they blossomed, and the areas under their control enjoy a standard of living far above that of Saddam's own parts of Iraq.

Another pointless U.S. policy debate has revolved around whether the United States should support a single opposition group or several. In a nutshell, it would be dangerous to support several uncoordinated opposition groups. Each group must have a stake in a future Iraqi government. But support for anything but a single united opposition could lay the groundwork for a future civil war. Support for anything but a single united opposition could lay the groundwork for a future civil war.

IV. Indict Saddam

Saddam must not only be countered militarily. He must be exposed for what he is: perhaps the worst at-large war criminal. Now that the U.N. has pursued war crimes trials against the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing or genocide in

the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, it is time to consider bringing Saddam up on similar charges.

Inexcusably, the United Nations has initiated no similar investigation of the crimes of Saddam and his government in Iraq. And the evidence against Saddam is greater. Many sites of Saddam's 1988 chemical weapons attacks are within the northern Iraqi safe-haven and accessible to investigators. According to officials in the safe-haven, since 1991 Saddam's forces have expelled almost 200,000 Iraqis from their homes solely for reasons of ethnicity, transferring their property to members of the Ba'th party. If those evicted and abused prior to 1991 are counted, more than 800,000 of the approximately 3.5 million residents of northern Iraq are internal refugees. Each and every one of these persons is a potential witness in a war crimes tribunal, as are the dozens more who stream into the safe haven every week. In addition, Kuwait and the United States acquired large numbers of incriminating documents when they liberated Kuwait, and the Kurds found still more when they seized Ba'th party buildings during the 1991 revolt. (Many of these documents are openly available to researchers in the United States.)

The war crimes issue is Saddam's Achilles' heel and a potentially valuable tool in a campaign against him. At present, the Qatar-based pan-Arab al-Jazira television broadcasts stories of alleged Iraqi suffering under the sanctions. Were a war crimes tribunal convened to try Saddam in absentia, the media would be forced to carry testimony of Iranians, Kurds, and Arabs describing their mistreatment at the hands of the Iraqi regime. The tales are true, and they are harrowing.

Ending Saddam

The four measures outlined above constitute the skeleton of a program for removing Saddam from power. It is impossible to prescribe precise modalities. Some steps will be harder to take than others. Implementation will pose unexpected problems. But in a general way, the program is eminently feasible. And in any case, it is an American imperative.

The United States and the Iraqi people no longer have the luxury of maintaining the status quo. Time is running out. Each day that Saddam remains in power is a day during which he can solidify the chance for his son, Qusayy, to succeed him. And as soon as Saddam tests a nuclear weapon in the Iraqi desert, he will have established a deterrent that will enable him to repeat his Kuwait adventure with near impunity. Now is the time to build a head of steam for a campaign to remove Saddam. September 11 has helped to persuade the region that the United States isn't going to take it anymore. Even onerous regimes are eager or willing to be part of the U.S. coalition against Usama bin Ladin's terrorism. Under resolute U.S. leadership, some of this spirit could be mobilized against Iraq.

But in Ankara, Amman, Kuwait City, and Riyadh, they are waiting to hear whether a new resolve will replace the old mantra of containment. From their point of view, Saddam's Iraq is like a hornet's nest -- they want to get rid of it, but they would rather leave it undisturbed than strike it once or twice, only provoking the ire of its wasps. They want to see a plan that is focused, determined, and close-ended. If the United States can produce one, its regional allies will fall into line. History rarely gives nations a second chance to undo mistakes. But this time it has, and the United States should be determined not to miss it. ❖

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