How to Unseat Saddam (Part I)

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Brief Analysis

This two-part essay, prepared for the Foreign Policy Research Institute (www.fpri.org **(http://www.fpri.org/)**), is a condensed version of an article that appears in the Winter 2001–2002 issue of the National Interest. **Read Part II. (templateC05.php?CID=1467)**

"With respect to what is sometimes characterized as taking out Saddam, I never saw a plan that was going to take him out." —Secretary of State Colin Powell

Before September 11, U.S. policymakers would have been hard-pressed to justify significant military action against Iraq without a major provocation. The events of September 11 and the subsequent anthrax incidents, however, have highlighted the dangers of "business as usual" in an age of sophisticated terrorism and weapons proliferation, and the potentially high costs of ignoring the likes of Saddam Hussein; that is true whether or not Iraq was associated with these events. The risks of perpetuating a faltering containment policy, and the imperative of regime change in Iraq have never been clearer.

The success of regime change in Iraq will hinge largely on the ability of the United States to harness the potential inherent in four principal policy levers that it holds, but has hitherto failed to effectively employ in concert: 1) military action; 2) psychological operations and propaganda; 3) economic pressure; and 4) support for the opposition. None of these alone can reliably overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein; taken together, however, synergy among them could create the necessary conditions for a coup or popular uprising that could sweep the Ba'ath from power. Let us take these four elements one by one.

I. MILITARY ACTION

The main obstacle to overthrowing the Ba'athi regime is not a lack of desire among Iraqis to get rid of it, but the efficacy of the regime's security organs and the extraordinary measures taken by Saddam Hussein to ensure his own survival. These security organs include the Presidential bodyguard, the Special Security Organization (SSO), the Special Republican Guard (SRG, a division-sized force located mainly in and around Baghdad), Saddam's Commandos, and the three Republican Guard (RG) armored divisions ringing Baghdad.

Nearly every coup attempt originating inside or outside the country in the past three decades has been compromised beforehand or nipped in the bud. Likewise, the regime succeeded in putting down the 1991 uprising following

Operation Desert Storm -- the most serious challenge to Ba'athi rule to date -- and it has put down several minor outbreaks of violence since then (in Ramadi in May-June 1995 and in Basra in March 1999). The bottom line is that as long as the internal security apparatus remains loyal, intact and alert, coup attempts and uprisings are likely to fail. Consequently, U.S. air strikes that land damaging blows to these organizations and thereby disrupt their functioning are a sine qua non for a successful coup or uprising. Recognition of this fact has thus far been missing from U.S. policy.

An air campaign that visits grievous injury upon these security organizations, and that immobilizes them for at least several days, could compromise the survival of the regime. By forcing the units that form the main pillar of Saddam's rule to disperse and lay low, a U.S. air campaign could create a window of opportunity for a successful coup or uprising (though each would require different targeting strategies). This concept is not founded on blind faith in the promise of airpower, for it does not require airpower to do anything that it has not already done in previous wars (e.g., force static ground forces to disperse, and interdict them when they move).

In going after the regime's security apparatus, the United States should strike only essential targets, dealing concentrated blows against the Special Republican Guard, Special Security Organization and the Republican Guard. It should avoid the temptation of using the opportunity to hit other target sets (e.g., units of the regular military or WMD-related facilities) that could dilute the impact of its effort. Because the United States pays a political price every time it uses force against Baghdad, the United States must not squander prestige, political capital, and a rare opportunity to achieve key objectives by diffusing its efforts.

There are, of course, major obstacles to pulling off a successful coup or uprising. In either case, success will require extensive planning. The few individuals both willing and able to undertake a coup need to be identified, a candidate from among them recruited and his reliability assessed before such an operation begins, in order to avoid falling victim to Trojan horse-type schemes engineered in Baghdad. Here, members of the Iraqi opposition might help identify potential coup-makers, though their potential contribution must be weighed against the risk of compromising the effort by involving oppositionists who might be incapable of keeping secrets or, worse, who are working for Saddam.

There are also practical obstacles to a successful coup. Assuming that a coup plotter could attract support from fellow officers for his effort without being detected (admittedly, a tall order), the ability of coalition airpower to support such an effort could be limited by various factors. It could prove difficult, for example, to distinguish friendly from hostile units involved in close-in fighting during a coup (though "friendlies" could solve this problem by placing aerial identification panels on their vehicles). Washington has also to consider the possibility that should Saddam learn of such U.S. efforts, he might organize a "coup" against himself in order to cause the United States to call off its air campaign, re-emerging once U.S. forces had returned home. He has, in the past, spoken obliquely of such a ploy. Some skeptics may worry, too, that by supporting potential coup-makers, the United States will be tainting them as American stooges and thus doom them to failure. Such risks could be mitigated if the United States were initially to adopt a positive, yet somewhat detached stance toward a new government, allowing the latter to define the parameters of a new relationship with Washington.

Clearly, organizing a successful coup will be difficult. Sparking an uprising would not be easy either, but it is not unprecedented. The 1991 uprising was a direct consequence of Iraq's defeat in Operation Desert Storm. Because it was unexpected and spontaneous in its origins, it has been passed off as a one time event -- a missed opportunity never again to be repeated. This need not, however, be the case. Several factors contributed to the 1991 uprising:

• pent-up hatred caused by decades of domestic repression, economic hardship (due to the Iran-Iraq War), and the regime's ruinous military adventures;

• the lopsided coalition victory in Desert Storm, which undermined Saddam's image of invincibility and caused many Iraqis to momentarily lose their fear of the regime;

• the disintegration of Iraq's army, which freed large numbers of retreating soldiers -- many still armed -- from the strictures of military discipline and the watchful eyes of the security services, enabling them to serve as a catalyst for the uprising;

• the defeat in Desert Storm, which paralyzed the regime's supporters with fear, while the disarray and confusion caused by the air campaign limited the ability of the regime's internal security apparatus to follow and respond to events;

• the belief that the United States would provide military support to an uprising, which encouraged and emboldened the rebels.

While it may not be possible to replicate all these conditions today, the United States could recreate some of them. A concerted air campaign against the main pillars of the regime could undermine Saddam's image of invincibility, shake the confidence of his supporters, cause disarray in the ranks of the security services, and embolden its enemies to seize the day. Much would depend on the perception in Iraq that the United States is serious about removing the Ba'athi regime. In light of its mixed track record, producing the necessary perception will not be easy, though an air campaign that focuses on regime targets could rapidly alter popular Iraqi estimations of American resolve. The opposition could play a role in exploiting such altered perceptions and expectations; in accordance with prior plans, oppositionists in southern Iraq (including members of the external opposition inserted into Iraq beforehand to organize such efforts) could engage in acts of sabotage and open rebellion to help spark a wider uprising during a U.S. air campaign. Likewise, oppositionists outside of Iraq might succeed in convincing commanders of units they are in contact with (either regular military or RG formations) to join in an uprising; the participation of ground units in such an undertaking would greatly enhance the odds of success.

A future attempt to foment a coup or uprising would also benefit from the fact that the United States would be dedicating all available assets toward achieving this goal -- whereas past efforts to target Iraq's leadership were unfocused, and not supported by other policy instruments. In Operation Desert Storm, the United States devoted only 260 out of nearly 36,250 strike sorties against "leadership" targets. (Even so, it reportedly came close to killing Saddam Hussein once or twice). American planners at the time, moreover, had only a vague understanding of how the regime's internal security apparatus worked. We have a much better picture today. Finally, these 260 strikes were not carried out in accordance with a detailed concept of how to bring about either a coup or an uprising, and there was no supporting psychological operations (psyops) effort to speak of. Even so, the United States succeeded in fomenting an uprising that might have succeeded in overthrowing the regime had not the United States withheld crucial support for the rebels. Presumably, Washington would not make that same mistake again.

In considering the relative advantages of a coup versus an uprising, policymakers face a conundrum. While a coup offers the possibility of a relatively swift, smooth transition, limited bloodletting, few if any adverse consequences for regional stability, and the possibility of regime change without the use of WMD, it is very hard to do. On the other hand, while an uprising is more "doable" and offers the possibility of fundamental political change in Iraq, it carries several major liabilities, including the possibility of a messy denouement that leads to chaos, massive bloodletting, or the use of chemical or biological weapons against the rebels and America's allies in the region. The risks associated with these outcomes, however, are still less daunting than those associated with the survival of the present regime: an aggressive, revanchist leadership armed with biological and nuclear weapons.

Continued in PolicyWatch no. 589.

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