Curtains for the Ba'ath

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Articles & Testimony

Even before September 11, 2001, the Bush Administration faced difficult challenges and choices as it charted U.S. policy toward Iraq. The period of Iraqi quiescence following Operation Desert Fox in December 1998 was clearly over, the containment regime on Iraq had weakened, and the resurgence of Israeli-Palestinian violence had imposed constraints on Washington's diplomatic leeway while creating new trouble-making opportunities for Baghdad. Sensing that momentum was on his side, Saddam Hussein seemed increasingly self-confident and assertive.

From the outset, most of President Bush's senior foreign policy advisors seemed to favor "regime change" over the continued "containment" of Iraq. Yet, a State Department-led effort to bolster containment and to steal a march on the proponents of regime change by "smartening" sanctions-well before the new administration's Iraq policy review was completed-suggested deep divisions in the Bush team. Though the smart sanctions effort failed due to a threatened Russian veto that was, somehow, not anticipated by the State Department, the administration's Iraq policy review still had not been completed before September 11.

The events of September 11 and the subsequent anthrax incidents should have been transformational events. They should 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 Osama bin Laden and rogue regimes such as that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Yet, regarding Iraq, all signs indicate the contrary. The old arguments continue, albeit in slightly different form, inside the administration and out, about whether, when and how to deal with Saddam Hussein and his regime.

Some believe that Iraq is connected to the events of September 11 or to the anthrax terror campaign that followed, and that these events make regime change more important and urgent than ever. Some believe that Iraq's relation to September 11 is irrelevant, that its enormous potential to harm America makes the status quo intolerably dangerous, and that after September 11, more people recognize this. But others argue that attacking Iraq, even if it was complicit in the September 11 events, would alienate Arabs and Muslims whose support is vital to the ongoing campaign against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. For this reason, they argue, containment will have to do for now-if not for the indefinite future as well.

The future of containment, however, is increasingly uncertain. Weapons inspections have not occurred in Iraq since

1998, and sanctions-a central pillar of containment-have eroded significantly, and will continue to do so. Furthermore, experience has shown that deterrence is an inadequate policy instrument vis-a-vis Iraq. Sooner or later Saddam's ambitions will bump up against U.S. interests, and he will again miscalculate in such a way as to generate conflict with the United States. Thus, while containment can limit Baghdad's trouble-making potential, it cannot stop Iraq from stockpiling weapons of mass destruction (WMD), or prevent further U.S.-Iraqi confrontations. And as long as Baghdad possesses chemical, biological and-perhaps in the future-nuclear weapons, a confrontation with a neighboring state or the United States could lead to their use. For this reason, the longer that hard decisions are delayed, the greater the potential costs of a future confrontation. It is simply too risky for the United States not to take bold steps to prevent such an eventuality. The case for regime change is more compelling now than ever before-even if it is not clear that the international environment is more supportive of it.

The shortcomings of containment go beyond questions of sustainability, or the risks of complacency. Containment requires an onerous forward U.S. military presence in the region that is clearly counterproductive politically for the United States. And to the degree that sanctions contribute to a sense of Arab/Muslim grievance against the United States and the West, containment stokes political extremism in Iraq and beyond.

Another drawback of containment is that by its very nature it is a preventive rather than a constructive policy; it does not hold out the possibility of a change for the better in Iraq. Regime change, by contrast, offers at least a potential path for a better future for the long-suffering people of Iraq, and for achieving long-term U.S. objectives in the Persian Gulf. It is the key to the emergence of an Iraq that can live in peace with its own people and its neighbors, and to stemming further WMD proliferation in the region. At least at the margins, too, a less troublesome Iraqi regime could make an Israeli-Palestinian accommodation easier to achieve. For all these reasons, the risks associated with containment now outweigh those associated with regime change.

If the case for regime change is clear, the way forward is not. The debate in Washington about regime change in Iraq has become highly partisan. Most who favor regime change have become disposed to support the "enclaves" strategy of Ahmad Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Most who favor containment justify their view on the belief that deterrence can work, and that the "enclaves" strategy is unrealistic-as though this were the only path to regime change. The way the debate has been framed has had the effect of placing controversies about personalities and organizations over substantive discussions of means and ends.

In truth, there is no support for the enclaves approach in the region, and Iraqi opposition groups are unlikely anytime soon to be capable of using liberated enclaves in northern or southern Iraq as springboards for offensive operations against Baghdad-with or without U.S. air support. Even if such an approach were to enjoy unexpected success, it probably could not work fast enough to avert the potentially disastrous use of WMD by the Ba'athi regime, should it feel its survival threatened. By nibbling away at its periphery, rather than by landing crushing blows to the nerve centers of the regime, the enclaves approach eschews the type of devastating and decisive American military action that is probably required to unseat Saddam and his regime, without disastrous consequences for innocent Iraqis and the peoples of the region.

Unfortunately, the "containment versus enclaves" structure of the debate over Iraq has obscured the real choices before us. This essay proposes to re-invigorate the debate by offering an alternative approach to regime change. The opposition has a role in it, but so does a significant use of U.S. airpower combined with psychological and economic warfare to create conditions in which a coup or an uprising by domestic opponents of the regime could occur. This alternative is based on several assumptions.

First, regime change offers the possibility of a better future for Iraq-including perhaps a less repressive, more broad-based government-though admittedly, the ultimate outcome of either a coup or uprising cannot be assessed with confidence.

Second, even less desirable outcomes might still offer advantages over the status quo. While a coup that would sweep Saddam, his family and his inner circle from power would still likely lead to an authoritarian military government, the head of such a regime is unlikely to possess the combination of personal attributes that make Saddam and his inner circle so dangerous: extreme ruthlessness, unbounded ambition, a propensity to miscalculate and a burning desire to avenge the Desert Storm defeat. And while a military government might still be wedded to WMD, it could be easier to manage the consequences of proliferation in Iraq with a regime less prone to miscalculation and aggression. Alternatively, while an uprising could result in a loss of central government control over much of Iraq, such an outcome would not necessarily be more harmful for the Iraqi people, the United States and its allies than the status quo-with its potential for an Iraqi nuclear breakout and another regional war. (Indeed, the residents of northern Iraq have experienced a net improvement in living conditions during the past decade due to the absence of central government control there.)

Third, it may be possible to achieve regime change without the United States and its allies having to occupy Iraq, and undertake a protracted and intrusive nation-building effort.

Finally, the United States will require access to bases and facilities of one or more regional Arab allies (or Turkey), so that it could commit substantial land- and sea-based airpower to the effort. Such support will not be forthcoming without a major diplomatic push, and unless the United States can convince its allies that it is serious about regime change and can show them a credible, carefully considered plan.

What is proposed here is not a sure thing; regime change could ultimately require a Desert Storm II. It is not clear, however, that domestic or international opinion would support a Desert Storm II. The plan outlined below, then, is put forth in the spirit that it is better to pay less than more to achieve the same outcome, and imprudent to ignore the very real political and military constraints on U.S. freedom of action, even when pursuing key U.S. policy objectives.

The Plan

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 internal security apparatus 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., conventional military units 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-even in a post-September 11 environment-the United States must not squander prestige, political capital, and a rare opportunity to achieve key objectives by diffusing its efforts.

Even were such an air campaign not to achieve its primary goal of regime change, it would still weaken Iraq's military capabilities and shake the confidence of the regime, thereby bolstering deterrence and containment. The three RG armored divisions around Baghdad that would be prime targets of such an effort form the backbone of Iraq's conventional military might. And it should be recalled that the four days of strikes of Operation Desert Fox-which targeted some of Saddam's key internal security organizations (the SRG and RG)-shook Baghdad so hard that the regime turned inward for nearly a year and a half afterwards.

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: a revanchist Iraq armed with biological and nuclear weapons, perhaps provoking another regional war.

II. Psyops and Propaganda Activities

Psyops and propaganda activities that aim to diminish Saddam in the eyes of his supporters, exacerbate existing strains between his inner circle and the military, stir up popular discontent, and embolden opponents of the regime are a crucial component of any policy that seeks regime change in Baghdad. Such efforts could keep Saddam on the defensive and create an atmosphere of crisis and tension, forcing the regime to divert assets to deal with internal security, and leaving fewer resources available for clandestine technology procurement or trouble-making elsewhere. Such efforts could transform the psychological environment in the country, creating an atmosphere in which a coup or uprising might occur.

Saddam understands this well. He devotes enormous energy to efforts that make him appear larger than life and invest him with an aura of invincibility. This explains the huge posters and murals of Saddam found everywhere in Iraq. The importance Saddam attaches to the psychological dimension can be gauged from a speech he delivered to senior Ba'ath officials from Basra in June 1999 in which he exhorted them to "strive to defeat the enemy's plans" and to "stand firm in the face of the influence of hostile media and information", which has an "influence bigger than that of bombs." Saddam realizes that psychological domination of his subjects is the key to their physical subjugation, and that losing the propaganda and psychological warfare battle could threaten his regime.

For this reason, the United States should support opposition radio and television propaganda efforts that seek to diminish Saddam through ridicule, and by planting doubts and raising questions about the stability of his rule and the long-term prospects of his regime. Such propaganda-especially on the eve of a crisis or in tandem with U.S. military action against Saddam's internal security organizations-could help undermine his carefully cultivated image of omnipotence and erode the climate of extreme fear that paralyzes his opponents. It could help create-at least briefly-the necessary conditions for a coup or an uprising.

Relations between Saddam and the military have never been warm. Saddam distrusts the military and has consolidated his control over them by fear. Moreover, the army quietly resents his interference in military affairs, and many officers are bitter at the ruinous impact that his rule has had on the country and its armed forces. American propaganda should play on this distrust and resentment, emphasizing the risks incurred by the armed forces as a result of continued Ba'athi rule. Such propaganda, along with the adoption of more aggressive rules of engagement for coalition aircraft patrolling the no-fly zones (e.g., allowing them to strike Iraqi ground forces, especially RG units), might encourage members of the armed forces to turn on the regime if given the opportunity to do so.

Finally, Washington needs to rebuild its credibility in the eyes of the Iraqi people. In particular, it needs to convince them that it is serious about removing the Ba'athi regime. Average Iraqis are unlikely to join another uprising if they believe that the United States will once again abandon them in midstream. The way to do this is by speaking out against human rights violations by Baghdad, supporting the opposition (the INC as well as other groups), and most importantly, by using massive force against regime targets. The bombing of organizations responsible for repressing the Iraqi people and ensuring the survival of the regime would be the most effective way to convince Iraqis that the United States is serious about ridding Iraq of the regime of Saddam Hussein.

III. Intensified Economic Pressure

Sanctions are a crucial component of containment: they prevent Iraq from rebuilding its conventional military capabilities and recouping much of the political and economic clout it enjoyed before the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Nevertheless, Baghdad has been able to generate a stream of unsupervised income through illicit oil sales to Syria, Turkey, Jordan, and Iran, and by manipulating the "oil for food" program. The amount earned through smuggling amounts to $1-2 billion a year (depending on oil prices)-sums that Saddam uses to assure the loyalty of his largely Sunni Arab power base and to insulate them from the effects of sanctions. Intensified efforts to reduce the flow of unsupervised oil income in order to reduce the amount of money Saddam can disburse to his power base

might make some of them more receptive to regime change.

In modern Iraq, conflicts among members of the regime's inner circle and popular political unrest have often had an economic dimension: the 1920 nationalist revolt against the British; the tribal rebellions of 1935-36; fighting since 1994 among the two main Kurdish opposition groups; and the defection of Saddam's son-in-law Hussein Kamil in 1995 were all at least partly due to struggles over money, land or other material assets. The potential role of economic pressures in contributing to political unrest should not be underestimated, and should be exploited to the utmost. ❖

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