Focusing on Iraq:

The Question is How, Not Whether

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Brief Analysis

In Washington, the debate over Iraq is shifting from the simple question of whether it should be targeted in phase II of the antiterror war, to how we should deal with a country that continually refuses to fulfill its UN obligations and surrender weapons of mass destruction (WMD). From the latter viewpoint, options for Iraqi policy are not confined to the extremes of either complete inactivity or dispatching 500,000 troops for a ground campaign. There are numerous approaches that the Bush administration can take if it is determined to increase pressure on Saddam Husayn's regime. President Bush spoke on Monday about the importance of resuming UN-mandated arms-control inspections in Iraq, and the Security Council has been considering this week whether to revitalize sanctions on Iraq.

Why Iraq?

While there may be a retributive aspect to the Afghan campaign, the main focus of U.S. counterterrorism effort is to prevent further terrorist operations. An important lesson from September 11 is that the United States is vulnerable to surprise attacks; America must take seriously the risks posed by those who repeatedly and publicly threaten it, and who are devout in acquiring the means with which to inflict mass casualties. In order to preempt terrorists, the question to ask is: who has the means and motive to engage in devastating terrorist attacks? After Al Qaeda, the most troubling figure is Iraqi leader Saddam Husayn. Saddam has stubbornly hung on to WMD and provoked repeated confrontations with the United States and its allies because he refused UN inspectors. He sacrificed more than $100 billion in potential oil revenue from 1991 to 1998 rather than surrender his WMD capabilities. If Saddam cares that much about WMD, it is reasonable to assume that he is prepared to use them. In light of America's ongoing experience with biological weapons -- which revealed how disruptive trace amounts of anthrax can be -- the United States has every reason to be gravely concerned about Saddam's refusal to comply with UN mandates.

Of note, the rationale for concentrating on Iraq has little to do with the scattered information suggesting Al Qaeda may have worked with Iraq, or with the speculation that Iraq may have been involved with the anthrax attacks. Those opposed to pressuring Saddam about his WMD like to raise this red herring, claiming that without real evidence tying Saddam to recent attacks, nothing can be done about the Iraq threat. That reasoning is faulty on two grounds: first, the lesson from September 11 is that responsible policy prevents terrorism resulting in mass

casualties rather than waiting until more casualties occur before responding; second, the question of Iraq's link to September 11 obscures the main U.S. problem with Saddam, which is his refusal to comply with clear UN requirements to give up WMD.

What Are the Options for Iraq Policy?

The framework for Iraq policy should be Saddam's WMD -- a matter for which there is broad international concern -- and especially his refusal to comply with his obligations under Security Council resolutions. The choice should be stark:

• He must clearly demonstrate that the WMD programs have been dismantled as required by the UN Gulf War ceasefire resolution, recalling that it places the burden of proof on him to show that Iraq is WMD-free.

• Failing this, he should expect that the United States will take strong action against his regime -- in line with Security Council resolutions authorizing use of force -- along with such countries as wish to join this.

The choice is up to Saddam, but he is not likely to comply any more than the Taliban were likely to hand over Osama bin Laden; offering him the choice, though, puts the onus on him. If Saddam does comply fully, the United States should follow a policy of deterring his regime, odious as it is, rather than overthrowing it. The only hope of getting him to give up WMD will be to demonstrate convincingly that, post-September 11, the United States is prepared to take tough, determined, and ongoing measures against his regime until he complies or is overthrown. It will not be easy; Washington suffers from a lack of credibility because its past statements have not been followed up with action. The victory in Afghanistan will improve America's credibility, but a broad-action program is necessary to build on that momentum. Elements could include:

• Stepping up enforcement of sanctions with sea-based assets in order to demonstrate willingness to use military force without putting regional allies on the spot by asking permission to use their bases. Cruise missiles could hit the Syria-Iraq pipeline pumping stations in Iraq, which would have the added benefit of showing Syrian president Bashar al-Asad the consequence of lying to Secretary of State Colin Powell, to whom he promised in Febraury that "if" the pipeline opened, the $2 billion in annual revenue would be channeled through the UN oil-for-food program.

• Demonstrating early on the U.S. commitment to follow through by taking steps that put American assets at risk. Examples could include: installing transmitters for the existing U.S.-run Radio Free Iraq in northern Iraq in addition to their current location in Prague; returning to northern Iraq the CIA presence withdrawn in haste in 1996 to collect intelligence and aid opposition forces; and reinstating in the north the token military presence of the Military Coordination Committee.

• Providing security guarantees to the Iraqi oppositions in the north, especially the Kurds, so they allow more anti-Saddam activity from the 20 percent of Iraq they already control. Those guarantees would be most credible if made in public at meetings between the president and opposition leaders, and if backed up by the presence of Americans on the ground, along the lines discussed above.

• Supporting the Iraqi opposition. The various opposition groups have tens of thousands of soldiers on the ground -- more than the Afghan Northern Alliance has -- mostly from two Kurdish groups, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Despite this, U.S. critics disparage the opposition for largely spurious reasons, such as the complaint that it is divided among various groups. In fact, just as was done in Afghanistan during the Soviet days, U.S. officials should encourage a wide array of opposition groups, celebrating their diversity as harbingers of a democratic future. Top U.S. officials should meet with the Iranian-based Shiite opposition as well as other groups. Generous assistance should be provided, such as communications equipment and funding to aid the internally displaced persons in the Kurdish north.

• Presenting this plan to allies -- especially Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Britain -- as a statement of policy, not as a proposal for coalition debate. The allies will object, both because of genuine concerns and as a probe of whether the United States will act tough rather than just talk tough. The most effective U.S. response to the objections would be to offer to work collaboratively on shaping tactics so that the allies are not exposed, while making clear that the United States is committed strategically to proceeding.

A Washington Post -ABC poll taken November 27 found that 78 percent of Americans favor "having U.S. forces take military action against Iraq to force Saddam Hussein from power." What is needed now is to follow up Bush's start at reminding the world of the threat Iraq represents. Saddam should be confronted with a stark choice: either he fulfills his obligations under UN Security Council resolutions to get rid of his WMD, or he will have to face the consequences.

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