

# How Some Iraqis Would Slam Saddam

Aug 12, 2001



Articles & Testimony

In 1981, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was near completion of a nuclear reactor in Osirak capable of producing nuclear weapons. Shortly before the reactor began operation, Israeli warplanes destroyed it in a raid roundly condemned throughout Europe and the United States. A decade later, in 1991, Hussein invaded Kuwait, and a U.S.-backed coalition responded. Dick Cheney, then secretary of defense, gave David Ivry, director of the Osirak raid, a satellite photo of the destroyed nuclear plant inscribed with this message: "With thanks and appreciation for the outstanding job you did on the Iraqi nuclear program .... which made our job much easier in Desert Storm!"

Fast-forward 10 years to 2001. Hussein cynically starves his people as he again strives to build nuclear weapons. Just as Israel's preemptive strike probably saved many lives in 1991-92, the Bush team now faces much the same choice. As soon as Hussein conducts a nuclear test in the Iraqi desert, the ability of the United States to contain him will be severely constrained. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan will lay open to Iraqi aggression. Unfortunately, the Bush administration does not appear up to the task. By pursuing a "smart sanctions" approach to constrain the Iraqi president, it seems dead set to make the same mistake again. The Bush administration's sanctions policy targets military materiel while allowing civilian goods to flow more freely. Iraq's neighbors, it is hoped, will agree to crack down on smuggling. This approach, the State Department says, will ease civilian suffering in Iraq but still keep the pressure on Hussein to fulfill his international commitments.

Ordinary Iraqis don't buy it. I recently returned from a nine-month visit to Iraq. Unlike journalists and activists who arrive with Hussein's blessing, I wasn't escorted about under watchful eyes. I entered the country without a visa, a capital offense according to Iraqi law. I stayed in the northern safe haven, but had the opportunity to talk to Iraqis from across the country. Only in the approximately 10% of Iraq that Hussein does not control do Iraqis speak without fear of reprisal.

One elderly Iraqi farmer, who had never been more than 100 miles from his home, had heard about the smart-sanctions proposal on the radio the previous day. "Why do they [the U.S. and Britain] talk about war crimes one day and reward Saddam the next?" he asked. Many other Iraqis pointed out that facilitating the flow of civilian goods would multiply Hussein's opportunities to cheat, but do nothing to force him to feed his people. Hussein can simply continue to withhold rations and blame sanctions for doing so.

No matter how hard the State Department tries, there is no magic formula to both contain Hussein and protect Iraq's neighbors. By working feverishly for short-term stability, the Bush administration is merely continuing the muddle-through approach of former President Clinton's years, while broadcasting both to Hussein and U.S. regional allies--namely, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait--that Washington neither has a serious plan nor understands that its allies are truly between Iraq and a hard place.

U.S. allies in the region aren't going to wait indefinitely for the Bush administration to formulate a viable Iraq policy. Turkey and Jordan have both sustained huge financial losses because of U.S. sanctions policy. Turkey has lost some \$20 billion in trade with Iraq; before the Gulf War, Jordan's trade with Iraq amounted to approximately \$1 billion annually. With their losses mounting, Iraq's neighbors are unwilling to prolong the confrontation indefinitely.

The Bush administration essentially has two choices: Allow sanctions to collapse and Hussein to win, putting Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel at greater risk, or remove Hussein's ability to brutalize his people and blackmail his neighbors.

Iraqis in the northern safe haven favor a more forceful approach. When Hussein ordered his army into their region last December, U.S. and British warplanes flew over the Iraqi lines. As a result, 138 Iraqi troops threw down their weapons and surrendered. Iraqis simply do not want to die for Hussein, but they need an alternative. The administration can provide one.

The U.S. and Britain should supplement the no-fly zones with no-drive zones. Hussein must not be allowed to use tanks and heavy weapons against his own people. The U.S. must be willing to use airpower to stop any movement of Iraqi armor into prohibited zones. When Hussein does test red lines, the U.S. should not strike cosmetically at buildings shuttered for the evening; it should not punish Iraq's cleaning ladies for the sins of Hussein. Rather, the U.S. should target the brains and muscle of the regime: the intelligence apparatus, the Republican Guard and the Baath Party.

Unlike the democratically elected politicians in the safe haven, Hussein carries neither electoral mandate nor popular legitimacy. If the Iraqi people, safe from heavy Iraqi weaponry, wish to rise up against him, the U.S. should do nothing to stop them. However, by preventing the Iraqi opposition from operating in portions of Iraq controlled by Hussein, the U.S. is effectively embargoing the opposition and protecting the Iraqi leader.

Some specialists contend that Hussein has already won; with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in disarray, the U.S. is less able to act in the Middle East. Quite the contrary: It was the constraints in the 1993 Oslo accords that prompted the Clinton administration to respond with kid gloves when Iraq's neighbors began eroding sanctions. When push comes to shove, Iran, Turkey and the Arab world will do what is in their national interests. A hands-off policy by the U.S. will only embolden Hussein later. Similarly, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia know their national survival is at stake when Hussein gains a nuclear deterrent. The Bush administration must not give him a chance. ❖

Los Angeles Times

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

### TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)