

# Northern Iraq, Sanctions, and U.S. Iraq Policy

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## Brief Analysis

Iraq remains at the forefront of U.S. and international attention. Many contentious issues -- such as sanctions, weapons of mass destruction, and the future political disposition of the country -- remain unresolved. In analyzing the source of Iraq's problems, it is useful to compare those portions of Iraq under the control of Saddam Hussein to the three northern governorates (Dahuk, Irbil, Sulaymaniyah), which are controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Islamic Unity Movement of Kurdistan -- especially as all parts of Iraq fall under the same set of UN sanctions. The population in the north is approximately 3.5 million, many of whom are Kurdish, Turkoman, or Assyrian, and almost 1 million of whom are displaced persons expelled from Saddam's portion of Iraq. By refusing to grant visas to many journalists, Saddam's government consistently seeks to deny press coverage to northern Iraq. Those who do visit Baghdad-controlled Iraq are restricted to guided tours with Iraqi government minders and are prevented from traveling into the Kurdish-controlled north. Foreigners visiting the north, however, are able to move around freely without prearrangement.

For the past decade, northern Iraq has used the sanctions regime to rebuild a shattered economy and society. The progress made has been considerable, especially considering that Saddam's government destroyed close to five thousand villages in ethnic cleansing campaigns of the late 1980s. Much of the redevelopment has occurred with the help of UN Security Council Resolution 986 -- the so-called "oil-for-food" program. Thirteen percent of funds from this program are specifically allocated to the north, although only about half of the money has been spent thus far.

### Lessons for U.S. Policy

Interviews conducted in the north indicate that Iraqis strongly oppose Saddam Hussein and hope for regime change. However, there is increasing frustration with a perceived lack of U.S. seriousness toward this end.

- People in northern Iraq do not believe that the United States is serious about countering Saddam. Instead, they claim that Washington is "rewarding" Baghdad by proposing to loosen the sanctions. They believe that Saddam views compromise and negotiation as weakness and will interpret any liberalization of the sanctions regime as a reward for previous obstructionism. If the United States were serious about countering Saddam, they claim, it would make a clear statement condemning his actions and outlining the consequences.
- Revised sanctions will undermine stability in northern Iraq. Although regional states view Kurdish autonomy as a threat to stability, the PUK and KDP have for a decade secured their respective frontiers with Turkey, Iran, and Syria. While the development income of the northern authorities comes from the oil-for-food program, the PUK and KDP rely on taxation for administration and civil services like police, teachers, and security. Altering sanctions to allow Baghdad to bypass the north weakens the PUK and KDP administrations, which in turn increases the ability of the separatist-terrorist PKK to entrench itself in the rugged northern Iraqi terrain.
- Initial local optimism about the Bush administration has waned. Northern Iraqis followed the U.S. presidential election closely. Although initially more comfortable with Al Gore because he was a known quantity, many Iraqis were optimistic with the election of George W. Bush. Many Kurds felt that his experienced team of advisors would not

fail to confront Saddam when the Iraqi president broke his commitments. Indeed, many Iraqis (both in northern and Saddam-controlled areas) were thrilled with the February 16 bombing of military installations near Baghdad and later astonished when the Bush administration seemed to backpedal and reconsider its enforcement of the no-fly zones.

- Morale in the Iraqi military is extremely low. A variety of sources have indicated that when U.S. jets flew over Iraqi troops who had encroached into the "safe haven" last December -- surrounding the northern town of Baadre -- 138 Iraqi soldiers threw down their weapons and surrendered without a shot being fired. The Iraqis simply do not want to die for Saddam. However, they cannot abandon him until an alternative exists.
- Regime change can only incur through insurrection. People who have served or have relatives still serving in the Iraqi military discount the possibility of a military coup because of the tight control exerted over the military by both intelligence and Ba'ath party functionaries. In order to move any division, the military commander, the Ba'ath Party commissar, and the intelligence officer all have to sign any order to relocate troops. Ammunition follows separately. Northern Iraqis insist that low morale on Saddam's side makes insurrection a real possibility, so long as outside forces are able to assist with material and air support.
- Support for the Iraqi opposition is dependent upon U.S. commitment. At present, many northern Iraqi politicians as well as people in the street do not support the external opposition because they say U.S. support for the Iraqi National Congress (INC) is half-hearted at best. They argue that change in Iraq has to occur from inside Iraq. If Washington were to make it clear that it wholeheartedly supported the INC -- with the PUK and the KDP acting as integral members of such an umbrella organization -- popular sentiment toward the INC (or any other opposition group) within northern Iraq could change significantly.
- Iraqis view federalism as the most viable alternative for a post-Saddam Iraq. Although Kurds in Iraq insist that they do not have separatist ambitions (they still observe Iraqi Army Day, for example), they do say that they will no longer consent to live under a centralized Arab rule. They also insist that the Shi'is, after more than two decades of Saddam, will likewise not risk living under centralized Sunni rule. The alternative would be a confederation of one or two Kurdish/Turkoman, Arab Sunni, and Arab Shi'i provinces, with oil income divided on the basis of population (as it is under the current oil-for-food program). Turkey would not be in favor of this kind of reorganization, fearing that a formalized Kurdish autonomy could have destabilizing regional effects. However, northern Kurds say they would return to guerilla warfare rather than allow Baghdad to control their local affairs. Re-imposing a centralized Iraq on the north could therefore undermine stability and encourage warlordism along the Turkish frontier.
- When Saddam dies, Iraq need not fall apart. When regime change does occur in Iraq, fighting will be limited to Baghdad and its environs. If the PUK and KDP are allowed to continue functioning and are not undermined by smart sanctions or a rollback of the no-fly zone, the north will remain stable when Saddam falls, although the KDP may try to grab Sinjar and the PUK Kirkuk from Iraqi government forces. Fighting may occur in predominantly Shi'i southern Iraq, but this would subside quickly while the real power struggle occurred in Baghdad.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Mohamed Abdel Dayem.

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