

Powell to the Middle East:

Assessing the Key Elements of Iraq Policy

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Feb 20, 2001

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

On February 26, U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell begins his tour of Iraq's Arab neighbors just as UN secretary-general Kofi Annan is scheduled to hold discussions with Iraqi foreign minister Mohammad Said al-Sahhaf in New York. Key themes in these meetings will be the return of UN weapons inspectors to Iraq; the future of UN sanctions; the need to prevent Iraqi adventurism, especially into the ArabIsraeli arena; and the larger U.S. goal of "regime change" in Iraq.

In his early comments on Iraq policy, Secretary Powell has emphasized the importance of inspections to eliminate weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Meeting with Annan, he said the U.S. goal is "to make sure that Iraq complies with the arms control agreements it entered into and let's move on beyond this." The danger of Iraqi WMD is not theoretical. Many new short-range al-Samoud missiles were on display in Baghdad's New Year's Day military parade; it strains credulity to think that Iraq is producing (permitted) missiles with range of less than ninety-five miles while abstaining from work on (banned) missiles with a greater range, especially since the al-Samoud is effectively a scaled-down version of the Scud missile. Plus, defectors report that the same General Ra'ad Ismail who invigorated Iraq's missile programs has now been placed in charge of the nuclear program. That is dangerous, because, as former UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) inspector Tim McCarthy put it, "General Ra'ad has shown an uncanny ability to bring together resources and people to get things done."

Unfortunately, the Iraq proliferation danger is not likely to be solved by inspections. Inspections by the now-dissolved UNSCOM did much to dismantle the easiest-to-find parts of Saddam Husayn's WMD programs during the early 1990s. But the sad lesson of the late 1990s is that Saddam did not allow inspections that threatened to uncover his remaining WMD and missile programs, nor was the international community prepared to support military action to force Saddam to cooperate. Only the triumph of hope over experience would suggest that Saddam will cooperate or that the UN coalition will support action to force him to do so.

In fact, inspections could be dangerous. Given the two-year impasse over inspections, the UN staff's natural impulse will be to compromise to find a solution. Russia and France are lobbying for such an approach. Under these circumstances, it would not be surprising if weapons inspectors, once they were finally allowed to return to Iraq,

reported that they did not find evidence of anything incriminating without dwelling on how much work is actually required to ferret out such evidence. The real risk is that inspections which fail to find anything in Iraq will be misinterpreted as evidence that nothing is there. Under the UN ceasefire resolution (Security Council Resolution 687), the obligation is on Iraq to provide full, final, and complete disclosure about its weapons programs, but the reality is that inspectors have now been handed the impossible task of finding evidence rather than verifying what Iraq has reported. Under these circumstances, there is little reason to expect much from inspections. The process could become a charade that undermines the authority of the UN as well as respect for all arms control agreements, which would harm U.S. strategic interests far beyond U.S. Iraq policy. Another risk of making inspections the centerpiece of Iraq policy is that sanctions could be lifted prematurely: under UN Security Council Resolution 1284, sanctions are to be suspended 120 days after UN inspectors report Iraqi cooperation. To be sure, if the cooperation later turns out to be a facade, then the United States could force re-imposition of the sanctions, since Resolution 1284 requires periodic Security Council votes to keep the suspension in place.

The policy conclusion here is that the United States should not make arms inspections the centerpiece of U.S. Iraq policy, that is, it should not sacrifice the goal of replacing Saddam in order to restart arms inspections, which experience suggests may no longer be particularly productive.

SanctionsA second objective of U.S. policy, as enunciated by Secretary Powell, is to "re-energize" sanctions. A major barrier to that goal is the perception that the sanctions impose intolerable suffering on the Iraqi people. Powell has explained that Iraq's humanitarian problems are because of Saddam: "At the beginning of the last decade, [Saddam] wasted the money available to him by investing in the military. He can't do that as well now because of the regime we have placed on him . . . All that the children of Iraq require, there is money for. But what we will not allow him to have money for is to go forward with weapons of mass destruction." Indeed, the State Department distributed a fact sheet highlighting that Saddam had \$7.8 billion available for humanitarian imports during the second half of 2000, but only submitted applications to the UN to spend \$4.3 billion of those funds. While true, none of this information may be relevant for years, U.S. officials have argued the case for sanctions without success. Regardless of the facts, few in the region or among America's Western allies believe that enough is being done to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people.

The sad truth is that U.S. policy has done little to focus the sanctions on the Iraqi leadership and minimize their impact on the Iraqi people. To this day, the United Nations has not frozen Iraqi leaders' foreign bank accounts. Given that Iraqi leaders have already had years to hide that money, perhaps the action would be primarily symbolic at this point, but symbolism counts. More substantively, the United Nations places no barriers to travel abroad (including for vacations and shopping trips) by the same Iraqi leaders who block implementation of UN resolutions and who stand accused of heinous war crimes. Meanwhile, the UN sanctions impede both the travel of ordinary Iraqis to foreign countries and the travel of ordinary foreigners to Iraq. These types of travel could help (even if only marginally, given the police state that is modern Iraq) open up the country permitting ordinary Iraqis to learn more about the outside world's concerns regarding Baghdad's aggressive threats and proliferation activities, and letting the world learn more about the torture, summary execution, and lengthy prison terms of members of minority groups and those thought to be dissidents.

Much could be done to make the ban on Iraqi imports of arms and dual-use technology more effective. UN sanctions in the Balkans only began to bite when the UN set up Sanctions Assistance Missions at major border crossings; nothing similar has been done regarding Iraq. Were most humanitarian goods certified pre-shipment by credible commercial companies such as Lloyds, the remaining shipments could be given more attention by UN inspectors both at the border and in-country. The UN in-country inspection program was beefed up in 2000 (to the considerable surprise of skeptics), but it still needs to hire more and better personnel and adopt more rigorous procedures to

detect when potentially troubling imports have been diverted from their declared humanitarian purpose. For instance, the most worrisome dual-use imports could be tagged electronically to make sure they are not diverted.

Preventing EscalationSaddam has a strong interest in inserting himself into the ArabIsraeli conflict, because it provides him with the best opportunity to gain more regional support for reintegration into the world community. The gravest risk is that Saddam might cooperate closely with Syrian president Bashar al-Asad. The strategic fit is good: Saddam has the money Asad badly needs, and Asad can provide both a route for uncontrolled imports and a cover for Iraqi arms shipments, given that most of Iraq's weapons are the same ex-Soviet types Syria has. Syria could import replacement parts for tanks or fighter planes, claiming they were for domestic use, while shipping some materiel to Iraq and keeping the rest; the advantage for Syria would come from Iraq paying for the whole deal. Such a relationship would renovate the militaries of two terrorist-supporting states hostile to the United States.

While in Damascus, Powell should combine a carrot (offering to help Asad with economic reforms he has tentatively started) with a warning about Syria's increasingly bold flouting of UN sanctions on Iraq. The oil pipeline from Iraq to Syria represents not just uncontrolled money for Saddam (bad as that may be), but what could become a new strategic alliance based on two dictators thumbing their noses at the UN and the United States. Asad already suspects Israel may lack resolve; if he concludes the same is true of the United States, he would have less reason to restrain Hizballah and more reason to work with Saddam. Asad needs to be told that the SyriaIraq pipeline must be brought under the UN oil-for-food program by the March 31 deadline in UN Security Council Resolution 1330, when the secretary-general must report on the pipeline issue.

Now, before a crisis actually invites Iraqi intervention, is the time to seek international consensus against Iraqi involvement in military adventures far from its borders. The United States could seek to ensure that any new UN Security Council resolution regarding Iraq includes a clause forbidding the stationing of Iraqi troops abroad so long as the sanctions are in place. An even better approach would be to adopt a "no enhancement" zone for western Iraq (along the Jordan and Syria borders) similar to the ban on enhancing forces in a southern zone of Iraq (often called the "no drive zone") under Security Council Resolution 949.

Replacing SaddamSecretary Powell has said that on this trip he will concentrate on "the UN part of [Iraq] policy as opposed to the U.S. bilateral relationship with respect to Iraq." That allows him to focus on the issues most amenable to consensus with regional and international allies, such as respecting UN resolutions and stopping Iraq's WMD programs. At the same time, the danger is that regional leaders may misinterpret this approach as reflecting a lack of concern about the United States' own agenda, especially the centrality of the goal of "regime change." Regime change is not going to be easy and it may not come as quickly as the Iraqi people and the U.S. government hope, but replacing Saddam is the only way to end the suffering of Iraqis and the threat to regional peace and stability.

Iraq's neighbors cannot be expected to take the lead in replacing Saddam. They are the ones who will have to bear the brunt of Saddam's reprisals. It is to be expected that they will therefore wait to see how committed the United States is to regime change. Asking regional leaders what they would recommend, akin to Secretary of State Warren Christopher's request for Europe's advice on Bosnia in 1993, could be taken as a sign of indecision and even weakness. Only U.S. leadership and a clear sense of purpose will generate support against Iraq. Some regional leaders would be delighted if the United States dedicated itself to replacing Saddam, but those same leaders will not take the lead in advocating such an approach.

If, as it appears, the Bush administration does not yet appear to have a clear policy on "regime change," it would be a mistake to suggest irresolution. Lacking a definitive plan to implement regime change would be less worrisome than hinting that the goal is no longer U.S. policy. Therefore, unless he is going to line up Arab support for the Iraqi opposition, Powell should underscore that the focus on the UN part of the Iraq question represents only the first phase in an on-going review of the new administration's approach to this difficult issue.

Patrick Clawson is director of research at The Washington Institute.

Policy #518

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

