

Sanctions on Iraq: Curtains for the Ba'ath

Feb 1, 2001



Articles & Testimony

• • • **T**he 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.

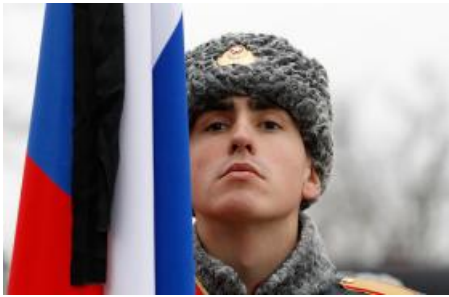
What is proposed here is not a sure thing; regime change could ultimately require a Desert Storm II. It is not clear, however, that domestic or international opinion would support a Desert Storm II. The plan outlined below, then, is put forth in the spirit that it is better to pay less than more to achieve 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 . . . ❖

National Interest

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