

Sidebar:

Saddam's Shakiness

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Articles & Testimony

The following is a sidebar to Dr. Satloff's article "[The Next Turbulent Zone.](#)" ([templateC06.php?CID=633](#))

Given current trends, Iraq will emerge as the foremost national security albatross around the neck of the next administration. Since the Clinton administration's welcome, if belated, 1998 declaration of "regime change" as a key goal in Iraq, a bold policy aimed at ousting Saddam Hussein from power is urgently called for.

Throughout the 1990s, the failure to engineer or demand regime change in Iraq after Desert Storm became the "original sin" of U.S. Middle East policy. The result was a containment strategy toward Saddam that began as an interim policy but evolved into a new status quo requiring enormous sums of human and financial capital. It has also drained the good will of allies, both regional and international. And despite this effort, Iraq today exports more oil than it did on the eve of the Gulf War and is able to pursue development of unconventional weapons without international supervision.

Yet Saddam's regime is shakier than many realize. His coterie of supporters is shrinking to those directly dependent on him. Army deserters continue to flock to opposition redoubts in the largely Kurdish north and the largely Shi'ite south. This is the time for the United States to press for Saddam's downfall with every technique at our disposal, from securing an international war crimes tribunal against Saddam to providing better weapons to his opponents, like the Kurds.

But we should go much further. Rather than making frequent pinprick air strikes in the "no fly" zones, we should grasp opportunities to attack Saddam where they will seriously damage his hold on power. With sufficient provocation, we should mount debilitating air strikes on the pillars of the regime: the secret police, Saddam's personal guard units, and the Iraqi command-and-control system. And, given Saddam's record, the provocations will surely come.

U.S. planners need to actively prepare for a window of political opportunity to attack Saddam. There are two plausible scenarios under which he might provoke the United States--and hopefully the Desert Storm coalition--to forcefully intervene with the international community's acceptance. The first would be Saddam's stymying the efforts of a new inspection regime cobbled together by the United Nations Security Council. The second would be

Saddam's pursuing some sort of "breakout strategy," using terrorism, conventional military means, or even weapons of mass destruction.

There is, not surprisingly, widespread squeamishness in Washington about such an aggressive new strategy. The reluctance is less a fear of "going in" than a fear of "getting out"--the famous exit strategy issue. Like the man who fretted about what to do with his lottery winnings, such worries are misplaced. The prime objective is to unseat Saddam, and only a lack of U.S. leadership masks the widespread support for such a policy that would emerge among Iraq's neighbors and some of our allies. Indeed, the fear that military action would cause the dismemberment of Iraq, as many argue, fails to recognize that Iraq is slowly disintegrating along ethnic lines precisely because of Saddam's rule.

Bringing the Iraq debacle to some kind of closure should be a front-burner objective. Unlike a containment policy, a goal of "regime change" cannot be left open-ended. Urgent planning must begin now to defuse apprehensions about a U.S. role in Saddam's ouster. To prepare for this dramatic ratcheting-up of U.S. policy, we should mount an aggressive public information campaign aimed at the Iraqi people, the Arab world, our allies, and the American polity.

Now that we have defined Saddam's ouster as our goal, every day that he remains in power is a setback for U.S. interests, prestige, and credibility.

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