

Stealth Bombing: Our Silent War in Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

What if they waged a war and no one noticed? In 1999, American and British pilots have bombed Iraq three times a week, hitting 360 targets with 1,100 bombs during more than 10,000 sorties. Yet the Anglo-American war over Iraq does not often make the front pages of even the Iraqi newspapers, let alone those in America. So far, the war has received little more than a perfunctory mention in either The New York Times or The Washington Post, and there's been practically nothing about it on television.

Yet Operation Desert Yawn is no haphazard campaign: it is a deliberate Clinton administration tactic that solves the smaller half of the Iraq problem--namely, how to keep Saddam Hussein in his box. By keeping Saddam contained, we are winning the battle. But we are still not winning the war, because we are doing essentially nothing to overthrow him.

The cleverness consists in breaking the mold of how force has been used against Iraq in the past. During the 1997-1998 cycle of Saddam-enhancing crises, each time America threatened to use force, Saddam generated international sympathy and inflated himself into a figure worthy of such attention. Keeping the bombing quiet has meant that there has been no opportunity for fawning diplomats and U.N. bureaucrats to offer Saddam concessions in the hopes of reaching yet another short-lived agreement. Instead, America has taken repeated military action without involving the U.N. security council, depriving Russia, China, and France of the opportunity to castigate the United States. Restoring the initiative to the United States, Operation Desert Yawn breaks from the paralyzing 1994-1998 obsession with holding together the mythic Gulf War coalition. The irony is that the new policy is better than the old one at reassuring our key allies: Turkey and Saudi Arabia allow U.S. planes to strike Iraq from bases on their soil, a step those governments found too domestically controversial to permit when the confrontations with Iraq were more openly advertised. In short, Saddam is no longer setting the agenda, gradually driving a wedge between the United States and its key allies; instead, Iraq is getting hit regularly without any end in sight.

The new strategy relies on a diplomatic fiction, namely that Saddam's provocations are causing the repeated bombings. In fact, what happened is that, last January, the United States changed the rules of the game. Take, for instance, the case of Iraqi radar. Under the old system, a plane could be authorized to hit an Iraqi radar site only if

the site's target acquisition radar illuminated a specific plane--a clear indication that the Iraqis were about to fire. Now, if the Iraqis simply turn on the radar used to monitor whatever traffic might be in the air, U.S. planes may respond by hitting Iraqi communications centers scores of miles away. That's a pretty expansive definition of "defense."

Saddam is in a vise: he must respond to the bombings if he is to maintain the aura of invincibility essential to his republic of fear. Faced with a threat, Saddam's every instinct is to bluster, threaten, and lash out. America's preoccupation with Kosovo would seem to have provided him with a great opportunity to counterattack by, for instance, bringing down a U.S. plane and capturing a pilot. But he took only pathetic steps: for instance, moving short-range missiles to Iraq's Persian Gulf shore to threaten shipping (the U.S. took them out). The bombing shows how hollow his military is and how little his foreign friends will do to help him.

Saddam is on the defensive--a dangerous position for an intensely hated dictator. For the first time in his 20-year rule, he gave more than 20 speeches in two months on themes such as (on a call to senior officials in Basra) the need to "confront the influence of hostile information" and to "spare no effort in thwarting the plans of our enemies"--a rare admission of internal dissent. Indeed, since the February assassination of Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, who had begun to criticize the regime openly, large protests have taken place in several cities. Meanwhile, Baghdad has seen a series of bombings against buildings said to house the secret police and the Republican Guard. This doesn't add up to an imminent uprising, but it shows that Saddam is no longer riding a wave of confidence, as he was in 1998.

Those unhappy to see Saddam weak and isolated are using every argument for why the pressure on him should ease up. The favorite rationale is that only concessions to Saddam will enable the United Nations to restart its inspections for weapons of mass destruction (WMD), an argument that plays well with the "arms control above all else" crowd. In fact, the end of inspections was no great loss, since Saddam had shown that he allowed them to occur only as long as they did not threaten his WMD programs. Since these programs generally require facilities so large and distinctive that American spy satellites can find them, Saddam's nuclear and missile programs are somewhat more vulnerable to detection and destruction.

The Iraqi chemical and biological weapons programs are harder to root out, because the factories that make those weapons can be used for legitimate civilian purposes: pesticide plants can make chemical weapons, and vaccine-producing facilities can make biological weapons. Under the program of U.N. inspections, those facilities were only monitored, not destroyed--they could always have been quickly shifted to weapon-making. Whether inspections are allowed to take place or not, the chemical and biological weapons threat will remain as long as Saddam is in power.

The real problem with the current U.S. strategy is not the end of inspections; rather, it is President Clinton's vacillation on whether or not to work for regime change in Iraq. By declaring that to be his goal in 1998 speeches to the nation, Clinton put the prestige of the United States on the line. From now on, the world will use a simple test to judge the success or failure of U.S. policy toward Iraq: namely, is Saddam still in power? Success is realistic if Washington commits to the effort, but failure is nearly inevitable if the administration sits back and waits for others to make it happen.

It is in this context that we should consider the role of the Iraqi opposition. To be sure, the opposition is unlikely to defeat Saddam's forces in the field. But that is largely irrelevant. The issue is what must be done to crack the aura of invincibility around Saddam and his repressive apparatus. If Saddam's security organizations are spending their time worrying about the country's internal opposition, they will have fewer resources to repress outbreaks of the now-seething popular discontent. If emboldened protesters began to act on a wide scale, an active opposition could catalyze and coordinate an uprising, turning what would otherwise be a riot into a regime-threatening rebellion. Similarly, the more occupied Saddam's security organizations are with the organized opposition and spontaneous

protesters, the less they can do to detect and stop coup plotters. Plus, U.S. containment efforts are strengthened when Saddam diverts time and resources from the regular military to deal with the opposition.

The United States has refused to take well-justified military steps to support the opposition in either the south or the north of Iraq. In the south, U.N. Security Council Resolution 949 authorizes the use of force if Iraq "takes any . . . action to enhance its military capacity in southern Iraq" (the so-called no-drive zone resolution)--but the United States very rarely hits the tanks and other heavy arms Saddam has moved into the south to use against the opposition. As for the north, Clinton pledged on national television that the United States would use military force to prevent Saddam from overrunning the Kurdish zone. But a July 29 letter to the Kurds from Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott said that America would do nothing to protect the Kurds if Saddam attacked them in retaliation for a planned meeting of the opposition National Assembly in the Kurdish area. To the opposition's credit and America's disgrace, the meeting may still take place, as scheduled, in Halabja--the Iraqi city Saddam bombed with chemical weapons in 1988. Halabja is near the Iranian border, which raises the prospect that Iran may provide the protection that the United States promised but will not deliver.

The Clinton administration's approach to aiding the forces trying to overthrow Saddam--talking big and acting small--has drawn the fire of both parties' congressional leadership, most recently in an August 11 letter to the president from Trent Lott, Joseph Lieberman, and others. Belying the critics who call it isolationist and unwilling to commit U.S. resources, Congress has been pushing money and authority at the administration, to little avail. The Clinton team has announced that it will begin using the \$97 million authorized for the opposition in the Iraq Liberation Act, but it refuses to deliver aid for use inside Iraq according to the strange logic that the U.N. sanctions forbid shipments into Iraq. (By that reasoning, the United States is violating the sanctions by "delivering" bombs to Iraq.)

And the aid proposed is strictly humanitarian. The administration has not even agreed to provide broadcasting equipment to counter Saddam's propaganda. Only when Washington ships weapons will Middle Easterners judge the United States to be serious about getting rid of Saddam. Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk has said that "to arm the Iraqi opposition ... is premature." Okay, so get busy changing that.

The current military strategy for Iraq has a smart side--the stealth bombings--and a not-so-smart side: supporting the opposition just enough to put the United States' prestige at stake but supporting it too little to make success likely within a finite period. What is "prudent and effective"--the words President Clinton used in his December speech to the nation to describe how America will back the opposition in Iraq--is to steadily increase support as the opposition matures, with the United States always pushing the process forward rather than lagging behind.

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