

Crisis with Iraq:

What Now? What's Next?

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt), [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Nov 25, 1998

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



[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

Three factors were cited by U.S. officials as reasons not to strike Iraq, none of which is convincing. First was the fear that air strikes would signal the death knell of UNSCOM. In fact, experience shows that Saddam has repeatedly backed down when threatened, and does not take risks when his survival is at stake. Even "pin prick" strikes have caused him to back off in the past. Analysts persistently overstate Saddam's pain and risk threshold, and mistakenly believe that he is driven by a martyrdom complex. If key pillars of his regime are hit hard, he will allow UNSCOM back in -- at least temporarily.

> Second, it was said that military action could lead to the collapse of sanctions. However, Russia and China have not violated sanctions on Iraq in response to American actions that more directly affected their security -- such as NATO expansion and arms transfers to Taiwan -- so it seems unlikely they would challenge the United States over this issue, especially when America is acting to uphold UN resolutions.

Finally, it was claimed that 10,000 Iraqi civilians could die during the envisaged air campaign. That is implausible, given that only 2,500-3,000 Iraqi civilians are believed to have been killed as a result of the 8,000 sorties flown against strategic targets during the forty-three days of air operations during Desert Storm.

> No matter what the United States' objectives are in Iraq -- to contain Baghdad, spark a coup, or support the opposition -- the willingness to use force is a necessary condition for success. Moreover, the threat of force is credible only if backed up by its occasional use. Delaying the use of force increases the chance of an unfavorable diplomatic compromise and enables Baghdad to disperse key military assets. Thus, the timely and effective use of force is crucial to the future of UNSCOM and the success of efforts to contain Iraq. It is the key missing ingredient of U.S. policy toward Iraq.

PATRICK CLAWSON

Whereas the previous U.S. goal was to keep Saddam Husayn in "the box," President Clinton implied a shift in policy when he announced at a 15 November press conference that the United States looked forward to working with a new Iraqi government. One way to achieve the new government would be through a military coup. However, the United States has not been successful in its past efforts at promoting Iraqi coups, and Saddam is very good at detecting threats and suppressing them. Another option is providing military support for the Iraqi opposition. To be sure, this is a high-risk proposal, but it does have a potentially high payoff: it could end the Saddam problem, greatly improve Gulf security, and alleviate Israel's fear of attack from the east -- which complicates a final settlement with the Palestinians. Because of the possible high payoff, this policy has a high degree of support in Congress.

> Several of the arguments against aiding the opposition seem suspicious. One objection is that support from the Gulf states would be needed but is not forthcoming. In fact, Kuwait deputy chief of staff General Fahd al-Amir told a Washington Institute Policy Forum the hows and whys of Kuwaiti support for the opposition. Another critique is that the United States would be leading the opposition to its slaughter, as happened at the Bay of Pigs. In fact, for the past twenty-five years, the United States has underestimated the political impact of opposition movements in Afghanistan and Nicaragua; it is possible that the experts have this wrong as well. The main argument against aiding the Iraqi opposition is the claim that it lacks broad support from the Iraqi people. However, the United States has a record of underestimating the opposition to Saddam; in 1991, it failed to realize that there would be a large-scale revolt against his regime. Currently, Bakr Hakim's group in Southern Iraq and the Kurdish groups in the north and in Iran are armed opposition movements that are present and active already inside the country.

In the interim, sanctions will continue. The sanctions can prevent large-scale import of conventional weapons and of luxuries that Saddam uses to reward his top officials, but sanctions will not have an impact on the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs which have made Saddam into a world-class problem and not just a minor dictator. The sanctions today allow imports of millions of tons of humanitarian goods under the "oil for food" program, and it is unrealistic to expect that a few hundred UN monitors will be able to detect a few tons of WMD-related imports hidden among that flood of humanitarian goods. Plus, with "oil for food" paying for humanitarian goods, Iraq is able to use its other resources to import hundreds of millions of dollars of goods which are not inspected by the UN at the border.

AMATZIA BARAM

The latest crisis was sparked by Saddam Husayn's reaction to an October 31 letter from the UN Security Council President which did not contain a timetable for removing the sanctions on Iraq. As a result, the Iraqi leadership really did feel as if they were in a "box." The lifting of the sanctions is very important to Saddam Husayn because sanctions negatively affects national honor, and prevent the regime from using all its oil export receipts in the manner of its choice. Iraq only makes three quarters of a billion dollars a year outside of the oil-for-food program. If another year goes by and the embargo is not lifted, a greater number of Saddam Husayn's power base -- his bodyguards, the Special Security Organization, the Special Republican Guard, and the Republican Guard -- will believe that he is leading them astray. In that case, there could be a repeat of the 1993 experience, that is, an attempted coup from within his inner circle (in 1993, from members of his own tribe in Tikrit).

> The Iraqi aim behind escalation was not to destroy UNSCOM, but rather to reconstruct UNSCOM into a different type of inspection regime that would not demand 100 percent compliance and would not be led by Richard Butler. This way UNSCOM would grant Iraq a clean bill of health, the embargo would be lifted, and Saddam could keep his WMD programs. He failed at this goal.

Saddam Husayn and the United States both gained experience from this conflict. Saddam found that his war of

attrition can at any moment force the United States to spend another billion dollars in order to check him. He also learned that causing a major crises is not always beneficial; many smaller crises can be much more effective since they gradually will erode the restraints he faces without provoking the United States enough to strike. Saddam has generally been very good at these tactical maneuvers, but he has been unable to achieve his grand strategic vision for making Iraq the major power in the region. He needs to find a way to drive a wedge between United States and the international community.

> The United States learned that Saddam Husayn very much fears a large scale strike that will cause devastation to his palaces and his military capability, e.g., his command and control system, tanks, and planes. If Iraq's military capability is damaged, then Saddam's power base, which he cares deeply about, will blame him. In the future, the United States can use this concern as an effective means to influence Saddam Husayn.

This Special Policy Rorum report was prepared by Benjamin Orbach.

Policy #355

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Facing Syria's Food Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)