The Implications of Bombing Iraq

by **Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)**

Nov 9, 1998

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

The Clinton administration is debating how to respond to Iraq's August 5 limits on the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) and its October 31 cessation of any cooperation with UNSCOM. To understand why force is being considered again requires examining each of the major problems facing the United States in its Iraq policy: the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threat, Saddam Husayn's grip on power, and allied criticism of U.S. policy. Importantly, this list of problems does not include how to respond to any threat by Saddam against Kuwait, for which the United States has well-developed plans supported by a broad international consensus.

The Iraqi WMD Threat. There are only two basic options for trying to restore the inspections regime: compromise or force. Each has its problems. Compromising to secure Saddam's cooperation requires agreeing to at least some limits on where inspectors can look; Saddam eventually violates whatever agreements are reached; and the United States has decided that holding together the UN consensus to keep the agreements in place requires advising UNSCOM to cancel planned inspections. It may even be that the only compromise acceptable to Saddam is one that allows him to retain his WMD capabilities. As for the use of force, Saddam may well cease cooperation with UNSCOM after military strikes, though the record to date has been that when hit or credibly threatened, Saddam backs down in a pattern of "cheat and retreat." In other words, it is not clear if the use of force will create problems for UNSCOM: The problems already exist, and there is some reason to hope they could be eased if Saddam fears he will pay a heavy price for not cooperating.

That said, the United States would be prudent to plan to rely less on UNSCOM. After all, UNSCOM is an instrument, not an aim; inspections are a means to respond to the Iraqi WMD problem, not an end in themselves. And the instrument is no longer working so well. The inspections regime has been seriously eroded by the stop-start nature of inspections since last October, which has provided Saddam with significant windows of opportunity for engaging in prohibited activities at new sites that could make irrelevant the long-term monitoring at declared sites. Quite apart from the larger question of the future of Saddam's regime, it would be wise to develop back-up plans about WMD that do not rely on inspections, including at the least a strong deterrent structure to convince Saddam that he would face the severest consequences were he found to possess WMD.

> Force cannot directly eliminate Saddam's WMD and missile capabilities. Despite the tens of thousands of bombing raids during Desert Storm, most of the WMD and missile facilities that the United States now knows about remained

intact because they had successfully escaped detection.

Saddam's Grip on Power. In the event of U.S. bombing, Saddam will try to whip up nationalist reaction as a means to strengthen his power base, to discredit the Iraqi opposition as unpatriotic and perhaps to undermine the new U.S.-brokered agreement among Iraqi Kurdish groups. In recent years, he has had considerable success blaming the West for the suffering he imposes on Iraqis. On the other hand, a bombing campaign could be designed to target the pillars of Saddam's regime, such as the Special Republican Guards and the various security services. That could weaken Saddam's grip on power, with several benefits: he might be more willing to cooperate, some insiders might decide to defect, coup-plotters might have a greater chance of success, and Iraqis might be more willing to risk open opposition.

U.S. bombing alone, no matter how intensive or prolonged, cannot be counted on to bring down Saddam. A strategy for the long-term is therefore needed. The main alternatives are:

- Sustain containment, if necessary for decades (60-year old Saddam could remain in power for twenty or more years, and his sons might succeed him), possibly by focusing on retaining the most important restrictions;

- Deter Baghdad's aggression with a strong security cordon around Iraq, while de facto accepting Saddam's reintegration into the world community ("offer him light at the end of the tunnel" is the phrase used in UN corridors);

- Overthrow Saddam, by covertly promoting a coup, by overtly providing extensive support for Iraqi opposition guerrilla operations to liberate the country piece by piece, and/or by directly invading Iraq. All of these options are consistent with the use of force proposed in the current circumstances.

Allies' Criticism of U.S. Policy. One of the main reasons force was not used in February was the administration's perception that it would be badly received by Europe and the Gulf monarchies, as well as openly attacked by Russia and China. International reaction is important if for no other reason than because sanctions on Iraq can be fully effective only with broad cooperation. In the current crisis, the use of force might draw less adverse international reaction, though open support might come from only a few key allies like Great Britain and Kuwait. During his visit to the six Gulf monarchies, Secretary of Defense William Cohen is said to have received conditional approval for use of their airspace and basing facilities, along with private political support -- though most of the six are publicly unsupportive of the use of force. In a major shift from their stance in February, France and Russia are said to be standing aside, annoyed at Saddam's refusal of the compromises they have offered.

The UN Security Council could also be said to be standing aside. Its Resolutions 1194 (passed September 9) and 1205 (passed unanimously on November 5) condemn the Iraqi actions -- which Resolution 1205 describe as a "flagrant violation" of the cease-fire resolution -- but the Council has taken no stance on the use of force in response.

> Iraq is not the only place where the United States must decide how forceful to be in carrying out its declared policy. Whether in Serbia, Libya, Afghanistan, Sudan, or North Korea, dictators periodically defy the international community, and the responsibility for organizing the response falls heavily on the United States. It must avoid the Scylla of appearing arrogant and the Charybdis of appearing ineffectual. Given that President Clinton and his cabinet members addressed Americans about the grave dangers they would face were Saddam to have WMD, the problem becomes how to live up to those tough words without appearing to be a bully.

One reason allies have been reluctant to endorse the use of force is the feeling that the Iraqi people have suffered too much already. Saddam has effectively used the sanctions to create a humanitarian problem; he cynically exploits international concern about the fate of ordinary Iraqis, against whom he has used poison gas, vicious repression,

and, for the Kurds, genocidal campaigns. U.S. policy is to provide Iraq with all the humanitarian imports it can possibly handle through the oil-for-food program. It can therefore be expected that the United States will support a Security Council resolution which renews the program when it expires on November 25. At the same time, U.S. policy is to insist that the restrictions on oil exports remain in place until Saddam complies with all the relevant UN resolutions, including those about the return of Kuwaiti prisoners of war and missing property, as well as those about WMD. To this day, one Kuwaiti in a thousand is still missing without being accounted for by the Iraqi government; the equivalent for the United States would be 270,000 missing Americans.

Small Force Now or Larger Force Later? A decision to use force would require the United States to identify how and when Iraq should be hit. The alternatives have evidently been framed as using a smaller force now or a larger force later. But the key issue is who gains more through delay, the United States or Saddam. Delay allows more U.S. forces to be brought to bear, but it suggests that with little effort and at any time he chooses, Saddam can force the United States to undertake costly deployments of additional forces. Delay allows the United States to hit more targets, but it creates the impression that Washington was uncertain about whether to respond vigorously, a factor that would weaken the effect if the United States did eventually strike. Delay provides an opportunity for diplomats to find a way for Saddam to back down, but it also gives an opening to those who would promote a dangerous compromise that would allow Saddam to proclaim victory.

Patrick Clawson is director for research at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #349

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)