



NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

STRATEGIC FORUM

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

Number 123, July 1997

Iraq: Troubles and Tension

Persian Gulf Futures I

by Phebe A. Marr

Conclusions

- Iraq's future is difficult to predict, but under any scenario, it is likely to be a source of regional tension and instability. If Saddam Hussein remains in power, as appears likely, he will continue to challenge the United States and the West. If he is removed, the transition to a new regime will be turbulent and could lead to prolonged instability.
- Hussein will continue attempts to split the coalition, erode the sanctions regime, challenge UNSCOM monitors, and remove the No-Fly Zones. Although some economic and military constraints will remain on Iraq as long as he is in power, the United States will find it increasingly difficult to maintain the current economic sanctions regime intact.
- Should the current government be replaced, a democratic Iraq is not likely to emerge soon. Decades of authoritarianism and, more recently, war and sanctions have eroded civil society and greatly reduced the middle class on which democratic order is founded. More likely is a weaker, but still authoritarian, regime.
- Any new regime will need some immediate sanctions relief and some foreign support to stabilize itself. Without such help, ethnic, sectarian, and factional struggles could further erode Iraq's stability.
- Under any scenario, a military invasion of Iraq by its neighbors is unlikely. However, a weakened Iraq would invite gradual intrusion of foreign influence, especially by Iran and Turkey. This would raise serious concerns among U.S. regional allies.

Background

Iraq's political future over the next decade is uncertain. As a result of war and sanctions, Iraq's society, economy, and military posture are all in a state of decline, although not at a point of collapse. Hussein remains in control of the country except for the Kurdish exclusionary zone in the north, but his political base is narrowing due to splits in the family, increased reliance on tribalism for governance, and a weakening of bureaucratic infrastructures. Implementation of UNSC Resolution 986 (oil-for-food) improves Hussein's chances of political survival, although it does not guarantee it.

Sanctions have taken a greater toll on the population than on the regime, particularly among Kurds, Shi`ah, and the educated middle class, which have migrated in significant numbers. Assessments of the impact of war and sanctions on Iraq's future vary. According to some experts, the population is becoming impoverished, with per capita income less than half of what it was in 1960. Estimates of the cost of reconstruction run between \$100 to 200 billion. Other analysts see Iraq as more resilient than expected. Much of the infrastructure damaged in the war has been rebuilt, especially in Baghdad. Sanitation is poor but roads and transportation networks are in good order. Iraq could probably recover fairly rapidly (within 5-7 years) if it received ample oil revenues and had a favorable investment climate, including debt relief. However, if Hussein remains in power, Iraq's recuperation is likely to be constrained by a continuation of some international restrictions and a poor investment climate.

The regime's longevity will be determined only in part by its prospects for economic recuperation. Other factors of greater importance include:

- The strength of the regime's security system
- The cohesion of the inner power circle, especially Hussein's family
- The degree to which national institutions-the military, the Ba`th Party, and the bureaucracy-have eroded or been supplanted by tribal ties and loyalties
- The status of national cohesion, which has been frayed by the increased alienation of the Kurds and Shi`ah.

The last two factors are critical, not simply for the survival of the regime, but for the Iraqi state itself.

Three Scenarios for Change

Iraq's future lies in one of three directions. They range from a most probable scenario of little or no change if Hussein remains in power, to modest change if he is replaced by someone of similar outlook from the Center, to radical change if the central government collapses. All have serious implications for U.S. security interests.

Scenario 1: Hussein Remains, More of the Same. In the most likely scenario, Saddam Hussein, or some member of his family, indistinguishable from him in policy orientation and outlook, continues

in power. Continuation of the current leadership could bring some cosmetic changes but would produce no fundamental change in domestic or foreign policy. An evolutionary change, possibly under a junior member of the clan, is not likely given Hussein's unwillingness to countenance political competition. A generation gap has opened up between the veteran Ba'athists of Hussein's generation—the 40-year olds who want economic benefits and pragmatism—and the under-25 generation which is frustrated and alienated; but these differences will have little impact on this regime. Rather, the security system will dominate. Some economic constraints will remain, but a loosening of sanctions will produce a modest improvement in social conditions. *De facto* partition of the north between Kurdish factions will continue, with portions under Turkish and Iranian influence. A third zone will undergo creeping Saddamization. However, disintegration of the Iraqi state is not likely to go much further. The regime's control over security and military organs, through family and clan ties, will persist, as will its repression.

In foreign affairs, there is little expectation of change in Hussein's aims or *modus operandi*. He will continue attempts to split the coalition, challenge sanctions and No-Fly Zones, and reduce his isolation by dangling lucrative oil concessions before interested parties. This is a formula for continued tension and uncertainty in the region, as the West learns to live with a "caged tiger."

Two contingencies could upset this scenario. The first would be an erosion of the sanctions regime due to the humanitarian plight of the Iraqi population and pressure from commercial interests, especially international oil companies. The second would be a conflict with the West. Hussein often makes mistakes. A big mistake, such as forcible termination of the UNSCOM inspection regime or a military threat to Kuwait, could produce a decisive military confrontation with the West which could change the scenario.

If Hussein remains in power, there are serious implications for U.S. policy. The United States will face increasing difficulty in maintaining the current sanctions regime and the No-Fly Zones. While a total lifting of the oil embargo is not likely soon, there will be increasing seepage, especially over commercial imports and, to a lesser extent, the WMD inspections. The costs of maintaining coalition cohesion will rise as the French, Russians, and international oil companies increase pressure to do business in Iraq. Humanitarian concerns for the Iraqi population will gradually lead to an increase in the amount of oil Iraq is allowed to export, (it could reach 3.5 million b/d in 2-3 years), providing resources Hussein can spend on his military and his supporters. His capacity to develop WMD will remain. Such an erosion could lead to increased threats to Persian Gulf stability, as Iraq seeks a return to the previous status quo, while coalition support for deterrent action will grow weaker.

Scenario 2: A Civilian/Military Replacement: Modest Change. A less probable scenario is Hussein's replacement by an individual or group from within the ruling circle. Assassination by a lone actor is seen as the most likely vehicle, but a coup by military or security elements, although more difficult to accomplish, is possible. The immediate successor would be a member of Hussein's clan, a Tikriti, a Ba`thist, an army officer, or some combination of these. The new regime would almost certainly be authoritarian, but its attitudes and orientation would depend on who was in charge and the mix of elements in the regime; a higher number of technocrats and professionals could produce more moderation.

Any regime change is likely to be turbulent. Deep-seated animosities among ethnic and sectarian groups, and individuals with scores to settle, could generate considerable bloodshed and violence. At the least, such a change is likely to lead to a succession of governments until a new domestic balance of forces emerges. The ability of the new regime to achieve stability-and minimize violence-will depend on benefits, such as sanctions relief from the West.

A major question in such a scenario is how different the new regime would be from the old. Few see the initial replacement as democratic. Most believe that a new regime, though authoritarian, would be weaker and hence more willing to propitiate key constituencies, such as prominent clans, military and security elements, and the bureaucracy. It would put Shi`ahs and Kurds into high profile positions and make some gestures to key Western interests in order to generate sanctions relief and end isolation. The new regime will attempt to extend its authority over the north, and end sanctions and No-Fly Zones. Such a regime will undoubtedly harbor a continued desire for WMD, but it might be willing to curtail such efforts in return for sanctions relief.

Several contingencies could cause this scenario to unravel. If Kurdish factionalism continues, foreign penetration of the north would disadvantage the new central government. Civil upheaval and a brutal takeover would virtually eliminate any support from the West, seen as essential to the legitimization of such a regime. Failure to stabilize the new regime could lead to Scenario 3, a collapse of government and the possible disintegration of the state.

Again, there are several implications for U.S. policy. If the current regime is replaced, the United States needs to be ready with a plausible response. In some policy circles there may be a tendency to "wait and see" what kind of a regime emerges and to make difficult demands on the new government. Differences of response are likely to emerge rapidly within the coalition, with some allies willing to end sanctions and other restrictions far more quickly than the United States. The ability of any new regime to stabilize itself will depend on help and acceptance from the West, in return for meeting Western demands for improved behavior. A balance must be struck between providing support sufficient to help stabilize a new regime and maintaining enough leverage to ensure that critical Western demands are met.

Scenario 3: The Political Structure "verthrown, Chaos or Warlords? Least likely but most disruptive would be the destruction not just of the regime but of the entire political structure. Whether as a result of a military coup or a change of government that gradually unraveled, this scenario could involve large-scale fighting. Kurds and Shi`ah could well take advantage of a change in Baghdad to achieve their aims, or tribal and clan groups embedded in military structures could engage in a low-level war of attrition. In the process, the central government might collapse or shrink to proportions where it could not keep order much beyond the environs of Baghdad. Three key elements would determine which, if any group, could achieve eventual domination in Baghdad: control over key oil fields, control over the food distribution system, and control over the central government apparatus.

Despite the turbulence, Iraq's neighbors are not likely to intervene militarily. Instead, they would extend their influence indirectly, using surrogate groups inside Iraq. Iranians would support Shi`ah and Islamist Kurdish groups, the Turks would support the Turko-men, the Syrians would back pro-

Syrian Ba`thists, and the Saudis would favor groups within the military and security apparatus. A rapid deterioration of the economy could be expected since oil could not be exported under these conditions, and the UNSCOM inspection mechanism would likely evaporate as well.

Analysts disagree on the eventual outcome of this scenario. In general, Europeans believe that chaos would not persist for long. According to this view, Iraq's neighbors as well as key Western players would act to prevent cantonization, and a new strongman would emerge, creating a regime similar to that in Scenario 2. Iraq would return to its familiar pattern. American analysts are more skeptical. They take a scenario of prolonged instability more seriously. One variant of such a scenario would be a very weak central government with some control over oil fields but not much else. The new government would have to bargain with Kurdish and Shi`ah groups who would thereby acquire more autonomy. Factionalism could produce warlords dominated by locally situated military units and ruling in conjunction with indigenous groups. In this case, separatist sentiment in Kurdish and Shi`ah areas would increase. Islamist ideology, including a Sunni version, could become much more pronounced.

A major trip wire in this scenario would be the intrusion of foreign actors into Iraq's domestic politics. While military action may not be likely, extensive foreign control over portions of the country, or over different constituencies within the country, could erode Iraq's independence. For example, Iran could gain influence in Shi`ah portions of the south through use of Iraqi Shi`ah military brigades now based in Iran, or the Turks could intrude military contingents into the north on a semi-permanent basis. Another factor would be spillover of refugees and other destabilizing forces that would raise pressure for international intervention similar to U.S.-UN operations in the north in 1991.

A long period of instability in Iraq would have serious consequences for Gulf security and U.S. policy. Policy analysts tend to assume that the United States would avoid intervention in Iraq's domestic affairs and insist that Iraq's neighbors do the same, allowing Iraq to sort out its own political future. A "hands-off" policy may become difficult to sustain. Pressures on the international community to intervene to staunch refugee flows or deter foreign intervention could become impossible to ignore. Conversely, it would probably be difficult to deter or prevent intrusion of hostile elements from neighboring states, especially from Iran.

A Caveat

No future scenario will exactly fit these three models. Iraq's future is likely to encompass a mixture of elements, including some like the exiled Iraqi opposition not included in these scenarios. For example, a period of prolonged instability in the aftermath of a regime change could produce a new and different mix of government elements, a more decentralized and ultimately more balanced and pluralistic government, or an authoritarian regime headed by an Iraqi "Ataturk" capable of leading Iraq in a direction far different from that of a Hussein clone.

Recommendations

- If Hussein remains in power, the United States needs more imagination in reshaping its

containment policy for the long haul. Resolution 986 must be refocused to constrain Hussein, while loosening constraints on the population. Over time, more food, medicine and necessities of life, including education, must be provided to deal with the humanitarian situation and repair the social damage of war and sanctions. Constraints should focus on controlling access to military imports, tighter controls over Iraq's WMD program, and restricting military activities, especially on Kuwait's borders.

- The U.S. Government should seek better coordination with its allies to shore up a fraying coalition. It might explore an agreement on the irreducible minimum for a long-term containment of Iraq if Hussein remains in power, including punitive measures in case of transgressions.
- The United States needs to develop a package of appropriate responses for a new regime, should one appear. Early symbolic and substantive measures will be required in circumstances bound to be ambiguous. First steps could include agreements with allies on amelioratory financial and economic help, such as unfreezing assets, reducing reparations, and easing sanctions. At the same time, the United States needs to indicate what criteria the new regime must meet to get U.S. and Western support. Recent policy statements by the Secretary of State and the Senior National Security Council Director for the Middle East indicate positive steps in this direction. The outlines of this policy need to be developed and communicated more clearly to the population in Iraq to avoid missed opportunities and misunderstandings.
- The United States needs to plan for contingencies should Iraq's political structure collapse. These include emergency relief for refugees and ways to keep hostile foreign intruders like Iran out of Iraq while minimizing the spread of instability to neighboring countries. The United States also needs to plan for the reduction or cessation of oil flows from Iraq and a cessation of the UNSCOM and IAEA missions.

This memorandum draws on a series of workshops with scholars and government policy analysts who examined alternative futures and their policy implications for Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The workshops were held in association with the Royal United Services Institute, London, and the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, DC. Dr. Marr is an INSS Senior Fellow. She can be reached at (202) 685-2227, fax (202) 685-3866, or e-mail marrp@ndu.edu.

The Strategic Forum provides summaries of work by members and guests of the Institute for National Strategic Studies and the National Defense University faculty. These include reports of original research, synopses of seminars and conferences, the results of unclassified war games, and digests of remarks by distinguished speakers.

Editor in Chief - Hans Binnendijk

Editor - Jonathan W. Pierce [NOTE](#)

| [Return to Top](#) | [Return to Strategic Forum Index](#) | [Return to Research and Publications](#) |

[Return to NDU Homepage](#)

[INSS Homepage](#)