

Strategic Insight

Iraq: Next Phase of the Campaign?

by [James Russell](#) and [Iliana Bravo](#)

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April 2, 2002

The Bush Administration's foreign policy is now being driven by a set of principles described by President Bush in his 2002 State of the Union Address. Characterized by various observers as the "Bush Doctrine," the outlines of this policy are: (1) that the United States will combat terror wherever it exists using all means at its disposal, including force; (2) that bilateral relationships around the world will be increasingly defined in terms of those countries that support the war on terrorism and those that do not; and (3) that "rogue" nations and/or terrorist organizations cannot be permitted to acquire and/or threaten the United States with weapons of mass destruction.

President Bush identified three countries - Iran, Iraq and North Korea -- as the "axis of evil" and needing particular attention in the next phase of the war on terror. Subsequent remarks by the President and senior officials make clear that acting against Iraq and its brutal dictator Saddam Hussein are the focus in the next phase of implementing the Bush Doctrine around the globe.[\[1\]](#)

Given the many policy pronouncements and press leaks over the last several months, there is a general impression that the issue is no longer whether Saddam will be attacked but when the attack will take place. Various arguments are being advanced to support the case for military action against Iraq and regime change in Baghdad. The main rationale for military action as highlighted under the Bush Doctrine is Iraq's unmonitored and illegal program to maintain and develop weapons of mass destruction. President Bush and various senior officials are threatening unstated consequences if Iraq does not readmit Iraq weapons inspectors, thereby linking the WMD proliferation issue with the objective of regime change. It should be noted though that some officials are suggesting that the United States will continue to pursue and insist on regime even change even if Iraq readmits U.N. weapons inspectors.[\[2\]](#)

Regime Change

While the Clinton Administration openly embraced the idea of regime change in Iraq, it limited the pursuit of this objective to policy pronouncements and covert operations. The Bush Administration is apparently prepared to act more aggressively. One school of thought advocates ousting Saddam by using the "Afghanistan model," which would combine air power and U.S. ground troops working in concert with active opposition groups inside Iraq: the Iraqi National Congress (I.N.C.) which is based in London and is the recipient of non-lethal military training and assistance; two Kurdish parties administering the areas in Kurdistan over the so-called "line of control," the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (led by Jalal Talabani) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (led by Masood Barzani); and Shi'ite Muslims in the south led by Sayed Mohammed Baqir Al-Hakim under an umbrella organization called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The idea is that U.S. airpower in conjunction with special operations forces on the ground could create "safe havens" for these groups to expand and/or create (in the case of the INC) geographic areas of control in a direct challenge to Saddam. Some believe that such an active challenge will prompt Iraqi military elements opposing Saddam to mount a long-awaited coup - solving the problem without a sizable conventional military operation.[\[3\]](#)

Others are not so sanguine and believe that a sizable conventional military operation will be necessary involving thousands of U.S. military personnel that will have to be built up in the region over the course of several months. This line of argument suggests that the opposition as currently constituted simply cannot challenge a conventional military that retains over 400,000 men under arms, with several thousand tanks and several hundred combat aircraft. Despite a conventional military structure that has been severely degraded by the U.N. trade embargo over the last decade this force still represents a formidable conventional military capability, particularly when compared to the lightly armed Kurdish and Shi-ite militias inside Iraq.^[4] Of these opposition groups, only SCIRI is currently conducting active and ongoing resistance to Saddam - although the INC has claimed to be conducting sabotage operations inside Iraq.

Continued Containment: "Smart Sanctions" and the Return of Weapons Inspections

Amidst the saber rattling, the Bush Administration has apparently reached consensus within the United Nations Security Council to implement so called "smart sanctions" that will effectively end the trade embargo over non-military and dual-use goods while retaining U.N. financial controls over use of Iraq's oil revenues. A military embargo would remain in place. It remains unclear whether the Maritime Interception Operations, administered by coalition naval forces in the Gulf, will continue if final agreement is reached to implement the smart sanctions. It is also unclear how the idea of smart sanctions fits within the construct of the Bush Doctrine, since it is possible to see the re-integration of Saddam into the international community if UNMOVIC Chairman Hans Blix declares (following weapons inspections) that Iraq is disarmed.

Some commentators have pointed to the contradictory nature of an approach that emphasizes regime change while at the same time seeking accommodation in the United Nations to implement smart sanctions.^[5] This argument agrees with the premise that Iraq's WMD programs are a threat to international peace and security; but notes that without WMD Saddam becomes just another unsavory dictator. Thus, the thinking goes, we should build international consensus around the objective of returning weapons inspectors to Iraq and establishing a rigorous inspection and long-term monitoring regime. With Saddam disarmed under such a system, he then ceases to be a threat and regime change becomes unnecessary.^[6]

Arab Response

The region's response to possible U.S. military action in Iraq was arguably delivered at the March 27-28, 2002 Arab League summit in Beirut when Kuwait and Iraq each signed a "rapprochement" and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's openly embraced Iraqi delegate Izzat Ibrahim. In this rapprochement, Iraq agreed in writing to honor Kuwait's security and sovereignty - effectively renouncing any hostile intentions towards Kuwait - a critical requirement in U.N. Security Council Resolution 687. Outstanding issues still remain between Kuwait and Iraq - notably an accounting for 605 Kuwaiti POWs as well as the return of Kuwaiti stolen property. The summit also endorsed Crown Prince Abdullah's peace proposal that offered recognition of Israel in exchange for a withdrawal to Israel's 1967 borders. The summit served to illustrate the dramatic polarization of the region caused by the ongoing Al-Aqsa intifada. Despite the Bush Administration's efforts to separate the issues, the intifada makes it virtually impossible for the United States to muster regional support for an invasion of Iraq. There is a belief in some quarters, however, that the opposition by Arab leaders is for public consumption only and that they will follow forceful and decisive U.S. leadership on Iraq.^[7] If public pronouncements are to be believed, however, it appears unlikely that the United States will be granted permission to use military facilities in the region - thereby dramatically complicating any sizable conventional military operation in Iraq. The United States would probably need the use of host nation military facilities and airspace in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar to launch an invasion of Iraq.

Coalition on War Against Terrorism in Danger?

Without direct evidence linking Iraq to the attacks of September 11th the United States faces difficulties in convincing its partners to take the war on terrorism to Baghdad. While acknowledging the threat that Saddam's unmonitored WMD programs pose, even the Europeans appear skeptical of our motivations in building a case to attack Iraq as part of the war on terrorism. This leaves the United States in the position of acting unilaterally -- one result of which may be the compromising of its ability to count on others to help fight the global war on terrorism.[\[8\]](#)

Conclusion

Unconfirmed press reports describe an increased U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf that is linked to potential military action in Iraq.[\[9\]](#) Should the decision be made to actually invade Iraq, the buildup of these forces will become even more apparent to the American public and the international community -- and a more public debate around this issue will result. Polls indicate that Americans by and large want Saddam Hussein removed from power, though there is no consensus on exactly how Saddam's removal is to be accomplished.[\[10\]](#) The aura of American battlefield superiority and the Nintendo-like capacity to apparently destroy targets at a distance at will presents a compelling and attractive vision to the public. But wars are never cost-free, gun camera footages notwithstanding. American ground troops in Afghanistan are discovering this first-hand. And, American battlefield superiority does not necessarily translate into operational invincibility. In Iraq, the international community faces an amoral foe in Saddam Hussein who values his regime security above all else and will exercise all means at his disposal to preserve his hold on power. It is difficult to predict the costs of another war against Iraq, but a starting point might be U.S. military personnel (not to mention other countries in the region, to include Israel) attacked by chemical and biological weapons, which if nothing else, could result in massive casualties in a civilian population that is totally unprepared for such an eventuality. This is not an argument against invasion; it is simply a call to carefully consider the immutable laws of unintended consequences as we set a course for confrontation and conflict with Saddam.

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References

1. See Nicholas Lemann's article "Inside the Bush Administration's Foreign Policy," *The New Yorker*, April 1, 2002, for interesting background on the development of the administration's foreign policy approach.
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5. Jessica Mathews, "The Wrong Target," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2002, page A19.
6. Ibid
7. See the series of articles in April 8, 2002 issue of the *Weekly Standard*: "The Detour," by Robert Kagan and William Kristol; "Appeasing Arab Dictators," by Reuel Marc Gerecht; "The Front Line in the War on Terror," by Marshall Wittmann.
8. See Gordon and O'Hanlon.
9. Julian Borger, "US paves way for war on Iraq" *The Guardian*, March 27 2002.
10. Richard Benedetto, "Poll: Americans Want Saddam Out, But Split on How," *USA Today*, March 26, 2002, page 4.