

Strategic Insight

Shibboleth Slaying in a Post-Saddam Iraq

by [James A. Russell](#)

Strategic Insights are authored monthly by analysts with the Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC). The CCC is the research arm of the [National Security Affairs Department](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Naval Postgraduate School, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

June 1, 2002

As the United States marches inexorably towards regime change in Baghdad, the critical issue facing policy makers is determining what happens after Saddam is removed from power. To produce a preferred outcome for Iraq in the post-Saddam period, the United States and its potential partners must address a number of critical assumptions that have gone unchallenged as the international community focused on containing Saddam during the 1990s.

Strategy During the 1980s and 1990s

During the 1980s, a consensus existed between the United States and its Gulf partners that a strong and viable Iraq -- even a heavily armed one -- served the region's interests. The main purpose of a Sunni-led Iraq was to provide a counter balance to the more populous and potentially dangerous Shiite Iran. The understanding during the 1980s -- and it was a mantle taken by Saddam willingly and aggressively -- was that Iraq would serve as the bulwark against any military expansion of the Islamic revolution by Iran into the Tigris and Euphrates valley and onto the Arabian Peninsula. The Gulf States consequently provided Iraq with billions of dollars in support during the Iran-Iraq war, and the United States provided intelligence to assist in the war effort when it appeared that the Iranians were winning.

During the 1990s, U.S. military forces in the Gulf engaged in operations in support of U.N. Security Council Resolutions and operated more generally on the basis of a policy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran. But there also was an implicit understanding that the United States and other countries in the region did not want Iraq to become too weak for fear of creating a strategic imbalance that could be exploited by Iran. And, while Iranian relations with the Gulf States have generally improved during the 1990s (with the exception of the UAE), the region remains concerned about Iran's Islamic revolutionary government and its aggressive pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), especially nuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems that hold their capitals at risk.

A potential ouster of Saddam provides U.S. officials and their partners in the region a unique opportunity to review the assumption that Iraq serves as a bulwark against Iranian aggression and to reach a consensus on the makeup of a post-Saddam Iraq and the role that Iraq will play in fostering regional security and stability. To be certain, U.S. policy today continues the approach taken over the last 20 years. U.S. officials want to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq, however artificial its borders may have been when they were created by Winston Churchill in 1921. The continued banding together of Iraq's three incongruous components -- a minority Sunni center, a Kurdish north and a Shiite south -- is deemed essential to regional security and stability.

Current Policy Issues

The idea that a strong Iraq is central to regional stability is enshrined in policy, despite a mountain of evidence that suggests that the opposite has in fact been the case. A compelling argument can be made that a unified Iraq under Baath-strongmen, most notably Saddam Hussein, has been a primary cause of

regional insecurity and instability for the last 30 years. Before Saddam came to power, Iraq threatened Kuwait in 1961. After a relatively peaceful period during the early 1970s, the Saddam-led Baath regime started two major regional wars, developed and used chemical weapons on its opponents and its citizens and aggressively developed WMD, including nuclear weapons. The death of an estimated 1.5 million people in both wars, the proliferation and use of WMD and the necessity of a forward deployed U.S. presence to prevent further Iraqi aggression simply does not support the idea that a unified Iraq has been a stabilizing force in the region.

It further remains unclear whether and how Iraq's Sunni, Kurdish and Shiite communities can function together in any sort of "modern" political context. Iraq has been led by an authoritarian Sunni-led minority regime since its inception, starting with the Hashemite monarchy imposed by Great Britain, which was followed by a Sunni-led Baath party apparatus and its series of military strongmen. Thus, the country has always been held together by coercion and force -- not by an underlying congruence of interests among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds that translated into common consent of the people. In fact, quite the opposite has been the case. The Sunni minority has been openly hostile to the Shiites and the Kurds virtually since the inception of the Iraqi state.

The "Balkanization" of Iraq?

The makeup of Iraq makes it difficult to envision anything but a Sunni-led minority ruling through coercion and force. So if not Saddam, then who and what? Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds present contending histories and circumstances that limit their ability to cooperate in a more representative form of democratic government. Each of these groups has more of an interest in governing themselves than in cooperating with each other.

The Kurds have periodically taken up arms against Saddam only to be brutally repressed, but their current circumstances across the line of control in northern Iraq have never been better. With U.S. security guarantees, a steady source of revenue from the U.N.-administered oil-for-food program and tolls imposed on the illegal Iraqi gas and oil trade across the Turkish border, the Kurds are living in relative peace and prosperity. They are closer now to realizing their dream of an independent Kurdistan than ever before. The Kurds have no reason to confront Saddam militarily because they have nothing to gain and everything to lose. Across their northeastern frontier in Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has been militarily defeated and the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan is in jail. The demise of the PKK has resulted in a termination of Turkish military incursions into northern Iraq over the last several years and has been another contributing factor in the relative peace across the line of control.

The Shiites have been persecuted mercilessly for the last 30 years, and in contrast to the Kurds, they continue to resist Saddam in a guerilla-style war. The Iraqi military continues to conduct counterinsurgency operations and is draining the marshes in an effort to deny the guerillas their sanctuary. The Shiites, who receive political and material support from Iran, want what the Kurds have -- a security umbrella that gives them the ability to govern themselves free from the interference of the Sunni-led central government in Baghdad.

For their part, the Sunnis, to outside observers at least, appear to have been completely co-opted by Saddam's Tikriti clique and have been party to if not willing participants in the rule of terror. This history makes the re-establishment of trust between the Sunnis and either of the other two groups difficult to imagine.

Conclusion

When confronted with the breakup of the states in Europe at the end of the Cold War, the West gave in to the inevitable -- no matter how hard U.S. officials and their European partners tried, they could not keep artificial entities together if the people in them could not or would not live in peace. NATO, in fact, made the decision in Bosnia to separate physically the warring communities and to deploy military forces to end

the violence. Perhaps the lessons of the Balkans are irrelevant to the situation in Iraq. But this history and its supporting assumptions are worth reviewing as the international community begins to contemplate the nature of a post-Saddam Iraq.

Whatever the practical difficulties of keeping Iraq together, the United States must declare its intention to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq to attract what political support it can for regime change in Iraq. But we should be under no illusions about the difficulties of unifying the three groups. U.S. officials should consider that by allowing the breakup of Iraq, the United States may find a viable path toward realizing its overriding policy objective, which is to prevent the re-emergence of another military dictator who will continue to develop WMD and threaten his neighbors if not the entire international community.

For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our [Strategic Insights](#) section.

For related links, see our [Middle East Resources](#).