

Iraq and the Future of the Middle East

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War with Iraq could begin as early as this week.

It is hard to see how we got to the point where the United States would take it upon itself to unseat Saddam Hussein, against world public opinion, against the will of a majority of the countries in the world, and with only tepid support in this country. It is even harder to see what the impact will be for the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, U.S.-Russian relations, the world's economy, and our position in the Middle East. Given these uncertainties, it is important, I believe, to understand the genesis of our policy toward Iraq, how it developed in the Clinton Administration, and to understand the continuity of policy between the Administrations. Where we are today is the product of two Administrations and their failure to find viable alternatives to military action to stop Saddam Hussein.

In 1991, when the first Bush Administration decided not to pursue the war against Iraq into Iraqi territory, one of the reasons for this decision was the belief that Saddam Hussein would not last long in power. He had suffered a massive defeat, his country was under severe sanctions, and he was isolated from the world. The belief in his inevitable downfall was persistent. I remember when I

was at our Mission to the United Nations in 1993, being called to Washington for a meeting at the National Security Council and being asked how long I thought we could keep the sanctions going. I said I was certain we could sustain them for another three years, but after that we would see slippage. The consensus was that three years would be enough time since the regime of Saddam Hussein would collapse before then. We had far too much confidence in the effect of sanctions and in the likelihood of a successful unsupported internal coup.

Then, when a coup was mounted in 1996, the Clinton Administration failed to support the Kurds and the Iraqi opposition in an attempt to oust Saddam Hussein. In the absence of U.S. support the coup crumbled and U.S. credibility as a reliable partner for future attempts was destroyed. In fact, the Clinton Administration was not ready to commit land forces to overthrow Saddam Hussein and did not want to be drawn into a coup attempt that could have required U.S. force intervention on the ground to save the plotters. The message was clear to the CIA, to the Kurds, and to the Iraqi opposition – the Clinton Administration was not serious about a covert program for regime change in Iraq. When asked, George Tenet, Director of the CIA, gave such efforts less than a 5% chance of success. As I said, up to this point, the Clinton Administration had relied on the sanctions imposed on Iraq after the Gulf War to contain Saddam Hussein. And from a military perspective, the sanctions had worked. By the end of the 90's, Tony Zinni, then running the Central Command, could demonstrate that the Iraqi Armed Forces were a shadow of their former selves and posed no significant military threat to their neighbors. While Saddam Hussein retained credible defensive forces, his ability to project force had been eliminated and it remains eliminated today.

However, the sanctions regime came at a cost. It was constructed in such a way that the principal victims, other than the Iraqi military, were Iraqi civilians. This created enormous pressure in the region and in Europe to relieve the Iraqi population from the ill-effects of the sanctions. As a result, during the last two years of the Clinton Administration, 1998 and 1999, the sanctions regime began to crumble. France, Russia and a number of Arab and other European states began to ignore selected aspects of the sanctions. In addition, Syria joined Turkey and Jordan in opening its border

to trade in oil outside of the sanctions system. Significant contraband, including military items, found their way through these and other channels. In fact, some of the states, like France and Russia, that today are loudest in condemning military measures to control Saddam Hussein, are the same states that undermined the viability of sanctions in the late '90s, and convinced the Clinton Administration that time was working against our ability to contain Saddam Hussein.

President Clinton had not relied on sanctions alone but had established a number of redlines against Iraqi actions that would provoke a massive U.S. military response – one of which was the development and production of weapons of mass destruction. In 1998, the Clinton Administration put this policy to the test in an extended bombing campaign against Baghdad and against suspect weapons development sites. But the actual results of the campaign, by all accounts, were minimal. Accordingly, by the end of the Clinton Administration, there was no longer any confidence in clandestine measures to eliminate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, there was no confidence in the sustainability of sanctions to contain him, and there was no confidence that his actions could be controlled by air power alone.

Based on hard intelligence and the facts on the ground, however, the Clinton Administration continued to believe that Saddam Hussein had not given up his plans to achieve hegemony in the region or to obtain weapons of mass destruction. There was clear evidence that he intended to buy off as many states as possible – and there were many willing participants. His goal was gradually to erode the sanctions regime to the point that it would be effectively eliminated. Thus, even in the Clinton Administration, there was dawning recognition that in due course, Saddam Hussein would present a greater threat to the region than ever before. This is when top figures in the Clinton Administration began publicly to talk about regime change. In short, the Bush Administration came into office on the heels of a failed containment policy and continued deterioration of controls on Saddam's freedom of action.

In its earliest days, the new Administration examined each element of the containment concept to determine if the gaps could be filled. We worked for the so-called smart sanctions to focus on military items and close the gaps in Iraq's borders. Indeed, the Bush

Administration was ultimately able to change the sanctions regime despite considerable resistance from the French and Russians, but it did not succeed in closing down the gaping holes open to smugglers. For example, key elements of Saddam Hussein's military communications network were reconstructed during this period with fiber optic cable which is far more difficult to penetrate. He bought the prohibited cable from China and smuggled it in through Jordan.

The Bush Administration also went back to the drawing board with the Joint Chiefs to see if new targeting could lead to better potential results than the 1998 air campaign. The result was disappointing – there simply were no lucrative targets that could end Saddam's clandestine efforts to build longer range missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Finally, the Administration looked at covert means with the hope that a new Administration could regain credibility with potential plotters. But Saddam Hussein's security continued to be extremely difficult to penetrate. In addition, potential coup plotters, even if they could be identified without being caught by Saddam, continued to have their doubts about U.S. military support. In the light of these conclusions, a full-scale military response to eliminate Saddam Hussein seemed increasingly attractive.

Inclining the new Administration in this direction was a strong contingent of like-minded conservatives who already had a strong preference for regime change. Their approach had its earliest roots in a document called "Clean Break" which was developed by Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and a number of others as campaign advice to Bibi Netanyahu in his campaign of 1996 for Prime Minister. Among other things, Perle told Bibi:

Israel can shape its strategic environment, in cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, by weakening, containing, and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq – an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right – as a means of foiling Syria's regional ambitions.¹

At this time – in 1996 – the Clinton Administration was still focused on Iran as the principal threat to Israel, to the region, and to the United States. Perle advocated changing this focus to deal with more immediate threats to Israel's security – Syria and its back door, Iraq.

This approach was further developed in the “Statement of Principles” of the “Project for a New American Century” signed off on in 1997 by Cheney, Rumsfeld, Perle and a host of other prominent figures in and around the new Administration. A key sentence in the statement is: “It is important to shape circumstances before crises emerge, and to meet threats before they become dire.”² This was the foundation of the preemptive defense policy announced by the President in 2002 as follows: “We must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends.”³ In this regard, the new Administration was deeply skeptical about the value of the United Nations and believed there were great risks in trying to reconstruct an inspection regime in Iraq.

During the policy discussions I attended in the beginning of the new Administration, I repeatedly heard the fear expressed that Saddam Hussein would get smart and recognize that by complying with the UN Security Council’s resolutions he could get a clean bill of health from a renewed inspection regime which, ultimately, would allow him to get out from under sanctions. Once free of sanctions he could be confident, given his money and ability to win favor with the French and Russians, that the Security Council would never be able to re-impose sanctions. Then he could rebuild his offensive capabilities, missiles, and weapons of mass destruction at will and with the benefit of massive oil revenues. In short, based on this fear, a number of people in the Bush Administration did not want to go back to the United Nations and did not want to see inspections resumed – particularly if they were successful. In fact, the policy followed by both Administrations until recently has been based on the optimistic assumption that Saddam Hussein would never catch on and that he would continue his self-destructive policy – a presumption that has only now been called into question as more effective inspections were resumed under the threat of military action.

One can argue about timing and priorities, but I think it is hard to argue with the basic conclusion that Saddam Hussein poses an inevitable long-term significant threat to the region and the world unless one ignores the man’s malevolent behavior patterns and exaggerates the will of the International community to contain

him. And if this is the case, then regardless of the Administration in power, sooner or later we would have come to the same outcome – a confrontation with Iraq. And, if deferred too long, the confrontation could come under far worse conditions than we face today – with less apparent justification, less practical support in the region, and a greater threat to our own forces. The problem has been that we have not been able to convince others of the validity of this argument.

One reason we have developed so little support has been that the Administration has been clumsy in making its arguments:

- It has failed to explain the gradual disintegration of the controls on Saddam Hussein that has taken place over the past ten years.
- It has conspired with the British in putting out fabricated intelligence derived from newspaper articles and other unsourced information, which has been bluntly rejected by the inspectors.
- It has exaggerated the nature of the immediate threat – comparing the threat of Saddam’s army with Hitler’s Wermacht.
- It has belittled the dangers of military action and its aftermath. It has exaggerated the ease with which Humpty Dumpty can be put back together.
- It has minimized the cost in terms of coin and commitment – suggesting a U.S. military occupation of less than two years and yet comparing it to our occupation of Germany, which lasted seven.

The Presidential speechwriters’ tendency toward hyperbole and exaggeration may make sense in domestic politics but it plays havoc with the President’s credibility abroad. Nevertheless, we are where we are and war is here – or at least it will be in the next few days. The question now is how we counter the hostility in the world and the region to this war after the combat phase is over and that depends on perceptions as much as facts on the ground.

Over the past two years a number of preconceptions have developed in the region starting with the belief that the U.S. objective in Iraq has nothing to do with Saddam Hussein and has everything to do with oil:

- We are suspected of being 21st century colonialists.
- We are thought to be hostile to Islam and to Arab culture.
- We are seen as insensitive to the pain of the Iraqi people.
- We are accused of arrogance and not listening to others.
- We are seen to be turning our backs on the issue that confronts every Arab every day on television news – the suppression of the Palestinian people.
- And we are cited for our unquestioning support for Sharon.

Our enemies in the region and particularly in Al Qaeda will do their utmost to play on these preconceptions. And if we fall into this trap, pressure will build on Arab governments to distance themselves from us; anti-Americanism will grow; new recruits will flow to fundamentalist causes and some will wind up in terrorist operations against us, against Israel and against moderate governments in the region; and the war on terrorism will suffer reversals. In fact, the *New York Times* yesterday reported that the ranks of Al Qaeda recruits were already swelling because of the threat of U.S. action against Iraq.

This does not have to be the outcome of war. The Administration can change the script, provided it carefully manages the aftermath. The Administration is counting on a relatively smooth and quick military operation. This is important for maintaining calm in the region. Extended conflict or heavy civilian casualties will exacerbate the situation and make the job of protecting our interests in the region much harder. But let us assume that the Administration conducts a successful military operation. It then will expect our forces to control the security situation in the initial aftermath of war and to provide for the immediate humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people.

The Administration intends to seek help from various Islamic countries like Bangladesh to provide security forces and get U.S. forces out of the middle. It will look to several Gulf and European states to provide resources for immediate reconstruction needs until oil flow is restored and Iraq can generate its own funds. It will also look to Gulf States and Saudi Arabia to ease the shock to Jordan and Turkey of facing an Iraq that is looking to maximize oil revenues rather than providing huge discounts designed to keep outlets to the world and sources of hard currency open. The

Administration expects to install Iraqi technical managers in the oil industry and in other sensitive areas of Iraqi life to make decisions and remove the suggestion that we are managing Iraqi resources to our own benefit. If we are able to follow this script, it will reduce our profile and make management of the inevitable negative reaction in the region easier. There are other steps we can take as well.

We can do what the Spanish have urged, muzzle our neo-conservatives and fundamentalists, stop undercutting the moderate governments in the region and get Secretary Powell, who has credibility, out to the region with the President's blessing and full public backing for a change. In addition, the Administration, which started out well after September 11, has to renew its efforts to blunt the charge that we are prejudiced against Islam and against Arabs – that we are engaged in a crusade against Islam. The strong measures taken by Ashcroft and the Justice Department against Arabs need to be reviewed as to their effectiveness. The assumption that every Arab is a terrorist needs to be challenged. But more important than all these steps, which are largely cosmetic, will be the President's sincerity in his recent Rose Garden statement that the Palestinian issue would be the next point on our agenda.

It will take strong and balanced measures on the part of the President if he wants to be credible on the issue of the Palestinians. He is seen today as a partisan of Sharon and a partner of Israel in suppressing the Palestinians. The antidote is not to attack Israel, it is to support the very policies of a two-state solution, termination of terrorism, termination of settlement activity, and support for democratic reform in the Palestinian Authority that the President has outlined repeatedly. Anything short of a fair and full-scale effort on the part of the United States will be an open invitation to all the negative outcomes of a war on Iraq that so many experts have predicted. Some in the Administration want to follow another path:

- They want to leave the Palestinian issue for Sharon to sort out.
- They want to follow up our efforts in Iraq with steps to force Syria's hand on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.
- They want to support Iranian opposition elements who seek the overthrow of the existing regime.
- And they want to force the pace on reform and democratization in the Arab World.

Some of these objectives may well be desirable, but pressing them too quickly in the aftermath of a war on Iraq and U.S. military occupation of an Arab country could be disastrous.

U.S. efforts to impose a U.S. vision on the area could lead to instability in countries like Jordan and Pakistan, and could result in further strengthening the hand of fundamentalism and terrorism. So far as I can tell, the American people are far more worried about terrorism than the threat of Saddam Hussein. How ironic it would be if the Administration, through its actions to stem the Iraq threat and its attempts to impose a U.S. made plan for democracy and governance in the region, increased the threat of terrorism against the United States.

The Choice is the President's.



NOTES

¹ Richard Perle, James Colbert, Charles Fairbanks, Jr., Douglas Feith, Robert Loewenberg, David Wurmser, and Meyrav Wurmser. "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," report prepared by The Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies' "Study Group on a New Israeli Strategy Toward 2000." (2000), (www.israeleconomy.org/strat1.htm, June 2003.)

² Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, et al. "Statement of Principles, of the Project for a New American Century." (June 3, 1997), (www.israeleconomy.org/strat1.htm, June 2003.)

³ George Bush. "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America." Address to the United Nations, September, 2002, (www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf, June 2003.)