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Iraq: U.S. Policy Options

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Summary

In the aftermath of the December 16-19 U.S.-British bombing campaign against Iraq (Operation Desert Fox), the United States continues to search for a sustainable and effective means of ending the threat posed by Iraq. Many in Congress believe that U.S. policy should focus primarily on removing Saddam Husayn from power. The Administration says it is working toward that outcome but that achieving it will be difficult. According to the Administration, near term U.S. policy should focus primarily on preventing any restart of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs and on containing Iraq's ability to threaten its neighbors. This report will be updated to reflect regional, diplomatic, or legislative developments.

Introduction

Repeated crises with Iraq over disarmament issues¹ have elicited a wide range of suggestions in Congress and among outside experts for dealing with the threat from Iraq over the long term. Even before Operation Desert Fox, there was a consensus within and outside the Administration that, as long as Saddam Husayn presides over Iraq, that country will pose a continuing threat to U.S. forces, allies, and economic and political interests in the Persian Gulf and Middle East region. Some other countries, including permanent members of the U.N. Security Council France, Russia, and China, argue that Iraq, even under its existing leadership, can and should be coaxed back into the family of nations. Options for dealing with Iraq range from launching a U.S. ground invasion of Iraq to overturn the current regime, all the way to lifting international sanctions and establishing a political dialogue between Washington and Baghdad. (*For information on past and current U.S. efforts to change the regime in Iraq, see CRS Report 98-179 F, Iraq's Opposition Movements.*)

¹For background on the recent crises, see CRS Issue Brief 92117, Iraqi Compliance With Ceasefire Agreements, and CRS Issue Brief 94049, Iraq-U.S. Confrontations.

The Current Policy: Containment Plus

In the aftermath of Operation Desert Fox, high-ranking U.S. officials state that the primary goal of U.S. policy remains the containment of the threat posed by Iraq's current regime to Iraq's neighbors and the world, using additional military force if necessary. For the seven years since the 1991 Gulf war, the primary mechanism for accomplishing this objective has been to ensure that the U.N. weapons inspection and monitoring regime maintains robust and to work to maintain comprehensive international sanctions on Iraq until it complies with all applicable U.N. resolutions. The United States and Britain also maintain no fly zones over northern and southern Iraq (France overflies part of the southern zone), and the United States and Britain have told Iraq they will enforce a U.N. prohibition on the reinforcement of Iraqi ground forces in the south.

In explaining why he aborted an earlier airstrike campaign, President Clinton said November 15, 1998 that restoring a robust WMD inspections program is the optimal goal for the United States, because inspectors (UNSCOM) on the ground represent the best means of preventing and/or detecting any restart of prohibited Iraqi weapons programs. For now, Operation Desert Fox has, as was predicted, led to a suspension of UNSCOM's work in Iraq, including the monitoring of industrial facilities that could be converted to WMD production. Iraq is threatening never to allow UNSCOM back into Iraq. The airstrike campaign, according to the Administration, succeeded in degrading Iraq's ability to restart its WMD programs, particularly its ability to produce prohibited missiles, and reduced the threat Iraq poses to its neighbors.

The United States has threatened further airstrikes if it detects a restart of any WMD programs or Iraqi attempts to threaten its neighbors. However, in the absence of an UNSCOM presence in Iraq, it is unclear whether U.S. intelligence alone is capable of detecting a reconstitution of Iraqi WMD programs. The United States has said it wants UNSCOM to reenter Iraq — provided Iraq gives it full cooperation — and the Administration has implied that it will entertain some Russian and French proposals to encourage Iraq to accept the resumption of a weapons inspections and/or monitoring regime.

Although seeking to keep Iraq contained, since November 1998 the Administration has stated openly that it would prefer a new government in Iraq. Congress has expressed its support for regime change in Iraq, most recently in the Iraq Liberation Act (P.L. 105-338, October 31, 1998) and H.Res.612 (December 17, 1998), supporting U.S. forces in Operation Desert Fox. During 1991-1996, the Bush and Clinton Administrations backed groups and initiatives intended to overthrow the regime, although the U.S. financial and political resources committed to the efforts were relatively small. However, many in and outside the Administration believe that the organized opposition is too weak and divided to oust Saddam and that there are no certain means of promoting an internal military or Ba'ath Party coup against him.

The target list for Operation Desert Fox appeared to answer calls for a use of U.S. airpower to help promote the goal of removing Saddam from power. Some outside experts believed that airstrikes should target Saddam's power bases in Iraq, such as the Republican Guard, the Special Republican Guard, and the intelligence services, in an attempt to prompt a coup against him. According to this view, under this scenario elements in the military and security forces will conclude that they will not survive unless

they displace Saddam Husayn. Several targets in these categories were damaged in the operation, but there was no evidence of resulting military unrest against Saddam.

Suggested Modifications to Current Policy

The Administration asserts that U.S. policy will be able to keep Iraq in a “strategic box,” but many in Congress and in the policy community see the need for adjustments. Many of these suggested changes to existing policy do not necessarily center around stronger steps on behalf of the Iraqi opposition. One observer, Richard Haass, Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution, believes that a straightforward containment policy is achievable and realistic, and that the Administration should not openly seek the overthrow of the Iraqi regime or insist on an indefinite maintenance of sanctions.²

This suggestion is in line with the views of U.S. allies and other countries that believe the United States should indicate its willingness, in line with Paragraph 22 of U.N. Security Council Resolution 687, to lift the embargo on Iraqi oil exports in return for Iraqi compliance with all post-war agreements. These countries maintain that Iraq does not now have sufficient incentive to comply on WMD issues because it believes the United States will not permit the easing of sanctions as long as Saddam rules Iraq. Some U.S. allies also believe that a stated U.S. desire to change the regime in Iraq removes Iraqi incentives to comply with U.N. resolutions, none of which mentions Saddam's removal.

These sentiments form the basis of French and Russian efforts, in the aftermath of Operation Desert Fox, to encourage Iraq to resume cooperation with a WMD inspection/monitoring regime by offering to restrict UNSCOM's activities or ease sanctions. France is said to be promoting a more limited UNSCOM operation and a monitored lifting of the ban on international trade with Iraq. Russia is suggesting reviving the idea of a comprehensive review of all outstanding requirements on Iraq, along the lines of that offered to Iraq prior to Operation Desert Fox. The United States rejects the easing of sanctions, but some press reports indicate it might agree to relegating some weapons categories, particularly nuclear issues, to monitoring rather than continued inspections. During mid 1998, Russia had tried to persuade the United States to agree to this change in nuclear inspections as an incentive to Iraq.

Some outside experts believe that Iran can contribute more than tactical benefits to the U.S. effort to contain Iraq. These experts maintain that, because Iran and Iraq are longtime rivals, continued warming of U.S.-Iran relations could place additional pressure on Iraq.³ On the other hand, this suggestion might not take sufficient account of the significant improvement in Iranian-Iraqi relations over the past two years, culminating in an early April 1998 mutual release of almost 6,000 prisoners from the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. A U.S. effort to use Iran as a counterweight to Iraq could also represent a return to

²Haass, Richard. Containing Iraq Without War. Washington Post, February 20, 1998.

³Friedman, Thomas. A One Word Strategy. New York Times editorial, January 6, 1998. P.A21.

a previous U.S. policy of alternately tilting toward Iran or Iraq to maintain Gulf stability.⁴

Another option attempts to strengthen containment by addressing the apparent erosion of Arab support for U.S. efforts to maintain international sanctions on Iraq. Many experts, and some Administration officials involved in the peace process, believe Arab governments and public opinion see a double standard in which the United States strictly enforces U.N. resolutions on Iraq but does not press for full Israeli compliance on relevant U.N. resolutions.⁵ Others counter that the two situations are not nearly comparable, arguing that Israel is a small state surrounded by potentially hostile neighbors and has never used weapons of mass destruction against its adversaries, as has Iraq. The United States has tried to address this issue, in part, by helping broker the October 1998 Wye River Memorandum which provided for Israel to withdraw from additional territory.

Despite the Wye accords, several Arab states gave only grudging public support to Operation Desert Fox on the grounds that Iraq was to blame for inviting U.S. military action by violating U.N. resolutions. Saudi Arabia, a close ally of the United States, did not allow strike aircraft to operate from Saudi territory. Operation Desert Fox also touched off anti-American demonstrations in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestinian territories, and in Syria, where demonstrators entered the grounds of the U.S. Embassy and Ambassador's residence.

Potential Major Shifts in U.S. Policy

Some believe that the options described above will not ensure protection of U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf and Middle East, and they advocate dramatic changes in U.S. policy toward Iraq.

U.S. Ground Offensive. At one end of the policy spectrum are those who believe that Saddam poses a long term threat to the region sufficient to warrant a U.S. ground offensive, if needed, to ensure his ouster.⁶ In the absence of any new Iraqi threat to use military force or weapons of mass destruction, the Administration appears to have rejected this option. Defense Department military planners believe that at least 200,000 U.S. ground troops — a significant proportion of total U.S. forces — would be required to enter Iraq in sufficient force to ensure collapse of the regime. Iraqi forces would likely fight hard and cause major U.S. casualties if U.S. forces drew close to major cities, such as Basra, although some observers believe the Iraqi military might quickly turn on Saddam. Administration officials doubt that Saudi Arabia, which has been hesitant to allow U.S. airstrikes against Iraq in the 1998 inspections crises, would permit the stationing of U.S. ground forces for a move against Iraq. Kuwait is too small and its facilities too limited to serve as a staging area for a major U.S. military operation in Iraq.

⁴ See, Searching for Stable Peace in the Persian Gulf. U.S. Army War College, February 2, 1998, by (name redacted). The author maintains that this policy might have contributed to the fall of the Shah of Iran, the rise to power of Saddam Husayn, Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

⁵Wright, Robin. White House Mulls Policies on Iraq.

⁶ Advocates of this option include William Kristol, editor of the Weekly Standard, and Robert Kagan, a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Iran and many Arab states do not want to see a Western power invade and occupy an Arab state and would not be expected to support this option, even though each of those countries has been at odds with Iraq at various times over the past few decades. On December 23, 1998, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger again publicly ruled out this option as too risky, too costly, and having the potential to turn the United States into an occupying power in Iraq.

Diplomacy and Engagement. Another option, diametrically opposed to the above and little discussed among policy experts, is to reopen official ties to the Iraqi government and offer other incentives for Iraq to fully comply with applicable U.N. resolutions. Jordan's King Husayn reportedly planned to recommend this option in talks with Administration officials in mid-March 1998, but the Administration signaled, in advance of his visit, that a U.S.-Iraq dialogue is not under consideration.⁷ King Husayn and Crown Prince Hassan (acting as regent in King Husayn's absence for cancer treatment) believe that a U.S. dialogue with Iraq could help the United States communicate the reasons for its insistence on full compliance and hold out for Iraq the hope that compliance would lead to an easing of international sanctions. The Administration and other opponents of the idea assert that Iraq would likely view a U.S. offer of dialogue as a sign that it can achieve lifting of sanctions without full compliance.

There has been some discussion of options short of full diplomatic engagement but leaning in that direction. Some experts believe the United States could accept a lifting of most international sanctions while at the same time protecting U.S. interests by articulating a posture of military deterrence should Iraq threaten its neighbors. Some observers who favor this posture, such as Carter Administration National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, suggest that Iraq is strategically weak and that the United States could easily undertake military action if Iraq is detected restarting its weapons of mass destruction programs or attempts to use any such weapons. Some maintain that Iraq was deterred from using chemical weapons against coalition forces during the Gulf war because of implied U.S. implied threats of massive (nuclear) retaliation. Supporters of this option also argue that, at the height of the Cold War, U.S. deterrence strategy helped prevent aggression by the Soviet Union, a far more formidable military power than Iraq. Opponents of this idea maintain that Saddam's leadership of Iraq is highly personal and not necessarily subject to the rational strategic calculations that characterized the Soviet Union.

A related option could be to draw Iraq into regional security talks with the Persian Gulf monarchies and Iran, focusing on conventional arms control and Gulf-wide monitoring of weapons of mass destruction programs.⁸ Such an option could provide Iraq hope of rejoining the international community, while ensuring that it does not reemerge as a security threat. This option does not appear to be under consideration by the Administration at this time, probably because the Administration doubts that Iraq can be trusted to abide by any security agreement.

⁷Faraj, Caroline, and Opall, Barbara. Clinton Spurs Hussein on Iraq. Defense News, March 9-15, 1998. P.1.

⁸See articles by (name redacted) entitled Beyond Dual Containment. Middle East Insight, November 1995 and the Emirates Center Occasional Papers, January 1997, and Searching for Stable Peace in the Persian Gulf. U.S. Army War College, February 2, 1998.

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