Dealing with Iraq: which way forward?

A decade after the Persian Gulf war, international efforts to contain Iraq are breaking down. Should the U.S. consider altering its policies in the future?

by Lawrence G. Potter

A decade after a U.S.-led military alliance drove Iraqi troops out of the neighboring state of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi president, continues to menace the region, and the international community is running out of ideas on how to deal with him. Iraq, indeed, is the problem that won’t go away, the unfinished business of the Persian Gulf war of 1990–91. Other Middle Eastern states are entering the age of globalization, embracing the Internet and experiencing a transition to a new generation of leadership. Iraq, however, is still locked in the grip of a party and a leader whose overriding goal of survival has decimated Iraqi society and who appears impervious to outside attempts to force reforms.

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The future of Iraq is indeed troubling, and a regime which has held power for three decades shows no sign of falling or moderating. Today’s Iraq has become, in the words of dissident Iraqi author Kanan Makiya, a “republic of fear” in which an entire population has been cowed, the formerly prosperous middle class has been greatly reduced and political discourse has been perverted into rote praise for the state. Any potential opposition within the country has been savagely suppressed, and the opposition in exile seems incapable of overthrowing the regime.

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Sanctions are supposed to remain until Iraq reveals and eliminates its programs to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and long-range ballistic missiles. However, a “sanctions fatigue” has set in among the international community. Concern has grown over the perilous humanitarian situation in the country, and there is an increasing unwillingness to punish the Iraqi people for the sins of Saddam. By late 2000 support for sanctions had weakened considerably among U.S. allies in the Middle East, as well as Russia, France and China—all key UN Security Council members. The sanctions program has been weakened with the removal of limits on oil exports, and since December 1996 Iraq has earned $35 billion in revenues.

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establishment, the military, and his own family cliques,” according to scholar Ofra Bengio. Saddam has been strengthened by the prolonged UN embargo, Bengio notes, since it makes people more dependent upon him. Rumored to have cancer, at present Saddam is positioning one of his sons to succeed him.

Iraq’s future is of major importance to the U.S. and to stability in the Middle East. Iraq has the region’s second-largest oil reserves, and any cutback in production could spike higher prices, already at record levels in 2000. During the first seven months of that year, Iraq was the sixth-largest supplier of oil to the U.S., providing more than Kuwait. In the future, Iraq’s development needs will be immense, and major oil companies are eager to return.

So far sanctions have not caused the overthrow of Saddam Hussein nor led to changes in his behavior. The Clinton Administration was widely criticized for letting policy toward Iraq drift over the last two years after a series of earlier confrontations. That Administration set out “red lines” that would trigger U.S. military action, including threats to Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, attacks on Kurds in the north or attempts to reconstitute WMD programs. If Saddam were overthrown, the U.S. has said it would be prepared to lift sanctions and help to restore the country to normalcy.

The problem American policymakers face is deciding which instruments, including military force and diplomacy, can best be employed to realize the goal of regime change. Every instrument comes with a cost, and the question is how to evaluate the tradeoffs. The U.S. has the military capability to punish Iraq, for example, but doing so will certainly alienate its allies. The U.S. could provide more lethal support to the Iraqi opposition, but to what end if it cannot overthrow the regime? If the UN Security Council is no longer willing to support sanctions, what are the pros and cons of the U.S. pursuing a unilateral policy?

One thing is certain: a new Administration will soon face the problem of how to deal with Iraq. What options should it be considering? How, in the absence of inspectors, can the U.S. be sure that Iraq is not reviving its WMD programs? How can Iraq be prevented from threatening Kuwait or Israel in the future? If Iraq’s government or its policy changes, can American troops based in Turkey or the Gulf be brought home? How does Iraq factor into our policy toward Iran? Finally, is the problem of Iraq linked to the issue of Palestine and an Arab-Israeli settlement, and if so what implications does this hold for U.S. policy?

**A stalled society**

The anguish over Iraq partly arises from the disparity between the key role it has played in the history of civilization and Islamic society and its reduced status at present. Iraq has many things going for it, including a favorable geographical situation with two great rivers (the Tigris and Euphrates), fertile soil, a relatively large population, and rich natural resources, including oil. But the fulfillment of its great potential has repeatedly been frustrated. “Iraq’s history over the last two centuries consists of long periods of very slow growth punctuated by short bursts of rapid development, all of which were abruptly ended by some catastrophe brought on either by an outside factor or by forces originating within the country itself,” according to economic historian Charles Issawi.

Historically, the area that comprises present-day Iraq was known as Mesopotamia—the land between the rivers. It was host to the Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian empires. This land, indeed, was the cradle of civilization where Ur, the traditional birthplace of Abraham, was located. It is here that writing, the wheel and the 60-minute hour were invented. In the 7th century AD, Arab invaders from the south claimed it for Islam. From the 8th to the 13th centuries Baghdad was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, regarded by many as the “golden age of Islam.” The historical development of Iran and Iraq was closely intertwined until the Mongol invasions of the 13th century. After that, Iraq declined in importance, and the Middle East was increasingly split into an Arab zone centered in Egypt, and Persian and Turkish zones.

The territory that became Iraq was governed by the Ottoman Empire, based in Istanbul, for 400 years starting in the mid-16th century. During that time, it consisted of three provinces: Mosul in the north, Baghdad in the center and Basra in the south. After World War I, Britain united the provinces to form the new country. Unlike neighboring Iran or Turkey, Iraq’s different communities had little sense of national identity, and Iraqi governments have placed a high priority on instilling one.

Iraq was a British mandate from 1920 until it became independent in 1932. Under the Hashemite monarchy (1921-58) the British maintained military privileges there and the country’s foreign policy was pro-Western. In 1955 Iraq signed a mutual defense treaty with Britain, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey called the Baghdad Pact.

The monarchy was overthrown in 1958 and replaced by a strongly nationalistic government hostile to the West. Since 1968 Iraq has been ruled by the Baath party, with the current leader, Saddam Hussein (b. 1937), at the top level of government and president since 1979. Baathist party ideology as originally formulated advocated an idealistic combination of socialism and Arab unity, but it has now degenerated into an instrument to legitimate Saddam and orchestrate mass support for the regime.

From the beginning, the army has played a disproportionate role in the state and initiated a number of military coups, starting in 1936. The army’s crushing of a revolt by Assyrians (Nestorian Christians) in 1933 was an ominous precedent for later military interventions in internal affairs.

For decades, Iraq has been ruled by a small “community of trust,” made up of kinsmen who will not betray each other, according to Charles Tripp, senior lecturer in politics at the University of London. Saddam Hussein, a poorly educated man of peasant background from the provincial town of Takrit, has
long relied on a circle of relatives from his hometown. “A central fact in Iraq today is that the regime in Baghdad rests on the narrowest power base in Iraq’s history,” according to historian Phebe Marr. Saddam has fostered a political culture characterized by fear, suspicion and violence. The regime exercises rigid control and tolerates no dissent. Last September, for example, Iraqi authorities began applying a new punishment for those who slander Saddam: the tongue of the offender is amputated.

**State and society**

As Issawi reminds us, “at the beginning of this century, Iraq was, even by Middle Eastern standards, a very backward country. Egypt, Turkey and Syria were far ahead of it in such indices of development as foreign trade, transportation, industrialization, education and availability of urban amenities. Only Iran stood at a comparable level.” Considering where it started, in the early decades Iraq made considerable progress in creating a state, in terms of infrastructure, education and health care, as well as a parliament, an army and a bureaucracy. In the post-World War II period a substantial urban middle class arose and Iraqis had high aspirations.

Iraq today has a population of some 23 million, which is about 95% Muslim and two thirds urban. It is divided into three large communities: Shiite Arabs constitute around 55% to 60% of the population, Sunni Arabs about 15% to 20%, and (mostly Sunni) Kurds about 15% to 20%. The Sunni Arabs monopolized political power both under the Ottomans and in independent Iraq. Shiites are concentrated in the southern part of the country and Baghdad and have been largely excluded from power. The Kurds are a non-Arab, mostly Sunni ethnic group living predominantly in the north, who have fought the central government for decades for more autonomy.

**Iraq’s strategic predicament**

Because of their country’s historical experience, Iraqis feel deeply vulnerable to outside forces that they believe constantly threaten the state. Although Iraq’s historical orientation was usually eastward, toward Iran, after independence it was often embroiled in Arab politics. Since the rise of Saddam Hussein it has been preoccupied with becoming a power in the Persian Gulf. Iraqis blame their unfavorable strategic situation on British colonialists, who arbitrarily drew the boundaries of the new state and prevented it from gaining a secure foothold on the Persian Gulf. Iraq is almost completely landlocked, with only a small 36-mile strip of land along the Gulf. This has led to periodic demands by Baghdad that Kuwait, once dependent on the Ottoman province of Basra (although virtually a British protectorate since 1899), be returned to it. When Kuwait attained independence in 1961, Iraq laid claim to it and Britain sent in troops (later replaced by those of the Arab League) to protect it. In 1963, a subsequent Iraqi government recognized Kuwait’s independence.

In order to use its major seaport, Basra, ships must pass up the Shatt al-Arab waterway which serves as the border with Iran. This has led to long-standing demands by Iraq that it control the entire Shatt. A 1975 treaty Iran and Iraq signed in Algiers stipulated that the boundary was to be the median line, as Iran wanted. Saddam repudiated this when he went to war with Iran in 1980, yet at the outset of the occupation of Kuwait in 1990, he again acknowledged the Iranian position. Iraq developed another small port, Umm Qasr, on an inlet near Kuwait, and to assure access to it has unsuccessfully demanded control over the Kuwaiti islands of Warba and Bubiyan. Since neither of the borders has been resolved to Iraq’s satisfaction, they may be the focus of future conflict.

Iraq is largely dependent upon the goodwill of others to export its major resource, oil. Its only export terminals are located offshore at Fao, at the mouth of the Shatt, but they were damaged in the war with Iran and are not currently in use. Otherwise Iraq must rely on pipelines via Turkey (closed after the
Gulf war but reopened in 1996), Syria (closed in 1980 but soon due to reopen) and Saudi Arabia (closed in 1990). This lack of an assured ability to export its oil has led to frustration and insecurity on the part of Iraqi leaders.

Iraq is also dependent on neighboring states for most of its water resources, especially the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which originate in Turkey. Major dams being constructed in southern Turkey (the GAP project) and in Syria threaten to constrict the amount of water Iraq receives. Iraqi relations with these states have sometimes been tense, and lack of adequate water could lead to conflict in the future.

The political response to Iraq’s strategic predicament could have been to cultivate good relations with its neighbors. But it has unfortunately been the contrary: a series of authoritarian, military-dominated regimes that espouse a strong Iraqi nationalism. Baghdad governments have often been suspicious of neighboring states, and sometimes with reason. Turkey has repeatedly carried out cross-border raids in the north in pursuit of Kurdish rebels, while Iran hosts an Iraqi Shiite opposition in exile. The Israeli destruction of an Iraqi reactor in 1981 was another unwelcome reminder of Iraq’s vulnerability. In light of these threats, the Iraqi military has sought an “equalizer,” and the Hussein regime found it with WMD.

Legacy of war

Many of Iraq’s problems today stem from its experience in two bitter wars, one with Iran (1980–88), and the other against the U.S.-led alliance in 1990–91. The wars were costly in terms of lives and infrastructure, and, together with a decade of sanctions, have seriously set back the country’s development. The first war had an undertone of ethnic (Arab vs. Persian) and religious (Sunni vs. Shiite) hostility, whereas the second pitted Arab against Arab, giving the lie to decades of rhetoric about pan-Arab solidarity.

The most important factor emboldening Iraq to attack Iran was the Iranian revolution of 1978-79 led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Iranian government was apprehensive that Khomeini’s propaganda would foment unrest among Iraqi Shiites. Saddam Hussein hoped to overthrow the new regime, prevent the export of the revolution and possibly even annex Khuzistan, Iran’s oil-rich southwestern province. Most importantly, Iraq hoped that by defeating and crippling Iran, it would gain hegemony in the Gulf.

War with Iran was a calculated risk. But Iraq believed that due to the disorganized state of the Iranian military, any defense would quickly crumble. The stated aims of the war were to obtain Iran’s recognition of Iraqi sovereignty over the entire Shatt al-Arab, for Iran to desist from interfering in Iraq’s internal affairs and to return the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs (seized by Iran in 1971) to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This last gesture was designed to demonstrate Iraq’s role as the protector of the Gulf.

On September 22, 1980, Iraq bombed Tehran, Iran’s capital, and invaded Khuzistan. Saddam Hussein’s expectation of an easy victory was soon dashed, however. In May 1982, Iran drove Iraqi troops out of Khuzistan. At this point, Iraq announced its willingness to accept binding arbitration to settle the conflict. Iran refused, and launched a series of annual offensives from 1983 to 1987 to bring down Saddam’s government and liberate pockets of Iranian territory held by Iraq. But Iran did not have the logistic capacity or adequate weapons to sustain its offensives for long.

The war’s end was hastened when the U.S. and others concluded that it was too dangerous to be allowed to continue. Attacks on international shipping had increased, and a strike by Iraqi aircraft on the U.S.S. Stark in May 1987 killed 37 American sailors. On July 20, 1987, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 598, which demanded a cease-fire, the withdrawal of forces to international boundaries, an exchange of prisoners, formal negotiations for a permanent settlement and the establishment of a tribunal to judge responsibility for the war. Iraq promptly accepted it, and to the surprise of many, Iran did not reject it.

In early 1988, Iraq stepped up military pressure on Iran. In March, Baghdad unleashed an estimated 150 Soviet-made missiles against Tehran,

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terrifying the population. It also used chemical weapons, which demoralized Iranian troops. A string of Iraqi victories on land, including the recapture of Fao, revealed Iran’s weakness. To the surprise of all, Ayatollah Khomeini decided to “swallow poison,” accept UN Resolution 598, and end the war. A cease-fire has been in effect since August 20, 1988.

The Iran-Iraq war was the longest and one of the costliest conventional wars of the past century. Casualties are estimated at over a million, with approximately 370,000 killed and 700,000 injured on both sides. When the war ended, neither side had achieved its aims and each felt that outside powers had cheated it out of victory. In Iran, and more especially Iraq, the conflict itself and the demonization of the opponent led to a stronger sense of national identity. Iran’s calculation that the Shiite majority in southern Iraq would rally to its cause, and Iraq’s, that the Arab citizens in Khuzistan would welcome the Iraqi army as their liberators, were both proven wrong.

The Gulf war

Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, altered political alignments in the Middle East, imperiled world energy supplies and confronted the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. with the first international crisis since the end of the cold war. The Iraqi leader evidently regarded the capture of Kuwait as a low-risk adventure that its Arab neighbors would be powerless to reverse. Iraq’s active armed forces totaled one million, by far the largest in the region and were battle-tested and well-armed. President Hussein calculated also that his ally, the Soviet Union, would not intervene, nor would the U.S.—which, critics argue, gave him a “green light” to invade or at least pass up an opportunity to warn him off.

There were several reasons for the attack. One was financial. Iran ended the war with Iraq with virtually no foreign debt, whereas Iraq was left with a debt estimated as high as $80 billion, around half owed to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE. Although the Saudis did not press for reimbursement, Kuwait showed no readiness to forgive or reduce the debt. Kuwait and the UAE also deliberately flooded the oil market in violation of the production quotas of OPEC, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, which depressed the price and hurt Iraq. In addition, Iraq charged that Kuwait was unfairly drawing oil from the giant Rumaila field which straddled their common border. In February and July 1990, President Hussein demanded more “loans” from the Gulf states, but they turned him down.

Saddam also needed to keep his huge army occupied. In a way, Kuwait would be a consolation prize since he had failed to wrest Khuzistan from Iran. Gaining Kuwait would solve Iraq’s financial problems and give Iraq a fine harbor on the Gulf. It would also lessen tension with Iran since it would greatly reduce the significance of who controlled the Shatt al-Arab.

The Western powers responded promptly to the invasion of Kuwait. President George Bush (1989–93) declared that “the acquisition of territory by force is unacceptable” and demanded Iraq’s “unconditional and complete withdrawal.” In announcing the dispatch of U.S. forces to Saudi Arabia in Operation Desert Shield on August 8, Bush declared that “a line has been drawn in the sand” to forestall an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia.

President Bush sought above all to make it clear that Iraq, by its act of aggression, stood condemned not by the U.S. alone but by the world. In this he was largely successful. He mobilized an international coalition against Iraq and initiated a series of resolutions in the UN Security Council, including one calling for an embargo on trade with Iraq and another which authorized the use of force against Iraq if it did not withdraw from Kuwait by January 15, 1991. By that time, there were 560,000 U.S. troops in the Gulf in preparation for a ground war. Partly thanks to the persuasive powers of Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak, a majority of the Arab League approved a resolution sending Arab forces to join U.S., British and French troops in Saudi Arabia.

Following over a month of bombing which pulverized Iraq’s infrastructure, an allied ground assault, “Desert Storm,” began on February 23. In 100 hours, Kuwait was recaptured from the Iraqi army. The question of why the U.S. abruptly halted the hostilities and why Saddam did not fall has haunted some who fought the war. At the time, the Bush Administration was concerned that if it marched on Baghdad and replaced the government, it would lose the support of its Arab allies and find itself in a quagmire. It was not willing to assume responsibility for administering Iraq and had no UN mandate to do so. The U.S. wanted to bring its troops home. In retrospect, many believe that the U.S. stopped the war too soon.

Triumph without victory?

Despite the triumph on the battlefield and the restoration of the Kuwaiti government, many feared that Bush had
IRAQ’S NEIGHBORHOOD

Since its invasion of Kuwait, Iraq has been a pariah state, prevented from playing the larger role in the Persian Gulf and in Arab politics it has sought. The reintegration of Iraq into regional politics, however, has begun. Widespread sympathy in the Arab world over the plight of the Iraqi people has led to increasing demands that the UN sanctions be lifted. As a signal of their disapproval many regional states, including Turkey, Syria, Bahrain and the UAE sent in relief flights to Baghdad last fall. As he did at the time of the Gulf war, Saddam tried to capitalize on the pro-Palestinian sentiment that arose along with a new uprising against Israeli control over the occupied territories.

All regional states have expressed support for Iraq’s territorial integrity. They know, however, that Baghdad will strive to regain a major regional role as soon as it can, and they share Western policymakers’ unease at Saddam’s staying power. Jordan, which is Iraq’s main trade partner and relies on it for oil, is in a difficult position in light of its close relations with the U.S. and Israel.

Differences of opinion exist among the Gulf monarchies: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait support the continuation of sanctions, while Qatar, Oman, the UAE and Bahrain are pressing to end them and have resumed diplomatic relations with Baghdad. Many perceive the need for a strong Iraq to balance Iran. An important issue that Iraq’s creditors, especially the Arab monarchies, must face in the future is debt relief and aid for reconstruction. Without this, Iraq’s development will be shackled for a long time to come.

Iraq’s relations with Kuwait remain tense. “The legacy of the invasion caused a moral and psychological shock, not only on the official side but also on the popular level,” according to Ghanim Alnajjar, a Kuwaiti political scientist.

Kuwait, which receives a share of the compensation that the UN withdraws from Iraqi oil sales, has continued to press for reparations that it is unlikely Iraq can repay. (Kuwait has filed claims of $168 billion against Iraq with the UN Compensation Commission.) Kuwait also seeks the repatriation of prisoners of war missing since that time, and the return of stolen goods. From the point of view of Baghdad, the situation has worsened since the end of the Gulf war. Under the terms of the UN cease-fire resolution, a commission determined the de jure border between Iraq and Kuwait which benefited Kuwait by granting it the southern part of Iraq’s port of Umm Qasr. Iraq and Kuwait, however, have long-standing historical ties and have cooperated before, especially at the time of the Iran-Iraq War. It is in the interest of both to work together in the future, especially on economic matters and oil policy.

Iraq and Syria have a history of bitter ideological conflict, and Iraq resents the fact that Syria, a fellow Arab state, broke ranks with it and supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. Syria also participated in the anti-Iraqi military alliance. Both today fear the recent Israel-Turkey axis. As the new president consolidates power in Syria, ties with Iraq have improved, with more mutual visits and border crossings. But Syria and Iraq, along with Egypt, will continue to vie for leadership of the Arab world.

Turkey, by hosting American and British troops at its southern base of Incirlik, enables them to police the northern no-flight zone. This policy is opposed by many Turks, who seek to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish state in Iraq at all costs, for fear this would serve as an inspiration to Kurds in Turkey. From the point of view of Turkey, a strong central government in Iraq is desirable, and it favors the reassessment of Iraqi control over the northern enclave. Turkey also favors the removal of the sanctions, which it claims have cost it $35 billion so far.

Relations between Iraq and Iran improved in the fall of 2000. Iran, with bitter memories of the sneak attack in 1980, remains the only serious military threat to Iraq in the future. The Iraqi government also fears that Shiite propaganda from Iran will encourage its own Shiite majority to demand a larger role in government. It is doubtful that the Iraqi government is reconciled to sharing the Shatt Al-Arab. Iraq also harbors bases of the Mujahideen, the Iranian opposition group that carries out occasional attacks in Iran. Outstanding issues between the two include Iranian demands for compensation for damage done during the war, which Iraq rejects, and the return of all prisoners of war. Iraq fears a U.S.-Iran rapprochement, since in combination with improving Iran-Saudi relations, Iraq could continue to be frozen out of the Gulf. So mutual suspicion will probably persist.

IRAQI WORKERS unload humanitarian aid from a Syrian Airbus-320. The Syrian plane, with senior government officials, doctors and nurses on board, landed in Baghdad’s Saddam International Airport on October 8, 2000, the first such flight in more than 18 years.
won the war and lost the peace. The U.S. conviction that Saddam would be ousted by his own commanders was soon proven to be mistaken. He remained in power and lost no time in crushing rebellions by Shiite Arabs in the south and Kurds in the north that the U.S. had encouraged.

Following Baghdad’s brutal suppression of the internal revolts, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 688, which demanded that the Iraqi government stop suppressing its own citizens, especially in the Kurdish areas. The Allied powers and neighboring states agreed that they would not recognize an independent Kurdish state. But the U.S., in cooperation with Turkey, Britain and France, started Operation “Provide Comfort.” To provide a safe haven for the Kurds, Iraqi forces were forbidden from flying fixed-wing aircraft above the 36th parallel. On January 1, 1997, with the withdrawal of the French air patrols, the operation was renamed Northern Watch. These air-exclusion zones, which lack explicit UN approval, have been criticized for their expense and long continuation. Last November, the Russian foreign minister called for scrapping them. Kurds, however, have enjoyed a decade of autonomy thanks to international protection.

Since August 1992, the U.S. and its allies in the Gulf war have banned flights by Iraqi aircraft south of the 32nd parallel; in September 1996, this was extended to the 33rd parallel. This protection was originally provided after the U.S. realized that the Shiites, who opposed Saddam Hussein, were not about to ally with Iran but might help bring about Saddam’s downfall. The objective was also to prevent Iraqi forces from massing for an attack on Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. In addition to military pressure, Saddam has adopted a simpler expedient to crush the Marsh Arabs or Madan, who are being punished for sympathizing with and aiding Shiite rebels. He is draining their marshes, denying them refuge, and in the process destroying their unique culture.

**Unfinished business**

At the end of the Gulf war, the coalition forces imposed stringent conditions on Iraq that still seriously restrict its sovereignty. So far the UN Security Council has passed about 50 resolutions on the subject. Under Resolution 687 of April 1991, Iraq is required to disclose the extent of its programs to develop chemical, nuclear and biological weapons and ballistic missiles, and to dismantle them. Iraq also had to agree to long-term UN monitoring to verify it is not rearming. Only after this was done could sanctions be lifted. For years Baghdad engaged in a cat-and-mouse game with inspectors from Unesco (the UN Special Commission), the last of whom were withdrawn in December 1998 before major airstrikes launched by the U.S. and Britain.

A new approach was tried under Resolution 1284 of December 1999, in which weapons-monitoring would resume in return for a possible suspension of sanctions. The UN created a new arms inspection agency to replace Unesco called the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (Unmovic), headed by Hans Blix, former director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency. After the monitoring system has been in place for
120 days with Iraqi cooperation, sanctions can be suspended for renewable periods of 120 days. However, so far Saddam has not allowed any UN inspectors back into Iraq. The Iraqi government argues that individuals from Uniscom had acted as spies and that all of its weapons have been destroyed, so sanctions should be lifted without further conditions.

By the fall of 2000, Saddam Hussein seemed as entrenched in power as ever, and with the rise in oil prices, the regime was increasingly able to import the things it wants, such as massive amounts of whisky and cigarettes. This income, however, probably also funds weapons development. In early 2000, U.S. intelligence reported that Iraq had rebuilt the military and industrial sites damaged in the air strikes of December 1998. Iraq has restarted its ballistic missile program and last summer flight-tested a short-range missile. The U.S. is most concerned that, after two years without inspection, Iraq has rebuilt some of its WMD capacity, particularly chemical and biological weapons.

Under a UN resolution that took effect in December 1996 and was renewed periodically, Iraq was allowed to sell a limited amount of oil every six months, with the UN closely supervising the disbursement of funds. Designed to relieve civilian suffering, a third of the income is reserved for victims of the invasion of Kuwait, for the Kurdish area, and to pay for arms inspections. A provision of 1284 removed the earlier ceiling on oil exports and eases some controls on imports of medical, agricultural and educational supplies. This augmented “oil for food” program was meant to alleviate the serious human welfare conditions in the country. With the recent rise in oil prices, Iraqi oil income ballooned to an estimated $16 billion to $20 billion in 2000.

Decade of devastation

Part of the difficulty in assessing conditions inside the country arises from Iraq’s refusal to admit independent experts to determine the human impact of the sanctions. In this way the Baghdad government closely controls all contact with outsiders and it is easier to blame the sanctions for its own failures. There is no question, however, that the impact of a decade of sanctions on Iraqi society has been very severe. “The sanctions have led to the pauperization of the population, mass emigration, breakdown of the social system and deprivation of the middle and professional classes,” according to Walid Khadduri, editor of Middle East Economic Survey. “These are the uppermost issues on the minds of most Iraqis, irrespective of their ethnic, social, or religious backgrounds and political beliefs.”

The dire state of society in Iraq can be understood by comparing its human indices to those of neighboring states. Iraqis have the lowest life expectancy (58 for men, 60 for women) and one of the highest fertility rates and birthrates in the region, according to the Washington-based Population Reference Bureau. The infant mortality rate is off the charts: 127 babies out of 1,000 die before the age of 1. (In the U.S. the figure is 7; in Kuwait it is 13; in Iran, 31; in Turkey, 38.)

By 1995, before the “oil for food” program took effect, Iraq was experiencing “pre-famine conditions,” according to an assessment by the Food and Agriculture Organization. In 1996, the UN Children’s Fund (Unicef) noted that “the food rationing system provides less than 60% of the required daily calorie intake, the water and sanitation systems are in a state of collapse, and there is a critical shortage of lifesaving drugs.” Since mid-1998 the situation has improved somewhat, especially in the north, but public health conditions are still bad, with a rise in chronic malnutrition and communicable diseases. According to an August 1999 Unicef study done in the center and south of Iraq, children under the age of five are dying at twice the rate of a decade ago. People in the government-controlled areas are almost completely dependent upon food rations provided by the UN, since salaries only range between $2 and $10 a month.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), defining the situation in Iraq as a “humanitarian emergency,” appealed to the UN Security Council in March 2000 to take decisive steps to help. HRW urged that modifications be made to the sanctions regime, such as reducing the number of holds on contracts, which require UN approval and delay the import of vital materials, and lifting most restrictions on Iraq’s nonmilitary trade and investment.

Hans von Sponeck, former UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, notes that “…a once-strong and educated middle class has been all but destroyed; all classes have become impoverished;licit coping mechanisms have given way to illegal means of surviving, largely created through sanctions breaking. This in turn has led to a social transformation bringing to the fore a new class of profiteers, an economic mafia that has teamed up with the political elite.” This elite benefits from a
significant amount of cheating on the sanctions. About 10% of Iraqi oil production is now smuggled, without UN approval, to neighboring states like Turkey, Jordan, Iran and the Gulf states. This has resulted in a financial bonanza of around $600 million a year for Saddam’s inner circle. The elite loyal to Saddam is pampered and those with money find plenty of luxury goods available in the shops.

The future of Iraq

Since the Gulf war the Iraqi government has been promoting a process of “re-tribalization” (anathema to Baathism) in which ethnic, tribal and religious affiliation are being emphasized at the expense of Iraqi nationhood. This comes after earlier attempts on the part of Saddam to redefine the country’s identity based on secularism and its Mesopotamian heritage, on Arabism during the war with Iran and on Islam during the Gulf war.

Such a policy of divide and conquer is aimed at strengthening the hand of the central government. In rural areas where tribal organization has persisted, the Baath has tried to co-opt tribal shaikhs who still wield considerable power. In the north, for example, some Kurdish chiefs fought with government troops against Kurdish nationalists, and in the south some Shiite tribes backed the government during the 1991 revolts.

An issue that has worried outside observers is whether Iraq will break up into separate entities along ethnic and sectarian lines, a prospect that seemed a distinct possibility at the time of the internal revolts. Today, however, the state is highly centralized and the integration of Iraqi society has gone too far to permit a breakup, in the opinion of Iraqi scholar Isam Al-Khafaji. The artificiality of Iraq, he maintains, is a myth. Rather, he points to the forces of integration at work since the early 19th century. He interprets the loyalty of the (largely Shiite) Iraqi army during the war with Iran, and the fact that after a decade of autonomy no Kurdish state has been declared in the north, as evidence that nationalism has now taken precedence over sectarian identity.

“What many observers, who raise the risks of dismemberment underestimate in the case of Iraq,” he says, “is the degree to which interests among various sections of the Iraqi population, especially, the more affluent and influential, are interlocked [so] that it would be very unlikely, though not impossible, to think of separate states within Iraq.”

The succession

Some have maintained that Iraq requires a strong leader in the mold of Saddam Hussein to hold it together. This idea—promoted by the Baghdad government—fueled domestic criticism in the Gulf of their monarchs’ dependence on Western protection and of U.S. support for Israel. Washington’s worst fear is an Iran-Iraq alliance against Israel. The anti-American mood took a sinister turn with the terrorist explosion aboard the U.S.S. Cole in Aden, Yemen, on October 12, that led to the death of 17 sailors. This followed bombings of U.S. military facilities in Riyadh and

U.S. policy conundrums

The U.S. is in a stronger military position in the Gulf today than ever before and has fully assumed Britain’s earlier security role. This posture is mainly justified by the need to contain Iraq and Iran. The American strategy is largely a naval one, with Bahrain serving as the headquarters for the U.S. Fifth Fleet. Kuwait and Qatar have allowed the U.S. to pre-position military supplies.

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Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, in November 1995 and June 1996, respectively. The U.S. is bracing for more incidents in the Gulf region.

**U.S. policy toward Iraq**

America’s historical experience of dealing with Iraq was meager until the 1980s. The two countries have more often been estranged: relations were severed from 1967 to 1984, and again since 1990. The U.S. tilted toward Iraq during its war with Iran, and between 1983 and 1989 it provided approximately $4.5 billion in credit guarantees for the export of American agricultural products to Iraq. This later led to the “Iraqgate” affair in which Iraq was accused of diverting some of this money to fund its weapons purchases and research.

After the British departure in 1971, the U.S. sought to foster a balance of power in the Gulf by playing off Iraq against the shah’s Iran, and later, after the Iranian Revolution, Saddam’s Iraq against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The idea of using one power to check the other was replaced by the policy of “dual containment” introduced by the Clinton Administration in 1993. This aimed to maintain a strong U.S. presence in the region to deter Iran and Iraq from asserting hegemony over the Gulf or acquiring nuclear weapons. At the same time, it sought to bolster the individual and collective defense capabilities of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. With the beginning of a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, the dual-containment policy has been eclipsed but has not been replaced by another strategic vision.

The U.S. aims to contain Iraq by maintaining UN sanctions, by enforcing no-flight zones in the north and south, and by pressing for renewed inspections. As long as Saddam remains in power, there is little likelihood that the U.S. will let up its pressure. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright has said that if Saddam Hussein departs, the U.S. would quickly move to establish normal relations with a successor.

After confrontations that led to U.S. military strikes in 1993, 1996 and 1998, the Clinton Administration in its last two years has tried to avoid military engagement with Iraq. Secretary Albright declared in September 2000 that the U.S. would not use force to compel Iraq to readmit UN weapons inspectors. At the same time, she reiterated the “red lines” that would trigger a U.S. military response: an attempt by Iraq to reconstitute its WMD programs, action against the Kurds, or threats to the neighborhood, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. is also pursuing the idea of filing charges of genocide and war crimes against the Iraqi leadership. Washington accuses the Iraqi government of destroying more than 3,000 Kurdish villages, killing over 5,000 Kurds with poison gas, executing thousands of prisoners of war and assassinating Shiite clergymen. Some have suggested that the U.S. institute “smart sanctions” that target the regime elite, such as preventing them from travelling abroad or confiscating their assets, rather than continue a broad-based system that punishes the entire Iraqi people.

The Iraq Liberation Act, passed in October 1998, commits the U.S. to “support a transition to democracy in Iraq.” The act calls on the U.S. to seek the removal of Saddam Hussein and replace his regime with a democratic form of government. But the U.S. will not itself liberate Iraq. The act gives the President authority to provide $97 million to the Iraqi opposition to do so. So far very little of this money has been spent, as the Administration has little confidence in the opposition groups, notably the Iraqi National Congress (INC). The Iraqi invasion of the Kurdish zone in 1996 exposed Central Intelligence Agency cooperation with the INC and led to the death of a number of its operatives. The U.S. also has tried to promote reconciliation among the two main Kurdish groups, the Kurdistan Democratic party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. It continues to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of northern Iraq through the UN and relief organizations.

**The critics**

U.S. policy toward Iraq has come under widespread criticism and became a minor issue in the presidential campaign. “Waiting for Saddam to go away has emerged as the most daring new strategy President Clinton will pursue in Iraq,” wrote Jim Hoagland in a *Washington Post* editorial last July. “He has also extended that strategy to the Iraqi opposition over the past two years, apparently hoping it too will just blow away if not given any meaningful U.S. help.”

Many consider the sanctions a failure: former head of Uncom Richard Butler, for example, told a Senate committee in September 2000 that “Saddam’s success in facing down the Security Council and ignoring Iraq’s obligations under international law constitutes a crisis for the system of collective management of global security.”

There is also unease about the extended American military deployment in the Gulf area, and the risk and cost involved (about $2 billion a year) in maintaining the no-flight zones. Since 1997, there have been more than 16,000 sorties in which pilots (many from the National Guard and Reserves) have dropped over 1,000 bombs. Iraq claims that these strikes have killed 300 people. So far Iraq has not managed to down an allied jet, but it is not for lack of trying. This forgotten war has received little public attention, but it has no end in sight.

To these criticisms the Administration responds that it can come up with no better strategy. It maintains that it is the policies of the Iraqi government, not sanctions, that are causing hardship. If Saddam chooses to build palaces rather than provide medical care for his people there is little the U.S. can do. On the
positive side, Iraq has been restrained from attacking its neighbors, and Unscm inspectors, who were able to operate in Iraq for several years, did discover and destroy many weapons. Sanctions have denied the government control over the northern portion of the country, where Kurds are enjoying self-rule for the first time. The U.S. fears that were it to relax its vigilance Saddam would lose little time in reconstituting Iraq’s WMD programs and engaging in threatening behavior. The U.S. has vowed to stand alone, if need be, to contain Iraq.

**Future U.S. policies**

Based on statements during the campaign, it is likely that the new Administration will maintain a firm policy toward Iraq aimed at removing Saddam Hussein from power. The U.S. will continue to enforce sanctions, support the opposition in exile and carry out air patrols. One question is whether Washington should provide lethal support for the opposition. During the presidential campaign, some of George W. Bush’s advisers recommended arming the Iraqi opposition and securing part of Iraqi territory from which to launch an invasion. Critics say this would likely lead to a repeat of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba. But both candidates indicated they would provide greater support to the Iraqi opposition and criticized President Clinton for withholding funds that Congress had approved.

The next Administration must determine how to maintain constraints on Iraq if the Saddam Hussein regime remains. This is difficult in view of the divergent interests of the U.S. and its European allies. Today, it is increasingly the U.S. and not Iraq which is becoming isolated. As the only superpower, the U.S. has the ultimate responsibility to contain Iraq. But its policies have costs and risks that must be weighed. The U.S. alone has the military might to punish the regime, end the war, and support the costs of another war. The U.S. must be careful to set out red lines it can back up—but how precise or ambiguous should they be?

The regional and European states are more vocal about the humanitarian situation and many support the weakening or elimination of sanctions. They would like to handle the situation by diplomacy, not military force. Some favor a strategy of engagement rather than confrontation. There is also an element of self-interest: France and Russia, for example, are eager to resume commercial relations with Baghdad and gain valuable oil-field concessions.

In formulating policies for the future, the U.S. must decide what trade-offs are acceptable and to what extent it is prepared to coordinate policies and share their cost with its European and Arab allies. Many regional states are resigned to the continuance of the Hussein regime and to working with it. Should the U.S. reconsider whether it can work with Saddam—thus giving him some incentive to cooperate? Should it offer to close the file on Iraq’s nuclear program, for example, in exchange for something, or should it remain committed to his removal?

Few in the Clinton Administration shared the confidence of some congressmen that an opposition group such as the INC could overthrow Saddam. How much assistance should the U.S. give to such groups? Should U.S. forces be committed to regime change in Iraq? What should the U.S. do if support for sanctions continues to atrophy?

An opinion survey of Great Decisions readers released in November 2000 gave some indication of Americans’ thinking on Iraq. Over 80% of the respondents advocated pursuing a multilateral, not a unilateral, policy toward Iraq. At the same time, 62% said the U.S. should not support a military overthrow of Saddam’s government, and 70% said that the U.S. should relax sanctions to permit humanitarian relief.

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Although Iraq has been in the grip of Saddam Hussein for three decades and has suffered greatly, the country’s past suggests that it should not be regarded as a basket case by outsiders. Iraqis see themselves as prevented from developing their own potential and asserting their rightful place in the Middle East. Whether they can do so depends both on their own leadership and on how the outside world deals with them as Iraqis seek to reconstitute their society.

A decade after Desert Storm, important elements of the U.S. strategy of containment have been weakened, yet the U.S. does not have a policy to replace it. The new U.S. Administration might do well to focus on areas of consensus on Iraq—such as the need to relieve civilian suffering and to prevent the revival of WMD programs—in order to create a sustainable policy for the future.
**THE U.S. AND IRAQ**

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. U.S. policy toward Iraq has become increasingly unilateral since the Gulf war. What are the advantages and disadvantages of acting alone, even at the risk of alienating allies?

2. In 1998, Congress voted to provide the Iraqi opposition with $97 million in military aid to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime, but the Clinton Administration turned over very little of the money. Should the U.S. provide significant assistance to the opposition?

3. How much influence do you think the U.S. will have over a future Iraqi government? What factors should govern how Washington treats such a regime?

4. Do you believe that economic sanctions have been an effective foreign policy instrument in Iraq or other places such as South Africa? Under what conditions should the U.S. relax sanctions on Iraq?

5. The policy of containment has not led to a change of government in Iraq or a moderation of its policy. Should the U.S. consider relying more on nonmilitary means such as diplomacy or providing incentives for Saddam to cooperate?

6. What price should Americans be willing to pay to get rid of Saddam? Should the U.S. be willing to go to war, for example, or to disregard civilian casualties of the sanctions? Under what conditions should Washington reduce its military deployment in the region?

7. How important is it to maintain the territorial integrity of states? Do you think that the Kurds should be entitled to their own state, even if it means redrawing the map of the Middle East?

8. Do you see any connection between the situation in Iraq and the Persian Gulf with that of Israel and the Palestinians? How do the two areas affect each other and the U.S. position in the Middle East?

### READINGS AND RESOURCES


Byman, Daniel, Pollack, Kenneth and Rose, Gideon, “The Rollback Fantasy.” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 1999, pp. 24–41. Authors argue that the U.S. should aid the Iraqi opposition as part of its containment policy but should not expect it to overthrow the regime.


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**U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT**, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs website on Iraq, including information on missile defense and weapons of mass destruction, human rights and sanctions. [www.state.gov/www/regions/nea/iraq_hp.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/nea/iraq_hp.html)

For a virtual library providing further readings and resources, pertinent maps, current Administration views and up-to-date news on this topic, visit [www.greatdecisions.org](http://www.greatdecisions.org)