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Before the next Iraqi crisis: Support Saddam's opposition

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HIGHLIGHT: The writer served as a National Security Council Middle East specialist and as deputy assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration.

When the inevitable next Iraqi breach of promise occurs, the US administration will do well to have a strategy ready. A sensible aim would be to maximize chances that Saddam Hussein's regime can be undermined and replaced by a popular opposition movement.

Saddam runs a police state of singular brutality that has impoverished a country with substantial natural resources and has made fatal enemies not only of neighboring states, but of the predominant populations in the north (the Kurds) and the south (the Shi'ites). Disaffection with Saddam throughout Iraq can be an American strategic asset, if the US would exploit it.

The key to such a strategy is building on the existing no-fly zones. US military power could support a declaration that those zones in the north and south of Iraq must also become "no-drive zones" for the Iraqi military. The goal would be to protect these limited areas as a base for Iraqi opposition forces.

An Iraqi opposition movement - comprising Sunnis, Shi'ites, Kurds and Christians - now functions under the umbrella of an organization called the Iraqi National Congress, which espouses democratic and pro-Western principles. Were the US to recognize the INC as the provisional government of Iraq, it could release to it portions of the \$ 800 million in Iraqi government assets that have been frozen in the US since Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. This could help the INC establish its authority in the exclusion areas and fund opposition military forces.

In protecting the exclusion areas, the US could put into the opposition's hands virtually all the approximately three million barrels of oil that Iraq could produce daily. One of Saddam's principle vulnerabilities is the concentration of Iraq's oil in the mainly Kurdish north and mainly Shi'ite south, both regions in which large-scale anti-Saddam uprisings occurred immediately after the 1991 Gulf War. The opportunity still exists to exploit the powerful anti-Saddam resentments that fester there.

THE US should urge the UN to lift sanctions from any area of Iraq under the opposition's control. This would tell the Arab world and others that America aims not to punish innocents in Iraq, but to relieve Iraqis of penalties they suffer as a result of Saddam's rule. The opposition would gain financial and political strength from oil sale revenues. And, if Iraq's oil were controlled by the opposition, Russia and France would have less incentive to back Saddam against the US and more to cultivate ties with his opposition.

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The US could bolster that opposition and encourage defections by working to have Saddam and his top officials indicted as war criminals and challenging the current regime's right to represent Iraq at the UN. America's purpose would be to communicate impressively that Iraq's future is not with Saddam, but the democratic opposition. To that end, the US should also make the small but valuable investment needed to establish a Radio Free Iraq.

The Iraqi military is in general ill-paid, ill-equipped, and maltreated. Even the Republican Guard units, which enjoy the greatest privileges, have evinced signs of discontent with their wicked, overreaching dictator. It is by no means certain that the various elements of Iraq's army would fight well, or, in some cases, at all if the US showed determination to delegitimize Saddam and to create exclusion areas to be placed under Iraqi opposition control, defended with US-supplied anti-tank weapons, and protected by the US Air Force and, only if necessary, by US ground forces.

If Saddam attempts to subjugate the exclusion zones, the US is capable of pushing him back as it pushed his forces back from Kuwait. If he refrains from challenging the zones, he will lose much of his ability to threaten his neighbors, for he will have lost control of Iraq's oil. He is unlikely to survive for long thereafter and would be largely defanged if he did.

US forces have the power to create the exclusion zones, but the Iraqi opposition's capabilities are unproven. For this and other reasons, no one can guarantee this proposed strategy's success. It is in the strategy's favor, however, that it entails limited military objectives and high potential benefits.

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