Difficulties and Dangers of Regime Removal

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The swift success scored by the US in removing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was a catalyst for hawks in George W. Bush's administration to advocate further experiments in regime removal surgery. But hawkish euphoria at this accomplishment may have been conducive to self-deception in Washington. Afghanistan is not the thesis that proves the viability of regime removal in Iraq; it is, in fact, the antithesis.

The Ba'thist regime in Iraq may have certain similarities to the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan—a narrow social base, aging weaponry, no control of its northern territorial reaches—but in Iraq these elements are intertwined in a much more complicated political structure. Unlike Afghanistan, Iraq has a totalitarian system and a mass urban society, with revived traditional tribalism and popular religion.

Defeating the Taliban

The US Afghan enterprise was anchored in a meticulous effort to segregate the components of a simple political system. Though tightly knit, the Taliban movement itself was just one among many competing factions in the country, which may have remained inconsequential throughout the 1990s without the arid ideology and generous funding, of which Osama bin Laden's handsome payments were only a fraction, coming from the Arabian peninsula. The Pakistani military and intelligence services added flesh and muscle to the skeleton of Taliban rule. The fourth component of the system was tribal alliances. With less than 10 percent of the populace living in cities, the Taliban controlled the rest by alternately allying with, bribing and manipulating the divisions among Afghanistan's tribal chieftains.

Diplomatic pressure stripped Saudi financing and Pakistani military backing off the Taliban regime skeleton. Gold was enough to buy the temporary loyalty of tribes. In less than a month, the Taliban was reduced to

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an amorphous organization of religious zealots, idealist dreamers, warlords, dislocated orphans and unemployed youth. The moment this core was isolated, the fate of Taliban rule in Afghanistan was sealed. The military campaign launched by the Northern Alliance, aided by heavy US bombing, proceeded relatively quickly, and would have ended sooner had the advance of the Northern Alliance not been delayed to match the slow pace of the political process in Bonn.

Survival Strategies

In Iraq, the political system combines modern mass politics, a command economy, oil rentierism and Arabist-Iraqi secular ideology, on the one hand, with tribal networks, kinship groups, Sufi orders and the discourse of traditional solidarities *('asabiyya}*, on the other. Most recently, Wahhabism has been given space to spread from Saudi Arabia. The *Babil* daily, owned by Saddam Hussein's elder son, Udai, began propagating this rigid Sunni orthodoxy in the hope that it may solder bonds in the political system formerly held tight by now discredited official nationalism. These, however, are novel features, whereas the original components have been well-blended since the 1970s. The relatively peaceful symbiosis among these elements may well explain the Iraqi regime's ability to survive thus far despite sanctions and containment, but it is also the regime's Achilles' heel.

From the very beginning, Saddam Hussein yearned for a totalitarian polity. In the 1970s, he wrote an article titled "Building Socialism in One Arab Country," echoing Stalin's motto in the 1930s. Two sources of potential threat were visible to Hussein's conspiratorial mindset: the army and ideological mass politics. Paradoxically, both were conducive to deadly schism, but both were also the very instruments of social control. For Saddam Hussein and his inner circle, how to keep the army and party activists under their thumb was a matter of life and death.

The regime's quest for total control was aided greatly by the oil boom of the 1970s, which helped to restructure the Iraqi upper and middle classes.

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ing of at least a quarter million people. We will know the exact number after the killing of Saddam Hussein."

Hamid Majid Musa of the Communist Party mentions the risk of a "bloodbath" when the central government falls. "There will be an explosion in Baghdad. Nobody will be able to control it," agrees a KDP military chief. "I cannot live anymore in Baghdad. I would be surrounded by so many people who are accomplices in Saddam Hussein's crimes," states Abd al-Razzaq Mirza, a minister in the PUK government. He adds: "How can people forget what hap-

pened?" "I can tell you that in Tikrit and in a number of places marked by Saddam Hussein's power, not even the foundations of the houses will remain," claims the leader of a large Kurdish tribe.

What should be done with the Ba'th party, the army and the various intelligence services? "We established lists of the responsible people who must be sent to court," recalls Mirza, who worked for the London-based Indict, which aims to prosecute the Iraqi regime for war crimes, before becoming a minister in Suleimaniya. "We made two lists. List A in-

At the start of the Ba'thist reign in 1968, there were some 50 millionaires in Iraq: by 1989 this stratum had expanded to include some 3,000 families. The highly educated middle strata grew from 34 percent to more than 50 percent of the urban population in the course of the oil boom.

Tribal networks, on the other hand, were recruited to control the uncontrollable. In less than two decades, a sophisticated web of tribal alliances was woven into the party, army, bureaucracy and business classes. At the helm was Albu Nassir, Saddam Hussein's clan, with its leading "house," Albu Ghaffur, composed of two extended families, al-Majid and Albu Sultan, filling most of the key positions in the party, army and security services. Clan relations undergirded the state with the ideology of kinship, while blood ties cemented allegiance and provided manpower.

Schisms within these clans did occur, the leading tribe and its ruling house included. But Hussein has consistently played on rivalries among the ten branches of his clan, deploying figures from competing houses to maintain a balance in his favor. Most recently, manipulation from above struck a balance between the Albu Sultan and al-Majid branches. The end result of this survival strategy was tribalization of state and society. Tribalization of the state culminated in the creation of a semi-monolithic ruling group possessing near hegemony over power and wealth.

In addition to the official chain of command, three other chains controlled the army: the party's military bureau with networks of commissars, webs of intelligence officers and, lastly, strings of kinship groups. Saddam Hussein was president, leader and grand patriarch all rolled into one. This Iraqi amalgam of modern mass politics, traditional tribalism, oil wealth and command economy has fared well. The devastating effects of the two Gulf wars and the UN sanctions have disturbed peripheral elements of the system, but have never damaged its central core beyond repair.

Scenarios of Regime Change

Many of the war scenarios circulating in the press posit the rapid defection of the elements propping up the regime in Baghdad, until, as with the Taliban in Afghanistan, only a small coterie around Saddam Hussein remains, unable to survive or defend itself. But the Ba'thist history of regime-building means that an attack on the regime will not threaten a thin layer at the very top, but rather a wide array of powerful, well-entrenched and wealthy forces. Blood, economic interest, ideology and culture tie these groups together. An undifferentiated and universal threat to "the regime" would only repair potential and actual cleavages.

In the history of efforts at "regime change" in Iraq, there has yet to be a meaningful attempt to disengage the various components of the regime from each other. No safe passage to voluntary exile, for example, has ever been offered to the Iraqi dictator. No distinctions between his inner kinship group and the larger clan networks have been drawn. Making public a list of 30 or so *personae non gratae*, inclusive of Hussein and his sub-clan Albu Ghaffur, might well persuade the other groups in the tribal-military-business alliance that change is the best insurance policy for continuity. Numerous recent hints from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and others in the Bush administration that the regime could avoid forcible removal by abdicating have been inadequate. Unless given specific guarantees of power-sharing in a post-Saddam Iraq or at least a negotiated transition, no decisive segment of the ruling elite will see these hints as attractive. The general mood in this class-clan is that if Saddam goes, even if peacefully, others would simply go with him into exile, or worse still, be destroyed along with him.

A split at the helm might open up a window of opportunity to induce commitment to embark on reforms, such as power-sharing and retrieval of nation-building mechanisms inclusive of all disenfranchised ethnic and cultural groups. Holding out the promise of a mini-Marshall Plan for a post-Saddam Iraq could also encourage the elite to break apart and increase the chances of a peaceful, or less costly, change of government in the country. At the present levels of foreign indebtedness, the annual cost of debt servicing is estimated at 300 percent of Iraq's current gross domestic product. Not all hopes for economic reconstruction can be pinned on rebuilding the oil industry.

Welcome as it is, the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime is likely to unleash latent and uncontrollable institutional and social forces that will make a mockery of those in Washington predicting a "cakewalk." It is likely that the very process of regime removal will prove too costly or degenerate into chaos. If the present campaign for regime change in Iraq retains its indiscriminate and belligerent drive, a full-scale invasion and occupation of Iraq will be the first option before the US and Britain. Absent more sophisticated strategies for breaking up the clique in Baghdad, the only other post-Saddam scenario, no less horrific, would be a civil war which would begin nobody knows where and end in nobody knows what. According to *Newsweek*, Rumsfeld has been known to quote the notorious gangster Al Capone: "You will get more with a kind word and a gun than a kind word alone." One logical term is missing: "You will get much less with a gun alone." ■

cludes a dozen names of Iraqi leaders directly linked to Saddam Hussein: his sons, his half-brothers and top officials in his inner circle. List B includes two dozen names. But we cannot transform Iraq into a slaughterhouse. We should pardon the majority of the people, except those who committed crimes against humanity." As for generals like Nazir al-Khazraji, former chief of staff, now a refugee in Denmark, and Wafiq al-Samarra'i, former chief of military intelligence, who proclaim their innocence and stand as candidates for the leadership of the opposition, Mirza says: "We have the

feeling that they are not telling the whole truth, but at the same time we want more officers to desert. We will see later." This somewhat opportunist attitude is not always well-received by the victims of these former collaborators of Saddam Hussein.

A Kurdish intellectual from Suleimaniya is skeptical about the prospective "purges." "Even if the main leaders are arrested and tried, the Ba'th will continue to rule the country," he claims with some bitterness, "because they are the people who have expertise. Already, here in Kurdistan, many