

Iraq after Saddam

The removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq is, correctly, one of the primary goals of the U.S. government for the Persian Gulf region. Since the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the United States has viewed Saddam as a second Hitler: aggressive, adventurous, and megalomaniacal. Stability and peace in the region cannot be assured until he is gone. President George W. Bush, former President Bill Clinton, senior U.S. government officials from both parties, and leading congressional and media voices have all called for Saddam's removal. Outside experts share this general opposition to Saddam. Rend Rahim Francke, for example, argues, "[T]he problems that exist in Iraq are inherent in the regime of Saddam Hussein and will not go away as long as he is there. Moreover, the longer he is there, the more they will fester, and the more intractable they will become."¹

This focus on Saddam drives many aspects of U.S. policy toward Iraq, including sanctions, arms inspections, and support for the Iraqi opposition. Washington has tied its support for lifting sanctions to Saddam's removal. In May 1991, shortly after the Persian Gulf War, deputy national security advisor Robert Gates declared, "Any easing of sanctions will be considered only when there is a new government."² Almost nine years later, in March 2000 Assistant Secretary of State David Welch testified, "[W]e doubt that Iraq will take the sensible steps necessary to obtain the lifting, or the suspension, of sanctions as long as Saddam Hussein remains in power."³ Although the Bush administration seeks to modify the sanctions, it remains committed to tight restrictions on what Iraq can purchase and to international control over Iraqi spending in general. Arms control experts are especially concerned about the Saddam regime's use of chemical weapons on its own people and against Iran, suggesting possible future use of other weapons of

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mass destruction (WMD). Because of these fears that Iraq under Saddam will always be aggressive and dangerous, Washington has increased its support for the Iraqi opposition.⁴

The United States is not alone in its focus on Saddam the man. Although many voices in the Arab and Muslim world criticize U.S. policy toward Iraq, Saddam himself has few backers. Islamists distrust Saddam's recent professions of religiosity, recalling his brutal persecution of their cause in Iraq. Arab nationalists at their most forgiving see him as a committed opponent of the United States, Iran, and other *bêtes noires*, but hardly consider him the heir to Egypt's Gamal Nasser. Iran, which seldom sees eye-to-eye with Washington in the Gulf area, shares the U.S. view that Saddam is a dangerous leader.

Saddam takes risks.⁵ He is more likely than most possible leaders of Iraq to invade his neighbors, use WMD, repress communities at home, and otherwise destabilize his region. In addition, Saddam bears grudges and will seek to punish Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and other foes—even if he must wait years to do so. If he were removed, chances for reconciliation both within the region and with the United States would improve.

Removing Saddam, however, is not a panacea for Iraq's woes. This focus on Saddam overlooks the potential dangers that his successor will pose and understates some fundamental problems that are inherent to Iraq's strategic position, which will make the relationship between Iraq and its neighbors tense for years to come, regardless of its leader.

Saddam's continuation in power also has some surprising benefits. First, Saddam's aggressiveness and outright evil have created a strong and broad consensus that Iraq must be contained to some degree. Any successor to Saddam, even if cast from the same mold, would probably receive control over Iraq's purse strings from the United Nations (UN), a warm welcome in most regional capitals, and the benefit of the doubt most generally. Second, Saddam's incompetence as a general is matched only by his ineptitude as a diplomat. Any likely successor, even including those who share his aggressive ambitions, would likely be more skilled. The United States and its allies should continue to seek Saddam's removal but should prepare for trouble down the road, especially in the event that they succeed incompletely and a leader from the same power base emerges.

Iraq's Troubling Geopolitics

Iraq cannot escape its neighborhood. Geopolitics shape Iraq's foreign policy almost as much as the regime that rules in Baghdad, limiting the choices that even the most benign ruler could make. Iran and Iraq have an enduring

rivalry that predates the 1958 Iraqi revolution and, because of the Iran-Iraq War, is bitterly ingrained in both sides at a popular level. Turkey has conducted repeated incursions into Iraq to quash Turkey's Kurdish movement, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), and would continue to do so as long as the movement used Iraqi territory to launch attacks on Turkey. Syria's hostility dates in part from Damascus's and Baghdad's rival claims to leadership of the Ba'th cause, and thus leadership of the Arab nationalist camp. Relations have improved under Syria's new leader, Bashar al-Assad, but suspicion remains high. Any new regime in Baghdad must manage these difficult challenges.

WMD is perhaps the most problematic issue. Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, and Israel all possess various types of WMD and missiles. A future Iraqi regime seeking WMD as a deterrent is thus understandable, if not necessarily desirable. Almost any regime would seek to possess a wide range of chemical weapons, in particular. For Iraq, in contrast to most possessors of chemical weapons, these weapons are of proven utility—both to repress at home and to intimidate abroad. The frequent use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War, and the belief that they played a key role in the victory over Iran, has led to widespread support for their acquisition among Iraq's military and much of Iraqi society.

A post-Saddam regime that is less willing to embrace risks and less aggressive in its intentions is also less likely to seek biological and nuclear weapons. Most leaders would probably recognize the tremendous political and economic price that Iraq might pay—and has already paid—for pursuing biological and nuclear weapons. A new regime, therefore, may be willing to abandon the quest for these weapons if international pressure is high. If not, a key distinction is the possession of WMD—particularly biological and nuclear weapons—as opposed to the use of WMD. A successor regime led by a more cautious individual than Saddam is also more likely to be satisfied with the defensive possession of WMD. Even possession, however, will lead to proliferation in the region and increase the chance of accidental use.

Hostility toward Israel is also likely to remain acute. Saddam gained considerable prestige by his repeated threats against Israel. Any successor might seek to gain similar support by maintaining a hostile policy, or at least rhetoric, toward Israel. This hostility appears to have broad support in much of Iraqi society, particularly among the military. Iraq's track record suggests that hostility toward Israel is independent of regime: Iraq sent more than 10,000

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men to fight in the 1948 Arab war with Israel, played a small role in the 1967 war, and deployed roughly 60,000 men to participate in the 1973 war.

As with WMD, however, the true question is one of degree. A regime less dominated by Saddam's power base would probably be less hostile to Israel. Iraq's Shi'a and Kurdish populations probably are less hostile toward Israel than the pan-Arab Sunni core. A successor regime in Baghdad is highly unlikely to be friendlier toward Israel, but it might possibly adopt a policy toward Israel closer to that of more moderate Arab states.

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Any future Iraqi regime would also face tough choices in its quest for balance among Iraqi unity, domestic peace, and human rights. Iraq's sense of national unity was never strong. In 1933 King Faysal I, Iraq's first ruler, observed, "[T]here is still no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic ideal ... connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever."⁶ Years of misrule, particularly the brutality of Saddam, has only worsened communal relations. In addition to the

slaughter of the Kurds and the Shi'a, Saddam has also pitted tribe against tribe and decimated Iraqi civil society. Even if Saddam and his henchmen are removed from power, their bitter legacy will remain strong. Kurds in particular are likely to be highly suspicious of any regime in Baghdad that seeks more than nominal control over their activities. If tribal, ethnic, or sectarian tension grows when Saddam falls, a successor regime will be hard-pressed to end any violence without resorting to significant repression.

Nor will a successor regime likely be free of territorial ambitions. Irredentism has a long history in Iraq. Iraq's leadership before the 1958 revolution sought to persuade the British to include Kuwait in a confederation with Jordan and Iraq. After Kuwait's independence in 1961, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim claimed Kuwait as part of Iraq—even though this declaration isolated Iraq in the Arab world—foreshadowing the claims Saddam would make almost 30 years later. Although a successor regime would not have Saddam's personal honor entangled in Iraq's claim to Kuwait, it would possibly use this claim to shore up its flagging popularity or otherwise distract Iraqis from domestic trouble.

Finally, the dispute over the Shatt al Arab waterway is particularly troublesome and likely to recur. The 1937 agreement over the Shatt al Arab, on the Iranian border, had little support in Iraq. Iraqi rulers before Saddam have claimed sovereignty over disputed parts of the Shatt and have even made claims to the Iranian province of Khuzistan. Moreover, the long

and bitter war with Iran has etched itself on the Iraqi consciousness. Even more than Iraq's claim to Kuwait, troubled successor regimes may try to seize on the rivalry with Iran to resuscitate their popularity in the event of economic difficulties or domestic unrest.

Two Scenarios for Iraq's Future

The transition from Saddam to his successor will almost certainly be chaotic. How Saddam will lose power—from a coup, assassination, insurrection, lucky bomb, or natural causes—is not clear. Iraq has no tradition of peaceful regime change, and civil society has been shattered.

Predicting the why, how, and when of Saddam's removal from power is impossible. Although lacking so many basic skills, the Iraqi dictator has shown a genius for survival. He has survived murderers within his family, would-be military coups, competitors within the Ba'th party, Shi'a revolutionaries, Syrian assassins, the revolutionary zeal of the clerical regime in Iran, and U.S. air strikes. He has weathered these challenges with a combination of ruthlessness and luck, centralizing power in the hands of a trusted few while keeping potential rivals at each other's throat or removing them from power.

In the most obvious terms, a replacement could come either from within Saddam's current power base or from outside it. Saddam's power base consists of military and paramilitary organizations—such as the Republican Guard, the Special Republican Guard, and the Popular Army—intelligence services, several key Sunni tribes (and a smaller number of Shi'a tribes), nontribal elements from or near Saddam's hometown of Tikrit, and Ba'th party hacks. These groups are united by their belief that their survival and prosperity are linked to Saddam's continuation in power.

If Saddam took a bullet—and if the assassin did not have the ability to seize power for himself—an individual from these ranks could most easily take power. This individual could be one of Saddam's sons, a close family member, or an uneasy junta that represented various key elements of the regime. In any event, Iraq's security and elite military forces likely will be important actors.

Such an individual would have the network and apparatus for seizing power and could appeal to fellow cronies on the grounds of survival: if an outsider seizes the helm, they will fall together. Any would-be successor who lacked support from security and military forces would have trouble maintaining and consolidating power. A 1995 CIA study contended that Saddam's successor would come from the same "political culture" as Saddam, sharing a commitment to Iraq's hegemony and hostility to the West.⁷

Should Saddam fall, whether one of his cronies will assume power is uncertain. Saddam has preserved power in part by keeping rivals weak, off-balance, and at each other's throat. His fall could lead to bloodletting among the elite, as rival factions seek power but are all too weak to hold it. Thus, a leader could possibly come to the fore from outside Saddam's power base.

The range of plausible contenders from outside Saddam's power base is even wider. Replacements could include a member of a militant Shi'a group, an officer from the regular army, an Iraqi exile with democratic leanings, or—as is most likely—someone whom those outside Iraq do not anticipate

or know at all. That individual will act according to his beliefs, personality, and power base—factors that are impossible to weigh given our lack of knowledge about him.

The role the United States or other outside powers play in removing Saddam from power is another important factor. No country likes outsiders to impose a government on it: Iranian nationalists, for example, never forgave the shah for returning to

power in a U.S.-backed coup in 1953. Certain segments of Iraqi society are highly nationalistic. The 1958 coup that overthrew the monarchy occurred in part because Arab nationalist officers perceived the regime as too close to the West. By openly backing one candidate for power and helping place him on the throne, the United States and its allies might damage his nationalist credentials, weakening his regime in the long term. Nationalists would inevitably tar him as a U.S. puppet, dismissing any rapprochement he made with the United States or its regional allies as *quid pro quo*. This disadvantage is not necessarily fatal. Almost all Iraqis would welcome the new leader as a long-awaited replacement for Saddam. Nevertheless, he would have one strike against him in the struggle to consolidate power.

If Saddam fell of his own accord, however, the new leader's nationalist credentials would be far stronger. Even if the United States removed Saddam (for example, through a lucky cruise missile strike) but did not install a replacement regime, the new leader would not be perceived as Washington's quisling.

Any successor to Saddam would probably have a brief honeymoon abroad. If Saddam fell, the international community and the Arab world would likely welcome Iraq back—even if the new leader came from within Saddam's power base. An exception to this probable embrace of a new Iraqi leader would occur if Saddam's sons 'Uday or Qusayy, or one of his more heinous henchmen, such as 'Ali Hassan al-Majid, took power. A honeymoon

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would be particularly likely if the United States helped bring about the change of government. Washington would feel compelled to work with the new leader, having worked so hard to bring about a change in regime.

Even though the United States has tried in its official statements to focus on the behavior of the Iraqi regime, all too often it has fallen back on the dangers that Saddam, the individual, poses. This perception is even more widespread outside the United States. France and Russia, already eager to rehabilitate Saddam's Iraq, would likely use his removal as a pretext for normalizing relations, citing the need to work with any successor regime to ensure it does not follow in Saddam's path. In the Arab world, widespread sympathy exists for the suffering of the Iraqi people. If Saddam fell, a call to help restore Iraq and rebuild society would have widespread appeal.

The Real, but Limited, Benefits of Saddam's Removal

Saddam's removal would yield at least two benefits for the region and for the United States. First, any successor to Saddam would very likely be far more cautious. Saddam, more than most leaders, considers military aggression, the use of WMD, and other dangerous activities to advance his interests.⁸ Fearing the threat from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Islamic revolution in the late 1970s, Saddam attacked Iran rather than negotiate. To avoid economic hardship in 1990, Saddam attacked Kuwait rather than focus on economic development. Nor have the recurrent crises in Baghdad since then given any indication that Saddam has learned his lesson: he continues to bully, threaten and provoke. As Amatzia Baram notes, "All the existing evidence points [in] one direction, namely that the Iraqi president is a high-risk gambler not only when it comes to his conventional army, but, also in terms of his nonconventional arsenal."⁹ Although a successor to Saddam would possibly be a risk-taker, in Iraq's foreign policy, any replacement—even one who shared Saddam's ambitions—would most likely be far more cautious than Saddam is.

The second benefit would be the possibility of better, though not necessarily warm, relations between Iraq and its neighbors and between Iraq and the United States. Saddam is a vengeful man. He believes that he must maintain his honor, which in turn requires dominating any confrontation. He is willing to wait years to wreak vengeance on his perceived enemies, killing and torturing those he believes have slighted him or his family. With a similar motive in mind, Saddam tried to assassinate former President George Bush, the architect of the military coalition that defeated him. His sense of honor demands that those who shamed or defeated him be punished, a view that makes better relations with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, or the

United States unlikely. Saddam has also played up domestic hostility to the United States and its regional allies, blaming them for the impoverishment and isolation of Iraq. Improving relations at this point would undermine what little credibility he possesses with the Iraqi public. Saddam's replacement would have neither the personal nor political baggage that has arisen from 10 years of confrontation, making moving beyond the past and working with Iraq's former opponents easier.

The Dangers of a Successor from Within Saddam's Power Base

Saddam's removal from power would not be an unmitigated benefit for Iraq's adversaries. A hostile post-Saddam Iraq will continue to pose significant dangers to the United States and its allies. In war, it is better if your enemy is weak, and Saddam helps keep Iraq isolated. Imagining the survival of sanctions or weapons inspections after Saddam's fall is difficult. His replacement, even if as brutal and as reckless, would not generate the same hostility.

In addition to keeping Iraq isolated, Saddam is a poor strategist and general. Saddam sees the army as a threat to his regime as well as an instrument for domination abroad. He has politicized the Iraqi armed forces—cronies and politically loyal officers advance through the ranks rather than those with demonstrated military skill. Over the years, Saddam's friends, relatives, and cronies have played key roles in Iraq's military, even if they have little or no military experience. In addition, Saddam often exercised direct control over military operations, stifling innovation at all levels. Saddam regularly rotates senior officers to prevent any of them from building independent authority to his rule and thus posing the risk of leading a coup. He has also appointed commissars to ensure that the military remains in accord with his regime.¹⁰

Saddam provides poor strategic direction to Iraq's military. In the Iran-Iraq War, he underestimated the strength of Iran's revolution and wrongly believed that terror attacks would induce surrender. After invading Kuwait, he held out for the U.S. ground offensive, believing that the United States and its allies could not stomach the casualties necessary for a ground war. These poor assessments make Saddam a dangerous foe who does not always recognize superior force when he confronts it and uses Iraq's limited resources poorly. Thus, Iraq under Saddam is more likely to be aggressive, but also more likely to blunder when it does so. Iraq under one of Saddam's cronies may be less aggressive, but also less susceptible to failure.

Saddam's diplomatic skills are poor as well. Saddam blusters instead of soothes in his diplomacy, alienating potential friends. As a result, sanctions, inspections, and other methods of keeping Saddam's regime weak have continued for far longer than their creators anticipated. As Pakistan's UN am-

bassador noted, "Every time lifting the sanctions comes up, the Iraqis do something to ensure that sanctions will not be lifted."¹¹ This clumsiness may change with new leadership.

The Bigger Picture

Members of Saddam's power base share many of his most troubling ambitions, suggesting that if a crony replaced Saddam it would still lead to many problems between Iraq and its neighbors. Like Saddam, his cronies are committed to making Iraq the strongest regional and Arab power. They see Iraq as the logical heir to Nasser's Egypt. Moreover, they are hostile to Israel, Iran, the Gulf states, and the United States—although not in the same personal manner as Saddam.

If Saddam's replacement came from outside Saddam's power base, the future would look far brighter. First, the new leader is unlikely to share in the dream of Iraq as the regional hegemon and as the strongest Arab power. Past Iraqi regimes, such as that of Qasim and King Faysal, were far more prudent in their foreign affairs and indeed tried to resist more sweeping revolutionary movements, even as they tried to use their fervor to bolster their own cause. Such prudence is particularly likely if the new leader is a Shi'a or otherwise came from outside the Sunni Arab nationalist core that has long dominated Iraq. Such a leader would have more difficulty donning the mantle of Arab nationalism, which has long been associated with the Sunni school of Islam, forcing him to focus on increasing his appeal within Iraq itself.

A replacement from outside Saddam's power base would also be more likely to concentrate on Iraq's myriad problems at home rather than adventures abroad. Iraq's economy and society are in shambles. What was once a prosperous and advanced nation has, after 10 years of war, sanctions, and isolation, become poor and backward. Saddam's base supported his war with Iran and his attack on Kuwait—and accepted his continued confrontation with the anti-Iraq coalition—despite the resultant prolongation of sanctions and isolation. Any leader who relied more on popular support would have to take measures to improve Iraq's economy and rebuild its society.

A leader from outside Saddam's power base also might be able to restore, or at least improve, domestic harmony in Iraq. Saddam's base shares Saddam's commitment to an Iraq in which Kurds, Shi'a, and other marginalized communities have little voice. They have promoted a pan-Arab identity to strengthen their position in Iraqi society. In this respect, Saddam's base, which disdains and fears Iraq's other communities, fully supports him. It shares his view that a narrow few should rule Iraq and that re-

pression is the most effective tactic for keeping the domestic peace. A leader from outside this core could only be more inclusive.

A new leader who was not a crony of Saddam also would be more likely to improve ties with Iraq's neighbors and the United States. Such a leader could blame Iraq's many problems on Saddam's foolish wars and seek sympathy and support from Iraq's former enemies. Ironically, a leader backed openly by Washington might be less able to moderate Iraq's foreign policy. A leader who came to power with U.S. assistance might have to oppose Washington on several high-profile issues to avoid charges of being a U.S. puppet.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The above assessment suggests that Saddam's removal is desirable but that considerable risks will remain after his fall. Most worrisome is the possibility that a leader would come to power with the same ambitions as Saddam. This leader not only is likely to be a far more skilled commander and statesman than Saddam but is also likely to be welcomed back into the international community and Arab fold with few reservations. The region could thus face an Iraq that has aggressive intentions but is able to rebuild its conventional forces, acquire WMD, and otherwise strengthen itself for a confrontation.

Such a successor, however, would probably still be preferable to Saddam because he would be more cautious. He would likely recognize that the continued pursuit of nuclear or biological weapons would carry grave risks and could lead to Iraq's isolation anew. Moreover, as long as the United States maintains a robust military presence in the Gulf region, he is likely to be deterred from any adventures, recognizing that a confrontation with the superior U.S. force would be disastrous.

The greatest benefits for the region and for the United States would come from a change in Iraq's elites, not just Saddam's fall. In addition to installing a more cautious ruler at Iraq's helm, such a change would produce a regime that is far less committed to Sunni hegemony over Iraq and to Iraq's hegemony in the broader Arab world—greatly increasing the possibility of regional and domestic peace.

Managing the transition will be especially important. Although how Saddam will be replaced is unclear, his fall will send shock waves throughout Iraq. The most important role outsiders can play is establishing limits to indicate clearly what behavior is not acceptable. Statements—backed by credible shows of force—that the United States will not tolerate Iraqi troop concentrations near its border with Kuwait, Jordan, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia, or that WMD use will invite international retaliation, will help deter any conflict between Iraq and its neighbors and avoid any accidental escalation in tension.

The United States and its allies also must try to limit outside meddling in Iraq's politics in the event of Saddam's fall—or at least ensure that the meddling is to their advantage. Both Iran and Turkey have strong interests in ensuring that a friendly, or at least not actively hostile, regime takes power in Baghdad. Both are concerned that restive Iraqi minorities might inflame tension within their own countries.

Outside powers can also help prevent or limit civil strife during a transition. If Iraq's communities believe they have been left to their own devices after Saddam falls, they are likely to arm and mobilize in self-defense—actions that have the potential of setting off a dangerous spiral that will lead all communities to take up arms. An outside troop presence might calm some of these fears.

Finally, the United States and its allies must recognize the limits of any success in removing Saddam from power. Even in the unlikely event that Saddam and his entire power base are swept from power, the United States and its allies will still have fundamental clashes with Iraq. Iraq's possession of WMD, particularly chemical weapons, will remain on the top of the list, but so too will Iraq's attitude toward the Middle East peace process, human rights, and continuing territorial ambitions. Even as Washington works to ensure Saddam's fall, it must recognize that his removal from power will not make all these problems disappear.

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Notes

1. Rend Rahim Francke, "Symposium: After Saddam, What Then for Iraq?" *Middle East Policy* 4, no. 3 (February 1999): 13.
2. Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 43.
3. C. David Welch, assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs, testimony before the House International Relations Committee, March 23, 2000.
4. See Daniel Byman, "Proceed with Caution: U.S. Support for the Iraqi Opposition," *The Washington Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 23–38; and Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Gideon Rose, "Can Saddam Be Toppled?" *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 1 (January/February 1999): 24–41, for more on the motivations behind U.S. support for the opposition and potential problems that lie ahead.
5. Amatzia Baram, "Saddam Husayn Between His Power Base and the International Community," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 4, no. 3 (December 2000).
6. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 28.

7. James W. Moore, "Après Saddam, Le Deluge? Speculating on a Post-Saddam Iraq," *Middle East Policy* VI, no. 3 (February 1999), p. 37.
8. For an interesting analysis of Saddam's decisionmaking, see Jerrold M. Post, "The Defining Moment of Saddam's Life: A Political Psychology Perspective on the Leadership and Decision-Making of Saddam Hussein during the Gulf Crisis," in Stanley A. Renshon, ed., *The Political Psychology of the Gulf War: Leaders, Publics, and the Process of Conflict* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), pp. 49–66.
9. Baram, "Saddam Husayn Between His Power Base."
10. For a review, see Andrew Parasiliti and Sinan Antoon. "Friends in Need, Foes to Heed: The Iraqi Military in Politics," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. VII, no. 4 (October 2000): 130–140.
11. Eric W. Herr, "Operation Vigilant Warrior: Conventional Deterrence Theory, Doctrine, and Practice," (thesis, School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., June 1996), p. 17.