Coercing Saddam Hussein: Lessons from the Past

Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack and Matthew Waxman

Saddam Hussein’s Iraq often appears immune to coercion. Despite military strikes, political isolation and seven years of the most comprehensive sanctions ever imposed on a country, Saddam has refused to abandon his ambitions for regional hegemony, dismantle his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes, repay Kuwaitis for war atrocities, or otherwise comply with international demands. In recent years, Saddam has become more defiant. In 1996, he attacked the Kurdish-controlled city of Irbil in northern Iraq, despite a widespread belief that the US would defend the Kurdish-held north. In 1997–98, he impeded UN access to some suspected WMD sites in Iraq for several months in the face of a US military build-up. Not surprisingly, some observers have begun to question whether Saddam can be coerced at all.

Despite Saddam’s intransigence, a closer look at Iraq’s recent history reveals that he has often bowed to foreign pressure and altered course. In 1975, Iraq met Iranian demands over the disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway; after the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam accepted a ‘no-fly zone’ over southern Iraq and a de facto US protectorate over northern Iraq; in 1993, he temporarily withdrew his opposition to the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM)’s long-term monitoring regime and stopped interfering with its inspections; and in 1994 he backed down from a second invasion of Kuwait. Even the often ambiguous resolution of more problematic confrontations – including the winter 1997–98 fracas over WMD inspections – indicates that Saddam can respond to coercive pressure.

Recognising that Iraq under Saddam continues to precipitate crises, despite being repeatedly coerced in the past, this article attempts to explain how Saddam can be successfully coerced in the future. The best way to coerce Saddam’s regime is to target its ‘centre of gravity’: the relationship between Saddam and his power base.

Identifying Iraq’s Centre of Gravity
In his monumental nineteenth-century study, On War, Karl von Clausewitz identified the concept of a nation’s ‘centre of gravity’. According to Clausewitz, this centre is that which, if destroyed, would cause the enemy’s resistance to

Daniel Byman is a Policy Analyst at RAND, Washington DC. Kenneth Pollack is a Senior Research Professor at the National Defense University, Washington DC. Matthew Waxman is a Consultant at RAND, Washington DC.
collapse. A centre of gravity is not the same as a vulnerability. Sometimes the enemy’s centre of gravity is its greatest strength – Clausewitz contends, for example, that Frederick the Great’s centre of gravity was the Prussian Army, the most powerful element of the Prussian state. Clausewitz noted that the centre of gravity can be material: the enemy’s army; its capital city; the army of its strongest ally; or a particular individual. Or it can be intangible: an alliance’s ‘community of interest’; public opinion; or morale. Tangible or intangible, Clausewitz argued that the surest route to victory is to locate the enemy’s centre of gravity and to focus all efforts on destroying it.

Clausewitz’s concept applies equally well to coercion. Although concessions can be gained by targeting a range of state interests, only by threatening the state’s centre of gravity can a coercer compel the greatest concessions from the target state. By threatening its centre of gravity, a coercer is most likely to provoke the desired response from the target state. If the threat is credible, then a rational opponent would probably be willing to accede to virtually any request rather than see the threat carried out.

When seeking to coerce Iraq, the US must identify and then target its centre of gravity. Despite its high international profile, Iraq is relatively small, underdeveloped and vulnerable. In the past, foreign adversaries have attempted to coerce Iraq by putting pressure on at least six components of Iraqi strength. All six of these possible centres are relevant to the current debate over how best Washington can rein in Iraq in the future; various analysts and policy-makers have suggested each as the proper point at which the US should apply pressure.

The first and most obvious is Saddam Hussein himself. Saddam has created a totalitarian state in which all power flows from him. If he were removed, the regime would collapse and Iraqi resistance to the international community would dissolve.

A second possible centre of gravity is Iraq’s conventional military power. Iraq is surrounded by neighbours who have frequently employed force in pursuit of national ambitions. Saddam is among the worst regional aggressors, and has regularly used his armed forces to accomplish his foreign-policy agenda. Any Iraqi leader would consider it a calamity if he were deprived of the ability to project force beyond Iraq’s borders or defend its borders against foreign threats.

Third, Iraq’s WMD and ballistic-missile arsenal appears to be a key element of Iraqi military might. Iraq is surrounded by enemies with formidable WMD and ballistic-missile capabilities, including the constant presence of the US with its massive nuclear arsenal. Several other Middle Eastern states – Egypt, Iran and Libya – have employed chemical weapons (CW) in combat, although Iraq has been the worst offender, using CW on Iranian troops and Kurdish villagers and firing ballistic missiles at Bahraini, Iranian, Israeli and Saudi cities during the Iran–Iraq and Gulf Wars. Possessing WMD also has non-military benefits to an Iraqi regime, bolstering its prestige and legitimacy with the Iraqi people and the larger Arab community.
Public sentiment is a fourth potential pressure point. Although the Iraqi people are kept under control and the regime rarely canvasses the public in formulating policy, popular opinion is not entirely irrelevant to Iraqi policy-making. If the Iraqi people were to muster the resources and courage to rise up, they could sweep the regime from power. Perhaps surprisingly, Saddam has repeatedly demonstrated that he can be responsive to public opinion under certain conditions, as several cases described below suggest.

A fifth might be Iraq’s economy, particularly its oil wealth. Iraq has the second largest oil reserves in the world behind Saudi Arabia. Although Iraq is rich in many resources, such reserves have allowed it to lean heavily on oil exports for state income. Denied its oil exports, Iraq has lost most of its ability to trade with the outside world.

A sixth and final centre of gravity is Saddam’s relationship with his power base – essential to his control over the Iraqi state. Saddam’s regime is loathed by most of the Iraqi populace, but he has remained in power by creating a pervasive and seemingly omnipotent internal security apparatus. This includes military and paramilitary organisations – the Republican Guard, the Special Republican Guard and the Popular Army – as well as an array of intelligence and security services. To fill the ranks of these organisations, Saddam draws largely from key Sunni tribes; a smaller number of Shi’a tribes; non-tribal elements from Saddam’s hometown of Tikrit, as well as Baghdad, Mosul, Samarra and other mostly Sunni cities; and old-time Ba’athists who still cling to their party membership as tickets to wealth and power. Collectively, these groups comprise Saddam’s power base and their support is vital to his grip on power.

Saddam values all six of these elements. However, the historical record reveals that Iraq’s true centre of gravity – and greatest area of sensitivity – is Saddam’s relationship with his power base, which is indispensable to his continued rule.

Coercing Iraq: The Historical Record

Iraq has been the frequent target of coercive threats since the Ba’athists took power in 1968. Although Saddam did not make himself President until 1979, he was a key player in the regime from its inception, and outside governments recognised him as such from the early 1970s. Efforts to coerce Iraq for the last 25 years can thus be considered efforts to coerce Saddam’s regime. Examining these efforts indicates that Saddam’s relationship to his power base is Iraq’s true centre of gravity and provides a rich set of lessons to guide future policy.

The 1975 Iran–Iraq Border Dispute

In 1975, Iran successfully coerced Iraq to limit its claims to the Shatt al-Arab waterway along their disputed border. To press Iraq over the Shatt al-Arab, over which Iraq claimed complete, and Iran partial, sovereignty, the Shah of Iran – and his ally, the US – supported Kurdish dissidents against the Ba’ath regime. Tehran and Washington provided the Kurds with arms, cash and a safe
haven in Iran from which to organise themselves. At times, Iranian units fought on the Kurds’ behalf in Iraqi territory. Iraq fought back, concentrating tremendous fire-power against the Kurdish *peshermga*, or frontiers. The Shah then escalated tensions with border clashes by regular Iranian forces. Iraq found it impossible to defeat the Kurds as long as they had Iranian and US help and feared that these skirmishes presaged an outright war with the Shah’s US-equipped military, which Baghdad recognised it could not win. After bitter fighting, it therefore agreed in March 1975 to meet Iran’s demands on the Shatt al-Arab. For Baghdad, the twin threats of prolonged instability from the Kurdish insurgency and war with Iran outweighed the humiliating public concession to the Shah. Following the withdrawal of Iran’s support, the Ba’ath regime killed thousands of Kurds and forcibly transferred tens of thousands to prevent the insurgency from recurring.8

Iran’s ability to coerce Iraq in 1975 demonstrates that Baghdad will back down when facing a credible threat from a superior conventional force. More significant lessons, however, can be drawn from Iran’s support of the Kurds. Here, Tehran’s coercive success reveals Baghdad’s sensitivity to instability along ethnic, tribal and sectarian lines. Iraq has little or no civil society that knits its peoples together. Tribal divisions and an urban–rural divide also create fissures rather than unity. By personalising his rule and relying on a narrow power base of Sunni tribesmen and non-tribal Iraqis from select cities, Saddam has alienated most Iraqis from the regime.

Because of Saddam’s narrow support base, a strong Kurdish insurgency posed a direct threat to his rule. Before Saddam and the Ba’ath took power Kurdish insurrections had helped discredit previous governments in Iraq, contributing to the fall of several strongmen. In the words of analyst Phebe Marr, ‘Saddam Hussein had staked his future on solving the Kurdish problem and could not risk failure’.9 A Kurdish insurgency also tied down many regime forces, an expensive and potentially dangerous liability, and distracted regime officials from their goal of aggrandising Iraqi power. Bolstered by Iranian assistance, the Kurdish insurgency was perceived as a direct threat to the Ba’ath’s legitimacy and survival.

Moreover, Iraq could not counter Iranian pressure. As long as Tehran offered the insurgents a haven on Iranian territory, Iraq could not completely control the Kurdish population. The Kurds in 1974–75 could better organise, arm and train than subsequent Kurdish insurgents, who lacked outside support. Unable to defeat the Kurds – and fearful of uncontrolled escalation with a more powerful Iran fully backed by the US – Saddam was forced to concede.10

**Iranian Missile Attacks on Iraq, 1980–88**

After evicting Iraqi forces from its own territory in 1982, Iran went on the offensive against Iraq. The Islamic regime in Tehran tried to destroy Saddam, not to coerce him. Nevertheless, the war was long and protracted, and contained several ‘wars within wars’ that were attempts at coercion.
The clearest example was the series of Iranian ballistic-missile and air-strikes against Iraqi cities. From 1982–87, successful Iranian ground offensives regularly panicked the Iraqi regime. In response, the Iraqis would launch air-strikes and missile barrages against Iranian cities to compel Iran to halt its ground offensive. Iran would retaliate against Iraqi cities with the coercive goal of forcing Baghdad to halt its own air attacks on Iranian cities.

In these limited coercive campaigns, Iran was largely successful. On virtually every occasion, the Iraqis eventually ceased their attacks, at least until the Iranians started to enjoy new success on the ground. Throughout the war, Saddam attempted to minimise the impact of the fighting on the Iraqi people. After each Iranian strike on Baghdad, he insisted that all damage be repaired immediately to maintain the fiction that Iraqi society was insulated from the attacks. Consequently, although Iranian missiles did kill several hundred Iraqi civilians, the rhythms of daily life in Baghdad were generally not affected.

The success of Iranian air and missile attacks in inducing Iraq to halt its own strikes reflects a deeper pattern of Saddam’s behaviour: he fears instability and resists it even when the risk of it is low. Iranian strikes did not foster any significant internal unrest in Iraq. The impact on Iraqi civilians was so minimal – and the Ba’ath regime’s police apparatus so strong – that no unrest occurred. Nonetheless, Saddam apparently feared not only that the attacks would erode popular support for the war, but that they could cause elements of his power base and the armed forces to move against the regime.

Saddam’s Arab nationalist, tribal and Ba’ath party followers support his rule because he promises them returns – principally power, security and wealth, but also a national image of strength and prosperity. For Saddam’s power base, the war could be justified on the grounds of defeating the traditional Persian enemy and eradicating any Shi’a hope of overturning Sunni hegemony in Iraq. But Saddam feared that allowing Iranian missile and air-strikes to continue against Iraqi cities without being able to respond in kind would lead his backers to conclude that he was making Iraq look weak and imposing unnecessary hardships on the Iraqi people. In addition, most Iranian missiles were aimed at central Baghdad, where Saddam’s loyalists lived and worked. Saddam therefore felt he had to back down whenever the Iranians demonstrated they could inflict more pain on Iraq than Iraq could on them.

**Forcing Iraq out of Kuwait, 1990**

From 2 August 1990–15 January 1991, the US-led coalition tried to coerce Iraq into relinquishing control of Kuwait. Some may question Washington’s motives, claiming that it secretly hoped that Saddam would not withdraw, thereby providing a pretext to crush his armed forces. There is some truth in this assertion, but only from late autumn 1990. Prior to November 1990, the US sought to compel Iraq to leave Kuwait without a war. This hope evaporated as Saddam stood firm.

The US-led coalition’s effort to coerce Saddam into withdrawing from Kuwait failed for two reasons. First, invading Kuwait was a huge risk. Saddam
underestimated that risk – he never expected to have to fight a total war against the US, let alone a coalition of 30 nations – but he understood that the risk existed.\(^{16}\) Having committed himself to annexing Kuwait, Saddam faced another risk: if he withdrew from Kuwait, his supporters might move against him.\(^{17}\) In the end, that fear proved the most powerful influence on his decision-making.

Second, Saddam was so concerned about how his power base would respond to a withdrawal from Kuwait that he exaggerated his own prospects in a war with the coalition. He concluded that the coalition would fail to drive him from Kuwait, based on several false assumptions: the coalition would have difficulty galvanising the political will to go to war; if the coalition found the will, Saddam could find ways to fragment it; and, even if they went ahead, Iraq’s military strength could force a stalemate in a bloody ground war.\(^{18}\)

Although the coalition’s bid to coerce Saddam in this instance failed, the reasons for this failure bolster the contention that Saddam’s relationship with his power base is the key to coercive success. Saddam knew that the Iraqi people would suffer in a war with the US, and he spent considerable time bracing popular morale for the coming air assault. He also recognised that his military would endure significant casualties even if it won. Again, he made this point repeatedly, calling on Iraqi soldiers to be prepared to make heavy sacrifices and warning the world that Iraq could accept tens of thousands of casualties in battle. These sacrifices he was willing to accept (as long as they did not include the 26,000-strong Republican Guard – a key element of his power base). What he could not countenance was the possibility that his supporters might turn on him if he brought on himself the humiliation of withdrawing from Kuwait.

**Preventing WMD Use During Operation Desert Storm, 1990–91**

Although the coalition could not coerce Saddam to leave Kuwait without a war, they did convince Iraqi leaders not to use chemical or biological weapons against coalition forces during the conflict.\(^{19}\) Iraq probably considered using WMD, but conclusive evidence on this subject is not available. Iraq had large stockpiles of such weapons and had used them against Iran and Kurdish villagers. Evidence revealed after Gulf War-syndrome investigations also indicates that at some point during the preliminary build-up to the war, the Iraqis had CW munitions in the theatre of operations.\(^{20}\) The use of such weapons in *Operation Desert Storm* might have cost the coalition many casualties. It might also have disrupted the coalition’s ground campaign, impeded initial deployments to Saudi Arabia and drawn Israel into the conflict. US planners believed that Iraq might use chemical weapons during *Operation Desert Storm*, and they therefore made Iraq’s WMD facilities a priority target.\(^{21}\)

Available evidence indicates that Iraq did not use its chemical or biological arsenal against coalition forces because Saddam feared that doing so might trigger nuclear retaliation by the US or Israel.\(^{22}\) Senior US officials, including President George Bush, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and, most notably, Secretary of State James Baker in his 9 January 1990 meeting with Iraqi Foreign
Minister Tariq Aziz, warned that an Iraqi biological or chemical strike might be met with massive retaliation. US officials deliberately used vague but ominous language to describe their likely response, trying to raise the spectre of nuclear retaliation.23

Using chemical weapons also might have involved sacrificing his regime’s very survival, even without a US nuclear response. In his January meeting with Aziz, Baker warned that the US would respond to the use of such weapons by holding any person responsible for their use accountable. The goal would be the elimination of the current Iraqi regime and the punishment of individual leaders.24

Drawing lessons from Iraq’s restraint in using chemical weapons is problematic, but it is clear that Iraqi decision-makers saw both the threats to their own well-being and the possibility of massive retaliation as highly credible. These threats, in turn, made a difficult decision almost inconceivable. Saddam did not want the US trying to hunt him down and kill him. Similarly, he recognised that nuclear retaliation by Washington – even if it did not kill him – was unthinkable. Saddam clearly understood US sensitivity to civilian casualties (hence his use of Iraqi civilians as ‘human shields’) and therefore almost certainly recognised that the US would never employ a nuclear weapon against an Iraqi city. But a nuclear explosion anywhere in Iraq would have been a devastating blow because it would have convinced his loyalists that his policies had failed. How could he possibly justify the gains from CW use if it led to a nuclear attack on Iraq? The US threatened Saddam and his standing with those who kept him in power – and he backed down.25

Forcing Iraq out of Kuwait, January–February 1991

The 1991 Gulf War offers one more noteworthy instance of coercion. In mid-February 1991, the coalition air campaign, coupled with the threat of an impending ground offensive, convinced Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait. For the most part, the US was no longer interested in having Iraq evacuate Kuwait at that time; US goals had shifted to the destruction of Iraq’s armed forces. Saddam was finally willing to accept earlier US demands for a withdrawal, but by then Washington was unwilling to accept ‘yes’ for an answer. Yet without trying to coerce Saddam, Washington succeeded in doing so. Saddam believed he was being coerced and he acceded to pressure.

By mid-February 1991, Saddam finally faced the realities of war with the US and its allies. The coalition had not only summoned the will to go to war, but had withstood his various efforts to break it apart. Moreover, Saddam realised that his army was being crushed by the coalition air forces and was losing any capability it might have had to stalemate the coalition ground forces. So he surrendered. From 12–22 February, Saddam offered greater and greater concessions to the coalition. In his last offer, on 22 February, Saddam agreed to accept all of the UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) and to withdraw from Kuwait in return for an immediate cease-fire. Washington insisted that there would be no cease-fire until all Iraqi forces had evacuated Kuwait.26 An
army is most vulnerable when it is retreating, and the Iraqi Army would have had to leave its extensive fortifications and retreat across open desert exposed to coalition air-power. Saddam saw this as a ploy to expose his forces to attack. Moreover, the short deadline demanded by the US for the Iraqi retreat would require Saddam’s army to leave much of its equipment in Kuwait. He chose to dig in rather than risk losing the whole army in a retreat.

The lessons from this example are not straightforward. Despite Washington’s hopes, the coalition air campaign coupled with the threat of a ground offensive convinced Saddam to leave Kuwait. But attributing this decision – or Saddam’s subsequent one not to withdraw when the coalition would not agree to an immediate cease-fire – is difficult when seeking to pinpoint Iraq’s centre of gravity. Ultimately, Saddam’s decisions stemmed from his fear of losing both the war and his entire army. But he could have perceived such a catastrophe as threatening to a number of potential centres of gravity. The destruction of the Iraqi Army would have stripped Baghdad of its ability to defend itself, either against further coalition advances or any other regional adversary, such as Iran. It also would have meant the destruction of the Republican Guard, crucial not only to Iraq’s conventional military power, but also to Saddam’s control over Iraq.27 Finally, such a crushing defeat would have been such a humiliation that he would have had to expect an immediate challenge from within his power base.

Forcing Iraq to Comply with UN Resolutions, 1991–98
Since the 1991 Gulf War, the international community has relied on comprehensive sanctions to try to force Iraq to comply with UNSCRs. By restricting Iraqi oil sales and limiting Iraq’s purchases abroad to food, medicine and humanitarian supplies, the UN has tried to coerce the Ba’ath regime by worsening the entire country’s economic welfare. This pressure could theoretically compel Iraq to abide by the resolutions in one of four ways. It could:

- increase the misery of the Iraqi people to the point where Saddam feared a popular uprising;
- so weaken the Iraqi Armed Forces that they would be unable to defend the country against foreign threats;
- hurt the regime’s élite and make Saddam fearful that either they would move against him or become too weak to prevent someone else from deposing him; or
- weaken Iraq’s economy so badly that Saddam would not believe it worth further impoverishing the country to continue to resist.

Saddam does not depend on popular support to stay in power. As a result, even though sanctions have made life miserable for the average Iraqi, the regime refuses to abandon its defiance of the West. Saddam has generally seen the suffering of the Iraqi people as little more than a propaganda tool to stir international sympathy to lift the sanctions.28
Nor has the slow disintegration of the Iraqi economy forced his hand. Saddam has given up at least $120 billion in oil revenues since 1991 by refusing to comply with UN resolutions. Visitors to Baghdad suggest that the Iraqi economy has contracted to pre-1980 levels.

Not even the impact of sanctions on the Iraqi military have convinced Saddam to back down. The morale and readiness of Iraq’s Armed Forces continue to decline as a direct result of sanctions. Iraq is less able to defend itself against the US or Iran than it was four years ago.29

Finally, the sanctions have never been able to bite hard enough for the Iraqi élites to suffer. Before 1991, Baghdad had substantial stockpiles of goods. The regime had also secreted sizeable amounts of hard currency which, when coupled with the money it earns from smuggled oil, has provided Saddam with sufficient funds to see that his loyalists are well cared for.30

Although sanctions have not compelled full Iraqi cooperation, they have had an indirect effect on regime behaviour. Most obviously, without sanctions, Saddam would never have acquiesed to UN inspections of his WMD and missile programmes. As noted, the strength of the Iraqi economy is not as important to Saddam as other assets, such as his WMD arsenal, but its health is not irrelevant. The economy matters to Saddam because it is important to his power base. Saddam’s supporters have no desire to see the Iraqi economy collapse, and they see Iraqi prosperity as one measure of Saddam’s success or failure. Consequently, economic problems brought on by the sanctions have forced Saddam to take actions he otherwise would not have. In summer 1994 and 1995, hyperinflation brought the Iraqi economy to the brink of collapse. In both cases, Saddam became desperate. In 1994, he threatened to attack Kuwait to try to force the UN to lift the sanctions – when the UN refused, he took a series of short-term measures that staved off collapse for a few months; and in early 1996, he grudgingly accepted UNSCR 986 – the ‘oil-for-food’ deal. Baghdad’s acceptance of this Resolution immediately revived confidence in the Iraqi dinar, allowing the Central Bank to stabilise the currency and avert catastrophe.31

Sanctions, despite their many drawbacks, serve a purpose by keeping Iraq weak. However, the success of sanctions as a coercive tool against Iraq has been mixed. On the one hand, Saddam knows that Iraq’s élites will demand that sanctions be lifted, and he fears that if they believe he cannot deliver, they will move against him. Only when the mounting pressure of sanctions began to affect Saddam’s standing among his power base were sanctions able to influence his behaviour. An end to sanctions is also necessary for Saddam to pursue his grander dreams of making Iraq – and himself – an Arab hegemon. For these reasons, Saddam accepted UNSCR 986 in 1996. On the other hand, resisting sanctions has become a symbol of Iraq’s defiance. If Saddam were to capitulate over sanctions, it would suggest to Saddam’s loyalists that his foreign policy has led only to defeat and suffering with nothing to show for it in return. Because of these conflicting pressures, sanctions are at best a weak coercive tool.
Supporting the Iraqi Opposition, 1991–96

Sanctions were not the only instrument that the US used to pressure Saddam into compliance after the Gulf War ended. Washington also supported various Iraqi opposition groups against the central regime in Baghdad. In 1992, the US helped to form the Iraq National Congress (INC) to serve as an umbrella organisation to coordinate resistance against Saddam and installed it in the Kurdish-held north. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funnelled arms, money and other supplies both to the INC and to the major Kurdish militias fighting Saddam. Meanwhile, Iran funded various Shi‘a opposition groups in the south. The Iranians provided military and financial support, and also gave the Shi‘a training and a safe haven across the Iranian border. Tehran backed them up with irregulars from the Badr Brigades, a force of exiled Iraqi Shi‘as controlled by the Islamic Republican Guard Corps.32

For roughly five years, Baghdad faced pressures from the US-backed INC and Kurds in the north and the Iranian-backed Shi‘a in the south. But these coercive efforts ultimately failed. Saddam fought both insurgencies ferociously. He even altered Iraq’s basic hydrography, draining much of the southern marshes to prevent the Shi‘a insurgents from using them as sanctuaries. Saddam never backed down or otherwise compromised on his policy of confrontation in response to these insurgencies.

Despite the concern these insurgencies provoked, they never really threatened any of Iraq’s potential centres of gravity. They were never strong enough militarily to threaten to defeat Iraq’s Armed Forces or to seize Baghdad’s WMD arsenal. Compared to sanctions, the strain they imposed on the Iraqi economy was slight. Most important, they could not garner any real support from the bulk of Iraq’s population, who dismissed the INC as weak, fractious, unrepresentative and corrupt.33 Kurdish groups were seen as a threat to the Iraqi state’s territorial integrity; the Shi‘a groups were considered Iranian pawns. The insurgencies did not inspire either public unrest or friction between Saddam and his power base. If anything, they produced the opposite effect: they convinced the Iraqi élite to rally around Saddam as the only man capable of preventing the loss of their privileged position.

Important differences distinguish the success enjoyed by Iran (and the US) when they coerced Baghdad by employing a Kurdish insurgency in 1974–75 and the failure of the US (and Iran) when they attempted to do the same in 1991–96. In 1974, the new Ba‘athist regime fought to demonstrate its full control over the country. Even minor Kurdish opposition threatened its legitimacy. After the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam’s regime was fighting for its survival – complete sovereignty over Iraqi territory was merely a long-term ambition. The US had – with its safe haven, no-drive and no-fly zones – made clear that the central regime in Baghdad would not exercise complete sovereignty in the near term, making Kurdish control over the north only one of many problems during this period. For this reason, the position of Saddam’s regime was not threatened by these insurgencies in 1991–96 as it was in 1974.
Ending Iraqi Defiance, 1993

US and allied military strikes against Iraq in January 1993 led Saddam to stop challenging the no-fly zones imposed over southern and northern Iraq and to end its active opposition to UNSCOM inspections. In December 1992 and January 1993, Baghdad initiated a crisis, flying planes and deploying air defences in southern Iraq and threatening to shoot down US aircraft. Iraq also interfered with UNSCOM inspectors, forbidding them access to WMD sites. To compel Iraq to accept the no-fly zones and to cooperate with UNSCOM, French, UK and US planes attacked several Iraqi air-defence sites. The US also hit an Iraqi nuclear-weapons facility at Zaa’foraniyah with several dozen cruise missiles.

These strikes led Iraq to end its defiance, although this success proved short-lived. Saddam abandoned his resistance to UNSCOM and complied with the no-fly zones – he did not have the capability to challenge them more than sporadically because his Air Force was so weak. It is not clear what it was about the strikes that convinced Saddam to back down. Was it the actual damage to his nuclear-weapons facility and the fear of follow-on strikes against other such sites? Was it the fear that this was simply the opening round in another massive air campaign on the model of Desert Storm? Or was it the concern that his inability to strike back at the US in any meaningful way was humiliating, and therefore – like Iranian missile attacks during the Iran–Iraq War – had to be brought to an end as quickly as possible, even if that meant admitting defeat? All three concerns may have contributed to his decision.

Deterring Another Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, 1994

In October 1994, Iraq massed heavy divisions of the Republican Guard near the Kuwaiti border, apparently threatening to repeat its 1990 invasion. Saddam’s preparations appeared extensive, and high-level defectors later indicated that he had intended to invade again. At the very least, Saddam probably hoped to use the threat of invasion to help have the sanctions removed. Simultaneously, Baghdad threatened to cease all ‘cooperation’ with UNSCOM, going so far as to threaten to throw the inspectors out of the country.

The US responded immediately with a rapid build-up in the area, Operation Vigilant Warrior, and warned of large-scale strikes if Iraq did not remove its deployment from southern Iraq. The UN Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 949 on 15 October, condemning Baghdad’s threats and demanding that Iraq pull its forces back to their original positions. Washington dispatched a carrier battle group, a Marine Corps Expeditionary Unit, an Army Mechanised Task Force and over 500 Air Force and Marine Corps aircraft to the Gulf. In addition, France and the UK also despatched warships to the Gulf. Baghdad responded by halting its deployment and dispersing its troops. Weeks later, Iraq recognised the sovereignty of Kuwait and the Iraq–Kuwait border.

As the success of Vigilant Warrior shows, Saddam had learned his lesson from the Gulf War. This time, he did not question his adversaries’ political will, nor did he miscalculate the chances that he could somehow prevail in a war.
with the US and its allies. He risked losing key combat units of the Republican
Guard and was setting himself up for another military humiliation – neither of
which was he willing to hazard.

Retaliating for Iraq’s Seizure of Irbil, 1996
One of the most widely criticised US actions against Iraq was the September
1996 air-strikes, launched in response to Iraq’s attack on Irbil. This criticism has
led analysts to ignore how even pinpricks against Saddam’s power base have
caused him to modify his behaviour. Air and cruise-missile attacks against
Iraqi military targets failed to deter Saddam but may have discouraged him
from making additional gains.

The attack on Irbil came after years of successful US deterrence in northern
Iraq. After Iraq’s defeat in Operation Desert Storm, the Kurds seized control over
most of their traditional homeland in Iraq. When regime security forces gained
the upper hand, however, massive refugee flows and the prospect of retaliation
and mass killing in the Kurdish regions – horrors that the Kurds had repeatedly
suffered in the past after failed rebellions – led the US to intervene. The UN
passed Resolution 688, condemning Iraqi repression of the Kurds. France, the
UK and the US created a no-fly zone for Iraqi planes north of the thirty-sixth
parallel and established a safe-haven in part of Iraqi Kurdistan where Kurdish
refugees would be protected. After Desert Storm, Baghdad was so terrified of
the US-led coalition that it not only abided by the coalition’s terms, but evacu-
at ed all of Kurdistan under the (mistaken) impression that it was all under the
protection of US air-power.

The US then instituted Operation Provide Comfort in 1991, a humanitarian
programme to assist the Kurds and enforce the no-fly zone over the north. This
operation was generally a coercive success. Although allied assets in the region
were limited, Saddam recognised that the US could easily supplement these
forces and, with the experience of Desert Storm, feared a massive US strike on
his army and regime. The Ba’ath regime’s forces stayed out of northern Iraq.

After years of relative success, however, this joint effort to remove Saddam
collapsed. Kurdish in-fighting resumed in May 1994, and in spring 1996 the
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) launched a large-scale offensive against the
rival Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), with significant assistance from Iran. In
response, KDP leader Massoud Barzani struck a bargain with Saddam to
collaborate against the PUK and the Iranians. During late summer 1996, Bagh-
dad cautiously built up its strength in the north, concentrating five divisions,
including three Republican Guard divisions, around Irbil. On 29 August,
Saddam struck. The Republican Guard enveloped and then swept through
Irbil, securing the city overnight. The next day, as the Iraqi combat units
withdrew back to their starting positions, KDP fighters and Iraqi secret-police
personnel swept into the city, where they rounded up and killed scores of INC
and PUK personnel and imprisoned hundreds more. Several days later, the US
retaliated with cruise-missile strikes against Iraqi air-defence sites in southern
Iraq – Operation Desert Strike – and an expansion of the southern no-fly zone.
from the thirty-second to the thirty-third parallel. Significantly, Baghdad had also been concentrating forces around the Kurdish-held city of Chamchamal (on the road to the PUK’s ‘capital’ at Sulaymaniyah), but immediately after the US cruise-missile strikes, Saddam pulled these forces back from the cease-fire line and dispersed the Republican Guard.

Technically, the Iraqi attack on Irbil does not constitute a failure of coercion. The US had never tried to deter Saddam from reasserting his control over the north, although Washington was glad to bluff Iraq into believing so. Nevertheless, like the Iraqi effort to withdraw from Kuwait in mid-February 1991, the attack on Irbil was an instance of coercion in Baghdad’s eyes. The Iraqis believed – or at least feared – that Washington intended to defend the Kurdish-held areas from the regime’s forces. All the Kurds believed this, as did the INC membership. And the government suspected it, hence Saddam’s cautious build-up around Irbil, the quick attack in the middle of the night, and then the rapid withdrawal of Iraqi forces back to their start lines the next day.

Saddam’s willingness to proceed with the attack on Irbil offers lessons for coercion – Saddam believed that Washington was trying to deter him, but he launched the attack anyway. For Saddam, the benefits gained by restoring his control and influence in the north, and thus eliminating a threat to regime stability, outweighed the dangers of a US retaliatory strike. The chance to weaken both the INC and the Kurds was irresistible and represented a partial regime victory. Intervention both rewarded a Kurdish ally and split the Kurdish movement in general, perhaps irrevocably. At the same time, Saddam demonstrated to the Kurds, to regional powers and to important domestic groups such as the armed forces that he remains a player everywhere in Iraq, including the north. Crucially, Saddam needed to improve his image with his power base. During summer 1996, he uncovered a serious coup plot among the Republican Guard. Saddam needed to give the military, especially the Guard, a military victory to restore their flagging morale and quell dissension. The attack on Irbil was a perfect way to ensure his sway over his traditional power base.

But while Desert Strike failed to undo the damage Saddam had already inflicted, it exposed potential chinks in the regime’s armour. Desert Strike revealed that Saddam is cautious about his own security. Calling off the attack on Chamchamal robbed Saddam of an even greater victory, and dispersing the Guard was painful – it decreased the Guard’s ability to prevent Army units from marching on Baghdad and reminded Iraq’s élite that they were vulnerable to US air-power and had no real counter other than to hide. Furthermore, the entire operation was conducted cautiously, indicating that Saddam was still wary of a massive US military response such as he had nearly provoked two years earlier when he threatened Kuwait.

Ending Iraqi Defiance, 1997–98
In autumn 1997, Saddam challenged UNSCOM again. He demanded that all Americans be excluded from the inspection teams, then that the teams be
reconfigured to allow for more personnel from France, Russia and other countries more favourably disposed towards Iraq. Baghdad also demanded a series of concessions regarding the inspection of Saddam’s presidential palaces. It insisted that the UN stop flying U-2 spy planes to monitor Iraqi compliance, and threatened to shoot them down. In response to Saddam’s defiance, the US increased its military forces in the area and threatened heavy retaliation if Iraq did not rescind its ultimata. Despite months of frantic negotiations – and at least one false ‘end’ to the crisis when Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov brokered a deal with Saddam that fell apart within six weeks – Saddam would not back down and the US moved closer to using force. At the last minute, Washington authorised UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to negotiate an end to the crisis with Saddam. In late February 1998, Annan struck a deal with Saddam by which the Iraqi leader agreed to end his opposition in return for several concessions, including restrictions on the presidential-palace inspections and the appointment of the Secretary-General’s representative to oversee the inspection of those sites that the Iraqis deemed sensitive.

At present, there is insufficient evidence to draw firm conclusions from the experience of the dual crises in October–November 1997 and January–February 1998, but two facts are clear. First, Saddam ultimately agreed to compromises short of his demands: he was unable to remove the Americans from the inspection teams; he was unable to stop the U-2 missions; and he was unable to force the UNSC to agree to a timetable for lifting sanctions. Second, Saddam instigated these crises aware of the risk that the US might retaliate with a major military operation against Iraq, shown by Baghdad’s efforts to brace the Iraqi populace for US strikes and Saddam’s decision to disperse the Republican Guard.38

Saddam was again partly coerced into some level of compliance by the threat of US military operations. But this is probably only one part of the story. There is no available evidence on how he assessed the results of these confrontations, but Saddam probably believes that he secured a great many useful benefits even if he did not achieve his ultimate aims. He forced the US to compromise on the inspections, brought the UN Secretary-General into the inspection process, gained coverage for his propaganda that the Iraqi people are suffering because of the US, demonstrated deep divisions between the US and its allies, and made clear that Baghdad was instrumental in deciding its own fate. Consequently, his decision was not simply a retreat. He doubtless believed that he had achieved enough from the crisis, and that there was little point in trying to push harder and risk a US military strike.

The Lessons of the Past
The history of efforts to coerce Saddam Hussein’s regime over the past 25 years yields vital lessons for those who want to coerce him in the future. Of the six possible Iraqi centres of gravity, one emerges as paramount in Saddam’s decision-making calculus: the relationship with his domestic power base. Threats to this base translate into threats to his grip on power, and the Iraqi dictator has responded rapidly. The corollary to this has also held true: when-
ever giving in to a coercive threat risked his standing with his power base, Saddam has refused.

It is more difficult to coerce Saddam by putting pressure on other vulnerable points. Sanctions have devastated Iraq’s economy, but they have only moderated Saddam’s behaviour when they threatened his relationship with his power base. Coercive efforts that created discontent among the Iraqi public have only influenced Baghdad’s behaviour when they affected Saddam’s power base too. The regime disregarded popular fears about a confrontation with the US in October 1994, and pulled back from the border only when faced with the prospect of another severe humiliation that would antagonise its power base. Nor has threatening Saddam himself proven effective. Iraq’s decision not to employ WMD during the Gulf War may have been tied to the US threat to hold regime figures personally responsible for casualties from WMD, but the available evidence indicates that fear of nuclear retaliation was an even stronger motivation. Moreover, during the Gulf War, the US did try to kill Saddam – many times – by dropping super-penetrator munitions on his bunkers. Yet this does not seem to have affected his thinking in any way.

Iraq has responded to threats aimed at several other pressure points, but not nearly to the same extent as when the regime’s power-base support is threatened. Clearly, Saddam is sensitive to the prospect of losing his WMD arsenal. If he were not, he would have revealed all to UNSCOM years ago and had the sanctions lifted. But the military value of the weapons themselves does not drive Iraqi actions. Were this the case, Saddam could have surrendered his entire stockpile to UNSCOM inspectors in 1991, received a clean bill of health, and then, as soon as they had moved to long-term monitoring, rebuilt the programme clandestinely. Rather, Saddam’s supporters see the preservation of Iraq’s WMD capability as a critical element of Iraq’s power, and so they judge Saddam’s performance by his ability to retain it.

Threatening Iraq’s conventional military power might force Saddam’s hand, but the evidence on this is not clear. The regime values conventional military might. Most of Iraq’s influence in the region has come from its oil wealth and its ability to project power beyond its borders. In addition, Iraq is surrounded by several larger neighbours who have menaced it at various points in the past. But the evidence from prior coercive efforts offers little conclusive proof that threatening Iraq’s military forces will effectively shape Iraqi behaviour. True, Saddam capitulated to a coalition offensive in February 1991 and a massive build-up in October 1994. But this could be attributed to several causes – Saddam’s fear of losing the regular army, the Republican Guard, his prestige, or some combination of the three. If Saddam feared losing the regular army, this would be a sure sign that he values Iraqi conventional military power enough for it to be a source of vulnerability. Alternatively, the Republican Guard was not only the most potent element of Iraq’s conventional forces, but also a key aspect of Saddam’s internal security apparatus. Thus, losing the Guard was a blow to Saddam’s relationship with his power base and a blow to Iraqi military power. Similarly, Saddam’s prestige is inextricably linked to his ability to keep the support of his loyalists.
To the extent that Saddam has proven susceptible to threats to Iraq’s conventional and unconventional military power, this generally reflects the perceived fragility of his relationship to his power base more than concerns over purely military risks. To a great extent, Saddam’s determination to retain strong conventional and non-conventional military power are driven by his calculation that he must do so to retain his supporters’ loyalty. Saddam’s overriding concern is staying in power, and he has succeeded in doing so for nearly 20 years because he is sensitive to his relationship with his power base – and largely insensitive to other considerations. This relationship is the Iraqi regime’s centre of gravity.

**Iraqi Counter-Coercion**

Properly targeting Iraq’s centre of gravity requires recognising and anticipating how Saddam will attempt to offset coercive pressure. Saddam and his henchmen have never passively taken blows to their centre of gravity; the regime fights back when it is threatened. The historical record highlights five techniques that Saddam employs to counter or mitigate coercive threats: he cracks down on any potential regime opponents; he inflicts whatever pain he can on the nation attempting to coerce him, even if it means increasing Iraq’s own pain; he conceals the amount of damage Iraq is suffering from coercive pressure; when forced to accede to coercion, he treats these events as temporary retreats to be recouped later; and he endures the coercive attempt and outlasts the coercer. These often predictable measures can frustrate attempts to compel Iraqi behaviour. A successful coercive strategy must not only anticipate these responses, but also try to neutralise or exploit them.

- **Increased repression.** Saddam has at his disposal a wide range of resources and institutions to combat threats to regime stability. Because his reign has been marked by frequent internal threats, he and his security chiefs are adept at responding to them. When threatened with an internal revolt, Saddam has killed, tortured, imprisoned and exiled opponents. After defeating the Kurds in 1975, Iraq killed thousands and deported hundreds of thousands in order to weaken the Kurdish community. In response to Iran’s attempt to organise Iraqi Shi’a before and during the Iran–Iraq War, Saddam arrested and executed many family members of Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim, the Chairman of the Iranian-sponsored Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Attempts by Iran to stir up the Kurds during that war met with massive repression, leading to hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilian deaths in the 1988 *Anfal* campaign. Following the abortive Shi’a uprising after *Operation Desert Storm*, Iraq drained the marshes in its southern, Shi’a-populated lands.

- **Tactical retreats.** Saddam is willing to compromise while viewing concessions as temporary. Although he must pay the concession’s short-term political costs, he views the long-term costs as uncertain and perhaps avoidable. When Iranian coercive pressure in 1975 proved too great over the
Shatt al-Arab boundary, Saddam conceded and accepted Iran’s conditions. He did not hesitate, however, to revive the issue in 1980, when the balance of forces appeared to shift back in his favour. Similarly, in 1991 Saddam agreed to abide by UN resolutions as part of the cease-fire arrangements. But he soon began lying to UN inspectors, hiding WMD and trying to avoid compliance.

- Retaliate. Saddam is not afraid to escalate when he fears his rule is threatened and believes his adversary is unwilling or unable to inflict even greater suffering on him. In 1991, Saddam invited Israel to attack him by firing al-Hussein missiles at Tel Aviv, calculating that if he did not employ WMD warheads, Israel would not either, and the benefits of drawing Israel into the war far outweighed the disadvantages. During the Iran–Iraq War, Saddam refrained from attacking Iranian cities, fearing that Iranian retaliation against Iraq’s own cities would foster internal instability. However, these self-imposed constraints vanished in response to major Iranian battlefield successes that threatened Iraq with losing the war. Similarly, Saddam readily employed CW to stop these offensives because it promised to allow him to avert the danger to his grip on power and Tehran had no way to retaliate in kind, at least until late in the war.

- Hide the truth. Saddam can conceal his miscalculations by controlling the information the Iraqi people receive about the country’s situation. An extreme example of this was the regime’s efforts to hide the effects of Iranian missile attacks during the Iran–Iraq War by quickly repairing damage in Baghdad.

- Grin and bear it. Finally, Saddam has demonstrated a willingness to accept greater pain if that allowed him to strike back at the coercing power. In 1988, at the end of the Iran–Iraq War, Saddam accepted Iraqi deaths from Iranian missile attacks as long as he could also attack Tehran and other large Iranian cities. Saddam has taken advantage of US concern for Iraqi civilian casualties – a squeamishness he does not share – in responding to US pressure. In 1997–98, he moved civilians to military targets and weapons depots to deter US air-strikes.

There is one crucial exception to this rule. Saddam frequently boasts of Iraq’s ability to absorb heavy sacrifices to resist coercion, but whenever a would-be coercer has been able to strike successfully at Iraq’s centre of gravity, the regime has proven susceptible to even minor suffering. For example, in the run-up to the 1993, 1994, 1996 and 1998 confrontations with the US, Iraq declared that it was ready to pay a heavy price to get its way. But it always backed down after only a minimal use of American force – or the threat of its use – because, in each of these cases, the US response managed to touch the nerve of Saddam’s relationship with his power base.

In employing these counter-coercive measures, Saddam can adapt to changing circumstances, although it often takes time and repeated poundings.
before he does so. Saddam has gradually learned the weak points of the US-led coalition, and how best to pressure those points without looking like an aggressor. With the memory of Desert Storm fresh in Iraqi minds, Saddam proved easy to coerce, accepting the safe haven over northern Iraq relatively passively. Over the years, however, Saddam returned to his old tricks: threatening his neighbours; defying the UN; and otherwise trying to challenge the US and its allies. Saddam recognises that certain provocations – particularly involving a military build-up – would lead to a massive US response and, possibly, sustained attacks. But he also recognised that other provocations, such as resisting UNSCOM or interfering in northern Iraq with local proxies, proved far harder targets for US coercion. While the US has learned Saddam’s vulnerabilities, the reverse also holds true.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that any attempt to coerce Saddam Hussein must be dynamic. Saddam responds actively to coercive attempts. He has numerous tools that allow him to defeat or diminish such efforts, and he is willing to let Iraq suffer to avoid being coerced. Any would-be coercer must be prepared to exert heavy pressure against Iraq’s centre of gravity and be willing to parry Saddam’s efforts to fight back. In particular, a would-be coercer must devote its full attention to keeping pressure on Saddam or he will exploit inaction and escape the pressure.

A Better Coercive Strategy

Whether the issue is its WMD arsenal, its quest for regional hegemony or its brutal treatment of its citizens, Saddam’s regime will inevitably clash with the US and its allies in the near future. The Iraqis have already set a time for this confrontation: October–November 1998. In addition to preventing Iraq from using its conventional forces to gain regional hegemony, Washington must be able to extract concessions from Saddam whenever he challenges the UN inspections and sanctions regime. If the US is to coerce Saddam in the future, then Washington will need a coherent approach, one that pressures Iraq’s centre of gravity and neutralises Saddam’s counter-strategies. This will require the coordination of several coercive instruments to maintain constant pressure on Saddam while creating the conditions necessary to increase pressure on him in crises. The suggestions below are not alternatives; they are individual components of a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy for coercing Saddam.

- **Keep him contained.** Sanctions should be preserved if possible, because they help to keep Iraq weak and force him to comply with UNSCOM inspections. This weakness limits Saddam’s options and has threatened internal instability when the Iraqi economy was particularly fragile. Sanctions make it difficult for Saddam to employ military or economic levers to achieve his goals, and they make it much harder for his regime either to resist coercive attempts or to develop counters to those efforts. In general, however, sanctions are more useful for keeping Iraq down than for moving it in any particular direction because they do not directly affect Saddam’s relationship with his power base.
The ability and the willingness to concentrate powerful military forces in the region is a necessary element of any US policy towards Iraq. Saddam knows from October 1994 and November 1997 that the US can concentrate formidable military power in the region quickly, but he must be convinced that Washington will do so whenever he tries to break free of his containment. When faced with overwhelming military power, Saddam is willing to moderate his goals. Large US forces will prove an effective deterrent to Saddam, preventing him from achieving his ambition of regional hegemony. Saddam also is reluctant to escalate when he knows that an adversary can match or exceed his power. The ability to concentrate strong US military forces in the Gulf removes one of Saddam’s preferred means of counter-coercion. Moreover, the deployment of US military units in the Gulf on a constant basis has the potential to embarrass the Iraqi dictator. The US military presence on Iraq’s border – and over its skies – demonstrates to Saddam’s power base that the regime’s regional influence is limited and that the country remains vulnerable.

- **Strike back aggressively when Saddam challenges containment.** A strong military presence and sanctions will keep Saddam contained and prevent him from dominating his neighbours through conventional military power, but they are insufficient to coerce him to surrender his WMD stockpile or accept Iraq’s other obligations to the UN. Nor do they alone exert enough pressure to convince Saddam to back down on those occasions when he commits his reputation and instigates a major crisis. To gain the additional leverage needed in these situations, the US must threaten Saddam’s relationship with his key supporters and thus his hold on power.

Prompt, powerful and sustained military strikes against Iraq’s élite military and regime-protection units such as the Iraqi Air Force, the Republican Guard, the Special Republican Guard, the Special Security Organisation and Saddam’s corps of bodyguards offer the best way to strike Iraq’s centre of gravity. If they are suffering under US air-strikes neither they nor their friends and kinsmen among the Sunni (and Shi’a) tribes, the Sunni townsmen and the Ba’ath party élites who comprise Saddam’s power base will appreciate such special treatment. If Saddam is not able to stop this punishment, they will be tempted to move against him. Moreover, any damage done to these units would weaken their ability to prevent other elements from challenging Saddam. For these reasons, Saddam has always regarded threats to these units as particularly painful and has sought to prevent them whenever possible.

More important still, Saddam’s past behaviour has demonstrated extreme sensitivity to such threats. He tends to back down long before the pressure exerted begins to cause dissension among his power base. Although a risk-taker by nature, Saddam does not gamble with threats to his support from those elements of Iraqi society that keep him in power.

A policy of targeting Iraq’s élite military forces in crises would also make it difficult for Baghdad to use its accustomed methods of countering coercive threats. Saddam could not repress the discontented elements as they would be
the very people that he counts on to do the repressing. Nor could he hide from them the amount of pain they were suffering. Nor is there a comparable set of targets on the US side against which he could strike back, even if he had the capability to do so.

One potential counter Saddam could employ would be to absorb the discomfort of US military operations. This is the final reason why strikes must be directed against Saddam’s elite military and regime-control forces. Saddam is not willing to tolerate damage to these forces because they play such a crucial role in his control over Iraq; they are the physical embodiment of Iraq’s centre of gravity. Thus the US must find the political will to conduct sustained military operations to ensure that it can inflict more pain on Saddam than he is willing to absorb.43

- **Maintain active pressure on Baghdad by supporting the Iraqi opposition.** A large military presence and sanctions will hold Iraq down, and threats of well-orchestrated military strikes will exploit Saddam’s fears, but further steps are also necessary. The US should create a viable insurgency in Iraq to enhance Saddam’s susceptibility to coercive threats.44 Such an insurgency will place broader regime concerns in jeopardy. The insurgency does not have to be victorious to place pressure on Saddam, but it must be credible.45

Building a viable insurgency will not be easy given the current state of the Iraqi opposition and the ambivalence of many key regional states. Nevertheless, there are numerous steps the US could take to bolster the opposition and give them some military capability. Making a commitment to turn the opposition into a credible insurgency would provide an important lift to its status inside Iraq. In addition, the US could arm and train opposition personnel and provide them with intelligence. Washington could help the insurgency by offering rewards to Iraqi defectors, securing international diplomatic support, and finding them a safe haven in a neighbouring state. Seducing the regime’s supporters to defect to the opposition would both weaken the Iraqi Armed Forces and strengthen opposition cadres. Perhaps more importantly, the very fact that rewards for defection exist would increase Saddam’s paranoia about the armed forces.

Like military strikes against elite Iraqi military units, supporting an insurgency against Baghdad would enable the US to undermine Saddam’s centre of gravity. First, as the Iranian and US-backed Kurdish insurgency of the mid-1970s showed, a strong opposition can threaten Saddam’s relationship with his power base. Today, Saddam’s loyalists are growing weary of the sanctions, weapons inspections, no-fly zones and other forms of pressure that the US has been able to employ since the Gulf War ended. This has been the primary – albeit not the only – impetus behind Saddam’s increasingly frequent challenges to the sanctions and inspections. These loyalists continue to support Saddam largely because they believe his strategy of defiance will work, and that Iraq will be relieved of these various burdens in the near future. An insurgency strongly backed by the US would demonstrate to Saddam’s
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supporters that this is not the case. Even if Saddam manages to have the inspections ended and sanctions lifted, the US will continue to hound Baghdad. Second, a strong insurgency will contest Baghdad’s control over all Iraqi territory and will remind the Iraqi people that Saddam’s regime is illegitimate and an alternative does exist. Saddam will find this enraging and humiliating, and his power base will see it as a further sign of his ineptitude.

Supporting an insurgency will also limit Saddam’s ability to employ his usual counter-moves. Saddam cannot retaliate in kind by supporting an insurgency against the US (it seems unlikely that the Michigan militias would accept support from Baghdad), and would have great difficulty doing so against any of his neighbours. Saddam would undoubtedly try to play down the insurgency in his propaganda, but if the insurgency made it unsafe for Iraqi forces to travel in certain parts of Iraq – as happened in southern Iraq for several years after the 1991 Gulf War because of the efforts of the Shi’a insurgents – it would be impossible to keep this secret. One last advantage of supporting an insurgency is that it would allow Washington to retain an important means of keeping the initiative in the confrontation with Saddam, keeping him on the defensive and making it harder for him to organise counter-moves.

Expectations for the overall success of an insurgency would have to be modest. An insurgency would put pressure on Iraq, but probably could not effect major changes in Iraqi behaviour. First, the amount of pressure an insurgency could place on Saddam’s centre of gravity would be limited. There is no evidence that Saddam’s power base has given up its belief that it must support Saddam against the opposition because he is the only man who can keep Iraq unified and protect their privileged position – one of the keys to Saddam’s ability to defeat various insurgencies in 1991–96. Moreover, complete sovereignty over Iraqi territory remains only a secondary goal of the power base at present, behind retaining Iraq’s WMD capability and seeing sanctions lifted. Second, an insurgency could not prevent Saddam from employing some of his other counter-strategies. In particular, Saddam would probably crack down against whichever groups within Iraq were supporting the opposition. He has demonstrated a willingness to engage in wholesale slaughter to ensure that he kills his opponents – even if it means killing innocents as well. No doubt he would try to wait for the US to crack first, believing that Washington would soon tire of the contest. For all of these reasons, an insurgency would be an important source of general pressure on Saddam, but could not be counted on to force his hand in a crisis.

Countering Saddam’s Counter-moves

When implementing this three-point strategy, the US must not let Saddam employ his usual counter-strategies. To undermine Saddam’s cult of personality and control over the flow of information, Washington should increase its radio and television transmissions to Iraq and jam those of the government. Even if this does little to convince Saddam’s supporters, it will affect Saddam
himself, as he clearly sees his control over information as necessary to his domination of Iraq. When possible, the US should also secure a haven for any refugees in order to reduce the humanitarian cost of Saddam’s counter-insurgency operations. To prevent Saddam from exploiting his own people’s suffering, Washington must prepare its allies and the US public for the possibility of innocent deaths – a sad but inevitable part of any attempt to contain the Iraqi dictator. Failure to do so will make his propaganda campaign even more effective. Completely offsetting Iraqi countermeasures is not possible, but the US can minimise their impact.

The US and its allies have more influence than they realise in Iraq. Even apparently intractable problems such as ensuring Baghdad’s compliance with UNSCOM can be solved by properly targeting Saddam’s relationship with his power base. If the US and its allies are willing to adopt a comprehensive policy that combines aggressive containment, decisive military action, support for the Iraqi opposition and measures to neutralise Saddam’s well-refined countermeasures, it can successfully coerce Saddam the next time he defies the world.

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Notes
1 In this essay, we define coercion as the use of threatened or limited force to persuade an adversary to do what it would not otherwise do. This definition includes what academics would characterise as both ‘deterrence’ and ‘compellence’.
3 As long as Prussia had its army it would continue fighting, no matter what else it lost, as the course of the Seven Years War of 1756–63 proved. Karl von Clausewitz, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 595–97.
4 By Clausewitz’s definition, a state only has one centre of gravity. However, as his Prussian example makes clear, Prussia had at least two centres of gravity – the Prussian Army and the Soldier-King himself. Had it been deprived of either, Prussian resistance would have collapsed. Ibid., pp. 595–97.
The Republican Guard is a component of two different potential centres of gravity: Iraq’s conventional military power; and Saddam’s power base. The Guard is the most competent conventional military formation in Iraq and undertakes major Iraqi operations. It also plays a key role in regime security: it is generally more loyal to Saddam than the Iraqi Army, and so is the force Saddam employs to defend his regime against an Army coup.


Ibid., p. 233.

There is a consensus among Iraq experts that Saddam saw the 1975 Algiers Accord as a temporary setback. He accepted it because of his weakness, but always intended to reverse it when he had the opportunity – which came in 1980. Ibid., p. 29; and Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, p. 23.

Until the Second Battle of al-Basrah in early 1987, Iraq constantly fretted that Iran would eventually break through its lines and destroy the Iraqi Army.

See Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran–Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 205–6. For the best overview of the ‘War of the Cities’, see Thomas L. McNaugher, ‘Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran–Iraq War’, *International Security*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 5–34. The decisive exception was in 1988, however, when Iraq learned to modify the range of its Scud missiles to be able to hit Tehran itself. Before then, Iran had two huge advantages in these battles: Iranian warplanes like the F-4 Phantom could haul much heavier bomb loads much longer distances than Iraqi aircraft; and Iraq’s most important cities were all within a few hundred kilometres of the Iranian border, putting them in range of Iran’s Scud missiles, while Tehran and many other major Iranian cities were too far to be hit by Iraq’s own Scuds. Consequently, when Iraq modified its Scuds to be able to hit Iran’s major cities and fired 200 of them, the Iranians panicked.


McCarthy and Tucker, ‘Saddam’s Toxic Arsenal’, p. 11.


would like to thank Steve Hosmer for bringing our attention to these sources.


This is a particularly persuasive argument because by mid-February, the Iraqi Army formations along the front lines were melting away under the relentless coalition bombardment, and many of the Army’s heavy divisions were likewise decimated and demoralised. However, the Republican Guard was in reasonably good shape. Thus, one could argue that Saddam may have concluded that the Army was largely obliterated already, and if he were to order a retreat only to have the coalition launch its ground offensive, it was the Republican Guard that he really stood to lose.


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31 Ibid., pp. 61–78.
41 On 17 June 1998, Iraqi Ambassador to the UN Nizar Hamdun told reporters that, ‘there are two things that can happen. Either the sanctions will be lifted as soon as possible or, by October or November, if the sanctions are not lifted, there will be a crisis. This will be the last crisis’. See Bernie Woodall, ‘Iraq to Force “Last Crisis” if Sanctions Remain’, *Reuters Financial Report*, 17 June 1998.
43 US military strikes should also try to embarrass Saddam and reduce his stature as a leader. However, even damaging precision attacks often do little visible destruction, thus minimising their psychological impact. Destroying Saddam’s large palaces or other public symbols could also be a valuable, secondary set of targets. Such a strike would probably be effective because it would play to Saddam’s fears. His reputation would be at risk, which in turn would reduce the support he has among his power base and make him more vulnerable to a coup or insurrection.
45 For one long-term plan based on creating an insurgency and overthrowing Saddam, see Zalmay M. Khalilzad and Paul Wolfowitz, ‘Overthrow Him’, *The Weekly Standard*, 1 December 1997. These authors note that
a successful insurgency would require a base, ideally in Turkey, and would require warring Kurdish factions to work together. However, there are many disadvantages to creating an insurgency that will overthrow Saddam – and such a policy’s requirements are considerable. For an assessment of this approach, see Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, ‘Annex: Overthrowing Saddam’, in Clawson (ed.), *Iraq Strategy Review*. 