Proceed with Caution: U.S. Support for the Iraqi Opposition

After eight years of containment, the United States has a new Iraq policy. According to its rhetoric at least, the Clinton administration is now committed to working with the Iraqi opposition to topple the regime in Baghdad, even as it continues to contain Iraq. In November 1998, President Bill Clinton embraced the opposition, promising to work for "a new government" in Baghdad. National Security Adviser Samuel ("Sandy") Berger echoed the president, saying that the administration seeks to "strengthen the Iraqi opposition" because containment might not be sustainable and because Saddam Hussein's continuation in power is detrimental to U.S. interests. To this end, the administration designated groups eligible to receive U.S. assistance and appointed a special representative for transition in Iraq, Frank Ricciardone, to coordinate U.S. assistance to the various Iraqi opposition groups.

The implications of this shift to "containment plus regime change" have not received sufficient scrutiny. Containment and regime change policies are not always complementary, and at times they pose conflicting demands. How the Iraqi opposition fares may hamper U.S. diplomatic efforts to reinforce containment and will affect the demands placed on U.S. military forces. In addition, the use of the opposition has implications for the future of Iraq that policymakers should weigh as they consider their options today. If the administration is not careful, American support for the opposition will undermine the containment of Iraq, place tremendous demands on U.S. military forces, and strengthen Saddam Hussein's influence at home and in the region.

Daniel Byman is a policy analyst at the RAND Corporation in Washington, D.C. The author would like to thank Michael Eisenstadt, Andrew Parasiliti, Abram Shulsky, and Judith Yaphe for their comments on previous versions of this work. These individuals do not necessarily share the author's perspective or conclusions.

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Neither the Clinton administration nor the Iraqi opposition groups are clear about the road ahead. Support for the opposition, in recent months at least, has followed a political track in the United States, responding to congressional criticism and other “inside the Beltway” concerns rather than conditions in Iraq. This track is distinct from other elements of U.S. policy in the region, which are more directly tied to developments in the region, creating complications when the two inevitably cross. The opposition groups, for their part, have not advanced a serious plan for their activities; instead, they have made grandiose claims about their capabilities and influence while predicting Saddam Hussein’s imminent downfall. They ignore the realities of the U.S. political position in the region and in the world at large. The opposition failure to unify also has frustrated plans to integrate its activities into overall Iraq policy. As a result of this neglect, there is little understanding of how support for the opposition will affect U.S. policy in the region and long-term U.S. objectives.

This essay explores the implications of a serious administration “rollback” campaign to help the Iraqi opposition topple Saddam Hussein’s regime. A “rollback” campaign is one where the administration would aggressively support the opposition, providing them with considerable funding and focusing their efforts on overthrowing Saddam. Under “rollback,” the primary tool of U.S. policy toward Iraq would be the opposition; containment would play a secondary, and supporting role. A serious rollback effort would involve arming, funding, and training the Iraqi opposition and championing the opposition’s cause along with American allies in the world and the region. In my opinion, such a “rollback” strategy is misguided because it is difficult to implement and undermines containment. A policy that provides limited support to the opposition would be more sensible. In any event, as the United States has decided to elevate the importance of the opposition in its overall Iraq policy, we should recognize the potential pitfalls in order to understand how to avoid them or reduce their impact.²

Potential Advantages of Opposition Support

So far, the Clinton administration appears to be moving cautiously with regard to the opposition. The 1998 Iraq Liberation Act authorizes the administration to transfer $97 million in military equipment to several opposition groups and to assist Iraqi opposition radio and television broadcasts. In addition to this modest aid, the administration is also trying to help the opposition better organize itself. The administration has not, however, committed U.S. military forces to supporting the opposition’s cause, either for training or to assist opposition military efforts.
Providing such limited support to the Iraqi opposition offers several advantages to the United States, particularly if the opposition is used to augment containment. Most importantly, a viable opposition keeps Saddam Hussein focused at home, particularly if opposition forces are active inside Iraq’s borders. Although the Iraqi president is often reckless in his foreign policy, he takes few chances when it comes to domestic stability. A strong opposition will force him to devote his attention to ensuring that his key supporters remain loyal, making it less likely that he will engage in high-risk adventures abroad. He will also have to focus much of his military machine on maintaining peace at home. A strong opposition thus augments containment, helping keep Iraq weak and the Iraqi dictator “in the box.”

The United States also has humanitarian and moral reasons to support the opposition. As many opposition advocates argue, the mere presence of an opposition offers hope for the Iraqi people. The existence of an alternative to Saddam Hussein, particularly one recognized by major powers and representing Iraq’s leading communities, delegitimizes Saddam Hussein’s government. The United States also owes a debt to the Iraqi people. The United States has supported various opposition groups since 1991 (and, earlier, at times supported the Kurds), encouraging them to overthrow the Iraqi president and otherwise committing U.S. prestige and honor to the opposition cause. Abandoning those who followed the U.S. lead to a gruesome fate at the hands of Saddam Hussein’s security forces would be unconscionable, particularly after Clinton’s recent promises of support.

A viable opposition also gives the Clinton administration (or any successor) an option on the shelf should circumstances change in Iraq. As in many Middle Eastern countries, politics in Iraq can be volatile. Saddam Hussein has ruled securely since the Ba’th took power in 1968, but he has also faced numerous assassination and coup attempts. Although unlikely, one lucky bullet could change Iraqi politics overnight. In such circumstances, a strong opposition with a presence in Iraq gives the United States an option for influencing Iraqi politics and could help the people of Iraq establish a more democratic, more representative government.

If the Clinton administration is creative and ambitious, it can also use its support for the Iraqi opposition to hasten the thaw in relations with Iran. Since the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997, some elements among Iran’s leadership have shown themselves to be receptive to
closer ties to Washington. Although the clerical regime and the United States remain divided on many important issues, both share an abiding hatred of Saddam Hussein. Like Washington, Tehran has tried to work with Iraqi insurgents (primarily Shi'a, but also Kurdish) to weaken Saddam and to overthrow his regime. Such a shared interest could be the seed out of which closer relations in general grow. (Of course, although Washington and Tehran agree that Saddam Hussein must go, they disagree strongly on the ideal nature of a successor regime, and the clerical regime does not want any successor to Saddam to be close to Washington.)

In short, even though supporting a rollback of Saddam Hussein's regime is misguided, supporting the opposition in a more cautious manner is not. The opposition can play a constructive role in containment and further a variety of U.S. humanitarian and strategic interests in the region. The most important question to answer now is how to best avoid the likely problems that will arise as the opposition becomes an important, and perhaps leading, instrument of U.S. policy.

**Current Fault Lines**

Although supporting the Iraqi opposition has many advantages, relying on it more heavily—even if only in a limited way—is likely to alienate other major powers and complicate U.S. cooperation with friends in the region. Because of the opposition's unpopularity with U.S. friends and allies, administration reliance on the opposition could undermine containment and, if the administration is not careful, may even make it more difficult to carry out a coup.

**A Threat to Containment**

The Iraqi opposition has few, if any, other supporters among the world's major powers. Although official European reaction has been muted, European leaders have unofficially scorned U.S. commitments to support the opposition and questioned the opposition plan's to topple Saddam with an army of exiles and defectors. Even Great Britain, perhaps the most steadfast U.S. ally in its Middle East policy, has publicly refused to follow the U.S. lead and provide military aid to the opposition. Other major powers, such as Russia and China, will oppose an opposition plan: Russia and China are highly sensitive to the dominant U.S. position in the world today and will resist an overt U.S. plan to change the government of an important regional power, even if it is one as loathsome as Saddam Hussein's.

Regional allies may also turn against U.S. policy if American backing of the Iraqi opposition is not handled carefully. Although Kuwait is likely to
stand by the United States, both Turkey and Saudi Arabia are, at best, ambivalent about the Iraqi opposition. Ankara, of course, is suspicious of any plan that might increase Kurdish autonomy or otherwise make its own Kurdish population more restive. Saudi Arabia also is hesitant, due to fears of Shi’a domination and skepticism that the opposition campaign is serious.

This lack of support from other major powers and U.S. friends in the region may further undermine containment, thus making the Iraqi opposition’s endeavors far more difficult. Defenders of the opposition recognize that containment is essential: it will take time for the Iraqi opposition to develop its strength, and containment will help keep Saddam Hussein weak in the interim.

In essence, containment has five pillars: comprehensive economic sanctions, intrusive United Nations (UN) weapon inspections, diplomatic isolation, restrictions on Iraq’s ability to deploy its forces, and military strikes to keep Saddam Hussein in check. If Washington pursues a plan to aggressively use the Iraqi opposition to try to topple the current regime, however, it will face tremendous criticism from its allies. France and Russia, eager for a pretext to offset American “hegemony” and to gain economic favors from Baghdad, are likely to use the switch to rollback as justification for opposing core elements of containment, including weapon inspections, diplomatic isolation, and comprehensive economic sanctions. As these elements collapsed, Saddam Hussein’s prestige and Iraq’s power would increase.¹

Regional allies’ concerns are not likely to undermine economic sanctions or weapon inspections, but they may hinder U.S. efforts to restrict Iraqi forces and to strike Iraq itself. The “no-fly” and “no-drive” zones that the United States enforces in Iraq depend on military bases in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. When Washington ratchets up the pressure, as it has in the aftermath of the Operation Desert Fox bombings, Saudi Arabia and Turkey become even more important to the U.S. military effort. If aggressively backing the opposition diminishes regional support for such military efforts, the whole containment policy suffers.

This concern for containment should not be overstated, however, as containment is already tottering. Two pillars of containment—economic sanctions and intrusive UN weapon inspections—have steadily eroded in recent years. Indeed, UN weapon inspectors have not conducted surprise, intrusive inspections for over a year now, and the international effort to eliminate

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Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs through the UN appears to be over. In part because of the low price of oil, the ceilings on Iraqi oil sales now are beyond Iraq's reach. Thus, the UN-imposed dollar limits to Iraqi purchases mean little (although the restrictions on Saddam Hussein's control over the money that Iraq receives remain important). Moreover, Russia, France, and China have criticized sanctions heavily, and they are not popular with regional allies. Although support for the Iraqi opposition may lead U.S. allies and other major powers to openly break with containment, clearly the foundation for it is already cracked.

Containment's demise also should not be equated with a worldwide embrace of Iraq. Even France and Russia would be reluctant to risk U.S. wrath by selling Baghdad items related to WMD—or even to major conventional military systems. Thus, while Iraq's power will increase if containment collapses, Saddam Hussein will hardly have a free hand. It will be easier, however, for him to smuggle or steal such systems and to restore much of the core of his military forces if sanctions further erode.

**Hindering a Coup**

In addition to placing a burden on containment, plans to build an Iraqi insurgency may interfere with attempts to carry out a coup, and vice versa. Although the two options are often lumped together—as both rely, to a degree, on covert action—they are diametrically opposed in their essence. A coup will depend on a small, secretive group of people close to Saddam Hussein (military leaders, security forces, Sunni tribal elites, or Ba'ath party officials) who move stealthily to depose the Iraqi leader and seize power for themselves. An insurgency, on the other hand, relies on the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam Hussein. The numbers involved may be in the tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands. The Afghanistan mujahedin, the supporters of Laurent Kabila in the Republic of the Congo, and the Viet Cong all mobilized tens of thousands of fighters and even more sympathizers who actively abetted their movements. Such an effort is open and usually involves bitter, and declared, enemies of the existing leadership. Whereas a coup is sudden, an insurgency builds over time and often takes years, or even decades, to accomplish its goal.

The United States has long sought a coup in Iraq, and even today this remains the preferred Iraqi outcome in American eyes. Since the end of Op-
eration Desert Storm, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has tried to encourage Iraqi military officials and other leaders to depose Saddam Hussein. U.S. officials have even justified the long bombing campaign that followed Operation Desert Fox as a way of keeping Saddam Hussein off balance, lowering the morale of Iraqi troops, and hindering Iraqi communications—all of which, they claim, will foster a coup. Ricciardone, despite being the coordinator of Iraqi opposition groups, expects a sudden demise for the Iraqi regime.

Supporting the opposition, however, may make a coup more difficult to engineer. Fear of losing power to an insurgency can unite a regime’s elites—the most likely candidates to carry out a coup—behind the existing leadership. Although the elites may want power for themselves, they recognize that an insurgency takeover would be the worst of all worlds. Successful insurgents seldom forgive and forget. Rather, they purge the former elites, often taking vengeance on their families and excluding that entire sector from power. The Ba’ath are responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis: some settling of scores can be expected and, certainly, is feared by the regime’s elites. U.S. assurances to the contrary are likely to ring hollow, particularly as U.S. officials regularly denounce the Iraqi regime for its atrocities. It is possible, however, that fear of an insurgency may lead coup plotters to turn on Saddam to avoid the worst. Pitching the U.S. message to encourage this will become more difficult the more the United States openly associates its policy with an opposition victory. If coup plotters believe Washington is committed to purging the old order, they are more likely to side with Saddam.

Saddam Hussein capitalizes on these fears. In the past, he has played on elites’ concerns over Iraq’s dismemberment and the specter of Shi’a dominance to shore up allegiance among his core supporters. A major U.S. campaign on behalf of the Iraqi opposition, which for now is dominated by Kurds and Shi’a, would play into his hands. Saddam has also implicated many security and armed forces leaders in atrocities and repression. Any replacement is likely to be almost as bloodstained as Saddam himself.

Similarly, efforts to foment a coup would hinder an effective insurgency. To encourage a coup, Washington must reassure those who would carry it out that their place in Iraq will be secure. But sending the message that the United States seeks to work with the existing power structure in Iraq while mounting a public campaign to replace that power structure does not bode well for either alternative. A message of support to the Sunni elite who surround Saddam Hussein would not encourage Shi’a, Kurds, and non-elite Sunnis to risk life and limb (and those of their families) to oust Saddam Hussein.
Potential Hazards Ahead

When thinking about whether and how to support the Iraqi opposition, the United States also needs to consider its obligations as this strategy develops. Whether the Iraqi opposition never gets off the ground, succeeds in a limited fashion, or makes real progress, each possibility poses a different—and demanding—challenge for the Clinton administration and for U.S. policy in general.

If the opposition campaign goes nowhere, the administration is back at square one—or, perhaps, even further behind than when it started. Congressional and other critics will continue to attack the administration on its Iraq policy. Already, the administration is under fire for not providing sufficient support to the opposition. The Iraq Liberation Act authorizes the administration to transfer military equipment to support the opposition; so far, no transfer has taken place. And indeed, by standards of past insurgencies, the amount of support provided—less than $100 million in assistance—has been limited. In contrast, the U.S. government spent billions for the Afghan mujahedin and hundreds of millions on behalf of the Nicaraguan contras.

An opposition failure to make any headway also will cause diplomatic problems (as I have described earlier) without any obvious payoff, particularly if the Clinton administration continues to embrace the opposition rhetorically. Saddam Hussein can crow to his supporters that he defeated the American puppets, a spin that U.S. rhetoric lauding the opposition will support. U.S. credibility in the region will suffer a further blow, as allies will question the wisdom of policymaking in Washington.

Limited success by the Iraqi opposition would pose a real challenge for Saddam Hussein—but it, too, would create potential problems for Washington. If the opposition took and held some territory in Iraq and presented a credible united front, it would force Saddam Hussein to devote his attention to keeping the peace at home and would discredit him somewhat among his core supporters over time. Yet, as noted previously, limited opposition success might actually unify the Iraqi leader’s core supporters. If he could present himself as the guardian of Iraq’s integrity and Sunni hegemony, his hold over Iraq’s Arab nationalist elite might become tighter.

Limited opposition success might also complicate diplomacy among regional allies of the United States. On the positive side of the ledger, regional allies (and perhaps even other major powers) might warm to the idea of supporting the Iraqi opposition if it could score some victories. However, U.S. allies also might seek more control over the opposition if it began to score successes. It is one thing for the Saudis and Turks to support an opposition that is, at most, a nuisance to Saddam Hussein; it is quite another for them
to work with a more serious opposition that is making progress on the
ground. Both countries might seek to influence opposition politics in ways
the United States opposes, such as supporting Sunni strongmen who ex-
clude minorities or trying to put their own quislings in power.

The United States might become responsible for the fate of the Iraqi op-
position, especially in the eyes of the Iraqi people and neighboring states. If
the opposition came into jeopardy after even a few symbolic successes on
the ground, the United States would find it hard to stand on the sidelines
again as it did in 1996, when Saddam Hussein overran the Iraqi National Con-
gress and Kurdish forces. Unlike its past rhetoric, the current U.S. rhetoric in sup-
port of the opposition is far less equivocal, and the will of the U.S. Congress appears
clear. But is the administration prepared to defend the opposition against Saddam
Hussein's inevitable counter-strikes? The force structure required for that is consid-
erable. Washington would have to aug-
ment its already substantial air presence in
the region and prepare for rapid deployment anytime Saddam Hussein con-
centrated his forces. The United States finds itself in an unpleasant di-
lemma defending an opposition that can harass Saddam Hussein, but that
has little prospect of defeating him outright.

Of course, greater success by the Iraqi opposition would be desirable for
the United States—but even this possibility raises serious questions that
policymakers must consider. Of paramount importance here are the com-
position of the opposition and the likely government it would install. Because
of the opposition's close identification with the United States, the American
people and their representatives would seek an opposition that was demo-
cratic and that respected minority rights.

Washington might also have to increase its political involvement at this
point to ensure that the opposition remained on course. If Saddam Hussein
teeters, infighting among any likely opposition coalition is likely to increase.
In the past, opposition forces—particularly Kurdish groups—have fought
each other, even allying themselves with the regime to gain momentary ad-

cantage. Because the Iraqi opposition lacks a well-accepted predominant
leader or institution to guide it, rivalry over the question of who will suc-
ceed Saddam Hussein would grow after opposition victories. As in Afghani-
stan, ethnic, tribal, religious, and regional differences might be kept in
check against a common enemy, but then explode as victory neared.

Although Saddam is
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domestic stability.
The United States must also be prepared for the use of biological and chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein. Although eight years of containment and weapon inspections have diminished Iraq's chemical and biological arsenal, Saddam Hussein still may have some weapons in reserve. Conventional wisdom holds that he did not use these weapons during the Gulf War largely because U.S. policymakers deterred him and because he was holding them in reserve in case the coalition pushed his back to the wall. But clearly an opposition victory would do just that: it would put Saddam Hussein in a “use it or lose it” situation where there is no incentive for restraint. Defending against such weapons is a challenge for the most trained militaries, and it is not clear how the lightly armed opposition would fare in such a situation. Casualties could be heavy, and Saddam Hussein’s loyalists might also employ the weapons in Shi’a and Kurdish areas to foster mayhem. Thus, U.S. forces should be prepared both for the military challenge of defending the opposition’s forces against these weapons and for the management of any disaster that would result should Saddam Hussein use these weapons in civilian areas.

**Alternative Scenarios**

In addition to preparing for different levels of success by the Iraqi opposition, the United States must also anticipate three possible events that would dramatically reshape Iraq: a coup, Shi’a rule, or the dissolution of the Iraqi state. The nature of the opposition campaign affects the nature and likelihood of each of these high-impact events. Thus, as plans for integrating the opposition into overall strategy are drawn up, policymakers must consider today what sort of Iraq they seek in the future.

**After a Coup**

Although U.S. policymakers would view almost any coup with favor, they must also make clear (at least to themselves) what kind of Iraqi government the United States can live with and what kind it can’t. Any successor to Saddam Hussein must meet the following criteria for the United States to engage him:

- First, the new government must abandon Iraq’s WMD programs and eschew terrorism.
- Second, the new regime must tacitly respect existing red lines near the Kuwaiti and Saudi borders. The United States and its allies must be confident that the successor government will not pursue Saddam Hussein’s dream of influence by conquest. Given that previous Iraqi rulers have laid
claim to Kuwait, it is not unreasonable to assume that a future one will, too.

- Third, the successor regime must not champion a campaign against U.S. regional allies. The stability of the Persian Gulf region is vital, and Turkey has emerged as one of the United States' most important allies in the post–Cold War world. No Iraqi regime should support Kurdish insurgents in Turkey or heap criticism on U.S. allies in the Arab world.

- Fourth and finally, the regime must offer a modicum of respect for the Kurds, Shi'a, and other groups that the United States will have aided as part of the pro-opposition strategy. Opposition forces are likely to want some degree of power for themselves: U.S. policymakers must be prepared to balance these groups' needs and U.S. interests by pressuring the new regime to incorporate opposition leaders into the national power structure. For future credibility, and for moral reasons, Washington must not be seen as abandoning those it once championed. Moreover, the American people will demand a better government in Iraq as partial recompense for the tremendous U.S. involvement and sacrifice in the region in recent years.

If the new Iraqi leader is as bad as Saddam Hussein—which is unlikely, but possible, as his sons Uday and Qusay seem to share many of his worst characteristics and most regime elites share Saddam's ruthlessness—the United States should continue working with the Iraqi opposition while trying to foster yet another coup.

**Shi'a Domination**

In addition to preparing for a coup, the United States also must recognize the possibility that Iraq would be dominated by the Shi'a in the future—and recognize that support for the opposition strengthens this possibility. If the insurgency does well and gains many followers, most of them are likely to be Shi'a, for an obvious reason: the majority of Iraq's population is Shi'a. Also, many of the Iraqi army's rank-and-file are Shi'a, and getting them to defect would be a major goal of the opposition strategy.

Such a shift might alarm U.S. allies in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, although Riyadh might welcome a Shi'a-led Iraq if the alternative was a continuation of Saddam Hussein's rule. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have long feared Iran's revolutionary government, seeing it as seeking to extend its influence over the region, particularly in Shi'a-populated areas such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Moreover, the puritanical strain of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia is hostile to Shi'ism in general. Although the Al Saud are highly pragmatic in their foreign policy, they may face domestic opposition to a Shi'a-led Iraq.

A Shi'a-led Iraq, however, would not be an Iranian pawn. Indeed, rivalry between the two states is likely to continue. Iraqi Shi'a fought bitterly
against the Iranian regime during the Iran-Iraq war; it would be a mistake to expect them to blindly follow Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomenei’s lesser successors. Ethnic divisions between Iraqi Arabs and Persians, and Iran’s economic problems, also diminish Iraqi Shi’a ardor for Tehran’s leadership. In fact, Iraq would probably become a rival for the mantle of Shi’a leadership, further reducing Iran’s influence among its co-religionists.

A Shi’a-led Iraq has long been a concern in Washington, but such fears are overstated. Iran is not likely to dominate a Shi’a-led Iraq, and there is little reason to think it would be hostile to the United States or to U.S. allies. Because Shi’a represent the majority of Iraq’s people, a Shi’a-led Iraq also would be a step toward more representative government.

Descent into Chaos

A third possibility that deserves scrutiny is the potential collapse of Iraq. Preventing the collapse of the Iraqi state has long been a major goal of U.S. policy, but supporting the opposition could make it more likely. If the opposition does indeed undermine Saddam Hussein’s rule, it will allow Iraq’s tribal confederations, religious communities, and ethnic groups to gain greater autonomy. There is little love lost among these groups. Iraqi national identity is weak in comparison to religious or tribal identity, and the collapse of the center could lead things to fall apart. Moreover, Saddam Hussein has devastated Iraqi civil society, destroying any independent organization and rending ties among citizens. Also, flooding Iraq with weapons would make it harder for any central government to assume control. And, as noted previously, opposition groups might cooperate long enough to depose Saddam Hussein, then turn on one another. If Saddam Hussein falls, as General Anthony Zinni, commander of the U.S. Central Command, has testified, dozens of opposition groups might compete for power, destabilizing Iraq.

The descent of Iraq into chaos could worsen the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. There is no guarantee that Iraq would collapse into neat Kurdish, Shi’a, and Sunni states—and even if it did, they might fight over territories where communities mixed or where there were significant oil reserves. In Afghanistan, Liberia, Somalia, and elsewhere, the collapse of the central government has made disease, warfare, and banditry far more prevalent. The collapse of Iraq could also spread unrest throughout the region, unleashing sectarian and ethnic struggles in Iran and Turkey. Guns and armed
fighters might flow across the already porous borders, strengthening resistance groups in Iran and Turkey.

If the United States actively supports the Iraqi opposition, it may feel compelled to help the opposition consolidate power. It is hardly in the American spirit to devote considerable U.S. resources (and perhaps lives) to help a group gain power, then to abandon it when a targeted individual is gone. Continued support could require U.S. assistance to opposition military forces and to fledgling democratic institutions. If unrest became widespread, U.S. forces might be needed to ensure the flow of humanitarian relief, secure WMD assets, separate warring parties, and fight banditry.

**Think Before Acting**

The manner in which we support the opposition should not be taken lightly. An aggressive and extensive campaign on behalf of the opposition will complicate U.S. diplomacy with other major powers and with U.S. allies in the region. Failures of the Iraqi opposition will make demands on U.S. diplomacy—and even successes will pose heavy burdens on U.S. forces. In addition, support for the opposition will color how the United States reacts to such possibilities as a coup against Saddam Hussein, a Shi'a-dominated government, or the collapse of Iraq. As the United States forms its plans for working with the Iraqi opposition, it can take several measures to help exploit the opportunities and minimize the challenges of this policy.

The first and most important step is to gain the support of U.S. allies in the region, including their backing for the opposition as the U.S. plan develops. The United States should carefully coordinate its policy with Ankara, making it clear that Turkey will call many of the shots, particularly regarding any support received by Iraqi Kurds. Supporting the opposition only to lose Turkish support would be a disaster for the United States: Turkey is vital to the United States for a host of military and political reasons; Iraq is only one of those reasons. Riyadh should be another stop. The Clinton administration must outline what would and wouldn't be acceptable for a new government in Baghdad, and it must gain Saudi support in anticipation of a Shi'a-dominated Iraq. Without the support, or at least acquiescence, of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi opposition effort will fail, and containment of Iraq will collapse.

Washington should also consider using its support for the Iraqi opposition to woo Iran. Covert talks with Iranian officials on how to strengthen the Iraqi opposition should be held as an initial move. Washington should also make it clear that it will accept a Shi'a Iraq (but not an Iranian puppet) if that is the result of the opposition campaign.
In planning an Iraqi opposition campaign, Washington must also recognize that an ideal opposition is unattainable. Iraq’s best rulers in the past were autocratic monarchs. Expecting to find, and support, a major democratic movement there is optimistic, to say the least. Moreover, aggressive demands for democracy discourage coup plotters, who in general seek power for themselves, not a government by, for, and of Iraqi people. But that doesn’t mean U.S. ideals must be completely abandoned. Supporting the more democratic elements within a coalition, and making it clear to others that some commitment to minority rights and civil liberties is important, is a sound approach that balances realism and American ideals.

Balance will be more elusive in the search for a U.S. policy that reassures coup plotters while also fostering opposition military strength. The Clinton administration will have to choose which option to emphasize in its information campaign and recruitment drives. If a coup appears unlikely, then an insurgency is more sensible. If the CIA can credibly argue that a coup is realistic, then the administration should go slowly with the development of an insurgency. U.S. officials must also emphasize that, despite growing ties to the opposition, they would work with almost any new regime if it met the conditions outlined above.

Most importantly, both the administration and its critics must also recognize that containment is not anathema to an opposition effort, but is essential to it. Iraq must be kept weak for the opposition to have any chance militarily. Should containment lapse, it would also be a major propaganda victory for Saddam Hussein, increasing his prestige at home. A U.S. campaign to support the opposition that jeopardizes containment would be self-defeating.

Tailoring support for the opposition to political concerns at home is dangerous as well as misguided. If not conducted carefully, such a campaign will hinder a coup, weaken the U.S. position in the region, and place unwanted demands on U.S. diplomats and soldiers. If the United States is not careful, it will inadvertently help Saddam Hussein in his struggle to stay in power.

Notes


2. The dangers of embracing the opposition, particularly if the campaign is intended to “roll back” Saddam’s regime, are considerable. In other words, other analysts and I have discussed the potential dangers of embracing a “rollback” strategy. In particular, see Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Gideon Rose, “Can Saddam be Toppled?” Foreign Affairs 78, no. 1 (January/February 1999), pp. 24-41; and Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth Pollack, “Undermine: Supporting the Iraqi Opposition,” in Patrick L. Clawson, ed., Iraq Strategy Review: Options for U.S. Policy (Washington,
D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998), 59-100. U.S. military leaders, particularly U.S. Central Command Commander Anthony Zinni, have also criticized the use of the opposition, questioning the opposition's military capabilities and political cohesion.

3. The Clinton administration's apparent ambivalence about the Iraqi opposition may place it between a hostile domestic audience, which seeks to confront Saddam Hussein more directly, and U.S. allies in Europe and the region, who want to ease tension. This gap between rhetoric and reality may anger allies in the region and in Europe, which would resist public U.S. pressure to support a policy that the administration does not advocate in private.


5. It is highly likely that Saddam has some biological and chemical agents that could be weaponized with relative ease, particularly if they were delivered via special operations forces or terrorists rather than missiles.


7. True democracy in Iraq, however, is too high a standard, although it is desirable. Washington has long worked with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, and it can do so in Iraq with little problem. Nevertheless, the regime must take steps in the direction of democracy even if it does not complete the journey.


9. From a U.S. point of view, however, a collapse is less calamitous. A weak Iraq would be unable to threaten its neighbors or mount an ambitious WMD program. Indeed, various rump states would probably focus their hostility on each other, not on the other states of the region. Given Tehran's military weakness and ideological exhaustion, the United States could easily prevent Iran from dominating any successor state. Moreover, several possible successor states, particularly one dominated by Iraqi Kurds, might become a staunch U.S. ally in the region. Nor is it clear that the humanitarian problems caused by civil strife would be worse than the suffering inflicted by Saddam Hussein's tyranny, which has caused immense suffering and hundreds of thousands of lives. Thus, if the destabilization of Iraq is the price to be paid for Saddam Hussein's removal, it may well be worth it.