



## Iraq: 10 Years After Gulf War

By Stephen Zunes, Middle East Editor—Foreign Policy In Focus

Ten years after the Gulf War, U.S. policy toward Iraq continues to suffer from an overreliance on military solutions, an abuse of the United Nations and international law, and a disregard for the human suffering resulting from sanctions. Furthermore, Washington's actions have failed to dislodge Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein from power.

The U.S. quietly supported Saddam Hussein during the 1980s through direct economic aid, indirect military aid, and the transfer of technologies with military applications. Washington rejected calls for sanctions when Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 and when it used chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and Kurdish civilians. The U.S. Navy intervened in the Persian Gulf against Iran in 1987, further bolstering the Iraqi war effort. The Reagan and Bush administrations dismissed concerns about human rights abuses by Saddam's totalitarian regime. Such special treatment likely led the Iraqi dictator to believe that appeasement would continue.

Saddam Hussein's government had brought an impressive degree of prosperity to the Iraqi people, ranking them near the top of third world countries in terms of nutrition, education, health care, housing, and other basic needs. Yet he ruled with a brutality and a cult of personality that ranked his regime among the most totalitarian in the world.

Following a dispute with the government of Kuwait regarding debt repayment and oil policy during the summer of 1990, Iraq invaded the sheikhdom in early August, soon annexing the country as its nineteenth province. The UN Security Council condemned

the takeover and demanded Iraq's immediate withdrawal. Iraqi failure to comply led to comprehensive military and economic sanctions. Arab mediation efforts were short-circuited when the U.S. announced it was sending troops to Saudi Arabia to protect the kingdom via Operation Desert Shield, supported by forces from a couple of dozen other UN members. It soon became apparent that the U.S. was preparing for an offensive military action to dislodge Iraqi occupation forces, rejecting any negotiated settlement.

The Bush administration eventually won approval by the U.S. Congress and the UN Security Council to authorize the use of force; in the latter case, extraordinary pressure, including bribes and threats against other

members were necessary to eke out a majority. The United States, with support from some allied governments, commenced a heavy bombing campaign in January 1991, inflicting severe damage on not only Iraqi military forces but much of the country's civilian infrastructure as well. The war, known as Operation Desert Storm, ended six weeks later, after a ground offensive in March liberated Kuwait from Iraqi control with minimal allied casualties but over 100,000 Iraqi deaths.

The cease-fire agreement imposed on Iraq by the U.S. in the name of the UN Security Council included unprecedented infringements on Iraq's sovereignty, particularly regarding the dismantling of weapons of mass destruction and related facilities, enforced through rigorous inspections by international monitors under the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM). In addition, severe repression by Saddam's regime against rebellious Shiites in the south and Kurds in the north provided a pretext for the United States and its allies to create so-called "no-fly zones," restricting Iraq's military movements within its own borders.

Alleging that Iraq has not fully complied with provisions of the cease-fire agreement, particularly regarding cooperation with UNSCOM inspectors, the U.S. has successfully prevented the UN from lifting its sanctions more than ten years after they were first imposed. The result has been a humanitarian catastrophe, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians—primarily children—dying from malnutrition and preventable diseases resulting from the inability of Iraqis to get adequate food and medicine or the materials necessary to rebuild the war-damaged civilian infrastructure.

In April 1993 and September 1996, the U.S. engaged in a series of sustained air strikes against Iraq as punitive measures against alleged Iraqi transgressions. UNSCOM inspections were restricted by Iraq in December 1998, in part due to the use of the inspectors for espionage purposes by the U.S., prompting their withdrawal and a heavy four-day U.S. bombing campaign. Since early 1999, the U.S.—with the support of Great Britain—has engaged in unauthorized air strikes on an almost weekly basis.

The U.S. maintains a large-scale military presence in the region to this day. American aircraft patrol Iraqi air space, and the U.S. Navy regularly inspects shipping to enforce both the sanctions and the restrictions on Iraqi military movements. U.S. policy has been defended as an effort to effectively restrict any potential Iraqi aggression against its neighbors, and as a means of creating internal political discontent. Critics charge that there are serious legal and ethical questions regarding U.S. policy and that it is actually strengthening the Iraqi dictator's hold on power.

### Key Points

- The U.S. effectively coddled Hussein's dictatorial regime during the 1980s with economic and military aid, likely emboldening the invasion of Kuwait.
- The 1991 Gulf War forced the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait and led to an ongoing U.S. military presence in the region.
- Certain provisions of the cease-fire agreement, severe economic sanctions and ongoing military operations, have limited Iraqi sovereignty and have created a severe humanitarian crisis.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

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Iraq still has not recovered from the 1991 war, during which it was on the receiving end of the heaviest bombing in world history. The U.S. has insisted on maintaining strict sanctions against Iraq to force compliance with demands to dismantle any capability of producing weapons of mass destruction and to address other outstanding issues from the cease-fire agreement. It is largely U.S. opposition that has prevented the UN from lifting the sanctions.

The sanctions have brought great hardships on the Iraqi people, as food prices are now 12,000 times what they were in 1990. It is Iraq's poor, particularly the children, who have suffered the most. Estimates of the total number of Iraqi deaths from malnutrition and preventable diseases as a result of the sanctions have ranged from a quarter million to over one million, the majority being children. UNICEF estimates that at least 4,500 Iraqi children are dying every month as a result of the sanctions. Indeed, perhaps there has been no other occasion during peacetime when so many people have been condemned to starvation and death from preventable diseases due to political decisions made overseas. The unseen impact of these sanctions on the social fabric of Iraq is perhaps even more severe.

The U.S. claims that such sanctions will lead to the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime. However, Washington's policy against Iraq has had the ironic effect of strengthening Saddam's rule. Since the Iraqi people are now more dependent than ever on the government for their survival, they are even less likely to risk open defiance. U.S. policies simply have not harmed Iraq's ruling elites or weakened its repressive internal apparatus. Unlike the reaction to sanctions imposed prior to the war, Iraqi popular resentment lays the blame for the protracted suffering squarely on the United States, not on the totalitarian regime, whose ill-fated conquest of Kuwait prompted the events that led to the economic collapse of this once-prosperous country. In addition, Iraq's middle class, which would have most likely formed the political force capable of overthrowing Saddam's regime, has been reduced to penury; many have emigrated. It is not surprising that virtually all of Iraq's opposition movements oppose the U.S. policy of ongoing punitive sanctions and refuse to endorse the air strikes. Even after Saddam leaves, U.S. policies are creating a whole generation of Iraqis who will be stridently anti-American. Meanwhile, more and more countries are violating aspects of the sanctions regime, further undermining U.S. credibility.

U.S. officials have stated that sanctions would remain even if Iraq complied with United Nations inspectors, indicating a lack of genuine U.S. support for UN resolutions and giving the Iraqi regime virtually no incentive to comply. Moreover, the failure of both the United States and the United Nations to explicitly spell out what was needed in order for sanctions to be lifted contributed to Iraq's decision to suspend its cooperation with UN inspectors in December 1998.

Although Iraq's nuclear and chemical weapons capability has been successfully dismantled, there are still concerns about Iraq's biological weapons potential, though the U.S. has failed to make a credible case as to how Iraq could successfully deliver such weapons or what might motivate the

regime to use them. And there is little evidence to suggest that U.S. air strikes have eliminated or reduced the country's biological weapons capability, which would be based upon small-scale operations that are difficult to find and eliminate through such military action.

The use of U.S. air strikes against Iraq subsequent to the weapons inspectors' departure has garnered very little support from the international community, including Iraq's neighbors, who would presumably be most threatened by an Iraqi biological weapons capability. The U.S. has been unable to make a credible case to clarify whom its policies are defending. The United States itself is certainly safe from Iraqi attacks, and most of Iraq's neighbors have strong armed forces of their own that are more than adequate to deter Iraq's severely crippled military.

In light of Washington's tolerance—and even quiet support—of Iraq's powerful military machine in the 1980s, the exaggerated claims in recent years of an imminent Iraqi military threat, after Iraq's military infrastructure was largely destroyed in the Gulf War, simply lack credibility. Indeed, the U.S. provided the seed stock for the very biological weapons that Washington claims the Iraqis may be developing. Though experts disagree about Iraq's ongoing potential for aggression, few actually believe current U.S. policy is making the region safer.

Only the UN Security Council has the prerogative to authorize military responses to violations of its resolutions; no single member state can do so unilaterally without explicit authorization. Were that the case, for example, Russia could bomb Israel for that government's ongoing violations of UN Security Council resolutions. The U.S. bombing campaigns, therefore, are illegal. In addition, the no-fly zones and other restrictions against Iraq's military activity within its borders were unilaterally imposed by the United States and Great Britain and are not based on any credible legal covenant.

U.S. policy toward Iraq seems to be a kind of foreign policy by catharsis, where air strikes and other punitive actions are imposed as “feel good” measures against an obstinate dictator. This may at times be politically popular, but it has little strategic value. Saddam Hussein and his inner circle remain safe in their bunkers as the bombs fall; civilians and unwilling conscripts continue to be the primary casualties.

Finally, U.S. double standards have greatly harmed American credibility in the region. Most Arabs and many other people around the world question why Washington insists that it is considered acceptable for Israel to have weapons of mass destruction and for the U.S. to bring weapons of mass destruction into the Middle East. This is particularly true since UN Security Council Resolution 687, which the U.S. claims to be enforcing through the sanctions and bombing, calls for “establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destruction and all missiles for their delivery.”

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## Key Problems

- U.S.-led sanctions have resulted in massive human suffering among the civilian population.
  - The U.S. bombing campaign and the enforcement of no-fly zones are implemented without authorization from the United Nations.
  - U.S. policy does not contribute to the security of the region nor weaken Hussein's grip on power.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

The ongoing U.S. air strikes against Iraq are illegal and counterproductive and must end. Washington should continue to support an arms embargo on Iraq, but the U.S. should join the growing number of countries in the Middle East and around the world calling for a lifting of the economic sanctions that have brought so much suffering to Iraqi civilians.

## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. must lift the sanctions against Iraq's civilian population. As a first step, Washington should offer to lift the sanctions in return for Iraqi cooperation with UN mandates.
- To maintain credibility in curbing Iraqi threats to peace and stability, the U.S. must support arms control and UN Security Council resolutions throughout the region rather than singling out Iraq.
- The U.S. should become more sensitive to the internal dynamics of Iraqi politics and must recognize that democratic opposition movements will more likely emerge if outside intervention is kept at a minimum.

The first step should be a U.S. promise to lift the economic sanctions once the UN secretary-general recognizes that Baghdad is in effective compliance with Security Council resolutions. Indeed, for sanctions to work, one needs a carrot as well as a stick, something Washington has failed to recognize. The United States, in consultation with other members of the Security Council, needs to clarify the positive responses that Iraq can expect in return for specific improvements in its behavior.

In addition, Washington must pledge to enforce other outstanding UN Security Council

resolutions and not simply single out Iraq. As long as the United States allows allied regimes like Turkey, Morocco, and Israel to flaunt UN Security Council resolutions, any sanctimonious calls for strict compliance by the Iraqi government will simply be dismissed as hypocritical and mean-spirited, whatever the merit of the actual complaints. This is particularly important given that recent Iraqi violations have been largely of a technical nature and that the resolution itself is unprecedented in its level of interference in areas traditionally considered the sovereign rights of individual countries. Such violations pale in comparison to those of the aforementioned U.S. allies, whose ongoing military occupations of neighboring countries represent a direct contravention of the UN Charter.

In a similar vein, the United States must support a comprehensive arms control regime for the region, including the establishment of a zone in the Middle East where all weapons of mass destruction are banned. Such an agreement would halt the U.S. practice of bringing nuclear weapons into the region on its planes and ships and would force Israel to dismantle its sizable nuclear arsenal. This more holistic approach to nonproliferation might include, for example, a five-year program affecting not just Iraqi missiles but phasing out Syrian, Israeli, and other missiles as well.

As with its highly selective insistence on the enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions, the double standards in U.S. policy make even the most legitimate concerns about Iraqi weapons development virtually impossible to successfully pursue. If Iraq is truly a threat

to regional security, there must be a comprehensive regional security regime worked out between the eight littoral states of the Persian Gulf. The U.S. should support such efforts and not allow its quest for arms sales and oil resources to unnecessarily exacerbate regional tensions.

The United States remains one of the few governments in the world that rejects any linkage between Persian Gulf security issues and Israeli-Palestinian issues. Few people familiar with the region, however, fail to recognize the importance of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (which would establish a viable Palestinian state with a shared Jerusalem) in order to weaken the appeal and power of demagogues like Saddam Hussein. There is little question of the pivotal role the U.S. plays in the peace process. Washington's failure to force Israeli compromise is the major reason for the current violence and the impasse in negotiations with the Palestinians.

International guarantees protecting the oppressed Kurds of northern Iraq are also necessary. However, they should not be used as an excuse for ongoing punitive air strikes; the Kurds should not yet again be used as pawns in an international rivalry. Comprehensive initiatives for a just settlement of the Kurdish question—including the oppressed Kurdish minority in Turkey and other countries—should be pursued by the international community.

Finally, there needs to be a greater understanding by U.S. policymakers of Iraqi politics and society, which Washington is not only sorely lacking but appears to have done little to improve upon. The reality is that Saddam Hussein will likely remain in power until the Iraqi people are able to overthrow him themselves. An appreciation for how this might best be done could be greatly improved if the United States would be more open to greater dialogue with Iraq's exiled opposition. In recent years, however, Washington has tended to dismiss input from the Iraqi opposition when crafting U.S. policy toward Iraq.

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the United States or other countries supporting democratic opposition movements against autocratic regimes, the U.S. has so thoroughly destroyed its credibility that little good can result from actively supporting an Iraqi opposition movement, particularly given its weakness and internal divisions. In particular, support for any kind of military resistance is not only futile but would give the Iraqi regime an excuse to crack down even harder against the country's already-pummeled people. There is little question that, with the lifting of economic sanctions and an end to the bombing, some kind of organized opposition will emerge. However, to be successful, it must be seen as a genuinely indigenous force, not the creation of yet another ill-fated intervention by Western powers.

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# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

**American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee**  
Email: [adc@adc.org](mailto:adc@adc.org)  
Website: <http://www.adc.org/>

**American Friends Service Committee**  
Iraq Peacebuilding Program  
Email: [askaboutiraq@afsc.org](mailto:askaboutiraq@afsc.org)  
Website: <http://www.afsc.org/iraqhome.htm>

**American Kurdish Information Center**  
Email: [akin@kurdish.org](mailto:akin@kurdish.org)  
Website: <http://www.kurdistan.org/>

**American Muslims for Global Peace and Justice**  
Email: [AMGPJ@global-peace.org](mailto:AMGPJ@global-peace.org)  
Website: <http://www.global-peace.org/>

**Arabic News**  
Email: [Editors@ArabicNews.com](mailto:Editors@ArabicNews.com)  
Website: <http://www.arabicnews.com/>

**The Boston Committee on the Middle East**  
Website: <http://www.salam.org/>

**Campaign Against Sanctions on Iraq (CASI)**  
Email: [info@casi.org.uk](mailto:info@casi.org.uk)  
Website: <http://www.cam.ac.uk/societies/casi/>

**Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR)**  
Email: [mep@cesr.org](mailto:mep@cesr.org)  
Website: <http://www.cesr.org/>

**Citizens Concerned for the People of Iraq (CCPI)**  
Email: [wwfor@connectexpress.com](mailto:wwfor@connectexpress.com)  
Website: <http://www.scn.org/ccpi/>

**Education for Peace in Iraq Center**  
Website: <http://www.saveageneration.org/>

**Fellowship of Reconciliation**  
Email: [iraq@forusa.org](mailto:iraq@forusa.org)  
Website: <http://www.forusa.org/>

**Human Rights Watch/Middle East**  
Email: [hrwdc@hrw.org](mailto:hrwdc@hrw.org)  
Website: <http://www.hrw.org/>

**Institute for Policy Studies**  
New Internationalism Project  
(See especially link to 1999 Trip Report of Congressional Aides Delegation)  
Email: [pbennis@compuserve.com](mailto:pbennis@compuserve.com)  
Website: <http://www.ips-dc.org/>

**Institute for Public Accuracy**  
Email: [dcinstitute@igc.org](mailto:dcinstitute@igc.org)  
Website: <http://www.accuracy.org/iraq/>

**International Action Center**  
Email: [iacenter@iacenter.org](mailto:iacenter@iacenter.org)  
Website: <http://www.iacenter.org/>

**Iraq Action Coalition**  
Email: [IAC@leb.net](mailto:IAC@leb.net)  
Website: <http://leb.net/iac/>

**Iraq Resource Information Site**  
Email: [iris\\_author@mail.com](mailto:iris_author@mail.com)  
Website: <http://www.iraqinfo.cjb.net/>

**Middle East Children's Alliance (MECA)**  
Email: [meca@mecaforpeace.org](mailto:meca@mecaforpeace.org)  
Website: <http://www.mecaforpeace.org/>

**Middle East Daily**  
Email: [staff@wn.com](mailto:staff@wn.com)  
Website: <http://www.middleeastdaily.com/>

**Middle East Policy Council**  
Email: [info@mepc.org](mailto:info@mepc.org)  
Website: <http://www.mepc.org/>

**Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)**  
Email: [ctoensing@merip.org](mailto:ctoensing@merip.org)  
Website: <http://www.merip.org/>

**UNICEF House**  
Website: <http://www.unicef.org/>

**United Nations Office of the Iraq Programme Oil for Food**  
Website: <http://www.un.org/Depts/oip/>

**U.S. Mission to the UN**  
Email: [usa@un.int](mailto:usa@un.int)  
Website: <http://www.un.int/usa/asiairaq.htm>

**Voices in the Wilderness**  
Email: [kkelly@igc.org](mailto:kkelly@igc.org)  
Website: <http://www.nonviolence.org/vitw/>

## Publications

Anthony Arrove, ed. *Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000).

Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

Stephen Zunes, "Are Iraqi Sanctions Immoral?" *Foreign Service Journal*, vol. 76, no. 2, February 1999.

Stephen Zunes, "Confrontation with Iraq: The Bankruptcy of U.S. Policy," *Middle East Policy*, vol. VI, no. 1, June 1998.

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