

# How Does Saddam Hold On?

*Ofra Bengio*

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MR. PRESIDENT

T. S. ELIOT called April the cruelest month. It is also, fittingly, the month most cherished by Saddam Hussein—the month in which he was born and in which his ruling Baath Party was founded. To celebrate Saddam's April 28 birthday one year, 15 million Iraqis reportedly lit candles to demonstrate their joy; in other years, fireworks, parties, processions (with the ruler sometimes borne in a royal carriage), and exhibitions of photographs of a beaming Saddam have marked the occasion. Saddam's birthday is also a pretext for inaugurating grandiose projects, the latest of which was a new, eponymous city northwest of Baghdad, Saddamiyyat al-Tharthar. Occasionally the "birthday cult" takes an even more grotesque form, with parchment pledges of allegiance to Saddam written in the blood of the senders. Through such rituals, Iraq's absolute ruler seeks to bind himself and his subjects together for life and death.

This year Saddam's birthday—his 63rd—arrived amid persistent rumors that his days were numbered. Thus far, all such predictions have proved wishful thinking. For 20 years, ever since the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, Saddam's fall has been called "imminent." In the waning hours of the Gulf War, the coalition agreed to end its hostilities after a 100-hour ground war in large part because U.S. analysts figured that Saddam was doomed. Since then, Western

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leaders have watched in a mixture of confusion and consternation as his grip on power has held firm.

Saddam's longevity has deeply frustrated those searching for a viable post-Desert Storm Iraq policy. Rollback—using the Iraqi opposition to depose Saddam and replace him with a friendlier regime—remains wildly unlikely, since the Iraqi opposition is weak and the United States is unwilling to provide the massive support that Saddam's foes would need. The main alternatives to rollback are various forms of containment to box Saddam in: either arms inspections without economic sanctions, sanctions without inspections, or a wearying attempt to keep both sanctions on and the inspectors in. But all these variations are really only designed to keep a lid on the situation until Saddam somehow disappears. They inevitably raise the question of why he has not yet fallen, after decades of war, crisis, and ruin. How has Saddam managed to hold on for so long?

The answer is not soothing. Saddam has kept his grip on power because of his ruthless personality, his foes' blunders, and his lethally effective mastery of the pillars of authority in Iraq: the Baath Party, the security establishment, the military, and his own family cliques. Among his most likely successors at this point—whether through inheritance or coup—are his two sons, Uday and Qusay, whom he has been grooming for power. (As in Syria, another Baathist republican has turned royalist.) But such a change would do the West little good, since Saddam's offspring are apt to be as thuggish and dangerous as their father. The West's shrewdest course of action, therefore, is to wait Saddam out while doing what it can to nudge Iraq's battered elites into replacing their overlord with some more responsible and less brutal autocrat. Washington should not expect an Iraqi *deus ex machina* any time soon.

#### THE ENIGMA OF SURVIVAL

SADDAM'S SURVIVAL can best be explained by a series of paradoxes inherent in his personality and world-view. Through his huge propaganda machine, Saddam presents himself as a brilliant strategist, the best Iraqis and Arabs have had in centuries. But his strategies have actually led to disaster. In his 21-year rule, he has managed to embroil

his country in two massive wars and drag it to the brink of military, political, social, and economic catastrophe. But if Saddam is a pathetic strategist, he is also a brilliant tactician, a talent that has allowed him to escape from mistakes again and again. Saddam's strategies are based on gossamer self-delusion; his tactics are built on brutal Machiavellianism. Whenever his grand design gets him into trouble, his domestic maneuvering gets him out.

Much has been made of the fact that Saddam has rarely left his country's borders, leaving him narrow-minded, consumed by conspiracy theories, and incapable of understanding the outside world. Some argue that Saddam does not understand democracies in general and U.S. decision-making in particular—leading him, for instance, to underestimate President Bush's seriousness about going to war over Kuwait. This parochialism surely exists, but it is more than compensated for by an intimate knowledge of his own state and society. The home front, after all, is Saddam's main battleground, a fact that has too often eluded his foreign adversaries.

Outsiders often call adventurism Saddam's signature trait, pointing to his invasion of Iran, a country three times Iraq's size, or his challenge to the huge U.S.-led coalition arrayed against him during the Gulf War. But despite his reputation for recklessness, Saddam actually thinks his moves through long in advance. The decisions to attack Iran and invade Kuwait were by no means haphazard; both were carefully planned well before the actual deed. Something similar is true for Saddam's closely related character traits, such as his penchant for risk-taking or improvisation. These exist, to be sure, but only in conjunction with their opposites: patience, perseverance, and cold-bloodedness. As the acknowledged strongman behind President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr before 1979, for example, Saddam waited fully 11 years to give his boss the coup de grâce. Indeed, he has tried to inculcate patience (*sabr* in Arabic, an oft-praised Islamic value) in the Iraqi people and manipulate it for his political purposes—especially to encourage his much-abused populace to withstand the post-1990 sanctions and the other calamities that he has brought upon the country.

Saddam is also notorious for his blunders and miscalculations. But although he is indeed incapable of correcting his own mistakes and prone to exacerbating them, he is simultaneously a master at capitalizing

on his enemies' missteps. In the end, Saddam is something of a house divided against himself—but unfortunately one that seems fit to last. Western policymakers need to be wary of dwelling too much on one set of Saddam's traits while neglecting their opposites; Saddam may not be wise enough to succeed, but he is wily enough to survive.

WITH ENEMIES LIKE THESE

SADDAM'S ASTONISHING ability to take advantage of his foes' mistakes goes a long way toward explaining his survival, even in dire crises. Consider the Ayatollah Khomeini's most serious error during the bloody Iran-Iraq War: making peace contingent on the fall of Saddam. Tehran's condition was vague and failed to specify who was to oust the Iraqi leader, to say nothing of when and how. Moreover, instead of punishing Saddam himself, it punished the Iraqi people (and for that matter, the Iranian people as well), who suffered through the prolongation of the eight-year war. The ayatollah's demand smacked of interference in another country's internal affairs but did nothing to influence the outcome. For Saddam, meanwhile, who is at his best when he faces the worst, Khomeini's condition provided another incentive to continue the war. The Iraqi leader waged a huge propaganda campaign that put the blame for further conflict and Iraqi suffering onto Iran and simultaneously launched a campaign of domestic repression to stifle any coup attempts. Saddam's patience paid off: after eight years of fighting, it was Khomeini who had to reverse his position, drink from what the Iranian leader called the "poisoned chalice," and shortly afterward pass from the scene.

President Bush and President Clinton both replayed Khomeini's mistake. By essentially conditioning the end of the embargo on Saddam's ouster, they once again played into his hands. Saddam has used this demand to divert responsibility for the misery of sanctions away from himself and onto the United States, which he blames for all of Iraq's mishaps. The prolongation of the embargo has thus strengthened Saddam rather than weakening him, not least because it has made Iraqis depend on him more than ever for their livelihood. What monies come into Iraq—through the U.N.'s "oil for food" program, for example—are controlled by Saddam and his loyalists,

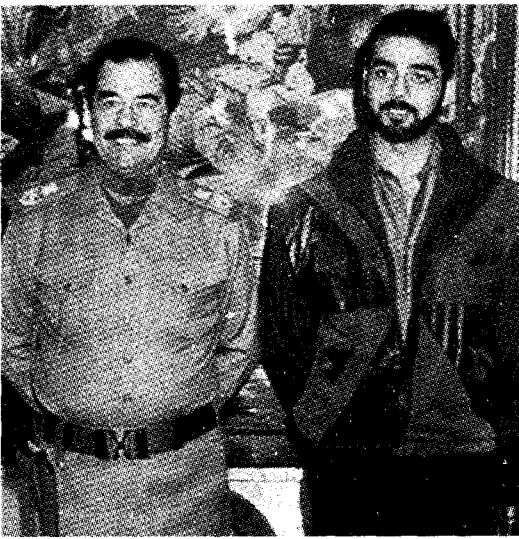
who distribute them at will. Similarly, the seemingly permanent “emergency” situation lets Saddam reinforce his repressive machine. To many Iraqis, the American failure to oust Saddam only helped “prove” a conspiracy theory: the American imperialists, determined to keep the Arabs down, were out to punish Iraq as a nation.

The Iranians and the Americans also both made the mistake of relying on the Iraqi opposition to destabilize Saddam’s regime. If they did so because they truly believed that the opposition could get rid of Saddam, they grossly miscalculated. Saddam’s bickering foes—a mélange of squabbling Iraqi Kurds, Shiite groups both secular and fundamentalist, communists, and hacks—are badly fragmented and deeply vulnerable to manipulation. But Tehran and Washington erred even if they backed the opposition merely as part of their ongoing psychological warfare against the regime in Baghdad. Iraqis could hardly have been expected to pin their hopes for salvation from Saddam on so fractious and feeble an opposition, and Saddam used its outside support to tarnish the opposition’s image and brand it as treasonous, beholden to foreign masters bent on the destruction of the country. Neither the Iranians nor the Americans seem to have fathomed just how little organized domestic opposition was left after 32 years of ruthless Baathist rule.

THEN AGAIN, YOU SHOULD SEE HIS FRIENDS

ANOTHER KEY to Saddam’s survival lies in the fact that Iraq is simultaneously a powerful state and a weak one, a situation that has created a lopsided competition between Saddam and his internal opponents. The country’s bountiful oil reserves, ample water sources, and reasonably sized population are important national strengths that give Saddam strategic depth, breathing room, and a large margin for error. The huge oil profits of the 1970s, for example, were used later during the war with Iran to save the country and the regime from catastrophe.

Socially and politically, however, Iraq is very weak, even by Middle Eastern standards. Over time, Saddam has eviscerated the political system. Civil society simply does not exist, no parties except the omnipotent Baath are permitted to function, and even minimal freedom of expression is at this point a dim memory. Apart from



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*Baghdaddy: Saddam Hussein with his sons, Uday and Qusay*

the Kurdish enclave in the north, the organized opposition has no significant bases in Iraq and lacks unity, credibility, support, and any positive sense of purpose.

Saddam's background in the security apparatus and in the propaganda business, coupled with his slow rise to the presidency, taught him how to thrive in such a weak sociopolitical system—how to cope with enemies, whether real or imagined, and develop various mechanisms of control. He understands the need to remain constantly alert, adapt quickly, preempt opponents, and above all expertly maneuver between different forces and factions. Saddam applies these rules to the Iraqi population at large, but also within the key institutions of power: the army, the Baath Party, the security apparatus and secret police, and even his own family. Saddam is only too aware of the fact that each of his bases of support is a double-edged sword that can slash his foes or be turned against him.

Saddam handles each power base differently. Long before he became president, Saddam managed to keep the military out of politics. He purged the strongest commanders, who could have proved menacing; "Baathized" the armed forces, seeding them with loyalists; busied the military with constant wars, first with Iraq's Kurds and then with Iran, Kuwait, and the Desert Storm coalition; and bought the military's goodwill by showering largesse on it and building a huge war machine. Saddam thereby ended the succession of military coups that had been so rampant before the Baath seized power in 1968.

For the security apparatuses, which have become the trademark of his regime, Saddam had to devise other techniques of control. These included developing competing bodies to watch each other, installing family members at their heads, and launching the occasional purge. His ploys here have not worked quite as well as they did with the military, as the security services have recently failed him twice: in 1995, they did not alert him to the flight of his two sons-in-law and his daughters to Jordan, and in 1996, they did not prevent a serious assassination attempt on his eldest son, Uday, who was hit repeatedly when gunmen raked his car with submachine-gun fire. (That the attempted hit on Uday took place while Saddam's second son, Qusay, was supervising the security apparatuses did not augur well for Saddam, but the holes are no doubt filled by now; he has a way of making his displeasure felt.)

As for the Baath Party, Saddam has had to reconcile his personal preference for one-person rule with the existence of a collective leadership. In the first two weeks of his presidency in December 1979, he executed 21 high-ranking party members for objecting to his takeover. This initial bloodbath set the rules of the game for the years to come, during which the party lost its ability to make autonomous decisions or check the president's powers. At the same time, Saddam and the Baath have become interdependent. Saddam needed the party to handle the day-to-day business of the state, mobilize the masses, and provide support after setbacks, and the party came to regard Saddam as the main guarantor of its existence, especially during times of crisis.

#### SADDAM'S FAMILY VALUES

SADDAM HAS EXCELLED at alternating "the sword with the smile," as the Arabic saying goes. But with the military, the security services, and the Baath Party all co-opted, one other potential threat remains. Iraq has developed an intricate sort of family rule, largely orchestrated by Saddam himself. Initially, he sought to bring to power as many of his relatives as possible, for various reasons: to build a parallel support network in order to reduce his reliance on the Baath; to respond to demands from family members for political spoils; to prepare the ground for hereditary rule; and most important,

to put loyal supporters in sensitive posts. Members of Saddam's extended family were appointed to key positions throughout the security apparatus, including the agencies that guard the president himself. Thus in the last three decades, Iraq has come to be ruled by both the Baath and by members of four major clans related to Saddam, all from his hometown of Tikrit: the Bakr, Talfah, al-Majid, and Ibrahim.

While Saddam carried his family with him to power, he also subjected them to the regular rules and devices of Iraqi politics: checks and balances, rotations from post to post, dismissals, reshuffles (among different family branches), and even elimination. But although these techniques have worked well for Saddam in controlling the army and the Baath and have worked passably vis-à-vis the security services, they have come closest to failing in dealing with his kin.

Saddam's family woes were put on display most dramatically in August 1995, when his two sons-in-law (who were also his cousins)—Hussein Kamil al-Majid, the head of Iraq's weapons programs, and Saddam Kamil al-Majid, the commander of the palace guard—defected to Jordan, along with Saddam Hussein's daughters Rana and Raghda. Hussein Kamil passed vital information on to the U.N. weapons inspectors and called for Saddam Hussein's ouster. The Iraqi ruler was caught completely unprepared but, true to form, recovered quickly. He assured his sons-in-law that all was forgiven, lured them to Baghdad in February 1996, made his daughters divorce them, and had other members of the Majid clan murder them. For good measure, the severely mutilated corpse of the defectors' mother was found last February in her Baghdad apartment.

The rest of Iraq's elite may lie prone before him, then, but Saddam must still cope with family intrigues. Indeed, over time, family relations have become more liability than asset. One complication had to do with the fact that the family consists of four major clans among which intermarriages were rampant, leading to constant rivalries and jealousies. Similarly, the family links could pressure Saddam to promote clan members to key posts. This he has done, but at the price of being

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blamed for nepotism, of maneuvering constantly between the different branches of the family, and of occasionally losing control.

Interestingly, crises and reshuffles within the family have often taken place almost simultaneously with crises in the other parts of the apparatus of power—as happened in 1991, when the Kurdish and Shiite uprisings after the Gulf War set off alarm bells in Baghdad, compelling Saddam to reshuffle posts among his family members. In 1995, his sons-in-law defected against the background of unrest in the Anbar region and still more major personnel changes among the clans. This suggests that Saddam treats the family network like the other pillars of power. Nevertheless, even as Saddam's frustration with his wider family is rising, he seems to be preparing to turn over the family business—running Iraq—to his sons.

#### RAISING CAIN

FROM THE START, Saddam has ruled less like a president and more like a king or sultan. For a long time, he refrained from holding what the Iraqi media contemptuously called “referendums of the 99.99 percent”—the palpably rigged elections staged by other modernizing Arab presidents such as Syria's Hafiz al-Assad and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Rather, at moments of crisis, Saddam has opted for a more monarchical and “spontaneous” method of demonstrating Iraqis' support for his rule: the traditional vow of allegiance known in Arabic as the *bay'a*. In a way, Saddam was imitating Iraq's King Faisal I, who came to power in 1921 through an act of *bay'a*. Saddam's “royalist” penchant for building palaces and monuments, moreover, was far removed from the accepted image of an austere, socialist Baathist ruler. He also followed in the footsteps of Arab kings by sitting on a throne-like chair and introducing the slogan “God, the homeland, the leader”—substituting “leader” for “king.”

One key reason for Saddam's fondness for monarchy is that it allows for hereditary succession. Early in his reign, Saddam began to introduce Uday, now 35, and Qusay, now 33, to the public and groom them for political life. Today they are among the most likely candidates to succeed Saddam, something that has important implications for Western policy.

Saddam made a point of appearing with Uday and Qusay in public on important occasions and ran glowing tributes to them in the state-run media to boost their profiles. No less important were the “political” marriages that he arranged for them—which, notably, lay outside the main bickering clans. To disengage himself from family pressures, Saddam had Qusay marry the daughter of an influential military commander, Mahir Abd al-Rashid, in 1987. The next year he had Uday marry the daughter of the loyal Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, who is currently deputy commander of the armed forces, assistant Baath Party secretary-general, and Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) vice chair. According to Iraq’s 1970 provisional constitution, if the RCC chair (predictably, Saddam) cannot fulfill the position’s duties, the RCC’s vice chair (Duri) steps in—which would leave Uday close to the new heart of power.

Even at the apex of his power, in other words, Saddam was already preparing his sons for a political future—and perhaps even positioning Uday, heretofore a frivolous playboy, as the heir apparent. But Uday shows every sign of being a true chip off the old block and therefore wildly unmanageable. Latif Yahya al-Salihi, who had the unenviable job of being Uday’s body double and later fled Iraq, told hair-raising stories about Uday’s rape of a girl before his very eyes and other acts of sadism. Uday’s ex-secretary claimed that he possesses 1,300 expensive cars, 160 of which were stolen from Kuwait. And Uday himself has recounted the way his paternal grandmother taught him courage when he was a young boy: having him handle scorpions and snakes.

In October 1988, Uday raised a host of problems after one particularly grisly excess: he beat one of his father’s bodyguards, Kamil Hanna Jajo, to death with a cane during a party on a tourist island in the Tigris River. What was the best way to prevent the ugly episode from reflecting badly on the president? How could Saddam continue to promote his son (then only 24) while guarding himself against his boundless ambitions? In the end Saddam opted not to punish Uday as he has other straying relatives; he merely removed Uday from the limelight for a bit to avoid the embarrassment of having a murderer

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for a son. Despite his reputation as violent, greedy, womanizing, corrupt, flamboyant, and quarrelsome, Uday was quickly rehabilitated. By the mid-1990s, Saddam let Uday make inroads into Iraq's power centers. He became involved in the illegal economic transactions that fill his family's coffers; paraded his interest in military affairs by announcing in 1993 that he had received an M.A. (with honors) in military studies;

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Saddam has held on to power longer than any other modern Iraqi ruler.

joined the Baath Party political bureau; and "supervised" the Iraqi media, turning it into a vehicle for aggrandizing himself and his father and settling accounts with ministries, institutions, and family members. This year, he was elected to parliament. As Uday expands his influence over the political and economic

echelons, he has done less to ingratiate himself with the four clans and his extended families. Uday loathes his relatives; he is believed to have supervised the raid in 1996 to kill his brothers-in-law, and in 1995, he shot his uncle Watban Ibrahim in the leg during a booze-soaked Baghdad party.

No one knows to what extent Uday's behavior was encouraged by his father or to what extent it spiraled totally out of Saddam's control. But recently Saddam appears to have been trying a little containment of his own—counterbalancing Uday with the younger Qusay. Saddam has never let too much power accumulate in the hands of any one person, his sons included. Uday's past excesses do not bode well for the future, Saddam now seems to figure, and the bloodless 1995 coup in which Qatar's crown prince, Hamad al-Thani, toppled his father could not have escaped Saddam's attention. Qusay, moreover, is apparently more discreet, controllable, and trustworthy than his brother. Accordingly, Saddam has given him key positions in the Special Security Apparatus and the Presidential Guard, both of which are crucial to the regime's stability. This division of labor between the two brothers has secured the separation of powers that Saddam wanted, with Uday spreading his influence over civilian and political affairs and Qusay over security and military ones.

By 1999, reports were emerging from Iraq of a power struggle between Uday and Qusay. Whatever the truth of such rumors, Saddam's dilemma over succession has clearly increased, not diminished, over

time. On the one hand, he sought to make his rule hereditary; on the other, he did not wish to give his enemies the slightest sign that he might relinquish power. So although Saddam might have been considering designating first Uday and then later Qusay as his heir, he could not risk saying so explicitly, because it would antagonize the Baath Party and spark a war of succession between the brothers (or between them and other branches of the family). Above all, Saddam had to protect himself against the ambitions of his own sons. As the Iraqi saying goes, “the most dangerous thief is the one from within the house.”

WHEN PUTSCH COMES TO SHOVE

MOST WESTERN OBSERVERS argue that there can be no change for the better in Iraq until Saddam disappears from the scene. That may well be true, but it leaves the hard questions unanswered. How might Saddam fall? Can an outside power decide the fate of the Iraqi regime and its ruler? And would his successor be an improvement?

Any attempt to answer these questions must begin with the understanding that Saddam has turned survival into an art. He has held on to power longer than any other ruler of modern Iraq, outlasting kings and presidents alike. His own brutal personality, a carefully developed set of control mechanisms, the mistakes and double messages of his Western enemies, the weakness of the Iraqi opposition—all have helped Saddam hold on, and all are still at work.

Pitted against Saddam's single-minded determination to survive, the United States and its dwindling list of allies have proved amateurish and inconsistent. Periodic Western declarations that Saddam is about to be ousted contribute to the opposite outcome. Ordinary Iraqis have come to interpret the variations of the American policy of containment as ruses designed to leave Saddam in power while protecting America's oil interests, leaving the Iraqis to their own devices. Declarations that the United States approves of Iraqis who would like to be rid of Saddam but cannot stand behind them serve only to increase popular hatred of “American imperialism” while giving the Iraqi leader more room for maneuver.

The fate of Castro's Cuba, which has been under severe U.S.-led sanctions for 40 years, provides clues about the likelihood of success

of American efforts to overthrow Saddam. In fact, Iraq may be an even tougher nut to crack. It is far from the United States; its society and politics are more complex and harder to understand; and many countries, including such erstwhile American partners as Russia, France, and even the Persian Gulf states, have vested interests there that limit American freedom of action.

The truth is that after a decade of containment, the United States and its allies still have no real vision for Iraq's future. Should either Uday or Qusay succeed their father, neither the West nor the Middle East would be better off. Even if one accepts as true only a small fraction of what is said about Saddam's sons, Uday appears a worse replica of his father and Qusay a pale one. Neither is immune to the megalomania that made Saddam dream of becoming a new Nebuchadnezzar. The only silver lining in such a scenario would be that Uday or Qusay might be easier prey for an ambitious Iraqi general and thus preside over a brief interregnum rather than a new era.

There is no way to get rid of Saddam on the cheap, and the sort of rhetorical posturing heard so often on Capitol Hill is just so much wind. If the United States wishes merely to contain Saddam, it should devise ways to ease the suffering of the Iraqi people. Their misery only strengthens Saddam while feeding anti-Western resentment. If the United States truly does wish to engineer Saddam's fall, then it will have to act with patience, determination, and vigor, avoiding foolish pronouncements while making Iraq a sustained foreign policy priority.

The wisest approach would be to combine containment with a concerted attempt to create the conditions necessary for a successful coup—a putsch from inside Iraq's government but outside Saddam's immediate family. Three moves might help. First, Washington should lower its public profile, speaking less about rollback yet maintaining its ability to deter any Iraqi military adventures against Iraq's Kurds, Shiites, or neighbors. Second, Washington should realize that containment need not be handled by the West alone and should rely more on Iraq's neighbors' healthy instincts to keep Saddam in his box. Finally, containment should be modified slightly, so as to maintain the vigilance of Iraq's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs—preferably through an ongoing U.N. inspections regime with teeth,

backed up by the constant and credible threat of force—while easing economic sanctions, especially along humanitarian lines. Together these moves may ease the state of emergency in Iraq, which itself has become Saddam's primary card. This, in turn, could provide crucial breathing space for Saddam's opponents within the regime, who have ample reason to act after accumulating a host of grievances during his years of misrule.

Saddam's successor would then most likely come from the Iraqi security establishment—hardly an inspiring prospect, but more realistic than an opposition uprising and less bleak than Uday or Qusay. It would be a major step forward for Iraq if the military leadership forged an alliance with enlightened members of the civilian establishment and exile communities. On the margins, the West can help Iraq's political and security elite wake from its long slumber. To be sure, any coup from within the Baathist regime would produce another nasty autocracy, but it would almost certainly be an improvement over Saddam's reign—either less brutal to Iraq's citizens, less menacing to Iraq's neighbors, or ideally both. Sooner or later, Saddam's domestic allies are likely to prove his deadliest enemies. 🌐