

Deterrence and the Contemporary Situation in the Middle East

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By Patrick Morgan

I. Introduction

The first essay by Patrick Morgan - professor of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine - joins the debate on the relevance of state-based deterrence in the post 9/11 world. He distinguishes between different types of terrorists and suggests that some terrorists can be deterred. In the case of Iraq, he argues that "Saddam Hussein is not beyond deterring".

II. Essay By Patrick Morgan

Deterrence and the Contemporary Situation in the Middle East
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Discussions of the terrorism threat and the problem of Saddam Hussein sooner or later, mostly sooner, turn to the problem of deterrence. Terrorism is seen as a particularly nasty threat because, it is said, the perpetrators cannot be deterred. Their irrational level of dedication to a cause and to terrorism as their chosen means makes them impervious to threats of retaliation or other costs. This is particularly demonstrated by the willingness of some to carry out attacks by suicide such as the Palestinian attacks on Israel recently and the September 11 terrorist attack on the U.S. In addition, these people have cut themselves off from the world - from governments and states in particular - and as nonstate actors have no "assets" to hold hostage via deterrence threats. So they cannot be manipulated either by threats to themselves or to others. Saddam Hussein's Iraq is said to pose several difficulties related to deterrence. Saddam is impervious to the costs his ambitions impose on his people so threats to harm them do not deter him. Those ambitions are so fierce that he is a constant danger to his neighbors and not readily deterred. It takes profound, direct threats to harm or defeat him to keep him in check. Like terrorists he is often depicted as bordering on irrationality

or something worse like megalomania, and this also makes him difficult to deter. This approach then takes an interesting twist by suggesting that he poses just the opposite problem for the US and others - that he will soon be entirely too successful in practicing deterrence himself. He seeks nuclear weapons and other Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) so he can pursue his ambitions without interference from outside. Those weapons will discourage the UN, the US, or anyone else from militarily intervening, or even cooperating in an intervention, if he attacks his neighbors. That will cancel any remaining leverage that outsiders have over him - he will then be even more difficult to deter.

These concerns have helped shape the announced desire of the Bush administration to root out the terrorists and attack Iraq - the terrorists cannot be deterred so they must be exterminated, and Saddam Hussein will never be sufficiently deterred and, if not stopped, will someday be able to deter us so he must be eliminated. This is a disturbing and controversial basis for American policy making because it is so open ended in terms of potential targets of American military efforts. The US has held a roughly similar view of numerous actual or potential terrorists and of the danger that WMD in the hands of North Korea or Iran (or Libya, or ...) would pose. Thus the deterrence of terrorists and of leaders like Saddam Hussein, as well as the deterrence they mount, is worth a careful analysis.

Deterrence and Terrorism Political terrorism is hardly new. It has been used by many types of actors and against many sorts of governments. Its threat to the US is not new either. Analysts and officials became aware of the rising threat from the latest version, Middle Eastern terrorists deeply hostile to the US and wanting to attack it directly, over a decade ago. In addition to increased efforts to forestall attacks by intelligence and law enforcement agencies, budgets for the preparations for terrorist attacks - training, emergency planning, stockpiling of relevant materials, disaster relief, etc. - went up sharply as a result. For instance, the country shut down so quickly in the wake of 9/11 because preparations for such a response had been elaborately developed during these years, right down to the local level. This effort at preparation was carried to elaborate lengths because it was an article of faith among terrorism experts that a totally effective defense was impossible and there could be no confidence that the terrorists could be deterred. As was often said, therefore, it was only a matter of time before the US suffered a major terrorist attack. Thus while much effort went into detecting and nullifying terrorist threats, as much or more was applied to dealing with the potential consequences of attacks.

Analyses of deterrence and terrorism like to stress that terrorists cannot be deterred. Here, several things can be said. First, the effectiveness of deterrence against anyone is not fully controlled by the deterrer. Various kinds of studies of deterrence over the years - statistical analyses, case studies, rational-choice analyses - show clearly that an important variable determining the success of a deterrence effort is the strength of the opponent's motivation to attack. Terrorists are therefore merely a striking example of this. It is actually a standard problem in all deterrence, not just for terrorists. For instance, a significant number of wars are started by states that are clearly militarily inferior to those they attack. The standard analysis of the escalation of the war in Vietnam is that the US took a series of measured steps to clearly indicate that it would respond very strongly to continued North Vietnamese-organized attacks on South Vietnam, the US followed through when those attacks continued, and in the end the deterrence failed because the motivation of North Vietnam to continue the war was simply too great. Finally, years ago analysts suggested the presence of a similar pattern when they studied the US-Japan relations leading up to Pearl Harbor. Japan had to take an enormous risk to attack an enemy the size of the US, and in fact various Japanese leaders thought the chances of success in an ensuing war would be very low. But Japanese leaders saw their nation's survival as an empire as critical to its future as a great power; failure to build a major empire would consign Japan to second class status in world affairs, to relationships of dependence on others who were stronger. In their view this left them with no choice but to press

ahead with expansion, militarily confronting the US which had become the most powerful remaining opponent of it. The US sanctions applied to cripple Japan economically, and meant to deter further Japanese expansion and compel its retreat from some of its occupied territories, reinforced the desperation Japanese leaders felt precisely because the sanctions were working - Japan was running out of oil and other precious commodities and, in combination with the rearmament the US had launched, meant that within a relatively short time the US would be too strong to even attack much less defeat and soon thereafter would attack and overwhelm Japan.

Nor are terrorists unusual in terms of being willing to die for their cause. Many people and governments, in many circumstances, are willing to put themselves at such a level of great risk of harm or death that, in effect, they approach the point of committing suicide on behalf of their goals. Soldiers are often in such situations; so are policemen and firemen; sometimes governments are - apparently Castro was quite ready to risk a general nuclear war in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Many political dissidents live such lives almost all the time, including powerfully committed members of ethnic and religious minorities in various parts of the world. Human beings have ample capacities to risk or trade their lives for their central values, terrorists included.

With terrorists, however, we have what is often a rather admirable quality displayed in what we consider dishonorable ways by contemptible people. Their dedication lacks appeal either because their cause seems outrageous or because their means of doing harm to advance it are so indiscriminate. While both are often cited it is particularly the latter that arouses enormous repugnance. It is hard to treat such people as "normal" in any way, and that includes their demonstrated and anticipated responses to threats of harm or death that we typically, almost instinctively, mount to try to protect ourselves.

Nevertheless, deterrence is almost never irrelevant to terrorists - it is not meaningless. Deterrence can sometimes be gleaned from a stout defense. Terrorism is rarely its own reward. Normally terrorists have distinct objectives in mind and a concept of how terrorism will secure them. If they will almost certainly be apprehended or killed in advance of carrying out plans for spreading terror this will deter most terrorism - it is rejected under these circumstances because it never gets to have the intended effect. Also, if terrorism provokes exactly the opposite effect from the one intended, making its objectives less attainable as a result, this will hamper its development. Terrorism tends to die out if it only hardens the target's intent or erodes support among others that the terrorists previously enjoyed - both effects mean that terrorism is putting its objectives further out of reach. One of the dangers of terrorism is that it will not have these effects, that from the first or over time it does not drive away supporters of the cause, does sow dissension among its opponents, etc. But terrorism shaped in this way is also, therefore, vulnerable to a stout defense and intense collective rejection.

Thus the most dangerous terrorism in terms of deterrence is when it is, indeed, its own reward, where the terrorist gains supreme satisfaction simply from hurting those who are keeping him from getting what he wants, or in the killing and harm itself, or simply from taking on the identity of being a terrorist. There are always some of these motivations at work in terrorist groups, but substantial movements normally cannot be built on them. They are typical of small radical sects - religious, ethnic, or political. One of the most interesting features of Al Qaeda is that it seems to be the exception that proves the rule. (Let us hope it is not a forerunner of more such groups.) It is a relatively large movement in numbers of members, geographical spread, funding, and logistics, but lacks clearly defined objectives beyond a revival of Islam's role in the world and the exclusion of the West's impact in the Islamic part of it. Apparently much of the reward for the members comes from preparing to and then killing Americans and other Westerners almost at random. If its main reward comes from lashing out at the West, particularly Americans, and from the grand rewards after death

granted to those who commit such a holy act, and from the inner joy at having this deeply righteous self-identity, it is a very dangerous foe indeed.

However, while this is the core or essence of Al Qaeda, as we learn more about it we can see that it has been something of an umbrella as well, absorbing or developing links, especially financial, to a variety of terrorists groups that emerged initially as separate from it. It also seems that a number of these groups are rather more instrumental in their approach to terrorism. Thus they have been and should be less difficult to deal with, less impervious to deterrence. It is important in dealing with Al Qaeda to keep this in mind. Some of the elements under that umbrella are more amenable to being deterred than others and this can be exploited to help fragment the overall organization. A policy of blanket condemnation and extermination of all those elements may miss important opportunities to cut down on the scale of the threat Al Qaeda poses.

Next, when it is not its own reward terrorism is rarely pursued by well-organized groups who are outside the political system where other avenues for achieving their goals are readily available. (State terrorists are quite another matter - they often use terror when they have plenty of other means available to them.) It is utilized when there are no other avenues that can be used or are feasible to use. This includes situations where other avenues are available but the individual or group cannot successfully use them, such as when what the potential or actual terrorist organization seeks is seen as so crazy or silly or totally harmful so that its goals arouse too much opposition. Thus terrorism readily arises in democratic or open systems, domestic and international. Germany and Italy, for example, have had long running terrorist violence from organized groups in the past. It is not only a weapon of the weak, but of the marginal. There is often no ready way to appease these terrorists; frequently they want things commonly or officially seen as despicable.

In some ways the most dangerous terrorist of all is the state terrorist; the established government which has many means available to do what it wishes and yet deliberately chooses terror. Presumably the officials involved do so because it is, in important ways for them, its own reward - one of the "joys" of having power. Terrorists are often marginal politically; sometimes, unfortunately, they are at the center. Except for the position it worked out for itself in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda has been mostly the former; Saddam and his cronies are the epitome of the latter.

In trying to deter terrorists, therefore, it is necessary to see whether their objectives can be met so that they can be appeased (often they cannot), then see what can be done to deter by defense (which is often not enough), ensure that the terrorists' means will be obviously counterproductive (which is fairly common), and finally see to what extent the motivation is terrorism as its own reward. Threatening to attack and destroy terrorists or doing so can be an important deterrent, but their destruction is imperative for dealing with those literally beyond deterring. Deterrence and Iraq

In the case of Iraq we return to the point that deterrence is almost never irrelevant. In Iraq the US does not face opponents for whom deterrence is meaningless. Saddam Hussein is not beyond deterring. He can be deterred if an attack he is planning will bring him very serious costs and have no chance of success. He is deterred in particular when the costs will directly affect him, his power and his survival.

Again, the key to deterrence success is, in part, the strength of the opponent's motivation. The US is concerned that in attacking Iraq it may provoke Saddam to use weapons of mass destruction. It is right to worry about this because the Bush government has made Saddam the target in most of its pronouncements - the point of planning to attack Iraq is to eliminate him. Like Hitler in his last days, Saddam therefore may turn out to have no incentive to avoid doing his worst. Since his past actions suggest that it is only his personal survival and power, and the vast enhancement of that power, that he cares about, the key to deterring Saddam from using WMD is to leave him with something if he

does not. That something is his survival. The threat of his deliberate elimination should apply only if he uses such weapons. And the key to approaching the regime as a whole, to encourage elimination of Saddam from inside, is to never assert that there will be war no matter what concessions are made. Otherwise, the motivation to stick with Saddam is apt to be too high.

This is hardly a new situation. The American government wrestled with it in attempting to get Japan to quit the war in 1945. The argument that Japan should simply be threatened with complete and utter destruction, with occupation and the elimination of its government, was criticized as leaving Japanese leaders no real incentives to quit - that the US should offer to permit the continued existence of the Emperor, for example. A standard argument against mandatory death penalties or three strikes laws for various crimes is that criminals intent on such crimes have no incentive to avoid the worst kind of behavior in trying to avoid being caught. There has been fear that the emergence of international war crimes tribunals will make leaders potentially subject to such tribunals all the more resistant to giving up power without a fight to the death.

Thus, deterrence of Iraq must rest on leaving the regime, Saddam, and the nation some reasonable alternatives to complete loss (and/or destruction). However, the Bush Administration is perilously close to inviting Saddam and others in the regime to do their worst because it has left them no way to avoid the worst. This may heighten internal efforts to get rid of Saddam and that appears to be something the administration is counting on. But if those efforts don't succeed, yet the policy remains, American forces in an attack will be at greater risk than they need be, as will Israel and neighbors of Iraq that cooperate with the US.

Particularly unwise, even reprehensible, was the suggestion by the President's spokesman in the most public fashion that the assassination of Saddam would be a lot cheaper way to bring about the American objective. Seeking a regime change is not unknown in international disputes. Saddam himself sought just that in his invasion of Kuwait. While such an objective makes ending or settling a conflict just that much more difficult because it raises the stakes considerably, at least it has numerous precedents. Quite apart from the moral issue of advocating assassination, inciting this cannot be in the interest of an open democratic society since in all such nations high officials are far more visible and approachable, much more vulnerable to a response in kind.

Something to be particularly concerned about in this instance is the fact that Saddam has long sought, has in fact claimed, the mantle of leading the Arab world to power and greatness in the contemporary world, throwing off decades of defeat, despair, and denigration. This comes with some inclination, apparent in his rhetoric, to accept the possibility of a heroic death on behalf of the noble cause - to become a pan-Arab hero. It would seem far easier to deter Saddam from putting up the ultimate fight to the death if he felt, much as Milosevic has felt since his defeat, that life would continue to give him opportunities, and even a stage, on which to try to build an heroic image even in defeat.

As for Saddam the megalomaniac, this is an old concern in the theory and practice of deterrence. Many years ago an Israeli analyst posed the problem of dealing with "crazy states," concluding incorrectly that deterrence would not work. Actually, trying to arrive at policy decisions about deterrence on the basis of the rationality of the opponent is of little utility. For one thing, irrationality covers a vast range of behavior and some variations or manifestations of it actually lend themselves to success in deterrence. In addition, it is almost impossible to know just how rational or irrational an opponent is, so fine tuning a deterrence policy to suit the opponent is regularly attempted but the chances of success are low. For instance, states and leaders can be irrational about their overall goals and related worldview but realistically crafty and calculating in going about achieving them; they can also be quite sensible about their overall goals and broad perspectives yet foolish in their selection, and then attachment, to means for achieving them that are inappropriate

and even counterproductive. North Korea may well be a good example of the former but analysts regularly disagree about this. On the latter, China's desire to absorb Taiwan does not seem strange or incomprehensible, but cavalier comments by some Chinese officials about being ready for war with the US over Taiwan flirt with lunacy in terms of the potential consequences for the nation of that course of action. In either case, building deterrence on seeing the opponent as rational or rejecting it because the opponent is irrational would terribly oversimplify the problem.

Far more appropriate is the concern, often voiced about Saddam, that his ambitions and pretensions are so huge, his power so absolute, and his certainty in his own abilities so complete that he will be prone to mistakes and miscalculations. Deterrence involves communicating effectively with an opponent, getting across a clear message backed up by a viable threat, yet many studies show that governments are prone to underestimating the power and determination of their opponents, the chances of defeat, and the effectiveness of their own military capabilities. Governments can be very difficult to deter because they resist information that clashes with their perspectives, build excessively optimistic estimates about how a military clash will go, too readily denigrate the caliber of their opponents, etc. And Saddam has a record of grievous miscalculations - that he could do whatever he wanted to the Kurds with no international repercussions, that he could easily bring about the collapse of the revolutionary government of Iran, that he could readily defeat Iran militarily, that no one would seriously react if he seized Kuwait, that no one would really care enough if he gradually undermined the sanctions against his regime. One of the ways power corrupts is by promoting the detachment of the power holder from reality.

Once again this is not necessarily tied in with the intrinsic rationality or irrationality of Saddam and his officials. It is a form of irrational behavior but its manifestation can obviously vary, depending on circumstances. It is also hardly unique to Saddam. It is a standard problem in deterrence and not something that, in itself, calls for dealing with Iraq in a unique way.

The other side of the Iraq problem is fear that while our deterrence will not work against Iraq, Iraq's deterrence will work very well against us. Its threats to use weapons of mass destruction will make the US, its allies, and the neighbors unwilling to intervene against the regime. We can readily see the potential problem with this argument. Why should Iraq readily be better able to deter than its opponents who are far more capable of inflicting almost any kind of harm or destruction? Iraqi deterrence via threats of the use of WMD faces essentially three related problems. One is that the opponents' motivation may be much too strong, and in Iraq's case may be stimulated by such threats. That is certainly the image the Bush Administration conveys, that it is ready to pay almost any price to get rid of the regime because of its association with WMD. The second is that Iraqi use of weapons of mass destruction would almost certainly increase that motivation greatly - the regime, perhaps the entire nation, would face the distinct possibility of extinction. Thus threats to use those weapons are not easy to make credible. That makes them very unlikely to be believed and then they would be unable to deter. Deterring an opponent like the US is a terribly difficult thing under such circumstances. This was precisely the case in the Gulf War. Saddam knew that if he used weapons of mass destruction his elimination was certain - only if he did not use them did he have a chance of surviving.

Does the possession of WMD, in itself, prevent attacks or prevent other coercive steps from being used by a nation's opponents? Is there, to use a common way of putting it, an existential deterrence associated with these weapons? Many analysts suggest that there is but in fact it is not reliable. Britain in the Falklands, the US in Korea and Vietnam, Israel in 1973, Israel and Iraq in the Gulf War, China and the Soviet Union in their 1969 border clashes, India and Pakistan in their more recent border clashes, Iran and Iraq in their long war are all examples to the contrary - states with WMD subjected to attack by both others similarly armed and states with no such weapons.

Sometimes attacks have been launched against states with both WMD and superiority in conventional forces as well. Getting effective deterrence is a particular problem for a state that is inferior in both WMD and conventional forces.

This is at the root of the third problem that would face Iraqi deterrence based on WMD threats. In a confrontation with a state or coalition that has overwhelming military advantages, a state with WMD will confront opponents exceedingly concerned about its possible use of those weapons and ready to take extreme steps to preclude this at the first sign it might happen. In the Gulf War Iraq faced opponents ready to attack and extremely alert to any possible Iraqi use of WMD, prepared to react very intensely, including by preemption. This is one reason why the Soviet Union did not rush to put its nuclear forces on high alert during the Cuban Missile Crisis - to do so would have been highly provocative and perhaps have drawn a preemptive attack from its much stronger opponent. WMD are by no means certain to be effective deterrents for Iraq - they may even have the opposite effect and make an attack more likely, just as Iraq's simply trying to develop nuclear weapons has.

Conclusion It is hard to conclude that Saddam is wildly irrational, beyond the capacity to make the necessary perceptions and calculations to be deterred. He is certainly very savage, having risen to power and then stayed there within a terrifying political system. He is also exceedingly ambitious; he wants to be a truly great man. Where he is vulnerable to pressure is with respect to his life and his power. Holding on to power is close to being the same as holding on to life itself for him. He can therefore be deterred by overwhelming threats to both if he goes across specified boundaries.

The fear in the US is that this will work only until Saddam crosses one particularly potent boundary - that he is willing to try to gain and retain WMD because this will allow him to cross other boundaries with impunity thereafter. That would give him a viable way to escape the boundaries the US and others have tried to impose on him with his life and power intact and he knows it. He must be stopped before he succeeds in doing so. While this is something to be concerned about, the fact is that his acquisition of nuclear weapons would not alter his highly unfavorable strategic situation. That he faces a most unacceptable outcome in a war would remain, whether he was to use those weapons or not. The incentives of his opponents to attack would, if anything, be enhanced particularly if, as the United States has indicated, it fears he would be willing to distribute those weapons to terrorists.

The best way to deter Iraq is, first, to continue to eliminate any chance of Iraq succeeding in its political objectives with an attack. This is what the US has been doing for years and Iraq has clearly been deterred. Second, if Iraq develops nuclear weapons it can still readily be contained and deterred. Real danger arises only if Iraqi leaders wrongly think that the situation has changed and that they can then pursue adventurous policies, if they are incorrectly emboldened to challenge the boundaries the US and others have set. (One fear now in South Asia is that India and Pakistan might wrongly think their nuclear weapons free them to do dangerous things with their conventional forces.) This is certainly a concern but hardly new - the entire Cold War was conducted in the shadow of it and states readily found ways to deal with it. The important element is making clear that any use of WMD will lead to far graver consequences than their nonuse.

Finally, the very good chance that Iraqi WMD could not deter a highly motivated US or international coalition is no grounds for complacency. Deterrence has never been automatically successful, never entirely reliable, never an ironclad guarantee against being attacked. Thus, a stringent effort to prevent proliferation of WMD, particularly to governments like Iraq, is very appropriate if only to reduce the potential or actual consequences when, or if, deterrence ever fails. The US is right to continue leading the international campaign against WMD, particularly given the chance that terrorists might acquire such weapons. However, the campaign would carry greater weight if the US were truly interested in eliminating all such weapons, its own included.

Deterrence was never entirely reliable during the Cold War. American concern about Soviet motivation for attack was so deep (and vice versa), concern for the reliability of deterrence was so high, that the Cold War rested on grossly indiscriminate threats of retaliation. Ultimately the US threatened to kill virtually everyone and destroy almost everything in the Soviet Union. We could certainly approach deterrence of terrorists in the same way. Imagine threatening terrorists with death for their relatives, friends, neighbors, and contacts and with destruction of their home towns, nations, all places of former and current residence. Or threatening to react to Islamic terrorism by destroying all Islamic places of worship and shrines - starting with Mecca. And we could be threatening Iraq with being completely wiped off the face of the earth, another Carthage. Those were precisely the threats on which Cold War deterrence rested because the enemy seemed so motivated to attack.

The point is not that we should resort to such threats; they were grotesque then and would be absurd now because the motivation to attack was not infinite and the threats would be all out of proportion to the damage we might suffer. The point is that neither Iraq nor the terrorists pose unfamiliar or unique threats. Terrorists have been around for a long time including ones with vicarious motives. The latter are largely beyond deterring and going after them, including by preemptive attack, is a suitable response but it is, as Israel certainly knows yet seems unable to come to grips with, far from certain to work.

Iraq is a different case. Iraq's motivation to attack is not that extraordinary - it derives from a man who loves power and glory and wants more. Threats to take those things away from him are effective because of that motivation. Iraq is not uniquely difficult to deter. It also cannot pose an especially daunting deterrence threat of its own against the vastly stronger states that threaten it. It is a difficult, obstreperous, evil opponent but taking the extreme step of attacking must be justifiable on other grounds than that it somehow poses an unprecedented problem in deterrence since it does not do so.

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