

11-7-1997

Trends. Miscalculating Miscalculations: Why Iraqi Threats against the United States (US) Make Sense

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Recommended Citation

Editor (1997) "Trends. Miscalculating Miscalculations: Why Iraqi Threats against the United States (US) Make Sense," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 15 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol3/iss15/4>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Trends. Miscalculating Miscalculations: Why Iraqi Threats against the United States (US) Make Sense

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Volume: 3

Issue: 15

Date: 1997-11-07

Keywords: Iraq, United Nations, Inspections

As of this writing, Iraqi political authorities are (1) barring some US citizens who are members of United Nations (UN) inspection teams from Iraq, (2) ordering others to leave, (3) inducing some inspection teams with US citizens to stop activity, and (4) threatening to shoot down US reconnaissance aircraft supporting the inspection teams. These actions have commonly been described by political commentators as a blunder, as a miscalculation by Saddam Hussein. These commentators write that just when a majority of the UN Security Council's permanent members--Russia, France, and China--were drastically reducing any of their support or acquiescence still remaining for UN sanctions against Iraq, the Iraqi threats have now increased this support in a failed effort to separate the US from its allies on policy towards Iraq. (The commentators write that the Iraqi threats were intended to further decrease support and acquiescence of these countries for sanctions after their refusal to go along with new sanctions advanced by the US and the United Kingdom.)

Perhaps. However, a political psychological analysis of events can suggest a different picture. Let's say that Iraqi officials desire to protect as much of their proscribed military assets--nuclear, chemical, biological, missilery--as possible--also as much of their procedures for further developing these assets. The force, threats, and lies already employed by these officials have hindered UN inspection efforts, but these efforts have still continued with the relentlessness of, first, Rolf Ekeus and now Richard Butler. By creating a new crisis, the Iraqis have in effect created a psychological anchoring phenomenon. Suddenly, the rigor of inspections is less important than the very constitution of inspection teams. If inspection rigor were a "10" on a scale of crisis, team constitution is now a "15." By seeming to give in on team constitution, the Iraqis may induce through psychological anchoring an implicit or unconscious partial relenting on inspection rigor. The degree of inspection rigor just may no longer seem to be quite the issue it once was. The political possibility of increasing sanctions on Iraq may be even less possible. (And the Iraqis have a case to demand the removal of certain UN team members. After all, Laurent Kabila has been able to induce the UN Secretary General to remove two head inspectors of UN teams in the former Zaire.)

Some commentators may hypothesize that any positive effects of anchoring come at the expense of increasing cohesion of Security Council members reacting to the Iraqi threats. This is a reasonable objection. However, in this case the governments of Russia, France, and China desire that sanctions against Iraq be abolished as soon as is politic to facilitate oil deals, payment of loans, and other economic activities. Social cohesion is a best seeming in this case. Moreover, with changes in time perception posited in a previous IBPP article, it is more difficult to sustain motivation to support sanctions in an era of globalization--and easier to feel that enough is enough. And, of course, once inspections lose their rigor and then cease to exist, it will be more difficult to "catch" Iraq in the future. In essence, Iraqi officials through "stress inoculation" have learned how to more covertly, clandestinely, and unobtrusively get what they need to continue rebuilding military assets proscribed by the UN.

Another psychological perspective is that of an avoidance-avoidance conflict. Iraqi authorities may well have concluded that the US Government intends to do everything it can to maintain sanctions until

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Saddam is no longer in power. The choice then becomes to suffer sanctions and inspections or to suffer sanctions without inspections. Iraqi authorities risk massive retaliation by US forces --resulting in the destruction of the present government--but probably believe such retaliation will not occur.

So there may be a miscalculation concerning threats against the US, but it is the commentators who miscalculate. The Iraqis may have it just about right. (See Czaczkas, B., & Ganzach, Y. (1996). The natural selection of predictive heuristics: Anchoring and adjustment versus representativeness. *Journal of Behavioral Decisionmaking*, 9, 125-139; Diplomacy and force on Iraq. (November 4, 1997.) *The New York Times*, p. A22; Erlanger, S. (November 5, 1997). Analysis: Latest Iraqi crisis tests resolve of Persian Gulf allies. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Globalization and time perception: Are multilateral sanctions on the way out? *IBPP*, 3(14); Mumma, G. H., & Wilson, S. B. Procedural debiasing of primacy/anchoring effects in clinical-like judgments. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 51, 841-853.)