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OPINION

And What if the Iraqi Played for a Draw?

By Hans Binnendijk

LONDON — Saddam Hussein is nearly in checkmate. He badly miscalculated George Bush's cunning and resolve at the Gulf chessboard. Knights and rooks of many countries have blocked most avenues of escape. But the black king retains some dangerous options. If the game should end in a draw, the black king wins.

The present crisis is not a game. Real lives are at stake. The outcome could largely determine the nature of the post-Cold War international system. But the crisis could end in a draw if Saddam Hussein is careful.

He has three basic options.

• He could continue playing for time, probing for ways to break the grip of the UN-imposed sanctions. He is not above starving children to alleviate the impact of the food embargo. But this embargo is unusually cohesive. And even if food were allowed in, Iraq's economy might still be crippled.

Whether sanctions quickly reach into Saddam Hussein's command bunkers is questionable. But Iraq cannot sustain the economic pressure forever. During the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein made sure that Baghdad escaped the economic pain.

He must also calculate that if sanctions do not work, military means might accomplish the same purpose. Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze recently suggested that even Moscow might support the use of force. So buying time looks like an

increasingly risky alternative for Iraq.

• The second option, a desperate one, is escalation. The Iraqi leader has threatened to unleash his terrorists, or to attack Israel and Saudi Arabia with ballistic missiles. These threats cannot be written off completely, though they probably are intended to deter attack and sow the seeds of dissension. But

What if he declared victory and withdrew — from most of Kuwait?

Saddam Hussein has been careful not to give the other side any pretext for escalation. He has told his fighter pilots, ship captains, and terrorist chiefs to avoid conflict.

He knows the U.S.-led forces could destroy most of his airpower and ballistic missiles, and much of his chemical and nuclear weapons potential in days. Iraq's forward-deployed tank armies are also vulnerable to overwhelming U.S. air power. Saddam Hussein could quickly lose most of his ability to extend military muscle. (Vietnam analogies are misplaced, unless the United States were to attempt a ground invasion of Iraq.)

An Iraqi preemptive attack on allied forces would not change the out-

come. Iraqi aircraft would have difficulty penetrating Saudi airspace. Chemical weapons would be difficult to deliver with accuracy, and U.S. and British troops are prepared to fight in a chemical war. Iraqi tanks would be even more vulnerable to air power once they left their defensive positions. Iraqi ballistic missiles could terrorize civilians, but they are not accurate enough to have a decisive military impact. Again, Iraq would be destroyed, though at a greater cost to allied forces.

Even pressure on Israel, either by direct attack or by undermining Jordan, would not benefit Saddam Hussein, since it would lead in the end to his destruction.

• Saddam's third option is to try to ease the crisis, and to work toward a draw. Negotiations are not the means; the United States rightly refuses to talk until Iraq leaves Kuwait. And a complete withdrawal would be a clear defeat for Iraq, one Saddam Hussein would be unlikely to survive.

An enticing alternative might be a partial withdrawal to the disputed territories and islands. He might follow the advice Senator George Aiken gave about the Vietnam War — withdraw and declare a victory.

By continuing to occupy the southern part of the Rumaila oil fields and Bubiyan and al-Warbah islands, he

could retain two strategic prizes: full control over those oil fields and guaranteed access to the Gulf. He might even garner more support in the Arab world by declaring Kuwait a temporary Palestinian homeland and calling for elections. The prospect of a partial withdrawal may explain why Iraqi forces have been plundering Kuwait City with such brutal determination.

Such a move would cause tremendous problems for U.S. policy-makers, making it far more difficult to maintain international support for sanctions or military force.

Saddam Hussein would hope to emerge as an Arab hero with his full military capabilities intact. The United States and Britain might continue trying to force total withdrawal, but the costs of doing so might loom larger than the gains.

It is Saddam Hussein's move on the chessboard. The United States has moved confidently so far and is on a steady course. It will continue to gain authority and capability for a military option. But barring a clear provocation, it is unlikely to exercise that capability so long as the sanctions appear to be working. Saddam Hussein's fate is in his own hands.

The writer is deputy director at the International Institute for Strategic Studies; these are his personal views. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.