

Strategic Insight

Current WMD Challenges in the Middle East

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The September 11th attacks and events that followed have again focused the U.S. administration, intelligence community, and Department of Defense on the danger that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) could be acquired by adversary states or non-state actors. Two threats in the Middle East currently stand out among the rest: Al-Qaeda's announced efforts to make or acquire WMD, and the suspected resumption of Iraq's nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons programs.

Al-Qaeda's WMD Potential

Osama Bin Laden and his network Al-Qaeda have been seeking to develop chemical, biological, and perhaps nuclear weapons capabilities for at least a decade. There is evidence that they have considered developing biological agents such as anthrax, botulinum toxin and ricin. U.S. troops inspecting terrorist training camps in Afghanistan have uncovered rudimentary laboratories for developing biological weapons. At the abu-Khabab terrorist camp, Al-Qaeda elements may have conducted tests on animals to investigate the effects of these agents. In terms of a nuclear weapons capability, there is little evidence to suggest that Al-Qaeda ever developed a nuclear explosive device. There are, however, several known instances in which Al-Qaeda members attempted to acquire uranium. Recently, troops investigating one camp close to the Kandahar airport found a substance in jars that is suspected to be depleted uranium. If this turns out to be true, it could mean that Al-Qaeda was attempting to develop a so-called "dirty bomb" intended to expose a large area to radiation.

The U.S. strategy to deal with Al-Qaeda's potential WMD threat is to collect intelligence in Afghanistan, and to rely on friends and allies for help in stopping other Al-Qaeda cells from obtaining or using WMD. U.S. troops and intelligence officers are interviewing detainees for information, closing down and investigating terrorist training camps for more evidence of WMD production, and examining existing evidence to put together a better picture of what Al-Qaeda may have been capable of developing. Additionally, the Bush administration is using diplomatic measures in countries around the world to identify and close down other Al-Qaeda cells.

Assessment

Although it is difficult to assess Al-Qaeda's capacity to develop biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons, it seems probable that the group would direct its efforts toward biological and chemical weapons, since these are easier to develop and simpler to deploy. It remains to be seen how successful U.S. efforts to stop Al-Qaeda from creating a WMD capability will be. Intelligence collection and analysis, and the cooperation of the international community, will be essential in this endeavor.

References and Resources

[Center for Nonproliferation Studies Special Resource Page: America's Response: Regional Issues and Implications](#)

[Hunting Bin Laden](#), Frontline

[The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days](#)

Iraq Returns to the Forefront

Iraq continues to be a major concern for the United States. The current war against terrorism has again put the regime headed by Saddam Hussein at the top of the U.S. government's list of countries attempting clandestinely to develop WMD. On November 19, 2001, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton said, "The United States strongly suspects that Iraq has taken advantage of three years of no UN inspections to improve all phases of its offensive BW program. The existence of Iraq's program is beyond dispute, in complete contravention of the BWC [Biological Weapons Convention]." The United Nations stated that in the absence of inspections, Iraq has the ability to reconstitute its biological weapons program, including production of anthrax, botulinum toxin, and aflatoxins, within a few weeks or months.

U.S. officials also believe that Iraq has retained the expertise needed to resume production of at least some chemical agents within a few months. As recently as 1999, Iraqi workers may have begun installing or repairing equipment at dual-use chemical warfare-associated facilities. Before the Persian Gulf War, the Iraqi regime was known to have produced and stockpiled mustard, tabun, sarin, and VX, some stocks of which are likely to be hidden away along with a variety of their precursor chemicals.

As for Iraq's nuclear weapons program, the Iraqi government claims that it has destroyed all the specific equipment and facilities that would be useful to develop nuclear weapons. Officials in the U.S. Department of Defense believe, however, that Iraq has retained the technical expertise and weapon designs that would allow it to restart its nuclear weapons program if scientists there could obtain fissile material.

The strategy of the United States against Iraq and its WMD threat so far has been two-fold. Recently, President Bush stated that Iraq must allow weapons inspectors to return or face the consequences, but he did not say what those consequences would be. In addition, the Bush administration is pushing a plan for "smart sanctions" that target the Iraqi regime rather than its people. This plan would lift restrictions on civilian goods, but tighten controls on arms-related equipment and clamp down on oil smuggling.

Assessment

The United States continues to pursue competing policy objectives on Iraq. On the one hand it has apparently agreed to pursue a compromise with Russia and others on the Security Council to restructure the current oil-for-food program by widening the types of acquisitions Iraq could make with oil sales revenues. Under the plan, the virtual last remaining element in the sanctions regime would be an arms embargo. Should the Security Council reach agreement on "smart sanctions," it is possible to foresee the partial reintegration of Iraq into the international community with Saddam still in power.

While the United pursues consensus in the Security Council, it continues to actively promote regime change in Baghdad by working with the Iraqi opposition and various high-level government officials also continue to assert that Iraq remains a threat to international peace and security due to its unmonitored WMD programs.

Eventually, these two approaches will have to be reconciled.

However the United States proceeds on its policy, it is an abiding truism that a Saddam-lead Iraq retains the intent and the capability to use WMD as: (1) an instrument to coerce its neighbors and promote regional instability; (2) a concrete threat to the security of Israel; and (3) a last resort to preserve the regime. As long as Saddam remains in power, the WMD threat will endure, and he shows no sign of loosening his grip.

The United States is faced with unattractive policy choices. President Bush's recent statement that Iraq must allow the return of UN weapons inspectors or face unspecified consequences implies that UNMOVIC could actually perform a meaningful disarmament mission inside Iraq. The danger for the United States and the international community is that Iraq agrees to this request and that we see the recreation of the situation that existed in 1997 and 1998 in which it became apparent that Security Council would not back its own weapons inspectors in their attempts to receive the unfettered access needed to fulfill a meaningful disarmament mission. The Clinton Administration decided in late 1998 that no inspections were better than sham inspections.

But pursuing a unilateral policy for regime change is equally problematic. Using the "opposition" is fraught with pitfalls. The Iraqi opposition in London remains disorganized and ineffective; the Shiite Marsh Arab opposition in the south is Iranian sponsored and at odds with the Sunni Arabs on the Arabian Peninsula; the Kurdish factions in the north have little incentive to undertake military action against Saddam, since US military assurances have already provided them with the defacto Kurdish state they have long sought. Attempts to tie military action on Iraq to the war on terrorism have failed, and there appears to be little international support for attacking Iraq on the basis of its WMD programs.

For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our [Strategic Insights](#) section.

For related links, see our [Middle East Resources](#) and our [WMD Proliferation Resources](#).

References and Resources

[Secretary of State Colin L. Powell: Interview on CNN's Larry King Live Smart Sanctions](#), John R. Bolton, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, Remarks to the 5th Biological Weapons Convention RevCon Meeting
[BBC Analysis: Will 'smart' sanctions work?](#)
[The Middle East and War With Iraq](#) November 30, 2001, Anthony H. Cordesman