

## Strategic Insight

### Iraq: The Weapons Inspection Conundrum

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The Bush Administration appears set for a showdown with Iraq. And, as was the case with the Clinton Administration's Iraq policy over the last eight years, the United Nations-imposed disarmament regime will likely be the centerpiece of a future crisis. The emerging "Bush Doctrine," which commits the country to combating terrorist groups and countries that support terrorism, also incorporates the idea that "rogue" nations should not be allowed to develop weapons of mass destruction that could potentially threaten the United States and its allies. While President Bush's State of the Union address identified the "axis of evil" -- Iran, Iraq and North Korea -- as particularly troubling countries needing attention under this doctrine, it seems clear that Iraq with its unmonitored WMD programs is the prime target.

The U.S.-Iraq arms inspection/WMD standoff represents a defining characteristic of the post-Gulf War environment in the region, not to mention the interaction within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) during this period. Simply put, Iraq's commitments to the international community under United Nations Security Council Resolution 687 and follow-on resolutions remain unfulfilled. These resolutions require that Iraq destroy all its WMD programs (weapons, production equipment and research programs) and submit to a U.N.-administered long-term WMD monitoring system. The United States and the Britain are effectively the only permanent members of the Security Council that continue to insist that Iraq live up to these obligations. While the Clinton Administration did not shy away from using force against Iraq to back up the U.N. Special Commission, or UNSCOM, it decided for a variety of reasons against an invasion to enforce the will of the international community as expressed in the Security Council's resolutions. In the context of more current events, traditional allies such as Britain and Canada have registered their support for the U.S. stance and possible military action, while Iraq's friends in the Security Council, Russia, France, and China, are simply calling on Iraq to let inspectors back in. Neither Russia, France, nor China appears to support an invasion of Iraq.

For its part, the U.N. Secretariat is currently playing messenger and negotiator for the international community. On March 7, Director General Kofi Annan held talks with high-level Iraq officials to urge the country accept the return of U.N. weapons inspectors. According to Mr. Annan, "the question of the inspectors and return of the inspectors has been one of the key bones of contention between the United Nations and Iraq," expressing hope that Iraq will work in a "constructive spirit." Even if these talks are successful, questions remain, such as, what will U.N. inspectors do when they get there, what might they find, and what may be the outcome if evidence of continued Iraqi WMD efforts is uncovered?

#### Inspections Now?

In December 1999 the U.N. established a follow-on inspection regime in the form of the Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) to continue UNSCOM's work. It has not begun its inspections due to Iraq's refusal to permit their inspections until sanctions are lifted.

Despite significant and well-documented accomplishments, UNSCOM arguably faced insurmountable problems in fulfilling its mandate. It remains unclear whether UNMOVIC could be any more successful given the fundamentally non-permissive arms control environment under which the mission is being undertaken. The inspections in Iraq are and have always been based on an assumptive disconnect. The international community broadly assumes that Iraq intends to honor its obligations under the cease-fire agreement; Iraq, for its part, has no intention of meeting these obligations and, as a result, has successfully pursued a strategy of obstruction and concealment. As chronicled in the recent testimony of former UNSCOM Deputy Director Charles Duelfer, Iraq's WMD programs are seen by the regime as central to its survival.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as noted by Duelfer, the regime believes that WMD actually saved the country during Iran-Iraq War, and, similarly, deterred the United States from marching on Baghdad after ejecting Iraq's forces from Kuwait. Hence, Duelfer convincingly argues, the programs will never be revealed to any international body. With this as a backdrop, UNSCOM's accomplishments are all the more impressive. The enduring nature of the regime's commitment to concealment and noncompliance make UNMOVIC's arms control mission just as difficult as UNSCOM's.

Iraq's readmission of weapons inspectors could lead to two outcomes: (1) Inspectors being denied access to suspected WMD sites and otherwise obstructed, leading UNMOVIC to report continued noncompliance; (2) Actual progress in narrowing the gaps between Iraq's declarations as to the state of its WMD programs and the ability of UNMOVIC to verify these declarations. An important issue under UNMOVIC's leadership is the "reasonableness" standard under which any progress in the three files (missile, chemical, biological) will be judged. Throughout the UNSCOM era, the United States insisted on strict and verifiable accounting standards; the fear is that UNMOVIC may not share this commitment and will be more prone to political influence from the Secretariat, which is anxious to settle the issue.

### Suspected remaining WMD capabilities?

Although the Gulf War, UNSCOM activities, and internal destruction activities have left Iraq with considerably less than their original WMD capability, experts believe that Saddam still has a significant infrastructure in all areas with the exception of nuclear weapons development:

- *Nuclear weapons* -- Western intelligence reports that Iraq has probably continued at least low-level theoretical R&D associated with its nuclear program. A sufficient source of fissile material remains Iraq's most significant obstacle to being able to produce a nuclear weapon. Western intelligence believes that Baghdad may be attempting to acquire materials that could aid in reconstituting its nuclear weapons program.
- *Missiles* -- It is probable that a small force of SCUD-derived missiles remain in Iraq. Defectors have reported their existence and this is consistent with the remaining uncertainties of UNSCOM's work. During UNSCOM's presence, Iraq maintained programs to develop short-range ballistic and multi-stage missiles. They even built a facility for the production of ammonium perchlorate, a key ingredient in solid missile propellant. It is reasonable to assume that such development work continues. Key indicators will be testing of separating warheads, fusing for detonation above ground, and perhaps employment of supersonic parachutes to retard warheads. Coupled with known Iraqi interest in these areas before UNSCOM left, such testing would indicate important advances in Iraqi CW and BW missile warheads.
- *Chemical weapons* -- The Iraqi chemical weapons program must be assumed to remain albeit in a diminished state from the huge industrial production of the 1980's. Dual-use facilities, even at known locations such as the production plants at Falluja, have the ability to produce chemical agents clandestinely. Chemical weapons have proven utility to Iraq on the battlefield against large troop concentrations. Iraq will retain the capacity to produce significant amounts of agent and fill munitions in a period of strategic warning. Storable, persistent VX agent may well have been produced since UNSCOM left in 1998. CW munitions for the battlefield can be produced in existing Iraqi munitions factories.
- *Biological weapons* -- The biological program is the most problematic for a number of reasons. It most certainly is the most difficult present threat posed by Iraq. First, it is the least visible. Facilities can be hidden or made mobile. BW programs have a small signature. Another key

concern about the biological programs is that Iraq can accomplish everything indigenously. They can produce all the production equipment (fermenters, dryers, centrifuges, etc.). Iraq is also quite able to produce dispersal weapons of various sorts. Finally, they may also have access to seed stocks for a range of agents. They also have the capacity to deploy it clandestinely or through surrogates should the regime so decide.

## UNMOVIC's Task

Hans Blix, the Chief U.N. inspector, says that any searches in Iraq will have to be tough, viable and not "cosmetic." The U.N. Security Council has empowered his organization to look anywhere and destroy Iraq's most lethal weapons. Preparing for the eventual moment when his inspectors would enter Iraq, UNMOVIC has assembled a list of tasks in a 300-page notebook with over 100 unresolved issues. These include identifying any remaining long-range missiles, clarifying the physical existence of any nuclear or missile infrastructure, verifying the destruction of numerous biological agents (to include over 8,500 liters of declared anthrax agent), and ensuring that programs have not been re-constituted. However, the U.N. Security Council has also mandated UNMOVIC to complete their work quickly, and to tread softly, with cultural sensitivity. Mr. Blix's mandate gives him 60 days after starting work in Iraq to come up with a shortlist of target weapons and facilities and a set of "clearly defined and precise" tasks that Iraq must fulfill to prove that it is disarming.

## Conclusion

The Bush Administration appears determined to force a resolution to the arms control-inspection conundrum in Iraq. Given Iraq's commitments to its WMD programs, many believe that regime change is the only way to enforce compliance.<sup>2</sup> Iraq is pushing back diplomatically, which could be seen as a stall tactic, asking the UNSC to answer a list of questions before they consider letting inspectors back into the country. The Secretary General asked the council to answer questions including whether U.S. threats against the Iraqi government were a breach of international law, whether U.S. spies would serve on inspection teams, whether there would be compensation for prior U.S. and British bombings, and how long inspectors would stay if Baghdad eventually let them in. One question was already answered by Hans Blix. He told the Security Council that it would take less than a year for his teams to complete inspections.

America's response to Iraq's questions is unreservedly negative. Robert Wood, spokesman for the U.S. mission to the U.N. called the questions an attempt "to portray Iraq as a victim." The United States is adamant that the UNSC should not answer the questions but rather focus on Iraq's obligation to permit full inspections. And the United States is not likely to be patient during this process. If it comes to it, acting unilaterally in Iraq will carry political costs for the United States within the United Nations and the Security Council, and it could complicate the war on terrorism. The U.S.-Iraq-UNSC standoff has been an enduring feature of the international landscape throughout the 1990s. Altering or removing this phenomenon will create ripple effects across the region and throughout the international community. We cannot foresee all the consequences of such a development, but we can say with certainty that the world would be a different place with a disarmed Iraq.

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

## References

1. "[Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs in Iraq](#)," Testimony of Charles Duelfer, Resident Visiting Scholar, Center for Strategic and International Studies, before the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, Armed Services Committee of the United States Senate, February 27, 2002.

2. See the testimony of Robert Einhorn, "[Addressing the Iraqi WMD Threat](#)," before the Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services, Senate Government Affairs Committee, March 1, 2002.

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