Weapons of Mass Destruction: Assessing the Iraqi Threat

This fact sheet is part of a series of publications produced by CESR for its Emergency Campaign on Iraq, which aims to inform public opinion and influence policy towards promoting peace and protecting human rights for resolving the crisis in Iraq.

The broad use of the term “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) to include chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons is misleading. While protection against chemical and biological weapons is possible for military forces on the battlefield and amongst prepared civilians, no such protection exists against nuclear weapons. Given their power, delivery method, heat radiation, and radioactivity, nuclear weapons are indiscriminate in their destructiveness.

The United States and Britain maintain policies of nuclear first-strike and a stated willingness to use nuclear weapons against states that do not have them. The US, which became the only state ever to use nuclear weapons when it dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, recent history is marked by a broad use of the term “weapons of mass destruction.” Both Iran and Iraq deployed chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War, with Iraq using mustard gas and tabun against Iranian troops on 9 separate occasions between August 1983 and October 1984.

In March 1988, Iraq used mustard gas against Iranian soldiers, and Iraqi-Kurdish insurgents and civilians in the village of Halabja. While mustard gas was implicated in the deaths of hundreds, and likely thousands of Kurds, the Reagan Administration blamed Iran for the attack on civilians in Halabja, and only acknowledged Iraq’s involvement under pressure from human rights activists.

The 1991 Persian Gulf War ended with Iraq’s acceptance of UNSC Resolution 687, requiring it to implement a disarmament program monitored by the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) before a crippling system of economic sanctions imposed on the country could be lifted. The resolution called for Iraq to unconditionally destroy and to never use, develop, construct, or acquire non-conventional weapons or ballistic missiles with a range greater than 150 km. Over the next seven years, UNSCOM conducted hundreds of inspections, destroying the majority of Iraq’s thousands of tons of weapons, as well as much of the infrastructure used to develop and produce them. In 1998, UNSCOM began inspecting Iraqi presidential sites and government defense and security buildings, leading to a series of confrontations between the US and Iraq. While the US claimed that Iraq was hiding proscribed weapons, Iraq claimed that the US was using the inspections for espionage. Iraqi allegations were later proven true: as early as 1995 US intelligence had infiltrated UNSCOM and used the inspection process as a cover for spying on the Iraqi government.

On December 16, 1998, the UN withdrew its inspectors in advance of an unauthorized three-day bombing campaign by the US over claims of Iraqi noncompliance. When Iraq refused to let inspectors return, the US pressured the Security Council to pass Resolution 1284, which declared the Council’s intention to “suspend” sanctions if Iraq complied with weapons inspectors, rather than its previously stated obligation to lift them. A few months later, a Security Council panel concluded that as of March 1998, “the bulk of Iraq’s proscribed weapons programs [had] been eliminated,” although “important elements still [had] to be resolved.” Contradicting UN resolutions, US policy makers have consistently stated that sanctions will not be lifted until May 2003, when US President Bush set a date for the withdrawal of US troops.

1 Harigel, G.G. “The Concept of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Chemical and Biological Weapons, Use in Warfare, Impact on Society and Environment” Seventh ISODARCO – Beijing Seminar on Arms Control Xi’an (Oct. 8-13, 2000)
3 Regan, Paul “Iraq: Consequences of a War” Oxford Research Group, UK (Oct 2002)
4 Arkin, WM. “The Nuclear Option in Iraq: The US has lowered the bar for using the ultimate weapon” L.A. Times (Jan. 26, 2003)
5 IAEA, Update Report for the Security Council (Jan. 27, 2003)
7 The Independent “Leaked report says German and US firms supplied arms to Saddam” (Dec. 18, 2002)
19 SCR 1284 (Dec 1999) France, Russia, and China all abstained.
20 UN Amorim Report, “Concerning disarmament & current and future ongoing monitoring & verification issues” (March 27, 1999); 5/1999/100UNSC
Iraq and UN officials met three times in 2002 to negotiate the return of weapons inspectors. Each attempt was overshadowed by US accusations of violations or plans for invasion. When Iraq agreed to a new round of inspections, Richard Perle, a key Bush advisor, stated that the US would attack even if inspectors found Iraq to be in compliance with UN resolutions. Bush Administration tactics prompted Hans Blix, head of UNMOVIC (the successor to UNSCOM) to publicly condemn US behavior.

Disarming Iraq invasion could 'worsen' "NY Times (Oct. 21, 2002)

The Bush Administration’s attempts to tie intelligence with the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and highjacker Mohammed Atta have also failed. Not only is there no evidence of such links, but Hussein is unlikely to forge ties with any terrorist groups simply because such a move would threaten his own survival, which is seemingly his primary concern.

Sanctions and the pressure of sanctions are part of "Financial Times (Nov. 30, 2001)

Current Iraqi WMD Capabilities

President Bush’s repeated claim that the threat from Iraq is growing makes little sense...and these statements should be viewed as transparent attempts to scare Americans into supporting a war. "Reuters (Jan. 27, 2003)

On January 27, 2003, Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the IAEA, briefed the Security Council on the results of more than 350 preliminary inspections. While stating that “Iraq appears not to have come to genuine acceptance...of disarmament that was demanded of it,” Blix challenged assertions that time was running out.

22 Financial Times, “Interview with Colin Powell” (2-13-02)
23 Voices in the Wilderness, UK, “Barring the Inspectors” (July 10, 2002)
24 Financial Times, “US to Present Evidence of Iraq Weapons Activity” (March 5, 2002)
26 Gilfeather, P. “Bush Aide: Inspections or Not, We’ll Attack Iraq” The Mirror UK (Nov 21, 2002)
28 Stanley Bedlington, a former CIA counterterrorism analyst, quoted in Zakaria, T. “Powell Speech Will Not Focus on Qaeda-Iraq Linking” Reuters (Feb. 4, 2003)
29 CBC News, “Experts doubt Iraq, al-Qaeda terror link” (Nov 19, 2001)
31 Special Report, “Holy War on the World” Financial Times (Nov. 30, 2001)
32 Risen, J., “The View From Prague: Prague Discounts an Iraq Meeting” NY Times (Oct. 21, 2002)
33 Peterson, S., “Can Hussein be deterred?” Christian Science Monitor (Sept. 10, 2002)
35 Miller, J. and Preston, J. “Blix Says he Saw Nothing to Prompt a War” NY Times (Jan. 31, 2003)
38 UN Arms Report, “Concerning disarmament & current and future ongoing monitoring & verification issues” (March 27, 1999)
41 Ritter, Scott, “The Case for Iraq’s Qualitative Disarmament” Arms Control Today (June 2000)