

Middle East Weapons Proliferation: Lessons from Iraq and Beyond

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Brief Analysis

New Lessons Regarding Proliferation

The culmination of Operation Iraqi Freedom has given rise to much debate concerning the exact nature of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Similarly, ongoing negotiations with Iran regarding its nuclear activities have also been dogged by imprecise intelligence and unclear strategies. Both of these cases have led many to realize that noncompliance with weapons inspections does not automatically indicate the existence of hidden weapons programs. Although the Senate Intelligence Committee has yet to issue its report on Iraqi WMD, one could reasonably argue that the situation in Iraq during the 1990s served as an example of how inspections can provide a powerful deterrent against covert WMD activity. At present, it is too early to establish with any certainty the exact nature of Iraqi WMD prior to the invasion. Just as some prewar analyses were mistaken when they claimed to know precisely where Iraq's weapons stockpiles were, it would now be erroneous to declare that the country possessed no WMD before the war or that such weapons are not present there today. One must remain open to various possibilities until history comes down conclusively on either side.

Iraqi WMD Before and During the War

Recent analysis of why Iraq did not use WMD during the war has raised several different theories as to the state of the country's WMD programs and Saddam Husayn's strategy regarding such weapons. Beginning in 1991, major portions of Iraq's relatively large stockpile of chemical and biological weapons were slowly uncovered and destroyed, due to both UN inspections and internal Iraqi calculations. By 1995-1996, Baghdad decided that it made little sense to maintain large WMD stockpiles, which were far too easy for inspectors to find and destroy. Hence, one could reasonably conclude that Iraq might have retained a small strategic reserve or breakout capability in its biological and, perhaps, chemical weapons programs. Under such a strategy, the former regime could have retained its nonconventional capabilities while still feigning full cooperation with the UN by permitting credible inspections. Such capabilities -- and the specter of their potential use -- could have helped Saddam save face regionally while simultaneously keeping his internal and external enemies at bay.

These possibilities lead to an obvious question: if the former regime possessed WMD prior to the invasion, why did it

refrain from using them against coalition forces during the war, as was anticipated by many? Several different answers are plausible:

The prewar prediction that the regime would deploy WMD may have been incorrect; i.e., Iraq either did not have such capabilities or was unable to use them due to technical or time constraints.

The country's WMD programs may have been in disarray due to corruption and the social effects that international sanctions had on Iraqi scientists. In addition, one should not underestimate the effect that Hussein Kamel's defection and death in 1995 had on those programs, as he was an effective manager who had accounted for much of the initiative behind the project. Finally, Saddam's psychological state, especially rumors of his withdrawn nature in the run-up to the war, might have played a factor in the program's lack of initiative or corruption.

The Iraqi political hierarchy might have decided that chemical or biological weapons would simply not be effective against the U.S. military, which was equipped to weather such attacks.

The use of biological or chemical weapons did not fit with Saddam's political strategy for surviving the war. According to this strategy, if Iraqi conventional forces could have held off U.S. forces, especially outside of Baghdad, then Russia or France might have intervened on Iraq's behalf. Such a strategy would not have been politically feasible if Iraq resorted to WMD.

Saddam might have been optimistic about the abilities of his conventional military forces and fully expected them to win the war. Under such a scenario, Iraq might have sent its WMD to Syria before the war with the intention of retrieving them after the invasion was successfully thwarted.

Iranian Intransigence and the Role of Inspections

Recent events in Iran and the nascent status of the country's nuclear weapons program have emphasized the need for a coherent U.S. policy regarding WMD proliferation in the Middle East. The Bush administration's current stance -- that Iran has a secret nuclear weapons program that cannot be proven but must be destroyed -- does not provide many concrete policy options for moving forward. Much of the purported intelligence regarding Iran's nuclear weapons program is distorted and inconclusive, and additional IAEA inspections are needed. Moreover, the United States and European Union (EU) must collaborate on formulating a definitive timeline for Iranian cooperation and action, as well as serious punitive measures if Tehran fails to meet the terms of the agreement.

Inconclusive intelligence aside, one cannot discount Iran's apparent intransigence in October 2003 regarding its nuclear proliferation agreement with the EU. Although Tehran divulged some information about its nuclear activities, it may also have gained the diplomatic and political cover needed to hide more serious developments. Reported inconsistencies in Iran's initial disclosures included not revealing its activities related to the German-made P2 centrifuge, which is more effective at extracting enriched uranium than Iran's declared P1 centrifuge. Subsequently, Tehran admitted to conducting a small research program into the capabilities of the P2. Soon thereafter, however, evidence was uncovered indicating that the country had attempted to import large quantities of components for a working P2 machine. In addition, Tehran is not honoring its most recent commitments to the EU, which included refraining from further uranium enrichment, halting any efforts to build heavy-water reactors, and removing spent fuel rods from Iran. The Iranian nuclear program remains poised to resume centrifuge production for enrichment purposes, and evidence of uranium hexafluoride (used only in heavy-water reactors) has been found. Tensions are high, and the risk of confrontation is very real. Satellite photos of the Natanz nuclear site have shown a substantial hardening against land and air attacks, demonstrating that Iran is indeed worried about a preemptive strike on its WMD capabilities. At the same time, U.S. intelligence has assessed that it would take the Iranians until at least the end of this decade to assemble a working nuclear bomb.

The Worldwide Proliferation Threat

The IAEA has begun to grasp the global nature of WMD proliferation and the need for new measures in addition to inspections. As in the past, foreign aid and technical assistance will play an increasingly integral role in the buildup of viable WMD programs worldwide. The nuclear black market network run by former Pakistani nuclear chief Abdul Qadeer Khan is but the most glaring example of individual entrepreneurship in the global WMD trade. To counteract this growing threat, the IAEA has begun to crack down on dual-use exports to certain countries by promoting a treaty-based export control system. Despite the weak regulations in place in many countries, the agency has had success with tightening controls in certain key nations. Yet, problems remain in other countries that have particularly weak domestic regulations and are new to the proliferation market. Pakistan is a clear example of this problem. The IAEA has taken steps to investigate the Khan network in the context of Iran. Yet, focusing similar attention on Iran's external sources of WMD equipment and expertise would give inspectors a better understanding of the Iranian nuclear program and its attempts at weaponization. One should not underestimate the effects of U.S. and international efforts to curb WMD proliferation. Nevertheless, a clearer understanding of the lessons from Iraq and Iran is imperative if these efforts are to succeed in the Middle East and beyond.

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