

Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD): An Emerging Challenge for the Bush Administration

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Brief Analysis

Iraq and its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are emerging as one of the first major foreign policy challenges of the Bush administration. Free of weapons monitors and with sanctions eroding, Iraq has resumed its aggressive policies. After the start of the al-Aqsa Intifada last September, it briefly moved elements of four to five divisions toward its border with Syria in a show of solidarity, and on several occasions since then, Saddam Husayn has threatened to destroy Israel. Then, earlier this month, his older son Uday reasserted Iraq's claim to Kuwait. With its conventional military capabilities hobbled by two bloody wars and more than a decade of sanctions, Iraq's retained WMD capabilities assume renewed salience.

Ongoing Activities? Iraq engaged in proscribed procurement, research and development, and production activities, even in the shadow of UN inspections and monitoring between 1991 and 1998 (though the UN efforts certainly constrained such proscribed activities). It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that such activities have continued, if not intensified, since the halt to inspections and monitoring.

Chemical Weapons (CW) Iraq almost certainly retains stockpiles of lethal agents, munitions, precursor chemicals, and production equipment. Iraq has acknowledged that prior to 1991 it produced mustard, sarin, and VX, and former weapons inspectors believe that retained stocks of CW munitions remain viable. This is because UN inspectors in Iraq recovered several mustard-filled 155mm artillery rounds in 1998 that were still "ready for combat use" perhaps a decade after they were produced, and because they believe that Iraq produced "VX salt" — a form of the highly lethal nerve agent that can be stored on a long-term basis. While its surviving CW stocks (possibly thousands of filled artillery rounds and aerial bombs, and a small number of missile warheads) would be of limited utility against U.S. forces, they could inflict massive casualties on unprotected civilians or ill-equipped allied military personnel. Moreover, according to UN documents, Iraq may retain enough precursor stocks to produce several hundred tons of agent of various types (including VX), as well as the production equipment necessary to do so. (According to former UN inspectors, Iraq has been able to manufacture chemical and biological weapon production equipment indigenously since the mid-1990s.)

Biological Weapons (BW) Iraq probably retains agent and seed stocks, growth media, production equipment, and

munitions. Because some agents (such as anthrax) can remain viable for years or even decades (particularly if produced in dry form, a capability which former UN inspectors attribute to Baghdad), Iraq almost certainly has sufficient quantities of agent on hand to cause massive casualties among both military and civilian personnel. It is unclear, however, whether Iraq has perfected means for efficiently disseminating BW.

Therefore, Iraq retains a strategic chemical and biological weapons (CBW) capability in "ready reserve" and could produce additional stocks on relatively short notice. It is probably working to improve the stability of its CBW agents (in storage and after dissemination), increase their lethality, and develop more efficient means of delivery and dissemination (e.g. spray tanks, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and more advanced warhead designs). Because the concentration of its CBW production assets in one place could invite U.S. military action, Iraq may not have engaged in industrial-scale production of CBW since 1991. It probably has, however, furtively produced at least small quantities of agent to replace aging stocks, or for testing purposes. If necessary (for instance, during a crisis), it could probably produce militarily significant quantities of biological agent in a matter of days, and chemical agent in a matter of weeks.

Missiles and UAVs Former UN inspectors have stated that Iraq retains a small operational force of mobile al-Husayn missiles (six to sixteen missiles according to one estimate) fitted with CBW warheads. With its 650km range, the al-Husayn can reach major population centers in Israel and Saudi Arabia. Because Iraq is permitted to produce missiles with ranges up to 150km, it retains the infrastructure, talent, and know-how needed to rapidly reconstitute its missile program. Its current efforts focus on the al-Sumud, which uses the engine of the Soviet SA-2 Volga surface-to-air missile, and which has a range of nearly 150km. It could, however, produce a delivery system of proscribed range by prolonging the engine burn time and reducing the payload of the al-Sumud, increasing its fuel capacity, clustering or stacking al-Sumud missiles, or by resuming production of the al-Husayn (though to do so it might have to smuggle in certain components which it cannot produce on its own). Former UN weapons inspectors have also expressed concern about Iraq's efforts to develop remote-controlled UAVs to disseminate CBW from spray tanks. One of the main target sets of Operation Desert Fox (December 1998) were facilities that were involved in converting Czech L-29 Delfin military trainer aircraft to UAVs capable of delivering BW payloads against Israel or Saudi Arabia.

Nuclear Weapons The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) never recovered many components produced by Iraq for its atomic bomb prior to the 1991 Gulf War. Since then, UN inspectors report that Iraq has reassembled its bomb-design teams, which are probably working to resolve bottlenecks in its pre-1991 program, and to achieve a smaller, lighter, more efficient weapon design. Because it is fairly easy to conceal work on the non-nuclear components for a bomb, Iraq is probably also engaged in these activities at this time. The greatest concern here is the possibility that if Iraq were to acquire fissile material from abroad (most likely the former Soviet Union, which still lacks adequate safeguards for large quantities of nuclear material within its borders), it could perhaps produce an operational nuclear weapon within a year. Thus, a nuclear breakout by Iraq could conceivably occur without warning, and at any time. Its dependence on diverted fissile material would, however, likely limit the size of an Iraqi nuclear arsenal to a very small number of weapons (perhaps one to three), although the acquisition of even one nuclear weapon could spur Saddam Husayn to provoke a high stakes crisis that would almost inevitably involve the United States and its allies.

U.S. Options At the conclusion of Operation Desert Fox, President Clinton cited Iraq's reconstitution of its WMD as one of several red lines that could prompt renewed U.S. military action. President George W. Bush has confirmed this point of policy. Realistically, however, military action against Iraq's WMD may not be practical at this time, not only due to the transition between administrations in Washington, but for several other reasons: Iraqi concealment and dispersion efforts are likely to preclude significant, lasting damage to Iraq's WMD and missile capabilities through

air strikes alone; an attack on CBW-related facilities could result in an inadvertent release of agents, causing potentially heavy civilian casualties downwind of the targets; and absent a blatant Iraqi provocation, a U.S. strike would intensify strong anti-American feelings raised by recent Arab–Israeli tensions and thereby undermine the stability of American allies. While the Bush administration should not eschew preventive or pre-emptive strikes when necessary (especially if high quality target intelligence were to allow the United States to inflict severe damage on Iraq’s WMD capabilities and, in particular, to prevent or delay a nuclear breakout), the only meaningful way of mitigating — if not eliminating — the threat of Iraq’s WMD is changing the regime in Baghdad. The Bush administration would thus be well advised to focus its energies on forging a serious, long-term strategy for achieving regime-change in Iraq despite the formidable challenges that this particular policy option entails. For if ridding Iraq of Saddam Husayn and his regime will be hard, experience has shown that living with him will be harder.

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