

From UNSCOM to UNMOVIC:

The Future of Weapons Inspections in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

When the United Nations (UN) Security Council created UNSCOM in April 1991, it intended to create an efficient, professional organization that would catalyze international cooperation in support of dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threat. The first task was to identify and supervise the elimination of "prohibited items," in other words, any means of producing or delivering chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons, including ballistic missiles with ranges exceeding 150 kilometers. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was responsible for the nuclear arena, although the two organizations worked closely together. The second task was to create a monitoring system to prevent Iraq from producing or acquiring prohibited items. In carrying out its mission, UNSCOM enjoyed a certain independence as the Security Council limited itself to setting broad policy guidelines, while allowing UNSCOM to implement that policy as it saw fit. The Council also ensured that UNSCOM remained financially independent, thus eliminating one potential constraint.

Events in Iraq

In the summer of 1991, UNSCOM and the IAEA identified components of Iraq's proscribed chemical and missile programs, and even a major nuclear program, that were clearly more extensive than that to which Iraq had previously admitted. The rigor and efficiency of the UN inspectors took Saddam Husayn and his advisors by surprise, causing Iraq to make a major declaration in March 1992 about all three programs; it continued, however, to deny the existence of a biological weapons program.

After two years of stonewalling, Iraq in late 1993 finally permitted UNSCOM to survey Iraqi facilities with the potential for chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons development such as medical and university laboratories, and pharmaceutical, pesticide, and fertilizer factories. In 1995, UNSCOM reported sensational evidence of a fairly extensive Iraqi biological weapons program.

Hussein Kamil's defection in August 1995 profoundly shook the Iraqi leadership, and UNSCOM benefited from significant Iraqi cooperation for several months; Iraq even surrendered important documents and explanations of Iraq's weapons development strategies. After these revelations, UNSCOM had a better grasp of the logic and scope underpinning Saddam's WMD programs.

But Iraq once again began stonewalling UNSCOM in February 1996, prompting talks between the two sides and the forging of an agreement between Ambassador Ekeus and Iraq's deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz defining modalities of access to facilities that Baghdad regarded as highly sensitive or national-security related. These modalities were designed to preserve Iraq's sovereignty, but the United States and other allies complained that they were in effect a concession to Baghdad.

Late in 1996, UNSCOM began to systematically investigate Iraq's methods of concealing its retained WMD capabilities, using U-2 reconnaissance aircraft and other assets. Iraq continued to resist, and unease grew among some of the permanent members of the Security Council concerning UNSCOM's tough approach and the potential for

U.S. military action. This led to a crisis between UNSCOM and Iraq, prompting UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to travel to Baghdad, where he managed to obtain an agreement from Saddam. The agreement soon unraveled, however, and things went from bad to worse, culminating in the withdrawal of UNSCOM and the December 1998 bombing of Iraq.

Introduction of UNMOVIC

After Iraq's refusal to allow UNSCOM to return, discussions in the Security Council revolved around a British-Dutch proposal for a new monitoring organization, the UN Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC). The United States eventually became involved in the drafting of the proposal's text, softening its stringency to address French and Russian concerns while maintaining a strong stance on the issue of sanctions. UN Security Council Resolution 1284 establishing UNMOVIC was passed in December 1999 (with France, Russia, and China abstaining), with the basic provisions of maintaining a strong monitoring regime, continued inspections, and suspending sanctions on Iraq after a 120-day period of good cooperation with UNMOVIC. Meanwhile, Iraq would no longer have to deal with UNSCOM, while the ceiling on its oil exports was lifted.

The resolution also defined the structure of UNMOVIC, limiting its independence and authorizing the Security Council to play a much larger role in its management than it did with UNSCOM. The emphasis would now be on supervising the executive chairman rather than controlling Iraq. Consequently, UNMOVIC can succeed in the field only if there is a supportive political climate in the Security Council.

Iraq Today

Although Iraq retains a chemical and biological weapons production capability, it is unlikely to be stockpiling such weapons at this time. During the war with Iran, Iraq used chemical weapons almost as soon as it produced them due to the dangers of storage and transportation. For the same reason, Iraq is unlikely to produce weapons until needed; stockpiling poses too great a risk.

Lessons Learned from UNSCOM

UNSCOM created a multi-layered system of inspection and monitoring using many new and innovative techniques that succeeded in uncovering much of Iraq's proscribed weapons programs. UNSCOM's weakness was its shaky political support; it was never able to exceed the authority granted by the Security Council. Strong political backing will be key for UNMOVIC; already, UNMOVIC chief Hans Blix is resisting pressure from some Council members who want to placate Iraq by preventing the assignment of dedicated, knowledgeable, and experienced arms control professionals to UNMOVIC.

UNSCOM's limited successes demonstrate that an international approach toward inspections is both feasible and necessary. A national (unilateral) approach cannot succeed, since proliferation is by its very nature an international problem too difficult for just one country manage on its own-even a country with the resources of the United States.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Stephane de Messieres.

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