

Disarming Iraq: Lessons from the UNSCOM Experience

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Brief Analysis

Last December's Operation Desert Fox resulted in the death of the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM). This leads to the question of how to deal with the issue of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities.

Status of Iraqi WMD

Between 1991 and 1998, UNSCOM achieved considerable results in disarming Iraq by dismantling the bulk of Iraq's chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons capabilities, as well as its ballistic missiles. None of Iraq's major biological weapons production facilities are in operation today, with some of them having been destroyed completely. Iraq's chemical weapons program has been driven into hiding, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has destroyed Iraq's pre-war nuclear weapons facilities.

If, however, the UN Security Council is still bent on disarming Iraq completely, more work will have to be done in the future. Although Iraq today possesses only a fraction of its WMD stock of 1991, chemical and biological weapons capabilities can be reconstituted with relative ease. Iraq has maintained components of a nuclear bomb, and it could receive fissile material to enable it to build a nuclear weapon. Tens of thousands of very capable Iraqi scientists who live in Iraq today could help realize Saddam Husayn's desire to become the leader of the Arab world.

The Erosion of the Weapons Inspection Regime

The inspection process disintegrated once the international community failed to oppose resolutely the Iraqi regime's efforts at preventing UNSCOM inspectors from entering suspected WMD facilities. Today, the concept of achieving 100 percent disarmament is unrealistic unless Saddam's regime is removed. The United States and the Security Council, however, were unwilling to seriously address regime removal between 1991 and 1998.

For the Security Council to be able to enforce its resolutions, the resolutions have to be respected by Security Council members, particularly the United States. Ever since Iraq prevented UNSCOM from doing the job as originally intended, the arms control inspection process was perverted. Inspections were no longer allowed to proceed under the mantle of UNSCOM, leaving the United States devoid of an effective disarmament policy. The end result was Desert Fox, the end of UNSCOM, and a complete absence of weapons inspectors in Iraq.

Weapons inspections were not only designed to rid Iraq of its WMD, but -- as laid out in paragraph 14 of the April 1991 UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 687 -- to build a framework for regional disarmament in the Middle East.

What Next? The current U.S. policy vis-a-vis Iraq is containment of Saddam's regime through economic sanctions and a low-level war of attrition.

The Failure of Containment: It has become painfully clear that the current U.S. containment policy is not effective in engendering confidence that Iraq will comply with international disarmament provisions.

Operation Desert Fox and the subsequent airstrikes in northern and southern Iraq have had a detrimental effect on the U.S. relationship with its critical allies. Allied support for the airstrikes is far from automatic at a time when it is getting increasingly difficult for the United States to justify its policy of containment.

The Impracticality of Regime Removal: The only way to guarantee a regime removal is through military force by the United States. A victory of opposition groups, however well trained, over Saddam's forces would be very unlikely. The opposition would succeed only if American ground troops were sent to Iraq in sufficient quantity -- a move that would meet significant resistance by many Americans.

Ongoing American threats to remove the Iraqi regime can hardly be expected to increase Saddam's willingness to comply with weapons inspectors. As long as Saddam feels threatened, he will try to retain his WMD capability.

The sanctions against Iraq were a horrible necessity when UNSCR 687 was actively implemented by an UNSCOM that was focused on issues of disarmament. Back in 1991, the Security Council stated that sanctions would be effective until Iraq disarms. In March 1997, however, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said that economic sanctions will be imposed until Saddam is removed. It is inappropriate to link sanctions to regime removal. The suffering of 22 million Iraqi people should be put to an end.

Diplomatic Engagement: The current deadlock in U.S. policy and the lack of an endgame policy toward Iraq require a less imperfect U.S. approach. The United States should consider diplomatic engagement of Iraq. The engagement would require that Saddam demonstrate he has abandoned pursuing WMD. Then, there could be a discussion that would center on the economic reconstruction of Iraq, aimed at generating regional stability. The United States could use more face-saving measures, such as finding a framework for the expansion of Iraqi oil sales or cooperating with European banks to underwrite loans to the Iraqis and to help facilitate a realistic repayment schedule. Diplomatic acceptance is the only incentive that can convince Saddam to disarm.

One issue that should eventually be addressed, for the sake of stability, is a potential peaceful Iraqi nuclear energy program. Notwithstanding Saddam's clear intentions to acquire a nuclear weapon, a future monitoring regime should be able to detect diversion from such a peaceful program into efforts to reconstitute a nuclear weapons program.

Resignation from UNSCOM

Once U.S. policy modified UNSCOM's mission, continuing to perform the task of disarming Iraq with honor was no longer possible. But rather than accepting the corruption of the inspection process, a new debate must now be engendered.

When Scott Ritter resigned from UNSCOM, he said, he assured the National Security Council that he was not going to talk about sensitive issues. Once he was charged with espionage, his patriotism and integrity were challenged, forcing him to defend himself by stating the facts. When the United States continued to leak ever more information on the intelligence dimension of UNSCOM, he simply put the reports in context:

It is true that the information on the Central Intelligence Agency's role plays into the hands of Saddam. But so does lying about U.S. policy objectives. UNSCOM should not shy away from the fact that due to Iraqi obstruction, it had to carry out an extraordinary effort to gain access to information that Iraq was withholding. In the end, when the United States lied about its role, the truth came out. And the truth is that the United States perverted the UNSCOM process.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Assaf Moghadam.

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