Show of Farce:

Why Our Iraq Policy Won't Work

by **Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Articles & Testimony

The Clinton administration's Iraq policy has been to "keep Saddam in his box" by doing everything possible to keep U.N. inspectors and international economic sanctions in place. But actually Saddam has boxed us in. True, the sanctions must be having some effect, because Saddam complains about them so much. Indeed, they materially weaken his grip on power. They sharply limit his imports of conventional weapons (Iraq can't make many weapons parts on its own). And they impede the flow of goodies for Saddam's cronies -- such as a liposuction machine classified by Iraq as a high-priority medical need that the U.N. refused to allow in.

But Saddam has also used the sanctions to create misery among his people and then blame the West. From 1491 through 1996, he refused to accept the U.N.offered humanitarian-import program, with the not-surprising result that malnutrition became a serious problem. In the face of Iraqi propaganda about this, the United States agreed last February to a Security Council resolution allowing Saddam to export $10.5 billion in oil annually-more than Iraq's average $9.5 billion in exports during the 1980s. The money, spent under U.N. supervision, pays for much more than food and medicine -- everything from oil-field equipment to electric plants.

With imports flooding into Iraq, the sanctions cannot do much to stop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs -- and it is those programs that transform Saddam from a tinhorn dictator into a world-class threat. Only an eagle-eyed expert could distinguish civilian goods from misleadingly labeled WMD equipment. And the small team of U.N. monitors inspects only oil-for-food imports, not the more than $500 million a year in imports Iraq buys separately. According to Dennis Halliday, former administrator of the U.N. oil-for-food prograin, more than 1,000 trucks a day cross the Turkish border, of which not more than 40 were subject to U.N. inspection.

What to do about the sanctions? One route would be to change the sanctions regime. Saddam and his French and Russian friends have directed most of their energy to getting the oil export restrictions lifted. The irony is that these have no practical effect. Despite Security Council permission to export $10.5 billion worth of oil a year, Iraq can't produce more than $7 billion. Yet Saddam focuses on the oil export restrictions rather than the limitations that really matter, such as restrictions on what Iraq can import and a requirement that 30 percent of oil revenues be paid into a fund to compensate Iraq's victims. So maybe the oil export restriction is an area where the United States could

compromise, because the result does not matter, anyway. On the other hand, perhaps it's smart to divert attention to the oil side-issue, because that keeps Saddam's friends at the U.N. fighting about something of no consequence. And, once the oil restrictions are off, Saddam would campaign to have the rest of the sanctions lifted.

One sanction that hurts U.S. interests is the restriction on travel to Iraq, which helps Saddam isolate his people from world opinion. Instead, the United States could encourage visitors of all sorts: congressmen, clergymen, journalists, students, even tourists. The more who go, the harder for Saddam's minders to tag along with them all. And the more Iraqis see of the outside world, tile more they will realize United States cares more about their welfare than Saddam does.

If we cannot count oil sanctions to affect Saddam's WMD programs, what about inspections? They too are only all imperfect tool. And they were never expected to be the centerpiece for disarming Iraq. The plan, as set out in tile 1991 U.N. cease-fire resolution, was to compel Iraq to make "a declaration oil the locations, amounts and types of all" biochemical and nuclear weapons including "all research, development, support, and manufacturing facilities related thereto." The inspections were to be a backup to verify the declaration. Instead, Saddam has shifted the burden of revealing the Iraqi WMD program onto the inspectors. Searching a flaystack as large as Iraq for a needle as small as a bathtub full of anthrax is a gargantuan task. Meanwhile, the latest of Baghdad's several "full, final, and complete disclosures" was found "not credible" by independent experts consulted by UNSCOM (at Iraq's insistence).

Furthermore, the inspection regime can work only if backed by credible threats of force. When Saddam sees no threat, he sees no reason to cooperate. Early on, when Saddam had credible reason to fear U.S. strikes, his pattern was to "cheat and retreat," but, now that international support for strikes appears weak, it is "cheat and compromise." Each compromise buys the West less: Kofi Annan's February deal got only four months of inspections, and UNSCOM's decision to cancel planned inspections (at the private urging of the United States) this summer bought only a few weeks of inspections. Contrary to common wisdom, compromise, not the rise of force, threatens inspections. The credible threat-and periodic use -- of military force is what breathes life Into UNSCOM.

Even if disclosure and inspection had worked, Iraq would retain the expertise and the facilities allowing it to produce biochemical weapons "in a matter of weeks," according to the CIA. Nuclear weapons would take only a couple of years. This means that, if Saddam ignores UNSCOM and invades Kuwait tomorrow, he could have biochemical weapons in less time than it took the United States to build tip its forces for Desert Storm. There is a broad, unstated international consensus that Iraq would suffer terrible consequences if it used WMD in war but not on what to do if Saddam announces he possesses WMD and uses that as a means of coercion, for instance, to discourage those contemplating reversing some Iraqi aggression. That is not good enough: we need a clear policy, backed by our allies, that Iraqi WMD possession is a casus belli.

Ultimately, neither inspections nor sanctions get to the core of the problem, which is the nature of the Iraqi regime. At his November 15 press conference, President Clinton identified the only solution: installing a new regime in Baghdad that has democratic legitimacy and respects human rights. The question of the day becomes the new government. None of the available options is. ideal. Providing military support for the main opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress, is a high-risk gamble, but it could deliver a the Saddam problem, solving the high payoff: ending fear of Gulf security conundrum, and relieving Israel's fear of attack from the east. The option of supporting opposition-led military operations therefore deserves more serious attention from the administration than it has gotten. ❖

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