What Happened to Saddam's Weapons of Mass Destruction?

- Arms Control Today

“It's sort of puzzling that you can have 100 percent confidence about WMD existence, but zero certainty about where they are.” —Hans Blix to the Council on Foreign Relations June 23, 2003

With a new and perhaps final phase of the U.S. and British search throughout Iraq for Saddam Hussein's delinquent nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons now well underway, it might be too early to reach a final verdict on the existence of such weapons. But as each day passes with no evidence of a “smoking gun,” the carefully worded series of analytical assessments by the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) increase dramatically in credibility. Despite pressure from the Bush administration to declare that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD), UNMOVIC concluded that, after only a few months of investigations and little practical help from either Iraq or U.S. intelligence officials, they had insufficient evidence to prove the case either way. At the time, those conclusions rankled some in Washington certain that Saddam Hussein possessed a WMD arsenal, that continued UNMOVIC inspections would be unable either to locate them or prove they were destroyed, and that possession of those weapons by Saddam posed an unacceptable and immediate threat to U.S. national security interests.

After all, top Pentagon officials were sure that Baghdad held tons of weaponized chemical and biological weapons and had not only proscribed SCUD missiles but also a clandestine, active program to obtain a nuclear weapons capability. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld summed up this attitude in a March 30 interview with George Stephanopoulos on ABC television, stating bluntly that, when it came to weapons of mass destruction, “We know where they are.” With senior administration officials making such definitive statements at such a sensitive time, operational commanders, poised to invade Iraq on the command of President George W. Bush, were right to expect that these chemical weapons would be used on the battlefield by Iraq's elite units, and if not, then certainly such massive WMD holdings would be quickly overrun. In June, the Los Angeles Times quoted the head of the U.S. Army's initial search program as saying, “Frankly, we expected to find large warehouses full of chemical or biological weapons, or delivery systems.” Throughout the hostilities, however, the Iraqis never used such weapons on the battlefield, and U.S. and British forces did not come across any as they advanced. Months after the termination of hostilities, they have yet to be uncovered.

The U.S.-led coalition’s inability to discover the alleged hidden caches of unconventional weapons cannot be ascribed to any lack of trying on the part of the U.S. Army itself. Indeed, search mechanisms put in place prior to the war were innovative and extensive. Three different approaches were devised. The first step was the designation and deployment of Task Force 20, which has been described as a covert Special Forces unit. Comprised of specialists drawn from the U.S. Army's Delta Force, elements of Task Force 20 were inserted into Iraq prior to the main invasion. With a broad and flexible mandate, its top priority was the uncovering of WMD caches on a “target of opportunity basis,” using the twin elements of mobility and surprise. Next came Site Survey Teams, drawn from specially trained regular army personnel. They were created and attached to military mainline units earmarked for the initial invasion. Finally, the Pentagon unveiled the 75th Exploration Task Force, a “rear echelon” operation. Formerly an artillery brigade based at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Task Force 75 was reconstituted by the Army’s Central Command prior to the invasion as a follow-up element behind the main invasion force. Its specific focus was also on the search for proscribed weapons caches. [See Table 1.]
During the period of active hostilities, these various specialist elements collectively searched more than 230 suspect sites. From UNMOVIC’s inspection records in New York, it is clear that some of these sites were the same facilities and laboratories that the UN inspection groups had already scrutinized. In a number of cases, detailed reports on them had already been inserted into the archives at the UN headquarters in New York. With the commencement of hostilities, and an overall strength of more than 900 specialists supported by tens of millions of dollars of detection and laboratory equipment, the U.S. mission-specific units swept through Iraq as part of a comprehensive and intensive program of WMD searches. With the support of additional facilities, both in theater and at home, these teams were unable to find any working unconventional weapons, long-range missiles, bulk storage of either chemical or biological warfare agents, enrichment technologies, or hidden equipment needed to reconstitute a nuclear weapons program. Put simply, the search teams came up empty-handed.

More recently, as these search teams were in the process of being quietly withdrawn, Pentagon planners decided to replace them with yet a fourth model, this time designed to reinvigorate the hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. This new mandate focused upon a more coordinated approach to account for the elusive WMD inventory. The Pentagon appointed Major General Keith W. Dayton, a senior manager with the Defense Intelligence Agency, to head up an Iraq Survey Group (ISG) based in Baghdad. With an overall strength of more than 1,400 specialists in Iraq, the new task force was designed to focus, in a more analytical and measured approach, on coordinating and extending the continuing search. Ironically, the CIA, meanwhile, called upon David Kay, a former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspector, to join the ISG as an adviser to provide expertise on methodologies. The ISG is expected to create some sort of compatible background of evidence to substantiate the administration’s contention—factual or not—that WMD inventories really do exist in Iraq.

What the Pentagon seems to have forgotten is that the task of effective accounting for Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction and associated developmental programs is not a new one. The UN Security Council, under U.S. leadership, first assigned that task more than a decade ago to the IAEA and to the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) immediately after the conclusion of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. That same mandate, with updated details, was given to UNMOVIC eight years later when the Security Council created it under Resolution 1284.

UNSCOM and UNMOVIC Success

It is often said, sometimes with dubious authority, that Baghdad never cooperated in the UN quest to account for its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. In fact, that is not entirely correct. Immediately following the termination of hostilities in 1991, Iraq did cooperate in a significant fashion. Not only did Iraq turn over militarily significant holdings of weapons of mass destruction to the United Nations as instructed, but it also participated effectively in a follow-on destruction process. The destruction of proscribed weapons and of associated facilities was carried out mainly by Iraq but under constant supervision by UNSCOM and the IAEA. Data from the archives in New York bear out the contention that UN inspectors proved to be extremely successful in effectively accounting for the disposition and ultimate destruction of nuclear materials and associated facilities as well as of proscribed missiles and of chemical weapons.

By the mid-1990s, significant quantities of Iraq’s nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs had been destroyed or rendered harmless under UN supervision. In 1996 the IAEA was able to report to the Security Council that no nuclear weapons had been manufactured in Iraq, that proscribed nuclear material had been removed from the country, and that no clandestine nuclear weapons program remained. During that time frame, UNSCOM was also able to account to the Security Council for 817 of the 819 short-range SCUD missiles known to have been in the Iraqi inventory. Indeed, UNSCOM itself had destroyed 48 SCUD missiles and 50 warheads and used material balance techniques reinforced by an extensive excavation program to confirm that Iraq had destroyed the rest. The inspectors were able to provide final proof by comparing missile and engine numbers with documentation the supplier states provided to UNSCOM.
Likewise, in the early 1990s, Iraq turned over to the United Nations more than 40,000 proscribed chemical warheads, half of which were drained and consequently destroyed by Iraq, again under UNSCOM guidance. Add to that the supervised destruction by Iraq of an additional 700 tons of bulk chemical weapons agents, some 3,600 tons of precursor chemicals, and more than 100 pieces of equipment used to produce chemical weapons, and it is clear that significant military quantities of chemical weapons had indeed been identified by Iraqi authorities and destroyed during the period between 1991 and 1996. Moreover, UNSCOM inspectors were able to extrapolate from some excavations of Iraq’s declared sites that claims made by Iraq of unilateral destruction were reasonably accurate.

To be sure, Iraq later directed a complex and active denial and deception campaign to mislead UN inspectors. Further, the inspectors’ record on unmasking Iraq’s biological weapons was particularly weak; although UNSCOM had managed to confirm the existence of a biological weapons program after their first inspection at Salman Pak in 1991, biological weapons inspections became a priority only after the 1995 defection of Saddam’s son-in-law.2 Still, if UNSCOM, and later UNMOVIC, had been allowed by either Saddam or the United States to proceed with their work unhindered in 1998 and 2003, their plans called for devoting the greatest attention and monitoring the most sites in the biological weapons sector.

It is also true that Iraq’s failure to produce specific and authoritative documentation did not permit either UNSCOM, or later UNMOVIC, formally to confirm that Baghdad had indeed destroyed these weapons. There is no clear reason—only speculation—as to why Iraq, facing sanctions and then war, did not produce this documentation. But UNSCOM and UNMOVIC also cautioned on a regular basis that declaring material as “unaccounted for” was not the same thing as saying that those materials continued to exist—caveats that Washington routinely ignored.

In retrospect, therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that one of the most significant reasons that U.S. and British troops have not found nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons or proscribed missiles in Iraq is that, following the 1991 Gulf War, the bulk of these weapons and associated facilities were destroyed either by the United Nations or unilaterally by Iraq. Thus, significant quantities of proscribed weapons (nuclear, chemical, or missile) simply did not exist. On top of that, any attempt by Baghdad to regenerate its proscribed weapons programs was effectively inhibited by the package of other UN control measures in operation since 1991. These measures included a severe sanctions program initiated in 1991, the export/import monitoring mechanism that followed, the UN escrow funds into which all Iraqi oil sales revenue was directed, the strict management of those funds by the UN Office of the Iraq Program, the interdiction operations at sea undertaken under UN mandate, and a number of other control mechanisms. Although relatively unknown to the general public, these control mechanisms operated effectively throughout the decade of the 1990s. In combination, they served to prevent any significant reactivation of WMD programs on the part of Iraq.

Today, there is scant disagreement within the international community that the removal of Hussein from power is good for the international community and ultimately will be good for the people of Iraq. Although other considerations for going to war have been raised and might have validity in their own right, however, the fact remains that it was the possession of weapons of mass destruction that was alleged to constitute an immediate threat to the United States. Therefore, it is important for the United States and its wartime partners to have the opportunity to re-evaluate and confirm aspects of the decision-making process that led them to abandon the policy of containment, to withdraw their support for a very successful UN inspection program, and to initiate hostilities against Iraq on March 18.

The Road Ahead

Although Iraq remains in turmoil and domestic security is uncertain, closure for the WMD issue could, in itself, be achieved without great difficulty through the internationalization of the search and analysis process. The first step might be an invitation to UNMOVIC and the IAEA to return to Baghdad to tie up loose ends and resume UN weapons inspections as part of a cooperative search process under a broadened but inclusive UN mandate. It is the only way to remove continuing doubts about
the existence of such weapons in Iraq. In such a cooperative process, the quantitative aspects of accounting for Iraq’s weapons could be finalized in a technically correct manner without prejudice to the United States and its allies or to the United Nations.

Moreover, with virtually unlimited funding, no apparent time constraints, and easy access to top specialists in a variety of science and technology disciplines, the ISG’s investigative activities have the potential to contribute significantly to our understanding of what happened in Iraq. This contribution, however, is likely to be in terms of providing corroborative support rather than in new revelations. That Hussein expended billion of dollars and employed thousands of specialists in a variety of WMD programs is already well documented by the United Nations in Vienna and New York. That he directed a complex and active “denial and deception” program to mislead UN inspectors is a matter of public record.

But in the future, the experience gained in such a cooperative effort between the U.S.-led coalition and the United Nations, both in Iraq and in New York, could pay real dividends in rethinking principles essential to the use of nonproliferation as an instrument for international security. These relate specifically to a revamping of the Nonproliferation, Arms Control, and Disarmament (NACD) process.3

Experience gained by the U.S.-led forces and inspectors in their various approaches to weapons inspections in the aftermath of the 2003 occupation of Iraq could prove supportive in designing an international framework to combat terrorism and to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. More broadly, a cooperative research effort could develop a new and improved set of guidelines for more intrusive inspection procedures. These could then be applied to other problem countries, such as Iran and North Korea, suspected of possessing nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction. After all, any long-term solution with these states will require some sort of effective international verification regime.

Alarming as they may be, the concerns over Iran and North Korea are but part of a much larger problem. There is an increasing perception that the international mechanisms developed over several decades to control nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons are insufficient and in danger of crumbling. Most recently, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, speaking to a joint session of Congress July 17, called for “a new international regime on the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”

Such a regime could better implement existing prohibitions on nuclear weapons, maintain the ban on chemical weapons, and introduce new methods to control biological agents and missiles. Certainly the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty itself needs to be strengthened. A new, more intrusive inspection arrangement can be drawn up by extrapolating from the experience gained by the IAEA’s Action Team from 1991 to 1998 (now referred to as the Iraq Nuclear Verification Group [INVG]), as well as its more recent activities in Iran and in North Korea. In this regard, the ISG could use its unique inspection activities as the coalition contribution to fine-tuning and upgrading the safeguard regime to make it more effective.

Two quite capable inspection regimes have already been laid out for implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the Hague is vigorously implementing the CWC while the CTBT Organization (Preparatory Commission) has deployed a network of detection technologies worldwide and is currently conducting onsite inspection practice as well as developing inspection techniques.

The final and least effective multilateral WMD agreement is the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), a U.S. initiative of the Nixon era. In the climate of counterterrorism today, the BWC should be perhaps the most important. For a variety of reasons, however, it continues to be neglected, and its verification provisions can only be described as “token” at best. Negotiators have met with little success in their attempts to add “teeth” to the clearly token verification provisions of the treaty.4
Within the context of the current situation in Iraq, the continuing and apparently escalating instability suggests that a quick resolution of the WMD issue would be welcomed by all interested parties, including the United Nations, the coalition partners, as well as others such as the provisional administrative authority now emerging in Iraq. The Security Council has expressed in Resolution 1483 (2003) its determination to revisit at some stage the comprehensive mandates of UNMOVIC and the IAEA as set forth in earlier resolutions.

UNMOVIC, as a subordinate body of the Security Council, has continued to meet its specified obligations under those parts of its present mandate that, under present conditions, remain operative. UNMOVIC’s strong analytical capability centered in New York has been applied to scanning the physical archives of UNSCOM and UNMOVIC as a means of creating an improved electronic format that will significantly enhance the future potential for search, analysis, storage, and instant retrieval of relevant information. To maintain and increase its operational readiness status, UNMOVIC’s photo interpreters have continued to process and exploit postwar commercial satellite imagery, where available, for more than 750 sites of interest. Although unable to ensure the integrity of its physical infrastructure in Baghdad, UNMOVIC nevertheless is maintaining its core of experienced technical experts in New York with an operational mission to retain and refine their specialized skill base and knowledge, recently upgraded by field experience. A roster of trained international experts remains available to supplement UNMOVIC operations as required. Thus, by continuing to exercise a high degree of operational readiness, UNMOVIC in New York and the IAEA’s INVG in Vienna continue to provide the Security Council with its own powerful, professional, in-house capacity to cooperate in a credible fashion with others interested in resolving at short notice outstanding issues vis-à-vis weapons of mass destruction, should the Security Council so decide.

In relation to the broader field encompassing the threats posed by global nuclear proliferation in all its aspects, the UNMOVIC and IAEA experience in Iraq, focused exclusively on the proliferation aspects of weapons of mass destruction, can provide a classic case study in the application and development of forensic inspection and analysis processes designed to contain the threat. Clearly, future nonproliferation scenarios are likely to differ significantly both in detail and in substance from the specifics of the Iraq experience. Thus, the United Nations should be prepared to initiate a comprehensive stock-taking of control mechanisms spawned from the ensemble of existing treaties against WMD proliferation and take advantage of unilateral and bilateral initiatives in this area. Discipline-oriented specialist groups such as the Missile Technology Control Regime and the Australian Group might play a role. In the final analysis, the international community, in its collectivity, must commit itself under Security Council guidance and leadership to deal systematically with these global threats—thereby creating, again in the words of Blair, “a new international regime on the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”

Table 1. The Administration’s Search for Weapons of Mass Destruction

- Force 20: Force 20 was a covert group comprised of the U.S. Army’s Delta Force specialists who entered Iraq prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Force 20’s objective was to uncover WMD caches on a “target of opportunity” basis, employing both mobility and surprise to achieve their mission.

- Site Survey Teams: Consisting of specially trained Army personnel, the Site Survey Teams were placed with the initial invasion force in Iraq.

- 75th Exploration Task Force: Considered a “rear echelon” operation, also with the
objective to find weapons caches, the Pentagon created this task force prior to the war as a follow-up element to the main invasion. The 75th Exploration Task Force was formally an artillery brigade based at Fort Still, Oklahoma.

- Iraq Survey Group (ISG): Headed by Major General Keith W. Dayton, a senior manager with the Defense Intelligence Agency, the ISG was formed in recent months to replace the three previous search forces. The ISG has around 1,400 specialists, including David Kay, a former International Atomic Energy Agency inspector. Utilizing a more analytical and measured approach to the weapons search, the ISG has been employed as the administration’s lastest attempt to find evidence to substantiate their claims that Iraq possessed and was in the process of producing weapons of mass destruction prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom.

NOTES


2. Lt. Gen. Hussein Kamel, Saddam Hussein’s son-in-law and the head of the Iraqi biological weapons program, defected to Jordan in 1995. The defection prompted Iraqi officials to admit that Iraq had weaponized biological agents, and they began to provide information on the program.

3. The NACD process is an umbrella concept designed to include not only the nonproliferation regime and initiatives but also the panoply of international treaties and agreements in the broader sense.

4. An Ad Hoc Group began meeting in 1995 to negotiate a BWC protocol designed to create a verification system. In March 2001, the group presented a legally binding draft protocol with the support of many countries, but the United States rejected it.

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