

Lessons for Handling Iran From the Sad Saga of Iraq

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March 2013

ACA THE ARMS CONTROL ASSOCIATION

Threat Assessment Brief
Analysis on Effective Policy Responses to Weapons-Related Security Threats

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MARCH 8, 2013

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Ten years ago this month, the United States and the United Kingdom announced the invasion of Iraq to remove the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) allegedly possessed by Saddam Hussein's brutal regime and to prevent their use by or transfer to terrorist networks such as al Qaeda. That no such weapons existed was less a symptom of flawed intelligence than the U.S. leaders' obsession with achieving regime change in Baghdad and their consequent willingness to distort evidence on WMD toward that end. This distortion, along with failures by the press and Congress to exercise due diligence in evaluating the assertions of the executive branch, blinded the public to contravening information on Iraqi WMD that was readily available during the six weeks preceding the attack. Ironically, the most important sources of this ignored information were the very inspectors that the international community had forced Iraq to readmit the previous fall. There are lessons here for current efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Regime change in Baghdad, not nonproliferation, was the prime motivation behind the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq in March 2003.
- Rather than relying on intelligence to assess the status of Iraq's WMD programs, the Bush and Blair governments cherry-picked intelligence products to buttress the case for invasion.
- In the fall of 2002, the threat of military force was instrumental in persuading Saddam Hussein to allow the return of inspectors, but by March 2003, their enhanced monitoring was removing the principal justification for invasion:
 - The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) exposed the documents on uranium from Africa as forgeries.
 - The IAEA determined that Iraq's high-strength aluminum tube imports were being used for artillery rockets, not for centrifuges to enrich uranium.
 - The UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) site visits disproved "Curveballs'" allegations about Iraqi mobile laboratories producing biological weapons.
- Iraq's violation of UN-imposed range limits for ballistic missiles was being redressed by UNMOVIC-supervised destruction of the offending systems.
- In each of these cases, personnel from the IAEA or UNMOVIC played a critical role.
- But the information they collected from the field and their conclusions presented to the Security Council on March 7, 2003, did not alter U.S. invasion plans.
- Today, the United States is better positioned to resolve the Iran nuclear challenge than it was with Iraq:
 - U.S. intelligence is more objective and reliable.
 - The UN Security Council is more united.
 - The U.S. government is cooperating with and listening to the IAEA.
- The U.S. priority must be to strengthen IAEA safeguards rather than impose regime change.

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Ten years ago today, President George W. Bush said in a radio address to the nation: "It is clear that Saddam Hussein is still violating the demands of the United Nations by refusing to disarm." Eleven days later, he announced the invasion of Iraq to remove the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) allegedly possessed by Hussein's brutal regime and to prevent their use by or transfer to terrorist networks such as al Qaeda. That no such weapons existed was less a symptom of flawed intelligence than the U.S. leaders' obsession with achieving regime change in Baghdad and their consequent willingness to distort evidence on WMD toward that end.

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Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

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