

Reasons Not to Attack Iraq

By Stephen Zunes

The Bush administration remains determined to invade Iraq, despite strong opposition at home and abroad and despite the resumption of United Nations inspections. Before the American public allows such a dangerous and unprecedented use of U.S. military power, it should seriously consider the following:

1. There Are Still Nonmilitary Options Available

The best way to stop the potential of Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction would be by strongly supporting the rigorous inspection process approved by the Security Council, under whose auspices a UN team is investigating firsthand whether Iraq is actually in possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems. If such weapons are found, the UN inspections team will have the mandate to dismantle them. Iraq agreed in September to allow the inspectors unfettered access, yet the Bush administration declared its intention to invade anyway. When domestic and international pressure forced the Bush administration to give inspections a chance, the U.S. demanded that the previously agreed-upon modalities be strengthened still further—conditions that the United Nations and Iraq accepted in early November. Despite episodes of Iraqi noncooperation with and harassment of weapons inspectors during the 1990s, UN inspections were successful in discovering and decommissioning the vast majority of Iraq's offensive military capability. Their successes would have been far greater were it not for two ill-considered U.S. actions: 1) the misuse of inspection teams for spying operations, and 2) an intense four-day bombing campaign against Iraq in December 1998. Washington's actions led Saddam Hussein to suspend Iraqi cooperation for almost four years. In the 1980s, Iraq was able to develop WMDs and delivery systems in large part due to transfers of technology and raw materials from industrialized nations. Maintaining the current strict sanctions against such trade should prevent Iraq from rebuilding an offensive WMD capability.

2. Without Explicit UN Authorization, a War Against Iraq Would Be Illegal

UN Security Council Resolution 1441, passed in early November, while warning Iraq of "serious consequences" of noncompliance, declares that only the weapons inspectors—not UN member states—have the authority to report Iraqi violations. Furthermore, it states that the Security Council "remains seized of the matter," meaning that it alone has the authority to approve the use of force. The 1990 Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq applied only to the enforcement of previous resolutions calling for an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait (which were fully met by the end of February 1991), nothing more. Iraq remains in violation of some subsequent resolutions, but the United Nations has not authorized the use of force to enforce them. According to the UN Charter (the U.S. is a signatory and is thereby legally bound by its provisions), UN resolutions cannot be enforced militarily without the explicit authorization of the UN Security Council. The only other legal grounds that would permit the U.S. or any other country to use military force would be self-defense against a direct attack. Iraq has not even threatened to attack the United States.

3. There Is No Evidence Linking Saddam Hussein to Al Qaeda or Other Anti-American Terrorists

Reports of an alleged meeting in Prague between an Iraqi intelligence officer and one of the hijackers of the doomed airplanes that crashed into the World Trade Center were investigated by the FBI, the CIA, and Czech intelligence and were found to be groundless. None of the hijackers were Iraqi, no major figure in Al Qaeda is Iraqi, and no Al Qaeda funds have been traced to Iraq. The only credible reports of Al Qaeda complicity in Iraq have cited supporters in northern Kurdish areas that have not been controlled by Baghdad since 1991. Although the Iraqi regime occasionally uses Islamist rhetoric, the decidedly secular ruling Baath party and the Islamic fundamentalist Al Qaeda have long been in vehement opposition to one another. Despite active support of Abu Nidal and other secular terrorist groups in the 1980s, Iraqi support for international terrorism has since declined markedly; the last act of anti-American terrorism the U.S. government tied to Iraq was in 1993. The State Department's latest annual study, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2001*, did not list any acts of international terrorism linked directly to the government of Iraq. Indirect support has been limited to some financial aid to families of Palestinians—including relatives of suicide bombers—killed in their struggle against Israel, a practice common in other Arab states as well.

4. There Is No Evidence that Iraq Possesses an Offensive WMD Capability

Iraq has certainly developed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the past, but the Gulf War and then UN sanctions and inspections (which ended in 1998) reversed and retarded its capabilities. The International Atomic Energy Agency has categorically declared that Iraq no longer has a nuclear program. UNSCOM—the UN inspections and monitoring mission in Iraq—reportedly destroyed an estimated 95% of Iraq's chemical weapons capability. Iraq may have a sizable arsenal of biological agents for use in weapons, but there is no evidence that Baghdad possesses the complex delivery systems necessary to make these potential bioweapons a credible offensive threat. More fundamentally, those familiar with Iraqi politics, such as former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Edward Peck, argue that Saddam Hussein cares first and foremost about his own survival and presumably recognizes that any effort to use WMDs, or to pass them on to a terrorist group, would inevitably lead to his own destruction. His use of chemical weapons against Iranian troops and Kurdish civilians in the 1980s took place in large part because the U.S. protected Iraq from international repercussions. However with nothing to lose in the event of a U.S. invasion, the likelihood of Saddam Hussein ordering the use of any WMDs he still has at his disposal would dramatically increase.

5. The U.S. Has Virtually No Allies that Support a Unilateral Attack

The 1991 Gulf War was widely viewed as an act of collective security in response to aggression by Iraq against Kuwait, and it had the support of several important Arab and European allies. Presently, however, U.S. allies have emphasized their opposition to a unilaterally declared war. Arab governments in the region have repeatedly stated that they do not view Iraq as a current threat and fear serious political ramifications in the event of a U.S. invasion. NATO, in its mid-November summit, refused a U.S. request to pass a resolution endorsing military action and instead reiterated its support for the United Nations. Only the British government has publicly expressed support for U.S. military action against Iraq, although the Blair government may be restrained by domestic public opinion from active participation in a war lacking UN authorization.

6. Iraq Is No Longer a Significant Military Threat to Its Neighbors

Iraq's offensive capabilities have been severely weakened by years of bombings, sanctions, and UN-sponsored decommissioning. Its current armed forces are barely one-third their pre-Gulf War strength. Iraq's navy is virtually nonexistent, and its air force is just a fraction of what it was before the war. Military spending by Iraq has been estimated at barely one-tenth of its level in the 1980s, and the country is presumed to have no more functioning missiles. None of Iraq's immediate neighbors have expressed any concern about a possible Iraqi invasion in the foreseeable future. The Bush administration has been unable to explain why today, when Saddam Hussein has only a tiny percentage of his once-formidable military capability, Iraq is considered such a threat that it is necessary to invade the country and replace its leader—the same leader that Washington quietly supported during the peak of Iraq's military prowess.

7. Defeating Iraq Would Be Militarily Difficult

The U.S.-backed Iraqi opposition is fragmented, lacks significant support, and is almost exclusively in exile. There is no equivalent of Afghanistan's Northern Alliance to lead the fight on the ground. U.S. forces would have to march on Baghdad, a city of over five million people, virtually alone. Iraq's defensive military capabilities remain strong, since the regime's elite forces—which avoided conflict during the Gulf War and left poorly trained conscripts to do the fighting—are still intact. Unlike during the Gulf War fighting, which involved conventional and open combat on a flat desert that allowed U.S. forces to take full advantage of their superior firepower and technology, U.S. soldiers may have to fight their way through heavily populated agricultural and urban areas. To minimize American casualties in the face of such stiff resistance, which would come largely from within crowded urban areas, the U.S. would likely engage in heavy bombing of Iraqi residential neighborhoods, resulting in very high civilian casualties.

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