

## ***Iraq: Has the Prospect of War Faded?***

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Diplomatic moves by the United States to gain support for the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime have intensified in the past two weeks. One aspect of this has been the request to NATO for backing for a military campaign; more important has been a series of discussions between the U.S. and its regional allies in the Middle East and the Gulf.

The latter may have led to an increase in support for U.S. action against Iraq, but this is partly because most of the region's elites are convinced that the U.S. fully intends to go to war, whatever happens with the inspection process. Thus, continued opposition does not make sense—it is more important to engage in the maneuvering necessary to avoid political isolation when the war comes.

At the same time, there is a region-wide concern about the impact of a war, not least its potential to increase sympathy among Arabs for al Qaeda and its associates. As a result, the distinction between declaratory and actual policies is widely apparent. Regimes may loudly proclaim their fears of a war, yet privately allow the U.S. some leeway, and even give tentative support for its war plans.

### **U.S. Forces in the Region: Five Key Elements**

How does this relate to present U.S. military deployments in the region? In assessing these deployments, five significant elements need to be taken into account.

First, the build-up of ground forces necessary for a full-scale invasion of Iraq is not yet under way. At the same time, the scale of movement of munitions, armor, and equipment to the region—together with all the supplies that have already been pre-positioned there—means that the remaining forces could now be moved into place in as little as three weeks.

Second, much of the training for a war with Iraq is being done in the United States itself, in addition to the many exercises being conducted in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Middle East. It would be possible for the United States to have five aircraft carrier battle groups in the region by the end of the year. The two headed by the George Washington and the Abraham Lincoln are already there. Both are due to return to their U.S. home ports within two months (along with their cruiser, destroyer, auxiliary, and submarine escorts), but their deployments could be extended and they would then be joined by the carriers originally due to replace them, the Harry S. Truman and the Constellation, both of which have now left port and are heading for the Middle East. The fifth carrier, the Kitty Hawk, is normally deployed in the Pacific, but was in Hong Kong at the end of November and could move to the Gulf within a couple of weeks.

In the region itself, two squadrons of Apache and Blackhawk attack helicopters from the Sixth Cavalry Regiment in Germany have been moved to Kuwait. Meanwhile, over 3,000 troops are in Djibouti and the command ship Mount Whitney is due there shortly. The Djibouti force is intended to aid operations

against al Qaeda groups in Yemen and possibly Somalia, itself an indication of the widening of the war on terror, but they could also be deployed in support of operations against Iraq.

It is also worth noting that far more U.S. strike aircraft are equipped with precision-guided munitions than in the 1991 war. The air forces already in the area could conduct precision bombing raids at five times the intensity of the first days of that war.

Third, the *New York Times* (5 December 2002) reports that a substantial call-up of reservists is now likely, possibly even matching the 265,000 figure of 1991. At present, there are 50,000 reservists back in uniform, with an additional 10,000 expected to be called up this week.

Fourth, the recent relocation of a major command center to Qatar has involved around 1,000 personnel from U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the command responsible for U.S. operations in the Middle East and southwest Asia. The headquarters of CENTCOM is normally in Florida, and the forward basing in Qatar was envisaged as a temporary measure to enable CENTCOM to carry out its "Internal Look" war exercise. It now seems likely that this command center will be maintained in the region for some months, a strong indication that war is expected.

Fifth, it is notable that the pace of existing military operations against Iraq has escalated substantially in the past few months, not least in terms of bombing raids in the no-fly zones. From June - August 2002, sixteen bombing raids were undertaken, dropping 34 tons of bombs; from September - November, there were nineteen raids, with over 84 tons of bombs dropped.

There has also been a qualitative change in U.S. actions. Two weeks ago, U.S. aircraft patrolling the northern no-fly zone out of the Incirlik air base in Turkey came under anti-aircraft fire but did not immediately retaliate. Instead, there was a substantial bombing raid in the Basra and Tallil areas of southern Iraq two days later. The Iraqis claimed that the target had been the offices of an oil company and that four people had been killed.

Whether or not this was the case, it was certainly the first occasion in which an attack on U.S. planes in one no-fly zone had resulted in retaliation in the other zone, several hundred miles away. The *Washington Post* reported a comment from a senior Turkish diplomat in Ankara: "Recently I see a more assertive position by the United States in hitting Iraqi positions. I think this will only increase sensitivities in the Muslim world and increase support or solidarity with the Baghdad government, which we really don't need."

Overall, the message coming from these five developments is that the United States would be in a position to go to war with Iraq to destroy the Saddam Hussein regime within a very few weeks from the decision being taken. That has not yet happened, yet the intensity of military operations is increasing, and the command system is largely in place.

## The U.S. and UNMOVIC

Meanwhile, the Bush administration is bringing increasing pressure to bear on the United Nations (UN) inspectors to speed up their investigations. The most recent expression of this is the belief that the inspectors should move rapidly to extract Iraqi scientists and technologists and their families

from Iraq in order to obtain information from them.

The problem here is that an inspection process aimed at uncovering Iraqi nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs simply cannot be completed in a couple of months. Some indication can certainly be gained in that time, but the reality is that any meaningful results will take at least six months, and possibly up to two years, to be dependable.

This is simply unacceptable to the Washington security advisers who want action much sooner, preferably as a result of obtaining the much-vaunted smoking gun. They do not appear to have that, they may not have it for some months, and this is a source of deep frustration.

Another significant development is the copying of the Iraqi dossier for the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and it is certainly possible that a detailed examination will lead the Bush administration to say that the dossier is misleading and incomplete, providing the administration with the reason to go to war. Whether this could get a more specific UN mandate is not at all clear, and the position of the British government could be significant in this regard.

There are already tensions developing within the Security Council, not least in relation to the way in which the U.S. took over the copying and distribution of the Iraqi declaration, censoring some aspects before distribution to the nonpermanent members of the Council.

Overall, it is now clear that three different processes are under way in parallel. The Iraqi aim is to drag out the entire inspection process for as long as possible, certainly until April. The U.S. aim is to demonstrate that the

Iraqis are deceitful, are retaining weapons of mass destruction, and that the regime must therefore be terminated early in 2003. The UN Secretariat's aim is a detailed yet open inspection operation, one guided by a more conscious awareness than Washington's of the potentially devastating regional implications of a war.

It may be six weeks or more before U.S. intentions are totally clear. At present, it is apparent that the sheer size and detail of the Iraqi dossier is proving to be an effective delaying tactic.

A number of analysts now believe that the risk of war is diminishing, but there is one key point to be made before accepting this conclusion. The whole security strategy of the Bush

administration is predicated on the need to maintain control of a disorderly and fracturing international system. Iraq is viewed as a prime example of a "rogue state" that has to be dealt with, as a perceived threat to the U.S. in the most strategically important region outside the American homeland.

The strategy includes a strong emphasis on the need to pre-empt, to get your retaliation in first, and a failure to deal with Iraq would be seen as the first sign that this strategy is flawed. Moreover, this failure would reinforce a widening perception that the U.S. war on terror is not being won.

If, therefore, Saddam Hussein is still in power in six months time, and lit-

tle further progress has been made in countering al Qaeda and its associates, the whole U.S. security posture will begin to be called into question. For that reason, if for no other, a war with Iraq is still probable.

*(This article was first published in its entirety on the global issues website [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net) as part of an ongoing debate about Global Security. Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University and is openDemocracy's international security correspondent. He is a consultant to the Oxford Research Group. The second edition of his book Losing Control has just been published by Pluto Press.)*