

## *Fallacies of U.S. Plans to Invade Iraq*

By Stephen Zunes

THERE IS NO EVIDENCE OF IRAQI LINKS TO AL QAEDA

In the months following the September 11 terrorist attacks, there were leaks to the media about alleged evidence of a meeting in Prague between an Iraqi intelligence officer and one of the hijackers of the doomed airplanes that crashed into the World Trade Center. Subsequently, however, both the FBI and CIA have declared that no such meeting occurred. It is unlikely that the decidedly secular Baathist regime—which has savagely suppressed Islamists within Iraq—would be able to maintain close links with Bin Laden and his followers. Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal, his country's former intelligence chief, noted how Bin Laden views Saddam Hussein "as an apostate, an infidel or someone who is not worthy of being a fellow Muslim." Much of the money trail for Al Qaeda comes from U.S. ally Saudi Arabia; none has been traced to Iraq. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi; none were Iraqi. Admitting that there was no evidence of direct links between Iraq and Al Qaeda, the best that CIA Director George Tenet could come up with in testimony before Congress was that the "mutual antipathy" the two have for the U.S. "suggests that tactical cooperation between the two is possible." Most observers consider this to be an extraordinarily weak justification for war.

Iraq's past terrorist links have primarily been limited to such secular groups as Abu Nidal, a now largely defunct Palestinian group. At the height of Iraq's support of Abu Nidal in the early 1980s, the U.S. dropped Iraq from its list of countries that supported terrorism in order to support Iraq's war effort against Iran. (Baghdad was reinstated only after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, despite a lack of evidence of increased ties to terrorism.) A recent CIA report indicates that the Iraqis have actually been consciously

avoiding any actions against the U.S. or its facilities abroad.

THE MILITARY THREAT FROM IRAQ IS GREATLY EXAGGERATED

The American obsession with Iraq's potential threat to the Middle East region during the past decade is weakened by the fact that Iraq's military, including its real and potential weapons of mass destruction, was significantly stronger in the late 1980s than it is today. Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was once a real threat when he had his full complement of medium-range missiles, a functioning air force, and a massive stockpile of chemical and biological weaponry and material. Yet, from the Carter administration through the Reagan administration through the first half of the senior Bush administration, the U.S. dismissed any potential strategic Iraqi threat to the point of coddling Saddam's regime with overt economic subsidies and covert military support.

Today, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent inspections regime, virtually any aggressive military potential by Iraq has been destroyed. Before the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) was withdrawn, its agents reportedly oversaw the destruction of 38,000 chemical weapons, 480,000 liters of live chemical weapons agents, 48 missiles, six missile launchers, 30 missile warheads modified to carry chemical or biological agents, and hundreds of pieces of related equipment with the capability to produce chemical weapons. In late 1997, UNSCOM Director Richard Butler reported that UNSCOM had made "significant progress" in tracking Iraq's chemical weapons program and that 817 of the 819 Soviet-supplied long-range missiles had been accounted for. There were also believed to be a couple dozen Iraqi-made ballis-

## Foreign Policy In Focus Policy Report June 2002

*Foreign Policy in Focus* is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from foundations and churches. *In Focus* internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments.

### Project Directors

Tom Barry (IRC)  
Martha Honey (IPS)

### Communications & Outreach

Kathy Spillman (IPS)  
kathy@ips-dc.org

Erik Leaver (IPS)  
erik@fpif.org

Siri Khalsa (IRC)  
communications@irc-online.org

### Project Administrative Assistants

Nancy Stockdale (IRC)  
Juliette Niehuss (IPS)

### Design/Production

Tonya Cannariato (IRC)

### Orders and subscription information:

**Mail:** PO Box 4506  
Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506

**Voice & Fax:** (505) 842-8288

**Email:** infocus@irc-online.org

### Editorial inquiries and information:

#### IPS Editor

**Voice:** (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232

**Fax:** (202) 387-7915

**Email:** martha@ips-dc.org

#### IRC Editor

**Voice:** (505) 388-0208

**Fax:** (505) 388-0619

**Email:** tom@irc-online.org

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPF) aims to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and the U.S. public—an agenda that makes the U.S. a more responsible global leader and partner. The project responds to current foreign policy issues and crises with FPF policy briefs, the *Progressive Response* ezine, and news briefings. In addition, FPF publishes a series of special reports, a media guide of foreign policy analysts, and a biennial book on U.S. foreign policy.

FPF's network of advocates, organizations, activists, and scholars functions as a "think tank without walls," reaching out to constituencies and foreign policy actors to ensure that U.S. foreign policy represents a more broadly conceived understanding of U.S. national interests.

<http://www.fpfif.org/>

tic missiles unaccounted for, but these were of questionable caliber.

Iraq's current armed forces are barely one-third their pre-war strength. Even though Iraq has not been required to reduce its conventional forces, the destruction of its weapons and the country's economic difficulties have led to a substantial reduction in men under arms. The Navy is virtually nonexistent, and the Air Force is just a fraction of what it was before the war. Military spending by Iraq is barely one-tenth of its levels in the 1980s. Why then, beginning in late 1997, when Iraq had only a tiny percentage of its once-formidable military capability, did the U.S. suddenly begin to portray Iraq as an intolerable threat? It is no surprise, under these circumstances, that so many Americans, rightly or wrongly, suspected President Clinton of manufacturing the crisis to distract the American public from the sex scandal surrounding his office. Indeed, the December 1998 bombing began on the very day of his scheduled impeachment by the House of Representatives, which, in response, postponed the vote.

Though in the past Iraq certainly produced both chemical and biological agents, the U.S. has never been able to present any credible evidence that Iraq currently has biological weapons or other weapons of mass destruction. Early UNSCOM inspections revealed evidence of the production of large amounts of biological agents, including anthrax, and charged that Iraq had vastly understated the amount of biological warfare agents it had manufactured. In response, UNSCOM set up sophisticated monitoring devices to detect chemical or biological weapons, though these were dismantled after the bombing raids of December 1998. Even in the unlikely event that Iraq was able and willing to engage in the mass production or deployment of nuclear or chemical weapons, these weapons would almost

certainly be detected by satellite and air reconnaissance and destroyed in air strikes. Iraq continues to allow inspections of its nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency, which has reported that there is no evidence of renewed nuclear weapons development.

The development of biological weapons, by contrast, is much easier to conceal due to the small amount of space needed for their manufacture. However, there are serious questions as to whether the alleged biological agents could be dispersed successfully in a manner that could harm troops or a civilian population, given the rather complicated technology required. For example, a vial of biological weapons on the tip of a missile would almost certainly be destroyed on impact or dispersed harmlessly. Frightening scenarios regarding mass fatalities from a small amount of anthrax assume that the Iraqis have developed the highly sophisticated means of distributing these bioweapons by missile or aircraft. To become a lethal weapon, highly concentrated amounts of anthrax spores must be inhaled and then left untreated by antibiotics until the infection is too far advanced. Similarly, the winds would have to be just right, no rain could fall, the spray nozzles could not clog, the population would need to be unvaccinated, and everyone would need to stay around the area targeted for attack. This is why unknown terrorists sent spores through the mail to indoor destinations in the eastern U.S. during the fall of 2001. Even this relatively efficient means of distribution resulted in only a handful of deaths.

It is also hard to imagine that an Iraqi aircraft, presumably some kind of drone, could somehow penetrate the air space of neighboring countries, much less far-off Israel, without being shot down. Most of Iraq's neighbors have sophisticated anti-aircraft capability, and Israel has the most sophisticated regional missile defense

system in the world. Similarly, as mentioned above, there is no evidence that Iraq's Scud missiles and launchers even survived the Gulf War. Indeed, UNSCOM reported in 1992 that Iraq had neither launchers for their missiles nor engines to power them. As British scientist Julian Robinson put it: "To say they [UNSCOM] have found enough weapons to kill the world several times over is equivalent to the statement that a man who produces a million sperm a day can thus produce a million babies a day. The problem in both cases is one of delivery systems."

Israeli military analyst Meir Stieglitz, writing in the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*, noted that "there is no such thing as a long-range Iraqi missile with an effective biological warhead. No one has found an Iraqi biological warhead. The chances of Iraq having succeeded in developing operative warheads without tests are zero."

Although Iraq's potential for developing weapons of mass destruction should not be totally discounted, Saddam's lack of full cooperation with the inspections regime prior to the December 1998 bombings—and his subsequent outright refusal to cooperate at all—was more likely a desperate power play by a weakened tyrant than an indication that Iraq was hiding anything potentially threatening to its neighbors. UNSCOM has been unable to surface any evidence that Iraq has been concealing prohibited weapons since October 1995. Saddam's goal, more likely, was to provoke a reaction by the U.S. in order to capitalize on widespread Arab resentment over Washington's double-standard obsession with the possibility of Arab countries procuring weapons of mass destruction while tolerating Israel's nuclear arsenal.

A far more likely scenario for an Iraqi distribution of biological agents would be through terrorists smuggling them clandestinely into targeted countries. This is what led to some initial specula-

tion, now considered very doubtful, that the Iraqis were behind the anthrax mail attacks during the fall of 2001. To prevent such a scenario requires aggressive counterintelligence efforts by the U.S. and other potentially targeted nations,

[Hussein] lasts." While testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell said that if Iraq let weapons inspectors back in, he could only say that the U.S. "may look at lifting sanctions."

---

*Part of the problem is that the U.S. has not offered any incentive for Iraq to allow inspections to resume. From the outset, Washington made it clear that even total cooperation with UNSCOM would not lead to an end to the sanctions.*

---

but this type of terrorism is not likely to be prevented by a bombing campaign. Indeed, the ongoing sanctions regime and military strikes are more likely to encourage rogue elements of Iraqi intelligence or an allied terrorist group to engage in such an attack as an act of revenge for the heavy Arab casualties resulting from Washington's policies.

Part of the problem is that the U.S. has not offered any incentive for Iraq to allow inspections to resume. From the outset, Washington made it clear that even total cooperation with UNSCOM would not lead to an end to the sanctions. The senior President Bush's National Security Advisor Robert Gates stated: "Iraqis will be made to pay the price while Saddam Hussein is in power. Any easing of sanctions will be considered only when there is a new government." Similarly, Secretary of State Albright noted: "We do not agree with those nations who argue that if Iraq complies with its obligations concerning weapons of mass destruction, sanctions should be lifted." President Clinton, in reference to Saddam Hussein's continued rule, declared, "Sanctions will be there until the end of time, or as long as he

Even without a resumption of inspections, relying on existing systems of air patrols and satellite surveillance—which ensure that Iraq cannot build any large weapons plants without them being detected and presumably destroyed—seems far less risky than an all-out war.

U.S. officials have admitted that there is no evidence that Iraq has resumed its chemical and biological weapons programs. Scott Ritter, a former U.S. Marine officer who had criticized the Clinton administration's alleged lack of resolve in pushing Iraq to open up its inner sanctums, responded to a query on a television talk show in 2001 about Iraq's potential threat to the U.S. by saying:

*In terms of military threat, absolutely nothing. His military was devastated in 1991 in Operation Desert Storm and hasn't had the ability to reconstitute itself ... In terms of weapons of mass destruction, ... we just don't know. We know that we achieve a 90% to 95% level of disarmament. There's stuff that's unresolved, and until we get weapons inspectors back into Iraq, that will remain a problematic issue .... Diplomatically, politically, Saddam's a little bit of a threat. In terms of a real*

*national security threat to the United States, no, none. ... We should be trying to get weapons inspectors back into Iraq, so that we can ascertain exactly what's transpiring in Iraq today instead of guessing about it."*

## A WAR AGAINST IRAQ WOULD BE ILLEGAL

The conflict regarding access for UN inspectors and Iraq's weapons of mass destruction has always been between the Iraqi government and the United Nations, not between Iraq and the United States. Though UN Security Council Resolution 687 (the resolution passed in March 1991 which specified Iraq's disarmament requirements) was the most detailed in the world body's history, no enforcement mechanisms were

Kuwait, but every U.S. attack against Iraq since Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait has been illegal. Indeed, these attacks create a very dangerous precedent. Following the U.S. example, Russia could claim the right to attack Israel, France could claim the right to attack Turkey, and Great Britain could claim the right to attack Morocco, simply because those governments, like Iraq, are in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. The U.S. insistence on the right to attack unilaterally has effectively undermined the principle of collective security and the authority of the United Nations and could encourage international anarchy.

International law is quite clear about when military force is allowed. In addition to the aforementioned case of UN

have not felt threatened. The U.S. has not done so, because such a claim would be seen as ludicrous and, as a result, would have virtually no support in the Security Council.

## DEFEATING IRAQ WOULD BE MILITARILY DIFFICULT

The U.S. would be mistaken to think that defeating Iraq would be as easy as routing the ragtag band of tribesman that constituted the Taliban. Though Iraq's offensive capabilities have been severely weakened by the bombings, sanctions, and UNSCOM-sponsored decommissioning, its defensive military capabilities are still strong.

A military victory today would not be as easy as during the Gulf War, either. Prior to the launching of Operation Desert Storm, when the Iraqis figured out the extent of the forces being deployed against them, they decided not to put up a fight for Kuwait and relied mostly on young conscripts from minority communities, many of whom were literally chained to their positions. Only two of the eight divisions of the elite Republican Guard were ever in Kuwait, and they pulled back before the war began in mid-January. The vast majority of Iraq's strongest forces were withdrawn to areas around Baghdad to fight for the survival of the regime itself. In the event of war, defections from these units are not likely. There are close to one million members of the Iraqi elite who have a vested interest in the regime's survival. These include the Baath Party leadership and its supporters, security and intelligence personnel, and core elements of the armed forces and their extended families.

Nor is there an equivalent to Afghanistan's Northern Alliance, which did the bulk of the ground fighting against the Taliban. The Kurds, after being abandoned twice by the U.S., are unlikely to fight beyond securing auton-

---

*The U.S. insistence on the right to attack unilaterally has effectively undermined the principle of collective security and the authority of the United Nations and could encourage international anarchy.*

---

specified. Enforcement is a matter for the UN Security Council as a whole, a normal procedure when governments violate all or part of such resolutions. According to articles 41 and 42 of the United Nations Charter, no member state has the right to enforce any resolution militarily unless the UN Security Council determines that there has been a material breach of its resolution, decides that all nonmilitary means of enforcement have been exhausted, and then specifically authorizes the use of military force. This is what the Security Council did in November 1990 with Resolution 678 in response to Iraq's ongoing occupation of

Security Council authorization, the only other time that any member state is allowed to use armed force is described in Article 51, which states that it is permissible for "individual or collective self-defense" against "armed attack. ... until the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to maintain international peace and security." If Iraq's neighbors or the U.S. had felt threatened by Saddam Hussein's armed forces, any of these countries could have approached the Security Council and made their case as to why their security was threatened. Iraq's neighbors have not done so subsequent to 1991, apparently because they

omy for Kurdish areas. The armed Shiite opposition has largely been eliminated, and it too would be unlikely to fight beyond liberating the majority Shiite sections of southern Iraq. The U.S. would be reluctant to support either, given that their success would fragment the country and would encourage both rebellious Kurds in southeastern Turkey and restive Shiites in northeastern Saudi Arabia.

U.S. forces would have to march on Baghdad, a city of over five million people, virtually alone. Unlike the Gulf War, which was conventional and open combat, where U.S. forces could excel and take full advantage of their firepower and technological superiority, U.S. soldiers would have to fight their way through heavily populated agricultural and urban lands. Invading U.S. forces would be faced with bitter, house-to-house fighting in a country larger than South Vietnam. Iraqis, who may have had little stomach to fight to maintain their country's conquest of Kuwait, would be far more willing to sacrifice themselves to resist a foreign Western invader.

#### THE U.S. HAS VIRTUALLY NO SUPPORT FROM REGIONAL ALLIES

During the Gulf War, the U.S. was able to repel even greater criticism than it might have otherwise received, because it had the support of major segments of the international community, including several Arab states. This would not be the case, however, in the event of a new war against Iraq, which would not be seen as a response to an attack on the U.S. or an act of aggression against an ally. Instead, Washington's actions would be seen as an unprovoked invasion. Unlike in 1991, when most of the region supported—and even contributed to—the U.S.-led war effort or were at least neutral, Arab opposition is strong today. Mustapha Alani, a Middle East specialist with the Royal United Services Institute in London noted that “This is a very sensitive issue for them. Liberating Kuwait is

a legitimate objective, but toppling regimes is completely different.” Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah has warned that the U.S. “should not strike Iraq, because such an attack would only raise animosity in the region against the United States.” When Vice President Dick

In the event of a U.S. invasion of Iraq, this lack of regional support would have more than just political implications. Without a land base from which to launch its aerial attacks, the U.S. would have to rely exclusively on Navy jets launched from aircraft carriers. Without

---

*In March 2002, Iraq and Kuwait signed a document written by Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheik Sabah al Ahmed al Jabbar al Sabah in which Iraq, for the first time, formally consented to respect the sovereignty of Kuwait. Sabah declared that his country was 100% satisfied with the agreement.*

---

Cheney visited the Middle East in March, every Arab leader made clear his opposition. At the Beirut summit of the Arab League at the end of the month, the Arab nations unanimously endorsed a resolution opposing an attack against Iraq.

Even Kuwait has reconciled with Iraq. In March 2002, Iraq and Kuwait signed a document written by Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheik Sabah al Ahmed al Jabbar al Sabah in which Iraq, for the first time, formally consented to respect the sovereignty of Kuwait. Sabah declared that his country was 100% satisfied with the agreement, and Kuwait reiterated its opposition to a U.S. invasion of Iraq. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah called the pact a “very positive achievement” and expressed confidence that Iraq would uphold the agreement. However, rather than welcoming this breakthrough, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher declared that the U.S. was “profoundly skeptical” of the accord.

permission to launch aerial refueling craft, even long-range bombers from U.S. air bases might not be able to be deployed. It is hard to imagine being able to provide the necessary reconnaissance and surveillance aircraft under such circumstances, and the deployment of tens of thousands of troops from distant staging areas could be problematic as well.

Finally, there is the question of what happens if the U.S. is successful in overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime. As is becoming apparent in Afghanistan, throwing a government out is easier than putting a new one together. America's Arab allies have expressed concern that an Iraq without a strong central government could disintegrate into Shia Arab, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish ministates. As the European Union's external affairs chief Chris Patten warned: “The Afghan war perhaps reinforced some dangerous instincts: that the projection of military power is the only basis of true security; that the U.S. can rely on no one but itself; and that allies may be useful as optional extras.”

Comments on the *In Focus* briefs are found in *The Progressive Response*, the project's weekly electronic forum. To subscribe, email [newsfp-subscribe@lists.zianet.com](mailto:newsfp-subscribe@lists.zianet.com)

Subscribe to the *Self-Determination Crisis Watch* listserv!

Send an email to [majordomo@fpif.org](mailto:majordomo@fpif.org) with the message "subscribe selfdeterminationlist" in the body.

Your home for global affairs on the Web: [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)

**Subscribe:**

Subscribe for \$15 (10 issues) or \$30 (20 issues). Individual copies of *In Focus* are \$2.50, postpaid; bulk orders of *In Focus* are \$12.00 for 10 copies of the same issue, postpaid; orders for delivery outside the U.S. are double the listed prices. (Subscriptions do not include back issues. Contact the IRC for a list of available back issues.) Make checks payable to the Interhemispheric Resource Center. We also accept VISA and MasterCard.

To subscribe to *Foreign Policy In Focus*, or to order back issues, contact the IRC:

PO Box 4506 ♦ Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506 ♦ Phone / Fax: (505) 842-8288

---

Name

---

Email Address

---

Street Address

City, State, Zip Code

---

VISA/MasterCard Number

Expiration Date

---

Signature