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U.S.-Iraq Conflict

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Iraq lost the 1990-91 Gulf war to the United States. After the war Washington (with London's support) dictated the terms of Iraq's surrender and bribed and threatened reluctant Security Council members to back its punitive sanctions regime. The cornerstone was Resolution 687, whose terms provided for harsh military and economic enforcement against Iraq. Ambassador Abdullah al-Ashtal, then representing Yemen on the Security Council, remarked that "with this ceasefire we are still in a state of war. We need peace."

Certainly some aspects of 687 worked: arms monitors found and destroyed stocks of forbidden chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons materiel together with

weapons research and development programs that had survived the war. This arms monitoring continued until October 1997, when Saddam Hussein ordered Americans on the UN inspection teams to leave, and the rest of the monitors refused to continue their work without their American colleagues.

There is significant concern regarding Hussein's apparent efforts to rebuild his military's weapons of mass destruction. While he did not

use available chemical or biological weapons, built from materials provided by Western corporations during Desert Storm, his army did use chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. At that time, the U.S. made no serious protest and continued providing Saddam Hussein with military intelligence to bolster Baghdad against Tehran.

At the start of the Fall 1997, crisis President Clinton and others asserted that "the most important thing" was to maintain the monitoring regime. But when the chief of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), Ambassador Richard Butler of Australia, responded to the expulsion of the Americans by pulling out the other members of the monitoring team, thus halting the inspections altogether, Clinton and other Security Council leaders backed him up. The principle driving this Security Council decision was that individual

nations should not be able to determine the national composition of UN teams. Yet the decision to defend this principle of UN operations and to rank Security Council facesaving higher than maintaining the actual monitoring work seriously undermined U.S. claims about the severity of the Iraqi threat.

Until a small exception was allowed for humanitarian purposes in 1996, Resolution 687's punishing economic sanctions stopped all oil exports from Iraq. With one stroke they blocked virtually the entire income potential of the once-wealthy and relatively economically egalitarian society. Washington's Middle East strategy emphasizes maintaining a stable climate for regional economic integration and to attract foreign investment. Establishment of a NAFTA-style free trade area is at the heart not only of the recently failed U.S.-backed Arab-Israeli economic summit in Doha (for which UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright remained the sole cheerleader) but also fundamentally at the heart of the U.S.-Iraq conflict.

U.S. interest in maintaining low oil prices and access guarantees for its allies (the U.S. itself relies far less on Gulf oil than on other sources) takes into account an increasingly resurgent Iran, empowered by reestablished ties with Europe and Japan, and well positioned to take advantage of oil and gas fields in newly opened Central Asian nations. Washington wants to balance Iran's influence by keeping Saudi oil flooding into the market. At the same time, the U.S. also wants an Iraq powerful enough to prevent an unacceptable Iranian expansion of economic-political reach—although weak enough that Baghdad is unable to challenge the political stability or oil strategies of Washington's other allies and unable to pose a strategic threat to nuclear-armed Israel.

An Iraq whose population is devastated by starvation and disease—but kept subdued by a harsh military regime whose domestic power grows in direct proportion to U.S. threats and/or missile strikes—would suit the bill just fine, if Saddam Hussein had not proved such an unstable former U.S. ally. This accounts for the personalized nature of the demonization of the Iraqi leader. But it remains the Iraqi population as a whole who continue to pay the price of that demonization.

Key Points

- The U.S. strategy towards Iraq since Desert Storm has failed, and it has no long-term potential.
- Economic sanctions are punishing the population but leaving the regime unscathed.
- UN monitoring teams have destroyed weapons stocks; the Security Council halted those inspections when Iraq expelled the few American members.

The latest skirmish between Iraq and the U.S., while provoked by Saddam Hussein's expulsion of Americans on the UN monitoring team, demonstrates two fundamental flaws in the U.S. strategy toward Iraq. First, the combination of drastic economic sanctions and insufficient curbs on arms sales by U.S., German, Russian, French, and other allied companies, is inherently flawed from humanitarian, political, and arms-control perspectives, and it does not provide a long-term policy framework. Second, the U.S. claim to represent a global consensus against Iraq is belied by Washington's consistent undermining, through selective enforcement and rewriting the terms, of UN decisions.

The linchpin of Resolution 687, the complex ceasefire agreement that ended Desert Storm, is the economic sanctions regime. Imposed ostensibly to pressure the Iraqi government into revealing and destroying its research and components for building weapons of mass destruction, it has brought Iraq to its knees. Most of its military, devastated by bombing and the Pentagon's turkey shoot slaughter of retreating Iraqi soldiers, has collapsed. Desperate civilians face insufficient food and water, childhood mortality from preventable diseases, and a serious brain drain of Iraq's vital intellectual and professional class. Although 687 allows Iraq to import food and medicine, the oil embargo makes that virtually impossible. According to a June 1997 report by the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR), "the effect of the ban on Iraqi exports is the same as the effect of a quantitative restriction on the importation of food or medicines, and in this sense, the allowances in the sanctions regime for 'humanitarian' imports are somewhat illusory."

The UN's 1996 oil for food arrangement allows Iraq to export small quantities of oil. But a joint October 1997 study by the Food & Agriculture Organization and the World Food Program notes that "malnutrition still remains a serious problem throughout the country." The sanctions have "significantly constrained Iraq's ability...to import sufficient quantities of food to meet needs. As a consequence, food shortages and malnutrition became progressively severe and chronic in the 1990s."

In the meantime, the economic sanctions have done little to accomplish their official purpose. The Iraqi regime, throughout the 1970s and 80s, obtained materials for a significant construction program involving weapons of mass destruction. The UN monitors found and destroyed significant parts of those programs, but there is no evidence that the economic sanctions played any military role at all. Worse yet, no effective sanctions regime was ever imposed, or even contemplated, against the companies that provided the Iraqi military with its dangerous components. It is no coincidence that the five largest weapons dealers in the world (along with Germany in the particular case of Iraq) happen to be the five permanent members of the Security Council, the U.S., Britain, France, Russia, and China. While the arms suppliers go largely unpunished (except for those few caught up in the revolving Iraq-related scandals that have plagued a few U.S. and European companies), the

civilian population, whose unaccountable government has purchased those weapons, pays the price of sanctions.

U.S. policy towards Iraq, despite the frequent rhetoric of coalition partnership and multilateral decisions, has severely undermined the UN. Washington has consistently moved the UN's goalposts, undercutting 687's expressed UN intention to lift oil sanctions as soon as monitors certified that weapons of mass destruction had been destroyed. Instead, as President Clinton reiterated in the midst of the recent crisis, the U.S. will not allow sanctions to be lifted as long as Saddam Hussein remains in power. The result, of course, is a negative incentive: Why should a recalcitrant Iraqi government make any effort to comply since the sanctions would not be lifted no matter what they do?

Perhaps even more seriously, the U.S. maintains a consistent double standard towards UN resolutions. For Washington, some resolutions are more equal than others. If the basis for imposing sanctions against Iraq is its occupation of Kuwait, what about Indonesia's brutal occupation of East Timor, let alone Israel in Palestine, Lebanon or Syria? If the concern is human rights, what about Saudi Arabia, China, Kuwait? If it's treatment of the Kurds, why should Turkey be exempt? Even within resolution 687 itself, only the punish-Iraq sections appear to be taken seriously. The preamble to 687 reaffirms the Security Council's call for a nuclear-free zone throughout the Middle East; but imposing such a zone would require disarming Israel's Dimona plant of its 200 high-density nuclear bombs, which is not on the U.S. agenda.

Such double standards continue to isolate the U.S. from its allies, and even more dramatically from countries in the global South. The Clinton administration, according to the *New York Times* (Nov. 17), found itself "forced to retreat" from its no-negotiations stance when only one country, Britain, backed it up. In the Middle East, the much-vaunted Gulf War coalition fell apart long ago. With anger exploding in the Arab street at continued U.S. backing for an expansionist, settlement-building Israel, Arab governments are far from joining the U.S. military build-up. Clinton's decision to send the aircraft carrier George Washington to join the Nimitz reflected Pentagon unease over the refusal of ostensible allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia to allow any military raids against Iraq from their territories.

Current U.S. policy against Iraq provides no vision for a strategic long-term approach that takes into account a starving population, a crippled economy, and a blustering military government. The policy was already eroding long before the current crisis. It cannot be sustained indefinitely.

Key Problems

- The combination of drastic economic sanctions and insufficient curbs on arms sales by U.S. and other allied companies is inherently flawed.
- The U.S. claim to represent a global consensus against Iraq is belied by Washington's consistent undermining, through selective enforcement and rewriting the terms, of UN decisions.
- U.S. policy against Iraq provides no vision for a strategic long-term approach that takes into account a starving population, a crippled economy, and a blustering military government, and it cannot be sustained indefinitely.

U.S. policy towards Iraq must be completely recrafted. Military action should be eschewed in favor of truly diplomatic and multilateral approaches. The U.S. should recommit to real consensus decisionmaking, in which risk assessments and potential policy directives reflect actual international opinions, not simply the power of U.S. bribes and threats. Washington should abandon threats of unilateral military force if multilateral decisions are not deemed harsh enough. Military policy towards Iraq should be an integral component of a renewed set of diplomatic and political initiatives aimed at serious, international arms control regimes with particular attention to arms exporting countries.

A serious arms control regime aimed at stopping the production, sales, and export of all components that can be used for weapons of mass destruction must be not only asserted, but stringently enforced. As the most powerful nation on earth, the U.S. should take the lead in calling for and implementing wide-ranging arms control measures. These should include implementing, unilaterally at first if necessary, the long-ignored sections of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty mandating nuclear disarmament. Washington should also support renewed UN efforts to reinforce existing international commitments to establish no-exception nuclear-free and weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zones in the arms-bloated Middle East.

threats, while insuring that Iraq's civilian population does not pay the price for its government's unaccountability. The mandate should draw up a new limited-duration UN weapons monitoring program. It should include a detailed set of specific criteria Baghdad must meet to end the monitoring. The U.S. should state and implement its unequivocal support for the specific terms of the UN resolution, and the U.S. should stop moving the goalposts, thereby undermining the UN's decisions. Crucially, while an arms embargo remains in place, the economic sanctions should be lifted, allowing Iraq to sell oil and purchase nonmilitary goods for civilian use. Reimposition of the type of crippling economic sanctions now devastating the civilian population must not be used as a threat to insure compliance with a weapons inspection or other arms control program; other incentives must be found.

Separately, a new monitoring program should be shaped to track exports and imports of potentially dangerous weapons components by all countries. All UN monitoring and any other military sanctions should be implemented even-handedly. Additional sanctions, aimed both in words and in implementation against Iraq's military leaders and not its civilian population, may be included as well. These might include international travel bans on all Iraqi military or governmental officials involved in efforts to purchase restricted weapons-related goods.

Concerns regarding Iraq must be put in context. Numerous terrible governments exist in the world—many of which came to and stayed in power because of U.S. backing during the cold war. Some are militarized and repressive, occupy other nations' lands, and are consistent violators of human rights. Many of those nations, seeing existing regional or global nuclear powers as threats answerable only with their own weapons of mass destruction, turn to what is often called the poor country's nuclear weapons, cheap and relatively easily obtainable chemical and biological weapons. All of these potential problems must be recognized and addressed politically, especially by reducing or removing altogether the existing nuclear arsenals that provoke such terrible responses. Iraq is only one such potential problem.

Key Recommendations

- Military action should be eschewed in favor of truly diplomatic and multilateral approaches.
- The Security Council should acknowledge that resolution 687's brutal economic sanctions have failed.
- A redrawn UN mandate should work to limit potential Iraqi military threats, while insuring that Iraq's civilian population does not pay the price for its government's unaccountability.

sanctions, whose impact is that of a blunt instrument against Iraq's civilians, have failed. A new resolution should be drafted, following comprehensive consultations with the General Assembly's First (Disarmament) Committee and especially with the Arab Group of the Assembly. The U.S. should endorse the UN Charter's emphasis on regional diplomatic solutions. In this case, the League of Arab States should be brought back as a major diplomatic player.

As to Iraq itself, a new UN mandate should be drawn. Its goal should be to limit potential Iraqi military

At the UN, the Security Council should acknowledge that Resolution 687's brutal economic



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