



U.S.-Iraq: On the War Path

By Stephen Zunes

With its enormous oil wealth, large agricultural base, and population of over 20 million, Iraq has long been considered one of the most important countries in the Arab world. The site of the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia, Iraq emerged as an amalgam of three Ottoman provinces under a British-imposed monarch in 1921. A nationalist revolution in 1958 led to a series of military-led leftist governments, eventually coalescing under leadership from the Baath Party, a secular Arab nationalist movement.

Though Muslim Arabs predominate, they are outnumbered by the combined populations of Sunni Muslim Kurds in the North and Shiite Muslim Arabs in the South. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Baghdad regime engaged in severe repression against these two minorities. The United States has twice backed Kurdish uprisings against the regime only to precipitously abandon them later. By the late 1970s, Saddam Hussein had risen to leadership in a bloody series of purges, allegedly with some support from the CIA, which hoped he would steer the country from a pro-Soviet to a more nonaligned direction. Under Saddam's leadership prior to the Gulf War, the Iraqi

people gained an impressive level of prosperity, ranking near the top of third world countries in terms of nutrition, education, health care, housing, and other basic needs. Yet Saddam ruled with both brutality and a cult of personality, establishing a system closely resembling fascism.

The U.S. quietly supported Saddam Hussein during the 1980s with economic aid, largely covert military aid, and technology transfers including key components for Iraq's chemical and biological weapons programs. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 and again when it used chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and Kurdish civilians, the U.S. refused to support sanctions against the Baghdad regime. Such special treatment likely led the Iraqi dictator to believe that appeasement would continue.

In 1990, following a dispute with Kuwait regarding debt repayment and oil policy, Iraq invaded and annexed the sheikdom. Applying enormous pressure, the senior Bush administration eventually won approval

from the U.S. Congress and the UN Security Council to authorize the use of force to end Iraq's occupation. The United States, with support from some allied governments, commenced a heavy bombing campaign in January 1991 targeting both Iraqi military forces and the country's civilian infrastructure. The U.S.-led assault, known as Operation Desert Storm, ended six weeks later after a ground offensive liberated Kuwait from Iraqi control with minimal allied casualties but over 100,000 Iraqi deaths.

The cease-fire agreement included unprecedented restrictions against Iraq's military and the dismantling of its weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and their delivery systems, enforced through rigorous inspections by international monitors under the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM). This intrusive yet innovative effort at unilateral arms control was damaged both by Iraqi evasiveness and by Washington's abuse of UNSCOM for spying purposes.

The Iraqi regime's severe repression against rebellious Shiites in the South and Kurds in the North immediately following the Gulf War provided a pretext for the United States and its allies to create so-called "no-fly zones" restricting Iraq's military movements even within its borders. In addition, since early 1999 the U.S. has engaged in unauthorized air strikes on an almost weekly basis.

Alleging that Iraq has not fully complied with provisions of the cease-fire agreement, the U.S. has successfully prevented the UN from lifting sanctions. The result has been a humanitarian catastrophe, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians—primarily children—dying from malnutrition and preventable diseases resulting from the inability of Iraqis to obtain adequate food and medicine or the materials necessary to rebuild the war-damaged civilian infrastructure.

In 1993 and 1996, the U.S. engaged in a series of sustained air strikes as punitive measures against alleged Iraqi transgressions. The U.S. engaged in a heavy four-day bombing campaign in December 1998, forcing the withdrawal of UN weapons inspectors. This prompted Iraq to forbid UN inspectors from returning until September 2002, when Iraq agreed to allow inspectors from UNSCOM's successor, the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC).

After President George W. Bush took office, the U.S. attempted to create an armed Iraqi opposition group out of disparate exile leaders, but with little success. By late 2001, official U.S. policy stipulated a "regime change" and included threats of a full-scale U.S. invasion of the country in order to install a new government more to Washington's liking.

Key Points

- U.S. support for Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1980s contributed to Iraq's emergence as a major regional military power.
- The U.S.-led Gulf War in 1991 forced the withdrawal of Iraqi occupation troops from Kuwait and led to an ongoing U.S. military presence in the region, including periodic air strikes against Iraq.
- War damage from 1991, combined with severe economic sanctions and periodic U.S. air strikes, precipitated Iraq's severe humanitarian crisis.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Although the senior Bush administration assembled strong international support for the 1991 Gulf War, subsequently the U.S. has taken an increasingly unilateralist stance toward Iraq. In early 2002, the Bush administration began warning that it was not enough for Iraq simply to allow UN inspectors to return; what was required was nothing less than a “regime change” in Baghdad, imposed by invading American forces if necessary. This was the first test of a new doctrine of “preemption,” whereby the United States reserves the right to invade and overthrow any government that it deems a potential threat to U.S. interests, a position that violates the United Nations Charter and basic principles of international law developed over the past century.

Iraq still has not recovered from the 1991 war, during which it was subjected to the heaviest bombing in world history. Since the war, the U.S. has insisted that UN sanctions not be lifted until Saddam Hussein is ousted. However, other UN members originally agreed to extend the sanctions only until Iraq complied with demands to dismantle its WMD capability and address other outstanding issues from the 1991 cease-fire resolution.

Rather than encouraging popular opposition, the sanctions have resulted in an unprecedented level of poverty, and the dependence of the population on the central government for rations has further consolidated Baghdad’s grip on power. Given the serious humanitarian consequences of the sanctions, combined with their ineffectiveness, by the mid- to late-1990s most UN Security Council members supported lifting non-military sanctions altogether. The United States has blocked such efforts, though the sanctions were modified.

By the time Iraq agreed to a return of UN inspectors in September 2002, WMDs were only one of a litany of issues raised by the Bush administration to justify an invasion. Many of Washington’s accusations—including human rights abuses, violations of UN Security Council resolutions, and the harboring of terrorists—were either gross exaggerations or were not unique to Iraq. The latest report by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1998 declared that Iraq’s nuclear capability had been completely dismantled. According to some UNSCOM inspectors, 95% of the country’s chemical weapons were accounted for and destroyed. Much of the biological weaponry has also been destroyed; there is some debate over how much remains or has since been developed. And whatever remaining functional ballistic missiles Iraq may have capable of delivering WMDs are of dubious reliability and probably number less than two dozen.

The Bush administration has also been unable to explain what might motivate this impoverished third world country either to launch a first strike against the world’s one remaining superpower or to pass on such precious technology to a terrorist group it could not control. Saddam Hussein has repeatedly valued his survival in power above all else, and he knows that any attack against the United States or its allies would be suicidal. Yet despite the absence of any direct evidence that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, a means of deploying them, or the motivation to launch a suicidal

offensive use of such weaponry, the Bush administration still maintains that the Iraqi regime is an intolerable threat to American security and must be overthrown.

Iraq is in clear violation of some sections of UN Security Council Resolution 687 as well as subsequent resolutions reiterating demands for Iraqi disarmament and related concerns. However, only the UN Security Council has the prerogative to authorize military responses to violations of its resolutions; no single member state can do so unilaterally. A unilateral U.S. invasion, therefore, would be a clear violation of international law. Moreover, as in most wars, innocent civilians will suffer the most.

Despite efforts to link Iraq to the ongoing war against terrorism, the Bush administration has been unable to show any firm evidence that the strongly secular Baathist regime is supporting the Islamic fundamentalist Al Qaeda network. Ironically, when Iraq was most active in its support of international terrorism during the 1980s—bankrolling the now-defunct Abu Nidal group and other radical secular nationalists—the U.S. dropped Iraq from its list of states sponsoring terrorism. Today, Iraq is back on the list, although the State Department’s most recent report on international terrorism failed to find any direct Iraqi support for terrorist activities.

In contrast to the 1991 Gulf War to liberate Kuwait, today there is virtually no support within the Arab or Islamic world for a U.S. invasion of Iraq. Indeed, such an attack could result in an outburst of anti-American protests and extremist violence, possibly threatening a number of pro-Western regimes. Furthermore, a U.S. invasion of Iraq would meet with far greater resistance than during the Gulf War: rather than facing poorly trained conscripts in flat open desert, American forces could end up fighting loyal, heavily armed elite units in the densely populated center of the country.

Finally, U.S. double standards have greatly harmed American credibility in the region. Most Arabs and many others around the world question why Washington insists on singling out Iraq for its alleged possession of WMDs while raising no objections to such allies as Israel and Pakistan developing nuclear weapons and sophisticated missile systems. This is particularly duplicitous, given that UN Security Council Resolution 687, which the U.S. claims to be enforcing through the sanctions and bombing, calls for “establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destruction and all missiles for their delivery.”

Key Problems

- A United States war on Iraq is illegal without explicit approval of the UN Security Council, and Washington’s policies of “preemption” and “regime change” violate basic principles of international law.
 - The Bush administration has failed to provide evidence that Iraq threatens the United States with weapons of mass destruction or that it is linked with the Al Qaeda network.
 - During the 1990s, UN inspectors succeeded in eliminating most of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems.
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

The Bush administration must drop its illegal doctrines of “preemptive strike” and “regime change,” support the return of UN weapons inspectors, and work to build genuine multilateral coalitions and decisionmaking. The most effective means of preventing any potential deployment or use of WMDs is to support unfettered access for UNMOVIC inspectors in Iraq, which would be impossible during a military attack.

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. must end its threats of an invasion of Iraq, support the return of UN weapons inspectors, and return to working within a multilateral framework.
- To maintain credibility in curbing potential Iraqi threats to peace and stability, the U.S. must support arms control and UN Security Council resolutions throughout the region rather than singling out Iraq.
- The U.S. must support the lifting of economic sanctions against Iraq’s civilian population. A credible democratic opposition movement capable of ousting Saddam Hussein’s regime will more likely emerge if sanctions are lifted and outside intervention is kept at a minimum.

Washington must pledge to enforce other outstanding UN Security Council resolutions and not simply single out Iraq. As long as the United States allows allied regimes to flout UN Security Council resolutions, any sanctimonious insistence for strict compliance by the Iraqi government will simply be dismissed as hypocritical and mean-spirited, whatever the merit of the actual charges.

In a similar vein, the United States must support a comprehensive arms control plan for the region, including the establishment of a zone in the Middle East where all weapons of mass destruction are banned. Such an agreement would halt the U.S. practice of transporting nuclear weapons into the region on its planes

and ships and would force Israel to dismantle its sizable nuclear arsenal. This more holistic approach to nonproliferation might include, for example, a five-year program affecting not just Iraqi missiles but phasing out Syrian, Israeli, and other countries’ missiles as well.

As with its highly selective insistence on the enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions, the double standards in U.S. policy render even the most legitimate concerns about Iraqi weapons development virtually impossible to successfully pursue. If Iraq is truly a threat to regional security, there must be a comprehensive regional security regime worked out between the eight littoral states of the Persian Gulf. The U.S. should support such efforts and not allow its quest for arms sales and oil resources to unnecessarily exacerbate regional tensions. In addition, the United States should withdraw its ground forces from the Persian Gulf, since the U.S. military presence—aimed largely at Iraq—has not contributed to the security of the region and has led to an anti-American backlash, most dramatically in the form of the Al Qaeda terrorist network.

Washington should continue to support a strict UN arms embargo on Iraq and closely monitor potential dual-use technologies. However, the U.S. should join the growing number of countries in the Middle East and around the world calling for a lifting of the economic sanctions that have brought so much suffering to Iraqi civilians. The Bush administration should promise to no longer block the lifting of economic sanctions once the UN secretary-general recognizes that Baghdad is in effective compliance with Security Council resolutions. The United States, in consultation with other members of the Security Council, needs to clarify the positive responses that Iraq can expect in return for specific improvements in its behavior.

International guarantees protecting the oppressed Kurds of northern Iraq are necessary. However, this should not be taken as an excuse for ongoing punitive air strikes, which perpetuate the sad history of using Kurds as pawns in international rivalries. Comprehensive initiatives for a just settlement of the Kurdish question—including the oppressed Kurdish minorities in Turkey and other countries—should be pursued by the international community.

Finally, there needs to be a greater understanding by U.S. policymakers of Iraqi politics and society, which Washington not only lacks but appears to have done little to improve upon. Most successful changes of regime in recent years have come from internal, nonviolent, popular movements.

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the United States or other countries supporting democratic opposition movements against autocratic regimes, the U.S. has so thoroughly destroyed its credibility that little good can result from actively supporting an Iraqi opposition movement, particularly given its weakness and internal divisions. In particular, support for any kind of internal military resistance is not only futile but would give the Iraqi regime an excuse to crack down even harder against the country’s already-oppressed people. The lifting of economic sanctions, a cessation of the bombing, and an end to the threat of an invasion, offers the best hope of some kind of organized opposition emerging. However, to be successful, it must be seen as a genuinely indigenous force, not the creation of yet another ill-fated intervention by Western powers.

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New Internationalism Project

(See especially link to 1999 Trip Report of Congressional Aides Delegation)

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Website: <http://www.accuracy.org/iraq/>

International Action Center

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Website: <http://www.iacenter.org/>

Iraq Action Coalition

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Website: <http://leb.net/iac/>

Iraq Resource Information Site

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Website: <http://www.iraqinfo.cjb.net/>

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Middle East Daily

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National Council of Churches

Website: <http://www.nccusa.org/>

National Reduction Disarmament Initiative

Website: <http://www.nrdi.org/>

UNICEF House

Website: <http://www.unicef.org/>

United Nations Office of the Iraq Programme Oil for Food

Website: <http://www.un.org/Depts/oip/>

U.S. Mission to the UN

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Voices in the Wilderness

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Website: <http://www.nonviolence.org/vitw/>

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