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## Iraq: The Snare of Inspections

*Gary Milhollin & Kelly Motz*

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EVERY TIME war clouds gather over Baghdad, Saddam Hussein has a habit of hinting that he may allow UN arms inspectors to return. Similarly, every time war clouds gather over Baghdad, voices in the United States and elsewhere, including some in or near the Bush administration, can be heard urging a new and improved system of inspections. Today, some of those voices belong to critics of administration policy who are opposed to war with Iraq. Others favor war but think a provocation, or “triggering event,” is lacking, and they see inspections (which they fully expect to fail) as providing the necessary trigger.

The inspectors departed Iraq in 1998 after enduring more than seven years of tricks and obfuscations, all aimed at protecting the country’s programs for building weapons of mass destruction. Since then, Saddam’s interest in renewed inspections has been aroused in direct proportion to the perceived risk that his country will be invaded. When things are quiet, he has refused even to consider letting the United Nations back—in egregious violation of his pledges under UN resolutions and therefore of international law. But now

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that Washington is seriously contemplating “regime change,” he may well announce that inspectors are once again welcome.

If he does, he can count on Russia and France, Iraq’s allies on the Security Council, to rally the world in favor of giving peace a chance. Any delay on Saddam’s part in admitting or cooperating with inspectors will then still look better than war, and it will become that much harder to argue that Uncle Sam should use soldiers and bullets to do what international civil servants could do with blue helmets and notebooks. If inspectors go back in, said Jack Straw, Britain’s Foreign Secretary, only last month, “plainly the case for military action recedes.”

Whatever one’s stance on the question of how best to handle Saddam Hussein, it is vital to understand one thing. Unless the Iraqi dictator should suddenly and totally reverse course on arms inspection and everything that goes with it, or be forced into early retirement—in other words, unless Saddam Hussein’s Iraq ceases to be Saddam Hussein’s Iraq—inspections will never work.

THESE ARE several reasons why this is so. Some of these reasons have to do with recent changes in the UN’s own inspection apparatus. Others inhere in the nature of the man, and the regime, we are dealing with.

Almost three years ago, a new UN Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC)

replaced the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM). The latter, which for seven years had run the inspection effort in Iraq, was a special-purpose enterprise operated by officials on loan from national governments. The former, which has yet to take the field, is modeled on the UN's notoriously inefficient bureaucracy.

This change has a number of serious and debilitating implications. Among other things, UN inspectors are no longer set up to make effective use of intelligence information—an essential tool for determining whether Iraq is telling the truth. In the 1990's, when U.S. intelligence officials agreed to supply secret information to the UN inspectors, they did so only after becoming confident that the inspectors were themselves willing and able to use the information thereby received to uncover forbidden Iraqi weapon efforts. The information went only to inspectors who were individually trusted to protect it; these inspectors obtained the information on a privileged basis, and could be counted on to use it aggressively.

At UNMOVIC, which is split into a number of separate divisions, no inspector will be allowed to receive intelligence information on a privileged basis, and any and all information is liable to be shared. Not only does this make it more difficult to prevent information from leaking, thus undermining the confidence of governments thinking of supplying it, but no one can be sure that particular pieces of information will be acted upon. Unless and until national governments become convinced otherwise, not much of significant value is likely to be provided—an especially grave problem today when solid intelligence on Iraq has become scarcer and therefore more valuable.

Other considerations are relevant here. The American, British, and Israeli officials who in the past provided information to UNSCOM benefited from the fact that their relationship with the commission was a "loop." Evidence uncovered by UNSCOM inspectors flowed back to those nations' intelligence agencies for analysis, and this analysis produced new leads for UNSCOM in return. UNMOVIC, however, has announced that there will be no loop. Information will flow only in, not out.

This will be a crippling handicap. Even if, for example, an Iraqi defector should turn up and tell UNMOVIC to look in a certain building, the agency will need a means of evaluating his reliability before it decides to act. Without a loop, it cannot ask the intelligence service of a national government to vet what it has learned. It will have to rely on its own resources, and if these are insufficient to

prompt action, an important opportunity may thereby be lost.

UNMOVIC's prohibition on dialogue apparently extends even to analysis. The agency recently refused an offer by a supporting Western government to help evaluate information UNMOVIC already had on hand. By thus depriving itself of access to friendly national governments, UNMOVIC has chosen ignorance over knowledge and removed one of the greatest incentives for providing intelligence information in the first place. And without a return flow of information, the governments concerned can hardly place confidence in UNMOVIC's inspection reports, especially if they reflect favorably on Iraq's behavior.

Nor is that all. Unlike their predecessors at UNSCOM, UNMOVIC's inspectors have been required to sever all links with their national governments and to become UN employees. Although UNMOVIC does train its inspectors in security precautions, it has no process for security clearance *per se*—without which there is no way to assess an inspector's personal reliability, to guarantee that he is not an intelligence agent, or to punish him if he reveals secret information. Even if UNMOVIC had not already moved to sever the loop of reciprocal relations, this lack of security would probably be enough by itself to inhibit most national governments from providing the agency with sensitive equipment or techniques of analysis.

SO MUCH for internal considerations. On the ground, in Iraq itself, UNMOVIC would soon run up against obstacles at least as formidable as those with which UNSCOM had to cope, and which UNMOVIC is far less equipped to handle.

UNSCOM conducted some 260 inspections in Iraq over its seven years there. A fair number of these were surprise visits with no advance notice, an enterprise at which UNSCOM had become particularly adept. Even so, Iraq's intelligence operatives defeated it more often than not: only about a half-dozen of the surprise inspections actually succeeded. Saddam Hussein's agents were active in hotel rooms in both New York and Baghdad as well as at the UN building in New York. It was a rare inspection when the Iraqis did not know what the inspectors were looking for before they arrived at the site to be searched.

Compounding the advantage held by Iraq in this regard is the success it has achieved, at considerable expense, in making its secret weapon efforts mobile. Laboratories, components, and materials are ready to hit the road at a moment's notice. During

the days when UNSCOM was conducting inspections, this mobility was revealed graphically in U-2 photos of a suspect site. The pictures were taken in sequence as soon as an inspection team left its headquarters. The first photos show no activity at the site; a slightly later sequence reveals a large number of vehicles leaving the site; then there is again no activity; and then the vehicles of the inspectors arrive.

UNMOVIC has not yet indicated whether it will conduct surprise inspections, but it is hardly likely to do better at them than UNSCOM, and will almost certainly do worse. The same goes for regular, scheduled inspections. Most UNMOVIC inspectors have little or no experience in Iraq, and, worse, little or no experience in handling or evaluating intelligence information. In effect, this will be a team of rookies going to bat against a world-class intelligence organization highly practiced at foiling inspections.

UNMOVIC's recruitment procedures do not help. In assembling staff for an inspection team, UNSCOM looked for experts who had actually worked on the specific technology it was targeting—not just, say, a person familiar with missile or rocket design but one who knew Scuds specifically. To accomplish this, UNSCOM recruited from countries that had already built advanced missiles, or whose expertise was derived from military programs. UNMOVIC, by contrast, has chosen not to work this way. In order to achieve “geographic balance,” UN-style, it hires staff from around the world, including from countries that do not themselves possess relevant weapon programs or expertise.

The results are predictable, and are likely to reverberate down the line, not just in planning and carrying out no-notice inspections (or inspections of any kind) but in generating new “baseline” information on the numerous Iraqi sites and in setting up a proper monitoring regime. In one way or another, UNMOVIC's inexperience will make itself felt in the myriad small signals that will tip off the Iraqis to its intentions.

**S**TILL MORE obstacles remain to be mentioned. UNMOVIC is stuck with a deal that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan made with Iraq in February 1998, just before the UN inspectors left. According to its terms, inspectors at certain sites—the so-called “presidential sites”—must be accompanied by members of a “Special Group” of diplomats, and must also notify Iraq in advance of any inspection, even disclosing the composition of the inspection team. Such procedures contradict the

principle of immediate, unconditional, and unrestricted access that is essential to effective inspections, and render inspection of these sites virtually impossible.

Iraq initially designated eight such presidential sites—each a swath of land large enough to conceal entire factories as well as mobile equipment or laboratories. It also retained the prerogative to designate new sites at any time, and to decide just how many sites there are, where they are, how big they are, and what they include. All such locations, in effect, create refuges for mobile items. If Iraq chooses to use them aggressively, they could be a loophole large enough to defeat any inspection effort.

Finally, one must consider that any new inspections in Iraq will be occurring under the threat of imminent American military action. President Bush has emphasized that the United States is determined to use “all the tools at our disposal” to remove Saddam Hussein from power; under such conditions, any announcement by UN arms inspectors that Iraq is not cooperating is likely to be viewed as a *casus belli*. But UN organizations do not normally like to trigger wars. How can this not inhibit the readiness of UNMOVIC to issue any such damning report, regardless of Iraq's actual behavior?

Besides, UNMOVIC's staff has spent more than two years in New York getting ready to return to Iraq, and will hardly be eager to admit that it has failed to secure Iraq's cooperation. Rather, there will be every incentive to define inspection tasks narrowly—thus making it easier for Iraq to comply, at least nominally—and to avoid any aggressive inspection activity. UNMOVIC's executive chairman, Hans Blix, is fully empowered to set policy in this regard; in his previous career as director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Blix usually avoided confrontation (except when dealing with North Korea) and also missed Iraq's vast clandestine effort to build nuclear weapons.

What Blix would do now in Iraq is unknown—although, if he were to choose nonconfrontation, he would admittedly have one or two arguments on his side. Even nonconfrontational inspections are disruptive to a degree, and even when UNSCOM was not surprising the Iraqis, it was forcing them to mount a large concealment effort and move key equipment from one site to another, which made it harder to run illicit programs. Nonconfrontational inspections also yielded much essential information about Iraq's actual progress in making mass-destruction weapons. (This was mainly so in the case of the country's missile program; in the case of its biological program, which was and is easier to

conceal, the nonconfrontational model was of far less benefit.)

In the present instance, however, a policy of avoiding confrontation will be dangerous in the extreme. Inspections will then be aimed only at monitoring what is already known rather than at searching aggressively for what is still hidden. Moreover, the very failure to find anything new will feed the demand that the embargo against Iraq be lifted without the goal of inspections—namely, disarmament—ever being achieved. The price to be paid will be all the higher in view of the elementary fact that, since the day inspections began in 1991, Iraq has consistently tried to defeat them.

But that brings us to the heart of the matter. What is it that inspections are designed to do? They are designed to verify that a country's declarations about a weapon program are honest and

complete. And that sort of verification is indeed a feasible goal for an inspection team: to look at sites and equipment and see whether the official story about their use is accurate. To do this effectively, inspectors can rely both on scientific principles and on information gained through intelligence-gathering. It is a different proposition altogether to go ranging about a country in search of things that have been deliberately concealed; that is a task with no beginning and no end.

In short, without a full and coherent description of the entire Iraqi weapon program, inspectors can never verify that it has been eliminated. The truth must come *first*, and it can come only from the Iraqis themselves. What the world needs is an Iraqi government that will stop lying and surrender those programs. That is hardly likely to happen as long as Saddam Hussein remains in power.

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