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Iraq: Divergent Views on Military Action

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Summary

Officials of the Bush Administration believe military action against Iraq became necessary to eliminate threats posed by the Iraqi regime to the U.S. and international communities. In October 2002, Congress passed a joint resolution (H.J.Res. 114) giving the President authority to use force if necessary to eliminate threats posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Some Members of Congress, commentators, and members of the international community questioned the Administration's rationale for military action or suggested delaying it to allow U.N. weapons inspectors more time to complete their findings in Iraq. This report summarizes arguments that were advanced by the Administration and by critics of the Administration's position before the war with Iraq was launched on March 19, 2003. This report will not be updated. For further reading, see CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: U.S. Efforts to Change the Regime*, by Kenneth Katzman. Also, CRS Report RL31756, *Iraq: The Debate Over U.S. Policy*, by Richard P. Cronin, provides further background on the policy debate through February 2003.

Overview

During the months before the war with Iraq began, discussions took place between the Bush Administration and Congress and in the international community about the rationale for military action against the Iraqi regime and the feasibility of such action. Supporters of a military option believe a campaign to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is probably the only way to compel Iraq's compliance with U.N. Security Council resolutions, eliminate its weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and terminate its ability to support international terrorism. Opponents have argued that further U.N. weapons inspections with unfettered access throughout Iraq might have achieved the goal of ridding Iraq of WMD without a costly military campaign, which could prove difficult to implement, and also could destabilize U.S. allies in the region and divert resources from other phases of the war against terrorism.

President Bush has repeatedly called for regime change in Iraq. In his speech before the U.N. General Assembly on September 12, 2002, the President emphasized the dangers posed by Iraq's programs to develop WMD and urged the United Nations to live up to its responsibilities by enforcing previous U.N. Security Council resolutions that Iraq has

ignored. On October 10 and 11, respectively, the House and Senate passed H.J.Res. 114 (P.L. 107-243), which authorized the President to use the U.S. Armed Forces to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing Iraqi threat and enforce all relevant U.N. Security Council sanctions regarding Iraq. At the international level, on November 8, 2002, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1441, which imposed a revised and more stringent weapons inspection regime on Iraq, required Iraq to submit a comprehensive declaration of all its WMD programs within 30 days, and warned of “serious consequences” if Iraq failed to cooperate.¹ On March 19, 2003 (March 20 Iraq time), President Bush announced that he had launched military operations (known as Operation Iraqi Freedom) “to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger.”

Rationale Advanced by Administration Officials

Credibility of U.N. Pronouncements. Iraq has defied at least 17 U.N. Security Council resolutions enacted since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, according to a position paper published by the Administration on September 12, 2002 and subsequent statements by the Administration. Iraq has concealed or falsified information on its programs to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD); failed to cooperate with U.N. weapons inspectors; failed to account for missing persons and property stolen during Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait; continued to repress its population; and periodically supported international terrorism. President Bush and other officials have said it will likely take military action to end Iraq’s continued defiance of demands embodied in U.N. resolutions. In his address to the U.N. General Assembly on September 12, President Bush posed the question: “Are Security Council resolutions to be honored and enforced, or cast aside without consequence?” On February 26, President Bush said that if the Security Council fails to respond to Iraqi defiance, “the United Nations will be severely weakened as a source of stability and order.”

Threat Posed by Lethal Weapons. The Administration and its supporters maintain that Iraq’s programs to develop WMD pose a threat to U.S. interests and allies. Iraq is known to have developed biological and chemical warfare agents and used the latter against its own population and neighboring Iran during the 1980s. During the Gulf war in 1991, Iraq fired conventional medium- and long-range missiles at Israel and Saudi Arabia. Many U.S. officials and other commentators believe that Iraq was on the verge of developing a nuclear weapons capability before its defeat in the Gulf war and that it retains considerable expertise in this field. In their view, post-war inspections did not fully reveal the extent of Iraq’s weapons programs, which in some cases were reported by Iraqi defectors. Lacking an air-tight inspection regime, which Iraq has managed to obstruct in the past, some believe that military action may be the only way to eliminate Iraq’s WMD capabilities and the threats they pose.

¹ The U.S. Administration believes that the wording of Resolution 1441 allows President Bush to mount an attack without going back to the Security Council if Iraq fails to comply with the terms of the resolution. Some other countries believe a second resolution specifically authorizing the use of force would be required. The United States and Britain abandoned a proposal for a follow-on resolution in early March 2003 after it failed to attract enough support for passage by the Security Council.

Terrorist Ties. Iraq has appeared on the State Department's annual list of countries supporting international terrorism since August 1990. Although no positive proof has emerged to link Iraq to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there have been unconfirmed reports of contacts between Iraqi agents and representatives of the Al Qaeda organization. Top level U.S. officials including President Bush have spoken of these ties. Secretary of State Colin Powell told the U.N. General Assembly on February 4 that Iraq is harboring a terrorist network headed by a collaborator of Osama bin Laden. The Secretary went on to describe a terrorist camp in northeastern Iraq where members of this network conduct training on poisons and explosives.² Secretary Powell acknowledged that this camp is located in an area outside Saddam Hussein's control, but maintained that the Saddam regime has an agent who works closely with this terrorist network. Iraq has also been accused of planning earlier terrorist actions, including an abortive attempt to assassinate former President Bush in 1993. In this context, some argue that military reprisals against Iraq could support the President's worldwide campaign against terrorism by dealing a blow to one of its state sponsors.

Regime Change. Ever since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, U.S. Administrations have called for replacement of Saddam Hussein's regime; Congress, too, has endorsed regime change by enacting the Iraq Liberation Act (ILA) in 1998 (P.L. 105-338). Saddam's tight control over his military and security apparatus, however, makes it unlikely that he could be overthrown by a coup or by other non-military measures. A U.S.-led military campaign, the Bush Administration contends, may be the only way to achieve Saddam's overthrow and replacement by a more friendly and hopefully democratic regime. Administration officials suggest that such a regime could serve as a model for democratization in the Arab World. In a speech on February 26, 2003, President Bush commented that a "new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region." In his final ultimatum to the Iraqi leader on March 17, 2003 to leave Iraq within 48 hours, President Bush emphasized to the Iraqi people that the "day of your liberation is near."

Internal Support. Senior U.S. officials believe a majority of Iraqis would welcome the overthrow of a regime that has long oppressed them. Disaffection from the Ba'thist regime is particularly strong among the Kurds, who have been leading targets of repression, but is reportedly also rife among other segments of the Iraqi population. Although many commentators discount the effectiveness of Iraq's divided opposition groups, these groups have taken recent steps to heal rifts and coordinate their efforts, though with mixed results. On December 9, 2002, President Bush decided to release remaining funds made available for Iraqi opposition groups under the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998. Proponents of a wider role for the Iraqi opposition suggest that under an optimum scenario, it could play a role similar to that of the Afghan Northern Alliance, which helped U.S. forces topple the Taliban regime.³ (Many observers, however, are skeptical about the applicability of the Afghanistan model to Iraq, and note that large-

² According to press accounts, however, some U.S. officials have cast doubt on these reported links between Iraq and Al Qaeda, suggesting, for example, that the alleged intermediary mentioned by Secretary Powell is not affiliated with Al Qaeda. "Details Of Alleged Iraq Ties To Al Qaeda Questioned," *Washington Post*, Feb. 7, 2003.

³ "U.S. Readies Training Of Hussein Foes," *Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 2002.

scale defections by Iraqis have not occurred so far in the early phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom.)⁴

Growing International Support. Despite criticism of the U.S.-led campaign against Iraq within the Middle East and other parts of the international community, some commentators have long maintained that many regional leaders would quietly welcome military action against Saddam, if it quickly and fully achieved the overthrow of his regime. On March 19, 2003, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher released the names of 30 countries that have agreed to be part of a coalition for the immediate disarmament of Iraq (known as the “coalition of the willing”) and mentioned that approximately 15 others have privately expressed support for the U.S.-led effort. With the exception of Britain and to a lesser extent Australia, most of the countries cited by Boucher are providing limited logistical support rather than military units with an offensive capability.⁵ Some moderate Arab states are quietly allowing U.S. military operations from their territory against Iraq. A notable example is Kuwait, where large numbers of U.S. military forces have been deployed. While stating publicly that it will not participate in a war against Iraq, Saudi Arabia is allowing U.S. use of at least three bases to help coordinate activities related to Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁶

Views of Critics of Administration Policies

Premature Action. A number of commentators including former high ranking U.S. officials believe that advocates of a military option have not made a convincing case in support of military action against Iraq at this time. According to this view, it may have been premature to mount a military campaign before the reconstituted U.N. weapons inspection teams had fully analyzed Iraqi WMD programs, a process that could have taken some months. In a report to the U.N. Security Council on January 27, 2003, the chief U.N. nuclear inspector suggested that allowing his team a few more months to complete and verify its findings “would be a valuable investment in peace.” In a similar vein, the chief inspector for chemical, biological, and missile systems told the Security Council on March 7, 2003, that it would take more time (“not years, nor weeks, but months”) to verify sites, analyze documents, interview relevant persons, and draw conclusions. Some observers have contrasted the high priority given by the U.S. Administration to Iraq with its lower-key reaction to recent revelations that North Korea has resumed work on nuclear weapons.⁷

Effect on Anti-Terrorism Campaign and Alliance Relations. Skeptics of the Administration’s approach maintain that a major campaign against Iraq could detract from U.S. efforts to pursue other phases of its war on terrorism. They assert that continued low level conflict in Afghanistan argues against diverting major military

⁴ “Plan’s Defect: No Defectors,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2003.

⁵ “War Will Be Mostly An American Effort,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2003.

⁶ “Reluctant Saudi Arabia Prepares Its Quiet Role in the U.S.-Led War on Iraq,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2003, p. A21.

⁷ In a press conference on Dec. 13, 2002, the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, pointed out that North Korea has not been active in terrorism since 1987 and that local allies such as Japan and South Korea provide a framework for diplomacy in dealing with North Korea.

resources to another area of operations. Most Arab and Muslim states, opposed in principle to U.S. action against Iraq, may prove less willing to continue cooperating with the United States in its on-going attempts to root out Al Qaeda cells and shut off sources of terrorist funding. Elsewhere, Britain is one of the few countries to join in military action on a significant scale, and many other countries including some key European allies (notably France and Germany) strongly criticized the United States for resorting to force, particularly on what many described as a unilateral basis. Efforts spearheaded by the United States and Britain in March 2003 to adopt an additional second U.N. resolution authorizing use of force against Iraq revealed little support in the U.N. Security Council for a military campaign against Iraq, at least in the absence of clear evidence that Iraq had failed to comply with U.N. disarmament resolutions.

Operational and Logistical Difficulties. The challenges of a military campaign could be formidable. With the exception of Britain, the “coalition of the willing” does not include the large military contingents provided by members of the allied coalition fought with the United States against Iraq in 1991. Moreover, most regional states have publicly rejected use of their territories as launching pads for the campaign against Iraq, and some observers believe that any cooperation they may provide in facilitating staging, landing, refueling, and overflight by U.S. forces is likely to be limited. (See CRS Report RL31533, *The Persian Gulf: Issues for U.S. Policy, 2002*, by Kenneth Katzman, for a discussion of facilities available in the Gulf region.) Turkey’s reluctance to allow U.S. troops to pass through its territory has complicated U.S. efforts to open up a second front against Iraq. Press reports indicate that Iraqi defense plans call for abandoning open desert terrain and retreating to Baghdad and other major cities where U.S. forces could face large-scale urban fighting. Also, should Saddam decide that he has nothing to lose in view of U.S. demands for his elimination, critics are concerned that he would use his chemical and biological warfare capabilities against allied forces and Israel; whereas the prospect of retaining power even in defeat effectively restrained him from such use during the Gulf war of 1990-1991.

Regional Destabilization. A U.S. military campaign against Iraq could precipitate serious turmoil in the Middle East, according to critics of Administration policy. Some fear that large-scale demonstrations against the war, which have occurred in several Arab capitals, could lead to upheavals in which one or more moderate pro-U.S. leaders may be replaced by radical anti-western regimes, possibly headed by Islamic fundamentalists sympathetic to Al Qaeda. For example, King Abdullah of Jordan, with his large Palestinian population and economic dependence on Iraqi oil and commerce, could be vulnerable in this regard. U.S. efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict would probably be adversely impacted by a war with Iraq, some believe, with the further loss of U.S. credibility in large parts of the Arab world. Some commentators believe U.S. priorities should be altered, with more emphasis on pursuing an Arab-Israeli peace settlement, arguing that Arab and Muslim states will be reluctant to cooperate with the United States as long as Arab-Israeli issues continue to fester.⁸

⁸ On Mar. 14, 2003, President Bush announced that the United States would resume work on a long-deferred Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, but did not indicate when this new effort would be launched. “Bush Promises to Adopt Plan for the Mideast,” *New York Times*, Mar. 15, 2003.

Economic Impact. Some critics of Administration policy believe that a war with Iraq could contribute to U.S. economic problems. Some cost estimates of a war with Iraq have exceeded \$100 billion, depending on duration, intensity, and specific expenses included in these estimates; however, White House officials were quoted on December 31, 2002 as predicting a cost closer to the \$61.1 billion spent during the Gulf War of 1990-1991.⁹ On March 27, 2003, the Administration requested a supplemental appropriations of \$74.7 billion for FY2003. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told the appropriations committees that this figure does not represent the total cost of the war; only an estimate of what the Defense Department and other government agencies will need to cover additional war costs through the end of the current fiscal year. In contrast to the situation in 1990-1991, when Arab and other donors paid \$53.6 billion of the \$61.1 billion costs incurred by the United States in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, other countries are unlikely to foot much of the bill for the current campaign against Iraq, which many of them do not favor. Beyond the direct budgetary impact, there could be increases in oil prices and disruptions in oil supply to the United States and its allies, although such problems proved short-lived during the 1990-1991 crisis.

Uncertain Outcomes. In conclusion, critics argue, even if an allied force succeeded in overthrowing the present Iraqi leadership, a post-Saddam Iraq would involve many uncertainties. In their view, several unfavorable outcomes are distinctly possible: an extended U.S. military occupation while attempting to put in place a new order in Iraq; another dictator who might prove little better than Saddam; a new and more representative regime which nonetheless retains Saddam's determination to pursue WMD for reasons of national prestige and security; or the fragmentation of Iraq along geographic and ethnic lines. The latter outcome would be of particular concern to several U.S. allies including Turkey, which fears that a possible upsurge in Kurdish separatist sentiment in northern Iraq could spread to Turkey's own Kurdish population. More broadly, fragmentation of Iraq could be exploited by other neighbors such as Iran or Syria or by hostile Islamic militant groups, with unforeseen consequences to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

⁹ *Reuters*, Dec. 31, 2002, 5:29 p.m. For more information on potential costs, see CRS Report RL31585, *Possible U.S. Military Intervention in Iraq: Some Economic Consequences*, Oct. 1, 2002. According to a *Washington Post* article on Dec. 1, 2002, the \$61.1 billion spent on the 1990-1991 war is equivalent to \$76.1 billion in 2002 dollars.