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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 may be 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 analysts question the Administration's rationale for such action and its feasibility. This report summarizes arguments advanced by the Administration and by critics of the Administration's position. It will be updated as the situation continues to develop. For further reading, see CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: U.S. Efforts to Change the Regime*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Overview

Discussion continues 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 argue that resumption of U.N. weapons inspections with unfettered access throughout Iraq may achieve 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 authorizes 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 fails to cooperate.¹ U.N. weapons inspectors returned to Iraq in November 2002 after an absence of four years.

Rationale Advanced by Administration Officials

Credibility of U.N. Pronouncements. Iraq has defied at least 16 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. 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. By all indications, senior Administration officials believe it will likely take military action to end Iraq’s continued defiance of demands embodied in U.N. resolutions. (See CRS Issue Brief IB92117, *Iraq: Compliance, Sanctions, and U.S. Policy.*) 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?”²

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, military action may be the only way to eliminate Iraq’s WMD capabilities and the threats they pose. In this connection, although Iraq has not directly hindered the work of U.N. inspectors since their return to Iraq in November, U.S. officials believe that the WMD declaration submitted by Iraq in accordance with Resolution 1441 is neither accurate nor complete.³

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.

² According to a U.N. official, the U.N. Secretariat is not able to track instances of non-compliance because of the ambiguities involved in interpreting U.N. resolutions. Some argue that putting pressure on Iraq to observe U.N. resolutions while ignoring other apparent violators amounts to selective enforcement. David R. Sands, “Iraq Not Alone in Defying Resolutions of U.N. Body,” *The Washington Times*, Sept. 21, 2002, p. A6.

³ During a press conference on December 19, 2002, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell described the Iraqi declaration as “a catalogue of recycled information and flagrant omissions.”

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. In late September 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld cited "evolving" intelligence reports indicating that Iraq has given safe haven to members of Al Qaeda and supported their efforts to obtain WMD.⁴ Iraq has also been accused of mounting terrorist actions against the United States and other countries, including an abortive attempt to assassinate former President Bush in 1993. In this context, 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. The U.S. role in its creation—if successful—could enhance U.S. prestige in the Middle East—as President Bush stated in his speech to the U.N. General Assembly, by "inspiring reforms throughout the Muslim world."

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. According to press reports, the Bush Administration plans to increase training and equipment supply for opposition elements, using funds already authorized 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.⁵ (Many observers, however, are skeptical about the applicability of the Afghanistan model to Iraq.)

⁴ National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice made similar comments. Some unnamed U.S. officials have expressed skepticism regarding these reports, and other commentators believe any Al Qaeda members in Iraq are located in the northern Kurdish zone, which is outside Saddam Hussein's control. See Rowan Scarborough, "Rumsfeld Links Al Qaeda To Saddam," *The Washington Times*, Sept. 27, 2002, p. A1; Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Officials Revive Debate On Iraq-Al Qaeda Ties," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 27, 2002, p. A19; Barbara Slavin and John Diamond, "Experts Skeptical Of Reports On Al-Qaeda-Baghdad Link," *USA Today*, Sept. 27, 2002, p. 4.

⁵ Karen DeYoung, "U.S. Readies Training Of Hussein Foes," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 2002, p. A1.

Growing International Support. Although friendly Middle East states continue to voice opposition to major military action against Iraq, some commentators have long maintained that regional leaders would quietly welcome a move against Saddam, if it quickly and fully achieved the overthrow of his regime. Many believe that other key countries, such as China and France, will eventually support military action, since they will not want to be perceived as “soft” on Saddam or implacably opposed to the policies of the United States as the sole remaining superpower. On September 18, Secretary Rumsfeld reportedly told a congressional committee that “other countries,” which he did not name, will assist the United States in various ways, including troops, bases, overflight rights, and financial contributions, in the event of military action. In this connection, there have been recent signs that some moderate Arab states may be softening their previous opposition to allowing large-scale U.S. military operations from their territory against Iraq, provided a military campaign were authorized by a U.N. resolution.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 imminent military action against Iraq. According to this view, a military campaign may be premature until the reconstituted inspection teams have fully analyzed Iraqi WMD programs, a process that could take some months. Several former U.S. military leaders have suggested that the United States should exhaust diplomatic options before mounting a military campaign against Iraq.⁷ Former National Security Advisor Lt. General (Retired) Brent Scowcroft has commented that inspections would serve to keep Saddam Hussein “off balance and under close supervision.” He added that if Saddam refuses unfettered inspections or if the inspections uncover compelling evidence of a nuclear weapons capability, then the United States would have a more persuasive case to use military force against Iraq.⁸ 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.⁹

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 resources to another area of operations. Most Arab and Muslim states, opposed in principle to U.S. action against Iraq, might be less willing to continue cooperating with

⁶ Although statements by senior Saudi officials have been non-committal, some officials have implied that the door may be ajar at least to limited use of facilities in Saudi Arabia by U.S. forces in the event of a war with Iraq, if authorized by the United Nations..

⁷ Eric Schmitt, “Three Retired Generals Warn of Peril in Attacking Iraq Without Backing of U.N.,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 24, 2002.

⁸ Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 15, 2002, p. A12.

⁹ In a press conference on December 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.

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 express willingness to join in military action, and other European allies have expressed reservations or opposition. General Scowcroft has pointed out that “there is a virtual consensus in the world against an attack on Iraq at this time” and adds that the United States cannot win the war against terrorism “without enthusiastic international cooperation, especially on intelligence.”

Operational and Logistical Difficulties. The challenges of a military campaign could be formidable. Emergence of a large allied coalition backing a U.S.-led military campaign against Iraq along the lines of the 1990-1991 Gulf war is unlikely. Most regional states have publicly rejected use of their territories as launching pads for such a campaign, and many 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.) 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;¹⁰ 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. Many fear that massive popular demonstrations against the United States and U.S. interests may occur and could lead to upheavals in which one or more moderate pro-U.S. leaders were 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, including the former commander of U.S. forces in the Gulf region, General Anthony Zinni, see merit in pursuing an Arab-Israeli peace settlement before moving against Iraq.¹¹

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 varied between \$100 billion and \$200 billion, depending on duration and intensity; however, White House officials were quoted on December 31, 2002 as predicting a cost

¹⁰ U.S. planners reportedly are considering various ways to mitigate this threat: keeping the invasion force relatively small, assembling much of the force beyond the range of Saddam’s missiles, and keeping troop movements as stealthy as possible. Thomas E. Ricks, “War Plans Target Hussein Power Base,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 22, 2002, p. A1.

¹¹ “USA—Zinni Comes Out Against Hawks,” *Periscope Daily Defense News Capsules*, Aug. 29, 2002. (Administration supporters maintain that the risks of destabilization or a mass uprising of the “Arab street” are exaggerated; neither eventuality occurred after the 1990-1991 Gulf war.)

closer to the \$61.1 billion spent during the Gulf War of 1990-1991.¹² 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 a new campaign against Iraq, which most 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.

¹² *Reuters News Wire*, December 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*, October 1, 2002. According to a *Washington Post* article on December 1, 2002, the \$61.1 billion spent on the 1990-1991 war is equivalent to \$76.1 billion in 2002 dollars.