

# The Iraqi Disarmament Crisis: What Lessons Can Be Learned?

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CARLOS RODRIGUEZ, OCT 2 2017

During the last few decades, the Republic of Iraq has experienced a number of overlapping crises, in particular since the 1980s, when the United Nations (UN) started issuing sanctions on Iraq for its alleged production and use of chemical and biological weapons against neighboring states. This essay focuses on the Iraqi disarmament crisis, an extremely complex crisis, characterized by a strong contrast between periods of cooperation and periods of acute conflict amongst the key actors involved. According to Boin and t'Hart (2007: 46) "crises are the result of multiple causes, which interact over time to produce a threat with devastating potential". This essay will show the extent to which Boin and t'Hart's statement is an accurate description of Iraq's disarmament crisis.

The campaign to disarm Iraq from its weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including "nuclear, radiological, chemical, and biological weapons" (Heywood, 2011: 264) has become a useful example of a global crisis where the conceptual landscape associated with crisis management can be applied and tested. This essay will focus on the period between the first UN resolution on Iraq's biological weapons, Resolution 582 (United Nations, 1986), and the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq which deposed then president Saddam Hussein. This being said, it is important to acknowledge that the origins of the stated crisis have far deeper roots than the period covered in this short essay.

The key players in this particular crisis are many, including Iraq, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), the UN and individual UN member states, most importantly the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), as well as the other three Security Council permanent members, Russia, France, and China. Other important actors include the mass media and the general public in Iraq and across the world.

This essay will answer the following question: to what extent have international actors been effective in managing Iraq's disarmament crisis? In order to answer the stated question, first, key terms associated with crisis management in the specific case of Iraq's disarmament will be defined and briefly discussed. Next, this essay will evaluate the extent to which Iraq's disarmament crisis was managed effectively, showing that although Iraq did behave in an aggressive manner against its neighboring states, the most delicate phases of the crisis were precipitated by forces outside Iraq, intensifying the crisis. This essay will stress the lack of adequate integration at the UN when attempting to resolve the crisis, drawing special attention to the fact that power dynamics amongst key actors had a very negative impact on Iraq. Consequently, this essay will expose US and UK intentions to remove Hussein and reach a regime change while pretending to be interested in bringing stability to the region and enhancing world peace and security. Finally, this essay will reach the conclusion that as a result of the way in which this complex crisis was handled, Iraq became a more unstable country, to the point that fourteen years after the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country is still trying to emerge from a period of chronic crises, a direct product of American and British intervention.

What is a crisis? Connolly (2015:13) states that a crisis can be described as "a time of great confusion, suffering, loss of confidence, a critical or dangerous point in a situation". Furthermore, t'Hart (2008: 88) adds that crises "always contain *multiple levels of conflict*" (italics in original). As such, crises demand solutions at multiple levels and in most cases, by multiple actors with multiple interests. Having provided a definition of crisis, what does effective

# The Iraqi Disarmament Crisis: What Lessons Can Be Learned?

Written by Carlos Rodriguez

crisis management involve? According to Pearson and Clair (1998: 66) it involves:

Minimizing potential risk before a triggering event. In response to a triggering event, effective crisis management involves improvising and interacting by key stakeholders so that individual and collective sense making, shared meaning, and roles are reconstructed.

Iraq's disarmament crisis is complex in a number of ways. For a start, unlike a crisis resulting from a natural disaster, such as a powerful tsunami, it is very difficult to identify the specific trigger of the Iraq crisis. Moreover, the stated crisis has had truly global implications and as a result of the elaborate network of actors involved with it, it is very difficult to identify which actor was in charge of resolving the crisis.

After describing Iraq's disarmament case as a global crisis, there is another key concept that needs to be considered: national sovereignty, defined as "the right of the state to do as it sees fit within its jurisdictional domain" (Barkin, 1998: 229). If national sovereignty is about nation states having the ultimate authority over their territory, to what extent are global and international actors, such as the UN, entitled to interfere with the activities within the borders of a sovereign nation? This highlights the dilemma faced by global actors when a state is *perceived* as being a threat to global peace and security by activities performed within its own borders, as it was the case of Iraq during some of the phases of the WMD crisis.

In order to evaluate how effective the handling of Iraq's crisis was, it is important to consider how the crisis began. According to Ibrahim Al Isa (2003) the first documented use of biological weapons by Iraq was during the Iran-Iraq war, which took place between 1980 and 1988. The UN responded from the onset of the war with Security Council Resolution 479, requesting both states to "immediately cease any further uses of force and instead settle their dispute through negotiations" (United Nations, 1980: 23). Six years later, noting that the conflict continued, the UN condemned the escalating conflict and responded with Resolution 582, UN's first resolution noting Iraq's breach of the Geneva Protocol of 1925 concerning biological and chemical weapons (United Nations, 1986: 11). Nevertheless, the Iran-Iraq war continued until finally, following almost eight years of violence, it was brought to an end to a reasonable extent thanks to UN resolution 598 (United Nations, 1987: 6).

The Iran-Iraq war had finished, however, what can be described as the 'broader Iraq crisis' was far from over. In August 1990 Iraq invaded, occupied, and attempted to annex Kuwait (O'Connell, 1991). The UN swiftly condemned the invasion with Resolution 660 demanding the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait (United Nations, 1990). There were thirteen UN resolutions in total, relating to the Iraq - Kuwait conflict. Important stress must be placed on UN resolution 678 (United Nations, 1990: 27) which gave Iraq one final opportunity to comply fully before 15<sup>th</sup> January 1991, otherwise authorising Member States to use "all necessary means to uphold and implement resolution 660". Iraq failed to comply with UN's demands and the Security Council authorised an American-led military coalition to launch Operation Desert Storm, defeating Iraqi forces in only four days, highlighting the extent to which collective action, when it occurs, can be effective towards addressing a serious international crisis (Heywood, 2011).

Operation Desert Storm's strategy was designed, to a great extent, by US president Bush Snr, working closely with former Army General Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Holland, 1999). President Bush Snr. used frequently a narrative which compared Iraqi president Hussein to Adolf Hitler, nevertheless, he insisted that the war should not exceed the authorization given by the Security Council (Graubard, 1992). After the ceasefire Hussein agreed to comply with all UN resolutions and the American-led military coalition took no further action (Heywood, 2011: 443). With the benefit of hindsight, it is interesting that while the U.S. Department of Defence (DOD) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) argued that Iraq did not use chemical weapons during the 1991 Gulf War (Tucker, 1997), UN Resolution 687 setting the terms of the ceasefire forbade Iraq from further "developing, possessing or using chemical, biological and nuclear weapons" (United Nations, 1991: 2). The UN and US positions towards evidence of Iraq's possession of WMD reverted in the following decade, leading to what can be described as the most acute phase of the Iraq crisis in 2003; this essay will return to that critical point in due course.

According to Connolly, (2015: 2) "the process of lesson-learning is often a *temporary* phenomenon and does not necessarily equate to *sustained change over time*" (italics added). The Iraq disarmament crisis is an excellent

## The Iraqi Disarmament Crisis: What Lessons Can Be Learned?

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example of the extent to which Connolly is correct. There are two distinct aspects of Connolly's reference to the lesson learning process: the immediate and to some extent temporary response to a crisis' triggering event and the long term change, which in turn should help to prevent a reoccurrence of the crisis. The *immediate* response to the Gulf War can be described as successful in two key respects. First of all, Iraqi forces were defeated quickly and decisively and what had not been achieved by diplomacy was reached via the use of force, endorsed by UN's Security Council. This showed a perfect combination of military might with exceptionally unanimous support at the UN. There is a second key aspect, which to some extent shows UN's ability to address the broader crisis of Iraq's WMD. In the immediate aftermath of the ceasefire, UN Resolution 687 (United Nations, 1991) created the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), in order to oversee Iraq's compliance with the destruction of WMD, working in partnership with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), yet another key actor in ensuring Iraq disarmament of nuclear weapons.

Nevertheless, the temporary success in Iraq also has two key aspects which can be described as failure. On the one hand, the UN left a significant 'loose end' in the wording of Resolution 678 (United Nations, 1990: 27). It authorised Member States to use "all necessary means to uphold and implement Resolution 660" unless Iraq offered full compliance and unconditionally destroyed all chemical and biological weapons. Resolution 678 also stated that all previous twelve UN resolutions on Iraq "continue to have full force and effect". In other words, the UN left, in very vague terms, an 'open invitation', for 'all necessary means' to be used against Iraq, should it not comply fully with a dozen previous UN resolutions. On the other hand, what Pearson and Clair, (1998: 66) describe as the essential "individual and organizational readjustment of basic assumptions" after a crisis triggering event simply did not take place; on the surface, UNSCOM and IAEA were conducting an exceptional work disarming Iraq, yet, well below the surface, a new creeping crisis was slowly emerging in the US political elites, which in turn reached the conclusion that there would be no final solution for Iraq unless there was a fundamental regime change. It was only a matter of time before an opportunity appeared for those particular political elites to implement their chosen 'crisis management strategy'.

In 1998, Former US President Bush Snr. and Brent Scowcroft, US National Security Advisor during Bush Snr's presidency co-authored an essay entitled "Why We Didn't Remove Saddam" (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998, cited in Global Policy Forum, 2003: non-paginated), explaining that "extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq, would have violated our guideline about not changing objectives in midstream, engaging in 'mission creep', and would have incurred incalculable human and political costs". While Bush Snr. and Scowcroft were writing their essay, Governor of Texas at the time, George W. Bush repeatedly stated that "among his aspirations in life was to 'take out' Saddam Hussein" (Heywood, 2011: 131).

Nineteen Ninety-Eight was an eventful year in relation to the Iraq disarmament crisis in which, amongst other developments, the power dynamics and tensions within UN's Security Council were truly highlighted. While Bush Snr. and Bush Jr. were busy writing essays and making statements about Iraq's past and future respectively, the US, under President Clinton and in partnership with the UK launched a four day airstrike called Operation Desert Fox against Iraq, which was allegedly not cooperating with UN's inspectors. According to Lansford (2014: 670), there was no consultation with the Security Council before launching Operation Desert Fox since opposition from China, France, and Russia was very strong and as Security Council members, would have vetoed any resolution on military action. Operation Desert Fox took place while the UN was meeting to consider reports from IAEA and UNSCOM. IAEA's report stated unequivocally that "there are no indications that there remains in Iraq any physical capability for the production of weapon-usable nuclear material of any practical significance" (ElBaradei, 1998: 6). However, UNSCOM's report suggested that it "did not enjoy full cooperation from Iraq" (United Nations, 1998: 1). Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General at the time, could not hide his sorrow at the airstrikes over Iraq, describing the day Desert Fox started as "a sad day for the United Nations and the world" (Annan, 1998, cited in Goldman, 1998: non-paginated). Unlike during the 1991 Gulf War, there had been no UN authorisation for use of military force against Iraq in December 1998. The 1998 disagreements at the UN and unauthorised airstrikes marked the shape of things to come for the Iraq disarmament crisis, highlighting that the UN has no means to stop powerful nation states from taking military action against weaker nations.

In January 2001 George W. Bush became US president. In the same year, on 11<sup>th</sup> September, a development which

## The Iraqi Disarmament Crisis: What Lessons Can Be Learned?

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may have been perceived as isolated from the Iraq crisis occurred in the US. Four commercial airliners were hijacked and crashed against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C., causing almost 3.000 deaths and injuring more than 6.000 people (Holloway, 2008). The US government quickly blamed al-Qaeda for the atrocities and the Bush administration almost immediately launched the so-called War on Terror as a direct reaction to the 9/11 attacks. Shortly after 9/11, President Bush made public and explicit the alleged link between Iraq's WMD and the "wider War on Terror", although no evidence to substantiate those claims was ever given (Rogers, 2006).

President Bush was surrounded in government by a group of the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party which included, among many others, Brent Scowcroft as Chairman of the president's foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and Colin Powell, who had helped design Operation Desert Storm in 1990-1991, as Secretary of State (Gompert et al., 2014). Heywood (2011: 131) argues that there is evidence of 'groupthink' which determined to a greater extent the US approach towards Hussein, Iraq and the alleged WPD. The concept of groupthink is useful for analysing Iraq's disarmament crisis, since it had an enormous impact on the eventual crisis strategy applied not only by the US but also by UK's military coalition with the US. In the words of Janis (1971: 85):

The more amiability and spirit de corps there is among the members of a policy-making in-group, the greater the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups

In other words, Bush's neo-conservative cohesive group reached their own conclusions and strategy in many aspects of US foreign policy, consciously or unconsciously manipulating the evidence they received and without requesting views outside their group. Bearing in mind the asymmetric power dynamics within the Security Council, Schwartzberg (2017) highlights the extent to which ideologically driven preconceptions eventually became unbreakable barriers towards diplomatic progress in the case of Iraq. Blix, (2004: 185) adds that regardless of the evidence, or lack of it, the neo-cons in the end decided to act "whatever the Security Council does".

In September 2002, on the other side of the Atlantic, the British government published "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government", also known as the September Dossier (British government, 2002), in which it was alleged Iraq possessed WMD that presented a direct risk to the British people. Amongst other claims, UK Prime Minister at the time, Tony Blair, argued the dossier disclosed that Iraq's "military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them" (Blair, cited in British government, 2002: 4). UK and US intelligence reports' appeared to be in strong contrast with Russian intelligence. Russian President Vladimir Putin argued that "Russia does not have in its possession any trustworthy data that supports the existence of nuclear weapons or any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and we have not received any such information from our partners as yet" (Putin, cited in White, 2002: non-paginated). Addressing directly the possibility of a military response to Iraq's crisis, French president at the time, Jacques Chirac, stated that "for us, war is always the proof of failure and the worst of solutions, so everything must be done to avoid it" (Gompert et al., 2014: non-paginated).

Contrasting positions on Iraq's intentions and military capabilities led to a diplomatic crisis at the UN, which in November 2002 adopted UN Resolution 1441 offering Hussein "a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations" (United Nations, 2002: 3). US and UK governments had a very particular understanding of the stated UN Resolution, an interpretation called the 'revival argument', suggesting that Resolution 1441 clearly stated Iraq was in material breach of the ceasefire terms presented under the terms of Resolution 687 (1991), which in turn, explicitly reaffirmed the previous 12 UN resolutions on Iraq. This included resolution 686, which authorised Member States to use "all necessary means to uphold and implement resolution 660 (1990) and all subsequent relevant resolutions to restore international peace and security in the area". This draws special attention to a clear area for improvement at UN level; a resolution 'reaffirming' the twelve previous resolutions led to confusion. The US and UK took advantage of that confusion as an excuse for a military adventure. Goldsmith (2003: non-paginated), the UK's attorney general at the time, produced a private memo for Prime Minister Blair stating that, "the revival argument is controversial. It is not widely accepted among academic commentators" and *in any case*, "regime change cannot be the objective of military action". Goldsmith's recommendations were ignored, and in March 19<sup>th</sup> 2003, the so called 'coalition of the willing, led by America and closely followed by the UK, invaded Iraq under the name 'Operation

# The Iraqi Disarmament Crisis: What Lessons Can Be Learned?

Written by Carlos Rodriguez

Shock and Awe' (Holloway, 2008). John Nixon, working at the time for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), stated that soon after interviewing Hussein following his capture, as well as conducting initial research after the fall of Hussein's regime, he reached the conclusion that Iraq's WMD programme had ended years before the 2003 invasion (Nixon, 2017, cited in Mortimer, 2017).

In a significant number of ways, history repeated itself during the 2002 – 2003 phase of the complex Iraq crisis. Addressing Parliament, Prime Minister Blair compared Hussein to Hitler, just like Bush Snr. had done in the early 1990s, suggesting that lack of action would be interpreted as encouragement by such a brutal dictator (Schult, 2013: 50-51). Also, just like in 1998, weapons inspectors were advised by the US and not by the UN, to leave the country just before the military operation begun on Iraq (Heywood, 2011: 443). Furthermore in 2003, just as in 1998, Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan made clear his opinion that the military action on Iraq was unauthorised by the UN, hence, illegal (Annan, 2012: 357); although in 2003 there was a key difference: Operation Desert Storm (1991) and Operation Desert Fox (1998) both lasted only 4 days, in contrast, the devastating consequences of the 2003 invasion are still evident in Iraq. The UN was not only unable to prevent or stop the 2003 Iraq invasion; it was also unfit to help the country in the aftermath of the 2003 war as a result of which it descended into chronic crises which continue at the time of writing. According to the Iraq Enquiry's findings, produced in the UK by Sir John Chilcot (Chilcot, 2016) the US – UK coalition invaded and occupied a sovereign country, violating international law, undermining the UN and leaving Iraq with at least 150,000 deaths and more than a million Iraqis displaced as a direct result of the invasion. In short, US and UK generated unbearable suffering to the Iraqi people, using the pretext of self-defence although the so-called WPD were never found.

In conclusion, to what extent have international actors been effective in managing Iraq's disarmament crisis? The stated crisis highlights the difficulties associated with evaluating a global crisis, which lasted for a long period of time and involved actors in a complex network. Iraq's crisis shows the extent to which Quarantelli's (1995, cited in Connolly, 2015: 13) suggestion that a crisis is not an event, but a process is an accurate description of reality. As such, there were phases of the Iraq crisis when key actors were able to work swiftly and in harmony, finding effective solutions in a short period of time, as it was the case with Operation Desert Storm (1991) and the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. Yet, there were other phases of the crisis characterised by what McConnell (2011: 74) eloquently described as political elites being "prepared to sacrifice a degree of operational effectiveness in order to preserve political goals". It is clear to the present writer that in relation to Iraq's alleged WMD, political elites in UK and US did just that, gave priority to what they believed would serve their own political goals, regardless of the consequences for Iraq. It is difficult to establish criteria for measuring with certainty the degree of success and failure in relation to Iraq's crisis; if US and UK main objective was to remove Saddam Hussein from power, then their strategy can be described as successful. However they failed in giving the Iraqi people a better future and even today, Iraq's very existence as a nation state is under threat, moreover, Iraq's instability has crossed its borders and it is now also affecting neighbouring countries.

Which policy-orientated lessons or recommendations can be offered from this analysis, in order to make national and international actors more effective towards managing a similar future crisis? With regards to national governments, useful advice comes from Quarantelli's (1977: 106) suggestion that during a crisis, obtaining valid information is far more important than taking "immediate action". In other words, although some crises do require an immediate response, it is usually not about how quickly a crisis is responded to but about how appropriate the response is. Also, national governments should take into account the importance of post crisis planning. According to Chilcot (2016: 2) "the planning and preparations for Iraq after Saddam Hussein were wholly inadequate". When the crisis appeared to be over, a much more serious crisis emerged as a direct result of the lack planning for a post-Hussein Iraq. This being said, it is likely that in similar crises political leaders will react according to their preconceived assumptions and those of the elites surrounding them, instead of putting into practice evidence based advice.

From a global governance perspective, this essay shows from the onset that at the heart of Iraq's disarmament crisis is the tension between sovereignty and global peace and security. There is simply no 'silver bullet' to resolve that tension. Should the UN have any tools at its disposal to prevent powerful actors, such as US and UK from violating international law, as they did in Iraq? Boin and Lodge (2016: 294) argue that nation states can simply not match the requirements of contemporary global crises, and encourage the building of transboundary crisis management

# The Iraqi Disarmament Crisis: What Lessons Can Be Learned?

Written by Carlos Rodriguez

capacities". There is no doubt that global collaboration is urgently needed in order to address certain contemporary challenges. Boin and Lodge's suggestion may very well work in relation to natural disasters, however, in terms of peace and security, it would not be realistic to expect nation states to allow the UN to 'override' their national sovereignty, even if that kind of approach was desirable for the maintenance of global peace and security. Nevertheless there are more modest steps which the UN could and should take in order to work more effectively. For example, the wording of UN's resolutions concerning Iraq, by which new resolutions gave all previous resolutions on the matter full force and effect, was used as an excuse by US and UK in order to bomb and invade Iraq in 1998 and 2003 respectively. This can be avoided by creating self-contained resolutions with explicit links to the relevant sections of previous resolutions. This type of approach will not prevent powerful states from taking unilateral military action; nevertheless, even if that is the case, self-contained UN resolutions would at least not leave room for member states to pretend to be following a UN mandate. This is only a modest suggestion, which relates more broadly to the UN's need for a large-scale reform.

This essay draws attention to some of the key failures in dealing with Iraq's crisis but also makes clear the fact that there is no easy solution to such situations. The current crises in Syria and North Korea, for example, are already putting national, international, and global actors to the test. Once again the UN Security Council and the US are at the forefront of those crises. The negative effects of groupthink are being felt and those contemporary crises are unlikely to be resolved by rational strategies but instead, will be met by the reactionary actions of the most powerful actors involved with them. Iraq's disarmament crisis is only one example of many which demonstrates a much larger crisis of global governance. It is well beyond the scope of this short essay to deal with such crisis, which belongs to a fundamentally important area for further research.

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# The Iraqi Disarmament Crisis: What Lessons Can Be Learned?

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