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WHAT IS THE ROLE OF INSPECTORS IN IRAQ?

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In his February 5 speech at the Security Council, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell described his understanding of the role of weapons inspectors: "This Council placed the burden on Iraq to comply and disarm and not on the inspectors to find that which Iraq has gone out of its way to conceal for so long. Inspectors are inspectors; they are not detectives."

According to this interpretation, all the inspectors had to do was to verify the veracity of hitherto unknown facts presented in Iraq's December declaration, and perhaps to seek clarifications on unclear issues. The inspectors' task of confirming disarmament would thus be their only activity. However, the contents of Security Council Resolution 1441, which marks the beginning of the renewed inspections, contradict this approach. This Resolution contains provisions concerning the rights of access and search, the right to question people, and other far-reaching authority even more extensive than that accorded to police and security bodies normally involved in the detection of illicit activities, at least in democratic countries. These provisions are very similar to those included in many past resolutions, from 1991 onwards.

Looking at the results achieved by UNSCOM (the previous inspection organization, which was replaced by UNMOVIC) and the IAEA in Iraq, especially during 1991, reinforces the validity of this approach. In that year, the second IAEA mission, at considerable personal risk (inspectors were actually shot at), uncovered the extent of the main Iraqi project for enriching uranium for the production of weapons-grade fissile materials. And the fifth and sixth missions went into offices that were not part of the official nuclear energy establishment and found a cache of documents, among them the so-called "smoking gun" that detailed Iraq's plan for the manufacture of the bomb itself. The ensuing standoff, where the inspectors were in effect quarantined in a parking lot, showed what perseverance can achieve. These widely hailed achievements were pure detection activities, not inspections as had been commonly understood until then.

Scientific detection methods, this time in North Korea's nuclear establishment, also revealed that the latter's statement concerning the amount of another fissile material – plutonium -- was incorrect, and that larger quantities than previously declared had, in fact, been produced.

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However, a different pattern emerges from the activities of UNMOVIC and IAEA since the resumption of inspections in Iraq in late 2002. The reports of UNMOVIC Chairman Hans Blix and IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei indicate that those bodies have been mainly concerned with ascertaining the accuracy of the Iraqi declaration. The inspections were slow to start and were low-key at the beginning. Most of the sites visited were known to the inspectors from activities prior to December 1998, when all inspections stopped. To be sure, there have been some instances of success, such as the discovery of the laser enrichment documents at a private residence and the existence of Iraqi al-Sumoud missiles with a greater range than that permitted by Security Council resolutions. These are but the tip of the iceberg, and Secretary Powell's disclosures at the Security Council indicate that much has yet to be learned.

Even according to the inspectors' statements to the Security Council, there was no all-out effort to detect illicit materials and activities. For example, vast amounts of materials, such as anthrax, nerve-gas agents and precursors, are still unaccounted for. But the inspectors simply chose to denote this fact rather than to demand and force access to offices, bank accounts, personnel records and supply and procurement agencies that surely hold the clues essential to uncover what is well concealed.

Had Iraq cooperated fully with the inspectors from the very outset, there would be less need to deal with a well organized concealment program. But the inspectors did not make the exposure of this program their top priority. Instead, they have focused on form and given less attention to crucial matters of substance. The Blix and ElBaradei reports to the Security Council emphasize accomplishments of format and procedure, balanced, mostly by inference, with

references to serious shortfalls in substance. But while the inspectors are clearly upset by Iraqi procrastination and stonewalling, they refuse to issue an unequivocal condemnation, preferring instead to characterize any information they do receive as progress and achievement.

Why have UNMOVIC and the IAEA acted in this way? The answer is probably a combination of many factors, including an imprecise definition by the Council itself of the purpose of inspections, a focus on the wrong issues, and a reluctance to act aggressively from the very beginning. Besides, the inspection teams were initially not fully prepared, staffed and equipped to perform at full tilt. Most critically, they were almost certainly hesitant to antagonize the Iraqis and precipitate an immediate crisis for which they would be blamed, not only by Iraq, but also by some Security Council members.

Iraq still has time until shortly before hostilities begin to cooperate fully, make a full disclosure, and avert war. However, the historical record suggests, instead, that it will continue the policy of deception and delay, occasionally appeasing the inspectors and/or opponents of a war with isolated bits and pieces of information in the hope that it can postpone war until world politics and public opinion finally sway the U.S. Administration against it.

Success for the inspectors would be to fully uncover Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs and disarm that country. But apart from a sheer stroke of luck, success can come only if the inspectors take on the role of detectives to reveal illicit activities and materials. If they do not succeed and war erupts, the subsequent exposure of concealed WMD and proscribed missiles in Iraq could deal the whole verification system of the non-proliferation regimes a serious blow, from which it would not recover for many, many years.