

---

# Remember UNMOVIC

ROBERT MCMAHON

---

Three years removed from the spotlight, the UN Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) for Iraq occupies a kind of international legal limbo. Iraqi transitional leaders say the agency is no longer necessary and call for the return of the Iraqi oil money used to finance it. U.S. officials periodically signal that they would like to see the commission phased out. The UN Security Council has promised to address UNMOVIC's status repeatedly since the U.S.-led invasion to oust Saddam Hussein in 2003, but it has so far declined to act. The time is ripe for the council to hold a full-fledged debate over UNMOVIC's fate. Indeed, given the current concern in major capitals over nonproliferation issues, it is curious how little attention the agency has merited from policymakers.

There is much to learn from UNMOVIC and the entire UN inspection experience in Iraq. The agency has assets that should be retained by the international community, including what is considered to be the only team of multinational weapons experts specifically trained in biological weapons and missile disarmament. UNMOVIC monitors performed admirably during a three-month period from December 2002 to March 2003. Under intense international scrutiny, they inspected 411 sites, confirming that Iraq had destroyed most of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities. Before the mission was withdrawn ahead of the U.S. invasion, inspectors determined that Iraq had violated the 150-kilometer range limit for missiles and was overseeing the Iraqi destruction of those missiles and test platforms.

While its own inspection experience in Iraq was brief, UNMOVIC has built on the voluminous work of its predecessor agency, the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), which is now credited with effectively dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. From an office building in New York, UNMOVIC staff members continue to work on a "lessons-learned" compendium of Iraq's chemical, biological, and ballistic missile programs.

---

*Robert McMahon is Senior Correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and has covered the United Nations for five years. He is a 2004 graduate of The Fletcher School's Global Master of Arts Program. The views expressed here are his own.*

---

The reports reveal the deceit and sleuthing that played out over the 12 years between the end of the first U.S.-led war in Iraq and the start of the second. Taken together with the work of the U.S.-led Iraq Survey Group, UNMOVIC's findings provide some insight into how a country subject to intrusive inspections and a comprehensive sanctions regime was still able to deceive the world.

The UN has spent the last 18 months confronting the tortured history of its management of the Oil-for-Food program in Iraq. That exercise has helped to energize—particularly in Washington—efforts to reform the UN Secretariat and other bodies. It is equally important, however, to take a thorough look at the other major UN operation in Iraq—the WMD inspections process. A systematic review can provide valuable information about how Iraq managed to develop extensive chemical and biological weapons programs at the time of the first Gulf War, some aspects of which puzzled inspectors right up to the U.S. invasion in March 2003.

The UN Security Council should now formally task UNMOVIC, together with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to compile a final report on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction programs. As Iraq's political transition advances past the parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2005, UNMOVIC should engage Baghdad's new leaders in the process of making a final declaration on the status of its weapons programs.

#### **BORN UNDER A BAD SIGN**

The UN Special Commission on Iraq operated from 1991 to 1998. Working with the International Atomic Energy Agency, it made substantial progress in dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction prohibited under Security Council resolutions—nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and ballistic missiles capable of traveling more than 150 kilometers. UNSCOM was unable to finish verifying that Iraq had eliminated all of its weapons of mass destruction, and Iraq's refusal to cooperate fully with UNSCOM led to joint U.S.-British military strikes in December 1998. At the same time, divisions were mounting at the Security Council, with calls by Russia, China, and France to ease or lift sanctions. The commission withdrew from Iraq ahead of the military strikes and was disbanded.

A year of negotiations followed before the council adopted Resolution 1284 establishing UNMOVIC. The measure called for suspending sanctions against importing civilian goods if Iraq cooperated with the mission. The exact level of cooperation was left purposefully vague in the resolution, a reflection of the lack of consensus among council members. France was concerned that the resolution specified neither what disarmament measures Baghdad had to

---

meet nor by when it had to meet them before sanctions would be suspended. Russia wanted to make any suspension of sanctions automatically renewable unless the Security Council acted to reestablish them. China followed Russia's lead. France, Russia, and China—three of the five permanent members of the council—abstained on the resolution, along with non-permanent council member Malaysia.

The council's failure to resolve the differences and present a unified front on Resolution 1284 harmed the new inspection mission's credibility from the outset. Encouraged by the divisions among the permanent members of the council, Iraq ignored UNMOVIC for the next two years. The Iraqi government repeatedly declared that it was fully disarmed and demanded that sanctions be lifted. At one point early in 2001, Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Said al-Sahaf derisively dubbed UNMOVIC's chairman, Hans Blix, a "detail" from a bad resolution.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, amid the U.S. military buildup in the Gulf in late 2002, council members unanimously supported intrusive inspections. But that agreement—Resolution 1441—masked differences over what constituted a "material breach" of Iraq's disarmament obligations and what circumstances should trigger further action. When UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan delivered his "fork in the road" speech in 2003, he expressed concerns about Security Council divisions surrounding the invasion of Iraq. A broad UN reform effort has followed that speech, but scant attention has been paid to the performance of the council throughout the 12 years of sanctions against Saddam's regime.

The UN Security Council remains the forum of last resort for considering grave violations of regulations concerning weapons of mass destruction. The permanent five members of the council must be united behind the concept that weapons inspections should never be launched without the council's full backing, nor without its agreement on consequences for lack of compliance. As the Iraq experience has shown, divisions in the council bedeviled the inspection effort at crucial moments.

#### MONITORING LESSONS

Despite political differences on the council, it now appears clear that UN inspectors succeeded in fulfilling their mandate of destroying, removing, or ren-

---

*The council's failure to resolve the differences and present a unified front on Resolution 1284 harmed the new inspection mission's credibility from the outset.*

---

dering harmless Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Through the spring and summer of 2005, in reports to the council summarizing the work of UNSCOM, its predecessor mission, UNMOVIC noted that on-site inspections were essential in determining the existence of chemical and biological weapons and the means to deliver them, such as ballistic missile systems. UNMOVIC also believes that inspections, along with sanctions, may have deterred Iraq from resuming most of its WMD programs.

---

*The UN Security Council remains the forum of last resort for considering grave violations of regulations concerning weapons of mass destruction.*

---

Examples from the UN's chemical and biological weapons file illustrate the value of a sophisticated verification system of which inspections were only one part.

In the case of Iraq's program to produce lethal VX nerve gas, a chemical warfare agent, UNSCOM inspectors were able to uncover evidence of extensive undeclared activities. UNMOVIC recounts how this was possible:

The verification of procurement data revealed the acquisition of large quantities of precursors by Iraq; document searches resulted in the discovery of some records on VX-related activities; interviews with Iraqi scientists and technicians helped to identify gaps in Iraq's declarations on VX; debriefings of defectors produced additional information on the weaponization of VX; information from former suppliers to Iraq helped to corroborate the procurement data; and sampling and analysis identified the presence of VX degradation products. All of the above in combination with on-site inspections led to the identification of the indisputable existence of undeclared activities related to VX.<sup>2</sup>

In 1991, Iraq declared that it had only carried out laboratory research on VX. In reaction to UNSCOM's findings, however, Iraq admitted in 1996 to the production of 3.9 metric tons of VX, the production of 60 metric tons of VX precursors, and the purchase of hundreds more metric tons of other chemical warfare precursors. While no stockpile of the nerve agent was ever found, UNSCOM still believed Iraq had acquired enough precursors to produce 200 tons of VX. Iraq said that it unilaterally destroyed all VX and key precursors in 1991, but inspectors now believe that Iraq removed the physical evidence needed to completely verify the elimination of VX. UNSCOM was still trying to answer questions about the program at the time it was disbanded. For the same reasons, its successor, UNMOVIC, listed the matter of VX production and disposition as one of the key remaining disarmament tasks in its March 2003 report to the council.

---

---

## DUAL-USE DILEMMAS

UNMOVIC's investigation of chemical weapons programs in Iraq confirmed the existence of some precursor chemicals that were clearly only used for prohibited purposes, but finding evidence about Iraq's biological weapons program was much more difficult. Production equipment and materials employed in the biological sector are inherently dual-use, making the detection of illegal activities very difficult. For example, the Iraqi plant at al-Dawrah in the southwest suburbs of Baghdad was considered a legitimate facility for the production of vaccine for hoof-and-mouth disease, which is endemic in Iraq. UN inspectors now say that production of this vaccine was suspended in 1990, when the facility began the illicit production of botulinum toxin, a biological warfare agent. UNMOVIC said inspectors found no evidence the facility was part of Iraq's biological warfare program until Baghdad declared these activities in 1995.

The revelations at al-Dawrah and other sites alarmed inspectors and demonstrate the difficulty inherent in detecting biological weapons programs because of their dual-use nature. To date, UNMOVIC has not been able to answer outstanding questions about Iraq's bio-weapons program, such as the total amounts of bulk agents produced, weaponized, and destroyed. But as in the VX case, UNSCOM experts were able to discover evidence of a program larger than that declared by Iraq, leading Iraq to admit to wide-scale production of biological warfare agents. For example, inspectors found very large quantities of bacterial growth media usable for the production of biological weapons. Iraq had originally said the growth media was for use in hospitals, but hospitals typically use far smaller quantities of such material, leading inspectors to challenge the Iraqi claims.

In one of its lessons-learned reports to the council, UNMOVIC said that while extensive sampling and analysis would have helped to detect such facilities, other measures were also necessary:

It has become clear through the experience of UN inspections that inspectors should not confine themselves to sampling evidence alone. If information exists, it may also be gleaned through secondary sources or an amalgam of interviews, searches of financial records, documents, procurement records or by examining personal associations and hierarchical structures.<sup>3</sup>

---

*Production equipment and materials employed in the biological sector are inherently dual-use, making the detection of illegal activities very difficult.*

---

The inspection experience in Iraq, because of its scale and duration, serves as an invaluable case study in dealing with a state intent on developing and concealing a large weapons of mass destruction program. The international community, once alerted to such a program, should have the standby capacity to pursue all leads—tracking down suppliers, carrying out environmental sampling, interviewing scientists, and studying all available documents—to help verify and destroy such a program.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

UNMOVIC has devoted much of the period since the ouster of Saddam Hussein to remote monitoring of WMD sites in Iraq and combing through the 30-million-page archive compiled by UN and IAEA inspectors.

The UN Security Council should now formally recognize its contributions and set it on a course to complete its work. At its next quarterly consideration of UNMOVIC, due in March 2006, the council should set forth the following steps:

- Establish criteria to determine whether Iraq has met its disarmament obligations as required by council resolutions. The council will need to clarify disarmament standards in the aftermath of Saddam's ouster and the pilfering of numerous sites that UNMOVIC has been monitoring. The main area of uncertainty involves Iraq's biological weapons program. Special emphasis should be given to satisfying UNMOVIC's concerns about the outstanding issues involving the weaponization of anthrax and whether Iraq achieved the drying of anthrax. Iraq, which used chemical weapons against Iran and Iraqi Kurds under Saddam Hussein, should be strongly encouraged to join the Chemical Weapons Convention as a confidence-building measure;
  - Direct UNMOVIC to compile a report detailing both its work and that of the U.S.-led Iraq Survey Group, which operated in the country for 18 months. The report should aim to promote understanding of the inspections process and provide a blueprint for future efforts. In particular, it should assess the value of on-site inspections, interviews with scientists, analysis of documents, and the role of national intelligence agencies;
  - Based on the report's conclusions, the council should consider the creation of a permanent nonproliferation inspectorate using UNMOVIC's standing expertise in chemical and biological weapons and missile systems. The agency currently has 44 full-time staff and another 350 experts on standby. They could be converted into a body able to launch
-

---

verification and inspection operations on short notice when directed by the council or UN Secretariat;

- The creation of such a body provides an opportunity to revitalize a little-known authority of the UN secretary-general: to launch field investigations of alleged violations of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which bans the use of biological and chemical weapons, or of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). The secretary-general has used this authority only sparingly, in part because the accused country is under no obligation to cooperate with UN investigators. But as noted by the U.S. Gingrich-Mitchell task force on UN reform earlier this year, this authority could be important given the absence of a verification mechanism in the Biological Weapons Convention. The UN should adopt the task force's recommendation to strengthen the secretary-general's investigation authority by calling on BWC parties to accept investigations on their territory without the right of refusal.<sup>4</sup>

In April 2004, the UN Security Council sent a strong signal of concern over the spread of weapons of mass destruction by unanimously passing Resolution 1540, a binding measure requiring all states to adopt laws to prevent the manufacture, possession, or transfer of such weapons. A year after the disunity displayed over Iraq, it demonstrated a new resolve to work cooperatively on WMD threats. In the same spirit, the council should take a clear-eyed look at the history of UN inspections in Iraq and apply those lessons to the nonproliferation challenges ahead. ■

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Bill Samii, "Iraqi WMD and ACM Developments Continue ... But Inspections Unlikely to Resume," RFE/RL Iraq Report Vol. 4, No. 6, March 2, 2001.
- 2 UNMOVIC, "Twenty-first Quarterly Report on the Activities of UNMOVIC," May 27, 2005, <[www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/new/documents/quarterly\\_reports/s-2005-351.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/new/documents/quarterly_reports/s-2005-351.pdf)> (accessed September 30, 2005).
- 3 UNMOVIC, "Twenty-second Quarterly Report on the Activities of UNMOVIC," August 30, 2005, <[www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/new/documents/quarterly\\_reports/s-2005-545.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/new/documents/quarterly_reports/s-2005-545.pdf)> (accessed September 30, 2005).
- 4 Report of the Task Force on the United Nations, "American Interests and UN Reform," June 15, 2005, 70-71.

