Weapons of Mass Destruction in West Asia

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Abstract

For most of the 1990s and the early 2000s, the international community was concerned about finding and destroying Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Following the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 the focus has shifted to neighboring Iran. This paper examines the motives of Iran and Iraq for seeking such capabilities regarding the acquisition of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and the missiles that deliver them in both countries. Finally, it analyzes American efforts to prevent, or at least slow, the proliferation of WMD in Iran in the aftermath of the 2003 war.

The 2003 war opened a new chapter in Iraq’s domestic and foreign policies. The question of WMD in post-Saddam Iraq will take some time to be fully addressed. The issue and future of Iraq’s non-conventional capabilities should be viewed in the context of a broader regional security system.

The nature of the political regime in Tehran is not the main reason for any Iranian efforts to acquire WMD. Instead, it is the perception of threats from regional powers (Iraq, Pakistan, and Israel) as well as a global power—the United States. There is no consensus on how to prevent Iran from developing nuclear capability. The Iranians categorically deny any interest in nuclear weapons. Also, it is not clear whether a nuclear Iran will behave in any way different from a non-nuclear Iran.

In the long run, there is no substitute for addressing the underlying reasons for conflict in West Asia, particularly in the Persian Gulf and the Arab-Israeli conflict.
Introduction

Since the early 1980s the Middle Eastern military and strategic environment has been in a state of flux. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the Gulf War (1991), and the war in Iraq (2003) have drastically altered the strategic dynamics of the region. Three developments, with significant strategic implications, can be identified: First, Iran’s conventional military capabilities under the Islamic regime have been severely restrained. The massive destruction of a large proportion of Iranian arms during the war with Iraq combined with a relative lack of available funds to buy new weapons suggest that militarily Tehran is much weaker than it was under the Shah. No more does Iran have the capability, resources, or international backing to play the role of the policeman of the Gulf, which it played in the 1970s.

Second, far worse than Iran, Iraqi military forces have been substantially destroyed. Enjoying high oil prices and revenues, Baghdad was a leading military force in the Middle East in the late 1970s. The three Gulf wars dealt a heavy blow to the Iraqi military capability and as a result of the last conflict Saddam Hussein’s regime was toppled and a “new Iraq” has been established. The post-Hussein Iraq will redefine its national interests and its regional and international relations.

Third, subject to this changing military calculus and the subsequent strategic uncertainty, it is worth noting that weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, and the necessary missiles to deliver them—have in the past been introduced and used in the Gulf region. Chemical weapons played a decisive role in the Iraqi attacks on the Iranian troops from 1984 until the end of the war in 1989. In response, Tehran sought to retaliate in kind to the Iraqi attacks and developed its own stockpile of chemical weapons. Furthermore, the two countries launched massive missile attacks against each other’s cities.

For years prior to the 2003 Iraq war, both Iran and Iraq have been interested in developing non-conventional capability, not only to match Israeli power but possibly more importantly to gain military and strategic leverage in their disputes with each other. Regional rivalries and insecurities compel nations-states to undertake efforts to safeguard their core interests. The acquisition of WMD and secure delivery systems would appear logical and even necessary to achieve this goal. Prestige can be seen as another incentive for states to acquire WMD, particularly nuclear capability. Nevertheless, the stockpiling of these non-conventional weapons combined with political rhetoric can substantially increase the odds for catastrophic war in the Middle East, and increase the chances of pre-emptive and preventive strikes.

This essay will review the status of WMD in Iraq and Iran. Particular attention will be given to the motives and history of the efforts to acquire these non-conventional capacities. Furthermore an assessment of the chemical, biological, nuclear, and missile capabilities of each state will be provided as well as their stand on the international non-proliferation norms and agreements. Finally, the future of WMD in the Middle East will be examined.

Iraq

During the Saddam era, Iraq was an interesting and unique case in the area of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), from the early 1970s the Iraqi experience with WMD featured the following characteristics: First, unlike many other developing countries, Baghdad had the necessary ingredients to manufacture and develop robust non-conventional capabilities. These included massive financial resources due to skyrocketing oil prices and revenues, a progressive technical infrastructure managed by thousands of competent engineers and scientists, relatively good relations with the major global powers (until the invasion of Kuwait), which enabled Baghdad to receive technical assistance from France and other European countries in the 1970s and some degree of tolerance by the United States to its stockpiling and use of chemical weapons (CW) in the 1980s. Interestingly, the Security Council of the United Nations issued a resolution, endorsed by the United States, condemning the Israeli attack on Iraq’s nuclear facilities in 1981. It is little wonder that by the time of the Gulf War (1991) Iraq had assembled an impressive stockpile of WMD, and was very close to manufacturing nuclear devices.

Second, Iraq was not the only country in the Middle East to seek non-conventional capabilities. Many of its neighbors such as Iran,