UNSCOM’s work to uncover Iraq’s illicit biological weapons program: A primer
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ABSTRACT
In this article, the authors offer a short primer that outlines UNSCOM’s historical context and the logistics of its work – central aspects contributing to the Special Commission’s successes in searching for Iraq’s hidden biological weapons program.

The United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) was a watershed experience for arms control. It developed and implemented new verification tools which enabled its weapons inspectors to uncover large quantities of hidden weapons of mass destruction (WMD), as well as the programs for making them, in spite of Iraq’s sustained attempts to impede it.

Nowhere is this clearer than in UNSCOM’s work unearthing Iraq’s significant effort to produce and weaponize biological agents. In doing so, it provided the first case history of an international biological weapons (BW) disarmament effort and proved that a multifaceted verification strategy can detect a covert, well-hidden biological weapons program. This primer outlines UNSCOM’s historical context and the logistics of its work – central aspects contributing to UNSCOM’s successes in searching for Iraq’s hidden BW program.

The Gulf War and its ceasefire agreement
UNSCOM was established by the United Nations Security Council through a ceasefire agreement at the end of the first Gulf War. Initiated by the United States and its allies, the Gulf War was the ultimate response to Iraq’s flagrant breach of international law when President Saddam Hussein’s troops invaded and occupied Kuwait in the summer of 1990. Iraq’s warmongering followed a series of previous violations of international norms and law, including its repeated use of chemical weapons (CW) in the 1980s against its arch-enemy Iran and Iraq’s own citizens, and several diplomatic efforts by the Security Council condemning Iraq’s actions.

Within hours of initial reports that Iraq had invaded Kuwait, the Security Council demanded that Iraq immediately and unconditionally withdraw its forces (SCR 660). Four days later, the Security Council imposed comprehensive and mandatory sanctions on Iraq (SCR 661). By the late fall, the Security Council gave Saddam Hussein a clear choice: withdraw your forces by January 15, 1991, or governments supporting Kuwait would be authorized to use military force (SCR 678). By January 15, the international coalition had approximately 680,000 troops in the Gulf, more than 400,000 of which were American soldiers; the Iraqi side had 300,000–600,000 (Pearson 1999). The world stood “poised between peace and war,” the UN Secretary-General said. The first Gulf War began shortly thereafter, initially through air raids, and six weeks later through ground operations, with hundreds of tanks and tens of thousands of troops moving into Iraq and Kuwait. On February 27, 1991, the United States announced Kuwait liberated. US President George Bush said, “The war is now behind us . . . ahead of us is the difficult task of securing a potentially historic peace.”

That peace took the form of a ceasefire agreement, formally known as Security Council Resolution 687 adopted on April 3, 1991. Part of that agreement decreed that Iraq was to eliminate, under international supervision, its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons stockpiles and its ballistic missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometers. It required Iraq to submit within 15 days a full declaration of its WMD holdings and their locations, and to provide full assistance to international investigators. UNSCOM was established to verify Iraq’s declared chemical and biological weapons capabilities, as well as its missiles, and to oversee their “destruction, removal or rendering harmless” (SCR 687). The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was tasked with verifying and dismantling Iraq’s nuclear weapons capabilities. To ensure weapons of mass destruction were not developed in future, UNSCOM and the IAEA were also to develop a plan for ongoing monitoring and verification of Iraq’s compliance.

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Setting up UNSCOM

UNSCOM was unprecedented in many ways. Not only was it the first subsidiary body set up by the Security Council (Ekéus 2016, 134), but, as a direct result of Iraq’s military defeat and the imposed ceasefire agreement, the Security Council granted UNSCOM sweeping rights of access and investigation. These surpassed even those of its partner, the IAEA Action Team, as UNSCOM took overall responsibility for arranging inspections of sites that Iraq had not declared. Underpinning all of this was the unusual situation in which the Security Council could come to agreement, which itself reflected the political possibilities and optimism afforded by the end of the Cold War.

In other ways, UNSCOM had important precedents. It developed from Cold War multilateral arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation efforts, which had created overlapping sets of international agreements to restrict the development and accumulation of weapons and other war technologies. Many of these treaties included verification arrangements, through which member states could build confidence in each other’s compliance and intentions. This in turn relied on the development of verification theory and practice, and a set of people who understood and could administer negotiated verification systems. Significant here were the confidence- and security-building measures within the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe, as well as the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Treaty on the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, and the Open Skies Treaty. The experiences of negotiating and setting up these processes informed UNSCOM’s work.

One of the first steps in creating UNSCOM was the appointment of 21 international expert commissioners, including Ambassador Rolf Ekéus of Sweden as executive chair in April 1991 (Ekéus 2016, 134). He proceeded to develop UNSCOM’s financing and staff arrangements, seconding experts from around the world – paid for by their home government – and establishing the working systems and culture which enabled UNSCOM to carry out its work. By the time Ekéus stepped down in 1997, UNSCOM had uncovered significant illicit chemical, biological and missiles programs, and supported the IAEA Action Team’s work uncovering the illegal nuclear weapons program.

Throughout UNSCOM’s operations, Iraq systematically tried to impede its work, by submitting incomplete and inaccurate declarations, obstructing inspectors, or refusing access altogether, all in direct violation of the terms of the ceasefire (Pearson 1999; Braut-Hegghammer 2020). At critical times, UNSCOM needed the support of the UN Security Council to leverage access in Iraq – invoking Security Council support gave Ekéus and his inspectors extra authority when needed, and included, at times, a credible threat of renewed hostilities. These ultimatums were critical in making sure Iraq succumbed to the terms of the ceasefire (Trevan 1999).

As the 1990s progressed and the early days of post-Cold War amicability dissipated, Security Council members became less able to agree on measures to support the continuation of UNSCOM’s work. On top of this, Ekéus’ successor, Ambassador Richard Butler of Australia, had to cope with allegations of inspectors’ spying. Together, the allegations and divisions within the Security Council contributed to the decision to disband UNSCOM in 1999. It was replaced by a new organization, the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), which had similar responsibilities to UNSCOM but fewer access rights.

UNMOVIC continued UNSCOM’s work, but Iraq had become more obstinate and refused access to inspectors. Despite revealing substantial quantities of illicit weapons in Iraq, uncertainties remained about Iraq’s weapon capacities. This contributed to the American and British case, laid out by the George W. Bush and Tony Blair governments, for another war against Iraq, supported by their own flawed national intelligence assessments. Following that second Gulf War in 2003, a US-led Iraq Survey Group (ISG) was set up and sent into Iraq to continue the search for weapons of mass destruction. The ISG validated UNSCOM’s findings in the Duelfer report of 2004 (Duelfer 2005).

Uncovering Iraq’s bioweapons program

Exposing, or verifying the absence of, illicit biological weapons capabilities is notoriously difficult. The knowledge, technologies, materials and equipment needed for a biowarfare program are in many ways very similar to those used in widespread peaceful settings, including in agriculture, food, healthcare, and biopreparedness settings. This “dual-use” problem means that in theory, a biowarfare program producing militarily-significant quantities of lethal bio-agents could be small and easily concealed within valid enterprises, and that multilateral monitoring and investigations must establish the purpose as well as the presence of elements of a BW program.

UNSCOM inspectors saw their work as divided between looking for “proscribed” and “non-proscribed” activities and artifacts – i.e. those which unambiguously belonged to a biological weapons program, and others that could potentially have legitimate uses. Because very few BW-related items are not dual-use, there were only a very few totally proscribed activities.

At the outset of its work, the Special Commission was faced with two mutually exclusive views about the BW situation in Iraq. First, as demanded by Resolution 687, in
April 1991 Iraq made an initial declaration on its biological weapons activities, claiming that it had none: “Iraq does not possess any biological weapons or related items as mentioned” in Resolution 687 (Government of Iraq 1991). The alternate view, held by the members of the Security Council, comprised a host of concerns about the Iraq BW program. While additional information was available to coalition governments, very little of it was shared, at least at the outset of the investigation, with the Special Commission. This highlighted twin challenges that UNSCOM initially faced: an uncooperative Iraq, and a Security Council initially unwilling to share relevant information.

The initial expectations was that UNSCOM’s task would be a straightforward matter of confirming that Iraq’s declarations were accurate, and then checking that all listed items were destroyed. But anomalies in Iraq’s first declaration quickly made it clear that it was incomplete. UNSCOM’s task became one of trying to establish the scope of Iraq’s illicit programs in other ways. This set the scene for the pattern of interactions between UNSCOM and Iraq: Iraq would submit declarations, UNSCOM would collect evidence of anomalies and inaccuracies, and when presented with these, Iraq would make subsequent declarations addressing some concerns but introducing others.

The broad history of UNSCOM can be characterized as one of increasing investigative skill and intrusiveness in the face of constant Iraqi obstruction and dissemblance (Black 2000, 115). The Commission started from scratch, with no personnel, corporate memory, or experience. In a matter of months, it was planning and conducting on-site inspections of chemical, biological and ballistic missile facilities, and supported the IAEA Action Team’s inspections of sites associated with the nuclear program, and even these first inspections were remarkably effective. As the disarmament regime progressed, and UNSCOM matured, the inspections became increasingly focused and proficient. Every advance by the commission resulted in more evidence of Iraqi efforts to hide its full WMD capabilities. By the second half of the 1990s, UNSCOM had developed sufficient investigative and inspection skills to prove repeatedly that Iraq was providing false declarations about its WMD programs and failing to abide by the access requirements of the disarmament regime.

It is possible to see the history of UNSCOM’s work uncovering Iraq’s bioweapons program as three overlapping stages. The first, 1991–1993, was concerned with setting up and running systems that could identify the broad scope of the program. The second, 1993–1994, focused on devising an “Ongoing Monitoring and Verification” system, which if implemented could build international confidence that Iraq had not resumed illicit BW research and development. The third stage, 1994–1998, conducted systematic searches to uncover the full extent of the Iraqi BW program. During the first stage, UNSCOM’s BW work was integrated within efforts to monitor Iraq’s illicit chemical weapons, while for the latter two stages UNSCOM set up separate systems for chemical and biological weapons.

To uncover the Iraqi biological weapons program, UNSCOM used small pieces of circumstantial evidence that individually did not seem significant, but combined created a damning picture of Iraq’s activities. This picture was then used to highlight elements of investigative data that did not fit Iraq’s declarations – anomalies that further developed and confirmed UNSCOM’s assessments (Black 1999, 68).

UNSCOM’s verification processes included remote sensing, inspections, and other on-site measures, along with ongoing monitoring and verification. UNSCOM pioneered an approach to verified disarmament that focused on the material balance for different systems. Its teams collected information on which different weapons/components had been imported and produced and correlated this with information on which weapons/components had been used or destroyed. For the missiles and chemical weapons, this process was relatively straightforward; it was extremely difficult for biological weapons.

UNSCOM showed the value of a system approach to biological arms verification, rather than looking for single elements and discrete actions. The all-pervasive problem of dual capability in BW arms control was addressed not by looking at single pieces of equipment or specific materials, but at the whole of the capability. It was the combination and obvious direction of Iraq’s dual-use capabilities that convinced the world of Iraq’s deceit. The evidence was such that Iraq was compelled to admit to illicit activities, and as UNSCOM developed and demonstrated its abilities, governments became more willing to work with the inspectors. By the time Ekeus left, there was a degree of confidence within UNSCOM that Iraq’s biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons, as well as its missiles, had been accounted for, and that no substantive illicit proliferation remained.

Conclusions on future relevance

The Special Commission proved that it is not impossible to detect a concealed biological weapons program, even when it is carefully hidden. While it took several years and significant effort, UNSCOM was able to build a case that could have only one outcome: Iraq’s admission of an offensive BW program. UNSCOM also shows that such verification may require a highly intrusive, prolonged
investigation, backed by threats of sanctions and military force.

Set up as a condition for ending a war, UNSCOM was certainly coercive disarmament. But it developed and used tools of cooperative arms control verification, many of which have been incorporated into wider multilateral verification theory and practice. This presents challenges and opportunities to states pursuing current and future arms control and disarmament: Can they provide the support necessary to uphold and maximize such systems, including by providing enforcement measures if necessary? As other articles in this volume show, there are mixed views about the possibilities for making this happen.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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