US and Britain combine to maintain crippling sanctions on Iraq

Barry Grey
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After more than eight months of intense negotiations within the United Nations Security Council, the US decided last month to bring to a vote a resolution that would effectively extend the sanctions against Iraq indefinitely, even though only one other permanent member of the Security Council, Britain, was prepared to vote for it.

The resolution that was passed December 17 calls for the establishment of a new weapons inspections agency—the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC)—to replace the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM). Baghdad refused to allow UNSCOM and its chairman Richard Butler to reenter Iraq after the US and Britain, based on a report from Butler denouncing the Iraqis for noncompliance, launched their four-day air attack in December of 1998. The Iraqis have likewise refused access to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is responsible, under the UN sanctions imposed in 1990, for verifying the absence of nuclear weapons programs in the country.

Iraq announced in advance that it would reject any resolution that did not provide for the unconditional lifting of sanctions, and indicated it would consider a resumption of weapons inspections only on the basis of a guarantee, with date certain, that the embargo would be ended. Of the permanent Security Council members, Russia, China and France, each of which could have exercised a veto by voting “no,” abstained in the December 17 vote. They were joined by Malaysia. The resolution, presented by Britain and backed by the US, passed by a vote of 11-0, with four abstentions.

That the US decided to go ahead with the vote, knowing that it would register the split within the Security Council over Iraq and the increasing isolation of Washington and London, underscores the American government's determination to continue its policy of punishing Iraq, in the hope that the massive suffering of the Iraqi population will lead eventually to the toppling of President Saddam Hussein.

By any objective standard, the US policy toward Iraq constitutes a crime against humanity. To find a comparable example of a great power trampling on the national sovereignty of a small country one would have to go back to the heyday of colonialism at the turn of the last century. The toll of death and destruction on the Iraqi populace from American bombs and US-backed sanctions is immense. Numerous reports by international agencies and humanitarian organizations have documented the collapse of health care, nutrition, clean water, sanitation and other rudiments of civilization resulting from more than nine years of economic embargo.

Last August, for example, the United Nations children's agency, UNICEF, published a study concluding that child mortality had more than doubled in central and southern Iraq since the UN sanctions were implemented. An earlier UNICEF report estimated that over 5,000 Iraqi children were dying each month for lack of adequate food and medicine. Last week the Iraqi Ministry of Health announced that 1.4 million Iraqis of all ages have died over the past nine years as a result of the UN embargo.

Since the December 1998 air war, the US and Britain have continued to bomb Iraqi military and civilian targets on nearly a daily basis. American and British jets patrolling “no-fly” zones in northern and southern Iraq have, according to Baghdad, carried out 16,848 missions and killed 156 people over the past year. The US, Britain and France unilaterally imposed these “no-fly” zones in the early 1990s, without even the legal cover of a UN resolution.

UN weapons inspections have served as a thinly disguised tool for Washington's efforts to destabilize and remove the Hussein regime. Over many years UNSCOM carried out one provocation after another, refusing to certify that Iraq had rid itself of chemical and biological weapons and demanding access to the most sensitive political and security-related facilities. Not infrequently UNSCOM's inspections were designed to provoke Iraqi opposition, and thereby provide a pretext for new political or military attacks by the US. The December 1998 air assault, for example, was triggered by Baghdad's refusal to allow Richard Butler's inspectors access to the ruling Baath Party's headquarters.

Within weeks of that missile and bomb attack, major newspapers around the world provided detailed evidence, including admissions from US intelligence officials, that Washington had long been using UNSCOM as a front for CIA intelligence gathering against the Iraqi leadership. In addition to pinpointing the movements of Saddam Hussein for possible assassination attempts, the CIA used UNSCOM to select targets for the December 1998 air war. These revelations vindicated Iraq's long-standing charge that UN weapons inspectors were working as spies for American and Israeli intelligence.

Given this record, it is hardly surprising that the Iraqis are reluctant to place their fate in the hands of another US-backed inspections program. Under pressure from growing public sentiment, both internationally and within the US, against the sanctions, the Clinton administration sought to cast the December 17 resolution as a mechanism for easing the burden on the Iraqi people, while remaining intransigent toward the regime in Baghdad.

The resolution sets forth a plan for suspending sanctions on the import and export of civilian goods for renewable periods of 120 days, should UNMOVIC and the IAEA report that Iraq has fully complied with their inspections programs for a period of 120 days. However, any suspension of sanctions must be voted on by the Security Council,

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where both the US and Britain have a veto. If, on the other hand, UNMOVIC or the IAEA should report that Iraq has fallen out of full compliance, reimposition of sanctions would be automatic.

The resolution gives UNMOVIC, in particular, a carte blanche to demand access to any and all facilities and individuals. It states that "Iraq should allow UNMOVIC teams immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access to all areas, facilities, equipment, records and means of transport as well as to persons under the authority of the Iraqi Government."

This would obviously give the new inspections agency a wide berth to stage the type of provocations for which its predecessor, UNSCOM, became notorious. Moreover, the paragraph outlining the conditions for suspending sanctions contains a caveat that Washington could seize upon to block any temporary lifting of the embargo. The innocuous-sounding clause reads: "subject to the elaboration of effective financial and other operational measures to ensure that Iraq does not acquire prohibited items."

US Deputy Ambassador to the UN Peter Burleigh alluded to this seemingly technical provision in his remarks following the passage of the resolution. According to the summary of Burleigh's remarks provided by the UN, the American delegate said: "Before considering suspensions, the Council would need to set guidelines on the means of delivering civilian imports during suspension. The present resolution did not define the details of those measures or stipulate what means of delivery would or would not be authorized. The United States attached the utmost importance to that requirement for effective control measures."

In other words, the US was prepared to exploit the vagueness of this clause to block even a temporary suspension of sanctions.

The one provision of the resolution that appears to grant some unconditional relief is the removal of the existing cap on Iraqi oil exports. Up to now the UN has limited Iraq to $5.26 billion in oil exports every six months. The lifting of the oil cap is, in large measure, a concession by the US and Britain to Russia and France, both of which have a substantial economic stake in the revival of the country's petroleum industry. This is further indicated by another clause in the resolution which speaks of "options for involving foreign oil companies in Iraq's oil sector, including investments, subject to appropriate monitoring and controls."

Overall, however, the resolution maintains the status quo, with no foreseeable end to the sanctions regime. Iraqi sovereignty remains a dead letter, and the fate of the country remains firmly in the hands of the US, which could continue indefinitely to block any resumption of normal economic relations between Iraq and the rest of the world. The resolution retains the basic mechanism for holding the country in subjugation—the invidious requirement that it prove the negative, i.e., that it has eliminated any capacity for producing nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, something that can never be positively proven.

Iraq immediately denounced the December 17 resolution as a new device for maintaining the sanctions regime. Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz said, "The US' and Britain's real objective through this resolution is not to lift sanctions but rather to trick international opinion. The suspension [of sanctions] is nothing but a trick in that it relies on a long and complicated series of conditions that are impossible to fulfill." Aziz further attacked the resolution for failing to address the no-fly zones and the ongoing bombing campaign of the US and Britain.

The semi-official Iraqi newspaper *Babel* said the resolution "maintains the embargo and brings Iraq back to the starting point." It went on to say, "This criminal resolution turns Iraq into a protectorate led from the outside with Iraqi money." At the same time the newspaper declared the Security Council vote, with four abstentions, "a victory for Iraq because after eight months of negotiations, pressures and blackmail, the United States and Britain failed to get a consensus on their hostile policy towards Iraq."

In their statements, the French, Russian and Chinese delegates echoed some of Iraq's concerns. Sergei Lavrov of the Russian Federation said the resolution had "the underlying purpose of indefinitely postponing the lifting of sanctions." Qin Huasun of China denounced the no-fly zones, "which had never been authorized or approved by the Council," and demanded that the US and Britain cease their bombing of Iraqi targets in the north and south of the country.

Peter Burleigh of the US underscored Washington's intransigent position, insisting that the resolution had the force of international law and demanding that all Security Council members, regardless of how they voted, "join in pressing Iraq for full and immediate implementation." He emphasized that any suspension of sanctions had to be approved by the Council, that it would only be temporary, and that it would be automatically revoked should the IAEA or UNMOVIC report noncompliance. He added that the Council "had placed the onus squarely on Iraq," which could expect "no benefit of the doubt."

Washington's motives were further underscored by its reaction to Iraq's rejection of the resolution. "The practical consequence of the Iraqi rejection is there will not be any prospect for suspension of sanctions," said US State Department spokesman James Foley.

The fact that France, Russia and China failed to exercise their veto power to defeat the resolution, opting instead to abstain, highlights their own economic and geopolitical ambitions in Iraq and the Persian Gulf. Iraqi oil, not humanitarian concerns, lies at the center of their maneuvers with the US and Britain in the Security Council. France, in particular, vacillated over its vote, deciding to abstain only after Iraq threatened to break off diplomatic relations and scrap potentially lucrative oil contracts with French companies if Paris supported the resolution.

Despite the Iraqi rejection, the Security Council is mandated to proceed with the implementation of the December 17 resolution. Maneuvering within the Council is now focused on the selection of an executive chairman of UNMOVIC, to be appointed by January 16 by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

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