

Blair's Iraq dossier: a transparently trumped-up case for war

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The document released September 24 by British Prime Minister Tony Blair failed to convince anyone who was not already gung-ho for war that the alleged extent of Iraq's possession of "weapons of mass destruction" justified renewed US bombing of Baghdad.

At home 70 percent of those questioned by ITV news opposed Britain joining any military action against Iraq.

Internationally, the document went down like a lead balloon with practically everyone apart from the Bush administration. Iraq was joined by most Arab regimes in dismissing it as propaganda. Russia's Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov took a similar stance, while China made its own skepticism abundantly clear.

In Europe Germany refused to endorse a British warning about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and said it remains opposed to war. "What we read there does not differ from what the German government already knew," said government spokesman Uwe-Karsten Heye. France said that it had not seen proof to back up the dossier's claims.

All the dossier succeeds in doing is to make clear Blair's readiness to concoct a pretext for great power aggression against a small, impoverished and, it must be said, largely defenceless country. Its 50 pages are filled with so many assertions, half-truths and qualifications as to render it worthless. In place of concrete evidence and facts, it substitutes possibilities, intentions and maybes.

The first falsehood is its claim to represent "the assessment of the British government" on Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction". In truth, neither the government nor parliament has had any role in preparing the dossier, which was drawn up behind closed doors following discussions between Blair, President George W. Bush and British and US military and security services. The US has apparently provided much of the alleged information contained within it.

Blair's cabinet was presented with the finished dossier just one day before parliament was due to debate it, at the start of a 90-minute "discussion" on Iraq that finished with unanimous endorsement of the document after dissenters Robin Cook and Claire Short were pulled into line. Other MPs only received it the following morning, hours before parliament met to debate its contents.

Under the anti-democratic provision of Crown Prerogative, the decision to commit Britain to war is taken by the prime minister, and is not subject to parliamentary agreement. Blair has stuck to this feudal tradition, rejecting calls to allow a parliamentary vote on British involvement in a US-led war. MPs opposed to war were forced to table a vote against parliament ending its emergency debate as the only way to indicate their position. A larger minority than expected supported the technical motion—53 Labour MPs plus three tellers.

The prime minister's fear of a vote points to the weakness of his dossier. Blair clearly wished to aid the Bush administration and smooth the way for military action. But even he did not feel capable of reiterating every absurdity emanating from Washington. Most glaring of all is the absence of any evidence linking Iraq with either the September 11 attacks

or Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. Neither these, nor the "war against terrorism" in general is mentioned in the dossier, despite the fact that the threat of terror attacks are routinely invoked by Washington as the reason why the western powers must turn their attention once again to Baghdad. The document also avoids mentioning the necessity for "regime change", emphasising the need to enforce compliance with UN resolutions regarding "weapons of mass destruction".

The dossier enumerates various claims that Iraq has breeched UN dictates but runs into problems, admitting that since United Nations weapons inspectors withdrew from Iraq in 1998, "there has been little overt information on Iraq's chemical, biological, nuclear and ballistic missile programmes". Much of what is publicly available is dated, it continues.

The prime minister rules out disclosing the sources for that which is presented as credible evidence of continued Iraqi danger on the grounds of national security. He merely reassures the reader in his foreword, "I and other Ministers have been briefed in detail on the intelligence and are satisfied as to its authority."

For those whom Blair's word alone is not enough, the dossier presents a less than compelling case. Its suppositions are designed to make for chilling headlines—i.e., Iraq "could deploy nuclear weapons within 45 minutes"—but there is nothing of substance to back up such apocalyptic statements.

For example: the dossier gives a potted account of Iraq's well-known involvement in chemical and biological warfare research over the previous 30 years—research that Britain, and the US, are only too familiar with as for much of that period they were allies of Saddam Hussein and supplied his regime with much of the necessary materials. But it is forced to acknowledge that even prior to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Iraq's nuclear ambitions were largely just that—ambitions. Its crash programme to develop a single nuclear weapon within a year, commenced in August 1990 but had "by the time of the Gulf War...made little progress", the dossier states.

After 1991, Iraq's military capabilities were even more severely denuded. The dossier congratulates UNSCOM inspectors for identifying and destroying very large quantities of chemical weapons and ballistic missiles as well as associated production facilities, between 1991 and 1998. The "IAEA dismantled the physical infrastructure of the Iraqi nuclear weapons programme, including the dedicated facilities and equipment for uranium separation and enrichment, and for weapon development and production, and removed the remaining highly enriched uranium."

In other words, even if Hussein were searching out sources of uranium in Africa and elsewhere, as claimed in the dossier, he has no facilities for the production of nuclear weaponry.

The dossier goes on to admit, "For the past three years, Iraq has allowed the IAEA to carry out an annual inspection of a stockpile of nuclear material (depleted natural and low-enriched uranium)." It complains,

“This has led some countries and western commentators to conclude erroneously that Iraq is meeting its nuclear disarmament and monitoring obligations”.

The dossier argues that Iraq remains a danger because “no convincing proof of any kind has been produced” to support its claim that all biological agents and weapons have been destroyed.

It is impossible for Iraq to provide such evidence, not least because Blair includes not only actual weapons but also the potential to build weapons. “Iraq retained, and retains, many of its experienced nuclear scientists and technicians who are specialised in the production of fissile material and weapons design,” the dossier complains. “Intelligence indicates that Iraq also retains the accompanying programme documentation and data” and even possesses a “number of technical manuals” relevant to the subject.

That Iraq acquired and used chemical and biological weapons is not in doubt. In the war against Iran, and in his suppression of the Kurdish minority, Saddam Hussein used such weapons to terrible effect. The dossier explains, “In 1988 Saddam also used mustard and nerve agents against Iraqi Kurds at Halabja in northern Iraq... according to Human Rights Watch up to 5,000 were killed”.

The hypocrisy of the Blair dossier citing this incidence as proof of the Ba’athist dictator’s intent is breathtaking. As Labour MP Alan Simpson sets out in his alternative “Labour against the War” dossier, the US was the main backer of the Hussein regime during its massacre at Halabja. As for Britain, just 10 days after the attack, the Department of Trade and Industry agreed to £400 million worth of trade credits to Iraq. “When Iraq used mustard agents and sarin against Iranians in the 80s, the US and UK blocked specific condemnation of the attacks by the UN Security Council. When the UN issued a weaker statement, it was opposed by the US and Britain abstained,” Simpson’s document said.

As for the dossier’s claims that Iraq is currently stockpiling chemicals for use in “weapons of mass destruction”, it also admits that “Almost all components and supplies used in weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programmes are dual-use. For example, any major petrochemical or biotech industry, as well as public health organisations, will have legitimate need for most materials and equipment required to manufacture chemical and biological weapons”.

Whilst there is evidence that Iraq possesses certain chemicals, there is no way of knowing whether these are to be used for military purposes or just to disinfect hospitals. At one point, the dossier cites as sinister the possibility that Iraq may be producing “the biological agent ricin” from castor oil pulp residue at its Castor Oil Production Plant at Fallujah. But ricin is a key agent in the production of medicines to treat cancer—incidences of which have grown phenomenally in the wake of the 1991 war.

The dossier alleges that Hussein has blocked access to presidential palaces that are “in fact large compounds which are an integral part of Iraqi counter-measures designed to hide weapons material”. The evidence? An aerial photograph of one such site, with a white blank superimposed at its centre that is meant to be a proportional representation of the size of Buckingham Palace. The discrepancy between the size of Saddam’s palace and that of Queen Elizabeth II is meant to prove the case.

In another section it complains that Iraq is rebuilding parts of industrial complexes bombed during the Gulf War, and says that these renewed plants may be involved in the production of nerve gas. Two of the sites referred to were visited by British journalists just moments after the dossier was released, following up on an offer by the Iraqi government. Given free access to the al-Qa’qa military industrial complex and the Amariyah Sera and Vaccine Institute, the journalists reported nothing that would suggest the complexes were involved in anything other than their stated, and permitted objectives.

Perhaps the worst example of the dossier’s absurdities is the map

purporting to show the range capabilities of “current and planned/potential ballistic missiles”, depicting five rings radiating out from Iraq—the last one taking in Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Cyprus and Turkey. This frightening image has been given great prominence in the media.

The dossier complains, “Since the Gulf War, Iraq has been openly developing two short-range missiles up to a range of 150km, which are permitted under UN Security Council Resolution 687.” Iraq is thus accused of “openly” doing what it is allowed to do, a classic example of Blair speak.

The first of these permitted missiles—permitted because they have only a defensive capability—has a range just encompassing Iraq’s borders.

The second missile, Ababil-100, is also permitted and is apparently still under production, although that doesn’t stop the dossier speculating that its range may be extended to “at least 200 km”.

This brings us to the other circles radiating beyond Iraq’s borders. The dossier has no evidence that the third missile, Al Hussein, defined as having a range of 650km, even exists. It asserts that these were probably hidden “from UN inspectors, presumably dismantled”. Even so, it continues that although Iraq has the “engineering expertise available” to maintain the missiles, “the fact that at least some require re-assembly makes it difficult to judge exactly how many could be available for use”.

And what of the Al Abbas (projected range 900km) and the MRBM (projected range 1,200km) marked as the outer rings on the aerial photograph and including in its target range British troops stationed in Cyprus? On the map these are indexed only as projects “active pre-Gulf war”, and are not referred to in the text.

In the end, the dossier consists of nothing more than the charge that Iraq may have potential capabilities, that when finally realised, may tempt it to attack the rest of the world.

Blair did not feel confident enough to present the document directly as justification for launching military hostilities. Rather, he pressed for parliament to support his demand for UN action to enforce fresh weapons inspections on Iraq. This is little more than a ruse. Bush immediately issued a blunt warning to the UN that it must endorse a tough new resolution on Iraq. If it was “unable to do so, the United States and our friends will act”, a clear reference to British participation in a military strike.

To reject Blair’s dossier of evidence does not imply the slightest support for Saddam Hussein and his regime. It is up to the Iraqi people to deal with Saddam and not his former sponsors in Washington, whose sole concern is to establish control of Middle Eastern oil supplies.

It may well be the case that the Iraqi government is seeking to rebuild its weapons arsenal, but the bully in this instance is clearly the US which is using its own “weapons of mass destruction”—capable of obliterating Iraq several times over—to intimidate the Iraqi people. In such circumstances Iraq has every right to take measures to defend itself.

Just as in the run up to the war against Afghanistan, when Blair supplied the dossier of evidence supposedly linking Al Qaeda to the September 11 terror attacks, he is again acting as Bush’s lawyer in seeking to justify a colonial war of aggression. The dossier sets a grave precedent, in that it seeks to sanction the newly declared US policy of the pre-emptive strike. Iraq is to be targeted not for what it has done, but what it may do some time in the future. On this basis, almost any country deemed to represent a threat, however minor, to the strategic interests of American and British imperialism can have a charge-sheet drawn up against it by the CIA and be targeted for bombardment.



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