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Iraq and the broader disarmament context

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Iraq is not the only state under a legal order to divest itself of all weapons of mass destruction. While Security Council Resolution 687 of 1991 prohibits Iraq from possessing or acquiring ballistic missiles over the range of 150 kilometres as well as any chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons or related materials or facilities, the context of that prohibition is significant.

Resolution 687 also refers to the importance of “all states” adhering to chemical and biological weapons bans. In addition, the resolution reminds states to “use all available means” to establish a “nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region of the Middle East,” to establish the Middle East as a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction, and of “achieving balanced and comprehensive control of armaments in the region.”

In other words, the Security Council recognized that to effectively address Iraq’s violations of international standards related to weapons of mass destruction, the prohibition of weapons of mass destruction will have to be region wide and accompanied by broad based agreements on

conventional arms reductions and controls throughout the region.

There is no hint or intention to make Iraq’s compliance with its Security Council and Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations conditional on regional disarmament, but there is in Resolution 687 a clear understanding that a comprehensive approach to the problem of Iraq requires that other violations of international standards in the region also receive urgent attention.

The extent to which the Arab world becomes engaged in the constructive resolution of the Iraq crisis will be closely related to the extent to which the international community is prepared to address all the states in the region that violate global norms against the acquisition of nuclear weapons and that are in violation of Security Council resolutions.

Israel’s nuclear arsenal cannot credibly be ignored. The presence of nuclear weapons in Israel in no way justifies Iraq’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, but it does mean that Israel’s nuclear arsenal must become the object of

accelerated disarmament diplomacy and pressure. Israel is not signatory of the NPT and so is not in violation of the Treaty as Iraq is, but Israel is unambiguously in violation of the global norm which the Treaty establishes – notably that no states beyond the original five nuclear powers are to acquire nuclear weapons, and that the original nuclear five are under legal obligation, confirmed by the World Court, to divest themselves of their arsenals.

It is worth noting that US compliance with the NPT is also under some dispute, on two counts. In the first instance, Article VI of the Treaty obliges all nuclear weapon states to proceed to complete nuclear disarmament. No timetable is given, but after 35 years, the majority of States at the 2000 NPT Review Conference were of the clear view that the nuclear disarmament process lags behind even the most minimal expectations.

In the second instance, last January leaked excerpts of the US Nuclear Posture Review revealed that the Pentagon identified Iraq, among others, as representing what it calls an “immediate contingency” for which “requirements for nuclear strike capabilities” must be established. What that means is that the Nuclear Posture Review was supporting the development of contingency plans and capabilities for the use of nuclear weapons against Iraq.

This threat is contrary to the intentions of the

1995 Security Council affirmation (Resolution 984) of assurances that nuclear weapons will not be used against non-nuclear signatories of the NPT. It is also in violation of calls in subsequent NPT review conferences that nuclear weapons states offer unambiguous negative security assurances to non-nuclear states.

Again, the point is not that the dangerous US nuclear posture articulated by the Pentagon justifies Iraq’s possession or pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, rather, the point is that the call on Iraq to fulfill its obligations would be more credible if those states making the demands were themselves in strict compliance with basic international obligations and not seen to be applying a rather glaring double standard.

At the centre of the international community’s commitment to forcing Iraq to forego all weapons of mass destruction should be a firm commitment to pursue comprehensive disarmament measures – including, as Resolution 687 prescribes, the pursuit of the Middle East as a region free of all weapons of mass destruction and a commitment to pursue general disarmament in the region in the interests of reduced tension, greater stability, enhanced development, and the peaceful resolution of political disputes in the region.

Project Ploughshares is an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches, formed to implement the churches’ imperative to pursue peace and justice. The mandate given to Project Ploughshares is to work with churches and related organizations, as well as governments and non-governmental organizations, in Canada and abroad, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war, and promote the peaceful resolution of political conflict.

“and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4)