

## Blair's dossier on Iraq: an argument for peace

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The British government's dossier [1] on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction says little more than is already available, yet it does make some assertions that have considerable significance for a possible war.

Much of what is in the dossier is based on information made available by the United Nations (UN) Inspectors in the late 1990s, and published in a series of reports up to 1998. Given the known levels of activity that the regime was embarked on when inspections ceased in 1998, a reasonable extrapolation from that point brings us remarkably close to what the government's dossier now states. There is, though, one specific point where the dossier confirms the view of some analysts, and this concerns Iraq's chemical and biological weapons.

The dossier states that work has continued steadily, that Iraq currently has the ability to deploy and use chemical and biological weapons, and that it has the command and control system necessary to do so. The numbers of weapons may be quite substantial, but they could be used, either against troops or, more effectively, against unprotected civilians.

Moreover, such weapons could be fired within forty-five minutes of an order being given, and authority to launch them may even have been delegated to members of Saddam Hussein's inner circle. This is actually very similar to the situation in 1991, where these weapons were seen as a last-ditch deterrent to dissuade the coalition forces from destroying the regime. As this was not attempted, and there was no assault on Baghdad, they were never used (see an earlier article [1]).

This time around, the US would be going to war with the specific and undisguised intention of destroying the regime. In these circumstances, we should assume that the Iraqi regime would use any methods it can to respond to such an attempt, including the use of chemical and biological weapons. Given that the US is a power having nuclear weapons, this will then be a circumstance in which two opponents will both have weapons of mass destruction – and the weaker of the two is likely to use them.

### The risk of escalation

If Iraq succeeds in using them effectively, how will the US react and under what circumstances will it reply with its own weapons of mass destruction – that is, nuclear weapons? This is a question that can be legitimately, if indirectly, posed as a result of the information on Iraq's chemical and biological weapons that is in the UK government's dossier.

This raises a further issue. The US is intending to base six of its B-2 strategic bombers on the UK territory of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. One weapon that the B-2 is configured to carry is the B61-11 tactical nuclear bomb, an earth-penetrating device developed recently, and specifically, for destroying deep underground targets. These include biological and chemical

weapons stores that are too heavily protected to be destroyed by conventional bombs, however powerful.

It would be illuminating to know whether the US is deploying stocks of these bombs to Diego Garcia along with the B-2 bombers. It is a question worth asking even if an answer is unlikely.

What can be argued, though, is that the dossier demonstrates a paradox. It describes Iraq's chemical and biological weapons, yet, if taken at face value, the existence of such weapons and their availability for use means that any war with Iraq is likely to be extremely dangerous. It would certainly have the potential for the use of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq, and possibly by the US.

In a world in which political wisdom prevails, that ought to encourage the urgent search for effective alternatives to war. In its own way, the dossier is actually an argument against a war.

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