

Americans on Iraq and the UN Inspections

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Public Conflicted Whether UN Should Strengthen Inspections or Authorize Invasion

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A new PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll shows the American public is highly conflicted about whether the United Nations should strengthen inspections or authorize an invasion of Iraq. Steven Kull, director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, comments that “Most of the discussion of Iraq is based on the premise that the US is champing at the bit to invade Iraq, while other members of the UN Security Council want to continue with inspections. However, a very large portion of the American public is having this very debate within their own minds.”

When respondents were presented strongly stated arguments on both sides of this issue, large majorities found both sides convincing, and when asked to make a decision, responses varied and no clear majority emerged. Steven Kull adds, “This is a very unusual dynamic and suggests that Americans feel caught in a conundrum. Though they do not have much confidence that the inspections will be effective, they are not ready to give them up as long there is some hope.”

If the UN inspectors do find weapons of mass destruction, a clear majority (62%) favors the UN taking military action, rejecting the argument that this would be proof that the inspections are working.

The poll also found that the majority continues to want UN approval before the US invades Iraq. But here too, Americans show signs of conflict, with majorities responding favorably to opposing arguments on whether the US should be ready invade without UN approval. On this question, though, a majority (60%) did ultimately come down on the side of persisting with inspections rather than invading without UN approval.

Even if some allies would join in an invasion, a majority (54%) still preferred continuing with inspections. However, when the option of inspections was not offered, a majority (52-59%) expressed readiness to invade with just the support of some allies. Steven Kull comments, “Of course, in reality the option of inspections is offered.”

The poll found a strikingly high perceived probability that there will a major terrorist attack in response to a US invasion of Iraq. The average respondent gave an estimate of 70%, rising to 79% if the US attacks without UN approval.

The poll included oversamples for five states: California, Florida, Illinois, New York and Texas. While only a relatively small number of questions revealed significant differences between the states, and the differences were generally not great, these differences did create a pattern. Overall Texas and Florida were the most supportive of military action against Iraq. Illinois was the least supportive. California and New York were in between but closer to the dovish end of the spectrum.

Other key findings:

- The median respondent estimated that a war with Iraq will last 6 months, will result in 1,000 US troop fatalities and will require that the US remain in Iraq for about 3 years.
- If the US were to invade Iraq successfully, an overwhelming majority (86%) says that the US would have the responsibility to remain in Iraq until there is a stable government. A strong majority (74%) says that it is important to bring democracy to Iraq, though the median estimate is that this will require US troops remaining there 3-5 years.
- A majority (58%) thinks the US should be willing to agree to a deal that entails Saddam Hussein giving up power in exchange for not being charged with war crimes. This number rises to 67% if the President endorses it.
- A majority (56%) thinks Iraq has given support to al-Qaeda, but only one in five believe that it was directly involved in 9/11.

The Program on International Policy Attitudes and Knowledge Networks conducted a nationwide poll of 3,163 American adults over February 12-18 (a national sample of 2,186, plus oversamples in five states). The margin of error for the full sample was plus or minus 2.6%. The poll was fielded using Knowledge Networks' nationwide panel, which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided Internet access.

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