



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Iraq War's Intelligence Fiasco 14 Years On: The WMDs That Never Were

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael Ofek

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 701, December 29, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The rationale for the 2003 Iraq War was the American intelligence community's assessment that the Saddam Hussein regime possessed chemical and biological weapons and was pursuing nuclear weapons. This assessment proved a colossal failure, as no trace of nonconventional weapons was ever found in Iraq. Though the overthrow of Saddam's cruel totalitarian regime was nevertheless worthwhile, domestic pressure led the US to quickly withdraw its forces from Iraq – resulting in many American casualties and preventing the establishment of a stable pro-Western regime.

The Iraq War began on March 20, 2003, when US airstrikes targeted strategic facilities across the country as well as Saddam Hussein and senior members of his regime. The US-led coalition forces invaded Iraq and conquered it within three weeks. On May 1, 2003, then-US President George Bush declared, "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended."

In fact, the war in Iraq appears to have ended only recently, in October 2017, when the Iraqi army ousted ISIS from the country with the help of American forces and Iranian-backed Shiite militias. Even with that collaborative victory, however, the current Iraqi regime is closer to Tehran than to Washington.

The official rationale for the war was a claim by the US intelligence community that the Saddam regime possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that could endanger regional and global security. Despite feverish searches by the army and CIA operatives, no signs of their existence were found in Iraq. In February 2004, Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair were forced to establish a commission to look into the reasons for the intelligence failure.

Teams of inspectors were sent to Iraq, headed by David Kay and later by Charles Duelfer, who in the 1990s had led a number of UN inspection teams in Iraq. The inspectors' conclusion was that prior to the war there had been no operational WMDs in Iraq because their production had ceased after the 1991 Gulf War. At that time, Saddam was more troubled by the international economic sanctions against Iraq than by an American attack. He does appear to have hoped to renew the nonconventional-weapons programs at some stage, but most of all, he wanted to get the sanctions lifted.

Saddam complied with the UN resolution and destroyed his WMDs – but not the weapons production facilities. He wanted to convince his military leadership that the weapons still existed so as to forestall a coup.

Saddam's lies caused the UN and CIA inspectors to suspect everything Iraq did. US Vice President Dick Cheney asserted in August 2002, "There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction," thus laying the groundwork for the 2003 Iraq invasion.

The signal to launch the war was given about six months later by Bush in his State of the Union address on January 28, 2003, and by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his dramatic appearance before the UN Security Council on February 3. The picture Bush and Powell presented in the run-up to war was gloomy: Iraq had amassed stockpiles of nonconventional weapons that could kill millions, threatening the countries of the region and global peace. This claim was based on the CIA's intelligence assessment that Saddam had built up an enormous array of chemical weapons and also possessed mobile biological laboratories that were intended to produce bacteria for military use.

Bush and Powell also asserted that Iraq was trying to procure a huge quantity of aluminum tubes from which centrifuges could be made – centrifuges that could be used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. In addition, Bush quoted information he said he had received from the British government that Iraq was trying to procure large quantities of uranium in Africa.

Aluminum tubes: supposedly for uranium enrichment

The most severe failure of American intelligence concerned the Iraqi procurement of aluminum tubes that were allegedly intended for the production of rotors for uranium-enriching centrifuges. The rotor is the main component of a gas centrifuge. UF₆ gas (uranium hexafluoride) is injected into it and it rotates rapidly, enabling the enrichment process. The CIA's information on the aluminum-tubes deal was indeed accurate. The interpretation of those facts, however, was erroneous and verged on fantasy.

At the end of 2000 or the beginning of 2001, the CIA became aware of an Iraqi deal to acquire a large quantity of aluminum tubes. In the CIA's assessment, these tubes – in light of their technical features (a 900-millimeter length and an

80-millimeter diameter) – were intended for the production of rotors for thousands of centrifuges. The Iraqi governmental organization behind the deal was the Military Industrialization Commission (MIC), operating through a Jordanian trading company that had signed the purchase agreement with an Australian company engaged in the aluminum trade and partially owned by a Chinese manufacturer of aluminum tubes.

Having uncovered the deal, the CIA began acting to thwart it. In May 2017, when the first shipment of 2,000-3,000 tubes was sent from China, the US asked Jordan to prevent it from reaching Iraq. The shipment was indeed seized by the Jordanian authorities.

The high-strength aluminum alloy from which the tubes were made, 70750-T6, was the main basis for the CIA's technical experts' assessment that the tubes were intended for centrifuge production. Although this alloy also has nonnuclear uses, it was used in the 1970s to manufacture the first centrifuges developed in the Netherlands for uranium enrichment, and later for the first-generation centrifuges of Pakistan and Iran, which were developed on the basis of the Dutch technology. Moreover, when the Iraqis first began to develop centrifuges for uranium enrichment in 1987, they focused on old aluminum centrifuge models that were developed in the 1940s and 1950s, some with 80-millimeter-diameter rotors. Eventually, thanks to the know-how provided by German experts, the Iraqis were able to focus – until the eve of the Iraq invasion – on centrifuge models with rotors made from maraging steel or carbon fibers. Also contributing to the CIA's assessment of the centrifuges' purpose was the huge quantity the Iraqis sought to acquire, which was in the tens of thousands.

Experts at the US Department of Energy; the national laboratories in Oak Ridge, Livermore, and Los Angeles; and the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research rejected the CIA experts' conclusion. In particular they denied the claim that the only use of the 70750-T6 alloy was in gas centrifuges for enriching uranium. They also maintained that it was difficult to operate centrifuge models with an 80-millimeter rotor in cascade arrays since a significant quantity of UF₆ gas would be lost in the enrichment process.

Furthermore, the tubes' specifications did not accord with those of centrifuge rotors. These rotors were three times longer than the required length for 80-millimeter-diameter rotors, and using them for that purpose would have necessitated cutting them. It would have been simpler to order shorter tubes. Nor was any explanation given for why the specifications required anodizing the outside plating of the tubes – a process that is not needed for centrifuge rotors. Furthermore, the Iraqis worked to procure only aluminum tubes. But if they aimed to make 25,000 centrifuges out of them, as the CIA claimed, they would also have had to procure corresponding amounts of the other

components of the centrifuges, and no intelligence information was found that indicated an Iraqi intention to obtain those components.

The real purpose of the tubes was discovered by experts of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who found that in the 1980s, Iraq had imported large quantities of tubes for making multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), with technical specifications identical to the tubes they worked to obtain in 2001. Nevertheless, the CIA experts remained unconvinced until after the Iraq War ended that those tubes had not been intended for producing centrifuges.

In the heated debate on the purpose of the aluminum tubes, the broader perspective is notably absent: in the period before the Iraq invasion, would nuclear weapons development have served Saddam's objectives? The answer is an emphatic No. The winds of war were already blowing at that time, and the Iraqi regime was preparing to fight for its life. For every step it took, the supreme criterion was the extent to which it would help it survive.

By a rough calculation, more than 10,000 centrifuges with an 80-millimeter-diameter aluminum rotor for enriching uranium would have been needed to produce one nuclear bomb per year, and the time required to build a centrifuge facility of that size is about five years or more – an eternity relative to Saddam's timetable in those days. Furthermore, an enrichment facility of that size would have made a convenient target for an airstrike. Thus, a uranium enrichment facility would not have been likely to prolong the Saddam regime's survival. It is likely, therefore, that a centrifuge project was not on Iraq's agenda at all.

Another failure: the forged documents about contacts on procuring uranium from Niger

Niger was the African country from which Iraq sought to purchase uranium, and President Bush referred to Niger in his State of the Union Address on January 28, 2003. The information had come from Britain. The investigatory commission Blair appointed after the war found that there was a basis for the information, but added that the deals between Iraq and Niger were never actually implemented.

In addition, the Italian military intelligence service (SISMI) gave the Americans documents saying Iraq had tried to purchase 500 tons of uranium oxide, known as yellowcake, from Niger. By early 2002, however, suspicions about the documents were raised in the American intelligence community. The documents were transferred for review to IAEA experts who determined that they were indeed a forgery. It still is not known who forged them, but he or she appears to have been a former employee of Italian military intelligence.

The chemical and biological weapons stockpiles that never were

In the State of the Union Address, Bush claimed that Iraq had 500 tons of chemical weapons – sarin and VX nerve gases and mustard gas, and about 30,000 munitions for carrying them. In actuality, as Tim Weiner pointed out in his book on the history of the CIA (2007), the American intelligence community's efforts to find information on the Iraqi chemical weapons did not succeed. Among other things, he noted that in March 1998, an American communications expert disguised as a UN weapons inspector came to Baghdad and installed an eavesdropping system to intercept conversations related to chemical weapons. The system did not reveal a thing. In the spring of 1998, UN weapons inspectors discovered apparent traces of nerve gas in the warheads of Iraqi missiles. But in responding to the inspectors' report, which was leaked to the *Washington Post*, the Iraqis claimed that this was an American lie. And in fact, Charles Duelfer, who returned to Iraq under CIA auspices in 2004 to lead the hunt for nonconventional weapons, commented, "Finally, I think the Iraqis were right, they did not have nerve gas weapons."

As for biological weapons, President Bush in his State of the Union Address referred to reports from 1999 by inspectors who were part of a delegation from UNSCOM (an organization established by the UN after the 1991 Gulf War). The reports stated that Iraq had produced 25,000 liters of anthrax bacteria and 38,000 liters of botulinum toxin – substances that in such quantities could kill millions. Here, too, no evidence was found for the claim.

Up to the eve of the war, apart from UNSCOM inspectors who searched the country for nonconventional weapons and tried their best to dredge up information, only a few Iraqi human-intelligence (HUMINT) agents were operated by the CIA – and they too seemed to lack real access to the Iraqi nonconventional weapons program. Thus, when Iraqi defectors emerged in the West at the end of the 1990s, their stories about Saddam's weapons found a very attentive audience among American intelligence personnel – though some of those defectors were corrupt.

A source viewed by the Americans as particularly special was an agent known as Curveball. (His real name, Rafid Ahmed Alwan, was published only years later.) It was he who "contributed" the information to the Americans about mobile biological laboratories ceaselessly making their way along the roads of Iraq.

Curveball was an Iraqi chemical engineer in his early thirties who defected to Germany in November 1999 and volunteered to be an intelligence source for Germany's Federal Intelligence Service (BND) in return for political asylum and a generous income. He was directly interrogated by his German handlers for many hours in the period from December 1999 to September 2001. The

information he gave was transferred to the CIA, which took part in the interrogation behind the scenes.

Curveball claimed the information had reached him while he was working with "Doctor Germ" – the nickname in Iraq of Dr. Rihab Rashid Taha, a British-educated microbiologist who held a senior position in the Iraqi military program. According to Curveball, Doctor Germ appointed him head of the group that built mobile laboratories for producing lethal biological weapons. During his interrogation by the BND, suspicions arose that his words were interwoven with contradictions and lies. To the Americans, however, the information appeared authentic, and they tended to believe his reports to the point of distorting and twisting the facts.

As mentioned, neither during nor after the war was any trace of biological weapons found in Iraq. Bush's investigatory commission on the intelligence failure found that all Curveball's reports had been fabricated. Indeed, when interviewed by *The Guardian* in February 2011 after his identity was revealed, he admitted that everything he had told German intelligence had been an invention.

And yet – the war in Iraq was justified

When the 2003 Iraq War began, the American public, still affected by the fresh memory of the events of September 11, gave it almost full support. As guerrilla activity and terror attacks on American soldiers multiplied, that support began to wane. Because of the Bush administration's prewar claims, American and British soldiers continued to plod the Iraqi mud even at the end of the war, suffering casualties along the way, in a quest to find evidence of WMDs.

More than a quarter million soldiers searched the country but found nothing. A vicious circle emerged after the war: the more criticism of the war in the US and the world intensified, the more terror attacks on American and coalition forces in Iraq and resulting casualties increased, which in turn caused the criticism to intensify even further. In this impossible situation, demands kept mounting in the US to bring the soldiers home.

On December 14, 2011, the last American soldier left Iraq as President Barack Obama had ordered, and the next day, Washington officially declared the end of its involvement there. Subsequently, however, ISIS arose in Iraq, and the poison that had seeped into the country's soil has continued to bleed.

Despite the numerous casualties and the public criticism of the mistakes committed before, during, and after the war, it was justified. Saddam subjected Iraq to a totalitarian and murderous regime. The world's gallant fighters for freedom, conscience, and human rights ignored the regime's savagery: the

terrible tortures of suspected opponents of the regime in the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad, the massacre of Kurdish civilians with chemical weapons in the town of Halabja in 1988. Such a regime could not be allowed to continue.

It was dangerous not only to the Iraqi people. Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980, which precipitated the eight-years-long First Gulf War, and the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, with the attendant Second Gulf War of January-February 1991, highlighted the ongoing danger Iraq posed to regional and global stability. One should also take into account the severe damage that would have been caused to the world economy had Iraq gained control of the oil wells in the Arabian Peninsula.

From an Israeli standpoint, the war was certainly justified. To this day, Israelis have a hard time forgetting the missile attacks on Israeli cities during the 1991 Gulf War, which they had to wait out in sealed rooms. Fortunately they were spared such assaults during the 2003 Iraq War.

A November 2003 article by Shlomo Brom of Tel Aviv University's Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies in November 2003, is worthy of note:

On the question concerning the picture that was painted by the intelligence services of the coalition countries, the third participant in the intelligence failure, Israel, remained in the shadows. Yet Israeli intelligence was a full partner to the picture of Iraq's nonconventional capability that the Americans and the British presented.

Notwithstanding Brom's apparently correct claim, however, there may have been those in the Israeli intelligence community who disagreed with the received assessment of Iraq's WMDs – for example, regarding the issue of the aluminum tubes – but kept quiet because they thought removing the Saddam regime at any price would be good for Israel.

The world's intelligence communities have two functions: to collect intelligence and to assess it. The crafting of an accurate intelligence assessment is conditional on the good collection of information. But the opposite is true as well: an accurate assessment, whether it stems from partial information or from intuition, facilitates improving both the quantity and quality of the information collected. When the interaction between collection of information and its assessment fails, the result is the "wave behavior" phenomenon that characterized American intelligence in the last decade: before September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda was not viewed as able to strike the heart of the US. Later, Iraq's WMD capabilities were overestimated; then, the Iranian nuclear effort was underestimated in 2007. It is to be hoped that in light of these failures, correct conclusions have been drawn and appropriate steps have been taken.

Lt. Col. (ret.) Dr. Raphael Ofek is an expert in the field of nuclear physics and technology, who served as a senior analyst in the Israeli intelligence community.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family