A Case Study of Intelligence in a Dictatorship

Iraqi Human Intelligence Collection on Iran’s Nuclear Weapons Program, 1980–2003

Anonymous

Introduction

Under the rule of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi intelligence was a complex, interconnected network of five government agencies responsible for ensuring Saddam’s security and safeguarding his life. The jobs of intelligence officers from the Special Security, General Security, General Intelligence, Military Intelligence, and Military Security Services often required blind loyalty and devotion to the Iraqi dictator’s intelligence-related impulses and intrigues. In addition to protecting the president, the five organizations maintained internal domestic security and conducted foreign intelligence operations. Of particular importance to Saddam, strategically and personally, were the General Intelligence (IIS) and Military Intelligence (GMID) services, the agencies responsible for the majority of international espionage.

The IIS was created in 1964. As Saddam amassed power in the late 1960s and 1970s, he began to ensure he had the organization’s allegiance by installing individuals close to and loyal to the presidency, typically close relatives or members of Saddam’s Tikriti tribe.

While IIS activities following the 1991 Gulf War concentrated primarily on domestic security espionage, a small cohort of IIS agents maintained an extensive network of overseas informants.

The GMID was established in 1932, the year Iraq gained independence from British rule. Unlike the IIS, the leadership of the GMID alternated between Tikritis and non-Tikritis. However, GMID officers were similarly conscious of remaining in Saddam’s favor after he came to power, lest they be removed from their positions or killed.

GMID operations focused primarily on gathering military intelligence and ensuring the loyalty of the armed services as well as conducting overseas operations and maintaining networks of informants throughout the Arab states and in Iran.1

This article draws on captured IIS and GMID records held at the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC) at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. Until US forces entered Iraq in 2003, most research on Saddam’s regime had relied on secondary sources or “the occasional memoir or defector’s account.”2 This is no longer the...

Well before the United States and the Western world first questioned Iran’s nuclear goals, members of Iraq’s intelligence services had recruited high-level Iranian officials and individuals involved in Tehran’s nuclear program.

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Iraqi HUMINT on Iran

Iraq begins collecting intelligence on Iran at the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, the year after the Ayatollah Khomeini took power in Iran. The effort began small. According to Iraqi Major General Mizher Rashid al-Tarfa al-Ubaydi (General Tarfa), a senior officer and section leader of Iraq’s military intelligence directorate dealing with Iran during the conflict, “In 1980, shortly before the outbreak of the war, those responsible for gathering and analyzing intelligence on Iran numbered three individuals—only one of whom had studied Farsi.” But by the war’s end in 1988, over 2,500 individuals were producing intelligence on Iran’s capabilities.6

With the end of overt hostilities, Iraq’s intelligence services turned their attention from analyzing Iranian military strengths and weaknesses to spying on Iran’s quest for the ultimate weapon: the nuclear bomb. According to Iraqi intelligence, Iranian interest in developing a nuclear weapons program “started seriously when its war with our country [Iraq] came to an end” in 1988.7 As Iran’s interest increased, so did Iraq’s intelligence on Iran’s nuclear activities.

Iraqi HUMINT—Global and Targeted on the Nuclear Issue...

The captured reports from the IIS and GMID bring to light the qualities of Iraq’s HUMINT collection against Iran, in particular concerning its nuclear program and demonstrate that, while the Iraqis obtained detailed insights into the plans and intentions of their adversary, the collection process itself was rife with stumbling blocks.8

With respect to Iranian nuclear activities Iraq’s HUMINT services appear to have effectively obtained information by recruiting numerous high-level Iranian government officials and individuals involved or acquainted with the nuclear program.9 While it does not appear that any Iraqi officer infiltrated the inner circles of the Iranian regime, the members of Iraq’s intelligence services reported that they were able to recruit sources possessing detailed information concerning the motivations underlying Iran’s nuclear aspirations and the development of the country’s nuclear program.

Through their sources, Iraqi intelligence officers concluded that Iran had three motives for acquiring a nuclear weapons capability: to prevent American interference in the region, to challenge Israel, and to protect the religious integrity and demonstrate the strength of Islam.10

The view of the American threat grew out of the Iranian expectation that “a huge crisis will occur when the United States interferes to prevent the emergence of the Islamic world.” According to Iranian sources, the “majority of religious men in the Iranian leadership believe that confrontation with the United States is certain and imminent…” (text highlighted in original document) and that obtaining nuclear technology would deter US threats.11

When it came to dealing with Israel, the Iraqi’s Iranian sources disclosed that, in October of 1991, the Iranian vice president...

... emphasized the necessity for developing nuclear weapons in Iran, so that Muslims can confront Israel. He also emphasized to all Muslims, including [those in] Iran, that they must reach an advanced level [of technological sophistication] in the nuclear
One month later, Islamic unity was one of the issues that arose in a meeting between Iranian President Rafsanjani and the National Security Council and High Military Command, sources disclosed to Iraqi intelligence officers. Present at this meeting were Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei, Defense Minister Ali Akbar Tarkan, Iranian Revolutionary Guards Commander Mohsin Rida’i, Intelligence Director Ali Falahi, and Ahmed Khomeini. At the end of their discussions, President Rafsanjani announced that “Iran must have nuclear weapons for the benefit of the region ... because the Arabs proved that they are incapable of doing so. Such weapons will be necessary for [Islamic] solidarity and to refresh Islamic unity” (text highlighted in original document).

Iraqi HUMINT records also provide detailed descriptions of the early stages of Iran’s nuclear program and ensuing efforts with other nations to obtain their own nuclear weapons. The majority of the HUMINT came from contact with Iranian nationals, contacts that were arranged and coordinated through intelligence officers serving as military attachés in Iraq’s embassies abroad.

According to Iraqi intelligence reports, Iran lacked the technology and materials to achieve nuclear power during the initial stages of its nuclear program. As a result, Tehran reached out to as many countries and organizations as possible to expand and develop their nuclear operations. The captured Iraqi records show that Iraqi officers collected intelligence from Argentine, Chinese, French, German, Mexican, North Korean, Pakistani, and Swiss agents in addition to their Iranian contacts.

From 1988 to 1989, Iraqi military attachés in Bonn, Istanbul, London, and Rome worked together to recruit and develop an unidentified Iranian source who was “educated, from Esfahan and is an employee in the Agricultural Department and has wide relations; in that, he ascertained his ability to collect information concerning chemical and nuclear targets through his relations...”

This source confirmed the Iraqi belief that the Esfahan Nuclear Technology Center was “one of the most well-equipped Iranian research centers which Iran could resort to, should they decide to set in motion the sensitive series of any nuclear program ... or could alternatively specialize in research and development in order to attain the required technology.” Additionally, the source provided information concerning Iran’s attempts to “obtain as much contracts as they can with specialized companies; especially, German and Swiss companies in order to expand and develop the Center’s operations.”

Iraqi officers also documented the increasing number of Chinese, North Korean, and Russian scientists working in Iran’s nuclear centers, along with Iran’s exploits in Central Asia. By following the activities of two Iranian weapons of mass destruction experts during the 1990s—the first codenamed “Qambiz” and the second an Iranian scientist with “master’s degree in nuclear physics from the University of California”—Iraqi officers acquired intelligence concerning Iranian conversations with, for example, “a high-level official from Kazakhstan who had a detailed offer for supplying Iran with nuclear weapons from the Soviet inventory. The [Kazakhstani] official stated that he has close contacts with Kurchatov Institute in Moscow and [Semipalatinsk] Establishment” (text highlighted in original document).

Similar intelligence was collected concerning Iranian-Soviet (later Russian) relations and the development of Iran’s nuclear bomb. Records from various Iraqi sources indicate high levels of cooperation between the two countries. In 1992, a source recruited by an Iraqi intelligence officer in Moscow “con-
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confirmed … that Iran has obtained three nuclear bombs...” and that a “number of Soviet specialists and experts in Iran al-Kubra area [Greater Iran area]” were working with Tehran to obtain “an active nuclear weapon.”

Based on the information provided by this source, as well as information obtained from unnamed “other sources,” “Iran will own operational nuclear weapons between February and April 1992.”24 A letter from the IIS to Saddam in 2000 entitled “Bushehr Nuclear Station,” summarizes the “most important information” IIS officers obtained through their “reliable resources.”25 This intelligence includes the details of technical exchanges between the two countries in 1999, various meetings held between Russian and Iran concerning the development of nuclear reactors, and the status of the Bushehr nuclear reactor.26

In sum, the documentation indicates that Iraq had developed a vast network of contacts and ability to recruit individuals close to the Iranian regime as well as experts participating in the Iranian nuclear program.

...But How Reliable?

As vast and productive as Iraq’s HUMINT collection effort appeared to be, there is plenty of reason to expect serious problems in the reporting. Some of these issues stem from the nature of Iraqi society under Saddam Hussein and the HUMINT collection discipline itself.

During Saddam’s reign, the main purpose of Iraqi intelligence was to ensure his survival and increase the power of the presidency.27 Saddam commanded absolute control of Iraqi society and demanded absolute loyalty from his intelligence and security services. According to Lt. Gen. Ra’ad Hamdani, a former Iraqi Republican Guard Corps commander,

Saddam had a number of personality traits. Sometimes he was intelligent, other times he could be as naïve as an illiterate farmer. One moment he would be extremely affectionate, the next moment he would be extremely hostile and cruel. Even Satan was better than Saddam at those times. One minute he could be overly generous, the next he could be extremely stingy. He had a great ability to listen, but then he would not allow you to say anything or he would refuse to listen to what you said.28

Saddam was unpredictable and had a proclivity to take impulsive actions that could end an officer’s career or life. In order to ensure his survival, Saddam used “carrot-and-stick methods” to secure his power.29 Members who displayed signs of disloyalty or who fell out of favor with Saddam, were punished by torture or death. On the other hand, members who pleased Saddam and fulfilled their duties were lavished with gifts, such as luxury cars and houses.30

Such tactics may have secured Saddam’s position as ruler, but they would also have caused intelligence officers to distort their reporting. Iraqi intelligence services reported directly to the Presidential Palace, and, afraid of being wrong or of upsetting Saddam, officers commonly generalized assessments to avoid upsetting superiors or to “save face.” For example, in one GMID report an intelligence officer was asked to assess the date when Iran “would obtain an active nuclear weapon.”31 The following are the various responses recorded in the same GMID account:

- “A nuclear bomb already exist[s]” in Iran;
- “A highly reliable Iranian official source confirmed in late January 1992 that Iran had obtained three nuclear bombs”;
- “Iran will own operational nuclear weapons between February and April 1992”;
- “Iran is expected to develop nuclear weapons before the end of the current decade”;
- “We do not believe that Iran can finish producing nuclear weapons through the program, on which Iran is working with the assistance of China, Pakistan, and other countries, before the end of the current decade.”

The conflicting nature of these responses and the failure of the report to clearly address the posited question is a reflection of the incon-
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Both reports use information provided by the same source and are addressed to the same directorate, yet they were authored by two different intelligence officers. With no framework to ensure coordination between the various agencies on intelligence-related matters, it is difficult to assess and analyze all the information on a particular topic. Further, there was no standard in place for intelligence collection and dissemination within the Iraqi intelligence service.

The third weakness of Iraqi HUMINT presented in this case study is the quality of the tradecraft—or lack thereof. The available captured records highlight that Iraqi officers tasked with reporting on Iran’s nuclear aspirations were generally not thorough in their paperwork and frequently made mistakes. In one GMID record, the reporting HUMINT officer incorrectly cites Iran as signing the United Nations Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1998—they became party to the treaty in 1968. In a different GMID report, an Iranian named “Mahjarani” is identified as a deputy president and as one of the authorities emboldening Iranians to continue their nuclear aspirations in 1991. In 1991, Hassan Ebrahim Habibi was Iran’s deputy president; it is not clear who “Mahjarani” was.

The captured records show that officers rarely documented assessments of their sources’ motivations to disclose secret information. Intelligence reports on Iran’s acquisition of the material necessary to produce a nuclear bomb are potentially valuable, but the reports make no mention of how, why, or from whom, the intelligence was collected.

- A GMID report in the 1990s claims that Pakistan established a reactor in Rasht, a city northwest of Tehran, which was used in the “treatment and enrichment of uranium.”
- A 1992 report claims “Iran was seriously exploring the possibility of working with China to develop its nuclear facilities and produce nuclear weapons, and [working] with China and North Korea to obtain missiles, develop them, and produce them in Iran.”
- The same report states that “all available evidence strongly indicates that Iran has obtained all it needs to assemble three tactical nuclear weapons by the end of 1991.”
- At the beginning of January 1992, there was an indication that an assembly process started for three nuclear weapons in Iran, from parts that were obtained from Kazakhstan.

The credibility of such intelligence is diminished considerably in the absence of an understanding of the identities or motivations of the sources. This type of additional insight into why Iranian sources divulged privileged information to Iraqi intelligence officers would have been especially interesting, given the virulence of Iraq’s anti-Shia and anti-Persian sentiments.
General Tarfa stated that he would rather have relations with Tel Aviv than Tehran, and, while not exactly the same view that Saddam held, Saddam did reissue a book written by his uncle entitled, Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews, and Flies. Why Iranian officials disclosed information to their neighboring adversaries is something Iraqi intelligence records fail to indicate.

All of these qualitative issues—poorly written or researched material, inadequately contextualized work, and insubstantial sourcing—make assessing the reliability of the information difficult. But further muddying the waters is the failure of the records to provide a history of what a given source had previously disclosed, which prevents recipients of the reports from being able to compare and determine the accuracy of the reporting.

When source reporting does occur, the source is often characterized as “reliable,” “highly reliable,” or a “high-ranking official,” with no additional quantifiable or substantial definitions of the source included. In his interview, General Tarfa disclosed that in recruiting an Iranian air force commander, “We provided him with money, took pictures, did some recordings, and told him our future information needs...” However, none of this information exists in any of the IIS or GMID intelligence records.

Conclusions

The ancient Chinese military sage Sun Tzu instructed readers of his Art of War to “know your enemy” before going into battle. During the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq’s knowledge and understanding of Iran greatly increased. As the war progressed and then beyond, Iraq became well positioned to assess Iran’s nuclear ambitions as its intelligence officers were able to get close to high-level Iranian officials and collect classified information, but when the many factors that influence reporting—the political, the structural, and the inherent credibility of sources—are taken into account, Iraqi reporting must be evaluated guardedly.

On balance, it appears that careful reading of Iraqi reports on the early development of Iran’s nuclear program can provide insight into Iran’s nuclear aspirations. At the same time, for students of intelligence the material offers many opportunities to study the human intelligence collection discipline and the many factors that make it valuable or dubious.
Endnotes


3. While Iraqi intelligence records start referencing Iran’s nuclear developments in the early 1980s, the majority of reporting begins in the late 1980s and continues throughout the 1990s. According to Jeffery Richelson, the United States’ intelligence community first addressed Iran’s nuclear potential in a draft version of a national intelligence estimate on Iran in the fall of 1991. See Jeffery Richelson, Spying on the Bomb: American Nuclear Intelligence from Nazi Germany to Iran and North Korea (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006:503-17).


6. Ibid.


8. For a table comparing the advantages and disadvantages of the different intelligence disciplines, see Mark Lowenthal, Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy (Washington: CQ Press, 2000:72); see also Abram Shulsky and Gary Schmitt, Silent Warfare: Understanding the World of Intelligence (Washington: Potomac Books 2002:11-21).

9. According to General Tarfa, by the late 1980s, Iraq had “10,000 mujahideen in Tehran. These Iranian opponents of the regime called their families and those helping them from Europe and the Gulf. Iranians were free to move to Europe and the Gulf region. For example, in September 1986, I went with General Wafiq al-Samarra’i to Ankara to recruit a senior Iranian air force commander. He was on vacation in Turkey with his family. We coordinated with him through the Iraqi military attaché in Ankara.” See Woods, et al., Saddam’s Generals, 98.

10. No Iraqi HUMINT report accessed in researching this study identifies combating, deterring, or competing with Iraq as a motivating factor for Iran's desire to acquire a nuclear bomb.


12. Ibid.

13. In the original Arabic, the author of this report describes this meeting using attributes not given in normal circumstances, indicating the importance of the meeting and the level of seriousness in the affairs that they were discussing. See SH-MODX-D-001-291.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid. Quote attributed to President Rafsanjani in November 1991.

16. For example, see “General Military Intelligence Directorate Assessments of Iranian Chemical and Nuclear Capabilities, Locations, Structures, and Readiness,” Conflict Records Research Center (SH-GMID-D-000-579).

17. Ibid.

18. “Intelligence Reports and Memoranda Regarding Early Stages of Iran's Nuclear Program and Activities, Including Development of Iran's Nuclear Energy Centers (particularly the Esfahan Nuclear Technology Center),” Conflict Records Research Center (SH-GMID-D-000-587).

19. Ibid.

20. A July 19, 1989, letter from Staff Brigadier General Issmat Judi Muhammad, Military Attaché in Bonn, to the GMID (19th Section) verifying and following-up on information. See SH-GMID-D-000-587.

21. See, for example, “Correspondence between the Iraqi Embassy in Moscow, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Iraqi Intelligence Service regarding Russian-Iranian relations,” Conflict Records Research Center (SH-IISX-D-000-148); “Various Iraqi Intelligence Service Memoranda Regarding Israeli Officials (Rabin) Visit to Russia and Russian-Israeli Relations,” Conflict Records Research Center (SH-IISX-D-000-691); and “Report on Iranian Efforts to Obtain Nuclear Weapons” (SH-MODX-D-001-291).


23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.
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26. Ibid.


29. Baram, 114.

30. Ibid.


35. al-Murashi, 2.

36. “Intelligence Reports and Memoranda Regarding Early Stages of Iran’s Nuclear Program” (SH-GMID-D-000-587).

37. “General Military Intelligence Directorate” (SH-GMID-D-000-579).


41. Ibid.


45. For example, see “Iraqi Intelligence Service Report” (SH-IISX-D-001-296).
