

OIA's perspective

Desert Storm and the BDA Controversy

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During Operation Desert Storm, CIA's Office of Imagery Analysis (OIA), in support of the Directorate of Intelligence's Persian Gulf Task Force, devoted a major effort to assessments of the damage to Iraq's military and economic capabilities caused by the coalition bombing effort. Although most of this work was well received by various military and policy consumers, such was not the case with OIA's assessment of the damage caused to key units of Iraq's elite Republican Guard (RG). This battle or bomb-damage assessment (BDA) caused considerable controversy and resulted in strong misperceptions about what actually happened.

By the time the coalition bombing effort began on 15 January 1991, OIA had already done extensive analysis of potential Iraqi military targets. [redacted]

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[redacted] Before the conflict, OIA also did extensive analysis of Iraq's ground forces, including their order of battle. [redacted]

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[redacted] This analysis was distributed to a wide variety of military customers, including the DIA Joint Intelligence Center (JIC) at the Pentagon and the CENTCOM J2 in Saudi Arabia.

Once the bombing began, OIA began to do assessments of the damage to determine the impact on Iraq's overall military capabilities. These assessments were incorporated into daily sitreps and status reports and disseminated to OIA's political and military customers. The assessments were intended both to inform policymakers of the damage to Iraq's military capabilities and to assist the military in its targeting effort. At first, much attention was focused on the damage done to Iraq's strategic infrastructure,

particularly its nuclear, chemical, biological and missile facilities. There was also a major effort to try to assess any damage to Iraq's mobile Scud missile launchers.

A Shift in Focus

As the damage to Iraq's strategic facilities and basic infrastructure mounted, the bombing focus shifted more to the ground forces. The RG units, particularly the one mechanized and two armored divisions which formed the strategic reserve force in the Kuwaiti theater, were key targets of this phase of the bombing effort. Intensive bombing of the RG mechanized division, which was closest to the front, began by 31 January. Heavy bombing of the two armored divisions, deployed further to the rear, began by 14 February. Military spokesmen stated that once 50 percent of the tanks and artillery in key units were destroyed, the coalition ground offensive would begin.

While CENTCOM relied heavily on the rest of the Intelligence Community to assess the bomb damage to Iraq's strategic facilities and military infrastructure, it developed its own methodology to assess the damage to Iraq's ground forces. The CENTCOM daily assessment listed the number of tanks and artillery pieces destroyed in each division as a percentage of the overall inventory in each unit. To determine what was destroyed, CENTCOM initially relied heavily on reports from the pilots themselves in their A-10 attack aircraft and reports from missions flown by F-111 aircraft equipped with video and infrared cameras.

CENTCOM needed to use pilot reports to provide the immediate BDAs necessary for mission planning. Using this methodology, CENTCOM assessed that the RG mechanized division lost 32 percent of its

tanks and artillery by 1 February in the initial air attacks. By 12 February, the division was assessed as having lost 57 percent of its tanks and artillery.

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While high-resolution satellite imagery could not reveal all damage to tanks, OIA believed it was more reliable than pilot reports.

Conflicting Assessments

The difference between the OIA assessment and the initial CENTCOM assessment was striking. For example, while CENTCOM counted 151 tanks in the mechanized division destroyed by 5 February, OIA could detect only five. OIA coordinated its analysis with DIA, which agreed with the CIA assessment, and the results were published in a *National Intelligence Daily* (NID) article on 9 February. OIA also sent a draft of the NID to CENTCOM, and queried the accuracy of CENTCOM's methodology.

Meanwhile, CENTCOM was doing its own reassessment of bomb damage to the RG mechanized division. It used high-quality U-2 photography which took several days to process and thus was not useful for rapid BDA. As a result, it reduced the damage assessment of the division from 57 to 26 percent of its tanks and artillery destroyed. This drastic reduction led CENTCOM to the realization that the A-10 and F-111 damage reports needed to be adjusted. It began to credit only one-third of A-10 reports and one-half of the F-111 reports, resulting in much lower subsequent damage assessments.

Nevertheless, as the bombing shifted to the two RG armored divisions, the difference between the damage assessments done in Washington by OIA and those done in the field by CENTCOM continued to widen. By 12 February, the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), Judge Webster, and the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence (DDCI), Richard Kerr, had become concerned with the growing differences in the CIA and CENTCOM damage assessments to the RG units. The DCI authorized a

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which highlighted the different CIA and CENTCOM methodologies and damage assessments. He asked, however, that CENTCOM be sent a draft of the article so the field could comment on the difference.

The response was sent by flash priority to the DCI on 21 February by the CENTCOM J2 at General Schwarzkopf's direction. It stated that "continued reassessments and less reliance on mission reports," along with "better targeting as a result of high-resolution imagery from theater assets leads us to the judgment that we may well have been substantially understating our BDA numbers since 14 February." It added that "extremely conservative figures (b)(1) do not provide a realistic basis for doing this." In other words, CENTCOM stood by its own BDA.

The DCI approved (b)(1) article and decided to brief the President and National Security Council personally. He did this on 21 and 22 February, respectively. Unfortunately, the different CIA and CENTCOM assessments were leaked to the press, bringing the issue to national attention.

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In terms of the conflict itself, the BDA dispute was irrelevant, because the coalition ground offensive was launched on schedule on 24 February, and the Iraqi ground forces were quickly defeated. The dispute, however, raised considerable controversy about whose BDA was more accurate.

Comparing Methodologies

Before addressing this controversy, some facts need to be established. By 24 February, at the beginning of the coalition ground assault, CENTCOM's assessment was that 425 tanks in the three RG divisions had been destroyed, 43 percent of the prewar total. The OIA assessment of 23 February was that only 145 tanks had been destroyed, about 19 percent of the prewar total.

Shortly after the cease-fire, on 1 March, a U-2 aircraft took high-quality photography of the battlefield. OIA used this photography to count the tanks in the RG units that had redeployed to face the US ground attack, and those that escaped to areas just north of

the cease-fire line. It also counted the RG tanks remaining in the revetments they had occupied before the 24 February ground offensive. The assumption was that tanks left in revetments were destroyed or otherwise became inoperable during the air attacks, and the rest left south of the cease-fire were victims of the ground offensive.

The study yielded a count of 166 tanks destroyed by the air attacks. This represented only 21 percent of the force, compared to CENTCOM's estimate of 43 percent. The OIA study also indicated that an additional 29 percent of the RG's tanks were destroyed or abandoned during the ground offensive. Thus, nearly half of the RG tank force remained intact at the end of the conflict.

DoD Reaction

Despite the OIA study, the BDA episode produced a strong negative reaction within the US military. An initial DoD draft report on *Lessons from Intelligence Support During the Gulf War*, dated November 1991, asserted that the "Bomb Damage Assessment produced by CENTCOM tended to be more useful and accurate to the CINCENT" than CIA information from national intelligence sources. It argued that CIA's independent assessments were less accurate than those produced by DoD, and that in wartime, "such assessments must be an integral part of the overall DoD effort." It concluded that the accuracy of CENTCOM's BDA methodology was confirmed by "the rapid defeat of division after division in the ground phase of Operation Desert Storm."

The rapid defeat of Iraqi units during the coalition ground offensive, however, did not confirm the accuracy of either BDA methodology. There is no doubt that the bombing destroyed at least 20 percent of the RG's tanks and contributed to the loss of Iraqi morale and will to fight. It helped to isolate many units, cut them off from communications and

resupply, and left them broken and ready to accept Saddam Hussein's initial phoney cease-fire. But it did not decimate the Iraqi tank force. CIA challenged the draft DoD report, and later drafts dropped the strong language about the inaccuracy of CIA's analysis. Nevertheless, an unfortunate consequence of the BDA controversy was a lingering misperception of the facts behind the issue.

Looking Ahead

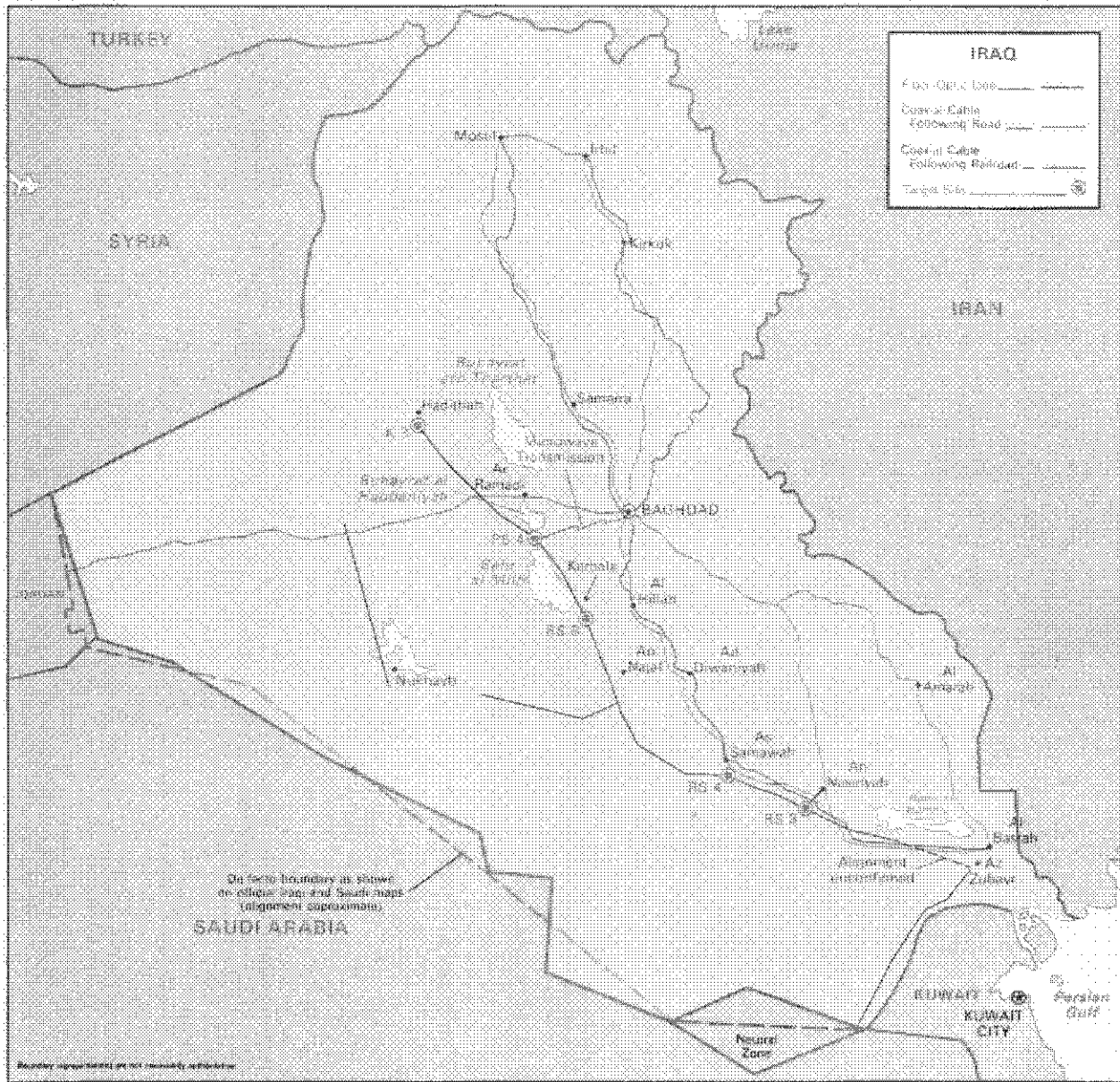
Fortunately, the controversy is now well behind, and the CIA is moving ahead with efforts to provide even better analytic support to the US military in future crisis situations. DCI Robert Gates created a new Office of Military Affairs in early 1992 to act as a focal point for all interaction between CIA and the military. Through its efforts, CIA is providing increased intelligence support and more coordinated assessments.

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In short, CIA's interaction with the US military is now closer than ever, and its analytic expertise is much in demand.

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