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Did the U.S. Teach Iraq To Hide Its Terror Arms?

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By William Scott Malone

AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE that was shared with Saddam Hussein for six years during the Iran-Iraq War may have helped Iraq hide weapons of mass destruction—including most of its secret atomic bomb project—from U.S. forces seeking to destroy the arsenals during the Gulf War.

This possibility has arisen in the aftermath of the recent discoveries in Iraq by United Nations inspectors that Saddam's deadly stockpile was more than 10 times as large as predicted by U.S. intelligence agencies during the Gulf War.

By any analysis, what Operation Desert Storm missed in its Gulf War effort to destroy Saddam's secret arms caches was staggering—more than 819 Scud missiles, a huge cannon almost 100-feet long resting on a mountainside and aimed at Israel, more than 11,000 chemical shells and three uranium enrichment/hydrogen bomb component factories, according to U.N. reports.

"Our failure to cover the Iraqi weapons programs was clearly a significant intelligence failure," former acting CIA operations chief Edward Juchniewicz recently concluded.

The causes of the U.S. miscalculations are not clear. But numerous former intelligence officials and other specialists in interviews expressed concerns that information given to Iraq—including photo-reconnaissance data—as part of the Reagan administration's "tilt" toward Saddam to prevent an Iranian victory in the 1980-88 war could have been used to shelter Saddam's military might during Operation Desert Storm.

On one occasion, Saddam is said to have personally shown one Soviet defense official a U.S. satellite image, according to two former intelligence officials, and asked for help in concealing things from the spy orbiters. The Soviets responded with training in military deception tactics and communications security. According to one of the former officials, the Soviets later provided the United States with some of the details of the techniques just before the Gulf War.

The long-running U.S. "intelligence liaison" with Iraq was the subject of a recent closed-door debate on the

nomination of Robert M. Gates as CIA director.

A majority of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that all intelligence supplied to Iraq was "appropriately sanitized" and thus of little use to Saddam other than helping him in his war with Iran. But not all the senators agreed, and important questions about the scope of the intelligence transfer remain unanswered.

In a report released last week, the panel noted that during the summer of 1986, "CIA staff officers had, on two occasions, shared certain intelligence with the

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Iraqis which, at the time it was provided, may have exceeded the scope of the sharing arrangement which had been authorized."

The problem was taken care of, the report noted, by having the National Security Council (NSC) grant an expanded "authority" three months after the fact, in October, 1986. But this did not keep the Iraqis from scrutinizing the data for minute clues to U.S. intelligence-gathering methods—perhaps so that counter-measures could be designed and implemented.

Generally speaking, it is always a risk when you share intelligence," said Gen. William Odom, director of the super-secret National Security Agency from 1984 to 1987. "When you give people intelligence, however well-sanitized, it is pretty hard to keep the recipient from making certain deductions. And the more you do it, the worse the risk becomes."

"Anytime you give access to photo-reconnaissance," said another former intelligence official and technical consultant, "a good interpreter could devise the countermeasures necessary to counteract the effectiveness of such coverage."

Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.), who opposes Gates' nomination, asserted during the confirmation hearings that "there are still important and unanswered questions about [Gates'] management and supervision of the undisclosed ties between Iraq and the United States."

Gates and acting CIA director Richard Kerr maintained in closed session that a still-secret July 1991 CIA inspector general's report cleared them of any "supervisory negligence" in the program, according to sources.

However, a review of declassified testimony, classified documents, academic studies and interviews with more than 40 former officials

and analysts adds unsettling details to the story of the "intelligence liaison" between the Reagan administration and Baghdad. It also raises questions about whether the Soviet military may have gained insights into U.S. intelligence-gathering methods because Saddam shared some U.S.-supplied intelligence with the Soviets.

And the episode stands as a cautionary tale for U.S. policymakers contemplating the nation's intelligence activities in the post-Cold War era.

Although the Senate committee said the U.S. intelligence "liaison" with Iraq began in 1984, it actually started two years earlier, when Iran began winning the war that Iraq had initiated. It was then that the Reagan administration decided to secretly "tilt" toward the then "terrorist" regime of Saddam Hussein.

"The theory [was] that the enemy of our enemy [was] our friend," said Juchniewicz.

"The basic decision was made March 15, 1982, when Iraq was taken off the [State Department's] terrorist list," recalled former Reagan NSC staff member Howard Teicher. "The political decision was made to help [the Iraqis] help themselves—to show them how they were vulnerable."

Said former NSC staffer Geoffrey Kemp, "I don't recall ever seeing a [particular] piece of paper . . . It was [more of] a hip pocket operation—there was no formal agreement." Kemp recalled that "from time to time we provided intelligence to Iraq of what the Iranians, in a timely manner, were up to."

During the first two years, the intelligence was delivered by CIA operatives through "third countries," namely Jordan and Saudi Arabia, various officials recalled.

Said Kemp: "The tilt was absolutely justified . . . You have to remember the magnitude of the problem in the spring [of] 1982. The Iraqis had suffered stunning reversals on the battlefield. We were terrified" that vulnerable Kuwait was next. "The intelligence sharing was of tactical importance."

In 1983, the Reagan administration publicly launched "Operation Staunch" to stem the in-

ternational flow of weapons to Iran only. In November 1984, President Reagan signed a still-secret National Security Decision Directive (NSDD), calling for direct "intelligence liaison" with Baghdad. The United States reopened its Baghdad embassy and intelligence began to flow.

According to recently convicted Iraqi arms dealer Sarkis Soghanalian, who was in constant touch with Saddam and his generals in the early 1980s, "Sometimes [the intelligence] was good, and sometimes it was bad. The Iraqis felt that they [the U.S.] were playing both ends against the middle." But, Soghanalian recalled, "the Iraqis took whatever they offered."

The intelligence provided to Iraq, Juchniewicz said, "was short range tactical intelligence. Tactical. To keep Tehran out of Baghdad. To neutralize Iran, not to strengthen Iraq. The only thing the U.S. government did was to stop the collapse of Saddam's military. It was perfectly clear to us, and to the Israelis, that Iran was lusting after the Arab Gulf states. We could not allow that to happen."

But the flow of intelligence increased in 1986 to much higher quality data delivered in "almost real-time," (with very little time lag between the event and the intelligence) according to sources. The material included narrative text reports derived from highly-sensitive electronic intercepts and photo-reconnaissance of Iranian targets, according to several former intelligence officials.

The liaison proved remarkably resilient, surviving even the scandal that erupted with disclosure of the Reagan administration's secret arms-for-hostages deals with Iran and the May 1987 Iraqi attack on the U.S. warship Stark that killed 37 sailors. Despite these episodes, U.S. intelligence continued to flow to Baghdad "on a sporadic basis until [July] 1988 when the war between Iraq and Iran ended," according to the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the Gates nomination.

What precisely was provided to Iraq is still highly classified. Whether the material included actual satellite photographs is the subject of some controversy.

According to a retired military intelligence official and consultant familiar with satellite imagery and military matters, the Iraqis'

knowledge of U.S. collection devices employed during the Iran-Iraq war could only have helped the Iraqis during the Gulf war three years later. "By knowing how we go about it, the layering of [satellite] passes—they [probably] were able to work it back so they could employ deception. It gave them an enormous advantage."

After the Iran-Iraq war ended in July 1988, Gates has testified, "our intelligence assets were shifted away." But when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, U.S. spy satellites reappeared over the region. The nature of satellite "orbital parameters" could have easily become clear to the Iraqis, specialists said. "If a physicist in Berkeley with a slide rule can do it, the Iraqis certainly can," said William E. Burrows, author of "Deep Black," a book on satellite espionage.

Part of the worry about the material Iraq obtained relates to whether it was actual imagery from photo-satellites and communications intercepts from eavesdropping apparatus. The more precise the material, the more the Iraqis could glean from it in assessing U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities.

Juchniewicz, who left the CIA before the program was "upgraded" in 1986, said: "I saw one packet and it was all hand-drawn. I think they may have showed them the photos, but they sure wouldn't let them leave with it."

Acting CIA Director Kerr recently testified that the Iraqis were given "some line drawings" and that "imagery was shown."

Former NSC staffer Teicher thinks the question is irrelevant. "What are satellite photos if not computer generated diagrams? You can find out the altitude and figure out the focal length. It's not like they couldn't figure it out once you opened that Pandora's box."

One retired military intelligence official said the Iraqis may have been given an actual overhead photograph, although it was somewhat "sanitized." "I've heard that [the photograph] got down to vehicular size—2 meters to 1.5 meters resolution."

A CIA spokesman said the agency does not comment about U.S. intelligence-sharing arrangements. A White House spokesman declined to comment; an NSA spokesman said there would be "no comment" about the Iraq liaison program.

Soghanalian said recently he is certain that

the United States supplied photographs. "They provided satellite photographs, not [just] diagrams."

"If somebody gave them actual photos they should be prosecuted," said Juchniewicz.

Some specialists have raised the possibility that Saddam shared his U.S. intelligence with his major arms benefactor, the Soviet Union. This could have benefited Soviet intelligence agencies in the years before the country was overtaken by internal crisis. The Soviets may have aided the Iraqis in finding ways to thwart U.S. espionage collection by analyzing the U.S. data.

"It is only reasonable to conclude, given the level of cooperation between Iraqis and Soviets, that they were privy to what Saddam knew, particularly [U.S.] intelligence," said former Pentagon official Frank Gaffney.

Even more sensitive than satellite reconnaissance is signals intelligence (sigint), interception and decryption of electronic signals and communications, the purview of NSA.

Juchniewicz said that until mid-1986, U.S. intelligence reports that went to the Iraqis usually contained "general numbers of tanks and troops, order of battle scenarios."

But after the liaison upgrade that summer, one source said, "the words [that] went with the diagrams" were a major improvement for the Iraqis. "The extent to which there was information on unit designations . . . They could see how radio silence and land [telephone] lines worked; they could see the raw product and how it contrasted with what they received from their own intelligence."

"I do know they later received information derived from intercepts," said Teicher. "And then they buried their land lines." Underground lines are much harder to eavesdrop on than radio or landlines. Saddam even laid high-tech European-made fiber optic lines to all major commands, making them virtually surveillance-proof.

Said Neil Livingstone, a terrorism consultant, "The U.S. missed virtually every key element of the Iraqi special weapons and weapons of mass destruction—much of the nuclear program, underestimated the count of the Scuds, and more importantly, the number of launchers. We missed a lot of targets."