Captured Documents:

What We Now Know about Saddam's Iraq

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Brief Analysis

On September 20, 2010, David Palkki, Kevin Woods, and Amatzia Baram addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Dr. Palkki is deputy director of National Defense University's Conflict Records Research Center, an archive of captured documents and audio files related to the Saddam regime in Iraq, among other items. Colonel Woods, who retired from the U.S. Army in 2004, serves on the research staff of the Institute for Defense Analyses, where he is task leader of the Iraqi Perspectives Project. Dr. Baram is professor emeritus of Middle East history and director of the Center for Iraq Studies at the University of Haifa in Israel, as well as the Goldman chair visiting professor at Georgetown University. The speakers offered insights spurred by materials captured following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

David Palkki

Saddam Hussein's decision not to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) during the 1991 Gulf War has generated much speculation concerning his rationale. Of the three prevalent hypotheses, the first and most generally accepted is that the threat of U.S. nuclear retaliation, issued in early January 1991 by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, persuaded Baghdad that the costs of WMD use would outweigh the military benefits. The second is that Saddam feared Washington would change its wartime goals to focus on regime change if Iraq launched a chemical or biological attack. The third is that technical difficulties, U.S. airpower, or other factors precluded the use of WMD even if Saddam had desired to use them. Yet documents and audio recordings captured since the war show that these three explanations, even taken together, do not fully account for Baghdad's decision.

Regarding the first hypothesis, Baghdad considered a U.S. nuclear strike to be within the realm of possibility even if Iraqi forces did not use WMD, and the regime prepared accordingly. During a meeting with the president of Yemen, Saddam claimed that Iraq was ready to withstand a nuclear attack, referring to civil defense measures rehearsed in the run-up to the Gulf War (e.g., evacuating sections of Baghdad), military measures such as dispersing the Republican Guard, and studies on the effects of nuclear strikes. This was not simply prudent contingency planning -- Saddam truly believed that the United States might use nuclear weapons in response to the invasion of Kuwait.

The threat of regime change likewise had a smaller effect than some contend. Saddam believed that toppling his government had been Washington's ultimate goal since the late 1970s, and many State Department officials serving in Baghdad during the decade leading up to the Gulf War held the same view. In the words of former ambassador April Glaspie, "For over twenty years, Saddam believed that the United States was irredeemably hostile to [his] government. It is very hard to persuade somebody of anything if they think you are irredeemably hostile."

The "technical difficulties" hypothesis lacks credibility as well, at least as a comprehensive explanation. During a January 1991 meeting, Iraqi WMD head Hussein Kamel told Saddam that all chemical and biological weapons were ready for use. And the regime's successful use of Scud missiles against Israel and Saudi Arabia showed that Saddam had the means to deliver WMD if necessary.

In short, deterrence succeeded during the Gulf War, but it stemmed from a variety of factors, not just one single policy. More important, this deterrent effect would not have been guaranteed if Iraq had acquired nuclear weapons -- in Saddam's view, such weapons would have enabled him to pursue a more aggressive regional policy, especially against Israel.

Kevin Woods

Documents captured following the invasion provide unique insights into the functioning of totalitarian regimes. In particular, they show that Saddam was a genius at managing Iraq's internal affairs. He was able to maintain control during a period marked by violence and instability and against fantastic odds -- an accomplishment made possible by his deft use of internal security services and effective manipulation of those around him.

One telling example is Saddam's criteria for selecting the commander of the Special Republican Guard. This unit, designed to protect the regime against internal threats, represented the most highly trained, best equipped, and most loyal element of the Iraqi military. Common sense would seem to dictate choosing an outstanding officer to lead this unit. Yet postinvasion interviews with senior Iraqi military leaders indicate that those who filled the post were selected for three reasons: nepotism, stupidity, and cowardice. Promoting weak leaders to important positions allowed Saddam to remain safely ensconced in power.

Indeed, much of what made Saddam such an effective dictator was his ability to manipulate senior leadership and preclude the formation of alternate power centers. High-ranking officers were actively discouraged from communicating with each other or even coordinating on military matters, and all units had designated informers who reported to Saddam on internal developments.

At the same time, Saddam was incompetent at conducting Iraq's external affairs, largely because his successful domestic survival strategies failed when applied to foreign and defense policies. For example, he insisted that his intelligence services provide him only with raw information, and not analysis. In other words, he was his own analyst, which frequently resulted in shocking misunderstandings of U.S. or Iranian policies and objectives. He also required absolute obedience from his decisionmaking council, which made advisors wary of giving him sound advice. As former Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz stated, "It didn't pay to be too popular or smart around Saddam."

Amatzia Baram

Captured materials have provided several invaluable insights into Saddam's decisionmaking style, often enhancing what we already knew or suspected. First, his advisors believed that the key to survival was to never give him bad news or speak the truth. As a result, there was little open discussion or debate on key issues or decisions, and Saddam often acted unilaterally. For example, he did not inform his leadership council of the decision to invade Kuwait until four hours before Iraqi troops crossed the border.

Partly as a result of this insularity, Saddam's rule was marked by an inability to recognize basic facts of life relating to world affairs. His perceptions of Iraq's power were often wildly off the mark -- on the eve of the Gulf War, he was confident that his forces could fight the United States to a standstill in Kuwait and produce a favorable ceasefire agreement. This, coupled with his steadfast belief that American aversion to casualties would lead to an early pullout, directly contributed to his decision to invade Kuwait. In short, his lack of substantive contact with the outside world, one-way relationship with his inner circle, and reliance on his own analytical resources to understand world affairs left him in a realm somewhere between reality and imagination.

Saddam-era documents and insights may also hold implications for contemporary Iraq. For example, his decision to pursue WMD development was in part intended to show military officers that he was in charge, thereby cementing civilian control over the armed forces. Iraq's current civilian leadership may likewise feel compelled to engage in posturing or take various steps to ensure their continued control over the military. Finally, and unfortunately, the

culture of corruption that pervaded Saddam's regime remains a problem in the current government.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Samuel Cutler. ❖

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