

Terrorism and the Strategic Logic of Saddam Hussein

Tony Boyles
Georgia Institute of Technology
INTA 6103: International Security
Dr. Lawrence Rubin
Spring 2011

In the wake of the 2003 fall of the Iraqi government, the U.S. military collected thousands of pages of policy memoranda, letters, lists, and other materials concerning the internal affairs of the Saddam regime. The National Defense University has overseen the translation of these materials, and created the Harmony database, which stores this rich resource of original Iraqi documents. A selection of these has been released to the public in a redacted five-volume compendium¹. Amongst those released were a number of documents candidly discussing Iraqi involvement in terrorist activities. These documents reveal some surprising information about the Iraqi government's² international activities. Contrary to the Bush Administration's assertion, Iraq was not providing financial or logistical support to al Qaeda. Instead, the documents indicate that the Iraqi government funded its own "commando force," called the Fedayeen Saddam, to perform bombings, suicide bombings, targeted killings, and liaise with other organizations with similar strategic goals.

What these documents do not tell us is the strategic logic that led the Iraqi government to order such terrorist attacks. The documents are less informative about the motivations for the attacks than about the outcomes thereof. Many of these are technical in nature—extended discussions about the construction of bombs and suicide vests, and explanations for their periodic failures.

¹ Woods, Kevin M. "Primary Source Materials for Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Iraqi Documents". Institute for Defense Analysis Paper P-4287. November 2007

² The relationship between any chief executive's agenda and the actions of the government over which s/he presides can be difficult to define. That said, Saddam Hussein's control over his government was sufficiently severe to prompt the Iraq Survey Group to claim, "Saddam Husayn so dominated the Iraqi Regime that its strategic intent was his alone." (Iraq Survey Group "Key Findings of the Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD", September 30, 2004. http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iraq/isg_key.pdf) As such, the two terms should be considered interchangeable in the text of this document.

Other sources offer some clues about Saddam's thinking³. For example, a team from the Institute for Defense Analysis conducted extensive interviews with Lieutenant General Ra'ad Hamdani of the Republican Guard, who provided insights into Saddam's behavior, garnered from a career of close affiliation with the leader. Hamdani categorizes the evolution of Saddam's personality, both as a person and a leader, into three time periods: prior to the invasion of Kuwait, after the invasion of Kuwait, and after the defection of Hussein Kamel.

This paper investigates the Iraqi government behavior with regard to terrorism in historical context. It is organized into three primary sections, following Hamdani's temporal demarcations. The next section addresses Saddam's terrorist activities prior to the invasion of Kuwait. The following sections investigate reports of terrorist activities after the invasion, and after the defection of Hussein Kamel. A final section concludes.

Prior to 1991

Saddam Hussein was born on April 28th, 1937 into a peasant shepherd family in rural Iraq. Saddam lived intermittently with his uncle Kharallah Tulfah in Baghdad. In 1941 Tulfah was arrested for participating in the Rashid Ali uprising against the British rule. Tulfah carried immense bitterness toward the British, a sentiment he purportedly imparted upon the young Saddam.⁴

In 1957, Saddam joined the Ba'th Party in support of rebellion against the monarchy. His connections in the party led him to participate in an assassination attempt on the sitting President Abd al-Karim Qasim. However daring, the attempt failed and Saddam fled to Cairo to avoid

³ See Woods, Kevin M., Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday. *Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq war*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2009.

⁴ Cleveland, William L., and Martin Bunton. *A history of the modern Middle East*. 4th ed. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2004.

arrest. He remained there until 1963, when the Ba’th party briefly seized power. The Ba’thist government did not survive, and Saddam was imprisoned. After two years of his incarceration, Saddam escaped and resumed his activities in support of the Ba’th party. These years of his incarceration and the time following as a Party organizer were highly influential to Saddam’s thinking—because the Ba’th party was outlawed, Saddam grew suspicious, at times bordering on paranoid.⁵

Saddam held an association with a higher-up in the Party named Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, a distant relative also from Tikrit. When the Ba’th again overthrew the government in 1968, al-Bakr took the helm as President, with Saddam not far behind in the government hierarchy. Saddam leveraged his new-found clout to make extensive connections within the government, including consolidating power within the police and intelligence services. In 1976, al-Bakr promoted Saddam to the rank of general in the Iraqi military, effectively solidifying Saddam’s claim to succession, though al-Bakr retained the title of President until 1979.⁶

In 1979, a popular revolution in Iran overthrew the ruling Shah. The majority Shi’a population of Iran supported the new government to the chagrin of the Sunni and newly President Saddam. The ruling Ayatollah Khomeini openly advocated the violent overthrow of Saddam’s government by Iraqi Shi’a, prompting Saddam to nullify the existing peace agreement between the two nations. Five days later, the Iraqi military invaded Iran. The war which followed was long and brutal, shifting from rapid Iraqi progress initially to an Iranian advance, yielding a war which was predominantly fought in Iraq. The bitterness and length of the war intensified Saddam’s long-standing hatred for Iran, a major factor in his later decision to order terrorist attacks within Iran’s borders.

⁵ Cleveland and Bunton. *A History of the Modern Middle East*

⁶ Cleveland and Bunton. *A History of the Modern Middle East*

Iran, however, was not the sole malefactor in Saddam's decision. Even before Operation Desert Shield was announced, Saddam had expressed a distinct intent to respond to the U.S. using asymmetric tactics. For example, this text is the translated transcription of a video of a meeting between Saddam and Yassar Arafat, on April 19, 1990 (emphasis added):

[...] if America strikes us, we will hit back. We said that before, you know us, we are not that talkative type of people that holds the microphone to say things only, we do what we say. Maybe we cannot reach Washington but we can send someone who has explosive belt to reach Washington. Our missiles do not reach America, but I swear if it does! I would strike it. We can't keep silent like this, while the Americans are hitting Arabs or Iraqis and say we can do nothing, yes we can, we can send a lot people to Washington just like the old days, for instance; **the person with explosives' belt around him would throw himself on [George H.W.] Bush's car.** However, the American Bases, which are all over the world, in Turkey...etc, we can sweep them. We have to be ready for that level.⁷

Given Saddam's conspicuous failure to assassinate President George H. W. Bush, following the U.S. invasion in Operation Desert Storm, it seems that Saddam was not, in fact, "ready for that level."

The First Gulf War

In August of 1990, Saddam ordered the invasion of Kuwait, claiming sovereignty over Kuwait as the 19th Province of Iraq. The United States responded in support of Kuwait by launching Operation Desert Storm, in a prepared contingency operation of the defensive Operation Desert Shield, protecting Saudi Arabia from Iraqi aggression. The U.S. intervention

⁷ Harmony: ISGQ-2003-M0006248

led to Iraq's sound defeat, though not regime change. This was not for want of trying, however. Revolts amidst the Shi'a population spread across 14 of Iraq's provinces, fueled by disenchantment with the solid decade of warfare which had preceded them.

General Hamdani of Saddam's Republic Guard reflects upon these revolts as a major turning point in Saddam's personality. As a younger man, Saddam was "violent and strong," seeking recognition not just as the Iraqi president but as an Arab leader. He had believed he possessed the full support of the Iraqi people in his actions. The revolts signaled to Saddam that the people were not in lock-step support behind him, but untrusting and disrespectful of Saddam's authority. Hamdani describes Saddam's response as a turn toward contemptuousness.⁸

Between these two events (The Gulf War and the Shi'a Revolt), Saddam realized his trust could not be invested either domestically or internationally. As such, Saddam's decided to resort to terrorist tactics, instead of merely discussing the possibility, as he did previously. An Iraqi intelligence brief on the problems bombing attempts have encountered because of faulty timing mechanisms confirms this, opening with the statement: "When the First Gulf War broke out, a committee was held to carry out commando operations. This committee, equipped with explosive devices, aimed to attack some hostile targets throughout the world."⁹

The file goes on to conduct technical discussions about the construction of bomb timers, their origin, and possible reasons for their failures. The stated rationale for this discussion is, "Having a file for failed missions to review and study the file to benefit from it in setting future plans to avoid such failures later." The substantively interesting content of the report, however, is the anecdotal descriptions of the attempted attacks.

⁸ Woods. *Saddam's War*.

⁹ Harmony: CMPC-2003-00015083

The first attacks receive these texts: “1 explosive device was used by Directorate 4 to destroy the residence of the American ambassador in Jakarta, but the device did not work and the reasons are unknown.” “An explosive device exploded prematurely, led to death of a first lieutenant, injured an employee belonging to the service, and destroyed the front side of the American Airlines office (the target) in the Philippines.” The events are not dated, and the material in the report spans the dates June 3rd, 1992 and May 10th, 1994. The events must have preceded the compilation of the report, so a search for external records regarding the event can be restricted to prior dates. The best-matching story comes from this excerpt from the *Toronto Star* in January of 1991:

On Monday, police in the Philippines accused the Iraqi embassy of involvement in the bomb blast and ordered the embassy's first secretary to leave the country. Saturday's bombing, in which an Iraqi citizen blew himself up while trying to set the timing device on a 90-kilogram (200-pound) bomb, was the second attack on an American target in Asia since the gulf war erupted. Earlier in the week, police in Indonesia found and defused a bomb outside the home of the U.S. ambassador in Jakarta.¹⁰

This excerpt provides several corroborating details: the faulty timing device, the (failed) attempt on the ambassador in Jakarta. It does not offer any specificity as to why the U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia. The ambassador at the time, John Cameron Monjo¹¹, does not seem to have any record of public criticism of Iraq or Saddam. It is thus doubtful that the attack was personally motivated. Instead, the first U.S. airstrikes on Iraqi forces occurred on January 17th, a single day prior to the attempted bombing. Given this timing, it seems the ambassador and American

¹⁰ Goodspeed, Peter. "Asian Nations Brace for Terrorist Attacks." *The Toronto Star*, January 23, 1991, sec. A.

¹¹ McAllister, Bill, and Paula Yost. "Faint Praise for Bush's Political Appointees; In Certifying Ambassadorial Nominees, State Dept. Has Kinder Words About Career Officers." *The Washington Post*, June 27, 1989, A21.

Airlines were simply the unfortunate targets of a terrorist assault on whatever (symbolically) American target was available, given the assets Saddam already had in place.

Suicide terrorism is effective to coerce liberal democracies into making territorial concessions¹². It makes sense, therefore, that Saddam should implement a policy of suicide terrorism against Western targets in the specter and thick of the First Gulf War in an attempt to win the territory of Kuwait. The terrorist activities did not stop, however, at the conclusion of the war. In a memo dated March 31st, 1993, the Iraqi Intelligence Service reported a telling list of Iraqi associations with other terrorist groups worldwide. The groups include such noteworthy names as Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Front, though al Qaeda is conspicuously absent. The document moves on to list some tactical goals and procedures to achieve them. Most chillingly, it notes that, “Disturbing the Egyptian regime and its alliance with America should be the target that produces easy results.”¹³ Again, however, we find little indication that Saddam carried out any successful attacks in furtherance of this goal.

When making the connection between the pre-2003 Iraqi Government and confirmed terrorist activities, it is important to be clear about the demarcation of the activities themselves. The absence of al Qaeda on the aforementioned list is not the only nonappearance of Iraq’s connection with the group, given the opportunity to express a connection. In short, there is *no* evidence that the Iraqi government was involved with al Qaeda.

The Defection of Hussein Kamel (1995)

Since the Shi’a revolts of 1990, Saddam had become increasingly suspicious of his people, his government, and the world at large. This left only his family on whom he could rely.

¹² Pape, Robert. “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism”. *American Political Science Review* Vol. 97, No. 3. August 2003.

¹³ Harmony: ISGP-2003-00300189

His sons, Uday and Qusay, held prominent positions in the government, as did the husbands of his daughters. In particular, the spouse of Saddam's oldest daughter, Hussein Kamel al-Majid, headed the military industrial commission. This body oversaw the projects supporting Saddam's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Kamel, however, defected to Jordan late in 1995, bringing his family with him. While in exile, Kamel confirmed the nonexistence of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (a testimony which would be used in opposition of the George W. Bush administration's claim to the contrary).

This defection triggered the final change in Saddam's personality, signaling to him that even his own family could not be trusted. His distrust was patently evident in his response to the incident: he coerced Kamel and family to return to Iraq, promising no repercussions. When they arrived, he forced his daughter to divorce Kamel and had Kamel summarily killed. Without his family on whom he could rely, according to Hamdani, Saddam retreated into himself, becoming more despondent, introspective, and religious. This did not, however, diminish his propensity to commit terrorist violence.

Even in the wake of 1995, records suggest Saddam carried on recruiting potential operatives for his commando activities. For example, one record recounts the arguments of a widow of one such operative demanding dispersal of her husband's pension.

The request came about because her husband died when he carried out a suicide mission on 19 July 2000, and exploded Ibn Sina Hotel during the presence of US, UK citizens and officials from Iraqi opposition parties. The mission was assigned to him by an order from the General Command of Fedayeen Saddam. The letter is also enclosed with a report, in which his wife mentioned the most important missions that he carried out.

The report goes on to list an imposing laundry list of terrorist activities, the makings of an impressive resume for a professional terrorist. This report (as with all these documents), however, is not without its dubious qualities. An independent confirmation of the July 19 attack could not be made as there is no matching record fitting the profile of the attack in either the Global Terrorism Database¹⁴ or LexisNexis.

This is not to suggest, however, that no terrorist actions actually took place. On the contrary—it seems that the intensity with which the terrorist elements of the Iraqi government addressed their missions increased. One document lists the names, ranks, years of birth, and educational levels of nine volunteers for suicide bombing missions. The fact that the government would produce a document, albeit a classified one, entitled “Volunteering for Suicide Bombings' Operations' Form”¹⁵ betrays a startlingly cavalier and routine attitude toward the process.

Conclusion: The Mind of Saddam Hussein

General Hamdani's three stages of Saddam's personality are a fair reflection on the evolution of his idea to use terrorist tactics strategically. The first stage preceded any terrorist action; it is merely a portrait of Saddam as a young man. A young man who was taught from an early age to despise Western authority. A young man who joined a radical political party and took part in a risky attempt to assassinate the sitting president of Iraq. Early in Saddam's biography, we see the seeds of terrorist techniques sewn into the dictator's mind.

The changes Saddam underwent at the onset of the U.S. invasion and Shi'a revolt turned the concept of asymmetric warfare as policy into a reality for Saddam. It is entirely conceivable

¹⁴ University of Maryland. “Global Terrorism Database”. <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

¹⁵ Harmony: CMPC-2003-011229

at this point that Saddam Hussein simply wished ill of a great many people and powers in the world, and desired a network of potential terrorists to provide an outlet for that frustration. As Saddam purportedly said of himself to American forces, “When I get something into my head I act. That's just the way I am.”¹⁶

¹⁶ The Economist. "Saddam Hussein: The blundering dictator." The Economist. <http://economist.com/node/84926>