

# An Intelligence Failure?

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**M**any months have passed since the conclusion of the war in Iraq, and despite intensive searching, no evidence of the existence of surface-to-surface missiles (SSM) or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, prohibited by resolutions of the UN, has been found. Likewise, no convincing evidence has been uncovered that projects to develop and produce such weapons were resumed after the suspension of UN inspections in 1998. The findings that have been revealed thus far are as follows:

■ Only two items have been found that are linked or may be linked to WMD projects: a) Vehicles that serve as mobile laboratories: according to an American intelligence human intelligence (HUMINT) source, these laboratories were intended to be used to produce biological warfare agents; b) Centrifuge components for uranium enrichment and related documents, which were buried in the yard of the official who was in charge of the centrifuge-based enrichment program until the Gulf War in 1991. These two items are problematic as evidence. Regarding the mobile laboratory vehicles, there is a dispute among technical experts if they were in fact suitable for producing biological weapons. As for the centrifuge components and the documents, they were buried underground in 1991 and had not been unearthed since.

■ In order to increase the chances of locating the weapons programs, the United States brought a team of 1200 experts to Iraq three months ago, led by weapons inspector David Kay. In late September, after three months of work, the team, which is supposed to work in Iraq for a period of six months, published an interim report. According to the report, the team was unable to locate weapons of mass destruction and had also not found any active programs for the development and production of such weapons. Indications were found that the Iraqis intended to preserve their capability to develop WMD in the future, including the fact that they maintained the biological research capabilities and strains of bacteria that could serve as the basis for future development and production of biological weapons. Another indication lay in the initial contacts with North Korea regarding the possibility of assistance in developing long-range missiles.

The picture that emerges from the findings discovered until now is that limited equipment and documents were hidden in 1991-1992 (when the nuclear and chemical programs were uncovered) and in 1995 (when the biological program came to light after the defection of Saddam Hussein's son-in-law Kamel to Jordan), and that they have not been used since. It appears that the Iraqi regime was satisfied with taking steps to preserve its capability of renewing these projects in the future. Other documents and pieces of equipment may possibly be found in the future, but it cannot be assumed that additional findings would be numerous and sensational. After all, in mid-2003 the United States offered generous cash rewards and safe haven outside of Iraq for anyone submitting related information. If no one has taken advantage of this offer yet, it is safe to assume that no large-scale concealment of equipment took place.

The prevailing supposition over the past decade was that despite the discoveries made by the UN supervisory commissions, Iraq had managed to hide operational equipment, such as surface-to-surface missiles, shells, and warheads loaded with biological and chemical warfare agents. However, all the searches carried out have failed to turn up evidence of the existence of such weapons. It can also be concluded that because weapons of this type are much bulkier and heavier than documents and small items related to projects, it would have been necessary in hiding them to involve a significant

number of people. This suggests, therefore, that no operational weapons were hidden, or that if they were hidden, the concealment was on a much smaller scale.

The emergent picture has thus sparked demands within the United States and Britain to establish commissions of inquiry to investigate the performance of intelligence bodies in the context of the Iraq War. Moreover, a critical question to be

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answered is whether governmental bodies falsely manipulated the intelligence information in order to gain support for their decision to go to war in Iraq, while the real reasons for this decision were obfuscated or concealed. Those demanding the inquiry contend that there are two basic issues that justify such a step: the need to assess the reliability and competence of the intelligence services, and the fact that sending a country to war based on false pretenses constitutes serious injury to the democratic process.

In the questioning of the picture painted by coalition intelligence, the

third party in this intelligence failure, Israel, has remained in the shadows. And yet, Israeli intelligence was a full partner to the picture presented by American and British intelligence regarding Iraq's non-conventional capabilities. In addition to an exaggerated assessment of Iraqi capabilities, it was also assessed that the Iraqis were apt to use these capabilities against Israel. In actuality, of course, Israel was not attacked, either because Iraq did not have the capability or because it had no intention of doing so.

Israel has no reason to regret the outcome of the war in Iraq. Saddam's regime was hostile to Israel, it supported Palestinian terrorism, and there was reason to believe that it would resume developing and producing surface-to-surface missiles and weapons of mass destruction when able. However, regardless of the outcome of the war, there is still a need to examine the functioning of intelligence bodies, their dialogue with political and operational echelons, and the possibility that the intelligence picture was manipulated. The same reasoning presented by those demanding commissions of inquiry in America and Britain applies in Israel as well.

In addition, the intelligence assessments prior to the war exacted a price. The assumption that creating an inflated, overly-severe intelligence picture relative to the actual situation does not cost anything is groundless. The saying "difficult training makes easy battle" – meaning that preparation for the worst possible scenario makes

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unfolding events better, and even if an easy situation turns out to be more mild – is not necessarily applicable in this case. An exaggerated assessment of the threat involves costs that must be weighed against the danger itself. The costs that we can identify in the present case are as follows:

■ *Damaging public trust in those appraising the situation and in the decision-makers* – Soon after the beginning of the war in Iraq, it became evident that the Israeli public lost its faith in the analysts and the decision-makers, and ignored their instructions.

■ *Financial cost* – While there are no accurate figures on this subject, the picture emerging is that prior to the war in Iraq, the defense establishment spent a great deal of money on addressing threats that were either non-existent or highly unlikely.

■ *Damaging international relations* – Foreign intelligence services might stop trusting intelligence received from Israel, and foreign countries might suspect that Israel is giving them false intelligence in order to influence their political positions. Indeed, in the past Israel has been

accused of disseminating false information that serves its own interests. Such suspicions, for example, could harm Israel's efforts to convince others that the intelligence on Iran's nuclear project is solid, despite the fact that the case of Iran is different from that of Iraq in that Israel's assessments in this regard are based on good, solid information.

■ *Psychological costs* – The tendency to panic that spread among some parts of the population, especially before the war and in preparations for the war, took its toll by reducing the public's fortitude.

■ *Projecting an image of weakness and vulnerability* – Israel's potential enemies might conclude in retrospect that if Israel was so frightened by what was apparently such a negligible threat, it clearly has good reason to be.

### Assessment of Iraq's Capabilities

On the eve of the war, Israeli intelligence on Iraqi capabilities resembled its counterparts in the United States and other Western countries. It had not received any information regarding weapons of mass destruction and surface-to-surface missiles for nearly eight years, since the defection of Kamel Hussein led to the discovery of the Iraqi biological program, other than the informed suspicion that Iraq was deceiving the international community regarding its program for developing longer range Sumud surface-to-surface missiles in claiming that they were permitted by UN resolutions.

The intelligence community had to choose between two alternative assessments. The first was that Iraq still had SSM and WMD capability and continued to maintain related projects, but had succeeded very adeptly at concealing them, and therefore the intelligence-gathering means of Israel and the Western world were unable to uncover them. The second explanation was that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN inspection commission (UNSCOM) succeeded through great efforts in disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction and long-range ballistic missiles, as well as preventing the resumption of their development and Iraq's armament until 1998. After supervision by these bodies was halted in that year, Iraq decided not to renew its activity in these areas, at least at that time, out of fear of the response of the United States and the international community were such activity to be revealed. Israeli intelligence adopted the first explanation without any signs of doubt regarding its validity.

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The unequivocal adoption of this strict explanation stemmed from the following factors:

■ *A dogmatic conception based on one-dimensional images of the enemy.* A one-dimensional perception of Saddam Hussein pervaded the intelligence bodies. At the heart of this perception lay the colorful portrait of an embodiment of evil, a man possessed by a compulsion to develop weapons of mass destruction in order to strike Israel and others, regardless of additional considerations. Thus, read the script, Saddam could not possibly have decided to give up these capabilities, even only temporarily. And yet, Israeli intelligence completely disregarded the complexity of the considerations of a leader like Saddam Hussein. While it is true that Saddam invested great resources in WMD capabilities until the 1991 Gulf War, since his defeat he has been engaged in a battle for survival. It was therefore reasonable to assume that survival was his number one objective and motivation. This assumption should have led to the realization that after 1991, activities in the realm of weapons of mass destruction became a factor that threatened his survival rather than ensured it. If immediately following the Gulf War he incorrectly thought he could conceal his activities in these areas, the developments of 1991-1995 proved to him that he was mistaken.

In response to this position, it has been argued that if this was in fact Saddam's approach, why did he not disclose everything to the UN inspection commission, UNMOVIC,

which was operating prior to the 2003 war? And why did he not do everything possible to convince Western governments that he was "clean," retaining no weapons of mass destruction? The answer is that from Saddam Hussein's perspective, he *did* do everything to respond to every whim of UNMOVIC, but to no avail, since the real aim of the United States was regime change and not Iraq's disarmament of weapons of mass

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destruction. The one area in which Saddam perhaps consciously refrained from full disclosure related to preserving the capability to renew WMD and SSM programs in the future, and therefore the Iraqis were unwilling to produce lists of their suppliers and other similar information.

The fact that this conception was not challenged, even though it should have been, is proof of problems in intelligence assessment methods that fail to enable critical examination, based on logical tools, of standard conceptions. Thus, sufficient systematic examination of standard

conceptions, through searching for contrary facts that may refute them, was not carried out, despite the establishment of bodies in Military Intelligence such as the "Control Department," which is supposed to serve as a devil's advocate. In reality, Control generally prefers to examine whether there is reason to cast an assessment as more severe, rather than if the assessment is overblown.

■ *Excessive intelligence anxiety.* The roots of this phenomenon date back to 1973. The intelligence failure on the eve of the Yom Kippur War resulted in the warning pendulum swinging to the opposite extreme: complete and uncritical adoption of the worst possible scenario. Three decades have passed since then, and the pendulum still has not swung back to a balanced position. A culture evolved in Israel of assigning culpability and punishing those responsible as a primary purpose in assessing events, and this culture may play a role in the continuing prevalence of uncritically adopting the most dire predictions. The Israeli media is a central player and an enthusiastic partner in encouraging this culture.

If investigating the truth, that is, aiming to uncover the facts and learn lessons to prevent the recurrence of similar mistakes, does not lie at the heart of the investigation of an event, rather it is driven by finding and punishing the responsible party, even for inadvertent mistakes, then every decision-maker will tend to make decisions completely devoid of risk, even if it is not done consciously. This

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has created an unworkable situation in the intelligence community, since generating intelligence means creating a picture of reality in a state of uncertainty. Information is never complete and never gives the full picture, and there is always some room for interpretation and assumption. Intelligence analysts feel that by giving bleak assessments they decrease the threat to themselves: if the assessment ends up being correct they will be heroes, and if it ends up being untrue, no one will give them any trouble because everyone will be pleased that their bleak prophecies did not materialize. When this is the psychological state of intelligence analysts, biases and serious distortions result. Conversely, the intelligence analysts who present a more optimistic assessment are in the opposite situation: if they are right nobody pays attention because nothing happened, and if they are wrong they are vilified.

Of course the contrary can be argued, that intelligence deals with life-and-death issues, and it therefore must adopt the bleakest assessment

possible due to the potential damage by a mistaken optimistic assessment. This argument is basically correct and dictates that the intelligence analyst must not be completely objective and balanced, but rather should have a slight propensity for bleak assessments, and a certain degree of intelligence wariness is justified. The problem lies in getting carried away to extremes, as was clearly the case with Israeli intelligence on Iraq. The best example of this approach, which illustrates the extent of its absurdity, took place during the last few days of the war, when American forces were in Baghdad and, along with their allies, had already completed gaining control of western Iraq, apart from a relatively small area near the town of Al-Qaim. The area was surrounded by American forces and was steadily monitored by intelligence 24 hours a day, with no sign of missiles found in the area. Nevertheless, Israeli intelligence remained staunch in its position: the intelligence analysts refused to declare that there was no danger of missiles being launched against Israel.

■ *Lack of sufficient professionalism.* Intelligence is a profession that requires and integrates skill, experience, and professional tools. Addressing the issue of weapons of mass destruction and the means of launching them, i.e., ballistic missiles and airplanes, demands additional professional expertise related to an understanding of the systems and the way they function. There are indications that there were lapses in this area as well. How can a

professional intelligence officer present an assessment that there is a concrete threat of Iraqi missiles when his own assessment is that the Iraqis have a small number of missiles and launchers that were well hidden, perhaps underground, because the Iraqis learned that burying them underground is the only sure way of concealing them? Even if these missiles did in fact exist, they had not been removed from their hiding places for over ten years, Iraqi forces had not trained with them, and they had not been serviced, due to the fact that any such actions would have emitted detectable signals. The necessary conclusion was that these missiles were of no operational value. Perhaps they would have been helpful in efforts to renew this capability in the future, once Iraq was no longer under such international scrutiny. But even then it would have to be assumed that it would take considerable time to get them into operational condition, if this was at all possible. Similarly, how can a professional intelligence officer disregard the fact that Iraq did not have full

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control over a large part of its territory due to the de facto Kurdish autonomy and the no-fly zone? American and British aircraft flew over Iraq continuously, facilitating ongoing good intelligence coverage, and the country was at the center of the priority intelligence requirements of many countries, especially the United States.

In such circumstances, it cannot be posited that Iraq had real capabilities in the realm of missiles and weapons of mass destruction and had simply been successful in preventing the emission of any signals that could be detected by intelligence services. Rather, intelligence should have considered the possibility that perhaps they could find no indication of such weapons not because of flawed intelligence gathering but because there were no such weapons. After the intensive work of UNSCOM, which gathered good evidence on the fate of the vast majority of Iraq's missiles, it became clear at the beginning of the 1990s that uncertainty existed regarding only a single-digit number of missiles. Therefore, it was estimated that Iraq had between zero and ten missiles. This assessment was consistent with that of most of the Western intelligence services. However, in the years that followed, a surprising phenomenon occurred: no additional information was gathered, but the intelligence assessment changed; the possibility that Iraq had zero missiles disappeared, and the top number continued to increase until it reached dozens of missiles by the eve of the war in Iraq. There was also the ridiculous phenomenon of establish-

ment spokespeople attempting to calm the Israeli public by stating: "There is no reason to worry. The Iraqis only have a small number of missiles, merely a few dozen." It is difficult to understand why this would be a reassuring message. During the Gulf War, Iraq launched "only" 39 missiles at Israel. Why should the claim that a similar number of missiles might be launched at Israel during this war as well have

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calmed anyone? By quoting these numbers intelligence analysts were actually telling the Israeli public that Saddam's ability to strike at Israel was similar to what it had been in 1991.

It is an historical irony that after an intelligence failure as serious as the one of the eve of the Yom Kippur War, caused by the dogmatic adherence to a specific conception, exaggerated self-confidence, and some elements of incompetence, Israeli intelligence moved from over-self-confidence to over-apprehension. However, the dogmatic adherence to conceptions and the lack of professionalism have remained as they were.

### Assessment of Intentions and Relations between Intelligence and Decision-Makers

The previous section focused primarily on intelligence lapses related to assessing enemy capabilities. However, prior to the war in Iraq, the intelligence community also failed to assess accurately the intentions of the enemy, by attributing too much weight to the possibility that weapons of mass destruction might be launched against Israel with missiles or planes. It is difficult to separate the intelligence assessment on this issue from the assessment of the operational situation by political and military decision-makers. It is therefore necessary to examine the intelligence assessment of capabilities through the prism of relations between intelligence and senior decision-makers.

The standard explanation for Saddam Hussein's decision to attack Israel with missiles in 1991 is that he was attempting to prompt Israel to retaliate, thereby causing the Arab coalition in the war against him to dissolve. However, it is not at all certain that there were not simpler explanations, such as Iraq's desire to exploit the opportunity to take revenge on Israel for its bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor ten years earlier, or a belief among Iraqi rulers that Israel pushed the United States into war against Iraq and therefore must be punished. Yet in any case, even the standard explanation was not directly relevant to the state of affairs immediately preceding the

2003 war due to the fact that there was no Arab coalition to be split. Therefore, Israeli intelligence developed two other theses intended to explain why it was possible that Iraq might try to attack Israel with non-conventional weapons. The first and more prevalent thesis was that when Saddam's "back was against the wall" and he felt that his regime was disintegrating, he would strive for a dramatic conclusion to his regime – one that "would take Israel with him," in order to leave his mark on Arab history. The second thesis was that he would try to disrupt American military operations by preemptively striking Israel before the United States began the war.

Both theses were based on a dogmatic conception of Saddam Hussein, and both disregarded the unequivocal indications in Saddam's behavior prior to the war that he was focused on strengthening his chances of survival. This was manifested first in his attempt to prevent the war, and then in his search for a way to survive even if war erupted. However, no intelligence efforts were made to assess whether or not an attack on Israel would contribute to his survival. Significantly, with survival as Saddam's principal objective, the preemptive strike thesis can be easily dismissed. All signs indicated that on the eve of the war Saddam was trying to convince the international community that he did not possess weapons of mass destruction and that there was therefore no reason to go to war. Had he initiated a preemptive strike, he would have given the

United States the ultimate excuse for war.

The back-to-the-wall thesis also appears unsound when analyzed according to this parameter. It disregards the fact that a survivor like Saddam would strive to resurface even after defeat, especially given the not infrequent phenomenon among Arab dictators of surviving severe losses and bitter defeats. Would the

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gruesome act of attacking the Israeli civilian population with weapons of mass destruction have increased his chances of surviving? Or, would it have only strengthened his enemies' determination to liquidate him physically as well? How would he have been written up in Arab history after Israel's inevitable retaliation against Iraq? Furthermore, this thesis ignores the difficulty people have – especially people of Saddam Hussein's type – to acknowledge that they are "done for" until the very last moment.

Thus, the dogmatic, one-dimensional conception of Saddam tainted all pieces of information and

prevented the emergence of any alternative interpretation. For instance, when Israeli intelligence became aware that certain items had been transferred by heads of the regime from Iraq to Syria, Israeli intelligence immediately portrayed it – including in leaks to the media – as if Iraq was moving weapons of mass destruction out of Iraq in order to conceal them. This same piece of information could also have been construed in a variety of other logical ways. Perhaps cash was being moved? After all, it is known that in preparing for the war Saddam and his colleagues transferred to themselves huge sums of money, in cash. Maybe it was family members of regime officials that were being moved? A little imagination can generate many more possibilities.

Furthermore, it appears that there was a communication gap between Israeli intelligence and the decision-makers. This problem stems from the historical baggage latent in common expressions within the "intelligence-leaders-public" triangle. A review of statements made by the establishment during the two months leading up to the war shows that as the war drew nearer, the Israeli establishment began to sense that it had exaggerated its presentation of the threat. For this reason, spokespeople started stressing publicly that an attack with non-conventional weapons was of "low probability." The IDF Chief of Staff even stated that he was not losing sleep over the Iraqi threat. These spokespeople disregarded the fact that since the Yom Kippur War, if an event is termed of "low probability"

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in the dialogue between intelligence and leaders, or between intelligence, leaders, and the Israeli public, it is understood that there is a significant possibility of its materialization and that preparations must be made as if it will indeed happen. Had the dialogue between intelligence and leaders been conducted in precise, connotation-free language, with “low probability” explicitly denoting a probability of a fraction of a percent that something will happen, the question needed to be asked in a rational decision-making environment what would happen if it did. If the answer was that the resulting damage would be horrendous, then the threat had to be taken seriously, despite its near-zero likelihood. Then, the leadership would have had to move on to the next question, namely, what precautions must be taken to address the threat. In the case under discussion, the possibility of the threat – which itself was not a serious one – materializing was perhaps a fraction of a percent, and the nature of the threat did not furnish any reason to expect widespread damage

The impact of the mistaken assessments was compounded by an additional, non-intelligence failure: the failure of an Israeli establishment “net assessment” of the threat. A net assessment involves drawing conclusions based on a combined analysis of the threat and the potential response, which is not usually undertaken by the intelligence bodies. It is performed by operational bodies, planning bodies, and the political leadership in power. However, if such a net assessment had been undertaken as it ought, it would have been possible to prevent the costs stemming from the exaggerated threat. Even if we accept the working premise that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that could be launched against Israel by means of ballistic missiles and planes, it was clear long before the war broke out that the United States was taking precautions to provide a fitting solution in both areas. All of Iraq’s airfields were to be disabled at the outset of the war, and during the early stages of the war the United States was to take control of western Iraq, the only region from which missiles could be launched against Israel. Even if the thesis that “Saddam will attack if his back is against the wall,” was valid, an Iraqi attack would occur during the later stages of the war, when the Iraqis felt that all was lost. Yet Israel could well assume with a high degree of certainty that Iraq would not have the capability of striking Israel with missiles or planes during the later stages of the war, because these capabilities would have been neutralized by the United States.

### Political Pressure for Distortion?

The final question that needs to be asked is whether in Israel, as in the United States, the intelligence picture was slanted due to the pressure by the country’s political leadership, which wanted to prepare the ground for war with the support of intelligence bodies. While there may have been political pressure in the US to distort intelligence findings, there is no indication of such pressure in Israel. The best proof of this was Israel’s refusal to participate in the American administration’s efforts to demonstrate a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

It is possible, however, that political considerations may have exerted a hidden, subtle influence on how the intelligence regarding the threat was presented. The ongoing dialogues between various levels of the Israeli and American governments over the last decade revealed disagreements between the two countries concerning the relative weight of the various threats in the Middle East. The United States was

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wont to emphasize the Iraqi threat, while Israel tended to express its understanding that the Iraqi threat was contained and under control, and it was the Iranian threat that loomed as far more serious. Once the Bush

administration decided to take action against Iraq, it was more difficult for Israel to maintain its position that dealing with Iraq was not the highest priority, especially when it was obvious that the war would serve

Israel's interests. Considering the circumstances, it would therefore be difficult to expect the Israeli government to express its doubts – if any – about Iraq's capabilities.

### Conclusion

It is standard procedure in Israel to inquire into failures for which the country has paid dearly. In the case of the war in Iraq, Israel's gains from the outcome of the war were exponentially greater than the price paid for the failures of the assessments made by Israeli intelligence and senior decision-makers. Therefore, the natural tendency is to bury the issue and forget about it. The problem is that the failures of this war indicate weaknesses and inherent flaws within Israeli intelligence and among Israeli decision-makers, and similar failures are likely to occur in the future as well, unless the issue is examined and lessons are learned. The investigation would best be undertaken by an independent professional body and not by political parties. It should address the relationship between intelligence and senior decision-makers, in addition to checking the intelligence work itself. The investigators will need to take into consideration that intelligence work will always involve bias and distortions in perception, and that the principal question is therefore how best to minimize them.