

Sound Professional Assessment

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All hope is not lost. Within the intelligence communities of the United States, Britain, and Israel, there is still hope of finding a “smoking gun” that would prove that Iraq did in fact possess chemical or biological warfare capability in the past few years, or that it had a significant number of long-range missiles. Finding such weapons in Iraq would extricate these intelligence communities from criticism that they were sorely mistaken in assessing the capabilities and intentions of Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Criticism has been directed primarily against American and British intelligence, which are accused of intentionally exaggerating their presentation of Iraq’s non-conventional capabilities in order to facilitate their governments’ decision to wage war on Iraq. Criticism has also been leveled at Israeli intelligence for assessing Iraq’s non-conventional capabilities and its intentions towards Israel as more serious than they really were.

This article questions the degree to which the Israeli intelligence community erred in its professional assessment of Iraq’s capabilities and intentions prior to the war. The examination is premised on the assumption that in the future no clear evidence will be found that Iraq possessed non-conventional capabilities before the war. Clearly, the discovery of such evidence would end the debate. It would also make it clear that if Saddam did have chemical or biological capabilities and the ability to launch them against Israel, Israel would have been justified in assessing that there was a possibility, even if of low probability, of his attempting to attack it with missiles armed with conventional or non-conventional warheads.

Israel's Intelligence Assessment

Israel's intelligence assessment in advance of the war in Iraq took shape over a period of years. It began evolving during the Iran-Iraq war, when it became clear that Iraq had developed chemical and biological capabilities, had manufactured the al-Hussein ballistic missile (based on the Scud missile purchased from the Soviet Union) with a range that covered Israeli territory, and had resumed efforts to develop nuclear weapons. At the end of the 1980s and during the Gulf War, this assessment was influenced by the fact that Saddam launched hundreds of missiles at Iran and dozens of missiles at Israel and Saudi Arabia, and did not hesitate to use chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds and against the Iranian army. The assessment did not change a great deal during the 1990s when it had to grapple with the very difficult question: what remained of Iraq's non-conventional capabilities after they were significantly reduced during the Gulf War and in subsequent UN inspections?

In advance of the 2003 war in Iraq, the intelligence assessment had to address two interrelated issues:

■ What were Iraq's capabilities in the realm of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles? There was no doubt that Iraq had chemical warfare capabilities and long-range missiles until the Gulf War of 1991, and biological warfare capabilities until they were discovered in 1995. But two questions remained: to what degree had Iraq

preserved its capabilities from before the Gulf War, and to what degree had Iraq successfully continued its secret work developing new capabilities during the 1990s despite the international supervision imposed on the country? An important related question was: to what extent did Iraq take advantage of its expulsion of UN inspectors in the summer of 1998 in order to progress in these areas?

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■ Was Saddam likely to launch missiles with conventional or non-conventional warheads against Israel, or perhaps aircraft carrying non-conventional weapons, if attacked by the United States? This question was clearly linked to the first question: an assessment that Iraq was not capable of striking Israel would have necessarily ruled out the possibility that he intended to do so. Conversely, an assessment that Iraq was capable of striking Israel would have required taking into account the possibility, regardless of its likelihood, that Iraq would attempt to strike Israeli targets in the case of an American attack.

As best as can be recreated from the statements of senior officials of Israel's intelligence branch and the Israel Defense Forces, Israel's intelligence assessment during the period leading up to the war in Iraq answered the above questions in the following manner:

■ Iraq had chemical and biological weapons that it retained from before the Gulf War. This included a few dozen chemical and biological warheads whose whereabouts were unknown, and shells carrying chemical and biological materials, intended for arming warplanes and long-range missiles.

■ Iraq had no more than a few dozen ground-to-ground missiles and one or two launchers, which were hidden during the Gulf War and remained in Iraqi hands. Iraq had not manufactured new missiles since the Gulf War, and no exercises or maintenance for its missile system were conducted since then. Therefore, the intelligence assessment held that if the system were to be used, it would be in deficient condition both technically and operationally. This would be expressed in the rate at which missiles could be launched and in the Iraqis' ability to keep the launchers concealed, but did not, however, mean that Iraq could not launch missiles at Israel. Rather, the message was that Iraq possessed the capability of launching a small number of missiles against Israel, and that there still existed a slim possibility that it could launch missiles with non-conventional warheads.

■ Iraq had neither nuclear weapons nor an active nuclear program.

■ Iraq had a number of fighter planes and possibly an unmanned aerial vehicle that could be used in attempts to carry out chemical or biological strikes against Israel.

■ It was very unlikely that Iraq would attack Israel with conventional weapons, and even more unlikely that it would attack Israel with non-conventional weapons. An attack might occur primarily in the event that Saddam was facing a complete military defeat and the crumbling of his regime. In such a case, he might decide to undertake the desperate suicidal act of launching a few missiles against Israel. The likelihood that Saddam would order the launching of missiles against Israel early in the war or before it began was even lower.

The Information Behind the Intelligence

The media made public only small portions and general characterizations of the informational foundation on which Israel's intelligence assessment was based. Based on what appeared in the media only, therefore, it is difficult to check if Israeli intelligence made correct use of the information at its disposal. However, two other important sources can provide assistance in examining the nature and significance of the information that was at the disposal of those undertaking the assessment.

One of these sources is the set of

American and British intelligence assessments of Iraq's capabilities. In September and October 2002, British and American intelligence released separate detailed and comprehensive assessments on the issue of the weapons of mass destruction possessed by Iraq.¹ Both assessments, intended to prepare the ground domestically and internationally for military action in Iraq, contain a great deal of information on the subject

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under discussion, and it can be assumed that Israeli intelligence had most or all of this information and used it in forming its own assessment. The American and British assessments were compiled over a period of years by a large number of experts and are both similar to and consistent with one another, although there are also a number of differences between them. They both hold that in 2002:

■ Iraq had chemical and biological warfare capabilities. Some of the warfare materials had apparently been hidden before the Gulf War and others were manufactured after the war in part through

mobile laboratories for the production of biological materials. Iraq could launch them by means of artillery shells, aerial bombs, or missiles. Iraq was also developing an unmanned aerial vehicle, based on training planes, in order to deliver biological and possibly chemical weapons across long distances.

■ Iraq had a small number of al-Hussein missiles (no more than 20, according to British assessments) that had been concealed from UN inspectors. These missiles could be fitted to carry conventional, chemical, or biological warheads. Iraq had succeeded in rebuilding a large portion of its missile-manufacturing infrastructure, which was destroyed in 1991 and 1998.

■ Iraq continued to strive towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons through centrifugal uranium enrichment and retained nuclear expertise, scientific staff, nuclear engineers, and documentation of its nuclear program. Sanctions had prevented Iraq from acquiring the materials required for producing fissile material, and for at least a number of years the country would not be capable of producing such material. However, if Iraq were to acquire fissile material from external sources, it would be capable of producing nuclear weapons within one or two years.

The British and American assessments characterize some central elements of the intelligence information that was at the disposal of the two intelligence communities. Both claim that their assessments were based on

a large number of reliable sources, including some who continued to supply information after the UN inspectors were expelled from Iraq in 1998. However, it is not clear to what extent the intelligence services had hard inside information, according to which it would have been possible to learn the precise state of the weapons of mass destruction possessed by Iraq. The impression is that some of the sources of information were in fact trustworthy, but that they provided primarily indications of various components of Iraqi activity and did not necessarily present a reliable, comprehensive, or unequivocal picture of this activity. The information referred to in both assessments relates to activity such as secret attempts to purchase missile parts and materials with potential dual use, i.e., that can also be used for the development of weapons of mass destruction or the rebuilding and expansion of Iraq's production infrastructure in this realm. Such information may be reliable – for example, the information derived from satellite photos. However, it may also be interpreted in different ways, and does not ensure reaching decisive conclusions. It also appears that some of the information was not sufficiently reliable, for instance, information received from Iraqi deserters who defected to the West.

The second source of information, of equal if not greater importance, lay in the reports of the UN weapons inspection regime UNSCOM (UN Special Commission on Iraq), which was stationed in Iraq after the Gulf

War in order to disarm Iraq of its non-conventional weapons and make certain that it did not rearm itself. After Iraq's expulsion of the weapons inspectors in the summer of 1998, the commission submitted a final report to the Security Council in January 1999 on its findings and conclusions.² The importance of this detailed report stems from the fact that it summarized the findings that were gathered in the

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field over a period of seven years, presented a picture of the weapons systems that had been destroyed by the commission and the systems that it was not able to find, and critically examined the claims and declarations of the Iraqis, who had attempted to conceal part of the non-conventional weapons systems that they possessed. This report was also important in that it was considered to be relatively objective, and was not suspected of portraying an exaggerated picture. For these reasons, this summary provided an important and sometimes exclusive factual foundation for the intelligence assessments of the United States, Britain, and Israel.

The primary findings presented in the final report were as follows:

■ Regarding **surface-to-surface missiles**: Iraq reported that it purchased 819 Scud missiles from the Soviet Union, and that more than half of them had been upgraded to al-Hussein missiles with a range of 650 km. Of these, Iraq launched 516 against Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. The remaining missiles were launched at Israel and Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War or destroyed, by the UN inspectors or by Iraq itself. The commission was able to verify some of this information. The problem related to the number of missiles fired at Iran, of which only a portion could be verified. Iraq also declared that it had 14 mobile al-Hussein missile launchers, and that of these they had destroyed five. However, the inspectors were unable to locate the remains of all five launchers. The rest of the launchers were destroyed by the inspectors. It should be pointed out that the commission's inability to verify the exact number of missiles launched against Iran is what resulted in the West's assessment that Iraq still had a small number of missiles. In addition, the uncertainty surrounding the number of launchers destroyed by Iraq resulted in the assessment that Iraq retained one or two launchers.

■ Regarding **chemical weapons**: Iraq declared that it possessed 200,000 special filled and unfilled munitions – in the form of aerial bombs, artillery shells, rockets, and missile warheads – designed for chemical or biological warfare materials, and that half filled with chemical agents had been used

in its war with Iran. The commission was unable to verify this declaration completely. Iraq also claimed that in 1991 it had 128,000 special filled and unfilled munitions, most of which it destroyed on its own, and the rest of which was destroyed by inspectors. In this case as well, the commission was unable to verify that Iraq did in fact destroy on its own all of the chemical munitions, and doubt still remains regarding the thousands of munitions and hundreds of tons of chemical warfare materials.

■ Regarding biological weapons: It was in this realm that the most serious findings were discovered. After the Gulf War, Iraq vehemently denied the existence of a program for the development of biological warfare materials and also denied that it possessed biological weapons. Although the commission of inspectors was unable to uncover the country's biological program, the Iraqis were forced to acknowledge the program in 1995 following the defection of Saddam's son-in-law to the West. In 1998, the commission still believed that Iraq was concealing elements of its biological program relating to the planning of biological weapons, the purchase of raw materials, and the production of biological warfare materials and their transformation into weapons. The commission had no confidence in the information provided by the Iraqis. It had not received sufficient evidence and was not convinced that the Iraqis had halted their military biological program. It also assessed that Iraq still had biological warfare capability. The

commission could not find support for Iraqi claims that the country had "only" 25 missile warheads and 200 aerial bombs filled with biological warfare materials. Furthermore, in contrast to chemical weapons and missiles, the commission did not destroy Iraq's biological weapons because Iraq claimed that it had done so on its own. However, the commission was unable to verify this claim, and regarded it with serious doubt.

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The report of the UN inspection commission provided an important component of the information for Western intelligence assessments leading up to the war in Iraq. The commission explicitly determined that Iraq retained biological warfare capability, and its report raised the possibility that it also retained some chemical weapons and a small number of al-Hussein missiles and launchers.

The 1999 report of the inspection commission was supplemented by the report of Hans Blix, the head of the inspection commission sent to Iraq in 2002. Blix, who bore the brunt of fierce

criticism from the Americans and the British for being too vague and diplomatic in his reports, submitted his final report to the Security Council in January 2003, about two months before the beginning of the war.³ His conclusion reiterated in brief the UNSCOM findings and determined that:

■ The difference between Iraqi declarations and the evidence uncovered by the inspectors indicated a gap of 6,500 airborne shells carrying chemical materials, and it was not clear where these shells were.

■ Iraq did not provide sufficient proof of its claims that it destroyed all of the biological weapons that it had manufactured, and at least some of these weapons remained in existence after the reported date of destruction.

■ Iraq claimed that as part of the development of a missile defense program during the 1980s it used a number of Scud missiles as targets, but it did not provide the technical information necessary to support this claim.

Was there an Intelligence Failure?

If the initial premise of this discussion proves to be true, and no weapons of mass destruction are found in Iraq, it will appear that there was an Israeli intelligence failure, along with the American and British intelligence failures. Israeli intelligence claimed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and that there was a small possibility that Saddam Hussein would launch missiles against Israel, and neither assertion has been proven.

However, this conclusion is partial and simplistic, and it relates only to the outcome. It does not take into consideration the way that the assessment was constructed, the use made of the information at the disposal of the intelligence community, or the considerations and the logical reasoning that constituted the foundation of the assessment. An in-depth examination must explore whether the intelligence community used the information at its disposal in a competent and balanced manner and whether it would have been more correct to adopt an alternative assessment. In this context, several critical angles must be probed.

First, over many years Saddam Hussein created the impression in Israel and other countries that he was steadily striving to build up Iraq as the dominant power in the Gulf region and in the Arab world, and that the effort to acquire weapons of mass destruction was a key component of this aspiration. This image was concretized by Saddam's huge investments in building a very large army, and the comprehensive efforts channeled towards acquiring a large variety of non-conventional weapons systems, including nuclear weapons. This image was also greatly bolstered by Saddam's decision to go to war with two of his neighbors, at his own initiative and without being forced to do so.

From the 1990s onward, it was justified to assess that Saddam had not changed his ways or his outlook and that he would continue striving to acquire strategic weapons, despite

his defeat in 1991. Iraq made great efforts to conceal its activity in the realm of non-conventional weapons from UN inspectors, and in this way created the impression that Iraq had something to hide. This impression was enhanced by the fact that Iraq paid a heavy price – in the form of sanctions, economic distress, human suffering, and limitations on sovereignty – with its policy of

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concealment and its evasiveness during the years following the Gulf War. Had Iraq opened up all the suspected installations to inspectors, it would have hastened the lifting of sanctions that were imposed on the country. The fact that it did not do so increased the suspicion that it was concealing non-conventional weapons. This suspicion was strengthened by the expulsion of UN weapons inspectors from Iraq in 1998, which led to the logical conclusion that Saddam was attempting to free himself from supervision in order to accelerate his efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

Second, the starting point of the intelligence assessment was solid: there was no doubt at all that Iraq had long-range missiles capable of striking Israel and chemical and biological weapons until 1991, and that Iraq had used a large number of missiles and chemical weapons against its adversaries. Due to the serious suspicion – supported by UN inspectors – that Iraq had succeeded in concealing some types of weapons, and the fact that Iraq had already proven its capability of producing chemical weapons, biological weapons, and non-conventional missile warheads, it was reasonable to assume that it possessed some degree of non-conventional capability. The fact that Iraq had been free of intense supervision for the four years preceding the war contributed to the assessment, as did the weak monitoring of Iraq's activities during this period.

Third, the state of information on Iraq's effort to acquire weapons of mass destruction was problematic. Western intelligence services identified many indications suggesting Iraqi activity, but apparently had no hard evidence that would enable them to present an unequivocal picture of Iraq's building of non-conventional capabilities. Theoretically, the state of information should have raised doubts regarding Iraq's capabilities in the realm of weapons of mass destruction. However in practice, it appears that such doubts did not arise for two reasons. On the one hand, most of the information – even if it was incomplete or not solid –

portrayed a picture of consistent Iraqi attempts to build up such capabilities and their at least partial attainment. Experience has taught intelligence communities that only rarely is it possible to collect hard evidence of concrete activity pertaining to weapons of mass destruction. More importantly, there was apparently no concrete evidence pointing to the opposite possibility – that Iraq possessed no chemical capability, no biological capability, and no missiles, and that Saddam had halted his efforts to acquire such capabilities. On the other hand, the inspection regime, which had access to selected Iraqi sites and was regarded as relatively objective, reported explicitly that Iraq retained biological warfare capability and also left open the possibility that Iraq had succeeded in concealing and preserving some of its chemical warfare capabilities and a number of missiles.

The inspection regime's reports noted particularly the possibility that Iraq had continued developing its biological program. During all the years of inspection activity, Iraq attempted to hide its biological program in entirety (until 1995), or components of its infrastructure: for example, specific bacterial growth media for certain bacteria (after 1995). It was clear that in the area of biological weapons development, Iraq had an extensive infrastructure of human resources and years of experience. During the 1990s, intelligence information had accumulated (even if it was not of sufficiently high quality) pointing to the possible

renewal of Iraq's biological program, and inspectors raised the serious possibility that it had never been halted. This information, coupled with the inspectors' reports, indicated significant activity towards developing means of attacking Israel with biological weapons, such as converting drop tanks and adapting them for the dispersal of biological warfare agents. The possibility that components of Iraq's biological

Only rarely is it possible to acquire hard evidence of actual, significant weapons of mass destruction activity concurrent with the activity itself.

program also remained intact was very real: anthrax bacteria can remain stable for decades, and it was therefore possible to hide anthrax-based biological weapons. These considerations had an impact on the formation of the logical working premise that if Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussein possessed the capability of developing non-conventional weapons systems, it would in fact do so.

Fourth, conceptions are by nature rigid and enduring and tend not to change quickly. The assessment regarding Iraq's non-conventional capability was constructed over a

period of years by many intelligence analysts, and grew even more steadfast due to the fact that the West's best intelligence services were associated with it and nurtured it, as it, in turn, nurtured the assessments of Western intelligence services. The chief way that such a rigid assessment could undergo a change is through the acquisition of solid evidence to the contrary that would raise doubts about it. Clearly, no such information was found.

Finally, the assessment of Iraq's capability influenced the assessment of Iraq's intentions. The intelligence assessment advised that Iraq had chemical and biological warfare capabilities, and that it possessed a small number of missiles – and possibly fighter planes and an unmanned aerial vehicle – that could launch these weapons. This assessment of capability made it impossible to disregard a scenario in which Saddam would launch a few missiles at Israel as a suicidal measure.

Herein there were two opposing considerations. On the one hand, the circumstances surrounding the period leading up to the war were clearly different from those characterizing the Gulf War period. In 2003 Iraq was more limited in capability, while Israel's passive and active defensive capabilities were greatly improved, and possibly sufficient to deter the Iraqis from trying to attack it. Launching one missile against Israel would have proven that Saddam had been lying all these years, and would have justified an American attack. Western Iraq was supposed to have

been contained by the Americans at an early stage in the war, and this would have negated Iraq's ability to attack Israel. Moreover, this time Iraq had no reason to drag Israel into a war, as it had in 1991.

On the other hand, under circumstances of heavy pressure, Saddam was liable to act unpredictably. In addition, he had already proven his willingness to provoke his neighbors, the United States, and Israel when he did not hesitate to launch missiles at Israel in 1991, despite Israel's military superiority. In these circumstances, the correct approach was to take into consideration the possibility – with the appropriate assignment of low probability – of an Iraqi attack.

Conclusion

At this point, it is worthwhile to return to the two basic questions that the Israeli intelligence assessment had to address: the question of Iraq's capability and the question of its intentions. In terms of capability, in light of the information at the disposal of Israeli intelligence – regardless of the fact that it was apparently not of sufficient quality or reliability and contained some gaps – and in light of the absence of concrete information to the contrary, the competent, correct, and responsible approach, at the time and in retrospect, was to assess that

Iraq had a degree of non-conventional capability, albeit significantly less than it had prior to the Gulf War. It could also not be ruled out that Iraq had mechanisms for launching and dispersing non-conventional materials, which would have provided it with the capability of attacking Israel with either conventional or non-conventional weapons. Regarding the available basis of information and its

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logically-indicated conclusion, an alternative assessment would have been less justified and less professionally valid. It is worth contemplating how Israeli intelligence would have looked had it assessed that Iraq had no such capabilities, but some were in fact uncovered after the war. This could have happened, and may possibly still happen.

In terms of intentions as well, the assessment that an Iraqi attack against Israel was of little likelihood but could not be ruled out appears to have been justified. This assessment sketched a dangerous possibility (that had it materialized would have exacted a high cost) in fitting proportions of limited likelihood, and should not be construed as the product of cowardice or excessive caution. Even in retrospect, the alternative to this assessment – assuming from the outset that there was no danger of an Iraqi attack – would have been irresponsible and an unnecessary gamble.

1. "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government," September 2002 www.official-documents.co.uk/document/rep/iraq/iraqdossier.pdf; and Director of Central Intelligence, "Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs," October 2002 http://www.cia.gov/cia/reports/iraq_wmd/Iraq_Oct_2002.htm.
2. UNSCOM, Report to the Security Council, January 25, 1999, www.fas.org/news/un/iraq/s/990125/index.html
3. Dr. Hans Blix, Executive Chairman of UNMOVIC, "The Security Council, 27 January 2003: An Update on Inspection," www.un.org/Depts/unmovic/Bx27.htm.