

Iran/Iraq ‘Defectors’ and Disinformation

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Official Washington has a soft spot for “defectors” from hostile nations, especially if their tales of perfidy about their ex-homelands fit with favored policy. That was the case with Iraq before the 2003 invasion and now with Iran, but these “defectors” often tell lies.

A new American war hysteria is rising, this time over Iran, and – like its predecessor with Iraq – this one employs “defectors” who come forward, often under the umbrella of neocon organizations, to impart alarming tales.

The latest example is a “default judgment” by a U.S. federal judge implicating Iran in the 9/11 attacks. It is based largely on Iranian “defectors” whose testimony was given without Iranian lawyers or anyone else present to challenge the lurid claims. Since Iran has no diplomatic relations with the United States and rejects the judgments of U.S. courts, the “default judgment” was predictable.



Iraqi National Congress chief Ahmed Chalabi

Nevertheless, it is being used as another talking point for launching a war against Iran. [For a dissection of the Iran-9/11 case, see Gareth Porter’s analysis, “[Muslim Haters Tie Iran to 9/11.](#)”]

Beyond the exaggerations and falsehoods of this Iran-9/11 argument, it is also worth recalling how Iraqi “defectors” were deployed in the run-up to war with Iraq. American journalists and intelligence analysts were either duped or overwhelmed by the sheer number of these “walk-ins.”

Yet, as the CIA and the Senate Intelligence Committee belatedly discovered, some “defectors” had been coached by the neocon-backed Iraqi National Congress, which was fabricating a casus belli around Iraq’s alleged WMD stockpiles and Iraq’s purported ties to al-Qaeda to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The Iraqi “defectors” and their stories then played into a sophisticated propaganda

campaign led by neocon pundits and pro-war officials who acted as intellectual shock troops to bully the few U.S. voices of skepticism that spoke out. With President George W. Bush eager for war with Iraq – and Democrats in Congress fearful of being labeled “soft on terror” – the enforced “group think” led the United States to invade Iraq on March 19, 2003.

It was not until 2006 – after Iraq’s WMD stockpiles proved non-existent and the Iraq-al-Qaeda ties were discredited – that the Senate Intelligence Committee released [a little-noticed study](#) on the role of phony “defectors.”

The report revealed not only specific cases of coached Iraqi “defectors” lying to intelligence analysts but a stunning failure of the U.S. political/media system to challenge the lies. The intimidated U.S. intelligence process often worked like a reverse filter, letting the dross of disinformation pass through.

The Backdrop

According to the Senate report, the official U.S. relationship with these Iraqi exiles dated back to 1991 after President George H.W. Bush had routed Saddam Hussein’s army from Kuwait and wanted to help Hussein’s domestic opponents.

In May 1991, the CIA approached Ahmed Chalabi, a secular Shiite who had not lived in Iraq since 1956. Chalabi was far from a perfect opposition candidate, however. Beyond his long isolation from his homeland, Chalabi was a fugitive from bank fraud charges in Jordan.

Still, in June 1992, the Iraqi exiles held an organizational meeting in Vienna, Austria, out of which came the Iraqi National Congress. Chalabi emerged as the group’s chairman and most visible spokesman.

But Chalabi soon began rubbing CIA officers the wrong way. They complained about the quality of his information, the excessive size of his security detail, his lobbying of Congress, and his resistance to working as a team player. For his part, smooth-talking Chalabi bristled at the idea that he was a U.S. intelligence asset, preferring to see himself as an independent political leader. Nevertheless, he and his organization were not averse to accepting American money.

With U.S. financial backing, the INC waged a propaganda campaign against Hussein and arranged for “a steady stream of low-ranking walk-ins” to provide intelligence about the Iraqi military, the Senate Intelligence Committee report said.

The INC’s mix of duties – propaganda and intelligence – would create concerns within the CIA as would the issue of Chalabi’s “coziness” with the Shiite government of Iran. The CIA concluded that Chalabi was double-dealing both sides when he falsely informed Iran that the United States wanted Iran’s help in conducting anti-Hussein operations.

“Chalabi passed a fabricated message from the White House to” an Iranian intelligence officer in northern Iraq, the CIA reported. According to one CIA representative, Chalabi used National Security Council stationery for the fabricated letter, a charge that Chalabi denied.

In December 1996, Clinton administration officials decided to terminate the CIA’s relationship with the INC and Chalabi. “There was a breakdown in trust and we never wanted to have anything to do with him anymore,” CIA Director George Tenet told the Senate Intelligence Committee.

However, in 1998, with the congressional passage of the Iraq Liberation Act, the INC was again one of the exile organizations that qualified for U.S. funding. Starting in March 2000, the State Department agreed to grant an INC foundation almost \$33 million for several programs, including more propaganda operations and collection of information about alleged war crimes committed by Hussein's regime.

By March 2001, with George W. Bush in office and already focusing on Iraq, the INC was given greater leeway to pursue its projects, including an Information Collection Program. The INC's blurred responsibilities on intelligence gathering and propaganda dissemination raised fresh concerns within the State Department. But Bush's National Security Council intervened against State's attempts to cut off funding.

The NSC shifted the INC operation to the control of the Defense Department, where neoconservatives wielded more influence. To little avail, CIA officials warned their counterparts at the Defense Intelligence Agency about suspicions that "the INC was penetrated by Iranian and possibly other intelligence services, and that the INC had its own agenda," the Senate report said.

"You've got a real bucket full of worms with the INC and we hope you're taking the appropriate steps," the CIA told the DIA.

Media Hype

But the CIA's warnings did little to stanch the flow of INC propaganda into America's politics and media. Besides flooding the U.S. intelligence community with waves of propaganda, the INC funneled a steady stream of "defectors" to U.S. news outlets eager for anti-Hussein scoops.

The "defectors" also made the rounds of Congress where members saw a political advantage in citing the INC's propaganda as a way to talk tough about the Middle East. In turn, conservative and neoconservative think tanks honed their reputations in Washington by staying at the cutting edge of the negative news about Hussein, with human rights groups ready to pile on, too, against the Iraqi dictator.

The INC's information program served the institutional needs and biases of Official Washington. Saddam Hussein was a despised figure anyway, with no influential constituency that would challenge even the most outlandish accusations against him.

When Iraqi government officials were allowed onto American news programs, it was an opportunity for the interviewers to show their tough side, pounding the Iraqis with hostile questions and smirking at the Iraqi denials about WMDs and ties to al-Qaeda.

The rare journalist who tried to be evenhanded would have his or her professionalism questioned. An intelligence analyst who challenged the consensus view that Iraq possessed WMDs could expect to suffer career repercussions. So, it was a win-win for "investigative journalists," macho pundits, members of Congress - and George W. Bush. A war fever was sweeping the United States and the INC was doing all it could to spread the infection.

Again and again, the INC's "defectors" supplied primary or secondary intelligence on two key points, Iraq's supposed rebuilding of its unconventional weapons and its alleged training of non-Iraqi terrorists. Sometimes, these "defectors" would even enter the cloistered world of U.S. intelligence with entrées provided by former U.S. government officials.

For instance, ex-CIA Director James Woolsey referred at least a couple of these Iraqi sources to the Defense Intelligence Agency. Woolsey, who was affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies and other neocon think tanks, had been one of the Reagan administration's favorite Democrats in the 1980s because he supported a hawkish foreign policy. After Bill Clinton won the White House, Woolsey parlayed his close ties to the neocons into an appointment as CIA director.

In early 1993, Clinton's foreign policy adviser Samuel "Sandy" Berger explained to one well-placed Democratic official that Woolsey was given the CIA job because the Clinton team felt it owed a favor to the neoconservative New Republic, which had lent Clinton some cachet with the insider crowd of Washington.

Amid that more relaxed post-Cold War mood, the Clinton team viewed the CIA directorship as a kind of a patronage plum that could be handed out as a favor to campaign supporters. But new international challenges soon emerged and Woolsey proved to be an ineffective leader of the intelligence community. After two years, he was replaced.

As the 1990s wore on, the spurned Woolsey grew closer to Washington's fast-growing neocon movement, which was openly hostile to President Clinton for his perceived softness in asserting U.S. military power, especially against Arab regimes in the Middle East.

On Jan. 26, 1998, the neocon Project for the New American Century sent a letter to Clinton urging the ouster of Saddam Hussein by force if necessary. Woolsey was one of the 18 signers. By early 2001, he also had grown close to the INC, having been hired as co-counsel to represent eight Iraqis, including INC members, who had been detained on immigration charges.

In other words, Woolsey was well-positioned to serve as a conduit for INC "defectors" trying to get their stories to U.S. officials and to the American public.

The 'Sources'

DIA officials told the Senate Intelligence Committee that Woolsey introduced them to the first in a long line of INC "defectors" who then told the DIA about Hussein's WMD and his supposed relationship with Islamic terrorists. For his part, Woolsey said he didn't recall making that referral.

The debriefings of "Source One" - as he was called in the Senate Intelligence Committee report - generated more than 250 intelligence reports. Two of the reports described alleged terrorist training sites in Iraq, where Afghan, Pakistani and Palestinian nationals were allegedly taught military skills at the Salman Pak base, 20 miles south of Baghdad.

"Many Iraqis believe that Saddam Hussein had made an agreement with Usama bin Ladin in order to support his terrorist movement against the U.S.," Source One claimed, according to the Senate report.

After the 9/11 attacks, information from Source One and other INC-connected "defectors" began surfacing in U.S. press accounts, not only in the right-wing news media, but many mainstream publications and news shows.

In an Oct. 12, 2001, column entitled "What About Iraq?" Washington Post chief foreign

correspondent Jim Hoagland cited “accumulating evidence of Iraq’s role in sponsoring the development on its soil of weapons and techniques for international terrorism,” including training at Salman Pak.

Hoagland’s sources included Iraqi army “defector” Sabah Khalifa Khodada and another unnamed Iraqi ex-intelligence officer in Turkey. Hoagland also criticized the CIA for not taking seriously a possible Iraqi link to 9/11.

Hoagland’s column was followed by a Page One article in The New York Times, which was headlined “Defectors Cite Iraqi Training for Terrorism.” It relied on Khodada, the second source in Turkey (who was later identified as Abu Zeinab al-Qurairy, a former senior officer in Iraq’s intelligence agency, the Mukhabarat), and a lower-ranking member of Mukhabarat.

This story described 40 to 50 Islamic militants getting training at Salman Pak at any one time, including lessons on how to hijack an airplane without weapons. There were also claims about a German scientist working on biological weapons.

In a Columbia Journalism Review retrospective on press coverage of U.S. intelligence on Iraq, writer Douglas McCollam asked Times correspondent Chris Hedges about the Times article, which he had written in coordination with a PBS Frontline documentary called “Gunning for Saddam,” with correspondent Lowell Bergman.

Explaining the difficulty of checking out defector accounts when they meshed with the interests of the U.S. government, Hedges said, “We tried to vet the defectors and we didn’t get anything out of Washington that said, ‘these guys are full of shit.’”

For his part, Bergman told CJR’s McCollam, “The people involved appeared credible and we had no way of getting into Iraq ourselves.”

The journalistic competition to break anti-Hussein scoops was building, too. Based in Paris, Hedges said he would get periodic calls from Times editors asking that he check out defector stories originating from Chalabi’s operation.

“I thought he was unreliable and corrupt, but just because someone is a sleazebag doesn’t mean he might not know something or that everything he says is wrong,” Hedges said. Hedges described Chalabi as having an “endless stable” of ready sources who could fill in American reporters on any number of Iraq-related topics.

The Salman Pak story would be one of many products from the INC’s propaganda mill that would prove influential in the run-up to the Iraq War but would be knocked down later by U.S. intelligence agencies.

According to the Senate Intelligence Committee’s post-mortem, the DIA stated in June 2006 that it found “no credible reports that non-Iraqis were trained to conduct or support transnational terrorist operations at Salman Pak after 1991.”

Explaining the origins for the bogus tales, the DIA concluded that Operation Desert Storm had brought attention to the training base at Salman Pak, so “fabricators and unestablished sources who reported hearsay or third-hand information created a large volume of human intelligence reporting. This type of reporting surged after September 2001.”

Going with the Flow

However, in the prelude to the Iraq War, U.S. intelligence agencies found it hard to resist the INC's "defectors" when that would have meant bucking the White House and going against Washington's conventional wisdom. Rather than take those career chances, many intelligence analysts found it easier to go with the flow.

Referring to the INC's "Source One," a U.S. intelligence memorandum in July 2002 hailed the information as "highly credible and includes reports on a wide range of subjects including conventional weapons facilities, denial and deception; communications security; suspected terrorist training locations; illicit trade and smuggling; Saddam's palaces; the Iraqi prison system; and Iraqi petrochemical plants."

Only analysts in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research were skeptical because they felt Source One was making unfounded assumptions, especially about possible nuclear research sites.

After the invasion of Iraq, U.S. intelligence finally began to recognize the holes in Source One's stories and spot examples of analysts extrapolating faulty conclusions from his limited first-hand knowledge.

"In early February 2004, in order to resolve ... credibility issues with Source One, Intelligence Community elements brought Source One to Iraq," the Senate Intelligence Committee report said. "When taken to the location Source One had described as the suspect [nuclear] facility, he was unable to identify it.

"According to one intelligence assessment, the 'subject appeared stunned upon hearing that he was standing on the spot that he reported as the location of the facility, insisted that he had never been to that spot, and wanted to check a map' ...

"Intelligence Community officers confirmed that they were standing on the location he was identifying. ... During questioning, Source One acknowledged contact with the INC's Washington Director [name redacted], but denied that the Washington Director directed Source One to provide any false information."
"

The U.S. intelligence community had mixed reactions to other Iraqi "walk-ins" arranged by the INC. Some were caught in outright deceptions, such as "Source Two" who talked about Iraq supposedly building mobile biological weapons labs.

After catching Source Two in contradictions, the CIA issued a "fabrication notice" in May 2002, deeming him "a fabricator/provocateur" and asserting that he had "been coached by the Iraqi National Congress prior to his meeting with western intelligence services."

However, the DIA never repudiated the specific reports that had been based on Source Two's debriefings. So, Source Two continued to be cited in five CIA intelligence assessments and the pivotal National Intelligence Estimate in October 2002, "as corroborating other source reporting about a mobile biological weapons program," the Senate Intelligence Committee report said.

Source Two was one of four human sources referred to by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his United Nations speech on Feb. 5, 2003. When asked how a "fabricator" could have been used for such an important speech, a CIA analyst who worked on Powell's speech said, "we

lost the thread of concern ... as time progressed I don't think we remembered."

A CIA supervisor added, "Clearly we had it at one point, we understood, we had concerns about the source, but over time it started getting used again and there really was a loss of corporate awareness that we had a problem with the source."

Flooding Defectors

Part of the challenge facing U.S. intelligence agencies was the sheer volume of "defectors" shepherded into debriefing rooms by the INC and the appeal of their information to U.S. policymakers.

"Source Five," for instance, claimed that Osama bin Laden had traveled to Baghdad for direct meetings with Saddam Hussein. "Source Six" claimed that the Iraqi population was "excited" about the prospects of a U.S. invasion to topple Hussein. Plus, the source said Iraqis recognized the need for post-invasion U.S. control.

By early February 2003, as the final invasion plans were underway, U.S. intelligence agencies had progressed up to "Source Eighteen," who came to epitomize what some analysts still suspected - that the INC was coaching the sources.

As the CIA tried to set up a debriefing of Source Eighteen, another Iraqi exile passed on word to the agency that an INC representative had told Source Eighteen to "deliver the act of a lifetime." CIA analysts weren't sure what to make of that piece of news - since Iraqi exiles frequently badmouthed each other - but the value of the warning soon became clear.

U.S. intelligence officers debriefed Source Eighteen the next day and discovered that "Source Eighteen was supposed to have a nuclear engineering background, but was unable to discuss advanced mathematics or physics and described types of 'nuclear' reactors that do not exist," according to the Senate Intelligence Committee report.

"Source Eighteen used the bathroom frequently, particularly when he appeared to be flustered by a line of questioning, suddenly remembering a new piece of information upon his return. During one such incident, Source Eighteen appeared to be reviewing notes," the report said.

Not surprisingly, the CIA and DIA case officers concluded that Source Eighteen was a fabricator. But the sludge of INC-connected misinformation and disinformation continued to ooze through the U.S. intelligence community and to foul the American intelligence product - in part because there was little pressure from above demanding strict quality controls.

Curve Ball

Other Iraqi exile sources - not directly connected to the INC - also supplied dubious information, including a source for a foreign intelligence agency who earned the code name "Curve Ball." He contributed important details about Iraq's alleged mobile facilities for producing agents for biological warfare.

Tyler Drumheller, former chief of the CIA's European Division, said his office had issued repeated warnings about Curve Ball's accounts. "Everyone in the chain of command knew exactly what was happening," Drumheller said. [Los Angeles Times, April 2, 2005]

Despite those objections and the lack of direct U.S. contact with Curve Ball, he earned a rating as “credible” or “very credible,” and his information became a core element of the Bush administration’s case for invading Iraq.

Drawings of Curve Ball’s imaginary bio-weapons labs were a central feature of Secretary of State Powell’s presentation to the U.N.

Even after the invasion, U.S. officials continued to promote these claims, portraying the discovery of a couple of trailers used for inflating artillery balloons as “the strongest evidence to date that Iraq was hiding a biological warfare program.” [CIA-DIA report, “Iraqi Mobile Biological Warfare Agent Production Plants,” May 16, 2003]

Finally, on May 26, 2004, a CIA assessment of Curve Ball said “investigations since the war in Iraq and debriefings of the key source indicate he lied about his access to a mobile BW production product.”

The U.S. intelligence community also learned that Curve Ball “had a close relative who had worked for the INC since 1992,” but the CIA could never resolve the question of whether the INC was involved in coaching Curve Ball. One CIA analyst said she doubted a direct INC role because the INC pattern was to “shop their good sources around town, but they weren’t known for sneaking people out of countries into some asylum system.”

Delayed Report

In September 2006, four years after the Bush administration seriously began fanning the flames for war against Iraq, a majority of Senate Intelligence Committee members overrode the objections of the panel’s senior Republicans and issued a report on the INC’s contribution to the U.S. intelligence failures.

The report concluded that the INC fed false information to the intelligence community to convince Washington that Iraq was flouting prohibitions on WMD production. The panel also found that the falsehoods had been “widely distributed in intelligence products prior to the war” and did influence some American perceptions of the WMD threat in Iraq.

But INC disinformation was not solely to blame for the bogus intelligence that permeated the pre-war debate. In Washington, there had been a breakdown of the normal checks and balances that American democracy has traditionally relied on for challenging and eliminating the corrosive effects of false data.

By 2002, that self-correcting mechanism – a skeptical press, congressional oversight, and tough-minded analysts – had collapsed. With very few exceptions, prominent journalists refused to put their careers at risk; intelligence professionals played along with the powers that be; Democratic leaders succumbed to the political pressure to toe the President’s line; and Republicans marched in lockstep with Bush on his way to war.

Because of this systematic failure, the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded four years later that nearly every key assessment of the U.S. intelligence community as expressed in the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate about Iraq’s WMD was wrong:

“Postwar findings do not support the [NIE] judgment that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program; ... do not support the [NIE] assessment that Iraq’s acquisition of high-strength aluminum tubes was

intended for an Iraqi nuclear program; ... do not support the [NIE] assessment that Iraq was 'vigorously trying to procure uranium ore and yellowcake' from Africa; ... do not support the [NIE] assessment that 'Iraq has biological weapons' and that 'all key aspects of Iraq's offensive biological weapons program are larger and more advanced than before the Gulf war'; ... do not support the [NIE] assessment that Iraq possessed, or ever developed, mobile facilities for producing biological warfare agents; ... do not support the [NIE] assessments that Iraq 'has chemical weapons' or 'is expanding its chemical industry to support chemical weapons production'; ... do not support the [NIE] assessments that Iraq had a developmental program for an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle 'probably intended to deliver biological agents' or that an effort to procure U.S. mapping software 'strongly suggests that Iraq is investigating the use of these UAVs for missions targeting the United States.'"

Today, as a similar process unfolds regarding Iran – both its alleged nuclear weapons program and supposed links to the 9/11 attacks – the case of the Iraqi “defectors” stands as a useful cautionary tale.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, [Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush](#), was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](#). His two previous books, [Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq](#) and [Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'](#) are also available there.

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