

JIC Assessment, 10 May 2000

IRAQ: SADDAM 63 NOT OUT

The attached assessment was approved by the Committee at their meeting on WEDNESDAY 10 MAY 2000.

At the request of the MOD, we review the security of Saddam's regime.

Key Judgements

- I. Saddam remains **firmly in control of Iraq**.
- II. Saddam's control of the political system and security apparatus is key to his survival. He uses **patronage and terror** to ensure that no individual or group becomes powerful enough to threaten him, and the **income from illicit trade** to buy loyalty. But over time he has become more reliant on a diminishing circle of relatives and confidantes, amongst whom there are rivalries and tensions. **An assassin from this inner circle remains more likely to remove Saddam than an orchestrated coup attempt.**
- III. Reports that Saddam (aged 63) is seriously ill are unconfirmed. He has, however, allowed younger son **Qusai** to be regarded as his deputy and successor, although Qusai lost face recently when some officers under his command were found to be plotting a coup. Elder son **Udai**, despite injury and erratic behaviour, will remain in the picture. **An official announcement in favour of either son is unlikely**; Saddam would not want to create a threat to his own position or inflame the rivalry between his sons.
- IV. Iranian-backed Shia insurgent attacks against government targets do not threaten the regime. Saddam can rely on traditional Sunni fears of the majority Shia population to ensure support for ruthless suppression. **The Shia, and the Kurds of northern Iraq, would only rise up against the regime if Saddam were to be seriously weakened by other factors.**
- V. Saddam's policies of divide-and-rule, patronage and terror, and the absence of constitutional arrangements for succession, will lead to **a period of chaos after his demise.**

1. Saddam Hussein celebrated his 63rd birthday on 28 April. After a low-key event last year, the festivities were lavish and high profile, portraying him as strong as ever. [...] Iraq is in no hurry to accept a UN resolution offering suspension of UN sanctions in return for Baghdad's co-operation with a new disarmament commission. He does not expect another large-scale coalition military attack before the US Presidential election. Although Iraq is increasing its efforts to disrupt external opposition groups, they do not pose a serious threat to his regime. Relations with



supporting attacks on the other by agents and proxy insurgents. But this is likely to be self-limiting; neither side wants to provoke war.

The centre of power

2. **Inside Iraq**, Saddam's mastery is based on strong central leadership buttressed by patronage, fear and the vested interests of the Sunni and Ba'ath Party elites. He manipulates and terrorises, punishes and rewards, to ensure that no individual or group in Iraq becomes powerful enough to threaten his absolute power. He moves his forces and their commanders around regularly and purges them after real or perceived coup plotting. Saddam has **made regime security the top priority of his security apparatus** (see box).

Saddam's vulnerabilities

3. Saddam is **having to work harder to maintain his position**. [...] Saddam's domestic and international policies are being criticised [within Iraq]. But Saddam has more cash (from oil smuggling and cheating on oil-for-food deals) to shore up support within the elite and amongst those who protect him. The beneficiaries are government and military officials and, where necessary, Ba'athist groups and tribal and religious leaders. Recent moves by the Iranian authorities to block the smuggling of oil is likely to reduce the flow of revenue, though Saddam will try to compensate by shipping more through Turkey and Syria.

4. Saddam's distrust of others has made him more reliant on **a diminishing circle of relatives and confidantes**. Regular purges – almost every month – contribute to this. He does not trust the Army and is increasingly suspicious of the Republican Guard. He is particularly reliant on younger son Qusai, who runs the security forces (SSO and SRG). In March he allowed elder son Udai, injured in a 1996 assassination attempt and notoriously erratic, a higher profile through election to the Iraqi National Assembly. Rivalries and animosities between his sons, and within the family and Tikriti [sic] clan, need constant attention by Saddam. Those forced out of the inner circle harbour resentment and provide the raw material for any coup plotting.

5. Reports of **coup plots** surface every few months. Some are likely to be exaggerated by the external opposition or are demonstrations by Saddam to pre-empt others. However, we judge as credible [...] media reports that a plot to assassinate Saddam was uncovered in March, and that officers in the SSO were involved, with many arrested or executed. This threat was unusually close

Saddam's internal security apparatus

Saddam's **Personal Protection Force** is about 80 people, all related to Saddam. Saddam's senior aides are responsible for his immediate protection.

The **Special Security Organisation (SSO)** oversees the security of Saddam. It also monitors other family members, senior officials and the other security forces. The SSO is the closest and most loyal of Iraq's services. It numbers around 2,000 members drawn primarily from Saddam's tribe or his home district of Tikrit.

The **Special Republican Guard (SRG)** forms an outer line of protection for the President and the regime's principal sites. It equates to a division, with at least 10,000 men. Only SRG military units are normally allowed within Baghdad.

The **Republican Guard** is Iraq's elite war-fighting force. It is also used for internal security and to defend the regime. It has six divisions and two Special Forces brigades, comprising about 75,000 men.

The **Regular Army** has 17 divisions. Its main role is to defend Iraq against external threats and Iranian-backed Shia insurgents.

to home. Nevertheless, Saddam's record of detecting and forestalling coup plots is intact, and a reminder to others. We continue to assess that **an assassin from the inner circle is more likely to remove Saddam than an orchestrated coup attempt**. There would be no warning.

Premonitions of his own mortality?

6. [...] some [...] believe that **Saddam's health** has deteriorated. This has led to rumours. One report suggests that Saddam has lymphatic cancer which is not responding to treatment. This report has not been corroborated.

7. Since mid-1999, Qusai has been treated effectively as Saddam's deputy. [...] and the media, Saddam told the family and senior officials that he would prefer to leave power in Qusai's hands if he dies or becomes incapacitated. However, there have been no official announcements. [...] Saddam has allowed such stories to leak as means to soften Western attitudes towards Iraq. Following SSO



Saddam appoints Qusai?

failures leading to the March coup attempt, Qusai has lost face, at least temporarily. Despite his injury and erratic behaviour, Udai will remain in the picture. We think that Saddam will prefer to keep everyone guessing. He will not want to create any threat to his own primacy or inflame the rivalry between his two sons.

Shias and Kurds

8. The **Shia population** - a much larger group than the politically dominant Sunnis - is potentially a major source of opposition to the regime. Most live in southern Iraq or in Baghdad's poorer suburbs. **Iranian-backed Shia insurgents** operate amongst them. But the Iraqi Shia community is diffuse and lacks recognised leadership. Few actively oppose the regime and most are not pro-Iranian. Saddam is able to control them. The insurgents themselves are more difficult to neutralise. They continue to carry out sporadic hit-and-run attacks against government targets in Baghdad and towns in southern Iraq. But the insurgents are fragmented and their actions rarely co-ordinated. Recent mortar attacks in Baghdad, including one against a presidential palace, are likely to have been sponsored by Iran in retaliation for an Iraqi-backed attack in Tehran. Such tit-for-tat exchanges do not threaten the regime. Iran's backing is moderated by its policy to oppose but not provoke Saddam, and by its fear of a dismembered Iraq. Overall, we judge that the Shia would **only rise up to become a threat to the regime if Saddam becomes weakened by other factors**. Failing that, Saddam can rely on traditional Sunni fears of the Shia to ensure support for ruthless suppression.

9. Although divided, **the Kurdish groups** are well organised in the autonomous region of northern Iraq and have recognised leaders who could rally political support to an anti-Saddam cause, if they so chose. Saddam's policy is to [...] divide-and-rule. But **Saddam is also prepared militarily**. If he felt threatened or needed to demonstrate his power, he would take action against them as he did in 1996. Like the Shia, the Kurds would only move against the regime in Baghdad if Saddam were already seriously weakened.

An unpleasant legacy

10. Saddam has retained power by a combination of patronage and fear. This continues to be successful. But we judge that much of what Saddam has done to retain power, especially since 1990, and the absence of constitutional arrangements for succession, will lead to a period of **chaos in the aftermath of his departure** from the scene. Bitter rivalries amongst the Tikriti clan and Sunni elites would surface. So would a long list of individuals, groups and tribes who have been exploited, excluded from privilege or dispossessed. In the last year, for example, Saddam has stepped up the forcible relocation of Kurdish and Shia families to obviate local security threats, just as he drained and burned the marshes in southern Iraq in the 1990s. The economy has been devastated by the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War and UN sanctions, and resources used for security and patronage rather than invested in infrastructure. Saddam has maintained his position, but his means of doing so will rebound on his successor, however orderly the initial transition of power.