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Director of Central Intelligence

DCI Red Cell

A Red Cell Report

Number 87

17 October 2002

How Saddam Might Play the Terrorist Card [redacted]

In response to the events of 11 September, the Director of Central Intelligence commissioned CIA's Deputy Director for Intelligence to create a "red cell" that would think unconventionally about the full range of relevant analytic issues. The DCI Red Cell is thus charged with taking a pronounced "out-of-the-box" approach and will periodically produce memoranda and reports intended to provoke thought rather than to provide authoritative assessment.

Please direct questions or comments to the DCI Red Cell [redacted]

Anticipating a US attack, Saddam may view acts of terrorism as the best way to deflect US attention from him. Once an attack is under way, he may use terrorism with an eye to diverting US resources from the main battlefield and, ultimately, to so expanding the war that the costs would be unbearable to the US and its allies. Saddam may also calculate that threats of terrorist reprisals will deter some states from cooperating with the US. He might consider launching a "false flag" terrorist strike, untraceable to Iraq, to make the US focus on al-Qa'ida rather than on him. Should he fail to deter or deflect an invasion, Saddam may plan to unleash pre-positioned terrorist "sleepers" against the US and its allies. We would also expect him to try to elevate his conflict with the US into a full-blown clash of civilizations by facilitating al-Qa'ida, Palestinian extremist, and other radical Islamist operations and by encouraging a broad rising among Muslim peoples worldwide.

[redacted] In the context of Saddam Hussein's historical interest in terrorism as a weapon against the US—we offer a speculative assessment of how Saddam might again be planning to use terrorist strikes in resisting a US attack. [redacted]

Malicious Intent—With Probable Capability [redacted]

During the Gulf War the coalition thwarted Saddam's hastily devised plans to use pre-positioned terrorist cells abroad in attacks against US assets. This time, Saddam has had a longer period of preparation and can draw on the lessons of his previous failures and the subsequent successes of al-Qa'ida and other terrorist organizations.

- As we learn more about possible Iraqi connections to al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups, it is probably prudent to assume Saddam has better "terrorism force multipliers" than he had a decade ago.
- And in confronting a mortal challenge, Saddam strikes us as more likely to use WMD in terrorist operations, thinking this might successfully fend off the US.

Terrorism As Deterrent [redacted]

As Saddam seeks to forestall a US attack, he might resort to terrorist threats as a way of discouraging potential coalition partners from cooperating with Washington. Although a failed gambit during the Gulf war, the threat may strike Saddam as more credible now given the current higher stakes. For example, Saddam might warn that Iraq plans to initiate terrorist strikes against any state supporting an invasion, seeking to deter such countries from backing the US or granting basing or overflight rights. Although unlikely to admit such attacks would involve WMD—which would bolster the case against him—he could couch the threat in vague terms designed to raise fears.

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- Such tactics might cause backtracking in states [REDACTED] already nervous about supporting the US, but in Europe and elsewhere such intimidation could miscarry by underscoring the danger Saddam poses.
- Even with a risk of backlash, Saddam might see an executed terrorist WMD operation as playing to existing sentiments that "the US is to blame"—and rather than an anti-Iraq outcry might just as well raise popular calls for cease-fire and negotiations. [REDACTED]

Creating Distractions [REDACTED]

Saddam might envision terrorism as capable of stirring up a sufficiently sizable crisis elsewhere to put an Iraq invasion temporarily onto the back burner. Saddam is surely aware of, and might seek to use, the debate in the US and Europe over whether Iraq is deflecting attention from al-Qa'ida—a controversy given new impetus by recent al-Qa'ida leadership audios and by attacks in Kuwait, Indonesia, and at sea against a French tanker. [REDACTED]

A major terrorist attack, staged by Iraq but bearing all the hallmarks of an al-Qa'ida operation, might represent a bid by Saddam to refocus attention on al-Qa'ida and on the risks to US equities in another locale. For such a plan, Saddam would have to calculate that only a very injurious operation would be capable of deflecting the spotlight from Iraq. Diversionary possibilities include:

- **Biological Attack.** Drawing a lesson from the US anthrax episode, Saddam could launch a biological attack in the US using relatively unsophisticated means, while trying to pin the attack on al-Qa'ida. He might even see the publicity about the Washington-area sniper attacks as evidence of how easily US attention is riveted on killings that, in his mind, would be innocuous.
- **Assassination.** President Karzai is already a target in his own country, and Saddam would be far from the first suspect if he were assassinated. Iraqi special forces might be able to carry out such an operation, or Saddam could hire assassins. If Afghan stability were undermined—opening the possibility of a comeback of the Taliban or al-Qa'ida—Saddam would count on pressures for the US to stabilize the situation in Kabul before moving on Iraq. Jordan's King Abdullah might be another accessible target whose assassination could be blamed on Palestinian or Islamic extremists.
- **Oil Panic.** A wartime alliance between Saddam and al-Qa'ida might yield terrorist attacks against Gulf oil targets. Successful attacks against major facilities, such as Aramco's in Saudi Arabia, might heighten Western anxiety about the impact of further cuts atop wartime loss of Iraqi oil—while stoking concern over al-Qa'ida moving against the Saudi regime. Saddam might even try to settle old scores by hitting Kuwaiti or even Iranian oil fields.
- **Israel.** Saddam appears to be tightening links to Palestinian groups. In place of Scud attacks, he could purchase a terrorist attack against Israel that goes to a new level—for example, a biological or chemical attack. Saddam would count on Sharon to lay the blame on the Palestinians and escalate his drive against Arafat, thus distracting the US and heightening Arab opposition to a war in Iraq. [REDACTED]

Once Saddam is convinced hostilities are inevitable, he will have little need to conceal his hand. Intelligence on Iraq's BW and CW arsenal is sufficiently alarming to raise our concern that Saddam might already have the means in place abroad to attack US or allied targets.

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In a no-holds-barred fight for his existence, Saddam might want to maximize the price his opponents will pay. Saddam has a history of using Iraqi embassies and business offices as bases of operations and of sending weapons through diplomatic pouches. WMD materials might merely be waiting for the arrival of special weapons officers to carry out attacks.

- Saddam might even imagine a successful 11th hour biological attack against multiple cities throughout Europe and the US would create sufficient havoc to postpone an invasion, even if he was clearly the culprit. [REDACTED]

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Stoking the Clash of Civilizations [REDACTED]

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Saddam expects a US invasion will be viewed throughout the Muslim world as an attack on all Muslims, whipping up strong anti-US sentiments and rallying much of the Islamic world to his side. The interests of Saddam, al-Qa'ida, and other Islamic extremist groups could thus dovetail in the common desire to attack the US and its allies. Indeed, an invasion of Iraq might provoke a broad terrorist front throughout much of the Muslim world to seek revenge against the US and increase US war costs. [REDACTED]

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From Saddam's perspective, any actions that create such havoc could force the US to confront a broader crisis with the Muslim world. In addition to using links with Palestinian groups and with a range of other potential terrorist allies at hand, Saddam might:

- Support anti-US demonstrations by Muslims in key regions and encouraging violence against US citizens and facilities.
- Reach out to Iranian hardliners to join in the fight against the infidel US by curbing oil production and taking the wraps off Hizballah to go after US targets.
- Seek to create severe oil shortages in the West by sabotaging Iraq's own oil fields and attacking those of states cooperating with the US, like Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, as well as encouraging other states to cut back on production or be attacked for aiding the US. [REDACTED]

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As a last-ditch measure, Saddam could invite Islamist fighters—not only al-Qa'ida or Taliban warriors but extremists from Chechnya and elsewhere—to defend Iraq. Such an appeal might conceivably attract thousands, many of whom fled Afghanistan, and would complicate US efforts to cleanse Iraq, particularly if the jihadis were willing to fight to the death in urban guerilla warfare. Saddam would only make a move like this in desperation, recognizing that such forces would be largely beyond his control. But if he at last saw the darkness closing in, he might prefer to turn the country over to Islamists—who could be relied on to vex Washington—than to the US. [REDACTED]

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