

Did the Russians Aid Saddam Hussein's War Effort?

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A lengthy study issued by the U.S. Defense Department in March 2006 has sparked allegations that Russian officials helped Saddam Hussein defend against the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq three years earlier. The report cites Iraqi documents from March 2003 containing information allegedly provided by Russian diplomats and intelligence officers. The day after the report was released, a spokesman for the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) heatedly denied that any intelligence was supplied to Saddam Hussein's regime before or during the war in March 2003. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that she would seek clarification of the matter from the Russian government, but thus far no clarification has been forthcoming.

The Pentagon report itself is an impressive, analytically persuasive study by analysts who clearly were doing their best to make sense of the huge amount of evidence available to them, including interviews with captured Iraqi leaders, a vast number of Iraqi documents, and published sources. However, the analysts were responsible only for assessing the Iraqi regime's perspective on the war. They skillfully highlight the extraordinary degree of self-delusion and incompetence on the part of the Iraqi leadership, but they do not – and were not expected to – evaluate the veracity of claims about other countries found in the Iraqi documents. At a news conference shortly after the report's publication, the Pentagon analysts expressed confidence that the Iraqi documents are authentic and that Iraqi leaders were receiving information that supposedly came from Russian officials, but they explicitly refrained from judging whether, and under what circumstances, the Russians may actually have provided the

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information.

The two main documents cited in the report that pertain to alleged Russian intelligence assistance – an undated, 3-page handwritten description of U.S. force deployments as of early March 2003 based on information allegedly provided by Russian Ambassador Vladimir Titorenko, and a typed, 8-page description of U.S. war plans dated March 25, 2003 and based on information also attributed to Titorenko, who cited “sources at the U.S. Central Command in Doha” – are publicly available, though only in Arabic. The excerpts cited in the Pentagon report are accurately quoted and are not taken out of context. A few other Iraqi documents concerning alleged Russian intelligence cooperation have been quoted extensively in some Russian and Western press reports from as far back as 2004. There is no inherent reason to doubt that these items, too, are authentic and have been quoted accurately. Whether the information contained in the documents is accurate is, of course, a different matter.

The SVR's denials of having provided war-related information to Iraq are largely irrelevant. The Russian agencies whose activities are in question are the military intelligence service (GRU) and the Foreign Ministry, not the SVR. Hence, whatever the SVR says is beside the point. Many reports in the Russian and Western press in March 2003 indicated that General Vladislav Achalov, the former commander of Soviet airborne forces who supported the attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991, visited Baghdad shortly before the March 2003 invasion, accompanied by another retired Russian general. Photographs taken at the time confirm that the two generals were awarded medals by the Iraqi defense minister on behalf of Saddam Hussein. In subsequent interviews, Achalov acknowledged that he traveled to Iraq at least 15-20 other times in the few years prior to the war.

Russian and Western press reports in March 2003 and afterward also indicated that other GRU officers were working with the Iraqi regime on a daily basis before and during the war, often through Abbas Qunfith, the former Iraqi Ambassador to Moscow, who sent numerous reports to Iraqi leaders citing GRU and diplomatic sources. In addition, a GRU “working group” known as Ramzaj, which posted daily assessments on a Russian military website, was widely described in the Russian press as a unit aiding the Iraqi government. Although Ramzaj's forecasts and some of its information proved to be wildly off the mark, the reports appearing in major Russian dailies and in highly respected trade publications like *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* lend strong credence to the assertions in the Iraqi documents that Ambassador Titorenko and some Russian military intelligence officers actively aided the Iraqi regime's efforts to withstand the U.S. invasion.

If Titorenko did provide illicit assistance, his motive may have been partly financial. The Volcker Commission's final report on fraud and corruption in the United Nations (UN) oil-for-food program, published in October 2005, listed Titorenko and his son as having received allocations of some 23.7 million barrels of oil. The report also listed numerous other Russian politicians and political entities, including Russian President Vladimir Putin's then-chief of staff Alexander Voloshin, the speaker of the upper house of the Russian parliament, Egor Stroyev, the Russian Communist Party, and the pro-Moscow government in Chechnya, as recipients of large oil allocations

worth many millions of dollars.

Whether Titorenko's apparent actions and the GRU cooperation were authorized at high levels is far from clear. Despite the often unsavory policies adopted by Russian President Vladimir Putin, there is no conclusive evidence that Putin or Igor Ivanov, who was then Russian foreign minister, would have given explicit approval for the provision of help that they almost certainly knew would be discovered by the United States. Russian opposition to the war – opposition motivated mostly by financial considerations (the enormous profits that Russian companies and elites had been reaping from the oil-for-food program) rather than by principle – was much stronger than many experts had anticipated. But this does not necessarily mean that Russian leaders would have condoned transferring information that potentially would cost American lives and would stand a high chance of eventually being detected. Unless solid evidence emerges to the contrary, we cannot assume that illicit cooperation by Titorenko and some GRU officers with Iraq in March 2003 was authorized at the highest levels.

Press coverage of the Pentagon report has emphasized an excerpt from the Iraqi document describing U.S. war plans that refers to “information that the Russians have collected from their sources inside the American Central Command in Doha.” Many journalists have construed this to mean that the Russians had a spy working in the U.S. Central Command. That conclusion seems highly dubious, even if the Iraqi document is accurate in what it says about the provenance of the information. Far more likely is that the Russian information was collected through electronic intercepts of communications or possibly even through an authorized sharing of information. The former possibility is a good deal more likely than the latter, but either of these possibilities is far more plausible than the notion that the Russians had recruited or planted a spy in the U.S. Central Command.

Indeed, had a spy actually been present there, he or she presumably would have provided highly accurate information. But one of the interesting aspects of the information allegedly turned over by the GRU and Ambassador Titorenko is that some of it proved to be egregiously wrong. The provision of this information, far from hindering Operation Iraqi Freedom, may actually have facilitated it in some small way by misleading the Iraqi leadership. Clearly, if Saddam Hussein and his aides relied to any significant degree on the information allegedly provided by Russian officials, they ended up worse off than if they had ignored it or had never received it.

The erroneousness of some of the intelligence suggests that U.S. commanders may have deliberately floated false information that they hoped would be picked up by Russian intelligence-gathering platforms and would then be provided to the Iraqis. General Tommy Franks, who oversaw the U.S. war effort, alludes to such a plan in his memoirs. The American commanders, like the rest of us, knew from press reports at the time that GRU officers were in Baghdad and were apparently assisting the Iraqis. Hence, the Americans may have counted on the likelihood that false information, after being picked up by Russian intelligence platforms and circulated within the GRU, would become known to the Russian officers in Iraq and would be divulged to the Iraqis. If this was indeed the case, the U.S. scheme worked brilliantly.

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The attempts by Russian officials and some Russian analysts to link the publication of the Pentagon report with the ongoing debate in the UN Security Council about Iran are far-fetched. The 210-page Pentagon report is a carefully prepared and extremely interesting analysis of the Iraqi regime's perspective. The notion that such a lengthy and thorough document was suddenly conjured up to serve a transitory diplomatic interest is preposterous.

Even more preposterous is the claim by Sergei Oznobishchev, the head of the Moscow-based Institute of Strategic Evaluations and Analyses, that the Pentagon issued its report because of a desire to undercut Russia. The RIA-Novosti press agency quotes Oznobishchev as saying that "they [Pentagon officials] are irritated by Russia's strengthening position in the international arena and its foreign policy course." This statement not only is misguided in its assessment of the Pentagon authors' motivations, but also reflects a high degree of wishful thinking about Russia's place in the international arena.

The Iraqi documents have exacerbated U.S. concerns about Russia at a time when Putin is preparing to chair the July 2006 G-8 summit in St. Petersburg. The uproar surrounding the disclosures is a sign of how frayed the West's relationship with Russia has become. Rather than simply brushing aside the report, the Russian government would be wise to clear up the matter as expeditiously as possible.

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