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Intelligence on Intelligence: Comments on Khamisiyah

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Title: Intelligence on Intelligence: Comments on Khamisiyah

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Abstract. This paper describes some of the problems intrinsic to intelligence analysis. The description derives from a close reading of the unclassified document "Khamisiyah: A Historical Perspective on Related Intelligence" (9 April 1997) which was prepared by a United States (US) Intelligence Community (IC) Persian Gulf War Illnesses Task Force authorized by the Acting Director of Central Intelligence, George J. Tenet, and directed by his Special Assistant for Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses, Robert Walpole.

No one gets it right all the time. But when it's gotten wrong, psychological phenomena are induced within inquiring minds, the mindful, even the mindless as if everyone should get it right all the time. Some of these psychological phenomena involve intentional mischief--to sabotage and advance careers, political parties, governments, ideologies, and legislation or to promulgate viewpoints which will make it into today's news or tomorrow's history books. But other phenomena reflect a genuine misunderstanding of some aspects of intelligence analysis.

For example, was information that there were Iraqi chemical warfare assets stored at Khamisiyah clearly available to some US intelligence analysts? Were they aware of this information? How did they interpret it? When were they aware of the information and their interpretations? What was done with their interpretations?

These questions are significant--at least to people concerned with the diagnosis, etiology, course, treatment, and prognosis of complaints subsumed under the term "Gulf War Illnesses." For a strong case can be made--based on unclassified data--for the following sequence. At least some intelligence analysts were clearly aware of the presence of chemical warfare assets at Khamisiyah before the Gulf War. However, the interpretations of these analysts may not have been available to appropriate military operational decision makers during the war and its immediate and intermediate aftermath. If the interpretations had been available, the decision makers might not have decided to order the intentional demolition of a bunker's and pit's contents at Khamisiyah by US military personnel--at least at close range. Or the decision makers might have decided to attempt to significantly warn US and Allied personnel judged at risk for possible CW agent dispersal--before, during, and after demolition--based on the best expert knowledge at the time. And, perhaps, just perhaps, there might today be a smaller number of veterans with Gulf War illnesses--even though there do not seem to be "smoking gun" data that exposure to low-level amounts of CW result in medical problems.

Assuming the strong case to be the case, what went wrong? A number of factors intrinsic to intelligence analysis were explicitly cited as culpatory within Walpole's report. However, these factors have been inappropriately seized upon and misinterpreted in screeds written by well-meaning but misguided commentators and observers.

Multiple Data Bases. Question: Why were there multiple data bases on a specific topic, e.g., what was stored at Khamisiyah? If there was only one database, there would be less chance to overlook or lose information. Answer: Sure, but look at this from a philosopher's, a cognitive psychologist's, even an intelligence analysis manager's point of view. Out there or in here, without or within, there are infinite

types and varieties of stimuli, some more important than others to a particular observer. The stimuli judged more important often are the ones not only sensed but perceived, categorized, and employed as concepts to which other stimuli are linked. In contrast, other stimuli judged less important are minimally or not even perceived, let alone categorized and linked. If there was a different database for each stimulus--important or not, and each database contained only what was uniquely characteristic of that stimulus, there would be an infinite amount of data bases, with little in each. If each database contained relevant but non-unique characteristics of a specific stimulus, there would be more information per database, but some overlap between them as well. So how many databases are needed, and how much should be in them?

An intelligence analysis manager knowingly or otherwise deals with the above Issues within the more mundane context of being tasked to maintain databases on certain topics, not on others. But sometimes the "others" are what turns out to be of crucial importance in a political crisis. Although the manager has some leeway on what data bases are to be maintained and on rules of content inclusion and exclusion, the "others" of vital import in a crisis may not comprise the names of existing data bases but may comprise the content of some of them. Fortunately, information technologies can facilitate data searches after a "must-be-done-yesterday" request from political authorities, because the existence of multiple data bases are a fact of life, not a smoking gun of incompetence. (And there are still other Issues about requiring multiple data bases to manage information with different levels of security and code word classifications. We now turn to this topic.)

Limited Sharing of Vital Information. Question: Why was information so zealously hoarded and guarded? If this weren't so, the people who really need it, e.g., military operators in the field, could get it. Answer: Sure. But some information needs to be limited to protect sources of information and to avoid noxious consequences if the wrong people had information access. Sometimes--and this does not seem to include Khamisiyah--what looks like a tactical blunder of information limitation may well be a tactical or strategic success in information management, perception management, or information warfare. On the other hand, sometimes information is inappropriately guarded not for national security reasons but to avoid embarrassment--or the two are conflated. At other times, information is guarded to engage in the mischief described in the opening paragraph. The very real fact that limited sharing can be abused does not necessarily render limitation or even abuse as an intelligence failure. (And there is the hoary Issue that the same people who protest controlling information that may affect the security of large numbers of people zealously control the sordid details of their personal lives, which usually affect only themselves and a few others.)

Incomplete Searches of Files. Question: Why weren't all files searched right away? If this had been done, then all information would have been obtained. Answer: Sounds reasonable. But just as the devil is in the details, the problem is in the nature of searching. For example, an order may come down mandating a complete search of files for a particular Issue. (Hopefully, orders do not often come down mandating an incomplete search.) Unfortunately, there will almost always be information about the Issue in files not labeled with the Issue as subject. (See Multiple Databases above.) In fact, information about the Issue may not even contain the name of the Issue. Instead, this information may comprise data that, only when interpreted in a certain manner, will even bear on the Issue. While the term "incomplete search" often connotes locking up the smoking guns where no one can find them--or better yet, destroying the guns altogether--the heart of the matter is that often there are no smoking guns or merely guns that look like plowshares.

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Analytic Errors. Yes, there seem to have been analytic errors--e.g., assuming that the Khamisiyah locale was An Nasiriyah instead or that, because S-shaped bunkers in Iraq often were associated with the presence of CW assets, the absence of such bunkers indicated as well the absence of CW assets. And there were other errors as well.

But with so many contaminants that go with the territory of intelligence analysis, the question is not why there were errors but why there weren't more. The following contaminants were cited or can be inferred from Walpole's report: (1) Information confronting an analyst is almost always contradictory, ambiguous, and incomplete--and there are huge amounts of such information. (2) Analysts rarely have access to all information within their government's information management system about a particular subject. (3) Resource constraints and conflicting intelligence and personal priorities limit the number of intelligence issues that can be addressed in depth. (4) The public release of relevant information can shape conscious and unconscious expectations and biases of analysts. For example, the presence of false alarms about CW storage and employment can affect analyst opinions about the likelihood of future true alarms. (5) Different intelligence analysts manifest different cognitive thresholds about what constitutes "suspected" or "known" CW facilities. (6) A target of interest is often labeled and relabeled with different names with different spellings at different times by different analysts and other sources. For example, Khamisiyah was frequently referred to as Tall al Lahm. Also, some Iraqi CW assets may have been specially marked or unmarked either through policy dictates or the vagaries of human factors. (7) The target of interest is often labeled and relabeled with different functional classifications at different times. For example, Khamisiyah was sometimes classified as a conventional ammunition depot. (8) Often there are differences in categorization and classification procedures and in procedures for limiting and sharing among different agencies--sometimes within the same agency--within the IC. For example, the same facility was maintained in a National Security Agency database as Khamisiyah and in an imagery database as Tall al Lahm. Also, there are similar and different uses of similar and different words--e.g., a list of CW sites may not be the same as a list of CW facilities. (9) The credibility of human sources and the reliability and validity of technical and physical sources of information vary and often are misperceived or unknown.

As of this writing, there is significant controversy about whether the IC in general and the Central Intelligence Agency specifically provided suitable and timely warnings about CW assets at Khamisiyah. CIA authorities especially seem to be stating that there were ample warnings before, during, and after the war about CW assets in the vicinity of Khamisiyah--although the Khamisiyah facility itself was not on a list of possible CW sites. In fact, nine days before the Khamisiyah demolition, there even seems to have been a CIA report to US Central Command authorities with map coordinates for a possible chemical storage area that was in fact the Khamisiyah depot--even though the depot was not mentioned by name. In any case, the Khamisiyah story is still incomplete, as is the understanding of intelligence analysis by some political authorities and informed citizens alike. (See Berkowitz, B.D. (Winter, 1997.) Information technology and intelligence reform. *Orbis*, 4, 107-118; Johnson, L. (Fall, 1983.) Seven sins of strategic intelligence. *World Affairs*, 146, 176-204; Shenon, P. (April 17, 1977.) CIA unfairly blamed in chemical blast, panel told. *The New York Times*, (<http://www.nytimes.com>)). (Keywords: Intelligence, Information Warfare, Perception Management.)