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Iraqi Intelligence and Antiterrorism/Counterterrorism: A News Conference by Tahir Jalil Habbush Concerning Abu Nidal

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Abstract. This article explores difficulties in preventing and resolving terrorist operations that are planned by one's adversaries for implementation against one's political entity.

On August 21, 2002, a news conference with the leader of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, Tahir Jalil Habbush, was broadcast via satellite television from Baghdad. The news conference focused on the alleged suicide of Sabri Al-Banna (aka Abu Nidal). Even recognizing the possibility of a lack of complete or of any candor concerning the fate of Al-Banna, one may identify several antiterrorism/counterterrorism concerns of the Iraqi intelligence leader that are ironically congruent with those publicized by the Bush Administration of the United States (US).

Habbush relates that Al-Banna lived in Iraq until 1983, was deported for activities harmful to Iraq, but then illegally re-entered the country through use of a passport (Yemeni) that precluded the need for an entry visa at a border post with Iran. Discovery of the re-entry was at least partially due to intelligence from an Iraqi ally. (Comment: This information suggests that fighting terrorism is necessarily a global not an intra-national one, that a focus on the legitimacy of passports and procedures at official border posts may be prudent, and that the sharing of foreign intelligence may have positive consequences.)

Habbush relates that the investigation into Al-Banna's whereabouts lasted "a very long time," and that Al-Banna was living on a name different than that that was on the passport. (Comment: This information resonates with the common observation that investigations may be lengthy and complex in the quest to connect the dots of isolated pieces of information, as in the US intelligence agencies, fruitless attempts to identify the details of an impending catastrophic terrorist attack pre-9/11. This information also suggests that the quest to identify individuals who have violated immigration laws may be bear fruit subject to the violations, linkages with other potentially relevant information.)

Habbush relates that after Al-Banna's whereabouts were discovered within Iraq, intelligence authorities first informed higher political authorities and then received orders concerning how to proceed. (Comment: This information may ring true to intelligence authorities throughout the world who recognize that proceeding in sensitive cases without the approval of higher political authorities may prove detrimental to the authorities? health and even their lives regardless of or even because of the high quality of their intelligence skills and achievements.)

Habbush relates that after a group of security authorities went to Al-Banna's domicile to escort him elsewhere for questioning, this same group allowed him time to be alone in another room, whereupon his death or something close to death ensued. (Comment: This information suggests that a cardinal security principle was violated - that of not letting a suspect out of one's sight after contact is made for investigation, arrest, or detention. This information also suggests that even if the purpose of the visit to Al-Banna's domicile was to torture or kill him or apprehend him for torture and/or killing, the cardinal security principle of capturing even the most heinous individual to preserve the option of obtaining valuable information was violated.)

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Habbush relates that after Al-Banna was fatally injured, investigation of the premises yielded fake identity cards with different photos and names, light weapons, silencer guns, booby-trapped bags, and a code that suggested the financing of Al-Banna from another country. (Comment: This information is similar to that validated after the entry of premises of other individuals throughout the world who have been involved in terrorism operations and/or support.)

The main purpose of this commentary of Habbush's remarks is to demonstrate what can be of value in verbal responses even of someone who (for good or for bad) might be expected to be less than completely forthcoming, i.e., someone representing a national intelligence service. That even deceptive intention and response may contain items of truthful value is, of course, the premise of direct and indirect projective assessment approaches. One truthful item may be that the US and Iraqi governments may be more similar than dissimilar in the context of antiterrorism/counterterrorism analysis, an irony that increases in light of the impending military conflict involving the two. (See Iraq: Intelligence chief discloses details of Abu-Nidal's "suicide." (0840 GMT 21 Aug 02). FBIS, GMP20020821000060. http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/an082102.htm; Lachkar, J. (2002). The psychological make-up of a suicide bomber. Journal of Psychohistory, 29, 349-367; Schbley, A.H. (2000). Torn between God, family, and money: The changing profile of Lebanon's religious terrorists. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 23, 175-196; Smith, B. L., & Morgan, K. D. (1994). Terrorists right and left: Empirical Issues in profiling American terrorists. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 17, 39-57.) (Keywords: Abu Nidal, Iraq, Tahir Jalil Habbush, Terrorism.)