Trends. Is Saddam Hussein Dead?

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol14/iss12/5

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses how we might know whether Saddam Hussein is dead, as well as his significance in the ongoing political narrative in Iraq.

The psychology of this question bears on our schadenfreude; our identification, projection, projective identification, and transference relationships with someone we have never met; our estimates of death’s political import; and resonance with entertaining narrative bordering on the mythic and archetypical. But from an intelligence perspective, here’s how one might seek to answer it through combining data sources.

Technical Intelligence. One might analyze data obtained through technological devices that allow hearing credible sources—e.g., statements that he is alive or dead including Saddam’s own voice suggesting his health status. Or devices that allow seeing anything which has implications for his being alive or dead—e.g., his body, a burial ritual, or mourning behavior among those expected to mourn. Or, in addition, devices that allow hearing and seeing events suggestive of Saddam being alive or dead—e.g., someone else seeming to be in charge, courses of action being taken that seemingly never would occur if Saddam were alive, or business as usual suggesting he is still alive.

Human Intelligence. One might analyze data obtained through credible human sources directly or indirectly reporting to intelligence officers on any of the above.

Physical Intelligence. One might analyze relevant physical data such as samples of what might be Saddam’s body tissue or what might be his actual body—corroborated through forensic means.