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THREATS AND RESPONSES: NORTHERN IRAQ; Kurdish Agents Play Spy Games With Iraqis on Arms Tips

By C. J. Chivers

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The Kurdish security official sat at his desk, handling letters from his informants. Each contained a tip that might change the future of Iraq. Or maybe he was being played for a dope.

He held a sheet of paper aloft.

''This one says the Iraqis built a mosque in Tuz Khormatu, but under the ground is a hollow place,'' he said. ''The mosque has no guards, people go there and pray, but underneath them chemical weapons are stored.''

He picked up another.

''This one is about a shoe and plastics factory in Baghdad where all of the workers were removed before the weapons inspectors returned, and new workers replaced them,'' he said. ''It is in a neighborhood called Hay Jameela. It is very strange.''

While United Nations inspectors search Iraq for prohibited weapons, a parallel operation is taking place in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. Kurdish officials here are evaluating a stream of tips about where Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons and illegal missiles are said to be hidden, and pondering how to handle them.

Throughout the region there is a lively internal debate about whether the tips are authentic or part of a deliberate counterintelligence campaign by Mr. Hussein's security services. Kurds wonder if they have uncovered definitive evidence against the Iraqi government, or become ensnared in a circular game of spy versus spy.

''One way that Saddam has always worked is that he has sent information into an area through his agents, and it is the wrong information,'' said a security official in Erbil. ''Believe me, the information we have received about all of the places he has hidden weapons is enough for the whole world to be busy searching. He leaks this information.''

Back in Sulaimaniya, the official with the hand-scrawled tips said he believed them, because they were delivered by informants who had been reliable in the past.

''I am not new at this business,'' he said. ''I know whom I work with.''

Dr. Barham Salih, prime minister of the eastern zone of northern Iraq, leaves open the possibility that both views are right.

''We know that the Iraqi government has chemical weapons and is involved in a very elaborate concealment effort,'' he said. ''And we know that Saddam Hussein is capable of such decoy operations and misinformation campaigns.''

Whether true of false, the tips have a receptive audience. Fear of chemical attack is part of the Kurdish psyche. These are people who Mr. Hussein's forces attacked in the 1980's with nerve and mustard gas. Kurds are certain the Iraqi leader retains prohibited weapons, and that he intends to use them again. The leaks carry great emotional power.

But emotional power and intelligence value are not the same thing, and officials say they worry about the damage planted information might cause, including damage to their own credibility, since some of the tips that Kurdish officials deem reliable have been shared with American intelligence teams working in northern Iraq.

''Saddam wants us to leak his misinformation to the U.N., so the U.N. will go there once, twice, three times, and waste their time, and lose respect for the credibility of the Kurds,'' the official in Erbil said.

Kurds also worry that the meager intelligence means at their disposal means they cannot fully evaluate or corroborate the material at hand. They claim to have networks of informants, but acknowledge that this ''human intelligence,'' as it is called, has limits.

''Kurdish intelligence is not that clever or smart to determine if these are lies or true things,'' Faraidoon Abdulkader, interior minister in the Kurdish eastern zone.

All the while, leaks keep surfacing, coming through informants, circulating in villages along the border between northern and southern Iraq, and being passed to journalists.

Karim Agha, chief of the Hammond tribe, whose people straddle the border region at nearby Chamchamal, said that earlier this fall a smuggler who often passes through the lines saw Iraqi soldiers with heavy equipment digging holes at night in remote gullies, and burying metal containers.

Mr. Abdulkader said that two weeks ago he received two separate tips of people burying materials at night under a military guard, and has been given descriptions of four trucks that are thought to be mobile biological labs.

The official with the reports on his desk said that the sheer volume of the tips, and the debate about what to do with them, meant that information was allowed to go stale. He said his informant on the storage site at Tuz Khormatu complained. ''He asked me, 'Why are you not coming to this mosque?' We give you this information, why are you not coming here?' ''

The tension and frustration is high enough in the region that at least one tipster has approached outsiders, although he seemed motivated more by opportunism than public service. An unshaven man in a suit visited an ABC News producer in his hotel room here in late November, seeking $50,000 to arrange the smuggling of what he called suspicious bottles out of a weapons factory in Baghdad.

The man said the region was overrun with spies, and that he did not want to notify the Kurdish government because he might be interrogated. He also hinted at fears that he might be killed by the Iraqis.

The producer, Kevin McKiernan, declined the offer and notified his office. He wrote in his journal that the visitor ''seemed angry when I told him that news reporters don't buy materials.''

The surge of tips has a familiar past. Another Kurdish official, who worked as a liaison to the United States military during its relief operation in northern Iraq in the early 1990's, said he helped sort and assemble reports for American officials in Dohuk and Erbil.

Each report was filled with detailed tips about illegal activities in Mr. Hussein's Iraq. The official said the volume was enormous, and reading through them was often a frustrating chore.

''I assumed that 10 or 20 percent were correct,'' he said. ''The rest I just crossed out, or wrote a note on the papers we gave them: 'From an unreliable source'.'' --------------------

Iraqi Exile Offers Information

(By The New York Times), TEHRAN, Dec. 28 -- An Iraqi opposition leader based here in Iran said today that his group had evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and offered to share the information with the United Nations if the world organization established ties with it.

''We have information about the modernization of weapons of mass destruction by the Iraqi regime and we have detailed information about some of the sites, as well as some of the ways in which the Iraqi regime tries to hide them,'' said Abdelaziz al-Hakim, a representative of a Shiite opposition group.