Saddam’s Table Talk

Interview with Williamson Murray

As Americans continue to debate fervently the justification for going to war against Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi regime in 2003, its deposal has provided the first opportunity to comprehensively examine the inner workings of the brutal dictatorship. Hundreds of thousands of captured internal documents are currently being translated and analyzed by a small group of individuals under U.S. Joint Forces Command (JFCOM). The Iraqi Perspectives Project (IPP), as the effort is called, constitutes the most raw documentation of a shrewd dictator whose warped view of the power he commanded ultimately led to his defeat. Some of the translated documents, along with the IPP analysis, have been made freely available over the Internet, and the staff published an initial report on its findings in the May/June 2006 issue of *Foreign Affairs.*

In September, *YJIA* Editor-in-Chief Evan McCormick spoke with Williamson Murray, a member of the IPP team, about the ferocious dictator, his fragile regime, and the process of writing history. In addition to his work with the IPP, Dr. Murray is Emeritus Professor of History at Ohio State University.

Let’s start with the genesis of the Iraqi Perspectives Project. How did it come into being?

One of the eventual authors and the team leader of the project, Kevin Woods, was over in Iraq as part of U.S. Joint Forces Command “lessons-learned” processes in the summer of 2003. It struck him that while everyone was doing a great deal of examination of what we had done during the war—historical analysis and preparations to write histories of the war—no one was looking at the Iraqi side of the equation. He got permission from his superiors to begin interviewing senior Iraqi generals and military leaders. That then extended to a number of other people being included in the process of interviewing Iraq’s senior leaders.
Williamson Murray

When they came back from Iraq, it came to our attention that there were a substantial number of captured documents that were going to be made available. Kevin persuaded—and again he has been the major driver in this whole project—Joint Forces Command to provide the financial wherewithal to translate a large portion of the Iraqi documents that were captured. That then led to our efforts both to use the documents and the materials we had picked up in Iraq to write a history of the war from the Iraqi point of view, which has come out as the Iraqi Perspectives Project. It’s still an ongoing project. We are still trying to gain a clear picture of what was happening in Iraq, not just during Operation Iraqi Freedom, but over the entire period of Baathist rule.

How many documents and what type of material are we talking about?

We’re talking about an unbelievably large number of documents—somewhere around six hundred thousand, to include governmental documents, memos, military planning documents, and a substantial number of transcripts of Saddam Hussein’s meetings with ministers, meetings with foreign dignitaries, meetings with a variety of individuals, both Iraqi and from foreign governments. It’s a huge collection.

Some of them of course are pretty worthless—normal bureaucratic garbage common to all governments. Many of them are fascinating. Hussein’s transcripts of his various meetings are very similar in many ways to Hitler’s Table Talk in that they provide unique insight into this bizarre and incredibly evil man and his regime.

How far along is the staff in processing all this information?

We’re just barely touching it. Our research is by no means complete. We’re not even close to having assimilated the bulk of the Iraqi documents—it’s going to be a major, ongoing, continuing project.

What makes this a unique opportunity in your mind, especially as an experience for U.S. decisionmakers?

Well, it gives us a clear picture of how the Iraqis reacted to major American initiatives throughout the period from 1979 to the present. And it suggests that a substantial portion of the diplomatic and other initiatives that the U.S. government took toward Iraq and Saddam were substantially, if not completely, misunderstood by the Iraqis. Incidents like the demarche of the U.S. government—what we thought was a tough-minded response—to the
missile attack on the USS Stark, the Iraqis regarded as a hilarious piece of American cowardice—not anything from their point of view to equal the damage done to the American destroyer by the Iraqi missile.

Has there been any interest for the findings of the project among the intelligence agencies?

Yes, very extensive interest in the intelligence agencies. Although I think it’s significant that the intelligence agencies were not at first disposed to look at these documents at all, since they thought the documents were nothing but simple history—in the past, not a means to look at what they’ve done well or done badly. That attitude has substantially changed.

Generally speaking then, would you say that the period covered by these documents have come to be viewed as history? Or is there a sense within government that the information here gathered is relevant to the current strategic environment in Iraq?

I think that initially the reaction was your typical American ahistorical belief that if it’s in the past—even if it happened yesterday—it’s of no significance to present problems. I think that what’s been uncovered in terms of the project has begun to convince substantial numbers of government officials, particularly at the higher levels in fact.

What have been some of the most striking or challenging conclusions about Saddam Hussein’s regime that you have been able to draw from analyzing the primary sources?

Well, I think most interesting is the general Iraqi attitude toward American initiatives, including the Gulf War. The Iraqi regime did not regard the Gulf War as a defeat, but rather as a political victory since it had not only stood up to a major world power, but to a coalition of thirty-two nations.

What information have you found in the documents regarding weapons of mass destruction that we did not previously know or understand?

I think that the critical point is that the Iraqis themselves, from the records, were very unclear as to what the situation in Iraq was because Saddam was clearly playing a double game: trying to comply to a certain extent with UN sanctions, or to the demands for Iraq to destroy the substantial WMD capabilities it had, to get sanctions lifted; at the same time, not wanting to come fully clean because Saddam wanted the Iranians—particularly the Iranians—and
the Israelis, to think that Iraq had substantial WMD capabilities; probably the United States as well.

■ What about connections to terrorism, Al-Qaeda or otherwise?

The real issue here is that there were some connections to Al-Qaeda that the documents identify—initial approaches and discussions. Nothing substantive appears to have occurred, although that may change with further examination of the documents. But clearly, Iraq was a major supporter of international terrorism and showed no desire to change its ways.

■ It also seems that the Iraqi Perspectives Project offers a unique look at the effectiveness of the economic sanctions that were leveled against Iraq in the interwar period. What can we learn from the internal documents regarding those sanctions?

Sanctions bit deeply, but not in terms of the regime. In fact, it is clear that the sanctions had an enormous, corrosive impact on Iraqi military capabilities. But at the same time, they were having a huge impact on the Iraqi people themselves, but no impact on the regime’s ability to control its population and maintain its hold on Iraq.

■ Is there anything that you so far have not been able to find within the information available? Conventional wisdom about the regime that has not been fully born out, or aspects of the regime that remain mysterious?

Well it’s hard to say, and I think this is worth stressing: we’re just beginning to touch the water in terms of the extent of the documents on what was going on in Iraq. It’s difficult to say what more we’ll discover because there’s so much still to be gone over.

■ The preliminary analysis published in Foreign Affairs seemed to cast Saddam as a calculating but ultimately flawed strategist, demonstrating a mix of delusion and perception.

Yes, clearly what we’re dealing with is a man who understood how to maintain himself in power in terms of the Iraqi political theater, but had no capability to understand the external world. He largely interpreted the external world in terms of his own view of Iraqi politics: a murderous, violent, and ferocious struggle for survival. It’s also very clear that Saddam had no conception of how weak he was militarily compared to the United States.
However, Saddam did calculate somewhat correctly, for example, that French and Russian economic interests would compel those countries to oppose the U.S. invasion. He also understood that U.S. military forces would experience great difficulty in fighting paramilitary forces, even though this ultimately didn’t prevent his regime from falling. Correct?

Actually in the latter case, the paramilitary had nothing to do with preparing to meet an American invasion. To be perfectly frank, Saddam never believed the United States had the willpower to launch such an invasion. So the paramilitary forces were built to protect the regime against the possibility of internal rebellion. And here one of the things the report makes clear in spades—something which Westerners have suspected but not understood—is just how close the regime came to collapsing in 1991 with the large rebellion by the Shiites and others in Iraq.

The IPP seems to highlight a change in, or a deterioration of, the Iraqi military culture and command structure after the first Gulf War. In Foreign Affairs you wrote of Iraqis celebrating the fact that their forces had not been completely obliterated, and the incorporation of bunker tactics into military doctrine among other examples. To what extent was U.S. intelligence—especially military intelligence—attuned to these changes when they launched the invasion? Or did it even matter?

Well, it didn’t matter a huge amount. U.S. intelligence had a pretty good idea of how incompetent and incapable regular Iraqi forces were when the invasion began. What was not understood was the purpose of the Saddam Fedayeen Al-Quds militia, which was viewed by American intelligence and military analysis as just simply a further extension of Iraqi military power—an effort, if you will, to extend that power by building up local military capabilities. In fact, the Al-Quds and Saddam Hussein Fedayeen were aimed specifically at protecting the Baathist regime, providing local military power to react to the outbreak of a rebellion in Iraq such as what occurred in 1991.

Do you feel that the information in the report is being adequately incorporated into the history of Operation Iraqi Freedom, or is that history proving to be somewhat impenetrable because it is so recent?

No, actually Cobra II, the Trainor and Gordon volume, makes extensive use of it. I think we know a good deal more than we did at the time they had access to the report and when they were briefed on it. Still, there are substantial pieces of our view of what was going from the Iraqi point of
view in *Cobra II*. My guess is that it will influence substantially how virtually everyone thinks about Iraqi preparations for the war.

**■ What is the importance of making the IPP documents available to public via the internet?**

I think it’s extraordinarily important, and the intelligence agencies have not been particularly cooperative, attempting to keep substantial portions classified and limit access—because the Project really underlines, if you will, the nature of this regime. I think one of the ironies of efforts to keep it classified is that declassifying substantial portions of the project would allow a far more coherent and intelligent view of the nature of this monstrous regime to percolate throughout the West and the Arab world. Instead of just making small portions of the Iraqi documents available on the website that’s set up, we ought to be declassifying virtually every document that we have captured as quickly as possible, except for the few that might have some intelligence implications.

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