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U.S. forces in Baghdad might now be searching high and low for Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, but in the past Saddam was seen by U.S. intelligence services as a bulwark of anti-communism and they used him as their instrument for more than 40 years, according to former U.S. intelligence diplomats and intelligence officials.

United Press International has interviewed almost a dozen former U.S. diplomats, British scholars and former U.S. intelligence officials to piece together the following account. The CIA declined to comment on the report.

While many have thought that Saddam first became involved with U.S. intelligence agencies at the start of the September 1980 Iran-Iraq war, his first contacts with U.S. officials date back to 1959, when he was part of a CIA-authorized six-man squad tasked with assassinating then Iraqi Prime Minister Gen. Abd al-Karim Qasim.

In July 1958, Qasim had overthrown the Iraqi monarchy in what one former U.S. diplomat, who asked not to be identified, described as "a horrible orgy of bloodshed."

According to current and former U.S. officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, Iraq was then regarded as a key buffer and strategic asset in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. For example, in the mid-1950s, Iraq was quick to join the anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact which was to defend the region and whose members included Turkey, Britain, Iran and Pakistan.

Little attention was paid to Qasim's bloody and conspiratorial regime until his sudden decision to withdraw from the pact in 1959, an act that "freaked everybody out" according to a former senior U.S. State Department official.

Washington watched in marked dismay as Qasim began to buy arms from the Soviet Union and put his own domestic communists into ministry positions of "real power," according to this official. The domestic instability of the country prompted CIA Director Allan Dulles to say publicly that Iraq was "the most dangerous spot in the world."

Close Ties With Baath Party

In the mid-1980s, Miles Copeland, a veteran CIA operative, told UPI the CIA had enjoyed "close ties" with Qasim's ruling Baath Party, just as it had close connections with the intelligence service of Egyptian leader Gamel Abd Nassar. In a recent public statement, Roger Morris, a former National Security Council staffer in the 1970s, confirmed this claim, saying that the CIA had chosen the authoritarian and anti-communist Baath Party "as its instrument."

According to another former senior State Department official, Saddam, while only in his early 20s, became a part of a U.S. plot to get rid of Qasim. According to this source, Saddam was installed in an apartment in Baghdad on al-Rashid Street directly opposite Qasim's office in Iraq's Ministry of Defense, to observe Qasim's movements.

Adel Darwish, Middle East expert and author of "Unholy Babylon," said the move was done "with full knowledge of the CIA," and that Saddam's CIA handler was an Iraqi dentist working for CIA and Egyptian intelligence. U.S. officials separately confirmed Darwish's account.

Darwish said that Saddam's paymaster was Capt. Abdel Maquid Farid, the assistant military attaché at the Egyptian Embassy who paid for the apartment from his own personal account. Three former senior U.S. officials have confirmed that this is accurate.

The assassination was set for Oct. 7, 1959, but it was completely botched. Accounts differ. One former CIA official said that the 22-year-old Saddam lost his nerve and began firing too soon, killing Qasim's driver and only wounding Qasim in the shoulder and arm. Darwish told UPI that one of the assassins had bullets that did not fit his gun and that another had a hand grenade that got stuck in the lining of his coat.

"It bordered on farce," a former senior U.S. intelligence official said. But Qasim, hiding on the floor of his car, escaped death, and Saddam, whose calf had been grazed by a fellow would-be assassin, escaped to Tikrit, thanks to CIA and Egyptian intelligence agents, several U.S. government officials said.

Saddam to Syria

Saddam then crossed into Syria and was transferred by Egyptian intelligence agents to Beirut, according to Darwish and former senior CIA officials. While Saddam was in Beirut, the CIA paid for Saddam's apartment and put him through a brief training course, former CIA officials said. The agency then helped him get to Cairo, they said.

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One former U.S. government official, who knew Saddam at the time, said that even then Saddam "was known as having no class. He was a thug -- a cutthroat."

In Cairo, Saddam was installed in an apartment in the upper class neighborhood of Dukki and spent his time playing dominos in the Indiana Café, watched over by CIA and Egyptian intelligence operatives, according to Darwish and former U.S. intelligence officials.

One former senior U.S. government official said: "In Cairo, I often went to Groppie Café at Emad Eldine Pasha Street, which was very posh, very upper class. Saddam would not have fit in there. The Indiana was your basic dive."

But during this time Saddam was making frequent visits to the American Embassy where CIA specialists such as Miles Copeland and CIA station chief Jim Eichelberger were in residence and knew Saddam, former U.S. intelligence officials said.

Saddam's U.S. handlers even pushed Saddam to get his Egyptian handlers to raise his monthly allowance, a gesture not appreciated by Egyptian officials since they knew of Saddam's American connection, according to Darwish. His assertion was confirmed by former U.S. diplomat in Egypt at the time.

In February 1963 Qasim was killed in a Baath Party coup. Morris claimed recently that the CIA was behind the coup, which was sanctioned by President John F. Kennedy, but a former very senior CIA official strongly denied this.

"We were absolutely stunned. We had guys running around asking what the hell had happened," this official said.

Communists Gunned Down

But the agency quickly moved into action. Noting that the Baath Party was hunting down Iraq's communist, the CIA provided the submachine gun-toting Iraqi National Guardsmen with lists of suspected communists who were then jailed, interrogated, and summarily gunned down, according to former U.S. intelligence officials with intimate knowledge of the executions.

Many suspected communists were killed outright, these sources said. Darwish told UPI that the mass killings, presided over by Saddam, took place at Qasr al-Nehayat, literally, the Palace of the End.

A former senior U.S. State Department official told UPI: "We were frankly glad to be rid of them. You ask that they get a fair trial? You have to get kidding. This was serious business."

A former senior CIA official said: "It was a bit like the mysterious killings of Iran's communists just after Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in 1979. All 4,000 of his communists suddenly got killed."

British scholar Con Coughlin, author of "Saddam: King of Terror," quotes Jim Critchfield, then a senior Middle East agency official, as saying the killing of Qasim and the communists was regarded "as a great victory." A former long-time covert U.S. intelligence operative and friend of Critchfield said: "Jim was an old Middle East hand. He wasn't sorry to see the communists go at all. Hey, we were playing for keeps."

Saddam, in the meantime, became head of al-Jihaz a-Khas, the secret intelligence apparatus of the Baath Party.

Relationship Intensifies

The CIA/Defense Intelligence Agency relation with Saddam intensified after the start of the Iran-Iraq war in September of 1980. During the war, the CIA regularly sent a team to Saddam to deliver battlefield intelligence obtained from Saudi AWACS surveillance aircraft to aid the effectiveness of Iraq's armed forces, according to a former DIA official, part of a U.S. interagency intelligence group.

This former official said that he personally had signed off on a document that shared U.S. satellite intelligence with both Iraq and Iran in an attempt to produce a military stalemate. "When I signed it, I thought I was losing my mind," the former official told UPI.

A former CIA official said that Saddam had assigned a top team of three senior officers from the Estikhbarat, Iraq's military intelligence, to meet with the Americans.

According to Darwish, the CIA and DIA provided military assistance to Saddam's ferocious February 1988 assault on Iranian positions in the al-Fao peninsula by blinding Iranian radars for three days.

The Saddam-U.S. intelligence alliance of convenience came to an end at 2 a.m. Aug. 2, 1990, when 100,000 Iraqi troops, backed by 300 tanks, invaded its neighbor, Kuwait. America's one-time ally had become its bitterest enemy.