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C's Private Office

2793

Telephone:

*Copy to Jonathan P  
Anna  
Matthew*

14 November 2002

*NB*

*Thank you*

*Dear Jonathan, H.*

#### IRAQ: PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF SADDAM

1. Further to Sir David Manning's letter of 6 November (Prime Minister's Phone Call with Bush), and our conversation of 11 November, I attach a draft psychological profile of Saddam.
2. Please note that the paper has its origins in a DIS profile produced in late 2001, although it has now been updated within SIS.  
If Assessments staff would like further details
3. I am copying this letter to Sir David Manning.

*Yours ever,*

*John Scarlett*

*120/7*

PS/C

John Scarlett  
JIC Chairman  
Cabinet Office

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## SADDAM HUSSEIN DIS PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE, UPDATED

### Key Points

- Personal survival, survival of the regime, and Iraqi-led Arab unity are the three most powerful factors that motivate SADDAM. He is driven by desire to control the state and expand his power. He will challenge constraints and convey himself through rhetoric as champion of the Arab world.
- He thinks strategically and will operate tactically. He is a judicious political calculator, who perceives the political world to be highly anarchic and full of threat. His strong nationalism and intense distrust of others comes from his narrow and distorted view of the world which in turn largely stems from his limited experience of political reality outside of the Arab world. He works to stay in power and maintain his influence by shrewdly manipulating his environment and those within it. His control is strengthened through patronage and an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that is created by playing people and organisations against each other.
- His propensity to take risks coupled with vigilance and a task-orientated approach to problems has led to generally judicious decision making. However, his tendency to seek and filter information to support his beliefs has created a skewed appreciation of any risks he may take. The lack of alternative advisory perspectives skews this perception further. Advisors serve as a means to provide confirmation, support and a means to implement action, not to challenge or offer alternatives to his ideas.
- The result is a perpetuation of a deeply entrenched belief that the intention of outsiders is unjust and it is they who are responsible for the ills in Iraq; he, in turn he is responsible for what goes right, and as a result his decisions, and actions are justifiable.

### Biographical Background & Later Life

2. SADDAM, whose name means "*the fighter who stands steadfast*", was born Saddam Hussein Al-Majid Al-Tikriti, on 28 April in 1937<sup>1</sup> to a poor peasant family near Tikrit in central Iraq. There is little record of what happened to his father who was absent throughout his childhood. It has been speculated that his father may have died before Saddam was born. His mother re-married Saddam's paternal uncle, Ibrahim al-Hassen, known locally as '*Hassen the liar*'. Saddam's relationship with his stepfather was believed to have been abusive; Hassen was renowned for being crude, brutal and illiterate. Whilst Saddam's cousins were sent to school he was sent out to work and despite confronting his family with a wish to become educated, he was turned down. Shortly after this time Saddam left his home (although may have been forced to leave) making his way to the home of his maternal uncle Kairallah Talfah in Tikrit. Kairallah became at the very least a political mentor for Saddam, if not a father figure. He had fought against Great Britain in the Iraqi uprising of 1941

<sup>1</sup> Saddam's exact date of birth is not agreed upon. This date is a best approximation.

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and had spent five years in prison for nationalist agitation. He tutored Saddam in his view of Arab history and the ideology of nationalism and the Ba'ath party. By the time Saddam moved to Baghdad to pursue his secondary education he was steeped in Arab history and Ba'athist ideology. Kairallah further confirmed Saddam's political learning by telling him tales about his heroic relatives: Saddam's great grandfather and two great uncles who, according to Kairallah, gave their lives for the Iraqi cause.

3. At the age of 20, further inspired by Nasser in Egypt, Saddam joined the Arab Ba'ath socialist Party in Iraq and quickly impressed party officials with his dedication. Two years later, in 1959, apparently emulating Nasser, Iraqi Army General Qassem led a coup which ousted the monarchy. Unlike Nasser, Qassem did not pursue the path of socialism but turned against the Ba'ath party. Saddam, at 22 years old, was called to Ba'ath party headquarters and given the mission to lead a five man team to assassinate Qassem. The mission failed, reportedly because of a crucial error in judgment by Saddam. He immediately fled to Syria and then onto Egypt where he gained a baccalaureate, and rose through the leadership ranks in the Egyptian Ba'ath Party.
4. Saddam, somewhat reluctantly, returned to Iraq after 1963. His actions in 1959 won him prestige both politically and personally. Qassem was ousted by the Ba'athists and Saddam was then elected to the National Command. He established himself as a leading Party theorist, coming progressively to the fore by taking the Presidency after the Ba'ath coup in 1968. Michel Aflaq, the ideological father of the Ba'ath party, admired Hussein, declaring the Iraqi Ba'ath party the finest in the world and designating Saddam as his successor. At the same time he was also welcomed back into the family by his maternal uncle and shortly thereafter married Sajida Khayrallah, his first wife and cousin, with whom he had five children, including Udai Saddam Hussein Al-Tikriti, born 1964, and Qusai Saddam Hussein Al-Tikriti, born 1967.
5. In November 1969 Saddam became Vice Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), Deputy to the President, and Deputy Secretary-General of the Regional Command of the Ba'ath. In 1970 he joined the Party's National Command and in October 1977 was elected Assistant Secretary General. In July 1979, through exploiting his position and removing his rivals, he succeeded Bakr as President, Chairman of the RCC and Secretary General of the Ba'ath Regional Command. In 1983 Saddam met Samira al-Shabandar who at the time was herself already married. Through a combination of money and veiled threats Saddam eventually secured her divorce and married for the second time in 1984.
6. Saddam is now approximately 65 years old.

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Physical and mental symptoms of old age will begin to become more manifest as time goes on. His ability to make swift decisions is likely to slow down as a result of the gradual impairment of other cognitive faculties such as memory and the ability to rapidly process information. However, the extent to which this applies to Saddam would appear to be minimal at present.

7. Reports on his physical health are mixed. Whilst it has been suggested that he is suffering from lymphoma, generally he appears to be in good health. There are few overt symptoms of illness other than the general signs of the onset of old age. Psychologically, the *self-awareness* of old age may have an impact on Saddam. Typically the contrast of his public representation (frequently based on the symbology of historical figures such as Nebuchadnezzar) that conveys a strong, powerful, energetic man may jar with the ageing body and mind of a man in his mid-sixties. However, it is more likely that Saddam still regards himself in this former light and will dismiss any notion that physically he may be becoming weaker with age.

8. Whilst the effects of ageing vary between individuals, at the very least the ageing process will serve as a reminder that death, and the end of his leadership, is an inevitability despite his ability to, so far, survive politically. This may cause his personal and political priorities to shift as old age becomes more apparent.

#### **Political Behaviour & Motivation**

9. Saddam is driven by three enduring factors: personal survival, survival of his regime, and an Iraqi led Arab unity. These drives are interdependent, each of them a goal which ensures, but also relies upon, the success of the other. He sees himself as destined to be leader of an Arab solidarity, a dream that can only be realised through ensuring his survival and the survival of those mechanisms that provide protection. As such Saddam's destiny and that of Iraq are almost indistinguishable.

10. Saddam is said to emulate many significant historical figures, most notably Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon who conquered Jerusalem (586 BCE), and Saladin who recovered Jerusalem in 1187 by defeating the Crusaders. He has adopted these significant characters as pillars in the creation of his own personality cult, with the determination that he too will be remembered in such a way<sup>3</sup>. His exalted self-concept is fused with his political ideology, thus his ambitions are mutually reinforcing: to achieve political greatness makes a great man, and a great man *will* achieve political greatness. However, he is cautious not to pursue one ambition to the detriment of the other. Whilst the rhetoric of Arab unity plays to a regional audience, he is unlikely to wish to see total unity as this may threaten his leadership position. He

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<sup>3</sup> Images of Saddam on horseback, in Kurdish clothes, embracing babies and war heroes, riding on a charger in medieval armour to confront the Persians at the Battle of Qaddasiyeh, dressed as Nebuchadnezzar, are often to be found in and around Baghdad.

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is motivated by ensuring that Iraq becomes the major player in the Arab world, thus securing his leadership. Furthermore, he does not wish a conflict in which Iraq will be grievously damaged and his stature as a leader destroyed<sup>4</sup>. Whilst he will challenge constraints and convey himself through rhetoric as champion of the Arab world, he will also respond to and exploit on going changes in the political environment, thinking strategically and operating tactically.

11. Saddam is very politically active, and is therefore likely to abhor passivity. Perceiving returns on the decisions or actions he takes is very important. Whilst he perceives such returns in his favour he is less likely to take more robust political or military action, preferring to remain steadfast and use time to his advantage. He is likely to perceive that this is a strategy that has proved successful in recent times, but less so now.

### **Perception of Threat**

12. Saddam is a judicious political calculator, who is by no means irrational, but can be contemptuous and aggressive towards those he regards as threats. His perception of the political world as highly anarchic and threatening has led him to increase his grip over his power and authority. He will use whatever force is necessary, and will, if he deems it expedient, go to extremes of violence. This is reflected in Saddam's willingness to use WMD both internally and regionally if he believes he is about to fall. His aggressive drive is instrumental in pursuing his goals, but it is at the same time defensive aggression based on the perceived necessity to neutralise threat. Justifiable anxiety for his own survival and that of the regime has created a need to eliminate any potential threat that may jeopardise the pursuit and achievement of his goals. If an individual is perceived as an impediment, no matter how loyal in the past, that individual is likely to be eliminated without a second thought. Similarly if a nation or organisation is perceived as a potential threat he will seek ways in which to neutralise it.

13. Saddam is highly nationalistic with little experience of political life outside of the Arab world. Much of Saddam's anxiety and intense distrust of others<sup>5</sup> emanate from this narrow view of the world and were further compounded by the political teachings of his uncle, Kairallah, who during Saddam's influential young years imbued him with an antipathy towards particular foreigners<sup>6</sup>. This lack of experience coupled with the influence of significant others has led him to generate a perception of the Western world as a harassing, imperialist superpower – a perception that although highly subjective, has over the years become an unequivocal reality that drives his decisions and actions.

<sup>4</sup> Saddam's perception of what may damage Iraq is far more focused on reputation than on physical or economic standing. As long as Iraq is still perceived to be 'steadfast' after engaging a threat (be it Persian, Western, Israeli, Kurdish etc.) then the mere survival of the regime post-conflict is considered victorious.

<sup>5</sup> As evidenced by his continual shifting of political and military advisors, his often extreme methods of dealing with those he regards as being disloyal, as well as his defensive discourse and political rhetoric.

<sup>6</sup> In 1981, Saddam republished a pamphlet written by his uncle Kairallah entitled, "*Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews, and Flies.*"

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14. Whilst he rejects western political influence he does not personally reject western culture within his own lifestyle. There are many aspects of western culture (fashion and entertainment) that are characteristic of his personal life<sup>7</sup>. However, publicly he attempts to isolate his country from Western influence, primarily as a means to control the perceptions of the Iraqi people. Through limiting Western influence in Iraqi culture, education and entertainment, Saddam is able to control the myth<sup>8</sup> of the 'West' which in turn helps to reinforcing his own idealised stature within society as the righteous leader of the Arab world. This type of cultural isolation typically creates a greater cohesion within society that leads to a greater dependency upon the leader.

15. Because of the way Saddam has framed the world politically he ignores his own role in creating enemies, and righteously continues to threaten his targets. The conspiracy theories he spins for the Iraqi people are not merely for popular consumption, but are likely to reflect his personal mindset. Perceiving the West as purely retributive further causes him to conclude that no matter what course of action he chooses he will be subject to further harassment and sanctions by the West. He is so convinced of this reality that it is not difficult for him to find a persuasive chain of evidence for his perception. This allows him to further justify the righteousness of sustaining an oppressive and aggressive regime.

### **Motivating Support**

16. Leaders like Saddam work to manipulate their environment to stay in power and to appear a winner. They are adept at sizing up situations and sensing what tactics will work to achieve their ends. One such tactic has been for Saddam to form a strong and highly manipulative relationship with the Iraqi population. Other people and groups are viewed as instruments for his own ends. He is quick to exploit situations publicly to his own advantage, especially if such an opportunity can be conveyed to put his adversaries in a negative light<sup>9</sup>. He is likely to attempt a variety of tactics to gain influence. He has often been reported as displaying considerable charm, often showing generosity towards his own people: however such reports are equally matched if not outweighed by evidence of his utter ruthlessness towards his close advisors, and general ambivalence towards human rights within Iraq. Yet for Saddam the strategy appears to work. A strong network of patronage ensures that he maintains support in Iraqi military, political and civil sectors. To oppose Saddam or destabilise the status quo would not only prove dangerous but it would also jeopardise the privileged status that many key Iraqis enjoy. As such he is able to justify extremes of aggression on the basis of revolutionary needs and will spend time persuading others of the appropriateness of his actions.

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<sup>7</sup> He has a penchant for branded, western style clothing and watches Hollywood films.

<sup>8</sup> The term 'myth' is used to describe the collective beliefs or perceptions that are held about a particular social institution, practice or the institutions and practices of others. They provide a legitimisation of social arrangements and are often perpetuated through societal discourses (communication, media etc.) (Barthes, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> By exploiting the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Saddam conveyed the US as lenient towards, and siding with, the Israelis in order to influence Iraqi sentiment by further compounding the perception of the US as anti-Arab. For this very reason Saddam has a vested interest in the intifada continuing. Mixing popular anti-Israeli feeling and conveying it as 'the street' radicalises popular opinion in his favour.

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17. Images of Saddam are ubiquitous within Iraq. They are projected throughout Iraqi society in many forms reflecting the different facets of his identity as leader. He is most often depicted in military uniform, clearly worn for its symbolic representation of power and authority<sup>10</sup>. These images reinforce his omnipotence and drive the cult of personality through which Saddam maintains the 'support' of the Iraqi people. The projection of power not only inspires faith, but also fear. Over time such images serve to remind the people of Iraq of the autocratic and unassailable nature of the regime under which they live.

18. During Saddam's early years he learned that violence and intimidation would often bring favourable returns. Through repression and exploitation he managed to survive and gain the respect of others. It became a strategy that has worked for him throughout his life and has been used to full effect during his leadership. Whilst many of Saddam's tactics may involve the use of coercion or deceit, this has ensured his views, at least publicly, have been adopted and support for the regime is maintained. Conformity arises from either the desire for reward or the fear of punishment. Control is maintained through a blend of patronage, fear and suspicion - an atmosphere that he creates by playing people and organisations against each other. An individual may be rewarded for their loyalty and yet later become the scapegoat for poor decisions. He also manages to deflect attention from the problems within Iraqi society by keeping a variety of external enemies in the public eye. He has been capable of putting his population through a sustained period of hardship, sustaining their tolerance towards the regime by attributing the ills of society to external threats. According to Saddam's rhetoric, outsiders are responsible for what goes wrong in Iraq; he is responsible for what goes right<sup>11</sup>.

### **Saddam's Advisers**

19. Saddam's relationship with his close advisers is largely determined by patronage and his highly nationalistic nature. Those he chooses to have around him are, at least outwardly, loyal and committed to Saddam's goals and interests. This serves as a mutually beneficial relationship. For Saddam a close and supportive inner circle allows him to retain power and influence whilst his advisers in turn receive power, prestige and security. The relationship is purely instrumental. For Saddam a close coterie provides the opportunity to diffuse responsibility for any political errors, thus allowing attention to be diverted from his own failure of judgement. The advisory status is therefore much less secure in practice than it may appear. Whilst Saddam may encourage open discussion in theory, in practice the decision has usually been made, or is in formation, in Saddam's mind. The purpose of such meetings is only to seek confirmatory evidence in order for his decision to be executed; advisers are therefore not so much responsible for helping form the decisions, as there to implement action.

<sup>10</sup> Saddam has never served in the Iraqi Army, nor received any formal Army training.

<sup>11</sup> Saddam has again exploited the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by drawing subtle parallels between the US bombing in Iraq and the Israeli shelling of Palestinians in order to elicit the same sentiment.

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20. Over recent years Saddam's inner core of support has decreased. Many of the advisors with whom he came to power have been removed or have become of an age where they are no longer engaged in politics. Advisors are often manoeuvred in and out of favour and proximity to ensure continual dependency on Saddam and maintenance of veiled servitude. This may be further influenced by a lack of a declared successor.

. For Saddam,

contemplation of who may be the next 'great' leader would be a difficult concept to consider. Having spent the majority of his career identifying and eliminating threats to his status, he is unlikely to outwardly show recognition of potential alternative power sources, even among kin. Publicly acknowledging the potential of another would be self-defeatist. He cannot simultaneously consider the possibility of another great Iraqi leader whilst persuading both himself and others that there is no one greater than himself. To do so would make him vulnerable both psychologically and politically. Stability and control in both senses can only arise from ensuring that he maintains his status indefinitely<sup>12</sup>.

21. Patronage is key to ensuring that Saddam's advisors do not challenge the man or the system, however their sycophantic nature has also arisen from fear of the brutality that Saddam has displayed towards his advisors in the past. Criticism is equated with disloyalty, and 'disloyal' elites are dispensable. To challenge, contradict or even show individual initiative is highly discouraged, as these are considered threats to his authority – a charge which may result in becoming a political scapegoat at best, although being exiled or killed more typically.

### **Decision Making**

22. Saddam is a vigilant, sequential decision-maker with a propensity to take risks. His sensitivity to threat causes him to monitor and anticipate his environment carefully, sizing up each situation in order to sense what tactics will work to achieve his ends. He will search for information that is driven by the objective of the moment and deal with each objective at a time. This task-orientated approach will often lead to judicious decision making, whereby considerable patience and time are used to best effect. Although his actions may at times appear obtuse and reckless to the West, Saddam is a rational actor, who chooses his course of action for what he considers to be good reasons. Each time he defies the UN or US he will push them, testing their resolve a step at a time, often until his adversary is at the brink of military attack. However, independently of this preferred decision making style, Saddam's decision and resulting behaviour will often be determined by the demands of the situation. When Saddam is making a decision in order to maintain control or influence to 'gain' in a situation he can be quite pragmatic, giving consideration and time to many different factors. However, if he feels that he is losing control, and becoming increasingly politically confined and potentially 'losing', he can become very dogmatic, increasingly impulsive and extremely non-compliant.

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<sup>12</sup> The term 'indefinitely' is used to refer to his political standing and the legacy of his rule in Iraq after his death.

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23. Saddam's schema, or template for understanding the world, is such that his search for, and assimilation of, information is driven with extreme bias. This concept-driven style of thought means that he will actively seek and filter information in order to substantiate further his current perceptions. His view of the world, motivation of others and perceived threats are rarely challenged but instead confirmed. This in turn this is used to convince other of the righteousness and necessity of his actions, and the retributive and unjust actions of others.

### **Risk Perception**

24. Operating in this type of environment whereby decisions are made in relative isolation, but consequences are shared, reinforces Saddam's risk-taking nature. Saddam has a distorted cost-benefit perspective, which is a consequence of his narrow view of the world coupled with his advisors' lack of desire to challenge this world view or highlight any flaw in his suggestions that may appear disrespectful. He is often likely to overestimate the benefits of a decision and underestimate the potential costs. If risks are continually downplayed, or potential consequences not thought through properly then the impact of a negative outcome is perceived as less important than the gain that can be made. In each case he will test the limits to see how far he can go before he starts to lose. Lack of contingency planning, which has characterised some of his actions in the past, illustrates this. Rather than weighing up potential losses before embarking on a course of action, he will, especially if under pressure, take action that he believes will put him at an advantage, and assess his losses as they occur. He plays for big wins but is willing to accept less as long as some gain has been made. Identifying alternative strategies is only likely to come about, therefore, once something has been *proved* to fail outright.

25. The above may lead to a conclusion that Saddam is a risk-taker. However, it is more likely, given his decision-making style, that it is more his *perception* of the *extent* of risk he is about to engage in that drives his behaviour, rather than purely the allure of the reward. Being concept-driven in the way he processes information and forms beliefs about the world has led him to appreciate risk differently from others. Whilst outsiders may consider his behaviour or action to be risky, Saddam is likely to re-value the significance of such risk to the point where it may not be considered a risk at all. This may account for previous ill-advised political decisions, and the need to strategically reverse himself out of difficult situations. It would be best to therefore characterise Saddam as having poor relational thinking rather than as someone who is happy to manoeuvre himself into risky situations.

### **Predicting Saddam's Behaviour**

26. Saddam maximises benefits before he minimises costs. Past actions that have been considered by analysts as high risk, have largely been taken by Saddam on the basis of the perceived considerable, personal gains to be made. In the current environment, however, Saddam is not aiming to gain extra power or resources but simply to maintain his current leadership position. The assumption that the current situation may increase his intent to take dramatic action, does not, therefore, necessarily apply.

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27. Whilst there is little doubt that Saddam's behaviour is being influenced by political pressure, there are no compelling indications that he is likely to take radical or unpredictable action. On the contrary, Saddam is currently making decisions and adopting tactics that makes his near term behaviour more predictable and stable than usual.

. But this behaviour is to be expected from a man who has a considerable need to maintain complete control and challenge any perceived weakness in either himself or his regime. Further, the recent Presidential decree ordering a re-evaluation of the loyalty of the Iraqi Armed Forces is typical of Saddam's regular desire to sweep for threats and keep the regime, and its supporting structure, mindful of the power that he still wields within Iraq.

28.

[The paper concluded that Saddam still judged there would be some opportunity to derail moves towards war.]

Whilst his threat perception remains 'potential' Saddam will continue to pursue a strategy of relative compliance, with the main intention of not giving the US or the UK any ground to move against him militarily; provocation at this stage is therefore not an option.

29. Many factors within the next few months might serve to either maintain Saddam's current threat perception, or give him cause to confirm the inevitability of an attack. The UN resolution is one such factor. If Saddam perceives a semblance of hope in the resolution, the likelihood of him taking precipitate action remains low. If, however, the resolution confirms, in Saddam's mind, the inevitability of an attack, then he will have little motivation to remain compliant.

30. In the longer term, there will come a time where Saddam may decide that a strategy to deal with the potential loss he faces requires him to take radical, aggressive action. He is unlikely to wait until such a threat becomes imminent. Once he is confronted with tangible evidence of an inevitable attack, such as troops on Iraq's borders, and believes that he is rapidly losing control, he is likely to conclude that he has no alternative option to guarantee his survival. In this instance he is likely to act quickly, decisively and whilst he still maintains some degree of loyalty within his command structures.

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