When Intelligence Made a Difference

— 21ST CENTURY —

Intelligence and the Iranian Attack on Al Asad Airbase

by Kevin K. Frank

In the early hours of January 8, 2020, the Big Voice alert system at the US airbase at Al Asad, Iraq boomed the message "INCOMING, INCOMING, TAKE COVER, TAKE COVER, TAKE COVER." Early warning sensors had detected the launch of medium-range ballistic missiles from Iran heading toward the US bases at Al Asad and Ebril in Iraq. For the next 80 minutes, at least eleven missiles peppered Al Asad Airbase with their 1,000 pound warheads in an attack of unique ferocity.[1] Yet there were no US deaths to the over 2,000 Americans deployed to the Al Asad Airbase and no loss to the aircraft stationed to the airbase.

A sophisticated intelligence system was able to provide decision makers with specific and timely intelligence information. It is an excellent example of intelligence making a difference in a dynamic situation allowing decision makers to gain the decision advantage so often talked about but rarely exampled.

GAINING THE ADVANTAGE

The Iranian attack on Al Asad was a manifestation of the ongoing adversarial US-Iran relationship, which has its roots in the 1953 US-supported coup which solidified the rule of Reza Pahlavi as the Shah of Iran and the 1979 Iranian revolution. Tensions

between the US and Iran increased over Iranian-supported militia activity in Iraq in 2019, culminating in the mortal US drone attack on Friday, 3 January, 2020 on General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) overseas action section, the Quds Force, and a powerful figure in Iranian foreign policy beyond the IRGC.

Iran's reaction was predictable, but occurred quicker than expected. Within five days of Soleimani's death, the Iranians launched a total of 16 medium-range Qiam-1 ballistic missiles at the US airbases in Iraq, with the majority targeted at Al Assad. The violence of this attack was reminiscent of the ballistic missile exchanges of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. While damage was done to infrastructure at the bases, especially Al Asad where eleven missiles struck, there were no American deaths or losses of the many aircraft operating from the two airfields. There were American injuries in the form of traumatic brain injuries to over 100 service members, an indicator of the fury of the attack.

Why a successful ballistic missile attack resulted in relatively light damage is a story of the synchronization of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). It is about the proper tasking, warning, and dissemination of intelligence. It is also about how intelligence was effectively used to minimize the

Iranian Attack on Al Asad Airbase, 7 Jan 2020

Iranian missiles launched from Kermanshah Province

damage of so fierce an attack.

The nexus of intelligence information and those who use it can be fraught. There are many instances where for lack of specificity, bureaucratic malaise or political expediency, intelligence information has not properly informed those who could, or should, use it. Intelligence is collected and analyzed for many reasons, from the encyclopedic function of foundational intelligence to the specific needs of strategic planning. Observers of intelligence do present the dynamic between intelligence information and decision makers

1. David Martin and Mary Walsh, "Who would live and who would die: The inside story of the Iranian attack on Al Asad Airbase," last modified February 28, 2021. CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iranian-attack-al-asad-air-base-60-minutes-2021-02-28/.

as one of the most complex relationships in the craft of intelligence.[2]

The US military has attempted to capture the dynamic between intelligence and decision makers in writing, and since this case is a military one, these characterizations are apt. Whether described as Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) synchronization or as Global Integrated ISR (to use US Air Force parlance) the idea of the relationship between intelligence information and the intelligence user is the:

> Cross-domain synchronization and integration of the planning and operation of ISR assets; sensors; processing, exploitation and dissemination systems; and, analysis and production capabilities across the globe to enable current and future operations.[3]

The USAF makes another important point in its concept: it is a combined intelligence and operations endeavor with the objective of increased understanding of the operational environment and "adversary intentions."[4]

The intelligence that the US Intelligence Community provided to the Commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM) that allowed him to take action that saved American lives and resources is an example of the power of information delivered in a timely fashion.

The intelligence on the Al Asad attack provides an exemplar of how the integration of intelligence and operations can work together. But as in all complex stories, context is important. The circumstances that contributed to the success were the result of myriad of circumstances coming together.

KNOWING THE ENEMY

The gathering of information on Iran had been ongoing since the fall of the Shah in 1979, so there was a solid base of foundational data and analytic expertise to make sense of the current situation.

There is often an expectation that the US Intelligence Community will provide global coverage all the time. But it cannot know everything about all countries at all times. Some observers have noted that "global coverage" is sampling. The intelligence system has developed methods to prioritize what should be gathered by the many collection methods. Iran was already high on the National Intelligence Prioritization Framework (NIPF), and would have become even higher with the Soleimani attack in anticipation of an Iranian response.

For intelligence to inform policy, it must have a level of fidelity and a high level of confidence. Years of adversarial relations between the US and Iran ensured that intelligence collection covered a wide range of subjects across all elements of national power. Concerns over the ability of Iran to use ballistic missiles gained even greater traction with the advancement of Iranian nuclear weaponization. Information gathered after the Iranian-supported missile attacks on Saudi Arabian oil infrastructure in September 2019 would have increased specific understanding of the tactics, techniques and procedures of such events. Decades of reconnaissance would have added unique insight into Iranian operations. Even the active presence of Iranian activity in cyberspace would have supplied valuable insight into Iranian use of that domain.

Such level of knowledge was available to those tasked with determining the response of the Iranian leadership to the attack of Soleimani. Importantly, that insight could build the capacity for warning intelligence of impending Iranian action. But where should they look? Iran had a wide range of response options — from direct attacks from Iranian territory against US forces to the use of Iranian surrogates — understanding the specific intent of Iranian leaders represented a challenge. When informed by intelligence of Iranian ballistic missiles preparing for launch, intentions became clearer.

FOCUSING THE EFFORT

To determine such activity is not a foregone conclusion even for such a sophisticated intelligence system as the US has. Its scope, complexity and size can work against it, given competing demands and limited capacity that is not always focused where it is most needed.

The US Intelligence Community has created National Intelligence Managers (NIM) to ensure that the intelligence priorities are properly coordinated, and it would not be a stretch to expect that the NIM for Iran and the Defense Intelligence lead would have been fully engaged in ensuring that the proper collection

2. See for example: Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence: from Secrets to Policy*, 7th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE/CQ Press, 2017, pp. 277-301; Carl J. Jensen, David H. McElreath and Melissa Graves, *Introduction to Intelligence Studies*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 13-4; Loch K. Johnson and James J. Wirtz ed., *Intelligence: The Secret World of Spies*, 5th ed. New York: Oxford, 2019, pp. 151-184; and Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 2010, pp. 157-174.
3. USAF, *Globally Integrated ISR Operations: Air Force Doctrine Publication 2-0.* Maxwell AFB: LeMay Center for Doctrine, 2015. *https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_2-0/2-0-Annex-GLOBAL-INTEGRATED-ISR.pdf.*
4. Ibid.

priorities were focused. This was not the first Iranian crises for the Intelligence Community. In May 2019 the US responded with deployment options to Iranian missile associated activity.[5] That a ballistic missile strike was an option was obvious; to understand that the Iranians are deploying and preparing for an actual launch is quite another. The warning regime in place for such an option provided important indications that an Iranian missile attack was the primary option in response to the Soleimani death.

When critical intelligence was gathered, it was disseminated quickly. Press reporting provides only a limited view of such activity. *The New York Times* reported that US Intelligence was issuing warnings of increased Iranian ballistic missile activity as early as the day after the Soleimani attack on 3 January 2020. US Space Force optimized the coverage for the space-based missile warning system, SBIRS, for Iran.[6] Such situational awareness afforded national security leaders, and especially CENTCOM, with operational options.. However, the CENTCOM commander, General Frank McKenzie, even with a solidifying idea of the Iranian response, faced a dilemma. How could he mitigate the Iranian response without tipping his hand or compromising the US's ability to surveil? The Iranian's might then choose a response option that was not so viewable.

DECISION ADVANTAGE

CENTCOM decisions were informed by intelligence of how the Iranians would conduct their missile strikes. As discussed in a CBS *60 Minutes* segment on the Al Asad attack, one small view of the larger intelligence iceberg was shared as an example of what the Intelligence Community provided.

One of the key requirements for a successful ballistic missile attack is having an accurate aim point. Iranian missiles, both cruise and ballistic, have demonstrated their ability to hit a target with increasing accuracy. But with no ability for airborne reconnaissance over Iraq, and with no indigenous space-based imagery system, how could the Iranians get the information they needed to optimize their attack? The answer is commercial imagery, available from a wide range of sources. That understanding, and also with access to such information, General McKenzie and his staff had a key piece of information. If they understood when the Iranian ballistic missiles were ready to launch, and they knew when Iran had access to commercial imagery of Al Asad Airbase, they could estimate when they could take action that would change what the Iranians were targeting.

Such understanding is not immediately accessible, and it would only be deduced as the result of a longer-term effort of information gathering and analysis to answer the question of how do the Iranian conduct missile attacks. If not a standing requirement of some importance, its priority would have increased in the wake of the Iran supported attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities in September 2019. This visibility into Iranian missile tactics, techniques and procedures likely formed the basis to focus intelligence collection after the death of Soleimani.

With the understanding that the Iranians would want to see their target prior to launch, US Intelligence was able to provide General McKenzie with the key data to inform his decision as he explained in a 60 Minute interview. He noted "he was sure the Iranians had downloaded the last of the commercial satellite photos they collected every day to observe the base."[7] With that information, CENTCOM was able to move the majority of personnel and aircraft out of harm's way. SBIRS, positioned appropriately by US Space Force, provided the early warning of the actual launch. Given the short flight time, six minutes by some accounts,[8] the warning mechanisms at US bases in Iraq, called Big Voice, provided alert of the incoming strike.[9] Even if such systems only provided minutes of warning, personnel quickly moved toward shelter, which decreased the casualty rate.

As General McKenzie would opine on *60 Minutes*, in addition to saving lives, the lack of US deaths deescalated the situation by changing the nature of the conversation concerning retaliation by the US administration to the Iranian attack.[10]

5. Barbara Starr, "Iran moving ballistic missiles by boat, US officials say," last updated May 8, 2019. CNN. *https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/07/politics/us-iran-transporting-missiles/index.html*.
6. Nathan Strout, "Exclusive: How the Space Force foiled an Iranian missile attack with a critical early warning," last updated January 7, 2021. C4ISRNet. *https://www.c4isrnet.com/battlefield-tech/space/2021/01/07/exclusive-how-the-space-force-foiled-an-iranian-missile-attack-with-a-critical-early-warning*.

7. David Martin and Mary Walsh, "Who would live and who would die."
8. Rachel S. Cohen, "For Missile Warning in Iraq, Thank the Space Force," last modified February 27, 2020. *Air Force Magazine*. *https://www.airforcemag.com/for-missile-warning-in-iraq-thank-the-space-force/*.
9. "New aerial footage of Iranian missile attack on Al Asad Airbase" *War is Boring*, last modified March 1, 2021 *https://warisboring.com/new-aerial-footage-of-iranian-missile-attack-on-al-asad-airbase/*.
10. David Martin and Mary Walsh, "Who would live and who would die."

CONCLUSION

This event falls into the category of current history. As such, it is incomplete. There is much that is not publicly known about US Intelligence activity related to this event and may never be declassified. What is obvious from the information released is that intelligence worked together with decision makers for a positive outcome. The US Intelligence Community fulfilled that highest of standards to provide precise information to decision makers in a timely fashion. The combination of current and foundational intelligence, and the ability and access to gather emerging information created the conditions that fully supported national objectives and saved the lives of American service members. Chalk up an intelligence success.

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