

Iraqi colonel says he is source of 45-minute claim on Iraqi WMDs

Chris Marsden
10 December 2003

The December 7 edition of Britain's *Sunday Telegraph* featured an interview with a Lieutenant Colonel al-Dabbagh, who claims to have passed information to British intelligence warning that Saddam Hussein had deployed "weapons of mass destruction" that could be used against coalition troops in less than 45 minutes.

Far from helping the Blair Labour government in Britain by verifying its claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, however, al-Dabbagh has only added to its difficulties arising from the inquiry by Lord Hutton into the death of Dr David Kelly.

Kelly, a top weapons inspector, killed himself last July after he was exposed as the source of a report on BBC's *Today* programme claiming that the Labour Government had included the 45-minute claim against the wishes of MI6 in order to "sex up" the September 2002 intelligence dossier on Iraq in order to justify going to war.

During the Hutton inquiry, MI6 head Sir Richard Dearlove said that the information contained in the dossier relating to the 45-minute claim had come from a single "established and reliable" source serving in the Iraqi armed forces. According to the *Telegraph*, "Privately British intelligence officers have claimed that they believe the original source was killed during the war."

They clearly did not want any examination of the source because it was already apparent that even were his information accurate, it was used wrongly. The information was supposed to relate only to battlefield weapons, but Prime Minister Tony Blair in his foreword to the dossier cited the 45-minute claim next to details of Iraq's alleged possession of al-Hussaid missiles—which it was said could strike British bases in Cyprus.

The possibility of weapons of mass destruction being used to threaten British interests became the excuse for Britain joining the US-led attack on Iraq, as numerous newspapers focused on the alleged threat.

The claim made by Blair has already been exposed as a lie. John Scarlett, chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, admitted to the Hutton inquiry that the 45-minute claim did not relate to chemical and biological weapons at all, but to "battlefield mortar shells or small calibre weaponry".

Former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, who quit the cabinet

over Iraq, also cited a private conversation on March 5, 2003 during which Blair had accepted his conclusion that Saddam could not attack foreign cities, let alone in the 45-minute timeframe implied by the September dossier. Cook had come to this conclusion, he says, based on a presentation on February 20 by Scarlett.

When he was questioned during the Hutton Inquiry, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said he knew the claim in the dossier referred to battlefield weapons only. He was asked by Andrew Caldecott QC, for the BBC, why, after newspapers had led with suggestions that the 45-minute claim related to strategic missiles, "was no corrective statement issued for the benefit of the public?" Hoon had replied: "I don't know."

Despite expressing his desire to help the Blair government, Lt. Col. al-Dabbagh compounds its difficulties with his claims.

The Lieutenant Colonel is said to have commanded an Iraqi air defence unit in the western desert during the build-up to the war in Iraq. He believes that his reports were the source of the dossier's claim that Iraq could launch WMD within 45 minutes and after reading the relevant passage declared, "I am the one responsible for providing this information.... It is 100 percent accurate."

He states that cases containing WMD warheads were delivered to front-line units, including his own, towards the end of 2002 that were to be used by Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen paramilitaries and units of the Special Republican Guard if the war with the US and Britain reached "a critical stage". But he then goes on to describe weapons that could only be for battlefield use. The devices were, he says, designed to be launched by hand-held rocket-propelled grenades.

The *Telegraph* report continues, "Although he gave details of Iraq's battlefield WMD capability, he said that he had no knowledge of any plans by Saddam to use missiles to attack British bases in Cyprus and other NATO targets.

"Col al-Dabbagh said that he doubted that Iraq under Saddam had this capability. 'I know nothing about this. My information was only about what we could do on the battlefield.'"

Lt. Col. al-Dabbagh has offered to give evidence to the Hutton Inquiry if it were reconvened. He told the *Telegraph*, "I admire Mr Blair because he made Iraq secure from Saddam. If Saddam's people kill me for saying this, I do not mind. I have

done my duty to my country and we have got rid of Saddam.

“And if the British Government wants me to come to London to tell the truth about Saddam’s secret weapons programme, I am ready to help in any way I can.”

But, as one would expect from people with a great deal to hide, the government’s reaction to an offer to open up an old political wound has been decidedly cool. Prime Minister Tony Blair said of the *Telegraph* report, “We’re not prepared to comment but we urge all those involved to provide the Iraq Survey Group [the coalition body searching for Iraq’s alleged WMDs] with whatever information they believe they have.”

No comment was forthcoming from either Whitehall or the Foreign Office.

There are other awkward questions raised by al-Dabbagh’s assertions, which do not ring true. Despite the mass of detail he cites, including descriptions of the boxes containing the weapons and the location of the factories at which they were produced, on other specifics he is less forthcoming. He claims he does not know whether they were “either chemical or biological weapons” or where they are now. They have been simply hidden by pro-Saddam loyalists.

And when he is more specific, the dubious character of his claims becomes apparent.

The *Telegraph* reports, “Saddam’s officials also gave elaborate instructions on how to use the weapons. Because of their limited range, those responsible for firing them were to dress in civilian clothes and drive in civilian vehicles with yellow number plates.

“Each military unit was given two four-wheel drive Isuzu cars,’ said Lt. Col. al-Dabbagh. ‘We were not allowed to use them and they had to be kept in good condition.’ If the war reached a critical stage and Iraq’s forces were in danger of being overrun, then designated officers would be given the task of driving the vehicles towards coalition positions and firing the weapons.”

The *Telegraph* states that al-Dabbagh saw “a group of Fedayeen attempt to use one of the warheads against an American position on the outskirts of Baghdad on April 6. ‘They were going to use this weapon, but then they realised that they would kill lots of Iraqis who did not have masks, so they put them in their cars and drove off.’”

This raises the question of what use small arms weaponry that had to be fired from a nearby car would have been in a battle with the US? Major Charles Heyman, editor of *Jane’s World Armies*, commented: “This is a very strange report, frankly.

“Biological weapons can’t really be used effectively at short range, and are no use to a frontline commander.”

In al-Dabbagh’s case the presumption should be that his evidence is not to be believed, given that he is a man with a definite political agenda. His aim is not only to support Blair’s claims that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, but also to insist that they are a continued threat that can be employed by remnants of the old regime. In this

way he hopes to justify further repression by the occupation forces and their puppet government, for which he functions as an advisor.

As was so often the case, if al-Dabbagh claim of origin is to be believed then the intelligence cited in the September dossier came from forces anxious to bolster the case for war against Iraq and with a vested interest in the Bush administration’s plans for regime change.

Lt. Col. al-Dabbagh was spying on the Iraqi government on behalf of the Iraqi National Accord (INA) or Wafik, a London-based exile group that was set up by MI6 after the first Gulf War and later backed by the CIA.

Dr Ayad Allawi, the head of the INA, and General A.J.M. Muhie, both prominent member of Iraq’s Governing Council, have confirmed that they passed al-Dabbagh’s reports to both British and American intelligence officers “sometime in the spring and summer of 2002.”

In the 1990s the INA was involved in a failed CIA attempt to overthrow Saddam Hussein. It was made up of military and security officers who had defected from Iraq and who were believed to have continued influence within the country’s military and security elites. From 1995 the INA was allowed to operate openly from Amman, Jordan. Its leaders assured the CIA that they were in close contact with top officials still in Baghdad and these insiders could oust Saddam. But Iraq’s intelligence services were able to penetrate the INA and in June 1996 a hundred military officers linked to the INA were arrested and 30 were executed. Successive US governments had given the organisation upwards of \$16 million dollars and they would have expected favourable intelligence reports at the very least in return for their investment, once the planned coup had failed and all-out war had been decided on.



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