

Western watch: Rethinking 'intelligence'

by Chibli Mallat

No country functions without intelligence services – that is a universal fact. That no country can function without intelligence services remains an axiom.

"Intelligence," of course, is an oxymoron. Spying, surreptitious gathering of information, or *uyun*, as our old Arab eyes were known in the history chronicles, are better renderings of the profession. It was after World War II that the Central Intelligence Agency replaced the Office of Strategic Services with an acronym including the oxymoron.

Thus, the new trend of a self-elevating "intelligence" was set by garbing its own title with a crude defense mechanism. The rhetorical artifice shouldn't mislead any-

one. To take an example from experience, who among any of my better students in Britain or in Beirut, or by projection, in the United States, would go into a public service called "intelligence" when she or he might find a position in the State Department, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, or the equivalent position in any national diplomacy or indeed the private sector?

Can a country function without spies? The question could be narrowed by distinguishing internal and external intelligence services, MI5 and MI6 in Britain, the FBI and CIA in America, and by arguing that at least one should dispense with domestic intelligence. During the second Gulf War, the blunders of British domestic intelligence were legion, which incarcerated fellow Arabs on dubious charges of their anticipated violent collusion with the Iraqi government.

I still bitterly remember the case of Abbas Shibliq, who had been heavily involved in supporting democracy in the Arab world, and who was incarcerated in Pentonville prison for several months after his denouncement by MI5 as a national security "risk" for his alleged contacts with "foreign" organizations.

Recently, domestic U.S. intelligence has performed disastrously with "allied" members of the Iraqi opposition who were evac-

uated from northern Iraq to America, and found themselves stranded in a Los Angeles prison for over a year-and-a-half. A resignation in the Immigration Services ensued, and their (lack of) trials and tribulations may soon come to an end, although the details of the pleas they are being asked to accept are not morally satisfactory considering the original intelligence blunders.

So much for the poor work of the FBI and MI5. Should one dispense with them altogether? Probably not, for they perform an effective job with such intractable problems as extremist religious or ideological sects. The extreme right and the extreme left are well infiltrated in America and Britain.

Still, there is one plain lesson from the Gulf War detainees and their Japanese predecessors who were put in concentration

camps in California during World War II. Domestic intelligence should never deal with cases involving information which is better collected by foreign intelligence. This is confirmed by the effective defense of the Californian detainees

by James Woolsey, a remarkable Washington lawyer who headed the CIA until 1996.

So "yes" to domestic intelligence – but under close control of the judicial process, and as long as it's not allowed to deal with foreign cases which it is singularly ill-equipped to confront.

This brings us to foreign intelligence acting abroad. Is it needed? Can it be dispensed with altogether? Should it at least be reformed? One may be too attached to James Bond to level criticism at MI6, of which he is the most endearing expression. For a jurist, a person who is "licensed to kill" abroad is over the top, however. In proper perspective, the secondary role of Britain in world affairs suggests that medium-power countries like Britain and France do not represent a real threat to a more decent foreign policy carried out by their governments, even if they tried.

The matter is different in the United States, for the guys at the CIA have real, dangerous power. Consider two recent cases in point. On Aug. 27, 1996, CIA officers in

northern Iraq withdrew suddenly, leaving America's "allies" in the Iraqi opposition at the mercy of overwhelming government power. One hundred Iraqi National Congress people were killed in an uneven battle, some 1,500 people were rounded up to face a dramatic fate over the next few days, and more than 6,000 "allies" were airlifted to Guam then to America in the following few weeks.

The Iraqi "Bay of Pigs" was a characteristic failure of the CIA, though it was not the sole one in Iraq. Over the last five years, the person in charge of the Middle East, a "single-minded" person according to a recent New Yorker article by Seymour Hersh, and a notoriously disliked person even within the organization, has managed to have hundreds of America's supposed "allies" killed in Iraq.

This person, Steven Richter, is still pushing his coup plots, undermining Iraqi democrats in the opposition, and floating a "five-year" strategy to get rid of the regime.

Another dramatic illustration of the failure of the CIA is

in the current conflict in Yugoslavia. The poor judgment of its current head, George Tenet, was evident in the bombing of the Chinese Embassy. He was forced by the Secretary of Defense to be a signatory to the apology, in an unprecedented move highlighting his responsibility.

The "intelligence" blunder in considering the Chinese Embassy a legitimate target for NATO bombing, might change the course of the war, or it might not. One thing is certain – it took out the dynamism of Viktor Chernomyrdin's initiative, and killed the little hope for diplomacy the Russians had developed before Boris Yeltsin's most recent moves. So much for the "intelligent" use of taxpayers' money – the budget for the CIA stands at \$26 billion.

Are the tragic flaws of Richter and Tenet the result of their lack of competence or intelligence, or should the CIA be jettisoned? Realistically, it's hard to imagine the U.S. without a CIA, whose disappearance would in the long term be an enhancement for transparency and good government.

But there may be some questions about reforming the tentacular oxymoron and making it accountable. Here are some suggestions. First, the CIA should be christened away from its disinformationist title, perhaps as OSUSI, "Office of Special U.S. Interests," or AFUHA, "Agency for Foreign Underground Hostile Activity." That would make a break with a false sense of superiority over other governmental agencies and focus its objective.

More substantially, the role of the CIA should be redefined, with its main task limited to the impact of foreign intelligence on American domestic affairs. In cases like the Californian Iraqis, the CIA is better equipped than the FBI or the Justice Department to explain the history and risks of this or that splinter Kurdish group in Northern Iraq.

Laurie Mylroie, a U.S. analyst of Iraqi policy, has conclusively shown how the domestic-international segmentation of intelligence leaves huge pans of darkness on an increasingly intertwined world of hostile activities.

Thirdly, and with regard to U.S. foreign underground activities proper, American foreign intelligence should be brought under the umbrella which it belongs. First and foremost the State Department, a politically accountable body which certainly has more intelligence than the self-standing agency, alternatively the Defence Department to avoid such discrepancy between analysis and implementation as in the Chinese Embassy fiasco, or, in Iraq the turning of the northern no-fly zone from a tool to prevent the repression of its people by the Iraqi government, into a silly observation scourge of Iraqi radar operators.

Perhaps an enlightened Woodrow Wilson will one day emerge and rethink foreign intelligence in America. Meanwhile, for the benefit of the world, including Yugoslavs, Middle Easterners and Americans, Tenet and Richter should resign.

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