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U.S. Department of Justice

Federal Bureau of Investigation

In Reply, Please Refer to
File No.

Baghdad Operations Center
March 30, 2004

DECLASSIFIED BY uc/baw 60324
ON 05-21-2009

Interview Session Number: 19
Interview Conducted by: SSA George L. Piro
Arabic/English Translation: SSA [redacted]
LS [redacted]

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(S) Saddam Hussein (High Value Detainee #1) was interviewed March 30, 2004 at a military detention facility at Baghdad International Airport (BIAP), Baghdad, Iraq. Hussein provided the following information:

(S) Prior to the start of the interview, Hussein was advised that today's session would be a continuation of the discussions regarding the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq.

(S) As stated in a previous interview, Hussein acknowledged that he had lived with the Marsh Arabs for a short period of time. When Hussein was in Egypt in the early 1960s, he hoped that it was "God's will" that he would return to Iraq. Upon returning, Hussein attempted to expand his own knowledge of Iraq through actual experience in areas of the country where he had never spent significant time including the mountains and the marshes. Hussein described life in the marshes of southern Iraq as "enchanted for any human being." The summers, however, were not pleasant due to the oppressive heat and humidity as well as the presence of insects.

(S) Regarding the drainage of the marshes conducted by the Iraqi government, Hussein stated that one was faced with the choice of preserving nature at the expense of humans or sacrificing a bit of nature for the sake of humans. Hussein noted that the water in the inhabited parts of the marshes was not always clean due to human and animal pollution. The inhabitants of the marshes drank this water and bathed in it. As a result, illness was prevalent including widespread bilharziasis, an intestinal disease. Life expectancy was relatively low. Hussein stated the Iraqi government could not simply "sit back and watch this misery." He added that the government decided to "bring them inside life" or to modernize the Marsh Arabs way of life. Hussein reiterated the difficult

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choice of the Iraqi government to preserve the simple, primitive life of the Marsh inhabitants or to bring them within the framework of modern life where a human is not "disgraced or insulted."

~~(S)~~ Hussein stated that all of Iraq is beautiful and again described the marshes as "enchanted." He added, "I slept there for days in 1981 and 1982." During that time period, Hussein stated he would travel to the front lines of the Iran-Iraq War in the morning, then return to the marshes in the evening upon completion of his duties. Hussein described this period as "the best of days." He claimed that he spent parts of each year from 1978-84 visiting the marshes.

~~(S)~~ Hussein described his visit in 1980 of a village called Baida located in the middle of the marshes. According to information, residents of Baida attacked a police station. Hussein stated this was not a matter to handle in a simple fashion. He traveled to Baida in a party of three boats, one carrying Hussein and others, one carrying his protective detail, and one carrying "news people." This event was filmed and shown on television. According to Hussein, the residents of Baida were "happy to see us." They slaughtered animals and prepared a meal thinking Hussein and his entourage would stay for dinner. However, the group only remained for a three hours then departed. Hussein never asked the residents of Baida whether they attacked a police station. At the time, Hussein was questioned by a member of his protective detail regarding the necessity for an investigation of the participation of the residents of Baida in the attack. In response, he stated, "Good people understood me. The evil ones also got the message." Hussein added that if a similar act had subsequently occurred, they would be "dealt with properly."

~~(S)~~ Hussein stated that the Iraqi government had good relations with the Marsh Arabs. However, upon entry of a foreigner into the situation, "it becomes bad." Hussein asserted that some of the Marsh Arabs were corrupted by Iran. In particular, the area of the Hweiza marshes became a smuggling route beginning during the time of the Shah of Iran. Hussein suggested that the family seen in the video previously shown by the interviewer was from Hweiza.

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(S) Hussein stated the Iraqi government chose to drain the marshes for the sake of the inhabitants and for strategic reasons for Iraq. He reiterated the Iraqi government wanted to modernize the way of life for the Marsh Arabs so that they would "not live like animals." Hussein believed it was unfit for an Iraqi to live in these conditions. The drainage of the marshes was also conducted for a strategic purpose. Only one road existed connecting Basra to Amarah to Baghdad. At points, this road was completely surrounded by the marshes. When the Iranians entered Iraq in 1984, their main goal was to cut off this road and to isolate Basra. Accordingly, the Iraqi government decided to drain the marshes and build a detour providing a secondary route.

(S) The Iraqi government studied the idea of building homes in the marshes for the inhabitants. However, research showed that this project would be too expensive and complicated particularly in the areas of sewage and electricity. As a result, the idea was abandoned and the government decided to build housing complexes on dry land for the displaced Marsh Arabs. The residents were also offered monetary allowances to build their own homes. Hussein stated that the government provided water, electricity, health care services, and schools for the inhabitants. Previously, teachers and medical professionals would refuse to enter the marshes unless paid three to four times their normal salaries.

(S) Hussein described the marshes as "nice to visit for two, three, or four days." In the summer, however, mosquitos would "eat you" and life was very harsh. Hussein acknowledged that humans have a need for primitive life, but only for a few days at a time. He added that the older man previously seen in the film commenting about the Marsh Arabs "came as a visitor, but did not live there" nor did his wife and children.

(S) Hussein suggested that the interviewer talk to personnel of the Iraqi Ministry of Irrigation in order to understand how the drainage was implemented. He added that the task was accomplished within three to four months. Regarding the individual or individuals who designed and supervised the marsh drainage, Hussein stated the Iraqi government utilized the entities with the most expertise and the necessary equipment. The project included the involvement of the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Irrigation and possibly the City of Baghdad. The

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"entire nation" and many of its experts participated in the drainage of the marshes. When noted to Hussein that Muhammad Hamza Al-Zubaidi claimed to be the "architect" of the marsh drainage who first proposed such a plan to the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) in 1991, Hussein responded, "Maybe." Hussein stated, however, that he received the first plan and proposal from Hussein Kamil. He is unaware whether Kamil consulted with Al-Zubaidi regarding the project. Similarly, Hussein denied knowledge whether Al-Zubaidi discussed the marsh drainage with other Iraqi leaders. He added, "If he (Al-Zubaidi) said this, he is being truthful." The interviewer told Hussein that others had also claimed to be the originators of the idea of the drainage of the marshes. Hussein replied that it is understandable that any Iraqi might attempt to take credit for such an important task that improved the lives of the Marsh Arabs while simultaneously cutting off the path of a foe such as Iran.

~~(S)~~ When questioned about reports of the presence of Iraqi army deserters and saboteurs in the marshes in 1991 and steps taken by the Iraqi government to deal with these individuals, Hussein acknowledged the existence of deserters. As typical for any protracted conflict, some individuals decide to abandon their duties. This has occurred in the past and continues to occur today during war. For a deserter, the Iraqi law is applied or the individual is pardoned by the appropriate authority. Hussein stated that the presence of deserters in the marshes of southern Iraq was not a contributing factor which led to the drainage.

~~(S)~~ Hussein stated that saboteurs began using the marshes after 1991. The response of the Iraqi government was "the same as that of any government against those who violate the law." Hussein could provide no example of a government response to saboteur activity. He denied that a military plan existed for confronting saboteurs and deserters. He stated that deserters were typically pursued by the police, local citizens, and family members. In cases of mutiny such as that which existed in 1991, Hussein stated the army would intervene. Hussein acknowledged that there were probably times when the Iraqi military had to deal with saboteurs.

~~(S)~~ When questioned whether the historical value of the marshes was considered prior to the drainage, Hussein asked

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whether similar consideration was given to the area where the High Dam was built in Egypt. He added that ruins located in the area of the dam were moved prior to construction. Hussein opined that some discussion most likely took place regarding issues concerning the movement of the stones versus saving the people from starvation. He stated that the matter of the drainage of the marshes "was studied" and "there is no historical value of the marshes."

~~(S)~~ Regarding any consideration given by the Iraqi government to the environmental impact of the drainage of the marshes, Hussein replied that he could debate this matter with experts for "the next twenty days." He noted that Americans did not allow the Indians to live as they had existed prior to colonization. He asked what laws are in place which prohibit American and European companies from destroying the jungles of the Amazon, which he described as the "lungs of the earth." Hussein asked, "Do we preserve species of birds and other animals or do we worry about the existence of Iraqis?" He further asked whether the water of the marshes should have been wasted for the sake of preserving the marshes or used for agriculture. Hussein stated, "What we did was correct." He added, if not, Americans should reopen the water now. The interviewer noted that a recent news article reported local Iraqi citizens did, in fact, recently collect money, rented a bulldozer, and opened a part of the canal in order to allow water to flow back into the marshes.

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