

The SIS and London-based foreign dissidents: some patterns of espionage

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Over forty years separates the arrival of the Iraqi community in London and today's Russian one. Some of the Iraqis making their home in the UK in the 1970s had substantial wealth, others were averagely well-to-do, and some had little more than the clothes in which they stood. For the most part they were fleeing for their lives and as a community, made up of many communities, kept a low profile. This holds true today.

The low profile strategy, for all its divisions and tensions – now under more stress following the arrival of post invasion Iraqis – allowed the community, and its children in particular, to evolve quietly as more Iraqis rolled in. It was only in the intelligence sphere – which the majority of 1970s Iraqis were seeking to avoid – that it had high visibility. Some Iraqis were sought out by the SIS; but for the most part the spies interested in the community were not Brits but fellow Iraqis.¹

In due course there were unexplained deaths, suicides, obvious murders and hellish other incidents. These came as one-offs or in waves. They stopped as quickly as they started, only to kick off again just as a semblance of peace of mind was being restored. Although largely invisible to mainstream Britain, the fear and hysteria this engendered within the Iraqi community and those associated with it was beyond belief. The children, desperate to fit in with their British schoolmates, absorbed it with insouciance. The Iraqi minority who were politically active and/or dissidents in contact with the SIS or other western intelligence agencies grew smaller and more hard core.

¹ Espionage has always been selective and never a numbers game – the Brits were only interested in a small minority. Mass espionage, which is what the Iraqis were playing at, is designed to create fear.

Protection

Security became the norm. My Baghdad-born father was an agent with the SIS and my family was lucky in that when I was a schoolgirl and we were under actual Iraqi threat in London, we had the support of a beloved SIS case officer who moved in with us until full protection could be put in place. By the time he left, we had armed Special Branch officers inside our house and uniformed police outside.

Many prominent Iraqis had the same level of cover. Those who did not, but had the means to pay for it, arranged it for themselves: when terrorising an entire community, one goal is to deplete its financial reserves, and forcing security provision upon it is one way of doing so. Inevitably a protection market developed – mostly stocked by moonlighters from Special Branch and the police – with Iraqi families complaining that their price could be one thing one moment and another the next. ‘Ordinary’ Iraqi families, meaning poorer ones, to begin with had the support of bewildered ‘bobbies-on-the-beat’. As costs escalated, they were withdrawn. Iraqi students, some of whom were politically active, had no protection at all; some relying on their British peers who organised rotas to sleep in their houses.

In due course, the Iraqi community separated, the majority pursuing apolitical and deliberately invisible lives. A minority remained politically active; an even smaller number continuing to work with the SIS and/or other countries’ agencies in the hope of toppling Saddam Hussein. The very few wealthy enough to consult the major PR companies of the day in the hope of keeping their cause alive did so for a time.

Courtship of Saddam Hussein

The entire community coped as best it could when Britain and the West started courting Saddam Hussein – one of the UK’s provisos being that his henchmen leave London and do his dirty work in some other European capital. The London-based Iraqi community’s children, by now well integrated, grew to maturity with a sophisticated knowledge of government-to-

government betrayal, many of them despising and eschewing politics to this day. Meantime, and in accordance with the British government's new policy of courting Saddam Hussein, the SIS's interest in Iraq was scaled down. Holistic knowledge of the country, at one time second to none, plummeted: what is taught in a dictator's secondary schools defines the capabilities of his next generation, knowledge of which is as important as knowing his current crop of officials. The minimal British intelligence product that emerged was skewed towards commerce and military intelligence.

When the wheel turned against Saddam Hussein once more, the SIS and other western intelligence agencies dusted off the shelf the original dissidents, no matter that after long years of exile they were decades out of date. Some of them threw their weight behind the illegal and immoral invasion. For all the reemployed PR companies' efforts, the 'nu-Iraq' does not seem to have favoured them.

London's Russian community

Flash forward forty years and look at London's newly-arrived wealthy Russian community. There are three big differences between it and the 1970s Iraqis. First, for the most part those Russians who have made London their home have not done so because they fear for their lives. Second, the Russians are highly visible, not least because of the quite exceptional riches of some of them. Third, Russian children attending British schools are under the fierce spotlight of reputational disadvantage: Iraqi children attending British schools forty years ago were there as a result of circumstance, often tragic; Russian children, so the narrative goes, are there because their parents are money-launderers and tax evaders, their countrymen back home no more than criminal cyber-warriors intent on stealing our bank details.

Two decades after the collapse of Soviet Communism some Russian money is likely to be innocent: the Russian people have an honourable history and criminals are not the preserve of one nation or another. Whatever the truth, the ferocity with which this Russian criminal story line has run in

the media is suspicious. Singularity always is. For example, the astronomical wealth of the newly arriving Chinese community is not under similar media scrutiny when its money is likely to have been acquired in much the same way as the Russian. The increasing numbers of Chinese state-inspired cyber attacks against the UK are in the news – I assume this is not one way traffic – but this does not criminalise them. Russian cyber warriors are ‘criminals’; their Chinese equivalents are working for their country. The murder of a British businessman who worked in China and was associated with the now disgraced Bo Xilai, the former Communist Party chief of Chongqing who was once tipped for high office, was characterised by systematic British media undermining of the dead man’s character (presumably because it was the British state’s interest to do so.) As a result, Chinese children attending British schools are able to evolve quietly, their country and community not subject to the same reputational onslaught.

Double standards: Russian wealth v Chinese

One reason for the double standard is that, unlike China, Russia has not proven adept at creating alternative PR opportunities with which the Western media will run. For example, China was embarrassed in Britain by Ai Weiwei’s seeds exhibition at Tate Modern in 2010; and further embarrassed when Elton John dedicated a concert in Beijing to Ai Weiwei in 2012. Within months, 18 months in the planning, it loaned two pandas to Edinburgh Zoo, a knockout feel-good PR story dominating the headlines and still commanding attention.²

Another reason for the double standard is that unlike the Chinese, the overseas Russian community was not initially

² China’s Panda PR: a foreign relations commercial juggernaut and state metaphor, the subliminal messaging being that like the peaceful bamboo-eating giant that is under threat, the Chinese people are also peaceful but similarly under threat. As Alexander Chancellor pointed out in *The Spectator*, 9 March 2013, many years ago Mao Tse-tung gave Edward Heath two pandas for London Zoo; and similarly to Richard Nixon.

under instructions from its government to maintain a low profile. Both nations are empire-building but doing it in different ways: Russia originally going for high visibility 'bling' and, say, purchase of football clubs; China for massive but quiet investment, a quiet that it has maintained despite the astonishing wealth of some of its overseas or visiting nationals.³ As a result, the migratory habits of the Russian super rich, but not the Chinese, attracted the attention of the popular press. Those who move in a gaggle of private jets between Gstaad, New York, Paris and London have always been fair game and the exuberance of the Russians merely added further copy. Their lifestyle and the extent of their wealth was what made them remarkable, the origin of their riches not the issue (in the popular press) any more than is, say, the origin of Chinese riches. After all, much of these riches are invested in London, one of the safest money-laundering capitals in the world, so Britain has benefited, the investment routinely celebrated in its financial pages. Which is to say: it is not in the British state's commercial interests for its media to draw attention to investment/investors from overseas or the origins of their wealth.

However unlike the Chinese, the Russian overseas community drew attention to itself. In the UK, this played into the hands of PR guru Lord Bell at a time when it was commercially – and therefore politically – expedient for Britain to favour Russian dissidents whether in Russia (and/or in Russian jails) or London-based. As a result, Lord Bell was able to build on an existing Russian community story and merge it with that of the London-based anti-Putin dissident campaign

³ See *Lobster 52*, Winter 2006/7, page 33: *China's Harmony PR*

bankrolled by his client, the late Boris Berezofksy.⁴ No matter how much Moscow by then wanted its overseas community to lower its profile, Lord Bell ensured this did not happen. 'Good' PR can hijack an existing story diverting attention elsewhere by adding to the narrative. Without a PR rebuttal, the new legend becomes impossible to throw off.

Similarities between the Iraqi and Russian dissidents

If there are differences between the majority of the London-based Russian community and the 1970s Iraqi one, there are also similarities. Like the Iraqis, all that many of the Russians want is for their family to evolve in situ and out of the spotlight; most are doing their best to stay away from politics; all know the whole community is being spied upon by its own. As with the Iraqis forty years ago, the London-based Russian dissident community has been terrorised and among it or its associates there have been questionable deaths, including those of some Britons, murder and suicide.

However, and because of Lord Bell's successful PR campaign, media attention has not been concentrated on those Russians who just want to get on with their lives and are living here by choice when not flitting backwards and forwards to Moscow. Instead, it has focussed on the minority unable to nip back to Russia because they are opposed to President-Prime Minister-President Putin. As with the 1970s Iraqis, the London-based anti-Putin dissidents were originally wildly courted and puffed up by Britain, their sentiments

⁴ For the best account of Lord Bell's work, see Mark Hollingsworth, 'Lord Bell: The PR consultants who campaign against Putin', 20 January 2012 at <<http://russianmind.com/content/lord-bell-pr-consultants-who-campaign-against-putin>>.

'Last month Vladimir Putin accused British and American public relations consultants and lobbyists of undermining the Russian state and disrupting the elections. In this issue we profile Lord Bell, the PR advisor who has been most active in campaigning against Putin....'

Declaration of interest: I worked closely with Mark Hollingsworth on lobbying issues in the 1980s/1990s; he edited my book *Baghdad's Spy* in 2003.

dovetailing with those of remaining Cold War warriors and, far more importantly, Britain's then commercial interests.

The latter, perhaps temporarily, ceased to be the case a while ago. In addition, foreign policy needs now demand that fences be mended. Which is to say: as with the SIS's shelving of Iraqi dissidents once courtship of Saddam Hussein became the goal, promoting London-based Russian dissidents opposing the status quo in Moscow has been 'out' for some time; and until they become fashionable again, the SIS will be more interested in getting to know those who support it. Meantime diplomacy is once more a matter of preference and if the patterns of yesterday are repeated (which they usually are) Moscow-originated dubious deaths or outright murder on the streets of London are likely to subside.

Britain's policy change leaves the London-based anti-Putin dissidents high and dry – as it did the Iraqi ones all those years ago, the similarities in their treatment striking. The last remnants of media interest are due to coverage of the current inquest into the death of Alexander Litvinenko murdered in London in 2006 (see endnote); in the same way that the last remnants of media interest in the 1970s Iraqis followed the 'sensational' death of the owner of a London restaurant frequented almost exclusively by Arabs and especially Iraqis. (He was found dead with his mistress in the back of his Rolls Royce. At the time, it was said that every table in his restaurant was bugged.) Once the Litvinenko inquest completes, and unless another Berezofsky-type financial backer can be found, the London-based anti-Putin dissident PR campaign is likely to be over and media interest will evaporate.⁵ If it resurrects, as did the anti-Saddam

⁵ A significant difference between the 1970s London-based Iraqi dissidents and the London-based Russian ones is that the Iraqis were younger. This could make the Russian ones feel even more desperate: they will be aware that age alone could limit their political longevity. This mattered less when they could maintain their high media profile. It is of consequence now because Boris Berezovsky is no longer around to pay for it. If Boris Berezovsky is mentioned again, it will be because his heirs continue to be pursued by the Russian government for money Berezovsky owes the Russian state: pots and kettles come to mind, government is often selective in whom it chases.

Hussein rhetoric, it will point to another British policy change – and changes, real or anticipated, in Russia too.

Meantime, events in Russia, including the actions of its various opposition parties will continue to be followed closely in the media. It has a middle class which is leaving its exiles behind and 'ridicules the division between a Kremlin-licensed opposition and an unlicensed one; craves fair elections, independent courts and public accountability – that craves, in short, civil society.'⁶ The London-based anti-Putin dissidents are outside this development if only because they are not in Russia.

Further heartbreak awaits them when, as seems likely, in place of Lord Bell's anti-Putin PR campaign, another takes its place: Russians living overseas through choice, no matter how distanced by privilege they and their children are from events on the ground back home, are sick of the stereotyping – dissidents 'good', non-dissidents 'bad'. In due course, they will recruit a PR company to lead a rebuttal: whichever wins the Reputation PR account will make a lot of money indeed. President Putin, for all the good it will do him in the longer term, is likely to throw substantial funds its way too.

As for the SIS's now discarded London-based anti-Putin dissidents, with exceptions, long years of exile are no way to remain relevant. Even if meeting Muscovites passing through London, it is impossible to follow every nuance of Russian affairs from a distance. In addition, exiled dissidents date quickly when a dissident generation matures internally. Nevertheless, the London-based anti-Putin dissidents will hope that one day they will become the SIS's flavour of the month again. Some of the London-based Iraqi dissidents certainly did. It did them and their country no good. If you are a dissident, exile and the patterns of espionage seldom change.

Endnote: Litvinenko Inquest

The inquest has allowed the public to catch a glimpse of the relatively modest payments made by the SIS to a contact:

⁶ 'Putin's Personal Vendetta', *Guardian*, 2 April 2013.

according to testimony given by Litvinenko's widow and reported in the *Sunday Times*, the SIS made a lump sum payment of £18,000 into the couple's bank account in late 2003 or early 2004.⁷ Mrs Litvinenko says she asked her husband about its tax status which could imply it was tax-free. From 2004 onwards the SIS paid a monthly retainer of £2000. The payments continued until March 2007, four months after Litvinenko's death.⁸

The SIS is unlikely to be pleased that these amounts are now in the public domain. It gives others a baseline figure by which they may measure their own worth and whether they should be getting more; to note whether or not there is a gender, racial or regional bias to the SIS pay-rate; and, were they to die 'in the field', how long their family might expect the SIS payments to continue. Unless things have changed, some families are protected for life.

⁷ *Sunday Times*, 17 March 2013

⁸ *Sunday Times*, 17 March 2013