

The Path towards Strengthened Safeguards: Experiences in Iraq, South Africa, and North Korea

This video series is a collection of dialogues centered on the immense role played by the IAEA, and in particular how the Agency supports nuclear nonproliferation through the practice of safeguards. This current update is a chronicle of events during the 1990s, Iraq, South Africa, and North Korea, that led to the development of the Additional Protocol.

7.12 Access to Individuals

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Rich: It seemed to me that one of the primary lessons of Iraq and other difficult verification challenges that existed at the same time, was the importance of access to individuals. That you will run across problems with idiosyncrasies, instances of issues that occurred in the course of their work, that you have no possibility to understand, without access to people that were there at the time.

Jacques: That, I can't disagree at all with that. Individuals were key. But we have to find the right individuals, and I agree with you. One of the problems we had in Iraq, or I could say, one of the problems Iraq had in the beginning, because it was the problem of the inspected party, was to find people who had been briefed, to talk to us, but did not really know what they were talking about. Which means that it was an additional manner to inject inconsistencies, to inject problems, that if we had been able to talk directly and immediately to the right people, some problems that we wasted some time on both sides to resolve, would not have appeared. So that's, for instance, one of the area where progress was only made after August 1995, was centrifuge enrichment. Before that, we had essentially spokespersons.

I would leave aside the weaponization side, before that we had no information, or hard information. Al Atheer¹ – the weapon development lab that we had destroyed in 1992, that we had decided contributed to weapon development, was actually only acknowledged in 1995. And then we had access to all people. So back to how effective it was, it was tremendous. Being able to talk to anybody who had worked on a given report, and ask in detail what was the reality, what were the problems, allowed us to have a tremendous understanding of the past program. It even allowed us to correct some of the achievements that were recorded in the formal reports, because, as you know, in any business, you know, "everything is under control, we're making good progress," reports were writing that. But then we're talking to people who obviously didn't understand what they were doing all that well, so things weren't going all that good. So we needed to sort out what was actually lack of progress that were real, and what were lack of progress that were only part of concealment.

So talking to people, being able to understand how a team was working, was absolutely key. I know an anecdote that was interesting – we dug for a long time to understand why there was no connection between two teams that should have worked together, and then we realized after meetings of repeating the same question, expressing the same lack of belief in what we were told, we ended up talking to the two teams on the same time at the table, and they obviously hated each other so much, that I thought, "I think it's true, they didn't actually work together."

¹ http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/iraq/al_atheer.htm

So I think it's true, it's something I think from a legal standpoint is always difficult to enforce. Again, 687 was great, but for all sorts of human rights issues, but even with the right we had with 687 I remember some times when the Iraqi counterpart, our official counterparts, were eager to provide us access to the person we had asked to talk to. I remember the event when I was someone, wanting to talk to the person on the Iraq side, that I got repeated apologies from the Iraq counterpart that that person simply did not want to talk to us. At the end, by whatever means, we ended up meeting each other, and the guy was just beyond himself, and shredded me during the whole meeting. It was genuine. It was just honesty. It wasn't a part of concealment. But that access to individuals will always remain a sensitive issue for verification regimes.

Rich: I think in Iraq, particularly in the early years, the delay of getting access to the right people, really slowed down the whole endeavor. Had there been access from the beginning to the people that had been involved in the development of the Iraqi centrifuge, for example, what ended up being spread over about a 4 year period could've been taken care of in about 4 months.

Jacques: I couldn't agree more.

Laura: They were surely motivated not to have us meet with the right people.

Rich: During the 3rd inspection, there was a design, at that point in time the only design we had, of the Iraqi centrifuge. And this was a design that had been stolen from a German fellow that was working with them. We had with us on the team some of the best centrifuge enrichment experts in the world, and there were details of this design they just simply couldn't put together. It isn't really this, and it's not really that, it's something in between.

And I remember the magic day when the Iraqis finally produced the guy, and in five minutes, you know, all the fog is gone. But it took them 2 years to produce this guy.

Laura: I wanted to touch on this 2002 time, when there was some pressure to take people out of Iraq.

Jacques: I completely agree with Rich, and I think it's to the benefit of the inspected party, but whenever there's an issue that needs to be resolved, bringing the right people, rather than sticking to an official counterpart, is the only way to resolve in a timely manner an issue for which someone has the answer.

Laura: Jacques we've been talking about the importance of access to the right people, if the state is interested in resolving a problem. I remember in 2002 when the SC was negotiating the "Return to Iraq Resolution," we were under considerable pressure to work with the measure that was being proposed about taking people out of Iraq, and people thought it was a great idea, they will feel safer when they're outside of Iraq. It's the human aspect of access to people.

Jacques: Yes, that's an important point. Whatever we do as part of a verification activity, we sometimes could forget we do not deal between an organization and a state system, that's what the legal text seem to imply, but on a daily basis we deal with individuals. We are individuals dealing with people on the other side. And the issue of taking into account the pressure that individuals can face was always important. We always kept in mind the as far as the Agency action in Iraq was concerned - the fact that we had people on the other side.

I was never a great supporter of the “Resolution 1441”² idea that we would get people talking freely as soon as we would interview them abroad. They would leave, if we had started to implement that action, they would leave their whole family behind. Which means that their freedom of speech, if there really was something to hide, and that they were tasked not to tell us about, was in existence. So that measure in my eyes never brought anything else.

More importantly for us was to make the most of any action in the field, and interviews, given the importance of getting the right people’s input, were key. And we even tried to develop our own interview skills, tried to understand even if it is in an official context, even surrounded by officials here to make sure that the party line was not going to be abandoned by one interviewee, we tried to make sure that we could read out of the interviews what we were comfortable to affect and what were obviously things that people were asked to say, rather than reality. You know there is one line that we always took care, that we would never use, you know, and I personally, having conducted dozens of interviews, is “you’re lying.” Because the person in front of you isn’t lying, they are on duty. And so the respect of the individual in my mind, is always a key parameter for a successful relation including in the context of a very tough, very demanding inspection regime.

Rich: The poor fellow that was assigned to deal with us in the early days on the centrifuge enrichment program, who was such a decent guy, that when he would start the party line, he would start to sweat. We used to tease him, “Alright, put the notes away.”

² <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/682/26/PDF/N0268226.pdf?OpenElement> – the final opportunity for Saddam Hussein to comply with its disarmament obligations. Stating that Iraq was in material breach of the ceasefire terms presented in Resolution 687.