



Iraq and Jihadist Terrorists: A Review Essay

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Over the last month, there has been renewed debate as to the validity of arguments used by the Bush Administration to justify the invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. Most of the discussion has focused on the extent of Saddam's ties to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network. While this re-examination has been somewhat useful, allowing a more sober judgment of evidence long after the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, it once again demonstrates that most analysts still do not understand the fundamental nature of the struggle. The continued myopic focus on al Qaeda, to the exclusion of its Islamist partners in terror, is especially troublesome.

On June 16, the 9-11 Commission issued "Overview of the Enemy," its preliminary assessment of the al Qaeda network. This paragraph has garnered most of the early attention:

Bin Ladin also explored possible cooperation with Iraq during his time in Sudan, despite his opposition to Hussein's secular regime. Bin Ladin had in fact at one time sponsored anti-Saddam Islamists in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Sudanese, to protect their own ties with Iraq, reportedly persuaded Bin Ladin to cease this support and arranged for contacts between Iraq and al Qaeda. A senior Iraqi intelligence officer reportedly made three visits to Sudan, finally meeting Bin Ladin in 1994. Bin Ladin is said to have requested space to establish training camps, as well as assistance in procuring weapons, but Iraq apparently never responded. There have been reports that contacts between Iraq and al Qaeda also occurred after Bin Ladin had returned to Afghanistan, but they do not appear to have resulted in a collaborative relationship. Two senior Bin Ladin associates have adamantly denied that any ties existed between al Qaeda and Iraq. We have no credible evidence that Iraq and al Qaeda cooperated on attacks against the United States^[1].

This finding launched a media firestorm, as exemplified by a blistering *New York Times* editorial:

It's hard to imagine how the commission investigating the 2001 terrorist attacks could have put it more clearly yesterday: there was never any evidence of a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda, between Saddam Hussein and Sept. 11.

Now President Bush should apologize to the American people, who were led to believe something different^[2].

However, as Troy University political scientist Steven Taylor notes, the early press coverage of the report elides a rather important distinction between "ties with al Qaeda" and "helped al Qaeda target the United States^[3]."

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It should be noted, too, that the Commission seemed to have demanded an inordinately high standard of evidence, unable to definitively establish links between al Qaeda and a number of attacks long presumed to have been perpetrated by them:

- "We have seen strong but indirect evidence that his organization did in fact play some as yet unknown role in the [June 1996] Khobar [Towers] attack."

- "Whether Bin Laden and his organization had roles in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and the thwarted Manila plot to blow up a dozen U.S. commercial aircraft in 1995 remains a matter of substantial uncertainty."

Given the nature of counter-terrorist intelligence, critics might argue that the Commission's apparent search for proof that meets the reasonable doubt standard of the U.S. criminal justice system is unreasonable.

Saddam and Al Qaeda

Saddam's government was never the world's foremost sponsor of terrorism. Iran and Saudi Arabia far outstripped him in that regard. (Although, ironically, the 9-11 Commission found scanty evidence for Saudi ties to al Qaeda, as well[4].) Nonetheless, the fact that Saddam Hussein actively supported Islamic terrorists has been an article of faith since the Carter Administration. Indeed, Iraq was one of the original five states (along with Iran, Libya, Syria, and Cuba) on the first "Patterns of Global Terrorism" list compiled by the State Department in 1979. Saddam was a major sponsor of various terrorist groups, including the PLO, HAMAS, Mujaheddin e Khalq, and the Abu Nidal Organization long before al Qaeda was founded. There is credible evidence that Saddam actively backed the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center[5].

The paper trail for the al Qaeda connection is more difficult to establish given the cellular nature of that organization and its recent provenance. *Losing bin Laden* author Richard Minter observed last September that,

[M]any of those sniping at U.S. troops are al Qaeda terrorists operating inside Iraq. And many of bin Laden's men were in Iraq prior to the liberation. A wealth of evidence on the public record -- from government reports and congressional testimony to news accounts from major newspapers -- attests to longstanding ties between bin Laden and Saddam going back to 1994[6].

Minter outlines-with twenty-three bullet points-details of proven contacts between senior al Qaeda leaders and Saddam Hussein or his representatives. Stephen Hayes notes that the Clinton Administration[7] and many seasoned professionals of both parties[8] believed Saddam and al Qaeda were connected. American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Ledeen, an opponent of the Iraq War, asserted in 2002 that "a relationship with bin Laden is as close to certain as you can get in the world of clandestine operations[9]."

"Anonymous," the senior CIA counter-terrorism official whose forthcoming *Imperial Hubris* has been widely anticipated by critics of Bush Administration[10], details this tie in his first book, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*. Not only did the Iraqis participate in military training but there was active cooperation in the effort to obtain CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear) capability:

Bin Laden's first moves in this direction were made in cooperation with [National Islamic Front] leaders, Iraq's intelligence service, and Iraqi CBRN scientists and technicians. He made contact with Baghdad through its intelligence officers in Sudan, and by a [Hassan al-] Turabi-brokered June 1994 visit by Iraq's then-intelligence chief Faruq al-Hijazi; according to Milan's *Corriere della Sera*, Saddam, in 1994, made Hijazi responsible for

"nurturing Iraq's ties to [Islamic] fundamentalist warriors." Turabi's scheme for an overall strategy was not achieved, but there is information showing that in the 1993-1994 period bin Laden began work with Sudan and Iraq to acquire a CBRN capability for al Qaeda.

. . . . A Sudanese military engineer named Colonel Abd-al-Basit Hamza . . . reportedly manages "a group of companies. . . run by the NIF in cooperation with Iraq and bin Laden. The operation of this program is led by Iraqi scientists and technicians, led by Dr. Khalil Ibrahim Mubaruhah, and by Asian and foreign experts." *The New Republic* quotes a Sudanese military defector as saying that "up to 60 Iraqi military experts rotate through Sudan every six months, and that some of these experts are involved in some kind of munitions development" at the MIC. In addition, Sudanese oppositionists--not the most unbiased sources--claim Iraq's technicians are helping Sudan build chemical weapons at MIC facilities in Khartoum and , in return, Iraqi chemical weapons have been hidden by Sudan at the Yarmuk Military Manufacturing Complex in Sheggara, south of Khartoum[11].

As is made clear elsewhere in the book, the relationship between MIC and al Qaeda during this period was symbiotic, making distinction between cooperation with one or the other both difficult to discern and irrelevant.

Apparently surprised by the furor over their report, the 9-11 panel's co-commissioners finally weighed in to quiet it down. Chairman Thomas Kean, interviewed on PBS' *Newshour*, noted

[T]here were contacts between Iraq and al-Qaeda, a number of them, some of them a little shadowy. They were definitely there. But as far as any evidence that Saddam Hussein was in any way involved in the attack on 9-11, it just isn't there[12].

Former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, responding to a question about Vice President Cheney's continued insistence[13] that there were indeed ties between Saddam and al Qaeda, said

I must say I have trouble understanding the flak over this. The vice president is saying, I think, that there were connections between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's government. We don't disagree with that. What we have said is ... we don't have any evidence of a cooperative, or a corroborative relationship between Saddam Hussein's government and these al Qaeda operatives with regard to the attacks on the United States. So it seems to me the sharp differences that the press has drawn, the media have drawn, are not that apparent to me[14].

This effort was to little avail, with pieces such as a widely-publicized *New York Times* op-ed by New America Foundation fellow Peter Bergen continuing to flow[15].

The cooperation between Saddam's regime and al Qaeda was of no minor consequence, especially as it pertained to the pursuit of CBRN weapons. As Anonymous argues, "What al Qaeda wants, simply, is a tool to kill as many non-Muslims . . . as possible in one stroke. . . . What al Qaeda wants is a high body count as soon as possible, and it will use whatever CBRN materials it gets in ways that will ensure the most corpses[16]."

While links between Saddam and al Qaeda are long established, evidence of Saddam's involvement in the 9-11 attacks has always been sketchy at best. The most compelling case has always rested on a meeting between 9-11 planner Mohammed Atta and Iraqi case officer al-Ani. At least one expert went so far as to argue that Atta received \$100,000 that "probably funded at least part of the September 11 operation[17]." The 9-11 Commission, as detailed in a separate report, "Outline of the 9-11 Plot," now believes that meeting never took place:

We have examined the allegation that Atta met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague on April 9. Based on the evidence available-including investigation by Czech and U.S. authorities plus detainee reporting-we do not believe that such a meeting occurred. The FBI's investigation places him in Virginia as of April 4, as evidenced by this bank surveillance camera shot of Atta withdrawing \$8,000 from his account. Atta was back in Florida by April 11, if not before. Indeed, investigation has established that, on April 6, 9, 10, and 11, Atta's cellular telephone was used numerous times to call Florida phone numbers from cell sites within Florida. We have seen no evidence that Atta ventured overseas again or re-entered the United States before July, when he traveled to Spain and back under his true name^[18].

There is little credible evidence that Saddam directly funded the 9-11 attacks. Given that the United States has occupied Iraq for over a year and that our intelligence agencies have had nearly three years to uncover such evidence, it is quite likely that there was no such connection. Nonetheless, we know that Saddam funded Islamist terrorists. We know that his government had significant and repeated contact with al Qaeda during the 1990s. Still, Iraq's interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi recently told Tom Brokaw that he thinks otherwise:

Brokaw: I know that you and others like you are grateful for the liberation of Iraq. But can't you understand why many Americans feel that so many young men and women have died here for purposes other than protecting the United States?

Allawi: We know that this is an extension to what has happened in New York. And - the war have been taken out to Iraq by the same terrorists. Saddam was a potential friend and partner and natural ally of terrorism.

Brokaw: Prime minister, I'm surprised that you would make the connection between 9-11 and the war in Iraq. The 9-11 commission in America says there is no evidence of a collaborative relationship between Saddam Hussein and those terrorists of al-Qaeda.

Allawi: No. I believe very strongly that Saddam had relations with al-Qaeda. And these relations started in Sudan. We know Saddam had relationships with a lot of terrorists and international terrorism. Now, whether he is directly connected to the September - atrocities or not, I can't - vouch for this. But definitely I know he has connections with extremism and terrorists^[19].

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently asserted that his intelligence service had warned the U.S. several times that Saddam has planned terror attacks on U.S. targets inside and outside the country^[20]. The timing of the claim struck many as politically motivated and no mention has been made of it since.

Overall, evidence for cooperation between Saddam and al Qaeda after the late 1990's is sketchier, with most pointing to Saddam's housing of Iraqi terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as the most definitive link. Peter Bergen argues that the evidence that Zarqawi is much more likely a bin Laden rival than part of his network, making that basis rather dubious^[21].

The World Islamic Front

Whether al-Zarqawi is a member of al Qaeda or a rival faction is essentially a semantic debate. As terrorism expert Steve Emerson explains, the Islamist terrorist threat is singular; the particular name associated with a faction hardly matters:

The dream of a world under Islam has engendered Muslim dissidents everywhere in the world over the last two decades. Almost every Islamic country has its own militant faction, often two or three. The Hamas of Palestine, Hizballah of Lebanon, the Islamic Salvation

Fron (FIS) and Armed Islamic Group (GIA) of Algeria, An-Nahda of Tunisia, Al Jihad and al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya of Egypt, Lashkar e-Tayyiba of Pakistan, and the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines and the Holy Warriors in Chechnya-all share the same goal of an Islamic world, or, as they refer to it, a *Khilafah*[22]."

Jason Burke, writing in the May/June *Foreign Policy*, goes further, noting,

The Arabic word *qaeda* can be translated as a "base of operation" or "foundation," or alternatively as a "precept" or "method." Islamic militants always understood the term in the latter sense. In 1987, Abdullah Azzam, the leading ideologue for modern Sunni Muslim radical activists, called for al-qaeda al-sulbah (a vanguard of the strong). He envisaged men who, acting independently, would set an example for the rest of the Islamic world and thus galvanize the *umma* (global community of believers) against its oppressors. It was the FBI-during its investigation of the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa-which dubbed the loosely linked group of activists that Osama bin Laden and his aides had formed as "al Qaeda." This decision was partly due to institutional conservatism and partly because the FBI had to apply conventional antiterrorism laws to an adversary that was in no sense a traditional terrorist or criminal organization.

Although bin Laden and his partners were able to create a structure in Afghanistan that attracted new recruits and forged links among preexisting Islamic militant groups, they never created a coherent terrorist network in the way commonly conceived. Instead, al Qaeda functioned like a venture capital firm-providing funding, contacts, and expert advice to many different militant groups and individuals from all over the Islamic world.

Today, the structure that was built in Afghanistan has been destroyed, and bin Laden and his associates have scattered or been arrested or killed. There is no longer a central hub for Islamic militancy. But the al Qaeda worldview, or "al Qaedaism," is growing stronger every day. This radical internationalist ideology-sustained by anti-Western, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic rhetoric-has adherents among many individuals and groups, few of whom are currently linked in any substantial way to bin Laden or those around him. They merely follow his precepts, models, and methods. They act in the style of al Qaeda, but they are only part of al Qaeda in the very loosest sense. That's why Israeli intelligence services now prefer the term "jihadi international" instead of "al Qaeda"[23]."

It is not simply a matter of these groups having similar goals. A key component of Osama bin Laden's strategy was to refocus the energy of existing Islamist factions outward, against the US and other Western interests, instead of at their host governments, under the rationale "if the US is beheaded, the Arab Kingdoms will wither away"[24]."

In the 1980s and most of the 1990s, the ambitions of Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist organization were overwhelmingly aimed against individual nations. The Egyptian groups wanted to overthrow the Sadat and Mubarak regimes, the Algerians wanted to destroy the secular government in Algiers, the Aghans wanted their country back from the Soviet and Afghan Communists, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf wanted Mindanao for an independent Islamic homeland in the Philippines, and some of the Kashmiris wanted an independent nation, not an entity that would be folded into Pakistan. All the groups fought in the name of Allah . . . but their goals were nation specific; they did not conceive or claim, at this stage, that they were fighting to restore the freedom and dignity of the ummah, the borderless worldwide Muslim community. That would come later, after the defeat of what the Koran described as the "near enemy"[25]."

The first groups he targeted, successfully, were al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya (IG) and Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) in Egypt. This coalition, which had its roots in the Afghan resistance, was multi-ethnic and went well beyond the Arab Middle East.

While bin Laden was the lead signer of the 23 February 1998 fatwah, "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," it was issued in the name of the World Islamic Front and co-signed by Ayman al-Zawahiri of EIJ; Abu-Yasir Rifa'i Ahmad Taha of the IG; Mir Hamzah, of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan; and Fazlur Rahman of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh. The jihadist groups that Osama bin Laden has funded, trained, worked with, or is otherwise involved span the entire Muslim world, including Sunnis and Shia and several non-Arab states. Among the many parts of this loose alliance are: Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and Islamic Salvation Front; Egypt's IG and EIJ; Mohammed's Army in Jordan; Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and MILF in the Philippines; Chechen insurgents in Russia; Pakistan's Harakat al-Mujahadin (HUM); Islamic Army of Aden (IAA) in Yemen; Jeemah Islamiyah (JI) in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Southern Philippines; Mujaheddin e Khalq (MeK)-which was founded in Iran but based in Iraq starting in 1987; United Front for the Liberation of Western Somalia (UF), itself consisting of several constituent groups; and groups in Fiji, West Bengal, Malaya, Mauritania, Bangladesh, Jordan, and Eritrea[27].

Several of the more radical Palestinian separatist groups, including several that Saddam actively sponsored, were trained by al Qaeda in the 1990's, according to Anonymous:

All the events fit the pattern bin Laden has established for his war, all contribute to the same goal. In this content, by 1996 bin Laden's worldwide insurgency against the Crusaders was well under way. . . . By the middle of bin Laden's stay, the EIJ; the IG; HAMAS (Islamic Resistance Movement); the Palestine Islamic Jihad; the ANO; several Algerian, Libyan, and Tunisian groups; the Eritrean Islamic Jihad; groups of Ethiopian, Ugandan, and Somali Islamists; and Lebanese Hizballah-among others-were in Khartoum[28].

The *New York Times'* Thom Shanker recently reported that, "Contacts between Iraqi intelligence agents and Osama bin Laden when he was in Sudan in the mid-1990's were part of a broad effort by Baghdad to work with organizations opposing the Saudi ruling family, according to a newly disclosed document obtained by the Americans in Iraq[29]."

Obviously, Saddam was no Islamist. Saddam supported these groups, not because he believed in their cause-indeed, they would likely have turned on him at some point-but because doing so bolstered his standing in the Arab world and harmed his enemies, especially the Americans. Similarly, while he undoubtedly despised Saddam for his secularism and ribald lifestyle, bin Laden has a long history of cooperating with nominal Muslims--and even the hated Russians--to further his long-term aims. In war, the enemy of my enemy is often my friend.

The Central Battleground

A few war hawks, notably Austin Bay[30] and David Warren, argued that this was actually a hidden agenda of the invasion, which they dubbed the "flypaper strategy." As articulated by Warren,

While engaged in the very difficult business of building a democracy in Iraq -- the first democracy, should it succeed, in the entire history of the Arabs -- President Bush has also, quite consciously to my information, created a new playground for the enemy, away from Israel, and even farther away from the United States itself. By the very act of proving this lower ground, he drains terrorist resources from other swamps[31].

It seems rather doubtful that this was an intentional aim. As University of Chicago political scientist Daniel Drezner notes, it is inordinately risky and also contradicts the stated hopes of the Administration that a new U.N. Security Council resolution being called for in August 2003 would "call on Iraq's neighbors, particularly Iran and Syria, to block the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq[32]." Regardless, it seems clear that Iraq has indeed been "flypaper" to jihadists from around the world, much as Afghanistan was for bin Laden and his generation.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz argued in a September 2003 *Wall Street Journal* editorial that Iraq was now "the central battle" in the war on terror.

Anyone who thinks that the battle in Iraq is a distraction from the war on terror should tell it to the Marines of the 1st Marine Division who comprised the eastern flank of the force that fought its way to Baghdad last April. When I met recently with their commander, Maj. General Jim Mattis in Hillah, he said that the two groups who fought most aggressively during the major combat operations were the Fedayeen Saddam--homegrown thugs with a cult-like attachment to Saddam--and foreign fighters, principally from other Arab countries. The exit card found in the passport of one of these foreigners even stated that the purpose of his "visit" to Iraq was to "volunteer for jihad."

. . . . [T]he battle to secure the peace in Iraq--is now the central battle in the war on terrorism. It's the same with the commander of the Army's 1st Armored Division, Brig. Gen. Martin Dempsey, who recently described that second group as "international terrorists or extremists who see this as the Super Bowl." They're going to Iraq, he said, "to take part in something they think will advance their cause." He added, "They're wrong, of course." Among the hundreds of enemy that we have captured in the last months are more than 200 foreign terrorists who came to Iraq to kill Americans and Iraqis and to do everything they can to prevent a free and successful Iraq from emerging. They must be defeated--and they will be.

Our regional commander, Gen. John Abizaid, head of Central Command, echoed Gen. Dempsey, placing in larger perspective the battle in Iraq. He said, "The whole difficulty in the global war on terrorism is that this is a phenomenon without borders. And the heart of the problem is in this particular region, and the heart of the region happens to be Iraq. If we can't be successful here, we won't be successful in the global war on terrorism." Success in Iraq will not be easy. According to Gen. Abizaid, it will be long, hard and sometimes bloody; but "it is a chance, when you combine it with initiatives in the Arab/Israeli theater and initiatives elsewhere, to make life better, to bring peace to an area where people are very, very talented and resources are abundant, especially here in Iraq[33]."

Wolfowitz' words are even more true today. As Michael Ware argues in *TIME* magazine,

The insurgents have no intention of laying down their arms. Indeed, the nature of the insurgency in Iraq is fundamentally changing. *TIME* reported last fall that the insurgency was being led by members of the former Baathist regime, who were using guerrilla tactics in an effort to drive out foreign occupiers and reclaim power. But a *Time* investigation of the insurgency today--based on meetings with insurgents, tribal leaders, religious clerics and U.S. intelligence officials--reveals that the militants are turning the resistance into an international jihadist movement. Foreign fighters, once estranged from homegrown guerrilla groups, are now integrated as cells or complete units with Iraqis. Many of Saddam's former secret police and Republican Guard officers, who two years ago were drinking and whoring, no longer dare even smoke cigarettes. They are fighting for Allah, they say, and true jihadis reject such earthly indulgences. Their goal now, say the militants interviewed, is broader than simply forcing the U.S. to leave. They want to transform Iraq into what Afghanistan was in the 1980s: a training

ground for young jihadists who will form the next wave of recruits for al-Qaeda and like-minded groups. Nearly all the new jihadist groups claim to be receiving inspiration, if not commands, from Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi, the suspected al-Qaeda operative who the U.S. believes has masterminded the insurgency's embrace of terrorism[34].

Whether toppling Saddam's regime in Iraq was worth the opportunity cost of diverting forces from other targets-let alone the immense continuing cost in blood and treasure-is beyond the scope of this paper, and is surely a matter the reader is competent to judge in the course of time. Completely aside from those questions, however, the war unquestionably removed a significant state sponsor of jihadist terrorists[35]. In so doing, however, it attracted thousands of them to the region to do battle with U.S. forces, hoping to defeat a second superpower in as many generations.

It remains to be seen whether the latter is a positive development. Certainly, it is preferable to fight terrorists in an open battle, using highly skilled soldiers, than to have them operate on the American homeland. The U.S. and its allies have killed or captured dozens of key terrorist leaders and hundreds of jihadist footsoldiers. It is unclear, of course, how many the invasion created.

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About the Author

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