

What are the connections between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein?

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Obviously, one cannot prove the absence of connections. There are, however, good reasons for doubting any serious ties between the two.

Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime has been ruthlessly secular and has had no love for fundamentalist groups. Al Qaeda, for its part, considers its task the overthrow of all governments in the region that are insufficiently Islamic, and certainly Hussein's regime counts as such. (One might note that Iraq did not have diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime -- in fact, the only countries that did have diplomatic relations with the Taliban were the U.S. allies Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan.)

Of course, hostile parties can sometimes be useful to one another against a common enemy, but no evidence has come to light of cooperation between al Qaeda and Iraq. Ever since September 11, U.S. officials have been frantically looking for some connection between the two. War hawks leapt on the report that Mohammed Atta, the leader of the September 11 hijackers, met in Prague with an Iraqi intelligence agent in April 2001. The Czech government, basing itself on the evidence of one informant -- a student who said he recognized Atta's photograph as someone he had seen with the Iraqi agent five months earlier -- said it was 70 percent sure the story was accurate, but the former director of Czech intelligence noted that "These informants tend to tell you what you want to believe" and the head of Czech foreign intelligence was skeptical. The FBI (which ran down "hundreds of thousands of leads") and the CIA concluded that the report was inaccurate; they found no evidence that Atta was in Prague on the relevant date and some evidence that he was in the United States (Washington Times, 6/19/02; Prague Post, 7/17/02; Washington Post, 5/1/02; Newsweek, 4/28/02 web exclusive; Newsweek, 8/19/02, p. 10; LA Times, 8/2/02).

On September 24, 2002, the British government released a 55 page dossier laying out its case against Iraq. The evidence was said to come from British intelligence and analysis agencies, but also from "access to intelligence from close allies" (p. 9). Surely this includes the United States and surely whatever hesitancy the United States government might have about revealing intelligence information publicly would not prevent it from sharing such information with its closest ally. The dossier presented zero evidence of any al Qaeda-Iraq links

In the last week of September, in the face of international and domestic hesitancy regarding the rush to war, U.S. officials again raised the specter of al Qaeda-Saddam Hussein links. Rumsfeld said he had "bulletproof" evidence tying the two together, but, significantly, he did not present any of that evidence and admits that it wouldn't hold up in a U.S. court of law.

There was one report, charged Rumsfeld, that Iraq provided "unspecified training relating to chemical and/or biological matters." The report apparently came from Abu Zubaydah, a high-ranking al Qaeda prisoner who, according to an intelligence source cited by Newsday, "often has lied or provided deliberately misleading information." As one U.S. official told USA Today,

"detainees have a motive to lie to U.S. interrogators: to encourage a U.S. invasion of Iraq, the better to make the case that the United States is the mortal enemy of Muslim countries."

The head of the Senate intelligence committee, Bob Graham, said he had seen nothing connecting al Qaeda and Iraq. Sen. Joseph Biden, who heard a classified CIA briefing on the matter, disputes Rumsfeld's summary. Nebraska Republican, Senator Chuck Hagel, commented that "To say, 'Yes, I know there is evidence there, but I don't want to tell you any more about it,' that does not encourage any of us. Nor does it give the American public a heck of a lot of faith that, in fact, what anyone is saying is true." Intelligence experts inside and outside the U.S. government expressed skepticism, and a Pentagon official called the new claims an "exaggeration." And French intelligence has found not a "trace" of evidence of any link. (NYT, 9/28/02; Newsday, 9/27/02; USA Today, 9/27/02; Washington Post, 9/27/02; Financial Times, 10/6/02.)

This said, there is one connection between Iraq and al Qaeda: namely, that an attack on Iraq may well play into al Qaeda's hands by destabilizing much of the Middle East and, in the words of former General Wesley Clark, possibly "supercharge" recruiting for the terrorist network (NYT, 9/24/02).