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Iraq and Al Qaeda: Allies or Not?

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Summary

In building a case for invading Iraq and ousting Saddam Hussein from power, the Administration asserted that the regime of Saddam Hussein had a working relationship with the Al Qaeda terrorist network. The Administration stated that the relationship dated to the early 1990s, and was based on a common interest in confronting the United States. The Administration assertions were derived from U.S. intelligence showing a pattern of contacts with Al Qaeda when its founder, Osama bin Laden, was based in Sudan in the early to mid-1990s and continuing after he relocated to Afghanistan in 1996. Another pillar of the Administration argument rested on reports of contacts between Baghdad and an Islamist Al Qaeda affiliate group, called Ansar al-Islam, based in northern Iraq in the late 1990s. Some Administration officials have said there are indications Iraq was involved in the September 11, 2001 plot, although there are major differences within the Administration on this analysis.

Critics maintain that the Administration argument did not demonstrate that the relationship, if it existed, was systematic or institutionalized, and that no hard data has come to light indicating the two entities conducted any joint terrorist attacks. Some major hallmarks of a consistent relationship were absent, and several experts outside and within the U.S. government believe that contacts between Iraq and Al Qaeda were sporadic, unclear, or subject to alternate explanations. Others believe there is evidence that Al Qaeda has, at times, been a rival or opponent of Saddam Hussein's regime and its secular outlook.

A related but different issue is whether or not Al Qaeda members or sympathizers are active in the anti-U.S. insurgency in post-Saddam Iraq. U.S. commanders on the ground have expressed different views on the extent of any Al Qaeda involvement in Iraq's insurgency. No U.S. commanders have dismissed outright involvement by Al Qaeda activists, but most U.S. commanders appear to lean toward the view that Iraqi nationals are the driving force behind the resistance campaign.

The issue of whether the war against Iraq weakened or strengthened Arab and Islamic public support for the Al Qaeda organization is a related but much broader issue that will not be covered in this paper. This report will be updated according to developments. For additional information, see CRS Report RS21529, *Al Qaeda After the Iraq Conflict*.

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Iraq and Al Qaeda: Allies or Not?

The debate over the U.S. war against Iraq includes discussion of whether or not the regime of Saddam Hussein was operationally allied with Al Qaeda. In building an argument that the United States needed to oust Saddam Hussein from power militarily, the Administration asserted that Iraq constituted a gathering threat to the United States because it continued to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and because it supported international terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda. In the Administration view, ousting Saddam's regime would lessen the possibility of Al Qaeda's conducting a major terrorist attack using resources or WMD provided by Iraq.

After ousting Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, U.S. forces and intelligence officers have scoured Iraq for evidence of WMD stockpiles and connections to Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. No actual WMD weaponry has been found in Iraq as of this writing, and major questions have been raised about pre-war U.S. assessments of Iraq's WMD programs. The outgoing head of the U.S. search effort (the Iraq Survey Group), David Kay, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 28, 2004, saying that pre-war WMD assessments were "almost all wrong," although he added that Iraq did conceal WMD-related activities in violation of key U.N. Security Council resolutions and that it did retain an intention to restart its WMD programs at a later date.¹ Based in part on Kay's findings, on February 2, 2004, President Bush announced he would appoint a nine person bipartisan commission to assess U.S. intelligence estimates of WMD in pre-war Iraq as well as in Iran, Libya, and North Korea.

Some similar questions are being raised about the pre-war U.S. assessments of Iraq-Al Qaeda linkages. The Iraq Survey Group, which is collecting captured Saddam regime files and interrogating captive members of the former regime, has not released formal results of its investigation of pre-war Iraq-Al Qaeda links. However, some Administration officials, including Secretary of State Powell, have recently expressed some uncertainty over whether Iraq-Al Qaeda linkages were as close as the Administration had characterized them before the war.² The issue is relevant for post-war Iraq because U.S. commanders assert that some non-Iraqis — and possibly active members of Al Qaeda — have entered Iraq to participate in an insurgency against U.S.-led forces and the emerging Iraqi governing structure. In the view of some U.S. commanders, foreign insurgents may be cooperating with Iraqi insurgents, possibly building on relationships that existed before the war. This paper reviews the

¹Testimony of David Kay. Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing. Federal News Service, Jan. 28, 2004.

²Powell Affirms Confidence in Decision to Wage Iraq War. U.S. Department of State, Washington File. Jan. 8, 2004.

debate on pre-war Iraq-Al Qaeda linkages as well as on the purported participation of Al Qaeda in the insurgency. The paper relies on information from open sources.

Background

The Bush Administration has asserted that there was an operational alliance between Iraq and Al Qaeda. On March 17, 2003, in a speech announcing a 48-hour deadline for Saddam Hussein and his sons to leave Iraq in order to avoid war, President Bush said, “the [Iraqi] regime has a history of reckless aggression in the Middle East. It has a deep hatred of America and our friends. And it has aided, trained, and harbored terrorists, including operatives of Al Qaeda.”³

The Administration argument for an Iraq-Al Qaeda linkage had a few major themes: (1) that there were contacts between Iraqi intelligence and Al Qaeda in Sudan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan dating from the early 1990s, including Iraq’s assistance to Al Qaeda in deployment of chemical weapons; (2) that an Islamist faction called Ansar al-Islam (The Partisans of Islam) in northern Iraq, had ties to Iraq’s regime; and (3) that Iraq might have been involved in the September 11, 2001 plot itself. Of these themes, the September 11 allegations are the most widely disputed by outside experts and by some officials within the Administration itself. Some Administration officials, including President Bush, have virtually ruled out Iraqi involvement in the September 11 attacks while others, including Vice President Cheney, maintain that issue is still open.⁴

Secretary of State Powell presented the Administration view in greater public detail than any other official when he briefed the United Nations Security Council on Iraq on February 5, 2003. Most of that presentation was devoted to Iraq’s alleged violations of U.N. requirements that it dismantle its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs, but Secretary Powell devoted substantial attention to the alleged Iraq-Al Qaeda linkage. According to Secretary Powell’s February 5, 2003 briefing:⁵

Iraq and terrorism go back decades...But what I want to bring to your attention today is the potentially more sinister nexus between Iraq and the Al Qaeda terrorist network, a nexus that combines classic terrorist organizations and modern methods of murder. Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda lieutenants.

After presenting information on Zarqawi’s alleged links to Baghdad, the Secretary continued,

³Transcript: Bush Gives Saddam Hussein and Sons 48 Hours to Leave Iraq. Department of State, Washington File. Mar. 17, 2003.

⁴Priest, Dana and Glenn Kessler. “Iraq, 9/11 Still Linked By Cheney.” *Washington Post*, Sept. 29, 2003.

⁵Secretary of State Addresses the U.N. Security Council. Transcript, Feb. 5, 2003.

Going back to the early and mid-1990s, when bin Laden was based in Sudan, an Al Qaeda source tells us that Saddam and bin Laden reached an understanding that Al Qaeda would no longer support activities against Baghdad...We know members of both organizations met repeatedly and have met at least eight times at very senior levels since the early 1990s...Iraqis continued to visit bin Laden in his new home in Afghanistan [after bin Laden moved there in mid-1996]...From the late 1990s until 2001, the Iraqi embassy in Pakistan played the role of liaison to the Al Qaeda organization...Ambition and hatred are enough to bring Iraq and Al Qaeda together, enough so Al Qaeda could learn how to build more sophisticated bombs and learn how to forge documents, and enough so that Al Qaeda could turn to Iraq for help in acquiring expertise on weapons of mass destruction.

Secretary Powell did not include in his February 5, 2003 briefing the assertion that Iraq was involved in the September 11 plot. Some analysts suggest the omission indicates a lack of consensus within the Administration on the strength of that evidence. In a January 2004 press interview, Secretary Powell said that his U.N. briefing had been meticulously prepared and reviewed, saying “Anything that we did not feel was solid and multi-sourced, we did not use in that speech.”⁶

Additional details of the Administration’s argument, as well as criticisms, are discussed below. Some experts in and outside the U.S. government have found the evidence of Iraq-Al Qaeda linkages ambiguous or even contradictory to the Administration case. One press report cited the findings of a classified draft national intelligence estimate, saying that reports of the ties were based on possibly unreliable sources. The report added that senior U.S. policymakers, in their public statements, often omitted characterizations of the reliability of the information on which their judgments were based.⁷ A United Nations committee, mandated by U.N. Security Council Resolution 1373 (September 28, 2001) to monitor Al Qaeda activities worldwide, issued a report on Al Qaeda in July 2003. Although no assessment of Al Qaeda-Iraq ties was included in the actual report, the drafters of the report stated that their investigations did not yield indications of linkages between Iraq and Al Qaeda.⁸

Some press reports discuss purported results of interrogations with captured Al Qaeda and Iraqi figures, in which those interrogated deny that there was an operational linkage between Iraq and Al Qaeda.⁹ The results of the interrogations, coupled with U.S. investigations of captured documents in post-Saddam Iraq, appear to have affected the views of some Administration officials. At a January 8, 2004 press conference in which he defended the U.S. decision to go to war with Iraq, Secretary Powell said, “There is not — you know, I have not seen a smoking-gun

⁶Powell Affirms Confidence in Decision to Wage Iraq War. U.S. Department of State, Washington File. Jan. 8, 2004.

⁷Pincus, Walter. “Report Cast Doubt on Iraq-Al Qaeda Connection.” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2003.

⁸“U.N. Panel Finds No Iraq Link to Al Qaeda.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 2003.

⁹Risen, James. “Captives Deny Qaeda Worked With Baghdad.” *New York Times*, June 9, 2003; Risen, James. “Iraqi Agent Denies He Met 9/11 Hijacker in Prague Before Attacks on U.S.” *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2003.

concrete evidence about the connection [between Iraq and Al Qaeda], but I think the possibility of such connections did exist and it was prudent to consider them at the time that we did.”

Another aspect of the debate centers on whether, and if so to what degree, Al Qaeda or pro-Al Qaeda fighters are participating in the anti-U.S. insurgency in Iraq. The presence of Al Qaeda fighters in post-Saddam Iraq, fighting alongside Iraqi insurgents from the ruling Baath Party or regime security forces, could provide support to the Administration view that Iraq and Al Qaeda have long been linked. On the other hand, some believe that Al Qaeda and other foreign fighters probably entered Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, motivated by an anti-U.S. ideology and a target of opportunity provided by the presence of U.S. forces there, rather than longstanding ties to the former Iraqi regime.

Major Themes in The Administration Argument

Any relationship between Saddam Hussein’s regime and Al Qaeda would have been, by its nature, clandestine and difficult to characterize. The Administration’s assertions are based on intelligence information, and the executive branch is the only arm of the U.S. government that generates intelligence information. Some of the intelligence information that the Bush Administration relied on to judge linkages between Iraq and Al Qaeda was publicized not only in Secretary of State Powell’s February 5, 2003 briefing to the U.N. Security Council, but also, and in more detail, in an article in *The Weekly Standard*.¹⁰ The Department of Defense has said the article might constitute a potentially harmful leak of classified information, but Vice President Cheney reportedly has said the article represents the “best source of [open] information” on the issue.¹¹ The article contains excerpts from a memorandum, dated October 27, 2003, from Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith to Senators Pat Roberts and Jay Rockefeller, the chairman and vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. The memorandum reportedly was based on research and analysis of intelligence and other information by the “Office of Special Plans,” an Iraq policy planning unit within the Department of Defense set up in early 2002 but disbanded in the fall of 2002. The following sections analyze details of the major themes in the Administration assertion of close Al Qaeda-Iraq linkages.

Links in Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan

The “DOD memorandum,” as well as other accounts,¹² include assertions that Iraqi intelligence developed a relationship with Al Qaeda in the early 1990s, brokered by the Islamist leaders of Sudan. At the time, Osama bin Laden was in Sudan. He

¹⁰ Hayes, Stephen. “Case Closed.” *The Weekly Standard*, Nov. 24, 2003. Online at [<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/378fmxyz.asp>]

¹¹ Milbank, Dana. “Bush Hails Al Qaeda Arrest in Iraq; President Defends U.S. Intelligence.” *Washington Post*, Jan. 27, 2004.

¹² Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Unknown. The CIA and the Pentagon take Another Look at Al Qaeda and Iraq.” *The New Yorker*, Feb. 10, 2003.

remained there until Sudan expelled him in mid-1996, after which he went to Afghanistan. According to the purported memo, the Iraq-Al Qaeda relationship included an agreement by Al Qaeda not to seek to undermine Saddam's regime, and for Iraq to provide Al Qaeda with conventional weapons and WMD. The Administration view is that Iraq was highly isolated in the Arab world in the early 1990s, just after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, and that it might have sought a relationship with Al Qaeda as a means of gaining leverage over the United States and a common enemy, the regime of Saudi Arabia. From this perspective, the relationship served the interests of both, even though Saddam was a secular leader while Al Qaeda sought to replace regional secular leaders with Islamic states.

The purported DOD memorandum includes names and approximate dates on which Iraqi intelligence officers visited bin Laden's camp outside Khartoum and discussions of cooperation in manufacturing explosive devices. It reportedly discusses subsequent meetings between Iraqi intelligence officers and bin Laden and his aides in Afghanistan and Pakistan, continuing until at least the late 1990s. The memorandum cites intelligence reports that Al Qaeda operatives were instructed to travel to Iraq to obtain training in the making and deployment of chemical weapons. Secretary of State Powell, in his February 5, 2003 U.N. briefing, citing an Al Qaeda operative captured in Afghanistan, stated that Iraq had received Al Qaeda operatives "several times between 1997 and 2000 for help in acquiring poison gases."

According to press accounts, some Administration evaluations of the available intelligence, including a reported draft national intelligence estimate circulated in October 2002, interpreted the information as inconclusive, and as evidence of sporadic but not necessarily ongoing or high-level contacts between Iraq and Al Qaeda.¹³ Some CIA experts reportedly asserted that the ideological differences between Iraq and Al Qaeda were too large to be bridged permanently.¹⁴ For example, bin Laden reportedly sought to raise an Islamic army to fight to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait following the Iraqi invasion in August 1990, suggesting that bin Laden might have viewed Iraq as an enemy rather than an ally. (According to some accounts, the Saudi royal family rebuffed bin Laden's idea as unworkable, deciding instead to invite in U.S. forces to combat the Iraqi invasion. The rebuff prompted an open split between bin Laden and the Saudi leadership, and bin Laden left the Kingdom for Sudan in 1991).¹⁵ Ideological differences between Iraq and Al Qaeda were evident in a February 12, 2003, bin Laden statement referring to Saddam Hussein's regime — dominated by his secular Arab nationalist Baath Party — as socialist and infidel, although the statement also gave some support to the

¹³Pincus, Walter. "Report Cast Doubt on Iraq-Al Qaeda Connection." *Washington Post*, June 22, 2003.

¹⁴Goldberg, Jeffrey. "The Unknown. The CIA and the Pentagon Take Another Look at Al Qaeda and Iraq." *The New Yorker*, Feb. 10, 2003.

¹⁵Gunaratna, Rohan. *Inside Al Qaeda*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2002. Pp. 27-29.

Administration argument when bin Laden exhorted the Iraqi people to resist impending U.S. military action.¹⁶

As noted above, Iraq had an embassy in Pakistan that the Administration asserts was its link to the Taliban regime of Afghanistan. However, skeptics of a Saddam-Al Qaeda link note that Iraq did not recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan when the Taliban was in power during 1996-2001. It was during the period of Taliban rule that Al Qaeda enjoyed safehaven in Afghanistan. Of the 12 Al Qaeda leaders identified by the U.S. government as either “executive leaders” or “senior planners and coordinators,” none is an Iraqi national.¹⁷ Only a very small number — possibly a few dozen — of the approximately 3,000 Al Qaeda suspects arrested since the September 11, 2001 attacks reportedly are Iraqi.¹⁸ This could suggest that the joining of Al Qaeda by Iraqi nationals did not have the sanction of Saddam Hussein. An alternate explanation is that very few Iraqis had the opportunity to join Al Qaeda during its key formative years - the years of the anti-Soviet “jihad” in Afghanistan (1979-1989). Young Iraqis who might have been attracted to the jihad in Afghanistan were serving in Iraqi units during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, and were generally not available to participate in regional causes. On the other hand, a political alliance between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda might not necessarily have included official Iraqi government backing for Iraqi nationals to join Al Qaeda.

Ansar al-Islam

Another major theme in the Administration assertion of Al Qaeda-Iraq linkages has been the presence in Iraq of a group called Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam). This aspect of the Administration’s argument factored prominently in Secretary of State Powell’s February 5, 2003 presentation to the U.N. Security Council. Ansar formed in 1998 as a breakaway faction of Islamist Kurds, splitting off from a group, the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK). Both Ansar and the IMIK were initially composed purely of Kurds. U.S. concerns about Ansar grew following the U.S. defeat of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan in late 2001, when some Al Qaeda activists, mostly Arabs, fled to Iraq and associated there with the Ansar movement. At the peak, about 600 Al Qaeda fighters lived in the Ansar al-Islam enclave, near the town of Khurmali.¹⁹

The leader of the Al Qaeda contingent within Ansar al-Islam is said by U.S. officials to be Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an Arab of Jordanian origin who reputedly fought in Afghanistan. Zarqawi has been linked to Al Qaeda plots in Jordan during the December 1999 millennium celebration, the assassination in Jordan of U.S.

¹⁶Text of an audio message purported to be from Osama bin Laden. BBC News, Feb. 12, 2003.

¹⁷“Al Qaeda High Value Targets.” Defense Intelligence Agency chart (unclassified). Sept. 12, 2003.

¹⁸Conversations with Administration officials involved in the war on terrorism. 2002-2003.

¹⁹Chivers, C.J. Repulsing Attack By Islamic Militants, “Iraqi Kurds Tell of Atrocities.” *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 2002.

diplomat Lawrence Foley (2002), and to reported attempts in 2002 to spread chemical agents in Russia, Western Europe, and the United States for terrorist operations.²⁰ Ansar fighters clashed with Kurdish fighters from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two mainstream Iraqi Kurdish parties, around Halabja in December 2002. Ansar gunmen were allegedly responsible for an assassination attempt against PUK prime minister Barham Salih in April 2002.

A number of official sources maintain that Baghdad was connected to Ansar al-Islam. The State Department report on global terrorism for 2002 stated that “it is inconceivable these groups [Ansar al-Islam] were in Iraq without the knowledge and acquiescence of Saddam’s regime.”²¹ In his presentation to the U.N. Security Council on February 5, 2003, Secretary of State Powell said the following about Zarqawi and Ansar al-Islam:

Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda lieutenants...Baghdad has an agent in the most senior levels of the radical organization, Ansar al-Islam, that controls this corner of Iraq...Zarqawi’s activities are not confined to this small corner of northeastern Iraq. He traveled to Baghdad in May 2002 for medical treatment, staying in the capital for two months while he recuperated to fight another day. During this stay, nearly two dozen extremists converged on Baghdad and established a base of operations there...From his terrorist network in Iraq, Zarqawi can direct his network in the Middle East and beyond.

However, some accounts question the extent of links, if any, between Baghdad and Ansar al-Islam. The Administration did not assert that Baghdad and Ansar carried out any joint operations. Baghdad did not control northern Iraq even before Operation Iraqi Freedom, and it is questionable whether Zarqawi, were he tied closely to Saddam Hussein’s regime, would have located his group in territory controlled by Saddam’s Kurdish opponents.²² The Administration view on this point is that Saddam saw Ansar as a means of pressuring Saddam Hussein’s Kurdish opponents in northern Iraq, explaining why Ansar was based in northern Iraq. An alternate interpretation is that Saddam Hussein was indifferent to Ansar’s presence in Iraqi territory so long as the group remained focused on Baghdad’s Kurdish opponents.

The September 11, 2001, Plot

The reputed DOD memorandum reportedly includes allegations of contacts between lead September 11 hijacker Mohammad Atta and Iraq intelligence, including as many as four meetings between Atta and Iraq’s intelligence chief in Prague, Ahmad Samir al-Ani. The DOD memo says that al-Ani agreed to provide Atta with funds at one of the meetings. The memo asserts that the CIA confirmed two Atta

²⁰ U.S. Department of State. *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002*. Apr. 2003. p.79.

²¹ Department of State. *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002*. p. 79.

²²“U.S. Uncertain About Northern Iraq Group’s Link to Al Qaida.” *Dow Jones Newswire*, Mar. 18, 2002.

visits to Prague — October 26, 1999 and April 9, 2001 — but did not confirm that he met with Iraqi intelligence during those visits. The DOD memo reportedly also contains reports indicating that Iraqi intelligence officers attended or facilitated meetings with Al Qaeda operatives in southeast Asia (Kuala Lumpur) in early 2000. In the course of these meetings, the Al Qaeda activists were said to be planning the October 12, 2000 attack on the U.S.S. Cole docked in Aden, Yemen and possibly the September 11 plot as well.

There is reportedly still substantial skepticism within the Administration itself, and even some dispute within Czech intelligence that provided the information on the meetings, that the Iraq-Atta discussions took place at all, particularly the April 2001 meeting. In November 2001, Czech Interior Minister Stanislav Gross said that Atta and al-Ani had met, but Czech Prime Minister Milos Zeman subsequently told U.S. officials that the two had discussed an attack aimed at silencing anti-Saddam broadcasts from Prague.²³ Since 1998, Prague has been the headquarters of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a U.S.-funded radio service that was highly critical of Saddam Hussein's regime. In December 2001, Czech President Vaclav Havel said that there was a "70% chance" the meeting took place. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) eventually concluded, based on records of Atta's movements within the United States in April 2001, that the meeting probably did not take place and that there was no hard evidence of Iraqi regime involvement in the September 11 attacks.²⁴ Some press reports say the FBI is more confident than is the CIA in the judgment that the April 2001 meeting did not occur.²⁵ Al Ani himself, captured by U.S. forces in 2003, reportedly has denied to U.S. interrogators that the meeting ever happened.²⁶

As noted above, Secretary of State Powell reportedly considered the information too uncertain to include in his February 5, 2003 briefing on Iraq to the U.N. Security Council.²⁷ President Bush did not mention this allegation in his January 29, 2003 State of the Union message, delivered one week before the Powell presentation to the U.N. Security Council. President Bush said on September 16, 2003 that there was no evidence Saddam Hussein's regime was involved in the September 11 plot; he made the statement in response to a journalist's question about statements a few days earlier by Vice President Cheney suggesting that the issue of Iraq's complicity in September 11 is still open.²⁸

²³ Priest, Dana and Glenn Kessler. "Iraq, 9/11 Still Linked By Cheney." *Washington Post*, Sept. 29, 2003.

²⁴Risen, James. "Iraqi Agent Denies He Met 9/11 Hijacker in Prague Before Attacks on the U.S." *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2003.

²⁵Gertz, Bill. "September 11 Report Alludes to Iraq-Al Qaeda Meeting." *Washington Times*, July 30, 2003.

²⁶Risen, James. "Iraqi Agent Denies He Met 9/11 Hijacker in Prague Before Attacks on U.S." *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2003.

²⁷Priest, Dana and Glenn Kessler. "Iraq, 9/11 Still Linked By Cheney." *Washington Post*, Sept. 29, 2003.

²⁸Hosenball, Mark, Michael Isikoff and Evan Thomas. *Cheney's Long Path to War*. *Newsweek*, Nov. 17, 2003.

Al Qaeda and the Iraq Insurgency?

A related issue is whether and to what degree Al Qaeda or Al Qaeda-inspired elements might be playing a role in the insurgency against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. The Administration, including President Bush, points to a possible Al Qaeda role in the insurgency as validating its assertions that Al Qaeda was linked to Saddam Hussein's regime. In his January 20, 2004 State of the Union message, President Bush said, "These killers [Iraq insurgents], joined by foreign terrorists, are a serious, continuing danger."²⁹ The Administration's apparent view is that it is preferable to combat Al Qaeda in Iraq rather than allow it to congregate elsewhere in the region and hatch plots inside the United States itself.³⁰

Tying the war in Iraq to the war on Al Qaeda, President Bush said in a speech on September 8, 2003 that "We have carried the fight to the enemy... We are rolling back the terrorist threat to civilization, not on the fringes of its influence but at the heart of its power."³¹ Critics of this view maintain that Al Qaeda or pro-Al Qaeda elements were motivated by the U.S. invasion to enter Iraq and to fight the United States there, without any prior coordination with Saddam Hussein. According to this view, the U.S. presence in Iraq has presented Al Qaeda with a new target of opportunity, and has motivated new Al Qaeda followers who might not have become active against the United States had the war against Iraq not occurred.³²

There appears to be a consensus among U.S. military and policy officials that there is a non-Iraqi component to the post-Saddam insurgency, but there are sharply differing views over how significant a factor is this portion of the resistance. At an October 28, 2003 news conference, President Bush said "the foreign terrorists are trying to create conditions of fear and retreat [in Iraq] because they fear a free and peaceful state in the midst of a part of the world where terror has found recruits." On the other hand, one senior U.S. commander in Iraq (Maj. Gen. Charles Swannack, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division) said in November 2003, "I want to underscore that most of the attacks on our forces are by former regime loyalists and other Iraqis, not foreign forces."³³ Swannack's comment does not rule out the possibility that foreign fighters could be providing technical, financial, or logistical support for attacks conducted by Iraqi insurgents.

Contrasting views were apparent again in early 2004. Following the January 2004 arrest in northern Iraq of suspected bin Laden aide Hassan Ghul, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, said the arrest "is pretty

²⁹ State of the Union Message by President Bush. January 20, 2004. Text contained in *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 2004.

³⁰ Miller, Greg. Iraq-Terrorism Link Continues to Be Problematic. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 9, 2003.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Brinkley, Joel. Few Signs of Infiltration By Foreign Fighters in Iraq. *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2003.

strong proof that Al Qaeda is trying to gain a foothold here to continue their murderous campaigns.”³⁴ Virtually simultaneous with the Sanchez comments was an interview with journalists by Gen. John Abizaid, overall commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East region (U.S. Central Command). In a comment that appeared at variance with Sanchez, Abizaid said, “I am confident that there is no flood of foreign fighters coming in [to Iraq].”³⁵

Those commanders who believe that non-Iraqis are playing a major role in the insurgency maintain that the many suicide bombings that have occurred in Iraq since July 2003 — particularly the August 19, 2003 bombing of U.N. headquarters in Baghdad and the August 29, 2003 bombing of a major mosque complex in Najaf — are hallmarks of past Al Qaeda operations. Recent audiotapes released by at-large Al Qaeda leaders, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, have warned U.S. forces of impending attacks in Iraq. However, the results of U.S./Iraqi investigations of these attacks have not been announced, and no firm conclusions of Al Qaeda complicity have been made public. Those who differ with the Administration view believe that Iraqi insurgents are capable of using terrorist-type tactics and munitions that appear similar to those typically carried out by Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups.

There are differences among U.S. commanders on the likely numbers of non-Iraqi fighters participating in the insurgency. Some U.S. officials place the overall size of the Iraqi insurgency at about 5,000 guerrillas, of which, according to the highest estimates, as many as 3,000 might be non-Iraqi.³⁶ Other U.S. officials have told journalists that their assessment is that there are far fewer non-Iraqi fighters in Iraq than that. In November 2003, Gen. Swannack said that only a small number of the 500 - 600 insurgents his forces had captured were non-Iraqi. In the interview noted above, Gen. Abizaid said on January 29, 2004 that the number of foreign fighters in Iraq was “low” and “in the hundreds.”³⁷

In discussing the non-Iraqi component of the insurgency, U.S. commanders generally do not draw a distinction between Al Qaeda and its ally, Ansar al-Islam, which was discussed above. Some U.S. officials apparently believe that the non-Iraqi component of the resistance is composed primarily of fighters from Ansar al-Islam. Possibly at the direction of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (see above), Ansar fighters might have remained in or re-entered Iraq during or after the major combat period. One press report quotes U.S. intelligence as assessing the number of Ansar fighters inside Iraq at 150.³⁸ Zarqawi’s current whereabouts are unknown, although some

³⁴Stack, Megan. U.S. General Sees Al Qaeda Evidence in Iraq. *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 30, 2004.

³⁵Shanker, Thom. U.S. Commanders Surveys Challenges in Iraq Region. *New York Times*, Jan. 30, 2004.

³⁶Bonner, Raymond and Joel Brinkley. Latest Attacks Underscore Differing Intelligence Estimates of Strength of Foreign Guerrillas. *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 2003.

³⁷Shanker, Thom. U.S. Commanders Surveys Challenges in Iraq Region. *New York Times*, Jan. 30, 2004.

³⁸Schmitt, Eric. Cheney Theme of Qaeda Ties to Bombings in Iraq Is Questioned by Some in Administration. *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 2003.

unconfirmed press reports indicate he might have fled to Iran after the fall of the Ansar camp to U.S.-led forces. Some recent press accounts say Iran might have him in custody.³⁹ A reputed affiliate of Ansar al-Islam, a group calling itself Ansar al-Sunna, claimed responsibility for February 1, 2003 twin suicide attacks in Irbil, northern Iraq. The attacks killed over 100 Kurds, including some senior Kurdish officials.⁴⁰

³⁹Finn, Peter and Susan Schmidt. Al Qaeda Plans a Front in Iraq. *Washington Post*, Sept. 7, 2003.

⁴⁰Al Qaeda Linked Islamist Group Claims Deadly Arbil Attacks in Iraq. Agence France Presse, Feb. 4, 2004.