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TERRORIST LEAVES HIDEOUT

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Article Text:

U.S. intelligence officials are worried that a burgeoning alliance between Islamic terrorist leader Osama bin Laden and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could make the fugitive Saudi's loose-knit terror organization much more dangerous.

Such an alliance, said officials who spoke only on the condition of anonymity, could provide bin Laden's far-flung operatives with professional training, sophisticated equipment and - in the worst-case scenario - even access to chemical or biological weapons. In addition, the officials said, Palestinian terrorist **Abu Nidal** is now in Iraq, as is a renowned Palestinian bomb designer, and both also could make their expertise available to bin Laden's organization.

"It's clear the Iraqis would like to have bin Laden in Iraq," said Vincent Cannistraro, a former head of counterterrorism operations at the Central Intelligence Agency and now a private consultant. "And the Iraqis have all the technological elements, the tradecraft bin Laden lacks and they have **Abu Nidal**."

Until now, bin Laden's agents, who are accused of bombing the World Trade Center in New York and the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last August, frequently have been handicapped by their amateurism.

Alleged bin Laden agents have been arrested in Malaysia and Uruguay with crudely counterfeited passports. It took bin Laden himself months to understand that it was unwise to use a satellite telephone to communicate with his agents.

And just this month, intelligence officials told Knight Ridder, a bin Laden-inspired plot to attack a U.S.-managed power plant in Pakistan was exposed before the would-be bombers could strike.

But American and Arab intelligence officials said that beginning in late December, when bin Laden met a senior Iraqi intelligence official near Kandahar, Afghanistan, there has been **increasing evidence that bin Laden and Iraq may have begun cooperating** in planning attacks against American and British targets

around the world.

Bin Laden, a militant Muslim, and Saddam, one of the most secular rulers in the Arab world, have little in common except their hatred of the United States and their desire for revenge against the country that has bombed them both.

"This isn't about ideology or Islam," said one senior American intelligence official. "This is a throwback to out-and-out retribution."

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Officials said there appear to be contacts between bin Laden's organization and two Iraqi intelligence organizations. Intelligence officials said that in the Afghan mountains in late December, bin Laden himself met with Farouk Hijazi, the Iraqi ambassador to Turkey who is identified by U.S. and Arab officials as a senior official in the Mukhabarat, the Iraqi intelligence service.

One senior U.S. intelligence official who requested anonymity called the Mukhabarat "the most professionally trained of all the Arab intelligence services." The special operations directorate of Baghdad's spy service is largely Soviet- and East German-trained and is well-versed in much of what the bin Laden organization lacks, including secure communications, concealment techniques, false documents and planning covert operations, the official said.

More worrisome, the American officials said, are indications that there may be contacts between bin Laden's organization and Iraq's Special Security Organization (SSO), run by Saddam Hussein's son Qusay. Both the SSO and the Mukhabarat were involved in a failed 1993 plot to assassinate former President George Bush during a visit to Kuwait. In retaliation, the United States bombed the Iraqi intelligence headquarters later that year.

The most frightening fact of all, U.S. officials said, is that in addition to its other duties, the SSO is responsible for safeguarding Iraq's secret chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs.

"The idea that the same people who are hiding Saddam's biological weapons may be meeting with Osama bin Laden is not a happy one," said one American official.

In addition, the officials said, Palestinian terrorist **Abu** Nidal is now in Iraq, and although his once-feared organization has largely disintegrated and his own health is poor, he remains a master of planning sophisticated, brutal and hard-to-detect terrorist operations. In its heyday almost two decades ago, when among other things its members attacked the Rome and Vienna airports, the **Abu** Nidal Organization sometimes took two years to plan an operation and often recruited people who never realized they were working for **Abu** Nidal.

Another infamous Palestinian terrorist, Mohammed Amri, known by the nom de guerre **Abu Ibrahim** and considered one of the most sophisticated terrorist bomb designers in the world, is also believed to be in Iraq. His specialty, intelligence officials said, was airplane bombs.

(STORY CAN END HERE)

Contact between Iraq and bin Laden isn't new. There were frequent meetings during the time that bin Laden was based in the Sudan, where Iraq maintains a large intelligence station. But intelligence officials said bin Laden kept the Iraqis at arm's length because they did not share his passionate Muslim faith.

And a federal grand jury indictment of bin Laden in New York last Nov. 6, which charges him with conspiring to attack U.S. facilities overseas and kill American citizens, also charges that bin Laden and the Iraqi

government have agreed to cooperate in a number of endeavors, "specifically including weapons development."

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