

Star finds bin Laden-Iraq links

Three pages of documents point to the arrival of a messenger

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[MITCH POTTER](#)

TORONTO STAR

Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization and Saddam Hussein's regime shared direct contact as early as 1998, according to top-secret Iraqi intelligence documents obtained by the Star.

The documents, discovered yesterday in the bombed-out headquarters of the Mukhabarat, Iraq's most feared intelligence service, amount to the first hard evidence of a link long suspected by the United States but dismissed as fiction by many Western leaders.

The handwritten file, three pages in all, relates to the arrival of a secret envoy sent by bin Laden to Iraq in March, 1998, apparently to establish a clandestine relationship with the Iraqi regime.

The purpose of the trip was "to gain the knowledge of the message from bin Laden and to convey to his envoy an oral message from us to bin Laden," according to the final page of the Iraqi document, a handwritten letter dated Feb. 19, 1998.

The letter describes bin Laden as an "opponent" of the regime in Saudi Arabia and said the message to convey to him through the envoy would relate to "the future of our relationship with him (bin Laden) and to achieve a direct meeting with him."

The signature beneath the letter is a codename, "MDA," believed to be that of a director of one of the intelligence sections within the Mukhabarat. A second signature on the page, also in code, recommends bringing the unnamed agent to Iraq because "we may find in this envoy a way to maintain contact with bin Laden."

The remaining pages confirm bin Laden's agent arrived in Baghdad on March 5 and stayed a full 16 days as a guest of the Iraqi government at the Mansur Melia Hotel, one of the capital's premier accommodations.

The contact came less than five months before bin Laden became America's most-wanted fugitive in the wake of deadly bomb attacks on two U.S. embassies in East Africa.

The White House has linked the invasion of Iraq to the war on terror maintaining that ousted Iraqi president Saddam harboured terrorists, including Al Qaeda operatives.

Bin Laden's name appears three times in the handwritten Iraqi file, but each of the references was concealed clumsily with corrective fluid and then blackened with ink, presumably by agents of the Mukhabarat.

But after the masking material was carefully removed yesterday, bin Laden's name was clearly legible in each reference. The translation of the document was confirmed independently by five Arabic interpreters.

The discovery coincides with the Friday capture of Farouk Hijazi, an Iraqi spymaster the United States claims

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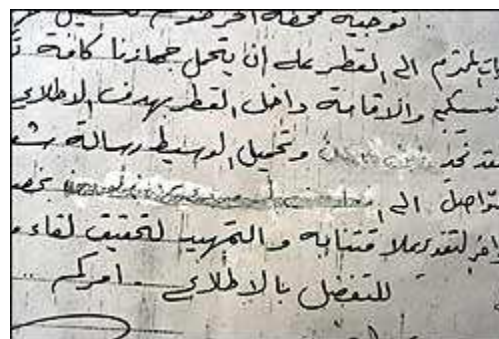
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Part of a document found by Star reporter Mitch Potter suggesting a meeting with Osama bin Laden, whose name had been obscured.

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was the link man between Iraq and Al Qaeda. Hijazi, according to U.S. allegations, met bin Laden before the Sept. 11 attacks during Hijazi's term as Iraq's ambassador to Turkey.

The Osama papers obtained by the Star were discovered yesterday within a file folder lying in rubble in a partially destroyed building inside the sprawling Mukhabarat compound west of the Tigris River in Baghdad. Around the tree-lined facility hundreds of thousands of papers litter the ground.

The final page, a handwritten letter dated Feb. 19 and marked "Top Secret and Urgent," refers to the planned trip from Sudan by an unnamed agent close to bin Laden.

The letter describes the envoy as "a trusted confidant (of bin Laden) and known by them (Al Qaeda)."

It continues: "According to the above we suggest permission to call the Khartoum station (the Iraqi intelligence station in Sudan) to facilitate the travel arrangements for the abovementioned person to Iraq. And that our body carry all the travel and hotel expenses inside Iraq to gain the knowledge of the message from bin Laden and to convey to his envoy an oral message from us to bin Laden."

According to notes at the bottom of the page the letter was then passed on through another director within the Mukhabarat to the deputy director general of the intelligence services.

The other two pages of the file, dated Feb. 23 and March 24, relate to correspondence between different agencies within the Mukhabarat over preparation and approval for Iraq to cover the costs of the bin Laden envoy's stay at the Mansur hotel.

Each is countersigned by a number of codenamed Iraqi officials. One is addressed to "M4/7" and signed by "MD1/3." The three pages were found bound with a staple.

Margin notes on the letter show a signature of the Mukhabarat's deputy director general, also in code.

It mentions that the visit of the envoy was extended by a week.

In a margin note, it mentions the name Mohammed F. Mohammed Ahmed, but there is no indication whether this is the envoy. The documents do not indicate whether an actual meeting took place, or whether any follow-up contact was planned.

Bin Laden's five years in Sudan ended in 1996, when he was ousted and returned to Afghanistan, home of the mujahideen fighters from which he launched Al Qaeda.

But it is believed remnants of his Sudanese operations remained behind.

Hijazi, the captured spymaster, was known to be a senior operative within the Mukhabarat before joining Iraq's ambassadorial ranks.

He was first proposed as Iraq's ambassador to Canada, but the placement was refused. In 1998, he became ambassador to Turkey.

According to U.S. officials, Hijazi travelled to Kandahar, Afghanistan, in December, 1998, for an alleged meeting with bin Laden near his expanding network of terrorist training camps.

Details of that meeting are not known, but U.S. officials cite the allegation as the clearest link to date between Iraq and Al Qaeda.

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