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Targeting Saddam: Was There An Iraqi 9/11 Link?

Usa Today, NEWS; Pg. 1A
December, 03 2001
Peter Eisler
2468 words

WASHINGTON -- Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network has ties to Iraqi intelligence that date to the mid-1990s, when they came together in Sudan to support Islamic insurgencies in Algeria and across the Middle East.

The CIA had convincing evidence at the time that Saddam Hussein's regime was funneling money through bin Laden to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria and other terrorist organizations, according to current and former U.S. officials who reviewed intelligence at the time. The scheme was seen as an effort to mask Iraq's support for the groups.

It's unclear whether the pass-through was directed by bin Laden, then living in Sudan, or by his circle of associates, at least one of whom was identified by 1994 as having close ties to Iraq's intelligence service, officials say.

The previously unreported arrangement appears to be the earliest in a series of murky connections between Iraq and bin Laden. It raises new questions in the fiery debate over whether Saddam's regime -- and its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs -- should be the next target in the war on terrorism.

If U.S. officials can establish a firm Iraq-al-Qaeda link, particularly with respect to the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it will give leverage to those in the Bush administration who want to take the war on terrorism to Iraq. So far President Bush has been non-committal, partly because key Gulf allies warn that any military action against Iraq without proof of an al-Qaeda link would shatter the coalition behind the anti-terror campaign.

Bin Laden was relatively unknown when the Sudan connection surfaced in 1994. He had been expelled from Saudi Arabia, but his fortune, business ventures and budding ideas of Holy War had made him a welcome guest of the radical National Islamic Front, the party that held power in Khartoum, Sudan's capital.

Saddam, under intense international scrutiny after the Gulf War, also had strong ties to Khartoum, and Iraqi intelligence was well represented in the stew of Islamic radicals, insurrectionists and foreign agents pouring through the city.

"We were convinced that money from Iraq was going to bin Laden, who was then sending it to places that Iraq wanted it to go," says **Stanley Bedlington**, a senior analyst in the CIA's counterterrorism center from 1986 until his retirement in 1994.

"There certainly is no doubt that Saddam Hussein had pretty strong ties to bin Laden while he was in Sudan, whether it was directly or through (Sudanese) intermediaries. We traced considerable sums of money going from bin Laden to the GIA in Algeria. We believed some of the money came from Iraq."

At the time, bin Laden was just emerging in U.S. intelligence reports on Sudan's sponsorship of terrorist groups and the role Iraq, Iran and other Arab states played in those arrangements.

Federal officials now are reviewing those old reports, looking not only for evidence of overt contacts between Saddam and al-Qaeda, such as Iraqi money passing through bin Laden, but for more covert ties, including the possibility that Iraqi intelligence had penetrated al-Qaeda.

Interpreting the evidence

Most current and former officials who have tracked Saddam's regime and bin Laden's organization believe there has been regular contact between the two. Many suspect that Iraqi operatives have helped al-Qaeda, perhaps with bomb-making materials and expertise, forged identity papers and safe houses -- the sort of assistance Iraq has provided to any number of terrorist groups. But relatively few believe Iraq is directly involved in the planning and execution of al-Qaeda attacks.

The debate is based mainly on a handful of known contacts:

* Mohamed Atta, the ringleader in the Sept. 11 attacks, met in Prague last April with Ahmed al-Ani, a suspected Iraqi intelligence chief posted at Iraq's Czech embassy. Czech Prime Minister Milos Zeman, whose agents monitored the meeting, says Atta and the Iraqi discussed a plot to bomb the Prague offices of Radio Free Europe, which broadcasts U.S.-backed programs into Iraq.

The meeting, according to Czech intelligence, focused only on the radio station, an alleged target of Iraqi agents at least once before, in 1998. But many suspect the Sept. 11 attacks were a topic, too. Atta, who'd made at least one previous trip to Prague, traveled 72 straight hours from Florida and back to see al-Ani. Upon returning, he used money wired from the Middle East to finance the attacks.

* Farouk Hijazi, Iraq's ambassador to Turkey and reputedly a top official in Saddam's intelligence service, went to Afghanistan in 1998, after bin Laden was implicated in the U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa, and offered the accused terrorist sanctuary in Iraq.

Iraqi officials deny any such invitation. But Vincent Cannistraro, former counterterrorism chief at the CIA, says the agency has evidence to the contrary: "Hijazi wanted bin Laden to relocate to Iraq, but bin Laden turned it down. He knew Saddam wanted to make him a tool of Iraqi policy."

The meeting was first made public by the Iraqi National Congress, an exiled opposition group that contends that Saddam's regime has helped train, equip and plan al-Qaeda attacks.

* Two Iraqi defectors this month provided details on a terrorist training camp south of Baghdad in Salman Pak, first identified by United Nations weapons inspectors in the early 1990s.

The defectors, in accounts provided by Iraqi opposition leaders, described a separate, secret compound where non-Iraqi Arabs, most of whom appeared to be Islamic radicals, were drilled in terrorist acts. Among other things, the trainees practiced hijackings in small groups, armed only with knives, on a Boeing 707.

"We always just called them the terrorist camps," says Charles Duelfer, former deputy chairman of the U.N. weapons inspection program in Iraq. "We reported them at the time, but they've obviously taken on new significance."

Other links between al-Qaeda and Iraq continue to crop up, including reports that at least two other people involved in the Sept. 11 attacks met with Iraqi agents beforehand. But most remain unconfirmed.

Cash and spies in Sudan

Whatever Iraq's relationship to al-Qaeda, its roots seem to be in Sudan. Bin Laden lived there from 1991 to 1996 after leaving his native Saudi Arabia, where his calls for a strict Islamic government had angered the monarchy. By 1994, U.S. officials were concerned that bin Laden was supporting Islamic insurgencies across the region.

The nexus of those efforts, according to U.S. and foreign officials, was Hassan Turabi, who headed Sudan's ruling National Islamic Front. Turabi, credited with bringing bin Laden to Sudan, opened the country to Islamic fundamentalists, providing training grounds and safe haven for terrorist operations, the officials say. Money for those efforts flowed in from several Middle Eastern states -- including Iraq -- and bin Laden was believed to be helping with its distribution.

"The years when bin Laden was establishing himself in Sudan also happened to be a time when there was a lot of Iraqi-Sudanese activity," says Steven Simon, a counterterrorism advisor for Clinton.

Many people associated with al-Qaeda came from a loose network of operatives who served a variety of states and terrorist organizations, and there were a lot of "tactical and shifting contacts," adds Simon, now at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies. He notes, for example, that it is rumored in London that some of the people Saddam employed to assassinate Iraqi dissidents "were affiliated with al-Qaeda."

U.S. officials worried at the time that Saddam was sponsoring development of chemical weapons in Sudan, and U.N. inspectors documented visits to Khartoum by officials in Iraq's chemical weapons program. Some believe bin Laden and his associates were helping to finance the weapons work.

The recent wave of anthrax-tainted letters to U.S. officials and media outlets has spurred speculation that bin Laden may also have gotten Iraqi help in building his own arsenal. Newly discovered camps in Afghanistan where al-Qaeda operatives appear to have experimented with chemical weapons may yield new information on any connections.

"There's a lot of (intelligence) collection going on in those caves and mountains," says Duelfer, the former UN official. "We're going to hear about more ties between al-Qaeda and Iraq, particularly when it comes to al-Qaeda's efforts to get chemical and biological weapons."

It was also during bin Laden's time in Sudan that U.S. intelligence officials began suspecting that Iraq's foreign intelligence service was trying to penetrate the then-fledgling al-Qaeda organization. And the question of whether Iraqi agents are operating secretly within al-Qaeda's ranks is one that the CIA continues to investigate.

"There was a guy in bin Laden's entourage in Khartoum -- he was not what you would call 'active duty,' but he had very close connections to Iraqi intelligence," recalls one former CIA operative who declined to be identified. "He was close to bin Laden and dealt with him a lot in his incarnation as factory builder and road builder."

Most officials doubt that anyone in the upper ranks of al-Qaeda is an Iraqi spy. And there's great debate about the extent to which Iraqi agents may have been able to get inside bin Laden's organization, which vets recruits extensively.

Even so, virtually no one doubts that Saddam would try to place someone inside al-Qaeda.

"That's the way he works," says Tim McCarthy, a scholar at the Monterey Institute of International Studies who did U.N. inspections in Iraq -- an operation that itself was penetrated by Iraqi agents. "Saddam believes in getting inside these sorts of organizations."

Wafiq al Samarrai, who headed Iraq's military intelligence operation before defecting in 1994, also believes Saddam has agents inside al-Qaeda, though he doubts they're in the upper ranks. The agents "most likely would be from other countries, Egyptians or Jordanians or Yemenis," he says. "It wouldn't be Iraqis -- the Iraqis in al-Qaeda are few."

A question of proof

Despite the contacts between Iraq and bin Laden's organization, there's still much debate over the precise nature of the relationship.

"In that part of the universe, the part occupied by Muslims who hate Americans, there are bound to be some (al-Qaeda) contacts with Iraqi agents, even some who are known as such," says Daniel Benjamin, a former National Security Council advisor on terrorism during the Clinton administration.

But Benjamin, now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, sides with many who doubt that Iraq has any meaningful role in steering al-Qaeda's operations. "We were never aware of any substantial cooperation," he says.

Those who doubt any sort of substantive relationship are quick to note that there are deep philosophical differences between Saddam and bin Laden. The most obvious is that Saddam, a secular autocrat who has repressed Islamic fundamentalists in his own country, seems to be the type of Arab leader that the deeply religious bin Laden often rails against.

Yet there's a vocal and powerful group of officials in the U.S. military and intelligence communities who believe Iraq and al-Qaeda work hand-in-hand. They point to what they see as clear evidence of state sponsorship in al-Qaeda strikes, such as the use of large amounts of C-4, a hard-to-get military explosive, in the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole, a Navy frigate rammed at a Yemen port by a suicide bomber on a small boat.

"People put aside ideological differences to work towards common goals -- in this case, driving America out of the Middle East," says Laurie Mylroie, author of **Study of Revenge**, which makes a case that Iraq helped plot the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Bin Laden "is not capable of carrying out the kind of major assaults we've seen . . . Iraqi intelligence provides the expertise and direction. Proving it is difficult, but many things that are true can't be proven."

Many who are pushing to turn the U.S. war on terrorism against Saddam believe there never will be absolute proof of Iraqi involvement in al-Qaeda attacks. But they say no more evidence is necessary, given Iraq's history of sponsoring terrorism, including a foiled 1993 plot to assassinate former President Bush, and Saddam's blocking of U.N. weapons inspections.

"I don't know what the (Iraq-al-Qaeda) relationship is, whether it's a 90-10 joint venture or a 10-90 joint venture, and it doesn't matter," says former CIA director James Woolsey. Some al-Qaeda attacks "look

like a foreign intelligence service was involved, and we have a long history of contacts between Iraqi intelligence and al-Qaeda," Woolsey adds. "All of that, plus the (blocking) of the U.N. inspections, is enough."

Contributing: Barbara Slavin

TEXT WITHIN GRAPHIC BEGINS HERE

The secret ties between Iraq and bin Laden

The relationship between Osama bin Laden and Iraqi operatives goes back to bin Laden's early years in Sudan and around the globe since then. Among the connections:

Czech Republic: Mohammed Atta, a leader of the WTC attacks, met in April with and Iraqi intelligence chief at Iraq's Czech embassy. Upon returning to Florida, Atta used money wired from the Middle East to finance the attacks.

Iraq: Iraqi defectors recently gave details of a terrorist training camp south of Baghdad in the early 1990s where non-Iraqi trainees practiced hijackings.

Algeria: While Osama bin Laden was living in Sudan from 1991 to 1996, strong ties with Iraqi intelligence emerged. In 1994, CIA officers obtained information that Iraq was passing money through bin Laden to Algeria's Armed Islamic group (GIA), a terrorist organization.

Sudan:

* Iraq is suspected of helping a bin Laden-backed effort to bring a chemical weapons program to Sudan.

* One man in bin Laden's entourage in Khartoum had very close connections to Iraqi intelligence. Iraqi intelligence is suspected of launching efforts to penetrate the all Qaeda organization without bin Laden's knowledge, though it is doubtful they are in the inner circle.

Yemen: Iraq is believed to have helped with the al-Qaeda attack on the USS Cole in December 2000, because large amounts of a hard-to-get-explosive, C-4, were used.

Afghanistan: Farouk Hijazi, Iraq's ambassador to Turkey, went to Afghanistan in 1998, after bin Laden was implicated in the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa, and offered him sanctuary in Iraq.

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