

Iraq WAS a US ally in the “war on terror”

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November 2006

Labour & Trade Union Review

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President Bush told a press conference on 25 October 2006 [\[1\]](#):

“Our security at home depends on ensuring that Iraq is an ally in the war on terror and does not become a terrorist haven like Afghanistan under the Taliban.”

These conditions existed in the Iraq of March 2003, before Bush overthrew Saddam Hussein. He was opposed to al-Qaida and didn't allow it to operate in the part of Iraq under his control (though an al-Qaida related group, Ansar al-Islam, operated in Kurdish-controlled northeast Iraq). The part of Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule was an al-Qaida free zone, and he had played no part whatsoever in the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001.

Thanks to the US invasion, and the subsequent destruction of the Ba'athist state, al-Qaida is now flourishing in Iraq and there is no state apparatus in Iraq capable of containing it. Bush has turned an al-Qaida free zone into “a terrorist haven”, at a cost of nearly 3,000 American (and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi) lives and well over \$300 billion dollars.

Bush's unprovoked attack on Iraq in March 2003 has brought about the situation which he now declares to be a threat to US homeland security. Without his action, the part of Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule would have remained an al-Qaida free zone - and would have continued to pose no threat whatsoever to US homeland security.

The supreme irony is that, in order to work up domestic support for his unprovoked attack on Iraq in March 2003, his administration continually gave the impression that Saddam Hussein was aiding al-Qaida and had played a part in 9/11, when there was no intelligence justification for saying so. In other words, he pretended that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was a haven for al-Qaida - when it wasn't - in order to justify an attack on Iraq that has made it into a haven for al-Qaida, which he now says is a threat to US homeland security. You couldn't make it up.

Senate Intelligence Committee report

Any remaining doubt about the lack of relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida was dispelled with the publication on 8 September 2006 of a report by the US Senate Intelligence Committee. This report, entitled *Postwar findings about Iraq's WMD and links to terrorism and how they compare with prewar assessments* [\[2\]](#), sets out the assessments from the various US intelligence agencies before the invasion about (a) Iraq's “weapons of mass destruction”, and (b) Iraq's relationship with al-Qaida, and compares them systematically with the post-invasion findings. The latter are the product of extensive examination of official documents and interrogation of Iraqi officials after the invasion.

(The Committee is supposed to follow up this report with one comparing pre-invasion statements by the Bush administration with the intelligence available at the time. This may be expedited now that Bush's Republican allies have lost control of the Senate and therefore of this Committee.)

Although there is little in the report that wasn't already in the public domain, it makes fascinating reading as it systematically knocks down the stories that the administration served up to justify the invasion. A summary of the report's conclusions on Iraq's links with al-Qaida, or rather the lack of them, is given in Appendix A.

On the relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida, the report concludes:

“Postwar findings indicate that the CIA assessment that the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida resembled ‘two independent actors trying to exploit each other’, accurately characterized bin Ladin’s actions, but not those of Saddam Hussein. Postwar findings indicate that Saddam Hussein was distrustful of al-Qaida and viewed Islamic extremists as a threat to his regime, refusing all requests from al-Qaida to provide material or operational support.” (p 105)

On 9/11, the report concludes:

“Postwar information supports prewar Intelligence Community assessments that there was no credible information that Iraq was complicit in or had foreknowledge of the September 11 attacks or any other al-Qaida strike.” (p 110)

The famous meeting in Prague in April 2001 between the lead hijacker, Muhammed Atta, and an Iraqi intelligence officer never took place, the report concludes (p110).

Note that even before the invasion US intelligence believed that, although there may have been a few contacts between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida, there was no evidence that Saddam Hussein had aided, or was aiding, al-Qaida, or had any intention of doing so.

Nevertheless, as I have said, the Bush administration stated continually in the lead up to the invasion (and afterwards) that Saddam Hussein was aiding al-Qaida - and was likely to assist al-Qaida in further attacks on the US, possibly by supplying it with “weapons of mass destruction”.

From the outset, the administration presented the attack on Iraq to the American people as an integral part of the post 9/11 war against al-Qaida, the so-called “war on terror”. It wasn’t in March 2003, but it is now.

Waxman’s database

Democratic Congressman Henry Waxman was instrumental in establishing a database of false or misleading statements about the case for invading Iraq by senior members of the administration (Bush himself, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice) [3]. The database records 237 misleading statements in all, 11 in one speech by the President, in Cincinnati on 7 October 2002, a few days before Congress was due to vote on the Iraq war resolution.

Here are a few examples of Bush’s own misrepresentations on Iraq’s relationship with al-Qaida:-

“The regime has longstanding and continuing ties to terrorist groups, and there are Al Qaida terrorists inside Iraq.” (*Weekly Radio Address*, 28 September 2002 [4])

“Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications, and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda. Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help develop their own.” (*State of the Union Address*, 28 January 2003 [5])

“The regime . . . has aided, trained and harbored terrorists, including operatives of al Qaeda. The danger is clear: using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons, obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country, or any other.” (Bush, 17 March 2003, when he ordered Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq within 48 hours [6])

“The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We’ve removed an ally of al Qaeda, and cut off a source of terrorist funding. And this much is certain: No terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqi regime, because the regime is no more.” (*Mission Accomplished* speech, aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, 1 May 2003 [\[7\]](#))

There are 57 more along similar lines in Congressman Waxman’s database from the five senior members of the administration. It is clear that, in the autumn of 2002, the administration set out to convince the American people that Saddam Hussein had a relationship with al-Qaida and that removing Saddam Hussein from power would therefore help to prevent further - perhaps much more lethal - attacks on the US homeland. The administration did so in the full knowledge that the available intelligence did not justify such a view. It did so in order to portray the invasion of Iraq to the American people as an act of pre-emptive self-defence against a repeat of 9/11 and, by so doing, to enhance domestic support for military action against Iraq.

Strategy worked well

The administration’s strategy worked exceptionally well and a large majority of the American people came to believe that Saddam Hussein was aiding al-Qaida and would be prepared to aid it in further attacks on the US. This can be seen from a succession of opinion polls from early 2003 onwards.

For example, an *ABC News* poll carried out on 28 January 2003 asked [\[8\]](#):

“Do you think Iraq has or has not provided direct support to the Al Qaeda terrorist group?”

to which 68% replied Yes and only 17% replied No.

And a poll carried out for *Newsweek* on 13-14 March 2003 asked [\[9\]](#):

“What if the US does NOT take military action against Iraq? If there is no US military action, do you think Saddam Hussein would be instrumental in helping Al Qaeda terrorists carry out future attacks against the United States?”

to which 80% replied Yes and only 13% replied No.

After the invasion, a *Newsweek* poll carried out on 24-25 July 2003 asked [\[10\]](#):

“From what you’ve seen or heard in the news, do you believe that Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq was harboring al Qaeda terrorists and helping them to develop chemical weapons, or not?”

to which 72% replies Yes and 17% replied No.

This state of opinion persisted long after the invasion, not least because the administration kept reinforcing it. Famously, vice-President Cheney told NBC’s *Meet the Press* on 14 September 2003 [\[11\]](#):

“If we’re successful in Iraq, if we can stand up a good representative government in Iraq, that secures the region so that it never again becomes a threat to its neighbors or to the United States, so it’s not pursuing weapons of mass destruction, so that it’s not a safe haven for terrorists, now we will have struck a major blow right at the heart of the base, if you will, the geographic base of the terrorists who have had us under assault now for many years, but most especially on 9/11.”

This overt connecting of Iraq with 9/11 by Cheney prompted both Rice and Rumsfeld to say that they had seen no evidence that Iraq had anything to do with 9/11 and forced the President to reinterpret Cheney's words, saying (on 17 September 2003) [\[12\]](#):

“We've had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved with the September 11th. What the Vice President said was, is that he has been involved with al Qaeda. ... There's no question that Saddam Hussein had al Qaeda ties.”

Ties can, of course, mean anything from having one or two contacts over a decade to being a regular supplier of material and operational assistance. Small wonder then that a large majority of the American people continued to believe in a connection beneficial to al-Qaida. Thus, a Harris poll carried out on 8-15 June 2004 asked [\[13\]](#):

“Do you believe that Saddam Hussein was supporting the terrorist organization Al Qaeda, which attacked the United States on September 11, 2001?”

to which 69% replies Yes and 22% replied No.

And an ABC News/Washington Post poll carried out on 10-13 March 2005 asked [\[14\]](#):

“Before the war, do you think Iraq did or did not provide direct support to the Al Qaeda terrorist group?”

to which 61% replies Yes and 30% replied No.

As late as July 2006, in a Harris poll carried out on 5-11 July 2006, 64% of people asked agreed with the proposition that “Saddam Hussein had strong links with Al Qaeda” and only 30% disagreed [\[15\]](#).

As recently as February 2006, amongst US troops serving in Iraq, there appeared to be a near unanimous conviction that Saddam Hussein had aided al-Qaida. The Zogby organisation wrote the following on 28 February 2006 about the results of its poll of US troops in Iraq [\[16\]](#):

“While 85% said the US mission is mainly ‘to retaliate for Saddam's role in the 9-11 attacks’, 77% said they also believe the main or a major reason for the war was ‘to stop Saddam from protecting al Qaeda in Iraq’.”

This belief that Saddam Hussein had aided al-Qaida continued to be held by a majority of Americans (albeit a majority declining over time) certainly up until the publication of the Senate Intelligence Committee report in early September 2006, which concluded that Saddam Hussein had never aided al-Qaida.

At the same time, there was a steady decline in support for the war in Iraq and a growing belief that it had made the US less safe. Today, by a considerable margin, Americans are opposed to the war and believe that it has made America less safe. For example, a CNN poll carried out on 3-5 November 2006 [\[17\]](#) found (a) 33% in favour of the war and 61% against, and (b) 56% who thought the US less safe because of the war, compared 35% who thought it more safe. The latter is very different from Britain, where almost everybody thinks that Blair's foreign wars have made Britain less safe.

Bush with Charles Gibson

Perhaps, the belief still persists in the US that Saddam Hussein aided al-Qaida despite the Committee's conclusion (I haven't found polling evidence either way). The Committee's conclusion emerged just before the 5th anniversary of 9/11, when Bush hoped to trumpet his success in the “war

on terror” to raise his and his party’s poll ratings prior to the midterm elections. Instead, he was questioned to an unprecedented extent about how the war in Iraq could be described as a part of the “war on terror” when Saddam Hussein had no connection with al-Qaida.

A prime example of this was an interview with Charles Gibson on ABC News on 7 September 2006 [18]. Here is an extract, in which Gibson posed the question three times in various ways and Bush’s best answer was that Iraq is part of the “war on terror” because Osama bin Laden says it is:

G: I heard you say just yesterday: “The hardest thing I have to do is to get people to understand how Iraq is a critical part of the war on terror”. ... And that’s the one thing that I question, whether people do have any sense of that. For loathsome as he may have been, Saddam Hussein was not connected to al Qaeda, and he was not behind 9/11.

B: No, I understand that people ask, “How can this be a connection, between the war on terror” and you know, “How can Iraq be a connection, when Saddam Hussein didn’t order the attacks?” And you know, I understand that concern, because he didn’t order the attacks. The enemy, however, believes that Iraq is a part of the war on terror. Osama bin Laden has called Iraq central to the war on terror. And if we lose, if this young democracy fails, the enemy will be emboldened. They will have resources in which to launch attacks. They have declared their desire to have a caliphate throughout the Middle East, and one of their targets is to topple modern governments.

Friends, moderates, reformers across the Middle East will say, “Where was the United States?” And so the stakes are incredibly high here, Charlie, and yes, this is a part of the war on terror. It is a central part of the war on terror.

G: But the point that I make and that many of the critics make is that Iraq wasn’t a part of the war on terror until we went in there. ...

B: I ... I ... listen, I understand it’s dangerous and troublesome, but I think it’s very important for the American people to ask, “Why, why is it that Osama bin Laden wants to drive us out of Iraq before this democracy can sustain itself?” One reason is they want a launching pad, another launching pad, a safe haven similar to Afghanistan. And the other reason is because Osama bin Laden recognizes that this is an ideological struggle, and the way to defeat an ideology of hate is with an ideology of hope, and that’s liberty and democracy.

Some say, “Well, it’s impossible for democracy to take hold in the Middle East”. Well, that’s true if we leave. But the Iraqis themselves have said, “We want to live in a land of liberty, we want to be free”, and that’s why 12 million people voted.

This ... this struggle is akin to the Cold War. And what I’m not going to let happen on my watch, Charlie, is to concede and cede territory to an enemy that wants to hit us again. An enemy that has made their intentions clear -- that is, drive the United States out of the Middle East, and the first place to do so is in Iraq: “Let us defeat the forces of reform and moderation, let us have oil from which to punish the West economically, and let us have a weapon of mass destruction”. That is their desire, and their goal, and we must not let them succeed. And so absolutely, Iraq is tied to the security of the United States.

G: A very good argument, that you just made for what you did in Afghanistan and what you did in working with the Pakistanis, to go after the Taliban, who were at the center of this, but Iraq was not, until we went in.

B: Charlie, I just told you, the president's job is to confront a threat, and ... and if ... if I can walk you back in history, uh, Saddam Hussein was clearly a threat. He was a sponsor of terror, he was shooting at American airplanes, he had invaded a neighbor, he had killed thousands of his own citizens, he had used weapons of mass destruction. We have learned since that he did not have them, but he had the capacity to use weapons of mass destruction. He was paying for suicide bombers, the families of suicide bombers.

It wasn't just the United States that saw a threat - Republicans and Democrats saw a threat. The international community saw a threat. He was given a last chance, and it was his choice to make.

Presidents don't get do-overs. But I did. ... I'm going to make this statement to you: This world is safer and better off without Saddam Hussein in power, and now the challenge is to help the reformers and moderates fight off the extremists in Iraq and develop a ... and help a country grow that can defend itself, sustain itself, and govern itself, and will be an ally in the war on terror. Victory in Iraq is a major defeat toward the extremists and the radicals who want to do America harm.

National Intelligence Estimate

A few weeks later, the President suffered a further setback in his efforts to prove that under his stewardship the "war on terror" was being won, when on 24 September 2006 *The New York Times* published an article, entitled *Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Worsens Terror Threat* [19]. It was about a US National Intelligence Estimate entitled *Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States*, which was completed in April 2006.

National Intelligence Estimates are formal assessments on specific national security issues, signed off by the Director of National Intelligence, John Negroponte. They express the consensus view of the 16 US spy agencies, based on raw intelligence supplied by all of them. This Estimate is the first formal appraisal of "global terrorism" by United States intelligence agencies since the Iraq war began.

The leak of the Estimate forced Bush to declassify and release the "key judgments" in the Estimate [20]. But the "key judgments" merely confirmed the headline on *The New York Times* article. Listen to this:

"We assess that the Iraq jihad is shaping a new generation of terrorist leaders and operatives; perceived jihadist success there would inspire more fighters to continue the struggle elsewhere.

- The Iraq conflict has become the "cause celebre" for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement. Should jihadists leaving Iraq perceive themselves, and be perceived, to have failed, we judge fewer fighters will be inspired to carry on the fight.

"We assess that the underlying factors fueling the spread of the movement outweigh its vulnerabilities and are likely to do so for the duration of the timeframe of this Estimate [believed to be 2006-2011].

- Four underlying factors are fueling the spread of the jihadist movement: (1) Entrenched grievances, such as corruption, injustice, and fear of Western domination, leading to anger, humiliation, and a sense of powerlessness; (2) the Iraq "jihad"; (3) the slow pace of real and sustained economic, social, and political reforms in many Muslim majority nations; and (4) pervasive anti-US sentiment among most Muslims - all of which jihadists exploit."

Bush took comfort in the sentence that said “Should jihadists leaving Iraq perceive themselves, and be perceived, to have failed, we judge fewer fighters will be inspired to carry on the fight”. But that is an argument for a US military presence in Iraq for the indefinite future.

Armed Services Committee

On 15 November 2006, the head of the CIA, General Michael Hayden, and the head of the Pentagon’s Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), General Michael Maples, appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee. According to a *Washington Post* report the next day [21]:

“Both men said a US military failure in Iraq would effectively turn the country into al-Qaeda’s next haven, providing the group with the kind of security it had in Afghanistan for years before 2001.”

As a measure of his success in the “war on terror”, Bush has often said that more than half of the al-Qaida leadership has been killed or captured since 9/11. Here’s what Hayden told the Armed Services Committee about the al-Qaida leadership today (according to *The Washington Post* article):

“Hayden said yesterday that ‘the group’s cadre of seasoned, committed leaders’ remains fairly cohesive and focused on strategic objectives, ‘despite having lost a number of veterans over the years’. Bin Laden himself, and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, continue to play a crucial role while hiding out somewhere along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

“Hayden said the organization had lost a series of leaders since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. But the losses have been ‘mitigated by what is, frankly, a pretty deep bench of low-ranking personnel capable of stepping up to assume leadership positions’. Hayden said the lower ranks are dominated by men in their early 40s with two decades of experience fighting.”

And in Afghanistan, Hayden said that al-Qaida and the Taliban are back waging a “bloody insurgency” in the south and east of the country and Hamid Karzai will need US support for ‘at least a decade’ to ensure that the country does not fall again. Hayden and Maples painted “a stark portrait of a struggling Afghanistan and a successful al-Qaida capable of operating on two battlefields”, according to *The Washington Post* article.

Appendix A: Conclusions on Iraq’s links with al-Qaida

The following are the conclusions on Iraq’s links with al-Qaida from the Senate Select Intelligence Committee report *Postwar findings about Iraq’s WMD and links to terrorism and how they compare with prewar assessments* [2] (p105-112), which was published on 8 September 2006.

Conclusion 1

Postwar findings indicate that the CIA assessment that the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaida resembled ‘two independent actors trying to exploit each other’, accurately characterized bin Ladin’s actions, but not those of Saddam Hussein. Postwar findings indicate that Saddam Hussein was distrustful of al-Qaida and viewed Islamic extremists as a threat to his regime, refusing all requests from al-Qaida to provide material or operational support.

Conclusion 2

Postwar findings have identified only one meeting between representatives of al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein’s regime reported in prewar intelligence assessments. Postwar findings have identified two occasions, not reported prior to the war, in which Saddam Hussein rebuffed meeting requests from

an al-Qaida operative. The Intelligence Community has not found any other evidence of meetings between al-Qaida and Iraq.

Conclusion 3

Prewar Intelligence Community assessments were inconsistent regarding the likelihood that Saddam Hussein provided chemical and biological weapons (CBW) training to al-Qaida. Postwar findings support the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) February 2002 assessment that Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi was likely intentionally misleading his debriefers when he said that Iraq provided two al-Qaida associates with chemical and biological weapons (CBW) training in 2000. The CIA's January 2003 assessment said that the al-Libi claim was credible, but included the statement that al-Libi was not in a position to know whether training had taken place. Postwar findings do not support the CIA's assessment that his reporting was credible. No postwar information has been found that indicates CBW training occurred and the detainee who provided the key prewar reporting of this training recanted his claims after the war.

[An alleged al-Qaida double agent, interviewed on BBC2's Newsnight on 16 November 2006, expressed the opinion that al-Libi had deliberately misled his interrogators in order to entice the US into attacking Iraq (see, for example, *The Guardian*, 17 November 2006 [\[22\]](#)).

Conclusion 4

Postwar findings support the April 2002 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessment that there was no credible reporting on al-Qaida training at Salman Pak or anywhere else in Iraq.

Conclusion 5

Postwar information supports the Intelligence Community's assessments that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, using an alias, and members of his network were present in Baghdad in 2002. Postwar findings indicate al-Zarqawi was in Baghdad from May 2002 until late November 2002, when he travelled to Iran and northeastern Iraq. Prewar assessments expressed uncertainty about Iraq's complicity in their presence, but overestimated the Iraqi regime's capabilities to locate them. Postwar information indicates that Saddam Hussein attempted, unsuccessfully, to locate and capture al-Zarqawi and that the regime did not have a relationship with, harbour, or turn a blind eye toward Zarqawi.

Conclusion 6

Postwar information indicates that the Intelligence Community accurately assessed that al-Qaida affiliate group Ansar al-Islam operated in Kurdish-controlled northeastern Iraq, an area that Baghdad had not controlled since 1991. Prewar assessments reported on Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS) infiltrations of the group, but noted uncertainty regarding the purpose of the infiltrations. Postwar information reveals that Baghdad viewed Ansar al-Islam as a threat to the regime and that the IIS attempted to collect intelligence in the group.

Conclusion 7

Postwar information supports prewar Intelligence Community assessments that there was no credible information that Iraq was complicit in or had foreknowledge of the September 11 attacks or any other al-Qaida strike. These assessments discussed two leads which raised the possibility of ties between Iraqi officials and two of the September 11 hijackers. Postwar findings support CIA's January 2003 assessment, which judged that "the most reliable reporting casts doubt" on one of the leads, an alleged meeting between Muhammed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague, and confirm that no such meeting occurred. Prewar intelligence reporting cast doubt on the other lead as well.

Conclusion 8

No postwar information indicates that Iraq intended to use al-Qaida or any other terrorist group to strike the United States homeland before or during Operation Iraqi Freedom [ie the US invasion of Iraq].

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18 November 2006

Labour & Trade Union Review

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