Order Code RL32217

CRS Report for Congress

Iraq and Al Qaeda

Updated July 27, 2007

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Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Congressional
Research
Service

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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 organization. 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.

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.

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. Although the connections between Ansar al-Islam and Saddam Hussein's regime were subject to debate, the organization apparently did evolve into what is now known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I). AQ-I is a key component of the Sunni Arab-led insurgency that has frustrated U.S. efforts to stabilize Iraq, but there is debate about how large and significant a component of overall violence is carried out by AQ-I. At the same time, U.S. commanders are increasingly focusing combat operations on AQ-I. The U.S. military also has sought, with some success, to exploit differences between AQ-I and Iraqi Sunni political, tribal, and insurgent leaders.

There are some indications that AQ-I is attempting to conduct activities outside Iraq in a process that some describe as "spillover" from Iraq into the broader Middle East. However, another interpretation is that the U.S.-led war in Iraq has stimulated radical activities outside Iraq that are sympathetic to Al Qaeda. Analysis of the broader implications of AQ-I might depend on the degree to which AQ-I is in contact with the remaining leadership of the Al Qaeda organization as it has evolved since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. That relationship remains a subject of debate among experts.

This report will be updated as warranted by developments. See also: CRS Report RL31339: *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security*, by Kenneth Katzman

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Iraq and Al Qaeda

Part of the debate over the Bush Administration decision to use military action to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein centers on whether or not that regime was 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) that it could potentially transfer to international terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda, with which Iraq was allied, in the Administration view. This combination produced the possibility of a catastrophic attack on the United States, according to the Administration.

The first pillar of the Administration argument for ousting Saddam Hussein — its continued active development of WMD — has been researched extensively. After the fall of the regime in April 2003, U.S. forces and intelligence officers in an "Iraq Survey Group" (ISG) scoured Iraq for evidence of WMD stockpiles. A "comprehensive" September 2004 report of the Survey Group, known as the "Duelfer report,"[1] said that the ISG found no WMD stockpiles or production but said that there was evidence that the regime retained the intention to reconstitute WMD programs in the future. The formal U.S.-led WMD search ended December 2004,[2] although U.S. forces have found some chemical weapons caches left over from the Iran-Iraq war.[3] The UNMOVIC work remained formally active until July 2007.

The second pillar of the Administration argument — that Saddam Hussein's regime had links to Al Qaeda — is relevant not only to assess justification for the invasion decision but also because an Al Qaeda affiliate is now, by all accounts, a key part of the ongoing Iraq insurgency. The Administration maintains that the Al Qaeda presence in Iraq, fighting alongside Iraqi insurgents from the ousted ruling Baath Party and former regime security forces, demonstrates that there were pre-war linkages. On the other hand, most experts believe that Al Qaeda and other foreign fighters entered Sunni-inhabited central Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, from the Kurdish controlled north and from other Middle Eastern countries, after the fall of the regime. They are 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, according to this view.

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[1] Duelfer report text is at [http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/iraq/cia93004wmdrpt.html]. The report is named for Charles Duelfer, the last head of the WMD search as part of the Iraq Survey Group. The first such head was Dr. David Kay.

[2] For analysis of the former regime's WMD and other abuses, see CRS Report RL32379, Iraq: Former Regime Weapons Programs, Human Rights Violations, and U.S. Policy, by Kenneth Katzman.

[3] Pincus, Walter. "Munitions Found in Iraq Renew Debate." *Washington Post*, July 1, 2006.

Background on Saddam - Al Qaeda Links

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."[4]

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, have maintained that issue is still open.[5]

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, although 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. According to the presentation:[6]

> 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. 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.

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[4] Transcript: Bush Gives Saddam Hussein and Sons 48 Hours to Leave Iraq. Department of State, Washington File. March 17, 2003.

[5] Priest, Dana and Glenn Kessler. "Iraq, 9/11 Still Linked By Cheney." *Washington Post*, September 29, 2003.

[6] Secretary of State Addresses the U.N. Security Council. Transcript, February 5, 2003.

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."[7] Additional details of the Administration's argument, as well as criticisms, are discussed below.

Post-Saddam analysis of the issue has tended to refute the Administration argument on Saddam-Al Qaeda linkages, although this issue is still debated. The report of the 9/11 Commission found no evidence of a "collaborative operational linkage" between Iraq and Al Qaeda.[8] In his book "At the Center of the Storm" in May 2007 (Harper Collins Press, pp. 341-358), former CIA Director George Tenet indicated that the CIA view was that contacts between Saddam's regime and Al Qaeda were likely for the purpose of taking the measure of each other or take advantage of each other rather than collaborating. Others note, however, that some of Tenet's pre-war testimony before Congress was in line with the prevailing Administration view on this question, contrasting with the views in his book.

Major Themes in the Administration Argument

Any relationship between Saddam Hussein's regime and Al Qaeda would have been, by its nature, clandestine. 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*.[9] Vice President Cheney has been quoted as saying the article represents the "best source of [open] information" on the issue.[10] 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 argument on the issue.

Links in Sudan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The "DOD memorandum," as well as other accounts,[11] include assertions that Iraqi intelligence developed a

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[7] Powell Affirms Confidence in Decision to Wage Iraq War. U.S. Department of State, Washington File. January 8, 2004.

[8] 9/11 Commission Report, p. 66.

[9] Hayes, Stephen. "Case Closed." The Weekly Standard, November 24, 2003. Online at [http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/378fmxyz.asp]

[10] Milbank, Dana. "Bush Hails Al Qaeda Arrest in Iraq; President Defends U.S. Intelligence." *Washington Post*, January 27, 2004.

[11] Goldberg, Jeffrey. "The Unknown. The CIA and the Pentagon take Another Look at Al

(continued...)

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 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 (NIE) 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.[12] Some CIA experts reportedly asserted that the ideological differences between Iraq and Al Qaeda were too large to be bridged permanently.[13] 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.[14] 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

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[11] (...continued)
Qaeda and Iraq." *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2003.

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

[13] Goldberg, Jeffrey. "The Unknown. The CIA and the Pentagon Take Another Look at Al Qaeda and Iraq." *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2003.

[14] Gunaratna, Rohan. Inside Al Qaeda. New York, Columbia University Press, 2002. Pp. 27-29.

"socialist and infidel," although the statement also gave some support to the Administration argument when bin Laden exhorted the Iraqi people to resist impending U.S. military action.[15]

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.[16] 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.[17] 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 volunteer in Afghanistan were serving in Iraqi units during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, and were 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 Iraqi government backing for Iraqis to join Al Qaeda.

Ansar al-Islam Presence in Northern Iraq. 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 U.N. presentation, and is the most directly relevant to analysis of the Al Qaeda presence in Iraq today. Ansar al-Islam is considered the forerunner of what is now known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I).

Ansar al-Islam 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 Arab fighters lived in the Ansar al-Islam enclave, near the town of Khurmal.[18] 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

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[15] Text of an audio message purported to be from Osama bin Laden. BBC News, February 12, 2003.

[16] "Al Qaeda High Value Targets." Defense Intelligence Agency chart (unclassified). September 12, 2003.

[17] Conversations with Administration officials involved in the war on terrorism. 2002-2003.

[18] Chivers, C.J. Repulsing Attack By Islamic Militants, "Iraqi Kurds Tell of Atrocities." *New York Times*, December 6, 2002.

were allegedly responsible for an assassination attempt against PUK "prime minister" of the Kurdish region Barham Salih in April 2002.

The leader of the Arab contingent within Ansar al-Islam was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an Arab of Jordanian origin who reputedly fought in Afghanistan. Although more recent assessments indicate Zarqawi commanded Arab volunteers in Afghanistan separate from those recruited by bin Laden, Zarqawi was linked to purported Al Qaeda plots in the 1990s and early 2000s. He allegedly was behind foiled bombings in Jordan during the December 1999 millennium celebration, to the assassination in Jordan of U.S. diplomat Lawrence Foley (2002), and to reported attempts in 2002 to spread chemical agents in Russia, Western Europe, and the United States.[19]

In explaining why the United States needed to confront Saddam Hussein's regime militarily, U.S. officials maintained that Baghdad was connected to Ansar al-Islam. In his U.N. presentation, Secretary of State Powell said:

> 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. 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.[20] The Administration view on this point is that Saddam saw Ansar as a means of pressuring Saddam Hussein's Kurdish opponents 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 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

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[19] U.S. Department of State. Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002. April 2003. p. 79.

[20] "U.S. Uncertain About Northern Iraq Group's Link to Al Qaida." Dow Jones Newswire, March 18, 2002.

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.

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.[21] 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.[22]

There is 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 denied to U.S. interrogators that the meeting ever happened.[26]

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[21] Priest, Dana and Glenn Kessler. "Iraq, 9/11 Still Linked By Cheney." *Washington Post*, September 29, 2003.

[22] Hosenball, Mark, Michael Isikoff and Evan Thomas. Cheney's Long Path to War. *Newsweek*, November 17, 2003.

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

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

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

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

Al Qaeda and the Iraq Insurgency

Whether or not Al Qaeda leaders and Saddam Hussein had a relationship, a major issue facing the United States is the degree to which Al Qaeda elements are playing a role in the insurgency against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. The Administration, including President Bush, most notably in a July 24, 2007, speech specifically on this issue, has consistently maintained that Al Qaeda elements are a key component of the Iraq insurgency; that Al Qaeda in Iraq is connected to the Al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan; and that this Al Qaeda role is a central reason that the United States needs to continue to conduct active combat in Iraq. Commenting on the Iraq insurgency when it was in its infancy, 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."[27] A few months later, 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."[28] Similar statements followed in subsequent years as the Administration sought to assert that Iraq had become the "central front" in the broader "war on terrorism," and that 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.[29] In a January 10, 2007, major speech announcing a new Iraq strategy characterized by a buildup of additional combat troops to secure Baghdad, President Bush made similar points:

> ... we will continue to pursue al Qaeda and foreign fighters. Al Qaeda is still active in Iraq. Its home base is Anbar Province. Al Qaeda has helped make Anbar the most violent area of Iraq outside the capital. A captured al Qaeda document describes the terrorists' plan to infiltrate and seize control of the province. This would bring al Qaeda closer to its goals of taking down Iraq's democracy, building a radical Islamic empire, and launching new attacks on the United States at home and abroad.

In the July 24, 2007, speech mentioned above,[30] President Bush said:

> ... Our troops are serving bravely in [Iraq]. They're opposing ruthless enemies, and no enemy is more ruthless in Iraq than al Qaeda. They send suicide bombers into crowded markets; they behead innocent captives and they murder American troops. They want to bring down Iraq's democracy so they can use that nation as a terrorist safe haven for attacks against our country....

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, and

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[27] Ibid.

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

[29] Miller, Greg. Iraq-Terrorism Link Continues to Be Problematic. *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2003.

[30] President Bush Discusses War on Terror in South Carolina. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/07/print/20070724-3.html].

that the U.S. presence in Iraq has generated new Al Qaeda followers — both inside and outside Iraq — who might not have become active against the United States had the war against Iraq not occurred. This view draws some support from the released "key judgements" of a July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that said:

> ...we assess that [Al Qaeda central leadership's] association with AQ-I helps Al Qaeda to energize the broader Sunni extremist community, raise resources, and to recruit and indoctrinate operatives, including for homeland attacks.[31]

Other critics maintain that the Administration emphasizes an "Al Qaeda" component of the insurgency as a means of bolstering flagging U.S. public support for the war effort in Iraq.

Interpretations of Al Qaeda Involvement in the Insurgency

In analyzing the debate over Al Qaeda involvement in Iraq, a major question is the degree to which AQ-I or unassociated foreign fighters are driving the Iraq insurgency against the United States and the elected government of Iraq. Few dispute that there has been, from almost the inception of the insurgency in mid-2003, a "foreign fighter" component, but the debate over the contribution of the foreign fighters is nearly as old as the insurgency itself. In November 2003, one senior U.S. commander in Iraq (Maj. Gen. Charles Swannack, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division) said, in response to reports that foreign fighters were key to the burgeoning insurgency: "I want to underscore that most of the attacks on our forces are by former regime loyalists and other Iraqis, not foreign forces."[32]

Contrasting views were apparent again a few months later. Following the January 2004 arrest in northern Iraq of suspected bin Laden aide Hassan Ghul, then commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, said the arrest "is pretty strong proof that Al Qaeda is trying to gain a foothold here to continue their murderous campaigns."[33] However, Gen. John Abizaid, then overall commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East region (U.S. Central Command) made a contrasting statement, saying "I am confident that there is no flood of foreign fighters coming in [to Iraq]."[34]

Those commanders who emphasized the foreign fighter role in the insurgency maintained that the many major suicide bombings that occurred — 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 that killed the leader of the main Shiite faction (then called the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, renamed

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[31] "'Key Judgments' on Terrorist Threat To U.S." *New York Times*, July 18, 2007.

[32] Brinkley, Joel. Few Signs of Infiltration By Foreign Fighters in Iraq. *New York Times*, November 19, 2003.

[33] Stack, Megan. U.S. General Sees Al Qaeda Evidence in Iraq. *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 2004.

[34] Shanker, Thom. U.S. Commanders Surveys Challenges in Iraq Region. *New York Times*, January 30, 2004.

in June 2007 to the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, SICI), Mohammad Baqr Al Hakim — were carried out by the "Zarqawi network." These bombings represented, to some extent, a turning point that shook confidence in the U.S. ability to stabilize post-Saddam Iraq, and heightened the U.S. focus on the foreign component of the insurgency.

On July 12, 2007, chief spokesman for the U.S. military in Iraq, Brig. Gen. Kevin Bergner, was quoted as saying that AQ-I is responsible for 80 to 90% of the suicide bombings in Iraq, many of them carried out by foreigners. U.S. officials quoted in July 2007 press reports footnoted above say that Saudis are a "majority" of suicide bombers in Iraq. He also called AQ-I "the principal threat" to Iraqis, and the main focus of the U.S. security campaign. On the other hand, some U.S. commanders say that, while most foreign fighters going to Iraq become suicide bombers, others are contributing to the overall insurgency as snipers, logisticians, and financiers.[35] However, other U.S. commanders noted — and continue to note — that these major bombings constituted a small percentage of overall attacks in Iraq (which now number a total of about 175 per day), and that most of the U.S. combat deaths came from roadside bombs and direct or indirect munitions fire likely wielded by Iraqi Sunni insurgent fighters.

Estimated Numbers of Foreign Fighters. Although there have been differences among commanders about the contribution of the foreign fighters to the overall violence in Iraq, estimates of the numbers of foreign fighters have remained fairly consistent over time, at least as a percentage of the overall insurgency. As early as October 2003, U.S. officials estimated that as many as 3,000 might be non-Iraqi,[36] although, suggesting uncertainty in the estimate, Gen. Abizaid said on January 29, 2004, that the number of foreign fighters in Iraq was "low" and "in the hundreds."[37] A September 2005 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies estimated that there were about 3,000 non-Iraqi fighters in Iraq - about 10% of the estimated total size of the insurgency. In testimony before Congress in January 2007, the then Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (John Negroponte) said that foreign fighters constitute less than 10% of the insurgents in Iraq. Other U.S. commanders said in July 2007 that approximately 60-80 foreign fighters come across the border every month to participate in the Iraq insurgency.[38] The specific nationalities of the foreigners are the subject of much speculation; one press report in July 2007, quoting U.S. officials in Iraq, say that about 40% of the foreign fighters in Iraq are of Saudi origin.[39]

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[35] "U.S. Officials Voice Frustrations With Saudis, Citing Role in Iraq." *New York Times*, July 27, 2007.

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

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

[38] Parker, Ned. "Saudis' Role in Iraq Insurgency Outlined." *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2007.

[39] "U.S. Officials Voice Frustrations With Saudis, Citing Role in Iraq." Op.cit.

AQ-I Strategy

Although the United States and its Iraqi partners have, from the inception of the insurgency, conducted a broad counter-insurgency campaign, a major U.S. focus has always been on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, his network, and his successors. On March 15, 2004, Ansar al-Islam (see above) was named as "Foreign Terrorist Organization" under the Immigration and Nationality Act. On October 15, 2004, the State Department named the "Monotheism and Jihad Group" — the successor to Ansar al-Islam — as an FTO. The designation said that the Monotheism group "was...responsible for the U.N. headquarters bombing in Baghdad."[40] Later that month, perhaps in response to that designation, Zarqawi changed the name of his organization to "Al Qaeda Jihad Organization in the Land of Two Rivers (Mesopotamia - Iraq) — commonly known now as Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQ-I. The FTO designation was applied to the new name.

Along with the designations came stepped up U.S. military efforts to find and capture or kill Zarqawi. There were several reported "near misses," according to press reports.[41] However, on June 7, 2006, U.S. forces were able to track Zarqawi to a safe house near the city of Baqubah, in the mixed Sunni-Shiite province of Diyala, and an airstrike by one U.S. F-16 mortally wounded him.

Related Groups/Ansar Al Sunna. While focusing primarily on Zarqawi, U.S. officials were also attempting to analyze the evolution of the foreign component of the Iraq insurgency. Attention began to focus on a group calling itself Ansar al-Sunna, which apparently was an offshoot of the Zarqawi network and was operating in northern Iraq, including the Kurdish areas and areas of Arab Iraq around Mosul. It was named as an FTO as an alias of Ansar al-Islam when the latter group was designated in March 2004, and Ansar al-Sunna remains on the FTO list. In its most significant attack after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the group claimed responsibility for February 1, 2004, twin suicide attacks in Irbil, northern Iraq. The attacks killed over 100 Kurds, including some senior Kurdish officials.[42] Another major attack — attributed to Ansar al-Sunna by the State Department "Country Reports on Terrorism: 2006" (released April 2007 by the State Department Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism) — was the December 2004 suicide bombing of a U.S. military dining facility at Camp Marez in the northern city of Mosul, which killed 13 U.S. soldiers. The State Department report says that Ansar al-Sunna "continues to conduct attacks against a wide range of targets including Coalition Forces, the Iraqi government and security forces, and Kurdish and Shia figures."

Before his death, Zarqawi largely set AQ-I's strategy in Iraq — an effort to provoke all out civil war between the newly dominant Shiite Arabs and the formerly pre-eminent Sunni Arabs. Zarqawi apparently calculated that provoking civil war

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[40] Zarqawi Group Formally Designated Terrorists by State Department. Usinfo.state.gov., October 15, 2004.

[41] Bazzi, Mohammad. "Another Near Miss" *Long Island Newsday*, May 20, 2005.

[42] Al Qaeda Linked Islamist Group Claims Deadly Arbil Attacks in Iraq. Agence France Presse, February 4, 2004.

could, at the very least, undermine Shiite efforts to consolidate their political control of post-Saddam Iraq. Ultimately, the strategy could compel U.S. forces to leave Iraq by undermining U.S. public support for the war effort, and thereby leaving the Shiite government vulnerable to continued AQ-I and Sunni attack. The strategy might have been controversial among Al Qaeda circles, as evidenced by a purported letter (if genuine) from the number two Al Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to Zarqawi, in July 2005. In that letter, Zawahiri questions the strategy by arguing that committing violence against Shiite civilians and religious establishments will undermine the support of the Iraqi people for AQ-I and the Sunni "resistance" more broadly. [43]

To implement its strategy, AQ-I under Zarqawi continued to focus primarily on spectacular suicide bombings intended to cause mass Shiite casualties or to destroy sites sacred to Shiites. Several suicide bombings were conducted in 2005 against Shiite celebrations, causing mass casualties. The most notable bombing was the February 22, 2006, bombing of the Shiite "Golden Mosque" in Sunni-inhabited Samarra, which is in Salahuddin Province. The bombing largely destroyed the golden dome of the mosque. It touched off widespread Shiite reprisals against Sunnis nationwide and is widely considered to have started the "civil war." Many sources and analyses[44] attribute the Samarra bombing to AQ-I, although the State Department terrorism report for 2006, cited earlier, does not specifically cite AQ-I as the perpetrator of the attack. On several occasions, President Bush has said that Zarqawi largely succeeded in that strategy, although he and other senior Administration officials do not say that the security situation in Iraq can be characterized as "civil war."

Reaction to AQ-I and Evolution of AQ-I Structure

The Zarqawi strategy of attempting to provoke civil war, and some of its ideology and practices, were not universally popular among Iraq's Sunnis, even among some Sunni insurgent groups. Some Iraqi Sunni insurgents believed that attacks should be confined to "combatant"targets — Iraqi government forces, most of which are Shiite, Iraqi government representatives, and U.S. and other coalition forces. Iraqi Sunnis purportedly have concrete political goals in Iraq, and some AQ-I tactics, such as attacks on Shiite civilians, might prevent any future power sharing compromise with Iraq's Shiites. AQ-I fighters had broader goals - defeating the United States, establishing an Islamic state in Iraq that could expand throughout the region, and other ambitious objectives beyond Iraq. Other Iraqi Sunnis resented AQ-I practices in the regions where AQ-I fighters congregated, including reported enforcement of strict Islamic law — segregation by sex, forcing males to wear beards, banning all alcohol sales and consumption, and like measures. In some cases, according to a variety of press reports, AQ-I fighters killed Iraqi Sunnis found violating these strictures.

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[43] [http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/006/203gpuul.asp?pg=2]

[44] One such analysis is: Beehner, Lionel. Backgrounder: Al-Qaeda in Iraq: Resurging or Splintering? Council on Foreign Relations, updated July 16, 2007.

Others believe that the strains between AQ-I and Iraqi Sunni insurgent fighters were a competition for power and control over the insurgency. According to this view, Iraqi Sunni leaders no more wanted to be dominated by foreign Sunnis than they did by Iraqi Shiites or U.S. soldiers. One concrete sign of the strains ermeged in May 2005 in the form of a reported battle between AQ-I fighters and Iraqi Sunni tribal militiamen in the western town of Husaybah. Still, despite these differences, during 2003-2006 these strains were mostly muted as Iraqi Sunnis cooperated with AQ-I toward the broader goal of overturning the Shiite-dominated, U.S.-backed power structure in Iraq.

In early 2006, just before the Golden Mosque bombing referenced above, there were indications that Zarqawi was aware of and attempting to counter the strains developing between AQ-I and the Iraqi Sunni political and insurgent structures. In January 2006, AQ-I announced formation of the "Mujahidin Shura Council" — an umbrella organization of six groups including AQ-I and five Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups, mostly those with an Islamist ideology. Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups dominated by ex-Baath Party and ex-Saddam era military members apparently did not join the Mujahidin Shura Council. Forming the Mujahidin Shura Council appeared to many to be an attempt by AQ-I to demonstrate that it was working cooperatively with its Iraqi Sunni hosts and not seeking their subordination. To further this impression, in April 2006, the Mujahidin Shura Council announced that an Iraqi, Abdullah Rashid (aka Abu Umar) al-Baghdadi, had been appointed its leader, although there were doubts as to Baghdadi's true identity. (In July 2007, a captured AQ-I operative said Baghdadi does not exist at all, but was a propaganda tool to disguise AQ-I's large role in the insurgency.[45]) AQ-I continued to operate under the Mujahidin Shura Council at least until Zarqawi's death in June 2006.

The shift to increased integration with Iraqi Sunni insurgents continued after Zarqawi's demise. After his death, Abu Ayub al-Masri (an Egyptian, also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) was formally named leader of the Mujahidin Shura Council (and therefore leader of AQ-I). According to the State Department terrorism report for 2006, al-Masri has "continued [Zarqawi's] strategy of targeting Coalition forces and Shi'a civilians in an attempt to foment sectarian strife." In October 2006, al-Masri declared the "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI) organization under which AQ-I and its allied groups now claim their attacks. ISI appeared to be a replacement for the Mujahidin Shura Council. In April 2007, the ISI named a "cabinet" consisting of a minister of war (al-Masri), the head of the cabinet (al-Baghdadi), and seven other "ministers."

The AQ-I moves toward greater cooperation with the Iraqi insurgents did not satisfy the entire Sunni community, even though that community remains highly restive and resentful of the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. The same factors — Iraqi Sunni fear of AQ-I domination of them, and resentment of AQ-I tactics — remain prevalent and have grown, according to observers. During 2007, U.S. commanders reported increasing sentiment among the Iraqi Sunni community in Anbar Province to drive AQ-I fighters out of Anbar and

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[45] Gordon, Michael. "U.S. Says Insurgent Leader It Couldn't Find Never Was." *New York Times*, July 19, 2007.

to cooperate with U.S. efforts to secure the cities and towns of the province. At least 23 Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar formed an "Anbar Salvation Council" that directed about 13,000 young Sunnis to join the national police force and to help secure Ramadi, Fallujah, and other cities in the province. This movement, which observers say is related to but separate from a broader Sunni political coalescence known as the "Awakening," has led to a sharp drop in the number of daily security incidents in the province, according to U.S. commanders. U.S. military leaders say they are trying to spread this trend to other restive Sunni provinces, including Salahuddin, Nineveh, and Diyala.

At the same time, some observers are skeptical that this security trend has ended AQ-I's prospects in Iraq. Suicide bombings, widely attributed to AQ-I, have continued despite the cooperation of Sunni tribes and insurgents against AQ-I. Many AQ-I fighters have relocated to areas outside Anbar Province, including Diyala (where U.S. forces are now pressuring them with Operation Arrowhead Ripper), Mosul, Tikrit, Kirkuk, Tal Afar, and other areas. Others maintain that, because most of the daily violence is anyway committed by Iraq Sunni insurgents, the overall effect of the turn against AQ-I might be insufficient to materially calm Iraq.

Linkages to Al Qaeda Central Leadership

As discussed briefly above, perhaps the most controversial question about AQ-I is the degree to which it is linked, if at all, to the central leadership of Al Qaeda as represented by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, both of whom are widely believed to be hiding in areas of Pakistan near the border with Afghanistan. That degree of linkage, if any, might determine to what extent the U.S. combat effort in Iraq is part of the overall post-September 11 war on the Al Qaeda organization, and whether or not AQ-I might seek to be attacking the U.S. homeland.

As discussed above, on July 24, 2007, President Bush devoted a speech almost exclusively to this issue. In making an argument that AQ-I is closely related to Al Qaeda's central leadership, the President noted the following details, including:

- In 2004, Zarqawi formally joined Al Qaeda and pledged allegiance to bin Laden. Bin Laden then publicly declared that Zarqawi was the "Prince of Al Qaeda in Iraq." President Bush stated that U.S. intelligence says Zarqawi had met both bin Laden and Zawahiri. He asserted later in the speech that, according to U.S. intelligence, AQ-I is a "full member of the Al Qaeda terrorist network."

- After Zarqawi's death, bin Laden sent an aide named Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi to help Zarqawi's successor, al-Masri, but al-Iraqi was captured before reaching Iraq.

- That AQ-I's leaders including several foreigners, including a Syrian, a Saudi, and Egyptian, and a Tunisian, and that in June 2007, U.S. forces killed in Iraq an Al Qaeda facilitator named Mehmet Yilmaz.

- That a captured AQ-I leader, an Iraqi named Khalid al-Mashhadani, had told U.S. authorities that Baghdadi was fictitious. In July 2007,

Brig. Gen. Bergner, a U.S. military spokesman, told journalists that Mashhadani is an intermediary between al-Masri and bin Laden and Zawahiri.

- In line with the increasing AQ-I efforts to cooperate with Iraqi Sunni insurgents, most of AQ-I's fighters and some of its leaders are Iraqi.

- That AQ-I is the only insurgent group in Iraq "with stated ambitions to make the country a base for attacks outside Iraq." Referring to the November 9, 2005, terrorist attacks on hotels in Zarqawi's native Jordan, President Bush said AQ-I "dispatched terrorists who bombed a wedding reception in Jordan." Referring to an August 2005 incident, he said AQ-I "sent operatives to Jordan where they attempted to launch a rocket attack on U.S. Navy ships" docked at the port of Aqaba.

In his speech, President Bush acknowledged but refuted some of the counter-arguments. Some experts believe that links between Al Qaeda's central leadership and AQ-I are tenuous, at best, and that the few operatives linking the two do not demonstrate an ongoing, substantial relationship. Others point to the Zawahiri admonishment of Zarqawi, discussed above, as evidence that there is not a close connection between the two. Still others maintain that there is little evidence that AQ-I seeks to attack broadly outside Iraq, and that those incidents that have taken place have been in Jordan, where Zarqawi might have wanted to try to undermine King Abdullah II, whom Zarqawi opposed as too close to the United States.