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Iraq and Al Qaeda: No Evidence of Alliance

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The direct and immediate threat to the United States, its allies and other friendly nations is terrorism, not Iraq. A U.S.-led invasion of Iraq to disarm the regime of Saddam Hussein, especially if it is seen to lack the authority of the UN Security Council, will weaken the international campaign to counter Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

Although Al Qaeda has suffered some heavy setbacks since the attacks on the United States in September 2001, its core leadership is intact and continues to provide ideological and strategic direction. As long as Osama bin Laden, the Al Qaeda leader, Ayman Zawahiri, the principal strategist, and Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, head of the Al Qaeda military committee, are alive, the United States is at risk of another serious terrorist attack.

Al Qaeda is growing. For every Al Qaeda and Taliban member captured or killed in Afghanistan, the group has been able to recruit another one or two members. For every terrorist support cell detected and disrupted, even in Europe, Al Qaeda has been able to establish a new cell to disseminate propaganda, raise funds and recruit.

There is overwhelming evidence that Iraq is not complying with UN resolutions to account for its chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons programs. However, the case that Saddam's regime has helped Al Qaeda is weak. Iraqi intelligence agents have met with Al Qaeda leaders and operatives, but there is

no conclusive evidence of Iraqi assistance to Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda operatives have traveled in and out of Baghdad, but there is no evidence of state sponsorship. Since U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, I have examined several tens of thousands of documents recovered from Al Qaeda and Taliban sources. In addition to listening to 240 tapes taken from Al Qaeda's central registry, I debriefed several Al Qaeda and Taliban detainees. I could find no evidence of links between Iraq and Al Qaeda. The documentation and interviews indicated that Al Qaeda regarded Saddam, a secular leader, as an infidel. Saddam has sponsored terrorism against Israel, Kuwait and Iran. He has provided money and weapons to such terrorist groups, but not chemical, biological or radiological material. He did not transfer chemical and biological weapons to terrorist groups, probably because he knew that they could one day be used against his secular regime.

But the U.S. threat to invade Iraq might prompt Saddam to establish ties with any enemy of America. The threat of an invasion is already starting to undermine the global campaign against Al Qaeda and its associate groups.

An invasion that lacks a broad base of support in the Islamic community is likely to cause severe disruption and damage to the security, intelligence, law enforcement and judicial cooperation that the U.S. government has built in Muslim countries since 2001.

As a result of this cooperation, U.S. and foreign counterpart agencies have prevented at least three dozen terrorist attacks against U.S., allied and friendly targets. More than 3,000 Al Qaeda leaders, agents and supporters have been arrested in 98 countries in the last 15 months. This has reduced the threat of terrorism significantly. If the United States launches a unilateral invasion of Iraq, Muslim rulers and regimes in the Middle East and Asia will come under sustained pressure from their citizens. Especially if the military operation in Iraq is

protracted and causes extensive civilian casualties, the Muslim public will demand to know why their governments are continuing to support the United States when fellow Muslims are being killed.

As public support for Muslim governments declines, information sources will dry up and the flow of counterterrorism intelligence will suffer. Muslim law enforcement and intelligence officials will be reluctant even to conduct counterterrorist operations. As a result, U.S. intelligence agencies and law enforcement authorities will fail to detect terrorist infiltration and attack plans against American targets at home and overseas.

A number of key Muslim countries in Asia, such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan, have cooperated with the United States in countering terrorism. In addition to weakening this work, a unilateral invasion of Iraq would strengthen the popularity of Islamist political parties at the expense of moderate groups. This would make it easier for terrorist groups to operate.

Islamist propaganda has already identified the United States as the main enemy and sensitized Muslims in their Middle East and Asian heartlands, as well as Muslim migrant communities in North America, Europe and Australasia. An invasion of Iraq would give a new lease on life to existing and emerging terrorist groups.

About the Author: Rohan Gunaratna is the author of *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*.