

# Why Iraq?

If Saddam stays in power, the war on terrorism will have failed. **BY GARY SCHMITT**

**S**HORTLY BEFORE getting on a plane to fly to New Jersey from Europe in June 2000, Mohamed Atta, the lead hijacker of the first jet airliner to slam into the World Trade Center and, apparently, the lead conspirator in the attacks of September 11, met with a senior Iraqi intelligence official. This was no chance encounter. Rather than take a flight from Germany, where he had been living, Atta traveled to Prague, almost certainly for the purpose of meeting there with Iraqi intelligence operative Ahmed Samir Ahani.

To understand the significance of this meeting, put yourself in the position of a terrorist. You work within a small cell of operatives; you are continually concerned about security; and you are about to launch a mission designed to bring unprecedented death and destruction to the world's most powerful country. The last thing you would do would be to meet with a foreign official—especially one from a country whose “diplomats” are presumably under close surveillance—unless the meeting were critical to your mission. In light of the otherwise sound “tradecraft” demonstrated by Atta and his confederates in the run-up to September 11, Atta would never have met with an Iraqi intelligence officer unless the Iraqi had been in some way in on the operation.

U.S. intelligence officials have responded to reports of this meeting (and others between Atta and Iraqi intelligence operatives) by denying that they provide a smoking gun tying Iraq to the attacks of September 11. That might be true by the standards of a court of law, but the United States is now engaged not in legal

wrangling but in a deadly game of espionage and terrorism. In the world where we now operate, the Prague meeting is about as clear and convincing as evidence gets—especially since our intelligence service apparently has no agents-in-place of its own to tell us what was in fact going on.

This much, however, is beyond dispute: Regardless of the differences between their visions for the Middle East, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden share an overriding objective—to expel the United States from the Middle East. Alliances have been built on less.

And there is evidence of an alliance. For example, there are numerous reports that Saddam's henchmen were reaching out to bin Laden as early as the early 1990s, when he was still operating out of Sudan and Iraq was using Khartoum as a base for its own intelligence operations after the Gulf War. We also know that high-ranking Iraqi intelligence officials have made their way to Afghanistan in recent years to meet with bin Laden and the leadership of al Qaeda. There are Iraqi defectors who claim to have seen radical Muslims at a special terrorist training site in Iraq where trainees learn, among other things, to hijack airplanes. None of this should be a surprise. Iraq can offer bin Laden money and technical expertise, and in exchange al Qaeda can provide the manpower to strike at the United States without exposing Baghdad's hand.

Then there is the matter of the refined anthrax that was used against American Media in Florida and against Congress in the letter sent to Senator Tom Daschle's office. (Both attacks, by the way, came from places visited by Mohammed Atta, New Jersey and Florida.) As Ambassador

Richard Butler, former head of the United Nations weapons-inspection effort for Iraq after the Gulf War, has said, “I don't believe that the terrorist groups —al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden—could themselves make anthrax” of this quality. Iraq could. Since the defection of Hussein Kamil, Saddam Hussein's son-in-law, in 1995, we have known that Iraq retains a large biological weapons program. We know it has stockpiled mass quantities of anthrax and has worked hard to make it as potent a weapon of terror as possible.

That Iraq would have a hand in the September 11 attacks or the subsequent anthrax onslaught or both should come as no surprise. Since 1991, Saddam has been at war with the United States, and we with him. The Iraqi dictator has made it known time and again that the “mother of all battles” continues. And, like all tyrants of his maniacal stripe, he seeks not simply to hold onto power but to claim a place history. As a result, Saddam will never relent until he has had his revenge and driven the United States from the Persian Gulf.

Every so often, we are reminded that the war continues, when Iraq attempts to shoot down an American or British fighter flying over the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq and we in turn bomb an Iraqi air-defense site. If this were all the war amounted to, one could argue that containing Saddam within Iraq sufficed for our strategic purposes. But it's not. In 1993, Saddam ordered his intelligence services to assassinate former President Bush on his trip to Kuwait. Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that Iraq had a hand in the first World Trade Center bombing back in 1993. The mastermind behind the plot was linked to Iraq (via a passport and other details), and a second key figure in the bombing fled soon afterwards to Iraq. Although the Clinton administration ignored the links to Iraq and refused to follow them up, Jim Fox, the FBI's head agent in New York at the time, was convinced of Iraq's involvement. And, finally, we know that Saddam's

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Iraq continues to pursue development of weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical, and biological—believing that these are the ultimate keys to overcoming America’s military dominance in the region.

In short, Iraq is both equipped with dangerous weapons and out to get the United States. If we have learned one lesson from bin Laden, it is that when someone says he is at war with you, and he has the tools to cause you significant harm, it’s no longer enough to say you are watching him carefully. The potential costs of leaving Saddam and his regime in place are simply too high.

This conclusion of course is not shared on all sides. Some still insist that we can contain Iraq, just as we contained the Soviet Union for more than four decades. After all, the Soviet Union posed a far greater threat than Iraq today. But this assumes that containment was our preferred strategic policy during the Cold War. It wasn’t. Containment was born of necessity—initially, a lack of conventional forces capable of defeating the Red Army in the drawdown following World War II, and subsequently, the threat of the Soviet Union’s own nuclear weapons. If we don’t have to adopt a policy of containment, we shouldn’t.

Moreover, if all we do is contain Saddam’s Iraq, it is a virtual certainty that Baghdad will soon have nuclear weapons. (German intelligence believes that day may come within three years.) The question any serious statesman must ask himself is how Saddam, once nuclear-armed, is likely to behave. Will he at that point think we have the stomach to play the game of nuclear deterrence on behalf of our allies in the region, if deterring him could cost us our own massive casualties? It’s a risk no one should want to take.

Right now of course the major stumbling block to taking on Iraq in this war, we are told, is the absence of support from our coalition partners for such a course. But that’s because they have their doubts, with some justification, that we would be serious about finishing off Saddam. The fact

is, the old Persian Gulf coalition began to fall apart around the time the Clinton administration failed to defend the CIA-supported Iraqi opposition from an attack by Saddam’s forces in 1996. From that day forward, it was clear that the United States was not really serious, and every state was out for itself. If Washington shows that it intends to get rid of Saddam, the allies who matter will be with us.

There is no question that Iraq has been involved in terrorism in the past; and there is more evidence that it has engaged in terrorism against the United States than many in Washington are willing to admit. But the far more important justification for extending the war on terrorism to toppling Saddam’s regime is the terrorist threat he will pose in the near future when his efforts to acquire still deadlier weapons come to fruition. The present war provides President Bush with the opportunity to prevent this from happening. But it is an opportunity that will not last for long. If two or three years from now Saddam is still in power, the war on terrorism will have failed. ♦