



Not What They Supposed. The terror connection missed by the Clintonistas

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Stephen F. Hayes

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Four months after the start of the Iraq war, two former senior Clinton administration national security officials took to the pages of the *New York Times* to demand accountability for the Bush administration's claims about Iraq and terrorism. Or, as they put it in their opening sentence, "Iraq's supposed links to terrorists."

Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon wrote that the Bush administration's assertions about Iraqi support for terrorism were "suspect" and demanded scrutiny. One sure way to know the truth about Iraq and terrorism, they argued, was to consult the mountain of evidence the regime left behind as its leaders fled in front of American forces. "Military and intelligence officials need only comb through the files of Iraq's intelli-

gence agency and a handful of other government ministries," and we would have our answers.

Well, we have our answers. They came in the 1,600-page Pentagon study released on March 13 and entitled *Iraqi Perspectives Project, Saddam and Terrorism: Emerging Insights from Captured Iraqi Documents*, produced after a review of some 600,000 documents unearthed in postwar Iraq. And it is a devastating indictment of the U.S. intelligence community's analysis of Iraq, the Clinton administration's counterterrorism policy, and the arguments of anyone who would use the word "supposed" to describe Iraq's links to terrorists.

A thorough examination of those flawed analyses and the policies that resulted from them is as important now as it was when Benjamin and Simon called for it in the summer of 2003. "This is not only a question of political accountability--it also bears on our nation's fundamental approach to security," they wrote. On that, at least, they were right.

Benjamin laid out his views in the 2003 article he coauthored with Simon and in another one he wrote by himself in the fall of 2002, also published in the *New York Times*. The Clinton administration itself was of two minds on Iraqi support for terrorism. Sometimes Clinton officials argued that Iraq and al Qaeda were in league, as they did in justifying U.S. airstrikes on the al Shifa pharmaceutical plant in August 1998 and in issuing a formal indictment of Osama bin Laden. But since George W. Bush took office, and particularly since 9/11, former Clinton officials have largely disowned these claims, pretending that they never made such arguments and lashing out at anyone who reminded them that they did.

There are few more succinct distillations of the Clinton administration's view of Iraq and terrorism than these two articles. It will take years before we understand the full scope of Saddam Hussein's support for terrorism and the U.S. government's response to it under Bill Clinton. For the time being, it is useful to contrast the views offered by these top Clinton administration national security officials with the findings of the military historians who au-

thored the Iraqi Perspectives Project (IPP) report, as well as with the actual words of the former Iraqi regime.

"Attacking Iraq would not be a continuation of the war against terror but a deviation from it." Benjamin, September 30, 2002

"The Iraqi Perspectives Project (IPP) review of captured Iraqi documents uncovered strong evidence that links the regime of Saddam Hussein to regional and global terrorism."

IPP report, page ES-1

"From 1991 through 2003, the Saddam regime regarded inspiring, sponsoring, directing, and executing acts of terrorism as an element of state power."

IPP report, page ES-2

Iraqi "documents show Saddam's terror organizations could be deadly. They were willing to target not only Western interests but also to directly attack Americans."

IPP report, page 32

"Iraq and Al Qaeda are not obvious allies. In fact, they are natural enemies. A central tenet of Al Qaeda's jihadist ideology is that secular Muslim rulers and their regimes have oppressed the believers and plunged Islam into a historic crisis." Benjamin, September 30, 2002

"Saddam supported groups that either associated directly with al Qaeda (such as the Egyptian Islamic

Jihad, led at one time by bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri) or that generally shared al Qaeda's stated goals and objectives."

IPP report, page 42

"During the Persian Gulf war, Omar Abdel Rahman, the radical sheik now imprisoned in the United States, summed up the Islamist view when he was asked what the punishment should be for those who supported the United States in the conflict. He answered, 'Both those who are against and the ones who are with Iraq should be killed.'" Benjamin, September 30, 2002

A memorandum "drafted in Saddam's office... refers to an agreement with Islamic terrorists to conduct operations against the Egyptian regime during the first Gulf War and for continued financial support for the terrorists after hostilities ended...This document appears to refer to the Egyptian Islamic Group [EIG]. EIG's spiritual leader, Sheikh [Omar Abdel] Rahman, is in prison for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. The group's most recent terrorist attack was the 1997 massacre of fifty-eight tourists in Luxor, Egypt."

IPP report, pages 16 and 51

"There has been agreement since December 24, 1990, with the representative of the Islamic Group organization in Egypt on a plan to move against the Egyptian regime by carrying out commando operations provided that we guarantee them financing and training and

provide them with the requirements in accordance with the honorable order of the President [Saddam Hussein] which calls for carrying out commando operations against hostile alliance governments."

Excerpt from an Iraqi Intelligence document dated March 18, 1993, describing terrorist organizations receiving support from Iraq, IPP report, page 16

"Like other Middle Eastern rulers, Saddam Hussein has long recognized that Al Qaeda and like-minded Islamists represent a threat to his regime. Consequently, he has shown no interest in working with them against their common enemy, the United States. This was the understanding of American intelligence in the 1990's." Benjamin, September 30, 2002

"Captured documents reveal that the [Iraqi] regime was willing to co-opt or support organizations it knew to be part of al Qaeda--as long as that organization's near-term goals supported Saddam's long-term vision."

IPP report, page 34

"As members of the National Security Council staff from 1994 to 1999, we closely examined nearly a decade's worth of intelligence and we became convinced, like many of our colleagues in the intelligence community, that the religious radicals of Al Qaeda and the secularists of Baathist Iraq simply did not trust one another or share sufficiently compelling interests to

work together." Benjamin and Simon, July 20, 2003

"In a meeting in the Sudan we agreed to renew our relations with the Islamic Jihad Organization in Egypt. Our information on the group is as follows: It was established in 1979. Its goal is to apply the Islamic shari'a law and establish Islamic rule. It is considered one of the most brutal Egyptian organizations. It carried out numerous successful operations, including the assassination of [Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat. We have previously met with the organization's representative and we agreed on a plan to carry out commando operations against the Egyptian regime."

Excerpt the Iraqi Intelligence document dated March 18, 1993, IPP report, page 14

"American policy must recognize this clear division between the old state-sponsored terrorism, which we have shown we can deter, and the new, religiously motivated attacks." Benjamin and Simon, July 2003

"Saddam's interest in, and support for, non-Iraqi non-state actors was spread across a wide variety of revolutionary, liberation, nationalist, and Islamic terrorist organizations. For years, Saddam maintained training camps for foreign 'fighters' drawn from these diverse groups."
IPP report, page 42

"Two movements, one pan-Arab and the other pan-Islamic, were seeking and developing supporters from the same demographic pool.

Captured documents reveal that later IIS activities went beyond just maintaining contact [with Islamist terrorists]... [T]he Iraqi [General Military Intelligence Directorate] was training Sudanese fighters inside Iraq."

IPP report, page 17

There are numerous other examples of these mistaken assumptions. If the consensus view of the U.S. government throughout the 1990s was, as Benjamin claimed, that Saddam Hussein had little interest in terrorism and no real links to al Qaeda and like-minded jihadists, we now know that consensus was wrong.

Benjamin and Simon were correct that the review of Iraqi documents could not only shape "our nation's fundamental approach to security," but also provide a measure of "political accountability," in this case for those who wrote off Iraq's "supposed" links to terrorists.

Military and intelligence officials have begun the process that these former senior Clinton administration counterterrorism officials demanded five years ago. And after combing through the files of Iraq's military and intelligence bureaucracies they have presented "strong evidence that links the regime of Saddam Hussein to regional and global terrorism," including al Qaeda and its affiliates.

Back in 2003, Benjamin and Simon wrote that the Iraq war was sold to the American people "as Phase II in the war on terror that began after

the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. But was there ever a credible basis for carrying that battle to Iraq?"

We have our answer.