

Perfect Allies? The Case of Iraq and Al Qaeda

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Four years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, many scholars and policy makers concluded that an alliance between Iraq and al Qaeda did not exist. Yet the absence of this alliance raises a puzzle: Given their mutual interest in opposing U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, why wasn't there an alliance between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden? In this essay, we develop an explanation for why Iraq and al Qaeda did not ally using previous scholarly work on bargaining and alliances. Our explanation concludes that Iraq and al Qaeda failed to form an alliance due to mutual fears of opportunism and the problem of credible commitment. We conclude by presenting evidence for our explanation and offering a policy prescription for governments facing threats of state sponsored terrorism.

Keywords: terrorism, alliances, state sponsorship

On March 17, 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush stated that unless Iraqi President Saddam Hussein left power, the United States would engage in a pre-emptive military strike against Iraq.¹ The argument for military action was that Iraq maintained a program geared at producing weapons of mass destruction, which could eventually be shared with terrorist groups such as al Qaeda. With the memory of al Qaeda's attacks on New York and Washington still fresh, fear of such an alliance between Saddam and bin Laden became a key justification for the war against Iraq.² Indeed, the Bush administration repeatedly made the case that cooperation between al Qaeda and Iraq had already begun. According to U.S. Vice-President Richard Cheney, "there is a grave danger that al Qaeda or other terrorists will join with outlaw regimes...to attack the United States."³ For the Bush administration, the possibility of an alliance between Saddam and bin Laden was simply too dangerous to accept.

Yet four years after the conclusion of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), many of the justifications for the war have proven unfounded. Contrary to the expectations of the Bush administration, no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were found, and little evidence of a functioning WMD program was

¹George W. Bush. "President Says Saddam Must Leave Iraq Within 48 Hours" March 17, 2003.

²Speech by George W. Bush January 28, 2003, "State of the Union Address"; Speech by Colin Powell. February 5, 2003, "Address to the UN Security Council."

³Speech by Richard Cheney. December 2, 2002. Adams Mark Hotel, Denver, Colorado.

uncovered. Additionally, the credibility of the claim that Saddam and al Qaeda were cooperating rapidly deteriorated. In 2004, the 9/11 Commission reported that there was little evidence of a connection between Iraq and al Qaeda.⁴ Although the report presents evidence suggestive of informal, low-level contacts, it did not appear that a functioning sponsor/client relationship existed. The proof of a connection now appears so suspect that several scholars and policy makers dismiss outright the possibility of an Iraq/al Qaeda alliance.⁵

A common explanation for why there was no apparent Iraq/al Qaeda connection is that there were clear ideological differences between Saddam and bin Laden.⁶ An examination of bin Laden's preaching provides clear evidence about contempt for many of the autocratic Middle Eastern regimes, particularly the Ba'athist government of Iraq.⁷ Bin Laden viewed Saddam with such hostility that he offered to begin a holy war against the Iraqi dictator following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.⁸ Indeed, the evidence suggests that contrary to seeing Saddam as a potential ally, bin Laden viewed Saddam as an obstacle to his dream of an Islamic caliphate.⁹ The disparity in the ideologies of Saddam and bin Laden raises the question: if the two sides were so ideologically different, how could the two parties agree on something as critical as a military alliance?

Yet history demonstrates that, while infrequent, ideological opposites do sometimes form alliances. Perhaps the best and most common cited example of cooperation between ideological opposites may be the alliance of the capitalist United States and United Kingdom with the Communist Soviet Union during World War II to defeat Nazi Germany. Clearly, given the reluctance of the Soviet Union to engage in security cooperation prior to Germany's attack, this appeared to be an alliance of convenience. However, an alliance did indeed form, despite the presence of large ideological differences. Similarly in World War II, Adolph Hitler formed his own alliance of convenience with Imperial Japan, despite the former's claims of the inferiority of non-Aryan races. Although alliances between ideological opposites appear rare in international relations, we see from these cases that it is possible. If we extend the examination to conflicts involving nonstate actors, we see even greater instances of cooperation among ideological opposites. In one of the more bizarre cases, the United States publicly provided assistance to various parts of the Mujahedeen in their campaign against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan despite the fact that many of these groups were overtly anti-American.¹⁰ A similar case can be found in the alliance between Joseph Savimbi's United Front for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and apartheid South Africa. Savimbi claimed that UNITA was fighting against oppression, yet he tied himself to the government most associated with the repression of indigenous Africans. Although there did appear to be an obvious clash in ideology, both Savimbi and South Africa developed extensive security ties during the Angolan Civil War.¹¹

These examples raise the question: do ideological differences fully account for the lack of an alliance between Iraq and al Qaeda? The historical record raises some questions regarding the completeness of this explanation. If the capitalist

⁴The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004:334).

⁵While most scholars agree with this claim, there are a few exceptions, such as Hayes (2004). For a discussion of why the link was dismissed, please see Pincus and Milbank (2004).

⁶Goldberg (2003).

⁷Nakhoul (2003).

⁸Bergen (2001, 2006).

⁹Coll (2004:222-223).

¹⁰Coll (2004:63-70, 149-176).

¹¹Byman, Chalk, Hoffman, Rosenau, and Brannan (2001:110).

United States, imperialist Britain, and Communist Soviet Union could overcome their differences in World War II to fight a common enemy in a time of conflict, why could not bin Laden and Saddam? If Adolph Hitler was capable of allying with an “inferior nation,” why could not bin Laden ally with an infidel? In all of the aforementioned cases, ideological opposites were willing to cooperate to oppose a common threat or enemy. The United States was clearly such an enemy for both al Qaeda and Iraq. For bin Laden, the stated goal of al Qaeda was to drive the U.S. from the Middle East. For Saddam, the American presence in the Middle East represented both a violation of his national sovereignty and a constraint on his regional power. For both of these parties, the removal of the United States would have represented an improvement over the status quo. Given this reasoning, the two sides did appear to have incentives to cooperate militarily, despite their clear lack of affinity.

Yet, from the available evidence, we are left with the observation that an alliance between Iraq and al Qaeda did not form. However, by observing these historical cases, it is unclear if ideological differences are sufficient to prevent an alliance from forming. In this study, we present an alternative explanation for the lack of a significant Iraq/al Qaeda relationship. We argue that this alliance failed to materialize not due to incompatible interests, but due to the problem of credible commitment.¹² Although both Saddam and bin Laden may have been better off with an alliance, neither side was able to cooperate due to the inability of both sides to trust each other. In the following section, we present an overview of the alliance literature, followed by an explanation of state sponsorship of terrorism. We then apply our explanation to the case of Iraq and al Qaeda to demonstrate why this alliance did not form, despite the potential for gain on both sides. We conclude by outlining policy prescriptions for states facing the threat of state supported terrorism.

State Sponsorship: A Joint Production Economy

To begin an analysis of state sponsorship of terrorism, it is first necessary to define what we mean by the term “sponsorship.” We conceive of state sponsorship as a type of alliance between a state and a terrorist group. Previous literature in international relations defines an alliance as “a formal agreement among independent states to cooperate militarily in the face of potential or realized military conflict.”¹³ As we are focusing on cooperation involving nonstate actors, it is necessary to loosen the definition to include various types of security partnerships. For the purposes of this article, our working definition of alliances is “a heterogeneous category of cooperative security agreements that may have differing effects on the probability of conflict.” This definition is based on previous work by Lake, who envisions the level of military cooperation as a continuum of security relationships.¹⁴

Using Lake’s conceptualization, we can think of state sponsorship as the joint production of offensive military capability. For example, let us assume that two goods are needed to conduct a terrorist campaign: fighters and weapons. The leaders of a terrorist group may be better equipped to recruit foot soldiers than to produce weapons. Similarly, a sponsor state may be effective at manufacturing weapons, but might be ineffective at recruiting.¹⁵ While both goods are

¹²Fearon (1995), Leeds (1999).

¹³Leeds (2005).

¹⁴Lake (1999).

¹⁵This is by no means universally true. It is entirely conceivable that some sponsors are better at recruiting, while some terrorist movements are better at making weapons. The designation is used only for illustrative purposes.

needed, neither the terrorists nor the sponsor have infinite resources to produce both. Thus, if the group and the sponsor act as a joint production economy, the two can produce more fighters and more weapons than either would be able to acting independently. This is the logic of free trade and comparative advantage. By specializing in what one side can produce most efficiently, more goods are produced for all.¹⁶ With more terrorists and more weapons, sponsorship produces greater power to extract concessions from target states.

In studies of alliances in international relations, scholars observe such joint production economies in asymmetric alliances.¹⁷ While stronger powers provide military security, weaker powers grant the stronger power some degree of control over their foreign-policy decisions. This trade is referred to as the security/autonomy tradeoff.¹⁸ The description of the security/autonomy tradeoff closely matches what scholars typically observe in state sponsorship of terrorism. By coordinating policies, terrorists gain security and protection from the sponsor in the form of a base of operations, weapons, and intelligence. The sponsor assumes responsibility for ensuring that the terrorists are protected, as well as sometimes providing intelligence and training. In exchange, sponsors often require some control over the terrorists' operations. As the sponsor is providing the weapons and training, the sponsor may gain some influence over when, where, and what the group chooses to attack.

Although this security agreement yields benefits for both sides, the empirical record demonstrates that alliances between states and terrorist groups can be notoriously unreliable. In many instances, one or both of the participants fail to fulfill their alliance obligations. For example, following Castro's seizure of power in Cuba, many Cubans fled to the United States seeking sanctuary. Once the exiles arrived, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided the exiles with training, weapons, and organization in the hope that they could seize control of Cuba back from Castro. On April 15, 1961, the exiles staged an invasion at the Bay of Pigs. When the exiles became overmatched, they called on their American ally to provide airpower. Given the extensive level of security cooperation, the exiles presumably expected that the United States would send support. However, President Kennedy refused to honor the agreement the CIA had with the exiles and refused to send air support. As a result, the exiles' attempt to dislodge Castro failed.

This case demonstrates the key problem in cooperation between states and terrorists: nothing exists to ensure that both sides will honor the terms of an agreement. As sustaining cooperation is costly, both sides have incentives to shirk on their responsibilities.¹⁹ In cases such as the Bay of Pigs, terrorists risk that the state will break cooperation either when it becomes too costly or when better opportunities arise. However, it is not only the terrorists that put themselves at risk. By supporting terrorism, the sponsor risks creating moral hazard whereby the group becomes more risk acceptant.²⁰ Prior to gaining sponsorship, terrorists may be weak. Yet, after sponsorship, terrorists may become overly aggressive toward their target. To demonstrate, consider the case of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the late 1960s. Following the 1967 war, Israel seized both the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordanian control. After its military defeat, Jordan ordered the PLO to cease its terrorist operations against Israel for fear of provoking another attack. However, as the PLO was

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Morrow (2000).

¹⁸Altfeld (1984), Morgan and Palmer (2005).

¹⁹For a greater discussion of the dilemma involving abandonment and entrapment, please see Snyder (1997).

²⁰Miller (2005).

aware that Jordan would bear the brunt of the costs of conflict, the PLO felt free to continue its terrorist attacks. Until 1970, the PLO's terrorist campaign effectively entrapped Jordan into continuous conflict with Israel. By initially supporting the PLO, Jordan strengthened the group to the point where it could no longer be controlled.

To deal with the problem of credible commitment, interstate alliances frequently develop safeguards, such as public disclosure, integration of military forces, and deployment of tripwire troops.²¹ While each of these actions is costly, these actions signal credibility to alliance partners. For example, in NATO, the United States deployed troops to West Berlin as a signal of its commitment, effectively committing its own military forces to fighting a hypothetical Soviet attack. This action publicly signaled that the United States was committed to defending its NATO partners. However, given the international scorn afforded to state support for nonstate actors, states often cannot publicly deploy troops or sign agreements with terrorist organizations. As these agreements are typically private, it is exceptionally difficult for either the potential sponsor or the terrorist group to engage in a costly signal as a demonstration of commitment. As a result, given the high costs of being "suckered" for both the terrorists and the sponsor, it is not surprising to observe that state sponsorship is a rare phenomenon.

And yet, this lack of credibility does not stop terrorist groups from actively seeking cooperation with states.²² Given that safeguards are absent, one possible explanation is that this behavior demonstrates the irrationality of terrorist groups. However, given the abundant evidence of strategic timing of attacks as well as targeting, this is not a particularly convincing explanation.²³ An alternative explanation is that in the absence of a costly signal, rational terrorist groups examine alternative sources of information to determine the credibility of their alliance partners. In other words, instead of seeking a tying hands signal from a potential sponsor, terrorists must use what information they have to determine if their potential sponsor is either trustworthy or untrustworthy. Similarly, absent a costly signal, potential sponsors must consider if the terrorist group can be trusted. Sponsors have little incentive to enter agreements if they believe that the terrorist group will refuse to take directives. Based on the compatibility of their agendas, and their beliefs regarding each other's trustworthiness, terrorists and states can potentially form sponsorship agreements.²⁴ The key question in predicting state sponsorship is therefore what factors work to increase the trustworthiness of a potential sponsor and a terrorist group. Therefore, to answer our question of why bin Laden and Saddam did not ally, we must examine what factors impeded their abilities to trust each other.

Examining Trust

One of the seminal findings in international relations is that the likelihood of cooperation increases as the prospect for future interaction increases.²⁵ In other words, individuals are more likely to cooperate if there is a long shadow of the future. If we apply this finding from the cooperation literature to our study of state/terrorist cooperation, we develop a key insight as to when these

²¹Lake (1999).

²²According to the data collected by Byman et al. (2001), 77% of insurgencies seek some support from abroad. While some of this support comes from other nonstate actors, implicitly, governments allow this activity to continue by either ignoring it, or refusing to spend the resources needed to stop it.

²³Enders and Sandler (1993), Kydd and Walter (2002).

²⁴Kydd (2005).

²⁵See Axelrod (1984), Kydd (2005).

organizations are able to trust one another. We are also able to see why most instances of state sponsorship end in betrayal by one or both sides. Given that most terrorist groups do not survive for extended periods, the shadow of the future is short, giving both the state and the terrorists incentives to pursue immediate short-term gains at the expense of longer term gains.²⁶ However, if we can establish that both the state and the terrorists believe that they will both continue to interact for extended periods, we should expect that cooperation is more likely to emerge.

Hypothesis 1: The likelihood of cooperation between al Qaeda and Iraq would increase as the durability of both organizations increased.

A second factor identified by the cooperation literature as promoting cooperation is reputation. Although most models of international politics are dyadic, players often infer reputations from their opponent's prior actions with other parties.²⁷ For example, in deciding whether or not to ally with Iraq, bin Laden would certainly consider whether Saddam was credible in prior dealings with other allies. If Saddam previously broke commitments to other allies, Saddam was very likely to be untrustworthy, which would decrease the willingness of bin Laden to seek sponsorship. Similarly, Saddam would observe prior behavior of al Qaeda before committing to an alliance. If al Qaeda had a history of defying former supporters, Iraq would be wary of accepting al Qaeda as a credible partner.

Hypothesis 2: The likelihood of an alliance would increase as the reputations of both al Qaeda and Iraq for trustworthiness increased.

The cooperation literature further establishes that as the "sucker" payoff worsens, cooperation becomes increasingly unlikely.²⁸ If al Qaeda were required to surrender substantial autonomy as part of a sponsorship agreement, it would recognize that the costs of abrogation by Iraq would be severe. Saddam could opportunistically trade information about al Qaeda to the United States, or even worse, repress the group in exchange for U.S. concessions. Recognizing this risk, bin Laden would likely refuse such an agreement. Similarly, if Iraq recognized that al Qaeda was so fanatic that it would not listen to directives, allying with bin Laden could potentially result in a costly conflict with the United States. If Saddam estimated that a U.S. response would be particularly severe, Saddam would be less likely to form the alliance.

Hypothesis 3: The likelihood of an alliance would decrease as the costs of defection by either al Qaeda or Iraq to their partner increased.

In addition to examining the factors that assist in establishing trustworthiness, we must also consider the parties' demand for an alliance. If the cost of opposing the United States alone became increasingly painful, both sides would be more likely to attempt cooperation, even if such cooperation did not appear perfectly credible. To illustrate this hypothesis with an example, let us return to the case of the Cuban exiles. Following the Bay of Pigs incident, the exiles clearly could infer that the United States, and President Kennedy in particular, were not trustworthy. Yet the exiles continued to cooperate with the Kennedy

²⁶See Bapat (2005).

²⁷Kydd 2005.

²⁸Ibid.

administration and the CIA as part of Operation Mongoose.²⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the exiles were again abandoned by the Kennedy administration as part of negotiations during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

This begs the question: if the exiles had past experience that Kennedy was untrustworthy, why did they maintain their alliance with the United States? In cases such as these, the costs to the terrorists for operating independently may outweigh any risks of defection by the sponsor. In this case, if the exiles were to face Castro without any assistance from the United States, the likely outcome would be defeat. Therefore, even if the risk of U.S. opportunism remained high, the price of no cooperation was almost certain repression by Castro. Faced with these choices, the exiles allied with the United States, despite the high priors that the United States would behave opportunistically. For the exiles, the costs associated with status quo were too high to bear without U.S. assistance. As a result, bin Laden might have sought an alliance with Saddam that was less than credible if he faced an increasingly desperate situation. Similarly, in desperation, Saddam might be pushed to ally with bin Laden to compensate for an increasingly difficult conflict with the United States.

Hypothesis 4: The likelihood of an alliance would increase as the costs of the status quo to either al Qaeda or Iraq increased.

The Case of Iraq and al Qaeda

These hypotheses give us the basis to explain and predict the lack of an alliance between Iraq and al Qaeda. To do so, examine the historical record of this case for consistency with our explanation from the end of the first Gulf War to Saddam's capture on December 13, 2003. The first hypothesis predicts that if the potential benefits from an alliance to both Saddam and bin Laden increased, the likelihood of cooperation should also increase. From the historical record, we find a great deal of evidence suggesting that the benefits of mutual cooperation to both leaders would be significant. While Iraq could have provided bin Laden with a safe haven in the heart of the Middle East, bin Laden offered Iraq a vehicle to accomplish Iraqi foreign-policy goals. Saddam's agenda included undermining the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, particularly the ability of the United States to police the no fly zones within Iraq's territory. However, Saddam would never be able to accomplish these tasks with his own conventional forces, given the overwhelming military superiority of the United States. Due to the no fly zones, it was impossible for Saddam to move forces close to the Saudi border without provoking U.S. resistance.

As Saddam could not impose costs on the United States using his own military, an alternative strategy would be to outsource the job to al Qaeda. Al Qaeda would provide Saddam with a tool to increase America's costs for maintaining its containment policy. In addition to harming American forces directly, al Qaeda would increase the cost to the Saudi monarchy of continuing to permit the American presence in the kingdom. By most accounts, the presence of infidel American forces within Saudi Arabia remained unpopular with the Saudi public. Al Qaeda could have easily tapped into these sentiments to improve its recruiting power within the kingdom. This challenge could have compelled the Saudis to modify its pro-American stance. If the potential of a widespread al Qaeda insurgency increased, the Saudi government might even be forced to pressure the United States to ultimately withdraw.

²⁹Prados (1996:194–217).

Like Saddam, bin Laden demonstrated that his willingness to overlook ideological differences with allies, as long as cooperation would further his strategic objectives. It therefore stands to reason that an alliance with Saddam was possible, particularly given the enormous potential gains to al Qaeda from such cooperation. An alliance with Saddam offered potential bases in the heart of the Middle East, funding from the Iraqi regime, and an improvement in al Qaeda's weapons technology. In terms of a basing, support from Iraq would have been of particular importance due to its geopolitically strategic location at the crossway between western Asia and the Middle East. Iraq in many ways represented an ideal base for al Qaeda to spread across the Middle East. Using Iraq, bin Laden's organization could easily infiltrate Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, al Qaeda would gain access to Iraqi military resources to further its campaign against the United States. Even with his personal fortune, bin Laden needed access to additional funding sources, military weapons, and space to set up training camps. Saddam could have provided al Qaeda with each of these critical components. With permission to set up or join camps in Iraq, bin Laden would have secured an additional safety zone. In terms of training, much can be learned from cooperation with different militaries, and bin Laden would have wanted the opportunity to learn as possible from friendly governments willing to provide assistance.

Aftermath of the Gulf War

Yet, as beneficial as this alliance could have been, the hypotheses predict that Iraq's short shadow of the future, the poor reputations of both bin Laden and Saddam, the high costs of being suckered, and the relatively low costs of the current status quo all work to explain the absence of cooperation between al Qaeda and Iraq. We begin by examining Hypothesis 1, relating to the shadow of the future. Shortly after his expulsion from Saudi Arabia, bin Laden faced an organizational crisis. After participating in virulent anti-Saudi activities protesting the U.S. presence in the kingdom, bin Laden was expelled from his home country. Bin Laden fled to Sudan, where he was one of a dozen militant Islamist leaders in operation. While bin Laden distinguished himself as a master in building organizations and working with other movements, he was under constant threat from his competitors. In one instance in 1994, bin Laden survived an assassination attempt. To add to his problems, bin Laden appeared acutely aware that Sudan was an unreliable ally and frequently tested the waters to see if it could trade him to the West for concessions. The assassination attempts, combined with the seizure of his assets by Saudi Arabia in 1994, illustrated that bin Laden was somewhat weak in this period with a short shadow of the future.³⁰

According to the 9/11 report, bin Laden opened the possibility of cooperation with Saddam upon realizing his time in Sudan would soon be ending.³¹ This behavior is consistent with the expectations outlined in Hypothesis 4. Prior to falling under strain, bin Laden had little incentive to seek an alliance with Saddam. Saddam's betrayal of Abu Nidal heavily suggested he was untrustworthy. Consequently, if bin Laden could succeed on his own, he would have no reason to seek an unreliable partner. Yet when bin Laden was facing pressure from Sudan, bin Laden sought out assistance from the Iraqi dictator. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, desperation should have led bin Laden to seek an alliance, even though he believed Saddam to be noncredible. However, according to the

³⁰Kean (Chair) and Hamilton (Vice Chair) (2004:91-93).

³¹Kean (Chair) and Hamilton (Vice Chair) (2004:91-92).

explanation, Saddam would reject such an alliance offer from bin Laden. To begin, although bin Laden was becoming well known among Islamists, he remained one among many. Al Qaeda, as it became known in the late 1990s, had yet to take form.³² Consequently, Saddam would have no reason to believe that al Qaeda would be durable enough to seek long-term gains, and therefore would expect bin Laden to immediately betray him.

Additionally, Saddam's own prospects for future survival were grim at best. After hearing the senior Bush administration's calls for an uprising, the Ba'ath party faced insurgencies from both the Kurds and the Shiite minorities.³³ While the United States did not intervene on behalf of the rebels, the United States imposed two no fly zones over Iraq in both the North and the South. Effectively, the no fly zones prevented Saddam from using his full military might against the rebels. This protection allowed the Kurdish rebels to establish a territory with de facto independence from Baghdad. According to the Center for International Development and Conflict Management, the insurrection following the Gulf War left Saddam without control over 25–50% of Iraq's territory.³⁴ In essence, Saddam's Iraq was in a condition of state failure.

To add to Saddam's troubles, the senior Bush Administration continued to support the idea of an internal coup to replace the Iraqi leadership. As part of the cease-fire, the U.N. imposed a near total embargo on Iraqi goods, allowing only for trade in food and medicine. These sanctions were crippling in that they effectively stopped all Iraqi economic growth, resulting in shortages. By 2000, the Iraqi economy began to contract. In addition to the economic pressure, the United States repeatedly exerted military force to keep Saddam contained, initiating six Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) from 1991–1998 against Iraq.³⁵ In one of these instances, new President Bill Clinton fired cruise missiles at Saddam's palaces in retaliation for Saddam's alleged terrorist plot to assassinate former President Bush. Judging by U.S. hostility, Saddam had to be quite aware of his very short shadow of the future. The Iraqi leader could certainly see that the United States had the forces and the resolve to destroy his regime. Based on the reaction of the United States to the Bush assassination plot, Saddam would have also realized that support for terrorism would result in punitive consequences. Therefore, although Saddam was clearly willing to support terrorist movements, the evidence indicates that Saddam did not support anti-American movements.³⁶ Tapes released in February 2006 of meetings between Saddam and his leadership during the mid-1990s reveals that the Iraqi dictator was indeed concerned about the possibility that the United States would attack if Iraq allied itself with terrorists. In one of the tapes, Saddam stated, "Terrorism is coming. I told the Americans and I told the British as well...that in the future there will be terrorism with weapons of mass destruction." However, Saddam added, "This is coming, but this story is not coming from Iraq."³⁷ Saddam appears to have been convinced that a terrorist attack like 9/11 would happen to the United States, but the transcript strongly suggests that he wanted no hand in it. It appears that Saddam would be unwilling to support a group like al Qaeda due to the devastating consequences of losing control of the group.

³²Ibid. 88.

³³Byman et al. (2001:27).

³⁴Esty, Goldstone, Robert Gurr, Harff, Surko, Unger, and Chen (1998).

³⁵Ghosn, Palmer, and Bremer (2004). Narratives Available at <http://www.correlatesofwar.org/>.

³⁶Byman et al. (2001:110–116).

³⁷Both quotes from: Ross (2006). Available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/Investigation/story?id=1616996>.

1996 to 2001

After relocating to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, al Qaeda began to grow in power.³⁸ While previously facing internal competition and pressure from the Sudanese government, Mullah Omar allowed bin Laden to operate in a fairly autonomous manner. In exchange for military support and monetary compensation, bin Laden was given a free hand to build his organization. In 1996, bin Laden issued a *fatwa* against the United States, publicly declaring his intentions to wage war against American forces until they left the Arabian Peninsula. In 1998, al Qaeda followed through on bin Laden's threat by successfully attacking U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The embassy attacks prompted a retaliatory attack using cruise missiles by the Clinton administration. However, instead of damaging bin Laden, the cruise missile attacks only seemed to elevate his popularity. According to the State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, bin Laden's organization grew from an estimated several thousand in 1997 to an estimated several hundred thousand in 1998,³⁹ following the attack. The evidence suggests that bin Laden's shadow of the future was lengthening.

On the other hand, Saddam's situation continued to deteriorate. In 1997, Saddam continued to challenge U.S. air supremacy in the no fly zones, as well as refuse to allow American U.N. weapons inspectors to search sites for suspected arms. On November 13, 1997, Iraq announced that it would expel the U.N. weapons inspectors from its country, only to allow them to return 10 days later. The pattern continued into January 1998, when Saddam again announced that it would expel the weapons inspectors if U.N. sanctions were not lifted. In response to Saddam's defiance, on October 31, 1998, the Clinton administration passed the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, which called for the United States to support dissident elements within Iraq in an effort to destabilize the regime. This act represented a move in U.S. policy from containment to a push for regime change. Further, the United States again threatened to use military force if Saddam continued to refuse weapons inspections. Again, Saddam capitulated, only to violate the terms days later. On November 16, the United States commenced Operation Desert Fox—a massive air campaign intended to degrade Iraq's ability to produce weapons of mass destruction. Unlike previous MIDs, however, conflict became continuous from 1998–2001. On almost a daily basis, the United States would bomb Iraqi targets within the no fly zones, contributing to further troubles for Saddam's regime.

After observing the increase in hostility from the United States, reports indicate that officials from Iraq met with bin Laden sometime in 1999.⁴⁰ At the meeting, both sides appeared friendly and discussed their mutual hatred for the United States and its policies. However, according to the 9/11 Commission Report, there was no evidence of cooperation as a result of these meetings. Unlike the previous period, bin Laden was now in a position of strength. After surviving the initial U.S. attack, bin Laden's organization was seemingly growing in power. He no longer needed Iraqi support to sustain himself as a viable organization. Consequently, bin Laden became much more concerned with issues related to Saddam's credibility. The evidence suggests that bin Laden would not agree to surrender significant autonomy to Iraq, namely because of his severe concerns about Saddam's credibility as an alliance partner. According

³⁸Kean (Chair) and Hamilton (Vice Chair) (2004:98).

³⁹U.S. State Department. *Patterns of Global Terrorism & Country Reports on Terrorism*. 1995–2005. Estimate from *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, Available at http://www.state.gov/www/global/terrorism/annual_reports.html. *Country Reports on Terrorism* available at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/>.

⁴⁰Kean (Chair) and Hamilton (Vice Chair) (2004:97).

to “two of the highest-ranking leaders of al Qaeda in American custody,” Abu Zubaydah and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, bin Laden “vetoed [an alliance with Saddam Hussein] because he did not want to be beholden to Mr. Hussein.”⁴¹ This detainee report suggests that bin Laden would not accept cooperation not because of Saddam’s political ideology, but rather his history of breaking commitments. Bin Laden did not trust that Saddam would remain a faithful ally and resist Western pressure to abandon the movement. According to Daniel Benjamin’s and Steven Simon’s analysis of over 10 years of intelligence, they “became convinced...that the religious radicals of al Qaeda and the secularists of Ba’athist Iraq simply did not trust one another....”⁴² Note that Benjamin and Simon identify the critical barrier to cooperation as a lack of trust on both sides, not a difference of ideologies.

The historical record further suggests that bin Laden was concerned about the reliability of his potential sponsors. This can be seen by examining bin Laden’s correspondence with Mullah Omar prior to his relocation to Afghanistan. Before leaving Sudan, bin Laden stated in a letter to Mullah Omar, “I want to come to your areas, but I need a promise from you that you are going to protect me, you will never surrender me.”⁴³ This demonstrates bin Laden was considering the credibility of Mullah Omar prior to relocating. If this were the case, bin Laden’s observations of Saddam’s previous history would have told him that Saddam would betray anyone to further his own interests and preserve his regime, as he had with Abu Nidal in 1983. If Saddam sold out an Iraqi-sponsored terrorist in exchange for Western concessions once, what would make bin Laden think that he would not do so again? Facing a potential American attack, Saddam could simply offer to round up al Qaeda leaders and trade them to save himself. Unlike the Taliban’s Mullah Omar, who publicly stated that if Afghanistan was “destroyed in trying to protect Mr. bin Laden, I am willing for this sacrifice,” in 2001, Saddam’s “survival in power...is his highest priority.”⁴⁴ Ultimately, bin Laden had to have known that “[Saddam’s] only loyalty is to Saddam Hussein” and that when an ally became a liability to his power, he would not keep his word or remain loyal. Given that bin Laden clearly did not appear to trust Saddam, and was gaining a reasonable payoff from the current status quo, bin Laden would have no reason to ally with the Iraqi dictator.

9/11/2001–12/2003

On September 11, 2001, al Qaeda attacks killed approximately 3,000 Americans in the World Trade Center and Pentagon, in addition to the passengers aboard the four hijacked aircraft. Almost immediately, the sentiment in the United States turned toward punishing al Qaeda, who was perceived as being responsible for the attack. For al Qaeda, the attack and the subsequent war in Afghanistan were monumental events. By engaging in the attack, bin Laden signaled that he was one of the only Arab leaders capable of imposing costs on the United States. However, in the subsequent American retaliation, bin Laden nearly lost his life at the battle of Tora Bora. His organization was pushed underground by extensive U.S. pressure. Bin Laden and his deputies fled their host government, presumably across the border into Pakistan. While 9/11 dramatically increased bin Laden’s prestige, the splintering of al Qaeda into numerous cells effectively decreased his control over his organization.

⁴¹Risen (1999).

⁴²Benjamin and Simon (2003).

⁴³Bergen (2006:164).

⁴⁴Post (2004:210–239).

For Saddam, 9/11 was a clear source of information about bin Laden and al Qaeda. From his previous overtures to bin Laden, it appears that Saddam worried that such a terrorist group would make him a target for a U.S. military attack. In particular, Saddam was concerned that if he provided shelter to al Qaeda, and al Qaeda engaged in a massive attack, he would be inviting the U.S. to destroy his regime. His observations following 9/11 confirmed those beliefs. The Bush administration's invasion of Afghanistan sent a clear signal of how the United States would respond to any international terrorist attack. As the al Qaeda operatives attacked the United States while the organization was located within Afghanistan, the Taliban was held responsible and drawn into war with the United States. Saddam could observe that despite the continuous attempts by high-ranking Taliban officials to constrain bin Laden, he refused to tone down his virulent rhetoric. Even direct appeals for moderation from bin Laden's ideological ally Mullah Omar proved fruitless.⁴⁵ If Mullah Omar could not control bin Laden, it was highly unlikely that bin Laden would follow Iraqi directives. Saddam did not want to share the Taliban's fate. As Saddam realized that cooperation with bin Laden's organization would eventually insure such a course of events, an alliance was not an attractive option.

This highlights a key reason why Saddam may have had little reason to ally with al Qaeda. For all of his rhetoric, it is clear from his last ditch efforts to avoid invasion in 2003 and his personal obsession with remaining in power, that Saddam did not want a war with the United States. Yet it is very likely that an al Qaeda operation against the United States following an alliance with the Iraqi regime would have increased the likelihood of such an outcome and would have done so regardless of Saddam's knowledge or complicity in such an attack.⁴⁶ Saddam had reason to believe that any evidence of a connection with al Qaeda could lead to open conflict with the United States, making him deeply suspicious of an al Qaeda presence within his territory. According to a report by the *Los Angeles Times*, Saddam issued a direct order to everyone within his government to have no dealings with al Qaeda.⁴⁷ Additionally, Saddam's behavior in 2003 toward al Qaeda lieutenant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi is rather revealing. Instead of seeking contact with Zarqawi, Saddam attempted to capture the terrorist leader and expressed contempt for bin Laden.⁴⁸ Rather than attempting to cooperate, Saddam was actively trying to destroy al Qaeda's presence within Iraq. Considering that Saddam heard Bush's threat that any nation harboring al Qaeda would face punitive consequences, Saddam's behavior is consistent with the credible commitment explanation.

The evidence in this period is supportive of the conclusion that while potential alliance cooperation was explored, both Saddam and bin Laden exhibited enough distrust of each other to prevent such an alliance from forming. The reputations of both Saddam and bin Laden were consistently poor throughout this period, with an increasing decline in reputation for bin Laden. While al Qaeda eventually stabilized, Iraq was under consistent pressure throughout the entire period, resulting in a shortened shadow of the future. This would provide a disincentive for Saddam to cooperate, and also a disincentive for bin Laden to trust that Saddam would be a credible alliance partner. Additionally, the costs of being defected upon were very high for both Saddam and bin Laden. In the

⁴⁵Bergen (2006:161, 210, 236).

⁴⁶Woodward (2002).

⁴⁷Miller (2006). Available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-na-carney22nov22,1,1878850.story?coll=la-headlines-politics&ctrack=1&cset=true>.

⁴⁸Weisman (2006). Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/08/AR2006090800777.html>.

latter stages, moral hazard by al Qaeda could easily provoke a U.S. invasion. Given that this was a possibility, bin Laden would have to expect that Saddam would turn on al Qaeda to save himself from an American attack. Finally, if we consider the value to both sides for opposing the United States alone, we see that while al Qaeda was on the run, it had a safe haven in the tribal regions of Waziristan. For Saddam, while the United States was putting enormous pressure on his regime, the Iraqi dictator was still holding onto power, and appeared to believe that Russia and China would block any action against him in the U.N. Security Council. As both sides appeared to have low positive payoffs for the status quo, and forming an alliance was especially risky given the obvious distrust on both sides, the alliance between Saddam and bin Laden failed to materialize.

Conclusion

Following 9/11, an alliance between al Qaeda and Iraq appeared to represent a nightmarish scenario. Much of the fear of an alliance between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein stemmed from the belief that a common enemy could unite the two ideological opposites. Yet despite their common animosity toward the United States, a key aspect that is overlooked is the credibility of such an alliance commitment. Given that the two parties had some degree of competing interests, it is reasonable to believe that considerable tension would have existed in an alliance between them. And it is that tension that might ultimately have caused one of the parties to behave opportunistically to further their own agenda. For Saddam, trading al Qaeda to the United States might result in the removal of sanctions and vastly enhanced prestige in the region. It would have prevented the radical restructuring of Middle Eastern politics favored by al Qaeda. On the other hand, pulling Iraq into a war might result in a power vacuum in the Middle East, making it easier for al Qaeda to operate. If it is true that both actors are forward looking and strategic, it stands to reason that both sides could anticipate betrayal by the other. Therefore, given that both sides should have expected betrayal, there would be no reason for either side to risk an alliance.

In March 2003, the United States began OIF in an effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power. U.S. forces quickly destroyed Saddam's conventional army, assuming control over Baghdad on April 9. On May 1, President Bush declared an end to major combat operations. Yet, in the coming months, the United States began facing stubborn resistance from ex-Ba'athist fighters and Fedayeen. U.S. General John Abizaid declared that the United States was facing a "classical insurgency."⁴⁹ The current evidence suggests that in these early stages, the United States was indeed facing a guerrilla war conducted by elements of the ruling Ba'ath party. According to Joe Klein, Saddam and his representatives began coordinating a plan to build a resistance network in Iraq in April 2003.⁵⁰ In addition to the members of the Ba'ath party, this network eventually grew to include Jihadists entering Iraq to fight the United States. Many of these Jihadists were openly sympathetic to Osama bin Laden, and many of them identified themselves as al Qaeda fighters. While it certainly cannot be argued that bin Laden or Saddam had direct control over these operations, it is interesting to note that in this early period of the insurgency, the feared alliance seemed to be taking hold. To fight the American enemy, al Qaeda and the Ba'athists were finally cooperating.⁵¹

⁴⁹Thompson (2004). Available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,993973,00.html>.

⁵⁰Klein (2004).

⁵¹Ibid.

It appears that indirectly, the United States created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Prior to OIF, the value of fighting the United States alone was high enough for Saddam to spurn cooperation with al Qaeda. Yet, after being removed from power, Saddam's payoff and ability to fight the United States diminished so rapidly that his Ba'athists appeared forced into an alliance with Jihadists. Like bin Laden in the early 1990s, the Ba'athist realized that the Jihadists were not likely to be trustworthy. Nevertheless, the costs of operating independently were so high that cooperation was a risk worth taking. According to Joe Klein, "the Ba'athists had helped move the suicide bombers into the country...and then provided shelter, support, and coordination for the attacks."⁵² Additionally, former members of the regime joined up with various Jihadist groups, such as Abu Musab al Zarqawi's al Qaeda in Iraq. Although these alliances were made out of necessity, we observe support for the model's final hypothesis: desperation can produce cooperation, even if it appears unreliable.

However, it is important to note that cooperation between the Jihadists and the Ba'athists did not appear to be durable or excessive. Ample evidence suggests that animosity continued to exist between the two sides. Yet the fact that such cooperation materialized, along with the analysis of the pre-war period, yields several policy implications for targets of state support for terrorism. To begin, our study indicates that state sponsorship will often fail to form due to mutual distrust. Given that there is often a short shadow of the future for the sponsor, the terrorists, or both, neither side has any reason to believe that cooperation will be credible. Therefore, if both sides place a reasonable value on the status quo, or opposing the target alone, they will have no reason to form an alliance. The policy implication is that excessive pressure on either a potential sponsor or a terrorist group might push these parties to cooperation, even if they are mutually distrustful. Therefore, for the target, the optimal policy might be to play on the beliefs of distrust between the potential sponsor and the terrorists. For example, targets could signal to the terrorists that should an alliance form, the sponsor would be more than willing to negotiate a side deal with the target and sell out the group. Similarly, targets could foster the belief that should a sponsor ally with a terrorist movement, the group will become so emboldened that it might push the sponsor into open conflict. Creating these beliefs might accomplish the goal of preventing cooperation in that it fosters the distrust that is already present. However, an equally important lesson is that if excessive costs are imposed on a potential sponsor, the state might resort to terrorism when it otherwise would not have. A key lesson from the case of Iraq and al Qaeda is that, despite threats of punishment for allying with terrorists, the actual utilization of force can potentially *induce* cooperation between states and terrorist groups.

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⁵²Ibid, 46.

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