

Iraq, Al-Qaida and the 9/11 Panel:

Panel Shortchanged Topic in Its Report

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The Sept. 11 commission isn't the first authority to say there is "no credible evidence" that Iraq cooperated with al-Qaida on terrorist attacks on the United States. "We've had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved with Sept. 11th," said President Bush almost a year ago, earning fewer headlines than the commission's recent report has.

The commission staff does go slightly further. It also sees no evidence that Iraq and al-Qaida established "a collaborative relationship" of any kind despite reports of various contacts over the years between Iraqi officials and al-Qaida operatives. But what does the commission mean by "collaborative relationship"? Would numerous meetings between Iraqi intelligence officials and al-Qaida not qualify as such a relationship? Would giving al-Qaida members occasional refuge in Iraq not qualify? The commission report doesn't say. Indeed, it devotes just one paragraph in a 12-page history of al-Qaida to discussion of its links to Iraq.

Vice President Cheney and CIA director George Tenet, as well as Clinton administration officials in the 1990s certainly suggested Iraq and al-Qaida established a relationship. A journalist named Stephen Hayes has written a book, *The Connection*, pointing to all sorts of collaborative possibilities.

Richard Minter, a senior fellow at the Brussels-based Centre for the New Europe and a former member of a Sunday Times (of London) investigative team that traced the secret war between the Clinton administration and bin Laden, detailed a number of links in a column published in Thursday's New York Post. To mention just a few:

"Abdul Rahman Yasin, a member of the al-Qaida cell that detonated the 1993 World Trade Center bomb, fled to Iraq. U.S. forces recently discovered a cache of documents in Tikrit, Saddam's hometown, that show that Iraq gave Yasin both a home and a salary."

"Bin Laden met eight times with officers of Iraq's Special Security Organization . . . and with Saddam's external intelligence service, according to intelligence made public by Secretary of State Colin Powell" in 2003.

"Bin Laden met the director of the Iraqi mukhabarat [secret police] in 1996 in Khartoum, according to Powell."

"In 1998, Abbas al-Janabi, a longtime aide to Saddam's son Uday, defected to the West . . . he repeatedly told reporters that there was a direct connection between Iraq and al-Qaida."

"Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi oversaw an al-Qaida training camp in Afghanistan. Wounded, he sought medical treatment in Baghdad in May 2002. When he recovered, he restarted a training camp in

northern Iraq."

The independent commission is so cautious, however, that it is unwilling to say even that the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center was an al-Qaida project despite connections between the terrorists and bin Laden, his camps, or his funding networks. The report mentions that "some of the plotters either were or later became associates of bin Laden," but wonders whether he directed them - a remarkably constrained view of what constitutes an al-Qaida operation.

Perhaps commission staffers simply forgot about the Clinton Justice Department indictment of bin Laden in 1998, part of which reads: "In addition, al-Qaida reached an understanding with the government of Iraq that al-Qaida would not work against that government and that on particular projects, specifically including weapons development, al-Qaida would work cooperatively with the Government of Iraq." Sure sounds like a "relationship" to us.

There is no question, finally, that Saddam did help other terrorist groups, provided sanctuary for notorious international terrorists such as Abul Abbas and Abu Nidal, and celebrated the Sept. 11 attacks on America. His overthrow is a victory in the war on terrorism, no matter what the 9/11 commission may be seeking to imply.

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