SWP Comments

Iraq and Terrorism

How Are "Rogue States" and Terrorists Connected?

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Even after U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the UN Security Council on 5 February 2003, doubts remain whether a connection exists between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. However, the public focus on this question largely overlooks the fact that the U.S. government's threat analysis concentrates more on systematic rather than specific links between "rogue states" and terrorists. For the U.S. government, a potential war against Iraq represents an integral component of the international fight against terrorism. In this respect, the Bush administration differs significantly from governments in Europe and the Arab world that differentiate more clearly between the challenges posed by Iraq and international terrorism. These governments fear that a war against Iraq would itself serve as a catalyst for the spread of terrorism and the creation of links between the Iraqi regime and terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. Yet how plausible are these positions? What supports or undermines the thesis that "rogue states" are linked to terrorists?

The assumed connection between Iraq and the war against terrorism is of crucial significance to the U.S. government, because it serves as a major reason for justifying an attack on Iraq not only to the international community but also to the American public. According to a Gallup poll of August 2002, 86 percent of U.S. citizens surveyed believed that Saddam Hussein supports terrorist groups who seek to attack the United States. 53 percent of respondents believed that he was personally involved in the September 11 attacks; this figure climbed to 66 percent in a Pew poll of October 2002. In a Gallup poll of February 2003, 39 percent of respondents were con-vinced that Saddam Hussein maintains direct links to al-Qaeda; an additional 48 percent believed that such ties were at least likely. 86 percent of respondents believed that evidence proving such links would provide the U.S. with legitimate grounds for intervening in Iraq. According to the poll, of all the potential reasons for con-ducting war against Iraq, this was the one that received the highest level of public approval, even more than Iraq's potential possession of weapons of mass destruction.

In order to substantiate its position, the U.S. government has put forward three arguments. While these arguments are frequently intermingled in official state-

ments, they can be distinguished analytically. First, the Bush administration repeatedly emphasizes that the Iraqi regime maintains contacts with al-Qaeda. Second, the administration points out the possibility, in principle, that dictators may provide terrorists with weapons of mass destruction or at least help them to acquire such weapons. Third, the U.S. government argues that there is ultimately no difference between "rogue states" and terrorist groups; they represent two "evils of the same kind" regardless of whether or not they are directly linked. The latter two arguments transcend the concrete case of Iraq and al-Qaeda and point to long-term strategic orientations in U.S. security policy.

The Saddam−al-Qaeda Connection

In the aftermath of September 11, the U.S. government has presented a considerable amount of circumstantial and anecdotal evidence to support its first argument: that the Iraqi regime is allied with al-Qaeda.

▸ Immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. did not rule out the possibility that Saddam Hussein was directly linked to and co-responsible for the operation. The greatest media attention was aroused by the so-called "Prague connection," according to which one of the suicide pilots (Mohammed Atta) had allegedly met with an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague prior to the attacks. In the meantime, this story – propagated in October 2001 by the Czech minister of the interior – has been exposed as hot air. Czech president Vaclav Havel discreetly informed the U.S. government that there was no evidence to prove that such a meeting had occurred (*New York Times*, 22 October 2002). CIA director George Tenet made a similar statement to the U.S. Congress in October 2002.

▸ Since early 2002, reports have been circulating that allege more indirect contacts between Baghdad and al-Qaeda (see, e.g., *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 March 2002). The organization purportedly function-

ing as intermediary is the Kurdish extremist group Ansar al-Islam, whose members are based in several villages near the Iranian border in northern Iraq. This group, which comprises approximately 700 members, is allegedly supported by Saddam Hussein due to its opposition to other Kurdish parties. Ansar al-Islam has reportedly provided al-Qaeda members with instruction in biological and chemical weapons technology. It is also believed that, during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, 120−150 al-Qaeda fighters fled to the Iran-Iraq border region and received shelter in Ansar al-Islam camps (*The Guardian*, 23 August 2002). The U.S. government claims that this latter operation was arranged by Iraqi intelligence agents with the approval of the Baghdad regime. However, all of this information must be viewed with caution, since its primary sources are the Kurdish parties (PUK and KDP) that dominate the largely autonomous region of northern Iraq. These parties are being challenged by Ansar al-Islam and have their own interests in a U.S. invasion of Iraq.

▸ In September 2002, leading U.S. government officials launched a new information campaign. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice declared that the U.S. government possesses "clear evidence" of long-term contacts between Iraqi officials and members of al-Qaeda. Defense Minister Donald Rumsfeld claimed that such contacts have existed for a decade and are reported to have increased since 1998. Both Rice and Rumsfeld accused the Iraqi regime of providing al-Qaeda terrorists with instruction in the use of biological and chemical weapons. In addition, they argued that al-Qaeda members had been granted shelter in Baghdad after the invasion of Afghanistan. In his presentation to the UN Security Council, Secretary of State Colin Powell specified these already familiar accusations by claiming that contacts between Iraqi intelligence

agents and al-Qaeda stretch back to the time when Osama bin Laden was based in Sudan (pre-1996). According to Powell, the Iraqi embassy in Pakistan had later functioned as the primary point of contact between Iraq and al-Qaeda. During this period, in December 2000, Iraq had also offered to train two al-Qaeda members in the use of biological and chemical weapons. Like Rice and Rumsfeld before him, Powell based these claims on statements reportedly made to U.S. authorities by an allegedly high-ranking al-Qaeda terrorist who has been taken into custody.

In his presentation, Powell pointed out an additional potential link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein: the Jordanian-Palestinian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi is alleged to be the former director of a training camp in Afghanistan and a close associate of Osama bin Laden. He is believed to have escaped to Iraq during the U.S. invasion. Powell argued that al-Zarqawi has ties to Ansar al-Islam and was involved in the construction of an al-Qaeda base in northeastern Iraq. In addition, he was reportedly in Baghdad from May-July 2002 to undergo medical treatment. During this period, he is believed to have established a network of approximately two dozen members who moved about freely throughout Baghdad for over eight months, primarily conducting transfers of money and materials. According to Powell, al-Zarqawi coordinated terrorist activities in the Middle East, Western Europe, and Russia from his base in Iraq, and his connections stretch as far as Chechnya and the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. Moreover, his associates reputedly specialize in attacks using poisonous substances. Powell based his statements on information gathered by U.S. and allied intelligence services, despite the apparent fact that these agencies do not interpret the information in an identical manner. For example, the German Federal Intelligence Service is also tracing al-Zarqawi's path, yet it claims that al-Zarqawi has been stationed primarily in Afghanistan, Georgia, and Iran and that his current whereabouts are unknown. It should be noted that al-Zarqawi is considered to be the leader of the terrorist group Al Tawhid, which first gained public attention in Germany when a number of its members were arrested in this country in April 2002. As a result of these arrests, the German Federal Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation against al-Zarqawi.

Ultimately, the American version leaves a number of open questions: Did the Iraqi regime merely tolerate al-Zarqawi's presence, or did it actively support his activities? Why did al-Zarqawi leave Iraq? How secure was this purported "safe haven" for him?

Where does this leave us? The U.S. government's assertions that Saddam Hussein is linked to al-Qaeda are based primarily on suppositions, dubious witness testimonies, and fragmentary intelligence information that ultimately give rise to more questions than answers. Admittedly, it is difficult to prove the existence or non-existence of such cooperation. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that there is still no hard evidence linking Saddam Hussein with al-Qaeda. Western intelligence services are likely to be unanimous in this assessment, even if their governments obviously are not.

Even if contacts have existed or still exist between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda, the nature of such contacts remains unclear. Do they involve informal conversations that allow intelligence agents to find out what terrorists are planning? Do they involve tactical arrangements along the lines of "We'll leave you alone if you leave us alone"? Do they involve concrete forms of support such as transit permission, falsified documents, etc.? Or do they actually involve the formation of a strategic alliance against a common enemy? Even if this latter worst-case scenario were true, it still does not indicate that Iraq would automatically be willing to supply terrorists with biological and chemical weapons.

In any case, this type of weapons prolif-

eration has not occurred in other cases in which the Iraqi government is clearly known to cooperate closely with terrorist groups. It is undisputed that the regime has provided support to a number of primarily secular terrorist groups. These groups include the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), which actively opposes the governing regime in Iran, as well as a number of Palestinian groups that Iraq has supported for decades, including the Abu Nidal Organization and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP). However, in sponsoring these Palestinian terrorist organizations, Iraq is no different from other Arab states that view these groups as legitimate freedom fighters. Saddam Hussein himself has proudly admitted that he provides financial assistance to families of Palestinian suicide bombers, primarily in order to enhance his image in the Arab world.

Although both Iraq and al-Qaeda perceive the United States as an enemy, several factors cast doubt on the likelihood that they cooperate substantially with each other. First, as a secular Arab national leader who formerly enjoyed Western support, Saddam Hussein is a prime example of the "un-Islamic" leaders that al-Qaeda seeks to depose. In 1990-91, Osama bin Laden expressly approved of a military operation against Iraq; however, this operation should ideally have been carried out by "Islamic fighters" rather than U.S. soldiers. Second, it is questionable whether Saddam Hussein would lend support to an organization that (a) had once been openly hostile to him, (b) he cannot really control, and (c) would place him in an extremely perilous position should evidence be found to prove a concrete connection between him and al-Qaeda.

State-sponsored "Catastrophic Terrorism"?

The U.S. government's second argument refers to potential rather than concrete links between Iraq and al-Qaeda. Because Iraq is believed to possess weapons of mass destruction (particularly biological and chemical weapons), and because terrorists are interested in acquiring these weapons, it is claimed that this situation could give rise to an alliance between "rogues." The outcome would be state-sponsored terrorism using weapons of mass destruction, also known as "catastrophic terrorism."

For over a year, this argument has been a central theme in statements made by U.S. officials, beginning with President Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002. In this speech, Bush declared that states such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea (the "axis of evil") might supply weapons to terrorists in order to attack, threaten, or blackmail the United States or its allies. This position clearly transcends the specific problem of Iraq. One can even identify additional states possessing weapons of mass destruction that might be considered unreliable from a U.S. perspective, particularly in the event of a regime change (e.g., Pakistan).

Indeed, no one can completely rule out the danger posed by these states with regard to weapons proliferation. This is particularly true when one considers the fact that, unlike states, terrorists are eager to acquire even small amounts of viruses or weapons that would enable them to produce a devastating psychological impact. Nevertheless, questions arise here as well, because this is not a new eventuality or constellation of actors. In the past, a number of regimes certainly had the capacity to supply terrorists with such substances or weapons. Yet to date there is not a single case in which this type of proliferation is known to have occurred.

There are good reasons for this. First, the risks to a regime that supplies such weapons to third parties are likely to outweigh the potential "benefits." If such a transaction were to be exposed publicly, the regime's very existence would be at risk due to the drastic countermeasures that would almost certainly be implemented by the international community.

Second, this assumption overlooks the ambivalent relationship between sponsoring states and terrorist groups. Ultimately, neither side can trust the other. A fundamental contradiction arises from the fact that sponsoring states are generally interested in maximizing their influence over such groups in order to use them for their own purposes. In contrast, terrorist groups seek to maximize their autonomy and resist the political dependence that derives from state support. If such cooperation actually occurred, the sponsoring regime would lose control over the weapons, because it could not eliminate the possibility that terrorists and criminals would distribute the weapons to other groups that might in turn pose a threat to the regime. In addition, states would risk accidents or disasters on their own territory if stockpiles or laboratories were in the hands of terrorists rather than under the control of state authorities.

Third, this thesis still conforms to the paradigm of state-sponsored terrorism despite the fact that transnational terrorist networks like al-Qaeda now operate largely without state support. Even when it comes to obtaining weapons of mass destruction, terrorists are in no way wholly dependent upon state support, because the materials and technical expertise for biological, chemical, and radiological weapons are available on the black market. Given these circumstances, why would al-Qaeda voluntarily choose to become logistically and technologically dependent upon a particular regime?

Instead, the most serious danger is likely to arise from poorly secured facilities or laboratories, or from individuals (such as scientists or state officials) who are either corrupt or ideologically aligned with terrorists and who are willing to sell their knowledge on the market.

State and Non-state "Rogues" as Analogous Threats?

The third argument does not posit a direct connection between "rogue states" and terrorist organizations but rather subsumes both types of actors under the same category. They represent "kindred spirits." Or in the words of President Bush (in his statement of 26 September 2002): Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda are "both equally bad, and equally as evil, and equally as destructive." The new U.S. National Security Strategy of 20 September 2002 formulates this same idea in a more analytical fashion. According to this document, "rogue states" and terrorists pose an equal threat to world peace because they are unpredictable, they refuse to cooperate, and they seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction. They no longer view these weapons as "weapons of last resort" in accordance with the classic doctrine of deterrence, but rather as "weapons of choice:" "Rogue states and terrorists do not seek to attack us using conventional means [...]. Instead, they rely on acts of terror and, potentially, the use of weapons of mass destruction – weapons that can be easily concealed, delivered covertly, and used without warning." This assessment ultimately provides the basis for the concept of pre-emptive war, in accordance with the formula "the greater the threat, the greater the risk of inaction."

However, this argument ignores significant differences between state and non-state actors which are of crucial importance for the selection of potential countermeasures.

First, "rogue states" are autocratic, strictly hierarchical regimes with a single leader whose authority is buttressed by a security apparatus. These regimes are not afraid to use terror against their own citizens or to conduct wars against their neighbors. Yet historical experience demonstrates that even these dictators can be put under pressure by classic instruments of diplomacy: they can be isolated internationally; they can be controlled through satellite surveillance; sanctions can be directed

against them; and if necessary, military force can be threatened or used against them. And, most importantly, it is possible in principle to negotiate with dictators – this has at least been practiced frequently in the past. In contrast, terrorist networks like al-Qaeda have relatively decentralized and less hierarchical structures that encompass the entire globe, and their command centers and congregation points are difficult to identify and eliminate. Even if their leadership levels were successfully crushed, one could expect portions of these networks to remain intact and active. Moreover, with terrorist networks, it is extremely difficult to identify potential negotiation partners, and it is unclear what the political goals of such negotiations might be. In short, most of the instruments that the international community has at its disposal to deal with "rogue states" are not applicable to terrorist networks. In particular, it is difficult to imagine that one could negotiate agreements, much less arms control measures, with an organization like al-Qaeda.

Second, it is unclear to what extent weapons of mass destruction represent "weapons of choice" for both state and non-state "rogues." This may indeed be true for terrorists, but experience shows that this is not generally the case with dictatorships. These regimes possess weapons of mass destruction primarily for political purposes, i.e., to blackmail or deter other powers, not to use them at the first opportunity that comes along. This is because the use of such weapons presents too great a risk to the regime's existence. However, if a regime is able to quantify this risk, the use of such weapons might be feasible under certain circumstances. It should not be forgotten that Iraq used its chemical weapons against its own Kurdish population and during the Iran-Iraq War, not least because the Baghdad regime did not expect to be punished with sanctions for both these crimes.

Third, the basic hypothesis behind this argument must be called into question:

Do both "rogue states" and terrorists strive equally to acquire weapons of mass destruction? Such a generalized theory is problematic, because both the willingness to possess such weapons as well as the necessary capacity to store and deploy them are likely to vary strongly from case to case. In any case, this premise is not true for most terrorist groups, particularly those that operate primarily at the local level. However, one can at least assume that transnational networks such as al-Qaeda intend to acquire such weapons. For this reason, one should not underestimate the danger posed by the combination of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. In pursuing this objective, however, terrorists confront a number of problems that can be more easily resolved by states and that ultimately limit the attraction of possessing weapons of mass destruction. For example, where should such weapons and materials be stored, and how should they be transported? Under what conditions can they be deployed, and what delivery systems are necessary? What risks are faced by those who carry out the attack? How much panic and destruction would such an attack cause? For this reason, even al-Qaeda confronts the question: Why should resources and energy be spent in an effort to solve these problems when the desired impact – including a high number of casualties – can be achieved using conventional weapons and suicide attacks?

Counter-argument: The Danger of a Self-fulfilling Prophecy?

Wouldn't a war against Iraq actually serve to increase rather than prevent the danger of terrorism? If war occurs, the following scenarios – which are not mutually exclusive – are conceivable:

First: When Saddam Hussein has nothing left to lose, he does exactly what has been insinuated all along – he provides support to terrorist groups and pursues a "scorched earth" policy that, unlike in 1991, is not limited to setting fire to oil fields.

Second: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalates further, leading to the formation of strategic alliances and networks among terrorist groups that up to now have operated independently and harbored certain misgivings against each other (e.g., Hezbollah, Hamas, and al-Qaeda).

Third: The war produces tremendous outrage throughout Muslim societies, resulting in further political destabilization. This would make it easier for Islamist terrorist groups to recruit new members over the medium term, particularly since the war would be perceived as yet another confirmation of al-Qaeda's ideology, according to which the sole objective of such a war would be the oppression of Muslims. For al-Qaeda, an attack on Iraq would represent a further step in the desired escalation of conflict between Western and Muslim societies, in which the enemy – i.e., the United States – is provoked into employing increasingly draconian measures.

Fourth: The international coalition against terror collapses or is at least profoundly weakened. In particular, Arab and Islamic states scale back their anti-terror efforts, thereby reducing worldwide pressure in pursuit of terrorists and creating greater leeway for terrorist activity.

The first two scenarios involve a number of unknowns and are therefore contingent upon other factors in addition to a war on Iraq. In the first scenario, it is unclear whether, under conditions of war, the Iraqi regime would even be capable of supplying weapons to third parties. In the second scenario, much would depend on the behavior of the conflicting parties in the Middle East; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would not necessarily escalate automatically.

In contrast, the third and fourth scenarios are very likely to occur, particularly if a war against Iraq is not conducted by a broad coalition that includes Arab states, and particularly if such a war is not concluded within a few weeks. In other words: the more the war appears to be a unilateral effort conducted by the United States, and the longer the war lasts, the greater the potential will be for mobilizing radical and extremist groups in the region.