

Powell's Al Qaeda-Baghdad link falls apart

By Peter Symonds
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A key element of US Secretary of State Colin Powell's address to the UN Security Council last week was his claim that a "sinister nexus" existed between Baghdad and the Al Qaeda network. The crude attempt to link Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden and his terrorist attacks was aimed at shifting public opinion in the US and internationally, which is increasingly opposed to the Bush administration's war plans.

In the space of just over a week, however, the argument has proven as hollow as all the other pretexts manufactured by Washington to justify a war of aggression against Iraq. All of Powell's so-called evidence has either been strongly questioned by other intelligence agencies and experts or shown to be completely false.

Powell's entire case rested upon the activities of a Jordanian-born Palestinian, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, 36, who fought in Afghanistan as part of the CIA-sponsored Mujaheddin against the Soviet-backed regime in the 1980s. According to Powell, Zarqawi is now linked to Al Qaeda, and, after fleeing from Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban regime, established a terrorist network in Iraq.

To back the allegations, Powell made two main claims. The first was that Zarqawi helped establish "a poison and explosive training camp centre" in a small enclave in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq controlled by an Islamic fundamentalist militia known as Ansar al-Islam. Powell provided an aerial photograph of the "camp" and gave its location as Khurmatal.

It is well known that this area is outside the control of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi army which have been fighting the various Kurdish militias for decades. To make a link, Powell claimed the existence of an agent of Baghdad "at the most senior levels of Ansar al-Islam... who offered safe haven to Al Qaeda". Some members of the Zarqawi network allegedly took up the offer.

Powell's concoction began to unravel as soon as it was made public. The location of the camp proved to be incorrect. As it turned out, Khurmatal was not even under the control of the Ansar al-Islam group. The buildings in the photograph are located at Sargat. Such an elementary factual error from a man who has at his disposal all the sophisticated resources of a vast intelligence network, immediately placed a question mark over the other "facts".

Further doubts were raised by Mullah Krekar, the leader of Ansar al-Islam who lives in exile in Norway. He issued a public statement denying any connection to Al Qaeda and reiterating his group's political hostility to Hussein. "I have never met Zarqawi. I have just read about him in *Newsweek* magazine. Powell has made many mistakes in his speech. He said that our group is connected to Al Qaeda, but we are not. I have evidence that shows the Americans are not telling the truth, and I am willing to show it to them," he told the *Boston Globe*.

Last Saturday the Ansar al-Islam group opened the "poison factory" to a group of Western journalists who found nothing remotely

resembling a chemical factory or military training facility. The group was first taken to neighbouring Khurmatal to show them the camp was not there, and then to Sargat. As Associated Press reporter Borzou Daragahi explained, there was no mistaking the camp's "distinctive polygon-shaped fencing and nearby hills."

The *New York Times* reported: "They found a wholly unimpressive place—a small and largely undeveloped cluster of buildings that appeared to lack substantial industrial capacity. For example, the structures did not have plumbing and had only the limited electricity supplied by a generator. Roughly half the buildings in the compound appeared to have recently been civilian homes, and one contained the sandals of a small child. The remaining buildings were in military or political use, serving as fighters' barracks or as a television and radio station for the Islamic party."

A senior US State Department official made an attempt at damage control. He told the *New York Times* that no matter what the rough conditions at Sargat, Powell's characterisation was correct. "A poison factory is a term of art, and doesn't necessarily mean that people are pumping out thousands of gallons a year," he said. He declared that intelligence experts had watched the compound carefully over time and had corroborating evidence. But he offered no explanation as to why the journalists found absolutely nothing—no chemicals, no equipment, not even a supply of running water.

Last Friday, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) released a detailed paper undercutting both the significance of the Ansar al-Islam group and Powell's claims of its links to Al Qaeda and Baghdad. The paper entitled "Radical Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan: the Mouse that roared?" concluded that the Bush administration's focus on Anwar al-Islam had "catapulted the small extremist group to a significance that does not appear warranted by the known facts."

Ansar al-Islam was formed less than two years ago as a breakaway from the larger Islamic fundamentalist group, the Islamic Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan, and has been engaged in fighting the secular Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—part of the US-sponsored Iraqi opposition. The ICG noted the PUK had for its own political purposes "sought to emphasise the group's putative terrorist connections, making detained Ansar followers available to foreign journalists and shepherding CIA agents and members of the US special forces up the mountain slopes to observe Ansar positions."

But as the report explained: "No independent sources have ever been presented to corroborate the link between Ansar and Al Qaeda." According to some Ansar defectors, members of the group's leadership have previously visited Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. But, as the ICG noted, that "does not automatically translate into supervision over or direction of Ansar al-Islam's activities by bin Laden's network." Ansar leader Krekar has stressed that his group views itself as "a part of the Kurdish national movement" rather than a component of Al Qaeda's international terrorist activities.

As far as Baghdad is concerned, even the PUK has denied any link between Ansar and the Hussein regime. “PUK officials, who stand most to gain from an Ansar-Baghdad collusion that might trigger US intervention on the PUK’s behalf, have stated that there is no evidence of such a link. Barham Salih, for example, has said so repeatedly, emphasising that the Iraqi Arabs fighting with Jund/Ansar are quite clearly anti-regime,” the ICG noted, adding: “Recent press reports suggest that some CIA officials also find the evidence for such a link less than convincing and have questioned its existence.”

The second prong of Powell’s case was the claim that Zarqawi had received medical treatment in Baghdad in May 2002 and used the two months of his recuperation to set up an extensive terrorist network—all with the sanction of the Hussein regime. According to Powell, the Zarqawi cell, linked to Al Qaeda, continues to operate from Baghdad, was responsible for the murder of US official Lawrence Foley in Jordan last October, and coordinates the operations of a network involving at least 116 operatives in the Middle East, Europe and elsewhere, some of whom have been recently arrested.

Like the poison factory in Khurmal/Sarget, the Baghdad terrorist cell appears to be pure invention. Every aspect of Powell’s story has now been questioned by intelligence agencies and specialists. Even CIA director George Tenet, who appeared this week before a US senate committee, admitted that Zarqawi was not “under the control” of Hussein and that his network was “independent” of Al Qaeda. Although Tenet twice told the committee that Zarqawi was currently in Baghdad, US intelligence officials later told the *Washington Post* that they did not know where he was.

A senior German intelligence official raised doubts about the existence of any connection between Zarqawi and Baghdad. He told the *New York Times*: “We have been investigating Mr Zarqawi for some time. We need to examine the evidence that Powell has drawn from, and it is possible that he knows things that we don’t. But as of yet we have seen no indication of a direct link between Zarqawi and Baghdad.”

Magnus Ranstorp, a terrorism expert at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, questioned the ability of the CIA to so rapidly trace the links between Baghdad and the arrest of terrorist suspects in Europe. “It takes a long time to backtrack the chain of evidence from all these different arrests—not only being able to link them together in Europe but also to link them all the way to Iraq. It seems awfully quick to be able to draw solid lines between this large group and find evidence that leads all the way back to Zarqawi,” he said.

Drawing on British intelligence sources, the *Guardian* commented: “[W]ell-placed officials in Whitehall insisted there was no solid evidence of any link between Zarqawi and the recent spate of arrests of suspect terrorists in western Europe, let alone a link with Al Qaeda. Though they said that Zarqawi was certainly an important figure, and had some knowledge of chemical warfare, sources with access to intelligence say they were not aware he had even visited northeastern Iraq. He had been travelling around the Middle East but was ‘not in Iraq,’ a well placed source insisted.”

A further damning refutation came from French intelligence. In a diagram allegedly illustrating the extent of the Zarqawi network in Europe, Powell included the photos of two Islamic militants—Merouane Benhamed and Menad Benchellali—who were arrested last year in Paris. However, French intelligence sources told Agence France Presse that the men they had detained had never been linked to Zarqawi and were considered to be part of a Chechen terrorist network.

“At no point did the DST (French anti-terrorist and counter-espionage services), which organised these arrests, establish the slightest link between these two men and al Zarqawi,” the sources said. “Al Zarqawi’s name never once appeared in our different investigations into the ‘Chechen link’ and its operational members active in Europe. We do not understand how the Americans—through Colin Powell’s words—were able to arrive at such conclusions about al Zarqawi’s so-called ties with both Iraq and with the ‘Chechen link’ operatives whom we arrested in France last year.”

Various analysts and intelligence officials have continued to emphasise the political incompatibility of the secular Ba’athist regime in Baghdad and the Islamic fundamentalism of Osama bin Laden. A top secret British intelligence staff report dated January 12, which was leaked last week to the BBC radio, cautiously concluded:

“While there have been contacts between Al Qaeda and the regime in the past, it is assessed that any fledgling relationship founded due to mistrust and incompatible ideology. Though training of some AQ [Al Qaeda] members in Iraq may have continued, we believe that bin Laden views the Ba’ath as an apostate regime. His aim of restoration of an Islamic caliphate, whose capital was Baghdad, is in ideological conflict with present-day Iraq.”

The report’s conclusions underscore the tendentious character of the latest attempts by the Bush administration to latch onto this week’s audiotape, purportedly made by Osama bin Laden, as proof of a link between Baghdad and Al Qaeda. In fact, the tape, even if genuine, proves nothing of the sort. Bin Laden calls on his followers to defend Iraq from US attack, *despite* the “infidel” regime in Baghdad *not because* of it.

A week after his UN address, nothing is left of Powell’s case. There is no poison factory or European terrorist network linked to Baghdad. And the terrorist mastermind, who is alleged to have set up the factory and the network, is not in Iraq, is “independent” of Al Qaeda and is “not under the control” of Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration has done what Powell repeatedly accuses Iraq of: it has manufactured a “web of lies”.

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