

Iraq, al-Qaeda, and Tenet's Equivocation

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Christina Shelton

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On Aug. 15, 2002, I presented my part of a composite Pentagon briefing on al-Qaeda and Iraq to George Tenet, then CIA director. In his recent book, "At the Center of the Storm," Tenet wrote that I said in opening remarks that "there is no more debate," "no further analysis is required" and "it is an open-and-shut case."

I never said those things. In fact, I said the covert nature of the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda made it difficult to know its full extent; al-Qaeda's security precautions and Iraq's need to cloak its activities with terrorist networks precluded a full appreciation of their relationship. Tenet also got the title of the briefing wrong. It was "Assessing the Relationship Between Iraq and al-Qa'ida," not "Iraq and al-Qa'ida—Making the Case."

That day I summarized a body of mostly CIA reporting (dating from 1990 to 2002), from a variety of sources, that reflected a pattern of Iraqi support for al-Qaeda, including high-level contacts between Iraqi senior officials and al-Qaeda, training in bomb making, Iraqi offers of safe haven, and a nonaggression agreement to cooperate on unspecified areas. My position was that analysts were not addressing these reports since much of the material did not surface in finished, disseminated publications.

Tenet revealed in his book that the CIA's terrorism analysts "believed to be credible the reporting that suggested a deeper relationship" between al-Qaeda and Iraq but that the agency's regional analysts "significantly limited the cooperation that was suggested by the reporting." Therefore, according to Tenet, an alternative view existed within the ranks of his analysts.

Tenet's response to my presentation was to attempt to denigrate my credentials. I was not a "naval reservist," as he wrote in his book, assigned to the Pentagon for temporary duty. In fact, I was a career intelligence analyst for two decades, and I spent half of that time in counterintelligence. I did not draw conclusions beyond the reporting, as he suggested. I addressed the substantive material in the reports.

Tenet claimed that the body of reporting did not prove an “operational” relationship existed. I never said it did. The use of the caveat “operational” became a convenient—albeit transparent—way to discount the credibility of the 1990s reporting and the relationship as I had described it. In his book Tenet maintained that there was no evidence of Iraq’s having “authority, direction, and control of al-Qa’ida operations.” I don’t recall anyone inside or outside the intelligence community ever making that claim.

It’s notable that on Oct. 7, 2002, Tenet sent a letter to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence stating that “our understanding of the relationship between Iraq and al-Qa’ida is evolving.” He wrote:

- “We have solid reporting of senior level contacts between Iraq and al-Qa’ida going back a decade” and of “the presence in Iraq of al-Qa’ida members, including some that have been in Baghdad.”
- “Credible information indicates that Iraq and al-Qa’ida have discussed safe haven and reciprocal nonaggression” and that “al-Qa’ida leaders sought contacts in Iraq who could help them acquire WMD capabilities. The reporting also stated that Iraq has provided training to al-Qa’ida members in the areas of poisons and gases and making conventional bombs.”
- “Iraq’s increasing support to extremist Palestinians, coupled with growing indications of a relationship with al-Qa’ida, suggest that Baghdad’s links to terrorists will increase, even absent US military action.”

His first two points reflected the material I used in my presentation. However, when addressing the issue of al-Qaeda and Iraq in his book, Tenet made no reference to this letter. Yet in his book Tenet provided details on activities between al-Qaeda and Iraq in addition to those described in his letter.

Since 2002, information from interviews of people being held in custody regarding contacts between Iraq and al-Qaeda has not always been reliable. Detainees may say what they think captors want to hear, or they may contradict themselves. For example, one al-Qaeda operative (Abu Zubaida) claimed that there were no ties between al-Qaeda and Iraq, then said any relationship would be highly compartmentalized. Another (Ibn al-Shayk al-Libi) said that Iraq provided al-Qaeda

operatives with training in chemical and biological weapons; then he recanted. Such testimony should not be taken at face value.

More reliable information probably will come from seized Iraqi documents—especially those of the Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS), which was the conduit for al-Qaeda contacts. One IIS document dated March 28, 1992, cited Osama bin Laden as having a good relationship with the IIS bureau in Syria. Another says that the IIS director met with bin Laden in Sudan in 1995. James Woolsey, a former director of central intelligence, has written that captured documents indicated a participant in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing (Abdul Rahman Yasin) was living in Iraq and receiving a monthly stipend.

A more complete understanding of Iraq's relationship with al-Qaeda will emerge when historians can exploit the numerous seized documents free from the politics of the Iraq war. For his part, Tenet, who was at the center of the political thicket, placed himself on both sides of the issue: providing intelligence on al-Qaeda and Iraq's relationship while at the same time inferring that no ties existed, only "concerns."

*Christina Shelton, an intelligence analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency from 1984 to 2006.*