

Zarqawi Letter Complicates War Hawks Efforts to Link al Qaeda with Hussein, Iran

By Jim Lobe | February 20, 2004

A letter purportedly written to senior al Qaeda leaders by a key associate, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, appears to undermine a major thesis of hard-core neoconservatives who led the U.S. drive to war in Iraq.

The letter (available online at http://www.cpa-iraq.org/transcripts/20040212_zarqawi_letter.html), is essentially an appeal for help in launching a “sectarian war” against Iraq’s Shi’a Muslim population. It was circulated by the Pentagon after it was allegedly seized in a raid on a safe house in Baghdad on Jan. 23 that netted a prominent courier of the al Qaeda terrorist group and subsequently leaked to the *New York Times*, which reported on it Feb. 10.

U.S. war planners clearly saw the 17-page letter as confirmation that their strategy for pacifying Iraq, particularly the so-called “Sunni Triangle,” was working. Its quick declassification and wide dissemination suggested the message was one the Pentagon was eager to get out, precisely because it corresponded to the military’s own claims that it was grinding down the armed opposition in the occupied country.

The writer, identified by the Pentagon as Zarqawi, a Palestinian Jordanian who the administration has long alleged is closely linked to al Qaeda—the group led by Osama bin Laden—admits that the U.S.-led occupation is making steady progress.

“There is no doubt that our field of movement is shrinking and the grip around the throat of the mujahidin [sic] has begun to tighten,” the letter, which was found on a compact disc, states. “With the spread of the army and police, our future is becoming frightening.”

The author takes credit for 25 “martyrdom operations” directed against Shi’a targets and U.S. and other coalition forces, suggesting that foreign Islamist fighters, rather than indigenous groups, might indeed be responsible for suicide bombings, as the U.S. military has argued.

The letter writer also reports that his forces are planning to carry out more attacks against Iraqi military and

security forces. Since the letter’s date, suicide attacks against these targets have indeed escalated sharply.

So far so good.

At the same time, however, the letter, excerpts of which were published by the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and the *Weekly Standard*, tends to debunk several of the neoconservatives’ own myths.

First, it contains no suggestion at all of any pre-existing cooperation or relationship between ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and either Zarqawi or al Qaeda, as the neoconservatives have long contended. It expresses great disappointment at the absence of al Qaeda in Iraq, a disappointment that undermines the administration’s insistence that it is that group that is behind a growing number of attacks in Iraq. Indeed, the tone suggests, according to Iraq expert Juan Cole of the University of Michigan, that the writer, if it is Zarqawi, has not been in close contact with al Qaeda for quite some time.

More important, the letter’s thrust—the necessity for carrying out attacks against Shi’a Muslims in Iraq—serves also to undermine a major neoconservative thesis—that Islamist extremists work together to accomplish their goals regardless of their own sectarian affiliation. This “terror masters” thesis—named for the book, *The War Against the Terror Masters*, by the theory’s foremost Washington proponent, Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—argues that western intelligence agencies have been naive to think that Shi’a groups like Hezbollah and Iran would not work closely with extremist Sunni groups, like al Qaeda or Zarqawi’s network, because of their sectarian differences. In Ledeen’s view they all form one “coherent terror network” in which Iran plays the dominant role.

Among others, Richard Perle—also based at AEI but better known for his close ties to Vice President Dick



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Cheney and the Pentagon's civilian leadership—has publicly propounded this thesis. “The terror network is more complex, and far more united, than most of our analysts have been willing to accept,” he wrote last September in an article in *National Review Online*. “The divisions and distinctions of the past no longer make sense; the terror mafias are working together, and their missions are defined by the states that protect, arm, fund, and assist them: Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.”

According to Ledeen, Iran is the “lynchpin of the terror network,” and routinely hosts or organizes meetings of the network's major leaders. Tehran has strongly denied any connection to or support for al Qaeda or any other radical Sunni group. In a September article, Ledeen wrote that Tehran hosted a terrorist summit last August that included Hezbollah's chief of operations Imad Mughniyah; Zarqawi; al Qaeda's number two Ayman al-Zawahiri; bin Laden's son Saad; and Iranian intelligence officials. Zarqawi promptly relocated to Iraq several days later, presumably to begin carrying out operations of the kind that he reports in the Jan. 23 letter, Ledeen added.

The problem with that theory is that the letter attributed to Zarqawi fails to provide even the slightest hint of an Iranian connection, and consistently refers to the Shi'a population in Iraq—to which Iran has long provided strong support—as if it, perhaps even more than Washington, is the ultimate enemy. “The Shi'a have declared a subtle war against Islam,” the letter states. “Even if the Americans are also an arch-enemy, the Shi'a are a greater danger and their harm more destructive to the nation than that of the Americans.” The letter describes the Shi'as as a “per-

verse sect” and continues to say that, “They are the most cowardly people God has created. Killing their leaders will weaken them and with the death of the head, the whole group dies.”

Such references to Shi'as and the lack of any reference at all to Iran in such a long letter, according to Cole, simply add to the view among most regional specialists both in and outside the U.S. government that Ledeen's “terror master” theory is as questionable as the notion of an operational link between Hussein and al Qaeda. “The document undermines all the conspiracy theories about Iranian support for al Qaeda or an al Qaeda-Hezbollah link,” says Cole. “The Iranians would as soon shoot those people (Zarqawi and al Qaeda) as look at them.”

In that respect, the letter and its widespread distribution, particularly by neoconservative groups and publications, mark a potentially serious setback to those in and out of the administration who have adopted Ledeen's view.

Not coincidentally, it is the same group, both within and outside the administration, which argued before the war that Hussein and al Qaeda were closely linked. The same group has been the major obstacle to any steps by Washington to improve relations with Tehran since talks were suspended last May, after an al Qaeda attack on a western compound in Tehran that U.S. officials charged had been ordered from somewhere in Iran.

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