

# Strategic Insight

## Comparing Threats from Saddam and bin Laden

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How does the threat to U.S. national security posed by Saddam Hussein compare to that posed by Osama bin Laden? This question bears importantly on U.S. policy in the ongoing war against terrorism. A prerequisite to answering such a question is to define "threat", which from the U.S. perspective can be deemed "a person, state, or organization having motivation, capability, and intent to attack the United States, U.S. personnel or U.S. assets anywhere in the world." While the United States as a global superpower faces a wide array of threats, this analysis focuses only on Saddam and bin Laden—the latter of whom we will assume, for the sake of argument, to be still alive.

### Motivations

Saddam and bin Laden share some basic perceptions of the United States. Both see U.S. cultural and strategic expansiveness not as benevolent global meliorism but as malevolent global imperialism that aims to whittle away at the internal rights and prerogatives of their domains. They see the products of that expansiveness—American values and culture—as fundamentally threatening to their designs and very existence. They do not recognize the legitimacy of the United States' ultimate global concerns, and they do not share U.S. faith in the benefits of political internationalism, economic globalization, and strategic cooperation. Both feel fundamentally threatened by the continuing U.S. military and political presence in the Persian Gulf region, which they regard (not unreasonably) as directed against them and their interests.<sup>[1]</sup>

From their respective speeches and other public proclamations, both Saddam Hussein and bin Laden have made apparent their intent to attack the United States and its global assets. Saddam's anti-U.S. rhetoric is borne out of his survival instincts, which have apparently inspired his quest for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and his vision of Arab unity against the West. Through WMD acquisition he aims to deter a major conventional attack against his regime, and establish Iraq as a regional military power to be feared until the time it reconstitutes its economic and conventional military power. Unlike bin Laden, Saddam carries no ideological baggage. From Saddam's perspective, ideology is a tool for survival in the complex world of Middle East politics. His anti-U.S. posturing is borne out of his personal and political insecurities, stemming from domestic challenges to his authority and a perpetual threat of military confrontation from the United States. Desire to avenge his defeat in the 1991 Persian Gulf War is presumably another motivating force for Saddam.

Bin Laden's anti-U.S. intentions, on the other hand, are based upon his deep-rooted Islamic ideology and hatred for the West. This is evident from his declaration on 23 August 1996 of a holy war against the United States, in which he stated:

"The Muslims have realized they are the main targets of the aggression of the coalition of Jews and the Crusaders [bin Laden's term for the West]. The latest of these assaults is the greatest disaster since the death of Prophet Muhammad — that is the occupation of the country of two sacred mosques—the home of Islam [Saudi Arabia]. If Allah wills and I live, God willing I will expel the Jews and the Christians from Arabia. Our Muslim brothers throughout the world, your brothers in the country of two sacred places and

in Palestine request your support. They are asking you to participate with them against their enemies, who are also your enemies—the Israelis and Americans—by causing them as much harm as can be possibly achieved."[\[2\]](#)

Bin Laden's motivations against the United States are borne out of his desires to rid the Muslim holy land of American presence; to establish strict Islamic rule in Saudi Arabia by defeating the U.S.-backed House of Saud; to provide a permanent home to the Palestinians, who he sees as being persecuted by Jews with the help of Americans; and to punish Americans for the deaths of an estimated 500,000 Iraqi children attributed to U.N. sanctions against Iraq.[\[3\]](#) In essence bin Laden has declared and initiated a crusade — a holy war—against the United States. Whereas Saddam's concerns are largely limited to the U.S. military, bin Laden's holy war clearly extends to American civilians, as gravely evidenced by the events of 11 September 2001.[\[4\]](#)

## Capabilities

These two leaders possess markedly differing capabilities with which to pursue their avowed aims. Saddam has at his disposal the entire state machinery of Iraq. This includes a vibrant economy with a GDP of \$57 billion growing at an annual rate of 15 percent, 112 trillion barrels of proven crude oil reserves (second only to Saudi Arabia), and 110 trillion cubic feet of proven gas reserves. Saddam's military assets include an army of 375,000 troops, 2200 tanks, 3700 armored vehicles, 2400 major artillery weapons, and 316 combat aircraft (130 attack aircraft including French Mirage F-1s and Russian Su-22s, Su-24s, Su-25s; and 180 air defense jets, including Mirage F-1s, MiG-25s, and MiG-29s). Iraqi naval assets include several guided missile patrol boats and numerous batteries of Silkworm and other anti-ship missiles. Saddam's key forces are his two Republican Guard corps, composed of six divisions (10,000 troops each) plus four Special Republican Guard brigades of up to 2500 troops each.[\[5\]](#)

Of particular concern is Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) arsenal, which many intelligence officials and military experts are convinced that Saddam is aggressively rebuilding. Saddam attempted to conceal his weapons infrastructure from U.N. inspectors throughout the 1990s, and since 1998 has refused to allow inspectors back into Iraq, even at the cost of international sanctions. The exact size and character of Saddam's WMD arsenal is a matter of speculation, but the arsenal's potential contours can be made out:

- *Biological Weapons.* In its report to the U.N. in 1999 the UNSCOM (U.N. Special Commission) concluded that Saddam had concealed nearly 160 biological bombs and more than a dozen missile warheads filled with anthrax and other pathogens. According to the latest intelligence reports 300 secret biological weapons facilities have been reactivated in Iraq since the withdrawal of U.N. inspectors.[\[6\]](#) Quoting Saddam's brother-in-law Hussein Kamel, who defected in 1995, a recent *New York Times* report stated that U.N. and American records both show that Iraq made more than 22,000 gallons of anthrax and 100,000 gallons of botulinum toxin, one of the world's most lethal poisons. The fate of these weapons is still unknown.[\[7\]](#) According to World Health Organization (WHO) experts, Iraq could have also obtained smallpox virus from a natural outbreak of smallpox that swept Iraq in 1971 and 1972.[\[8\]](#)
- *Chemical Weapons.* UNSCOM records show that much of Saddam's once-vast chemical weapons stockpile remains unaccounted for. The Iraqi government in 1997 claimed to have destroyed 3.9 tons of lethal VX nerve agent, along with 550 mustard gas shells and 107,000 special artillery shell casings. But because the Iraqis did not back this accounting with compelling evidence, UNSCOM dismissed the claim as a lie. Meanwhile, Iraqi insiders contend that Saddam's chemical munitions work is continuing in locations like Falluja, a site known for previous chemical weapons activity. Iraqi defector Ahmed-al-Shemri (pseudonym), who claimed to have worked for many years at the Muthanna State Enterprises—once Iraq's weapons plant—disclosed in August 2002 that Iraq had the ability to make at least 50 tons of liquid nerve agent. Shemri also said that Iraq had invented in 1994, and is now producing, a new solid nerve agent (VX) that clings to soldier's protective clothing and makes decontamination difficult.[\[9\]](#)

- *Nuclear Weapons.* Experts suggest that in 1991 Iraq was very close to being able to develop a nuclear device. However, weeks of Gulf War bombing followed by years of intrusive inspections neutralized the country's capacity to synthesize nuclear fuel. Intelligence reports now suggest that during recent years Saddam has developed secret uranium enrichment facilities, and also that Iraqi nuclear scientists currently possess enough equipment and expertise to build a nuclear bomb quickly. The previously mentioned *New York Times* report stated that in the last 14 months, Iraq has sought to buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes, which American officials believe were intended as components of centrifuges to enrich uranium. According to intelligence and security analysts, if Saddam manages to obtain the necessary amount of nuclear fuel, he has the means to develop a nuclear weapon.[\[10\]](#)

As compared to Saddam, bin Laden's material resources are limited. The recent U.S.-led allied military action in Afghanistan has severely impacted bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda organization. However, while allied troops succeeded in killing and capturing a large number of Taliban and Al-Qaeda terrorists in Afghanistan, top Al-Qaeda leaders—possibly including bin Laden—along with many of its cadres managed to escape. Nothing is certain about the fate and whereabouts of bin Laden. His cadres, drawn mainly from youthful Muslim populations, are spread in almost 60 countries. They are equipped primarily with light weapons, and with the technological know-how to handle sophisticated explosives and other tools of destruction. There are widespread reports about bin Laden trying to acquire WMD,[\[11\]](#) yet there is no published evidence to show that he has actually achieved this goal. During an interview with a Pakistani journalist, bin Laden claimed that "We have chemical and nuclear weapons as a deterrent and if America used them against us we reserve the right to use them." In another interview with *Time* magazine, bin Laden asserted that acquiring weapons of any type was a Muslim "religious duty."[\[12\]](#) There are also reports of bin Laden trying in 1993-94 to acquire nuclear materials from the erstwhile Soviet republic of Kazakhstan. In recently surfaced training videos, Al-Qaeda is shown to have tested cyanide gas on dogs.[\[13\]](#) All such reports indicate bin Laden's mind on the issue and his urge to possess WMD—but there is as yet no concrete evidence that he actually has such weapons at his disposal.

An analysis of their respective capabilities indicates that although Saddam has more material resources at his disposal, those resources are matched in kind many times over by his adversaries—mainly the United States. His power comes from the state apparatus and his survival as a dictator lies in his propensity for self-preservation. On the other hand, bin Laden's power lies in his ideology and the appeal in some quarters of his call for Jihad against the West. Ignorance and religious intolerance are the fuel that he has used to stoke a burning fire of hatred and revenge in the minds of his followers and sympathizers. In August 1996 he challenged the entire free world by openly declaring Jihad against America, and since then he has repeatedly attacked U.S. targets with a fair degree of success. America's unsurpassed economic, technological, and military prowess have so far failed to neutralize this man. Whether actually alive or just potentially alive, bin Laden continues to be a threat. He may or may not possess WMD, but he demonstrably possesses the ability to exploit human minds. Motivated minds with an urge for self-destruction are the most potent weapons bin Laden possesses.

### Strategies and tactics

Saddam and bin Laden differ in their strategies and tactics. Despite his military decimation during the 1991 Gulf War, years of international sanctions, intrusive weapons inspections, and coercive enforcement of no fly-zones, Saddam has continued to survive and authoritatively rule Iraq. Due to his brutal suppression of domestic dissent and his unending quest for WMD, he continues to be a threat to the international system. However, after his defeat in the Gulf War this threat has not manifested in any overt acts of aggression. His quest for self-preservation has led him to adopt a strategy of active defense (modernization of his military and seeking WMD capabilities) coupled with a verbal offensive and defiance against the international community. Although Iraq is high on the United States' list of states sponsoring terrorism, Saddam has not been definitively linked to any major terrorist incidents in recent years. His linkages with terrorism have taken the form of providing material and economic support to militant Palestinian groups, and also sheltering leading terrorists like Abu Nidal, who recently died in Iraq.[\[14\]](#)

As compared to Saddam's defensive strategy, bin Laden's strategy is based upon relentless offensive. As a non-state actor he has the independence of choosing his targets, time, and means of striking. He has successfully employed terrorist methods such as suicide bombings (World Trade Center in 1993, U.S. Embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, U.S.S. Cole), assassination (Ahmed Shah Massoud 2001),[\[15\]](#) and hijacking and using aircraft as weapons. Although intelligence and security agencies have so far not been able to solve the riddle of anthrax attacks in the United States during the aftermath of 11 September, some media reports have pointed fingers of suspicion towards bin Laden.[\[16\]](#) Also, motivated men and women imbued with radical Islamic ideologies, and willing to die for the cause, are present in many countries including the United States. These potential agents of terror directed by bin Laden may not need to be supplied with readymade WMD to succeed in their designs. They can use WMD precursors available on the market shelves and also through other indigenous sources to attack their targets.

## Conclusions

By all evidence bin Laden continues to pose a real threat to the United States. The possibility that he has survived against the entire might of the U.S.-led international coalition will in some quarters give him an aura of invincibility at par with divine status. This status will surely be exploited by his followers to recruit more agents for their destructive cause. Dealt a blow in Afghanistan, bin Laden and Al-Qaeda will call passionately for a new wave of terrorism against the United States. These battle cries will confront the profound conservatism of Muslim society, which has repeatedly denied glory to its radicals. The anti-crusader rhetoric will also confront a current reality vastly different from that which initially shaped bin Laden's hatred for the West, and from the promises he has made to his holy warriors.[\[17\]](#)

There is no doubt that arguments for regime change in Iraq have substance. However, if a prospective attack against Iraq is cast as a continuation of the war against terrorism, then the question arises: Have we achieved all our objectives in the initial phase of war? That bin Laden is not known to be dead or neutralized indicates a significant failure of the terrorism war's first phase. Therefore, until the threat posed by bin Laden is removed, opening another war front against a different enemy will amount to disregarding the time-tested Clausewitzian principle of "unity of aim." Focusing on bin Laden does not have to mean a passive approach to Saddam. President Bush in his 12 September address to the U.N. General Assembly made a strong case for international action that results either in Iraqi compliance with its obligations, or the establishment of a new and ultimately democratic government in Baghdad. There is an urgent need for a bipartisan backing for such a policy at home, and also for gaining global support, instead of a unilateral action against Iraq. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had it right when she recently said, "I hope that the president will not be pushed by his hard-line advisors into an unwise timetable for military action against Iraq. We should pick this fight at a moment that best suits our interests. And right now our primary interest remains the thorough destruction of Al-Qaeda and related terrorist networks."[\[18\]](#)

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## References

1. Caroline F. Ziemke, "Strategic Personality and Effectiveness of Nuclear Deterrence: Deterring Iran and Iraq," September 2001, published by the [Defense Threat Reduction Agency](#) (DTRA).
2. Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, Wieldenfeld and Nicholson (publishers), 2001, page 103.
3. *ibid* , page 23
4. During his interview with Peter Bergen in March 1997 (published in *ibid*) bin Laden is quoted as saying, "The country of Two Holy Places (Saudi Arabia) has in our religion a peculiarity of its own over the other Muslim countries. In our religion, it is not permissible for any non-Muslim to stay in our country. Therefore

- even though American civilians are not targeted in our plan, they must leave. We do not guarantee their safety." Also, during an interview with a Pakistani correspondent on 9 November 2001, bin Laden is quoted to have said, "If an enemy occupies a Muslim territory and uses common people as human shield, then it is permitted to attack that enemy. America and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Iraq. Muslims have the right to attack America in reprisal." Hamid Mir, "Osama Claims He Has Nukes: If U.S. Uses N-arms It Will get same response," [Dawn](#) (Pakistan), 10 November 2001.
5. Bill Gertz, "Biochemical Weapons Boost Iraq's Military Might," *Washington Times*, 8 March 2002
  6. Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, an Iraqi defector, is reported to have given this information to U.S. intelligence agencies in August 2001. Jobby Warrick, "In Assessing Iraq's Arsenal, The Reality is Uncertainty," *Washington Post*, 31 July 2002
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  8. *ibid.*
  9. *ibid.*
  10. Jobby Warrick, "In Assessing Iraq's Arsenal, The Reality is Uncertainty," *Washington Post*, 31 July 2002
  11. Jack Boureston, "[Assessing Al-Qaeda WMD Capabilities](#)," Center for Contemporary Conflict.
  12. The interview between Hamid Mir, the editor of Pakistan's Urdu daily *Ausaf*, was published on 9 November 2001 in Pakistan's English daily *Dawn*. According to *Dawn*, this was the first interview given by bin Laden to any journalist after the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington. See Hamid Mir, "Osama Claims He Has Nukes: If U.S. Uses N-arms It Will get same response," [Dawn](#) (Pakistan), 10 November 2001.
  13. CNBC in their late night news documentary on 27 August 2002 showed a training video in which a dog was seen dying due to a cyanide attack.
  14. Abu Nidal is a Palestinian terrorist organization representing Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat's al-Fatah, the dominant faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Its leader Abu Nidal received training, funding and logistical support from Iraq, Libya and Syria. Abu Nidal died in Iraq in August 2002.
  15. Ahmed Shah Massoud, the charismatic Tajik leader of the Northern Alliance, was assassinated on 9 November 2001 by a suicide squad sent by Osama bin Laden. According to media reports, bin Laden removed Massoud from the scene immediately prior to 11 September fearing the Northern Alliance would aid U.S. retaliation against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, in the wake of terrorist strikes in New York and Washington. "Masood Murder: Al-Qaeda hand confirmed," *Hindu*, 1 January 2002.
  16. "Anthrax Attack may be linked to bin Laden," BBC news 13 October 2001.
  17. "To western ears, the public utterances of Osama bin Laden have always come across like the tirades of a loony ideologue. But these skillful rhetoric constructions, rich in historical allusion, have enormous powers of penetration—and will survive their author." By Reuel Mark Gerechet, "The Gospel According to Osama bin Laden," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 2002.
  18. Madeline K. Albright, "Where Iraq Fits in the War on Terror," *New York Times*, 13 September 2002.