

Two men, two missions

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Both men hate the United States. Both see themselves as crusaders. And both have a proven desire to destroy what stands in their way.

But Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden do have their differences. Mr. Hussein orders servants. Mr. bin Laden serves the Islamic order. Hussein's portrait saturates Iraqi life. Bin Laden has become the invisible man.

But many Americans, however, perceive the Al Qaeda leader and Iraqi dictator as partners in terror. A recent Knight Ridder survey showed that 45 percent of those polled believe that "some" or "most" of the 9/11 hijackers were Iraqis. In fact, 15 of the 19 were Saudis.

And when Al-Jazeera recently aired a new audiotape believed to be bin Laden, the US government was quick to argue that it proves a link between two men exists. "This is the nightmare that people have warned about, linking up Iraq with Al Qaeda," White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer told reporters.

As the US continues to press its case against these two men, US policymakers must identify and understand the differences between them, says Roxanne Euben, a political science professor at Wellesley College. The more they are lumped together, she says, "the more we risk bringing about the collaboration we most fear, thereby making it a self-fulfilling prophecy."

The story of each man's path to power illuminates the values behind their missions.

Path to power

Hussein was born in the same village as Saladin, the 12th century Muslim warrior who overthrew Western Crusaders at Jerusalem. He was given the name "Saddam," which translates to "he who confronts."

It is a fitting namesake.

Reportedly frustrated with his Sunni Muslim family's impoverished condition and his stepfather's cruel treatment, Hussein left home at age 10 to live with his uncle, Khairullah Tulfah, who later became governor of Baghdad. Mr.

Tulfah hated Britain for its post-WWI rule of Iraq. He even wrote a pamphlet Hussein later republished titled, "Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews, and Flies."

Before he turned 20, Hussein joined the Baath Party, a small political group that sought to redress the Arab downfall under European colonialism by creating a single Arab socialist state. Hussein rose through the ranks, serving as assassin - he botched an attempt to kill Iraq's prime minister in 1959 - and then as head of a torture center.

Baathist Party secret police forces ensured a stable, loyal leadership - dissidents were killed on the spot - and Hussein made his way to the party's forefront in 1979. Tulfah never enjoyed his nephew's position because Hussein had him ousted.

In the strange world of cold war politics, Western powers found Hussein useful. But during the ramp-up to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Hussein's latent anti-Western sentiments emerged in raw, religious tones. "Saddam Hussein began to use a lot of religious imagery and rhetoric primarily as a kind of political ploy," says Wake Forest religious professor Charles Kimball.

Hussein branded the coming battle as the "mother of all battles." He rounded up a few hundred religious leaders and forced them to declare the coming confrontation a "jihad," or holy war. "Basically, if they wanted to see the sun shine the next morning, that's what they were commissioned to do," says Kimball.

This mother of all battles gave birth to humiliating defeat, decade-long sanctions, and ethnic fighting within Iraq. But it also opened a new chapter in Near East politics, and accelerated a radical Muslim agenda.

For Hussein and bin Laden, the Gulf conflict clarified their missions. And it provided common ground: shared hatred of perceived American hubris.

It is an ironic development, considering both men first pursued their goals with US support. Anxious about the Islamic revolution sweeping the region, President Reagan supported Hussein's battle against Iran. And when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the US supported Afghan resistance fighters - mujahideen - like Osama bin Laden.

Turning toward terror

Born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to a wealthy construction magnate, bin Laden graduated from King Abdul Aziz with a degree in civil engineering. He would end up along the Afghan-Pakistani border, where he helped the mujahideen logistics operation. When the Soviets left Afghanistan, he returned home to Saudi Arabia a hero.

Hussein and bin Laden found favor with the United States during the cold war's final chill only to become confirmed US enemies by the opening of the New World Order. What changed?

"It's pretty clear that one of the real tipping points [toward terrorism] for Osama bin Laden...was at the time of the Gulf War," Kimball says.

For bin Laden, the conflict may have added insult to injury.

First, US resources that had been pledged to Afghanistan in the late 1980s never materialized. Then the Saudis turned a cold shoulder to bin Laden. Worse, in his view, they welcomed a permanent US military presence in Saudi Arabia, land of the two most holy places in Islam: Mecca and Medina.

Soon after, he began transforming the mission of his fledgling Al Qaeda organization from a remnant Afghan resistance group to an ambitious and hard-line terrorist unit.

Experts say bin Laden's path to prominence reflects a sincere - if twisted - religious sensibility soured by feelings of betrayal. "There are people who think [bin Laden is] a manipulative political figure using religion. I don't think so; I tend to think he is deeply religious," Kimball says. Many Muslims themselves dispute this point, arguing that bin Laden has hijacked their peaceful beliefs for political purposes.

Whether pure or perverted, bin Laden's convictions motivated a small army of followers to fly commercial jets into the Pentagon and World Trade Centers. Sept. 11 showed that adherents of a militant strain of Islam could be their own weapons of mass destruction.

As an architect of terror, what does bin Laden's ideological blueprint look like?

Bin Laden desires nothing short of pan-Arab theocracy, says Graham Allison,

a Harvard political science professor and former Clinton administration defense analyst. "Bin Laden represents a very extreme form of Islam in which he has...a grand vision of an Islamic revival - an extreme Islamic caliphate that would run across the Middle East from Iraq to Morocco."

He is also part of an Islamic fundamentalist political tradition deeply opposed to nationalism, says Wellesley College political science professor Roxanne Euben. "[Bin Laden] sees himself as engaged in the fight to restore the dignity and purity of Islam from the corruptions of Western culture and power from without, and the betrayal of Islam from within by Muslims, both elite and non-elite, who have allowed Islam and Muslims to be degraded."

Saddam Hussein's political vision, however, appears peripheral to his personal ambitions. The Baathist ideology he promotes is a version of Arab socialism, but as Ms. Euben says, "...the only vision he seems to have is the maintenance and augmentation of his own power, by whatever means necessary."

Are these blueprints compatible? Mr. Allison doesn't think so. "Saddam Hussein and bin Laden are not very closely connected," he says.

As the prospect of war against Iraq grows, bin Laden appears willing to tolerate an "infidel" socialist like Hussein to further the cause of united Muslim opposition to the "Satanic" powers of America. As he is purported to say in his tape, "It doesn't hurt, under these conditions, that the interests of Muslims contradict the interest of the socialists in the fight against the crusaders."