As the Bush administration works to strengthen support for a war against Iraq, it is sowing a dangerous confusion about the relationship between Al Qaeda and the regime of Saddam Hussein. Arguing, as the president did last week, that the two are "equally as bad, equally as evil and equally as destructive" — and that "you can't distinguish between Al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror" — reinforces widely held misunderstandings about the extraordinary danger of the new religious terrorism.

Undoubtedly, Saddam Hussein is eager to procure weapons of mass destruction, including a nuclear bomb, and to dominate the Persian Gulf region. These facts provide the basis for strong arguments in favor of removing him from power. But such arguments need to be considered in their own right, and with the clear understanding that attacking Iraq would not be a continuation of the war against terror but a deviation from it.

Iraq and Al Qaeda are not obvious allies. In fact, they are natural enemies. A central tenet of Al Qaeda's jihadist ideology is that secular Muslim rulers and their regimes have oppressed the believers and plunged Islam into a historic crisis. Hence, a paramount goal of Islamist revolutionaries for almost half a century has been the destruction of the regimes of such leaders as Presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar el-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria, the military government in Algeria and even the Saudi royal family.

To contemporary jihadists, Saddam Hussein is another in a line of dangerous secularists, an enemy of the faith who refuses to rule by Shariah and has habitually murdered Sunni and Shiite religious leaders in Iraq who might oppose his regime. During the Persian Gulf War, Omar Abdel Rahman, the radical sheik now imprisoned in the United States, summed up the Islamist view when he was asked what the punishment should be for those who supported the United States in the conflict. He answered, "Both [those] who are against and the ones who are with Iraq should be killed."

In the years since, opposition to secular regimes has remained central to Islamist thinking. What has changed is the radicals' strategy for toppling these governments. After decades in which jihadists were defeated by security services in their home countries, Osama bin Laden and his followers decided that they would attack the "far enemy," the United States, which they believe is the primary source of strength for the secularist regimes in the Arab world. If the United States withdrew its support, the "near enemy" that holds power in Muslim capitals would be unable to defend itself.

Like other Middle Eastern rulers, Saddam Hussein has long recognized that Al Qaeda and like-minded Islamists represent a threat to his regime. Consequently, he has shown no interest in working with them against their common enemy, the United States. This was the understanding of American intelligence in the 1990's. In 1998, the National Security Council assigned staff to determine whether that conclusion was justified. After
reviewing all the available intelligence that could have pointed to a connection between Al Qaeda and Iraq, the group found no evidence of a noteworthy relationship.

Later, an indirect link appeared. A Sudanese effort to procure chemical weapons, which Mr. bin Laden had invested in, seemed to rely on an Iraqi production method. Today it is known that the Iraqi regime supports radical Islamists in Iraqi Kurdistan to undermine pro-American Kurdish groups, but there is no other indication that Mr. Hussein has changed his fundamental policy. The claims of the national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that senior Qaeda officials have been in Baghdad and that there is evidence of cooperation on weapons of mass destruction represent a dramatic departure from the record and, as such, ought to be aired as comprehensively as possible.

Iraq has indeed sponsored terrorism in the past but always of the traditional variety: it sought to eliminate Iraqi opponents abroad or, when conspiring against others, to inflict enough harm to show the costs of confronting it. But Mr. Hussein has remained true to the unwritten rules of state sponsorship of terror: never get involved with a group that cannot be controlled and never give a weapon of mass destruction to terrorists who might use it against you.

A more realistic assessment of the relationship between Al Qaeda and Mr. Hussein weakens the arguments for immediate action against Iraq — and strengthens those for focusing on the jihadists first. After all, while we may have to go to war with Mr. Hussein eventually, he still has a country that he wishes to hold on to, and that fact will govern all his calculations. Mr. bin Laden, by contrast, has said that Muslims have a duty to obtain nuclear weapons. After Sept. 11, no one should doubt that he and his followers would put them to use.

It is also worth considering how a war in Iraq might further the jihadist cause. With his regime threatened, Mr. Hussein might break the taboo on giving terrorists weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, as images of the United States attacking another Muslim nation are beamed throughout the Middle East and South Asia, many will take it as confirmation of Mr. bin Laden's argument that America is at war with Islam. The last war against Iraq was a catalytic event for the Islamists who formed Al Qaeda. We should not be complacent and believe that the next one will be different, or that the jihadist violence cannot grow worse.

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