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March 2: The suspect in the series of suicide bombings that killed at least 140 people in Iraq is a well-known terrorist suspect, NBC's Jim Miklaszewski reports.

Nightly News
By Jim Miklaszewski
Correspondent
NBC News
Updated: 04:14 PM PT March02, 2004

Avoiding attacking suspected terrorist mastermind
Abu Musab Zarqawi blamed for more than 700 killings in Iraq

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With Tuesday's attacks, Abu Musab Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant with ties to al-Qaida, is now blamed for more than 700 terrorist killings in Iraq.

But NBC News has learned that long before the war the Bush administration had several chances to wipe out his terrorist operation and perhaps kill Zarqawi himself but never pulled the trigger.

In June 2002, U.S. officials say intelligence had revealed that Zarqawi and members of al-Qaida had set up a weapons lab at Kirma, in northern Iraq, producing deadly ricin and cyanide.

The Pentagon quickly drafted plans to attack the camp with cruise missiles and airstrikes and sent it to the White House, where, according to U.S. government sources, the plan was debated to death in the National Security Council.

"People were more obsessed with developing the coalition to overthrow Saddam than to execute the president's policy of pre-emption against terrorists." — Roger Cressey, Terrorism expert

"Here we had targets, we had opportunities, we had a country willing to support casualties, or risk casualties after 9/11 and we still didn't do it," said Michael O'Hanlon, military analyst with the Brookings Institution.

Four months later, intelligence showed Zarqawi was planning to use ricin in terrorist attacks in Europe.

The Pentagon drew up a second strike plan, and the White House again killed it. By then the administration had set its course for war with Iraq.

"People were more obsessed with developing the coalition to overthrow Saddam than to execute the president's policy of preemption against terrorists," according to terrorism expert and former National Security Council member Roger Cressey.

In January 2003, the threat turned real. Police in London arrested six terror suspects and discovered a ricin lab connected to the camp in Iraq.

The Pentagon drew up still another attack plan, and for the third time, the National Security Council killed it.

Military officials insist their case for attacking Zarqawi's operation was airtight, but the administration feared destroying the terrorist camp in Iraq could undercut its case for war against Saddam.

The United States did attack the camp at Kirma at the beginning of the war, but it was too late — Zarqawi and many of his followers were gone. "Here's a case where they waited, they waited too long and now we're suffering as a result inside Iraq," Cressey added.

And despite the Bush administration's tough talk about hitting the terrorists before they strike, Zarqawi's killing streak continues today.

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