



## **Bush overstated Iraq links to al-Qaeda, former intelligence officials say**

WASHINGTON (AP) — As President Bush works to quiet a controversy over his discredited claim of Iraqi uranium shopping in Africa, another of his prewar assertions is coming under fire: the alleged link between Saddam Hussein's regime and al-Qaeda.

Before the war, Bush and members of his cabinet said Saddam was harboring top al-Qaeda operatives and suggested Iraq could slip the terrorist network chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons.

Critics attacked those assertions from the beginning for being counter to the ideologies of Saddam and al-Qaeda and short on corroborating evidence. Now, two former Bush administration intelligence officials say the evidence linking Saddam to the group responsible for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks was never more than sketchy at best.

"There was no significant pattern of cooperation between Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist operation," former State Department intelligence official Greg Thielmann said this week.

Intelligence agencies agreed on the "lack of a meaningful connection to al-Qaeda" and said so to the White House and Congress, said Thielmann, who left State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research last September.

Another former Bush administration intelligence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, agreed there was no clear link between Saddam and al-Qaeda.

"The relationships that were plotted were episodic, not continuous," the former official said.

A United Nations terrorism committee says it has no evidence — other than Secretary of State Colin Powell's assertions in his Feb. 5 U.N. speech — of any ties between al-Qaeda and Iraq.

And U.S. officials say American forces searching in Iraq have found no significant evidence tying Saddam's regime with Osama bin Laden's terrorist network.

"One of the things that concerns me is the continued reference to the war in Iraq as part of the war on terrorism. There's not much evidence to support that

linkage," said Sen. Bob Graham of Florida, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee and a presidential candidate.

In the weeks and months before the war, Bush and administration officials repeatedly said Saddam had ties to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups which could provide a pathway for weapons of mass destruction to find their way to terrorists. U.S. forces have not found any chemical, biological or nuclear weapons in Iraq so far.

"Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al-Qaeda," Bush said in his January State of the Union speech.

"Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own," Bush said.

At the time, many terrorism experts criticized the claim. They noted that Saddam's secular regime was just the kind of Arab government bin Laden's Islamic extremists want to replace. Critics also pointed out the lack of hard evidence of links between Saddam and bin Laden.

The administration's case apparently was persuasive. In a poll conducted last month by Knowledge Networks, 52% of those questioned said they thought the United States found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam was working closely with al-Qaeda — although no such evidence has been found.

"You see the polls — lots of Americans believe that there was a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda despite the lack of intelligence evidence on that score," said Gregory Treverton, a former chairman of the National Intelligence Council under President Clinton.

The administration's key evidence of a link was an operative named Abu Musab Zarqawi, who got medical care in Baghdad in May 2002 after being wounded in Afghanistan. In his Feb. 5 presentation to the United Nations, Powell called Zarqawi "an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda lieutenants."

Current and former intelligence officials now say Zarqawi's links to al-Qaeda are more tenuous — the CIA now says Zarqawi considers himself independent of al-Qaeda, for example. And while Zarqawi spent time in Iraq, it's unclear whether Saddam's regime simply allowed him to be there or actively tried to work with him.

"There was scant evidence there had been any other contacts between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden," Graham said in an interview Friday.

U.S. officials say a handful of suspected al-Qaeda members have been captured in Iraq, but most are probably low-level operatives. The biggest catch was a man described as a midlevel terrorist operative who worked for Zarqawi, who was nabbed in April near Baghdad.

Vince Cannistraro, a former CIA counterterrorism chief, said last week it's still unclear how much support Zarqawi and his followers got from Saddam.

"That he (Saddam) was promoting al-Qaeda is absurd," Cannistraro said. "That there was a tolerance for a Zarqawi network in Iraq seems clear."

High-level captives from both al-Qaeda and Saddam's regime also have denied any links between the two, U.S. officials say. They say al-Qaeda leaders Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and Abu Zubayda denied their network worked with the former Iraqi government

Farouk Hijazi, a former Iraqi intelligence operative who U.S. officials allege met with al-Qaeda operatives and perhaps bin Laden himself in the 1990s, also has denied any Iraq-al-Qaeda ties, officials say.

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