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QUESTIONS GROW OVER IRAQ LINKS TO QAEDA

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WASHINGTON - Shortly after his now-discredited report that Saddam Hussein was seeking to buy uranium in Africa, President Bush asserted in his State of the Union address that "evidence from intelligence sources, secret conversations, and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of Al Qaeda."

The link between Hussein and Al Qaeda was a component of Bush's larger assertion that Hussein was an imminent threat to the United States - that "secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists."

But a review of the White House's statements and interviews with current and former intelligence officials indicate that the assertion was extrapolated from nuggets of intelligence, some tantalizing but unproven, some subsequently disproved, and some considered suspect even at the time the administration was making its case for war.

Unconfirmed reports - such as a Czech assertion of a meeting in Prague between Sept. 11 terrorist Mohamed Atta and an Iraqi agent, as well as a captured Al Qaeda member's assertion that Iraq had provided chemical weapons training to Al Qaeda members - were presented as facts at various points by Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

"I know this," Cheney said on Nov. 14, 2001, when asked on the television news show

"60 Minutes II" about the alleged Atta meeting with a Hussein aide. "In Prague in April of this year, as well as earlier . . ."

The following March, Cheney acknowledged the White House was still working to "nail down" the Atta connection, although national security adviser Condoleezza Rice depicted it last September as part of "a picture that is emerging that there may well have been contacts between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime."

Last week, congressional investigators declared in their major report on the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that after tracing Atta's movements for two years, including trips made under all known aliases, there was no evidence of the Prague meeting. A former intelligence official in the Bush administration told the Globe the CIA obtained evidence soon after the Czech report that the Iraqi agent was elsewhere at the time of the purported meeting.

"The CIA had proof that Iraqi guy was not in Prague at the time," said the official, who asked not to be named. "The mystery here is why did the CIA allow that story to live when it could disprove it with hard information."

The administration now says the justification for Bush's reference in the State of the Union Address was intelligence showing that Abu Mussab Zarqawi, a terrorist associated with Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, operated out of Baghdad after coming to the Iraqi capital to receive medical treatment last year. Intelligence agencies contend Zarqawi recruited a terror cell in Baghdad and helped engineer the killing of State Department official Lawrence Foley in Jordan last October.

The administration does not contend it has evidence of ties between Zarqawi and the Iraqi government. Instead, Bush's statement that Hussein "aids and protects" known Al Qaeda operatives is based on the assumption that Hussein's police would have to know the comings and goings of a terrorist, a point emphasized by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in the months leading up to the war.

But two senior intelligence officials who asked that their names not be used said they were never convinced that Hussein knew Zarqawi's whereabouts, noting that some stretches of Iraq's borders are notoriously porous. And they said other countries' intelligence agencies have questioned the extent of the link between Zarqawi and Al Qaeda, suggesting he is an Al Qaeda associate but not a member.

Ten days ago, Cheney offered a forceful defense of the administration's case for war, intended to quell growing criticism about the discredited uranium report. But he surprised many political leaders by making no mention of a link between Hussein and Al Qaeda. Cheney's office declined to explain the omission.

Mike Anton, spokesman for the National Security Council, said Bush never declared an "alliance" between Hussein and Al Qaeda, only contacts.

"It's not an alliance," Anton said. "It was midlevel contacts, in some cases high-level contacts, going back a decade. That's a fact. No one's ever debunked it."

Indeed, intelligence agencies tracked contacts between Iraqi agents and Al Qaeda agents in the '90s in Sudan and Afghanistan, where bin Laden is believed to have met with Farouk Hijazi, head of Iraqi intelligence. But current and former intelligence specialists caution that such meetings occur just as often between enemies as friends. Spies frequently make contact with rogue groups to size up their intentions, gauge their strength, or try to infiltrate their ranks, they said. The United States sometimes seeks such contacts, they said.

"While there have been a number of promising intelligence leads hinting at possible meetings between Al Qaeda members and elements of the former Baghdad regime, nothing has been yet shown demonstrating that these potential contacts were historically any more significant than the same level of communication maintained between Osama bin Laden and ruling elements in a number of Iraq's Persian Gulf neighbors, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, Qatar, and Kuwait," said Evan Kohlman, senior terrorism analyst at the Investigative Project, a Washington think tank credited with compiling the largest archive on Muslim militants.

Last week, several prominent Democratic senators invoked the alleged link between Hussein and Al Qaeda as part of an administration pattern of inflating the case for war. Senator Barbara Boxer of California produced a government map from late 2001 on which the administration identified 45 "countries where Al Qaeda has operated" - but Iraq was not among them.

Boxer introduced the map into the Congressional Record at a hearing at which Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz testified. Wolfowitz did not respond at the hearing, and the State Department did not respond to questions about the map.

Senator Russell Feingold, Democrat of Wisconsin, said, "Even though they were selling us something else - selling us an invasion and occupation of a major Middle Eastern country even though intelligence did not reveal solid ties to Al Qaeda - the administration incorporated references to Al Qaeda in its hard sell."

Some former intelligence officials are even more critical.

Greg Thielmann, the director of the strategic, proliferation, and military affairs division in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research until last September, was charged by Bush officials with determining where Al Qaeda might acquire expertise and materials for weapons of mass destruction.

"Based on the terrorism experts I met with during my period of government, I never heard anyone make the claim there was a significant tie between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein," he said. The Bush administration, he added, was

"misleading the public in implying there was a close connection."

Daniel Benjamin, who directed counterterrorism efforts on the National Security Council in the Clinton administration, said: "No one disputes that there have been contacts over the years. In that part of the America-hating universe, contacts happen. But that's still a long way from suggesting that they were really working together."

In 1998, Benjamin said, he was part of a National Security Council exercise aimed at critically examining the CIA's assessment that Al Qaeda would not team up with Iraq.

"This was a red-team effort," he said. "We looked at this as an opportunity to disprove the conventional wisdom, and basically we came to the conclusion that the CIA had this one right."

Bush, when asked at his news conference last week whether the administration was amassing proof of the alleged link between Hussein and Al Qaeda, said it was examining "literally miles of documents."

"And it's just going to take a while, and I'm confident the truth will come out," Bush said. "And there is no doubt in my mind . . . that Saddam Hussein was a threat to United States security, and a threat to peace in the region."

But some current and former intelligence officials say whatever the ultimate verdict on the link between Hussein and Al Qaeda, the administration erred in presenting raw intelligence as part of an argument for its own policy rather than as a subject for analysis. In some cases, officials did not provide a context for the material. For instance, they said, only in the rarest instances did an administration official refer to a large amount of evidence that Hussein and bin Laden were on bad terms and therefore unlikely to join forces.

"In my judgment, Saddam assessed Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda as a threat rather than a potential partner to be exploited to attack the United States," said Judith Yaphe, who worked on counterterrorism at the CIA for three years, specializing in Iraq during the administration of George H.W. Bush. "Bin Laden wanted to attack Iraq after it invaded Kuwait in 1990 rather than have the Saudi government depend on foreign military forces."

In other cases, current and former intelligence officials said, the administration presented promising leads as fact. During his presentation of the US case for war before the United Nations on Feb. 5, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said one captured "senior terrorist operative" from the high ranks of Al Qaeda reported that the terror network had sought training in "chemical or biological weapons" from Iraq in 2000, and that the Al Qaeda agent charged with making contact with Iraq declared his mission a success.

Vincent Cannistraro, the CIA's former chief of counterterrorism operations and analysis, said the allegation was intriguing but remains unproven. "We know this guy said it," said Cannistraro, but "the question is where it would have happened."

But by Feb. 6, when Bush followed Powell's presentation with comments of his own, the captured operative's account was presented as fact.

"Saddam Hussein has longstanding, direct, and continuing ties to terrorist networks," the president declared. "Senior members of Iraqi intelligence and Al Qaeda have met at least eight times since the early 1990s. . . . Iraq has also provided Al Qaeda with chemical and biological weapons training." SIDEBAR: AL QAEDA LIST PLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA.

ORGANIZATION: AL-QAEDA (94%);

COUNTRY: IRAQ (95%); MIDDLE EAST (95%); NORTH AMERICA (94%); UNITED STATES (94%); CZECH REPUBLIC (92%); EUROPE (92%); AFRICA (90%); CENTRAL EUROPE (87%);

CITY: BAGHDAD, IRAQ (93%); PRAGUE (90%);

COMPANY: AL-QAEDA (94%);

SUBJECT: TERRORISM (91%); US PRESIDENTS (90%); EVIDENCE (90%); INTELLIGENCE SERVICES (90%); TALKS & MEETINGS (89%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (89%); INVESTIGATIONS (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (75%); MILITARY WEAPONS (70%);

PERSON: GEORGE WALKER BUSH (92%); MOHAMED ATTA (69%); DICK CHENEY (68%);

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO CHART, President Bush, in his State of the Union address, linked Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Bush also has linked 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta (top) and an Iraqi agent. His administration says Al Qaeda associate Abu Mussab Zarqawi worked from Baghdad. / AP PHOTOS (ABOVE LEFT AND TOP), REUTERS PHOTO (ABOVE RIGHT)

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