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Qaeda-Iraq Link U.S. Cited Is Tied to Coercion Claim

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Editors' Note Appended

WASHINGTON, Dec. 8 - The Bush administration based a crucial prewar assertion about ties between [Iraq](#) and Al Qaeda on detailed statements made by a prisoner while in Egyptian custody who later said he had fabricated them to escape harsh treatment, according to current and former government officials.

The officials said the captive, Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, provided his most specific and elaborate accounts about ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda only after he was secretly handed over to Egypt by the United States in January 2002, in a process known as rendition.

The new disclosure provides the first public evidence that bad intelligence on Iraq may have resulted partly from the administration's heavy reliance on third countries to carry out interrogations of Qaeda members and others detained as part of American counterterrorism efforts. The Bush administration used Mr. Libi's accounts as the basis for its prewar claims, now discredited, that ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda included training in explosives and chemical weapons.

The fact that Mr. Libi recanted after the American invasion of Iraq and that intelligence based on his remarks was withdrawn by the C.I.A. in March 2004 has been public for more than a year. But American officials had not previously acknowledged either that Mr. Libi made the false statements in foreign custody or that Mr. Libi contended that his statements had been coerced.

A government official said that some intelligence provided by Mr. Libi about Al Qaeda had been accurate, and that Mr. Libi's claims that he had been treated harshly in Egyptian custody had not been corroborated.

A classified Defense Intelligence Agency report issued in February 2002 that expressed skepticism about Mr. Libi's credibility on questions related to Iraq and Al Qaeda was based in part on the knowledge that he was no longer in American custody when he made the detailed statements, and that he might have been subjected to harsh treatment, the officials said. They said the C.I.A.'s decision to withdraw the intelligence based on Mr. Libi's claims had been made because of his later assertions, beginning in January 2004, that he had fabricated them to obtain better treatment from his captors.

At the time of his capture in Pakistan in late 2001, Mr. Libi, a Libyan, was the highest-ranking Qaeda leader in American custody. A Nov. 6 report in The New York Times, citing the Defense Intelligence Agency document, said he had made the assertions about ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda involving illicit weapons while in American custody.

Mr. Libi was indeed initially held by the United States military in Afghanistan, and was debriefed there by C.I.A. officers, according to the new account provided by the current and former government officials. But despite his high rank, he was transferred to Egypt for further interrogation in January 2002 because the White House had not yet provided detailed authorization for the C.I.A. to hold him.

While he made some statements about Iraq and Al Qaeda when in American custody, the officials said, it was not until after he was handed over to Egypt that he made the most specific assertions, which were later used by the Bush administration as the foundation for its claims that Iraq trained Qaeda members to use biological and chemical weapons.

Beginning in March 2002, with the capture of a Qaeda operative named Abu Zubaydah, the C.I.A. adopted a practice of maintaining custody itself of the highest-ranking captives, a practice that became the main focus of recent controversy related to detention of suspected terrorists.

The agency currently holds between two and three dozen high-ranking terrorist suspects in secret prisons around the world. Reports that the prisons have included locations in Eastern Europe have stirred intense discomfort on the continent and have dogged Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) during her visit there this week.

Mr. Libi was returned to American custody in February 2003, when he was transferred to the American detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, according to the current and former government officials. He withdrew his claims about ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda in January 2004, and his current location is not known. A C.I.A. spokesman refused Thursday to comment on Mr. Libi's case. The current and former government officials who agreed to discuss the case were granted anonymity because most details surrounding Mr. Libi's case remain classified.

During his time in Egyptian custody, Mr. Libi was among a group of what American officials have described as about 150 prisoners sent by the United States from one foreign country to another since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks for the purposes of interrogation. American officials including Ms. Rice have defended the practice, saying it draws on language and cultural expertise of American allies, particularly in the Middle East, and provides an important tool for interrogation. They have said that the United States carries

out the renditions only after obtaining explicit assurances from the receiving countries that the prisoners will not be tortured.

Nabil Fahmy, the Egyptian ambassador to the United States, said in a telephone interview on Thursday that he had no specific knowledge of Mr. Libi's case. Mr. Fahmy acknowledged that some prisoners had been sent to Egypt by mutual agreement between the United States and Egypt. "We do interrogations based on our understanding of the culture," Mr. Fahmy said. "We're not in the business of torturing anyone."

In statements before the war, and without mentioning him by name, President Bush, Vice President [Dick Cheney](#), [Colin L. Powell](#), then the secretary of state, and other officials repeatedly cited the information provided by Mr. Libi as "credible" evidence that Iraq was training Qaeda members in the use of explosives and illicit weapons. Among the first and most prominent assertions was one by Mr. Bush, who said in a major speech in Cincinnati in October 2002 that "we've learned that Iraq has trained Al Qaeda members in bomb making and poisons and gases."

The question of why the administration relied so heavily on the statements by Mr. Libi has long been a subject of contention. Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, made public last month unclassified passages from the February 2002 document, which said it was probable that Mr. Libi "was intentionally misleading the debriefers."

The document showed that the Defense Intelligence Agency had identified Mr. Libi as a probable fabricator months before the Bush administration began to use his statements as the foundation for its claims about ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda involving illicit weapons.

Mr. Levin has since asked the agency to declassify four other intelligence reports, three of them from February 2002, to see if they also expressed skepticism about Mr. Libi's credibility. On Thursday, a spokesman for Mr. Levin said he could not comment on the circumstances surrounding Mr. Libi's detention because the matter was classified.

Editors' Note: Dec. 11, 2005, Sunday:

An article on Friday about a prewar Bush Administration assertion of ties between Iraq and Al Qaeda based on statements made by a prisoner while in Egyptian custody described how the prisoner later said he had fabricated the statements to escape harsh treatment. While the article disclosed new information about the handling of the terrorist suspect, it should have acknowledged earlier reporting on the subject by other news organizations, including Newsweek, The Christian Science Monitor and The New Yorker.