

February 2, 2003

THREATS AND RESPONSES: TERROR LINKS; Split at C.I.A. and F.B.I. On Iraqi Ties to Al Qaeda

By JAMES RISEN and DAVID JOHNSTON

The Bush administration's efforts to build a case for war against Iraq using intelligence to link it to Al Qaeda and the development of prohibited weapons has created friction within United States intelligence agencies, government officials said.

Some analysts at the Central Intelligence Agency have complained that senior administration officials have exaggerated the significance of some intelligence reports about Iraq, particularly about its possible links to terrorism, in order to strengthen their political argument for war, government officials said.

At the Federal Bureau of Investigation, some investigators said they were baffled by the Bush administration's insistence on a solid link between Iraq and Osama bin Laden's network. "We've been looking at this hard for more than a year and you know what, we just don't think it's there," a government official said.

The tension within the intelligence agencies comes as Secretary of State Colin L. Powell is poised to go before the United Nations Security Council on Wednesday to present evidence of Iraq's links to terrorism and its continuing efforts to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

Interviews with administration officials revealed divisions between, on one side, the Pentagon and the National Security Council, which has become a clearinghouse for the evidence being prepared for Mr. Powell, and, on the other, the C.I.A. and, to some degree, the State Department and agencies like the F.B.I.

In the interviews, two officials, Paul D. Wolfowitz, deputy defense secretary, and Stephen J. Hadley, deputy national security adviser, were cited as being most eager to interpret evidence deemed murky by intelligence officials to show a clearer picture of Iraq's involvement in illicit weapons programs and terrorism. Their bosses, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and the national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, have also pressed a hard line, officials said.

A senior administration official said discussions in preparation for Mr. Powell's presentation were intense, but not rancorous, and said there was little dissension among President Bush's top advisers about the fundamental nature of President Saddam Hussein's government. "I haven't detected anyone who thinks this a not compelling case," the official said.

Mr. Bush asserted in his State of the Union address this week that Iraq was protecting and aiding Qaeda operatives, but American intelligence and law enforcement officials said the evidence was fragmentary and inconclusive.

"It's more than just skepticism," said one official, describing the feelings of some analysts in the intelligence agencies. "I think there is also a sense of disappointment with the community's leadership that they are not standing up for them at a time when the intelligence is obviously being politicized."

Neither George J. Tenet, the director of central intelligence, nor the F.B.I. director, Robert S. Mueller III, have publicly engaged in the debate about the evidence on Iraq in recent weeks, even as the Bush administration has intensified its efforts to build the case for a possible war.

The last time Mr. Tenet found himself at the center of the public debate over intelligence concerning Iraq was in October, when the Senate declassified a brief letter Mr. Tenet wrote describing some of the C.I.A.'s assessments about Iraq.

His letter stated that the C.I.A. believed that Iraq had, for the time being, probably decided not to conduct terrorist attacks with conventional or chemical or biological weapons against the United States, but the letter added that Mr. Hussein might resort to terrorism if he believed that an American-led attack was about to begin.

Alliances within the group of officials involved have strengthened the argument that Mr. Bush should take a firm view of the evidence. "Wolfowitz and Hadley are very compatible," said one administration official. "They have a very good working relationship."

There were some signs that Mr. Powell might not present the administration's most aggressive case against Iraq when he speaks to the United Nations, leaving such a final definitive statement to the president in some future address.

"You won't see Powell swing for the fences," the official said. "It will not be the end-all speech. The president will do that. The president has to lay it out in a more detailed way."

Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last Thursday that Mr. Powell would not assert a direct link between the Iraqi government and the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

In demonstrating that there are links between Iraq and Al Qaeda, Mr. Powell is expected to focus on intelligence about possible connections between Mr. Hussein, an Islamic militant group that may have produced poisons in a remote region of northern Iraq and a Qaeda terrorist leader, Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. Much of the intelligence has been publicly known for months.

Some of the most recent intelligence related to Mr. Zarqawi centers on charges that he orchestrated the plot on Oct. 28 in Amman, Jordan, in which two Qaeda followers -- under Mr. Zarqawi's direction -- stalked and shot to death Laurence Foley, an American diplomat.

In December, the Jordanian authorities announced that the two men had confessed to killing Mr. Foley and that they had been directed by Mr. Zarqawi.

The connection to the Foley killing was important because the United States had evidence that Mr. Zarqawi, a Jordanian of Palestinian descent, had spent time in Baghdad earlier in 2002. American officials describe Mr. Zarqawi as a major figure in Al Qaeda's leadership and say that after he was wounded in the fighting in Afghanistan after Sept. 11, he made his way to Iraq in the spring of 2002.

He was hospitalized in Baghdad for treatment of his wounds, and then disappeared in August, after Jordanian officials told the Iraqi government they knew he was there. There have been recent reports that he is in hiding in northern Iraq, but that has not yet been confirmed.

But despite Mr. Zarqawi's earlier presence in Baghdad, American officials have no evidence linking Iraqi officials to Mr. Foley's killing, or direct evidence that Mr. Zarqawi is working with the Iraqi government.

"All they know is that he was in the hospital there," one official said.

If he is in northern Iraq, American officials believe that Mr. Zarqawi may be with members of a militant group there called Ansar al-Islam. There is evidence that he has links to the group, and that he may have been working with it to develop poisons for use in terrorist attacks, possibly including a recent plot to poison the food supply of British troops.

But intelligence officials say there is disagreement among analysts about whether there are significant connections between Ansar al-Islam and the Baghdad government. Some administration officials, particularly at the Pentagon, have argued that Ansar al-Islam has close ties to the Iraqi government, but other intelligence officials say there is only fragmentary evidence of such a link.

Intelligence professionals have expressed fewer reservations about the administration's statements concerning Iraq's weapons programs. There is broad agreement within intelligence agencies that Iraq has continued its efforts to develop chemical, biological, and probably nuclear weapons, and that it is still trying to hide its weapons programs from United Nations inspectors.

Officials said the United States had obtained communications intercepts that show Iraqi officials coaching scientists in how to avoid providing valuable information about Iraq's weapons programs to inspectors. At the United Nations, Mr. Powell may also display American satellite photographs showing Iraqi officials moving equipment and materials out of buildings before they can be inspected by the United Nations.

Still, there have been disagreements over specific pieces of intelligence used publicly by the White House to make its case, including the significance of one report that Iraq had imported special aluminum tubes for use in its nuclear weapons program.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday, Mr. Armitage acknowledged that the administration had at times relied on inconclusive reports that had not served to strengthen Washington's case.

He agreed with the suggestion of Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. of Delaware, the committee's ranking Democrat, that the administration should instead stick with the indisputable evidence that Iraq has in the past stockpiled chemical weapons, tried to make biological weapons, and has continued to deceive United Nations inspectors.

"As we used to say in the Navy, KISS, 'Keep it simple, sailor,' " Mr. Armitage said. "Go with your strong points."