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Doubts cast on efforts to link Saddam, al-Qaida

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WASHINGTON — The Bush administration's claim that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had ties to al-Qaida — one of the administration's central arguments for a pre-emptive war — appears to have been based on even less solid intelligence than the administration's claims that Iraq had hidden stocks of chemical and biological weapons.

Nearly a year after U.S. and British troops invaded Iraq, no evidence has turned up to verify allegations of Saddam's links with al-Qaida, and several key parts of the administration's case have either proved false or seem increasingly doubtful.

Senior U.S. officials now say there never was any evidence that Saddam's secular police state and Osama bin Laden's Islamic terrorism network were in league. At most, there were occasional meetings.

Moreover, the U.S. intelligence community never concluded that those meetings produced an operational relationship, American officials said. That verdict was in a secret report by the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence that was updated in January 2003, on the eve of the war.

"We could find no provable connection between Saddam and al-Qaida," a senior U.S. official acknowledged. He and others spoke on condition of anonymity because the information involved is classified and could prove embarrassing to the White House.

The administration's allegations that Saddam still had weapons of mass destruction have been the subject of much greater public and political controversy than its suggestions that Iraq and al-Qaida were in league. They were based on the Iraqi leader's long history of duplicity regarding WMD, which

appeared to be confirmed by spy satellite photographs, defectors and electronic eavesdropping.

But the evidence of Iraq's ties to al-Qaida was always sketchy, based largely on testimony of Iraqi defectors and prisoners, supplemented with limited reports from foreign agents and electronic eavesdropping.

Much of the evidence that's now available indicates that Iraq and al-Qaida had no close ties, despite repeated contacts between the two; that the terrorists who administration officials claimed were links between the two had no direct connection to either Saddam or bin Laden; and that a key meeting between an Iraqi intelligence officer and one of the leaders of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks probably never happened.

A Knight Ridder review of the Bush administration statements on Iraq's ties to terrorism and what's now known about the classified intelligence has found that administration advocates of a pre-emptive invasion frequently hyped sketchy and sometimes false information to help make their case. On two occasions, they neglected to report information that painted a less sinister picture.

The Bush administration has defended its prewar descriptions of Saddam and is calling Iraq "the central front in the war on terrorism," as the president told U.S. troops two weeks ago.

But before the war and since, Bush and his aides made rhetorical links that now appear to have been leaps:

— Vice President Dick Cheney told National Public Radio in January that there was "overwhelming evidence" of a relationship between Saddam and al-Qaida. Among the evidence he cited was Iraq's harboring of Abdul Rahman Yasin, a suspect in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Cheney didn't mention that Iraq had offered to turn over Yasin to the FBI in 1998, in return for a U.S. statement acknowledging that Iraq had no role in that attack. The Clinton administration refused the offer, because it was unwilling to reward Iraq for returning a fugitive.

— Administration officials reported that Farouk Hijazi, a top Iraqi intelligence officer, had met with bin Laden in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 1998 and offered him safe haven in Iraq.

They left out the rest of the story, however. Bin Laden said he'd consider the offer, U.S. intelligence officials said. But according to a report later made available to the CIA, the al-Qaida leader told an aide afterward that he had no intention of accepting Saddam's offer because "if we go there, it would be his agenda, not ours."

— The administration tied Saddam to a terrorism network run by Palestinian Abu Musab al Zaraqawi. That network may be behind the latest violence in Iraq, which killed at least 143 people Tuesday.

But U.S. officials say the evidence that Zaraqawi had close operational ties to al-Qaida appears increasingly doubtful.

Asked for Cheney's views on Iraq and terrorism, vice presidential spokesman Kevin Kellems referred Knight Ridder to the vice president's television interviews Tuesday.

Cheney, in an interview with CNN, said Zaraqawi ran an "al-Qaida-affiliated" group. He cited an intercepted letter that Zaraqawi is believed to have written to al-Qaida leaders, and a White House official who spoke only on the condition of anonymity said the CIA has described Zaraqawi as an al-Qaida "associate."

But U.S. officials say the Zaraqawi letter contained a plea for help that al-Qaida rebuffed. Linguistic analysis of the letter indicates it was written from one equal to another, not from a subordinate to a superior, suggesting that Zaraqawi considered himself an independent operator and not a part of bin Laden's organization.

— Iraqi defectors alleged that Saddam's regime was helping to train Iraqi and non-Iraqi Arab terrorists at a site called Salman Pak, south of Baghdad. The allegation made it into a September 2002 white paper that the White House issued.

The U.S. military has found no evidence of such a facility.

— The allegation that Sept. 11 hijacker Mohamed Atta met in Prague, Czech Republic, with an Iraqi intelligence officer now is contradicted by FBI evidence that Atta was taking flight training in Florida at the time. The Iraqi, Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al Ani, is now in U.S. custody and has told interrogators he never met Atta.

CIA Director George Tenet told the Senate Intelligence Committee last month that there's no evidence to support the allegation.

— Bush, Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell made much of occasional contacts between Saddam's regime and al-Qaida, dating to the early 1990s when bin Laden was based in the Sudan. But intelligence indicates that nothing ever came of the contacts.

"Were there meetings? Yes, of course there were meetings. But what resulted? Nothing," said one senior U.S. official.

The charges that Saddam was in league with bin Laden, and carefully worded hints that he might even have played a role in the Sept. 11 attacks, may have

done more to marshal public and political support for a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq than the claims that Iraq still had chemical and biological weapons and was working to get nuclear ones.

A postwar poll last July by PIPA-Knowledge Networks found that 7 in 10 Americans thought the Bush administration had implied that Saddam was involved in the Sept. 11 attacks. Bush himself never made that claim, but Cheney has kept the allegation alive.

Powell, however, was so unpersuaded by the claims of Iraq-al-Qaida contacts that he rebuffed efforts by Cheney's office, the Pentagon and the White House's National Security Council to include a lengthy listing of them in his February 2003 speech to the U.N. Security Council. Instead, Powell limited himself to a few sentences.

In a major address on the Iraqi threat on Oct. 7, 2002, Bush outlined a series of ties: "We know that Iraq and the al-Qaida terrorist network share a common enemy: the United States of America." He went on to say that Iraq and al-Qaida had high-level contacts over a decade, some al-Qaida leaders who fled Afghanistan went to Iraq and "Iraq has trained al-Qaida members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases."

In his January 2003 State of the Union address, Bush raised the possibility that Saddam "could provide one of his hidden weapons (of mass destruction) to terrorists or help them develop their own."

Yet Tenet had told Congress the previous October that Saddam would take that "extreme step" only if he concluded that he couldn't deter a U.S.-led attack on his country.

Concluded the senior U.S. official: "Did Saddam tolerate terrorists? Yes. Was there any evidence Saddam was involved with 9/11? No."

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