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Posted on Fri, Feb. 13, 2004

Most pre-war information from Iraqi defectors was iffy, officials say

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last updated: January 31, 2008 04:12:49 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. intelligence officials have concluded that almost all of the Iraqi defectors whose information helped make the Bush administration's case against Saddam Hussein exaggerated what they knew, fabricated tales or were "coached" by others on what to say.

As probes expand into the intelligence used to justify the war in Iraq, questions are growing about the defectors' role in building the momentum toward last spring's invasion.

Most of the former Iraqi officials were made available to U.S. intelligence agencies by the Iraqi National Congress, a coalition of exile groups with close ties to the Pentagon and Vice President Dick Cheney's office. The INC had lobbied for years for a U.S. military operation to oust Saddam.

The defectors claimed, among other things, that Saddam had built mobile biological weapons facilities, was rapidly rebuilding his nuclear weapons program and had trained Islamic warriors at a camp south of Baghdad.

None of those allegations has been borne out so far.

At least one defector provided by the INC—an Iraqi engineer named Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri—provided valuable information on Saddam's underground military facilities, U.S. officials said.

But most of the information provided by the INC's defectors "was shaky" at best, said a senior Bush administration official. He and others spoke on condition of anonymity because of the classified information involved.

The Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, which handled the INC-supplied defectors, has since concluded that they provided little worthwhile information on Saddam's weapons programs or alleged ties to Islamic terrorism, a defense official said.

The officials said some of the defectors showed signs of "coaching" because they used similar language. That raised suspicions that the INC had prepped them before their debriefings.

Much of the defectors' testimonies were discounted in the run-up to the war by analysts at the CIA and State Department, which soured on the INC and its leader, Ahmad Chalabi, during the 1990s.

Nonetheless, some of the information found its way into the most critical prewar intelligence assessment on Iraq's illicit weapons program, known as a National Intelligence Estimate; media reports; statements by top U.S. officials and, in one instance, Secretary of State Colin Powell's watershed presentation to the U.N. Security Council in February 2003.

Senior U.S. officials said that despite doubts about the defectors' reports, they continued to be sought by top civilians in the Defense Department and other officials eager to make the case for war.

"These guys were persistent," the senior administration official said of the Iraqi exiles.

Defectors were one of several sources of information on Saddam's Iraq. Their reports were combined with those from human spies, satellite photographs and electronic snooping.

Cheney and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, two principal advocates for a U.S.-led invasion, underscored the importance placed on defectors and other human sources.

In a January 2003 speech, Wolfowitz said, "For a great body of what we need to know, we are very dependent on traditional methods of intelligence—that is to say, human beings who either deliberately or inadvertently are communicating to us."

Cheney, opening the administration's drive for public support for Saddam's ouster, said in an Aug. 26, 2002, speech that "firsthand testimony" from defectors had disclosed that Saddam had resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons.

Those defectors, Cheney said, included Gen. Hussein Kamal, Saddam's son-in-law, who fled to Jordan in 1995 and was murdered when he returned to Baghdad in 1996.

Cheney's assertion, however, conflicts with Hussein's comments in an interview conducted by Rolf Ekeus, the then-head of a U.N. weapons inspection program.

"All weapons—biological, chemical, missile, nuclear—were destroyed," Hussein said, according to an official U.N. transcript of the Aug. 22, 1995, session.

Cheney's office did not explain the apparent discrepancy. Instead, Cheney's spokesman Kevin Kellems referred Knight Ridder on Friday to an interview earlier this month with St. Louis radio station KMOX, in which Cheney stood by his comments about Iraq's nuclear weapons program.

"The fact is that if you look at the statements I made, they track almost perfectly with the National Intelligence Estimate" on Iraq's weapons programs, Cheney told the interviewer. Intelligence is never perfect, Cheney said, adding, "This is a business where you don't have absolute proof on these subjects."

U.S. officials also said Kamal, in his debriefings, made a variety of statements about Iraq's nuclear program, some of which contradicted one another.

Kellems said the vice president's office gets its intelligence in daily briefings by the CIA and "did not receive intelligence briefings on weapons of mass destruction or Baghdad's terror ties from the Iraqi National Congress." However, other officials said information provided by the INC found its way throughout the administration through routine intelligence channels.

In addition, a report issued by the White House on Sept. 12, 2002, said former Iraqi military officers described how Iraq had been training Iraqis and non-Iraqi Arabs in "hijacking planes and trains, planting explosives in cities, sabotage and assassinations" at a secret terrorist facility in Iraq, Salman Pak.

No information has surfaced since the war to support those claims, defense and intelligence officials said.

Sens. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., and Jay Rockefeller IV, D-W.Va., the chairman and vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, announced Thursday that they're expanding a probe into prewar intelligence to include the use of information from the INC.

The CIA already has announced changes in how raw intelligence is shared with intelligence analysts, after it was discovered that a May 2002 alert saying an INC-supplied defector was believed to be fabricating data went unnoticed.

The oversight led the NIE and Powell to claim that Iraq had mobile biological warfare research facilities.

CIA Director George Tenet, in a Feb. 5 speech, said the agency also is "finding discrepancies" in defectors' claims about separate mobile facilities for producing, as opposed to researching, biological agents.

Under the new procedures, analysts will be given more detail about the sources of information provided by the CIA's intelligence-gathering arm, such as whether it comes from exiles. Previously, analysts often didn't have access to that information in order to protect the sources.

Chalabi, now on the U.S.-installed 25-member Iraqi Governing Council, has said publicly that the INC made three defectors available to the U.S. government. They were Saeed, a second individual who provided the information about mobile biological weapons laboratories and a third person, whom Chalabi said U.S. officials had little regard for.

The INC's role, Chalabi said, was simply to introduce the defectors to U.S. specialists and let the Bush administration decide the value of their information.

An INC spokesman didn't return a phone call seeking comment.

Officials declined to disclose how many defectors were interviewed. But the senior administration official said "a few" defectors came from sources other than the INC.

In some cases, the official said, civilians in Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's office would issue an "executive referral," a memorandum ordering the DIA to deal with defectors who were otherwise regarded as questionable.

The DIA, the military's main intelligence arm, was unenthusiastic about taking over the INC defector program, known as the Information Collection Program, which was transferred from the State Department in about August 2002, officials in several departments said.

A State Department official said the transfer occurred after Entifadh Qanbar, the director of the INC's Washington office, wrote a June 2002 memo to Congress outlining plans to cultivate defectors and set up a five- or six-person intelligence unit in Washington to analyze the material.

The proposal convinced the State Department that the program shouldn't be under its purview because it involved intelligence activities, not foreign policy, said the official.

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