

Casting about for a pretext for war

Washington insists Iraqi scientists submit to private interviews

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Amid mounting domestic and international opposition, the Bush administration is increasingly desperate to find a pretext for war against Iraq. With the issue due for debate in the UN Security Council after weapons inspectors present their progress report on Monday, Washington's repeated denunciation of Iraq's "non-cooperation" and "non-compliance" has gone into overdrive.

Lacking evidence that Iraq either has or is seeking to construct so-called weapons of mass destruction, the Bush administration yesterday latched on to the opposition of Iraq's scientists to being interviewed by UN inspectors without the presence of Iraqi officials. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer declared that "Iraq's refusal to allow Iraqi scientists to submit to private interviews" was a "willful act of defiance".

"Iraq has an obligation to comply. This is not a matter for negotiation. This is not a matter for debate. Saddam Hussein has no choice. His refusal is further evidence that Iraq has something to hide," Fleischer stated. "To protect the peace, Iraq must allow and encourage its scientists to participate in private interviews and must do so without delay and without debate."

Fleischer ignored the fact that Iraq had already agreed last Monday, as part of a 10-point pact with UN inspectors, to encourage scientists to grant private interviews. General Hussam Muhammad Amin, Iraq's top liaison official with the inspectors, announced on Thursday that six scientists wanted for interview had refused to speak without the presence of a government official or unless the proceedings were recorded.

An exasperated Amin told reporters: "How can we solve this? Should we put him [the scientist] in prison and say to him: 'Make an interview in private.' This is contrary with his rights and his human rights. This is unrequired indeed." There is every indication, however, that Iraq's refusal to hand over its scientists, despite their objections, is being prepared by the US as a pretext for war.

The clearest sign was a statement yesterday by US Deputy Secretary for Defence Paul Wolfowitz, a right-wing ideologue, whose obsession with invading Iraq stretches back more than a decade. He declared in a speech in New York: "Today, we know from multiple sources that Saddam has ordered that any scientist who cooperates during interviews will be killed, as well as their families. Furthermore, we know that scientists are being tutored on what to say to the UN inspectors and that Iraqi intelligence officers

are posing as scientists to be interviewed by the inspectors."

Like every other claim made by the Bush administration about Iraq's alleged weapons' programs, Wolfowitz's statement was simply a bald assertion, devoid of any evidence. He made no mention of the sources of the information. He did not identify the Iraqi intelligence officers or who they were meant to be impersonating. After years of UN inspections following the 1990-91 Gulf War, all of Iraq's top scientists are well known.

The Hussein regime is certainly not averse to thuggery. But all the evidence in the public arena indicates that it is the UN inspectors, under pressure from Washington, who have attempted to manipulate and bully Iraqi scientists. Only a few scientists have been interviewed. In two cases, those involved have publicly denounced the UN inspection teams for trying to distort their evidence and to coerce them into private interviews.

The first case took place in late December. UN spokesman Hiro Ueki confidently announced in Baghdad on December 27 that International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors had interviewed "a metallurgist from a high visibility state company" who had provided them with "technical details of a military program". He said that the program was being viewed "as a possible prelude to a clandestine nuclear program". Ueki also indicated that UN officials were preparing, for the first time, to take the scientist out of the country for further questioning under the extraordinary terms of UN resolution 1441.

Within hours, however, the UN's claims had begun to unravel. The scientist, Kazem Mijbil, insisted to reporters that he had provided no such information. Plans for him to leave the country were rapidly put on hold. At a press conference the following day, Mijbil branded Ueki's statement as grossly exaggerated, bordering on fabrication. "I strongly deny this," he said. "Frankly I am very disturbed... over these statements because they don't relate to reality."

As a metallurgist, Mijbil was involved in the restoration of aluminium tubes that had corroded since their purchase in the 1980s. He insisted that his company had simply been cleaning the piping, which was used in the production of short-range 81mm missiles permitted under UN resolutions. "Does cleaning an aluminium tube from corrosion with basic elements... lead to a secret program?" he asked.

He said he had refused to be interviewed at the UN headquarters

because he was concerned over what might happen to him and how his testimony might be distorted. Referring to the hundreds of prisoners being detained and interrogated by the US military in Cuba, he said: “I look at this place [UN headquarters] as Guantanamo Bay and I am not a prisoner, I am a free Iraqi man.”

Appealing to his fellow scientists to refuse to go abroad or be interviewed in private, he declared: “My interview was in my country with the presence of the [Iraqi] representative... and you saw what happened in the press. So what will the situation be when someone is interviewed abroad? There will be lots of misunderstandings, fabrications and lies.”

The issue of the tubes was not a minor one. The US has repeatedly claimed that Iraq has imported aluminium tubes in order to construct uranium enrichment devices known as gas centrifuges. When Bush appeared before the UN last September, one of his few concrete claims was that Iraq had attempted to purchase the tubes in order “to enrich uranium for a nuclear weapon”.

Many questions have been raised about this claim. The aluminium tubing is perfect for making 81mm rockets, but not gas centrifuges. As one expert cited in the *Washington Post* explained: “It is technically possible that the tubes could be used to enrich uranium. But you’d have to believe that Iraq deliberately ordered the wrong stock and intended to spend a great deal of time and money reworking each piece.” Moreover, there is no evidence that Iraq has attempted to import other key components, including motors, metal caps and special magnets.

Following Mijbil’s public comments, the UN inspectors were forced into an embarrassing, although little publicised, backdown. In a second public statement to “clarify” his original remarks, Ueki acknowledged that the scientist “was not involved in Iraq’s past nuclear program”. The UN official insisted that he “did not make a judgement” that Iraq had a secret nuclear weapons program but only that Mijbil’s “non-classified information was of interest to the Agency [IAEA].”

In a preliminary report in early January, the IAEA was forced to conclude that the aluminium tubes—both in the country and the attempted imports—were “not directly suitable” for uranium enrichment but were “consistent” with making ordinary artillery rockets.

The second case involved the Iraqi nuclear physicist Faleh Hassan, 55. He was one of two scientists whose homes were searched unannounced on January 17. UN inspectors questioned him and his family and scoured their house for six hours, seizing a large number of documents and papers. At their insistence, Hassan took the inspectors to a farm that he previously owned, and then accompanied them to their hotel. After hours of argument, the team finally agreed to provide Hassan with photocopies of the documents.

Great play was made in the media of the seizure of “3,000 pages of documents, some of them concerning enrichment of uranium with lasers”. IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei insinuated to reporters that the find was further proof of Iraq’s failure to cooperate and to keep its nuclear programs secret. “We shouldn’t have to find these on our own. Why should these documents be in a private home? Why are they not giving them to us?” he asked.

The following day Hassan angrily accused the UN inspectors of “mafia-like behaviour”. While at the farm, Hassan explained, he had been approached by a female inspector, an American, who had offered, out of earshot of Iraqi officials, to provide medical treatment overseas for his sick wife. He, of course, would have to act as an “escort” and submit to questioning over Iraq’s weapons programs.

“We would rather live as beggars in our country than live as kings abroad,” Hassan told the media, implying that the pair had been offered other inducements. He said he would not leave even if instructed to do so by the Iraqi government. “I am not accused of any crime. No one can force me to go somewhere that is not under the control of Iraqi institutions.” He refused to be interviewed alone, saying: “Perhaps they would lock me up and claim that I had asked for political asylum.”

Hassan described the documents as “old, not worth photocopying”. He explained that research into the use of lasers for uranium enrichment had been abandoned in 1988—a point later acknowledged by the UN’s chief inspector Hans Blix. Hassan also offered to go through the documents with IAEA chief ElBaradei “page by page, line by line and even word by word to prove that everything they found is in alignment with what we declared in 1991.”

The statements yesterday by Bush administration officials Fleischer and Wolfowitz reveal that the US will be insisting on even more aggressive and provocative methods—insofar as the UN inspections continue at all. As Fleischer put it, Iraqi scientists must “submit” to private interviews “without delay and without debate”. Already facilities are being prepared for interviews outside the country. This week Cyprus announced that it had agreed to a UN request to act as a venue for inspectors to question Iraqi scientists.



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