

Washington rejected sweeping Iraqi concessions on eve of war

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7 November 2003

On the eve of its invasion of Iraq, carried out without United Nations sanction and in violation of international law, Washington brushed aside Baghdad's offer of sweeping concessions that would have realized nearly all of the Bush administration's publicly stated war aims without the massive loss of life that followed.

The somewhat murky story of the last-ditch Iraqi attempt to forestall military aggression was broken Wednesday by ABC News and *Newsweek* magazine. It involved a back-channel approach by senior Iraqi officials to some of the leading Pentagon architects of the war, using a prominent Lebanese-American businessman as an intermediary.

According to participants in the secret talks, representatives of the Iraqi regime insisted that Baghdad had no weapons of mass destruction—the pretext for the looming US invasion—and offered to allow the deployment of thousands of US troops as well as US weapons inspectors on Iraqi soil to verify this fact.

They further indicated that the Saddam Hussein regime was willing to accept United Nations-supervised national elections within two years, and would agree to support US policy in the region, including Washington's blueprint for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Finally, it offered to grant US energy conglomerates preferential rights to the exploitation of Iraqi oil.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan refused comment Thursday when asked if Bush was informed of the Iraqi offer.

The revelations of the back-channel approaches from Baghdad expose yet another lie of the Bush administration in its drive to war—that the Saddam Hussein regime's intransigence made military action unavoidable. In his nationally televised speech on the eve of the invasion, Bush told the American people: "Should Saddam Hussein choose confrontation, the American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war."

Similarly, after military action had begun, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld claimed that Washington had exhausted every other means. "The American people can take comfort in knowing that their country has done everything humanly possible to avoid war and to secure Iraq's peaceful disarmament," Rumsfeld declared.

Both men were lying. The decision to launch an unprovoked war against Iraq had been taken long before, and there was nothing the regime in Baghdad could do to stop it.

The intermediary contacted in Beirut by Iraqi officials was Imad Hage, the head of American Underwriters Group, an insurance

company with international operations in the US, the Middle East and Africa. Hage, a Christian Maronite, had fled to the US during the Lebanese civil war in 1976, acquiring US citizenship. Returning to Beirut in the 1990s, Hage became a prominent businessman and political figure considered aligned with Washington.

Hage established close ties to intelligence officials, both in the Arab world and the US. Among the latter was a fellow Lebanese-American, Michael Maloof, who worked in the Pentagon as a member of a secret intelligence unit established by Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy. Feith, one of the group of right-wing ideologues brought into the Pentagon's civilian leadership under Bush, set up the unit with the aim of uncovering ties between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda in order to provide a pretext for war. No objective evidence of such links was ever produced.

Through Maloof, Hage was also introduced to Richard Perle, a close protégé of Feith, who was then the chairman of the Defense Policy Board and an influential adviser to the Bush administration. Together with Feith, Perle was one of the principal advocates and architects of the war on Iraq.

Hage was contacted last February in Beirut by an Iraqi official, Hassan al-Obeidi, chief of foreign operations for the country's intelligence service. In an article published November 6 by the *New York Times*, based in part on an interview with Hage, the Lebanese-American is cited as saying that Obeidi insisted Baghdad wanted to cooperate with the Bush administration and could not understand why it was being targeted in the so-called "war on terrorism," since it had no links with Al Qaeda.

"He said if this is about oil, we will talk about US oil concessions," Hage told the *Times*. "If it is about the peace process, then we can talk. If this is about weapons of mass destruction, let the Americans send over their people. There are no weapons of mass destruction." Hage added that Obeidi told him the "Americans can send 2,000 FBI agents to look wherever they wanted." He also raised the offer of holding elections within two years.

The meeting in Beirut was followed a week later by more talks in Baghdad, where Hage met with Lt. Gen. Tahir Jalil Habbush, the director of the Iraqi intelligence service.

"Based on my meeting with this man," Hage told ABC News, "I think an effort was there to avert war. They were prepared to meet with high-ranking US officials." Habbush repeated the offer to

admit US weapons inspectors, including 5,000 American troops, to hold UN-supervised elections, and to approve oil concessions for US companies.

He also offered to turn over Abdul Rahman Yasin, wanted by the FBI in connection with the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Iraqi officials had jailed the US-born Yasin in 1994 after he arrived in Iraq and had repeatedly offered to turn him over to US officials.

Despite having placed Yasin on its most-wanted list and offered a \$25 million reward for information leading to his capture and conviction, Washington repeatedly rebuffed these offers. Since the invasion, Yasin has disappeared, with some US officials suggesting he is active with Islamist forces in the Iraqi resistance.

Hage also met in Baghdad with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz and other top aides to Saddam Hussein.

The *Times* quotes from a three-page memo that Hage faxed to his main Pentagon intelligence contact—Maloof—outlining the Iraqi offer. It included an offer of direct aid to the US in combating terrorism and “full support for any US plan” on the Israeli-Palestinian question. It went on to affirm that “the US will be given first priority as it relates to Iraq oil, mining rights” and that US troops and inspectors would be allowed to enter the country.

Subsequently, Hage met with Perle in London to discuss the Iraqi offer. He told Perle that Iraqi officials were prepared to meet with Perle or any other top US officials to discuss “unconditional terms” for a peaceful resolution of the mounting US war threats. Perle confirmed the meeting in an interview with ABC News.

“Although I was not enthusiastic about the offer, I was willing to meet with the Iraqis,” Perle said. “The United States government told me not to.” Perle added that the approach through Hage was “one of many channels going on,” indicating that similar approaches had been made through the governments of France, Russia and Saudi Arabia.

“It seemed to me there was a genuine offer that was on the table and somebody should have talked, at least talked,” Hage told ABC News in summing up his discussions with the Iraqi and US officials. According to *Newsweek*, the contacts between Hage and Pentagon officials have become the subject of an ongoing probe by congressional investigators into the Bush administration’s handling of intelligence during the buildup to the war against Iraq.

Some US officials “see the meeting, and others that took place overseas involving Pentagon officials, as part of a secretive intelligence operation that was set up by administration hard-liners within the Defense Department and functioned outside the boundaries of the US intelligence community—and without congressional oversight,” the magazine reported. “It was a renegade operation,” says one Democratic investigator.”

Perle and Feith hardly seem the most likely prospects for an Iraqi effort to avert a US invasion. Both men had been identified with the campaign for a US war against Iraq since the 1990s, when they lobbied the Clinton administration to adopt a more aggressive stance toward Baghdad. Both of them are closely identified with the aggressive aims of the right-wing Likud bloc in Israel. After September 11, 2001, they were among the most prominent advocates of using the terrorist attacks as a pretext for invading Iraq and adopting a policy of “preemptive war.”

It may well be that the Pentagon officials were utilizing the Hage contacts as a means of monitoring Iraqi peace initiatives, with the aim of blocking any attempt by other agencies to pursue peace proposals from Baghdad.

Whatever the case, the revelations concerning these Iraqi proposals on the eve of the US invasion underscore the criminal character of both the war and the continuing military occupation of Iraq. Every pretext given for the war has proven a lie, from the nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, to Baghdad’s supposed terrorist ties, to the claims of Iraqi intransigence.

The Bush administration would not accept a negotiated agreement in Iraq no matter what concessions were offered. It was determined to wage a war both to secure its unrestricted control over Iraq’s vast oil wealth and to pursue an agenda of global domination by means of military force. It wanted this war as a means of inaugurating a militarist foreign policy doctrine that claims Washington’s right to employ armed violence against any state that it perceives as even a potential future threat to US interests.

Credible estimates of the Iraqi death toll in the war are placed at 20,000, with the fatalities among US and other “coalition” troops approaching 450. Many thousands more have been wounded. These deaths and injuries, whose numbers grow daily, are the product of an unprovoked war that could have been halted at any time without incurring any threat to the people of the United States.

The principal charge leveled at Nuremberg against the surviving leaders of the German Nazi regime was that of waging an aggressive war. It is clear that the members of the Bush administration who plotted and carried out the war against Iraq are guilty of just such a crime.

The new revelations concerning Iraqi initiatives to prevent this war pose the need for a full and independent investigation into how the war was prepared, so that those who planned and carried it out can be held accountable through impeachment and criminal prosecution. The demand for such an investigation must be raised, together with the call for the complete and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq.



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