

# Saddam wanted secret U.S. talks, officials say

Although a U.S. official says Saddam wanted to avert war, several meetings with Iraqi leaders fell through

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WASHINGTON — Intermediaries for ousted dictator Saddam Hussein made numerous attempts to open secret contacts with the Bush administration to head off a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, but the administration rebuffed or ignored the efforts, U.S. officials said Wednesday.

Early this year, a Lebanese-American businessman, Imad El Haje, relayed word that Saddam would allow U.S. experts and troops into Iraq to verify that he had no weapons of mass destruction, said the officials, who requested anonymity.

El Haje sent his message through a Department of Defense official, F. Michael Maloof, who was involved in a Pentagon effort to find links between Saddam and Osama bin Laden, and Richard Perle, the head of a Pentagon advisory panel that was a leading advocate of invading Iraq.

U.S. officials said none of the approaches went anywhere. They were deemed either fraudulent or attempts by Saddam to stall for time to allow international opposition to a U.S.-led attack to build, they said.

"They were all non-starters because they all involved Saddam staying in power," said a senior administration official, who spoke only on the condition of anonymity because intelligence matters are classified.

The Bush administration publicly refused to negotiate with Saddam. It

demanding that he abide by U.N. resolutions that required Iraq to cooperate unconditionally with U.N. arms inspectors and make a full accounting of its illicit biological, chemical and nuclear weapons programs.

President Bush rejected Saddam's assertions that he had no illicit weapons programs and declared that only the Iraqi leader's unconditional surrender or departure from Iraq could avert war.

A second senior U.S. official said that in the months before the March invasion, individuals, foreign governments and intelligence services contacted the United States with what they claimed were Iraqi offers to discuss Bush's grievances against Saddam.

"Whenever it (an approach) was relatively plausible, we sent word that we were ready to listen," said the second senior U.S. official. "But the Iraqis never showed up."

The first approach came more than a year ago, when self-declared intermediaries for Saddam contacted the CIA and offered to meet in Morocco. The Iraqis never showed up for the meeting, U.S. officials said.

In another instance, Osama al Baz, the national security adviser to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a U.S. ally, sent a message via intermediaries to the State Department that Iraqi officials wanted to discuss U.S. allegations that Saddam was hiding biological and chemical weapons and was supporting al-Qaida and other terrorist groups.

After that approach also went nowhere, the officials said, the Iraqis evidently tried to get through to the Pentagon.

Weeks before the war, another approach was made through El Haje, an aspiring politician in Lebanon and president of the Beirut-based American Un-

derwriters Group, which has an office in Vienna, Va., and extensive business dealings in the Middle East and Africa.

According to a defense official, El Haje contacted Maloof about a month before the war began and said Iraqi officials had asked him to open a secret channel to the Bush administration.

The discussions between El Haje and the Iraqis began in Beirut, but at one point, the businessman went to Baghdad to meet with senior Iraqi officials.

The Iraqi officials included Gen. Tahir Jalil Habbush al Tikriti, Saddam's intelligence chief and the jack of diamonds on the U.S. playing cards depicting the most-wanted members of Saddam's regime, and former deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz.

Saddam wanted to avert a war and was ready to discuss allowing U.S. inspectors and U.S. troops into Iraq to verify his contentions that Iraq was not secretly stockpiling weapons of mass destruction, said the defense official.

"More than 5,000 troops were being proposed," said the defense official. Like the other U.S. officials, the defense official spoke on condition that he was not identified.

The Iraqi offer was conveyed to El Haje because the Iraqis knew he was acquainted with Maloof, who had close ties to hardliners in the Pentagon who were pushing for an invasion, the defense official said.

Maloof and David Wurmser, who now works for Vice President Dick Cheney, oversaw a Pentagon effort to find evidence that Saddam was supporting bin Laden's terrorist operations.

Maloof believed El Haje was conveying a "serious offer" and took his message to other Pentagon officials. They included Jaymie Durnan, the chief of staff to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, a military aide to Undersecretary of Defense for

Policy Douglas Feith and Perle, said the defense official.

Perle agreed to pursue the matter if he received approval from the administration, but the go-ahead never came.

One reason may have been because El Haje was detained at Dulles International Airport, near Washington, last January for trying to carry a .45-caliber handgun out of the United

States without an export license. He was not charged and eventually was permitted to leave the country.

Maloof, a Pentagon veteran and recipient of the Defense Department's Distinguished Civilian Service Award, declined comment when reached by telephone, and Perle was not immediately available.

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