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## Iraq was invaded 'to protect Israel' - US official

By Emad Mekay

WASHINGTON - Iraq under Saddam Hussein did not pose a threat to the United States, but it did to Israel, which is one reason why Washington invaded the Arab country, according to a speech made by a member of a top-level White House intelligence group.

Inter Press Service uncovered the remarks by Philip Zelikow, who is now the executive director of the body set up to investigate the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001 - the 9/11 commission - in which he suggests a prime motive for the invasion just over one year ago was to eliminate a threat to Israel, a staunch US ally in the Middle East.

Zelikow's casting of the attack on Iraq as one launched to protect Israel appears at odds with the public position of US President George W Bush and his administration, which has never overtly drawn the link between its war on the regime of Saddam and its concern for Israel's security.

The administration has instead insisted it launched the war to liberate the Iraqi people, destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and to protect the United States.

Zelikow made his statements about "the unstated threat" during his tenure on a highly knowledgeable and well-connected body known as the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), which reports directly to the president. He served on the board between 2001 and 2003.

"Why would Iraq attack America or use nuclear weapons against us? I'll tell you what I think the real threat [is] and actually has been since 1990 - it's the threat against Israel," Zelikow told a crowd at the University of Virginia on September 10, 2002, speaking on a panel of foreign policy experts assessing the impact of September 11 and the future of the war on al-Qaeda.

"And this is the threat that dare not speak its name, because the Europeans don't care deeply about that threat, I will tell you frankly. And the American government doesn't want to lean too hard on it rhetorically, because it is not a popular sell," said Zelikow.

The statements are the first to surface from a source closely linked to the Bush administration acknowledging that the war, which has so far cost the lives of nearly 600 US troops and thousands of Iraqis, was motivated by Washington's desire to defend the Jewish state.

The administration, which is surrounded by staunch pro-Israel, neo-conservative hawks, is currently fighting an extensive campaign to ward off accusations that it derailed the "war on terrorism" it launched after September 11 by taking a detour to Iraq, which appears to have posed no direct threat to the US.

Israel is Washington's biggest ally in the Middle East, receiving annual direct aid of US\$3-4 billion.

Even though members of the 16-person PFIAB come from outside government, they enjoy the confidence of the president and have access to all information related to foreign intelligence that they need to play their vital advisory role. Known in intelligence circles as "Piffy-ab", the board is supposed to evaluate the nation's intelligence agencies and

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probe any mistakes they make. The unpaid appointees on the board require a security clearance known as "code word" that is higher than top secret.

The national security adviser to former president George H W Bush (1989-93) Brent Scowcroft, currently chairs the board in its work overseeing a number of intelligence bodies, including the Central Intelligence Agency, the various military intelligence groups and the Pentagon's National Reconnaissance Office.

Neither Scowcroft nor Zelikow returned numerous phone calls and e-mail messages from IPS for this story.

Zelikow has long-established ties to the Bush administration. Before his appointment to PFIAB in October 2001, he was part of the current president's transition team in January 2001. In that capacity, Zelikow drafted a memo for National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on reorganizing and restructuring the National Security Council (NSC) and prioritizing its work.

Richard A Clarke, who was counter-terrorism coordinator for Bush's predecessor president Bill Clinton (1993-2001) also worked for Bush senior, and has recently accused the current administration of not heeding his terrorism warnings. Clarke said that Zelikow was among those he briefed about the urgent threat from al-Qaeda in December 2000.

Rice herself had served in the NSC during the first Bush administration, and subsequently teamed up with Zelikow on a 1995 book about the unification of Germany.

Zelikow had ties with another senior Bush administration official - Robert Zoellick, the current trade representative. The two wrote three books together, including one in 1998 on the United States and the Muslim Middle East.

Aside from his position on the 9/11 commission, Zelikow is now also director of the Miller Center of Public Affairs and White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia. His close ties to the administration prompted accusations of a conflict of interest in 2002 from families of victims of the September attacks, who protested his appointment to the investigative body.

In his university speech, Zelikow, who strongly backed attacking the Iraqi dictator, also explained the threat to Israel by arguing that Baghdad was preparing in 1990-91 to spend huge amounts of "scarce hard currency" to harness "communications against electromagnetic pulse", a side-effect of a nuclear explosion that could sever radio, electronic and electrical communications.

That was "a perfectly absurd expenditure unless you were going to ride out a nuclear exchange - they [Iraqi officials] were not preparing to ride out a nuclear exchange with us. Those were preparations to ride out a nuclear exchange with the Israelis," according to Zelikow. He also suggested that the danger of biological weapons falling into the hands of the anti-Israeli Islamic Resistance Movement, known by its Arabic acronym Hamas, would threaten Israel rather than the US, and that those weapons could have been developed to the point where they could deter Washington from attacking Hamas.

"Play out those scenarios," he told his audience, "and I will tell you, people have thought about that, but they are just not talking very much about it".

"Don't look at the links between Iraq and al-Qaeda, but then ask yourself the question, 'gee, is Iraq tied to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the people who are carrying out

suicide bombings in Israel?' Easy question to answer; the evidence is abundant."

To date, the possibility of the US attacking Iraq to protect Israel has been only timidly raised by some intellectuals and writers, with few public acknowledgements from sources close to the administration. Analysts who reviewed Zelikow's statements said that they are concrete evidence of one factor in the rationale for going to war, which has been hushed up.

"Those of us speaking about it sort of routinely referred to the protection of Israel as a component," said Phyllis Bennis of the Washington-based Institute of Policy Studies. "But this is a very good piece of evidence of that."



Others say that the administration should be blamed for not making known to the public its true intentions and real motives for invading Iraq. "They [the administration] made a decision to invade Iraq, and then started to search for a policy to justify it. It was a decision in search of a policy and because of the odd way they went about it, people are trying to read something into it," said Nathan Brown, professor of political science at George Washington University and an expert on the Middle East.

But he downplayed the Israel link. "In terms of securing Israel, it doesn't make sense to me because the Israelis are probably more concerned about Iran than they were about Iraq in terms of the long-term strategic threat," he said.

Still, Brown says that Zelikow's words carried weight. "Certainly his position would allow him to speak with a little bit more expertise about the thinking of the Bush administration, but it doesn't strike me that he is any more authoritative than [Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul] Wolfowitz, or Rice or [Secretary of State Colin] Powell or anybody else. All of them were sort of fishing about for justification for a decision that has already been made," Brown said.

(Inter Press Service)

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