

Baghdad Scrambled to Offer Deal to U.S. as War Loomed

By James Risen

WASHINGTON, Nov. 5 — As American soldiers massed on the Iraqi border in March and diplomats argued about war, an influential adviser to the Pentagon received a secret message from a Lebanese-American businessman: Saddam Hussein wanted to make a deal.

Iraqi officials, including the chief of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, had told the businessman that they wanted Washington to know that Iraq no longer had weapons of mass destruction, and they offered to allow American troops and experts to conduct an independent search. The businessman said in an interview that the Iraqis also offered to hand over a man accused of being involved in the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 who was being held in Baghdad. At one point, he said, the Iraqis pledged to hold elections.

The messages from Baghdad, first relayed in February to an analyst in the office of Douglas J. Feith, the under secretary of defense for policy and planning, were part of an attempt by Iraqi intelligence officers to open last-ditch negotiations with the Bush administration through a clandestine communications channel, according to people involved.

The efforts were portrayed by Iraqi officials as having the approval of President Saddam Hussein, according to interviews and documents.

The overtures, after a decade of evasions and deceptions by Iraq and a number of other attempts to broker last-minute meetings with American officials, were ultimately rebuffed. But the messages raised enough interest that in early March, Richard N. Perle, an influential adviser to top Pentagon officials, met in London with the Lebanese-American businessman, Imad Hage.

According to both men, Mr. Hage laid out the Iraqis' position to Mr. Perle, and he pressed the Iraqi request for a direct meeting with Mr. Perle or another representative of the United States.

"I was dubious that this would work," said Mr. Perle, widely recognized as an intellectual architect of the Bush administration's hawkish policy toward Iraq, "but I agreed to talk to people in Washington."

Mr. Perle said he sought authorization from C.I.A. officials to meet with the Iraqis, but the officials told him they did not want to pursue this channel, and they indicated they had already engaged in separate contacts with Baghdad. Mr. Perle said the response was simple: "The message was, 'Tell them that we will see them in Baghdad.'"

A senior United States intelligence official said this was one of several contacts with Iraqis or with people who said they were trying to broker meetings on their behalf. "These signals came via a broad range of foreign intelligence services, other governments, third parties, charlatans and independent actors," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "Every lead that was at all plausible, and some that weren't, were followed up."

There were a variety of efforts, both public and discreet, to avert a war in Iraq, but Mr. Hage's back channel appears to have been a final attempt by Mr. Hussein's government to communicate directly with United States officials.

In interviews in Beirut, Mr. Hage said the Iraqis appeared intimidated by the American military threat. "The Iraqis were finally taking it seriously," he said, "and they wanted to talk, and they offered things they never would have offered if the build-up hadn't occurred."

Mr. Perle said he found it “puzzling” that the Iraqis would have used such a complicated series of contacts to communicate “a quite astonishing proposal” to the Bush administration.

But former American intelligence officers with extensive experience in the Middle East say many Arab leaders have traditionally placed a high value on secret communications, though such informal arrangements are sometimes considered suspect in Washington.

The activity in this back channel, which was detailed in interviews and in documents obtained by The New York Times, appears to show an increasingly frantic Iraqi regime trying to find room to maneuver as the enemy closes in. It also provides a rare glimpse into a subterranean world of international networking.

The Intermediary in Beirut

The key link in the network was Imad Hage, who has spent much of his life straddling two worlds. Mr. Hage, a Maronite Christian who was born in Beirut in 1956, fled Lebanon in 1976 after the civil war began there. He ended up in the United States, where he went to college and became a citizen.

Living in suburban Washington, Mr. Hage started an insurance company, American Underwriters Group, and became involved in Lebanese-American political circles. In the late 1990's, he moved his family and his company to Lebanon.

Serendipity brought him important contacts in the Arab world and in America. An influential Lebanese Muslim he met while handling an insurance claim introduced him to Mohammed Nassif, a senior Syrian intelligence official and a close aide to President Bashar al-Assad.

On trips back to Washington last year, Mr. Hage befriended a fellow Lebanese-American, Michael Maloof, who was working in the Pentagon as an analyst in an intelligence unit set up by Mr. Feith to look for ties between terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and countries like Iraq. Mr. Maloof has ties to many leading conservatives in Washington, having worked for Mr. Perle at the Pentagon during the Reagan administration.

In January 2003, as American pressure was building for a face-off with Iraq, Mr. Hage's two worlds intersected.

On a trip to Damascus, he said, Mr. Nassif told him about Syria's frustrations in communicating with American officials. On a trip to the United States later that month, Mr. Hage said, Mr. Maloof arranged for him to deliver that message personally to Mr. Perle and to Jaymie Durnan, then a top aide to the deputy defense secretary, Paul D. Wolfowitz. Pentagon officials confirmed that the meetings occurred.

Mr. Perle, a member of the Defense Policy Board at the Pentagon, is known in foreign capitals as an influential adviser to top administration officials.

After Mr. Hage told his contacts in Beirut and Damascus about meeting Mr. Perle, Mr. Hage's influential Lebanese Muslim friend asked Mr. Hage to meet a senior Iraqi official eager to talk to the Americans. Mr. Hage cautiously agreed.

In February, as the United States was gearing up its campaign for a Security Council resolution authorizing force against Iraq, Hassan al-Obeidi, chief of foreign operations of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, arrived in Mr. Hage's Beirut office.

But within minutes, Mr. Hage said, Mr. Obeidi collapsed, and a doctor was called to treat him. “He came to my office, sat down, and in five minutes fell ill,” recalled Mr. Hage. “He looked like a man under enormous stress.”

After being treated, Mr. Obeidi explained that the Iraqis wanted to cooperate with the Americans and could not understand why the Americans were focused on Iraq rather than on countries, like Iran, that have long supported terrorists, Mr. Hage said. The Iraqi seemed desperate, Mr. Hage said, “like someone who feared for his own safety, although he tried to hide it.”

Mr. Obeidi told Mr. Hage that Iraq would make deals to avoid war, including helping in the Mideast peace process. “He said, if this is about oil, we will talk about u.s.

oil concessions,” Mr. Hage recalled. “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.”

Mr. Obeidi said the “Americans could send 2,000 F.B.I. agents to look wherever they wanted,” Mr. Hage recalled.

He said that when he told Mr. Obeidi that the United States seemed adamant that Saddam Hussein give up power, Mr. Obeidi bristled, saying that would be capitulation. But later, Mr. Hage recounted, Mr. Obeidi said Iraq could agree to hold elections within the next two years.

Mr. Hage said Mr. Obeidi made it clear that he wanted to get his message to Washington, so Mr. Hage contacted Mr. Maloof in Washington. “Everything I was hearing, I was telling Mike,” he said.

A few days later, Mr. Hage said, he met Mr. Obeidi at a hotel in downtown Beirut, and Mr. Obeidi repeated the offers of concessions, which he said came from the highest levels of the Iraqi government. Mr. Obeidi seemed even more depressed. “The u.s. buildup was clearly getting to them,” Mr. Hage said.

A Meeting in Baghdad

A week later, Mr. Hage said, he agreed to hold further meetings in Baghdad. When he arrived, he was driven to a large, well-guarded compound, where he was met by a gray-haired man in a military uniform. It was Tahir Jalil Habbush, the director of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, who is No. 16 on the United States list of most wanted Iraqi leaders. Mr. Hage said Mr. Habbush asked him if it was true that he knew Mr. Perle. “Have you met him?”

Mr. Hage said Mr. Habbush began to vent his frustration over what the Americans really wanted. He said that to demonstrate the Iraqis’ willingness to help fight terrorism, Mr. Habbush offered to hand over Abdul Rahman Yasin, who has been indicted in United States in connection with the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Mr. Yasin fled to Iraq after the bombing, and the United States put up a \$25 million reward for his capture.

Mr. Hage said Mr. Habbush offered to turn him over to Mr. Hage, but Mr. Hage said he would pass on the message that Mr. Yasin was available.

Mr. Hage said Mr. Habbush also insisted that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and added, “Let your friends send in people and we will open everything to them.”

Mr. Hage said he asked Mr. Habbush, “Why don’t you tell this to the Bush administration?” He said Mr. Habbush replied cryptically, “We have talks with people.”

Mr. Hage said he later learned that one contact was in Rome between the C.I.A. and representatives of the Iraqi intelligence service. American officials confirm that the meeting took place, but say that the Iraqi representative was not a current intelligence official and that the meeting was not productive.

In addition, there was an attempt to set up a meeting in Morocco between Mr. Habbush and United States officials, but it never took place, according to American officials.

On Feb. 19, Mr. Hage faxed a three-page report on his trip to Baghdad to Mr. Maloof in Washington. The Iraqis, he wrote, “understand the days of manipulating the United States are over.” He said top Iraqi officials, including Mr. Habbush and Tariq Aziz, the deputy prime minister, wanted to meet with American officials.

The report also listed five areas of concessions the Iraqis said they would make to avoid a war, including cooperation in fighting terrorism and “full support for any u.s. plan” in the Arab-Israeli peace process. In addition, the report said that “the u.s. will be given first priority as it relates to Iraq oil, mining rights,” and that Iraq would cooperate with United States strategic interests in the region. Finally, under the heading “Disarmament,” the report said, “Direct u.s. involvement on the ground in disarming Iraq.”

Mr. Hage's messages touched off a brief flurry of communications within the Pentagon, according to interviews and copies of e-mail messages obtained by The Times.

The Rebuff in Washington

In an e-mail on Feb. 21 to Mr. Durnan, the Wolfowitz aide, Mr. Maloof wrote that Mr. Perle "is willing to meet with Hage and the Iraqis if it has clearance from the building," meaning the Pentagon.

In an e-mail response, Mr. Durnan said: "Mike, working this. Keep this close hold." In a separate e-mail to two Pentagon officials, Mr. Durnan asked for background information about Mr. Hage. "There is some interesting stuff happening overseas and I need to know who and what he is," he wrote in one e-mail.

Mr. Hage had impressive contacts, but there was one blemish on his record: In January he had been briefly detained by the F.B.I. at Dulles Airport in Washington when a handgun was found in his checked luggage. He said he did not believe it was a security violation because it was not in his carry-on luggage, and the authorities allowed him to leave after a few hours.

Senior Pentagon officials said Mr. Durnan relayed messages he received from Mr. Maloof to the appropriate officials at the Pentagon, but they said that Mr. Durnan never discussed the Hage channel to the Iraqis with Mr. Wolfowitz. (In May, Mr. Maloof, who has lost his security clearances, was placed on paid administrative leave by the Pentagon, for reasons unrelated to the contacts with Mr. Hage.)

Mr. Hage continued to hear from the Iraqis and passed on their urgency about meeting Mr. Perle or another representative of the United States. In one memo sent to other Pentagon officials in early March, Mr. Maloof wrote: "Hage quoted Dr. Obeidi as saying this is the last window or channel through which this message has gone to the United States. Hage characterized the tone of Dr. Obeidi as begging."

Working through Mr. Maloof, Mr. Hage finally arranged to meet with Mr. Perle in London in early March. The two met in an office in Knightsbridge for about two hours to discuss the Iraqi proposals, the men said. Mr. Hage told Mr. Perle that the Iraqis wanted to meet with him or someone from the administration.

Mr. Perle said he subsequently contacted a C.I.A. official to ask if he should meet with the Iraqis. "The answer came back that they weren't interested in pursuing it," Mr. Perle said in an interview, "and I was given the impression that there had already been contacts."

Mr. Perle now plays down the importance of his contact with Mr. Hage. He said he found it difficult to believe that Saddam Hussein would make serious proposals through that kind of channel. "There were so many other ways to communicate," he said. "There were any number of governments involved in the end game, the Russians, French, Saudis."

Nonetheless, Mr. Hage continued to deliver messages from the Iraqis to Mr. Maloof.

In one note to Mr. Perle in mid-March, Mr. Maloof relayed a message from Mr. Hage that Mr. Obeidi and Mr. Habbush "were prepared to meet with you in Beirut, and as soon as possible, concerning 'unconditional terms.'" The message from Mr. Hage said, "Such a meeting has Saddam Hussein's clearance."

No meetings took place, and the invasion began on March 20. Mr. Hage, speaking in Beirut, wonders what might have happened if the Americans had pursued the back channel to Baghdad.

"At least they could have talked to them," he said.