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Iraq-Terrorism Link Continues To Be Problematic

No evidence has come up tying Hussein to 9/11, but the war itself seems to have triggered attacks.

By Greg Miller, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — In describing Iraq as the "central front" in the U.S.-declared war on terrorism, President Bush was sounding a theme that continues to resonate powerfully with the American people — even as some in the counter- terrorism community increasingly wonder whether the assertion is true mainly because the American invasion made it so.

The president invoked the terrorism theme repeatedly in his speech to the nation Sunday night, portraying the invasion of Iraq as part of the U.S. response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

To have reacted otherwise, he suggested, would have reinforced the image of the United States as reluctant to confront terrorism head on, and would have imperiled more American lives.

"We have carried the fight to the enemy," Bush said. "We are rolling back the terrorist threat to civilization, not on the fringes of its influence but at the heart of its power."

Iraq, it was clear the president meant, was within that "heart" of power.

Tying Iraq to the war on terrorism has become crucial to the Bush administration's appeal for continued public support, particularly with the failure so far to find banned weapons and the ongoing turmoil that is undercutting visions of a swift transition to democracy that might spread across the Middle East.

But the terrorism link is problematic. The administration has yet to prove that deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had any complicity in the Sept. 11 attacks, or even any significant relationship with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. For that reason, some counter- terrorism experts challenge Bush's characterization.

"I do think this argument about terrorism is disingenuous," said James Steinberg, vice president and director of foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution, a nonpartisan public policy center in Washington. "This wasn't the place you had to confront Al Qaeda. They weren't there, and this is not what that war was about."

Meanwhile, the war has attracted foreign fighters to Iraq, Al Qaeda members reportedly among them, U.S. officials say. Some counter-terrorism officials and experts are expressing concern that the war could incite a new generation of terrorists.

White House officials bristled at the suggestion that the war in Iraq had exacerbated the terrorism problem.

National security advisor Condoleezza Rice argued the opposite Monday, saying Al Qaeda sees U.S.

involvement in Iraq precisely the way the administration would like the public to: as a potentially mortal blow to terrorist forces.

A transformed Iraq "is going to be the death knell for terrorism," Rice said on NBC's "Today" show. "And that's why foreign fighters are now coming to Iraq. Even though we don't know the numbers in which they're coming, they clearly understand that a victory for the peace in Iraq, like the military victory we've had there, will mean that their goals and their strategies will be severely undermined."

Bush's speech and Rice's remarks represent a new tack by the White House: a concerted effort to quiet second-guessing about the campaign, cast the effort as part of a broader anti-terrorism cause and remind the public of the outcome's stakes.

In his speech, Bush used variations on the word "terror" at least two dozen times.

In so doing, Bush was playing to an American audience that already seems convinced. Polls have consistently showed a majority believing that the deposed Iraqi dictator played a role in the Sept. 11 attacks, despite the lack of evidence and even skepticism voiced by intelligence agencies.

The White House effort comes at a critical juncture: U.S. soldiers are still being attacked in Iraq, anti-coalition violence is escalating, and reconstruction and military costs are ballooning.

The new White House push marks something of a departure from the administration's case before the war, when it emphasized Iraq's alleged stocks of banned chemical and biological weapons.

Bush was careful in the way he couched his statements Sunday. He said the United States acted in Iraq, "where the former regime sponsored terror, possessed and used weapons of mass destruction."

Few counter-terrorism experts dispute that Iraq sponsored terrorism. Hussein's government was said to have paid out \$25,000 to families of Palestinian suicide bombers.

But evidence of ties to Al Qaeda were flimsy at best. And the Al Qaeda allegations were never as prominent in the White House's case for war as Iraq's alleged stocks of weapons of mass destruction, its flouting of U.N. sanctions, and the argument that installing a democratic regime could transform the Middle East.

Some experts and U.S. officials believe that the war against Iraq has weakened the war on terrorism, distracting attention and sapping military and intelligence resources that had been trained against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere.

Whatever the Iraq-terrorism nexus was before the war, several experts said it was indisputable now.

"In a sense, Iraq has become the central front, as Bush said," said Bruce Hoffman, a counterterrorism expert in the Washington office of Rand Corp., an independent public policy center based in Santa Monica. "The contest there will have a profound effect on [the war on terrorism]. Our ability to stabilize Iraq and bring democracy would certainly be a positive and salutary development. And that's why the forces of terrorism are marshaling their efforts to challenge us in Iraq."

Bush blamed the turmoil on terrorists "desperately trying to undermine Iraq's progress." Some, he said, are "foreign terrorists who have come to Iraq to pursue their war on America and other free nations."

Senior FBI officials said it was too soon to tell whether Islamic militants affiliated with Al Qaeda played a role in the three most significant bombings in Iraq in recent months — the attacks on the Jordanian Embassy, the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad and a Shiite Muslim mosque in Najaf.

Larry Mefford, the FBI's head of all counter-terrorism programs, said that "it's under discussion" as to who was responsible for the bombings and whether they were related.

A U.S. congressional official with expertise in Al Qaeda and Middle East terrorism issues said evidence clearly indicated that Iraq was now attracting large numbers of Islamic militants who support Al Qaeda.

"It is a significant number of people, in the low thousands," said the congressional official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. He said it was nearly impossible to tell whether any were high-level Al Qaeda members or merely sympathizers who lack the training and motivation to carry out large-scale attacks.

Times staff writer Josh Meyer contributed to this report.