

Niger and Iraq: the War's biggest Lie?

By [Neil McKay](#)

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Investigation: Neil Mackay reveals why everyone now accepts that claims Saddam Hussein got uranium from Africa are fraudulent ... except, that is, Britain's beleaguered prime minister and his Cabinet supporters

In February 1999, Wissam Al Zahawie, the Iraqi ambassador to the Holy See in Rome, set off on a series of diplomatic visits to several African countries, including Niger. This trip triggered the allegations that Iraq was trying to buy tons of uranium from Niger — a claim which could yet prove the most damning evidence that the British government exaggerated intelligence to bolster its case for war on Iraq .

Some time after the Iraqi ambassador's trip to Niger, the Italian intelligence service came into possession of forged documents claiming Saddam was after Niger uranium. We now know these documents were passed to MI6 and then handed by the British to the office of US Vice-President Dick Cheney . The forgeries were then used by Bush and Blair to scare the British and Americans and to box both Congress and Parliament into supporting war. There are an increasing number of claims suggesting Bush and Blair knew these documents were forged when they used them as evidence that Saddam Hussein was putting together a nuclear arsenal.

The truth behind claims that Blair's government 'sexed up' intelligence reports that Saddam could mobilise weapons of mass destruction in 45 minutes may never be known, but the Niger forgeries lie like a smoking gun covered in Britain's fingerprints. At some point Tony Blair is going to have to answer questions about what the British government and MI6 were up to.

The fact that the documents were forged matters less than the purpose to which they were put. On September 24, 2002, Blair's dossier Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government said: 'There is intelligence that Iraq has sought the supply of significant quantities of uranium from Africa. Iraq has no active civil nuclear power programme of nuclear power plants and, therefore, has no legitimate reason to acquire uranium.'

On January 28, 2003, Bush, in his State of the Union address, said: 'The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.' Bush didn't stop there — later, there was talk of 'mushroom clouds' unless Saddam was taken out.

It was the International Atomic Energy Agency which rumbled the documents as forgeries — a task that their experts were able to complete in just a matter of hours. Here are just four examples of how easy it was to work out the documents were, as one intelligence source

said, 'total bullshit':

1. In a letter from the President of Niger a reference is made to the constitution of May 12, 1965 — but the constitution is dated August 9, 1999;
2. Another letter purports to be signed by Niger's foreign minister, but bears the signature of Allele Elhadj Habibou, the minister between 1988-89;
3. An obsolete letterhead is used, including the wrong symbol for the presidency, and references to state bodies such as the Supreme Military Council and the Council for National Reconciliation are incompatible with the letter's date;
4. It wasn't until just before the war began that Mohamed El Baradei, IAEA director-general, told the UN Security Council on March 7 that his team and 'outside experts', had worked out that 'these documents ... are in fact not authentic'.

Exactly who was behind the forgeries is unclear but the finger of suspicion points towards some disaffected or bribed official in Niger. What looks more certain is that Bush and Blair were warned the documents were rubbish before El Baradei told the UN. The IAEA says it sought evidence about the Niger connection from Britain and America immediately after the US issued a state department factsheet on December 19, 2002, headed 'Illustrative Examples of Omissions from the Iraqi Declaration to the United Nations Security Council'. In it, under the heading 'Nuclear Weapons', it reads: 'The declaration ignores efforts to procure uranium from Niger. Why is the Iraqi regime hiding their uranium procurement?' But the IAEA, despite repeatedly begging the UK and US for access to papers, wasn't given any documents until February 2003 — six weeks later.

Well before the IAEA rained on the pro-war parade, the CIA was telling its masters in the Bush administration that the British intelligence on the Niger connection was nonsense. Vice-President Dick Cheney's office received the forged evidence in 2002 — before Bush's State of the Union address on January 28 this year — and passed it to the CIA. The CIA then dispatched former US ambassador Joseph C Wilson to Africa to check out the claim. Wilson came back saying the intelligence was unreliable and the CIA passed Cheney the assessment. Nevertheless, Bush kept the claim in his speech, and Cheney said, just days before the war began in March, that: 'We know (Saddam's) been absolutely trying to acquire nuclear weapons, and we believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.' He also poured scorn on the IAEA for saying the documents were forged. 'I think Mr El Baradei frankly is wrong ... (The IAEA) has consistently underestimated or missed what it was Saddam Hussein was doing. I don't have any reason to believe they're any more valid this time than they've been in the past.'

Wilson said it was Cheney who forced the CIA to try to come up with a credible threat from Iraqi nukes. 'I have little choice but to conclude that some of the intelligence related to Iraq's nuclear weapons programme was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat. A legitimate argument can be made that we went to war under false pretences,' he wrote. Wilson also said: 'It really comes down to the administration misrepresenting the facts on an issue that was a fundamental justification for going to war. It begs the question: 'What else are they lying about?'

Wilson is no rogue official. He was lauded by George Bush Snr for 'fighting the good fight' after he became the last US diplomat to confront Saddam in the run-up to the first Gulf war. The irony isn't lost on Wilson, who says: 'I guess he didn't realise that one of these days I would carry that fight against his son's administration.'

Greg Thielmann, director of the State Department's Office of Strategic, Proliferation and Military Issues, says the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research ruled the Niger connection implausible and told US Secretary of State Colin Powell. Thielmann also said Iraq posed no nuclear threat, and Team Bush distorted intelligence to fit its drive for war. Richard Kerr, a former CIA deputy director now leading a review of the agency's pre-war intelligence on Iraqi WMDs, says intelligence was ambiguous and the CIA was under pressure from the Bush administration.

The CIA, in what one British intelligence source described as a 'wise attempt at an ass-saving manoeuvre', also tried to have reference to Iraq's uranium links to Niger deleted from Bush's State of the Union address. CIA officials say they 'communicated significant doubts to the administration about the evidence'. Condoleezza Rice, Bush's national security adviser, disputes the claim, saying the CIA cleared the reference made by Bush.

The CIA also tried to save Blair's ass too. In September, before publication of the UK dossier citing the Niger connection, the CIA tried to persuade Britain not to use the claim. CIA figures say the agency was consulted by the UK and 'recommended against using that material'. Blair, however, continues to defend the allegation, claiming the UK has separate intelligence — or 'non-documentary evidence' — to back up the Niger claim, proving Britain wasn't solely reliant on the forgeries. That's quite a different tack to the White House, which shamefacedly admitted on Monday that Bush's uranium claim was based on faulty British intelligence and shouldn't have been included in the State of the Union address. But Bush is determined not to find himself in the same situation as Blair — facing calls for his resignation over claims that he lied. On Friday, CIA director George Tenet said he was to blame for Bush's use of the bogus uranium claim. He said the insertion was a 'mistake', the CIA cleared the speech and 'the President had every reason to believe the text presented to him was sound'. But that doesn't tally with high-level intelligence that the Niger claim was written into the President's Daily Brief — one of the most top-level intelligence assessments in the US, prepared by the CIA and given to Bush and other very senior officials.

Also significant was the refusal by Colin Powell to use the uranium claim when he addressed the UN on February 5 calling for war. On Thursday, Powell said it was not 'sufficiently reliable'. With Bush trying to get off the hook, Blair looks as if he could be twisting in the wind — unless he has this 'other evidence' to back up the Niger connection. It should be pointed out that it would be extremely difficult for Niger to sell uranium in quantities large enough to be weaponised as its mines are controlled by France and its entire output goes to France, Japan and Spain. Experts say it couldn't be smuggled out unnoticed. One western diplomat said: 'As far as I know, the only other evidence Britain has about the Niger connection is based on intelligence coming from other western countries which saw the same forgeries. Blair's claim that he has other evidence is nonsense. These foreign intelligence agencies are basing their claims on the same forgeries as the Brits.'

The diplomat's accusations tally with a letter sent in April, before the White House climbdown, by the State Department to Democrat House of Representative's member Henry Waxman, who has been demanding answers on the deception carried out against the American and British people. In it, the State Department admits that it received intelligence

from the UK and another 'western European ally' — which many believe to be Italy — that Iraq was trying to buy Niger uranium. But it adds: 'not until March 4 did we learn that, in fact, the second western European government had based its assessment on the evidence already available to the US that was subsequently discredited'. In other words, as one intelligence source said: 'It was based on the same crap the British used'. Given the letter is dated April 29, this information invites the question: why did it take until last week for the White House to admit the Niger connection was rubbish?

Another State Department letter to Waxman makes the astonishing admission that when America handed the Niger documents to the IAEA they included the qualification 'we cannot confirm these reports and have questions regarding some specific claims' — hardly the same tune that Bush and Blair were singing with their claims that Saddam was chasing down Niger uranium.

We know that Blair's 'other' evidence backing the Niger connection includes second-hand or even third-hand intelligence — and that it doesn't come from the UK. Nor has this intelligence been passed to the IAEA (in accordance with UN resolution 1414). The Foreign Office says: 'In the case of uranium from Niger, we did not have any UK-originated intelligence to pass on.'

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw says the Niger uranium claim was based on 'reliable evidence', which was not shared with the US. Although the Foreign Affairs Select Committee hasn't seen the evidence either, Straw told its chairman, Donald Anderson, the 'good reasons' for withholding the intelligence from the US in a private session. Blair won't say why the information is being kept under wraps, but he tells the nation there is no reason to doubt its credibility.

Foreign Office minister Mike O'Brien said on June 10 that all relevant information on Iraqi WMDs had been sent to weapons inspectors — but less than a month later he was contradicted by another Foreign Office minister, Denis MacShane, saying the UK didn't give the IAEA any information on Iraq seeking uranium. One senior western diplomat told the Sunday Herald: 'There were more than 20 anomalies in the Niger documents — it is staggering any intelligence service could have believed they were genuine for a moment.'

'I know that the IAEA told Britain and America, two weeks before El Baradei made his statement to the UN in March, that the documents were forgeries, that the IAEA was going to publicly state the documents were faked. At that point, the IAEA gave them a chance — they asked the US and UK if they had any other evidence to back up the claim apart from the Niger forgeries. Britain and America should have reacted with shock and horror when they found that the documents were fake — but they did nothing, and there was no attempt to dissuade the IAEA from its course of action.'

'The IAEA had said it would follow up any other evidence pointing towards a Niger connection. If the UK and US had had such evidence they could have forwarded it and shut the IAEA up — El Baradei would never have gone public if that had happened. My analysis is that Britain has no other credible evidence.' The source added: 'The weapons inspectors have friends in the CIA and the State Department. They made sure the documents made their way to the IAEA as they knew fine well they'd be exposed as forgeries.'

'If I was prosecuting someone in a court of law and I brought in what I knew to be forgeries in an attempt to convict you, the case would be thrown out immediately and it'd be me in

the dock. The case wasn't thrown out against Iraq, however, and what we are left with is an ominous sense of the way intelligence was treated to promote war. There are only two conclusions: one is that Britain has intelligence but kept it from the weapons inspectors, which they should not have done under international law, or that they don't have a thing. If they did have intelligence, then why not show it to the world now the war is over'.

An IAEA source said the issue was 'now a matter for the UK and the USA to deal with'. The IAEA, as well as UNMOVIC inspectors, feel discredited and humiliated after their bruising encounters with the UK and US. One UN diplomat said: 'They're bitter, but perhaps now they may have some solace as the truth seems to be coming out. It's obvious that we could have done this without a war — but the evidence shows war would have happened regardless of what the inspectors could have done as that was the wish of Bush and Blair. Everyone, it seems, was working for peace — except them.'

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