

ANALYSIS

Iraq's 'Dr. Germs' will be on UN's 'most wanted' list

BRITISH-TRAINED SCIENTIST WAS KEY IN BIOWAR PROGRAM

'I can't imagine anyone less likely to have become involved in such things'

Ed Blanche
Special to The Daily Star

When UN inspectors return to Iraq to hunt for the weapons of mass destruction Saddam Hussein swears he doesn't have, one of the first people they're going to want to question is a petite 46-year-old mother with a PhD from Britain's University of East Anglia. Rihab Taha headed Saddam's biological weapons program for many years and may still do so. And even if she doesn't, she has a unique knowledge of its dark secrets.

The UN teams who worked in Iraq before they were withdrawn in December 1998 called her "Dr. Germs" and believe that her witch's brew of deadly toxins and poison may have been tested on human guinea pigs – helpless prisoners held in Saddam's Gulag, the chain of prison camps that spread across Iraq to house political dissidents and those even suspected of speaking against the regime. Despite the amnesty that Saddam announced with great fanfare a few weeks ago, many of those camps are probably still in existence.

Taha and another British-trained scientist, General Amer Saadi, who obtained a master's in chemistry from Oxford University, were instrumental in building up Saddam's covert biological warfare program from small-scale research into a network of factories that by the late 1980s were producing vast amounts of deadly germs, toxins and nerve agents.

Both are still considered to be key figures in Saddam's quest to arm himself with weapons of mass destruction. Taha is married to Iraq's oil minister, Lieutenant General Amer Mo-

Wife of powerful oil minister acquired reputation for throwing tantrums

hammed Rashid, an engineer who was a prime mover in developing Baghdad's weapons programs. Oddly enough, it was the UN that brought them together – they met in New York in 1993 during talks on UN-Iraqi relations. Rashid divorced his wife and married Taha, who three years later received an award from Saddam for "scientific achievement."

UN officials maintain that despite the success the inspectors had before the end of 1998 in tracking down much of Saddam's secret nuclear, chemical, biological and missile programs, they believe that much of the biological work remains undiscovered. Richard Butler, the tough-talking Australian who headed the UN inspections teams for two years before they were withdrawn, says the deadly germ stocks that Saddam is still believed to have are the most mysterious and dangerous weapons in his arsenal because they are the easiest and cheapest to manufacture and can be deployed with less difficulty than others.

Indeed, Western intelligence agencies consider the greatest immediate threat from Iraq to be



Dismantled equipment at a former biowar site: Saddam has had four years to put his weapons programs back together

its biological warfare program, which the Americans claim has been expanding since the UN inspectors left and which now employs mobile production facilities that are difficult to locate and track. According to Ewen Buchanan, formerly the spokesman for the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) that was tasked with tracking down and dismantling Saddam's secret weapons programs, 30 tons of biowar agents remain unaccounted for by the Iraqis.

This includes 1,900 liters of botulinum toxin, the poisonous bacteria that causes botulism; 8,500 liters of anthrax; two tons of aflatoxins, which produce liver cancer; and clostridium, better known as gas gangrene. Thousands of chemical warfare munitions also remain unaccounted for, along with some 600 tons of precursors that could make 200 tons of VX nerve agent, a few drops of which can kill a human in minutes. Iraqi defectors claim the Iraqis had loaded six missile warheads with VX before the 1991 Gulf War.

Taha's former teachers at East Anglia recall her fondly, although they are amazed and bewildered that she wound up making lethal poisons for Saddam Hussein. "She was absolutely charming," said Dr. John Turner, who supervised her for four years before she graduated in 1984. "She was a model student, hard working and very dedicated to her studies."

After Taha returned to Iraq, she joined the staff at Al-Muthanna, a weapons research center 100 kilometers north of Baghdad, just as the bioweapons program was getting started in 1985. How she was recruited, or why, is not clear. But the way the UN inspectors heard it, Al-Muthanna's director got a phone call one day telling him to hire this "brilliant PhD and he did."

She and Turner exchanged Christmas cards for a few years before losing touch. Turner said that when he found out what she was doing, in the mid-1990s, he was "absolutely flabbergasted. Of all the students

I've ever had I can't imagine anyone less likely to have become involved in such things."

The UN inspectors who struggled to uncover Iraq's biowar infrastructure remember her less fondly. They say she lied through her teeth, repeatedly telling her inquisitors that the military-financed research she had conducted was purely to find ways of protecting Iraqis against disease. Normally mild-mannered, she was accused of exploding into a rage or bursting into tears when the questioning became too intense, screaming and hurling chairs around the room before storming out.

Some inspectors said her behavior was so outrageous that they believe it was staged to disrupt questioning; some even suspected that she did not have the clout Baghdad wanted them to believe, although she was clearly a leading researcher. But whether or not she was, or is, as important as she was made out to be, she and others like her form a brain trust that is the core of Saddam's biowar program.

Initially she claimed that all the biological agents and weapons that her organization had produced before 1991 were destroyed following the Gulf War. All the time she was supervising a secret germ factory at Al-Hakam, on the banks of the Tigris River 60 kilometers southwest of Baghdad. When the UN inspections began in 1991, she insisted that the innocuous, rambling desert complex covering 18 square kilometers produced protein for chicken feed.

It took the UN teams four years to uncover the lie and discover that Al-Hakam was the key to Iraq's biowar program, where mass production of Bacillus anthracis – possibly as much as 500,000 liters of anthrax and botulinum toxin – was started as far back as 1989.

Until 1995, the inspectors had concentrated primarily on exposing Saddam's nuclear, missile and chemical weapons programs. Following information from high-level defectors like General Waffiq al-Samarrai, the

former head of military intelligence, and the late Hussein Kamel al-Majid, Saddam's son-in-law and head of the military industrialization program, they discovered the extent of the biowar program at Al-Hakam, Al-Muthanna and other sites.

Saddam's bioweapons program was supplied in almost every aspect by US and European companies and the governments of the countries involved were well aware, almost from the start, of what the Iraqis were doing. But he was fighting Iran, so they took his billions and did nothing to stop him – until he invaded Kuwait. By then, his weapons programs had

Western analysts believe biological arms may pose greatest threat

become a secret industry in which most of the key figures, like Taha, were graduates of Western universities.

Taha's mentor in her early years with the biowar program was Abdul Nassir Hindawi, its architect. He received a PhD in microbiology from Mississippi State University in 1969 and, according to those who should know, had inspired Saddam to launch a full-blown biowar program by whispering in his ear about how gas and germs would win Iraq easy victories over Iran. This was the man who bears the responsibility for the atrocity at Halabja, the Kurdish town where more than 5,000 men, women and children were killed by Iraqi poison gas on March 16, 1988. The Kurds called it "our Hiroshima."

Hindawi was arrested by Saddam's secret police in March 1998, apparently as he was about to defect. The Iraqis gave the inspectors eight biowar documents they said he was carrying, but it turned out that the information contained in seven of them was already known to the UN. The contents of the eighth have never been disclosed.

There were reports in early 1999 that Hindawi had, in fact, been feeding information to US intelligence for some time; that he had been arrested by the Iraqis several months before his apparent bid to defect and "turned" – forced to continue contact with his handlers but to pass on data that was false or of little value.

Had Hindawi, who was then in his 70s, managed to escape, he would probably have had important data to give the UN. Indeed, in early 1998, Richard Spertzel, UNSCOM's chief biological officer, was reported to have let slip that the inspectors were "on to something very big, very significant."

He didn't say what that was, but it was then that Saddam embarked on his final confrontation with the inspectors that led to their withdrawal in December 1998 prior to a four-day US-British aerial blitz.

What Saddam has been up to since then is anyone's guess. But Western governments are convinced he has revived his weapons programs. The argument runs that he considers his bioweapons indispensable since, apart from the estimated \$35 billion he spent developing his covert programs he has foregone potential oil revenues of around \$180 billion since 1991 by refusing to cooperate with the UN. Since it's unlikely he would initiate a military confrontation against him, he's more likely to use his bioweapons to retaliate for any large-scale military action taken against him – like a US invasion.

So when the new UN teams do go back into Iraq, the knowledge that Taha and her colleagues possess would be vital in heading off a potentially catastrophic showdown. The UN has suggested that rather than laboriously hunting for hidden weapons and equipment, scientists like Taha should be taken out of Iraq, with their families, so that the regime cannot intimidate them into silence. But if Saddam permits that, he's as good as lost the game.

Exiles put off meeting on post-Saddam regime – again

Visa trouble, rivalries plague squabbling groups

CAIRO: Exiled Iraqi opposition groups have again postponed a conference planned this month in Belgium to discuss their possible role in toppling Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

In a statement sent to The Associated Press in Cairo on Thursday, a preparatory committee said it is putting off the conference, scheduled for Nov. 22 in Brussels, Belgium for two weeks, in part because most of the delegates have not yet received Belgian visas.

Six major opposition groups, who refused to work together in the past, have been planning the conference. In addition to discussing their role in any US-led invasion of Iraq, delegates also were expected to choose a committee that might be the basis of

an interim government for a post-Saddam Iraq.

Rivalries and internal fighting over power-sharing after "regime change" have delayed the conference, originally scheduled for September.

A major obstacle is a demand by Ahmed Chalabi, a leader of the US-backed Iraqi National Congress, to enlarge the conference by some 300 INC members, trying to bring more of his supporters to a gathering expected to be dominated by more powerful political rivals.

Kanan Makiya, another key dissident and a Chalabi ally, has written the US State Department asking it to intervene to stop the conference, which he says is dominated by a few groups and in particular ex-

cludes liberal-minded, independent dissidents.

The United States has urged Iraqi opposition groups to develop plans for governing their nation if Saddam is overthrown. In a recent letter to exiled Iraqi opposition leaders, US Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman pressed the dissidents to speed up the convening of a broad conference on Iraq's future.

Grossman said the proposed conference should choose a committee to consult with all sectors of Iraqi society about the country's future should Saddam be ousted.

The opposition is split along sectarian, ethnic, clan and political lines. Rivalries have grown more intense with the prospect of a war to oust Saddam. – AP

COMMENTARY BY GHASSAN AL-ATIYYAH

American discord undercuts planned Iraqi opposition conference

Last Aug. 9, six prominent Iraqi opposition figures – Abdulaziz al-Hakim representing the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI); Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK); Hoshiyar Zibari representing the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP); Ahmed Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress (INC); Iyad Allawi of the Iraqi National Accord (INA); and Sharif Ali bin al-Hussein of the Constitutional Monarchy Movement – arrived in Washington at the joint invitation of the State Department and Defense Department.

After several meetings, a spokesperson said the six participants "agreed to convene a conference of all opposition factions where the Iraqi people and all political forces that oppose dictatorship would be represented."

The Washington meeting could never have been held had Defense and State not jointly sponsored it. It is public knowledge that the two departments have been engaged in a bitter – yet hidden – disagreement on the best way to deal with the Iraqi opposition. That the meeting was held at all was – wrongly – interpreted by many observers (including this author) as signaling the end of this dispute.

Despite the fact that the six leaders were originally all members of the INC (an umbrella organization set up at a 1992 conference the Iraqi opposition held at Salaheddin, northern Iraq), the INC lost much of its influence when it turned into a propaganda tool for the containment policy pursued by the Clinton White House. SAIRI and INA subsequently froze their membership, but not before other opposition factions (the Communist Party and the Islamic Daawa Party) had already left. The two Kurdish parties (PUK and KDP), together with the INA and SAIRI, later formed what became known as the "Group of Four."

The INC returned to prominence, however, when the US government decided (post-Sept. 11) to pursue a policy of "regime change" in Baghdad. Given the decision taken by the other factions to leave the INC, Chalabi had emerged as the sole leader of the organization and succeeded in becoming the Pentagon's point man in the Iraqi opposition. The most recent manifestation of this relationship was the Pentagon's decision to make him solely responsible for nominating Iraqis for US military training, much to the annoyance of other pro-American opposition groups.

During the Clinton years, Chalabi could veto any administration policy concerning the Iraqi opposition that he did not like – thanks to his Republican allies in Congress who were instrumental in passing the Iraq Liberation Act. In 1998, for instance, Chalabi succeeded in imposing his conditions on an opposition meeting held in New York.

Now that Chalabi's friends control the Bush administration, in addition to Congress, his influence has grown immeasurably. Iraqi opposition factions recognize that only the US holds the keys to change in Iraq. The opposition (particularly the Group of Four) realizes, moreover, the source of Chalabi's power. Opposition leaders know that they have to deal with Chalabi and accept him as a partner in any power structure they might create.

The problem is that the forces behind Chalabi want him to become the leader of a future post-Saddam Iraq. They want him to carry out their agenda, which envisages change in Iraq as only the precursor of a process that will ultimately involve the entire region.

Now, if the administration hawks see the UN as irrelevant, what would they make of the fragmented and weak Iraqi opposition? As for the Kurds, who rely on American air power to protect them from Saddam and the Turks, they would have no choice but to submit to US demands – including abandoning their cherished goal of a federal system in post-Saddam Iraq. Since Saddam's ouster will be met through an American invasion – and not an Afghan-style "northern alliance" of Kurdish and Islamic forces – the Kurds have no leverage on the Americans anyway.

The State Department and the CIA, however, are wary of the Pentagon plans. They fear the process of change might turn into an unpredictable adventure. That is why they insisted on involving the UN in the proceedings, and succeeded in persuading President George W. Bush to go to the Security Council in the face of stiff opposition from Vice-President Dick Cheney and Pentagon hawks.

While administration hawks consider Saddam's unseating to be their first priority, Secretary of State Colin Powell has stressed that his priority is instead disarming Iraq. The State Department would still be forced to go along with the "regime change" option if Saddam decides not to cooperate. But it would still differ with the Pentagon in that it sees change in Iraq as a goal in its own right, and not as the beginning of a process that would engulf the entire Middle East.

But where does the opposition stand?

Some opposition factions have for various reasons decided to reject any US role in the process of change. Some of these factions expressed a readiness to respond to any steps the Iraqi regime takes to reform itself.

With the exception of the INC leadership, the rest – including chiefly the secular liberals – oscillate between support for the hawks and their enthusiasm for change on the one hand, and fear of the hawks' attempts to impose a leadership on Iraq as well as a political agenda that would go beyond the country on the other. They believe Iraq has already paid a heavy price when it was used as a club to bludgeon Iran, and they fear that Iraq could be called on to play the same role against other neighbors once again.

The said liberal circles that look forward to a strategic alliance with Washington believe that American and Iraqi interests are best served, not by Iraq becoming a spearhead for an American side wishing to structure the region according to its own yardstick, but by an exemplary and politically and economically reformed Iraq; one which is free of fundamentalism and fanaticism; which does not covet territory outside its borders; which is focused on national reconstruction and whose alliance with the US, like post-war Japan's, would make its possession of mass destruction weapons superfluous. And the first step toward such an exemplary Iraq does not start by imposing a specific leadership on the Iraqi opposition, but in enabling anti-dictatorial forces to play by fair parliamentary rules.

Instead of uniting the various factions, the proposed opposition conference will serve to perpetuate these differences.

The objective of holding the conference – as outlined in a letter to the six opposition leaders on Oct. 11 by US Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman – is to "organize a broad-based, inclusive conference of the Iraqi opposition. Those invited should sign up in advance to a set of principles regarding the future Iraq, including the need for a democratic, multi-ethnic, unified Iraq without weapons of mass destruction and at peace with its neighbors."

On a practical level, the conference would, "put forward a vision of Iraq that will elicit support from all Iraqis and establish a steering committee with which the US can consult on a regular basis."

The preparatory committee has already ac-

The meet would establish a steering committee with which the US can regularly consult

cepted to make its decisions by consensus and finally agreed on a list of participants. However, the issue of who will sit on the "steering committee" was not discussed. According to Grossman's letter, it will become the Iraqi opposition representative. It will be the only recognized conduit to the Bush administration, effectively replacing the INC. Such an arrangement can be seen as the embryo for a future transitional post-Saddam government.

But in the absence of agreement among the various wings of the Bush administration, will the hawks be prepared to accept the results of a democratic vote for the steering committee if such a vote fails to appoint Chalabi as its leader?

What incentive does Chalabi have to share power with his rivals so long as he enjoys the support of administration hawks, not to mention the lavishly funded INC apparatus and the fact that the Pentagon is training his men? Since the process of change will be undertaken by American troops (and not by the opposition), why would the hawks even contemplate involving pro-Iran Islamists, anti-Turkish Kurds, and former Baathist individuals (like the INA's Allawi) in the enterprise anyway?

By merely walking out, if his demands are not met, Chalabi has it in his power to stymie the entire conference.

The two Kurdish parties are in no position to upset the Bush administration or either of its wings by taking sides between Chalabi and his opponents.

In such circumstances, it would be best if the Iraqi opposition conference were deferred – unless the White House steps in and orders the various wings in the administration to deal with the Iraqi opposition in a framework reminiscent of the intra-Afghan conference in Bonn, whereby a broad-based and transitional Iraqi opposition leadership is forged.

Short of that, liberal and democratic Iraqi forces that cooperated with Washington would feel that they have lost the battle before it even started.

Ghassan al-Atiyyah is the Iraqi editor of the London-based Iraqi File (iraqifile@aol.com). He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR

Blix team set to arrive at Cyprus staging post

Hotel once hosted Palestinian gunmen

NICOSIA: UN weapons inspectors, led by Hans Blix, are due to arrive at their staging post in Cyprus on Sunday before moving on to Iraq the following day, an informed source said.

Blix and his advance party will be staying at the same hotel on the southern Larnaca coast that hosted 13 Palestinian exiles in May following Israel's siege of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, the source said Thursday.

"They are coming on Sunday and leaving (for Iraq) Monday," said the source. "The whole team of about 20 will be staying at the hotel and they want complete privacy during their stay."

Blix is chairman of the United Nations Monitoring Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), tasked with verifying that Iraq does not have weapons of mass destruction.

An administrative officer and a technical adviser to Blix were in Cyprus last week to establish the staging post for UNMOVIC's operations in Iraq, as all inspectors going to Baghdad will be processed through Cyprus.

Those traveling with Blix will be mostly logistics experts and technicians going to Iraq to install secure communications, satellites and set up labs.

Cyprus will operate as entry and exit point from Baghdad, and the staging post will also act as a supply line and procurement center through which equipment can be shipped.

Larnaca will be a base where inspectors, from as far afield as Argentina, Japan and Canada, can receive instructions and UN identity cards before flying to Iraq. Most inspectors will be on short-term contracts to the

Tamperproof and weatherproof digital cameras are prepared for shipment to Baghdad at the International Atomic Energy Agency headquarters in Vienna. The first inspectors will leave Cyprus for Iraq on Monday

AP/Martin Gnedt



UN and have to take leave from jobs elsewhere.

It will be a fairly large operation, with 80-100 inspectors in Iraq at any one time.

The quiet and unassuming Flamingo Beach hotel hit world

headlines when it hosted 13 Palestinian gunmen sent to Cyprus in a US-EU brokered deal to lift the Bethlehem siege in May. It overlooks the sea and is close to Cyprus' main international airport at Larnaca,

which lies about 1,000 kilometers from Baghdad.

Cyprus approved the staging post's set-up on Oct. 23, with a 1,200-strong UN peacekeeping force already on the island being a key factor. – AFP