



Iraqi Scientists Lied About Nukes

By CHARLES J. HANLEY
AP Special Correspondent
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Iraqi scientists never revived their long-dead nuclear bomb program, and in fact lied to Saddam Hussein about how much progress they were making before U.S.-led attacks shut the operation down for good in 1991, Iraqi physicists say.

Before that first Gulf War, the chief of the weapons program resorted to "blatant exaggeration" in telling Iraq's president how much bomb material was being produced, key scientist Imad Khadduri writes in a new book.

Other leading physicists, in Baghdad interviews, said the hope for an Iraqi atomic bomb was never realistic. "It was all like building sand castles," said Abdel Mehdi Talib, Baghdad University's dean of sciences.

Seven months after a U.S.-British invasion toppled Saddam's Baath Party government, Iraqi scientists have grown more vocal in countering Bush administration claims, used to justify the war, that Baghdad had "reconstituted" nuclear weapons development, and that it once was a mere six months from making a bomb.

At best, Khadduri writes, it would have taken Iraq several years to build a nuclear weapon if the 1991 war and subsequent U.N. inspections had not intervened.

His self-published "Iraq's Nuclear Mirage," a chronicle of years of secret weapons work and of a final escape into exile, is part of this senior scientist's emergence from a low profile in Canada - intended to refute what he calls a "massive deception" in Washington that led the United States into war.

Months of searching by hundreds of U.S. experts have found no trace of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons in Iraq, just as U.N. inspectors found none before the war. No Iraqi scientists have confirmed the programs were revived in recent years.

Bush administration officials still speak, nonetheless, of a threat from such weapons - of Baghdad's "robust plans" for them, as Vice President Dick Cheney puts it - in defending last March's U.S. invasion of Iraq. They offer no hard evidence, however.

Khadduri, a U.S.- and British-educated physicist, writes that he did theoretical work on nuclear weapons as long ago as the mid-1970s, after joining Iraq's Atomic Energy Commission. By the late 1980s, as the secret bomb program accelerated, he was in a pivotal position as coordinator of all its scientific and engineering information.

The U.N. inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, who dismantled the bomb program after Iraq's defeat in the 1991 war, saw Khadduri as a key source and conducted an

all-day interview with him earlier this year in Toronto, where he has resided since 1998.

"Iraq's Nuclear Mirage," available via online booksellers, dismisses the U.S. contention that the atom-bomb establishment was somehow resurrected after the IAEA demolished it, U.N. inspectors were stationed in Iraq and Iraqi specialists were scattered.

"Where is the scientific and engineering staff required for such an enormous effort?" he asks. "Where are the buildings and infrastructure?"

The continuing U.S. weapons hunt amounts to no more than "investigating mirages," he says.

An ex-bombmaker still in Iraq is just as dismissive of the unsubstantiated U.S. allegations.

"There was no point in trying to revive this program. There was no material, no equipment, no scientists," former bomb designer Sabah Abdul Noor said in a recent interview at Baghdad's Technology University.

"Scientists were scattered and under the eyes of inspectors, totally scattered. To do a project, you have to be together."

Talib, the newly elected university dean, was an anti-Baathist who didn't participate in the bomb program, but was close to many who did. They vastly oversold their accomplishments before 1991, the physicist said.

"They put a lot of lies on Saddam Hussein," he said in a Baghdad interview. "They took a lot of money out of him through what you call, in English, bluffing." When their installations were finally demolished, it "saved their necks" by burying their mistakes, he said. "They could tell Saddam, 'There's nothing left.'"

Khadduri, in his core position in the program, could attest to the overselling.

He writes that when he transferred top-secret documents of bomb program chief Jafar Dhia Jafar to an optical disc in 1991, he found the "blatant exaggeration" in a 1990 report to Saddam.

With its clever wording, Khadduri said in a telephone interview from Toronto, "one could easily have been convinced we had produced a couple of kilograms of enriched uranium instead of a couple of grams" - that is, about four pounds of bomb material instead of a fraction of an ounce.

A bomb would have required some 40 pounds of highly enriched uranium.

In a 1997 summary, the IAEA said there were no indications the Iraqis ever produced more than a few grams of such material. It also said there were "no indications that there remains in Iraq any physical capability for the production of amounts of weapon-usable nuclear material of any practical significance."

Khadduri and others said the design and actual production of a bomb would have been an extremely difficult task.

It was an impossible quest, "all futility," said one of Baghdad's senior nuclear physicists, Hamed M. al-Bahili.

Al-Bahili, who joined the Atomic Energy Commission in 1968 but remained outside the weapons program, said his colleagues inside "all knew they wouldn't achieve results." As for

whether the program was later revived, he said, "these American inspectors are wasting their time."

Arms deal turned sour for Saddam U.S. officials tell of a failed effort to buy North Korean missiles, with Syria's help

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WASHINGTON - It was Saddam Hussein's last weapons deal - and it did not go exactly as he and his generals imagined.

For two years before the American invasion of Iraq, Saddam's sons, generals and front companies were engaged in lengthy negotiations with North Korea. Bush administration officials now say they believe that those negotiations - mostly conducted in neighboring Syria, apparently with the knowledge of the Syrian government - were not merely to buy a few North Korean missiles.

Instead, the goal was to obtain a full production line to manufacture, under an Iraqi flag, the North Korean missile system, which would be capable of hitting American allies and bases around the region, according to these Bush administration officials.

As war with the United States approached, though, Saddam discovered what American officials say they have known for nearly a decade now: Kim Jong Il, the North Korean leader, is less than a fully reliable negotiating partner.

In return for a \$10 million down payment, Saddam appears to have gotten nothing.

The trail that investigators have uncovered, partly from reading computer hard drives found in Baghdad and partly from interviews with captured members of Saddam's inner circle, shows that a month before the American invasion, Iraqi officials traveled to Syria to demand that North Korea refund \$1.9 million because it had failed to meet deadlines for delivering its first shipment of goods.

North Korea deflected the request, telling Saddam's representatives, in the words of one investigator, that "things were too hot" to begin delivering missile technology through Syria.

The transaction provides an interesting glimpse into the last days of Saddam's government, and what administration officials say were Iraq's desires for a long-term business deal for missiles and a missile production plant.

Bush administration officials have seized on the attempted purchase of the North Korean missiles, known as the Nodong, and a missile assembly line to buttress their case that Saddam was violating United Nations resolutions, which clearly prohibited missiles of the range of the North Korean Nodong. It also establishes that Syria was a major arms-trading bazaar for Saddam's government, in this case hiding an Iraqi effort to obtain missiles, they say.

Investigators say that Syria also probably had offered its ports and territory as the surreptitious transit route for the North Korea-Iraq missile deal, although it remains unclear

what demands the government in Damascus might have made in return.

Further, according to United States government officials and international investigators, the Iraqi official who brokered the deal, Munir Awad, is now in Syria, apparently living under government protection. In serving as a middleman in this deal and hoping to have a cut in the proceeds, Syria was acting in violation of Security Council resolutions even as it served on the council and voted with the United States on the most important resolution before the war.

International inspectors note that the missile deal gone bad appears to be the most serious violation that has been found so far. The investigators say they tripped upon it while looking for evidence of a continuing nuclear program, or an active effort to accumulate more biological or chemical weapons. "So far there's really not much in that arena," said one official who has monitored the continuing search for weapons.

After spending millions of dollars in a search that continues on the ground in Iraq to this day, the official noted, "We've learned this much: that Kim Jong Il took Saddam to the cleaners."

The deal that Iraq struck with North Korea was supposed to be for more than just missiles.

"This \$10 million was a down payment, and not just a straight purchase for Nodong missiles, but for Nodong technology," said one American official who has read documentation on the deal. "Saddam's intent was to get the expertise from the North Koreans and, potentially, open his own production line."

The exact outlines of the deal remain unclear, the official said, "since the North Koreans ended up stiffing the Iraqis." The Iraqis were demanding their money back, "right up to the end," the official said. Administration officials say investigators uncovered evidence of meetings between the Iraqis and North Koreans as least as far back as late 2001.

The final session was held in Syria in February of this year, just before the war began, officials said. On that trip, says an Iraqi report on the mission that has since been uncovered, the Iraqis were also seeking night-vision goggles, ammunition and gun barrels - mostly through European middlemen.

At that point, a huge American-British force had been built up on Iraq's southern borders, and it was clear that war was coming. What is also interesting about the shopping list, however, is "what's not on it," said one investigator. "Nothing nuclear, no dual-use items, nothing about weapons of mass destruction."