



# Saddam's Germs

by Laurie Mylroie and James Ring Adams

*This man's purpose is lawless,  
lawless are the plans in his mind;  
for his thought is only to destroy  
and to wipe out nation after nation.*

—Isaiah 10:7

A motorcade sped all the night through the stony, silent waste of northeast Jordan in early August, bringing the West more bad news than it knows how to handle. The caravan of official cars from Baghdad carried the most important defector ever to flee from Saddam Hussein's regime. He brought confirmation that the U.S. and our allies still face a final threat from Saddam.

The leader of this group of family members and aides was Hussein Kamil Hassan al-Majid, the son-in-law and cousin of Saddam Hussein. For more than a decade Hussein Kamil organized Iraq's quest for every weapon of terror known to modern warfare. Desert Storm may have forced Iraq to destroy its chemical weapons stockpile, routinely used in the war against Iran, and abandon its crash atomic bomb program—at least that is the conclusion of the remarkably energetic United Nations inspection effort. But the intrigues after the August defection revealed a more serious threat. Even after the war, Iraq managed to conceal one of the largest biological warfare programs in the world, a massive effort that explored a far wider range of horrors, and stored up a far larger array of weapons, than anyone in the West had ever imagined. This program was Iraq's real prize, and it has tried to hold on to it as long as possible, while

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sacrificing its chemical warheads and ballistic missiles to the inspection teams. The biological stockpile could still create a disaster of biblical proportions.

In an attempt to blunt the impact of Hussein Kamil's revelations, Saddam's regime summoned its chief U.N. monitor, Rolf Ekeus, to Baghdad and gave him truckloads of documents on its top-secret work with the deadliest agents of the microbial world. Ekeus is the chairman of the U.N. Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), which oversees Saddam's compliance with Security Council orders to destroy his "weapons of mass destruction." His October report is said to be a shocker.

As just one sample of Iraq's ambitions, Ekeus revealed that Saddam's scientists were trying to make a weapon using the Ebola virus or something very similar. The cause of a globally publicized epidemic in Zaire earlier this year, Ebola produces a virtual meltdown of internal organs, followed by contagious bleeding from every orifice. That wasn't the only horrifying virus in the program. During the Gulf war, one Soviet official suggested that Baghdad had a "stock of agents for extremely rare African and Asian diseases that are usually untreatable and lead to death."

Iraq found its viruses disappointing, however. Since they are transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids and not through the air, they proved difficult to turn into a biological warfare agent. This lends plausibility to Iraq's claim that it never took its viral research to the production stage.

But the virus program was only one of three in Iraq's search for bioweapons. The others—botulinum and anthrax, the stars of its bacterial program—worked. As Madeleine Albright, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., told the Senate this August,

botulinum toxin is 100,000 times more toxic than sarin, the poison gas used in the Tokyo subway attack last March. And doses of a millionth of a gram of anthrax are fatal, within five to seven days, nearly 100 percent of the time. Even before the August defection, Iraq admitted producing more than 500,000 liters of botulinum and anthrax at its Al Hakam facility, mathematically more than enough to end human life on earth.

Not only did Baghdad grow the poison, it learned how to deliver it. Iraq built and tested anthrax bombs delivered by airplane. UNSCOM received videotapes of the tests, in which all animals within 250 meters of ground zero were killed. To be lethal, anthrax should be airborne and absorbed by breathing. If the particles are too large, more than one five-thousandth of an inch, they aren't absorbed by the respiratory system and so cause little harm. Iraq mastered the difficult task of producing just the right size of anthrax spores.

Iraq actually deployed them during the Gulf war. Ekeus learned that Baghdad filled bombs and ballistic missile warheads with biological agents and stationed them at two of its airbases in December 1990. The arsenal included fifty R-400 bombs and warheads for ten al-Husayn missiles filled with anthrax, and 100 R-400 bombs and fifteen warheads with botulinum. They were taken to airfields on December 23. (Independent confirmation of this recently came from another defector, General Wafiq Samarra, chief of Iraqi military intelligence during the war.) Ekeus was shocked by the lax controls. There were none of the dual key or voice check release mechanisms that both the U.S. and the former Soviet Union imposed on their unconventional arsenals. Control of the warheads apparently rested in the hands of an air

force colonel. It has to be considered a minor miracle of the Gulf war that they weren't exploded accidentally, either by local command or allied bombing.

Although Iraq had previously revealed some of its anthrax production, and rumors had spread about the viral work, no one suspected that there was a third full-size program centered on mycotoxins. These are poisons produced by microscopic fungi, which became notorious in the early 1980s in the controversy over "Yellow Rain." When the Reagan administration accused the Soviets and their proxies of using this new bioweapon in Laos and Afghanistan, left-leaning scientists and their friends at the *New York Times* raised howls of derision.

But Saddam took it seriously. He was suspected of using Soviet-supplied mycotoxins, mixed with mustard gas to make them more deadly, against Iran in early 1984. He now admits to starting a crash program in 1985 to make them in Iraq. This program eventually branched out to work on aflatoxin, a mycotoxin found naturally in corn and peanuts that attacks the lungs and liver. On his trip to Baghdad, Ekeus learned that Iraq had produced twenty aflatoxin bombs and deployed them, along with the anthrax and botulinum, in December 1990—the first time this substance was ever known to be used as a weapon. Mycotoxin authority Chester Mirocha, professor of plant pathology at the University of Minnesota, says that for Iraq to grow that quantity of aflatoxin, they must have a large-scale culturing facility.

Iraq now claims that it destroyed all its biological weapons in the summer of 1991. But if Western intelligence and active teams of U.N. inspectors failed to detect these programs until told about them, how can we believe it now? The answer is we can't. Botulinum doesn't have a long shelf life. That stockpile has probably perished, but Iraq may have cooked up a new batch. The properties of the aflatoxin weapon remain unknown, but anthrax can remain potent for twenty-five years. This is the stockpile that worries UNSCOM. There are no written orders or other documents detailing its alleged destruction, and it's unlikely that anyone in Iraq would eliminate one of Saddam's most lethal weapons on the basis of an oral command. Even a large-scale destruction of

the stockpile would be next to meaningless. If only a small amount survived, Baghdad could quickly re-grow large quantities. UNSCOM doubts that the stockpile is gone, and suspects that Iraq was working on the program well after the end of the war.

Biological weapons have a marked advantage over the more attention-grabbing chemical and nuclear programs. They don't require large-scale imports of precursor chemicals or sophisticated electronics. Once Iraq masters fundamental lab techniques and builds up its microbial zoo of death, it can replenish its stock largely with its own resources. International monitoring and export controls would have no handle on the situation. Iraq might even have a shot at using genetic engineering to create the ultimate secret weapon, drug-resistant strains of disease or new diseases altogether.

Would Saddam use these weapons? Fear of an American nuclear retaliation may have been one factor that kept Iraq from unleashing its chemical and biological arsenals during the Gulf war. But General Samarraï, the former military intelligence chief, said Saddam "definitely" would have used them if he had thought his regime was about to collapse.

As the Tokyo subway attack demonstrated this spring, you don't need bombs and missiles to stage a chemical or biological attack. A terrorist team can do the job just as effectively. (In the case of biological agents, terrorists may even be more effective; the impact of missiles risk destroying the toxins and microbes.) The U.S. army tested the possibility decades ago, delivering mock agents in New York's subways and by boat off the California coast. It concluded that such an attack was feasible and that the casualties could be enormous. Robert Kupperman, a former chief scientist at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, estimated that a boat spraying anthrax while circling Manhattan could kill as many as 400,000 people.

Last fall, a clearly orchestrated Iraqi press campaign threatened just that sort of retaliation if U.N. sanctions continued. Saddam massed conventional forces near Kuwait, as Iraq's government-controlled press hinted at possible biological attack: "Does America realize that every Iraqi is a missile that can cross to countries and cities? A people on the verge of death can spread death to all." Such warnings

appeared almost daily from September 27 on. The most dramatic threat of all ran on October 12 in *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, an Arabic language paper in London funded by Baghdad:

True, Iraqi forces surrendered in their thousands in the second Gulf war and did not inflict huge human losses on the coalition forces. . . . However, it does not mean that the same thing would happen again. All previous factors have changed. . . . If the Iraqi regime realizes that the United States is after its head, there is nothing strange about its using all the weapons in its possession—banned or unbanned—to defend itself and inflict the heaviest losses on its enemy. One chemical weapon fired in a moment of despair could cause the death of hundreds of thousands. And we are not talking here about the germ and other bombs.

The next month Iraq formally recognized Kuwait, after a massive U.S. deployment thwarted its planned invasion and Baghdad came to believe that the sanctions would ease significantly. The Clinton administration seemed inclined to go along, until Republican pressure forced it to announce that, for the first time, the U.S. would use its Security Council veto to block any proposal to lift sanctions. At the same time, UNSCOM began to acquire evidence that Iraq had a significant biological weapons program it had not accounted for. The sanctions remained in place.

As Iraq grew disappointed, the Baghdad press began to echo its previous threats. In April, the number two official in the Information Ministry said, "Iraq's abandonment of part of its weapons—the long-range missiles and chemical weapons—does not mean that it has lost everything." In mid-June, *Al-Quds al-Arabi* returned to the theme. Iraq, it editorialized, "still has options—destructive options. Continuing to press it into a corner, a corner of hunger, disease, humiliation, and internal subversion . . . could lead it to resort to the option of bringing down the temple on everyone."

Saddam soon began to take steps suggesting preparation for military confrontation. The release of two American prisoners on July 16 gave him a chance to meet personally with Rep. Bill Richardson (D-N.M.) and gauge American opinion. That evening

Saddam changed his defense ministers, replacing his brutal cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid with a professional soldier, General Sultan Ahmed, who led the Iraqi delegation to the Gulf war cease-fire talks. Only once before has Saddam had as his defense minister a competent soldier unrelated to him—from December 1990 to April 1991, the months of Desert Storm. Iraqi troops soon began conducting unusual exercises. Then came the August 8 defections. In their aftermath, the U.S. increased its forces in the region.

We still don't know, of course, what Hussein had in mind. But the press campaigns suggest that he may have been thinking the unthinkable—the use of biological weapons. A terrorist attack could spread devastation on the cheap and still be deniable. Strong American retaliation is by no means a sure thing. In his memoirs, Colin Powell records his own hand-wringing before the Gulf war when Defense Secretary Dick Cheney asked him for nuclear strike options against Iraqi forces. Less resolute men than they are currently in charge.

Saddam's neighbors certainly take the biological threat seriously. King Hussein of Jordan now calls him "the most dangerous man in the Middle East." The Saudis and their smaller allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council have been even more outspoken. Abandoning its customary blandness, the group on September 19 expressed fear that the biological weapons "can spread epidemics and seriously harm Iraq itself, and the Arab region as a whole, to such an extent that no one can foresee at the present."

The administration should heed these alarms, rather than take the short-sighted view that they would insure the indefinite continuation of the sanctions against Iraq. If Saddam is trapped and weak, as some policy-makers suggest, his massive biological stockpile still makes him truly dangerous.

Shortly before taking office, the president claimed he was not "obsessed" with Saddam. "I am a Baptist," Clinton said. "I believe in death-bed conversions." This Christian charity misreads the Iraqi tyrant's ability to wreak an apocalyptic revenge. General Samarraï, who knows Saddam far better, warns, "Allies must eliminate Iraq's biological weapons before Saddam has a chance to use them." This man, he says, is a "destroyer." □