

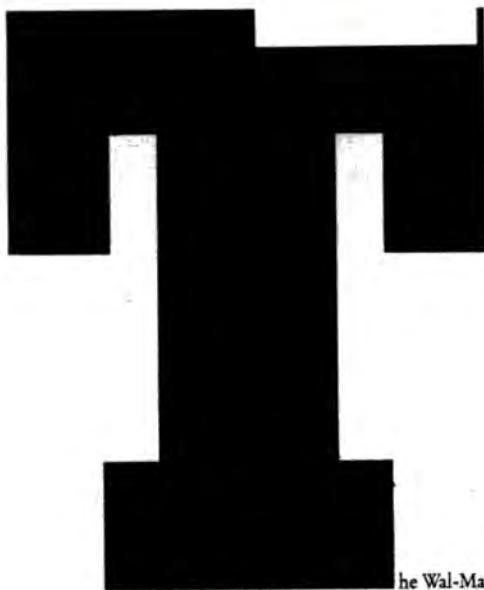
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Saddam's Bomb

Khidhir Hamza, once Iraq's leading nuclear physicist, defected five years ago and, so far, has lived to tell about it. In his new memoir, he recounts the inside story of how Saddam almost built an atomic weapon.

By Jonathan Broder



he Wal-Mart on Route 3 in Spotsylvania County, Va., about 50 miles south of Washington, is not the sort of place where you would expect even a whiff of Middle Eastern intrigue. Yet one humid morning in August, Khidhir Hamza, once a high-ranking Iraqi nuclear physicist and now a defector, experienced a moment there as chilling as anything out of a Hitchcock movie. As he picked through a stack of shirts, Hamza looked up to see before him two people he knew from Baghdad, the wife and daughter of a senior official on the Iraqi Atomic Energy Commission.

The 61-year-old Hamza is not a man who believes in coincidence. As the wife expressed her delight at bumping into him after so many years, Hamza pretended not to recognize her. He also carefully maneuvered his shopping cart between them, fearing she might draw close enough to prick him with a poison-tipped instrument — a technique favored by Saddam's assassins.

"It was terrifying," Hamza says in his accented English, which he speaks slowly, with a deep voice. "What were they doing there? I couldn't ask them. So I pretended they had confused me for someone

else. Then I asked them who they thought I was, but they wouldn't answer. I could see from the sarcastic smiles on their faces that they didn't believe me." Hamza excused himself and hurried out of the store. A few weeks later, as he pulled his car into the Wal-Mart parking lot, Hamza saw the woman again, this time with her husband. Shaken, he kept driving.

The episodes at Wal-Mart keep Hamza awake at night because he knows from long experience how Saddam Hussein operates. He knows, for example, that when Saddam wants someone eliminated, he often chooses a friend or relative of the victim to perform the task — not only to get inside the defenses of his target but also to test the loyalty of his designated assassin. Hamza has seen friends liquidate friends under Saddam's orders to kill or be killed.

"They always send someone you know," Hamza told me a few weeks after the incident. "With Saddam, no one can be sure who somebody really is. You can never know who is who."

Hamza also knows that Saddam has good reason to want him dead. Before he defected to the United States in 1995, Hamza was the director general of Saddam's secret program to build a nuclear bomb, a three-decade effort that nearly succeeded. When he fled, Hamza took the secrets of the weapons program with him, disclosing them to the Central Intelligence Agency in detailed briefings and later going public with his story in interviews, lectures and TV appearances. For now, Hamza has the unusual distinction of being the highest-ranking Iraqi scientist ever to defect and live to tell about it.

But he may be pushing his luck. Next month, Scribner will publish Hamza's memoir, "Saddam's Bombmaker." The book not only recounts how he and a team of scientists secretly designed and nearly built a nuclear device; it also provides a rare glimpse of life in the presidential palace. There are firsthand descriptions of Saddam's impulsive murder and torture of subordinates, his drunken rages, his sexual exploitation of women and his paranoia about germs. There are new charges about Saddam's use of human guinea pigs in biological-warfare experiments. And Hamza alleges that during the Persian Gulf war the Iraqi leader deliberately positioned stockpiles of chemical and biologi-

Illustration by Nancy Harris



Khidhr Hamza and his wife, Souham, tempting fate as defectors from Saddam's regime.

cal agents in the path of advancing American troops. Hamza also warns that Saddam remains determined to reconstitute his nuclear bomb program and still has the scientists to do so.

In the shadowy world of intelligence organizations and defectors, it is often difficult to know what is really going on. Were the people Hamza encountered at the Wal-Mart assassins or merely innocent shoppers? You can't know. But those who worry about Hamza's safety say that an incident in McLean, Va., last year provides a cautionary tale. There, a 63-year-old Iraqi businessman named Fuad Taima was found professionally murdered in his home, along with his American wife and their 16-year-old son. Af-

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'You can never know who is who.'**

ter 18 months, the crimes still remain unsolved. What the lead investigator, Bradley Garrett, of the F.B.I., can confirm is this: the assassin was a Middle Easterner and a skilled killer; the Taima family knew him and let him into the house; and the murder of Taima's wife and son was a pointed message to others.

"There is a very important fact about Saddam that people do not tend to take into account, and that is his need for revenge," says Rend Rahim Francke, the Baghdad-born executive director of the Iraq Foundation, a democracy and human

rights group in Washington. "You don't know what we're dealing with here. It's pretty beastly."

HAMZA LIVES SOUTH OF WASHINGTON IN ONE of the many new subdivisions that have homogenized the communities along Interstate 95 heading toward Richmond. When I arranged to visit him at his home recently, it was only a few days after the second Wal-Mart episode, and he insisted that an associate drive me while I wore a blindfold. He apologized for the inconvenience but said he couldn't take the chance that I might

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA WYNNE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

reveal where he lived. "They read, you know," he told me on the telephone, referring to Saddam's security men. "They look for clues."

When I arrive a few days later, Hamza is waiting outside his house, wearing dark slacks and a white shirt. He is a short, stocky man, with black hair and dark, intense eyes. He suggests we drive to a restaurant nearby for lunch. There I begin to sense the loneliness of a defector's life. As we enter the restaurant, Hamza stops briefly to chat in Arabic with the owner, who is Palestinian. When he returns to the table, I ask Hamza if the owner ever asks him about his past. "They don't really ask questions," he says quietly. "If they do, I tell them I'm an ex-college professor from Iraq."

Hamza thinks any contact with Iraqi opposition groups, convinced that they are thoroughly infiltrated by Saddam's agents. He is also leery of Iraqis working at gas stations and convenience stores; he fears they might serve as look-outs for Saddam. For the same reason, he stays away when Iraqi entertainers come to the Washington area.

After lunch, Hamza takes me back to his house, a modest white rambler, where he introduces me to his wife, Souham, a composed, rather formal woman. She sets out coffee and a crème caramel she has prepared, then excuses herself, apologizing for a bad back.

As Hamza tells it, he gave little thought to returning to Iraq after receiving his doctorate in physics from Florida State in 1968. But that was before an Iraqi agent came calling at tiny Fort Valley State College in Georgia, where Hamza was teaching in 1970. The agent made it clear that Hamza was expected to pay back government loans by working for the regime, increasingly dominated by Saddam, then Iraq's vice president. In a foretaste of Saddam's heavy-handed methods, the agent warned Hamza that his refusal could mean the arrest and torture of his father.

At first, Hamza said, he was seduced by well-paid employment at a civilian center in Baghdad that researched the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. But after a year on the job, government agents presented him with another offer he couldn't refuse: a senior post on the secret team working to build a nuclear bomb. Refusal was never an option, as he understood after his first face-to-face encounter with Saddam. During an unannounced inspection of his new office, Saddam suddenly exploded in anger at Hamza for a seemingly harmless oversight — not framing some pictures of eminent scientists that had been tacked up on a wall outside his office.

"Hours later, when my shakes finally went away, I figured it out," Hamza writes. "He'd sensed some independence in me, and made the only point he wanted to make: he was in charge. Anyone who challenged him did so at the risk of his life. It had nothing to do with the pictures. For months, at a distance, I had assessed him as rather clever. But now I saw he was a killer."

Hamza says he and his fellow scientists were

AN EXCERPT

Inside Saddam's Court

The food was flown in from Paris, tested for poisons and sampled by a taster. A doctor checked visitors for germs. Women were treated like towels, to be used and discarded.

The Egyptian belly dancers jiggled across the stage, shaking like bowls of crème brûlée. A quartet of clarinet players wailed themselves into a dither. The drummer thrashed his cymbals and snares. It was a typical night at the Hunting Club, the private cabaret for Baghdad's elite. With a difference: normally the band had the audience on its feet, clapping and whistling. But not tonight. On Thursday nights we sat glued to our seats, sipping our drinks and checking our watches. We were waiting for Saddam.

Sometime between 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. he appeared in the doorway. His oiled black hair, brush mustache and rheumy-looking eyes had not yet earned the instant, global recognition they would after he sent his armies into Kuwait, set wells afire and terrorized the world with the threat of chemical weapons. In 1974, few Americans outside the Middle East knew his name. To Washington, however, he was someone to track as he tightened his grip on power.

I watched Saddam move deliberately through the crowd. With his gold Rolex watch, French cuffs and entourage trailing behind him, he evoked nothing less than an expertly tailored, well-barbered gangster. He brimmed with casual self-confidence, the same smiling image so ubiquitous on TV. We, his senior ministers, scientists, army generals and party faithful, so desultorily sipping our Scotches only a moment before, rose from our tables, obsequiously offering applause. Gliding through the club, Saddam returned a half-smile, a nod or a brief wave, soaking us up with his onyx eyes, betraying nothing. In the unlikely event that he missed anything, security cameras, watching through pinholes in the walls, got it all.

The Hunting Club was Saddam's private preserve. He personally approved the guest list, personally managed the décor. He picked the entertainment and went over the reports supplied by his private police on the patrons. Most of us would spend hours, or even days, trying to decipher his gestures on these nights. Did he smile our way? Did he seem pleased to see us or annoyed? We lived in a gilded cage.

I watched Saddam and his entourage take their seats at the front row of tables for drinks and dinner. Everything, of course, had been screened by Saddam's own taster, who led a worrisome life. If he intercepted a poison, he could die a terrible death. If the president developed a cramp, he might be arrested and the entire kitchen staff threatened with death. The likelihood that Saddam would eat tainted food was highly remote, however. Most of it was flown in daily from Paris, where a special embassy detail purchased the best beef, lamb, lobster and shrimp. Then it was sent to technicians who employed multimillion-dollar machines to check for poisons, radiation and even trace elements of metals, like mercury, lead or arsenic. The same went for Saddam's toilet articles, clothes and the black dye for his hair. The Iraqi Embassies in London and Paris employed men of Saddam's exact size to shop for his wardrobe.

Saddam had a terrible fear, perhaps paranoia, about germs. A doctor was always stationed outside his office to examine visitors. Even the eyes, ears and mouths of his closest aides were examined for signs of disease. No one was permitted to touch Saddam, unless it was an occasion carefully choreographed for television. Those who forgot or simply didn't know were beaten beyond the camera's eye. Although he was a nominal Muslim, Saddam permitted only Christians to work on his housekeeping staff, convinced that they were cleaner than his own people.

Under Saddam's rule, the grounds of the Republican Palace spread like an inkblot, swallowing up office buildings, homes, shops, restaurants, gas stations and even a

Excerpted from "Saddam's Bombmaker: The Terrifying Inside Story of the Iraqi Nuclear and Biological Weapons Agenda," a memoir by Khidhir Hamza, to be published next month by Scribner. Copyright © 2000 by Khidhir Hamza.

hospital, turning the palace grounds into a small city. It was an armed fortress. Checkpoints began several blocks from the presidential grounds, the site of Saddam's two-story, columned, white marble headquarters. On my first day in residence there, I was directed to drive my new Mercedes onto concrete tracks over an open pit and ordered to step out. Security men checked under the car, opened the hood and trunk, looked under the seats and rifled the glove compartment. The security checks would slack off only slightly in the ensuing weeks, as the guards began to recognize my face. Yet knowing that their jobs, not to mention their lives, were on the line if an assassin or terrorist gained entrance to the grounds, they never completely relaxed. I soon heard that in the early days a few arrogant officials had tried to bully their way through and had been quickly cut down with a few bursts of automatic rifle fire. Far from being upset, Saddam awarded the guards medals.

My education in presidential protocol began right away, with the arrival of my "cleaning ladies." Both were far from ordinary. In fact, they were young, beautiful and flirtatious. It didn't take much digging to get the story behind these women. They were all



She refused Saddam's advances, she feared she would end up dead on a side road.

ample, that Saddam was extremely aggressive, culling women from the crowd, coercing them into sex and then discarding them. He used them like towels, passing them on to aides and other senior officials — generously, he thought.

Saddam's favorites by far, I was told, were virgins, probably because of his fear of disease. He would spot a young woman in a hotel, say, and instruct his security detail to procure her. The saddest story I heard concerned women who came to the palace gates to petition for information on fathers, brothers or husbands missing at the front. If Saddam liked their looks, a signal went out to security to follow up.

One woman went to see Saddam early in the Iranian war, after her father was killed. She was destitute and begging for help. Two weeks later, she was called back for some formality concerning her benefits. But instead of an appointment at the palace, she was directed to one of Saddam's secluded downtown facilities. When she arrived, two women were waiting for her with hairbrushes and makeup kits. As the situation dawned on her, she was mortified. If she refused Saddam's advances, she feared she would end up dead on a side road on the outskirts of Baghdad. So she submitted to the makeover. Then the guards came and took her to a waiting car. The Mercedes delivered her to a side door at the presidential palace, where an armed guard led her through the corridors to a room upstairs. She was told to undress and lie on the bed. The room was furnished like a hotel, with one large bed and a side table with a reading lamp. The guard waited until she was naked on the bed, then left, locking the door behind him.

The minutes passed like eternity, she said. Finally, Saddam appeared from an adjoining room, naked. He looked at her with glazed eyes and a wooden face. Without a word, he came to the bed, got on top of her and satisfied himself. Finished, he went back into the adjoining room and shut the door. He had not spoken a word. A few minutes later, as she lay crying, a guard came into the room, placed an envelope with 5,000 Iraqi dinars (about \$15,000) on the bedside table and ordered her to get dressed. The rape and payoff were insult enough. Almost as disturbing was the memory of Saddam's yellow, lifeless eyes. "They were the eyes of death," she told me. "He looked at me as if I were a corpse. There was not a hint of humanity or warmth in them." ■

unwilling participants in the clandestine bomb program, kept in line by Saddam's punishments and rewards. He says Saddam ordered colleague after colleague dragged off to jail and severely beaten for failing to produce results. After their release, they would be placated with gifts of cash, cars and houses, "as if nothing had happened."

In July 1979, just days after Saddam seized complete power from President Ahmed al-Bakr, a friendly official of the ruling Baath Party invited Hamza to watch a video. "He said I would find it interesting," Hamza says. The opening scene showed a smiling Saddam, surrounded by top party leaders, sitting in a large conference room at the Presidential Palace. Standing at a lectern, one of Saddam's aides read out a list of names of "conspirators." Saddam ordered them to stand, and armed guards pushed them through a side door. Though Hamza didn't know it at the time, he was watching Saddam's first major purge.

"The next scene was in a courtyard," Hamza says. "All those who had been taken out of the conference room were there. Some were standing against the wall. Others were kneeling with their eyes blindfolded. Then the shooting started." The camera focused on those who were doing the shooting. "This was not a regular execution squad," Hamza says. "The shooters were party members, people I know. One of them was my own boss. People were being forced to shoot their own friends, people they had eaten with, gone out with, people they had known all their lives. Men were weeping."

When the video was finished, Hamza says, the party official turned to him in disgust and said, "We are now cannibalizing ourselves. These are not people you don't know. These are your friends. One day, I might be asked to shoot you. And I would, because my own head would be on the line."

With those grim images in his mind, Hamza focused all his energies on developing the bomb. He led secret missions to Europe and the former Soviet Union to acquire bomb technology, carefully covering his tracks to avoid assassination by Israeli agents. On trips to the United States, he was able to glean invaluable guidance by studying scientific journals and technical accounts of America's bomb effort, all of which were open to scholars. Even Israel's 1981 bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor failed to halt the program. If anything, Hamza says, it moved it into high gear as Saddam defiantly poured billions of dollars into the effort and threatened more torture for any scientist who faltered.

Over the next decade, Hamza says, he reaped lavish rewards — new cars, money, membership in Baghdad's exclusive Hunting Club — as he climbed the ranks to director of weaponization. Thanks to Hamza's efforts, Iraq stood only a few months away from building a nuclear device when the allies began bombing during the gulf war.

Finally, in 1993, two years after the war ended, the body of a senior nuclear procurement officer

Hamza alleges that Iraq positioned stockpiles of chemical and biological agents in the path of advancing American troops. He also warns that Saddam remains determined to reconstitute his nuclear bomb program.

was found in a ditch, prompting Hamza to begin to plot his escape. But it was not until 1994 that he was able to slip out of Baghdad into the "no-fly zone" in northern Iraq, controlled by opposition groups with connections to the C.I.A. There, using an opposition leader's encrypted telephone, he contacted C.I.A. headquarters outside Washington to announce his readiness to defect. To Hamza's utter dismay, however, the C.I.A. turned down his offer. Now he was stranded, the clock ticking on how soon Saddam would notice his absence.

Warren Marik, one C.I.A. officer who spoke to Hamza that day, told me, "We had no idea of his importance." But Marik, now retired from the agency, added that Hamza had another mark against him: the opposition figure who put him in contact with the C.I.A. — Ahmed Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress, had fallen out of favor with the White House. Marik says the C.I.A. essentially dismissed Hamza as "unacceptable by association." Later, the C.I.A., realizing its mistake, brought him in from the cold, and later still arranged for the clandestine exfiltration of his family from Baghdad.

A

As a matter of policy, the C.I.A. does not comment one way or the other on defectors. But a United States official, speaking on condition of anonymity, opened the door a crack to say that Hamza was "helpful to the community's understanding of weapons of mass destruction programs, specifically nuclear issues, and what Iraq was up to in the period he was there."

A happy ending, of sorts. But like many defectors, Hamza remains tethered to his past, and the book is his attempt at redemption. "I did a tremendous amount of evil," he says. "Now I'm making up for it. It's one thing to know things from the inside. But it's another thing to say the things you know."

In his book, Hamza is particularly critical of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which monitors nuclear programs around the world. He describes how Saddam's spies easily infiltrated the agency, enabling the regime to stay a step ahead of the inspectors. In the late 1970's, he says, Baghdad quietly cultivated a close relationship with the late Maurizio Zifferero, who represented Italian companies that built Iraq's plutonium separation plants. Later, Zifferero became the leader of the I.A.E.A.'s inspection team for Iraq. Hamza says that Saddam's top lieutenants referred to Zifferero as "our man at the I.A.E.A."

Hamza maintains that it was only after his defection, and that of his former boss, Gen. Hussein Kamel, Saddam's son-in-law, that inspectors learned the full extent of the nuclear program. (Promised amnesty by Saddam, Kamel returned to Iraq, where he was killed in a shootout with Iraqi security forces in 1996.) Hamza says it was his information that helped inspectors uncover Saddam's sprawling secret nuclear weapons center at Al Altheer, outside Baghdad, and other sites. Most important, Hamza says he was the first to identify Iraq's senior nuclear scientists and tell the C.I.A. where to find them. More than anything else, he asserts, it was the demands of the United Nations Special Commission's inspectors to know what these scientists were doing, as opposed to where weapons were hidden, that led Saddam to abort international inspections in late 1998.

"For a while, it was successful," Hamza says of the inspectors' efforts after his briefings. "But it was probably too successful."

The International Atomic Energy Agency won't comment on the specifics of Hamza's criticism. It denies that its inspectors were soft on Iraq before the war, saying that under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty they were allowed to inspect only those installations that Iraq had declared. As for Hamza's role in exposing Iraq's duplicity after the war, the organization says that he has exaggerated his importance.

Meanwhile, there are signs that Saddam has resumed his nuclear weapons program, just as Hamza warned. Over the past six months, says Richard Butler, the former chief United Nations weapons inspector, credible reports have been received indicating the movement of Iraqi atomic scientists and technicians to a site outside Baghdad. "They're domiciled there," Butler told me. "They sleep and eat there and work there. And that raises the question of whether they are back in the business of seeking to design and build a nuclear explosive device."

Given that there is little prospect of resuming international inspections, Hamza, with the help of David Albright, an arms control specialist in Washington, has put together his own proposal for blocking Saddam: lift all sanctions against Iraq — provided Baghdad permits its senior nuclear scientists and their families to immigrate to the West. Hamza believes the resulting brain

drain would thwart Saddam's nuclear aspirations for years to come. "Lifting of sanctions would be a big reward for Saddam," he argues. "At the same time, the loss of his scientists would be irreplaceable. He can replace equipment, but he can't replace scientists."

AS LONG AS SADDAM IS IN POWER, HAMZA WILL face the question of whether the Iraqi leader will stand by while he speaks out — especially as Saddam shows new confidence over the end of weapons inspections and the failure of economic sanctions. "I worry a little more," says Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security. "Right now I don't think they would do anything. He's so public that it would be obvious that they assassinated him. What he has to worry about is what looks like an accidental death, and I think he should protect himself carefully."

Hamza says he has been receiving anonymous and untraceable calls on his unlisted telephone number from people speaking Iraqi-accented Arabic. "They say things like, 'We know you are an American agent' or just, 'You're dead,'" he says. Hamza is reluctant to seek F.B.I. protection, fearful that it might draw attention to him.

Hamza says he'll probably move soon, a change he and his wife have been considering for some time. His plans to promote his memoir with advertised bookstore appearances and lectures might have to be altered or shelved entirely. Hamza's situation now resembles that of another author, Salman Rushdie, whose book "The Satanic Verses" earned him a public death sentence from Iranian religious authorities, who considered it blasphemous.

As much as he hates Saddam, Hamza still sees the wisdom in a remark the dictator made in one of their meetings. "He once told me: 'If you are a believer in God, and you get killed following a certain path, then you are rewarded with heaven and you are a great man. But you are a greater man if you are not a believer. Because then you do it out of personal commitment. You know there is no reward on the other side.'"

"I do what I do not because I expect some reward in heaven," Hamza insists. He smiles confidently. He is not a very religious man. Nevertheless, for Khidhir Hamza, the price of redemption seems to be rising. ■

10-8-00

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anyhow Terry together
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no argument
JL



THE GOLF CHANNEL®

September 25th, 2000

Dear Terry:

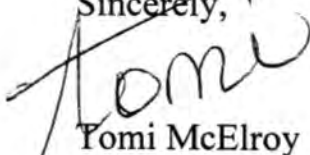
Hello! It's Tomi from The Golf Channel. Thank you very much for interviewing with us! It was a pleasure meeting you and hearing the great stories you had to tell!!

Enclosed please find two shirts... one for yourself and one for President Clinton... we would greatly appreciate his time! Hopefully we could join you both on the golf course and video tape a couple holes and do a 5 minute interview! We do not have any Democratic representation... President Ford has agreed to do an interview, so that's two Republicans! (Ford and Bush)

The show has been pushed back to air in January... therefore we have a much more open window for interviews. Hopefully we can do something in October or November with President Clinton... and anything you can do to help in this matter would be extremely appreciated.

Also, I have enclosed some of those "Golf Channel" tees I was telling you about... they are not for sharing... they should help *your* game. ☺
Again, many thanks for your time and help.

Sincerely,


Tomi McElroy
(407)248-6314

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