

The Proof: There *were* WMDs in Iraq Prior to the War

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A microbiologist named Richard O. Spertzel was the head of the United Nations biological-weapons inspection teams in Iraq—the UNSCOM teams—between 1994 and 1998. Spertzel joined the Army in the late 1950s and was assigned to the American biological-weapons program at Fort Detrick, where he served as a veterinarian and medical officer. When the biowarfare program was shut down in 1969, he stayed on at USAMRIID, working the peaceful side of biodefense. He knows a good deal about biological weapons. Spertzel is now in his late sixties, a stocky man with glasses and a white flattop buzz cut. He has an understated, blunt way of talking. He made some forty trips to Iraq, until the inspectors were kicked out for being too nosy. Spertzel picked his way through suspected sites of biological-weapons research and development, and he directed the analysis and destruction of the main Iraqi anthrax plant, Al Hakm, a complex of buildings on a missile base in the desert west of Baghdad. The UN teams blew up Al Hakm with a large amount of dynamite. Spertzel now lives on a ten-acre spread in the country just outside Frederick, Maryland, within a few minutes' drive of USAMRIID.

“There is no question in my mind that the Iraqis have seed stocks of smallpox,” Spertzel said to me.

“Why do you think that?”

“In a nutshell, the Iraqis formally acknowledged to us that they were acquiring weapons of mass destruction by 1974,” he said. By then, Spertzel explained, the Iraqis had already built a pair of Biosafety Level 3 lab complexes at a base called Salman Pak, which covers a peninsula that sticks out in a bend of the Tigris River. Salman Pak was run by the Iraqi security service. They had what they called an “anti-terrorist training camp” there. “It would have taken a while to build these biocontainment labs at Salman Pak, so we think their biowarfare program dates back to 1973 or earlier,” Spertzel said.

In 1972, an outbreak of smallpox occurred in Iran and spread into Iraq. “There would have been many samples of smallpox in hospital labs in Iraq after that outbreak,” Spertzel said. “It is inconceivable to me that at just the time when they were starting a biowarfare program they would have gone around Iraq and thrown out all their smallpox.”

In the mid-nineties, the UN inspectors often used the Habaniya air base outside Baghdad. Every time they flew into Habaniya and took the road to town, they drove past a group of dusty concrete buildings that were run by a branch of the Ministry of Health called Comodia. The Comodia buildings were warehouses and repair shops, and they were surrounded by apartment buildings and residential neighborhoods. This did not seem to be a likely place for biowarfare activity, but in Iraq you could never be sure, so one day the inspectors decided to have a look around Comodia.

The repair shop was a nothing. They went into the warehouse. On the second floor they found a machine sitting by itself in its own room, awaiting repair. The inspectors recognized the machine as a type of freeze-dryer that is used for filling small tubes with seed stocks of freeze-dried virus. The machine had a label on it that said SMALLPOX.

“I just hoped they'd sterilized the thing,” Spertzel remarked.

The top virus expert in the Iraqi biowarfare program was Dr. Hazem Ali, a beefy, robust, proud man in his forties, who had a PhD. in virology from Newcastle University in England. He spoke fluent English with a British accent. “He was one of the more brilliant scientists we had contact with,” Spertzel said. Dr. Ali ran a complex of Level 3 biocontainment labs called Al Manal, which was Iraq’s virus-weapons development facility. Al Manal is in the outer suburbs of Baghdad. The UN people spent some time questioning Dr. Ali in a room in the Al Rashid Hotel, and in September 1995, they questioned him in a conference room where television cameras were operated by the Iraqi government. Spertzel listened while Dr. Ali described his work with poxviruses at Al Manal. Dr. Ali said that he and his group had been working to develop camelpox virus as a biological weapon. Camelpox virus is extremely closely related to smallpox. It makes camels sick, yet it hardly ever infects people—you could run your hands over the wet, crusted muzzle of a postulated camel then lick your hands and rub them on your face, and you would probably not catch camelpox.

“You sit back and listen to this, and you try to control your emotions,” Spertzel said. “If I heard that from some Joe Blow on the street I would say, ‘He’s an idiot,’ but this was Dr. Hazem Ali, and he is not an idiot, he is a British-educated Ph.D. virologist. Our only explanation for their camelpox was that it was a cover for research on smallpox.” The biocontainment zones at Al Manal were kept at Level 3 but the safety controls didn’t look like they were up to Western standards. The Americans and most of the Europeans on the UN team were very afraid of Al Manal. They wanted to blow the place up, but the French government vetoed that idea.

Al Manal had been built by a French vaccine company then known as Pasteur Mérieux (now part of Aventis-Pasteur). Pasteur Mérieux had constructed it as a plant for making veterinary vaccines and had run the facility while training Iraqi staff on the equipment. The Pasteur Mérieux people left Al Manal several years before it was converted to a poxvirus-weapons facility, and though they may have been a little naïve, there is no evidence they ever thought Iraq would use the plant for weapons.

In any event, the French government did not want to see a French-built plant dynamited, principally because that might threaten France’s other commercial interests in Iraq. The United Nations had to find a less obvious way to give the facility the deep six. “We filled the air-circulation system with a mixture of foam and concrete before we left Iraq, and I believe we made the labs unusable,” Spertzel said. Not that it matters. A Level 3 lab is not expensive to build or very difficult to hide. Most legitimate Level 3 research facilities are a few rooms, and they can be anywhere.

In 1999, the Iraqi government asked the United Nations for funds to reopen Al Manal. The UN turned down the request.

“Their biowarfare program continues,” Spertzel said, “and the chance the Iraqis are continuing research into smallpox today is high.”