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## Iraqi Ph.D. Graduate Braves Dangers to Rebuild Home Country

By Skye Dent

Hajim al-Hassani, Iraq's new Minister of Industry and Minerals, is a Ph.D. graduate of UConn's Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, where he specialized in the agricultural economic analysis of industrial organizations. He also spent several years conducting research for the department after graduating in 1990.

He is now working around the clock to help rebuild Iraq, in the midst of violence and despite threats on his life.

This interview took place by phone in July, the day after former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was formally charged for crimes against humanity.



*Q. Can you tell us if your studies here at the University of Connecticut apply to what you are doing now?*

Hajim al-Hassani, Ph.D. '90, second from right, in the late 1980s with fellow students and Professor Ronald Cotterill, seated. Al-Hassani was recently appointed as Iraq's Minister of Industry and Minerals.

Photo supplied by Ronald Cotterill

*A.* Of course it does. I majored in industrial organizations and that is helping me tremendously on my job. The education I received there was essential in preparing me for what I am now doing.

*Q. What are some of your responsibilities as Minister of Industry and Minerals?*

*A.* I am researching the whole ministry right now and my major role is to transfer most of the companies and factories that we have into the private sector. That's our long-term plan. Right now, I'm trying to do some rehabilitation of some of the factories and I'm using a lot of information that I learned in the course of my studies at UConn.

*Q. Can you give us an example?*

*A.* For example, the standardization of all of our products. That was one of the things that I studied while I was at the University of Connecticut. We are trying to maintain our standardization equivalent to the international standardization of the product. And we are also working very hard to become a member of the World Trade Organization. It's going to take some time, but somebody has to start it.

*Q. How did it come about since you left here in the '90's that you rose to this position of prominence in Iraq?*

*A.* I was working with the opposition for the last 10 years. I was commuting between Los Angeles and London. We've been working hard to make this change happen.

*Q.* Since your appointment to the Ministry was announced, we have seen the danger to you and other ministers increase. Is the danger as bad as the media make it

appear?

A. Well, some of the terrorists are trying to target us, definitely. But we have protection and it's worth the price. Even if something happens to us, it's worth the price to make this tremendous change that we are making in Iraq right now. It is a duty and an honor.

Q. *Are you living in Baghdad?*

A. I'm living in Baghdad.

Q. *And your family is with you?*

A. Yes, my family is here. I have three children. The oldest is nine years old and the youngest is two and a half.

Q. *How are they dealing with all of this?*

A. The violence, the danger, it's becoming to us a normal thing. The children are getting used to it. People who live here don't think much about these things. First when we came here and we heard bombs exploding, it would take your attention. But right now, it's become part of our lives.

Q. *Do you remember which professors at UConn had the most impact on you?*

A. I had many people. Boris [Bravo-Ureta], he was one of the people who was my friend and my associate advisor. Professor [Tsoung-Chao] Lee was another of my advisors in the department. Everybody over there, I like them. Ron Cotterill, my thesis advisor, definitely. Also Emilio Pagoulatos, the head of the department.

Q. *There's a lot of controversy over here in America about whether the war is worth it. I was wondering if there was anything you could say to those people who have family members over there fighting.*

A. When the war happened, I was against the war, at the time when they were preparing for the war. I was always thinking that probably we could do it without the war. It turned out that it was almost impossible to do it without the war. So, I believe that things will go the way that we wish and that it was necessary for us to go to war. Mistakes have been done by the army and by the civilian administration that we have here. But, such a big job like this, you make mistakes. And I think the biggest mistake was in dissolving the army and the security forces. Two major mistakes that they did. Now we are correcting all of these mistakes.

Q. *What about [the atrocities at] Abu Ghraib [prison]?*

A. What happened in Abu Ghraib hurt us a lot. We need some time to remedy all these problems that we have.

Q. *Will time be enough to erase the impact of Abu Ghraib?*

A. I think it will become a minor thing in time. It was a shameful thing here, to tell you the truth, when we discovered it. I was defending the United States initially when I first heard about it. I had visited Abu Ghraib a month before this thing became public and nobody told me about it. So it was very difficult for me after this thing came out. But there are some irresponsible people who did these things. That should not be generalized on all the people, and I think we are working to strengthen our security and after that, the troops should go home.

Q. *Were you in the room when Saddam Hussein was formally charged?*

A. No, nobody was there except the National Security Advisor. We tried to keep ourselves away because we don't want to interfere in the judicial system. The former

government used to do that. We preferred not to be in that place and have any influence.

*Q. Would you encourage any of your professors, colleagues, or current students here at UConn to come over to Iraq to help rebuild or teach?*

A. As a matter of fact, after Iraq becomes a little bit more secure, I encourage everyone to come and help rebuild the country. I wish I had some of them right now.

*The Advance thanks foreign correspondents from The New York Times and Newsday for assisting the reporter in contacting al-Hassani.*

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