

# Ready to take out Saddam

## On the AGENDA



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**T**o be in Kurdistan - from where I have just returned having attended the first Iraqi Opposition Advisory meeting - for a journalist, is to be at the centre of the most important story going.

It is for sure the eve of war and a historical moment. The fate of Iraq will likely be decided in the next few weeks. People in the Iraqi opposition, many of whom I have known very well, are preparing to return to a land they have fought to free. Based now in Kurdistan, they are closer than they have ever been.

During those four years since my initial surreal meeting with Iraqi dissidents in London, who seemed as remote and unfamiliar as aliens, I have shared their interest in ousting Saddam Hussein from Iraq, primarily because he is the personification of evil. Throughout the bleakest days when the Iraqi National Congress seemed doomed to certain failure, I have shared this passion.

When I received a call three weeks ago from a contact in Sulaimaniya, in the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq, saying they were waiting for me, change became a reality. War became personal. The DNA of the opposition has transformed into something significant.

I have seen the movements of these exiles morph into the confident strides of men. Men who have stuck by their principles rather than guns, despite being ridiculed by the majority of people - governments, journalists, onlookers who felt the infighting and rivalries and end goals were laughable not laudable. Admittedly, the battle is not yet won, and their detractors may still be proved right, but the most astonishing thing is to watch people fight for what they believe in, despite the odds.

From a beleaguered group of also-rans - and that was the best-case scenario - these refugees may just yet, although there are very many hurdles, establish the first democratic government in the Arab world.

And, perhaps, from the most unlikely of locations. In the opulent surroundings of Sharif Ali bin Al Hussein's home several weeks ago, I watched a man who thinks he may be king of Iraq, walk through the halls of his mini-palace with regal bearing.

Upright, formal and unfailingly charming, he gave an interview to a Japanese TV

station sitting on a gilt-edged silk brocade chair. It didn't take much imagination to see a throne. On the wall hung a portrait of King Faisal II of Iraq, his cousin, who was assassinated in the 1958 revolution. Atop the carved gold frame was a crown.

Painted in pastel colours on the dining room walls was an amazing trompe l'oeil, depicting pyramids and peacocks on one façade, on another was a weeping willow tree by the banks of a mythical stream on which swans glided by.

The man who would be king even had a spotted cat that looked like an ocelot. The likelihood of the monarchy being restored in Iraq I would think is marginal, but the palpable taste of real possibility hung in the air as heavy as the drapery.

In the starkest of contrasts were the austere offices of the KDP, the Kurdish Democratic Party. On their walls in a far shabbier part of London south of the river, hung sharpened swords and pictures of the rough Kurdish terrain - sure evidence of the ingredients that have made these fighting men.

In still another part of London, in the rabbit warren that has been home to the Iraqi National Congress, the umbrella group that ties all these factions together and since 9/11 the hub of activity, the expensive property echoes in desertedness.

All its inhabitants have gone to northern Iraq in preparation for what they believe will be the positive conclusion to 24 years of Saddam Hussein's repressive regime.

This of course is their moment of truth. All their dreams of seeing a democratic Iraq, free from the tyranny of a psychopathic dictator, will in theory come to fruition now. That, ultimately, is worth fighting for.