

# Saddam Hussein's Would-Be Successors

**With President Bush pledging to get rid of Saddam, rivals and potential heirs gear up to seize the moment**

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**I**N MID-MARCH IRAQ.NET, A two-year old website owned by a prominent member of the Iraqi opposition in London, ran a poll asking who could head a transitional government in Baghdad, should President Bush make good on his declaration that he intends to get rid of Saddam Hussein. The U.S.-funded opposition Radio Free Iraq gave the poll good coverage, and commentators good-humoredly dubbed it the first democratic election in Iraqi history.

About 2,500 respondents — mostly exiled Iraqis — chose from a list of 14 names. The results indicate the dilemma faced by the Americans, who say they are determined to "change the regime" in Baghdad but are much less clear on who, or what, they want to see replace Saddam Hussein.

The most popular answer was "none of the above." The top "candidate" of the 14 named, with 19 percent of the votes, was Najib Salhi, a former Iraqi army brigadier general who defected in 1995. Salhi heads the Free Officers Movement based in Fairfax, Virginia. The group supports regime change in Iraq, but not by military coup.

Because the Salhi clan is found throughout Iraq and spans the country's Sunni and Shi'ite Muslim populations, he's a plausible consensus candidate. (About 65 percent of Iraqis are Shi'ites though the country's current leadership is Sunni.)

Second, with about 15 percent, came Sharif Ali, a cousin of Faisal II, the Iraqi king who was assassinated in the original Free Officers revolution of 1958. Ali, 45, left Baghdad at the age of 3, grew up in Beirut and now lives in London. A banker, he heads a movement for a constitutional monarchy for Iraq based on the British model, and favors democratic elections.

Ali's party, the Constitutional Monarchy Movement, is a member of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the pro-democracy umbrella movement that represents all the main segments of the Iraqi opposition in ex-

ile. Ali finished ahead of INC founder Ahmed Chalabi, long tagged as the Pentagon's favorite for the successor role, who scored only 12-13 percent in the poll. The London-based INC, which has U.S. funding but is riven with rivalries, advocates new leadership but so far has not put forward names of those it considers candidates to succeed Saddam.

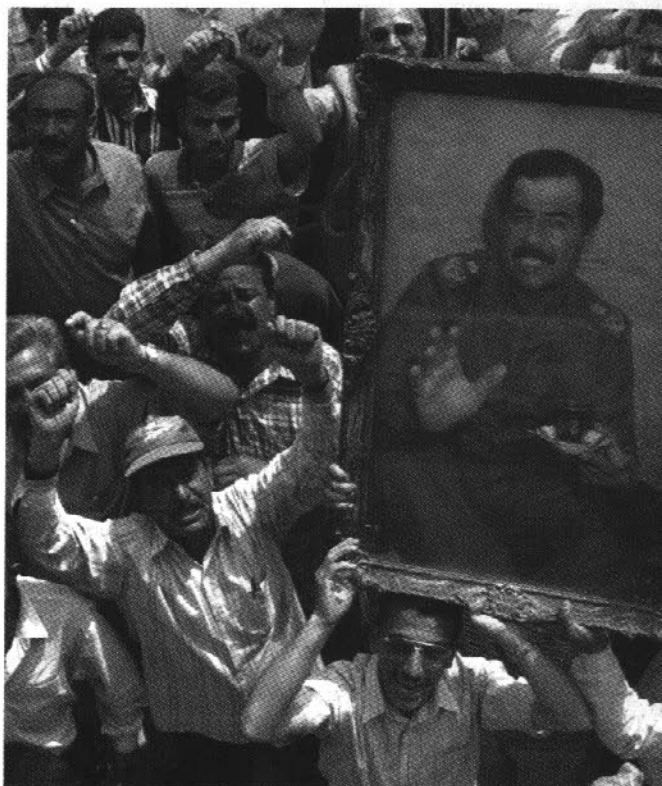
Unsurprisingly for a poll taken in the Iraqi diaspora, two candidates related to Saddam — his son Qusai and his half-brother Barazan Tikriti — garnered less than 3 per cent between them.

In addition to being inconclusive, the results were tainted by the fact that the poll was called off a few days ahead of schedule. Critics say that was because Chalabi was not winning. The website's managers deny that, saying they pulled the poll because they suspected someone was falsely inflating the figures of front-runner Salhi.

**I**F ANYTHING, THE POLL SERVES as an ironic microcosm of Iraqi politics, reflecting just how murky the future after Saddam looks.

President Bush, worried about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, has now clearly stated that Saddam needs to go. But the administration is being much more coy about how or when that goal will be achieved, and observers can't make out whether Washington will follow through or not. David Mack, vice president of the Middle East Institute, a Washington think tank, echoes a common sentiment: "America is getting serious about getting rid of Saddam Hussein, but they have not yet figured out how to do it."

Washington appears to be mulling sev-



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eral options, ranging from diplomatic pressure through covert activity to a full military invasion. And, Iraq watchers say, Washington officials are on the lookout for potential new leaders. "It's one of the strands in the administration's bow," says a former U.S. government official.

Some traditional Washington lines about who or what could replace Saddam seem to be getting blurred. State Department skeptics who once ruled out any dealings with what they saw as the non-credible INC, favoring a military coup scenario instead, now seem open to other options. And Pentagon hawks who once looked upon anyone who didn't back Ahmed Chalabi as an agent of Saddam now recognize that the INC head might not be the ideal or only vehicle for change after all.

Despite the uncertainty of U.S. intentions, scores of Saddam opponents, rivals and potential heirs, many of whom live in exile, are gearing up to seize the moment. Mack, a retired U.S. diplomat with con-

siderable experience in dealing with Iraq, reckons about 40 people are in the running.

Among these, the most recognizable is Chalabi. A Shi'ite from Baghdad, Chalabi left Iraq in 1958, at the age of 13. His father had been the head of the Senate under the monarchy. A former banker and former professor of mathematics at the American University of Beirut, Chalabi now operates out of London and Washington. Supported and funded by the Pentagon and Congress, he founded the INC in 1992, is the organization's representative in Washington and sits on its six-seat leadership council. One criticism leveled at Chalabi is that he has little support in present-day Iraq.

Another would-be contender in the eyes of the think-tank world is Ayatollah Baqir Al-Hakim, a

Shi'ite from a clerical family in the southern city of Najaf. Hakim heads the Shi'ite Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, an armed opposition group based in Iran, as is Hakim. SCIRI claims to stand for democracy, not theocracy. But its critics say that should the organization ever come to power, Iraq would effectively become an Iranian province. Obviously, Hakim would not be the Americans' idea of a desirable successor.

Also being tossed around Washington is the name of Fawzi al-Chamari, one of a clutch of generals now in the United States who might take part in any future action. "For some reason Washington is fixated on the notion that only a military leader can force Iraqis to live in one cohesive state," says Ibrahim Marashi of the Middle East Centre at Oxford University. He notes that Najib Salhi has been dubbed in some circles as a "Hamid Karzai of Iraq," a reference to the interim Afghan leader — a comparison that greatly annoys the INC.

Then there's Gen. Nizar al-Khazraji, a former Iraqi army chief of staff who now lives in Denmark under virtual house arrest. Danish police are investigating his

possible role in the Anfal campaign of the 1980s, when the Iraqi army used chemical weapons against Kurdish villages in the north, killing thousands. Khazraji has denied any part in the attacks. A former national hero of the Iran-Iraq war, Khazraji has pro-Saudi leanings. His name has been put forward by Iraqi opposition splinter groups known to have close links with the CIA.

Other mooted contestants include Dr. Ayad Allawi (head of the Iraqi National Accord, a Ba'athist party based in south London that was originally organized by British intelligence, and that is dedicated to staging a coup in Baghdad) and Adnan al-Pachachi (a former foreign minister who left Iraq before Saddam came to power in 1979.)

**T**O COMPLICATE MATTERS, THE INC may no longer be the only opposition umbrella in town. Emerging as an alternative is the "Gang of Four," a coalition including the INA, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and SCIRI. Though technically members of the INC, the four groups have recently distanced themselves from Chalabi and the INC core.

While the leaders of the KDP and the PUK, Masoud Barazani and Jalal Talabani, already represent powerful rival forces on the ground in the Kurdish "safe haven" of northern Iraq, the fact that they are Kurds takes them out of the running for the top job in Baghdad. But both would certainly be involved in any future central government.

There is a natural empathy between Iraq's Shi'ites and Kurds. Both see themselves as the oppressed victims of Saddam's brutality, though that doesn't mean they work closely together. The Kurds are not in a hurry for political change, due to a lucrative sanction-busting and oil trade thriving in the autonomous Kurdish zone of northern Iraq. But any potential leader will have to be able to reach out to the country's Shi'ites, Sunnis and Kurds.

The INC is certainly the most all-embracing Iraqi opposition organization, but it lacks credibility as a real force capable of effecting change inside the country.

"It is unrealistic to think that a political umbrella group, the INC, which is not on the ground in Iraq the way the Northern Alliance was in Afghanistan, could actually engage in operations as opposed to merely providing a sort of form for political consensus," believes David Mack.

And while many would-be Iraqi leaders are putting themselves forward, the outcome will depend at least in part on who

will be effective when the moment for change comes. Says Patrick Clawson, deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy: "There is going to be a moment of opportunity. Hamid Karzai is where he is today in part because he was effective when he first got in."

The would-be contestants have one thing in common: none has any real power base inside Iraq. So a crucial factor will be who the army and the internal security agencies support.

"If you have a truly military government," says Clawson, "you are likely to get a succession of coups. If you want to have a semi-stable Iraq that doesn't dissolve in some kind of general chaos you need a broader based government than just the Iraqi army. That should include some people in the Shi'ite community, probably named by the ayatollah there, and you would include some prominent Kurds."

The U.S. administration is not looking to create a government in exile or leaders in waiting, according to a former U.S. official. Rather, it is trying to get the lay of the land to figure out what options are available to it and asking if there are other people in the Iraqi Diaspora who could create the foundation for a new Iraq.

Ken Pollack, a former CIA military analyst and now deputy director of national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, says: "If the States did invade Iraq, it would be nice to have a small contingent of Iraqi forces alongside us; kind of like the Free French in WWII. No one would expect a whole lot of them during the fighting but the symbolism would be important. It could have some impact on Iraqis inside Iraq, seeing free Iraqis as part of a liberation rather than us just coming to conquer them."

One problem the U.S. faces in working with the opposition is that key opponents of Saddam's regime are Shi'ites or Kurds. The Sunnis now in control of Baghdad see U.S.-led efforts as undermining their position. Bringing in more Sunnis would convey the message that this is not a Shi'ite or Kurdish plot, but an exercise by all Iraqis to liberate Iraq.

But the American government needs more experience and knowledge, experts say, about the Iraqi opposition's organizational, propaganda and military abilities.

"The first step is to ask those questions," says Pollack. The next is to test the candidates. "Give them resources and tasks, then see if they can use those resources to accomplish those tasks. This is what experienced foreign service and intelligence professionals in the State Department and the CIA will be looking to do." ●



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