

IRAQI'S

VOICES
FOR
FREEDOM



AHMAD AL-RIKABY, London-based correspondent for Radio Free Iraq, recalls an interview he conducted with a former Iraqi intelligence officer, illuminating the fundamental nature of Saddam Hussein's regime. "He told me how the Iraqi special security directorate decided to execute 2,000 people in one day. They wanted to clean the prison, so the day before the executions took place, Qusay, the son of

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(Ahmad Al-Rikaby)

Saddam, gave the orders – and he was part of the team that supervised the executions. He told me how they executed people. They started at 6:00 a.m. and were done at 9:00 p.m. and I asked him, "It is awful to witness



one execution, how were you able to watch the executions of 2,000 people in one day?" As terrible as this is, it is just one of many stories about people who have lost their life in the seas, under the trains, in the cold weather, in the mountains while trying to flee the regime."

Al-Rikaby's family was forced into exile when the Ba'ath party came to power in 1968. "It has been very difficult not to have a homeland, or rather to have a homeland you cannot visit without risking your life." His family sought refuge in seven different countries. He has never known the comfort

of his close relatives. "It was very difficult to go to school and hear all of the children talk about their experiences with their grandmothers or how they spent their holidays. I even blamed my parents for not having pictures of them...I always felt that something was missing. Everybody treated you and saw you as an Iraqi, and I was proud to be Iraqi, but at the same time, I couldn't live in Iraq.

"When I speak now with other Iraqis in exile, we talk mainly about the future. We don't dwell on the torture inside Iraq because it is something so obvious. We are concerned about the future—how to change the current situation, how to rebuild our country. We talk about our dreams of a democratic Iraq, where you can travel, write and express your opinion about the government or any other subject. As a journalist, I want to meet the next Iraqi president and ask him tough questions without fearing for my life.

"I see the press as the guardian of democracy. We need the press to expose mistakes, present new ideas and help our voices be heard."

SAYED ABDUL MAJID AL-KHOEI speaks about the breadth of the regime's brutality. "The regime's criminal acts, beginning in 1968, have been never-ending," he says. "Executions, the closing of schools, mosques and shrines sacred to



Shia worshippers; the burning of old religious scriptures; looting the sacred sites of gifts left by presidents and kings.

"The aged scholar Murtada Al-Khakhali was taken into custody with his son and three grandsons.

The following excerpts were taken from interviews conducted in late 2002 with Iraqis now living beyond the brutal control of Saddam Hussein's rule.

These voices represent but a few of the millions of Iraqis whose hopes for the future have been silenced by tyranny.



Three generations were detained and no one knows their fate...hundreds of families lost loved ones. The family of Al-Hakim lost 17 scholars to the executions, the family of Bahr Al-'Uloom lost more than 22." Some families, he believes, have no male members left to carry on the family name.

Temporarily living in London, Sayed Abdul Majid Al-Khoei works to preserve the integrity of religious spirit that Saddam would destroy. He is deeply troubled by the regime's manipulation of Islam. "Saddam has misused and abused the Quranic texts to cover and protect his actions. He based his whole invasion of a neighboring, brotherly Muslim country [Kuwait] on these personal interpretations...You cannot consider a person like Saddam Hussein as a Sunni dogmatist who oppresses only the Shia. He has attacked Arabs, Kurds, Sunni, Shia, Turkmen and others. He has no mercy, even on those closest to him...Saddam has tried to ignite a fire of hatred among us, when all Iraqis know Saddam does not believe in any religion.

"In Iraq, when I was a boy in my father's house, I would meet Sunni scholars more often than Shia scholars. We would exchange visits with Kurdish scholars from northern Iraq. Group discussions were held among Muslims and Christians. Iraqis are civilized, peace-loving people. I believe they will know how to fill the regime's artificial gaps." Iraqis again should be free to follow their faith.

ABBAS AL-BAYATI strongly believes Iraqi society needs a national dialogue that leads to mutual recognition of all the nation's peoples. "Without the recognition of Sunni, Shia, Kurdistan, Turkmen, Arab, and Assyrian peoples, without this, there will be no peaceful coexistence, only a coercive, rigid society. For decades the regime has created ethnic divisions among Iraqis." As a Turkmen, Al-Bayati knows



such divisions only create victims.

The regime is, he explained, "melting the Turkmen identity, forcing people to surrender their identity.

No Turkmen is allowed to conduct official business in Kirkuk until he has renounced his ethnic identity and claimed an Arab one. Tens of thousands of Turkmen, Sunni and Shia, have been expelled or executed. Iraqi citizens of Turkmen ancestry are also not permitted to enroll in military or police

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(Abbas Al-Bayati)*

academies, serve as ambassadors or in other institutions of state."

Al-Bayati sees the need for other basic reforms in the new Iraq. "We want a police force that respects and obeys the law. It has become a stick in the hands of the regime, rather than a tool to fight crime and terrorism. To understand their responsibilities to society, academies will need to develop cultural and educational training. All this requires change, a change in mentality, so that the police understand they are on the same level as the people, and only the law is above them." No citizen should fear the institutions of a truly representative government.

SAYED MOUSTAFA AL-QAZWINI was a child in 1968 when the regime first tried to force his father and grandfather to support the Ba'ath party. "They refused and due to their political involvement against the regime, my father was sentenced to death. Luckily we managed to escape the country." The family fled to Kuwait, except for Al-Qazwini's 80-year-old grandfather. The elderly scholar was arrested in his home in Karbala in 1980. The secret police came to my grandfather's house after midnight. They knocked on the door, then entered by force. He was bleeding when they took him away, according to neighbors who witnessed the event. "The last time we heard about him was in 1982, 20 years ago."

At age 20, Moustafa Al-Qazwini came to the United States, where he now leads the Islamic Education Center in Orange County,



California. "I have heard people state that any action against Iraq is a war on Islam, but this is just not true. I believe that Saddam Hussein is the main source

of war in the region. He is inviting war, in fact, by his atrocities. But unfortunately, some people have a double standard. They do not admit that reality. They talk about tyranny and dictatorship and dominance, but they forget that in their backyard there is a tyrant who has destroyed a whole country... the blood of millions is on his hands. But I have hope in a new Iraq, an Iraq based on respect for human rights and democracy and one that can influence the situation in other places."



IRAQ'S VOICES FOR FREEDOM

Al-Qazwini envisions an Iraq reintegrated into the world. "I believe in cooperation with the international community, with the United States, with Europe and other countries. We have mutual interests with others; we have to work with others. Today, in this world that we live in, we have to work with all nations, all nationalities." The Iraqi people should be free and independent to debate and determine their national priorities.

SAFIA TALEB AL-SOUHAIL has, out of tragedy, gained the determination to speak out against Saddam Hussein's brutality. "In 1994, an assassin traveled to Beirut on orders from Baghdad and, working with Iraqi diplomats, gained entry to our house and shot my father at his front door." Al-Souhail's father was an Iraqi patriot, democrat, leader of the respected Bani Tamim tribe, and father of eight children. "It affected all of us, my mother, my sisters, the rest of the family, and my tribe. He was a person we looked up to and, living abroad, he was our only support. It made us more determined to remain on the same path as my father - which is to liberate the Iraqi people from the oppression and corruption that the Iraqi people have endured for more than 30 years."



Now serving as Advocacy Director for the Arab and Islamic World at the Alliance Internationale, pour la Justice, Safia Taleb Al-

Souhail is particularly concerned that others understand the toll the regime has taken on the lives of Iraqi women. "Iraqi women make up more than half of Iraqi society. Not half - but more than half of it. Iraq has been through two destructive wars. The Iraqi man has had the lion's share of the physical

losses, but the Iraqi woman, she truly has had the greatest share of suffering. She lost the father, husband, son and more. The Iraqi regime has employees whose job it is to rape women. Can you imagine that? Is there such a job in the world? In Iraq, it exists. It is a tool to prevent men from being patriotic towards their country." Al-Souhail says that women and children have witnessed horrible scenes that only time and security can fade. Iraqi women should be freed from the burdens they have carried for decades.

SADIQ AL-MOSSAWI should have been executed by the regime. His captor made a mistake in reading the official orders and instead, forced Al-Mossawi out of the country. "On a pitch black night, with three other people, I was expelled. The Iraqi police left us in the desert between two armies." Al-Mossawi emerged from this nightmare to become a successful entrepreneur.

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economically, and politically. Iraq, with its wealth and abilities can become the Japan of the Middle East," Al-Mossawi says. "I do not want the Iraqi nation remembered only for its deadly weapons, aggression or links to terror, but rather for its expertise and strength as a mediator in all the world's struggles.

"I want to see a liberal, democratic, federal and, I personally hope, a constitutional monarchy. In the meantime, I want to see a transitional phase during which the Iraqi people can recover. This phase would be led by a government that I see as half economic experts and half politicians that would lead the country toward a comprehensive economic recovery." Al-Mossawi's first priorities would be to ensure economic sanctions are lifted and that an agreement with OPEC is reached so that Iraq can resume legal sales of oil. "Building on economic prosperity, I would proceed with political recovery. The first thing here is giving the Iraqi people the chance to choose the type of government they want in order to take Iraq to the shores of safety, security, freedom and prosperity." Iraqi society should be free to develop its full potential.



IRAQ'S VOICES FOR FREEDOM

FAWZI KARIM was quick to sense the looming shadow the Ba'ath regime would cast on Iraq's intellectual life. A poet, he explained that his art grew out of the free-thinking environment of the 1940s and 50s.

"Saddam came and destroyed all of that. He knew that his regime wouldn't survive in that kind of environment. So the first thing he did was to kill every sign of freedom in Iraq. Iraqi intellectuals, like others in many countries, were the first to rebel and go into exile after Saddam came to power. I left in 1968, and the following year, scores more Iraqi poets, writers and other intellectuals followed suit. One of the things we Iraqi intellectuals discuss when we get together in informal sessions is that there is not only physical imprisonment in Iraq. There is also a mental or intellectual occupation that has taken root in Iraq over the last decades."

Karim has set his sadness aside, however, to gaze squarely at the future. "Because

of the personal experiences of thousands of Iraqi exiles like me, with their direct experience of the outside world, I can tell you that I feel confident that Iraq can be rebuilt – an Iraq that respects man again. Some people argue that Iraq – an Arab and Muslim country – cannot be democratic. I beg to differ! There is a lot in our history – the idea of justice and the fair leader, for example, that shows Iraq can be democratic and pluralistic. We are full of hope for the future. We feel that this long night is about to be over. There are 4 million Iraqis in exile now and 60 percent of them are young, educated, and willing to go back and rebuild this country for all Iraqis, not just the few who are members of the party or close to the regime." Iraqis should be free to explore, express, and exchange ideas.

HUSSAIN SINJARI was raised in an



area of rich ethnic diversity. "I learned tolerance on Sinjar Mountain, northwest of Nineveh. Our village was home to Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians and other peoples.

We had two mosques and three churches."

In 1974, the regime deported Sinjari's family and others from the area. "Our property was confiscated and we have never been able to return. When my father died a year ago, we could not even bury him there with his forefathers."

Hussain Sinjari has emerged from the deprivations and wars waged by the regime to head the Iraq Institute for Democracy in the northern city of Irbil. His mission is to weave the threads of democratic change into Iraqi society. "For the last 30 years, the word 'democracy' has been taboo in Iraq. In the entire school curriculum, when you look at what students are reading in sociology, in history and social sciences, the word 'democracy' is deleted."

To help build an understanding of what is possible in society, the institute sponsors grassroots activities like the September 20-27, 2002, "Democracy Festival." It is also training young journalists to think critically, to write and promote discussion. We are publishing *Al-Ahali* (The People) newspaper, the only independent, liberal newspaper published in Arabic in Iraq today. What does it mean to be liberal? For Sinjari, "To be liberal is not to take anything for granted, to think critically, apart from any ideology. *Al-Ahali* is a new voice for a new country, a way to involve ourselves in changing Iraq's political culture so that there will be no more dictators in Iraq. In the end, we ourselves, the people of Iraq, must push for democracy."

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(Hussain Sinjari)*



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Iraqi girl observes the parliament of Iraqi Kurdistan, December, 2002, in the city of Irbil.
(AP)



Iraqis in Stockholm challenging Saddam Hussein's bogus referendum to extend his presidency, October, 2002. The "No to Saddam" campaign, organized by a coalition of pro-democracy Iraqi organizations in Europe, North America, and northern Iraq produced their own on-line referendum that overwhelmingly rejected Saddam's rule. (AP)



Iraqi women opposed to Saddam's regime speak out in London, December, 2002. (AP)



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