

A glimpse into the background of an Iraqi “oppositionist”

Peter Symonds
12 March 2003

An article on the front page of the *Australian* newspaper last Friday about an Iraqi exile resident in Sydney provides a revealing insight into the type of characters that Washington has gathered together as its Iraqi advisers and planners. Entitled “Saddam’s betrayed mentor plans revenge,” it dealt with Mohamed Al Jabiri, a former top Iraqi diplomat and Ba’ath Party official.

As the newspaper proudly noted, Al Jabiri, working from a small office in Sydney’s southwestern suburbs, is the only Australian member of the “Transitional Justice Working Group” being run by the US State Department. Apparently, Al Jabiri is about to fly to Washington to join a group of about 30 other “oppositionists” and senior US officials in putting the final touches on the US plans for a neo-colonial regime in Iraq.

Undoubtedly, the former diplomat, like many Iraqis, suffered under the Hussein dictatorship. According to Al Jabiri, he was kept in solitary confinement for two years and under virtual house arrest following his release. Hussein organised the murder of his brother and son. In January 1993, Al Jabiri was allowed to leave Iraq for medical treatment and in May 1995 was accepted as a refugee in Australia.

The most significant aspect of the article, however, concerns Al Jabiri’s account of his early association with Saddam Hussein in the 1950s and 1960s. In their first encounter in 1959, Al Jabiri was in his 30s, “something of a powerbroker” in the nascent Ba’ath Party and the son of a well-off commercial family. Hussein was in his early 20s and, as Al Jabiri recalls, unimpressive and uncharismatic.

“I was sitting with a group of Iraqis and two people approached us—Saddam was one of them,” Al Jabiri explained. “He sat down with us and we decided to

help him because he was involved in a group **that was going to kill the prime minister at the time, Abdul Karim Qasim** [emphasis added]. He [Hussein] was nice-looking, and I didn’t imagine he’d turn into a butcher and become so cruel.”

This astonishing remark demonstrates firstly that, despite all his protestations about Hussein’s violence, the only reason Al Jabiri and his circle backed Hussein was that the young man was a killer. Secondly, it underscores the rank hypocrisy of the *Australian* editorial staff, who routinely cite Hussein’s brutality as one of the justifications for war and yet have no compunction in embracing a man who was directly complicit in Hussein’s practices. A little history helps make clear just how much blood Al Jabiri has on his hands.

In October 1959, Saddam Hussein and his thugs did try to murder Qasim, who as a leader of the Free Officers movement had overthrown the despised Iraqi monarchy the previous year. The military coup, which was broadly supported, raised expectations that the new administration would institute sweeping democratic and social reforms. Qasim relied heavily on the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), which uncritically supported his new regime and prevented the popular movement from taking an openly anti-capitalist direction.

The “leftist” character of the new administration made Qasim a target of various right-wing groups, including the Ba’ath Party—and of Washington. Hussein’s assassination attempt failed. Qasim’s driver was killed but the prime minister himself was uninjured. The assassins escaped and much of the Ba’ath leadership fled the country. The whole episode earned the previously unknown Hussein a certain notoriety.

Al Jabiri’s support for Hussein’s assassination

attempt is in keeping with the character of the Ba'ath Party, which relied on intrigue and thuggery as its modus operandi. Hussein's group of thugs was just one of a number of Ba'ath gangs on which the party relied.

In 1963, the Ba'ath Party ousted Qasim in a coup organised by sympathetic officers and unleashed a reign of terror against leftists. As one history of Iraq explains: "The months between February and November 1963 saw some of the most terrible scenes of violence hitherto experienced in the postwar Middle East... Having captured the main strategic points, and having executed Qasim, the Ba'ath set about the physical elimination of their rivals...

"It is impossible to establish exactly how many people were killed, but many thousands were arrested, and sports grounds were turned into makeshift prisons to hold the flood of detainees. People were killed in the streets, tortured to death in prison, or executed after mock 'trials'. Many of those who escaped with their lives were condemned to long periods in prison under atrocious conditions" [*Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*, Marion Farouk Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, pp 85-86].

As the book points out, at this stage the Ba'ath Party, even though it enjoyed the support of other rightwing nationalist groups, was still relatively small—around 850 full members and perhaps 15,000 sympathisers. The scale of the slaughter suggested outside assistance, and, as was the case in anti-leftist coups in Iran (1953), Indonesia (1965-66) and elsewhere, the dirty hand of the CIA.

"Although individual leftists had been murdered intermittently over the previous years, the scale on which the killings and arrests took place in the spring and summer of 1963 indicates a closely coordinated campaign, and it is almost certain that those who carried out the raid on suspects' homes were working from lists supplied to them. Precisely how these lists had been compiled is a matter of conjecture, but it is certain that some of the Ba'ath leaders were in touch with American intelligence networks, and it is also undeniable that a variety of different groups in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East had a strong vested interest in breaking what was probably the strongest and most popular communist party in the region" [*ibid*, p.86].

Al Jabiri makes the self-serving claim in the

Australian that he tried to keep the party clean. But having encouraged the assassination attempt in 1959, Al Jabiri was, by his own admission, friend and mentor to one of the party's chief thugs, who had no compunction in murdering its political opponents. When the party seized power in its own right in 1968, Hussein made himself indispensable to Ba'ath leader Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr by consolidating his grip over the military and setting up a ruthless intelligence and police network.

Hussein, although still young, rapidly rose in the ranks to become vice-president. Al Jabiri remained his loyal confidante and served the regime in various diplomatic posts. "I used to meet him and give him advice," he told the *Australian*. He only came into conflict with Hussein during the internecine infighting that followed Hussein's replacement of al-Bakr as president in 1979. Al Jabiri and his family became victims of the ruthless Ba'ath dictatorship, which he helped create, participated in and, as a diplomat, defended and justified.

The willingness of Washington to use men such as Al Jabiri once again underscores the fact that US plans for Iraq have nothing to do with democracy and justice. That Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* chooses to pass over Al Jabiri's record in silence speaks for itself.



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