

IRAQI-AMERICANS REACT

March 18, 2003

Members of an Iraqi-American community in Detroit give their views on a possible war with their home country and President Bush's ultimatum ordering Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq.

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: Events in Iraq have now reached the final days....

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: This Iraqi-owned cafe in Detroit was packed and all eyes were glued to the Arabic al-Jazeera Channel for President Bush's speech last night -- 160,000 Iraqis now live in the Detroit area, the largest Iraqi community in the country.

Many of these Iraqi-Americans fled after persecution from the regime of Saddam Hussein, and have worked to dismantle that regime ever since. Here, the president's ultimatum brought cheers. (Applause) Activist Emad Dhia was especially pleased.

EMAD DHIA, Iraqi Forum for Democracy: It's a sense of accomplishment and relief, in all honesty. Iraqi-Americans worked very hard for this moment, this moment of the truth when President Bush announced on the TV Saddam and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Many here have family and friends still in Iraq, so there was concern about the kind of war the U.S. will wage.

ABUKAR ALHASHY: I would rather the U.S. troops direct their job towards Saddam and his sons and knock them down and get the freedom for the people over there. But I don't want the war to be against the Iraqi people or to destroy bridges or kill people in cities or destroy factories.

Joining the war effort

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Several of the men in the crowd were members of Iraqi resistance groups Dhia has been organizing to return to Iraq. Working with the Pentagon, Dhia is trying to place Iraqi -Americans everywhere from the battlefield to positions in the hoped-for post-Saddam government. Twenty-nine-year-old Nasrat, an Iraqi American immigrant who does not want his last name used, has very personal reasons for wanting to return to Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein from power.

NASRAT, Iraqi Uprising Committee: When I'm 12 years old, I see how's my dad, he's sent to death in front of the family, and we lose everything. I hope... I want to see some new life for my kids, especially.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Nasrat fought in the Iraqi Shia uprising in the South in 1991. The movement collapsed with the withdrawal of U.S. Troops, and Nasrat was forced to flee. Now he and other former fighters in the uprising are among the several thousand Iraqis eager to find a role in the impending war. Some found that role last weekend, when the Defense Department kicked off a recruiting drive for Iraqi-Americans. A job fair was held just outside Detroit.

WOMAN: Is there any particular type of work that you would not want to do?

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: The several hundred people who showed up get signed up with the Titan Corporation, a private contractor providing interpreters for the military, sign a personal services contract with or become a term employee of the military, join the reserves or in one of the most popular options, join the Free Iraqi Forces, or FIF.

MAN: You'd be in uniform in a free Iraq... a special Free Iraqi Force uniform.

The fight for a free Iraq

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: The Pentagon says nearly 1,000 Iraqi-Americans have already been sent to Hungary for a four-week army training course for FIF fighters. Mahdi Altwabaa was eager to join the FIF, which will fight under the supervision of U.S. forces.

MAHDI ALTWABAA: The reason for all these people -- and I've been talking to every single one of them -- most of them they victimized by Saddam Hussein and his bloody regime. Most of these people, me personally, I got two brothers executed back in '87.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Nasrat has been trying to think of a way to tell his family he is leaving, but he hasn't come up with one. He is particularly worried about telling his mother.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: So you haven't told her yet?

NASRAT: No.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: And you're leaving tomorrow?

NASRAT: And tomorrow, yep. So I'm going to surprise her.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Is she going to like that surprise?

NASRAT: I don't think so. Well, hey this is the future, so we have to work hard for the future.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: This group of Iraqi-Americans we gathered said they really had no choice but to return.

MOHAMMED AHMAD: My dad told me to leave Iraq when I was 14 years old, and I was arrested twice because I said something against the government, and it's really time to get rid of this... it's really hard to see him, that he's still in power

SAMIR SHOUKRI: I think that's the duty of every Iraqi who feels that he's tied to that country, that's his responsibility to... from his position to help in any way that can be possible.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: They hoped that those in the Arab world that now opposed the war would change its mind about the U.S.

IHSAN ILASSADI: Hopefully when they go in and create a role model out of this country, this sentiment will be changed. When they start, when the troops are marching in Baghdad, have received and welcomed them, then I think the whole world will understand why the U.S. did what they did.

Crafting post-war Iraq

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: It is postwar Iraq that also concerns successful Iraqi businessman Assad Kalasho. Kalasho is Chaldean, a Roman Catholic minority in Iraq, though they are in the majority in the Detroit Iraqi population with more than 120,000. Kalasho says the Chaldean community is not as supportive of the war as Detroit's Iraqi American Muslims. Nevertheless Kalasho says he recruited 50 Iraqi Chaldeans to help U.S. Forces in Iraq. In return he hopes to ensure a seat at the table for Chaldeans when a new government is formed.

ASAAD KALASHO: I will be focusing on putting that country together within no more than two years -- build a democratic country.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Chaldean Iraqi -American Ramsey Jiddou is more concerned about the U.S. creating democratic institutions in Iraq than ensuring a place for Chaldeans.

RAMSEY JIDDOU, Iraqi Forum for Democracy: Again, if the intention is good and they say it is just temporary there, they are just there to keep law and order and install... or make elections after six months or a year I wouldn't have big objections there. But if they are going as occupier, I have big objections. We are liberators, not occupiers.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: The more than 150 Iraqi Americans who signed up to help in the war with Iraq are hoping that they will be asked to help liberate their homeland sooner rather than later.