
VOICE OF RESISTANCE

February 25, 2003

Elizabeth Farnsworth talks with one of the key leaders of the Iraqi opposition, Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr Al Hakim, one day before major opposition groups prepare to meet to elect transitional leadership for a post-Saddam Iraq.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Tehran, a city of 12 million people, seems frenetic as usual. The threat of an American invasion next door in Iraq doesn't seem to slow anyone down. Iranians are going about their daily business as if a war in Iraq weren't a possibility in the weeks ahead.

But war is a possibility, and these men in Tehran are acutely aware of it. They're Iraqi exiles, and the ayatollah leading the prayers, Muhammad Bakr al Hakim, is a key Iraqi opposition leader. His father, pictured here, was the leading Shiite cleric, and his family has suffered greatly because of its long opposition to Saddam Hussein. Ayatollah Bakr al Hakim fled to Iran in 1980 after being imprisoned and tortured in Saddam Hussein's jails. In Tehran, he prays under the photos of five brothers and nine nephews who were killed. More than 60 percent of Iraqis are Shiite, as are most Iranians, while Saddam Hussein is Sunni.

After fleeing to Iran, Ayatollah Hakim helped organized SCIRI-- the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq-- and with Iranian help, a guerrilla army with more than 10,000 fighters known as the BADR Brigades. This video provided by SCIRI shows the brigades in training. They have, over the years, carried out attacks against Saddam Hussein, and were a key part of the mass uprising of Shiites after the Gulf War in 1991. In the ayatollah's view, the administration of the former President Bush encouraged that uprising, then did nothing as Saddam Hussein butchered the Shiites. Ayatollah Hakim said he believes that the current Bush administration may make another deadly mistake now. In my interview with the ayatollah, I wore a head scarf as required by law in Iran.

Opposition to an invasion of Iraq

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: As you know, some people in the United States, the military planners, believe this could go very quickly, this war. Do you believe that, or do you think this could be a very bloody, drawn-out war?

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM, Iraqi Opposition Leader (Translated): That would depend on how the Americans enter. If it's a war of invasion and occupation, the United States forces will face a strong resistance. But if the Americans come to help the Iraqis to determine their fate and to rule themselves, there will be no resistance.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Have you decided whether your forces will help the Americans if there is an invasion?

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): We haven't been consulted about this matter, so we haven't yet made any decisions.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What is your view of what you've heard about the Bush administration plans for a post-invasion Iraq?

Support for a democratic government

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): I've heard that the Americans want to occupy Iraq and impose a military governor to administer and run affairs inside Iraq as they like, without getting the opinions of the Iraqi people or having the opinions of the political forces inside Iraq. This is very dangerous.

Still, I believe we do have issues in common with the Americans. The first is democracy, because we believe that democracy should be established in Iraq. The second is fighting terrorism, because we also have suffered from terrorism, and we believe that Iraq should be a safe country. The third is weapons of mass destruction. We also want to disarm the Iraqi regime because it used these arms against the Iraqi people and against the people -- of the region.

But there are other very dangerous subjects. The United States is taking an anti-Arab and anti-Muslim position. And this, in fact, creates very sensitive feelings against the United States. The U.S. is thinking of dominating and occupying Iraq, which will create nationalist and religious sensitivities inside Iraq, and this will lead to violence and bad consequences for the Iraqis and the Americans. And these subjects need to be discussed to reach a mutual understanding about them. But unfortunately, the Americans, until now, do not allow such a thing to happen.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Let's assume for the purposes of this discussion that the American plans continue to be that there will be an American military government after an invasion of Iraq. What will that mean for you, for your forces? What would you do?

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): The Iraqi people will surely resist this idea. I believe that the Iraqi people and the popular and national forces inside Iraq will not accept a military governor, because this is a violation of democracy.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: If what you hear from the Bush administration continues to displease you in its plans for a post-invasion Iraq, does it mean that you and your BADR Brigades will not participate or help?

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): I believe that getting rid of the regime of Saddam is legitimate and justified. Nevertheless, we believe that it is not right to have this happen through war, but rather through helping the Iraqi people to do this themselves.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: So at this point, you don't want an American invasion?

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): We believe it's not correct to wage a war against Iraq. What is correct would be the U.S. helping the Iraq people to make the changes.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: So help me get this straight. Are you saying that you would like American forces to help you, or to help the Kurds, to help the forces inside Iraq overthrow Saddam Hussein-- that you would actually do the overthrowing, is that what you would like?

The U.S. role

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): Yes, I believe it's most necessary that the U.S. help the Iraqi people to get rid of the regime of Saddam. I do not want the United States to help me personally. I want U.S. help for the Iraqi people to get rid of the regime.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: You know what the Bush administration says. They say that they don't want to have a government in exile that they then put in power because that would deny the Iraqi people inside Iraq the ability to make their own decision about who they want. What's your response to that?

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): I don't want to establish a government before toppling the regime. After toppling the regime, the government should be established and all national forces should take part in it.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: You know the Americans worry about your organization because they're afraid it would be too much like the Iranian government, and the Bush administration is hoping ... the Bush administration does not want Iraq to be like Iran. Would a government in which you had a key role be different from Iran?

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): There should be no concern about this, because all the Iraqi opposition groups agree that there should be a democratic government in Iraq. But the concern is that America will make another mistake like the one it made when it allowed the Iraqi regime to suppress the popular uprising in 1991.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: There were reports last week that the ayatollah had moved 5,000 of his guerrilla forces from Iran into Iraq and that they were accompanied by Iranian advisors. But he said the reports were wrong, that his troops had been active in the north of Iraq for ten years.

Not far from his headquarters, a documentation center founded by the ayatollah's brother has amassed evidence including photographs, testimony, and leaked Iraqi documents about human rights abuses in Iraq. These pictures show the results of torture in Saddam Hussein's jails, and the gassing of Kurds in the north in 1988. Shiites in the south have been gassed too. We were told that some of these files contain evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but the ayatollah said no U.N. inspectors have come to the center, or to him, for information.

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): Reports come to us from inside Iraq indicating the existence and whereabouts of these weapons. These reports should be examined.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Are there specific sites you'd like to mention right now that you think inspectors should visit?

AYATOLLAH MUHAMMAD BAKR AL HAKIM (Translated): If the inspectors or the United Nations asked about that, we will give them the details and information we have.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: While Ayatollah Hakim continues to work in Tehran, his brother and close associate, Abdul Aziz, is in northern Iraq with other opposition leaders, waiting to meet with a Bush administration envoy.

JIM LEHRER: And for the record, the Bush administration has begun to release details on how it plans to handle a post-war Iraq. The U.S. military would control the country, including reconstruction and humanitarian efforts, as long as there were U.S. troops in Iraq. According to the State department, control would be transferred to the Iraqis after a process that could take up to two years.