

# UN remains the best hope for Iraqis

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BAGHDAD: The young cleric called several thousand on to the streets of Najaf last week. The deaths of three American soldiers on Thursday, men from the same division which killed Saddam Hussein's sons, are an early blow to American hopes that resistance to occupation will fade now these key leaders of the former regime are dead. Five Americans have died since Tuesday, and 11 in the last week, the highest rate of killing since the war officially ended.

Some US officials had covered themselves by saying there might be a short "uptick" in the resistance, prompted by a spate of revenge-seeking if the Hussein brothers or their father were captured or killed. But their basic prediction was that resistance would subside.

In other quarters there has been a contrary suggestion that resistance might increase with the Hussein family's deaths, since some Iraqis might feel less inhibited about opposing the occupation if they no longer felt that they were somehow supporting the old regime. Both positions are predicated on the assumption that resistance is linked to the fate of Saddam Hussein and his closest followers.

US officials tend to argue that some Iraqis are hesitating to work with them out of fear that the old regime might one day return. The deaths of its leaders will lift the last curtain of fear, it is claimed.

Conversations with Iraqis undermined this argument. It was hard to find many who seriously believed the old regime had any chance of returning to power even before the events in Mosul. The family was unmourned even by most members of the Ba'ath party. Many were pressed into the party for career reasons and hated its

repression. An earlier generation felt Saddam and his tribal cronies from Tikrit distorted and subverted the party's original ideals.

Occasional comments by Iraqis that "things were better under Saddam" are not an indication that they want to restore his regime. They are more a rhetorical way of highlighting disappointment at the lack of security, the collapse of public order, problems with water and electricity, fear of unemployment, as well as the daily indignity of seeing foreign troops on their streets.

US officials seem unwilling to accept or admit this in public. It is easier to claim that the resistance comes from "remnants of the past" than recognise that it is fuelled by grievances about the present and doubts about the future.

Some armed attacks are probably conducted by former soldiers and officers, acting out of anger at the abrupt disbandment of the army and the humiliating conditions under which they have to queue to collect small payments. Resistance appears to be localised with no central command.

There is also evidence that resistance is supported by some Sunni mosques, which were not closely linked with the former regime. Indeed the potential rise of resistance, both Sunni and Shia-based, ought to be worrying the Americans more than the issue of the discredited Hussein family. The young cleric, Muqtada al Sadr, called several thousand supporters on to the streets of Najaf last week for demonstrations against the Americans. US officials have sought to marginalise him by denouncing him as a hot-headed populist. It is true that he does not represent the mainstream of

Shia thinking but he could start to do so if the occupation authorities fail to improve living conditions for ordinary people quickly.

Before the war critics argued that invading Iraq would encourage fundamentalism throughout the Muslim world. This seems to be happening, as Al Qaeda elements and other antiwestern groups see the American presence in Iraq as a new source of easy targets.

No wonder the United States would like to internationalise the coalition presence. Only a few small countries which want favours from it have offered help. The best hope remains the United Nations. At the UN security council on Tuesday, Kofi Annan called for a road map and a date for an end to the occupation. "There is a pressing need to set out a clear and specific sequence of events leading to the end of military occupation," he said.

The US needs to take his advice. Officials talk informally of a year before an Iraqi government can take over, based on two months to choose a constitutional commission, eight months to write and approve the constitution, and two months to hold elections. This calendar ought to be spelt out. It could be done under a new UN mandate in which the UN takes overall control of Iraq's transition to independence. This would make it politically easier for anti-war nations to join a peacekeeping contingent in which the US might remain as the largest member but no longer with supreme control. There is little doubt that US troops would welcome light at the end of the tunnel, as would Iraqis. Whether Bush and Rumsfeld are ready looks more doubtful.—Dawn/The Guardian News Service.