

A Town That Bled Under Hussein Hails His Trial

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DUJAIL, Iraq - The scars of what happened after an assassination attempt on Saddam Hussein, on July 8, 1982, are painfully evident in this mainly Shiite town 35 miles north of Baghdad.

People lower their voices when they speak of fathers, brothers and sons who went to the gallows, their fates unknown until Mr. Hussein's overthrow 21 years later set off the ransacking of a secret police headquarters in Baghdad that uncovered records of the executions. The landscape around Dujail is mostly barren scrubland, stark testament to the bulldozing of thousands of acres of date palms and fruit orchards after plotters fired on Mr. Hussein's convoy from thickets on the edge of town.

Now, the events at Dujail have come full cycle for Mr. Hussein.

Officials at the Iraqi Special Tribunal set up to try the former dictator and his top aides have said they expect to put him on trial by the end of the year in the deaths of nearly 160 men and boys from Dujail, all Shiites, some in their early teens. Some were shot dead in the immediate aftermath of the assassination attempt, but 143 - 9 of them ages 13 through 15 - were executed three years later by Mr. Hussein's revolutionary court. Townspeople say that many others remain missing - at least 200, by some counts - and that they hope the trial will reveal at least something of their fate.

For now, their families have only fading photographs of their lost menfolk at weddings, school graduations and summer outings, and tales of the moments they disappeared, seized on the streets or pulled from their homes by secret police squads that descended on Dujail in the days that followed the attack on Mr. Hussein.

Along the sun-blasted streets and alleyways of the town, a nondescript, impoverished sprawl of single- and double-storied concrete structures and makeshift, domeless mosques beside the main highway to Iraq's oil-rich north, the prospect of seeing Mr. Hussein, 68, facing a possible death sentence has brought relief - at least to the three-quarters of the population who are Shiites, though not to many in the Sunni Arab minority in the town, where there are still fierce loyalties to Mr. Hussein.

"Having Saddam on trial for what he did here will be good for Dujail, and for all of Iraq, because many people in this country, and in Dujail, still think of him as some kind of a god," said Ali Haj Hussein, a 37-year-old Shiite who lost seven brothers in the executions

that followed the assassination attempt, including one, Hussein, 19, who confessed to his father before he died that he was one of those who had shot at the Iraqi ruler.

The visit to Dujail amounted to a venture into enemy territory for Saddam Hussein. In 1982, he was in his third year as president, still consolidating his power, and many in this town, with a population of about 75,000, despised him for starting a war with Iran, Iraq's Shiite neighbor, two years earlier. Shiites here say that Mr. Hussein had long distrusted the presence of a large Shiite enclave, including Dujail and the nearby town of Balad, deep inside Iraq's Sunni Arab heartland - and beside the main highway from Baghdad to Tikrit, Mr. Hussein's hometown.

A conservative Shiite religious party, Dawa, with an armed wing that had mounted terrorist attacks against Mr. Hussein's government, had strong support in Dujail, and saw in his visit a chance to avenge the government's killings of hundreds of Dawa leaders and sympathizers. The plotters named the mission Operation Bint Huda, after the sister of Dawa's founder, Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Sadr, a prominent Shiite cleric. The two were executed in 1980.

Other crimes for which Mr. Hussein is likely to face eventual prosecution, in separate trials, include the Anfal campaign - the Arabic word means spoils - of the late 1980's, in which as many as 150,000 Kurds were killed, many shot and dumped into mass graves, others killed in poison-gas attacks; the chemical weapons attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja in March 1988 that killed about 5,000, which is likely to be treated as a separate case, like Dujail; and the repression of a Shiite rebellion in southern Iraq in 1991, in which 150,000 people are believed to have been killed. Also under investigation by the tribunal are the executions of more than 200 Baath Party leaders after Mr. Hussein seized power in 1979.

But the Dujail trial will set the pattern for the others, and lawyers for Mr. Hussein have made it clear they plan to use every legal recourse to expose the proceedings as a show trial, manipulated by the American lawyers who run the Regime Crimes Liaison Office, an American Embassy agency that has been the legal and financial mainstay of the tribunal.

"All over the world, people know Saddam Hussein as the man who said 'No!' to America, and it will be so in court," said Ziad Najdawi, a Jordanian who is part of an international team of defense lawyers.

"They can talk as they want, about executions and chemical weapons and mass graves, but we will say, 'It is all lies, nothing but lies. Everything here is tainted by America.' "

On the summer afternoon 23 years ago when Mr. Hussein came to Dujail, he was greeted with gunfire from the palm groves on the north side of town, survivors say. The first to rush to the streets were the youths; they had heard rumors for days that something important was about to happen. Army helicopters had been circling near the town, and official vehicles from Baghdad had been coming and going from the Baath Party

headquarters in a grim, guarded compound along the road leading into Dujail from the main north-south highway.

"It was about 2:30 p.m. when we heard people saying that Saddam had arrived, so we ran into the streets to see him, and right away his bodyguards started shooting at us, and they killed three of my friends," said Ghalib Hussein Abbas, a 42-year-old tractor driver now, then an unemployed youth of 19.

Fleeing to their homes, the townspeople saw the helicopters return, firing at villages amid the palm groves from which the plotters had attacked.

Two days later, survivors said, a 24-hour curfew was eased when loudspeakers announced that those missing relatives should go to the Baath headquarters and search among rows of bodies laid out in the building's forecourt. For some, it was a trap. According to witnesses' statements to the tribunal, four of the men set to go on trial with Mr. Hussein had gathered at the building to direct vengeance on the town: his half-brother, Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, deputy head of the Mukhabarat secret police in 1982; Taha Yasin Ramadan, a deputy prime minister and later Baath Party vice chairman; and the two local Baathist officials, Abdullah al-Musheikhi and his son, Mizher al-Musheikhi. Another defendant will be Awad Hamad al-Bandr al-Sadoon, former chief judge of the revolutionary court.

In small groups at first, then in larger roundups, about 1,500 townspeople were arrested, as many as 30 from single families, and started on a journey into Mr. Hussein's gulags - first at a detention center in Tikrit, later at a secret police detention center in Baghdad, and finally, to the Nugra as-Salman prison, an old British-built fort in the desert along the Saudi Arabian border. Some survivors, who were released in 1986, say that the appalling conditions at the prison caused several dozen deaths, including women, children and nursing infants. The 143 who were hanged never got beyond detention in Baghdad, where Mr. Sadoon, the chief of the revolutionary court, sent them to the execution chambers at the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad.

Accounts from local Shiites say Mr. Hussein outwitted the Dujail plotters from the start. On his entry to the town, those accounts say, tribal leaders made him a gift of a car, and marked it, in tribal tradition, with hands dipped in the blood of slaughtered sheep. Mr. Hussein, though, Shiites in Dujail say, saw the gift as a possible harbinger of assassination and returned the car, insisting that the tribal leaders and some of his aides travel in it - to their deaths, as the accounts have it, when the plotters fired on the car.

A few hours after the shooting, Mr. Hussein took to the flat roof of the town's main clinic and told a crowd that he was "not a coward who can be chased from your town," but assured his listeners there would be no reprisals. "He told us that the people who had attempted to kill him were a small band of traitors, and that we don't want to confuse them with the good people of Dujail," said Kassem Aalbuhaider, a shopkeeper now, then only 12.

But even as Mr. Hussein spoke, Mr. Aalbuhaider said, the secret police were at work. "They took whole families, even old people, women and small children," he said.

Within weeks, the razing of the palm groves and the orchards began, continuing until more than 250,000 acres had been bulldozed. In 1992, after the first Persian Gulf war, Mr. Hussein returned to Dujail for the first time, and told tribal leaders that the wastelands could be replanted, with grain crops, but not with palms and orchards. But it took 12 more years, and the overthrow of Mr. Hussein, before the town could begin in other ways to recover from what townspeople now refer to simply as "al karitha," the disaster.

Now, the plinths where Mr. Hussein's statues and portraits once stood at the town's major intersections are bare, and the streets are hung with portraits of the white-bearded clerics who are the icons of religious Shiites. The Baath Party headquarters serves now as a Shiite mosque. But the totems that seem to matter most are the date palms that some townspeople began planting discreetly in the mid-1990's as memorials to those who died.

On a recent evening, Mr. Hussein, the townsman who lost seven brothers to the gallows, led a visitor to the family's fields outside the town and through a grove of half-grown palms dedicated to them: Faleh, Hussein, Mahmud, Mohsen, Muhammad, Saad and Salim. "Here, I feel like a king," he said, smiling broadly as he reached out to touch the palm trees' drooping fronds. "Like these trees, Iraq is reborn. We are just at the beginning, but once Saddam has been tried and executed, we believe Dujail will begin to rise again."

Razzaq al-Saiedi and Khalid al-Ansary contributed reporting for this article.

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