

Disbelief and Joy in Baghdad

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Celebratory gunfire and conspiracy theories abound in the Iraqi capital after rumours of their ousted president's capture are confirmed.

At first no one believed the news. After all, just two weeks ago Kurdish sources reported the capture of Izzat al-Duri, number six on the coalition's list of wanted fugitives. That report was even carried by the BBC, only to be declared false soon after.

So, few people credited the weekend report carried by the al-Jazeera satellite television network which - quoting Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani - announced the capture by US forces of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein.

But more reports confirming the arrest soon piled up, and celebratory gunfire quickly erupted into the skies over Baghdad. Even the Communist Party - banned under the old regime - spilled into the streets, waving red banners and handing out sweets.

Throughout the streets, people gathered around television screens. At first there were few celebrations - the streets were empty as people were glued to the media coverage. When the power went out in one Baghdad neighbourhood, people rushed to neighbours with generators to keep watching TV.

Speculation was rife as to who had eventually turned in the former dictator. One major rumour - that Saddam had been shopped by his own wife, Sajida - seemed to have little substance behind it.

Meanwhile, Al-Jazeera's televised broadcasts alternated between the ghoulish pictures of Saddam's Kurdish victims at Halabja and a pan-Arabist commentator from Egypt, who declared the resistance would continue despite the arrest of the ex-leader.

If the mere announcement of the capture wasn't jarring enough, though, a visible wave of shock hit Iraqis when his bearded image was splashed across the nation's TV screens.

"I was frightened when I saw his photo - especially the beard," said one viewer. Another said, "Did you see his picture? This is the man who used to really frighten us."

One Baghdadi who wished to remain nameless perhaps best expressed the nation's feelings at the seizure of the former president, saying, "He killed my brother. He murdered a million good people. I've waited for this moment - to see him cornered like a rat in the sewer and picked up by the tail."

However, there are still a handful of Iraqis who cling to the old guard out of a loyalty that most would regard as misplaced.

"The arrest was unjust," said Ali Khalil Hamza, a self-employed businessman, adding, "I am very sorry. He is a better and more honourable man than the American occupiers."

One man, clearly a conspiracy theorist, insisted that the coalition caught the former Iraqi leader when it invaded Baghdad. “[Saddam] worked with them as an American agent all along,” he claimed, “and only now are they exposing him for political reasons.” However, he offered little to back this version of events up.

Other Iraqis simply in denial about the reports of the arrest.

Abu Saha, who once regarded his former leader as a hero for defying the Americans, insisted the captured man was one of the fallen president’s many doubles.

“It’s not Saddam,” Abu Saha said. “There are 20 people [who look] like him.”

Haifa also used to laud Saddam as a hero for fighting the Americans. But she’s now convinced that he “is a rat because of the way he surrendered”.

One former military man saw the ousted leader’s detention as an act of cowardice. “Saddam allowed himself to be captured. He could have worn a suicide belt. But he was taken alive,” he argued.

“This shows that he values his life above anything. His sons were braver than him. This is the act of a cheap man.”

Nizar Ahmed Abbas, a self-employed businessman, did not deny that Saddam had been arrested, but felt that it would have no effect at all on the continuing insurrection against coalition forces.

“It struck me that he did not resist during his arrest, and I believe that Saddam has no relation with the resistance, which will continue,” Nizar said.

Ali, a former army general now demoted to sergeant, felt the arrest was just, but that it would have no effect on the country.

“This is the end of any oppressor, anyone who oppresses the people,” said Jihad, whose sister, mother, and other family members were deported from Iraq under Saddam’s rule.

But he told IWPR that he was not going to celebrate the arrest, saying, “We still have no security. We still have no jobs.”

Jobs or not, most Iraqis seemed to think Saddam’s capture was beneficial. “I’m very happy because at last they’ve caught him,” said Salaam Ali Khairullah, a resident in Baghdad’s Al-Amal working class neighbourhood.

Raid Abdel Jalil Mohammed, a barber from al-Amal, seemed to sum up the hopes of many. “After the arrest of Saddam we need to forget the past and turn a new page,” he said, adding, “The important thing is that he will not return to rule us again.”

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