

Town Honours Saddam Assailants

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The conspirators of Dijail settled on a plan to rid the country of its dictator 22 years ago.

The city of Dijail, 60 kilometres north of Baghdad, has long-standing insurrectionary credentials. Its other name is al-Ibrahimiya, in honour of Ibrahim Ibn Malil al-Ashtir, who led a seventh-century revolt against Iraq's Umayyad rulers in support of Imam Hussein.

Like their fellow Shia in Iraq, the inhabitants of this town mark the Islamic month of Muharram, which this year runs from late February to late March, by wearing black clothes and participating in other rituals to mourn Hussein's death in the battle of Karbala, in 61 hejira (680 AD).

For Dijailis, however, Muharram is also a time to remember their sons who were martyred in a more recent rebellion - a 1982 attempt to assassinate former president Saddam Hussein.

Residents say the town was a hotbed of activity led by the Islamic Dawa party, loyal to the scholar Mohammed Bakir al-Sadr, who was famous for having declared, "Were my finger Baathist, I would cut it off."

In 1981, the regime embarked on a campaign to suppress the Dawa party. Sadr was arrested, tortured and killed, along with his sister, while in Dijail an unknown but large number of residents - mostly educated young men - were arrested. Shortly afterwards their dead bodies were returned to their families.

As a result, the inhabitants of the region decided to take revenge.

Dijail lies on one of the main roads to Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, a location that conspirators thought would give them their chance to kill the dictator.

Faris al-Dijaili, then a 19-year-old secondary school student, proudly recalls how he signed up with the insurgents.

"In 1982 I joined a cell against Saddam. It was so covert that even my closest relatives knew nothing about it. We used to meet on a farm belonging to a member of our cell, where we hid some rifles and pistols."

The first sign that the group might be successful came early in July 1982.

A number of planes flew low over the town's orchards, purportedly conducting aerial spraying for pests.

But an agricultural engineer with the would-be assassins concluded that the aircraft were not spraying but were undertaking surveillance ahead of a visit by the president himself.

Brothers Sattar and Mohammed Tawfiq had signed up to the plot to avenge their brother Talal, 16, who had been executed in the crackdown. "He was handsome. Everyone thought he would grow up to be a doctor,"

recalled Mohammed.

Sattar was the first to spot the dictator - in the centre of town, greeting an apparently adoring citizenry. According to Mohammed, Sattar first rushed home to get a pistol. "Shoot straight," Sattar's mother told him.

He then ran to the orchard. It was a hot day during the holy month of Ramadan and several members of the group were spending their fast in the shade of the trees. The orchard was also where they stored their weapons.

Sattar gathered about a dozen men. He volunteered to ride his motorcycle alongside the presidential motorcade so that the shooters would know which was the president's car - a "fidayee" or self-sacrifice mission, which would surely result in his death.

The group split themselves into two teams, hiding in the orange groves along the side of the road leading out of town.

The motorcade arrived. Sattar triggered the ambush by firing on the president's car with his pistol. The attackers opened up, and Saddam's guards shot back.

That is Sheikh al-Dijaili's version. There were other accounts. But regardless of how it started, Sheikh al-Dijaili says the hail of gunfire killed Sattar, in addition to a number of bystanders lined up alongside the road.

"We are sorry for that, but we had a greater goal, to rid the people of the tyrant," the sheikh said.

The rest of the attackers escaped in the confusion. They later received word that a number of the president's guards - some of whom had leaped upon the car to protect him - had been killed, along with his personal photographer.

Saddam Hussein, however, survived. The attackers hadn't realised that his car was armoured.

"We would have saved Iraq from Saddam 22 years ago if we had rocket propelled grenade launchers," Sheikh al-Dijaili said.

The attackers regrouped in the orchard and waited until it got dark. They then embraced each other, and went their separate ways.

Sheikh al-Dijaili and a number of his colleagues made it to Iran, where he lived until the fall of Saddam's regime.

Meanwhile, the government launched a ruthless response. According to residents, Saddam's brother Barzan al-Tikriti led the crackdown.

Abd al-Hussein Mustaf, head of the Dijail branch of the Freed Prisoners' Society, says 900 people were

detained. Of these, 380 were executed.

After the fall of Saddam's regime, the society recovered an execution certificate for 148 of the detainees, who were hanged in 1985.

In other acts of collective punishment, the Baathists bulldozed homes and orchards belonging to relatives of the conspirators and other Dijail residents.

Most of the attackers have still not returned from exile.

But those who have, Dijaili and Mohammed Tawfiq, are now honoured citizens, despite the harsh consequences their attack engendered.

Both men are now clerics - Dijaili gives religious lectures at the local mosque, while Tawfiq heads the town's office for the charismatic radical preacher Muqtada al-Sadr.

Despite the suffering, Dijaili says he is now happy.

He looks at a line of worshippers, flailing themselves in a mourning ritual for Imam Hussein which, like many other displays of Shia religiosity, was banned in Saddam's time.

For Dijaili, the ability to perform such rituals "is a dream come true. This is enough for me".

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