

From a Beirut cell, an Iraqi watches as the U.S. finally takes his advice

By Robert F. Worth

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BEIRUT, Lebanon: More than a decade before the first American tanks rolled into Baghdad, Mudher al-Kharbit and his family began slipping out of Iraq to meet secretly with CIA officials, pleading for help with their plan to unite Iraq's tribes against Saddam Hussein. If that effort had succeeded, Kharbit or his older brother might have become the ruler of Iraq.

Instead, he sits in a Beirut prison cell chain-smoking Marlboros and reliving the past. A gaunt, worn-looking 52-year-old with warm brown eyes and an apologetic manner, he is one of the many people whose fortunes have been utterly transformed by the American invasion.

Yet even by Iraq's tumultuous standards, Kharbit's story is extraordinary. Once one of Iraq's richest men, he repeatedly escaped death at Saddam's hands, only to help shelter him — tribal hospitality required it — after the American invasion. He stood with a weeping Saddam in April 2003 after American bombs meant for the fleeing dictator had instead killed Kharbit's brother Malik and more than a dozen other family members.

Now the Americans are finally taking Kharbit's advice in Iraq, and working with the Sunni tribes to fight Islamic extremists, such as the group Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. But it is too late for Kharbit, who was arrested here before the Anbar Awakening movement transformed America's worst enemies in Iraq into its best friends.

"After the war, the Americans wanted me," Kharbit said, smiling sadly, as if to explain his prison surroundings. "But the resistance is an honor I do not claim."

Although some leaders of the Anbar Awakening — America's new tribal Sunni Arab partners in Iraq — say Kharbit could bolster their efforts to fight the insurgency, he is not likely to get back to his native land.

Iraq's Shiite-led government views Kharbit as a terrorist. And while the United Nations says the Iraqi warrant on which he was arrested here last year is baseless, and has called for his release, the Lebanese authorities cannot decide what to do with him. An official at the United States Embassy in Beirut declined to comment about Kharbit's case.

So he waits in limbo, staring at the photographs of wounded and dead Iraqi children he has pasted to his cell wall. A haggard-looking man who treats his prison guests with elaborate hospitality, he says he has forgiven the Americans for killing his brother and his nephews and nieces, and for appropriating much of his family's large fortune. The future of Iraq is what matters, he says.

Kharbit, who worked in the family's thriving construction business before 2003, says he never took part in the insurgency. But he concedes that the facts of his life are murky and easily misunderstood.

He has a long history with Saddam, who helped make the Kharbit family rich in the 1970s through construction and oil contracts. Many Iraqis still see his family — which helped to police the Iraqi border for years and served as go-betweens with King Hussein of Jordan — through that lens.

"I think my story has never happened before in history, not anywhere," Kharbit says with a smile that looks more like a wince.

In a sense, his predicament can be traced to the night of April 11, 2003, when he arrived back at his family's palatial compound west of Baghdad to find the main house a heap of burning rubble. The American military had bombed it, having heard that Saddam was hiding there.

But instead of killing the Iraqi dictator, they had killed Kharbit's older brother, Malik al-Kharbit — the very man who had led the family's negotiations with the CIA to topple Saddam.

The bombing also killed 21 other people, including children, and the fury it aroused has been widely believed to have helped kick-start the insurgency in western Iraq. That fact may have helped fuel American suspicion toward Kharbit.

But until now, Kharbit has not disclosed another crucial detail about the bombing: Saddam was, in fact, staying at the Kharbit family compound that night, with his two sons and his half-brother Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti. They were all in a smaller villa next to the one the bombs struck, and were not harmed.

When Kharbit arrived that night, he says he found Saddam weeping outside the burning building. The dictator's son Qusay was struggling to rescue a wounded child from the rubble.

The Hussein family left soon afterward. American officials said they had not known that Saddam was there at the time, and the account came from Kharbit alone.

Later, Kharbit received a letter from the fugitive Iraqi president to thank him for his family's hospitality, invoking an old Arab parable about a man who slaughters his wife's mare to feed a group of guests.

Kharbit is quick to point out that his family was obligated by Arab tradition to shelter Saddam, and that the gesture was not a show of support. He is keenly aware of the dictator's cruelties, he said, having spent years in hiding in the mid-1990s when Saddam suspected him of backing an insurrection.

"If Bush lost the war and came to my house, we would accept him," Kharbit said. "We would do exactly what we did with Saddam; this is our way."

In the weeks and months that followed, Kharbit says, he overcame his feelings of rage and betrayal, and tried to help the Americans rebuild Iraq. As the leader of one of western Iraq's most important tribal families, he urged American officials to work with the tribes to secure peace. Some American military officers were receptive.

But the office of L. Paul Bremer III, then the administration's top civilian administrator in Iraq, suspected Kharbit of being an insurgent sympathizer — or worse — and rebuffed him, said a former CIA official who was in Baghdad at the time.

Kharbit soon moved to Jordan, in 2004, but Jordanian officials — acting under pressure from American officials in Baghdad — later forced him to leave that country, said the former official. Kharbit moved to Syria.

In 2006, Kharbit left Syria for Lebanon, seeking treatment for his wife's brain cancer. By then, Iraq — now ruled by Shiites who were deeply suspicious of anyone with ties to Saddam Hussein — had issued a formal arrest warrant, charging Kharbit with financing terrorism in Iraq. That was the basis of the Interpol warrant on which he was arrested when he arrived at the Lebanese border.

Kharbit, who suffers from heart and liver problems, has been in a prison cell inside a Beirut hospital ever since. He still wears well-tailored English suits, a remnant of his salad days in Iraq, when he rode a Mercedes limousine from Ramadi to Baghdad every day.

But his money is running out. The American military took \$7 million worth of gravel from a quarry owned by the Kharbit family and paid only \$20,000 for it, according to Kharbit and some of his friends, who provided documents to support their claim. However, that is the least of his problems.

Late last year the Shiite-led Iraqi government nearly succeeded in having Kharbit extradited to Iraq, where he is wanted on charges that could result in the death penalty. But the Iraqi government has not made public any evidence for its claim that Kharbit had been involved in financing the insurgency.

And the Iraqi ambassador to Lebanon, Jawad al-Hairi, said in an interview in his Beirut office that he had heard that the Iraqi prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, might agree to drop the charges once Kharbit is back in Iraq.

The United Nations' refugee arm, after conducting an investigation, declared Kharbit to be a refugee this year, saying that the Iraqi charges against him appeared to be baseless. But the Interpol warrant has not been reversed.

Some who know Kharbit and his family say he could make an important difference in Iraq.

"His absence in the Awakening is not good," said Ali Shukri, a former general in the Jordanian military. "He could have a tremendous effect."

Whether he returns to Iraq or not, some say Kharbit deserves better treatment.

"The Kharbit family was the early backbone of U.S. policy on tribes," said another former C.I.A. officer who had spent time in Iraq. "It's a bit odd that no one in the U.S. government really cares about him."