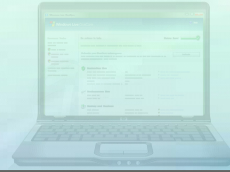


Advertisement

View the demo.

Start here



PRINT THIS

Powered by Clickability

Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Female official controls Iraq's security forces

By Charles Levinson
USA TODAY

Shiite woman overcomes odds to rise in ranks, but U.S. generals say she impedes reconciliation

BAGHDAD — The fate of Iraq's security forces, and their ability to bring peace to the country, may rest in the hands of a 69-year-old female Iraqi rocket scientist.

Bassima al-Jaidri spent most of her career struggling within Iraq's male-dominated society and is now one of the country's most powerful officials, in charge of a committee that determines, among other things, who can join the police and army.

She has also been a target of unusually harsh criticism by some senior U.S. military officials. They accuse al-Jaidri, a Shiite, of abusing her power to keep Sunnis out of the security forces, making her a major obstacle to reconciliation between the two religious sects.

Al-Jaidri shrugs off the accusations and counters that Iraqis, not Americans, control Iraq's destiny.

"I have had a long struggle with men," she replies with a smile. "I can handle the American officers."

The confrontation illustrates the challenges facing the United States as it pressures Iraq's Shiite-dominated government to bring Sunnis into positions of power and take control of its own security before planned U.S. troop reductions in the months ahead. Al-Jaidri's personal story also is emblematic of the lasting sectarian scars that often make peace so elusive here.

In a rare interview, al-Jaidri spoke without emotion about how her aunt and uncle were trampled to death in 2005 when a Shiite religious procession in Baghdad got word of an imminent attack by a Sunni suicide bomber. The resulting stampede killed more than 1,000 Shiite worshipers.

Under Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated government, al-Jaidri says, she was denied the career she had earned with her three graduate degrees in statistics, missile targeting and radar systems.

She took a job as a civilian in Saddam's officer corps but was never allowed to work on the missiles whose trajectories she had mastered. The patriarchal military assumed her unequal to the task because she was a woman and deemed her untrustworthy because she was a Shiite.

"The officers fought me every step of the way," recalls al-Jaidri, who never married. "I had the most advanced degrees and knew more than all of them, but they didn't even give me a desk to sit at."

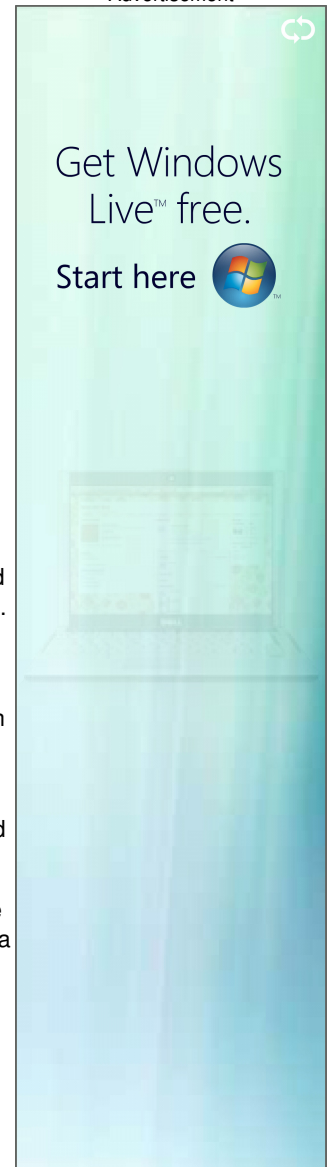
Much has changed since the United States ousted Saddam and a Shiite-dominated government came to power. Today, al-Jaidri's office is a spacious chamber in the former headquarters of Saddam's internal security service. It has marble floors and 20-foot-high ceilings, and it is bedecked with chandeliers, leather couches and a large oak desk. Leather armchairs surround a polished conference table with pyramids of

Advertisement



Get Windows
Live™ free.

Start here



chocolate truffles.

Last year, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki tapped al-Jaidri to head Iraq's Implementation and Follow-up Committee for National Reconciliation, which is spearheading efforts to mend sectarian ties.

Since then, some U.S. generals say, al-Jaidri is doing to Sunnis what they once did to her by systematically excluding them from the Iraqi security forces.

"She is one of our significant impediments to reconciliation," says Brig. Gen. David Phillips, who is in charge of the U.S. effort to train Iraqi police. He says al-Jaidri "should be one of the banned leaders in Iraq" because of her refusal to allow Sunnis to enter the army.

Phillips described a recent incident in which a Shiite Iraqi army general, Adnan Thabit, submitted a list of recruits that was 45% Sunni. Al-Jaidri stripped the list of all the Sunni names, Phillips said. Thabit was later stripped of his command.

Three months ago, Brig. Gen. Jim Huggins, who oversees the Iraqi police for the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division south of Baghdad, sent 3,000 names of potential police recruits to al-Jaidri's office for approval.

The recruits came from the predominantly Sunni band of farming villages south of Baghdad where al-Qaeda held sway until recently. The 3,000 recruits were among the more than 80,000 mostly Sunni Iraqis who have turned on al-Qaeda and the insurgency during the past year, part of the "Awakening" movement that President Bush credits with a dramatic nationwide decline in violence.

Huggins says he heard nothing from al-Jaidri's office until December, when 400 names were approved. They were all Shiites, even though the list had been heavily weighted with Sunnis.

"That's a blatant example that someone is still looking at this thing with a sectarian eye," Huggins says. He says he is frustrated with al-Jaidri because "I want to see more progress, and she's part of the reason it's moving at a snail's pace."

Huggins warned that unless more Sunnis are incorporated into security forces soon, the former insurgents could once again turn on the Iraqi government and U.S. forces, only this time with more arms and better organization.

"If these (Awakening members) aren't pulled into the security forces, then we have to wonder if we're just arming the next Sunni resistance," he says.

Al-Jaidri insists Phillips, Huggins and others portray her unfairly. She accuses the United States of bringing unvetted people — including al-Qaeda sympathizers and insurgents — into the security forces.

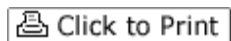
"The Americans just want the fast solution, but we want to build a government that is clean of the sectarian violence, the militias and al-Qaeda," she says. "The fast and easy solutions will only bring us further chaos."

Still, she expresses little sympathy for the Sunnis, whom she broadly paints as al-Qaeda sympathizers. "The Sunnis decided to take orders from al-Qaeda and were excluded from politics in Iraq. That's not our fault," says al-Jaidri, who was elected to Iraq's first postwar parliament as an ally of the anti-American Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, with whom she later split.

Al-Jaidri says she is ultimately accountable only to al-Maliki. "I have a message to the U.S. government: I don't work for the U.S. I work for the Iraqi government," she says.

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/news/20080201/a_iraqpolice01.art.htm



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2008 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.