

Ofra Bengio

A Republican Turning Royalist? Saddam Husayn and the Dilemmas of Succession

Like many other rulers in the Middle East, Iraqi President Saddam Husayn has been preoccupied with the issue of succession for quite some time. Unlike other countries, the question of who will be Iraq's next ruler is not merely a domestic issue, as various forces, particularly the USA, are keenly interested in influencing the outcome. Their primary efforts are aimed at precipitating Husayn's downfall, yet they do not seem to have any plans for its aftermath.

The open challenge to Husayn's rule during the 1990s only helped to increase his resolve to retain power but did not diminish the problems he faced with regard to his succession. How was he to make preparations for the succession without giving his enemies the impression that he was about to rid himself of all his assets? How was he to reconcile a regime which purported to be republican with his plans to make the role of head of state hereditary? If power was to remain in the hands of his family, who was the most suitable person to be entrusted with the job of president, and who would best carry Husayn's legacy?

In his drive to achieve the twin goals of maintaining his own rule and making it hereditary, Husayn has developed a unique style of governing and special mechanisms. This article will focus on the special traits of Husayn's rule, analyse the balancing mechanisms he has developed to retain power and assess the extent to which his strategy has succeeded. My argument will be that while Husayn has scored unprecedented success in achieving the first goal, the pursuit of the second might place him in the gravest danger ever.

The modern history of Iraq does not provide one single example of a smooth or natural transfer of power from one ruler to another. Transfers have either been unexpected, bloody or both. Even the monarchical era (1921–58) which, theoretically speaking, should have provided for smooth successions, failed to do so. All three kings, Faysal I, Ghazi and Faysal II died or were killed at a young age — 48, 27 and 23 respectively, after relatively short reigns and without having had the time or opportunity to plan properly for the succession. Nor was the first decade of the republican era (1958–68) any better. Its two main protagonists — 'Abd al-Karim Qasim and 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif — also died untimely deaths. The first was killed by the February 1963 Ba'th coup-makers, the second in a helicopter crash. Interestingly, only 'Abd al-Rahman

'Arif, the President from 1966 to 1968, managed to escape the fate of his predecessors; he was allowed to go into exile in Turkey in 1968 and was even brought back to Baghdad in 1998 to laud the Ba'th and be a kind of counterweight to the opposition abroad.¹

Saddam Husayn, the strong man during the first Ba'thi decade of power (1968–79) and president and omnipotent ruler ever since, sought to break this vicious circle by ensuring the longevity of his own rule and preserving maximum power within his family with an eye to making the role of president hereditary. It should be stressed, though, that Husayn himself has never referred openly to the issue of succession nor has he hinted as to who his preferred successor is. The little we know is from circumstantial evidence or from opposition sources abroad, which should be taken with a grain of salt.

During the first phase of Ba'thi rule, Husayn gradually rose from relative anonymity to the official position of second in command and then to that of ruler of Iraq. All the while, he made a point of stressing the importance of collective leadership. Evidently this was meant to either legitimize or conceal his relentless efforts to usurp as much power as possible from President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and turn him into a mere figurehead. Upon his assumption of power in July 1979, Husayn took three steps simultaneously. First, he stopped talking about collective leadership and cultivated his image as the sole leader towering over the Ba'th Party. Second, he spread the Ba'th Party's presence throughout the country and stepped up its control of the military. Third, he gradually increased his family's powers in the state machinery. These three actions, which at first sight appear to be contradictory, were in fact meant to complement each other and realize Husayn's vision of being Iraq's omnipotent ruler, with the Ba'th Party as his almost exclusive tool of control, and the family network as another basis of support which would be both loyal to him and enable him to turn his rule into a dynasty in the long run.

From the very start, Husayn styled his rule along the lines of that of kings and sultans, and not that of presidents. For a long time he refrained from undergoing what the Iraqi media contemptuously termed the 'referendum of the 99.99 per cent', which other Arab presidents, such as those of Syria and Egypt, followed. Rather, at moments of crisis, for example in 1982 following severe reversals in the war with Iran, Husayn opted for the more 'monarchical', 'loose' and 'spontaneous' method of support — the traditional vow of allegiance, the *bay'a*.² In a way Husayn was imitating King Faysal I, who came to power through an act of *bay'a*. Husayn also attempted to imitate the king on the occasion of the inauguration of the twin victory arches in Baghdad in 1989, when he appeared riding a white horse and wearing a uniform similar to

I should like to thank Dr Bruce Maddy Weitzman for his insightful remarks.

1 *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 2 May 1998.

2 For Husayn's use of *bay'a*, see Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word* (New York 1998), 74–7. It was only in 1995, in another moment of crisis, that he turned to the device of the referendum.

the one worn by King Faysal I.³ In addition, his 'royalist' penchant for building palaces and monuments was far removed from the accepted image of an austere, socialist Ba'thi ruler.⁴ Husayn also followed in the footsteps of Arab kings by sitting on a throne-like chair and introducing the slogan 'God, the homeland, the leader', substituting 'king' with 'leader' (*qa'id*).⁵ With regard to the title 'leader', here again Husayn preferred it to the formal one of President (*ra'is*) adopted by the heads of other Arab countries. '*Qa'id*' carried greater resonance for Muslims. It also connoted both civilian and military leadership. He also had a tendency to issue rules and directives, bypassing leading institutions such as the party, the Cabinet or the National Assembly (the Iraqi parliament). For example, in 1993, the provisional constitution was amended to empower the president to issue resolutions 'carrying the force of law'.⁶

How was Husayn to reconcile his style of one-man rule with that of a collective Ba'th Party leadership? He laid down the rules in the first two weeks of his presidency in December 1979. According to the provisional constitution of 1970,⁷ the president was to be elected by members of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the highest legislative and executive body in the state. On the eve of Husayn's coming to power, all 22 RCC members (except for one) were also members of the Ba'th Party Regional Command. Five of these did not give their consent to Husayn's presidency and were executed, together with 16 other high-ranking Ba'th Party officials. This initial bloodbath decided the rules of the game for the coming years. The Ba'th Party has since been inexorably neutralized, even castrated, losing its independence and autonomy as a decision-making body as well as its ability to check the president's power. Party congresses, which should have convened every four years, were taking place at more infrequent intervals and only when it suited Husayn's political needs. At the same time, relations of interdependence developed between Husayn and the Ba'th. The Party regarded him as the main guarantor of its very existence, especially in times of crises in Iraq, while communist and leftist parties in other countries were being dismantled one after the other. On the other hand, Husayn needed the party for operating the day-to-day business of state, for mobilizing the masses and for providing support following setbacks. Indeed, congresses were only convened at times of such domestic crisis, and with a view to forestalling possible anti-Husayn moves. In other words, Husayn managed to turn the party into an obedient tool in his

3 See his picture in Elaine Sciolino, *The Outlaw State* (New York 1991), 160–1. Similarly, one of Husayn's many statues was like the king's, which depicted him riding a horse.

4 Another example of 'traditional' behaviour is marrying more than one woman, the second being Samira Shahbandar. He was rumoured to have married in the early 1990s a third wife — Nidal al-Hamdani, manager of the solar energy department at Iraq's Ministry of Industrialization and Military Industrialization.

5 *Al-Jumburiyya*, 31 July 1999; *al-Majalla*, 5–11 September. For a picture showing him sitting on a throne-like chair, see *al-Iraq*, 16 October 1999.

6 *Babil*, 1 February — Daily Report, 11 February 1993.

7 *Al-Jumburiyya*, 17 July 1970.

hands. Accordingly, while bringing members of his family to power, he made a point of not allowing them to achieve *key* posts in the Ba'th. In this way he developed a special hybrid of one-man/party/family rule, seeking to preserve a delicate balance between a modern institution, the Ba'th, and a more traditional, family-tribal network. Did he succeed?

In Husayn's Iraq, alongside party rule, there developed an intricate kind of family rule, mostly orchestrated by Husayn himself. Initially, he sought to bring to power as many of his relatives as possible. He did so for various reasons: to build another network of support; to respond to demands from family members to be included in the political system; to prepare the ground for hereditary rule and, most important, to place loyal and reliable persons in sensitive posts. Indeed, members of his extended family were appointed to key posts in the various security apparatuses of the state and surrounding the president himself.⁸

Many years ago, when asked about family rule in Iraq, Husayn declared: 'We are not like others, as our brothers do not become princes.' Years later, Foreign Minister Muhammad Sa'id al-Sahhaf stressed again that there was no family rule in Iraq but 'a presidential set-up' which included a leading party — the Ba'th.⁹ In fact, however, Iraq has in the last three decades been ruled by members of four major families — the Bakr, Talfah, al-Majid and Ibrahim — who have exchanged various posts among themselves. Complicating things further were the intermarriages between the different branches of the family. Thus, President Husayn of al-Majid was married to Talfah women, the Talfah and Ibrahim to the Bakrs and other al-Majids to the Ibrahims.

Before analysing these intricate family relationships, a word of caution is appropriate. While Husayn sought to carry his family with him into power, he also subjected its members to the same rules and devices of politics: checks and balances, rotation, dismissals, reshuffles among the different branches of the family, and even elimination.

In 1977, two years before Husayn reached the pinnacle of power, two of his relatives began to climb the political ladder: 'Ali Hasan al-Majid, his paternal cousin, became a member of the Ba'th Party military bureau and 'Adnan Khayrallah Talfah, his maternal cousin and brother-in-law (Husayn is married to his sister Sajida) became Defence Minister. However, since these two were related to President Bakr as well (they were his sons-in-law), it is impossible to know whether their rise was due to Husayn's efforts to implant his supporters in key roles or to Bakr's attempts to check Husayn's powers and counter-balance him by appointing his own relatives (or both). Similarly, in the first

8 A Shi'i journalist who went into exile in the 1980s described this phenomenon in an original term: 'Loyalty to the small geography' (*al-jughrafiyya al-sughra*). Hasan al-'Alawi, *Al-Shi'a wal-Dawla al-Qawmiyya fi al-'Iraq, 1914–1990* (2nd edn, n.p., 1990), 245–56.

9 *International Herald Tribune*, 6 August 1984; Agence France Press, 4 October — Daily Report, 5 October 1995.

four years of Husayn's rule two prominent relatives occupied the centre stage: Talfah, who was made Deputy to Husayn as Prime Minister and as Supreme Commander of the armed forces,¹⁰ and Barazan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, the President's half-brother and brother-in-law (as well as Talfah's brother-in-law, being married to another of his sisters), who became chief of Iraqi intelligence.¹¹

However, by 1983, intra-family conflicts and political rivalries began to come to the surface, requiring the employment of checks and balances. Thus, in October 1983 Husayn sought to check the powers of his half-brothers by dismissing Barazan from his post and putting two others, Warban (Salah al-Din, Governor) and Sab'awi (deputy chief of police) under house arrest. (Another half-brother, Dahham, was assassinated the same year, reportedly by a criminal gang.)¹² At the time it was reported that the move was due to the brothers' objection to the marriage between President Husayn's daughter, Raghd, to their (second) cousin (and 'Ali Hasan al-Majid's nephew) Husayn Kamil. If true, this would have proved to be the tip of the iceberg of intra-family rivalries. But it might also have been a sign of a covert struggle for power between Barazan and the president. It should be noted that shortly before his dismissal, Barazan published a book about the failed assassination attempts that had been made against Husayn. Though it might have been aimed at aggrandizing the reputation of the 'security forces' for forestalling the attempts, such a book, nonetheless, cast doubts on the stability of the regime. Indeed, Barazan would remain a dissenting voice, at times criticizing the regime's performances, though not Husayn himself.¹³ Thus, the end of 1983 witnessed the decline of one branch of the family — the brothers — and the beginning of the rise of another, that of the cousins.

The end of the Iraq-Iran war in summer 1988 marked another phase in Husayn's family politics. He once again reshuffled power among the three different branches of the family. Thus, by 1989 he had rehabilitated the branch of his half-brothers: Barazan was made ambassador to Geneva; Sab'awi, head of public security (*mudir al-amm al-'amm*) and Watban, adviser to the president.¹⁴ Husayn also continued to promote his paternal cousins: 'Ali Hasan al-Majid became minister of local government; Husayn Kamil, Saddam's son-in-law, had already been made head of special security (*al-amm al-Khass*)¹⁵ and later held the prestigious post of minister of industry and military industrialization; Saddam Kamil, another cousin and son-in-law of the

10 Radio Baghdad, 16 July — Daily Report, 17 July 1979.

11 *Al-Mustaqbal*, 11 August — Daily Report, 15 August 1981; *al-Thawra*, 2 June 1981; *al-Watan al-'Arabi*, 30 July 1993 — Daily Report, 12 August 1993.

12 *Al-Thawra*, 9 September 1983. The death of Husayn's mother, Subha, the same year reportedly facilitated the dismissal of the brothers.

13 *Al-Thawra*, 8 June 1983; *al-Hayat*, 5 December 1994.

14 *Kull al-'Arab* (Lebanon), 24 July 1989; *al-Thawra*, 14 November 1991; *Babil*, 30 August 1992.

15 *Al-Qadisiyya*, 25 December 1987.

president (married to Rana), was made a member of the special bureau of Saddam Husayn and later head of the president's personal bodyguard.¹⁶

The same year witnessed, however, the final fall of the maternal branch; 'Adnan Khayrallah Talfah was killed in a helicopter crash on 5 May 1989. Long before the accident, Talfah had fallen from Husayn's favour. At the time, it was speculated that this was due to the fact that he had sided with his sister Sajida against the president's second marriage to Samira Shahbandar. Though this might be true, other weighty political reasons must also have been involved, indicating the very thin line dividing family affairs from political conflicts. Talfah's alienation had already begun in early 1988, reportedly against a background of disagreements with the president on the conduct of the war with Iran.¹⁷ The end of the war in August of that year provided yet another cause of concern for the president. Talfah, the war hero, was suspected of commanding such popularity among the military to turn him into his rival in peacetime. The other side of the coin was that the end of the war made Talfah's role as the main link between the president and the military irrelevant. Thus, a few months before his death, Talfah had already been put in the shade, given less prominence than Husayn Kamil, for example, a clear sign of Husayn's preferences.

Against this background, the accident raised speculation that the president himself was behind it, as the other two helicopters accompanying Talfah's were not hit in the 'sand storm'.¹⁸ Probably in an attempt to refute these rumours, which might have had severe effects on the military, the president turned the day of Talfah's death into an annual memorial day.¹⁹ Whatever the truth behind Talfah's death, one thing is certain. Husayn has not allowed any of Talfah's four sons to reach key posts in the state, indicating that family and political rivalries were passed on to the second generation.

The August 1995 defection to Jordan by his two daughters and sons-in-law marked a temporary loss of control by Husayn.²⁰ Earlier in the year the initiative was still in the president's hands. Against the background of unrest in May and June in the al-Anbar area, Husayn dismissed his brother Watban from his post of interior minister and his brother-in-law, Arshad Yasin, from the post of his chief aide-de-camp. Then on 16 July he summoned the Ba'ath Party Regional Command which among other things dismissed 'Ali Hasan al-Majid from his post as defence minister. (Husayn made the party dismiss

16 *The Economist*, 29 September 1990; *New Yorker*, 14 June 1991. Saddam Kamil had performed the role of Saddam Husayn in a film that dealt with Husayn's attempt on the life of Qasim in 1959. *Alif Ba'*, 28 April 1993.

17 See Ofra Bengio, 'Iraq' in Ami Ayalon (ed.), *Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS)*, vol. XIII, 1989 (Boulder, CO 1991), 381-3.

18 *Ibid.*

19 See, for example, *al-'Iraq*, 5 May 1999, which referred to him as the beloved and spoke at length about the close ties that he had had with the president. It is interesting to compare this with the 'official oblivion' of Husayn's predecessor, the late Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr.

20 For the defection and its aftermath, see Ofra Bengio, 'Iraq' in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman (ed.), *MECS*, vol. XIX, 1995, 317-21.

Majid so as to portray the Ba'th as a decision-making body, to clear himself of nepotism and maybe also to justify the deed by depicting it as 'a collective decision'.) The Kamil brothers' defection caught him completely unprepared. However, he recovered by luring his sons-in-law to Baghdad in February 1996 and helping engineer their murder. This time, however, the demise of one branch of the family was not balanced by the rise of another. Quite the contrary, the powers of his reinstated half-brothers were also waning. In August 1995, Husayn's son 'Udayy shot and wounded his uncle Watban, and not much has been heard about him since then. In November of the same year, Sab'awi was dismissed from his post as chief of security. In late 1998, Barazan was recalled to Baghdad from Geneva, after which he reportedly left Iraq in September 1999, seeking political asylum in the United Arab Emirates.²¹ Thus, by the beginning of 2000, of all the brothers, cousins and many other relatives, there remained only one figure in a *key* post — Hasan 'Ali al-Majid, who had managed, so far, to weather all the family and political crises. After the setback of 1995, he won back Husayn's favour by orchestrating the demise of his own brother and two nephews — the Kamils. Indeed, his fame for ruthlessness gained him at the end of 1999 the post of commander of the troublesome Shi'i southern region.

Did Husayn, then, learn to protect himself from the repercussions of family politics and intrigues? In a speech delivered shortly after the defection of the Kamil brothers in August 1995, Husayn likened his situation to that of the prophet Muhammad who had been betrayed by his uncle, Abu Lahab.²² At the same time, however, he praised others for 'placing the ties of kinship in the service of Islam'. Indeed, Husayn's moves to bolster his standing by turning the family into a main basis of support proved very problematic as, in time, family relations became more a liability than an asset. One complication had to do with the fact that power revolved around four major families in which intermarriages were rampant. Hence, rivalries, jealousies and revenge were innate features of their relationships with one another. Similarly, the family links could cut both ways: not only support Husayn but also bring pressures to bear on him to promote its members to different key posts. This he indeed did, but at the price of being accused of nepotism, having to balance and manoeuvre constantly between the different branches of the family and at times even losing control. Interestingly, crises and reshuffles within the family often took place almost simultaneously with crises in other apparatuses of power, such as happened in 1991 and 1995. This indicated that the family network behaved and was treated like the other pillars of power. Moreover, in hindsight, one can say that Husayn had more trust in Ba'thi associates who were more controllable than his close relatives. Thus, while family members have changed posts and none has remained in power more than ten years (Talfah), four Ba'thi associates have remained Husayn's constant 'companions' since his advent to power in 1979 and even before. These are 'Izzat

21 *Al-Wasat*, 13 September 1999; *Le Monde*, 9 October 1999.

22 Radio Baghdad, 11 August — Daily Report, 14 August 1995. See Sura 111 of the Qur'an.

Ibrahim al-Duri, Taha Yasin Ramadan, Tariq 'Aziz and to a lesser extent Sa'dun Hammadi. Similarly, Husayn sought to make a clear separation between the party and the family as, except for Talfah and Majid who were already party members back in the 1960s, none of the relatives reached a prominent role in the party, namely membership in the Ba'ath Party Regional Command. Clearly, the idea was to keep this pillar of power out of family struggles and tie it as much as possible to Husayn personally. All said, Husayn continued to keep the reins of power firmly in his own hands. But if he managed to get rid of relatives who could endanger him, his dilemmas regarding his own sons were not so easy to solve.

In a letter addressed to his two sons, 'Udayy and Qusayy, on the eve of the liberation of the Faw peninsula from the Iranians in April 1988, Husayn praised them for their participation in the fighting, together with all the other 'sons of Iraq', which proved, as he maintained, their love of their homeland, their being part of the nation and their serving as a model for the other fighters. The letter illustrated Husayn's desire to authenticate the military background of his sons, to introduce them to the public and to prepare them for political life.²³ Thus, he made a point of appearing with them in public following the victory in Faw. Similarly, he accorded them publicity in the media while boosting their political profile. By October 1988 'Udayy had made an important leap forward by assuming different posts dealing with youth: head of the Olympic Committee, head of the executive bureau of the Assembly of Arab Youth Sports Ministers, head of the board of trustees of Saddam University for Technology and Sciences, and, for all practical purposes, Youth Minister. Qusayy was also promoted the same year, when he was made deputy head of the Olympic Committee and sent on a visit to Egypt where he met President Husni Mubarak.

No less important were the 'political' marriages that Husayn arranged for his two sons. Possibly in order to disengage himself from family politics and pressure as well as link his sons to leading personalities, he had Qusayy marry the daughter of the influential military commander, Mahir 'Abd al-Rashid, in 1987 when the latter was at the zenith of power. Similarly, in 1988 he had 'Udayy marry the daughter of 'Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, Husayn's deputy as chief commander of the armed forces, RC secretary-general and RCC chairman. The marriage with Duri was important because, according to the provisional constitution of 1970, in the event of the RCC chairman being unable to fulfil his duties, the vice chairman would replace him.²⁴ In such circumstances, 'Udayy's 'link' with Duri could be essential.

Meanwhile, Saddam Husayn initiated another symbolic move: the rehabili-

23 The letter written in Husayn's handwriting, was published in *al-Thawra* on 17 April 1990. As early as 1984 it had been made known that 'Udayy was a pilot and Qusayy an armoured soldier. *Alif Ba'*, January 1984.

24 *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 17 July 1970.

tation of the Hashemite royal family, violently toppled from power in 1958 and reviled ever since as traitors.²⁵ Husayn sought to emphasize the continuity of the Iraqi state and also to propagate and legitimize the notion of hereditary rule as symbolized by the monarchical regime. The audience for such a message could be, among others, Ba'ath Party cadres, who undoubtedly viewed such ideas as anathema to party supremacy. (Later, in the 1990s, Husayn would have to contend with a new opposition group in exile which called for a constitutional monarchy to be headed by Sharif 'Ali bin Husayn, cousin of the murdered King Faysal II.)

These actions indicated that, though being at the apex of his power, Husayn was already preparing his sons for political life and perhaps even grooming 'Udayy as his heir apparent. However, the 'incident' of October 1988, when 'Udayy killed the president's bodyguard, Kamil Hanna Jajo,²⁶ opened for Husayn a Pandora's box of questions and dilemmas regarding the issue of succession. What was the best way to prevent the event from reflecting badly on the president? How was he to guard himself against his son's boundless ambitions but at the same time continue promoting him politically? Who of the two, 'Udayy or Qusayy, should be groomed as heir apparent and how could he prevent a struggle for power between them?

Husayn opted not to punish his son, as he had other relatives, but just to keep him out of the limelight for a short while in order to avoid the embarrassment of having a murderer for a son. Indeed, in spite of his reputation for being an unruly, greedy, womanizing, corrupt, flamboyant and quarrelsome person, 'Udayy was quickly rehabilitated. By 1996, 'Udayy was allowed to make inroads into different centres of power. He became involved in various illegal economic transactions which filled his family's coffers.²⁷ He continued to parade his interest in military affairs by announcing in 1993 that he had received an MA degree with honours in military studies from the military college of Bakr's University.²⁸ In the same year he became a member of the Ba'ath Party political bureau.²⁹ 'Udayy also posed as the 'voice' of youth through his posts as head of the National Student Union and head of a number of universities. He supervised the media and turned it into a vehicle for aggrandizing himself and his father and for settling accounts with ministries, institutions and family members.

'Udayy's problematic relationship with his uncles and other relatives added another layer to the family-political complex. Thus, after a short-lived marriage with Barazan's daughter Saja in 1993,³⁰ relations with the uncles

25 *MECS*, 1989, 374–5.

26 Jajo was rumoured to be the go-between the president and his would-be second wife, Samira Shahbandar.

27 For a detailed account on 'Udayy, see the articles of his secretary, 'Abbas al-Janabi, who fled the country. *Al-Hayat*, 18, 22 October 1998.

28 *Al-Iraq*, 10 August 1993.

29 *Al-Iraq*, 24 July, 10 August 1993.

30 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 12 October 1998. Later he was reported to have married 'Ali Hasan al-Majid's daughter but it is not known whether or not he had divorced Duri's daughter before. The

deteriorated very quickly. Barazan attacked 'Udayy, describing him as unfit for power and one who was not aware of his size and ability,³¹ while 'Udayy physically attacked his uncle Watban.³² 'Udayy also reportedly 'supervised' (together with Qusayy) the killing of his two brothers-in-law — the Kamils, which opened a Pandora's box of revenge (*tha'r*) and counter-revenge.³³ Family rivalries and conflicts had thus been transmitted to the second generation of the leading families.

The extent to which 'Udayy's behaviour was encouraged by his father and to which it spiralled totally out of his control was not known. One thing was certain. Husayn did seek to contain 'Udayy by counterbalancing him with his younger son Qusayy. For one thing, 'Udayy's past practices did not portend well for the future. For another, developments in other places, such as the bloodless coup engineered by the Qatari crown prince Hamad al-Thani against his father in June 1995, could not escape Husayn's attention. The need to prevent the accumulation of too much power in the hands of any one person was another consideration which had guided Husayn throughout his rule and which applied to his sons as well. In addition, Qusayy appeared much more discreet, controllable and trustworthy than his elder brother. Accordingly, in 1991 Husayn appointed him chief of the Special Security apparatus (*Jihaz al-amm al-khass*).³⁴ Later he accorded him the posts of supervisor of the Presidential Guard, and supervisor of the command of the Presidential Guard (*al-Haras al-Jumhuri wa qadat al-haras al-Jumhuri*), both key positions for ensuring the security and stability of the regime. In addition, Qusayy reportedly became a member of the armed forces military command and presided over a joint co-ordination committee between the army and the security apparatuses.³⁵ This division of labour between the two brothers seemed to have secured the desired separation of powers, with one spreading his influence over civilian/political affairs and the other in security/military ones.

The attempt on 'Udayy's life in December 1996 changed the picture overnight.³⁶ Though 'Udayy escaped death, for Husayn the attempt signified a loss of control and a message that the regime's opponents would not let the sons inherit the father. For Qusayy, it meant that the security apparatus which

anti-Iraqi *al-Majalla* quoted him as saying that he favoured polygamy. *Al-Majalla*, 11–17 July 1999.

31 *Al-Hayat*, 31 August 1995.

32 For the circumstances of this attack which almost cost the uncle's life, see Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein* (New York 1999), 193–5.

33 Reported by 'Abbas al-Janabi, 'Udayy's secretary, who fled the country. *Al-Hayat*, 18 October 1998.

34 *New Yorker*, 24 June 1991; *Country Report*, 'Iraq', no. 4, 1991.

35 *Al-Jumhuriyya*, 23 October 1995; *al-Hayat*, 21 November 1998.

36 Lately it was reported that a secret organization, 'al-Nahda' was behind the attempt. *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, 26 March 1999.

he supervised had severe cracks. As for 'Udayy, who was left crippled, it could have meant the end of his political and public career. Hence, the efforts of all three to stabilize the situation and return to normal as quickly as possible. Husayn sought to rehabilitate 'Udayy physically and politically but at the same time keep a certain distance from him so that his disability would not reflect badly on him. Qusayy made a point of showing solidarity with his brother; for example, by accompanying him when he left hospital. As for 'Udayy, aware that his physical condition might put paid to his pretensions to the role of heir apparent, he lost no time in resuming a latent race with his brother. Within a year of the attempt on his life, 'Udayy resumed many of the posts he had previously held. In an attempt to change his image of a frivolous playboy, he made it known that he had completed his doctoral thesis with excellence.³⁷ He also grew a beard and followed in his father's footsteps by parading his religiosity, and by citing verses from the Qur'an on every occasion, even more profusely than his father. Most important, he turned the newspapers which he owned (like *Babil*) or those he supervised, into a platform for his personality cult, as the president did in the 'official' newspapers such as *al-Thawra*, *al-Jumhuriyya* and *al-'Iraq*. Interestingly, Husayn's pictures appeared less frequently than 'Udayy's in the newspapers which the latter supervised.³⁸

By 1999, signs of a covert struggle for power between the two brothers began to surface. On 23 March, the London-based *al-Sharq al-Awsat* reported that Husayn had named Qusayy number two in the leadership hierarchy. This was followed by persistent reports that Qusayy had been granted wide powers to act as Iraqi president in an 'emergency'. *Babil*, 'Udayy's newspaper, was quick to describe these reports as 'farces and absurdities by ignorant enemies'. Iraq, 'Udayy said, 'was a state of institutions and party'.³⁹ Evidently, these reports aroused 'Udayy's fears and anxieties, leading him to parade his own achievements. Thus, in summer 1999 Iraqi television showed him walking without support, signifying that he could restart the race with his brother on an equal footing and no longer as a disabled person.⁴⁰ Then in spring 2000 he ran for elections to the Iraqi National Assembly, a parliament of sorts, which gained him more than 99 per cent of the votes.⁴¹ But, as in general politics, here too Husayn's views and mechanisms of control carried the greatest weight.

How, then, does Husayn approach the issue of succession in the year 2000? There is no doubt that he continues to prepare his sons for any contingency while also constantly balancing between them. Yet, of the two he seems to favour the younger Qusayy, evidenced by the fact that he appointed him to the

37 *Babil*, 28 September 1998; *al-Thawra*, 30 November 1998.

38 See, e.g., *Nabd al-Shabab*, 1 February 1999; *Alwan*, 6, 20 February 1999; *al-Ittihad*, 2, 16 February 1999; *al-'Alam*, 3, 17 February 1999; *al-Zawra'*, 4 February 1999; *al-Iqtisadi*, 14 February 1999. It must be stressed, however, that in the official newspapers, namely *al-Thawra*, *al-Jumhuriyya*, *al-'Iraq* and *al-Qadisiyya*, Husayn's pictures kept their monopoly.

39 *Babil*, 5 August; BBC, *Summary of World Broadcasting*, 9 August 1999.

40 *Al-Majalla*, 11–17 July 1999. *Al-Majalla*, however, doubted that 'Udayy had really and truly regained his walking facilities.

41 *Al-Zawra'* (internet version), 9 April 2000.

more important posts dealing with military and security affairs.⁴² In a more symbolic gesture, the president decorated Qusayy, but not 'Udayy, with the medal of valour. At the same time, however, Husayn was careful not to give the slightest sign that he was about to relinquish power. On the contrary, the greater the outside pressure on him to leave power, the greater his ambition to stick to it. Thus, from summer 1999 on, and maybe against the background of reports of a struggle for power between his sons, Husayn initiated a series of meetings with the most influential sectors in Iraqi society, such as the military high command, historians and judges. Most important, he concluded a series of some 30 consecutive meetings with Ba'th Party members to discuss various problems facing the state.⁴³ These meetings, which were quite exceptional in their scale and intensity, were obviously given extensive media coverage. All in all, they were designed to drive home the following (sometimes contradictory) messages: Husayn still controlled all small and big issues of state; rather than concentrating power in the hands of his family, he was democratizing the political system by approaching and sharing ideas with different sectors of Iraqi society; the Ba'th Party continued to be his most important mainstay, especially in times of crisis; his sons should be checked too — after all, they might have inherited his ambition for power and the same lack of qualms about how they attained it.

In a paper entitled 'Constitutional monarchies and unconstitutional republics in the Arab world', Nathan Brown maintained that republics have far more poorly developed constitutional procedures for succession than monarchies. While all Arab republics do have succession provisions in their constitutions, none has currently designated a successor, as monarchies do. They have refrained from doing so in order not to alienate key constituencies, but mainly in order not to endanger the position of the incumbent president. Since republican constitutions do not acknowledge lifetime tenure for the president, an overly eager designated successor might be encouraged to oust the president at any time, and not wait until he dies, as is the usual procedure in monarchies. As a result, ambiguities and uncertainties with regard to the issue of succession are much greater in republics than in monarchies.⁴⁴

This is nowhere more true than in Iraq where President Husayn has developed a special kind of regime which may be termed a 'republican monarchy' and which has sought to combine the best of both worlds. On the one hand, he has kept all the trappings of a republican regime, the most important of which is a leading party, while castrating it and turning it into an

42 At the end of 1997, Husayn appointed 'Udayy supervisor of the paramilitary organization, Saddam's Fedayeen (Fida'iyyu Saddam), but this post is nothing compared to the military and security posts held by Qusayy. See *al-Iraq*, 4 November 1997.

43 See, for example, *Al-Iraq*, 10, 25 June 1999; *al-Thawra*, 15, 16 July 1999.

44 Essay prepared for the conference 'At the Turn of the Century: Transitions in Middle East Societies', held at Ben-Gurion University, 7–8 December 1999.

obedient tool for his political purposes. On the other hand, Husayn has sought to imitate monarchies by turning himself into a ruler for life and preparing a member of his family to succeed him. Husayn has certainly scored a great success with regard to his first goal. No other ruler in the modern history of Iraq, be he a monarch or president, has managed to stay in office for such a long period. His success is all the more striking in view of the formidable, and ever-increasing challenges that have surrounded him from the moment he came to power. Not least among these were the combined efforts during the 1990s, however amateurish and inconsistent, of the USA and the Iraqi opposition abroad to unseat him.

Husayn, however, has been far less successful in his second endeavour. Indeed, managing family politics has proved as dangerous and as complicated as general politics. Moreover, Husayn's dilemmas with regard to the issue of grooming one of his sons as heir apparent have increased rather than decreased with time. The fear of alienating a 'key constituency', in this case the Ba'th Party, has been one constant consideration. Another has been the jealousies and rivalries of the other branches of the family which have increased incrementally over time. The relatives of Husayn's victims will always be suspected of harbouring the desire for blood revenge. A third has been the rivalry between the two brothers themselves which might turn the formal designation of either of them as heir into an open struggle for power, reminiscent of past Byzantine and Ottoman intrigues. No less important has been Husayn's own suspicion of his sons' ambition, especially that of 'Uday. Thus, unlike the Syrian case where Asad had groomed his son Bashshar as his heir, in Iraq President Husayn has remained ambiguous through and through. The greatest danger to Husayn may, after all, lie in his closest relatives; as the Iraqi saying goes: 'The most dangerous thief is the one from within the house.'

Ofra Bengio

is a Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History, Tel Aviv University. She is the author of *The Kurdish Revolt in Iraq* (1989, Hebrew); *Saddam Speaks on the Gulf Crisis, A Collection of Documents* (1991) and *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (1998), as well as co-editor of *Minorities and the State in the Arab World* (1999).