

Tariq Aziz

By William R. Polk

“I will not run away. I was born in Baghdad and I will die in Baghdad.” Those were among the last words Tariq Aziz said to me in his office in the Council of Ministers in Baghdad. Now, he is a captive of the American forces and the Council of Ministers building in which we sat has been destroyed by a missile. Who was he? What did he do? What will happen to him? These are questions I will consider here.

Tariq Aziz, as we know him, was born in 1936 in northern Iraq into a poor Christian family. His name was Michael Yhanna.

Like most of the young men and women I knew when I was studying in Iraq in the 1950s, Tariq Aziz, as he had become, regarded emphasis on religious and cultural differences as a means the British imperialists had used to “divide and conquer” their country. He adopted his name, in part, as an expression of solidarity with his Muslim colleagues and in part as a repudiation of his own ethnic background: in the new Iraq, he and his fellows determined, all citizens would be united and equal. Christianity and Islam would be put aside.

Yet, ironically, throughout his career, Tariq Aziz’s Christianity served as a shield to protect him in the brutal world of politics as practiced by the Baath party under the leadership of Saddam Husain. Regardless of his name, Tariq Aziz was still a Christian and in Iraq that made of him a sort of religious eunuch. Virtually alone among the inner circle of the Baath party, he was trusted by Saddam Husain because there was no way he could aspire to supreme power.

Today, the fact that he is a Christian poses a dilemma for the incoming American military regime: if he is treated more favorably than other members of the Baath party, it will appear to the Muslims that the foreigners still intend to split Iraqi society, favoring the Christians over the Muslims.

Yet, already observers have pointed out that Tariq Aziz was never, despite his posting as minister of information, minister of foreign affairs and deputy prime minister, an intimate associate of Saddam Husain. That group was made up of Saddam's kinsmen and fellow Tikriti townsmen. Tariq Aziz hovered on the fringe but was never a full member of it.

He was also apparently regarded with some suspicion because he was paradoxically too good at the jobs he was assigned. A graduate of the college that grew into Baghdad university, he became a journalist. Recognizing the need to communicate with foreigners, he alone among the senior Baath leadership was completely fluent in English. Relaxed and confident, he gave scores of interviews to foreign journalists that made him the best known Iraqi of his time. Whatever his title, he was the spokesman of the government.

And, as often as he could, he put aside the green uniform of the Baath party. I watched this evolution personally: in 1983 just as he was about to fly to New York to attend the UN General Assembly, he asked me what he should wear. I laughed and suggested that at least he leave aside the pistol that was the symbol of Baath party membership. He left more than the pistol. When we were together on February 3 of this year, just on the eve of the American attack, he was beautifully turned out in what must

have been the pride of some Savile Row tailor. The urbane and sophisticated statesman had come very far from his childhood as the son of a poor waiter.

Having held most of the senior positions in the civilian hierarchy of the Baath party, Tariq Aziz was authoritative, assertive and confident. He was Iraq's "point man" (as soldiers say) in its dealings with foreign governments. Meeting with US Secretary of State James Baker and Russian emissary (and later prime minister) Evgeni Primakov in late 1990, he had tried to stave off the war over Kuwait. And he developed close ties with the British, French and German leaders.

I had gone to see him in February to try to find out if there was any basis on which the fragile peace could be maintained. 'Not a chance,' he had pronounced. "Your President Bush is determined to have a war. Nothing we can do will dissuade him. We have no weapons of mass destruction; we are not supporting terrorists; but, alas, we have huge reserves of oil and we support the desires of the Palestinian people for freedom. We are doomed. But we will fight. Your soldiers will find a nasty surprise in Baghdad."

Probing into the delicate areas of Iraqi-American relations, I asked about what then appeared to be "flashpoints" that might trigger war. At that time, Iraq was resisting the UN demand for permission to fly U-2 aircraft over the country. Why, I asked did Iraq object since anything that could be seen by it could also be detected by a satellite. That, he said, was not the issue; the issue was that Iraq was truncated by the "no-fly" zones and could not ensure the safety of the plane. I replied bluntly that I thought that was silly: protecting the plane was not Iraq's responsibility. He pondered but did not reply.

I then raised the issue of acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. There was no way by which Iraq could hope to acquire enough or soon enough to stave off the

attack as North Korea seemed to have done. So why not make a virtue out of this by proclaiming that the government would not attempt to do so? I suggested a way to say this. He read my note carefully and then said, "I will have to put this in my own words." I took that to mean that he would have to refer it to Saddam.

A week later, Iraq did both of these things. But he was right: it did not prevent the war.

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