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Iraq

Saddam Husayn Appointed General

Iraqi strongman Saddam Husayn was given the rank of general last week by President Bakr. The action, according to Baghdad radio, was made retro-active to July 1, 1973. Saddam Husayn's biography reflects no previous military service or rank.

The 39-year-old Saddam Husayn is clearly the dominant figure in Baghdad, although, nominally, he holds only the number two position in both the Revolutionary Command Council and the ruling Baath party. A tough opportunist, he is a former Baathist street fighter who helped plan the Baathist coup that toppled the government in July 1968. Three months later, he was appointed deputy to Baath party leader Bakr. Saddam's ascendancy in recent years has been facilitated by the declining health of Bakr who is now restricted to an essentially ceremonial role.

We can only speculate on the significance of Bakr's move. We suspect that the title is meant to be more than an honorific "Kentucky Colonel" variety. Saddam Husayn now holds the second highest rank in the Iraqi army. President Bakr is a field marshal--he was, in fact a major general when the Baathists seized power--and chief of staff Shanshal is a lieutenant general. Bakr formally holds the defense portfolio but he has delegated authority to Shanshal.

The conferring of the rank of general to Saddam may be a prelude to his appointment as minister of defense, a post consistently given to military men since the army overthrew the monarchy in 1958. Bakr may see the bestowal of a key ministerial post on Saddam--who now has no government position--as giving him legitimacy that would ease the transition of Saddam's succession to the presidency when Bakr leaves the scene.

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