

Interview with Kate Seelye, NPR

As the United States builds up its military forces in the Persian Gulf in preparation for a possible war against Iraq, there is growing speculation about a diplomatic initiative to persuade Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to resign. The Arab world is keen to avoid what many fear could be a destabilizing war and some Arab intellectuals are starting to say publicly that Saddam's resignation is the best option.

From Beirut, NPR's Kate Seelye reports

Seelye: A group of prominent Arab writers and lawyers is planning to release a statement in the next few days appealing to the Arab public to pressure Saddam Hussein to step down...Lebanese lawyer Chibli Mallat is one of the statement's authors.

Seelye: THERE ARE TWO IDEAS IN THE CALL – CREATING AN ATMOSPHERE FOR HIS RESIGNATION AND TWO THE STATIONING OF HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORS, EITHER FROM THE U.N. OR FROM THE ARAB LEAGUE, ACROSS IRAQ TO ENSURE THAT THE TRANSITION IS ONE THAT IS PEACEFUL.

Seelye: Mallat says the statement was inspired by a letter written to Saddam Hussein late last year by Lebanese publisher Ghassan Tuani. Entitled "resignation is more honorable," the letter ran in Tuani's influential newspaper, Al Nahar.

Ghassan Tuani.

Seelye: MY LETTER IS ADDRESSED TO HIM BUT IT WAS ADDRESSED TO PUBLIC OPINION AND TO PEOPLE IN IRAQ WITH THE HOPE THAT THEY WOULD READ IT TO, TO BRING HIM TO RESIGN, TO PREPARE HIM TO THE MOMENT WHERE HE SHOULD BE FORCED TO RESIGN. 14

Seelye: Tuani says the letter sparked an irate response from the Iraqi government, which accused him of serving Washington's agenda. In fact says Tuani his letter was prompted by a desire to protect Arab interests. Tuani says he believes Saddam's resignation in exchange for asylum would remove any pretext for the United States to wage war against Baghdad – a war which Tuani believes would be followed by an American occupation of Iraq and attempts to further dominate the region.

Seelye: IF WE CAN AVOID PRAGMATICALLY, A DISASTER AND THE CATAclysm THAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN HERE IT IS WORTH IT, BECAUSE WE DON'T WANT TO BE SUBJECTED TO AMERICA'S GRAND DESIGN OR DOOMSDAY SCENARIO.

Seelye: No Arab government has publicly called on Saddam to resign, but in Saudi Arabia, foreign minister Saud al Feisal said recently that if war became imminent, he hoped that Arab countries would be given a chance to try to a broker a peaceful solution. An unnamed Arab official told London's Financial Times that one

of the options might be for Saddam to leave Iraq. Lawyer Chibli Mallat says the sooner Arab governments openly back the call for Saddam's resignation, the better.

Seelye: PART OF THE REASON WE HAVE ISSUED THAT APPEAL IS BECAUSE THERE IS NO ARAB VOICE, PARTLY BECAUSE ARAB GOVERNMENTS ARE SCARED OF MR. HUSSEIN AND THEY SHOULDN'T BE AND PARTLY BECAUSE THEIR LEGITIMACY UNFORTUNATELY IS VERY WEAK SO IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT FOR THEM TO CALL FOR CHANGE.

Seelye: Mallat says he doesn't expect a leader like Saddam to willingly resign. But he says the Iraqi leader could come under increasing pressure as his supporters and other Arabs realize that his departure would spare the region a war

Seelye: IF YOU CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE WHERE HIS TELEPHONES STOP RINGING, WHERE HIS CLOSEST ADVISORS STOP TAKING ORDERS FROM HIM, IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER IF HE SURRENDERS OR NOT, HE WILL HAVE LOST POWER.

Seelye: Analysts say it's unlikely any country in the Middle East would offer Saddam asylum - it would be considered too politically risky. But publisher Ghassan Tueni, says he welcomes rumors that other countries, like Russia, may be willing to offer the Iraqi leader safe haven.

Kate Seelye, NPR news, Beirut