

Sheik Lobbying On Capitol Hill

By **Kate Ackley**
ROLL CALL STAFF

It sounds like the setup for a joke: An Iraqi sheik, an American lobbyist and a collection of U.N. ambassadors walk into a Congressman's office.

But such was really the scene late last week when this unlikely team of advocates began a series of meetings on Capitol Hill to discuss an obscure nutrition program that is set to launch this fall in war-torn Fallujah, Iraq. Led by Sheik Tarik Alabdullah and Remigio Maradona, a United Nations ambassador, the group told Members about a supplement called spirulina.

They wanted to gin up future Congressional support for the Intergovernmental Institution for the Use of Micro-algae Spirulina Against Malnutrition (IIMSAM), an organization that has "observer" status with the United Nations. While the Fallujah project is already in the works, the lobbyists said they were looking for letters of support as well as Congressional funding for future spirulina projects in Africa and Latin America.

They allowed a reporter to sit in on a meeting with Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.), providing a glimpse inside a closed-

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Sheik Tarik Alabdullah (right) speaks with Dr. Mufada Kamal, both with Unification of National Iraqi Efforts Council, before meeting with Rep. Dana Rohrabacher.

Tom Williams/Toi Call

Spirulina Seeking a Fair Sheik Among Members

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door meeting between a Member and those seeking to influence him.

"I had not heard of this before," Rohrabacher said during the exchange in his Rayburn office festooned with a surf board. "These are the kinds of things we should be doing. ... You could use this as a model for other countries."

The delegation also met with Reps. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.), Mike Pence (R-Ind.), Sam Johnson (R-Texas), Tom Feeney (R-Fla.) and Connie Mack IV (R-Fla.) as well as Sen. John Sununu (R-N.H.).

"When I heard about IIMSAM, I decid-

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Sheik Tarik Alabdullah

ed to join and start the project in Fallujah," said Alabdullah, who is currently living in Jordan. "There is a lot of malnutrition in our area. It has been a war zone for a long time."

Dan Faraci, the volunteer lobbyist for the group and a one-time Republican campaign aide, said the Fallujah project will start in September and will be privately funded. "They are setting up a bakery over there with

spirulina added to cookies and breads," Faraci said. "We'll be targeting the most severely malnourished of the population, mostly children and the elderly."

He added that the Members were receptive and some had even offered to seek funding for future spirulina projects.

"It's very encouraging at this point," Faraci said. "It makes it worth the risk and the sacrifice that everyone involved in this project is undertaking — financial, time, livelihood. Ambassador Maradona sold a ranch to keep IIMSAM afloat."

Maradona said the spirulina projects can be done without U.S. government support, but he said it would help, especially in Iraq, to have logistical support from Americans.

"The Fallujah project is an example of when there is political will from all sides what miracles can be accomplished," he said, adding that the cost of the Fallujah program is about \$3 million to \$5 million over three to five years.

Maradona said spirulina is very high in protein and other nutrients and is "the answer to a lot of problems."

The sheik, who also conducted meetings with U.S. military officials, said his tribe, called Al Halabsa, includes about 150,000 members. As for the war in his homeland, he said, he wants the United States to "support the political situation, to rebuild Iraq."

Revealing the dual nature of the sheik's visit to the United States, Rohrabacher, delayed by votes and running late for a hear-



File Photo

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher was one of several Members visited by Sheik Tarik Alabdullah during his lobby mission to gin up support for a spirulina project in Iraq.

ing on the subject of Iraq, couldn't resist asking Alabdullah about the situation on the ground during their meeting in his Congressional office. "We agreed to welcome you in Iraq," replied Alabdullah, who is a Sunni. "And the Marines, we appreciate what they have done. With your effort and assistance, maybe we can help."