

U.S. Support for the Iraqi Opposition

By Chris Toensing

On December 17, 2002, a long-delayed conference of the Iraqi opposition in exile concluded in London. After four days of contentious debate among over 300 attendees representing a spectrum of opposition groups, a smaller number of delegates entered a closed-door conclave to select a “coordinating committee” tasked, in the view of some delegates, with the eventual formation of a transitional government that can replace Saddam Hussein the moment he falls. White House and State Department spokesmen promptly hailed the conference as “the broadest gathering ever convened of free Iraqis opposed to the tyrannical regime in Baghdad,” pledging to “work with” the coordinating committee in achieving its goals. Days earlier, press reports revealed that George W. Bush’s administration has released \$92 million to train 1,000 Iraqis screened by the Iraqi National Congress (INC), a group that most Iraqi opponents of Hussein regard with scorn, to help U.S. soldiers police a post-Saddam Iraq.

These contradictory signals from Washington—applauding with one hand an inclusive Iraqi opposition while feeding with the other hand the ambitions of one narrow faction—partly reflect rancorous and ongoing battles within the Bush administration over dealings with “Free Iraqis,” as U.S. officials have begun calling the organized Iraqi opposition. They also indicate the end of U.S. reliance on Iraqi opposition groups in their plans for overthrowing Saddam Hussein’s regime, even as the outward signs of cooperation increase.

U.S. support for Iraqi opposition groups has become primarily an exercise in “public diplomacy” aimed at showing American and international critics of the administration’s push for “regime change” that Iraqis want to be liberated from the grip of Saddam Hussein and the ruling Baath Party. But the Bush team is also spinning its intentions for the sake of

Iraqi public opinion. “I want to create the national story that Iraqis liberated themselves,” said Patrick Clawson of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank close to key policymakers in the Bush administration. “It may have no more truth than the idea that the French liberated themselves in World War II,” he added. In Bush administration thinking, such fiction is necessary to stave off resentment toward U.S. soldiers occupying a post-Saddam Iraq—still the likeliest scenario for “the day after.”

Though different agencies of the U.S. government nurture their own theories about who will emerge to take Saddam’s place, nobody really knows the nature of a postwar Iraq. Despite the appearance of unity in the London conference’s endorsement of a democratic, pluralistic, federal Iraq, the ambitions of different opposition groups clearly conflict. In mid-September, the formerly warring Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—who control two Kurdish enclaves in northern Iraq—agreed on a draft constitution for a federal Iraq that reserves for the Kurds, among other things, either the presidency or the prime ministership of the country, their own court system, and the right to maintain their own militia under arms. The latter provision in particular is highly unlikely to win support from Iraqi Arabs, whose concepts of federalism offer the Kurds more limited autonomy. The Iran-based Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) wants to build some form of an Islamified state, while most other oppositionists are firmly secular in their politics.

Iraqi exiles disagree sharply over the scope of “de-Baathification,” which Iraq will likely undergo after the regime is gone, creating the possibility of extrajudicial retribution. Defectors from the Iraqi Army, touting their contacts who still command strategic posts, argue that the best way to forestall postwar

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revenge attacks is to encourage a coup—in which case numerous officers stained by the current regime's depredations may never be investigated. One such general, Wafiq al-Samarra'i, former head of Iraqi Military Intelligence, was named to the coordinating committee, which may reconvene in Erbil, a city in Iraqi Kurdistan, in January 2003. The INC, for its part, has relentlessly asserted a bogus claim to be an "umbrella" for the opposition. Though by all accounts the INC has the weakest claim of any opposition group to a social base inside Iraq, its leader Ahmed Chalabi and other members are prominent on the coordinating committee.

Given the persistence of disputes within the Iraqi opposition, the Bush administration is keeping the exiles on the margins of actual planning for Iraq's future. Washington dispatched Zalmay Khalilzad, formerly the chief U.S. advisor to interim president Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan and now America's envoy to Free Iraqis, and Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary William Luti, a vociferous hawk, to London. Their main task—at which they succeeded—was to ensure that conference delegates did not form a provisional government. White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer described the coordinating committee as "a follow-up advisory committee," a designation that falls considerably short of the government-in-exile called for in working papers prepared by conference attendees. The U.S. envisions the 1,000 INC-affiliated trainees acting as "guides and go-betweens" for American troops; the INC views the trainees as

constituting the nucleus of a new national army. Although Khalilzad assured SCIRI that the U.S. would not sponsor an anti-Iranian government in Baghdad, the U.S. is not arming and training SCIRI fighters, and Washington will probably seek to limit Iranian influence in whatever new government is formed.

Strategic calculations in Washington are likely to undercut the agendas of opposition forces within Iraq as well. Leaked war plans reveal that the U.S. will move quickly to occupy oil-rich Kirkuk, currently controlled by the Iraq regime but regarded by the Kurds as their capital, to prevent a Kurdish move on the city. Turkey, which fears aspirations toward autonomy by its own Kurdish population, has threatened to intervene if the Kurds take Kirkuk.

Every scenario for postwar Iraq is speculative. But the agendas of Iraqi opposition groups are so incongruous with each other, and with the strategic goals of the U.S. and its regional allies, that U.S. war planners have abandoned proposals for substantive Iraqi participation in the impending war. Continued U.S. encouragement of opposition organizing serves to silence domestic critics who complain that the Bush team has no plan for reconstructing Iraq after the war. Washington's public behavior also impugns pundits who argue that the U.S. will have to occupy Iraq for a long time after the Baathist dictatorship is gone. It is a strategy for marketing the war, not for building a democratic alternative to Saddam Hussein.

Searching for a Pliant Iraqi Partner

Well-publicized infighting has plagued Bush administration policy toward the Iraqi opposition. Neoconservatives clustered in the Defense Department and the

vice president's office, together with conservative Republicans in Congress, have championed Ahmed Chalabi and the INC, even though the INC has conspic-

uously little endorsement from other opposition groups. “The Iraqi National Congress has been the philosophical voice of free Iraq for a dozen years,” key neoconservative Richard Perle told *The American Prospect*, in typical exaggeration of the INC’s clout. Eagerly and publicly supportive of Bush’s war plans, the INC scores more points with the neo-conservatives by embracing U.S. strategic goals in the Middle East as its own. “American companies will have a big shot at Iraqi oil,” Chalabi told the *Washington Post* in September 2002.

Defectors spirited out of Iraq by the INC also supply much of the Bush administration’s purportedly “bullet-proof” intelligence about Iraq’s putative illegal armaments. The special intelligence gathering unit under the supervision of Defense Department official Douglas Feith—formed because the administration’s war planners did not like the information they were getting from established agencies—is said to rely very heavily on the reports of INC associates. Given the INC’s crystal-clear prowar agenda, the administration may be making major decisions based on politicized intelligence whose veracity the CIA disputes.

The State Department, the CIA, and the INC have a long history of mutual antipathy. Both U.S. agencies suspect the INC of slippery accounting for funds disbursed to it during the 1990s, and they disbelieve the INC’s claims to command a following inside Iraq. Relations between the INC and the CIA have been hostile since the CIA abruptly withdrew its support for an INC covert military operation against the Iraqi Army in 1996. The INC base in Erbil was crushed when an erstwhile INC member, the KDP, invited the Iraqi Army into Kurdish-controlled territory to help the KDP defeat its rival, the PUK.

Republicans in Congress kept INC financial support alive during the Clinton years. Still, by 2000, the State Department had released only \$8 million

U.S.-SUPPORTED GROUPS

The **Iraqi National Accord**, headed by Iyad Alawi, comprises former military and intelligence officers and Baath party officials in exile. Originally organized by Saudi intelligence and subsequently funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, British intelligence, and the Saudis, it staged a disastrous coup attempt in 1996. Despite this failure, the group still enjoys CIA patronage.

The **Iraqi National Congress (INC)**, based in London but often frequenting Washington, was founded in 1992. Described by retired Gen. Anthony Zinni as “Rolex wearing, silk-suited guys in London,” the INC falsely claims to be representative of the opposition as a whole. Many formerly participating groups dropped out because they perceived the INC as merely a vehicle for its leader, Ahmed Chalabi, who fled Iraq in 1958. Other nominal INC groups work independently, also because they distrust Chalabi. Still, the INC enjoys fervent support in Congress and among hard-liners in the Bush administration, and it has received millions in U.S. aid for military training.

The **Movement for Constitutional Monarchy** is headed by Sharif Ali Hussein, nephew of the Hashemite king killed in the revolution of 1958. The visit of fellow Hashemite Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan to an opposition meeting in August 2002 ignited speculation that the U.S. would support a postwar reinstatement of the monarchy, but the monarchists’ fortunes appear to have declined of late.

The Iranian-backed **Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)**, the main Shia opposition group, is based in Tehran. SCIRI claims to have thousands of men under arms at bases both inside and outside Iraq. Headed by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, the group has recently moderated its call for an Islamic republic in Iraq. Its public statements about U.S.-led “regime change” have varied considerably, depending upon Washington’s rhetoric toward Tehran at the time.

The **Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP)**, historically the main Kurdish party in northern Iraq, was formed in 1945 and fought the central government from 1961-66, 1969-70, 1974-75, and again immediately after the 1991 Gulf War. Led by Masoud Barzani, the KDP has enjoyed a “golden age” in the 1990s, living in the U.S.-British northern no-fly zone and reaping profits from smuggling Iraqi oil into Turkey.

Jalal Talabani’s formerly Leninist **Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)** split from the KDP after the Kurdish rebellion of 1974-75, which failed when then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reneged on promises of U.S. support. The PUK squabbled with the KDP from 1994-97 over territory and oil smuggling revenues, but in 1998 a rapprochement was negotiated. In 2002, the KDP and PUK agreed on a draft constitution for Iraq and the Kurdish region.

of the \$97 million allocated for Iraqi opposition military training—much of it earmarked for the INC—by the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998. The installment of Bush in the White House brought the INC’s neoconservative champions into power, and Chalabi’s group renewed its claim to represent the opposition as a whole.

Over the summer of 2002, the State Department and the CIA encouraged the formation of the “Group of Four” (the KDP, PUK, SCIRI, and the Iraqi National Accord), coalesced by a common disdain for Chalabi’s maneuvering. But the neoconservatives successfully blocked this effort to marginalize the INC, tasking the Defense Department

OTHER GROUPS

The **Iraqi Communist Party (ICP)**, established in 1934, worked in opposition to the king (sometimes with the Baath Party) and then in opposition to successive Baathist regimes. Saddam Hussein ruthlessly repressed the ICP, driving many members into exile. Much of the information about human rights abuses in Iraqi prisons comes from the ICP, which opposes a U.S.-led regime change.

Al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya (Islamic Call) is a Tehran-based Shia group that supports the creation of an Islamic state in Iraq.

Several groupings of ex-military officers advance ideas for overthrowing the regime through a coup supported by units of the Iraqi Army. Among the most important are the **Free Officers' Movement**, led by Najib al-Salihi, the **Higher Council for National Salvation**, led by Wafiq al-Samarra'i, and the **Iraqi National Movement**, led by Hassan al-Naqib. Al-Samarra'i and another former high-ranking general, Nizar al-Khazraji, are among the officers suspected of involvement in the Iraqi regime's war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The **Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK)** is based in Halabja, site of the most infamous gas attacks on the Kurds, in the PUK-controlled enclave. In 1998, a radical faction under the leadership of Mullah Krekar broke off from IMIK over the latter's decision to join the PUK administration. Extremist guerrillas affiliated with Krekar, some of whom fought with al Qaeda in Afghanistan and who now call themselves Ansar al-Islam, apparently control an area between Halabja and the Iranian border.

with managing INC funding. Chalabi's group remains one of the six officially recognized by the State Department, along with the Group of Four and the Movement for Constitutional Monarchy.

The tumultuous destiny of the INC has been directly tied to the notions of their U.S. patrons in Washington debates. Iraqis inside the country do not respect the INC, according to a report from the well-regarded International Crisis Group (ICG), based on interviews in three cities (Baghdad, Mosul, and Najaf) conducted in November 2002. One informant told the ICG rapporteur that "the exiled Iraqis are the exact replica of those who currently govern us...with the sole difference that latter are already satiated, since they have been robbing us for 30 years." Mainly for this reason, the two opposition forces who do have considerable strength on the ground—the Kurds and the Shia—are usually careful to maintain their independence from Chalabi's group.

Tensions between the major U.S.-supported opposition groups are under wraps for the time being but are likely to resurface. Prior to the London conference, Chalabi met with KDP leader Masoud Barzani and the Iranian-backed Shia leader Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim in Tehran to work on unifying their positions. But perceptions of INC manipulation dog the appearance of unity. The "Transition to Democracy in Iraq" document presented at the conference was not adopted, because its call for a "transitional government" was seen to privilege INC ambitions. Delegates representing the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan stalked out of the London conference, arguing that the agenda had been rigged by Washington to favor the six main groups.

These debates are likely moot, for the U.S. knows it cannot completely refashion the Baghdad regime. The practicalities of maintaining territorial integrity and public order in postwar Iraq, not to

mention ameliorating humanitarian crises caused by U.S. bombing and any scorched-earth tactics to which the current regime may resort, dictate a different approach. The U.S. is likely to adopt a minimalist definition of "de-Baathification," leaving much of the existing governing structure intact. This course of action would anger those in both the organized and unorganized oppositions who want a cleaner sweep, and would enhance the likelihood of revenge attacks. Further, it would make a mockery of Bush's already dubious claim to be "liberating Iraq" because of the current regime's dismal human rights record. Perhaps the worst prospect, but one still under discussion, would have the U.S. sharing power with high-ranking Iraqi Army commanders who desert Saddam Hussein after the bombs begin to fall.

A genuinely unified, democratic, and representative Iraqi opposition may not have emerged without U.S. interference, but the relentless neoconservative campaign for the INC—a pliant but unpopular Iraqi partner—has certainly made matters worse. This meddling, coupled with perennial rumors of U.S.-backed coup plots, calls into question the Bush administration's commitment to establishing a democratic government in postwar Iraq. As conservative analyst Anthony Cordesman points out, "we already have nondemocratic priorities," because of the U.S. need to placate Turkey and other regional allies. Cordesman notes: "We virtually must enforce territorial integrity and limit Kurdish autonomy. There will be no valid self-determination or democratic solutions to these issues." Finally, there is no basis for the administration's optimistic predictions that Iraqis will welcome a U.S. presence in their country indefinitely. The London conferees unanimously agreed that Iraqis do not want an American military protectorate.

Toward a New Foreign Policy

Bush's race toward war, following previous administration funding of corrupt and marginal exile groups, demonstrates scant regard for ensuring a democratic alternative in Iraq. Yet, Saddam Hussein's brutal regime can hardly be described as a victim in the current crisis, as some opponents of war and sanctions would have it. The regime has fought two wars of aggression that wreaked havoc on Iraqi society, once among the most prosperous in the Arab world. It has murdered and repressed its domestic critics and has perpetrated crimes against humanity, particularly against the Kurdish population in the north, that rank among the worst of the late twentieth century. The regime must share responsibility with the UN and the U.S. for the humanitarian disaster of economic sanctions.

In the hearts of the numerous Iraqi exiles who have kept their distance from the U.S.-backed opposition, apparent U.S. determination to achieve regime change in Iraq creates agonizing ambivalence. Few welcome the prospect of a U.S. invasion or have illusions about the imperial vision that animates the war party in the White House. Many worry about communal strife erupting during or after a war. Such concerns moved 23 independent Iraqi exiles to issue a statement repudiating the London conference's de facto support of U.S. war plans. But many also feel that the regime cannot be dislodged without external intervention, and that whatever government accedes to power after Saddam Hussein is gone cannot possibly be worse than his dictatorship. Even Hamid Majid Musa, secretary general of the Iraqi Communist Party, who opposes the war, says that "there is no way to get rid of Saddam Hussein without the Americans."

Though it is impossible to gauge public opinion inside Iraq with precision, the available evidence indicates that Iraqis in

the country harbor a welter of competing emotions about the prospect of U.S.-led regime change. A December 2002 International Crisis Group report found that most Iraqis view the war as inevitable and simply want it to be over quickly. They display surprising indifference to the possibility of U.S. occupation and the exiles' debates over the future shape of Iraqi self-governance. These openly expressed sentiments, coupled with the unprecedented spontaneous demonstrations on October 22 by mothers whose imprisoned sons are still missing after Saddam Hussein supposedly emptied Iraqi jails, appear to be cracks in the previously ironclad edifice of regime control over Iraqi society. Iraqis clearly want an end to their country's 12 years of international isolation. On the other hand, Iraqi nationalism is strong. Press reports from Jordan in December 2002 quote Iraqis living there who vow to return home to fight an invading force. The neoconservatives' predictions that the war will be a "cakewalk," because the population will instantly rally to aid the invaders, appear to be vainglorious at best.

Genuine concern for the plight of ordinary Iraqis would, of course, rule out war as an option for U.S. policy. Having borne the brunt of the economic sanctions for 12 years, Iraqi civilians should not now be forced to pay the costs of war: the inherently indiscriminate bombing, an even further degradation of the country's civilian infrastructure, the prospect of mass refugee flight, tenacious and bloody urban combat, the possibility of chemical/biological weapons use (and disproportionate U.S. response), and the specter of postwar ethnic and sectarian conflict. However, antiwar forces often do not take the horrors of Saddam Hussein's rule seriously enough to propose third alternatives to war or an indefinite continuation of the unacceptable status quo.

A responsible U.S. Iraq policy would respect the authority of the UN and international law. The Bush administration's saber rattling and arm twisting frightened the UN Security Council into producing the current semblance of international consensus behind toughened weapons inspections, and further bellicosity from Washington—coupled with backroom deals over postwar access to Iraqi oilfields—could be used to assemble a "coalition of coercion" behind war. But if justice is to be served, a genuine and discerning international consensus must be built around measures that directly target the regime and avoid punishing ordinary Iraqis for the regime's transgressions, as 12 years of sanctions and bombing have done, and as an invasion would also do.

Economic sanctions should be lifted, but military sanctions and rigorous border inspections must remain in place. Foreign investment should be allowed as a means of enabling the reconstruction of Iraq's civilian infrastructure, especially the water and sanitation systems, whose disrepair has caused the majority of the needless civilian deaths under sanctions. The gradual restoration of Iraq's economy, perhaps spurred by a UN-administered mini-Marshall Plan to rebuild key infrastructure, would remove the regime's ability to blame Iraq's problems on foreign powers.

The U.S. should back the formation of an international tribunal, under UN or independent auspices, to indict Saddam Hussein and his top lieutenants for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the Iran-Iraq War, during the genocidal Anfal campaign against the Kurds in 1987-88, and both during and since the Gulf War. Human Rights Watch estimates that 115 army and security services officers were implicated in the Anfal campaign alone, and

that the total number complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity is much larger. In November, a Danish prosecutor indicted exiled General Nizar al-Khazraji for his part in the Anfal campaign. Some in the Iraqi opposition lamented al-Khazraji's indictment, because it may discourage his high-ranking peers (who might also face prosecution) from carrying out a coup. But there should be no guarantees of immunity to

implicated army or state security officers. The compelling need to bring Iraqi war criminals to justice, rather than using them as a tool for regime change, should drive international justice efforts.

Such measures do not promise a quick end to Saddam Hussein's regime, but they hold out the possibility of peaceful, democratic change in Iraq—a possibility foreclosed by the false choice between

war and perpetual rollovers of sanctions. In the meantime, the U.S. should steer clear of anointing any group of outsiders as a government-in-waiting, eschew bankrolling coup attempts in contravention of international and U.S. law, and abandon any plans to govern Iraq through a military proconsul after invading and occupying the country. The political future of Iraq must be for Iraqis to decide.

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