



## *U.S. - Supported Iraqi Opposition*

By Nicholas Arons, Institute for Policy Studies

On February 6, 2001, President George W. Bush announced that the U.S. would resume funding opposition efforts inside Iraq for the first time since the Iraqi army overran the rebels' main base in 1996. The next day, Sharif Ali Bin Al-Hussein, spokesman for the umbrella opposition Iraqi National Congress (INC) proclaimed: "It's a different ball game now. It's tangible

how big the change is." Ten days later, as U.S. fighter jets bombarded Baghdad suburbs, INC leaders met with U.S. State Department officials to discuss funding details. But despite the public show of strength and unity, Bush administration officials were quietly describing the INC as "the gang that couldn't shoot straight"—so hapless, corrupt, and unpopular both within Iraq and with neighboring states that the State Department was out searching for other Iraqi dissidents to support.

Over the past several decades, U.S. support for the Iraqi opposition has blown hot and cold. Four months before the

provide air cover. The uprisings materialized, but U.S. air cover never did. When the Iraqi military retaliated, butchering thousands of rebelling Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south, U.S. officials claimed that Bush favored a military coup within the regime, not a popular insurrection, which Washington feared would lead to a possible breakup of Iraq and a destabilization of the regional power balance. Internal Iraqi coups were reportedly attempted in July 1992, July 1993, and May 1995. Each ended with mass arrests, executions, and the restructuring of the ruling Ba'ath Party's security apparatus and tribal alliances, but with Saddam Hussein's regime intact. Most disastrous was a 1996 covert U.S. military training operation in Arbil in northern Iraq that degenerated into internecine feuds. Saddam Hussein's forces crushed the INC, forcing its operations to come to a standstill.

During the early 1990s, the U.S. spent over \$100 million to aid the Iraqi opposition. Most of this money was for public relations and propaganda, not military hardware. In 1998, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, which allocated \$97 million for Pentagon training and used military equipment. But the INC has been slow to take advantage of Pentagon training, to submit proposals, or to complete audits, so most funds remain unspent.

There are over seventy opposition groups within and outside Iraq, representing a diverse network of religious minorities, Iraqi monarchists, and military exiles. The U.S. has long played favorites, pitting these groups against each other. The Clinton administration selected seven for assistance, foreseeing the INC as the umbrella organization.

### Key Points

- The Bush administration has pledged to resume funding opposition groups inside Iraq for the first time since 1996.
- Most U.S. support goes to the Iraqi National Congress (INC), an umbrella organization that has little or no internal support and has proved inept, slow, and, many contend, corrupt in utilizing U.S. funds.
- Over the past few decades, U.S. has repeatedly urged a popular uprising and then failed to provide military support.

1990 Gulf War, two Republican senators visited Baghdad and reassured Saddam Hussein that Voice of America broadcasts criticizing the regime's human rights record did not necessarily reflect U.S. government policy. When the Gulf War ended, President Bush called on Iraqi dissidents to rebel, implying that the U.S. would

**Iraqi National Congress (INC)**, a London-based coalition founded in 1992 in Vienna with 87 members in its National Assembly. Since then, a number of participating groups have dropped out. It is led by Ahmed Chalabi, a shadowy Shiite mathematician frequently described as a limousine insurgent or an armchair guerrilla. Chalabi was indicted in Jordan for embezzling millions from a bank he once headed.

**Iraqi National Accord (INA)**, headed by Iyad Alawi, consists primarily of military and security officers who defected from Iraq. Started in 1990 with support from Saudi intelligence, it was reorganized in 1996 by CIA, British MI-6, and Saudi intelligence operatives and infiltrated by Iraqi intelligence in 1996, leading to its devastating defeat.

**Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)**, headed by Muhammad Baqir HaKim, is backed by Iran, is headquartered in Tehran, and has its base of support among Shiites in southern Iraq.

**Movement for Constitutional Monarchy** is led by Sharif Hussein, a member of Iraq's deposed royal family.

**Islamic Movement of the Iraqi Kurdistan**, led by Sheik Ali Abdel Aziz, is backed by Iran and based in Halabja, site of a 1988 chemical attack by the Iraqi army that killed thousands.

**Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)**, led by Jalal Talabani, has drawn support from Iran.

**Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)**, led by Masoud Barzani, is one of the oldest opposition groups and is also supported by Iran. In 1974, based on promises of arms and support both by then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and by the shah of Iran, the KDP launched its first attacks against Iraq's military. When the U.S. and Iranian help didn't materialize, the Iraqi government forcibly resettled 600,000 Kurds from northern Iraq.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

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A decade of failed operations, internal squabbling, backstabbing, wasted opportunities, piecemeal plans, and disastrous results has evidently not convinced Washington policymakers to chart a new course to achieve a regime change in Iraq. The fractious INC is costing U.S. taxpayers millions of dollars. Poor planning and internal fighting cost hundreds of lives in the 1996 debacle alone, when Iraqi troops allied with the KDP, reclaimed the Kurdish “safe haven” in northern Iraq, executed dozens of INC members and CIA operatives, and won a major propaganda war against Washington. Five years after this fiasco, Washington is again handing out money to renegade spies and untrustworthy allies in hopes of fomenting a coup.

The most basic flaw in the structure of the Iraq Liberation Act is its attempt to bring together a coalition marred by mistrust and discord. Only three of the seven organizations—the PUK, the KDP, and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan—are actually based inside Iraq. Some opposition groups, especially the Kurds, who view Washington as a disingenuous broker, parlay their connections in both Washington and Baghdad to further their own agendas. In May 1994, the two Kurdish parties began fighting over territory, revenues from duties levied at the Turkish border, and control over the Kurdish regional government in Arbil. In 1996, Barzani’s KDP joined forces with Baghdad in order to suppress the PUK, thus facilitating Iraq’s victory that year over the PUK and the CIA in Arbil. Two years later, Talabani’s PUK resorted to ties with Baghdad in order to defeat the KDP.

After the U.S. announced its intention to fund SCIRI, this opposition group, with its base of support in southern Iraq, announced that it wanted no U.S. support. SCIRI’s dream of an Iranian-backed southern opposition began to fade after Iran and Iraq established closer ties. During 2000, several Shiite clerics and political leaders in Iraq’s southern cities were executed by the government, and Baghdad drained the southern marshes, displacing thousands of marsh Arabs, with no response from Washington. The U.S. State Department would hardly look favorably on a future Shiite-dominated Iraq taking its cues from Iran. Indeed this was one reason why the U.S. did not bolster the southern insurgencies in March 1991.

The Iraq Liberation Act has virtually no international support, isolating the U.S. and U.K. as the only nations willing to back the Iraqi opposition. Iraq’s neighbors fear civil strife spilling across their borders and do not want to set a dangerous precedent of acquiescing to U.S. coups in their region. Some regional diplomats worry that a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq would fragment, threatening Turkey with a Kurdish dilemma and Saudi Arabia with a Shiite problem. Prince Talal, brother of Saudi King Fahd, openly questioned whether America really wanted Saddam Hussein’s ouster at all: “I believe the existence of the [Saddam Hussein] regime serves the American interests.”

Within Iraq, the open U.S. support for the INC gives the regime another excuse to refuse cooperation with

UN policies. The Iraq Liberation Act has only made the Iraq government more openly hostile and belligerent, unnecessarily militarizing what should be a diplomatic dispute. Even those U.S. policymakers who fervently believe that sanctions should be sustained until the Iraqi president is ousted (rather than lifted when Iraq complies with UN resolutions, as international law provides) also concede that the INC will probably not succeed.

Within the Clinton administration, numerous U.S. officials have echoed these doubts. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said before leaving office that it was “wrong to create false or unsustainable expectations” from such a “fragmented opposition.” Then-National Security Advisor Sandy Berger noted that supporting the Iraqi opposition could force a future U.S. administration either to be drawn into a civil war or to abandon its allies. And Marine General Anthony Zinni said in February 2000: “I don’t see an opposition group that has the viability to overthrow Saddam... Even if we had Saddam gone, we could end up with 15, 20, 90 groups competing for power... Bay of Pigs could turn into Bay of Goats.”

Before voting for the Iraq Liberation Act, Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) explained that the measure “harkens back to the successes of the Reagan doctrine, enlisting the very people who are suffering most under Saddam’s yoke to fight the battle against him.” And the INC continues to have strong support among Republicans in Congress. Marc Thiessen, spokesman for Helms, says: “Our strategy in Iraq must be the same as in Nicaragua, which was to provide the means and training necessary for the contras to take back their country.... [W]ith the contras, we eventually overthrew a dictatorship together.” Not mentioned is that Reagan’s “successes”—the Nicaraguan contras and the Afghan mujahideen—have bequeathed to the world a bitterly divided and poverty-stricken Nicaragua and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Likewise, the INC is unlikely to build democratic institutions should it ever come into power, since its component groups all have authoritarian internal structures, scant popular support, and undemocratic tendencies. The only way that Iraqi opposition groups could succeed militarily against Saddam’s regime is if the U.S. armed forces assisted the invasion, which would clearly be both illegal and unwise, and would elicit angry responses from countries around the world. However, by linking economic sanctions to a regime change while realizing that, given the disarray of the opposition, a regime change will not occur anytime soon, the U.S. has relegated Iraq to abject poverty and soaring infant mortality rates—the price of Washington’s inability to develop a coherent policy.

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## Key Problems

- The Bush administration is once again stepping up support for opposition groups, despite a decade of failed operations and a lack of either internal or regional support.
  - The 1998 Iraq Liberation Act is flawed in its attempt to bring together a coalition marred by fractious infighting.
  - Even U.S. officials have expressed doubts that the opposition can overthrow Saddam Hussein.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

While there is no way to accurately gauge the level of internal discontent inside Iraq, there are numerous indications that Saddam Hussein's regime is widely unpopular. As one ex-Ba'ath Party member put it: "It is not a matter of who hates the regime, but of who does not." The irony is that U.S. efforts to overthrow Saddam Hussein, in part by supporting militarily the discredited INC rebel coalition, are not only illegal, but are also fueling anti-American sentiments in Iraq.

## Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should halt its efforts to arm the opposition and foment a coup in Iraq: it is illegal under international law, a waste of U.S. taxpayer money, and pushes Baghdad to even greater repression.
- The Bush administration has inherited a bad policy toward Iraq and needs to move, instead, work with the UN to enforce international treaties and resolutions.

International law is clear that planning coups in another country is illegal, and even U.S. law states that its citizens cannot organize coups abroad. In addition to being illegal, U.S. military support of the Iraqi opposition is an ill-conceived excuse for an effective policy and a feeble public relations response to Saddam Hussein's recalcitrance and tenacity in outlasting three post-Gulf War U.S. administrations.

The U.S. can best support the human rights of Iraqi Kurds and Shiites by helping the UN enforce international treaties and resolutions, not by supporting those minority groups only when they serve narrow U.S. interests. A helpful policy must include not only ceasing the U.S. "no-fly zone" bombings, which have killed scores of Kurds, Shiites, and other Iraqis, but also pressing for an end to similarly lethal Turkish air strikes and land invasions against Kurds in northern Iraq.

The only way for an indigenous, credible opposition to emerge within Iraq is if there is a strong middle class and civil society. Middle-aged Iraqis recall a time when the U.S. was their political model and close friend. Despite political repression in pre-Gulf War Iraq, students and intellectuals did travel and exchange information. Women enjoyed rights in Iraq that Kuwaiti mothers and daughters only dreamed of. And Western European nations sent envoys to study Iraq's emergency and hospital care system, the best in the region.

Sanctions and Iraq's fear of U.S.-led coups, however, have helped push the Baghdad regime to even greater repression, including restrictions on travel, Internet access, and the circulation of information. Parents express dismay at their children's open hostility and beligerence toward the West. A once-thriving job market is now nonexistent. Iraq's education budget has been slashed by billions of dollars. The Iraqi currency, the dinar, is virtually worthless outside Iraq, while profits

from black-market oil sales continue to enrich a ruling minority. Droughts in the north and electrical outages in the south make communication between families—let alone nascent insurgencies—impossible. Families spending scarce resources on salvaging health and avoiding starvation hardly have the time and energy to overthrow their leader. Saddam Hussein's grip on power is as firm as ever. Contrary to its stated purposes, U.S. funding of a high-profile but feckless opposition serves only to legitimate Iraq's claims that its very national survival, as well as its sovereignty, is threatened.

The arms-glutted Middle East region does not need a further infusion of arms and violence. The Iraq Liberation Act further militarizes what should and could be a diplomatic dispute. Sending CIA vigilantes into a region already beset by national tensions, ethnic conflicts, rising religious fundamentalism, and a culture of fear adds nothing positive to Iraq. The Iraqi regime must be challenged with a strong, democratically oriented middle class relying on popular protest by open and nonviolent means.

President George W. Bush has inherited a bad policy toward Iraq, as did President Clinton. If Bush reviews the last decade of U.S. policy toward Iraq, however, he will surely recognize that continued funding for the opposition will only mean more wasted U.S. tax dollars and a stronger, more paranoid, and more belligerent Iraqi regime. While some within his administration and military are pessimistic about the opposition's chances, others fear what might happen should the opposition actually succeed. This is not the kind of policy that is worth continuing.

The U.S. has coexisted with, and too often supported, some unsavory leaders and dictators. Saddam Hussein is, in part, a creation of the West. His military arsenal grew during a marriage of convenience in the 1980s between Washington and Baghdad. To even allude to establishing ties with Baghdad may sound like political suicide today, but the successor to Saddam Hussein could easily be worse.

At a March 19, 2001, address to the Israeli lobby, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that "violence is always a dead end." The secretary should put his words into action by engaging the Iraqi leadership in diplomatic negotiations. In doing so, he would prove to the Iraqi people what no other U.S. administration ever has—that Washington understands the difference between a population and their unelected president.

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# Sources for More Information

## Organizations

**Iraqi National Congress**  
(Al-Mu'tamar al-Watani al-Iraqi)  
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Email: [pressoffice@inc.org.uk](mailto:pressoffice@inc.org.uk)  
Web: <http://www.inc.org.uk/>

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**Education for Peace in Iraq Center**  
<http://www.saveageneration.org/>

**Federation of American Scientists**  
<http://www.fas.org/>

**Iraq Action Coalition**  
<http://leb.net/iac/>

**Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty**  
(Radio Free Iraq Service)  
<http://www.rferl.org/bd/iq/index.html>

**Voices in the Wilderness**  
<http://www.nonviolence.org/vitw/>

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