

The Iraqi oppositionists and US plans for “regime change” in Baghdad

Part 1

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Below is the first of a two-part article on the Iraqi opposition. The second part will be published on October 1.

The Bush administration argues that a US invasion of Iraq and the ouster of Saddam Hussein will constitute an act of liberation, ushering in a new period of peace and democracy for the long-suffering Iraqi people. US officials are currently engaged in a flurry of activity among Iraqi exile circles aimed at fashioning a replacement regime.

But there will be nothing democratic about the installation of a US-backed regime in Baghdad. A new leader will be foisted on the Iraqi people in the same way that Washington plucked long-time CIA asset Hamid Karzai out of obscurity in Pakistan and turned him into the Afghan president. And, like the regime in Kabul, the new administration in Baghdad will be filled with carefully vetted personnel. Perhaps an Iraqi version of the stage-managed *loya jirga* (grand tribal assembly held in Kabul) will even be convened to give the proceedings a veneer of legitimacy.

The process is well in train. Key hard-line figures in the Bush administration, including Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, his deputy Paul Wolfowitz and US Defence Policy Board chairman Richard Perle, have long championed the arming of Iraqi opposition groups to topple Hussein. Soon after Bush took office, the flow of money to various Iraqi oppositionists began to substantially increase.

The clear favourite has been the Iraqi National Congress (INC), which has been the main focus of US intrigues inside Iraq for more than a decade. It currently operates from offices in London but its chairman Ahmad Chalabi, a shady financier who has been convicted on major fraud charges in Jordan, is well known in Washington and counts people like Perle among his long-time American friends.

Over the last few months, the CIA, State Department and other agencies have been bullying, bribing and cajoling various other Iraqi opposition groups to back the Bush administration's war plans. Their aim is to establish a unified front that can, superficially at least, provide a coherent and plausible alternative to Hussein. The US also wants intelligence, militia and bases inside Iraq to help plan and facilitate a US invasion.

In April, the CIA met with two Kurdish groups—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—to seek permission to establish bases in two cities in northern Iraq. According to a report in the British-based *Guardian*, the two groups were wary because the CIA had double-crossed them before. Northern Iraq, which the two Kurdish militias have effectively controlled since 1991, has been a hotbed of US intrigue for over a decade.

In June, the State Department held the first official talks in Washington with the Shiite-based Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI, which is just one of a number of organisations based among Iraq's Shiite majority, has connections to Iran where its leader Muhammad Baqir Hakim resides. Initially cautious about openly supporting a US invasion of Iraq, SCIRI now appears to have joined Washington's anti-Hussein front.

The most significant meeting took place on August 10 at the White House. It brought together the six groups at the core of US plans for a post-Hussein regime for high-level discussions with top Bush administration officials, including Powell, Rumsfeld and Vice-President Dick Cheney. The gathering, which was jointly organised by the Defence and State Departments as well as the CIA and National Security Council, pledged to work together for a “free Iraq”.

The groups included Chalabi's INC, the two Kurdish groups and SCIRI, as well as two other exile formations—the Iraqi National Accord (INA) and the Constitutional Monarchy Movement (CMM). The INA is a shadowy group of defectors from Hussein's Baathist Party, the Iraqi military and security apparatus with close contacts to the CIA, British MI6 and Saudi Intelligence. It has offices in London and the Middle East. The CMM aspires to put the heir apparent, Sharif Ali Bin Al-Hussein, back on the throne as king of Iraq.

Since the White House meeting, preparations have accelerated. A week later, the *Sunday Times* reported that the US was intending to provide additional funding to Iraqi opposition groups to conduct covert operations inside Iraq for the purpose of gathering intelligence and encouraging high-level defections. The State Department's “Future of Iraq Project,” which was described by the *Guardian* in July as a small “underfunded and understaffed” office, has mushroomed into six working groups, which have begun holding meetings in the US and Britain. Last week the US media reported that the Bush administration was preparing to seek congressional approval to provide military training for up to 10,000 members of Iraqi opposition groups.

One look at the assortment of military defectors, dubious businessmen, aspiring monarchists, political opportunists and thugs that constitute the Iraqi opposition is enough to make clear the venal nature of the regime that the US proposes to install in Baghdad.

All of them have collaborated and connived with Washington, to one degree or another, since the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. Some have been directly on Washington's payroll and involved in the various failed US schemes and plots to oust Hussein. Others, like the Shiite- and Kurdish-based groups, have exploited the opportunities

opened after the war to establish a degree of autonomy and to manoeuvre with the US and various regional powers.

Neither Washington nor its Iraqi clients want a popular rebellion or any genuine expression of democracy, either of which would be profoundly destabilising in Iraq and throughout the region. In February 1991, in the midst of the Gulf War, George Bush senior called for a revolt against Hussein, but rapidly backtracked when the Shiites in the south and the Kurds in the north rose up. The US military stood by while Hussein's elite Republican Guards slaughtered the insurgents, sending streams of refugees flooding towards the borders.

Washington had no intention of making any concessions to Kurdish demands for independence, or calls by the Shiites, who constitute 60 percent of the population, for a greater say in the country's political affairs. US ally Turkey, as well as Iran and Syria, were all acutely sensitive to any move that would have strengthened their substantial Kurdish minorities. In the case of the Shiites, the US, along with Saudi Arabia, was opposed to any step that would bolster the position of predominantly Shiite Iran within the region.

The US, with the backing of Britain, exploited the plight of the Kurds and the Shiites to unilaterally impose "safe havens" or "no-fly" zones in the north of the country in April 1991 and in the south in August 1992. The military exclusion zones effectively partitioned the country into three and provided Washington with the pretext needed to keep its warplanes patrolling over Iraq and attacking military targets.

Having stopped short of a full-scale assault on Baghdad in 1991, the Bush administration focused its attention on ousting Hussein through an internal coup or military putsch. Washington was instrumental in establishing the Iraqi National Congress (INC) at a gathering in Vienna in June 1992. The INC was both an umbrella organisation for anti-Hussein groups and a front for clandestine activities inside Iraq.

The INC and its CIA advisers set up a base of operations in Irbil inside the northern "no-fly" zone—the area of Iraq north of latitude 36 degrees, which included some, but not all, of the major Kurdish cities. The two Kurdish groups—the KDP and the PUK—had taken advantage of the military exclusion zone to establish a de-facto Kurdish autonomous region. Elections were even held in 1992 for a Kurdish Regional Government, which resulted in an uneasy power-sharing arrangement between KDP leader Massoud Barzani and his PUK counterpart Jalal Talabani.

Notwithstanding the bitter experiences of Kurdish and Shiite insurrections the previous year, both Kurdish groups—the KDP and PUK—joined the INC. The Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party, the Islamic fundamentalist Al Daawa party and the forerunner to SCIRI, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, signed up at a meeting held in northern Iraq in October 1992.

The US is estimated to have spent \$100 million financing the activities of Iraqi opposition groups in the early 1990s—much of it purportedly spent on propaganda and public relations. But the CIA's efforts to foment a revolt in Baghdad failed dismally. Coup attempts were reported in 1992 and 1993, but each ended in arrests, executions and a further strengthening of Hussein's security apparatus.

Moreover, the shaky alliance of opposition groups that comprised the INC began to rapidly fall apart. The two Kurdish groups came into conflict over the division of profits from the lucrative smuggling operations that had sprung up to circumvent the UN-imposed sanctions on Iraq. Scores of trucks carrying goods from Turkey to Iraq passed through the northern "no-fly" zone every day and returned laden with cheap oil and petroleum products. But the route passed

through KDP territory, and Barzani refused to share the huge customs fees with his PUK rivals.

Fighting between the groups broke out in 1993 and continued to escalate. Each manoeuvred and schemed against the other, trying to garner the support of the regional powers—Iran, Syria, Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The conflict destabilised the INC and resulted in the departure of other groups, including the Shiite organisations and the Iraqi Communist Party.

At the same time, the CIA began to concentrate more of its activities on INA, which had been established in 1990 with the backing of the British MI6 and Saudi intelligence. The INA, with its focus on establishing clandestine military networks in Baghdad, was more in line with the CIA's needs than the rather amorphous and increasingly unstable front organisation, the INC.

The most extensive CIA operation appears to have been in March 1995 and included the INC and the INA based in Irbil and other operatives inside areas of Iraq controlled by Hussein. Insofar as details are available, the plan involved both a military offensive in the north and a coup attempt in Baghdad. The CIA conspired with elements of the INA and other contacts to organise the putsch in the capital.

At the same time, Chalabi enlisted the support of the Kurdish militia to retake the Kurdish cities of Kirkuk and Mosul, which lay outside the northern "no-fly" zone, after implying that the US would provide the attackers with air cover. The KDP and PUK were particularly keen to seize control of Kirkuk, because it lies at the centre of Iraq's rich northern oil and gas fields. Thousands of ill-trained and poorly equipped militia members were dispatched to fight the Iraqi army.

The whole affair—both the coup attempt in Baghdad and the military offensive in the north—failed miserably, leading to bitter and continuing recriminations on all sides. With the support of US and British intelligence, the INA reorganised its operations in 1996 and received permission to use Jordan as a base. Its network was infiltrated by Iraqi intelligence, however, with devastating results. In June 1996, well over 100 military officers linked to the INA were rounded up, at least 30 of whom were summarily executed.

In northern Iraq, matters went from bad to worse for the CIA and its Iraqi proxies. The bloody fighting between the KDP and the PUK reached its climax in August 1996. Barzani, claiming that his rival was being supported by the Iranian military, invited the Iraqi army into the Kurdish areas to retake Irbil from the PUK. The Iraqi security forces not only seized the city, but also took the opportunity to crush the Iraqi oppositionists.

The result was a complete disaster for the CIA, the INC and the INA. According to one estimate, 200 oppositionists were executed by the Iraqi army and as many as 2,000 arrested. Another 650, mainly INC members along with their CIA handlers, managed to escape and were resettled in the US. As an umbrella group, the INC all but disintegrated. And in the space of a year, the INA had lost both its network in Baghdad and its base of operations in northern Iraq.

To be continued



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