The Iraqi oppositionists and US plans for "regime change" in Baghdad

Part 2

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Below is the concluding part of a two-part series on the Iraqi opposition. The first part *appeared on September 30.*

The humiliating debacle suffered by the CIA and Iraqi opposition groups in northern Iraq in 1996 was to have political ramifications in Washington. The Clinton administration was already under fire from the Republican right wing for failing to pursue US interests in the Middle East with sufficient aggression. The collapse of the Iraqi oppositionists was added to the long list of Clinton's sins and a campaign mounted in Congress that culminated, in 1998, with the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act. Under the legislation, "regime change" in Iraq was enshrined as part of US law—an unprecedented step—and military aid to the tune of $97 million was provided to nominated opposition groups.

Among those who backed the Iraq Liberation Act, and then berated Clinton for failing to fully implement its provisions, were the chief organisers of war against Iraq today—Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Perle. After the law was passed, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz wrote as private citizens to Clinton, demanding he use the funds for operations inside Iraq. As Wolfowitz declared to Congress in 1998: "The heart of the problem is that the United States is unable or unwilling to pursue a serious policy in Iraq."

In the course of the 2000 election campaign, Perle, speaking as Bush's foreign policy adviser, declared: "Governor Bush has said... he would fully implement the Iraq Liberation Act. We all understand what that means. It means a serious and sustained effort to assist the opposition with a view to bringing down Saddam's regime." Perle ridiculed the Clinton administration for providing only non-lethal assistance to the Iraqi opposition and denounced its "sustained hypocrisy" for failing to implement the Act.

But Iraq was part of a far broader agenda. The Bush election campaign became the vehicle for those layers of the American ruling elite who were determined to use the US military to establish America's unchallenged global predominance, in particular in the key strategic and oil rich areas of Central Asia and the Middle East. Once in office, having stolen the 2000 election, the Bush administration rapidly proceeded to press ahead with these foreign policy objectives.

Funds available under the Iraq Liberation Act began to flow to Iraqi oppositionists. The September 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were seized upon by Rumsfeld, Perle, Wolfowitz and others as a pretext to accelerate their long-held agenda for regime-change in Iraq—irrespective of whether or not Saddam Hussein was actually involved.

The chief beneficiary of the renewed activity was the Iraqi National Congress (INC). After 1996, it had reestablished itself in London. According to the US State Department, by February 2002, the INC had received over half the $24 million that had been appropriated under the Iraq Liberation Act.

There is no doubt that for Perle, Rumsfeld and Co., Chalabi is the preferred replacement for Hussein. But, even within the Bush administration, opinion is sharply divided. As one staunch defender of Chalabi noted, he has the reputation among CIA and State Department officials of being "a small-time opportunist and trying to use his position in the INC to make something of himself." Supporting evidence includes his conviction for financial fraud over the collapse of the Petra Bank. Chalabi fled Jordan in 1989 and, despite proclaiming his innocence, failed to return in 1992 to defend charges that he had fleeced the bank of $200 million. The INC's detractors also point out that the group commands no serious support inside Iraq.

Significantly, however, the obvious deficiencies of Chalabi and the INC do not appear to concern his champions in the Bush administration. In a recent interview on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's program *Four Corners*, Perle lavished praise on Chalabi declaring he "very much reflects Western values". And, when asked on the same program about Chalabi's conviction in Jordan, one of Perle's co-thinkers, Danielle Plekta from the American Heritage Foundation, declared: "It's absolutely immaterial."

In the eyes of hardliners like Perle, Chalabi's weaknesses are more than made up for by his loyalty to American interests. He has long advocated a US military invasion of Iraq and backs the Bush administration's policy in the rest of the Middle East, including support for the Israeli state. On the most crucial question of all—who controls Iraqi oil—Chalabi has already indicated where he stands. He recently told the *Washington Post* that he favoured the creation of a US-led consortium to develop Iraqi oil fields. "American companies will have a big shot at Iraqi oil," he declared.

Those in the CIA and State Department critical of Perle, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz have no fundamental objections to a US military invasion of Iraq. But they regard the idea that the US army can march into Baghdad and install a figure like Chalabi, without serious repercussions in Iraq or the region, as utterly light-minded.

Reflecting these views, Bob Baer, an ex-CIA operative with 20 years experience in the Middle East, scathingly denounced the "neo-conservatives" on the *Four Corners* program. "What everyone knows in Washington is that there's no endgame plan. Who's going to replace Saddam? They don't have the slightest idea... Do you have to go in and destroy the military, which would create a vacuum in Iraq?

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No-one's dealing with that," he exclaimed.

Critics of Bush's "regime change" fear that if the Iraqi government is completely destroyed the country will rapidly disintegrate. They point to the experience of Bush's father, who stopped short of ousting Hussein in 1991 when the Shia and Kurdish revolts threatened to break up the country. Their alternative is to push for a greater role for various military defectors, with the aim of refashioning a defeated Iraqi army as a key instrument of US policy.

There is no shortage of candidates with the credentials for such a job. In addition to the remnants of the Iraqi National Accord, there are various cliques of former Iraqi military officers, all of whom maintain contact with the CIA and/or other intelligence agencies.

The list includes Brigadier General Najib Al-Salhi, leader of the Free Officers Movement, who was Chief of Staff for the First Mechanised Division of the Fifth Corps of the Iraqi Army until he defected seven years ago. He lives near Washington, claims to be able to raise 30,000 fighters and will explain his detailed plan for a three-pronged attack on Baghdad to anyone willing to listen. He is facing a war crimes investigation in Denmark over the use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war.

Another group of ex-Iraqi officers known as the Iraqi National Coalition helped organise a gathering of 80 military exiles in London in July. Among other decisions, the meeting grandly decided to establish a military council to prepare for a post-Hussein regime. General Fawzi Al-Shamari, who heads the Iraqi Officers Movement, did not attend the London meeting, because, as he explained to *Four Corners* he had already established his own military council two years ago. He admits to having used chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers during the Iran-Iraq war.

The State Department has attempted to seek out another military defector, General Nizar Khazraji, a former Iraqi army chief-of-staff, who was invited last December to a meeting of Iraqi oppositionists at a US thinktank known as the Middle East Institute. He is under investigation in Denmark for his role in the use of mustard and nerve gas against the Kurdish population of Halabja in 1988 that resulted in an estimated 3,000 deaths. Khazraji led the army during the months-long repression of the Kurdish population in 1998, during which an estimated 100,000 people were killed.

The purpose of enlisting the services of figures like Khazraji and Al-Salhi is all too obvious. Their proven military skills can be exploited in crushing opposition, while their military contacts can lay the groundwork for reforging the Iraqi army as the basis for a US-backed regime. As Baer bluntly commented in reference to General Al-Salhi: "He could go back and set up a military government to replace Saddam, which is the most logical thing to do if you're really interested in holding this country together. What you don't—can't introduce into Iraq is democracy. It would be total chaos."

As for the remaining Iraqi opposition groups, the Bush administration regards them as useful, if expendable, auxiliaries.

Not wanting to be left out of any post-Hussein arrangement, the two Kurdish organisations have both lined up in support of a US invasion. The KDP and PUK ended the brutal fighting of 1993-1996 through a settlement brokered by Washington that divided northern Iraq into separate Kurdish fiefdoms. The former bitter enemies have decided they will have more clout at the negotiating table if they join forces. To that end, Barzani and Talabani met in early September and agreed on a plan for Kurdish autonomy as well as to convene the Kurdish regional assembly.

The KDP and PUK claim to be able to jointly muster at least 40,000 fighters. But the US views the Kurdish militia with mixed feelings. While they may be of assistance to the US military in ousting Hussein, the Kurdish fighters pose a threat to any regime that Washington sets up in Baghdad and are regarded with deep suspicion in Turkey, Iran and Syria. Moreover, the groups have ambitions to extend the area under their influence to Kirkuk, with its extensive oil and natural gas fields—an aim which will conflict with US plans to control Iraqi oil from Baghdad.

Washington has even less reason to cooperate with the Shiite-based SCIRI, estimated to command between 5,000 and 10,000 fighters, except for immediate tactical reasons. Asked on *Four Corners* whether the US could "stomach a leader that came from a possibly Teheran-leaning Shia," the American Heritage Foundation's Danielle Pletka summed up the general attitude in Washington to the various Shiite organisations. "Do we want the Iranians to have a controlling interest?" she replied. "No. No question. We don't want the Iranians to have a controlling interest. To the contrary, we want Iraq to be the exemplar for Iran, and then get rid of those guys."

The least significant of the Iraqi opposition groups is the Constitutional Monarchy Movement which is closely identified with the INC. Iraq's would-be king Sharif Ali Bin Hussein may have taken heart when Zahir Shah, Afghanistan's octogenarian former monarch, was hauled out of his Italian villa to preside over that country's *loya jirga* in June. But Sharif Ali Bin Hussein has even less claim to any legitimacy than his Afghan counterpart.

The Iraqi monarchy is a concoction of British imperialism, cooked up in 1920 as the preferred method of rule for its newly-acquired League of Nations mandate territory. The Hashemite Amir Faisal was offered the job as Faisal I. When he died in 1933, his playboy son King Ghazi took over, but died in a car accident in 1939. The third king Faisal II, then only three, mounted the throne in 1953, but was executed in the military revolt of 1958. On the basis of this short and inglorious history, Sharif Ali Bin Hussein, who was two-years-old when his uncle was killed, offers himself as a "uniting influence" for Iraq.

The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for Saddam Hussein. But, like the regime they propose to replace, none of the Iraqi opposition groups seeking US patronage represents in any way the interests and aspirations of the Iraqi masses. Their thoroughly mercenary character is the surest indication of the type of "regime-change" being hatched by the Bush administration. Like Karzai in Kabul, any new incumbent in Baghdad will be nothing but a neo-colonial puppet, totally dependent on US military, financial and political support for survival.

Concluded

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