

CRS Report for Congress

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Iraq's Opposition Movements

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Summary

Many in Congress and the Administration agree that the only way to blunt the long-term threat from Iraq is to remove Saddam Husayn from power. The Iraq Liberation Act (H.R. 4655, P.L. 105-338), signed October 31, 1998, gives the President authority to provide up to \$97 million worth of defense articles to support an insurgency against Saddam. However, there are disagreements over the viability of the opposition and over how aggressively the United States should support the opposition groups. This report will be updated to reflect legislative and other developments.

Introduction.¹ Since October 1997, in the course of repeated crises over Iraqi non-cooperation with U.N. weapons inspections, a number of foreign policy experts and Members of Congress have been calling for a long-term U.S. effort to overthrow Iraq's President Saddam Husayn. In November 1998, amid one such crisis, the Administration adopted that recommendation as official policy. In January 1999, the Administration named senior diplomat Frank Ricciardone as Coordinator for the Transition in Iraq.

Past Attempts to Oust Saddam. Prior to Desert Storm, which began January 16, 1991, President Bush called on the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam. Within days of the end of the Gulf war (February 28, 1991), opposition Shiite Muslims in southern Iraq and Kurdish factions in northern Iraq, heartened by the U.S. call and the regime's postwar weakness, launched rebellions against Saddam and his Sunni Muslim-dominated regime.² The rebellion in southern Iraq reached the suburbs of Baghdad, but enough Republican Guard forces survived the war to defeat the rebels by mid-March 1991. The Kurds, benefitting from a U.S.-led no fly zone established in April 1991, were able to carve out

¹ Much of the information in this paper is derived from press accounts of U.S. covert operations. CRS has no way to independently confirm the information contained in these press reports.

² Shiites constitute about 65% of Iraq's population but have historically been repressed and underrepresented in governing bodies by the members of the Sunni Muslim sect. Kurds are about 20% of the population of about 20 million.

an enclave in northern Iraq, free of Iraqi troops and governmental presence. However, Iraq is an Arab state that would not accept Kurdish political leadership or independence.

According to press reports, in May 1991, about two months after the failure of the Shiite and Kurdish uprisings, President Bush forwarded to Congress an intelligence finding justifying new U.S. efforts to topple Saddam Husayn. Press accounts indicate that about \$15 - \$20 million were allocated to efforts to cultivate ties to Iraqi military and security officials in the hopes of fomenting a coup.³ The Bush Administration believed -- and this view apparently still is shared by many in and outside the Clinton Administration -- that a coup could produce a more favorable regime without risking the fragmentation of Iraq. Many observers maintain that Shiite and Kurdish groups, if they succeed in ousting Saddam, would divide the country into warring ethnic and tribal groups, and open Iraq to political and military influence from neighboring Iran, Turkey, and Syria.

An Opposition Coalition Emerges. Although reports in July 1992 of a serious but failed military rebellion suggested that the "coup strategy" might ultimately succeed, in its last months the Bush Administration appeared to shift toward backing the diverse opposition groups that had led the postwar rebellions. The Kurdish, Shiite, and other opposition elements were coalescing into a broad and diverse movement that appeared to be gaining support internationally. Congress more than doubled the budget (to about \$40 million for FY1993) for covert support to the opposition and to maintain clandestine anti-Saddam radio stations.⁴

The Iraqi National Congress. The Iraqi National Congress (INC) served as the vehicle for U.S. support. The INC was formed when the two main Kurdish militias — the KDP, headed by Masud Barzani, and the PUK, headed by Jalal Talabani — decided to participate in a June 1992 meeting in Vienna of dozens of opposition groups. In October 1992, the major Shiite groups came into the coalition and the INC held a pivotal meeting in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. Selected to chair the Executive Committee was Ahmad Chalabi, a secular Iraqi Shiite Muslim and U.S.-trained mathematician. In the late 1950s, before the Ba'th Party came to power in Iraq (July 1968), Chalabi had fled Iraq to work in Jordan, eventually chairing the Petra Bank there.

The INC appeared viable because it brought under one banner not only varying Iraqi ethnicities but also diverse political ideologies, including nationalists, ex-military officers, and defectors from the ruling Iraqi Ba'th Party. The INC also had a source of armed force (the Kurdish militias) and a presence on Iraqi territory (the northern enclave). Its constituent groups nominally united around a platform that appeared to match U.S. values and U.S. interests, including establishment of "human rights and rule of law within a constitutional, democratic, and pluralistic Iraq;" preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity; and compliance with U.N. resolutions on Iraq.⁵ However, many observers have noted that the INC might not act as a democratic body if it came to power, because most of its groups have an authoritarian internal structure.

³ Tyler, Patrick. "Plan On Iraq Coup Told To Congress." *New York Times*, February 9, 1992.

⁴ Sciolino, Elaine. "Greater U.S. Effort Backed To Oust Iraqi." *New York Times*, June 2, 1992.

⁵ The Iraqi National Congress and the International Community. Document provided by INC representatives, February 1993.

Some observers believe the Kurds would seek independence or full autonomy from an INC-dominated Iraq. Iraq's Kurds have been fighting for autonomy since the 1920s, shortly after their region was incorporated into the newly formed Iraqi state after World War I. In 1961, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), now led by Masud Barzani, son of KDP founder Mullah Mustafa Barzani, began an insurgency that has continued until today, albeit interrupted by periods of negotiations with Baghdad for Kurdish autonomy. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani, split off from the KDP in the 1960s. Together, the two Kurdish parties have about 35,000 fighters, which initially formed the backbone of the INC's military threat to Saddam Husayn. A small Islamic faction, the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK), is headed by Shaykh Ali Abd-al Aziz. Based in Halabja, Iraq, the IMIK has been publicizing the effects of Baghdad's March 1988 chemical attack on Halabja.

Several outside experts have concerns about the alliance between Iran and another INC component, the Iraqi Shiite Islamic fundamentalist group called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI was set up in 1982 to increase Iranian control over Shiite opposition groups in Iraq and the Persian Gulf monarchies. SCIRI has about 4,000-8,000 fighters in an organization called the Badr Brigade operating against the Iraqi military in southern Iraq. Although Iran has improved relations with Iraq over the past few years, Iran's Revolutionary Guard reportedly continues to provide the Badr Brigade with weapons and training. SCIRI's close ties to Iran contributed to the failure of the Shiite uprising in southern Iraq after the 1991 Gulf war; most Iraqis do not want an Islamic government or to be controlled by Iran. SCIRI's leader, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, was the late Ayatollah Khomeini's choice to head an Islamic Republic of Iraq. SCIRI has periodically distanced itself from the INC and has publicly refused to attend opposition meetings in the United States or accept U.S. assistance.

The Fragmentation of the Opposition. The differences within the INC eventually led to its virtual collapse as a viable challenge to Saddam Husayn. In May 1994, the two main Kurdish parties began fighting with each other over territory, revenues from duties levied at the Iraq-Turkey border, and control over the Kurdish regional government based in Irbil. To bolster their positions against each other, the PUK obtained a measure of support from Iran while the KDP, always somewhat amenable to negotiations with Baghdad, sought and received countervailing backing from Saddam. The infighting contributed to the failure of an INC offensive against Iraqi troops in March 1995; the KDP refused, at the last minute, to participate in the offensive.

As a result of the growing difficulties within the INC, the United States began seeking out other Iraqi opposition groups.⁶ One group, the Iraqi National Accord (INA), consisted primarily of military and security officers who had defected from Iraq and who were perceived to have some residual influence in Baghdad. The INA had received U.S. and Saudi backing in 1991 and 1992, before the INC came into favor in Washington. Its prospects appeared to brighten in August 1995 when Saddam's son-in-law Husayn Kamil al-Majid — architect of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs — defected to Jordan. The defection suggested to many in the region that Saddam's grip on power was weakening and Jordan's King Hussein agreed to allow the INA to operate from Jordan.

⁶ An account of this shift in U.S. strategy is essayed in Hoagland, Jim. "How CIA's Secret War On Saddam Collapsed." *Washington Post*, June 26, 1997.

However, the INA became penetrated by Iraq's intelligence services and, in June 1996, Baghdad broke the back of the INA by arresting 100 military officers linked to it and executing 30 others. The leader of the INA, Dr. Iyad Alawi, claims that INA sympathizers continue to operate throughout Iraq.

Iraq's counteroffensive against the opposition was completed two months after the INA arrests. In late August 1996, the KDP asked Baghdad to provide armed support for its capture of Irbil from the rival PUK. Iraq took advantage of the request to strike against the INC base in Salahuddin, northern Iraq, as well as remaining INA operatives in the north. Iraq executed two hundred oppositionists and arrested as many as 2,000. The United States evacuated and eventually resettled in the United States 650 oppositionists (mostly INC).

Rebuilding an Opposition Strategy. For the two years after the collapse of the opposition in northern Iraq, the Administration had little contact with the INC or other groups. Secretary of State Albright said on February 26, 1998, in testimony before a Senate Appropriations subcommittee, that the opposition is fragmented and that it would be "wrong to create false or unsustainable expectations" about what U.S. support for the opposition can accomplish. However, Iraq's deteriorating cooperation with UNSCOM throughout 1998, coupled with growing congressional calls for overthrowing Saddam, contributed to the Administration decision in November 1998 to formally adopt a policy of overthrow of Saddam Husayn.

Congressional pressure for a policy of regime began in early 1998 with an FY1998 supplemental appropriation (P.L. 105-174, signed May 1, 1998). Among other provisions, the law appropriated \$5 million in aid (Economic Support Funds, ESF) to the opposition and \$5 million for a Radio Free Iraq, under the direction of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).⁷ The State Department received approval from Congress to use \$3 million of the ESF for an overt program to coordinate the diverse participating groups, promote comity among the various opposition leaders, and highlight Iraqi violations of U.N. resolutions. The remaining \$2 million was used to translate, analyze, and publicize the regime's alleged war crimes -- including material retrieved from the Kurdish north and contained on 176 CD-ROM diskettes -- an issue on which virtually all the opposition groups agree.

Perhaps reflecting congressional concern about the diffuse nature and external focus of the State Department plan, a provision of the FY1999 omnibus appropriation (Section 590 of H.R. 4328, P.L. 105-277), provided \$8 million in FY1999 aid to the opposition. The provision made the INC the focus of U.S. assistance and stipulated that at least \$3 million in ESF be given directly to the INC and at least another \$2 million be used for opposition activities inside Iraq itself. As stipulated in that law, another \$3 million went to the opposition-led INDICT (the International Campaign to Indict Iraqi War Criminals) organization for war crimes issues. All the FY1998 and FY1999 funds have been spent, according to the State Department, and the obligations included the first direct payment to the INC -- a March 2000 grant of \$267,000 to help it organize and open new offices. The \$2 million in funds for opposition activities inside Iraq were used for humanitarian projects mainly in the Kurdish north, according to the State Department. Another \$10

⁷ RFE/RL began broadcasting on October 30, 1998, from its headquarters in Prague.

million in ESF for the opposition was appropriated in the FY2000 foreign aid law, passed by reference in P.L. 106-113. Of that amount, \$2 million is to be spent on war crimes issues. No FY2000 funds for the opposition have been obligated as of late June 2000.

Iraq Liberation Act (ILA). Apparently seeking a more assertive U.S. policy, another bill was introduced in 1998, authorizing funds to provide U.S. defense articles and services to the opposition. The Iraq Liberation Act (H.R. 4655), which passed the House on October 5, 1998 (360-38) and the Senate on October 7, 1998 (unanimous consent), gives the President the discretion to provide up to \$97 million in defense articles (and \$2 million in broadcasting funds) to opposition organizations to be designated by the Administration. The Act appeared to support the concept, advocated by Ahmad Chalabi and some U.S. policy experts, to promote an insurgency by using U.S. airpower to protect opposition-controlled enclaves. The Administration briefed several Members on the difficulty and risks of promoting an insurgency in Iraq,⁸ but the President signed the bill (P.L. 105-338) on October 31, 1998, in the course of a crisis with Iraq over U.N. weapons inspections. On February 5, 1999, after consultations with Congress, the Administration designated (Presidential Determination 99-13) the following organizations as eligible to receive U.S. military assistance under the ILA: the INC; the INA; the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK); the KDP; the PUK; the Movement for Constitutional Monarch (MCM); and SCIRI. The IMIK and the MCM, in particular, are considered small movements that cannot contribute much to an overthrow effort.

In May 1999, in concert with an opposition visit to Washington, the Administration announced it would draw down \$5 million worth of training and “non-lethal” defense equipment under the ILA. In late 1999, three opposition members began civil administration training at Hurlburt air base in Florida. As of June 2000, that training and some drawdown of non-lethal U.S. equipment amounted to \$20,000. In concert with another opposition visit to Washington in June 2000 and a meeting on June 26 with Vice President Gore, the Administration announced that another 145 oppositionists would undergo similar training. The Defense Department-run courses will teach them skills in field medicine, logistics, computers, communications, broadcasting, and power generation. No combat training will be provided.

Continued Debate Over Policy. The U.S. efforts during 1999 and 2000 to rebuild and train the opposition has not silenced the debate over the viability of the opposition or the contribution of this effort toward overall U.S. policy toward Iraq. Some in Congress believe the Administration should move more forcefully to aid the opposition with ILA drawdowns and appropriated funds. In a reflection of that view, a provision of the Senate version of the FY2001 foreign aid bill (S. 2522) provides for the INC to distribute \$15 million in humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people and use another \$10 million for broadcasting inside Iraq. Administration officials say they generally support the concept of opposition distribution of aid inside Iraq but question whether the INC has the capability to perform that mission.

Some Administration statements suggest a pessimistic view of the opposition and a hint of disagreement within the Administration on some aspects of the policy. Since the ILA was passed, outgoing Commander of the U.S. Central Command Gen. Anthony Zinni,

⁸ Pincus, Walter. “Bill Tries to Shift U.S. Policy on Iraq.” *Washington Post*, October 1, 1998.

has openly opposed implementing the Chalabi insurgency plan on the grounds that the INC or other groups are not sufficiently strong to challenge Saddam's grip on power. The United States, Zinni believes, would probably be drawn into a direct military effort to support or rescue the opposition forces.⁹ In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 2000, Secretary of State Albright said the opposition has "a long way to go" before it could pose a major threat to Iraq's regime. On the other hand, in his June 26, 2000 statement after meeting with the opposition, Vice President Gore appeared to suggest that the Administration would strongly pursue an opposition-based overthrow strategy. He reaffirmed the Administration's "strong commitment to the objective of removing Saddam Husayn from power..."

Some outside experts say that strong U.S. backing will give the Iraqi opposition legitimacy inside Iraq and could spark a broad revolt against Saddam Husayn's rule. Other experts, however, say that there is no evidence of broad support for the opposition inside Iraq. Many have noted that virtually none of Iraq's neighbors is willing to host an armed insurgent opposition effort against Saddam Husayn. Others note that the two main Kurdish parties are increasingly reluctant to host other opposition groups or to participate in a renewed effort to change the regime. Some believe that pursuing a strategy of overthrow conflicts, to some extent, with the goals of the United Nations' "oil-for-food program" to alleviate human suffering and with U.N. efforts to obtain Iraqi cooperation with a restart of weapons inspections, suspended since December 1998.

Perhaps in an attempt to develop an alternative to the ILA strategy, in 1998 the Administration reportedly tried to obtain congressional approval of and funding for an unspecified CIA plan to oust Saddam through covert operations.¹⁰ However, press reports in January 1999 said that the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence rejected the Administration plan.¹¹ It is possible that the Administration's covert plan represented an attempt to return to the "coup strategy" pursued earlier, in which the United States would attempt to find sympathetic Iraqi military or security chiefs who might mount a rebellion against Saddam. It is also possible that the plan was rejected by the Senate committee because it might have involved sabotage against humanitarian targets, such as power grids, that are needed to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people. Some observers privately speculate that some covert operations, combined with opposition funding authorized by the ILA, could form a cohesive strategy intended to provoke a coup against Saddam or force him to make key concessions on weapons inspections or other outstanding issues.

⁹ Richter, Paul. Top Military Commander Questions Plan to Topple Hussein. Los Angeles Times, October 22, 1998.

¹⁰ Rogers, David. Congress Passes \$250 Billion Budget for Pentagon With Anti-Iraq Funds. Wall Street Journal, September 30, 1998.

¹¹ Wright, Robin. U.S. Dispute Holds Up Covert Iraq Operation. Los Angeles Times, January 5, 1999.