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# **Iraq's Exiled Shia Dissidents**



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**A Research Paper**

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June 1985*

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# Iraq's Exiled Shia Dissidents

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**A Research Paper**

This paper was prepared by  Office of  
Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, with  
biographic information contributed by   
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Comments and queries are welcome and may be  
directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESAs,  
on

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**Iraq's Exiled Shia Dissidents**

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**Summary**

*Information available  
as of 3 June 1985  
was used in this report.*

Exiled Iraqi Shia dissidents remain a source of concern to Baghdad, but they pose little threat to Iraq's stability. Baghdad's ruthless and effective security services have arrested or deported most Shia activists and intimidated the remainder. Iran's efforts to unify dissident factions in exile into an effective force have left them weakened and more divided than ever. They have largely resisted Tehran's attempts at domination and are splintered by ideological, leadership, and strategic issues.

Tehran's greater interest in making the Iraqi Shias subservient than in building an effective anti-Baghdad movement presents the dissidents with a difficult choice. The acceptance of Iranian control gains them a nearby base of operations, arms, and financial support, but it weakens their appeal to Arab Shias in Iraq, many of whom harbor deep-rooted resentment toward Iran. Independent Iraqi Shia dissident groups, on the other hand, must locate their organizations far from Iraq and are too weak to capitalize on their greater potential appeal.

These divisions are reflected in the rivalries evident in Tehran's umbrella organization of Shia and Kurdish dissidents—the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. It is composed of elements of the Dawa Party, the Islamic Action Organization, the Iraqi Mujahidin, Kurdish nationalists, and smaller groups. Moderate factions of Dawa and the London-based Rabitat Ahl al-Bayt, on the other hand, remain largely outside the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Syria probably has agreed to closer cooperation with Iraqi Shia dissidents and may give them military aid, training, and support for cross-border operations into Iraq.

The Shia dissident movement has limited appeal in Iraq. Most Iraqi Shias of Arab origin back efforts to prevent an Iranian invasion and view the Tehran-backed opposition groups as pawns of Iran.

Radical Iraqi Shia opposition elements will continue to engage in terrorism against the United States, the West, and Arab moderates. Stymied at the battlefield, Iran may direct those Iraqi Shia groups it controls to begin attacking foreigners, including Americans, to reduce outside support for the Baghdad regime.

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**Iraq's Exiled Shia Dissidents** 


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The success of Islamic fundamentalists in overthrowing the Shah of Iran in 1979 emboldened some Iraqi Shias to organize to oust the secular Ba'thist regime of Saddam Husayn in Baghdad. Dissidents formed clandestine cells, tapping the disgruntlement of Iraq's disadvantaged Shias, who make up over half the population but do not share proportionately in political power or economic benefits. By 1980, Shia activists were mounting terrorist attacks against the regime, including the attempted assassination of Iraq's Foreign Minister. 

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The ruling Ba'th Party responded in tough fashion by deporting over 60,000 Shias of Iranian origin and arresting and executing dissident leaders, including Iraq's most respected Shia clergyman, Muhammad Baqr Sadr. The success of Baghdad's efforts is reflected in the virtual absence of significant Shia-conducted terrorist operations in Baghdad since then, according to the US Embassy in Baghdad.<sup>1</sup> 

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Although largely crippled inside Iraq, the dissidents remain active in exile and have gained considerable organizational and financial help from Iran and, to a lesser extent, Syria. Iran has sought to forge the Iraqi oppositionists into a single body that would conduct terrorist and guerrilla activities inside Iraq and help assure Iranian domination of Iraq after the defeat of the Ba'thists. So far, Iran's efforts have met with little success. 

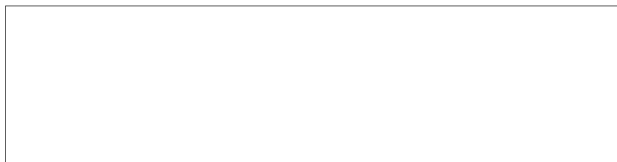
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**Creating an Umbrella for Iraqi Shia Dissidents**

The Iranians created the 40-member Tehran-based Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI) in 1982 as an umbrella organization for most Iraqi Shia and Kurdish dissidents.<sup>2</sup> It was designed to coordinate their activities and ensure Iranian influence over them. Iran is disappointed by the ineffectiveness of the organization, however, 

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**Principal Iraqi Shia Dissident Organizations**

**Pro-Iranian or Leaning  
Toward Iran**

**Independents**

*Supreme Assembly of the  
Islamic Revolution in  
Iran (SAIRI)*

*Dawa (The Islamic Call  
Party)*

*The Iraqi Mujahidin  
(The Iraqi Fighters)*

*Rabitat Ahl al-Bayt  
(League of the Descen-  
dants of the Prophet)*

*Islamic Action  
Organization*

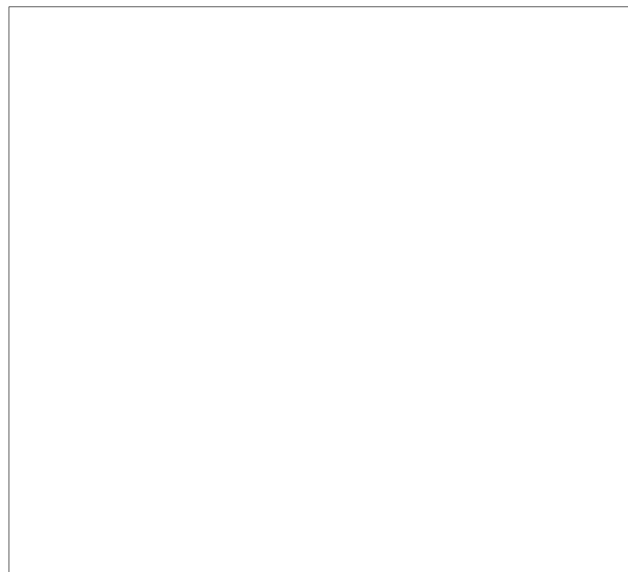
*Al-Fatah al-Islami  
Movement (The Islamic  
Conquest Movement)*

*Jund al-Imam (Soldiers  
of the Imam)*

*The Iraqi Hizballah  
(Party of God)*



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**Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim**  
*Leader, Supreme Assembly of  
the Islamic Revolution in Iraq*

*Jeune Afrique ©*

access to the SAIRI-controlled military training camp at Ahvaz and are not allowed to publish magazines or propaganda leaflets. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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[redacted] the International Relations Department of Iran's Revolutionary Guard has set up an organization that appears to rival SAIRI, the 10-member Council for Iraqi Affairs. The Council, composed of Iraqi Shias and Kurds, seeks to gain influence in Iraq and export Iran's revolution to the Persian Gulf states, which have large Shia populations. The creation of the Council probably reflects in part Iran's frustrations over SAIRI. [redacted]

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[redacted]

**Shia Weaknesses**

Tehran's efforts to make the Iraqi Shia opposition subservient to Iranian concepts and control are partly to blame for the fact that they are divided and weak. According to the US Embassy in Baghdad, many Iraqi Shia dissidents oppose Iran's concept of *velayat-e faqih*, which holds that Ayatollah Khomeini is the supreme guide of all Shias, including those in Iraq. Others resist Tehran's attempts to control their activities. [redacted]

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[redacted]

The dissident movement is further weakened by its factionalized support base in Iraq. [redacted]

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[redacted] middle-class Iraqi Shias favor Iraqi independence and therefore support the more independent groups such as Dawa and the Rabitat Ahl al-Bayt, a relatively moderate London-based organization. Lower-class Iraqi Shias and those of Iranian origin, on the other hand, are more receptive to Khomeini as their supreme guide and back pro-Iranian groups such as the Islamic Action Organization (IAO). [redacted]

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SAIRI can take no independent action without the approval of the Iranian Committee for Iraq. It is composed of representatives from the Iranian Prime Minister's office, the Ministry of Interior, the Majles (National Assembly), the Revolutionary Guard, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [redacted]

[redacted]

Shia religious leaders in Iraq have misgivings about Iran as well. US diplomats in Baghdad report that, even though many of these leaders desire the overthrow of President Saddam Husayn, they are concerned that his ouster would bring an influx of Iranians into Iraqi cities that house some of Shia Islam's most revered shrines. They also are worried that Iranian religious leaders would demand precedence over their Iraqi counterparts. [redacted]

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Iran uses a carrot-and-stick approach to gain dominance over the Iraqi Shia opposition. Iraqi dissidents who refuse to accept SAIRI's control are denied



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**Iran's Puppets**

Just as they have formed an alternative to SAIRI, the Iranians are trying to form new mass movements among Iraqi Shia exiles in Iran to supplant the older groups, such as Dawa, that are resisting Iranian dominance. [redacted] they have created several organizations, including the Iraqi Mujahidin, Hizballah, and Jund al-Imam (Soldiers of the Imam) in the hope that they will gain popular support in Iraq for an Islamic republic on Iranian lines. [redacted]

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The Mujahidin is SAIRI's primary military wing. The Mujahidin, headed by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, and the Iraqi Hizballah Party, headed by Sadri Qobbanchi, are composed at least in part of Iraqi prisoners of war and expelled Iraqi refugees of Iranian origin. [redacted] both groups receive military and paramilitary training from the Revolutionary Guard to prepare them for intelligence and paramilitary operations inside Iraq. We believe that members of these organizations number at most only a few thousand. The Jund al-Imam, headed by Abdullah Shirazi, is another small group that is in the Iranian camp. [redacted]

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Increased Syrian support for the Mujahidin will enhance its terrorist capability inside Iraq, but such activity will remain little more than an irritant to Baghdad. Mujahidin leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim headed a delegation that met with Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad in February, according to the US Embassy in Damascus. The visit received prominent coverage in Syria's press, and we believe that Damascus agreed to closer cooperation with Iraqi Shia dissidents and may give them military aid, training, and support for cross-border operations into Iraq. Such action is consistent with other Syrian efforts to weaken the Baghdad regime such as increased military support for Iraqi Kurdish rebels. [redacted]

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The Iranians have considerable control over the Islamic Action Organization as well. The IAO, an offshoot and rival of Dawa, is headed by Muhammad Taqi al-Modarasi, an Iranian cleric. The IAO has conducted terrorist operations inside and outside Iraq, but we know of none that has been directed at US interests. [redacted]

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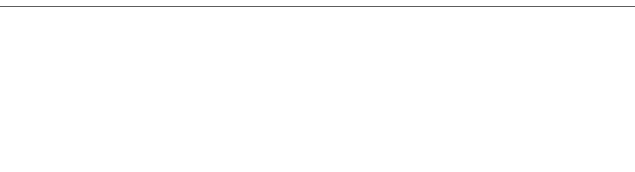
**The Primary Opponents of Iranian Domination**

**Dawa.** Dawa, the Islamic Call Party, is the oldest, largest, and most prestigious Iraqi Shia dissident group. Dawa's moderate majority faction has sharp ideological differences with Iran. In particular, [redacted] this grouping rejects the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, because it would provide Iran with political and religious control over the party and over Iraq if Dawa overthrew the regime in Baghdad. [redacted]

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Tehran has tried to undercut the influence of Dawa's moderate leadership. [redacted] until SAIRI was formed, Dawa's principal leaders were influential in Iraqi exile politics and in Iran itself. They were particularly strong in Iran's Ministry of Islamic Guidance and broadcast Arabic-language programs from Ahvaz. Since the formation of SAIRI, Iran has shifted the limelight to pro-Khomeini leaders such as Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim. [redacted]

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**Rabitat Ahl al-Bayt.** Rabitat Ahl al-Bayt, the League of the Descendants of the Prophet, is another Shia group reluctant to accept orders from Tehran. It is based in London and brings together factions from SAIRI, Dawa, and other groups not resident in Iran. Its leader, Mahdi al-Hakim, elder brother of SAIRI's leader, Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, was formerly closely identified with Dawa, but, [redacted] he and his followers resented Iranian attempts to dominate SAIRI and Dawa. Mahdi failed in his bid to gain substantial support from Ayatollah Khomeini in 1981, probably because he refused to

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accept Iranian domination. [redacted]

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[redacted] he also was frustrated over Khomeini's support for other Shia exile leaders, including his brother Muhammad. [redacted]

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We believe that Rabitat Ahl al-Bayt's independence from Iran gives it more potential appeal in Iraq than rival organizations headquartered in Tehran. We have no confirmation, however, of its effectiveness inside Iraq and no estimates of its size. [redacted]

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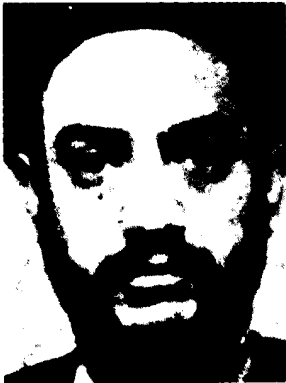
[redacted]

**Prospects**

The Iraqi dissidents pose no immediate threat to the Baghdad regime, and we see little chance of an effective Shia dissident movement emerging from the badly splintered rebels. The differences between the groups are too numerous and wide to be easily bridged. The emergence of a native Iraqi Shia leader with widespread popular support among Iraq's Shias would improve the rebels' prospects, but no candidate with the necessary appeal is on the horizon. Even if one were to emerge, Iran probably would view him as a challenge and undermine his influence. [redacted]

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*Mahdi Abd al-Muhsin al-Hakim  
Leader of Rabitat Ahl al-Bayt*

*Mahdi Abd al-Muhsin al-Hakim and his brothers, Muhammad and Abd al-Aziz, were prominent in the Dawa Party. Mahdi, however, subsequently put distance between himself and Dawa and organized the Rabitat Ahl al-Bayt in London. [redacted] the group is composed of relatively moderate Iraqi Shia exiles seeking to establish a freely elected, Shia-dominated government in Baghdad that is independent of Iran. [redacted]*

Iraqi Shia dissident leaders who accept Iranian control gain a secure base of operations, financial and logistic support, and weapons. They pay a price for such support, however, because we believe their reputations are tarnished among Iraq's Arab Shias, who harbor deep-seated resentment toward Iran. This animosity stems from repeated wars and national rivalries for regional influence. Independent leaders, on the other hand, keep their reputations intact but lack the practical support that their rivals enjoy. [redacted]

Bogged down in a stalemated ground war, Iran will be tempted to direct the Iraqi Shia dissident groups that it controls to conduct terrorist operations against foreigners, including US citizens, in Iraq. The Iranians doubtless were encouraged by the departure of many dependents of diplomats and foreign contractors from Iraq during the recent Iranian Scud missile attacks. Terrorist attacks would have a similar impact in weakening foreign support for the Iraqi regime as well as its economy. [redacted]

As the bombing of the US Embassy in Kuwait demonstrates, Iraqi Shia dissidents have the assets to strike outside Iraq. Large indigenous and Iranian-origin Shia populations and proximity to Iran make the Persian Gulf the most likely location for such

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***Developments That Would Improve Exiled Shias' Prospects***

*The fortunes of Iraqi Shia dissidents would rise under the following conditions:*

- The removal of Iraqi President Saddam Husayn or other events that fuel rivalries within the ruling Ba'th Party.*
- A significant upsurge in fighting by Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq that diverts the attention of Iraqi security services.*
- Drastic Iraqi Government austerity measures necessitated by the war that create resentment toward the regime.*
- Major Iraqi military setbacks that embolden some Iraqi Shias to engage in antiregime activity and lead others to hedge their bets by becoming less anti-Iranian.*
- The emergence of a powerful Iraqi Shia dissident leader with widespread appeal in Iraq.*
- A shift in Iranian policy that encourages the independence of Iraqi dissidents. [redacted]*

attacks. Iran might order terrorist attacks against US, other Western, and Arab moderates' interests there, particularly if it believed its military situation was desperate. Despite the fact that Dawa moderates give primacy to political action over terrorism, radical Shias are prepared to engage in such acts either on their own or as Iran's surrogates. Although divisions have weakened the dissident movement and reduced its troublemaking potential, Iraq's Shia opposition will possess a terrorist card that they can play for years to come. [redacted]

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