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CIANESA --- 93-20024 --- M ---

Directorate
of Intelligence

Intelligence Memorandum
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis
26 April 1993

The Iraqi Opposition: Struggling To Make a Difference

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Summary

The fledgling Iraqi National Congress has the potential to develop into an instrument of pressure on the regime of President Saddam Husayn, but has poor prospects for amassing broad support inside Iraq or deposing the Iraqi leader. After two years of halting efforts to build unity, the numerous groups that make up the organization still agree on little beyond their mutual goal to overthrow Saddam. The opposition movement in general, including groups outside the Congress, is plagued by divergent goals, personal rivalries, and intimidation by Baghdad. Most opposition leaders have been exiled from Iraq for many years and have little popular support, military capability, or name recognition inside the country. The support these groups derive from Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, with their differing and often competing interests, hinders unity, and the perception that they are outsiders detracts from the groups' credibility inside Iraq. Opposition competition for influence could contribute to protracted instability in Iraq after Saddam falls. Only those opposition leaders--particularly the Kurds and some Shias--who have established support inside Iraq are likely to play important roles in a post-Saddam Iraq.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, [redacted] NESAA [redacted]

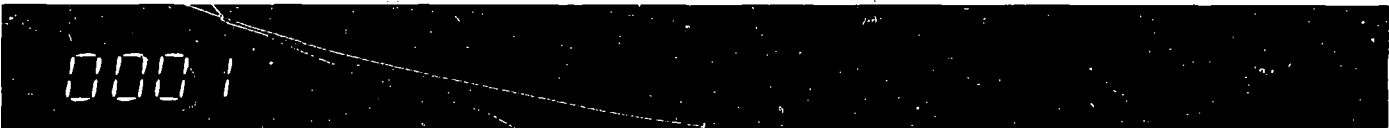
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The Iraqi Opposition: Struggling To Make a Difference [Redacted]

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The Iraqi opposition movement comprises numerous ethnic, political, and religious groups based abroad, principally in Middle Eastern and Western capitals. * Most opposition leaders have been exiled from Iraq for many years and--with the exception of some Kurdish and Shia leaders--have limited popular support, military capability, or name recognition inside the country. Outside backers frequently vie for control of individual groups and for greater influence over the movement as a whole. Since the Gulf war the number of new and splinter groups, individual dissidents, and umbrella organizations has burgeoned, complicating efforts to unify the opposition and intensifying competition between its sponsors. [Redacted]

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The Western-backed Iraqi National Congress offers the opposition its best chance to press Iraqi President Saddam Husayn. Since its founding in June 1992, the Congress has made visible progress in building unity and articulating a pluralistic, democratic national agenda. The organization has capitalized on the widespread and deep-seated hatred of Saddam to assume nominal leadership of most Iraqi opposition groups. [Redacted]

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Despite this progress, the Congress still faces serious challenges to its viability. [Redacted]

[Redacted] Arab Sunnis, Shias, and regional sponsors are concerned about the large Kurdish role in the organization. Kurdish aspirations for self-determination and federalism are part of the Congress's platform and a point of contention with other members. Damascus and Tehran have pressed their opposition clients to oppose the policy. Arab Sunni and Shia groups seek a more proportionate representation in the Congress's Presidential Council and Executive Committee and some Shias want a more Islamic agenda. The group has taken steps to assuage regional concerns about the Kurds and to include more Shias and Sunnis, but [Redacted] such measures have not eliminated these contentious issues and suggest they will continue to generate underlying tensions. [Redacted]

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* This memorandum deals only with Iraqis who have announced themselves as oppositionists and operate in exile. Iraqis who are most likely to topple Saddam someday are those close to him in his regime or security forces. Consideration of these Iraqi oppositionists [Redacted] is beyond the scope of this paper. [Redacted]

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Looking For Greater Support from Washington

Iraqi National Congress delegates who are visiting the United States this week will seek greater political and financial support and assurances that the United States is not softening its stance on Iraq. The delegation is led by the Congress's Presidential council, which includes the Damascus-based Sunni leader Hasan al-Naqib, Kurdish leader Mas'ud Barzani, and London-based Shia cleric Bahr al-Ulum.

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Congress leaders will bring requests

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including:

- Creation of a security zone in southern Iraq.
- Help in lifting Baghdad's blockade of northern Iraq
- Placement of UN human rights monitors throughout Iraq.
- Establishment of a war crimes tribunal.
- Help in obtaining support from Iraq's neighbors.
- Money to create a Liberation Army under Congress control.

the Congress's agenda will also include a request to extend the no-fly zones to include central Iraq and to release Iraqi funds now in frozen accounts to the Congress.

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The dissidents have little to offer in exchange for US aid. Congress leaders have yet to follow through with a promise to issue a statement recognizing Kuwaiti sovereignty and the newly demarcated Iraq-Kuwait border.

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Another important Congress objective will be to obtain assurances that Washington will not reduce pressure on the regime of Saddam Husayn. Recent US press reports claiming a "depersonalization" of Washington's Iraq policy and rumors of impending cuts in support to the dissidents have made Congress leaders nervous.

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In response to any perceived erosion of Washington's support, some opposition leaders may reduce cooperation with the Congress and increase contacts with regional supporters like Iran, Syria, or Saudi Arabia, presenting further risks to opposition unity.

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The Kurds--Strongest Opposition Faction

Iraqi Kurds, with a long history of resistance to the central government, are the most powerful and organized opposition to Saddam, have the most cohesive base inside Iraq, and are a strong component of the Iraqi National Congress. The Kurds have had some success since the Gulf war in asserting their political autonomy from Baghdad and forming basic institutions of government and local administration, including a Kurdish legislature, Council of Ministers, and a nominally unified Kurdish opposition front. The primary Kurdish leaders, Mas'ud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, compete with each other for leadership of the Kurds and the allegiance of many smaller Kurdish political and tribal groups. Barzani and Talabani also represent the eight-group Kurdish Front in the Congress. [redacted]

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Despite the Kurds' recent success in asserting autonomy, their unity will remain vulnerable to recurring personal rivalries, interference by Iran and Turkey, and economic and military pressure by Baghdad. The regime's economic embargo of northern Iraq and effectiveness in impeding UN humanitarian and security activities there could eventually motivate some Kurdish leaders to break ranks and seek an accommodation with Baghdad to ensure their survival and well-being. Moreover, Kurdish unity depends on Western political support, symbolized by Operation Provide Comfort and the coalition-imposed no-fly zone above the 36th parallel. A significant reduction in such support probably would cause some Kurds, particularly Mas'ud Barzani, to reopen negotiations with Baghdad. [redacted]

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The Shias--Disorganized and Dominated by Iran

[redacted] exiled Arab Shia groups are highly factionalized, heavily influenced by Iran, and wary of Western intentions and other dissidents. Tehran created the largest Shia opposition group--the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq--headed by Iraqi cleric Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim. Tehran also holds sway over the second largest group, the divided Da'wa Party. Both groups have been contentious participants in the Iraqi National Congress. Tehran provides these groups substantial financial, political, and military support, as well as access across the Iranian border to Shia areas of southern Iraq. Tehran also supports several Iraqi Shia military forces in Iran and maintains contact with rebel units in southern Iraq. Nevertheless, the Iraqi Shia rebels' persistent lack of unity and military coordination has kept them from advancing beyond small-scale hit-and-run attacks against regime forces. [redacted]

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Tehran's control of its Iraqi clients has fragmented the exiled Shia opposition and alienated many Iraqi Shias who, like their Arab Sunni countrymen, fear domination by Iran. Published theological debate shows that many Iraqi Shias oppose the Iranian system of clerical rule and resent Tehran's perceived aspirations to create an Iraqi regime in its own image. Sharp disagreements over the extent to which to submit to Iran's

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control have split the Da'wa Party. Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim--with Tehran's tacit support--is trying to portray himself as independent of Tehran in a so far unsuccessful effort to broaden his Iraqi and foreign support and protect Shia and Iranian interests in the Western-backed Iraqi National Congress [Redacted]

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The Rest--More Talk Than Action

Other exiled Iraqi opposition groups share the problems of internal rivalries, divergent agendas, and competition for sponsors, but have the additional impediment of a weak or non-existent infrastructure inside Iraq. These groups comprise a broad range of secular, religious, political, and ethnic groups based in London, Damascus, and Saudi Arabia. Many are members of the Iraqi National Congress, but a few Syrian- and Saudi-backed groups, under pressure from their sponsors, have tried to form rival organizations:

- Some independent London-based groups, such as the Iraqi National Union and the Independent Iraqi Alliance--both Congress members--comprise a mixture of mostly liberal and secular Sunnis and Shias. Many individual oppositionists from various political and religious backgrounds--including Congress members Ahmad Chalabi, Hani Fukayki, Layth Kubba, and Muhammad Muhammad Ali--also reside in London.
- Syria controls a handful of Arab Sunni and nationalist groups and former Iraqi officials and officers, including renegade elements of the Iraqi Ba'th Party, the Iraqi Free Officers movement, and some small Communist groups.
- Saudi Arabia holds sway over a small number of Sunni groups and individuals, including a splinter faction of the Iraqi National Union led by Salah Umar al-Ali, and former Iraqi officials Ibrahim Da'ud and Arshad Tawfiq. Riyadh also backs a newly formed group--intended to rival the Iraqi National Congress--led by Sa'd Salih Jabir, who also heads the London-based Free Iraq Council, [Redacted]

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Many of these dissidents began to oppose Saddam publicly only after he invaded Kuwait and are perceived by many Iraqis and sponsors as opportunists eager to enrich themselves with Western and Arab support. [Redacted] None have a significant following inside Iraq or measurable military capability. We believe they could play meaningful roles in a new regime only if most of the current Ba'thist military and political apparatus were swept away with Saddam. [Redacted]

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The Role of Foreign Backers--With Friends Like These . . .

The diverse goals of sponsors in the region reduces the chances the opposition can succeed against Saddam. Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia all compete for control of individual groups and greater influence over the opposition movement as a whole. Although each aims toward Saddam's downfall, all are using the opposition to further more narrow interests:

• [Redacted] Syrian intent is to replace Saddam with a regime of Ba' thist military officers or Arab Sunni nationalists sympathetic to Damascus. Syria's concern that Kurdish federalism will contribute to the fragmentation of Iraq and create several unstable and possibly hostile entities on its eastern border have led it to oppose the Iraqi National Congress, and Damascus has repeatedly tried to obstruct Congress efforts to unite the opposition. Syria also competes with Iran for influence over Iraqi Shia groups to broaden its sway over the opposition movement as a whole.

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• [Redacted] believe Iran's primary aim is to use its Iraqi Shia clients and its contacts with Iraqi Kurds to gain influence inside Iraq, particularly in a post-Saddam regime. Tehran has tried to lure Iraqi Kurdish opposition leaders into cooperating against Iranian Kurdish dissidents who are based in northern Iraq.

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• [Redacted] Saudi Arabia's involvement in the opposition is aimed at ensuring the continuation of Arab Sunni rule in Iraq and preventing the fragmentation of the country--which could leave a large, Iranian-backed Shia enclave on Saudi Arabia's northern border. Riyadh's attempts over the last two years to recruit Iraqi dissidents backed by Iran and Syria suggests in part that it intends to use these clients and contacts to foment discord between Iran and Syria to further isolate Iran in the region.

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All three sponsors of the Iraqi opposition have expressed doubt [Redacted] that the opposition will achieve enough unity, military strength, or influence to seriously threaten Saddam's hold on power. [Redacted]

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Saddam's Agents--Trying To Terrorize Dissidents

Saddam's campaign of terrorism, intimidation, and propaganda threatens to set back opposition activities inside Iraq and abroad. Iraqi operatives over the last year have carried out assassinations and bombings against dissidents in northern Iraq and Jordan:

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[Redacted] believe Baghdad is behind numerous bombings since the Gulf war of Kurdish and other opposition offices in northern Iraq, as well as assassinations and attempted poisonings of regime opponents, [Redacted]

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establish a network of informants and assassins in northern Iraq to monitor and eliminate regime opponents. [Redacted]

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Many Iraqi Arab Sunnis are receptive to Saddam's propaganda that portrays the opposition as traitors and Western lackeys bent on partitioning Iraq. [Redacted]

[Redacted] Saddam is showering some Shia tribal leaders with cash, gifts, and weapons in exchange for their support against Shia rebels and dissident tribes. [Redacted]

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After Saddam--Little To Bind the Factions

Saddam's ouster would probably find Iraqi oppositionists still arguing over basic issues and unable to implement a coordinated plan for a post-Saddam government. A sustained period of unity before Saddam's departure would help the opposition build influence inside Iraq, but it would have a long way to go to develop the political and military muscle necessary to make it a viable political entity. [Redacted]

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Opposition competition for power in a post-Saddam regime would contribute to a protracted period of instability in Iraq. In the worst case, opposition demands, rivalries, and military moves could increase domestic tensions or lead to violence that a new and weaker regime would find difficult to control. These could lead to civil war and the partitioning of the country--at least temporarily--into several ethnic/sectarian enclaves. Despite the stated intent of almost all opposition leaders to maintain Iraq's territorial integrity, their demonstrated lack of coordination would limit their ability to stem widespread unrest. In any case, we believe Saddam would not be succeeded by the kind of pluralistic, democratic government envisioned by the Iraqi National Congress, but some opposition leaders, particularly those with strong domestic constituencies like the Kurds, could play important roles in post-Saddam Iraq. [Redacted]

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