

Whither the Iraqi Opposition?

The Future of the Iraqi National Congress

Sep 25, 1996



Brief Analysis

In 1992 a spectrum of Iraqi dissidents met in Vienna, Austria and then in Salahuddin, northern Iraq (under Kurdish control), and established the Iraqi National Congress (INC) to lead the opposition to Saddam Hussein. The INC opposes the use of force as the solution for ethnic and nationality problems and sectarian disputes in Iraq. The INC wants ultimately to achieve a final country, putting to rest such notions as an independent Kurdistan or an Iraq that is merely part of a larger umma (as urged by Islamists) or a proletariat super-structure (as urged by communists). By instituting a democratic system respectful of human rights, Iraq would maintain its territorial integrity as a pluralistic society that solves political disputes at the ballot box. Pluralistic democracy was a highly contentious idea throughout the region when the INC endorsed it; however, it remains the only solution to the repression, mass arrests, martial law, war, and genocide that is the cancer of Iraqi society.

International welcome

The United States responded positively to the INC diplomatically, financially, and politically. High-ranking INC members met with Secretaries of State Baker and Christopher. INC leaders were also received by King Fahd, the late Turkish President Ozal, British Prime Minister Major, and Emir al-Sabah of Kuwait.

Northern Iraq

Northern Iraq was declared a safe-haven by the coalition after the Gulf War five years ago on humanitarian grounds. With the intention of maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity, the international community (with the support of the INC) refrained from granting northern Iraq international status. Nevertheless, Saddam Hussein had effectively been thrown out; he was no longer administratively responsible for the region. The primary residue of his government is the continued use of the Iraqi dinar, though even that changed. In northern Iraq, only pre-Gulf War Iraqi bank notes are legal tender. The value of the (northern) Iraqi dinar ultimately reached sixty times the value of the dinar used in the south.

The INC in northern Iraq

Convinced that diplomatic opposition to Saddam's regime from the outside was insufficient, the INC established an infrastructure within northern Iraq that was praised by international visitors. The highest praise, though, was Saddam's view that the INC was indeed a threat to his regime, proven by the many assassination attempts on INC members and their families as well as the constant demonization of the INC in the official Iraqi press and media. The INC met every two months in its headquarters in Salahuddin, resolving internal disputes by democratic means.

Unfortunately, the INC's unity was undermined by Kurdish factional fighting. From the beginning, starting with the 1992 Kurdish elections, the Western anti-Iraq coalition did not treat the Kurdish administration of northern Iraq with sufficient seriousness. This attitude reinforced the Kurdish parties' tendency to see themselves as the ultimate exercisers of power--as parties, not as representatives of the government. A Kurdish government official does not ask: "What can I do for my government?," but rather, "What can I do for my party with the government's resources?"

After intra-Kurdish fighting broke out in May 1994, the INC initially succeeded in negotiating and monitoring a cease-fire. It lacked the resources to continue this operation beyond six months, however. The coalition said it welcomed the INC's role but did not provide the INC with the means to continue its cease-fire efforts, even as the Kurdish factional dispute was deepening and Iran was availing itself of this opportunity to increase its influence in northern Iraq. The resumption of Kurdish fighting was a relief to the many regional powers who felt threatened by the prospect of a successful Kurdish administration. Only in late August 1996 did the United States request that the INC prepare anew to monitor a cease-fire between the Kurdish factions. As this was being negotiated at the U.S. embassy in London, word arrived that one of the Kurdish factions, Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), had requested Saddam's help against the rival group, Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Saddam's invasion of Irbil, formerly held by the PUK, dealt a serious blow not only to Talabani, but also to the INC; indeed, a major motive for Saddam's attack on Irbil was to crush the Iraqi opposition. The seemingly endless and inconclusive negotiations to halt Kurdish fighting signaled that northern Iraq had become a backwater from the standpoint of U.S. interests and that prospects for removing Saddam by northern-based activity were dwindling. The situation in northern Iraq must be reversed. The United States has said that its strategic interest lies in the south, not in the north, relaying the message to Saddam and Iran that the north is available. As it stands, the situation will deteriorate and the (Kurdish) civil war will resume. Reversing the current situation does not necessarily require major military action. Acute diplomatic pressure on Baghdad and a stern, effective warning to Saddam could force him to keep his armor out of the region.

The INC's presence in northern Iraq is its lifeline; it must be resuscitated. Additionally, it intends to cultivate its activity in the south. There are now around 500 Iraqis hidden in the north that are prepared to put their lives on the line to be a part of the cease-fire observation team. For now, they are in danger and, with some assurances from the United States, the INC is working to get them out safely. The determination of Iraqis to oppose Saddam is currently stronger than ever.

UN Resolutions

The INC has consistently supported implementation of UN Security Council resolutions, most recently 986, for export of Iraqi oil to raise funds for humanitarian aid administered under UN control. Further, in pondering future policy toward Saddam, oft-raised legal concerns about threatening Iraq's sovereignty should be disregarded. The UN has already limited Saddam's sovereignty: resolution 688, which condemned Iraqi repression of its own citizens, separates the Iraqi people from their leader in unprecedented fashion and legitimizes the international community's effort to protect the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's genocidal tendencies. Resolution 986 specifies that 30 percent of Iraq's oil revenues goes automatically, and directly from the source, to the Reparations Commission of the Kuwait War without a financial ceiling or a time limit. Saddam's acceptance of that resolution is the clearest signal of his own willingness to squander Iraq's sovereignty to save his regime.

Allied Support

The allies of the United States in the region recently appear reluctant to participate in an effort to oppose Saddam. In fact, what they are opposed to is a pinprick approach. The less the United States is willing to do to counter Saddam, the more the allies will oppose those limited actions. If there were resolve to take decisive action to get rid of Saddam Hussein, however, they would fall into line.

Mr. Chalabi's remarks were followed by an off-the-record question and answer session.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eden Bossom. ❖

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