

U.S. Policy and the Iraqi Opposition:

A Cautious Start

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Brief Analysis

A leading Iraqi opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), recently announced that its political convention will meet in Washington in late April. Despite the U.S. administration's new policy calling for an end to the Iraqi regime, its approach to the Iraqi opposition has thus far been cautious and limited. Notwithstanding U.S. pledges to "work very actively with the opposition," most evidence suggests that the administration envisions a minimal opposition role -- and certainly no near-term military role -- in efforts to topple Iraqi president Saddam Husayn. This suggests that the United States will focus most of its energy on efforts to create conditions conducive to a coup.

Background. On October 31, 1998, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Iraq Liberation Act (ILA), which states that the United States "should . . . support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Husayn." On November 15, he affirmed that the best way to deter Iraqi threats, "over the long term," is through the emergence of "a new government" in Baghdad. To that end, he pledged to "intensify" U.S. "engagement with the forces of change in Iraq," widely understood to mean the diaspora-based Iraqi opposition. In a December 20, 1998, television interview, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright reinforced the link between U.S. support for Iraqi opposition groups and the envisioned downfall of Saddam's regime, saying that the United States is "going to be working toward [a regime change] by more active support of the various opposition groups." Three days later, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger went further, pledging to "do all we can [emphasis added] to strengthen the Iraqi opposition so that it can seek change inside Iraq." This new approach -- a clear departure from the long-time goal of merely containing the threat from Saddam through economic sanctions and arms inspections -- has come to be known as "containment-plus-regime-change."

For years, a desire to encourage Saddam's cooperation with United Nations arms inspectors inhibited the United States from publicly embracing the notion of regime-change. But the waning prospect of Iraqi cooperation, along with the ILA push from Congress, convinced the administration to change its public tune.

Caveats and perceptions. The administration made clear that it foresaw obstacles ahead. Spokesmen emphasized that Saddam's removal would be only a "long-term goal," and that U.S. support to the opposition would be based

strictly on "what the opposition can effectively make use of." Secretary of Defense William Cohen, speaking after Clinton on November 15, specifically rejected an activist U.S. plan to "overthrow" Saddam.

Nevertheless, many people believed that Washington had committed itself to the policy foreseen in the ILA: a near-term effort to build Iraqi opposition groups into an effective insurrectionist force that could be installed on territory adjacent to Iraq (probably Kuwait), whence it could initiate a military campaign to bring down Saddam's regime. It is now clear, however, that the administration's intentions are considerably more modest.

The evolving approach. Perhaps the administration's "regime-change" policy is a work-in-progress, but a few early conclusions present themselves:

- In the administration's view, the diaspora opposition is not an important means to achieving regime-change in Iraq. Administration statements reflect a conviction that change will have to be accomplished from the inside. New policy elements that the administration hopes will contribute to the creation of a coup-friendly environment include aggressive enforcement of the no-fly zones; demonstrated willingness to use force against key Iraqi military formations as in Operation Desert Fox; stepped-up propaganda through newly established Radio Free Iraq; and greater stability in Iraqi Kurdistan, as a result of the U.S.-brokered September 17 agreement between rival Kurdish leaders Masud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. Working with Iraqi opposition groups is an additional element of this approach but far from its centerpiece.

The recent appointment of a State Department "Special Representative for Transition in Iraq," whose main task is to act as a liaison for the opposition, seems only to underscore the halting nature of the administration's commitment. Although a highly regarded diplomat, the new appointee, Frank Ricciardone, will likely be limited in his bureaucratic sway. Slated to be part of the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau, he presumably will not report directly to the Secretary of State, nor will he carry the title "ambassador," as do, for example, Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross, Special Cyprus Coordinator Thomas Miller, and other specially designated diplomats.

- Support for armed action is not imminent. The ILA calls on the administration to transfer up to \$97 million worth of excess military equipment -- not cash and not necessarily even lethal items -- and to provide "military education and training" to the Iraqi opposition. Initial indications are that the administration prefers to send only nonlethal equipment, if any at all. Although the administration has designated several groups as "eligible" to receive such equipment, it has not actually made any specific material offers. The administration also appears disinclined to provide any training in the near term.

The administration appears loath to embark on a path toward supporting armed insurrection -- the vision behind the ILA. U.S. officials doubt that the Iraqi opposition could form an effective force. They also probably believe that open sponsorship of armed insurrection would lead inexorably to involvement by U.S. ground troops -- something they wish to avoid at all costs. Although departing in tone from administration statements, the commander of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf, Gen. Anthony Zinni, almost certainly expressed administration views when he told Congress that the opposition has "little, if any, viability to exact a change of regime . . . Their ability to cooperate is questionable." That view was punctuated last week by Ricciardone's reported prediction that Saddam "most likely" will be brought down by "a military coup."

In general, administration officials in recent weeks have dropped some of the more forward-leaning rhetoric of November and December. In late February testimony before the Senate, Albright side-stepped questions about U.S. support for the opposition and implementation of the ILA -- perhaps reflecting expressions of Arab concern she reportedly heard during her January trip.

- To the extent that it does increase contacts with Iraqi opposition groups, the administration apparently does not intend to give primacy to the INC. Led by Shi'i businessman and intellectual Ahmad Chalabi, the Iraqi National Congress was established in 1992 as an umbrella for all Iraqi opposition groups. It initially served that purpose and even assembled a small fighting force of Iraqi army defectors, based in Kurdish-held northern Iraq. Eventually, however, most of the constituent groups ceased cooperating with the INC. In August 1996, following their invasion of Irbil, Iraqi troops executed some 100 of the INC's troops, and the remaining 700 or so were given asylum in the United States. Chalabi and his American supporters contend that his efforts to develop a formidable fighting force were undermined primarily by U.S. failure to follow through on commitments. Most administration officials, however, are skeptical of Chalabi. They tend to see him as unreliable, ineffective, and lacking support inside Iraq and among diaspora opposition groups.

The INC and its American supporters would like Washington to treat it as the primary opposition group and main focal point for opposition activities; the administration is not so inclined, however. In virtually all their pronouncements, administration officials are careful to speak of "opposition groups," or occasionally "the opposition," but not "the INC." The INC was but one of several Iraqi opposition groups declared eligible for support under the \$97 million ILA. Earlier legislation last year actually set aside some \$3 million in cash specifically for the INC, but the administration has yet to deliver the funds and shows little inclination to do so.

Conclusion. The Clinton administration publicly asserts that "regime change" in Iraq will be difficult and is, at best, a "medium- to long-term" goal. In seeking that goal, the administration is far more inclined toward aggressive defense in the no-fly zones, stepped-up radio propaganda broadcasts, and coup-plotting than it is toward creating and developing an armed Iraqi opposition.

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