



## **THE IRAQI OPPOSITION'S EVOLUTION: FROM CONFLICT TO UNITY?**

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*This article uses Iraqi documents to survey the relationship between the Iraqi opposition and the regime of Saddam Hussein. Both government and opposition have gone through different phases varying on such issues as cooperation, conflict, and degrees of repression. A key question is whether the opposition has reached a higher level of unity and both the determination and ability, with U.S. help, to develop a new democratic regime in the country.*

This article, based largely on official Iraqi documents, reviews the relationship between the Iraqi opposition and the regime of Saddam Hussein.<sup>(1)</sup> It also tries to place the opposition's evolution and actions in the context of regional and international factors. Generally speaking, the opposition went through four phases since the current government took power in 1968.

During the first phase, from 1968 to 1980, opposition to the regime was mainly local. Although Iran supported a Kurdish rebellion, the regime was able to suppress the opposition and solidify its own rule. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) heralded a new phase marking the opposition's shift from a local to a regional phenomenon. The regional countries, particularly Iran and Syria, tried to control the opposition parties' agenda by developing patron-client relationships given their own interest in undermining Saddam Hussein's power. The second Gulf war (1990-1991) and the March 1991 uprisings by Kurds and Shi'is after the regime's defeat in Kuwait ushered in a new phase. During the next decade, the opposition was transformed to an international phenomenon, letting the groups free themselves from the leverage of regional states. The Iraqi National Congress was born and Kurdish

autonomy was secured in the north under U.S. and UN sponsorship.

At the same time, the opposition camp gradually began to solve the historical problem of its fragmentation due to rivalries and ideological differences. This trend was accentuated following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The Bush administration made "regime change" in Iraq a high-priority objective. Suddenly, the opposition became the focus of the U.S. efforts. The future of the opposition, and Iraq itself, will largely depend on whether the opposition will play a significant role in removing Saddam and be able to institute a democratic and stable government if he falls.

### **SUPPRESSING THE OPPOSITION**

The Iraqi opposition is not the product of either the first or second Gulf Wars. Throughout its modern history, Iraq has had an active opposition and this has been especially true during the Ba'th party's rule over the country since 1968, and particularly after Saddam Hussein became president in 1979. Yet while opposition to Ba'th rule gathered momentum, opposition forces were plagued by fragmentation and disarray, partly due to the regime's ruthless

suppression and its ability to exploit internal dissent and rivalry.

During this period, the opposition consisted mainly of the Kurdish movement led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Iraqi Communist Party, the Arab nationalists and the Islamic movement, led by the Da'wa party. It is noteworthy that the distribution of the opposition conformed to a great extent with the ethnic and sectarian division of the country, with the Sunni Kurds in the north, the mainly Sunni nationalists in the center, and the Shi'a Islamists in the south.

The deep structural changes brought about by the post-1973 hike in oil revenues and the Algiers agreement with the shah of Iran in 1975 allowed the regime to deal the opposition camp severe blows. Immediately after the Algiers agreement, the Kurdish rebellion collapsed because Iran no longer backed it. These events followed a pattern characterizing Kurdish-Iraq relations since 1958. Each Iraqi government that came to power at first pursued peace talks with the Kurds only to fight them at a later date and assert its authority throughout the country. This was also the case with the Ba'th party government taking power after the July 1968 coup. The new regime was pragmatic enough to seek political accommodations with the Kurds at a time it had not yet consolidated its rule.

The government's Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the highest authority in the land, issued a manifesto on March 11, 1970 essentially recognizing the legitimacy of Kurdish nationalism and guaranteeing Kurdish participation in government. But it avoided defining the territorial extent of Kurdistan pending a new census. Since the next census was not scheduled until 1977, the regime felt confident it would

be in full enough control to break its promise by then.

In March 1974, Baghdad unilaterally decreed an autonomy statute excluding the oil-rich areas of Kirkuk, Khaneqin and Jabal Sinjar from the Kurdish autonomous region, which would include only the three provinces (governates) of Irbil, Sulaimaniya and Dohuk. In line with the new statute, the Ba'th regime undertook an administrative reform in which the country's sixteen governates were renamed and some had their boundaries altered. Of special importance, the governate of Kirkuk was divided and the area around its capital city Kirkuk was renamed al-Ta'mim (nationalization) governate after its boundaries were redrawn to give an Arab majority.

As a result of the collapse of the Kurdish rebellion, the KDP split into two main factions, the KDP-Provisional Command led by Idris and Masoud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani. The Iraqi regime embarked on a campaign to "Arabize" the areas it had excluded from the autonomous region. Hundreds of Kurdish families were uprooted and Arabs from the south were lured to move to the north. Subsequently, in 1977-1978 the regime began to clear a strip of land along its northern borders with Turkey and Iran, which was expanded several times until it was several few miles wide.

Sharing a long mountainous border with Iran, the governate of Sulaimaniya was deeply affected. Hundreds of villages were destroyed in this border clearance campaign. Their residents were forcibly relocated to *mujamma'at* (complexes), crude resettlement camps, known also as "modern cities," built near large towns or main highways under the army's complete control.(2) By the time Saddam Hussein became president in 1979,

Kurdish social and political life had been very much affected by these measures. Army and intelligence units stationed throughout Iraqi Kurdistan continued to control and oppress them.

Simultaneously, the regime continued its persecution of Communist party members and supporters. Upon his ascendancy to the presidency, Saddam Hussein orchestrated a bloody purge of the Ba'th Party. By early 1980, the regime focused on the Islamist opposition, after a number of grenade attacks in Baghdad were blamed on the Da'wa Party. Tens of thousands of people were expelled to Iran on the pretext they were of "Iranian origin."<sup>(3)</sup> Equally significant, the RCC banned the Da'wa Party and made membership in the party punishable by death.<sup>(4)</sup>

### **THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON THE OPPOSITION**

With the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in September 1980, Baghdad's campaign to suppress Kurdish political life had eventually foundered after so many army units stationed in Iraqi Kurdistan were sent to the front. The resurgent Kurdish fighters, known as *peshmerga* (those who face death), were quick to fill the security vacuum there. In addition, rejuvenated by the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Islamist opposition continued its underground attacks on the regime's facilities and officials. However, unlike its Kurdish counterpart, the Islamist opposition failed to transform its individual attacks into an armed struggle.

The eruption of the Iran-Iraq War marked a new phase in the development of the opposition. Iraq's neighbors, mainly Iran and Syria, began to support the opposition on a scale hitherto unseen. But the opposition forces themselves had little success creating a united front. Consequently, the opposition lost the

initiative as it ineluctably deferred to the decisions of its regional supporters, who tried not only to control them but also to play off one party against another.

On November 12, 1980, two months after the war began, Damascus hosted the inauguration of an alliance of opposition forces, the Democratic Patriotic and National Front (DPNF). The DPNF included nationalist and Kurdish groups and the Iraqi Communist Party. However, the Arab nationalist parties (Arab Socialist Movement, Socialist Party and the pro-Syrian Ba'th Party) objected to the inclusion of the KDP and supported the PUK, whose leader Talabani had resided for several years in exile in Syria. On November 28, another opposition front, the Democratic Patriotic Front (DPF), was established at the instigation of the Communist Party and included the KDP and the Kurdistan Socialist party. Throughout the 1980s, opposition forces were plagued by personal rivalries for leadership, institutional control, and ideological differences.

At this time, it was fairly difficult to identify and assess the real strength of the various Islamist underground forces. But the regime's ruthless clamp down on the Da'wa Party indicated that it was the strongest of the forces.<sup>(5)</sup> Among other active groups at the time was the Organization of Islamic Action. In a move to close Shi'i ranks, Iran supported the creation of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in November 1982. However, this is not to say that Iran supported only Islamist organizations. It also backed the two main Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, though not equally. In the beginning of the 1980s, Iran extended substantive support to the KDP, whereas Syria gave hers to the PUK. Thereafter, Iran, with the help of Syria, intermittently tried to coordinate with both the KDP and PUK,

which played significant military roles in Iran's attacks on Iraq.

Early in the war, the Ba'th regime understood the danger resulting from the collaboration of the opposition with Iran. But it also understood the overall incoherent state of the opposition and attempted relentlessly to undermine it further. In addition to continuing its persecution of the Communists and Da'wa Party members, the regime issued an edict on August 4, 1980, to confiscate all the monies and properties of all opposition members.(6) It devised a "working plan" for dealing with the opposition in general and the Kurds in particular. The plan, included in General Directorate of Security's letter number 9566 of September 1, 1981, contained the following goals:

1. To penetrate the leadership of the saboteurs and maintain contact with their leading personalities in an attempt to either recruit them or create suspicion among them.

2. To widen the disagreement among the bands of saboteurs and to continue the delicate work to fomenting clashes among them.

3. To work to prevent the expansion of saboteurs' activities to areas they have not reached previously.

4. To pressure famous well-known saboteurs by detaining their families, letting them know that the fate of their families is conditioned on them leaving the opposition.

5. To expose [to the Iraqi people] the bands of saboteurs' collaboration with the Persian regime and their betrayal of the country.

6. To stop saboteurs from establishing organizations within the cities.(7)

In addition, the regime continued to recruit Kurds into pro-government Kurdish militias, informally called *Jahsh* (a pejorative name literally meaning mule), but known officially as the

National Defense Battalions. The regime favored recruiting Kurds from influential tribes such as the Zibaris, Hirkins and Surjis which had the clout to compete with the PUK and the KDP.(8)

Equally significant, the regime at first focused its attention on the KDP's links to Iran. This relationship entered a new dangerous phase in the regime's eyes when Iran, with help from the KDP, seized the important border garrison town of Hajj Omran in July 1983. The regime was furious with the KDP and branded it a fifth column. At the same time, the regime maneuvered to deepen the rivalry between the KDP and the PUK. Capitalizing on the PUK's opposition to the KDP's role in facilitating the Iranian offensive on Hajj Omran, Saddam Hussein launched a diplomatic initiative centering on offering the PUK leader a renewed commitment to Kurdish autonomy. Talks ensued between the PUK and Baghdad and continued inconclusively until their collapse in January 1985. One of several reasons for this result was the regime's rejection of the old Kurdish demand that the oil-rich regions of Kirkuk and Khanqin be considered part of autonomous Kurdistan.

This policy now pushed the PUK as well into Iran's arms. Tehran was happy to welcome this new ally in the midst of its war with Iraq. Within two years, Iranian-PUK cooperation improved dramatically, culminating in a sweeping political, economic and military accord signed by the two parties in October 1986. They agreed to fight Saddam until he was toppled and to sign no unilateral deal with Baghdad. The Iraqi government's reaction was to ascribe officially the epithet of *Zumrat Umala'* Iran (Band of Iranian Agents) to the PUK.(9)

With both Kurdish groups helping Iran, Baghdad lost control of the countryside in Iraqi Kurdistan except for

the main towns, cities and connecting roads and highways. The regime designated villages falling under the *peshmerga*'s control or those where this militia was active as prohibited for security reasons.

As official Iraqi documents show, it was at this point, at the beginning of 1985, that the regime dropped its hitherto ad hoc counterinsurgency measures and began to pursue a systematic policy against the Kurds aiming at destroying their political, economic, social and military foundations.<sup>(10)</sup> The resulting plan was to carry out one sweeping operation, code-named Termination of Traitors. In line with the name's implication, that operation was designed to implement the highest possible level of punishment and physical liquidation of both the Kurds and their villages. The method was to destroy villages and towns, and then forcibly deport their inhabitants to tightly supervised camps. The first step would be against population centers in government-controlled areas, followed by another phase to eliminate villages prohibited for security reasons wherever the army could reach or even politically passive villages in areas where guerrillas might operate.<sup>(11)</sup>

In this way, most of rural Kurdistan was declared prohibited, and villages were marked for destruction regardless of whether the villagers abetted, harbored, or supported the saboteurs. The first phase ran from April 20 to May 20, 1987 while the second was conducted from May 21 to June 20. The final phase culminated in the Anfal campaign, characterized by the use of chemical weapons against the Kurdish population and lasting from February to September 1988.

In the meantime, relations between Kurdish opposition parties remained characteristically incoherent and marked by rivalry. Although in parlous times they

tried to cooperate of their own volition or at the instigation of Syria and Iran, the parties were more interested in maintaining and expanding their spheres of influence.<sup>(12)</sup> According to intelligence reports, the KDP was active in the provinces of Irbil and Dohuk, while the PUK was active in the province of Sulaimaniya. Other Kurdish parties operated in these provinces but hardly competed with either the PUK or KDP. The Kurdistan Socialist party operated in Diyala, Irbil and Sulaimaniya; the Kurdish Socialist party operated in Irbil and Sulaimaniya; the Kurdistan Democratic party operated in Dohuk; and the Islamic Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK) operated mainly in Sulaimaniya, although the IMIK rarely set up political headquarters, preferring mobile offices.<sup>(13)</sup>

Throughout the war, Iran cared for Kurdish casualties and allowed both the KDP and the PUK to establish headquarters on its territory, in Rajan and Qasem Rash respectively. In general, it favored the KDP and allowed its members a freedom of action not afforded to the PUK.<sup>(14)</sup> Syria, on the other hand, early on favored the PUK. Syrian officers trained PUK fighters and supplied them with weapons.<sup>(15)</sup> It nevertheless tried to coordinate with all the opposition camp in general and with the two Kurdish parties in particular to help Iran in its war against Iraq.

According to Sulaimaniya Directorate of Security's intelligence report number 10907 [Branch 5] of December 12, 1987, Syria in October 1987 hosted a meeting for the opposition in which all parties agreed to divide Iraq into three fields for operations. Islamist parties would operate in the south, the Kurds in the north, and the Communists and the renegade band (nationalists) in the middle and Ninawa province.<sup>(16)</sup> But Syria, unlike Iran,

allowed the Kurdish parties to open only representative offices. Equally significant, while Syria hosted the nationalist parties, Iran hosted the Islamist parties. Libya also supported the PUK, including training its members, and tried to coordinate between Iran and the PUK.(17)

The tragic consequences of the Anfal campaign pushed the opposition parties to put aside their differences temporarily. In May 1988 they established a united front, the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF), which had been the subject of discussion (mainly in Damascus) for quite some time.(18) It included the PUK, the KDP, the Kurdistan Popular Democratic Party, the Kurdistan Socialist Party and the Kurdish Socialist Party. Subsequently, three other groups joined the IKF: The Iraqi Communist Party, the Kurdistan Toilers' Party, and the Assyrian Democratic Party.

The carnage and destruction brought about by the Anfal campaign also caused many Iraqis to flee, mainly to Iran and Turkey. These countries placed the refugees in military barracks (mainly in Turkey) or in compounds (mainly in Iran). Moreover, Iran jailed Iraqi prisoners of war (POWs), many of whom were captured by the Kurdish opposition.

This presence of refugees and Iraqi POWs in Iran allowed that country to promote and strengthen certain opposition groups. This was very much the case of Iran's advancement of SCIRI. With the blessing of Iran, SCIRI convened some of its meetings in the north of Iran with the objective of intensifying propaganda in Iraqi Kurdistan. In this way, SCIRI could project itself as a representative of all Iraqis. A special committee was established in Tehran in 1987, including most of the opposition parties, to coordinate with Iranian authorities on the treatment of POWs. Besides the fact that the committee was headed by Islamists,

Iran put Muhammed Baqer al-Hakim, leader of SCIRI, in charge of arranging family visits to the POWs.(19)

Of the regional countries, Turkey posed the greatest dilemma for the Kurdish opposition. Given its own large Kurdish minority, Turkey wanted to prevent any situation that might fuel Kurdish sentiments for independence in Turkey and to suppress the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In addition, Turkey abhorred the Iraqi Kurds' attempts, with Iranian support, to sabotage Iraq's oil pipeline that passes through Turkey to the Mediterranean. Turkey thus saw Iraq's Kurdish insurgency as a threat to its own interests. Turkey guarded its borders with Iraq closely and was intermittently hostile to Kurdish parties. With Iraq's tacit agreement, Turkish forces made several air raids across the border in 1986 and 1987 into Kurdish camps, thereby establishing a pattern of involvement in northern Iraq that has continued since.

This military involvement coincided with a revived Turkish interest to make references to its old claims to the Mosul region, relinquished in 1926, to protect not only the pipeline from Kurdish insurgency but also the ethnic Turks, Turkomen, who are a minority in northern Iraq. When Iraq was faring badly in the war, Turkey reportedly notified Iran and the U.S. in 1986 that it would demand the return of Mosul and Kirkuk in the event of Iraq's collapse.(20)

This Turkish attitude became discernibly ambivalent in the late 1980s as the PKK intensified its anti-Turkish operations at a time when Turkey had become the destination of many Kurdish refugees. To keep a watchful eye on the refugees and prevent them from fraternizing with Turkish-Kurds, Turkey housed the refugees in military barracks mainly in Mardin, Diyar Bakr and

Mosh.(21) Kurds complained about the dismal and harsh conditions.

In the meantime, the PUK signed an agreement with the PKK in May 1988, which the KDP denounced as detrimental to the unity of the IKF.(22) Turkey, for its part, went on to sign two separate agreements, one with the Iraqi government and the other with the KDP. On September 19, 1989, Turkey and Iraq signed a legal and judicial agreement stipulating that each party to the extradition agreement would surrender any person present on its soil who was accused of or found guilty of any charge by the judicial authorities of the other country.(23)

Immediately thereafter, Turkey signed an agreement with the KDP pledging to support that party in exchange for its helping the Turkish army in its fight against the PKK. Accordingly, Turkey ordered its military border posts to let through KDP *peshmerga* and offer them refuge, provisions and medical help. It also allowed KDP fighters to appear in military gear in some Turkish towns and cities without army interference.(24) At the same time, Ankara continued its policy of pursuing PKK forces inside Iraq. It maintained a military presence inside Iraq a few miles across the border. In May and September 1997, the Turkish army launched two major offensives in Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkish forces even joined the KDP in fighting the PUK.

Meanwhile, following the Iran-Iraq cease fire, which went into effect in August 1988, Syria's and Iran's support for the Kurdish opposition became more circumscribed since these countries (plus Turkey) were adverse to the idea of an independent Kurdistan. Nevertheless, these countries also desired a weakened Iraqi regime. Thanks in no small part to Iran and Syria, the Kurds were able to reestablish their presence in areas that had

been the target of the Anfal campaign. But Iran now barred the Kurdish parties from launching military operations from its land or along the Iran-Iraq border, though it did not object to operations deep inside Iraq.(25)

The Kurdish parties were concerned about secret Iran-Iraq cease-fire terms or about a prospective peace treaty between the two countries that could have negative implication for Kurdish activities. Consequently, the Kurdish parties began to convene large meetings to which they invited all opposition parties. For example, the KDP, in the course of convening its tenth congress in Rajan in November 1989, invited the IKF. One of the important decisions taken in the congress was to adopt a new vision emphasizing "a belief in national unity and considering the Kurds as part of the Iraqi people."(26) While this attitude apparently affirmed Kurdish identity as Iraqi, it most likely stemmed more from the Kurds' apprehension about possible agreements between the regional countries and Iraq, for which the Kurds would pay the political price.

### **BREAKING FREE**

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and subsequent American-led efforts to build an international, anti-Iraq coalition marked a new phase in the relations among opposition parties as well as between regional countries and the opposition camp. Several intelligence reports from the General Military Intelligence Directorate dating from October 1990 to January 1991 shed light on the state of the opposition and its position on the impending U.S.-led attack on Iraq. The opposition reckoned that their cause might now become "internationalized." They intensified their mutual contacts and tried, with little success, to fashion a unified plan of

action. Although they expected fundamental changes in Iraq, they were wary of launching an armed attack, or participating in one, against the regime.

In fact, according to intelligence report number 200 [Branch 3, Section 2] of January 5, 1991, PUK chieftains expressed a desire that in the event of a confrontation between a U.S.-led coalition and Iraq, the PUK should reach an agreement with Baghdad rather than fight it.(27) The KDP preferred to reestablish its positions in northern Iraq. Both parties adopted a "wait and see" position, including suspending their operations, to find out the outcome of the confrontation.(28) One of the Kurdish concerns expressed about this position was that the Kurds might again become the target of the regime's chemical weapons.(29)

Following the invasion, Syria was the first of the regional countries to upgrade its relations with the Kurdish opposition to the foreign ministry level. Damascus brought opposition parties together at several meetings in Damascus at which a unified plan of action was discussed. In addition, Syria offered not only to open bases and headquarters for the KDP but also to facilitate and help its military operations.(30) In fact, Syria agreed for the first time to open a military headquarters for the opposition in the Iraqi-Turkish-Syrian border triangle.(31) While the PUK went along with Syrian plans, the KDP and the Communists expressed reservations about these meetings as strengthening Syria's leverage and appearing to coordinate efforts with the U.S.-led coalition against the regime.(32)

Iran, on the other hand, was so concerned about American plans in the region that it adopted an ambivalent position toward both the Kurds and Iraq. It seems possible that Iran and Iraq concluded a secret agreement based on

denying the United States a future hegemonic role in Iraq. This is reflected, as we shall see, by the statements of Iran's protégé, SCIRI's leader al-Hakim. In fact, this agreement was mentioned twice in intelligence reports and elicited concerns from the Kurdish opposition including the IMIK.(33) Responding to Kurdish concerns, Iranian authorities emphasized that this agreement would not affect the activities of the Kurds.(34) According to General Military Intelligence Directorate's report number 11256 [Branch 2, Section 3] of October 15, 1990, Ahmad Khomeini alleviated the IMIK's concerns by stating, "We do not bargain with Islam, and we shall support you as previously. You should continue your activities."(35)

Although Turkey, an important coalition partner, allowed Western nations and Syria to open a number of headquarters in the border province of Hakari, it did not permit any military operations against Iraqi troops along the Iraqi-Kurdish border.(36) Finally, the crisis in the Gulf pushed Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to interfere for the first time in opposition affairs.

Obviously, the growing interest of the regional countries in the opposition stemmed from their concerns about a possible transition of power in Iraq. They sought to have a say regarding the composition of any new government. More specifically, Syria and Iran believed that Saddam would fall and thus began preparing for an alternative. But the two countries did not share the same vision for Iraq. Syria disliked the idea that a future Islamist government might rise on the ruins of the Ba'th Party.

Syria's efforts to bring the opposition under one umbrella materialized with the establishment of the Joint Action Committee in December 1990 in Damascus. The Iraqi opposition consisted mainly at the time of the Kurdish parties,



represented in Damascus, but possessing headquarters in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran; the pro-Damascus parties (pro-Syrian Ba'athists, and some Nationalists, Iraqi officers, Communists) based in Syria; and the pro-Tehran Islamist parties, based in Tehran, mainly SCIRI, Da'wa party (less Tehran-oriented than SCIRI), and the Organization of Islamic Action.

Essentially, the creation of the Committee reflected a kind of accord between Damascus and Tehran. Subsequently, Damascus and Tehran began to prepare for an Iraqi opposition congress. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, lacking any influence with the opposition, tried to create pro-Saudi groups and build bridges to existing ones. In this respect, it supported Sa'd Saleh Jabr, a liberal scion of an influential family and leader of the Party of the New Nation. Saudi Arabia prodded him to dissolve this party and establish a broader organization. Jabr did so, establishing the Free Iraqi Council in February 1991. Shortly thereafter, some Ba'athists and nationalists, led by former Ba'ath officials Salah Omar al-'Ali and Ayad Awali, established the Iraqi National Accord (INA). Based in London, the two movements joined the Joint Action Committee before the congress convened.

While war was raging in the Gulf, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and opposition parties were engaged in shuttle diplomacy to convene the first national Iraqi opposition congress. The congress took place in Beirut in March 1991, coinciding with the spontaneous uprising that engulfed Iraq. The congress succeeded only in bringing opposition groups under one roof. The regional countries' different future visions for Iraq clashed with the opposition's personal rivalries and ideological differences. The failure of the congress marked the gradual shift of

the opposition from a regional to an international phenomenon.

At this point, it is important to examine some of the opposition's statements on the eve of Desert Storm, especially with regard to the United States. Once coalition air forces began bombing Baghdad, SCIRI's leader, al-Hakim criticized the war as aggression against the Iraqi people under the pretext of punishing Saddam for occupying Kuwait. In addition, he called on Iraqis to confront the foreign aggression and to seek to establish Islamic rule in Iraq.<sup>(37)</sup> This statement underscored SCIRI's intimate relationship with Iran, which considered the United States to be the "Big Satan" to be confronted first.

Da'wa issued a statement radically different from that of SCIRI's. It called on the army to overthrow Saddam, the real culprit in rending Iraq. In its January 17 statement, The Organization of Islamic Action focused on toppling Saddam's regime while at the same time blaming the United States for not targeting the regime's headquarters.<sup>(38)</sup> The Kurdish parties were wary of taking a definite position at the time. In fact, the Kurdish parties took a unilateral decision during the uprising to negotiate with Saddam after it appeared to them he would be victorious.

In the aftermath of the failed uprising, the opposition was in disarray. However, it tried to break free from the grip of regional countries, which it perceived as harmful to the cause. Toward this end, it convened a congress in Vienna in the summer of 1992 which elected the Iraqi National Congress, an umbrella organization including most opposition parties and headed by Ahmad Chalabi, to take leadership in opposition politics. In addition, the opposition began to seek international support, mainly from the United States and Britain. The groups

also decided to convene another congress in Iraq, which met in September 1992. At that congress, the opposition forces fashioned and agreed on a unity plan. The groups meeting in Salahuddin, Iraqi Kurdistan, including SCIRI, Joint Action Committee and Da'wa, agreed to convene an enlarged General Assembly and also agreed to the principles that a future Iraq would remain geographically united and headed by a parliamentary, democratic and constitutional government.

The General Assembly convened in Salahuddin in October 1992 and ratified the decisions made at Vienna and Salahuddin. At this conference, the INC managed to include individual democrats and most established organizations and currents within the Iraqi opposition. While some nationalists boycotted the Assembly because they rejected the idea that the future form of Iraqi government will be based on a federalist structure, a decision discussed and accepted at the Assembly, the Da'wa party expressed its reservations about this decision.(39)

Meanwhile, the regime's brutal suppression of the uprising triggered a mass exodus, mainly Kurds and Shi'is, to the neighboring countries of Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In April 1991, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 688, calling on Iraq to end "the repression of the Iraqi civilian population." Shortly thereafter, the allied forces, especially those of the United States and United Kingdom, established "no-fly" zones in northern and southern Iraq, forbidding Iraqi aircraft from flying north of the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel and south of the 32<sup>nd</sup> parallel. Consequently, the Iraqi regime withdrew from the Kurdish region in late October 1991, except for Kirkuk. As a result, an "internal frontline" was established separating the Kurdish region from the rest of Iraq. Also in April, the IKF and the Iraqi regime entered into negotiations that remained inconclusive until their

collapse a few months later. As before, the disagreement over the demarcation of the Kurdish autonomous region, particularly concerning Kirkuk, scuttled the negotiations. In January 1992, the IKF announced the suspension of the talks.

The IKF exercised de facto control of the Kurdish region and began a process of institutionalizing its rule. For the first time in their history, in May 1992, the Kurds held free parliamentary elections for a 105-member Kurdistan National Assembly. The elections were based on a system of proportional representation with a seven per cent threshold for party legitimacy. The KDP won 50.8 per cent of the vote while the PUK won 49.2 per cent. The parties settled for 50 seats each as part of a power-sharing agreement. In a move defining Kurdish-Iraq relations, the National Assembly issued a statement in October 1992 adopting federalism within a unified Iraq as the basis for its future political program.(40)

Yet, personal rivalry and struggles for control soon shattered the calm in Iraqi Kurdistan. Rising tensions between the PUK and IMIK, which controlled significant swaths of territories along the border with Iran and around towns such as Halabja and Kifri in proximity to PUK strongholds, led to PUK-IMIK armed clashes in December 1993. Subsequently, widespread battles broke out between the PUK, the KDP, and the IMIK in May 1994. Although all parties sustained heavy casualties, the IMIK suffered the most as it retreated close to the Iranian border. This, however, did not prevent the IMIK, and later on other splinter Islamist parties such as Jund al-Islam and Ansar al-Islam from reestablishing their presence in and around Halabja.

On the other hand, tension climaxed between the KDP and the PUK, following PUK encroachment on what the KDP considered its sphere of influence in Irbil. In a dramatic twist of events, the KDP

called on Iraq's armed forces to help with the fight against the PUK. In August 1996, the KDP, with the help of Iraq's armed forces, launched an attack on PUK positions in Irbil and drove them from the area. In the process, the Iraqi army attacked INC headquarters, which had been established there with the CIA's help, and killed many INC members, ending INC presence in northern Iraq.

As a result of all these events, Iraqi Kurdistan split into two regional areas with their own separate quasi-governments. The KDP rules the provinces of Dohuk and Irbil, while the PUK rules Sulaimaniya province. While the PUK has intermittently had armed clashes with the Islamist parties around Halabja, since 1996 the overall situation in Iraqi Kurdistan has largely stabilized and the two major parties cooperate on a wide range of efforts aimed at improving the economic, educational, and political life in Kurdistan. The two parties have committed themselves to democratic rules and freedom of speech. Schools, universities, newspapers, NGOs, and other mediums of a democratic free society have proliferated in the area. This has been made possible thanks in no small part to the UN. In an effort to ease the negative effects of the international embargo on Iraq, the UN adopted Resolution 986 in 1995 that created the oil-for-food program. This program provides money to Iraq in exchange for petroleum exports. The Kurds receive 13 percent of the funds.(41)

Paralleling these developments in the Kurdish region, the London-based INC tried to advance its program of toppling Saddam by enlisting the financial and military help of the United States. Chafing over Saddam's continuous haggling with and delaying UN inspectors, who were pulled out of Iraq in 1998, the U.S. Congress issued the Iraq

Liberation Act of 1998 which established a program to support a transition to democracy in Iraq. The INC emerged as the recipient of this support. However, although the INC served as an umbrella organization of opposition groups [KDP, PUK, SCIRI, Constitutional Monarchy Movement (CMM), INA], each one of them has claimed the right to operate outside the INC framework, thereby undermining the cohesion of the opposition.(42) This was set in sharp relief when the Bush administration made a regime change in Iraq a U.S. foreign policy objective and focused on widening the Iraqi opposition camp. Disagreement in the Bush administration at the personal and departmental levels over the methods to bring about a regime change has confounded the opposition groups as well.

It should be noted that other opposition groups and personalities have emerged on the international stage as the United States seeks a wide opposition circle to oust Saddam. They include the Iraqi Free Officers, led by General Najib Salhi, who claims influence within the Iraqi Army; the Iraqi National Movement (INM) led by General Hassan Nakib, former deputy chief of staff of the Iraqi army (the INM is a recent merger of the Iraqi National Liberals and Iraqi Officers Movement, headed by General Fawzi Shamari. The group, like the INA, claims support in key central provinces); and General Nizar Khazraji, a former chief of staff, and Wafiq al-Samara'i, a former intelligence chief, both of whom claim influence within the Iraqi army.

As the campaign to topple Saddam has been gathering momentum in Washington, the Iraqi opposition has been attempting to close its ranks and adopt a unified position to present itself as the alternative government for Saddam's regime. In this respect, it succeeded to a

large extent in working together as a group united by two principles: Toppling Saddam's regime and calling for democratic form of government with federalism and decentralization at its basis. Several meetings for the opposition confirming these views took place, including the exiled officers' convention in London in July 2002 and the leaders of the opposition "group of six" (representing SCIRI, PUK, KDP, INA, CMM, INC) meeting with U.S. officials in August 2002.(43)

In addition, statements by opposition leaders, unlike past statements on the eve of the Gulf War, reflected a genuine understanding that the opposition not only needs to work together but also to cooperate with the United States. Toward this end, most importantly, the statement by SCIRI's leader, al-Hakim, marked a substantial shift from the sentiments he expressed during the Gulf War. He now welcomed the idea of American intervention to destabilize the Iraqi government, provided it was the Iraqis who carried out the real change. He stated that "the Iraqi people will benefit from any opportunity that weakens Saddam," and added, "They can topple him if they know that he will not be able to suppress them like in 1991."(44)

At first the Kurdish leaders, Talabani and Barzani, expressed reservations about a U.S.-led campaign to oust Saddam. They were concerned about a repetition of U.S. actions such as in 1975 and 1991, in which Kurds were left alone fending for themselves. Equally significant, they were apprehensive about disrupting their current situation in Iraqi Kurdistan unless there was a clear and beneficial alternative. Responding to questions about the United States touting the Kurds as possible allies, Barzani said: "First of all, we have to know who the alternative is, if there is one. Of course, so far there is no alternative." Talabani concurred and

stated, "We do not know what will happen....We will not enter adventures whose end is unclear."(45)

This attitude, similar to that on the eve of the Gulf War, mutated to one gingerly supporting the United States. The Kurdish leaders eventually admitted that their "ideal" current situation in Iraqi Kurdistan was ephemeral and could change for the worse. Since they considered themselves part and parcel of Iraq, they realized the imperative of contributing to opposition efforts to bring about democracy to Iraq. Following a meeting with U.S. officials in August, Talabani even went so far as to confirm that the Kurds would relinquish the "independence of the current reality and that urban street fighting against Americans [in the event of an invasion] was unlikely."(46) It can be argued that this attitude is a logical extension to the initial one taken by the Kurdish leadership on the eve of Desert Storm in which they identified themselves as Iraqis.

### **THE OPPOSITION'S DEFINING MOMENT**

No doubt the Iraqi opposition, given its past disarray, has made strides toward unity and common cause. But a closer examination of the opposition groups' intentions and motives reveals schisms beneath the surface of opposition unity that, if not addressed, could again split the opposition and prove disastrous to a possible U.S. intervention in Iraq. SCIRI's shift to supporting U.S. intervention rests largely on SCIRI's apprehension about Iraq's readiness to use non-conventional weapons against the opposition. SCIRI is more interested in U.S. protection than in U.S. intervention or in any future role for America in building a new Iraq. This also reflects Iran's uneasiness with a U.S. presence on both its borders (Afghanistan and Iraq).

SCIRI has remained vague about the specifics of federalism (let alone about Kurdish aspirations) since the Salahuddin conference. SCIRI, on the one hand, has endorsed the concept of federalism for Iraq's future political structure, but, on the other, has refrained from elaborating its position about it, opting instead to claim that the "will of the Iraqis will be the final recourse."<sup>(47)</sup> Given that the Shi'a are the majority and there exists no secular Shi'a party, this could well mean that SCIRI has ulterior motives not only to acquire a determinative role in a future Iraqi government but also the ability to enhance its Islamist agenda.

In addition, a group of Shi'a academics, professionals, religious leaders, tribal leaders and businessmen, reflecting the whole spectrum of Shi'a viewpoints, issued a declaration dealing with the sectarian problem in Iraq and its future political order. The declaration emphasized democracy and federalism, whereby the central authorities would be effective but not hegemonic. It also stated that "Iraq's federal structure would not be based on a sectarian division but rather on administrative and demographic criteria."<sup>(48)</sup> But the group formulated its outlook of Iraq's future by speaking exclusively as Shi'a and significantly by defining the Shi'a community as a distinct group created by the regime's anti-Shi'a policies. Consequently, despite its positive outlook, this declaration has the potential of deepening the ethnic and sectarian divide in Iraq by highlighting the identity and singular experience of the Shi'a as a community, thereby promoting a Shi'a rather than a national collective consciousness.

Equally significant, the KDP issued a draft constitution in April 2002 that reflects both Kurdish wariness and doubts about power-sharing arrangements and Kurdish aspirations for complete

autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>(49)</sup> The constitution adopts democratic rule and federalism. But federalism is based on ethnic and historic demographic criteria. It calls for the establishment of a federal union consisting of Arab and Kurdish regions, whereby the area of Kurdish region is coterminous with historic Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>(50)</sup> In addition, it calls for the repatriation of all Kurds forcibly relocated from Iraqi Kurdistan and the expatriation of all Arabs who the government relocated there since 1957.<sup>(51)</sup>

Arabic would be the official language of the union and the Arab region while Kurdish would be the official language for the Kurdish region. The constitution stipulates the establishment of a federal parliament consisting of national and regional assemblies. The regional assembly would participate on an equal footing with the national assembly in practicing federal legislative powers. Every region would have its own constitution taking into consideration rule by an Iraqi republic and the provisions of the federal constitution. Every region would have a president, prime minister, and a council of ministers, in addition to an independent judicial system. The federal union would be responsible for collecting customs' taxes while each region will collect all other taxes.

The provisions of this draft constitution clearly reveals the Kurds' suspicions about future power-sharing by attempting to acquire an arrangement that would give them a veto power on all national and political decisions, and a structure that was in many ways that of a state. Although this preliminary position is still under discussion, it reflects the attitude of the Kurds after 11 years of autonomous rule.

Peter W. Galbraith, a former U.S. ambassador and currently a professor at

the National War College, explained the position of the Kurds:

“In the past 11 years, the Iraqi identity has largely disappeared from the north of Iraq. Kurdish television, media and universities have replaced earlier Iraqi counterparts. In schools, Arabic has been demoted from the language of instruction to a foreign language (one considered by young people far less useful than English). Kurds take pride in what they have accomplished on their own...In a post-Hussein Iraq, the Kurds will insist on maintaining the independence they now enjoy. Barzani and Talabani have proposed that a future Iraq be a federal state with Kurdish and Arab entities. In the coming months, they will be moving unilaterally to create a legal structure for a self-governing Kurdistan that will have its own assembly, president, tax and spending powers and police. Believing that written promises in an Iraqi constitution provide scant protection, the Kurdish leaders insist on retaining a Kurdistan self-defense force.”(52)

This could not only prove divisive for the opposition camp but also could provoke Turkey to intervene militarily in Iraqi Kurdistan in the event of an American attack in order to have leverage over the shape of a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. A joint committee representing the KDP and the PUK has approved the core of the KDP’s draft constitution. The amended version outlines the structure of a regional administration in Iraqi Kurdistan, including legislative, judiciary and executive responsibilities. The region would have a flag, presidency, and the city of Kirkuk as capital. Turkish officials viewed the draft constitution as an expression of Kurdish ambitions for full independence, an outcome the officials said they would encounter with the use of troops. Defense Minister Sabahattin Cakmakoglu told reporters that northern Iraq was “forcibly separated” from

Turkey in the 1920s and added “Turkey considers northern Iraq to be under its direct care.”(53) A former general, Armagan Kuloglu of the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies in Ankara has lobbied the current general staff to amend its contingency plans for northern Iraq. He proposed moving troops 200 miles into Iraq to hold Mosul and Kirkuk until the situation has “stabilized.”(54)

Complicating things further, Mudr Shawkat, executive committee member of the INM, expressed his reservations about a federalist structure “based on ethnicity and sectarianism,” a position similar to that of the Shi’a.(55) Equally significant, the opposition risks being stigmatized by an American intervention in Iraq to remove the regime. The opposition needs not only to play a significant role in removing the regime but also make that role obvious and out-front for all to see and recognize, so as to avoid seeming like U.S. puppet.

Clearly, the Iraqi opposition may be entering its most challenging era in history, with the potential rewards for success and penalties of failure extremely high.

## CONCLUSION

During the last three decades the Iraqi opposition went through dramatic events and changes. At one point, it needed the support of regional countries to survive. But these states subordinated the opposition’s interests to their own national priorities. The removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime was not a foreign policy objective for them. What they really sought was a weak but territorially integrated Iraq, stripped of its capacity to pose a regional threat or foment crises. It was within this context that the regional countries offered their support to the Iraqi opposition. Consequently, the opposition camp fell hostage to the national agendas of these

countries. The opposition's disarray allowed the regional countries and the Iraqi regime to further widen its ideological and personal discord. This situation gradually changed in the aftermath of the Kuwait war (1990-91) as the opposition maneuvered to extricate itself from the grip of the regional powers. But this did not save the opposition from continuous debilitating internal dissent.

The Bush administration's policy of effecting a regime change in Iraq mobilized the opposition camp to attempt to close its ranks. Although the opposition has made strides toward common objectives and unity, it still has difficulties to overcome, including the attainment of a national consensus on the future political structure of government. The opposition camp is at a crossroads, and to a large extent its actions will define the future of Iraq.

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#### NOTES

1. During the March 1991 uprising in Iraq, Kurdish opposition groups captured huge quantities of Iraqi government documents primarily belonging to Iraqi intelligence. Thanks to efforts by Kanan Makiya and Human Rights Watch, these documents were transferred to the U.S., where the Senate Foreign Relations Committee took charge of them. Along with government officials, Human Rights Watch/ Middle East first examined these

documents, which were subsequently given in digital format to Iraq Research and Documentation Project (IRDP). Supplementing documents possessed by Makiya, this collection of documents numbering approximately 2.4 million pages is available at URL:

<<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~irdp>>

2. Iraq Research and Documentation Project-North Iraq Data Set [hereafter IRDP-NIDS] [1108064, 1106843-1106895], available at URL: <<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~irdp>>

3. IRDP-NIDS [324282, 324623, 324709, 321561, 1344601].

4. IRDP-NIDS [1110666]. See the text of RCC decree 461 of March 31, 1980, sentencing members of the Da'wa party to death, in IRDP-NIDS [1372984]

5. IRDP-NIDS [1400768-1400776].

6. IRDP-NIDS [754953].

7. IRDP-NIDS [736283].

8. IRDP-NIDS [63302].

9. IRDP-NIDS [1027970-1027975].

10. As illustrated by official documents, the barrage of decrees and orders began systematically on June 15, 1985 with telegram number 3488 ordering the deportation of "women, children and elderly people who were the relatives of saboteurs." Any males who might bear arms were to be arrested and detained. See IRDP-NIDS [735456] Consequently, many families were forcibly deported and many males arrested. For example, in the Shaqlawa district most families were forcibly removed to the Khoshnaw region. See IRDP-NIDS [735410-17]. Those detained would only be released if their *peshmerga* relatives surrendered to the authorities. See IRDP-NIDS [711051, 717546].

11. For complete details on the operation see Robert G. Rabil, "Operation 'Termination of Traitors': The Iraqi Regime Through Its Documents," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*

- Journal (MERIA)*, Vol. 6, No. 3, (September 2002).
12. IRDP-NIDS [2382536].
  13. IRDP-NIDS [1400771-6]. A Sunni Muslim movement, the IMIK was formed in 1986 under the leadership of Shaykh Uthman ‘Abd al-‘Aziz. Some of its cadres included former members of the Union of Religious Scholars and veterans of the war in Afghanistan. In recent years, notwithstanding the growing political and military clout of the IMIK, splinter Islamist groups emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan, mainly Ansar al-Islam (supporters of Islam) and Jund al-Islam (soldiers of Islam).
  14. IRDP-NIDS [1146242].
  15. IRDP-NIDS [645920-1].
  16. IRDP-NIDS [900023].
  17. IRDP-NIDS [1144055, 749311].
  18. IRDP-NIDS [742820].
  19. IRDP-NIDS [900017]. Iran also demanded from the PUK and KDP to allow some opposition cadres to operate in areas under their control. IRDP-NIDS [903634, 900026, 859393].
  20. Richard C. Hottelet, “Mideast Wild Card: Kurds in Iraq, Turkey,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 24, 1990.
  21. IRDP-NIDS [1274043].
  22. IRDP-NIDS [749441, 749433].
  23. See complete agreement in IRDP-NIDS [1139017-1139033].
  24. IRDP-NIDS [855198-855120].
  25. IRDP-NIDS [888118].
  26. IRDP-NIDS [1274045].
  27. IRDP-NIDS [639605].
  28. IRDP-NIDS [639599, 1270082].
  29. Ibid.
  30. Ibid.
  31. IRDP-NIDS [639626].
  32. IRDP-NIDS [1274066-1274072].
  33. IRDP-NIDS [639624-639625, 639626-639628].
  34. Ibid.
  35. IRDP-NIDS [639628].
  36. IRDP-NIDS [639625].
  37. Ibrahim Nawar, *al-Mu’arada al-Iraqiya wa al-Sira’ li-Isqat Saddam 1990-1993*, (Iraqi Opposition and the Struggle to Remove Saddam 1990-1993) (London: N Publications Ltd, 1993), p. 56.
  38. Ibid., pp. 56-64.
  39. See the preamble of the report issued by the Executive Council of the Iraqi National Congress, “Crimes Against Humanity and the Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy,” (Salahuddin, May 25, 1993), pp. 5-6.
  40. This statement was issued in National Assembly Decree No. 22 on October 4, 1992.
  41. It should be noted that the Kurds have an additional significant income deriving from adding a surcharge on (smuggled) Iraqi fuel passing through their territory into Turkey.
  42. The CMM was established in the mid-1990s. The Hashimite prince Ali bin Hussein, grandson of the deposed king Feisal of Iraq, is the leader of this movement.
  43. See respectively *al-Hayat*, July 15 and August 13, 2002.
  44. Nazila Fathi, “Iraqi Cleric, a Hussein foe, Finds Support Within Iran,” *New York Times*, August 4, 2002.
  45. Howard Schneider, “The Last Thing We Want Is a Confrontation,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2002.
  46. See Talabani’s statements in *al-Hayat*, August 21, 2002.
  47. See the statements of SCIRI’s representative in Iraq and head of its military wing Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim in *al-Hayat*, August 13, 2002.
  48. See text of the declaration on the web site of Iraqi Future Affairs Institute, <<http://www.iraqiaffairs.org>>.
  49. See text of the KDP draft constitution in *al-Zaman*, April 28, 2002.
  50. The constitution stipulates that the Kurdish region includes the provinces of Kirkuk, Sulaimaniya, Irbil as specified by



their administrative borders before the government's redistricting in the 1970s; the province of Dohuk; the districts of Akra, Sheikhan, Sinjar and the sub-district of Zimar in Ninawa province; the districts of Khaneqin and Mandali in Diyala province; and the district of Badrat in Wasit province. Ibid.

51. Especially in the areas mentioned in the above-mentioned footnote.

52. Peter W. Galbraith, "Protect the Kurds," *Washington Post*, August 11, 2002.

53. Karl Vick, "Iraqi Kurds' Plan for Constitution Draws a Warning," *Washington Post*, September 27, 2002.

54. Ibid.

55. See Statements of Mudr Shawkat in *al-Hayat*, July 26, 2002. Significantly enough, the Iraqi Communist party and the Da'wa party have objected to any U.S. intervention in Iraq. In fact, as reported by *al-Zaman*, an alliance of opposition groups have formed the Iraqi National Forces, whose aim is to overthrow Saddam Hussein without foreign intervention. It reportedly includes: the Iraqi Communist party, the Da'wa party, the Arab Socialist Ba'th party (Iraq Command), the Group of Mujahedin Ulema in Iraq, the Islamic Action party, the Iraqi Democratic Grouping, the Socialist Party in Iraq, the Arab Socialist Movement, the Turkomen Democratic party, the Assyrian Ethnic Organization, plus other independent political and military figures. See *al-Zaman*, June 25, 2002.