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## IRAQ: THE NATURE AND ROLE OF THE OPPOSITION TO SADDAM HUSSAIN<sup>1</sup>

### Background

1. Our ability to influence and/or direct the Iraqi opposition is constrained by the fact that we are reliant on contacts with the external Iraqi community while the **internal opposition** remains closed to us. With no diplomatic presence inside Iraq for ten years, we have been unable to develop direct links with key military or tribal figures who might lead political opposition to Saddam Hussain's regime. We have no means of knowing whether such individuals entertain any thought of political alternatives: if they do, they are highly unlikely to acknowledge it, given the penalties they would suffer.
2. Dealing with the **external opposition** throws up a number of problems:
  - There is no coherent structure to the external opposition. The Iraqi National Congress (INC), an umbrella group formed in 1992 and re-launched in 1999, has regrouped in recent years and made some attempt to reach out to other representative bodies, but has also succeeded in alienating some of its constituent members. The Iraqi National Accord (INA), for example, has frozen links with the INC. Others are highly resistant to associating themselves with the INC. Offers of political backing or financial support from the West have exacerbated rivalries. The US Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 was engineered by the INC, and directed most funding to it; but US policy now is to look at a broader range of the external opposition groups.
  - The absence of Sunni representation within the INC suggests that it could not provide a lasting successor to the present regime. The Sunni Arab minority of central Iraq has traditionally provided the backbone of Iraq's government. The current Ba'athist regime is no exception: the vast majority of political, security, military and propaganda positions are held by Sunni loyalists. The INC, by contrast, is dominated by Kurds and Shia Arabs from the south. Defectors from the Sunni officer class have generally been unwilling to work as part of a wider umbrella group, preferring to build their hopes for change on their network of contacts within the military.
  - The external opposition generally has little to no credibility. Regional governments have no faith in the INC's ability to achieve its goals as an umbrella organisation, and they fear the motivations of the more effective non-Sunni Arab organisations, in particular suspecting the Kurds of wanting an independent state and the Shia of being a vanguard for Iranian influence. High-profile Western support for the INC has damaged its credibility further, leaving it open to charges of being Western stooges. A number of groups are careful to distance themselves from both the INC and the UK/US. SCIRI is one of the most effective and credible groups

<sup>1</sup> This paper is developed from MED's "non-paper" of 11 June 2001

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but retains very close ties with Iran and historically has been wary of involvement with the US.

### **Internal opposition**

- For the reasons set out in the first paragraph, it is difficult to judge the level of support such groups enjoy on the ground or within the security/military apparatus. However, we can categorise several different types of opposition that might have the ability to organise effectively, or at least to coordinate action through their own networks, inside Iraq. The Kurds (KDP, PUK, IMK and subsequent offshoots) have an identifiable constituency in the north; SCIRI (through the Badr Corps) and other Shia groups can also point to proxy insurgency activity in the south. Some of the tribes - mainly Shia, but often mixed - have their own networks of trusted family connections. And members of the Iraqi military who have defected to the opposition have their own links with trusted former comrades in arms.
- There are good reasons why we have seen few signs of coordinated opposition action within Iraq (although there were attempts in the mid 90s). Saddam's efficient security organisations are probably well placed to hear of any plot once it becomes known outside a handful of close colleagues; and, because of fear or coercion, individuals who might genuinely wish to see the back of Saddam may at the same time "re-insure" by informing the authorities if they hear of a plan that might involve or implicate them but not be certain of success.
- For similar reasons, external opposition organisations have little success communicating and coordinating effectively with sympathetic elements inside Iraq. Most are believed to be penetrated by agents of the Iraqi regime. But in any case Iraqi oppositionists have not erected an impermeable security barrier between themselves and the regime. Many will be in contact with representatives of the regime (such as Ambassadors abroad) as well as with family members or former colleagues. It is highly probable that opposition activities are compromised by information filtering through such channels.
- It is impossible to say what (if any) support the INC itself can muster inside Iraq. The Iraqi regime often plays on the external opposition's ineffectiveness and links to the UK/US to its own advantage.

### **Scenarios for change**

3. UK policy has not included support for **regime change**. There are clear constraints in international law to our ability to support those working for the overthrow of a foreign government (e.g. the Friendly Relations Declaration of 24 October 1970 (GA resolution 2625 (XXV))). Beyond that, we doubt the external opposition's capability to deliver.

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4. Various opposition groups (PUK, INC, etc) have told us of plans involving a national liberation movement in which Iraqis, backed from the outside, would launch a series of attacks on Saddam's forces with the intention of occupying specific territory. Allied air support would be required. The leadership council of the external opposition, once in control of some territory, would turn itself into a provisional government and seek international recognition. Beyond the legal question over committing forces to support such an operation, we would also be faced with the problem of securing host nation support for our forces (based in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait etc).

5. In any case, we do not assess the external opposition to be capable of leading a military operation as outlined above. They do not have the leverage within the Iraqi military and security apparatus to realise a plan of this kind, and leading oppositionists are not credible figures for a provisional government. Regime change relying mainly or exclusively on the external opposition is therefore not a viable option.

6. More realistic calculations suggest that the immediate successor to Saddam Hussain will be a senior Sunni member or ex-member of the Iraqi military. This may be a figure from the present senior military hierarchy within Iraq prepared to initiate a coup once convinced of adequate support from outside Iraq (ie the US) and a clear commitment from the US and whichever allies they can muster to maintain support until the present regime has been replaced. Alternatively it may be an ex-member of the military still able to command respect and obedience within Iraq and with credible political contacts outside. In the first case, we will not know who the candidate is until after the coup, but we will be able to draw on our contacts among the Iraqi opposition - especially former military officers - to assess the likelihood of the new leader being acceptable to all factions of Iraqi society and ready to deliver a programme of reform moving towards democracy. In the latter case - a leader drawn from the military in exile - there are relatively few candidates. Two key figures are General Nizar **al-Khazraji**, the most senior Iraqi military defector who joined the opposition in 1996; and Brig (?) Najib **al-Salihi**.

- **Al-Khazraji**, the more plausible claimant, would be acceptable to a wide range of the Iraqi opposition and to regional players, such as Saudi Arabia. His situation is complicated by charges (recently levelled against him in Denmark where he is staying) that he had some involvement in atrocities committed against the Kurds in the 1980s; others (including the main Kurdish parties) deny his involvement, and suggest that the accusations have been made by Kurdish sympathisers of the PKK at the behest of the Government in Baghdad.
- **Al-Salihi**, though junior, is more sophisticated and has developed good links in Washington (where he lives) and is regarded as a credible candidate elsewhere.

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