

Iraq 'Opposition' Is Full of Minuses for War

by William Jones

To beat the drums for a war against Iraq's Saddam Hussein, the Pentagon warhawks around Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Defense Policy Board Chairman Richard Perle laid out the red carpet for a semi-official visit of the "Iraqi opposition." It was a conglomeration of six disparate Iraqi exile groups, who are doing their best to present a "united front" for their American handlers. Even characterizing them collectively as an "opposition" raises the question as to whether their opposition to the ruling regime of Saddam Hussein is greater than their opposition to each other.

The group held a meeting at the State Department on Aug. 9, jointly sponsored by Undersecretary of State Marc Grossman and Undersecretary of Defense Doug Feith, a former aide to Perle and a key player in the pro-Zionist Clash of Civilizations crowd. On Aug. 10, the opposition groups went to the White House for a teleconference with Vice President Dick Cheney, who was vacationing in Wyoming. As if to highlight the significance of the visit, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld met personally with the group at the White House. These were the highest-level meetings yet for this motley crew.

Both Cheney and Rumsfeld told them that the Bush Administration is committed to ousting Saddam. Perhaps also aiming in part at these meetings, President Bush, speaking from his vacation in Crawford, Texas on the day of their White House visit, told reporters, "As I said, I have no timetable. But I do believe that American people understand that weapons of mass destruction in the hands of leaders such as Saddam Hussein are very dangerous for us and our allies."

Full of Risks

Nevertheless, the game that administration warhawks are playing is high risk.

This was not the first visit by the "opposition" to the nation's capital. Since the late 1990s, there have been rather concerted efforts by those wishing to "teach Saddam a lesson" to cobble together some form of credible Iraqi opposition out of the gaggle of exile Iraqis, to be in readiness at the point the United States decides to strike against him.

For many years, the "Iraqi opposition" had been the Iraqi National Congress (INC), headed by London-based Ahmed Chalabi, a graduate of the University of Chicago and MIT, a fast-talker and a real wheeler-and-dealer. Chalabi had long

been a great favorite of Republican Saddam-bashers, such as Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott (Miss.) and Sen. Sam Brownback (Kan.). He thrived in his self-styled role as leader of the opposition. In its heyday, the INC had headquarters, a radio station, and a veritable army of its own, based in the U.S.-protected Kurdish territory in northern Iraq, with the CIA pouring over \$100 million into the venture. A foiled military operation against Iraq in 1995 led, however, to the eviction of the INC from Kurdish territory, with numerous allegations that Chalabi had misused the funds he received from the CIA.

Farhad Barzani, the Washington representative for the Kurdish Democratic Party—now another opposition party—told the *Washington Post* that Chalabi had left "a lot of debts," delayed payment to some INC officials when he left northern Iraq, and refused to disclose details about the INC's finances to its members. Chalabi had been convicted of banking fraud in Jordan, which prevents his ever operating from Jordanian territory. Nevertheless, he was given a clean bill of health by none other than Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), who called him "the face of the Iraqi opposition in Washington." "He is a person of strength, principle and real national commitment," Lieberman had extolled him, after they had met in Lieberman's Capitol Hill office in 1999. But Lieberman, a protégé of the notorious Wall Street speculator Michael Steinhardt, is not one to ask where the money comes from, nor where it is going.

Nevertheless, Chalabi's personal reputation was giving "the Iraqi opposition" a very bad name. The United States helped pull together a meeting in New York in 1999, under the direction of Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering, in which the INC was broadened, and new faces brought in. Although Chalabi was still labeled a member of the INC leadership, his previous role was drastically curtailed.

During the recent visit to Washington, the prime spokesman of the INC, and the combined opposition, has been the dapper Sharif Ali bin Al Hussein. This is ironic, indeed, as Sharif Ali, the head of the Iraqi Constitutional Monarchy Movement, is a cousin of the last Hashemite King of Iraq, Faisal II, and he himself has pretensions for reestablishing the throne in Iraq, and placing himself on it! For now, however, Sharif Ali is content to work with other opposition groups in order to topple Saddam Hussein and establish "a democratic regime" in Iraq, the expressed goal of the United States.

The Man Who Would Be King

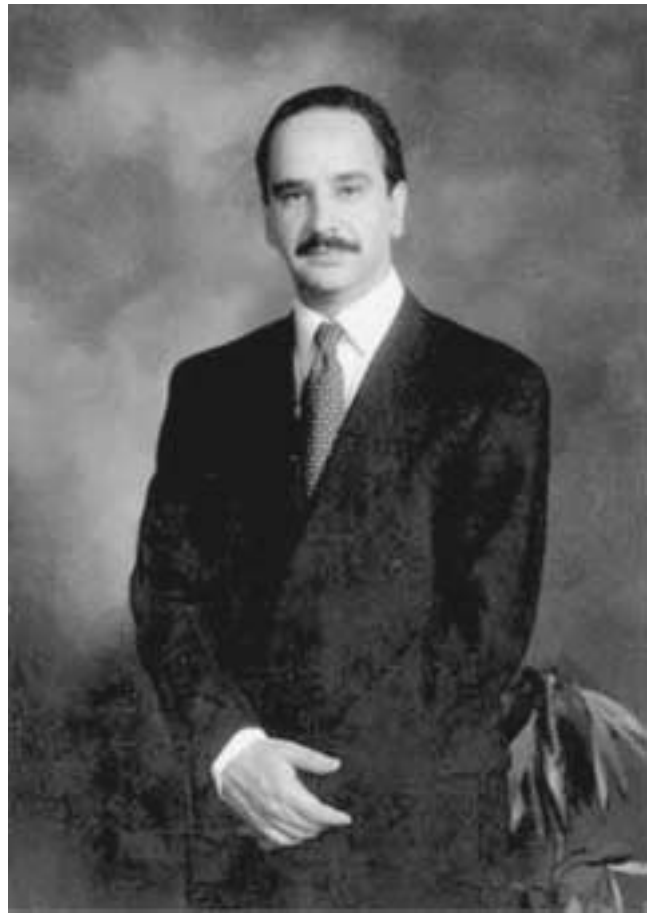
Speaking at a "National Press Club Newsmaker" press conference in Washington on Aug. 8, Sharif Ali insisted that he was committed to the goal of establishing democracy in Iraq, but that he would continue to work for a constitutional monarchy. Sharif Ali also painted the rosy "cakewalk war" scenario of the Perle-Wolfowitz crowd, predicting that

the Iraqi people would rise up, and greet the invading American forces and their puppet regime, strewing flowers in their path. “No Iraqi is willing to fight and die for Saddam Hussein,” Sharif Ali claimed. “And which Iraqis are willing to fight and die for you?” *EIR* pointedly asked him at the press conference: “Why do you think anybody would rush to meet your people with open arms, after your decades spent in exile, and riding in on U.S. tanks?” Sharif Ali had to admit that they had no clear reading of their support within Iraq—if any—but insisted that people were so unhappy with the regime that they would embrace any alternative. He also urged that the United States military planning try to limit any “collateral damage” that might negatively effect the thinking of the Iraqis!

But there is more to this opposition than this uncrowned King of Iraq. On the one hand, there is the Kurdish opposition, consisting of two major groups—the Kurdish Democratic Party of Massoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, of Jalal Talabani. Although at each other’s throats for years, the two have learned to live together since the Gulf War in the U.S.-protected northern Iraq, and with a modicum of prosperity. They are none too eager to become engaged militarily in operations against Saddam Hussein which might upset their applecart. Indeed, not even a personal meeting with President Bush could entice Barzani to the Washington meeting, still angry with what he considers insufficient guarantees for Kurdish fighters who might engage in action against Saddam. Their ultimate goal has always been an independent Kurdistan, which would encompass not only northern Iraq but also a large chunk of eastern Turkey. Fears of fueling Kurdish ambitions have hitherto kept Turkey out of play in any new Iraq operation, and the Kurds find little public support for their broader plans among U.S. administration officials. They are therefore limiting their demands, for now, to achieving autonomous status in a united Iraq.

The other major player is the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which represents the opposition among the Shi’ite population in Persian Gulf regions of southern Iraq, bordering Iran. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Supreme Council had fought alongside their religious compatriots from Iran against Saddam Hussein, and the Supreme Council still has its headquarters in Tehran. With Bush having designated Iran as a part of the “axis of evil,” it is doubtful that the Supreme Council would really be granted a seat at the table in a post-Saddam Iraq.

A sixth group, the Iraqi National Accord, includes a number of former Iraqi military officers. It is not clear what role these people would play in the anti-Saddam campaign. U.S. officials have held numerous meetings with former Iraqi military officers over the last few months. But parading the Iraqi generals would not provide an effective political cover for U.S. military action, as it would raise the obvious outcry that the United States was trying to replace Saddam with another



The “democratic Iraqi opposition” had as chief spokesman, during recent meetings at the Pentagon and elsewhere, the would-be king of Iraq! Sharif Ali bin Al-Hussein, who says he wants to be a constitutional monarch, is one problem with this “transition to democratic rule” crew.

dictator. So the military discussions remain hush-hush and behind closed doors.

While administration officials are assuring skeptical U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf that they would never agree to an ethnically based balkanization of Iraq, they are building their envisioned coup/invasion plans on Iraqi forces, most of which have been fully committed to just such a balkanization. While trying to convince a skeptical American public that they wish to establish a “democratic regime” in Iraq, they have revamped the discredited INC to be headed by the self-styled “heir-apparent” to the Iraqi throne. Is there any surprise that the world stands aghast at the audacity of the “New Empire” crowd in Washington, attempting to revamp the world according to their whims, as if they were engaged in some “virtual reality” computer game?

The stakes in this particular game are, however, extremely high, with a U.S. military action against Baghdad threatening to unleash spreading war, and an unprecedented wave of anti-Americanism throughout the region.