

The Iraqi Opposition at Crossroads

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On 9 August, six Iraqi opposition leaders took up a joint invitation from the US State and Defense Departments to meet in Washington. Those attending emerged, with a spokesman for them saying “we have agreed to hold an Iraqi opposition conference with all the opposition forces to guarantee representation for all the peoples of Iraq and the political forces that oppose the dictatorship.” The idea for the conference, albeit under US supervision, was to provide an opportunity for all involved in the tussle for power to cooperate with the opposition – a move which, some said, would mark the end of that tussle.

The group of six were founder members of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) that was formed in the Salah al-Din meeting in 1992. But the INC lost much of its importance when it became no more than a propaganda instrument for US policies, and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Iraqi National Covenant (INA) froze their membership. Before that, other groups (the Communist Party and the Islamic Da'wa Movement) had withdrawn from it. Later, the two Kurdish parties formed, with SCIRI and the INA, a coalition that became known as the Group of Four.

But after 11 September, the US developed a policy to bring down the Iraqi regime and it put the INC back onto center stage. Therefore, the departure of the others, or the freezing of their membership, achieved the opposite of what they wanted. Ahmad Chalabi alone became the sole leader of the INC, and he was able, through his alliance with the US right – and especially with what are known as the neo-conservatives – to become the Pentagon's man. And it is through him that the hawks of the Pentagon deal with Iraq and the Iraqi opposition. The latest sign of this was the Pentagon's decision to restrict the military training of Iraqis to Chalabi's supporters – a decision that caused resentment among other opposition groups cooperating with the US.

The Iraqi opposition knows very well that the Iraqi regime is not capable of changing itself or in such a way as to prevent an attack. The US alone holds the key for change in Iraq, and the opposition – especially the Group of Four – realizes the extent of Chalabi's strength. Hence they deal with him and accept him as a partner and member of any leadership working group. The problem, though, is that the forces lined up behind Chalabi see him as the leader of all the others and leader of Iraq after Saddam. They refuse to deal with the other groups (which were founder

members of the INC) on an equal footing. This has sparked fear among the others that the hawks of the US administration have a secret agenda which goes beyond the borders of Iraq and its people, embroiling the future Iraq in adventures that it could do without.

Since, in the minds of the hawks, the UN is irrelevant, then what about the fragmented Iraqi opposition? As for the Kurds, with the greatest need for US protection – from the dangers of Saddam on the one side and Turkey on the other – the assessment of the hawks is that they will have no choice but to accept US conditions and drop the slogans of federalism. This is especially true if the anticipated change is accomplished by total military occupation of Iraq, rather than by relying on a popular rebellion or the equivalent of an Afghan Northern Alliance, whether Kurdish or Islamic.

Supporting the opposite view of that of the hawks is the State Department and the intelligence community which believe that the regime change operation in Iraq could turn into an adventure with incalculable results. They pushed for UN participation and succeeded (with the help of the UK) in convincing the US president to agree to this, despite the opposition of his vice-president and the hawks of the Defense Department. For evidence of the efforts of the State Department one can see how it involved itself, along with a number of Iraqis, in a series of intellectual/academic seminars about post-Saddam Iraq.

Against this background of where the opposition finds itself, some groups – for different reasons – take a stand of refusing a US role in whatever shape or form, while others are ready to respond to any reforms undertaken by the Iraqi regime. Others still – all of which are relying on some kind of US role to bring about change in Iraq – have begun to reflect the divisions within the US administration. For the INC leadership has sided with the hawks in the administration while the feeling of others, in particular liberal and secular groups, is that there is a contradiction between the support of the hawks for their efforts directed at regime change on the one side and a fear that they will try to impose an Iraqi leadership and political agenda that exceeds the boundaries of Iraq on the other. The feeling is that Iraq paid a high price as an instrument for striking at the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the fear is that it could find itself playing a similar role against other regimes in the region. These liberal groups, which favor a strategic relationship with Washington, believe that it is in the joint interests of Iraq and the US to see the former becoming a political and economic model for the region – getting away from any notion of fundamentalist extremism. Iraq would become an ally of the US in the same way that Japan is, shorn of weapons of mass destruction and free to rebuild the country

without external interference. There would also be an opportunity for a move to democracy and for Iraq to recreate a belief in itself, without pressure to become a spearhead for US ambitions to change the shape of the region as a whole. This is why the groups and individuals in the opposition supporting a US role favor the idea of an all-embracing conference being organized by them alone.

Despite the failure of the US's attempts to unite the opposition, the holding of an open conference provides an opportunity for the opposition to settle their differences and choose a joint leadership – especially given the fact that certain parties in the US have begun calling for the setting up of a military government in Baghdad headed by an American general. This suggestion reflects the lack of confidence in the ability of the opposition to govern in the future and the belief that many Iraqis would prefer this option, rather than seeing the continued struggle involving various opposition groups. But more than two months after the Washington meeting, the group of six still have not been able to reach a final decision on the convening of the conference and on its agenda.

Deputy US Secretary of State Mark Grossman wrote a letter to the six, dated 11 October, in which he reminded them of the decision taken in August to convene a conference on the future of Iraq, based on the principles of unity, democracy and plurality, the absence of weapons of mass destruction, and peaceful coexistence with its neighbors. At the practical level, the letter said the six should set up a steering committee for the US administration to work with. Mr Grossman also said that Assyrians, Turkomans and others should take part in planning the conference to ensure that it was all-embracing and received maximum support.

The problems facing the conference have had nothing to do with the message or the political vision for Iraq after Saddam – for the Salah al-Din conference decided on these matters. Rather, the problem has been in the selection of the participants – and even more so in the choice or election of members of the steering committee – or as the group of six call it, the follow-up committee. After more than two months, agreement was reached on the names of those to take part in the conference, but not on the steering committee – which effectively is to act as a transitional government after a forced regime change. Because of these differences, which were to have been settled by consensus, the possibility arises that an election procedure will have to be introduced, which in turn is prompting various groups to lobby, for one reason or another, for greater representation. In the absence of consensus among the group of six, and the resort to elections, the question that then arises is whether the various groups would be prepared to accept the result of a selection procedure that was against their interests. INC leader Ahmad Chalabi would find it

hard to accept the choice of rivals at a time when he was enjoying the trust of the hawks in the US and his organization was receiving millions of dollars from the Pentagon for his men to be trained. All the more so because the regime change would be carried out by US forces and not the opposition. And would it really be in the interest of the hawks to see the involvement of SCIRI, with its close links with Iran, the Kurds, with the complication of the US's relations with NATO ally Turkey, or INA, with former Ba'athist Iyad 'Alawi? Ahmad Chalabi, with support from the hawks in the US, is in a strong position to torpedo the conference merely by staying away, just as the surrender of the Kurds to Mr Chalabi's wishes would see the lack of SCIRI and INA participation, leading to the same result. The Kurds are in no way involved with the tussles within the US administration - as demonstrated by their continued membership of the INC on the one hand and their participation within the group of four on the other. But if this state of affairs was acceptable under past political circumstances, with the Kurds enjoying their free zones, then today's circumstances are quite different, with the impending US strike on the Baghdad regime which will determine the future of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Kurdish interests make a successful conference a necessity - and that is true not only for the Kurds, but for Iraq as a whole. For as much as it is in their interests for the various groups to adopt a common stance in opposition to federalism, their bigger fear stems from the prospect of a military administration being established with a US general in command, or a military coup that would put Iraq back to square one once more. So it is in the interests of the Kurdish leadership to see unity among the opposition which, on a number of occasions in the past, has sanctified the principle of federalism.

In order to establish as broad a front as possible, it is essential that serious and sincere efforts are made to secure the participation of the Communist and Islamic Da'wa parties - and other groups opposed to the dictatorship. Also the well-being of the Turkomans and Assyrians dictates that they should be able to represent themselves.

But the most difficult problem is the divisive nature of the Iraqi Arab opposition - a state of affairs that gives the Kurdish leadership the opportunity to play the role, in political terms, of the Afghan Northern Alliance. For the conference to end in failure is not an option that the Kurds can contemplate. But the chances of success are limited, given the continued struggles among those groups receiving support from different wings of the US administration. If there is no genuine guarantee of success, then it would be better for the conference to be postponed. But if the White House ended the tussles among the various US factions within the administration

and cooperated with the opposition, calling for a conference on the model of the one held in Bonn with the Afghan opposition – which resulted in the emergence of a unified leadership – then it would be better to convene a broad opposition conference to guarantee unity and success.