



Fixing it: the London conference, Tehran deal, and beyond

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Last December, despite all the division and desperation, Iraqi exiles of many different backgrounds and opinions, came together in a major London conference to chart a political way forward for Iraq. Encouraged by the US, punctuated by a trip to Tehran, there were some successes and some useful conclusions to be drawn, but was the event sufficiently ambitious?

An [Iraqi opposition conference](#) was finally held in London on 14–17 December 2002, after repeated postponements had led some to consider it an almost impossible undertaking. From a positive perspective, the holding of this conference, after a decade of political disunity, shows that the 1992 opposition conference in Salah al-Din was not a unique and unrepeatable event. The opposition has so far failed to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, but this recent conference demonstrates that Saddam has not succeeded in completely eliminating it either. It rekindles a spark of hope that the Iraqi regime believed it could extinguish forever, and leaves the door wide open for collective action on the part of the Iraqi opposition.

The participation of a significant number of Iraqis – more than 400 – made it a political event that attracted the attention of the international media. The opening session presented an impressive show of Iraqi solidarity and, although this broke down during the following days, the conference did not end in failure. It saw the adoption of parliamentary practices based on compromise and mutual concessions, a new phenomenon in Iraqi politics.

The gatherings of independent groups held on the margins of the

conference represent an unprecedented emergence from the domination of the major parties, despite their failure to influence the outcome of the conference. More importantly, the event ended the polarisation between the [Iraqi National Congress](#) and the Group of Four (the Supreme Islamic Council, the two main Kurdish parties, and the National Accord movement) to reveal new alliances that are still in the process of taking shape. One of the most important political decisions is the selection of an expanded committee of 65 members known as the Coordination Committee, which will select the opposition leadership when it next meets in Arbil in January. This makes the 65-member committee the highest authority that the conference has produced, although its powers have not yet been defined.

Conference background and the Tehran deal

The Group of Six (the Four together with [Ahmad Chalabi](#)'s Iraqi National Congress and Ali bin al-Hussein's monarchist movement) had announced their intention to convene an Iraqi opposition conference following their meeting with US officials on 9 August last year, but had failed to take any significant steps towards achieving this until American pressure was stepped up in various ways. The most important of these was the White House letter of 19 November, signed by four high-ranking US officials, urging the Six to hold an expanded gathering of Iraqi opposition groups.

While the US administration had clear aims for the conference, namely a demonstration of the unity of the Iraqi opposition and its alignment with the US, the Six held divergent views about the importance of convening such an event. Some parties had preferred not to hold a conference, notably the National Accord, fearing the consequences if it failed. Ahmad Chalabi saw the prospect of a successful Iraqi opposition conference in selecting a new leadership as a possible victory for the 'Group of Four' against him, entailing the end of the Iraqi National Congress and his

leading role.

The two Kurdish factions, on the other hand, saw the conference as an opportunity to clarify the future map of post Saddam Iraq in order to prevent their being once again deprived of their national rights. The strengthening of the Iraqi opposition in the face of Turkish threats was an additional motive for the Kurdistan Democratic Party. The Islamic Council, for its part, was keen on the idea of a conference to prevent America dominating the Iraqi opposition and the future of Iraq.

During the dispute between the Four and Ahmad Chalabi, the former indicated that they were prepared to hold a conference without the participation of Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress. Chalabi, in order to put pressure on the Four and to guarantee their agreement to his conditions, and well aware that the US wanted a conference to consolidate the unity of the opposition rather than exacerbate its divisions, played the 'Arab Sunni' card, portraying the Four as essentially an Iranian-Shi'ite-Kurdish alliance. He further developed links with former Ba'athists, encouraging them to object to the composition of the planned conference by writing to the US administration. In order to undermine the Supreme Islamic Council, he sought contacts with independent Shi'ite religious figures living in London, and presented them to US official circles as rivals to the dominance of the Islamic Council, which is based in Tehran. Chalabi (despite the fact that his own leadership of the Iraqi National Congress had its origins in Salah al-Din) also criticised the use of the method of proportional representation chosen by the Salah al-Din conference, which he claimed reinforced the dominance of the Islamic Council and the Kurds, favouring instead the inclusion of more secular liberal elements.

Chalabi played the 'independents' card through a number of letters sent by Iraqi Americans to the US State Department, demanding that the number of participants in the conference be increased beyond the

allotted quotas and that the dominance of the major parties be balanced by a larger number of independents (close to Chalabi). These would support his nomination in the event of elections being held for a new leadership, or sabotage the gathering by withdrawing in full view of the TV cameras if his conditions for participation were not met. While the Four were in favour of reducing the number of participants in the conference to less than 200 in order to ensure its effectiveness, Chalabi demanded an increased number of participants as another way of putting pressure on them.

In this tense atmosphere, the US desire for the conference to be successful came together with Iran's aspirations to play the role of partner to Washington. The US need for the participation of Islamic groups, in particular the participation of al-Sayyid al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Islamic Council, allowed Iran to play a role in the political process by inviting Chalabi to Tehran a few days before the conference. There, a bargain was struck whereby Chalabi gave his support for al-Hakim and for an opposition conference on the basis of the quotas of representation decided at Salah al-Din, and accepted the Supreme Islamic Council as the authority for the Iraqi Shi'i movement. In return, Iran, and by implication the Islamic Council, guaranteed its support for Chalabi's participation in the leadership of the coming conference. The issue of selecting the new opposition leadership was decided in favour of keeping to the 'Group of Six' and accepting Chalabi as a full participant.

This deal had an immediate impact on negotiations: the number of conference participants was no longer an issue, and more than 400 people participated. Chalabi metamorphosed into a defender of the Islamic Council's stance to the US administration's representative Zalmay Khalilzad, who had demanded increased representation for independents and other groups in the leadership committee. He went even further in placating al-Hakim, by not nominating his associate in the National Congress leadership, Shaikh Muhammad Ali, for the coordination

committee.

Days before the opposition conference, Iran also invited Iyad Alawi, general secretary of the National Accord movement, and the two Kurdish leaders, Jalal Talabani and Masud Barzani, through Hakim to visit Tehran. While Alawi sent his excuses, Talabani sent a representative, and Barzani, who lives in a precarious situation under threat from Turkey, accepted the invitation. The price of Iranian support for Barzani was clearly his support for al-Hakim and the Islamic Council at the London conference.

Iran's presence was thus felt in the conference negotiations despite its apparent absence. The Islamic Council insisted on maintaining the representation quotas fixed at Salah al-Din for the composition of the continuation committee, and restricting the leadership exclusively to the Group of Six. Faced with this situation, some elements of the Six were forced to contact Iranian representatives in Tehran directly to assist in solving the crisis, which extended the conference for an extra day. Despite this, attempts to widen the leadership committee beyond the Six failed, forcing the postponement of its formation until mid-January, when the continuation committee will meet in Arbil.

The Coordination Committee was constituted on the basis of the Salah al-Din quotas: 24 Islamic representatives on the part of the Islamic Council (including two representatives from the Iraqi Islamic Party, and two Sunni Muslim independents); 15 names put forward by the two Kurdish Parties; 15 nominations made by the National Accord, the monarchist movement, and Ahmad Chalabi in person; four Turkmen nominations; two Assyrians; and five names chosen by agreement, in addition to the quotas, making a total of 65 members. The inclusion of independents was made possible by each party conceding some of its nominations in their favour. The names of the Coordination Committee members were announced during the closing session of the conference without holding a discussion or a vote. Despite this, as soon as the names were announced, the Supreme Islamic

Council declared that it would add ten nominees to correct the under-representation of Shi'is, who were equally represented with Sunnis on the list of 65.

The role of the US

Despite the obvious shift in the US administration away from previous infighting towards a united stance, made clear by the appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad as the President's representative to the Iraqi opposition, the latter only took on this function a few days before the opposition conference, which did not leave him much time to grasp the complexities of the Iraqi opposition. He made significant efforts to ensure that the conference would be inclusive and representative of the widest range of Iraqi groups, and contacted several groups and personalities including those who shunned the conference. During the conference he supported greater representation for independents, but in the face of opposition from some elements of the preparatory committee and the Group of Six, he was unable to push through any alterations in the composition and function of the leadership and continuation committees. Moreover, the Islamic Council and Barzani threatened to withdraw from the conference in opposition to his suggestions.

The role of the US administration was decisive in enabling the conference to be held, and credit is due to Khalilzad for achieving a temporary agreement and preventing the conference from breaking apart by encouraging mutual concessions. The effectiveness of the American role would have been reinforced if the decision to appoint Khalilzad had been made months, and not days, before the conference.

The role of Iraqi groups

Jalal Talabani was prominent at the London conference, and acted as an Iraqi leader first and foremost. He strove to act as a bridge between different factions, and was responsible for the participation of the Iraqi

Islamic party in the conference. His good relations with both Iran and Turkey link him to all the stakeholders in the region.

The independent participants could have been more effective, especially given the support of the American representative for their participation and representation. Despite this, their meetings frustratingly failed to produce a common standpoint. Nevertheless, this can be explained in part by the lack of time; they have the potential to play a more important part in the future.

Fringe meetings and informal conversations at the conference revealed an unexpectedly widespread sectarianism, whether it invoked the vocabulary of liberalism, nationalism or Islamism. Sectarian considerations haunted every political agreement, and the Kurdish parties deserve the credit for helping to overcome them.

On the other hand, the absence of the secular left was glaringly obvious, and I do not believe that the Communist Party's decision not to participate has served the party or the left in general. Their presence was necessary to create some balance, and to improve the chances for democratic methods. This also applies to the non-participation of the Islamic Call party, whose presence would have restored some balance in the representation of the Shi'a and prevented their domination by a single faction.

The liberal secular tendency had an opportunity to influence the conference, especially since some on the preparatory committee claimed to belong to this group, but this opportunity was wasted. Today, however, it is more than ever before necessary for this group to take shape beyond the lines of the existing political polarisation, in order to ensure that the game is played according to democratic principles. An alliance between left and secular liberals is needed, to stand in the face of the sectarian

storm that threatens the future of Iraq after Saddam.

The regional states and the Arab world

With the exception of the symbolic participation of Kuwait, represented by the Kuwaiti Member of Parliament, Muhammad Jasim al-Saqr, the states of the region and the Arab world were completely absent. This does not mean that they took no interest in the conference; although Iran and Turkey were not represented, their shadows hung over the proceedings. If we, as Iraqis, want a peaceful Iraq that is not a battleground for the other states in the region, this conference has demonstrated that an international presence is needed. If Europe is hesitant, then this makes the role of the United Nations and especially the US necessary for the Iraq of the future to avoid such a conflict.

The support of Arab states for the Iraqi opposition is the only way to preserve Iraq, as Arab leaders have demanded. If regime change in Iraq is inevitable, there is no sense in ignoring the Iraqi opposition and allowing it to be dominated by Iran, Turkey and the US.

The need for an Iraqi 'Bonn' or 'Taif'

You could say that this was the best possible outcome for the London conference. Despite all its problems, it was certainly better than not holding a conference at all. However, the question has to be asked whether the new body is capable of overcoming these problems in the longer term. And the answer would have to be no. Perhaps the main reason for this is that regime change in Iraq will be carried out by the US on the basis of international law, and not according to the behest of the various groups that make up the Iraqi opposition. Their conflict therefore centres on the issue of Iraq after Saddam.

What, then, is to be done? The solution is simple, and ought to have been carried out years ago. The opportunity is still there for it to be

implemented now. It would involve an invitation to attend talks from Washington to the 65-member Coordination Committee, formed at the London conference, to be supplemented by representatives from all the Iraqi groups, absent or concealed, who are part of both the problem and its solution. These should be held along the lines of the Lebanese talks in Taif, the Kuwaiti talks in Jeddah, or the Afghan talks in Bonn, with the added participation of regional and Arab states, to assist Iraqis struggling to overthrow the dictatorship in reaching an agreement on the path to Iraq's future, particularly in the period of transition.

As Iraqis we must recognise that we are powerless to overcome the diseases afflicting the Iraqi body politic under the tyranny of the regime without the assistance of others, and that this is exactly what was achieved by the Lebanese and the Kuwaitis at the Taif and Jeddah conferences with the help of Saudi Arabia. Ideally our neighbours in the region and the Arab world would play a similar role, but at present they are too weak. Their incapacity to take the initiative does not, however, prevent them from participating in such a conference under the auspices of the United States.

The aim of such an Iraqi 'Bonn' would not be to create a government in exile, or to distribute spoils, but rather to agree on a plan for Iraq after Saddam that all Iraqi factions could be committed to, which would be guaranteed by Washington, whatever the means used to change the regime, whether through the removal of Saddam, a military coup, or the deployment of an international military force.

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