Imperial Overreach
Washington's Dubious Strategy to Overthrow Saddam Hussein

by David Isenberg

Executive Summary

The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 says, "It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime." But a U.S. policy of attempting to remove Saddam from power is flawed in several respects.

Although the Clinton administration claimed to support the congressionally inspired legislation, it has fortunately been unenthusiastic in its implementation of the law. The ILA continues a record of U.S. attempts to unseat Saddam that is unblemished by success. For example, during the Persian Gulf War President Bush urged the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam—building expectations that the United States would support them—only to abandon them when they did.

Overthrowing Saddam will be difficult and may even be counterproductive. Saddam relentlessly suppresses opposition with an extensive security apparatus. In addition, the elite Sunnis in Iraq apparently believe that Saddam serves their interests and can best keep the country from breaking apart. Saddam and the elite face opposition groups that are weak, have different goals, and do not cooperate with each other. Furthermore, the opposition cannot get any of Iraq's neighbors to provide a sanctuary from which to launch an insurgency.

The successful overthrow of Saddam could make things worse. Iraq could be thrown into civil war and break up, or a more radical Iraqi regime could arise. Either outcome could cause instability in the entire region. Given the hardships the Iraqi population has suffered since the 1991 war, a post-Saddam regime could be even more virulently anti–United States than he is.

Since his military was decimated by war and sanctions, Saddam's threat to the region has been overblown. Moreover, Iraq lives in a rough neighborhood and has an incentive—like many nations in the region—to develop nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, regardless of who is in power. The West needs to take only limited actions to monitor and constrain Saddam's military capabilities. Economic sanctions should be lifted in exchange for international inspections of Iraq's weapons programs. A more narrowly focused Western embargo on arms shipments should be retained. Surely, if the United States could outwait a superpower adversary throughout the long decades of the Cold War, it can do the same with a small, weak nation such as Iraq—waiting until that inevitable day when Saddam's tyranny falls because of its heavy-handed repression.

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Introduction

Winston Churchill once said that Russia was a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. A similar, albeit less charitable, sentiment might be voiced about the Clinton administration's foreign policy toward Iraq. Nearly nine years after U.S. military forces reversed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Iraq's resilient and resourceful leader Saddam Hussein remains in power—a fact that has caused the Clinton administration no small amount of vexation. Economic sanctions, containment, no-fly zones, sporadic attempts to organize opposition groups, and abortive attempts to foment coups have all failed to loosen Saddam's grip on power. And his continuing reign has brought about numerous confrontations with the United States by obstructing UN weapons inspection teams, perpetrating terrorist acts, failing to abide by air exclusion zones imposed by the allies over northern and southern Iraq, moving troops to threaten Kuwait, and repressing groups internally.[1]

But on the premise that the appearance of doing something—no matter how foolish—is better than doing nothing at all, the United States has decided to reembrace a failed policy. Instead of merely trying to prevent Saddam from committing future military aggression or revitalizing his nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons programs—a limited objective that has resulted in limited success—the United States has decided on the more ambitious goal of attempting to overthrow Saddam.

Iraq Liberation Act of 1998

The operative section (Section 3) of the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 says, "It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime."[2]

To that end, the ILA provides assistance valued at $97 million, including money for grants to Iraqi opposition groups doing radio and television broadcasting to Iraq, military education and training for such organizations, and the drawdown of defense articles from Defense Department stocks for those groups. The executive branch may provide military equipment and training services of the Department of Defense and assets of the Departments of State, the Treasury, and Justice on a grant basis to meet emergencies that it cannot meet through other aid channels. The Foreign Assistance Act authorizes the president to draw down up to $100 million of defense articles or services from the Pentagon for "unforeseen emergencies." The ILA requires the president to designate one or more Iraqi democratic opposition groups that satisfy the criteria for receiving assistance.

The president is required to (1) include a broad spectrum of Iraqi individuals and groups opposed to Saddam's regime and (2) ensure that those individuals and groups are committed to democratic values, respect for human rights, peaceful relations with Iraq's neighbors, maintenance of Iraq's territorial integrity, and cooperation with other democratic opponents of Saddam's regime.

The ILA may go down in history as the single most ill-conceived attempt at covert action during the Clinton administration. Both the act's conception and its execution are fatally flawed. For starters, the scheme is the most overt covert action ever initiated. The United States is attempting to organize internal Iraqi opposition groups whose strategies and policies can be found detailed on their own Web sites.[3] Furthermore, Washington has designated opposition groups that have doubtful allegiance to the specified criteria and minimal ability to cooperate with each other. The groups do not have a viable plan to overthrow Saddam. None of Iraq's neighbors are inclined to support those groups—certainly not to the extent of providing reliable sanctuary. And, most important, the United States has

shown a reluctance to back the groups when they get into trouble.

The Clinton Administration Exhibits Only Lukewarm Support for the ILA

President Clinton claims to support the ILA:

> Over the long term, the best way to address that threat is through a government in Baghdad—a new government—that is committed to represent and respect its people, not repress them; that is committed to peace in the region. Over the past year, we have deepened our engagement with the forces of change in Iraq. . . . We will intensify that effort, working with Congress to implement the Iraq Liberation Act . . . to do what we can to make the opposition a more effective voice for the aspirations of the people.[4]

In reality, the administration's support for the ILA is tepid. The administration, to its credit, is reluctant to implement the ILA, and administration officials warn of the difficulty of the task. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Walter Slocombe testified before Congress: "No one should underestimate the difficulties of the task of bringing about a change in this regime or the time it may take. It cannot be done by imposing a new regime by military force from without, even assuming that such would be possible, which is very doubtful. Nor, in our judgment, can it be done by encouraging an internal insurrection before the conditions exist that would make it possible for such an uprising to succeed."[5] In 1999 the administration infuriated ILA supporters by naming Kenneth Pollack to the National Security Council staff as director for Near East and South Asian affairs.[6] Pollack was a coauthor of an article in *Foreign Affairs* that derided a U.S.-sponsored insurgency in Iraq as a fantasy that could lead to a new Bay of Pigs.[7] ILA supporters correctly saw his appointment as a sign of the administra-

tion's reluctance to militarily support the Iraqi opposition groups.

National Security Adviser Sandy Berger met in May 1999 with seven Iraqi opposition groups at the White House and declared a determination to get rid of Saddam's regime by the end of Clinton's second term. But the administration's action did not match its rhetoric. The White House meeting spurred the opposition groups to propose holding a session of their legislature in northern Iraq's Kurdistan region—across a de facto border from Saddam's forces. They also requested U.S. protection to deter Saddam from attacking and ensure that key opposition leaders would participate. The administration declined to protect the legislative meeting.[8]

A Manifestation of U.S. Arrogance

One might say that the ILA is a testament to continuing American arrogance about its ability to dictate political outcomes in other countries. As syndicated columnist Richard Reeves observed, "Since World War II, Americans have periodically deluded themselves into believing that because we have the power to disrupt normal life in most any part of the world, we therefore must have the power to stop or start ancient enmities we know little about—and that little is often wrong."[9] Dennis Halliday, who served as UN humanitarian coordinator for Iraq before quitting in frustration in 1998, noted, "The thinking seems to be, 'We've tried everything else, so why not promote an invasion and see what happens? Who knows, maybe we'll get somebody out of this who can keep things quiet for the next twenty years.'"[10]

U.S. Efforts to Unseat Saddam So Far Have Failed

The ILA continues a record of U.S. attempts to unseat Saddam that is unblemished by success. Such attempts started about a month after the beginning of Operation Desert Storm. On February 15, 1991, President Bush spoke directly to ordi-

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nary Iraqis. Twice that day—at the White House and at a missile plant in Massachusetts—he repeated a carefully phrased call for revolt, calling on "the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside."[11]

Sadly, at the end of the war, the thousands of Iraqi citizens who took the president up on his call—in the mistaken expectation that they would receive help from the United States—paid for it with their lives.[12] The brief rebellions launched in the south by the Shiites and in the north by the Kurds presented the best chance to overthrow Saddam, but U.S. policymakers apparently refused to support those rebellions because they were afraid that Saddam's overthrow would lead to the dismemberment of Iraq and the loss of a counter to "revolutionary" Iran.[13] Brent Scowcroft, the president's national security adviser, contends that "there was never a promise to aid an uprising."[14] If there was not, President Bush's carefully parsed remarks encouraging the Iraqi opposition groups to take matters into their own hands were hardly in the finest tradition of U.S. foreign policy.

Why did the Bush administration undertake the seemingly contradictory policy of encouraging the Kurds and Shiites to rebel and then fail to support them? The first possibility is that U.S. policy was simply incoherent—that is, the Bush administration wanted to overthrow Saddam but then backed off for fear of destabilizing Iraq and giving Iran an opening. The other possibility is that the Bush administration hoped for an ideal outcome—that the Kurdish and Shiite uprisings would be accompanied by a military coup that would win acceptance by the two rebellious groups and result in a unified Iraq— that did not materialize. The latter possibility seems more likely.

The haste with which the Bush administration sought to end the war only increased the ability of Saddam to put down the postwar rebellions. As Scowcroft noted, "Owing to the unexpected swiftness of the Marine advance into Kuwait, the [Iraqi Republican] Guard reserves were not drawn into the battle—and into the trap created by the western sweep around and behind Kuwait as we had planned."[15] Then the ground war was stopped after 100 hours, which allowed the elite Republican Guards to escape. Some analysts argued that the Bush administration allowed them to escape to act as a counterweight to Iran.

Thus, U.S. efforts to organize Saddam's overthrow preceded the ILA by several years. According to journalists Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, three months after Operation Desert Storm ended, President Bush signed a formal finding authorizing the Central Intelligence Agency to mount a covert operation "to create the conditions for the removal of Saddam Hussein from power."[16] In short, the CIA was being asked to do what Saddam's loss of the Gulf War could not. And it was not clear that the CIA was—or is—up to the job. Frank Anderson—former chief of the Near East Division of the agency's Directorate of Operations and the man who attempted to carry out the operation—later remarked, "We didn't have a single mechanism or combination of mechanisms with which I could create a plan to get rid of Saddam at that time."[17] By 1995 that operation—reauthorized by Clinton—had turned into a training and support mission for guerrillas in northern Iraq. Richard Perle, an assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration, has severely criticized Steve Richter, the current chief of the Near East Division, for supporting unsuccessful attempts to instigate military coups in Baghdad. Perle said, "The head of the (Near East) division of the CIA should be removed on the grounds of incompetence and a lack of the fundamental qualifications to hold that position."[18]

Those early efforts to overthrow Saddam were flawed for several reasons. First, although the United States spent roughly $100 million to aid the opposition, much of the money was spent on public relations and propaganda, not military aid. Thus, military opposition to Saddam remained

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weak. Second, the United States was unwilling to compensate for that weakness by providing direct military support when the opposition forces engaged the Iraqi military. That refusal resulted in the opposition's loss of confidence in the United States. As a result, U.S. influence over the opposition declined. Third, the United States did not convince the key regional states—Turkey, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—that support for the Iraqi opposition was in their strategic interests. Fourth, the United States refused to support Saddam's opponents in 1996 when he moved against them in northern Iraq. Hundreds of opposition members who worked with the United States were evacuated to Guam and hundreds more were killed.

The United States was not the only country interested in getting rid of Saddam. In 1998, according to a press report, Israel had developed an elaborate plan to kill Saddam during a visit to his mistress.[19] That goal may be one of the few things that Israel and some of its enemies agree on. Iran and Syria appear to have begun coordinating efforts to overthrow Saddam. In December 1998 the London-based Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Hayat* cited "diplomatic sources" reporting that Tehran and Damascus would intensify contacts regarding developments in Iraq. In short, Iran and Syria favor the overthrow of Saddam, but not U.S. attempts to do so.[20]

Overthrowing Saddam Is Fraught with Difficulties

To outside observers, U.S. attempts to overthrow Saddam look more like a plan organized by Maxwell Smart or Austin Powers than one organized by James Bond. No less a personage than Henry Kissinger, hardly an opponent of covert actions, cautioned:

> We should beware the siren song that a painless (to us) cover operation can enable us to sidestep the complexities

of military confrontation. I favor supporting the Iraqi resistance in principle, but having seen such enterprises from the inside, I would put forward three cautions. They must be run by professionals, not adventurers; they must take into account the interests of neighboring countries, especially Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Jordan; and they require an American willingness to back the resistance movement when it gets into trouble, with American forces if necessary—or else we will repeat the debacle of the Bay of Pigs and of northern Iraq in 1975 and 1996, when most of those we supported were wiped out or exiled. This is a tougher job than Afghanistan.[21]

Even veteran intelligence agents are skeptical. Frank Anderson noted:

> I absolutely agree that there is a moral imperative that we do not accept Saddam in power in Iraq without seeking to do what we can to change that. My big concern with this is that discussions of small programs or even large programs involving support to opposition elements and particularly people who are outside the country is inevitably ineffective. Dean Acheson's wisdom on this subject I think is right in this. It was the comment that if you wish to change the form of government in another country, you must conquer it.
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> In terms of working with opposition groups, for example, the Iraq Liberation Act would support an armed force of about 5,000 fighters in an area that is already occupied by at least 50,000 Kurdish fighters, who were unable to resist a small commitment of Saddam's available forces—a similar situation in the South. Neither of these things will significantly change the balance of power in Iraq.[22]

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Similarly, former Pentagon official Paul Wolfowitz, another supporter of the ILA, noted, "At day's end, a 'viable opposition' depends on American credibility, and that will be difficult to establish since anti-Saddam forces believe the United States has already abandoned them twice, in 1991 and 1996."[23]

In addition, social and economic conditions in Iraq are not conducive to a rebellion. It is true that Iraqi youth are growing up embittered because they have been denied any hope for a normal life. The conditions of their upbringing are in many ways worse than those that gave rise to European fascism after World War I. But, as Gregory Gause, a professor at the University of Vermont, observes, "The social disintegration brought on by sanctions is not only a tragedy in its own right, but also diminishes the already slim chance that internal Iraqi discontent could be converted into sustained popular rebellion; people consumed with finding their next meal do not have time to overthrow dictators."[24] Revolution usually happens when economic conditions are improving, but not fast enough to keep up with expectations of prosperity that are rising more rapidly.

Even half-hearted supporters of the opposition have only modest expectations. As Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Matthew Wasman wrote:

> An insurgency would put pressure on Iraq but probably could not effect major changes in Iraqi behavior. First, the amount of pressure an insurgency could place on Saddam's centre of gravity would be limited. There is no evidence that Saddam's power base has given up its belief that it must support Saddam against the opposition because he is the only man who can keep Iraq unified and protect their privileged position—one of the keys to Saddam's ability to defeat various insurgencies in 1991–1996. Moreover, complete sovereignty over Iraqi territory remains only a secondary goal of the power base at present, behind retaining Iraq's WMD [weapons of mass destruction] capability and seeing sanctions lifted. Second, an insurgency could not prevent Saddam from employing some of his other counter-strategies. In particular, Saddam would probably crack down against whichever groups within Iraq were supporting the opposition.[25]

As Byman wrote in another article, "If the administration is not careful, American support of the opposition will undermine the containment of Iraq, place tremendous demands on U.S. military forces, and strengthen Saddam Hussein's influence at home and in the region."[26]

Iraq's Apparatus for Internal Security

Even if the opposition were united—which it is not—and had assistance from neighboring states—which it does not—it would face an effective dictatorship whose apparatus of repression is extraordinarily efficient. Saddam has not stayed in power for 20 years by being careless. As one CIA officer noted: "Saddam's 40-year career profile fits that of a predator bent on survival; an assassin, party thug, intelligence operative, and regime strongman before becoming president. As both hunter and hunted, he knows the buildings, rooms and closets of the Iraqi gulag."[27]

The Estimate, a publication of *The Economist*, noted that "what he lacks in military talent he makes up for in political cunning. Combining that cunning with the utter ruthlessness, which Saddam applies even to his own family members, he has created a climate of fear at home which discourages challenges, as well as a disequilibrium among his foreign enemies."[28] To that end, he has created a complex, multilayered, overlapping security and intelligence apparatus.

The Special Security Service

The Special Security Service coordinates the efforts of Iraq's various organizations that protect Saddam. The SSS has a Political Branch that monitors all suspect citizens. The service has an operations unit that can arrest, interrogate, and execute suspects. The service's Special Branch essentially acts as a watchdog that ensures the loyalty of the members of the SSS and other top intelligence and security officials. The SSS also has a paramilitary security force called the Amm Al-Khass Brigade that cooperates closely with and monitors the Special Republican Guards. The Special Republican Guards would evidently provide the SSS with heavy units in the event of a serious military coup.

Special Republican Guards Force

The Special or Presidential Republican Guards, a force of approximately 30,000 men who act as the palace guard, are under a military command structure that reports directly to Saddam. That force's mission is to protect Saddam.

The General Intelligence Service

The General Intelligence Service—also known as the Mukhabaret—is the intelligence and security service of the Ba'ath Party. The organization grew directly out of the clandestine Ba'ath Party security organization built up by Saddam in the 1960s and became the General Intelligence Service in the early 1970s.[29] Saddam originally rose to power as head of the Ba'ath security apparatus and has made it the lead agency in consolidating his grip on power.

Military Intelligence

Military Intelligence traces its origins back to the time of the Iraqi monarchy. It focuses on foreign military threats but also is responsible for internal security within the Iraqi military. Military Intelligence is responsible for detecting "enemy" infiltration in the armed forces. Since military service is compulsory for all male adults, this agency is

sanctioned to target virtually all of the regime's domestic opponents.

Military Security Service

The Military Security Service emerged out of Military Intelligence in 1992 following growing signs of unrest within the military forces. The MSS now has officers in virtually every Iraqi military unit and performs both an internal security and an anti-corruption function. Like many Iraqi intelligence and security services, the organization has its own paramilitary unit and a special internal security unit.

General Security Service

Like Military Intelligence, the General Security Service organization traces its roots back to the time of the Iraq monarchy, when it was part of the police forces controlled by the Ministry of the Interior.[30]

The Military Bureau of the Ba'ath Party

The Military Bureau was strengthened and reorganized after the Gulf War. The bureau is headed by Saddam. Saddam's deputy is Kamel Rashid Yassin, his cousin and brother-in-law. The bureau indoctrinates the armed forces and checks on their political loyalty.

The Tribal Chiefs' Bureau

The Tribal Chiefs' Bureau is a new bureau that was created after the Gulf War. This service pays tribal leaders to control their tribes, spies on possible tribal dissidents, and provides arms to loyal tribesmen to suppress any dissidents.

The Ministry of Information

Most Middle Eastern governments control their media and press and use them as intelligence and propaganda services. Iraq's Ministry of Information is a strong and ruthless instrument of control. The ministry tolerates some criticism—much of which seems to be manipulated to give the perception that it is safe to make Saddam aware of the faults of the government or to give outsiders the

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impression of a free press. At the same time, the ministry controls virtually every word written or spoken in the Iraqi media; uses "journalists" to propagandize internally and abroad; and uses writers, academics, and artists to influence both domestic and foreign opinion.

The Iraqi Telecommunications Services and Major Academic and Research Institutions

All Iraqi telecommunications services and academic and research institutions have intelligence and security cells designed to improve state control. Many have special sections for military and intelligence efforts, for purchasing equipment for military purposes, and for supporting government propaganda and outreach efforts in dealing with foreigners.

The Iraqi Signals and Electronic Intelligence System

Iraq received considerable technical assistance from both the West and the East in developing signals and electronic intelligence (SIGINT/ELINT) capabilities during the Iran-Iraq War. This system collects and translates SIGINT/ELINT and distributes it to both military and intelligence users. It monitors internal communications, as well as foreign political and military communications.[31]

The primary role of this extensive security system is, of course, to keep Saddam in power. Iraq's security men have mastered that task. In short, Saddam isn't going to meekly wait for a U.S.-sponsored overthrow. He has placed loyal family members and followers from his native Tikrit region in every key position of the Iraqi infrastructure—particularly in the officer corps of the military and the intelligence and security services. To forestall plots against him, Saddam has such groups spying on each other. In coming to power through violence, Saddam followed the principle of "kill or be killed." He has even murdered longtime friends and associates—most recently in 1996 when he had two sons-in-law executed.

Iraqi Elites Have Few Incentives to Overthrow Saddam

Saddam survives because he is so brutal and heavily protected and because Iraq's elites fear what might happen to them if he were overthrown. They are tied to his fortunes, and if he goes down, so might they. For the elites to attempt to eliminate Saddam, they must believe that their lot will not be worse without him. Attempts to overthrow dictators always face this problem, but it is especially acute in Saddam's Iraq. If he falls, the elites risk losing prestige, wealth, and possibly their lives.

Steve Yetiv, a political scientist at Old Dominion University, detailed four scenarios in which the Iraqi elite could be adversely affected by Saddam's demise.[32] The first scenario is a breakup of Iraq similar to that which appeared possible after the 1991 Gulf War—when Saddam was facing uprisings in both the north and the south. Saddam—through brute force and sheer terror—has kept Iraq unified despite pressures from the Kurds in the north for their own state and the Shiites in the south for greater autonomy. Iraq's breakup would likely impose severe costs on the political, commercial, religious, and cultural elites—unless someone could effectively replace Saddam.

Second, in a post-Saddam Iraq, Shiite influence would likely rise. Worldwide, Shiites—the more fundamentalist branch of Islam—are the minority. But Iraq's population is about 67 percent Shiite. Yet Iraq is ruled by a Sunni elite, who come mainly from Saddam's small town of Tikrit. Although the Shiites currently lack political influence, Saddam's fall could alter that and threaten Iraq's outnumbered Sunnis.

In the third scenario, the elite must worry that, if Saddam is deposed and Iraq is thrown into chaos, Iran, Syria, or Turkey—which has ongoing water and territorial disputes with Iraq—will gain influence. Syria, like other regional states, has created a special committee to rid Iraq of Saddam and has cultivated

political contacts within Iraq. Iran, which is 93 percent Shiite, would delight in affecting Iraqi internal politics—which it regularly attempts to do.

In the fourth scenario, U.S. influence over Iraq increases. The Iraqi elites understand fully that Washington wants Saddam's ouster, and they remember that the CIA was involved covertly in northern Iraq to achieve that end. In a post-Saddam Iraq, they would expect U.S. power in the country and region to increase significantly—a concern heightened by the presence of a large U.S. force in the region. That fear strengthens pro-Saddam forces because many Iraqi elites would prefer Saddam's wild ride to yet another round of Western dominion.

Problems with the Opposition

The opposition to Saddam is tremendously fragmented. Despite attempts by the United States to reconcile various factions of the opposition, such fragmentation existed during the Bush administration and continues to this day. Lawrence E. Cline, an expert from academia, wrote:

> Both during and subsequent to the war, efforts were made to find credible political opposition for Saddam; it is probably fair to say that the search was in vain. Even by the statements of one of the organizing committees for the Iraqi opposition, there are five main currents of the opposition movement: Islamists, Arab nationalists, Kurds, communists and independent democrats. . . . Each of these groupings has a very specific agenda, with the only unifying source being opposition to Saddam. In the past, they have been bitterly divided over their grand visions of Iraq in the future. . . . If this situation were not bad enough, even within the opposition "currents"

there is frequent discord. Iraqi Arab nationalists are divided between Baathists and non-Baathists, as well as by philosophical splits among the Baathists.[33]

Of course, the foregoing assumes that the opposition groups are sincere in wanting to overthrow Saddam. That may not be the case. As Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute noted: "The opposition is a motley assortment of 91 groups running the gamut from Marxist revolutionaries to Islamic fundamentalists. The principal goal of most factions seems to have been extracting funds from a credulous U.S. Congress rather than waging an armed liberation struggle against the Baghdad regime."[34]

Rep. Porter Goss of Florida, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and a former CIA officer, observed, "I sure wouldn't spend a lot of money or bet the ranch on any group." They "are going to have a very high overhead and a very low capacity to accomplish much. It's unspeakable to me that we would be putting any money in the pockets of expatriates who are talking about revolution in the comfortable capitals of Western Europe. Every time you do all that, all the boot-makers and suit-makers in London just cheer."[35]

Who's Who among Saddam's Opponents

On February 5, 1999, as called for under the ILA, President Clinton forwarded to the secretary of state a Presidential Determination (99-13) that listed groups he designated as democratic opposition groups. They are the Iraqi National Accord (INA), the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Islamic Movement of the Iraqi Kurdistan, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and the Movement for a Constitutional Monarchy (MCM).

Who are the groups on which the United States is staking its hopes? Before detailing them, a short history is in order. In 1993,

The opposition to Saddam is tremendously fragmented.

with the CIA's help, the INC began to prepare a military force to attack Saddam's forces in northern Iraq and even recruited officers from Baghdad's elite army units. The INC gained the support of both the PUK and the KDP, but officials in Washington continued to support a military coup option. In May 1994 fighting broke out between the two most important Kurdish factions, although the groups later reconciled.

A paramilitary operation to take the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul in Iraqi Kurdistan was planned for March 1995 with forces backed by the INC, KDP, PUK, the Iraqi Kurd regional government, and the CIA. The operation was designed to "trigger a CIA-backed coup among Iraqi troops" and also a popular insurrection. The administration was hopeful that this operation could be done simply and quickly before the elections in 1996, thus giving President Clinton a badly needed foreign policy accomplishment. But the night before the action unfolded, Gen. Adnan Nuri—a former brigade commander who had been recruited by the CIA to work separately for both the INC and the Iraqi National Accord in 1992—landed in Washington. Nuri reported that the INC had "tricked the CIA and was preparing to draw the United States into a new war with Iraq, something he knew the Clinton administration would avoid at all costs." National Security Adviser Anthony Lake quickly cabled Ahmed Chalabi, the leader of the INC, stating emphatically that "the United States would not support this operation militarily or any other way."[36]

The paramilitary offensive was undertaken anyway and nearly defeated Saddam's Republican Guard troops. In April 1995, one month after the campaign began, the CIA was ordered by the White House to end support for the INC and to change strategy. But the damage was already done. Just as Cuban-Americans lost their faith in the United States after the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, Iraqi opposition forces felt betrayed again and were furious.[37] A sad consequence of that abortive insurgency was that some of the sur-

vivors who came to the United States for refuge were categorized as terrorists and kept in jail for years by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Such actions were hardly a sign of U.S. commitment to the opposition cause.[38]

Subsequently, renewed fighting flared between the KDP and the PUK in northern Iraq's Kurdistan. In August 1995 the KDP invited Iraqi military forces to help its cause. Iraqi forces easily routed both the PUK and the INC. The Clinton administration's response was limited to firing 44 cruise missiles at targets far to the south of the fighting. The administration also extended the southern no-fly zone, which has proven wholly ineffective in protecting the Iraqi Shiites. To this day, Kurdistan continues to be a mixing bowl of rival armies and guerrilla factions. The following is a more detailed description of Iraqi opposition groups.

Kurdish Democratic Party. The group was founded in 1946 by the late Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani. Now led by Barzani's son, Massoud, the KDP remains the dominant Kurdish faction. It has 25,000 to 30,000 fighters based in the northern Iraq town of Salahuddin.[39] The group's main aim—autonomy for Iraq's Kurdish north—has led Barzani to cooperate from time to time with a variety of allies: the United States, Iran under the late shah, and Saddam. But the KDP has been betrayed by the United States twice in recent decades. During the Ford administration, Henry Kissinger cut a deal with the shah of Iran to stop training and arming the Kurds, who had launched a massive insurgency against Iraq. In 1995 the United States refused to support the INC-organized insurgency against Saddam launched from Kurdish territory. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the KDP could ever really trust the United States.

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The PUK splintered from the KDP in 1975 after Iran and Iraq resolved a border dispute and Iran and the United States ended support for the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq.[40] By 1995 the PUK had fallen under Iranian influence. The PUK

is led by Jalal Talabani and has 5,000 to 10,000 fighters based in the northern Iraqi town of Sulaimaniya.

Iraqi National Accord. The INA, founded by Saudi Arabian intelligence after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, consists of defectors from the Iraqi army and security services. The group became a U.S. favorite after the 1995 defection of Saddam's son-in-law, Hussein Kamel. But the Iraqi government penetrated the organization a year later and smashed an INA-organized coup attempt. Once based in Amman, Jordan, the leader of the INC—Iyad Alawi—now lives in London and his support within Iraq is very small.[41]

Iraqi National Congress. Founded in Vienna in 1992 with CIA support, the INC was intended to be an umbrella for the Iraqi opposition, but now it is just the spokes. The group's leader, Ahmed Chalabi, who lives in London, is trying to reorganize the coalition. Chalabi has enlisted support from an all-star team of former American officials. Among them are retired Gen. Wayne Downing, former head of the U.S. Special Operations Command; Warren Marik, who ran a covert CIA program to overthrow Saddam that foundered in 1996; Dewey Clarridge, a former top CIA official involved in the Iran-Contra affair; and former director of central intelligence R. James Woolsey.[42]

Islamic Movement of the Iraqi Kurdistan. Backed by Iran, this group is led by Sheik Ali Abdel Aziz and is based in Halabja—the site of a chemical attack by Iraq in 1988 that killed thousands and is still causing genetic damage and death. The group is devoted to publicizing the Halabja atrocity and lacks armed support.

Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. This group was created in 1982 to increase Iranian control over Iraqi opposition groups belonging to the Shiite faith.[43] SCIRI has 4,000 to 8,000 fighters and is based in southern Iraq. The group's leader, Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, was chosen by Iran's late leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomenni and lives in the Iranian capital, Tehran. Bakr al-Hakim has refused U.S.

offers of aid. Given the patronage that SCIRI receives from Iran, the group is unlikely to cooperate with the United States as long as Washington continues to treat Iran as a rogue state.

Movement for a Constitutional Monarchy. According to Judith Yaphe of the National Defense University, this group has "one fighter."[44] Its leader, Sharif Ali, is a cousin of Iraq's Hashemite King Faisal, who was assassinated in 1958. Ali, who fled Iraq at the age of two, lives in London. The group consists of Ali, a man who brings only his ambition to be Iraq's next king.

Opposition Groups Lack Unity

The groups opposing Saddam are not coordinated. Gen. Anthony Zinni, who commands the U.S. Central Command, which has an area of responsibility that includes Iraq, is well known for his doubts about the opposition. He has characterized it numerous times as fragmented. For example, he noted that "they have very little if any, viability to exact a change of regime in and of themselves. Their ability to cooperate is questionable."[45] In congressional testimony Zinni said: "There are 91 opposition groups, 91. We follow every one of those opposition groups in great detail. I will be honest. I don't see an opposition group that has the viability to overthrow Saddam at this point."[46] In October 1988, when the ILA was being debated, Zinni commented to reporters about attempts to overthrow Iraq:

> I don't think these questions have been thought through or answered. If they have, no one's asked me about it. I'll be honest with you. I don't see the parts that make it sensible. I think a weakened, fragmented, chaotic Iraq—which could happen if this isn't done carefully—is more dangerous in the long run than a contained Saddam is now.[47]

Frank Maestrone, a former U.S. ambassador to Kuwait, wrote: "It is unlikely that any

"A weakened, fragmented, chaotic Iraq is more dangerous in the long run than a contained Saddam is now."

efforts to mobilize the disparate dissident Iraqi elements will succeed. Even if a coherent opposition could be assembled, the fact that it was an American creation would guarantee popular opposition as well as that of potentially dissident military elements. Therefore we should not waste our time and money in the support of a bunch of losers."[48]

And there is criticism of the opposition's leadership. Ali Allawi, Ahmed Chalabi's nephew who helped him set up the INC, argued: "I believe Ahmad [Chalabi] is a great energy field, but his style is not the right style." Allawi and others say Chalabi made the INC a one-man show by refusing to tell fellow elected leaders how much money was being raised and spent.[49] Although Chalabi has backing from members of Congress, he receives little support from other opposition groups.[50] According to one U.S. official, "The thought that Chalabi has enough support and enough unity within these various Iraqi groups is ridiculous."[51]

Other opposition figures believe that some of the groups are tainted by their close association with the United States. As one Iraqi in exile noted, groups like the INC and the INA are discredited partly because they failed in their attempts to overthrow Saddam and partly because they are tainted by their excessive reliance on the CIA. U.S. policy should recognize that the Iraqi population will not rally to the leadership of anyone who is viewed "as an agent or a tool of the United States or British."[52]

No Refuge for Rebels

Another major problem for the opposition groups is that none of Iraq's neighbors are inclined to support them. Historically, successful rebellious movements have been able to retreat to sanctuaries in neighboring countries. There they could take refuge, gain supplies, train, regroup, and prepare new operations. China and North Vietnam provided sanctuaries for the Viet Cong, Pakistan was a refuge for the Afghanistan mujahideen, and South Africa was a sanctuary for Angola's UNITA rebels. Groups opposing Saddam have no such support; no country will host the opposition.

Neighboring countries have not been shy about making their doubts about the ILA known. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan (especially with the recent death of King Hussein and the ascension of his son to power), and Syria are unwilling to go to war with Iraq. Besides, their territories bordering Iraq are mostly sparsely populated deserts—inhospitable terrain for mounting an insurgency. Mountainous or forested terrain provides better sanctuary for guerrillas.

Given the history of half-hearted and fitful U.S. attempts to build opposition to Saddam, the Arab world has greeted new U.S. efforts to overthrow him with some skepticism. In January 1999 two Saudi-owned newspapers in London quoted an unnamed Saudi official as saying that the kingdom is opposed to any foreign role in changing Iraq's government. The official said that any such change should "take place from within Iraq and by the people themselves."[53] Indeed, any lasting beneficial change would have to occur that way.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Maaktum, defense minister of the United Arab Emirates, expressed strong reservations about U.S. attempts to overthrow the Iraqi government. He feared that any political change in Iraq imposed from outside could lead to rifts and civil war.[54] An Omani government statement noted that Sultan Qaboos bin Said emphasized to Martin Indyk, U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries.[55] Qatar, too, has reservations about the U.S. plan. "It is an internal matter for Iraq," a senior Foreign Ministry official said. "We would prefer that this matter should be left to the Iraqi people to decide whether they want a change or not or whom they want as their leader. Any outside interference will not be in the interests of anyone."[56]

Only Turkey and Iran are left as possible

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supporters. But the Turks will not sponsor groups opposed to Iraq because they know that any anti-Saddam insurgency based in Turkey and northern Iraq would center around the Kurds. Ankara worries that supporting such an insurgency would embolden its own Kurdish rebels. The Turks actually prefer to keep Saddam in power and have even favored his efforts to reassert control over Iraqi Kurdistan.[57] Indeed, Turkey was deeply angered when the United States endorsed the establishment of a future Kurdish federation within Iraq. In September 1998 Turkey was also miffed when the United States brought together in Washington the two leading Iraqi Kurdish leaders, Massoud Barzani of the KDP and Jalal Tabani of the PUK, to sign a peace agreement ending more than four years of factional fighting.[58]

Iran does not support the Kurdish opposition in Iraq for the same reason that Turkey shows restraint. Iran has a large Kurdish population and does not want to encourage separatist notions. Although Iran shelters the leader of Iraqi Shiite opposition, it does not provide direct support or sanctuary to the group. Iraq and Iran fought a bloody war in the 1980s, and Iran does not want to antagonize even a weakened Iraq. The Iraqi Shiites rose up after the Gulf War, but that uprising was the result of U.S. exhortation rather than Iranian encouragement.

Be Careful What You Wish For

Although the ILA is unlikely to succeed, one question should be, but rarely is, asked: what if Saddam were overthrown? Even if the opposition could take power, it is questionable whether it could keep it without massive U.S. backing. Some analysts, such as James Woolsey, minimize the problems and argue that a breakup of Iraq is unlikely.[59]

The reality is more complex and ambiguous. Indeed, the consequences might be very unpleasant. Dilip Hiro, a veteran Middle Eastern observer, asked:

> How will such a new ruler cope with inevitable bloodletting as thousands of Iraqis who have suffered under Saddam's rule, kill intelligence agents and Ba'ath Party officials? How will Iran, with a network of agents and sympathizers among Iraqi Shiites, respond to a pro-US general in Baghdad? How will Syria's President Assad, surrounded by hostile Israel, unfriendly Turkey and an untested young King of Jordan, react to the emergence of a pro-US regime to the east? No prizes for the answers, which point toward a civil war in post-Saddam Iraq, which will inevitably draw in Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, and destabilize the whole region.[60]

Indeed, the danger is real that a fragmented post-Saddam Iraq would leave a power vacuum in the Persian Gulf region that other nations would seek to fill. (Ironically, this is likely one of the reasons that the Bush administration did not aid Kurdish and Shiite rebels in 1991.) Also, given that Iraq probably has nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons and missiles, the prospect of anarchy in the aftermath of Saddam is frightening. Yet such an anarchic situation might be cited as another justification for a continued—and perhaps enhanced—U.S. role in the region.

Indeed, putting aside for the moment the prospect of external intervention, the desire for revenge may well be undeniable. An opinion piece in the Canadian press noted:

> Too many Iraqi Kurds and Shiites have suffered at the hands of the present Sunni-dominated regime to forgo revenge. Shiites—comprising about 55 per cent of the population—still grimly remember their own fate, when, at the urging of the Bush administration in 1991, they

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rose up against Saddam, only to be slaughtered when no one came to their rescue. Similarly, the Kurds in northern Iraq (20–25 per cent of the population) also haven't forgotten that when they tried to win autonomy from Baghdad in 1988, the civilian population of several villages was wiped out with mustard gas and cyanide.[61]

Bloodletting is not the only concern. There is no guarantee that the next Iraqi regime will be friendly to the United States. According to Dennis Halliday, former UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, and Jennifer Horan of Boston Mobilization for Survival, the ruling Ba'ath Party is contending with rising political extremism in its ranks—especially among the younger members. U.S.-mounted efforts to organize a coup may backfire. The authors noted that "the new leadership would likely be less, not more cooperative with Western powers."[62]

Halliday elaborated on Saddam's potential long-term problem with radical elements of his own party:

> He has a political problem of his own. People don't quite believe it but there are domestic politics. There is a Ba'ath Party that has two or three million members. There is a parliament. Within the Ba'ath Party there is a new element rising which is frustrated with Saddam Hussein. They consider him a moderate because he's compromising with the United States. He's willing to back down repeatedly on all these ridiculous threats he makes. They're ready to quit the U.N. and throw them all out, go it alone, collaborate with Iran and some of the neighbors. And these people are a danger, and they're going to take over this country in five to 10 years. It's going to be worse, that's what I'm predicting.[63]

If that scenario came to pass, it would not be the first time U.S. policymakers had overlooked the possible consequences of their actions. As one commentator noted: "The United States has tried conquest by proxy before. Sometimes it works (Guatemala in 1954). Sometimes it flops (the Bay of Pigs in 1961). And sometimes—think Afghanistan in the '80s—the United States gets what it prayed for, and only later got a bad case of second thoughts."[64] Throughout the 1980s the U.S. government aided the Islamic opposition in Afghanistan to help them fight Soviet forces that had invaded their country. After the rebels succeeded, U.S. policymakers found that many of the rebels were willing to fight for Islamic terrorists—such as Osama Bin Laden—whose number-one target is the United States.

Lukewarm Support

Yet another obstacle for the opposition is the lukewarm support it receives from the Clinton administration. The administration should not be blamed for its reluctance. The ILA was forced on it by a Congress more interested in scoring rhetorical points than in making sound foreign policy. The administration is at least somewhat more honest in acknowledging the limitations of the opposition groups and is doing only the minimum required to implement the ILA. In March 1999 a U.S. government official argued that by merely naming the groups, the administration has fulfilled the requirements of the law. The ILA allows the administration to transfer military aid to those groups but does not require it.[65] In a series of meetings that same month with House and Senate committees, administration officials cautioned Congress that efforts to unseat Saddam could also destabilize Iraq, produce an even more virulently anti-American regime, or result in a backlash among Iraq's neighbors.[66]

The administration does not believe the time is right to hand out weapons to the

Iraqi opposition groups. As Secretary Indyk testified before Congress:

> Many have called on the President to use this authority [ILA] to arm the Iraqi opposition and support military action against Saddam Hussein. We believe such action is premature. There are a host of issues that must be resolved before such equipment and training could be provided with confidence that it would advance our objectives of promoting a change of regime and not just lead to more Iraqis being killed unnecessarily.[67]

The administration has provided only lukewarm support for the ILA mainly because it believes that Saddam is more likely to be removed from within by a military coup than by the activities of outside groups. Even though Saddam has demonstrated an unparalleled ability to detect and crush all such plots, many in the administration think a coup is still a likely prospect.[68] For example, Frank Maestrone wrote: "If any change is to occur, it will have to come from within the Army, where the only other element of power, besides that in Saddam's hands, resides. Any American clandestine efforts should be concentrated on the military sector."[69] But the INA already tried to generate a coup that Saddam brutally crushed in 1996.

In fact, Frank Ricciardone, the administration's U.S. Special Coordinator for Transition in Iraq, was quoted in the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet* as saying that Saddam will be toppled by a military coup. "All I can say is that it will be very sudden and without warning." He added that "the United States does not have a candidate [to replace Saddam]. . . . A military regime will be in power for some time after the coup."[70] Some analysts speculate that the statement was intended to reassure Turkey that Iraq would not be split up into semiautonomous zones—thus alleviating Turkish fears regarding an independent Kurdistan.

Plans for Overthrowing Saddam Are Nonviable

Even, if by some miracle, all of the above obstacles could be overcome, none of the opposition groups has come up with a viable plan for getting rid of Saddam. The idea that he can be overthrown by the opposition groups has been rightly derided as a fantasy. The most detailed analysis of this argument that has been made public appeared early in 1999 in *Foreign Affairs*.[71] The authors examined the various options that have been under consideration—conducting a massive air campaign, helping the INC to seize large enclaves in Iraq, and using a neighboring state to launch an insurgency (as the United States did in Afghanistan)—and found them all wanting. Any option selected must be militarily feasible, amenable to American friends and allies that must cooperate if the operation is to succeed, and acceptable to the American public. None of the options met those criteria.

Massive air strikes to effect an internal political outcome in a sovereign nation would be unacceptable to American friends in the region and the American public. The enclave approach was tried unsuccessfully immediately after the United States defeated Iraq in 1991, when the Shiites and the Kurds began an uprising. Their efforts were for naught. The Kurds and Shiites were mercilessly slaughtered by the Iraqi military as the United States stood aside and did nothing—even though its forces were in Iraq. As noted earlier, Iraq's neighbors are unwilling to provide a sanctuary for opposition forces.

Conclusion

The rationale for passage of the ILA was that the continued reign of Saddam Hussein presents too many dangers for the world—notably his determination to produce, and possibly use,

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weapons of mass destruction, or WMD (chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons). According to that logic, Saddam must go, and the ILA would help remove him. But the ILA is not likely to achieve that goal. The amount of pressure that opposition groups can bring to bear on Saddam is minimal compared with what has already been tried. If the UN estimates of the human damage in Iraq are roughly correct, economic sanctions may well have caused the deaths of more people in Iraq than have been slain by all so-called WMD throughout history.[72] Unsurprisingly, Saddam has not met the conditions that would allow the sanctions to be lifted. He is willing to suffer the costs of sanctions.

Because over a year has passed since the UN Special Commission conducted effective inspections of Iraqi WMD facilities, the ILA is irrelevant to coping with the primary danger. Saddam has probably continued developing WMD in secret. If the ILA is ineffective, what can take its place? The West could replace general economic sanctions with an export control process that limits Iraq's importation of specific goods that will contribute to its rearmament—especially its development of nuclear weapons.

Although inspections may provide some information on Iraq's development of WMD, they will not prevent Iraq from developing WMD. Iraq lives in a rough neighborhood and has incentives—like other nations in the Middle East—to develop WMD, regardless of who rules the nation. No U.S. policy will prevent that nation from attaining nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons if it so chooses.[73] Thus, the focus should be on deterring the use of those weapons.

The United States has successfully deterred the use of WMD for about 50 years and should be able to deter Iraq from using such weapons in the future. Despite reductions in the U.S. inventory of nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. arsenal is still more than enough to deter the use of any small stockpile of nuclear arms built by Iraq. At the end of 1998, the United States had 500 intercontinental ballistic missiles with 2,000 warheads, 432 Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles on 18 submarines with 3,456 warheads, and 92 bombers with 1,750 bombs and air-launched cruise missiles.[74]

Even the current policy of containing Iraq may be unnecessary. Before the Gulf War, economists from across the political spectrum argued that an Iraqi military takeover of Saudi Arabia would have had little adverse effect on the world oil market or the U.S. economy. But the Iraqi armed forces have since been so degraded by the war and sanctions that it is doubtful whether they could successfully conduct an offensive over an extended distance against Saudi Arabia. In addition, pro-Western neighbors of Iraq—Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council states—are wealthy and could do more to defend themselves but will not if the United States continues to police the Near East.

Someday Saddam will be removed from office—most likely by force. The premise behind the ILA is that the United States needs to do something now because the status quo in Iraq is intolerable. That premise is false. Saddam may be odious, but his regime does not pose a serious threat to America's security. Even the threat he poses to neighboring states is less than it was at the beginning of the decade.

Thus, the United States needs to take only limited actions to monitor and constrain Saddam's military capabilities. Given the demonstrated inability of the opposition to work together or come up with a realistic strategy to remove Saddam and given U.S. reluctance to pay the costs necessary to overthrow him, the United States should not give military support to the opposition. U.S. policy should instead be to lift general economic sanctions in exchange for some kind of renewed WMD inspection program, while continuing a selective embargo on military weaponry.

Although this policy prescription is unlikely to please the zealots calling for Saddam's head—especially as the American election cycle progresses—it does offer a realis-

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tic way to deal with an overblown threat and alleviate the sanctions-induced suffering of the Iraqi people. That prescription also avoids sacrificing the lives of more innocent Iraqi citizens, whose only mistake was to believe what the United States said about the need for a "regime change" in Iraq. If the United States could patiently outwait a superpower adversary during the long years of the Cold War, it can certainly wait for the collapse of a petty tyrant in a small nation that poses little direct threat to the United States.

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