

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Iraq: U.S. Efforts to Change the Regime

March 22, 2002

Kenneth Katzman
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Iraq: U.S. Efforts to Change the Regime

Summary

In his January 29, 2002 State of the Union message, President Bush characterized Iraq as part of an “axis of evil,” along with Iran and North Korea. The President identified the key threat from Iraq as its development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and the potential for Iraq to transfer WMD to the terrorist groups it sponsors. The President’s speech left observers with the clear implication that the Administration is planning to take additional steps to achieve the ouster of Iraq’s President Saddam Husayn and his Ba’th Party regime. In comments after the speech, senior U.S. officials reiterated that it was already U.S. policy to work toward a change of Iraq’s regime.

The President’s comments raised the possibility that the Administration might try to go beyond previous efforts to destabilize Iraq by aiding internal opponents of the regime. Those efforts have been pursued, with varying degrees of intensity, since the end of the Gulf war in 1991. According to several experts, past efforts to change the regime floundered because of limited U.S. engagement, disorganization of the Iraqi opposition, and the efficiency and ruthlessness of Iraq’s several overlapping intelligence and security forces. Some past U.S. efforts focused on an attempt to promote a military coup from within Iraq’s regime, while other U.S. activities consisted primarily of supporting organized opposition groups composed of groups outside Iraq’s current power structure.

Some experts believe that the removal of Saddam Husayn would require substantially more U.S. assistance to the opposition than has been dedicated to this purpose previously, or the direct use of U.S. armed force. Some are concerned that Saddam’s removal could lead to the fragmentation of Iraq and not necessarily produce a stable regime that is attuned to U.S. values and U.S. interests. There are also concerns that most Western and virtually all Arab governments have publicly stated opposition to a U.S. military effort against Iraq.

An alternative view is that the Iraqi opposition is stronger than widely believed, and that a minor amount of U.S. help could bring it to power. Some believe that almost any successor regime would be preferable to that of Saddam Husayn, and that Saddam’s removal would almost certainly bring an end to Iraq’s WMD programs. Advocates of forceful steps to change Iraq’s regime maintain that Iraq’s neighbors would support a U.S. overthrow effort, even if it involves the direct use of U.S. military force, provided the effort succeeds. Congress, in various legislative measures including the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, has made clear its support for changing Iraq’s regime. However, some Members have questioned the costs and risks of strategies currently under discussion.

Contents

Past Attempts to Oust Saddam	1
An Opposition Coalition Emerges	2
The Iraqi National Congress	2
The Fragmentation of the Opposition	3
Rebuilding an Opposition Strategy	4
Iraq Liberation Act (ILA)	5
Continued Debate Over Policy	6
Bush Administration Policy	6
Pre-September 11 Policy	7
Policy Post-September 11	8
Congressional Reactions	11
Appendix. U.S. Assistance to the Opposition (Appropriated Economic Support Funds, E.S.F.)	13

Iraq: U.S. Efforts to Change the Regime

The United States has been attempting to change Iraq's regime since the 1991 Persian Gulf war, although achieving this goal was not declared policy until 1998. In November 1998, amid a crisis with Iraq over U.N. weapons of mass destruction (WMD) inspections, the Clinton Administration stated that the United States would seek not only to contain Iraq, but to promote a change of regime. Bush Administration officials say this is still the policy of the United States. This paper discusses past and current U.S. efforts to oust Saddam Husayn and the current debate over the implementation of that policy.

Past Attempts to Oust Saddam

Prior to the launching on January 16, 1991 of Operation Desert Storm, an operation that reversed Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush called on the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam. Within days of the end of the Gulf war (February 28, 1991), opposition Shiite Muslims in southern Iraq and Kurdish factions in northern Iraq, emboldened by the regime's defeat and the hope of U.S. support, launched significant rebellions.¹ The revolt in southern Iraq reached the suburbs of Baghdad, but enough Republican Guard forces had survived the war to defeat the Shiite rebels by mid-March 1991. The Kurds, benefitting from a U.S.-led "no fly zone" established in April 1991, were able to carve out an autonomous zone in northern Iraq, and remain free of Iraqi rule today.

According to press reports, about two months after the failure of the Shiite uprising, President George H.W. Bush forwarded to Congress an intelligence finding stating that the United States would undertake efforts to promote a military coup against Saddam Husayn; a reported \$15 million to \$20 million was allocated for that purpose.² The Administration apparently believed -- and this view apparently still is shared by many experts and U.S. officials -- that a coup by elements within the current regime could produce a favorable new government without fragmenting Iraq. Many observers, however, including neighboring governments, feared that Shiite and Kurdish groups, if they ousted Saddam, would divide Iraq into warring ethnic and tribal groups, opening Iraq to influence from neighboring Iran, Turkey, and Syria.

¹Shiites constitute about 65% of Iraq's population but historically have been repressed and under-represented in governing bodies by the members of the Sunni Muslim sect. Kurds, who are not Arabs, constitute about 20% of the population of about 20 million.

²Tyler, Patrick. "Plan On Iraq Coup Told To Congress." *New York Times*, February 9, 1992.

An Opposition Coalition Emerges

Reports in July 1992 of a serious but unsuccessful coup attempt suggested that the U.S. strategy might ultimately succeed. However, there was disappointment within the George H.W. Bush Administration that the coup had failed and a decision was made to shift the U.S. approach from promotion of a coup to supporting the diverse opposition groups that had led the postwar rebellions. The Kurdish, Shiite, and other opposition elements were coalescing into a broad and diverse movement that appeared to be gaining support internationally. Congress more than doubled the budget for covert support to the opposition groups to about \$40 million for FY1993.³

The Iraqi National Congress

The Iraqi National Congress (INC) served as the vehicle for U.S. support. The INC was formed when the two main Kurdish militias — the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), headed by Masud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), headed by Jalal Talabani — participated in a June 1992 meeting in Vienna of dozens of opposition groups. In October 1992, the major Shiite groups came into the coalition when the INC met in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. Selected to chair the INC's Executive Committee was Ahmad Chalabi, a secular Shiite Muslim and U.S.-trained mathematician who had fled Iraq to Jordan in the late 1950s, before the Ba'th Party took power in Iraq (July 1968). He eventually chaired the Petra Bank there, but later ran afoul of Jordanian authorities on charges of financial malfeasance. Chalabi maintains that the Jordanian government was pressured by Iraq to turn against him.

The INC initially appeared viable because it brought under one banner varying Iraqi ethnicities and diverse political ideologies, including nationalists, ex-military officers, and defectors from Iraq's ruling Ba'th Party. The Kurds provided the INC with a source of armed force and a presence on Iraqi territory. Its constituent groups nominally united around a platform that appeared to match U.S. values and interests, including human rights, democracy, pluralism, the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity, and compliance with U.N. Security Council resolutions on Iraq.⁴ However, many observers doubted its commitment to democracy, because most of its groups have an authoritarian internal structure, and because of inherent tensions among its varied ethnic groups and ideologies.

Some observers believe the Kurds would seek independence or full autonomy from a post-Saddam Iraq. Turkey, which has a sizable Kurdish population in the areas bordering northern Iraq, particularly fears independence for Iraq's Kurds. Turkey believes that outcome would likely touch off an effort to unify into a broader "Kurdistan." Iraq's Kurds have been fighting intermittently for autonomy since their

³Sciolino, Elaine. "Greater U.S. Effort Backed To Oust Iraqi." *New York Times*, June 2, 1992.

⁴The Iraqi National Congress and the International Community. Document provided by INC representatives, February 1993.

region was incorporated into the newly formed Iraqi state after World War I. In 1961, the KDP, then led by founder Mullah Mustafa Barzani, began an insurgency that has continued until today, although interrupted by periods of autonomy negotiations with Baghdad. The PUK split off from the KDP in the 1960s. Together, the PUK and KDP have about 35,000 fighters. A small Kurdish Islamic faction, the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK), is headed by Shaykh Ali Abd-al Aziz. Based in Halabja, Iraq, the IMIK has been publicizing the effects of Baghdad's March 1988 chemical attack on that city.

Several outside experts have concerns about the alliance between Iran and another INC component, the Iraqi Shiite Islamic fundamentalist group called the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI was set up in 1982 to increase Iranian control over Shiite opposition groups in Iraq and the Persian Gulf states. Its leader, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, was the late Ayatollah Khomeini's choice to head an Islamic Republic of Iraq. It has as many as 5,000 fighters organized into a "Badr Corps" (named after a major battle in early Islam) that conducts forays from Iran into southern Iraq to attack the Iraqi military and officials there. Although Iran has improved relations with Iraq over the past few years, Iran's Revolutionary Guard – which is politically aligned with Iran's hard line civilian officials – reportedly continues to provide the Badr Corps with weapons and other assistance. However, many Iraqi Shiites view SCIRI as an Iranian creation and SCIRI/Badr Corps operations in southern Iraq have not been known to spark broad popular unrest against the Iraqi regime. SCIRI has periodically distanced itself from the INC and has publicly refused to attend opposition meetings in the United States or accept U.S. assistance.

The Fragmentation of the Opposition

The differences within the INC led to its near collapse in the mid 1990s. In May 1994, the KDP and the PUK began clashing with each other over territory, customs revenues levied at border with Turkey, and control over the Kurdish enclave's government based in Irbil. The PUK lined up support from Iran while the KDP sought and received countervailing backing from its erstwhile nemeses, the Baghdad government. The infighting contributed to the defeat of an INC offensive against Iraqi troops in March 1995; the KDP pulled out of the offensive at the last minute. Although it was repelled, the offensive did initially overrun some of the less well-trained and poorly motivated Iraqi units on the front lines facing the Kurds. Some INC leaders have pointed to the battle as an indication that the INC could succeed militarily in the future if it were given additional resources and training.

The infighting in the INC caused the United States to briefly revisit the "coup strategy" by renewing ties to a separate group, Iraq National Accord (INA).⁵ The INA consisted of military and security defectors who were perceived as having ties to disgruntled officials currently serving within their former organizations. The INA's prospects appeared to brighten in August 1995 when Saddam's son-in-law Husayn

⁵An account of this shift in U.S. strategy is essayed in Hoagland, Jim. "How CIA's Secret War On Saddam Collapsed." *Washington Post*, June 26, 1997.

Kamil al-Majid — architect of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs — defected to Jordan, suggesting that Saddam's grip on the military and security services was weakening. Jordan's King Hussein agreed to allow the INA to operate from there. However, the INA became penetrated by Iraq's intelligence services and, in June 1996, Baghdad dealt it a serious setback by arresting or executing over 100 INA sympathizers in the military. Its leader, Dr. Iyad Alawi, claims that the INA continues to operate throughout Iraq, and it apparently has rebuilt itself to some extent since the June 1996 arrests.

Iraq's counteroffensive against the opposition was completed two months later. In late August 1996, the KDP asked Baghdad to provide armed support for its capture of Irbil from the rival PUK. Iraq took advantage of the request to strike against the INC base in Salahuddin, northern Iraq, as well as against remaining INA operatives throughout northern Iraq. In the course of its incursion in the north, Iraq reportedly executed two hundred oppositionists and arrested as many as 2,000 others. The United States evacuated from northern Iraq and eventually resettled in the United States 650 oppositionists, mostly from the INC.

Rebuilding an Opposition Strategy

For the two years following the opposition's 1996 setbacks, the Clinton Administration had little contact with the opposition. In those two years, the INC, INA, and other opposition groups attempted to rebuild their organizations and their ties to each other, although with mixed success. On February 26, 1998, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright testified to a Senate Appropriations subcommittee that it would be "wrong to create false or unsustainable expectations" about what U.S. support for the opposition could accomplish. However, Iraq's obstructions of U.N. weapons of mass destruction (WMD) inspections during 1997-98 led to growing congressional calls for overthrowing Saddam Husayn, and contributed to the Clinton Administration's open declaration in November 1998 that it is U.S. policy to change Iraq's regime.

A congressional push for a regime change policy began with a FY1998 supplemental appropriation (P.L. 105-174, signed May 1, 1998) that, among other provisions, earmarked \$5 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) for the opposition and \$5 million for a Radio Free Iraq, under the direction of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). The radio service began broadcasting in October 1998, from Prague. Of the ESF, \$3 million was devoted to an overt program to coordinate and promote cohesion among the various opposition factions, and to highlighting Iraqi violations of U.N. resolutions. The remaining \$2 million was used to publicize evidence of alleged Iraqi war crimes, retrieved from the Kurdish north, and subsequently placed on 176 CD-ROM diskettes.

Reflecting congressional views that the overt coordination program did little to challenge Iraq's regime, a provision of the FY1999 omnibus appropriation (Section 590 of H.R. 4328, P.L. 105-277, signed October 21, 1998), earmarked \$8 million in ESF to the opposition, with the stipulation that at least \$3 million in ESF be given directly to the INC and at least another \$2 million be used for opposition activities

inside Iraq itself. The provision also appeared to indicate that many in Congress believed that the INC was the most effective vehicle to implement the regime change policy. The remaining \$3 million went to the opposition-led INDICT (International Campaign to Indict Iraqi War Criminals) organization for publicizing Iraqi war crimes issues. The \$2 million for use inside Iraq was spent on humanitarian projects mainly in the Kurdish north, according to the State Department. Another \$10 million in ESF for the opposition was provided by the FY2000 foreign aid law (passed by reference in P.L. 106-113, signed November 29, 1999). Of that amount, \$2 million was earmarked for war crimes issues.

Iraq Liberation Act (ILA)

The clearest indication of congressional support for a more robust U.S. overthrow effort was encapsulated in another bill introduced in 1998 – the Iraq Liberation Act (*ILA*, H.R. 4655, P.L. 105-338, signed into law October 31, 1998). The ILA gave the President authority to provide up to \$97 million in defense articles (and \$2 million in broadcasting funds) to opposition organizations to be designated by the Administration. The Act's passage was widely interpreted as an expression of congressional support for the concept, advocated by INC chairman Ahmad Chalabi and some U.S. policy experts, to promote an insurgency by using U.S. airpower to protect opposition-controlled enclaves. President Clinton signed the legislation despite reported widespread doubts within the Clinton Administration about the chances of success in promoting an insurgency inside Iraq. In January 1999, career diplomat Frank Ricciardone was named as the State Department's "Coordinator for the Transition in Iraq," – the chief liaison with the opposition. On February 5, 1999, after consultations with Congress, the President issued a determination (P.D. 99-13) that the following organizations would be eligible to receive U.S. military assistance under the Iraq Liberation Act: the INC; the INA; the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK); the KDP; the PUK; the Movement for Constitutional Monarchy (MCM); and SCIRI. The IMIK and the MCM, in particular, are considered small movements that cannot contribute much to an overthrow effort.

In May 1999, in concert with an INC visit to Washington, the Clinton Administration announced it would draw down \$5 million worth of training and "non-lethal" defense equipment under the ILA. In late 1999, three opposition members began civil administration training at Hurlburt air base in Florida and, in June 2000, the Clinton Administration announced that another 145 oppositionists would undergo similar training. The Defense Department-run courses provide civil affairs training, including instruction in field medicine, logistics, computers, communications, broadcasting, power generation, and war crimes issues. However, the Clinton Administration asserted that the opposition was not sufficiently organized to merit U.S. provision of lethal military equipment or combat training. These limitations reflected divisions within and outside the Clinton Administration over the effectiveness and viability of the opposition, and over the potential for the United States to become militarily embroiled in civil conflict in Iraq.

Continued Debate Over Policy

U.S. efforts after 1999 to rebuild and train the opposition did not end the debate within the Clinton Administration over this component of Iraq policy. In hearings and statements, several Members of both parties expressed disappointment with the Clinton Administration's decision not to give the opposition lethal military aid or combat training. Many took those decisions as an indication that the Clinton Administration was skeptical of the overthrow strategy in light of past failures to oust Saddam Husayn. Others believed the Clinton Administration erred in publicly declaring a policy of overthrow, on the grounds that a public declaration raised expectations of U.S. action to achieve that objective. Opponents of the overthrow policy maintained that nothing short of substantial direct U.S. military involvement would guarantee an opposition victory, and that such involvement was risky and not justified by the threat posed by Iraq. Other critics suggested the United States focus instead on rebuilding an international coalition to contain Iraq, in part by achieving re-entry into Iraq of the U.N. weapons of mass destruction inspectors that had been absent from Iraq since December 15, 1998.

As a reflection of continued congressional support for the overthrow effort, a provision of the FY2001 foreign aid appropriation (H.R. 4811, P.L. 106-429, signed November 6, 2000) earmarked \$25 million in ESF for "programs benefitting the Iraqi people," of which at least: \$12 million was for the INC to distribute humanitarian aid inside Iraq; \$6 million was for INC broadcasting; and \$2 million was for war crimes issues. According to the appropriation the remaining \$5 million could be used to aid the seven groups eligible to receive assistance under the ILA. Taking note of congressional sentiment for INC distribution of aid inside Iraq, on September 29, 2000 the Clinton Administration reached agreement with the INC to provide the organization with \$4 million in FY1999 ESF (one half the total earmark available) to develop an aid distribution plan and to gather information in Iraq on Iraqi war crimes. Three days before it left office, the Clinton Administration issued a required report to Congress that noted that any INC effort to distribute aid in areas of Iraq under Baghdad's control would be fraught with security risks to the INC, to Iraqi recipients of such aid, and to any relief distributors with which the INC contracts.⁶ On February 2, 2001, the Bush Administration confirmed that, shortly after President Bush took office, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) granted the INC a license to proceed with the information gathering portion of the humanitarian aid distribution plan.

Bush Administration Policy

Bush Administration policy toward Iraq appears to have changed after the September 11 terrorist attacks, even though no hard evidence has come to light linking Iraq to those attacks. The shift toward a more assertive policy became clear

⁶U.S. Department of State. *Washington File*. Clinton Sends Report on Iraq to Congress. January 17, 2001.

in President Bush's State of the Union message on January 29, 2002, when he characterized Iraq as part of an "axis of evil," along with Iran and North Korea.

Pre-September 11 Policy

Throughout most of its first year, the Bush Administration continued most elements of Clinton Administration policy. With no clear consensus within the new Administration on how forcefully to proceed with an overthrow strategy, Secretary of State Powell focused on strengthening containment of Iraq, which the Bush Administration said had eroded substantially in the year prior to its taking office. Secretary Powell visited the Middle East in February 2001 to enlist regional support for a modification of the U.N. sanctions regime to ensure that no weapons-related technology reaches Iraq. His plan offered to alter the U.N.-sponsored "oil-for-food" program by relaxing U.N. restrictions on exports to Iraq of civilian equipment and needed non-military technology.⁷ The United States asserted that this step would alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people. Powell, who has sometimes openly expressed skepticism about the opposition's prospects, barely raised the regime change issue during his trip or in his March 7, 2001 testimony before the House International Relations Committee, at which he was questioned about Iraq.⁸

Even though several senior officials had been strong advocates of an overthrow policy, many of the questions about the wisdom and difficulty of that strategy that had faced previous administrations were debated in the Bush Administration.⁹ Aside from restating the U.S. policy of regime change, the Bush Administration said little about the regime change strategy throughout most of its first year. During his confirmation hearings as Deputy Secretary of Defense, a reported strong advocate of overthrow, Paul Wolfowitz, said that if there were a real option to overthrow Saddam Husayn, "I would think it was worthwhile," although he also stated that he did not yet see a "plausible plan" for changing the regime. Like its predecessor, the Bush Administration declined to provide the opposition with lethal aid, combat training, or a commitment of direct U.S. military help. It eliminated the separate State Department position of "Coordinator for the Transition in Iraq," further casting doubt on its enthusiasm for the overthrow strategy. The Bush Administration also refused to back the INC plan to rebuild its presence inside Iraq by distributing humanitarian aid. However, these possibilities were left open pending the outcome of a policy review.

Possibly signaling skepticism about the value of the INC in an overthrow plan, there were some indications that the Bush Administration began to build ties to opposition elements other than the INC, such as ex-military officers or ex-Ba'th Party officials. In March 2001, a senior official seemed to suggest to journalists that covert

⁷For more information on this program, see CRS Report RL30472, *Iraq: Oil For Food Program*, July 10, 2001, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁸Perlez, Jane. Powell Goes on the Road and Scores Some Points. *New York Times*, March 2, 2001.

⁹One account of Bush Administration internal debates on the strategy is found in, Hersh, Seymour. The Debate Within. *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2002.

options were under consideration, saying that, “The INC has a role to play, but there may be other things we want to do.”¹⁰ Some viewed the outreach to non-INC figures as a signal that the Bush Administration might be considering returning to the “coup strategy” pursued on several occasions in previous administrations.

Many in Congress, on the other hand, continued to support the INC as a viable and immediately available vehicle for achieving regime change. Partly in deference to congressional sentiment, according to several observers, the Bush Administration continued to expand its ties to the INC. In August 2001, the INC began satellite television broadcasts into Iraq, from London, called Liberty TV. The station was funded by the ESF aid appropriated by Congress, with start-up costs of \$1 million and an estimated additional \$2.7 million per year in operating costs.¹¹

Policy Post-September 11

Bush Administration policy toward Iraq became notably more assertive after September 11. Almost immediately after the U.S.-led war on the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan began in early October 2001, speculation began building that the Administration might try to change Iraq’s regime through direct use of military force as part of a “phase two” of the war on terrorism. Some in the Administration are said to believe that Iraq might have had a connection to the September 11 attacks or the subsequent anthrax mailings, although many press reports have downplayed such connections. Those who see a direct Iraqi connection tend to attach significance to official Czech accounts of a purported April 2001 meeting in Prague between September 11 hijacking leader Mohammad Atta and an Iraqi intelligence officer. Others point to a recent report that an Islamic group linked to Al Qaeda and which is operating in Northern Iraq, has links to the Iraqi government.¹² On the other hand, Baghdad does not control Northern Iraq and some U.S. officials, speaking on background, have said they cannot verify this report.¹³

Other U.S. officials reportedly maintain that Iraq’s purported commitment to developing WMD – coupled with its support for terrorist groups to which Iraq might transfer WMD – constitute an unacceptable potential threat to the United States and that major U.S. military action could be justified. This view was represented in President Bush’s January 29, 2002 State of the Union message, in which he named Iraq, along with North Korea and Iran, as part of an “axis of evil” against which, according to the President, the United States might act preemptively. In the aftermath of the speech, senior Administration officials said that the President’s characterization was meant to identify the perceived threat, but did not necessarily imply that military action against any of the three states, including Iraq, was imminent.

¹⁰Sipress, Alan. Powell Defends Stand on Iraq. *Washington Post*, March 8, 2001.

¹¹ Sipress, Alan. U.S. Funds Satellite TV to Iraq. *Washington Post*, August 16, 2001.

¹² Goldberg, Jeffrey. The Great Terror. *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2002.

¹³U.S. Uncertain About Northern Iraq Group’s Link to Al Qaida. Dow Jones Newswire, March 18, 2002.

In conjunction with the presidential and other statements on Iraq, press reports in early 2002, often quoting Administration sources, discussed numerous scenarios and purported U.S. planning to achieve a change of Iraq's regime. Several of the reports indicated that some in the Administration believe that successful U.S. military operations that brought down the Taliban in Afghanistan could easily be replicated in Iraq to depose Saddam Husayn.¹⁴ Other U.S. defense officials were said to believe that the overthrow of Saddam Husayn by the U.S. military, while achievable, would require a robust U.S. military effort. Those who subscribe to this view believe that the Iraqi opposition is too weak to fully capitalize on a military campaign by U.S. airstrikes and special operations forces alone, particularly against an Iraqi military that is much larger than was that of the Taliban, and that direct U.S. ground combat would be required. Some defense experts speculated that a force of 200,000 or more U.S. troops would be needed to ensure success, although others feel that a smaller force could accomplish that mission, and with relatively few U.S. casualties.¹⁵ A major issue in the debate over this scenario appears to be over whether Iraq's military would quickly unravel or rebel against Saddam Husayn in the face of U.S. military action, or whether it would fight hard to defend the regime.

The reports of Administration planning for military confrontation with Iraq prompted both support and criticism from outside experts. Several of the critics cite statements from several Arab leaders that a military attack on Iraq, in the absence of a clear Iraqi provocation, would lack regional support, and that a U.S. military move against Iraq could destabilize the region further in the context of ongoing Israeli-Palestinian violence. Several Arab leaders made public comments along these lines to Vice President Cheney during his March 2002 visit to the region, although aides to the Vice President told journalists that the Arab leaders were more supportive of the United States in private. Some experts say that Arab leaders would at least tacitly back a U.S. military effort to overthrow Saddam if the United States assures them it would complete that mission.

Some analysis suggested that the United States might be far from any decision to use military force to change Iraq's regime or reduce its WMD capabilities. Indicating that it was taking into account allied calls for diplomatic efforts to restart weapons inspections, the Administration publicly supported a March 7, 2002 meeting between Iraq and the U.N. Secretary-General to discuss the re-entry of U.N. weapons inspection teams to Iraq. Most experts believe negotiations on new inspections will likely be prolonged, and that these talks could push the horizon for any U.S. military action against Iraq well into the future. Others believe the Administration is likely at least informally, to set a deadline for Iraq's readmission of the inspectors.

Several press reports and Administration statements suggested that a U.S. confrontation of Iraq might not involve overt military action, but might be conducted covertly. Some believe the United States might pursue covert overthrow options prior to and independent of any decision to use military force against Iraq. A few

¹⁴ Slavin, Barbara. U.S. Examining Options to Deal With Hussein. *USA Today*, February 12, 2002.

¹⁵ Scarborough, Rowan. Military 'Leaning Forward' To Gird For War in Iraq. *Washington Times*, March 18, 2002.

press reports said that, in recent weeks, the Administration has stepped up planning for covert action to destabilize Iraq's regime.¹⁶

The INC appears to be a major factor in the purported U.S. planning efforts but it is also apparent that the Administration does not want to rely solely on promoting an INC-led insurgency. According to observers, the Administration believes the INC is making little progress in developing itself into a force that could challenge Iraq's regime, although others believe it could gain strength quickly if it were given a firm U.S. commitment and some lethal assistance.¹⁷

Increasing U.S. outreach to Iraqi former military officers suggests that the Administration might want to return to the strategy of promoting a coup d'état, rather than an opposition insurgency, or perhaps that it is considering the pursuit of both plans simultaneously.¹⁸ One press report said that the CIA had developed a plan, approved by President Bush, to arm the INC-related forces while also working to encourage defections within the Iraqi military.¹⁹ On February 28, 2002, the State Department said it was discussing the possibility of a conference of former Iraqi military officers – a conference that might include but would not be limited to the INC – as part of a process of broadening the opposition coalition against Iraq.²⁰ Some observers say that the Administration is considering designated groups, notably on ex-military officers and tribes close to the regime, as eligible to receive assistance under the Iraq Liberation Act. At the same time, another report said that the Administration would finance the building of a broadcasting facility – either in northern Iraq or in Iran – run by the INC, as part of a stepped up program to undermine Iraq's regime.²¹ In early 2001, the Bush Administration had granted the INC a license to open an office in Iran, a license made necessary by U.S. sanctions against Iran that ban any U.S. aid to that country.

Although the INC appears to continue to be a significant factor in Administration planning, there are signs of strain between the opposition group and Administration officials. In recent press interviews, Ahmad Chalabi has openly criticized the Administration for refusing to give the organization the lethal aid it wants, and he has expressed mistrust of the CIA. In September 2001, the State Department's Office of Inspector General issued an audit of the group's use of U.S. funds and found several examples of misuse, including expenditures for health club memberships, artwork, and

¹⁶Scarborough, Rowan. White House Wants Saddam Out of Power by 2005. *Washington Times*, February 22, 2002.

¹⁷Gordon, Michael. Iraqis Seek to Oust Hussein With U.S. Military Training. *New York Times*, February 1, 2002.

¹⁸Nasrawi, Salah. Military Exiles Are Courted For Iraq Coup. *Washington Times*, March 13, 2002.

¹⁹Slavin, Barbara. U.S. Stirs Efforts to Oust Saddam. *USA Today*, February 28, 2002.

²⁰Excerpt: U.S. Iraqi Opposition Discuss Broad Based Conference. *Washington File*, February 28, 2002.

²¹Gordon, Michael. Radio Transmitter To Oppose Hussein Wins U.S. Support. *New York Times*, February 28, 2002.

household appliances.²² As a result of the audit, the State Department temporarily suspended ESF grants to the INC, although funding resumed in late January 2002 on the grounds that the INC was taking steps to address the deficiencies noted in the audit.

Congressional Reactions

Congress, like the Administration, appears to have divergent views on the mechanisms for promoting regime change. Some Members have, at times, urged a more assertive U.S. regime change effort than that reportedly being considered within the Administration. On December 20, 2001, the House passed H.J.Res. 75, by a vote of 392-12, calling Iraq's refusal to readmit U.N. weapons inspectors a "mounting threat" to the United States. The resolution did not call for new U.S. steps to overthrow Saddam Husayn but a few Members, including Representative Benjamin Gilman and Representative Dana Rohrabacher, called for the overthrow of Saddam Husayn in their floor statements in support of the resolution. In a joint appearance with Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden on Cable News Network on February 17, 2002, House International Relations Committee Chairman Henry Hyde said that "...supporting the underground, the opposition, the internal opposition, is to me the procedure of choice. That is an option that is being worked on. All of these options are under consideration."

Several Members have spoken strongly in favor of the INC and urged direct U.S. funding for that organization. In early December 2001, a bipartisan group of nine Members – Senators John McCain, Jesse Helms, Richard Shelby, Sam Brownback, Joseph Lieberman, and Trent Lott and Representatives Henry Hyde, Benjamin Gilman, and Harold Ford Jr. – wrote to President Bush to urge that U.S. assistance be provided to the INC for operations inside Iraq itself. According to the letter,

Despite the express wishes of the Congress, the INC has been denied U.S. assistance for any operations inside any part of Iraq, including liberated Kurdish areas. Instead, successive Administrations have funded conferences, offices and other intellectual exercises that have done little more than expose the INC to accusations of being "limousine insurgents" and "armchair guerrillas."

Some Members have expressed concerns about the costs and risks of an all-out U.S. effort to achieve that result. On the CNN appearance noted above, Senator Biden said "...there is not a single, informed person I have ever spoken to, for or against moving into Iraq, that thinks you can move into Iraq now, take down Saddam Husayn, and have any real prospect that there will be a unified, central government that is able to maintain control of the Kurds in the north and the Shi'as in the south and the Sunnis in the middle, et cetera."

Others have questioned the past U.S. reliance on the INC for its regime change strategy. In consideration of assistance to the opposition for FY2002, despite the support for the INC expressed by the nine Members in their letter to President Bush,

²²Department of State. Office of Inspector General. Review of Awards to Iraqi National Congress Support Foundation. Report Number 01-FMA-R-092. September 2001.

Congress criticized the INC. The criticism signaled doubts among many in Congress about the organization's viability and its role in the U.S. overthrow effort, and appears to have contributed to the decision by the Bush Administration to broaden its opposition contacts beyond the INC. The conference report on the FY2002 foreign aid appropriation (H.R. 2506/P.L. 107-115, H.Rept. 107-345) accepted Senate language referring to the critical State Department audit of the INC mentioned above, stating:

[Conference] Managers are troubled by the recent audit by the State Department Inspector General on the use of prior year funds appropriated for this program. The managers also note that this section does not impose restrictions on which groups may receive those funds or on the use of funds for activities inside Iraq. As part of the consultation process regarding the use of these funds, the managers expect the Department to identify options for the transfer of funding to more appropriate sources.

Appendix. U.S. Assistance to the Opposition (Appropriated Economic Support Funds, E.S.F.)

(Figures in millions of dollars)

	INC	War Crimes	Broadcasting	Unspecified Opposition Activities	Total
FY 1998 (P.L. 105-174)		2.0	5.0 (RFE/RL)	3.0	10.0
FY 1999 (P.L. 105-277)	3.0	3.0		2.0	8.0
FY 2000 (P.L. 106-113)		2.0		8.0	10.0
FY 2001 (P.L. 106-429)	12.0 (aid distribution inside Iraq)	2.0	6.0 (INC radio)	5.0	25.0
FY 2002 (P.L. 107-115)				25.0	25.0
Total (FY1998- FY 2002)	15.0	9.0	11.0	43.0	78.0
FY2003 (request)				25.0	25.0