**1001- ARTICLE**

*Article Content*

THREATS AND RESPONSES: THE IRAQ OPPOSITION; Iraq Opposition Is Pursuing Ties With Iranians

By Lowell Bergman, Section A, Page 1

Dec. 13, 2002

In advance of the expected war against Iraq, the American-backed Iraqi opposition is solidifying ties to Iran, part of what President Bush has called the ''axis of evil,'' and opposing the possibility of an American-installed government in a postwar Iraq.

Leaders of all the major opposition groups, including an Iranian-backed group that represents Shiite Muslims and two Kurdish groups that have tens of thousands of troops on the ground, warned that while they welcomed American help in overthrowing President Saddam Hussein, Iraqis would not tolerate an American military occupation afterward or an American ''viceroy'' to govern Iraq, as some administration officials have contemplated.

''If we don't accept an Iraqi general, how are we going to accept an American general?'' said Jalal Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, expressing a view echoed by his historic and equally well-armed Kurdish rivals, the Kurdish Democratic Party.

In interviews as they prepared for an American-supported unity conference in London that begins on Saturday, the dissidents said they would not be bound by American recommendations that they refrain from establishing either a provisional government or a national assembly. The exiles' declaration prepared for the conference specifically recommends establishing a constituent assembly on their own timetable.

Several Iraqi representatives said they agreed with Washington that it might be premature to create a provisional government when Mr. Hussein is still in power. Many others, however, resisted what they called the administration's effort to dictate ground rules to the opposition in written instructions signed by officials including Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage and I. Lewis Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff.

Kanan Makiya, a professor at Brandeis University and a leading Iraqi intellectual who helped draft the declaration for the conference, said the exile groups did not want an American military ruler.

''There is an Iraqi need here that's at least as great as the American need to have an event that shows that the Iraqis consider this a celebration and not an occupation or a purely military operation,'' he said.

Professor Makiya was part of a group that briefed Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security adviser, on the opposition agenda twice in the last three weeks.

A State Department official confirmed in a telephone interview from Washington that the administration did not want the opposition groups to form a provisional government or create a national assembly now.

''We want an advisory committee to work with the coalition, and a unified opposition message that the opposition is committed to a democratic, multiethnic Iraq that maintains its territorial integrity, rejects weapons of mass destruction, lives in peace with its neighbors and complies with United Nations Security Council resolutions,'' the official said.

The official said the administration was not concerned about Iraqi exiles' contact with Iran. He said the conversations filled a gap because the administration was not talking directly to Tehran. He also said Iraqi exiles and other sources had told the administration that Iran intended to play a passive role in any military conflict in Iraq.

The talks between exile leaders and Iran this week were featured on the front pages of Tehran's leading newspaper. Among those present was Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party, who had been estranged from Iran for years.

Also attending was Ahmad Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress, the umbrella opposition group. The conference has raised Mr. Chalabi's political profile and influence. At times a polarizing force both among opposition groups as well as in Washington, Mr. Chalabi has enjoyed strong support from senior civilian officials at the Pentagon and the White House, but has been viewed with skepticism by the Central Intelligence Agency.

''Our alliance with Iran is not temporary,'' he said, echoing the views of many exile leaders interviewed here in recent days.

Even before the conference opening, there are questions about how long the opposition's new unity will last.

Professor Makiya, one of the exile leaders, said that President Bush decided it was necessary to change Iraq's government and try to build a coalition through the United Nations, but that he had not chosen an Iraqi partner.

''You need an Iraqi partner for a whole host of different reasons,'' he said.

Administration officials said they had not decided what role they wanted the Iraqi opposition to play, but the State Department official said the White House was drafting plans for a post-Hussein Iraq that would cover 30 days, 60 days and 90 days after the end of a war.

''We're looking to the transition to a democratic civilian government, hopefully within six months,'' he said.

Several of the 316 delegates to the conference expressed both gratitude toward and frustration with the United States. While they were clearly pleased by the administration's apparent willingness to change the Iraqi government and back democracy in a Muslim country, several said they wanted to emphasize that they were not American puppets.

Some also questioned the sincerity of what they called Washington's permanent bureaucracy to the idea of democracy in a Muslim country.

''There are some people who claim to love Arabs, but all they prescribe for them is tyranny,'' Mr. Chalabi said.

He also acknowledged a long-standing tension involving him, his political allies who have long championed democratic rule in Iraq, and the C.I.A. and State Department.

Mr. Chalabi and Ayad Alawi, the head of the Iraqi National Accord, another exile group, said their embrace of democracy and human rights prevented them from obtaining support from Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Chalabi and another exile leader said a representative of Prince Turki al- Faisal, then the head of Saudi intelligence, said in Riyadh in 1993: ''Our leadership wants to help you. The condition: abandon democracy, human rights, then we will help.''

A spokesman for the Saudi Embassy in Washington would not comment on 1993 events, but said the Saudi government believed that the Iraqi people must ''choose what kind of government they will have, be it a monarchy or a democracy.''

There is an undercurrent of fear among exiles that the United States will play off one group against another and abandon the proponents of a democratic Iraq. There is also concern that the administration will find it easier to support a military coup.

''That's frankly my greatest fear,'' Professor Makiya said.