

Iraqi Exiles Oppose US Plans

Author: [Julie Flint](#)

Exiles support a UN-led transitional authority and an independent Iraqi executive authority.

Non-aligned Iraqi exiles opposed to American plans to occupy their country are stepping up their efforts to gather support for a UN-supervised interim administration that would pave the way for a new, Iraqi democracy free of American control.

The exiles, known as the "Iraqi Group," first made their presence known last month when they appealed to President Saddam Hussein to relinquish power voluntarily in order to save Iraq from war and "a subsequent train of disastrous developments". It was the first such appeal in more than 30 years of his rule in Iraq.

The exiles said Saddam had unleashed "a series of crises and catastrophes that have afflicted Iraq and Arab interests as a whole". They called on the United Nations, the Arab League and Arab governments to do all in their power to bring about a non-violent change of regime.

The appeal was signed by 37 well-known exiles spanning Iraq's entire political, religious and ethnic spectrum. The exiles included five former cabinet ministers - best-known among them former foreign minister Adnan Pachachi - as well as academics, technocrats and journalists. Within days, their demand for Saddam's departure was echoed by one of the elder statesmen of the Arab world, United Arab Emirates President Zayed ibn Sultan al Nahayan - the first Arab leader to restore relations with Iraq after the 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

"Demanding that a leader step down is a completely new thing in Arab politics," economist Mehdi Hafeedh, a leading member of the Iraqi Group and a former regional director of the UN Industrial Development Organisation, told IWPR.

"It's difficult to believe that Saddam will accept exile, but I don't rule it out. Dictators like him always insist on staying in power, but are sometimes obliged to step down. Look at Milosevic," he said.

Hafeedh said Saddam was showing clear signs of weakness - not least of all in seeking a political rather than a military solution to the current crisis.

"In the past, he has said: 'Let them come!'" Hafeedh said. "But now he's playing for the sympathy of the outside world. In his dealings with the UN weapons inspectors, he's backing down very fast. Despite all his noise about resistance, he's in a very desperate mood."

Hafeedh said the Iraqi Group opposes America's plans to remove Saddam because "while we don't want Saddam to continue in power, we don't want our country to be destroyed". War could destroy what was left of an economy already burdened by foreign debts totalling more than \$90 billion.

Hafeedh said he believed there might be a coup of some sort against Saddam - although not before the start of a war. "All things are possible now because Saddam is so weak," he said.

Since making public their appeal, Pachachi and his colleagues in the Iraqi Group have been travelling widely - both within Europe and the Middle East - to gather support for their proposed alternative to an American-controlled Iraq.

The group wants a transitional administration that would work "in cooperation with the UN" - not under the US. Pachachi has said he favours a collective leadership to minimise the possibility of ethnic conflict or argument. They call for an immediate lifting of sanctions against Iraq in the post-Saddam period. They also seek the development of an oil policy to help rebuild Iraq and - coordination with other producing countries - "to achieve stability in international oil markets".

In the longer term, the group calls for elections to a constituent assembly that would draw up a constitution, establish the rule of law, eliminate political oppression and protect "the unity and sovereignty of Iraqi territory".

After widespread dissemination of the group's appeal, and courtship of Pachachi by the US administration, US-backed opposition leaders meeting in Salaheddine in northern Iraq asked the 80-year-old Pachachi to join a six-man leadership council that is expected to have an advisory function after Saddam's removal. This council includes longstanding opposition figures such as Massoud Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party and Ayatollah Mohamad Bakr Al Hakim of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Pachachi refused, saying linkage to a US military administration would be both "damaging and unacceptable". He said Iraqis should have executive powers in the post-Saddam period, not merely advisory ones.

Asked for the Iraqi Group's evaluation of the Salaheddine leadership, Hafedh acknowledged that its members had contributed to the struggle against the Iraqi regime. Their failing, he said, was that they were "part of an external project. . . . They are not independent."

Julie Flint, a long-time correspondent from the Middle East and a former IWPR trustee, is coordinating editor of the Iraqi Crisis Report.

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