

With the Iraqi opposition: if, how, and then what?

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At the end of February, 55 delegates came together for the Iraqi Opposition Conference in northern Iraq. Among them were *Shi'a*, *Sunni*, Arab, Kurd, Assyrian, and Chaldean delegates; exiled diplomats, ex-brigadiers and an intelligence chief who defected in the early 1990s; three women (one wearing a full enveloping black *chador*, one with a headscarf, and one bareheaded); a Turcoman with a hotel business in Istanbul, and a *Shi'a* cleric with an American passport who has been an aeronautical engineer in Detroit for the past twenty-five years.

Abdul Aziz Hakim, brother of Ayatollah Hakim – the head of the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq ([SCIRI](#) [1]) – wore his clerical robes and his black turban denoting a *seyyed*, a descendant of the prophet. Ahmad Chalabi, head of the Iraqi National Congress (backed half-heartedly by the US), is a short man, but he held himself stiff and presidential in a dark suit, white shirt and red tie.

[Masoud Barzani](#) [2], the head of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), wears a suit for more formal occasions like the conference, and looks rather ordinary despite the big mole on his cheek. (All his portraits hung up in the party's offices throughout Erbil show him in *peshmerga* baggy pantaloons, knife stuffed into the wide sash around his waist and a red-and-white checked turban wound around his head). Barzani's long-term rival (and sometime ally) Jalal Talabani, the head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), is portly, white-haired and wears glasses like a benign, grandfatherly statesman.

The Turkish shadow

Behind them all lie thirty years of ruined Iraq, Saddam, killed relatives, flight and exile. In front of them, the unknown territory of post-Saddam is a giant hypothetical. Around them, a vast shifting panoramic interface of global diplomacy – Russia meeting China, France meeting Germany, England meeting Spain, the Arab League in Egypt, Bush banging his fist on the table and talking about time running out.

Between them, a stream of leaked gobbets, media speculation, passed-on phone conversations with friends in different Washington offices, splits between the CIA and the State Department and the White House and mixed signals emitted by all of them.

The delegates gathered in the lobby of the Chwar Chra Hotel, once a mental hospital and now the best hotel in town while the Sheraton is rebuilt (it was destroyed in fighting between the PUK and KDP in 1995). They drank tea, feeling despondent, irritated, isolated and ignored.

The support the Americans have is withering away, warned Sheik Asad Feyli, a *Shi'a* cleric originally from Baghdad. "We are against America if it ignores the will of the Iraqi people in the future of an Iraqi government," said Mowaffak al-Rubaie, an independent Islamist. "The Americans are making a major mistake if they think they can do this without consulting us."

The meeting had been repeatedly delayed for almost two weeks. At first the logistics of travelling into northern Iraq were blamed, then the weather. The real cause was the wait for Zalmay Khalilzad [3], the special envoy and 'ambassador-at-large for Free Iraqis' appointed by President Bush in December 2002. His imminent arrival was rumoured, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The expectation was reminiscent of school-friends who had invited the coolest classmate to their party: I think he's coming; he *said* he'd come; should we start without him? It was implicitly understood that without an American presence there was no credibility and no audience.

Zalmay Khalilzad was in Turkey, by some accounts his travel plans held hostage by the Turks to the ongoing Turkish–American negotiations [4] that were setting off alarm bells among the Kurds. America was desperate for a northern front, but found the Turks demanding not just \$17 billion in compensation for hosting US forces, but seeking their own deployment of tens of thousands of troops inside northern Iraq.

The latter claim was founded on the need to prevent a humanitarian crisis, especially to protect the Turcoman [5] population in Kurdistan. There was even talk of the Turks garrisoning the northern oil cities of Kirkuk and Mosul; insistence that the 60,000 Kurdish *peshmerga* be disarmed; a Turk as part of an American military interim administration.

The Kurds went ballistic. "Any Turkish intervention under any pretext would lead to clashes," thundered Hoshyar Zebari, veteran KDP head of foreign relations. "If Turkish soldiers come here, to Erbil, I will hate the Turks and the Turcomans. We will use what we have, even our lives, if we have to," said Nasreen Mustafa Sidiq, the Kurdish minister of reconstruction and development in Erbil.

In a press briefing during the conference, Sami Abdul Rahman, deputy prime minister of the KDP, could barely control his anger. "It is a betrayal," he said, thumping his finger on the table. "[The Americans] should ask our consent; we are a partner. We haven't been asked. We are opposed to the freedom of our people being part of a price paid to Turkey. Our people will resist it by all means possible. It is [Turkish] 19th century nationalism and expansionism, and nothing else. In my lifetime the Americans have betrayed us twice: in 1975 Kissinger betrayed us to the Shah, in 1991 the Iraqi people were asked to rise up against Saddam and then they said we have given no promises to the Kurds and dropped us. Now, if this goes ahead, it will be a third betrayal in one generation."

In the bazaar the mood was no less fearful. People talked about American interests and Turkish repression. "Saddam Hussein is much better than Turkey," said one man. "The Arabs are better than the Turks. If Turkey sends troops to the region we are ready to fight them and go back to the mountains."

Even the Turcoman population could only see hostility in Turkish ambitions [6]. Mam Qassem, a Turcoman money changer whose family has lived in Erbil for generations said that protection of the Turcomans was only a pretext and that Turcomen enjoy equal rights under Kurdish rule. "The Turks are only coming for oil," he said. "Those Turcomans who ask the Turks to come here; we don't like them, they are like spies for the Turkish government."

A cryptic American

Zalmay Khalilzad finally arrived late on a Tuesday afternoon. He did not come by helicopter; the Turks drove him to the border and he was picked up by a convoy of forty KDP land-cruisers.

The conference was held in Salahuddin, perched on the rim of a high massif, above a serpentine road guarded by *peshmerga* and checkpoints. Once a summer resort, it is now a KDP stronghold with the feel of an elite suburb.

It has wide roads and vast houses with balconied views of the plain below that stretches to sprawling Erbil and the line of Iraqi troops on a bluff above a tributary of the Tigris beyond. It is the beginning of the highland, and during the week of the conference the weather changed from balmy sun on the plain to mountain blizzard in the half hour it took to climb up the road from Salahuddin.

Some of Khalilzad's remarks gained a smattering of applause, at least from among the Kurdish delegates: "the US has no desire, no desire, to govern Iraq" and "the coalition will not depart Iraq one minute before this job is done, nor stay one minute after the job is complete."

Khalilzad likened a transition in Iraq to that of Japan and Germany after the second world war. "Some have said it is impossible for Iraq to become a democracy," he said; "the US government completely disagrees."

He repeatedly affirmed that there would be a role for the Iraqi opposition in a post-Saddam transitional government. "The US will need tactical help and assistance in identifying what has to be done to meet the immediate humanitarian needs."

There were some signs of relief. "He's here, and he's not just talking about a military governorship," said Kanan Makiya, author of *Republic of Fear* [7] (and colleague of Ahmad Chalabi), who had just written an *Observer* [8] (UK) article condemning unilateralist American noises. "He is talking about democracy and real de-Ba'athification. I feel reassured the US will not just remove a thin crust of Ba'athist officials."

Equally, there was suspicion. "There are still questions that need to be answered," said Hamid Biyati of SCIRI. "We have different views about a civilian government. We believe that a new Iraqi government should be set up on the same day that Saddam falls."

But Khalilzad brought no blueprint – and the Iraqi opposition did not have one either. Khalilzad spoke of taskforces to be set up, from both within the opposition and other exile groups not present at the conference, that could coordinate with Washington and the American Army Central Command. In accordance with this advice, conference delegates went on to create subcommittees among themselves.

The delegates' discussions and politicking had traction, a sense of urgency that opposition meetings over the last decade have lacked. However, it often seemed that the word 'Iraq' was interjected into conversations only in parentheses. 'Our people' more often referred to *Shi'a* or Arab or Kurd, than 'Iraqi'.

In the streets the KDP had erected banners that read 'Kurdish Arab Fraternity' as if the event were a bilateral summit. And as much as the word 'democratic' was attached to the rhetoric of 'Free Iraq', it was always followed by the word 'federal'. In the margins of the conference I heard remarks such as, "no one wants the turbans", "some of them have been in the west – they have western minds, they do not even think like Arabs anymore", and even "you know, the delegates are all assholes."

Ghassan Atiyah [8], a former diplomat who has lived in England since 1984, described himself as an independent secular Iraqi delegate to the conference. His frustration with the "parties jockeying for post-Saddam positions and sloganeering" was evident. He admitted he did not

have much expectation of the outcome. "I am trying to play the role of the constructive pragmatist," he told me; "if I fail, it will not be a surprise."

An unknown future

The four members present of the six-man leadership committee [9] nominated by the conference – Masoud Barzani, Jalal Talabani, Abdul Aziz Hakim and Ahmad Chalabi - talked to the gathered media. (The other two men nominated – Adnan Pachachi [10], a former foreign minister, and Ayad Allawi of the Iraqi National Accord - had not attended the conference and wouldn't confirm their participation in the committee).

The conference ended with a communiqué that recorded agreement and unanimity. The four leaders present each thanked Khalilzad for coming, and (in turn) Iran, Syria and Turkey for being friends of a free Iraqi territory – even if it did happen to be Kurdish. They agreed to send a high-level delegation to remonstrate with the Turks. They expressed hope for a good working relationship with the Americans in the future.

Khalilzad, the only one representing any real power in the room, answered a few questions from journalists about Turkish involvement/interference/incursion. He said the Turks would be coming. He said that they would come under the umbrella of a coalition force and leave when the rest of the coalition did. He had nothing else to add. The Turkish parliament had still not voted to accept American deployment from Turkish soil. He could cast no soundbites into the implacable, unknown future and answer: what if, how, and then what?

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