

Waiting

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Tehran is like a waiting room at the moment. Iraqi opposition diplomats are everywhere shuffling behind closed doors. Nobody knows what will happen and everything is only hypothesis. In six months or so we'll have hindsight and we will be able to look back and understand what all this activity meant – if anything. At present, the situation is confused, uncertain and dangerous.

For the Iraqi opposition and journalists alike, Iran is the only way into Kurdistan since Syria closed its own border in November. It is also the main base for Iraqi exile movements. Ahmad Chalabi's [Iraqi National Congress](#) [1] (INC) and the [Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution](#) [2] (SCIRI) both have offices in Tehran (as do the two Kurdish parties, the [Kurdish Democratic Party](#) [3] (KDP) and the [Patriotic Union of Kurdistan](#) [4] (PUK).

SCIRI has been based here since 1979. The Iraqi opposition wants to show that it is unified and capable of organising a provisional government that will be able to manage the transition of a post Saddam Iraq. They all sound very hopeful and say *inshallah* and 'democratic federalism' a lot. Beyond this they are rather vague.

I had a quick conversation with Keran Makiya, an INC aide, after Chalabi's press conference last week, which pretty much sums things up. 'Yes, there are only weeks left. We are on the eve of war,' he said. I asked him about the proposed Iraqi opposition meeting in Iraqi Kurdistan that has been delayed from 22 January until 'sometime in the middle of February'; wasn't all this rather last minute, too little too late? And what about policy differences between INC and SCIRI, over democracy, secularism, and an Islamic state?

'That is for the future,' he said, as everything must be. 'We're not making an issue of this now. We're talking about the question of leadership only.' And what is being decided about the leadership question? 'It's in progress,' he replied. It seems there is a plan for the committee to create a committee....

Palm-reading the Americans

Kurdistan itself is a big mess of competing/cooperating interests, most of them armed: KDP and PUK *peshmerga*, American special forces, CIA operatives, Iraqi *mukhabarat* spies, [Ansar al-Islam](#) [5] (800 extreme Islamists lobbing mortars and assassination squads at the PUK near Halabja), several thousand leftover [Kurdish Workers' Party](#) [6] (PKK) fighters, some SCIRI forces from the Iranian-backed Badr Corps, whose leader Ayatollah Seyed Abdul Aziz Hakim told me they have been teaching the *peshmerga* [7] how to drive tanks...not to forget Turks who are setting up humanitarian stations to prevent refugees from fleeing and making their usual incursions, hemming Kurdish ambitions, hunting PKK.

Amidst all this, it seems the Iranians offered the Iraqi opposition security protection for their mooted meeting. The Kurds said no thanks, we've got Americans coming instead.

To varying degrees the Iraqi opposition is concerned, critical and suspicious of American involvement. No wonder. Bush's rhetoric goes only as far as 'disarming Saddam'; post Saddam is an undecided question. But this is the question the Iraqi opposition is interested in because it's their country and their future, and naturally they want to influence the answer. The paradox is that they make it very clear that they want Iraqis to be responsible for Iraq, but they need American approval in order to make this responsibility viable.

'For forty years we have struggled as Kurds against the Iraqi regime,' said Dr Ibrahim Pirot of the KDP. The KDP has plenty of money from the trade in Iraqi oil through their checkpoints between Kurdistan and Turkey. Dr Pirot sat in a large office with a marble fireplace and pictures of Kurdish scenes on the walls. Behind him, a vast black polished granite desk with a laptop and several telephones. The phones rang often.

'We want this regime changed,' he continued. 'If any forces or other persons help us, we can agree with them. We are waiting. We haven't got any power. We can say we are against the Americans or for them – but we want the Iraqi people to have a guarantee of their own future. We don't know if the Americans will allow that.' He said this smiling, turning his palms upside down and then right side up; who knows what they want, what they're up to, what will happen. Dr Pirot is a cheerful bluff man, as Kurds often are (for no fathomable reason; it is as if they are having their own private joke with history).

Finessing the future (with the aid of the Koran)

The SCIRI headquarters in central Tehran are housed in a nondescript concrete building distinguished by the metal grilles covering all the windows that make it look like a North London squat. Interviewing the SCIRI hierarchy is a fairly repetitive affair. Dingy office; take off your shoes; tulip glass of tea half-filled with sugar; pull headscarf so that it covers all my hair; a clerical establishment – black turbans, grey beards, square pair of glasses, prayer beads counted between fingers.

Seyed Heideri, SCIRI's political officer, is a formal ascetic man, with a sharp nose, thin face, wearing a pinstriped *abaya*. He was very serious. He did not smile much but emanated a certain wisdom and tried to talk as frankly as he could, although SCIRI now finds itself occupying the sensitive space between Iranian hospitality and American negotiations which does mean a certain obscurity of finesse.

'The US has not yet formally backed the Iraqi opposition Provisional Government,' Heideri admitted. 'Our idea is that regime change must be done by the Iraqi people.' Which would be a fine sentiment if events had not moved beyond it. ('I think these ideas are dreams,' said Ibrahim Pirot of the KDP when I asked him about SCIRI's position. 'We must be realistic.')

'I do not think an invasion is a realistic way of solving the problem,' continued Heideri. 'We believe the Americans do not have the ability to manage the country from outside; if they risk this there will be many dangers. We think that at the end the Americans will be forced to take the point of view of the Iraqi opposition. Because the Iraqi opposition has given many victims and losses to liberate their country and the US should not neglect the active role of the Iraqi people and the Iraqi opposition.'

Sheikh Ibrahim Hamoudi, part of the SCIRI delegation [8] that went to Washington last summer, explained further the organisation's resistance to an American solution. 'It is not acceptable that American military forces will arrange the affairs of the Iraqi people,' he declared. 'When I went to America I met Rumsfeld and Cheney. We negotiated and I said that America should give help to

the Iraqis and not simply invade and occupy. This idea is something frightful and we are worried and afraid of what might happen afterwards.'

'Do you trust the Americans?' I asked him, 'after their inconsistency in the past?'

'The Iraqis hope and expect the American administration will behave in a way that will inspire trust,' said the Sheikh. Clerics can be very adept at avoiding the explicit; like large tracts of the Koran.

Smooth talk in rough times

Culturally, it is not hard to see why a group of people who would like a future Iraqi constitution underpinned by the precepts of Islam, would be slight wary of American involvement. The Kurds express similar irritation with US unilateralism, although they seem to be more practical about facing the increase likelihood of it. 'Cooperation with the Americans?' responded Dr Piro. 'Until now we haven't got anything. They don't tell us what they will do, if they will attack or not. There are negotiations, but information about an attack, no. Maybe they will tell as at the final moments, some days before.'

Everything depends on the Americans. Which Ahmad Chalabi [9], the most westernised of the Iraqi opposition leaders, and fresh from his spooky sugar-puff 'best-thing-to-happen-to-the-Middle-East-since-sliced-flat-bread' profile in *Vanity Fair* last month, knows well.

Chalabi wore a dark blue suit and a tie, held his press conference with a practised geniality and presidential lean; one hand rested on his thigh as he inclined forward, looking intent. When he wanted to get his point across he waved his finger, much like Tony Blair. He was quite the smooth operator until he was asked what credible authority a provisional government made up of exiles might manage over a population most of them have not seen for twenty years. Then he got rather irritated.

'A third or a quarter of Iraqi people live outside Iraq,' he replied indignantly. 'Those people are in contact with their relatives and friends on a daily basis. We have communication. Our leadership is known. It is proof enough that Saddam keeps cursing us in the newspapers.'

An Iraqi reporter present pressed further, asking him about the lack of an opposition presence in Baghdad. Chalabi pointed to a bombardment directed at a Presidential palace in Baghdad last year, military operations against the regime in 1995 and other things that (to my knowledge) were SCIRI guerrilla operations carried out by their Badr Corps [10] – Iraqi opposition activities, true, but nothing to do with Chalabi.

'These are significant actions,' argued Chalabi. 'It is true that the opposition has not overthrown Saddam, but equally Saddam has not managed to subdue the Iraqi opposition.' Precisely because the Iraqi opposition is outside Iraq, Saddam's Iraq – this is their strength and their weakness.

Who gives meaning to words?

It is easy enough for the western press to dismiss the Iraqi opposition groups as fractious, uncoordinated and ultimately marginal. Seyed Haederi wanted me to understand that their divisions should not be exaggerated. Beyond all the speculation, there is a clean, clear, very genuine message that comes from all of the Iraqis I have talked to. More than anything, they say again and again, their people have suffered and all they want is to have their country back, to hold elections, to re-establish justice, to have human rights and the rule of law.

What Iraqis in opposition want is 'freedom' and it is a word they repeat almost as often as 'democracy'. Sometimes I find myself watching Bush on TV – belligerent, simplistic, and easily derided and lampooned as such – and I remember that the freedom he bangs on about is a very real hope to millions of Iraqis who don't have any measure of it.

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[1] http://209.50.252.70/p_en/inc/index.shtml?inc=inc

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[4] <http://www.puk.org/>

[5] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0315/p01s04-wome.html>

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