

ANNEX 2

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Talks With Iraqi Opposition Intensify

By Alan Sipress

Senior U.S. officials have been stepping up discussions with Iraqi opposition groups, including several newly prominent in U.S. thinking, as the Bush administration proceeds with plans for toppling Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

In one unpublicized meeting, a U.S. team, including a senior CIA official, met secretly in Germany last month with Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, leaders of two Kurdish parties based in northern Iraq that allied with the United States after the Gulf War in 1991, according to sources familiar with the session.

The meeting, which one source said was also attended by retired Gen. Wayne A. Downing, the White House's deputy national security adviser for combating terrorism, was one in a series Downing and other officials have held with Iraqi exiles as the administration tries to determine what role they can play in any attempt to oust Hussein.

The meetings are part of an effort by the Bush administration to develop ties with opposition groups in addition to the Iraqi National Congress, a London-based umbrella organization that for a decade has been at the center of U.S. policy toward Iraq. But even as it expands its contacts with Iraqi exiles, the administration is deeply divided over which groups to court and how helpful they could be in any move against Hussein.

With a military strike in Iraq now not envisioned until at least next winter, the differences over the opposition groups add an element of confusion to the administration's policy despite President Bush's stated objective of "regime change" in Baghdad. Heightening the uncertainty is the unproven capability of many Iraqi opposition groups.

The meeting in Germany last month dealt with the military and intelligence capabilities of the Kurdish parties and the Kurds' insistence on U.S. guarantees for their protection if they come under attack by Hussein's forces, sources said. When Kurdish forces rose against Hussein after the Gulf War with the expectation of U.S. backing, they were brutally crushed. The two parties now control northern Iraq in an uneasy partnership under the protection of the "no-fly" zone patrolled by U.S. and British aircraft.

Two months ago, Downing also held a pair of meetings with a delegation of Iraqi exiles who claim to have strong ties with elements of Hussein's military and in the country's central provinces, long the backbone of his support. Participants in the meeting with the recently formed Iraqi National Movement said it focused on what role these exiles could play, for instance how many active military officers they can call upon, and ended with Downing encouraging them to continue broadening their contacts.

The unpublicized meetings provide a rare glimpse at the influential but largely unreported role Downing has assumed since he joined the White House after Sept. 11 to head its counterterrorism efforts. The former commander of all U.S. Special Operations forces, Downing has long been plotting how to oust Hussein and previously served as the mentor and leading advocate for the Iraqi National Congress.

A White House official declined to confirm any meetings held by Downing. The official said, "We intend to continue our discussions with various groups and individuals who are working toward a free and democratic Iraq."

Different elements of the administration have been promoting different groups. While the State Department has proposed convening a conference in Europe of Iraqi exiles, including many outside the INC framework, the INC has sought to hold its own conference in Washington and claims the tacit support of the Pentagon. Both gatherings have been delayed.

Military planners are looking at a possible invasion of Iraq that could involve several roles for the Iraqi opposition, according to sources familiar with the review. These include gathering intelligence on Iraqi army units and Hussein's development of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. Opposition groups could also establish contact with Iraqi commanders to persuade them not to fight, assign local militia to work with U.S. Special Forces and provide a staging ground, especially in northern Iraq.

Administration planners are also exploring the option of encouraging elements of the Iraqi military to mutiny against Hussein, with U.S. military assistance, sources said. This would rely heavily on networks established by opposition groups inside Hussein's security forces.

Under either scenario, U.S. officials would like to see opposition groups positioned to help take over running Iraq if Hussein is ousted. Administration officials say they want to avoid Iraq splintering into ethnic regions, a prospect that deeply worries U.S. allies in the area, notably Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

A key piece in the administration's thinking remains the Iraqi National Congress, the U.S.-funded organization headed by Ahmed Chalabi, who is based in London. As the administration has increasingly focused on the idea of a U.S. invasion of Iraq, the INC has recast the role it sees for itself. Rather than fielding a rebel army that would carry the brunt of the combat, INC officials now envision helping to coordinate airstrikes and forming an interim administration in areas freed from Hussein's control.

The INC, which has strong support in the Pentagon and among influential lawmakers, has sought to maintain its central place by lobbying against administration efforts to build a broader front of opposition forces. Chalabi enlisted his government backers to help delay the State Department conference, which would have brought together exiles to discuss how to govern Iraq and provide public services after Hussein is gone.

Some key policymakers under Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld remain devoted to the INC and have kept other dissident groups and figures at a distance, arguing that these contacts will dilute the opposition. But Pentagon officials have met with representatives of the Kurdish parties, especially Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which continue to hold INC membership. Barham Salih, head of the PUK's regional government in northern Iraq, saw Rumsfeld while visiting Washington last month.

State Department and CIA officials remain skeptical of Chalabi's leadership, saying he has failed to make the INC an inclusive organization. They have been seeking to cultivate other prominent Iraqis with ties to the military and the ruling Sunni Arab elite.

"We've really broadened our scope of contacts," a State Department official said. "We are not trying to replace the INC. . . . We are trying to move outside it, beyond it."

The INC announced this month it had suspended broadcasts on its television station, Liberty TV, which beams programming into Iraq, because the State Department failed to provide funding. State Department spokesman Richard A. Boucher said that \$15 million has already been given to the INC and that money for broadcasting was held up because of problems with the group's accounting procedures.

INC officials also said they were disappointed the State Department has not signed an agreement providing money for the group's proposed conference of military officers in Washington.

Sharif Ali Bin Al Hussein, a member of the INC leadership council, said the administration seems to have frozen most of its support for his group until a decision is taken on how to confront Iraq. But he said he was confident that the INC would play a central role.

"The INC will be the principal interlocutor with the Americans on this issue," he said. "The INC is the best vehicle to bring the opposition together. There are no other alternatives."

The CIA, in particular, remains dubious about the INC's potential. The agency continues to support yet another longtime opposition group, the Iraqi National Accord, headed by Ayad Alawi that has been involved in U.S.-backed covert operations inside Iraq, including an unsuccessful coup attempt in 1996. The CIA has urged the group to widen its contacts and make common cause with other opposition strains, according to sources.

Iraqi opposition groups themselves are becoming more independent of the Iraqi National Congress. For about a year, representatives of four major groups have been meeting weekly in London to coordinate efforts to resist Hussein and plan for governing the country after his demise. This informal arrangement, known as the Group of Four, is significant because the four groups have at one time or another been major participants in the INC but have now decided to meet outside that framework.

The meetings, which have been welcomed by U.S. diplomats, rotate among the offices of the four groups: Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, Alawi's Iraqi National Accord and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

The group arose from casual conversations among the groups' London representatives about the role that opposition forces could play in governing a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, Alawi said.

"The Group of Four is not interested in creating a new outfit," Alawi said. "It's a group of real forces that are inside Iraq and have healthy relations with each other."

The planning became more urgent after the Sept. 11 attacks, when opposition leaders concluded that the United States was becoming increasingly serious about ousting Hussein.

"These four groups are the core of the Iraqi opposition," said Mohammad Sabir, the PUK representative in Washington. "These consultations are very necessary because we are the four groups operating inside Iraq."

The administration has also been working to enlist anti-Hussein elements with contacts among Arab military officers and tribes, especially in four central Iraqi provinces that remained loyal to the Iraqi president during a 1991 uprising immediately after the Gulf War.

Iraq's population is primarily divided among Arabs and Kurds and, within both these groups, Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Although Shiites are in the majority, the Sunnis located largely in the center of the country represent Hussein's main support and the toughest community for the opposition to penetrate.

The Iraqi National Movement, recently formed from a merger of two other groups, claims to include prominent Sunni and Shiite Arabs with a particular emphasis on the central provinces.

Downing first met leaders of the group at their request during a short meeting at the Willard Inter-Continental Hotel in Washington in late February. Joined by his assistant Linda Flohr, an expert on

Iraq and a CIA veteran, Downing held more extensive discussions with the group a day later in private offices in Georgetown.

Downing spoke with the Iraqis about practical issues, such as how many military officers inside Iraq were believed to be loyal to the group, what kind of equipment they had and what training they would need.

The Iraqis said Downing specifically asked whether the Iraqi National Movement was willing, despite the bad blood, to work with the Iraqi National Congress. Mudhar Shawkat, one of the leaders responded, "General, absolutely we are willing to work with the INC. There's no reason why not."

As the meeting ended, Hatem Mukhlis, another leader, shook Downing's hand and appealed to him to keep in mind the best interests of the Iraqi people. "Please look out for the plight of the Iraqi people. Don't let them get hurt again as they have already been," Mukhlis recalled saying. He said Downing squeezed his hand tighter and said he was "going to do everything he could not to hurt the Iraqis again."

The group reached tentative agreement with the State Department late last month to receive several hundred thousand dollars every three months for organizing activities.

After joining the Bush administration last year, Downing sought to broaden his opposition contacts, said Gen. Najib Salhi, leader of a group called the Iraqi Free Officers Movement.

Downing's willingness to open discussions with opposition figures outside the INC framework is significant because he has long been one of its leading advocates. As a consultant to the organization before joining the Bush administration, Downing developed a military plan for the INC involving the establishment of "liberated" enclaves inside Iraq backed by U.S. Special Forces and air power.