

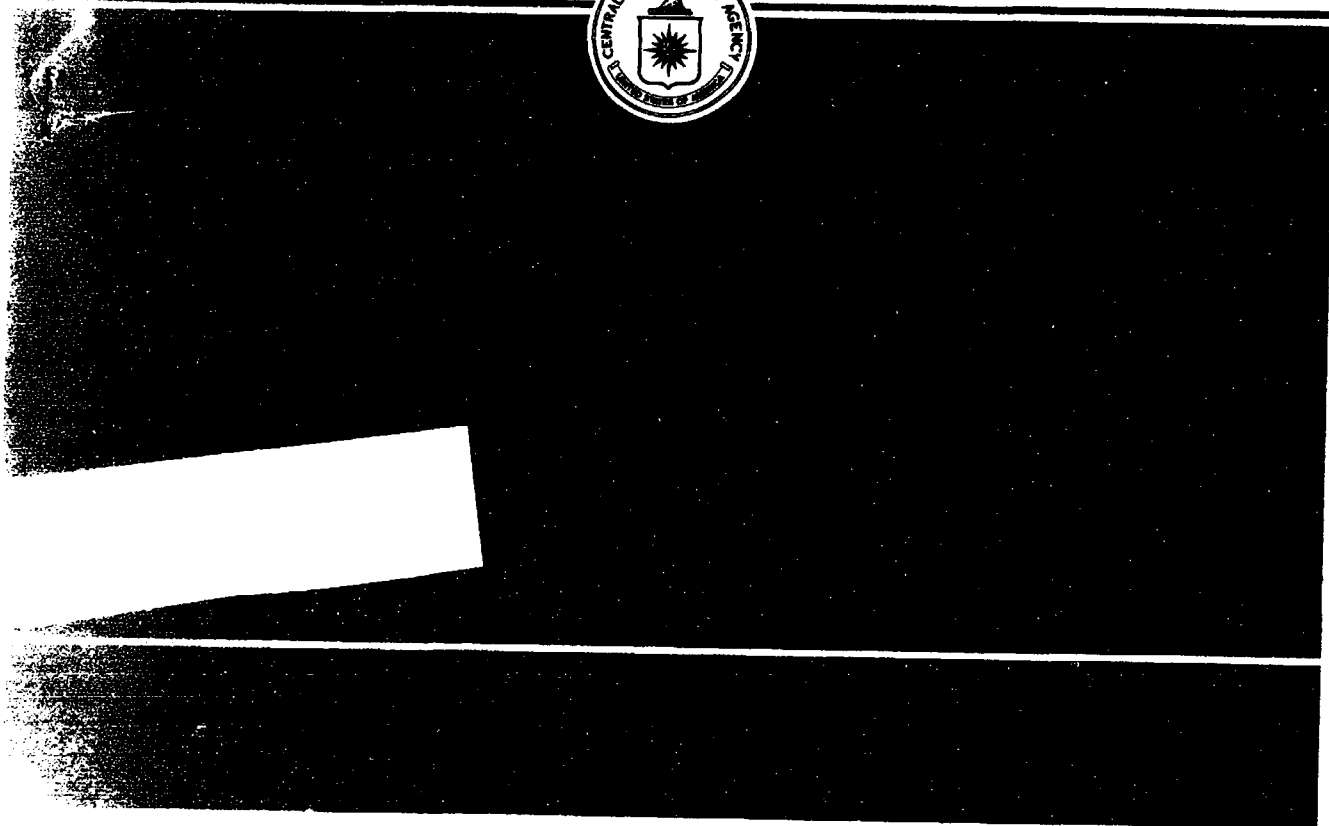
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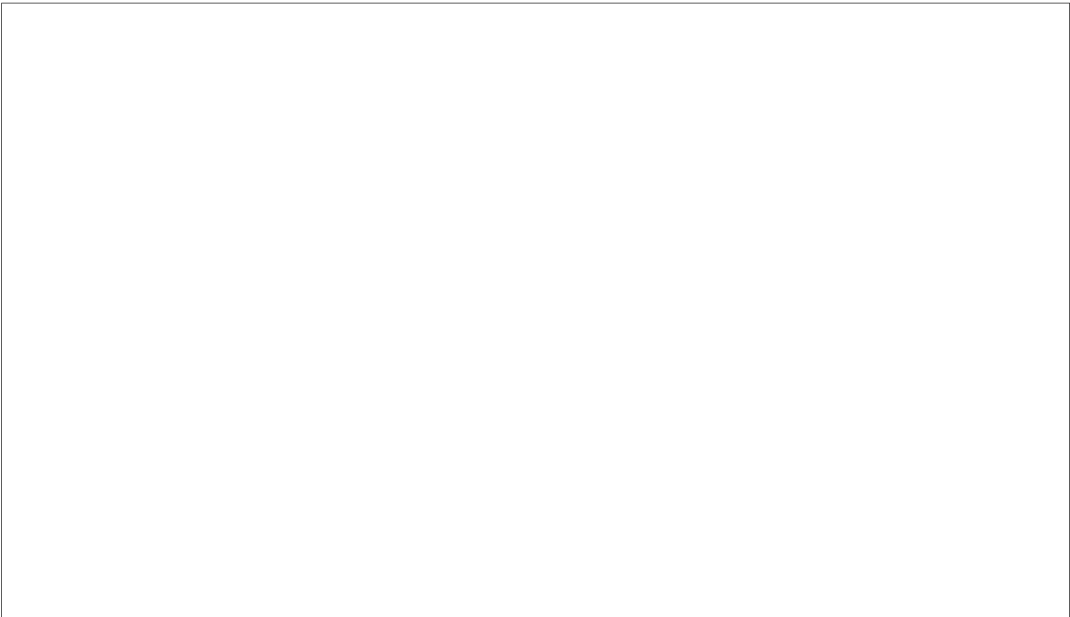
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Iraq: Opposition Becoming Bolder

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IRAQ:

Opposition Becoming Bolder

Iraqi opposition groups, emboldened by growing Western support, are trying to hold a meeting in northern Iraq this weekend to promote unity and increase pressure on Saddam. [Redacted]

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The Iraqi National Congress, which was formed last June and comprises the major Iraqi Kurdish and London-based opposition groups, is sponsoring the meeting in the hope of persuading groups based in Tehran, Riyadh, and Damascus to join them. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] The INC will also lobby for a "temporary government" in the coalition-controlled security zone in northern Iraq. Leaders of the group are especially eager to obtain the support of Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, leader of the largest Iraqi Shia opposition group. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] The conference has yet to draw a reaction from Baghdad. [Redacted]

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Comment: Congress leaders hope holding a well-run meeting inside Iraq will build credibility among Iraqis. They probably believe pledges of support from US and European officials this summer will convince prospective attendees and their Middle Eastern sponsors that they are the only umbrella group with enough Western backing to offer any effective opposition to Saddam. Hakim's attendance would go far to foster the appearance of unity. [Redacted]

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Tehran's intentions are not clear. It probably fears it will lose influence with the Iraqi opposition if it does not cultivate ties to groups with US backing, and it may draw closer to the INC. Nevertheless, it probably does not want to lend the group too much credibility and may allow Hakim only to send a deputy. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Holding the conference on Iraqi soil risks retaliation by Saddam's forces, which almost certainly are aware there will be a meeting and may know its location. Nevertheless, Saddam almost certainly regards the threat from popular rebel leaders in southern Iraq as more dangerous than that from exiled oppositionists, who still have only a limited following inside Iraq. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] growing popular support for former Gen. 'Ali Husayn al-Arbid, who is now a Shia rebel leader in the southern marshes. [Redacted] Videos, cassettes, and posters promoting Arbid and attacking Saddam [Redacted] have appeared throughout Baghdad. Saddam is exacting reprisals against Arbid's family and supporters and [Redacted] has destroyed his village in southern Iraq. [Redacted]

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