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17 September 1993

The Iraqi National Congress: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Challenges

The Iraqi National Congress (INC) has made more progress than any Iraqi opposition group toward building unity and articulating a pluralistic, democratic national agenda. The organization has succeeded in keeping key Kurdish and Shia groups in its ranks, has weathered efforts to undermine its unity by regional opposition sponsors and rival dissidents, and has made visible progress toward organizing its leadership and policy committees. INC unity and strong Western support have helped individual groups, especially the Kurds, to spurn Baghdad's overtures. Kurdish control of territory in northern Iraq gives the INC a domestic base for political and propaganda operations. INC leaders claim contacts with a growing number of Iraqi army officers who have pledged their support to the opposition in the event of a serious challenge to Saddam's regime.

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Recent efforts by Baghdad to discredit, intimidate, or eliminate INC leaders suggest that Saddam considers the group at least a nuisance and potentially a threat. If Western support remains strong, we believe the INC has a good chance of developing into an instrument of pressure on Saddam.

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Despite the INC's progress toward unity, the group still faces significant challenges--including persistent internal squabbling, a lack of credibility inside Iraq, and interference by Iraq's neighbors, who all want to shape the INC to suit their own limited agendas. Competing interests and the geographic separation of senior leaders slows and fragments INC decisionmaking. Ahmad Chalabi's aggressive leadership of the INC's Executive Committee has been a recurring source of controversy. Inequities in ethnic and religious representation in the organization's leadership bodies remains an underlying source of tension between member groups. Despite increased contacts with Saudi Arabia, no country in the region has offered tangible support to the group and Riyadh still has doubts about the INC's credibility and prospects. Syria vehemently opposes the group, and both Syria and Saudi Arabia sponsor rival Arab Sunni opposition groups. In our judgment, current levels of Western support are insufficient to enable the group to achieve its goals of overthrowing Saddam Husayn and installing a democratic, pluralistic government in Baghdad. (S NF)

The INC includes representatives of all the major Kurdish, Shia, and Independent groups based in northern Iraq and abroad. The participation of the Kurdish Front in the organization gives the INC a large following among Iraq's minority Kurdish population. Iran-based Iraqi Shia groups also participate in the INC. Support among Shias and Sunnis in central and southern Iraq, however, is much harder to come by. INC ties to Washington, a perceived lack of Western interest in the plight of Iraq's majority Shias, and lack of access to southern Iraq by exiled opposition groups and international humanitarian organizations detract from INC support in southern Iraq. Support for the INC is weakest among Iraq's privileged minority Arab Sunnis, who still view INC policies and makeup--exiles, Kurds, and Shias--as a threat to their continued dominance of the country. Increased Sunni backing is needed if the INC is to appeal to key military and political figures in the regime. Most INC members, however, have been exiled for years and have little name recognition inside the country. Only a handful of them who already have strong support bases inside Iraq--like the Kurds and some Shias--might have sufficient political and military clout to play a role in a post-Saddam Iraq.

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