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Iraq's one-man war machine

It is remarkable how Ahmad Chalabi, a Shiite exile who commanded no army and led no tribe, managed to get a superpower to wage a war it will rue for years.

By Richard Bonin
December 29, 2011

When Vice President Joe Biden slipped into Baghdad this month to commemorate the end of eight bloody years of war in Iraq, there was one face conspicuously absent from the host of solemn ceremonies and farewell meetings he attended: that of Ahmad Chalabi. The Iraqi politician, who lived in exile before Saddam Hussein's ouster, is shunned by Washington these days. But there has never been a foreigner more crucially involved in a decision by the United States to go to war than Ahmad Chalabi.

I've examined his involvement, both as a producer for CBS News' "60 Minutes" and for a book. I have interviewed Chalabi himself for more than 60 hours for the book, and I also spoke to many who knew him, both allies and enemies, and reviewed numerous government records. The research built an overwhelming picture of Chalabi's unflagging, decades-long work to promote regime change in Iraq.

Those efforts took a decisive turn in a meeting on Jan. 21, 2001, the second day of the George W. Bush presidency. That day, he attended a gathering at the two-story, suburban home of Richard Perle, a leading figure in the neoconservative movement. Among those present, Chalabi says, were several men who, within a few months, would hold influential positions in the new administration.

At the January meeting, according to Chalabi and Perle, the topic under discussion was how to

get the nascent Bush administration to back Chalabi in his lifelong quest to overthrow Hussein. "Those of us who wanted to see Saddam's regime brought down regarded him as a very important find," Perle said of Chalabi.

To Perle and the others, Chalabi seemed to provide a possible answer to the crucial question of who could replace the dictator. Perle says that he and the others at the time considered the Iraqi exile someone who "shared our values" and who could be trusted to carry U.S. national interests to this most vital of regions, the oil-rich Middle East. As soon as they were ensconced in the Bush administration, Perle and his neoconservative confederates began pushing for their vision of a post-Hussein Iraq, one in which Chalabi would play a central role.

For Chalabi, membership in this elite and well-positioned circle of Americans was a critical stepping stone in his long journey to triumph in Iraq.

That journey began in 1958 when Chalabi was 13 and the monarchy in Iraq was overthrown, forcing his wealthy and powerful family to flee its homeland for the West. Chalabi, by his own account, participated in his first coup attempt at age 19, while on a school break from MIT. His next occurred five years later, in the summer of 1968.

But as the years passed and Hussein stubbornly held on to power, Chalabi says he made a bold decision: He would attempt to enlist both Iran and its powerful archenemy, the United States, to his cause. Only America had the might to remove Hussein from power, he reasoned. But Iran, fearing its regime might be the next to be toppled, had enough assets on the ground to complicate, if not undermine, any U.S. effort at regime change. It was key to get Iran to go along.

Moreover, Chalabi calculated, making himself the essential liaison — the "indispensable man" — between Tehran and Washington might help guarantee him power in a post-Hussein Iraq.

In 1991, Chalabi linked up with the CIA, in a relationship that by all accounts ended tumultuously six years later for both parties. He then pressed his case with leading members of Congress, the media, influential think tanks, American oil companies and, ultimately, the Perle-led band of neoconservatives who embraced Chalabi as their point man for Iraqi regime change.

During the Clinton administration, Chalabi led the charge up Capitol Hill for passage of the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, which made supporting the ouster of Hussein and his regime official U.S. policy. After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, when the Bush administration was at war with itself over whether to include Iraq in its response to those attacks, Chalabi procured a string of timely, high-profile defectors with tales that seemingly confirmed Hussein's ties to Al Qaeda and his possession of catastrophic weapons of mass destruction. Chalabi proved to be a great asset to administration hawks, who needed ammunition to win the policy war over Iraq that was being waged inside the administration.

"We didn't go to the Bush administration" with defectors, Chalabi told me. "They came to us."

When 9/11 happened, there was already support in Washington for the neoconservative goal of bringing down Hussein's regime, and Chalabi was viewed as central to that end. But after 9/11,

the institutions that became crucial were the generals at Centcom, along with the CIA and the State Department, all of which mistrusted Chalabi and his ties to Iran. That made it easy for the administration to kick Chalabi to the sidelines when it decided to invade Iraq, infuriating Chalabi and driving him closer to Iran.

In 2004, concerned about allegations that Chalabi had betrayed U.S. interests in his dealings with Iran, President Bush ordered all ties with him severed. Ever since, Chalabi has nuzzled closer to Tehran, while remaining undaunted in his quest for power.

Today, at age 67, he is a member of the Iraqi parliament — hardly the exalted position he had long envisioned for himself. But he says he's a happy man. "Iraq is liberated and I am sitting at home," he told me in one of our last interviews.

Meanwhile, with the U.S. military presence in Iraq just ended, it is worth pondering how this lone and largely powerless exile managed to play such a key role in pushing the greatest power on Earth into a war it will rue for years.