

# Chalabi, Iranian spies and the crisis of the Bush administration

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8 June 2004

Allegations that emerged last week concerning one-time Washington favourite Ahmed Chalabi—head of the Iraqi National Congress (INC)—have highlighted the ferocity of the barely disguised conflicts raging within the Bush administration.

Chalabi has been the subject of a series of accusations since both his home and the INC offices in Baghdad were raided by US and Iraqi security forces late last month—linking him to kidnapping, torture, theft and murder. Last week, however, details were leaked in the US media concerning claims that Chalabi divulged top-secret US information to the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Iran.

The *New York Times* reported last Wednesday that US intelligence officials were accusing Chalabi of telling the Baghdad station chief of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security that the US had broken the ministry's security code and was reading all of its communications. The US had learned of the breach when the Iranian station chief informed his superiors about Chalabi—using the same encryption code.

The accusation is politically harmful, not so much to Chalabi, but to his closest US allies—the right-wing neoconservatives in charge at the Pentagon. A further *New York Times* article last Thursday reported that the FBI had already begun an investigation to determine who provided Chalabi with the information. FBI investigators were reportedly questioning civilian employees at the Pentagon and administering lie detector tests.

According to the *Times*, only a small group of senior officials would have had direct knowledge that the US had broken the Iranian code. A somewhat wider circle may have been able to infer from US intelligence reports that Washington was reading secret Iranian communications. Whether any culprit is identified or

not, the latest revelations can only further damage the Pentagon leadership, already under siege over the systematic torture of Iraqi detainees.

At this stage, it is not possible to determine whether the accusations are true. None of the agencies involved has issued statements. No one has been charged. Chalabi himself has denied the allegations and offered to be questioned by US investigators. Senior Iranian official Hassan Rohani told the media: “The story is basically a lie.” He said Iranian intelligence frequently changes codes and denied any “special relationship or special intelligence activity with Chalabi”.

What is clear, however, is that the moves against Chalabi are bound up with the deep-going crisis of the Bush administration over Iraq, produced by the ongoing popular resistance to the US occupation. An article in *Time* magazine on Monday entitled “Inside the Takedown” revealed that the decision to undermine Chalabi was taken in top US circles. In late April, a White House meeting discussed and agreed on a lengthy memo entitled “Marginalising Chalabi,” setting out the options.

*Time* magazine claimed the concerns in Washington stemmed from the misinformation provided by the INC about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD), along with allegations of Chalabi's corruption and links to Iran. But all of these failings were well known in Washington over a year ago—prior to the US-led invasion. At that time, the Bush administration was anxious for anything to justify its long-held plans to subjugate Iraq. It willingly used the bogus information supplied by Chalabi and ignored the fact that he was a convicted embezzler. His dealings with Iran were no secret—Washington even funded the INC's office in Tehran.

Chalabi's fall from grace is connected to a shift in

Washington's tactics to try to contain the armed anti-US uprising in Fallujah and the southern Shiite areas of the country. By late April, it became apparent that, in order to crush the armed opposition, cities like Fallujah would have to be levelled—a move with potentially explosive consequences in Iraq and the region. Instead, the US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) secured temporary truces in these areas to buy time for the setting up of a puppet government and to rebuild the Iraqi military, police and intelligence services to deal with the resistance.

The tactic, which also included the use of former Baath Party members, had long been advocated by the CIA and State Department, and opposed by Pentagon neocons and Chalabi, who claimed that the US invasion would encounter no serious resistance from the Iraqi people. Among his other posts, Chalabi was the head of the so-called “de-Baathification” committee and publicly criticised moves to use former generals and intelligence officials from the Hussein regime.

Significantly, the man who drew up the “Marginalising Chalabi” memo was US diplomat Robert Blackwill. While described in the *Time* article as an “Iraqi expert” with the National Security Council (NSC), Blackwill has no specific Iraqi expertise—academic or otherwise. He worked for the Bush senior administration as a special assistant on European and Soviet Affairs, was a foreign affairs adviser to George W. Bush during the 2000 election campaign, and until March last year was US ambassador to India, where he had been assigned to consolidate a close strategic relationship with New Delhi.

Blackwill, who has connections to the CIA and State Department, was appointed last year to the White House with the backing of Bush's National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice as a “fixer”. According to several press accounts, he, not UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, played the main role in Baghdad last week in determining the makeup of the new interim Iraqi government. The key appointment was that of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, a longtime “asset” of US and British intelligence, and, in opposition to Chalabi, an advocate of exploiting former Baath Party officials and military officers to crush the anti-US resistance.

It appears that Blackwill's memo has been put into effect. In the space of a month, Chalabi's Pentagon

funding has been cut off, his house and headquarters have been raided and he stands accused of a number of serious offences. The INC's security chief has been accused of being an Iranian agent. Over the weekend, an Iraqi judge issued an arrest warrant for Chalabi's aide and unofficial lobbyist, Francis Brooke, over allegations that he obstructed the police raid on the INC's headquarters.

No senior Pentagon official has sprung to Chalabi's defence. Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz has carefully distanced himself from the man he once championed. Speaking to the *New Yorker*, he declared: “I think there's quite a bit of street legend out there that somehow he is the favourite of the Defence Department, and we had some idea of installing him as the leader of Iraq.” A State Department official caustically noted in the same article: “Every list of Iraqis they [the Pentagon] wanted to work with for positions in the government of postwar Iraq included Chalabi and all the members of his organisation.”

Only the staunchest ideologues of the extreme rightwing have defended Chalabi. Late last month a strange little protest group headed by former Pentagon official Richard Perle appeared at Rice's office to complain about the treatment of Chalabi, accusing the CIA and the US proconsul in Iraq, Paul Bremer III, of instigating the police raids. In a further statement last week, Perle said the accusations concerning Chalabi and Iranian intelligence failed “to pass the laugh test”.

While Chalabi and his backers appear to be on the outer, nothing is settled. An article in *Newsweek* last week entitled “A return to sanity, finally” crowed over the fact that “Iraqi policy has been wrested from the Pentagon and is now being directed by Robert Blackwill,” describing him as “a smart, aggressive effective problem-solver”. But Blackwill is no more able to foist a neo-colonial regime on an unwilling and hostile Iraqi population than his predecessors. As the resistance to US rule continues, it is certain to intensify the recriminations and internecine warfare inside the Bush administration.



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