

# Man with a mission

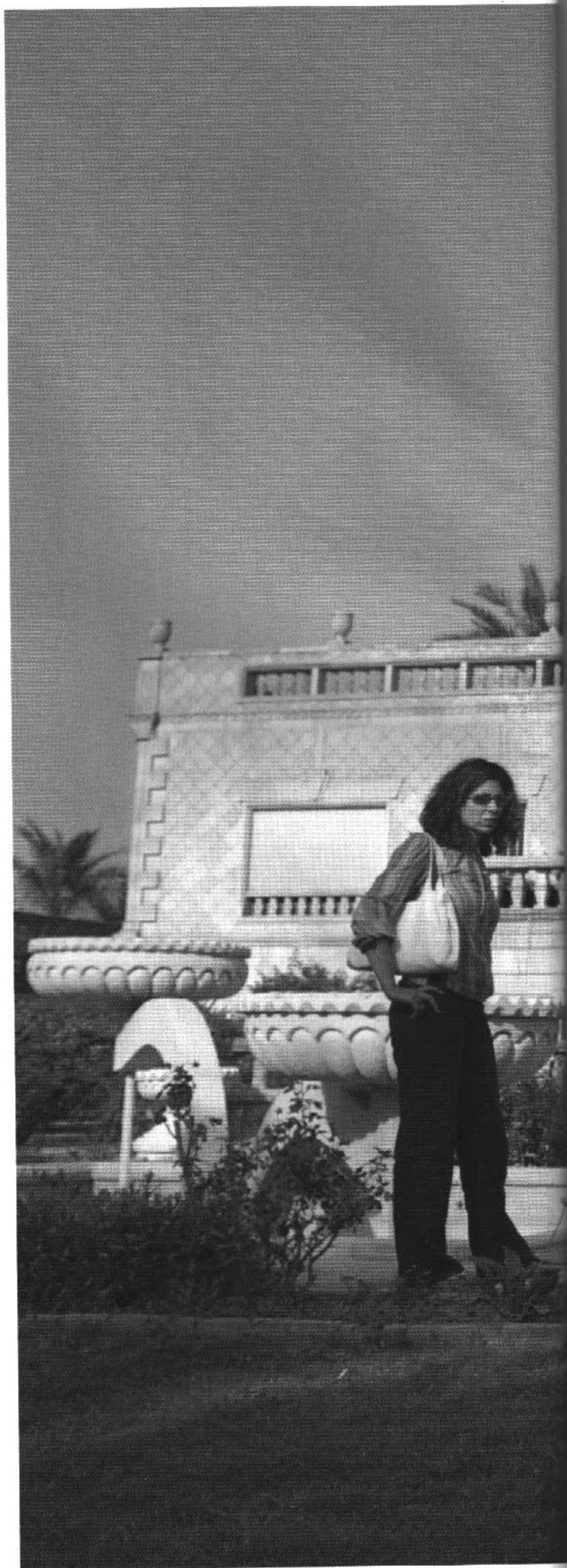
After 45 years in exile, Ahmad Chalabi persuaded the US to share his dream of deposing Saddam Hussein. For his efforts, he was one of the first Iraqis to confront the captured dictator. **Heidi Kingstone** meets the man who may yet become Iraq's next leader

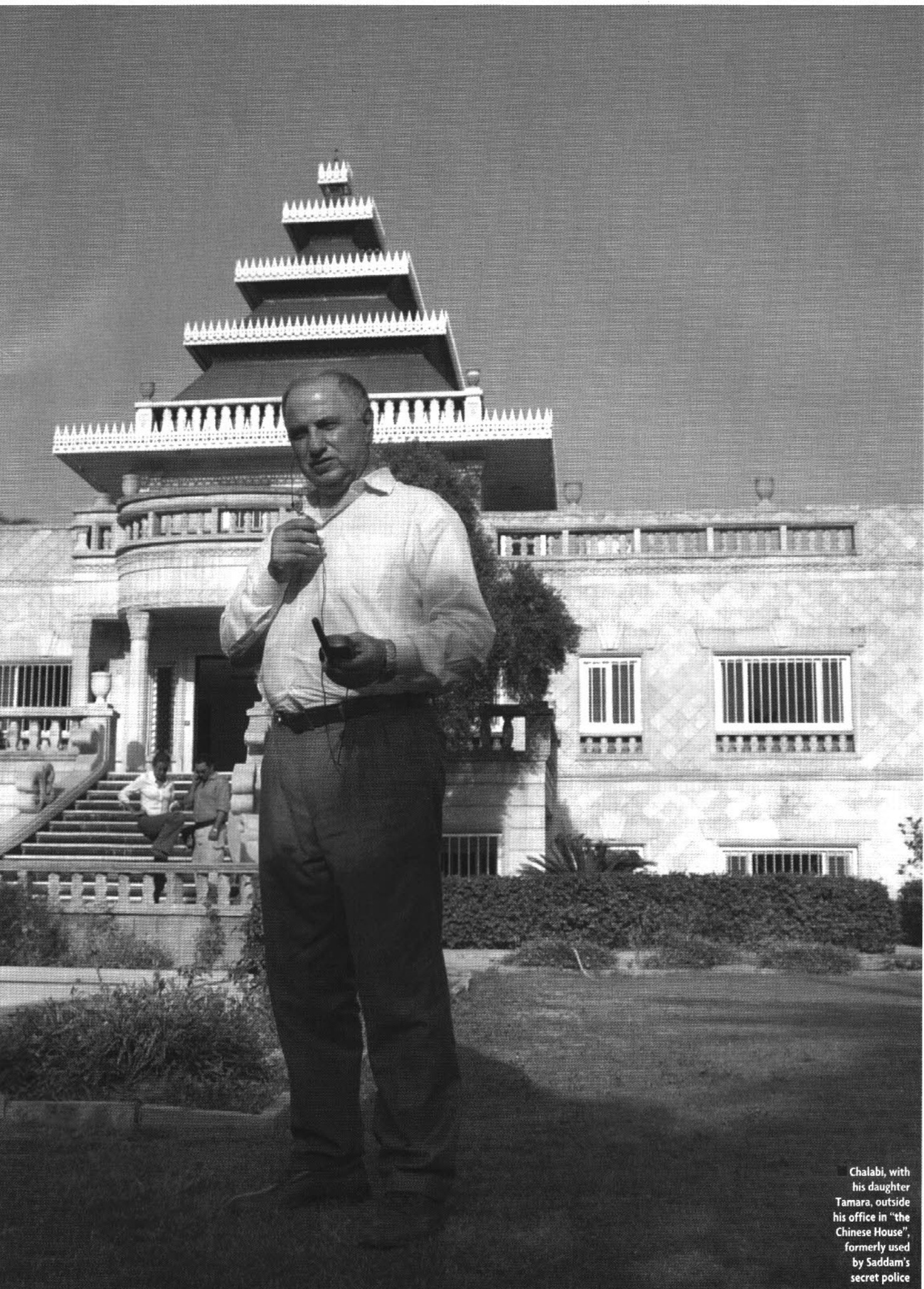
**I**t is past midnight in Baghdad. The streets in the residential neighbourhood are eerily empty. There is the occasional sound of gunfire. Earlier, the house of Iraq's most famous returned exile, Ahmad Chalabi, shook with the force of a bomb exploding nearby. The helicopters that followed swooped low in search of the perpetrators, churning up the dust, their rotor noise throbbing through the houses. Now it is quiet again. The night air is cool with winter approaching, balmy, unlike the desperate heat of summer that makes Baghdad unbearable. In the newly refurbished mansion, there is much activity in spite of the hour.

"We want to help President Bush! We're doing better because of him! He did a great thing for us. I want to turn public opinion around in the US," Chalabi is saying. He pads about the large living room in the once swanky al-Mansour district in Baghdad, speaking loudly into an American-issue mobile phone, pacing back and forth. His accented but perfect English is witness to decades of exile – in Lebanon, Jordan, England and the US.

In Washington, it is four in the afternoon and the man who is talking to Ahmad Chalabi is Richard Perle – sometimes called, by his many enemies at home and abroad, "the Prince of Darkness" – an epithet he acquired because of his hardline stance on national security issues while he was a Pentagon adviser during the Reagan years.

Earlier this year Perle quit his chairmanship of the Pentagon Defense Policy Board over allegations, since dismissed by a Pentagon inquiry, of a conflict of interest with a private company on whose board he serves. But he is still influential. He and Chalabi have known each other for years. Chalabi is Perle's man, >>





Chalabi, with his daughter Tamara, outside his office in "the Chinese House", formerly used by Saddam's secret police

and vice versa. Their partnership helped to shape America's war in Iraq, and it still has the potential to shape the peace.

Perle is a leading policy spokesman for America's "neo-conservatives" who are credited with putting so much moral pressure on the administration that it undertook the invasion of Iraq. Chalabi has been the neo-Cons' prime exhibit: he is back in the Iraq he left as a child refugee because he, more than any other single figure, made the case for Iraqi "regime change" to the neo-Cons across many barren and frustrating years. Chalabi is here because he was a very large influence in bringing round the world's greatest power to share his dream of ridding Iraq, and the world, of Saddam Hussein.

He was one of the first Iraqis to see the former dictator in person after his capture last week. "I pulled up a chair about 2ft from Saddam. He was sitting on the side of the bed and had just woken up. I just looked at him. Saddam was unrepentant - he has learned nothing, shows no remorse, and didn't deny his crimes. He is a man who has lost his honour."

When I ask Chalabi if this 30-minute meeting, face-to-face with a man whose rule he had spent decades trying to destroy, was a defining moment, he replies: "I don't gloat." But his voice is tinged with disgust for the brutal dictator.

Chalabi's role in Saddam's downfall is a tremendous personal triumph, but he now lives with the consequences. One of these is that he is seen as America's stooge. He needs the Americans to stay and to prevail against both the domestic remnants of the Saddam regime and the foreign jihadis, or he is likely to find his throat cut. But he also needs them to go, for it has become clear in the months since he has been back that among even those Iraqis who like their country without Saddam, there are many who would like it more without the Americans. Thus, when Chalabi writes or speaks in public - which he does infrequently - he calls for the Americans to be more active, even ruthless, in cracking down on the enemy within, but also to restore Iraqi sovereignty by developing the American-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, on which he sits, as a transitional government which - as he wrote in the Washington Post in August - should "share the burden of security with the coalition while directing the transition to democracy".

He survives in the tension between these two imperatives, amid the bombs and bullets, because he is tightly and constantly protected against the eventuality that one of these has his name on it. As such, Chalabi poses in the sharpest terms the dilemma of the American superpower. In giving a people freedom from tyranny, can it give them the order in which that freedom can be enjoyed? In the years before he returned, Chalabi had told anyone who would listen that it could. Now he has to justify his optimism.

AC, as his inner circle refers to him, has been up since the early morning, working straight through the day, despite the usual restrictions of Ramadan. He always seems to be on the move - meeting ministers or officials, discussing procedures for appointing judges, meeting with other Iraqi leaders about the constitution, trying to work out business deals. In the evenings men file into his office to talk, something Iraqis love.

Chalabi has made a home in a house that had belonged to one of his close relatives. Saddam's Mukhabarat, the secret police, took it over when the family went into exile. The secret policemen used its large rooms to keep meticulous files. They also stored stockpiles of machine-guns here, and built a sand-map of the neighbourhood on one of the floors. Now the place is filled

with leather sofas, silver ornaments and beautiful cream tusks. An inlaid elephant from India, which stands guard at the entrance, used to be in Chalabi's house in Jordan.

On this night, Chalabi had broken the Ramadan fast at 5pm with Jalal Talabani, chairman of the Iraqi Governing Council, the unelected interim authority made up of 25 Iraqis, and leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of two organisations representing the Kurdish minority. Now, after his phone conversation with Perle, Chalabi is eating again, with a small group including his long-standing associate, Nabeel Musawi, who lives across the road. Musawi is another returned exile who acts as Chalabi's political adviser and deputy on the governing council. Food is laid out on large white oval platters across the table, far too much to eat, which is typical in the Middle East, where hospitality is second nature. Despite the rather grand surroundings, there is nothing formal about dinner: everyone reaches over everyone else to gather up the marinated lamb, kebabs, rice and bread. Musawi and Chalabi seem as relaxed as diners anywhere,

**Chalabi says Paul Bremer suffered from "the sin of pride" and saw the former exiled Iraqis as "just a bunch of failed nincompoops who either do our bidding or we will replace [them] with other nincompoops who will"**

yet attempts have been made to kill them both, and their houses are surrounded by armed guards and concrete barriers to block suicide bombers. The mood is upbeat. We dine as Paul Bremer, America's pro-consul in Iraq, is on his way to Washington, where he has been summoned for urgent talks. This does not displease my host. Something is in the air, which seems to be to his liking.

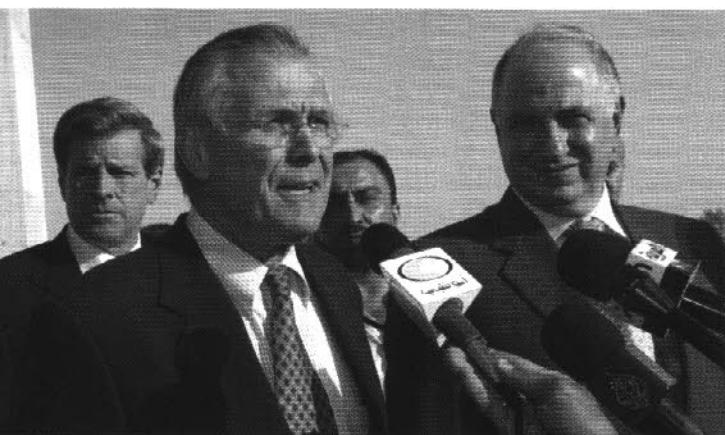
There's not much love lost between the two men. L. Paul Bremer III was appointed presidential envoy in May and, as such, is the senior coalition official in Iraq. Bremer, a former diplomat and leading expert on crisis management, reports to secretary of defence Donald Rumsfeld. Bremer has made decisions that Chalabi didn't like, such as slowing down the transfer of political power, and he did so without consulting Chalabi and others on the council. Chalabi thinks the coalition troops need to be pulled out from the cities in order to remove "this business of occupation". There is a lot of talk at the dinner table about the Americans being able to deal with the terrorists in the "shit hole that has become famous" - Fallujah, where pockets of resistance against the Americans seem to be located, in what has become known as the "Sunni triangle".

A few days later, Bremer returns from Washington with an utterly new American plan for Iraq. Out goes the original, slow and methodical programme - the drafting of a constitution, the holding of a referendum, elections, and finally the handover of power to an Iraqi government. Now, with losses mounting and an American presidential election on the way, Washington is in a hurry. So in comes plan B. No need for direct elections: America will transfer power to an unelected, interim Iraqi government next June. It will take charge of writing a constitution. And there will be no proper national election until 2005. This is a complete

reversal. For Chalabi, it is a tremendous encouragement, as Plan B is really his Plan A, the one he wanted in the first place.

Chalabi has been in exile for 45 of his 59 years. Having become the best-known face of the main Iraqi opposition, the umbrella group known as the Iraqi National Congress (INC), he returned to Baghdad after Saddam's regime fell in mid-April for the first time since he was 14. The Americans had flown him to Nasiriyah in the south from where he drove across the desert up to Baghdad in the week after the Americans took control of the capital. But he makes it clear that he arrived in Iraq under his own steam, having spent the months before the war first in Tehran and then in the autonomous (Kurdish) region of northern Iraq. "General [Tommy] Franks [the US commander] was dead set against us and they did their damndest to makes us fail," he says.

Chalabi's American backing, however ambivalent it sometimes appears, does him scant good in Iraq: he had little following on the ground when in exile, and fear that the Americans will leave and that the vacuum will be filled with a new set of tyrants keeps



■ Chalabi's critics say he is America's stooge: here seen with US secretary of defence Donald Rumsfeld (centre) and the US pro-consul to Iraq Paul Bremer (left)

him from acquiring one now. He was not seen as a liberator: instead, once back home, he became just one of many politicians jostling for influence. His enemies depicted him as a puppet of the Pentagon with no popular credibility, whose relevance would vanish once Iraqis were able to express their preferences at the ballot box. Now, with plan B, Chalabi is back in business.

Chalabi and Bremer meet twice a week. Their relationship is cordial rather than warm. And both have the same end-game: peace and keeping the bad guys out. He tells me that Bremer arrived in Baghdad suffering from "the sin of pride". He behaved, he says, as the representative of the most powerful nation on earth, and saw the former exiled Iraqis as "just a bunch of failed nincompoops who either do our bidding or we will replace you with other nincompoops who will". The new plan means the Americans have been constrained to admit that they need the help of the nincompoops.

**We have driven to Jalal Talabani's palatial spread on the banks of the muddy Tigris.** The place is so large and garish it seems more like an official building than a residence, typical of the old regime. Bremer has returned and Chalabi is talking about the switch in strategy. "Yes, of course this is a vindication," he says. "We had an impasse and several things had to be done to resolve this. First, Iraqis wanted sovereignty. Second, a constitution had to be drafted by a properly elected body such as a constituent assembly. Third was that the US, due to various political timetables, had to hand over sovereignty to Iraqis to end the occupation. The

block was that some in the US only wanted to hand over to an elected government. The only way to resolve this impasse was to decouple these three things. When this was put to President Bush he saw it and cut the knot. This was the position we were advocating before the war. It is an important development because we can take away this creeping venom from the relationship between Iraq and the US and lay the ground for a good strategic alliance."

Theories abound of what went wrong in post-conflict planning. The basic dichotomy, Chalabi believes, was that a struggle took place between the CIA, the state department and the defence department. The latter felt that Iraq could transfer to an electoral democracy easily, while the former two felt that the chances for any such thing were bleak.

Chalabi says the advantage of the new plan is that it will give Iraqis control of their own affairs much earlier, ending the perception that they are still under American occupation. What he doesn't say is that postponing the election, and relying more on the established groups that came to the fore in exile, gives an advantage to people like him. How popular he is ceases to matter. His skills – those of a coalition-builder who manoeuvres shrewdly behind the scenes – are now the ones needed. He is perfectly placed in the new dispensation. He is a member of the Shia majority; but he is a secular one, with the ear of Washington. Bremer has brought back a dizzying prospect for this man. He has the opportunity to emerge as the country's pre-eminent politician.

But will he be able to seize the opportunity? He can be stiff and evasive when he is not being charming and erudite. He likes to control his environment: and to control himself (he is a non-drinker). He forces people about him to extremes – of devotion, or loathing. But after three careers – as a scholar, a banker and now a politician – he is nobody's nincompoop. Above all, he has furthered his last career, that of politician, by getting to know which buttons to press in George W. Bush's Washington. His allies and supporters do not end at Perle: they include a still more powerful figure, the deputy secretary of defence, Paul Wolfowitz. The screen-saver on his office computer is a picture of himself standing, in Baghdad, alongside Wolfowitz's boss, defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Chalabi's office is in another former Mukhabarat building, this one known locally as the Chinese House. It is surrounded by graceful palms, but its architecture is typically vulgar. To reach his office you walk past a large fountain with circular hoops and red and green lights that shine in the dark. In the office itself the gold curtains are always drawn for security. Outside, in the compound, old Iraqi dinars with Saddam's picture on them are being incinerated. Sometimes, when the wind blows towards the office, you catch the pungent smell. However unpleasant, it is a sweet reminder to Chalabi of the destruction, hundreds of thousands of times a day, of the face of his enemy.

A typical day starts at 9am and ends well after midnight. In the evening he holds court. When I go to see him, he is breaking his fast with Kamel al-Gailani, the minister of finance, and several Americans from the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), including George Wolfe, director of economic development, sent by the US Treasury Department to help rebuild Iraq's financial sector.

Chalabi is at ease with these Americans. He is a good raconteur and relishes being the centre of attention. At the time, Saddam was still at large and it is hard to get away from talking about him. Now Chalabi is telling the story of his own blind brother (there were nine children) who was a famous international law and constitution professor who had Saddam as a student and gave him a 3 per cent average. Chalabi's father had advised against it: even then Saddam was marked out as a future man of power and, as >>

>> we subsequently learned, going against his authority could cost you dearly. Someone quips: "If George Bush lived here during the Saddam years he, too, would have become a Baathi." Wolfe takes Chalabi aside for a private talk. Later, he and Wolfe and the governor of the central bank sit together like schoolboys on a gilt sofa as he displays pictures of his family from the old days in Baghdad. One of the photographs shows his forebears at a food-laden table in their 27-acre garden in 1946. The Chalabi family's guest back then was Sir Edward Spears, the British general who administered much of the Middle East after the second world war. Chalabi calls the general the Bremer of Lebanon and Syria. "So we've all seen this before," he says, laughing.

Chalabi is talkative and relaxed in this sort of company because he is at least their intellectual equal, and had the kind of elite schooling that most Americans don't. He was educated by Jesuits from Georgetown, Washington DC, at the famous Baghdad College and, after a spell at Seaford College, a private Church of England school in Sussex, he went on to read mathematics at MIT at the age of 16. He received a doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1969. "It's easy to be an American," he says. "It's a welcoming place and people are generally straightforward and open. I saw the good sides of being free, and I saw the idiotic sides. You can make stupid decisions but it's all part of the game and it's better than anything else. There are compromises to be made. There are winners and losers. But the losers don't get killed and the winners don't own everything."

By around 7pm the meeting room is filling up. Large and ornate upholstered chairs form a U-shape, and there are small plastic white tables with non-alcoholic drinks on them. Conversation rings to the sound of spoons clanking against the

little glasses full of strong tea, stirring the obligatory, heavy sugar. Late arrivals include the deputy mayor of Baghdad, Hadi Faisal Saleh al-Salmany, and a tribal sheikh from Nasiriyah whose name I don't catch. The sheikh complains that the governing council is ignoring his people. Though he tells Chalabi he appreciates the Americans for getting rid of Saddam, he says he will oppose them if they do things wrong. The deputy mayor wants to talk about the electricity situation. "Our work must continue 24 hours a day but the security situation is so bad that we can just work in the daylight hours."

Why do Baghdadis take their troubles to Chalabi? (The wife of Saddam's half-brother, Wathan, turned up one evening to ask about getting one of her houses back.) Part of it is the famous name. The Chalabis are an Iraqi dynasty, similar to the Kennedys in America. But much has to do with Chalabi's personal reputation as an effective operator. "Articulate, forceful, good at attaining his objectives," one high-ranking American official tells me. But his very ability to make a good case is now part of the indictment against him, from the many Americans who think the war against Saddam was a mistake. They believe he and the INC exaggerated the threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and fed bad intelligence to the CIA. He is also often blamed for giving his Washington friends too rosy a view of the welcome US "liberators" would receive from ordinary Iraqis once the war was over.

When I put these accusations to him, Chalabi dismisses them all. The INC did press for the removal of Saddam, but he says it did so entirely openly. "We definitely made a case about Saddam and his crimes and the dangers he wrought on the Iraqi people and we kept doing it publicly and openly. The INC agenda was to remove Saddam Hussein from office." But he says the INC never



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made any independent claims on WMD. Its only intelligence contribution consisted of helping three defectors who claimed to have expert knowledge to make contact with the Americans.

"The idea that I would sell to Wolfowitz and Perle things like that in the face of a multi-billion-dollar intelligence operation run by the US is something ridiculous. It does not stand the test of logic or fact. Look at this: I went and sold this to Wolfowitz who sold it to Rumsfeld who sold it to Cheney who sold it to Bush and Bush got the approval of Congress, and then Colin Powell, on my say-so, someone with a known agenda and so many enemies, spoke to the UN, and I brought the US army to Iraq. It's a great thing. I'm getting maximum recognition, held up in the west as the man responsible for getting troops into Iraq."

But both Chalabi, and his opponents, fail to address a more subtle issue. Chalabi's contribution to the war was not primarily the intelligence he provided, nor contact with the defectors whom he knew, nor detailed knowledge of Iraqi society. What he gave was a moral imperative, with which Wolfowitz and others already agreed: that is, that Saddam was an evil who had to be removed for a raft of reasons - strategic, political and moral. He had that moral force because his enmity towards the Iraqi dictatorship has consumed almost all of his own lifetime. The Iraqi political analyst Siyamend Othman, whom I talked with in the eerily vacant Palestine Hotel a few days before it was bombed last month, believes that "more than any other Iraqi, he has contributed to the removal of Saddam Hussein, albeit by proxy. Forty or 50 years from now, that is how history will judge him."

His personal story tells you why. In 1958, the day after General Abd al-Karim Qasim, Saddam's predecessor, seized power by slaughtering the Iraqi royal family and many of its ministers and

officials, the new regime came looking for Ahmad's father, Abdul Hadi Chalabi. He was president of the Iraqi senate under the constitutional monarchy of the Hashemites, who still rule Jordan today. The family had always been wealthy and powerful. Ahmad's uncle, Mohamed Ali, started the Rafidain Bank in the 1950s. British prime minister Harold Macmillan was a guest at their home in Baghdad. When the plotters arrived Ahmad's father was, luckily, abroad, as was his brother, Rushdie, a minister in the deposed government. (His parents died in exile years later.)

Tamara Daghistani, a close friend, tells the story that when the soldiers arrived at their home, Ahmad volunteered to be taken hostage as they held a pistol to his mother's head. Daghistani calls Chalabi "EO", which stands for "eternal optimist". They were born two years apart on the same street. Her brother Timoor is the Jordanian ambassador to London and was married to King Hussein's sister, Princess Basmah. All are friends of Jordan's Prince Hassan. Ask her what she thinks has kept Chalabi committed to Iraq for all those years of exile and she says her generation yearns to recapture a golden age for Iraq in the more liberal and tolerant 1940s and 1950s. She remembers childhoods where families would go down by the river, dressed in their best outfits, full of colour, and the Tigris would be alight with candles; fisherman would return to its banks with a lantern shining at the bottom of their boat. "We lived Iraq, this was our daily fare. All my friends think I'm mad. They're leaving Baghdad, but I have this wonderful feeling of being home, and I'll be damned if I'll be kicked out again. This is where my memories are."

Chalabi says it never occurred to him to settle permanently in exile. "I like being here. It's my country and my people. It was my mission to return and it became clear when I left that there was >>



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no question in my mind that I belonged in Iraq, nowhere else. Even though I have lived in Lebanon, Jordan, England and the States and I had a good career, I never felt I was at home... Immediately I returned to Baghdad I felt an empathy with everyone and everything around me. The fact I was not in Iraq was something I missed very much and wanted to be part of."

Chalabi's forte is his cultivation of people. He began to do so at university and he has not stopped. He worked particularly closely with those who were committed anti-Baathists, including General (Mustafa) Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party. "Not for one day did I ever stop. Within two days of getting my PhD I flew from America to Tehran to meet them."

When he moved to Beirut to take up his post in mathematics, he met Leila, the mother of his four children, who lives in London in a big, rambling flat that overlooks green gardens and is full of art and artefacts – more lived in than his Baghdad home. Her father, Adel Osseiran, was president of Lebanon's



National Assembly, and a leader in their war of independence.

One way Chalabi kept the flame alive was, in 1992, to establish the INC, the umbrella opposition organisation that led the struggle against Saddam. In the wake of the 1991 Gulf war, Chalabi rounded up disparate factions – Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, Turkomans, Christians, ex-communists – to fight Saddam in exile, and the INC was its driving force over the next decade, bringing it both infamy and a high profile. Washington channelled funds to the INC, covertly, via the CIA. But the group acquired many inside-the-beltway enemies. It never really cohered: within it, differing interests and parties pushed their own agenda. The state department thought Chalabi ineffectual, pointing out that he failed to establish order on the INC's varying factions. On top of that there was an allegation of "accounting irregularities" made by the state department, which tied up promised funds and was later dismissed.

One thing above all others has dogged his steps, and given those who oppose him grounds for saying that he is not a man to be trusted. In 1978 in Jordan, Chalabi created Petra Bank, which grew rapidly and was the first to introduce credit cards and ATMs. But when it submitted its annual financial statement to the Central Bank of Jordan in 1989, the central bank maintained that millions had been transferred to other parts of the family business in Switzerland, Lebanon and London. The bank was closed and the central bank said the nation had to spend many millions to prevent a wider financial crisis. In 1992 Chalabi was

■ Amid the bombs and the bullets, Chalabi is constantly and tightly protected

charged with 31 counts of embezzlement, theft, and currency speculation and was convicted in a Jordanian military court for fraud and embezzlement. He was sentenced to 22 years' hard labour. Luckily, like his father when the Iraqi soldiers came to seek him almost 30 years before, when they came for him Chalabi was not there. He is said to have escaped in an official Syrian car, which ferried him over the border with his close friend Tamara Daghistani at the wheel. Neither will comment.

**Chalabi says he was framed by the governments of Iraq and Jordan, but** Abdul Ghafar Freihath, the judge appointed as head of the committee for evaluation of the bank's assets, insisted then and insists now that the direct legal evidence against him is clear and properly documented. The collapse did not, as it happens, ruin the Chalabi family, which has retained other successful businesses and has a worth estimated at the end of last year of some £150m.

It is de rigueur to hate Chalabi in Jordan. At an elegant dinner party of wealthy, well-connected and sophisticated Jordanians in



Amman, men and women who travel regularly to London and wear the most expensive clothes, I was surprised to hear him universally described as corrupt, a thief who almost brought Jordan down, a man who should never have power in Iraq.

Dr Mohammad Said Nabulsi, the governor of the Central Bank of Jordan in 1989 who had to pick up the pieces when Petra Bank fell apart, is more vehement. "He's definitely evil... He fled within 48 hours. Is this what innocent people do? This was before investigations. He hadn't even been accused of anything. We just took him out as chairman." Nabulsi says Chalabi is a fraud, and his network of influential friends and allies has been formed, at least in part, by direct bribery or indirectly by extending bank facilities to people who cannot repay. "He was very clever in cementing relationships with very important people in Jordan. I discovered problems so big they needed quick action."

His defenders say that Chalabi was simply ahead of his time, and that he was guilty of mismanagement, not embezzlement. "On the one side you had, in Jordan, the old traditional banks," says Osama Halabeh, a Jordanian businessman who joined Petra Bank in 1983. "Then here comes this young banker who started doing things the modern way. A number of factors destroyed Petra Bank. In banking, rumours can be very disruptive. In Arabic we have a saying, 'capital is a coward'. No one was willing to risk money. He saw business opportunities, he wanted the bank to grow fast and make money and he wanted to make an empire quickly. One month before this happened the bank had foreign exchange problems and the Jordanian dinar was devaluing every day."

The Petra scandal has had the effect of making Chalabi all the more committed to winning in Iraq and bringing out what he sees

as the truth. Documents have surfaced, he claims, which show "egregious interference, from the prime minister to the governor of the central bank". He says the case makes no difference to him now that he is in Baghdad. Not everyone agrees: Dr Mahmoud Othman, an independent on the governing council who thinks that Chalabi is highly capable, says Petra Bank is his weak link. "That's his main problem, and it has affected him very much. If somebody is responsible for public office they need credibility."

While Chalabi may now have the best chance he is likely to get of becoming the country's first post-Saddam leader, to do so he will have to overcome the handicaps of his long exile, the stain, justified or not, of the Petra Bank matter, and his unshakeable self-belief, often interpreted as a haughty, impatient demeanour. Iraq is not a democracy, but it shows some features of becoming one. Popularity and credibility matter. Chalabi's fluency with the neo-Cons doesn't carry with the neo-Iraqis. He might be Shia, but his secular traditions could count against him if indeed the clerics take control of the Shia discourse. If many Iraqis fear the

**If Chalabi is a prophet with at least some honour in his native land, he is one without any possibility of personal safety. Asked if he might have a normal life again, he says, "One way to stop is to get killed. Everyone dies"**

emergence of an Islamic republic, dominated as Iran is by the clerics, they are not numerous or vocal enough to demand an irreligious leader like Chalabi, whose achievements have been built on lobbying behind the scenes in foreign countries. On the other hand, he could provide the bridge. The analyst Siyamend Othman believes Chalabi will always be influential but will never be No. 1. "He is a power broker, good at backroom deals, not a leader," something he has always maintained, perhaps disingenuously, that he doesn't want to be anyway.

If, in all of this, Chalabi is a prophet with at least some honour in his native land, he is one without any possibility of personal safety. When he returns home from one of his endless office evenings, a convoy of eight four-wheel-drives with darkened windows bucks and weaves at high speed through the night in which danger can be imagined around every corner, behind every window, on every rooftop. Just before the approach to his home the horns start blasting as the convoy zigzags past the roadblocks, alerting the guards to remove the sabre-tooth-like barrier that juts menacingly from the road. As he steps out of the car, four bodyguards wrap around him like clingfilm. They walk in unison to his door and then release him into its spacious, gracious confines. After one such ride, I ask him if anything would make him give up and get back to some kind of normal life. "One way to stop is to get killed," he says. "Everyone dies." But if he stays alive it is hard to imagine an Iraq in which Ahmad Chalabi does not play a central role. He has won his dream, and is now honour-bound to live in it. ■

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Piaget, the secret garden



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