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Bad Clients

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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U.S. officials are apparently miffed at their one-time Iraqi favorite, Ahmed Chalabi. As the head of the so-called Accountability and Justice Commission, Chalabi engineered the disqualification of nearly five hundred candidates from the March 7 parliamentary elections. The vast majority of the excluded candidates are Sunnis, and American policy makers fret that the decision is exacerbating sectarian tensions to the point that they could reignite the Sunni-Shiite violence that so convulsed Iraq in 2006 and 2007.

Washington is also suspicious that Iran is pushing the agenda to weaken Sunni factions, thereby magnifying Shiite political strength in Iraq and Tehran's influence there. U.S. officials mutter that Chalabi seems to be doing Iran's bidding. That would hardly be a surprise. Evidence emerged years ago that Chalabi was disturbingly cozy with the Iranian regime.

America's relationship with Ahmed Chalabi has certainly deteriorated from the period before the invasion of Iraq, when Bush administration leaders (and many others) saw him as a champion of freedom and the probable leader of a new, democratic Iraq. Washington generously funded his Iraqi National Congress (INC) and regarded the intelligence information the INC provided concerning Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction with an astonishing degree of credulity. That bogus information played no small role in getting the United States to launch a war to oust Saddam from power.

Washington's disillusionment with Chalabi would be amusing if the consequences of trusting him had not been so tragic. And if that gullibility were an isolated incident instead of merely one episode in a long, dreary pattern. Unfortunately, U.S. policy makers have had a distressing tendency of placing their trust in foreign clients who turn out to be duplicitous, inept or both.

The record of gullibility goes back a long time. Eisenhower administration officials originally thought that South Vietnamese dictator Ngo Dinh Diem was a democratic tiger who would repel the communist assault against his country. Jimmy Carter toasted the shah of Iran, contending that he was loved by his people and that Iran was an "island of stability" in that part of the world. Carter's toast occurred barely a year before the Iranian people ousted their beloved monarch and forced him into exile. Vice President George H.W. Bush made an infamous toast to Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos in 1981, hailing his alleged commitment to democracy. Marcos had been a blatant dictator ever since he had proclaimed martial law in September 1972, and proceeded to use those expanded powers to enrich his cronies and loot the country.

President Ronald Reagan proclaimed the Nicaraguan Contras to be "the moral equivalent of America's founding fathers." Senator Joseph Lieberman asserted that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)—a motley collection of unreconstructed communists, intolerant Albanian nationalists, Islamic radicals, and garden-variety criminals—stood for the same values as America. Even worse, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acted as though the KLA did.

American political leaders apparently have not learned much from those bruising and embarrassing episodes. In addition to the fiasco with Chalabi, Washington embraced two other

highly dubious clients in the just the past decade. One was Viktor Yushchenko, the great Orange Hope of democracy in Ukraine—and Ukrainian membership in NATO. But that country's Orange Revolution shriveled quickly as Yushchenko feuded with coalition partner Yulia Tymoshenko over mundane political spoils.

Flagrant corruption soon afflicted the coalition as well (including the spectacle of the president's teenage son driving around Kiev in a sports car worth six figures—a purchase that would have been difficult to make on his father's modest salary). Just prior to the recently concluded presidential balloting that put pro-Russian and anti-NATO politician Viktor Yanukovich in power, Yushchenko's job approval rating had plunged into the single digits.

Another U.S. favorite from the former Soviet bloc was (and in many respects still is) Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. Washington hailed his election and portrayed him as a champion of democracy and free markets, and praised his support for NATO. And once again, the reality of America's client was far different from the image he cultivated. Among other offenses, Saakashvili ordered assaults on peaceful demonstrators, closed opposing media outlets, and jailed political opponents. Even more alarming, he triggered a war with a far more powerful Russia over the status of Georgia's secessionist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia—apparently with the expectation that the United States would back his play.

At a minimum, future U.S. leaders should keep an arm's-length relationship with would-be foreign allies and clients. Prospective clients are adept at telling American policymakers exactly what they know those policy makers want to hear. Administration officials should be especially wary of lionizing foreign clients, since such public statements and gestures not only frequently prove embarrassing in retrospect, they antagonize opposing political factions and can lead to needlessly hostile relationships with successor regimes.

There are times, of course, when crucial American interests require us to make common cause with unsavory foreign political figures. But we need to be certain that such associations are essential, not just a lazy convenience, and that the chosen client is competent. Too often, the affiliations have not met even one of those standards, much less both.

Finally, American leaders need to maintain a sober, realistic view of even justifiable relationships. Franklin D. Roosevelt famously quipped about Anastasio Somoza Garcia, the corrupt, but friendly dictator in Nicaragua: "He's an S.O.B., but he's our S.O.B." That cynicism might seem jarring, but it is better than actually believing that the likes of Ferdinand Marcos, Mikheil Saakashvili and Ahmed Chalabi were true champions of democracy and freedom. There should be no place for that kind of gullibility in U.S. foreign policy.

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