

# Ahmad Chalabi –the friend who aided in Preserving the Babylonian Jewish Heritage



Ahmad Chalabi 1944-2015

Source: Image by © Patrick Robert/Corbis

[Ahmad Chalabi](#), the controversial secular Shiite Iraqi nationalist leader, passed yesterday at the age of 71. He left behind a mixed reputation as the eminence grise behind American leadership during the Bush era toppling the dictatorship of the late Saddam Hussein. A University of Chicago PhD in Mathematics, banker and exiled leader of Iraqi opposition, he was accused of using questionable information on weapons of mass destruction to convince the Bush Administration to secure Congressional and UN support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. There are some who [maintain](#) that Hussein's WMD was transferred to Assad's Syria and possibly Hezbollah in Lebanon in convoys allegedly facilitated by Russian Spetsnaz in the weeks prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq. Chalabi never achieved the sought after position of Premier of Iraq, but remained a controversial member of its Parliament with connections to Shiite Muqtada al-Sadr and the Iranian regime. Yesterday, I chanced to listen to an American journalist on NPR, speaking from Erbil in the Kurdish Regional Government, who give a nuanced view of Chalabi. She noted the great outpouring of grief on his passing in Iraq as a deep expression of a lost opportunity to positively utilize his multi-faceted talents to bring cohesion to a sectarian riven Iraq.

The gamut of opinion can be seen in the commentary on the passing of Chalabi by Ira Stoll in

the *New York Daily News*, Max Boot and Michael Rubin in *Commentary Magazine* columns. Stoll's headline extolled his virtues, "[In praise of Ahmad Chalabi: I knew him to be a truth-teller who put love of country over personal interest.](#)" Max Boot called him, "[Ahmad Chalabi the Charmer.](#)" Michael Rubin, wrote of personal views and exchanges with the late Chalabi in "[Mourning Ahmad Chalabi.](#)"

[Rubin](#) caught the measure of the late Chalabi:

Many things are written about Chalabi, few of which are positive and many of which depict him as a cartoon villain. Chalabi was both brilliant and arrogant, but he was less villain than scapegoat. And he was first and foremost an Iraqi patriot.

Less well known was Chalabi's crucial role in securing the Babylonian Jewish Heritage. That episode was revealed in our December 2013 *New English Review* (NER) interview, "[The Savior of Iraqi Jewish Heritage,](#)" with Dr. Harold Rhode, former Pentagon Turkish and Islamic Affairs expert. Here is an excerpt from the introduction of the NER interview with Rhode about that incident:

In May 2003, [Ahmad Chalabi](#), prominent secular exile Shiite leader and the head of the opposition [Iraqi National Congress](#) (INC) received a visitor, the former Head of the Israel and Jewish Section of Saddam Hussein's [Mukhabarat](#), Intelligence Service. The visitor was seeking a safe passage document from the [Coalition Provisional Authority](#) in exchange for disclosing that there was a vast trove of ancient Jewish artifacts in what was the water-logged basement of former Intelligence headquarters in Baghdad. The Mukhabarat building had been severely damaged by a massive unexploded bomb that had pierced the water lines placing the basement under four feet of water. Chalabi reached out to former [New York Times](#) journalist [Judith Miller](#) who was embedded with the [Mobile Exploitation Team Alpha \(MET\)](#) seeking evidence of Hussein's rumored WMD – chemical and biological weapons. He also called [Dr. Harold Rhode](#), a civilian specialist and Islamic Affairs expert with the [Office of Net Assessment \(ONA\)](#), a think tank in the Office of Secretary of Defense and a friend of longstanding from their days in Washington, DC. As he was an Orthodox Jew Rhode could assess the significance of the

archives. Rhode had volunteered to serve with the CPA and served as Liaison to the Iraqi Opposition for the CPA, hence the connection to Chalabi.

The MET Alpha WMD specialists, Rhode, Miller, Chalabi and workers went to the Mukhabarat in the company of the former Israel and Jewish section chief who directed them to the vast sodden array and promptly disappeared. Under the four feet of water in the basement of the Mukhabarat was a vast trove of several thousand ancient holy books, and artifacts of the legendary [Babylonian Jewish Community](#) that had been seized by Saddam Hussein in the 1970's from local synagogues and Jewish community centers.

Working with Chalabi, Rhode and a team of workers dewatered the Mukhabarat basement, endeavoring to salvage the documents. Rhode learned from contacts in Israel that they needed to cool or freeze the artifacts for restoration. The US government obtained a refrigerated semi-trailer. Chalabi procured metal containers to store the Iraqi Jewish archives for ultimate shipment to the US for restoration. Rhode working through his Pentagon mentor, [Richard Perle](#), former Chairman of the Defense Policy Advisory Committee, ultimately obtained the backing of Bush Vice President Cheney. He facilitated the professional support of the US [National Archives and Records Agency](#) (NARA). NARA sent archival restoration specialists to Baghdad to evaluate and supervise the shipment of the Iraqi Jewish archives to their laboratories for restoration and digitization. Initial funding for the restoration project came from a \$15,000 grant from [Harvey Krueger](#), a New York investment banker then with Lehman Brothers. In July 2003, the CPA reached an agreement under international law with the Iraq interim government for return of the restored Jewish archives. An agreement that is [controversial](#) as Rhode and others

contend that the Hussein's Mukhabarat stole the property from the Jewish community and that it rightfully should be returned to the Babylonian Jewish Heritage Center in Israel. The Iraqi government [contends](#) that the archives may contain important historical information of the origins of the country. The saga of Rhode's role in salvaging these archives is embodied in an [exhibit](#) of more than two dozen restored items from the [16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century](#) mounted by NARA in Washington, DC.

We understand that the restored and digitized Iraqi Jewish archives may eventually be transferred to the [Babylonian Jewish Heritage Centre](#) in Israel.

The quote from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act II, and Scene 2 would be an apt assessment of the career of the late Ahmad Chalabi: "The evil that men do lives after them; *the good is oft interred with their bones.*"