

Grooming the next Ahmad Chalabi: Richard Perle is again propping up regime-toppling Mideast dissidents who lack credibility

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Global Research, November 30, 2007

Los Angeles Times 28 November 2007

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ON A COLD MORNING last winter, I arrived at the home of Richard Perle outside Washington for a scheduled interview. I was about 10 minutes early, so I chose to shiver a bit on the front porch. Perle, the point man for the neoconservatives' drive for regime change throughout the Middle East, had agreed to spend time with me for a book I was writing about his life and times. Just then, the front door opened and out stepped Perle and a robust young man who was obviously in a hurry.

"Oh, Alan," Perle said with some surprise. "I'd like you to meet . . ." But I already knew who his guest was.

"Yes, sir," I said, extending my hand. "I recognize you from your photographs."

My, my, I thought. Mr. Perle is at it again.

The exiting guest was Farid Ghadry, an exiled Syrian dissident who, like Perle, believes it's past time to replace Syrian dictator Bashar Assad. Ghadry, who heads a Washington-based group called the Syrian Reform Party, hopes to be the man in charge one day in Damascus. When I met him, he had already been granted audiences with David Wurmser, Vice President Dick Cheney's top Middle East advisor and Perle protege, and with Cheney's daughter, Elizabeth, who headed the State Department's Iran-Syria desk from 2005 until last June. I asked Wurmser about Ghadry. Was he another Ahmad Chalabi, the checkered Iraqi exile whom the United States backed as a Saddam Hussein replacement in Iraq?

"He's not asking for money, and we're not advocating money for him," Wurmser told me. "As for him wanting power, sure, he probably has an agenda. But it doesn't matter. This is where you go back to the Soviet Union, because it's the same question that we always work with, from Lech Walesa to Vaclav Havel: 'Did they have an understanding of the malady and danger posed by the totalitarian regime in their country?' "

The scenario of the U.S. backing exiles to aid in "democratizing" Middle Eastern countries is so appealing to Perle, Wurmser and their like-minded friends that they continue to pursue it despite past failures. Perle, of course, was the most prominent and aggressive advocate of Chalabi, dubbed the "Jay Gatsby of Iraq" for his social life and financial scandals, as the leader of a new Iraq. That effort collapsed when the Iraqi people, finally given a chance to vote in January 2005, did not award Chalabi's party a single seat in the new parliament.

Perle insists that his man, who has a new job with the Baghdad government, was the victim

of a smear campaign led by the State Department and the CIA. The Chalabi experience has not muted Perle's unabashed affection for dissidents. "I think the best way to bring about regime change," he told me, "is to help decent people who are powerless without outside help."

People such as 32-year-old Amir Abbas Fakhravar, an Iranian dissident now living in exile in the United States. In a 2006 Washington Post Op-Ed article, Perle promoted Fakhravar as a heroic and inspirational figure around whom oppressed Iranians could rally, if only he were given America's support. Fakhravar is president of the Iran Enterprise Institute, which takes its name and some of its financial support from the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute, of which Perle is a resident fellow. In the coming weeks, Fakhravar will be speaking at a conference in Palm Beach, Fla., on the subject of regime change in Tehran, addressing the Heritage Foundation in Washington and then heading to Rome to deliver a lecture on "Democracy in the Islamic World." Just recently, he was the honored guest at DePaul University's "Islamofascism Awareness Week," where he was introduced as "the hero of our age."

His story, as he and his supporters tell it, could be a Hollywood script. Young, handsome, bold Iranian student leads the oppressed and downtrodden against the crushing tyranny of the mullahs, rising up, à la "Les Misérables." He stands atop the barricades during student protests in Iran in 1999 and is then imprisoned and tortured. He communicates with the West from Tehran's maximum-security Evin prison via a cellphone and escapes to freedom, with a shoot-to-kill order hanging over his head.

Unfortunately, Fakhravar's detractors, including some Iranian dissidents and exiles, insist that his story might as well be a Hollywood script. In a report last November in Mother Jones, Laura Rozen interviewed Iranian dissidents and journalists who cast doubt on Fakhravar's story. They claim, for example, that in their experience, political prisoners at Evin weren't allowed to use cellphones to communicate with the outside world. And, they say, he did not so much escape from prison, he simply went AWOL while on a kind of furlough that prisoners could sometimes arrange. As for other harrowing details, in reality he took a regular flight to Dubai (where he was met by Perle). Most important, Rozen's sources told her, Fakhravar was never a major figure in the student uprising of 1999.

Writing in Progressive magazine, Muhammad Sahimi, a chemical engineering professor at USC, lists Fakhravar among the exiles who have no credibility in Iran: "They are not even known there." Although Amnesty International lists Fakhravar among those tortured by the Tehran regime, it uses the word "reportedly" to describe his ordeal.

Perle insists that Fakhravar is being smeared by forces opposed to aggressive regime change. But the fundamental problem for Perle and like-minded others is that the men they are supporting lack the stature of their successful and illustrious predecessors, the Walesas and Havel. In the first place, Walesa and Havel did not operate in exile; they remained in their countries despite repeated imprisonment, government pressure and threats. There was never any question that they were recognized as the real thing — opposition leaders — by the throngs in the shipyards of Gdansk and St. Wenceslas Square. They may have had personal as well as altruistic ambitions and motives, but they were nothing if not authentic.

Which brings us back to America's Middle East wannabe heroes. Take Ghadry, an American-educated Arab with a passion for technology start-ups as well as saving Syria. Unfortunately

for Perle, Ghadry is seen in many quarters as a front man for Israel. Not only is he a dues-paying member of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee, the most powerful Israeli lobby in Washington, but a recent column on his website, titled "Why I Admire Israel," seems to play right into the hands of those who believe the Bush administration's obsession with regime change in the Middle East is really all about protecting Israel. Did Perle, the savviest of Washington power players, believe that Ghadry's tub-thumping for Tel Aviv would make him more popular in Syria?

"No," Perle replied. "I don't. But he's his own man. I don't always understand what he's doing and why he's doing it."

So, in his quest for idealistic dissidents to do in the Middle East what the Walesas and Havels achieved in Eastern Europe, Perle and his acolytes have tapped the discredited Ahmad Chalabi for Iraq, the suspect Amir Abbas Fakhraoui for Iran and the allegiance-challenged Fahrid Ghadry for Syria. They're just not making heroes like they used to.

Alan Weisman is the author of the first biography of Richard Perle, "Prince of Darkness — Richard Perle: The Kingdom, the Power, and the End of Empire in America."

The original source of this article is Los Angeles Times
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