

US connection of the Lebanese lawyer leading the push for Saddam's exile

By Robert Fisk, Middle East Correspondent

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Can we play musical thrones? Arab academics, intellectuals and writers are suggesting that Saddam Hussein step down to prevent a "catastrophe" in the Middle East, adding that they want a democratic Iraq in which human rights observers would oversee a "peaceful" transition of power.

Signatories to the petition include the Kuwaiti lawyer Hassan Jawhar, the Egyptian film director Yousry Nasrallah and Kammel Obeidia from Tunisia, the former director of Amnesty International Beirut. "The immediate resignation of Saddam Hussein, whose rule for over three decades has been a nightmare for Iraq and the Arab world, is the only way to avoid more violence," the petition says.

Among the signatories is Chibli Mallat, the Lebanese lawyer who has attempted to bring the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, to court in Belgium for war crimes at the 1982 Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in Beirut in which up to 1,700 Palestinian civilians were murdered.

Mr Mallat is a close friend of Ahmed Chalabi, the leader of one of the wealthiest Iraqi opposition groups in the United States. Asked by *The Independent* about his connections with Mr Chalabi, who faces financial fraud charges in Amman, Mr Mallat insisted that his Iraqi friend had no knowledge of his initiative.

"Ahmed is someone whom I'm very fond of, but I'm not sure he would support this petition," Mr Mallat said. "Usually I sound things off Ahmed, but on this one I think he would have some reservations."

So would many others. Ghassan Tueni, the ageing Lebanese publisher of Beirut's second greatest newspaper *An-nahar*, wrote to President Saddam last year stating that "resignation" was more honourable than war. "If we can avoid a disaster and the cataclysm it is going to provoke here," he wrote, "it is worth it – because we don't want to be subjected to America's grand design or doomsday scenario."

Over the past week, Gulf Arab governments have been suggesting obliquely that President Saddam could go into exile in their countries – in reality, an unlikely prospect. For once a dictator is deprived of his power he becomes subject to international law, human rights accusations, charges of war crimes or murder.

The full text of the petition says the academics "call upon public opinion in the Arab World to exercise pressure for the dismissal from power of Saddam Hussein and his close aides in Iraq, in order to avoid a war that threatens with catastrophe the people of the region ... the immediate resignation of Saddam Hussein ... is the only way to

avoid more violence. We call likewise for the rule of democracy in Baghdad and for the stationing across Iraq of human rights monitors from the United Nations and the Arab League, to oversee the peaceful transition of power in the country."

Mr Mallat does not believe President Saddam will step down, but "if you create an atmosphere where his telephones stop ringing, where his closest advisers stop taking orders from him, it doesn't really matter if he surrenders or not, he will have lost power".

It sounds pretty good. If you remember reality. And Mr Chalabi.