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What Ahmed Chalabi should say at the United Nations

I have just written to Ahmed Chalabi about the importance of his speech on Oct. 2 at the United Nations. This is not the place to discuss a long-standing friendly collaboration, which started over 10 years ago when we founded the International Committee for a Free Iraq in London. This friendship has created me many enmities across the world, and the mere mention of his name raises passion, for and, more generally, against him. Still, I have spent a few hours in prison with him on the Iran-Iraq borders, when we led a group of international monitors to the Kurdish elections, and such friendships seal many a bond of trust, and indeed of criticism when needed. Although the matter is far more complex than that, if the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein is owed to one person, it is to Ahmed Chalabi that the Iraqis owe it. Now Chalabi is to make the most important speech of his career, and I have suggested to him in a brief note not to allow speechwriters to undermine what he, and only he, must take responsibility for, in style and in substance.

In style: Chalabi must choose between addressing the General Assembly in Arabic or in English. He is eloquent in both, but his talk should be in English to his world audience. An English address would be a useful break from narrow nationalisms which view the use of the country's official language as a sign of patriotism. In the same vein, the first thing Chalabi should do upon returning to Iraq is address Iraqis on what he achieved, or failed to achieve, in New York and Washington, in Arabic. Also a matter of style, it is important to clarify the distance between him as a person, the Governing Council he presides over and Iraqis at large. Explaining the three tiers, which will be heard through his one voice, is particularly important because of the controversies surrounding him and the council.

First, Chalabi needs to wash away the ugly image surrounding him from the Petra Bank failure in Jordan in 1989. He must explain why the matter was political and not financial, and expose "the anonymous sources" in the CIA and the State Department who have never failed to raise this issue, despite the fact that the late King Hussein met with him several times in the 1990s, and the present efforts to dispel this cloud. He should also explain forcefully how the Clinton administration abandoned the INC in the summer of 1996, removing the air cover on the "safe haven," and allowing a hundred members of his group to die fighting the Saddam Hussein onslaught, and the death, within that week, of over 1500 people summarily rounded up and disappeared — only Senator McCain raised his voice then in the west against the cruel letdown. He should also explain how he spent four years in Northern Iraq, mediating between the Kurds, and how his group received an unusual accolade from no less than Amnesty International for their human rights work.

On the level of the Governing Council, he should explain why he speaks for them all, but also why the diversity of the composition prevents him from representing the full council. The nuance is important, and people must get used to hearing different voices from within Iraq until elections come, and elections will require at least a year before enough normalcy is established to allow for a gradual local, federal, and national

process to proceed solidly. Until then, the voices from the council will sound different, except that they all agree on one central condition: violence is not acceptable as a means to increase the political audience of any Iraqi. On the level of the Iraqi people and the UN, Chalabi should be combative and say what he thinks, namely how difficult it was to get any serious audience from people of the opposition in the dark dictatorship days. It is important to underline that despite the ultimate sacrifice of de Mello, Annan has been particularly pusillanimous on Iraq through his mandate. He brokered the deal with Saddam in 1997, which prolonged the suffering of the Iraqis for six years, and consistently prevented the demand of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iraq, Max van der Stoep, to have monitors for human rights deployed in the country. The withdrawal of the UN humanitarian personnel last week is an act consistent with shying away from people in difficulty. In contrast, both Bush and Blair have staked their political career on a new regime in Iraq, and for that courage and determination, they can be saluted, from the heart of a people rid of the worst dictatorship in the Middle East, as rare statesmen.

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