

His Excellency. Lukman Faily
Ambassador of Iraq to the United States
“Iraq Update: Challenges and Opportunities – A Conversation with the Ambassador”
National Council on US-Arab Relations (NCUSR)
Washington, D.C.
May 9, 2014

Thank you, Dr. Anthony for that great introduction.

The National Council on US-Arab Relations is doing a great job at improving American knowledge and understanding of the Arab world. And I’m proud to be here today with all of you.

Before I say more, I would like to thank the American people for helping the Iraqi people to free ourselves from dictatorship.

There has been debate about whether Iraq was worth America’s blood and treasure – including the sacrifice of too many of your sons and daughters.

All I can say is that the Iraqi people – and our neighbors throughout the region – suffered terribly from Saddam’s regime during the decades of Tyranny.

For all the challenges that we face, Iraq is a better place today than we were 11 years ago.

The topic of today’s discussion – “Iraq Update: Challenges and Opportunities” – couldn’t be more timely.

Only nine days ago – on April 30th – 60% of Iraq’s 21.5 million eligible voters participated in the parliamentary elections at 8,075 polling centers.

This was the fourth national election since the overthrow of Saddam and the first since the withdrawal of American troops late in 2011.

The vote count continues to be underway, and the final results are expected to be released by the end of this month.

This election marks a milestone in Iraq’s journey from despotism to democracy. And the international community is recognizing the progress we are making under very difficult circumstances.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s special representative for Iraq, Nikolay Mladenov, said this election was – and I quote – “the first entirely Iraqi-owned process in which the United Nations had an advisory role, but the leading role was with the Iraqi authorities.”

He added – and again I quote – that the Iraqis “deserve a lot of credit for the very professional way in which they approached the organization of the election.”

Despite the terrorists' tactics to intimidate Iraqis and disrupt the voting, we did everything we could to ensure that the election was free, fair and transparent.

Iraqis chose among more than 9,000 candidates from 107 political entities competing for 328 parliamentary seats.

Our electoral process encourages an inclusive government. More than 2,600 women were on the ballots. 25% of the seats are allocated to women, and other seats are reserved for Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities.

We took strong steps to ensure accountability and transparency.

For the first time, Iraq used the electronic voting card system. This system significantly minimizes electoral fraud. And it ensures that all voters are clearly informed about their polling stations in advance.

Transparency means we want observers to watch what we're doing. There were more than 650 foreign observers, including representatives from foreign missions and the Arab League. There were 37,500 Iraqi observers – more than four for every polling center. These Iraqi observers came from the political parties and the local NGOs.

In addition, there were 278 accredited foreign media and 1,915 accredited Iraqi journalists.

There was strong security on Election Day. In fact, there was not a single security incident in Baghdad.

Special arrangements were made to allow internally displaced people to vote in several provinces across Iraq.

For Iraqis overseas, there was out-of-country voting in 19 nations. Here in the United States, there were polling stations in Illinois, California, Michigan, Texas, Arizona, Virginia and Tennessee.

While the ballots are still being counted, we know that every vote that was cast was a strong vote against the violent extremists.

These terrorists were trying to frighten Iraqis away from the polling places in order to keep democracy from taking hold in our country.

As the 59 % turnout reveals, the terrorists failed. But the fight continues.

I am sure you are all aware of the ongoing battle against Al Qaeda and its affiliates in Anbar.

The threats we face are part of a larger struggle. The terrorism we face is transnational in nature. Iraq again is the gateway for this fight. It threatens our neighbors in the Middle East and North Africa. And ultimately it endangers the United States and the entire world community.

We are well aware that a purely military approach will not succeed in stopping terrorism. Nor will it succeed in healing the sectarian, ethnic and regional rifts that the violent extremists exploit.

This challenge requires a comprehensive strategy, including outreach and open, inclusive politics. We are striving to build a democracy where everyone has a voice.

Because al-Qaeda is targeting all Iraqis –whether Shiites, Sunnis, Arabs or Kurds, among other groups –we are seeking to unite all Iraqis against al-Qaeda. As a result of our outreach efforts, many tribes in Anbar have been fighting alongside the security forces in Ramadi, Falluja, and elsewhere.

Yes, as Secretary of State John Kerry stated, this is Iraq’s fight. And we accept the challenge. But make no mistake: We will win this fight because of our tenacity and determination to avoid a return to tyranny.

Here, let me be clear: Iraq does not seek American boots on the ground. We want to work within the Strategic Framework Agreement - which was signed prior to the withdrawal of American troops - to bolster our joint efforts to defeat our common enemy –Al-Qaeda and its offshoots.

Iraq and the United States have defeated Al-Qaeda before. Our blood is mixed together on Iraqi soil.

And we will defeat Al-Qaeda again, as we did in the past. We will work with the tribes and the local citizens who help to protect their own communities. And we will pursue the terrorist network with sound intelligence and capable forces.

The partnership between Iraq and the United States is based on more than military cooperation. .

On the strategic front, Iraq wants to share information about the terrorist threat and to better coordinate our efforts against it.

On the diplomatic front, our partnership is developing into what President Obama describes as “a normal relationship based on mutual interests and mutual respect.”

Iraqis — and our government — value the opinions of our American friends. Your government makes decisions based on America's best interests — just as we make decisions based on Iraq’s interests.

Most of the time our goals converge; sometimes they may diverge.

There are occasions when the position of our government may appear to you to resemble that of America's antagonists in the region. But when that happens, you should rest assured that our reasons are distinctly different than those of your adversaries.

For instance, on Syria, Iraq has been criticized for not joining the United States and others in seeking to remove Basher al-Assad from power.

As a result, some have unfairly lumped us with supporters of Al-Assad. Having suffered under the Baath Party led by Saddam, we understand that the Baathist regime led by Assad is no friend of Iraq.

Terrorists have used Syria as a base for targeting Iraqis for a decade now. In 2009, we lodged complaints against the Syrian regime at the United Nations, but many countries stood against us and protected Assad more so at the Security Council.

Now, times have changed, and some accuse us of wanting to perpetuate Assad in power. Simply not true.

We are not opposed to political change in Syria, on the contrary, but we are opposed to using destructive methods to bring about that change. Further militarization of the conflict in Syria can only lead to a spread of violence and extremism, which unfortunately has already spilled over into neighboring countries. Our Syrian brothers have suffered enough.

If change in Syria will mean that al-Qaeda and other extremist groups control large swaths of the country, then we oppose that kind of change. We seek a better future -- a negotiated settlement and a freely chosen government of national unity, with the participation of all social sectors, and an end to the bloodshed.

We strive for good relations with all countries, especially our neighbors. Naturally, we have stronger relationships with some of our neighbors than others. But without exception, we have extended a hand of friendship to all the countries of our region.

We have made great strides in mending our relationship with Kuwait. This resulted in the lifting of United Nations sanctions. And we continue to pursue dialogue in order to resolve any outstanding differences with other countries in the region.

In all our dealings in the region, Iraq has made it clear that we oppose the introduction of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. If any country acquired nuclear weapons, it would immediately threaten regional stability.

We strongly support moving the Middle East toward becoming a nuclear weapon-free-zone. Last year, Iraq ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. We hope other countries will ratify it as well. And we are pleased that America and Iran are both serious about a negotiated solution to overcome differences, for the sake of our region and the world. This will certainly lead to the reduction of tensions in an already volatile part of the world.

In Iraq we do not shy away from our challenges. We acknowledge that the road ahead is filled with obstacles. We need to put an end to the scourge of terrorism that continues to threaten our people, and we must strengthen our state institutions in order to effectively combat the corruption that is impeding greater development and prosperity for our people. Having come so far, we are determined to set the country on a path towards democracy, development, stability and ultimately social harmony.

That is why on the economic front, we seek a stronger partnership with the US, based on investment and trade, not charity and aid.

Iraq has one of the world's fastest-growing economies — expanding by 9.6 % in 2011 and 10.5 % in 2012.

Our oil production has increased by 50 percent since 2005. We are expected to emerge as the world's second-largest energy exporter by 2030. This has been a critical factor in keeping global energy markets stable despite increased sanctions on Iran.

We are investing our energy revenues in rebuilding our infrastructure, diversifying our economy, restoring our electricity, and reviving our education and health care systems.

As we rebuild, Iraqis can be promising partners for American companies in these fields. As an IT professional myself, I would add that Iraq offers great opportunities for companies in information technology, telecommunications, and other industries where America, and notably silicon valley lead the world. Iraq recently announced plans to auction 3G telecommunications licenses, and we are keen to see American companies enter this market.

As some of you may have heard, only two weeks ago, I ran the Boston Marathon in honor of, and in support of, the victims of terrorism from Boston to Baghdad.

From the fight against terrorism to the work of rebuilding our own country, many of our endeavors seem at least as long and hard as running a marathon.

We want to run that race alongside our American friends. Together, we can climb Heartbreak Hill and reach the finish line of a prosperous and democratic Iraq, a more stable Middle East, and a world with less to fear from terrorism.

Thank you all for everything you do to promote international understanding. And now I would be glad to take your questions.