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Remarks of Hon. Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman,
Kurdistan Regional Government Representative to
the United States

Joint Program: Tennessee World Affairs Council and
Lipscomb University
April 4, 2016



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I thank all of you for the warm welcome that my colleagues and I have received since we arrived in Nashville on Sunday. We've had meetings with members of the community. We spent a day in Cookeville at Tennessee Tech, and today we're back here in Nashville where we met the Governor, the Deputy-Governor, the Mayor of Nashville, Congressman Jim Cooper who told us he was going to try and be here tonight, but whether he's here or not we're very grateful for his continued support for Kurdistan and for the community here.

I'd like to set out for you what the situation is today in the Kurdistan region in Iraq. Today we face several crises in Kurdistan.

As you know, ISIS took over the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2014, June 2014. A couple of months later, ISIS, Da'esh, or ISIL decided to attack Erbil, the Kurdistan region's capital, and also the Yazidis and the Christians in Sinjar and Nineveh. It engaged in a campaign of genocide against the minorities, and it also wanted to take over our capital, Erbil. Fortunately at that moment in August 2014, President Obama ordered airstrikes and the airstrikes changed everything.

Immediately we knew that the United States was with us, would not leave us to face ISIS alone. ISIS is a terrorist organization. It espouses a warped, mutated version of Islam that most Muslims do not recognize. ISIS wants to recreate or create a caliphate, a caliphate that frankly is not what most Muslims want. It's something that they want.

They wanted to take over Kurdistan and fortunately with the help of the airstrikes our Peshmerga forces, the Kurdistan Army, has been able to push back

ISIS. Since August 2014, we have been able to push ISIS back out of all of the areas in Iraq that we consider to be Kurdistan areas.

We have done this thanks to the support of the United States, other coalition partners who have provided weapons and training to the Peshmerga, but also thanks to the valiance of the Peshmerga. The Peshmerga force is a voluntary force. We don't have conscription.

Today because of the economic crisis that we have in Kurdistan many Peshmerga are not paid for five months or they receive their salaries five months in arrears. That means they're facing great financial hardship. Their families find it difficult to pay the rent, find it difficult to put food on the table, and yet the Peshmerga will continue to fight against ISIS.

The Peshmerga have been provided with weapons and training by the United States and other coalition forces, but the weapons that we are getting are not the type of weapons that ISIS has. ISIS has captured the most sophisticated modern weaponry that was supplied to the Iraqi Army by the United States. The Peshmerga forces are carrying mostly Kalashnikovs, maybe some RPGs, and very light weapons. We cannot fight against tanks and armored vehicles with this kind of weapon. So we've been asking the United States to continue to supply weapons to the Peshmerga, but we're asking for weapons that can match what ISIS has.

We're asking for the weapons to be delivered direct to Kurdistan and not to have to go through Baghdad. And this is a continuing dialogue that we're having with Congress and Washington and with the U.S. Administration.

In addition to fighting this costly war, and by costly I mean costly in blood and treasure, over 1,600 Peshmerga have been killed since 2014. 1,600. Over 7,000 have been injured, and we don't have the means to deal with a lot of those injuries, and we don't have the finances to send all of the injured overseas for treatment. At the same time, ISIS's entry into Iraq has created a huge humanitarian crisis.

In the Kurdistan region we are caring for three hundred thousand Syrian refugees and 1.5 million displaced Iraqis. That's a total of 1.8 million refugees and displaced people. I ask you to imagine how would Tennessee cope if suddenly you had a flood of 1.8 million people in a very short period of time

who have nothing except the clothes they're wearing, who have seen terrible trauma, who have seen beheadings, rape, enslavement?

There are some families among the displaced, particularly among the Yazidis, where there is only one member of the family left. An entire extended family has been wiped out by ISIS and only one sole survivor. Imagine being that person. This is what we're dealing with. Kurdistan region's population is about five, five and a half million, and we have 1.8 million new people to take care of.

This has stretched our public services - electricity supply, water, education, health care. This has put a huge burden on the government. While we're fighting a very expensive war, it's true that we're being provided with training and weapons, but the cost of the war is still borne by our government. It's the Kurdistan regional government that has to provide transpiration for the Peshmerga, food and board for the Peshmerga. Who is it that provides the boots they wear? When we had the operation to liberate Sinjar, which is by coincidence my hometown, we needed about 8,000 Peshmerga for that operation.

The Kurdistan regional government wasn't able to provide food for that force for the entire operation, and we had to ask some wealthy Kurdish businessmen to provide food for the Peshmerga for that operation, and they stepped up, they came forward, they did it. There are many, many wealthy individuals in Kurdistan who are doing things like that. They're providing for the Peshmerga, they're providing for the refugees and the displaced people. So this humanitarian crisis is placing a huge responsibility on the shoulders of the people of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan regional government.

The United Nations has been launching appeal after appeal to raise money for the displaced and the refugees in Iraq. Fifty-four percent of the displaced in Iraq are in Kurdistan. Kurdistan is a very small part of Iraq, and yet fifty-four percent of the displaced have come to us because they feel safer in Kurdistan than anywhere else.

Among the displaced are Christians and Yazidis, Turkamen, Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians - I mean you name it, they have come to Kurdistan for shelter. And we're proud of our culture of openness, we're proud of our tradition, and it really is a long-held tradition in Kurdistan to respect other peoples' faith's, to respect people of other cultures, and yesterday someone was asking me why is

that when the rest of the Middle East seems to besiege the Christians and disrespect other faiths?

First, I don't think that's true across the Middle East. I think there are many places in the Middle East, pockets of the Middle East where all people are respected, but in Kurdistan I think one of the reasons why this is true is partly because it's just in our tradition, it's in our history, our culture.

I often give the example of my mother who was born in Sinjar to a Muslim, Sunni Muslim family and the first school she attended was run by Christian nuns. Nobody thought it odd that a Muslim girl should go to a Christian school. They might've thought it odd that a girl was going to school in the first place at that time, but anyway. That's the point that I'm trying to make, and my mother would often speak about when she was growing up in Sinjar there were many Armenians, Assyrians. There were Yazidis of course, Muslims, Turkamen, Arabs, Kurds, and everybody lived together.

There were some tensions, but they were more political tensions rather than cultural or linguistic or faith-based. The tensions were more to do with the Baathist regime or whoever was in power in Baghdad at the time, not to do with peoples' faith and heritage. So we have that long-standing culture and tradition of peaceful coexistence, but also the people of Kurdistan have endured so much oppression, so much denial of our culture that we want to be open to everybody else. In so many countries to be Kurdish, to say you were Kurdish, to give your child, your newborn child a Kurdish name was forbidden. Your language was forbidden.

You had no political representation, or if you did they would end up in jail and their families would end up being targeted. We are a people who have a history of our culture, our heritage, our rights being denied, and we will not do the same to other people.

So I think these are the two core reasons why the people of Kurdistan have an attitude of openness, acceptance, and protection, and defense of people of other faith, cultures, and traditions.

So in Kurdistan we have the security situation, which I explained is diverting a lot of resources and focus from our people and our government. We also have the humanitarian crisis. The U.N. has launched appeal after appeal to raise money

for the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. Last year it was able to raise only a fraction of what it needed because people see Iraq as a middle-income country, a country that's rich in oil, so it should be able to cope with a humanitarian crisis.

But I'm afraid whether it's incompetence, neglect, or something worse, Iraq is not able to cope. Iraq is indeed very wealthy in oil, but oil prices have crashed. There's been huge economic mismanagement in Baghdad. Vast amounts of money have disappeared over the past decade in Baghdad and nobody knows where it's been spent, or how, or where it is. So even though Iraq has the image of a middle-income country it's not able to cope with a humanitarian crisis, so the U.N. is struggling to raise the money that it needs.

So far in 2016, the U.N. has raised less than ten percent of what it has called for in Iraq. So I ask all of you - please lobby your members of Congress, your Senators in Washington, your local legislator. Please speak to your churches, your schools, your organizations to see how you can help us raise money to help the displaced and the refugees. They have nothing. They have suffered so much. I ask you to put yourself in their shoes just for five minutes and that will change your thinking and your heart.

ISIS came to Mosul in June 2014. June is around the time when most high school students are preparing for their exams. Imagine you're a teenager preparing for your exams. You're thinking of which university you might go to. You have your dreams, your life ahead of you. Suddenly ISIS comes and because you're a Christian, you're a Kurd, you're a Syrian, you're a Yazidi they behead your father, they enslave your sister, they throw you out of your home, and all of the dreams that you had, all of the people that you love have disappeared, and you have nothing. So I ask all of you, whatever your organization, whatever entity you belong to, please see how you can help the displaced people and the refugees in Kurdistan.

The other crisis that we're facing in Kurdistan region today is an economic one. We've been hit by this very expensive war. We are sheltering 1.8 million new people in Kurdistan. They share our electricity, they share our water, they share our hospitals.

So we've had a thirty, thirty-five percent jump in our population, but we haven't had a thirty percent increase in investment in our hospitals. Our clinics are open

twenty-four hours a day just to cope with a number of people who we are now taking care of.

Electricity supply in Kurdistan used to be close to twenty-four hours a day. Now it's half that because we have more people to take care of. The main source of our income is oil, oil exports. The price of oil has dropped dramatically in the past year to eighteen months, so our income has dropped.

So while we have this greater responsibility for the war, for the displaced and the refugees, the money that we have to take care of them has reduced sharply. So we're asking the United States - who we see as a strategic ally - we're asking the United States to provide foreign aid, financial assistance to the Kurdistan regional government.

What is at stake is the fight against ISIS. What is at stake is our ability to protect and provide for the Christians, Yazidis, and all of the displaced communities that have come to Kurdistan for refuge. We are in discussion with the State Department, with the White House, with the Department of Defense - we're asking them to find ways that they can help alleviate the financial burden on the KRG.

Again, I ask all of you to speak to your representatives in Congress, to write to the White House, to lobby whoever you think will listen, to ask them to support the Kurdistan regional government through this financial crisis.

I mentioned that we see ourselves as strategic partners to the United States. I want to just speak about that a little bit because this is very, very important for us. This year, in fact this month it's the twenty-fifth anniversary of Operation Provide Comfort. In 1991, after the United States and a worldwide coalition liberated Kuwait, Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait. The United States and others liberated Kuwait in 1991.

Immediately, there was an uprising in Iraq, in Kurdistan and in southern Iraq. There was an uprising, an attempt to overthrow Saddam Hussein and his dictatorial regime. Living under Saddam Hussein meant living under oppression. It meant torture, it meant violence, it meant cruelty, it meant silence, it meant war against our neighbors, it meant that our sons, brothers, and fathers were conscripted into the Iraqi Army to fight wars that we didn't believe in. It meant that there was genocide, chemical bombardment, and I can see many fellow

Kurds here today. I know that some of you were tortured, I know that some of you gained refuge in the United States because you escaped the genocide.

So what I'm talking about is real. There was an uprising in early 1991 against Saddam Hussein. Saddam turned his weapons on us because he had by then been thrown out of Kuwait, and he committed terrible crimes during that period of the uprising. And this was just a couple of years after the chemical bombardment of Halabja, where five thousand people were killed, and the Anfal genocide campaign, where two hundred fifty thousand people were killed.

So when Saddam turned against the Kurdish people everybody thought he would use chemicals again. Everyone fled. They fled to the borders of Iran and Turkey. This was in the spring of 1991, an incredibly cold spring, severe weather conditions. People died on the mountaintops. People starved. They died of exhaustion and exposure.

The United States, Britain, France launched Operation Provide Comfort. It was the biggest military and humanitarian operation, and probably the most successful in history. I've met some of the military leaders, American military leaders who were involved in that operation, General Jim Jones, General Bob Barrow, General Jay Garner, and others who were involved in that operation, and they all speak of that operation with great pride because they saved lives. They saved hundreds of thousands if not one and a half million lives.

By providing humanitarian assistance and protection, they encouraged all of those people who had fled to the mountains and were starving and dying of exhaustion to come back because we would protect them, the U.S. would protect them. This is what they were told.

So people came back, and then the United States instigated a no-fly zone over Kurdistan. This no-fly zone was from the early 90s all the way to 2003.

This no-fly zone and the protection that the United States provided to Kurdistan meant that for the first time in Kurdistan we were able to hold free elections, which is what we did in 1992.

Out of those elections in 1992 we created the Kurdistan parliament, the Kurdistan regional government. We declared the Peshmerga to be the official army of the Kurdistan region, and so on.

So that was a key moment in Kurdish history, when the United States stepped in and helped us, and then again in 2003 when the United States liberated Iraq, and I use the word liberated with care. Having been through decades of genocide, four and a half thousand of our villages destroyed, our agriculture industry wiped out, hundreds of thousands of people killed, up to a million people killed in the Iran-Iraq War.

After all of that to be liberated of the genocidal dictator gave us a breathing space that we'd never had. So we're grateful to the United States for what it did in '91, in 2003, and what it did again in 2014. And we want to be the strategic partner to the United States in the Middle East.

Kurdistan is a reliable partner to America. We have proven ourselves to be reliable partners in the fight against ISIS. Our Peshmerga are being paid late, they're paid very little. The Peshmerga get a much lower salary than an Iraqi soldier, and yet they fight, and it's a volunteer force.

We have proven ourselves to be committed to democracy. We have proven ourselves to be committed to promotion of women's rights, human rights, freedom of expression. I'm not saying that Kurdistan is perfect, nor do I say that we are a full democracy. We still have a long way to go, but we're committed to this path.

This is what the United States is looking for. It's looking for a reliable partner in the Middle East. A partner who is open to other cultures, other faiths, a reliable partner that looks to the west, and that's Kurdistan.

And I would like all of you to really understand what I mean by that. It means that today, of course, we're engaged in a war together against extremism, against ISIS, but I want us to look beyond that. We will defeat ISIS, but what about the future relationship between Kurdistan and the United States?

We should be thinking about cultural exchanges, about universities like this having relationships with Kurdish universities, about student exchange programs.

We should be thinking about business. Why not do business in Kurdistan? Today we met with the Nashville area Chamber of Commerce and we talked about

that, and I'm hoping that we will be able to bring a Kurdish trade delegation to the United States sometime this year, and hopefully they will come to Nashville.

So we should think beyond the crisis that we're facing today and think about the future and how we can deepen this relationship.

I want to thank you all once again for coming here tonight. I would like to thank all of the people of Nashville, Cookeville, and Tennessee, and your leadership for extending such a warm welcome to us.

Southern hospitality is very, very famous, and I can say deservedly so. So thank you all again.

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