

**World Affairs Council of Northern California
312 Sutter Street
Conference Room, Second floor
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**Turn the Page Mr. President, but don't close the book
The Next Steps in Iraq's Political Evolution and the role of the
Kurds**

Good evening. It is a pleasure to be here.

I want to thank all those of the World Affairs Council who invited me tonight, particularly Carla Thorson, and Ned Hawkins, who helped organize this event

I have had the honor of meeting many members of World Affairs Councils and their associate groups. The interest shown by these Councils, who play such an important role in connecting Americans with all what's going on around the world has left me feeling much better about the determination of Americans to stay a strong partner for democracy and development in all parts of the world, including Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

California conjures up many images and ideals. California is the land of agricultural bounty, of Yosemite and the Pacific, of new ideas in science, communications, hi-tech, education, politics and entertainment. As Sam Spade – whose office was just two blocks east of here -- once said: IT IS the stuff dreams are made of.

Your state is the first place in the United States where women could earn wages higher than men for equivalent work. Your economy is ranked as the seventh or eighth largest among the nations of the world.

You have become synonymous with new ideas and new thinking. California is one major reason so much of the world admires America – and why so many wish to come here.

We all have a piece of California within us, whether we realize it or not. And that is for the better. It makes us eager to move to the future.

So, if you please, I would like for you to close your eyes and see if this sounds familiar.

“We have hundreds of millions of acres of untouched wilderness, and it's safe. But the thing is no one understands that it's here. So it's a potential waiting to boom. The river itself, the Zab, was a brilliant shade of turquoise-green.

On either side, the mountains were yellow, covered in green scrub. And overhead, colorful birds - bee-eaters and hoopoes - swooped and played over the water.

“At a bend in the river we came across a large family, sitting under the shade of a tree, enjoying a seriously impressive picnic of dolma: stuffed vegetables and flat-breads.

Those words were broadcast in October by a BBC reporter who visited the Kurdistan Region for the first time and was awestruck by what he found. He had heard that Iraqi Kurdistan was, as some say, the Other Iraq. He knew that no Americans or foreigners had been killed there and that many in Europe saw Kurdistan as the economic gateway to Iraq. Yet even with his expectations set high, he was still amazed at how peaceful, progressive – and fun – it is in the Kurdistan Region.

Now I do not want to make a stretch, but this description of Kurdistan sounds much like how California was described more than 150 years ago, when those in other parts of America became aware of California as a destination for them.

From the early explorers to the Spanish missionaries, to the 49ers of the Gold Rush to the Dust Bowl caravans, California has always been a place of new hope and a brighter future.

We in Kurdistan like to think we are replicating a little bit of that for Iraq.

Here is what *Foreign Affairs* magazine observed around the same time:

“Landing at the international airport in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, one is immediately struck by the high level of economic activity that pervades all parts of the city.

New highways, high-rises, and construction cranes punctuate the city's skyline, which now includes modern office towers and the frame of a Kempinski luxury hotel.

Traffic fills the streets, which bustle with pedestrians shopping for new cell phones and imported designer clothing. The city has a large amusement park, replete with roller coasters, bumper cars, and a large Ferris wheel.

A nearby go-kart racing facility—recently built by an American from Galveston, Texas—attracts a steady stream of young adventure-seekers, while the bookish crowd can take refuge in a brand-new, multi-level public library. Sulaimaniyah and Dohuk, respectively the second and third largest cities in Kurdistan, has seen a similar flurry of economic development.”

Obviously, we are pleased with the progress any visitor can immediately see upon coming to Kurdistan. After decades of oppression, our citizens deserve the chance to have their most dangerous moment come as a roller coaster races down a track or they dodge a bumper car.

We want these good times to stay and multiply, not just in Kurdistan but through all of Iraq.

Today we are the strongest friend and ally the United States has in our part of Eurasia.

Our home is the place with the most progressive press law in the region, the place with a higher percentage of women in our legislature than most of the nations in the world, the place where Christians and others fleeing religious persecution from elsewhere in Iraq come to find sanctuary and a future.

We are the place where those seeking to invest – from some of our newest friends like the Koreans to neighbors like Turkey – find our new economy vibrant, promising and full of opportunity.

And we are just outside your door. For example, we can make our way to San Francisco International Airport any day we chose and board United flight #900, bound non stop for Frankfurt, Germany. When you land in Germany, you can have a coffee and pastry – more likely a beer - and then board a Lufthansa flight non-stop to Erbil, the capital off the Kurdistan Region. By dinner time, you will be in my homeland enjoying a savory kebab and having a much tastier tea.

Referring to California, Horace Greeley famously was credited with saying “Go West, young man.

Today, in Iraq, it is Go North to Kurdistan.

I tell you this because, here in California we know that image is often as important as reality. In the case of the Kurdistan Region, both are accurate and intertwined. We think it is important to show the world that in a country that has become a byword for conflict, there is region that has many, many better things to offer.

That said, we do have timely issues to talk about. A crucial part of this discussion is about what makes up Iraq today and why it's important for the U.S. to stay with us, as we seek to secure the hope that was given to us when your brave sons and daughters came from afar to liberate us from Saddams tyranny.

President Obama has clearly stated that the U.S. has turned the page in its relations and engagement with Iraq.

Turning the page is not the same as writing the next chapter. All of us in the Kurdistan Region know **HOW** we want this story to end. What concerns us is who the main characters are going to be, what those story elements are and, of course, if the story will unfold to the end in the way we wish.

We have had many sorrowful chapters in the history of Iraq; we have drawn enough blood.

Iraq remains critically important for the United States, and the region.

It is important because it can be a moderating factor in a turbulent part of the world

It can be a strong economic partner for the future

It can be a strong partner in countering terrorism

Furthermore it can be a reliable source of natural resources, oil, gas, and in the future renewable energy

It's also important because so much progress has been made over the last few years.

Sectarian violence is down around the country

While there continues to be political stalemates – and a lack of government almost 8 months after our elections - politicians are abiding by the process

and no one is using force to get what they want – it's not too often that free and fair elections are held in the middle east, and where the outcome is not known before hand, and even after fact the fact, it's almost too close to call?!?! Such a scenario during Saddam's tenure was inconceivable!

The U.S., has done the hard part, it liberated us from tyranny. And while your President has boldly stated that the U.S. is turning the page vis-à-vis its engagement with Iraq, I urge that the U.S. not close the book.

The U.S. mustn't close the book because even though much progress has been made, the remains much still to do.

Iraq's fledgling institutions need time to stand on their own feet. Its bureaucracy needs nurturing as it transforms from a centralized authoritarian system to a decentralized federal structure.

Iraq's industries, for almost a century under the direct and dysfunctional stewardship of the state, needs to be gradually handed over to a more capable private sector.

Iraq's outward focus must shift from what has been a militarized hostile stance, to a more tolerant, proactive, and moderating one. Instead of investing our natural treasures into rearming our security services, we still need guidance on how to better invest in our peoples future, into our education systems, and critical sectors such as agriculture and health.

In all of these factors, Kurdistan is leading the way to a brighter future for all of Iraq.

We have strengthened the unity of our people and are today working to make our government in Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Regional Government more transparent, effective and accountable. We are applying best practices and are working with renowned international consultants to streamline our bureaucracy, eliminate graft, and institutionalize transparency.

We realized that while as a government we had the best of intentions, that we weren't necessarily best equipped to deal with the many challenges facing our society – especially in the delivery of services. 2 years ago, along with the rest of Iraq, the KR generated only 2 hours of electricity per day.

That was unacceptable. So our government teamed up with our private sector to rectify the situation. Today, with the leadership of our private sector Kurdistan has over 20 hours of electricity while the rest of the country

still has an unacceptable 2-3 hours. We know there are 24 hours in a day and we are working towards hit that goal.

Furthermore, while the promise of our hydrocarbons serves as a sound insurance policy to ensure continued economic growth, we will not rest on our laurels and rely solely on our oil and gas to secure our economic future. My government has launched our region's most ambitious scholarship program intended on sending thousands of students abroad to the world's best universities. No doubt, Stanford, Berkley and many other of California's excellent universities will be targets for our students.

Moreover, we are fervent in our desire not to be solely an oil dependent economy. Your experience in the U.S. and in particular California is instructive.

That's why agriculture and tourism serve as such enormous potential for us.

With our four clearly defined seasons, and fertile lands we are able to grow and produce almost anything, and with our untouched naturally beautiful mountains and valleys, we could easily have our own natural parks that would attract tourists from the world over.

But while we have a secure, prospering region, we are still part of Iraq, and the fate of Iraq impacts our fate. And given the fledgling status of Iraq, its security, its institutions and its politics, continued U.S. engagement, and more importantly interest is vital.

We have shown what we have been able to achieve with little, but strategic interventions.

I am certain, that with the right kind of engagement from the U.S. its government, and interest from its people, we can build a relationship that ensures that Iraq, including Kurdistan, fulfills its potential, and America is served with a reliable ally in a turbulent and unpredictable part of the world.

But our first challenge to fulfill this potential is to break the current political stalemate, and for our government. This is especially timely, as I previously stated, it has been nearly 8 months since we had our national elections.

If this impasse continues, it will limit Kurdistan's potential, and we do not want that. It will also limit Iraq's potential – and we do not want that either.

We want this to work, despite what many think. You see, we always manage to surprise analysts. During the buildup to the 2003 liberation, everyone expected Kurds to grab for land or break away and become independent.

We surprised them all. We went to Baghdad – not to take the city, but to build a new democratic government. We helped stand up the army – the very army that had been so oppressive to us.

We did not just sit up in the mountains then, nor are we sitting there now. We are attempting to break this impasse, to make sure all Iraqis are included and represented in the new government.

We are clear in what we think that new government should be like. We released 19 points we wish to have included in the next government's action plan.

There are some very specific issues and some broader policy points. There is no hidden agenda – if anything, we have naively laid it all out there.

So again, I am glad you invited me today. We need you – the United States -- to remain interested in Kurdistan and in Iraq.

Kurdistan is today successful, in large because and at times in spite of U.S. policy.

From President Woodrow Wilson's 14 points – which was the first time a world leader has staked out the position that Kurds deserve to, well, live first and then be equal – to the 1991 no fly zone, which gave us breathing room from Saddam -- to brokering an end to our civil war in the 1990s -- to the final liberation -- it has been the United States who has had pronounced impact on our security and development..

The Kurdistan Region is bound to America like few others. Kurdish hopes for self determination, within a federal Iraq - after a history of being the victims of ethnic cleansing and mass slaughter -- first became a precarious reality when President George H. W. Bush, then UK Prime Minister Jon Major and French President Mitterrand - instituted the northern no-fly zone over Iraq in 1991, this just three years after Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign wiped out close to 200,000 Kurds, many victims of chemical weapons.

With American and allied protection in place, we began building our infrastructure and honing our political vision. Today, we are a tangible success for the United States. We are your natural friends and your unshakable allies.

Please be clear that I am not here to discuss whether you think George W. Bush was right to invade to Iraq. He did. And because of that, we are free

from fear for the first time in more years than I would like to recall. That is a black and white decision for us.

President Bush and President Obama both have said they believe democracy can take hold and grow in the Middle East. They are correct – and it has, with us. Against, thanks to the United States.

Agree or disagree with the decision by the Bush administration – but agree that, in Kurdistan, there were a people yearning to be free, to learn democracy. We are deeply grateful for your toil, tears, blood and treasure spent on our behalf.

There are no statues to American liberators in Kurdistan or streets named after your presidents. Perhaps those will come. What there is today, in the eyes of every Kurd, in the bazaars of our large cities, in the tea shops of our villages and along the trails of our mountain shepherds, are the faces of gratitude for what you did for us.

When we no longer fear the knock of the door, we give you thanks.

When we no longer hear an airplane and worry if poison gas will fall upon us, we give you thanks.

When we see investment, tourists and diplomats from our neighbors and other nations come to the Kurdistan Region, we give you thanks.

There are very few times you can see a **DIRECT RESULT** of your efforts. We are that clear, unequivocal direct result.

It is crucial for Americans to realize that our success is your success – and that elusive light at the end of the tunnel is actually already shining in the Kurdistan region.

We do not want that light go out. Thus, we still need your support. Today the Kurdistan Region offers a kaleidoscope of movement and progress, sometimes at first blush even contradictory. For example, there are now almost 1 million vehicles in the Kurdistan Region, for a population of about 4 million. Thanks to the booming business in the cities, for the first time in history some streets are clogged with cars.

Yet at the same time we have a problem with one of our other modes of transport, the donkey. Some have declared we have too many of them and that they are not being treated properly. So now there is a Kurdistan Donkey's Association to address that problem humanely.

As you can see, the fruits of economic progress come in many forms.

We are thrilled that the world is learning that our hard work is paying off, that we are steady in our march along the path of democracy.

We are delighted that we in the Kurdistan Region have done our part to help move all of Iraq forward. We are committed to that task - to making a federal, democratic Iraq a shining example for the world.

Our story from the Kurdistan Region has been uplifting. For much of the last seven years people throughout Iraq have come to the Kurdistan Region because of what we have today and what will be there tomorrow. We are on a right path.

The U.S. military is leaving, but the stability that will define the U.S. success in Iraq cannot and must not leave. That is why we were thrilled when U.S. officials announced they plan to open a diplomatic consulate in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, and in Basra, as well as maintain temporary facilities in Mosul and Kirkuk.

We see this decision as one in a series of steps by the United States to honor the pledges of President Obama and others for renewed and continued support to the Kurdistan Region as part of its desire to ensure that stability stays in Iraq.

We remain baffled that the United States has never embraced the success it had in Kurdistan. Such an embrace would go far to thwart any ideas of instability.

As I noted, there remain tough internal issues that we Iraqis must work out – revenue sharing, a hydrocarbons law, the future of the disputed territories. Solving these issues is a great priority to our friends in the United States.

But solving these issues is of even a greater priority to us.

The Kurdistan Region has been called many things, depending on if the caller is a friend or a foe. But it is indeed the one entity that, through fits and starts, has moved forward in fulfilling its pledges of democracy.

It has not been easy and it certainly has not always been neat and tidy. But it is happening and Congress and the Obama administration should reflect on just how important this is for all of Iraq and the region and avoid actions –

intentional or otherwise – that would impede or diminish this laudable progress.

Thankfully, many recognize this imperative. In a column in August Jim Hoagland, the highly respected foreign policy columnist for *The Washington Post*, urged the Obama administration to work with Kurdistan and to, quite bluntly, pay attention to our efforts to establish strong and direct security relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the U.S.

“It is a good time, Mr. President, to get to know the Kurds – and their ambitions,” Mr. Hoagland wrote.

We agree and hope the White House -- and all of you -- listens.

I believe that the chance America has given us is **THE MOMENT** for us. We plan to charge ahead and keep a positive outlook.

Thank you very much.

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