

Qubad Talabani speech, April 16, 2008, Florida International Summit
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Florida

Good morning ladies and gentleman.

On Sunday, I returned from four weeks in Kurdistan, the first four weeks of our new year. Always an exciting time, this visit was even more so. Things that Iraqis had once only whispered about, and then realized they could hope for, are becoming true. We are developing our democratic and economic institutions and now have the confidence to open our nation to our friends, for investment and development.

This is my first stop since returning to the United States and it is hard to think of a more appropriate place to come. This is the new home of the first ever chair in Kurdish studies, at the University of Central Florida – an honor that is thrilling to me and all Kurds. Here is the first step toward greater cooperation and knowledge between our two unique regions, one that will generate understand and opportunity for Florida and Iraq.

Now, add to that ANOTHER stated mission of University of Central Florida's Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Global Perspective: to help advance UCF's goal of providing international emphasis to curricula and research and to work to expand the university's efforts to enlarge Central Florida's awareness and understanding of the interconnectedness of the global community.

I am in agreement in the importance of such interconnectedness. International knowledge and cooperation are key, as you here know so well. Recently, three of your area's leading business organizations were joined by more than 250 community leaders to discuss how the Central Florida region can remain competitive in the new global economy. The Central Florida Partnership, the Metro Orlando Economic Development Commission and the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau, Inc., sponsored the Community Leadership Conference, themed "Going Global Together."

How is Kurdistan connected to this region's economics – and how could it be further connected? That is something we in Kurdistan now have the ability to examine and pursue. And we see your region,

through such studies as the Metro Orlando economic development commission, as a wonderful example of how to deepen initial economic niches and broaden the field to use all of the creativity and resources.

See if this sounds familiar. In general, a region with growth potential as an industry cluster and compatibility with Florida strengths is characterized by at least the following: sufficient infrastructure, organization that includes including participation from industry leaders, economic development groups and universities, and “seed” projects that give momentum and visibility to cluster development activities. Kurdistan has all of those.

Here in central Florida, there are based a number of strong and established industry sectors, which is a goal we have established. As in Kurdistan, there are community and industry leaders who are dedicated to advancing the growth of these sectors as the region enhances its standing as a place good for business.

You properly boast of two growing airports, a fine quality of life and a competitive pro-business atmosphere with no personal income tax;

it sounds almost exactly like Kurdistan –except on the last one; we can already trump you there. ☺

Like central Florida, Kurdistan has a good workforce ready to go. And we value education. And just as you have developed a hi-tech corridor here in central Florida, that draws talent and sends results beyond your region, we see that as a logical opportunity for those looking for a similar foundation in Iraq and the Middle East.

From tourism to manufacturing, to agriculture and transportation, Kurdistan is ready to have others play a bigger role in its economic future. It is indeed the perfect location for a regional base, profitable work in developing infrastructure or launching new businesses outright. As Rich Tesch, onetime president of the Economic Development Commission of Mid-Florida, noted, “As economies have become more global, competition has become more global.” This is how anyone can become more global in the Middle East. There are plenty of economic positives in Kurdistan.

Kurdistan can act as a bridge for international trade between the United States and Europe for Iraq and the Middle East. It provides excellent investment opportunities and already some companies

(name some if you wish) have found that it is indeed profitable to do business in Kurdistan. We would hope that the ties between Central Florida and Kurdistan lead to formal cooperative ventures, to foster growth in areas of mutual benefit, including tourism, trade and investment and the advancement of technologies and to enhance educational, research, economic and cultural exchanges between Florida and Kurdistan, with out shared values and mutual interests.

The last few years have seen a remarkable foundation being constructed in Kurdistan that gives all Iraqis the confidence that our nation will become a bright economic light for the entire region.

Now the Kurdistan region is ready and eager to build on that great foundation. And we want to open this investment window to all of you, to have you join us to capitalize on our stability and vision.

Today in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, there are a multitude of paths to investment and prosperity. Opportunity lies in many different sectors of our new economy and I cannot urge you enough to take a good look at what our publication outlines. I am certain you will find many things that appeal to your enterprise and discover just how easy it will be to find a business home in our homeland.

Kurdistan is the safest place in Iraq and is undergoing an economic boom because of its stability.

The Kurdistan region's political unification, coupled with a dynamic business-friendly government, an investor friendly investment law and tax structure, all make it easier for businesses to invest. Each day we are addressing the challenges of the past as we further democratize our region. Today, we have a more transparent society. We have a new generation of civil servants undergoing the rigors of academies that stress serving the people and the nation, not themselves, as we work to eliminate corruption. We are generating a free press, and working to pass a press law that decriminalizes libel. We are building institutions to ensure that we strictly uphold the rule of law. We are nurturing a society that for centuries has maintained ethnic and religious tolerance, even under the harshest of circumstances.

Centuries ago, Kurds may have first made their commercial mark as renowned flower cultivators and merchants but today Kurdistan is ready and ripe for major investment projects in fields as diverse as ,

power supply, water delivery, roads and bridges, educational institutes, general support services, manufacturing and modern gated residential and commercial communities to house the increasing number of middle-class populations.

Atop that list is our agricultural potential, where the right investments and partnerships will turn Kurdistan into the breadbasket for all of Iraq – with enormous export potential.

Additionally, the lure of our natural beauty offers many venues for tourists and tourism, 2008 will be the year for tourism in Kurdistan, NOT terrorism! The mountains were always our friends – now they can be yours as well.

Some insist on characterizing our economic advancements through the eyes of the past, suggesting that our gains threaten the future of Iraq. This could not be further from reality. Just as our determined-steps- toward- democracy have given hope and assurance to our fellow Iraqis, so too the steps we take to expand and enrich our economy will help prosperity blossom throughout our nation. For example, as we develop our oil and gas sectors, revenue gleaned

from the export of our resources will flow into the national treasury before a proportional percentage is returned to Kurdistan. This is what we have proposed under the revenue sharing formula currently under discussion.

Washington DC today stands as your nation's political capital. It is not however the US's economic capital. Baghdad is Iraq's political capital; Kurdistan can be our nation's economic capital.

Our stability can be the engine to stimulate economic growth and prosperity, which if built upon will in turn lead to national stability. All Iraqis must do what they can to help our country rise from the ashes of war and we are proud of what we can contribute.

It is because of the Kurdistan Region's stability that, in February, a bipartisan group of 15 distinguished members of Congress called upon the U.S. State Department to revise its current travel advisory for Iraq to more accurately reflect the safety and stability of the Kurdistan Region.

We applaud their request and join them in urging our friends at the State Department to update this advisory.

The people of Iraqi Kurdistan are proud of what they have achieved since the genocide of the Anfal campaign, and the betrayals that led to a mass exodus after the first gulf war. Americans should also be proud of where Iraqi Kurdistan stands today – a thriving, developing civil society, in the heart of the Islamic world.

Attracting investment will help us as we build our own private sector. Private sector development stimulates economic growth and aids in the reduction of poverty and the subsequent transformation of societies.

In 2008 we will focus on developing our banking and insurance systems, to increase economic growth. As our Prime Minister has stated, we will facilitate entry into Kurdistan for reputable banks and insurance companies, which in turn will help assure investors that their investments are protected.

One good way to break into the Kurdistan market is through a joint venture with a Kurdistan company (or cite some other good way).....

Some have already seen the benefits of joining in our development. Today investors have seen the potential for a wide swath of areas, including a regional call center, a tomato paste factory, a Ford Motor Company parts manufacturing facility – just a few examples of harnessing the economic versatility of Kurdistan.

Today's interdependent global economy requires that trade policy be developed at the national *and* state *and* regional levels. Kurdistan should be high on any list you develop as you look to where to become a successful participant in the ever-evolving state of global finance and trade. It is the best place for any business to set up shop to be a player throughout the Middle East... and only getting better. And we are determined. As Pulitzer Prize winning editorialist John C. Bersia, now the special assistant to the president for Global Perspectives and co-chair of the Middle Eastern Studies Advisory Board at UCF, said "the Kurds are well-known as a stateless people who have struggled against difficult odds." He added that Kurds have entered the world's consciousness as never before.

Kurdistan has become known as "the Iraq that works," said Bersia, who played a key role in securing the endowed chair at UCF. He described Kurdistan as developing a model government with

increasingly democratic features and an economy based on free-market principles.

We completely concur and look forward to you letting us help you prosper. The potential for greater cooperation with Kurdistan for the benefit of Florida is limited only by the imagination.

Thank you all very, very much.