

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

ASSESSING IRAQ'S FUTURE:

THE PATH TO THE MARCH ELECTIONS AND BEYOND

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Introduction and Moderator:

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Featured Speaker:

H.E. MASOUD BARZANI

President, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. POLLACK: Good morning and welcome to the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. We are absolutely delighted this morning to have His Excellency, President Masoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Regional Government joining us for one of our statesman's forums this morning.

As I think everyone in the audience is aware, Masoud Barzani is one of the most important figures in Iraqi politics today. He was famously born on the same day as the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the party which he has led for many years. He served as a warrior among the Peshmerga. He has served as a political leader of the Kurds. And since 2005, he has served as the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government. And he was also, of course -- I think we are all well aware -- just re-elected in 2009 in a popular vote by over 68 percent of the population of Kurdistan -- re-elected to be the president for another term.

Masoud Barzani is one of those figures whose importance is hard to describe to people who don't know anything about Iraq or about the Kurdistan region. I was thinking about it this morning. It occurred to me that in some ways the place that Masoud Barzani occupies in Iraqi politics and Middle Eastern politics is a little bit like the place that Paris occupies in France -- all roads lead to him.

And so for that reason, we are especially gratified to have him here with us at this moment when Iraq has once again risen to the forefront of American and global importance and attention regarding this part of the world. As you're all aware, Iraqis will be going to the polls again on March 7th to elect a new Council of Representatives, a new Parliament. This vote is going to be crucial for the future of Iraq. If it is a good vote; if it produces a stable, strong government that is able to move forward on all of the issues that

Iraqis care about so dearly; if it is able to reconcile the various groups fighting so bitterly since 2003, there is every expectation that these elections will move Iraq smartly down the path toward stability, security, and even prosperity.

And, of course, there is the flipside of that coin: the great danger that if these elections do not go well they could actually cause the fissures to reopen in Iraq, for the situation to worsen, and, once again, for Iraq to slip back into the void of civil war and internal strife.

And so for that reason, it is especially important that Katmasut, as he is known to his people, is here with us today to help us to understand the important issues facing Iraq as they move forward and as they look forward to their elections. As you are all aware, the issues that confront Iraq today are in many ways issues that deeply entwine with the future of the Kurdistan region. Issues like the future of Iraq's natural resources, federalism, the resolution of its internal boundaries -- all of these are critical issues which are going to have to be resolved if Iraq is going to be able to emerge as a stable and secure and unified country.

And so even as Iraqis look forward to their elections, we must all look past the elections to the process of reconciliation and political compromise that needs to follow those elections in order to see an Iraq emerge that will truly be what both Iraqis and Americans all hope it to become.

And so we're thrilled to have with us today President Barzani to discuss with us the future of Iraq and the future of Kurdistan.

A few administrative announcements before we begin. First, the format for today will be a conversation, beginning with myself and the President. I'll ask him a series of questions and then about halfway through it we'll open it up to questions from the floor. Second, please, if you could, silence your cell phones if you have not done so already. And

third, the President will have to leave very sharply at 11:15. We are disappointed that he can't stay with us for longer, but we understand he needs to go and meet with the Vice President, and we obviously wish him well in that meeting. The security personnel have asked if everyone could please remain seated until the President and his entourage have left the building.

With that, let me begin by turning to you, Mr. President, and once again welcoming you to Brookings. And asking you I think the question that is on a great many Americans' minds because it has been the issue concerning Iraq that has been in the newspapers, which is that we've all read about the recent moves in Baghdad to attempt to ban about 500 Iraqi politicians for their association with the Ba'ath Party. It's something that's gotten a great deal of ink here in the United States, and I'd like for you to start us off by just explaining to us what's going on and how concerned we should be about it.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Thank you very much for providing me with this opportunity to be at Brookings Institution with you.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: I would like to thank the audience here for taking the time and attending.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: I believe there has been a little bit of exaggeration in showing this issue.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, it's in Article 7 of the Iraqi Constitution for all those who have committed crimes or for those who promote the principles of the Ba'ath Party or those

who cooperate with the terrorism should not be given the opportunity to participate in the political process in Iraq.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, issues have been mixed and people have been mixed together. For those who have to be covered by this decision and for those who do not deserve to be covered by that.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Before departing Iraq, I also have a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Malachi.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, our view is that for those who have not committed crimes against the Iraqi people, for those who have not participated in the (inaudible) operations or other operations against the Iraqi innocent people, for those who show their commitment to the Constitution of Democratic Principles, they should be given an opportunity to participate in the political process and participate in the upcoming elections.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, it does not only include Sunni Arabs; it includes some Shiites, as well as some Kurds.

MR. POLLACK: Before I ask the next question I must apologize. I had a great many responsibilities this morning and I confess that I flubbed one of them, which is that I forgot to introduce my old friend, Falah Mustafa Bakir, Minister and the Head of the Office of Foreign Relations of the Kurdistan Regional Government. And we're delighted to have you back at Brookings, Falah. Thank you so much for agreeing to serve as the President's translator for this forum, too.

MR. BAKIR: It's my pleasure.

MR. POLLACK: Mr. President, thank you for that answer. And let me expand on that. It's very helpful to hear that, but obviously there are other concerns about the election.

It would be very helpful I think for us if you could give us a sense of what you are looking for from the elections coming up in March; what you hope that they will produce; and what you fear could be the result if things go badly.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: There is no doubt that the forthcoming election is an important one to determine the future of Iraq and all the Iraqi people, including (inaudible).

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: We expect that there will be some change for the political mapping of Iraq today.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: So the most important thing to have a high percentage and high turnout of the Iraqi people and also to ensure that the elections are fair, free, and transparent.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: I believe it's premature to enter any coalitions right now because people would be waiting for the elections to be conducted and the results to be declared then to enter elections. We, in the Kurdistan region, we have decided that we will enter coalitions with partners in the political process on the basis of commitment to the Constitution and that will be our criteria for entering into a coalition.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: I don't expect that any list or any block would be able to get

the majority of the votes to be able to form a government unilaterally. Therefore, any block would be in need of making coalition partners in order to form the government.

MR. POLLACK: Mr. President, obviously we're all very concerned about the potential for these elections to go badly. What are your nightmare scenarios? What keeps you up at night? What is it about the elections that you most fear? Is there some scenario out there that you're most afraid of?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The most fearful thing is that when we approach the elections, under the election there would be attempts by terrorist groups in order to carry out terrorist activities and to spoil the process. This is our main fear.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The other thing that we have asked our friends to help us and support us in the election process is to ensure that there will be a free and fair election; there will be no forgery or double voting which is the main fear as well.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, have we had a transparent and fair election, whatever the results would be, we're all obliged to respect and to honor the outcome of the election.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: For that we are reliant on reliable, mutual, international observers to be part of that process in Iraq.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Technically and logistically, the U.N. and other friends of the Iraqi people have to help us in that process.

MR. POLLACK: Mr. President, you, of all people, are well aware that your

friends beyond Iraq's borders, your neighbors, have often had great interest in the internal affairs of Iraq. Are you concerned about the possibility that any of Iraq's neighbors will try to get involved in the elections?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Unfortunately, the interferences of the neighboring countries are continuing.

MR. POLLACK: Is there a way that the United States or other countries can help to push back on that interference that would be more effective than we have done so far?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, this is the responsibility of the Iraqis themselves. The Iraqis themselves can, I'm sure, put an end to this interference. I don't believe there will be much that the United States or friends of Iraq can do. The Iraqi Political Party, the Iraqi Federal Government, have to move in order to prevent these interferences. We are for having good neighborly relations, relations on the basis of mutual interest, mutual respect. That to be the criteria for the relationship. And the Iraqis should not give any opportunity for such kind of interferences in the internal affairs of Iraq. The more they have that opportunity, the more it's difficult for the United States to be able to play an effective role in preventing that from happening.

MR. POLLACK: I'd like, Mr. President, if I could to pick up on another point which you raised which I think is very important which is your expectation, which I think is shared by many other experts, that it's unlikely that one part in the election is going to secure an outright majority. What this has suggested to many American observers in Iraq is that we

may have a long and difficult process of government formation. And I'd like to pick up on this theme of the American role and ask how you think the United States can be helpful in helping the Iraqis to overcome those obstacles -- those hurdles.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, there's always room for the United States to play using its weight, its effectiveness, its influence, to help the Iraqi people to overcome the difficulties and the problems that we face. Once again I would like to reiterate that the Iraqi Political Forces can help the United States so that the United States will be able to help them succeed in the process.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: If the political forces in Iraq seek for a solution, then I believe there will be a role for the United States to play to help them.

MR. POLLACK: Why don't we look now beyond the election because obviously the election is an important milestone, but it's only another step in the path; it's not the end of the path. After the election we're going to need to have some very difficult negotiations regarding the real bedrock future of Iraq. And I think it would be helpful for us, Mr. President, if you laid out very clearly going into these negotiations what you believe the right answers on the issues of greatest importance to you -- Kirkuk, the other disputed internal territories, the hydrocarbon law -- where you believe that these issues need to come out as we move forward with these negotiations.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Of course, the problems are twofold. One side are the problems which are relevant to Iraq and the federal government in Baghdad and the other

one is relevant to the issues between the KRG and the federal government.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, issues related to Iraq as a whole -- a commitment to the Constitution, participation in the power-sharing arrangements, the governance system in Iraq, the culture of self-imposition and culture of unilateral decisional ruling in the country.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The others are related to the relationship between KRG and Baghdad includes Article 140 of the Constitution, which is relevant to Kirkuk and other disputed territories.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, Article 140 is not only relevant to Kurdistan region, Kirkuk, and other disputed territories. There are other areas in Iraq that have been affected by that because of the manipulation and the gerrymandering of internal boundaries in Iraq as well.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: As far as we are concerned, for going down there to solve the issue of Kirkuk and other disputed territories, until now we did not find any other alternative better than Article 140 of the Constitution.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Because eventually it is good to go back to the vote of the people to determine their own future.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the most important thing for us is determining the identity of Kirkuk, which we believe that all the historical, geographical, and demographic facts prove that Kirkuk has been part of (inaudible).

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Having said that, we have agreed and we have shown (inaudible) flexibility to go back to the vote of the people for the people themselves to determine their own status.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The moment this is implemented on the ground we pledge that we will be ready and willing. And we show flexibility to make sure that there will be genuine power sharing arrangements in Kirkuk.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The other point regarding the differences that we have with the federal government is regarding the oil and gas or the hydrocarbon legislation. According to the Constitution, we agree that the oil and gas belong to all the people of Iraq and the revenues have to be shared by -- among all the Iraqis equally. To that we have no problem.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The other difference that we have is on the revenue sharing. In fact, now, based on the political agreement or political accord that we have, 17 percent of the revenue has been allocated for the Kurdistan region, although we deserve more than that, but this was agreed upon until a census was carried out in the country. We believe that the right thing to do is to allocate the share of the region in order to go to a separate account relevant to the KRG to be under monitoring, to be transparent, but not to be at the control and for us to be at the mercy of Baghdad -- for that card to be used as a political card or as a pressure card to influence the region to cut in whenever they like, to disrupt the process of the revenue to be allocated for the region.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The other difference that we have regarding the status of the Peshmerga forces, according to the Constitution of the country, the Peshmerga forces, which are known as the Regional Guards in the Constitution, are a legal and a lead constitutional force. And we believe that their funding should come from the federal government based on the fact the Peshmerga are part of the defense force or the defense structure -- the defense system of Iraq.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the other issue that we have regarding the restructure or rebuilding of the Iraqi Army, after the fall of the regime in 2003 we were hoping and we were working for rebuilding the new Iraq based on a new system -- a new culture, new education, so that the Iraqi forces will be built that way. But right now if you look out of the total makeup of the Iraqi Army, only 8 percent of them are from the Kurds; 48, the Shiites; and 44 from the Sunnis. So we do not see any justice in that. Therefore, it has to be adjusted and a true representation of the Iraqi society.

MR. POLLACK: Mr. President, thank you very much for that very helpful explanation.

I'd like to bring you back, if I could, to Kirkuk. As you are aware, the United Nations has suggested a variety of different compromise solutions, including some that might put Kirkuk into a special status -- its own separate province or a province that has dual representation in both the KRG and the central government. What is your reaction to these different proposals? Is that something that you might envision as a potential solution to the dispute over Kirkuk at some point?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the issue of Kirkuk is a very important and sensitive

issue for us as Kurds and also for Iraq as a whole.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: This has been the main reason behind the walls that have been between the Kurdish movement and the success of Iraqi regimes in the past.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, what we want is for this problem to be solved and not to have it remain as it is.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, during the time of the drafting of the Constitution that was the main provision for us to continue participating in the political process for a solution to be found for Kirkuk on the basis of Article 140.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Even then we have left the final decision for the people of these areas.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Therefore, we do not see any other alternative to play the role of Article 140. This is evading or running away from the constitutional text which is very clear. All these alternatives do not help -- are not helpful for solving the problem. In fact, it further complicates the issue.

MR. POLLACK: Thank you.

Mr. President, I'd like to turn your attention a little bit farther abroad now. You have, because of your difficult geographic position, had a great deal of experience, as I mentioned earlier, with some of Iraq's neighbors. And with one of Iraq's neighbors we have particularly problematic relations -- the United States, that is. And that's the country of Iran. And today the United States, once again, is confronting Iran, trying to figure out what policy

we should adopt. And I was wondering if you had any wise advice for us in how to think about Iran and what you think the United States ought to be thinking about in terms of a new policy toward Iran?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, this is a difficult question. I don't see myself in the position to be able to give advice to the United States because everybody is watching the situation the same way as we do.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: But certainly, Iran is an important country in that area.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Iran seeks for a greater role.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Then that depends on the United States, Europe, and the international community, whether they would be willing and able to give that role to Iran to play.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Any violence that happens there, of course it will have an impact on our own situation.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Therefore, we hope that if we could use and utilize the peaceful means and also dialogue in order to reach a solution that will be better than using violence or the use of force in order to solve problems.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the Kurdistan Regional Government or the Kurdistan

region of Iraq are not in a position to be part of that dispute really.

MR. POLLACK: Mr. President, I started out with a very specific question. I'd like to end my questions with a much broader one.

You've led your people for 30 years. You have fought for your people for even longer. I think it would be very helpful for us to hear straight from your lips your vision for Iraqi Kurdistan. What is it that you would like to see? What role would you like to see it play within Iraq? Within the region? Where would you like your people to be in five years? In 10 years?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: As far as Kurdistan Region is concerned, we can probably say that the (inaudible) situation is very good.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And that's a tribute to the culture of tolerance of our people and the cooperation of our people with the (inaudible) in the region.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: We're working on building more institutions in the region.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Considering the tragic sufferings of our people, we believe today we have an opportunity in order to compensate for that to secure a bright and prosperous future for our people.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: I can admit and say that we have just started. We have just started and we're learning, like students learning at the beginning, at early stages.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: We have shortcomings as well, but we have a serious desire.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: So long as Iraq is governed by this Constitution, we will move accordingly based on the decision that was taken by the Parliament of Kurdistan in order to remain within the boundaries of Iraq, and also work and cooperate with Baghdad and the political forces and the rest of Iraq to build a Federal Democratic Iraq.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the Kurdistan region can play a role of a bridge to fill in the gap to Iraq and Turkey and to Iraq and Europe.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And also Kurdistan could be a business gateway for the rest of Iraq until the security and stability is accomplished in the rest of the country. It could be a gateway to welcome companies and investors through the region to the rest of Iraq.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: But this is our desire and this is what we will work for. But there is also a fact that I have always honestly stated and I would like to reiterate it. God forbid if Iraq goes back to dictatorship. We will not be able to live under a dictatorial regime.

MR. POLLACK: Thank you, Mr. President.

Let me open it up to some questions from the floor. First, we, as always, are joined by an audience in Doha, Qatar, at our Brookings Doha Center. (inaudible) to you. And we'll try to take some questions from you as well.

When I call on you, please wait for the microphone. Please identify yourself, and give your name and your affiliation so that the President knows who you are. And please do ask a question and only a single question.

Okay. Why don't we start in the back?

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MR. YURLIK: Good morning. My name is Achsun Yurlik . I'm with the Turkish edition of Newsweek Magazine.

I was wondering, my question is about the BKK and how you see Turkey's role. And if BKK refuses to drop arms and if Turkey continues with military operations in the region, would you consider cooperating with Turkey? And to what extent would you cooperate with Turkey in that case?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Right now there is an opening process and an opening policy in Turkey. And also efforts have been made to find a peaceful solution for that problem. Let's focus on that.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: We strongly support this opening policy and this peaceful approach to solve the problem. And we strongly support the Turkish government in its endeavors to solve this problem.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: But all of us are convinced that never wars bring any solutions or military ways or political pressures will bring any solutions. God forbid if that is chosen. We will not be part of that solution.

SPEAKER: Related to the -- sorry, related to the question that was just asked, relations between the KRG and Turkey are improving. To what factors do you attribute that improvement? And what dangers -- what potential problems could there be that would arrive that might threaten or harm those relations?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: That's true that there has been improvement in the KRG Turkish relations. And I believe that Turkey has come to the conclusion that the region is not a threat to Turkey. And there is also huge economic and also energy cooperation -- huge economy cooperation between the region and Turkey. And also that opening policy towards the Kurdish (inaudible) with Turkey is a helpful factor and we can play -- this relationship can play an important role in supporting that approach.

MR. HUSSEIN: Thank you. Hussein Abdul Hussein with (inaudible) Newspaper.

President Barzani, I'd like to hear your opinion on the claims of Kurdistan's position -- politician, Nawshiran Mustafa, has been arrested. And he announced that he is not running on the Kurdish Alliance between the KDP and the PUK. Do you think this negatively affects your chances in the coming elections?

Thank you very much.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: There is a difference between having the same stand and being in the same list.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, even in the last elections that we had -- the Iraq-wide election -- we were not running in the same list. There was the Kurdistan Alliance list; there was the KIU -- Kurdistan Islamic Union. But on all the strategic and national issues they have been standing by the position of the Kurdistan Alliance list. Therefore, before the elections we have a meeting with all the political parties in Kurdistan. They have all pledged and promised that even if they participate in the elections in a separate list, they will stand and they will have the same policy regarding the strategic and national issues in Baghdad.

And this is what's important for us.

MR. POLLACK: Let's go to Robert next.

MR. DREYFUS: Good morning. I'm Bob Dreyfus with The Nation magazine. And I apologize if I missed something in the translation. Perhaps you can speak a little more slowly.

But in answer to Ken's first question about the banning of people like the defense minister and Mr. Salih Mutlak in running, did you condemn this decision by the Justice and Accountability Commission? Or do you support it? I wasn't clear on the answer.

And do you see any role behind the scenes by Iran in this action? Because the United Iraqi Alliance, the coalition with Hakim and Sadr and Saleh al-Obeidi was almost assembled in Tehran really over the summer and fall so I'm wondering if you see Iran's hand behind what Saleh al-Obeidi and Ayad Allawi did in banning Mr. Mutlak and many other candidates?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: So my answer to this question is that we in the Kurdistan region of Iraq have overcome this issue and we have solved it. We have passed that complexity. We do not have kind of a complexity to this. We have got rid of it because we don't have the culture of retaliation and revenge in Kurdistan.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: At the same time we do not have any sectarian problems in Kurdistan.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the same as you, I have heard about the banning of the list from the media. We have not been consulted and we have not been asked about our

view. The list came out from that committee.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, there has to be a criteria in order to determine this issue. For Mr. Salih Mutlak or others, I have not heard personally that he has participated in the killing of Iraqi people -- for him or for others who have been Ba'athist. But if they come today to show their allegiance to Iraq and to show their commitment to the Iraqi Constitution, I do not have a problem personally with that.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Generally speaking, all Iraq's neighbors have got their own agendas. Maybe Iran's agendas are broader than the other neighbors. Certainly, each of these countries would like or would prefer to have some of them be part of that process or some would be out of it. But that could be seen as a national thing in Iraq -- in today's Iraq.

MR. POLLACK: Mr. Indyk.

MR. INDYK: Martin Indyk from the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings.
Mr. President, welcome to Washington and welcome to Brookings.

It's wonderful to see the progress that the Iraqi Kurdistan has made under your leadership over the last 20 years. And it's a contrast success story when so many other problems confront us in your part of the world.

The big problem that we, in America, see in Iraq today is terrorism. That's the focus of the stories in our press. Most recently, this morning, again. And I think it would be helpful to us if you could explain two things about that. Number one, where is it coming from? What are the sources now of this terrorism, the suicide bombings that we see in Baghdad? And as the United States Armed Forces are withdrawn from Iraq, do you expect this to be a problem that can unravel the political progress that Iraq has made? Or is it going to be a chronic problem that essentially Iraqis will have to learn to live with and that

eventually it may go away?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Well, let me start by this, Martin. Thank you very much.

Indeed, I would like to thank you personally for the role that you played in 1998 due to the difficult times that we had. And when you had the senior position in the State Department, you helped us to overcome the internal differences and problems that we had at that time.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: So the success story that we have achieved, part of it is a credit to you as well.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the terrorism phenomena has become a very dangerous phenomena in the whole world.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And day after day it's broadening.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: I believe there are many sources that provide this to Iraq.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Certainly, it comes from outside of Iraq, but to identify exactly where, it would be very difficult.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Although it has reduced, it's not like before, but it has not ended as well.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Probably in the past we've had 50 explosions; today we have

10. It has reduced greatly, but it has not ended. It's still too much.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the political situation in Iraq has to be remedied so that it paves the way for a stable and secure situation to be able to uproot the terrorism phenomena. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to find a solution for this through military operations.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: There has to be a genuine and national reconciliation.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And the unfortunate thing is that in today's Iraq the security apparatus are infiltrated. There have to be clean and loyal forces to provide that security.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Regarding the withdrawal of the American forces, I would like to start by thanking the people of the United States and the government of the United States for their contribution. And we appreciate the sacrifices that have been given to free the people of Iraq as a whole, and also the Kurdish people.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: But we have to expect that one day these forces have to come back.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The most important question I have raised with President Obama as well was whether what was meant by the withdrawal of the troops in Iraq is the withdrawal of the troops only or withdrawal of America's commitment and decision to be engaged in Iraq.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And also in the forthcoming election, the Iraqi government has to work seriously to solve Iraq's internal problems. And as a priority would be the security situation.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: It's not necessary to have a great number of troops on the ground. There could be a limited number of troops on the ground, helping and cooperating the Iraqi forces and it would provide that. What was encouraging -- I heard it from President Obama that with that plan implemented, America's attention and America engagement will remain.

MR. POLLACK: Let's take a few questions down here. I want to start with this lady right here.

SPEAKER: Thank you. This is (inaudible), a Turkish daily newspaper.

Mr. Barzani, I'd like to take you back to the issue of Kirkuk. You met with the President and also the Secretary of State. Was this issue, the Kirkuk issue, a part of your discussions? And what is your understanding of the U.S. position on this?

And a very quick, you know, second question, will you be a guest of the President tonight during his State of the Union Address?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, the American policy or attitude is a public one that has reiterated America's support for the Constitution of Iraq and Article 140 of the Constitution, which is sufficient for us.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, it's not an origin to be part of that State of the Union Address.

MR. POLLACK: The gentleman right behind her.

MR. BASS: My name is Sherka Bass from Kurdistan National Assembly of Syria representing the Syrian Kurds.

First of all, I'd like to thank you, Mr. President, for being a partner for democracy and supporting democracy initiatives and supporting America -- the Kurds allied with America in the region and liberating Iraq and building Federal Iraq.

My question is, speaking of neighbor and terrorism, countries like Syria, obviously, and Iran, are undermining because of fear of democracy next door. And obviously, we know Syria as -- and Syria has used violence. And the Kurds, in constantly using violence against the Iraqi people by supporting terrorist groups within Iraq. What can the U.S., or the West, or Europe do to basically convince or at least delink Syria from Iran and stop this terrorism and promote democracy in Iraq? Because obviously it's important for the region to have democracy and we see Syria as obviously causing problems undermining the Iraqi -- or the violence in Iraq actually creating a problem there.

Thank you.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, that question would be better answered if it's addressed to the United States itself because I'm not in a position to respond on their behalf. But what we see or what we have realized, there has been a rapprochement between the United States and Syria. But whether that is on the basis or on the experience of the Syrian-Iranian relationship or whether it will succeed in ending that, we have to wait and see.

MR. POLLACK: Let's go to Ken next.

MR. JOSEPH: Ken Joseph with the Syrian Universal Alliance.

As you know, the Syrians are the original people of Iraq. What advice

would you give to them as your neighbors as they seek to find an area of their own? We lost our leader, John Nimrod last year, and as you know him well, that was his dream. If you could give us some advice.

Thank you.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: The late John Nimrod was a great man. He was a close friend of ours.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, at your own country, as you said, you are the original inhabitants of the country. The Syrians, the Caldeas, it's your own country. You're to come back and see for yourself what has been achieved; what is happening. And I would like you to talk to your own people in the Kurdistan region to see what has been done for them -- what has been provided. Because we have been together and we have tried to be supportive of each other.

MR. POLLACK: Michael, back there. I think Colonel --

MR. MARTIN: I'm J.R. Martin from the Army Strategic Studies Institute.

I appreciate your answer to Dr. Pollack's question about the nightmares for the election. I think we share a concern that the Sunnis will boycott the election because of the ban on the politicians, which are predominately Sunni, of course.

What can -- what are the chances, do you think, of turning that van around? And if not, how will we guarantee or encourage, I guess, the Sunni participation?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, among the Sunnis there is no single individual or

political party that represents the entire Sunni community. Therefore, among the Sunni community there is a group of political parties and organizations and individuals that represent the Sunnis. Therefore, even if the ballot stays like this there would be Sunni participation in the election. There wouldn't be a boycott of the election.

MR. POLLACK: Mr. President, I'd like to ask you now a question on behalf of our audience in Doha. They would like to know the fate of internally displaced persons and refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan and whether you believe that there are things that the international community could and should be doing to help with their plight.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Who do you mean by the IDPs? Those Iraqis who have fled the sectarian violence?

MR. POLLACK: Yes. And Kurds as well who have fled and in some cases come back, but others who have not returned.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Almost -- according to the statistics that we have, around 25,000 Arab families from the rest of Iraq in the center and south have come to Kurdistan.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And also a considerable number of Kurdish families have fled Mosul and the suburbs because of the terrorist activities and intimidation who have come to Irbil and (inaudible).

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And as the Kurdistan region, we have provided and facilitated their stay there and we will continue in doing so.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: But certainly the international community can do a lot in order to provide material support and in meeting their requirements.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: But the final solution is for these people to be able to go back to their original homes.

MR. POLLACK: Let's take the gentleman all the way in the back. There.

SPEAKER: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. POLLACK: Falah? Falah, do you want to translate the question first?

(Laughter)

MR. BAKIR: Okay. Question was asked from (inaudible). There was a constitutional code in Turkey that banned the Kurdish party there. What's your position and the reason for that decision? And what's your proposal? What's your advice for the Kurds in Turkey? An Ankara always seeks advice from Brussels and Washington vis-à-vis the Kurdish question and whether they approach you regarding that issue.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: We did not view the constitutional court's decision as the right decision because we didn't believe that would serve the peace process that has started.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: It was against democracy.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And also, my advice to our Kurdish brothers in Turkey is to have good and positive response and to be cooperative with the Turkish government so that we do not lose this opportunity so that we continue pursuing the peaceful process.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And we have continued dialogue with Turkey and that's going on closely for that peace process in order to end and to continue.

MR. POLLACK: Let's take the gentleman in the back, please.

MR. KAISER: My name is Ziran Kaiser from the Kurdish Shakili Party in Syria. My question for the President Masoud Barzani is what's the official position of KRG regarding what's going on in the Kurdish region in the area, like Syria, Iran, and Turkey? Like the human rights abuses, as well as the political crisis?

Thank you.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: Of course, the official position of the KRG is that we are against any inhuman conduct or behavior with the Kurds, wherever they might be.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And we support the rights of the Kurdish people, whether they are in Syria, in Turkey, or in Iraq.

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: My advice is that that goal to be pursued in a peaceful and democratic way. And we support you. My advice is that not to pursue that goal using force or violence.

MR. POLLACK: The gentleman right here, please.

MR. McCOY: Mr. President, Lloyd McCoy from the Department of Defense.

In light of recent attempts by the PUK to reform, particularly since July regional elections, are there parallel similar efforts within the KDP to undertake internal reforms?

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: So we are heading towards holding the KDP Congress this year. Whatever reform that will be needed will be conducted there.

MS. GILLI: (Speaking in Kurdish.) My name is Shala Gilli . I have just graduated from Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

Ken, you asked about how the U.S. can help Iraq. As an Iraqi, I got a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Fletcher, so America helped. As an Iraqi, I got back to Kurdistan to practice what I learned at Fletcher. So the success story is like only 400 kilometers from Baghdad. So for Americans, it would be best to collaborate and incorporate what we are having in Kurdistan to what we have in Baghdad.

Very quick two examples. In July --

MR. POLLACK: Actually --

MS. GILLI: Very, very quick. Just one sentence.

MR. POLLACK: We do not have time. I'm afraid we don't have time. And there are a few other people. If there's a question --

MS. GILLI: There is a question.

MR. POLLACK: So please, if you could ask the President.

MS. GILLI: The first thing is that in Election 2009 we had a position in Kurdistan.

MR. POLLACK: The President needs to leave in two minutes and there are still three people I would like to bring into this.

MS. GILLI: I'm going to wrap this.

MR. POLLACK: So if you could please ask your question.

MS. GILLI: So my question is that for America to help Iraq, we have

Kurdistan. They should look at our success story.

By the way, I am born and raised and Baghdad, so I'm so neutral in what I'm saying.

The second thing, for business also, America can help a lot. So soft power and public diplomacy would be great.

Thank you.

MR. POLLACK: Thank you very much. Thank you.

Over here.

MR. OBERLANDER: I'm Leonard Oberlander, an independent international liaison.

Mr. President, I'd like to ask you about the growth of some civil society institutions in Iraq within Northern Iraq and Kurdistan. There was 8 to 10 years ago the first democratic newspaper, which was started and published within the KDP by I think Hussein Sanjari. And then more recently, the formation of a human rights organization. Can you say something about how these types of organizations are succeeding in achieving their purposes or to what degree they may be struggling versus succeeding if that were the case?

Thank you.

MR. BAKIR: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: In fact, as I explained earlier, we are in a learning process. It's in the making. There are a lot of official issues, diplomatic issues, issues related to the civil society institutions. We are at the learning phase in order to be able to (inaudible) society. There have been efforts in the past and that will continue. You mentioned Hussein Sanjari, who was part of that civil study. Now he has become Iraq's ambassador.

MR. POLLACK: My apologies to those who were unable to ask --

MR. BARZANI: (Speaking in Kurdish.)

MR. BAKIR: And he has left his organization.

MR. POLLACK: But I'm afraid we're going to have to leave it there. The President has a hard stop time.

Mr. President, thank you so much for joining us. Good luck to you here in Washington, in Hallaire , and in Baghdad.

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