

## **The United States and Iraq: A Time for Remembrance and Renewal**

*Brookings Institution – Opening remarks (10-15min)*

Thank you so much, Ken, for your generous introduction and thanks to you and the Saban Center for hosting me. It is a great honor to speak at your prestigious Institution.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to join you this afternoon and to make the case for why renewed efforts to establish a strategic partnership between Iraq and the United States are more important than ever before.

Since the Tunisian uprising that sparked a wave of popular protests across the region in December 2010, the Middle East has undergone, and continues to undergo, fundamental transformations that are shifting the sociopolitical dynamics in the region and beyond.

The Arab Spring has yielded new opportunities for many of our Arab brothers and sisters to chart a course toward a new social contract in which prosperity and social justice are its core drivers. However the subsequent power vacuums have also made way for the resurgence of old threats, namely extremist organizations that seek to capitalize on instability and the ever-growing dangers of sectarianism. What started off as pro-democratic protests is sadly sliding towards polarization of communities along sectarian and religious lines.

Needless to say, Iraq's own security has been adversely impacted by the region's instability and in particular by the situation in neighboring Syria. In recent months, levels of violence in Iraq have spiked as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates try to push Iraq toward civil war.

Amid this backdrop, Iraq seeks to strengthen its relationship with the United States in order to help stay on track towards establishing a strong, democratic and prosperous country that is a source of stability in the region.

Bearing this in mind, I have been dispatched by my government with the primary mission of nurturing an enduring partnership with the United States. Our message to our American friends is simple but urgent: **In a region that is filled with so much uncertainty, Iraq can be a trusted and reliable ally.**

We are under no illusions, and neither should you: Much work needs to be done on both sides for this vision of a strong and enduring partnership to become a reality. But we do not need to start from scratch. Our two countries have endured much together over the past decade. Both of our great nations have made great sacrifices for the sake of establishing a free and democratic Iraq. On that note, I would like to extend my country's appreciation to all the American servicemen and women who served in Iraq, some of whom paid the ultimate price, for the sake of a free and democratic Iraq.

I was honored that one of my first duties as the Iraqi Ambassador to the United States was to visit the Arlington memorial and pay tribute to your fallen sons and daughters.

The nature of our bilateral relationship has been articulated through the Strategic Framework Agreement, which was signed by our two countries at the end of 2008. It outlines the basis for long-term friendship and cooperation, based on the principle of equality in sovereignty. It defines areas of cooperation across a whole host of political, economic, cultural and security arenas.

Among its core principles, the Agreement states that – and I quote -- “a strong Iraq capable of self-defense is essential for achieving stability in the region.” Much has been achieved: Iraq was the first country in the region to move from dictatorship to democracy. We have successfully held three free and fair national elections and two provincial elections. One of these elections was held recently, despite our security challenges.

Notwithstanding all our challenges, Iraq has managed to harness its oil wealth to raise living standards; we have reduced poverty and

unemployment; and Iraq has asserted itself as a credible actor in the Middle East, culminating in its removal from Chapter VII of the UN charter earlier this year. We have come a long way. But more hard work is needed to maintain our achievements in the face of the growing threat of terrorism and sectarianism.

Since the collapse of the Saddam's regime in 2003, Iraq has sought to adopt a foreign policy that no longer threatens international security and stability. While the new Iraq has tried to remain a neutral actor, it has inevitably been drawn in to regional rivalries, by virtue of its geography and history. My country cannot realistically remain a passive observer in such a climate, but we have chosen to adopt an impartial stance in any conflict affecting our neighbors.

In other words, it is in Iraq's interest to play an active role in helping to resolve crises that may impact our national security. But we do not wish to take sides. And we firmly believe, as our constitution has stipulated, in the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others.

This policy is demonstrated in our position on Syria: Since day one, we have said that there can be no military solution to resolve the conflict, and only a negotiated settlement between the warring parties can bring any hope of peace and justice to the Syrian people.

Last week, Prime Minister Maliki outlined a nine-point initiative that details how a potential ceasefire could be achieved. Iraq and the United States share a fundamental interest in ensuring that the flames of the Syrian civil war do not engulf the region. We also share a common enemy in Al-Qaeda that continues, along with other extremist elements, to try to undermine what we have built together in Iraq and to hijack the aspirations of the Syrian people.

This is why it is crucial that we work closely to diminish the role of extremists in the region.

Many have accused Iraq of facilitating Iranian military over-flights bound for Damascus. I have been vocal in Washington in expressing my government's categorical rejection of military support for the Syrian regime. We have called on our American allies to support us in building an Integrated Air Defense System that can prevent our airspace from being used to funnel armaments to Syria. Just last month, Foreign minister Zebari was in Washington, making the case for greater security cooperation, and reaffirming our commitment to the strategic partnership.

While security and defense cooperation is important, we believe that trade and commerce should be at the heart of any endeavor to foster deep and longstanding ties between our two countries.

Iraq has the fastest growing economy in the region, and it is expected to grow at least 9.4% annually through to 2016. But this growth is mostly derived from our oil production, which has eclipsed Iran to become the second largest among OPEC members. Diversifying Iraq's economy -- and attracting investment capital and foreign expertise -- are among our top priorities.

Last month, I went to California to meet with business leaders from among America's most successful enterprises, and I was delighted to hear their enthusiasm for the Iraqi market. Iraq is purchasing \$10 billion worth of military equipment from the United States. America's top energy companies are already working in Iraq. And our recent purchase of 30 Boeing planes for Iraq's national carrier testifies to our potential as a market for US goods and services.

To summarize, amidst the turmoil and uncertainty in the Middle East, we are more determined than ever to build an enduring partnership with the United States. Much work needs to be done to strengthen our democracy, to counter the rising threat of terrorism and to rebuild a strong and prosperous nation that can help alleviate some of the region's misfortunes. We see in the United States a fitting partner to help realize our full potential. Thank you.