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CONSULATE GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
ERBIL, IRAQ

Transcript

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SEIZING THE POST-ISIL OPPORTUNITY
FOR DEMOCRACY AND INCLUSION

February 11, 2015
Erbil, Iraq

DR. ALA-ALDEAN: Right. Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski (inaudible), welcome to MERI, and welcome to Erbil. Welcome to the Kurdistan region. Is it your first time?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY MALINOWSKI: Yes, yes.

DR. ALA-ALDEAN: Right. In Iraq, as well?

ASSISTANT SECRETARY MALINOWSKI: Yes.

DR. ALA-ALDEAN: Wonderful. You will have a great visit, I'm sure, a fantastic trip. Before we start, I would like to personally introduce your friends to my friends, and I will also introduce the audience to you, and also to the viewers -- or, actually, the session is being transmitted live through a number of channels. And I will introduce you to them, as well.

(Speaks foreign language) international religious freedom. And I guess -- I understand you are the first non-Christian in this post. Right? And you're the fourth in this post, but the first non-Christian. I don't know if you end up having a say in your successor, but I would recommend that you would recommend a Kurdish Yazidi (inaudible).

I have Jonathan Cohen, who is Deputy Chief of Mission at the embassy in Baghdad, and we've got the very-famous Joseph Pennington. He's our Consul General of the United States. (Speaks Kurdish.)

Well, Mr. Assistant Secretary, the people you find here are a mixture of the intellectuals who actually are close to decision-making, close to policy-making. They are senior members of the political parties across the board. The five main ones are PUK, KDP, (inaudible): interesting names you will get to become familiar with. I hope you will

remember them. But they are the full spectrum of the political parties, or landscape. We've got chief executives and editors-in-chief of a number of dependent and independent newspapers, as well as (inaudible). And we also have academic students -- students, most important, okay? We want to create such opportunities for everybody to benefit from this occasion.

And the session is going to be televised, but then we'll have a question-and-answer session that will be carried out later, after the break.

Just for your information, obviously, my colleagues will know that you're not an ordinary diplomat over here. You've got an extraordinary track record of working with civil society, with human rights. And, having been director of Human Rights Watch in Washington for well over a decade, you're one of us. Welcome to diplomacy.

And people here are very interested in your views because Kurdistan is a place where we are proud to see a vibrant society emerging out of the tough history we have, where people are very thirsty for nation-building, for democracy, for human rights. And, luckily, our leaders, our political leaders across the board, are very much committed to democracy. We know we are not there yet, but this commitment has took us this far, and that is where we are, because of that commitment. But it's by no means perfect. And our politicians -- our leaders, as well as our people -- very much value the American contribution to the war. Without the American leadership, we would not have survived this far against this war attrition -- in fact, war of (inaudible) it's the war of survival.

So, people are grateful, and I'm sure politicians will have told you and we appreciate the military, the diplomatic, and the political support the United States provided. But, actually, general population are even more excited about the American engagement with Kurdistan for democracy. People here want to democracy to work. We would like you to be here, supporting nation-building, good governance, social justice, and supporting human rights here. And your team are among the best to come and provide us support.

And MERI, Middle East Research Institute, I would like to give you a brochure that says this is exactly what we want. Our mission, our objective, our focus, is nation-building, human rights, having a good neighborhood in the Middle East to live in, to have neighbors at peace with themselves, so that we will be at peace. And I'm lucky to (inaudible), because these are the values we share, and we know America (inaudible) this share of common value, as well as common vision.

Your talk is -- address -- or the title is "Seizing the Post ISIL Opportunity for Democracy and Inclusion," but I don't think you will get away without talking about American policy, too. People would love to know what's the American policy in the region, for the region, for KRG, for Iraq, for the Middle East, and the vision that you provide, as well as expectations that you have. I am going to hand over the floor to you, and you can take as long as you like.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY MALINOWSKI: Thank you. Thank you so very, very much -- to you, and to MERI, and to everybody who has taken a little bit of time out of their day to come and have a conversation with us today. Can you hear me?

DR. ALA-ALDEAN: (Speaks in Kurdish.)

ASSISTANT SECRETARY MALINOWSKI: Are we okay now?

DR. ALA-ALDEAN: We should be okay.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY MALINOWSKI: Can you hear the translation? Okay.

So, again, thank you for joining us. And I don't think we will have to wait for Ambassador Saperstein's "Yezidi" successor, because we all feel like we are Yazidis now, after what happened -- and Kurds, and Shabak. And we feel this extraordinary sense of solidarity with people here who have faced this onslaught of Daesh in the last several months.

And so, our main goal is, really, just to express that sense of solidarity, to say, on our own behalf, on behalf of our President, on behalf of our Secretary of State, that we are here with you, and we will be here with you until this fight is finished -- and well beyond that moment, as well.

In the meantime, I know that it's a very difficult and painful time for many, many people in Kurdistan and beyond. We have seen things that I had hoped we would never see again in this region, or anywhere else: the deliberate mass murder of civilians, targeting people because of who they are, because of their faith. The kidnapping and enslavement of women, a horrific problem that weighs on us every single day.

Some people say this has something to do with religious values. Personally, I don't think so. I see it as a rejection of all values, that this movement is about one thing, it is about giving itself absolute power over other people; recruiting fighters and telling them, "You can do whatever you want, there are no rules, there are no limits." That's what it is. And I know that the people of Kurdistan have faced that sort of thing before. Fundamentally, it's no different from what you faced from the Saddam regime during the Anfal, the same casting away of all limits, all rules, all morality.

Now, not long ago this was right at your doorstep, and there was fear that these people would come into this city. And now we are in a different time; we are in a slightly better time. We have greater security, greater confidence. My country joined the fight, your forces fought bravely, so we have an opportunity, even though the fight is not finished, to take a moment to look ahead at what the longer-term challenges are. And, in doing so, I will start by taking a cue from one of my favorite Americans, Eleanor Roosevelt, who, as you know, was one of the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that was written after the worst events of the 20th century, when people had

every reason to be depressed about the state of the human condition, but then came up with this incredibly hopeful document about what we could be, as a human society. And one of her favorite sayings was that it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness. And so I am going to start by focusing on what I see as a few rays of hope, a few opportunities to build something good out of the evil that we have faced.

Now, it's often said that war brings out both the worst in people, but also the best in people. And here is an example of the very best, the overwhelming, amazing generosity of the Kurdish people to all of the people who have had to flee from Daesh in the last few months. You have already hosted over 200,000 refugees from Syria, from that nightmare. And now you have taken in so many, many more. Over half of all the IDPs in Iraq are here, maybe a quarter of the population of Kurdistan. And I know what this means for everyday life, people opening their homes to strangers who need help, schools having to open up a second and a third shift to accommodate the children, so that they will have something to do, something to develop their minds, while they wait to be able to go home.

There are still tremendous problems. We visited an IDP camp this morning, and spoke to many of the people there who hoped to go home. But, for now, they need a roof over their heads, they need food, they need something for their children to do, they need work, they need dignity. And we are all trying to work together to provide for them.

You face the biggest burden. We have tried to help. The United States has provided over \$218 million since 2014 through the UN, through other international and non-governmental organizations, to try to help you meet this burden. And we will continue to work with both the Iraqi and the Kurdish governments to provide protection and assistance to everybody who needs it, regardless of their ethnicity, or their religion, or where they are from.

Now, another good thing, I think, that has come from this tragedy is that it has proven that none of us can stand alone. No one group or region or political party, no matter how powerful they think they are, no matter how impregnable they used to think they were, can defeat Daesh alone. There is no border, there is no line on the map that can protect any of us. And so, regions in this country have to work together. Divisive politics has to be set aside. I think people realize that. And nations have to work together, too. Iraq needs its neighbors, and it needs the United States to help. The United States needs Iraq, and it needs Kurdistan to succeed, to be strong, to be successful, for our own sake. So we are standing here with you for you, but also for ourselves.

When President Obama announced in August that air strikes would begin to rescue the people who were stranded at that time on Mount Sinjar, it was a very, very proud day for Americans who feel strongly about this country and about the cause of human rights. And we were even happier when our strikes in support of Peshmerga forces broke that siege. And, since then, we have taken that effort and grown it into a coalition of over 60 countries dedicated to making sure that this struggle succeeds.

We have beaten the enemy back in Makhmur, in Mosul Dam, in Amirli, in many, many other places around the country, and we will continue until Daesh is completely defeated.

Now, as we pursue the military side of the struggle, the challenge, I think, has presented us with another opportunity: to convince everybody, to make everybody understand that the underlying problems of this country have to finally be addressed, the problems that led to this crisis in the first place.

We have to recognize that Daesh did not arise out of nothing. It arose because some people in this country, especially among Sunni Iraqis, did not feel included in the political structures of the country, and because many felt that their most basic human rights were being denied. That is a fact. None of that justifies any of Daesh's evil crimes. But when people lose trust in their authorities, when they start to fear their authorities, rather than look to them for protection, they sometimes turn in misguided desperation to whoever promises deliverance from their fear. That's how this happened.

And we also need to recognize that this phenomenon of Daesh isn't necessarily going to disappear just because we defeat this particular manifestation of it. It can arise again, perhaps under some different name, if the underlying causes are not addressed.

So, what does this mean, in practice? It means several things, in my view. First, as we fight Daesh, we have to respect human rights in the way that we do it. Now, all of us understand the anger of people who have been victims, the people who have lost their families, the anger of young men who were fighting on the front lines who may lose a friend in the battle. But we also know that, if we want to win this fight, we have to be very disciplined.

For example, if we harm enemy prisoners, Daesh will not surrender. They will fight to the death. And that means that more Iraqi and Peshmerga soldiers will die. If Sunni civilians are killed, innocent people, by, say, militia forces or by neighbors who are seeking revenge, some of those civilians will stay with Daesh, rather than coming over to the side of legitimate government, and helping us rid the country of that evil.

So, human rights abuses are not just a moral concern, they are a practical problem, because they will make this war longer and bloodier for us. So we have to be disciplined. This also means that our generosity to civilians who are fleeing the war zone must extend to everybody equally, including to Sunni Arabs. Now, so many have already been accepted in this part of the country. This is an example of the incredible generosity that you have shown.

But we have to be honest; there is also fear of some of these people. I understand where some of that fear is coming from: people worry that some of them may bring the virus of Daesh here. And so, it is becoming harder for some of them to find acceptance, to be able to move around.

And I think, here again, we have to be very strategic. The overwhelming majority of Sunnis do not want to live under the terror of Daesh. When they come here, it's because they are choosing a different way. Sending them back to Daesh territory is only going to reinforce their sense that they are treated as if they don't belong in Iraq, that they will never be included, which only gives Daesh more support, not to mention more civilian shields that they can place between their forces and ours, more young people that they can forcibly recruit into their ranks. So, the fight to liberate those lands will be much, much easier if all civilians who want to leave are welcomed with support and with kindness, including here, in the Kurdish region.

All of this raises even more fundamental questions: Will the fight against Daesh help to unite the country and ease the divisions, or make them even worse, which is exactly what Daesh wants? When Iraq is liberated from that evil, what will that post-Daesh Iraq look like? Will people who fled be able, all of them, to go home? And what will they find when they get there?

And we know, because we've been talking to displaced persons of all ethnicities, all religions, that a number of them are afraid to go home, not just because Daesh is there now. People from the Nineveh Plains and Anbar, and around Mount Sinjar, they worry, even if Daesh is expelled, about what will happen. Neighbors may not trust each other after the terrible things that have happened. There may be conflicts between people of different communities. There may be a temptation in this crisis to try to change the demographics of Iraq. And this is something we have to address in the planning for liberation.

That effort can't just be a military one. We need planning now, to make sure that the day after Iraqi forces or the Peshmerga expel Daesh from a village or a province or a town, they are followed immediately by police, by humanitarian aid, by local government structures, by support to restore basic services. That planning has to be happening now.

And the right to return home has to be enjoyed equally by all the people of Iraq, whether they are Sunni, or Shia, or Christian, or Yazidi, or members of any other group. No one should be favored or held back in an effort to redraw the ethnic and religious map of the country. The process of return, in other words, should aim to repair what Daesh did, not to reinforce it.

We must equally provide people who suffered the most painful abuses under Daesh, especially the women, the support and the help and the social embrace that they will so urgently need -- again, something that is a very important priority for us, and that we discussed with local officials here today very intensely.

Now, the Iraqi authorities, Kurdish authorities, will play the leading role in this effort. But it's important that people living in the local communities that have been temporarily seized by Daesh, that those people have the primary say in their own governance, and

that they participate in providing their own security. That is the best way to restore trust and increase the chance that people will return.

Now, one final point -- and you alluded to this in your introduction. And it's a point that applies to all of Iraq, but with particular force, I think, to the Kurdish region. As you mentioned, this is my first time here. But I have had impressions of Kurdistan for many, many years. And they were very strong impressions. And they were very positive impressions. And I am not alone in my country in having such positive impressions.

And if you had asked me, "What do you think of this part of the world, what do you think of Kurdistan," I would not have pointed to the physical changes over the last several years -- to the roads, to the bridges, to the buildings, to the infrastructure -- although, obviously, that is extraordinarily impressive. I would have pointed to the values and the institutions that made those physical changes possible in the first place, and that made this region unique in all of the Middle East because of its tolerance, openness, embrace of diversity, and respect for differences.

Now, such values, as we all know, are always challenged when a society is threatened from the outside, when it faces an existential threat. This happened in my country after September 11th. We were hit hard; we were afraid. And we made some mistakes. We compromised some of our values in ways that people in this country bore the brunt of in Abu Ghraib, for example. And we learned very quickly that every time we compromised our values, it was a strategic mistake. It wasn't just a moral mistake, it was a strategic mistake. And we have been busy ever since then correcting those problems.

Now, here, I hear similar things. This is a time when people are threatened, so it's a time for patriotism. It's a time for coming together, it's not necessarily a time for open and critical debate about what the government is doing. But I would ask you to consider that this is perhaps particularly the time when one needs those institutions of openness and democracy and tolerance of different opinions to be strong.

We don't need limits on free expression to fight Daesh; that should be clear. On the contrary, in every part of the world, in every part of Iraq, it is precisely civil society, it is people who challenge authority and dogmatic ways of thinking, people who work together across lines of religion and party and ethnicity to solve problems, who are in the best defense against extremism. That's what groups like Daesh hate the most. If Daesh were to roll into Erbil tomorrow, it is these people -- the journalists, the activists, the independent thinkers, the writers, the artists, probably many people in this room -- who would be the very first people they would try to kill. So these are the people, I would argue, who we most need to protect in this time.

The best way to defeat Daesh and all that it stands for is to ensure that the ideal of an open and inclusive society wins out in the Kurdish region and in all of Iraq, a society that respects dissenting voices, even if they offend some of us some of the time, a society also that values women. The women of Kurdistan -- this is something else we have noticed --

have proven themselves to be very valiant fighters in their military units, and they have gained worldwide admiration for this. I would suggest that if they can fight for Kurdistan in war time, they should be able to do anything in peace time, whether in government or in business, or in any other field, not to mention have the respect that they have earned in daily life, and freedom from the fear of violence.

So, to sum this part up, I would just stress that one reason why Americans and others have come to the defense of the Kurdish people over the years, including now, is the belief that you stand for the values of openness, tolerance, and human rights, even if the reality here has sometimes been more complicated. That reputation, even more, I would argue, than the strength of the Peshmerga, is Kurdistan's number-one strategic asset. It represents a potential, not just to be a little bit better, a little bit more stable than your neighbors, but to be a true model, truly worthy of the sacrifices that your people have made over the years.

Now, only you can decide whether and how to realize that potential. Your friends can only advise you and encourage you. We can defend your skies; only you can build your nation. But these are the values around which we hope that this nation will continue to be built. And I can tell you with absolute certainty that you will have the United States as your partner in building. Thank you so very much. (Applause.)

DR. ALA-ALDEAN: Well, thank you so much. That was very well delivered, very clear, and highly reassuring. Can I just ask a couple of questions before we break, and then come back for question-and-answers?

Basically, I mentioned that people in Kurdistan are really grateful for all the efforts the United States is putting in, not just in Kurdistan and through the military with help in the (inaudible), but also in Kobane, in Syria, and across the border, but also your efforts in Baghdad, in making sure that Baghdad becomes strong against ISIS and against the common enemy.

Mr. Assistant Secretary, you came, you saw, and you are going to go back (inaudible) to tell your boss. What are you going to say what you saw (inaudible) -- what were your recommendations for action? What are you going to carry with you? And then, on reflection, or in follow-up, so that we can hear from you again. That's the first question.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY MALINOWSKI: Well, I will tell -- I will give you my overall impressions. Sort of just did give you the big-picture view. But I think what I would tell my boss is that the moment of immediate, desperate peril is over, because people here have pulled together, because there is a new government in Baghdad that is more inclusive, more determined to work on the problems that I just outlined, because of the determination of ordinary people to resist Daesh. I'd say that we have an obligation to finish the job -- and it's not going to be easy, and it will take more time, because I've also come to understand the complicated nature of the challenge in the last few days. And I'd add that that we have an opportunity, not just to finish this job, but to deal with some of

those underlying problems that I mentioned in a way that will diminish the chance we will have to do this job again and again and again.

And I do want to stress -- and I will stress when I come home -- my belief that this is not necessarily a one-time problem. If we deal with it in the right way, it will not arise again. But it does have the potential to rise again, if we don't deal with it the right way. And so we have to make the best of this opportunity. It can't just be a military effort. It can't just be about killing as many Daesh fighters as we can. It has to be about seizing a moment of unity to deal with the underlying political problems and grievances that all of you have known about and could have told us about a year ago, two years ago, three years ago, but which were not being adequately addressed.

And I will tell him that every single person I met in every part of this country wants the United States to play its part, that this will be an Iraqi-led effort, but that this partnership, which has been built up over so much common experience, some of which has not been happy experience, is, nonetheless, extremely close and extremely important, and one that is worth building on.

DR. ALA-ALDEAN: Well, thank you so much. The second question will be, really, the question that is in the mind of many people here.

You -- very clear, you mentioned that we (inaudible) problem. We are in a very difficult neighborhood, so we had external challenges, and also had internal challenges. We have the -- in terms of your agreement, democracy and human rights, you alluded to the fact that we have forces from Baghdad, forces from Peshmerga. They liberate towns, (inaudible), and there are inhabitants, indigenous Arab Sunni inhabitants of those regions who at times held to ISIS for whatever reason. They found themselves on the same side, and they inflicted damage to the Peshmerga and others. And now (inaudible) being liberated. This is making (inaudible) reconciliation an extremely tough challenge.

We have not gone through this before. We are not (inaudible). South Africa went through this, they have emerged. Bosnia, many other countries. What can the United States do to actually make sure that we can live with this, reconcile, coexist? These are our neighbors, they have been there for thousands of years, they will be here with us for thousands of years. We can't afford to be losing sight of that.

We have internal challenges. We had internal wars in the '90s. We had divisions. We had two administrations. We've now been very lucky and fortunate that, in the last 10 years, there has been serious effort in unifying administrations, making democracy work, and, indeed, our parliament is a source of authority and legislation, so on. But the (inaudible) of unifying our institutions, of institutionalizing KRG, has been very challenging. It's going to be even more challenging in the future. What can the United States do to help (inaudible) reconciliation, as well as helping our nation to become more stronger through democracy, good governance, institutionalization, and unification?

And, finally, I would like just another comment. The people of Kurdistan actually know (inaudible) that it's possible to live with what they have, in terms of federal entity within Iraq. They want (inaudible) within Iraq. People aspire to become (inaudible) having greater certainty, in terms of (inaudible) economic, diplomatic, military, and security development, or separation and independence. What would be -- I mean these are three separate questions, I know. But people, the viewers who are now watching us, the people here, would love to hear from you, as one of the top diplomats from America, how you see these challenges that we are facing, as well as our aspirations. And this is what is cooking now in the region.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY MALINOWSKI: That's easy. (Laughter.) On the first question, the most important thing we can do is to support you and to stand by you. As we do that -- and we will do that -- then I think we can say that, as we give a lot, we can also ask a lot. And we are doing a great deal. American pilots are risking their lives right now over the skies of Iraq, to try to make sure that people here are safe. And we are providing great resources, both on the humanitarian side and on the military side, to make sure that you will not just survive, but win, and come out well from this trouble.

We can always do more. And everywhere I go, people ask us to do more. And I always acknowledge that we're not doing enough. Because one can never say one is doing enough, when so many people are still suffering. But I do think we are doing a lot, and that gives us the right to ask something in return.

We have asked a great deal of the government in Baghdad, and we have seen changes that are very real and very tangible, because of efforts that we have made. And we can certainly ask a great deal, in terms of the manner in which this fight is conducted in those sensitive areas where, as you mentioned, people are mixed, and there is anger, and there is division, and there is the potential for a new cycle of violence to begin. And we cannot allow that to happen, not just because we care about the people who live there, but because that cycle, if it continues, will bring us back to the beginning. We cannot have that.

So, what will it take to avoid it? I think there is a long-term answer and a short-term answer. The long-term answer is you need institutions of justice. People who are rightly angry over what happened, whether because they lost their family members, or their property was destroyed, they need to be able to look to institutions that can give them redress through the law, not through revenge. Now, that's very easy to say, and we know that, in many parts of the country, those institutions do not exist, and will have to be built, and that will take time, and it will take longer than the amount of time we have.

And so, that means there has to be a shorter-term answer, too. And I think the only shorter-term answer is leadership and discipline. People who are in positions of responsibility need to restrain those who look up to them, whether it is leaders here, in Kurdistan, or in Baghdad, or in the security forces. They have to make clear to everybody

who looks up to them there are limits you cannot cross, there are things you cannot do. And we can remind all of our friends about why this is important.

So, for example, we do have concerns about the Popular Mobilization Forces, otherwise known as the Shia militias, and some of the abuses that they have been accused of committing. These are not only wrong, but they are very counterproductive, in terms of the struggle that we have to wage, and that we have to win. And we will continue to raise concerns about issues like that.

Today we spoke to leaders here in Erbil, including in the Peshmerga, about the importance of Kurdish forces, respecting human rights in their own conduct, and the importance of planning to make sure that the return of civilians to those sensitive areas is done with security and with the provision of the kinds of services that will help people focus on rebuilding their lives, rather than getting revenge. So, we will do our part. But this is largely going to be your challenge.

On the small issue you raised at the end, you're right, I am a diplomat, which means I am not going to make news (Laughter.) on what I know many of you see as the ultimate question, the status of Kurdistan. I will say that the Kurdish people are our allies, and we are standing with you in this struggle, and we want this region to be successful, and we want it to be open and free and democratic.

My diplomatic task today is to encourage you to keep building your democracy, and to keep living up to the values that have made Kurdistan's reputation in the world, and to assure you that this is the best way to not just maintain, but to gain international support for everything that you aspire to. Thank you.