Emerging Kurdistan

A Conversation with Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman

FLETCHER FORUM: *You've noted before that discussing Kurdistan's emerging role in the world always brings up the question of independence and identity. You have also talked about how Kurds across borders develop at different paces and have different political agendas, and how that affects greater Kurdish unity and identity. Could you comment on this concept of dual, cross-border identity?*

BAYAN SAMI ABDUL RAHMAN: I think all Kurds live with two, maybe even three, identities. For example, in my case, I'm an Iraqi Kurd, but I'm a Kurd, and I view all of Kurdistan as my homeland. My husband is an Iranian Kurd, and therefore my son is an Iranian-Iraqi Kurd. My maternal grandmother was from Syria, and I have a very large family also in Syria, as well as many relatives in Turkey. I do not think this is unusual. Maybe it is unusual that I cross all four borders, but it is not unusual at all for Kurds to have at least one cross-border relationship, or to have been a refugee in another part of Kurdistan.

In the 1970s, my family became refugees in Iranian Kurdistan, and then later we ended up in Britain. Many Iraqi Kurds have been refugees in Turkey and Iran, and now we are hosting Syrian Kurdish refugees. So this dual identity of belonging to the country where you were born, but

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also having a cross-border greater Kurdish identity, is something we all live with. Among ourselves, we do not really refer to "Iranian Kurdistan" or "Kurdistan in Syria"; instead we talk about East Kurdistan (in Iran) or West Kurdistan or "Rojava" (in Syria). Or, we refer to the region of Kurdistan in Iraq as South Kurdistan.

This dual identity of belonging to the country where you were born, but also having a cross-border greater Kurdish identity, is something we all live with.

At the same time, it is a fact that we live within these borders. My life has been affected by the fact that I am an Iraqi Kurd, and that I was born and live within Iraq's borders. That has affected me at a personal level, as well as the broader community of Kurds in Iraq politically as well. Since we all live with these local identities, what do they mean for greater Kurdish identity and for Kurdish aspiration? Over time, different parts of Kurdistan have evolved differently. Political developments in one part of Kurdistan may have been faster. Maybe there has been war, maybe there has been genocide in one region, while another part of Kurdistan has been peaceful, and political resistance has taken the form of passive civil resistance. Things have evolved differently.

Also, the governments of those countries, have, on the whole, not behaved so well toward the Kurds over the past century. However, there have been times where there have been openings and dialogue. In Iraqi Kurdistan in 1970, we had an autonomy agreement with the government at the time—and for four years between 1970 and 1974, in theory, Kurdistan enjoyed an autonomous status within Iraq. But of course, this situation unraveled, which led to war against the Iraqi government.

There are also the particular domestic developments in each of the different countries to take into account. For example, the Iranian Islamic revolution has, of course, impacted the Kurds there. The fact that Turkey is part of NATO and has been considering joining the European Union has impacted Ankara's relationship with the Kurds in Turkey. I would also say the same is true politically. For example, in Turkey, the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) is a radical Marxist movement, while in Iraqi Kurdistan, I would say that the freedom movements—that is, the guerrilla movements—are now becoming more normalized political parties. They are getting used to governance. We have evolved differently, and at different paces, due to different political situations on the ground, and from having to deal with different forms of oppression against the Kurds in different countries.

However, there are many things that unite us as well. The Kurds as a whole are secular, in the sense that their Kurdish identity is not tied to one particular religion. While the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, we have substantial minorities who are Christian, Yazidi, or Shi'a Muslims. Overall, the Kurds are generally secular in their outlook, and are committed to democracy. Again, even that has evolved at a different pace depending on what has happened in each country.

Of course, it is also our aspiration that unites us. We dream of a unified, greater Kurdistan as one state. This is a dream that many have, although we are also very realistic about the borders that we live within. We are also practical—pragmatic—about what we need to achieve. Most Kurds are asking for autonomy right now, autonomy within some sort of democratic state. And in Iraqi Kurdistan, this is also what we are striving toward. We have achieved autonomy, so we are now looking toward economic independence. We have this history of reliance on Baghdad, and it is being used as a weapon against us. We are not making a political statement that we are breaking away from Iraq. We are still part of Iraq. However, our aim is to no longer be reliant on Baghdad for our budgets and our economy. And that, I guess, is where we are right now.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *On that relationship with Baghdad: you have mentioned a golden age of development for Kurdistan that began in 2003 and ended in 2014 with the budget cutoff from Baghdad and with the advent of the self-declared Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In your view, did that "golden decade" represent sustainable growth regardless of Baghdad's intervention? How would things have progressed if the budget had not been cut off?*

ABDUL RAHMAN: In early 2014, we received a couple of payments, probably in January and February, and then it stopped. During the "golden decade," we were getting our budget from Baghdad, but we never got 17.5 percent, which was the amount agreed agreed on by Erbil and Baghdad. At best, we got close to 11 percent. That was the peak. Most of the time we got less than that.

And as I have said, there were other issues. For example, we never received the budget for the Peshmerga, who should be paid out of Iraq's defense budget. We never received that, and we still do not have that.

That economic development, was it sustainable? Yes and no, I think, is the answer.

We started an oil and gas industry pretty much from scratch in that decade. There were some contracts signed early on with oil companies, with what they call "wildcatters." These are very risk-friendly, small oil companies that, worldwide, tend to be the first to go into an unknown territory. The wildcatters are generally the ones who are gung-ho: they go in, they discover oil, and then they usually sell to one of the large, established companies. In Kurdistan, some of these wildcatters have now become part of the establishment. Some have merged with, or sold to, larger companies.

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In any case, it was in that decade that we started the oil industry. It began with the odd contract here and there. Then, with the appointment of Dr. Ashti Hawrami as the Minister for Natural Resources, a lot of things changed for us in the oil sector. Dr. Ashti, as we call him, had worked in the oil industry in Britain for decades. He was in the business, he had his own oil consultancy, he worked for other companies, and he was a professional in the industry, so he understood it inside out. He did very well as a businessman operating in Scotland and England for decades, and then he was invited to join the Kurdistan Regional Government; he was Kurdish, and we needed a minister for oil and natural resources. Very fortunately, Dr. Ashti accepted the post.

He has faced many challenges and difficulties since. While I am sure he has his own political views, he really works in the post as a technocrat, somebody who knows the industry. People know him, and they respect him. It is actually quite unusual for an oil minister, or a natural resources minister, to have been so deeply embedded in the industry prior to accepting the post. Most ministers are politicians who then have to learn about their portfolio and have a lot of advisors in order to function. Dr. Ashti has a lot of advisers, but he came from within the industry. With that industry knowledge, he focused on transparency, on putting laws in place, and so on.

When I say we started the oil industry from scratch in 2007, I'm referring to the passing of the oil law: the Kurdistan oil law, not the Iraq oil law. Iraq is still operating under an oil law passed under Saddam Hussein. In Kurdistan, we passed an oil law in 2007, which is in line with the Iraqi constitution. Even though some contracts had been signed before, it was

really in 2007 that everything became legal and therefore legitimate. Dr. Ashti established production sharing contracts that we signed with international companies. We recognize that we do not have the expertise, and if Exxon and Chevron do, they can come and work with us to extract the oil. The companies make money, we make money, we get our oil out, and we get it out in an environmentally-friendly way. The companies are also obliged to hire a certain number of locals. It's win-win. That's the ideal situation.

While from 2003 to 2014 we relied on the budget from Baghdad, we were also simultaneously developing our oil sector. We recognized that oil and gas were key to our immediate financial security. At the same time, however, we have been very aware that we do not want to be a one-commodity nation, because there are so many traps in this model. One of the great things about the level of autonomy and self-governance that we are achieving now is that it is coming so late that we are able to learn from everybody else's mistakes. We make our own mistakes, but at least we do not have to repeat a mistake that another country has made, because that mistake has been studied and analyzed already. We know that relying entirely on oil and gas will cause us problems. While we are focusing aggressively on building pipelines, refineries, signing contracts with international oil companies, and preparing to export oil, we are also working very hard on finding ways to diversify our economy.

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Even within the natural resources sector, we can diversify. So far, we have been primarily exporting oil, and the gas has been for domestic use, for electricity. We could probably export electricity at some point, to some of our neighboring countries and to other provinces outside Kurdistan. We hope to export gas in the future, possibly to Europe, although it could be to anywhere. If gas is going to Europe, this might provide a way for Europe to lessen its reliance on Russia. Also, Kurdistan is also incredibly rich in untapped minerals. These are currently untouched, but at some point we will need to pass a minerals law in order to then be able to start that industry. We are trying very hard to focus not just on natural resources or energy because we do not want to be a lazy state.

A few years ago, our Ministry of Planning issued a document called "Kurdistan: Vision 2020." It lays out our economic vision for Kurdistan in 2020 and establishes the reasons why we should not rely just on energy,

highlighting other key sectors where Kurdistan could have a strong economic role. One of these is tourism. Kurdistan historically has been the tourist destination within Iraq: the cooler climate and the mountains have always made it a very comfortable place for the Arab Iraqis to spend their summer vacations. Since 2003, we have also become a regional tourist destination for people from Iran, Turkey, and other places, and a trickle of Western tourists has also been coming. Back in the golden decade, we focused on this area too; there were many conferences about what sort of tourism industry we should have and how to develop it. Up to that point, the industry was very domestic, and the demands of the local tourists were not very high; they were just happy with a clean room, whereas nowadays you have to have wireless internet, good roads, and public conveniences for tourism, among other things. Since that time, we have had to learn what tourists want. We actually have a tourism board now, and I have personally been involved in many tourism conferences, bringing experts from Europe to Kurdistan to help advise the board. We've opened two international airports with dozens of daily flights from Europe and the Middle East. We don't have any from America yet, but we do have them from Vienna, Frankfurt, places like that. It might sound strange that we are still trying to develop our tourism industry when we are fighting a war, but we have to start looking beyond ISIL and start preparing for the future.

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Another sector that gives us a way of diversifying our economy is agriculture. Historically, Kurdistan has been the breadbasket of Iraq, a rural society and a very agricultural community. Everybody was a farmer. In the 1950s, wheat and barley from Kurdistan were exported to Europe. Even up to probably the mid-1970s, 70 percent of the Kurdish workforce was in farming or agriculture. Then, the genocide and scorched-earth policy of Saddam Hussein destroyed 4,500 villages in Kurdistan. Yesterday, I was talking to an archeologist from Harvard, who has been looking at satellite imagery of these areas, and he said that one can still see the ruins of some of those recently destroyed villages. Saddam destroyed the villages and prohibited farming. Anybody farming could be shot on sight. That was the law under Saddam Hussein in Kurdistan. This destroyed the fabric of Kurdish society, which was one of Saddam's aims. He also targeted the Peshmerga

through this law: the villages were a way of supporting the Peshmerga, who would hide in the mountains and would come into the village to be fed, and then would disappear again. Saddam had many reasons for this policy, and his destruction of the villages and removal of the farmers into what were effectively concentration camps destroyed that agricultural way of life in Kurdistan.

Then the United Nations Oil for Food Program in the 1990s made the situation even worse. Saddam insisted on having a say in what the UN did in Iraq, and the UN only works through sovereign states—even if that state is a crazy dictatorship that has killed its own people, the UN will only work through the capital. So the UN worked through Baghdad. There was huge corruption that has been well-documented; a film has even been made about corruption during the UN Oil for Food Program in Iraq. The Kurds were saying to the UN, "Why are you buying wheat, rice, barley and fruit imports that we can grow ourselves in Kurdistan? Let our farmers grow it, and buy it from them. Then you're doing two things: you're helping bring money to the economy, and you're reviving agriculture." But that revival didn't happen. The destruction of the villages began in the 1970s, and the UN Oil for Food Program operated from the 1990s until 2003, and so there were effectively three decades without agriculture in Kurdistan.

Therefore, over the past decade, since 2003, we have invested a great deal in agriculture, in trying to understand how we could revive agriculture while still recognizing that we are never going to go back to the days where 70 percent of the workforce was in that sector. This is because the agricultural sector has moved on worldwide. It is much more mechanized: four or five people can now tend acres of land. We recognize that the technology has moved on. However, agriculture is still an asset to the Kurds: we have fertile land, we have water, and we do have that history. This is another area that we believe we can develop going forward, to diversify from oil.

We are still committed to Vision 2020, but we have to recognize that all of that has slowed down.

Now, did we achieve enough in that decade? I think the answer is partially yes, because we are exporting oil. Today, we are living on oil. Baghdad is not able to pay us. The UN is struggling just to take care of the humanitarian crisis caused by ISIL, so it is not really able to help Kurdistan as the host community. The fact that we pushed our oil development so aggressively means that today we have some sort of income and that we

can keep pushing toward economic independence. We are still committed to Vision 2020, but we have to recognize that all of that has slowed down.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Speaking of the current crisis, let's turn to the impact of ISIL on this situation. As former Representative to the United Kingdom, you lobbied strongly for greater intervention against ISIL by the coalition in Iraq and in Kurdistan. In your current role as Representative to the United States, what substantive steps would you recommend the United States take against ISIL to help the KRG?*

ABDUL RAHMAN: We are grateful to the United States, and we want to thank the friends who stand by us when they do not have to. So, we are grateful to the United States for standing by us, and for its leadership in the coalition against ISIL. The United States has provided weapons, as well as asked other coalition members to provide weapons when the United States is not able to do so itself: for example, because the Kurds are used to very Soviet-style weaponry like Kalashnikovs. There is an argument for needing the weapons that you are used to, even though ISIL has seemed to very quickly pick up how to use new weapons that they have captured.

In any case, the U.S. and the coalition have provided us with weapons and with training. Some of the training has been in Kurdistan, though sometimes they have taken the Peshmerga to other countries to be trained, and then sent them back. All of that helps and makes a difference. Of course, deliveries of ammunition and so on are also very important. Other forms of assistance, non-lethal assistance, still help the fight. For example, we are also beginning to see more help in terms of mine clearance; currently, the largest portion of Peshmerga has died due to unexploded devices, specifically improvised devices. Another thing that, of course, the United States and the coalition have helped us with is intelligence sharing, because they have satellites and technology that we do not have. Other examples are armor, or helmets, or first aid. So many people can be saved with immediate medical attention on the front line, if we do not have to drive them all the way to a hospital, by which time they bleed to death.

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So the assistance has come in many forms—training, equipping, delivering weapons, ammunition, planning, and coordinating among these. Air strikes are very effective, but an area where we are asking the

United States to do more is in providing heavy weapons. We are asking them to provide more weapons in general. ISIL has captured heavy, very advanced weaponry, and is using it. ISIL also improvises, and I am sure they also buy weapons. We want our Peshmerga to be a match for them, to be able to match the weaponry they have. If, for example, we are talking about liberating Mosul, we will need the weapons necessary for doing that.

FLETCHER FORUM: *To date, we know that the United States has provided the Peshmerga with 1,000 AT-4s,*[1] *and the Germans have provided MILAN systems.*[2] *How effective has this weaponry been against the VBIEDs, the vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices that ISIL uses? Besides AT-4s and the MILAN, what other systems would the Peshmerga prefer?*

ABDUL RAHMAN: Both the AT-4s and the MILAN have been great, especially the MILAN, of which we received forty from Germany. The MILAN is probably the favorite weapon of the Peshmerga because it is laser-guided, so it is difficult to miss with this, and it operates at a very long range. The AT-4s, by contrast, are not laser-guided, and have a shorter range. It is still a long range, however, and they are still able to take out some of the heavier vehicles or weapons that ISIL use. When you have these kamikaze, Mad-Max, bomb-laden suicide bombers coming at you, you want to be able to take them out from a great distance, and do so without affecting everyone around you. This is why the MILAN is very effective. With the MILAN, however, we did only receive forty, unless there has been a shipment recently that I'm not aware of. The real problem with these weapons is that you get a limited amount of ammunition and you use it, so you need more ammunition. There is also the issue of maintenance.

When you have these kamikaze, Mad-Max, bomb-laden suicide bombers coming at you, you want to be able to take them out from a great distance, and do so without affecting everyone around you.

What we want is heavy weapons in greater quantity. I am not a military person, but I am told that the MILAN is considered a "medium" weapon. We want more of those as well as more heavy weapons. Only then will we be able to match what ISIL has and be able to take out some of their armor-plated vehicles. I will give you an example to illustrate this. ISIL has vehicles that are triple-layered; they have three layers of armored plating. A

rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) will penetrate one layer. So, having RPGs is actually pretty useless in that situation.

This is why we are asking for these things that we need today. We are not asking for pie-in-the-sky items. Maybe, at the beginning, there were misunderstandings: for example, we said we want helicopters and this was misinterpreted as, "The Kurds want a fleet of helicopters." However, we were asking for helicopters that can evacuate the injured Peshmerga, not to be given a fleet. Someone else can fly them, but we need them.

FLETCHER FORUM: *You mentioned Mosul earlier, and part of this weaponry question is the talk about how far the Peshmerga and how far the KRG are willing to go into Iraq. Right now, the Peshmerga operate in the Kurdish majority area. Would the KRG and the Peshmerga be willing to support the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the Shi'a popular mobilization front as they try to liberate Mosul?*

ABDUL RAHMAN: Yes. President Barzani, when he was in Washington in May, said both in public and in private meetings we had with the current administration that the Peshmerga will be part of the liberation of Mosul, but that they will not be the only force. If they were the only force, the liberation could be interpreted as a Kurd-versus-Arab conflict, and that's not what this is about. This is about Mosul and ISIL. Ideally, we would like to have Iraqi forces, the Peshmerga, some kind of Sunni force, and of course the Coalition supporting us. Alongside this, the Sunnis must want Mosul liberated, otherwise what's the point? That should be how we really go into Mosul.

The Peshmerga will be part of the liberation of Mosul, but they will not be the only force.

I should mention, though, that the Peshmerga are already protecting the Mosul Dam, which is a very rickety, fragile dam. If it floods, it could kill millions of people, in Baghdad and elsewhere. The Mosul Dam wouldn't threaten Kurdistan, which is in the other direction, but the Peshmerga have protected it. Today, I unfortunately received a report that some of the Peshmerga were killed overnight at the Mosul Dam, due to ISIL throwing mortars at them.

We will be part of the Mosul liberation, although we hoped that the liberation would have taken place by now. Focus at the moment has shifted to Ramadi, because that is what Baghdad wanted. The focus on Ramadi has taken longer than anticipated, and Mosul is still occupied.

FLETCHER FORUM: *On a similar note, we have seen both collaboration between the Peshmerga and the anti-ISIL coalition forces, and also intra-Kurdish cooperation—for example, during the battle for Kobani when the Peshmerga supported the People's Protection Units (YPG). We now know, however, that the Peshmerga are no longer coordinating with the YPG. What is the current state of relationships between the Kurdish parties, and how might this affect the Kurds' relationship with the coalition overall?*

ABDUL RAHMAN: First, I would say—and this goes back to the earlier question about duality and Kurdish identity—that I am a Kurd, and I am so proud that the Kurds in Syria have fought so valiantly against ISIL and that they have been so effective, as have the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan. If you were to look through my Twitter account—it's boring to do that; I warn you, don't do it—about a month ago, I came across a map that showed control of territory in Iraq and Syria. The areas where the Kurds were in control in Syrian Kurdistan were a contiguous area, all in purple, and on my Twitter I just wrote, "the beautiful color purple." We are very proud of what the YPG have done in Syria and the Peshmerga have done in Iraqi Kurdistan.

I think the world watched with astonishment as the Peshmerga fighters in Kobani just continued, and resisted, and resisted, until the city was pure rubble. The initial problem was that Kobani was nowhere near our border and to get there, we had to go through Turkey. It took a great deal of negotiation with Turkey for all the Peshmerga to go in and assist, and a great deal of persuasion from both us and the anti-ISIL coalition. While Turkey has been criticized for many things with regard to ISIL, as well as its treatment of the Kurds, the fact that Turkey allowed a Kurdish force from one country to go through Turkey to help Kurds in another country is groundbreaking. That would have been unthinkable five years ago.

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But, with ISIL, there is a lot happening now that is changing things in the Middle East. It is painful. Everyone is resisting it. It's a shock. Things are happening in the Middle East that were previously unthinkable, and this gives us a breakthrough in the mentality of state rivalry and political division. The battle for Kobani was the first time that officially, not as a guerrilla movement, but very officially and openly, a

Peshmerga force went from one area to another. And that force helped. It helped to turn the situation around in Kobani. While the Peshmerga were not the only factor, they were very important in doing that.

We would be very happy to further help the Kurds in Syria, but we would need Turkey's cooperation, and Turkey has been very busy with domestic issues. At the moment, the YPG seem to be doing all right; I think Kobani was a turning point. Once Kobani was retaken, there was much more coalition support for the YPG. And in Iraqi Kurdistan, the YPG and PKK have helped the Iraqi Kurds in certain areas, showing a unity of purpose. As a Kurd, I'm so proud that when ISIL first came—in the very early days, when we thought we had no friends but the mountains—the Kurds from every part of Kurdistan said, "We will defend Iraqi Kurdistan." I am moved even saying this to you. Nobody has many weapons, and we are all sort of "homemade armies," with probably the most professional being the Peshmerga. But that fact that all the Kurds were prepared to defend what we had achieved in Iraqi Kurdistan says so much. Once the coalition and the United States came to our help, though, the need for cooperation was not as pressing, and so things became complicated politically.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *On the topic of political complications, would you say that the anti-ISIL coalition is forced to view the KRG through the lens of other states in the region—that is, through the perspectives of Syria, Turkey, Iran, and so on? If that's an accurate assessment, how does that color the relationships between the KRG and the coalition, and the KRG and the United States?*

ABDUL RAHMAN: I think that is partially accurate in that it represents the status quo: that Kurdistan is a region, not a state. There are Kurds in Iran, Turkey, and Syria, and so one has to take into consideration that if one is too friendly to the Iraqi Kurds, Turkey might be upset, and so on. That is the default position—but that is changing. We are in the middle of that evolution; Turkey, for example, has a different view now about the Kurdistan region in Iraq. All the regional players have to accept that the Kurdistan region in Iraq is an autonomous region. Now, I have a coun-

terpart in Tehran, and that means that Tehran recognizes the Kurdistan Regional Government by allowing a KRG representative to have an office there. The status quo is evolving.

We are now a player in the Middle East. We are not a state, but people cannot ignore the Kurdish factor anymore. At one time, we were not just ignored—we were trampled over, we were killed, we were abused, we were oppressed, and nobody batted an eyelid. Whereas now, we can be kingmakers. We can be the tip of the spear in the war. We can be the host to millions of refugees, we can be the safe haven for Christians. All these things impact how we are viewed.

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ISIL appeared to the world in Iraq in June 2014. At that time, for the first six months of ISIL's campaign in Iraq, I was the KRG representative in London. As the crisis evolved, the Peshmerga were fighting ISIL, and we were also taking in the Yazidis, the Christians, and others. Day by day, I could see respect and goodwill toward the Kurds rising as people learned more about what we had done, what we were doing, and what we were trying to achieve. When I arrived in Washington in early 2015, the goodwill there was even stronger. I heard the respect for the Kurds at every level, from President Obama all the way down. In the past, whenever I told someone that I'd met that I am Kurdish, I would get a very puzzled look. Now the reaction to this is, "Hey, Kurdish is Peshmerga, you're great!" That's just so wonderful. All of these things help to change perceptions, and I would say we are in the middle of that evolutionary process. We are not at the end, but we are not at the beginning either.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In so many ways, the Kurdistan Region is a beacon, particularly for democratic governance and inclusivity, but at the same time we are seeing infighting and tensions in the current government—most recently, the controversy over President Barzani's re-election. How, in your view, will the Kurdistan Region move beyond this to continue being a role model in the Middle East?*

ABDUL RAHMAN: We are having tensions and difficulties right now, but I am optimistic that we will resolve them and progress past them. We have already progressed so far and so fast. The Kurds were in a civil war in the

1990s—that is not so long ago—and by the end of the 1990s, when the civil war had come to an end, we had found a way to just live side by side, by having two administrations in Kurdistan. That was a way of saying, "Okay, we've stopped fighting, but you run your affairs, and we'll run ours." Then, post-2003, we realized that Kurdish unity would be our strength in engaging the United States, the rest of Iraq, and the wider region. Therefore, we merged the two administrations and have had multiple inclusive elections since then. Together we have created more and more institutions. We have tried to develop the economy. We have taken steps—not enough yet, but still steps—toward a smaller government and a far smaller proportion of the workforce that relies on the government. At the moment, everybody wants to work for the government, but we want to persuade new graduates, "Go and work for a private sector company, don't work for us! We're boring. We're slow—really!" We want to encourage the private sector, which has to be more nimble and preemptive, whereas governments tend to be reactive. We've come such a long way, and I think we are entering a third phase in Kurdistan's development.

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In my own analysis, phase one was from 1991 to 2002 or 2003. At that point, we were partially but not completely liberated from Saddam. We had elections and so much optimism. We created a parliament; we created a government. For the first time, we had some form of self-governance and international protection. The United States and Britain (and, for a while, France) had a no-fly zone over Kurdistan. When we fell into a civil war, we realized that neither side was going to win. People stopped fighting, because they came to the realization that we could fight for another century without either side winning. Only then we were able to start making use of the Oil for Food Program money. It was not as much as we should have received because of the corruption, but still, some money came. We started to rebuild villages that had been destroyed. We started to build schools. We really started to make progress and step out of poverty.

Then the "golden decade" began in 2003. Everything flourished, not just the economy, but also oil, a construction boom, retail boom, housing boom, international airports, and the travel industry. Everybody was learning English, German, French, Turkish, Arabic. Kurdistan was opening up to foreign direct investment for the first time. Our society started to

flourish. Women comprised 30 percent of Parliament. We probably have more women representatives than the U.S. Congress does, although ours is by quota. Nevertheless, it is making a difference. During this period, we also began to have our own media in our own language. While there are still a lot of issues that need to be resolved, but this decade established a flourishing of Kurdistan socially, economically, institutionally, and academically.

Then, we had shock after shock in 2014. Al-Maliki cut off the budget, oil prices shot downward, ISIL showed up, and then we were flooded with refugees and displaced people. Economically and societally, we are still having shock after shock, and this inevitably affects politics, since politics are not divorced from any of that. Fortunately, for the first eighteen to nineteen months since ISIL, we have had a coalition government in Kurdistan, a grand alliance of five leading parties. This is exactly what we needed. We needed unity at the moment that ISIL came, and our government was actually formed just after ISIL arrived. The timing matched up almost exactly.

And so we had unity, this grand alliance coalition—but underneath, we still have the political issues that we had before ISIL came. We still have the political issues that were bubbling underneath, but could be previously ignored when the economy was doing well. Now, these issues cannot be ignored anymore. These have come to the forefront, and they are not just about the presidency, or about President Barzani's election. They are about what sort of governance structure we want. Do we want a strong president who is balanced by Parliament, as in the United States or France? Or, do we want a president whose office is ceremonial, keeping all of the power in the Parliament? Both options have positives and negatives, and every Kurd has a different view. That is fine, because this is a discussion. These are deep questions that we have not really had time to discuss, because we had a civil war soon after the initial creation of our Parliament and government, and then two administrations to just keep the peace. Once Iraq was liberated, we unified and could then focus on getting a constitution, on starting the oil industry, and on just making progress. It was inevitable that these issues would one day need to be resolved. I think that day is here. We are at the beginning.

So we had unity—but underneath, we still have the political issues that we had before ISIL came.

This is the beginning of the third phase of Kurdistan's development, where we have to take a hard look at not just our economic structure, but also what sort of governance structure we want. I do not see that as negative. Of course, the way some of that reform has happened is very unfortunate,

but I do see it as painful rather than negative: every birth has issues and pain, but the joy at the end of it makes up for everything.

I think we are just entering that third phase, where we have to think more deeply. We have to analyze the experience we have had since 1991: what has worked and what has not worked. The situation now is very different than it was in the 1990s. As recently as the past decade, there were just two main parties, but now we have a third party, which has twenty-four seats in Parliament, almost 25 percent of the total seats. The balance is changing, and so the power sharing needs to change. The way some of those tensions manifested themselves was very unfortunate, and there were naysayers who saying, "Oh look the Kurds are about to fall into a civil war again," but I am so glad they have been proven wrong. I was confident that they would be.

We have to take a hard look at not just our economic structure, but also what sort of governance structure we want.

The dread of every Kurd is to have another civil war. Our history is very dark. We have had so much killing and murder and wholesale slaughter of our people. But for us, the darkest period of our history was the civil war, because we inflicted it on ourselves; it is the most shameful part of our history. While there have been some unfortunate incidents, I am personally very optimistic that we will ride through them. I'm not saying everything is going to be a smooth ride, or that there are not going to be tensions again. There may be tensions, but—if there are—I am optimistic that we will resolve them and take Kurdistan to the next phase of its development in a positive manner. ***f***

ENDNOTES

1 AT-4s are unguided anti-tank weapons, and some of the most common light anti-tank weapons in the world.
2 MILAN is a portable anti-tank weapon.