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“Where Is Iraq Heading?”
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Thank you, Jon for that kind introduction. And thank you all for coming here this afternoon.

You have asked me to address the question, “Where is Iraq Heading?” I will discuss where our country is heading on the domestic political front, the military and security front, and the regional and international front. And I will refute a few false choices — and outright myths — that are distorting Americans’ understanding of Iraq.

First, I want to make one important point. Slowly but surely and steadily, Iraq is moving forward as one country.

In fact, the only way we can defeat Daesh and build a stable democracy is to strengthen ties within our country along a federal arrangement that is in line with our Constitution.

Any other course of action leads to division, disorder and defeat. And that is the future that Daesh, with its divide-and-conquer strategy, wants for Iraq — and Iraqis, our neighbors and the world community must never, ever accept that vision for our country. There is no three-state solution for Iraq.

Recent events have demonstrated that, despite what outside observers claim, Iraq is not irrevocably divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. This is the first myth that I will refute this afternoon.

Make no mistake: For all their discontents, for all their differences, Iraqis want Iraq to succeed. This was apparent during what could have been polarizing protests this summer in Baghdad and other major cities.

Look at the images from these protests, and you will see a sea of Iraqi flags. Iraqis do not want revolution that overturns the post-2003 democratic order. They want reforms that will strengthen the unity of Iraq, the inclusiveness of our democracy and the effectiveness of a government that is not hamstrung by corruption and sectarianism.

In a shared understanding that is all-too-rare in the Middle East, the protestors and our government both want to unite our country and uphold the rule of law.

Security forces were deployed to protect the protestors rather than suppress them. On many occasions, police were seen distributing bottles of water to protestors and even joining in some of the chants. This dynamic between citizens and the security forces represents a paradigm shift that

is emblematic of the new Iraq. Those who still question whether life was better under Saddam should think back to how his henchmen would respond to even the suspicion of dissent.

In that spirit, let me address the first issue: developments on our domestic political front.

Almost one year ago, Prime Minister al-Abadi's government took office after free elections and a peaceful transition of power. With the support of the protestors, the initial approval of Parliament and the backing of the marja'iyah in Najaf, the Prime Minister has both a democratic and popular mandate to pursue reforms that represent, defend and improve prospects for all of our people.

The government is streamlining itself, eliminating costly ceremonial positions and divisive sectarian quotas. And we are decentralizing decision-making to the provincial level so that that local communities can determine where resources are most needed.

We are also addressing the fiscal crisis that was worsened by bloated bureaucracies and an over-reliance on oil revenues. We are broadening the tax base and investing in our agricultural, industrial and housing sectors. Just last week, the Cabinet approved a capital injection in these sectors worth 4.3 billion dollars.

Now, I need to dispel another myth: that abolishing the sectarian quota system will undermine the rights of minorities.

In fact, this is a coalition government, representing every major political faction and ethnic and religious community.

Let me be clear: National unity requires an effective as well as inclusive government. Whatever their religious beliefs, whatever their ethnic backgrounds, Iraqis want an honest, effective and law-abiding government. This aspiration is unifying, not divisive.

In order to unify Iraq, our government has set forth a framework for national reconciliation. We seek a fair, comprehensive and historic settlement between every segment of society in order to save our country from the prospects of civil war and partition.

Our framework for national reconciliation is built upon three pillars: the Constitution; the political agreement through which the major political blocs supported Prime Minister al-Abadi's government; and the government program that was approved by Parliament.

These are the basic principles: Every stakeholder in our society must be committed to national unity and the rule of law. Everyone must accept the results of the democratic process. Everyone must reject dictatorship, sectarianism and the use violence as a means to extract political concessions. And everyone must respect each other's basic human rights.

Iraqis also deserve and demand security forces that can protect our people from the barbarians of Daesh. As with our civilian government, our security forces must be cleansed of corruption,

while reflecting the populations they protect. Just as there must be no more “no-show” employees on government payrolls, there must be no more “ghost soldiers” on military payrolls.

Towards these goals, the government is seeking to create a national guard, manned by local citizens defending their own communities. Parliament is currently debating the draft text as we speak. This process has been strenuous but laws need to undergo the rigor of the democratic process if they are to stand the test of time. We are determined to train and equip more local people to protect themselves and their neighbors.

Together, these reforms will make our society more democratic, more stable – and more secure. Democracy enhances stability, and stability enhances security. Yes, there are those who say we must choose between democracy, on the one hand, and stability and security, on the other. But that is a false choice that we must move beyond.

This leads me to my second topic: developments on the military and security front.

The government of Iraq is committed to taking back every inch of our territory and liberating every segment of our society from Daesh.

We are conducting ongoing operations in Anbar Province, around Ramadi and Fallujah, in coordination with the Coalition. Coalition air strikes have been very important in supporting advances on the ground by Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish Peshmerga.

But the stark reality is, with oil prices currently below 40 dollars a barrel, our ability to finance the war against Daesh is becoming increasingly difficult. That is why we continue to urge our Coalition partners to increase their military assistance. As a simple example, when areas in the highly contested town of Baiji are retaken by our forces, Daesh responds by deploying a wave of armored suicide truck bombs to break down our defenses. Anti-tank missiles are the most effective means of responding, but we are in short supply and at times our troops are overwhelmed by the sheer ferocity of these counterattacks.

While we have a long, hard struggle ahead, we can be encouraged that towns are being liberated from Daesh, and many local residents feel safe enough to return to their homes. Some 75,000 IDPs from Tikrit have returned to their homes since the city was liberated in March. Across Iraq, almost 300,000 individuals in total have been able to return to homes that have been liberated from Daesh.

This represents only about 10 percent of the more than 3.1 million individuals who have been displaced by Daesh. The scale of this human tragedy should remind us of the daunting dimensions of the challenges that will confront the Iraqi government including the Kurdistan Region as we defeat Daesh and drive them out of our country.

And that leads to my third point: the challenges on the regional and international fronts.

Iraq is on the frontlines of the struggle against Daesh. But, as United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2199 recognize, Daesh is a global network with global financing and global recruitment.

These transnational terrorists threaten every country in the Middle East and around the world. Therefore, all the countries in the region have a binding commitment under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter to do their part to defeat Daesh.

It is a very positive development that the United States, the United Arab Emirates and other coalition countries have founded the Sawab Center in Abu Dhabi to communicate Islamic messages against Daesh on digital media and other platforms.

We need to counter the murderous messages that Daesh disseminates with truths from Muslim brothers and sisters that speak to the hearts and souls of their potential recruits. We need more nations to participate in this communications effort and to better coordinate messaging between the military and civilian components of the coalition.

Because Daesh finances itself by laundering money and human trafficking, the international community also needs to work together to stop these sources of support - from financial transfers to sexual slavery.

As we look towards national reconciliation and reconstruction, the United States and other coalition countries can continue to help us stabilize Iraq. You can provide us with technical assistance in streamlining our government, rooting out corruption, improving our public services and restoring our infrastructure. And you can offer private investment in building and rebuilding highways and bridges, housing and hospitals, schools and sanitary facilities, communications networks and new businesses.

Together, we can address these challenges on the home-front, the battle-front and the regional and international fronts. Together, we can build a secure and stable Iraq in a Middle East where the transnational terrorists have been defeated, once and for all now and forever. Together, we can redeem the sacrifices that Iraqis, Americans and all our allies have made over the past 12 years.

Thank you.