

**CENTER FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS)**

THE KURDISTAN REGION AND THE FUTURE OF IRAQ

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FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2008

*Transcript by
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.*

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JOHN HAMRE: Okay. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming. We're delighted to have you here. This is a rare privilege. You know, normally important things don't happen on Fridays in Washington, you know, but today we have important things happening in Washington. We're delighted to welcome Massoud Barzani here today. This is a, he's an iconic figure. Before I say a word of introduction, let me just welcome Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh. We're delighted to have him here today, and obviously you're lifting the quality of the audience today. Thank you for coming. Dr. Brzezinski, thank you for joining us today, it's always a pleasure to have you here. Paul Wolfowitz, thanks for coming, Paul. Delighted to have you here.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are very pleased to welcome Massoud Barzani today. He is – you know, this is the kind of figure around which novels are written. This is, of course he is the president of the Kurdistan region in Iraq and was born on the same day that the Kurdish Democratic Party was founded. So he, you know, there's a unique constellation of his personal history and the development of the Kurdish region in Iraq. He's lived through the tragedies. You know, his family was separated; he's suffered a great deal of personal tragedy in his own life, the oppression that existed in Iraq, the violence. He's had to personally set aside his own professional development in order to become a warrior on behalf of Kurdistan. And he carried the banner for Kurds throughout a very long and difficult period. And he now comes as the senior statesman for the Kurds in Iraq, and it's a time when we – I was saying to him in our brief meeting beforehand, we now need to be listening to people in this region because we're going through a pretty big change in this country.

We're going to have an election here on Tuesday. I don't know how it's going to come out, but I'm pretty sure that we're going to have a lot of pressure for changing our posture, and we need to know we're doing the right thing. And I think that's part of the reason it's important to have you here, president. So thank you for coming. This strong, powerful figure has chosen to spend a little bit of time with us today, we're delighted to have him here. I have many, many friends here today, I should recognize them. Mike Wynne, thank you for coming; Rudy DeLeon, thank you for being here. Jay Garner, you know, it's great to see you again. He doesn't ever want to come back to Washington, he told me he doesn't ever want to be back here. But it took Massoud Barzani to bring him back from his grandchildren down in Florida. So it's great to have you all here, thank you for coming, and let me turn to you – Ray, do you want to say any further word of introduction?

RAYMOND DUBOIS: No, I think that –

MR. HAMRE: Let me just, let me say, Ray DuBois is going to be leading the question-and-answer period, and please ask questions, don't give speeches. You know, that's one thing, we want to hear the president. So, Mr. President, we're delighted to have you here. Thank you for coming, we look forward to your remarks. Thank you for coming.

(Applause.)

(Note: Mr. Barzani's comments delivered via translator.)

MASSOUD BARZANI: Thank you very much; thank you, Mr. Hamre, the chairman of the CSIS. Thank you all for coming. I'm pleased and privileged to have this opportunity to talk to you.

Our visit to Washington comes at a very critical and sensitive time, a time which is critical to the people of the United States but also to us and to the whole world. In a few days' time, we will be seeing the presidential election, which has a great impact on everything. Our visit was to come to the United States to express our thanks and appreciation to the people of the United States, to the United States military and the president of the United States for the assistance and support that they have provided to liberate our people from dictatorship. And we've always appreciated and we express our condolences for the sacrifices of men and women in uniform for sacrificing their lives for the sake of the liberation of our people in Iraq.

I would like to take this opportunity to express the views of Kurdistan region on the situation in Iraq, in the region, of the role played by the Kurds and also the SOFA agreement. So a great opportunity has come to the people of Iraq in order to have the opportunity to build a new Iraq, an Iraq that's federal and democratic, and also a political process has started in Iraq. Still, there are a lot of challenges ahead of us, but Iraq today enjoys an advanced constitution, we've had elections in Iraq and next year we will see another election. There has been improvement in the executive situation, but at the same time there are also challenges ahead.

The role played by the Kurds is very obvious. We have participated in the liberation of Iraq. We have also shed blood side by side with the Americans for that sake. And now we are partners in the federal government in Baghdad and we will continue to play our positive role in bringing about a federal, democratic and pluralistic Iraq.

And I would also like to say it's very normal in such circumstances to have disputes or different point of view, and different interpretations to articles and items of the constitution, but I would like to assure you that we're determined in order to try our best to settle all discourse and to solve all the problems through dialogue and peaceful means and to have the constitution to be the judge and the referee to go back to. We in the Kurdistan region focus our efforts on building constitutional institutions. Although nowhere in the world one can say that there is absolute security, but we have been able in Kurdistan region of Iraq with the assistance and support of our people and also the hard work of our security authorities to be able to provide a safe and secure environment for the people in that region.

And what has helped is in order to maintain that safety and security is the culture that our people have grown up with, culture of tolerance. Throughout history, we have brought up with culture of tolerance and with the history of tolerance. National, ethnic, religious and sectarian tolerance has been with us all the way through history. Now we would like to say that we want Kurdistan to be a model for the new Iraq. Although I don't claim that we don't have problems or

we don't have flaws in the Kurdistan region, but there is a strong political will in order to cope with the situation and to find solutions, and to make Kurdistan for all the people of Kurdistan region to be for Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrian and Chaldean, all the residents of that region.

And the future of Iraq would be guaranteed in a way that all the parties would stay committed to the constitution and to have real and serious partnership in government system in Iraq, and we will try our best to make sure that this program succeeds in Iraq. And we have to stay committed and determined. Until we achieve final success, we will not allow the terrorists to find a foothold in Iraq. Regarding the relationship between Iraq and Kurdistan region and the neighboring countries, we would like to enjoy the best relations with our neighbors. I believe that there is a good opportunity in order to enjoy such relations. I am pleased to say that recently there has been a very positive development in the position and attitude of Turkey and a number of good and direct meetings have happened between the two sides and we hope that such kinds of meetings and dialect will continue, and we hope that we will be able to achieve positive results that will be in the interests of both sides.

Regarding the State of Forces Agreement, which is the main subject being discussed today, although we do not want for your sons and daughters, men and women in the army to stay away from their loved ones and their family and their country and we wish one day sooner that they would come back to enjoy their lives here, but the process has started which has not finished yet. If the situation in Iraq breaks down or collapses, that will have a huge negative impact on the economic situation. It may develop to have impact on the entire Gulf region. We believe that the current agreement that's being worked upon includes a timetable, a schedule for the withdrawal of the troops. Working by such kind of a program, that would organize the way the troops to be withdrawn back and also for the situation in Iraq to be under control, and so that once again Iraq will not become a foothold or a safe-haven for the terrorists of Iraq to be under the influence of this or that. We believe that this agreement is better than any other alternative available.

And once again I would like to reiterate and stress on the rule of Kurds and the Kurdistan region. We're determined to continue to play a positive role in Baghdad. We're committed to the constitution that 85 percent of the Iraqi people voted for and for the other areas or the disputed territories, there is an article, Article 140 of the constitution that has stipulated a roadmap in order to find a peaceful and lasting solution so that all of the people of Iraq would enjoy stability and security. Once again, I would like to thank you, thank the CSIS and all of you for coming and providing us with this opportunity to talk to you and I wish success and progress to the people of the United States.

(Applause.)

MR. DUBOIS: Thank you, Mr. President. If you'll forgive me in my humble Kurdish – (in Kurdish). As John Hamre said, having the president of the Kurdistan regional government with us today is quite an honor. We want to give as much time to questions from the audience, so I would ask that when you are recognized, please stand and identify yourself and your affiliation with whatever organization you represent. Needless to say, we would appreciate concise questions for the president, and I would ask for myself and for the various audience

members here that you refrain from expressions necessarily of personal political opinions. Now, a number of the issues raised by President Barzani I'm sure are of interest to many of you. Not the least of which, of course, is the Status of Forces Agreement negotiations, the issues with respect to Turkey, the issues with respect to the oil law, the situation surrounding refugees, if you will, from Nineveh Valley and Mosul that are now streaming into Kurdistan for protection. Also, Article 140 that the president referred to. I will take the prerogative of the chair, if you will, and ask the first question. It was reported, Mr. President, that the special foreign policy advisor to the Turkish prime minister, Erdogan, was also here coincidentally in Washington during this trip. I know that you have also said that you're prepared to meet with your Turkish counterparts. Did you have any opportunity to meet with that gentleman during this trip?

MR. BARZANI: No, indeed, I have not met him here but we have met in Baghdad and we have met in Arbil, and the program was agreed that we will meet in Turkey and Iraq and Kurdistan region. I would have loved to meet with him, I didn't know about that, but this was the program here.

MR. DUBOIS: Thank you. All right, we should take some questions. Yes, sir. Right here. Please – the microphone will be delivered to you promptly.

Q: This is Umit Enginsoy with NTV, Turkish television. Mr. President, do you and the KRG view the PKK as a terrorist group?

MR. BARZANI: Indeed we have discussed this issue with the state of Turkey, and we will refrain from talking about this subject in the media until we reach an agreement or a solution on this subject with the government of Turkey.

MR. DUBOIS: Another question back here.

Q: Balen Saleh (ph), Kurdish Service –

MR. DUBOIS: Could you – is that microphone on?

Q: Yeah. Sorry. Balen Saleh, Kurdish Service, Voice of America, excuse me ladies and gentlemen, I am going to ask my question in Kurdish. (In Kurdish.)

MR. DUBOIS: Why don't you repeat the question?

Q: Yeah, question from the Kurdish Service of Voice of America addressed to President Barzani regarding the Status of Forces Agreement between the United States and Iraq. If that agreement was not signed between Washington and Baghdad, is there any possibility for American forces to be based in Kurdistan region of Iraq, and what would be the request of the United States or how would you see that?

MR. BARZANI: So far, the focus is on the agreement in order to be signed. We will try our best for that agreement to be signed. This issue has not been raised or discussed yet, but if there was no agreement or no agreement was signed and we did not reach an agreement, and if

the United States requests for its forces to be based in Kurdistan region, I am confident that the Kurdistan regional parliament and the people of Kurdistan region and the Kurdistan regional government would welcome that.

MR. DUBOIS: All right. Yes, in the back.

Q: Charlie Wolfson with CBS News. Also on the Status of Forces Agreement, can you speak to the amendments which the Iraqi government is now considering? Can you be as specific as possible, and can you also tell us whether you think in the end there will be a successful Status of Forces Agreement signed?

MR. BARZANI: In the last meeting that we had of the Political Council of National Security in Baghdad, which was on the 19th of October, the final version of the draft was submitted to the political council, and at that time there was no mention of any amendments. I realize that after I was traveling to the United States some amendments were proposed, but I am not aware of these details. But the version that was submitted or put on the table at the Political Council of National Security, our position was very clear regarding that, that it was a good one and there's room for reaching an agreement on that.

Q: As a follow-up, I read, I believe this morning, that in your meeting with the Washington Post, the editorial board, you indicated that you did not think that the SOFA, as currently structured, would pass the Iraqi parliament.

MR. BARZANI: There are a lot of complications and there are a lot of efforts in order not to have that SOFA agreement signed, and I still reiterate that I have doubts or I am doubtful for the SOFA to be signed, but there is also a possibility for the SOFA to pass and to be signed. There are two approaches, there are two thoughts. One is in favor, one is against. But we, our position is very clear. We are in favor of this agreement.

The alternatives for this either would be the extension of the current status quo or not to have the agreement or not to have the extension, which would lead to an unknown destiny for Iraq. We believe in the agreement there is a lot of detail talking about the timetable for the withdrawal of the forces by the end of 2011 – at least the agreement gives you a clear picture in the horizon about what kind of Iraq, or what will happen in Iraq in the coming period. Therefore, we are in favor of it.

RAYNARD DUBOIS: Very well. Young lady back there in the corner?

Q: Thank you, Mr. Barzani, this is Tulin Daloglu with the Washington Times. As you are wrapping up your visit in Washington, what is your understanding of the U.S. position on issues related to Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution? Thank you.

MR. DUBOIS: Perhaps it would be a good idea also to put some annotation around – for the audience to know what Article 140 refers to.

MR. BARZANI: Yeah. Article 140 is an article in the Iraqi constitution that has stipulated a roadmap to solve the problem of the disputed territories that start from Sinjar, Sheikhan, Akra, Makhmour, Kirkuk, Khanaqin – so all these areas – there was a line of 19th of March 2003 where the Iraq forces were there since 1991. So with the liberation of Iraq, there was an article in the constitution that said that these areas should be settled according to the constitution.

The official position of the United States government, as expressed by the official spokesman of the State Department and also in the meetings that we had, all stress on the implementation of the Article 140 because this is a constitutional article, a constitutional commitment and also the people of Iraq have voted for that constitution.

MR. DUBOIS: Very good. Yes, Steve.

Q: Yes, I'm Stephen Flanagan from CSIS. President Barzani, could you describe for us your assessment of the relationship that exists now between the Kurdish security forces and the Iraqi National Army and how you see that evolving over the period as we move towards a transition of the U.S. presence in Iraq?

MR. BARZANI: For your kind information, after the fall of the regime in 2003, the effort, in order to rebuild the new Iraqi army, it comprised of three brigades which were made of the Peshmerga forces because, at that time, neither the Shiites nor the Sunnis were ready and willing to join the Iraqi army. Now many of the units of the Iraqi army are comprised of Kurds or Peshmerga forces – other Peshmerga forces. And we consider the Iraqi army as our own army. But there has to be kind of system set in Baghdad so that once again the army would not get involved or engaged in internal political matters with a country like the past – and for the army to be an army for all of Iraq, not an army for one political party or one individual. It's in the making process, of course. Probably sometimes there are different opinions or positions between us and the federal government, but in the shadow of the constitution – in accordance with the constitutional rights, we have sent a committee in order to look into the matters regarding or relevant to the armies so that in the coming couple of months that issue would be addressed.

MR. DUBOIS: Yes, Joe.

Q: Mr. President, Joe Reeder.

MR. DUBOIS: Wait for the mike so that – media can pick it up too.

Q: (Inaudible) – voice so that everyone can here me.

MR. DUBOIS: We could hear you in Grand Central Station.

Q: Joe Reeder. Mr. President – question's about Khanaqin. What happened there and what has been done to hopefully prevent that from happening again? Thank you.

MR. BARZANI: (Via interpreter.) Khanaqin administratively is part of Diyala province and, generally speaking, the terrorists have almost full control over that area for quite some time. At the request of the federal government, we have sent the brigade of Peshmerga forces – a force that went there in order to handle the situation, and as a result has given 18 martyrs – 18 Peshmerga were killed and 43 were injured, but they were able to control the situation and achieve security. After the Peshmerga forces cleaned up that area, the other areas of the Iraqi army have requested for the Peshmerga forces to withdraw and for them to come and replace them. At the time that the Peshmergas were preparing to withdraw as a result of a mistake from an Iraqi army commander – a problem has emerged. It reached a status which was fearful or dangerous, but it was good that we were able to handle it, and we hope that it will not recur again.

MR. DUBOIS: Thank you. Jay. Right behind you.

Q: Thank you. Jay Garner. Mr. President, I know in your area, the Kurdish regional government, the Christians have total freedom, they have their own churches and in your constitution, you have strong minority rights. But down in Nineveh province, I know there's – right now, there's a lot of persecution of the Christians, and they are moving into Kurdistan. Could you comment on what's going on in Nineveh and what the KRG is doing to accommodate the Christians that are moving there?

MR. BARZANI: The terrorists in Basra, Baghdad, and other places – they focus their attention on the Christians, and recently – very recently a lot of focus were put on the Christians who were living in Mosul province. We have always assured our Christian brothers that Kurdistan is open to them because we have Christians who are living in Kurdistan region, but I am talking about those who are outside the KRG. Whenever they fear their lives they are welcome to come, and they have come to Kurdistan; they are respected with full dignity – not only the Christian families, but we have offered 25,000 Arab families who have escaped and fled from the violence and have found refuge and safe haven in Kurdistan. And for your – for your kind information, since 2003 until now, over 2000 Kurds have been killed inside Mosul because of identity – because of their Kurdish identity. So it's not only Christians who have been killed, but also Kurds have been killed, and over 100,000 Kurds have been displaced from Mosul.

MR. DUBOIS: Thank you. Dr. Wolfowitz.

Q: Paul Wolfowitz, AEI. I wondered if you could give you estimate of the current strength of the insurgency, not just in Kurdistan or even mainly in Kurdistan, but in the rest of Iraq, and what do you think are the chances of it regaining strength in the coming year or two?

MR. BARZANI: Fortunately, the terrorists were not able – they could not establish any base in our region. Sometimes they were able to have an infiltration and mainly from Mosul to come to our region, and the majority of the terrorists were in a specific area, in the areas of Anbar, Baghdad, and Baghur (sp) and Mosul – in the middle, and also Mosul to the northwest. If we look at the situation right now, they have been defeated, they have been weakened, and areas have been cleaned from the terrorists, especially in Anbar, when people rose against them and fought them. In Baghdad, with the assistance the people have provided with the Iraqi security

forces and the support that was given by the American forces, they were able to give a heavy blow to the terrorists. But in Mosul, still the terrorists are there. If they have not been uprooted, they have been weakened, but under the circumstance that we have if we would not continue on the successes that we achieved, there is always the possibility of them regaining strength.

MR. DUBOIS: Young lady against the wall.

Q: Thanks, it's Elizabeth Rosenberg with Argus Media. Mr. President, can you give us a status update on the communications or negotiations between the KRG and the federal government in Baghdad about exporting oil from the KRG and also Baghdad's recognition of the contracts awarded by the KRG to several oil companies?

MR. BARZANI: In fact, the constitution is very clear in talking about the oil issue. It talks about the existing oil fields that will be managed by the federal government together with the regional governments. And for the new oil fields, they will be managed by the Kurdistan regional government. But at the same time, it talks about the revenue share – that revenues should be shared by both. And in addition to that, there was a draft oil law not that was prepared in February 2007 and was supposed to go to the cabinet – Iraqi cabinet, council of ministers, and from there to go the Iraqi council of representatives. It has with it a side letter. Side letter was stating that if there would be no agreement on the oil law until May 2007, then both sides would have right to sign contracts.

Of course, the agreement was not reached; therefore, based on that draft law and the side letter, which was an annex to the draft, as well as the constitution, and what the constitution says – we have continued to deal with this. But in the last meeting that we had in middle of October in Baghdad, at the political council of the national security, we have agreed that we will form a strong committee, a committee that would be comprised of the political leadership in Iraq in order to deal with it, because right now, the issue needs a political decision and the political decision has to be made by the Iraqi political leaders. And according to the constitution, we agreed that there would be revenue sharing and also that oil and gas in Iraq belongs to all the Iraqi people in all regions and governorates. Therefore, we do not have any problem in sharing the revenues and also working hard to reach an agreement on the hydrocarbon law.

MR. DUBOIS: Yes, ma'am, right here.

Q: Ah Hosit (ph), from CNN Turk Imilliat (ph). Thank you Mr. President. I have two quick questions. One is a follow-up on the PKK issue. When do you think you might give us – to the press – and insight of how your talks are going and what agreement you may reach with Turkish government. The second one is about you trip to Tehran, if I'm not mistaken. Could you give us an insight about you visit to Iran?

MR. BARZANI: As I mentioned earlier, that our talks and dialogue with the government of Turkey is continuing, and when the right time comes, we will disclose everything with the press. Of course, my visit to Iran comes within the context of neighborly relations. Iran is a neighbor. It was necessary for Iran to hear our point of view, we've discussed the issues regarding the agreement, the SOFA agreement, and also bilateral relations between Iraq and Iran

and the KRG in Iran, and also important for me to hear that point of view. On certain matters, we agreed, on all other matters, we disagreed, and this is normal.

MR. DUBOIS: Question?

Q: Hassan Barari, New Orleans University. Mr. President, will you share with us your view about Iran, whether you see it as a threat or not, because the Sunni in Iraq see Iran as a threat because Iran has been playing a negative role in Baghdad. And you, as a Kurdish, but at the same time you're Sunni. Do you share with the rest of the Sunni in Iraq that Iran is a threat or not? Thank you.

MR. BARZANI: Well, the Shia-Sunni sectarian violence started in Iraq, we have tried and we will continue to try not to take sides and in order to bring the two sides together, because we did not believe and we do not believe in sectarian violence between the Shias and the Sunnis, and we tried to bring them together to bring them closer. And we played a mediatory role, and we assisted them so that that violence will not go deeper and will not be more bloody. Probably, there will be other countries who want to create problems inside Iraq, but it has to be the Iraqi people – the Shia, Sunnis, and the Kurds – to work together so that they would not allow other countries to interfere in Iraqi internal matters. I'll stop such kind of interference.

MR. DUBOIS: Yes, sir.

Q: Hi, I'm Zana Krujom (ph). I'm – (inaudible). You said that your dialogue with the Turkish government is continuing, but still the attacks towards the Turkish targets by the terrorists also continue. I want to ask a question, whether you are taking some unilateral measures to end these terrorists attacks in KRG region? Thank you.

MR. BARZANI: We have never supported any attacks and we have never supported bloodshed. But as I said earlier, so long as we have open dialogue with the government of Turkey and that dialogue door is open, I would not go into details about the subject with the press.

MR. DUBOIS: Let me, as we near the appointed hour, Mr. President, you met with President Bush and you met with Secretary of State Condi Rice, I understand. In your meetings with President Bush, can you give us some sense as to the thematics and the exchange that might not have been, shall we say, reported in the press? Perhaps, did you talk about the 55,000 Kurds in the U.S. and those who are U.S. citizens, how they might vote on Tuesday?

(Laughter.)

MR. BARZANI: The Kurdish citizens, the Kurds who are here and American citizens like yourself, have enjoyed the freedom and democracy. They are free, like you, to vote to whichever party you like. I don't think they would be listening to the voting issues. To my knowledge, they have also been divided into two camps, like yourselves.

(Inaudible, cross talk.)

In fact, as I said earlier, that the main purpose for the visit was to thank the people of the United States, the president of the United States for the assistance they provided and also for their support to liberate our people from a dictatorial regime. And also, in the last few years, a close personal relationship has been established between President Bush and myself, but the main issue that was discussed in the meeting was the issue of the Status of Forces Agreement. And as we know that in a couple of months time there will be a change in the administration and President Bush leaves the office, but I wanted to come and thank him personally. We also have discussed the issue of ballot relations between Iraq and the United States and also the role played by the Kurds. Of course we do realize that our relationship with the United States comes within the framework and context of the Iraq-U.S. relationship, but the Kurds do play an effective role in Iraq and we will support the agreement. And I also promised President Bush that we will continue our efforts in order to reach that agreement.

MR. DUBOIS: Very good, thank you very much. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, for joining us today.

(Applause.)

(END)