

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much and welcome everyone. I would like to thank and congratulate the managers and organizers of the Kurdish National Congress of North America for holding their 24<sup>th</sup> annual conference. In the name of Kurdistan Regional Government's Representation in the United States, I wish you all of the success in implementing the programs of your conference and in achieving your future objectives.

On behalf of the Kurdistan Regional Government's Representation, it is a pleasure to be here with you today to talk about all of the progress that has been made towards strengthening ties between our government and the United States. The Kurds have a long history of diplomatic relations with the US, and indeed the US has

been the strongest supporter and ally of the Kurds in their quest for freedom and security. More than two decades ago, we rose up against the oppressive Baath regime that had committed genocide and had gassed its own people. When Saddam sent in his tanks and helicopters, we feared another chemical bombardment, emptied out cities and fled to the mountains in the 1991 mass exodus.

In an attempt to prevent massive destruction and killing, the U.S., Britain and France declared a no-fly zone at the 36th parallel and this created a safe zone and allowed refugees to return home from Iran and Turkey. Months later, Saddam's regime withdrew the Iraqi Army from the liberated areas in Kurdistan Region. This was a key moment in the history of the Kurdish struggle, but also for Kurdish-American relations which have

continued to improve and strengthen since that time. This decision to declare the no-fly zone in UN Security Council was a big change in the attitude and position of the international community and the super powers towards the Kurds in Iraq. For the first time, UN Security Council members including the United States of America decided to provide protection for the people of Kurdistan Region in Iraq. This was historic and in 2003 when the US as preparing to liberate Iraq, the Kurds were their strongest and most reliable allies.

In 2003, when the US-led coalition ousted Saddam's regime, the people of the Kurdistan Region freely joined U.S. forces in defeating Saddam Hussein's regime in. The already close relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the United States became even stronger. Since the war, the Kurdistan Region has remained largely peaceful

and secure, and the Kurds and Americans have expanded their relationship beyond military and security matters, to focus on development, economy, cultural exchanges and growth. When the rest of Iraq was in turmoil and violence, many organizations based themselves in the Kurdistan Region where they knew they could operate safely. Businesses started investing and the economy grew significantly. Today it is not uncommon to find tourists from the US, Canada and Europe visiting the Kurdistan Region.

The Kurds are grateful to the US for the sacrifices made by US troops in Iraq as well as the contributions by US taxpayers to helping to rebuild the region that was devastated by the former regime. With this continued support from the US, we have been able to strengthen our institutions and create a better future for young

people today that their parents could have never imagined.

The Kurdistan Regional Government's Representation in the US has played a key role in furthering this important relationship. We ensure that the position of the KRG is widely disseminated to key allies in the US government and business community. As a symbol of continued friendship and cooperation between the US and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Congressman Lincoln Davis (Democrat – Tennessee) and Joe Wilson (Republican – South Carolina) formally created a Kurdish American Congressional Caucus within the US House of Representatives, aimed at strengthening America's ties with the Kurdistan Region.

A significant achievement was made in 2010 when the US decided to establish its diplomatic Consulate General in Erbil to solidify US-KRG mutual strategic, business and cultural interests. Eventually this Consulate will process visas and Kurds will no longer have to make the difficult and often dangerous trip to Baghdad to visit the US embassy.

In January 2010, the President of Kurdistan Region Masoud Barzani met with the U.S. President Barack Obama in the Oval Office. During these meetings, President Obama reiterated US support for the Iraqi Constitution and the democratic process in Iraq, stressing that the prosperity of the Kurdistan Region within a federal Iraq was a key priority.

In the beginning of April this year, President Barzani was in Washington DC where he met again with President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden as well as other US administration's top officials. The President and Vice President of the United States reaffirmed their continued commitment to the historic relationship with the people and government of the Kurdistan Region, and their support for an Iraq that adheres to its constitution.

Moreover, the continuous US-KRG dialogue reflects shared values. One of the many symbols of KRG's commitment to development of the region on the American model is its creation of the American University of Iraq in Slemani (AUI-S). Founded in 2006 and committed to providing an American-style liberal art education at both undergraduate and graduate level.

With our bustling economy, our continued democratization and strengthening of our judiciary, we must take time to remember and acknowledge the enormous sacrifice of the US and the American people in their efforts to liberate Iraq. Without this sacrifice, for which Kurds will forever remain grateful, we would not be witnessing our tremendous growth.

The KRG is among the strongest allies of the US in the Middle East, and given the events surrounding the Arab Spring, our longstanding relationship is critical. The KRG has also provided a safe haven for people fleeing violence from other parts of Iraq, including for the Christians who were recently attacked, but also to others fleeing persecution. The KRG Parliament has taken significant steps to improve our laws – especially those impacting women and girls such as the revised Personal

Status Laws in 2008, and the anti-FGM bill recently passed.

The Kurdistan Region is also a place where those seeking to invest- from some our newest friends such as the Koreans to neighbors such as Turkey – find our new economy vibrant, promising, and full of opportunity. We hope that the enthusiasm will spread to the US private sector, as the opportunities are plentiful.

Our story from Kurdistan Region has been uplifting, but there is more to come. Our policy is to become a major producer and supplier of power strengthens our standing in Iraq and beyond. Our focus on investing in our future by appropriating \$100 million on sending students abroad to study underscores our forward-

thinking approach. We understand that greater political, democratic and economic reforms are necessary. We are working on them, and we are on the right path.

As the US withdrew its military forces in Iraq, the KRG looks forward to increased diplomatic and economic relations between the US, Iraq and Kurdistan Region. The US Department of State's decision to open a Consulate in Erbil, coupled with our representation in the US, will serve not only as a symbol of the unbreakable bonds between the US and the Kurdistan Region, but also as a bridge to help strengthen ties in the future.