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**“IRAQ - FROM DICTATORSHIP TO DEMOCRACY”

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Thank you very much for inviting me to address your members this evening. It is an honour to be here at this prestigious institute and the timing could not be better to discuss Iraq’s transition to democracy. We have just concluded a two day international conference on Iraq, here in Brussels, which successfully rallied 85 members of the international community to publicly pledge their committed support for our cause.

Compared to Belgium, Iraq is a relatively young country. Carved out of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s, many different ethnic groups were deemed to live together in this new nation hailed as the ‘cradle of civilizations’. However, since then, from the British mandate to the monarchy to the Arab Socialist Baathist version of a republic, we have never experienced social peace or lasting stability as an Iraqi nation. Instead, power and wealth have been seized and concentrated in the hands of successive minority rulers that rejected democratic values and never governed in the interests of the Iraqi people nor by their consent. Relying on the might of the army and a systematic abuse of our country’s wealth, these authoritarian rulers alternately co-opted, marginalized and persecuted the rest of the people at will.

But the height of dictatorship and tyranny in Iraq was embodied in the former Ba’aathist regime and no ruler was as ruthless, as destructive and as brutal as Saddam Hussein. He bullied his way to preside over a regime, and successive illegitimate governments that misappropriated the resources of our country and invested them in state institutions that served only to control society, eliminate dissent and launch devastating wars in our region.

This regime set out to fashion Iraq in the model of an ultra-nationalistic and quasi-socialist ideology. Instead - the political economy they created served only to keep Saddam and his inner circle in power through far-reaching systems of patronage and control of the army and brutal intelligence and security forces. To feed the politicized system of economic distribution, they created and plundered a bloated state-run economy, squandered Iraq’s considerable wealth and divided the Iraqi people through deliberate social inequality and a climate of terror and fear.

Power was seized and concentrated in the hands of one-party, one clan, one family and ultimately one man. No institutions or civil society were allowed to emerge to hold their ruler accountable. Pluralism was subjugated to a centrist view, peaceful opposition was suppressed and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were forced into exile, many of whom fell into the hands of clandestine foreign networks of Iraqi intelligence agents. Pro-democratic forces, ranging from the south to the Kurdish north, advocated reform or resorted to resistance, only to meet a brutal genocidal response. The mass graves we are unearthing today bear witness to the legacy of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship.

The policies of this dictatorship severed diplomatic relations with much of the rest of the world, inflicted over a decade of poverty and sanctions on our people and plunged the standard of living to an all-time low. The enormous potential of Iraq’s human and natural resource base was tragically wasted and our infrastructure destroyed. Saddam’s regime sponsored terrorism, violated international law, pursued, and used, weapons of mass destruction and sent millions of our sons to their deaths on the battlefields in Iran and Kuwait. There is barely an Iraqi family today who is not bereaved as a result of the violence, but we, the Iraqi people, also paid the cost, left burdened with over 120 billion dollars of debt.

Iraq was eventually forced into international isolation and our people abandoned. Even when they attacked the Kurds with chemical weapons, the international community’s response was silence.

Outside of the country, the Iraqi democratic opposition organized and positioned itself for the day when we would be rid of tyranny and oppression. But inside the country, democratic forces could not stand up to the military power of the Iraqi regime. Our revolution would require outside intervention.

While the international community was divided on the war on Iraq, we knew it was the only way forward to allow Iraqis the opportunity to build a new free and democratic country. Iraqi democrats came forward to take up the mantle of initiating this process of change. This was a daunting task - the scars of our past are deep-rooted and within our society there was much animosity to overcome.

We recognized therefore that the rebuilding of our country and our democratic reform had to begin from the bottom up. Our democracy would not happen automatically, nor could it be imposed from outside  – we had to start at the grass roots level with education….experience…. even trial and error. This must be coupled with integrated economic reform to kick-start the economy towards free market principles and inject huge sums of money to finance this drive.

To move forward, we had to reintegrate Iraq into the international community and equally as important, engage the international community in Iraq. But only we Iraqis can truly understand our own cultural values. The formula for a peaceful and tolerant future requires us to do the ground work, to choose and implement the political system that best reflects our political landscape. All Iraqis have to play their part in building our future in which every one of us have a stake and a say.

We have just delivered our political vision to the widest international audience to date to convene in support for Iraq’s future. The resulting resolution, signed by all participants, reflects this vision our elected Transitional Government presented to lead our peaceful revolutionary process.

We are building a country where the people have the right to freely determine their own future and run their own affairs, where freedoms and the supremacy of the law are upheld, human rights protected and Iraqis enjoy equal citizenship. We are empowering our civil society so that it participates fully in public life.
We want a stable, constitutionally elected government - established through the democratic processes mandated in the TAL – working for its people who are free to choose their own future in a democratic, pluralistic, unified and federal Iraq.
We are also rehabilitating our institutions of government, so that they have the capacity to provide effective services to the Iraqi population delivered within a framework of democracy, transparency, accountability and good governance based on the rule of law. We are fighting corruption via the Office of Public Integrity and employment is based on equal opportunity.

We see a sovereign and independent Iraq at peace in the region and a responsible fully integrated member of the international community. We have extended the hand of friendship to our neighbours and proven we want to work side-by-side with them, with no interference in each other’s affairs, for our common interests of which security and peace are the priorities.

Our political process was set out in Iraq’s Transitional Administrative Law and endorsed by UN Security Council resolution 1546, essentially to hold free and fair elections, draft and ratify a constitution and hold subsequent general elections for a constitutional government by the end of the year.  Even though only one year has passed since we reasserted Iraq’s sovereignty in June 2004, we have made good progress, most notably on January 30th this year when eight and a half million Iraqis defied the terrorists’ threats and cast their vote for a democratic future. We now have an elected transitional government and a National Assembly running on parliamentary practices. And Iraqis have proved that the transfer of power can be democratically achieved through the ballot box, it does not have to be seized through violence or force.

The momentum created by the success of our elections has been seized to expand national dialogue and reach out to include all who renounce violence to ensure that the political process is fully inclusive and truly representative of the Iraqi people. To share power in the new Iraq, not just among election winners or one single group, but across the social, ethnic and religious mosaic of our society. Peaceful political opposition is recognized not eliminated.
Iraqis want an open society, free from oppression and dictatorship. We are in the process of liberalising the economy so that people are free to chart their own future and the decentralisation of wealth, and power, to the provincial and local levels reflects the pluralistic and federal make-up of our country.  There has been 16 governorate councils, 78 district councils, 192 city councils and 392 neighbourhood councils established allowing more than 19 million Iraqis to engage in local policy discourse. 660 community associations in 16 governorates form part of a campaign targeting grassroots democracy.
Drafting our new permanent constitution will be our most critical test to compromise and consolidate all agendas of Iraqi society into a unified national charter that reflects our political vision. This must be based on nationwide consensus and the process must be inclusive, open and crafted with the input of all Iraqis. So we are promoting public education, encouraging a free media and empowering Iraq’s long-suppressed but now emergent civil society.
The days of one-party or one-man authoritarianism are behind us, our government must be legitimated by and held accountable to the people. But we are facing a violent opposition to anything we are trying to build, by terrorists, Saddamists and criminals waging a bloody campaign of terror across the country. They are trying to exploit the situation in Iraq to return to the brutal days of the past or use our soil to spread their extremist agenda of hate and violence. There are forces that do not want to see values like democracy and good governance, some of which are new to the region, take root in our part of the world and we anticipated some resistance to our cause. They do not represent the will of the majority who sent a clear message on January 30th that they want democracy. We are fighting them on every corner – after all, it is not just our freedoms at stake but all countries that value liberty, peace and tolerance.

Some observers have compared the change in Iraq to that in Romania and the overthrow of Ceausescu’s regime. Whilst there were a great many similarities between the dictatorship in Romania and the Saddam regime in Iraq, our experiences in transforming to democracy are different. In Romania after the popular revolution, they responded to opposition by piling money into the country and rebuilding the economy. In our case, the insurgents and terrorists are very well-funded. So while all emerging democracies share some common experience, every country’s history, experience and socio-political economy is unique.

Many lessons have been learnt from our experience, both under Saddam and now as we stand up to terrorism. There are two paths we can choose to determine our future, the peaceful path to democracy, tolerance and unity or the violent path where we allow the terrorists and all who oppose freedom to win. Iraqis have chosen their way forward and although the engagement and enduring commitment of the international community is critical to our progress, it is we who must do the hard work – to ensure we all have a say in the political process, to
rebuild our country and be self-sufficient in securing Iraq and defending the interests of the Iraqi people.

We have come far along the path from dictatorship to democracy and we are determined to complete our political transition on time, but to be truly democratic in spirit, not just deed, requires time, patience and assistance to face up to our new challenges. Our process of change is testing, it is also turbulent and sometimes painful but we will succeed as long as the will and participation of the people are paramount to this process.

For more than 3 decades Saddam Hussein and his torturers attempted to destroy the soul of our nation. But we have emerged from our darkest days to build a new Iraq and we Iraqis are a strong and proud people. We will never forget the cruelties that we have suffered but by bringing those to account, for the first time in their lives, for their crimes, and engaging in national reconciliation, we may be able to lay the ghosts of the past to rest. As I said yesterday, Iraqis are the inheritors of a great civilization and we are determined to recover our country and move forward to the bright and promising future that awaits us.

In the modern international system, the effects of any revolution – whether achieved peacefully or through force – cannot be isolated from the rest of the world. Success in our experiment will mean a safer world. Belgium is an important country – as well as being the capital of the European Union and the seat of NATO – and there is much you can teach us from your democratic experience - how to share power among different communities in a single entity and how you resolved the issue of federalism within a united country.

Thank you