

**Speech by H.E. Hemin Hawrami,
Deputy Speaker of Kurdistan Parliament
to US Chamber of Commerce Delegation
at Divan Hotel, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq
on 24th June 2019, 12 noon**

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, it's my pleasure to welcome you to Kurdistan. Thank you for taking the time to visit our Region, get to know our people, our companies and our institutions, and see for yourselves the opportunities available here.

It sends an important message when the US Chamber, the largest business organization in the world with a very strong voice in Washington, visits the Kurdistan Region. Thank you also to the KRG US Representation under the leadership of Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman and her team, for organizing your important visit.

Kurdistan Region is entering a new era of hope and prosperity, after five years of crisis. We have come out of the other side of the multiple shocks of the oil price crash, the war against ISIS, massive budget cuts by the Iraqi government, and the influx of 1.8 million refugees and internally displaced persons.

It has been extremely tough, but we are a resilient nation. We recovered. The oil price improved, our brave Peshmerga forces defeated ISIS with the help of our allies led by the US, and we reached an agreement with Iraq for the 2019 budget to separate public servant salaries from any other disputes we have.

Nevertheless, the crisis was an opportunity for us to re-evaluate and learn from our shortcomings. The crisis taught us that our government and our economy need reform, that we need to diversify our economy away from reliance on oil, and strengthen the private sector. For the first time in decades,

between 2014 and 2016 our wheat production doubled because people in urban areas moved to rural areas to work in agriculture. They made an opportunity out of the economic crisis.

More of our young people than ever before are studying in the fields that we need to modernize our economy, such as business, IT and oil engineering, and many private universities and colleges have opened to meet this huge demand for education.

You as leading companies can be our partners, you can help us to diversify our economy and boost efficiency. For example, private companies will take over the collection of electricity charges when the KRG switches households to smart meters. We need investment and collaboration in agriculture, hotels and tourism, banking, industry, health and education. US and other international companies can do business with us through Public-Private Partnerships in delivering electricity, and building major highways.

For our growing agriculture sector, we need to build dams and we need to raise crop yields by following modern farming methods. As world leading companies, we want you to be our partners in these initiatives.

As Deputy Speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament, please allow me to give you an overview of our Parliament. We are proud that both the Speaker and the Secretary of Parliament are women, and both were elected by the MPs.

We are also proud that we have a minimum quota by law of 30% women MPs. We reserve 11 out of the 111 seats for Christian, Turkmen and Armenian MPs, to ensure that their communities are represented and involved in law-making. I sometimes joke that as the only man in the Parliament's leadership, I will lobby for a minimum quota for men!

Last month, Parliament elected former Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani as President of the Kurdistan Region, and MPs selected, by a large majority, Mr. Masrour Barzani to be the next Prime

Minister and form the Kurdistan Regional Government cabinet. He is expected to form his cabinet in the coming days.

In 2006, our Parliament passed the Investment Law. We are proud that our investment law is one of the friendliest towards foreign investors in the entire Middle East. For projects that qualify for an investment license, the investor is entitled to own the project land and fully repatriate their investment and profits.

Investors are also exempt from certain customs duties and non-custom taxes. The law gives equal treatment to foreign investors and capital. The sectors covered by the investment law are manufacturing, electric power, agriculture, hotels and tourism, health, transport, banking, infrastructure, and education. According to Article 115 of the Iraqi Constitution, Kurdistan's law has supremacy in our region over federal law.

Our investment law also allows for international arbitration, if the investor wishes to specify in the investment contract which international court of arbitration to use in the case of a dispute. We understand that investors want the protection of international arbitration.

But doing business is not just about a friendly investment law. We know that we need to reduce bureaucracy. Our government is already taking steps to cut red tape, the bugbear of companies and citizens. The government has created an online services portal to access public services remotely instead of queuing for hours at government offices, for example to complete company registrations and pay taxes.

Our Parliament and the new government cabinet will focus on much-needed reforms. We already took important steps by introducing biometric ID cards for all government employees, which has helped to reduce government salaries. But we will go much further to streamline government offices and tackle corruption.

Parliament will work with the government to introduce important legislation to bring about reforms. In health and consumer products and services, we need more quality control to raise standards. Here, you can help us with your expertise in quality assurance.

This new government is a coalition of the three major parties, with the KDP as the winning party in the September 2018 election being the biggest party in the government. We are committed, as a coalition government, with the PUK and Change Movement, to implementing more reforms, which we began in earnest from 2014 during the financial crisis. This new era of realism is healthy, and will strengthen our society and economy and increase our competitiveness.

In the Middle East, Kurdistan is unique for enjoying and protecting the peaceful coexistence of all religions and ethnic components: Kurds, Christians, Turkmen, Yazidis, as well as tens of thousands of Arab IDPs, living together and respecting the freedom of religion and language.

We are absolutely committed to protecting and nurturing our deep culture of tolerance and mutual respect, through existing legislation and in the future within a Kurdistan Constitution.

We are also committed to democracy and our multi-party system. Our last general election was in September 2018. We have a lively parliament and an active vocal opposition, with eight main political parties, and eight smaller parties that represent Christians and Turkmen. We are not a perfect democracy, but we continually learn from our past and make progress, and we rule through consensus and agreement between the main political parties. The recent negotiations between the KDP, PUK and Change Movement on the formation of the KRG cabinet have taken longer than any of us wished, but it was important to achieve a consensus rather than impose one party's will and majority on another. I think our patience has paid off.

On behalf of the Kurdistan Parliament, I thank the United States of America and our other coalition partners for your military advice and air support. Our brave Peshmerga soldiers on the ground made

great sacrifices to defeat ISIS, and we should never forget the debt that the world owes the Peshmerga.

Kurdistan Region remains safe and stable for both our citizens and foreigners living and doing business here, thanks to our well organized and committed Peshmerga, the Kurdistan Region Security Council, and its counter-terrorism and intelligence services. Even at the height of the war against ISIS, daily life continued here as usual and there were very few security incidents in the Kurdistan Region. Since 2003, only one US soldier has died in the Kurdistan Region, and this was not in combat. But please don't take my word for it.

I think as you travel around, you will see for yourself that Kurdistan is safe and welcoming.

Kurdistan enjoys good relations with the current Iraqi government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi. The Iraqi prime minister is moderate and pragmatic, we support him. We stick to the Iraqi Constitution as the reference for solving outstanding issues between Erbil and Baghdad. Dialogue and coordination is the best constructive way forward with Baghdad.

We want to have friendly, positive and peaceful relations with the neighbouring countries. We are practical about our neighbours: We share long borders with them and we must ensure that we maintain good political and economic relations with them. It serves no one to be enemies with your neighbour. We stay out of regional conflicts and differences.

We have a special relationship with the United States, and we welcome your companies to come and do business here, and use Kurdistan as a safe and secure base for all of your business in Iraq. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you once again for visiting Kurdistan, I hope it will be the first of many more visits, and I wish you an enjoyable and productive stay.