

Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Statesmen's Forum:
Looking Forward: A Holistic Strategy for Iraq**

**Speaker: H.E. Dr. Haider Al-Abadi,
Prime Minister, Republic of Iraq**

Introduction:

Dr. John Hamre,
President and CEO, CSIS

Moderator:

Dr. Jon B. Alterman
Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and
Geostrategy, and Director, CSIS Middle East Program

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JOHN HAMRE: Good morning, everybody. Thank you very much for coming. We're delighted to have you here.

We're very pleased that Prime Minister Abadi would be with us today. This is a great privilege. He's had an incredible program. I don't know many of us that could keep up the pace that he's had. I've had the privilege of kind of snooping around asking how have things gone in his discussions, and he's made a very fine mark.

You know, America's tired of wars. It's been a long time, but we now know we are inextricably tied in a partnership to help the prime minister re-secure Iraq. And he's here to talk to us about that. He's here to talk to the American government, and he's going to, this hour, speak with us, the American people.

And I will just say we're all honored and refreshed by his candor, the energy that he has brought to this mission, and the insights that he's given us. He's the leader that Iraq needs now, and I would argue he's the leader that America needs now.

So, without any further delay, would you please, with your warm applause, thank and welcome the prime minister of Iraq, Prime Minister Al-Abadi. (Applause.)

PRIME MINISTER HAIDER AL-ABADI: Thank you, John. Well, I haven't really brought all the peace to the country yet. We have to wait a bit.

Well, thank you all for coming here. I wish you a very good morning, everybody, ladies and gentlemen.

This week, I had very productive meetings with the president, President Obama; with the vice president; and with the leadership of both houses of Congress. On behalf of the people of Iraq, I would like to tell the American people what I have told America's leaders: Your sacrifices over the past decade to help Iraq were not in vain, definitely they were not in vain. And we thank you and our other allies for assembling the international coalition to support us in our struggle against Daesh and against terrorism in general.

And now, as our campaign to defeat these transnational terrorist organizations, a crucial phase, we ask you to join us in looking ahead to the challenges that we must confront together in order to defeat Daesh – Daesh is ISIL; it's an Arabic acronym for ISIL – and address the tasks of rebuilding Iraq, reunifying our society, and bringing reconciliation to our nation. We must not only win the war; we must also win the peace. And that's what we intend to do. Together, we must take action against the political, economic and social problems that give rise to violent extremism, so that terrorism on the scale of Daesh will never re-emerge again in Iraq and in the region, and will never threaten our nation and our neighbors and the international community again.

The recent developments in Iraq underscore the fact that winning a military battle, important as that is, will not be enough. Two weeks ago, I was proud to raise the Iraqi flag in Tikrit and to join our armed forces in liberating the city of Tikrit. This victory

belongs to all the people of Iraq. It was fought and won by Iraqi heroes on the ground, including the Iraqi security forces and the popular mobilization forces, made up of volunteers from all across the country, and the locals and tribal leaders from the governorates of Salahuddin and local politicians. It was also a victory for all our friends and allies, including members of international coalition, who helped us win this battle, and of course headed by the United States.

In many ways, the victory of Tikrit offers a case study for how the rest of Iraq can be liberated militarily, and how federal and local forces can work together to ensure the safe return of displaced people to their homes. The images of thousands of men, women and children returning to their homes under the protection of the Iraqi security forces is heartening.

But the battle and its aftermath also demonstrate the challenges that lie ahead of rebuilding Iraq and continuing to reach out, to reach across political, ethnic and sectarian lines to unite the people. We must continue to crack down on the abuses and excesses of a small minority of fighters that stand in direct opposition to the government's clear policies. We are investigating all of these allegations of criminal conduct. Once corroborated, people involved are held accountable and prosecuted to the fullest weight of the law.

Let me be clear. Let me be as clear as I can on this: Our government's highest priority is reducing ethnic/sectarian tensions and divisions in Iraq. And we have nurtured a close working relationships with parliament and Iraq's community leaders and religious minorities and institutions to ensure an outcome that is favorable to all our people.

This won't be easy, because of the atrocities of Daesh and the atrocities committed by terrorism in Iraq, but this must be done. Many of these divisions are centuries old. Others can be traced to the decades of dictatorship and genocide. But whatever their cause, we must exert our utmost efforts to ensure they do not paralyze the development our nation.

As we move forward to liberate Anbar and Nineweh, Mosul, we will learn from and act, and we learn and act upon the lessons of Tikrit. Mosul is our second-largest city and a complex environment, while Anbar is our largest governorate geographically. So there is a huge task there. Our goal is not only to liberate Mosul and Anbar from barbarism of Daesh, but also to restore a level of civilization worthy of our people, our history and our heritage.

That is why all the legs of strategic stool – humanitarian, infrastructure, as well as military – must be in place before our government moves to liberate these areas. We must be fully prepared not only to retake Mosul, but to rebuild it as well.

What is true of Mosul is true of all of Iraq. We must rebuild our country so that it is so strong, united, and true to our spiritual and civilizational heritage, that we will never again be vulnerable to tyranny and terrorism.

As I have often said at home and abroad, while we welcome the support of our friends and neighbors, partners and allies, this is Iraq's fight to win, and we will win it. As the American people confront the challenges of transnational terrorism around the world, please remember that the people of Iraq, who have suffered so much, are doing our part to ensure that no other nation need endure what we are enduring at the moment. We are fighting back on the battlefield, and we are working hard on the home front as well.

Since I became prime minister of Iraq last September, the people of Iraq have set about reconciling our society reforming our government and our military and security forces is not easy when we are at war – reviving our economy and restoring relationships with our neighbors.

Over the past 12 years, Iraq has had a succession of free elections. Our government took office in a peaceful political transition in which elected leaders stepped down to make way for new leadership. We want to protect our nascent democracy and honor the shared sacrifices of our two countries that fought for the freedom and liberty we all cherish.

Our government represents every political bloc in parliament and every sector of society at the moment. We are doing our best to provide public services, economic opportunities and equal justice for all Iraqis, whatever their religious confession, whatever their ethnic origin, and wherever they live.

Our government has successfully concluded a long-sought interim agreement with our Kurdish Regional Government. This agreement provides for a fair sharing of oil revenues, and the weapons and support that the peshmerga forces need to participate fully in the fight against Daesh as part of Iraq's national security forces.

We are also restoring relationship with the local tribes in areas threatened or dominated by Daesh. I have met regularly with representatives from the provinces of Anbar, Salahuddin, Nineweh. We are reinforcing our support, increasing our arms supplies, and providing humanitarian deliveries, including hundreds of tons of food aids, to these regions. We are striving to give all our people a system of self-government that is worth fighting for.

As we weed out corruption and incompetence in civil and military institutions, we replaced over 50 senior commanders and officers in the Ministry of Defense and Interior. And just last week, we retired more than 300 generals and officers – officers in general – in the Ministry of Defense as part of the efforts to rejuvenate the armed forces.

Military reforms means respecting human rights under even the most difficult circumstances. One of my first acts as a commander in chief was to call a halt to the shelling of residential areas, because we value human life and want to minimize the

suffering of the people and the civilians in general, who are trapped while the terrorists of Daesh or terrorism of Daesh engages in slaughter of innocent people.

Throughout our country, our government is striving to protect personal freedoms and reinforce the rule of law. As prime minister, I issued an executive order to expedite the release of detainees who have not been charged and establish a central registry of those who have been arrested.

Because a free society needs a free press, I have met with Iraqi journalists and dropped all pending lawsuits against journalists on behalf of the Prime Minister's Office.

While fighting terrorism and protecting human rights, we are also striving to revive our economy, reform our government, reconcile our society and restore our infrastructure. Iraq's oil production has increased – in fact, it is reaching record level, despite some of the damage that Daesh has caused and inflicted on our oil infrastructure and installations in the north.

But with our reliance on oil revenues for 85 percent of our economy and federal budget and the decline in oil prices, we have had to take a new look at our fiscal policies and our economic prospects. We have been forced to turn to a new source of revenue, including taxes on goods and services, which is new to Iraq.

Still, we are looking to the future. In addition to our energy sector, with one of the world's largest reserves of oil, we are exploring alternative industries as well. We once – we once were one of the most diversified economies among OPEC. We will build a diverse economy again. That is why we are investing in agriculture, petrochemicals and other industries.

In order to encourage economic growth, our government must become more efficient and effective. We need more brainpower, more muscles and less fat. Our government is trying to cut our budget through spending reductions and economic reforms. As you know so well here in Washington, D.C., this isn't an easy task. It's very hard when we are at war, and we have to sustain the community as well. But we are striving to lead by example.

While we are holding the line on spending in many areas, our budget includes 450 million U.S. dollars for rebuilding the areas which has been damaged by Daesh and terrorism, which we liberate from Daesh.

In a major government reform, we are decentralizing decision-making from Baghdad to the local administration and local governments. Decisions about the local populace will be made at the local level by those closest to the people, because they are elected by the people in these areas.

We are moving from a state-dominated system to a more vibrant mixed economy. We are privatizing key sectors, exploring public-private partnership, and entering more

joint ventures with international companies, including American firms. Through these initiatives, we are encouraging domestic and foreign investment, expanding and creating large and small businesses, and ensuring that government supports, not stifles, the private economy, which is very important for us. These efforts are already reaping returns. Major oil companies, manufacturers, and banks are investing in Iraq at present and expanding their operations in our country.

Government reforms, economic recovery, and physical and social reconstruction can and must go hand in hand. In an effort towards reconciliation, our Cabinet has approved amendments to the accountability and justice law, commonly known as the de-Baathification. We need to bridge the sectarian and ethnic divides, but reconciliation is a two-way street. We all must reach out to our fellow Iraqis and reach back when the hands of friendship is offered. Ultimately, the best way to achieve reconciliation are restoring a sense of personal safety for all the people of Iraq, and reviving the economy for those without work and the more than a half-million high school and college graduates entering our job market every year.

To conclude where I began, just as Iraq is working with the United States and all our international partners to defeat Daesh, we must also work together to rebuild our country in every way: physically, socially, economically and politically. We ask the United States and the coalition partners to continue to support Iraq militarily through providing weaponry, training and advisers; the sharing of critical intelligence; and doing all that you can to stop the flow of foreign fighters – terrorist foreign fighters and other foreign groups – into Iraq. And again, foreign funds – Daesh is smuggling oil, is smuggling artifacts of our inheritance, and getting money for that. This must be stopped.

We also ask the United States, our neighbors nations, our coalition partners and the international financial community to help us to rebuild our country, including restoring the areas that have been devastated by Daesh and assisting more than 2 million internally displaced people, refugees.

We have devoted hundreds of millions of dollars in scarce resources in our own budget for a stabilization fund for our country. We have had useful discussions with the World Bank and the IMF. And we ask the United States and other Western nations, and of course countries in the Middle East, to assist as well, through public and private investment, in rebuilding our infrastructure and reviving our economy.

For all our challenges, Iraq has great strengths and offers great opportunities. Our economic fundamentals are strong: vast energy reserves, an educated population, and rapid growth before the turmoil brought by Daesh.

As we defeat Daesh, we can realize our potential as a business and investment partner, with growing demand for new transportation, electrical power, water supply, and schools, and new schools and hospitals, and new communication and information technologies. And we will not only become an economic success story; we can become a

model for how a society can free itself from tyranny and terrorism, and develop an inclusive and effective system of good governance on the local and national level.

Together, we can and we must win the war. And then, together, we can and must win the peace.

We have extended our hands to our neighbors. And as I mentioned before, I feel very free to talk to regional leaders and talk about different subjects, even subjects of diverse opinions. I have been talking to many leaders, including King Salman of Saudi Arabia, and we will continue to do so. I was happy to learn yesterday that Saudi Arabia has nominated an ambassador to Baghdad. Their embassy compound is ready and renovated. And I hope the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iraq is going to be restored as soon as possible.

We have our own opinion on the war of Yemen. We expressed it publicly. We have suffered so much from wars in Iraq, we are very sensitive to wars, very sensitive to humanitarian costs. And in our own belief, we think an end to this war of Yemen must be very soon, and the only way forward is a political solution by Yemenis themselves.

Thank you all for everything you have done for Iraq. And together, we can win. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

JON B. ALTERMAN: Mr. Prime Minister, thank you very much for those comments. I'm Jon Alterman. I'm a senior vice president here, the Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Gestrategy, and the director of the Middle East Program. I thought I might start a discussion, then we'd extend it out to the audience.

As you noted, you've been very critical of Saudi actions in Yemen. You're a plain-spoken person. You say what you mean. I want to give you an opportunity to be critical of what Iran is doing in the Middle East. What are they doing that they shouldn't be doing?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, I think the challenges which are facing us – terrorism and Daesh – we are in it together. The challenge is not only for Iraq; this challenge is for Saudi Arabia, for the Gulf States, for Jordan, for Egypt, even for Turkey – and Iran, of course. We must be together on this rather than polarizing the whole situation.

What we are facing in Iraq is a polarization of society caused by this terrorism, and of course failure or governance not only in Iraq, in the whole region. And that is a very dangerous cocktail of failures which produce terrorism.

I think instead of us fighting among ourselves and polarizing the region—we have paid heavily in terms of human lives, damaging infrastructures in our own cities due to this polarization. There is a polarization in the region. It is a regional competition for

control. But unfortunately, sectarianism is being used, ethnic difference is being used. This is harmful for us and harmful for everybody.

We in Iraq are paying dearly for these mistakes, and that's why we talk in public. I'm not trying to criticize anybody on this. It is not my role to criticize Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, my neighbors. I wouldn't allow myself to do that. But I'm very much caring about the Iraqi people, and an action there, away from us, can cost lives in our own country.

DR. ALTERMAN: One of the criticisms has been that, in fighting against terrorism, that Qassem Suleimani was very prominent in Iraq. In retrospect, was it a good idea or a bad idea for Qassem Suleimani to have such a visible presence fighting Daesh in Iraq?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Certainly it's a bad idea. I mean, we don't accept it. We welcome the Iranian help and support for us. To be honest with you, it's a very sensitive issue. Iraqi sovereignty is very important for us. Iraqis are sacrificing to save their country. To make it appear as if others are doing this on behalf of Iraqis, Iraqis wouldn't accept that. So I very much distaste what's been happening. I've been talking to the Iranians about it. They claim it's not them who's doing this propaganda, it's somebody else. I have yet to find who that somebody else is.

DR. ALTERMAN: I was talking to a senior Arab official this week and told him you were coming. He said to ask you a question: "What do you think needs to be done – after the battle to push Daesh out of Tikrit – in your judgment, what needs to be done to win the confidence of the Sunnis for the forthcoming battle to retake Mosul?"

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: To restate the state. The state must be visible for the people and the state must deliver. That's why, within 48 hours of liberating Tikrit, I commanded that the local police should take charge of the city. People want to see the institution of the state, the institution of the government. They want to deal with it. They don't want to deal with fighters who carry rifles. They want to see a civilian institution in place. And that's why we talked with the governor, with the local government, with local councils, that they should hold their meeting very quickly and that they should immediately restore basic services. We want people to have clean water, electricity when they turn the light on, and to have schools and hospitals as well, very quickly. Later, there comes roads and other infrastructures.

But we have been very successful in these areas, to restoring basic services. We have even restored mobile services very quickly. You can talk to people in Tikrit now very quickly. That was absent for the last nine months. And this is a huge development.

I think this is important, that the state must be there. People must believe that democracy works, freedom works, as opposed to tyranny and terrorism.

DR. ALTERMAN: Are people back in Tikrit? The reports I'm getting are that Tikrit has been, to some serious measure, depopulated through this battle.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, Tikrit has not been populated for the last probably six months. People just moved away from Tikrit. But the surrounding villages of Tikrit, a lot of people returned. In Tikrit the problem is Daesh, because it's a vast city, has detonated with explosives some houses, some government buildings. It's taking time to clear all of this. We need a lot of efforts. That's why we ask our friends in the international coalition to help us with equipment. What we are doing, we are doing it by hand.

Now, I receive daily reports from Tikrit that my security people being killed because they tried to do it by hand and mistakes can take place. We're losing life through removing the detonation of Daesh. This is a criminal act by Daesh, which shows clearly Daesh are not even caring about the Sunni population, who they claim they are protecting. When they are defeated in a city, which is a Sunni city, they detonate whole buildings, the whole infrastructure. They even detonate electrical equipment, water installations, which makes it very hard for us to restore.

But I'm very proud of the Iraqi efforts, local Iraqi efforts to restore services. In actual fact, in, like, al-Alam, which is on the east of the River Tigris, east of Tikrit, electricity service was restored within three days, and that's quite an achievement.

DR. ALTERMAN: Given the successes that you've talked about, why do you think Daesh, six months after you started getting significant international support, seems to be moving forward in Ramadi? What explains their success, despite the international support you're getting?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, see, Daesh is a mobile terrorist organization. They are very, very dangerous. When they lost Tikrit and lost the whole of Salahuddin, they want to send another message. I think it's timed with my visit to the U.S. They want to show that, despite the support Iraq is receiving, we are there to cause damage and we are still there. They want their voice to be heard. That's what they're doing.

This is a war. And a war, you can win in a place and lose somewhere else. But all in all, if you look at the Iraqi map over the last six, seven months, the green areas – which means the areas controlled by the government – are increasing, and the red areas – which is a danger area controlled by Daesh – is receding.

Number two, is this psychological advantage of Daesh. Daesh has occupied Mosul without a fight, through psychological warfare, and they have sent fear into the hearts of the people. And of course, Daesh are very good at using the media. They're frightening everybody in the world when they show people being lynched, chopping off heads. They're very good at that, to frighten people. They want to achieve that so that they win the battle psychologically, not militarily; without having to fight.

At the moment in Iraq, I think we are being immunized against that. The suffering and the will of the Iraqi fighters has turned this tide against Daesh. Now we can see Daesh are fleeing. They fled from Tikrit, although a lot of them were being killed. But they didn't have the will – the remainder of Daesh– didn't have the will to fight in Tikrit. And that's quite a development, is our fighters have the upper hand in psychological warfare.

So that is an important reverse, and that's why now the number of Iraqi fighters among Daesh are decreasing rapidly, and most of the fighters we are facing now are foreign fighters inside Iraq. And of course, this has to be put to an end. I think fighters are still flowing through Syria to Iraq, from other countries. I think our coalition partners must do something about it.

DR. ALTERMAN: What do you think the U.S. needs to do in Syria?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: I think a lot. At the moment, everybody recognizes that Syria cannot be solved militarily. There must be a political solution. By all honesty, I haven't seen any movement on that. That's a failure. I think we have failed the Syrians. The international community has failed everything in Syria. About 10 or 11 million Syrian refugees – half of them internally, half of them externally. Syrian society has been almost fully damaged, its infrastructure has been damaged.

I think this is something which is very hard on us. Because of this, Daesh was able to develop in Syria and attack Iraq through the border, and it cost us heavily. We will push forward for political solution in Syria, but I think this is the role of the international community. I wish the U.S. administration can do something about it.

You have to bring everybody to the table. The war in Syria is not achieving anything. All it's achieving is more miseries, more casualties, more terrorist organizations, other than Daesh. There are many other, numerous, terrorist organizations springing up in Syria. I don't know where we are heading to.

DR. ALTERMAN: How do you think the United States should prioritize, and how much effort should the U.S. allocate to all the different conflicts? Because we have Syria, we have Iraq, we have this nuclear deal with Iran, we have Yemen, we have Libya, we have Sinai. There's a lot. And there are some people who say, "You know, we're not going to fix a lot of those," and then there are people who say, "We have to get involved in all of them."

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: That's the price you pay for being a superpower. I don't envy the U.S. (Laughter, laughs.)

DR. ALTERMAN: How should we prioritize? Is Iraq the key? Does Iraq have to be one of the top three, with equal value?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, if you look carefully, I think Iraq has been an example where, for the first time after so long period, Daesh is trying to establish an Islamic caliphate. It's very appealing to a lot of young people. Of course, many people are probably pro-Islamic caliphate. But what they are trying to establish is an Islamic caliphate which is not related to Islam at all. This is about killing others, about eliminating whoever you disagree with. You may object to what I say, you may object all my opinions, but to go to the extent of extinguishing them and seeing them off and killing them, that's what Daesh is doing. This is a very, very dangerous phenomena.

If it is allowed and if we allow it and don't do anything about it, it can expand rapidly. And I tell you, what Daesh is doing in recruiting young people – not only in Iraq, but across the world, and I stress “across the world.” We have seen among the terrorist fighters in Iraq most nationalities of Iraq and American, Europeans, Russians, and Chinese even. Chinese are now are fighting in Iraq with Daesh.

Apparently they have – I don't know how – developed this expertise of detonating houses. They do it in a very smart way – well, I say “smart” – it's a very criminal way where you don't find it. You enter the house, you think everything is safe. You wait a while, a few hours, then the whole thing collapse over your head. And we have paid a lot of casualties for that.

So this transnational terrorism is dangerous, is not only national. They trying to establish an entity on the ground. And if Daesh develops this capability, no army, no uniformed army in the area will be able to stop them. So they must be stopped now. And to me, this is a priority. They can extend to Jordan, Egypt, I think the Gulf will be very easy for them if they get their hand on that.

DR. ALTERMAN: So what role would Daesh or people sympathetic to Daesh have in the negotiations to resolve these issues?

PRIME MIN. ABADI: Well, you cannot negotiate with Daesh. I think, if you look carefully, who has negotiated with Daesh? I think al-Nusra was the closest and the closest to them, and see what they've done to al-Nusra. I mean, they are all in the same bed. They have always been on the same, in the same bed. But look what they've done to them. I don't think you can discuss anything with Daesh. I've talked even to the humanitarian organizations about what they are doing in these areas controlled by Daesh. They cannot do anything. They cannot even talk to anybody there, even if they want to help the people under the control of Daesh.

What Daesh is caring about is they want to establish their state – their state. They don't care – they don't pay a lot of attention to the people and well-being of the people. That's why they don't carry a lot of responsibilities. They control vast land in Syria and Iraq which represent a state, to be honest with you. But they don't have to pay salaries to the people. They don't have to provide services for the people. They only have to account for a small amount of money for them to continue.

That's why the smuggling of oil is of paramount importance. It may look, in terms of the amount, for a state not much. But for the terrorist organization, this is a lot of money to pay only their fighters and to get weapons so that they can continue fighting.

I think I cannot stress that any more, including my friends in the Gulf. I know they share this opinion with us. I know they can see the danger of Daesh. But by all honesty, I haven't seen much steps to combat Daesh. There must be steps on the ground because Daesh ideas and Daesh ideology is there, everywhere, but it is not unique. It is there, but Daesh has taken it a step further, where they are practicing it. I mean, there is this ideology which doesn't accept the other, it refuses the other, it doesn't want to work with the other. But Daesh is practicing it on the ground by killing the other. I think this is very dangerous and I think this is – to us – a priority.

DR. ALTERMAN: So one of the solutions that people have proposed is that there could be more decentralization in Iraq, which would restore power to Sunni leaders who were there before, who are currently at least acquiescing, if not supporting, Daesh to protect themselves against what they see as Shia aggression. Are there redlines or limits to decentralization in Iraq that you think are important to lay down, or is the idea of decentralization and local rule something that should be pursued until there are problems?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: To me, there is no limitations. If you look back on the last 11 years, I think the constitution calls for decentralization. But why did the previous governments do it improperly? For a simple reason: They were very much scared that if they decentralized, Iraq will disintegrate. This government believes the opposite: If you don't decentralize, the country will disintegrate. In actual fact, to be inclusive, to include everybody in a unified Iraq, you have to give authorities to others. Otherwise, they won't stay with you. If you want to take away all their authority, they will resist that and it will create a problem.

The only way, in the opinion of this government, to keep the country unified is to give more power of decentralization to these regions and think they own it. They must own it.

DR. ALTERMAN: Before we got to the audience, which I'll do in a second, we got a question from Twitter. But it's from Ali Khedery, so it's not from just anybody, on Twitter. He asks: Would you favor referring militia members, Sunni and Shia alike, to the ICC for war crimes to promote reconciliation?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, I think we have a good Iraqi justice system, and I'm already referring some of these to the Iraqi justice system. I've arrested a few in Al Anbar and arrested a few in Salahuddin. I arrested hundreds of them in Baghdad. And one of my ministers was surprised when he visited some prisons to see many of those so-called militia – or they claim to be – are in prison because they committed crimes, they were carrying arms, probably they were kidnapping people, they were killing their opponents.

But we have to distinguish between real fighters and those people who claim to be fighters. In every war there are people who would utilize the war to their own ends. And we have seen in Tikrit a large number of fighters—they just got into Tikrit. They didn't fight for it, but because this vacuum which occurs after liberation they very quickly move in and try to achieve their own goals. They put their own slogans.

As I mentioned in Baghdad, I was surprised to see in Tikrit a writing on the wall in Persian. Iraqis don't understand Persian. So who wrote that? For what purpose? What message they want to send? It's very clearly there is a minority there and they, of course, put out placards or photos – although Ayatollah Sistani has instructed that his photos must not be displayed anywhere. Of course, I called for my photos to be removed from everywhere, including the command centers of my security forces.

But again, there are photos of foreign leaders. I'm sure these foreign leaders, they don't want their photos in Iraq because Iraqis are not voting for them. But there's someone there, a minority, who is doing that for a purpose. I think probably they want to antagonize the United States. I don't know. There were negotiations there, Ukraine negotiations and other things, and I think our Iranian friends and Iranian neighbors are very good at that.

DR. ALTERMAN: Thank you. We have some microphones. I will call on people. If I could ask you to wait for a microphone, to state your name, and to only ask one question because we're not going to be able to get through people I see right now.

Q: Tony Cordesman, CSIS. The United States is providing military assistance to Iraq in three key areas: air support in the bombing campaign, a train-and-assist mission to the Iraqi army, and the transfer of weapons. And I wonder, from an Iraqi perspective, what are the areas where you would like us to either do more or do it better?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, I think you mentioned these areas. I want to do better in these areas, like bombing missions must be quicker. It is precise at the moment. It's good. But we're talking about time scale between asking for a mission and then actually getting the mission. That's vital, especially when we are fighting a war on the ground. You want the enemy to be hit as quickly as possible when you are moving forward.

I think there has been some suggestions with the administration. The administration, as I understand, is very keen to move forward with this, including the transfer of heavy weaponry to Iraq, because we are building new divisions and there are new battalions and new brigades which we are establishing, about nine brigades, to fight in Mosul and other brigades to fight in Al Anbar. And these new brigades, they need heavy weapons, and I understand these are on their way. I hope we receive them on time.

Q: Michael Gordon, New York Times. Sir, yesterday you and the Saudi ambassador expressed different perspectives on the situation in Yemen and you had some very blunt comments on that. Today you're more conciliatory. Have you had any

conversations with Saudi officials since those comments to clear the air? And on the opening of the Saudi embassy, this is something people have been talking about forever. It's been in discussion for months, never seems to happen. When is this actually going to occur? And who's going to be the ambassador? Is there anything concrete on this?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, first, I'm always very fond of conciliation. I was conciliatory yesterday as well, but probably some media have blown things out of proportion. I'm very frank about the situation in Yemen. My intention is not to criticize anybody. That's not my role as prime minister of Iraq. But of course, Yemen will have its fallout on us.

This polarization is very dangerous. We are in the same boat on this in the region. If anybody makes a hole in that boat, we will all sink. And that's the purpose of my comments, for my Saudi friends to listen to us. We are only giving some advice on this, some opinion on this. We are airing our thoughts. We don't want to intervene in their own affairs and we ask them not to intervene into our own affairs.

We have a democratic government, very inclusive. This is not a Shia government. It may be a Shia prime minister, but I am extending my hand to all Iraqis. I happen to be Shia, but I don't treat Iraqis for what they believe in. I treat Iraqis as being Iraqis, and I'm responsible to all of them. And all sectors of Iraqi society are in this government and are in parliament. So as we are not interfering into other people's affairs, I hope they don't.

As to the ambassador, I heard yesterday or I think the day before that a new ambassador has been appointed, and I hope he will take office very soon. There is no reason why this should be delayed. We look forward to improve our relationship with Saudi Arabia. We are very keen on that. For them to have an embassy in Baghdad makes our job much easier.

We may differ on certain things. And this is our new policy: We don't have to have agreement 100 percent between us, but this doesn't prevent us from moving forward. Between allies, you don't have to agree on everything. Between allies, there are differences on different aspects. But still you move forward because the common things and the common threat are more than the things we are differing about. That's our opinion.

Q: Thank you. Welcome, Mr. Prime Minister. My name is Said Arikat. I am a local journalist. I also served in Iraq for five years with the United Nations. Good to see you again, sir.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Yes, I know you. I remember.

Q: My question to you is on Syria. Is it really realistic to have an effective fight against Daesh and defeat it without a more real coordination between Iraq and Syria, since you share the same front against this group, and without really having the

neighboring countries, especially to the north, sealing their borders to disallow the foreign fighters that you spoke so much about? Thank you, sir.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: It's a very larger border, quite long, and I think the bombing campaign probably is not going to end Daesh, but is drastically reducing the capabilities of Daesh, which is very important for us. And I think [it is important] continuing to bomb the headquarters of Daesh, fighters of Daesh. Because what they are doing, they're crossing from Syria to Iraq and the other way around. So to prevent them from doing that, to reduce their ability and their mobility, I think bombing campaign is enough and is essential.

But as you mentioned, it cannot be a solution. There must be a political solution on the ground in Syria. And I'm very much encouraging all parties in Syria to sit down. And I know it's hard. Especially when there are crimes committed. We've lost many lives in Syria. There are millions of refugees. But what is the solution? To continue with more refugees, to continue with more killing, is that a solution? I don't think that's a solution.

We have seen wars, and wars only lead to more wars, more sacrifices. And in the end you go back to square one: You have to sit down and negotiate. Might as well do it now rather than later.

Q: Thanks very much. Barbara Slavin from the Atlantic Council and Al-Monitor.com. Is it in your power to tell the Iranians what to do in Iraq and how many people to send, whether Qassem Suleimani should be there or not? And also, one of our colleagues, Ned Parker, recently left because of threats against Reuters for reporting what happened in Tikrit. Will you issue a statement in Arabic protecting journalists for reporting what goes on in Iraq? Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Yes, I think we must have a say in what the Iranians do and what the Iranians don't do in Iraq. I've told my Iranian friends very bluntly they are helping Iraq, thank you very much, but everything must be done through the government of Iraq. Any other way they are doing it, I consider it and my government considers as hostile to Iraq. And they claim they're not doing it outside the government; they're doing it through the government. And I very much encourage that.

Iran is our neighbor. We have the longest borders with Iran. We don't intend to quarrel with Iran, or with any of our other neighbors. We have to live in peace with other neighbors. We have suffered for a very long time through wars. We don't want to enter another war.

Having said that, Iraqi sovereignty is of utmost importance. And I think many of the political blocs are with me on this and the religious leadership in Najaf was very, very clear about this. Iraqi sovereignty must be respected. Although we welcome any help that's given to us, but it shouldn't trespass and shouldn't break the Iraqi sovereignty. And that's our position with the Iranians.

As with Mr. Parker, Ned Parker, I've known him for many years. I've heard his story while he was still in Baghdad. In actual fact, a spokesman for my office has given me a message, and he told me Ned Parker feels threatened. And I asked, "What sort of threat has he received?" We want more information so that I can take action about these people who are threatening him. I haven't received anything on that, to be honest with you. I asked for a protection of his office, to increase the protection of his office, which we did. But all of a sudden I heard he left. I know he sent a message he want to meet me in Washington, but unfortunately my program is – I didn't have even time to talk to my wife yesterday. (Laughter, laughs.)

DR. ALTERMAN: And a statement in Arabic?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: I think my office issued a statement.

Q: You issued it in English.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Sorry? In English? OK, we translate it. (Laughter, applause.)

DR. ALTERMAN: We've broken news!

Q: Hi. My name is Jennifer-Leigh Oprihory and I'm with Northwestern University's Medill National Security Journalism Initiative. First, I wanted to say thank you for speaking with us today. But piggybacking off of the last question about Ned Parker, I was just wondering if you could briefly comment as to your take on the current state of press freedom within Iraq. And also, in terms of going and taking action in response to Parker's being chased out of the country, what steps are you planning, or are there any steps planned, to institute protections for international press covering your country, since during your address you said, and I quote, "free society needs a free press"? So I was just wondering if that would extend to foreign press as well.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, I think – if you look at the Iraqi press first, I think they're free to criticize. I think the number-one institution which is being criticized in Iraq is the government. We don't even reply to them. We don't do anything. I dropped charges against all media.

But I asked the media to have their own self-discipline. That's important. The media shouldn't be free to accuse others falsely. They should respect freedom of others. Freedom of speech is there, but so is freedom of others. We need facts.

But I refuse so far, and I hope I'll continue on that. You never know what office does. Office usually corrupts people, doesn't it? But I hope it doesn't corrupt me. We'll keep on respecting the freedom of the press, and protecting it.

As to foreign press, as far as I know, there is no limitation on them, no restrictions. They are free even to go to within our military units. I think we went to the extent to allow free reporting from the fronts. I remember when the U.S. Army was in Iraq in 2003, they have embedded journalists, and they were restricted to what they were reporting. I very much respect that. I hope I can have that power to do that, but unfortunately I cannot do it now.

Now, I'm not sure if Mr. Parker, why he has left, to be honest with you. I didn't have the story from him. He wrote something to me. I cannot see why he left. Was he really threatened or he felt he was threatened? I know some Facebook thing and social media has mentioned him in a bad way. But the thing I've seen, in actual fact, they were condemning the government in the first place, not him. They were condemning me as a prime minister to do something about it, rather than him. I know some of these, they want to use these things to just criticize the government, in the same way when they accuse the coalition of dropping help to Daesh or accuse the coalition of killing Iraqis, falsely. In actual fact, what they're trying to do, they're trying to criticize the government for its policies. They don't want the government to seek the help of the coalition, international coalition, or to work with the U.S.

But I think for me, as a prime minister, the safety of the Iraqi people and the interests of Iraqi people is number one. I respect what other countries believe in. Their national security is their own. But I refuse for them to interfere in Iraq. They shouldn't tell us what is best for Iraq or what is not best for Iraq. The Iraqi people, I think, decide at the end, and I as prime minister, commander in chief, I can decide for the Iraqi people what is best and in their interest. If it is in their interest, I will decide it. The same with our security forces.

Q: Thank you, Dr. Jon, Mr. Prime Minister. Fadi Mansour with Al Jazeera.

If I may ask my question in Arabic, since I see many Arabic journalists here.

(Continues in Arabic.)

DR. ALTERMAN: Now you have to translate it.

Q: Basically I'm asking you, before coming to Washington, you made statements and other officials made statements about Iraqi needs, of the list of weapons and military items that you wanted the Obama administration to provide in order to better fight ISIS. We are talking about drones and other advanced weaponry. But President Obama basically kind of avoided answering this question during the statements you and him made at the White House and only referred to humanitarian assistance. Did you make such a request? Because the White House was, through Josh Earnest, very clear that you did not make any such request. So are you asking the administration for anything? And did they answer your – what you're asking? Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: (In Arabic.)

(Continues in English.) I'm sorry there's no translation. (Laughter.)

DR. ALTERMAN: I think you're the translator, because your English is much better than my Arabic. (Laughter.)

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: (continues in Arabic).

DR. ALTERMAN: Would you like to do that in English now for the – for the rest of the audience?

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: You want to translate?

DR. ALTERMAN: I thought you might translate. (Laughter.)

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: So you make me as a translator? How much you pay me an hour? (Laughter, laughs.)

DR. ALTERMAN: Let me see what I can do. I work at a nonprofit. (Laughter.) You're the prime minister of a state. (Laughs.)

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: (Laughs.) I don't think you can afford my hour. (Laughter, laughs.)

DR. ALTERMAN: Just give a little summary, if you would.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, it is, to be honest with you I think even the administration thought we had some requests. They asked us before I left Baghdad. I said we haven't made that statement. We don't have even have a list in that regard.

All we have is we have an agreed list beforehand, which is to do with other supplies. We have two divisions which are under training. They need heavy equipments, which we've agreed with the U.S. administration on that and with the Pentagon as well. And we have the F-16. We want to make sure the delivery is on time, and we've been assured that delivery will be on time and there is no problem in delivering these.

And the second is how we accelerate and make the air campaign more – it is accurate at the moment, but more precise and more effective. And there is a lot of talk about this, and I'm glad I've heard very favorable responses from the administration and from the Pentagon. In actual fact, the atmosphere was very, very cooperative. And in my opinion, we are on the same line on this.

And again, accelerating training. Now everybody's happy that now training is taking place. It is on track. And we are seeing more numbers of Iraqi security forces being trained, and this is important.

We're looking forward to train the police. Police is our second face, because what we have seen in Salahuddin, local police and police in general are very, very crucial in restoring these areas. So we need the police to have the capabilities and the ability to govern or produce security for the people in liberated areas.

DR. ALTERMAN: We are out of time. Before I let you go, first, if we could all let the prime minister and his party exit first so they can get out of here and not be late for their next appointment.

Before I thank you, I want to thank Rebecka Shirazi and the Middle East Program team for organizing this, Carolyn Schrote and the Conferencing team for making a whole number of things that seem invisible work, and Andrew Schwartz and the External Relations team for doing all the things they do. And the Secret Service – I've never seen so many Secret Service guys in one place, but they kept us all safe and I'm grateful for that.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Well, thank you.

Well, there's only a few of my Secret Service, to be honest with you. (Laughter.)

DR. ALTERMAN: Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for coming. We hope to have you back, and good luck. Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER ABADI: Thank you. Thank you, Jon. (Applause.)

(END)