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“Arab-U.S. Relations: Going Where?”

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**RONALD REAGAN BUILDING & INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTER
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LUNCHEON KEYNOTE ADDRESS

INTRODUCTION:

Rear Admiral Harold J. Bernsen, (USN, Ret.) – Chairman, Board of Directors, National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations; President, Board of Trustees of Physicians for Peace; Director, American-Bahraini Friendship Society; former Commander, U.S.-Middle East Force; and Director Emeritus, National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce.

LUNCHEON SPEAKER:

Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker – Dean and Executive Professor at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University; former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq (2007-2009); former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan (2004-2007); and previously served as U.S. Ambassador to Syria, Kuwait, and Lebanon.

LUNCHEON KEYNOTE – AMBASSADOR RYAN CROCKER

[Rear Admiral Harold Bernsen] It's my great pleasure today to introduce our luncheon keynote speaker, career Ambassador Ryan Crocker. A native of Washington State, educated at University College Dublin, Ireland, Whitman College in Washington and later at Princeton University. He entered the United States Foreign Service in 1972. In subsequent years, unlike the various geographic assignment path of most FSOs, his entire diplomatic career centered on the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

From 1990 onwards he served in succession as Ambassador to Lebanon, Kuwait and Syria. In 2002 as Special Envoy to the newly formed government in Afghanistan, followed in 2004 by assignment as Ambassador to Pakistan and in 2007 as Ambassador to Iraq. Keenly aware that success in Iraq would require the total harmonization of the U.S. military and diplomatic efforts he forged a celebrated bond with General David Petraeus, thus ensuring a coordinated approach that has been lauded for its effectiveness in moving U.S. policy forward.

He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his extraordinary service in Iraq. Ambassador Crocker left government service in 2009 and earlier this year assumed his current position as Dean of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A & M University. He will take questions after his talk.

Please join me in welcoming to the podium career Ambassador Ryan Crocker.

[Ambassador Ryan Crocker] Thank you very much for that warm introduction Admiral Bernsen. It does remind me that like a number of others in this room I have much more of a past than I do a future.

I would just like to express my own appreciation to the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations and Dr. John Duke Anthony for this tremendous program. Looking at not just the numbers of participants, but the distinction of the participants, I think reflects very favorably on the weight the National Council holds in focusing the attentions of this nation and far beyond this nation on a critical part of the world. So thank you, John, for all that you've done for America and America's relations with the Arab world.

I am going to talk briefly about Iraq. I know that you've just had a panel on that but I was asked to talk about Iraq, and I will talk about Iraq. I'm a little daunted in so doing as I look around this room. I refrain from jokes on these kinds of occasions but there is one awful old joke that is so appropriate that I have to drag it out.

And it's the story of the man who survived the Johnstown flood. I hear the groans. The rest of his life he lived off that. Delivering paid lectures about the Johnstown flood and how he survived it – that saw him through his entire life. Eventually he died, ascended to the pearly gates and was informed that it was customary for new arrivals to speak to the heavenly multitudes on any topic of his or her choice. The man said well I think I'll talk about the Johnstown flood. I've riveted audiences throughout America on that subject. And St. Peter said, well you're free to do it but I have got to warn you, Noah is in the audience. I'm looking around at an audience full of Noahs,

from the United States and from the region.

Iraq as we now move past month seven in an effort at government formation the refrain is out there in the commentary and the media why can't they just get their act together. I think many of you in this room know the answers to that.

One of my mantras when I was in Baghdad with General Petraeus later General Odierno is that Iraq is hard, it's hard all the time and it's going to go on being hard. And that's what we see in the process government formation.

Shortly after the elections took place in early March I was interviewed on TV and asked what my prediction was for the time of government formation and this was March 8, March 9. I said I couldn't be certain but I thought there was a reasonable chance that a government could be in place by the beginning of Ramadan, a little over five months away. And the interviewer was horrified and so was I because as soon as I said it realized I had been guilty of irrational exuberance and that was highly unlikely to happen.

And indeed of course it hasn't. I do think that in the next month or so the Iraqis will put all the pieces in place and I think as most of you as keen observers of the region would also agree this is a total package deal. It's not just who is going to be the prime minister, it is who is going to occupy every single position of consequence down to the Minister of State for Environment. That will all have to be hammered out.

My predictions for what they're worth, is that the Prime Minister will be Nouri al-Maliki and that he will preside over a very broad based government. I think he is determined not to try to put together a narrow coalition for fear that he would then be hostage to any single small constituent party, kind of on the Israeli model, that could bring the government down.

So it's taken a long time and it's going to take a good bit longer but what I think you will see will be a fairly stable, broad based Iraqi government that will not be vulnerable to the likelihood of a vote of no confidence. You know one of the great things of being out of government service is that I can now stand up in fora like this and say any outrageous thing I want. Any kind of half-baked opinion or prediction, you know, I no longer am responsible for the consequences of what I say, so you now have the benefit of mine and they are worth exactly what you paid me for it.

What will that government face? Tremendous progress has taken place in Iraq over the last couple of years not just in security terms but also politically. When I look at where Iraq was when I left in early 2009 versus where Iraq was when I stepped off a helicopter two years previously, it was beyond my wildest dreams. Yet for all of that progress the challenges in front of Iraq, by any measure, are greater than those it already faced.

What are they? The list goes on and on. Kurdish-Arab tensions. We have seen sectarian violence diminish. Sectarian tension still persists but in many respects that's given way now to ethnic tension. No longer Sunni-Shia but now Kurdish-Arab. That is a complex set of challenges with its roots in a deep, divided and bloody history but it's more than that. It's also institutional. Because a good deal of the tension between Baghdad and Irbil revolves around questions such as

what are the rights and prerogatives and responsibilities of a regional government in the north vis-à-vis a federal government in Baghdad, vis-à-vis a provincial governments elsewhere in the country.

It was only during my time as Ambassador that some huge questions were resolved, like could a provincial governor take command of federal forces in his province in a state of emergency if communication with Baghdad was impossible. Parliament passed legislation to say that governors under no circumstances could take command of federal forces and through the length and breath of Iraq disappointed governors had to show plans to blow up microwave towers rendering communication with Baghdad impossible.

So what confronts Kurds and Arabs, and Iraqis as a whole are a set of historical challenges, political challenges with roots in the past, manifestations in the present, and deep institutional challenges. Again these tensions between Irbil and Baghdad, the legal writ of regional forces, who commands them, who outfits them, what they may or may not do, these are states-rights issues. And as we just heard from John Duke Anthony some times a little modesty and thinking about our own experience is worthwhile. It took us 13 years from the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution after an excursion down the dead end of Articles of Confederation. When we did get our Constitution, we kicked some tough issues down the road. Like states-rights. And that, of course, almost literally destroyed this country decades later.

Again just to give you some perspective on that I was getting ready to deliver another mind-numbingly boring Fourth of July oration such as Ambassadors are inclined to do. In 2008 one of the sharper members of my staff trying to think of something to spice it up said hey boss you know what, its 2008, if you date the creation of modern Iraq to the establishment of the monarchy in 1921, modern Iraq's been in existence for 87 years. If you date the creation of the United States of America to July 4, 1776, you add 87 years; it's the day after the battle of Gettysburg. So we didn't manage it all quite right in this great nation, I hope, indeed I expect the Iraqis will move on faster timelines to better results. But it is a way that helps me think about the extraordinary complexities of the challenges the new Iraq faces.

Other challenges, and everything is related to everything else. The disputed internal boundaries, the gerrymandering of the state under Saddam. Kirkuk, of course, is the case that most people know about but it is not the only case. There are disputed internal boundaries between for example Karbala and Anbar. When Saddam decided that those fractious Shia in Karbala should not be sitting astride the main land pilgrimage route to Mecca he separated the Nuhaib (phonetic) district from Karbala and gave it to Anbar. Well the Karbalawis would like it back.

For the Anbaris these are fighting words. I am now a resident of the great state of Texas, I tell Texas audiences it would be though someone were to decide that North Texas rightly belongs to Oklahoma. Some people think that's a good idea. So these are all out there, as are the challenges of economic and social development, as are the issues of the integration or non integration of the Sons of Iraq into state structures, security and otherwise.

A major "New York Times" story this past week asserting that giving up on hope that they will have a full role to play in Iraqi society, members of The Awakening are now moving back into

the insurgency. You heard this morning about the problem of refugees, an immense challenge both within Iraq, with internally displaced and outside Iraq's borders. There are profound questions of civil-military relations. The Coalition Provisional Authority was roundly faulted for a decision to disband Saddam's armed forces in 2003 and of course the reality is that army wasn't disbanded, it had disbanded itself. Had we wanted a different outcome we would have had to actively reconstitute the armed forces of Saddam Hussein. History is made of things that didn't happen as well as those that did.

Arguably had we taken that step we could have had a Shia revolt rather than the Sunni revolt we faced a little bit later. I was there in the early days and one thing we worked very hard on was not to repeat the British experience of the Shia revolt in the early 20s. But my point is actually slightly different. What we are seeing today in Iraq is already a significant imbalance between capacities of the security forces, their organizational abilities and their accomplishments and those of civilian authorities. Had, magically, Saddam's military's stayed whole, stayed together and not produced a revolt of some form or another that disparity would be even greater and one of the challenges going forward, I think, will be for the Iraqis given their history to manage this civil-military disparity. By the time I left a year and a half ago there were already voices in the Iraqi military saying here we are fighting and dying for our country while the civilians just mess it up. Such sentiments have not been unknown in this country but the principle of civilian control over the military is very well established. That is not the case at all in Iraq.

That is a little bit of the list of the challenges that a new Iraqi government is going to face, in my view, when a government is formed. And all these issues have been in abeyance basically for the past year in the run-up to elections and then of course their contentious aftermath. What does that mean? Does that mean Iraq is going to go off the rails. One doesn't know but I don't think so. But what it does suggest to me is that there is a role for the United States going forward that will be, in many respects, as critical as the role we have played heretofore.

We remain in Iraq, in my view, the indispensable outside power. We are in the back rooms and no longer in the front, as these tough political issues are wrestled with and I do not think Iraqis broadly speaking are yet in a position where they can tackle these things without substantial outside assistance and that means assistance from us.

Kanan Makiya wrote a book about Iraq prior to in 2003 invasion called "Republic of Fear." And if there is one word that I had to use if I was only allowed one to describe Iraq, past and present, that word would be fear. Saddam created that republic of fear where everyone was afraid of someone else, that's how he ruled. Those fears persist long after Saddam, where compromise isn't the way to a political deal, compromise can be political weakness, that can lead not only to a political downfall but something rather worse.

I think the U.S. role in helping to broker key political compromises as we did during my time is going to be crucial going forward. Now that takes me to what that US role is, going forward.

We are approaching the last year of our security agreement that was signed in late 2008 that calls for all U.S. forces to be out of Iraq by the end of 2011. There is not a lot of time left on the clock, and there are a lot of very immense challenges.

Here is what I think is going to happen. Sometime after an Iraqi government is formed, so late this year, early next year, I think that government is going to come to us and say, “You know about that security agreement that idiot Crockett negotiated back in 2008, that calls for all U.S. forces to be out by the end of 2011. Why don't we rethink that?”

I can't be sure this will happen but I think it's likely. The Iraqis know the challenges their up against and it was rather telling when we re-missioned ourselves at the end of August there were two polls that were conducted, one in the US that found that 70% of Americans were just completely sick of Iraq, didn't want to hear about it anymore and wanted all forces out the sooner the better. A Poll in Iraq came up with exactly the same percentage, 70% of Iraqis believed that an early withdrawal of U.S. forces would be a catastrophic mistake. So I think it is quite likely that the Iraqi government is going to ask for an extension of our deployed presence.

If they do I hope very much that we will be prepared to respond positively. Because I do believe that for the next several years going forward we are the indispensable guarantee, both for the range of internal challenges that Iraqis face as well as the external dimension.

We negotiated a second agreement, the Strategic Framework Agreement that lays out literally the framework for U.S. Iraqi strategic cooperation in every conceivable sphere. So we have a roadmap for a long-term U.S. Iraqi relationship that would be fundamentally different than that U.S. Iraqi relationship that has ever existed before. And that can make a profound difference I would suggest for the United States, for the West and certainly for the Middle East.

To get there, there is considerable lifting yet to be done. And that is why I think an extension of time on U.S. clock for a security presence – not a combat presence – will be important. It's also important again in an external dimension. The Iraqis, as you know, have no combat airpower. They have no viable air defense system. They do not have main battle tanks. And they do not have artillery. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a rough neighborhood to be under-armed in.

The transactions are moving forward now that the Administration has finalized its request, but you're not going to see these systems fielded until 2013, 2014, 2015 or thereafter. So not only as an internal anchor, I think as an external security guarantee, the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq and in the region is going to be key going forward.

Finally just a word about that region and since we have so many distinguished representatives from the region in the room I'm going to be as brief as possible in hopes that I won't sound as dumb as possible.

I'd like to talk mainly about Iraq's two main non-Arab neighbors. I know you had a panel this morning on Iran. The point I would make is simply that Iran has something that is in short supply in this country and that's what I call strategic patience. They've had a bad couple of years in Iraq thanks in part to us, thanks mainly to the Iraqis themselves who had a bitter bloody history with Iran.

But the message from the Iranians right now is “A” the Americans are going home; the process

has already started and guess what? We are still going to be here. Better reevaluate your priorities because we are going to remember who did what. Again I think a reason to have an American anchor in that it critical part of the world.

Turkey has shown, I think, a very positive constructive engagement but we've got to be careful of our relationship with Turkey. I think we've seen a turning away from the West as Turkey has been disappointed in its quest for European Union membership. Active engagement in the Middle East doesn't necessarily mean estrangement from the West but the U.S. has a key role in ensuring that it is not so and I think Iraq is an area where we can cooperate fruitfully.

And to our many Arab friends in the region the message that General Petraeus and I had as we made the regional rounds was we know that many of you didn't like 2003, well guess what? It's not 2003 anymore. And Iraq is still Iraq. The kind of Iraq that will develop may have a great deal to do with the role that regional Arab states play or don't play.

Iraq isn't going away. It's how that Iraq develops and what role moderate Arab states play in a development that is going to be so crucial. So those are just a few of my thoughts. Bottom line, the U.S. role has been, is, and will remain critical in Iraq.

President Obama on 31st of August spoke of turning the page in Iraq. That's fair. Our role does need to evolve. But what we cannot do as a government or as a people in the United States, is think that in turning a page we are closing the book, because the Iraq story is going to go on with us or without us. And the quality of that story is going to be a direct function of how active and engaged we are.

So with that I would be happy to entertain your questions.

[Admiral Bernsen] Unfortunately, sir we run out of time. No questions.

[Crocker] I love it when a plan comes together.

[Bernson] Please join me in thanking a great diplomat.

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