



ALAEI: WE ARE DETERMINED TO FURTHER IMPROVE TURKEY-IRAQ RELATIONS

Hisham Al-Alawi



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Mr. Ambassador, firstly, congratulations on your new post as of this summer. We are also pleased to see that you accepted our invitation for the interview. We understand that one of your priorities is to bolster the relations between the two countries. In that respect, the fight against DAESH is one of the main items in the portfolio. If you allow me, I would like to start with the fight against DAESH and then also other issues. We see that there has been major progress in the fight against DAESH in Iraq in recent months. There are discussions about the upcoming Mosul operation. Could you share with us your opinion on the latest situation on the military front?

A: Thank you very much for your visit and your interest in recent developments in Iraq and the relations with Turkey. You are most welcome also to the Embassy and we look forward to having good relationship with you and your Center because we sincerely believe there is a need for cooperation in this regard. As you have rightly indicated, Alhamdulillah we have achieved significant progress in our fight against the terrorist organization DAESH. If we start with the

most recent developments, as you know, we have liberated the town of Gayyara in the southern part of Mosul city. This is an important place and could be the basis for subsequent operations. We have also made a significant progress when it comes to liberating the city of Sharqat, and we are currently working on liberating the city of Hawijah, which is in the southeast of Mosul. In addition to the progress achieved in the province of Ninawah, we have also managed to liberate almost all the towns and cities in the province of al-Anbar. As you know, the victory achieved in liberating al-Fallujah and before it the city of Ramadi and more recently al-Khalidiyah as well as the other towns in the province of al-Anbar represented major successes to us, and major blows to the terrorist organization DAESH. This was done through the coordinated efforts of the Iraqi army supported by Iraqi national police, local police, popular mobilization units, local tribes who have all worked together. They were also supported to by the coalition forces when it comes to air power. They managed to achieve those successes in a way that caught the attention of the world. These positive models could certainly be used when it comes to liberating the city of Mosul, and completing the liberation of the province of Ninawah.

Before that, as you know, we have also liberated almost all the towns and cities around Tikrit and the province of Salahuddin, as well as Diyala and Babylon Provinces. The trend has been very positive and very encouraging. We feel very confident that our security forces supported by local people could finish off this process, and liberate the remaining towns and cities in the province of Ninawah and Kirkuk, hopefully, before the end of this year.

Obviously the challenges that we face when it comes to managing the situation in those places after the successive operations are enormous. We are fully aware of the needs in those places. There is a need to facilitate in various ways the return of people who have been displaced internally or forced to leave the country to the neighboring countries including Turkey. There is a need to clear the houses and roads from the mines. As you know, DAESH has been very notorious when it comes to not only destroying the houses and the towns, but also leaving behind thousands of mines that could potentially threaten people's life. In addition to that, there is a need to reconstruct those towns and cities, and help people to go back to their daily lives, help them in terms of infrastructure, jobs and services.

We look forward to receiving as much support from our friends in the region and beyond when it comes to achieving those important goals.

Let's focus on the reconstruction of the cities devastated by ISIS terror. Could you also specify what kind of assistance would you expect from the international community in that respect?

First, let's start with the security challenges. There is certainly a need for support from our friends in the region when it comes to removing those mines and potentially harmful equipment which were left behind. We need help when it comes to the reconstruction of the towns and cities. We also need to ensure that the much needed services get back to normal as quickly as possible such as education, health care, etc. There is a need also to look after the environment because some of the things they have done have affected the environment as well. There is also a need to work on strengthening community cohesion and promoting peaceful coexistence and tolerance. As you know, it is well known that it is not enough to challenge extremism and terrorism through military means only. We need to address the political and socio-economic factors that contributed to these

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phenomena, as well as the cultural and religious factors. We are working on all these fronts to help people go back to their towns and cities and live together peacefully. We are also working to reduce the chances that our young generations will be subjected to this kind of ideology in the future.

You referred to the community cohesion. Unfortunately, due to terrorism, sectarian politics gained some ground and visibility, which negatively affects the cohesion. Another side of the story is the situation of non-Muslim minorities, such as the Christian groups, who are also affected. Many communities are shattered.

As you know, DAESH targeted not only non-Muslims but also Muslims, whether in Iraq, Syria or other countries in the region. Unfortunately, the majority of the victims are Muslims. For example, if we take into account the city of Mosul, they killed a large number of Scholars and Clergy men who did not embrace their ideology and refused to give allegiance. They killed many activists, lawyers, doctors who were not happy with their practices. As you know, they tortured people, they abused women, whether Muslims or non-Muslims. And they certainly practiced sectarianism and extremism in the most brutal way that we could see. It is important to highlight that those practices are not approved by Islam, and by average Muslims.

And it is also important to work on the root causes, as I mentioned, in order to ensure that future generations will not be affected by those ideologies and those practices.

Another challenge highlighted by the influx of DAESH is the issue related to the disputed territories in Iraq. It was already one of the problems waiting for a solution. Since 2014, due to the new developments, this has gained a new characteristic especially in some areas where Peshmerga is taking effective control over some of the disputed areas, particularly Kirkuk. Could you share with us your views or Baghdad's views about the Kirkuk issue? How will it develop in the next months, especially in post-DAESH period?

As a general rule – and this is not unique to Iraq, we could learn these lessons by looking at the experiences in other countries – when it comes to disputed territories; you cannot achieve state stability and lasting peaceful solutions by force. You have to work with your partners in order to reach a desirable outcome through negotiation, persuasion and agreements. We certainly do not believe that forcing realities on the ground is helpful

and this is not going to last and it will further complicate the matters on the ground, whether it is Kirkuk or some parts of Ninawah or Diyala. There is a legal framework for these issues to be dealt with. As you know, the Iraqi constitution and the relevant laws have identified practical steps in order to address those issues. It is not good to force a solution on particular problems by using force and leave the other issues in other provinces unresolved. We certainly do not approve the practices of the past couple of years. They have complicated the matters. We certainly believe that we need to sit together and talk about those issues, and we need to use the legal frameworks that have been identified in the constitution and the relevant laws. DAESH initially took control of some provinces in Iraq; they tried to portray themselves as coming to support certain components of the Iraqi society. It is clear now, after more than two years of their influx to Iraq, that this is not the case. They were looking for the control of these cities, dominating the societies and communities. They have abused people's rights in these areas. People have themselves seen the kind of destruction they cause, the promotion of sectarianism and extremism they make, and the devastating influence they could have

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potentially on communities and young generation if they are allowed to continue their practices.

We all have a responsibility to address our differences, to use the available opportunities to negotiate with our partners, and to use the appropriate legal frameworks to address these issues. I am sure that we could reach an agreement, which will be mutually acceptable. At the end of the day, I think we should all agree that the Iraqi constitution has specified that Iraq territorial integrity and unity should be respected; and when it comes to the differences among different provinces, we have to use legal frameworks to address those differences. We have to work together to establish a mature and stable democracy with accountable institutions that would embrace good governance practices. This will ensure that, whatever resources we have in Iraq, will be used for the benefits of people and will lead to sustainable development.

Also one particular issue, which is of course sometimes very sensitive for Turkey is the situation of Turkmens in Iraq. The Turkmen groups have also been affected by the DAESH terror campaign

and they have been displaced from their hometowns. Some are in Turkey, some are in different parts of Iraq. Some went to the south, some are in the KRG. What would you say about the future of Turkmens in a unified Iraq?

As you know, Turkmens in Iraq are an important ethnic component. They are the third largest ethnic component in Iraq and have a sizeable presence in certain cities including Mosul, Tal Afar, Kirkuk, Baghdad and other cities. We look at Turkmens just as we look at other Iraqi citizens. They all have the same rights; they need to make contributions to building the country. They are allowed to participate in the elections. As you know, they have their own representatives in the Iraqi parliament. They have their own representatives in the national government, in the ministries as well as the provincial legislating councils and local governments. Recently there have been some discussions about their grievances because they do not have a minister in the cabinet. I think this is a legitimate aspiration and I think there is a need for their representatives in the parliament as well as the relevant parties and blocs to address this grievance. By working with

the other parties and blocs in the parliament, this particular aspiration can be met.

Thank you for your expression of support. What would you say about the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq's calls for independence, from time to time the discussions about referendum, and what should we expect regarding the future of the relations between Baghdad and Erbil?

When it comes to the question of independence of the Kurdistan region, as you know, there is no consensus within the region among the parties and the local population. There are some who believe that time has come for the region to move in this direction, and others do not share the same view. The situation on the ground also does not indicate that those who believe that time has arrived to move in this direction are right. Currently, as you know, they face enormous challenges when it comes to the political differences, the political environment, and the need to having more mature institutions with more transparency and good governance, and better use of public resources. There are security challenges that the Kurdistan region and some other regions in Iraq have faced and continue

to face. There are economic difficulties that they are currently facing, related to the recent drop in the prices of oil and the increase in defense expenditure, which clearly show that the region is not yet ready to be fully independent. Some politicians have been talking about it. Personally, and this is a view based on the relevant articles in the constitution, I think we certainly need to have a de-centralized system in Iraq. The constitution has called upon all Iraqis to work together to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq. We need to work together to develop a more mature democratic system, with better performances by our key institutions. We need to ensure that we fight corruption, to ensure that our institutions will use the available public resources in a more effective way. This is not unique to Kurdistan. All the provinces in Iraq have a need to see those developments. All Iraqi citizens look forward to achieving those ambitious goals. As you know, from experiences in other countries, to have those major social, political and economic developments, we need time. It takes considerably long time, decades not years, to establish a mature democracy with accountable and effective institutions.

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As you know we started this process in thirteen years; we went through the democratic transition in a very difficult environment, in the presence of occupation and the mistakes that were associated with it, the influence of terrorists, and recently the problem with DAESH and dropping prices of oil. So when you operate in a difficult environment such as the one we had, and if you take into account the huge legacy that was inherited because of the wrong policies of the former regime that led to the meaningless wars and the economic sanctions. If we take into account all these factors, it won't take much for us to realize that we have to be patient and continue to work hard to bring people on board to work together in order to achieve those important goals. I think it will be in the best interest of our brothers in the Kurdistan region as well as in other provinces to continue to work together, to make our democratic institutions more mature and effective, to address our differences through dialogue and negotiations, and to use the available constitutional and legal frameworks in order to address these issues.

You referred partly to the issue of oil prices. It also affects the entire eco-

nomie structure in Iraq. We also see that, in addition to the falling oil prices, the oil production and delivery infrastructure has also been damaged in this conflict environment. What are your expectations and preparations about the contribution of oil to the Iraqi economy? What are you specifically working on to improve your revenues from the oil production and exports?

The energy sector in Iraq is the most important sector. Nearly 90% of our foreign revenues come from the export of oil. Iraq is currently the second biggest exporter within OPEC. Our proven reserve is well in excess of 170 billion barrels. We are currently number 4 in terms of proven oil reserves. There is a potential for that also to change with the new exploration activities that we have embarked on. In the past few years, we have done a lot to develop our oil/gas industry. Our production rate has increased from under two million barrels per day in 2009 to 4 million barrels per day. Most of that comes from the southern fields. Currently, roughly 80% comes from the south, 20% from the north. We continue to export on average around 3.5 million barrels per day from the

southern field. We estimate that we could export 5-6 hundred thousand barrels per day from Kirkuk and the fields in the Kurdistan region.

There was an agreement, as you know, between the Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government to deliver on average 550 000 barrels of oil per day from the fields in Kirkuk and the Kurdistan Region. This was seen as a very positive development and the central government was keen on continuing with it. Unfortunately, in the past year, KRG has decided to stop handing over the agreed amounts. Because of that, there was some disruption in the export of oil, especially from Kirkuk. In the past eight months, KRG exports oil through Ceyhan pipeline without much coordination with the central government. We hope that this issue will be resolved. Currently, there are discussions and negotiations to address this issue.

When it comes to future developments, obviously, we had very ambitious plans to continue with our projects to increase the production rate as well as our export capacity. Our estimates suggested that Iraq was in a good position to continue increasing its production rate by over 5 million barrels per day, taking the maximum daily produc-

tion into around 9 million barrels per day compared to around 4 million now. The drop in the prices of oil obviously affected the implementation of this ambitious plan to some extent, together with the increase in the defense expenditures because of the war against DAESH. As you know, it is very difficult to predict when the oil prices will recover. We certainly believe that the current prices are not the most appropriate prices for the producers as well as the entire world. We do hope that by next year we will see a significant rise in the prices. We consider any price around 70 US dollars per barrel as reasonable. It will help us to meet our needs when it comes to continuing our reconstruction plan. I am not sure how long it will take to reach there. Hopefully, we will see some significant increases in the prices next year. We will continue to implement various projects to develop our oil fields, in addition to investing more in developing the gas industry in Iraq.

The production rate of natural gas in Iraq has been going up. We are currently producing slightly more than what we need and use domestically. There is a great potential for further increases in the production of natural gas in Iraq. There are contracts that have been given to interna-

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tional companies, which are doing some good works in certain parts of Iraq as well as in the Kurdistan region.

This is also an area for possible cooperation with Turkey. We are certainly interested in attracting more investment from Turkish institutions and companies to develop our energy sector. We are also keen on providing Turkey with some of its needs when it comes to oil and gas. This will be a win-win situation for both countries. There is a need to, as I said, develop our export capacity. One option will also be to expand the capacity of Ceyhan pipeline. This will be in the interest of both countries. There is also a potential for both countries to establish some joint projects when it comes to refineries,

strategic storage capacity and other petrochemical facilities, which could be beneficial for both countries. I'm hoping that, during my stay here as Iraqi Ambassador to Turkey, we will achieve some progress along all these lines including increasing the level of investment Turkey has in the Iraqi energy sector, increasing the amounts of oil and gas that Iraq provides to Turkey, and expanding the capacity of the Ceyhan pipeline.

Speaking of the bilateral relations, you have assumed your new post at a very critical juncture. What are your specific projects to improve Turkey-Iraq relations in political, economic and cultural-social fields?

From the Iraqi perspective, the relations between Turkey and Iraq are very important for both countries. There are important and different aspects of the relations, politically, economically, educationally, culturally, security-wise. We also have very large number of Iraqis living in 40 or so provinces inside Turkey. All those factors make it more important for us to work with our counterparts at national and local levels, as well as in the private sector to achieve our goals. When you look at specific figures, it is important to reflect on those figures since they indicate the progress achieved when it comes to bilateral relations. The level of trade between Iraq and Turkey in 2003-4 was under 1 billion US dollars (950 million). By 2013, the level of trade reached 13 billion US dollars. A fourteen-fold increase, which is phenomenal. There wasn't a similar increase in the trade level with any other country in the region or beyond. Over several hundreds of Turkish institutions implemented hundreds of projects in Iraq with a total cost of 20 billion US dollars. These are some indicators that help you realize the positive developments in Ankara-Baghdad's relations especially when it comes to economic relations.

In the past two years, as you know, there has been some cooling-off in the relations, associated with a significant drop in the level of trade between the two countries. The latest figures in the past year show that the trade level has gone down to around 10 billion dollars. It is obviously still very high and Iraq is still one of the top trade partners with Turkey. We need to work together to address the reasons, the factors that led to the drop of the trade level. Some of that obviously could be done through revolving some of the factors that have created tension between the two governments, including the Turkish military presence in northern part of Iraq, near the city of Mosul. There are also differences when it comes to the conflict in Syria. The two countries also need to maximize security cooperation between them, addressing the issues when it comes to PKK activities as well as DAESH. Certainly there is a need to work on those issues and the two governments are doing so. We certainly need to put more efforts into this area in order to resolve these issues in a way that will create a positive environment and allow us to achieve progress on other fronts. When it comes to economic and trade relations and enhancing the trade level, I certainly believe that we need to work not on-

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ly with the national government institutions but also local government institutions, provincial institutions as well as the private sector. Because of that, in the past three and a half months, I have reached out to other provinces. We have visited 8 key provinces so far including Gaziantep, Adana, Mersin, Kilis as well as Istanbul, Yalova, Sakarya and recently Izmir. We will continue with our efforts to engage with the provincial governments and the private sector, including the commercial and industry offices.

We currently working with our colleagues to organise business, trade and investment meetings. There will be one in Gaziantep during the second half of October. We are working on organising similar meetings in Istanbul and Izmir. We need to also do the same in other key provinces such as Antalya. We need to work together to implement some of the existing agreements that we have signed. We need to work closely to prepare the ground for the next round of the High-level Council for Strategic Cooperation. We need to ensure that not only we have the relevant ministers and ministries represented, but also the private sector with representatives from the key sectors that are important for both countries.

We will continue our efforts to enhance educational and cultural relations between the two countries, in addition to maximizing cooperation when it comes to counterterrorism and reducing the security threats to both countries. I'm sure we will not only resolve some of the factors that led to the recent tension, but also prepare the right environment for achieving our goals when it comes to enhancing the trade level. I am pretty confident that if we do that, we will not just reach 13 billion dollars per year, but we will exceed that level and Iraq could potentially become the second most important trade partner for Turkey after Germany.

You referred to the High-level Council for Strategic Cooperation. This has been a very useful platform to conduct bilateral relationships with a strategic vision. So, what is the current calendar for the next meeting? Is it anticipated, what are the specific items on the agenda?

As you know, the high-level council for strategic cooperation was established in 2009. Over the past few years, there have been two rounds of meetings, one in Baghdad and one in

Ankara, the last meeting was held in December 2014. The next round of meetings is supposed to be held in Baghdad at the end of this year or early next year. We have started some practical steps in order to prepare for that. As I indicated earlier, we need to achieve good progress when it comes to resolving some of the factors that led to the recent tension and bring on board the relevant government institutions as well as provincial and private sector institutions to ensure that not only we have the third round of meetings at the appropriate time but that we will achieve as much as possible from the next round of meetings. We could then move faster to have meaningful changes on the grounds when it comes to developing the relations in different aspects; politically, security-wise, economically, trade as well as educationally and culturally.

You have been visiting different cities. I also understand that in those visits you are very closely following the situation of Iraqi citizens. There is quite significant number of Iraqi citizens living in different provinces in Turkey. What are your efforts and projects to reach out to them, improve their conditions, so

that they can become a very constructive bond between the two countries?

Since I arrived to Ankara at the end of May, it has been certainly one of my priorities and the Embassy's priorities to reach out to Iraqi communities that are currently living in different provinces in Turkey. The numbers are huge, the most reliable figures suggest that we have 300,000 or more Iraqis distributed in 41 provinces or more. Generally speaking, there are three groups of Iraqis that are currently living in Turkey. There is a very well established group that came to Turkey decades ago. Some of them have Turkish citizenship, some are married to Turkish citizens. They generally represent the different professions that we have in Iraq. There are doctors, academics, and bussiness people and so on. The second group is represented by those who came to Turkey in the past decade and so. Within them, we have also a large number of well-established Iraqis. Many of them have properties, established businesses etc. They work, support themselves and they seem to be happy with what they have achieved in Turkey. The third group is the largest group and they represent the most challenging group for us when it comes to reaching out and supporting them. Most

Nearly 90% of our foreign revenues come from the export of oil.

of them came to Turkey after the influx of DAESH into the Iraqi provinces particularly Ninawah, Salahuddin and al-Anbar. Currently, there are 140,000 Iraqis, who are registered asylum-seekers with the UNHCR. That is a good indication that at least half of those Iraqis that are here are asylum-seekers who were forced to leave their homes and migrate. Many of them are vulnerable. They don't have jobs. They find it challenging to ensure that their children go to school. Sometimes they also struggle when it comes to receiving acceptable healthcare services given their lack of resources.

So, in order to engage with them effectively, we have been trying to visit those provinces. Wherever we go, in addition to meeting the governors, mayors, chambers of commerce and universities, we also have specific meetings with members of the Iraqi communities. Sometimes we go to Iraqi private schools that are in those provinces. I think those visits enabled us to understand fully what kind of challenges are faced by our communities, which are mostly related to their migration status, the schooling for the children, healthcare services, or jobs. We are trying to help them out. Obviously, as an Embassy, we cannot resolve all these

issues ourselves. Some of the issues we need to engage with the relevant Iraqi ministries and institutions. To resolve most of the issues, we also need to engage with the relevant Turkish institutions. That is why we have visited the relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Education; we are also waiting for an appointment with the Minister of Home Affairs. We need to engage all the relevant partners in order to resolve some of the challenges that Iraqi communities face.

One other thing which is important to do is to benefit from the available resources within the communities themselves. When it comes to the Iraqis that are living in different parts of Turkey, we know that, within them, there are many doctors, nurses, teachers, lecturers, business people, people with legal background, some even diplomats that have retired. We need to help them come together, establish their societies, councils, associations, encourage them to help each other and engage with the relevant Turkish institutions. I think this will also help a lot when it comes to achieving our goals. Certainly, we will continue to look at this as a priority. The results we have achieved in the past two to three months are very encouraging. We have man-

aged to change the perception within our community that the Iraqi government and Embassy are very much interested in Iraqis, are doing their best to reaching out to them and meeting with them, hearing about the successes, but also the challenges they face. We are working with them, with the Turkish authorities, with our relevant ministries and institutions in order to address those challenges. I feel very confident that, by bringing on board our institutions, your institutions, and encouraging members of the Iraqi communities to do more for themselves, we will achieve our goals and obviously that will mean that their life here in Turkey will be better.

We will also continue with our efforts to facilitate the return of those who want to go back to Iraq voluntarily. This is why we are also engaging with the UNHCR and the

International Organization of Migration as well as your authorities and our authorities. Last week, we arranged a chartered flight run by the Iraqi Airways to take 204 Iraqi citizens to Baghdad, mostly families who voluntarily expressed their wishes to go back and wanted our support. The experience was very positive. Many of them have sent their messages to indicate that they are very happy to go home. Currently, there are many Iraqis who also want to do the same and express their interest. We are working with our Ministry of Migration and Displaced as well as the Ministry of Transportation and the Iraqi Airways and our own ministry to prepare for other flights in the future. We will continue with those efforts.

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for sparing time for our interview.

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