**Beirut Institute e-Policy Summit Circle 34**

Raghida Dergham with esteemed guests HE Barham Salih:, President of Iraq,

with Input by HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal and General David Petraeus

**Raghida Dergham:** In the tradition of the e-Policy Circles of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, I will start with good afternoon Baghdad, where we have the esteemed guest President of Iraq, President Barham Salih, joining us for this very special e-Policy Circle. I will say good afternoon to Jeddah, or whereabouts, where the best co-chair anyone ever can dream of is with us, His Royal Highness Prince Turki Al-Faisal. I'm humbled that he is my co-chair at the Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi. And good morning New York, my beloved city, I must say, where the loyal friend of Beirut Institute, General David Petraeus is, and I will join you in the fall I promise. This is our one-year anniversary. For the e-Policy Circles. In this one year we hosted 118, today it will be 119, major policymakers from 32 countries. I must say we're very proud to have done that. None of this would have been possible without the host country of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, for which we are utterly grateful both, and I'm sure the co-chair allows me to speak on his behalf as well. Three editions were held. General Petraeus was with us and they were in the great capital of the UAE and the fourth edition, hopefully, God willing, COVID permitting, is likely to be held in the fall, also in Abu Dhabi. Behind me here, I want you to see this painting. Let me see if I can get out of it. And this painting is by the Syrian artist Yehya Warrak. It was intact before the explosion of Beirut Port, of the Beirut Port. I decided to remount it, broke as it is, cut off as it is, to just say that we cannot be held back. That we need to continue, that we have to have the determination to continue where we started and continue we shall. Together with the Beirut Institute global family, which had been gathering at the Saint Regis in Abu Dhabi, or the virtual family, which is following us here from the Feghalo, we will persevere. Without this global family of policymakers, policy influencers, policy addicts, if you will, I couldn't have delivered. So thank you most profoundly and most sincerely, I'm grateful to President Salih for marking the anniversary. You honor us. And I'm absolutely delighted as you will know, my dear friend, you will give us your opening remarks first for probably five to seven minutes. Prince Turki Al-Faisal will then ask a couple of questions and engage with you for another seven minutes. Same thing will be done by General David Petraeus. Within the allocated time, I will then have the one-on-one conversation with you in the style you're used to with me, Mr. President, so I count on your tolerance. This policy circle will be thorough and dynamic. I count on all of you to make it memorable. With that, please take it from here our dear friend, President Barham Salih.

**President Barham Salih:** Thank you Raghida. And I'm truly honored to be hosted by Beirut Institute, to be hosted by you. And I was there at the inaugural Abu Dhabi Summit and I'm really proud of what you have achieved, and to your dedication and your commitment to this cause. Beirut Institute has evolved to becoming a relevant institute and I salute our good friend, the co-chair His Royal Highness Prince Turki, as well as my very good friend, General Petraeus. And I very much hope it won't be long before we could have a Beirut Summit in Baghdad, where we can talk about the very profound issues facing not only Iraq, but the entire neighborhood. I will also want to say hi to many friends who are joining us online. I hope it won't be long before COVID is behind us and we come back to normal and we can meet face to face and in person. I'm talking to you from Baghdad, from Al Salam Palace. Many of you have been consumed with the events in Iraq, the transitions in Iraq. It seems to be that Iraq is a country that is always in transition. My hope is that today I can speak to you about the many challenges that Iraq is facing and continue to face given the legacy of conflict, political instability, terrorism, wars, sanctions, you name it. But also talk to you about the hope that I see for my country. And the hope that I can see also, based on what we hope to become a stable, sovereign Iraq will be a common theme that can help bring the Middle East together. Iraq for decades have been the domain of conflict in which many people fought their interests through proxies, turning Iraq into a conflict zone, essentially. And we are just out of a terrible, terrible war against ISIS and against terrorism, which I can say that we have won by liberating our land with the help of our international partners in the international coalition with our neighbors, coming to our assistance. But this war is far from over in terms of defining victory being the eradication of extremism and terrorism. The conflict in Syria still centers on and poses a problem to us. In Iraq itself, we have still a long way towards political recovery. And also economic revitalization, which is a major, major challenge facing us. We are also faced with this spectrum of the regional dynamics of tension between Iran, Turkey, the Arab world, for that matter, many of this is also playing out in the on Iraq. One hope is that we are witnessing, we are seeing signs of, diffusion of this crisis. Iraq is trying to play a role bringing the various actors in the region together. My theme, and our Prime Minister's theme, is that Iraq, that has been the domain of conflict between these various regional actors, the notion of a stable, sovereign Iraq that is at peace with itself and at peace with its neighbors. This is the common theme that our neighbors should come together. The Middle East has been condemned to the cycle of conflict and instability of the past few decades, and at least if we were to account for the Iraq-Iran war, 40 years of conflict that has evolved in this part of the world without a moment of reprieve. I hope that we can all come to a conclusion, it is time to move beyond, change the conversation to focus on what matters, mainly regenerating our economies, deal with the many challenges our societies face. And I can say to you from Baghdad, I cannot see a solution without adhering to the notion and helping Iraqis in their quest for consolidating their sovereignty, for consolidating the authority of their state, and to consolidate in the rule of law in this country. Iraq cannot be weak. Iraq state's sovereignty cannot be compromised. If it is the consequence, everybody is engulfed in trouble, is in engulfed in conflict. And my message, again, is that most Iraqis want to move on. And with the help of our partners and friends in the region, as well as the international community, we really hope to move on and make Iraq what it deserves to be. A sovereign, stable, prosperous country that is a bridge between the various actors in this neighborhood. With that I conclude and I ask you for your questions and your comments, please.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you, Mr. President. You mentioned that you were with us at Beirut Institute summit in Abu Dhabi in 2015, in the inaugural, and many of your friends and the board members of Beirut Institute are sending you greetings. In particular, Amre Moussa, asked me to mention that to you, because we are very proud that he also is on our board. I will give the floor to His Royal Highness Prince Turki Al-Faisal. I do take note, a very strong note, of the fact that you have repeated the word sovereignty, consolidating the sovereignty of Iraq, multiple times, because you have been speaking about a transgressed country and aggressively transgressed. So we will engage in the role that you're trying to play during the question and answers that you would have with His Royal Highness and with the General and then later on with me, but first I shall give the floor to the co-chair of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, my very dear friend and guiding light for me, His Royal Highness Prince Turki al Faisal, please.

**HRH Prince Turki al Faisal:** Thank you very much. What a pleasure and a privilege to address you as Mr. President, President Bahram Salih. It is, I think, an indication that hopefully, Iraqi is on the mend. And therefore, we are all in awe of what faces you, and challenges and all the problems that not just you, but the whole Iraqi people are facing today. Whether it is terrorism, whether it is the issues of reconstruction, whether it is the issues of Iraq's role in the Arab world, in the world in general. All of these things, they are in need of your wisdom and your insight into all these problems. The questions I have for you, Mr. President, you want me to put them to you all together? Perhaps it is easier for you?

**Raghida Dergham:** One by one.

**HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** One by one?

**Raghida Dergham:** Yes please Your Royal Highness .

**HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** We follow the taskmaster's orders.

**HE Barham Salih:** We all do. We all do your Highness. We all do.

**HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** The first question: now that America is going to withdraw from Iraq, as was recently agreed, as we read in the papers, is there the intention also to seek similar withdrawals from Iranian forces perhaps, and advisors? As you may wish to comment on that.

**HE Barham Salih:** Well, first and foremost, as far as the American presence in Iraq, we have an ongoing strategic dialogue with the United States. Many issues are involved, including the U.S. military presence, the emphasis on ending combat operations in Iraq by the United States and the international coalition. Obviously, this is very much contingent upon capabilities of the Iraqi Security Services, which are improving in no small measure because of the help of the international coalition led by the United States to which we are grateful. We are not one of those who are shy of saying thank you to our partners, when they help us and we genuinely appreciate. The General was there during those difficult times. And those days were the tough days, we still have some ongoing challenges. However, and this is very important, and crucial: both the Iraqi side and the United States actually do not want to see permanent presence of American troops here in Iraq. Both sides are in agreement that Iraqi Security Services should be bolstered, should be developed so that they can be totally self-reliant in the context of things. But the war against terror, whether in Syria, whether even two days ago we have had attacks by ISIS on a number of Iraqi posts in Baghdad, in Kirkuk, in Diyala. It shows us that we still are confronted with that. As far as Iranian military presence in Iraq, I'll be very blunt and very direct about it. The Iranian, our neighbors in Iran, came to our assistance as ISIS swept through Iraqi territory. And that assistance, at that time, was absolutely important and crucial, and they have helped us. To which we are also grateful. But Iraq should be decided, the Iraqi issues, Iraqi sovereign issues like military presence of any foreign country should be decided by the Iraqi government, by the Commander in Chief based on the requirement of Iraq. We seek good relations with Iran, Iran is a vital and important neighbor of ours. And we do not want to go back to the days of conflict with Iran. We do not want to go back to the Iraq-Iran war, which was a terrible catastrophe for Iraq, for Iran, for the entire neighborhood. Having said that, this has to be a relationship between a sovereign state in Iraq and a sovereign state in Iran. We in Iraq, and I can speak for the majority of the Iraqi people, I dare say, people do not want to see interference from any foreign quarters in the domestic affairs of our country. With the end of terrorism, these foreign troops should be leaving, all of them should be leaving. Ee cannot, Iraqi situation and Iraqi dynamics cannot afford to have that. If Iran is here, other countries in this neighborhood, for example, now Turkey has a presence in the mountains of Kurdistan under the guise of combating the PKK. This situation, this dynamic has to change and the way to end it is genuinely the focus has to be in bolstering, emboldening the state of Iraq as the sole authority in this land to be deciding for the Iraqi people and be conducting the Security Services.

**Raghida Dergham:** Your Royal Highness, please, your second question. Very interesting. Go ahead, please.

**HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** Your Excellency, the Hashd al-Shaabi, as we read in the papers, has control of the border between Iraq and Syria. Will Iraqi armed forces and border forces take control from the Hashd?

**HE Barham Salih:** Your question implies that Hashd al-Shaabi is not an Iraqi institution. Hashd al-Shaabi is legalized by a vote in Parliament, and it is part of the institutions of Iraqi Security Services. However, you are referring probably to some groups that are operating outside the Hashd al-Shaabi, possibly Iraqi groups that operate inside Syria. These are not acting on the behest of the Iraqi government. As far as the borders with Syria are concerned, there are a mixed presence of both Iraqi military, Peshmerga forces in certain areas, and certainly Hashd forces in those areas. Again, Your Highness, Hashd al-Shaabi came in to being at a moment of crisis that afflicted the Iraqi state. I remember the day when ISIS swept through Mosul. And they were in reports that Baghdad was about to be overrun by ISIS attacks from Western areas of Iraq. We are dealing, we are still and I will be very direct about it, we are still dealing with the issue of institutionalizing these forces so that they are fully importantly, under the command of Iraqi state. Progress has taken place, but still we do have challenges. And as far as the borders with Syria are concerned, at least on the Iraqi side, the Commander in Chief and the Iraqi government is exercising its control to making sure that no outlaw groups can utilize these border crossings to its advantage.

**HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** Thank you Mr. President. May I just continue with that Raghida. Just another follow up on that. My concern here in Saudi Arabia, of course, is that some of the leaders of the so called Hashd al-Shaabi, have made statements about the kingdom. And its interests and so on. And that is why your reassurance that they are part of the institutionalization of the Iraqi armed forces is welcome. And I'm sure that people here in the kingdom will be very grateful for that reassurance. So, the last question, Mr. President is the and you refer to this, the Iraqi militias that are fighting in Syria, as you say they have gone on their own, they are not under the control of the of the Iraqi authorities. Will there be any attempt by Iraqi authorities to have some control on these volunteers?

**HE Barham Salih:** Your Highness, as far as this kingdom is concerned, Saudi Arabia is a very, very important neighbor of Iraq. And I was honored to visit Riyadh and meet with His Majesty the King and with the Crown Prince, and also had the honor of meeting you in Riyadh. We understand. And statements against Saudi Arabia from Iraq and so-called Iraqi officials are absolutely unacceptable and do not accord with what we as Iraqi government, Iraqi state, want to. I'm not, given the transition in Iraq, and I'm being as clear as I could be. This is not, we have not gone through a normal process in this country. This state has been totally undermined, weakened, ravaged by wars and sanctions and political instability. And this is a reality of it. And I'm not telling you things that you don't know. But I want to assure you, those of us in charge today, we are adamant that we want to have the best of relations with our neighbors. And what has happened with our Saudi neighbors is remarkable in terms of the changes of attitude and the changes of conversation, the improved relationship in terms of trade, the opening of a number of things. And there are security incidents you are aware of, and I'm aware of and we don't want necessarily talk about it, but is being dealt with, has been dealt with. But the challenge continues, and we need to be careful because there are people who want to undermine this relationship. They are absolutely adamant to prevent closer Saudi and Gulf relations with Iraq. We are adamant that Iraq's what I call an *al umma al Arabia*. The Arab depth of Iraq is absolutely important for the stability of Iraq and for the balance of the neighborhood as far as Syria concerned. Frankly, speaking, this war with ISIS transcended borders. ISIS did not recognize borders. And this has become a regional war. And yes, Iraqi groups actually fought in Syria. As far as I can tell of this government, and this Commander in Chief, and this Prime Minister has not condoned any of these groups to go into Syria and fight. But there were Iraqi military, Iraqi Security Services cooperating with the Syrian side, in the war against ISIS. By the same token, with the Kurdish groups in northeast Syria, in Rojava, there were collaborations, etc. Because we were faced with a terrible threat called ISIS. And there were areas of cooperation, partly with the knowledge and acquiescence of our international partners. We would want no Iraqis to be in Syria, acting on their own or the behest of the others without the Iraqi government knowing. I'm just telling you, whatever groups have had inside Syria, the ones that you're referring to are not there at the behest of the Iraqi government.

**HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal:** Yeah, thank you very much. Raghida, yes one more thing. You mentioned that our border, I remember the first time, General Petraeus and I spoke together, and I was Ambassador in Washington. He asked me about Arak, because I had made the comment then that Arak should become a free trade area between Iraq. And now I'm glad to say that under your presidency, and Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi 's direction, that is happening. And it is something that we all welcome, not only as a sign of cooperation between the two countries, but for the well-being of the of the people themselves. So thank you very much for your determination and your leadership in that.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you. Thank you very much, Prince Turki al Faisal. I'm going to go to General David Petraeus. But I just want to say Mr. President, when you spoke of Hashd al-Shaabi you did say that they are part of the security structure of Iraq, but they do not abide by the chain of command. So that is a major problem. I have a feeling that General Petraeus would pick up in one of his questions on this point. General Petraeus.

**General David Petraeus:** Well *Ramadan Kareem, Sayed El Raess*. It was great to see you. *Shukran jazeelan*. Thank you for all that you've done for Iraq, and the Kurdish Regional Government since we first met over 18 years ago, in Sulaimaniyah. And actually, I'm going to another question than the one that we just grilled you on repeatedly about the Hashd al-Shaabi. I think we understand the issues there, frankly. And instead, I want to ask about the recent visit just last night, I believe. Brett McGurk who is the senior member of the National Security Council staff for the President of the United States, and his whole team are out in the region. They were in Baghdad last night. Could you give us any insights about the discussions that were had and what the structure of the continued U.S. presence in Iraq will be?

**HE Barham Salih:** General, again, it's wonderful to see you, and you and I go back a long, long time to 2000.

**General David Petraeus:** *Tsharafna. Tsharafna.*

**HE Barham Salih:** By the way, I as I said, I invite you to come to Baghdad with the Beirut Institute, *inshallah*, we will host it there and also go to Sulaimaniyah. I want to tell you that General Petraeus’s name is engraved on the foundation stone of Sulaimaniyah Airport. He helped us build it that day I remember.

**General David Petraeus:** Together with yours.

**HE Barham Salih:** Yesterday, we had the American delegation here with Mr. Brett McGurk, as well as the council over the State Department and other representatives of U.S. government agencies. They went to Riyadh, Abu Dhabi. I think today they're going to Cairo as well. Their message was twofold. One, dealing with the Middle East saying this ‘notion that the Biden administration is somehow de prioritizing the Middle East is not the case’. This remains a vital region for the United States and we want to continue our partnerships and deal with these issues. Obviously, then, the issue of Iraq can be a vital importance of Iraq in terms of U.S. policy towards the Middle East was reaffirmed. Commitment to the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States. And in that context, General, Iraq's relations with the United States has been largely defined by the security collaboration, and security cooperation. And this is truly not doing justice to that relationship. The United States is an important global power. What matters to Iraq, matters to the Middle East. And we do have a strategic framework agreement that was voted on by Iraqi Parliament that talks about culture, that talks about economic relations, political collaboration. We spoke at length about how to develop these areas of cooperation. And Iraq is on the cusp of some major economic restructuring and economic development plans. Our cooperation in these areas remain important. Education is a matter of priority to me, at least personally, is an area where we need to cooperate obviously. COVID has been an issue that we talked about. So there was a range of conversation points. But the message was one of commitment, was one of supporting Iraq's regional initiatives, working with the neighbors trying to bring the neighborhood together, and one of affirmation of respect for Iraq's sovereignty.

**Raghida Dergham:** General Petraeus?

**General David Petraeus:** Let me follow on by asking, as you'll recall, Minister of Finance Allawi visited the United States with Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi back in 2019. What he did, he laid out a very ambitious plan for reform of how the Iraqi government operated. How do you assess the subsequent progress in making those plans reality?

**HE Barham Salih:** Well, reality is Iraq is a tough country. And when you are ruled by a parliamentary democracy, and you have either a 329 Members of Parliament, they each have an opinion, or sometimes more than one opinion makes it difficult. However, having said that, our Finance Minister was able to present to Parliament and to the political leadership of the country, a white paper that detailed the reality of Iraq's economic situation status, which is difficult dire, we have a rentier economy of the worst kind. And if we do not do the reforms, to restructure the economy and turn it around, we would be in real trouble. I want to give you some statistics, General, on this matter. Today, Iraq's population is about 14 million. By 2030, it could reach 53-54 million. We have about 70% of our population below the age of 30. We can't rely exclusively on revenues from oil. And we can't create jobs for our younger population without some structural reforms, and doing reforms in a society like Iraq with the challenges we face is not easy. To be fair to the Prime Minister, to the government, to our Finance Minister, they were able to present this white paper and it was endorsed by Parliament, or the relevant committees, it was endorsed by Cabinet. We have a budget now. And that was quite, quite difficult to pass through Parliament. And it's on track. There was a devaluation of Iraqi currency as a way of helping with some financial gaps that we have had, but also to encourage domestic production in the country. This was done in conjunction with the IMF. The overall plans of the government enjoys the support of G7. I'm hopeful about it, it’s going to be a bumpy road, especially as we enter an election year. In an election year, politicians would like to promise things that they cannot afford. And I hope we will be able to stay our ground and not to let into some of these excessive demands of political actors. But so far, so good.

**General David Petraeus:** And then finally, *Sayed El Raess*, how do you assess the ability of the Iraqi Security Forces to continue the pursuit of the remnants of the Islamic State which are now operating as insurgents, as terrorist cells and essentially to find, to detain them, or if necessary, to kill them?

**HE Barham Salih:** General, I think it's fair to say Iraqi Security Services have improved, have improved in many, many ways. And I'm proud of their service and their commitment and their professionalism. But we still have some way to go, particularly in terms of developing capabilities for which the international coalition has been helpful and has been there. I think by and large, one can say that Iraqi Security Services, with the experience that they have accumulated in the war against ISIS, with the help of our international partners, have really developed these capabilities. However, and you as a military commander understand this, at the end of the day, the war against ISIS and terrorism cannot be won by military means. I want to affirm that we have succeeded in liberating our land with the help of our friends. But terrorism remains, part of which is still connected with what is happening in Syria, this ongoing conflict, this terrible human tragedy. Idlib the place where you have thousands of extremists. And this is the heart of the urban Middle East. This is not the Tora Bora of Afghanistan. This is not where you have Bin Laden and few associates in these remote caves. You have thousands of armed, trained people in the heart of the Middle East. In that sense, you also need a regional framework to deal with this issue. Iraq on its own, and for that matter the United States on its own, cannot deal with this. We need to bring the various actors in the neighborhood, including the Turks, including the Iranians, including our Arab neighbors all into a regional framework that can really work on combating this scourge of terrorism and extremism, and requires political solutions as well, in bringing back these communities that were devastated by war, and were displaced. Deal with the root causes of this problem, otherwise, I am afraid we will continue to deal with this problem for some time to come.

**Raghida Dergham:** Mr. President, I want to do a quick follow up to a General David Petraeus’s question. Are there efforts to establish a court to prosecute ISIS crimes in Baghdad? I mean, is there going to be any legislation to prosecute war crimes?

**HE Barham Salih:** There is an ongoing conversation with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on this matter. Obviously, Iraqi law allows for prosecution of ISIS criminals, and many had been prosecuted, and many have been imprisoned. But we do have a problem with some of the foreign detainees that we have, when we still need to get into an agreement with the international actors to really take up responsibilities with this matter. Many, by the way, Raghida, this is one of the problems that we have in our part of the world. And I can say this bluntly: everybody wants to throw their problems upon us in this neighborhood. And you have many foreign fighters. And their countries don't own up to them. We still have the ongoing problem of Al Hawl camp, and many so-called refugees or families of these ISIS fighters. And many in the international community still expect Iraq to deal with this problem on its own. And we simply cannot. We need international collaboration and we need an international framework to deal with these issues.

**Raghida Dergham:** Noted. Stay with me, Mr. President, I'm going to go into a one-on-one conversation with you. But I first want to thank His Royal Highness Prince Turki al Faisal and General David Petraeus for fantastic questions and fantastic feedback and engagement. And I thought was a really brilliant conversation. Stay with us as attendees. We will not see you on our screen. But don't leave. There's going to be an interesting conversation right now between the President and I. So I've going to thank you again. And Mr. President, I will turn to-Bye-bye Prince Turki al Faisal, bye-bye General David Petraeus. President Barnham Saleh. I want to stay with the visit of Brett McGurk, who is a friend, a friend of the Institute.

**HE Barham Salih:** He was with us a friend of the Institute as well. Yes.

**Raghida Dergham:** And he was with us at the Summit in Abu Dhabi. He also honored us by being part of the e-Policy Circles and he's a friend and his brilliant man. So let me ask you about that visit. Did he come to you to say and ‘take it easy on us. We couldn't handle the situation with you know, with an approach that is the Trump approach’, brings in the issue of missiles and bring in the issue of the original behavior together with the JCPOA? They split it in the Biden administration. Did Brett McGurk come to say, ‘just don't worry, you know, we had to do this. But don't worry’? Tell me about that message.

**HE Barham Salih:** Well, I think his message was one of reassurance, of continued commitment to this part of the world, certainly commitment to Iraq. Obviously, we want to see a diffusion of this crisis between Iran and the United States and the international community for that matter, these international actors, we would like to see a resolution. This is this issue of JCPOA. But I will be very blunt. Iran is our neighbor, we want it to be incorporated into the regional framework. And this is important for us and for the neighborhood, but we want also to be very, very careful about our sovereignty about our country, about our interest. We want Iraq not to be a mere subtext of other dynamics in this neighborhood. Iraq is an important player and stability in this part of the world cannot be attained without due regard to Iraqi interests as well.

**Raghida Dergham:** But Mr. President it must feel a bit awkward that comes the Biden administration, and they take away the tools of influence and say, wait it out. In as far as, for example, in the case of Iraq, retaining, getting its full sovereignty with require and pressuring Iran, but this administration is saying ‘that's later. That's that now’. Are you-

**HE Barham Salih:** I don’t think they say, they did not say that to us. I mean, this is not the message that we got. And this is not the type of conversation that we have with the United States. I’ll be, again, very direct. Iraq is a country that has been in serious disrepair for decades. Raghida, it's really important to put things in context and not to be judgmental about it. My generation, I’m a Kurd, from 1963, Kurdistan has been in a state of conflict. If you talk the rest of Iraq, probably since 1980, Iraq-Iran war, 1991 the Kuwait invasion, the sanctions 2003, the onslaught of waves of terrorism, after terrorism. A country that has been condemned to this state of conflict over the last 40-50 years. And, you know, you cannot be too judgmental about it. This has been a country that has been embroiled in outside wars, in internal repression, genocide, you name it, and re-regaining our sovereignty, or establishing our sovereignty in the truest sense of the word, first and foremost requires a political will, a serious decision by Iraqis themselves. The Americans cannot deliver that for us.

**Raghida Dergham:** Yeah, okay. And-

**HE Barham Salih:** So Iraqis have to be serious about it. And I dare say, most Iraqis, and I want to refer to something very significantly. They were protest movement that swept Iraq in 2019. These young Iraqis went to the streets, demanding one thing: *Nureed Watan*. ‘We want our homeland back’. Oh, that was such a profound statement about what Iraqis are after. I hope, I hope, with the help of our friends, with the help of our neighbors, we really can realize this objective because without it, without a sovereign Iraq that is at peace with itself first and foremost and at peace with its neighbors, there can be no stability in this part of the world.

**Raghida Dergham:** You will have to forgive me for pushing back.

**HE Barham Salih:** I'll forgive you always, I have no choice.

**Raghida Dergham:** The people who went on the streets also were complaining about the fact that the Central Bank of Iraq was being depleted by forces coming in from Iran and the Revolutionary Guards in particular, depleting the resources of the Central Bank, in order to help out their own projects, whether it was in Yemen or Syria or Hezbollah in Lebanon. And you know, the government was unable, incapable, unwilling, uninterested, I don't know what's the right word, in doing something about that. So how can you get sovereignty, full sovereignty, if you can't get control of your own resources in the Central Bank, and how can you have sovereignty if Hashd al-Shaabi, which is part of your security apparatus structure does not abide by the chain of command? Can you please-

**HE Barham Salih:** I think that being, with all due respect, you’re being somewhat selective about how you analyze a situation, I think, fair to say most of Hashd al-Shaabi are abiding by the chain of command and they fought heroically against ISIS, and without their contribution and their sacrifice, we would not be where we are today, vis-a-vis ISIS. And again, I underlined the word most. And there are issues with elements of Hashd, as there are elements with other armed forces in Iraq. The key theme is we need to bring all armed forces of the country totally and unequivocally under the state control. Is it so today? Absolutely not. We still have some way to go. But to basically generalize the situation as one of total lawlessness, I disagree with I look at the context of things, things have improved, things are moving along. But we still do have problems as far as the corruption. Corruption is not unique to any single group, by the way. It's remarkable. We talk about Iraqi national unity, my take on it. Corruption does not know a sect, does not know an ethnicity. Corruption is quite an amazing phenomenon that brings corrupt people across the political and ethnic and sectarian divide. And basically, corruption is the political economy of conflict. That is why a young chap in Basrah and a young chap in Anbar and in Mosul and Suleimania, an impact that genuine Iraqis, and you are from this region, and you understand what I'm talking about. I'm proud of my identity. I'm proud of my culture, I'm proud of my ethnicity as a Kurd. But at the end of the day a Kurd and a Shia and an Arab, a Turkoman, a Yazidi all want a dignified life, decent schools, decent health service. Seriously. Again, there are people who are doing the opposite of that Raghida. I'm not saying. I’m just, essentially what we're trying to do in this country, trying to move our country in the right direction. The protest movement demanded early elections, because the last elections, they saw it, for good reason, as problematic, fraudulent, you name it. Now, we are entering into the area where we are planning for the next elections in October. Hopefully, Iraqis will have a free and fair elections. And hopefully, our international partners will help provide a degree of observation that will give confidence to the population. These elections are different from what we have had before, because the Iraqis want to take back their homeland. And this is please important-

**Raghida Dergham:** Mr. President, do you have a plan? Are you doing things in order to get total control of your Central Bank, just like the people in Iraq are demanding?

**HE Barham Salih:** I think there were important changes in the Central Bank. Central Bank is audited by the Iraqi Parliament and other institutions. And the international community international financial system is also very, very much following what is happening not just here in Iraq, across the region. I think depicting that situation in that way, I'm not saying that there are no problems, certainly in the exchange of dollars, and this is a major, major theme. People are worried that we lose in a lot of hard currency because of the *Souk al Mazab*, the auction of hard currency. Many issues have been taken up and some measures have been taken, but we still have a problem and I tell you frankly speaking, Iraq is faced with the twin problems of terror and outlaw groups and corruption, because they feed on one another.

**Raghida Dergham:** Whose corruption is worse? Yours or ours in Lebanon?

**HE Barham Salih:** *Walahi.* Look, I feel obviously I have-how shall I say? Lebanon is a dear country, and many people used to snipe at Lebanon by the word ‘lebanization’. As a young person, everybody looked to Lebanon as a model of tolerance, of peace, of culture. Everybody who wanted to go on a holiday would go to Lebanon, all refugees, all the political activists of the time would end up in Lebanon. Regrettably, Lebanon also became a victim of its own political system, as well as regional interferences. The scale of corruption in Lebanon, you know better about it, but as far as I can tell you corruption is a big, big impediment to political reforms in this country because again, political economy of conflict is corruption. Corruption feeds conflict, conflict feeds corruption. And corruption ends up with manipulating elections, with manipulating media, it is trickle down. And it is a problem. And in that context, I would say also, Raghida, corruption cannot be dealt with only in a local context. Corruption is a global phenomenon. And as we have had an international coalition to fight ISIS, I have recommended in my UN address twice, actually, this year and last year, the formation of an international coalition to combat corruption. Because if you control the money, take it from me, much of the support for this issue of terrorism will dry up. Terrorism and conflict without money, ill-gotten money from corruption, cannot be sustained. So the two are intertwined.

**Raghida Dergham:** Well, that's why it's important to dry the wrong sources, that were used by the wrong players. Mr. President, I have so many questions, I got to be very quick. Let me start with Iraq hosting the Saudi-Iranian talks. Because I want to talk about Turkey later, I want to talk about, you know, several different things. So help me out, let’s be quick here if it's possible, if you permit me. You have hosted, how many by the way, how many rounds of Saudi-Iranian talks, how many rounds?

**HE Barham Salih:** You are asking a direct question? Is more than once.

**Raghida Dergham:** Yeah, okay. You don't want to say anymore. Okay. let me-

**HE Barham Salih:** But is ongoing, and it is important, it is significant. And for Iraq, to be able to play that convenient role between these regional actors is important. And again, the theme is a stable, sovereign Iraq is a common interest of our neighbors. Instead of Iraq being a source of instability, let it be the common binding theme for bringing the region together.

**Raghida Dergham:** So give me kindly, quick answers to some of these questions. Has there been significant progress made on Yemen? Let's start with that.

**HE Barham Salih:** Again, I'm not going to go into details. But we all want to see an end to this. Conflict in Yemen is a humanitarian catastrophe. And it is also a security problem for the entire neighborhood. We support and acknowledge the initiative of Saudi Arabia, about peace in Yemen. And I think there is some positive development by the interested parties in making this happen.

**Raghida Dergham:** Interesting. Second, was the rapprochement that we have witnessed in the last few days between Saudi Arabia and Syria part or as a consequence of the conversation that is taking place between Saudi Arabia and Iran via Iraq.

**HE Barham Salih:** In my view, as far as, and again, I'm not going to go into too much detail about this, from what I have heard from our Saudi partners and friends, as well as other Gulf leaders, everybody recognizes that this situation in Syria needs to be resolved. And again, Raghida, Syria has been a terrible, terrible tragedy in every sense of the word. So many years after this conflict, 1 million Syrian children born in refugee camps, we still are talking about very bad options in Syria. So I'm hopeful that we from an Iraqi perspective, we are for incorporating Syria back into the Arab League. There can be no viable solution without bringing back Syria into the process and hopefully a political process that will see a respect of the desire of Syrian people for peace and for stability in their country.

**Raghida Dergham:** So you saying total rehabilitation of Syria with the President Bashar Al Assad, at the helm? Regardless of what happened? And go ahead, and then I will ask the-

**HE Barham Salih:** That this is not for me to decide, that is for the Syrian people to decide, but I'm talking about a dynamics in Syria, that we cannot afford the status quo. This has to move. This cannot turn into a new normal. Again, I'm worried about the level of extremism that exists in various pockets of Syria. But more importantly, Raghida, the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people cannot be tolerated. We are for Iraq supports the re-admission of Syria back into the Arab League, and we should be having a conversation there as opposed to in different ways.

**Raghida Dergham:** Mr. President, many Lebanese feel that you're dropping the ball on Lebanon because a lot of our resources are being smuggled into Syria. While people in our country are about to go into starvation. You dropping the ball, but as if like, you know, ‘okay, let's just fix the Syria situation and we don't have it. You know, what about Lebanon’? So why are you dropping the ball on that?

**HE Barham Salih:** I don’t say that. I don't say that and you probably all have followed events. Iraq has been trying to be as helpful as it can to Lebanon, Lebanon is a very dear country to us. And the people of Lebanon have been always gracious to Iraq and to the neighborhood. And there are a variety of measures that the Government of Iraq and the Prime Minister and others have done in order to help see Lebanese people through this difficult crisis. Again, when we talk about the Syria dynamics, this is not to say to ignore Lebanon. Lebanon, remains an important actor and obviously, the instability in Lebanon, the impasse in Lebanon is one of major concern. And we continue to talk to our Lebanese partners about this, about how to push the dynamics in Lebanon in the right direction.

**Raghida Dergham:** But I want to repeat what you said the very profound statement you made at the very beginning. The need for your country to have a stable, sovereign Iraq. To emphasize about the sovereignty of your country. Why isn't Lebanon's sovereignty on the table when you when all of you are discussing the return of Syria to the Arab League? Why is that country is allowed to be violated?

**HE Barham Salih:** Why should that be at the expense?

**Raghida Dergham:** [unclear audio] conditions rather than-

**HE Barham Salih:** Raghida, I don't see that to be at the expense of Lebanon sovereignty. We believe, genuinely, let me tell you, essentially, decades of these conflicts, decades of these subjugation, interferences ended up with hurting everybody. Nobody has won out of Syria’s intervention in Lebanon, the Syrians did not win. Lebanese did not win. This is not an invitation for Syria to interfere in the affairs of Lebanon. On the contrary, what we are trying to say is we need to have a regional dialogue, basically, respecting the sovereignty of each other.

**Raghida Dergham:** You're having this regional dialogue with Egypt and with the Jordan, that trilateral dialogue. I don't know whether I mean, again, let me, again, Lebanon is out of that dialogue, but let me just ask you, will you be starting any conversation to speak about respect of borders between Iraq and Syria, between Syria and Lebanon, so that there will be demarcation of borders, and stop the smuggling at each other's expenses? Whether it is weapons or whether it's food or whether it is- Is there nothing going on? Or should you not do that all of you leaders in this part of the world?

**HE Barham Salih:** So, that's a very valid question. And if we feel that we can have a solution in Iraq, that would be immune from implications of Syria, or Lebanon is also not very viable. As far as our relations with Jordan and Egypt is very important. This has developed over the past couple of years. And we are hopeful about developing our economic relations, building infrastructure work, connecting electricity networks, together with our neighbors in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia with the Gulf. These are profound in terms of changing the dynamics of relations across this neighborhood. I want to come back to one fundamental point, Iraq Mesopotamia. Essentially, is the heartland of this neighborhood. This is where historically Persia, Anatolia and Arabia came. And this is where regional dynamics were defined. When Iraq was weak, compromised, engulfed the entire neighborhood into conflict. It was not only Iraqis who suffered everybody else has suffered. Look at the amount of money that was wasted, because of these problems, somehow related to Iraq and emanating from Iraq. I hope we can be successful in what we hope for but I know we cannot be successful without giving due regard to the neighborhood as a whole. And there are some basic principles that needs to be established. One of which is respect for sovereignty. We talk nowadays increasingly, and we talking about Mesopotamia. And we talk about environmental challenges. We talk about climate change. Iraq, when this was the green land of the Middle East. Environmental devastation that has afflicted this country because of mismanagement because of wars because of deforestation, desertification, redirection of water to the Euphrates and to Tigris. We cannot deal with these environmental challenges unless we deal with the neighborhood in a larger context. So all these issues and I don't want to be too centric about where I am today. But starting from Iraq, working with our neighbors, and working on these ambitious plans for, again, consolidating our sovereignty, revitalizing our economy and working on infrastructure that will bind us to our neighbors, working on environmental initiatives that will help us come together is the way to go forward.

**Raghida Dergham:** And I have three minutes and I have so many important questions. Turkey is apparently, the Turkish Defense Minister went into the Iraqi territory, obviously, without permission and you objected. And some people are speaking of Turkish incursion into the Iraqi territory. Brett McGurk, by the way, visited Kurdistan, which I thought was interesting, I'd like you to comment on that. And the American Turkish relations have been, you know, dented. I mean, they have been, they took a stern turn, if you will. Can you just address this in like a minute and a half? Because I still have one more question about the missile attack in Erbil and attacks on the facilities and what conversation are you having with Iran on that? I bet you want to take the Turkish question first.

**HE Barham Salih:** Okay, I mean, obviously, Turkey is a very important neighbor of Iraq, and we want to have very good relations with Turkey. Turkey has security concerns about the borders, about the presence of the PKK. It makes no secret of these concerns. But we say to our Turkish neighbors, the way to deal with these things cannot be done by unilateral action by violating Iraqi sovereignty. It has to be done in conjunction and collaboration between the Iraqi government and Turkey, and including the Kurdistan Regional Government. The visit of the Turkish Defense Minister was unwelcomed by the Iraqi government. A protest was submitted to the Turkish side on this matter, and we hope that this could be dealt with swiftly. And again, this is what I talked about: Iraqi sovereignty is multifaceted.

**Raghida Dergham:** And Brett McGurk’s visit to Kurdistan?

**HE Barham Salih:** And the visit of the American delegation to Kurdistan is quite normal and frequent. And most foreign delegations who come to back that they end up visiting Erbil. Erbil is an important place. I was in Erbil two days ago when I met with the Kurdish leadership and we have had some good conversations.

**Raghida Dergham:** And with the Iranians about the attacks, about the missile attacks in Erbil.

**HE Barham Salih:** These attacks are unacceptable. No of course. Mr. Zarif was here in Baghdad last week, we have had long conversations and very serious conversations. Obviously, the government of Iraq considers these attacks acts of terrorism and acts of sabotage and we are confronting them. And by the way, some culprits have been apprehended, at least in relation to the first attack on Erbil. These are challenges to our sovereignty, and we should take them on.

**Raghida Dergham:** Mr. President, one last word. Is there a grand bargain in the making? Should people have be hopeful or are we going to-

**HE Barham Salih:** Well, my humble experience, modest experience of the world is that we need us in this neighborhood to work on our grand bargain, not to wait for outsiders to do it for us. Thank you so much for having me Raghida. You have been most kind and most gracious. Thank you.