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“The Other Iraq”

*By Nebraska Attorney General Jon Bruning*

I take my responsibility of protecting Nebraskans and building a stronger, safer future for our families very seriously. With that responsibility comes an obligation to learn more about the threats and opportunities that surround us.

When we think of the Iraq where our troops are fighting and sacrificing their lives, many of us may picture what we see on the news. An Iraq plagued by unrest, roadside bombs and killing, along with innocent people suffering - a war-torn, destroyed country.

Recently, at the request of the Kurdistan Regional Government, I spent several days in the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq, a region known as “the other Iraq.” I was honored that government officials came to me as Nebraska’s Attorney General to learn my perspective on the rule of law and how we go about serving our citizens.

What I saw in the Kurdistan Region was so inherently different from the rest of the country that I’m compelled to share my experience with Nebraskans.

Kurdistan is a place where there is personal security and political stability. There are more than 40 million Kurds who are the largest ethnic group in the world without their own country. The thriving democracy is a sign of success, and the people are reaching out to Americans. It is truly a wonderful place, and the Kurds are very kind and very much pro-United States.

History tells the story. From 1987 to 1989, Saddam Hussein released his wrath upon the Kurds with what was called the “Anfal Campaign.” An estimated 180,000 Kurds were killed.

Reminders of this genocide are still there. I visited what’s called the “Red House.” It’s a prison where Saddam’s men tortured and killed thousands of Kurds. Today, what you see in Kurdistan are very few men in their 40s and 50s. The Kurds turned the other cheek many, many times despite Saddam’s atrocities and didn’t return those atrocities in kind.

A few months after Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, Americans came in to stop him. In 1991, we encouraged the Kurds to rebel against Saddam, and they did. Shortly after that, we abandoned them.

Saddam Hussein treated the Kurds brutally, yet they are prospering. They were at our right-hand during our initial effort against him in 2003. The Kurds have been open and honest. There haven't been any American deaths in the region for years nor has there been the violence that many believe is a hallmark of Iraq. However, peace and stability in the region are somewhat dependent on our presence there.

Earlier this month I met with Kurdistan's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani. We had a frank discussion where he implored the American people to remain in Iraq until stability has been achieved across the entire country, not just in Kurdistan. He made it clear he thinks we're moving in the right direction.

Now, the Kurds want to increase connections with American state leaders and show that Kurdistan is not only safe, but its people are thriving and the area is ripe with opportunity for American investment.

Stability in the region and open communication among leaders not only helps the Kurds, it makes for a stronger America and a safer Nebraska.