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## **IRAQ'S CHIEF DIPLOMAT IN U.S. CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT HIS NATION'S FUTURE**

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Iraq is plagued with problems: terrorism, sectarian strife and a catastrophic drop in the price of oil, the lifeblood of the Iraqi economy.

But the Iraqi ambassador to the United States was cautiously optimistic about his countrys future in a speech Thursday at Raleighs City Club.

Ambassador H.E. Lukman Faily pointed to an example that might surprise many Americans: the mass demonstrations in Baghadays Green Zone led by the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia cleric who has been a vociferous critic of the American occupation of Iraq.

In protesting government corruption, Al-Sadr has demanded that the prime minister fire his cabinet and replace the ministers with technocrats

And the ambassador, a buttoned-down accountant with an MBA from an English university and two decades in international business, agrees with populist cleric.

Corruption is deep, Faily said. This is a genuine movement for the people, for social justice and good governance.

Faily spoke to a gathering of Raleighs movers and shakers on the 29th floor of the Wells Fargo tower. The elegant and ordered surroundings acted as counterpoint to the reality of life in Iraq.

I can assure you, we will keep making mistakes, Faily said.

Two-thirds of the population is under the age of 35. The population grows by a million people a year. Iraq must create jobs or face unrest from its young population, who are avid users of social media.

Job creation and investment are particularly difficult at the moment. The collapse of oil prices has driven the price of oil down 60 percent, depriving the state of revenue.

Iraq has 3.5 million internally displaced people - citizens who are refugees in their own country. Hundreds of thousands have fled to Europe over the past year, in addition to the brain drain of the educated middle class during the reign of Saddam Hussein.

And there is ISIS, the terrorist army known for beheadings, burning captives alive and the recent murderous attacks on civilians in Paris and Brussels. ISIS used to occupy 40 percent of Iraqi territory, which is now below 20 percent.

ISIS the group can be defeated, but its underlying ideas and themes will be harder to root out, Faily said.

It has its own self-destruct button, because of its viciousness and its unwillingness to accommodate anyone else, he said.

Iraq is making progress toward ending the appeal of groups like ISIS, the ambassador said. The democracy and elections are chaotic and sometimes vicious, but politics is better than war. Some progress is being made fighting corruption. Most leaders believe in holding Iraq together rather than splintering into Kurdish, Shia and Sunni states.

There will be a ripple on effect of partition that will not end with Iraq, Faily said. It will create a tsunami in the region.

And Faily shared ideas for weaning Iraq from its dependence on oil.

The country is fertile and has great agricultural potential, he said.

The housing sector is begging for investment: the average Iraqi household is home to 12 people.

And he proposed a sector that undoubtedly surprised most listeners.

Tourism, he said. Iraq is the cradle of civilization, and you have at least five or six civilizations on top of each other ... Here is a good story to tell, Iraq is not a country of violence but one that attracts tourism.

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Kaynak/Source: