

Retired General on Importance of Kurds to the US

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On Tuesday, February 23, 2016, the Learning Institute for Elders (LIFE) and the UCF Global Perspectives hosted retired Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ernie Audino in the Pegasus Ballroom for a special feature of the LIFE Global Issues Series. His presentation, “Why the Kurds Matter to the United States,” engaged an audience of over 300 LIFE members and students with personal anecdotes from his time embedded with Kurdish peshmerga forces in 2005 and 2006.

Audino discussed Kurdish identity and history before moving on to U.S. foreign policy and the potential Kurdish forces have as strategic allies for the U.S. Audino described the Kurds, who live in parts of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, as a remarkable people who “have taken themselves from the ashes of genocide and built themselves—even dealing with ISIS right now—into the most peace-loving people.”



General Audino discussed the importance of Kurdish/U.S. relationships.

Audino described his time with the peshmerga—the combat forces of Kurdistan—fondly, saying he was treated as “their brother, father and son.” He said he felt at home among the Kurds as they shared the values of democracy, human rights and freedom of religion.

Regarding the strategic potential of U.S.-Kurdish relations, Audino stressed the importance of having another strong democratic ally in the Middle East. He maintained that by supporting the Kurdish people, the U.S. could realize its goal of defeating ISIS as well as promote stability in the region by curtailing Iranian ambition and mitigating Russian influence.

Audino praised the efficacy of Kurdish forces in the frontlines of “the war of defending humanity” against ISIS. He noted that though Kurdish forces are often outnumbered and outgunned, they have succeeded in protecting their land, administering reclaimed areas and accepting nearly 1.8 million refugees into Kurdish territory. Audino said that Kurdish forces were able to reclaim the city of Kirkuk after Iraqi military forces deserted it in June of 2014, and now have Mosul, the ISIS-held and second-largest city in Iraq, surrounded on three sides with its supply lines interrupted.

When an audience member asked whether a status of forces agreement—whereby a host country allows another to establish a military base within its borders—would work in the region, Audino responded affirmatively. He said that Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi would not sign such an agreement, but that the Kurdish President Masoud Barzani would likely sign one. “[The Kurds] want a U.S. base there and that’s one thing we could do to help,” said Audino. “We need to be preparing for the day that Iraq is irrevocably broken.”

Another audience member then asked whether or not Audino believed a sovereign Kurdish state would ever be established, to which the answer was yes. He cited a non-binding Iraqi referendum in which 98% supported a sovereign Kurdish state. Reinforcing the theme of his lecture, Audino emphasized the importance of U.S. support for the Kurdish peshmerga forces. “Directly equipping the peshmerga is in *our* best interest,” he concluded.