

Iraqi Turkmen leader fears assimilation of Turkmen



Arshad Al-Salihi, leader of the Iraqi Turkmen Front (Photo: Today's Zaman, Mevlüt Karabulut)
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Attacks against Iraqi Turkmen, which seem to have significantly increased in the past two years, could at this rate lead to the assimilation of Iraqi Turkmen and their leaving the Iraqi geography they currently inhabit, the leader of the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITC) has said.

“Turkmen identity in Iraq risks being assimilated,” Arshad Al-Salihi, leader of the ITC who is on a visit to Turkey, told Today's Zaman in an exclusive interview. “In the last two years, both Turkmen and the geography in which they live have been a target of [terrorist] attacks,” he added.

Al-Salihi himself narrowly escaped a bomb attack against his life in Kirkuk when a roadside mine exploded on Sunday, while Salihi's vehicle, along with other cars in the convoy, was passing by. Salihi, who also miraculously escaped an assassination attempt in 2011, says that for the future of Turkmen identity in Iraq, the general elections to take place on April 30 are very important. Underlining that in a country deeply divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, he said it's essential for Turkmen to act together to be able to obtain more seats and be heard in the Iraqi parliament. He called on all Turkmen to come together for the elections under a common ITC list in Kirkuk, a city where Turkmen make up almost one-third of the population -- the city's demography having changed in favor of Kurds and Arabs with new settlements in past years.

Concerned that the Iraqi people may well vote based on their tribal identity, Salihi emphasized that they would have no discrimination towards any Turkmen based on sectarian belonging or political

stance in the formation of the list. "We will announce a [common] Turkmen list in Kirkuk at the earliest time," he said.

In an earlier attack against Turkmen, ITC Vice President Ali Haşim Muhtaroglu and the former vice governor of Selahaddin province, Ahmet Koca, a Turkmen, were killed together with 13 people in bomb attacks in Tuz Khurmato, a Turkmen city in Iraq's Selahaddin province.

In Kirkuk on Thursday, seemingly al-Qaeda militants positioned at the top of a shopping mall launched an attack against a police station. At the end of a standoff lasting about an hour, the police killed the terrorists, but the mall was also largely damaged.

Turkmen paid \$55 million in ransom since 2009

Salihi, who met both with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu during his visit, strongly believes that as part of an effort to drive Turkmen out of the area they live, Turkmen are also targeted economically. Noting that the owner of the mall, most of those who owned a shop in the mall and owners of most houses around the mall were Turkmen, Salihi said: "The Turkmen economy is also being targeted." Since 2009, abducted Turkmen business people, Turkmen with various professions, have had to pay in ransom a total of \$55 million to have their freedom.

Most of the Turkmen population in Iraq live in areas known as disputed territory, a territory between Arab and Kurdish territories and claimed by both Kurds and Arabs. Turkmen, whom Salihi describes as the cement for Iraq to remain unified, favor the unity of Iraq, because otherwise they would have to be torn apart between Arabs and Kurds in a potential armed conflict between Kurds and Arabs over disputed territories that include cities such as oil-rich Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmato among others. As the Turkmen in Iraq are the only major ethnic group that does not have an armed security unit of their own, they become easy targets in terrorist attacks. "These attacks aim to push Turkmen from the region," maintained Salihi, who believes that a possible break-up of the country, which he fears may come to happen, would be easier when Turkmen are not around.

Following a number of attacks in Tuz Khurmato this year, at least several hundred families left the town to settle down in cities such as Najaf and Karbala in the south of Iraq, while some of the families went to Kirkuk or to Turkey, said Salihi. The attacks against Turkmen, he believes, are also connected with Turkmen deputies having raised their voices in Iraqi parliament for the rights of Turkmen.

Turkmen demand own security force and territory

It's for this reason that Salihi thinks a security force composed of Turkmen, which neither the Iraqi central government nor the Kurds in the north of the country favor, is needed. "We would be suspicious of whoever is against the establishment of such a security unit," Salihi said, underlining that Turkmen would never use the weapons either against the Kurds or the central government. According to Salihi, Turkmen feel they have been denied their share in the government of the country and should have authority in the government of the region they live in. "A Turkmen region should be formed," he said, citing Kurdish, Shia and Sunni regions in Iraq as examples. As to the Kirkuk province over which Arabs and Kurds nearly clashed in the past, the oil-rich city should, he believes, be granted a special, autonomous-like status whereby Turkmen, Arabs and Kurds jointly participate in the government of the province.

Erdođan should visit Kirkuk

Salihi, who met for the first time with Erdođan on the occasion of his visit, sounded a little reproachful towards Turkish officials for their apparent lack of attention towards Iraqi Turkmen's problems. Although making a point of noting that Iraqi Turkmen are, in the first place, citizens of Iraq, he said, "I hope Turkey will establish closer ties with us [in the future]."

"We are meeting with Turkish officials less often than everybody," added Salihi, implying that Turkish officials have in the past two years or so gotten together with Iraqi Kurdish officials more often than with Iraqi Turkmen.

Following a visit by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki to Turkey, Erdođan plans to pay a visit to two capitals in Iraq, Bagdad and the Kurds' capital Arbil. But Salihi thinks Erdođan must visit Kirkuk if he goes to Iraq. "If Erdođan visits both capitals, he should absolutely also pay a visit to Kirkuk. Otherwise, Turkmen would feel hurt," he stated.

Keywords: [iraq](#), [turkmen leader](#), [fear of assimilation](#)