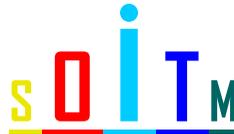


Conference Report

Iraqi Turkmen:

The Human Rights Situation and Crisis in Kerkuk

26 – 27 March 2007, the European Parliament, Brussels



Organised by:

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)

The Iraqi Turkmen Human Rights Research Foundation (SOITM)

In partnership with

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

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Introduction

The conference *Iraqi Turkmen: the Human Rights Situation and Crisis in Kerkuk* was organised jointly by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and the Iraqi Turkmen Human Rights Research Foundation (SOITM), and held at the European Parliament in Brussels from 26 to 27 March 2007.

The conference was organised with the aim of giving voice to Iraq's third largest community, the Iraq Turkmen, and raising awareness of their rapidly deteriorating human rights situation. This was considered especially important at a time when tensions in northern Iraq are rising rapidly ahead of a constitutionally mandated referendum on the future status of the oil rich city of Kerkuk. With the process of reversing the demographic distortions imposed under Ba'ath Party rule clearly far from complete and itself subject to charges of distortion, the referendum appears poised to risk fostering further discontent and ethnic tension, as opposed to stability and security.

All parties to the conflict profess an interest to a peaceful resolution - surely the only option for the people of northern Iraq following decades of persecution and violence under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. A prevailing atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion, fuelled by violence and chronic insecurity, continues however to undermine the possibility of meaningful and constructive dialogue between the conflicting parties.

The Iraqi Turkmen in particular feel frustrated by the political process that has followed the fall of Ba'ath Party rule. Persecution had all but destroyed Turkmen civil society and political organisation, and as a result, their leaders have felt excluded from a number of political decisions that appear set to determine the region's future.

In response to this, the conference had two main objectives:

The first was to address a concern amongst Turkmen leaders that they are finding it difficult to effectively present their concerns on the international stage. To this end, the conference was undoubtedly intended as an opportunity for members of Iraq's Turkmen community to present their thoughts and concerns to an international audience.

The second objective was to begin restoring a process of dialogue, aiming eventually at peaceful resolution to the region's outstanding problems, and in particular the status of Kerkuk. UNPO is in a unique position and offers a distinct forum within which to address these concerns as its membership

includes the Iraqi Turkmen, the Iraqi Kurds, and Assyrians. To this end it was however important to include participation from a range of political representatives capable of influencing proceedings in Iraq. Much effort therefore went into securing the participation of local political actors, a process much complicated by the perilous security situation and complex visa and passport requirements.

We are delighted to have successfully included the participation of influential political actors such as Dr. Muzaffer Arslan, advisor on Turkmen Affairs to the President of Iraq H.E. Jalal Talabani, Mr. Ali Mehdi, Head of the Turkmen Group at the Kerkuk City Council, and Mr. Burhan Jaf, the Kurdistan Regional Government's Representative to the European Union. Unfortunately a number of other parliamentarians and politicians, representing both Iraqi Turkmen and Kurds, were unable to travel on this occasion due to security concerns.

This conference was however only a first step. The quality and enthusiasm of discussions bodes well for the prospects of future dialogue, negotiations, and commutation between the region's many communities. The organisers remain hopeful therefore that dialogue can save the people of northern Iraq from the violence that continues to plague their southern neighbours.

A proposal discussed during the conference focused on the possibility of establishing a permanent forum for such communications, setting in place the framework for a structured and democratic process for the resolution of all outstanding conflicts.

UNPO and SOITM maintain a commitment to contributing to such future initiatives, and hopes future conferences and events might represent an opportunity to gather further representatives from the communities of Iraq.

The organisers are grateful to the many participants whose varied contributions made the conference a successful step towards the restoration of a constructive dialogue. We are also very appreciative for the partnership of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), without which the conference could not have been a success.



Marino Busdachin
UNPO General Secretary



Sheth Jerjis
SOITM Chairman

The Turkmen of Iraq

The last reliable census data from Iraq, gathered in 1957, identifies the Turkmen as the third largest ethnic group in Iraq. Their population has long historical roots in northern Iraq, stretching back beyond the Islamic period, with ongoing settlement throughout the pursuing centuries. Iraqi Turkmen communities rose to prominence during Umayyad and Abbasids, playing an important role as rulers and administrators during Seljuks, Atabags, Mongols, Qara Qoyunlu, Aq Qoyunlu, and Safavids. Turkmen were also prominent administrators, merchants, and politicians under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, especially in urban areas such as Kerkuk, Erbil, Telafer, and in several districts in Diyala, Salah al-Din and Kut, where they lived as a majority. The decline of their influence and marginalisation began first after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during the aftermath of the First World War.

Under British rule and Iraq's era of Monarchy, cultural rights were gradually taken away from Turkmen communities, and their activists frequently jailed. British rule is also widely viewed by Turkmen as the beginning of efforts to systematically misrepresent the true extent of their presence in northern Iraq – perhaps in an effort to minimise vestiges of Ottoman rule as they sought to cement their own control.

Iraqi Turkmen influence in northern Iraq continued to gradually wane during successive Iraqi governments following the dismembering of the Ottoman Empire and Iraq's independence in 1932. Other minorities and communities, predominantly Kurds, began entering Iraq's northern cities in large numbers from mountainous areas in the east following the growth of a burgeoning oil industry. This rapid demographic change soon produced ethnic tension and violence and Turkmen communities began to feel the effect of marginalisation. This is most clearly evident in the events of 14 July 1959, where scores of once prominent Turkmen officials were killed in Kerkuk. Tensions were exasperated still further upon the establishment of Ba'ath Party rule in 1968, a period during which the position of all minorities in Iraq became increasingly precarious.

Saddam Hussein's regime instigated a campaign of intensive "Arabisation" in rebellious regions of northern Iraq, systematically expelling Turkmen, Kurdish, and Assyrian minorities, encouraging the resettlement of Arabs, and redrawing political boundaries to dilute their political influence. This period of violence and persecution effectively destroyed Turkmen civil society, forcing many of its political institutions underground or into exile abroad.

Rebuilding civil society remains the major challenge facing Iraqi Turkmen leaders as the new Iraqi state begins to take shape.

Iraqi Turkmen communities are in particular of the view that their historical presence and influence in the region has remained marginalised during the process of reconstructing the Iraqi state, claiming that relatively little has been achieved with respect to correcting the past injustices they have suffered. With limited representation in local administration and security forces, as well as in the vital Property Claims Commission, many have concluded that little has changed with respect to their political and social marginalisation. Perhaps most crucially, Turkmen communities have come to view the recent waves of immigration into Kerkuk as increasingly disproportionate, suspicious of the role this might play in the imminent referendum on the city's future status.

The cities of Telafer and Erbil are also considered historical home to large Iraqi Turkmen communities. Feelings of marginalisation and exclusion are also beginning to emerge in these cities, leaving many to fear for the future of Iraqi Turkmen communities in northern Iraq. Many have already taken the difficult decision to become refugees, seeking refuge and peace in neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Syria.

Human Rights Violations

Attempts to assimilate Turkmen communities began in earnest during the establishment of the Iraqi Monarchy in 1921. The study of Turkmen language was quickly banned from schools and public life, and once prominent Turkmen politicians were increasingly excluded from local administration and law enforcement. A burgeoning oil industry exposed the Kerkuk region to demographic change, bringing waves of immigration both from the surrounding regions and from abroad in search of employment. This rapid demographic change inevitably introduced ethnic tensions and rivalry that frequently resulted in violence.

These tensions continued into Iraq's Republican Era, escalating most dramatically in Kerkuk, the site of a now notorious massacre of Turkmen leaders which took place on 14 July 1959. This effectively destroyed the remnants of Turkmen civil society, still stifled by restrictions on Turkmen language, culture, and media.

The establishment of Ba'ath Party rule over Iraq in 1968 made the prospects for all of Iraq's minorities increasingly precarious. Alongside Kurdish, Assyrian, and other communities, Iraq's Turkmen suffered extensively under the brutal Anfal campaign, aimed at securing still further Ba'ath Party dominance in the region. Land seizures and confiscation severely damaged the Turkmen economy, countless families were forcefully expelled, and those able to remain were often forced to register as Arab in order to partake in the economy or seek employment of any kind, whilst political and cultural exclusion prevented recourse to any meaningful form of justice.

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 brought an initial wave of stability to northern Iraq. Economic marginalisation and under-representation in local administration and security services continues however to undermine the revival of Turkmen civil society. The return of seized land and property has in particular been ineffectual; with many Turkmen leaders left with the feeling little has changed with respect to their political and economic marginalisation. As still prevalent ethnic tensions have brought increased levels of violence and intimidation to cities such as Kerkuk and Telafer, traditionally home to large Turkmen communities, many have already taken the difficult decision to seek safety as refugees in neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Syria.

Kerkuk – A Brewing Crisis

Kerkuk is a city in northern Iraq rich in both history and oil. Whilst northern Iraq has long been the home of numerous minorities, Iraqi Turkmen consider the city of Kerkuk especially central to their historical presence in the region. The present demography of Kerkuk, they claim, reflects relatively recent waves of immigration that began with the growth of the city's oil industry in the 1920s, and more substantially, the brutal campaign of "Arabisation" instigated by a Ba'ath Party intent on securing their domination over the region. Many Turkmen remain critical also of the process meant to address these injustices following the fall of the Ba'ath Party in 2003, some suggesting it has merely facilitated a new form of demographic distortion.

During the Ba'ath period, forced expulsions, killings, and violence, were coupled with economic incentives and benefits designed to drive local minorities out of northern Iraq. Turkmen civil society, along with that of Assyrian and Kurdish minorities, was severely weakened, and in some cases, effectively eradicated. Their communities were forced to register as Arab in order to engage in commerce or employment of any kind, and their language and culture was banned for education and public life.

Following the events of 2003, Turkmen communities now resent in particular the extent to which their leaders were driven from their once influential positions in local administration and security, leaving their communities bereft of meaningful representation and influence in local decision making. Their current under-representation in Iraq's new political institutions, both national and local, is therefore a matter of particular concern.

Kurdish communities in Kerkuk also claim the city as historic property, focusing primarily on their population numbers in the wider Kerkuk region, as opposed to its urban centre. Denying a primary interest in the city's oil wealth, Kurdish leaders have repeatedly urged the incorporation of Kerkuk into the Kurdistan region, though accepting its essentially mixed ethnic composition.

What is often described as a brewing crisis in Kerkuk is inherently tied to these diverging claims to the city. The constitutional mechanism for resolving these conflicting claims and determining the city's future status with respect to a federal Iraq has however only produced further tensions.

Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) and the subsequent Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution recognise the injustices of Saddam Hussein's "Arabisation" campaign, and contain provisions for a process of "normalisation" intended to reverse the damaging effects of this policy. Upon

the completion of this process, followed by a census, Article 140 suggests that the “will of its citizens” should determine Kerkuk’s final status by a date no later than 31 December 2007.

The proposed process of normalisation is however clearly complex. No consensus has yet emerged on what might constitute normality in such a beleaguered region, and numerous practical questions remain unanswered with respect to reversing the demographic distortions that are a legacy of the Ba’ath Party era.

Demography remains perhaps the most controversial issues, concerning both the question of how many of the city’s various ethnic communities can claim to have been displaced, and the question of what to offer Arabs brought in, some against their will, to take their places.

Many Turkmen leaders have strongly opposed what they consider excessive Kurdish immigration into Kerkuk after 2003, claiming this unfairly determines both local elections and the scheduled referendum in their favour, at least when compared to what they view as the historical makeup of the city. Their exclusion from local administrative structures has allowed, they argue, rival communities to facilitate the relocation of many more families than were expelled from the city during “Arabisation.”

Little has also been done with respect to returning confiscated lands, with the Iraqi Property Claims Commission riddled with bureaucratic difficulties and legitimacy problems. Turkmen communities in particular lament its domination by Kurdish representatives and failure in particular to address cases involving Turkmen land owners.

The process of normalisation has undeniably been slow and ineffectual, with many important questions still unanswered. On this basis it has begun to appear increasingly unwise to proceed with a referendum by the end of 2007. Without further efforts to ensure all of Iraq’s minorities feel genuinely included in the democratic processes aimed at reconstructing the Iraqi state, coveted stability appears inevitably and increasingly elusive in the absence of further dialogue and discussion.

Key Iraqi Legal Documents

Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law for Iraq states:

(A) The Iraqi Transitional Government, and especially the Iraqi Property Claims Commission and other relevant bodies, shall act expeditiously to take measures to remedy the injustice caused by the previous regime's practices in altering the demographic character of certain regions, including Kerkuk, by deporting and expelling individuals from their places of residence, forcing migration in and out of the region, settling individuals alien to the region, depriving the inhabitants of work, and correcting nationality. To remedy this injustice, the Iraqi Transitional Government shall take the following steps:

(1) With regard to residents who were deported, expelled, or who emigrated; it shall, in accordance with the statute of the Iraqi Property Claims Commission and other measures within the law, within a reasonable period of time, restore the residents to their homes and property, or, where this is unfeasible, shall provide just compensation.

(2) With regard to the individuals newly introduced to specific regions and territories, it shall act in accordance with Article 10 of the Iraqi Property Claims Commission statute to ensure that such individuals may be resettled, may receive compensation from the state, may receive new land from the state near their residence in the governorate from which they came, or may receive compensation for the cost of moving to such areas.

(3) With regard to persons deprived of employment or other means of support in order to force migration out of their regions and territories, it shall promote new employment opportunities in the regions and territories.

(4) With regard to nationality correction, it shall repeal all relevant decrees and shall permit affected persons the right to determine their own national identity and ethnic affiliation free from coercion and duress.

(B) The previous regime also manipulated and changed administrative boundaries for political ends. The Presidency Council of the Iraqi Transitional Government shall make recommendations to the National Assembly on remedying these unjust changes in the permanent constitution. In the event the Presidency Council is unable to agree unanimously on a set of recommendations, it shall unanimously appoint a neutral arbitrator to examine the issue and make recommendations. In the event the Presidency Council is unable to agree on an arbitrator, it shall request the Secretary General of the

United Nations to appoint a distinguished international person to be the arbitrator.

(C) The permanent resolution of disputed territories, including Kerkuk, shall be deferred until after these measures are completed, a fair and transparent census has been conducted and the permanent constitution has been ratified. This resolution shall be consistent with the principle of justice, taking into account the will of the people of those territories.

Source:

[<http://www.cpa-iraq.org/government/TAL.html>]

Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution states:

First: The Executive Authority shall undertake the necessary steps to complete the implementation of the requirements of all subparagraphs of Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law.

Second: The responsibility placed upon the executive branch of the Iraqi Transitional Government stipulated in Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law shall extend and continue to the executive authority elected in accordance with this constitution, provided that it completes (normalization and census and concludes with a referendum in Kerkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens), in a period not to exceed (the thirty first of December two thousand and seven).

Source:

[<http://www.iraqigovernment.org/Content/Biography/English/constitution.htm>]

Marino Busdachin **UNPO General Secretary**

Mr. Marino Busdachin is the current General Secretary of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). He has spent decades campaigning for human, civil and political rights, focusing especially on Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Mr. Busdachin spoke of his desire to use the experiences of UNPO and its members to bring resolution to conflicts such as that which at present surrounds Kirkuk.

“The topic of this conference is rather ambitious – it concerns the future of Iraq. This is a major challenge, both to the international community and to the people of Iraq. As recent events have made abundantly clear, central to this challenge is a universal respect for the human rights of all Iraqis.”

“Many difficulties face the Iraqi people at present; the time however is ripe for dialogue amongst its minorities.”

Such a dialogue, Mr. Busdachin emphasised, would be crucial to resolving in particular the current tensions in the city of Kirkuk. Amongst the most serious consequences of these tensions and the increased insecurity, he noted, is the large numbers of refugees who have fled the region, depriving them of an opportunity to assist in the reconstruction of their own political system.

Articles 140 of the Iraqi Constitution and article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law for were steps towards creating a democratic framework for cooperation and development, though this evidently still requires a great deal of work.

“Numerous reports by international organisations and observers have for example recommended that the Kurdistan Regional Government begin negotiations with other affected communities aimed at establishing a kind of special governorate for Kirkuk.”

“Political will is the most important commodity towards this end, and the fact that a number of different communities are represented at this seminar is a good sign for the prospects for future dialogue.”

Mr. Busdachin noted however that a “special status” for cities elsewhere in the world has proved only viable in the short term, urging therefore caution ahead of such negotiations.

“The process for reaching an eventual consensus might however be as interesting as the final solution, creating room for a middle way, such as a federal Iraq, in which all parties are willing to give in a little for the sake of peace and stability.”

Mr. Busdachin expressed to this end his hope for a substantial and effective dialogue between all parties to the conflict, especially the UNPO members involved; the Iraqi Turkmen, the Iraqi Kurds, and Assyrians.

“UNPO, I hope, will be seen as a tool for creating such dialogue and understanding, a tool for the advancement of initiatives related to democracy and human rights.”

“I very much appreciate this opportunity to learn about the history of the region. We must remember however that history can be dangerous, as history is prone to manipulation. Present problems are therefore resolved primarily by a focus on present realities.”

Noting the obstacles that existed to ongoing dialogue between affected communities, Mr. Busdachin recommended “at this time it is necessary to work on civil society, on the promotion of democracy, and on respect for basic human rights.”

The European Parliament, he noted, was a particularly apt stage upon which to begin this work - Europe’s own laws on the rights of minorities ranking amongst the most developed in the world.

As a strong framework for negotiations is created however, “one of the starting points for an effective solution must also be a reconsideration of the positions of each party to the conflict – positions must be articulated with deference to an overarching objective of finding a peaceful solution to this problem.”

“The Iraqi Turkmen should be assisted as they work to develop a political and civil society, and the European Union should invest more support in all Iraq’s minority groups, regardless of ethnicity and religion. Through such work, the EU can support and protect those human rights defenders that are establishing the civil and political society upon which the future of Iraq will be built.”

Sheth Jerjis

SOITM Chairman

Mr. Sheth Jerjis is the Chairman of the Iraqi Turkmen Human Rights Research Foundation (SOITM) and a member of the Iraqi Turkmen delegation to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). He was previously a member of the Steering Council for the Iraqi Turkmen Cultural and Solidarity Association in Izmir, and has also served as Secretary of the Iraqi Turkmen Cultural Foundation in the Netherlands. Mr. Jerjis focused on the violation of the Iraqi Turkmen human rights since 2003 and shared with the conference some of his research on the dispute that surrounds the city of Kerkuk.

Dr. Jerjis noted that the underestimation of the Turkmen population size in Iraq dates back to the end of the First World War. Discussing during this time the future of Mosul, it was suggested that Turkmen constituted just 2% of the Iraqi population. Dr. Jerjis highlighted however that Arabic writers suggested a figure of 7%, with Patrick Clawson suggesting a figure of 9%. He noted also however that the Turkmen themselves consider their population to be in excess of 10% of the total Iraqi population. The presence of the Turkic people in Iraq dates back to the Sumerian era, with extensive settlement in Iraq continuing from 673 until the Mongol invasion in 1231.

This population is however now almost entirely marginalised suggested Dr. Jerjis. With reference to economic disparities, he noted that two issues in particular had disadvantaged the Turkmen relative to the Kurdish population in northern Iraq since 1991:

- Kurdish authorities accumulated fees for the transportation of goods through the Khabur border crossing to Turkey
- Kurdish authorities were also granted a relatively large share of oil revenues, 13%, in the 1990s

Turkmen communities however, noted Dr. Jerjis, have been completely deprived of such support.

Noting also that marginalisation occurs within the administrative structure, Dr. Jerjis underlined; “the administration of Ottoman Iraq included large numbers of Turkmen officials. The number of these officials has decreased continually since the establishment of the Iraqi state.”

Whilst focused primarily on Kerkuk, Dr. Jerjis outlined also how Turkmen marginalisation has had its effects on other northern cities, including Mosul and Erbil. Dr. Jerjis suggested that the Turkmen population in Mosul is estimated at more than half a million, who remain the target of attacks and

social exclusion. Referring to William R. Hay, a British officer resident in Erbil from 1918 to 1920 who noted the city's predominantly Turkmen nature, Dr. Jerjis suggested that also Erbil has a substantial Turkmen population today. Following extensive immigration however, the city is now the capital of the Kurdistan region.

As elsewhere, Dr. Jerjis suggested that Erbil has seen restrictions on Turkmen political, social and cultural activities. Election campaigns have limited the display of Turkmen material, except on their own buildings, and Turkmen are seldom appointed to governmental offices.

The Kerkuk problem, suggested Dr. Jerjis, has its roots in a flawed constitutional process. Because of competing interests, crucial issues such as "unity of the country (article 115), the authority of the central government (article 111), and the principles of democracy, are almost lost in the constitution."

"Kerkuk is a region beneath which lies over 10 billion barrels of oil renowned for its quality."

Noting that most reliable references acknowledge the Turkmen nature of Kerkuk, he suggested that its underground wealth has resulted in the Kerkuk region being victim always to the aspirations of local, regional and international powers.

Dr. Jerjis noted that as a result of these interests, demographic distortions have come to threaten the Turkmen identity of cities such as Kerkuk. In particular high-ranking officials are now largely Kurdish, facilitating the influx of large numbers of Kurdish families.

Concern and suspicions is also prevalent, according to Dr. Jerjis, of predominantly Kurdish controlled voter registration ahead of the proposed referendum on the status of Kerkuk. A lack of transparency has jeopardised, he suggested, the credibility of elections which on previous occasions have already resulted in a Kurdish majority in the Kerkuk City Council.

"Voter registration was facilitated and promoted primarily in Kurdish regions under what ultimately amounts to Kurdish auspicious."

Dr. Jerjis suggested that whilst there was undeniable displacement of all minority communities under the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein, estimates of their numbers are around 120,000 to 140,000 - considerably lower than those that have since returned claiming to have been displaced, numbering now, according to Turkmen sources, perhaps over 600,000.

Dr. Jerjis stressed however the peaceful nature of Turkmen opposition, underlining that it was one of the few Iraqi ethnic groups not to have formed militia groups. Human rights abuses however, he stressed, remain a serious concern, including; raids on Yengice, repeated attacks on Turkmen regions such as Tuz Khurmatu, Kara Tepe and Telafer, kidnappings, and assassinations. As a result, increasing numbers of the Turkmen community have taken the difficult decision to leave Iraq for Syria and Turkey.

Dr. Jerjis concluded by thanking Kurdish participants for their contributions to the discussion, in particular the EU representative of the Kurdish Regional Government, Mr. Burhan Jaf.

Recognising the importance of continuing multilateral dialogue and communication, Dr. Jerjis suggested that “the European Parliament should work to continue bringing parties to the conflict together, creating a forum for future dialogue aiming to prepare a viable solution for peaceful and prosperous region in which the spirit of democracy and the rule of law prevails.”

Jan Marinus Wiersma MEP

Member of the European Parliament

Mr. Jan Marinus Wiersma MEP is a Dutch Member of the European Parliament and Vice-Chairman of the Socialist Parliamentary Group. As a member of Committee on Foreign Affairs, he spoke of his desire for greater international engagement in northern Iraq.

Stressing the importance of remembering the lessons learnt from Europe's own integration, Mr. Wiersma MEP underlined the need to work together on the project of reconstructing Iraq.

“Europe has developed a long tradition of support for the reconstruction and rebuilding of regions and nations. This work requires however a political context – political parties must support this process and there must be agreement from the people of the country we are attempting to rebuild.”

A prerequisite to the task of reconstruction is however, according to Mr. Wiersma MEP, security. “What we cannot afford is a real conflict in the Kirkuk region, and so this brewing political conflict has drawn great attention from the European Union.” Optimistic however that a resolution could be found, Mr. Wiersma MEP recollected the period before the rule of Saddam Hussein, when numerous different peoples lived and worked together peacefully in the region.

With this in mind, Mr. Wiersma MEP stressed that “the European Union is eager to stimulate dialogue, even if this entails having to postpone the referendum.” “Kirkuk is the small scale example of the problems that face the entire country of Iraq, primarily that of establishing a multi-ethnic society after Saddam Hussein. Hopefully this battle in Kirkuk will only be a political one, and not one of great violence as we see throughout other regions in Iraq. One cannot count on the sympathy of the European Union if the actions or politics of ethnic groups turn to violence.”

Considering other potential paths to a peaceful resolution, Mr. Wiersma MEP suggested that perhaps the United Nations could play an enhanced role in facilitating a dialogue, paving the way in turn for a more active role on behalf of the European Union.

“The Kirkuk situation needs to be resolved, not only for the future of the north or Iraq, nor only for the future of Iraq as a whole, but also the future stability of the greater region.” For this reason, Mr. Wiersma MEP stressed that all parties should partake in dialogue, negotiations, and talks, creating a stable platform upon which to build a prosperous future for a region that it is ultimately a very rich one.

Muzaffer Arslan

Advisor on Turkmen Affairs to the President of Iraq H.E. J. Talabani

Dr. Muzaffer Arslan is an advisor on Turkmen Affairs to the President of Iraq H.E. Jalal Talabani, and one of the founders of the Iraqi Turkmen National Party. He serves also as the head of the Iraqi Turkmen delegation to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). Dr. Arslan outlined some of the essential steps on the road to constructing an Iraq in which various ethnic groups can once again live in harmony.

“We are gathered for this conference in a place where human rights are respected. It is very important for us to be able to distribute human rights also in Iraq. We have lived for thousands of years in Iraq with different ethnic groups. However, because some groups have grown preoccupied with their own interests, this common culture and background has faded whilst the differences have been highlighted, and peoples no longer understand and respect one another.”

Dr. Arslan lamented in particular that successive Iraqi constitutions has classified individuals according to groups, defining in the process the Iraqi people along these lines. Some were left out entirely, leaving them to feel as “second class citizens.”

“Now that Iraq is no longer ruled by a dictator, the Turkmen have high expectations for the future and for the prospects for change.”

Dr. Arslan underlined however that despite high hopes, everyone in Iraq now faces challenges. These include problems with other minorities and outstanding claims to land and property – a legacy of the region’s troubled past. The main challenge he suggested however is “translating ongoing talk and discussion of a new era of rights into actual progress on this front.”

“One of the problems that has arisen for the Turkmen of Iraq was the fact that the new cabinet has only one Turkmen member.”

Furthermore; “when the city council of Kerkuk was established, the Coalition Authorities decided that the number of Kurds should be twofold the number of Arabs and Turkmen in the Council, which is a flaw in the democratic system favouring Kurdish communities.”

The symbolic representation afforded the Turkmen in many of Iraq’s new intuitions, he stressed, is a violation of their rights.

Dr. Arslan reminded participants that most of Iraq's Shiite communities want a federation and that Kurdish politicians also support such a federal model. He presented the Turkmen position; "the land is one piece."

"The ethnic build up of Iraq needs to be taken into consideration. If the land is separated along religious lines, other groups need to be taken into account. We need to decide on which classification to use. The Turkmen, should it come to a federal state, want a piece of this federation, since it is their birthright. We seek not to make a separate ethnic distinction, as we should promote and live in brotherhood. With the constitution that is accepted, the Turkmen could have an autonomous region, with the capital being Kerkuk. However, Kerkuk is at the base of this problem."

Dr. Arslan underlined that the Turkmen are the second largest community in northern Iraq, though the constitution of the Kurdistan region does not recognise this. Beyond Kerkuk, Turkmen presence in cities such as Telafer are also marginalised and consequently included in the Kurdistan region without genuine discussion.

Coalition authorities have given the right to self-determination to several groups according to Dr. Arslan. With this in mind, he appealed to the European Parliament and its member states "to support this right for the Turkmen to self-determination, and to construct a basis for protecting rights related to land and property."

"Today however, the rights of the Turkmen are not being respected. Demography is being changed. All we are refusing to accept is this."

Dr. Arslan concluded by looking forward, noting in particular that Iraqi Turkmen will focus on amending the constitution, attempting to make it more inclusive and less influenced by the narrow range of political interests that were capable of mobilising quickly upon the fall of the Ba'ath Party.

Burhan Jaf

Representative of the Kurdish Regional Government to the EU

Mr. Burhan Jaf is the Representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to the European Union. As a prominent Kurdistan official, Mr. Jaf stressed a willingness to work with his democratic Turkmen colleagues, and a desire to engage with the international community's efforts to prevent further conflict in Iraq.

Mr. Burhan Jaf opened by calling for constructive approaches to resolving outstanding conflicts in northern Iraq, lamenting the culture of accusation that has further exacerbated tensions.

“Most of the accusations we have heard before, and we are open to you, our leadership does meet with you regularly. This is what we believe is a foundation for dialogue.” The Turkmen have been recognized by the Iraqi constitution, as has their language, stressed Mr. Jaf. “We applaud that. We want to solve the Kirkuk conflict in a more peaceful way, through dialogue.”

On Article 140 and its proposed referendum, Mr. Jaf stressed that it is not up to a single political group to change the constitution, either by force, or by involving other governments or states. “This is a constitution approved by referendum of all the Iraqi people.”

The problem, he suggested, is that there remains much mistrust of central government, a remnant from the era of Saddam Hussein. A central challenge for the reconstruction of Iraq will be restoring this trust.

Mr. Jaf emphasised however the willingness of the KRG to be flexible. “We never said Kirkuk is one hundred percent Kurdish.” He underlined also their willingness to cooperate with the United Nations and the European Union.

However, “at the end of the day, we must accept that there are procedures that we all have to follow and that we have to believe in democracy and negotiation.”

“At the end of the day there has to be a referendum; leave it to the citizens of Kirkuk to decide if they want a federal state for themselves, whether they want to be part of Kurdistan, or they want to be administrated by the central government.”

“All options are open to you, and whatever emerges out of the referendum, the Kurdish Regional Government will commit to. This, I think, is the best solution if we believe in democracy.”

Suphi Saatçi

Editor of Qardashlik Journal

Dr. Suphi Saatçi is the editor of Qardashlik Journal, and is one of the founders and present General Secretary of the Kerkuk Foundation, one of several Turkmen groups based in Turkey. He is also Chairman of the Iraqi Turkmen Solidarity Association and has written extensively on the Turkmen people, including a book titled "The Historical development of Turk's presence in Iraq." Dr. Saatçi shared with the conference some of his detailed knowledge of Iraq's Turkmen communities.

"The Turkmen of Iraq inhabit an area which stretches from Telafer to Mendeli. The largest towns within this area are Kekuk, Erbil, Telafer and Tuz Khurmatu."

"In the absence of an accurate census it is difficult to declare an exact population figure for Turkmen in Iraq. The exact population of the Iraqi Turkmen has always been manipulated and denied by ruling authorities. None however could deny the existence of Turkmen in Iraq. We assume, along with many researchers, that the percentage of the Turkmen relative to the entire population is between 9-12%. Independent sources accept this number as somewhere between 2 and 2.5 million."

"The history of the Turkmen in Iraq begins with the Abbasids era. Turkmen migrated in waves into Iraq as military forces starting around 1055 G. Since then Turkmen have ruled Iraq as and with Seljuks (1055-1258), Mosul Atabegs (1127-1233), Erbil Atabegs (1339-1410), Mongols and the Ilkhans (1258-1508), Jalayairs (1339-14100, Karakoyunlu (1411-1468), Akkoyunlu (1468-1508), and Safawids (1508-1534)."

"Baghdad also became a centre of Turkmen culture during the 16th century. The famous poet Nesimi, along with the Turkmen poet Fuzuli, attended literature summits and we see clear evidence of the importance of Turkish language in Baghdad at that time. Mosul, Erbil and Kerkuk have also been central to Turkmen communities and culture since the 13th century."

Dr. Saatçi stressed that as a consequence, Turkmen have accumulated considerable cultural heritage in cities such as Baghdad, Mosul, Kerkuk and Erbil.

"The historical city of Mosul is known for several architectural monuments, all constructed during the Turkmen era. The city is completely moulded by a Turkmen identity."

“The Kerkuk citadel also reflects the undeniable influence of Turkmen communities and culture. This was true also of the surrounding rich environment of narrow streets, now sadly demolished completely. “

Dr. Saatçi noted that there is a special architectural method unique to Turkmen settlements - the Tayfur house. This is evident in many of the narrow streets in northern Iraq. He outlined also the existence of Turkish magazines and newspapers in Iraq, appearing shortly after the arrival of the first press houses in Kerkuk and Baghdad.

“The Turkish-Arabic ZA WRA newspaper began to circulate on 15 June 1869, the HA WADIS newspaper started to publish in Kerkuk on 25 February 1911. This weekly magazine was published for seven years until the British occupation in May 1918.”

“Turkmen society is also rich tradition in the field of ethnographic materials and handicrafts. In Kerkuk; the art of “kuzecilik”, which is the production of earthenware utensils such as water jugs and bowls, is widespread. Tuz Khurmatu is also famous for its potteries.”

“In general the Turkmen have displayed a strong presence in Iraq, specifically in Kerkuk. The accumulation and heritage left by the Turkmen in the region has helped construct a permanent identity, an identity which is now under threat.”

Erşat Hürmüzlü

Iraqi Turkmen author

Erşed Hürmüzlü is a highly-regarded Turkmen scholar born in Kerkuk. Recent articles include "Iraq: A unified or Federal Government?" which offers an incisive Turkmen perspective on the future direction of Iraq's development. As one of the founders of the Qardashlik Journal Erşed Hürmüzlü has also written a number of books on the subject of the Turkmen in Iraq, and spoke of the long Turkmen presence in Iraq's northern region.

Mr. Hürmüzlü opened by stressing that the demographic structure of the Turkmen in Iraq is unlike that of Arabs, Kurds, or other minorities.

"The Turkmen are more family oriented, having intimate feelings for descendants from a grandfather who held the same family name. The family system however did not prevent any member from getting his share of respect, honour and fame due to a religious, academic or professional status. This difference, which was neglected by many researchers, may be a reason for the diminished role of the Turkmen in the structure of the Iraqi society."

Noting that Turkmen presence in Iraqi civil society has undoubtedly been reduced, Mr. Hürmüzlü considered also other potential reasons for this. Demographic changes and distortions associated with various attempts to exercise control over the riches of Kerkuk could, he claimed, not be overlooked. Crucial to this has been the downplaying and denial of the actual size of the Turkmen community in the city and in Iraq as whole, evident from the rhetoric of dominant political actors from the Ba'ath Party to the present Kurdish authorities.

Drawing attention to the numerous documents discussing population figures in Kerkuk in the early twentieth century, Mr. Hürmüzlü outlined the content of documents he had studied in the National Archives in London, drafted by the British delegation to the Lausanne conference and headed by Lord Curzon. The figures offer a view in which the city of Kerkuk has a distinct Turkmen character and presence, with less than half of the population designated as Kurdish.

Citing Turkish documentation from the same period however, Mr. Hürmüzlü suggested that more reliable census data puts the Turkmen population of the city even higher.

British authorities however never denied that the majority of Kerkuk was Turkmen. In 1952 a report from the British Ambassador in Iraq, Mr. J.M. Trulbil, addressed to the British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden,

stated: “The issue of minorities in Iraq is based on the relationship between the Arabs and non-Arabs, and this relation is evident now than ever before. The coexistence and harmony is clearly demonstrated in Kerkuk, for Turkmen constitute the majority of the population in that region and they live with Arabs and Kurds side by side”.

Mr. Hüzmüzlü stressed the agreement that exists between Iraq’s minority communities today with respect to the difficulties of determining accurately various population sizes. This follows particularly from a universal recognition of the distortions instigated by the regime of Saddam Hussein.

“President Barzani accused the government of resettling Arabs in the areas Kerkuk, Khaniqin and Sinjar, and has told the government that he would not accept the census result if it indicated an Arab majority. He also dismissed the offer of using the 1965 census, which he said was forged. When however the Government proposed to apply the 1957 census in Kerkuk, he refused this, presumably because it will show that the Turkmen community, although outnumbered in the governorate of Kerkuk as a whole, was still predominant in the city itself.”

Outlining the resistance to acknowledging the historical presence of Turkmen communities in the city of Kerkuk, Mr. Hüzmüzlü recalled a recent debate with a colleague.

“My colleague mentioned that the Turkmen always exaggerate their numbers in Iraq, and that they do not exceed 700,000 or 800,000. In response I noted that the natural rights of any individuals of any community are totally independent of the latter’s size or strength. Even if contested testimonies were true, the fact has to be recognized that the Turkmen population actually exceeds that of several independent and internationally recognised nations.”

In this spirit, Mr. Hüzmüzlü concluded:

“It is the firm belief of the Turkmen that the solution to the ethnic problems of Iraq will come to fruition only when the process builds on a solid foundation that embraces all ethnicities, and considers them all as first class citizens of a single nation. The selection of a free and sovereign united government system should take place in accordance with the resolve and free will of all Iraqis. The Iraqi Turkmen desire a united, democratic, pluralistic and parliamentary Iraq. The current situation in Iraq is based on manoeuvres that favour one interest group over another, often along ethnic lines. Iraq’s Turkmen will not fall into this trap, and will continue to encourage other groups to adopt a similar position.”

Hassan Aydinli

Iraqi Turkmen Front Representative in Europe

Dr. Aydinli is the European Representative of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, a prominent advocate of Turkmen rights in Iraq. He spoke on behalf of Dr. Sadettin Ergec MP, President of the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) and member of the Iraqi Parliament.

“The Turkmen of Iraq are the third largest ethnic group numbering an estimated 3 million, or about 12% of the Iraqi people. The last reliable census data, suggesting a proportion of approximately 12%, is however from 1957.”

Dr. Aydinli opened by describing the long history of Turkmen in Mesopotamia and Iraq, dating as far back as the fifth century. Throughout this period the Turkmen played an increasingly important role in Iraq, ruling parts of it for considerable periods of time.

“The Turkmen produced writers, scientists, philosophers, poets, and architects, all of whom are names well known and appreciated, including Al-Khawarazmi, Al-Bukhari, Al-Farabi, Al-Beruni, Sarkhsi, and Fuzuli. Some of the greatest architectural masterpieces built in Erbil were constructed under the Turkmen Atabeg Muzzafer Al-Deen more than 800 years ago.”

On the basis of this historical presence Dr. Aydinli outlined what is today considered the Turkmen region of Iraq – Turkmenli.

“This area covers an area situated between the Arab region and the Kurdish region. It starts at Telafer in Mosul Province, and includes Eskikelek, Mahmur, Erbil, Altun Köprü, Kerkük, Taze, Beşir, Tavuk, Tuz Hurmatu, Kifri, Karatepe, Khanaqeen, Mendeli and Bedre in Wasit Province to the south-east of Baghdad, near the Iranian border.”

Dr. Aydinli proceeded to outline some of the challenges which have threatened these historical communities since the fall of Ba’ath Party rule in 2003.

Following the occupation of Baghdad by US forces, Kurdish militia were permitted entry into Kerkuk. Amidst looting and violence they crucially failed to protect the Property Registration Office and the Civil Population Registrations Office, both of which contained information crucial to the task of redressing the injustices of the Ba’ath Party era. Dr. Aydinli suggested that this was a major factor contributing to suspicion of Kurdish political actors, perceived by many as planning to take effective control of the city and its oil reserves.

“The current tension in Kerkuk has arisen due to attempts to merge Kerkuk into the Kurdistan autonomous region in the north of Iraq. Many Turkmen, Arabs and Keldo-Assyrians in Kerkuk oppose this, demanding instead that Kerkuk is to be either a distinct region on its own, or stay as it is, but with broader administrative and financial powers in accordance with the principle of a decentralized administration.”

“Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law composed of four paragraphs which dealt with the Kurdish Regional Government’s authority, the boundaries of the 18 governorates, federalism in Iraq, and the special status for Kerkuk and Baghdad. Paragraph C clearly specified that both Baghdad and Kerkuk are outside the Kurdistan region and that they may not be federated with any other entities in Iraq. In the Iraqi Constitution Kurdish parties, taking advantage from the unstable conditions in Iraq, managed to remove all but paragraph A. They also managed to incorporate article 140, which calls for a process of normalisation, a census, and a referendum on Kerkuk’s inclusion in the Kurdistan autonomous region, to be held before 31 December 2007.”

Dr. Aydinli proceeded to express concern at the number of Kurds that have arrived in Kerkuk claiming to have been displaced under the rule of Saddam Hussein.

“We Turkmen are the only group without any militia or paramilitary organisation, as we have always refused the use of force and violence in politics, simply because we believe in the values of democracy. Our aim is to make Iraq a democratic country, which is the only way to end the tragedy imposed on our people through a history of war and aggression. It is a historical reality that the Iraqi people are composed of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Keldo-Assyrians, it is therefore an absolute necessity that the rights and the freedom of all these communities be determined and secured by a constitution.”

“As such, we have some specific new ideas that we wish to share with EU policy makers;

- The right of self-determination must not be reserved only for Kurds, the Shias, and the Sunnis, but recognised also as the Turkmen’s natural right;
- The Kurds chose to be a federal state and so did we. We want a federal state where we can administer ourselves and protect our people and culture;
- With respect to Kerkuk, we ask for the suppression of contestable articles and the postponement of the referendum until a more suitable time, following a thorough review of the constitution. If the referendum is maintained, it must be approved by all Iraqis, not only by the inhabitants of Kerkuk, as the demographic composition of the city has been altered too many times.”

Ali Mehdi

Head of the Turkmen Group at the Kerkuk City Council

Mr. Ali Mehdi is an elected member of the Kerkuk City Council where he is also Head of the Turkmen Group. He sits on the Council's Security Commission, and is the Secretary of the Turkmeneli Party. Mr. Mehdi criticised the sectarian politics that have led to conflict, and suggested possible federal solutions to current instability.

“The Kerkuk issue is an enduring issue that has affected Iraqi politics for over 50 years.”

“Almost all governments have attempted to change the demographic shape of Kerkuk. Today this remains the case. Actions aim to change the Turkmen identity of the city ahead of a referendum, which will inevitably favour one group over others.”

Mr. Mehdi lamented in particular the cost borne by Turkmen communities. Human rights violations remain commonplace as rival factions jostle for control of the city, forcing displacement in the process of “relocation.”

“Turkmen parties have repeatedly explained this to US and British forces, along with representatives of the United Nations and the hundreds of reporters who have visited Kerkuk. Unfortunately, nothing has been done to rectify the situation.”

Mr. Mehdi stressed that the political imbalance that exists in Kerkuk today has real consequences for the people of the city. “You may think that there is no difference whether a police chief or high-ranking administrator is Kurdish, Turkmen or Arab. It makes however a difference in a country like Iraq.”

At the root of this, Mr. Mehdi suggested, is the sectarian and ethnic divisions imposed upon Iraq by U.S. administrators following the fall of Ba’ath Party rule.

“It was under the umbrella of the democracy that we started to fight one another. The Iraqi identity was ignored, with the division of Iraq coming instead to the surface. The result is what you see today - hundreds of dead and injured daily.”

Mr. Mehdi proceeded to underline that the instability of Iraq has emerged as key contributor to the instability of the wider region.

On the subject of Kerkuk, Mr. Mehdi criticised KDP and PUK efforts to control the city. “As we are approach the deadline for the referendum, the people who oppose this feel under threat.” This, he noted, was not a climate conducive to trust and dialogue.

Consequently, Mr. Mehdi called upon the EU and UN to recognise that a referendum is “not the best solution, and that a just and fair solution must be sought instead.”

“The Turkmen believe that the solution is to have Kerkuk as a separate region, under the supervision of an international arbitration committee, preventing hopefully the kind of division we have witnessed already in Bosnia, as well as elsewhere in the world.”

Mary Younan

Assyrian Universal Alliance

Ms. Mary Younan is the Executive Secretary of the Assyrian Universal Alliance, and a member of the Assyrian delegation to UNPO. Ms. Younan outlined the way in which sectarian conflict has affected also Assyrians in Iraq, recommending a federal solution to this problem.

“The focus of the international community since the beginning of the war in Iraq has been the perplexing insecurity. The primary cause of the prevailing environment of insecurity has been the country’s deeply rooted communal war and sectarian conflicts.”

Ms. Younan underlined that sectarian divisions fall along a number of lines; gender (women), age (children and students), religious (Christians and other non-Muslim minorities in Muslim states), sectarian affiliations (Shiites, Sunnis, Catholics, etc.) and ethnicities (Assyrians, Turkmen, etc.).

“Due to their distinct ethnic and religious identity, the Assyrians have been habitually persecuted under various regimes for refusing to recant their ethnicity and their religion. They face systematic and serious assaults on their fundamental human rights on a daily basis by different levels of authority who deny them peace in their multi-ethnic ancestral nation-state: Iraq.”

“The Assyrians are the indigenous people of the present day Iraq, descendants of the first people of Mesopotamia. The Assyrian communities, that are predominantly Christian, presently inhabit areas of Tur Abdin and Hakkari in south and eastern regions of Turkey, Jazira in north-eastern Syria, Urmi in north-western Iran, and the Iraqi provinces of Ninawa, Dohuk, and Arbil that is precisely where the Assyrians’ ancestral homeland (Assyria) is located.”

As with other minorities in Iraq, the Assyrian population has faced repeated waves of persecution. Unfortunately this persists even today, as violence and instability have led to extensive displacement and many casualties.

“Today, the Assyrian nation is struggling to impress upon the international community the importance of being distinctly recognised as a nation in need of significant protection and more importantly a nation in pursuit of autonomy within the territorial boundaries of a centrally governed Iraq.”

Ms. Younan linked the recent exodus of Assyrians to two major factors: the rise of insurgency against those residing in the targeted cities; and discrimination by leading political officials.

“The exodus has already resulted in an international refugee problem. In its most recent report, the UNHCR reported that out of approximately 1 million Iraqis who took refuge in Syria, 36 percent were Iraqi Christians, most are Assyrians.”

Ms. Younan consequently called upon the United Nations, the European Union, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, and the international community to:

“Support an autonomous, self-administrated, Assyria Federal Region which is secular, pluralistic, and democratic.”

Providing further details of this proposed federal unit, Ms. Younan suggested;

“The constituency of the Federal Region shall be all-inclusive and pluralistic, consisting of: all inhabitants of the territory, all Diaspora Assyrians that were displaced from the Assyrian homelands in the course of the recent history, and the current Assyrian refugees that presently are residing in sub-human conditions in Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran.”

“International support for the Autonomous Assyrian Federal Region will assure enforcement of the following primary rights and basic freedoms for all of its constituents: the rights of life and security, socio-political rights in an all-inclusive Representative Assembly, freedoms of expression and religion; and the rights of economic freedom.”

“For those many Assyrians that may remain as inhabitants in regions that are beyond the Autonomous Assyria Federal Region, the United Nations, the European Union, and the international community shall provide the region with mandate to impose and enforce internationally protected safe haven for such Assyrian communities.”

“For the multitude of Assyrian families that are presently residing in sub-standard living conditions as refugees of the Iraqi war and insecurity, the United Nations, the European Union, and the international community should extend all the required means and resources necessary for: implementation of the Assyrian refugees safe return, and establishment of viable and permanent settlement of all the returnees in the Assyria Region.”



Photographs are courtesy of the European Parliament



Nermin al-Mufti

Author and al-Ahram Correspondent

Ms. Nermeen Al-Mufti is an internationally recognised Iraqi Turkmen journalist who has worked in the profession for more than 20 years. She is the editor of al-Qalaa weekly based in Baghdad, a writer for Cairo based Ahram weekly and the Ankara based the new Anatolian, and the author of five books.

“Kerkuk is going to be the third front in the ongoing war in Iraq according to U.S. and other international analysts. In the midst of Iraq's other unsolvable problems, another crisis is on its way.”

The threat, according to Ms. al-Mufti, stems largely from attempts to manipulate the city's demography as rival factions jostle for control. She stressed the number of historical sources that document an unmistakable Turkmen presence in cities such as Kerkuk, Kifri, Erbil, and Tuz Khurmatu, contesting the claim that these are “Kurdish cities”.

“The Kerkuk issue is not an Iraqi or Turkmen issue, but a regional one.” Ms. al-Mufti noted that a number of existing states have taken an active interest in the division of the new Iraqi state – the United States, Turkey, Iran, as well as other countries. Much of these interests are motivated by the desire for resources, or geopolitical strategic advantage.

On the subject of Kerkuk however, she lamented; “most have no comment except; you cannot interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign country.”

Kurdish political actors have in particular benefited from international attention suggested Ms. al-Mufti. As such, they have remained relatively free to “continue their pressure toward applying article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, stating the normalization in Kerkuk and a referendum on its future status.”

Ms. al-Mufti stressed however that these objectives should not come at the cost of the rights of other Iraqis. Responding to the remarks of Mr. Jaf, the EU representative of the Kurdish Regional Government, Ms. al-Mufti contested the claim that Turkmen enjoy full rights in Iraqi Kurdistan.

“There are only two Turkmen ministers and four Turkmen members of the Iraqi Parliament: Is this what is meant by full rights?”

Ms. al-Mufti concluded by noting that Iraqi Turkmen have in the past been appointed to high office, requesting that their presence now be acknowledged by their appointment to similar positions in the central or regional governments of Iraq.

Mohammad Koja

Author and Editor of the Turkmen Times

Mr. Mohammad Koja is a journalist and the present Editor of the Turkmen Times, a leading source of Turkmen news in the Turkmen language. Mr. Koja spoke about his home town of Tuz Khurmatu, sharing with the conferences some indications of the human cost of ongoing conflict in Iraq.

“The city I want to convey to you experiences from is the city of Tuz Khurmatu, which is located to the south-east of the city of Kerkuk, at a distance of 87 km.”

“The city of Tuz Khurmatu, where I was born, is a city that has never been only a Turkmen city.” Mr. Koja stressed however that the city is nevertheless one central to the national identity of Iraqi Turkmen, a fact often contested by force.

“For a period of time Tuz Khurmatu was free of Arab nationalism, with pockets of Kurdish families living in the area. The migration of Kurdish families to Tuz Khurmatu dates back to 1959 when the government of Iraq distributed land in the north. After the Anfal operations and the demolition of Kurdish villages in both Qadir Karam and Nojul a growing number of also Kurds settled in Tuz Khurmatu permanently.”

Mr. Koja outlined the tensions that grew during the period of Communist influence in Iraq, escalating at times into violence and sectarianism. The greatest challenge to the Turkmen communities of Tuz Khurmatu came however with the emergence of Ba’ath Party rule in 1963, when all elements of the state fell under their rule.

“The role of Turkmen citizens in the city was significantly diminished, and they were not allowed to work any administrative posts. More Arabs were brought from the cities of Tikrit, Aldur, Elam, Sharqat and Samarra. Acres of Turkmen land was confiscated and distributed to Ba’ath Party followers. Most tragic perhaps was however the execution and arrest of hundreds of young Turkmen.”

Following a rebellion against Ba’ath Party rule in 1991, Mr. Koja noted that “for the first time in history, Turkmen and Kurds were united against the Ba’ath Party.” When Saddam Hussein retaliated, Turkmen suffered extensively along with other minorities unhappy with his rule.

Mr. Koja suggested the events of 2003 brought however hope to the people of Tuz Khurmatu - hope that this period of persecution and injustice was over.

“Unfortunately, history repeated itself.” Mr. Koja warned in particular that Parliamentary elections in region were highly irregular, creating increased tension between now dominant Kurdish political actors and the city’s Turkmen residents who still considered the city central to their national identity. Tensions flared when the Mursa Ali Shrine was destroyed on 22 August 2003.

Since these events, Mr. Koja outlined the way in which the security situation has deteriorated in the city. Arrests and assassinations remain prevalent, contributing to an atmosphere of fear and mistrust amongst the city’s ethnic groups. Like elsewhere in Iraq, much of this violence has been sectarian in nature, leaving many “threatened for simply being Turkmen.”

“On the road between Baghdad and Tuz Khormatu, through Tikrit, many Turkmen have been kidnapped and executed once their Turkmen identity has been uncovered. Turkmen citizens have been forced to leave their jobs, depriving their families of a means of living, and their right to an education.”

With this in mind, Mr. Koja urged the international community to rethink its position on northern Iraq.

“In this country of Iraq, a country which attracts international attention from institutions including the European Union and the United Nations Human Rights Council, these abuses are ongoing. I hope that our voices will eventually be heard, because I fear that the Turkmen of Iraq are in the process of disappearing. I urge you therefore to take our suffering and the critical security conditions that prevail at present into consideration when drafting your resolutions. “

Merry Fitzgerald

Assistant to the Iraqi Turkmen Front Representative in Europe

Ms. Merry Fitzgerald is assistant to the Iraqi Turkmen Front's permanent representation in Europe. She spoke to the conference about the city of Tel Afer, sharing her knowledge of the devastating effects war has had on its communities.

“Tel Afer is the largest Turkmen city of Mosul Province, and also the largest sub-district of this Province with some 500,000 inhabitants. Tel Afer is also an important strategic location in the north-west of Iraq.”

Ms. Fitzgerald reminded participants that Tel Afer was the site of a famous 1920 Iraqi revolt against British administrators, a revolt that formed the first step towards liberating Iraq from the British rule. Today, its citizens face a new struggle.

“Since April 2003 the inhabitants of Tel Afer have been displaced from their city by violence and insecurity.”

Ms. Fitzgerald outlined a number of factors that have contributed to the regional instability, foremost amongst which is the city's strategic significance;

- Tel Afer unites Iraqi Kurdistan with Syrian Kurdistan
- It offers control of the Rabee'a Border Gate between Iraq and Syria, a source of large financial income
- Tel Afer is also the site of a proposed new border gate between Turkey and Iraq, again offering potentially large financial revenues
- The region is also a fertile and well irrigated, offering plentiful crops, complemented by the Aski Mosul dam, producing about 500 megawatts of electricity a day

Ms. Fitzgerald noted that as part of attempts to antagonize and divide Iraqis, many have tried to pit Shia against Sunni. “The Turkmen however, throughout their long history in Iraq, have never differentiated between Shia and Sunni. Their objective and main concern is to obtain their legitimate rights in Iraq, equal to those of their Arab and Kurdish compatriots.”

Communicating the sources of antagonism towards Kurdish political actors in Tel Afer, Ms. Fitzgerald lamented the way in which political control had been transferred upon the fall of Ba'ath Party rule. A lack of transparency during the process of appointing a new governor, mayor, and customs officials in particular bred a climate of suspicion and mistrust. A failure to prevent looting

and violence further escalated tensions and substantially complicated the process of normalisation.

Ms. Fitzgerald underlined however the victory of non-Kurdish candidates in subsequent elections as evidence of the fact that Tel Afer should not be considered an exclusively Kurdish city.

As violence escalated elsewhere in Iraq however, Tel Afer rapidly became subject to ever increasing raids by both US troops and local security forces, often with little protections offered to Turkmen civilians. Growing violence eventually began forcing Turkmen to leave their city in search of refuge. “Thousands of Turkmen fled whilst US troops and the Iraqi National Guard were bombing and raiding the city.”

“The only help which could reach the outskirts of Tel Afar was from the Turkish Red Crescent. Hundreds of Turkmen civilians were killed and hundreds of young Turkmen were arrested. Turkmen were forced from their city, with no opportunity to return as their houses were destroyed.”

Ms. Fitzgerald quoted Dr. Muhammad Qasim, the Director of the Tal Afer Branch of the Iraqi Red Crescent, who announced that “90 percent of the residents of the city had left as refugees because of the battles raging.”

Ms. Fitzgerald called for an immediate end to the siege of the city and for provisions of sufficient medicines and food for the city, an international presence, supervised by the United Nations, to oversee the humanitarian situation, and further assistance and awareness of the Turkmen communities of Iraq.

Abdulahad Astepho

Director of the Assyrian Institute of Europe

Mr. Abdulahad Astepho is Director of the Assyrian Institute of Europe, a political and democratic movement aiming to safeguard of the existence and traditions of the Assyrian people. Mr. Astepho outlined also Assyrian opposition to a hasty political settlement of Kerkuk's final status.

Mr. Astepho opened his remarks by noting that various names; Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Chaldo-Assyrian etc., all make reference to the same ethnic, religious and linguistic minority.

“As the world’s attention is focused on the daily and tragic struggle to achieve a balance of interests between Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, no proper attention has been paid to the serious plight of minority groups who nevertheless make up ten per cent of the Iraqi population.”

“Co-religionists and collaborators”, remarked Mr. Astepho, is a label often ascribed to the largely Christian Assyrian population, subsequently used to justify murder, abduction, and persecution.”

Rising tensions between Muslims and Christians the world over has also played out its consequences in Iraq, with churches and clergymen bearing much of the cost of this conflict.

“Women are forced to wear the veil; priests are being threatened so that they can no longer wear their clerical robes in public; and Christian-owned small businesses and shops, particularly those selling alcohol, have been attacked.”

“Although these attacks and terrorist acts aim at creating ethnic and religious tensions within the Iraqi society, their principal objective remains the destabilization of the country.”

Mr. Astepho reminded participants that also Assyrians suffered under Ba’ath Party rule as victims of forced assimilation policies and the general oppression of minorities.

“Demographically, Assyrians, Armenians and other Christian communities form a small group in Kirkuk, estimated at 30,000 in 2005. This small figure ought however not to be reason to ignore our national and human rights in our own country.”

Mr. Astepho expressed Assyrian support for recommendations that the Government of Iraq, the Council of Representatives, the Representatives of

Kirkuk's Communities, the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Government of Turkey, the Government of the United States, the United Nations Security Council, and the European Union, take an active role in facilitating a road map towards compromise, which may not completely meet the vital interests and agendas of all national, ethnic, and religious groups in Kirkuk, but at the very least could curb a rapidly deteriorating situation.

"As the December 2007 deadline approaches for the proposed referendum in Kirkuk, article 140 remains a Pandora's Box."

"The United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report that for the period from October 2003 to March 2005, 36% of Iraqi refugees are Christians."

"Therefore, the European Parliament's Motion of 6 April 2007 was appreciated by all Assyrians. It is high time that the International Community take forceful actions and concrete measures to guarantee the safety of Assyrian churches, establishments, cities, and villages in Iraq."

Mr. Astepho consequently called for greater support and protection for religious minorities, including Assyrian, Armenians, Mandaean, Turkmen, Yezidis, and Shabakes. "They need to be supported by establishing a fourth federal region, on the basis of Section 5 of the Iraqi Constitution, in their territories in the provinces of Ninawa, Tamim, and Diyala."

"This federal region will represent a smaller Iraq where all components of Iraqi society can meet and contribute to solutions to possible conflicts, adopt the principles of democracy and citizenship, and rebuild, as partners, a modern political, economic and social system on the basis of principles of mutual respect and toleration."

Ahmad Hakky Jalal Mohammad

Cultural and Social Forum, Geneva

Mr. Ahmad Hakky Jalal Mohammad is a member of the Cultural and Social Forum in Geneva and spoke extensively about the underlying causes of the current conflict in Kerkuk, recommending also a way forward based on greater cultural understanding.

“The main problem in Kerkuk, as I see it, is the differing visions of the different parties to the conflict in Kerkuk. Specifically, the problem is that no-one is open to doubting or questioning their visions.”

“Kerkuk has become a political and an ideological issue.”

Framing the issue in ideological terms, stressed Mr. Mohammad, is not conducive to dialogue or the compromises necessary for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Ideology, he noted, quickly assumes religious aspects and connotations, noting the damage that has been inflicted by “holy wars” in the past.

Mr. Mohammad stressed therefore that an ideological solution is not always the best kind of solution for many kinds of political problem.

“The solution should be cultural. Culture means a diversity of ethnicities and religions, living together peacefully in the same place on the basis of mutual concern and respect.”

Recounting the words of Dr. Arslan, Mr. Mohammad noted that “Iraqis have lived for thousands of years together. They had their own ideology and their own culture, but they never forced their culture or ideology upon one another.”

Mr. Mohammad criticised also the U.S. vision of Iraq as insensitive to these cultural realities and preoccupied instead with geopolitical strategy.

“Kerkuk, because of its oil, is on the floor again, and Europe should be more aware of the difficulties this has created for the people of this region.”

Mr. Mohammed stressed that there is now no clear strategy for winning the war in Iraq. Violence and insecurity have become endemic, and this represents not only a threat for the country’s civilian population, but also to the world as a whole. He consequently called for greater international engagement, and greater attention to the causes of Iraq’s many problems.

Mofak Salman

Turkmen author

Mr. Mofak Salman is a Turkmen author. He spoke of the historical Turkmen presence in Iraq and presented to the conference a number of practical proposals aimed at reducing tensions and encouraging dialogue in northern Iraq.

“The Iraqi Turkmen live in an area they call “Turkmeneli” - land of the Turkmen. The Turkmen are a Turkic group with a unique heritage and culture as well as with linguistic and historical links to surrounding Turkic groups in Turkey and Azerbaijan. Turkmeneli is a diagonal strip of land stretching from the Syrian and Turkish border areas around Telafer and down to the town of Mendeli on the Iranian border.”

Mr. Salman linked the current tensions in northern Iraq to the influence of Kurdish security forces beyond the Kurdish autonomous region, operating now also within what is considered by Turkmen as Turkmeneli. The city of Kerkuk, he noted, has become a particularly tense focal point for such interaction.

With this in mind, Mr. Salman recommended to the European Union the following;

- The European Parliament should withhold funding from groups that do not respect equal rights for all ethnic groups in northern Iraq;
- The EU should support a new border crossing to Turkey, near Telafer, facilitating movement and reducing dependence and consequent tensions at the Kurdish controlled Kabour border crossing;
- The EU should support the conversion of the Kerkuk military airbase into a civilian airport, enabling increased mobility for the region's minorities without having to travel through tense or contested areas;
- The UN and EU should take firm steps to prevent demographic distortion in Kerkuk, assisting the process of normalisation instead;
- The European Parliament should call for a cancellation of the proposed referendum on the status of Kerkuk, planned to take place before 31 December 2007, in order to prevent further ethnic tension in the region;
- Provisions should be made for an “Turkmeneli Autonomous Region”; and the EU should organise an International conference discussing the prospects for peace and the reconstruction of Iraq, involving neighbouring countries by making them guarantors for the integrity and safety of all the people of Iraq.

Ayoub Bazzaz

Chairman of Iraqi Turkmen Advocating Committee (ITRAC) London

Mr. Ayoub Bazzaz is the Chairman of Iraqi Turkmen Advocating Committee (ITRAC) based in the UK. He spoke of longstanding Turkmen communities in northern Iraq and how this rich culture is now under threat from conflict.

“The crisis faced by Turkmen in Iraq dates back almost ninety years to when the Ottoman Empire was defeated in the First World War (1914-1918). The Turkmen have been living in Iraq for almost fourteen centuries, since long before the Ottoman Empire, but we cannot deny these cultural and ethnic links. Unfortunately others deny these older roots and still consider us merely as descendants of the Ottoman Empire.”

Mr. Bazzaz stressed that “hundreds of historians and documents confirm Turkmen existence in Iraq for over fourteen centuries, and that every stone bears a Turkmen stamp.”

This fact was now being changed, suggested Mr. Bazzaz. On the one hand Turkmen and Arab families are forcefully being displaced from their residencies and their. Such outreach is imposing significant costs on Turkmen culture - the language in particular having been all but eliminated in many regions.

Since fall Saddam Hussein in April 2003, over 31 Turkmen activists and politicians have been assassinated in Kerkuk, though the local administration has not investigated these crimes. Implementing a judicial system premised on respect for the rule of law was therefore amongst the primary goals Mr. Bazzaz identified.

Mr. Bazzaz lamented that elections held in Kerkuk have so far not been free and fair, and that the crucial land registration office in Kerkuk was not protected. “Almost all offices, firms, and factories in Kerkuk are under the control of Kurdish representatives. This perceived inequality spreads suspicion and encourages narrow sectarian politics.”

The current status can only undermine the future of Iraq, suggested Mr. Bazzaz, damaging relations between its many communities through increased competition and confrontation.

“To solve the Turkmen crisis, the first issue should be the recognition of Turkmen land, particularly in Kerkuk province and the surroundings towns of Telafer and Diyala. On this platform, the occupation of Turkmen lands should end, and a new democratic Iraq should be re-assembled, aiming to return to the time when its many minorities lived peacefully along side on another.”

Acknowledgements

A great number of individuals and organisations were crucial to the success of the Conference.

The organisers are appreciative for the valuable partnership of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), that of the Nonviolent Radical Party, and in particular the offices of Mr. Panella MEP and Mr. Capatto MEP. Their support and assistance afforded participants a unique opportunity to present their views within the European Parliament in Brussels, home not only to a number of influential policy makers but also many of the principles of democracy and human rights central to discussions. The participation and contributions of Mr. Jan Marinus Wiersma MEP, Vice-Chairman of the Socialist Parliamentary Group (PSE) was also a valuable indication of the Parliament's broad support for the project of building a sustainable future for the people of northern Iraq.

Challenging discussions demand most of all an attentive and careful Chairperson, and the organisers remain grateful for the skilful stewardship of both Mr. Ken Kostyo, Director of Global Democracy Resources, and Mr. Martin Schulthes, Special Programmes Director for No Peace without Justice.

The attentiveness of the Chairpersons was matched by that of the translators; Ms. Yasemin Vaudable and Mr. Selçuk Perin.

Dr. Hassan Aydenli, the Iraqi Turkmen Front representative to the EU, and his assistant, Ms. Merry Fitzgerald, were of great assistance before, during, and after the Conference's conclusion.

The Belgian Government and its Embassies demonstrated both patience and goodwill with respect to the challenging task of securing the participation of individuals from within Iraq.

The EU Office of the Kurdistan Regional Government, and its EU Representative Mr. Burhan Jaf, assisted extensively to ensure also Kurdish voices were heard and policy makers reached.

Finally, and in addition to the numerous and dedicated speakers, the countless journalists, academics, and activists who travelled often considerable distances to attend the Conference offered participants an informed and engaged forum within which to present their thoughts, moving also discussion forward through insightful and engaging questioning.



Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is a democratic, international membership organisation. Its Members are indigenous peoples, minorities and occupied or unrecognised territories, who have joined together to protect their human and cultural rights, preserve their environments, and to find non-violent solutions to conflicts which affect them.

UNPO Members share one condition; they are not represented in major international fora, such as the United Nations. As a result, their ability to participate in the international community and to have their concerns addressed by the global bodies mandated to protect human rights and address conflict is limited. UNPO provides a legitimate and established international forum for Member aspirations and assists its Members in effective participation at an international level.

UNPO is dedicated to the five principles enshrined in its Covenant: Non-violence, Human Rights, Self-determination and democracy, Environmental Protection, and Tolerance.

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Iraqi Turkmen Human Rights Research Foundation

The objectives of the Iraqi Turkmen Human Rights Research Foundation, known as “SOITM”, are to:

- Promote emancipation and improvements in the Human Rights situations inside Iraq by:
 - Supporting international protection and promotion of the civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and human rights inside Iraq, particularly in Turkmeneli (the Turkmen Region in Iraq)
 - Monitoring the Human Rights situation and documenting violations
- Watching and publicising developments and regresses
- Promoting Turkmen cultural identity by:
- Encouraging the study of Iraqi Turkmen culture and history
- Introducing the Iraqi Turkmen to the international community
- Encouraging the social integration of the Iraqi Turkmen in the Netherlands by:
 - Supporting the participation of Turkmen in social activities and civil society organizations and institutions
- SOITM realizes these goals by:
 - Organizing lectures, courses, seminars and symposiums
 - Publishing books, newspapers, journals, and electronic resources
 - Organizing conferences, training programs and assistance campaigns
 - Promoting cooperation between Turkmen organizations
 - Cooperating and exchanging information and analysis about the situation in Iraq with other international organizations
 - Informing European Parliaments, academics, journalists and communities about the situation in Turkmen regions

SOITM currently involves some 15 volunteers, both inside and outside of Iraq. SOITM's headquarters are in the Netherlands with teams established in the following Turkmen regions: Kerkuk, Baghdad and Mosul, with additional representation also in other Turkmen regions.

SOITM is an institute with a focus on human rights and democratization. It maintains regular contact with Middle Eastern academics, the international press, and other human rights organizations, in order to introduce them to the Turkmen of Iraq, and to assist the process of democratization and the spread of civil society culture in Iraq, particularly within the Turkmen region.

SOITM is a non-profit foundation established in 2001. The foundation's budget is based upon donations, but it remains an independent organization. SOITM is not connected to any particular political party or ideological faction.

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