

Recommendations to Change the Process for Obtaining a Schengen Visa by Iraqi Politicians

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In the second half of 2008, the Iraqi Turkmen Human Rights Research Foundation (SOITM) and Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) started to work on a project to organize a conference in the European Parliament discussing the problems in the north of Iraq the situation of the Iraqi non-ruling communities (minorities) and the responses of the new Iraqi Parliament to the disputes. [1]

We aimed to bring the representatives of all the Iraqi ethnic and religious communities to present first-hand information about the problems in the north of Iraq to the policy makers of the European Parliament. We planned also to publish a series of press releases and prepare a detailed final report of the conference to be presented to the international community.

After the planned conference won the interest and support of a member of European Parliament in late 2009, we started preparations for the conference to be held on 10 June 2010. A room in the European Parliament (*2000 Euro*) was reserved for the conference and participants from the Iraqi political authorities with whom SOITM and UNPO had been in contact were extended invitations. Knowing to the importance of presenting their ideas on the problems in the north of Iraq to the international community, all the Iraqi politicians who we contacted were enthusiastic about the conference, and aware of the limited resources of the conference organizers, agreed to pay their own travel costs (*2000 USD / Person*).

Spokesman of the Iraqi Accordance Front Dr. Salim al-Juburi, who was a member of the former Iraqi Parliament from Diyala province, was coming to present the Arab approach to the problems in the north. To present the view of the Shabak community, the General Secretary of the Democratic Shabak Assembly and a former Member of the Iraqi Parliament, Dr. Hunain al-Qaddo, was to participate in the conference. The head of the Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress and member of the Iraqi Parliament Mr. Amin Farhan Jajjo was to contribute to the conference for the sake of the Yazidi community. Dr. Salam Farhan, secretary of Mandaean Human Rights Group was to present the Mandaean view. The Chaldea-Assyrian view was to be presented by Mr. Gevara Youkhana, representative of the Assyrian Democratic Movement in the al-Hamdaniya district of Nineveh province and a former member of the provincial council. Professor Suphi Saatci, a well known Turkmen author and general secretary of the Kerkuk Foundation was to introduce the Turkmen vision. The second session was to be presented under the title "A New Iraqi Parliament – With New Responses to Disputes?" by members of the recently elected Iraqi parliament, including Mr. Bashar Mohammed Hamid [2] from Nineveh province and Ms. Jale Naftchi from Kerkuk, as well as Kurdish representative from the Iraqi Parliament who were to present up-to-date views on the problems in the north.

Despite extensive contact with Kurdish political authorities, unfortunately, we could not find any Kurdish participants. We contacted all of the Kurdish parties and the Kurdish regional government by both telephone and email. The Gorran member of the Kurdish regional Parliament apologized that he could not participate, saying that was very busy. The Kurdistan Islamic Union and KRG did not reply to our invitations.

While we worked to cement our speakers, the conference concept note, the provisional program, invitation and the press releases were written and distributed to the members of the European parliament and several hundred guests and representatives of the international media, civil society, and the diplomatic and academic communities. Hard work was done to find a chairperson for the conference, as well as remark givers and experts in the subject of the conference. The visit of community leaders from Iraq was also seen as an opportunity to convene meetings with

deputies from European and national parliaments and representatives of European institutions who expressed both interest and support for the conference and its discussions.

Simultaneous interpreters were hired and a contract was made (2200 Euros). The cancellation was possible only a month in advance, on the 9th of May 2010, after which the full amount was due to the interpreters whether the conference took place or not.

Visa application procedures for participants

One of the most exhaustive and expensive stages of organization of such a conference is the visa application procedures. Many of the European countries, including Belgium, issue no visa procedures in Baghdad. Therefore, Iraqis who would have to obtain a Belgian visa are obliged to travel to Jordan to apply for a visa at the Belgian Embassy in Amman.

Following advice from the Belgian diplomatic missions in Amman and Ankara, the participants were required to meet specific requirements which required several weeks and substantial financial outlay:

- Collection of requested documents, including possession of Iraqi Passport 'G' Series after previously valid Series 'S' were rendered invalid, from all conference participants in Iraq;
- Application for the Jordanian visa in Baghdad (50 USD), which requires two weeks to be issued, to allow transport to Amman to submit Belgian visa applications and demands travel to Amman by Jordanian Royal Airlines.
- Booking and travel to Amman by Jordanian Royal Airlines (800 USD).
- Application for Belgian visa (100 USD)
- Return to Iraq waiting two to three weeks for the results
- In the case that the Belgian visa procedure takes long time, the participants would be forced to apply for a Jordanian visa for the second time
- After getting the visas, travel to Amman (800 USD)
- Two to three days stay in Amman (300 USD) to get the visas and to book travel to Brussels.
- Booking and travel to Belgium (600 USD)

Getting a Turkish visa in Iraq is much easier than getting a Jordanian visa. Requests from the conference organizers to the Belgian diplomatic authorities to have the applications processed in Ankara, though, which was the case during our two earlier conferences, were refused.

Nevertheless, the Belgian Embassy in Amman accepted our request that the visa applications and collection be made by one person representing all conference participants and visa applicants, understandably on the condition that all participants present themselves at least once in person to the Belgian Embassy in order to be fingerprinted. Accordingly, it was planned that all the visa applicants will personally attend the Belgian embassy in Amman when the visas were issued.

On 4th May 2010, after collecting the required documents from six participants in different Iraqi provinces, Dr. Hunain al-Qaddo flew to Amman, submitted the visa applications with the Belgian Embassy and returned to Iraq (1000 USD).

After a delay of six critical days, the Belgian Embassy in Amman informed us that all of the visa applications had been refused. [3]

The organizers learned that several authorities who registered to attend the conference could cancel the reservation of accommodation and travel and others have to pay for cancelling of the reservation.

Two illogical reasons were made by the Belgian authorities for the refusal of the visa applications:

Firstly, for allegedly not providing “justification for the purpose and conditions of the intended stay” in Belgium. This, however, appears to ignore the following:

- ✓ Visa applicants submitted their conference letters of invitation, all of which bore the emblems of SOITM, UNPO and the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D);
- ✓ SOITM had exchanged detailed emails with the Belgian Embassy in Amman and provided comprehensive information about the conference and participants;
- ✓ A letter from the Member of the European Parliament, who sponsored the conference, was sent to the Belgian Embassy in Amman informing them about the conference and its importance including details about the Iraqi policy makers participating in the conference and asking assistance with relation to visa applications to facilitate their attendance at the European Parliament.

Secondly, the Belgian Embassy claimed there was not “proof of sufficient means of subsistence, both for the duration of the intended stay and for the return to his country of origin or residence, or for the transit to a third country into which he is to be admitted, or is not in a position to acquire such means lawfully.” This reasoning was arrived despite the following:

- ✓ Participants’ invitation letters including assurances that the conference organizers had paid for the accommodation costs associated with the participants’ stay in Brussels;
- ✓ The participants hold prominent positions in Iraqi society with assured incomes in excess of most Iraqi citizens.

Recommendations

- ✓ SOITM urges the authorities of the European countries to make the visa applications procedures for Iraqis clearer and more reflective of the uniquely dangerous environment in which they must make such arrangements;
- ✓ SOITM calls upon the European Parliament to establish a mechanism to facilitate and support events convened and supported by deputies of the European Parliament.

Reference:

1. The publications of the conference:
 - a. [First Press Release “SAVE THE DATE”](#)
 - b. [Second Press Release](#)
 - c. [Concept note of the conference](#)
 - d. [Program of the conference](#)
 - e. [Flyer of the conference](#)
 - f. [Press Release of two conferences in The Hague](#)
2. Mr. Bashar Mohammed Hamed was assassinated on 24 May 2010. Mr. Hamed was due to attend the conference as the elected representative of Mosul to the Iraqi Parliament.
3. The hotel reservations for participants, (3000 Euros), could be cancelled only a few days before the deadline.