



DISPUTISTAN

RESOLVING INJUSTICE IN IRAQ

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DISPUTISTAN

– RESOLVING INJUSTICE IN IRAQ



City of Kirkuk

Collectively, the disputed areas in northern Iraq tell a story of injustice, a story of people being forced out of their homes for the crime of belonging to one ethnic group and not the other. For much of Iraq's modern history, the places now known as the "disputed areas" were subjected to policies of Arabization, essentially meaning that the original residents, Kurds and Turkmens were forced to flee from their homes and Arab families were often paid to resettle there. The objective of the policies for those who carried out the injustices was the hope that the

demographics of these areas would change, giving the central government, the Arabizing force, control over these strategic locations and, in many cases, the rich oil reserves lying deep below their soil. The process of Arabization was intensified under the reign of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party (1968-2003), the darkest age in modern Iraq's history, a time when much of Iraq became a mass grave beneath the ground and a concentration camp above it.

Iraqi writer and professor Dr. Kanan Makiya once aptly described Saddam's Iraq as a "Republic of Fear"; it was within that republic where an historic

injustice was committed against the original inhabitants of Kirkuk and a number of other towns and villages stretching from just north of Baghdad all the way to the gates of Dohuk, not far from Iraq's border with Turkey.

Following the removal of the Ba'athist regime, the issue of *Disputistan* became a topic of focus for the actors in Iraq's new political system, and was immediately addressed through Article 58 of the Transitional Authority Law (TAL). Article 58 of the TAL mentions only the governorate of Kirkuk by name, but covers all of Iraqi locales which had been subjected to Arab nationalist and

sectarian policies enacted by the previous regime.

In the Iraqi constitution which succeeded the TAL, Article 140 is dedicated to the issue of the disputed areas, with a specific reference to the text of Article 58 of the TAL. Article 140 gave the new Iraqi government a deadline to complete the implementation stage - 31 December 2007. Kirkuk and the remaining disputed areas were to be "normalized" by moving Arab settlers out of the regions and moving formerly displaced families back to their previous homes. A consensus, followed by a referendum, would then determine whether the areas would be incorporated into the Kurdistan Region. Today, well into mid-2009, these important steps have yet to take place.

Within the landscape of Kurdish politics (both pre- and post-regime change), few things are more important than the issue of Kirkuk and the other disputed areas. Thus, in 2005, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) established the Ministry of Extra Regional Affairs with the specific mandate of focusing on the disputed areas, and appointed Dr. Muhammad Ihsan to head this new ministry. In an interview with *Kurdish Herald*, Dr. Ihsan said that the single most important factor impeding the implementation of Article 140 is the lack of political will.

Policies stemming from Arab nationalism resulted in the displacement of people from their homes because of the fear that if a place like Kirkuk, which sits on 20% of Iraq's known oil reserves and continues to have a Kurdish majority, is treated as part of Kurdistan, then the Kurds of Iraq could more easily separate from Iraq and form their own independent state. Indeed, that fear seems to persist to this very day. The people of Kirkuk and other Iraqis inside and outside of Kurdistan were led to believe that the removal of the Saddam regime would bring about a new set of ideals, that these new ideals would be part of a new order. This belief seems unfortunately unwarranted, as almost two years have passed since the constitutional deadline for the implementation of Article 140, and no progress has been made.

Dr. Muhammad Ihsan's ministry, which has relied on documents and recent surveys conducted by the minis-

try, believes that the number displaced from the disputed areas is approximately two million. However, Dr. Muhammad Ihsan insists that without a referendum and a census there is no adequate way to determine how many people were affected by the Ba'athist policies of Arabization and displacement. The Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens and other groups seem to all claim certain disputed areas to be theirs, and no public census has ever been conducted in these areas in recent times.

The city center of Kirkuk is undoubtedly the most important of the disputed areas as its mixed population is estimated to be approximately half a million. The Kurds say that Kirkuk is "the heart of Kurdistan", while Iraq's Turkmens see it as their cultural center in Iraq. The Arabs, most of whom were resettled there for political purposes culminating in this crisis, believe that they have been there for too long to just pack up and go back to the homes of their fathers and grandfathers.



The KRG frequently claims that it has had an outstanding record of coexistence with non-Kurdish minorities within the current borders of Iraq's Kurdistan Region. Kurdish authorities argue that the non-Kurds of Kirkuk would be treated no differently than the rest of non-Kurdish Kurdistanis (including indigenous Turkmens and non-Kurdish Christian populations) that are currently living within the administrative borders of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

In the center of Kirkuk, according to the Electoral Commission's certified tallies, the 2005 election results yielded a strong victory for the Kurdish parties, with the Kurdistan Alliance list receiving 261,577 votes, which amounted to 67.8% of the total vote (not including

the districts). The runner-up was the Iraqi Turkmen Front, which received 54,213 votes (14% of total), with the remainder going to various other slates, including Islamist Kurds. The district of Dibis, with an estimated population of 40,000, sits on the northern tip of the governorate of Kirkuk, bordering KRG's administrative capital, Erbil. 75% of the votes from Dibis were won by the Kurdistan Alliance during the December 2005 elections. Also within the administrative borders of the governorate of Kirkuk is the district of Daquq with an estimated population of 75,000 people. Daquq, like most of Kirkuk, is a mosaic consisting of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens and others groups. During the 2005 elections, the Kurdistan Alliance won a plurality of the votes in the region, capturing 37% of the total. On the other hand, in the district of al-Hawijah bordering the Salahadin governorate, where the Arab tribes of Jibour and al-'Ubaid reside, the Kurdistan Alliance received less than a 1,000 votes (not even 1%). In the event that there is a full implementation of Article 140 and the referendum results show that the people of the governorate of Kirkuk choose to be included with the Kurdistan Regional Government, the people of al-Hawijah would become either remain an Arab minority within Iraqi Kurdistan or join Salahadin governorate, with the latter being more likely given ethnic tensions.

That is part of the legal principle behind Article 58 of the TAL and Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution – rearrangements of administrative borders ought to be addressed if need be. Indeed, the current borders are a function of previous adjustments made by the Iraqi central government to serve its chauvinistic agenda, and it only makes sense that they could now be reevaluated in an attempt to right the wrongs of the past, which would mean reevaluating the provincial assignments of places such as Makhmour (moved from Erbil to Mosul) and Akre (moved from Dohuk to Mosul). Additionally, outside Kurdistan, this could mean reevaluating the current size of the Karbala governorate, which was decreased by the previous regime, and that of the Anbar governorate, which was increased.

In Mosul, the demographics are even more mixed, with a number of large and small ethnic and religious communities comprising the ever-so-mixed region known as the Nineveh plains. A drive from Dohuk to Erbil will inevitably lead a traveler through part of this region and include some areas which are exclusively Kurdish and others including various groups such as the indigenous Shabak, Yezidi or Christian populations. The vast majority of the areas within this region are quite diverse. To some residents of the Nineveh plains who have seen the horrors inflicted by al-Qaeda and the neo-Ba'athists in the center of Mosul since 2003, the idea of being included within the relatively safe and prosperous Kurdistan Region may be an easy decision.

In Diyala, the districts of Kifri and Khaneqin and the sub-district of Mandali

are comprised of mostly Kurds, Feyli (Shi'a) Kurds to be specific. Despite numerous terrorist attacks against them, the Feyli Kurds in this area still enjoy relative safety compared to the Feyli Kurds victimized during the most intense stages of the insurgency in Sunni majority areas north and west of Baghdad.

In Salahadin lies the district of Tuz Khurmatu, which has considerable Kurdish and Turkmen communities. Tikrit, the birthplace of the former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, is located at the center of the Salahadin governorate. Saddam used the fact that it was his birthplace as a qualifier to turn the small town into a governorate and incorporated districts such as Tuz Khurmatu to become part of Salahadin.

Behind these names and numbers are shattered families that were once stripped

of their right to remain in their ancestral homes. Thousands of families were displaced for purely chauvanistic and sectarian reasons, causing the new Iraqi political class an unenviable problem whose resolution seems to require more than a constitutional article. Indeed, Article 140 is a fair legal mechanism at resolving the issue of *Disputistan* and no new proposal can be more just or sensible than what is already outlined in the text of the Iraqi constitution. Now, the new Iraq needs to commit to one of its primary purposes as a historical actor and focus on resolving the injustices of the previous regime.

The table below shows 15 disputed areas on the level of governorate and district, all within areas of north of Baghdad. Tens of sub-districts, small towns and villages are part of these fifteen areas. The table is based according to the administrative borders recognized by the Iraqi central government.

	<i>Disputed Area</i>	<i>Governate</i>
1	Kirkuk	Kirkuk
2	Sinjar	Mosul
3	Tal Afar	Mosul
4	Tel Keif	Mosul
5	Sheikhan	Mosul
6	Akre	Mosul
7	Hamdaniya	Mosul
8	Maakhmour	Mosul
9	Al-Hawijah	Kirkuk
10	Dibis	Kirkuk
11	Daquq	Kirkuk
12	Tuz Khurmatu	Salahadin (Tikrit)
13	Kifri	Diyala
14	Khanaqin	Diyala
15	Balad Ruz (Mandali Only)	Diyala

THE EVOLUTION

of the Modern Electoral Process in the Kurdistan Region

By Delovan Barwari

Today, spirits are running high in the streets of Iraqi Kurdistan as the upcoming regional elections on 25 July 2009 approach. Kurdish television stations, newspapers, online news sources, blogs, and chat rooms have been dominated by this monumental event in Kurdish history as the preparation for the third parliamentary election and the first direct election for the presidency of Kurdistan region is underway. Undeniably, it will be a transformative test case for Iraqi Kurdistan.

As Operation Desert Storm drew to a close, United States President George H. W. Bush encouraged the Iraqi people to rise up against the regime of Saddam Hussein, stating, "The day [Saddam] and his regime are removed from power will be the day of [the Iraqi people's] liberation."

As Kurds rose up and liberated the vast majority of the Kurdistan Region, a ceasefire between the US-led coalition and the defeated Iraqi army allowed Saddam's ground forces to launch a large military attack, massacring tens of thousands of civilians in the process. Kurdish civilians were forced to flee their homes, taking refuge on the border regions of Iran and Turkey. Humanitarian outcry led to a proposal by France, supported by United States and Britain, to establish a no-fly zone (UN resolution 688) in northern and south-



Kurdistan Parliament, Erbil, Kurdistan - Iraq



A photo of N. Mustafa, J. Talabani, and M. Barzani on the front page of Kurdish magazine-2009

ern Iraq to provide the masses with a measure of protection against Saddam's brutality.

The Iraqi regime officially withdrew its administrative institutions from Iraq's three northernmost provinces in October 1991. During the same period, the Kurdistan Front, a coalition of seven Kurdish political parties led by the two largest - the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) - began a series of negotiations that led to a collective agreement on a parliamentary system. A special committee was created involving the representatives of various Kurdish political parties, intellectuals, judges, and lawyers. The end result was the formation of the first Kurdistan Election Law, preparing the groundwork for the first free and democratic elections in Kurdistan.

On 19 May 1992, the region was filled with an atmosphere of joy and unity and nearly a million votes were cast. The results were a near tie between the two main Kurdish parties, KDP winning approximately 51% of the vote and PUK winning 49%. To avoid tensions between the two parties, they agreed on a 50/50 power sharing formula. However, the unity did not last long

as rivalry and mistrust grew between the PUK and KDP. In 1994, the two factions entered a bloody civil war that resulted in the creation of two separate regional administrations in Erbil (run by the KDP) and Sulaymaniyah (run by the PUK), creating a deep division in Kurdish society. The two administrations officially reunited in Erbil in October 2002, but many major tasks remained divided by the two parties long after this reunification event.

When a smaller US-led coalition initiated its invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the KDP and PUK presented a unified military front and worked with the US to defeat Saddam's forces in northern Iraq. In particular, Kurdish forces played a major role in driving Saddam's forces out of Mosul and Kerkuk. Following the disintegration of Saddam's regime, the Kurdish leadership was far more organized and sophisticated than most of its counterparts in post-Saddam Iraq, giving Kurds the ability to greatly influence the establishment of the new Iraqi political system and allowing them to politically guarantee their own rights in the new Iraqi constitution.

The first post-Saddam national elections in Iraq took place on 30 January 2005. In

parallel, elections for parliament were held in the Kurdistan Region. Nearly all of the Kurdish political parties along with the Chaldo-Assyrian, and Turkmen parties entered the elections under a banner called the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan (DPAK). In both the national election and the regional election, DPAK scored a major victory, became a major player in Iraqi politics, and Kurds were able to expand their political influence in Baghdad. As a result of DPAK's strong showing in the national parliamentary elections, PUK Secretary General Jalal Talabani, became the first Kurd in Iraq's history to become president of the country.

Thus far, 2009 has already been a year of monumental elections. The year began with Iraq holding provincial elections in 14 of 18 provinces; the KRG-administered provinces did not participate, nor did the disputed region of Kerkuk. Elections in Kerkuk have been postponed indefinitely. However, the Kurdish parties did participate in elections in disputed areas excluding Kerkuk, with significant showings in the provinces of Nineveh and Diyala. In Turkey, nationwide municipal elections saw the rise of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) as the voice of predominantly Kurdish regions of Turkey, perhaps providing an opening for a sincere dialogue addressing the Kurdish question in Turkey. In Iran, alleged vote-rigging in presidential elections resulted in widespread protests that provided the most serious challenge to the existing regime in many years.

The timing of the elections in Turkey, Iraq, and especially the civil unrest on the streets of Iran has increased excitement in Iraqi Kurdistan as the parties and masses prepare for elections scheduled on 25 June 2009. The up-

coming elections will be the third parliamentary and first direct presidential elections in the region. *Kurdish Globe* reported that the IHEC office has announced the names of registered 42 political lists, and 509 candidates that will be competing for 111 seats in the Kurdistan parliament. Eleven seats have been allocated to represent the Assyrian, Armenian, and Turkmen minority communities in the KRG-administered provinces.

On 25 March 2009, four articles were added and three amendments were made to the Kurdistan Election Law. Highlights of these new developments are as follows:

- The elections will be a closed list and conducted by the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq (IHEC);
- The political entities must consist of candidates with a minimum of 25 years of age, and a 30% female representation; they must be residents of Kurdistan and represent the entire region;
- The law pertaining to the Presidency of Kurdistan region requires the candidate to be a citizen and resident of Kurdistan of Iraq; to be not less than 40 years of age on the election date, and to have valid civil and political rights.

Many factors will influence the outcome of the upcoming elections in Kurdistan. Opposition slates are aiming to play to the frustrations of the masses, focusing on issues such as corruption, nepotism, lack of economic transparency, and the lack of resolution concerning the status of Kerkuk and other disputed areas. Indeed, the slogans of these opposition groups appear fairly similar, calling for reform and change. However, in an attempt to retain their hold on the region, the current ruling parties have been emphasizing their rich history and the sacrifices

Photo courtesy Natsumi Ajiki

Photo courtesy Natsumi Ajiki



Election campaign propoganda covers an overpass in Erbil -2009

made in the past in the name of the Kurdish cause, while also attempting to provide concrete facts outlining the accomplishments of the KRG over the last few years, and highlighting their success in protecting the region from terrorist attacks.

Furthermore, in apparent move to win voters' confidence, the prime minister of the Kurdistan Region, Nechirvan Barzani, unveiled a new plan as late as 12 July 2009 to counter corruption by hiring an international firm to assist the administration. The prime minister stated, "PricewaterhouseCoopers is a well-known international company that works in 150 countries and can eliminate corruption."

The biggest political block competing in the parliamentary elections is the *Kurdistan List*, a coalition of the two dominant political parties, the KDP and PUK. In the previous elections, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) was seen as the strongest opposition challenging the ruling parties in the polls. However, perhaps in an attempt to optimize their number of votes, the KIU has allied with the Islamic Group in Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Socialist Party,

and the Kurdistan Toilers Party to form a coalition known as the *Service and Reform List*, also known as the Four Parties List.

Most significantly, a new opposition group, known as the *List for Change*, has entered the scene. The *List for Change*, led by former PUK deputy Newshirwan Mustafa, is believed to be the main challenger to the Kurdistan List, and has gained popularity and support by promising to reform the way in which the KRG administers the region and provides services to the people. Observers note, however, that Mustafa's popularity is limited geographically due to his record of leading old rivalries between the province of Sulaymaniyah and the rest of the Kurdistan Region.

In addition, most recently, a smaller list receiving some attention called the *Kurdistan Reform Movement* has been formed, which is comprised of 14 candidates and is led by Dr. Abdul-Musawar Barzani, a professor at University of Sulaymaniya and cousin of President Massoud Barzani.

In the race for the Presidency of Kurdistan region, the

most well-known and perhaps most popular candidate is, of course, the incumbent, Massoud Barzani. President Barzani is widely expected to win the elections by a great margin. Four other candidates are competing: Halo Ibrahim Ahmad, the brother in law of Jalal Talabani. Kamal Mirawdali, a scholar, writer, and a poet formerly based in London; Hussein Garmiani and Safeen Sheikh Mohammad, two independent Kurdish businessmen.

In the 2005 election, one of the main slogans of DPAK was the promise to resolve the status of Kerkuk and other disputed territories in favor of Kurds. However, the ruling parties have yet to fulfill that promise. On 24 June 2009, a new constitution was approved in Kurdistan Parliament, which defines the Kurdistan Region as including the disputed areas of Kerkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala. The KRG originally sought to hold this referendum on the same day as the July 25 parliamentary and presidential election, though Iraq's electoral commission ruled out the possibility, stating, "The commission finds it impossible to organize the referendum at the same

time as the presidential and legislative polls because this would affect the credibility and integrity of the [electoral] process". The proposed new constitution is well regarded by many Kurds, but it has caused uneasiness within the Iraqi central government, as well as with Kurdish opposition groups for a variety of reasons.

Indeed, it appears that the upcoming election will be a great milestone in modern Kurdish history and a crucial step forward in the development of democracy in Iraqi Kurdistan. Without a doubt, the election will serve as a catalyst in the transformation of the political norms. Furthermore, it will likely open the door for the creation of an atmosphere more amenable to open political debate. This will pave the way to a change in the political mentality and norms of the society of Iraqi Kurdistan. It will also hopefully make the parties feel truly accountable to the people, and influence all participants in the political process to act with greater transparency. Such a result would be a victory for all people of Iraqi Kurdistan, regardless of which candidates they support. 🌸

IRAN

PROTESTS AGAINST ELECTION RESULTS OR THE ENTIRE ESTABLISHMENT?

by Sayeh Hassan

Particularly in the final days of campaigning, the real race was clearly one that would be a choice between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi. Mousavi ran on a platform of reform that included such buzzwords as 'equality and fairness' and 'freedom of expression'. In total, an estimated 46.2 million Iranians cast their ballots. Not surprisingly, many Iranians, hopeful for change, supported Mousavi and voted for him on Election Day, June 12, 2009.

Given the unpopularity of Ahmadinejad among the Iranian people as well as the historic televised presidential debates in which analysts described Mousavi as coming out the clear winner, the expectation of many was that Mousavi would pose a serious threat to the incumbent president come Election Day. In addition, less popular candidates were expected to considerably change the margins in favour of Mousavi. In particular, it was expected that the ethnic Arabs in the province of Khuzestan and Iranian Kurds in the province of Kermanshah would turn out in support of candidate Mehdi Karoubi, who made ethnic rights a key item in his campaign for presidency.

Many Iranians from Tehran to provinces in the east and west were shocked after an announcement came almost overnight that Ahmadinejad had won by a landslide, with more than 60 percent of the vote, a shock that would turn into frustration and ultimately a challenge of the government establishment.

Massive demonstrations emerged in many major cities in Iran including Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz, Esfahan, Kermanshah, Karaj and Zahedan, becoming the largest protests since the Islamic revolution. Demonstrators were met with violence by Islamic Revolutionary Guards, plain-

clothes paramilitaries, and other police and security forces. Footage of demonstrators beaten and arrested quickly spread across the Internet as Iranians took advantage of social networking websites to dodge regime efforts and censorship. While official government sources have confirmed the deaths of approximately 20 people in the

Iranians protest alleged election fraud



protests, non-governmental sources claim that the number is closer to 200, while several thousands have been arrested and are subject to torture.

Demonstrations in Tehran continued into the month of July on a nightly basis, although not in such large numbers as were observed in the first two weeks after the election. As many poured into the streets shouting slogans such as "Death to [Supreme Leader]

Khamenei" and "Death to the Dictator", chants that were unthinkable in Iran just months ago, an important debate has emerged in Iranian society about whether protests persist in opposition to the election results or whether people are or should be protesting the entire system of government in Iran. A question within this debate begs to ask what the difference would be between an Ahma-

Iranian woman Neda Soltani is killed in midst of protests



dinejad presidency and a Mousavi one and what types of changes would have taken place.

To answer this question, it is crucial to first examine Mousavi's history as a politician. Early in his career, Mousavi was in charge of the closing of Iran's universities immediately after the revolution in order to conduct a *cultural re-education*. He also served as the prime minister of Iran from 1981 to 1988, a time period dominated by the executions of thousands of political prisoners. In the summer of 1988 alone, independent sources confirmed that nearly 10,000 political prisoners were executed after quick three-minute show trials. Despite this dark past, Mousavi has never shown any sign of regret about the executions, nor did he make any mention of the status of the current political activists in Iran's prisons.

This is not surprising since Mousavi has been an integral part of the Islamic Republic since its founding days and has never before challenged the establishment nor the founding principles that were laid down by Ayatollah Khomeini. Some analysts inside Iran appropriately noted that Mousavi had become a "reformer" almost overnight but that any reform would have to take place within the laws and framework of the current regime.

Of course, even if Mousavi were sincere, a quick look at the powers of the president versus that of the supreme leader sheds light on the fact that the major decisions in Iran are made by the latter. The supreme leader appoints the heads of many powerful posts - the commanders of the armed forces, the director of the national radio and television network, the heads of the major religious foundations, the prayer leaders in city mosques, and the members of national security council's dealing with defence and foreign affairs. He also appoints the chief judge, the chief prosecutor, special tribunals, and with the help of the chief judge, half of the 12 jurists of the Guardian Council - the all-powerful body that decides both what bills may become law and also who may or may not run for president and parliament.

These realities have made it difficult for many Iranians to understand just what powers are left to the elected president, and have certainly played a factor in encouraging many to take to the streets to protest something far greater than election results. One indica-

tion of discontent with the entire system is that the slogans that Iranians have been shouting in the streets of Tehran are no longer solely directed at Ahmadinejad, but at the Islamic government as a whole.

In some parts of Iran, discontentment with the entire system is affirmed by actions other than protest and demonstrations. In the province of Kurdistan in Iran, the majority of people simply boycotted the election. Kurdish oppositional parties such as the outlawed Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran asked their sympathizers in the region to join the boycott. Many Kurds in Iran followed such requests with the notion that, regardless of who is elected, it would not make any fundamental difference since either president would have to work within the laws and framework of the current regime.

Even while Karoubi campaigned very heavily in the Kurdish areas of Iran and even used pictures of Massoud Barzani, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, to win the sympathy and votes of Kurds in Iran, the majority of Kurds in the Kurdistan province did not turn out to vote. Promises of equality or freedom of expression made by candidates such as Karoubi, and even louder by Mousavi, are meaningless with a presidential post that does not possess the power to make such things happen. Any law promoting equality between men and women or minorities would have to be approved by the supreme leader, and the approval of such a bill would be highly improbable. On the same note, the promise of freedom of expression or freedom of press would face similar obstacles, especially given the fact that the head of national radio and television network is appointed by the supreme leader. Therefore the chances of any real reform or change taking place in Iran would be extremely difficult regardless of who may be the president. Still, many Iranians placed their faith in the system when they voted. However, that faith has all but faded as evident by the millions of protestors in the streets of Iran and loud calls by the people for an end to a system in which one dictates and the rest follow in fear of retribution. 🌹

Sayeh Hassan is a criminal defense lawyer practicing in Toronto, a pro-democracy Iranian activist, and is currently involved in writing articles and translating news to highlight and draw attention to the human rights abuses in Iran. She holds a degree in Psychology and Mass Communication, and an LL.B.

Village life in the Qendil Mountains

by Thomas James

Qendil Mountains - Iraqi Kurdistan - Photo Courtesy Shivan Sito



Qendil Mountains, Iraqi Kurdistan - In any other country, an area such as the Qendil Mountains in the northernmost part of Iraq would be a tourist attraction, on a par with the Swiss Alps or the Spanish Pyrenees. Rugged, snow-capped peaks and deep gorges give way to carpets of wild flowers and small farm holdings. The people here are broadly self-sufficient, able to meet their needs from the fertile land and mountain streams. Ostensibly, it should be a simple and peaceful way of life for the population of the area's two hundred odd villages.

Yet it is high in these mountains on the Iran-Iraq border that the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has based itself in its ongoing war with the Turkish State. The PKK enjoys support from many of Turkey's Kurds and is supported by a large network of civilians throughout Turkey and the Kurdish Diaspora. Many armed PKK fighters are based in southeast Turkey, though the majority are believed to be based in

the mountains of Kurdistan near Iraq's borders with Iran and Turkey. Of the various bases of operations in this region, the Qendil region is believed to host the largest number of camps and is the current home of many of the group's leadership.

For the PKK, the benefits of the Qendil region are clear. The region itself is quite far from Turkey and is not accessible for most vehicles, and the mountainous terrain provides shelter from aerial bombardment and land-based attack. Long before the PKK entered Qendil, it was a safe haven for Iraqi Kurdish rebels and was never conquered by enemy forces. While Turkey has threatened to expel the PKK from Qendil, the rebel forces there remain safe and secure. Turkey launches periodic airstrikes against suspected PKK positions in Qendil and elsewhere in Iraq with very little effect. In February 2008, Turkey launched a major military offensive, sending thousands of soldiers into Iraq with

the stated aim of striking a major blow against the PKK. While initial reports indicated some success, the Turkish offensive failed to dislodge the PKK from bases close to the Iraqi-Turkish border, such as Zap, and came nowhere close to Qendil. The Turkish incursion, codenamed Operation Sun ended after just over a week, and the PKK survived with renewed confidence.

For the villagers of Qendil, the benefits of hosting the PKK are less certain. The Qendil Mountains are not only home to guerrillas from the PKK, but also to its Iranian sister organization, the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK). Consequently, the area faces both artillery bombardments from Iran and aerial attacks from Turkey, as well as the threat of invasion should the conflict escalate seriously. During this writer's visit, the birdsong of the day was accompanied by the whine of a surveillance drone and there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the spectre of war hangs just over



the hills. PKK reports suggest that Iranian artillery bombardments continued right up until the beginnings of the current Iranian presidential election. Meanwhile, Turkish air strikes continue against various alleged PKK sites in Turkey and various regions of Iraq on an almost daily basis.

Locals in Qendil talk of one night of air strikes on 16 December 2007 that led to the death of one elderly woman and to another woman losing a leg. This round of air strikes destroyed a hospital in the village of Lavche and unexploded munitions led to homes being abandoned and farmland untended. A local PKK official also reported the demolition of a school and the partial destruction of a mosque in the village of Klatuka. Since then, continued bombardments have led to more deaths and to many villages being abandoned. With the current lull in hostilities, the majority of villagers have returned but remain ready to leave their homes again.

One man, a local farmer named Mohammed from the village of Lavche, commented that, while he was a supporter of the PKK, he was also scared for his children and scared of what the future might hold for his young family. When asked about the indiscriminate nature of the bombings, he replied that they were not indiscriminate, but instead were designed to "kill Kurds and turn the locals against the PKK".

Inside Mohammed's one-story stone farmhouse, a picture of a young woman took pride of place. Dressed in combat fatigues and standing in front of a PKK flag, it is clear where the sympathies of his family lie. His children played on a rope swing and over glasses of warm milk, their

daughter showed me a pin-badge depicting the image of the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Their grandfather, formerly a Peshmerga fighter, explained that "the guerrilla is in my soul. I will always support them, even if there is a risk of bombing".

The more people I spoke to made it seem clear that the locals support the PKK. Others spoke of their admiration for the group and the security that they provided. People still remember Saddam's Anfal campaigns of the 1980s and the feeling remains in some quarters that the Kurds are likely to become a target again; clearly the bombings of hospitals and mosques only encourage this fear.

From the Turkish side, there are allegations that the PKK live in the villages, and even that the villagers are PKK guerrillas. This is strongly denied by the PKK and by the villagers themselves. One PKK official told me that their camps are away from the civilian populations and that members are drawn not from local villages in the Qendil, but from all across the Kurdish areas in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Indeed, there can be no doubt that there is complicity and assistance from the local population, who are able to benefit financially through providing services and supplies. Despite PKK claims that there is very little interaction with the villagers, anecdotal evidence and my own observations seemed to suggest otherwise. Hospitality offered to journalists visit-

ing the PKK is provided by ordinary villagers and, during my visit to the area in May 2009, my driver for the day was a local man from outside the PKK-administered area taking advantage of the opportunity to earn some extra money.

Sympathies for the PKK extend well beyond the immediate area. Although there are no official figures, support (whether active or passive) for the PKK is very strong and many ex-PKK members are able to live within Iraq. The KRG generally describes the PKK as a Turkish problem and, while they have closed offices of pro-PKK political parties, they have thus far refused pressure to take military action against the group. Just recently, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, welcomed the extension of the PKK's official ceasefire, describing it as "important step towards peace and stability in the area", while concurrently praising "recent positive steps taken by Turkey".

For the people of Qendil, military action against the PKK would be a disaster. Past experience indicates that civilians in the region are the first to be adversely impacted and military operations against the region have yielded little success.

For now though, with talk of peace between the PKK and Turkey growing, the people of Qendil are cautiously hopeful for the future. They will continue to farm the lands of the Qendil and until there is peace, the PKK will continue to dwell among its high peaks. Perhaps some time later, Qendil will really become famous for its natural beauty.



NO COUNTRY, NO IDENTITY

The story of the Makhmour refugees

By Derya Cewlik

The Makhmour Refugee Camp is one of approximately seven camps in Iraq providing shelter for Kurds outside of the country. While its very existence is the focus of intense Turkish opposition, the existence and condition of the camp is hardly known by the international community.

The brutal war between the Turkish military and rebels from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has displaced tens of thousands of Kurds from their ancestral homes in southeastern Turkey. Migration from this region to other areas, both forced and unforced, continues to this very day. Since 1994, there was an influx of Kurdish refugees from southeastern Turkey into Iraq. Initially, these refugees settled areas around the city of Atroush in the Duhok governorate. In 1998, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) opened the Makhmour Refugee Camp in the district of Makhmour, located in the Musil governorate but only about a one hour driving distance from the Kurdistan region's capital of Erbil.

Makhmour's inhabitants - Kurds from Turkey and their children - are officially registered as refugees. Their numbers grow every year, having risen from about 10,000 people two years ago to an estimated 12,000 at present. The refugees have a very uncertain future due to Turkish pressure to close the camp, which they label a "PKK camp". Day-to-day life in the camp is very difficult, as electricity averages an estimated eight hours a day, although it is anything but consistent. Clean water is limited as well, and according to one camp resident, the intense heat in summer spoils food very quickly.

Despite constant external disturbances and uncertainties, the strong spirit of solidarity among camp residents in the Makhmour is rather impressive. The camp itself is organized like a small town, with yearly elections for municipality mayor and the municipality assembly (where 40% of representatives are women) and a special women's assembly. Approximately 3,500 of the camp's 12,000 residents of them are between the ages of 7 and 25 years. There are many children born each year in the camp and, while their parents may officially have Turkish citizenship, the children are born as



refugees with no citizenship whatsoever. There are three elementary schools and one middle school to accommodate students. Kurdish in the Kurmanji dialect is almost exclusively spoken by camp residents, and the camp's education committee publishes textbooks in Kurmanji every year for their students. General curricula also include two hours of Turkish and English language courses per week, and the camp's library is stocked with books written in Kurdish (Kurmanji and Sorani dialects), Turkish, Arabic, and Farsi.

Other community organizers also spoke about the importance of promoting gender equality in the camp, consistent with the ideology of many who address the Kurdish question in Turkey. A leader of the camp's Women's Center explained that they seek to address all facets of the "Women's Question," by not only promoting women's rights but also focusing on changing the psychological approach to the rigid stereotypes and cultural framework about what women should be.

Despite the uncertainty of the future, the camp's leaders continue to work to increase quality of life in the camp and promote education and culture among camp residents. They have recently built an outdoor entertainment area that resembles a miniature Roman coliseum where music, dancing, and theater are performed. Weekly newsletters and special student monthly publications are also printed.

According to community leaders, quality of life increased noticeably after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In their words, under Saddam's regime, the Makhmour Refugee Camp was "like a prison". Residents were not allowed to go outside of the Camp except for medical emergencies. Communication was very limited for camp residents, as it was for all living under Saddam's control. Now, however, a handful of modest, new internet cafes link the camp to the outside world, and refugees are allowed to go to the Kurdistan Regional Government's administered region to work. Nevertheless, it does not mean that such opportunities are abundant to all refugees. To do so, one needs to arrange transportation and travel miles through military checkpoints to reach nearby cities.

According to the head of Youth Organization in the Camp, approximately 300 students have attended universities in Erbil, building a profound connection between students in Erbil and youths in the Makhmour Refugee Camp. A bridge between the Camp and the world may be now slowly possible.



TRANSFORMING EVERY HOUSE into a SCHOOL

An Exclusive Interview



*Abdullah Demirbas, Mayor of Sur District, Diyarbakir
Interview conducted by Servet Tosun for Kurdish Herald*

Diyarbakir's Sur District Mayor Abdullah Demirbas is one of the most significant figures with regards to his great emphasis on Kurdish culture and language. I visited him at his office to talk about his recent project called "Sere seve Cirokek u her malek Dibistane," (A Story for each night and every house is a School). Despite being deposed from his duty as a mayor for promoting "Multilingual Municipality Service," he was re-elected by the people. Mayor Demirbas is persistently and passionately working for the preservation of Kurdish culture.

Kurdish Herald: What is the purpose of placing emphasis on preserving the mother tongue through your recent project? To whom do you want to reach out with your project? What are your expectations from it?

Mayor Demirbas: As an educator and sociologist, I see the importance of culture and language. Educating a person with his or her mother tongue helps to develop his psychology and cognitivity. People who grow up freely can interact with their society more easily and are more functional. Therefore, forbiddances of any language or culture have negative consequences on a person.

Researches' results have shown that a person who learns his or her mother tongue can learn a second language better and is academically more successful and compatible with his or her society. Municipalities have a mission of educating and informing society and preparing people for their future. An important part of this mission is to develop communication among people so that they can be a part of society. This would also help reduce the number of problems that occur with the process of urbanization [in Turkey].

For years, Kurds have been the victim of Turkish state ideology. People in Turkey (regardless of ethnicity) have grown up with a uniform way-of-life. Our Sur Municipality has initiated an alternative education model called "Transforming Every House into to a School." In this project, 'stories' are our main tools. Stories have positive effects on the development of children. If parents tell stories to their children before they sleep, it can help shape the socialization of children. Stories propagate history and culture to the future generations. In so doing,

stories disseminate good types of behaviors that are desired by all societies.

The Turkish state ideology has prohibited the Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, and other ethnic groups from learning their own languages at schools. If we wait for the state to take a step to allow us to learn our mother tongue at schools, it might be too late. We should realize that homes are only places where the state cannot easily occupy. With this project, we can show the Turkish state that nobody can stop us from learning our mother tongue, and we will always try to find alternatives against the state's suppression. Therefore, our project's theme is focused on the phrase, "Sere seve Cirokek u her malek Dibistane," (A Story for each night and every house is a School).

KH: How did you come up with this idea? Which culture or ethnic group did you choose for the project other than Kurdish stories?

MD: This project was initially prepared by a Kurdish writer, Selim Temo. It is a unique project in terms of its originality and its mission. It consists of 365 stories. We divided these stories by months and made them into 12 fascicules. Every night, each story tells us about life of an important Kurdish figure such as Ahmede Xani, Melaye Ciziri, Dr. Qasimlo, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, Abdulqadire Geylani, Seide Kurdi and others. We also included Armenian and Assyrian stories in these books. These stories will be published as fascicules and will be broadcasted in the near future. We will also make audio version of the stories with professional storytellers so that people can access them over the Internet. Stories will also be made available to people with hearing disabilities.

We planned and developed this project before I was confronted with the deposition of my official duty as a mayor at Sur Municipality in 2007 due to my "Multilingual Municipality Service." Because of the deposition, our project remained unfinished. However, we started to work on it after I was re-elected by our people. We published a magazine called "Semamok" in five different languages and it contains short comical stories called "fikra," puzzles and other stories.

As you know, the success of education should be measured

with a long-term vision. We will see the results of this project in 10-15 years. People will educate their children with their own language and culture as free citizens so that they will be more productive in the future. With this project, we should not be limited to teach our children their language only by telling stories. We also intend to develop new interactions between parents and children, and families to neighbors so that it will help people integrate in the modern city life. In this sense, our city will witness positive outcomes from this model. As I mentioned before, not only does this project embrace the Kurds, but it also covers Armenians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Turkmens, Arabs, Turks and other ethnic groups.

KH: Can you tell us the financial aspects of your project? What kind of difficulties have you encountered during the preparation of the project? What kind of assistance do you further need?

MD: For this project we have used our own financial resources and also received help from Kurdish Institute Flemish Culture Ministry in Brussels. We still need a lot of support for this project. For example, we would like to publish 15,000 - instead of 5,000 - story books. We would like to reach people more easily and convince them to participate in our project. In Yuksekova [a town in Hakkari], a Kurdish cultural organization called "Kurdi-Der" came up with a new idea in which their members attend weddings, inform people about our project, and distribute books to grooms and brides as gifts. A nine-year old Kurdish girl at Kurdi-Der particularly liked this project and has created a classroom with ten students and has taught them all Kurdish. Our municipality supported her and attended a symbolic "grade report ceremony" of this class. We want to show that we are ready to help anyone who involves themselves with our project and transforms his or her house into a school.

KH: How is state approaching this project? How is their attitude?

MD: The Turkish state dismissed my official duty as a mayor because of our Multilingual Municipality Service, but now governorship of Diyarbakir and the government are using our project. Now the government has opened a Kurdish TV program, TRT 6. Diyarbakir Governorship has established a call center in Kurdish. The ones who once dismissed us initially are using our project now. History shows that we were right. Had we not fought for it, these things would never have happened.

I believe that if we succeed in transforming a house into a school, the state will try to find a way to teach Kurdish at schools just to stop us. In that way, they will be forced to change their policies. Therefore, we need not only economic

support but also active involvement of people in order to accomplish our goal.

The way in which the state approaches this project is not very different from how it treats other Kurdish cultural works. After we published books for our project, the state opened various allegations against us. For example, there are twenty-three prison sentences against me for total ninety-eight years of imprisonment. The main charge in these accusations is an alleged act against the Turkish Alphabet and violation of Article 3 and Article 42 of the Turkish constitution. Article 3 states that the state's official language is Turkish and prohibits the use of any other language. Article 42 states that the state's education language is only Turkish and prohibits any other language. When I attended the symbolic "grade report ceremony" of the nine-year old Kurdish girl, the Diyarbakir education administrator accused me of illegal conducts. In reference to our project, he described to the media that education cannot be given in homes. The Turkish State ideology does not even have the patience for education.

The state has averted the development of the education in Kurdish language by closing madrassas in the past, but Kurdish stories and music have helped the Kurdish language to survive. Therefore, we will re-establish our education system with this project, and we hope that the Kurdish language will live forever. 🌟

The Heart of Kurdistan is BLEEDING



Kerkuk - Blast kill 33 - 30 June 2009

Erbil, Kurdistan - One day after the Americans left the cities in Iraq, a blast in a Kurdish neighborhood in Kerkuk killed 33 people and wounded almost three times as many. As we approach the regional elections, scheduled for July 25, of which the people of Kerkuk will not partake, one question seems to be on the mind of many Kerkukis. Yesterday at lunch, a Kerkuki friend of mine reminded me of a saying with which all Iraqi Kurds grow up, "Kerkuk is the heart of Kurdistan." The heart of Kurdistan was subjected to a lengthy and aggressive series of policies of attrition which resulted in drastic changes of demographics, leading Iraq's new leaders to constitutionally commit the state of Iraq to undoing the injustice that occurred to the people of Kerkuk. However, despite a constitutional commitment which calls for a governorate-wide referendum, things in Kerkuk continue to be filled with uncertainties. In the recent local election in Iraq, the people of Kerkuk were excluded from voting and as KRG-administered governorates prepare for an election, Kerkuk is excluded once again.

The security situation in Kerkuk is slightly better than that of Musil's, but perhaps as bad as Baghdad's. Despite the fact that it sits on almost 20% of Iraq's known oil reserves, municipal services in Kerkuk are horrendous. The streets are dirty, security is horrible and most importantly people simply do not know when the situation will improve in Kerkuk. Insofar as the people of Kerkuk are concerned, that injustice is ongoing and despite all the moral and legal commitments to fix their status, things continue to be hanging in the air.

The implementation of article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution should be on the next government's top priorities, that is the consensus here. Alternative ways of solving the problem of Kerkuk should not be accepted; that too is a consensus here, among the competing slates. The consensus seems to be one among the constituents in Kurdistan as well, and certainly will be influencing their choice in the upcoming elections. Voters say they expect that the next elected leaders put words to action and finally resolve the decades-old problem of Arabization of one of Kurdistan's most important cities.

The Constitution of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a proposal waiting to be voted on, includes Kerkuk as part of the Kurdistan Region. However, as far as the people of Kerkuk are concerned, that transition from paper to reality is a six-year-old dream that continues to frustrate them.

Although the constituents live outside of Kerkuk, the parliamentary candidates for the upcoming elections all have Kerkuk atop their agendas because they know that that old saying of "Kerkuk is the heart of Kurdistan" is not something that the people of this region take lightly.

Dispatch by Vahal A. Abdulrahman

Vahal A. Abdulrahman reports from Iraqi Kurdistan; contact him via the contact form at www.kurdishherald.com



Visit kurdishherald.com for more dispatches.

THE MYSTERY

On the wrists are
the traces of blood
On the eternal road,
I reached to the bosom of the mother
with two steps
You, the light of the souls, arise!
Read my name,
embellish the cradle
with your blueness

These are the traces of blood
not the strings of beads
not the amulets of the moon
I am a nude heaven
under the tree of knowledge
the cries of the old women and the children
I am either going or living
I am either the coffin of existence
or the womb of death
I am the last finger
and the funeral of life
This is the secret of me and the soil
Thin veins rotted in the nappies
and the glad tidings
and the laments
budded on the crosses
they were enshrouded

I am
sometimes the cradle
and sometimes the graveyard

NEPENÎ

li ser zendan
rêçên xwîné
li ser rîya bê dawî
bi du gavî
gihîştîm sînga dayê
rabe ronîya rihan
navê min bixwîne
bi şînahîya xwe
mehdîkê bixemilîne
ev rêçên xwîné ne
ne rêzên morîyan
ne nivîştên hêyvê ne
bin dara genim
bihuşteke tazî me
qîre qîra jînepîr û zarokan
an diçim, an dijîm
an çardarê hebûné
an kardanka mirinê me
ez tilî ya paşîn
meyîta jîyanê me
ev raza min û xwelîyê
rehên zirav di quntaxan de rizîyan
û mizgînî
û şîn
li ser çarmîxan kulîlk dan
bi kefen hatin girêdan
geh dergûş im (ez)
geh goristan



Sibel Akman

Kurdish Herald publishes Poetry & Art from featured Kurdish artists and writers. In this issue, Kurdish writer, Sibel Akman, contributes a piece that expresses deep thoughts and emotions. The piece entitled, "Mystery", is Sibel Akman's latest work.