

# Turkey's Kurdish Question



R. ROYCE '09

## ... at a crossroads

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**



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Also take a look into Iraqi Kurdistan's economy with **Mr. Falah Bakir**, KRG Head of Foreign Relations



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# TURKEY'S KURDISH QUESTION AT A CROSSROADS

Turkey has changed drastically over the last two decades. The politics of the officially secular republic are today dominated by the firmly entrenched Justice and Development Party (AKP); a party with a national following and an unambiguously Islamist tendency. At the same time, the country is closer than ever before to being regarded as a member of the European community. With respect to the Kurdish question, much has happened over the last two decades that have significantly changed the relationship between the Turkish state and the Kurdish people, including demands, concessions, and methods of dialogue. It cannot be disputed that the Kurdish people living within Turkey's borders have more right to the expression of their identity than ever before. However, just as equally undeniable are the presence a number of draconian and selectively enforced laws remaining in place that effectively restrict the most basic rights

While for the first time Turkish high officials are openly expressing their intentions to resolve the unsettled and

overdue Kurdish question, there still remains a lack of will in Turkey both politically and socially to approach the conflict in an effective and resolute manner. Each year, deadlines come and go, pivotal events transpire, and yet no solution that comes close to satisfying all parties involved in this conflict seems any closer to reality.

Over the last several weeks, a number of developments that are believed to be a prelude to the Turkish government's so-called Kurdish initiative have given some cause for optimism. The Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, issued an unprecedented statement urging members of society to engage in discussions and debates in support of the government's efforts towards solving the Kurdish issue. Additionally, the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), shunned from the mainstream political process for years, has been invited for public discussions on the Kurdish issue with members of the AKP and the Republican Peoples' Party (CHP); both refused to meet with the DTP



Rebbaz Royee © Kurdish Herald 2009

in the past. At the same time, the very existence of a plan to unveil a Kurdish initiative has prompted the mainstream Turkish press to address the Kurdish issue in an uncharacteristically open way.

Ever more subtle yet significant developments with regards to cultural and political rights have also been taking place. In the Kurdish stronghold of Diyarbakir, a move by the city's provincial council to change the name of the village of 'Kirkpinar' back to its original Kurdish name of 'Celkaniya' was allowed, rather than being blocked by the city's governor as was the fate of previous motions. At the same time, an open discussion is taking place on the possibility of offering some education in Kurdish language and Kurdish studies.

While one may think that the official and open discussion of a solution to Turkey's Kurdish question, including concrete steps being taken to right some wrongs of the past, would mean that a peaceful resolution is on the horizon, it appears that this is not the case. Indeed, the public debates

surrounding the AKP's Kurdish initiative on one hand and a roadmap drawn up by the imprisoned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader, Abdullah Ocalan, on the other, simply serves to show – in very plain view – the fault lines that still prevent any true solution from being reached. While the prime minister has made calls for engagement by virtually all segments of society, the government's candid aim to preemptively dismiss the roadmap seems counterproductive as has been further exemplified by recent public reaction in the Kurdish region. At the beginning of this month, millions rallied in predominantly Kurdish city streets to protest the government's current approach to the drawing up of a Kurdish initiative.

## Kurdish question, PKK, and recurring state denial

When Turkey emerged from the ruins of the collapsed Ottoman Empire after the former died a slow and painful death, denial quickly became a technique for painting over the significant cracks in the

logic of the ideology underpinning the new Turkish republic. While the Ottomans used religion as the glue to hold together the various components of their empire, the new Republic of Turkey would use Turkish identity and nationalism to establish itself. As a substantial portion of Turkey's citizens were Kurdish, and not ethnic Turks, the new republic would need to conveniently deny the existence of the Kurdish identity, and eventually, this denial would become a hallmark of Turkish nationalist ideology dedicated to the unity of the new Republic.

When the PKK became a major force, transforming itself from a small group of leftists into a significant and very disruptive political and military entity, the Turkish state added a new facet to its policy of denial with respect to Turkey's Kurds, choosing to deny the fact that the PKK enjoyed grassroots support among the Kurdish population while trying to convince the Turkish masses and others that the PKK had minimal popular support and was primarily backed by

Kurds in Turkey hold signs that say "peace" and rally against the Turkish government's refusal to negotiate with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party- Photo courtesy of Ozgur Gundem



foreign actors. The folly of this approach is clear – 30 years after the founding of the PKK, the party remains a powerful movement and Ocalan is still a potent symbol to many of Turkey's Kurds over a decade after his capture.

Turkish denial has entered a new state and despite groundbreaking changes and the apparent ability of Turks to address the Kurdish question openly, this denial persists and manifests itself as the major obstacle to reaching a true solution to the Kurdish question. The Kurdish question in Turkey is as old as the Turkish Republic, and owes itself to the aforementioned denial of Kurdish identity by the Turkish state. Disparity in development and living standards between the primarily Kurdish southeast and the rest of the country stoked the flames of discontent among Turkey's Kurds.

The PKK emerged as this era's incarnation of Kurdish rebellion in Turkey and quickly gained support among disgruntled Kurds impacted by the injustices virtually mandated by the founding principles of the Turkish Republic. As the PKK gathered strength and support, the Turkish state took a paradoxical approach to explaining the nature of the group. While, on one hand, the PKK was characterized as a terrorist group backed by foreign actors, on the other hand, most expressions of Kurdish national identity were characterized as "separatist" and thus associated with the

PKK. The false assertion by the Turkish state about expressions of Kurdish identity became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as an increasingly restrictive policy against Kurdish identity prompted Kurds who still sought to preserve their identity to move closer towards the PKK.

Past policies and statements from the Turkish establishment had the perhaps unintended consequence of causing the Kurdish issue in general and the PKK as a movement to become very much intertwined with one another in both practice and in the mindset of Turkish and Kurdish citizens of Turkey.

Despite these realities, while the state is assembling its own Kurdish initiative, it seems once again that the Kurdish issue and the PKK are being characterized as two issues that are quite separate from one another. While ostensibly seeking to solve the Kurdish question in Turkey, the Turkish government's attempt to circumvent the PKK and refusal to address the party directly is among the most definite flaws that may prevent an effective solution to the conflict from being reached. Yet again, basic truths are being ignored

for the sake of avoiding the contradiction of patently false beliefs that are part of the Turkish state's rigid ideology.

### Ending conflict requires engagement

Exact details of the Turkish government's Kurdish initiative are still unknown. However, reactions in the predominantly Kurdish region to preliminary details and public statements by government representatives have not been positive thus far. Earlier this month, thousands of Kurds rallied in Diyarbakir, many of them waving portraits of Ocalan and PKK flags, calling for peace and holding signs with slogans such as "We want our roadmap" and "The counterpart for a democratic solution of the Kurdish question is in Imrali." Meanwhile, representatives of the pro-Kurdish DTP who have strong support in Diyarbakir and throughout the Kurdish region soundly reject any plans that do not consider the points laid out by their own so-called democratic initiative.

The Turkish government has already dismissed Ocalan's roadmap even before its release, with Turkish President Abdullah Gul stating that people should "forget about Imrali," a reference to the island prison where the PKK leader is currently being held. Undoubtedly, many Kurds in today's Turkey, including some of the democratically-elected political representatives of the Kurdish people, support Ocalan and look to him for a solution to the current state

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) base high in the Qendil Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan- © Kurdish Herald 2009



Kurds in Batman hold up a banner in Turkish that says "We want our roadmap" referring to the unreleased roadmap of the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan- Photo courtesy of Ozgur Gundem



of affairs. Protests and rallies along with complaints of disregard for their own demands are enough to demonstrate that the Turkish government is not taking the required steps to engage the most critical people to the process; people that would most directly be affected by any reform.

It is of great concern that one significant item, an amnesty for PKK fighters, has already been ruled out by the Turkish state. While claiming to pursue an end to war, the Turkish government is reportedly rejecting the idea of giving amnesty to rebels. Indeed, this shows that decisive steps to address the Kurdish issue and end conflict are not part of the state's initiative. The end of armed confrontations would be perhaps the most crucial sign of the achievement of a solution to the Kurdish issue. If the PKK has not been defeated in twenty-five years by Turkey's large modern army, then it makes very little sense to believe that the PKK will cease to exist simply because the state formally demands that the rebels, still branded as terrorists, should capitulate.

### Overcoming the Political Obstacles

The lack of political will to confront the Kurdish question with the necessary steps and solve the conflict via diplomacy is the biggest roadblock on any map to peace in Turkey. Turkey has fought a brutal war against the PKK for many years. At the same

time, the Turkish state's harsh restrictions on expressions of Kurdish identity has made suspicion of and opposition to basic concessions to the Kurdish people a hallmark of nationalist policy and a litmus test for patriotism among many Turks. Thus, there is an unquestionable political risk for any Turkish politician pondering the idea of promoting reforms relative to the Kurds, and a political risk of significantly greater magnitude which would be faced by anyone who might suggest engaging the rebels. The CHP, Turkey's oldest political party, has been critical of the ruling AKP for their evident reluctance to involve the opinions of all parties in the political



Citizens in Turkey wave the Turkish flag and rally against the attacks by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party- Photo courtesy of Getty

process, but for completely different reasons. Those proposals that the AKP has communicated have generated a great deal of emotional debate and has prompted CHP leader Deniz Baykal to protest that it would "pave the way for separation of the country."

Furthermore, Ocalan himself remains an extremely polarizing figure among both Kurds and Turks. For many years, he was considered Turkey's most serious threat and most wanted terrorist, and branded a "baby killer" in both official and unofficial discourse. His capture elicited massive celebrations in Turkey. It is not difficult to see that any political figure who entertains the idea of engaging Ocalan or even simply acknowledging his efforts to find a solution to Turkey's Kurdish question will face great pressure from the Turkish masses as well as elements Turkey's military and political establishments.

Today, more than ever, the Kurdish issue is acknowledged and, to some extent, addressed in Turkey, and this in and of itself is certainly a positive development. At this critical juncture, the specifics of the Kurdish issue that make a resolution so elusive are more apparent than ever, not only to Turks and Kurds, but also to the world community that keenly follows developments in the republic, especially in light of Turkey's bid to

# Mr. Bengi Yildiz, Kurdish MP of Turkey's Parliament from Batman for the Democratic Society Party (DTP)

Interview conducted by Sibel Akman for Kurdish Herald at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in Ankara

Ankara, Turkey – Mr. Bengi Yildiz, Kurdish member of Turkish Parliament from Batman and a member of the Democratic Society Party (DTP), met with Sibel Akman of Kurdish Herald to discuss progress on work for a solution to Turkey's Kurdish issue as well as the situation of the DTP. Mr. Yildiz is a lawyer by training with a great deal of journalistic experience. He was previously President of the Batman branch of the IHD (Human Rights Association).

**Kurdish Herald:** In the past few months, DTP leader Ahmet Turk has met with Prime Minister Erdogan and members of the CHP. What changed since the the previous refusals to meet with your party? Have these meetings been constructive?

**Bengi Yildiz:** After the 2007 general elections, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan refused to meet with DTP. His reason for doing so was the refusal of the DTP to call the PKK a terrorist group. But there have been new developments relative to the Kurdish issue since that time. It was stressed by different segments of the society that, to reach a solution to this problem, the first group that he should meet would be the DTP, and thus the Prime Minister met with the party. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's meeting with the the Prime Minister also contributed. The image of Turkey in the Middle East as a model country paved the way for these negotiations – a country which hasn't solved her internal problems wouldn't correspond with this image, and thus some problems were handled and meetings were held with the DTP.

**KH:** What is the status of the court cases still pending against members of your party, and in particular those

following the numerous arrests made soon after the March 29 elections?

**BY:** I am the head of Law Commission of DTP. After both the general and local elections, serious operations were executed against the DTP. On April 14, [2009] more than 50 members including a vice chairman, provincial chairmans and county commissioners were taken into custody. On September 11, [2009] 15 persons including newly elected and incumbent mayors were taken into custody. More than 500 party managers and members are now under arrest. While a long time has past since their arrest, their indictment has yet to be prepared. This causes serious anxiety among the masses and prevents the democratic and legal policy.

In the past 2 years, in Turkey, the public, politicians, intellectuals and writers had been speaking of the necessity of bringing PKK members down from the mountains to enter social and political life, but this route is not being taken; quite the opposite – even participating in politics is a reason of arrest.

**KH:** What do you think about the prime minister's announcement to opposition parties, media and other segments to contribute to the initiative to solve the Kurdish issue? Do you think these efforts are sincere, and are the discussions in these various segments being taken into consideration?

**BY:** A significant problem like Kurdish problem seems that it cannot be solved by the the will of the government alone. For the solution to be achieved, there must be some legal and constitutional changes. Societal agreement is necessary for this. At this juncture, the government's meetings with various segments of society is a positive development, and represent one action that needed



Mr. Bengi Yildiz, MP in Turkey's parliament

to take place. However, it is unknown at which level these actions are and how much the discussions are taken into consideration. It is not a very clean atmosphere for discussion. The government does not have a concrete project.

The most recent remarks of Interior Minister Besir Atalay have dampened the hopes of the public when he stated that they do not think a constitutional change, an amnesty, and the education in the mother tongue should be pursued. We do not think that the solution will come into being unless these three conditions are fulfilled. Thus, the process is founded upon these impossibilities, it has been blocked. We can test their sincerity by observing their actions, and the things they have done are not very encouraging.

**KH:** Some time back, the DTP released a written proposal that was also handed

to U.S. President Barack Obama, and the points contained in this proposal have been since discussed publicly by members of your party. Are there any discussions in Turkey at the political level regarding your party's previous proposals? Were they addressed during Mr. Turk's meeting Prime Minister Erdogan?

**BY:** What we gave to President Barack Obama was the project of democratic autonomy, not a federative constitution in the unitary state. We handed him a project which diminishes the powers of the central authority and transfers the powers to the local units, as we see in Ireland and Scotland, and the rights given to the Corsicans by France. We also shared the project with the public and sent it to the other parliamentarians. This project was discussed a great deal by the public. Although it is not contradictory to the unitary constitution, MHP and CHP parliamentarians stated that it was a project dividing up the country. Most intellectuals and the writers refer to Spain, Ireland, and the issue of Corsicans in France, as models for a solution to the Kurdish problem.

In recent statements, the government itself announced that they were analysing all types of solutions seriously. This project was not brought up during the Turk-Erdogan meeting; they only came to an agreement on the method which to be followed. They talked about using conciliatory language, taking ideas from all segments of the society, and introducing a concrete project after these negotiations. Later on, the government said that they would share the developments of such talks but they did not do so. Nonetheless, the Turk-Erdogan meeting was very important.

**KH:** If a thorough plan is laid out by the Turkish government to resolve various issues surrounding the Kurdish question, how likely is it in your opinion that Kurds will be willing to compromise or forgo some demands that have been laid out over the past few years in various previously presented "road-maps", written proposals, and blue-prints so-called democratic solutions set forth by pro-Kurdish elements?

**BY:** We do not believe that the Kurdish problem using the plans introduced over 1 to 2 years, as this is a deeply-rooted problem and finding a solution will take

time. It is necessary to go through the process of preparing the Turkish public, and that is why the projects should be introduced in installments of short-, medium- and long-term measures. Thus, the negotiations are the process of the reciprocal bargaining and a compromise must be reached. It is not possible that all the demands of the parties can be accepted in the first year. The parties will make mutual concessions and reach an accord. On both the Kurdish side and the Turkish side, there are a number of factions and chauvinistic nationalism, and this will not contribute to the solution. The CHP and MHP base some of their policy on this problem and makes use of it. That said, it is possible to make concessions about many things. At the same time, it is known that all of the segments have sine qua nons, such as the education in the vernacular language and the demand for the democratic autonomy.

**KH:** It seems that we have entered a pivotal time when it comes to approaching a solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey. How long do you think this window of opportunity will remain open?

**BY:** It is related to how the various parties will run this process. If the parties are prepared for the process, they must forecast in advance the problems which may impede progress. It is well-known that, in Turkey, the military may prevent this process and the elite class functioning inside the government will hamper developments. It is also known that chauvinistic nationalistic elements will seek to disturb the process. Two conditions are necessary to pass by these obstacles: the first is the unity and solidarity of the democratic powers who are for a solution, and the second is the serious support of the European Union and the United States. When we look at the history of Turkey, from the final stages of the Ottoman Empire to today, namely from the administrative reforms of 1839 to the period of transferring to amultiparty system, it is true that external dynamics and factors had significant roles.

**KH:** What is the greatest obstacle impeding the process towards a resolution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey?

**BY:** The opposition parties, the military, and the elitist bureaucracy are the ob-

stacles. Their approach is something like, "We founded this country and we can decide on how to govern it." This is a continuation of the tradition of the Committee of Union and Progress. That tradition prompted Turkey to enter the World War I and caused the country's land to diminish from five million square meters to seven thousand square meters. With respect to many standards, this is the direction they seek for Turkey. Thus, the greatest obstacles are this approach and tradition.

**KH:** The March 29 elections brought a number of new DTP members to power in various municipalities throughout the Kurdish region. How have they been performing since their election, and how are their popularity ratings among their constituents?

**BY:** Although the 29 March elections were for the municipalities, the Kurds perceived it differently. For the Kurds, this election was for proclaiming their own language, culture and identity. Consequently, their reflection was not the approach of taking into consideration some points such as electing local municipalities and receiving services. It is doubtless that, when compared with the previous periods, our local management and municipalities have made important accomplishments. They introduced concrete projects. This progress continued despite budget restrictions from the government, such as enforcing an award for the accumulation of arrears of the electricity and Social Security Institution in the municipalities prior to our rise to power and usurping the 40% of the income of the municipalities. In the past periods when we went to the cities where the local governments belonged to us, there was no infrastructure – no roads, parks, cinemas, or cultural centres.

As of now, these problems have been surmounted and the projects are progressing while other projects are being prepared. Because we are fulfilling our responsibilities, when we meet with the public, we see that their demands are not roads, centres or cinemas, they also demand food and job. This reveals that our constituents are demanding things which are normally expected from the central government. That is why democratic autonomy should be demanded, because nobody expects anything from the central government any more.

# TURKEY'S GAP AND ITS IMPACT IN THE REGION

by Ercan Ayboga



The historic Kurdish city of Hassankeyf

Since the 1980s, the Turkish State has endeavored to implement the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Güneydogu Anadolu Projesi-GAP); a project that includes the construction of 22 dams along the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in nine different predominantly Kurdish provinces. Currently there are plans to build more than 90 dams and 60 power plants in the Euphrates and Tigris basin. According to the Turkish government, the main purposes of the project are energy production (an installed capacity of 7500 Megawatts is planned) and regional development through irrigated (1.82 Mio. ha land) agro-industrial production for export. However, the socio-economic and political implications of the GAP are rather controversial both domestically and internationally.

One of the upcoming projects initiated through the GAP is the construction of the 138-meter high Ilisu dam 45 km

around the Syrian-Iraqi border, which would be the largest in the Tigris River Basin. Although the construction was initially approved, Turkey failed to fulfill 150 conditions in social, ecologic, cultural and international standards.

Consequently, three governments in Europe that include Germany, Austria and Switzerland, cancelled their export credit guarantee in July of 2009 after ten years of international discussion on the Ilisu dam and a number of non-governmental campaigns. Nevertheless, while the construction process of the Ilisu dam has been halted, the plans to continue with the project are still on the table. The involved companies have not cancelled their engagement and the Turkish government affirms that the project can continue through alternative finance models. Today, Ilisu still remains one of the most discussed dam projects in the world.



The historic Kurdish city of Hassankeyf

## The Ilisu Dam: The impact of the recent GAP on local socio-economy and historical site

Perhaps the greatest concern among activists who are against the construction of the Ilisu dam is potential destruction of the livelihood of up to 78,000 people – the majority of whom are ethnic Kurds – living along the approximate 158-mile river stretches. Since the legal framework for resettlement of the displaced people is inadequately recognized in Turkey, except for a handful of large landowners, most of the displaced population is confronted with poverty.

In the case of the Ilisu dam, half of those people that will be affected have no legal land titles; thus they would receive little or no compensation by this eminent domain. The mentioned conditions foresee, for instance, that resettlement of the displaced persons has to be done with the principle of land-for-land, and the Turkish government often build projects in old agricultural regions. However, there is little land left for resettlement as the majority of suitable land is already in use in Turkey.

Even when small landowners receive some compensation, since there is insufficient public infrastructure to support newly displaced populations, they often encounter great difficulty integrating into a new urban life. For instance, the two most popular destination cities for newly displaced persons are Diyarbakir and Batman, but the compensation is not enough to sustain even a basic living standard in these cities without having necessary skills to work in an urban economy.

The Turkish government insists that the benefits of the dam project for the local population are vast because proponents claim that the dam will help to develop the region's economy through creation of new jobs and investments and produce hydro-electric power for Turkey's population in order to compensate for the energy consumption. Nevertheless, so far, the evidence has shown otherwise.

On average, during a seven-year period of dam construction, 2300 people are employed. However, after the completion of the project, the hydropower plant only provides about 200 jobs while some 1000 jobs are permanently destroyed in the impounded region. Such contradiction inevitably leaves impressions among locals that that the construction of dams in Kurdish provinces is a continuation of previous campaigns of forced displacement and the assimilation of the people in the region. Activists and academics who are against the construction of Ilisu dam argue that the conservation and soft-sustainable development of the cultural heritage of the city and preservation of the biodiversity in the valley could bring more socio-economic benefits among other things.

Additional important struggle against the construction of the Ilisu dam is

the fate of the ancient city of Hasankeyf, which is believed to be one of the oldest and most continuously-inhabited cities in the world with a history stretching back estimated at least 12000 years. Hasankeyf is located in the Tigris valley, which is a very important part of Upper Mesopotamia and is where the first settlements of human history were found. More than twenty Eastern and Western civilizations have left their traces in Hasankeyf, and it is, indeed, a unique open-air museum. The approximate numbers of historic sites discovered to date in and around Hasankeyf total 6000 manmade caves and 300 monuments, including the biggest stone bridge of the Middle Ages. In order to carefully excavate, archaeologists need at least another one-hundred years. An estimated 289 known archaeological sites will be affected due to the construction of the Ilisu dam. Furthermore, an unknown additional number may be affected since surveys have been done in only less than half of the region.

Since Hasankeyf has become the main symbol in the protests against the Ilisu project, the Turkish government has developed a plan to construct a cultural park with some of the original monuments in the region. However, due to sophisticated structure of the monuments, it is not technically possible to do so. Even if it is done successfully, the monuments would lose their sense by moving them from their original site to an artificial location. In addition, the flooding caused by the dam will wipe out the unique cultural heritage and traditions of the people who live in the area today. In this sense, the Ilisu project is not a unique case. The GAP in general decreases cultural diversity, and in particular, wipes out the presence of the Kurdish culture from the region.

## Decreased water quality and quantity in Syria and Iraq due to the GAP

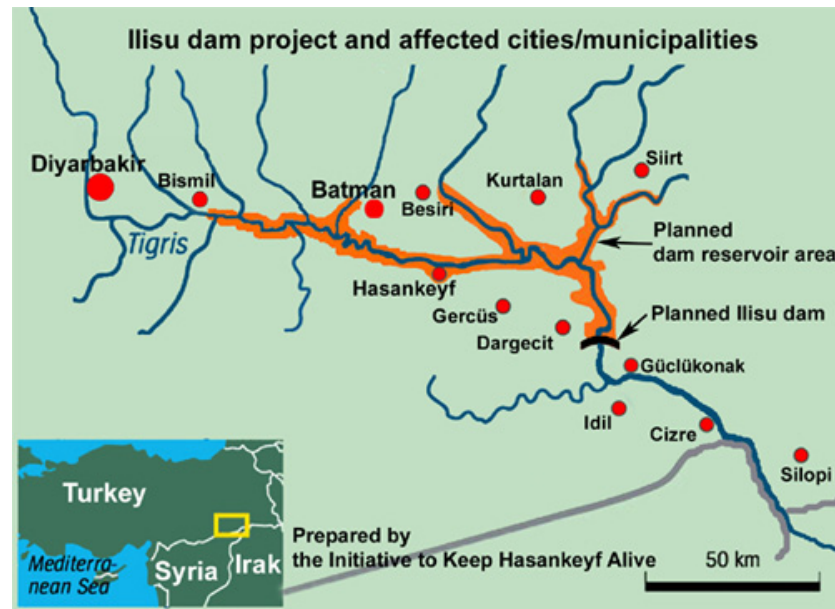
The Euphrates and Tigris rivers in southeast Turkey have been the primary sources of irrigation and drinking water for Syria and Iraq for thousands of years. If the GAP is ever fully realized, up to 50% of the river water will be used within the Turkish borders. Quality of water is expected to deteriorate due to

water waste from larger cities, which are located in upstream of the planned reservoir, and from developing agro-industrial irrigation in Turkey. That said, concerns among people in Syria and Iraq with regards to the implementation of the GAP are not farfetched. The complete implementation of the Ilisu dam and other planned irrigation works in the Tigris Basin will drastically affect millions people along the Tigris in Iraq, including approximately four to five million people in the marshlands in southern Iraq that depend almost entirely on the rivers for their water supply.

The Euphrates River has already shown a substantial change due to a partial completion of the GAP. All planned dams on the Euphrates have completely been built and while complete irrigation has not been implemented, this already has negative effects on Iraq and Syria concerning water quantity. Between 2000 and 2001, and since 2008, there have been a series of severe droughts in the region, dramatically reducing water flow to Iraq and Syria. Since April 2009, the Iraqi government has communicated official statements to Turkey to release more water from the Euphrates.

The storage capacity of the constructed five dams on the Euphrates within Turkey is about 90 cubic kilometers while the annual mean flow of the Euphrates River is approximately 32 cubic kilometers. The planned capacity of the dams in the Tigris River Basin is 20.5 cubic kilometers, and the annual mean flow of the Tigris is approximately 17 cubic kilometers at the Turkish-Iraqi border. In other words, the water storage capacity of the existing and planned dams of the both rivers is more than enough to cease water flow for a long period of time.

The most relevant international agreement that Turkey has long refused to sign for the GAP is the UN Convention on Non-Navigational Use of Transboundary Watercourses (1997). Nevertheless, the cut of water is still a breach of international customary law regardless of whether there are formal legal agreements between Turkey and the other two countries. These factors are of great concern but the international community has not paid enough attention despite the historical precedent of detrimental relationship between the states in the politically-fragile Middle East. Turkey has implemented the GAP at the expense of the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people, one of the well-known archeological sites and the local biodiversity. By way of caution, malign influence created by water disputes can impede stabilization and peace in the region. Thus, increased attention and concern in the international community is necessary and there must be efforts to foster constitutions and regulations to manage the direct distribution of water wealth.



The Ilisu dam project, the cities, and the municipalities that will be negatively impacted



Map showing sites of various dams as part of Turkey's Southwestern Anatolian Project (GAP)

# KURDISTAN'S ECONOMY:

## ITS POTENTIAL AND ITS CHALLENGES

by Delovan Barwari

The most essential elements of a nation's economy are its natural resources and its labor force to convert these resources into end products. Since the liberation of Iraq from the tyrannical rule of the dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Kurdistan has undergone great economic growth as the dual sanctions were lifted that included UN-imposed international sanctions on Iraq and Iraqi sanctions on the autonomous Kurdistan region. With an abundant amount of proven natural resources and a tremendous labor force, Iraqi Kurdistan has the potential to become a regional economic powerhouse.

In an exclusive interview with Kurdish Herald, Mr. Falah Mustafa Bakir - the Kurdistan Regional Government's Head of Foreign Relations - stated that a free market economy has been promoted as the driving force to build Kurdistan's economy. Mr. Bakir further acknowledged, "The Kurdistan Region Investment Board was created as an institutionalized 'one-stop-shop' for all domestic and foreign direct investment and enterprise. This is a body to which foreign companies refer; the Board streamlines the work of national and international firms and facilitates business in the [Kurdistan] Region. The Board has licensed more than 160 projects, valued at more than \$16 billion, thus far."

In addition, an investment law was passed and promotes foreign venture by providing numerous incentives and legal guarantees to protect their investment in the Kurdistan Region.

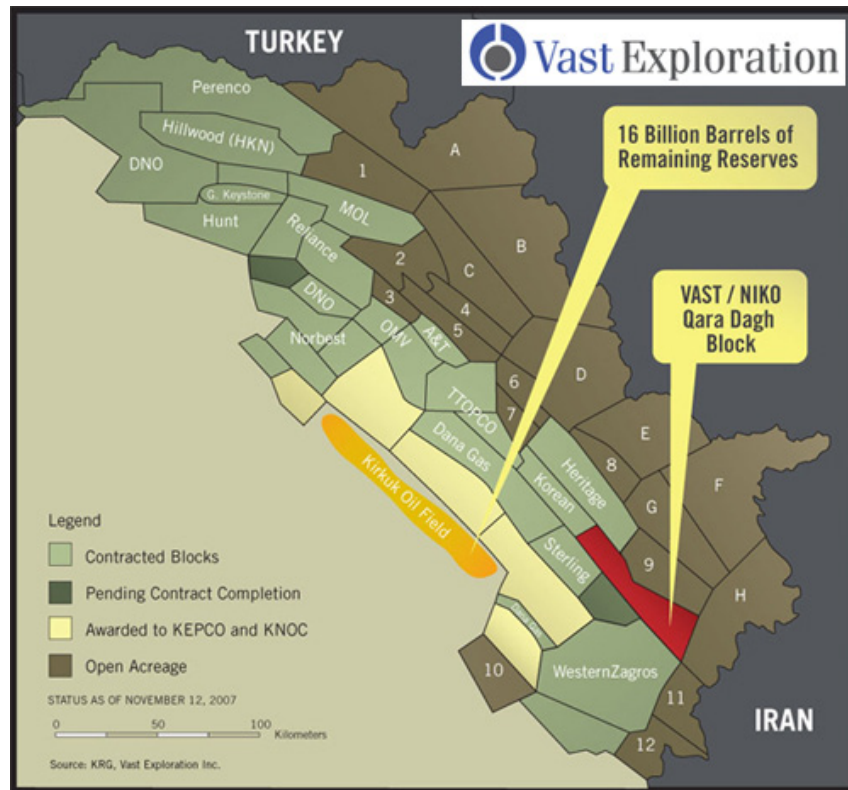
The population of the three provinces (Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah) under the administration of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is approximately 4 out of the total 26



The Bekhal Summer resort in Iraqi Kurdistan

million living in Iraq. With seven established universities in the Kurdistan Region, thousands of students graduate each year, many of whom cannot find professional employment. Based on unofficial estimates, Kurdistan's unemployment rate is significantly high (nearly 50%) compared to any healthy economy. In addition, according to a published report by Iraq News Monitor, the estimated unemployment of Iraq is over 60%. While these numbers are certainly joyless, they also mean that the availability of professional and unskilled laborers in the Kurdistan Region is abundant.

The economy of Iraqi Kurdistan is fundamentally composed of three segments: Agriculture, Crude Oil, and Tourism. Iraqi Kurdistan is geographically located in northern portion of Mesopotamia and naturally has an ample amount of water, making it a highly arable land for agriculture. Most recently, numerous gigantic petroleum reserves have



Map identifies the Kurdistan region's Qara Dagh Block - Photo courtesy of Vast Exploration www.vastexploration.com

been discovered in the region. In addition, due to its stunning nature and its historical and archeological sites, it has historically been a regional tourist destination, visited by thousands. With all this in hand, Kurdistan has great potential to establish a strong economy.

### Black gold and its abundance

According to various studies, Kurdistan sits on 43.7 billion barrels (bb) of proven oil and 25.5 bb of potential reserves. In addition, the majority of the estimated 200 trillion cubic feet of gas in Iraq is reported to be in Kurdistan Region.

Against the backdrop of challenges by the Iraqi central government over the past few years, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has granted over 30 contracts to foreign companies for the exploration, development, and production of petroleum in the Kurdistan Region, and has begun exporting crude oil via Turkey. In addition, a number of refineries are currently being built to meet its domestic energy needs.

In a Kurdish Herald interview with Mr. Ahmad Said - the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian-based Vast Exploration Inc. - he stated that the KRG has been receptive and transparent to their firm with regards to business matters. Yet, he also acknowledged a number of areas that are in need of improvements. Mr. Said stated, "KRG is a developing democracy in the heart of Middle East. As such it is in a transition phase. We have found it to be efficient and transparent. There are deficiencies which are not uncommon to developing countries such as bureaucracy, banking and legal infrastructure. The KRG needs to work on developing these areas as to not hinder their progress and investment potential in the short and long term."

Vast Exploration Inc. primarily focuses on the exploration and production of petroleum in the Qara Dagh Block. Currently, it does not intend to conduct business in marketing of products or the refining sector; however, as it has significant operations throughout the world, it would consider potential mining opportunities in the Kurdistan Region in the future.

Crude oil is considered as the most critical ingredient needed to cycle the world economy. Dozens of products are distilled as it is processed. The most common concentrates of petroleum are fuels such as ethane, diesel fuel, fuel oils, gasoline, jet fuel, kerosene, and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG); in addition, other derivatives such as alkenes to manufacture plastic, lubricants such as motor oil and greases, wax, sulfuric acid, bulk tar, asphalt, petroleum coke, paraffin wax, aromatic petrochemicals can be manufactured from the residue.

The majority of all the electrical, mechanical, or manufacturing products produced throughout the world contains or requires petroleum based products. Hence, the world economy is greatly reliant on not only crude oil, but also on petroleum derivatives. Therefore, as an economic development measure, it is essential for KRG to further diversify and expand its oil industry and develop the infrastructure for this special sector. Implementing such projects will generate thousands of jobs for its citizens, and will increase the domestic products exported from Kurdistan.



KRG Head of Foreign Relations Mr. Falah Mustafa Bakir ©Kurdish Herald 2009

Amediyah is a unique and historic city located atop one of many mountains in the Kurdistan Region - Photo courtesy of Goran Sadjadi © Kurdish Herald 2009



### Agriculture: Moving back towards self-sufficiency

Kurdistan is believed to be where humans first domesticated animals and planted crops. In a scientific publication by Rice University School of Science and Technology, it was reported, "Recent archaeological finds place the beginning of agriculture before 7000 B.C. and animal domestication (mostly dogs used as hunting aids) thousands of years before that. There is some evidence that the people of Shanidar, in Kurdistan, were domesticating sheep and planting wheat as long ago as 9800 B.C."

With over 10,000 years of experience, and a fertile land, it is certainly ironic that the great majority of its agricultural products are imported from the neighboring countries of Turkey and Iran.

Many factors have contributed to the loss of what was once known as the breadbasket of the Middle East. Perhaps the greatest factors were the decades of oppression and the wars waged by various Iraqi regimes against the people of Kurdistan. Most significantly, in the late 1980s, Saddam Hussein's forces brutally destroyed over 3,500 villages in the infamous Anfal campaign that killed over 182,000 innocent civilians. Tens of thousands of survivors were forced out of their homeland and became refugees, and many are currently living in the Diaspora. In addition, the great majority were forced to abandon their villages and moved to the Kurdish cities. As a result, the backbone of the agricultural economy in Iraqi Kurdistan took a devastating hit.

In a press release, the former Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region, Nechirvan Barzani, stated that the year 2009 will be dedicated to the agricultural sector. A five-year plan has been set for achieving self-sufficiency. Some of the methods intended to implement the plan is tackling the challenges through solving the agricultural land issues, applying modern technology, encouraging citizens to return to their villages, and attracting local and foreign private investors to invest in Kurdistan.

According to The National - an online magazine - the KRG plans to invest \$10.5 billion in the next few years in the agricultural sector: "Among its many goals, the strategy calls for doubling of milk production to 400 million liters per year, building 30 agricultural factories and providing farmers access to \$100m of micro-loans annually to run their businesses."

Based on the same report, KRG officials have been accommodating various investment delegations from Western Europe, the US, and other locations. The first investment thusfar is by a US-based private equity firm known as The

Marshall Fund, which took place in the form of an investment of \$6 million into the development of a Tomato Paste and Fruit Processing Plant in Harrir, a small town north of Erbil.

### Tourism

Another segment of the Kurdistan Region's economy with significant potential is tourism. The tourism sector is quite new to KRG and some limited planning and work has been gone underway. Mr. Bakir stated, "Quality hotels are being built across the [Kurdistan] Region, and we are seeing more and more international visitors. We plan to take advantage of the mountains and to offer tourists a glimpse of the archeological and historical sites throughout the [Kurdistan] Region on visitor-friendly tours. A number of foreign tour companies have commenced operation already."

Iraqi Kurdistan is a region with stunning natural sites and is dominated by gorgeous mountains, waterfalls, and rivers, and an amazingly beautiful countryside. In every city, one can find pleasure and let loose by touring various sites. Kurdistan is also a region that is rich in history and includes such archeological sites as the Sumerian-built citadel known as 'Qalat' in Erbil, the infamous Shanidar cave where Neanderthals first buried their dead with flowers, the Zoroastrian and Assyrian sites in Dohuk, what is believed to be the home of the biblical 'Three Wise Men' in Amadiyah, the Delal bridge from the Roman Era in Zaxho, and many more.

Nevertheless, there are some political challenges that must be resolved in order to fully develop the tourism sector in certain areas of the countryside. The unresolved Kurdish issue in Turkey and Iran has been a cause of numerous cross-border military operations and aerial bombardments near the strongholds of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK). In addition, during the Iraq-Iran war, millions of land mines were planted in the country side, and these still must be cleared to make the region safe.

Kurdistan certainly has the fundamental ingredients -- a considerable amount of natural resources and a healthy labor force -- to become a strong economic force in the region. KRG has managed to progress greatly in various sectors, with massive development projects since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Nevertheless, there are numerous challenges, shortcomings, and unresolved political issues that must be dealt with through unity, commitment, and objectivity, in order to achieve the ultimate dream.



# Ms. Arian Arif

## A WOMAN'S STRENGTH CANNOT BE HIDDEN

by Haje Keli

If you entered a room full of women, she would instantly be the one who captures your attention. Young, charismatic, and with a disarming, contagious smile, Arian Arif comes across as one who must have attended a prestigious university and lived most of her life in the West. One would never imagine that this 31-year old journalist left Kurdistan just 3 years ago – she completed her studies in Sulaymaniyah until finding love with a Kurdish man living in Norway. Born in Sulaymaniyah, Ms. Arif previously taught mathematics at a grade school level and worked in a number of ministries before her journalistic talent was discovered by the mother of Kurdish politician, Dr. Barham Salih.

“It was my only wish in this life to live and die in Kurdistan, and only leave for vacations. Fate would have it different – I left Kurdistan because I fell in love with a man in Norway.” She continues furiously, “People think that living in Norway has made me conscious about women’s issues and that it’s because I’m outside my homeland that I speak my mind about women’s rights in Kurdistan. They could not be more wrong; in fact, I am less active here than I ever was in Kurdistan.”

In Kurdistan, Ms. Arif wrote articles for several well-known Kurdish newspapers. Her articles were primarily about women and the various obstacles they face. One women’s issue, in particular, that drew her attention the most was female genital mutilation, also commonly referred to as female circumcision.

Debating female genital mutilation is still something of a taboo issue in Kurdistan, but certain people, including Ms. Arif, and some groups such as the German-based Association for Crisis Assistance and Development Cooperation, or WADI, work hard to try to spread awareness of this horrible practice despite meeting resistance from many sides. Although focus on this topic in Kurdistan and elsewhere has increased over the last 7-8 years, Ms. Arif’s unfortunate introduction to this practice came much earlier.

### THE DAY

Ms. Arif’s father owned an ice cream shop and wished to expand his business. He moved his family from Sulaymaniyah to Raniya in order to set up a business there. She explains the tragedy that would soon follow in her own words:



Ms. Arian Arif - Photo Courtesy Haje Keli © Kurdish Herald 2009

“I was nine and the women in the neighborhood had a great deal of impact on my mother. They asked her if she’d circumcised her daughters. ‘How could you not?’ they asked. ‘You really have to. Badji Gole is going to circumcise our daughters tomorrow.’ Two of my friends, two beautiful sisters, were scheduled for Badji Gole’s ‘operation’ as well.

“Another friend, Ala, was also facing the same fate as us, but when her mother took her hand to take her to Badji Gole, her older sisters refused to let her go. They shouted at their mother, saying that Ala should not go through this. Ala was off the hook. Our laundry room was used as the operation room. Without telling us what would happen, they took us to the laundry room and held a hand over our mouths. In the room, we saw an old wrinkly woman with tattoos all over her face. We saw plastic covers on the floor and a collection of razors. We were all so young, our eyes were so full of life and joy and with those razors Badji Gole took all that away. Our mother put us in the hands of an old, tired woman with shaky hands to play with our bodies and mess with what God had created. It’s only by the grace of God we survived her cuts. My mother was illiterate, and so were all the other women. They kept us down with force. Every little girl in there wanted the other girls to go first. The two sisters who were my friends, Ajin and Jino were beside me. Ajin seemed to know what was going to happen. She said her cousin had gone through this a few weeks ago and she had said how much it hurts. The first girl to be cut was three years old. I remember my mother asking Badji Gole not to cut me very deep. Badji Gole replied that the more she cuts of my genitals, the more the blessing (kheyir) there is.”

A big why arose in Ms. Arif’s heart that day. This question still haunts her – a question for herself, her parents,

and Badji Gole. She says she knows on a factual level why parents do this to their daughters, but the young child in her is not satisfied with that as an answer.

They put Ms. Arif in bed and she recalls cursing at her mother and the woman who mutilated her. “I was so devastated that it made me hate my mother,” she said. “This pain made me hate the most precious person in my life. At that moment, everything was mother’s fault.”

Ms. Arif doubts that this particular phenomenon can be labeled as purely the fault of men. “My father was not home when they mutilated me,” she said. “When he came home and found out what had been done to me, he got very angry with my mother and called her irrational.”

Ms. Arif vividly remembers the rest of the day. “They surrounded us with cookies, chocolate and potato chips as if that would heal our unbelievable pain. They placed all us girls in the far back room of our house. We were the shame of the neighborhood and we had to be hidden away. No one ever spoke of our mutilation. They were ashamed of us and our genitals. When my brothers were circumcised, they received countless gifts and words of praise and blessing from people. They had visitors and yet all they did for us was some candy and a few mattresses on a cold floor.”

This, Ms. Arif claims, is why she will no longer keep quiet about her genital mutilation. She is emerging from hiding, from that back room, and into the light. She is doing it for Ajin, Jino and every other girl who was mutilated and for those who will unfortunately face genital mutilation. The world needs to hear Ms. Arif’s story and now they finally are. This, she says, will set her apart from the woman who circumcised her. If she continues to hide and live in shame, she will keep Badji Gole’s horrific actions alive and well.

As for the alleged religious nature of this mutilation, Ms. Arif says, “There nothing in any religion claiming that women should be circumcised. Yet we see that this practice exists among different cultures belonging to different religions.”

### LIFE AFTER MUTILATION

When asking Ms. Arif about her life as a teenager and after, she is very frank: “I enjoyed attention from boys, but I never saw it as anything else than words. I never thought love was anything other than words, it could not be physical.” When Ms. Arif was eleven, she was in an accident that left her seriously injured, and she had to go through 8 surgeries to recover fully. That, in addition to her genital mutilation, made falling in love and finding a suitable man difficult. When Ms. Arif was nineteen, she befriended a man with a similar mindset and way of thinking. Their friendship grew deeper, and she eventually tried telling him about what had happened to her. He stopped her in the middle of her sentence and said that anything she had gone through did not matter to him because she was perfect. Time went by and her friend moved abroad. From there he seemed to change, and brought up what she had once tried to tell him. She

finished the story of the two incidents from her childhood that had scarred her for life. He replied by saying that she probably looks horrible. Many more incidents like these would occur until Ms. Arif found the man who would be her husband.

Ms. Arif's experience made her aware that members of the opposite sex may not accept her for who she is, and be unable to look past horrible things that had happened to her. Many men would be captivated by her looks and immense charm and glow, but as soon as Ms. Arif opened up about her past, they withdrew. She said, "I believed in myself, and I knew what a good person I was. I can't do anything about it if other people do not see that."

There was a man that did not let Ms. Arif's past overshadow the magnificent person that she is. Ms. Arif calls him the very definition of respect and love. "His love and respect for women is mind-blowing. I want to tell the world how wonderful he is. I owe him so much. There are many Kurdish women who never experience or ask for an orgasm because of the taboos in our culture. Luckily, I am with a man who understands and caters to my mental and physical needs. He is the best friend and lover. He is making up for the damages happened to me, he is my calmness and safety."

## LAWS AND ACTIONS AGAINST FGM IN KRG

Ms. Arif wants female genital mutilation to be outlawed in Kurdistan. She also wants women who were subjected to FGM be treated physically and mentally. They should have teams of support tending to their needs. "I married a wonderful man who understands me. What about all the women who do not have wonderful men and remain incomplete?" she asks.

She says she begs every member of the new parliament to ignore people who claim that genital mutilation is a thing of the past or a dying practice. "The Minister of Religious Endowments says female genital mutilation was a phase. How dare he? I challenge him and anyone who claims the same. What they are doing is mocking thousands of girls who are scarred for life. They put a sheet over the wounds of these girls and pretend they were never hurt. The [Kurdistan] government has a negative view of people who wish to draw attention to female genital mutilation. When I lived there, I was in a constant fight with people in power who disliked my interest in this issue. Do they really think that by turning a blind eye to this issue it will make our region look good?"

## WISHES FOR THE FUTURE

According to Ms. Arif, the numbers of mutilated women are higher than published reports state as there are women who do not wish to reveal that they have been circumcised: "I understand why they wish to keep quiet, they do not want to put their family's name in shame. They have already lost a lot, and experienced psychological damage. On top of all of this, they keep it inside. It's important to own our problems and be first in the line to speak about them. Women in our Kurdish culture are still too weak to speak about their own problems, and therefore, people keep oppressing us. They have to start questioning, why do people constantly hurt us? I proudly reveal my name and story in this article because women need to stand up and say, 'Yes we have been genitally mutilated.'"

Ms. Arif says that her wish was to stay in Kurdistan for her whole life, but her husband has a life in Norway and she wanted to join him. In the cold Scandinavia, far from her homeland, she is not as able to speak, write and campaign against female genital mutilation. The language barrier and the difference in work culture frustrate her and she wishes she could be as active as she was in Kurdistan. Ironically, while many Kurdish women wish they had Ms. Arif's life in Norway, she longs to return "home" and fight for her cause.



Union of Kurdish Writers, Dohuk in Iraqi Kurdistan

# Dohuk: The Protector of My Dialect

by Sibel Akman

Until recently, I never needed a passport – while I had travelled some fairly significant distances in Turkey, not once had I crossed its borders. However, I was recently invited by the Union of Kurdish Writers, Dohuk branch to attend their 38th year anniversary and so this all changed. In order to attend, I would be required to make a trip across the border from Mus, Turkey to Dohuk, Iraq. In another world, such a trip might not have required a passport. But borders, like so much else, tend to take on lives of their own after decades of existence.

Dohuk is a dream city of Kurdistan, or, more specifically, the dream city of Kurmanci-Kurdistan. It carries and raises the flashing flag of the language, the most fundamental particle of the Kurdish national identity. The city is surrounded by mountains on all four sides, making it seem like a small valley in the vast world of Kurmanci-speaking Kurdistan. It is the smallest of the three provinces that make up the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan. The other two provinces, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah speak Sorani, the dialect used most commonly in official discourse in the region. However, Dohuk is different. Armed with the realization that the two dialects, both with their own rich histories, cannot be integrated, the city's intellectual elite work tirelessly to ensure that Kurmanci continues to be used.

Union of Kurdish Writers, Duhok in Iraqi Kurdistan

The Dohuk Writers Union is currently headed by Mr. Hassan Slevani, himself a poet and a novelist who heads the organization that is responsible for publishing hundreds of literary works – all in Kurmanci – over the past few years. His is an institution whose work benefits so many millions of Kurds far beyond the borders of this small town; this wonderful town called Dohuk.

As a young Kurdish poet living in Turkey, the union's invitation was a most welcome surprise and an amazing opportunity; not only was I given a chance to recite my humble poems before an audience of contemporary literary giants such as Badirkhan Sindi, Muhsin Quchan, Mu'ayad Tayib, and Arif Hito, I also saw with my own eyes how the Kurmanci dialect is being protected and advanced by this city's beautiful people.

When I returned to Turkey, my suitcase was full of extremely precious books given to me by the union – books that one, unfortunately, cannot obtain beyond the tiny borders

## LETTERS OF THE DIASPORA from San Diego, California:

### Activist and Community Organizer, Luqman Barwari

By Vahal A. Abdulrahman



Kurdish activist and community organizer, Luqman Barwari, in Hasankeyf © Kurdish Herald 2009

“Immigration is not simply a tradition in America, it is the essence of America,” said Mr. Luqman Barwari as we talked about the Kurdish-American community. Mr. Barwari, a resident of Southern California, has his roots in Iraqi Kurdistan, the land he fled in 1975. Building a new life in the United States, he not only mastered the English language very quickly, but went on to earn a number of higher degrees. He currently works at one of the world’s leading biotechnology companies as a scientist focusing on molecular biology.

There are roughly 50,000 Iraqi Kurds living in the United States, most of whom have come during one of three waves of immigration. The first wave occurred following the 1975 Algiers Agreement, which led to the end of the Mullah Mustafa Barzani’s Kurdish revolt in Iraq. The second wave occurred in the aftermath of the Anfal campaign, which ended in 1988, and 1991 uprising following Iraq’s expulsion from Kuwait. The third and most recent wave included when the staff and families of Kurdistan-based NGOs that left the region in 1996 following the stalemate that halted the Kurdish factional war of the mid-1990’s. Collectively, this community of Kurdish-Americans is scattered on both coasts of the United States, which the biggest concentration of Kurds in America being found in Nashville, Tennessee, a city otherwise known for its contributions to American music.

There are other Kurdish communities of considerable size throughout the United States, one of which is in Southern California, namely in San Diego, where some 10,000 people there identify themselves as Kurds. Not too far from San Diego lives Mr. Barwari; a long-time community leader who recently spoke to me at length about the situation of Kurdish-Americans, their activism and overall advancement and integration, using California’s San Diego County as a model.

The 10,000-person community of Kurds in San Diego is mostly from Iraqi Kurdistan; that is also true of most of the other communities of Kurds in the United States. In San Diego, the Kurds have settled there over the past three decades, almost all as refugees, fleeing the various campaigns of terror conducted by the Ba’ath regime against the people of Iraqi Kurdistan. Mr. Barwari tells me that the vast majority of this community are naturalized US citizens. Their sense of belonging to the host country, Iraq, was shattered by the genocidal policies of the previous Iraqi regime, hence making the choice to become American citizens much easier, Mr. Barwari added.

Unfortunately with that citizenship comes very little progress, insofar as the Kurds of Southern California are concerned. Mr. Barwari stated that the number of the community members who are part of California’s professional workforce is so small that it is almost “insignificant.” Their participation in higher education is only slightly better, but by no means sufficient given the opportunities that America has to offer. Economically, Mr. Barwari says, the Kurds in this area take advantage of the social benefits that the state of California that he described as a “welfare state,” offers for her residents. With that dependence on state benefits comes high percentages of unemployment among the community, especially in professional fields. That said, the new generation of Kurds, the daughters and sons of those who had once fled genocide are now becoming more and more aware of the opportunities of America. Unlike their parents, Mr. Barwari tells me, they are attending institutions of higher education, working hard to pursue professional careers and advancing their lives while at the same time remaining ever more culturally Kurdish. Mr. Barwari praised the efforts of emerging Kurdish youth organizations whose members and leaders work together for the pursuit of a better, more organized Kurdish-American community that can work for the improvement of both America and the Kurdistan. Mr. Barwari, himself, actively advises members of the national Kurdish American Youth Organization (KAYO).

When I asked Mr. Barwari to tell me of those long-gone days of living in Kurdistan, my question instantly reminded him of Iraqi Air Force jets hovering over their village in Barwari Balla region along the Turkish border. Even today, he remembers how the five-year-old Luqman would see the planes arrive, bomb, and then disappeared into the endless sky. What a childhood, what a world!

He still remembers that night when his father deserted the Iraqi army and decided to become a peshmerga and flee to the sub-district of Galala where the Kurdish leadership was headquartered at the time. That ten-day journey from their village on the Turkish border to Gallala on the Iranian border, like so much else from his childhood, has accompanied him to America and still lives with him today. In 1975, the 10 year old Luqman would find himself a refugee in Iranian camps where cold, hunger and death were part of the daily package that once seemed to be the fate of the Kurdish nation. At the age of 12, Luqman found himself relocated involuntarily to Qom in southwestern Iran, where he worked as a child laborer in factories doing 12-hour shifts, 6 days a week, for a full four years!

Ironically, these not-so-pleasant memories link the successful family man, US citizen, and accomplished scientist, Luqman Barwari, to Kurdistan. He is currently working with Dohuk University to help them develop a molecular biology laboratory. He makes frequent trips to Kurdistan and has helped raise funds for humanitarian efforts, most notably for the victims of floods in Diyarbakir in the fall of 2006 through a nationwide campaign effort with KAYO. Mr. Barwari is also very concerned for Kurdish music; he often invites Europe-based Kurdish musicians to hold concerts and attend community events. His pan-Kurdish sentiments and appreciation for Kurdish culture have brought him to Diyarbakir for the world’s largest Newroz celebration a number of times. He also is an active member of the Kurdish National Congress of North America.

Like so many active Kurdish intellectuals, Mr. Barwari dreams of the emergence of a powerful Kurdish community in America where effective grass-roots lobbying can pressure policymakers to keep the Kurds in their minds. Mr. Barwari, despite the rough road to success and countless disappointments along the way, is optimistic that the new generation of Kurdish-Americans will emerge as a force of which all Americans and Kurds can be proud.