

THO PANEL DISCUSSION ON THE KRG INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM AND REGIONAL REALITIES

Wednesday, October 18
National Press Club, Washington, DC

Statement from Arshad Al-Salihi Iraqi Turkmen Front Leader Member of the Iraqi Parliament Kirkuk, Iraq

Dear guests,

The elimination of DAESH (ISIS) is a major gain for Iraq, which has been going through really difficult times for the past three years; therefore, we must be happy. However, this is not enough. We need to understand the underlying reasons and conditions that created DAESH and develop measures against them. Unless we do this, wars and conflicts in Iraq will never end. DAESH massacred Turkmens, Yezidis, Christians, Kurds, and Arabs in territories that they controlled. DAESH and DAESH-like terror organizations gain strength from instability. If instability is not addressed, Iraq's problems cannot be resolved. Unless we identify the reasons that create instability, we can't deal with it effectively.

For the past fourteen years, there have been three major factors that have created instability in Iraq:

- A culture of reconciliation has never been formed;
- Political goals have been tried to be reached by using political goals and the mindset of *fait accompli*;
- Instead of acting with governmental authority, all political parties involved have tried to move along with the power that was brought to them via their own armed forces.

These three major factors continue to cause conflicts and instability in Iraq. Despite the involvement of all parties by the Iraqi government, why do you think there has been no political stability in Iraq since 2005? Because there has been no reconciliation between the political parties; their focus is only on temporary gains. When things are no longer in their best interest, they do not keep their promises.

Almost all important political parties first establish alliances to reach their goals; then they change these alliances. They do not care about the people of Iraq. Regardless of who is right and who is wrong, parties and important political actors put pressure on unarmed groups with the armed groups that are loyal to them.

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This is what happened to us in Kirkuk. The governor of Kirkuk gave numerous promises to Turkmen, including bringing services and providing employment, so that he could gain their support. While giving these promises, the governor allowed the PKK to operate in Kirkuk.

Reconciliation in Kirkuk is an important issue for American authorities as well. Article 140 of Iraq's constitution – which basically acknowledges that there should be a reconciliation in Kirkuk between Turkmen, Kurds, and Arabs – had been disregarded. Various types of pressures caused this reconciliation to never actually form. As a result, Kirkuk is on the verge of a conflict today.

I began talking about Kirkuk, but the issues that the Iraqi Turkmen community have been experiencing are not limited to Kirkuk.

Turkmen geography is being changed by force

Turkmen are spread throughout a large area in Iraq, which includes Mosul, Kirkuk, Erbil, Salah ad Din, Diyala, Sulaymaniyah, Wasit, and Dahuk. Their population is mostly concentrated in Mosul and Kirkuk. However, this geography and Turkmen lives have been impacted by DAESH and anti-DAESH operations.

With DAESH's occupation, Turkmen who have been living in cities like Mosul and Salah ad Din for generations had to flee. Regions that include Tal Afar, Tuz Khurmatu, and Qarah Tapah experienced a mass exodus. Some of the internally displaced Turkmen were settled in camps located in or around Dahuk, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Soleimani. Although some of these houses, villages, and towns were re-captured either by Iraqi or Peshmerga forces, Turkmen were not allowed to return to their homes. In other words, Turkmen suffered not only under DAESH but also from post-DAESH pressures that are strategically aimed at changing the demography.

Turkmen geography has turned into a conflict zone

DAESH's territorial gains and losses have turned the Turkmen geography into a conflict zone. In particular, clashes in the northern part of Iraq took place in regions where Turkmen are heavily concentrated. As a result, the northern part of Diyala; Tuz Khurmatu; areas near Kirkuk; and northern parts of Mosul were controlled by either DAESH or Peshmerga forces. Even the PKK penetrated as far as east of Sinjar and parts of Kirkuk. Turkmen have either had very limited or no exposure to such scenarios before.

Now, there are new concerns about possible clashes between the central Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Where will these clashes be? Of course, in Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, Diyala, or northern Mosul. In other words, places where Turkmen live. Those

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who have been waiting to return to their cities, towns, and villages will not be able to return because they will soon turn into a new conflict zone.

Turkmens are deeply disappointed

When Turkmens faced these challenges, as Iraqi citizens, they expected help from the Iraqi central government and nations that have influence in Iraq. Unfortunately, this help either came very late or never came at all. Our lands were occupied and properties were seized. Basically, our future was stolen from us. It is really difficult to be a Turkmen in Iraq. When we request support from Turkey, we are being blamed. We are all Turks, therefore, it is only natural for us to request help from Turkey, especially when our own government in Iraq does not provide us the necessary support and protection.

The fact is that Erbil does not treat us well. Our relations with the central Iraqi government in Baghdad are much better. Therefore, a strong Baghdad is in our best interest. We believe the U.S. wants to bring stability to Iraq, so we expect the U.S. to support us in this matter. We consider those who are working toward establishing stability in Iraq as our friends. We continue to hope and believe that the U.S. will have a much more supportive policy towards the Turkmens in Iraq's future.

The referendum and its implications

As Turkmens, we are pleased that the U.S. did not support the KRG's referendum for independence. Despite this, the KRG's decision to move forward has caused great concerns for the region's stability. Today, we are faced with a potential armed conflict between the central government and KRG. As this development clearly indicates, the referendum not only jeopardized Iraq's territorial integrity but also created significant security risks for Turkmen lands. As Turkmens, we support the rights and privileges that the Iraqi constitution has given to the Kurds. In fact, we wholeheartedly support the expansion of democratic rights and regional autonomies. However, at the same time, we realize the potential consequences of political decisions that are against Iraq's constitution and international laws. This would certainly jeopardize existing sensitive balances in Iraq.

Iraq's constitution should be the only guide

For decades, we have experienced numerous human rights violations that not only took away our basic rights but also displaced our people from their lands. Turkmens have suffered equally from all the negative developments that took place in Iraq. It simply did not matter whether Saddam Hussein was in power. We were oppressed before him, and this oppression continued after he was toppled. When DAESH began its attacks and taking over territories, thousands of

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Turkmen had to flee. Some of those who lived in Tal Afar, Mosul, Salah ad Din, and Diyala haven't been able to return yet, and they don't have any hopes to do so. While we are still facing these challenges, now we are faced with another conflict with grave outcomes. We absolutely do not want to take sides in this conflict. However, while one side is clearly going against Iraq's constitution, it is only natural for us to be on the side of the government.

As the conflict intensifies, Turkmen are being targeted

The assassination, kidnapping, and extortion of Turkmen have significantly increased, particularly in and around Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu. Unlike other ethnic groups in Iraq, we do not have any armed groups to protect us. Yes, it is true that some Turkmen serve as police and military officers. It is also true that some Turkmen have joined pro-government militia groups such as Hashd al-Shaabi. However, this does not mean that Turkmen took up arms to protect themselves. We are simply using our constitutional rights to unify and protect Turkmen. Even this is not enough for Turkmen to deal with all the violence and human rights violations that we are facing. There are two reasons behind this violence and violations. The primary reason is lack of authority, and the secondary reason is geopolitical – they want to rid places like Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu of Turkmen. Certain factions within the Peshmerga forces, combined with the security forces covertly directed by the Kirkuk governor and the PKK, continue to target Turkmen.

Our options: Establishing our own militia, joining military forces that would protect us, or requesting help from other countries

Turkmen have no option but to protect themselves from these security threats. No nation can accept a fate that would eliminate them like this. Similar to our worries about DAESH, we are seriously concerned about the potential security risks that emerged with the referendum and what would happen next. The international community should protect us from being a target and help us protect ourselves from various criminal acts that are driven by political motives that are planned by certain factions within the Peshmerga forces and the PKK. If we do not get this protection, we have three options to consider. The first one is to form our own militia group, followed by the option of joining military forces that would protect us; the last option is to request help from other countries.

The referendum is illegitimate, against the constitution, and destructive for Iraq

There is no question that this referendum has violated Iraq's constitution. In addition to violating the constitution, the KRG extended the referendum to territories that were not designated in the constitution. We think this is wrong, and it clearly violates both Iraq's constitution and

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international rules. We think that this referendum was planned to benefit a political party and the self-interests of its leadership. We know that not all Kurds in Iraq support the referendum, because shortly before the referendum, many Kurds were opposed to it. In fact, the KYB political party's office in Kirkuk, which happens to be the strongest Kurdish political party, was against the referendum. However, using various claims, the KRG went ahead with the illegitimate referendum anyway.

At this point, as Turkmens, our request from the U.S. and U.N. Security Council is to not to recognize the outcome of this illegitimate referendum. The international community should clearly know that we are deeply concerned with this referendum that was conducted on September 25. The KRG's bid for independence is going to create new clashes and claim innocent lives. Eventually, it will cause Iraq to lose its territorial integrity. When this scenario plays out, Turkmens will do whatever it takes to preserve their lands, because their rights on these lands, which go back centuries, simply cannot be denied.

Protecting the rights of Turkmens and other ethnic communities in areas of conflict is first and foremost the Iraqi central government's duty; secondly, it is also the international community's duty. We would like to cooperate with the international community and are ready to receive support from countries like the U.S., Turkey, and others. Again, we would like to emphasize that we support Iraq's constitution and territorial integrity along with the protection of Turkmen rights and regional security.

In conclusion, we, the Turkmens, do not recognize this illegitimate referendum of the KRG for independence. We request the U.N. General Secretary to prepare a report that highlights the illegitimacy of this referendum, to be shared at the Security Council. We continue to hope and believe that the U.S. will protect vulnerable ethnic communities by supporting our request.

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