

Challenges facing the Nation and Federalism in Iraq

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by congratulating the KNC for their 21st conference and thanking you for giving me the honour of speaking before this distinguished audience.

I will start by giving you an update on the latest developments in Iraqi Kurdistan.

We are today a key element in the new Iraq. A country new to many of its people and perhaps to its leaders too. The new Iraq is built on the basis of consensus between its ethnic and religious components.

As for us Kurds, the constitution recognises Iraqi Kurdistan as a federal region within Iraq, the final administrative borders of which will be defined according to article 140. It also recognises the rights of the people of Kurdistan. This was a very important and historic development for the Kurdish people of Iraq and came as a result of their immense sacrifices and sufferings in their long struggle.

They were finally starting to feel that they are an equal partner and are part of the making of the new Iraq.

Over the past few years, these principles were also recognised and approved by various non-Kurdish Iraqi political parties that formed the government and parliament.

But more recently, and especially after the significant improvement in the security situation and a marked decline in sectarian conflict, there seems to be a sort of backtracking on these promises.

The Kurds today feel that they are being sidelined.

We feel that our partners in the political process are grouping against us, in spite of the political coalition we have with some of them.

We notice this very clearly when adversaries of Prime Minister Maliki would not hesitate to support him whenever he makes a statement that affected the Kurds.

For example; amending the constitution, decreasing authorities of the regions in favour of a stronger central government, the lack of implementing Article 140 of the constitution, and the accusations that the KRG has been violating the constitution.

Statements like these and acts like the illegal forming of the Support Councils from tribes, moving the Iraqi army forces towards the disputed areas and asking peshmerga to leave them, not reaching an agreement over the Hydro Carbon law and the oil contracts signed in Kurdistan; have all contributed to the tension between Baghdad and Erbil. For its part, the KRG has also failed to meet some of its constitutional obligations, especially in the financial field. Also there is no proper coordination between Baghdad and KRG administrations necessary in a federal state.

This was further aggravated by the open exchange of criticism between the two governments in the media. and also with some Arab and Turkoman claims that Article 140 was no longer valid when the deadline for implementing the article had passed. (31 December 2007)

Various meetings took place between the KRG and Baghdad but they couldn't solve the problems.

President Jalal Talabani and others exerted efforts and arranged for President Massoud Barzani to visit Baghdad in October 2008.

He held a series of meetings with Prime Minister Maliki and also participated in the meetings of the Political Council for National Security and the Executive Council.

The Executive Council decided on November 1st to form five committees to suggest ways of solving the problems of: Military and Security; Foreign Relations; Finance and Economy; Article 140; Power sharing.

These committees were supposed to finish their task and present their reports to the Executive Council by the 15th November 2008.

The committees have not finished their work, and neither the Executive Council nor the Political Council for National Security met yet. Furthermore, No high-level meetings between the two sides have taken place, except for the brief and courteous meeting between Dr Maliki and Nechirvan Barzani who came to Baghdad to meet the visiting president Abdullah Gul.

Baghdad does not seem to be in a hurry to solve the problems, especially after the Prime Minister's victory in the local elections and the signing of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States.

As for Prime Minister Maliki, he is wrong to think that he is strong without the Kurdistan and Sunni regions. He must behave as the prime minister for the whole of Iraq and not just the areas in which he won the elections – after all he won just under a million votes, the Kurdistan vote outside KRG areas was 600,000.

As for the Kurds, I think time is not in their favour.

They have to break the deadlock and come up with an initiative that goes beyond the senior level committees and meetings behind closed doors that are not usually followed up properly.

We must also realise, that today's Baghdad is different from the one of before. There are many parties, institutions and people to lobby.

Working in Baghdad today is a bit like lobbying in Washington and Europe. You have to meet more than the leaders in order to get the proper support for your case.

The Kurds must also look at ways of strengthening their position. Fighting corruption, performing political, economic and social reforms, greater transparency and good governance must be the top priority for the Kurdish leadership in Iraqi Kurdistan. Full respect of ethnic and religious minorities and recognition of their rights and aspirations should be observed in every aspect.

Public confidence in the leadership is declining to say the least.

This has to be restored.

Iraqi Kurdistan used to be called a model for the rest of Iraq. This was at a time when Saddam Hussein was in power, also for some time after the toppling of his regime.

We must maintain the character by upholding the values of the free and democratic world, giving particular importance to human rights, women's rights and all types of individual freedoms and offering services to people.

Externally, we must be realistic in reading US, international and regional policies towards us that are obviously built on their interests which often don't match ours.

To understand them better and comprehensively, we must look at the pan Kurdish issue as a whole in different parts of divided Kurdistan.

Our divided nation is facing many internal, regional and external challenges.

Internally, and at a country level, the various Kurdish movements are rather fragmented.

The presence of different groups and political parties has on many occasions placed narrow partisan aspirations before larger national ones.

On many occasions, the various political parties were united over the goals but not over the mechanisms and the ways to achieve them. This division has created a dilemma for finding the true representative of the people in a given part of Kurdistan, especially for the ones who want to deal with our case or lobby for it.

In addition to this, none of the countries that the Kurds live in, apart from new Iraq, recognise the legitimate rights for the Kurds and people who live in Kurdistan.

They have always dealt with the Kurdish issue as a threat to their national security that should be confronted.

They often cooperated too in eliminating this threat, as they see it. As in 1937 Saed Abad treaty, 1955 Baghdad pact, 1975 Algiers agreement..... Etc.

Some of these agreements still exist between Iraq and these countries though not as active as they were. This has gone even to the extent of these countries making ties with the Kurds of their neighbours in the name of helping them at the expense of their own Kurds. Aiming at initiating internal Kurdish conflicts which has happened at times unfortunately.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, we are still not completely free of these ties and their consequences as a result of our relations with Iran and Turkey, that geography imposes and we cannot do with them.

We have always been victims of geography; furthermore our leadership haven't drawn necessary lessons from our history.

It seems that our geopolitical situation has dictated the position of the international community towards us to a great degree.

In general, we have always been dealt with as part of the country that we live in and within the same political framework as that of the various central governments.

During the 80s, we were considered saboteurs and out-laws because Saddam Hussein said so, and the international community were supporting him.

Today, the PKK or any group using arms to defend themselves and their people are considered terrorists because Turkey says so.

More recently, PJAK was also put on the list of terrorist groups by the USA as a bribe to pave the way for to start talks with Iran.

Disregarding the state terrorism practised by these countries against our people, the international community has at times helped these countries against the Kurds directly or indirectly.

The abduction of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan from Kenya in 1999; handing back the killers of of Dr Abdulrahman Qasimlu to Iran, also giving a blind eye to Kurdish sufferings in Syria, as well as complete negligence and silence over the big crimes of using chemical weapons and Anfal even when a world summit was held in Paris January 1989 against the use of these weapons are clear examples of that.

In spite of these tough and unjust policies, our cause couldn't be undermined and the Kurdish nation is trying to live in peace and dignity on its soil. We are trying to be part of the free world. We are hoping to live in countries where all citizens are equal and our rights are respected.

On the occasion of this conference, I call on the government of the United States of America to revise its policy towards the Kurds and put our nations issue as such on its agenda.

As a nation of more than 40 million people in the heart of the Middle East, we believe that the United States of America stands for the same ideals that we strive for.

It represents the values that we want to have in our countries.

I urge President Obama who was elected as change and for change, to also bring real change to US policy towards the Kurds. I also urge him to appoint an envoy for the cause of Kurds and Kurdistan.

I am sure that he or she would be one the busiest envoys and would contribute a great deal to a better image of the United States in the Middle East.

Finally I wish KNC all success and progress and agree with the title of your conference, because in spite of all the bitter realities surrounding us we should think like a nation that has the right to self determination.

Thank you for your kind attention

Dr Mahmoud Osman