

The Plight of the Kurds in South-West Kurdistan

by Moustafa Rechid Washington DC 2009

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I should like to express my gratitude to the organisers of this meeting for inviting us to speak about the situation of the Kurdish people in Syrian Kurdistan (we call it South-West Kurdistan). Thank you that you gave us a chance to show you, what kind of problems we have and what kind of oppression we suffer from the totalitarian Syrian regime.

Esteemed guests,

The Kurdish people are one of the most ancient peoples in the Middle East. The 40-million-strong Kurdish nation is one of the four big nations: Arabs, Persians, Kurds and Turks. Until the World War 1, our homeland Kurdistan was divided between the Ottoman and Persian Empires. After the war, Kurdish lands from the Ottoman Empire were given to three new states-Turkey, Iraq and Syria. South Kurdistan, or Mossul Vilayet - because of its oil - was added to Iraq. Another part, was south of the train line Berlin-Baghdad and it became a part of Syria. The new borders were made in 1916 in the Sykes-Picot Agreement and these names of an English and a French diplomat are being still remembered. Unfortunately, these two gentlemen paid no attention to the ethnic composition of these regions. They made these borders with a pen and a ruler only. Everyone can see their drawings on the map. The Sykes-Picot Agreement created the modern Syrian state and attached to it a part of our homeland.

The Kurds live in the northern part of Syria, in the border region between Syria and Turkey and Syria and Iraq. But they always played a big role in Syrian history. Many aristocratic and rich Kurdish families had important positions in Damascus, Aleppo, Hamma, Homs, Ladhqiya; many families in the district of Horan and some Druzes are of Kurdish origins. We know that until 1958 a big number of important Syrian politicians came from these families. I can mention the Defence Minister Yusuf al-Azma (during the French arrival), Ibrahim Henano (a patriotic symbol of anti-French resistance), Muhammad Ali al-Abid (the President of the Syrian Republic in 1936), other Presidents Husni al-Zaim, Fawzi Silo, Shukri al-Quwatli. I can also mention other important politicians: Muhsin Berazi, Reshad Bermeda, Rushdi al-Kixiya, Tawfiq Nizameddin and also a family of Jumblat in Lebanon. So, I can agree with the President of Syria Mr. Bashar al-Asad, when he said to Al-Jazeera that "the Kurdish nation is one of the basic elements of Syrian society".

During the World War 2, when France occupied Syria and Lebanon and the British troops came to Syria to support General De Gaulle, many Arabs were angry at France and the UK and showed sympathy with the Nazi Germany. We know that in 1942 the educated Arab nationalists followed the example of the National-Socialist Party of Germany and created the Arab National -Socialist Party (al-Baath). There were two main reasons why the party al-Baath became dominant. in Syria and Iraq:

1. The Baath made national feelings of the Arabs strong and promised to create a pan-Arab Union. People believed that the Baathists could develop Arab economy and social life;
2. West European states and the USA did not want the Soviet Communist influence in the Middle East, they wanted to use the Baathists against the local Communist parties. So, they in different ways supported the Baathists.

Soon the Baathists came to power in Syria and Iraq. In foreign policy they moved between the West and the Soviet block. In the domestic policy they applied the National-Socialist principles.

1958 was the year of big changes in both Syria and Iraq. In Syria, the policy of Arabization was applied to state symbols, organisations and even chemistry and mathematics. The name of Syrian Republic was changed, it became the Syrian Arab Republic. The national anthem became the Syrian Arab National Anthem. The Syrian Army became the Syrian Arab Army. The TV became the Syrian Arab TV and so on.

The atmosphere was created when only those people who shouted Arab nationalist slogans were accepted by the state. Everything Arabic was higher than anything else. But this could not change the mosaics of Syrian society. The Kurds are the second biggest group in Syria, but many other minorities live in Syria: Assyrians, Syriac (Suriyani), Chaldeans, other Aramean groups, Turkomans, Cirkassians, Armenians and Jews. The official ideology did not fit this multilinguistic and multi-religious society.

During the short Union of Syria and Egypt, the Arab Socialists nationalised banks, factories and the whole private sector. The Arabs were regarded as better citizens than non-Arabs. I can tell you only one example: the Syrian state took away the possessions of the Kurdish land-lords and gave them not to the Kurdish peasant, it gave this land to the Arabs from other regions.

In 1962, the Syrian government and especially the Baathist official Muhammad Talab Hilal started a racist policy against the Kurds. I shall try to sum up the Syrian actions:

- 1) The Kurds living within 10-15 kilometres from the Turkish border had to be replaced by the Arabs. So, the Kurds who lived there for hundreds and thousands of years were forced to leave and the Arabs from other regions came and took their land and belongings.
- 2) The number of Kurds had to be decreased at any cost.
 - a) An emergency census was conducted in 1962 and around 150,000 Kurds were deprived from Syrian citizenship. Several generations of these Kurds are now stateless. We know, that in 1962 the Syrian population was 5 million and now it is 17.5 million. So, perhaps the number of the stateless Syrian Kurds is now 500,000 people. The stateless Kurds have no right, no possession, they cannot build a house, they cannot go to the state hospitals and hotels.
 - b) The Syrian state creates barriers for the social and cultural development of the Kurds and opens the ways for them to leave Syria, to become a refugee in Europe or elsewhere.
- 3) The Syrian state changes everything with the Kurdish name and identity: Kurdish cities and villages get new Arab names, the Kurdish language and publications are illegal, the Kurdish kids must have Arab names and so on.

- 4) Those Kurds who preserve their identity cannot make carrier in civil service or in the army. The people with Kurdish identity will never become generals or fly military airplanes.

Between 1963 and 1970 the Baathists had power but the power struggle was there: one dictator replaced another. In 1970 General Hafiz al-Assad established a total control over the state apparatus and army. To keep his power, al-Assad created three different security organisations: State Security Office, Political Security Office and Military Security Office. These three organisations prevented any form of political and economic development.

There was only a short period of democracy in Syria: between 1954 and 1957. All the Syrians have a hard life, but the minorities face more discrimination. The Syrian regime act against the human rights and freedom of press. The outside world knows maybe 10 per cent of the things which happen in Syria.

The Syrian regime and the destroyed Saddam Hussein's regime have the same ideological grounds but they did not like each other. The reason was that the Syrian and Iraqi Baathists competed who are better Arab nationalists. Now the Syrian authorities do everything to bring the Iraqi Baathists back to the power in Iraq.

After the Iraqi Constitution was signed on the 8th of March and it gave the Kurds an official status within the Iraqi Federation, the Syrian regime became crazy. The Syrian Baathists are afraid that one day the Kurds in Syria and their language will become official, like in Iraq. Such an atmosphere allowed the state security people to make a provocation on the 12th of March. The attacks against the Kurds have sad results: tens of the Kurds are killed, hundreds are wounded and thousands are detained. Every day one group of the Kurds is arrested and another is released. There are tortures even of the teenagers between 12 and 17 years old. Some people are killed and buried by the police and the relatives have no information about this. I can tell you only one example. A Kurdish mother wanted to see and kiss her killed son before he would be buried. She wanted to kiss his chin and saw that his chin was cut off. There are other killed Kurds whose eyes were smashed. Ladies and Gentlemen, these are not horror stories from Alfred Hitchcock's films, unfortunately these are realities of the Kurds in Syria.

To protest such deadly attacks, the Syrian Kurds demonstrate in Europe. The Syrian regime is afraid that it will share the fate of the Iraqi regime. But the Syrian authorities are not afraid of the Kurds who are 16 % of their population and many of whom left South-West Kurdistan and live in other regions of Syria. The Kurds always try to use democratic and non-violent methods. To get their human rights, they now need a better coordination. The Syrian opposition under the name of civil society group is weak. So, the Syrian Kurds and other democratic groups cannot themselves make Syria modern and democratic. We need support from democratic forces from abroad. The oppressive Assyrian Empire, the cruelty of Nero and Caligula in the late period of the Roman Empire, the Third Reich of Hitler, the regimes of Pol Pot in Cambodia and Saddam Hussein in Iraq - all of them were destroyed from outside forces.

I want to show you how important the help from outside can be. One and a half years ago, a Syrian Kurdish poet Merwan Osman together with his friend were detained after a peaceful demonstration. The Syrian state court blamed them for separatism and wanted to jail them for 15 years. We in the Kurdish PEN Centre, where I am a VicePresident, informed other PEN Centres. So, the last year PEN Congress in Mexico adopted a special resolution demanding Merwan Osman's release. Our colleagues from the English PEN Centre organised a big campaign, collected 200 signatures from the famous English

writers and sent a protest letter to the Syrian President and other officials. The English PEN Centre involved the UK diplomats and the Syrians dropped their charges and released Merwan Osman and his friend. I want to use this occasion to thank the English PEN Centre and the PEN International for their help.

As we see, the Kurdish voice alone is not enough. To stop killings, attacks and tortures against the Kurds in Syria, I bet you for help. Only your support can make Syria more democratic and only with your support the Kurds can get their democratic rights.

Let me be frank with you. We know very well that Syria has a very important geo-political and psychological place in the Middle East and the Arab World. If this country starts democratic changes, it will influence the whole region. Our hopes are:

- 1) For the Syrian state:
 - a) Military and dictatorial rule and one-parts system must be abolished.
 - b) The State Constitution must reflect the religious and ethnic mosaic of Syria, guarantee the rights of women and multi-party system.
 - c) Peaceful relations with all the neighbours and respect for international law.
 - d) The State Constitution and other laws must provide that Arabs and Kurds are main nations and guarantee the rights of other minorities.
 - e) Economic liberalisation and removal of socialist plan economy with its heavy bureaucracy from 1960s and 1970s.
 - f) New functions for central power, regions and local governments. The regional and local governments must be elected and must deal with local problems.
 - g) Independence of courts and freedom of opinion and mass media.
- 2) For the solution of the Kurdish issue I refer to the statement of the President Bashar al-Assad who said that a wrong policy towards the Kurds of the last 40 years must be corrected:
 - a) The results of the emergency census of 1962 must be abolished and the Kurds must get back their Syrian citizenship.
 - b) The Kurds must be allowed to go back to their villages which are now illegally occupied by the Arabs. Those Arabs are also victims of the wrong policy; the Syrian state must help them to go back to their native villages.
 - c) The policy of Arabization of historical names of the cities, villages and personal names must be reverted and corrected.
 - d) In the Kurdish regions the Kurdish language must become the second official language together with Arabic.

- e) The Kurdish language and culture must be free in other regions of Syria and especially at the universities and in mass media.
- f) There must be no discrimination against the Kurds and other minorities in the army, government, education, social and political life.

Dear friends,

We see that the new communication facilities, cultural, political and social contacts bring the nations of the world together. The people speak of the "world village". I can compare it with the ship in the sea. If some harm the ship, it will be bad for everyone on the ship. If we all take care of the ship, we shall survive.

Thank you for your attention.