

**Summary of the real story of Telafer  
disaster: How the Sectarian Hatred was  
introduced in to the city and the role of  
Kurdish militants**

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Before discussing the Telafer issue, it is essential to mention the important characteristics of the region and its population, and the reasons why the ruling powers in Iraq fight for the region and complicate the solution of the Telafer problem.

Tel Afer is in an important location in the north-west of Iraq, it is located about 60 km from Mosul, 85 km from Turkey and 70 km from Syria. Tel Afer is in-between the so-called 'Iraqi Kurdistan' and the so-called 'Syrian Kurdistan' and Sinjar, which is claimed by Kurds as being part of their region. Telafer is considered by the Kurds as an obstacle to the unification of the Kurdish regions into the 'great Kurdistan'. The geopolitically important Rabi'a border gate, between Iraq and Syria, is also located in Telafer district. This gate brings in a lot of money. By controlling the Telafer region, the Kurds will also have power over the new border gate that is supposed to be opening between Turkey and Iraq. This gate will also severely diminish the huge incomes, which Barzani get from Khabur Gate between Turkey and Iraq.

The oil fields of Ayn Zala, which are located to the north of Telafer, are another important source of wealth in Tel Afer, through which the strategic Kirkuk - Yumurtaalik Oil Pipeline passes. Another economic reason why the Kurds want to control Tel Afer is because of its fertile soil. According to experts on the completion of the irrigation project in the region, the income of the agricultural crops will equal that of the region's oil revenues.

Tel Afer region controls the Aski Mosul Lake with its dam which produces at the moment about 500 Megawatts and whose production could be increased under normal circumstances.

The population size of the Telafer district is estimated at about half million. The population of the district consists largely of Turkmen (80%), and the central part is inhabited almost 100% by Turkmen. The religious structure is 75% Sunnis and 25% Shiites. They are in close contact with each other and intermarriages are usual between the two sects.

For decades, particularly during the last 35 years, Telafer people suffered severely from oppression, persecution, negligence, marginalization and assimilation policies to such a degree that it was looked like 18th century city before occupation and further demolished thereafter. The people in Telafer have learned to live with these facts so as to avoid hostilities.

Within 2 days after the fall of Baghdad, on 11th April 2003, the Ba'ath party authorities, security and police systems and the government deputy had left Telafer, leaving behind a large security vacuum. The Notables of Telafer controlled the city and protected the city from looting. A consultation council was formed which guarded the government offices and possessions and prevented lootings.

In a conference of the consultation council on 15th April 2003, major Khalil Ibrahim, who had worn the rank of Staff Brigade, announced that the coalition forces had put him in charge of the city and that the Pashmarga (Kurdish Militants) were going enter the city on the same day and that the Notables should receive the Pashmarga as liberators. The Iraqi flags were delivered to the inhabitants and the Notables went to the entrance of the city to welcome the Pashmargas.

When the Pashmarga entered the city they immediately went to the police office, tore the Iraqi flag down and raised the yellow flag of Barzani instead. On seeing this young Turkmen rushed into the Police office and in their turn ripped of Barzani's flag and raised the Iraqi flag again. This was the first sign of divergence with the Kurds.

On the second day, the Turkmen discovered that Pashmarga occupied the Government and the Customs offices and had appointed a Kurdish governor for their city and that they had begun looting the public offices and transferring all the documents, furniture etc to the Kurdish area. At the same time the Pashmarga began raiding Turkmen houses under the pretext that they were searching for governmental vehicles. This caused the inhabitants to attack the Government and the Customs offices and burn them, forcing the Pashmargas to leave to the building of the Ba'ath leadership office. As the Turkmen continued to resist and injure several of them, the Pashmarga left the city after looting all the public and government buildings. These events gave the Pashmarga a bad reputation in Telafer.

One week later Jowdat Nadjar was sent to the city by Barzani to tell the Turkmen that Barzani was very upset and that they committed misdeeds. They should realize that they are part of Kurdistan and should be under his control. The Turkmen answer was that the Pashmarga had begun attacking them and that they should realize that Tel Afer is not part of so-called Kurdistan.

Despite this, the Kurdish leadership opened two offices in Tel Afer, for PUK and PDK, and they began forcing the people to join them. They offered lots of money to those who accepted. The Telafer Notables were invited to Erbil and were promised a large sum of money. Thereafter the Kurds intensified their attempts, with the help of the Kurdish deputy of Mosul governor Mr. Khasraw Goran, to find supporters for their City Council at the general and local Iraqi elections, and for the appointment of a new government deputy. They hoped that their men, Kurds or those who were 'bought', would win, but they didn't despite manipulation. Meanwhile Al-Arabiya TV interviewed Massoud Barzani who as an answer to one of the questions said that if Turkey would open another gate with Iraq near Rabi'a this would affect incomes of Habur gate. He said: "we will never accept this and we will use force if necessary". The Kurds continued to increase the activities in the region and enlarged the Kurdish political representation and upgraded its political stature. As a consequence the resistance of the Telafer people increased. In an attack on a Kurdish convoy several members of the Kurdish leadership were injured and killed.

When the Kurdish riot began in Hassaka and Qamishly in Syria on 13th March 2004, Barazani sent tens of his followers to Syria as a solidarity sign. 45 of the Barazani's men were arrested by the Syrian border authorities and were conveyed to the nearest Iraqi police station which is Tel Afer police station. The Kurdish deputy of Mosul Governor Mr. Khasraw Goran asked the Chief of the Police Station and the Government deputy of Telafer to free them, but they both refused. The rage of the Kurdish authorities then focused on the police Chief and the Government deputy of Telafer. A week later the police chief was accused of cooperation with the terrorists and dismissed and arrested.

During this period the American troops left the city, handing over security affairs to the city's security office and the police forces. The Kurdish Pashmargas functioning as Iraqi national guards frequently entered the city, pretending they wanted to go to the hospital or had come to receive their salaries, shooting randomly and obstructing the streets. But they faced resistance and were injured.

Despite the failure to contain the Telafer Turkmen, the Kurds continued their violence against the city. On 2 September 2003, the Kurdish militant Pashmargas instituted a control office at Abu Maria location and started insulting those who were leaving or entering Telafer. That same day 35 cars were attacked by the Kurds; the windows were broken and people were knocked about with rifle butts.

Telafer was exposed to several military operations during which many inhabitants were killed due to random bombings. On 5 September 2004, the Kurdish Pashmargas in the Iraqi National Guards supported by the American troops surrounded the Saray Neighborhood in the City claiming that they were going to search for insurgents. The inhabitants resisted and a fierce fight took place and several military vehicles were destroyed and an American Helicopter was shot down. On the Turkmen side several inhabitants were killed including children and women.

Despite that Telafer people were given a 5 days' period to discuss the situation with authorities. Several authorities convinced the American to attack the city before completion of the respite period. Telafer was attacked by tanks and helicopters. 85 people were killed and 235 were injured including children, women and elders. 350 houses, shops and cars were damaged. The Turkmeneli Radio-television station was totally destroyed by five bombs thrown by American helicopters. Thousands of families fled to the neighboring villages and towns.

The operations continued for a week and the city was completely surrounded. The ambulances were prevented from entering the city to transfer the wounded people.

Noting worth that Tel Afer is a city that is almost entirely Turkmen. They in turn are divided between a Sunni Turkmen majority and a large Shia Turkmen minority.

The Iraqi Shiites, who were the most oppressed section of the Iraqi community during Ba'ath regime, revived and started to acquire leadership positions in Iraq. In Telafer, the Turkmen Shiite leader Taqi al-Mawla, who returned from Iran, entered the city with ceremony. The Shiite ceremony of Muharram was organized. Their domination in the administration in the region became evident. Then the government deputy was dismissed. Al-Mawla first dismissed the Sunni staff in the Youth Center and appointed Shiites. They continued their attempts to control the elections for the district council and to appoint a Shiite government deputy. However they did not manage to win the elections. In accordance with the loyalties of the population of the district, only two Shiite members were elected and a Sunni Government Deputy was appointed.

The political institutes of the Shiite Turkmen in Telafer were:

- Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution
- Islamic al-Dawa party
- Turkmen al-Wifak Movement
- Islamic Union of the Iraqi Turkmen

The gunfire in the Hassan Koy neighborhood on 5 September 2004 as described above, which was considered to be one of the main provocative events that started the unrest in Telafer, was later agreed to have been caused by the Shiite troops established in Telafer Citadel.

The Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) entered the political field of Telafer unhurriedly but steadily. Despite the fact that they did not have much experience and no plans and in spite of many obstacles and difficulties the ITF managed to become an important factor in the political field in a short time because they were of great service to the Telafer people from 9 April 2004 to 9 September 2004. During this period, ITF established offices and organized their members to compete with the other political groups. They provided valuable services to inhabitants and succeeded in getting the absolute support from the Telafer People:

- The hospitals were provided with all types of required equipment.
- The untreatable cases were sent to out of country for treatment.
- A new modern style-hospital was planned
- A radio and television station was constructed and a newspaper was published. Plans were made to build a sports complex.
- Students were sent abroad to complete their studies which had stopped after occupation.

- Unexpectedly large numbers of Telafer people started to join courses of Turkish language; the number of students both female and male younger than 18 years old was seven thousands in the courses which were organized in 2004.
- Tens of other projects were still waiting to be realized.

The success of the ITF and the appearance of Turkmen power in the region were considered unfavorable by the occupation forces, the Shiite and Kurdish authorities. As a result the building of the Iraqi Turkmen front, which included the Turkmeneli television transmitter, halls for teaching Turkish and ITF offices were the first targets of American helicopters in the later attack on Telafer.

It is important to comment on the situation in Telafer directly after the occupation. Telafer people hoped to have a peaceful period after the occupation. They expected the Ba'ath era oppression had ended and that the region would live in prosperity. The American soldiers moved around freely in the city. They visited the government offices, houses and shops without any problems.

But instead of prosperity the contrary happened:

- It was well-known that there were no factories, installations and construction sites in Telafer. As result, the people depended on agriculture and posts in the government offices. The number of recruitments in the Iraqi army, police forces, Ba'ath party institutions and Media were high. The Ba'ath party representation in Telafer was a high level Branch. In the course of the deba'athification process a large number of Telafer people were dismissed from work.
- Absolute support of the USA troops for the Kurds in their efforts to control the region led to hostile Kurdish operations against the Telafer people. They started to break into the houses and arrest innocent inhabitants.
- The municipality services, health care education deteriorated severely.

Moreover the atmosphere in Telafer became increasingly hostile to the government, influenced by increasing resistance in Iraq generally and by the position of Telafer near the Syrian border. As a result, aggressive attacks started against occupation troops and those who cooperated with them. The powers who wanted to control Telafer succeeded in convincing the occupation authorities to attack the city on 5 September 2004.

The ITF played a major role in bringing the voice of Telafer into the international arena and in ending the attack within a short period. The declarations of the Turkish minister for foreign affairs Mr. Abdullah Gul heartened the inhabitants and played an important role in stopping the attack. After the ceasefire the Turkish Red Crescent started to provide the region with all sorts of daily requirements. Great supports were also brought in from the other Turkmen regions in Iraq. This further strengthened the position of the ITF and the number of supporters increased. During this hard period, Telafer people received no help from the Iraqi government.

After completion of the military operations the sectarian hate began. The government deputy Mr. Mohammed Amin al-Othman and the mayor were dismissed. A pro-Kurdish Shiite government deputy was appointed, Mr. Taleb Wahab, and the representative of Kurdistan Democratic Party from Shiite sect Mr. Mukhtar Ismail was appointed as a mayor. Six hundred and thirty Sunni policemen were discharge, despite the fact that they had been in service for 15 – 30 years, and in their places Shiite policemen were appointed from only three Telafer tribes. Later on, the newly appointed government deputy and Mayor were found to function inadequately and they were replaced by other pro-occupation staff. Colonel Ismail Faris from the Sada Tribe, who was newly appointed as police chief of Telafer, played a major role in these events. Consequently, his house was attacked and burned by insurgents and a few of his relatives were killed. The Sada tribe members who started to protect him were also turned out to be a goal for the resistance. .

The Kurdish powers which wanted to have authority over the Telafer region, benefited from the chaos and aborted several attempts to solve the quarrel during the following period.

Their attempts to submit the region under their control continued. Several Telafer Notables and heads of Tribes including Abdullah Weheb Aga, Tawfiq Sayyid Khalil and Hadi Idris Muratli were invited to meet the Kurdish authorities. They were given a proposal to establish paramilitary units from Telafer tribes which would be trained in Sulaymaniya and financed by the Kurds. The proposal was rejected and the reappointment of the 630 policemen was requested which was refused by the authorities.

The attempts continued to convince the police chief Mr. Ismail Faris and his tribe to give the policemen their jobs back. Despite initial agreement, he went back on his words after receiving orders from Baghdad. Soon after, the military operations by the Iraqi National Guards and occupation troops, on the one side, and insurgents on the other side started; assassinations, kidnappings, bombings and exploding booby-trapped cars. Three hundred inhabitants were killed, most of them innocent. Many more were injured and about three thousand were arrested. The Iraqi government did not interfere and tolerated the aggressive events against the people. The government and occupation media reported the events incorrectly to benefit in election campaigns.

In April 2005, the deputy of the Prime Minister Mr. Ahmed Cheleby sent for several Notables and intellectuals of the city to discuss the solutions for the Telafer problem. The meetings started in the Hotel of Opera in Baghdad and the deputy of the Prime Minister for security affairs Mr. Abed Mutlaq al-Juburi and the minister for defense Mr. Sadun al-Dilaymi attended the discussions. The Telafer delegation was informed that if the quarrels would not stop the city would be exposed to hostile attacks. After several meetings with their members the Telafer delegation prepared a written statement including constructive suggestions for bringing the peace to Telafer, and they presented it to the deputy of the Prime Minister Mr. Ahmed Cheleby.

No attempts were made by the government to carry out the suggestions of Telafer delegation to bring peace. The government media continued publishing and broadcasting forged news about the region. The delegation went to Baghdad for a second phase of negotiations, which failed, too.

On 26 Augustus 2005, the Telafer delegation of notables was called to al-Numan military camp to meet the deputy of Prime Minister Mr. Haydar al-Ibadi. During this meeting, they were informed that the city would either be besieged and devastated or some neighborhoods would be surrounded and attacked and the insurgents would be arrested. The news of the government media started to publish false news saying that the Telafer people asked the Iraqi government to interfere and to rescue them from the insurgents.

On 5 September 2005, the prime minister al-Jafari announced the closure of the frontier with Syria in the Telafer region. On 9 September, the neighborhoods Hassan Koy, al-Qadisiyya and Saray were surrounded and the inhabitants were asked to leave towards the south through an outlet controlled by military troops. The Shiite regions were left untouched but a hundred and fifty thousand Sunnites were evacuated from Sunni neighborhoods in seven days. Hundreds were arrested in the outlet. The evacuated people spread into the neighboring villages and towns where the living conditions were very hard. The commandos of the ministry of Interior Affairs invaded the evacuated neighborhoods and houses shouting slogans that they came for revenge. The houses were searched in the absence of the inhabitants and robbed, the doors and windows were broken, the furniture was scattered and destroyed and the food was mixed with oil and spread on the ground. As this was an agricultural community every house had a number of cattle. A large number of livestock died due to thirst.

The occupation and Iraqi media started to publish forged news saying that 900 foreign insurgents were captured and that factories for manufacturing booby-trapped cars and a field hospital were found. The arrested people were gathered and different types of weapons were put in front of

them and they were photographed and filmed and broadcast on television as insurgents, though some of them were released the next day. One of the most harmful outcomes of the attack on Telafer was the disarming of the Sunnis, while the Shiites remained heavily armed.

On 18 September 2005, the commander of the USA troops in Telafer colonel Mack Mater falsified the aforementioned news and he said that the troops attacking Telafer was savage and that he had sent them out of Telafer.

The prime minister al-Jafari came to Telafer and visited the commando's squadron of the Ministry of the Interior and congratulated them on their hostile deed. He did not visit the thousands of displaced inhabitants in the tents near entrance to Telafer.

When the military operations ended, the police control posts started to hamper the homecoming of tens of thousands of Telafer inhabitants. The cars were not allowed to enter the city; returnees had to walk several kilometers with their children.

Consequently instead of opening a new peaceful phase in Telafer the government deepened the sectarian animosity.

The houses-raiding was started with the returning of the inhabitants. Hundreds of innocent people of different ages (15 – 70) were arrested. The municipality services were almost absent. The large number of sectarian police vehicles started cruising around. One of the targets was to hinder the participation of the inhabitants in the upcoming referendum about the constitution on 15 October 2005.

On 25 October 2005, once more the representative of the Prime Minister Mr. Haydar al-Ibadi called the Telafer notables to the Kask military Camp to discuss the Telafer catastrophe and find solutions. Mr. Haydar al-Ibadi was requested to clarify many important issues: the hostile deeds of the army; the random arrests and assassinations by the police forces in Telafer, and the large number of houses that were taken as barracks by the soldiers. He was asked about the nearly absent municipal services and health care services, and the presence of large number of barracks on the streets. The ration food was not given to the families. The difficulties in the police control stations when people enter or leave the city, which sometimes takes hours. Despite the start of the study season the schools were occupied by soldiers. He was criticized about the inability of students to perform the final exams of 2005. Mr. Haydar was shocked after hearing the Telafer people; he frequently asked the government deputy of the City about the accuracy of the claims. He promised to assign 50 million dollar for compensation of casualties, and for the upgrading of the municipal services, which was not realized until the date this article was written, 15 April 2006.

The rival powers continued their provocative activities to prevent the representation of a large number of Sunnis in Telafer on the lists of referendum, and to create instability. The homecoming of Telafer people was hampered. No Sunnis were appointed in election commissions. The observers were expelled from the election centers. The results did not reflect the wishes of the Sunnis, who constitute the majority in Telafer. This has deepened the feelings of inequity among the Telafer people.

While president Bush claimed in his speech in Maryland that peace had been brought to Telafer and that the governmental services had improved, life in the city was unbearable even for the Shiites.

The Shiites were isolated in a small circle in Shiite neighborhoods. The Shiite students could not follow lectures in the Universities. They started blaming the government and complaining about the lack of security.

A new security campaign started in order to show the international media which started to visit the city after the speech of President Bush that the city is living in peace and calm the numbers of police control posts increased inside and outside the city. A police control post was to be found every several hundred meters. The Sunni neighborhoods were frequently surrounded and besieged and the houses were searched. The male population who were older than 15 years were collected and examined by veiled people. The ones who were pointed at by them were arrested and sent to unknown prisons. This happened several times in a week. In this way almost all the houses were more than once investigated. Additionally, the residents were treated harshly and furniture was damaged during the raids. The basic infrastructure – healthcare, education, municipal facilities were destroyed. Assassinations, kidnappings, arrests, random bombing with mortars were almost daily happenings in Telafer. The major marketplaces were frequently closed.

The following figures show the size of the catastrophe hit the city, which are neglected by the international media and the USA government:

- The number of those who died is 1350 and 2650 people were injured
- Seven thousand of inhabitants were arrested and sent to Yoka, Abu Girayp, Mosul and Kurdish prisons, 2750 are still not released. The signs of persecution and psychological breakdown are clearly visible on those who were released.
- The number of official complaints which the Telafer inhabitants made is about 6250.
- Hundred fifty thousand inhabitants were displaced in a very dramatic manner.
- Three thousands five hundred families are still living outside the Telafer region: in Kerbala, Baghdad, Kerkuk, Mosul. This is going to change the demography of the region.

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*Note: This article written by Yahya Telaferli*