



AINA Editorial

Kurdish Autonomy Proposal Threatens Iraqi Territorial Integrity

Posted 2004-01-08 17:00 GMT

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(AINA) -- A recent Kurdish proposal to establish an ethnically based autonomous area even beyond the current occupied northern provinces has alarmed various Iraqi communities including Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syrians), Arabs, Turkman, and Yezidis within Iraq and abroad. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's (PUK) Barham Salih recently declared that the Kurdish autonomous area ought to be extended beyond the three occupied and already diversely populated and contentious provinces of Dohuk (Nohadra), Arbil, and Sulaimaniya to include large portions of Diyala, Nineveh, and Karkuk.

The Citadel of Karkuk, Iraq. The ancient Assyrian name for Karkuk was Arrapha. During Persian rule, it was known as Karka d-Bet Slokh, still an Assyrian city.



According to a December 25, 2003 Jordan Times article, Mr. Barham Salih asserted that "Karkuk is an integral part of Kurdistan, administratively, geographically, and historically." In addition, Mr. Salih affirmed that the Kurdish map includes the historically Assyrian provinces of Arbil and Dohuk and now unabashedly extends the proposed area to occupy the remaining Assyrian towns and villages in the plains of Nineveh, the ancient Assyrian capital, which up until the war of liberation were under government control.

The Kurds seem especially emboldened to press their advantage since the capture of Saddam Hussein. On December 22, 2003, thousands of Kurds descended on Karkuk from the surrounding areas in a bid to claim Karkuk as the capital of Kurdistan. When a December 31, 2003 counter demonstration by Assyrians, Arabs, and Turkman drew thousands of protesters against the Kurdification of Karkuk, PUK gunmen "opened fire on demonstrators, killing three and injuring 31," according to a report by zaman.com. The shootings have raised serious concerns about an escalation of fighting along ethnic lines.

The Assyrian position in favor of a unified Iraq has been articulated by Dr. Emanuel Kamber of Western Michigan University. "Let us be clear that the new Iraq is for all Iraqis and any political system in Iraq should not be for only one part of Iraq, but for the whole country; it should not be only for the Kurds, but for Arabs, Assyrians, and Turkman as well." In the lead up to the war, Dr. Kamber was a member of the Democratic Principles Working Group of the Project of the Future of Iraq sponsored by the US State Department. Early on, Dr. Kamber, an independent political leader, enjoyed the support of the major Assyrian political parties.

Chaldean Catholic Church
A ChaldoAssyrian church in
Karkuk, Iraq



Alluding to his work with other Iraqi opposition groups within the State Department Working Groups framework, Dr. Kamber added "We worked with patriotic and democratic forces to establish a democratic, pluralistic, secular, and sovereign Iraq that will be constituted on principles of democracy, the rule of law, and guarantee human rights and equality for all citizens, irrespective of their ethnic background or religion."

In response to the Kurdish proposal, Dr. Kamber added "Our objection to this issue does not mean

that we reject the aspirations of the Kurdish people, but we should all express a formula to create Iraqi national unity." Hinting at the prospects of Iraq's neighbors' uneasiness about the Kurdish proposal, Dr. Kamber noted, "In other words, we should all work toward an Iraq that enjoys full sovereignty and territorial integrity and not (one) centered on fears of minority conflicts and the possibility of intervention by neighboring countries."

In fact, Iraq's neighbors have already reacted to the Kurdish proposal with deep concern. A January 6 joint statement between Syria and Turkey flatly rejected any possible scenario that would tamper with Iraq's territorial integrity. The Kurdish proposal prompted a historic first ever visit by a Syrian President to Turkey. Syrian President Bashar Assad noted that "We agreed that it is a must to protect Iraq's territorial integrity. We condemned approaches that could endanger Iraq's territorial integrity." Turkish leader Ahmet Necdet Sezer echoed Assad's statements asserting that Turkey shared Syria's view on the territorial integrity of Iraq and added "Turkey and Syria, as regional countries neighboring Iraq, are determined to efficiently pursue these objectives."

Most observers believe that the Kurdish proposal has been timed to pressure concessions and guarantees from the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) prior to the formalization of an Iraqi constitution. Reflecting the mainstream Assyrian political position, Dr. Kamber noted "The diverse ethnic and religious make-up of Iraq will require that we design, agree upon, and implement a constitutional structure that will develop a sufficiently decentralized unitary state or federal system that will not only

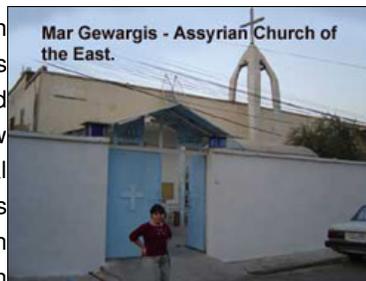


secure the rights of Arabs and Kurds, but also respect the rights and aspirations of Assyrians, Turkmen, and other Iraqi minorities." Regarding the timing of such a process, Dr. Kamber said "This must take place only after democratically electing a National Assembly and a new Iraqi government represented by all Iraqi nationals or constituents." Asked if the CPA or IGC were of like mind, Dr. Kamber stated "I believe that the IGC and the CPA are working toward that goal."

Echoing similar discontent with the Kurdish scheme, Mr. Abgar Maloul of the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) added that "ethnic federalism built on the premise of the subjugation by one ethnic group of other minorities is not what we envisioned a liberated Iraq would resemble. We have long stood for a free, sovereign, secular, and democratic Iraq for all Iraqis."

It is widely believed that the controversial Kurdish plan reflects Kurdish overconfidence in their current relative political and military capability. According to one analyst, "the Kurds have reason to be confident since they have the largest, best organized and unopposed militia in Iraq. Moreover, they have had a 12 year head start to prepare for this opportunity. Also, they enjoy a very, very close working relationship with the US military and the CPA." Still more, the PUK's reported assistance in the capture of Saddam Hussein has greatly enhanced Kurdish political capital with the US government.

Never the less, according to one Assyrian analyst, the Kurdish gambit remains problematic. The Kurdish move is described as a "brazen gamble that risks alienating the Kurds from within and without Iraq." "Turkey, as an example, has been until now content to merely limit its response to occasional political rhetoric in order to not damage its relationship with the US or its chances for European Union membership, but may reassess in light of an overzealous Kurdish push. Inside Iraq, the Kurdish



land (and oil) grab has already galvanized Arab, Assyrian, Turkman, and Yezidi resistance." Referring to tribal divisions within the Kurds themselves, the analyst continued "Furthermore, and more ominously, the Kurds themselves still have two separate administrations in the north. In the 1990's, KDP-PUK fighting over smuggling revenues at border crossings led to thousands of deaths,

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At one point, strongman Masoud Barzani of the predominantly Behdanani KDP enlisted the support of Saddam Hussein in order to wrest predominantly Sorani Arbil away from the PUK. Imagine what tension might develop when Karkuk, Diyala, and Nineveh are at stake."

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