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THE TURKMEN REALITY IN SYRIA

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Abdurrahman Mustafa, born in Aleppo in 1964, graduated from the Aleppo University. He had to move abroad for years between 1988 and 2010 due to political oppression. During his time abroad, he worked as manager in private sector in Libya and Saudi Arabia. With the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, he ended his professional career and returned to Syria. He has played an active role in Turkmen organizations in Syria between 2011 and 2012. He was elected as president at the second general meeting of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly. He still serves as the President of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly, which is the one and the only legitimate representative body of Syrian Turkmens.

Turkmens constitute an important part of the social life in Syria. They carry on a “struggle for honor and freedom” against the regime, within the ranks of both military and political opposition. It is unknown as to what kind of expectations the Turkmens, who have been largely ignored by the international society for various reasons, have for the post-Assad Syria. The Syrian Turkmen Assembly, the only legitimate representative body of Turkmens, seeks to fill this gap by explaining Syrian Turkmens’ demands and goals in a strategic framework. This article should be considered as part of the same goal. In this paper, the Syrian Turkmen Assembly’s founding process, vision and mission will be discussed. In addition, short, medium and long term expectations of Turkmens regarding the Syrian crisis will be explained. This article seeks to contribute to the efforts for political solution in Syria.

While the civil war is raging in Syria, the efforts for finding a political solution are continuing as well. The biggest difficulty about reaching a political solution is the presence of domestic and foreign social and political actors with different expectations, which directly intervene in the Syrian crisis. A possible political solution has to rely on a formula, which excludes none of the actors and brings together many different expectations on a common ground. The Syrian Turks, who carry on a “struggle for honor and freedom” against the regime, within the ranks of both

military and political opposition, should be evaluated in this context.

There has been little understanding of the expectations the Turks, who have been largely ignored by the international society for various reasons, have regarding to the post-Assad Syria. For years, they were deprived of any opportunity for organization under the Assad regime. They have started to make up for this loss after the popular uprising that started in March 2011. Initial efforts for organization started in this period. Syrian Turks, similar to other opposition



groups, have built their organizations in Turkey, with which they have historical and kinship relations. Since they lack any experience in organization due to the Baath regime's oppression, their first attempts were not successful. After these unsuccessful attempts, Syrian Turkmen living in Turkey launched an initiative to establish Syrian Turkmen Platform in 2012. The Platform aimed at forming a Syrian Turkmen Assembly, by electing delegates from among Syrian Turkmen, as a legitimate representative of Turkmen that will carry out any kind of negotiations. As a result of this initiative, at the end of 2013, the Syrian Turkmen Assembly was founded, which today brings together all Turkmen organizations under one roof. Since 2013, the Syrian Turkmen Assembly has put together Syrian Turkmen's demands and goals in a strategic framework and has acted as the sole legitimate representative of Turkmen

both among the Syrian opposition and in the international arena.

Above all, this paper seeks to fill the knowledge gap about the Syrian Turkmen. The Syrian Turkmen Assembly's founding process, vision and mission will be discussed. In addition, short, medium and long term expectations of Turkmen regarding the Syrian crisis will be explained. The paper seeks to contribute to the efforts for political solution in Syria.

Introduction

Syrian Turkmen have been living in their homeland in Syria since the 11th century. With their size of 1,5 million Turkish speaking and some other 2 million who have lost their language, the Syrian Turkmen have a considerable population in the country. The Syrian Turkmen speak a Turkish dialect very close to the contemporary standard Turkish of Turkey.

The Syrian Turkmen Assembly was established on 29 March 2013, in the general congress which was convened in Ankara, and attended by the Turkish Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The Syrian Turkmen have considered themselves not as a minority in the country which they are living in, but as a part of the society they have been living in, and the real owners of the land they cultivated. Today the majority of Syrian Turkmen are living in the provinces of Aleppo, Latakia (Bayır-Bujak), Homs, Hama and Damascus. There are small numbers of Turkmen, also, who live in the provinces of Tartous, Raqqa, Idlib, Golan and Daraa.

There is no doubt that the Syrian Turkmen are one of the most suffered groups in Syria, due to the war. Turkmen villages in Hama and Homs were destroyed by the regime. Turkmen villages in Aleppo are entirely controlled by ISIS. Turkmen villages in Latakia are constantly bombarded by the regime. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian Turkmen were forced to emigrate during the war and thousands of Syrian Turkmen were killed, since 2011.

Establishment of Syrian Turkmen Assembly

The Syrian Turkmen, like all other groups in Syria, had no organizational experience until 2011. The first efforts of their politicization took place abroad, just as other groups. Starting in 2012, the Syria Turkmen Bloc and the Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement began engaging in political activities on behalf of Syrian Turkmen. However, these two parties could not be organized well. Shortly after, in 2012, the Syrian Turkmen Platform was established through the initiative of the Syrian Turkmen that were living in Turkey. The objective of the Platform was to establish a Syrian Turkmen Assembly through delegates elected from Syria, which would make it a legitimate representative of the Syrian Turkmen.

As a result of this well-organized initiative, The Syrian Turkmen Assembly was

established on 29 March 2013, in the general congress which was convened in Ankara, and attended by the then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu. The participation of opposition parties at high levels in this historical meeting, along with the participation of the Syrian opposition, and National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the interest shown by the representatives of the foreign countries, made the meeting a turning point in the history of the Syrian Turkmen.

Syrian Turkmen Bloc and the Syrian Democratic Turkmen Movement also joined the Assembly. Consequently, all political groups of Syrian Turkmen unified under the umbrella of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly. The meeting was held with the participation of 400 representatives, whose majority was from Syria. The Turkmen elected, for

the first time, with their free will, the members of their own Assembly through the ballot boxes. The Syrian Turkmen Assembly held its 2nd General Congress on 9-10 May 2014, in Ankara. As a result of the Congress of the Assembly, 42 people were elected to the Legislative Committee, and 13 people to the Executive Committee.

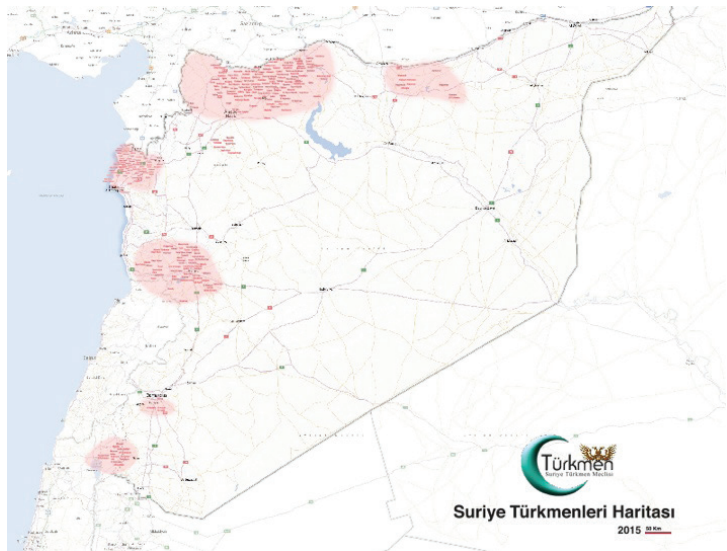
Vision of Syrian Turkmen Assembly

- Syrian Turkmen Assembly is the one and only legitimate representative of the Syrian Turkmen.
- Syrian Turkmen Assembly is the first and only organization that elects its own executive committee and delegates with democratic, fair and transparent elections within the Syrian Opposition.
- Syrian Turkmen Assembly defends Syria's territorial integrity.

Syrian Turkmen respect individual rights and freedoms, reject all kinds of privilege or immunity for any section of the society and embrace a new system based on the principle of democracy, pluralism and equality.

- Syrian Turkmen Assembly adopts a new constitutional order based upon “peaceful co-existence principle” in Syria.
- Syrian Turkmen Assembly rejects racial separation and any kind of religious, sectarian and ideological discrimination.
- Syrian Turkmen Assembly rejects a constitutional order dominated by any religious and/or sectarian identity.
- To ensure the Syrian Turkmen as a constituent element in the New Syrian Constitution.
- To carry out political activities within the framework of the territorial integrity and national unity of Syria.
- To play an active and constructive role at the creation of a multicultural society, based on respect for human rights and universal values of democracy and state of law as the basic principle of a new Syria.

Mission of Syrian Turkmen Assembly



- To contribute to social state of law, adopting the principle of equal citizenship and fair and democratic representation.
- To discuss the issues of Turkmen in a democratic way.
- To ensure the development of civil initiatives in all areas inhabited by Turkmen.
- To encourage the inclusion of different ideas within the Assembly.

As Syria Turkmen Assembly, in accordance with our vision and mission, we carry on a cause that we call “struggle for honor and freedom”. This is a struggle for survival and identity. Syrian Turkmens are the group, which lives under the most difficult conditions in Syria as of the current situation. In order to overcome these difficulties, to protect our presence in the “New Syria”, to guarantee our future, to preserve our heritage that we inherited from our ancestors, to defend our land

of a thousand years and to stand strong against the global war and the well-known schemes against us, we go at it hammer and tongs. The Turkmen cause is not only our problem, but also a cause for Turkey, which we know as our “fatherland” and “source of oxygen”. Syria with its territorial integrity intact and living in peace is crucial for Turkey’s national security. Preserving Syria’s national integrity is possible only through protecting Turkmen settlements. Thus, a strong Turkmen presence in Syria will hinder the global schemers, who do not want Turkey to be strong. As we always mention, the security of Aleppo is the security of Turkey’s southern border, and the security of Bayirbucak mean the security of Aleppo.

In this respect, the issues that we state in our “New Syria Statement” are of strategic value for Turkey as well as Syria and Syrian Turkmens.

The Turkmen delegation presented De Mistura with a statement comprising 15 articles and has made Turkmens’ voice heard at the highest levels. Therefore, the Turkmen presence in Syria has been documented and the Turkmen reality has been recorded in the U.N. archives.

Syrian Turkmen Assembly “New Syria Declaration”

1- Syrian Turkmen defend the preservation of the territorial integrity and people’s unity in Syria and reject all types of separatism.

2- Syrian Turkmen demand the recognition in the Constitution of the fact that they are the primary and founding element of Syria.

3- Syrian Turkmen are ready to cooperate with the honest and patriotic sections of the Syrian society for a transition from the Assad regime into a modern administration reflecting the will of people. Syrian Turkmen believe that those who destroy Syria politically, economically and socially and cause bloodshed must be brought to justice.

4- Syrian Turkmen state that they will contribute to the convening of a

National Conference covering all sections of the society that supports the legitimate and common expectations of the Syrian people in order to develop a comprehensive national project.

5- Syrian Turkmen support a real political transformation on the basis of the Geneva Declaration, which will ensure an environment of peace and trust in Syria where Bashar Assad or those who committed crimes against the Syrian people will not be included, and annul the Laws of State of Emergency which constitutes the foundations of the Assad regime.

6- Syrian Turkmen respect individual rights and freedoms, reject all kinds of privilege or immunity for any section of the society and embrace a new system based on the principle of democracy, pluralism and equality, which will protect the fundamental rights

and freedoms of the Turkmen and other elements of the society.

7- Syrian Turkmen agree to contribute to the transition government to govern the country in the transition period and the efforts to draw up a new Constitution as a primary and founding element of the country and support the new Assembly to be formed as a result of fair and free elections.

8- Syrian Turkmen adopt the principle of separation of powers and demand the judicial independence to be secured by the Constitution.

9- Syrian Turkmen believe that state institutions and organizations must be preserved.

10- Syrian Turkmen support radical restructuring of the Army and the Law Enforcement Forces and the establishment of a new Army assigned to defend the territory of the

country, and they believe that the Army must stay out of politics.

11- Syrian Turkmen demand that all the articles of the “Human Rights Declaration” be respected taking into consideration the religious values of the communities in the area of fundamental rights and freedoms in New Syria.

12- Syrian Turkmen demand that the political, cultural, economic and social rights of the Turkmen, including the use of Turkish language, be guaranteed, based on the principle of supremacy of the Constitution and the international agreements.

13- Syrian Turkmen believe that efforts must be made to return all the Syrian refugees back to their country.

14- Syrian Turkmen confirm the principle of good neighborliness, make efforts to establish good relations with the countries

It is vital not only for Syria but also for the whole region that the Turkmen, who suffered grievously from the Assad regime's oppression and human rights abuses, take their place as an equal actor among the other groups in social and political life of Syria.



in the world based on common interests.

15- Syrian Turkmens support equality between men and women and attach peculiar importance to having healthy new generations.

Conclusion

Staffan de Mistura, United Nations and Arab League Envoy to Syria, has been negotiating with the adversaries in Syria in order to gather the Geneva III Conference since 5 May 2015, as a part of the efforts for reaching political solution in Syria. In addition to the regime, more than forty Syrian factions and approximately

twenty regional and international actors have been invited to the talks, which are expected to go on for two months. These actors include Syria's neighboring countries, the U.N. Security Council member countries, political and military actors, Syrian women, civilians, diasporas and religious leaders.

De Mistura came together with the STA delegation on 24 May 2015, in the context of the consultative talks. The Turkmen delegation presented De Mistura with a statement comprising 15 articles and has made Turkmens' voice heard at the highest levels. Therefore, the Turkmen presence in

Syria has been documented and the Turkmen reality has been recorded in the U.N. archives. The delegation stated that Turkmen must have a say in the reconstruction of Syria and its future as a democratic country with its territorial integrity intact. In this sense, it is important that De Mistura said after the meeting that “Turkmens are very important actors in Syria.”

Syrian Turkmen are the key for the democratic future of Syria. The future administration of Syria has to accept the presence of Turkmen and give them equal rights for political

representation, if it wants to establish a peaceful country, in which all ethnic and sectarian groups live together. Syrian Turkmen, who resist courageously against the authoritarian measures of the regime since the first days of the uprising, defend the integrity of Syria as much as any other group. It is vital not only for Syria but also for the whole region that the Turkmen, who suffered grievously from the Assad regime’s oppression and human rights violations, take their place as an equal actor among other groups in social and political life of Syria.

Syrian Turkmen Assembly defends Syria’s territorial integrity and adopts a new constitutional order based upon peaceful co-existence principle in Syria.

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