



KIRKUK IS A CENTER WHICH CONCERNS THE ENTIRE TURKMEN REGION, IT IS TURKMENS' WEALTH

Erşat Salihi



Erşat Salihi was born in Kirkuk, Musalla District in 1959, where he completed his primary and secondary education. In 1978, Mr. Salihi started his BA at the Faculty of Science in Baghdad. In 1979, he was arrested and sentenced for 10 years with the charge of "taking part in the Turkmen National Movements". Following the end of Saddam's rule, in 2003, he was appointed as the head of the Musalla bureau of the Iraqi Turkmen Front. Between 2004 and 2008, he served as the Syria Representative of the Iraqi Turkmen Front in Syria. In 2008, following the congress of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, he became the provincial head of the Iraqi Turkmen Front in Kirkuk. Mr. Salihi was elected as an MP from Kirkuk in the Iraqi general elections on March, 2, 2010 and also serves as the head of the Iraqi Turkmen Front since May 2011. He was re-elected as an MP of Kirkuk in the general election held in April 2014.

ORSAM: The games played on Kirkuk has come to light again nowadays. As a result of the circular issued by Kirkuk Governor Najmaldin Karim on 14 March, a voting was held by Kurdish members of Kirkuk Provincial Council, which led to a flag crisis in Kirkuk on 28 March. Again, Kirkuk Provincial Council decided later to hold a referendum in Kirkuk despite the boycotts of Turkmen and Arab members. You showed reactions as well as Iraq and Turkey in this regard. First of all, what are the legal dimensions of this decision in Kirkuk?

Ershad Salih: While Kirkuk and Turkmen were going through such difficult days, the invitation that we received from Ankara gladdened us. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım immediately invited us to Ankara, which shows Turkey's support to Turkmen. After being invited to Turkey, we held a meeting with the officials and deputies in Baghdad. I left for Ankara after this meeting. We also have other plans following the meetings in Ankara. There is absolutely a political marathon today. We have distributed the roles among us. Some of us hold meetings in the Iraqi Parliament, some of us in Kirkuk Provincial

Council, on the streets, in the press, and in media organs, and some of us meet the political groups in Baghdad. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all our politicians, prominent party chairmen, deputies, religious leaders, the youth, students and our nation since Turkmen are in a grand unity. If Allah permits, no one will disrupt this unity. Today is the day of solidarity and unity. Turkmen should remain as the hot topic of the agenda in Europe and Turkey, it should not be possible to make groundless criticism. I would like to make such an introduction to my speech. I would like to thank you as well. In Ankara, we have closely discussed the decision taken in Kirkuk Provincial Council. As I have said, our officials hold meetings with the Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on one hand and the party chairmen on the other hand. We have also come here to keep in contact with Turkey as one of the neighboring countries, to talk about the process and to enlighten the public.

Although Turkey has different topics on its agenda in such a delicate time, our visit to Ankara is substantially meaningful after all these developments. Turkey has always kept the tensions increasing in Turkmen regions

on its agenda, such as the incidents in Tuz Khurmatu or in Tal Afar or the explosions in Amirli. This time, Kirkuk is on the agenda. Kirkuk is a center which concerns the entire Turkmen region, it is Turkmens' wealth. The decision rendered in Kirkuk Provincial Council means something to us. The 2005 Kirkuk Provincial Council elections were held through the law numbered 71 issued by Paul Bremer, the chief US administrator in Iraq in the post-2003 period. The current Kirkuk Provincial Council is composed of 41 people. 26 out of them are of Kurdish origin, while 9 members are Turkmens and 6 members are Arabs. Why are there 26 Kurdish members? Turkmens should learn the reason for this. When we told them that "elections were important", they thought that they would vote to place someone in some positions. Therefore, there was no active participation in the elections. If there had been high level of participation in the elections in 2005, there could have been 19 Turkmen members instead of 9 members and these decisions would not have been taken to the detriment of Turkmens. Therefore, Turkmens shot themselves in the foot. They should consider this situation. Instead of calling us to account today, they

should first ask themselves. If you do not participate in the elections and there is no one who represents you consequently, who will defend you? If the number of Turkmens in Kirkuk Provincial Council were higher today, Kurdish members would not have been able to take this decision. On the other hand, Provincial Council is not authorized to issue such a decision in legal terms. It is not entitled to raise the flag of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on state buildings in Kirkuk and to hold a referendum in Kirkuk later since there is a Law No. 21 on the Provinces not Associated in a Region enacted by the Iraqi Parliament. According to this Law, Kirkuk is not within its scope even though provincial councils are authorized, thus making the decisions unlawful. Therefore, Baghdad government has not approved the decision since the local elections have still not been held in Kirkuk. We have requested that a special law to be enacted for Kirkuk. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution regarding Kirkuk has expired. Furthermore, according to Article 23 of the Provincial Elections Law enacted in 2008, special elections should be held for Kirkuk. Briefly, the law stipulates that new elections should be held in Kirkuk. But Kurds have not accepted the enactment

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of this law because they do not want to form a new provincial council, fearing that the balances may change in Kirkuk. The provincial councils are more important than the parliament in Baghdad. Therefore, if one Turkmen citizen did not go to polls or vote for Turkmen during the provincial elections, he/she betrayed his/her people and harmed the future of his/her children since the authority is in the hands of local administrations in new Iraq. Turkmen should understand this. This is also the same in Tal Afar, Tuz Khurmatu, Diyalah, Kirkuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The Iraqi Parliament takes decisions in terms of politics, military, security and finance which concerns all the nation. However, the decisions affecting the overall life in the provinces are rendered

by local administrations. For instance, if a street was going to be built in a region previously, the Ministry of Municipalities in Baghdad took the decision but now it is up to the decision of the provincial administrations. Therefore, it is vital for Turkmen to have a seat in local administrations. Furthermore, Turkmen are not significantly represented in the overall politics in Baghdad. That is why Turkmen may participate in the administration of their own regions by taking part in local administrations.

There is a special legal process ongoing in the post-2003 period in Kirkuk. Kirkuk is separately mentioned both in the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period draft-

ed by the USA in 2004 and the 2005 Iraqi Constitution and in the 2008 Provincial Elections Law. How would you evaluate this situation?

Turkmens opposed the administrative, political and legal process in Iraq after 2003. Under Bremer's term, Turkmens gathered in Baghdad, coming from all the other regions, and staged a big protest on the grounds that their rights were being violated. Unfortunately, we did not have Turkmen defenders in the parliament formed by the USA at the time. This is how people fall into disgrace and see such difficult days if they do not have any representatives. If we had had a real defender, we would not have ended up in such a disgraceful game. Indeed, the articles related to Kirkuk in the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period and in the Constitution were prepared in favor of one party, which was Kurds since they were very powerful at that time. Unfortunately, the Shiite and the Sunni did not stand up against them. They could not foresee that these drafted articles were like a bomb and would disintegrate Iraq in the future. Those who criticized and stood up against them most were Turkmens and the majority of Arabs in Kirkuk. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution concerning

Kirkuk had three subheadings. One of them was the reinstatement of the rights of Turkmens and Kurds. Under Saddam's term, Arabs revoked our rights. Our lands needed to be returned during the normalization process. Leaving aside the return of lands, our territory was seized again. Our people needed to turn back but they could not. Kurds who had left Kirkuk turned back in larger numbers. The demographic structure changed in Kirkuk. Having a population of 850 thousand people before 2003, Kirkuk reached 1,6 million. That is to say, there are 800,000 Kurds and 800.000 Turkmens and Arabs in total. The region belonging to Arabs are already under ISIS control. There is a weak and insecure situation around. There are kidnapping cases. As a consequence, no matter how a decision is taken, it is against us. There is only one solution to this, which is compromising. Apart from compromising, all the decisions will be against you after you change the demographic structure in your territory. Therefore, Article 140 has a bomb effect and it is crystal clear how it will disintegrate Iraq today.

The issue of independence has been constantly noised around by Barzani especially in recent times. The referendum of inde-

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pendence is on the agenda. Taking it into account within this framework, what do you think the decision to raise the Kurdistan flag in Kirkuk will serve for? What is the viewpoint of Kurdish groups in terms of the decisions taken? Are there different views? You have mentioned about compromising. However, is it possible to mention about a compromise between Kurdish groups?

There is an ongoing problem in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk in northern Iraq. Erbil government has been corrupted; Sulaymaniyah, that is the PUK and Gorran do not respect it. Barzani has a government in Erbil and Talabani has one in Sulaymaniyah. Gorran supporters are dominant in the regions called Kalar, Kifri and Germiyan. Halabja, on its part, is under the control of Kurdish Islamists. This means that Northern Iraq is divided into four regions: Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Germiyan and Halabja. There is a potential Islamist group which may emerge in Dohuk in the future since Kurdish Islamists are also powerful in the region. There is a contentious situation between these groups. On the other hand, Talabani's party is substantially disintegrated. Of course, Talabani is a wise man and he would not have made such a

mistake in Kirkuk and would not have accepted the decision of Governor Najmaldin Karim if his health had been in a good state. Because he knows the situation in Kirkuk. There has recently been a large power vacuum in Northern Iraq. The region is seriously in financial difficulties. Furthermore, there are significant problems and disputes ongoing between Kurdish parties in the field of public services. That is why efforts are made to trigger disputes in other fields and to keep Kurds occupied. What has happened in Kirkuk is a result of this. There is already no government left in Northern Iraq. There was previously a parliament but it is not possible to mention about the existence of a parliament for two years. Turkmen community should know this. The government in Sulaymaniyah does not recognize the Erbil government. The public officials cannot be paid, there is no electricity. The situation in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk has deteriorated. So, why are you bringing your problems to our territory, to Kirkuk? It is like a gunpowder here, which may explode suddenly. Why are you bringing your own mistake to our region? The party of Governor Najmaldin Karim had its own problems inside. There was a big corruption in the PUK. It is not possible to do the

math of the oil stolen from Kirkuk. All of those who are responsible have tankers to steal oil, leaving aside the oil taken through pipelines and stolen from the wells. All this financially supports them. The conflicts between them are increasing as the amount of the money is high. They have recently wanted to bring their conflicts and problems to our field. They have wanted to bring Kurds together by taking an initiative in Kirkuk. However, those who have come together are not Kurds but Turkmens. Turkmens are in strong solidarity now. This means that we have done what is correct and they have acted wrong and without being organized. Do not be deceived by their situation seen from outside. They have serious problems inside. However, we have not followed the developments inside them unfortunately. If you follow them well, you will see what kind of power vacuum and corruption exist there. At the same time, I would like to clearly indicate that this step would deteriorate the relations between Turkmens and Kurds. This situation would bring us back to 1959. If a problem comes out with Kurds, we cannot overcome it for another 50 years. Kurdish wise men, politicians, researchers and clan leaders think that what Najmaldin Karim has done is

wrong. However, they cannot tell it clearly. They are afraid of being declared traitors. It depends on our strength and political power to do something. We also have military forces but this is another issue. We do not want to bring fire to our region. Remember what happened between the Peshmerga and Turkmens in Tuz Khurmatu. We struggle to prevent this from happening again. We have strong moral force. Kurdish parties did not expect us to be united. They thought Turkmens would be suppressed and they would do whatever they wanted. However, we proved ourselves. They saw even more than that. They flagrantly divided the oil wells into 6 parts in Kirkuk although this geography belonged to us. Barzani side receives the oil income coming from Havana, Bay Hasan and Hurmala wells while Talabani side receives the income coming from the wells of Baba Gurgur, Canbur and Hubbas. These wells do not belong to Kurds, why are they receiving the income? Has this region been left to Kurds? We are the owners of the territory.

Why did Kurds arrive in this territory? Even though Americans and military forces pushed them to this region, we accept it anyway. Let's live together without any problem. What can the people of this nation do? In 1996, Kurds

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killed each other for a border gate. Saddam came to power and stopped Kurds. Turkmens were influential as well. Then, Turkmens acted as arbitrator between Barzani and Talabani. Today, the public officials are starving and corruption and gangs rule in the region under Kurdish control. Why do they want to bring these adversities to Kirkuk? Unfortunately, there are some gangs in Kirkuk for the moment. Especially Turkmens are kidnapped. If they do not allow us to even breath in Kirkuk before it is annexed to Kurdish region, what will they do after annexation? They will drop chemical bombs on us,

they will say: "Let's kill all Turkmens and live on our own." This is unacceptable. Turkmen nation is both intelligent and warrior. We do not want to go through a war. We can come to terms through compromising. They should not force us to resort to other means. The Iraqi Parliament rendered a decision on the future of Iraq and Kirkuk. It did not recognize the step taken by Kurds. Kurds boycotted the session of the parliament and did not accept the decision. They later said that their own decision was valid. The decision they took despite the boycotts of Turkmens and Arabs in Kirkuk Provincial Council



was valid but the decision of the Iraqi Parliament was invalid. This is not understandable. Both Arabs and we will be harmed by this mistake and even all people in Kirkuk and Iraq will be affected. The responsibility will not only fall on to Turkey at this point. A discourse spread, alleging that “Turkey interfered with their domestic affairs”. Turkey did not interfere with our domestic affairs. It defended the territorial integrity in Iraq and said: “Our kins live in Kirkuk”. Why would it not protect them? Iran protected the Shiite under Saddam’s term. The militia such as the Badr Brigade was formed. When it comes to the Sunni, Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar and Arab Emirates support them. The USA, on its part, backs Kurds. Why is it said today that Turkey interferes with the domestic affairs when it helps Turkmens? Turkey does not want to see conflicts in this region because if there are conflicts, everyone will be harmed. I would like to ask Kurds where they fled in 1999. Where did they go? Who opened arms to them when Saddam used chemical weapons through aircraft? Turkey. You entered Turkey before Turkmens. You left for European countries before Turkmens by means of

the United Nations. Do not deny the favor Turkey did. We criticized Turkey about its policy towards KRG. Turkey helped Kurds to such extent. Kurds should also side with the Turkish state. Even now, the artery of KRG passes through Turkey. Kurds did this without thinking about the future. What will happen tomorrow if Turkey closes the Ibrahim Halil (Habur) Border Gate? Last year, it faced PKK problems and limited the arrivals through this gate. The price of a liter of water went from 250 dinars up to 1000 dinars. This should be taken into consideration. If it were not for Turkey, to whom would they sell Kirkuk’s oil? I would like to express my gratitude to Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for showing its attitude immediately. On the other hand, the UN representative said that what was done was wrong. All the political parties said that this was wrong. Finally, Iran also made an announcement, saying that what was done was wrong. No one said that Iran intervened with the domestic affairs. Americans also indicate that this is wrong. Everyone says that they made a mistake. Finding a solution will be quite difficult if a fait accompli policy is followed despite the central and regional wills.

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What will you do if the situation continues as such?

Of course, there are responsibilities which also fall on to us. When the decision to raise the flag was first rendered, our civil society organizations planned that 400-500 people would take to the streets. They wanted to do it themselves before the political parties were involved. They said: "We can take control with 400-500 people" and they gave good messages. As Turkmen parties, we will organize bigger demonstrations in Kirkuk or Baghdad if necessary. We have so far resorted to civil means. I would like to underline this specifically. We are trying the civil means for the time being. We are trying to make ourselves heard in the world. We are in contact with the officials in Baghdad. We have applied to the justice. The judge will want to act as an arbitrator. We will consider the solution methods after the outcome. Besides this, I would like to say to the neighboring Arab countries that there are some issues especially concerning Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Kirkuk is where the pulse of the Middle East is felt. It is important not only for Turkmen but also everyone. You should also assume responsibility. Neither the Arab Union nor the Islamic Cooperation Organization issues a decision.

What I wish is that Turkmen politicians can put pressure for a decision to be taken in the Arab Union. We do not disrespect their flag. If you may realize, their flag is present in the offices of the Iraqi Turkmen Front in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. We do not betray any flag. We have not so far burnt any flag. However, they unfortunately burnt our flag and showed it in the streets. I would like to reiterate that we are trying the civil means. Do not give way for the weapons. If you seize the territory where I live by force of arms, the Peshmerga or the security forces, I will definitely consider what I can do against it. I will not stand against Kurds with a pencil in my hand. Under Saddam's term, Kurds purchased weapons from Europe and started an armed conflict with Saddam. This is not what we want. Turkmen political parties or nation does not want it either. Do not push us towards this. Let's say that you will annex Kirkuk to your territory. Tomorrow, a young man comes forth among us to evoke a spirit of resistance and starts to kill Kurdish young people. Why would these even happen? Kurdish youth, Turkmen youth, Arab youth are all human. The Shiite, the Sunni and the Christian are all human. This is how we evaluate the developments. Kirkuk is like a powder keg. We hope

that they will not solve this problem by making a mistake.

Lastly, what messages do you want to give to Turkmen through the pages of Ortadoğu Analiz?

First of all, Turkish government significantly supports us. Especially the Prime Minister, the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs have shown considerable support. Turkish nation has held two important rallies. I would like to express my gratitude to the associations which held these rallies. The opposition, the ruling party, the government came together to side with Turkmen. This is a good message indicating that Turkmen are not alone. Turkmen should not say that they are oppressed, they should say that they have to stand up against oppression. They should not accept being oppressed. Turkmen are now in solidarity. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate all Turkmen officials. I would like to congratulate all political parties and our representatives in the provincial council. As of today, the representatives in the provincial council will do whatever we say. However, we should not escape the field, we should show resistance. There is pressure on us in several terms. Since there is a faithful nation behind Turkmen, there is first

Allah, then Turkey depending on its own power. We will be pleased with any hand lent by anyone in Turkey. However, as Turkmen nation, we should take to the streets any time we want and we should not be afraid of fighting. This is a serious issue of territory. The territory should be protected in order to unfurl the flag. That territory is yours. Unfortunately, hundreds of Turkmen are settled in Turkey. The hometown of our ancestors cannot be abandoned. Do not leave the hometown. If you leave, your children will remain without territory in the future. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım also said: "We would like to make it possible to turn back to Tal Afar, to Tuz Khurmatu, to Yangija, to Bashir." Therefore, let's remain committed to our territory. Turkmen nation should follow the politics. They should review what mistakes we have made. We should take lessons from this. I see that Turkmen have a powerful position. Today, the world is with Turkmen.

We wish that you can continue your valuable efforts.

I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity and I wish you success.

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