



KARIM: “THE FUTURE OF KIRKUK, REGARDLESS OF WHERE IT WILL END UP POLITICALLY, IS THAT IT HAS TO HAVE A SPECIAL STATUS.”

Kirkuk Governor
Najmaldin Karim



Dr. Najmaldin Karim was born in Kirkuk 1949, where he finished his high school education, before heading to Mosul Medical College where he completed medical school and was elected to the leadership of the Kurdish Student Union. In 1972 he joined the peshmerga forces. Dr. Karim arrived in the United States in 1976, Dr. Karim was the first Kurd to be officially received by the U.S. State Department in April of 1991. Dr. Karim is the founder and President of the Washington Kurdish Institute. Dr. Karim participated in the Vienna Conference which founded the Iraqi National Congress and was elected to the General Assembly. He later participated in the Iraqi opposition conference in London in December 2002 and was elected to the 65-member Follow up and Steering Committee. He also participated in the Salahaddin meeting of the Follow up and Steering Committee of the Iraqi opposition in February 2003. Dr. Karim was a member of the first conference held in Baghdad following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003. Dr. Karim was elected to the Iraqi Parliament in 2010, and later elected to his current position; Governor of Kirkuk on April 3, 2011.

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ORSAM: How do you see the broader political situation evolving? Now that there is a new government we have realised that the major groups were not necessarily satisfied with the current government formation but at the end of the day they gave it a chance. Where is it heading to? How do you see the political process evolving?

Najmaldin Karim: The Iraqi government faces three main issues. One is the security issue in all of Iraq. As you know large areas of the Iraqi territory is under the control of a terrorist group. Then we have economic challenges. Iraq is under a lot of strain because of years of mismanagement.

And of course this strain of the war brought all these issues out. Iraq has a large deficit and there is no liquidity. On top of that you have hundreds of thousands of refugees who have left their places and need help which the government has to provide. And the third issue is the relationship between Baghdad and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Even though in the case of the new government there was hope that some steps would be taken to try to repair that relationship, unfortunately until now it has not happened. No steps have been taken, not even one official Kurdistan Regional Government's delegation has been to Baghdad or from Baghdad to Erbil. Although minis-



ters come back and forth, there has been no official dialogue between the sides. With regard to the security situation, it is a big challenge. The country is endangered. In August even the capital of the Kurdistan region was in danger. And at the beginning [of the ISIS attacks in Iraq so was] Baghdad. However, I think that the US is committed to protect Baghdad and Erbil and they are expanding their protection to other places such as Kirkuk to at least stop the momentum they [the ISIS] were having. And then, the tide started to turn against them in places like Diyala and Amirli, then in Jurf Sakhar which is on the way to Karbala and of course in the Kurdistan region in the north in Makhmur and Zummar which had been taken by ISIS and now they are back under the control of Peshmerga. Yet, the challenges remain.

The reason for ISIS being able to control these areas is that Iraq did not have a true representative army. It did not have a professional army which would have been trained, disciplined and equipped. I think [there were] all of these were reasons. Additionally, there was a political dispute. Sunnis felt they were not treated well and were underrepresented. I think you have to look deep into that. Not all of it was the fault of the central government. Sunnis have to take some of the blame themselves as they do not have a single spokesman, they do not have a unified leadership. These are the reasons for the current problems with ISIS. The ISIS advance

showed that even the Peshmergas were not well prepared. There was lack of training and there was lack of weapons to fight with. I think it all needs to be looked at how you form a professional army that can defend your country.

Then, there is of course the economic situation that shows that Iraq cannot continue like this. Just because it has oil and it sells oil, it will not resolve the economic issues in Iraq. Around 75% of Iraq's revenues and budget is spent on salaries. This means you do not get anything in return for it. [There is] a lot of corruption and mismanagement of anything that is done. For example the foreign investment in the oil sector has not been encouraged much. Since 2003 not a single refinery has been built. That comes with having a competent government.

I am still not sure whether with the way this government is formed, those issues can be dealt with. Because after all we still have the same Sunnis who were in the [former] government, now in this government and the same Shias and the same Kurds. We do not have a competent technocratic government. Whoever the party sends he is accepted. I think Haider al-Abadi did not have any choice about which minister he would take. They were given to him and that was it. I do not know how this will get any better than before because you have got rid of Al-Maliki but you have not changed anything else. I think it was a mistake to put

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all the blame on him. He made mistakes but this government is facing real issues. Then, there is of course the relationship between KRG and Baghdad – like I said nothing really has been done. The issues of oil, who pays for Peshmerga, who exports and how it is exported keep dividing the two sides. We have the issue of oil fields of Kirkuk which is a new thing that has come into the dispute. The differences between Baghdad and Erbil have today become more significant than what they were before Daish.

What do you think about the three-month deadline given by the Kurds to the Iraqi government?

I always think that putting a timetable for things like that and announcing it is a little premature and I think that the time is premature. First of all, the Kurdish minister did not go until two months after the government was formed.

You made a very good point about deepening divisions between KRG and Baghdad. It is also partly because of the new challenges that Kurdistan Region faces. Could you elaborate more on these new challenges such as the refugees.

There are probably close to half a million refugees in Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. We have about 50 thousand so we have a large number [of them]. That is one thing. Then, you did not have the issue of oil fields of Kirkuk before June. That has come up now. And

of course the KRG is under more strain and pressure because even though it gets some help from the international community, including Turkey, it is not enough for all these refugees. We also of course have the issue who pays the Peshmerga and who provides them with training. We know there is a talk that all these countries in the world are helping them but in the reality the weapons they receive are good but there are very few of them. The training is there but these are very few people working there. So there are a lot of problems.

Then it also raises the issue of intra-Kurdish problems. There are various Kurdish parties. On the one hand different groups are currently unified by one threat-which is Daish but we also know that divisions are there. How do you see it?

It is very normal in a democratic place and Kurdistan is definitely democratic with all its shortcomings. You have parties competing for different things. You have in your country for example CHP or MHP accusing the AK Party of all kinds of things. The AK Party is controlling the government. So that exists. I think that is not unusual. But I think that with Daish coming, despite the political differences, the nationalistic approach and defending of the region has actually brought the parties together.

Can we see any practical implications in the case of the Peshmerga issue?

We hope that not only in Kurdistan but in all of Iraq you have to look back as I said before how you bring a professional army into being. I think one way to do that is that you cannot have political parties controlling the military. The military has to be controlled by a professional leadership. Here comes the point: Can a country like Iraq or the Kurdistan region function with a volunteer army like the US? No. Maybe one has to think about conscription as you have it here in Turkey and in a lot of other countries in the world everybody has to serve in the army. It is not my or your party who brings their people. And that is true for Iraq as well. When you have conscription you do not differentiate between one or another. Everybody serves. Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens, KDP, Gorran everybody does. Now Gorran says we do not have any Peshmergas, which is not true because most of Gorran was originally PUK so they still have a lot of their people. But this is wrong-you cannot have an army with allegiance to political parties.

Do you think the project of creating a professional army is progressing well?

I think some of the issues that came up when Daish invaded Sinjar, Zumar and other places in the Kurdistan region raised the awareness about the need to do it.

In Turkey there is a concept from time to time that there is a budget crisis with the central

government and stopping of the revenues from Baghdad definitely leads to certain pressures on the KRG. But there is also a need for the KRGs to have good governance. This is also a part of the problem and it should be discussed. We should not put blame on Baghdad for not giving the money but we should also focus on KRG's own problems. What do you say about this argument?

I think Baghdad is definitely at fault not to pay salaries. This has nothing to do with the division between the political differences and how the oil is exported. This has nothing to do with the salaries. In the KRG no salaries have been paid by Baghdad since January except for, I think, one month. But are there governance problems within the KRG? Of course there are. There is corruption in the KRG as well, there is mismanagement of how things are done. Sometimes private money is used by private institutions as opposed to public institutions but I think Baghdad can show good intentions. This can open the door for dialogue if they send a month or two months salaries to Kurdistan.

Last week we were in Erbil and the impression we got were that Baghdad has run out of money. Even if they want to solve it and send the money, they will not have much left because of the wrong policies.

It is not that Baghdad did not have money or it had billions of dollars in a big place like this and

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it has been spent and it is finished. Baghdad gets about \$7bn every month in oil revenues. So there is always money coming in. So that is nonsense. Baghdad can easily send a month or two month salary and that will open the door for negotiations to start to look for solutions.

I read some news about your speech where you said you do not need Haras Watani (National Guard) in Kirkuk. Why is that?

First of all, Kirkuk is not like other places in Iraq. It has a special status, it is covered by the article 140 of the Constitution. Haras Watani for Anbar, Erbil, and Tikrit or Karbala and Najaf is fine because they are all Sunni or Shia Arabs. In Kirkuk you have different communities, different sects, different religions, and I think this idea of Haras Watani is misunderstood even by the highest officials

in the Iraqi government who deal with the defence. Haras Watani, which is the National Guard in the US, is not the army that you need to liberate places like Mosul, Tikrit, Faluja or Hawijah. You need an organised military probably under the command of the defence department. Haras Watani in the US are on an active duty only for a month in a year. I do not know if you are familiar with it. The other 11 months some of them are bartenders, postmen, or professors and they register for that because they receive extra benefits: they can obtain student loans for their children or a mortgage at a good rate. When they are needed in emergencies the president or the government of that state can use them.

Is this the Haras Watani they are talking about?

No, this is like the real army

and they always expect to be paid after they finish their job. So this is like forming an army. In addition to that Kirkuk has a special status so they cannot apply a decision that is made in Baghdad on Kirkuk without talking to the people of Kirkuk and representatives of Kirkuk.

Some Turkmens and Arabs are worried about Kirkuk's situation. In particular Turkmens worry about the security and they would like to have safe havens provided for them. What do you think about it?

I think Turkmens are as well protected as Kurds and Arabs in this city. Whatever protection the Kurds have, the Turkmens and Arabs have as well. They were once under the control of Peshmerga and are now under the police's protection. Where do most of the Turkmens live in the city? 85-90% of the Turkmens live within the Kirkuk city. Who is in the city? - The Police. How is the police force formed? One third are Kurds, one third are Arabs and one third are Turkmens.

Are there Asayish in Kirkuk?

Yes, there are Asayish and we have always told our Turkmen brothers that they can always serve in Asayish. Because Asayish is a governmental organisation. It belongs to the KRG. We are against any forces outside the governmental regulations and control. We talked about it with our [Turkmen]

friends and they agree on that. Turkmens they can become Peshmerga. They can work in the Peshmerga forces. No one is against that. Even Arabs can do it. The same protection is available for everybody. It is not like the Kurds have separate protections and Turkmens have nothing. It is the same.

Are most of the people happy about it?

Right, and they like that. Do not pay attention to some people who make big statements far from the truth just to get some notoriety or public attention. I deal with Turkmens every day. I have a lot of Turkmens working for me in my office and actually they are very happy about their protection. Kirkuk has never been that safe since 2003.

What is the future of Kirkuk?

There is the article 140. It tells you what to do. The future of Kirkuk, regardless of where it will end up politically, is that it has to have a special status. If we have a referendum and the vote is to join the Kurdistan region for example, it cannot be like Erbil or Duhok because Kirkuk is different. In Kirkuk you have Arabs along with Turkmen and Kurds. These people need to be represented and their rights need to be protected. We emphasize that.

Do you mean Kirkuk with a special status with the KRG or separately?

Kirkuk has a special status so they cannot apply a decision that is made in Baghdad on Kirkuk without talking to the people of Kirkuk and representatives of Kirkuk.



Whatever the people of Kirkuk decide. There is the constitutional article 140 and this depends on the the Kirkuk's people. Nobody can force anything on Kirkuk. It has to be with the consent of people of Kirkuk including Kurds, Turkmens and Arabs.

However, there are practical issues that have so far hindered the solution such as the population census, the models to organise special status.

This is why I have been suggesting that Kurds would like Kirkuk to be a part of Kurdistan Region but they should also look at other options. There are a lot of places where the majority [of the population] are Turks and they are not a part of Turkey. You have Turks in Azerbaijan. You can have different things. You can have

something called the same way historically but not necessarily administered by the same organ. But I think for the Kurds who would obviously like Kirkuk to be in the Kurdistan Region. The Kurdistan Parliament, even before there is any vote whether they want to join the Kurdistan region or not, should discuss this issue with participation of Turkmens and Arabs. Then it should come up with a position for the event if we want Arabs and Turkmens to vote with the Kurds to join the Kurdistan Region, then when we do join, you would be represented in the Kurdistan presidency, the Council of Ministers, the parliament in this or another way and Kirkuk itself would be administered in this particular way. I think that if you do it and you present it to the people of Kirkuk, I think that a lot of Turkmens and

Arabs will vote for it because they have not seen anything better before than the Kurdistan region. It is also better for the Kurds also to win by 65% or 70% rather than 50.1% and then 49.9% is against it because it gives you more legitimacy, and it is more democratic. However, I do not personally think that we should go for something that only Kurds would vote for. Even if we get the majority there, we will still get problems afterwards.

As ORSAM we were international observer in Kirkuk on the elections day. The election results showed that you win votes in every part of Kirkuk.

Exactly. And that is what I am saying. You know, an average Turkmen or an average Arab leader do not care what I say or what I should say or what Turkmen leaders or some Arab guy says. What they want is how you treat them. What do you give them? If you respect them, if you do not discriminate against them, I think they want to live under a regime like that. If the Kurdistan can provide that, I am sure they will accept it. If Kurdistan cannot provide it, not only Turks and Arabs will reject it, but also Kurds will.

Then again, a sort of reflection of the intra-Kurdish differences are observed in Kirkuk.

You know that, Kirkuk is PUK dominated area.

Will this situation continue?

You know, elections after elec-

tions show it. These elections we had 6 seats. Last elections we had 5.

Can you keep this process?

Well, I think we will not only keep it, but we will increase it. But if we do not do a good job, I think it is just like in this country. Elections after elections you have the AK Party so obviously people see something in the AKP, they do not see with CHP or MHP and that is the same way with Kirkuk.

As a governor what are your priorities for the future in terms of development?

We really have to pay more attention to the agriculture sector. We have to improve our highways and roads, build a big refinery for Kirkuk, and also to start presenting the Kirkuk's resources to investors including oil resources and other things. Just like the KRG is doing it, we have a right to do the same thing. The Iraqi constitution grants that right to Kirkuk, to all the governorates in addition to the regions, and we have only one region which is the Kurdistan region.

Mosul took a similar step before all these Daish events. Do you want to go along a similar way?

Mosul had a lot of problems among themselves. I think we will do better than that. In Kirkuk we will do something where there will be a consensus.

Could you also elaborate on the current situation in the oil fields: who controls them? What

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percentage is controlled by the locals and are any of them controlled by Daish?

There is zero control by Daish of the fields around Kirkuk. It is controlled partly by the KRG and partly by the North Oil Company. I think that this issue will be resolved between Baghdad and us.

Are you having talks on this issue with your Turkish counterparts?

Yes, I am having talks on it with both sides.

Do you think there will be any positive outcome any time soon?

I think there will be, because there is no other choice.

Turkey for a long time has been viewed by the Kurds as an obstacle to the solution of the status of the city. Do you see any constructive attitude coming from Turkey?

I think what Turkey wants is what the people of Kirkuk want and what people of Kirkuk decide and that is the best approach in my opinion.

Thank you very much.

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