



## **AS LONG AS THE TURKISH REPUBLIC EXISTS, TURKMENS IN THE REGION WILL ALSO THRIVE.**

**Aydın Maruf**



Aydın Maruf obtained a bachelor's degree in Law and a post-graduate degree in International Relations from Gazi University. He was member of the executive board of administration of the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) established in May of 2011. In the same year, he became the ITF's representative within the Iraq Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Between 2000 and 2002 he worked as a political office member of the Turkmeneli Party. As founder of the Iraq Turkmen Students and Youth Union, Aydın Maruf also became president of the institution between 1995 and 1998, and again in 2000. During the September 2013 KRG parliamentary elections, Maruf was also elected to parliament as representative from Erbil.

**ORSAM: There is a serious political crisis within both the Kurdistan Regional Government and in Baghdad. By August 2015, there emerged a serious presidential crisis and this crisis is ongoing. Political issues in parliament also prevail. Exclusion of the Gorran Movement from the political system and the parliament is disputed. How did this crisis begin and how is it developing? Could you briefly explain this process?**

**Maruf:** The current political controversy between parties in the KRG dates back to past. The presence of issues between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) that are resurfacing from the past is a known fact. There is an unofficial, *de facto* dual administration in the KRG, which began in 1995 and continues to this day. The other branch of the political crisis is the separation of the Gorran Movement from the PUK. Gorran has become a significant movement both within the PUK and throughout the region. It is actively operating as an opposition

force in the KRG. Gorran also participated in the KRG government. After the president of the parliament was designated, a new government was established. This government, in which the participation of all parties is ensured, has been called a conciliation government. This government was in charge for a while.

The conflict between the political parties emerged and they refused to recognize one another. This led to a presidency crisis. Upon the pressure of the Gorran movement, the political parties in the KRG (the PUK and the Kurdistan Islamic Union), with the exception of the KDP, jointly prepared four different presidency projects. The aim of these projects was to change the administrative system within the KRG, and adopt a new system whereby the president of the KRG is elected by the parliament. These projects were later presented to parliament. On June 22, 2015, the political parties, with the exception of the KDP, conducted the first session of the debate in the parliament. The KDP negatively reacted to this situation and this received media cov-

erage. It can be said that the political crisis began at this point in time.

**One of the biggest reasons for the KDP's opposition to such proposals was the presence of foreign diplomatic representatives at the parliamentary meeting which you mentioned.**

Yes. Unfortunately, this meeting was not a good step for the region. We, as the Iraqi Turkmen Front, did not take sides in the regional meetings because we shared different opinions. We supported peace and reconciliation. However, the presence of representatives from foreign countries at the parliamentary meeting held on June 22, 2015, disturbed the KDP administration. After this, the political parties continued the meetings. On August 19, 2015, a meeting was held in Erbil under U.S. supervision. All the political parties, except for Gorran, attended this meeting. In this meeting, the parties came to an agreement and an alliance was formed. Prior to this meeting, a five-party political meeting was held and Gorran attended this meeting. An

agreement was reached there. According to this agreement, a decision was taken to not attend the meeting on August 19. However, different factions in the parliament did not listen to their political parties and the meeting was conducted nevertheless. There was a loss of trust between the political parties. After that, the political crisis evolved. In the regions of Germiyan, Suleymaniyah and Ranya, some non-Iraqi political organizations have supported some political parties and groups with the support of some countries in the region, and demonstrations have begun. Unfortunately, some of the political parties' offices, especially the KDP's political offices, were attacked, and there were casualties from these attacks. Then, on October 10, 2015, the KDP as a reaction to these attacks, forbade the president of the KRG Parliament to enter Erbil. Since then, there has been no session held in the parliament, and the political parties have not been able to come to an agreement. Now there is a political crisis in Iraq, particularly in the KRG.

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The administration in the region is divided. There are two parliament presidents: One in Erbil and the other one in Sulaymaniyah.

**Was the last government that was formed at the end of a nine month period not established according to a very strong agreement?**

No, it was not. Within the political structure that defines the politics of northern Iraq, the government consists of two political parties that have been in power since 1991. With the emergence of Gorran and the opposition parties, the situation has changed. The political organizations in the KRG have argued that they should

align against Baghdad and agree upon a single approach to address the incidents in the region. They have acted upon this. However, this has led to unfavorable outcomes. The opposition parties could not unite either within the KRG or in Baghdad. Therefore, in today's KRG, there is a government without a parliament. The parliament has not held a single parliamentary session in the past six months.

**Are there other problems in the government?**

Of course there are. After the resignation of the ministers, meetings with the other groups have been conducted. More specifically, meetings

with the PUK and the Kurdistan Islamic Union have been held. They did not want to take the ministries of Gorran. KDP ministers are performing these tasks by proxy. Thus, there is a critical situation in the region. On the one hand, the region faces political instability and political crises between the parties, and controversy between Baghdad and Erbil. There is a financial crisis and a conflict regarding oil between the two parties. Moreover, the KRG's relations with Turkey, and Baghdad's disapproval of this situation, exacerbate the crisis. On the other hand, the terrorist organization PKK's advances in Suleymaniya and Garmiyān, its presence in the Sinjar region, and its pressure on the KDP are other critical developments. This situation negatively affects the relations between the PUK, the KDP and Gorran. It can be seen that the PKK has a hand in the demonstrations taking place in Garmiyān, Suleymaniya and Ranya regions, particularly those levied against the KDP, as these same demonstrations and same methods have also been used in Diyarbakır and Şırnak. A demon-

stration similar to that in the KRG was also made in Diyarbakır. Both people and political parties in the KRG clearly know that the PKK is behind these demonstrations.

**What is the position of the PUK? Is it pursuing a balancing policy? What steps is it taking take to resolve the political crisis within the KRG?**

The PUK is a significant political party in the region. The PUK has political, military, intelligence, and economic hegemony in the region. There is currently no government and no parliament in the KRG and there is a presidency crisis. People are asking why the PUK and the KDP do not compromise while these crises are occurring in the region. The KDP has offered the PUK an opportunity to compromise and to reestablish government. The PUK is a significant actor and it can solve these issues but it has some concerns. The PUK paid a heavy price for supporting the extension of Barzani's presidency in 2013. The party does not want to find itself in the same situation again. Therefore, it is not possible

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for the PUK to compromise with the KDP, with receiving Gorran's approval of some sorts. If it does cede, its total number of representatives will decrease from 18 to about 10. It would be political suicide. For this reason, the current situation will continue in the same manner, until September 2017. This is for the benefit of both the PUK and the KDP. Gorran is also exploiting this situation. We had a meeting with Gorran. An officer from Gorran said "It is speculated that our president Nosirvan Mustafa is sick, but he is not. He is abroad." Then why does he not come back to the KRG or Suleymaniyah? Because,

this situation creates psychological pressure on KDP. In this way, Mustafa is giving the message: "If I don't come back, the issues in the region cannot be resolved. The key to resolving the presidency crisis and the parliamentary issue lays in us, not in the PUK." If the solution lays with the PUK, then, it should resolve the crisis, but it can't. For this reason, they said the president is not coming back. This situation is creating psychological pressure on both the PUK and the KDP. The message sent is "without Gorran nothing can be resolved in the KRG". Thus, the situation for the KYB is difficult. It doesn't



pursue the right policy in Baghdad. Let's recall that the PUK, just as the KDP, exercises crucial power in the KRG politics. In fact, the PUK has more power than the KDP when we consider the land size it controls. However, the region is currently in a very bad situation. Civil servants have not been paid for 6 months. On the one hand, the Baghdad-Erbil conflict continues. On the other hand, there is the threat posed by ISIS. The PUK cannot compromise with the KDP due to this situation. The most important reason for this is that the PUK fears losing in the elections.

**Doesn't the same dilemma exist for Gorran? Solving this political crisis will also require an agreement with the KDP. If it reaches an agreement with the KDP, won't Gorran also pay for this in the elections? Is Gorran really in a critical party position?**

Of course it is. Gorran represents the grassroots level within the KRG. In Suleymaniya, Kifri, Halepce and Ranya, Gorran is connected

with people at the grassroots level. In contrast to those that are affiliated with the PUK or the KDP, Gorran grassroots supporters do not align with a civil servant mentality. They are loyal to Gorran. 60-70% of those who are affiliated with the PUK and the KDP are civil servants and receive a salary. Gorran thus benefits from this situation. As I previously mentioned, there are different crises occurring simultaneously within the KRG, but Gorran is not implicated in these crises. The government has no money and for this reason civil servants and teachers cannot be paid. Demonstrations are taking place everyday. The media that is closer to Gorran is supporting these demonstrations. They are trying to present themselves as oppressed: "We are also treated unfairly. We are kept out of parliament. We are oppressed. We don't have anything either." As such, Gorran is demonstrating that they are unaffiliated with the KDP and the PUK, seemingly responsible for what is occurring within the KRG. They are rather emphasizing that they are more connected with

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the ‘oppressed’ who are manifesting against the KRG at the grassroots level.

**What is the position of the Iraqi Turkmen Front on these issues?**

ITF’s position within the KRG is at an important juncture. Let’s remember that, over time, ITF has become a significant actor in the region. In fact, the ITF has become an effective political party. In 2005, the ITF was dissolved in Erbil. In 2011, we became active again in Erbil. Then, we became active across the KRG and its region. We participated in Parliament and within the Erbil Provincial Assembly. I

already mentioned the meetings that were held. If we had participated in one of those meetings, we would have had to side with one of the groups present. We have demonstrated our stance both at the press meetings and at the meetings with all political parties. Prior to the meeting held on June 22, we were called by both the KDP, the PUK and Gorran. They asked us if we would participate in the meeting. Although we have only one representative in the parliament, even this one person has a lot of weight when it comes to this issue. We have made use of this situation well. ITF explained that it takes no sides. Stability in the region is most import-



ant for the ITF. We have especially supported reconciliation between the political parties. We explained this in both the parliamentary meetings and meetings that took place outside of parliament. ITF's policy has resulted in a positive outcome. ITF supports every political party to act and conduct politics with self-determination. ITF pursues such a policy both within the central government, in Erbil and Kirkuk. ITF does not support the political parties which do not act according to their own political will. We do not support a political party when it acts under the influence of another party. This can be a Turkmen political party or a Kurdish political party. We are proud of the ITF's recent political work in Erbil. ITF began to be recognized by all the political parties and diplomatic missions in the region. ITF has good relations with all the political parties within the KRG. Positive steps have been taken and positive meetings have been conducted. Based on these good developments, legislation regarding the protection of the

rights of ethnic groups has been enacted in Parliament. Moreover, a law regarding official languages has also been passed in Parliament. These are important developments for us, which have resulted from our adoption of a neutral political stance within the KRG.

Apart from this, we also have many problems and demands. For example, although we, Turkmens are the second core element in the region, but we have not been given an important mission in the region. We have not been assigned any task for representing Turkmens directly whether in the prime ministry, regional presidency, or within Parliament. We are demanding these tasks to be given to Turkmens. Turkmens should be assigned significant tasks and positions within the KRG. Since 1991, Turkmens have not been assigned significant positions such as deputy prime minister, minister, deputy regional president or president of parliament. This issue is important for us.

For example in 2014, some of our representatives in Erbil appealed to the Di-

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rectorate of Religious Affairs for *khutbah* (sermons) in Turkmen language and in 2 days, a decision regarding this issue was made. After 1 year, the decision came into effect. These good developments and our positive approach are reflected in this issue. These are progressive steps but alone are insufficient. ITF has supported peace and prevented the breakout of a civil war. We are expecting similar support from the administration. Currently, we do not see sufficient support. For the ITF, the most important issue is education and Turkmen schools. Turkish Cooperation and Coordination

Agency (TIKA) is currently repairing Turkmen schools and this makes us very happy. Turkmen schools are critical for us. The Turkmen Directorate of Education within the KRG Ministry of Education has not operated for 6 years. We drafted a petition to the Ministry of Education in 2013, but no one has been designated to the position yet. Due to such situations, we are losing trust and optimism in officials. These demands constitute our basic rights. They are also in accordance with law. When we mention democracy and human rights in theory, they should also be applied in practice. There

are many examples like this. For instance, a committee responsible for Turkmen activities was going to be established. They promised us this in the first meeting after the government was formed, but the committee has not been established yet. We can be given a Ministry but this too, has not taken place yet. We want officials to beholden to their promises.

**Are all the parties supporting you on the priorities you are putting forth?**

When the KDP formed government under the presidency of Necirvan Barzani, we made an offer in the meeting with Turkmen representatives. In that meeting, Barzani promised us the imminent establishment of a committee responsible for Turkmen activities. That committee would take the form of a ministry. An undersecretary responsible for Turkmen affairs was also going to be designated. However none of these have taken place as of yet.

**What is your opinion regarding the KRG becoming an independent state?**

**It can be simple to hold a referendum, but do you think the KRG is ready for independence?**

There is currently an abnormal situation occurring in the region. On the one hand, there is a war with ISIS, and on the other hand, political crises and the Baghdad-Erbil conflict are also taking place. Therefore, I don't think it is the right time to hold a referendum. For a referendum to take place, a stable environment should exist in the region. 2 months ago, under the presidency of Mesut Barzani, we conducted a meeting with all political parties, with the exception of Gorran. The meeting concerned the question of the referendum. The other parties did not support the referendum either. They also stated that it is not the right time to hold such a referendum. Party officials stated that the referendum question is not only one of timing, but also the region and the conditions are not favorable to hold a referendum. There is also a tendency to work more closely with Baghdad. Before that, a committee from the KRG

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government went to Baghdad, too. Now, a new political party commission, which consists of all the political parties in the KRG will be established. This commission will go to Baghdad and there will be a meeting. I think the referendum issue creates pressure on Baghdad due to the existing crisis between Baghdad and Erbil. A referendum for independence is the right of every nation and its citizenry. We don't have any problem regarding this issue. A referendum can take place in Basra, Kirkuk, Necef, or Musul. It is normal. As a member of ITF, I think that if Turkmen are excluded from the process and not given the

right to speak, they won't support the referendum. We explained it to all the political parties within the KRG. The ITF and Turkmen have different projects when it comes to Kirkuk and the other regions. A referendum does not fit into this process. However, this question can be considered when the situation improves. Where the referendum will be conducted is also important. Will this referendum be conducted in Erbil, Duhok, Suleymaniyah and Halepce region, or will it be conducted in the other regions where there are problems? This question is not clear yet. All the political parties are asking the same question. Why is the ref-

erendum to be conducted? For the purpose of political formation, for the creation of an independent state, or for the establishment of a federation? This is also not clear yet. I don't think people currently support holding a referendum. For the past six months, a citizen or a civil servant cannot receive a salary. Such challenges definitely do not constitute grounds for supporting a referendum. There is also a migration crisis faced by the region. A large number of migrants have relocated to the KRG from Kirkuk and Mosul. Migrants are a burden to the KRG government. There is economic support to address this issue, but no security support exists. As a result, a referendum does not seem possible if these problems are not first addressed.

**What is your opinion regarding the crisis faced by the Iraqi Central Government? What is the position of the Iraqi Turkmen Front?**

It was a significant matter that the ITF President, the Kirkuk representative Ersat Salih, the Vice President of

ITF, and Kirkuk representative Hasan Turan, as well as other representatives, acted in unison. It is very important that Turkmens have a common approach against injustice towards Turkmens in Baghdad. As I said before, the position of our representatives, particularly from the ITF, is important. The ITF has protected Turkmens. We do not want to be unfair to other political parties in this statement, but this is a reality. When we consider the history of Iraq, after the 1926 Ankara Agreement, governments have always been unfair to Turkmens in Iraq. Turkmens have not been assigned any significant duties during this process. However, Turkmens constitute a significant element of the Iraqi nation. According to the constitution of Iraq, Turkmens are the third fundamental component of Iraq. Turkmens also play an important role in the politics of the region. Unfortunately, the governments that have been established according to ethnic identities after 2003 have brought about negative outcomes for Turkmens. The presence of Turk-

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men is ignored. Turkmens cannot participate in political decision-making. They are not assigned meaningful duties. Recently, under the presidency of Abadi, a technocrat government was established. It is a government that was established prior to the crisis in Parliament. Everybody saw how passive this government remained in response to the attacks against Turkmens in Talafar and Mosul, on the Kirkuk issue, and the rescuing of the Beshir town. We have always defended the territorial integrity of Iraq. Turkmens have never formed or armed separatist organizations. We have never supported the disintegration of Iraq, but

unfortunately Turkmens have been treated unfairly. Turkmens have explained that if an administration without Turkmens is established, they will not support it. As a result, a Turkmen Minister has been appointed within the technocrat government. It is important that Turkmens act together.

**What is your opinion regarding the operation of capturing Mosul back from ISIS?**

Mosul is very important for us both historically and strategically. The Turkmen presence there is very important. Unfortunately, someone is preventing an operation to recapture Mo-

sul. The operation was going to be conducted, but a crisis emerged in Baghdad. Crises have also emerged in other regions when the operation was to be conducted. We as Turkmens are supporting these operations because our region is under occupation. Half a million of our people have had to migrate. Many of them have gone to the South of Iraq. A lot of them are in Turkey. Therefore, the Mosul operation is critical for us. Now, the Iraqi Army is in Mahmur. There are also Peshmergas among the 10,000 soldiers. If any operation takes place, we want Turkmens to also participate in this operation. We are telling the world. A Turkmen is a Turkmen, whatever his or her sect.

**Lastly, what is the position of Turkey in this current crisis?**

Turkey is a significant country both for us and for the region. Turkey has supported all the ethnic groups and political groups equally, both within the KRG and in Iraq. Turkey has also helped and supported the KRG continuously. When ISIS

was closer to Erbil, Turkey supported the government and the Peshmerga there. Moreover, institutions such as TIKA and the Red Crescent have helped migrants in the KRG region. During the economic crisis, Turkey provided economic support to the KRG. The relations between Turkey and the KRG are very good. We, as Turkmens, want Turkey to have good relations with both Iraq and the KRG, because when Turkey has good relations with countries in this region, particularly with the countries where Turkmens live, the conditions of Turkmens improve. Turkmens are also becoming significant actors. There are examples of this in Syria, in the KRG region, and in Iraq. Thus, we support these relations. Turkey has always opened its doors to Turkmens. It helped injured people during ISIS attacks. Our 83 citizens who were injured in the chemical attacks by ISIS in Taza Khormato have undergone treatment in Turkey. Our internally displaced citizens in Erbil, Suleymaniyah, Duhok and Kirkuk have been helped by the Turkish Red Crescent,

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by TİKA and by AFAD. The position of Turkey is a source of pride in the region. We as Turkmens are very pleased with Turkey. Turkey is supporting us in both humanitarian and political aspects. As

long as the Turkish Republic exists, Turkmens in the region will also thrive.

**Dear Mr. Maruf, thank you very much.**

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