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MULLA BAKHTIAR: “THE REASONS BEHIND ISIS WAS SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES AND LACK OF DEMOCRACY”

**Deputy Secretary General of PUK
Mulla Bakhtiar**



Hikmat Muhamad Karim, known as Mulla Bakhtiar, joined the leadership cadre of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1976. He was promoted to become a member of PUK Political Bureau in 2001, a member of Executive Body of PUK Political Bureau in 2009, and the chief of Executive Body of PUK Political Bureau in 2010. Since 1996, he has been acting as the supervisor of all PUK media. Some of his books: *Against History* (1998), *Democracy after Cold War* (1999), *Democracy between Modernism and Post-modernism* (2000).

ORSAM: The situation in Syria started as a popular uprising, but later it became militarised and turned into a conflict and has been greatly affecting its neighbours. The effects of the conflict on the Kurds have been mixed; on the other hand, they have been affected directly by the conflict, and on the other hand, there are some windows of opportunity for the Kurds. These are personal views on the negative and positive effects and implications of the Syrian conflict.

Molla Bahtiyar: I am pleased to hear about a strategic center in Turkey and to be discussing these situations with them. I am glad they are paying more attention over their concerns of the Kurdish situation. Such research and meetings with such centers contributes towards understanding each other closely. The Syr-

ian crisis is part of all crises in the Middle East. As a Kurd, I think that there are certain policies which are imposed upon our nation. British and French colonialisms are responsible for such impacts, in changing policies and mentalities. For the past century we were victims and we were bound to such policies. Without understanding this, we are implementing the decisions imposed upon us by colonial powers, and as a result of this, we are fighting and killing each other. Syria has become the centre of political crises and political problems of the whole region. There are two types of outcomes of the occurrences in Syria at the moment; either positive or negative. Turkey is like Spain in the Middle East; however Syria is just like African states. It is the first time Turkey is participating alongside the Arab uprisings. Since there is a will for democracy and freedom, the uprisings indicate a positive out-



come. In these events, the positive outcomes override the negative aspects. The fighting and civil war is just like in Spain (Franco of Spain) being repeated in Syria and caused peoples' death. It is possible to easily find solutions to the fighting and bloodshed. One of the impacts of what is happening in Syria is negatively affecting Kurdistan and their own administration. The direction that the people took in this uprising, in which the civil revolution transformed into an armed struggle, was wrong. I was the first one in the Middle East to write a book in 1998 on the continuous uprising in the Middle East. I stated that there will be an uprising by the people in the Middle East. I emphasised on one this in this book that it is a big mistake to mix the civil revolution of the people with the armed struggle. Mixing these two resulted in up to 8 million people displaced of their homes, up to half a million people killed, and many terrorist groups poured into Syria. According to the estimation of economics professors, in order to recover Syria 200 billion dollars is needed, which is a negative aspect of the crisis. As a strategic dimension, despite all of these negative aspects, I do not suspect it will conclude to victory and prevail in democracy for us all.

I would like to emphasise the visionary perspective you have is very similar to that of the Prime Minister of Turkey, Davutoglu. When the Arab

uprisings started, Davutoglu stated they were delayed revolutions and transformations; such a transformation should have taken place earlier in the Middle East. Also, he thinks we currently have a lot of negative security problems; however the transformation in the long run may result to being good for the future of the region, for the Arabs, Kurds and Turks. That is why your perspective is very similar to his visionary approach to the Arab Spring. More specifically, can you evaluate the impacts of the new regional environment on the Kurds in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and maybe in Iran? How does this contribute to the situation of the Kurds in the region in general?

As Mr. Davutoglu has confirmed, these revolutions are delayed revolts and they are bound to happen in this century. The Kurds have not had any delayed revolutions; they have always been revolting however the problem for the Kurds is that their rights have been delayed. It is clear that if the Kurds are not permitted their rights in the four parts that the Kurds have been divided on, revolution will not happen. It is normal for revolutions to be occurring in other regions of Kurdistan and we will be supporting and empathising with them. I love Castro, Che Guevara and other generals of the revolutions. They were revolu-

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tionists and we supported them. Of course I will take Ocalan and Salih Muslim into consideration as revolutionists. They are struggling for freedom. You cannot regard freedom as 'right for you and not right for me'. Freedom is just like air; when you breathe, when you drink water, you are free. You have rights to do so, and freedom is the same. You have a right to have freedom, to taste it; it is like nature. Any government in the world cannot say to their nation that they do not have a right to drink water, yet say that they themselves have a right to drink water. If any government has the right to look at the flower then you have the right to look at the flower. An Arab philosopher, Jibran Khalil, says that 'if you see slaves are asleep, do not wake them because they may be dreaming of freedom'. If we, as Kurds, are all slaves, we dream of freedom. This is our right. We all supported the recent events in Rojava. If there is any Kurd in this part of Iraqi Kurdistan, it's against the revolution and the struggle of Rojava, and there will be thousands on the streets. Turkey understood the situation, and as we are not a state, allowed the Peshmerga forces to pass through its land to go to Rojava. Turkey decided so because the Kurdish issue in Rojava has become subjective, humanitarian, and a global issue. So Turkey made a good step to accept this situation. It is much better for Turkey and its deep strategy to support the resolution of the Kurdish issue.

There are a couple of new developments now. The connection between the Kurds in Syria, Turkey and Iraq are more enhanced and there is an increased awareness over the wide region because of the common security problems created by ISIS. This is pushing a sort of pan-Kurdish identity in the region, but we know that there are different political realities in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Principally, we do support the rights and freedom of the Kurds, the right to self-determination. However the meaning of that self-determination will be different in Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. So, could you give us some sort of projection or estimation of the status of the Kurds in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey for forthcoming 5-10 years? In Turkey, as you said, there is the Peace Protest, but Turkey, Iraqi Kurds and Syrian Kurds will all have their own experiences based on unique conditions. So, how will be the evolution from that point on?

I support your view that in each part of Kurdistan there are specific elements for the Kurdish issue, it is not conditional for it to be the same as in Iran and Turkey. They are ruled by the economic, cultural, political agendas or directions of their countries. Regarding your question on the

situation of the Kurds in the next 5-10 years, this issue is related to the re-drawing of the geographical and political map of the Middle East. If there are international intentions to re-draw the map of the Middle East. Of course, we will not be denied of those rights that we need to have. If it will remain as it is right now, the Kurds in the eastern region of Kurdistan will have democratic rights in the next 10 years. If in upcoming years the political map is changed in the Middle East, then we will have another decision. We observe the situations, we have powers and we have international relations. If we can see this as appropriate then we can decide in our interest, and not only our nation, but for others too. There are many nations that do not have their rights in the Middle East.

More specifically, now, there is a very current and actual threat regarding the issue of ISIS, the ongoing fight by the coalition and the Iraqi government. So, where do you see this struggle going? Do you think you will get some results any time soon?

We have heard that the national and geographical map will be changed, so we know that the governmental systems will not remain as they are. When the system changes to democracy, we will have our democracy and our democratic rights.

In that, do you mean more federalism? Now, we also hear different arguments. For instance, the Sunnis are defending the federal region, and some of the Shiite groups may be considering the federal region. So what will be the structure of Iraq in this process according to you?

The Iraqi system is a federal system. Three provinces can unite and declare federalism. Do you think that three Sunni provinces will unite and have a strategy to declare federalism? I do not think it is possible in the near future, because the Sunnis do not have leadership. If any component does not have leadership. This is why they cannot achieve strategic results, especially in the Middle East.

How about the KRG's relationship with Baghdad now? We hear the agreement about the revenues and energy resources. Will it be better than before or will there be other obstacles along the way?

There is a compromise agreement between both sides. We are trying and struggling to reach a full agreement but we fear the situation inside Iraq. Both Shias and Sunnis are not united among themselves. Each party has relations with the settlements. The Sunnis in Iraq will listen to Saudi Arabian leaders and will not unite with other components. Hence thus will not achieve a

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democratic process. This is because the Saudi Arabian system does not agree with or accept the democratic process. We have conflicting issues with those systems of governmental bodies.

Speaking of the differences among different groups, we can also come to the KRG. As we know, there are divisions in the perspectives among some Kurdish groups. How do you see the impacts of the recent political developments on different parties within the KRG?

There are differences, and they will remain, however now there are less than before. Now, we have a united policy in Northern Iraq. The political parties have produced united policies with Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iran. We have rela-

tions and mutual interests with those governments. We have a policy of relation and mutual interest between KRG and each of these states. There are many political parties, hence we have differences in our philosophy, politics, ideology, political strategies and in our structures. Of course we have differences, and differences will remain. We have no intention to become one party.

Going one level down and focusing on your party; what is going on in your party? What would you say for the future of the party? We know that in the recent elections PUK regained some strength, especially from the Gorran movement. How do you see the future of PUK in Kurdistan politics?

The party's policy and the military campaigns are very much welcomed by the people. Similarly across the region there is emotional support for our party. We have had differences for a long time but we have to resolve these in the next congress that we will hold. We have good relations with the Gorran movement. We have agreed with the Gorran movement about administration issues in some provinces. Within 6 months we will have new relations and experiences which mean administering and running the areas together. I think that this new experience will succeed. In addition we will move to other political steps with Gorran movement.

We had the opportunity to meet with Kirkuk Governor Necmettin Kerim in Ankara and grasped his very constructive suggestions about Kirkuk. How does he himself see the evolution of Kirkuk.

I do not know what he has said, but anything Dr. Necmettin Kerim has said, we entrust in him.

In this fight against ISIS, we saw that the Iraqi army collapsed in Mosul, and later in other places. Now, there is this coalition support for the Iraqi State but practically on the ground the fight is done

by Peshmerga forces as well as the Shiite militia forces, al-Hashd al-Shabi. This is an issue that is very complicated. Not only here but in international meetings that I attend with Americans and Europeans, there are big questions about what these forces mean and how they may affect the future of Iraq when ISIS has gone. Will they still remain? Will they be good for the future of Iraq? Will there be more problems than before?

The social conditions or circumstances that people have been living in created ISIS. If we do not change their lifestyle and their social conditions, another ISIS will appear. Most importantly, the countries that want to help us must support us to prevent another ISIS group reappearing in the region. ISIS arised upon peoples' suffering from economic problems, illiteracy and unemployment issues. In a country or place or region lacking literacy and democracy, how do we not expect there to be another ISIS? There will be. I expect that groups like ISIS will remain until social and political issues are resolved.

Thank you.

We fear the situation inside Iraq. Both Shias and Sunnis are not united among themselves. Each party has relations with the settlements. The Sunnis in Iraq will listen to Saudi Arabian leaders and will not unite with other components.

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals *Ortadoğu Analiz* and *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

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