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## **ABDURRAHMAN MUSTAFA: TURKMENS' SURVIVAL CAN BE ENSURED BY SYRIA'S TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY**

**Abdurrahman MUSTAFA**



Abdurrahman Mustafa was born in Aleppo in 1964. After he graduated from Aleppo University, he had to move abroad due to the political oppression. During 1988-2010, he worked as a manager in the 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 in the years 2011 and 2012. He was elected as the president at the second meeting of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly in May 2014. He still serves as the president of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly, which is the one and only legitimate representative body of Syrian Turkmens.

**ORSAM: President of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly Mr. Abdurrahman Mustafa, we would like to talk to you about Syrian Turkmen, a topic that came up now and again but not very well known in Turkey. Would you mind telling us about the presence of the Turkmen in Syria even though there is not an official record documenting their presence since the foundation of Syria? Could you tell us how many Turkmen there are, where they live in Syria and how they make their living by considering the situation before and after 2011?**

**Abdurrahman Mustafa:** The Syrian Turkmen's presence dates back to 11th century. They have been living in Syria for a thousand years. They regard Syria as their motherland and they have ruled Syria at different periods from the Seljuk Empire in Syria until the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. As it is well known, Turkmen were abandoned to their fate after the First World War in 1918 followed by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Republic of Turkey was so overwhelmed by its own problems that it had to neglect Syrian Turkmen. However, Syrian governments have never forgotten them. That is to say,

Syrian governments who took office after the downfall of the Ottoman Empire have always thought that the Turkmen people and Turkish people have the same roots; therefore they put a lot of pressure on Turkmen. This situation has gained momentum following Gamal Abdel Nasser's efforts after 1958 which made Arab Nationalism very popular. After Ba'ath Party seized power and especially during the presidency of Hafez al-Assad and Bashar Hafez al-Assad, Turkmen were put under a lot of pressure. Throughout the presidency of Hafez al-Assad and his son, Turkmen have been seen as a component of the Syria-Turkey relations and the pressure on the Turkmen have become systematic ever since. Particularly when the relations between two countries were "tense", when the problems of water, PKK and Hatay escalated, Syria has implemented harsh policies towards Turkmen.

As it is stated in the ORSAM field research report of 2011, about 3.5 million Turkmen live in Syria. During the oppressive and dictatorial regimes like in Syria, the existence of minorities is denied. All ethnic and national groups are considered as Syrian Arabs according to the constitution. However, this situation changed after 2011. On my ID card, it is written

that I am a “Syrian Arab”. When Arab nationalists, the Ba’ath Party and Nasser were in power, one of their main goals was to eliminate all ethnic groups under the influence of Arab nationalism.

**Mr. Mustafa, so you are saying that there are about 3.5 million Turkmens in Syria. It is evident that Syria has implemented deliberately oppressive policies towards Turkmens in order to assimilate them throughout history. Generally the minority groups who are subject to such oppressive policies either lose their mother tongue or national and ethnic consciousness under the influence of Arab culture. Can you categorize those 3.5 million Turkmens for us? In other words; of the entire Turkmen population how many are there who speak fluent Turkish or Syrian Turkish, who did not lose their Turkish identity? How many are there who have lost their mother tongue but not their Turkish identity or who have lost completely Turkish identity and mother tongue?**

1.5 million people out of 3.5 million Turkmens speak Turkish just like I do. Let me

be more precise just like I do. I did not get an education in Turkey. My mother tongue is Turkish, I learned it in Syria. Turkmens in Aleppo speak Kilis and Antep dialect; those in Tell Abyad and Al-Raqqah speak Urfa dialect; those in Bayır Bucak speak Hatay/Yayladağı dialect. Turkmens in Aleppo, Bayır Bucak, Tell Abyad and Al-Raqqah have never forgotten their mother tongue and culture, they still abide by their traditions. However, it is those living in Aleppo who stuck to Turkish identity and culture the most.

However, Turkmens in Homs -a region very far from the Turkish border- are slightly different from the others. Those have managed to preserve their national identity, yet they are very bad at Turkish. Additionally, we have Turkmen villages in the region called “Central Homs” whose names are in Turkish. Al-Zarah Village, for instance. Most of the people who live there have Turkish surnames. In short, some Turkmens in Homs cannot speak Turkish whereas some can speak a little, but when asked about their origins they say “I am Turkmen”. Let me give you another example. Turkmens in Damascus speak Turkish with an ancient Yörük dialect which is different from common Anatolian dialect. To sum up, what I

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just explained: Off all 3.5 million Syrian Turkmens, 1.5 million speak Turkish, have preserved their traditions and national identity and live in Aleppo, Bayır Bucak and Al-Raqqah, whereas 2 million cannot speak Turkish yet state that they are Turkmen such as those in Homs.

The number of Syrians who are of Turkish descent are more than the number of Turkmens. While talking about Syrian Turkmens I excluded the Atasi, Çiçekçi and Kuvvetli families of Turkish descent who have ruled Syria as prime minister or president in the past. Because those families do not call themselves “Turkmen” anymore. The reason of their assimilation is the practices of repressive regimes in Syria. Among assimilated Turkmens, there are those who had to lose their identity and became Arabs. For example, if you want to rise in rank in Syrian Army, you have to

have Arabian identity. In rural areas such as Homs, families had to teach Arabic to their children instead of Turkish.

To sum up, if we look for people of Turkish descent in Syria and not Syrian Turkmens, we deal with much bigger numbers of people. People who are in the Syrian opposition have a lot of relatives of Turkish descent. There are big families who are of Turkish descent in Syria. When we talk about Syrian Turkmens we refer to 1.5 million Turkmens who speak Turkish and stick to their national identity and traditions and 2 million Turkmens who call themselves Turkmen, but cannot speak Turkish.

As far as their geographical distribution is concerned, Syrian Turkmens clustered mostly in Aleppo. There are 242 Turkmen villages in the rural side of Aleppo, on the Turkish border and in the region between Euphrates River and

Jarabulus. There are also Turkmen villages in central Syria such as Homs, Hama and Tartus, though not as crowded as Aleppo. There are Turkmen villages also in Bayır-Bucak, Damascus, Golan and Al-Raqqah.

**Did policies about radio and television broadcasting in Syria after 1970 improve Turkish speaking among Turkmens? Did it make Turkish language more comprehensible?**

Radio and television broadcasting had a huge effect indeed. Our ancestors spoke Turkmen, but were illiterate and did not know Turkish alphabet. Thanks to TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Association) after 1970, we learned standard Turkish by watching TV and improved it on our own. We already knew Turkish, but we learned how to read and write in Turkish. TRT helped us a lot. For instance, some young Turkmens take exams in Turkish in Turkey and they are able to pass them without having Turkish courses.

**As you mentioned, Turkmens have been a disadvantaged group in Syria for many years. Besides, there is a crisis which started with peaceful demonstrations in 2011,**

**then turned into a popular uprising and ended up being a civil conflict. This crisis inevitably affects all the peoples and communities in Syria. Nevertheless, it is a well-known fact that Turkmens in Syria have suffered the most, compared to the other groups. On the one hand Turkmens are faced with a regime that has tyrannized them for years, on the other, an opposition that is not so eager to meet Turkmens' demands. So can we say that the Turkmens had to choose between the opposition and the Syrian regime when the crisis broke out?**

The uprising started with peaceful demonstrations at first. All of the Syrian people took part in that uprising. It was not an ethnic or a sectarian conflict. It was against a brutal regime and a dictator. Therefore, Turkmens have always been on the front line of this conflict. Because, Turkmens had suffered a lot despite the fact that they have been considered to be "Syrian citizens". Of all the people, "they" had a right to protest the regime on the front line. 6 months after the beginning of these peaceful protests, Syrian government resorted to repression and armed violence that caused Syrian people to arm

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in self-defense. That is what Turkmens did, too. The biggest center of the revolution is Baba Amr in Homs. The entire population in Baba Amr is Turkmens. When the government used barrel bombs and heavy weapons to destruct Baba Amr, nobody thought of Turkmens. However, Turkmens had never wanted to cause violence, all they wanted was to protest in the name of justice and democracy just like other Syrians. Although not mentioned very often, Turkmens were the ones who have suffered to the greatest degree from this conflict. The Syrian regime has always considered the Turkmens as the Turkish people, and this belief caused the violence and pressure towards the Turkmens to get worse. After the revolution, most of the people who were massacred by the Syrian government were Turkmens. People who have been slaughtered in Al-Zarah, Baba Amr,

Aleppo, Hacer-ül Esved and Bayır Bucak were Turkmens. However, international community, media and Arabian media did not pay attention to the Turkmens who were being slaughtered. Media made the conflict look like that it was between the Nusayris and the Sunnis whereas Turkmens were also the target of the bombings. In this context, we need to acknowledge that we have had some drawbacks. Turkmens were incapable of organizing their ground forces for political goals. Turkmens got into politics only after the Syrian Revolution. We did not have organized military forces or political parties like other ethnic groups. Turkmens entered politics after the Revolution.

**When did you leave? The uprising began and all Syrians started protesting against the regime together.**



**er. When did the protesters divide into different ethnic and sectarian groups?**

For the first 6 months, the protesters did not take up arms, it was the regime that used armed forces. It all started in Daraa and continued in other regions. It is only after that the opposing groups started to bear light arms by their own means to protect the civilians in the protests. After this, the situation changed. Many groups turned into brigades, they formed military forces. Everything started to change after the opposing forces founded Free Syrian Army. Following these developments, Syrian National Council was founded. Hereafter, politics and military forces could take joint action. Turkmens have not had any military or political experience so far. In Syria, Turkmens did not have the right to assemble or found associations. Let me give you an example. We have very devastating and tragic events that are called “1996 Events” in our history. In 1996, about 1000 intellectuals who studied in Turkey were accused of espionage and were imprisoned overnight. It was until 8 years later in 2005 that they got out of jail when the relations between Syria and Turkey got better. That is to say, it was very dangerous for the Turkmens to play politics

or establish associations. Turkmens were suppressed in Syria since they were considered as “usual suspects” even though they had no such intentions.

**In Syria it was very hard for people who have different opinions to be politically organized. Moreover, Turkmens have been put consistently under pressure. Can we say that when the uprising broke out the Turkmens were caught unprepared for the conflict?**

Very unprepared indeed. In fact, there was no need for the conflict. Syria has always been a motherland to Turkmens. We have never seen ourselves as the “minority”. Turkmens have been living in Syria for over a thousand years. All we ever wanted was to be able to speak our own language and live according to our own culture. We did not have any political intentions. We want to live as “Syrian citizens” by keeping our national identity. It is obvious that we have peaceful demands that conform to human rights values. We differ from groups that have secret plans about Syria’s future. Therefore, we did not make any plans for creating a “de facto” position to consolidate our power in Syria in the future like other groups. Syrian Turkmens started engaging

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in politics, here in Turkey, after the revolution. The Syrian National Council was established in Turkey and the Syrian Turkmens were formed in a similar way. Before us, Turkmens who were in the battle field were fighting against a brutal regime.

**Do you mean that first the armed resistance started there and then the political organization is founded here?**

Yes, definitely.

**So you have formed a new political organization that is separated from the Syrian opposition. When and how was the Syrian Turkmen Platform founded?**

The Turkmens' fight constitutes various aspects. On the one hand, there is Bashar al-Assad, a tyrant against whom all Syrians rose. One the other hand, it is possible to demand our rights through the Syrian opposition. Suppose that we overthrew the regime, would it mean anything if Turkmens were not present in the opposition? 30 thousand Turkmens have been martyred in the clashes in Syria. They have lost their houses and were forced to leave their homelands. In order that the sufferings of our people would

not be in vain, Turkmens who studied in Turkey started to take some action against these atrocities. Of course, at first we tried to form a military force not a political organization. I wanted to organize rebels and fighters and form brigades in Aleppo. We have learned that if we were not politically organized, we could not be successful in the fight against brutality and our remarks would remain unheard. That is why we had to form a political organization. A large Turkmen diaspora is present in Turkey. 10 Turkmens who studied and still live in Turkey joined forces and wondered what could be done for the Turkmens' situation. Then this number reached 40. 1st Turkmen Platform was held in Istanbul on 15 December, 2012. 1200 representatives from every part of Syria -Damascus, Al-Raqqah, Homs, Latakia, Tartus, Bayır-Bucak, Aleppo- have attended the platform. This was the first time Turkmens have gathered together. I knew that there were Turkmens in Bayır-Bucak and other regions but I was not familiar with their traditions. Gathering 1200 Turkmens together was a big event. Many officials from Turkey also participated in the platform. The platform attracted huge participation from Syrian opposition, too. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time gave a

remarkable speech in front of 1200 excited Turkmens. Cemil Çiçek, Speaker of the Grand National Assembly also gave a speech. Abdullah Gül, President have sent a meaningful message about the events. During the platform, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan received Syrian Turkmens at Dolmabahçe Palace. I was there, too.

The purpose of the platform was to gather the Turkmens together and to find out what could be done for their best. We have thought that we needed an assembly first. There were some political movements concerning Turkmens but they were separated into many groups. We needed an assembly that will bring all groups of Turkmens together, organize the armed forces and protect the rights of Syrian Turkmens. The platform was a huge success. When we were authorized to form an assembly we started to work on it immediately. A Preliminary Commission that consists of about 460 representatives who were chosen from each Turkmen region was founded in March, 2013 in Ankara. 39 members of parliament were elected. 19 members of the executive council and a president were elected. I was chosen as vice president at that time. This was definite-

ly a great experience. Syrian Turkmen Assembly was the first political movement of Turkmens. Furthermore, Syrian Turkmen Assembly is the one and only movement that was formed using democratic ways within the Syrian opposition. This characteristic of our assembly is something we are proud of.

**Does such a democratic election really work?**

We did not grow up in a democratic country, we grew up in Syria. Of course we have had some difficulties in the ongoing process, because we are not accustomed to democratic elections. I am the third president of this assembly. This is just the beginning, and every day we take steps that will carry us forward. We all learn together. We, Turkmens have our own assembly and I hope this democratic institution will continue to exist in the future.

**Can we say that Syrian Turkmen Assembly is the only legitimate institution that represents the Syrian Turkmens in Turkey and at an international level?**

Definitely. We are a member of Syrian National Coalition. But we have created our own assembly. Syrian

*We want to live as "Syrian citizens" by keeping our national identity.*



Turkmen Assembly consists of political parties and non-governmental organizations. While our fight continues on the ground and at an international level we deal with other problems in the Syrian opposition. We think that we are not represented as we should in Syrian National Coalition.

**How many people are there in the coalition? How many are there who represent the Turkmens?**

The coalition has changed a lot of times. We do not think that Syrian Coalition is as strong as it was in the past. However, they are not to blame because they deal with their own problems, they do not have much time to deal with Turkmens' problems. When Turkmens were about to take important steps which will move them forward, the coalition had to deal with either a presidential election or another important develop-

ment other than us. Syrian opposition was too busy to pay attention to Turkmens. This was an obstacle for us. What is important is that we have submitted a "Turkmen Document" to the coalition in which we explained our visions and demands for the future.

**What do you think Syria will be faced with in the future? Where do you see Turkmens in Syria's future?**

Our fight is conducted for two reasons. One is creating an independent, democratic and pluralist Syria that respects human rights. And the second one is that Turkmens take part in forming a better Syria.

**Can we say that you do not support ethnic and sectarian division?**

We wish that all ethnic

groups stay united and their rights as well as the Turkmen's rights are guaranteed by the constitution. We do not want to see any ethnic group being discriminated against. So we struggle for the Syrian Turkmen to gain their legal rights without suffering from discrimination. We want that our rights are guaranteed by the constitution. Syrian Turkmen have the right to speak their mother tongue in the regions where they are the majority. We want that our political and economic rights are determined by the law.

**Considering that you are aware of Syria's situation before 2011 and you know the regions where all ethnic groups live in Syria, is it possible to make a geographical division in terms of who lives where ?**

Today, in the fifth year of the Syrian civil war, it is evident that the war broke out in order to accelerate the separation between the ethnic groups and sects in Syria. We have been living there for a thousand years. We are used to living peacefully with every group of people in Syria. In other words, we have a sense of belonging to Syria, our villages and regions. However, there are some powerful groups who have been planning this separation for a long time with in-

ternational support. They are very different from us.

**How is that they are different from you? Do these groups plan to cause unrest in the regions where different groups of people live in peace?**

The Syrian Turkmen are considered as the "cement of Syria" meaning that Turkmen are the only forces that can keep Syria on its feet.

**Turkmen have always been in favor of Syria's territorial and social integrity.**

Yes, Turkmen have always supported Syria's territorial integrity. We live among our Kurdish brothers and Sunni Arabs in Aleppo. We live among Sunni Arabs and Assyrians in Tell Abyad. We live among Sunni Arabs and Nusayris in Bayır-Bucak. We live among the Druze and Sunni Arabs in Daraa. We live among Sunni Arabs and Nusayris in Homs. Therefore, our regions are extremely strategic. As you mentioned, there are groups who have plans to take our lands away from us. For example, Turkmen in Homs were forced to leave their homes. Some of them went to Turkey and some went to Lebanon. An ethnic cleansing policy was implemented in Homs. No matter how

*Syrian Turkmen Assembly consists of political parties and non-governmental organizations.*

hard it is, Syrian Turkmen Assembly is trying to ensure Turkmens' presence in their homes in Aleppo in order to prevent any change in demographics. That is very important. We do not want to live what has happened in Homs once more. Unfortunately, a lot of terrorist organizations were formed in those regions in order to force us to leave. What we have gone through is a matter of life and death for us. If the territorial integrity of Syria cannot be preserved, there is no future in Syria for Turkmens.

**You are a member of Syrian National Coalition. You meet with UN Special Envoy for Syria on special occasions. How do you assess the conflicts and interpret the current situation?**

**What developments do you expect in the future?**

Syrian Turkmens were involved in politics after the Syrian Turkmen Assembly. We are certainly grateful to the Republic of Turkey for its huge support. We founded Syrian Turkmen Assembly thanks to Turkey's support.

Syrian Turkmen Assembly was invited as the special guest of UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for the meetings in Geneva which is highly crucial in the history of Turkmens. We have been waiting for this moment for four years. Special invitation was sent to the presidency of Syrian Turkmen Assembly. We set off with a committee of four people and have met with Mr. Mistura. We stated clearly our demands and views regarding Syria's future and



the Assad regime. Additionally we submitted a written report of our demands. Our warm meeting lasted one hour and a half. At the end, Mr. Mistura emphasized the importance of Turkmens for Syria's future. With this meeting, the presence of Turkmens in Syria was recognized by an international organization for the first time in history. It is important that the presence of the Syrian Turkmens was documented in UN archives. From now on, neither the international community nor the Syrian opposition can ignore us. We have made a lot of sacrifice, we have lost 30 thousand people and our struggle still continues. Turkmens' and Syria's future is interdependent.

**As you mentioned, you have about 30 thousand martyrs. A lot of people have been wounded and lived in terrible conditions. It is an undeniable fact that Turkmens have been affected to a much greater extent than other groups. They are under a lot of pressure from the regime. Moreover, they feel under threat because of PYD's enlargement strategies and ISIS's violence. That is why you turned to Turkey. How do you evaluate the situation?**

We always insist that Turk-

mens are the biggest victims of this battle. Our regions are very strategic; therefore they are targeted by certain organizations that have secret plans for Syria's future. We try to deal with both the regime and terrorist organizations. We are under constant barrel bomb strikes by the regime. I am sure you have heard that Aleppo has been under control of ISIS since the fall of Çobanbey. ISIS is heading for the West. They are heading for Azaz and Öncüpınar border gate where Turkmen villages are situated. They plan to head towards Afrin and take control of it as they did in Kobani. The Coalition has not taken any action against ISIS so far. On the contrary, they have opened fire on Turkmen villages and the opposition. The situation is the same in Tell Abyad. PYD forces are attacking ISIS forces. There are Turkmen villages in Hammam Turkmen, Tell Abyad as well as some Arab groups. They are on the battle field. They have been under Islamic State's control for a year and a half, now PYD forces control that area. They are under fire from four different groups; the Coalition, the Syrian regime, ISIS and PYD. Where can they go once they have left their regions? Thanks to Turkey's open door policy, Syrians could flee the battle field and take shelter in Turkey. We do not accept a state-

*No matter how hard it is, Syrian Turkmen Assembly is trying to ensure Turkmens' presence in their homes in Aleppo in order to prevent any change in demographics.*

ment like this “There were 20 thousand Turkmens in Tell Abyad”. When we think about a region, we consider its habitants as a whole without discriminating between their languages, sects, religions and ethnicity. There are Turkmens, Christians, Kurds and Arabs among them. There are our Iraqi brothers who came from Al-Hasakah. We never thought that Turkey kept its gates closed to us. Elections were held in Turkey at that time. In fact, Turkey acted rightfully when taking precautions to prevent terrorists organizations from passing through its gates. That is why Turkey allowed Turkmens gradually within its borders. Turkmen villages in Aleppo have been under the control of the Islamic State for a year and a half. ISIS has been controlling Turkmen villages (242 in total) from Euphrates and Jarab-

ulus to the west of Çobanbey and Azaz. Although ISIS plans to capture strategic places such as Öncüpınar gate and Azaz, international coalition chooses to sit back and watch. On the contrary, international community supports PYD forces in Tell Abyad. Kurdish regions have been divided recently. We think that first, the creation of a second Kobani incident in Afrin and then taking control of the regions where Turkmens leave, from west to the east, are planned.

Let's say for a moment that PYD won against ISIS there. This is no benefit to Turkmens. What matters for us is to be able to stay in our homelands where we have been living for a thousand years. We are not interested in which terrorist group won against which one. We believe that all terrorist groups should be fought against and suppressed,



that is the only way that Turkmens can live in peace.

**If necessary measures were not taken, all parties did not act with common sense and manipulate the current situation to extend their ethnic, sectarian or religious spheres of influence, scope of authority or sovereignty, there could be no hope for a sustainable peace in Syria. Your approach on this issue is very clear, you want a Syria where all ethnic and religious groups live peacefully and can be represented equally. However, current situation is not suitable to create such an environment.**

The situation in Syria is changeable. A lot of estimations have been made about Syria's future. It was estimated that Assad would be overthrown, but the fall of the regime will not make so much difference. For Turkmens, Assad must leave indeed; he is a dictator who has been slaughtering women, children and old people in his country. What we say is that all terrorist organizations must be eradicated once and for all. It is wrong to discriminate between bad and good terrorists. We have the names of the terrorists organizations. The fight against terrorism should be against any terrorists and

radical groups that have plans against the territorial integrity of Syria. I am afraid, the international community supports less threatening terrorist groups against more dangerous and violent ones. This is a dangerous thing to do. An all out fight against all terrorist organizations is a necessity. There are no other options.

**What do you think about the political situation in regard to the future of the Assad regime and ISIS?**

Certain forces have been using perception management in Syria. For this reason, people tend to think that two things exist in Syria; first one is the regime and the second one is the terrorist organizations. However, there are also Free Syrian Army, a moderate opposition and Syrian National Coalition in Syria. These forces want to see that Syrian people are confused about what is going on. They want to force Syrian people to choose between terrorists and the Assad regime. In fact, there are not only radical groups in Syria, there is a Free Syrian Army and other opposing forces who fight against the Assad regime in various regions such as Jisr ash-Shugur, Ariha and Idlib. People tend to think that "there are only the regime and the radical forces". However, what should not be ignored is

*First, the creation of a second Kobani incident in Afrin and then taking control of the regions where Turkmens leave, from west to the east, are planned.*

the presence of a moderate opposition.

**In terms of different actors and the balance among these actors, precisely the triple balance, where do you think this conflict will lead Syria to?**

We have always supported the territorial integrity of Syria. Because Turkmens can only survive if it is preserved. However, the ongoing war threatens Syria's territorial integrity. Integrity must be preserved. We do our best to prevent an ethnic cleansing from happening in Aleppo as it hap-

pened in Homs. And we must do our best to preserve the Turkmen identity in Aleppo. Syrian regimes have tried to assimilate our people into Arabian culture, especially the Baath regime. Now we are up against terrorist groups that are planning to take the control of our homelands. They are dangerous for us. Turkmens are under threat in Syria. The only power we have relied on through this painful process has always been our one and only supporter, Republic of Turkey. We pray for Turkey's stability.

**Thank you for your time.**

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