

The Turkmen of Erbil: captives in their city

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William R. Hay, an English political officer, ruled the Erbil region from 1918 to 1920. He commented on the population of the city as follows:¹

"The only two Turkish speaking populations which concern us closely are Erbil and Altun Kopri". "One mahalla or quarter of the town (Erbil) is purely Kurdish, and in the rest the lower classes resemble the Kurds in appearance and dress. All can speak Kurdish fluently, but the language of their homes is Turkish. In the upper town which contains 6000 inhabitants, the purest Turkish element is found" "Starting from with the Nebi Yunus on the bank of the Tigris opposite Mosul, and running down through Erbil, Altun Kopri, Kerkuk, Kifri and Kizil Rabat to Mendeli we find a line of towns with Turkmen speaking inhabitants"

The Kurdish arrival to the region is portrayed by Hay on several occasions:^{2, 3}

"Dizai tribe descended from the hills about 3 centuries ago, and occupied a few villages round Qush Tappah. In the middle half of the 19th century they started to expand, and rapidly covered the whole country up to Tigris. In the late 1920s, they constitute one third of the Erbil district population." "It is reported that less than a century ago trees and shrubs were plentiful on the slopes of Qara Choq Dagh; when the Kurds came, however, they were quickly taken for fire woods and no trace of them now remains"

Today Erbil is a heavily populated city and has been declared capital of the Kurdish region. No less than one third of the city's population is Turkmen. Under the aggressive hegemonic policy of Kurdish tribal parties, the Turkmen of Erbil are marginalized, intimidated and exposed to suppression and assimilation.

Marginalization

The Turkmen parties got only 2000 votes in the Iraqi general election in Erbil. Seats in the city council are shared between members of two Kurdish parties; the KHP & KUP. Policy dictates that appointment of governmental offices and positions are to be made to members of Kurdish political parties only, thus depriving the Turkmen who are not members of Kurdish parties from governmental posts. The estimated number of employees in Kurdish region is about a million.⁴

Turkmen are being discriminated against and are seldom appointed to hold governmental offices or in the university in Erbil. Those who want to be appointed must show allegiance to the Kurdish parties and support their party's ideology.

Assimilation

In April 2005, Kurdish security agents broke in to Turkmen institutions and took over 24 buildings: Nine primary and four secondary schools, the buildings for education, health, information, Turkmen Unions and syndicates, Turkmen House, Shifa dispensary, the Turkmen Radio and Television, Turkmeneli print house, the building of headquarters of the Iraqi Turkmen Front in Erbil, the building of Iraqi Turkmen National Party and the building of the Turkmeneli party.

The educational quality in the Turkmen schools was deliberately worsened which lead to a decrease in the number of students; the student registration have been stopped in 2008. The name of the Turkmeneli Television and Radio were changed and are now used as propaganda instruments by those Turkmen that work for the Kurdish parties and whom are paid by the Kurdish authorities. The Turkmeneli newspaper has not been published in Erbil and the Turkmeneli print house has been out of use. The Turkmen department of the Institution for Teachers was closed. Turkmen publications are not allowed to be sold in shops and put in the

libraries. Cafés and public houses can not operate Turkmen TV and radio and can not keep the Turkmen publications, such as newspapers in their premises.

Suppression and intimidation

The suppressive policy of the Kurdish administration hinders the appearance of Turkmen civil society activists and stall establishment of Turkmen civil society and political organizations. The Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) is the only Turkmen organization which could resist the suppressive policy of the Kurdish authorities, but its functioning is severely restricted. The ITF is not allowed to realize political, social and cultural activities only inside the small buildings of the organization. Governmental buildings cannot be rented. Those who present logistic support to Turkmen organizations will be intimidated. During election campaigns Turkmen were allowed hang their posters and flags only on their own buildings.

The daily critics to the Turkmen organizations, by the newspapers of which the majority are controlled by the Kurdish political parties puts continuous psychological stress on the Turkmen of Erbil and particularly, on the small numbers of the politicians and activists who could resist the suppression.

Mr. Nadhim Abd al-Karim al-Saig was the chief of the news division of the Turkmeneli Radio and television which was taken over by Barzani's administration. Resisting the intimidations and threats of the Kurdish authorities, he is active in different fields: media, politics and civil society. He was arrested by Kurdish Peshmerge militia on 30 Augustus 2008 in the center of Erbil city, when he photographed the entrance of the Erbil citadel, which is located in the center of the city and officially considered a historical landmark. When they found a number of Turkmen newspapers with him, he was taken to a center of Peshmerge militia. There he was exposed to a harsh interrogation. He was accused of spying and taken to the inspection department of the Peshmerge headquarters. The authority which received him asked those who brought him if any one knew of his arrest. They answered that his son was with him. It is worth noting that there are thousands of missing persons in the vast regions which controlled by KDP and KUP. The investigation continued for 2 hours and the investigators were a colonel and other with higher rank. He was cursed at, insulted, harshly beaten and accused of different charges. He was put in a prison, where about 40 other prisoners were being detained and he was threatened to be questioned even more harshly. In contrary, the second interrogation was much calmer and he was asked to abandon writing against the Kurdish administration. Later on, he was released and asked not to talk to any one and write about his arrest.

This is one of the many suppressive methods, which the Turkmen of Erbil are exposed to since the institution of the Save Haven in 1991, to intimidate the Turkmen of Erbil. These have decreased severely the engagement of the Turkmen of Erbil in the cultural, social and political activities. The small number of the Turkmen activists who resists the intimidation of the Kurdish authorities lives in fear of arrest, exposure to persecution, disappearance and assassination.

Reference:

1. William R. Hay, "Two Years in Kurdistan 1918 – 1920", (William Clowes and Sons, Limited, London and Beccles 1921), P. 81 – 83
2. Ibid., P. 77
3. Ibid., P. 19
4. Judit Neurink, "another copy of Saddam Regime", July 2007, http://archief.trouw.nl/artikel?REC=TR_ART_00225426