

Kerkuk after Occupation

Mohammed Khalil Nasef, Member of Kerkuk City Council

Mohammed Khalil Nasef is an elected member of the Kerkuk City Council as a representative of the Arabic group, serving at present as the Head of the Council's Commission on Projects. He further serves on the government appointed Committee charges with implementing Article 140 and spoke on the recent realities in Kerkuk.

The Kerkuk issue, opened Mr. Nasef, is the focus of attention of both Iraqis and people outside Iraq. The city, he continued, "is oil rich and considered an example of pacifist cohabitation between different religions and ethnicities. It is certain that the situation in Kerkuk is important for the stability of all Iraq."

Iraqis have experienced considerable suffering due to poor administration of the new authorities in Iraq explained Mr. Nasef, especially the Arab and Turkmen regions in the north, including Kerkuk.

Article 142 of the Iraqi Constitution, reminded Mr. Nasef, is a paragraph which states some articles can be amended, including Article 140, if they are considered to be under conflict. Mr. Nasef continued to explain that not all constitutional articles received acceptance from all Iraqis; one of which is Article 140. Some political parties, noted Mr. Nasef, pushed for the application of Article 140 without waiting for national consensus; and so implementation of Article 140 began prematurely noted Mr. Nasef.

Mr. Nasef highlighted the historically multi-ethnic nature of Kerkuk, which is located 250 km northeast of Baghdad. The Zab River forms its northern boundary and had an estimated 855,000 population size before occupation informed Mr. Nasef. A project was implemented on the Zab River explained Mr. Nasef; one which provided water to the city of Kerkuk and its surrounding farms. "This project changed the lives of many of the villagers and farmers; their lives became better." In later years, continued Mr. Nasef, the water level of the Zab River drastically decreased due to dams built throughout Kurdish regions, which has adversely impacted access to water in Kerkuk and consequently the quality of life there.

Mr. Nasef noted that Kerkuk remains today a multi-ethnic city that includes Turkmen, Arabs, Kurds and Chaldo-Assyrians. "Kerkuk has been known for a long time for its different ethnicities that live in peace and harmony."

Following the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003 the demography of northern Iraq continued to change, asserted Mr. Nasef, largely due to the "Kurdification" of administrations, marginalization of non-Kurdish communities, and the massive in-migration of Kurdish people to the region. Since the fall of the regime, explained Mr. Nasef, the Kerkuk administration has behaved as Kerkuk is part of the Kurdish region. Authorities have distributed large swaths of land to the newly incoming Kurdish families and have supported them financially to built houses on these lands affirmed Mr. Nasef. Furthermore, authorities have changed the non-Kurdish directors of all governmental offices using various types of intimidation by the Peshmerga militias, which are enormous in the province, he asserted. Large numbers of Arab and Turkmen youth are arrested and face persecution while in prison in Kurdish regions Mr. Nasef noted. Many other youths, continued Mr. Nasef, are assassinated.

The Kerkuk problem has become an international issue stressed Mr. Nasef. In addition, the matters of land claims and demographic changes in the region are issues of human rights he asserted; therefore representatives from the United Nations should participate in the Article 140 Commission. These representatives should also directly control voter registrars in all election centres in Kerkuk he suggested.

Mr. Nasef considers the "Kurdified" Kerkuk administration to be illegal as they came to power firstly via the occupation authorities and later on by a manipulated election.

Mr. Nasef underlined several reports which point out the dangers surrounding the Article 140 referendum and it was due to these reports and the dangers they highlighted, explained Mr. Nasef, that the Iraqi and

American administrations postponed the referendum. The International Crisis Group has been active in submitting information to the Iraqi and American leaders warning them of the rising tensions in Kerkuk noted Mr. Nasef.

There are large numbers of Kurds from northern Iraq, including from provinces other than Kerkuk, who were displaced and are currently living in central and southern Iraq stated Mr. Nasef. These people, he continued, have possessions such as homes, land and businesses. According to the Iraqi Constitution and Article 140 these Kurds should also return to their original place of residence in northern Iraq asserted Mr. Nasef.

In some areas in Kerkuk an illegal form of normalization, claimed Mr. Nasef, was carried out by Kurdish political parties and militias. He continues to explain that thousands of Arabs were forcibly removed from their homes and forced to flee Kerkuk, despite the fact that these people were cultivating lands in accordance with government contracts. These people are now living in refugee camps throughout Iraq under egregious living and economic circumstances Mr. Nasef highlighted. Instead of the Kurds formerly living in Kerkuk returning, thousands of Kurdish families not originally from Kerkuk were given land and other privileges lamented Mr. Nasef. Some of the Arabs forcibly removed, noted Mr. Nasef, have returned to Kerkuk and rent homes while their original homes remain occupied by Kurdish families.

There are thousands of Arabic families in Kerkuk who previously immigrated to Kerkuk without any support from the former regime, asserted Mr. Nasef, under what was officially titled the Transport of Subdivision Registered peoples. Thereafter he continued, these families bought homes and created businesses. What are we going to do with these people who are not mentioned in Article 140, questioned Mr. Nasef. He asserted the Kurdish dominated government in Kerkuk has dealt with these Arabs by forcing them to leave their homes and prohibiting them from holding employment. This presents a difficult situation, emphasized Mr. Nasef, as there are thousands of qualified workers who have been employed for over 25 years in Kerkuk and who are now being forced to leave. How will they find the same speciality work in their previous places of residence, questioned Mr. Nasef.

"The Constitution is considered the most important law for the life of citizens." It determines the relationship between citizens and the state and it guarantees the rights and freedoms of citizens, continued Mr. Nasef. "After the Constitution was created there were some contradictory points that caused the people to lose confidence in the state." For example, after the fall of Saddam's regime, noted Mr. Nasef, no Iraqi Arab was appointed in Kerkuk. Despite orders from the Iraqi central government the Kerkuk Government refused to accept their appointments asserted Mr. Nasef. Furthermore he continued, the unqualified Kurdish police chief of Kerkuk city was dismissed, however the order was not realized by the Kurdish governor in Kerkuk. The disobedient actions of the "Kurdified" Kerkuk administration is the major catalyst behind the failure of the normalization process asserted Mr. Nasef.

Unemployment is on the rise among the Arab community in Kerkuk stressed Mr. Nasef. Moreover he continued, Arabs in Kerkuk are faced with harsh intimidation from the Kurdish dominated administration.

Mr. Nasef concluded by urging impartial parties to intervene in the Kerkuk situation. Furthermore he called for the security forces, army and police in Kerkuk to be composed of members from all ethnic communities and to remain impartial at all times.

Mr. Nasef affirmed in his final words that many Arabs and Turkmen have been killed or jailed as a result of their involvement Kerkuk politics. Discussing the Kerkuk issue can be a life threatening venture stressed Mr. Nasef.