



True North in
Canadian public policy

Straight Talk

October 2017

Straight Talk with Her Excellency Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman

Today, Iraq and Kurdistan are in the middle of a great contest of wills: the will of the Kurdish people expressed in their recent independence referendum, and the will of the Iraqi federal government to keep Kurdistan in Iraq. The Macdonald-Laurier Institute hosted Her Excellency Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the Kurdistan Regional Government's Representative to the United States, on October 25. It was a rare opportunity to discuss with one of the leading experts of the world what is affecting the Kurdish people, their aspirations, and the complicated region they are confronting.



Her Excellency Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman is the Kurdistan Regional Government's representative to the United States. Prior to her US appointment in 2015, Ms. Abdul Rahman was the High Representative to the United Kingdom. She was elected to the Leadership Council of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in 2010. Before her career in public service, Ms. Abdul Rahman worked as a journalist for 17 years. She began her career on local newspapers in London and won the Observer Newspaper's Farzad Bazoft Memorial Prize in 1993, which led her to work at *The Observer* and later at the *Financial Times*. She worked for the *FT* in Britain and in Japan, where she was Tokyo Correspondent. Ms. Abdul Rahman was born in Baghdad. Her family briefly lived in Iran in the mid-1970s before moving to Britain in 1976. She is a history graduate from London University.

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MLI: As Iraqi forces and militias have moved against the Kurdish Peshmerga in recent days, many are questioning the timing of the recent referendum on Kurdish independence. Why did the Kurdistan Regional Government decide to proceed with the referendum when they did? What was the significance of holding it in September 2017?

HE Abdul Rahman: We wanted to hold a referendum much earlier, years earlier, but because of the fight against ISIS it was set aside. But why did we even want a referendum? The Kurds have wanted an independence date for 100 years, essentially since the creation of Iraq and the carving up of the Middle East. But in 2003, we decided that we would be part of the new Iraq. We had a choice in 2003. We had been autonomous since '91. We knew that America was about to intervene and we made the decision that we wouldn't push for independence. Instead, we would join the new Iraq. An Iraq that we believed would be federal, democratic and secular. And we've genuinely invested in this new Iraq.

We helped to draft the new Constitution, which was passed in 2005. We sent some of our best people to Baghdad. The President of Iraq was Jalal Talabani, a Kurd. And the foreign minister, later the finance minister, was Hoshiyar Zebari. And members of Parliament – Kurdistan has had a block in the Iraqi Parliament since 2005.

We have done our best to make Iraq work. But unfortunately, in the decade following 2005, we have seen violations of the Constitution by successive prime ministers and governments in Baghdad, with the international community largely turning a blind eye. We have seen the hounding of the Sunni community. We have seen the Iraqi army turn into a sectarian army, which is why they fled when ISIS came.

We have seen that some of the key institutions that were set out in the Constitution have not been created. For example, to ensure the federal structure of Iraq, the Constitution stipulates that there should be two chambers of Parliament: The House of Representatives and a second chamber. The second chamber, established by a large majority in the Parliament, would create a chamber that represents the regions and the provinces, thereby guaranteeing the federal structure of Iraq. We don't have a second chamber. There are many other examples I can give you of violations and of articles of the Constitution that have been ignored, including Article 140 on the disputed territories.

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Over the past decade we have seen Iraq becoming more sectarian, more violent, and we don't see a partnership. We don't believe Kurds are seen as partners. We don't see governance by consensus. We hear more and more noises from the sheer majority that they believe in majoritarian rule.

Then we have ISIS, which commits genocide against the Christians, the Yazidis, the Kurds and others, including fellow Arabs. And all of the problems that we had seen bubbling away, festering before ISIS came, have essentially been suspended over the past three years. The international community has had a focus on ISIS. It has ignored the fact that the problems that created ISIS have never been dealt with. We have those. In addition to that, over the past three years we have seen a creation of new problems, including the creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

MLI: The Shia militias.

HE Abdul Rahman: The Shia militias, but we're not bothered whether they're Shia or Sunni. What we're bothered about is that this is an armed wing of a force effectively led by Iran, loyal to Iran. This is another

IRGC, another Revolutionary Guard from Iran created in Iraq, something like Hezbollah. And the day that the Popular Mobilization Forces were created, we started to ring the alarm that this is creating a problem for the future.

We predicted that the Popular Mobilization Forces, the Iran-backed militias, would one day attack Kurdistan. And unfortunately, we are now seeing that come true. So we have all of the problems that we had before 2014, untouched, festering away. We have new problems that have been created: genocide, Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), units directed and commanded by Iranian leaders and so on. And then we have a prime minister who has not really been able to create an atmosphere of reconciliation.

So for us, how much longer should we have waited to have a referendum? How much longer should the people of Kurdistan continue to be second-class citizens, with the Constitution being violated? We felt that we had waited long enough and that in fact, there were many who wanted the referendum to take place in 2016. The political will was not there then. But in 2017, the vast majority of political parties in Kurdistan wanted the referendum.

We were under pressure to postpone the referendum on the promise that the US and the UN would broker a dialogue and a negotiation with Baghdad. We wanted a guarantee that if those negotiations failed, that we could hold a referendum then and that it would be supported. We didn't get that guarantee. And so in the end, it was decided to go ahead with the referendum.

“Kirkuk is historically, geographically, culturally, and linguistically part of Kurdistan.”

MLI: So, in the context in the aftermath of the referendum, you've now seen the invasion of Kirkuk, which was a position that the Kurdish Peshmerga fiercely held against ISIS when the Iraqi security forces abandoned their posts. What is the meaning of Kirkuk to the Kurdish people?

HE Abdul Rahman: Kirkuk is often described as “the oil rich city of Kirkuk,” and that explains a lot as to why it is contested. But for us, from a Kurdish perspective, Kirkuk is historically, geographically, culturally, and linguistically part of Kurdistan. It doesn't mean that everybody there is Kurdish. Of course, there are Turkmen, Assyrians, Arabs and others in Kirkuk. But when you look at maps from the Ottoman era, Kirkuk is in Kurdistan. It became a contested city and a contested province because oil was discovered there by the British about 80-100 years ago.

For us, it is a significant place and so many lives have been lost because of the disputed nature of Kirkuk. The people of Kirkuk have suffered gerrymandering of the borders of their province to change the demographics, to minimize the number of Kurds there. There has been genocide in Kirkuk. There has been a program called by the Iraqi government of the time “Arabization.” What did that mean? Kurds were literally forced out of their homes, only with the clothes on their backs and Arab settlers were paid to move into their homes and properties.

And if I may go back to the Constitution, the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 stipulates that the disputed territories – which include Kirkuk and others – should be resolved through a mechanism set out in the Constitution. And this mechanism, very briefly, is to allow people who were the original people of Kirkuk to return, compensate the settlers so they can move elsewhere, have a census, and then a referendum so that the people of

the disputed territories can choose if they want to be under the federal government's authority or to join the Kurdistan region.

The deadline for this was the end of 2007, exactly 10 years ago. Neither Baghdad, nor the international community was interested in implementing Article 140. If they had, perhaps we would not be where we are today. For us, the blood that has been spilt over Kirkuk, the oppression, the cruelty, the genocide, the Arabization program, we cannot forget that. It's impossible to forget that. Too much has been at stake for the people of Kurdistan and Kirkuk. We are still prepared to talk about Kirkuk and the other disputed territories within the framework of the Constitution.

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The Constitution is a very good document. It sets out how we will all live together. It sets out a resolution for issues like the disputed territories. Let's go back to that and let's find a peaceful way of settling this.

MLI: It's a heart wrenching issue now, the Constitution, because what you're seeing today is almost the intensification of that Arabization policy of Kirkuk with the Arab militia takeover the city. Who are these military actors we're seeing at work in the region?

HE Abdul Rahman: We exercised a democratic process, arguably, the highest form of expression, a referendum. And the response has been tanks and Humvees. The militias are Iraqi. We don't say that they're Iranian. They're Iraqi. But they are advised by Iran. They are loyal to Iran and they are using the tanks and Humvees provided by the United States. They carry pictures of Ayatollah Khamenei and other Iranian leaders. When you watch their propagand machinery, it's very clear where their loyalty lies. Some of them have played a role in Iraq for a very long time. There are people like Hadi Ameri, Abu Mahdi Mohandes and others.

MLI: Terrorists.

HE Abdul Rahman: Well, some of them have been accused of killing Americans, so yes. But they are guided, they are instructed, they are trained by Iran. We question their loyalty to Iraq. We believe that their loyalty lies elsewhere. We also question the power of the Iraqi government and the prime minister's office to control them. We are confident that Prime Minister Abadi wants to control all of the armed forces in Iraq, but we are not sure that he's able to do so.

What we have seen in Kirkuk since the takeover by the Iraqi military and the Iran-backed militia, is 170,000 people fleeing for their lives. Nobody leaves their home in that situation unless they fear for their lives or the lives of their children; 170,000 people fleeing overnight tells you something. In Tuz Khurmatu, which is also very close to Kirkuk, Amnesty International recently issued a report alerting the world to what is happening in Tuz Khurmatu, where homes of Kurds have been burnt, properties have been taken over and Amnesty is highlighting the human rights abuses there. Kirkuk was actually quite stable despite its disputed nature under Governor Najmaldin Karim. Until October 16th, it was a stable part of Iraq. Now you have another mass displacement of people, another humanitarian crisis and the potential for a civil war.

MLI: Some people would say that the referendum catalyzed this attack. Was it inevitable or was it that the referendum was a spark in this tinder box waiting to explode? What do you believe was the intent of these private militias?

HE Abdul Rahman: For us, the militias, particularly the Iran-backed militias have been a threat from the day that they were created. We have sounded the alarm from that moment onwards. I, and colleagues in Washington, have been talking about this threat. We believe that Iran has had its eye on Iraqi Kurdistan for a very long time. Its plan is to divide and conquer, to divide us geographically, politically and to have a weak, unstable Kurdistan like the rest of Iraq.

It is not in Iran's interest to have a stable, democratic, prosperous Iraq or Kurdistan on its doorstep. So what we are seeing today, from our perspective, has been the plan all along. Maybe the referendum gave them the spark or the excuse, but I'm sure if we go back to our meeting notes from two years ago, there would be notes where we have been telling our friends in the international community that we're very fearful about the potential for an attack from the Iran-backed militias.

MLI: Since the advent of ISIS, Canada has been contributing training and assistance to the Kurdish Peshmerga who have proven to be brave, ferocious, heroic allies. The Kurdish people share the same values as Canadians on pluralism and tolerance, the aspiration for democracy. In so many ways, Kurdistan is an ally of Canada's. What can Canada do now in the context of this imminent civil war as the Kurdish people are being suppressed by so many actors in the region?

HE Abdul Rahman: Well, the threat to us is very real. We're under an economic blockade by Baghdad, but with the help of our neighbours. And, for example, flights have been banned to Kurdistan. This is not only impacting business, but also it means that international journalists can't go and can't report for themselves on what's happening on the ground.

MLI: You have sympathy for this. You used to be a journalist.

HE Abdul Rahman: Yes, and I definitely believe in being present somewhere. I think it makes a difference.

MLI: It does.

“We've explained to the international community, to the United States, to Canada that any further attacks and we will fight back.”

HE Abdul Rahman: So for us, the threat is real. The economic blockade is real and the military threat is not just a threat now. Baghdad, with the backing of the Iran-backed militias, has been attacking us. We believe that what the militias want to do is to cross over from Rabia, which is close to Syria, to then be able to block the Syrian and Turkish border crossings. This is a very real threat. And this is where the potential for civil war is. This is where we need the international community to act, to step in. It's not enough to say we're watching, we're monitoring, or we're not taking sides. It's time to act. ... We've already warned the Iraqis. We've warned the Iranian-backed militias. We've explained to the international community, to the United States, to Canada that any further attacks and we will fight back. And this has the potential to end up in a civil war. We don't want that and I believe Baghdad doesn't want that. And certainly the coalition should not want that. Otherwise the entire Iraq project, so much has been invested in over the past several years, the project is finished.

MLI: What can the international community do now?

HE Abdul Rahman: Well, from our perspective, we have been calling for a dialogue with Baghdad for weeks and months, actually. Before, during, and after the referendum we said that we wanted to have talks with

Baghdad. Since October 16, when Kirkuk was taken, we have still been repeatedly saying we want to enter a dialogue with Baghdad. What we are asking Canada, and our other international partners, is to warn Baghdad that any further escalation, any further military movements will not help the situation. We're asking our partners to call on Baghdad to stop any other military deployment and to begin a dialogue with Kurdistan. Our leadership, our cabinet has made an offer. Again, the offer has always been there, but it's been renewed to have a dialogue with Baghdad. We have frozen the results of the referendum. This is a huge concession and there is uproar among the Kurdish population. So it's a big risk to take by our government to do this. But we see that that risk is necessary because we want to avert bloodshed and war. So we ask Canada to play its part. Canada has been a key player in the coalition against ISIS. It's provided military and humanitarian assistance. It's pledged money for the stabilization program.

“We're open to a dialogue on any subject. We haven't said it needs to be about the referendum.”

MLI: It's in Baghdad's interest to make sure that does not get to the Kurds.

HE Abdul Rahman: Yes, we're still waiting for weapons and ammunition that was promised in 2016 to come over. We want Canada to play its role in the coalition, in the United Nations, play a role as it does in the international community as a leading voice on human rights, on democracy, and ask for a serious dialogue between Erbil and Baghdad. We're open to a dialogue on any subject. We haven't said it needs to be about the referendum. We're open to discuss anything that Baghdad wishes to discuss. The important thing is to avert and avoid bloodshed, and to begin the conversation.

MLI: Excellency, Kurdistan has had very sophisticated diplomacy with its neighbours, and with Baghdad and the international community for many years. You're an obvious example of one of the best in the Kurdish diplomatic community. Thank you so much for taking some time to visit with us at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute during your visit here in Ottawa. And we hope to see you successful and to see you back here when you can come back.

HE Abdul Rahman: Well, thank you for your very generous comments. And thank you for this opportunity to explain our position.



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