

**ARA news**

*Ajansa Rojnamevaniya Azad*

<http://aranews.org/en/index.php/interview/216-kurds-should-not-fear-renewed-persecution-in-syria-expert-says>

**18 April 2013**

**Interview**

---

## **Kurds Should Not Fear Renewed Persecution in Syria, Expert Says**

18 April 2013

By: Adib Abdulmajid

AMSTERDAM, Netherlands – Dr. Nikolaos van Dam is the former Ambassador of the Netherlands to Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Germany and Indonesia, and author of *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (2011). With a profound diplomatic experience in different areas across the world and a broad knowledge on various outstanding causes in the Middle-East, including the Kurdish issue, Dr. Nikolaos van Dam observes the current developments in Iraq and Syria with a special interest in the potential outcome of the ongoing crises on the future of the Kurds. Dr. van Dam illustrates his views in this regard through this exclusive interview.

*On the basis of your profound experience as a former Ambassador to Iraq and your broad knowledge regarding the Kurdish issue there, how do you read the situation of the Iraqi Kurdistan today with respect to the current developments, especially the strained relations and growing crisis between Erbil and Baghdad?*

**Dr. Nikolaos van Dam:**In August 1971, still a student being highly interested in Iraq, I had the opportunity to for the first time meet with the legendary Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani in Hajj ‘Umran, high in the barren mountains, close to the Iraqi-Iranian border. On that same occasion I enjoyed the kind hospitality of the Kurdish Democratic Party close by in Naw Purdan, where it celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the presence of Mustafa Barzani’s two sons Mas’ud and Idris. I had the opportunity to hear the views of various erudite Kurdish national leaders at the time, like Dr Mahmoud Othman, which was very instructive, and helped me a lot in further understanding the Kurdish cause in Iraq. Much later on, when ambassador to Turkey in 1998,

I had the honour to receive the Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani to a meeting with European Union ambassadors, where he provided us with in-depth views on Kurdish and Iraqi matters.

In his sober mountain quarters, Mustafa Barzani in 1971 clearly explained his position on Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdistan was his one and only priority. More than a year earlier, on 11 March 1970, an agreement had been reached with the central Iraqi government, granting the Kurds in the Iraqi north some autonomy, thereby supposedly ending the long military conflict between Baghdad and the Kurds. The agreement was known as “The Eleventh of March Declaration [1970]” (*Bayan 11 Adhar*). From the very beginning Mustafa Barzani took issue with what exactly was to become the region of Kurdistan in which this autonomy was to be realized, and, by implication, how the natural wealth of this region was to be under his control. Barzani wanted the oil rich area of Kirkuk to be included. A key element in his reasoning was that the Iraqi Kurds had a justifiable claim to its oil wealth, because it came from an area that he claimed to be Kurdish by majority. According to the Kurdish autonomy law that later on was effectuated in March 1974 by decision of the Baghdad Revolutionary Command Council, the Kurdish autonomous region was designated for those areas “having a Kurdish population majority”, taking the national population census of 1957 as a point of departure. According to this 1957 census, Kurds were the plurality outside Kirkuk city, whereas the Turkomans were the plurality inside the city (with the Kurds as the second largest group). Another census was, however, still to be held, but did not take place. Turkomans, Kurds and Arabs all claimed that it was they who had a majority in Kirkuk. The ethnic composition of a city like Khanaqin constituted a disputed area between Arabs and Kurds as well. In the meantime, the Arab Baath régime in Baghdad was promoting the Arabization of these areas, so as to strengthen its Arab nationalist cause. During my period as Ambassador to Iraq (1988–1991) the Kurds were declared to be free in choosing either the Arab or Kurdish national identity. The possibilities for making such choices were particularly in favour of the Arab identity: once the Arab identity was chosen, it could not be reversed into Kurdish. A Kurd could choose to be Arab at any time, but, the other way around, an Arab could not choose to officially become Kurdish, not even if he would have family reasons to do so.

Kurdish claims to a larger area than was intended by the Baghdad régime have continued to play a role during the past decennia until today, just as have the claims to the local energy sources. The main difference today is that the Kurdish region is not only officially autonomous, but also has become semi-independent, particularly in the period after the fall of the régime of president Saddam Hussein in 2003. This has created the de facto possibility for the Kurdish Regional Government to independently deal with the oil and gas production on its own territory and to negotiate contracts with foreign oil companies for activities within the Kurdish dominated area, fully against the wish of the central government in Baghdad. At the same time the Kurdish

Regional Government does not permit the Iraqi armed forces of the central government to enter its autonomous Kurdish region.

The main issue at stake here is that as long as the Kurdish area is part of the sovereign Republic of Iraq, the central government forces should officially have the possibility to deploy their units all over the country, including in Kurdistan. Secondly, income derived from oil and gas exploration within the national territory of Iraq should be channelled through the central government and be redistributed to the benefit of the whole country, and not only to the benefit of those districts where the oil and gas has been found. If the latter were the case, regions within Iraq without any oil or gas reserves would remain very poor, whereas other regions with substantial oil and gas reserves would become relatively rich. Concerning the energy resources, the Kurdish Regional Government is in fact operating as if it were an independent national entity. It is only natural that Baghdad rejects such a Kurdish policy. It would have been different if an agreement had been reached beforehand on a certain division of oil and gas exploration income between Baghdad and the Kurdish autonomous region. A precedent for such a model exists in Indonesia, where agreement was reached on this point between the central government in Jakarta and the northern province of Aceh.

When, on the other hand, looking at the decennia old conflicts between Baghdad and the Kurds, and the great mutual distrust this had created, it is quite understandable that the Kurdish Regional Government does not want to allow Baghdad military forces to enter its territory once again. Nevertheless it should officially be considered as a Kurdish infringement on the sovereign authority of the central state. If Kurdistan is to be part of a sovereign Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government should take this into account. The de facto situation is, however, that Kurdistan is officially part of Iraq but in practice independent or semi-independent. The Kurds clearly do not want to repeat the bad experiences they had with the Baghdad central authorities in the past.

Something similar is reflected in the education provided in the Kurdish area. Originally both Kurdish and Arabic were to be taught side by side, in varying ways depending on the ethnic composition of the classes, but now education is mainly given in Kurdish only, leading to a situation in which many younger Kurdish inhabitants of the Kurdish region are not even familiar any longer with the Arabic language, being the first official language of the Republic of Iraq. This also gives an indication concerning the trend of de facto Kurdish independence.

It is only natural that such developments cannot but lead to strained relations between Erbil and Baghdad.

***How should the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) deal with the Iraqi Prime Minister's apparent attempt to monopolize power in Iraq, in your opinion? Would***

*independence for the Kurdistan Region be a convenient solution to the mounting rifts between Erbil and Baghdad?*

**Dr. Nikolaos van Dam:** It is up to the Kurdish Regional Government itself, of course, to decide which path to take. Full independence is, however, very difficult to realize without war and endless conflict, as happened in the past. National boundaries drawn up in the past by colonial forces may seem unpopular to many, but in the end they turn out to be much more durable than imagined or wanted. Constructive dialogue between Baghdad and Erbil, taking into account both the actual situation on the ground as well as historical realities, seems to be the better option. What complicates the situation even more is the effect that an eventual independent Iraqi Kurdistan would have on the adjacent states and their Kurdish regions. It seems better for the Kurds to be de facto independent or semi-independent than to officially claim it. An historic lesson for Baghdad could be that central dictatorial rule has over the decennia only contributed to further estranging the Kurdish population. If Baghdad could contribute to a substantial improvement of the situation in Kurdistan, things could be much different. But at the moment this looks more like a utopia. One thing seems to be sure: the Kurds will not readily be prepared to give up their improved situation and their achievements, only to be part again of a unified centralist Iraq, thereby falling back under Baghdad's authoritarian rule. The situation in Kurdish Iraq has improved substantially, also in the field of economic development and security. There seems to be no way of simply going back to the past. If the situation of the Kurds could really be improved by positioning themselves under the central rule of Baghdad again, things might be different. Under the present situation doing so would, however, most probably help achieve the opposite, with all its disadvantages for the Kurds. In various ways the present situation in Iraqi Kurdistan looks better than in the rest of Iraq.

*In regard to the Kurdish issue in Syria, and after twenty months of popular uprising against the Assad dictatorial rule, do you believe that freedom for Syria will necessarily mean freedom for the Kurds? Or should the Kurds be prepared for a new era of persecution in the post-Assad Syria?*

**Dr. Nikolaos van Dam:** In the first place I am not quite optimistic that freedom, by which I mean political freedom with a substantial degree of democracy, will be achieved in Syria in the shorter term. In case the régime of president Bashar al-Asad were to fall, I expect the military who dethrone him to take over themselves. And it depends on these military whether or not they are prepared to hand over power, which they would have achieved through many bloody battles with numerous victims, to those who would then return from abroad without actually having been involved in the bloody military struggle. This implies that if a régime change does not lead to freedom for the Syrian people in general, it will not either lead to freedom for the

Kurds in Syria. It does, however, not mean that Kurds would be persecuted on ethnic grounds under a new kind of dictatorship, as was the case before. If there would be really freedom in a post-Assad Syria, it would only be logical that this freedom would also include the Kurds, on an equal basis with other population groups.

*Since the start of the ongoing uprising in Syria, there is a crisis of mistrust between the Kurdish political forces and the Arab opposition. The Kurds are constantly looking for guarantees about the Kurdish future in Syria, while the Arab opposition –including the recently founded coalition –refuses to openly negotiate the Kurdish demands and says that the Kurdish rights will be discussed only after the downfall of the current régime. Do you think that the Kurdish worries are justifiable? What is required from the Arab opposition to do in order to reassure the Kurds on their future in Syria, in your opinion?*

**Dr. Nikolaos van Dam:** In Dutch we have a proverb that says: “you should not sell the skin of the bear before he has been shot”. As long as there is not any unified opinion amongst the opposition in general, I think it would be unrealistic to expect any reliable deal between the so-called Arab opposition and the Kurdish opposition (which does not seem to be unified either). On the other hand it should not be that difficult for the opposition in general to commit itself to democratic rule all over Syria, including the areas with a Kurdish majority. A successor régime will probably not be an Arab nationalist régime as much as the Baath régime has been during its years in power. Similar discriminatory policies against the Syrian Kurds should therefore not be feared. A key future question could be however: should Syria become a democracy with equality for all (which in itself would already be an enormous improvement, also for the Syrian Kurds), or should special arrangements be made for ethnic minorities? It can be imagined that successor regimes may be hesitant when it comes to discussing Syrian Kurdish autonomy, taking into account what happened and happens in Iraq.

*The Turkish government has constantly revealed its worries regarding a potential role of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in the Kurdish areas in Syria after the downfall of the Assad régime. In a case that Syria’s Kurds obtain their rights and establish a form of autonomous region in northern Syria without a PKK’s influence, what would be Turkey’s attitude and how would it deal with a new Kurdish power in the region, according to your point of view?*

**Dr. Nikolaos van Dam:** This depends also on the composition of the Syrian successor régime. The Turkish government will probably not prefer to promote any Kurdish autonomy trends in neighbouring countries, except if it were in its strategic interest and helps its fight against the PKK in Turkey. If a Syrian autonomous region would constitute a safety guard against, for instance, the PKK, and Turkey’s internal situa-

tion and stability would not be negatively influenced by the developments in Syria, one could expect Turkey to condone the new situation and have nothing against it. But this is just theoretical speculation.

*In your perspective, should the Kurdish people in all of Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran stay hopeful and optimistic about the aspiration of the establishment of a united Kurdish state (Kurdistan) someday, or is that merely a utopian dream which will never come true with respect to the last century's developments in the Middle-East?*

**Dr. Nikolaos van Dam:** One should never say “never”. Taking a look at the developments in the region over the last century, however, I expect a united Kurdish state Kurdistan to remain a utopian dream for a very long time to come, if not forever. In practice it would mean carving out parts of Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran, all having a Kurdish minority. And then there should be the willingness among all those Kurdish parts to unite themselves into one state with a unified leadership.

The Arab states that in the past fervently wanted to unite under the banner of Arab nationalism did not succeed to do so. And they did not even have to separate from other states in order to be able to unite, as would have to the case in order to be able to achieve a united Kurdistan.

Several decades ago, the Kurdish nationalist movements in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria were mainly confined to each individual country. Mustafa Barzani did not mention any ambitions outside Iraqi Kurdistan. A transnational Kurdish nationalist movement connecting Kurds with one another across international boundaries did not really manifest itself at the time. The Kurds were more preoccupied with their situation in each country separately. The situation in Iraq after the fall of president Saddam Hussein, and the development of a semi-independent Kurdish region in its north, may well have inspired Kurds in Syria to come out more explicitly for their own rights, just as it may have had its effects on the Kurds in Turkey. Different from Iraq, Iran or Turkey, however, the Syrian Kurds do not have one single geographically connected area in which they are a majority. This aspect does not make their aim of an autonomous Syrian Kurdistan easier. Many Syrian border areas in the north, which were formerly inhabited mainly by Kurds, have since the 1960s become more heavily populated by Arabs who have settled there as part of a Ba’thist policy to Arabize the northern Syrian border region and create a so-called “Arab Belt.” It goes without saying that undoing these Arabization schemes will not be possible without serious conflict. The Syrian Kurds’ demands for a regionally defined area with self-determination will not be easily accepted by Arab Syrians in general, as it might be interpreted as a prelude to further and more ambitious demands, whether justified or not. In Iraq, it took decades of war with various Baghdad regimes before an autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region was realized. The Kurds in Iraq may continue to inspire the Kurds in

Turkey and Syria in their quest for more autonomy or even independence. For Turkey such a development may have serious consequences, as the Kurdish nationalist movement there may be further reactivated with support from the Kurds in neighbouring countries.

====

An earlier version appeared in *Rudaw*, 28 December 2012.