

# The Crisis in Syria from the Perspective of Syrian Kurds

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### Salih Muslim

All of you are familiar with the Syrian issue and the Kurdish issue. Of course, it's a long story. We're not going to talk about everything, but at least (within the 20 minutes I'm permitted) to tell you about the Kurdish viewpoint about what's going on in Syria.

Of course, we are inside the struggle. Practically, we are trying to execute some policies and diplomatic activities for Kurdish rights and for democracy in Syria. So we are involved in it, practically I mean, and day by day we are making some steps and reviewing and talking and actioning. We are not just following from the outside. Because of that, maybe the view will be a little bit different.

Let's say about Syria. Syria is the heart of the Middle East, and the Middle East is the heart of the world, as you know, so everybody is involved in it. In history, when in Syria the situation is good, it means all the Middle East is quiet and okay. Otherwise, in all the history, the wars and attacks and everything start from Syria. Until now, the 21st century, the situation didn't change.

All of you are aware of what is called – called from the beginning – the Arab Spring, which is not anymore the Arab Spring; it has turned into the Arab autumn, maybe even the winter of the Arabs. Everything has changed, which gives the idea that the people even were dreaming something, and some other things happened. When they started from Tunisia and Libya, there were some plans for all the Middle East to replace everything, with the Islamic [indiscernible] accepting the new rules in the 21st century and so on. Then what actually happened was completely different from that. The forces were trying to make a new world starting from the Middle East – especially I mean the Western countries, with Turkey. Turkey was kind of instrumental for going ahead with these policies.

We are sure, all the people in the Middle East, they need democracy and they need freedom. Also in Syria we need democracy, we need freedom, since the Ba'ath Party was ruling since 1963. So everybody was looking forward, especially for the globalism and the information and connecting between people. All the world became one village, so everybody is connected to each other. So we were expecting a kind of democracy and freedom for Syria.

But when it started from Tunisia and then came to Libya, then to Egypt and then to Syria, we thought – as the Syrian people, and especially the Kurdish people – we thought maybe the day is very near and this regime will be changed. Somebody said maybe three months, four months. But we were fighting against this regime, struggling against them, since 2004. We know how much they are strong and how much they have roots. Because of that, we didn't expect it to be changed very easily.

So we considered the change, if it happened, it will be not before two years, and according to that what we should do. We know this regime, we are struggling against them: Ba'ath fascism and the Ba'ath Party. We have our rights but who is going to change that? The Ba'ath goes and who is playing behind the screen? What's going to happen? At that time we had some contacts with some other sides who were trying to make a revolution in Syria. We saw them. They were religious people, with which we don't believe, and some other people were just looking for power-sharing and changing the power instead of the Ba'ath. They have the same mentality to the Ba'ath regime.

So what should we do? If we go to the side of the regime, they are killing us, since 1963 to now. They are enemies to the Kurds and especially our party, which was established in 2003. Until ten years we are struggling against this regime. We were tortured in the boardrooms of the intelligence services and

security services. We cannot stand with them. We cannot even kiss the hands who are killing us. This is first.

Secondly, if we go to the other side, we know them: they don't recognize the Kurdish people. They don't give them freedom. They just say: tear this regime out and then everybody will have that right. According to our experience, as the Kurdish people, we didn't believe that. We said, okay, just give us in the paper, say: I am recognizing the Kurdish people and so on, the Kurdish rights. They said no.

At that time what we decided: we are part of the revolution; we need democracy; we need freedom. But we will join this revolution according to our demands and our colours and our voice. And that's what we have done. Because we don't believe in the other sides, we felt we should organize ourselves, our people, the Kurdish people. We should organize them and let them defend themselves. Self-defending is a natural thing, to defend yourselves in your areas. So to organize ourselves, organize our people and make them able to defend themselves – that, we have decided.

This was a decision not only by us but our Arab partners in the National Coordinating Body (NCB). We have the same views. We considered that if the revolution would be turned to armed revolution, at that time you need the arms, you need money to pay expenses. Who gives you the money, who gives you the weapons? He will make decisions then. So you are not anymore free politically to decide what to do. Because of that, the revolution should not be turned to armed revolution.

What happened? Everything has changed. This is what we have recognized from the beginning. Everybody recognizes the situation after three years of fighting. Everybody knows what's going on in Syria now. Still hundreds of people are being killed and still the regime is getting stronger and stronger. On the other side, you can see those Salafist-jihadist groups who are sent by some other forces. In the 21st century we see some examples which are unbelievable, to have people eating the livers of humans and slaughtering people on the streets. So the situation is very bad.

According to that, the Kurdish side, what we have done, we said we would organize ourselves. Of course, the regime forces, we threw them out in July 2012. After one year, we tried after one year of experience, we thought those people said that they should rule themselves, because we find there is no solution on the horizon. There is no hope even. You cannot hope for a political solution for Syria.

So we were forced to establish some kind of administration, at least to rule our people, to not leave them hungry. Maybe they need medicine, they need everything. So we have to make some kind of administration. Then the Kurdish people, not only PYD I mean the other sides, the project was our project as the PYD. Since 2007 we decided to have a kind of democratic self-rule project for the Kurdish people but we were not able to do anything. This revolution in Syria was an opportunity for us to protect ourselves, to organize ourselves.

What we have done – so this project had to be modified. The other components of Syria, which we are living together, the Arabs and the Syrians are living together especially. The Syrians – I mean as components, and some other minorities. We called them and we came together to decide what to do, how we can manage ourselves in our areas, to protect ourselves. Especially some organizations, defending organizations, they became national organizations – like Kurdish defending units (YPG) and the Assayish – and a judgment system. So it became national because there were Kurds inside it, there were Arabs and there were Syrians all together. So it became not PYD, only Kurdish, but other people came together.

So what happened? After we called all these components, they came together. There were 82 people from 35 organizations. Most of them were non-governmental, civil organizations and political parties. They came together and they decided to go ahead with this administration, democratic self-administration. They decided – I mean, it was our decision, a decision made by those that we can call consultants: 82 people. They decided to make three cantons because of the actual situation in Rojava, not to be one part, at least temporarily until we find another [indiscernible] or to see the other people, how much they can join this project. They decided to make three cantons – one of them is al-Jazeera, and then there was Kobani and Efrin – three cantons to look after themselves, for people to rule themselves, because there is a kind of political vacuum. There is no regime and those Salafis, we defended ourselves – they cannot go through these areas.

The solution for Syria is not seen. We don't know, maybe one year, ten years, we don't know. So we cannot just stand and wait for the solution. Those people – we need medicine, we need food, we need daily demands for them. So we need somebody to look after them. The best way is for those people to organize themselves to look after themselves.

That's what happened. The consultants, the people who came together, they decided to make three cantons. They said there was a social contract among those people, a kind of constitution for the people, for all the components. They decided to have three official languages: Kurdish, Syriac and Arabic. For the first time in history in Syria, the Syriac language became an official language, and Kurdish also. They started to teach it in the schools, those three languages.

There was also the election law, which was accepted by them. According to this election law, there should be a quota for the three components – four components: 10 per cent for Kurds, 10 per cent for the Arabs, 10 per cent for the Syriacs, and 5 per cent for the other minorities. Then the rest, 65 per cent, should be election by who has a chance to be elected to this election.

And also another point, which is for the women, they decided to make 40 per cent for gender altogether, for women. So the women should not be less than 40 per cent in all the establishments, which we have already – I mean, we have already done it. For example, now in the PYD we have a co-presidential system. Even for the Rojava council also, we have a co-presidential system. All the organizations we have in our system, it's a co-presidential system. Even for the defending units, we have YPG also which has women defence units. We have some people who went there and saw them and talked to them, so they know the situation, very nearby. So maybe they can talk about their experience also.

We are establishing, by doing this system, there are some points. One, we are forced to do some kind of system to protect ourselves. This system is part of the political solution for a future Syria. It's not independent. Syria anyway cannot return to what it was before 2011. There should be some democratic change and what we are establishing is the minimum we can accept: self-determination, democratic self-administration. This is the minimum that people can accept.

So what we are establishing, first of all, we are forced to establish some kind of system to protect our people in those areas. Secondly, this system we are establishing is a part of the future Syria, under a political solution which will come to Syria. We are looking forward to cooperate with Arabs, Druzes, Alawis, Ismailis, everybody in Syria, to have the same solution for their areas. This is the point, to have a part in the future. If somebody says the Kurds are establishing themselves and just dividing Syria, it's not true at all. Syria cannot become the Syria what was before 2011. It should be some kind of change, and what we are doing is a part of it --- and protecting ourselves.

Because of that, we have a lot of enemies. Some sides don't accept the Kurdish being – they still have doubts about the Kurdish being. There is a kind of Kurdophobia with them, a kind of illness. The Kurds, they don't accept it. Some other sides, they are not willing to share power with the people, a kind of mind of dictatorship that cannot accept a democratic way or solution – especially for the women. Many minds do not accept it. Because of that, we have a lot of attacks from the regime side and from maybe some [indiscernible] from the area – you know the situation very well. Maybe the regime doesn't do very well but we know some of those Salafis are supported by the regime themselves, especially this ISIS and others.

Now we are talking about ISIS – it's not only one ISIS, we have many ISIS. Some of them are supported by the regime, some of them supported by Turkish government – not the government, I mean the Turkish side. Some of them by Saudi. Many sides. A lot of them are fighting against the Kurds. What we are doing until now, we are defending ourselves. We believe that by defending ourselves in our homes, we are defending the democracy – not only for the Middle East, even for Europe. We know the numbers, maybe you are following – there are thousands of people who left Europe and they are fighting in Syria. A lot of them are killed on our fronts, fighting our people over there. So if you guess they return to Europe, what should they do? We are fighting against them so it means we are defending Europe also.

So until now, we felt, as the Kurds, we are alone. We are struggling against those Salafis and jihadis and the dictatorship regime of Syria. We are alone, nobody was beside us. Even from Europe, from other countries. So this is the situation.

I have some few minutes for talking about the Brits, the British policies. Britain is involved in the Middle East, as you know, in a very pragmatic way since maybe 300 years, three centuries. They were in the Middle East, they were in Egypt, they know Syria. They know the Kurdish case very well, especially with the conference that was held in Cairo in the 1920s, when it was decided what to do against the Kurds. Until now the British policies were against the Kurds, especially I mean. By this situation in the Middle East, of course Britain was involved in the Middle East also. Actually they were planning for the Middle East and other countries since Sykes-Picot in 1916. They were planning everything and doing until 1956 when the balance of power was changed. Even now, still British policies are very effective in the Middle East. Maybe if they are not there with their weapons and their armies, but by planning the politics and the other forces, especially for the United States and NATO, the British policies are very effective in the Middle East.

I think lately for the policies for the Middle East, there were some mistakes in the policies. I mean by supporting those religious groups, because they were saying maybe – liberal Muslims? Moderate Muslims. They never thought that the school is the same – this school, if you send your child or the people to this school, you don't know if you will become extremist or moderate Muslim. You don't know. They expected everybody goes to this school or to be religious, he will be similar to Mr Erdogan, which is wrong, a wrong judgment. It was not like that.

So because of that, I think especially those policies, maybe they have now started to know the situation and what's going on, especially after the situation in Libya. They couldn't solve it. In Egypt, when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, they know actually what they can do. The Muslim Brotherhood are not Salafists, they are not killing people like those jihadis in Syria, but they have the same mind. So they couldn't accept them.

So in Syria also, especially the Kurds. I think it's time for the British government and the British people to remedy the mistakes they have done in the 1920s. Now we are the Kurds struggling in Rojava; maybe we

are not representing all the Kurdish people but all the eyes of the Kurdish people in the four countries (in north, in south, in east Kurdistan), they are looking toward Rojava. Any decision against or with the Kurdish Rojava will affect all the Kurds. I think it's time to stand beside the Kurdish people in Rojava and to support at least their being, to accept their being.

I know in Geneva II, for example – I was in Geneva. In Geneva I, there were no Kurds. Nobody talked about the Kurds. We need some guarantees for our future, at least for a future Syria, to say there are some Kurds living in Syria. They didn't do it until now, not even just on a piece of paper to say the Kurdish – there is a Kurdish issue in Syria and it needs to be solved. Even if they don't look for the solution, at least to recognize the Kurdish being. That's what we are looking for. They didn't consider it in Geneva I and even in Geneva II there were no Assyrian people, there were no Kurdish people. We just thought maybe they are going to a second Lausanne, what happened in 1923 – they are going to repeat it in Geneva II. So because of that, we were against it.

Until now, after Geneva II, you know the situation has changed and the Syrian issue became the second land, after Ukraine and some other places. Actually we don't know what's going to happen. The only thing we know is we have to protect ourselves. We have to be strong enough to protect ourselves in these conditions. We will go ahead with these democratic steps we have taken with all the components of Syria, because we believe this could be an example for all Syria, for a future Syria solution, and also for all the Middle East. We know the mentality; in the Middle East, we need to change the mentality.

According to our party, since 2003 until now, we could affect the mentality of our people a little bit to accept democracy. Democracy is not a thing you just can give – it's a kind of culture, you have to do it, to protect it and to be it on the ground. What we have done in the Kurdish, we could change their mind a little bit, but until now it's not enough. Because if you don't think of your neighbours and your neighbours didn't change their minds, you have the same situation because they will attack you.

So we tried to change the mind of our people and we succeeded until now. We need now to change the mind of our neighbours – the Arabs, the Turks, others – to believe in democracy and to live together. That's what we are struggling for. We are trying to do it on the ground. Of course, we need help for all the people, all the organizations, for democracy. They like democracy, they like the democracy culture.

One point: until now, we have many contacts in Europe and countries and people. I'm very sad to say that European democracy just ends at the border of Europe. It doesn't go over it. That's all we are aiming for, according to our experience.

Thank you very much for listening to us. I am ready to answer any questions or any points you want to.