

26 May 2016

Attention: [Parliamentarian].
Member for [Electorate]
[Email]

I am writing on behalf of Kurdish Lobby Australia (KLA) in response to the demonstration held by Assyrian people at Martin Place on 8 May 2016. The demonstration and speeches at this event protested ISIS' attacks on Assyrian people and the destruction of Nimrud and Assyrian sites in Mosul. They also protested Kurdish aggression and occupation of the Assyrian homelands on the Nineveh Plains around Mosul, and the villages along the Khabour River in Hasaka province in Syria.

KLA advocates for peace, human rights and democratic processes for all people living in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran, many of whose citizens have suffered discrimination, oppression and war. We advocate political transformations given the governments of these countries have repeatedly failed to respect and serve their citizens, as when the Baath regime killed 182,000 Kurds during the Al-Anfal operations between 1986 and 1988.

KLA would like to register three concerns arising from reports of the Assyrian protest. The first is that little distinction was made between the atrocities of ISIS and the failures of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the failure of Peshmerga forces to protect the people of Sinjar, and no mention was made that these areas in Syria and Iraq are active war zones. Secondly, the Syrian Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) were wrongly accused of not protecting Assyrian villages and claiming these villages as their own. Thirdly, while the destruction of Nimrud and Assyrian sites in Mosul are a tragic cultural genocide, the use of the word 'genocide' in relation to Assyrians suffering at the hands of ISIS overstates the actual loss of Assyrian lives, while the use of the word 'hostile' appears inappropriate when it comes to politically differences that need to be resolved.

There is no doubt that Assyrians have legitimate grievances. One grievance is the land grabs that have occurred in the name of development throughout the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) without consultation, negotiation and compensation largely because the KRG and private citizens have taken advantage of Iraqi land laws, which progressively nationalised all land. This enabled the Baathist regime to conduct Arabization policies that forcibly moved more than 2 million people in the disputed territory of Kirkuk alone, with Arabs being brought in and Kurds, Assyrians and Turkmen being forcibly evacuated. Even the Arabs did not gain ownership to the land. They rented the land, and could be moved at the whim of the Baathist government. Assyrians describe the KRG's land grab as hostile Kurdish aggression towards Assyrians, but the land grab has been an unfair imposition on people throughout the KRI, and needs to be addressed.

Regarding the forced removal of Assyrians from their land during the war with ISIS, the KLA rejects the accusation that:

‘The Kurds are intensifying their aggression to occupy the Assyrian territory by force to remove the Assyrian population. The Kurds under the watchful eye of their regional government are systematically and unlawfully forcing Assyrians from their villages and homes in the occupied Assyrian lands in Northern Iraq and in Al-Hassaka province in North East Syria, declaring Assyrian lands as their own’.

In northern Iraq, areas around Mosul where many Assyrians lived are active war zones impacted by a future Mosul offensive. In these areas Peshmerga are being subject to sustained ISIS attacks, suicide bombers and IEDs, making these areas unsafe for civilians. Six districts and three subdistricts in Nineveh - the Yezidi district of Sinjar/Shingal and the districts of Akra, Shekhan, Tal Afar, Telkeif and Qaradash, and the subdistricts of Zumar, Bashida and Aski Kalal - are disputed territories. While currently under the jurisdiction of the Government of Iraq (GoI), the KRG wishes to incorporate these territories into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Given this dispute between the GoI and KRG, and that many Yezidi and Assyrians want to form autonomous regions in these disputed territories, international mediation and monitoring is urgently required before ISIS is defeated to ensure the security and rights of all people, in view of the vacuum and potential conflict that could occur after ISIS is defeated.

KLA empathises with the Assyrians’ grievance that one battalion of Peshmerga did not protect the people of the Nineveh plains, which falls outside the KRI, and in particular, the people of Sinjar, from ISIS aggression between June and August 2014. The onslaught of ISIS on the Nineveh plains caused about 100,000 Assyrians and other Christians to flee to the KRI and the disputed territory of Kirkuk. On the night of 2 August 2014, the Peshmerga in the Sinjar district were ordered to retreat, leaving 200,000 civilians defenceless, and allowing ISIS to take control of the city and district on 3 August. This was the worst failure of Peshmerga in an otherwise successful fight against ISIS.

The fog of war has prevented an accurate assessment of why the Peshmerga were ordered to retreat, but in June 2014, the Peshmerga were ill prepared and underarmed when called upon to protect a 1,000 kilometre front line against ISIS, who, while far less numerous than Peshmerga, were far better equipped with weaponry left behind by the Iraqi Security Forces. Peshmerga reportedly tried to re-engage with ISIS in Sinjar on 4 August, and continued to fight ISIS on the Nineveh plains, but by 6 August, ISIS was threatening Erbil, the capital of the KRI. Some observers have concluded that the Peshmergas’ retreat from Sinjar was due to the KRG wishing to push the international community into action against ISIS. If this observation is correct, the strategy succeeded. If it were not for US airstrikes on 8 August, ISIS would have taken Erbil, and on 9 August US airstrikes hit ISIS around Sinjar allowing Kurdish forces from Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran to open a corridor on 12 August for Yezidis trapped on Mount Sinjar to escape. Over the next 15 months, US-led coalition support has enabled Kurdish forces to regain control of areas around

Mosul, including Mosul dam on 18 August 2014, Sinjar on 13 November 2015 and on-going operations around Mosul city.

In Syria, when ISIS attacked Assyrian villages along the Khabour River in Hasaka province on the 23 February 2015 and 7 March 2015, Assyrian Guards and Kurdish YPG fighters defended the villages, and people voluntarily evacuated to the nearby towns of Al-Hasaka and Qamishli. However, the Assyrian and YPG defence did not prevent ISIS from killing four Assyrians and taking 287 civilians prisoner. Some of these prisoners were executed or sold as sex slaves, but by 23 February 2016 most hostages had been released after millions of dollars were paid in ransom.

In 2015, Assyrians criticised the US-led coalition for arming PYG/YPJ and not Assyrians. This was remedied in October 2015, with the formation of the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) consisting of 60 percent Kurds, and 40 percent Arabs, Assyrians and Turkmen. The SDF has been successful in defeating ISIS in the provinces of Aleppo, Hasaka, Idlib and Raqqa, and politically, in a conference held on 8-9 December 2015, two Assyrian organisations joined Kurdish, Arab and Turkmen organisations to form the Syrian Democratic Council to promote a system of local multi-ethnic administrations in areas freed from ISIS. It is the international community that has failed these people by not inviting the Syrian Democratic Council and other representative bodies to the three rounds of Geneva negotiations on a political solution for Syria in February, March and April 2016.

The only reported clash between Assyrian and Kurdish forces occurred on 11 January 2016 in the town of Qamishli in Hasaka province in Syria. Security in Qamishli is divided between government forces and YPG/YPJ. According to Assyrian reports the one to four hour clash was provoked by YPG fighters, who demanded that an Assyrian checkpoint, established after three restaurants were bombed, be dismantled. The clash resulted in the deaths of one Assyrian militia and three to six YPG fighters, depending on the source. It would appear these YPG fighters lacked experience on a number of levels.

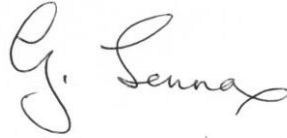
This incident contrasts the efforts of Syrian Kurds to include all ethnicities in local administrations established in Afrin, Kobani, Tel Abyad and Cizere. On 16-17 March 2016, a conference was held in Hasaka province attended by 200 delegates including Assyrians, some being pro-Assad, some belonging to the Opposition and others in the SDF and Syrian Democratic Council, Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs. The outcome of the conference was the announced intention to establish a federal system of government based on multi-ethnic local administrations and security forces in each area. The unilateral move was rejected by the Assad regime and Opposition forces, and does not have US support, but contradicts the suggestion that Kurds are trying to take Assyrian land.

Back in Iraq, there are five Assyrians and five Turkmen in the 111-member Kurdish parliament. The numbers reflect the proportion of these communities in the KRI. Because the Assyrian representatives align themselves with the Kurdistan

Democratic Party (KDP) they have not been vocal about establishing an Assyrian homeland that surrounds the city of Mosul on three sides and extends west to Sinjar and north-east to Dohuk. To complicate matters, many Yezidi are proposing a Yezidi autonomous region, while in the multi-ethnic disputed territory of Kirkuk there is also support for becoming an autonomous region. At least five scenarios have been suggested. An autonomous region could be based on territory run by a multi-ethnic administration, as proposed by Kirkuk Provincial Council, and the PYD and Syrian Democratic Council in Syria, or a region could be based on ethnicity and religion, as proposed by Assyrians and Yezidi. A region could become autonomous outside the jurisdiction of GoI and KRG, or an autonomous region could come under the jurisdiction of the GoI or the KRG. A number of representatives in the Yezidi, Assyrian and Kirkuk communities have expressed a wish to join the KRI provided a suitable autonomy is negotiated. Given the complexities, the KLA supports Assyrians and others who call for independent mediation. The KLA suggests that Kurdistan could officially become a federation, whether or not it breaks from Baghdad.

In conclusion, it is important to study the facts on the ground and listen to diverse perspectives in these multi-ethnic war damaged regions to ensure reconstruction and the development of fair, inclusive democratic processes for all citizens.

Yours Sincerely,



Dr. Gina Lennox
On behalf of Kurdish Lobby Australia



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