

ISDP ISSUE FOCUS

IRAQ SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

Political Oppression and Targeting in the KRG: A Personal Story of Terror and Tragedy

In July of 2004, George Oshana¹, a ChaldoAssyrian² Christian and member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), was detained, beaten, and tortured by the Kurdistan Democratic Party for 22 days in a prison outside of Arbil.

Summary Arrest, Torture, Failed Courts and Refugee Flight

The basis for his alleged crime had begun earlier the same day on which he was dragged from his home and summarily arrested. That morning, George was hunting with family near the Iraq/Turkey border. Several Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters stopped them along the way and claimed they found papers in the mountains belonging to their (Assyrian) political party. George looked through the papers and discovered identification cards and paperwork which belonged to several martyrs of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) – from the days when the party had been operating in the mountains in its opposition to the Ba'ath regime. George decided to part with his family and return to Dohuk in order to return the decades-old, historic papers to a senior member of the ADM.

¹ The name of the following victim has been changed to protect family remaining in North Iraq.

² ChaldoAssyrian is the politically defined name for the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac people who belong to one ethnic group.

His journey to return the paperwork to their rightful owners successful, he returned home to his family.

At 2 a.m., KDP militia fighters, briefed by the PKK, entered George's house, beat his mother until she quieted down, blindfolded him, and drove him to a prison outside of Arbil. When they arrived at the prison, they tied him down and asked if he had taken papers which he had found in the mountains to the ADM. Answering yes, George was detained for 22 days – he was beaten, hung from the ceiling from his hands behind his back, and he was deprived of sleep and continuously had cold water splashed on his body.

After 22 days, they dragged him into court, where he not only had no representation, but was not officially charged with anything. He was warned that if he created any sort of "trouble" – which they did not define – they would detain him for three more years. To George, this was a familiar sentence – when ISDP asked George why they threatened to detain him further, he answered that the KDP "loses people", that "they will take you one day and no one will hear from you again."

George's family urged him to leave the country. At 23, he found himself a

refugee in Greece, and he currently lives in Sweden.

Understanding the Issue

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) portrays itself as a success story within a failed Iraq. Whereas Iraq south of the KRG is chaotic and violent, the north and particularly the KRG, are controlled and violent. The distinction is vital. The KRG has a functional government, and is the main arbiter of the use of force. It uses this force to purge all elements of dissent and criticism of parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party – the perpetrators of the human rights violations endured by Mr. George Oshana.

Effectively, this is nothing new as it mirrors exactly the methods and tactics of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The KRG is a dictatorship and not a democracy. Political parties independent of the KDP face extraordinary pressures and intimidation. Civilians remain even more vulnerable in these conditions, and therefore live in even greater fear of voicing any opposition or criticism of the dominant parties in the KRG.

The Assyrian Democratic Movement, the Assyrian General Conference, other political parties and an array of NGOs that are independent of the KRG's dominant Kurdish political parties face the same threats and worse as detailed above.

The Assyrians represent the truest indigenous presence in Iraq and the people directly, ethnically connected to Mesopotamia. Their 6,757-year history on their lands itself represents the single greatest threat to Kurdish claims to the right of self-determination and the efforts at declaring Kurdish statehood. As a consequence, absolute control of the ChaldoAssyrian population, its political and civic groups, is a fundamental requirement.

It is for this reason that George Oshana was denied all his basic freedoms and ultimately became a refugee at the age of 23.

Furthermore, other minorities that represent a threat to the KDP/PUK's hegemony are experiencing the same pressures – Shabaks, Yezidis, Turkmens, among others.