

ISDP ISSUE FOCUS

IRAQ SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

The Summary Arrest of Johnny Khoshaba – A Glimpse into KRG Authoritarianism

At 6:30pm on Sunday evening, February 17th, 2008, Mr. Johnny Khoshaba Al-Rikany was summarily arrested at his home in the town of Telkaif, without charges, by four men in military uniform. Telkaif is a northern town of the Nineveh Plain, situated in Ninawa Governorate, and south of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Members of Mr. Khoshaba's family indicated the men who forcibly removed him spoke Kurdish and initially held him under the pretext of wanting him for a few hours because they needed some questions answered at the National Guard station in Telkaif. Family members stated that one of the Kurdish men declared they were Iraqi National Guardsmen.

Johnny Khoshaba's father went to the National Guard station to provide Johnny with some money and his identification. The men who arrested Johnny never asked for his identification or took any other measure indicating the arrest was lawful, or to even confirm whether they were arresting the correct individual.

Men at the station denied Johnny Khoshaba's father access or the chance to give his son his identification or to check on his son's condition while detained.

Afterwards, Johnny was taken from the National Guard facility in Telkaif and relocated to the village of Serkene (located

between the city of Dohuk and the town of Sarsink). Once there he was placed in a secret facility where detainees of the Asayesh (secret police of the Kurdistan Regional Government) are held.

By removing him from the Governorate of Ninawa, in the jurisdiction where he resides, and taking him into the Kurdistan Region in Dohuk Governorate, it is clear that KRG authorities are involved, or at least accountable. Placing him in a detention facility outside of Ninawa is in itself highly questionable, and the KRG's involvement is indicative of their over-reaching in areas outside of their formal jurisdiction.

Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac media sources internationally began covering this story and drawing international attention to the summary arrest, fearing for the life of Mr. Khoshaba. Quite suddenly, Mr. Khoshaba was released on Thursday, February 21st.¹

The Cause for Arrest?

Human rights activists and related minority civil society organizations are working to determine the full nature of the ordeal and the basis for the summary arrest of Mr. Khoshaba. However, it is well

¹ Notably, The Mesopotamian, Eastern Star News Agency, and Assyrian International News Agency.

known that Johnny Khoshaba is a prolific writer on politically-related developments in the Nineveh Plain and surrounding areas.

Johnny is a writer whose articles are posted on his website, 'Al-Sarkha' (The Outcry). He developed a reputation as someone shining light on unethical and corrupt acts by those in positions of responsibility. It appears this may be linked to the cause of his arrest.

More specifically, Mr. Khoshaba regularly reports on injustices and authoritarianism perpetrated by the Kurdistan Regional Government. He wrote critically about the activities of the Kurdistan Regional Government's Finance Minister, Mr. Sarkis Aghajan.

Additionally, he exposed corruption in the Church leadership which has been the beneficiary of financial largesse from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) through Finance Minister Aghajan.

In his own words, he was arrested for maintaining a website known as 'The Outcry'. Recent articles explicitly exposed the activities and scrutinized the corruption that has entered the Church leadership in northern Iraq through largesse from the Kurdistan Regional Government. Johnny Khoshaba indicates that instead of refuting the corruption he was exposing, the Church leadership had him summarily arrested by their KDP benefactors.

As part of the conditions of his release, he was required to sign a contract. Mr. Khoshaba states, "The contract was written in Kurdish and was translated to me. The clauses were that I would not

write offensively again about the government of Kurdistan, its men and some Christian religious authorities."²

Making Sense of a Summary Arrest

The political climate of the Nineveh Plain sits in a delicate balance vis-à-vis larger, but related dynamics in Mosul and Kirkuk. The latter two major population centers are seeing fervent activity by the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in expanding their influence, with a view to direct territorial expansion of the Kurdistan Region.

The Nineveh Plain is an area overwhelmingly dominated by vulnerable ethnic/religious minorities, including Shabaks, Yezidis, and the largest group there, Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriacs. These peoples, through independent, legitimate political groups which represent them, are seeking the establishment of an 'administrative unit' in the Nineveh Plain as per Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution.

This constitutional, federal agenda pursued by the abovementioned minorities is in direct conflict with KRG plans at territorial expansion. The KRG's constitution specifically identifies the major towns of the Nineveh Plain as part of an expanded Kurdistan Region. Many believe that KRG largesse bestowed on easily threatened religious institutions and leaders is part of a cynical strategy to co-opt religious leaders into KRG efforts at absorbing the Nineveh Plain.

² Readers are encouraged to read Mr. Khoshaba's own statement upon his release provided as an appendix to this Issue Focus. Translation provided by Michael Joseph.

The summary arrest of Mr. Khoshaba and placing him in a secret detention facility in the KRG, is a reflection of the KRG's willingness to remove and/or eliminate those resisting, or threatening their agenda of territorial expansionism into the Nineveh Plain. It also reaffirms the observations of a growing number of Iraq experts and analysts that the KRG has over-reached and needs to pull back from such patterns of behavior.

This incident is all too common in the Nineveh Plain, whose citizens have been

enduring such authoritarianism by the KRG since the liberation of Iraq. What is changing is their willingness to speak out loudly and to take firm stands against the injustices they are suffering.

Will the US listen, however? Will the US see that such KRG actions are a regionally destabilizing variable, and one cause of Christian Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac flight from their homeland in what is effectively now an ethno-religious cleansing from Iraq.

أطلق سراحى بعد تعهدى بعدم الكتابة عن حكومة الإقليم وعن بعض رجال الدين..



عنكاوا كوم / خاص

بعد أن أطلق سراحه يوم أمس الخميس 21/2/2008 كشف الكاتب جوني خوشابا لعنكاوا كوم عن أسباب اعتقاله وكيفية الإفراج عنه وتداعيات هذه القضية، من خلال التصريح التالي:

" بداية أود أن أقول أن سبب اعتقالي هو (الصرخة) الموقع الذي أديره بنفسى منذ أكثر من سنة ونصف السنة وأنشر فيه كتاباتي، ودون سابق إنذار طرق علينا الباب أربعة من عناصر الحرس الوطني – البيشمركة يوم الأحد الساعة السادسة والنصف مساءً وطلبوا منى مرافقتهم لأننى متهم بقضية ما، وأحسنوا معاملتى ورافقتهم بهدوء إلى سيارتهم (البيكاب البيضاء) واقتادوني إلى مقرهم في تليكيف، وكل ذلك تم دون مذكرة اعتقال، وفي صباح اليوم التالي نقلوني إلى معتقل في منطقة سكرين بدهوك حيث أمضيت هناك أربعة أيام أجري معي خلالها تحقيقين اثنين، وخلال هذه الفترة عوملت بشكل حسن ولم أتعرض للضرب أو التعذيب.. ولظروف ربما تكون أكبر من جوني أنا الآن أمام تعهد قطعه في المعتقل تم على أثره الإفراج عني، كان مكتوباً باللغة الكردية تُرجم لي على أنه تعهد بعدم الكتابة والإساءة مرة أخرى لحكومة الإقليم ورجالها وكذلك بعض رجال الدين المسيحيين.. لذلك لن أستطيع البوح أمامكم بحريتي وجرأتي المعهودة.. والحقيقة أنهم لم يفرضوا علي إغلاق الموقع ولكن لم أعد أستطع الاستمرار

فيه بالشكل الذي أريده بسبب تعهدي لهم بذلك ..

وأقول لكم أن صرختي أصبحت نصف صرخة أو صرخة مكبوتة، فانا الآن نصف جوني ونصف صرخة.. أما عن إطلاق سراحي فلا اعلم كيف تم ولماذا، ومن المواقف المؤثرة التي أطلعت عليها بعد خروجي هي موقف أمي التي قالت أمام الجميع ليكن جوني فداءً لكلمة الحق، وهي امرأة مريضة ستجري لها عملية جراحية بعد يومين، والموقف الآخر هو ما أقدم عليه صديقي ناجي الذي طرد من عمله لأنه لم يسمح لصاحب عمله أن يسيء إليّ، فأن هذه المواقف لن أنساها أبداً وتأثرت بها كثيراً ..

أن العراق اليوم هو في مرحلة الإدعاء بالديمقراطية وليس ديمقراطياً.. وأنا إنسانٌ آشوري مستقل أريد أن أقول لكل من كان له الحق أو كان يحس بأنه مظلوم من (الصرخة) كان بإمكانه أن يأخذ حقه بالحق الذي يمتلكه وليس بقوة علاقاته، أن الذي كتبت في الصرخة إنما هو بسبب الفساد الذي يحيطنا من كل جانب..

وأخيراً أريد أن أشكر من خلال عنكاوا كوم كل من ساندني ووقف إلى جانبي من منظمات حقوق الإنسان والمنظمات الآشورية والمواقع الإلكترونية التي ساندتني وتعاملت مع قضيتي.. ومن خلال موقع عنكاوا كوم أناشد جميع قراءه أن يساندوني للقاء البطريك مار دنخا خلال زيارته المرتقبة إلى أرض الوطن في الصيف المقبل وأن يسمح لي بلقائه وليس كما فعلوا في الصيف الماضي حين أقدمت للقاءه في دهوك وطردت من الباب الرئيسي، فأرجو من سيادته السماح لي بمواجهته ولقائه لأنه لدي الكثير الكثير لأقوله لسيادته.



I was released after offering guarantees not to write about the government of Kurdistan and some religious authorities

Ankawa.com/Private

After his release on Thursday 02-21-08 the author Johnny Khoshaba, to Ankawa.com, informed us on why he was detained and how he was released and he explained the allegations of the case through his testimony below:

First I would like to clearly state that the reason I was arrested is because of the website I have moderated for over a year and a half, “Al Sarkha” which means The Outcry. I used this platform to voice my views.

At 6:30 PM on Sunday night, and without being forewarned, four men from the National Guard – Peshmerga – knocked at my door. They asked me to accompany them because they claimed there was a case against me. They did not have a warrant or any other legal document. I was not mistreated because I did not resist and I went with them to their car (a white pick-up truck). I was taken to their station in Telkaif. The next day they moved me to the station in Sarsink in Dohuk where I spent four days. During those four days they conducted two investigations with me. They did not mistreat or torture me while I was there.

Due to circumstances perhaps greater than me, I am now bound to a contract I signed while being detained which ultimately led to my release. The contract was written in Kurdish and was translated to me. The clauses were that I would not write again offensively about the government of Kurdistan, its men and some Christian religious authorities. This is why I won't be able to attest to you of my freedom and my courage...and the truth is they did not impose on me to shut down the website but I cannot continue the way I intended to because of the contract I have signed.

I tell you that my outcry has become half an outcry or a written outcry, I am half Johnny and half the outcry ... With regards to my release, I do not know how that happened or why. I would like to express my gratitude for two courageous positions that were taken by my mother and my friend that touched me very deeply. These positions were relayed to me after my release. My mother, who suffers from an illness and who will soon undergo surgery, bravely said that ‘may my son be taken for the sake of the truth’. My friend Naji was fired from his job because he did not allow his boss to speak ill of me. I will never forget these actions.

Iraq today is in a state of alleged democracy, and not a democracy... I am an Assyrian independent man and I would like to say to all that took grievance or felt targeted by Al Sarkha that they could have claimed what was theirs by their own positions and righteousness and not by the strength of their connections. For what I have written in Al Sarkha is because of the corruption that surrounds us...

Finally I would like to extend thanks through Ankawa.com to those who backed me and stood by me, and to all the human right organizations and Assyrian organizations and the websites that stood by me and supported my case... and from the site of Ankawa.com I call on all its readers to support me to meet with the Patriarch Mar Dinkha during his next visit to the mother land next summer, and that he allows me to meet with him and to prevent what happened last summer where I went for an audience [with him] in Dohuk and I was thrown out of the main gate. I ask His Holiness to allow me an audience because I have a many things to tell him.