

Remarks by Samuel Jordan for Presentation at Washington, DC Conference of the Kurdish National Congress of North America

May 12 – 13, 2012

Thank you and good morning. I'm Samuel Jordan, former Director of the Program to Abolish the Death Penalty at Amnesty International. A number of you know that in 1999, I conducted a "Human Rights Solidarity Tour" in Turkey to investigate and address Turkish human rights conflicts on behalf of Amnesty International and our members in Turkey. It was also my mission to campaign against the threatened execution of the Honorable Abdullah Ocalan. I can report with some relief that the advocacy of human rights defenders like Amnesty International and the pressures of the Turkish concern for accession into the European Union led to the decision to commute Mr. Ocalan's sentence to life imprisonment, which is as you know, still a death penalty – death by incarceration. Having committed no crimes, he should be released. However, fighting for dignity and self-determination is considered criminal in some quarters.

After having attended several EUTCC meetings in Brussels, I am convinced that the fight for dignity and self-determination for all peoples including the peoples of Kurdistan must constantly be adjusted to accommodate the changing international political landscape.

It is in this context, the need to constantly adapt, that I want to revive the concept of a US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative, a concept that I proposed in your conference here in Washington, in 2008. While I think that the concept is valid, there are new considerations that must be assessed if we are to succeed.

Although, the notion was received well, we did not commit the necessary human and financial resources. Furthermore, during my work as an advisor to the Honorable Parliamentarian Nazmi Gur to properly establish and register first DTP then, following the decision by the Turkish Constitutional Court, BDP in USA, it became clear that the people and elected officials of the United States were

exposed to a single, distorted narrative describing the political aspirations of the people of Kurdistan.

Among our proposals was a reception at City Hall and a Kurdish Friendship Day to be declared by the Mayor of the District of Columbia. While the Mayor was amenable, he was instructed by the White House to direct inquiries for approval to the Turkish embassy for proper protocols. This was the assistance we received from the US Department of State: When addressing matters of importance to the people of Northern Kurdistan, the Kurdish question is a Turkish question.

How will we influence the policies of the United States when such thinking and political considerations determine the fate of at least one-quarter of the Turkish population? I arrive at this question not as an insider with knowledge of the most detailed and well-crafted strategies of the leadership of BDP and KNC, but as an advocate for human rights and full enfranchisement of all peoples wherever they reside in the world - as an advocate who has developed an affinity for the struggle of the peoples of Kurdistan.

A US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative would have as its purpose the systematic replacement of current Turkish-centered policies with those that demonstrate that the United States endorses the principal of full enfranchisement and full participation by Kurds in the social, political, cultural and economic life of the nation. Because we seek more than lip-service, this proposal requires sound planning and resources. It should proceed in stages with clearly determined bench-marks that certify our progress.

For example, the halt in oil deliveries by the Barzani government in Iraq may well be the precursor to a long-dreaded, but conceivable armed clash between the Maliki government and the Kurdish provincial forces over the future of oil supplies and sales and Kirkuk. Such a conflict will be the defining confrontation in the Greater Middle East for years to come, exceeding by several magnitudes the grossly one-sided battle for Palestine. I don't think that if well-armed, Kurds will walk away from Kirkuk. For this reason, we must implement the option that allows peace, mutual respect and self-determination. We must avoid the misery,

the lasting, death-bound misery of another war in Iraq followed by a peace that promotes more war.

The US government must be told repeatedly in as many media platforms and as broadly across the US as we can master that it has a special responsibility to restrain the ambitions of the Turkish military which might consider such a clash in Iraq as an opportunity to invade and establish an enduring presence in Iraq on Kurdish lands. Turkey has crossed the border before without opposition from the US.

An effective US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative would have the US insist that Turkish or Iranian intrusion diminishes the likelihood of an effective resolution reached by Iraqi Kurds and Arabs - if stability in Iraq is truly a goal of the US government. Prompted by the public information campaign of the US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative, the US government would also counsel its Turkish allies that armed conflict in Kirkuk might draw increasing numbers of Kurds in Turkey to the defense of Kurds in Iraq, thereby destabilizing Turkey itself. A clear signal to the Turkish military to restrain itself would also signal a successful step for us.

A meaningful US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative would focus its energies on exposing the nature and scope of disenfranchisement of Kurds in Northern Kurdistan and demanding with friends recruited through extensive social media networks that the US insist that Turkey resolve the integration of Kurds into Turkish society – peacefully. The US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative would position the civil and human rights of the peoples of Northern Kurdistan in the same conceptual framework as the US has framed concern for the status of the disenfranchised people of Libya, Syria, China, Myanmar, India, Russia and other nations exhibiting growing internal distinctions between the fully empowered and the dispossessed.

I believe that this is a proper focus on the people of Northern Kurdistan – let the people of the US learn to characterize the status of Kurds in Turkey as similar to the status of African Americans in the US in the 1930's, 40's and 50's, a dispossessed population in a nation of great disparities.

The US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative must be able to publicize its connections to the people and events in Northern Kurdistan. In December, I participated in a demonstration at the Turkish embassy in protest of the bombings of Kurds crossing the border with Iraq who were mistaken for guerillas. A social media campaign and a quick press release to at least 300 news outlets around the US could have had an impact when tied to a network of US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative local representatives. The emphasis was to quickly mobilize Kurds for the demonstration. I would have liked to have been assured that 300 media concerns including Facebook, twitter and Kurdish themed websites also carried our news release with the slogan: Support Kurdish civil and human rights!

A US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative would humanize the Kurds of Northern Kurdistan; bring stories of daily life in Diyarbakir to the websites and Facebook. At present, according to the Turkish narrative everyone in Northern Kurdistan is a dangerous, armed insurgent. How many children go to school regularly? What health services are available to families with children? What are the statistics pertaining to chronic illnesses, clinics, hospitals, libraries, employment – when compared to the rest of Turkey? We know that the state invests very little in Northern Kurdistan. What are the numbers?

Televised scenes of forceful Turkish repression in Northern Kurdistan ironically, make US audiences think that perhaps, force was necessary. However, when we publicize the lack of significant state investment in health care, education, employment and housing in Van before and after the earthquake, a chord may be struck with a US audience. Do the people of the US know how Kurds live? What does a wedding ceremony and party look like? How do they sound? Depictions of daily life and its moments of celebration win friends.

Funds for the Solidarity Initiative can be raised through donations and online crowd funding along with nationally coordinated messages and investments in a well-constructed website, events open to the public, social marketing and thoughtful news briefings.

The US KSI is deliberately politically motivated. Its objective is to alter the US policy toward the Kurds by expanding the public knowledge base while emphasizing a civil rights struggle analog that explains the state of Kurds in Northern Kurdistan. Such an expanded knowledge base and the cultivation of the civil rights analogy will declare to the US government that we and the US public expect support for full enfranchisement for the peoples of Northern Kurdistan.

The Kurdish National Conference, BDP and fraternal organizations in the Kurdish diaspora would coordinate the political message of the US Kurdish Solidarity Initiative to influence and leverage the foreign policies of Washington and Ottawa. On some issues, Ottawa may be more responsive becoming thereby a lever for use in influencing the US.

We still want to have a Kurdish Solidarity Day here in Washington, DC with the Mayor and a reception at City Hall, lectures at the Brookings Institute, a parade and rally at Freedom Plaza. We can only be bold. Goethe, the German philosopher said that in boldness there is genius, magic and power!

We will do these projects not in reaction to tragedy or Turkish repression, but pro-actively asserting the rights of Kurds to enjoy the benefits all nations seek to guarantee for their citizens. The governments of Canada and the United States can be taught to understand. Approval of this proposal is appropriate at this time.

Thank you.

#####