

Opening Remarks

Ali Kocak – MIM President

11/20/2004

Our distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman;

It is a great pleasure to be here this afternoon, and I would like to welcome all of you to this informative and important academic event on the critical role of Turkmen in a democratic Iraq. This is the first of such a symposium in the United States where various invited speakers from Iraq, Turkey, Canada, and the United States share with the American academia and public their knowledge, experience, and points of views on topics of vital importance for the future social and political developments in Iraq.

I would like to express my special thanks to the Keynote speaker Mr. Scott Taylor for joining us today, and sharing with us his unique experiences in Iraq, and his encounters with the Turkmen of Iraq. Scott will autograph his recently published book entitled "Among the "Others"; Encounters With The Forgotten Turkmen of Iraq" at the end of the symposium.

Our thanks go to our invited speakers crossed the borders from the overseas to make this event special. Their contributions are greatly appreciated.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Society of Turkish American Architects, Engineers, I wish to express our thanks to all of you here.

As a side note, I would like to share it with you that I was born in Kerkuk and obtained my K-12, and college education in Iraq.

It has been well understood that the Turkmen reality in Iraq can not be ignored nor underestimated anymore. The Turkmen, the third largest nationality in Iraq, are now demanding their ethnic recognition and right for self determination as similar to other major ethnic groups of post-Saddam Iraq. The Turkmen have become a major political test for the future of a democratic Iraq. Its time has come that their friendly, constructive, self-restrained and responsible actions during and after the 2003 war need to be recognized by the Iraqi Transitional Government and its allies, including the United States.

The impact of the new and ongoing political momentum in Iraq has brought up a host of Post-Saddam concerns. These issues include the crucial challenges of ethnic movements leaning to break up from Iraq, human rights, the treatment of ethnic minorities within minorities,

implementation of the democracy, the cultural freedoms, the type of federalism, and many others.

The Turkmens, for intentional and unintentional reasons, have been undervalued and underestimated in the Post-Saddam Iraq. Their significant presence in the Iraqi society and Iraqi political equation has been forgotten by the United States Government and other allies. Although this mistreatment caused a major disappointment among the Turkmens, they have been channeling their demands for a timely political correction in diplomatic and peaceful manners. It is very encouraging that the Turkmen awareness in the international political arena has been catching a strong momentum. This symposium also serves for this purpose where the American academia, people, and government officials might benefit from the presentations given by the domain experts.

As a major ethnic group, the Turkmens have long been aware of their own identity, as being distinct from the other groups in Iraq. Yet, their ethnic and cultural presence and existence in Iraq have been systematically ignored, denied or suppressed for the last 80 years.

Having come from Central Asia, and settled down in various places in Iraq, Turkmens have been living on this land for more than 1,000 years. In Iraq, Turkmens established six states, and educated philosophers such as Farabi and Ibn-i Sina, and poets such as Fuzuli and Nesimi. In numerous cities and towns of Iraq, they built the first schools, hospitals, mosques, mausoleums, caravanserais, and bridges- most of which have survived so far. Turkmens have become the owners and an inseparable part of their homeland. They never migrated nor did they desert their country in the history of last 1,000 years. They are very much attached to their homeland and they are proud of it.

Turkmens, during the period of Iraqi Kingdom as well as after the declaration of the Iraqi Republic, have educated invaluable statesmen and always contributed for the development of Iraq. Historically speaking, they have never rebelled against the Iraqi governments, and they have always been good and loyal citizens of Iraq. Despite the fact that they are Iraq's third largest constituent nation, Turkmens have always opted for civilization, peace, brotherhood, and peaceful co-existence with the many other ethnic groups of Iraq. Saddam and other political groups, however, massacred many Turkmens.

Among the Iraqi ethnic groups, Turkmens always pioneered the concepts of co-existence and multi-cultural democratic society. For instance, the Turkmen Brotherhood Herd, which was established in Baghdad in 1963 and later opened its branches in Mosul and Erbil, had always democratically elected their presidents and boards of directors until 1977. This Herd, however, was undemocratically handed over to an administration that sympathized with Saddam, and its previous directors were arrested and killed one by one.

Turkmen who live in the cities of Kirkuk, Mosul, and Erbil are very much concerned about their political future in the local governments, particularly in Kirkuk and Erbil, as well as in the federal government and political system. They are thankful and grateful to the coalition forces for liberating all Iraqi people from Saddam's cruelty. However, they also demand that all necessary steps to be taken swiftly to eliminate these very legitimate concerns. As the liberator of Iraq, the United States should not cause any political injustice to Turkmen. The American people and the American government should recognize the unconditional friendship and partnership the Turkmen have been providing them, during and after the war, for a united and democratic Iraq. They should appreciate that the Turkmen people share with them the common goal of a democratic and unified Iraq with free market economy.

Iraq's ethnic and sectarian diversity, the splits between Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen, and between Shiites and Sunnis, is usually seen as an impediment to building a stable democracy there. However, all this antagonism could serve a constructive purpose. Having factions zealously checking each other's power might actually promote the plural democracy at the expense of rigid communal divisions. The trick, however, is to work out a fair constitutional arrangement that is compatible with Iraq's unique social and cultural mosaic. The bottom line is that every minority group of Iraq must trust in the new constitution of the country from the get go. Otherwise, the country will never be able to stabilize since there are many denominations of the Iraqi equation.

We encourage the graduate students who are specializing or interested in doing research in relevant topics to network with the speakers during the coffee break and after the symposium for further information and exchange of knowledge. Please take your time to visit displays on Turkmen books, music, and cultural presentations during the coffee break.

Once again, Ladies and Gentlemen it is a great pleasure to be here with you on this splendid occasion, and I would like to express my gratitude to everyone involved in this organization. In particular, we thank the association of the Turkish Students at Columbia University, and the administration of the University, for hosting this symposium. Please note that the video of the symposium will be available at www.m-i-m.org for on-demand Web-casting. I would also like to express my deepest thanks to our volunteers who always contribute their time and money to our society and make very special events like this possible. I hope you find the symposium valuable and enjoy the rest of the day.