

Of Kurds and Avian Flu and More ...

World Affairs Councils of America National Conference
Washington, DC

Kani Xulam
February 3, 2007

(A shortened version of this statement was also delivered at the first Kurdish American Youth Organization (KAYO) conference at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee on February 10, 2007)

If I -- like the participants of this conference -- were a member of a World Affairs Council (WAC) and attended a workshop titled, "The Kurdish Dilemma" and found out that the speaker was a Kurdish activist, I would have, if I were you, been curious about what he thought of the hanging of Saddam Hussein on December 30, 2006. Wouldn't you? Since my friend Barbara Propes, President of World Affairs Councils of America, has seen fit that yours truly be that speaker for this talk, I will indulge you with my answer, but, if you don't mind, not until I am done with my presentation. In the twenty minutes that I have between now and then, I would like to take you on a quick tour of a desolated part of Kurdistan, which is presently occupied and misruled by Turkey, a country that styles itself a democracy and has plenty of misguided friends the world over, including a few, I suspect, at this national gathering, who ardently and blindly promote the lie and shamelessly and inexplicably wear the titles of statesmen or mandarins or -- get ready for a shocker here -- lovers of humanity, and all, through and through, misnomers, if ever there were any.

These no friends of humanity, or Kurdish liberty if you are concerned about the purity of the English language, as I am, especially when I get a chance to read the likes of Chaucer or Milton or Dickens, are at best like whacky doctors who add to the misery of the world rather than eradicate it. They use not brutal facts or the reflections of sages, but fantasies of their delusional minds and want us to trust them the way babies trust their mothers. In this country, they occupy high places in all kinds of positions, span both parties, represent both sexes, and engage in absurdities like there is, surprise, surprise, a "freedom deficit" in the Middle East and, in the same breath, tell the Kurds to submit to the yoke of Arabs in Iraq, Turks in Turkey, Persians in Iran and Asad in Syria. Should I make you privy to a few specimens of this strange breed? George W. Bush. Lee Hamilton. James A. Baker, III. Condoleezza Rice. And, yes, even that one time president wannabe Howard Dean. With these captains at the helm of your ship of state, the Middle East will not, and let me underscore the word not, make any advances towards freedom -- that is, of course, if we mistakenly assume that the West alone can free the Middle East.

A cursory look at the recent history of the region makes it abundantly clear that, at least for those who have eyes that see, ears that hear, and hearts that feel, the West, while holding onto one of the most precious blessings of humanity, liberty, has done more to deny it to the children of the Middle East than help them gain

it. "What Went Wrong?" is the title of a book about the Middle East by Bernard Lewis, a confidante of Vice President Dick Cheney, but it could also be the subject of my presentation this morning. The sage of Princeton, to his eternal credit, predicted the implosions that are sweeping the region, but unfortunately, absolves the role of the Occident in their proliferations. God knows, and Mr. Lewis is quick to point out as well, we have had an abundant crop in dictators, -- no place in the world can compete with us in despots, -- from his favorite Mustafa Kemal Ataturk to the bloodthirsty butcher of Baghdad Saddam Hussein, but both, and a slew of nobodies in between, have had longer and better relations with the West than all their dissidents, including this scribe, put together. Why is that? While I am at it, let me also poke at the thousands of peace activists who descended on the National Mall in Washington, DC last week. Notwithstanding their heartfelt humanity that genuinely stirred me, I can't help but ask them, and forgive me for using you as a conduit, where was their righteous indignation when thousands of Kurds were gassed in broad daylight and the body parts of some of the hapless Kurds or Shiites were served as food to the pet lions of Uday Hussein? I don't know how to put this for you but to state it the way it is and that is that I see a profound disconnect between the level of complaint that is out there in the media and the level of misery that is out there in the world. Make no mistake about it; this dysfunctional human family of ours is in dire need of therapy. In my work, as a Kurdish activist, I used to worry just about the Kurds; but these days, I have added you to my list. In the remaining time that I have, I would like to dwell on this dichotomy of our times with two stories from Turkish Kurdistan. And if I don't do a good job of it, please feel free to badger me with your questions afterwards.

The first story belongs to the Kocyigit family and their three kids, Fatma, Mehmet Ali and Hulya. About a year and a month ago, no one, outside of their little town, Bazid, had heard of them. On January 1, 2006, a tragedy struck their home without any warning. Fourteen-year-old Mehmet Ali died of mysterious symptoms. His death certificate noted a severe case of pneumonia. Then Fatma and Hulya followed suit. A panic spread over the tight community. People began wondering if a deadly virus had lodged itself in their midst. When word got out that the family had consumed one of their sick ducks for lunch, the alarm bells were sounded all the way in Geneva, Switzerland, at the headquarters of the World Health Organization (WHO). Could it be that the avian flu, which had killed scores of people in Southeast Asia, had now relocated itself to Turkish Kurdistan? The initial reaction of the Turkish officials was that H5N1, the scientific name for the strain of flu, had nothing to do with their country. A local effort to cull and destroy all the fowl had the opposite effect. Kurds rushed to consume their domesticated birds rather than surrender them to the authorities. Within days, a delegation of the World Health Organization made it to the isolated town to rein in the situation. What looked, at first sight, like a simple health crisis, analyzed more closely, revealed a gaping hole in the façade known as the Turkish government! Those in the know couldn't help but notice that their intervention was like rushing food to the starving Jews of concentration camps in Europe, or Darfuris in Sudan, and "thanking" the governments that had no use or the worst of intentions for the affected populations.

I was in Washington, DC, when the reports of Mehmet Ali and his sisters appeared first in the wire reports and then on the television screens and newspapers. As someone who follows Turkey closely, I have learned to withhold judgment on the news emanating from that forsaken country, be it good or bad, for a while at least. It takes a trained sharp eye and a lot of practice to find truth among the pile of verbose declarations, bitter denunciations or outright denials that are the standard stock of the Turkish officials and are in turn repeated in the country's journals pretty much verbatim. And if the news has anything to do with the Kurds, it is better not to believe it at all, but if you have to make heads or tails of it, follow a simple rule of thumb: believe the opposite. Never in the history of modern times has a country so thoroughly adopted the diction of George Orwell's scary book, 1984, as Turkey has, and, here is what makes my job one of the most mournful in the world, without a mutter or a murmur from the international community. Going back to our story, I knew something serious was afoot when the initial Turkish denials began to reflect the findings of the World Health Organization. In no time, in addition to the staff of the World Health Organization, scores of reporters descended on the stricken town and came face to face with a profound "Eureka" moment. The Kurds were not as alarmed as their visitors. For one thing, they were more afraid of the Turkish government than their chickens. There was also a "Eureka" moment for the Kurds. The outsiders, with their expensive camera recorders, cared more about what the infected Kurdish chicken might do to the world and not at all what the world could do for the terrorized Kurds in the occupied Kurdistan. The first, the chickens, had the potential to kill the White people, the preferred race; the second, the Kurds, could only wallow in their misery, just like Darfuris in Sudan, and it would be business as usual in Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and Moscow.

Thirteen months have passed since that fateful day in which the first of four Kurdish children died and scores of others were hospitalized. Considering the ongoing ban on the Kurdish language in the public buildings throughout Turkey, I sometimes wonder, how did Mrs. Kocyigit, the mother of three Kurdish teens, seek help from the Turkish-only speaking doctors who staffed her local hospital? Did she feel like a cow with her three calves, with an indecipherable tongue as one high-ranking Turkish official called her language once back in 1991, visiting a veterinarian who was barred by law to decipher it? If you think this is like criminalizing an entire people, it is, and let me elaborate on it a bit with two tidbits from Bazid, the stricken Kurdish town, to underscore my point. A Canadian reporter, Caleb Lauer, visited the region one year after the event. He met with the families of the dead children and interviewed some of the grief-stricken residents. But he also checked his emails from time to time in the local Internet café and one day got the urge to visit a Kurdish website in the English language. Do you know what he found on his monitor in a country that is on tenure track to join the European Union? "This site is listed as forbidden and has been blocked." He then visited the mayor of the town, Mukaddes Kubilay. Turkish Kurdistan is an "open-air prison", she confided in me, he writes. She also told him of her attempt to name a traffic island after a Kurdish poet, Ehmede Xani, the last name spelled with letters, X, A, N, I. But because the letter X doesn't exist in the Turkish alphabet, and the Kurdish one is

banned by law, yes, there are banned letters of an alphabet in this European wannabe country, -- hello Hitler, your dream of an intolerant Europe is finally becoming a reality these days, -- the Turkish authorities forced her to use the letter H instead. And yes, the Kurdish bard who wrote freely in Kurdish when Ottomans were calling the shots some three hundred years ago is now forced to speak Turkish, through translations if you will, with his kith and kin. I guess you should count your blessings and thank the Austrians for stopping the fathers of present day Turks from taking over Europe. Had they succeeded, in addition to reading Goethe, Moliere and Shakespeare in Turkish today, you would have had to say goodbye not only to the notorious letter, X, but also its wicked sisters, Q, and W, which do not exist in the Turkish alphabet.

My second story is a bit dated if you think yesterday's newspaper is old news. But I am a student of history and subscribe to the maxim of Nathaniel Hawthorne that, "Our past is a rough draft of our present and of our future." At the heart of my story lies the fate of a university student. Murat Aslan was his name. Kurdish was his mother tongue, but he also spoke Turkish. A native of Amed, my hometown, he lived with his parents. On June 10, 1994, he was tasked with the payment of an electric bill in person. It was the last time people saw him alive. At the time, some people furtively approached his parents and told them that they saw him being forced into a white car against his will. Izzettin Aslan, Murat's father, went to the Turkish occupation forces for help. It was like asking a blind person for directions. None were offered. But what happened to Murat haunted the family. Every single one of them would have been happy if there had been some telltale signs of deliberate absence from home. None existed. Who were the kidnappers? What did they want from him? People who knew Murat spoke of his love for life, his interest in politics, and his good looks that were the talk of all the ladies in the neighborhood. But the times were not a happy one for the Kurds. Turkey had a Yale educated female Prime Minister, Tansu Ciller, who often spoke of fire and brimstone. The Kurds, and especially the political ones, were the object of her deadly animus. Could it be that she was partly responsible for his death? The answer came ten years later. It was not what the family, or the Kurds, wanted or expected.

In March of 2004, two reporters of the *Ulkede Ozgur Gundem* interviewed a Kurdish turncoat, Abdulkadir Aygan, in Ankara, Turkey. What started as a casual talk turned into a long conversation that appeared in the pages of the daily from March 8 to March 15! In gruesome detail, the killer recounted the murder of 29 Kurds. He implicated 31 Turkish officials, some of them as high as the provincial governors, the literal sidekicks of the prime minister of Turkey in Kurdistan. Among the dead, there was the name of Murat Aslan. He had been, the eyewitnesses were correct, forced into a white car and taken to an outfit of the Turkish military called JITEM, which translates to something like, the Military Intelligence Service. There, he had undergone unspeakable tortures. I will spare you the details of how the Turks have perfected that heinous art. Suffice it to note that the prisoners of Guantánamo are very lucky not to have our masters as their guards. Again, going back to our story, Murat was then taken to the shore of a tributary of the Tigris River in the vicinity of Bezamir, a hamlet, in the province of Botan, and executed in close range with a single shot to his head.

Doused with gasoline, he was then burned on the spot. Unbeknownst to the turncoat and his murderer friends, a shepherd was watching the whole chilling scene from afar. A few days later, he mustered enough courage to visit what was left of the hapless stranger. All he saw was a pile of bones. He buried them on the spot and marked the place with a few white stones. Since no one knew the name of the hapless person, word got out that he must have been a righteous one. The villagers of the area began visiting the place as a tomb of a favorite of God. Some of the afflicted Kurds who have gone to the site have reported blessed recoveries, similar to those in Bible, after the visit.

One man who was reading this particular newspaper avidly was the father of the murdered Kurdish student, Izzettin Aslan. He visited the hamlet of Bezamir and talked to the villagers about the possibility of finding an eyewitness to the death of his missing son. Sure enough, the shepherd who had witnessed the whole thing was still alive. He accompanied the father to the gravesite. The search of ten years had come to an end on the side of a tributary to the Tigris River. If life had been normal, Murat would have stared at his father's grave, a marked one back in Amed, but here he was, a dad, miles away from home, staring at a plot of land that might still hold the remnants of his boy. What could one do under these circumstances? What would you do if you were that father? I don't know it for a fact, but I wouldn't be surprised to hear that he collapsed there and then. After the visit, he appealed to the Amed Bar Association for help. The Amed Bar put together a forensic and legal team to exhume the body. Not six feet, but one foot into the ground, the members of the team unearthed the bones. The skull, as the turncoat had said, carried the scar of a single bullet hole. The DNA tests proved beyond any doubt that he was indeed the son of Mrs. and Mr. Aslan. Guli, the mother of the Kurdish student, told a Kurdish reporter, "We suffered a lot. It is an unbearable pain. For ten years, tears never stopped rolling down our eyes. We could never forget it. We want our right."

What could possibly be the "right" compensation for the cold-blooded murder of one's son? Could it possibly involve an apology from the killers or their supporters in the Turkish government including the Yale educated prime minister who, according to some reports, has properties in the United States? Of the 31 people that were implicated with the confessions of this turncoat, can you guess how many were prosecuted? None! People, who are better versed in human nature than myself, often say, suffering leads to compassion. But compassion will only come to the Kurds if their pain is acknowledged. Treating them like beasts of prey will only lead to rebellion. Or perhaps the Turks will come up with a new discovery, their contribution to the civilization if you will, of how to turn humans into zombies. And this may be the right time to ask, what is America's role in this blasphemous domination of one race over another? Aside from Woodrow Wilson, can someone stand up here and name me one American president who has stood up for the right of Kurdish people to self-determination? If the World Health Organization can muster enough strength to send in a delegation to rein in the health crisis in Kurdistan, why does its parent organization, the United Nations, stand by idly, in dereliction of its solemn obligations, and let the Turkish government experiment with the cultural genocide of 20 million Kurds? These are the cracks of our common humanity

posing themselves as dilemmas of our times. Maybe one day we, too, will learn to live side by side as neighbors with equal rights the way they have learned to do in Europe. In the meantime, you can be sure of one thing: in spite of our bleak conditions, we are not accepting the yoke of our neighbors and will continue to fight for our inalienable rights for as long as we are part of this world.

I have tested your patience and made it to the end of my presentation. On the exact day in which Murat Aslan, the young Kurdish university student, was kidnapped, the residents of a small Czech village called Lidice were holding a memorial service for 340 men, women, and children that were murdered by the Nazis on June 10, 1942. Only 52 years separate these two events; but the mindsets that conceived them were one and the same. We abhor the authors of the first deed now, but have adjusted ourselves to live with the perpetrators of the second so to speak. How could that be? Perhaps one of you could explain this mystery to me. I sure would appreciate it if you could put my mind at ease.

As to what I think of the hanging of Saddam Hussein, let me answer you with a couple of questions of my own. Imagine if you will, Adolf Hitler didn't commit suicide, but was caught alive and tried at Nuremberg. Is it conceivable that he would have been tried *only* for the crime of Lidice and then hanged right after? Do you really think the Russians, the English, the French, the Poles, the Serbs, the Greeks, the Dutch, the Americans and even the surviving Jews would have allowed such a miscarriage of justice to take place? If my study of history has taught me one thing, it is that they would have demanded to know how and when the German monster ordered the death of their loved ones. That is what I wanted as well with the butcher of Baghdad and was shocked that he was sent to the gallows for the death of 146 Shiites in Dujail. I wanted to hear him recount not just for me, but the whole world, how he murdered one in 20 Kurds, a quarter million of my compatriots that is to say, in Iraqi Kurdistan. I also wanted to heal, if one could be healed of these things, so that I could perhaps forgive the people that give birth to his likes. But the Arabs and the Americans had other plans. Whatever they were, they did not serve the cause of justice or that of peace or that of freedom or that of reconciliation between the Kurds and the Arabs. An opportunity was squandered. I felt sorry for the Middle East. Do I need to add that I felt the same for your country?