

**An Exclusive Interview with
Najmaldin Karim, newly elected
Kurdish member of Iraqi Parliament
from Kirkuk for the Kurdistan Alliance**

*Kurdish Herald Early Release for April
2010 - Interview conducted by Goran
Sadjadi for Kurdish Herald on 01 April
2010.*

Washington, DC – Dr. Najmaldin Karim, a newly elected Kurdish member of Iraqi Parliament representing Kirkuk and a member of the Kurdistan Alliance, led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), recently sat down with *Kurdish Herald* to discuss the unresolved issue of the disputed areas in Iraq and the plans of the Kurdistan Alliance, as well as his own views on the recent Iraqi election. Dr. Karim is well-known for his activism in the U.S. on behalf of the Kurds and founded Washington Kurdish Institute and is a board member of the Kurdish Institute in Paris. He is a practicing neurosurgeon who left his home in the United States earlier this year to run in the 2010 Iraqi elections. Dr. Karim is a native of the city of Kirkuk.



Najmaldin Karim, newly-elected Kurdish MP in Iraqi parliament

Kurdish Herald: Many people expected that you would announce some sort of candidacy for the Kurdistan elections last year. What influenced your decision to leave your home in the U.S. to run as a candidate in the Iraqi elections, and particularly, to run to represent Kirkuk?

Najmaldin Karim: In the United States for many years, the Kurdistan issue – in all parts of Kurdistan – has been the focus of our activities. However, in the past few years, the challenges in Iraqi Kurdistan have become more pressing for all of us; particularly, the situation in Kirkuk.

As you know, the Anfal campaign and ethnic cleansing really all started in Kirkuk and the aim was to create demographic changes so that Kurds would no longer be able to claim Kirkuk and have it join the Kurdistan Region. The [current Iraqi] constitution was drafted and voted upon and Article 140 specifically laid out a roadmap for the return of all territories that have been cut off from Kurdistan. However, by the way of the actions of the government in Baghdad, and also lack of enthusiasm and push from the Kurdish side and our own deficiencies, the article has not been implemented. [Article 140] has 3 stages: Normalization, Census and the Referendum. We have not even started the first stage.

I felt that returning [to Iraq] would allow me to work to bring all the different communities in Kirkuk together, work toward having Article 140 implemented, and also address the many needs in Kirkuk with regards to services provided to the city. The best way to accomplish these goals and serve the people of Kirkuk and all its communities is to be there on the ground and work through the parliament and through any other position that allows me to address the needs of the people of Kirkuk and the other territories for that matter.

Kurdish Herald: What are some of the immediate plans of the Kurdistan Alliance for the disputed areas, and particularly the issue of Kirkuk, that will be done differently from that which has been done in the last 4 years?

Najmaldin Karim: I think, firstly, we need to organize ourselves as Kurds to speak as one voice and we need to have a strategy. I believe that there was a lack of strategy in the past with regards to the pressing issues. We have basically reacted to events rather than having a roadmap on how to reach our goals. Our strategy begins with our position and with who we will make an alliance with to form the new government in Iraq. Also, I believe that Article 140 and other disagreements that remain between governments in Baghdad and in Kurdistan should be the key matters in our discussions about the possible alliances with different groups that are trying to form the government in Baghdad.

Kurdish Herald: What are the major immediate obstacles to the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution that need to be addressed by the newly elected Kurdish Iraqi parliamentarians such as yourself?

Najmaldin Karim: Like I said, we need to have a strategy. We – the Kurdistan Alliance, the Change List, the Islamic Union List, and other representatives from Kurdistan – should hold regular meetings to go over the agenda that is before us and to make sure that important issues such as Article 140 are placed on the agenda of [Iraq's] parliament. One of the issues before us

is concerning the parliament's decision to hold elections in Kirkuk. New [local] elections are needed in Kirkuk so that we will have a viable new representative government in Kirkuk to run the affairs of the province.

We also need to make sure that our appointed representatives in the Iraqi government who take charge of the ministries and other senior positions are really in capable positions and that there is dialogue and strategic meetings between the people who represent Kurdistan in the executive branch and in the parliament so that we can have our issues on the agenda during the meetings of the Council of Ministers in Baghdad.

Kurdish Herald: More recently, some people are suggesting that a special status will be given to Kirkuk in the future that will be a compromise that Kurds are likely to accept. What are your thoughts on this? Would you accept a special status for Kirkuk?

Najmaldin Karim: I believe that a special status for Kirkuk will not work. It will not work because such an arrangement would place Kirkuk in a weak position. During the election campaign and my meetings with other communities, such as the Arabs and the Turkmens, I asked the people if they were satisfied with the status quo. I asked if they were satisfied with the services that they have been receiving from Baghdad. I did not hear a single positive answer to these questions. Then I asked: 'If you are not satisfied, then will you be searching for alternatives to the current situation that guarantee your ethnic rights, human rights, and your democratic rights whether you are Turkmen, Arab, Christian, or another minority?'

The rights of the Turkmen, Christians, Yezidis – whether ethnic or religious minorities – are fully protected in the Kurdistan Region; be it the language or the practicing of religion, representation in the parliament, or having cabinet members. This is a reassurance to the different communities in Kirkuk.

I believe that with extra efforts from us, and by reassuring the non-Kurdish communities in Kirkuk – whether it is about preserving their rights or guaranteeing their rights to run their own affairs or even running the KRG affairs in Erbil – we will be able to win those people who have been opposed to joining the Kurdistan Region and that the future of Kirkuk is in Kurdistan. Baghdad has completely ignored Kirkuk, and if you go to Kirkuk and visit all the districts and different villages and small towns, you can see that the services are zero from schools, to hospitals, to roads, and to electricity and water. Kirkuk's budget ranks 14th or 15th among the budgets of the other governorates outside the Kurdistan Region. This is a great injustice against the people of Kirkuk.

Kurdish Herald: Some political analysts have mentioned that the emergence of the Change List and its popularity, specifically in Sulaymaniyah, might weaken the Kurdish position in Baghdad. How will the KDP and PUK work with the Change List in the near future to ensure that Kurdish demands are not lost and distorted or inharmonious?

Najmaldin Karim: I don't think the Change List will weaken the Kurdish position. I believe the Change List and the Kurdistan Alliance List and the Islamic lists will have a unified position on important issues such as Article 140, the issue of the Peshmerga, the issue of oil and gas, and the borders of Kurdistan. There will be one position on these issues. I have talked to our friends from the Change List, at the top leadership level, and I have no doubt that they will pursue the same goals.

Kurdish Herald: One of the surprises of the recent election results was Iraqqiya's strong showing in Kirkuk. What do you feel were the main reasons that the Kurds did not secure more seats in this election than Allawi's list?

Najmaldin Karim: Firstly, with regard to the total vote, the Kurdish votes were the majority in Kirkuk if we count the Kurdistan Alliance, Change List, Islamic Union and other lists. Second, we have no doubt that there has been massive fraud in the election in the Arab areas. I was in Kirkuk and in the Kurdish majority areas, and even in the mixed Turkmen/Kurdish and Arab areas, there were election observers that could visit the polling stations and make sure that there was no fraud and that the election was going well and was transparent.

However, in some districts in Kirkuk such as Hawija, Rashad, and Zab – these are 100 percent Arab-populated areas and areas where the Ba'athists are strong and insurgents and terrorists still receive support – election observers were prevented from visiting. They were threatened, and some of them whom I know personally, said they left because they had the choice of either risking their lives and being killed or leaving the area. Also, how could you have around 65% voter turnout in the entire province, but in these places where we know that women do not even vote, there is a 94% - 96% turnout?

Kurdish Herald: Will the Kurdistan lists be making any objections to the election results because of these allegations of fraud?

Najmaldin Karim: Yes, we have. Unfortunately, as I have expected, the UN's role was very negative. I think some of this was deliberate. When [observers] were turned away and threatened, [the UN] did not raise any objections. And some others may have also thought that by having a 50/50 result between the Kurds and the combined Arab and Turkmen lists, they

would place doubt into whether or not Kirkuk will return to Kurdistan. We know Saddam Hussein tried to use these tactics, and actually at one time, the Arabs became the majority in Kirkuk. But fortunately, after 2003, significant numbers of deported Kurds from Kirkuk were able to return, despite the difficulties they faced.

And still, remember one thing, there are places such as Chamchamal, Kelar, Kifri and Tuz, which are outside of Kirkuk [and] are areas that were cut off from Kirkuk. If we get through the normalization process and these places join Kirkuk again, as they have always been part of Kirkuk, the Kurdish population will probably surpass 67% of the population of Kirkuk.

Kurdish Herald: On a different topic: You have been one of America's most vocal Kurdish activists for many years, frequently speaking out against the oppression of Kurds both inside and outside of Iraq's borders. As an elected Iraqi parliamentarian, will you remain a vocal advocate of Kurdish rights in Iraq's neighboring countries?

Najmaldin Karim: Of course. The Kurdish cause is the same whether it is in Iraq, in Turkey, Iran, or Syria. We will never look the other way or turn a deaf ear to the cries of help of our brethren in other parts of Kurdistan. We know about the atrocities and the oppression that is ongoing.

In Iran, you see that the torture and imprisonment for political belief is rampant in Iranian Kurdistan. In Turkey, people are still put on trial for beliefs, for writing articles, and for speaking out. Political parties are disbanded because of their defense of the Kurdish identity in Turkey. The Syrian regime killed Kurds and many others were wounded simply for celebrating Newroz. In addition, hundreds are in Syrian prisons being subjected to physical and psychological torture every day.

<http://www.kurdishherald.com/issue/v002/002/article02.php>