

Syrian Activist Nidal Rahawi Provides Rare Insight into the Deteriorating Conditions in the Northeastern Region

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In this exclusive interview Syrian Nationalist/Outspoken Activist/Artist Mr. Nidal Rahawi a Qamishli native and resident, provided us with crucial direct insight into the most recent tragic events that have taken place in his hometown in north eastern Syria. An Arabic version of this interview will be available on The Rabbit Hole.

Mr. Rahawi discussed how life has drastically changed under the illegal rule of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and their military wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) which is the Syrian arm of the Turkish PKK who are considered a terrorist organization by the US, Turkey and other countries. The YPG was later rebranded into the Syrian Democratic Forces under the guidance and suggestion of US forces that wanted to distance their allies from the PKK association.

Mr. Rahawi spoke about the concerted effort by separatist Kurds and their western backers to establish Kurdish nationalist sovereignty in north eastern Syria. In a must-read article titled Romancing Rojava: Rhetoric vs. Reality by Max J. Joseph and Mardean Isaac refer to this as the "Rojava Project".

As I have noted in previous articles, Kurds as an ethnicity are not a homogenous or collective group and therefore should not be painted with a broad stroke paint brush. The focus of

this and other articles has primarily been on the actions of Kurdish militias and their political councils not the people themselves, who are located around the world, nor the ones that live in the four countries that some Kurds inaccurately claim historically belongs to them (Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran). Some Kurds do not agree with the aspirations of their political or military leaders. It's important to keep in mind that tribal identities and political interests often supersede a unifying national allegiance.

In Part I of this II part article, Mr. Rahawi explains what the past, present, and future may look like for Qamishli. Part II will discuss some of these items in more detail along with videos from the demonstration that took place on August 28th against the Kurdish militias latest wave of school closings.

Sarah Abed: It's my understanding, that you are responsible for organizing a demonstration in Al Qamishli in northeastern Syria that took place on August 28th 2018. What prompted the demonstration? What was the outcome?

Nidal Rahawi: In fact, I was not behind the uprising, but the frustration that the people of Hasakah governorate in general and Christians in particular had felt, accumulated over the past six years because of the actions of the so-called (Kurdish) self-administration against citizens at all levels, and their takeover of the state institutions including schools, and shutting them down, was the main motive behind this demonstration, which was called upon by all the people of the city, especially the Christians.

This demonstration was after the Kurdish self-administration conducted an armed attack – through members of the Syriac Union party that works under the cloak of the separatist plan – on the (Private) Christian Church Schools and shut them down. Afterwards, they deployed their gunmen in the yards of

schools and churches from the inside on 28/8/2018. And then we the people of Qamishli city with representatives from the Arab Tay tribe arranged a sit-in in front of our churches and schools to get them back from these gangs, and we were led by some clerics and representatives of a number of religious communities such as the Syriacs and Evangelists.

But the initiative of these gangs to use live bullets in our face just because they saw us, despite the presence of clerics at the forefront of our march contributed to turning our sit-in into a real uprising, and we were able to get back our schools and churches and our inherited right which we have earned through generations.

(I'd like to make a quick note here that multiple local sources had notified me about Mr. Rahawi's brave involvement in organizing the demonstration that took place on August 28th. As you will read later in the interview he references this demonstration again and his involvement) – Sarah Abed

Sarah Abed: What changes has the Kurdish PYD self-administration implemented in the area? Do they have the authority to make these changes and demands? Can you tell us more about the school closures, and what they are trying to achieve? How long has Kurdish self-administration prevented education in Arabic? Are state schools still open?

Nidal Rahawi: The changes implemented by the so-called "self-administration" in all the lands that they have seized, while taking advantage of the state's preoccupation with other fronts, in addition to the endless support that they receive from the US administration, these changes have affected everything: such as changing the names of towns, villages and public utilities, rejecting all the licenses that belonged to citizens, and their properties and their activities, imposing taxes as they like, and even issuing a Military Service document of their own alongside the official requirements and daily life need ... etc. in addition to the issuance of personal

status laws that do not match the religious beliefs of the Syrian people.

Of course, all of this was imposed by the administration with the power of arms because it does not have a legitimate authority and the people did not and will not accept them – this is what was proven by the reality on the ground during the last (few) years of the war and until now, and most of their leaders are either Turks or Iraqis and this means that all the decisions they make against the citizens in our region are being issued by non-Syrians. The biggest evidence of this is the pictures of their leader, Abdullah Ocalan (Turkish), that they are putting in all the institutions they have seized, in addition to the PKK flag they carry everywhere. And even their curriculum, which they want to impose on schools, we note that the main purpose is to Kurdify the region and close any school that does not recognize this curriculum (which is unrecognized by anyone) and therefore we see that they closed all the schools of the state, perhaps there are no more than four or five schools that are still opening their doors within the security blocks of the state authority in the region. This is what the administration has done for three years now. This also applies to the private schools.

Sarah Abed: Can you tell us about the ambush attack that took place on September 8th, 2018 by the Asayish killing 14 Syrian Arab Army soldiers? Who are the Asayish? What do you think about the SDF's apology? Do you think the Syrian government will react?

Nidal Rahawi: On the morning of 8 September, at around 9 am, three cars carrying members of the Syrian Arab Army moved towards a guard post at Zawra, which is located at the entrance to the city (Al Qamishli), in order to replace the members of rotation on this barrier controlled by the State, which was part of a daily routine that has been going on for a long time. But the Asayish forces had ambushed them in one of the streets of the city where the ambush had been set for them

since 4:00 am, and they deployed the snipers on the roofs that are overlooking the road that the Army members will pass, and deployed gunmen in the corners of the streets, so they surprised the army members, stopped them and then started to shot at them directly while most of them were still inside their cars. It is not true what Asayish later reported, saying that the patrol was arresting civilians within the control area of the Asayish belonging to the so-called self-management, this lie does not mislead anyone, especially us, the people of the region, because we know that the state can not enter these areas, and this was clear in the video clips that was photographed by the citizens. The evidence is that the operation took place on a public street that connects the city with the outside, also the pictures and video clips show that they did not have any medium weapons possessed by the murdered members.

Since the decline of the state control over a lot of Syrian territories as a result of the war, the Syrian branch of the PKK (Turkish Workers' Party) began to expand its influence on the Syrian Jazeera (north eastern region) under the pretext of protecting the region from the Takfiri organizations. (They received a lot of support from the Syrian state before they turned on it to the favor of the American plan that suited their aspirations), so then their true intentions towards secession from Syria has appeared, and they began to create new names for the region, such as Rojava and the province of West Kurdistan, for the purpose of Kurdification. They also formed many militias, including the Asayish militia, which they recently changed its name to (Internal security). By the way, even the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, which were established with purely American support, are also under the control of the PYD, even if they try to cover it with some Arab members, and proof of that, as I said earlier, is the pictures of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the (Turkish) PKK. This is why, we the people in the region do not buy these apologies from some of their factions every time another faction of them

conducts an attack, and that is exactly what was happening when the Asayish were attacking us in Al Wusta neighborhood (which has a Christian majority) we had lost many martyrs as a result of their repeated assaults, while at the same time the rest of their factions were repeating the play of apology.

U.S. Bases Strategically Placed to Prevent Syrian Military From Advancing; Outlining Borders of Kurdistan

Of course, they are taking advantage of the circumstances and the preoccupation of the state, and the American support to continue these attacks on citizens and their personal properties, and on the state also, realizing that the state can not respond to them at this time because of priorities on other fronts and battles in the rest of the Syrian geography. The words of President Bashar were clear (about two months ago) when he said regarding the Syrian democratic forces "Qasad- SDF": if they do not accept the dialogue, we will restore the entire Syrian territory with the US presence or without it.

Sarah Abed: On September 8th, 2018 the Syriac Patriarch was interviewed on Al Mayadeen, what do you think of his statements?

Nidal Rahawi: Many disagreed about what was said in the speech of the Patriarch in that interview on the subject of the private schools, where despite that he was late to make any statement or position since the attack on schools in 28/8, they saw that his speech was not as important as the event and did not touch on the real injustice that occurred to Christians in general and the Syriac community in particular. But let me go to his interview that was published on 9/14 on the Facebook pages in a meeting with Christian youth in Damascus (as I believe). His speech was clear and unequivocal – stating he categorically rejected the curriculum that the Kurdish so-called Education Authority in the self-administration had imposed on them. He described their movement against the Christian schools as (attack and closure

of churches and schools). He declared that the Christians and their churches were and will remain with the Syrian state as they have been since the beginning of the establishment of Syria (he said).

Sarah Abed: Can you describe to us what life was like in Al Qamishli before the war in 2011? How has life changed? Do you think at some point things will return to how they were prior to 2011?

Nidal Rahawi: I remember as a child that there was a description for Qamishli city as (Syrian Paris), and the history of this city is very modern dating back to the 1920s, where the first of its builders and residents were Syriac and Armenians (1923 – almost), thus they were able to paint the city with their culture, folklore, customs and lifestyle, the most important characteristic of which was joy, tolerance and the acceptance of other expatriates later, including Kurds.

Until 2011, the city was full of life in the same style as the big cities, despite its smallness. Everyone shared a very close social life without paying attention to differences of religion, ethnicity or sects. The relations between all of its inhabitants were brotherhood and common living relations, without any party trying to control the other or impose its wishes or dictates on it, especially Syriac, who we all know to be the indigenous people of this region.

Unfortunately, I do not think that things will return to what it was before 2011, even after the state regain control of the region, and this is because of the policy adopted by these gangs that claim democracy, the same policy practiced by the Zionist gangs in Palestine until they were able to pass a UN resolution that recognize them, this policy based on the forcible displacement of indigenous peoples and changing the demographic reality to make it easier for them to Kurdify the region after emptying it from its original inhabitants (Syriac).

The character of the city has now changed completely with a direct American help (and the Americans have several military bases in and around our city), they are not only seeing what these gangs are doing with the citizens and the city, but they directly manage, nurture and support them in all possible ways, including weapons of course.

With all this I do not expect the return of life to the city as it was before 2011.

Sarah Abed: We hear about many Christians fleeing your region, have you thought about leaving? What is your message to those that have fled? Do you think they will return at a later date? Have any returned already in your area? Do most people in your area support President Assad?

Nidal Rahawi: Yes, unfortunately most of the Christians emigrated (forcibly) and this was not because of ISIS, but because of the abuses committed by the so-called self-management against them by various means, including economically besieging them. For me, I did not think about leaving my city and my country, but I still defend our rights in our land and our presence with those who remain here. This is what I see as a duty for every Syrian citizen.

Many immigrants are contacting me, expressing their intention of return and their regret because they have left their homeland, complaining of the humiliation they have suffered in their expatriation, but the situation now and their own circumstances there do not allow them to return. Many of them now come home and return to their new countries, but unfortunately who returned and stayed here are very few, we can count them on the fingers of one hand.

In any case, this war contributed in one way or another to the emergence of the national sense and the spirit of citizenship, the spontaneous and sincere belonging of the homeland by most Syrians, especially the people here in the region and even

those of them who left. Not only that, but this war has also established in the hearts of the majority a great affection and support for President Bashar al-Assad, which was already planted in their conscience before the war, he proved to his people that he was a strong and intelligent leader in choosing his alliances, and was able to stand up with our army in the face of this war, in which America and some of its agents conspired with it against us.

Sarah Abed: How has the war impacted you on a personal level? Has your life been threatened for speaking out and leading a demonstration? What precautions do you have to take to insure your safety? I heard that you had a restaurant and that it was a target of a terrorist act. Can you tell me what happened?

Nidal Rahawi: In fact, the issue of threatening my life by assault, kidnapping attempts, and murder attempts are nothing new or because of my involvement in the recent demonstration. I've been living with these repeated attacks for three years now, since I was an investor of Domino restaurant that is located in Al Wusta neighborhood, and now I'm forced to refrain from doing any business after all of these treacherous attempts against me.

We in Al Wusta neighborhood, did not accept the to surrender our neighborhood or ourselves to the so-called (Kurdish) self-management, but we stayed defending the state authority and our Syrian flag, this is what bothered these separatists, with the Syriac Union Party, which had intended to give us to these gangs, so they started harassing us and annoying us through their militants (Asayish and members of the Syriac Union Party, whose Christian members do not exceed 15). We have often had to arm ourselves to confront them with the help of Sootoro, which was responsible for protecting Christians in Al Wusta neighborhood.

A lot of skirmishes happened between us and them without being able to get our steadfastness, and our insistence that we are

Syrians and we will stay with the Syrian state, we lost some martyrs because of the attacks they were carrying out against us.

After they were sure that we will not bow to them, they resorted to other methods like explosive devices which they planted several times between our cafés, our restaurants and our gatherings, one of them was in New Year's Eve (2015/2016), where Christians gathered to celebrate, in that night alone we lost nearly 25 martyrs, and then their terrorist attacks continued against us civilians and against our businesses, and of course including myself, through several attempts to kill me, specifically targeting my restaurant, this is because I was one of the most prominent resisters to them, and have been exposing their kurdification plans. One time a head of an Asayish patrol, that was trying to attack us, said to us when he saw the large crowd of Christian civilians who had resisted them: "This is Rojava and you will leave, or we will burn Al Wusta with everyone in it." This was the last time they harassed us. After that the terrorist attacks, which lasted for more than six months, began with several bombings – claiming that those who carried out these terrorist operations were ISIS. Of course, this lie did not mislead anyone in the city.

Sarah Abed: Do you think there is a political solution for the current situation in Al Hasakah governorate or will there be a military response from the SAA and the Syrian government?

Nidal Rahawi: I believe that the possibility of a political solution for the situation in the province of Hasaka with these gangs has become very difficult because of their recent practices against the citizens and the state, especially in this last period after the army went to Idlib. Even if the state accepts any kind of political solution, I will still have to ask: How can I, as a citizen like the rest of the citizens and with all that we have suffered of terrorism by these gangs, accept a political solution?

Sarah Abed: In your opinion, what is the solution that Christians and Muslims wish?

Nidal Rahawi: In my opinion, the only solution that citizens can accept (that I'm aware of) is the return of the state and the restoration of its full authority over the facilities, as was the situation before 2011, without giving anything to these separatists except granting permits to the rest of the Kurds to establish their own schools, like other ethnic groups and sects.

Make Art Not War

Mr. Rahawi risks his life every time he speaks out against the criminal and inhumane actions of Kurdish militias' in his hometown. He has made it a point to explain how their illegal actions have negatively impacted the lives of the majority of Syrians in the region in many different ways. They have essentially made life in one of the most oil and agriculturally rich areas in the country almost unbearable. Unless a person is living under these dire circumstances it's hard to imagine the amount of stress and trauma residents go through on a daily basis.

Mr. Rahawi had mentioned during our phone call that he was an artist, but couldn't go out much to buy supplies due to various reasons including availability and the risk involved in leaving his house.

I underestimated his artistic talent until I looked at his paintings on his Facebook page. It's upsetting to think that such a talented artist can not pursue his passion especially during this depressive and stressful time of war.

A tragedy that not too many people are aware of is that the people being targeted the most whether it be by Kurdish militia's or other terrorist factions in this particular area,

are the indigenous people, the original inhabitants: the Assyrians and Arameans. These are the native people whose roots dig deep into the fertile Mesopotamia soil and will not be easily uprooted. Not only have they had to endure coordinated attempts to kick them out of their homes, steal their land, ransack their businesses but they have had to deal with cultural appropriation and historical revisionism which is at the center of the Kurdish imposed curriculum. =

Many of the Syrians I have spoken to in the north eastern region over the past few years, have expressed the same frustration that Mr. Rahawi touched on. At this point, the remaining residents that have weathered the storm fully acknowledge that they need to fight for their right to exist and can only do so if they are united, just as we saw during the demonstration on August 28th, 2018.

In part II of this article, we will expand on the issues brought on by the unrecognized yet strictly imposed Kurdish self-administration curriculum on Kurdish and non-Kurdish children alike in the north eastern region of Syria.

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