

Iraqi MP: Syria's Collapse Would Endanger All Mideast Christians

The collapse of the Syrian state would be a jihadist triumph and a threat to Christians throughout the Middle East, says Yonadam Kanna, a member of the Iraqi National Assembly and secretary general for the Assyrian Democratic Movement.

Assyrians are an ancient ethnic group indigenous to the Middle East and belonging mostly to various Eastern and Orthodox Christian churches.

In his parliamentary capacity as chairman of the Labor and Social Affairs Committee in the Iraqi Council of Representatives, Kanna has been traveling Europe to deliver speeches and meet with members of parliaments in Sweden, Germany and Britain. Sweden-based freelance journalist Nuri Kino connected with Kanna by phone to discuss the civil war in Iraq's western neighbor, Syria, and the stakes there for Christians throughout the Middle East and Persian Gulf.

Kanna says he fears a mujahideen takeover in Syria that would create chaos across the region. He says exporting jihad to neighboring countries, and not a democratic Syria, is their aim.

An edited transcript of their conversation follows.

Nuri Kino: What do you think about the future of Christians in the Middle East?

Yonadam Kanna: It depends upon the political systems or political regimes in the region. If the regimes are fanatic Islamists, extremists or racists, then it's very difficult for us. But if the regime is liberal, if it's recognizing civil

and human beings' rights and looks to a nation's identity rather than to a religious basis, then it can work out.

It's our grandfathers' land, which we love and want to stay in. We want to live in peace with our partners and neighbors, on the same standard, equal for all citizens.

But if they are extremists or fanatics and run the countries on a religious basis, it will be very hard in, for example, Syria. We'll face a huge migration in the future. Same like what's going on with the Copts in Egypt, and same [as] what happened with us in Iraq after the fall of Saddam [Hussein].

The policy that is used today in Syria, under the excuse of getting rid of the regime, is very dangerous. If the state collapses, then the jihadists are in power. If the jihadists are in power, it's a huge risk, not only for Christians, but also Muslims of that region—not only in Syria, but in the rest of Middle East and then Europe too. They are pushing Syria to be unorganized, the whole region to be unorganized. After Syria, next will be Lebanon, Iraq and so on.

So it all depends on what kind of regime will be in power, either a democratic, liberal one or a different one.

NK: What would you advise George Sabra [a Christian and president of the Syrian National Council, the main opposition group in Syria] or other Christian leaders in Syria?

YK: We respect the Syrian people's free will. They have to see what to do, and they have to decide what to do.

But I'm surprised that they are not the ones making the decisions; others are making the decisions behind the border. That's one [thing]. Second, the people who are being pushed in Syria are not Syrians. Over 29 ... let's say, colors of jihadists, are in Syria, fighting. I don't think they'll listen to Mr. Sabra or to any Syrian leader who is pushing for

freedom and democracy.

[For] Christians in Iraq or even in Syria, when a struggle has no national background and is on [an] extremism or religious-basis background, then it is not my war, it's not my job to be a part of that conflict. We have to push for peace process among the communities, not to be part of the conflict and then they convince you to pay the taxes. So Mr. Sabra and Mr. [Abdulahad] Staifo [a member of the Syrian National Council], they know what to do, they are closer than me in this. What we see is the picture from outside.

The result of this change is not [the fault of] them. The result of change is [the responsibility of] some very extremist people who are thinking on some new Islamic state and on a religious basis, based on Sharia—not on a free and democratic country. It's a situation that can be much worse than the one in Iraq.

NK: How do you know there are so many nationalities, mujahideen, fighting in Syria?

YK: It's in public. The data are not secret today. It's because still the United Nation's role is there. In addition to that, the informational community agencies are still there. So that's one of the reasons that we know there are people from Denmark, there are people from Canada, people from Chechnya, people from Yemen, from everywhere. There are 57 Islamic countries in the world, but those people are not coming only from Islamic countries. They are coming from Canada, Europe and America. So you can imagine. And from European countries, from Belgium, they have passports, or they have identity cards and they have been arrested, some of them.

NK: Arrested? Where?

YK: In Syria itself.

NK: And you are sure about that?

YK: Yes, I'm sure about that, because I represent Iraq in the executive council of the Arab Parliamentary Unions, and we've discussed this issue several times. So it's not just my personal information.

NK: If mujahideen are in Syria fighting, and chances of a liberal, democratic country seem small, how do you think that will affect Iraq? Do you think Iraq today is a liberal country? A free, democratic country?

YK: There are good diplomats and good politicians in the opposition of the Syrian regime, but not on the ground. They don't control the ground. That's, as I said before, very dangerous. The extremists are not hiding their policies against us in Iraq. They are openly saying that after Syria, they will invade Iraq, which means they are preparing themselves for revenge. They want the power in Iraq that they feel they don't have. Many have already been arrested by our military on the border.

NK: Sunnis are the majority in Syria. Alawites are the minority. After the fall of Saddam, the Sunnis see themselves as a minority group persecuted in Iraq. They have threatened violence in Iraq before. Do you think this is one of the reasons the mujahideen are threatening to strike Iraq?

YK: No, it's not that easy. The [people] that threaten and hurt Iraq today are from the same groups that have done it from the beginning of the fall of Saddam. They are backed from some regimes in the countries around Iraq who are scared of freedom and democracy. They are scared of human and women's rights. They believe that women's rights are against Sharia. They are not fighting Iraq because of persecution. They don't want a liberal and free country.

NK: What do you want to say to world opinion, to the United Nations?

YK: I'm calling it to be much more fair in their policies

toward us in that region and not to make us victims of its policies and interests. I do understand the need of Europe for energy and their markets and other issues. But today in Syria, over 90,000 people [have been] killed because of these policies, the wrong policies.

So the people's free will must be respected. And interfering in this way, in wrong ways, is a big risk. Every single negative result there will reflect negatively on Europe. So they have to be much more careful and not to allow the minorities, especially the religious minorities, to be victims of their policies.

We are victims of some wrong policies, either of Europe or America. To have some peaceful political reforms is OK. To support the liberal people is OK. But to allow for some conflict to push and push money, weapons and arms to make people kill each other? This is a big mistake. We have to stop this policy. We have to reject their attitude and their policies toward these countries. I do understand, again, the need of Europe for energy, the need of Europe for markets and other things. But to deal with us in this way is a big mistake.

NK: Are you saying the Obama administration's decision to support the Free Syrian Army with weapons is a wrong decision?

YK: Unfortunately, the [term] "the Free Syrian Army" is very broad. Who is the Free Syrian Army? Jihadists? Jebhat al-Nusra [a Syrian group with links to al Qaeda]? All others? Which one of them is it? So who are they really supporting?

We need people to support the liberals. We need people to support the free and democrat people, not to allow the extremists to control—and to think about the peaceful political transfer of the power, not by force, not by destroying infrastructure, not by destroying the unity of the community, [and not] on racist basis or religious basis.

How we are thinking here in Europe about integration? In America, over 300 ethnicities are living together. Today in Syria, maybe there are four or five ethnicities. In this war we will lose the unity of the community. They'll destroy it. The future will be the Sunni, the Shia and the Alawite and the Christian and the Kurds—and not Syrian.

Again, I will say we are calling all the decision makers in the United Nations to think about the civilians and then decide on the matter on the right basis, not only looking for economic interests.

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