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## **Kana's Iraq**

A story you can't hear enough of.

By Meghan Clyne – National Review Online

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** — "We are calling on...America not to stop; to go on with us on this blessed mission, which the Iraqi people will never forget: this blessed mission of liberation, of democracy, and of freedom."

This is the plea of Younadem Kana, a member of the Iraqi Governing Council and leader of Iraq's Assyrian Democratic Movement.



**Mr. Yonadam Kanna at the Assyrian Democratic Movement Headquarters in Zayouna, Baghdad**

Kana has just wrapped up a whirlwind tour of the U.S., aimed at reaching out to Assyrian Americans and combating the image of Iraq as a lost cause. It has

been a tiring journey — Kana has visited seven cities in six states in ten days — but well worth it. He knows first-hand what is at stake.

#### **FROM APARTHEID...**

As an [Assyrian Christian](#) — the only one on the Governing Council — Kana and his people suffered greatly before the war. "During Saddam's time," Kana says, "we were disrespected guests in our own home." The Baathist regime destroyed close to 200 villages and over 125 churches and historical monasteries in the region; it tried to impose Koranic law on Christian children; it employed a policy of Arabization toward the Assyrian community; it assassinated the leader of the Assyrian Christian church; it exiled and killed many in the Chaldean community. "They destroyed us and deported our people, without even giving them a chance," Kana notes.

In 1991, following his defeat in the first Iraq war, Saddam Hussein used religion to try to endear himself to the Islamic world. During this "faith campaign," symbolized by the addition of "Allah Akbar" (God is Great) to the Iraqi flag, Saddam closed down Christian businesses and shut Christians out of politics and positions of power. Unable to make a living for themselves, and weary of the persecution, many hundreds of thousands of Assyrians were forced to leave Iraq, fleeing to Europe, Australia, and the United States.

"Under Saddam's sectarian, apartheid policies, we were fifth-degree citizens," Kana explains. "First came the Sunnis, then the Shiites, then the Kurds, then the Turkomen, and we were fifth — unwelcome, even though we are Iraq's native people. This oppression was for nothing more than our Christian faith and our Assyrian ethnicity; we were allowed only to be Baath-party members, and to be Arabized."

#### **...TO FREEDOM**

While the world's elite opinion-makers rail vehemently against the current U.S. presence in Iraq, Kana appreciates what has been accomplished there.

"Since the liberation, everything has changed."

"The Iraqi people are free now," Kana proclaims. "For the first time in the history of Iraq — for the first time in 14 centuries — our neighbors, and the majority of people today, recognize us [Assyrian Christians], and acknowledge us. We are all together on the Governing Council, and the cabinet; our rights are guaranteed under the fundamental law" (referring to the [provisional constitution](#) signed on March 8).

Satisfaction with Operation Iraqi Freedom is not limited to the Assyrians. "The vast majority of Iraqis are very happy with the liberation," Kana says. "Maybe

fewer than five percent today are unhappy — but that's because they were Saddam Hussein's people, or are fanatic extremists."

What proves frustrating to Kana, and to others striving to rebuild Iraq, is the ill will shown by the media in obscuring these positives. "The media are very bad," Kana observes regretfully. "This is mostly because they are the tools of Islamist fanatics; because they are unhappy with the democratic freedom process." It's not just al-Jazeera: "Even the Western media are very bad. They are trying to sell their product, so they keep exaggerating the bad spots. The media in America are not fair; they hide the liberation of Iraq, the restoration of public services — of hospitals, and schools. Nobody wants to speak about those achievements, or about the fundamental law, which was a very successful compromise and is the most liberal constitution of any Islamic Arab country."

In a Washington indignant over the now-infamous Abu Ghraib images, Kana adds ruefully, "But they *will* speak about some simple problem, some crazy incident like with these prisoners in jail."

Over the Abu Ghraib scandal, Kana is unruffled. "Yeah, we condemn that — but it's certainly not the official or normal policy of American troops in Iraq. And Saddam did far worse than that every day, and no one stopped him!" Oddly enough, while those on Capitol Hill gasp that prisoner mistreatment will destroy America's reputation in Iraq and the rest of the world, Kana reports, "If Iraqis are upset with the American troops, it's mostly because they are very nice — too nice — with these criminals, dealing with them as prisoners of war. But they are not prisoners of war, they are criminals; they are killers. But Geneva Convention rules put pressure on the Americans to be nice, and to take good care of them."

"We had heard that there were rumors, bad rumors, about Americans raping Iraqi women in these prisons. So we sent the leader of the Iraqi Islamic party, Mohsen Hamid, to visit the prisoners. And he came back to the Governing Council and was a very positive witness. He is the closest to the Sunni sect of Iraq, and is the most trusted guy in the Sunni Islamic world — and he gave a very positive account, saying there is no big problem."

"But unfortunately these isolated bad spots — bad moves here or there by some crazy soldier — are exaggerated, and abused."

#### **MORE THAN 50 PERCENT DONE**

Kana is, of course, aware of the difficulties that lie ahead in his homeland, difficulties that need no exaggeration to loom large and daunting. There is, most immediately, a concern over what will happen after the June 30 handover deadline. There is fear that if U.N. Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has his way, a weak and ineffectual government — possibly filled with ex-Baathists, and unable to withstand attempts to turn Iraq into a mullocracy — will be instituted. Brahimi's Francophilia is worrisome, too; in the wake of the Oil-for-Food scandal, Iraqis are rightfully wary of U.N. involvement in their country's rehabilitation.

Kana, however, remains optimistic; he urges Americans to remain optimistic too. The work of rehabilitating Iraq, he says, is "more than 50 percent done." For the U.S. and other coalition members to abandon it now would be tragic. The prospects for July 1 are good; Kana insists that once the Coalition moves out, foreign extremists will lose their strongest card. They will no longer "be able to move the emotions of simple people by saying they are fighting a holy war against the occupier," because, after June 30, there will be no occupier. He adds that the U.S. troops that do stay will be removed from danger, in safer camps. "When we need them, we will call on them, but they will no longer be easy targets in the streets."

"Plus," Kana explains, "we will be imposing Iraqi laws, and there will be no more Geneva Convention conditions. The death penalty will be back again; he who kills will be killed. And in my opinion, this will bring the violence down very much. So I call on public opinion to be more confident that, on July 1, things will change. This is a moral and psychological issue, not a numerical issue."

This urging aside, Kana is not oblivious to the numbers. "We appreciate the losses of the United States, of those 700 victims — martyrs, we call them — who shed their blood on Iraqi soil. But compare the losses in one year of fighting terrorism to the roughly 3,000 people terrorism killed in America in two minutes. Think of the \$84 billion lost in those two minutes, and compare that to the financial cost in Iraq. You have to make these comparisons, and then choose whether to fight the terrorists in the Middle East, and keep yourselves safe, or to fight terrorism here, in your home."

## THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

If it seems odd that an Iraqi would be more attuned to what America stands to lose should the terrorists win than many Americans are, perhaps it's because he faces terrorist brutality every day, and has for most of his life.

Kana began his career as a dissident in 1970, during his last year of secondary school in Kirkuk. "Our people had always been persecuted, for being Assyrians and for being Christians. But when I read the Baath-party philosophy, I saw that they were even worse," Kana explains. In 1976 the Baathist regime began destroying Assyrian villages and churches, and on April 12, 1979, Kana and his fellow dissenters established the Assyrian Democratic Movement to combat Saddam's aggression.

"We founded this movement in order to push for peace, democracy, and freedom in Iraq; for recognition of our existence in Iraq, and for the rights of Christians in Iraq." In 1980, the ADM began negotiations with other opposition movements — democrats, Communists, Christian groups — and prepared to unite in the mountains to fight Saddam Hussein. They launched their opposition in 1982, sending rebels to the northern part of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.

Saddam, of course, struck back. On July 14, 1984, the Baathist regime attacked the ADM's bases in Baghdad, arresting over 150 members of the movement. "I was saved by the wife of a friend who was killed by Saddam. I had to flee," Kana recounts. "Of the 150 people they arrested, 22 of them were sentenced to life imprisonment by Saddam. Four of us were sentenced to death. Three were killed, and I was sentenced to death in absentia in November of '84." With a look of wistful sadness, Kana adds that he recently visited the graves of his executed comrades.

"That's why we have continued our struggle since 1984 until this moment, nonstop — for 20 years."

The struggle is a dangerous one. Being a member of the Governing Council is no secure job — two have now been [assassinated](#). Kana is married, and has three children; while they are pleased with his work, "they are at risk all the time. I am at risk all the time. But this is the price of freedom."

To Kana, it's a price well worth paying. Is it a sacrifice he will continue to make, exposing himself in such a public capacity, once the Governing Council

is disbanded? "It is not necessary for me to be in an official position, necessarily. What *is* necessary is for our community to be represented, and for there to be no more persecution, no more apartheid policies against us because of our ethnicity or religion. This is what's most important to me; not a position. After all, I'm tired! I've spent 34 years fighting this crazy guy, and these crazy criminals. But if it's necessary, I'll keep going."

Though the fight has been long and exhausting, it has not been without its rewards. Kana relates, "A few days ago, in Chicago, I was given a present. It was a picture of me, with my friends, during our last year in high school and our first at university, when we began our struggle against Saddam. The photograph was taken on March 9, 1970. They then presented to me a second picture: the photograph that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, and other papers, on March 9, 2004 — a picture of me raising the new constitution of Iraq, exactly 34 years later."

Kana wants Americans — and people the world over — to keep these rewards in mind when processing the daily news out of Iraq. He cautions election-year bickerers: "...[T]he challenge in Iraq is not a challenge for Republicans, or for Democrats. If we don't stand united, the terrorists will win. You will have to prepare yourselves here, at home, to have more September 11ths, and that will be a tragedy. This is not a challenge for President Bush: It is a challenge for all free and democratic people, not only in America, but in the world, together."

It's a challenge that must be met.

— *Meghan Clyne is an NR associate editor.*