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The American-Kurdish Information Network

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Last semester, I had planned to do a research project on the public diplomacy of the Kurds and Palestinians. A while back, during the snowpocalypse that was blanketing the nation's capital, I made my way back east to work on the aforementioned project. My plans got waylaid over a photography exhibit I was putting together on Public Health and Public Diplomacy. However, before the project got shelved, I conducted some fascinating interviews with various representatives of the Kurdish and Palestinian movements on how national movements conduct public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. This is the first article of a series based on my interviews, and deals with the public diplomacy of the Kurdish people as conducted by the American-Kurdish Information Network.

While in DC, I met the demure Kani Xulam, the Executive Director of the American-Kurdish Information Network (AKIN), who founded the nonprofit organization in 1993. He noted that the organization serves the information needs of the Kurdish people with regard to disseminating information and creating knowledge in America. It reaches out to those in politics, the media and academia with the intention of generating understanding and respect for the rights of the Kurdish people, in all forms and fashions.

Xulam noted that the genesis of AKIN was borne out of a void of information about the Kurdish people in the wake of Saddam Hussein's Anfal Campaign- the brutal gassing of the Kurds in Northern Iraq. At a time when the Kurds were being discussed in the public sphere, Xulam found a real dearth of information related to who the Kurds actually were. From this void of information, Xulam went on to found the American-Kurdish Information Network to be a public diplomacy presence and voice for the Kurdish people in the American landscape.

As such, AKIN works to present the Kurdish view and express the Kurdish point of view as well as undertake advocacy in order to connect with the right people in order to bring out meaningful change for the situation on the ground, which as Xulam states, is rather deplorable and negative towards the Kurdish people.

AKIN's work began in earnest in 1994 with its work in the Free Leyla Zana campaign. Leyla Zana made news by becoming the first Kurdish woman ever to enter the Turkish parliament. Three years later, in 1994, she was imprisoned by the Turkish state for having the temerity to speak Kurdish on the floor of the Turkish Parliament (long an illegal act to speak Kurdish in a public forum in Turkey), as well for addressing the U.S. Congress' Helsinki Commission on violation of Kurdish rights. After Zana was stripped of her parliamentary immunity and sentenced to a 15-year prison sentence, AKIN worked through public diplomacy efforts to bring attention to her plight as well as the plight of the Kurdish people.

AKIN began its efforts by campaigning on Capitol Hill to garner signatures among Congress for Zana's release. The initial six-month campaign gained 100 signatures, short of the 218 needed for a binding Congressional resolution. To raise the public diplomacy stakes, AKIN then went on to carry out a hunger strike on the steps of US Capitol as a means to bring the

issue to the forefront of Congressional attention. The forty-day hunger strike, carried out in the cold October/November weather, gained another 53 Congressional signatures of support, as well a beneficial coverage for Kurdistan's plight in the mainstream media. Although still short of the full number of signatures for a resolution, AKIN later learned that their protests had reached the very apex of American leadership, and that the White House had discretely but directly raised the issue of Leyla Zana's release with the Turkish government.

Meanwhile, in another act of very public diplomacy, on the seventh anniversary of Leyla Zana's imprisonment, AKIN kept its pressure on the Turkish government by erecting a replica prison cell to represent the cells holding Zana and three other Kurdish prisoners in the middle of Sheridan Circle- directly across from the Turkish Ambassador to the United States' residence.

According to Xulam, such events generated interest in the Kurdish cause. It also brought the American media's lens to the Kurdish question. In this regard, as Xulam states, "our little office, in a way, has become a megaphone for the Kurds. And that is what I call 'public diplomacy.' It is us, the Kurds, doing our best to reach out to as many as we can." Since then, AKIN has continued its work to bring the plight of the Kurdish people to American public with the hopes of making America and Americans a part of the solution to the enduring Kurdish Question in the heart of the Middle East.
