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A Beacon of Light: The Public Diplomacy of Kurdistan [1]

"Five million Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan have become a beacon of light for the 35 million Kurds who live in Turkey, Syria, and Iran. That beacon of light is keeping us awake at night and is filling our hearts with hope."
-Kani Xulam, Director of the American-Kurdish Information Network

For marginalized or underepresented states, public diplomacy is a key component of drawing global public attention to the cause. For Iraqi Kurdistan, public diplomacy represents a vital area of outreach in bringing awareness to "the Kurdish Question."

While working on a project on the public diplomacy of national movements, I had the privilege to chat with Representative Qubad Talabani, the Kurdistan Regional Government's de facto Ambassador to the United States of America. In speaking with the debonair diplomat, we discussed various elements and aspects of Kurdish public diplomacy.

In defining the mission of Kurdish public diplomacy, Talabani stated, "I think if there is one word that sums it up, it is education. It is about educating a public on what Kurdistan is, who it is you are, and what it is you're trying to do…by educating policy makers and public opinion, to serve your people's goals, agendas, or objectives."

From the brutal Anfal campaign in the mid-1980s, in which Saddam Hussein's regime gassed parts of Iraqi Kurdistan and razed Kurdish villages to the ground, the need for Kurdish public diplomacy as a means to educate the global public became a paramount concern for the Kurdish movement. This meant the need to strategically focus on educating policy makers and global public opinion about Kurdistan. The Kurdish movement began constructing a more formal dialogue with U.S. policy makers in the wake of the Kurdish uprising in 1991 and the vicious reprisals that was meted out by the Ba'athist regime on the Kurds as Western support fail to materialize to support the insurrection, and with Operation Provide Comfort in which a No-Fly Zone was instituted in northern Iraq.

Much has changed in the decades since. Today, Iraqi Kurdistan has a functioning, legitimate regional government. Over the years, Kurdish public diplomacy has matured, and the Kurdistan Regional Government has increased its outreach. Talabani noted that whereas early Kurdish public diplomacy focused on the political power centers in Washington or New York, during the Second Gulf War (Operation Iraqi Freedom) the Kurdish issue became a national issue and there was a need to conduct wider public diplomacy across the United States. Meanwhile, an outreach campaign to areas with Kurdish diaspora populations became more robust, and efforts were made to empower Kurdish communities in the U.S. to become more engaged as local public diplomats.

As Middle America became more interested in information about Kurdistan and its importance

in U.S. foreign policy and the war effort, invitations came in for speaking engagements at universities, public affairs committees, and chambers of commerce across the country.

Through this enhanced outreach, Representative Talabani noted that with speaking engagements came an opportunity to listen, and to better understand the messages that resonate with different American audiences. Perhaps the most telling anecdote of Kurdistan's outreach to broader swathes of the U.S. population is seen in the dual Kurdistan-Texas flags in Representative Talabani's office, which declares: "Don't Mess with Texas, Don't Mess with Kurdistan."

Representative Talabani spoke of framing the Kurdish message with language that the American public understands. He stated: "It is us trying to tell Americans that we are not that different to you. We like the principles of democracy, we like the principles of pluralism, we believe in the principles of overcoming oppression and we've seen you do it. We're inspired by what you've done and we are trying to do it ourselves."

Another area where Kurdistan has been conducting greater public diplomacy outreach is in the area of cultural affairs. Representative Talabani noted that the Kurdistan Regional Government had opened a Cultural Affairs Department in its DC office. As such, one of the first things that the office did was conduct outreach to Hollywood as a means to make Hollywood more interested in the Kurdish story. He mentioned that the executives from Sony and Miramax were brought out to Kurdistan to educate Hollywood on the beauty of Kurdistan's landscapes for film scenery as well as to help raise Hollywood's interest in the story of Kurdistan's struggles. Talabani noted that he hoped to also host a Kurdish Film Festival in the U.S. in the future, and use cultural diplomacy as an avenue for greater understanding about Kurdistan.

For the Kurdistan Regional Government, public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy represent key vehicles for which the issue of Kurdistan can be projected internationally, and more understanding and appreciation can be generated for the Kurdish cause. Effective Kurdish public diplomacy ensures that the Kurds will no longer be voiceless in the world, and will not be forgotten.