

**Interview with Dr. Abdel Qareem, Public Relations officer for the office of Martyr al-Sadr**

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “Shall we start?”

**INTERVIEWER:** “Your name please?”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “DR. ABDEL QAREEM”

**INTERVIEWER:** “Your function?”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “Public relations officer for the office of the Martyr al-Sadr”

**INTERVIEWER:** “Ok”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “ In the name of god the merciful, prayers be upon Muhammad, the holiest of the messengers and his house and his companions”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “Kirkuk was an ethnically diverse city throughout its history, it was built by the Assyrians, and then it was subjected to several waves of invasions”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “...then the Ottoman rule started in Iraq, then came the British colonialism and then the age of the monarchy, and the republic”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “...since forever, Kirkuk has been the city of cohabiting nationalities. Not a single ethnicity has an exclusive right to Kirkuk. That is why the office of the Martyr al-Sadr has asserted this fact since the beginning”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “...that Kirkuk should be a city of cohabitation and peaceful coexistence, Kirkuk is a mini-Iraq, that is why the office of the Martyr al-Sadr here has a vision that entails connecting with the different political constituencies, and I believe that we have succeeded in doing so...”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “...we have special and intimate relations with the Kurdish entities, the Turkmen entities, with the Kurdo-Assyrian entities. We are among the defenders and the supporters of the Kurdo-Assyrian Christians who live in Kirkuk and who have a special right, since we all know historically, that the builder of Kirkuk was Assyrian. That is why we contact these communities at every turn and we have attempted to spread the spirit of friendship and peace in the city of Kirkuk, because,

firstly, we are a religious group in addition to the fact that Kirkuk needs a safeguard, and we believe that the office of the Martyr al-Sadr in Kirkuk has been a safeguard against several outbursts that have happened because of the behavior of X or Y...”

“...this is what pushes us all to stand united, because we have a vision for the city of Kirkuk. We do not believe that Kirkuk is a city that belongs to a specific ethnicity. Kirkuk is an Iraqi city, that has been our opinion since the beginning. It is an Iraqi city, therefore the political process should be one of sharing between all sides...”

“...regarding what came to be known as “the article 53” of the constitution, we believe that only by adding the paragraph “A” to the article 53, the problem can be solved. Without the paragraph “A” of the 53<sup>rd</sup> article, clashes could emerge in Kirkuk, and I believe that the paragraph “A” is well-known by everyone, as it enunciates that Baghdad and Kirkuk shall not be made part of any region, that would divert the ambitions of certain parties, and it is normal for all parties to have ambitions in Kirkuk, this oil-rich city, this city of coexistence...”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “...regarding the return of the displaced, we, as a religious office, are surely with their return, but not a arbitrary return, but one that is based on a specific order, on historic bases, on authentic documentations, on [demographic] proportions that the UN acknowledges, on the food coupons. The return should be designed on legal bases, but a chaotic return, we believe, will cause conflicts within the city of Kirkuk...”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “...in what concerns the Arabs who live in Kirkuk, there is a mistaken perception by all groups concerning the Arabs, one that perceives the Southern Arabs in Kirkuk to have been brought during the era of Saddam Hussein. This is a lie; this is a hoax, the Southern Arab presence in Kirkuk dates back to 1922. There is a brick factory in Kirkuk that belonged to a man from al-Kut, the clans of al-Kut have lived here since 1922, in addition to many families that moved here because of the military service, and the first oil well to be dug in Kirkuk had 15 workers from the South working on it. These were not exploiters who moved their registers, Kirkuk is a city that is a commercial center, a strategic center, a military center that was inhabited by Southern clans...”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "...when the decision came encouraging people to move their registers to Kirkuk, coupled with the grant of a piece of land and an a certain monetary compensation, several families moved to Kirkuk, which produced the impression that [they] were part of the Arab-ization policy, while in fact, they were not part of the policy, because two of the largest neighborhoods of Kirkuk had been inhabited by Southern Arabs since 1922: al-'arasa and Durdabadsaf districts which were founded in 1943-44, I recall...

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "...but the Arab who has taken the house of a Kurd or a Turkmen or a Kurdo-Assyrian, we assume that he must leave that house. But he who has received municipal land that was distributed according to a law, as happened in all parts of Iraq, in al-Nasriyah, Suleymaniya, Arbeel. In these cases, we do not believe that the Arab should leave his property. As long as Kirkuk is an Iraqi city, it should be allowed for any Iraqi to live in Kirkuk. I also believe that the so-called migrant Arabs – and I refuse this appellation, because a “migrant” refers to someone from outside the country, while this is their homeland. I believe that these Arabs have contributed greatly to the building of this city, and have produced many of its cultural personalities. They have been unjustly treated throughout Iraq, the Southerners, what happens is that if there is bombing in Basra [referring to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s], if there are attacks, if the front lines drove people out of their areas into Kirkuk, these families are guests in Kirkuk and all the political groups should welcome these people who have contributed to the building of this city.

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "...I don't believe that there is logic in this world, whether the UN charter or the Human Rights Declaration that legitimizes the uprooting of a child or a woman who was born in Kirkuk. We find it disquieting on the part of the American and British forces and the UN organizations, that while there is a law in America that if a foreigner lives in the country for 5 years he receives a citizenship, how can it be that an Iraqi lives in Kirkuk for 25 or 30 years, and intermarries with other ethnicities and gets uprooted from his land by a decree? No administrative decision should have the power to uproot a human being from his home. As long as he was born here, in Kirkuk, he should be considered a Kirkuki like everyone else. I believe that the office of the Martyr al-Sadr will be, in the

upcoming days, striving to apply this form of fairness in a way that pleases all parties and achieves justice for all. We are optimistic with the personalities we have in Kirkuk, we hope that they will, whether Kurds or Turkmen, understand this issue so we can build our city, Kirkuk in a peaceful way and we do not accept the intervention of any region or external party, and we believe that Kirkuk is for the Kirkukis who live in it, and who have the priority to decide on its affairs and to build it in a way that would make Kirkuk a city of peaceful coexistence and I believe that the issue of Kirkuk reflects on the entire Iraqi scene, if Kirkuk is stable and has the bases for peaceful coexistence, Iraq will also persist in peaceful coexistence. And we do not accept that other countries interfere in the affairs of Kirkuk because there will be risks that many Kirkukis will not be treated fairly, Doctor Abdel Kareem Khalifa, officer of public relations, the office of the Martyr al-Sadr, the city of Kirkuk.

**INTERVIEWER:** “Does the army of Mahdi send the Shi`as from the south to Kirkuk?”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “No, not at all, not a single family has come to Kirkuk since the fall of the [Saddam] regime; to the contrary, many families have been pushed out of the city. But because of the fact that certain groups have rumored that there will be a monetary compensation (for relocation), some Arab families who were exiled after the fall of the regime have returned to Kirkuk, seeking those promised compensations, which is a false premise anyway. You cannot compensate a citizen to leave, why should he be compensated? Is he a settler? Is he a foreigner? This is HIS city. He has a piece of land, a home, he can do whatever he wants, sell them or remain in them. The very rumor that there will be a compensation for Arab families made those Arabs who had been pushed out of the city return to it. The Mahdi army had nothing to do with it,

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “...in what comes to the Mahdi army in Kirkuk, it is a doctrinal organization, a cultural organization, it did not contribute to any fighting or wars. It is doctrinal, cultural, above all, it is a faith-based army, its name does not refer to the military term of an “armed force”, that is how it is in Kirkuk. This is the vision of the office of the Martyr al-Sadr, al-Mahdi army is a faith-based movement, it has helped organize the city, it has built several public-service and humanitarian institutions, it has built many institutions that help the society. Al-Mahdi army is a

doctrinal army, not an armed force and it never contributed to any aggression, the members of the Mahdi army in Kirkuk are the educated section of society, they have cultural clubs, poetry recitals and all fields that serve the political process in the city of Kirkuk, and protect stability in the city of Kirkuk.

**INTERVIEWER:** “In other parts of the country, like in Baghdad, you see something that resembles a civil war, do you see that there is a civil war or not? Whether in Kirkuk or in Baghdad?”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “I don’t believe there is anything that amounts to a civil war. There is a battle between good and evil. There was never a civil war, because you cannot divide the Iraqi people along sectarian lines. And we find that some have bad intentions to divide...it is not possible, you cannot divide Iraq ethnically and religiously at the same time , such divisions are untenable. What I find is that there is an illusory conflation between Shi`a Arabs and Sunni Arabs. If we wanted to divide Iraq ethnically, Iraq would be divided between Arabs and Kurds and Turkmen. If we wanted to divide Iraq religiously, there would be Shi`as and Sunnis. Why do Arabs get divided into Shi`as and Sunnis while the others are seen as united wholes? I don’t understand that. Who created these divisions that aim to destroy the unity of Iraq? There are intermarriages, there is no “Shi`a Arab” and “Sunni Arab”, there are Arab clans, and the basis of the Arab clans is very strong in Iraq. Iraq is a society based on clans and values. Clans are united, in the South and the North, otherwise, there are Shi`as and Sunnis, there are Shi`a and Sunni Turkmen and Shi`a and Sunni Kurds. There is no civil war in Iraq, there is a struggle between good and evil, there is a struggle between righteousness and sin. In the absence of the power of the law, after the weakening of the super-ego, caused by the weakening of the laws, these gangs, the terrorists, or whatever name you want to call them, they have started spreading terror among citizens. These gangs aim to extort the Iraqi citizen; they have no political project or a political program. Why do they bomb churches? Why do they target a mosque or a Husayniya? They have no political project, they just want to extort the citizen and perpetuate fear, which weakens the state and the authority, the solid bases of the citizen. I believe that the coming days will be better, because of the political wisdom of the leaderships, especially, the leader Muqtada al-Sadr who has played a role in neutralizing civil strife that others have attempted to nurture, or trick people into believing that there is a sectarian warfare, but the

calls of Muqtada al-Sadr, for collective prayers, for the protection of mosques...

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "...there are also groups on the other side that are moderate in their discourse, and have participated in the spreading of love and unity among the Iraqi people. I believe that this should be the function of all those who love Iraq and want to build a unified Iraq based on law, love and peace".

**INTERVIEWER:** "What are the mistakes that were committed by the U.S. in Iraq? What were the benefits and the wrongdoings of the American presence in Iraq?"

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "Well, the mistakes are numerous. Their mistakes far outstrip their benefits.

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "The mistakes that the Americans made are numerous, firstly, they did not understand the psychology of the Iraqi people, and this was a grave mistake. And I fault the [American] psychologists, since I am a specialist in the field. They never understood the psychology of the Iraqi people.

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "...the proof being their mistreatment of the Iraqi clans. This is a grave mistake. They dealt disrespectfully with the elders and the women; this has led to the building-up of Iraqi anger at the American forces. That in addition to the dissolution of the army, the dissolution of state institutions, the marginalization and exclusion of certain groups, many mistakes were committed by the American troops have led to the negation of the favor done by the Americans [the elimination of Saddam]. The average, simple citizen hoped for better socio-economic conditions, but things went from bad to worse, in addition to the absence of security, and here I address the American psychologists, Masleau (Spelling?) has devised a pyramid where sociological and basic needs were placed in the bottom, followed by the need for security. The absence of security, in any country, leads to the absence of all human needs. We are a people that have lost its sense of security, and we have therefore become nihilists, a deformed image of the Iraqi people, the cradle of civilization, the people that has taught humanity the written word, and the first written texts were in Iraq, and the first human civilization was in Iraq. Every country in the world has one civilization, but in Iraq, there is a civilization in every region, every spot:

Ur, the Chaldeans, there are vestiges of entire countries that existed in Iraq, the state of Misan, the first village in the world was the village of Arafa, here in Kirkuk.

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "...then, the history of Iraq should have been understood by the Americans, there is a profound history here, and this historical dimension shouldn't have been disregarded. We are disappointed by America, this civilized country, they should have done like Napoleon Bonaparte when he invaded Egypt: he brought all the knowledge and culture of his country into the occupied territories. In such a case, we could have been thankful to such a country, but America has shown us its ugly side. And we do not believe that this was the fault of the American people, we do not hate the American people, the people who produced Bernard Shaw and George Washington and [Oscar] Wilde and many other authors and musicians and scientists who have served humanity. This is the American people that has a history of honorable deeds and formidable landmarks from which we inspire, as an Iraqi people. We are disappointed by the American leadership that has transmitted the ugly picture of the Americans, in the full sense of the word: inhuman treatment, arbitrary arrests, the violation of domiciles, the soliciting of tips that have caused the arrest of many innocent citizens. There are many people, whom we believe to have participated in the spread of terror, but they have remained out of the reach of the Americans because of several reasons, we do not understand this situation, there are many inexplicable actions. Why don't they put the security dossier in the hands of the Iraqi forces? Why is the American soldier present in the Iraqi street, instead of staying in his base? There is an Iraqi army and police, let them carry this responsibility. The Iraqis should have the priority in dealing with the security issues. Why do they expose the American soldier to danger in the Iraqi street? Why do they enter the cities? We have sacred cities in Iraq and tribal cities which we do not allow them to enter, like al-Sadr City, like al-Falluja and al-Ramadi, there are tribal rules and values. The American troops should have understood these issues and specificities before entering Iraq. These are values that we are proud of, as an Iraqi people.

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** "...this Iraqi people, this social fabric, is based on values and customs that are inspired by the Islamic framework and the tribal framework, the latter being very important

since the vast majority of the Iraqi people is of tribal origins. This imposes certain values; their disregard has greatly contributed to the spreading of chaos. I believe that the Americans should be aware of these issues, and should not have implicated themselves and their army. This, we believe, has greatly contributed to disrepute of the American forces, which have claimed to bring freedom to the Iraqi people. In fact, we see no freedom, all we see are irregularities and arrests, and a constant violation of even the most basic human rights, on several levels.

**INTERVIEWER:** “Are you glad that America has finished off Saddam?”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “Don’t ask me this question, ask me something else, this is Kirkuk man!”

*Laughter*

*Translator translates, “It is dangerous”, he says*

**INTERVIEWER** “Ok, what does he think about Ibrahim Jaafari...it seems like the Americans are trying to prevent him from becoming prime minister”

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “Well, there is my personal opinion and that of the Sadr office, my personal opinion is quite similar to that of the office. I believe that changing al Jaafari constitute a constitutional infraction. The constitution does not say so...those who oppose Jaafari were the authors of the constitution, the relevant constitutional article says that the list with the most representatives gets to choose the prime minister, and that the prime minister gets delegated by the president, then the prime minister forms his cabinet, and the cabinet gets its confidence vote in the parliament. And I think that the “half plus one” [simple majority] should be enough to elect a prime minister. That is firstly, second, the intervention of America, and Rice in specific, the American secretary of state, as well as the British foreign minister, is wrong. There is a democratic system in Iraq, which is what they claim, as long as there is a democratic system; the political program of the government should orient the prime minister, not the other way around.

**DR. ABDEL QAREEM:** “...because Ibrahim al-Jaafari does not represent anything in terms of a political program. Therefore, the political entities should take part in formulating the political program,

not in choosing the personalities. That is number one. We also find that the objective behind changing Ibrahim al-Jaafari is to split the strong Shi'a coalition, and weakening it. If this happens, I believe, it will also weaken all the political groups in Iraq, because it will further the "arms' race" and similar issues in Iraq. The stronger these political groupings are, the stronger Iraq is, and the stronger the political process is. This is an unwarranted intervention...it pertains to the person of Jaafari...jaafari's political program is to draft the constitution, when Jaafari presented himself as a candidate, he said that this government was exclusively charged with the drafting of the constitution, and the constitution was drafted, and it was voted on. The political entities should debate the political program of the government and not its personalities. Otherwise, the entities that make up the [Shi'a] coalition will suggest that certain personalities on the other side of the spectrum be changed. The coalition would then be allowed to protest any personality that is a candidate to any political position. Eventually, it will become a matter of individuals and not a political process. That is why we do not only support the person of jaafari, the [Sadr] office never supported Jaafari for his person, but it finds that the intervention of others in the process has disturbed it, causing the delay in the formation of the government, and the increase in terrorism as a result. I believe that eventually, the political entities will be more aware in assessing the situation, and they will produce a national program, a program of national unity that will represent all the political directions on the Iraqi political scene.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thanks a lot.