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# **What's Turkmen Front leader Arshad al-Salehi's Resignation Means for Kurdistan Region?**

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The "Resignation" or "dismissal" of Arshad Salehi from presidency of Turkmen front party as it's an important development for the Turkmen in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, as well as externally. Currently the Turkmen due to their sectarian divisions among Sunnis and Shias are between political games of Turkey and Iran. Some of them are in the camp of Ankara and others in the camp of the Iranian proxies such the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) groups especially Badr organization. In addition when it comes to land disputes in Iraq they are important element for the Kurds. For example the Turkmen front party is not a game changer at the Iraq level but in the case of Kirkuk is key actor and their position can impact the situation of Kirkuk. Therefore changes in the Turkmen policy is matter for Kurdistan region.

In the case of Salehi's resignation the question is that what's the meaning of "resignation" of a "pan -Turkish" leader that since 2010 was president of Turkmen front and to be replaced by Hassan Toran who has Islamic and nationalist background? What are the motives behind this change? And more importantly, is this can open new political approach for Turkmen front party in the issue of Kirkuk?

### **"Resignation" or "Dismissal"**

In the end of March, 2021 Arshad Salehi resigned from leadership of Turkmen front and his deputy Hassan Toran replaced him which has been his deputy since 2018. In his first reaction Salehi said after consultation with some of the other leaders of the party decided to resign. And also said that such "decision was not easy for me. And still do not want to speak of details." Then he used Turkish writer proverb that says: "sometimes words cannot deliver everything."<sup>[1]</sup> Earlier he tweeted that "some Turkmen parties" became "foreign agents" and want to divide Turkmen front. So he mentioned both internal and external factors in his resignation. His words prove that he was not happy to resign in other words he was dismissed. The Turkmen front's statement on his resignation indicates sort of compromise between Salehi with those parties wanted him to leave his position. According to the statement, Salehi from now on "Will dedicate himself for political work, prior and after Iraqi national elections on behalf of Turkmen entity he will negotiate to achieve their rights."<sup>[2]</sup> this could mean that at least he will have opportunity to stay as MP for another term or himself or someone close to him get a position in the future Iraqi cabinet. After the party's statement, Salehi said that he is just Turkmen individual and MP! This made his future role more unclear in the Turkmen front.

### **Is Ankara removed him?**

Timing of "Arshad Salehi's resignation" which came some days after that on March 24<sup>th</sup> he visited Ankara to attend anniversary of Turkish nationalist leader (Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu) this raised doubt that Turkish government may have asked him to resign. On March 27, 2021 a leader of "Iyi party one of the nationalist parties in Turkey which is rival of current Turkish government." Vedat Yanar mentioned that Ankara is going to remove Arshad Salehi.<sup>[3]</sup> And day after he resigned. Also during his visit to Ankara Salehi met with Mansur Yavaş mayor of Ankara which in the last Municipality elections on the Republican People's Party (CHP) list won against The Justice and Development Party (AKP) candidate which also the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) supported AKP candidate. Although Salehi's meeting with Mansur which is nationalist person and previously was member of MHP could be normal meeting but during revealing his resignation was seen as political reaction.

His resignation as much as local event, also in Turkey become internal political issue and most of the Turkish nationalists criticized Turkish government that pushed Salehi to resign. Devlet Bahçeli as big supporter of Ankara government in a statement only thanked Salehi for his previous works and did not say much on his resignation! In the past several times also during AKP and under leadership of Ahmet Davutoğlu had tried to remove him but did not work. Although this has

not confirmed if he was removed or not but some sources close to Turkmen front party says that he was removed. If it's true could be related to these factors, the upcoming Iraqi elections and Salehi's rapprochement to Iran and PMF groups and internal issues inside the party.

Salehi was mastermind of rapprochement between Sunni and Shia Turkmen since 2017 at least he led two Sunni and Shia Turkmen delegations to Turkey. First time was after the Kurdish referendum, he built relations between Turkey and Shia Turkmen even he took some of the Turkmen commanders such Yilmaz Najar to Turkey.[4] Another time was after Iraqi national elections of 2018, he brought all Turkmen MPs and met with officials in Ankara. It was a time when Turkish Ambassador Fatih Yildiz that published a photo with PMF flag in his hand: this was an indication at that time Turkey and Iran over the Kurdish issue, Syria and other developments in the region were collaborating! But now when Salehi as prominent figure in connecting Turkey and Shia Turkmen resigned again tensions between Iran and Turkey is growing in Iraq and other places in the region, so this also is another indication that the "resignation" is not just an internal development.

Also the Turkmen front is concerned about the new elections law as they may not get the three seats like before anymore. And this show that they need to make cooperation and alliances with other Turkmen parties. And according to some information some of the parties such Turkmeneli Party headed by Ryaz Sari Kahya and Turkmen endowment (waqf) party headed by Toran Katana were not happy with Salehi's policies.

## Conclusion

Salehi's "resignation" is not just local, internal and Turkmen development. This can have an external political dimension too. Turkey might be is going to reorganize its Turkmen proxies and select its borders with Iran among the Turkmen. Changing nationalist leader to Islamist-nationalist can be a factor to open door of the new era in the Turkmen front policy especially in Kirkuk.

His resignation as much as can unite Turkmen in Kirkuk also can create chances for rapprochement between Kurds and Turkmen. Interesting point here is that he resigned 14 days after that Turkmen front opened its office after 18 years in Erbil in the mid of March, 2021.[5] And at this stage Kurdistan region is taking the Turkmen issues and demands more seriously.

One of the most important specifications of the Turkmen front policies at the era of Salehi's leadership was increasing tensions with Kurds and getting closer to the Shia Turkmen groups. He has extreme nationalist Turkmen perspective. For example in the recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan he asked for donations to Azerbaijan. He is similar to the Turkish nationalist movement (MHP) and using the grey wolf salute which is common symbol of the Turkish nationalists. Hassan Toran who replaced him as new leader of Turkmen front has Islamic and nationalist background. And he is one of the faces was more present during relative stable relations between Kurds and Turkmen in the second half of 2000s. And when after 2010 tensions have grown more between Kurds and Turkmen figures like Arshad Salehi had more role in Turkmen front. Although that Hassan Toran has been deputy of Salehi since 2018 and not expected to make some fast radical changes but there are more motivations to change Turkmen front policy. The upcoming Iraqi elections push the Turkmen front to listen other different Turkmen voices which some of them like Turkmeneli is more pragmatically looking at the Turkmen-Kurds relations. Changing Salehi can create an opportunity for Kurdistan region to revise its policies towards Kirkuk and relations dossier with Turkmen. If the past policies whether were right or wrong it's better to recognize the position of Turkmen which from Dyala to Mosul have created different ethnic borderline among the Kurds and Arabs and their role in the disputed areas cannot be ignored.

[1]

<https://qha.com.tr/haberler/guncel/turkmen-lider-salihi-den-istifasinin-ardindan-ilk-aciklama-mucadeleye-hep-birlikte-de>

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[2] -<https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/middleeast/iraq/28032021>

[3] -<https://serbestiyet.com/featured/analiz-ankara-irak-turkmen-cephesinin-milliyetci-liderini-neden-istifa-ettirdi-55487/>

[4] -<http://old.qha.com.ua/tr/turk-dunyasi/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-turkmen-heyeti-ile-gorustu/161187/>

[5] -<https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/kurdistan/140320213>