

PRESIDENT TALABANI

President Jalal Talabani: “The Safety Valve of Iraq”

❖ **The President’s history spanned the struggle for the patriotic and national movement, and a democratic service that extended from Kurdistan to the Al-Salam Palace in Baghdad.**

He began from a young age, and over the course of more than sixty years over different eras, continued unabatedly until his death. His life cannot be succinctly summarized, but here is an attempt to lay out his legacy.

President Jalal Talabani began his journey in 1947, when he founded an assembly to encourage reading among students, whereupon he became involved in the work of the student party. “Why the Kurdistan Student Union?” was one of his early political writings. His partisan journey extended to the professional and organizational struggle, and the establishment of the Youth Union. Socialist and the left-wing parties ruled a large portion of the world in the fifties, and he actively participated in student and wider conferences and events, be they inside or

outside Iraq, in places such as Warsaw, and other socialist capitals of the world.

So it came to pass that he was introduced to democratic and patriotic alliances in the era of the monarchy. Later, his struggle transformed to taking up arms to fight against Iraq's dictatorship regimes.

His struggle was a revolution for justice and in defense of the patriotic and national principles deeply rooted in the mentality of Iraqis. His efforts were always without prejudice to the struggle between the two nations – Arabs and Kurds – and other ethnicities on Iraqi soil. Throughout his life, he supported broader human rights and the principles of Arab-Kurdish brotherhood.

The President's revolution was not just for Kurdish rights, but for the rights of all Iraqi nationalities, ethnicities and minorities. He strove for a revolution that would encompass nationality alongside social justice, partnership and equality, and in a way that everyone would feel included. Indeed, it was a new revolution that would comprise the struggles of all nationalities, intellectuals, students, feminists, and young people, for democracy and progress.

President Talabani exemplified the posterity of leaders and pioneers. He was a noble fighter who fought clean battles for the sake of justice - battles that were fought based on the highest standards. Whenever any rare political breakthroughs would occur during the time of humiliating dictatorships in Iraq, he was an excellent democratic negotiator who fought viciously for democracy and the rights of his nation.

The principle of national reconciliation was never far from his actions. His strategy and his stance were always to distinguish between the chauvinistic fascist governments from the people who were oppressed.

Despite the cruelty of successive despotic regimes and governments in Iraq, his glorious and generous march stressed the need for partnership, reconciliation, negotiation, and dialogue; always, preferring the diplomatic role to ward off calamities, tragedies, and disasters; and as a civilized way to solve problems and overcome obstacles.

He continued on this path, as a loyal Iraqi patriot and democrat; and as a prominent pioneer and advocate of reform, justice and brotherhood among nations.

In his career that was full of great sacrifices, President Talabani preferred the principle of supporting the oppressed; upholding social justice; striving to achieve freedom; supporting women and women's rights; strengthening the freedom of speech, press, and expression; and liberating all from the shackles that restricted them politically and socially.

He was the first to build a platform in Azadi Park in Sulaymaniyah to give a chance to whomever sought to criticize, and preached that they should start with him in their criticism.

As an educated and enlightened struggler, he began fighting against backwardness; standing beside activists for women's rights, demands and appeals. Moreover, he was involved in the political corridors from the start as a brilliant writer and journalist, open-minded and insightful, afraid to express his opinions and ideas.

President Talabani's effective contributions to the Socialist International eventually led him to assume the position of its vice president.

Fortunately, this did not only result in positive benefits for his party - the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan - and the other Kurdish parties that were taking the same approach in different parts of Kurdistan, but it helped him in the Iraqi political arena too, since he became the first elected Kurdish President of Iraq.

He also used the deepest concepts of understanding in matters that were totally new for many of the politicians in the region: matters like the tendency to be against internal and civil war; abhorring the death penalty, and his staunch defense for not signing it; and the prohibition of shedding Iraqi blood at every occasion.

He was labeled ‘the backbone of women’ and their defender in state and government institutions. This was because of his seriousness about their equality with men; expanding their participation in civil and political life; and empowering them in all fields and sectors.

Of course, as always, his efforts did not go to waste, and he achieved a quota rate of 25% for women. Furthermore, his decision to ban second marriages without proper justification during his presidency of the Sulaymaniyah administration was an honorable record that history will respect.

Because he was anxious about the fate and the future of Iraq and its citizens, President Talabani did not fail to support economic and social development by urging national investment, local capital, and ensuring the appropriate conditions for them to thrive.

The maturity of Talabani’s vision came clearest to light after the fall of the dictatorial regime; saving the country from the clutches of chaos and disorder, and involving everyone in managing the country after they were marginalized for years.

Due to him, consensus, coalition, alliance, and joint action replaced the abuse and monopoly of power. His bold decisions closed the door in the face of division and rivalry and paved the way for a federal democratic

system that was later established in the constitution, for which the majority of Iraqi people voted in the 2005 referendum.

The challenges of governing and managing a country that was so recently liberated from a totalitarian and tyrannical rule that lasted 35 years were vast. But they did not divert Talabani's will from his firm principle of comradeship and brotherhood in supporting the Kurdish cause in parts of Kurdistan. It also did not prevent him from forming constructive engagement with the countries and capitals of the region to push them towards more democratic solutions and an Iraqi-Arab alliance against dictatorship.

His response to a Turkish student in Columbia University demonstrates this. Asked about the location of Kurdistan, he replied: "Kurdistan is a country, I did not create it, God created it, if you in Turkey deny it, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist." With this high dynamic, President Talabani sponsored constructive dialogue rounds between the Turkish government and the Kurdish movement in Turkey for the purpose of supporting national rights and an advocacy for regional peace and our rights toward each other's brotherhood.

Talabani's ability to maintain balance was unique. He was a close and trusting friend to the Shiites and their political parties, and at the same time, he was a stubborn defender of the Sunnis. He did not forget nor stopped protecting the rights of the other ethnicities and minorities such as Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians and Christians. Similarly, he was the main source of trust for the Americans, and always keen to improve relations with the British, Russians, Chinese, French and Germans.

He had a strong bond of friendship with Turkey and his words carried weight for them. He was the sponsor of the peace process between Ankara and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), before Ankara backtracked. He had a prestigious and high status among the Iranians and Kurdish opposition parties. And without exception, he built strong brotherly relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the State of Kuwait, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Egypt.

He was described by the press and cultural and political forums as a "man who keeps balances." He is the only person who could have meetings with Condoleezza Rice - the former US Secretary of State - and shake hands with Iranian President Ahmadinejad at the same time.

Throughout his political career, which lasted more than half a century, Talabani knew nothing but optimism, and relied on frank dialogue to solving problems. The promotion of values of religious and sectarian tolerance, and respecting religions and social peace, were key priorities he strived to achieve.

The Arabs, the Shiites, the Turkmen, the Christians, and the Kurds loved him.

His eminence Al-Sistani granted him a national scarf with the title, “the safety valve of Iraq”.

There is nothing more telling than the words of one Baghdad protestor during the recent demonstrations in Iraq. “If Mam Jalal was present, the situation would never turn out this way,” he said.

Jalal Husamuddin Nouralla was born in 1932 in Kalkan Village in the town of Koya, on the mountain of Kosrat in Iraqi-Kurdistan. His family originated from the Talabani sheikhs’ family, and they moved to Koya after his father was selected as the director of the Talabani’s Tekkiye.

Mam Jalal was the founder and Secretary General of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and former President of Iraq between 2005 to 2014.

In 1945 when Kurdish “Nawroz” was celebrated in Koya, the 13 years old Talabani participated in the celebration and presented a speech that fascinated his teachers and the celebrants.

In 1946, he formed a secret Kurdish Students Association with a group of friends under the direction of one of his instructors and named it (Reading Advance Association) (K.P.X) and he was elected as its secretary.

The aim of the association was to encourage reading and self-studies. After joining the political life, (Rizgari) secret newspaper that belonged to Kurdistan Democratic Party, published one of his articles under the fake name (fire).

He subsequently joined an intellectual group of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) through the help of the Kurdish fighter Omar Dababa.

The roots of his political and organizational relations with the KDP go back to 1947, made through his teacher Tahir Said. He attended intermediate school in Koya and from there he took on the responsibility for the Koya's Student Party.

At the age of 15, he led a demonstration in Koya town against the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, also known as the Portsmouth Treaty, that took place in 1948.

That same year, he was elected as a representative of Koya's student body to participate in the founding congress of the General Union of Iraqi Students; a congress in which he was selected as a reserve member and, after one year, became Koya's committee member.

He received his high school education in Kirkuk and wanted to study at the College of Medicine in Baghdad University, but his request was denied because the security institutions did not provide him with the necessary documents to enter the college. Therefore, he applied to the College of Law and was accepted for the academic year 1952-1953.

In the third congress of KDP in 1953, Mam was elected as a member of the KDP's Central Committee. On February 18 that same year, he founded the Kurdistan Students Union and became its General Secretary.

In 1955, as a part of the Iraqi Students and Youth delegation, he participated in World Festival of Youth and Students (WFYS) in Warsaw, Poland, before organizing a campaign to define the Kurdish case.

When the Chinese witnessed how active he was in Poland it caught their attention, and they decided to invite him along with an Arab member of the delegation. With a large group of young people that were invited from all around the world, the two departed to China by train, passing through the Soviet Union territory.

On the way to China, he thought about a way to meet Mala Mustafa Barzani, the president of the KDP, who was then a political refugee in Russia. On the road from Beijing to Moscow, he wrote a long letter for him and in Moscow he handed the letter to an Iraqi Arab presenter, asking him to give it to Barzani, since the presenter was working at Moscow's Arabic radio.

Talabani received some instructions from the carrier of the letter, which included an address of an Iranian resident in West Germany, so Mam Jalal could write to him and for him to become a bridge between Barzani and the Democratic Party Leadership inside the country. Upon his return, the security services attempted to make some problems for Mam Jalal but their attempts failed, since they could not prove anything against him.

In 1956, and after his participation in the demonstration condemning the Israeli-British-French attack on Egypt, the authorities issued a warrant to arrest him. Due to alibis and accusations of him belonging to the Iraqi Communist Party, he was banned from the College of Law.

In 1957, he was invited to participate in the World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow as a Secretary of Kurdistan Students Union.

There, he met Mala Mustafa Barzani for the very first time and made several meetings with him, meetings which marked the first meetings between Barzani as a president of the Kurdistan Democratic Union and the internal party leadership after the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy, and the Declaration of the Iraq Republic.

On July 14th., 1958, Mam Jalal returned to study at the college of Law and finished his study the following year, whereupon he started his lifelong career as a lawyer.

In 1960, when the Democratic Party's Secretary Ibrahim Ahmed, also editor in chief of (Khabat) newspaper, was arrested, Talabani and a group of lawyers defended him. In court, he took the responsibilities for labors and supported them, since they were in quarrel with other companies.

After the tension arose between Abd al-Karim Qasim and the KDP, it became clear that Baghdad did not have any intentions to solve the Kurdish issue, and therefore in 1961, they declared a massive rebellion against Abd al-Karim Qasim to object the implementation of the agrarian reform decision, and Abd al-Karim Qasim responded to this brutally by launching an airstrike against them. As a result, the KDP decided to turn the clan revolution into a national revolution and initiated an armed force battle against the Abd al-Karim Qasim's government. At that time, Talabani was supervising the activities of the peshmerga armed forces in Chami Rezan district, and he was leading the Rizgari forces. He also led the battles of Sharbazher, Penjwen, and Chami Rezan.

After the collapse of Abd al-Karim Qasim's government, the Baathists took control of everything. In February 1963, Mam Jalal and Salih Yousifi as the representatives of KDP discussed with the new government the Kurds case, so as to reach a solution. Meanwhile, the Baath government announced that Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Arab leader back then, might not agree on taking that step, describing Baath as a weakness in the matter of Arab Nationalism.

Therefore, in the same month Mam Jalal himself visited Egypt and met with Egypt's President Jamal Abdul Nasser, where he explained to him the autonomy of his homeland. From Egypt he went to Algeria, and from there with the Iraqi delegation he met with Ahmed Ben Bella, and then he returned to Egypt to visit Abel Nasser again, persuading him that the autonomy and improved rights of Kurds will not affect the Arabic Nation.

The tension between Kurds and Baghdad increased when Baghdad refused to recognize the autonomy of Kurdistan, and instead suggested that the Kurds could only control the governorates. When Mam Jalal was in Lebanon holding a press congress about Kurdish rights, the Iraqi government issued a warrant to arrest all the Kurdish delegation members, and on June 10th, they launched a massive attack on Kurdistan.

In 1964, after the armistice of the revolution and the government, Abdul Salam Arif revolted against the Baathists and banished them from power. Internal conflicts began within the KDP, between Mala Mustafa Barzani and the political bureau that was led by Ibrahim Ahmad. Talabani was supportive of the political bureau. The political bureau retreated to Iran and settled in Hamadan when they were attacked by the Barzani forces in Mawat.

After a while, the political bureau reached an agreement with Mala Mustafa but, due to the increased pressure on them and the risk of losing their members, they reached an agreement with the Iraqi government in 1966, where the government gave them the right to continue their political activities freely and even provided them with armed forces.

When Iraqi President Ahmad Hasan Bakr announced the agreement and the reunion of the two Kurdish movements on March 11, 1970, Mam Jalal in cooperation with a group of old cadres of the KDP's political bureau founded a secret Leftist Party named the Marxist-Leninist Society of Kurdistan.

In 1971, according to the agreement that was made with Barzani and after the union of the two parties, Talabani and his companion did not take any responsibilities.

In 1972, Mam left Kurdistan and settled in Lebanon. During this period, he strengthened his relations with the Palestinians, especially with the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Palestine that was led by George Habash.

When the revolution failed in 1975, following the Algiers agreement between Iraq and Iran, Talabani was living in Cairo as a member of the KDP's Arab Relations office. At that time, he did everything in his power to convince the leadership that there was still an opportunity for resistance and endurance, and the clue for this was that a representative of the Soviet Union confirmed his alliance to support the Kurds issue under a condition that the revolution lingers.

After three months of Kurdistan Revolution setback, Talabani founded the PUK in Damascus,

Syria. From there he took two vital steps towards strengthening the Patriotic Union's position; the first step which was to bring a Kurdistan Working League and Kurdistan Socialist Movement into the PUK, and second to join the PUK with the Iraqi National Rally and form a political alliance against Baath Regime.

In August 1977, he returned to Kurdistan and provided the requirements for the resumption of armed peshmerga in Kurdistan and took upon himself the task of leading the revolution.

In 1980, when Iraq declared an attack on Iran, Talabani stood against this hostile regime of Iraq and in the same year he participated in establishing the National Democratic Front of Iraq that consisted of 8 parties. Its aim was to bring down the Baath Regime.

In 1984, Mam Jalal started to negotiate with the Baath Regime but could not reach an agreement regarding the Kurds issue therefore he ended the negotiating in the mid of January 1985.

That same year, the Iranians announced that they were ready to correct their attitude towards the PUK and they wanted reconciliation and coordination.

Mam Jalal welcomed this and extended his support for neutralizing the relations between both.

In 1986, the relations between Iran and Patriotic Union improved until it reached an alliance level and they rebelled against the Baath Regime.

Since then, Kurdish home was reunited and a project for the public reconciliation was suggested. At the start, the conciliation was made with the Kurdistan Socialist Party and then with PASOK. After that, it was with the Iraqi Socialist Party and lastly the KDP in Tehran. This public reconciliation became the corner stone for the foundation of Kurdistan Front in 1988 among the Kurdish parties and forces.

Mam Jalal predicted that the Baathist Regime would turn into a regime isolated from the international community, so he called on all Kurdish forces to prepare for a new phase of free life in Kurdistan, and that the Kurdistan uprising was the beginning of a new political turn despite the temporary setbacks.

After the 1991 uprising, Mam Jalal was leading the Kurdistan Front delegation and was in negotiation with the Baath Regime to find a democratic, justice solution for the Kurdish issue.

Mam Jalal defied against a trivial, unsecured, and non-guaranteed agreement between Kurds and the Baath Regime, and due to two different ideologies a parliamentary election was held in Iraq.

Moreover, in the election of 1992, the PUK and the KDP gained the most votes and from there they formed the first cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

During the congress of Iraqi Opposition Forces in Salahaddin governorate, Talabani played the major role in directing the program of the congress and supporting the congress to verify the federal system as a form of governance in the new Iraq, and based on the congress decision, the Kurdistan Parliament approved federalism to

regulate the relationship between the central and regional governments.

After the outbreak of internal conflicts, Mam Jalal did everything in his power to bring peace to Kurdistan and he acknowledged the efforts of the United States, Britain, France, Iran and Turkey to end the problems between the PUK and the KDP.

In 1998, under the supervision of United States of America, Mam Jalal signed the Washington agreement with Masoud Barzani, the president of the KDP, and then he tried his best to unify the administrative institutions of the KRG.

After the fall of Baath Regime in 2003, Mam Jalal was elected as a member of the Governing Council, and in 2004 he presided over the council.

After the authentication of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), in January 2005 the KRG and Iraq were officially recognized as a federal state, following which the first public election took place according to this law.

In April 2005, Mam Jalal was elected by the Iraqi National Association as the President of Iraq in the transitional stage. In the phase of writing the Iraqi constitution, he exchanged dialogues with Kurdistan representatives and Iraqis, and he contributed greatly in writing the constitution, which was the first constitution that people voted on.

With this, Mam Jalal, the revolutionary democratic, and libertarian and companion to Iraqi leaders, and the founding father of country's constitution and the father of democracy, was elected President by the parliament on April 22 of 2006, for a period of 4 years.

He became the first Peshmerga, the first Kurd, and the first freely elected President in the history of Iraq.

As a Kurdish democratic President and the protector of the constitution, he played a vital and effective role in building democracy and pluralism, promoting coexistence and consolidating the values of a federal Iraq.

In his annual Address that he presented to the United Nations General Assembly, he stated the objectives of all nationalities and its parts for a pluralistic Iraq, and he presented his speech in both Arabic and Kurdish Languages.

In 2007, Mam Jalal signed a strategic agreement with the KDP, seeking to resolve long-standing issues between the two parties. By this he brought peace and prosperity to Kurdistan for a long period of time.

In July 2008, during the work of the twenty-third congress of the International Socialist Organization, he was elected as the Vice President of the organization and in 2010, he was elected by the Iraqi Council of Representatives as President of the Republic for the second term.

During his period of presidency, Mam was the father of peace, coexistence, and was on the same page with various parties, and he brought up all the nationalities under his umbrella.

His table in the Peace Palace was a place of gathering the parties, for peace, reconciliation, and collaboration.

He was the Iraqis' safe haven, as described by Ali al-Sistani. Despite the difficulties and confrontations of terrorism and sectarian violence in the country, on the regional and Iraqi levels, Mam Jalal's Presidency gave a great prestige and a new character to the federal, democratic Iraq.

Unfortunately, sickness and struggle prevented this great leader from completing the roadmap for building a democratic federal state. With his great legacy in presidency and politics and a lifetime of experience in the struggle for a democratic liberation, he left this mission to the Kurds and the rest of Iraq to complete.

On December 17, 2012, President Talabani fell sick and was taken immediately to (Charité) hospital in Germany's capital, Berlin. On July 19, 2014, he returned to Sulaymaniyah and settled down in Dabashan. Due to his health condition, however, he could not continue his political journey.

On October 3, 2017, the brave leader, liberal peshmerga of Kurdistan and great President of Iraq passed away.

Talabani was interested in Kurdish literature, and he often repeated Haji Qadri Koya's poem:

Life and death resemble shadow and the sun

And the only thing that shall remain is legacy

