

Federalism can help remedy conflicts in the Middle East, say conference speakers at the European Parliament

By Serena Romeo, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (09.10.2013) - On 2nd October, MEP Tunne Kelam hosted a conference in the European Parliament on federalism in the Middle East as one possible solution to the region's conflicts. The event was organised in collaboration with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and gave particular focus to Iran and Iraq.

Marino Busdachin, General Secretary of UNPO and moderator of the conference, underlined that federalism is not an easy system to implement, citing that even modern states like Belgium have their own problems to face with their respective federalist systems. In the Middle East, where states and minorities exist with overlapping interests, implementing such a system could nonetheless offer a path toward reconciliation within countries and in the region.

William Spencer from the Institute for International Law and Human Rights compared the different systems of government adopted by European states with the possibility of a federalist system in Iraq. The expressions of federalism in Europe vary from one state to another, depending on which power or which authority has been decentralised. In the case of Iraq, Spencer noted that the country's new constitution has defined its government as a federal system, which has the potential to mitigate some long-standing conflicts; however, work still needs to be done to provide an adequate legal framework to protect religious and linguistic minorities in Iraq. Even still, such a framework could be useless if state institutions are too weak to guarantee these protections. Federalism can be a first step toward democracy, he said, but it is surely not the final step.

Regarding Iran, Ayda Karimili, spokesperson for the Southern Azerbaijani Alliance, began by outlining the composition of the country's population, where there are several ethnic minorities like Turks, Kurds, Baloch, Turkmen, Arabs and Lors. However, solidarity between the various "nations" of Iran, said Loghman Hazar Ahmedi of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan and member of the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran (CNFI), is strong only because of their common struggle against discrimination from the regime. According to Loghman Ahmedi, the implementation of a federal system would be positive both for the state and for the security of the Middle East region.

The Government of Iran has been widely criticised for its systematic violations of human rights and brutal repression of its political opponents. On the 26th September, an exchange of views on the human rights situation in Iran took place at the EP Subcommittee on Human Rights, during which a political prisoner described the mistreatment and "psychological rape" he endured in an Iranian prison. In November 2012, the European Parliament passed a Resolution on the situation of ethnic minorities in Iran, highlighting the need to improve the human rights situation there.

The second panel focused on the theoretical concept of federalism. A doctoral researcher at KU Leuven Institute of Philosophy, Michael Jewkes, spoke about the theory of federalism. Nasser Boladai of the Balochistan People's Party discussed how federalism in Iran could be regarded as a solution for the rights of minorities, since minorities are well established in different parts of the Iranian territory. Finally, Ivan Serrano of Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona talked about the implementation of federalism in different European countries in regard to their national minorities.

All in all, the theme of the conference was quite clear: serious consideration of a federal model of government could go a long way toward resolving conflicts in the Middle East. The extent to which sitting governments in the region are prepared to move in this direction – and how to create the political will to do so – are still open for debate.