

# MEETING ARMENIAN DEFENSE FORCES OF IRAQI KURDISTAN

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Hamo Moskofian, Hawrezg-Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan, 27 September 2014

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**Commander Murad Vardanian - Third from left**

Following the visit, we drove to Hawrezg--45-minutes away by car. The Hawrezg village, constructed in 1928 through the efforts of Levon Pasha Shaghoyan, was reconstructed in 2006 by the former Minister of Finance of Iraqi Kurdistan Sarkis Aghajan, an Armenian from maternal side.

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As opposed to my last year's visit to the settlement, this time I encountered armed Armenian fedayees in the village. They stopped our "Parliamentarian" Jeep and upon learning that we had come to visit Murad Vardanian, their commander and the head of the village council ("moukhtar), they guided us to Vardanian's modest house.

A week earlier, the LBCI satellite channel of Lebanon had aired an interview with the Armenian hero. Vardanian had said that Armenians had armed themselves to defend the 19,000-strong Armenian community, specially in Dhok, Hawrezg, Avzruk, Ishkender, and Zakho.

I did not know that Vardanian had been an Iraqi army commander for eight years and had seen action in several wars. His aides had also been in the Iraqi army. The walls of his modest and cozy house were covered with machine guns, sniper weapons, pistols and photos of Armenian fedayees and that of beloved Levon Pasha Shaghoyan.

I asked Commander Murad how he and his followers had chosen the dangerous path of struggle

against a ferocious foe like ISIS while thousands of other Iraqis had fled from their villages, leaving even their firearms behind?

"As Armenians, we are famous for our intellect and courage. The Kurds and the Iraqi Kurdistan state leaders respect us immensely. We, Armenians, are born and raised with eagles and lions. If necessary, we will die as lions too," said Commander Murad.

He added: "We fought much greater battles in the eight-year Iraq-Iran War and stopped the massive attacks of thousands of enemy troops. These ISIS people are a bunch of killers and crooks, armed mainly by Turkey and its allies. ISIS will be defeated by the united force of Armenians and our Kurdish brothers."

Vardanian said that the day he announced the formation of an Armenian defense force, 36 Armenians who had served in the Iraqi army, joined his nascent group. "As we began to buy weapons and bullets through our own resources our troops grew bigger and bigger. New recruits came from all over the Armenian villages and towns of Iraqi Kurdistan," said Vardanian.



"We went to confront the treacherous enemy on the riverbank, before they reached our villages," said the Armenian commander, and added: "A delegation of the Kurdistan government visited us. They were extremely happy to see their Armenian brothers defending their second motherland beside Armenia...They promised all kinds of help."

Like Father Shahinian and Kurdistan MP Aminian, the heroic commander was surprised and angry that the Armenian ambassador in Baghdad and the Armenian authorities in Yerevan have shown no interest in Iraqi Armenians. "Anyhow, we will go to the aid of Nagorno-Karabagh, if it is attacked by Azerbaijan," said the patriotic commander.

