

Kurdistan Chronicle

FROM
FARM TO
FORK





Kurdistan's Diplomatic Engagements Kick Off 2024 on Positive Note

The year 2024 has commenced on a positive note for the Kurdistan Region, marked by significant diplomatic engagements and high-level visits by Kurdish leadership. Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and President Nechivan Barzani have been actively representing the region on the international stage, addressing critical issues and fostering relationships with key global stakeholders.

Further cementing Kurdistan's diplomatic efforts, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani embarked on a crucial visit to the United States, accompanied by senior cabinet members. The visit aimed to strengthen bilateral relations between Kurdistan and the United States, focusing on mutual policy issues and regional developments. Meetings with key officials at the White House, the Department of State, and Capitol Hill provided an opportunity to discuss pertinent issues affecting Iraq, Kurdistan, and the wider Middle East.

In the thick of ongoing challenges in the Middle East, including the Gaza conflict, the Kurdish factor emerges as a beacon of stability and a safe haven for refugees. Kurdistan Region's commitment to democracy and its track record in providing refuge to displaced populations highlight its significance in the region's landscape.

Kurdistan's discussions with world leaders have also delved into the political dynamics of Iraq. Of particular concern are the recent rulings by the Iraqi Supreme Court, which have been widely criticized as unconstitutional and seen as a clear attempt by regional powers to undermine the economic prosperity and democratic institutions of the Kurdistan Region. Kurdish leaders have brought this issue to the forefront in numerous meetings with international counterparts.

Despite these challenges, Kurdistan remains resolute in upholding democratic principles and ensuring the strength of the Kurdistan Region within Iraq's federal framework. However, the manipulation of the Iraqi Supreme Court signals a dangerous escalation, one that demands attention and intervention from the international community to prevent further destabilization.

Amidst the upheavals in the region, the Kurdish leadership is asserting its presence on both the global and regional stages, sending a strong message to the international community. This message emphasizes the Kurdistan people's commitment to regional stability and their partnerships with the United States and its allies. The Kurdish factor cannot be overlooked in these turbulent times, highlighting the importance of Kurdistan's involvement in shaping the future of the Middle East. ●



Marewan Hawramy

President Nechivan Barzani, on the other hand, participated in the Munich Security Conference, engaging in crucial meetings with international leaders and officials. The discussions primarily focused on understanding the security landscape in Iraq, Kurdistan Region, and neighboring countries. President Barzani's presence at such a significant forum signifies Kurdistan's commitment to fostering peace and stability in the region through constructive dialogue and cooperation.

TIMELINE

FEBRUARY 2024

February 1 • Kurdistan commemorated the victims of the 2004 twin terrorist attacks.

• French President Macron reaffirmed his country's support for the Kurdistan Region's stability in the wake of repeated Iranian attacks.

February 4 • KDP and PUK reached an agreement on the nomination of a Kurdish candidate for Kirkuk governor.

• A delegation from the Iraqi Bar Association visited Erbil and discussed the rule of law with President Masoud Barzani.

February 5 • Turkish Foreign Minister warned the PUK against ties with the PKK.

• A *Peshmerga* and US military delegation reviewed the implementation of the MoU between KRG and the US Department of Defense.

February 6 • Prime Minister Masrour Barzani received the newly appointed Consul General of the UK in Erbil. • Iraq dropped its complaint against Iran at the UNSC under Tehran's pressure.

February 7 • Turkish National Defense Minister Yaşar Güler visited Erbil and met with top Kurdish officials. • The US welcomed reports of declining press freedom violations in the Kurdistan Region. • Referring to Turkey and the PKK, Kurdistan Region Interior Minister urged neighboring countries to avoid using Kurdistan to resolve their disputes.

February 8 • In an interview with NBC News, PM Barzani stressed the need for increased US support in the Kurdistan Region.

February 10 • PM Barzani congratulated Azerbaijani President on his re-election.

February 11 • PM Barzani arrived in Dubai for the World Governments Summit.

February 12 • PM Barzani delivered a speech at the World Governments Summit, stressing that the Kurdistan Region poses no threat to anyone. • While in Dubai, PM Barzani met with several world leaders, including UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

February 14 • Deputy Chief

of Mission at the US Embassy in Baghdad, David Burger, visited Erbil to discuss elections and bilateral ties with Kurdish officials.

February 18 • The Kurdistan Region joined the International Honey Fair in Doha, Qatar. • Germany pledged \$320,000 in training and assistance to the Kurdistan Region's *Peshmerga* forces.

February 19 • KRG called on Canada to upgrade its diplomatic presence in Erbil to the level of Consulate General.

February 20 • The KRG reported a suspension of crude exports. • Theing reforms aimed at bolstering

February 21 • A Turkish airstrike

\$10 billion loss from the 11-month US commended KRG's new bank-financial inclusion and security.

killed two civilians in the border areas of Duhok, Kurdistan Region. • Iraq's Federal Supreme Court reduced Kurdistan Parliament seats from 111 to 100, removing the quota seats reserved for minorities. • Japanese Ambassador Futoshi Matsumoto visited Erbil and discussed bilateral relations with PM Barzani.

February 22 • PM Barzani visited Halabja province and announced several projects, including a strategic road.

February 24 • World leaders extended condolences to President Masoud Barzani over the passing of his sister.

February 25 • PM Barzani arrived in Washington, D.C., on an official visit to meet with Secretary Blinken and other US officials, congress

members, and business owners.

February 26 • French Ambassador to Erbil to discuss bilateral ties with

February 27 • In an interview Masoud Barzani warned of continued domestically and internationally.

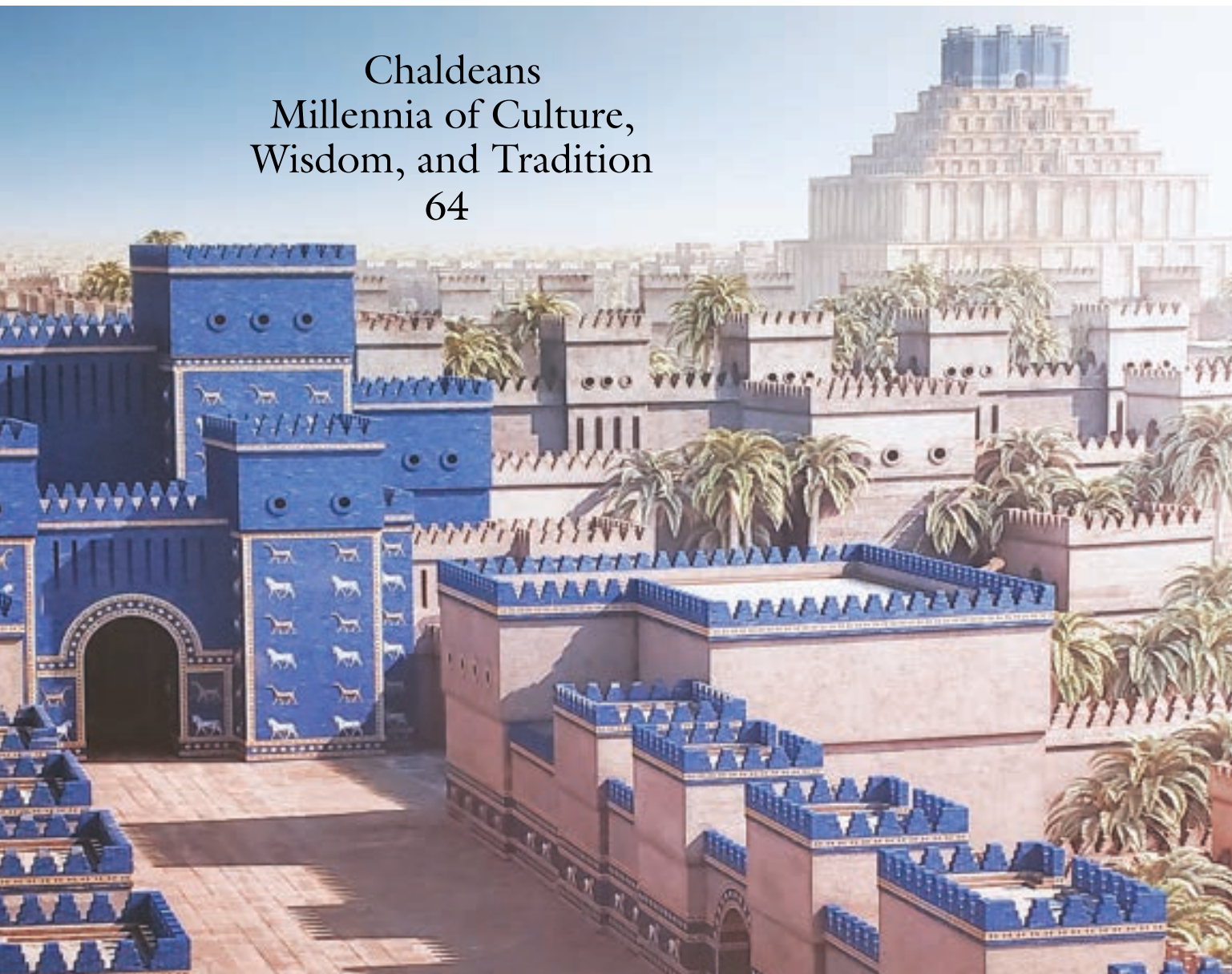
February 28 • Religious and ethnic minority components decried the Iraqi court's decision on removing quota seats in the Kurdistan Parliament. • Kurdistan Region's Commission of Integrity announced a digitalization plan to enhance transparency.



February 29 • Armenian President Vahagn Khachaturyan visited Erbil and met with top Kurdish officials to discuss relations and expanding cooperation.

CONTENTS

FEBRUARY 2024

Chaldeans Millennia of Culture, Wisdom, and Tradition 64



 Kurdistan Chronicle  Kurdistan Chronicle  Kurdistan Chronicle  Kurdistan Chronicle  Kurdistan Chronicle

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6-11 Historic Ties, Future Horizons	80-83 This is Fadil Jaf
12-15 Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's Speech at the World Government Summit 2024	84-87 The Musical Legacy of Mohammed Zaza
16-19 Kurdistan Region President Joins Munich Security Conference	88-92 Kurdish Dialects in Konar's Films
20-23 Building on Strong Friendships My Early Weeks in the Kurdistan Region	93 Explore the Kurdistan in America Podcast!
24-25 U.S. Consulate Commends Press Freedom	94-97 Teaching Kurdish in China
26-31 Freedom is Not Free Commemorating the February 1, 2004 Attack	98-101 Paintings of Hope
32-35 What is the fragility of Iraq?	102-107 The Maestro of Kurdish Theater
36-41 From Farm to Fork	108-113 Emissary of Culture and Art
42-45 KRG Offers Protection For Refugees	114-117 Painting on Walls
46-51 A Haven Burdened by Displaced Populations	118-119 From Kermanshah to Academic Success
52-55 The Kurdish Conundrum in Centralist Iraq	120-123 The Path of a Mixed Martial Artist
56-57 Kurdistan's Para-Diplomacy	124-127 Hanna's Athletic Triumphs
58-63 Assyrian Contributions to Kurdish Struggle	128-129 Poetry Nazand Begikhani
64-69 Chaldeans Millennia of Culture, Wisdom, and Tradition	130-131 Wildlife Sabr Dri
70-73 Repatriation of Artifacts	132-133 Capturing Star Trails in Kurdistan
76-79 Journey Among the Kurds	134-137 Erbil Autoshow

Historic Ties, Future Horizons



Chris Johannes

is an international journalist, communications expert, and editor. He has lived in and reported on Kurdish and Iraqi issues since 2016. Additionally, he has worked across the United States, Germany, and the Middle East.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's visit to Washington, D.C. in February 2024, marks a significant moment in the ongoing partnership between the KRG and the United States, highlighting their strategic and multifaceted collaboration. It also underscores the commitment of both parties to reinforce their relationship, focusing on security, economic, and political cooperation. The discussions between Prime Minister Barzani and high-level U.S. officials have aimed to further solidify this friendship, emphasizing a mutual dedication to fostering peace, prosperity, and regional stability.

"Our relationship with the United States remains strong," KRG Prime Minister Barzani said after the trip, reflecting the sentiment and significance of the visit to Washington, his first in this official role.

Built on past partnerships

In 2005, former KRG President Masoud Barzani made a historic visit to the White House to meet with former U.S. President George W. Bush. The visit was a testament to the burgeoning relationship between the KRG and the United States and set a formal precedent for future cooperation and strategic partnership.

The 2005 meeting between Barzani and Bush also marked a pivotal moment in Kurdish political history, with the United States supporting the se-



Photo: Farhad Ahmad

A statement from Secretary of State Anthony Blinken during his meeting with Prime Minister Masrour Barzani in Washington, D.C.

“It is a great pleasure to have the prime minister here. We saw each other a few weeks ago, but I'm so glad to have you here today in Washington at the State Department as well as the entire team.

“We have – the United States has a long partnership with the KRG, with the Kurdistan Regional Government. And it's a partnership that is cemented first and foremost in shared values, shared interests, and also a shared history of sacrifice together and something that we take very seriously, and something that for me personally over many, many years in working in this area and on these issues has meant – meant a great deal. Our support for a resilient KRG is integral to our 360-degree approach to Iraq. And so the opportunity today to reaffirm this support, reaffirm this partnership and the work that we're doing together I think is important and timely.

“In many ways, this is a relationship for us that is unique in the region, and, again, one that we value greatly. The KRG has also been a critical partner for stability in the region and the health of the private sector, including American investments, and that too is important. So we've had many periods together where we've been side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder under the most challenging circumstances. This period has its share of challenges as well. But being able to face them together is very important.

“Finally, I would just say that also important to us, because I think it's important to the success of our friends and partners, is unity among Kurds and making sure that everyone, because the interests are shared, is working together to the greatest extent possible.”

PM Masrour Barzani and Secretary Antony Blinken in Washington (Feb. 26, 2024).

curity, prosperity, and democratic governance of the region through strategic diplomacy. This foundational engagement established a platform for a lasting partnership, which was further exemplified by current Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with former President Bush while he was in Washington.

Prime Minister Masrour Barzani posted on X: “I was honored to see President Bush during my visit to the United States. I thanked him for his personal support to the people of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, for liberating Iraq from a brutal dictator, and for backing the democratic process in the country.”

Despite the warm ties, the KRG-U.S. relationship remains deeply dependent upon the Iraqi state and, in the broader context, Iraqi politics. Dynamics between Erbil and Baghdad are crucial to their existence and the wider geopolitical equilibrium of the Middle East. David Romano, Thomas G. Strong Professor of Middle East Politics at Missouri State University, articulated the important nature of Iraqi-Kurdish relations.

“This was the first time that Masrour Barzani has visited Washington as Prime Minister of the KRG, and the visit came at a very worrisome time for the Kurdistan Region. The so-called Federal Supreme Court of Iraq in Baghdad – which was never formed according to provisions in Iraq’s constitution – has been issuing ruling after ruling to undermine the Kurdistan Region’s autonomy, including on election laws, salaries of Kurdistan civil servants, oil, and other issues,” he told Kurdistan Chronicle.

A delicate balance

The timing of Prime Minister Barzani’s visit was particularly noteworthy, as it coincided with increased attention on regional challenges, including the threats posed by Iran-backed militias and the resurgence of ISIS. These security concerns were paramount, especially in the context of protecting U.S. soldiers and ensuring the stability of the region. The visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ Al Sudani to the U.S. capital, scheduled for later in March, is expected to complement these discussions, focusing on critical issues like Iran, the Palestine-Israel conflict, and the overarching security landscape, including the safety of U.S. troops.

“Iraqi Prime Minister Sudani will seek to maintain U.S. sup-

port for Iraq without preconditions, at the same time that KRG leaders are calling for U.S. aid to Iraq to be used as leverage to pressure Baghdad to respect Kurdish autonomy and fulfill its constitutional obligations. Sudani must, all the while, balance between the United States and Iran, attempting not to alienate either,” Romano said.

The visits of the Kurdish and Iraqi leaders to the United States signify a concerted effort to address pressing regional challenges through diplomatic channels and strategic alliances. These developments highlight the importance of the Erbil-Baghdad-Washington relationships.

“I’m still not certain that the Biden administration has a foreign policy in the Middle East and particularly Kurdistan. They have short-term objectives, such as preventing a major outbreak of war in the region and avoiding escalation with Iran, but besides that I am not aware of a larger vision or a strategy to achieve it,” Romano said.

The partnership’s security dimension, particularly through cooperation with the peshmerga forces, was instrumental in overthrowing Saddam Hussein and creating stability, as well as in combating ISIS and other ongoing terrorist threats. This collaboration, as noted by Romano, including continued reform efforts, is a cornerstone of the KRG-U.S. alliance.

“I believe the United States will continue to assist the peshmerga in various ways, including salaries, but this aid may see reductions over time. Were the peshmerga to unify under

the Ministry of Peshmerga truly and fully, this could change many things for the better. Such unification remains a strong wish of the Americans,” Romano said.

The Kurdistan Region is still not receiving its share of the budget from Baghdad. The KRG faces obstacles in the exportation of oil and has faced unprovoked cross-border attacks. Even the system for reserving quota seats for minority parties within Kurdistan has been struck down. Amid these challenges, Prime Minister Barzani has encouraged the growth of the private sector in Kurdistan.

Steve Lutes, Vice President of Middle East Affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s U.S.-Iraq Business Council, told Kurdistan Chronicle that “turbulence across the region” can undermine the confidence of investors and companies that may not already have a strong presence in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq.

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The discussions between Prime Minister Barzani and high-level U.S. officials have aimed to further solidify this friendship, emphasizing a mutual dedication to fostering peace, prosperity, and regional stability
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PM Barzani and U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham in Washington D.C. (Feb. 28, 2024).



PM Barzani and White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan (Feb. 29, 2024).



PM Barzani and Sasha Baker, the U.S. Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (Mar. 1, 2024)



PM Barzani and Former Speaker of House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi (Feb. 29, 2024).

Photos: Farhad Ahmad



PM Barzani and Brett McGurk, the White House Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa (Mar. 1, 2024).



PM Barzani and Amos Hochstein, Senior Advisor to the U.S. President for Energy and Investment (Mar. 1, 2024).



PM Barzani and Matt Zais at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington DC (Mar. 1, 2024).



PM Barzani and Senator Tammy Duckworth, a member of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (Feb. 28, 2024).



PM Barzani and Congressman Don Bacon, Co-chair of the Kurdish Caucus in the US Congress (Feb. 29, 2024).



Kurdistan Region delegation received by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the State Department (Feb. 26, 2024).

Photos: Farhad Ahmad



PM Barzani and Senator Chris Van Hollen (Feb. 29, 2024).



KRG delegation meeting with Senator Jack Reed, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, and Senator Roger Wicker, senior member of the committee (Feb. 27, 2024).

“Of course, the visit of Prime Minister Barzani and his delegation was an opportunity to highlight the strong and long-standing alliance with the United States on several fronts. On the economic front, one clear difference from prior visits was the continued shutdown of the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline and the ability to export oil from the Kurdistan Region. Since this has implications for

commitments to democratic principles, is a unique partnership within the turbulent and often politically stagnant Middle East. Prime Minister Barzani’s visit, nearly 25 years after the U.S.-led liberation of Iraq, provided renewed optimism and a glimpse into the future of the relationship.

“In essence, every visit is unique, as cir-

ment to security, economic prosperity, and democratic values in a region fraught with challenges. Despite the hurdles, such as constitutional disputes with Baghdad and threats to regional stability, the KRG and the United States continue to navigate these complexities through sustained dialogue and cooperation.



KRG delegation, led by Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, outside Capitol Hill.

Photo: Farhad Ahmad

U.S. companies, the Kurdistan Region, and Iraq, with billions of dollars being lost as the challenge continues to linger, we are encouraging stakeholders to take concrete steps to reopen the pipeline and resume oil exports,” Lutes said.

Shared values, interests, and mutual respect

The KRG-U.S. relationship, characterized by shared sacrifices and com-

circumstances and challenges evolve. This visit by Prime Minister Barzani came at a time when there’s a great deal of turbulence across the region. This has implications for how investors and companies view potential opportunities, as they perceive the security challenges they would face entering the market,” Lutes said.

Moreover, the enduring partnership between the KRG and the United States stands as a beacon of mutual commit-

The continued strategic collaboration at the highest levels of government is more than a testament to shared interests; it is the foundation upon which the future of the region is being built. As challenges evolve, so too will this partnership. The journey of the KRG and United States serves as a powerful reminder of the transformative power of alliances that are built on shared values, interests, and mutual respect. ●



Photo: Farhad Ahmad

PM Masrour Barzani addresses the 2024 World Governments Summit in Dubai on Feb. 12, 2024.

Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's speech at the World Government Summit on February 12, 2024 in Dubai emphasizes global unity in addressing terrorism and advancing four key pillars: political stability, security, economic prosperity, and combating climate change. He advocates for justice and self-determination for the Kurdish people and highlights Kurdistan's role in regional stability. Prime Minister Barzani also urges collective action on climate change and calls for courageous leadership to tackle shared challenges.

Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's Speech at the World Government Summit 2024

Before I begin, I would like to express my deepest condolences to the people and government of the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain and the families of the fallen members of their armed forces during the recent terrorist attack in Somalia.

Excellencies, organizers of the World Government Summit, and distinguished guests, a very good afternoon to you all.

It is my pleasure to address you today at the opening of this gathering of global thinkers and leaders. I am pleased to be back in Dubai for this year's annual summit and want to express my appreciation to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum for bringing together like-minded leaders: those com-

mitted to the betterment of society and humanity by marshalling the best that we can offer as decision-makers.

It is a chance to exchange ideas, explore ways to do things differently, test ourselves, and be better. This is a challenge that we must all embrace.

I address you today as the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which has over the past 20 years built and consolidated a region out of the chaos and instability of the former Iraq. But I speak to you also as someone who stands alongside decision-makers in our proud region who are confronted by many of the same challenges.

All of us have, in some way, become accustomed to turmoil and upheaval, and numerous crises that have required deft navigation over many decades, to say the least. War, insurrection, hardship, and economic instability have

unfortunately become part of our hardwiring. There is no denying the toll that this has taken on social and economic development.

But as I have engaged with stakeholders across the Middle East and abroad, I have noticed a will to break free from the tragedies of our collective past. In all corners of our region, there is a determination to embrace progress and a recognition that change is not just inevitable, but necessary.

People yearn for the right to shape their destinies, both individually and collectively. Self-determination is a driving force of human nature, and we need to provide citizens with an environment in which they can flourish.

I believe there are four pillars towards achieving the progress that we all seek: political stability, security, economic prosperity, and combating climate change. These themes are inter-linked but addressing them also needs a tailored approach. There is no denying that many geopolitical issues in our region have been placed in the “too-hard-to-solve” basket for too long. But why let them linger? Having the courage to acknowledge that a problem exists is the first step towards solving it.

The crisis we are witnessing in Palestine is deeply troubling for many of us for several reasons: its humanitarian toll on civilians, its capacity to fuel chaos well beyond Gaza, and the fact that the root causes of the injustice remain unaddressed. Had the foundational rights of the Palestinians been dealt with 80 years ago, or in the decades thereafter, there would have been far less chance of the tragedy we are witnessing now. Instead, the cause has been left to fester, and stakeholders with conflicting agendas have filled the vacuum that has emerged.

The same can be said of the plight of the Kurdish people. We too have legitimate claims for self-determination. These are rights that have been acknowledged by our friends and allies, who at the same time tell us that political imperatives impede their help in delivering a historic justice.

We must accept that injustice together with inequality, poverty, and corruption all feed political instability. Citizens, communities, and other parts of society must feel that natural justice is being upheld in order to show loyalty and contribute to societies in the ways expected of them. They must be allowed to determine their future on their own terms. Respecting the rights of nations, or in our case a people, should not scare anyone. This recognition strengthens stability and fosters prosperity.

On the security front, we need to do more to address our collective security. Our collaboration as a region to defeat the scourge of ISIS was a shining example of how challenges can be met and how like-minded people can work together.

As Gaza, Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea boil, a new plan to safeguard national, regional, and global interests is necessary. Those who seek wars to advance their interests by threatening regional security must be held accountable.

The international community must not be indifferent towards the origins of threats simply because vested interests may overlap with them. On the regional stage, we are paying a high price for what we stand for. The region now faces a crisis of a different nature, and we must all collectively work to safeguard regional security and stability. In our case, we have been unjustifiably targeted. This aggression must end. As I have said in the past, here and in other forums, Kurdistan has never been a threat to anyone in the region. We are a factor of peace and stability, and we want regional conduct to be based on mutual respect and interests.

We expect support and need to work together to stave off grave security threats, which could undermine all we have achieved.

Let this be a moment in history where leaders everywhere can say enough is enough. We need enduring solutions to clearly identified problems.

We stood by our allies during the plague of ISIS. It was the right thing to do, and had we not done so, the region would now be a very different place, plagued by global terrorists who had consolidated a foothold in the heartland of the Middle East, sowing chaos among us at will.

But we have prevailed. The struggles of the past 20 years and of the decades of Kurdish resistance that foreshadowed them have enshrined for us a rightful stake as a sovereign people and an integral part of the Middle East.

Placing our economy on a firm footing has been a central element of what we have done in Kurdistan, and economic development more broadly is a vital component of regional growth and stability.

Leaders must focus on the well-being of people and continue to invest in human resources. Best practices governance is critical to developing our societies and political cultures, and citizens have a right to expect that from us. Prosperity and development create jobs, fueling hope and ambition. If we provide economic and political ecosystems that minimize poverty and corruption, we leave less space for extremism, and create roots for political stability and security.

I can say with satisfaction that for one of the biggest challenges of all, climate change, there is a collective will to do things differently. The UAE’s successful hosting of the COP28 summit last year led to an unequivocal commitment to reverse the tide of global warming before its effects change our planet forever.

The challenge before us requires bold decisions to diversify our energy sources and invest in renewables.

The UAE is a world leader in such new technology. Dubai and Erbil are both at the epicenter of a warming planet and we are fully aware of the risks of ignoring a catastrophic reality.

Many of the commitments made so far go against short-term economic in-

ly the sense, to make such tough decisions. If we fail to do so, our part of the world will become a furnace in our lifetime. Large tracts of land will be uninhabitable, water sources will dry up, and food security will prove an enormous challenge. Desertification, mass immigration, and economic collapse could follow.

We will then see internal migration, international migration, and demograph-

Leadership with a defined purpose is now more necessary than ever. We must encourage and reward leaders of conviction, both among decision-makers currently on the global stage and in the generations to come. We must clearly separate those who stand with progress and modernity from those intent on holding us back.

Together we can summon the will to confront the issues that hold us back. It

PM Masrour Barzani joins global leaders at the 2024 World Governments Summit in Dubai on Feb. 12, 2024.



Photo: Farhad Ahmad

terests. They were made to safeguard future generations. It is no secret that the transition to cleaner energy sources may cost more in the short term. But the long-term savings to us all are immeasurable.

We must have the courage, and frank-

ly changes. Competition for scarce resources will push peoples into conflict. This will fuel an international problem with multiple dimensions. Every country will then have to deal with the economic, political, cultural, and security challenges that mass immigration brings.

is not always easy as leaders to look to the horizon. But we must. We owe it to those who put their faith in us.

I thank you all very much for being here today and may this conference be a forum for big ideas. ●

Kurdistan Region President Joins Munich Security Conference

Kurdistan Chronicle



Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani embarked on a significant diplomatic mission to Germany, where he participated at the esteemed Munich Security Conference – a pivotal forum for fostering dialogue and forging alliances to address global security challenges – from February 16-18, 2024.

During the conference, the Kurdistan Region President engaged in a series of crucial meetings with various international leaders and high-ranking officials, the primary focus of which was understanding the prevailing security landscape in Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, and neighboring countries, and identifying the formidable hurdles obstructing the path to peace and stability.

The Kurdish president aimed to articulate the viewpoints of the Kurdistan Region while also fostering an exchange of perspectives with the international community. He also underscored the paramount importance of collaborative endeavors in safe-

guarding peace and stability, not only within Iraq and the Kurdistan Region but also across the Middle East. Through dialogues with leaders and officials from diverse nations, he aimed to discuss proactive measures aimed at mitigating further turmoil in the region.

During his participation, Kurdistan Region President seized the opportunity to engage with several prominent world leaders, including King Abdullah II of Jordan, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron, and the UK Secretary of State for Defense Grant Shapps, and held discussions with Qatar Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, Greece Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev.

Notably, the Kurdish leader also interacted with key German officials, including the foreign minister and chief of defense, as well as the foreign ministers of Austria, Kuwait, Turkey, and the Vatican.

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Kurdistan Region President aimed to articulate the viewpoints of the Kurdistan Region while also fostering an exchange of perspectives with the international community
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Kurdistan Region President and UK Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord David Cameron at MSC (Feb. 17, 2024).



Kurdistan Region President and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell (Feb. 18, 2024).



| Kurdistan Region President meeting with world leaders on the sidelines of 2024 Munich Security Conference.



| Kurdistan Region President and Vatican Foreign Minister Archbishop Paul Gallagher at the MSC (Feb. 17, 2024).



| Kurdistan Region President and Siemtje Möller, the Parliamentary State Secretary of the German Ministry of Defense at the MSC (Feb. 16, 2024).

The Kurdistan Region President's active engagement in the Munich Security Conference underscored the Kurdistan Region's commitment to contributing constructively to regional and global security initiatives while advocating for collaborative approaches towards fostering lasting peace and stability.

After the conference, the Kurdistan Region President welcomed Armenia counterpart Vahagn Khachaturyan on

February 29 in Erbil. The meeting, attended by several ministers of the Kurdistan Regional Government, primarily focused on enhancing Armenia's relations with Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, most notably in the economic domain. However, discussions also covered recent developments in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region and the status of various religious and ethnic communities.

Both leaders explored avenues to bolster ties between Armenia and Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, emphasizing potential collaborations in commerce, investment, the private sector, healthcare, and tourism. They also underscored the prospects for establishing direct flights between Armenia and both Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. ●

Building on Strong Friendships My Early Weeks in the Kurdistan Region



James Goldman
is the British Consul
General to the Kurdistan
Region.

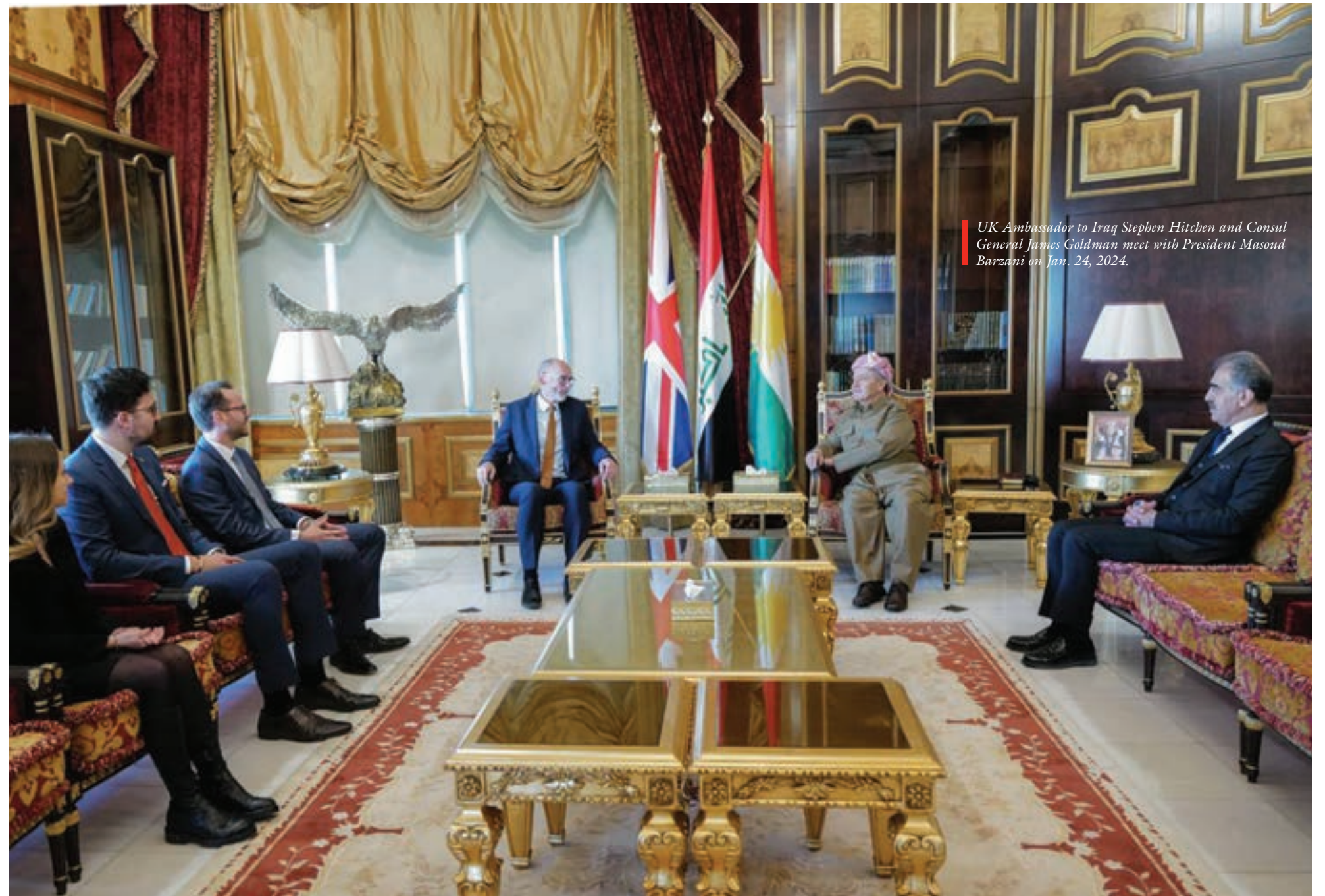
Before arriving in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), I set myself the objective of exploring the region, to meet as many people as possible and to learn about the culture, people, history, and – as those that know me will attest, most importantly – cuisine.

I am writing this in February, marking my fourth week here, and am happy to report that during this time, I have met an enormous variety of people – and eaten some fantastic meals – in Erbil, Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah, Rawandiz, Halabja, Soran, and Mosul.

Across the many warm and welcoming meetings, one thing that has stood out is the shared history of the KRI and UK. Indeed, earlier today I travelled to Soran along the picturesque Hamilton Road that was constructed by Archibald M. Hamilton (1898 – 1972) between 1928 and 1932.

Most significantly, as so many people have recalled during my encounters, the UK, along with France and the United States, established the no-fly zone in 1991. This is the foundation of the flourishing relationship that exists today and is continuing to grow.

And, like true friends, we have been through hard times together, with none being harder than the fight against ISIS. The terrorist group once controlled a swath of territory that is roughly the size of the UK but, thanks to a sustained military campaign by the Global Coalition with our Kurdish and other partners, over 7 million people were liberated from its control.



UK Ambassador to Iraq Stephen Hitchen and Consul General James Goldman meet with President Masoud Barzani on Jan. 24, 2024.

Photo: Adnan Barwari

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Politically, the UK has long been a supporter of the KRI, and today we remain steadfast in our support for the KRI’s status as a semi-autonomous region in Iraq

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UK Consul General James Goldman and Sarbaz Barznji, mayor of a southern London borough, explore lake Rania in the Kurdistan Region on Feb. 29, 2024.



UK Consul General James Goldman and Sarbaz Barznji, mayor of a southern London borough, explore lake Rania in the Kurdistan Region on Feb. 29, 2024.

More broadly, we continue to work closely on tackling terrorism with the KRI, which includes longstanding support to the Kurdish *peshmerga*. The UK is supporting the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) plans for reform to make the *peshmerga* more affordable, capable, and accountable. We are also enhancing collaboration with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), a key priority for strengthening regional security. Our ultimate mission is to support a secure and prosperous KRI, contributing to stability within Iraq. The UK has trained 111,000 members of the ISF, including 21,000 *peshmerga*.

Mutual prosperity

During my visit, I have also been inspired by the amazing people who have dedicated their lives to supporting the victims of ISIS's heinous crimes. I am proud that the UK is playing its part through our funding of non-government organizations that work with Yezidi survivors and advocate for the full implementation of the Yezidi Survivors Law.

We are also intent on building cultural engagement between the KRI and UK. For instance, the British Council is supporting an initiative that includes providing expertise and training in heritage management between UK universities and the Kurdistan Region's General Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage. The Council is also working with a range of artists and policymakers in the KRI to unlock the potential of the region's creative economy.

Education forms another strong bond between us. Across the KRI, I have met many people who have studied either at a British-affiliated school in the KRI or in the UK itself. Every year, we send students from the KRI to the

UK to study a master's degree course as part of our Chevening Scholarship Programme, with the aim of creating a lasting link between the UK and young leaders in the KRI.

There are many such links already between our two peoples. I know this personally. I was born and have lived for many years in the heart of London, where I first dipped my toe into the wonders of Kurdish cuisine. Many thousands of people from the KRI call the UK their home, and there are many British citizens living here in the KRI. I am delighted to be one of them.

Our trade and investment links are also

also work with the KRG on its economic growth plans to identify how UK companies can support in delivering on the government's priorities.

Politically, the UK has long been a supporter of the KRI, and today we remain steadfast in our support for the KRI's status as a semi-autonomous region in Iraq. We believe that a stable and sustainable constitutional arrangement within Iraq between the KRG and Iraqi central authorities is vital for the stability of Iraq as a whole.

I will end with two ambitions. First, to grow our ties even deeper to benefit the UK and KRI and support our mutual



UK Consul General James Goldman and Sarbaz Barznji visit Rania, Kurdistan Region on Feb. 29, 2024.

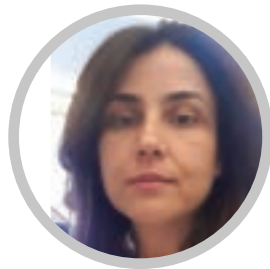
growing. We support British investors seeking to operate in the KRI and create local jobs, while many British businesses bring great products to the Kurdish market.

We thus seek to expand our engagement with businesses in the region through regular roundtable discussions. We have supported the establishment of the British International University, which offers University of London-accredited degrees in the KRI. This £38-million investment is an investment in the future of the KRI. We

prosperity. Second, to do so by building on the strong friendships we have across KRI society, breaking bread, and sharing frank views and experiences, and learning from each other.

I have been overwhelmed by the warmth and generous hospitality I have experienced in the KRI. From dolma to kebabs and shifta (a type of kofte), I look forward to sharing many more meals and continuing our dialogue and collaboration. ●

U.S. Consulate Commends Press Freedom



Samal Erfani

Professor of Anthropology and Researcher.

The United States Consulate General in the Kurdistan Region has recently lauded a significant reduction in press freedom violations within the Region. This commendation comes in the wake of concerted efforts by both local authorities and international stakeholders to create a safer and more conducive environment for journalism.

Following visits to several media establishments, the consulate issued a statement recognizing the positive strides made toward ensuring journalists' safety and freedom from intimidation, harassment, and political bias.

The commendation from the U.S. Consulate General highlights the positive trajectory of press freedom in the Kurdistan Region, recognizing the efforts of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and other stakeholders in creating an environment where journalists can work without fear or other obstacles.

Moving forward, it is essential to build on these achievements, address remaining challenges, and reaffirm the commitment to press freedom as a fundamental pillar of democracy and human rights. The consulate's acknowledgment also underscores the unwavering commitment of the United States to support an environment where journalists can operate freely, independently, and without fear of reprisal.

Central to the progress in press freedom within the Kurdistan Region is the concerted efforts of the KRG's Ninth Cabinet. Guided by international principles of press freedom, this administration has

been instrumental in fostering an environment conducive to journalistic endeavors. By prioritizing the protection of journalists' well-being, promoting transparency, and championing the public interest, the KRG has demonstrated its commitment to upholding freedom of expression and fostering democratic values.

Moreover, the strides made in enhancing press freedom reflect a broader commitment to democratic governance and human rights in the Kurdistan Region. By fostering a culture of openness and tolerance, the Region not only strengthens its democratic institutions, but also enhances its standing in the global community.

Furthermore, the recognition from the U.S. Consulate General serves as an affirmation of the progress achieved and encourages continued efforts towards safeguarding press freedom. In this way, it also underscores the importance of international cooperation and support in advancing democratic principles worldwide.

However, while significant progress has been made in the Kurdistan Region, challenges to press freedom persist in Iraq and globally. Threats such as censorship, violence against journalists, and undue political influence continue to pose obstacles to a free and independent press. Addressing these challenges requires ongoing vigilance, collaboration, and a firm commitment to upholding the principles of press freedom and the freedom of expression more broadly. ●



Photo: Safin Hamid

A man reads newspaper headlines at a newsstand, while another sells books, magazines, and newspapers on a sidewalk.



Photo: Safin Hamid

COMMEMORATION

Freedom is Not Free Commemorating the February 1, 2004 Attack



*Bayan Sami
Abdulrahman*

*Senior Advisor to Prime
Minister Barzani for
Foreign Affairs and
Climate Change.*

Every terrorist attack is shocking by its very nature. The February 1, 2004 attack was particularly appalling as it took place on the first day of Eid, as well-wishers – including children – were less than a year earlier and there was hope in the air, hope that a new Iraqi constitution that was being drafted would heal the wounds of the past. There was a real chance that we could all live in a new fed-



Sami Abdulrahman

being greeted by political representatives, and flowers and sweets were exchanged along with good wishes, warm hugs, and handshakes.

It was a sunny morning in Erbil on February 1, 2004. Iraq had been liberated

eral, democratic Iraq as equal citizens, something that millions had dreamed of, yet never dared hope.

For my father, Deputy Prime Minister Sami Abdulrahman, and my older brother Salah, it was the start of what was sup-



Memorial of 2004 Erbil bombing in Sami Abdulrahman Park



A bird's-eye view of Sami Abdulrahman Park

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

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The shocking massacre of more than 100 men and boys and the wounding of hundreds more – shook the Kurdistan Region and reverberated around the world

posed to be their planned week of time together. Salah had traveled to Erbil from his home in London to attend the funeral of a beloved uncle who had just passed away, and to spend time with his father.

That morning, father and son took a short and pleasant walk in the park that today bears my father's name. This new park was still under construction and had yet to open to the public, but it had become my father's pet project. He took delight in every flower, tree, and shrub as if it were one of his children and enjoyed debating with the gardeners about the best type of soil to use and when to water the plants.

After their short stroll, they headed to the Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) second branch headquarters across from the park to join in the Eid celebrations and meet old friends, party colleagues, and visitors.

Less than an hour later, a suicide bomber belonging to the terrorist group Ansar Al-Islam walked into the KDP branch headquarters, while simultaneously an associate did the same at the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's Erbil branch less than a mile away. The two terrorists joined the lines of visitors to shake hands with party officials and detonated their vests of explosives within seconds of each other.

“We must strive forward”

What happened that morning – the shocking massacre of more than 100 men and boys and the wounding of hundreds more – shook the Kurdistan Region and reverberated around the world.

Although the Kurdistan Region had suffered terrorist attacks in the past, this was the first time a suicide bomber had walked into a crowded space and killed themselves along with as many innocent people as they could. It was the first time that this kind of indiscriminate and cowardly assault on civilians had taken place in our homeland. What was not new was the response of

our nation. After the initial pall that fell over the Kurdistan Region that bitter winter, our people's will, resilience, and determination could not be cowed and sparked into motion. Even as my mother – like dozens of other mothers that day – grieved the devastating loss of her beloved son Salah and her husband of more than four decades, she was more resolute than ever that Kurdistan would not bow down in the face of terror.

She knew courage well, for her generation of women was the backbone of the Kurdish liberation movement and its unsung heroes.

“Freedom is not free,” she said, as she picked herself and her family up. “We

can grieve but we must also strive forward.”

She spoke as the wife of a man who had been a *peshmerga*, a political leader, and statesman, and as the loving mother of a fine man that she had cherished with all her heart.

That sentiment was echoed across the Kurdistan Region, by those whose sons, brothers, and fathers were killed and wounded that day, and by those who had lost loved ones in the Kurdish struggle against dictatorship and in the genocides perpetrated by Saddam Hussein's regime. *We stand firm, we carry on, and we serve our nation.*

Today, Sami Abdulrahman Park blossoms in the heart of Erbil and is a place for quiet walks, joyful wedding celebrations, and children's laughter. The monument to the victims of the February 1, 2004 terrorist attack stands tall and bears their names with pride. Every year, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region, officials, and diplomats join the families of the victims in a ceremony of remembrance.

Much has changed in the two decades since that tragic day; what remains constant is our collective will to protect our beloved homeland and to keep building a brighter future.



Sami Abdulrahman and President Masoud Barzani in the 1970s.



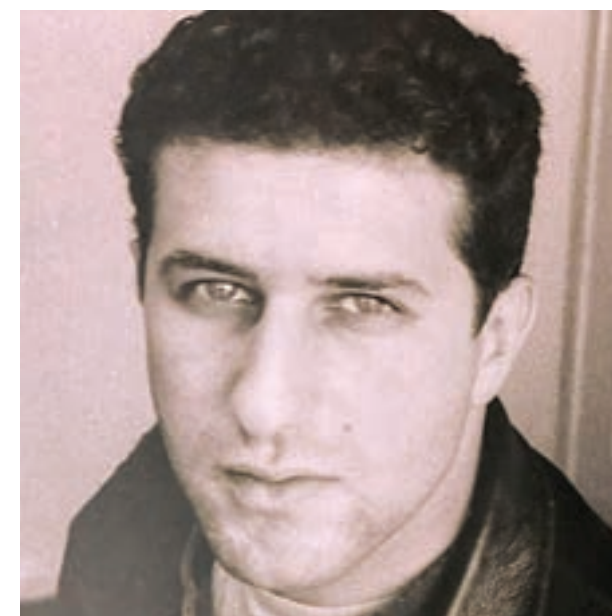
From left: Sami Abdulrahman, Halmat Hamid, Tenya Karim, Shawkat Shekh Yazdin, Mahmoud Halo, all of whom were killed, with Mohamed Khoshnaw at the Council of Ministers.



Sami Abdulrahman was captured in a photograph with the late Idris Barzani, as they participated in a gathering alongside Mala Mustafa Barzani, the revered father of the Kurdish revolution during the 1960s.



Fawzia and Sami Abdulrahman photographed in Nawprdan during the late 1960s.



Salah Sami Abdulrahman.

About Sami and Fawzia

My father, born in Sinjar, studied engineering in the UK and joined the Kurdistan Democratic Party in 1961 under the leadership of Mala Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish nation.

He quickly rose through the ranks and became a member of the KDP's leadership and chief negotiator, playing an instrumental role in the 1970 Autonomy Agreement between the Kurds and Iraqi government. He became one of the Kurdish ministers in the Iraqi cabinet, which was part of the agreement that for the first time stipulated an autonomous Kurdistan Region with language and governance rights. He and my mother, Fawzia Amin Abdulrahman, were both sentenced to death in absentia by a Baathist court in 1974.

In later years, my father formed his own political party, the Kurdistan People's Democratic Party, which eventually united with the KDP and my father rejoined the party under the leadership of President Masoud Barzani.

Like other Kurdish parents, my father and mother instilled a sense of pride in our nation that could not be shaken. In their different ways, my parents faced numerous challenges and made sacrifices, but no sacrifice was too great for the love of their homeland and they never complained of the hardships they endured. In that way, they were typical of their generation and an example to ours.

About February 1st

Several KDP party and government figures were martyred that day, including ministers Shawkat Shekh Yazdin and Saad Abdullah, Erbil Governor Akram Mentik and his deputy Mehdi Khoshnaw. At the PUK branch headquarters, Adnan Mufti, a member of the PUK leadership, was injured while two of his leadership colleagues, Shakhawan Abbas and Khasro Shera, were killed. Children were among those killed and wounded that day.

Perhaps the terrorists who attacked Erbil on February 1st, 2004, thought they would terrorize the people of Kurdistan into submission, but to the contrary, they reawakened the spirit of unity and strength of purpose. ●

What is the fragility of Iraq?



Saman Shali

is a political analyst, has been passionately involved in advocating for Kurdish rights since the mid-1970s.



Photo: Mahmoud Rauf

Freedom Monument in Tabrir Square, Baghdad

Iraq is enjoying its most stable period since 2003. Armed violence continues in various forms but is sporadic, fragmented, and localized. However, the country remains fragile and divided, and its people face a range of profound challenges that the country struggles to address. This fragility has a wide range of effects, impacting everything from politics to the economy and regional relations.

The impact of fragility on politics in Iraq

Iraq has a multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian society, and political power is often divided along these lines. However, this division has led to factionalism, where different political groups represent different religious and ethnic communities. Conflicts and power struggles between these factions have sometimes led to political instability, creating social divisions and hindering the development of a unified national identity. Reconciliation efforts to address historical grievances and build community trust are ongoing. Fostering social cohesion and inclusivity is essential for the country's long-term stability.

Another longstanding issue in Iraqi politics is widespread corruption within government institutions, which has eroded public trust and hindered effective governance. Efforts to combat corruption have been ongoing, but progress has been slow. Similarly, issues such as corruption, unemployment, and inadequate public services have sparked public protest and civil unrest. Protesters have called for political reforms and an end to the dominance of political elites. Similarly, frequent government changes and conflict over key positions have created a climate of political instability, hampering the government's ability to address pressing issues and improve the overall situation.

Addressing security

Security concerns often shape political

decisions, and the government must balance the need for security with addressing the demands of various political factions. Despite the defeat of ISIS in major urban areas, there have been lingering security concerns related to the presence of insurgent groups in the country. These groups, sometimes affiliated with ISIS or other extremist ideologies, continue to operate in certain regions, carrying out attacks and destabilizing the security environment. Terrorism is a key concern, with both domestic and international terrorist organizations posing a threat to the secu-

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The KRG has sought to uphold the federal model of government. In contrast, the Iraqi government in Baghdad has sought to maintain national unity by promoting a strong central government, which contradicts the Iraqi Constitution

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rity and stability of the country. This, in turn, has led to significant internal displacement and created a refugee crisis. Large numbers of people have been forced to flee their homes, increasing pressure on security resources and complicating efforts to maintain stability.

Iraq has been a battleground for regional and international influence, with different external actors seeking to shape its political landscape. Iraq shares borders with several countries, and the control of these borders is vital for preventing the infiltration of militants, illegal activities, and arms trafficking. Beyond border security, the interference

of the region's countries in the affairs of Iraq has led to instability, the emergence of factions belonging to these countries outside the authority of government, and an increase in the spread of uncontrolled weapons.

Iraq has a diverse population with various ethnic and religious communities. Tensions between these groups, exacerbated by historical grievances and power struggles, have contributed to security challenges. Managing these tensions is crucial for maintaining stability, as is maintaining the relationship between political and military entities in Iraq. Coordination and cooperation between various security forces and government agencies are essential for addressing security threats effectively.

Economic risk factors

Political conflict has a direct impact on economic stability. Uncertainty in the political environment can deter foreign investment, disrupt economic planning, and delaying the implementation of economic reforms. Corruption further contributes to this issue, hindering investment, impeding economic growth, and contributing to inequalities within the country.

Iraq's economy is heavily dependent on oil exports, making it vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. The reliance on a single commodity exposes the country to economic volatility and challenges in managing fiscal sustainability. Commodity price fluctuations, along with political and external factors, also pose a threat to the stability of the Iraqi dinar. These concerns have put a strain on public finances, showing that effective budget management is critical to maintaining economic stability.

Key economic concerns are directly linked to social spending demands. The country has faced significant challenges in rebuilding and maintaining infrastructure, especially in conflict-affected areas. This includes repairing damage to transportation, electricity, health,

education, higher education, and other essential services networks, which may hinder economic development. High levels of unemployment, particularly among the youth, is another factor impacting economic well-being. The government faces challenges in generating enough job opportunities to meet the demands of a growing population.

Human rights concerns

The aftermath of recent conflicts, especially the fight against ISIS, has caused significant internal displacement, placed a strain on social structures and services, and left lasting psychological and social scars on individuals and communities. Dealing with trauma, both at the individual and societal levels has been a significant social challenge. Conflict has also disrupted access to education and healthcare services, and efforts to rebuild and maintain a robust social infrastructure, including schools and healthcare facilities, are ongoing.

Ensuring the protection of vulnerable population groups is key to upholding human rights in Iraq. Despite efforts to address gender inequality, challenges persist, including disparities in education and workforce participation. Social norms and cultural factors continue to influence gender roles in Iraqi society. Additionally, high levels of youth unemployment contribute to social discontent and frustration, particularly among the younger population. The lack of economic opportunities can impact the social fabric and contribute to unrest and discontent.

The Iraqi Constitution

The Iraqi Constitution, adopted in 2005, defines a federal structure with a balance between centralized and decentralized powers and recognizes and protects the rights of different ethnic and religious groups. However, how power-sharing mechanisms were implemented may have exacerbated ethnic and sectarian divisions. The focus on ethno-sectarian quotas for political representation has sometimes deepened divisions rather than fostering a sense of national unity. Additionally, the struggle over control of resources and power between the central government and regional entities, especially in oil-rich regions such as Kurdistan, has led to disagreements and tensions.

The constitution-drafting process was complex and was a focal point in the competition for political power. The perception of exclusion and underrepresentation has fueled grievances between specific communities. Parliament and Federal Court decisions are issued by the majority at the expense of the minority, which led to an imbalance in the consensus and partnership based on which governments were formed.

Lastly, the Constitution did not provide a straightforward solution to address security challenges, especially those aris-

ing from rebellious movements and external influences. The lack of adequate security mechanisms has contributed to the fragility of the state. Regional and international factors have played a role in exacerbating fragility, with the provisions of the Constitution related to the relationship between Iraq and its neighbors and the presence of foreign actors having implications for internal stability.

Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

The relationship between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Region has historically been tense over issues such as land disputes, oil revenue distribution, and security issues. The KRG has sought to uphold the federal model of government. In contrast, the Iraqi government in Baghdad has sought to maintain national unity by promoting a strong central government, which contradicts the Iraqi Constitution.

A number of longstanding disputes continue to create tension between the KRG and the Iraqi government. The status of areas such as Kirkuk, claimed by both the KRG and the Iraqi government, remains undetermined. Controlling these areas has economic and strategic implications. Additionally, disagreements over how to share oil wealth and manage oil exports have been a controversial issue. This has in turn affected the allocation of the federal budget, with delays in budget payments from Baghdad to Erbil straining ties. Lastly, political disagreements between the KRG and the central government have contributed to general fragility.

Various regional armed groups operating within Iraq have sometimes led to security concerns. Coordinated efforts against common security threats, such as ISIS, have brought the two sides together at times, but differences remain. The implementation of power-sharing agreements and the Federal Court's decisions against the Kurdistan Region have exacerbated tension in relations between the Federal Government and the KRG.

It is essential to realize that, although the Constitution has had an impact, Iraq's fragility is affected by historical legacies, economic challenges, geopolitical factors, and external interventions. Addressing fragility requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond constitutional considerations. It includes promoting inclusivity, strengthening institutions, and addressing social and economic issues. Internal reconciliation and building bridges of trust between the components of Iraqi society is the basis for getting out of these fragilities and building a new Iraq based on equality among the Iraqi people. ●

AGRICULTURE

From Farm to Fork



Peshraw Mahdi

is a freelance journalist and photographer with substantial experience in the field, having worked for numerous media agencies over several years. He has won multiple awards in photojournalism.



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Spanning over 10 hectares of lush agricultural terrain, Kurdistan Farm is a sprawling testament to the potential of sustainable farming practices

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Kurdistan Farm, tucked away in the lush surroundings of Halabja, is an icon to the perseverance of Kurdish farming. Established more than a decade ago by forward-thinking farmer Hamid Ismail, this artistic agritourism endeavor has redefined the relationship between farmers, customers, and the land itself, while also transforming barren fields into a flourishing oasis.

Spanning over 10 hectares of lush agricultural terrain, Kurdistan Farm is a sprawling testament to the potential of sustainable farming practices. Here, amid vibrant fields and orchards, Ismail cultivates over 105 different agricultural products.

At the heart of Kurdistan Farm lies its bustling weekly market, a vibrant tapestry of sights, sounds, and flavors. Here,

visitors can sample the region's finest produce, hand-picked and freshly harvested from the farm's abundant fields. From the colorful hues of the rainbow wheat to the fragrant aromas of freshly brewed tea, the market offers a sensory feast for all who visit. Moreover, visitors can indulge in grilled fish caught from the farm's own ponds, sip on fresh juice, and relax in cozy tea houses and cafes.

But Kurdistan Farm is more than just a marketplace; it is a living, breathing ecosystem of innovation and community spirit. Through novel farming techniques and a deep respect for the land, Ismail has transformed what was once considered barren and unproductive terrain into a bounty of agricultural abundance. From the verdant vineyards to the sprawling olive groves, every corner of the farm tells a story of perseverance and renewal.



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Kurdistan Farm has become a favorite destination for tourists seeking to capture the beauty of rural life

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The transformational potential of agriculture

Central to the ethos of Kurdistan Farm is its commitment to sustainability and community empowerment. In addition to providing a platform for local farmers to sell their goods, Ismail has created jobs for over thirty people on the farm, offering employment opportunities and economic stability to the surrounding community. Moreover, the farm serves as a learning center for sustainable agriculture practices, hosting workshops and training sessions to educate both farmers and consumers on the importance of environmental stewardship. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Kurdistan Farm is its status as a pioneer in agritourism. Believed to be the first project of its kind in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, it has set the standard for similar initiatives to follow, inspiring a new generation of farmers and entrepreneurs to explore the potential of agriculture as a tool for economic development and cultural preservation.

In addition to its agricultural offerings, Kurdistan Farm has become a favorite destination for tourists seeking to capture the beauty of rural life. With its picturesque scenery and charming design, the farm has become a magnet for photographers and sightseers alike, who are drawn to its rolling hills and green fields to capture the essence of Kurdish hospitality and tradition.

Visitors from all over the region flock to Kurdistan Farm to experience its unique blend of agriculture, hospitality, and community spirit. Ultimately, this is more than just a farm; it is a symbol of hope, resilience, and innovation. As the farm grows and expands, it not only bears witness to the transformational potential of agriculture but also acts as a catalyst for future generations' economic success and sustainable development in the area. ●

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi

KRG Offers Protection For Refugees

Kurdistan Chronicle

The Iraqi government wants to close all camps throughout Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), by July 30 of this year. However, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has made clear that it will not forcefully return people who fled to the Kurdistan Region from ISIS in 2014 and the Syrian civil war in 2011.

The question now is where those vulnerable people will go and what will happen with the camps in the Kurdistan Region.

The KRG's choice might encounter opposition from the Iraqi central government, yet it's earning praise from the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. "The UNHCR is grateful for this favorable protection space for refugees from both the KRG and the local communities who have been welcoming to them – especially as we witness less generosity in other parts of the world," Jean-Nicolas Beuze, UNHCR Representative told *Kurdistan Chronicle* in an exclusive interview.

"We have supported – and will continue to support – Kurdish communities and authorities to protect and assist the Syrian refugees that they generously host. By and large, most refugees can stay in the KRI and have access to public services such as health or education as well as opportunities to live lives that are on par with those of the local population," Beuze added.

The U.S. Consul General in Erbil Mark Stroh, after a visit to the Sheikhan refugee camp in late January, also praised the KRI for being a safe haven for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.

Meanwhile, KRG Minister of Interior Reber Ahmed, after meeting with Beuze to discuss IDPs and refugees on February 28, said in a post on social media platform X that there is a "need for rallying efforts among stakeholders to find a durable solution to their plight, ultimately ensuring their safe and dignified return to their places of origin."



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In 2014, the Kurdistan Region alone hosted nearly two million IDPs and refugees despite budget difficulties

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Jean-Nicolas Beuze, the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Iraq.

Grateful for KRG policies

In 2014, the Kurdistan Region alone hosted nearly two million IDPs and refugees despite budget difficulties, while the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, with the support of the United States-led coalition, prevented ISIS from advancing further into the Kurdistan Region. According to the latest data, the Kurdistan Region now hosts over 900,000 IDPs and refugees, including those living in camps and those outside them.

Beuze said that many IDPs who were displaced by the violence triggered by ISIS have returned home, but many are still living in informal settlements and urban settings. “Their current displacement status is not linked anymore to the presence of ISIS in their areas of origin but relate to factors that are unique to each displaced individual.”

“The UNHCR took the lead on behalf of the humanitarian community to focus on finding solutions for IDPs residing in camps while the International Organization for Migration and UN Development Program, as co-chairs of the Durable Solutions Task Force, are supporting the authorities in finding solutions for the 950,000 other IDPs,” he said.

Additionally, Beuze noted that most refugees can stay without fear of being forcibly returned to a country where they risk persecution, serious human rights violations, or armed violence.

“The UNHCR is particularly grateful for the policies adopted by the KRG in this respect, as they are aligned with international law,” he underlined. “In addition, refugees are largely included in public services such as education and health and have the same opportunities to find jobs as Kurdish Iraqis.”

He said that the UNHCR continues to remind relevant authorities that nobody must be forced to return to their place of origin.

Challenge for Yazidis

The Iraqi decision to close the camps is particularly challenging for the over 100,000 Yazidi IDPs, who fled the ISIS genocide in Sinjar in August 2014 and are still residing in camps in the KRI. Sinjar remains dominated by various militias and characterized by instability. “This militarization, which has result-

ed in intermittent violence and invited Turkish air attacks, has created deep insecurities for Sinjar’s residents and prevented IDPs from returning,” a recent report on Sinjar by the London School of Economics and Politics Middle East Centre noted.

In October 2020, Baghdad and Erbil signed the Sinjar Agreement to reconstruct Sinjar District and remove



Jean-Nicolas Beuze, the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Iraq.

the militias operating there, but so far it has not been implemented due to differences between the two capitals. According to the decision of the Iraqi government, IDPs and refugees should have three options: return home, be integrated locally, or be relocated to a third part of the country.

“The choice must be given to the IDPs themselves, and they must be able to exercise this choice freely, without pressure, and be fully informed of the conditions and assistance available for all three solutions,” Beuze underlined.

“At the same time, they must be supported so that once they have made a choice, their solutions are not only dignified but also sustainable in the long term. Otherwise, one risks fostering a cycle of displacement that has nothing to do with the original cause of displacement.”

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The UNHCR is
particularly grateful for
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The Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration has started to allocate 4 million Iraqi dinars for the IDPs in camps to opt for one of the three solutions. The UN refugee official said this will help some to return home while others will opt to integrate locally or relocate somewhere else.

“We acknowledge the increase of this grant, which was previously 1.5 million Iraqi dinars, and the UN advocates that this assistance should also be made available to the majority of IDPs who are not residing in camps,” Beuze said.

“We will similarly work with Iraqi federal and Kurdish authorities to find

solutions for IDPs in camps in line with international human rights law and best practices about the three choices that must be given to them and about ways to support the implementation of their decision.”

Beuze added that the “UNHCR has always advocated against putting forcibly displaced populations, refugees or IDPs, in camps, as they are never a sustainable, dignified manner of life, or a cost-effective way to host people.”

So far, some camps have already closed in the Kurdistan Region, including in the Sulaymaniyah Governorate and Garmiyah District, with many Sunni Arab IDPs able to return to the Diyala and Salah-Al-Din Governorates.

Moreover, last summer, the KRG Ministry of Interior permitted IDPs in camps in eastern Mosul to return to their nearby villages in the Al-Hamdaniya sub-district of the Nineveh Governorate.

“Those who have now returned need continued attention, so that these villages are reconnected to public services provided by federal institutions,” Beuze said.

The UN refugee official underlined that solutions may require time and must be tailored to the specific circumstances of each family and individuals, but that the UNHCR will support Baghdad and Erbil to assist the IDPs to return home safely and in dignity.

Nobody should be forced to return

Another question remains: what will happen to the over 251,475 Syrian Kurdish refugees from northeastern Syria and 8,357 Kurdish refugees from northwestern Iran, who are mostly residing in the Kurdistan Region?

Syria continues to grapple with ongoing violence, while Iranian Kurdish refugees – many of whom escaped the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and have

links to political parties outlawed in Iran – risk facing political persecution or even death sentences upon their return to Iran.

“The UNHCR identifies the most vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers for resettlement but ultimately, globally, far less than 1% of refugees are ever resettled in a third country,” Beuze said when asked about the options for Iranian Kurdish refugees to be resettled abroad.

“The UNHCR also works with a number of countries who admit refugees as migrants through work permits, under family reunification schemes, or for study purposes, including through scholarships,” he added.

The situation is also challenging for Syrian Kurds, who could face military conscription, instability, violence, and economic challenges at home.

“The human rights situation in northeastern Syria has not improved,” Beuze noted. “As a result, some Kurdish Syrians need to leave Syria to save their lives. The UNHCR thus commends the authorities, especially the KRG, in allowing them to stay.”

In 2023, the UNHCR registered just over 11,000 new arrivals, of whom 87% were Syrians, and recorded around 2,300 spontaneous returns to Syria.

“The Syrians who recently arrived confirmed to us that they fled due to prevailing insecurity, dire living conditions, and limited access to or availability of basic services in northeast Syria,” Beuze said.

“Ultimately, nobody should be forced to return to one’s own country if they do not feel that they will be safe from harm, be it individual persecutions or generalized armed violence and conflict,” he concluded. ●

A Haven Burdened by Displaced Populations



Sardar Sattar

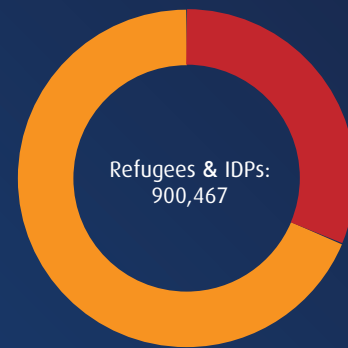
is a translator and journalist based in the Kurdistan Region. He has an MA in English Studies from the University of Lodz, Poland. He has translated several books and political literature into Kurdish and English. He writes regularly for local and international newspapers and journals.



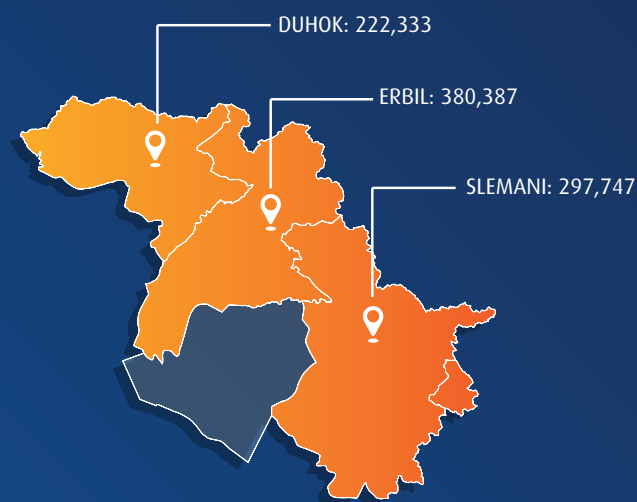
Individuals of all ages escaping their homes following the ISIS attacks in 2014.

IDPs and Refugees in the Kurdistan Region

- Total Number of IDPs: 631,174
- Total Number of Refugees: 269,293



Geographical Distribution of IDPs and Refugees



Refugees in the Kurdistan Region

SYRIAN	251,475
IRANIAN	8,357
TURKISH	7,796
PALESTINIAN	652
OTHERS	1,013
TOTAL	269,293

IDPS in the Kurdistan Region

SUNNI ARABS	40%
YEZIDI KURDS	30%
MUSLIM KURDS	13%
CHRISTIANS	7%
OTHERS	10%
TOTAL	631,174

Geographical Distribution of IDP/Refugee Camps in the Kurdistan Region

TYP OF CAMP	ERBIL	SLEMANI	DUHOK
REFUGEE	4	1	5
IDP	6	2	15
TOTAL	10	3	20



A refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region providing shelter to thousands of Iraqi IDPs following the emergence of ISIS in 2014.

Photo: Safin Hamid

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, despite political and economic struggles, has become a sanctuary for hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing conflict and persecution in Iraq and the wider region. This influx, while showcasing Kurdish hospitality and the humanitarian spirit of its people, presents significant challenges for host communities and raises questions about long-term solutions.

The Kurdistan Region’s commitment to offering sanctuary is well-established. During the harrowing fight against ISIS (2014-2018), the region sheltered an over two million refugees and IDPs.

As of late 2023, the region sheltered a staggering 900,467 individuals, comprising 631,174 IDPs and 269,293 refugees. Syrians constitute the largest group, with over 251,000 individuals seeking refuge in the region. Notably, 70% of these displaced people reside outside designated camps, having integrated into urban areas. Erbil shoulders the heaviest burden, housing 41% of the displaced population, followed by Duhok (40%) and Sulaymaniyah (19%).

A glimpse into the numbers

- Total registered refugees: 269,293
- Total registered IDPs: 631,174
- Syrian refugees: 251,475
- New arrivals in November-December 2023: 3,389

While the Kurdistan Region’s open-door policy is commendable, the sheer number of displaced individuals presents enormous challenges, including:

- **Insufficient resources:** Providing essential services like healthcare and education strains infrastructure and budgets.
- **Competition for jobs:** Displaced populations compete for scarce employment opportunities, potentially fueling tensions with host communities.
- **Camp conditions:** Overcrowding and inadequate facilities raise concerns about the well-being of camp residents.
- **Uncertainty:** Many lack formal legal status and face an uncertain future, impacting their mental health and long-term planning.

Addressing this complex situation requires a multifaceted approach. Some important objectives include:

- **Increased international support:** Financial and humanitarian aid are crucial to assisting the Kurdistan Regional Government and non-governmental organizations in meeting the needs of displaced populations.
- **Durable solutions:** Facilitating voluntary return to areas of origin when they are deemed safe, resettlement in third countries, or local integration are key options.
- **Economic development:** Fostering economic opportunities for both host communities and displaced individuals can promote integration and self-reliance.
- **Regional stability:** Addressing the root causes of displacement, such as conflict and insecurity, is essential for long-term solutions. ●

The Kurdish Conundrum in Centralist Iraq



Yadgar Ismail Said

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Today, a Kurdish person's situation differs according to the countries they are forced to be part of. While Kurds in Iran and Turkey continue to experience difficulties, others live in autonomous regions in Iraq and Syria and enjoy relative freedom or struggle for self-rule.

In Iraq, a century-old battle has resulted in a few wins, most notably autonomy in the Kurdistan Region. However, Kurdish concerns in Iraq remain unsolved, including unclaimed constitutional rights, disputed territories, oil reserves and revenues, and economic autonomy.

Internal colonization

Some Kurds might argue that Kurds themselves should be blamed for their status. However, the international world order indicates otherwise, and external factors like international alliances and regional conflicts have trapped Kurds in a dark destiny, living under occupation and internal colonization.

Historically, Kurds lived under local Kurdish dominions, some of which covered the geographical area of today's Kurdistan Region. Such dominions battled for survival and often formed alliances with regional colonial powers, such as the Arab Islamic caliphates, as well as the Safavid and the Ottoman Empires.

Later, in the "new world order" designed by European colonialists, Kurds found themselves deprived of their local dominion rule. The geopolitical shifts following First World War resulted in a number of treaties to demarcate the region in line with the interests of ethnic groups such as the Persians, Arabs, and Turks. The 1920 Treaty of Sevres between the Allied powers and the defeated Ottoman Empire aimed to dismember the Ottoman state and redistribute its territories. It was never fully implemented, as the Turkish War of Independence led to the

1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which recognized the boundaries of modern-day Turkey and established the international status of the straits that connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The Treaty of Lausanne also recognized the autonomy of the Kurdish people and provided for the possibility of a Kurdish state in the future, a future more possible in a parallel world!

However, this provision was never im-

plemented, and the Kurdish people were subsequently divided among several different countries that have yet to fully integrate them. Arguably, Kurds are still not part of the countries they are forced to be part of, especially in Iraq and Syria.

Why were these provisions never implemented? The reasons are complex and include both internal and external factors. Internally, the Kurdish people,

having already been part of Arab, Persian, and Ottoman Islamic empires, were divided among several different countries and lacked a unified political voice. Externally, the interests of the Great Powers and the regional states often took precedence over the interests of the Kurdish people. Additionally, the geopolitical context of the Cold War made it difficult for the Kurdish people to gain international recognition and support for their cause. Despite its

The Kurdistan flag flying proudly atop Akre Mountain ahead of Newroz celebrations.



provisions on decolonization, the UN has turned a blind eye to the Kurdish case and functions as a mega-colonial power, protecting the interests of its neocolonial member states.

The Kurdish people should acknowledge their battle and place the responsibility on the UN and other international forces that operate against their so-called charters of human rights and minority rights, rather than blaming themselves for historical events, as is often the case. The Kurdish peo-

ple have frequently been victims of uncontrollable external factors like political persecution, colonization, and wars and proxy conflicts. They have therefore frequently felt unable to control their own fate and have been compelled to adjust to shifting conditions.

to recognize that we as Kurdish people have also shown remarkable resilience and creativity in the face of adversity, and have continued to fight for our rights and identity despite significant obstacles.

The self-blame of Kurds can be understood as a response to the complex and often traumatic experiences that they have faced, including war, political repression, displacement, and other forms of violence. It is natural and unsurprising for

individuals and communities to question their own actions and seek to understand how they might have contributed to their own suffering. However, it is important to recognize that the self-blame of Kurds is not a reflection of any inherent inferiority or lack of hope, but rather a response to the difficult and often overwhelming circumstances. By acknowledging the trauma of their past and present experiences, and by working to build a more just and equitable future, the Kurdish people can begin to heal and move forward.

ic opportunities. Additionally, there have been conflicts between Kurdish groups and the governments of various countries in the region.

There are likely a number of factors contributing to the difficulties in reaching an agreement between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the federal Iraqi government in Baghdad.

Crossroads for Kurdish-Arab relations in Iraq

Kurds in the Middle East have often faced discrimination and violence due to their ethnic identity. They have historically been marginalized and excluded from political and economic power, leading to poverty and limited econom-

Some of the key issues include disagreements over the distribution of oil revenues, the status of disputed territories, and the role of Kurdish forces in the region. Additionally, there may be broader political and ideological differences that make it difficult for the two sides to find common ground.

It is important to recognize that there is a diversity of opinions among both Arabs and Kurds in Iraq, and that not all members of these groups necessarily hold the same views. That being said, there are certainly differences in the political aspirations of Arabs and Kurds in Iraq. While some Arabs may prefer a centralized Iraqi state, many Kurds seek greater autonomy and self-determination. These differences have contributed to ongoing tensions and conflicts between the Kurds and the “Centralist Arabs,” and has affected the status of Kurds in the country, with many Kurds feeling marginalized and excluded from political and economic power.

The role of the Islamic Shi’a authority in Iraq has also been a powerful factor in shaping the relationship between Kurds and Arabs in the country. Prominent Shi’a figures have often tried to mediate disputes between different groups but are often criticized for lacking determination. On the other hand, there have been instances where the Shi’a authorities have taken actions that have been seen as detrimental to the interests of Kurdish people, such as supporting the centralization of power in Baghdad. Ultimately, the relationship between the Shi’a authorities and the Kurdish people in Iraq is complex and multifaceted, and is shaped by a range of political, economic, and social factors.

The relationship between Erbil and Baghdad has been significantly shaped by the roles played by neighboring countries. While some appear close to the Kurds, others have shown greater support for Baghdad’s Shi’a Arab-led government, especially in economic disputes. The relationship between Erbil and Baghdad is ultimately shaped by

a variety of circumstances, including the role of the surrounding states as well.

While the relationship between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq has been marked by conflict and tension, there have been efforts by both sides to promote reconciliation and dialogue in recent years. However, there have not been many positive developments, other than in the formation of new governments in Baghdad. Additionally, there is little optimism about the future of Kurdish-Arab relations in Iraq due to problematic incentives and political opposition to Kurdish rights in Baghdad. Misconceptions about the federal system and centralist rhetoric towards Kurdish aspirations are two other contributors to the issue.

In brief, there are several challenges that need to be addressed in order to improve Kurdish-Arab relations in Iraq. One of the most significant is the issue of disputed territories, a major source of tension between the two sides. There are also ongoing disputes over the distribution of oil revenues, which have contributed to the economic marginalization of the Kurdish people, and deep-seated political and social divisions between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq that will need to be addressed in order to build trust and promote reconciliation. Finally, external factors like regional geopolitics and the involvement of foreign powers in the region can complicate efforts to improve Kurdish-Arab relations. There are some reforms that can change the dynamics of the issues, including the reform of education, implementation of laws, democratic exchange of ideas, and promotion of tolerance and positivity through media.

Personally, I think there is little hope, and we are at crossroads, especially when considering how far apart the two sides have drifted in terms of understanding the concept of democracy, rule of law, and tolerance, let alone aspirations towards federalism, women’s rights, minority rights, and acceptance of the other. ●



Demonstrators setting fire to Israeli flags during a protest at Tahrir Square in Baghdad on October 13, 2023.

Photo: AFP

ple have frequently been victims of uncontrollable external factors like political persecution, colonization, and wars and proxy conflicts. They have therefore frequently felt unable to control their own fate and have been compelled to adjust to shifting conditions.

The centuries-old struggle of the Kurds has led to feelings of frustration and self-blame, as well as a sense of collective trauma and political incompetence. However, it is important

individuals and communities to question their own actions and seek to understand how they might have contributed to their own suffering. However, it is important to recognize that the self-blame of Kurds is not a reflection of any inherent inferiority or lack of hope, but rather a response to the difficult and often overwhelming circumstances. By acknowledging the trauma of their past and present experiences, and by working to build a more just and equitable future, the Kurdish people can begin to heal and move forward.

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Kurdistan's Para-Diplomacy



Kazhan Mohammed Karim

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Peace is an integral part of Kurdish culture, and leaders in Kurdistan, both historically and today, have consistently pursued their goals for the region through meaningful negotiations, constructive dialogue, and active advocacy for diplomatic resolutions. The liberation of Iraq in 2003 provided an unprecedented opportunity for the Kurdistan Region to achieve its goals, with leaders in Kurdistan initiating their first official diplomatic interactions as a sub-state actor thereafter. Diplomatic ties have been forged with numerous neighboring nations such as Turkey, Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, with recent years witnessing a surge in diplomatic engagements extending to European and North American countries.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) engages in para-diplomacy, utilizing sub-national actors and organizations to navigate the complex web of international relations and advance its regional interests. In the process, the KRG has built cultural bonds, positioned its political affairs on the global stage, and promoted peace, security, and economic development. Moreover, its para-diplomatic efforts are promoting and enhancing the Kurdistan Region's economic, cultural, political, military, and security objectives.

Culture and economy

With prosperity and coexistence serving as core tenets of Kurdistan's identity, the KRG has naturally focused on cultural diplomacy, with the KRI launching international forums and events that endeavor to establish partnerships between the KRG and regional and global actors. One prominent example is the interna-

tional film festivals held in Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah. Coupled with an International Theater Festival, these gatherings have illustrated the rich cultural tapestry of the Kurdistan Region and the world's engagement within it. Organizing such festivals provides high-level entertainment and critical support for the arts but also creates a stage for intercultural dialogue, encouraging a dynamic exchange of ideas and innovation that transcends borders.



The KRG's para-diplomacy is also evident in its economic accomplishments. Through active engagement and transparent regulations, the KRG has garnered significant foreign direct investment, promoting economic expansion and infrastructure development. The vision of the KRG's Ninth Cabinet is to "make Kurdistan a premier investment destination in the Middle East," serving as a springboard for local products to access markets in the region and beyond.

Under the supervision of KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, the KRG has developed and implemented policies to create an enabling environment for business, with the energy, technology, and infrastructure sectors targeted as essential spaces for fostering foreign investment. According to the KRG's Board of Investment, the KRG initiated 1,174 investment projects from 2006 to 2023, with a total capital of \$68.4

“The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) engages in para-diplomacy, utilizing sub-national actors and organizations to navigate the complex web of international relations and advance its regional interests”

billion, across various sectors, most notably in oil, manufacturing, real estate, tourism, trade, and agriculture.

Strategic partnerships

Various countries have made notable investments in Kurdistan, including Germany, Lebanon, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and the United States. Each of the KRG's diplomatic actions, it should be noted, fosters political engagement with international and regional countries, either directly or indirectly, as the Ninth Cabinet aims to fulfill its vision of being a strong and trusted global partner. Indeed, for the last five years, Prime Minister Barzani and his diplomatic team have actively cultivated and strengthened diplomatic ties with numerous countries. Support for the *peshmerga* forces, including training during the war against ISIS war by the U.S.-led coalition forces, was facilitated through the diplomatic channels that the KRG has established. Politically, Prime Minister Barzani's diplomatic acumen has been evident in navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, fostering alliances, and advocating for the KRG's interests on the international stage. By establishing strategic partnerships, he has enhanced the KRG's geopolitical standing and played a crucial role in addressing regional challenges through diplomatic channels.

Establishing sisterhood between cities in the Kurdistan Region and other cities around the world is another diplomatic approach cultivated by the KRG. The most recent example is the Erbil-Nashville sisterhood, which was signed between the two cities on May 23, 2023.

In today's world, soft power and diplomacy play a significant role in building sustainable, long-lasting global partnerships. As the youth in the Kurdistan Region who must safeguard its future, we should also be willing to play our role. We must prepare a generation of diplomats who can protect Kurdistan and its achievements through soft power and diplomatic skills and further advance the economic, cultural, and political prosperity that has been realized over the past two decades. ●

Assyrian Contributions to Kurdish Struggle



Mohammad Dargalayi is a journalist and photographer with 14 years of experience. He is a member of IFJ Global.

Gorgis Yalda, a veteran Assyrian *peshmerga* fighter, has defended the Kurdistan Region for 56 years, fighting alongside his Muslim comrades. His story, interwoven with the narratives of other Assyrians who participated in the Kurdish struggle for freedom and self-determination, reveals a unique perspective on the region's history. The article below is based on Yalda's recent interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle* and provides detail into the Assyrian experience in Kurdistan, the historical co-existence between Muslims and Assyrians, and the often-unknown contributions of Assyrians to the Kurdistan Region.

Arrival of Assyrians in Erbil

A prominent Assyrian figure from the Soran District of the Erbil Governorate, Yalda detailed the geographical distribution of Assyrians in the district, mentioning their presence in the cities and towns of Diyana, Harir, and Shaqlawa, the suburb of Ankawa, and the villages of Batas, Bedial, and Hawdian.

He traced the arrival of the Assyrians to the outbreak of World War I. Initially settling in Urmia, Sain Qaleh, and Hamedan in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran), they later migrated to Baqubah in central Iraq, where they established a temporary camp.

Following the establishment of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq, Assyrians formed a brigade called the Levies within the Iraqi army. In 1926, they arrived in the Kurdistan Region and were welcomed by Smail Beg, who was the Emir of Soran at the

time. The Assyrians who would later settle in Bedial remained under the protection of the Barzani tribe, belonging to the Sherwani tribe within it.

Currently, around 200 Assyrian families reside in Diyana, Hawdian, and Bedial.

Multi-faceted roles in the revolution

In flourishing detail, Yalda recounted his own journey as a *peshmerga* fighter. Born in 1950 in Diyana, he completed his education alongside Kurdish and other Assyrian students. Naturally drawn to the *peshmerga* cause and the fight for liberation, he joined the Kurdistan Students Union in 1966. Upon being drafted into the Iraqi army, he refused and joined the *peshmerga*, seeking refuge in the mountains.

He initially sought to join the Balak force stationed in Galala, led by a relative, Mam Rehana Shilimon. Welcomed by Shilimon, who had accompanied Kurdish revolutionary leader General Mullah Mustafa Barzani to the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, Yalda quickly settled into his career of service. He was assigned to the fighting force of Franso Hariri, where he served until the revolution's end in 1975.

Yalda described Franso Hariri as a prominent leader and *peshmerga* fighter. Joining the ranks in 1962, Hariri gained General Barzani's respect and was entrusted with various responsibilities. Following the Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement of 1970, Barzani appointed him as the governor of Choman in Erbil Governorate in 1974, a testament to the general's trust

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Upon being drafted into the Iraqi army, he refused and joined the *peshmerga*, seeking refuge in the mountains

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Margaret George with her father (1964).

in him and the skills that Hariri had demonstrated.

Hariri maintained close ties with the Barzani family and remained loyal to the Kurdish cause. Following the revolution's collapse in 1975, he joined Barzani in Iran, along with 400 other Assyrians. Yalda highlighted Hariri's connection with influential Assyrians in Iran. He frequently engaged with figures like Homer Assyrian, Sargun Oshana, Daniel Grespi, Dr. Wilson Betmansour, Albert Khurshid, and Yousef Maqudpour, in discussing the Kurdish revolution and its objectives. Hariri later went on to become a minister in the Kurdistan Regional Government and governor of Erbil Governorate.

Other Assyrians made different contributions. Yalda shared the story of George Shello, who played a crucial role in constructing roads vital for the *peshmerga's* operations. Notably, he paved crucial routes from Qasre and Dilman in the Balakayati area to Sheladize in Duhok Governorate, earning these paths the moniker of "The George Road." George's dedication went beyond road building. He even personally operated the bulldozer to complete other projects, facing harsh weather conditions and the constant threat of attacks by the Iraqi army.

Another notable contribution came from Dr. Betmansour, who was one of the Assyrian doctors who treated Barzani at Jam Hospital before his departure to the United States. Yet Dr. Betmansour was not the only Assyrian

medical professional to serve the Kurdish cause. Many Assyrian doctors and nurses provided crucial medical care to *peshmerga* fighters

participated in the surgery on former Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul-Karim Qasim after his injury. He later established a hospital in Zakho specifically for treating wounded *peshmerga*.

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Adam Gorgis (1970) at Barzani Headquarters.

throughout the decades of revolution.

Assyrian Figures in the Kurdish Revolution

Yalda acknowledged the contributions of numerous other Assyrians during our discussions, including:

- Hermoz Malkchko: Military general.
- Toma Thomas: Active participant in the revolution.
- Colonel Yousef Petros: Provided mine and explosives clearance training
- Nisan Kani
- Yohanna Idupre: *peshmerga* fighter.
- Mam Talya: *peshmerga* fighter.
- Archbishop Mary Wala: Prominent religious figure who offered spiritual guidance and support to the Kurdish people.
- Mikhail Binya: *Peshmerga* fighter.
- Faraidoon Wardazai: *Peshmerga* fighter.
- Adam Gorgis
- Margaret George: First woman to join the revolution.
- Bishop Francis: Religious leader who provided support to the Kurdish people during the revolution.
- Jardis Fathullah: Lawyer who used his legal expertise to defend the Kurdish cause.
- Dr. Awro: Doctor who served the *peshmerga*.
- Dr. Mushel: Doctor who served the *peshmerga*.
- Dr. Hannah Zulfu: Renowned surgeon who participated in the surgery on former Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul-Karim Qasim after his injury. He later established a hospital in Zakho specifically for treating wounded *peshmerga*.



Gorgis Yalda (left) and Rebwar Yalda (right) alongside Faranso Hariri (middle) in Razban, Iranian Kurdistan (1986).



Gorgis Yalda alongside a group of *Peshmerga* comrades in Iranian Kurdistan (1984).



Faranso Hariri alongside other *Peshmerga* fighters pictured with Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani (1970).

Close bonds in unity

Yalda emphasized the strong sense of camaraderie among *peshmerga* fighters, as well as the absence of any religious discrimination. He notes that his experience of 56 years serving alongside both Muslim and Assyrian comrades

had fostered mutual respect and unity. Symbolic of this relationship between Kurdish and Assyrian leaders was the close bond between General Barzani and Archbishop Mar Yousef Khannani, the Bishop of Harir and Batas. Their friendship was exemplified by their meeting in 1961, when Barzani sought counsel from him before taking refuge

into the mountains. Despite advocating for negotiations, the Archbishop ultimately respected Barzani's decision and wished him well.

Yalda also addressed the tragic event of 1963 when the Iraqi army attacked Assyrian communities in Harir and Batas. This assault resulted in the martyrdom



■ A Cross with Bedial village in the background.

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi



■ (From right) Gorgis Yalda alongside Peshmerga comrades in Betush village, Iran-Iraq border, (1986).



■ Gorgis Yalda posing for the camera after receiving Barzani Honor Medal (2022).



■ (From left) Gorgis Yalda, Sinam Badirkhan, Albert Jibrail (2022).

of several individuals, including Joam, Qushan, Jabali, and Victoria, and forced many Assyrians to flee their homes and seek refuge in Erbil, Baghdad, and Kirkuk. Yalda emphasized the devastating impact of this attack on the Assyrian community and the ongoing struggle for justice and recognition for the victims.

Yalda concluded his time with *Kurdistan Chronicle* by emphasizing the positive treatment that Assyrians have received in the Kurdistan Region, acknowledging that they have even benefited more than some Muslim communities in certain aspects.

He also reiterated the unwavering support of the Assyrians for the Kurdish cause, particularly the Barzani family. He believes that the Kurdish people deserve an independent state and urges international powers to support the region's aspirations for peace and security.

He concluded with a powerful statement: "The future of Kurdistan lies in unity and co-existence. The sacrifices made by Assyrians and Kurds alike during the revolutions stand as a testament to the strength and resilience of our communities. We must continue to work together to build a brighter future for all." ●

Chaldeans Millennia of Culture, Wisdom, and Tradition

Kurdistan Chronicle

Mesopotamia has a long and fascinating history that has captivated scholars for centuries. The diverse populations that have inhabited this land have contributed to its rich history, leaving behind a legacy that transcends its borders. Located in today's Iraq, the "land of two rivers" was the birthplace of the first city-states that forged many groundbreaking developments. As the site of such innovations as the invention of the wheel, planting the first cereal crops, and the development of written language, as well as advancements in the study of mathematics, astronomy and agriculture, it has justifiably earned the title of "the cradle of civilization."

Who are the Chaldeans?

Among the many peoples who have lived in Mesopotamia are the Chaldeans, also known as Assyrians or Syrians, whose histo-

ry spans more than 5,500 years. The Chaldean Catholic Church is united with the Roman Catholic Church but has a separate patriarch and bishoprics.

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Like many ethnic groups, Chaldeans began immigrating to the Detroit metropolitan area in the 1920s in search of better economic, religious, and political opportunities

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Like many ethnic groups, Chaldeans began immigrating to the Detroit metropolitan area in the 1920s in search of better economic, religious, and political opportunities. In fact, Detroit has the world's largest population of Chaldeans outside of Iraq, an estimated 187,000 people, who contribute more than \$18 billion annually to Michigan's economy.

An imaginary depiction of Ishtar City, Babylon.



■ Ancient Gallery Walls showcased at the Chaldean Cultural Center in Detroit.



■ Exhibits at the Chaldean Cultural Center portraying ancient village life.





A directional sign guiding visitors at the entrance of the Chaldean Cultural Center in Detroit.

The Chaldean Cultural Center

Established in 2003, the Chaldean Cultural Center (CCC) in Detroit aims to celebrate and explore the extraordinary history, arts, cultural traditions, and contributions of the Chaldean people from ancient times to the present day.

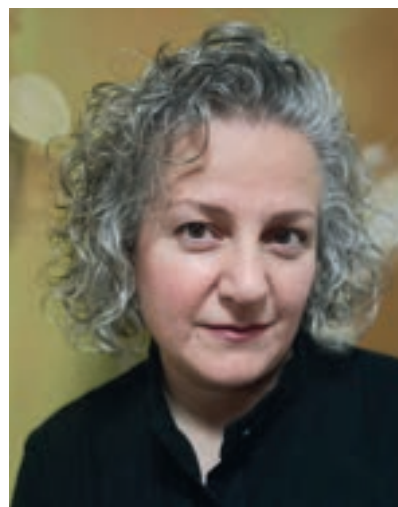
Moreover, by forging relationships with other educational and cultural institutions, the center nurtures pride within the Chaldean community and exposes others to its cultural and historical heritage, promoting greater understanding of cultural diversity.

The CCC also opened a museum in 2017, which serves as a permanent home for the history and archival collection of the Chaldean people, the preservation of which is paramount given that Chaldea, the Chaldean land of origin, no longer exists.

The museum responds to the need to

document the history and culture of these industrious people and preserve the country's native tongue, Aramaic, the oldest continuously spoken language in the world.

Plans are underway to relocate the Chaldean Museum to a larger building, which will house a number of oth-



Zina Lumelsky, Communications/Archives Manager, The Chaldean Cultural Center.

er Chaldean organizations, including a radio and TV station, a theatre, and the bishop's library, which has a large collection of ancient manuscripts in Aramaic. The newer museum will include a genocide gallery and a larger section on the Jews in Babylon, among other new objects and artifacts.

“While the historical relationship between the Kurds and Chaldeans has generally been positive, it has also fostered mutual support and cooperation during moments of crisis”

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An impact beyond borders

The CCC, with all its departments and facilities, has already had a profound impact on the local Chaldean community of Michigan, and on Chaldeans elsewhere in the United States and around the world, in places as far away



Weam Namou, Executive Director, The Chaldean Cultural Center.

as Argentina and Iraq.

The center has succeeded in uniting Chaldean migrants scattered around the world. Its ultimate goal is to strengthen this unity and to document the community's stories, thus preserving Chaldean history for future generations.

It is worth underscoring that Chaldean history and culture have not been well documented and understood by the communities in which Chaldean immigrants settled in the early 20th century – until now. This is largely because the Chaldeans were not allowed to record their history in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, and when they migrated to the United States and elsewhere, most continued to live in survival mode until recent years.

Digital storytelling

Over the past three years, the CCC has embarked on a project to capture the life stories and histories of elderly Chal-

deans in the Detroit area via digital storytelling. Many of these stories are told in Aramaic, a language that is believed to have been spoken by Jesus.

As the CCC continues to interview Chaldean-Americans in the Detroit metropolitan area – which became the largest diaspora community in the world after the 2014 genocide in Iraq against Christians and other minorities – the center has also begun to expand the scope of its work by interviewing Chaldeans in Iraq, Argentina, and Austria.

The goal of this project is to include a digital storytelling component in all the Chaldean Museum's galleries. Through this work, the center has witnessed that documenting and sharing stories has served as a healing and therapeutic experience for older immigrants, who in many cases suffered trauma while leaving Iraq.

The programs led by the CCC enjoy invaluable support through grants from various foundations, including the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, Michigan Humanities, the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, and PNC Bank.

Kurdish-Chaldean relations

While the historical relationship between the Kurds and Chaldeans has generally been positive, it has also fostered mutual support and cooperation during moments of crisis.

The Kurds extended much help and support to Christian Iraqis during and after the ISIS attacks in 2014, with many seeking shelter in the Kurdistan Region, particularly in cities such as Erbil and Dohuk, where the KRG established host communities, camps, and safe zones. Many of the Chaldeans are well integrated into society in the Kurdistan Region and continue to contribute to the rich diversity of the region. ●

Repatriation of Artifacts

Kurdistan Chronicle

In February, a delegation from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and U.S. Consulate General in Erbil visited the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) General Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage to discuss the repatriation of historical artifacts from the region.

Kaifi Mustafa, KRG General Director of Antiquities and Heritage, informed the *Kurdistan Chronicle* that the delegation reported having 360 artifacts in the United States that are from the Kurdistan Region, and plans to send catalogs and images of these items.

According to Mustafa, if these items are verified to have origins in the Kurdistan Region, they will be returned to local museums.

“We need to see these artifacts and make sure they belong to the Kurdistan Region,” he said.

Furthermore, the discussions emphasized cooperation between the United States and the Kurdistan Region on measures to protect antiquities and return artifacts that were looted and are now abroad.

“The U.S. delegation expressed willingness to assist in the return of any artifacts dis-

covered abroad that are proven to belong to the Kurdistan Region, ensuring their reinstatement in local museums,” said Mustafa.

Mustafa praised the cooperation between the United States and the Kurdistan Region, calling it “very important.”

“Kurdistan’s artifacts are part of world heritage, but they must be preserved and displayed in their original location,” said Mustafa.

Unlike the central and southern parts of Iraq, the museums in the Kurdistan Region were not looted after the United States-led coalition liberated Iraq in 2003.

However, Mustafa revealed that there have been incidents at Kurdistan’s archeological sites, including the destruction of caves and archeological mounds, and the looting of old graves.

“I believe that some regional countries encourage looters to destroy and distort the history and heritage of the Kurdistan Region,” Mustafa stated.

He requested that the KRG Ministry of Interior hire special guards to protect historical sites from looters.



Photos: Safin Hamid



Furthermore, he urged the ministry to prohibit the sale of metal detectors in the market, as looters have increasingly used the instrument.

In recent years, Iraq has managed to recover about 17,000 artifacts from the United States through such cooperative initiatives.

During Saddam's rule in the 1990s, looting became a major issue in Iraq. By 2000, it had become so widespread that workers at archaeological sites were looting their own workplaces. When Saddam's government fell in 2003, archaeological sites were left unprotected, and looting was uncontrollable.

Over 6,000 archaeological sites

The Kurdistan Region is rich in historical and archaeological sites. Currently, the region has 30 partnerships with international universities and archaeological organizations to map and explore archaeological sites in Kurdistan and to host workshops and conferences on archeology-related topics. According to Mustafa, the KRG is striving to develop and convert some of the region's archeological sites into tourist attractions in order to educate people about Kurdistan's heritage while also generating revenue and creating job possibilities.

Among the sites earmarked for development as tourist destinations is Shanidar Cave. Located in the Zagros Mountains in the Erbil Governorate, the Shanidar Cave is home to one of the largest collection Neanderthal fossils ever unearthed.

Another standout location is Bestansur village, situated in Arbat, Sulaymaniyah Governorate. Dating to 8000-7100 BC, it stands as one of the earliest known settlements globally. Its



Photo: Satiin Hamid

archaeological value extends beyond national borders, offering a glimpse into the dawn of sedentary farming life during the Neolithic period.

During the Neolithic period, human communities across the Middle East transitioned from being nomadic hunters and foragers to settled farmers and animal herders, a dramatic process of change often called the Neolithic Revolution. At this time people domesticated many of the animals and plants in their surrounding environments, including goats, sheep and pigs, as well as cereal and pulse crops.

"Early Mesopotamia civilization started in the Kurdistan Region," says Mustafa.

Another testament to this heritage is the Assyrian archeological site located in Khinis, Duhok Governate. This site is an open-air museum featuring stone

carvings dedicated to King Sennacherib, who ruled the Assyrian Empire from 704 to 681 BC. The carvings at the site were discovered across several stages of excavations carried out through a joint mission of Duhok Governate's Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage and Italian archaeologists from the University of Udine. The first phase of the park was inaugurated in 2022.

The General Director of Antiquities and Heritage also highlighted recent discoveries, such as Zakhiku, an ancient center of the Mittani Empire. Unveiled by a team of German and Kurdish archaeologists, this 3400-year-old city emerged from the receding waters of the Mosul reservoir due to drought. The discovery sheds light on the importance of the region in ancient times and adds another layer to Kurdistan's rich historical tapestry. ●

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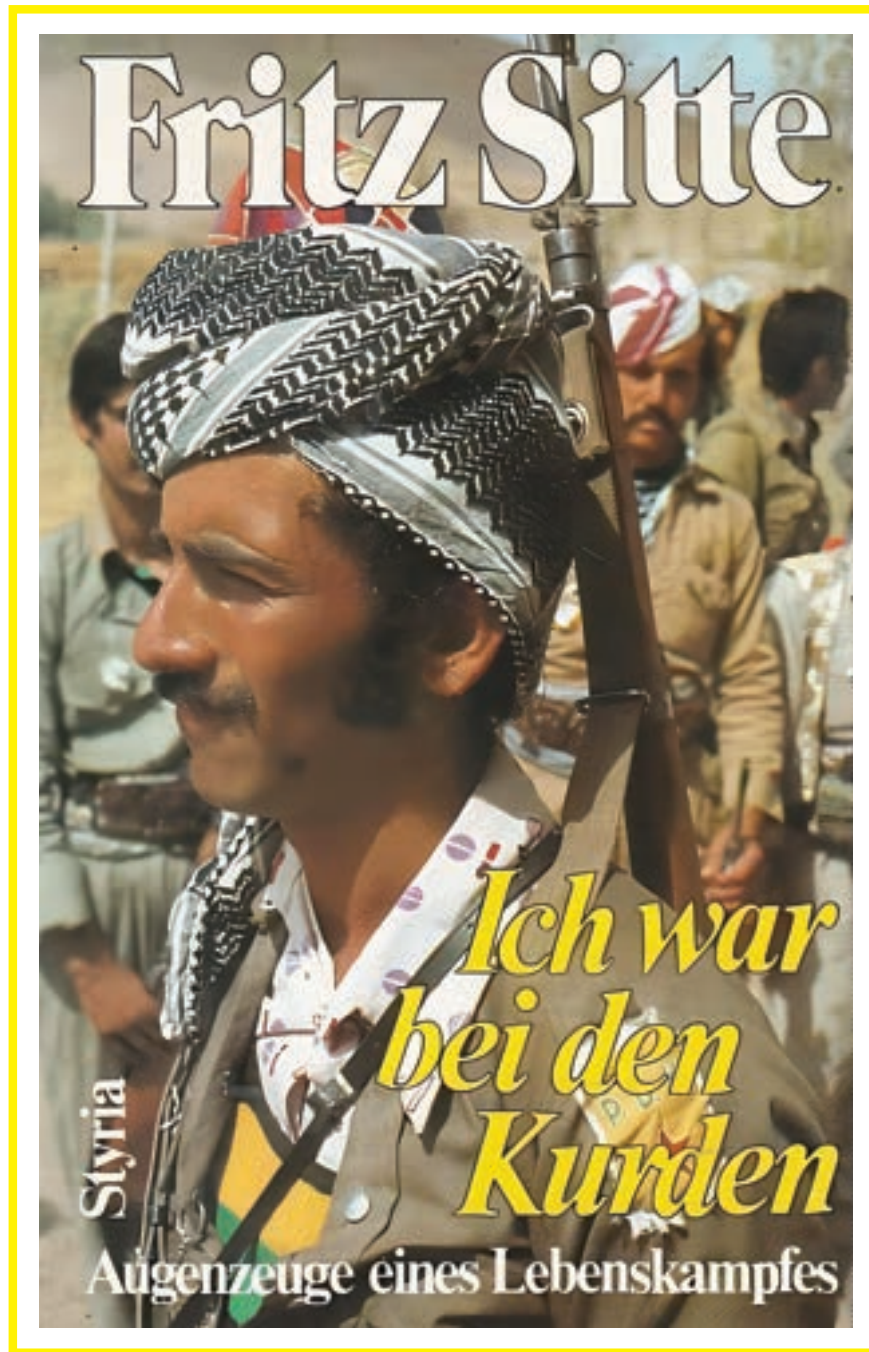


Journey Among the Kurds



Baker Schwani

is a Kurdish writer and translator based in Germany. He has translated several acclaimed novels into Kurdish. Schwani was born in Kirkuk and studied geology in Baghdad before moving to Germany and obtaining a degree in oriental studies at the University of Bonn.



Fritz Sitte, an Austrian freelance journalist, television reporter, author, and explorer, was born in 1924 in Krems an der Donau, a city along the Danube River northwest of Vienna, Austria. When he passed away in 2007, the world lost a veritable jewel. His journalistic efforts and written works provided Western audiences with unique insights into many of the world's liberation struggles in far-off places of the world, telling the stories of the freedom fighters on the front lines.

Early in his career, Sitte reported for the local paper *Kärntner Grenzrufes*. Following his military service, he contributed to various newspapers and magazines during the late 1940s and early 1950s. From 1951 onward, he embarked on journeys to crisis-ridden regions around the world as an independent journalist. In 1967, he faced arrest for reporting on the civil war in Yemen. Sitte's renown spread, prompting him to document his experiences and observations in books. In 1972, Sitte published his first book on the Angolan Civil War titled *Flammenherd Angola*, earning him the Dr. Karl Renner Publizistikpreis for journalism the subsequent year.

Starting from 1968, he began producing television reports on the Angolan Civil War and other global crisis zones. His reports aired on major channels such as *NBC*, *BBC*, and *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF)*, serving as crucial sources of information for Western audiences who otherwise would not have had first-hand reporting on such events.

As a freelance journalist, Sitte delved into contemporary issues and crises, immersing himself in the lives of revolutionaries and fighters in various countries. Apart from his jour-

nalistic endeavors, he conducted interviews and took notes for his books. To gather material, Sitte often embarked on risky and adventurous journeys, illegally traveling to interview freedom fighters and representatives of liberation movements.

I Was With the Kurds... Witnessing a Struggle for Survival

Sitte first visited Kurdistan in 1979, at a time when his journey ultimately resulted in the publication of his German-language book entitled *I Was With the Kurds... Witnessing a Struggle for Survival*, with the first edition released in 1980 by Styria Publishing House in Vienna. It was also one of the riskiest and most adventurous journeys of his life.

Sitte had harbored a dream of visiting Kurdistan for over 15 years, but it was only after someone in Paris contacted him and arranged a meeting in Cologne, Germany, that he could find his way there. Welcomed by Kurds in Cologne, the journalist was escorted to Turkey and subsequently to the mountains of Northern Kurdistan (southeastern Turkey), Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran), and Southern Kurdistan (Kurdistan Region of Iraq), a sojourn reminiscent of a movie script. Notably, the Kurds who greeted him in Cologne were from *Bakur*, Kurdish for Northern Kurdistan. They handed Sitte half of a Swedish five-krona note, instructing him that the other half would be provided by an individual in Istanbul, emphasizing the need for secrecy to evade Turkish and Iraqi intelligence agencies.

A week after the Cologne encounter, he traveled to Istanbul, where a Kurdish



A street sign in Iran directing travelers to the Kurdish headquarters.



"In this car, we passed through three Iranian government checkpoints."



"The Kurdish people have preserved their traditions and attire for generations."



"Kurdish villages are characterized by stone-built stables and houses with flat roofs."



"Sami Abdul Rahman, a prominent Kurdish politician stationed at the border headquarters of the Peshmerga forces."



"The Kurdish radio station, 'Voice of Kurdistan,' situated in the mountains and frequently relocated."



"Handling incoming mail."



"A group of Peshmerga fighters trekking through the rugged mountain terrain."



Fritz Sitte bidding farewell to the Peshmerga in the mountainous regions of Kurdistan, where he had ventured against regulations.

youth presented him with the remaining half of the note, arranging his journey to remote areas of Northern Kurdistan. Sitte detailed his passage through several Kurdish villages on the northern and eastern borders of Kurdistan, crossing into Eastern Kurdistan before being smuggled into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and reaching the *peshmerga* forces. This was all undertaken against the backdrop of the Iranian Revolution, and Sitte relied on Kurdish assistance in navigating the region's tense and perilous political dynamics.

While in the Kurdistan Region, he interacted with numerous commanders, politicians, and *peshmerga*, documenting his encounters through conversations and photographs, some featuring him holding a television camera.

Among those with whom Sitte conversed was Sami Abdulrahman, then secretary-general of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, to whom Sitte dedicated a chapter titled "Sami Rahman, the Kurd without a Turban" in his book. Abdulrahman provided extensive insights into the Kurdish people and their revolution and even wrote an introduction to the book, accompanied by a dated signature. Sitte included a photograph of a letter from Abdulrahman with its Kurdish text. Additionally, he vividly described the activities of the *peshmerga* in an engaging manner for his German-language audience.

In the book's concluding chapters, Sitte highlighted the lack of attention paid by international powers, including the UN, to the Kurdish cause and their legitimate demands. His narrative not only celebrated the courage and resilience of the Kurdish people but also served as a critique of global indifference towards their plight, particularly by industrialized nations that prioritized economic interests over human rights. He emphasized the imperative of international solidarity in support of the Kurdish cause and underscored the need for Kurdish unity to overcome internal divisions and garner broader global support.

Fritz Sitte's expedition through Kurdistan stands as a testament to the power of journalism in spotlighting marginalized struggles and amplifying voices long quieted. His legacy endures through his evocative writings and photographs, offering hope to oppressed communities striving for liberation. ●



"Traversing the mountains was a challenging journey."

This is Fadil Jaf



Anwad Ali

is a novelist, critic, and theater researcher originally from Kirkuk. He has penned 12 books on theater criticism and published eight novels.

Fadil Jaf – now a diligent scholar, cosmopolitan director and actor, and prolific translator – was passionate about music since childhood. In his early youth, he was influenced by existentialism and is one of the most prominent Iraqi Kurdish creative theater directors active today. A key figure representing Iraqi culture in Western and Arab artistic spheres, Jaf holds many theatrical workshops on biomechanics in the Gulf countries and North Africa and participates as a researcher in Arab theatrical seminars and forums.

Prior to resettling in Europe, Jaf was involved in directing several plays in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk, including *The Martyr's Mother*, *The Peshmerga*, *Ras al-Shalila*, and *The World in the Palm of a Hand*, to name but a few.

Reimagining the theater

Jaf is well versed in the contemporary developments in the art of drama, making important contributions to the field of theater by attempting to combine theory and practice. This approach is apparent in his efforts to add interesting and attractive touches to theater performances in Sweden, all of which appealed to audiences and garnered acclaim from critics.

Perhaps one of his most prominent achievements in Sweden is directing *In the Broad Sea* by the Polish avant-garde writer, Slawomir Mrozek, which ran at the Roselund Theater (it is now called Teater Tre). Another of Jaf's plays was *One Thousand and One Nights*, per-



Fadil Jaf during his twenties.



Fadil Jaf pictured alongside his father.

formed at the Helsingborg City Theater, which made a lasting impression on Swedish theatergoers. I had the opportunity to see it filmed when it was shown on the sidelines of the Kuwait Theatre Festival in 2008.

In this play, Jaf referenced Middle Eastern culture, employed Arab actors, and used oriental music, which was performed beautifully by Swedish musicians. In addition to exploiting light and color, he entwined decoration and sound effects in a striking manner, leaving viewers gripped with anticipation for what would come next. The play recounted a Middle Eastern classic in a graceful, modern style characterized by a mixture of fantasy and rituals, depicting adventures with deep historical roots.

Jaf is involved in children's theater as well. He has directed many plays for children in Swedish, including *The Prince with the Hat Underground* by the Swedish writer Nina Olsson; *The Abandoned Doll* by Alfonso Sastre; *The Girl and the Bear*, which is based on a Russian fairy tale; and the famous fairy tale *The Little Red Riding Hood*.

Not only has Jaf produced plays in Sweden, but he has also directed several plays in the UK, Iraq, and Morocco, such as *Return to the Desert*, by the French writer Edouard Coultès; *The Ghost Sonata*, by August Strindberg, performed at Bahnini Hall in Rabat; *A Dream Play* by Strindberg, at the Mohammed V National Theater, Rabat; *Poisons* by Strindberg, in London; *Tartuffe* by Molière, at Man in the Moon Theater, London; and *Rashomon* at Kenfaoui Theater at the High Institute of Theatrical Arts and Cultural Animation in Rabat.

Additionally, he has produced plays in Russia, such as *Playing with Fire* by Strindberg at Chernoe Rychkov Theater in Saint Petersburg, Russia. He directed *The Storm* by the Russian writer Alexander Ostrovsky at the People's Theater in Erbil.

Translation and research

In 2004, Jaf embarked on the translation and direction of Ariel Dorfman's "Death and the Virgin" into Kurdish. He readied it for staging by the Ararat Group, featuring a cast including Telar

“ Perhaps one of his most prominent achievements in Sweden is directing *In the Broad Sea* by the Polish avant-garde writer, Slawomir Mrozek ”

Hirani, Mariwan Kamal, and Adel Abdullah.

The show was first performed at Ingrid Hall in Gothenburg, Sweden, then in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah in 2006. Although the play takes place in Chile, Jaf succeeded in giving it a comprehensive character to suit any time and place ruled by a totalitarian dictatorship. Jaf used the methods of Konstantin Stanislavski and Vsevolod Meyerhold to produce the play, combining the psychologically realistic approach with the biomechanical approach, which is based on movement, emphasizing the

visual dimension and a grotesque view of reality. In doing so, he intended to produce it in an open space, allowing the audience to focus on the dramatic values and emotional aspects that abound in the text, as the use of empty space emphasizes the actors' deep and simple performance.

In addition to his experience directing, Jaf was active in adapting a group of plays taken from literary and dramatic texts, including *The Emerald City* and *The Sisters*, both of which are based on *One Thousand and One Nights*. He also adapted *Gilgamesh*, and *The Soldier and the Witch*, which is based on a tale by Hans Christian Andersen. He has translated a number of plays from Swedish to Arabic.

His translation of three plays by August Strindberg (*The Swan*, *Playing with Fire*, and *Poisons*) was published by Darul Nu'man in 2004. He has written many articles and papers about theater, including a series of articles about the Meyerhold approach and biomechanics, a field in which he specializes. These seminal papers were later published in the book *The Physics of the Body: Meyerhold's Theater of Movement and Rhythm*, issued in two editions, the first published by the Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah, and the second by Dar Al-Mada.

Jaf has also contributed to academia by analyzing the works of some key Swedish directors, such as Ingmar Bergman, Torsten Flink, Susan Astin, Peter Askarsson, Richard Guenther, and Valdimir Holm. His analysis was compiled in a monograph entitled *Critical Views and Opinions in Contemporary Swedish Theater* published by Dar Al-Manfa in Sweden, and then reprinted by Aras Publishing in Erbil. I was not able to get a copy of the book, but I read reviews of it by Fakhir Jassim and Ahmed Muhammad Amin. The former states that it is a study that sheds light on the development of the theater movement in Sweden – describing institutions, directors, writers, and theatrical productions – as analyzed according to Jaf's academic and practical experiences gained from directing many plays around the world.

Jaf's academic portfolio extends to include workshops on theatrical direction, acting, and the biomechanical curriculum. He has also trained playwrights and teachers specializing in children's and youth theater across various institutions in Sweden, the UK, Finland, Italy, Iraq, the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait, and led the theatrical directing workshop at the Sharjah Institute.

He has facilitated academic workshops at renowned venues like Teatro Zag-Chorny Richie Theater in St. Petersburg, Gavleborg Theater in Sweden, the Department of Theatre and Performance at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and Helsinki Theatre Academy in Finland. Additionally, he pursued his theater studies at Goldsmiths University in London and participated in workshops and training programs at various institutions including Scarborough College, the Royal Academy of Arts, and Rose Brudford College in London. He also engaged with the Theatre Academy in Malmo, Sweden, the La MaMa Umbria International Theater Center in Italy, and the National Council for Culture and Arts in Kuwait. ●



The Musical Legacy of Mohammed Zaza

Kurdistan Chronicle

Born in the early 1950s in Qamishli, a Kurdish city in Syria, Mohammed Aziz Zaza's beginnings were modest, but he soon discovered in himself a love of music. Zaza's early encounters with music were simple, crafting primitive instruments from wooden boxes and tin cans and discovering melodies by tinkering with strings and wires. It was a humble beginning, but one that nevertheless sparked a lifelong love of music.

"Music found me," Zaza recalls, who enjoyed listening to music on the radio after it had begun to spread throughout Qamishli.

One summer, while sitting in his family's orchard, he noticed a *tanbur*, a traditional, long-necked string instrument, reclining in the shade of the trees. The musician began singing and playing it.

"It was a turning point for me," Zaza explained. "My eyes welled up with tears of ecstasy when I heard the simple chords I was playing."

Zaza, now a renowned Kurdish musician, was driven by a desire to refine his skills. He pursued higher education in Prague, Czech Republic, completing a diploma from the State Conservatory, followed by a master's degree and a doctorate in musical sciences from Charles University.

Despite his qualifications, Zaza faced challenges in securing a teaching position in his home country due to political constraints; being a Kurd made it difficult for him to establish an academic career in Syria. Instead, he began a successful seven-year period of employment in Algeria, where he established the Department of Music at the Higher School of Teachers.

However, conditions in the country began to worsen. Zaza described how colleges and universities across Algeria became breeding grounds for extremist Islamic groups, with the music department specifically targeted by threats. The situation grew increasingly intense, with extremists regularly intimidating and threatening anyone involved in seminars or musical activities within the department.

“

Looking at the broader landscape of Kurdish music, Zaza acknowledges the historical richness and diversity of Kurdish music

”



Dr. Muhammad Zaza performs at the Kurdish Students Association band at the Nitra Folk Music Festival in Czechoslovakia, 1972.



Facing personal threats from these extremists and witnessing the social and economic deterioration of Algeria, Zaza made the difficult decision to leave the country in 1991. He relocated to Libya, where he secured a position as a lecturer in the Music Department at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Tripoli.

Incorporating both Eastern and Western musical traditions

Zaza continued to perform and compose throughout his teaching career, but his legacy extends even further. Among Arab musicians, he is widely recognized for his books *Diatonic and Chromatic Harmonies* and *The Science of Counterpoint in Music*, which filled a critical gap in Arabic music education. His writings emphasize the importance of incorporating both Eastern and Western musical traditions.

Later, he also developed the curriculum for the Music Department at the Facul-

ty of Arts at Salahaddin University-Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Notably, his curriculum mandated that students specializing in the piano must also master an oriental instrument like the oud or *qanun* as a secondary pursuit. Likewise, those focusing on the oud were required to delve into harmonic instruments such as the guitar or piano. This approach aimed to cultivate a new generation of musicians with a comprehensive understanding of both local and international musical cultures.

“I wanted to ensure that aspiring musicians had access to comprehensive resources that honored both Eastern and Western musical traditions,” reaffirmed Zaza.

Looking at the broader landscape of Kurdish music, Zaza acknowledges the historical richness and diversity of Kurdish music. He highlights various Kurdish musical forms such as *Lauk*, *Hairan*, and *Allalawaisi*, each with its unique characteristics and significance. He stresses the importance of appreci-

ating each culture’s music on its own terms, avoiding comparisons that could lead to a “cultural invasion.”

As a listener, Zaza enjoys a wide range of music, from Beethoven and Mozart to Kurdish singers like Kawai Agha and Muhammad Arif Jaziri. He also likes Sivan Perwer, and the rich creativity of the Kamkars, and admires the work of Arab composers like Mohamed Abdel Wahab and Fairuz.

“I was very influenced by Beethoven,” Zaza says. “I used to, and still do, consider him a role model on the artistic and intellectual levels.”

Today, Zaza lives in Canada and continues to be actively engaged in music. He is working on new pieces for the classical guitar, reprinting his books, and mentoring doctoral and master’s students in the musical department at the University of Salahaddin in Erbil. He also finds time to keep his playing skills sharp on his instruments. ●

Konar's two films, both in Kurdish, were made in such a context. Since his first film was predominantly in Zazaki, it can be considered the first feature-length film in this dialect.

Colorless Dream

Colorless Dream tells the story of Mir-

za, played by Civan Guven Tunc, who grows up in Diyarbakir, Turkey, in the 1990s. Already a quiet child, he becomes extremely withdrawn after the death of his mother, with his depression fed by nightmares that bifurcate his sleeping and waking life. However, all this changes when his brother's friend Mir Ehmed, played by Bilal Bulut, visits

their home and stays for an extended period. Eventually Mirza comes to his senses, even if only a little, and feels better, but his nightmares reappear and take over his life again but in another form.



The Dance of Ali and Zin

The Dance of Ali and Zin unfolds in a quiet village in Bingol Province but during a difficult decade for all people living in Kurdistan. Mother Zin (Dayka Zin) lives with her son Isa, a beekeeper, as well as her daughter-in-law, daughter, and two grandchildren. Zin decides



to hold a wedding for her young son Ali, who was recently killed, but problems arise between Zin and her family. The reactions and reservations of the village people, especially the *imam*, the village chief, and the village elders, regarding this unusual wedding request, challenge Isa and Zin.

captures the sorrowing reality of life for Kurds in recent decades. Kurdistan is the land of broken lives and incomplete tales, where the perpetrators are unknown. With the state of emergency declared in the early 1990s, the Kurdish areas of Turkey were declared an emergency region and governed according to harsh laws. It is a known fact that people were "lost" in acid wells, and

had more closure and could mourn properly. It is unsurprising that relatives of the missing continue to wonder about the fate of their loved ones.

A cornucopia of Kurdish dialects

It is well known that Kurdish-speak-

Stills from *Colorless Dream* film by Mehmet Ali Konar.

ing people mainly live in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as in various cities that are under the political domination of former Soviet countries. This reality makes it unsurprising then that the Kurdish language is divided into various dialects, which have drifted apart due to history and the national borders that divide Kurdish populations. At the

scene of the movie, she sobs, hugging Ali's cardigan that had been knitted by his aunt, a powerful reminder of her beloved son. This moving scene is a perfect demonstration of the point made by Italian neo-realist Cesare Zavattini: that reality itself is extremely lively and interesting.

The Dance of Ali and Zin ultimately

often their bodies could not be found, while others were buried anonymously in mass graves. The deceased were sometimes buried inside pavement or on the roadside, and sometimes sent to their relatives by cargo. Compared to those who could not have funeral for their loved ones because of the horrific and painful ways in which they died, those who could have a funeral at least

ing people mainly live in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as in various cities that are under the political domination of former Soviet countries. This reality makes it unsurprising then that the Kurdish language is divided into various dialects, which have drifted apart due to history and the national borders that divide Kurdish populations. At the



GOVENDA ALI U ZIN

Maryam BOUBANI • Suat USTA • Korkmaz ARSLAN • Duman ZANDI • Fatma YILDIZ
Civan güney TUNÇ • M.Feyzi KONAR • Abdullak ZORKAN • Orhan EKINEKER

HEMET ALI KONAR • HEMEN ENYANAR • NAR KANI • TOR BIRBIR • HEN/NEHA • SOR • ZAZAKI
Hemmenkonar • Pêşdar • Çîrovan • Zazaki • Sorani • Zazaki • Sorani

ROSTOM/NEV • LEVENT/ORTUK • HALI/ZEKİ • İSMAIL/EMER • GEM/GEZER
Zazaki • Zazaki • Zazaki • Zazaki • Zazaki

same time, in Kurdish towns like Lice, Siverek, Dersim, and Bingol, two dialects of Kurdish are used together, with locals knowing and understanding both.

For instance, in *Colorless Dream*, the *imam* who prepares amulets and Mir Ehmed speak Kurmanji, while Mirza, his classmates, and family members speak Zazaki. Meanwhile, in *The Dance of Ali and Zin*, Zin speaks Sorani, Isa and others speak Kurmanji, and Zin's grandson and Isa's brother speak Zazaki. Nevertheless, these characters have no difficulty understanding each other. Watching the films, I realized once again how similar the Kurdish dialects are to each other.

When talking about the use of various dialects in cinema, it is impossible not to mention Federico Fellini, one of the leading neo-realist directors, who similarly mixed Italian and

local dialects in his 1973 film *Amarcord*. A lot has been written about the use of language and dialect in Fellini's films, but I have not come across any study about this element in Kurdish films.

It should be noted that Konar's films are not the first to mix Kurdish dialects. The 2013 film *My Sweet Pepper Land* by Hiner Saleem in 2013 also features characters speaking Kurmanji, Sorani, and Zazaki. Konar's films build on this dynamic by removing the political and artificial boundaries between the various Kurdish dialects and offering a unified and integrated Kurdish linguistic utopia. His masterful films prove that the people who divide the Kurds are misguided, and his attitude toward language sensitivity in cinema can be fairly termed as anti-colonial and anti-national. ●



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Teaching Kurdish in China

Kurdistan Chronicle

Life is full of surprises and unique journeys. For Dyar Ali Kamal, a 46-year-old associate professor of linguistics from the Kurdistan Region, life has proved to be a truly one-of-a-kind journey.

In 2021, Dyar traveled to China to teach the Kurdish language at Peking University.

of a cultural exchange program initiated in 2019, when Salahaddin University-Erbil established the Department of Chinese Language – a rarity in the Middle East, where only Iran, Turkey, and the Kurdistan Region offer such programs.

Dyar was initially slated to move to Beijing in March 2020, but the outbreak of the



Diyar Ali imparting Kurdish language lessons in China.

ty in Beijing. Originally founded in 1898 under the name Imperial University of Peking, it is today one of China's most prestigious institutions of higher learning.

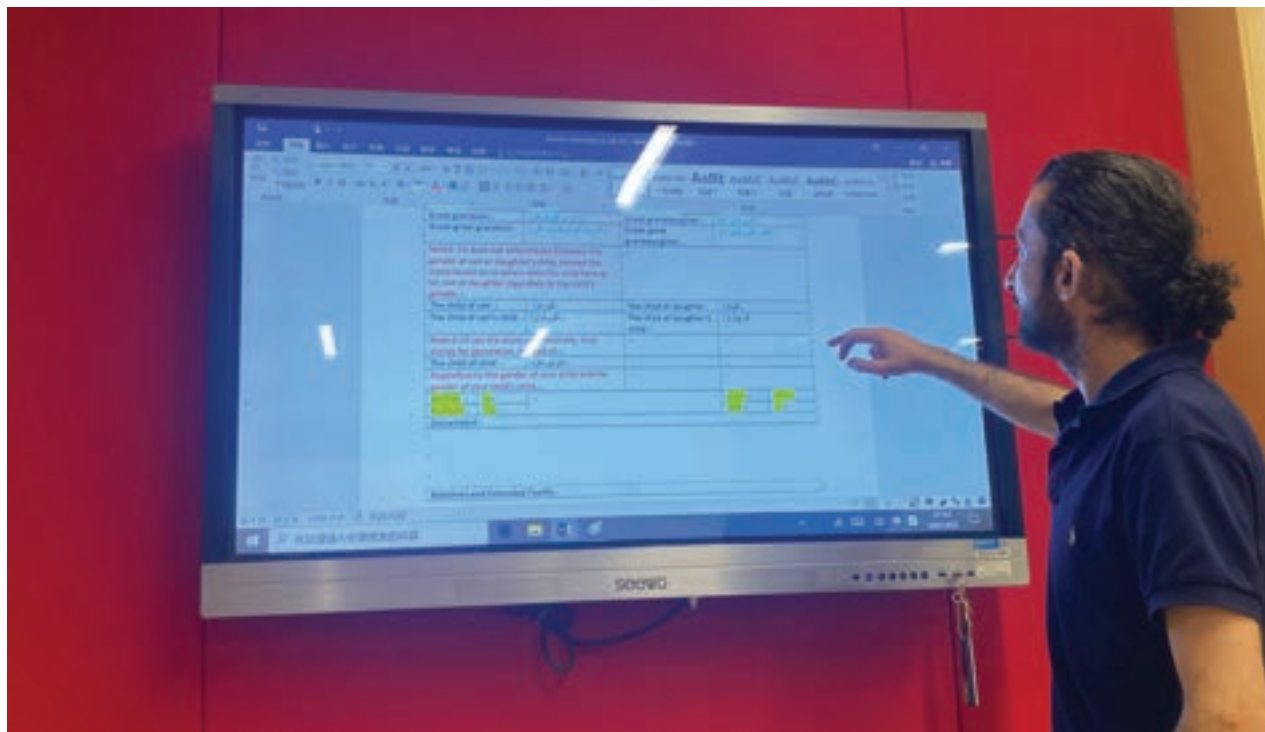
This opportunity originally emerged out

Covid-19 pandemic forced him to conduct his first year of courses online. However, in 2021, he finally met his students in person at Peking University and taught Kurdish for four hours per week.

“ In 2021, he finally met his students in person at Peking University and taught Kurdish for four hours per week ”



Diyar Ali receives a thoughtful gift from one of his Kurdish language students.



■ *Diyar Ali interacting with his Chinese students.*

Diyar described his journey as a challenging yet rewarding experience when he spoke recently with *Kurdistan Chronicle*. “There are no unified Kurdish language programs for foreigners,” he says. “I have had to adapt, drawing on my knowledge of the Chinese language and culture to create a practical curriculum for my students.”

Diyar has concentrated on teaching the Sorani dialect, which is the official language of the Kurdistan Region under the Iraqi Constitution. He has also incorporated elements of Kurdish culture into his lessons. “The students are fascinated by Kurdish culture,” explains Diyar. “They ask about our traditions of hospitality, celebrations such as *Newroz* (Kurdish New Year), wedding and funeral customs, and even epic mythologies.”

Diyar has noted parallels between Chinese and Kurdish cultures. “Both cultures hold family in the highest regard,” he observes. “Traditions, values, and social structures revolve around the family unit, and elders are revered for their wisdom and guidance.”

When asked for advice for aspiring Kurdish language learners, he emphasized the importance of historical context. “Seek out credible sources on Kurdish history,” he urges, “and do research into established grammar re-

sources like those by David Neil MacKenzie.”

Despite leaving China after his contract ended, Diyar has remained optimistic about the future of the Kurdish language in China. “I believe a dedicated Kurdish language department within a Chinese university is right around the corner,” he says. He encouraged other Kurdish language instructors to pursue similar opportunities, emphasizing the enriching experiences they provide.

He added that his students in China were passionate about traveling to the Kurdistan Region, saying that “Kurdish people have sublime virtues and good manners; plus, Kurdistan has deep history and beautiful landscapes, some reminiscent of landscapes in China.”

Diyar’s sole difficulty was a mandatory three-week quarantine that he undertook upon arrival in China. Nevertheless, he looks forward to returning someday, not as a teacher, but as a tourist eager to explore the vastness of this fascinating country.

Distinction between Kurdish and Farsi

One question frequently posed to Kurdish language teachers or Kurdish people is the degree of similar-

ty between Kurdish and Farsi. Both languages, indeed, belong to the vast Indo-European family tree, sharing a common ancestor.

Diyar, who has been teaching Kurdish since 2003 and has conducted numerous Kurdish language studies – including a comparison of Kurdish and Farsi languages – said that both Kurdish and Farsi are Aryan languages. Aryan does not refer to an ethnic group of people or a specific DNA, as is often misunderstood, but rather to a linguistic group of people who speak Aryan languages, such as Kurds, Persians, and Pashtuns in Afghanistan and India.

“In terms of chronology, both Kurdish and Farsi exhibit notable similarities. However, when it comes to sentence structure, grammar, tense, and pronunciation, Kurdish differs significantly from Farsi,” Diyar proclaims.

Diyar agreed with the notion that Kurds have preserved their language more purely than Persians, arguing that ethnic groups facing existential threats are less open to external influences and thereby safeguard their language. In contrast, he maintained, Persians have historically been more open to other cultures and languages because they have not faced existential threats like the Kurds. ●

Paintings of Hope



Qassim Khidhir

has 15 years of experience in journalism and media development in Iraq. He has contributed to both local and international media outlets.

Just a few days ago, in Erbil, Kurdistan Region, visual artist Shayan Shahir Nuradeen unveiled her latest solo exhibition titled “Enough,” as part of a global campaign to combat child hunger commissioned by World Vision International, a leading humanitarian organization.

Nuradeen displayed nine paintings that shed light on various hardships faced by Iraqi children. These paintings, all based on firsthand encounters the artist had in the governorates of Nineveh and Kirkuk, address issues such as child labor, early marriage, displacement due to climate change, and disability caused by conflict.

“I want my paintings to convey a message of hope, even in the midst of despair,” she explains. “Through my art, I hope to amplify the voices of marginalized people and advocate for their rights.”

Nuradeen, 40, is a well-known artist in the Kurdistan Region and is curious about the human experience and people’s life stories. “I’m constantly daydreaming about people,” Nuradeen says.

She also describes herself as an artist who wants to promote human rights. “I want my paintings to highlight and convey messages about human rights issues, both locally and internationally,” Nuradeen states.

Even though they address difficult topics, viewing Nuradeen’s paintings makes one happy. The subject is dark, but the colors are vibrant, and there is a glimmer of hope in each of her works.

“I like to offer a glimmer of hope. When there is so much darkness around someone, a little care can provide a lot of hope. It’s critical for me to convey hope in my paintings, even if the subject is dark,” she explains.

Nuradeen became very emotional when she began discussing women’s rights and freedom. She is deeply affected by the violence committed against women in Kurdish society. Women’s rights and a struggle to prevent violence against women are strongly reflected in her art.

Her solo exhibition “Souls and Dreams Never Forgotten” featured the stories of seven women who had been victims of “honor crimes” in Kurdish communities, not only in the Kurdistan Region, but also in Sweden, Turkey, and the UK.

In her paintings, she attempted to portray the beautiful side of these women by depicting their dreams, such as simply wanting to be with a guy or going out and enjoying the simple pleasures of life. However, they were denied those simple dreams.

“My message was that all of these women had beautiful souls and had the right to live with dignity,” says Nuradeen.

“A belief in positivity and creativity”

Nuradeen’s father, an architect and civil engineer, nurtured her artistic spirit.

“My father encouraged me to draw and paint from a very young age,” Nuradeen explains. “I recall him in his studio in

“

I want my paintings to convey a message of hope, even in the midst of despair

”



**SHAYAN
SHAHIR
NURADEEN**



the home. We had a living room with a large table. He was always designing things on large pieces of paper. I'd often see him standing up in this room, sketching."

Even during the turmoil of the Gulf War, her father's encouragement served as a lifeline, guiding Nuradeen through the darkest of times.

"Even during the war, my father gave me drawing materials," she recalls. "His support allowed me to escape into my imagination, shielding me from the harsh realities outside."

Tragically, her father's guidance was cut short when he passed away when she was just nine years old. Yet, his influence continued to shape Nuradeen's path.

"His encouragement to see the world as beautiful and colorful stayed with me," she reflects. "Despite the hardships, he instilled in me a belief in positivity and creativity."

When she was a child, her mother hired Tawana Marjan, an art teacher, to teach Nuradeen how to paint. However, Nuradeen took a detour after everyone encouraged her to study business, saying that she could not make a living from art.

"I felt pressured to meet societal expectations," she admits. "Everyone around me was interested in science and academia, but I knew my passion was elsewhere."

Nuradeen travelled to the United States in 2008 to pursue a business degree. However, her time in there rekindled her artistic zeal.

"Experiencing American culture and seeing the celebration of individualism inspired me," she says. "I realized I couldn't ignore my true calling any longer."

"I found myself sneaking into art history classes next to my business school," she admits. "The memories of my child-

hood drawings resurfaced, igniting my desire to pursue art once more."

Her time in the United States, particularly in cities like Boston and New York, served as a catalyst for her artistic awakening.

"I stumbled upon street artists in New York City, and that's when I realized that art was my true calling," Nuradeen explains. Inspired by the diverse artistic expressions around her, she took the initiative to enroll in life drawing classes and immerse herself in the creative process.

Nuradeen returned to the Kurdistan Region determined to pursue her passion wholeheartedly. She sought advice from local art teachers, including Faisal Othman and Hazhar, to improve her skills and refine her artistic vision.

"Art became a means of self-expression for me," she says. "It enabled me to express my emotions and advocate for causes close to my heart."

In 2019, she held her first solo exhibition at the French Institute in Erbil.

"If it hadn't been for the French Institute, no one would have known or recognized me," Nuradeen explains.

Her paintings are now sold in Europe and the United States, as well as in the Kurdistan Region. She hopes to one day have her own private studio and rely solely on art for her livelihood.

She mentions that the art business has only recently started to develop in the Kurdistan Region, with people now beginning to show interest in original paintings made by the region's artists.

More recently, she traveled to Italy to take courses in paintings and study the Italian language, as well as to Spain to practice painting and explore her craft freely.

"I would live on art if I could," Nuradeen says. ●

The Maestro of Kurdish Theater



Savan Abdulrahman Ahmed

is the editor-in-chief at *DidiMn*, a Kurdish cultural website. Concurrently, she is engaged in a research project on the origins of masculinity in her role as a research assistant at the American University in Iraq, Sulaymaniyah, and also collaborating on this project with the London School of Economics (LSE).

Think of a writer, actor and director who has had a major impact on Kurdish theater over the span of 16 years and who, with each passing year, introduces audiences to innovative techniques, captivating stories, and a unique aesthetic. This description brings to mind none other than Shwan Karim, whose name is familiar to any aficionado of Kurdish theater.

Born in Sulaymaniyah in 1973, Karim moved to Germany in 1994. He lives in Hanover, where he has taught improvisation at Hanover University and been an active member of Germany-based Sketch Kurdish Impro Theater Group.

His works are known to both Kurdish and German audiences, as Karim has directed twelve plays. His most influential works include *We No Longer Have Time for Songs*, *Homeland Nights*, *The Year of Zero*, *The Beginning...The Very Beginning*, *The Last Days of Bablo*, and *Seven Seconds*, which is currently playing in Sulaymaniyah.

Innovative storytelling

Karim officially launched his career in 2008 with *Sorrows Behind a Window*, a one-man show written, directed and acted solely by himself at Sulaymaniyah Theater Festival.

Beyond his directing skill, Karim is best known for his compelling storytelling. His plays explore the everyday challenges of life within a society, examining issues to which audiences can relate and give audience members a chance to reflect on their own lives.

For instance, his play *We No Longer Have Time for Songs* features a dialogue between the two main characters, who are married, that portrays the complexity of human beings and depicts how the hardships of daily life have created a chasm between them. The couple fights, with each blaming the other. Without a clear declaration of who is right and who is wrong, the audience empathizes with both characters and the challenges that affect them.

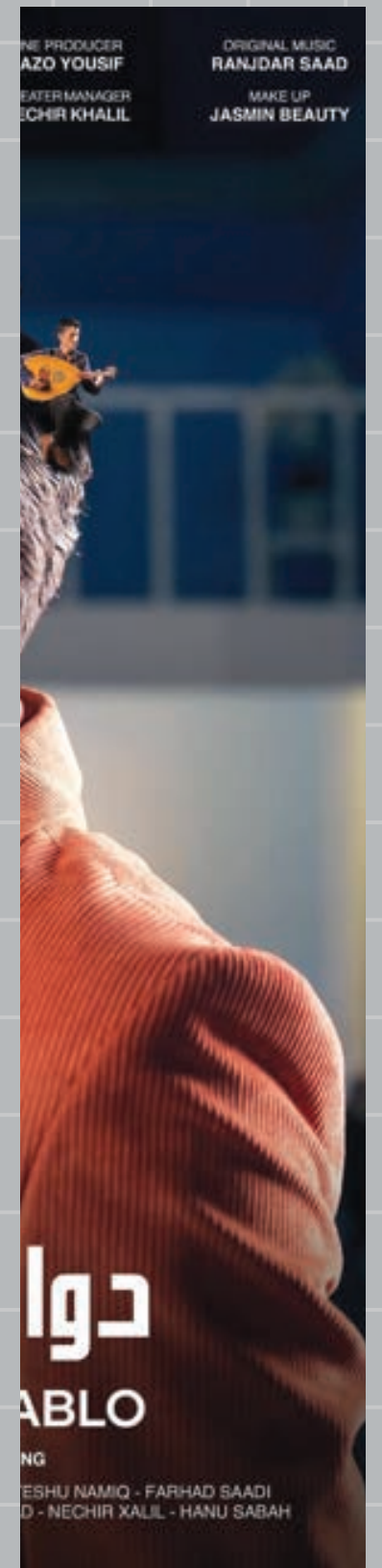
The play itself is performed in an ancient household in the bazaar. The audience sits on Kurdish rugs and enjoys the familiar confines of being in a home. Sometimes, Karim stages his plays outside, eschewing traditional indoor stages for locations that best suit the story.

In *The Beginning...The Very Beginning*, again we are confronted with different characters. An unborn child needs to choose a family. After being shown three different households that combine and reflect three different types of families in the modern world, the child decides that it does not want to be born.

This time what makes this play so engaging is that it involves the audience in the child's decision-making process as they move around the performance space to visit each household themselves.

His 2022 work *The Last Days of Bablo*, starring Reshan Hemo, was a turning point for Karim, as the total audience figures exceeded 46,000. The play ran for 97 days in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Kirkuk.

The play, a tragicomedy, follows a mid-





dle-aged artist named Bablo, who gets lost in a demonstration against the “thieves” who work for the government. Bablo falls unconscious and wakes up in a mental health hospital. This is where the play truly begins, as Bablo starts characterizing himself as one of the thieves in the government against whom he was protesting. Again, Karim depicts human beings in a straightforward manner, revealing how the environment they are placed in can make them both innocent and deserving of the consequences of their actions.

Finishing touches

Songwriting and live music feature

The play’s action is driven by subplots that showcase the power of Karim and McDonagh’s writing.

Beyond his directorial achievements, Karim’s rehearsals serve as learning opportunities for the cast, who gain a deeper understanding of theater by working with him. An actor who previously worked with him, wrote: “Karim not only presents astonishing pieces on stage, but also lectures and prepares actors for the real-world demands.”

Karim also sprinkles in jokes, stories, and references that are familiar to a Kurdish audience, drawing from his lived experiences and observations. “I get glimpses of ideas from the events I

beacon in Kurdish theater, leaving an incredible mark on his art form.

Chronology of Works

2009: Wrote, directed and acted *Sorrows Behind a Window*

2011: Wrote and directed *We No Longer Have Time for Songs*

2013: Wrote and directed *Homeland Nights*

2014: Wrote and directed *The Year of Zero*

2017: Wrote and directed *In Front of the Mirror* in German.



prominently in Karim’s plays. His lyrics engage the audience and elevate the emotional resonance of his productions, leaving a lasting impression for theatergoers.

Seven Seconds is his most recent production. Currently showing in Sulaymaniyah, it will come to Erbil soon. Co-written by Martin McDonagh and Karim, it stars the Kurdish singer Hardi Salami and features other experienced actors, including Tahir Abdulwahd, Lawk Ebubekir, and Karo Sawz. The plot centers around a writer who is brutally dragged into an interrogation room in an unnamed totalitarian dictatorship and questioned by two detectives about the stories he has written.

have witnessed,” Karim explains. “You never know where and when you will need those ideas again and how those ideas can serve a bigger purpose.”

Perhaps it is his ability to draw inspiration from personal experience and observations – as well as his dedication to instilling ethical values in his actors – that sets him apart as a true master of the stage.

Ultimately, in Karim’s world, theater is more than a form of entertainment. It is a platform for exploring honesty on stage, demonstrating loyalty to the story, and maintaining an ethical commitment to the audience. As his career continues to unfold, Karim stands as a

2018: Wrote and directed *There’s Always a Person Who Leaves Us*

2018: Wrote and directed *If We Are Doomed to Die*

2019: Wrote and directed *This City*

2019-2020 Wrote and directed *The Beginning...The Very Beginning*

2022: Co-wrote and directed *The Last Days of Bablo*

2024: Co-wrote and directed *Seven Seconds* ●



Emissary of Culture and Art



Jan Dost

is a prolific Kurdish poet, writer and translator. He has published several novels and translated a number of Kurdish literary masterpieces.

Born in 1952 in Tirbespi in Rojava Kurdistan (Kurdistan in Syria), Bahram Hajo moved with his family to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq at an early age, where he witnessed the Kurdish Revolution of the 1960s and then the 1970 March Accord (also known as IraqI-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement) between the Iraqi regime and the leadership of the revolution. He studied in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah before moving to Europe, eventually settling in Germany.

We met Hajo in his studio in Münster at the end of 2023 and had a long interview with him about his fruitful artistic experience as well as his life story, fraught with instability and characterized by frequent relocations. During the interview, he made it clear to us that painting was his greatest passion. He first studied archeology and then devoted himself to painting in 1989, making a lasting impact on the world of contemporary art. His paintings are sold for large sums of money and still decorate many art galleries in cities worldwide.

We started by asking him about the large Hajo family, who are scattered throughout the world, just like other Kurdish families who were forced by the *de facto* political situation in their countries to immigrate in search of a safer life. The Hajo family has produced musicians, politicians, and artists who have played a major role in revitalizing contemporary Kurdish art and culture.

A family scattered around the world

Bahram Hajo (BH): I can't provide a fitting answer to explain our family. Perhaps

being so mixed through marriage with other Kurdish families helped it to grow and become more influential. As you know, the issue is sometimes related to genes. For example, my father Youssef Ibn Hajo used to play the saz (*baglama*), and I learned how to play thanks to him. He used to play at family gatherings, as we drank and sang together.

Kurdistan Chronicle (KC): There is something else that caught my attention about your family. Your ancestors originally came from Turkish Kurdistan and moved to the Kurdish region in northern Syria. Later they scattered around the world, with a large portion joining the Barzani revolution. You studied in Baghdad, and part of your family moved to Iran after the collapse of the Kurdish revolution in 1975. Then you migrated to Europe. You might have been among the first Kurds to immigrate to Europe. Why didn't your family stay in one place?

BH: Yes. This was the result of the injustices our family was subjected to. The Ba'athist government, on the recommendation of a Syrian intelligence officer named Muhammad Talab Hilal, attacked the families that supported the Barzani revolution in the 1960s. Our family was among them. I was eight when the revolution broke out and witnessed my family send gold, money, clothes, and even shoes to the revolutionaries.

The Hajo family even bought radio equipment from East Germany and sent it to the mountains, thus establishing the first radio station for the revolution.

I remember a Syrian army division going to support the Iraqi army, which was fighting



| Bahram Hajo's contribution.

the *peşmêrga*. Trucks full of soldiers passed by our house in Tirbespi. They started cursing us, saying that they were going to eliminate the Barzanis and threatening to come back and kill us as well. They confiscated our family's property so that we had nothing. Most of the Hajos were farmers. There were only a few educated people in our family, including Dr. Hazni Hajo, who was in Europe. Majeed was an officer, and Othman was a soldier in the French army in Syria during the Mandate.

KC: *Yet you remained attached to the homeland. You said in an interview that you would like to have a grave in your hometown.*

BH: Yes. exactly.

KC: *But is there a difference between a person being buried in a foreign country or in his homeland?*

BH: For me there is. It is better to have a grave on my land. I returned to Qamishli in 2010 and built a house there, hoping to settle for a long time and spend my holidays there instead of in France, Spain, or elsewhere. It is easy for me to go from Qamishli to the Mediterranean coast, for example, but the situation has deteriorated, and it is no longer possible to go back.

Teaching and engineering

Hajo's answer was followed by a five-minute walk to his studio, which was full of paintings, some finished and a few still in progress. I started studying the portraits, which included crushed, naked figures twisting in torment. Some resembled nightmares, full of pain and alienation. After a short tour, we sat on a leather sofa in the middle of his studio.

KC: *Your paintings sell for high prices. You have a worldwide reputation. Some famous people buy your paintings, yet you say that you do not paint to sell them. If you had not been able to sell your paintings, would you have continued painting?*

BH: Yes. I left my main job to commit myself to painting. I was a schoolteacher and translator, and my job brought in a decent salary to live on. Back then, my German wife – whom I met at the University of Münster in 1976 – did not support me the way that my wife Fatima does now. Still, I was adamantly dedicated to painting.

KC: *Did you come to Germany when you were young?*

BH: Yes. In 1974.

KC: *Did you study in Baghdad?*

BH: Yes. I went to Baghdad. At the age of 18 I was studying in Sulaymaniyah. I was at university studying for my baccalaureate degree when the Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement of 1970, also known as the March Accord, was signed. At that time, there was an urgent need for teachers in Kurdistan. After the agreement, Arab teachers had to return to their cities after spending some time teaching in Nawprdan, Haji Omaran, and elsewhere, leaving the schools almost without teachers. My father explained the situation to my cousins Prshing, Brusk, and I, asking if we wanted to become teachers. Despite the lack of strong motivation, we opted to become teachers in Nawprdan. Dr. Hazni Hajo had come from Germany to work as a doctor. He and Dr. Mahmoud Othman were the only doctors of the revolution. The leader of the revolution, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, used to come from time to time to Nawprdan, and I met him many times. The political office of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was in Nawprdan, and Dr. Hazni's hospital was their headquarters.

KC: *Do you have any special memories with the late Barzani?*

BH: I can say that I saw him every week. During the year and a half that I spent in the region, in Galala and Nawprdan, I attended the KDP councils with my father and uncles. The late Barzani often rolled cigarettes from his own box

of tobacco and offered them to the attendees. He would also offer one to me, even though I didn't smoke then.

One time, an Italian journalist asked me about Barzani after he saw his picture: 'Is this your grandfather?' I told him, 'He is my grandfather, but not my biological grandfather. He is like the Kurdish Garibaldi.' When the newspaper published the interview, accompanied by pictures of my paintings, it said: 'Barzani is like Garibaldi to us.'

I remained in the region until mid-1971, when the University of Sulaymaniyah established the Department of Kurdish Literature and the Department of Civil Engineering. Kurdistan enjoyed relatively peace after the March Accord. Kurdish ministers were appointed to the government, and Kurdish ambassadors were assigned to Iraqi embassies abroad. If my memory serves me well, Mohsen Dizayi became the governor of Sulaymaniyah. I had met him many times in Nawprdan. One time he took me in his car to Sulaymaniyah University and advised me to study at the university there, saying, 'You did not come here to become a schoolteacher. You must pursue your studies.'

In Sulaymaniyah, I received a scholarship from the KDP amounting to 25 Iraqi dinars, in addition to 15 Iraqi dinars from the university. This was a large sum at that time. I started studying civil engineering in English. Brusk and I were staying in the teachers' accommodations. Dr. Sherko Abid, who recently passed away, was one of those teachers. He was a chemist who studied in London until he returned to teach us physics and chemistry.

Studying civil engineering did not appeal to me. I was weak in subjects such as mathematics but wanted to study fine arts, theater, or music. I moved to Baghdad to complete my studies in engineering. I passed the first year successfully, but my grades were very low. So, I decided to leave my engineering study.



Artwork created by Bahram Hajo.

“You are in West Berlin”

BH: I stayed in Baghdad less than a year. Disagreements quickly broke out between the KDP and the Ba’athist government in Baghdad in 1972 and 1973. Kidnappings became frequent and many problems arose. At the time, I was staying with Prshing in a student housing complex. One night, I was with Ezzat Kettani, whose father was a martyred revolutionary officer. Ezzat was

minister. He and Dara Tawfiq, the editor-in-chief of the party’s newspaper, *Al-Ta’akbi*, agreed to try to issue me a passport. Meanwhile, I hid in the house of the Kurdish poet, Hazhar Mukryani, in Old Baghdad. At the time, Mohsen Dizayi had become Iraq’s ambassador to Czechoslovakia.

KC: What happened to your cousin Prshing?

torture on him. He was a handsome boy with a graceful stature, and we used to call him Shammi Kapoor because he was so handsome.

After a sigh of sadness and regret, we resumed our interview.

I remained in hiding until my papers and passport were ready. Then I left Baghdad on a small plane with about thirty passengers. I think they were British diplomats who were friends of the



Babram Hajo (right) and Jan Dost (left) depicted together.

staying at the house of his uncle, who was a colonel in the Iraqi army. When I got back, I was told that the authorities had taken my cousin Prshing and that I had to go into hiding. They had taken him directly to the Qasr al-Nihaya, a palace the Ba’athist regime had turned into a prison.

At that time, Sami Mahmoud was a

BH: The Ba’athist authorities released him several months later in an exchange deal. Three Syrian Kurds were exchanged for eleven Iraqi officers who were prisoners of the *peshmerga*. After that, Prshing moved to Germany and passed away when he was very young. He had been brutally tortured at Qasr al-Nihaya. They pulled out his nails and teeth and practiced the worst types of

Kurds. The plane landed in Prague and then took off to another destination. Friends had provided me with recommendation papers to study in Prague. I went to Mr. Mohsen Dizaye, the Iraqi ambassador in Czechoslovakia, but the Iraqi government had summoned him to Baghdad fifteen days after my arrival. I was left alone, not knowing where to go. Fortunately, during those two

weeks, I had met a young Kurdish man from Afrin named Muhammad, who was staying in the student housing and doing a degree in medicine. He offered me his room, while he stayed with his Czech friend who was also studying medicine. I remained perplexed for about twenty days, not knowing what to do. It was not possible to study without a scholarship in socialist countries. I was told that I had to exchange five dollars daily, which was equivalent to fifteen Deutsche marks at that time.

Some advised me to go to West Germany via East Germany. I only had a passport, and my Iraqi visa was sufficient for three months of wandering around the socialist countries.

I resorted to traveling by train and had a guitar with me. On December 24, 1973, I arrived in a town called Teplice on the Czech-German border. There, four policemen boarded the train, two of them were Czech and two East German. I started playing my instrument, pretending that everything was fine. They asked me for my papers, so I gave them my yellow and white passport, which was in Arabic and English. They did not understand what was in the passport because they did not understand the languages. They took me off the train and escorted me to a police station, where I was detained for the night. I spoke English fluently because I studied at Sulaymaniyah University in English. I somehow made them understand the need to contact my friends in Prague. So, I was allowed to make a call to my friend Muhammad.

Things went smoothly after that. They stamped my passport, and I entered East Germany, where I was told that I had to take the metro to Friedrich Strasse station. I did not know that this station was in West Berlin until I asked people how to travel to West Berlin. ‘You are in West Berlin,’ they said. I finally arrived at my brother’s house.

Style and experience

KC: Let’s go back to art and your paintings. All or most look like self-portraits.

You are the hero of your paintings. What is the motivation for this? What message do you want to deliver?

BH: I will answer you without philosophizing the topic. The face I see most is my own. I see myself every day in the mirror. I can draw myself so that others can easily recognize me. Plus, my baldness matches the canvas (laughing). If you draw a head with hair, it will not be beautiful.

KC: You said in one of your interviews that a person’s bare skin is enough to express the artist himself and that he doesn’t need any clothes!

BH: Yes. I originally work on my painting briefly with color but leave areas of the canvas uncolored. This is what drew attention to my way of drawing. I may be the only one who works this way.

KC: Yes. You leave a large area in your paintings with no color at all. And you give women a distinct presence in your paintings! We see this duality of man and woman in almost every painting of yours. According to my understanding, some of your paintings portray hallucinations and nightmares. We see faces bearing the hardships of life. There is also pain in your paintings, as well as mystery.

BH: In my life, I have encountered many social challenges. I closely observed the disputes that break out between men and women. Personally, I did not live a comfortable, luxurious life.

These things are reflected in my paintings and their characters. I carry the concerns of contemporary man and depict them visually into paintings that show my visage, which can portray men in general and, of course, me. I wanted to highlight the suffering of oppressed people in particular. People who suffer from despair, boredom, and brokenness. These things are not far from my personal experience.

My guest then talked about his relation-

ship with the late Syrian-Kurdish artist Malva (Omar Hamdi), who died years ago in Vienna after leaving behind a massive body of paintings. He spoke of meeting Malva for the first time in 1991 in Vienna at Hajo’s solo art exhibit. He also told us about the exhibitions he held here and there, and his travel to Syria encouraged by Malva. I then returned to discussing the paintings that surrounded us, in which I could see characters that looked at us with patent pain.

KC: I would like to return to the topic of the voids or spaces you leave on the canvas. We find large areas in your paintings that you leave blank, unpainted. We know that artists usually do not leave a point or a small spot on the painting without working on it color-wise. What do these colorless spaces in your paintings tell us?

BH: The uncolored spaces in my paintings symbolize human loneliness. Even when I draw two people in one painting, voids surround them. They are alone. They are alienated and no one cares about them. This is repeated in my paintings and is a symbol of human alienation.

KC: Is your Kurdish national affiliation reflected in your paintings? How?

BH: That’s a difficult question. I cannot claim that I draw Kurdish faces. My characters may have oriental features, but they would not necessarily be Kurdish characters. I think that my identity as a Kurdish artist and the creator of these paintings is a reason for me to be proud. Wherever I am, in all my interviews, I talk about my belonging. I am a Syrian Kurd, and I paint for the world.

I feel pain when I find people criticizing the great Kurdish writer Salim Barakat because he writes in Arabic. I know him well and have sat with him several times. We are from the same generation. It is enough for us that he is Kurdish and that he conveys our story as Kurds to others. ●

Painting on Walls



Sabr Salih

is a journalist based in the Kurdistan Region.

A young artist in Soran, Kurdistan Region, is making a big difference by painting murals on the walls of schools, hospitals, sidewalks, and public spaces. Zhiman Kamaran, a self-taught painter, has become a local hero, beautifying her city and using her art to promote peace, environmentalism, and the Kurdish identity.

Soran, located in Erbil Governorate, is a mountainous region known for its natural beauty and diverse population. Kamaran, born in 2002, began drawing as a child, honing her skills with dedication and practice. Even though she has not attended formal art courses, her talent and passion shine through in her vibrant and meaningful murals.

Currently working with Avashin, a local human development organization, Kamaran has painted at least one mural in every school and health center in Soran and the neighboring district of Rawanduz. Her desire to leave her artistic mark extends beyond her current projects, and she dreams of painting more and more, spreading her message through art.

While the community appreciates her work, official recognition has not been lacking. The Soran Independent Administration has repeatedly acknowledged and commended Kamaran's efforts, encouraging her to continue her artistic journey. She sees her art as a continuation of the struggle for Kurdish identity, where her weapon is a paintbrush.

"My goal is to beautify my city and paint messages of environmentalism, peace, and

patriotism," Kamaran explains with pride. "Through my art, I want to raise awareness about protecting our environment, loving our country, and upholding Kurdish culture and language."

Kamaran's repertoire extends beyond murals, encompassing portraits and other artistic styles. Her work, often priced higher than the norm for the local market, is well-received and widely admired. Collaborations with other aspiring artists allow her to share her skills and nurture young talents, fostering an artistic community dedicated to beautifying their city and expressing their love for their homeland.

Hope, beauty, and the Kurdish spirit

Family support has been crucial for Kamaran's success. Her family, along with the local administration, institutions, and the community, has provided unwavering encouragement and helped her projects come to life.

"Painting gives my life meaning and allows me to express my emotions and worldview," she explains. "It is a way to spread messages of humanity, culture, and peace." Kamaran's ambitions go beyond personal expression. She dreams of empowering young girls and offering them opportunities to explore art. "My advice to young people, especially girls, is to learn and express themselves through art," she says. "It's a way to relax and explore your imagination."

Currently lacking her own exhibition space, Kamaran uses social media to show-



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She sees her art as a continuation of the struggle for Kurdish identity, where her weapon is a paintbrush

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Zhiman Kamaran engaged in wall painting.



Zhiman Kamaran painting on a wall.



case her work. With continued support, she hopes to open a gallery to further share her art with the world.

While still in her senior year of high school, Kamaran's future is brimming with artistic aspirations. She plans to

pursue sculpture at an art college, honing her skills and taking her art to even greater heights.

This young Kurdish artist is a shining example of passion, dedication, and the power of art to transform commu-

nities and inspire others. Keep an eye on Kamaran as her brush continues to paint messages of hope, beauty, and the Kurdish spirit on the walls of her city and beyond. ●

From Kermanshah to Academic Success



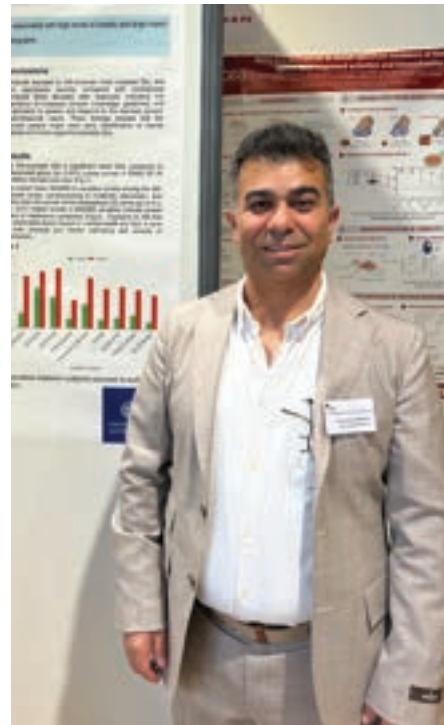
Rabim Rashidi,
a Washington DC-based
Kurdish journalist, is
widely recognized as "Mr.
Kurd." He is focused
on Kurdish affairs in
Kurdistan and abroad.

Faraidoun Moradi's earliest memories are filled with the beauty of a clear sky surrounded by towering mountains and playful moments on nearby farms. However, these happy memories are overshadowed by the harrowing night his family – with the assistance of compassionate individuals near the border – fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as refugees. This unfortunate turn of events was a direct result of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent war against the Kurdish population in Iran, all of which happened before Moradi had started formal education.

Raised in Dalaho in Kermanshah Province in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran) – a region marked by discrimination against non-Muslims, particularly in the mountainous area where his family resided – Moradi's early life was challenging. In 1990, seeking a safer and more stable life, his family moved to Sweden, embracing a new rhythm in their "new haven." Despite the initial difficulties, Moradi set his sights on building a better future.

In 2006, Moradi achieved a significant milestone, graduating from Uppsala University with a master's degree in pharmacy. His academic pursuits led him to write his undergraduate thesis at the University of London, resulting in the publication of his research in the prestigious British Journal of Pharmacology. Notably, he completed his education in four and a half years, an impressive accomplishment.

Passionate about education and research, Moradi pursued a master's degree in medicine from the University of Gothenburg in 2012. Continuing his journey, he attained the title of specialist in family medicine in



2020, allowing him to provide comprehensive healthcare to individuals and families in need.

Currently, Moradi is researching the long-term effects of mustard gas on the mental health, quality of life, and lung function of Kurdish survivors of chemical attacks. This research extends beyond the Kurdish community in Sweden to the resilient people of Halabja in the Kurdistan Region.

Dissertation Research

Chemical weapons, particularly mustard gas, pose a significant threat to human health and safety. Despite being easy and cheap to produce, they cause physical and psychological damage, with potential long-term effects on individuals' well-being. Moradi's dissertation, entitled "Long-Term Impacts of Sulfur Mustard Exposure on Mental Health, Quality of Life, and Lung

Function," focuses on exploring the consequences of mustard gas exposure, comparing exposed individuals in Sweden and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq with unexposed counterparts.

The thesis delves into the Anfal Campaign, a genocide in Iraq involving chemical attacks on the Kurdish population. Moradi utilizes qualitative research to uncover life experiences, social conditions, and gender differences



Throughout his journey, Moradi has maintained a commitment to serving marginalized communities, actively participating in various student associations and international medical organizations. Today, he is a general practitioner contributing his expertise to patient care while concurrently working at the Center for Catastrophe Medicine at the University of Gothenburg. In 2023, Moradi earned a PhD, shedding light on the long-term effects of mustard gas on Kurdish survivors and actively contributing to academia and the medical field. His life story exemplifies resilience, determination, and a commitment to making a positive impact on the lives of others.

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Moradi is researching the long-term effects of mustard gas on the mental health, quality of life, and lung function of Kurdish survivors of chemical attacks
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among exposed individuals. Additionally, quantitative studies in Sweden reveal differences in mental health and quality of life between exposed and unexposed individuals, emphasizing the need for increased awareness and research dedicated to addressing the long-term physical and neuropsychiatric symptoms, as well as gender-specific differences, in this vulnerable population.

Moradi's findings underscore the importance of a biopsychosocial model to address the unique needs of individuals exposed to mustard gas, emphasizing the need for continued research and resources in this critical area. ●

The Path of a Mixed Martial Artist



Riband Kurd

is a professional photographer and journalist. Recognized as a member of the Union of Journalists in Finland, he currently contributes to MTV.

Makwan Amirkhani, a warrior draped in the Kurdish flag, fist raised high after a grueling victory in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) octagon, the eight-sided ring used for UFC matches. Each time, the image ignited a spark of pride, a testament to the human spirit's ability to overcome adversity. So, it was with immense anticipation that I stepped into his training hall in the Finnish city of Turku, eager to meet the man behind the legend.

"It's not magic," Amirkhani says with a gentle smile, his hands working with seasoned ease as he wraps them in weathered white tape. "It's just relentless preparation." This humble statement about his success masks the extraordinary journey that forged him into a champion, a journey etched with the harsh realities of displacement but also nurtured by the warmth of unwavering family support and the burning dream of representing his heritage on the global stage.

Displacement and Europe

The narrative of Amirkhani's parents doesn't start amidst the bright lights of the octagon, but rather in the sun-drenched streets of Kermanshah, their ancestral hometown nestled in the heart of Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran). Here, their days unfolded peacefully.

Yet the specter of war loomed large. In the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq War cast a long shadow, and his family, caught in its relentless crossfire, was forced to flee their beloved homeland. Their displacement

led them to the desolate Al Tash refugee camp in Ramadi, Iraq, where Amirkhani was born, the fourth child of the family. His earliest memories are painted in shades of dust and the scorching sting of sand, starkly contrasting the life he left behind. He spent his first five years in the camp, forever marked by the experience. In 1993, Finland offered his family a new beginning, but the transition was not easy. As the only foreign children in their school, Amirkhani and his siblings faced the sting of prejudice and isolation. One anecdote he recounts with a chuckle: finding a black shirt on sale, they bought it only to learn later that it was emblazoned with racist symbols. This experience, though unsettling, fueled Amirkhani's determination to persevere. It was in the world of martial arts that the family found solace and strength. Starting with his older brother, they were drawn to the discipline and structure the sport offered. Despite his smaller stature, Amirkhani's natural talent shone through, as he honed his technical prowess, outmaneuvering bigger, stronger opponents.

His dedication was unwavering, fueled by his mother Zare, a pillar of strength who walked him to training sessions through harsh Finnish winters, rain, snow, or shine. Her unwavering support became his anchor, her belief in him a burning torch against the darkness of doubt.

Fighter and mentor

Amirkhani's rise to the UFC was anything but meteoric. It was a grueling climb, each victory a testament to his relentless pursuit of excellence. From his

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Beyond the accolades, Amirkhani found his true purpose in representing his heritage

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MAKWAN AMIRKHANI



record-breaking eight-second knock-out in the UFC's featherweight division to his triumph over Conor McGregor's protégé, Johnny Walker, he etched his name onto the sport's tapestry, one fight at a time.

Beyond the accolades, Amirkhani found his true purpose in representing his heritage. Inspired by the indomitable spirit of the *peshmerga* fighters who defended Kurdistan against ISIS, he proudly raised the Kurdish flag after each victory, a beacon of hope for his people scattered across the globe. This simple act resonated deeply, serving as a powerful reminder of the human cost

of conflict and the enduring spirit of his people.

Now a father himself, Amirkhani instills the importance of his roots in his young son. But his impact extends far beyond his family. He is a mentor, guiding a thriving sports club in Turku, where predominantly Kurdish and Afghan youth train under his watchful eye. He sees in them the same hunger, the same fire that burned within him, and he nurtures it with the same dedication that his mother showed him.

His dream, however, transcends borders. He envisions establishing a similar

academy in Kurdistan, nurturing young talent and providing them with a pathway to the world stage. It is a dream fueled by a desire to give back and empower his people.

Amirkhani's success is evidence of the human spirit's capacity to rise above hardship and succeed on the global stage, inspiring fighters, refugees, and anyone who dares to dream big. Notably, he was even welcomed by the Finnish president, Sauli Niinisto, for coffee, a testament to his impact beyond sports. The world now eagerly awaits the next chapter in the legend of the Kurdish warrior who conquered the UFC. ●

Hanna's Athletic Triumphs

Kurdistan Chronicle

Born in June 2004 in Oslo, the capital of Norway, Hanna Maroofi is a proud Kurdish girl with roots in Rojhelat in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran). Her parents' story is one of resilience and courage. They fled their homeland due to their Kurdish identity and the difficulties

racing around the playground, or simply exploring the world around her.

It's no surprise that her favorite subject in school was physical education. One trait that set her apart was her fierce competitive spirit. She had the drive to be the best in



this posed, seeking safety and freedom in the welcoming arms of Norway.

Growing up, Hanna experienced what one might call a "normal" life, filled with laughter and friendships. Yet she was anything but normal; in fact, she had an uncanny knack for being in constant motion. It seemed like she was always on the go, whether it was chasing after a soccer ball,

whatever she did, whether it was a friendly game on the playground or a schoolyard race against older kids. Gender and age were inconsequential to her; what truly mattered was the thrill of competition and the desire to prove herself. One thing that really caught her interest was gymnastics. She was fascinated by how gymnasts moved with grace and strength at the same time. She wanted to be just like them, doing

flips, turns, and all their cool moves.

Hanna's gymnastics adventure

At the age of seven, she fell head-over-heels in love with gymnastics. Watching gymnasts on TV, she was captivated beyond measure. Her mother discovered a local gymnastics club, and she had the chance to attend a trial session. She was bursting with excitement and could not wait to get started. Walking into the gym, and seeing the mats, bars, and beams seemed to open up a whole new world of possibilities. As the months

alizing her dreams. Being a part of the competitive team brought new challenges and opportunities.

Being an athlete meant Hanna had to make sacrifices. She spent a lot of time practicing, sometimes missing out on hanging out with friends or doing other things she enjoyed. Not every competition ended in victory, and learning to handle disappointment was important. The good memories and proud moments made it worth it. In her local area, she consistently earned a spot on the podium. Either first, second or third place. Hanna even had the opportunity to travel across Norway, taking

gymnastics might not be the right fit for that.

Deciding to quit gymnastics was one of the toughest choices she ever made. It had become a part of who she was, her identity. Hanna often wondered who she would be without it. After a lot of thinking, she made the decision to end her gymnastics journey in the summer of 2020 at the age of 16. Instead, she chose to transition into a role as a gymnastics coach. Hanna wanted to share the knowledge she had gained and everything she had learned from her own journey. People often told her how strong she was, and she really en-



went by, her dedication and hard work began to show. It was around the age of nine that something truly amazing happened. The coaches recognized her potential, as well as the motivation and strength that she poured into every routine. They saw in her not just a young gymnast, but someone who could really shine in the sport. That is when everything changed. She was moved up to the competition group, a step that felt like a huge leap toward re-

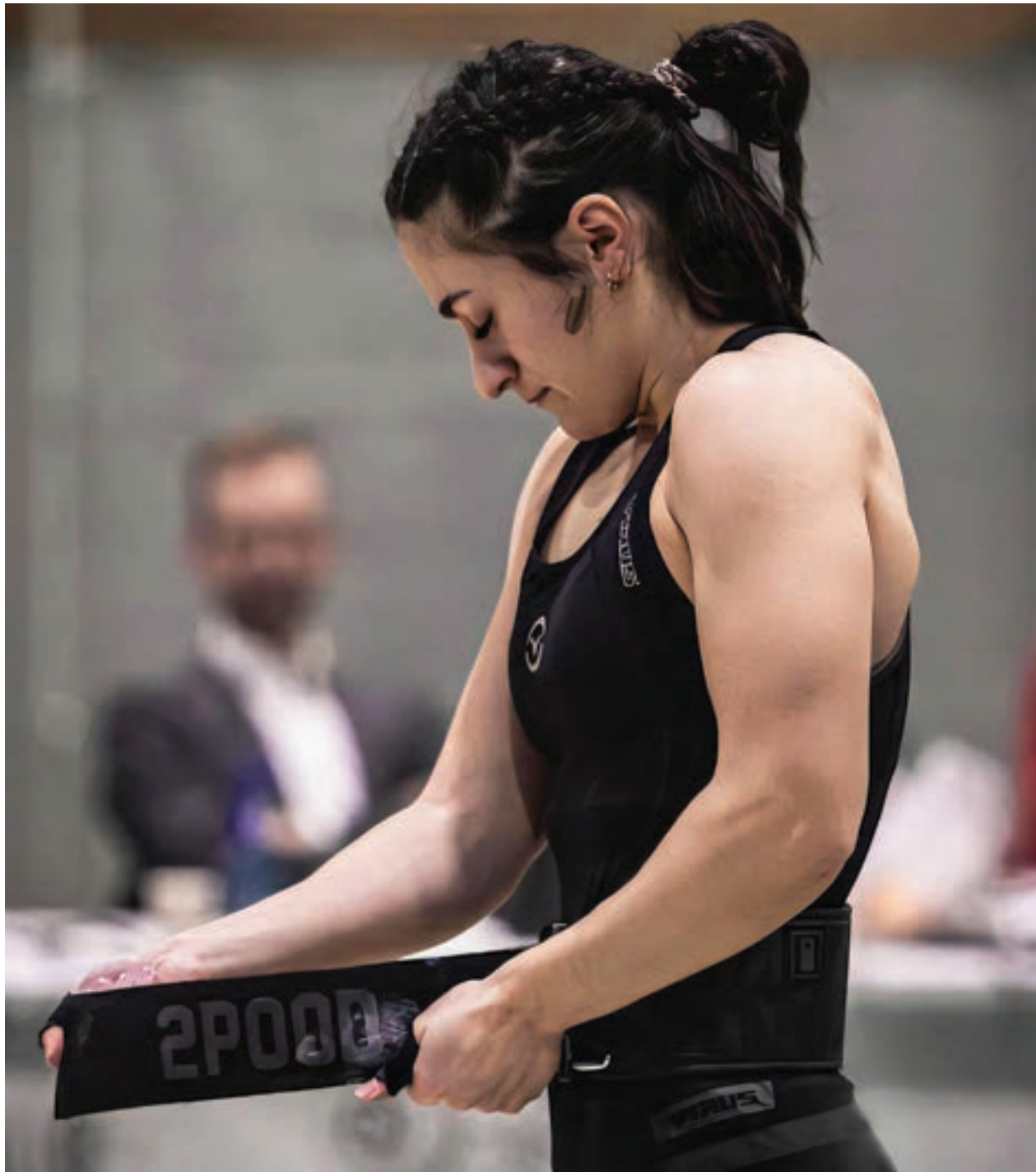
part in numerous larger competitions within the country.

As she got older, she did not feel as excited about gymnastics anymore. It is a tough sport, and her love for it started to fade. The sport felt less like a source of excitement and more like a duty. She kept going, but that initial excitement was gone. She wanted to try something new. Hanna wanted to explore and discover her full potential and felt that

joyed strength training. She knew that she wanted to find a sport that aligned with that passion.

A new chapter

She discovered a CrossFit gym nearby, and from the very first trial session, she was hooked. Just like seven-year-old Hanna stepping into gymnastics for the first time, Hanna felt that same rush of excitement and passion. Cross-



Fit captured her heart, and she has not lost interest for a single day since that moment. The muscle memory, body awareness, and determination she cultivated in gymnastics seamlessly translated into her CrossFit training. What might have taken other years to learn, she could pick up in a matter of weeks. Hanna realized that this was something she wanted to fully commit to, and eventually she formed a partnership

with a coach who was eager to work with her. He recognized her potential and saw an opportunity to collaborate. Even though she had only done CrossFit for a little while, she managed to become one of the best in Norway in her age division. A big part of this success was thanks to her gymnastics background.

Weightlifting in CrossFit turned out to

be something she excelled at quickly. It was kind of surprising how fast Hanna got good at it. Getting feedback and making little tweaks to get better – that is something she learned from her gymnastics days. Hanna knows there is always room to improve; things are never perfect. She always strives to get better, and loves picking things apart to improve. She stumbled upon a weight lifting course and wanted to up her



game, so she decided to give it a shot. The coach's eyes widened as she lifted. He asked, "Who are you, and where have you been hiding? Why haven't I seen you before?" Hanna surprised a lot of people, but mostly herself. She had not realized the potential she had or how good she was at something she had been doing for only a few years.

Her intention was just to enhance her lifting for CrossFit, but things took an unexpected turn. The coach at the course saw something in her. He convinced her to join the weightlifting club and even pushed her to enter a competition just three weeks later. It was a whirlwind, going from wanting to improve her lifting technique to stepping onto the competition platform in such a short time. With her willingness to take on challenges, she thought, "Why not?"

Stepping onto the platform

And there she stood, ready to compete

against athletes from across the entire region. Surrounded by unfamiliar faces, she realized that the truest competition was within herself. She as stressed as everyone else before her turn – or maybe even a bit more, because it was all so unfamiliar. But as she grabbed that barbell and started to lift, there was this surprising sense of calm. The weight was heavy, but deep inside, she felt strong and determined. In that very moment, her confidence in herself soared higher than ever before. It was not just about lifting; it was about conquering her own doubts. And guess what? This performance did not just secure a win; it led her to a clear first-place victory. Since then, she has made significant progress in every competition she has taken part in, even being chosen to represent Norway at the Junior European Weightlifting Championships. This incredible opportunity also means that she is now an official member of the Norwegian national weightlifting team.

Empowering others

Hanna is also driven by the desire to inspire others and prove to both young girls and boys that they can achieve their dreams if they truly want to. She is passionate about showing that there is no difference between genders when it comes to strength and determination. What she has accomplished is not exclusive to her – it is attainable for anyone who is willing to put in the effort. She particularly wants to be a source of inspiration for Kurdish girls, letting them know that they are capable of achieving greatness. Her journey is a testament that gender does not define potential; it is about embracing her passion and pushing beyond perceived limitations. By sharing her story, she hopes to encourage other Kurdish girls to chase their aspirations fearlessly and break through any barriers that stand in their way.

"If I can do it, you can too!" Hanna said. ●

POETRY

If This is a Girl

Thanks to Primo Levi for 'If This is a Man'

Nazand Begikhani

On the 8th commemoration of Yazidi genocide
3 August 2019

You who walk free
In your own town
You who can sing in your mother tongue
You who can pray in your own temple
You who can sunbathe
And swim in the sea
You who can laugh
And hold the hands of your children
Consider if this is a girl
Whose school is bombed
Whose town is invaded
Whose home is bulldozed
Whose parents are killed
Who is taken as a sex slave
And sold in public markets
With price tags on her wrists
Who is forced to wear a burqa
Spit on her own religion
And bear children by her rapist
Whose head is cut off if she dares to say no
In all that you do
Remember her

In the beginning of the day
And at the sunset
Remember her

In dark evenings
And under starry nights
Remember her

In your actions
And your thoughts
Remember her

In your holy days
And in your prayers
Remember her

Carry her deep in your heart
It happened to her
And it can happen to you too
Lest we forget to remember
To honour them all



Nazand Begikhani

Dr. Nazand Begikhani, an accomplished academic, poet, and lecturer, has earned acclaim on the international literary stage, securing prestigious honors such as the Emma Humphrey's Memorial Prize and the French Prize of Feminist Poetry of Simone Landry. After serving 15 years at the University of Bristol, UK, she was bestowed with the esteemed Vincent Wright Chair at the School of International Affairs at the Paris Institute of Political Sciences (Sciences Po) in 2020. This institution, renowned for shaping the careers of four French presidents, including President Macron, now benefits from her expertise. Dr. Begikhani instructs courses on violence against women during times of conflict and trauma, while actively advocating for women's rights worldwide. She demonstrates linguistic versatility by writing proficiently in Kurdish, French, and English.



SABR DRI



The golden eagle, a majestic raptor native in Kurdistan's mountains, is known for its imposing presence. Its name is derived from the golden hue of its neck feathers. Thriving across a wide range of habitats, it preys on small mammals such as rabbits, hares, marmots, and ground squirrels. Remarkably, these eagles can have longer lifespans than other raptors due to their ability to store food atop high, cold peaks during the periods when they are regrowing their beak and talons. Some golden eagles, mainly adults, migrate between 1000-2000 kilometers to find more favorable environments. While globally stable, populations have experienced periods of decline and local extinctions have occurred. Today, the population is estimated to be between 170,000 to 250,000, with breeding pairs ranging from 60,000 to 100,000, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Scientific Name: Aquila chrysaetos **Size:** 69 - 97 centimeters **Wingspan:** 1.8 - 2.5 meters **Life Expectancy:** Up to 25 years, potentially longer with food storage **Weight:** 3,630 - 6,700 grams **Photo credit:** Hostan village, Barzan area, Kurdistan Region.

AQUILA CHRYSÆTOS

Capturing Star Trails in Kurdistan

Sabr Dri

Sometimes, when you see a scene of stars rotating around another star, it may be a little hard to believe. You might think they are just a few artificial circles drawn by hand or computer. But in reality, this thinking is not correct.

In fact, the scene you see is straightforward; you only need to understand the system, which we will refer to here.

Star trails mirror the Earth's rotation around its center. The Earth completes a full rotation relative to the fixed stars in a period of around 23 hours and 56 minutes. So, as seen from Earth, all the stars appear to complete a full circle and return to the same place within the sky after this period of time.

In short, it is the Earth's rotation that creates the orbits of star trails. This transformation with regard to the stars is what space experts call a sidereal day. This means that the stars are not actually rotating, but the Earth is, giving the illusion that the stars are moving around the Polaris star in the north. To make this movement visible, photographers take hundreds of pictures and then combine them all into one that depicts these so-called "star trails."

When depicting star trails, photographers often look for an object such as a mountain or a tree to include in the moving scene to make the photo more beautiful and attractive. The Kurdistan Region is rich in mountains and trees, making it a good place to capture these scenes, whether in photo or time-lapse. ●



Erbil Autoshow

Kurdistan Chronicle



From February 29 to March 3, Erbil hosted the ninth edition of the Erbil Autoshow, which featured the participation of 120 national and international companies, that showcased 13 new brands for their products.

The 9th International Exhibition of Automotive, Spare Parts and Car Accessories, was notable for its focus on electric vehicles and their spare parts, which took center stage.

Chinese car makers were the largest presence at the exhibition, with 60 Chinese companies showcasing their innovations. These companies also presented over 200 new brands of automobile and spare parts.

During its four-day run, the Erbil Autoshow attracted over 64,000 attendees, particularly drawn to the luxury vehicle segment. Topping the charts was a car priced at \$400,000, the most expensive on display.

As a testament to its success, the exhibition garnered 288 contracts.





Photo: Peshraw Mahdi