

Kurdistan Chronicle

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Kurdistan's Path Toward Unity and Stability



*Marewan Hawramy
is the Co-publisher of
Kurdistan Chronicle.*

In the past two months, the Kurdistan Region has witnessed several initiatives related to ethnic and religious coexistence, the most significant of which was the National Prayer Breakfast held on April 23 in Erbil.

Several well-known personalities from different world religions participated in the event, with many emphasizing President Masoud Barzani's assertion that the essence of religion is morality.

This issue of *Kurdistan Chronicle* contains several articles that highlight the Kurdistan Region's commitment to embodying the concept of coexistence, and the many projects it has undertaken to this end. This approach has had an impact on stability and peace, especially in the broader context of the Middle East, which faces several major security, political, and environmental challenges.

Kurdistan Region President Nechriwan Barzani's attendance at Pope Francis' funeral on behalf of Iraq further emphasized the region's dedication to upholding peaceful coexistence among all nationalities and religions as a universal message.

At the same time, during his recent visit to Washington, D.C., Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani reiterated the region's readiness to pursue strategic political agreements with Middle Eastern partners, including collaboration on Iraq's natural resources, as well

as promoting peaceful resolutions to Kurdish issues in Türkiye and Syria.

The disregard for Kurdish rights over the past century has led to severe consequences for the countries into which Kurdistan has been divided, including major humanitarian disasters such as the genocidal Anfal Campaign in Iraq. The dedication it takes to bring perpetrators to justice is explored in detail in an interview with Dutch activist Simon Minke.

The Kurdistan Region has always reaffirmed its commitment to stability and equality. Thanks to its people's fierce spirit, it has made great achievements, such as Duhok SC's recent victory in the Gulf Champions League.

The Kurdistan Region is not only rich in energy resources, but also in biodiversity. Mountain plants are a highly valued source of healthy food in the spring. Several articles on the richness of Kurdistan in terms of flora are featured in this issue.

In various articles, the artistic achievements of Kurds have been presented, such as the role of the *tambur* as both an instrument and a symbol of Kurdistan's cultural spirit. In the field of music, Alan Arif's journey to become one of the greatest violinists in the world is an inspiring tale of dedication and heritage.

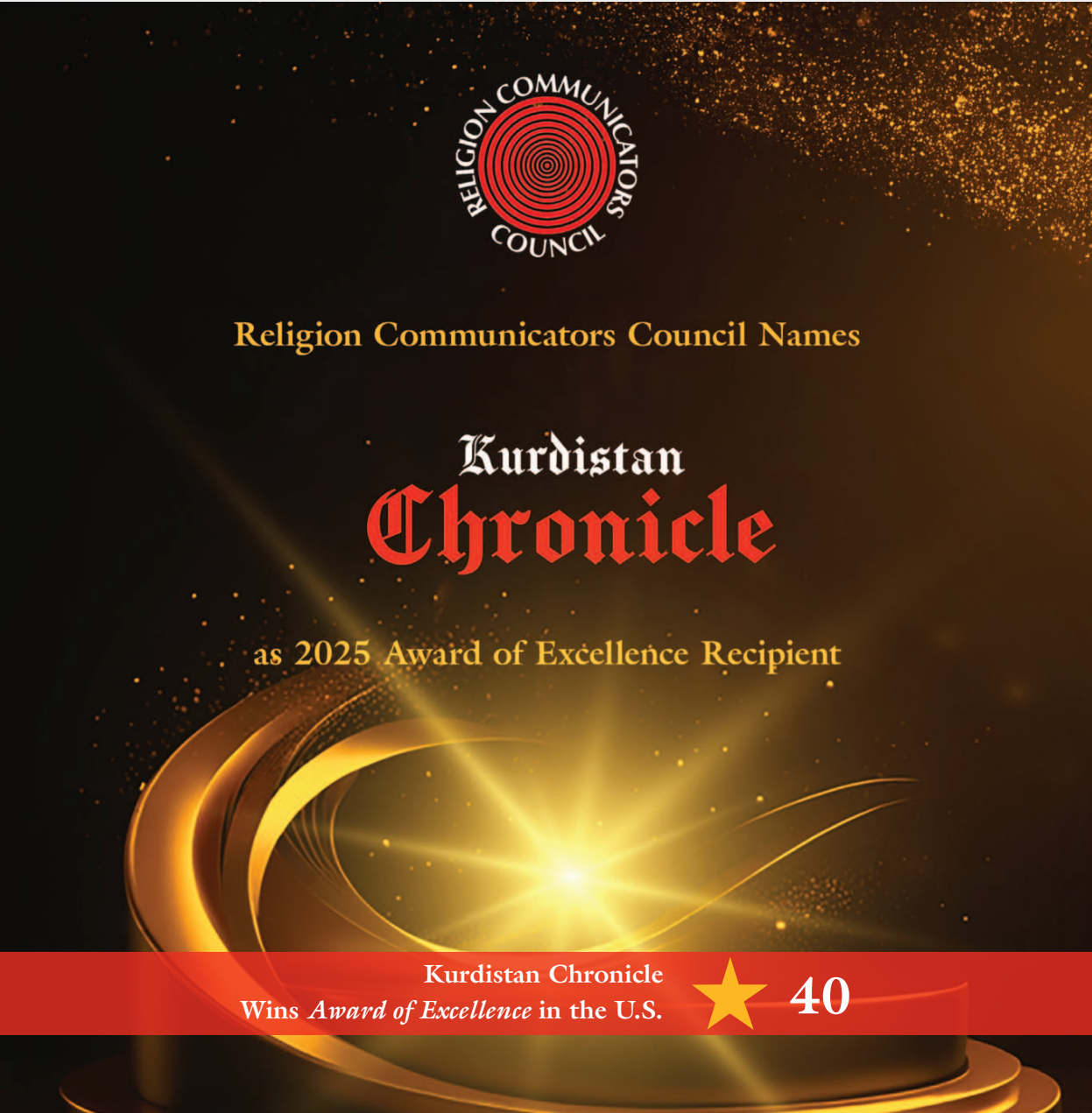
In terms of gender, the Kurdistan Region has long worked to oppose violence against women. Moreover, women have become major figures in the management of the affairs of the Kurdistan Region; for example, Halabja's Governor Noksha Nasih is the only woman governor in Iraq and has emerged as a role model in the field of provincial administration. Her governorate, Halabja, has shown that the role of women in this region has always had deep roots. In the past, Adila Khanum was one prominent example. Now, most of the governorate's offices are largely run by women.

The people of the Kurdistan Region can become icons of success in other societies if they are given the opportunity. Roza Salih in Scotland and Enver Erdogan in Australia are prime stories of Kurdish success in the political spheres of their adoptive countries.

Agit Kabayel, a German boxer of Kurdish origin who is featured on the cover of this issue, shows his pride and delight at the beauty and progress of the Kurdistan Region in an interview.

In recent weeks, the whole world has feared a major conflict between India and Pakistan, two major nuclear powers, but in Kurdistan, Indians and Pakistanis live peacefully and play sports together, exemplifying the coexistence that makes the region a model on the global stage. ●

CONTENTS



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info@kurdistanchronicle.com

Publishers: Botan Tahseen Marewan Nasraddin Hawramy	Geoffrey Ballinger	Photograph Editor: Safin Hamid
Editor in Chief: Nahro Zagros	Board Member: Jan Dost	Photographers: Sabr Dri Mohammed Dargalayi
Managing Editor: Shamal Abdulla	Senior Reporter: Sardar Sattar	Liaison: Aveen Howrami
Editors: John Bowlus	Graphic Designer: Hilal Çelik	US Desk: Goran Shakhawan
	Features: Qassim Khidhir	

Kurdistan’s First-Ever National Prayer Breakfast 8-13	Before the Silence: The Forgotten Photographs of the Yezidis 72-77
Energy Deals for Peace and Prosperity 14-19	A taste of Kurdistan: UK’s Best Kebabs 78-79
Peace-Driven Diplomacy 20-23	Alan Arif’s Musical Odyssey 80-83
Dutch Prosecutor Who Jailed Saddam’s Supplier 24-27	Fadil Jaf’s Kurdish Staging of <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> 84-87
London Honors Victims of Saddam Atrocities 28-31	Leyla Bedirkhan and the Liberation of Dance 88-91
Halabja: Finally a Governorate 32-35	The Minaret Erbil’s Enduring Landmark 92-95
Kurdistan Joins Digital Green Revolution 36-39	The Colors of Heritage 96-99
Kurdistan Chronicle Wins <i>Award of Excellence</i> in the U.S. 40-43	Women’s Exhibition in Krakow: Reclaiming Identity Through Art 100-103
First Kurd Elected to Political Office in Scotland 44-47	Duhok FC Makes History in the Gulf Champions League 104-107
<i>Pedal for the Planet</i> 48-51	More Than a Fighter 108-113
Tambur: A Sound Too Sacred to Be Silenced 52-55	Erbil: A Peaceful Arena for India and Pakistan 114-117
<i>Crimes Against the Kurds</i> 56-61	Gul-Shler: An Upside-down Crown 118-121
<i>Awez Journal:</i> Fostering a Culture of Enlightenment in Kurdistan 62-65	Presenting Traditions Through Nature 122-125
Baban Dynasty’s 122-Year-Old Manuscript 66-71	Poetry 126-127
	Wildlife 128



Photo: Adnan Barnawi

Kurdistan's First-Ever National Prayer Breakfast



Wladimir van Wilgenburg

is a seasoned reporter and analyst who specializes in Kurdish affairs, and holds a Master's degree in Kurdish studies from Exeter University, UK.

The inaugural Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast took place in Erbil from April 22 to 25, gathering senior Kurdish officials, religious leaders, and international guests. It underscored the Kurdistan Region's reputation as a haven for religious communities and the importance of peaceful coexistence among its diverse faith groups.

Participants included religious leaders from Sunni and Shi'a Islam, Christianity, and Yezidism.

A testament to tolerance

Ambassador Sam Brownback, who formerly served as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in

2018-2021, called the event "an extraordinary show of support of all religious communities in a challenging region.

"It will bode well for the future of Kurdistan and this entire region, their diversity and their willingness to fight for the toughest of human rights, which is religious freedom," he told Kurdistan Chronicle. "This initiative is excellent – a true model. I hope they continue it. Places like Syria right now would do well to look at a place like Kurdistan when they look for how to put their country back together."

Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch Ignatius Aphrem II, who traveled all the way from the Syrian capital of Damascus

■ The inaugural ceremony of the Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast in Erbil (April 22, 2025).

to attend the event, underlined in a speech that the Kurdistan Region sets a good example by keeping religion out of politics and providing a haven for fleeing Christians.

"This historic event in Erbil – the first of its kind in the region – not only will continue annually, but will hopefully inspire other governments in the region to organize similar events for the sake of humanity," he said.

U.S. Consul General in Erbil Steven Bitner added that it was "wonderful to see the high level of attendees, with people coming from around the world to gather in the Kurdistan Region.

"It's a testament to the unique nature of the Kurdistan Region as a place for the peaceful coexistence of so many different religious components."

Promoting coexistence

In a keynote speech, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani stated that this was the first time such a gathering has been organized in Kurdistan. "Its goal is to introduce to the world our deeply rooted culture of coexistence, acceptance of others, and freedom of opinion, religion, and sect. These are values we take pride in and are determined to continue pursuing. I hope this gathering will deepen and expand the bonds of brotherhood and coexistence in Kurdistan.

"Worshiping God unites different religions. Truth is indivisible, and there are many paths to reach it. All holy religions that accept the truth of God's oneness seek that truth and should all be respected. The core of religion is morality.

"Let this be the beginning of future gatherings of this kind, to remind us all that above all, we are servants of God and brothers in humanity. We can live together through acceptance, love, and peace. But through injustice, neither the oppressor nor the oppressed will find peace," he underlined.

"The teachings and guidance of all prophets call on people to extend the hand of brotherhood and to coexist."

Platforms for dialogue

Nadine Maenza, President of the U.S.-based International Religious Freedom Secretariat, told Kurdistan Chronicle that it is wonderful "to see people from all over the world and also religious leaders from all over the region come together and pray for the Kurdistan Region, to pray for Iraq.



■ President Masoud Barzani delivering a speech at the inaugural ceremony of the Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast in Erbil (April 22, 2025).

“It’s a way to bring people together to talk about the region and its problems. We have challenges, we can work together to improve conditions. So it’s encouraging to see,” she said, adding she was glad she was able to come.

David Muller, an advocate for religious freedom in Iraq representing the German non-profit ojcos foundation and a regular visitor to the Kurdistan Region, emphasized the importance of dialogue in societies with a history of conflict.

“Platforms for dialogue are essential in a society with such a past,” he said. “Whether it’s a prayer breakfast, an interfaith discussion, or another form of meeting, the key is that people

come together. In the West, religion is often perceived as a source of conflict. Yet here, and in neighboring countries, religion is not the root cause of conflict.”

He continued with a metaphor: “I like the image of a flame. In winter, it brings warmth. But if it burns down your house, it becomes dangerous. Religion is similar. Religious people are not inherently holy or evil – they exist somewhere in between. It’s not about the religion itself, but about how people live their faith. You can misuse Islam, Christianity, or any other religion. It depends on the person.”

He stressed that spiritual gatherings that focus on peace rather than incit-

ing conflict are deeply needed – both in Iraq and globally.

“In small conversations, I’ve spoken with various minorities,” Muller added. “They’re all struggling for recognition and awareness. It’s important that we emphasize equal rights for everyone, but we must also create spaces where recognition is felt.”

Leadership recognition

Maenza also added that it is important “to see the leadership talk about these issues, and talk about the importance of religious coexistence, of accepting one another, regardless of the religious community.”

During the event, KRG Prime Min-

ister Masrour Barzani explained that during the war against ISIS, the Muslim Kurdish *peshmerga* soldiers fought alongside their Yezidi and Christian brothers-in-arms, “each ready to face death so that mosques could sound the call for prayer, churches could ring their bells, Yezidi temples could stand proud, and people of all faiths could worship freely and without fear again.”

The *peshmerga* paid a heavy price, with a total of 12,000 fighters being wounded or killed in the war against ISIS.

He also mourned the recent passing of Pope Francis, who died on April 21 at the age of 88. “We were proud and honored when, in 2021, His Holiness Pope Francis visited Erbil and held

“
This historic event in Erbil – the first of its kind in the region – not only will continue annually, but will hopefully inspire other governments in the region to organize similar events for the sake of humanity
”

a mass in the Franso Hariri Stadium where thousands of people gathered to be in his presence,” he said.

During a visit to the Vatican on February 2020, Prime Minister Barzani presented Pope Francis with a picture of a *peshmerga* fighter restoring the cross in the town of Bashiqa after it was liberated from ISIS.

“In my meetings with His Holiness in Erbil and Rome, I came to know him for his commitment to peace and understanding. We all mourn his passing and pray that his legacy inspires unity among all peoples of the world.”

“Today, the KRG remains committed to this sacred duty. We are not only rebuilding homes and cities, but renewing our promise to protect



■ President Masoud Barzani, together with religious leaders and foreign diplomats at the Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast (April 22, 2025).



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, delivering a speech at the Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast (April 22, 2025).



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, chatting during the inaugural ceremony of the Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast in Erbil (April 22, 2025).



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Kurdish and Iraqi leaders at the Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast in Erbil (April 22, 2025).

“ This multiculturalism is not a challenge, but a strength that we draw upon in building a peaceful, democratic, and prosperous Kurdistan ”

freedom of religion, promote coexistence, and foster peace in every corner of our land,” Prime Minister Barzani underlined.

Furthermore, he noted that Ankawa – a Christian-majority suburb of Erbil that was turned into a separate district in 2021 – stands as the only growing Christian city in the Middle East, with a population that has more than doubled since 2011.

“This is a testament to our commitment to diversity and coexistence. We are also investing in the restoration and development of the holy sites of our Yezidi brothers and sisters, as well as preserving mosques, churches, and temples for all communities.”

He also underlined that Kurdistan is home to many other religions, including the Kaka’i, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Bahai’i faiths. “Our government is actively working to build more mosques, churches, and places of worship, ensuring every citizen has the right to practice their faith openly and safely.”

Furthermore, in the education field, he said his government is “reforming our school curricula to reflect the true, diverse, and inclusive nature of Kurdistan – teaching our children not only about their own traditions, but about those of their neighbors, so they grow to respect and celebrate one another.”

In addition, he said that followers of

every faith and nationality are represented in the parliament, government, and public institutions. “This multiculturalism is not a challenge, but a strength that we draw upon in building a peaceful, democratic, and prosperous Kurdistan.”

“Today, as we gather in Kurdistan, we pray not only for our nation, but for all nations,” Ano Jawhar Abdoka, KRG Minister of Transport and Communications and the President of the Christian Alliance, said in prayer at the event. “That the walls of hatred may fall, and the roots of peace be firmly planted. We pray to God Almighty, each according to their faith and spiritual convictions, that we may rise above fear and draw our strength from our unity.” ●



Goran Shakhawan

is a Kurdish-American journalist and author based in the United States. He has covered news for several Kurdish news outlets and was a former senior correspondent for Kurdistan24 in Erbil and Washington D.C. He has published several books in Kurdish.

Energy Deals for Peace and Prosperity



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington, D.C. (May 24, 2025).

In a productive week in Washington, D.C., Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani held over 20 meetings with U.S. officials, senators, representatives, and members of the Trump administration, including the Secretary of Energy, Secretary of the Interior, and Secretary of State.

This visit marked a significant opportunity for the KRG to strengthen ties between the Kurdistan Region and the United States, particularly in energy and economic development.

New era of energy development

On May 19, 2025, the KRG delegation under the leadership of Prime Minister Barzani achieved a landmark milestone by signing two multi-billion-dollar agreements with U.S. energy firms HKN Energy and WesternZagros Resources. The signing ceremony took place in Washington and was hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Prime Minister Barzani hailed these

deals as the dawn of a new era for the region, emphasizing their critical role in advancing Kurdistan's energy infrastructure. "These new investments are going to be very critical in developing the region as a whole," Prime Minister Barzani said in his keynote address. "Our government has been dedicated to enhancing energy stability in Kurdistan, particularly through our reform programs aimed at providing round-the-clock electricity across the region and potentially exporting energy to other parts of Iraq." He congratulated the people of both Kurdistan and



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani overseeing the signing of two major energy agreements during a formal ceremony at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C. (May 19, 2025).

Iraq on this achievement, recognizing the importance of the partnership with U.S. companies.

Reflecting on the historical ties between the KRG and the United States, forged during the fight against terrorism, Prime Minister Barzani stressed that while security remains essential, economic cooperation is becoming a defining feature of their bilateral relationship. “Economic development and energy investment are powerful tools that can deepen our relationship and strengthen our bonds,” he stated.

The agreements, estimated to be worth a combined \$110 billion over their lifetimes, involve HKN Energy operating the Miran Block, valued at approximately \$40 billion, and WesternZagros managing the Topkhana-Kurdamir gas field, projected to generate around \$70 billion. Both companies have a long-standing presence in the region, significantly contributing to its economic growth and sustainability.

Steve Lutes, Vice President of Middle

East Affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, praised Barzani’s leadership, stating he is “the right man at the right time” to foster strong economic ties between Kurdistan and the United States.

Eric E. Stoerr, Managing Director of Oil & Gas Investment at Crest Investment Company, expressed optimism about the potential for significant natural gas production from Kurdistan, which is crucial for strengthening local and regional electricity infrastructure.

U.S. reaffirms commitment to energy deal

During his official visit, Prime Minister Barzani also participated in high-level discussions with U.S. officials, reaffirming the mutual benefits of the trade agreements. He met with U.S. senators Elissa Slotkin, Bill Hagerty, Angus King, and James Lankford, as well as U.S. representatives Adam Smith, Abraham Hamadeh, Mario Diaz-Balart, and Joe Wilson, discussing the importance of further

strengthening and expanding ties between the Kurdistan Region and the United States. Representative Wilson voiced concern over the Iraqi government’s position on several issues affecting the Kurdistan Region, emphasizing the essential nature of U.S. investments in the region, particularly in developing Iraqi gas resources to reduce reliance on Iranian imports.

Later in the week, Prime Minister Barzani met with U.S. Secretary of Energy Chris Wright. During the meeting, Secretary Wright reaffirmed U.S. support for the significant energy deals signed earlier in the week between the KRG Ministry of Natural Resources and U.S. companies HKN Energy and WesternZagros and emphasized the importance of expanding U.S. energy investments in the Kurdistan Region.

Additionally, Prime Minister Barzani expressed gratitude for U.S. support and provided an overview of the KRG’s reform efforts across various sectors, particularly in energy, as well as initiatives such as Runaki

and MyAccount. He also discussed the government’s broader strategy to strengthen the region’s economic foundations.

The future of power and energy

Following the meeting between Prime Minister Barzani and Secretary Wright, both leaders participated in a conference on the future of energy and power in the Kurdistan Region, hosted by Al-Monitor Global Institute, titled The Future of Power and Energy in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The conference was attended by numerous high-ranking officials and media outlets. Prime Minister Barzani and Secretary Wright underscored the vital partnership between the Kurdistan Region and the United States, highlighting the region’s emerging role in the global energy sector. The event included several informative panels, one of which was titled “Oil and Gas: The Kurdistan Region as an Energy Hub.” Moderated by Presi-

dent of Al-Monitor Andrew Parasiliti and KRG Minister of Electricity and Acting Minister of Natural Resources Kamal Mohammad Salih, it emphasized that the Kurdistan Region has the capacity to export 400,000 barrels of oil daily, positioning itself for a significant increase in energy production and electricity generation.

During a broad discussion, Secretary Wright highlighted the Kurdistan Region’s potential to become a key player in regional energy development, aligning with U.S. energy and foreign policy goals. “We are eager to support the Kurdish people in transforming their natural resources into valuable assets,” he stated. He noted that while oil is essential for modern society, natural gas is the fastest-growing energy source globally and can dramatically improve quality of life.

Secretary Wright also emphasized that the existing power infrastructure could enhance electricity production and delivery to the people of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, support-

ing U.S. President Donald Trump’s energy goals for the United States and its allies. He expressed excitement about these commercial developments and the potential to develop the region’s resources, affirming that “the Kurdistan Region has tremendous natural resources, and I see great opportunities for U.S. cooperation there.”

“We are very keen to work with and support the people of the Kurdish Region to turn the endowments of their natural resources into valuable assets,” Secretary Wright said during the panel discussion. Afterward, he noted President Trump’s belief in “prosperity at home and peace abroad, commerce not conflict,” and commended the Kurdistan Region for its energy policy, expressing hope for the growth of commercial relations with U.S. companies.

In his remarks, Prime Minister Barzani highlighted the KRG’s commitment to development. “We are here to demonstrate that Kurdistan is not only effective in fighting terrorism alongside our allies, but it is also ready to build with them to serve our people and attract U.S. investors interested in opportunities in Kurdistan,” he stated.

He expressed pride in the relationship with the United States and highlighted the eagerness to collaborate on building a brighter future that benefits both the Kurdish people and U.S. investors, ultimately creating a win-win situation for all. Barzani conveyed a strong sense of welcome and support during his visit to Washington.

When asked by the moderator about U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s remarks, which highlighted Kurdish autonomy as the “linchpin” of U.S. policy toward Iraq, Prime Minister Barzani responded warmly: “We deeply value Secretary Rubio’s remarks and the continued support of the United States, our closest ally. We take pride in being allies and friends



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani U.S. Secretary of Energy Chris Wright in Washington, D.C. (May 22, 2025).



Photo: Sabir Dri

■ Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani speaking at a panel hosted by the Al-Monitor Global Institute in Washington, D.C. (May 22, 2025).

of the United States. Frankly, we fully support the policies of President Trump’s administration, particularly his efforts in promoting peace, development, and prosperity around the world.”

Kurdish autonomy is key to U.S. strategy in Iraq

This all followed on a statement by Secretary Rubio who, during a House Foreign Relations Committee hearing on May 21, 2025, underscored the significance of Kurdish autonomy as the “linchpin” of U.S. policy toward Iraq. Engaging with Representative Wilson – who expressed concerns about Iraq and Iranian interference in recent agreements between the KRG and U.S. energy companies – Secretary Rubio emphasized that supporting Kurdish economic freedom is essential for fostering stability and prosperity in the region. The KRG took a momentous step toward economic prosperity by sealing multi-billion-dollar agreements with HKN Energy and WesternZagros Resources, which are poised to significantly enhance the KRG’s oil and gas exploration and development capabilities in northern Iraq.

During the hearing, Representative Wilson emphasized the importance of these agreements for the Kurdish people, stating that “the regime in Tehran has exerted influence over Baghdad’s decision making.” He argued that the agreements would not only benefit Kurdistan, but also the broader Iraqi populace, promoting freedom and economic empowerment. Secretary Rubio responded by reiterating that Kurdish autonomy is the “linchpin” of Washington’s approach to Iraq, articulating that the KRG’s economic independence is crucial for its success and prosperity.

Meeting with Trump Administration Officials

Prime Minister Barzani held talks with key Trump admin-



Photo: Sabir Dri

■ Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem in Washington, D.C. (May 23, 2025).

istration officials, including U.S. Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum. “We have great work ahead of us,” Prime Minister Barzani said in a post on X following the meeting. According to a statement from the KRG, the two leaders focused on strengthening the strategic partnership between the United States and the Kurdistan Region. They also addressed the latest developments in Iraq and the broader regional landscape. Secretary Burgum welcomed Prime Minister Barzani and referred to the Kurdistan Region as a valued partner of the United States. Secretary Burgum expressed satisfaction with the expanding ties between the region and U.S. companies, underscoring the potential for mutual benefit.

In turn, Prime Minister Barzani reiterated the Kurdistan Region’s gratitude for the ongoing support from the United States, stressing that the Kurdistan Region continues to play a crucial role in promoting peace and stability in both Iraq and the Middle East.

Prime Minister Barzani also met with U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem. They discussed enhancing cooperation and coordination between relevant institutions in the KRG and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, particularly in the areas of security, training, and countering organized crime.

ers. “This initiative helps Iraq harness domestic resources and progress toward energy independence – a goal we’ve frequently emphasized.”

Prime Minister Barzani meets with Secretary Rubio

On May 23, 2025, the final day of his official visit to Washington, Prime Minister Barzani met with Secretary of State Rubio. “The meeting went very well,” Prime Minister Barzani told *Kurdistan Chronicle* following the meeting. He then thanked Secretary Rubio for his hospitality in a post on X, stating, “Thank you Secretary Rubio, for your warm hospitality to-

In a post on X, Secretary Rubio reaffirmed U.S. support for a strong and resilient Kurdistan Region, which is critical to the stability of Iraq and the broader region. “Met with KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and reaffirmed U.S. support for a strong and resilient Iraqi Kurdistan Region that is critical to the stability of Iraq and the broader region” he stated.

According to a statement from the U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Rubio and Prime Minister Barzani discussed opportunities to further increase trade and investment between the United States and the Kurdistan Region. The Secretary commended the Prime Minister for finalizing deals with U.S. companies to expand natural gas production in the Kurdistan Region, which will help Iraq move toward energy independence.”

Prime Minister Barzani’s historic visit to Washington was extensively covered by U.S. media, highlighting his significant impact during high-level discussions with key officials from the Trump administration. In an exclusive interview on Fox News with anchor Bret Baier, Barzani focused on the steps taken toward enhancing U.S. relations with the Kurdistan Region, as well as the new energy agreements exceeding \$100 billion with U.S. companies. This visit marks a pivotal moment in strengthening the partnership between the Kurdistan Region and the United States.

During the interview, Barzani concluded his visit by expressing deep gratitude to President Trump, the U.S. government, and the American people for their unwavering support. “I’m very glad to be back here in Washington,” he stated, emphasizing the KRG’s commitment to being allies and partners. He highlighted their collaboration, noting, “we fought together against terrorists, and now, together with the United States and U.S. companies, we can build a lot in the region, contributing to peace and prosperity.” ●



Photo: Sabir Dri

■ Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with U.S. Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum in Washington, D.C. (May 22, 2025).

In the same day, U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Tammy Bruce spoke about the significance of Prime Minister Barzani’s visit to the United States. Bruce emphasized that Barzani’s visit is a pivotal step toward strengthening bilateral ties and highlighted Washington’s unwavering support for a robust and resilient Kurdistan Region. “We were pleased to see massive deals with U.S. companies to expand natural gas production in the Kurdistan Region,” Bruce remarked during her address to report-

day and your longstanding support and partnership for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. I look forward to continuing our dialogue.”

As part of diplomatic tradition, Prime Minister Barzani signed the U.S. Department of State’s distinguished visitors’ book. He wrote, “It is my pleasure to be back in Washington and to meet with His Excellency, Secretary Rubio. We are grateful for all the support that the United States has given us. Now, we believe we can build together.”

Peace-Driven Diplomacy

Kurdistan Chronicle



Photo: Kurdistan Region Presidency

■ Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani was welcomed by French President Emmanuel Macron at the Élysée Palace in Paris (April 14, 2025).



Photo: Kurdistan Region Presidency

■ Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani meeting with Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum (April 11, 2025).

Over the past two months, Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani has undertaken a flurry of diplomatic trips abroad, engaging in high-level meetings in Abu Dhabi, Amman, Antalya, Baghdad, Tehran, and Paris, underscoring the Kurdistan Region's growing role in regional diplomacy. These meetings focused on bilateral relations, regional trade, the situation in Syria, and broader efforts toward peace.

UAE investment

On April 8, the Kurdish President visited the Annual Investment Meeting in Abu Dhabi, as part of his official visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

During his visit, he met with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and other senior officials. "We discussed ways to further strengthen cooperation between the UAE, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region, as well as unfolding regional developments," he posted on X after the meeting.

The Kurdistan Region also hosted a pavilion at the event to promote the region's flourishing ties with the UAE. The current trade volume between the UAE and Iraq stands at approximately \$30 billion, and the Kurdistan Region over

the past years has been exporting agricultural products to the Gulf, including the UAE.

"I can affirm that the UAE is earnestly and genuinely seeking investment opportunities within the Kurdistan Region. In this regard, they are in the process of appointing a dedicated special envoy for investment in the Kurdistan Region, marking a significant advancement," Kurdistan Region President told reporters during his visit.

Antalya Forum

On April 11, the President of the Kurdistan Region traveled to Türkiye to participate in the fourth Antalya Diplomacy Forum, where he met with several top officials from the EU, Russia, Bulgaria, and Türkiye, including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

During his meeting with President Erdoğan, the two leaders discussed the importance of Türkiye's relations with Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Türkiye over the years has strongly invested in energy, construction, and health in the Kurdistan Region and enjoys strong ties to the Kurdish political leadership. According to the Kurdistan Region Presidency, both also expressed a "mutual desire to expand joint cooperation."



Photo: Kurdistan Region Presidency

■ Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani meeting with Abbas Araghchi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran (May 18, 2025).

Additionally, the Kurdish and Turkish leaders discussed the ongoing peace process in Türkiye between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish government.

On February 27, the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan made a call for the PKK to disarm. The Iraqi Kurdish leadership has supported this process from the beginning, as it has for previous other peace initiatives. On May 12, the PKK announced during its congress a decision to disband and disarm, marking a signifi-

cant shift in the decades-long conflict with Türkiye.

"I emphasized that this historic opportunity must be seized, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) must respond positively to Mr. Ocalan's call," Barzani said after meeting with the Turkish President.

France

Shortly after, on April 14, Kurdistan Region President was welcomed by French President Emmanuel Macron

at the Elysee Palace in Paris. "It was a great privilege to be at the Elysee today to meet my dear friend, President Emmanuel Macron. Our relationship with France is very special and continues to grow stronger," the Kurdish leader said in a statement following the meeting.

Furthermore, both presidents emphasized the importance of maintaining peace and stability in Iraq to help shield the country from regional unrest.

France maintains strong political, cultural, and economic ties with the Kurdistan Region, with a Consulate in Erbil, a French institute, and several French schools. The Kurdish and French presidents have met several times, both in France and in the Kurdistan Region. Peshmerga Park is set to open soon in Paris. Additionally, on May 26, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials took part in a business forum in France focused on Iraq.

On April 23, Kurdistan Region President welcomed French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot in Erbil, where they discussed the longstanding friendship and historical ties between France and the Kurdistan Region.

Jordan

On April 27, Barzani made an official visit to Jordan and met with the Jordanian King Abdullah II to discuss enhancing bilateral relations between Jordan and the Kurdistan Region in political, economic, and security fields.

Jordan has strong business and diplomatic relations with the Kurdistan Region and opened its consulate in Erbil in 2011. On May 5, a Jordanian government delegation visited the Kurdistan Region to further boost academic and tourism ties.

"I thanked HM and the people of the Kingdom of Jordan for their warm welcome, gracious hospitality, and continued support for Iraq and the Kurdistan Region," the Kurdish leader wrote on X after the meeting. "We deeply value the strong and historic ties between Jordan, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region and remain committed to further strengthening our relations."

The Royal Hashemite Court said in a post on X that the meeting covered the deep-rooted ties between Jordan and Iraq, as well as "ways to enhance cooperation with the Kurdistan Region in various sectors."

Arab League Summit

On May 17, the President of the Kurdistan Region visited Baghdad to attend the 34th Arab League Summit, where he met with the Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani and several high-ranking leaders and officials from Arab nations.

On the sidelines of the Forum, Barzani expressed his gratitude to Prime Minister al-Sudani for hosting the summit. He also emphasized the importance of fostering stronger ties between Erbil and Baghdad, as well as enhanced cooperation and mutual understanding.

Tehran Dialogue Forum

Shortly after, Barzani traveled to Iran on May 18, 2025, to attend the Tehran Dialogue Forum. "Our relations in the region with Iran are historic. There are deep-rooted cultural, historic, and linguistic ties. We are neighbors," he said at the event.

"Approximately 60% of the trade between Iran and Iraq flows through the Kurdistan Region. We have very strong economic relations, and they're improving daily. "

During the visit, he met with Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian, where the Kurdish leader emphasized the Kurdistan Region's commitment to fostering good neighborly relations.

In March 2023, Iraq and the KRG signed an agreement to secure the border with Iran and remove Iranian Kurdish opposition forces to prevent attacks from Iraqi territory.

Both sides stress the importance of maintaining stability, resolving conflicts peacefully, amid ongoing U.S.-Iran discussions and the peace process in Türkiye.

During the forum, Barzani also criticized Baghdad for failing to implement federalism and emphasized that there is a need for serious dialogue

between Erbil and Baghdad on the issue of federalism. "If they (Baghdad) properly implement the Iraqi constitution by definition, the issues between the Kurdistan Region and Iraq will be resolved," he added.

Regional diplomacy

The Kurdistan Region President's recent diplomatic engagements, spanning forums and official visits from Abu Dhabi to Paris, and from Amman to Tehran, show the Kurdistan Region Presidency's strong role in regional diplomacy.

"Collaborative efforts between the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, as well as with neighboring nations, present a significant opportunity to address challenges and achieve peace through diplomacy and dialogue," Barzani pointed out on April 16 during the Sulaimani Forum.

The visits by the Kurdistan Region President underscore the Kurdistan Region's goals of fostering peace with its neighbors, expanding trade with Gulf countries, and strengthening its role in regional cooperation.

"Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani's diplomacy demonstrates the KRG's grasp of the shifting geopolitical circumstances in the region and the need to adapt to the emerging conditions," Mohammed A. Salih, a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Philadelphia-based Foreign Policy Research Institute and expert on Kurdish and regional affairs, told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

"In this regard, strengthening relations with friends and neighbors is important to ensure that Kurdistan remains out of any conflict that might surface in the future. The visits and the high-level receptions across a variety of regional capitals and Paris show that Kurdistan is being received as a de-facto state and carries weight far greater than an autonomous region within a federal state." ●

Dutch Prosecutor Who Jailed Saddam's Supplier

Kurdistan Chronicle

Simon Minks, the Netherlands' National Coordinating Advocate-General for counter-terrorism, extremism, and international crimes, visited the Kurdistan Region in late April and met with senior Kurdish officials.

Minks gained prominence in 2004 for prosecuting Frans van Anraat, the first individual convicted for supplying the chemicals used in the Halabja massacre to Saddam Hussein.

"I was one of the prosecutors in the Anraat case. I studied the case file in great depth, but I also deeply immersed myself in the history of the Kurds and everything that happened to them," he told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. "I was so profoundly affected that I may have made an unusual decision: after the Anraat case became final and irrevocable, I traveled to Kurdistan in a personal capacity to pay my respects to the victims. Since then, I've felt a strong connection with the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan.

"We did indeed charge complicity in genocide, but the court did not find that proven. This was later confirmed by the Supreme Court, which emphasized that genocide, as an international legal concept, is highly complex. It requires special intent on the part of the perpetrator, and we were not able to prove that. What was found proven was complicity in war crimes committed by Saddam Hussein, Ali Hassan al-Majid, and their associates, who together launched the Anfal Campaign and inflicted immense suf-

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We must motivate young people to engage with topics like justice, especially now that the world seems to be moving in a different direction

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fering on the Kurdish population – suffering that continues to this day and will continue into the future.

"When Anraat was convicted, we were not really surprised – there was substantial evidence – but it was disappointing that he was not found complicit in genocide."

Close ties to Kurds

Shortly after the case concluded, Minks came to the Kurdistan Region to honor the victims of the genocidal Anfal Campaign and the Halabja chemical attack. "After years of specializing in international core crimes like genocide, war crimes, and chemical attacks – the most serious crimes



■ Simon Minks in front of the ancient citadel of Erbil



■ Government officials and NGO representatives attending a seminar by Simon Minks in Erbil.

imaginable – this has shaped my life, especially the realization that you must always do what you can for the victims of such grave crimes.”

Minks also collaborated with Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, now Senior Advisor to Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and formerly the Kurdistan Democratic Party representative to the UK. “We attended many meetings and conferences together. It was a great honor and fit well with what I felt was my duty: to contribute, however small, to achieving justice for Saddam Hussein’s victims,” he said.

As National Coordinating Advocate-General, Minks primarily handles terrorism appeals, including cases involving Al Qaeda and ISIS. He has also advised the UN on terrorism cases.

“These include cases where Yezidis

and other religious groups such as Christians and Shi’a. At this moment, we have – for the first time in the Netherlands – an appeal case against a woman who is accused of being an ISIS member and of holding Yezidi slaves,” he told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

On April 24, Minks met with KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, who thanked him “for decades of work on genocide and terrorism cases, some of which involved Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons and others that involved Yezidi victims of ISIS.”

Prime Minister Barzani also thanked Minks for his ongoing efforts to secure justice for the victims of atrocity crimes.

“It saddens me that people who have suffered so much – and continue to suffer – have not been compensated in any meaningful way, to the extent that’s even possible,” Minks said.

“They’ve received no financial support, and I find that deeply disappointing.”

On March 16, 2025, the 36th anniversary of the Halabja chemical attack, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani posted on X, criticizing Baghdad’s continued refusal to “constitutionally provide reparations to the victims of the former Ba’ath regime.”

Continued search for justice

During his visit in April, Minks came to promote the Kavien Justice Foundation – established in memory of Kavien Suleiman, a Kurdish friend, who passed away in November 2021 at the age of 27 – together with his mother and cousin. “I hope to encourage students to explore the opportunity to apply for a scholarship starting in 2026,” he said.

“When I visited the region in 2017,

I was a guest at the American University in Duhok, where I gave a keynote speech on the atrocities against the Yezidis. That’s where I met Kavien, who studied in Leiden and The Hague – someone full of ideas, deeply involved in Kurdish history and accountability, who sadly passed away too young, at 27,” he said. “To keep his memory alive, together with his mother Awaz and Kurdish writer Nazand Begikhani, we founded a foundation in Kavien’s name.

“We’re here to promote the foundation and encourage students from Leiden and certain universities in Kurdistan to write articles or make contributions in line with Kavien’s vision and Kurdish history.

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We must continue to
fight for justice

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Minks underlined that Kavien, before he died, organized an exhibition on Halabja at Leiden University and was deeply engaged in seeking justice for Kurds and later Yezidis. “Even in dark times, he always looked for light. He tried to connect people and explore how to achieve justice for peoples who have been victims of atrocities

on victims of international crimes, especially the fate of the victims of the Anfal Campaign.

During his visit, he also paid his respects at Kavien’s grave, reaffirming the Foundation’s mission to “keep his ideas alive, to bring attention to his values: justice, accountability, and positive thinking.”

In addition, Minks held private meetings regarding the possible establishment of an ISIS tribunal, which is one of the goals of the current Dutch government, and whether Kurdish evidence can contribute to that. “That’s both my profession and the reason I’m here.”

So far, Minks has been to Halabja



■ Simon Minks giving a lecture during his visit to the Kurdistan Region.

“We must motivate young people to engage with topics like justice, especially now that the world seems to be moving in a different direction. This is how we can draw attention and inspire the younger generation,” he said.

– like the Kurds under Saddam and minorities such as the Yezidis under ISIS.”

Minks also spoke at the Fourth International Kurdish Studies Conference at the University of Kurdistan Hewler

twice. “It was deeply moving to be confronted with the images and live testimonies. It leaves you speechless. I’ll never forget the first time I visited. We must continue to fight for justice – especially in this context,” he concluded. ●

London Honors Victims of Saddam Atrocities

Kurdistan Chronicle

In April this year, Kurds and their friends in London gathered to remember a wound that may take generations to heal — the atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein, one of the most notorious dictators of the 20th century.

Looking at the modern history of the Kurdish nation, one can see several major turning points that showcase their bravery and resilience. But their past is also marked by frequent tragic moments. Among these heartbreaking episodes are the chemical attack in Halabja, the genocidal Anfal campaign, and the bombardment of Qaladiza — all of which brought Kurds and Brits together in two separate commemorations in London last month.

Remembering Qaladiza

In a quiet corner of Holland Park, West London, where the air carries the scent of fallen leaves and distant memories, a small gathering took place beneath a tree. The tree is not native to the UK, yet it now stands firmly rooted in British soil.

The gathering was a memorial marking the 51st anniversary of the bombing of Qaladiza, a small Kurdish city in Iraqi Kurdistan.

On that day in 1974, 163 civilians were killed, including nine students from the University of Sulaymaniyah, which had been temporarily relocated to the town. Around 300

others were injured in the devastating airstrike ordered by Saddam Hussein's regime.

The power of place

The memorial in Holland Park unfolded beside the “Halabja Tree,” a modest sapling planted in 2019 to honor the victims of the 1988 Halabja chemical attack. Though unassuming in stature, the tree has grown into a living monument — its roots intertwined with British earth, its legacy steeped in Kurdish sorrow.

Among the attendees was a young man named Ahmed Hassan. His father had survived the Qaladiza bombing but lost his wife and eight children. Years later, he remarried and named each of his six new children after the ones he had lost.

This is not a metaphor. It is not the script of a film. It is history — raw, brutal, and true. A Kurdish father in Qaladiza rebuilt his family from the ashes, name by name, because memory was his act of resistance.

“This is our answer to genocide,” Hassan said. “Our enemies couldn't erase us from the land. My father's story is proof of that.”

Nearby stood Bakhtiar Mam Sheikh, a Labour Party member who had helped plant the tree. His words were quiet but resolute: “This is how strategic Kurdish advocacy be-



Participants honoring the victims of the Qaladiza bombardment in London.

gins. It begins with small ceremonies like this.”

“The tragedies the Kurds have endured — Qaladiza, Halabja, Anfal — are deeply painful,” James Park, another attendee and Labour Party member, added. “We mark them again and again here in the UK, because they must not be forgotten.”

Also present was Dilshad Abdullah,

whose brother was among those killed in Qaladiza. His voice trembled as he spoke. “I became more committed to the Kurdish cause the day my brother died,” he said. “Every year, our family remembers him.”

When the air betrayed us

Elsewhere in South London — where the late winter cold clung to the skin like sorrow — a small group gathered

outside of Lambeth Town Hall. The red-bricked building stood quiet as usual, its civic calm disrupted not by protest or performance, but by memory. Two granite memorial stones had just been unveiled on the pavement outside. One bore the name Halabja. The other, Anfal.

In 1988, in the final days of the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi regime dropped chemical bombs on the Kurdish city



Candles lit and flowers placed under the “Halabja Tree” to remember victims of the Qaladiza bombardment.

of Halabja. In minutes, nearly 5,000 civilians – many of them women, children, and elderly – lay dead. That same year, a broader campaign unfolded in silence and dust: Anfal. It was a name borrowed from scripture, twisted into code for mass extermination. Thousands of Kurdish men were rounded up and executed – including entire families from the Barzani tribe, who were specifically targeted and buried in mass graves across the deserts of Iraq.

Now, 37 years later, the names had resurfaced in the form of two solemn

stones – firm, cold, and immovable on a London street.

A wound that never closes

Among those in attendance was a man who bore both witness and wound. Shaho Halabjay – his wheelchair humming softly against the stone – approached the memorial slowly. His body moved with practiced effort, the result of decades navigating life without legs – lost to the chemical attack that took everything else from him when he was just a boy.



Memorial stones unveiled outside of Lambeth Town Hall, London, honoring the victims of the Halabja chemical attack and the genocidal Anfal Campaign.



Sarbaz Barzani, the Kurdish-British councilman of Lambeth, together with other participants honoring the victims of Halabja chemical attack and the genocidal Anfal Campaign.

“Nothing can describe what happened to us,” he said, his voice scarcely louder than the breeze. “We were dying just trying to breathe. The air itself betrayed us.”

He looked down at the carved granite. “The world must recognize it. Genocide is not a chapter in a book. It is a wound that never closes.”

Then, with a flicker of something between pain and pride, he added, “No one seemed to care back then. What we went through was unbearable. But somehow, we began again. Today, Halabja is a governorate within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We rebuilt. And we are proud.”

A story re-rooted

In the crowd stood Mohammed Jalal, head of the UK Kurdish Association. His voice carried the weight of both resolve and exhaustion.

“Today is a historic day for us as the Kurdish community in the UK,” he said. “With the installation of these

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I became more
committed to the
Kurdish cause the day
my brother died
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two memorials, we begin a new chapter. We will launch programs to collect signatures from Kurds and non-Kurds alike. Our aim is to deliver these petitions to Parliament and demand recognition of these atrocities as genocide.”

At the center of the ceremony stood Sarbaz Barzani, the Kurdish-British councilman who had fought for years to make the memorial possible. His presence was calm but assertive – the look of someone who had carried this idea alone long before it became a collective goal.

“This is not a temporary tribute,” he said. “These stones are here to stay. Let no one say they didn’t know.”

He continued: “As a Kurd in this position, I see it as my duty to work in this way – on behalf of the Kurdish community and on behalf of Kurdistan. Years ago, I helped install the statue of Omari Khawar, which stands inside Lambeth Town Hall. That statue represents the tragedy of the Halabja chemical attack – a frozen scream of memory that will never be silenced.”

The wind pulled at coats and flags. A child clutched a parent’s hand. A woman adjusted her scarf. And yet, despite the chill, there was warmth – of presence, of witnessing, of a story re-rooted.

For one day, London stood still. Not to lament a buried past, but to acknowledge a living grief. Not to rewrite history, but to insist that it be read – aloud, in stone, and on every tongue that dares to remember. ●

Halabja

Finally a Governorate



Yadgar Ismail

is an academic, political analyst, journalist, and translator whose work centers on Kurdish identity, postcolonial politics, and minority struggles.

Near the border between the Kurdistan Region and Iran lies Halabja, a city whose name evokes both profound sorrow and hope. Once synonymous with the horrors of chemical warfare, Halabja has now emerged as a symbol of administrative rebirth and gender equality brightened by the vision of Kurdish leadership.

On April 14, Halabja became Kurdistan's fourth and Iraq's 19th governorate, marking a historic milestone – an achievement crowned by the appointment of Nuxsha Nasih as Iraq's first female governor.

Halabja's wait was one of endurance and patience; in other words, one might say justice was delayed but eventually fulfilled.

Rightful determination, political courage, and the relentless pursuit of dignity paved the way for this achievement. Historically, President Masoud Barzani began advocating for awarding Halabja the status of governorate from the early 2000s, a goal later taken up by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) from the 2010s and onward.

A persistent people

Halabja's identity is inseparable from the 1988 chemical attack, one of the darkest chapters of Saddam Hussein's genocidal Anfal campaign. On March 16, 1988, Iraqi MiG jets dropped mustard gas and nerve agents on the city, killing 5,000 civilians, mostly women and children, and

injuring thousands more. The attack, perpetrated by the former Iraqi regime in order to end Kurdish resistance, instead elevated Halabja's status as both an integral part of Kurdistan and a global emblem of resilience.

For decades, survivors fought for recognition and many passed away awaiting a cure. The city, meanwhile, awaited a legal remedy. The tragedy of Halabja left a profound wound on the hearts of all Halabjans and Kurds as a whole. The district still requires increased healthcare infrastructure and support, as many live with chronic health issues, including cancer and birth defects.

The city's official governance and managerial status upgrade to governorate in 2025 is thus seen as "long-awaited justice" for these sacrifices. The change opens doors to new possibilities and is a step toward honoring the blood of the martyrs, rewriting Halabja's narrative from one of victimhood to agency.

The road to governorate status: a decade-old struggle

It all began in 2009, when President Barzani promised the status of governorate for Halabja to its people, with successive KRG cabinets working wholeheartedly toward this goal. While the KRG unilaterally declared it a governorate in 2014, federal recognition stalled due to disputes



■ Nuxsha Nasih, Governor of Halabja.

between Erbil and Baghdad, as well as sectarian divisions among Sunni and Shi'a lawmakers. More recently, competing demands from regions like Tuz Khurmatu and others across Iraq further complicated legislative progress.

The breakthrough came on April 14, 2025, when Iraq's parliament, with 178 of 329 members present, voted to formalize Halabja's status as previously recognized by the KRG. The law, published in Iraq's official gazette on May 5, granted the city administrative autonomy, federal funding,

and the authority to manage local infrastructure and services. Kurdish leaders, including Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani and KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, hailed the move.

Key to this success was the behind-the-scenes diplomacy and dedication of Prime Minister Barzani and other KRG officials. The governorate's new budget, projected to be about \$200 million annually, is to be used for roads, hospitals, and memorial sites to attract people locally and internationally.

Nuxsha Nasih

Amid this historic shift, Halabja witnessed another milestone: the appointment of Nuxsha Nasih as Iraq's first female governor. As an experienced politician and public servant, Nasih has served as Halabja's mayor since 2016, earning respect for her advocacy for survivors and infrastructure development. Her promotion in March 2025, triggered by the retirement of former governor Azad Tofiq, symbolized a crack in Iraq's political glass ceiling.

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Despite this major victory, many challenges still lie ahead for Halabja

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Nasih's leadership style blends pragmatism with symbolism. She has prioritized partnerships with nongovernmental organizations to address Halabja's healthcare crisis, including a joint initiative with Doctors Without Borders to establish a specialized clinic for chemical attack survivors. Her work to establish an international airport in the governorate aims to connect Halabja to Kurdish diaspora communities, fostering economic and cultural ties. Her journey underscores systemic challenges as Halabja's council has not held elections since 2014.

Challenges and hope for the future

Despite this major victory, many challenges still lie ahead for Halabja; citizens still suffer from unemployment and the physical and psychological scars of 1988. Hence, federal budget allocations and financial support for



Photo: Peshraw Mahdi

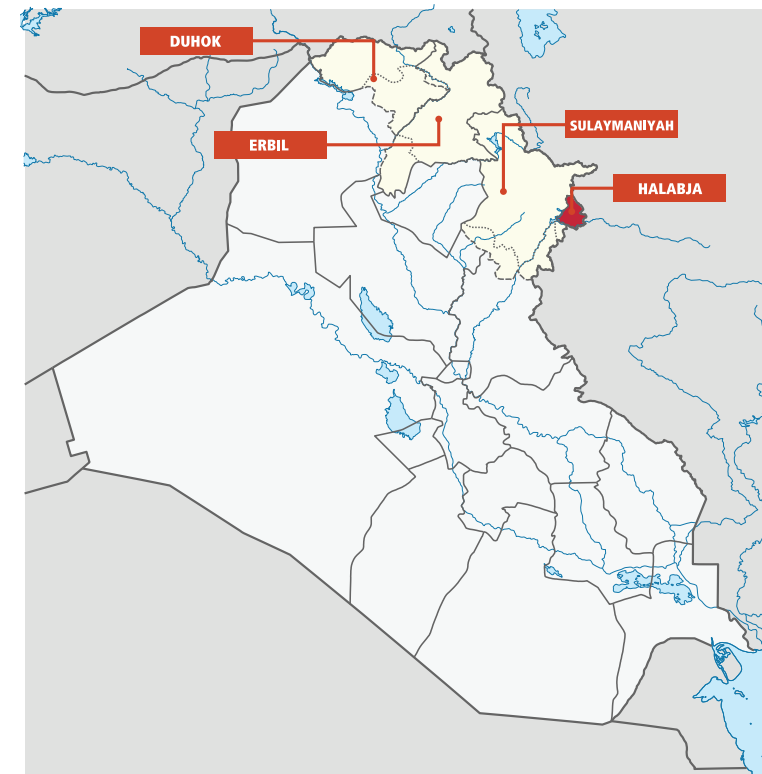
■ A view of Halabja Monument.



Photo Courtesy: Zheen Center

■ Early 20th century local market in Halabja.

Governorates in the Kurdistan Region



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Halabja stands as a testament to what marginalized communities can achieve through perseverance amid challenges

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Photo Courtesy: Zheen Center

■ A group of women dancing during a celebration at a school in Halabja.

long-awaited projects remain crucial, as does addressing demands for the return of victims' remains and reparations for survivors of the Anfal Campaign.

The KRG has reiterated its commitment to supporting Halabja Governorate. Internationally, the United States has pledged \$15 million for de-

mining efforts, while Italy committed to funding a peace education center and vocational training programs. The UK announced scholarships for Halabja's students to study abroad. For Halabja's people, however, the true measure of success lies in tangible change: schools rebuilt, hospitals staffed, and jobs created.

A beacon of change

Halabja's story has two sides: a past full of suffering and a future shaped by resilience and dedication. Its provincial recognition and Nasih's historic appointment represent more than administrative shifts – they are manifestations of Halabja's pure struggle for recognition. As Nasih remarked, “The souls of the 5,000 martyrs are at peace today.” Yet the road ahead demands vigilance, and the time for more action is now.

Halabja stands as a testament to what marginalized communities can achieve through perseverance amid challenges. Its journey from ashes to autonomy offers a blueprint for healing. The governorate's phoenix-like rebirth is a reminder that justice, though delayed, can still bloom in the harshest conditions. Halabja's revival can be a model for post-conflict recovery, blending memory with modernity in post-colonial Iraq. ●

Kurdistan Joins Digital Green Revolution



Masood Ahmed Hameed

is a Biotechnologist at the College of Medicine University of Zakho. Ecosia campaign leader.

Climate change is no longer a distant concern or an isolated issue confined to one country – it is a global threat that will shape the future of our planet in the years to come. Its impacts are intensifying, with devastating consequences for agriculture, heightened concerns about water scarcity, and increased incidents of wildfires around the world.

In the Kurdistan Region, the effects are already being felt. Irregular rainfall, prolonged drought, and shifts in climate patterns are impacting the production of staple crops. While the region has not yet suffered from large-scale wildfires, local forests and dry farmlands are susceptible to fire due to the extreme conditions caused by climate change. Therefore, reforestation efforts and protecting natural landscapes are essential to maintaining and improving the balance of nature and biodiversity.

Whether you are an environmental enthusiast or someone who emits tons of CO2 annually, it is not too late to reduce your carbon footprint, starting with your computer or mobile phone.

Environmentally positive web searches

Back in 2009, German entrepreneur Christian Kroll launched Ecosia, a search engine that transforms your web searches into tree planting-efforts around the

world. That's right – by simply searching the web, you can help fund reforestation. Ecosia generates revenue through advertisements and dedicates 80% of its profits to planting trees. To date, the platform has helped plant over 229 million trees in more than 70 countries.

On average, every 45 to 50 searches fund the planting of one tree. The “Ecosia on Campus” campaign, moreover, has helped the search engine gain traction at more than 40 prestigious universities, including the University of Edinburgh. Meanwhile, Ecosia's Impact Calculator estimates that 15,000 users can help plant over 700,000 trees in just five years.

The funds are directed to trusted non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that plant trees in the areas most in need of reforestation. Beyond the environmental benefits, these efforts help revitalize agriculture, create job opportunities, enhance biodiversity, and protect endangered wildlife species, empowering local communities while healing the planet.

Kurdistan's green digital shift

Kurds have long held a deep cultural connection to nature, often referring to themselves as “children of the mountains”; similarly, they have often used the oak tree as a symbol of resilience throughout their history. In a historic move for both the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, University of Zakho (UoZ) became the first institution of higher education in the

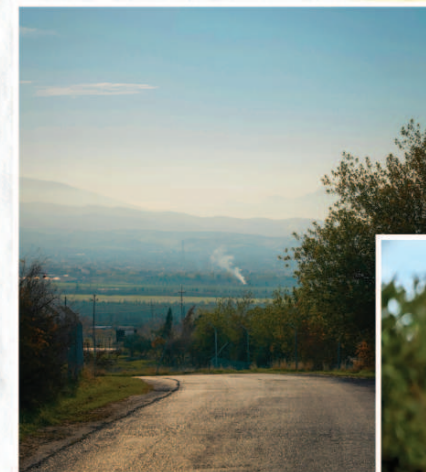


Photo: Ansar Muhammad / Pexels



Photo: Akbar Nemati / Pexels

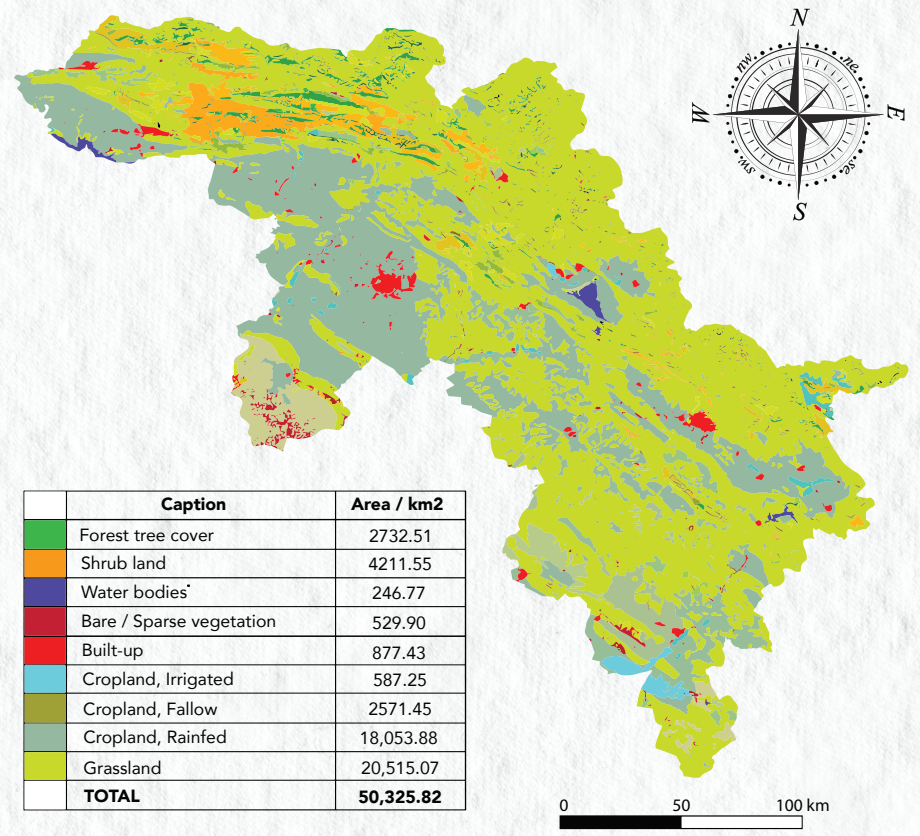


Photo: Kheze / Pexels



Photo: Ismimo / Pexels

KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ LAND USE AND LAND COVER CLASSES



	Caption	Area / km2
	Forest tree cover	2732.51
	Shrub land	4211.55
	Water bodies	246.77
	Bare / Sparse vegetation	529.90
	Built-up	877.43
	Cropland, Irrigated	587.25
	Cropland, Fallow	2571.45
	Cropland, Rainfed	18,053.88
	Grassland	20,515.07
	TOTAL	50,325.82



Photo: Rebnaz Geo / Pixels

region to integrate Ecosia by setting up all university and office computers to use the eco-friendly search engine.

The Ecosia initiative has also partnered with local NGOs like Yak Dar and Future Influencers, integrating the campaign into their outreach and expanding its user base via other institutions in Zakho.

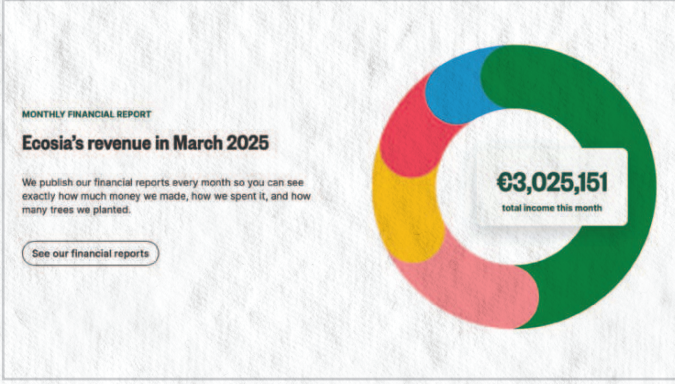
This initiative sparked a unique collaboration between UoZ and the Ecosia team, resulting in a dedicated campaign web address: <https://ecosia.co/UOZ>. What began as a simple idea – “Can we fight climate change with our daily internet searches?” – grew into a university-wide movement supported by faculty, administrators, students, and graduates. It was not a top-down directive; rather, it was led voluntarily by the student body, who not only installed the search engine but also continue to raise awareness and grow the number of Ecosia users.

A major focus moving forward is reaching schools, with the goal of encouraging children to adopt sustainable digital habits early on. Teaching students about climate change and their daily carbon footprint fosters environmental responsibility and helps them make conscious, eco-friendly choices. Plus, student volunteers engaged in these efforts gain valuable leadership and public speaking skills –essential tools for their future careers.

Beyond the university

At UoZ, the switch to Ecosia was completed in less than ten days. However, for individuals the process can take as little as one minute, making it an effortless procedure for government offices, NGOs, and companies to implement.

To get started, simply click the campaign web address or scan the barcode provided (compatible with both iOS and Android). Alternatively, copy and paste the link into your browser, add Ecosia as an extension, and set it as your default search engine. ●



Familiar search, greener impact

Make the switch to the greenest search engine on the planet

Switch to Ecosia — It's free

Looking for the Ecosia Browser?

230,902,828 trees planted by Ecosia

€93,320,079 dedicated to climate action

AWARD

Kurdistan Chronicle Wins *Award of Excellence* in the U.S.

Kurdistan Chronicle

Kurdistan Chronicle has been honored with the prestigious Award of Excellence by the U.S.-based Religion Communicators Council (RCC), making it the first print media outlet from the Middle East to win this distinction in the award's 70-year history.

On April 25, 2025, a dedicated team from *Kurdistan Chronicle* attended the Wilbur Awards ceremony held in Salt Lake City, Utah. Established in 1949, the Wilbur Awards recognize outstanding communication on religious issues, values, and themes in public secular media. This honor reflects the RCC's emphasis on professionalism, fairness, and integrity in religious storytelling, making this recognition even more meaningful.

The three-day conference featured panels with distinguished speakers from around the world. On the final day, *Kurdistan Chronicle* stood alongside esteemed organizations such as the *Associated Press*, *NPR*, *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, *ABC*, *The Atlantic*, and *CBS* "60 Minutes" to accept this remarkable accolade. We are proud to join past winners, who include Morgan Freeman, Oprah Winfrey, Jane Pauley, Mister Rogers, *CBS* "Sunday Morning," *ABC*'s "20/20," *NBC*'s "Meet the Press," *Vanity Fair*, and the *New York Times*.

Among the notable works recognized at the event, *Kurdistan Chronicle*'s article "The Prophet Nahum: A Symbol of Religious Coexistence in Kurdistan," written by Hemn Baban and published in Issue 20, received special acknowl-

edgement. This piece exemplifies the publication's commitment to bridging cultural divides and promoting the shared values of the Kurdistan Region's diverse communities. Reflecting on the honor, Baban emphasized that "this award is not just for us; it's for all the voices in Kurdistan Region striving for peace and understanding."

Highlight commonalities through storytelling

As head of the U.S. Desk at *Kurdistan Chronicle*, I, along with my colleagues Sardar Sattar (senior reporter) and Hemn Baban (deputy editor-in-chief of *Kurdistan in Arabic*, the magazine's Arabic-language edition), had the honor of delivering *Kurdistan Chronicle*'s message on stage. Since establishing the *Kurdistan Chronicle* Media Foundation in 2023, our mission has been to address the gap in media representation in the Kurdistan Region. While many English-language outlets focus on hard news, we strive to tell the stories of the people – highlighting the commonalities that unite the region's diverse ethnic and religious groups.

Within the message, Sattar provided a brief history of the Kurdish cause, shedding light on the atrocities committed by the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, which included genocide, mass graves, chemical attacks, the destruction of more than 400 villages, and the deaths of over 300,000 Kurds.

Brad Pomerance, Award Coordinator for the RCC, emphasized the significance of *Kurdistan Chronicle*'s achieve-

Kurdistan Chronicle



A team from *Kurdistan Chronicle* receiving the RCC's Award of Excellence in Salt Lake City, Utah (April 25, 2025).



■ RCC's Award of Excellence honoring Kurdistan Chronicle.

ment, noting that it is the first time a Middle Eastern entity has claimed this honor in the Wilbur Awards' history. "I was overjoyed when I saw that our friends from *Kurdistan Chronicle* had been awarded an Award of Excellence, a very high honor here at RCC," he said. "This marks the first time in 70 years that an organization from the Middle East has been recognized."

Founded in 1929, the RCC has presented the Wilbur Awards annually since 1949. According to its classifications, the Award of Excellence is granted to submissions of exceptional quality, deemed unquestionably worthy of recognition. "To see *Kurdistan Chronicle* among such esteemed media outlets is a testament to the

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As a Kurdish American,
it fills me with great
pride to see Kurdistan
Chronicle receive this
Award of Excellence

power of storytelling in promoting interfaith dialogue. This award represents a bridge between cultures and celebrates the values we hold dear," Pomerance said.

Bringing communities together

Rabbi Eric Greenberg, a veteran in multi-faith relations, praised *Kurdistan Chronicle* for its efforts to foster understanding among diverse faith groups, cultures, and traditions. "It's vital for us to learn about one another's backgrounds and beliefs," he said. "*Kurdistan Chronicle* is playing a crucial role in that educational process, helping to illuminate the rich tapestry of Kurdish culture and its many faiths."

Meanwhile, Kathy Williams, a board member of the RCC, expressed her excitement at *Kurdistan Chronicle*'s recognition for its excellent journalism, describing it as a beacon of inter-



Photo: Henna Baban

faith connectivity in the region. "Tonight, we celebrate not just an award, but the spirit of collaboration and mutual respect that *Kurdistan Chronicle* embodies," she said. "Their work exemplifies the kind of journalism that brings communities together." On the first day of the conference, Pomerance introduced us to RCC

President Teresa Faust, who was delighted to meet the *Kurdistan Chronicle* team. After an engaging conversation, she discussed the Wilbur Awards' mission of recognizing excellence in faith and religious communication among secular organizations. "We are here to honor those who illuminate the complexities of faith and religion

in our world," she stated. "The communicators help us reflect on our beliefs and foster understanding among diverse communities, reminding us that, despite our differences, we all share a common humanity."

RCC Board Member Ibrahim Anli also expressed pride in *Kurdistan Chronicle*'s achievements, particularly its coverage of Prophet Nahum. "As a Kurdish American, it fills me with great pride to see *Kurdistan Chronicle* receive this Award of Excellence," he shared. "Their commitment to telling stories that resonate both locally and globally is commendable. I look forward to seeing more of their impactful work in the future."

This recognition not only reflects *Kurdistan Chronicle*'s commitment to high-quality journalism, but also highlights the vital role of diverse voices and the spirit of coexistence in shaping conversations about religion and society in the Kurdistan Region. ●



Photo: Henna Baban

■ A member of the RCC during the award ceremony.

First Kurd Elected to Political Office in Scotland

Kurdistan Chronicle

Roza Salih, a 35-year-old refugee originally from Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan Region, became the first Kurd and former asylum seeker elected to political office in Scotland.

Salih was a lead candidate for the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the Glasgow Region during the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. A year later, in May 2022, she was elected as the SNP's councilor for Greater Pollok in Glasgow.

Following her election, then-First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon posted on X that she shed a "very happy tear at this result. From asylum seeker to SNP councilor."

"I have incredible parents who have always supported me. Thank you mum and dad, you are my best friends," Salih posted on X at the time.

A natural advocate

Salih has campaigned for refugee rights since she was a teenager, when she and her school friends came together to protest the detention of a friend.

Salih's family fled Iraqi Kurdistan when she was only 12 years old, after her grandfather and two uncles were executed for opposing Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime.

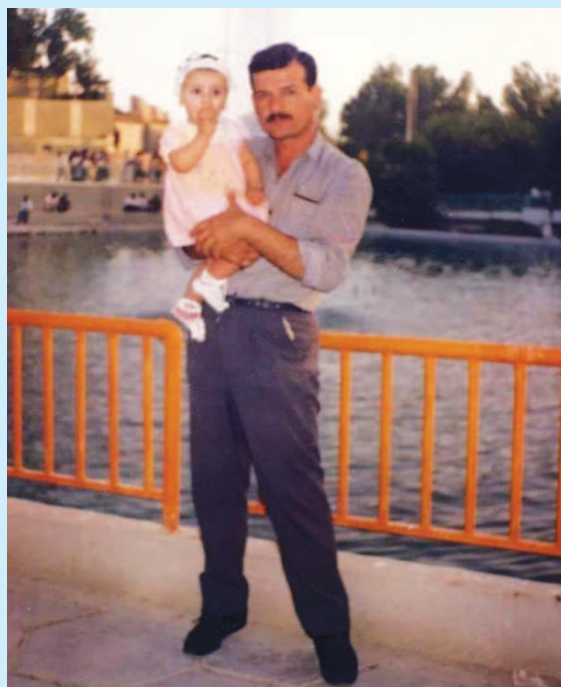
"I was born in Sulaymaniyah. My dad is from Kirkuk. We came to Scotland in

“

I felt like the Scottish people needed to know about the Kurdish people and their struggles

”

■ Roza Salih



■ Roza Salih (aged 1) and her father in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region.



■ Roza Salih (aged 4) and her mother.

2001,” she told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. As a Scottish Kurd, she believes in Scottish Independence and has campaigned for it.

“The 2014 referendum deeply influenced me. I joined the SNP in 2015 after we lost it, but I still believe in independence and in the Scottish people’s right to make their own decisions. As a member of Glasgow Girls, I was familiar with campaigning. The Glasgow Girls’ story is very well known in Scotland,” she said. Founded in 2015, the group fought for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, and ran campaigns against the deportation of school children.

In 2017, Salih was honored by the Saltire Society as an Outstanding Woman of Scotland. In December 2022, she was named by the BBC as one of the Top 100 Influential Women of 2022, recognizing her campaign for refugee rights when she was a teenager.



■ Roza Salih celebrating with her parents after winning a local government election in May 2022.

Salih completed an honors degree in law and politics at the University of Strathclyde in 2013, and worked with the Scottish Refugee Council and the Education Strategy Commission to establish funding from Strathclyde Univer-

sity for scholarships specifically for asylum seekers.

Scotland is home to over 7,000 Kurds, though exact numbers of difficult to determine.

“This is only an estimate, given that when there is a census, Kurds are listed under Iraq, Türkiye, Iran, and Syria. So, data collection could be improved in Scotland for the Kurds,” she said.

Scotland, Kurdistan, and independence

Salih also established a group called Scottish Solidarity with Kurdistan. “I felt like the Scottish people needed to know about the Kurdish people and their struggles. At the time, Kobani was under attack, and we raised awareness through the Scottish Parliament and raised money to build a Scottish school in Kobani.”

On September 25, 2017, under the leadership of then-President Masoud Barzani, Iraqi Kurds held an independence referendum, in which over 93% of the people of the Kurdistan Region voted for independence.



■ Roza Salih and her parents in Glasgow.

“Of course there are many similarities, as we both want self-determination for our people,” Salih said on the Kurdish independence referendum. “However, the agreements between London and Scotland and between Baghdad and Erbil were different.”

“Scotland’s agreement with London was legal, and if we had won the referendum, we would have achieved it,” she added.

In Iraq, Salih noted, the case was different. “Of course, I believe the Kurds have the right to hold a referendum – that’s a democratic right of any nation if they wish to become independent. However, the fundamental difference was the legitimacy of the referendum. The Scottish Government can play a major role domestically, but currently has no power over foreign policy, which is reserved for the UK government.”

Recently, on April 7, the police in Scotland released a video message in Kurdish, which is a sign of more recognition of the Kurdish language in Scotland.

“I believe the Kurds are being recognized more than before, and now translations in Kurdish are provided in main government places,” Salih said. “This is important for the Kurds, as we have our own identity, culture, and language. We have a need for visibility, and I believe this can only be achieved if more Kurds become active citizens.” ●



■ Councilor Roza Salih attending a civic event on behalf of the Lord Provost of Glasgow in 2023.

ENVIRONMENT

Pedal for the Planet

Kurdistan Chronicle





“
It’s about dignity,
sustainability, and showing
that people – no matter where
they are – deserve to breathe
cleaner air, live with shade,
and have hope
”

■ French cyclist and manufacturer Sergio Deutro holding a trophy after a championship.

In a heartening act of environmental solidarity and support, a famous French bicycle manufacturer has chosen Kurdistan for his annual global reforestation project, committing €60,000 to plant 10,000 trees in the Simele district of Duhok Governorate.

Each year, Sergio Deutro chooses a country to support its ecological initiatives and carries out a noble environmental charity project. After successful initiatives in Türkiye and Armenia, this year he has brought his vision to Kurdistan, to support the region’s efforts to combat climate change.

“Kurdistan has a beautiful natural landscape,” Deutro told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. “I wanted this year’s project to support people and ecosystems in a place that doesn’t always get the

international attention it deserves. Environmental action is a way of standing with people – and giving something back to the planet.”

The tree-planting initiative is being implemented on the ground by Yak Dar, a Kurdish environmental organization led by Hakar Subhi, in coordination with locals and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). According to Subhi, Simele was chosen for its urgent need for reforestation and its openness to environmental education.

“Simele has fewer green spaces and limited access to ecological resources,” Subhi explained. “This project will not only reintroduce trees to the soil, but also reconnect local communities to the land through care and knowledge.”

Each family receiving a tree will also receive a custom wooden planter box, as well as guidance from volunteers on how to care for it. The idea is to foster community ownership, turning every household into a guardian of the region’s greenery and helping to ensure a much greener future.

Ali Dolamari, the KRG’s representative in France, confirmed Deutro’s donation and praised the spirit of international cooperation behind the effort. “Deutro’s commitment to Kurdistan is deeply appreciated,” Dolamari said. “He brings with him not only financial support, but also the spirit of empathy and environmental unity.”

Pedaling for the planet

Tree planting began in early spring and is scheduled to continue over the next three months until all 10,000



■ Locals planting trees in the Kurdistan Region as part of the “Pedal for Planet” project.

trees are planted. Priority is being given to native and drought-resistant species to ensure long-term resilience in the face of climate challenges that may affect the Kurdistan Region. Iraq as a whole is notably prone to the impacts of climate change, a crisis the UN has labeled “the biggest threat Iraq has ever faced.”

Deutro is a former professional cyclist who has taken on the roles of climate avenger and superhero, an environ-

mental activist. Through his initiative, “Pedal for the Planet,” he raises funds and awareness for reforestation and ecological recovery projects worldwide. He personally travels to each selected country, cycles across parts of the region, and works closely with local organizations to ensure each project is both worthy and productive.

“This isn’t just about trees,” Deutro said. “It’s about dignity, sustainability, and showing that people – no matter

where they are – deserve to breathe cleaner air, live with shade, and have hope.”

As thousands of trees begin to take root in Kurdistan, they stand as a living symbol of environmental renewal and of the shared human effort to care for one another and the Earth we all depend on. Deutro’s endeavor adds to the initiative led by KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani to combat climate change. ●



TAMBUR

A Sound Too Sacred to Be Silenced

Kurdistan Chronicle

In the breezy April air of Hawar Village, southeast of Halabja in the Kurdistan Region near the Iranian border, a distinct sound drifts across the hills. Sunlight glints off the vibrant colors of traditional Kurdish dress worn by women, men, and children gathered for the annual Giving Day ceremony.

For the Kaka'i – a religious minority also known as Yarsan, living in Hawar and nearby villages such as Hawarakon and Daratwe – Giving Day is more than a festive gathering. It is a cornerstone of spiritual life, a celebration steeped in centuries of tradition.

Above the hum of conversation and laughter, ancient music rises: the intricate, soulful strumming of the tambur or tambura. Along the village heights, seasoned musicians and eager young learners – men and women alike – cradle the long-necked instruments, their fingers dancing across the strings in a living dialogue with the past. Voices soon join, singing sacred Kaka'i hymns and *maqamat*, traditional melodies that have endured through generations.

For the Kaka'i, the tambur is far more than a musical instrument. It is central to their identity – an ancient vessel carrying their stories, faith, and spiritual way of life.

“It was made alongside Adam and Eve. It is the mother of all musical instruments”

An instrument rooted in home and soul

Shamal Hemelaw Salih, a respected Kaka'i tambur instructor, deeply understands the instrument's significance.

“The tambur is present in every Kaka'i home,” he told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. “It is often regarded as a member of the family.”

This intimate presence, he explains, is why the tradition has survived through the ages. The tambur is not merely taught; it is absorbed naturally, woven into daily life.

“From childhood, in 70% of Kaka'i homes, there is a tambur,” Salih says. “Children watch their parents and elders play it. Automatically, that love is received.”

While formal tambur schools exist, especially in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran), Shamal emphasized that the true conservatory remains within homes and among communities.

The Kaka'i trace the tambur's origins to the dawn of existence itself.

■ Shamal Hemelaw Salih, a Kaka'i tambur instructor, stands with his sacred instrument during Giving Day in Hawar village. For him, the tambur is a sacred part of identity and faith.

Photo: Safin Hamid

“It is even connected to the creation of the world,” Shamal explains. “It was made alongside Adam and Eve. It is the mother of all musical instruments.”

This ancient lineage confers sacred status on the instrument. Though similar stringed instruments exist elsewhere, the Kaka’i tambur – sometimes called “temire” in some Kurdish dialects – holds unique spiritual significance. Traditionally crafted with a walnut neck and a body of mulberry wood, it is rooted both in the local land and in the strength of nature.

For the Kaka’i, playing the tambur is an act of devotion.

“Your body must be pure and clean to play it,” Salih says. “It’s not like any

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The tambur is not just a musical tool – it is part of our sacred texts, part of our body and soul
”

“Each melody is connected to a specific subject,” Shamal says.

Among them is Jangera, an epic maqam recalling times of struggle and hardship, carefully preserved so that it

rect communication with the soul.

Goran Nofel Fettah, an experienced player, finds deep personal refuge in the instrument.

“When you play the tambur, if you feel sorrow, unhappiness, or trouble ... it calms the soul,” he says. “It is the only instrument that connects directly with the human spirit.”

Yet preserving this unique heritage faces growing challenges. Fettah voices concern about the tambur’s identity being co-opted.

“Some neighboring countries are trying to claim the instrument as their own at UNESCO,” he warns. “We hope the authorities of the Kurdistan

like to record and archive,” Fettah says, lamenting the lack of funding and institutional support.

He dreams of establishing a *mali tambur*, or tambur house – a dedicated space for learning, preservation, and performance, ensuring the survival of the sacred sounds.

I ever played, and I view it through its spiritual side.”

Raber Burhan Rustam, who has devoted nearly two decades to the tambur, remembers picking up the instrument at the age of 16 – later than many peers, but with fierce devotion. Today, he plays a leading role in the Hawar Players Group.

“We don’t always have words to express our inner sorrows,” Rustam says. “But the tambur speaks for the soul. It rescues me from my burdens.”

For Rustam and many other Kaka’i, the tambur is inseparable from their spiritual and cultural identity.

“The tambur is not just a musical tool



■ A group of Kaka'is playing tambur during the Giving Day in Hawar village.

other instrument – it has its own value, its own respect.”

The music of the tambur carries layers of memory, faith, and history. Through complex melodies called *maqamat* or *lehn*, musicians evoke spiritual states, recount epic stories, and keep ancient knowledge alive.

is “not lost, but passed down generation after generation.” Other *maqamat*, like *Terz* and those honoring sacred figures such as Babe Nawus and Shah Khoshin, form a living archive of Kaka’i spiritual and historical identity.

For many Kaka’i, playing the tambur is not simply music – it is prayer, a di-

Region will protect it as an authentic Kurdish instrument.”

Beyond political battles, there are practical hurdles. Oral traditions persist, but new compositions need proper documentation.

“We have many melodies we would



■ Sana Zana Sadiq, 19, plays the tambur alongside fellow Kaka'i musicians during Giving Day in Hawar village.

A new generation of guardians

Sana Zana Sadiq, a 19-year-old musician and singer from Hawar Village, embodies the next generation carrying the tambur tradition forward.

“I started playing at 12 as part of a beautiful little group,” Sadiq recalls warmly. “We were young, enthusiastic, and grew up with the tambur shaping our talents.”

Though she also plays piano and guitar, the tambur holds a unique place in her heart.

“It’s very close to my soul,” she says. “The tambur was the first instrument

“We have about 120 tambur players from Halabja who have learned from this tradition,” he says.

Most performances remain within private, sacred ceremonies, not for public broadcast. In these spiritual gatherings, musicians sit in an arc – a formation rich with religious symbolism, representing unity and connection.

“We rehearse weekly, but the true playing happens in our places of worship,” Rustam says. “There, the tambur takes its rightful place.”

When he plays, he feels something beyond mere performance.

– it is part of our sacred texts, part of our body and soul,” he explains.

Yet he, too, worries about outside attempts to claim the tambur’s heritage.

“This instrument belongs to the Kurds. It belongs to the Yarsan. It is not the property of any other nation,” he insists.

In the village of Hawar and beyond, the tambur remains living proof of the enduring spirit of the Kaka’i people – singing their soul, heritage, and history through strings that will not be silenced.

As Rustam says, “it is part of us. It always will be.” ●

Crimes Against the Kurds



Miran Abraham
is a well-known Kurdish
novelist and director of
Shanidar Publishing
House.

Published by Shanidar in collaboration with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, this series presents a profound and compelling exploration of the suffering and resilience of the Kurdish people. It sheds light on the relentless persecution they have endured for decades, transcending borders and political regimes. Each book serves as a powerful testament to their unwavering spirit, enduring strength, and the unyielding determination to preserve their identity, culture, and humanity in the face of unimaginable adversity.

Book 1: Crimes Against the Kurds: Genocide in Iraq – The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds

From 1980 to 1988, Iran and Iraq waged the longest conventional war of the 20th century, a brutal conflict that reshaped the region through relentless violence and widespread destruction. Cities and villages were obliterated, chemical weapons poisoned the air, and countless lives were forever scarred. While the war remains a defining chapter for those who endured it, it is a conflict that is often misunderstood or overlooked in much of the world, especially in the West.

Of all the victims of this devastating war, the Kurds suffered among the most. Their lands, situated along the contested border between Iraq and Iran, became a deadly battleground. For centuries, the Kurds have been viewed with suspicion and hos-

tility by neighboring powers, regarded as perpetual enemies. During the war, this historical mistrust culminated in unimaginable atrocities.

Over a thousand Kurdish villages were reduced to rubble, and more than half a million Kurds lost their lives. Fertile plains and rolling hills, once the lifeblood of Kurdish communities, were scarred by craters and stained with blood. The air, which once carried the melodies of Kurdish songs and the whispers of nature, now reverberated with the sounds of explosions, the screams of the wounded, and the cries of those mourning their loved ones.

Idyllic villages were transformed into dystopian nightmares as chemical weapons cast a toxic shadow over the landscape. Clouds of poison drifted silently, leaving behind trails of death and unspeakable suffering. Men, women, and children, their skin blistered and eyes burning, collapsed in convulsions, gasping for breath. Survivors of these attacks, marked by both physical scars and psychological torment, will carry the weight of these horrors for the rest of their lives.

Yet even amid such devastation, the Kurdish spirit remained unbroken. Families sought refuge in makeshift shelters, clinging to unity as their only solace. Elders, the keepers of Kurdish culture and memory, recounted tales of a life before the war, nurturing resilience and identity in the younger generation. Despite centuries

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Despite centuries of oppression, the Kurds persevered, their fight for survival and recognition undeterred by the atrocities they faced

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■ A Kurdish woman holding her husband's picture and searching for his remains at a recently discovered mass grave in the Iraqi desert.

of oppression, the Kurds persevered, their fight for survival and recognition undeterred by the atrocities they faced.

The Iran–Iraq War, with its unprecedented destruction and staggering human cost, stands as a powerful testament to the horrors of conflict. For the Kurds, it represents a chapter of profound suffering, yet also of unyielding resilience and hope. Their story, deeply intertwined with the history of the region, is one that demands recognition beyond its borders – a reminder of the enduring impact of war on those who are too often forgotten.

Through the lens of Kurdish suffering, this narrative serves not only as a record of loss, but also as a call for justice, understanding, and an end to the cycles of violence that have defined the region for far too long.

The Anfal Campaign: A genocide in the making

Named after a Quranic term meaning “spoils of war,” the Anfal Campaign was a coordinated and ruthless military operation targeting Kurdish regions. Once serene villages, brimming with culture and life, were turned into desolate landscapes of devastation.

Military convoys, tanks, and troops invaded these areas, supported by helicopters and jets dropping bombs that razed homes and sent waves of terror through the population. The use of chemical weapons, including mustard gas and nerve agents, added an unspeakable layer of horror to the genocide. Entire families were found lifeless, their bodies bearing the cruel evidence of chemical attacks.



■ Mockups of different volumes of the book titled *Crimes Against the Kurds*.

Book 2: *Crimes Against the Kurds: Genocide in Iraq – The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*

This second volume in the series offers a harrowing and meticulously detailed account of the atrocities inflicted upon the Kurdish population during the Anfal Campaign, orchestrated by Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime in the late 1980s. Through vivid storytelling and comprehensive documentation, this book sheds light on the systematic and brutal efforts to eradicate Kurdish identity and existence.

The betrayal by Jash forces – Kurdish collaborators armed and incentivized by the regime –worsened the tragedy. These collaborators revealed the locations of hidden villages and mountain refuges, leading to the deaths of countless innocents. By the end of the campaign, approximately 5,200 Kurdish villages had been obliterated, leaving behind nothing but charred rubble and scorched earth.

Context and impact

The book explores the historical and socio-political dynamics that led to the Kurdish struggle for autonomy and,



■ A Kurdish woman sitting outside the notorious Nugra Salman prison in Al Muthanna Governorate, Iraq. The prison served as a transitional hub for Kurdish victims of the genocidal Anfal Campaign during the 1980s.

Photo: Amir Hasan

“

Survivors faced enduring trauma, loss of loved ones, and the destruction of their cultural and economic foundations

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■ A Kurdish woman lamenting with pictures of family members who perished during the Anfal Campaign in the 1980s.

ultimately, to the Anfal Campaign. It contrasts the vibrant, flourishing Kurdish regions before the genocide with the horrors inflicted upon them during this dark chapter.

The psychological and socioeconomic toll of the genocide is examined in depth, revealing the profound scars left on the Kurdish population. Survivors faced enduring trauma, loss of loved ones, and the destruction of their cultural and economic foundations.

Global response and justice

Initially, the international community’s response to the Anfal Campaign was muted. However, the book traces the eventual shift in global attention toward the Kurdish plight. Efforts to document and acknowledge the genocide gained momentum, culminating in significant legal and symbolic victories.

Notable milestones include:

- Recognition of the Anfal Campaign as genocide by a court in The Hague in 2005.
- Convictions of key figures in Saddam Hussein’s regime, including Ali Hassan al-Majid, infamously known as “Chemical Ali,” who was convicted of genocide in 2007.

These legal proceedings marked pivotal steps in the pursuit of justice for the Kurdish people, offering a measure of accountability for the atrocities committed.

Resilience and remembrance

Despite immense suffering, the Kurdish people have demonstrated extraordinary resilience. Memorials and commemorative events now serve as solemn tributes to the victims, ensuring that the atrocities of the Anfal Campaign are never forgotten.

The book emphasizes the critical importance of remembrance as a tool for healing and as a deterrent against future genocides. It stands as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of state-sponsored violence and the urgent need for international vigilance and action to prevent such atrocities.

Book 3: Crimes Against the Kurds: Legal Qualifications of Operation al-Anfal of Actions Taken against the Yezidis

By Professor Dr. Ireneusz C. Kaminski

This volume offers a comprehensive legal analysis of the systematic crimes committed against the Kurdish people, focusing on the Anfal Campaign and the 2014 Yezidi Genocide perpetrated by ISIS. Through meticulous legal expertise, the book aims to solidify the classification of these atrocities as genocide under international law.

Part 1: Legal qualification of operation al-Anfal

The Anfal Campaign was a series of brutal military campaigns conducted by the Iraqi Ba’ath regime from 1988, targeting Kurdish civilians. The legal analysis details:

- The scale of atrocities, including mass executions, chemical attacks (most notably in Halabja), forced displacements, and the destruction of over 4,000 villages.
 - The legal framework, referencing the 1948 Genocide Convention and international tribunal precedents.
 - The intent behind these crimes, emphasizing how the systematic targeting of Kurds qualifies as genocide due to the aim of destroying the group in whole or in part.
- The book explores how the international community, despite evidence and recognition in some countries, has yet to universally acknowledge these acts as genocide.

Part 2: Legal qualification of the actions taken against the Yezidis

This section examines the genocide committed against the Yezidi community during the ISIS invasion of Sinjar:

- The mass killings of Yezidi men, the enslavement and sexual exploitation of women and girls, and the abduction of children for indoctrination and military conscription.
- The use of ISIS propaganda justifying these atrocities under distorted religious interpretations.
- Legal classifications, framing these crimes as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes under international law, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

The book also highlights efforts by the Kurdistan Regional Government and international actors to seek justice for the Yezidi people, including the European Parliament’s recognition of the genocide.

Key themes:

- 1. The universality of genocide:** The author argues that genocide transcends national borders and requires global accountability, regardless of political context.
- 2. Legal and moral responsibility:** Beyond legal frameworks, the book calls on the international community to morally recognize and act against such atrocities.
- 3. The Kurdish struggle for recognition:** Both historical and contemporary crimes against Kurds reflect broader issues of marginalization, statelessness, and the fight for identity. ●

Awez Journal Fostering a Culture of Enlightenment in Kurdistan



Abdulkhalig Yaqubi
is the Managing Editor of
Awez Journal.



The *Awez* scientific journal is a quarterly publication based in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, that operates within the framework of the comprehensive *Awez* Project and with the support of the Kurdistan Chronicle Media Foundation. This journal aspires to be a platform for exploring contemporary thought and theory, offering a window into the evolving landscape of conceptual knowledge.

Awez features articles by skilled Kurdish writers who engage with important issues affecting the global community and Kurdish society. It aims to familiarize its readers with new developments in philosophical discourse and to encourage critical reflection on the world around them. The name *Awez* means “intellect” in Kurdish, and the journal is founded on intellectual, epistemological, and theoretical principles.

Positioned as a forum for academic dialogue, *Awez* invites scholars and thinkers to contribute work that emphasizes rationality, scientific inquiry, and enlightenment, seeking to adopt a critical lens in

examining societal issues and to promote analytical rigor in Kurdish intellectual life. A key element of the *Awez* Project is the comprehensive support it provides to writers, thinkers, and researchers. While such support systems have deep historical roots in the Western world, they remain underdeveloped in the Middle East. Inspired by intellectual models such as that of Thomas Kuhn in his influential book, *The Structure of Cultural Revolutions*, *Awez* seeks to provide a working environment for researchers and present the *Awez* Award annually to outstanding researchers inside and outside Kurdistan.

Our journal’s motto is “Fact, Not Opinion,” because Kurdish society needs the kind of discourse and analysis that is rooted in empirical evidence and critical reasoning rather than ideology, political interests, or profit-seeking motives. We believe that the consciousness of the individual and society is guaranteed only through rational, fact-based analysis.

The goal of our project is to rationalize the political and cultural institutions of Kurdish society. Each issue of *Awez* in-

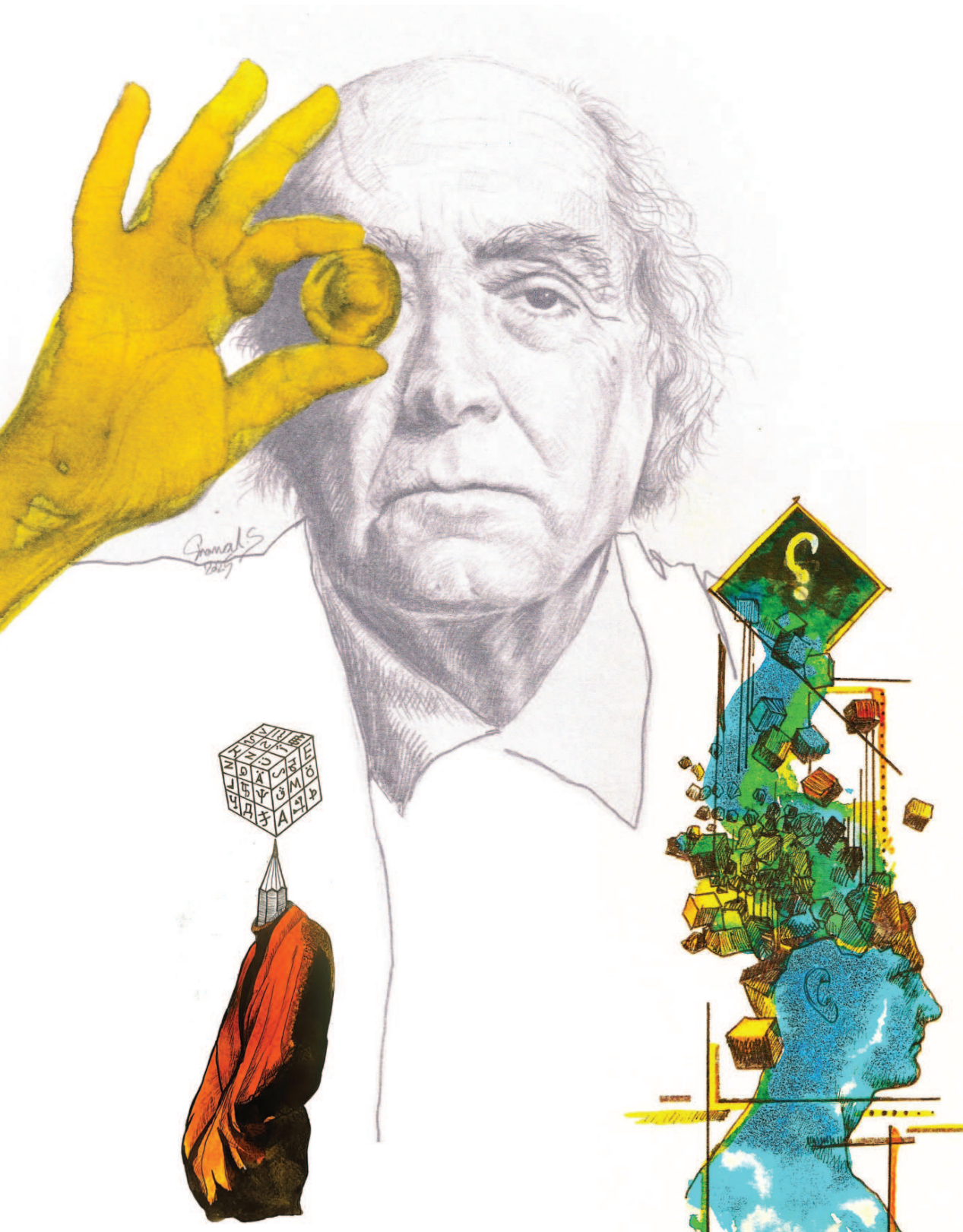
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The core mission of *Awez* is to promote a culture of research, thinking, enlightenment, and criticism across all fields of knowledge and thought

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■ A mockup of the first issue of *Awez Journal*.



Sketch by Shamal Saadulla



A mockup of the second issue of Awez Journal.



A mockup of the third issue of Awez Journal.

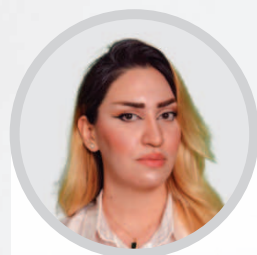
cludes a dedicated section addressing key epistemological and theoretical questions. For example, the inaugural issue focused on language and identity, the second issue presented a high-quality collection of articles on

science and the philosophy of science, and the third discussed the importance and role of philosophy in society in general and in Kurdish society in particular.

Ultimately, the core mission of *Awez* is to promote a culture of research, thinking, enlightenment, and criticism across all fields of knowledge and thought. Our journal takes a position based on knowledge-based reading about the world and the situation in Kurdistan while, at the same time, pushing Kurdish society toward thinking in new ways. We operate, in other words, under the belief that criticism is the cornerstone of progress and therefore aim to critique traditions and expose their limits.

The editorial team is led by Farooq Rafiq, a prominent figure in Kurdish literature and philosophy, as editor-in-chief. Abdulkhaliq Yaqubi, a researcher and translator in the field of thought and literature, serves as writing secretary. To date, *Awez* has published three issues, attracting an elite and discerning readership in Kurdistan and promising a fresh and intellectually rich cultural vision. ●

Baban Dynasty's 122-Year-Old Manuscript



Fatima Qasim Habib

is a journalist, writer, translator, artist, poet, and art designer who has organized numerous art exhibitions in both the Kurdistan Region and international locations.

In a world where the past often fades into silent ruins, sometimes a single piece of paper gilded with gold and inked with dreams can revive the story of centuries of old. Thanks to the care of the Baban family, such a treasure has survived: a 122-year-old Ottoman manuscript, a golden decree addressed to Mirmiran Babanzadeh Abdulmajid Pasha.

Preserved through generations, this manuscript is a living

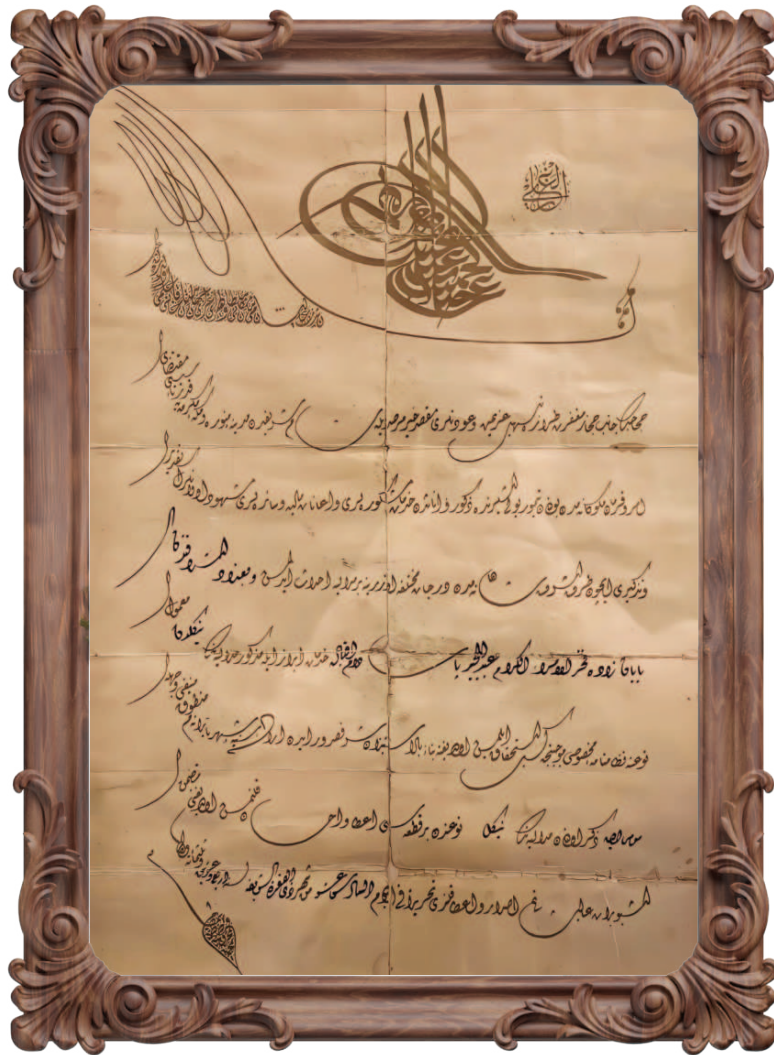
testimony of a prestigious past, a story stitched into the fabric of Kurdistan's heritage.

Time may erase faces and voices, but monuments, manuscripts, and memories seem to travel through time—not in with a Hollywood-style time machine, but by enduring through the centuries. Historical manuscripts carry within them the weight of civilizations and legacies connecting the past with the present and future alike. By documenting



Kurdish men at their small shops in a local bazaar in Sulaymaniyah (1921).

Photo Courtesy: NCL-AOGB-PERS_M (01.11.1921)



■ A decree issued by Sultan Abdul Hamid II in which he appointed Mirmiran Babanzadeh Abdulmajid Pasha of Baban as the successor to the Principality.

the life, thoughts, experiences, and achievements of people who walked the earth before us, they offer a window into their world and spectacles through which their hopes, ambitions, and spirit can be revisited.

The man, the prince, the governor

In the case of Abdulmajid Pasha – a man whose life straddled the tumultuous shifts of the 19th and early 20th centuries – his legacy has been preserved not only in the city he helped to shape but in the words gifted to him by Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II himself.

Born in 1840 in Sulaymaniyah, Abdulmajid Pasha hailed from a prestigious lineage as the grandson of Ibrahim Pasha, Sulaymaniyah's founder. His life was marked by exile, return, leadership, and dedication to his people. Exiled to Kut in Iraq as a child alongside his father in 1847, he witnessed the collapse of the Baban principality in 1860, only to return and serve the Kurdish heartland.

By 1880, he had become the governor of Koysinjaq. Later, in 1886, he made Kifri his home, a city that would become inseparable from his name. While Abdulmajid Pasha died in Baghdad in 1905 and was laid to

rest at the A'zamiya cemetery, in Kifri, his presence dominates through his legacy.

Rebuilding Kifri

Abdulmajid Pasha was not just a ruler; he was a dreamer, and more importantly, a dreamer who believed in the beauty of his dreams and manifested them in reality. His commitment to the future of Kifri translated into major projects that would leave a lasting mark on the city and its surrounding region, including:

- Construction of the railway station, a key link intended to connect Istanbul to Mecca and facilitate the Hajj pilgrimage.
- Development of extensive irrigation systems bringing water to surrounding villages, supporting agriculture and ensuring prosperity for generations.
- Construction of a grand palace known as the King's Ear, a symbol of the city's growing importance.
- Establishment of a public bath called the King's Bath, built to improve hygiene and strengthen community life.

• Founding of a monastery as a space for reflection, learning, and religious gathering.

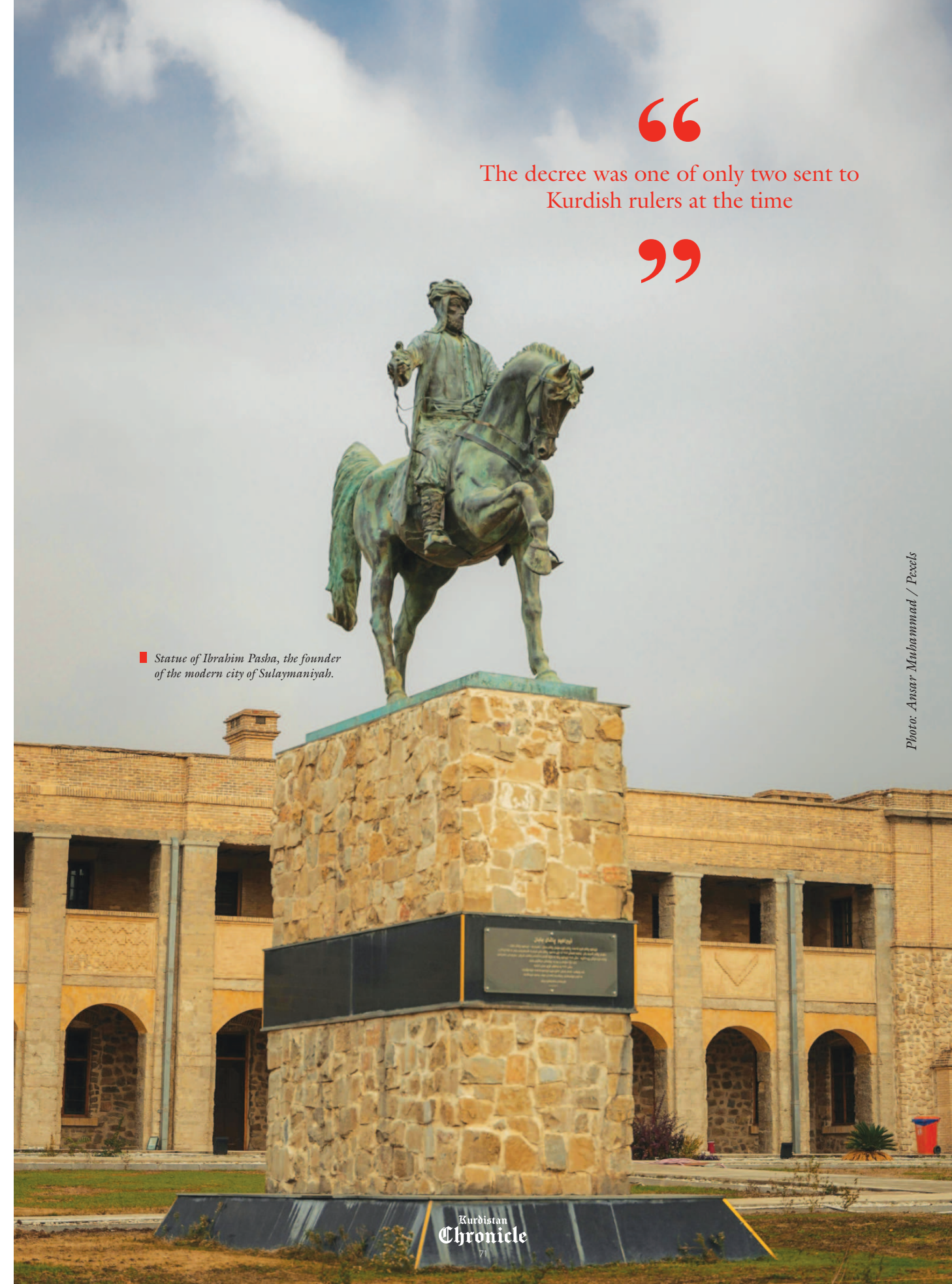
• Erection of the King's House, a royal residence that reflected the architectural beauty of the time.

• Creation of Taqalti, also known as Chokhmaka Kifri, a unique and historical building that remains a symbol of Kifri's heritage.

Through these projects, Abdulmajid Pasha offered Kifri a fresh life, turning it into a beacon of culture, infrastructure, and coexistence in Kurdistan.

The Ottoman sultan's decree

It was Abdulmajid Pasha's contribu-



■ Statue of Ibrahim Pasha, the founder of the modern city of Sulaymaniyah.

“
The decree was one of only two sent to
Kurdish rulers at the time
”

Photo: Ansar Muhammad / Pexels



Photo: Nasib Ali Xayat

■ The ruins of the palace of Abdulmajid Pasha, built in the 19th century.

tion to the railway project that caught the attention of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. In the Sultan's grand dream of connecting Istanbul to Mecca by rail, Abdulmajid Pasha offered his wealth and determined effort to help fund the precious project. Recognizing this remarkable act of generosity, Sultan Abdul Hamid II decided to honor him.

On February 13, 1903, he commissioned a royal decree through a manuscript. The text conveyed deep gratitude, awarding Abdulmajid Pasha the "Sultan's Medal of Purity" for his contribution to the construction of the Hajj railway.

The decree was one of only two sent to Kurdish rulers at the time. The other was sent to Mustafa Pasha Bajalan, who also held an extraordinary position similar to that of the Baban family.

The decree reads as follows:

"Ghazi Ali Maqam, Hazrat Abdul Hamid Khan, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, has decided to award the Sultan's Medal of Purity to Emir Miran Babanzadeh Abdul Majid Pasha for purchasing nickel for the construction of the railway between Istanbul and Mecca Sanjaq Salahiya to Mecca and Medina, and this will be a good cause for performing the obligatory Hajj."

The decree was written in the Ottoman tughra script. A tughra is a calligraphic monogram, seal or signature of a sultan that was affixed to all official documents and correspondence. It was written using gold ink on semi-thick paper. The tughra script is one of the most popular types of Turkish script and was used only in the court of the Ottoman Sultan to write important decrees.

Guardians of the manuscript

The golden decree remained safeguarded within the Baban family across turbulent years. It was passed from Abdulmajid Pasha to his eldest son Jamil Beg, then to Mohammad Jamil Beg, and today is carefully protected by Mirmiran Babanzadeh Mohammad Fatih Beg.

"I view this manuscript as a national treasure," Mir Mohammad tells Kurdistan Chronicle. "Like all our family's books, documents, and archives, I am determined to preserve it for the sake of history and scholars."

His dream extends beyond private preservation, as he envisions a day when the National Documents House will open in Kurdistan, offering a permanent home for these invaluable relics of Kurdish memory. He adds: "If such an institution is founded, I will



Painting by Rebrwar Khalid

■ A portrait of Ibrahim Pasha, the founder of the modern city of Sulaymaniyah.

proudly donate our entire family archive to serve researchers, historians, and our people."

A city in memory

Kifri itself stands as an extension of Abdulmajid Pasha's legacy. Once a cultural destination in the Garmian region, the city was a vibrant political and intellectual center during the 20th century. Its diverse population reflected the spirit of coexistence that Abdulmajid Pasha championed through infrastructure, agriculture, and community development.

Today, the memories of the pasha are alive on every corridor, pathway, corner, and old building in the city. As

visitors walk through Kifri's streets, see the water channels that feed its fields, admire the design of the old stone baths, gaze at the traces of grand palaces, they cannot help but sense the presence of a leader who cared deeply about his city's future and, more importantly, its citizens.

And somewhere, behind safe glass and careful hands, lies a letter written in gold, a testimony to a man whose work was so profound that even an Ottoman Sultan paused to bow his head in gratitude.

The bridge between the past, present, and future

In a fast-changing world, where new

replaces old at lightning speed, the preservation of historical manuscripts like this Ottoman decree tells us that, for Abdulmajid Pasha's family and many others, roots matter. The manuscript shows how ancestors' struggles, their contributions, and their visions build bridges between the family's past, present, and future.

The story of Mirmiran Babanzadeh Abdulmajid Pasha is of commitment, of service and dedication, and of a heritage strong enough to travel through time gilded in honor, sealed by history, alive and still beating in the heart of Kurdistan. ●

Before the Silence The Forgotten Photographs of the Yezidis



Qassim Khidhir

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

For nearly a century, around 300 black-and-white photographs capturing the everyday life of Yezidi (Ezidi) communities in the Nineveh Plains – men and women in ceremonial dress, joyful wedding dances, pilgrims climbing the path toward Lalish, their holiest shrine – remained unseen. Yet long before the world came to know the Yezidis through stories of genocide and exile, these images show a vibrant, rooted people, living their traditions under the northern Iraqi sun.

Taken between 1930 and 1937, the photographs were never meant to tell the story of the Yezidis. They were, in some ways, accidental – taken by a team of American archaeologists led by Polish-born Ephraim Speiser, who was excavating the ancient sites of Tepe Gawra and Tell Billah. But as the archaeologists dug into Mesopotamia’s past, they also spent months among the Yezidis, often turning their cameras not toward ruins, but toward the people around them.

And then, for decades, silence. While Speiser’s archaeological finds were documented and published, the more human side of the expedition – the photographs of daily life – was stored away and forgotten. Until one image resurfaced.

In 2022, Katherine Blanchard, Keeper of Near East Collections at the Penn Museum, came across a striking photo of Lalish from the 1930s. She shared it with Marc Marin Webb, a PhD candidate at the Uni-

versity of Pennsylvania researching heritage preservation in post-conflict Yezidi communities.

“She immediately passed it to me,” Marin Webb recalls. “And what we found wasn’t just that photo – it was a whole archive.”

“

They’re bridges between generations, between sorrow and healing, between silence and voice

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Long overlooked, the collection suddenly took on a new meaning, not as a side note to archaeology, but as a valuable cultural record.

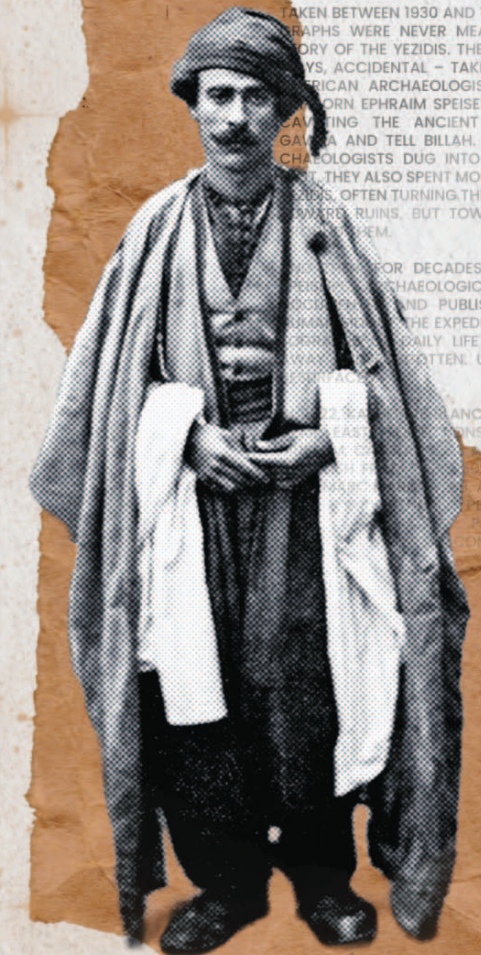
Why hadn’t anyone looked at them before? “People only viewed the material through the lens of archaeology,” Marin Webb explains. “Anything not related to ruins or artifacts was simply ignored.”

The Sersal Project

Today, those images feel almost sacred. In the aftermath of the 2014 ISIS genocide, which included mass killings, forced con-



■ Yezidi women in traditional dress pose with a child at the entrance of a home in the Nineveh Plains, circa 1930s.



■ A Yezidi man in ceremonial clothing stands for a portrait.

FOR NEARLY A CENTURY, AROUND 300 BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS CAPTURING THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF YEZIDI COMMUNITIES IN THE NINEVEH PLAINS – MEN AND WOMEN IN CEREMONIAL DRESS, JOYFUL WEDDING DANCES, PILGRIMS CLIMBING THE PATH TOWARD LALISH, THEIR HOLIEST SHRINE – REMAINED UNSEEN. YET LONG BEFORE THE WORLD CAME TO KNOW THE YEZIDIS THROUGH STORIES OF GENOCIDE AND EXILE, THESE IMAGES SHOW A VIBRANT, ROOTED PEOPLE, LIVING THEIR TRADITIONS UNDER THE NORTHERN IRAQI SUN.

TAKEN BETWEEN 1930 AND 1937, THE PHOTOGRAPHS WERE NEVER MEANT TO TELL THE STORY OF THE YEZIDIS. THEY WERE, IN SOME WAYS, ACCIDENTAL – TAKEN BY A TEAM OF AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGISTS LED BY POLISH-BORN EPHRAIM SPEISER, WHO WAS EXCAVATING THE ANCIENT SITES OF TEPE GAWRA AND TELL BILLAH. BUT AS THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS DUG INTO MESOPOTAMIA’S PAST, THEY ALSO SPENT MONTHS AMONG THE YEZIDIS, OFTEN TURNING THEIR CAMERAS NOT TOWARD RUINS, BUT TOWARD THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM.

FOR DECADES, SILENCE. WHILE SPEISER’S ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS WERE DOCUMENTED AND PUBLISHED, THE MORE HUMAN SIDE OF THE EXPEDITION – THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF DAILY LIFE – WAS STORED AWAY AND FORGOTTEN. UNTIL ONE IMAGE RESURFACED. IN 2022, KATHERINE BLANCHARD, KEEPER OF NEAR EAST COLLECTIONS AT THE PENN MUSEUM, CAME ACROSS A STRIKING PHOTO OF LALISH FROM THE 1930S. SHE SHARED IT WITH MARC MARIN WEBB, A PHD CANDIDATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA RESEARCHING HERITAGE PRESERVATION IN POST-CONFLICT YEZIDI COMMUNITIES.

Photos from the Ephraim Speiser Collection, courtesy of the Penn Museum, digitized as part of the Sersal Project



■ A group of Yezidi men and women gather in traditional dress for a community event in Sinjar, circa 1930s. (From the Ephraim Speiser Collection, courtesy of the Penn Museum, digitized through the Sersal Project).

versions, and the destruction of Yezidi temples, they are more than old photographs. “They show what life looked like before,” Marin Webb says.

There is Bashir Saduq, a Yezidi man who worked on the digs, smiling at his wedding. Children laughing in front of a home. Pilgrims walking toward Lalish beneath the bright sky. These are not the usual media images of suffering or displacement. These are memories that survived.

“It’s refreshing to see joyful images of the Yezidis,” says Nathaniel Brunt, a photographer and postdoctoral fellow at the University of Victoria Libraries, who joined the project. “For the last decade, every photo of the Yezidis has focused on trauma. These are different. These are about life.”

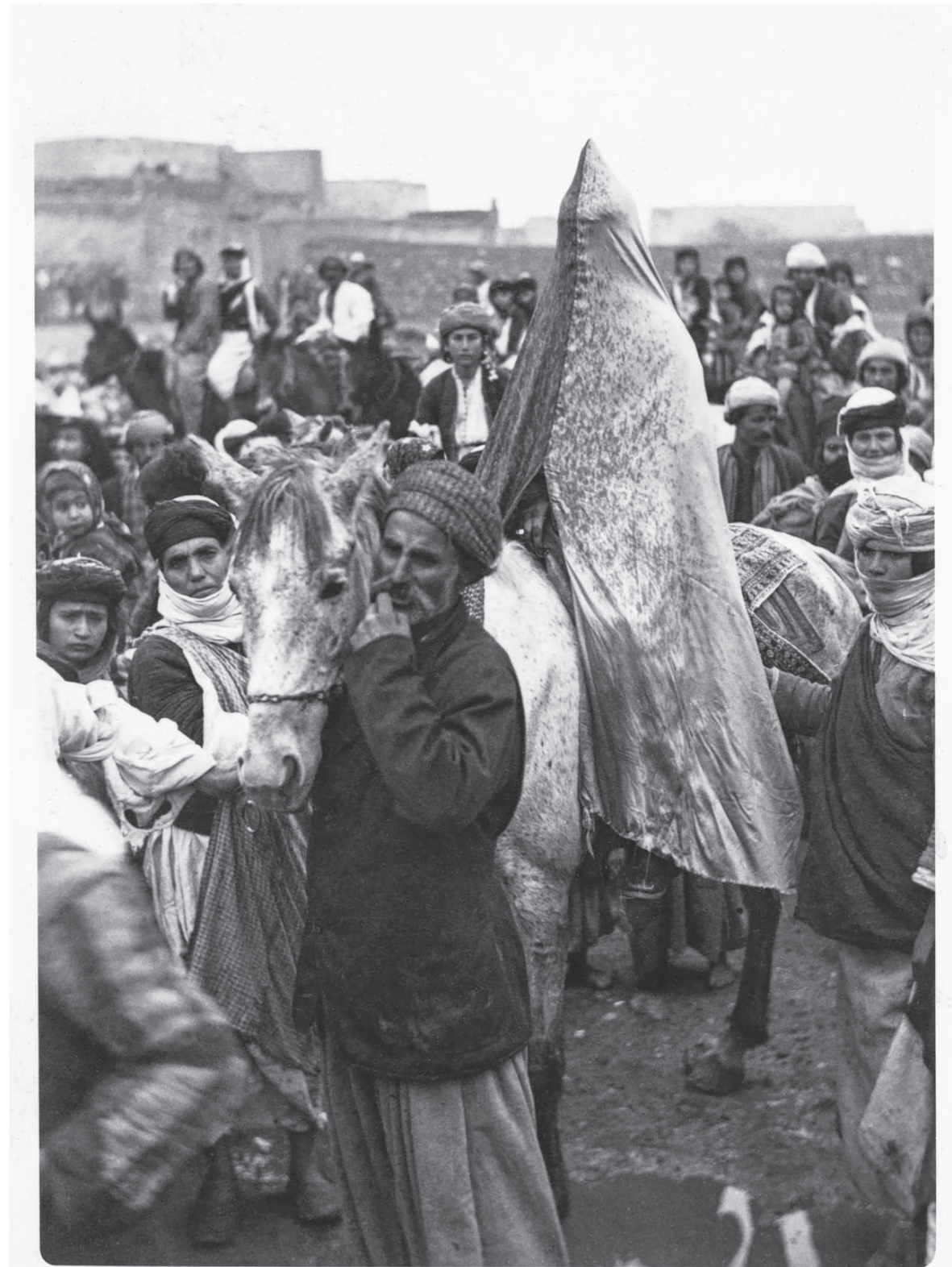
Out of this discovery, a new initiative took shape: The Sersal Project, named after the Yezidi New Year. The goal was not just to preserve the photographs, but to return them to the community. In collaboration with the



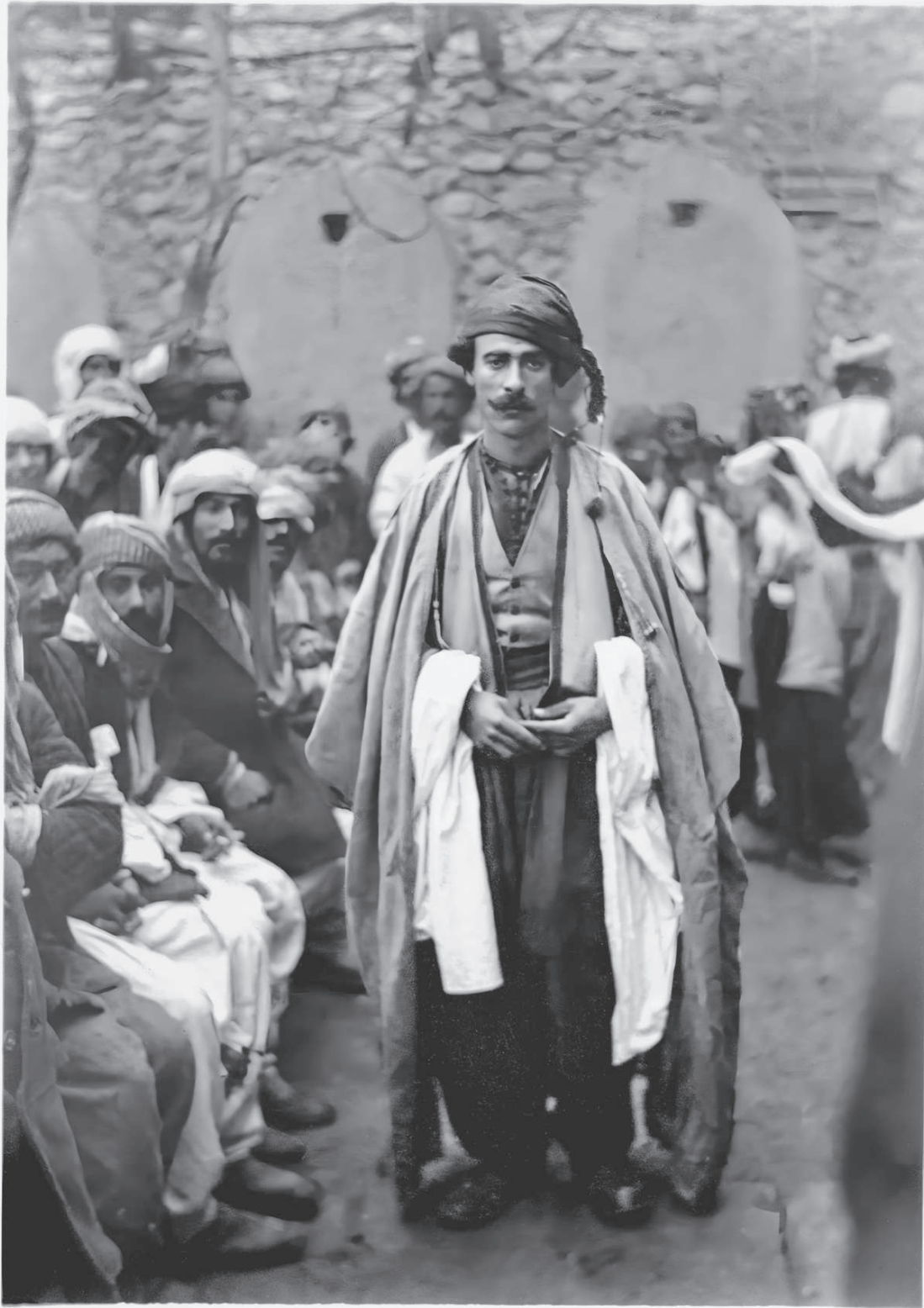
■ The sacred Yezidi temple at Lalish, as seen in a rare early 20th-century photograph. Lalish is the holiest site for Yezidis worldwide and the final resting place of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, a central figure in the Yezidi faith. (From the Ephraim Speiser Collection, courtesy of the Penn Museum, digitized through the Sersal Project).

Penn Museum, the University of Victoria, the Mirzo Music Foundation in Sinjar, Catholic Relief Services, and the Goethe-Institut in Erbil, the team began restoring, digitizing, and researching the images.

This was no easy task. Many of the prints were damaged, the negatives brittle, and most of the people in the photos were unnamed. “It’s not just about scanning,” Marin Webb says. “It takes hours of cleaning, editing,



Photos from the Ephraim Speiser Collection, courtesy of the Penn Museum, digitized as part of the Sersal Project



Photos from the Ephraim Speiser Collection, courtesy of the Penn Museum, digitized as part of the Sersal Project



Photos from the Ephraim Speiser Collection, courtesy of the Penn Museum, digitized as part of the Sersal Project

understanding – and, most importantly, listening.”

More than a museum collection

A key part of this work was led by Alessandro Pezzati, Senior Archivist at the Penn Museum. Pezzati coordinated the digitization and repatriation of nearly 300 unpublished photographs. He ensured the archive would be freely available for non-commercial use, especially to Yezidi descendants, researchers, and artists. His efforts helped turn the project from a museum collection into something much more alive and connected.

Listening meant taking the photos back to where they were taken – showing them to elders in Sinjar, Bashiqa, and other towns. The reaction was emotional. People recognized faces, remembered names, pointed out clothing, even identified homes that no longer exist. “They were so happy,” Marin Webb says. “Can you give

us copies?’ they asked. And of course, we did.”

That response shaped the ethics of the entire project. As Brunt explains, “These are images of the community, but they’ve been kept from the community for decades. How do we change that?”

The Penn Museum decided to do something rare: make the photos freely accessible for anyone in the Yezidi community to use, with proper credit, but without restrictions. The archive would not stay hidden behind museum walls – it would be returned to those who lived the history.

The project’s first public event took place in April 2025, during the Yezidi New Year celebrations. Exhibitions were set up in villages and towns across the region. “We wanted the moment to feel joyful,” Marin Webb says. “Not a time of mourning, but celebration.” The prints were left behind. The digital archive was shared.

People gathered not to grieve, but to remember and to reclaim.

But the work is not over. Marin Webb and his colleagues believe more photographs are out there – in other archives, in other cities, perhaps even in Erbil or Mosul. “This is just the beginning,” he says. “There’s a whole visual history waiting to be uncovered.”

What the Sersal Project offers is not just old images, but a new way to think about archives. It is about returning history to the people who lived it. In a time when so much has been taken from the Yezidis, these photographs give something back: memory, dignity, presence.

“These aren’t just historical photos,” Brunt says. “They’re bridges between generations, between sorrow and healing, between silence and voice.”

And, maybe most of all, between the past that was and the future that still can be. ●

A Taste of Kurdistan UK's Best Kebabs

Kurdistan Chronicle

At the 13th British Kebab Awards, Kurdish chefs do more than serve food – they shape a legacy.

In a ballroom bathed in crystal light, where whispers of expectation floated above starched linen and the faint scent of grilled meat clung to the air, over 1,500 guests took their seats. It was a night not for politics or diplomacy – though a few political faces were scattered among the tables – but for something humbler and, perhaps, more universally understood: kebab.



■ Sir Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London.

The British Kebab Awards, now in their 13th year, have become a peculiar fixture of the UK's cultural calendar – a celebration of sizzling skewers and garlic sauces as well as migration, enterprise, and identity. Over 4,000 restaurants apply each year. Two hundred reach the final stage. A small, lucky handful take home trophies for categories ranging from “Best Kebab in Scotland” to “Best Newcomer.” The mood is competitive, but the applause is warm,

and year after year, one truth endures: Kurdish chefs dominate. Recognized here as a Kurd from Northern Kurdistan. We'll continue bringing the true flavor of Kurdish kebab to this country. This is just the beginning.”

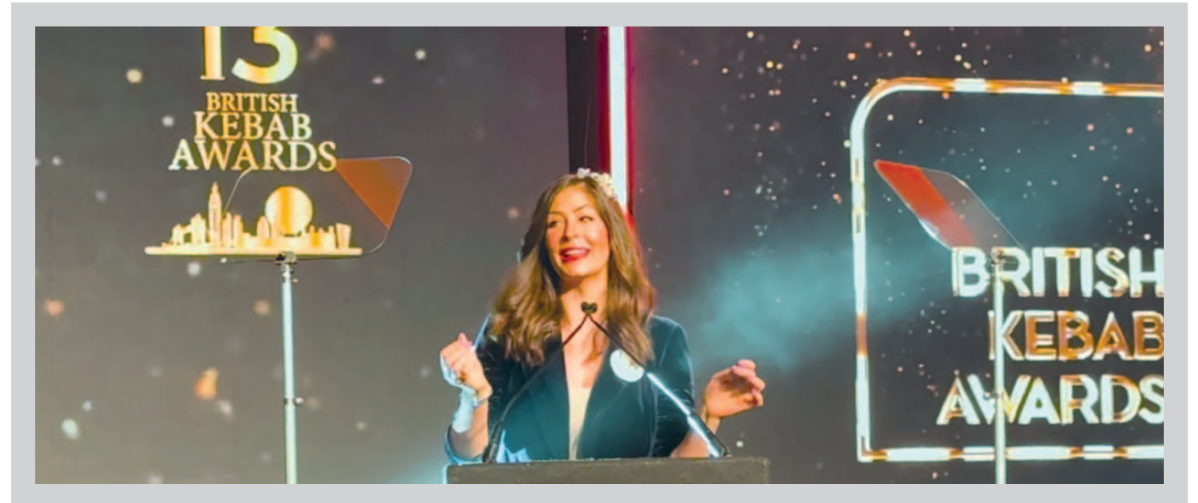
But the night's most thunderous applause belonged to Majed Badrekhan, a chef from Western Kurdistan (northeastern Syria), who has, over the past four years, achieved something close to cult status in Scotland. For the fourth

and year after year, one truth endures: Kurdish chefs dominate.

Scotland's best kebab

Among this year's recipients stood Yalmaz Shana, a soft-spoken restaurateur from Northern Kurdistan (southeastern Türkiye). Originally from the city of Bingol, he now runs a modest but much-loved eatery in North London with the help of his wife and two daughters. As he stepped onto the stage, Shana offered a brief, heartfelt thanks:

“It's an honor to be recognized here as a Kurd from Northern Kurdistan. We'll continue bringing the true flavor of Kurdish kebab to this country. This is just the beginning.”



■ A scene from the 13th British Kebab Awards in London.

“Kurdish kebab is more than a dish. It's a message”

year in a row, he claimed the title of “Best Kebab in Scotland.”

Seated beside him was, Michelle Welsh, a Member of Parliament from Glasgow – Badrekhan's adopted city – who leaned in and, with the measured pride of a mentor, said: “Majed is a model of determination, culture, and excellence. He represents the best of our communities.”

Badrekhan, his voice thick with emotion, offered more than thanks in his speech. He offered philosophy: “Winning this for the fourth time is personally rewarding, but it's also a statement. We Kurds have a rich culture, deep skills, and a cuisine that tells our story. Food is not just about taste – it's identity.”

A community's impact

The Kebab Awards are the brainchild of Ibrahim Dogus, a restaurateur, entrepreneur, and one-time Labour Party candidate, himself a Kurd from Northern Kurdistan. For Dogus, the event was born out of necessity – not commercial, but communal.

“I saw so many Kurdish chefs creating excellence,” he said in an interview. “They deserved recognition – so we built a platform to give them that.”

Though open to all backgrounds, the awards have become something of a de facto tribute to Kurdish culinary achievement. Dogus does not shy away from the pattern.

“It's a testament to our community's impact on food and on the economy more broadly,” he said. “Kurdish kebab is more than a dish. It's a message.”

Among the evening's guests was Nadhim Zahawi, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and one of the most prominent Kurdish politicians in the UK. Zahawi, who has made a habit of attending the event each year, spoke less about identity and more about impact. “This sector contributes over £2.8 billion annually to the UK's economy,” he said. “That's something we should all be proud of.”

A cultural testimony

Even Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of Lon-

don, could not resist a moment of culinary confession. With a grin that suggested diplomatic mischief, he told the crowd:

“My favorite kebab? It has to be the Kurdish kebab in Hackney. But don't ask me to name the place. I visit too many great ones to pick just one. What I can say is: Kurdish kebab is truly delicious.”

The evening wore on – a blur of shimmering dresses, trays of meze, and camera flashes. But beneath the festivity was a deeper current, one not always named. In a nation where immigration often sparks debate before it sparks celebration, the British Kebab Awards are, in their own fragrant, festive way, an act of cultural testimony. They offer not just prizes, but a platform; not just applause, but belonging.

And as Kurdish chefs stood beneath chandeliers, shaking hands with ministers and smiling for cameras, they were serving more than food. They were serving story, memory, and identity – grilled to perfection. ●

Alan Arif's Musical Odyssey



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

In a modest home in the suburbs of Sulaymaniyah, a young boy once dreamed of a secondhand violin, his head filled with visions of stages far beyond the mountains that surrounded him. That boy was Alan Arif. Decades later, he stands on the brink of a historic performance with the Brussels Philharmonic, becoming the first Kurdish soloist to appear with what is one of Europe's most prestigious symphonies.

Alan's journey is more than a musical success story; it is a story of cultural persistence, self-discovery, and a lifelong commitment to incorporating Kurdish culture with global heritage.

"I started playing music in 1977, when I was nine," Alan recalls in a soft, reflective voice. "There was something about the sound of the violin – it felt like a voice that could speak without words."

As he tells *Kurdistan Chronicle*, within a year, his talent and determination led him to become the leader of the local band Mandali Bekhud, an extraordinary achievement for someone of his age. The group, based in Sulaymaniyah, became a local sensation, known for their innovative blend of Kurdish melodies and modern rhythms.



“

I don't just want people to hear a piece of music.
I want them to feel the mountains, the struggle,
the love, and the beauty of Kurdistan

”

■ Kurdish musician Alan Arif.



“MUSIC IS LIKE



■ Kurdish musician Alan Arif.

Photos: Nasib Ali Xayyat

Going out

By the early 1980s, Alan's passion had outgrown the local scene. After completing primary and secondary education in his home city, he was admitted to the prestigious Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts. There, between 1983 and 1988, he submerged himself in the ocean of classical training, mastering music in both theory and practice, refining his technique and mastery in the craft he chose so wholeheartedly. He reflects on those golden days: "Baghdad gave me structure. But the melodies of my homeland remained in my heart."

In 1996, driven by the need to evolve artistically and seek broader horizons, Alan made the life-altering decision to migrate to Europe. Moving to Germany was the beginning of a new chapter for him, he explains. "I wanted to explore how Kurdish music could speak to the world, not just the Kurds."

Living in Europe was not altogether easy; the "cultural continent" presented both challenges and opportunities. Alan had to adapt to a new language, culture, and artistic landscape. Yet between all those changes, one constant remained: his violin. Over the years, he has performed as both a soloist and ensemble member across the continent, steadily building a reputation not only for technical brilliance, but for a unique musical voice that merged the Kurdish spirit with European aesthetics – a match made in heaven that created an international harmony.

"Whenever I compose or perform, I try to embed the Kurdish soul in the notes," Alan explains. "I don't just want people to hear a piece of music. I want them to feel the mountains, the struggle, the love, and the beauty of Kurdistan."

O May 16, 2025, he takes the stage as a soloist with the Brussels Philharmonic, a landmark moment in Kurdish music history on a main European stage. The orchestra, widely regarded as one of Europe's finest, will perform a Kurdish masterpiece in orchestral form. Then, on

BREATHING”



■ Kurdish musician Alan Arif playing violin at a concert in Baghdad, Iraq.

September 20, the piece will be presented again, cementing its place in the global classical catalog.

Alan sees this not as a personal triumph, but rather a collective one. "This is for every Kurdish child who dreams with an instrument in their hand. It's for those who had to leave their homes, but never left their culture behind."

Staying tuned to home

Today, Alan is based in Germany but maintains strong ties with the Kurdish artistic community. He collaborates frequently with Kurdish musicians, mentors young artists, and is an active member of Novum Brussels (for-

merly Theatre Saint-Michel), a venue known for hosting avant-garde and multicultural performances in the heart of Europe. Alan's work aims to explore the intersection of diaspora identity, memory, and sound.

Those who listen to Alan's compositions describe them as cinematic, emotional, and deeply rooted in Kurdish folklore. His music carries the melancholy of exile, the resilience of a people, the continuation of the struggle, and the boundless curiosity of an artist determined to cross borders and link worlds.

When asked what keeps him motivated after so many years, Alan smiles "Music is like breathing," he says.

"But for me, it's also a way to keep my homeland alive in every note I play."

When the world tunes in to hear Alan's violin soar above the orchestra this May, it will be more than just a concert. It will be a moment where music becomes a voice for a nation, carried by the hands of a man who never gave up on his dream. Through every note, you will hear the determination of a dreamer who – despite the hardships of a war-torn country, the pain of marginalization, and the weight of being part of a targeted Kurdish minority – kept playing. Alan's music is not just about him; it is a powerful reminder that art has the ability to defy all odds and keep the spirit alive. ●

Fadil Jaf's Kurdish Staging of *Romeo and Juliet*



Awwad Ali

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

Taking a bold risk, the director, trainer, and researcher Fadil Jaf translated the play *Romeo and Juliet* – as adapted by the Swedish writer Thomas Melgren from William Shakespeare's masterpiece – into Kurdish. He also directed it for the Ararat Theater Troupe, collaborating with professors and students from the Institute of Fine Arts in Sulaymaniyah.

Funded by Karim Ala Ka and the Charitable Cultural Foundation in Erbil, the play was performed at the Culture Hall in Sulaymaniyah. It received significant public interest, running for 11 consecutive days, although it could have extended for a full month.

The audience was remarkably engaged, quiet, and respectful. On the tenth day of performance, I attended and did not hear a whisper throughout the one hour and 40 minute-show. The adaptation condensed Shakespeare's original text and reduced the number of characters without compromising its central events or theme. Moreover, it retained the classic traditions of Shakespearean theater.

A timeliness tale

The story of *Romeo and Juliet* is well known to anyone interested in theater. The sheer number of adaptations – over 100 films, 24 operas, and over 10 ballets (most notably by the Russian composer

Sergei Prokofiev) – reflects its cultural magnitude on a global scale and speaks to the timelessness of the play's themes of romantic love, familial conflict, and social division. Tchaikovsky's symphonic work relating to the play and other musical references, including Mozart and Shostakovich, were effectively incorporated by Jaf into the dance and fencing scenes of the performance.

Set in Renaissance-era Verona, Italy, the play revolves around the bitter feud between two noble families, the Montagues and the Capulets. Romeo (Rawand Ahmed), a 16-year-old Montague, crashes a Capulet party with his friend Benvolio, both wearing masks. There, he meets Juliet (Teshu Namiq), the 13-year-old daughter of Lord Capulet (Kamal Ali), and they instantly fall in love. Juliet, however, is betrothed to Count Paris (Shanyar Hama Hoshman). Despite the feud, *Romeo and Juliet* secretly marry with the help of Friar Lorenzo (Hunar Hassan).

Conflict escalates when Tybalt (Shafan Kheder), Juliet's cousin, kills Romeo's friend Mercutio (Mohammed Hoshyar). In retaliation, Romeo kills Tybalt and is banished from Verona. The priest devises a desperate plan for Juliet to feign death, but miscommunication causes Romeo to believe she has truly died. He returns, kills Count Paris at her tomb, and takes his own life. Juliet awakens, finds Romeo dead, and kills herself. In the aftermath, the families reconcile, vowing to honor

Romeo and Juliet



“

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■ A mockup of the poster for *Romeo and Juliet*.

the lovers with golden statues – finally acknowledging their shared guilt in the tragedy.

The story’s themes can, of course, find relevance today, echoing many of the political, socio-economic, and sectarian divisions that plague our world today. My critical reading, from a cultural perspective, is that Jaf’s choice of *Romeo and Juliet* is an implicit message that calls for rejecting these divisions in Kurdish society and seeking reconciliation and harmony.

Design elements enhanced the plays themes of revenge versus reconciliation. For instance, a striking moment in the performance features a statue of *Romeo and Juliet* bathed in blue, reminiscent of the famous scene between the main protagonists Jack and Rose in the movie *Titanic*. The symbolic blue lighting, used in all romantic scenes, evoked open horizons and love, contrasting with the red tones used for scenes of violence that connote blood. Lighting designers Shwan Mohammed Sa’id and Fidar Sa’id effectively conveyed these thematic contrasts, despite the hall’s limited technical facilities.

Theatricalization and metatheatre

Jaf approached his production of *Romeo and Juliet* through the context



of “theatricalization” and the framework of “metatheater” or “reflexive theater.” The former creates an infrastructure for great acting, while the latter provides the audience with many scenes and elements that are best described as “theater within theater.”

From the opening – where actors announce they will perform the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* – to fight scenes and abstract movement choreographed by Goran Sargaluyi, the production embraced stylized performance – theatricality – over realism. These techniques, rooted in Vsevolod Meyerhold’s biomechanical theater, on which Jaf completed his doctoral



thesis, were used to great effect. His book, *Physics of the Body: Meyerhold, Theater of Movement and Rhythm*, explores these principles further.

Meanwhile, Shiraz Aziz’s minimal but effective set design placed Lord Capulet’s palace on stage right, including Juliet’s iconic balcony, while stage left housed Friar Lorenzo’s cell. Costumes by Avin Gharib reflected the period and setting. Scene transitions were made visible to the audience, reinforcing the metatheatrical tone. Central stage areas served as streets or graveyards, depending on the scene.



The show concluded with the actors reemphasizing the metatheatrical frame, playfully acknowledging the performative nature of theater and breaking the illusion one final time.

The cast delivered nuanced and engaging performances. Rawand Ahmed embodied Romeo’s romantic vulnerability, while Teshu Namiq portrayed Juliet with bold passion. Kamal Ali was both strict and composed as Lord Capulet, and Hero Sabah brought elegance and dignity to Juliet’s mother. Shanaz Muhammad added depth and humor as the nurse, while Hunar Hassan’s Friar Lorenzo was measured and wise. Supporting cast members, including Shafan Kheder (Tybalt), Guly Hassan (The Governor), Zhilwan Luqman (Benvolio), Mohammed Hoshyar (Mercutio), and others, demonstrated strong ensemble work and commitment.

The 22 actors and actresses, along with a large technical team, underwent three months of rehearsals under challenging conditions. Yet, the outcome was a dazzling production rich in aesthetic and emotional power. Jaf’s directorial vision, supported by his deep knowledge and creativity, resulted in a performance that stands out as a landmark in Kurdish theater. ●

Leyla Bedirkhan and the Liberation of Dance

"I am the first Kurd to dance at La Scala [Opera House in Milan]. When I was asked, 'Are you a woman from the East?' – especially regarding Egypt, a country where I spent part of my childhood – nothing there felt foreign to me. But if your question implies, 'Are you an odalisque?' then know that only my dance is oriental; I am not myself oriental."

— Leyla Bedirkhan



Shazin Jaf

is an experienced Executive Assistant and Chief of Staff at Canada's House of Commons, holding a bachelor's degree in diplomacy and public relations.

Reading women's narratives leads to a historiographical paradox between the past, which has been constructed by tradition, and the future, which is shaped by readers who impose their own ideologies that may obscure the original traces of historical incidents. The subject of women, dance, and modernity thus invites challenges. It becomes essential to unravel history and explore the concepts of gender as they relate to body movements, which often defied social conventions.

Leyla Bedirkhan, the first Kurdish dancer to perform at La Scala Opera House in Milan, was born in Istanbul. Although her birth date is disputed, with sources suggesting either 1903 or 1908, her lineage is clear: she came from a distinguished family. Her father, Abdurrezak Bedirkhan, was a notable diplomat, and her mother, Henriette Ornik, was an Austrian-Jewish dentist. Her family's background highlights significant historical and political dimensions. As Ottoman Kurds, her ancestors long coexisted with Turkic peoples starting from the early Ab-

basid era and established official ties with the Ottoman Empire following the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 – a pivotal moment in the conflict between the Ottomans and the Persian Safavids.

The dilemma of modernity and gender

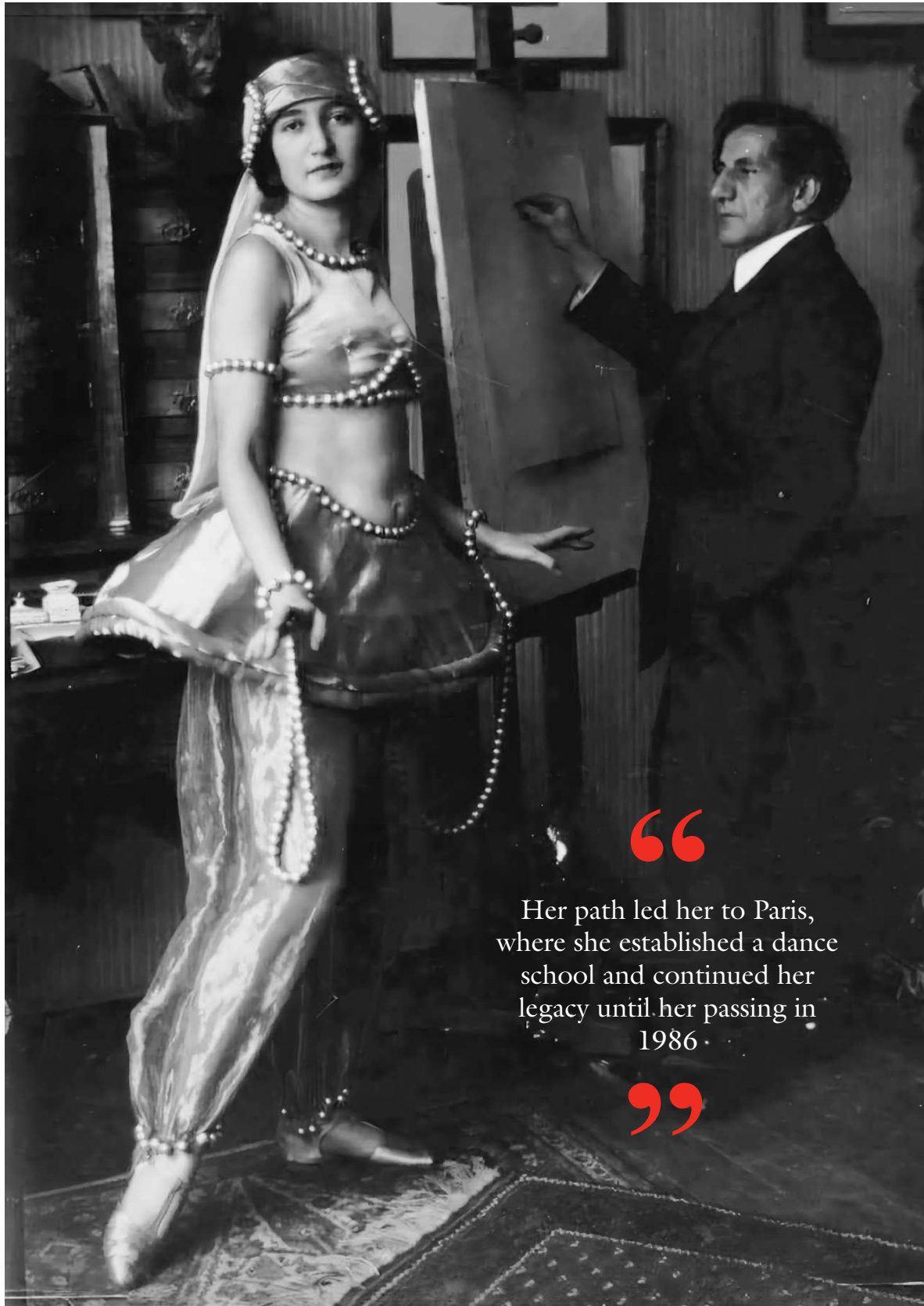
The topic of identity and liberty becomes particularly complex when considering Bedirkhan – a Kurdish woman shaped by political and cultural conflicts. During the early twentieth century, according to scholar Zharmukhamed Zardykhani in his 2006 article in *Middle Eastern Studies* titled "Ottoman Kurds of the First World War Era," Kurds played a significant role in World War I and the Turkish War of Liberation, affecting the destinies of the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia, and the nascent Turkish Republic.

Globally, after World War II, women's lives in developed countries transformed dramatically: household technologies reduced the demands of domestic labor, life expectancies rose, and the expansion of



■ Leyla Bedirkhan.

Photo Credit: Ayesta Publisher



“ Her path led her to Paris, where she established a dance school and continued her legacy until her passing in 1986. ”

Photo Credit: Avesta Publisher

the service sector created new professional opportunities that required less physical strength.

Against this backdrop, Bedirkhan's identity was doubly constructed – by both nationality and gender – illustrating the concept of intersectionality. Her position highlights Zardykhan's concept of how Kurdish cultural conflict intertwined with gender issues, complicating any straightforward understanding of modern identity.

Philosophically, this raises important questions about how women were perceived during the Ottoman era and the roles Kurdish women occupied within that context. The challenges that Bedirkhan faced and the transformations she underwent concerning race and gender offer significant insights into unraveling the complexities of historiography.

Bedirkhan's early years were shaped by significant upheaval, including a 1913 decree calling for her family's extermination, which compelled their forced migration to Egypt. Despite these challenges, she thrived in Egypt and pursued studies in music and medicine in Switzerland. Her dance career took flight after World War I with her ground-breaking performances in Vienna, blending Indo-Aryan and Middle Eastern influences. She then gained acclaim across Austria, the United States, and Italy, showcasing her talents and introducing original choreography.

Furthering her ballet training in Germany, she performed at prestigious venues like La Scala, captivating audiences worldwide. Although recognized for her 'exotic' role in *Belkis, Reine de Saba* (*Belkis, Queen of Sheba*), she primarily showcased original choreography inspired by Assyrian and Egyptian traditions. She even staged performances in authentic locations, including a memorable exhibition at the Great Sphinx in Egypt.

Eventually, her path led her to Paris, where she established a dance school



Photo Credit: Avesta Publisher

and continued her legacy until her passing in 1986.

Challenging orientalism

Bedirkhan's work is fascinating for how it challenges orientalist conceptions. While she described her dance as oriental, she explicitly denied being oriental herself. On one level, this reflects her assertion that she did not want to embody the stereotypes projected onto Eastern women. More

profoundly, it inverts the traditional image of the Eastern woman as a passive, exoticized subaltern.

The irony – being viewed as oriental while resisting its essentializing gaze – mirrors modernity's challenge to constructed social ideologies. Through her dance and life, then, Bedirkhan both embodied and resisted the narratives imposed upon her, carving out a space for autonomy, creativity, and cultural fusion. ●

The Minaret Erbil's Enduring Landmark

Kurdistan Chronicle

The Mudhafaria Minaret, also known as the Choli Minaret, continues to stand as a prominent historical landmark in the heart of the Kurdistan Region's capital, Erbil, nearly nine centuries after its construction. Built between 1190 and 1232 AD during the rule of Muzaffar al-Din al-Kawkaboori, the minaret is widely believed to be the only surviving element of the Muzaffariya Mosque, which was built during the city's medieval expansion.

Al-Kawkaboori, then-ruler of Erbil under the command of Kurdish-Islamic leader Saladin, oversaw a period of significant urban development. For the first time, residents began settling beyond the citadel walls, a shift enabled by improved security. As part of this growth, al-Kawkaboori established two schools, a mosque, and the historic Qaysari Bazaar. The Mudhafaria Minaret was constructed as part of these efforts.

Though originally a site of religious life, the area around the minaret is relatively empty compared to the rest of the old town, which led to its local name, Choli Minaret, meaning "Desolate Minaret." The structure remained largely neglected until 1935, when the Iraqi government, under monarchical rule, designated it a heritage site. Restoration work was undertaken in 1960 by Iraq's General Directorate of Antiquities.

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Erbil, or Hewler in Kurdish, is often called the “City of Citadel and Minaret.” The city's iconic citadel is one of the oldest continuously inhabited areas in the world. In 2014, UNESCO inscribed this ancient settlement on its prestigious World Heritage List.

The minaret, located approximately one kilometer west of Erbil's citadel, is 36 meters tall. The lower part of the structure begins with a seven-faceted design that transitions to eight at the



■ The Mudhafaria Minaret in Erbil, Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Mohammed Dargalayi



■ The Mudhafaria Minaret, early 20th century.



■ The Mudhafaria Minaret in 2025, with Minaret Park in background.

Photo: Mohammed Dargalayi



Photo: Mohammed Dargalayi



Photo: Mohammed Dargalayi

■ The Mudhafaria Minaret and statue of Ibn al-Mustawfi.

seven-meter mark. This adaptation likely results from its proximity to the now-collapsed mosque wall. The base is 15 meters tall and features two doors – one to the west and one to the east – each leading to independent spiral staircases that do not intersect. Ascent from one entrance does not allow visibility into the other.

The cylindrical upper portion of the minaret, at 21 meters, is aligned directly above the base and was likely taller be-

fore suffering partial collapse due to weather exposure and insufficient upkeep. The structure is composed of baked bricks and features Kufi calligraphy along its surface.

Over time, the area around the Mudhafaria Minaret has been developed into Minaret Park, a public garden that draws both local residents and visitors. The site remains freely accessible, offering a link between the present-day city and its historical legacy. ●

The Colors of Heritage



Ahmet Çakmak

is a poet and writer, hails from Diyarbakır. His evocative writings and poems have been translated into numerous languages. Among his notable works are "Grieving in Two Languages," "Eskikent Disturbances," and "No One for Man" (poetry), as well as "Ben u Sen" and "Çütkafa's Book" (novels).

Ahmet Çakmak (AC): *At what age did you first encounter painting and sculpture, the cornerstones of fine arts? What were your feelings?*

Gokhan Aslan (GA): Reflecting on my artistic journey, I would say that my initial encounters with painting and sculpture began in early childhood. However, it was during my middle school years that I truly started to explore my creative instincts. The drawings I created caught the attention of my art teacher, who recognized their potential and decided to showcase them in the teachers' lounge. This moment was pivotal; it marked a significant turning point in my life.

Although I was too young at the time to fully comprehend the depth of what art meant, this experience ignited something within me. Describing the emotions I felt on that day is challenging; they are complex and layered. Even now, those memories evoke a profound sense of nostalgia and excitement that is difficult to articulate. The impact of that moment still resonates within me.

AC: *Have you had experiences that drew you to the world of colors and left a lasting impression?*

GA: My relationship with color has been a constant thread throughout my life, though it began somewhat unexpectedly. Growing up in Diyarbakır during the 1990s, I navigated my daily existence much like anyone else in the city. It was

during this time when a friend of mine stumbled upon some of my drawings and encouraged me to consider pursuing a formal education in art. Taking my friend's advice to heart, I embarked on preparations for this new path. That very year, I successfully gained admission to the Faculty of Fine Arts at Gazi University in Ankara. This marked the beginning of what I now refer to as my painting adventure – a journey that would immerse me in the vibrant and dynamic Ankara art scene. Throughout this experience, I encountered numerous artists and their remarkable works, each leaving an indelible impression on my creative psyche.

AC: *In your body of work, while you create non-figurative pieces that are rich in symbolism, the majority of your paintings focus on faces and geographical landscapes. Is there a specific reason for this choice?*

GA: My artistic practice is characterized by a dynamic interplay of brush and spatula strokes, drawing inspiration from a variety of influential movements including Cubism, Suprematism, Surrealism, and Social Realism. The city of Diyarbakır, where I reside and create, has a profound historical significance; it has been shaped by approximately 29 different civilizations throughout its history. Each of these cultures has left an indelible mark on our city's landscape – evident in the mosques, churches, madrasas, bridges, and particularly the iconic city walls constructed from stone. The artisans of these eras have

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I consider myself a “glocal” artist, as I believe that art draws from local influences to achieve universal resonance

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■ Gokhan Aslan.

also contributed to this rich tapestry by inscribing symbols and icons into the stones using engraving techniques that can be described as ornamental. My intention is to breathe new life into these ancient reliefs through my canvases.

Therefore, my works are not solely meant to be non-figurative – they are subject to periodic transformations that reflect both my artistic evolution and the historical narratives embedded within Diyarbakir itself.

AC: As an artist, do you create your paintings and sculptures with a specific purpose in mind? Reflecting on your current position, how close do you feel to achieving your artistic goals?

GA: You can consider my works as a way of life, rather than a means to a specific end, and this is how I approach my creative process. As you know, our region is constantly facing challenges. Naturally, this compels us to create ever-evolving works. My art is primarily based on interpretation, often reflecting oppression, Kurdish issues, and the expressions or experiences of the Kurdish people, which come to life in my paintings and sculptures.

Sometimes, your thoughts may not reach the places you intend, but with hope and effort, they eventually take shape. You always have goals – short-term, medium-term, and long-term aspirations. Some of my most important goals for the upcoming period include participating in prestigious events such as Art Basel or the Venice Biennale, and bringing Kurdish art to these international platforms.

AC: You have showcased your artwork in various cities across Türkiye and participated in numerous group exhibitions and touring exhibitions. How do you perceive the relationship between your own creations and the works of other artists you admire?

GA: I have had the privilege of par-

ticipating in both solo and group exhibitions throughout Türkiye and Europe, totaling 25 exhibitions, with seven being solo shows. However, my journey as an artist is ongoing; I am constantly seeking to learn and grow. I hold immense respect for the talented artists that Türkiye and the world have produced. My inspiration comes from great artists like Pablo Picasso, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Nuri Iyem, and Abidin Dino. While I do not see myself on their level, their work profoundly influences me. The art I encounter in European museums leaves a lasting impression on me.

considerable gap between our artistic expressions and those of Western countries. For instance, while some figurative art has emerged in the last century, it is important to note that prior to that, there was a scarcity of artistic output. This can largely be attributed to Islamic cultural influences, which favored geometric patterns, miniatures, and ornamental designs over figurative painting and sculpture. I perceive art as a ritualistic practice, and I strive to incorporate local elements into my works.

I consider myself a “glocal” artist, as I



In today’s modern landscape, art is evolving rapidly, embracing contemporary, conceptual, and digital forms. Therefore, making direct comparisons between my work and that of others feels inappropriate to me.

AC: In your view, how does Kurdish painting and sculpture fit into the global art scene? Can we discuss the broader context of Kurdish art, particularly in relation to our geographical influences? Are there notable Kurdish artists who have gained recognition beyond their own borders?

GA: The status of painting and sculpture globally varies significantly, and it is essential to recognize this distinction. The Renaissance created a

believe that art draws from local influences to achieve universal resonance. Unfortunately, the Kurdish community has produced only a handful of notable artists over the past century, which I attribute to external objective conditions beyond our control.

Life resembles an ant’s relentless journey – constantly moving, working, and striving to build something meaningful. It requires immense effort, labor, patience, and persistence to elevate Kurdish art onto the world stage.

Before closing, I would like to express my gratitude to Ahmet Cakmak and Kurdistan Chronicle for this enlightening conversation. ●

Women's Exhibition in Krakow Reclaiming Identity Through Art



Aryan Tahsin

*is a Kurdish journalist
based in Erbil, Kurdistan
Region.*



Renowned for its medieval architecture and vibrant intellectual life, Krakow – one of Europe's cultural capitals – added a new thread to its rich tapestry this spring: an evocative exhibition of Kurdish art that became a powerful platform for cross-cultural dialogue.

In a landmark cultural event, fourteen pioneering Kurdish women artists showcased their creative talents in a thought-provoking exhibition held in the heart of Krakow, Poland's cultural capital. This rare and powerful display marked the first time in history that a collective of Kurdish women artists has exhibited their work in the city.

The exhibition highlighted the depth and diversity of Kurdish artistic heritage, blending ancestral motifs with contemporary media and forms. From vibrant textiles to emotionally resonant paintings, each piece told a story of identity, memory, and homeland.

Running from April 3 until May 1, the exhibition captivated audiences with its seamless blend of tradition and contemporary expression. The artists' authentic and innovative masterpieces resonated deeply with European viewers, connecting the artistic traditions of Kurdistan and Poland.



■ Ziad Raoof, KRG Representative to Poland, and a group of Polish artists and intellectuals during the opening of the exhibition in Krakow.

Photo: Vladimir Wilanov



■ A selection of artwork by Kurdish women artists on display in Krakow.

Photos: Vladimir Wilanow



Visitors were particularly struck by the way the Kurdish artists conveyed identity, history, and resilience through their craft. Through a variety of media, including intricate handicrafts and mixed-media pieces, the collection offered a vibrant reflection of Kurdistan's rich cultural mosaic highlighting its diverse ethnicities and heritage.

The gallery space itself became a testament to Kurdish creativity, as each work whispered stories of hope, resistance, and a deep connection to homeland. This exhibition not only elevated the visibility of Kurdish art on the international stage, but also fostered meaningful cross-cultural dialogue between the Kurdish and Polish communities.

The KRG's support of art

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been unwavering in its support for the arts, and this event was supported and sponsored by the Kurdistan Center for Arts and Culture, under the supervision of the KRG Representative to Poland Ziad Raoof, who owns a gallery in Krakow.

"Kurdish women artists, drawing from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, use their bodies, voices, and art to redefine identity beyond traditional norms," Representative Raoof said. "The artists boldly engaged with global themes such as gender, the environment, and politics through contemporary forms like performance, video art, and installation, giving their work a unique local-global resonance."

Prominent artist Shan Faisal explained the exhibition's themes. "Some of the artworks here reflect on Kurdish identity through the lens of resilience and femininity, emphasizing the historical and symbolic role of Kurdish women as central figures in both cultural preservation and resistance. Drawing on ancient references, the artist juxtaposes the

celebrated bravery of Kurdish warriors with the often-overlooked strength of Kurdish women, describing them as both participants in and shapers of history," Faisal said.

One featured figure is Margaret George, the first female peshmerga and an Assyrian Kurdish freedom fighter, whose 1969 martyrdom under the Ba'athist regime symbolizes both personal sacrifice and collective defiance. For the artist, Kurdish women embody an enduring force in the struggle for freedom, encapsulated in the powerful slogan: *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi* – woman, life, freedom.

The venue of the event

The Krakow exhibition was supervised by the prominent Polish curator Wacław Kuczmą and held at the historical Palace of Fine Arts, which was built in 1901. The aesthetic of pieces enhanced the beauty of the space, and the artist's vibrant palette of bold blacks and deep blues gave the paintings a dramatic, emotional intensity.

"This exhibition engages with the enduring and contested ideal of freedom, a concept frequently referenced yet unevenly realized throughout history," Kuczmą explained. "It affirms the universal right to autonomy over one's body, choices, and existence, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or geography."

"Central to the exhibition are the works of Kurdish women artists, whose practices reflect resistance, resilience, and the pursuit of self-determination. Their contributions serve both as artistic expressions and as acts of solidarity with broader struggles for human rights and freedom," Kuczmą said.

As the doors of the Palace of Fine Arts closed on this chapter, they opened new pathways for artistic diplomacy, illuminating how art can forge bonds across borders. ●

Duhok FC Makes History in the Gulf Champions League



Hakar Mubamad
is a sport journalist and TV presenter.

In a moment that will echo through the Kurdistan Region for generations, Duhok Football Club has etched its name into history. By lifting the Gulf Champions League trophy for the first time, Duhok became the first team from Iraq or the Kurdistan Region to win the prestigious title.

Their journey was fueled by dedication, tactical discipline, and a little bit of magic from their unwavering fans – the “12th man.” The final, a hard-fought 2-1 victory over Kuwait’s Qadsia Sporting Club, ended a 43-year wait for Iraqi clubs in the tournament and sparked celebrations across Kurdistan and Iraq alike.

A hard-fought journey

Founded in 1981, the Gulf Champions League is no stranger to drama, but this year’s edition will forever be remembered for Duhok’s remarkable rise against all odds. Drawn into a challenging Group A alongside Oman’s Dhofar, UAE’s al-Nasr, and Yemen’s Ahli Sana’a, Duhok showcased grit, tactical brilliance, and a hunger for victory.

Their performance in the group stage earned them a place in the “Golden Square” semifinals, where they faced familiar powerhouses: al-Nasr, Saudi Arabia’s al-Ettifaq, and Kuwait’s Qadsia. This would be a clash of regional titans, echo-

ing the battles seen in Asia’s top competitions.

Wearing their hearts on their sleeves, Duhok squared off against al-Ettifaq in its home-and-away two-game matchup, with every tackle, sprint, and pass carrying the weight of a nation’s hopes. The club’s eagle emblem came to life, as Duhok dominated the field, emerging victorious 2-0.

A tale of two legs

The final was also a home-and-away matchup. The first leg, in Kuwait, ended in a cautious 0-0 draw, with both teams wary of overcommitting. But the return leg in Duhok was a different story.

Beneath the bright lights of Duhok Stadium in the Kurdistan Region, fans draped in the team’s signature red and white turned the stadium into a cauldron of noise. Their energy electrified the players.

In the 58th minute, midfielder Siyaband Ageed unleashed a thunderous strike to break the deadlock. Minutes later, forward Marlon Santos weaved past defenders to double the lead, slotting the ball into the net with surgical precision. Though Qadsia fought back, with Mohammed Sule scoring a late consolation goal, it wasn’t enough.

When the final whistle blew, Duhok’s

“No amount of money can buy the feeling of seeing our people celebrate like this”

■ Duhok FC celebrating the title of the Gulf Champions League in Duhok.





Photo: Eron Khalifany

■ KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani celebrating Duhok FC's win at the Gulf Champions League.

players collapsed in tears. A 2-1 victory had sealed their place in history.

A celebration for the ages

The championship's individual awards reflected Duhok's collective brilliance. Haroon Ahmad, Duhok's midfield maestro, was named Best Player of the Championship. His creativity, leadership, and tenacity symbolized Duhok's fighting spirit, dedicating the win to the Duhok, Kurds, and Iraq: "This isn't just a victory for Duhok – it's for every Kurd, every Iraqi who believed in us," he said, clutching the MVP trophy.

The trophy presentation was a scene of pure joy for Duhokis and Kurdistanis as a whole. Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, alongside Iraqi and Kuwaiti sports officials, presented the cup to the triumphant Duhok side. The players hoisted it high, their smiles mirrored by thousands of fans chanting in unison.

Days later, Duhok unveiled the trophy in a carnival-like parade through the city. Streets overflowed with supporters waving flags, dancing to traditional *dbol* drums, and showering the team bus with flowers. This was more than a football win; it was a celebration of pride and unity.

A turning point?

Duhok's triumph also shattered multiple barriers. As the first Iraqi club to win the Gulf Champions League, they brought global attention to Kurdish football, a scene long overlooked despite its passionate fanbase.

While the \$3 million prize money will bolster the club's future, the real reward is the legacy they've built. Even Qadsia, the runners-up who took home \$1 million, acknowledged the significance of the moment. "Football writes the best stories," said their coach. "Today, Duhok wrote theirs."

Yet Duhok's rise also casts a shadow on the chronic struggles of Iraq's national football team, which continues to falter in World Cup qualifiers amid accusations of fractured morale and cohesion.

While Kurdish players like Duhok's Ahmad shine regionally, they remain sidelined in national squad selections, sparking frustration among fans who argue that Iraq's stagnant football hierarchy, riddled with political favoritism and sectarian divides, could learn from Duhok's model of meritocracy and collective purpose.

As public discontent grows, many Iraqis are provocatively



■ Duhok FC's Captain Haroon Ahmad, named best player of the league.

asking: if the national team cannot embody the spirit of its people, why not look to teams like Duhok that have already proven their worth?

More than a game

The tournament also marked growing investment in Gulf football, with each club receiving a \$300,000 participation fee and \$50,000 bonuses for individual award winners. But for Duhok, the real prize was the joy of their people.

"No amount of money can buy the feeling of seeing our people celebrate like this," said captain Ahmed Hassan. "We played for them."

As the confetti settles and the cheers fade, Duhok's victory stands as a reminder that football is more than a game. It's a language of hope, a bridge between cultures, and proof that underdogs can rise, even in the unlikely of places. For the kids in Duhok's streets, kicking makeshift balls tonight, this is just the beginning.

The 31st edition of the Gulf Champions League will be remembered not for the goals or prize money, but for the team that turned a dream into reality. Founded in 1981, the tournament has now crowned Duhok as a historic first-time champion from Iraq – proof that underdogs can indeed rise. ●

Photo: Eron Khalifany

More Than a Fighter



Sardar Sattar

is a translator and journalist based in the Kurdistan Region. He has translated several books and political literature into Kurdish and English. He writes regularly for local and international newspapers and journals.

He pushed his opponent to the edge until his back hit the ropes. Then came a barrage of jabs, hooks, and uppercuts, enough to take the giant down. The referee pulled him back and began the ten-count before announcing the knockout. “This is Kurdish power!” his brother shouted from outside the ring.

A loud roar filled the packed hall. Kurdish-German boxer Agit Kabayel had just won a major championship against Arslanbek Makhmudov, a Russian boxer who had recorded 18 wins in 18 fights until that painful loss.

“Before the fight, everyone said it would be a quick end for Kabayel. But in Round 4, the critics were silenced,” Kabayel told *Kurdistan Chronicle* in an exclusive interview during his visit to the Kurdistan Region in April 2025.

Since February 2025, he has held the interim heavyweight title under the World Boxing Council. Over the years, he has also claimed several regional heavyweight titles, most notably securing the European championship twice between 2017 and 2024.

International rise

As of February 2025, Kabayel is recognized among the top heavyweight boxers in the world. He is ranked third by Box-Rec and fourth by *The Ring* magazine.

However, these titles have not been won easily. He recalls the endless hours of sweating in the ring until he finally made a name for himself on international stages.

Born in Leverkusen, Germany, to a Kurdish family originally from Pazarcik in Türkiye, Kabayel grew up playing football. Eventually, he was drawn to boxing clubs as a path to pursue his goals in sports. His dream of winning big in international rings was shaped later, however, after watching the film *Rocky*.

“It wasn’t just the movie, but the idea that you could go in as the underdog and still win people’s hearts, even those who originally supported your opponent,” Kabayel explained, sitting proudly in traditional Kurdish clothing. “At this point, boxing became my purpose, identity, and a stage to prove myself not just as an athlete, but also as a symbol of resilience.”

Although he appears very calm during normal social engagements, Kabayel is tough on the inside. He believes that motivation pushed him towards boxing, resilience encouraged him to continue, and discipline is what led him to be among the world’s top heavyweight boxers.

Warrior spirit

Kabayel sees himself not just as a fighter in the ring, but as someone shaped by an inherited fighting spirit. His parents are his role models; he believes that his strength

AGIT

KABAYEL



■ Agit Kabayel after winning the WBC Interim Heavyweight championship (February 2025).



Photo: Riband Saadalla

■ Agit Kabayel in traditional Kurdish clothing outside Kurdistan Chronicle headquarters in Erbil (April 2025).



■ Agit Kabayel in the ring against Zhilei Zhang.

Photo: DAZN/ Edited by 75create

and resilience are deeply connected to his Kurdish identity, the people who, as he puts it, have been warriors all their lives.

When asked what he sees as his ultimate mission, he cited the legendary Muhammad Ali as an example of an athlete who fought for his Black and Muslim identities in a world that often rejected both. In his own way, Kabayel is fighting for his Kurdish identity, which has been “silenced, denied,

and oppressed for generations.”

“In every fight I know that I’m not just fighting for myself, but I’m fighting for my family, for my team, for my people,” he explained in a confident tone. “We as Kurds are warriors, and that spirit lives within us.”

A second father

While Kabayel takes pride in his Kurdish identity, he also acknowledges the role Germany played in his journey.

Living there, he believes, opened new horizons for him and allowed him to shoot for the stars.

But success in the professional world requires more than just talent and opportunity. Every fighter has someone who believed in him when no one else did. For Kabayel, this person was his coach Sukru Aksu.

When they first met, Kabayel was overweight, and Aksu jokingly called



■ Agit Kabayel posing for the camera next to the flags of Germany and Kurdistan.



■ Renowned world footballer Cristiano Ronaldo congratulating Agit Kabayel on his championship at the WBC Interim Heavyweight.

him “fat boy,” a nickname that stuck and marked the beginning of their long journey. But Aksu also instilled in Kabayel’s mind the dream of conquering world stages, having stood by his side since his amateur matches nearly two decades ago.

“My coach is like the second father to me. I spend more time with him than with anyone else. Though I’m the one in the ring, we walk this path together.”

Fighting for Kurdistan

During the interview, delight and warmth were evident in Kabayel’s facial expressions, perhaps because it was his first visit to the Kurdistan Region. He expressed great joy in seeing the remarkable developments in Kurdistan and meeting people who spoke the same language and shared the same spirit.

During his stay, he was welcomed by top Kurdish leaders, including President Masoud Barzani and Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani.

He described meeting President Masoud Barzani as a moment filled with pride and excitement. For Kabayel, the meeting went beyond a formal greeting; it was a deep, inspiring conversation that will stay with him forever.

“I felt like a small kid,” he said. “I told him, ‘I fight for Kurdistan in the ring, and you fight for Kurdistan outside the ring.’” ●

Photo: DAZN/ Edited by 75create



■ Kurdish boxer Agit Kabayel.

Photo: DAZN/ Edited by 75create

Erbil

A Peaceful Arena for India and Pakistan



*Zivak Tariq
is Kurdish journalist
based in Erbil, Kurdistan
Region.*

In Erbil, the capital city of Kurdistan Region, the crack of the cricket bat and the cheers of Indian and Pakistani players fill the stadium's air. It is a sound far removed from the gunfire and tension back home, where the latest armed conflict between India and Pakistan has raged for days. Here, on a sunny pitch, culture and sport unite people from historically divided nations.

Every Friday, under Erbil's warm sun, players from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka gather in colorful sports-wear. With every swing of the bat and cheer from the sidelines, they celebrate a game and a small act of peace, a reminder that beyond politics, people crave connection, friendship, and laughter, not conflict.

Introducing cricket

While informal matches have been common among expat communities, April marked a new milestone. A one-day tournament was held at the Ankawa Sports Academy, with the participation of 12 teams. This day-long festival of competition was sport in its purest form.

Anand Vijayakumar, 36, an Indian national and one of the organizers, told Kurdistan Chronicle that although cricket is associated with Indian history, the teams in Erbil are wonderfully diverse. "We have Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan players – the whole talent of South Asia," he said.

Despite this growing passion for cricket among the expat community, local interest remains limited. "Most people prefer to play football, and no Kurds have joined the teams," Vijayakumar said. "Most people in Erbil don't even know the game is being played here."

As the tournament kicked off at 7:00 am, Vijayakumar offered a primer on cricket for local spectators. To the untrained eye, cricket might seem complicated, but for those who grew up with it, it is a language spoken

through swings, runs, and silence between deliveries.

Vijayakumar explained further: "After the first innings, the teams switch roles. Batsmen score by running between two wickets. If the ball crosses the boundary after touching the ground, it's four runs. If it crosses without touching the ground, that's six."

A batsman can be dismissed in several ways – bowled out, caught, or run out. These intricacies, while technical,

are poetry and ritual to fans.

The tools of the game reflect this reverence: a leather ball weighing 155-163 grams, a willow bat up to 96.5 cm long, gloves, pads, and helmets – gear worn like armor by guardians of a cherished tradition.

South Asian culture

According to unofficial statistics from India's Consulate General in Erbil, over 8,000 Indian workers live in the Kurdistan Region. With them, they



“
Here in Erbil, far from the stadium lights of Mumbai or Lahore, the game still matters – perhaps even more
”

Photo: Omar Karim

■ Pakistani and Indian nationals playing cricket in Erbil.

have brought not just their labor and talent, but a deep love for cricket.

Among them is Harpreet Murkhraj, 37, from Punjab, India. He has lived in Erbil for 13 years and is the captain of ELS King, whose team won the tournament. Murkhraj plays every Friday, but dreams of holding more organized tournaments and building a larger stadium in the city.

“Back in India, we played every day,” he said. “It is part of our identity.

Now, I want to keep that spirit alive here.”

A significant number of players from the 12 cricket teams in Erbil are from Pakistan, including 23-year-old Ibrahim Akram from Karachi. After six days of work, Akram finds solace on the cricket field when he plays on the weekend. “In Erbil, cricket is not just a sport. It’s therapy. It’s a memory. It’s a breath of fresh air,” he said.

Pawan Vikrala, 24, from Hyderabad,

India, has worked as an accountant for a private company in Erbil for six years. He started playing cricket at 13 and did not know it was played here until he stumbled upon a local match. Now, he is a regular.

A cultural inheritance

As the sun set and the final ball was bowled at the tournament, ELS King emerged as champions, with 99.5 points. Ankawa United took second, with 61.6 points. Nikhil of ELS



Photo: Omar Karim

Pakistani and Indian nationals playing cricket in Erbil.



Photo: Omar Karim

Pakistani and Indian nationals playing cricket in Erbil.

KING was named the best player of the tournament.

Cricket has deep roots in India. Introduced by British merchants and soldiers in 1721, it blossomed after India’s independence in 1947, evolving into an important part of the country’s culture.

Now a fiercely loved and kept cultural inheritance, the sport’s popularity has blossomed across the subcontinent. The Indian Premier League, launched in 2008, is now

the most-watched and highest grossing cricket league in the world. At its highest level, international competitions like the Cricket World Cup and World Test Championship also bring together the strongest teams on the planet.

Here in Erbil, far from the stadium lights of Mumbai or Lahore, the game still matters – perhaps even more. Because for those who gather on Fridays, cricket is not just about winning. It is about belonging. It is about remembering. It is about home. ●



Photo: Omar Karim

Gul-Shler An Upside-down Crown



Rezhin Ahmad

is a journalist based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region.

Nestled among the snowy peaks and verdant valleys of Kurdistan, each spring the Kurdish tulip (*Gul-Shler* in Sorani Kurdish, or *fritillaria imperialis*) emerges, adding brilliance to the harmony of spring and Newroz, the Kurdish New Year.

Known as the crown imperial for its regal bearing, this striking flower is more than a botanical marvel; it symbolize resilience and cultural identity and reigns as the star of Kurdistan's highland ecosystem. With its bright red flowers rising through the last patches of snow, the Kurdish tulip shows us how nature can survive even in the hardest times. However, climate change and excessive harvesting have put its future at risk.

Queen of the mountain

The Kurdish tulip is instantly recognizable by its long stem, reaching a height of 1 meter, crowned by a cluster of pendants, bell-shaped flowers in hues of red, orange, and occasionally yellow. Its blooms, shaped like inverted chalices, are framed by lance-shaped leaves arranged in a distinctive pyramidal pattern.

This architectural elegance is not merely ornamental – the plant's structure is a survival adaptation. The waxy coating on its leaves retains moisture, which helps it conserve water in the dry mountain air, while its height ensures visibility to pollinating bees and butterflies in the sparse high-altitude terrain. You'll find it

between 1,800 and 2,400 meters in elevation, on steep, rocky slopes where few plants survive.

The flower thrives in Kurdistan's mountainous regions. In the shadow of peaks like Hakkari, Judi, and Sinjar, the Kurdish tulip emerges in late spring, often blooming alongside melting snow across the Zagros Mountain range.

Its preference for rocky, well-drained slopes protects it from competition with hardier lowland flowers. Yet this specialization also makes it vulnerable; even minor shifts in temperature or precipitation patterns can disrupt its lifecycle. A late frost or less snow can hurt it, and when the ground gets too crowded, it simply will not bloom. It needs space, silence, and just the right balance to thrive.

A national memory

For many Kurds, the Kurdish tulip is more than just a flower; it is part of what makes Kurdistan home. An age-old tradition tells of a heartbroken young woman whose tears turned into these flowers. Others say ancient heroes planted Kurdish tulip on mountaintops like torches to guide travelers through dangerous paths. Whether in songs, poems, or tales told by the fire, this flower is part of Kurdish memory.

Families decorate homes with the Kurdish tulip, artists carve it into wood, and poets use it as a symbol of love and freedom.

Crown of Kurdistan's Mountains





■ *Gul Shler, or crown imperial, in the mountains of Kurdistan.*

Photo: Engin Tavak. Via Wikipedia

The families of Kurdistan’s martyrs often plant them on the grave of their loved ones as a gesture of remembrance and resilience. As the poet Ahmad Khani once wrote, “As the Kurdish tulip defies the snow, so too shall our spirits rise above tyranny.”

However, the Kurdish tulip is not just a symbol – it has real uses, too. In Kurdish folk medicine, its bulbs were crushed to treat coughs and fevers, and oil from its stem was used to heal wounds. It became a trusted medicine in remote villages where doctors were far away.

Its role in the environment is just as important. The Kurdish tulip supports insects that keep the ecosystem alive. When it blooms, it is a sign that the land is still healthy.

Protecting *Gul-Shler*

The Kurdish tulip is in danger, as climate change has thrown off the seasons. Some years, the snow melts too fast. In others, the rains come too late. Overgrazing, road construction, and illegal flower-picking have also affected their survival.

“Twenty years ago, these hills were full of red,” says Azad Mahmoud, a

shepherd in Hakkari Province. “Now, you’re lucky to see a few.”

Kurdistan is still protective of its natural resources, but climate change is not a local issue – it is a global issue with regional severity. Mahmoud also blames deforestation and other unnatural changes: “desertification, drought, and conflict have played a role,” he adds. “The worst may be yet to come unless we act together to restore nature’s order.”

Fortunately, not all hope is lost. In Kurdistan, local groups are working to save the *Gul-Shler*. The Kurdistan Botanical Foundation is teaching people how to protect the flower and plant it responsibly. In 2023, they launched a program called Guardians of the *Gul-Shler*, where students learn to replant bulbs and take care of mountain habitats.

Outside Kurdistan, the flower has caught the eye of gardeners in Europe and North America. Some farms now grow Kurdish tulips for export, which helps reduce the pressure on wild plants. But this has also raised concerns like whether such mass-production diminishes the flower’s cultural meaning or introduces new ecological risks.

In a positive turn of events, Kurdish women in Duhok Province have a sustainable model: growing Kurdish tulips in protected gardens, selling the bulbs abroad, and reinvesting profits to replant flowers in the wild. This business model reflects an innovative way to protect their culture, piece by piece and story by story.

The restoration of cultural heritage and protection of the environment is more than just a conservation effort; it is a continuation of a story that spans thousands of years. For the Kurdish people, it reflects their deep, lived history of holding onto their land, their identity, and the natural beauty that defines their home.

In a land where life has never been easy, where people have faced war, exile, and neglect, the Kurdish tulip’s story is one of survival, beauty, and meaning. It reminds us that some things bloom only through struggle, and that to protect the land is to protect the soul of a people.

And so, each spring, the mountains may still turn red with the Kurdish tulip. Delicate but determined, this flower teaches us what it means to hold on, to stand tall, and to bloom even when the world tries to stop you. ●

Presenting Traditions Through Nature



Pesbraw 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.

In early April, the town of Khurmal in Kurdistan bloomed livelier than ever under the shadow of the Zagros Mountains. The seventh annual Spring Herbs Festival – a vibrant tribute to nature, tradition, the quiet wisdom of its people, and their attachment to the land – was in full swing.

For three days, the air buzzed with the scent of wild mint, the chatter of foraging experts, and the laughter of families celebrating the natural plants that have sustained their ancestors for generations. More than 65 varieties of spring herbs were on display, as locals and visitors alike gathered to see, taste, and learn about the region's rich botanical wealth.

Among the visitors was Ken Zhin, a Chinese national who traveled to the region and was clearly impressed by the festival. Roaming from one stall to the next with his phone in hand, Zhin captured the colors of the herbs and listened closely to the participants explaining their histories and uses.

"The traditional environmental knowledge people have today is very important," he told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. "We must study how people have used plants in the past to maintain their health and sustain their lives. They met their needs from nature and lived prosperously. This kind of knowledge is a treasure."

Zhin praised the festival, noting that people had not only presented a wide variety

of fruits, vegetables, and herbs, but also took the time to wholeheartedly open-up to the visitors and explain their traditional uses. To visitors like Zhin, the event was more than just an exhibition – it was a living classroom.

Keeping traditions alive

One of the main organizers of the festival, Rangin Salam, spoke passionately about its purpose: "Our objective is to introduce the youth to these herbs and their benefits. We want to encourage them to avoid canned and unhealthy foods."

To Salam and other organizers, this festival is a celebration of the skills of foragers and an opportunity to display the local herbs that give the area national prestige and pride.

Each year, the number of plants exhibited continues to grow. This year, over sixty types of herbs were brought from the region's plains and mountains. Salam emphasized that only beneficial and safe plants are displayed. "Our hope is not just to share information about the herbs," she added, "but also to teach young people how to prepare them, use them in cooking, and appreciate the importance of protecting our environment, water, and soil."

Connecting with nature

Visitors like Tahsin from Kalar found the

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The Khurmal Spring Herbs Festival carried a strong message about the need to preserve traditional knowledge, protect natural resources, and reconnect the next generation with the land

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Photos: Pesbraw Mahdi



Photos: Pesbraw Mahdi

■ Different kinds of spring herbs presented at the Khurmal Spring Herbs Festival.



■ Local and international visitors at the Khurmal Spring Herbs Festival.

Photo: Pesbraw Mahdi

festival eye-opening. Dressed in traditional Kurdish clothing, he wandered through the festival's stalls with enthusiasm. "I was happy to see some Kurdistan plants I had never seen before," he said. "I didn't know how they were eaten or prepared. I came here to try some of them. My family values these herbs because they grow naturally in clean mountain waters and have a richer taste."

Tahsin explained that they often store these plants by drying or refrigerating them, allowing them to enjoy the flavors of spring all year round. This is a tradition that has endured among Kurds since long before the era of refrigerators and modern appliances.

Elsewhere at the festival, university students introduced a seed bank project aimed at preserving samples of endangered plant species. Workshops taught sustainable harvesting practices, including the golden rule: "Take one leaf, leave two."

Zhin reflected on the message: "Back home, we've lost so much. Here, they're fighting to keep theirs. Maybe it's not too late."

A bounty of herbal treasures

Ma'az, a local seller, underscored the

importance of these activities for the region. For him and many Kurds, especially those from the pre-1990s generations, natural herbs are part of their daily cuisine all year round. "Our region and Kurdistan are rich in dozens of natural and useful plants. It's important for people to know them and use them," he said proudly. Ma'az listed several of the featured plants by their Kurdish names: watercress (*gyadokhawa*), wild mint (*haz*), wild artichoke (*kanger*), rhubarb (*rewas*), spinach (*barza*), beetroot (*tolka*), mountain herb (*kuzala*), sorrel (*palpina*), garlic (*punga*), mallow (*gabla*), chicory (*chawbazal*), cress (*psal*), shepherd's purse (*gozrwan*), dandelion greens (*papokalasher*), violet (*vannusha*), purslane (*manola*), mustard (*rusqa*), and the rare Loya mushroom (*qachiki Loya*), among others.

One special highlight was indeed the rare Loya mushroom. Highly prized, hard to find, and incredibly tasty, it is considered by some to be the best of all wild mushrooms, according to Ma'az. Its price reflects its value, with a kilogram costing around 25,000 Iraqi dinars and even more in some cases. "It's rare, it's delicious, and it grows only in clean mountainous areas, where only experts can trace and find it," he said.

A message for the future

The Khurmal Spring Herbs Festival carried a strong message about the need to preserve traditional knowledge, protect natural resources, and reconnect the next generation with the land. In an age dominated by processed foods and convenience, the festival reminded visitors that nature still offers healthy, flavorful, and sustainable choices.

Organizers hope that festivals like this will inspire people not only to enjoy nature's gifts, but also to respect them. By learning about these plants, cooking with them, and understanding their role in local culture, the people of Kurdistan can keep their rich traditions alive for generations to come.

For participants like Zhin, Ma'az, and many others, it was a powerful reminder that sometimes the simplest wisdom lies in returning to nature and living harmoniously with it, embracing its free gifts toward living a long and healthy life.

As the sun set on the final day of the festival, Khurmal's herbs whispered an old truth to a modern world: survival and joy can bloom in the same soil if we care enough to listen. ●

POETRY



Farid Zamdar

(1952-2019) was a Kurdish writer,
poet, and painter.

Even if I become a mountain,
I shatter myself.
If I become glass,
I break myself.
If I become a forbidden poem,
I tear myself apart...

But my blood and bones,
Head, heart, mind, and soul—
Are of a fragile human.
My pain is the ink of my pen;
With red sorrow,
It writes itself—
So that, perhaps,
It laughs only when wounded.

ئەگەر چیا بام،
خۆم دەرووخان.
گەر شووشە بام،
خۆم دەشکان.
گەر شیعریکی قەدەغەش بام،
خۆم دەدران...

بەلام من خوین و ئیسکەم،
سەر و دل و هۆش و هەستی
ئادەمیزادیکی ناسکەم.
نازارم درکی خامەیه
بە ژانی سوور،
نووسینی خۆی هەلەدەکەنئ
بۆین هەتا
بریندار نەبێ پیناکەنئ.

Translated by Nahro Zagros



The Eurasian Marsh Harrier



The Eurasian Marsh Harrier (*Circus Aeruginosus*), also known as the western marsh harrier, is one of the most common raptors in Kurdistan and is frequently seen near water bodies across all four parts of the region. Native to temperate and subtropical western Eurasia and parts of Africa, it is a large bird of prey measuring 48–56 cm in length with a wingspan of 115–130 cm. Males are easily identified by their grey wings, brown body, pale head and shoulders, and black wingtips, while females are larger, mostly dark brown with a creamy-yellow crown and throat; juveniles resemble females but are darker. The species nests on the ground in dense vegetation near water, typically breeding in spring and summer, laying 3–6 eggs incubated mainly by the female. Although classified as Least Concern by the IUCN, local populations are threatened by habitat loss, pesticide use, and human disturbance.

Kurdistan

The Heart of the
Middle East



Gomi Bekodiyan, Erbil Governorate,
Kurdistan Region

36.545, 44.980

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