

# Kurdistan Chronicle

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## A Journey of Triumph



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## Today Does Not Resemble Yesterday



Botan Tahseen

Almost 250 years ago, Pope Clement XIV delegated priest Domenico Lanza to Mosul. The priest spent 14 years in the city on two separate deployments between 1750 and 1770, during which he observed the political, social, cultural, and historic roots of the diverse society and, in his memoirs, spoke highly of the Kurds for playing a significant role in

shaping one of the most prominent cities in the complex region.

Nearly 150 years after priest Domenico Lanza, British traveler and politician Mark Sykes traveled throughout the Ottoman Empire for over 25 years, often disguised as an archaeologist, to explore the region. Sykes wrote several books during his time in the Middle East and often negatively portrayed the Kurds. According to the Ottoman Archives, however, Sykes himself was involved in questionable businesses in the region. For instance, he was once captured in the Kurdish town of Rawanduz – some 130 kilometers to the northeast of Erbil – during an attempt to unearth artifacts. Nevertheless, Sykes’ negative opinion about the Kurds reflected on the created borders of the post-World War I Middle East, which unjustly denied statehood to the Kurds under the false pretext that Kurdish

society was tribal and lacked the essential qualities of a nation.

But the history of the Kurds is filled with examples that proved Mark Sykes wrong. Ninety years ago, the first school with a modern education system was opened in Erbil to bring students from Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, Christians, and Jewish background together in ethno-religiously harmonious classrooms. Around the same time, many Kurds traveled around the world and grew as prominent figures actively contributing to the development of their host countries.

The current issue of Kurdistan Chronicle highlights several successful Kurdish individuals in Kurdistan and beyond, shedding light on their achievements and contributions. Among them is the story of Kassem Taher Saleh, a Kurdish member of the German Bundestag; Ahmet Güneştekin, a renowned Kurdish artist from Batman; and Mano Khalil, a Kurdish filmmaker whose recent work *Neighbors* captured the attention of critics and film enthusiasts in Europe.

Also in this edition, Bokan Jaff relates his quest to add the Kurdish Sorani dialect to Google Translate; Zara, a famous Kurdish singer known as the voice of Kurds in Russia, spoke to Kurdistan Chronicle about her journey and how her identity is reflected in her work; Kurdish-Spanish race car champion Issac Tutumlu recalls the ups and downs that he experienced to champion the name and flag of Kurdistan in international competitions; and Marwa Khailani speaks about the joy of shining on the international podiums of athletic championships. These are examples only a few examples of successful Kurdish individuals who have made significant impacts on international levels and remind us of the words of former Turkish President Abdullah Gül: “The Kurds of today are different from the Kurds of 100 years ago.” Indeed, we are present and active at the highest international levels across many artistic, athletic, political, economic, and social endeavors. ●

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[info@kurdistanchronicle.com](mailto:info@kurdistanchronicle.com)

**Publishers:** Botan Tahseen  
Marewan Nasraddin Hawramy  
**Editor in Chief:** Nahro Zagros  
**Managing Editor:** Shamal Abdulla

**Editor:** John Bowlus  
**Co-author:** Jan Dost  
**Liaison:** Sardar Sattar  
**Graphic Designer:** Hilal Çelik

**Photograph Editor:** Safin Hamid  
**Photographers:** Sabr Dri  
Mohamad Dargalayi  
**Features:** Qassim Khidhir

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# NEW INVESTMENT ERA

PM Barzani's Speech at the Launch of Invest Kurdistan

*Dear Guests,*

I would like to welcome you all to the launch of Invest Kurdistan, a platform dedicated to investment in the Kurdistan Region that will facilitate local and foreign investors and provide access to information on investment opportunities in the Kurdistan Region.

I have always argued that the public and private sectors complement each other. This is not just a slogan; we believe it deeply and realize the significance of the private sector's role in the development and progress of the country's economy.

We've overcome difficult challenges in recent years, from the coronavirus pandemic and instability in global markets to the political and financial challenges emerging locally and regionally. All of these have thrown up major obstacles in front of us.

Yet, thankfully, with the resilience of Kurdistanis, we successfully overcame these challenges through a direct partnership with Kurdistan's private sector. Therefore, I want to take this opportunity to give a special thanks to the private sector of the Kurdistan Region, who have always stood in support during times of crisis and helped the government and our people.

Ladies and gentlemen, now it is time to move forward with our plan for a brighter future. We want to ensure that investors in the domestic and foreign sectors have greater confidence in the Kurdistan region's market. We have made tangible progress to remove legal and bu-

reaucratic barriers in our investment strategy, but we know there's still much more to do to make it easier for investors.

We know that investment requires a reliable and efficient banking sector, which is why this cabinet took the initiative to develop the banking sector. With teams from my office and international experts, we are working to transform the Kurdistan Region from a cash-based market to one with a reliable banking system that harnesses new financial technologies.

We are continuously working to digitalize and modernize services that facilitate investment, from business registration to procurement procedures. We have tried to increase efficiency in investment and reduced the processing time for companies. I am certain there is still more to be done in this space. For instance, I want to work with the relevant institutions to expedite our process for providing land for investors.

The Kurdistan Region is stable and peaceful. Its environment and geography are naturally suited for investment in agriculture, tourism, and industry. We have adopted a diversified economic policy, so we support a wide range of investments across all sectors.

There are substantial resources in this country, but human capital is our greatest asset. By investing in our people, we can ensure a brighter future for all of us. Last year, I announced the Kurdistan Innovation Institute (KII) to find and invest in our people's potential. The ideas and innovations of our talented people can



become the focus of big projects and local and foreign investors alike can benefit from them.

The region also boasts beautiful and colorful natural environments and landscapes, pleasant weather across all four seasons, ample water resources, and fertile land. Kurdistan's agriculture and food industry present large opportunities for investors.

Our nature and weather also create the best opportunity for tourism investment in the Middle East.

Ladies and gentlemen, we stand alongside the progress of the whole of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. In other words, we believe that if the Kurdistan Region develops and grows, it will benefit the whole of Iraq. We want the Kurdistan Region to be a gateway, a launching point for companies to work here and in other parts of Iraq.

In the past, Iraq's investment capital and fiscal revenues have not been used well, while citizens in the Kurdistan Region have faced discrimination. Now, however, an opportunity has emerged, and we hope that the Iraqi budget law will be implemented with justice and without political meddling. I have a good understanding with Iraq's Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani and believe that with the support of all the parties, we can face political and economic challenges together and bring Iraq to the ranks of the developed countries in the world because the whole of Iraq is rich in all respects and only requires good and just management.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Kurdistan Region Board of Investment has announced more than 1,000 investment opportunities in different sectors. Now, as the KRG, we understand and have strategies to develop our region in the interest of both investors and our citizens. We want to do this to create jobs and livelihoods for our people and to revitalize Kurdistan's economy.

I will personally meet with local and foreign investors, so that we can learn their remarks and suggestions for improving the process and attracting more investment in this promising land. I hope that this is the start of more investment in Kurdistan across all sectors.

Let's all work together now to have a prosperous and stronger Kurdistan. ■



Photo: Sabr Dri

PM Barzani attends the launch event of Invest Kurdistan ■



## JORDAN AND KURDISTAN New Cooperation Opportunities



**Fuad Khazer  
Al-Majali**

*Fuad Khazer Al-Majali  
is the Consul General of  
the Hashemite Kingdom of  
Jordan in Erbil*



Photo: Farhad Ahmad

PM Barzani meets with Jordanian Health Minister, Firas Al-Hawari, in Erbil on June 12, 2023

**A**s the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, we are proud of our historical fraternal relationship with the brotherly Republic of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We seek to develop and strengthen these relationships in various fields and take advantage of the potential opportunities.

There are many opportunities to develop relations between Jordan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the fields of trade, investment, health, and education. The recent period has witnessed important activities that contribute to the strengthening of relations, such as the first one-

week Jordanian-Kurdish health forum in June 2023, the visit of an economic delegation from the public and private sectors to Jordan in October last year, and the establishment of a joint Jordanian-Kurdish Business Council. There is an intention for leading Jordanian companies in the field of information technology to make investments in Kurdistan, while some Jordanian companies have participated in the Erbil Information Technology Exhibition over the last two years.

We also seek to bolster cooperation between Jordanian and Kurdistan universities. This year observed a remarkable achievement, as sever-



President Masoud Barzani and King Abdullah II of Jordan hold a meeting



Photo: Farhad Ahmad

al hospitals in the Kurdistan Region were accredited for training purposes approved by the Jordanian Board. Concerning capacity building and the exchange of experience, Jordanian institutions are always ready to cooperate, especially in light of the great development of vital sectors in Jordan such as education, medical, information technology, and tourism.

We are delighted to witness the development in the brotherly Kurdistan Region of Iraq, due to the wise policies of the leadership and government as well as the establishment of security and stability. Also, as Royal Jordanian now provides daily flights to Erbil, opportunities to enhance cooperation between our private economic and technical sectors have never been

more plentiful.

As for the Consulate General in Erbil, its efforts will continue to enhance cooperation and benefit Jordanian citizens while providing several facilities for our brothers and sisters in the Kurdistan Region who wish to visit Jordan, whether they be businessmen, students, or patients. ■



## The Kurds of Jordan

*An extract from Kurds Outside Kurdistan*



**Muhammad Ali Al-Swerki**

*Dr. Muhammad Ali Al-Swerki, a Jordanian national of Kurdish descent, is a distinguished individual with a PhD in Philosophy/Education and Curricula. He is an esteemed member of the Jordanian Writers and Writers Union and has been recognized for his contributions to the modern history of Jordan, receiving the State Encouragement Award.*

In Jordan today, there is a Kurdish minority population estimated at thirty thousand people, which includes Kurds who settled in the Jordanian territory in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, as well as Kurds from Palestine who sought refuge after 1948 and 1967.

Historical sources indicate that the Kurds have settled in Jordan since the beginning of the Ayyubid era and continued to do so in the Mamluk, Ottoman, and modern eras. Kurds have been living in the city of As-Salt located west of Amman since the early Ayyubid era, and their neighborhood (Harat Al-Kurd, meaning suburb of the Kurds) is still there and serves as a well-known landmark of the geographical, historical and tribal divisions of As-Salt. In fact, half of the tribes of As-Salt are attributed to the neighborhood and are known by it.

Today, Jordanian Kurds live in many cities and villages and have formed with time a part of the Jordanian social, political and economic fabric. Alongside Jordanians, Kurds have greatly contributed in building modern Jordan, which was founded by the late King Abdullah bin Al-Husseini.

Several factors have contributed to the harmony of the Kurds with the Jordanians: the similarity of customs and traditions, religion, geographical proximity – Kurdistan's borders closely align to and overlap with Mesopotamia and Greater Syria (the Levant) – intermarriage and lineage, and common history. This harmony, however, does not prevent the Kurds from saying that they constitute an "ethnic minority" like other minorities in Jordan, including the Armenians, Chechens, and Circassians. The Kurds of Jordan also have cousins, relatives, and in-laws in Kurdistan, the home of their ancestors.

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### Historical overview

As mentioned above, historical sources trace the arrival of Kurds in Jordan to the beginnings of the Ayyubid dynasty, which was founded by the famous Kurdish leader Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin) in 1173. The Kurds, who came from Kurdistan to the Levant and Egypt, formed the mainstay of his army. East Jordan, where Saladin's forces were stationed, became the battlefield of the Ayyubid-Crusader conflict, with Saladin's forces besieging the castles of the Franks in Karak and Shoubak and building Ajloun Castle on top of Mount Awf to monitor the movements of the Franks in the Jordan Valley.



itor the movements of the Franks in the Jordan Valley.

Salah al-Din settled a group of Hakkari Kurds in his army in the city of As-Salt. That group played a prominent role in the Crusades from 1177-1189, and the neighborhood that they inhabited in As-Salt was named after them. Many scholars and judges emerged from the Hakkarian Kurds in As-Salt, including Abdullah al-Hakkari As-Salti and his son Badr al-Din As-Salti, who studied at the Seifiya school in As-Salt. The latter worked as a judge in As-Salt, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Homs, where he died in 1384.

Some Hakkari Kurds also moved from As-Salt to Jerusalem during the Mamluk era and formed a neighborhood of their own known as Haret As-Saltiyya, which was named after As-Salat from where they hailed. In Jerusalem, they became imams of Al-Aqsa Mosque for a long period of time and are known today in Jerusalem as the Imams.

### Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman eras

During the Ayyubid era, King Al-Nasir Dawood Al-Ayyubi established in 1229 what is known as the Ayyubid

Emirate of Karak, which lasted about eighty years and was based on the current site on which the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is based today. With his army, Al-Nasser Dawood was able to repel the Crusaders and liberate Jerusalem from their grip again in 1239. Through building schools, Al-Nasser Dawood also stimulated the scientific and cultural movement in Jordan whereby Karak became a destination for religious men and scholars. The Kurdish Ayyubids in Jordan have left prominent archaeological landmarks such as the Ajloun citadel and As-Salt citadel, which was destroyed in 1840, as well as the Great Mosque of Ajloun and the Reemon Mosque in Jerash.

During the Mamluk era (1260-1516), the Kurds continued to settle in their neighborhood in the city of As-Salt, with some studying at the Seifiya School, including Abdullah al-Hakkari, his son Badr al-Din, and the Kurdish faqih (an expert in Islamic jurisprudence) Shihab al-Din bin Suleiman al-Kurani.

Ottoman records mention the presence of a Kurdish neighborhood in As-Salt in the years 1538 and 1596, providing clear evidence of the continuation of Kurdish settlement in the region despite the migration of some Hakkarian Kurds from As-Salt to Jerusalem in that period and later. The Kurdish neighborhood (mahalat Al-Kurds) remains a prominent geographical name in As-Salt from the Ayyubid era to the present day, so much so that no Arab or foreign traveler passed through it without mentioning the Kurdish neighborhood and its clans.

### Late nineteenth century influx

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Kurds began to flow to Jordanian cities and villages in larger numbers, and the settlement of most Kurdish families in Jordan dates to this period. This influx may be attributed to the fact that the Ottoman Empire extended its administrative and military control over the region,





Kurds in Jordan attend a national celebration in their traditional costumes

which led to improvement in transportation methods and the establishment of security and order. Thus, most of the gendarmes, soldiers, administrative staff, and tax collectors in Jordanian cities and outposts were Kurds, who came from Kurdish neighborhoods in Damascus, Aleppo, the Jazira region, Mardin, or Diyarbakir. The Kurdish staff in Jordan specialized in collecting imperial funds and the taxation of tithes. In her book *Irbid and its Neighborhood* (1995), researcher Dr. Hind Abu Al-Shaar confirms that soldiery, gendarmerie, and tax collection agents during the Ottoman era were reminiscent of the Kurdish element.

In addition to the army and gendarmerie, many Kurds worked in administrative and governmental jobs in the centers of provinces and districts in Ajloun, Balqa, Karak, and Maan. Meanwhile, many Kurdish women from Salahiya in Damascus married Jordanian citizens, as indicated in the Ottoman legal records of Irbid, Ajloun, Amman, and elsewhere. At the end of the Ottoman era, commercial movement flourished among Damascenes and

across Jordanian cities and the countryside. Many Damascene merchants were Kurds from Salahiya in Damascus who preferred to settle in Jordanian cities to manage their



King Hussein of Jordan (Right) and his friend Pilot Badraddin Zaza, originally from Diyarbakir (left)

own trading businesses and other interests. After the defeat of the Turks in 1918, many Kurdish employees and soldiers returned to their countries, while others preferred to remain and reside in Jordanian cities.



King Hussein of Jordan (Left) and former Jordanian VP Wasfi Tal (Right)

## Kurds and the establishment of Jordan

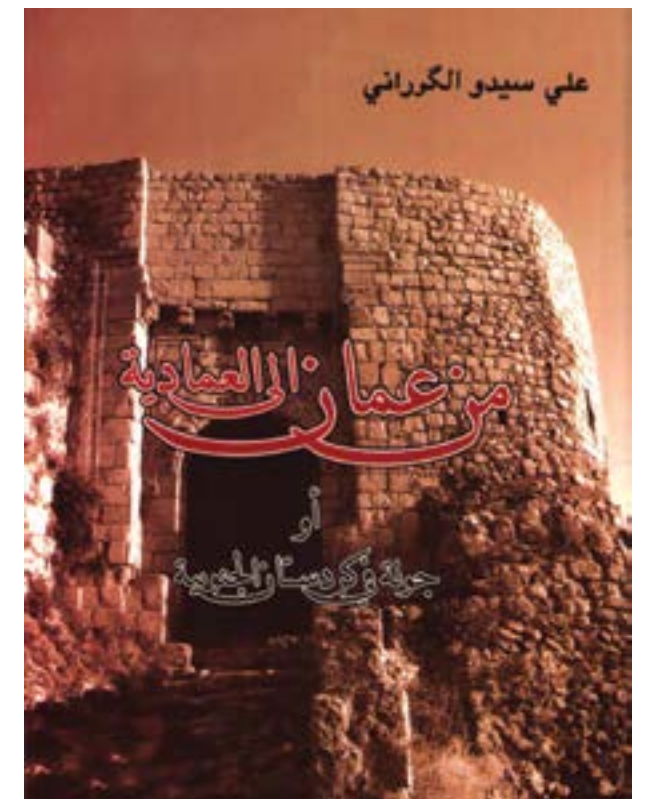
The Kurds of Jordan have made major contributions to the building and establishment of modern Jordan in the political, military, economic and cultural realms and left clear imprints on those fields, so much so that their participation exceeded those who outnumbered them.

For instance, two Kurdish officers Khalil Bakr Zaza and Nour al-Din al-Barzanji were among those who received His Highness Prince Abdullah bin Al-Hussein on his arrival to Ma'an in 1920. When Prince Abdullah came to Amman, the notable Sayyidou al-Kurdi, Ali al-Kurdi, and the leader Rashid al-Madfai – an Iraqi Kurd and one of the prominent leaders of the Great Arab Revolt – were among his recipients.

Officers of Kurdish origin were among the notable founders of the army and gendarmerie when Prince Abdullah bin Al-Hussein set out to establish the Jordanian army. In addition, many served in the army, gendarmerie, and police and attained various high-ranking positions throughout the Jordanian emirate and the later Jordanian kingdom. Some even reached the highest leadership positions in the army and the gendarmerie, including Rashid Al-Madfai as Director of Public Security in 1923 and Lieutenant General Saleh Al-Kurdi, who was Commander of the Jordanian Air Force and Assistant to the Commander-in-Chief of the

Jordanian Armed Forces from 1962-1971. Some Kurds have also held high political positions in the government. For example, Mr. Rashid Al-Madfai was Minister of Interior and Defense in 1939, Saad Jumaa was Prime Minister twice in 1967, Engineer Salah Jumaa was Minister of Agriculture and Supply from 1967-1979, Dr. Youssef Zahni was appointed as Minister of Social Affairs and Labor in 1973, Saad Eddin Jumaa held the position of Secretary General of the Jordanian Prime Ministry for decades and was Minister of State for Prime Ministry Affairs, and Dr. Ashraf Al-Kurdi was Minister of Health and a notable figure in the Jordanian Senate.

In diplomacy, Mr. Ali Seydo Al-Kurdi was Minister Plenipotentiary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and served



Book Cover of "Journey from Oman to Amedi" by Ali Sido Gorani, 1939

in the Jordanian embassies in Ankara, Damascus, Jeddah and Yemen. Mr. Medhat Jumaa, on the other hand, was

Jordan's ambassador to Britain, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia, West Germany, and the United States. Major General Abdul-Ilah Al-Kurdi was Ambassador of Jordan to Malaysia and Russia, and Mr. Mazen Medhat Jumaa Ambassador to Malaysia.

Today, the Kurds of Jordan have a charitable social association named Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi Association that is located in Tlaa al-Ali, one of the prestigious areas of Amman. ■



## Kurdistan Region and Türkiye Strengthen Bilateral Relations



**Marewan Hawramy**

*Marewan Hawramy is a writer and has master degree in diplomacy and international relations.*

In a significant diplomatic move, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani embarked on a visit to Ankara, where he met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The high-level meetings were aimed at discussing and enhancing the Kurdistan Region's relations with Türkiye and focused on various political, economic, and security aspects. The visit underscored the importance of bilateral cooperation and the shared interests between the Kurdistan Region and Türkiye.

On June 20, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan welcomed Prime Minister Masrour Barzani in the presidential complex for a closed-door meeting in the Turkish capital. The meeting, which also included newly appointed Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, focused on various regional and bilateral issues.

During the meeting, Prime Minister Barzani conveyed his congratulations to President Erdoğan on his recent electoral victory. The leaders engaged in discussions concerning the latest developments in Iraq and the wider region, emphasizing the importance of maintaining open lines of communication and cooperation. Prime Minister Barzani also expressed his commitment to strengthening bilateral ties between the Kurdistan Region and Türkiye.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister Barzani held talks with Foreign Minister Fidan, highlighting the significance of their meeting in furthering dialogue and understanding between the KRG and Türkiye. These discussions provided an opportunity to address key issues of mutual interest, including economic cooperation, security, and regional stability.

The meeting between Prime Minister Barzani and President Erdoğan marked the KRG leader's third official visit to Türkiye and the first following President Erdoğan's reelection in May. This demonstrates the commitment of both leaders to fostering closer ties between the Kurdistan Region and Türkiye.

The economic and political relations between the KRG and Türkiye have played a crucial role in strengthening their partnership. Notably, the KRG was among the first foreign entities to provide assistance in the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes that struck southern Türkiye in February. The quick response and support from the KRG showcased the close cooperation and solidarity between the two.

The meeting between Prime Minister Barzani and President Erdoğan not only reaffirmed their shared commitment to regional stability but also emphasized the importance of cooperation in various domains. The discussions encompassed economic collaboration, security cooperation, and cultural exchanges, all of which contribute to fostering a stronger and more prosperous relationship.

As the Kurdistan Region and Türkiye continue to work closely together, it is expected that their partnership will further evolve and yield positive outcomes for both sides. The meeting serves as a testament to the significance of dialogue and diplomacy in strengthening relations and addressing common challenges. With shared interests and a mutual commitment to peace and stability, the KRG and Türkiye are poised to build on their strong foundation of cooperation and forge an even brighter future.



Photo: Farhad Ahmad

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**Prime Minister Barzani and President Erdoğan marked the KRG leader's third official visit to Türkiye and the first following President Erdoğan's reelection in May**

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PM Barzani holds a meeting with the Turkish President in Ankara on June 20, 2023



## A Vision to Accommodate 20 Million Tourists by 2030

Kurdistan Chronicle

“Recent statistics from the KRG tourism board reveal that in 2022, the Kurdistan Region welcomed over six million tourists

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Number of Tourists Visiting the Kurdistan Region Over the Past 16 Years	
377,397	2007
558,860	2008
791,345	2009
1,313,841	2010
1,702,390	2011
2,216,993	2012
2,952,027	2013
1,529,434	2014
782,251	2015
1,603,400	2016
2,100,210	2017
3,057,642	2018
3,789,983	2019
845,747	2020
4,189,569	2021
6,035,057	2022



The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Tourism Board has set an ambitious goal of attracting 20 million tourists annually to the autonomous Kurdistan Region by 2030. Through collaborative efforts with government institutions, it has developed an extensive eight-year plan aimed at unlocking the immense tourism potential of the region, which currently has a population of over six million.

During an interview with Kurdistan Chronicle, Amal Jalal, the head of the KRG Tourism Board, expressed confidence that the region would surpass expectations and deliver an exceptional tourism experience by fostering cooperation among ministries and government agencies.

Recent statistics from the KRG tourism board reveal that in 2022, the Kurdistan Region welcomed over six million tourists. With more than 3,100 captivating attractions scattered throughout the region, visitors are treated to a diverse and enchanting journey.

One notable achievement has been the increase in foreign tourist arrivals, which rose to 25% of total visitors last year, as reported by Jalal. The KRG remains dedicated to attracting travelers worldwide, positioning Kurdistan

as an exceptional destination that caters to all individuals, especially those in pursuit of extraordinary and cherished experiences.

The Kurdistan Region has already witnessed an influx of tourists from various corners of the globe, including Hong Kong, Russia, and Western countries. Extensive plans are underway to revitalize and restore several historical landmarks and touristic sites in Erbil, Duhok, and Suleimani, further enhancing the region's appeal to international visitors. Exciting investment opportunities arising from these projects will be announced in the near future, further fostering a thriving tourism industry.

Beyond its promising tourism growth, the Kurdistan Region boasts breathtaking landscapes that transcend seasons. From cascading waterfalls and lush green valleys in spring to scenic mountains and outdoor activities in summer, beautiful ancient citadels and archaeological sites in autumn, and a winter wonderland for skiing enthusiasts, the region offers a diverse range of experiences throughout the year.

With strategic plans and a unified commitment, the Kurdistan Region is poised to emerge as an irresistible destination for global travelers seeking authentic experiences and natural wonders. Its breathtaking landscapes, rich cultural heritage, warm hospitality, and ongoing development initiatives form the foundation of a prosperous and thriving tourism industry. As the Kurdistan Region endeavors to achieve its ambitious target of 20 million visitors annually, it invites the world to explore its treasures and embrace a journey of a lifetime in this vibrant and hospitable region.

*\*Note: The attached table displays the number of tourists visiting the Kurdistan Region over the past 16 years, with 2015 and 2020 respectively experiencing a notable decrease due to the rise of extremist groups in Iraq and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. ■*

Photo: Sabr Dri



# Nine Years in ISIS Captivity

Love Triumphs Over Tragedy as Couple Embarks  
on a Journey of Healing



Rojhat Loqman

*Rojhat Loqman is a Kurdistan-based journalist with 10 years experience with different media organizations.*

**D**uhok, a province in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, recently witnessed a heartwarming reunion. Samiya Smu Khodeda, a courageous Kurdish-Yezidi woman, has finally been freed after enduring nine years of captivity at the hands of ISIS extremists. Overwhelmed with joy, Samiya and her husband, Dakhil Hassan, have decided to rekindle their love and remarry, embracing a future that is rooted in hope and resilience.

In the tragedy that unfolded in 2014, when ISIS fighters attacked Sinjar (Shingal), many Kurdish-Yezidi girls and women suffered the unimaginable fate of being kidnapped. Samiya's story is just one among many that highlight the harrowing plight faced by Yezidi women since that fateful attack. Thousands of Yezidi women were snatched and subjected to unspeakable atrocities, including rape, sexual assault, and constant abuse during their captivity.

The journey of Yezidi women like Samiya is a testament to their unwavering spirit and the enduring power of love. During her interview with the Kurdistan Chronicle, Samiya shared chilling details of her time in captivity. "When the ISIS extremists attacked, I was at my mother's house for the 40th summer holiday celebrations, when suddenly the ISIS extremists kidnapped us. Our first stop was Mosul, where we stayed in a prison for a long time surrounded by over 200 other women and girls who had also been snatched from their homes and families."

Samiya's voice quivered as she recounted the horrors she witnessed and endured. The systematic cruelty inflicted upon her and countless other Yezidi women is a stark reminder of the urgent need for justice and

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Samiya's story is just  
one among many  
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harrowing plight  
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fateful attack

”

healing. Her liberation, though a ray of hope, represents only a fraction of the long road to recovery that the Yezidi community must undertake.

**Indomitable spirit and  
unwavering love**

Amidst the darkness that shrouded their lives, the reunion of Samiya and Dakhil offers a glimmer of light. Dakhil, who stood by Samiya's side throughout the arduous nine-year separation, emphasized the depth of their love. "Samiya and I were deeply in love for five years before we tied the knot. However, only nine months into our marriage, tragedy struck, and Samiya was cruelly torn away from me by ISIS," he shared. Their love story, once filled with dreams and promise, was suddenly overshadowed by uncertainty and despair.

As Samiya and Dakhil begin their journey of







Photo: Rojhat Luqman



Photo: Rojhat Luqman

Samiya and Khalil reunite after being in ISIS captivity for nine years

healing, their resilience becomes an inspiration to the Yazidi community and the world. Their reunion in Duhok serves as a symbol of hope, igniting a collective desire for justice and a future free from the shadows of the past.

In their pursuit of closure, Samiya and Dakhil express their gratitude for the support they have received from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). However, the path to reclaiming their homeland in Sinjar is currently obstructed by various armed forces. Their yearning for peace and the restoration of their lives echoes the sentiments of the entire Yazidi community, as they hope for Sinjar to remerge as a place where tranquility prevails and they start to rebuild their shattered dreams.

Samiya's indomitable spirit and Dakhil's unwavering love stand as beacons of strength in the face of unimaginable adversity. Their story represents the countless Yazidi women who have suffered at the hands of ISIS and serves as a call to action for

justice, healing, and the protection of the most vulnerable in society.

In August 2014, ISIS militants seized control of Sinjar, the Yazidi heartland in northern Iraq, resulting in a series of devastating consequences for the minority community. Over 400,000 Yazidis were compelled to flee their homes to escape the violence and persecution. Tragically, those who were unable to escape, including men and older women, faced brutal killings, with the remains of over 5,000 victims discovered in mass graves. Additionally, an estimated 6,417 women and children fell victim to enslavement, enduring unimaginable hardships at the hands of their captors.

The KRG's Yazidi Rescue Office, established by KRG President Nechirvan Barzani, has played a significant role in rescuing thousands of Yazidi individuals, particularly women and children, from the clutches of ISIS, offering hope and a chance for a brighter future. ■

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# DEMOCRACY

## PM Barzani's Town Hall Sets New Precedent

Kurdistan Chronicle



Town Hall 2022



Town Hall 2021





Photos: Sabr Dri • Farhad Ahmad

Town hall meetings, or town halls, have long been a staple of democratic societies, providing a platform for citizens to directly engage with their elected representatives. These televised programs foster transparency and the exchange of ideas, bridging the gap between politicians and their constituents.

## PM Barzani's bold initiative

In a groundbreaking move, Prime Minister Barzani has become the first politician in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq to hold a town hall, welcoming all sectors of society to participate and debate politics.

Prime Minister Barzani's decision to organize a town hall sets a remarkable precedent not just in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq but also in the Middle East. By embracing this interactive approach, he displays a willingness to engage directly with the public, encouraging open discussions about his role in leading the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

## Engaging every sector of the public

One of the highlights of PM Barzani's town hall is its inclusivity. By extending an invitation to every sector of society, he ensures that diverse perspectives are heard and considered. By gathering people from different backgrounds, professions, and ideologies, they foster a rich and dynamic exchange of ideas.

## Answering questions and building trust

During the town hall, PM Barzani will field questions from participants, providing an opportunity for citizens to directly submit their concerns to the region's leader. By responding openly and honestly, he aims to build trust and demonstrate his willingness to be held accountable. This engagement can help bridge the gap between politicians and the public, fostering a stronger sense of unity and shared responsibility.

## The impact on Kurdistan's political landscape

PM Barzani's town hall meeting carries significant implications for the political landscape of the Kurdistan Region. This innovative approach to governance has the potential to inspire similar initiatives in the region and beyond, promoting citizen participation and strengthening democratic institutions.



# INTERVIEW

## Award-Winning Journalist Discusses Media and Political Challenges

Kurdistan Chronicle

Jomana Karadsheh, an award-winning CNN journalist, recently visited Erbil to share her experiences and stories with a group of journalists as part of a CNN Academy training session, which now has an office in Erbil. During her visit, Karadsheh spoke with Kurdistan Chronicle about a variety of topics, including journalism, the media situation in Iraq, the country's political landscape, and ISIS threats.

Now based in the CNN's London bureau, Karadsheh has spent the last two decades reporting from countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, including Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

She began her career as a producer and reporter at CNN's Baghdad bureau from



Jomana Karadsheh reports for CNN from Erbil Citadel



2005 to 2011, where she covered major news events such as the trials and execution of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Iraq's first democratic elections, and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country. Karadsheh was one of several CNN correspondents on the ground in Iraq in 2014 and 2015, covering ISIS's rise and the battle to retake cities from the terrorist group.

**Kurdistan Chronicle (KC):** How has Erbil changed since your last visit during the fight against ISIS? What is your impression?



Jomana Karadsheh visits Kurdistan Chronicle's Erbil headquarters

**Karadsheh:** I love returning to Kurdistan and Iraq because the people are so welcoming. I feel at home and consider this region to be my home because I spend so much time covering it. I don't consider it as a story or as a place that I covered; it's my second home. The last time I was here was during the height of the war against ISIS. It's incredible to return now and see how relaxed everyone is, to see the transformation of the city, the new buildings, the new restaurants,

the new shopping malls. It just feels so normal; people here can finally live normal lives.

**KC:** Can you tell us more about your trip to Erbil?

**Karadsheh:** It's great that CNN Academy is sharing our experiences with some of the journalists who have enrolled in CNN Academy training, as well as the CNN way of doing journalism. I've only been here for less than 24 hours and have met so many journalists already, and I love hearing everyone's questions. People would

**Karadsheh:** I don't see this as a job or a career; it's a passion and a duty. It's difficult, demanding, and exhausting at times, but I love it. I never saw it as a job; I saw it as something I was born to do, something I enjoy doing. I feel an obligation and duty to tell people's stories. My advice to journalists is to never take no for an answer; if you work hard enough, you will be able to achieve your goals.

**KC:** If not billions, millions have been spent on developing Iraqi media and journalists since 2003, but some may argue that the current level of Iraqi media professionalism is not very ambitious; what are your thoughts on this?

**Karadsheh:** It is extremely difficult after decades of dictatorship to suddenly open up and have media freedom. You will make a lot of mistakes and still have a lot to learn. At the same time, the risks that journalists in this country face doing their jobs are incredible, whether from armed groups or terrorists. Clearly, Iraq is the most dangerous country in the world to be a journalist. It is not easy, and I am sure it is not ideal, but when you come to Kurdistan Chronicle or when we visited Rudaw Media Network today, it is great to see all the different media organizations and that there is a vibrant media environment. At the very least, Iraqis now have a choice in terms of which channels to watch and which media to follow.

**KC:** As someone who has covered Iraq for many years, what are your thoughts on the country's successes and failures?

**Karadsheh:** I believe that is a question for the United States government. I believe that a lot of things went wrong; for example, in 2010 and 2011, the United States withdrew its army, when all the warning signs were present of the emergence of another terror organization, and people were concerned. Then, two years later, ISIS emerged. Look at it now, things are better and more stable, but there is always a risk. I believe it is critical that Iraq continues to receive international assistance, such as security cooperation.

**KC:** Given the low turnout in Iraq's 2021 parliamentary elections, do you believe Iraqis have lost faith in the electoral process?

**Karadsheh:** I was in Iraq for a few days for the last elections, and people were asking why they should vote just because this person or that person gets a seat, but my life will not change. I'm still not going to have electricity or running water. They simply do not see a difference in their lives if they vote, which is very unfortunate.

**KC:** You've written a lot about ISIS.



Jomana Karadsheh participates in CNN Academy in Erbil

**What is their current status, and are they still active?**

**Karadsheh:** They're down but not out – a phrase the U.S. military once used. The most common mistake is believing that there are no threats from ISIS. This lesson should be learned from the past: don't let your guard down thinking it's over. There are still real threats, whether here or in Syria, because some of the problems that gave rise to ISIS still exist today, such

as high unemployment and an economic crisis. The international community should support regions such as Kurdistan, which fought ISIS on behalf of the world in order to ensure that the threat does not resurface.

**KC:** Thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

**CNN Academy/ Erbil Media City**

CNN opened its fourth academy in the world in Erbil in 2022, in collaboration with Erbil Media City, following its academy in Abu Dhabi, Dub-

currently planning its third course, which will begin in September. This upcoming session will delve into critical topics such as the environment, water conservation, clean energy, and climate change, with a focus on the critical theme of sustainability. Participants will attend weekly four-hour training sessions for 11 weeks. They will conclude their learning journey with a one-week training experience at the CNN Academy in Abu Dhabi.

Reflecting on this transformative venture, Sanjay Rania, the accomplished General Manager of Erbil Media City, shared his vision for the region. With an impressive 30-year background in international media and entertainment, Rania envisions Erbil Media City as the premier media and entertainment hub in Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Building on this ambition, he is currently in discussions with esteemed film schools from around the world, exploring the possibility of establishing the first-ever film school in the region.

Rania, who has 30 years of international experience in media and entertainment, told Kurdistan Chronicle that Erbil Media City aspires to be the hub for media and entertainment in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. He is currently in talks with film schools around the world about opening the first film school in the Kurdistan Region and is also in talks with local universities and camera companies about participating.

Rania expressed his enthusiasm by saying, "Kurdistan is uniquely situated to host a film school. Its proximity to Türkiye, Iran, Syria, and the Iraqi province of Nineveh, which was occupied by ISIS in 2014, provides a wealth of cultural and storytelling opportunities. Furthermore, the region has excellent connectivity, with two-hour flights to the UAE, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Above all, the breathtaking topography, which includes picturesque mountains, valleys, and cities, provides an ideal setting for aspiring filmmakers. The film school will serve the entire Middle East." ■

The CNN Academy in Erbil has run two successful journalism training courses since its inception and is



## The Journey of an American University in Kurdistan

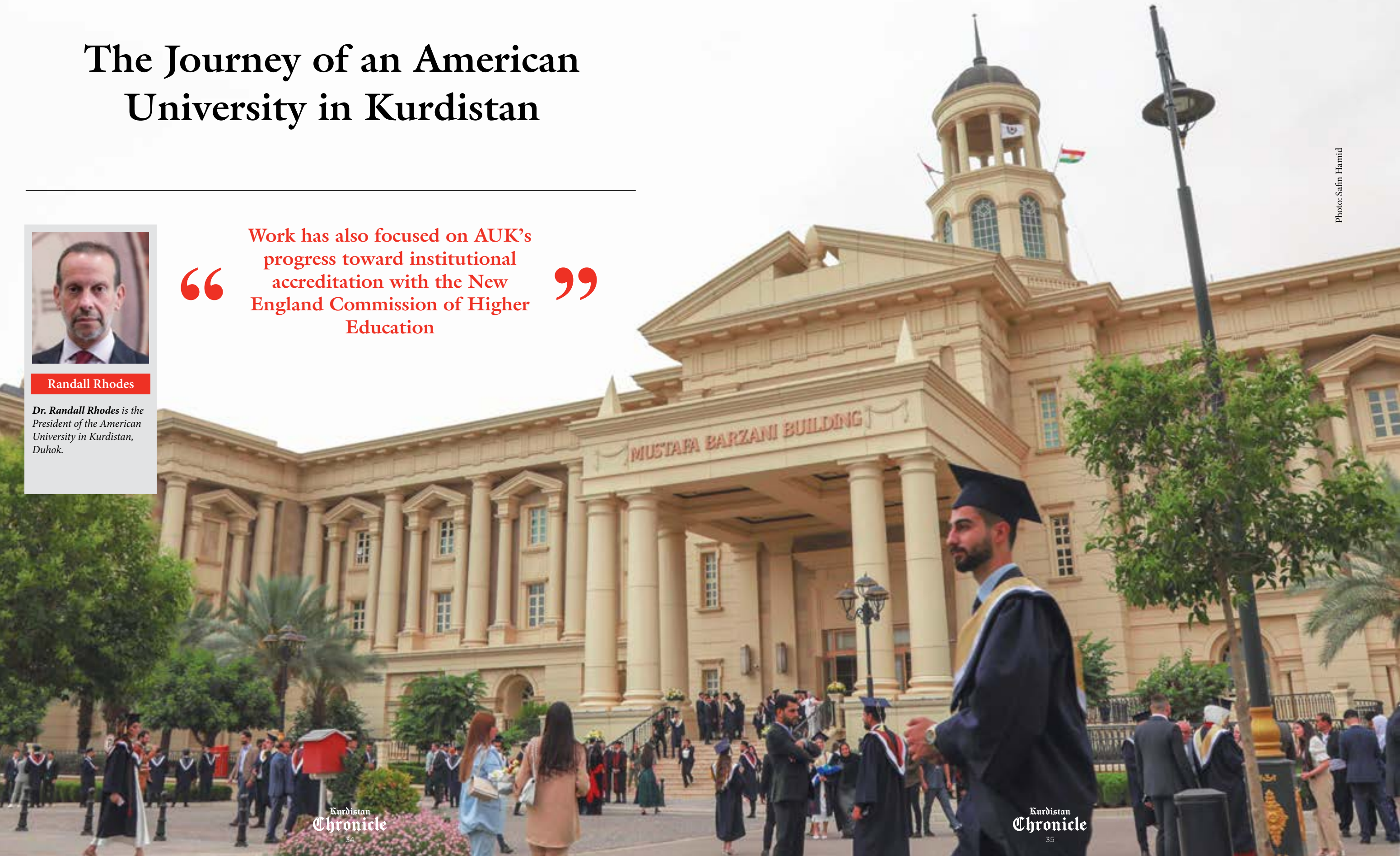


Randall Rhodes

*Dr. Randall Rhodes is the President of the American University in Kurdistan, Duhok.*

“Work has also focused on AUK’s progress toward institutional accreditation with the New England Commission of Higher Education”

Photo: Safin Hamid







PM Barzani joins AUK students for their graduation photo

Founded in 2014 as a non-profit institution of higher learning by Masrour Barzani, the American University of Kurdistan (AUK), located in Duhok, provides an American-style education based on the liberal arts model. Currently, AUK offers eight bachelor's programs across four colleges: Engineering, Business, Arts & Sciences, and Nursing. Academic programs focus on transformative knowledge and innovative problem solving that address real-life issues. Extracurricular activities ensure the holistic development of the students with opportunities to advance in the areas of volunteerism, community service, and leadership. This approach to education prepares graduates for success in their professional and personal lives.

The adaptation of the American model has been strengthened by the award of three competitive grants from the U.S. Department of State (2020, 2021, and 2022) totaling over \$11 million. These grants have supported partnerships with U.S. universities with the aim of redesigning bachelor's programs in preparation for program-level accreditation; establishing state-of-the-art BIM, FAB, and Nursing Simulation Labs that have shifted the pedagogy toward innovation and applied learning; and growing student-support structures to address the needs of an increasingly diverse population. Work has also focused on AUK's progress toward institutional accreditation with the New England Commission of Higher Education. Collectively, these initiatives ensure that AUK achieves parity with universities in the United States, which will facilitate student, faculty, and staff mobility, exchanges, and collaborative research opportunities.

## Challenges

However, developing a true American-style higher education in Iraq comes with logistical, fiscal, and cultural challenges. It also comes at a premium, and access remains an issue due to the high cost of tuition, which captures only a fraction of the true cost of education. Women need support to reach parity with their male peers, especially in the STEM and entrepreneurial domains. Vulnerable populations, notably minorities, IDPs, and refugees, need customized programming to develop the knowledge and skills to start businesses and become self-sufficient. Innovation needs to be fostered to inspire students, diversify the economy, and move Kurdistan forward to become the knowledge nation envisioned by the government. And, there is still more that the University needs to accomplish in respect to capacity building and advancing its infrastructure to truly become efficient and transparent in its operations.

In addition to the U.S. partnerships and accreditations, the University is committed to pursuing the following objectives:

Establishing a sustainable ecosystem dedicated to job creation, innovation, and private sector development.

Ensuring that all qualified students have access to an American-style higher education so that the student population mirrors the diversity across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI); this necessitates national and international corporates and organizations to support scholarships to

fund the education of those from marginalized and vulnerable populations.

Promoting sustainable and innovative technologies through the establishment of teaching-learning labs that will serve as regional centers for research, innovation, and business creation.

Adopting and adapting international best practices in operations and administration that will provide the tools for data-driven decision-making and foster institutional effectiveness.

## Impact

A nation can only achieve a strong economy and enjoy social and political progress if it invests in education. As the President of AUK, I lead the National Task Force on K-19 Education, founded in 2021, to support the KRG Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to assess the current system, research international best practices, and formulate recommendations for reform. In the past year, the Task Force focused on stakeholder engagement in three areas: University Admissions, Technical and Vocational Training, and Early Childhood Education. Additional areas of interest include conducting a market study analyzing the alignment of the academic programs across the KRI with workforce needs, online platforms to connect students with internships and employment opportunities, and the drafting of a strategic plan for the Ministry of Education. The Task Force continues to be of service to the ministries and hopes that in the coming year, after the elections, education will be foremost on the agenda.

Regarding inclusion, the economy of Kurdistan can only progress if all of its citizens participate. While the percentage of AUK students who are female is increasing (from 40% in 2021 to 44% in 2023), which is partially attributable to scholarships where a majority of seats are reserved for women, additional assistance is needed to support their persistence to graduation and long-term professional success. In a region where only about 25% of women in their twenties are employed outside of the household, it is important for AUK to focus on their professional aspirations and work force preparedness. As stated above, more funding is needed from the public and private sectors to ensure that no woman is left behind.

It is also important to note that the University must seriously address the specific needs of IDPs and refugees, especially those struggling with various traumas. Programming such as gender-based counseling and networking with successful role models will serve to engage and inspire participants. These interactions also focus on tools for success, including roadmaps on starting SMEs as well as ventures in social entrepreneurship. An example is the implementation of a certificate program in business start-ups for women IDPs and refugees; the curriculum includes English language, business management, accounting, hu-

man resource management, and market assessment, and will also feature long-term mentorships to support participants past the end date of the classes. This program will be administered by AUK's Center for Academic and Professional Advancement.

AUK hopes that these tactics will ensure that all students of the KRI enjoy equal opportunities and the support that they need to succeed academically and professionally. These will include networking support so that everyone can effectively transition to careers, achieve economic self-sufficiency, and contribute to the economic, social, and political progress of Kurdistan – the ultimate goal of a higher education institution. ■



Photo: Safin Hamid



## Charting the Path for German-Kurdish Relations

*In this interview with Kassem Taber Saleh, a German-Kurdish Member of Parliament (MP), the focus is on his official visit to the Kurdistan Region in June 2022 and his vision for German-Kurdish relations.*

Kurdistan Chronicle

**Y**ou visited Kurdistan in June 2022, accompanied by your colleague in the Green Party and the Bundestag, Max Lucks. To start, what can you tell us about this visit?

**Was it an official visit or for tourism and educational purposes?**

It was an official visit with two other members of Parliament (MPs). As members of the committee for human rights and humanitarian aid, we chose to pay our first visit to the region of Kurdistan, where we met with representatives of the autonomous government, non-governmental or-



ganizations, German institutions, etc. It was my very first trip as MP and was very important to me as a Kurd to travel to the place I was born.

**H**ow did you see Kurdistan? Do you have a particular vision for the development of German-Kurdish relations?

I see lots of potential and achieve-

ments but also many obstacles. There must be more economic possibilities for young people. Meanwhile, climate change causes droughts. These two things present an opportunity: the region has a high economic potential for solar power and could start businesses in this field and create opportunities for youth.

**I**n the Ninth Cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) under the leadership of Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, the issue of the environment has become the center of attention. Since you are an orga-

nization that is known on a global level for your interest in the environment and your efforts to protect it, do you have any recommendations for the KRG in this regard? How could it protect the environment and reduce pollution?

Yes, the climate crisis must be the center of attention around the world, but especially in such a dry region as Kurdistan. Water management is of utmost importance. Investments in drip irrigation and other modern forms of agriculture should be made. Another field is energy production, which should transform from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, most importantly solar.

**T**he question of identity is of central importance in Germany, with integration a priority of the German government. As an integrated Kurd, how would you explain the story of your integration to the point of entering the German Bundestag? Can a person's original identity become an obstacle for them to realize their ambitions in the country to which they emigrate?

Germany has not yet entirely realized that it has become an immigration country. Racism is still a big problem for migrants. It is harder for children from migrant communities to achieve success in higher education and find well-paid jobs. Therefore, I had to struggle twice as hard to reach my goals. Luckily, there are many organizations and institutions that aim at supporting kids from poorer backgrounds, for example with scholarships. This helped me tremendously.

**T**here is a large, heterogeneous Kurdish community in Germany, which comes from several Middle Eastern countries. Based on your experience, do you see hope that the Kurds will become an

electoral weight in Germany in the future? How can the members of this community maintain a balance between their national German identity and their own culture? Are there obstacles on the way to this balance?

I think this is a highly individual question and depends on many factors. In general, it is important that people feel that their votes count and contribute to positive change with regards to their respective political goals and requests. So far, the German political landscape has not been as diverse as it could, and I can imagine that many Kurdish-Germans have not felt properly represented due to the lack of politicians with a similar background. I hope that other MPs and I with minority background can contribute to a more representative political field that feels more inviting for potential voters, but also for additional Kurdish-German politicians, be it on the local, state, or federal level. ■





## Institute for Disaster Control



**Mohammad  
Dargalayi**

*Mohammed Dargalayi is a journalist and photographer with 13 years experience. He is a member of IFJ Global.*



Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi

Kurdistan Interior Minister, Reber Ahmed, and German officials inaugurate the Crisis Management Training Institute

**I**n June the Kurdistan Region hosted an important event in Erbil to announce the inauguration of the Training and Crisis Management Institute.

With local history marked by natural and man-made disasters, there has always been a need for a modernized organization in Kurdistan that can effectively train and equip first responders, rescuers, and civil protection services. Recognizing the magnitude of this undertaking, it became evident that the local commitment and determination need international support to materialize such capacity.

Germany, as one of the key partners of the Kurdistan Region on an international level, acknowledged the need and mobilized its essen-

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**Now with the new institute, the right tools are available for the Kurdistan Region’s ongoing efforts “to enhance its crisis response skills, safeguard lives, and minimize damage,” as underscored by Minister Reber Ahmed in his statement**

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**The Crisis Management Training Institute is built on 4,000 square meters in Erbil and offers emergency services and a wide range of training opportunities**

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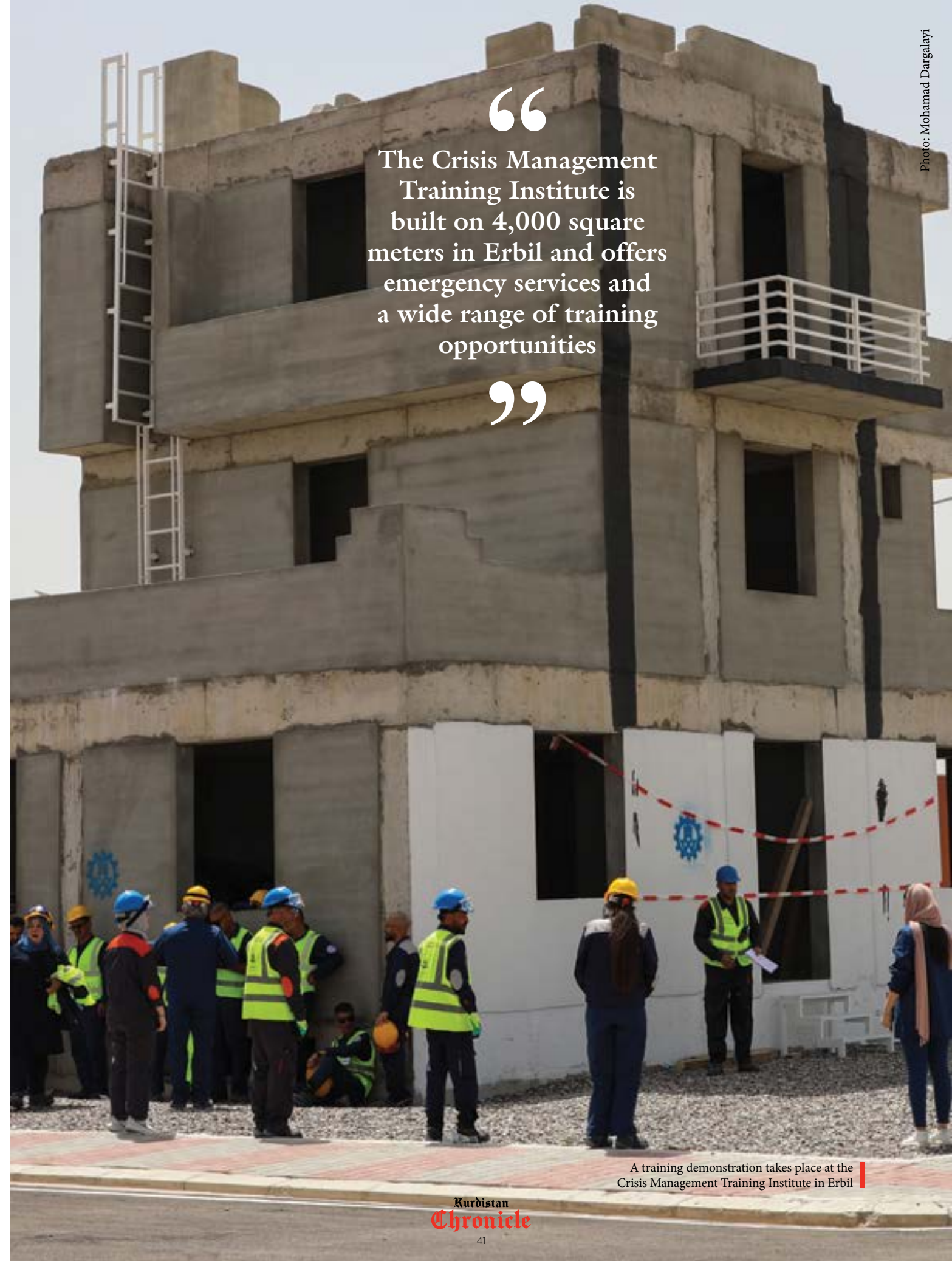


Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi

A training demonstration takes place at the Crisis Management Training Institute in Erbil





Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

tial resources to help realize the first Training and Crisis Management Institute in Kurdistan, which opened its doors on June 4th of this year.

The official opening ceremony of the institute was attended by Kurdistan Region Interior Minister Reber

sis management infrastructure in the region and enhancing the human capacity of its first responders.

The Kurdistan Region established the Joint Crisis Coordination Center (JCC) in 2015. It nearly coincided with the emergence of the Islamic

ternational aid to the people in need. However, responding to the humanitarian crisis caused by the brutality of ISIS was not JCC's only remarkable mission; the organization has also spearheaded campaigns to respond to natural disasters like flooding, pandemics, fires, etc.

Now with the new institute, the right tools are available for the Kurdistan Region's ongoing efforts "to enhance its crisis response skills, safeguard lives, and minimize damage," as underscored by Minister Reber Ahmed in his statement.

The Crisis Management Training Institute is built on 4,000 square meters in Erbil and offers emergency services and a wide range of training opportunities. It expands across six different sections with two routes strewn with rubble, a tower for height rescues, and an area with streets and paths. Full-time and volunteer responders can try numerous scenarios. During the handover ceremony for the institute, JCC staff conducted a training demonstration to provide a clearer picture of how the institute can grow the future capacities and competencies of the civil protection service in the region.

The collaboration between the German THW and Kurdish JCC, however, is not limited to the infrastructural support in the new facility. The former supported the latter with technical equipment and built a comprehensive

logistics network in the region. This has already enabled the JCC to react quickly in some emergency aid operations, for example in delivering humanitarian aid to people in Syria and Türkiye.

Likewise, the THW, together with JCC, has set up Rapid Response Units and trained first responders from civil society who can apply the basics of rescue and first aid in the event of an earthquake.

In a speech delivered during the opening ceremony, THW President Gerd Friedsam said: "With the new training ground, we are further strengthening civil protection in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The training of the full-time and voluntary emergency services will be raised to a new level at this new training ground, since the emergency services can now realistically practice different scenarios, from earthquakes to rescue from heights to traffic accidents."

Commenting on the new training compound, JCC head Srwa Rasul told Kurdistan Chronicle that since the trainings are not limited to full-time first responders who work for the government, volunteers can also join the trainings which can help prepare society as a whole to react properly in a disaster and minimize loss and damage.

She further explained that support for the JCC enhances international aid

deliveries to other devastated regions around Kurdistan as well. According to Rasul, in the past few months, 27 truckloads of humanitarian aid – valued at \$800,000 – was delivered to the Syrian Kurdish areas through the JCC

ny have developed strong bonds throughout the past few years. Germany is among the key members of the International Coalition to Combat ISIS and provided essential weapons, military equipment, vehicles, and



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

Ahmed, President of Bundesanstalt Technisches Hilfswerk (THW) Gerd Friedsam, and Parliamentary State Secretary in the Federal Ministry of the Interior of Germany Johann Saathoff. The officials each delivered a speech to highlight the importance of the institute for improving the cri-

State (ISIS), which led to the displacement of millions of people, many of whom sought refuge in Kurdistan. Back then, the JCC, part and parcel of the Interior Ministry of Kurdistan, played a remarkable role in setting up and managing refugee camps across the region and channeling in-



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

in Erbil.

"We thank the German government for the generosity," she stressed.

The Kurdistan Region and Germa-

trainings to the peshmerga forces to enable them to fight ISIS more effectively, leading to the defeat of the extremist group in 2017. ■



## Empowering Innovation



**Farhang Bradosti**

*Farhang Bradosti is a Kurdish tech entrepreneur, organizer of HITEX for the past five years, CEO and Founder Lucid Source.*



PM Barzani attends HITEX 2023 in Erbil

Photo: Farhad Ahmad



A panel discussion is held during HITEX 2023 in Erbil

**H**awler International Technology Exhibition (HITEX) has established itself as Iraq's premier annual technology and electronics exhibition and conference. With a bold vision, HITEX aims to become the leading international tech and electronics event in the region. Its primary objective is to facilitate market entry for both local and international companies, thus driving the growth of the domestic market. By partnering with top-tier international companies and offering high-quality products, HITEX strives to elevate industry standards and foster innovation.

The journey of HITEX is a testament to its remarkable achievements. From its modest inception in 2019, the exhibition has experienced exponential growth, culminating in its position as the largest exhibition in terms of both visitor turnout and business transactions by 2023. Over the course of five years, HITEX has persevered, building its brand and reputation as the go-to event for technology and electronics.

HITEX 2023 was a four-day extravaganza that attracted an impressive attendance of over 48,000 visitors. With 121 companies representing 21 countries, the exhibition provided a global platform for exhibitors to showcase

their cutting-edge products and services. It also served as a catalyst for business transactions, with over 1,800 contracts signed during the event. Moreover, HITEX placed a spotlight on 32 startup projects, offering them a valuable opportunity to gain exposure and connect with industry experts. The event featured 21 local and international speakers who shared their insights and expertise, while 17 local influencers added their unique perspectives, creating an immersive and inspiring experience for attendees.

The resounding support received by HITEX from the Kurdistan Regional Government, particularly through its IT department in Erbil, and the backing of the Iraqi government through the Ministry of Communication, the Communications and Media Commission (CMC), and the Iraqi Telecommunications and Post Company (ITPC), further emphasizes the exhibition's significance. As the largest exhibition in Iraq, HITEX solidifies its position as a pivotal event in the country's technology and telecommunications landscape.

HITEX remains unwavering in its commitment to promoting the highest standards of quality and professionalism in its collaborations with international companies. By introducing the best international products and tech-

nologies, HITEX not only enhances the local market but also grants consumers access to world-class innovations. The exhibition recognizes its crucial role in contributing to the development of Iraq's local economy. Consequently, HITEX is dedicated to supporting local businesses by helping them expand their reach through effective marketing and distribution strategies. By facilitating the exchange of knowledge and expertise, HITEX fosters a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation within Iraq's tech sector. Organized by Red Eagle Expo Company LTD., HITEX continues to ensure the success of exhibitions and conferences.

In summary, HITEX stands as the pinnacle of technological advancement in Iraq. Its continuous growth and accomplishments have cemented its position as the largest annual exhibition and conference for technology and electronics in the country. With a clear vision for international recognition, HITEX remains dedicated to facilitating market entry, promoting high-quality products, supporting local businesses, and contributing to the development of Iraq's local economy. As it moves forward, HITEX will continue to shape and drive the technology and electronics landscape in the region. ■



## IRAQ'S OIL HISTORY

### How Kurdistan Was Wronged?



**Kamal Kolo**

*Dr. Kamal Kolo, based in Erbil, serves as a distinguished professor specializing in Petroleum and Biogeosciences at Soran University. Alongside his noteworthy scientific endeavors, he has contributed to the literary world with several authored and co-authored books. Some of his notable works encompass "Es War Einmal in Aradin," "Das Ende Des Babylonischen Exiles," "Inside Out: Textorientierte Erkundungen des Werks von Annemarie Schwarzenbach," and "Iraqi Kurdistan Region A Path Forward."*

In the 1890s, there was a growing belief that Iraq, then a province of the Ottoman Empire, possessed significant oil and gas reserves. This belief sparked negotiations between European actors and the Ottoman Sultan's Civil List, or Privy Purse, in Istanbul, about securing exploitation rights for these resources. Following the successful appropriation of these rights in 1909 (a year after the Young Turks Revolution), the Turkish Petroleum Company (TPC) was established in 1912.

The TPC's shares were divided among the British, Germans, Turks, and an Armenian-Turk named Calouste

Gulbenkian, who held a 5% stake and was nicknamed "Mr. 5%." On June 28, 1914, the Ottoman Grand Vizir agreed to lease to the TPC the already discovered and any potential petroleum deposits in the vilayets of Mosul and Baghdad. Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, this agreement served as the basis for the TPC's application to the newly formed Iraqi government for a concession for the aforementioned regions. In 1920, in accordance with the San Remo mandate, France assumed control of the 25% shares previously owned by Germany.

### Postwar oil and geopolitics

Following the Treaty of Lausanne, the League of Nations delimited the borders between Iraq and Türkiye in 1926, with Iraq receiving the Mosul vilayet and Türkiye receiving 10% of the royalties for the oil produced in the Baghdad and Mosul vilayets for 25 years. The Iraqi Government granted a defined 75-year concession covering these areas in March 1925. The Americans were then given 23.75% of the TPC's shares under the name Near East Development Corporation. Similar shares were held by





the French company Francaise des Petroles (later Total), the British Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later BP), and the British-Dutch Royal Dutch Shell, with Gulbenkian holding the remaining 5%. The TPC renamed itself the Iraqi Petroleum Company in 1929, and the concession, though modified several times, lasted until 1972 when Iraq nationalized its oil resources.

Meanwhile, the Kurds were granted self-determination by the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, but this promise was revoked or ignored in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which promised Iraqi Kurdistan autonomous status only. Kurdistan was now included in the old Baghdad vilayet's oil concessionary areas. The Mosul vilayet, along with parts of Kurdistan promised to France in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, became part of the newly formed state of Iraq.

The natural conclusion is that modern Iraq, rather than being a cohesive nation-state, is shaped primarily by its abundant oil wealth. Iraq's formation as a state can be said to have occurred in the aftermath of World War I, during the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the new Middle East. Unlike other postwar states however, the formation of Iraq as well as its rugged course of development as a state, were heavily influenced by its significant oil resources.

The causes of its creation as an artificial state—even the monarchy was imported from outside Iraq—were founded on greed and wealth rather than 'national' factors. Iraq as a state experienced turmoil in the years 1936, 1942, 1948, 1958, 1963, 1967, 1968, 1979-1988, 1990-2003, and 2014-2016. It is now a textbook example of a rentier state that meets all of the classical conditions proposed by Charles Tilly (1985) (What were those conditions? And what do they diagnose or signal?). Such states derive most of their revenues from the outside world and the functioning of their political system depends to a large degree on accruing external revenues (Rolf Schwarz, 2008). With the experience of state failure in many parts of the developing world, the famous dictum that "war makes states" has been revived in recent years.

Outside of a brief period in modern Iraqi history (1920-1950), the political system and economy became heavily reliant on oil rents. The establishment of the Majlis Al-Imar al-Aala in 1950 signaled a paradigm shift in which oil revenues became critical to the government budget and thus to economic development. Ironically (This idea seems to build more on the events of 1950 rather than act as something surprising or amusing), the major economic projects in Iraq that formed the foundation of its current infrastructure were either completed or planned during the 1950s. The degradation of representation and the fragile democracy that existed during the monarchy were direct consequences of the newly formed rentier state, not rentier economy. The period between the mid 1930s and 1940s marked the beginning of political instability and turmoil, which culminated in 1958 with the drastic change of the political system through military force. Thus, since its independence in 1932, Iraq's political history has cycled



between a weak rentier state, a war-making strong rentierism state, and a de-formed rentier state in the aftermath of Kuwait war in 1991.

## Kurdistan and its potential

Kurdistan stands on the shoulders of a century of Iraqi experience. Major powers thwarted the Kurdish people's aspirations for an independent nation-state during this period, instead offering promises of autonomous status that were never fulfilled.

Kurdistan's social structure is primarily tribal but also has ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. Throughout history, the region has had peaceful relations with its ethnic and religious minorities. Centuries of coexistence and shared land and heritage have blurred these distinctions. Despite this, Kurdish society in Iraq has faced significant racial and ethnic discrimination. Kurds, like other minority groups, have been treated as a minority within an Arab-majority population. This difficult situation has resulted in a commitment to fair governance and security for all minorities in Kurdistan.

Kurdistan's historical connection with its homeland and geography remains strong. The concept of a historical homeland is firmly rooted in the region's past and continues to be relevant in the present day.

Another irony is that the same oil that prevented the formation of the Kurdish state may one day play a significant role in the formation of a new Kurdish state. Only after clear indications of oil wealth in Kurdistan did the British redraw the map of Iraq after revoking the Sykes-Picot agreement. That map of Iraq is fundamentally based on knowledge of the presence of oil within Kurdish territory. For the same reason, the Kurds were denied the right to self-determination.

The former IPC, like successive Iraqi governments, dabbled in Kurdistan. Kurdistan's total number of drilled wells did not exceed 28 boreholes.

sizes Kurdish nationalism within the boundaries of existing states while rejecting the concept of trans-nationalism altogether. However, when state formation and construction are possible, some authors, such as Denise Natalie (2012), argue that "Iraqi Kurds are likely to continue their drive for greater autonomy, aiming to transform their status as a dependent quasi-state in Iraq or economic vassal state of Türkiye into their own self-sufficient independent entity." A similar conclusion is reached by columnist David Romano: "On pragmatic grounds, Kurdish leaders could avoid maximalist approaches; however, if there is increasing instability in Iraq, they might also tell international partners that they deserve to be released from a failed state."

Clearly, such authors see past the current status quo and believe that Kurdistan will eventually become an independent state. Others, such as Dutch journalist and writer Joost Hiltermann, believe that asymmetric federalism models are the best mechanisms for power sharing. These analyses and conclusions are undoing and unraveling at least some of what the Sykes-Picot agreement had knitted in the aftermath of the strange, unpredictable, chaotic upheaval and massive complexities of the 'Arab Spring,' specifically in Syria.

Although the Kurdish region's oil resources are roughly a tenth of those of Iraq, they are still significant given that the region has a population of nearly 5 million people. Current discovered resources are most likely greater than those of OPEC member Ecuador (population 15 million) or major exporter Azerbaijan (9 million). At current oil prices, the Kurdistan Regional Government planned to reach a production capacity of 1 million barrels per day by 2016, which would have generated enormous revenues. The author of *The Myth of the Oil Crisis*, Robin Mills, saw this as evidence that Kurdistan's oil resources could serve as the foundation for a viable economy. ■

Since 2005, the number has risen to more than 100. The discovery of oil in Kurdistan is thought to be one of the main reasons for the annexation of southern Kurdistan (the Kurdistan region) into Iraq and the revocation of the Sykes-Picot agreement. The marginal development of oil exploration in Kurdistan was actually intended to stymie Kurdistan's economic development and, as a result, reduce the possibility of economic and political autonomy and future independence. Fearing that Kurdistan would seek independence if it became economically powerful, all Iraqi governments have avoided exploration in Kurdistan, even during periods of peace.

## Can oil be seen as a driver of self-determination?

The current school of thought empha-



## DARBANDIKHAN DAM

### A Witness of Living Memory



**Kadhim Sahar**

*Kadhim Sahar was the coordinator of the General Directorate of Dams between Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. He is an accomplished authority for 34 years in the field of dam creation and management in Iraq.*

The night of March 29, 1954, was long and terrifying for the people of Baghdad. Though the flood no longer directly threatened them from the river, the city's inhabitants remained at risk from the eastern side, as new fractures in the rivers north of Baghdad had opened and were already placing severe pressure on the city's surrounding areas, exacerbated by the strong winds that had continued to rage for two straight days. Due to the seriousness of the situation, the British engineering team that was hired by the Directorate of Irrigation General informed the government that three-quarters of a million people in the city were at risk.

#### Emergency meeting and a courageous minister

Such a circumstance demanded an emergency meeting, which was called at the General Directorate of Irrigation and attended by all the relevant official centers of the country, including ministers, members of Parliament, a large number of experts and the Crown Prince Abdullah bin Ali. Participants agreed on a statement and decided to evacuate and relocate residents from the densely populated Rusafa side of Baghdad to the Karkh side of city.

One attendee, the late Minister of Interior Mohammed Saeed Qazzaz, opposed the decision and put forward a different opinion, one for which he would bear full responsibility. After having assessed the risks evacuation would cause he concluded that these

outweighed the risks of residents staying in their homes that these would outweigh the risks of residents staying in their homes. He argued that the breakdown of one car on one of the two bridges in Baghdad during the evacuation would lead to large-scale deaths among the terrified masses of people fleeing their homes and to an unprecedented disaster for the country. Attendees concurred, and Qazzaz announced this policy to the people of Baghdad on government radio.

#### The birth of the dam

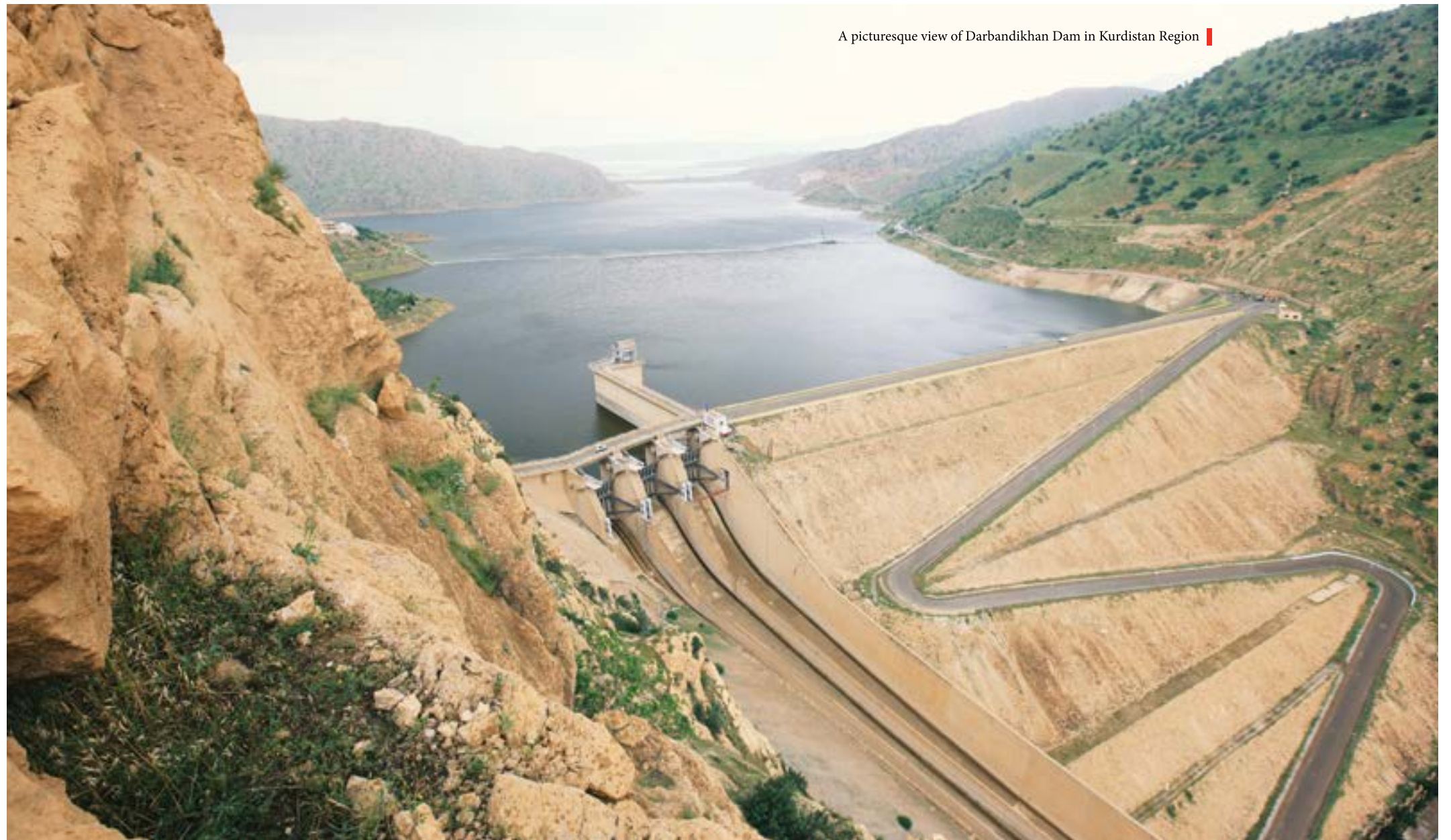
As the wind calmed down and the

river levels receded, Baghdad escaped the danger, but the crisis prompted the Iraqi government to change tactic. A new system for controlling the country's water resources was needed, and the Council of Reconstruction would be trusted with that project. The construction of the Darbandikhan Dam, which could control water levels from the Sirwan River that had threatened Baghdad with previous floods, was a major aspect of this new strategy.

The council undertook a comprehensive survey of the riverbed and assessed studies of the areas proposed for the dam. All possible methods of

construction were considered based on cost and how much water could be stored, with major international companies from the United States and Europe providing feasibility studies with such estimates.

By 1956, all the preparations had been made to begin construction on the river close to the Darbandikhan district in the Sulaymaniyah governorate. The work was then carried out by American companies over five years, so that Prime Minister Abdul Karim Qassim inaugurated the dam on November 23, 1961, in time for the wet season that year. Since the storage



A picturesque view of Darbandikhan Dam in Kurdistan Region





capacity of 2.5 billion cubic meters was insufficient to absorb greater rises in water levels from the Sirwan River, the dam became the main part of a storage, operation and irrigation system that would be completed with the later construction of the Hamrin Dam and Al-Sudour Dam in Diyala.



## A design ahead of its time

Of course, much has changed in the design, methods, and technologies of dam construction and operation since the 1950s. Though the dam at the time was cutting edge, it

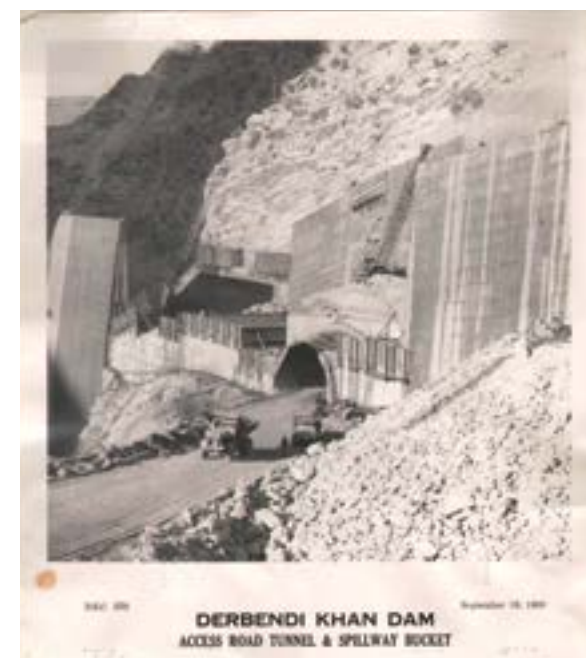


now requires a wholesale review to consider how to implement the latest monitoring and sensor technologies and to take advantage of digital computing systems. This process can help nurture a new generation of engineering and technical specialists who can develop their skills in managing dams and water systems in line with the expansion of scientific understanding.

When the dam was first constructed, two proposals were submitted: one for a concrete dam similar to the Dukan Dam, and one for a dam made of stone with a clay core. Based on the feasibility studies presented, the collective opinion of the technicians settled on the second proposal of a clay core. The texture of the core was determined with specifications that would suit the conditions surrounding the dam and the possible environmental changes that might occur, especially since the dam would be located very close to the active seismic belt in the western Iran. The dam's length was less than 450 meters, which was ideal in terms of cost and functionality. There was no need for post-construction filling work, and nearby quarries provided abundant supplies of the necessary materials. The dam's water column height was over 100 meters, an ideal design for the three-unit hydroelectric power plant with a total capacity of 250 MW that accompanied the dam.

## Earthquakes and war

In November 2017, as the 56th anniversary of the dam's opening was approaching, it was subjected to a violent earthquake measuring 7.2 degrees on the Richter scale, with its epicenter approximately 100 km from the dam's axis. In the preliminary study, the dam's designer expected that it would be exposed to an earthquake of this magnitude, although the probability of such an event was roughly 1 in 1,000. Yet the design was accepted on this basis, and the dam indeed withstood the earthquake's tremors



and did not incur serious damage, as the tremors occurred where storage levels were under the maximum limits. Therefore, the rehabilitation process was short, and the dam returned to operation that very same wet season of 2017-2018. The following wet season of 2018-2019 proved another test for the dam, as storage levels approached the maximum limits, but there were not any problems.



It is worth noting that the Darbandikhan Dam previously experienced a different type of earthquake in the 1980s, when it was the site of clashes during the Iran-Iraq War. During this time, the former Iraqi regime destroyed and removed the dam's floodgates for military reasons, knocking the dam out of service and preventing the accumulation of water. The dam was rehabilitated after the war's conclusion and thus stands as a living memory and true witness to the conditions of water, people, and nature in Iraq.



## Breathtaking beauty

The dam is in one of the most beautiful parts of Kurdistan, and its lake extends between high mountains and winding valleys, leaving small islands between them. When the waters recede, it leaves flat lands between them and creates a lake that has moderate temperature during most seasons of the year. Although the dam itself is a tourist attraction, its location and the region's topography constitute an ideal environment for further tourism investment.

## Further clarification

In the spring of 1954, Baghdad experienced an unprecedented rise in the level of the Tigris River due to a wave of surging waters in the lower Zab and Sirwan basins due to a rush of melting snow and rain. Muhammad Saeed Qazzaz, a Kurdish citizen born in Sulaymaniyah, held several positions during this period, including as Minister of the Interior in multiple governments. After the monarchy system ended, he was tried in court and sentenced

to death after refusing to concede and there he said his famous words: "I stand close to death and am not intimidated by the ropes of the gallows; when I am hung, I will see many who do not deserve to live under my feet."

Clay core and pulp: these were clay materials that were placed in the heart of the dam to prevent water leakage. The wet season is the rainy season in Kurdistan, from the beginning of October to the end of May. ■



# 100 Years of Dividing Kurdistan



Burhan Jaff

*Burhan Jaff, a Kurdish veteran politician, has an impressive track record of diplomatic service. He held the esteemed position of Iraq's Permanent Representative to the United Nations and served as the Ambassador of Iraq to Greece and Cyprus from 2010 to 2016. Additionally, he served as the Head of Mission of the Kurdistan Region to the European Union in Brussels from 1998 to 2009.*

The Kurdish people are, and have always been, the most victimized in the region by the national borders drawn by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Divided between four countries, marginalized, and persecuted by each state, the treaty caused unimaginable suffering that is ongoing today. The divisions of the map remain like scars of shame on the bodies of those who made it.

The Kurdish region continues to experience severe tensions, failed regimes, terrorist gangs, civil and economic decline, and blatant denials of human rights. While Iraq and Syria focus on the daily harassment of their Kurdish citizens, Iran and my focus in this talk Türkiye compete for control and influence in the region.

At the centenary of the treaty, these facts do nothing but confirm its failure and clarify the need for the international community to reconsider its map, to end historical injustices, and to ensure a lev-

el of regional peace, security and stability that is impossible so long as millions of Kurds are denied their most fundamental human rights.

A word of warning though: this it is not a simple task. We must tread carefully because despite the suffering that the treaty has caused since its inception, it now acts as a crucial mea-



Burhan Jaff speaks at the 100th Anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne

sure to prevent land reclamation.

In Turkish politics the treaty is at the center of a

raging battle for the soul of the nation. In some quarters there is the alarming notion that Türkiye plans a neo-Ottoman expansion into neighboring territories.

In its 2018 military operation against Kurds in Arfin, President Erdogan invoked "the red apple," a centuries-old symbol of the Ottoman pursuit of global power. It is a forceful and disturbing ideology among Turkish politicians who believe Türkiye remains entitled to the former lands of the Ottoman Empire, including Idlib, Aleppo, and Hasakah in Syria; Mosul, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Salah al-Din in the Mosul province of Iraq; and areas in Armenia, Bulgaria, and Greece, where there are significant Kurdish populations.

That movement is countered by more co-operative groups that wish to improve Türkiye's standing in the international community and particularly the European Union, but politicians who identify as being part of the "red apple coalition" insist Türkiye would lose its autonomy were it to adopt pro-EU policies. And since talks on Türkiye's EU membership are currently frozen due to member concerns about the Turkish human rights record, it seems those nationalist voices are getting their wish.

Inside Türkiye there is rampant speculation about the influence of the treaty on the country's capacity to expand, and here we enter the muddy realms of hearsay and conspiracy theory. While we know these collective myths often stray far from fact, we also know they are rooted in common psychological truths, such as the need to enhance group identity or defend against perceived threats, so they can be instructive as a means of understanding better that "red apple" psychology. So, when some in Türkiye claim that the treaty contains mysterious "secret articles" pertaining to Türkiye's right to extract natural resources from the region, and that the treaty will expire in only a few weeks, clearing the way for a rapid Turkish expansion, we understand truly the threat that exists to Kurds in Türkiye and beyond.

In reality, the Treaty of Lausanne is still in force today and has no expiration

date, "secret articles," and "sunset clauses" that would specify a period after which the agreement will become void. It is an imperfect document that hurts and defends Kurds at the same time, a splintered shield that cannot last but should not be discounted totally for the safeguards it provides. It offers a map that must be redrawn so that Kurds in the region may thrive, but also warn of the risks of land reclamation that we must heed going forward. We know this kind of delicate but meaningful progress can be made.

The achievements of Kurds in Iraq, where the constitution now recognizes Kurdish rights and the Kurdish region as a federal entity, are a strong example. The recognition of the fight for Rojava in the Syrian constitution is promising too. And I hope that Iran, and indeed Türkiye, will acknowledge soon the democratic and national entitlements of Kurds, and that peaceful, humane policies will be adopted in those countries. Of course, the solution for the Kurdish people will always lie in our divided homeland, but as we strengthen our resolve and build our unity towards that reunion, take this as a call for intelligent, constructive diplomacy a century after the Treaty of Lausanne. ■



Burhan Jaff poses next to the statue of Charlie Chaplin in Lausanne

“

Divided between four countries, marginalized, and persecuted by each state, the treaty caused unimaginable suffering that is ongoing today.

The divisions of the map remain like scars of shame on the bodies of those who made it

”



# Sevres to Grant Kurds Freedom, Lausanne to Make it a Pipe Dream

An Excerpt from "Three Steps to the Gallows"



Jan Dost

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



**I**t was 100 years ago, on a summer day in Lausanne, Switzerland next to Lake Léman, where the snow had yet to melt and the snowcapped mountains stood like corpses in shrouds to the north. There, people were skiing happily oblivious that the hopes

of a nation were melting in the closed rooms to the breaths of those who had gathered with maps in their hands. They had no clue that the Treaty of Sèvres was being buried just below them.

That morning, the Kurds were preparing their sacrifices, distributing meat and expressing their blessing to one another in celebration of Eid, not knowing that Ankara was sacrificing their dreams and burying their many wishes.

As Ismet Pasha, the chief negotiator for the Turkish delegation, put his hand behind his ear to listen to the British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon's smooth English speech, the lord opened his box of ivory tobacco, extended it towards Ismet Pasha, and said:

"Here we are releasing smoke at the Sultan as well," he said. "He is now just a successor spending his time in the Ottoman Imperial Harem. He is none other than the official of the maidservant. We will also end the caliphate and make Türkiye a republic."

What do you want next?

"Mosul."

"Mosul! If I don't put Mosul in my pocket, I won't go back to Ankara."

"No, Mosul will remain in our pocket.

were a mermaid. Ismet Pasha laughed. He picked up a glass of cold water in front of him and drank a mouthful. Then he too took a stone out of his pocket and threw it at the half-broken vase of Sèvres.

The fragments of the vase flew out of the hall window until they reached Lake Léman. Some lingered on the surface of the lake for several moments before sinking into the depths.

With that, the vase of dreams sank in Lake Léman near the city of Lausanne.

"Smoke." He smoked and released a cloud of smoke at us and our differences.

Ismet Pasha smiled and took the white handkerchief out of the pocket, wiped his sweat, stroked his moustache, and said:

Let's dream of something else, Ismet Pasha. The Sèvres vase is more valuable than Mosul."

With that, Lord Curzon took out a stone from his pocket and threw it at a vase in the middle of the table, surrounded by cigarette smoke, as if it

Without putting Mosul in his pocket, Ismet Pasha returned to Ankara. But he came back with something more expensive and bigger that filled all his pockets: the destiny and future of the Kurds. ■





# Haunting Moments

## War Against ISIS



President Masoud Barzani and the Peshmerga forces on Mount Sinjar, 2015

Farhad Ahmad

Farhad Ahmed is a Kurdish photographer with over 20 years of experience. He spent a long time on the frontlines to capture the haunting moments of the war against ISIS.





# Captivating Blend of Fantasy and Reality



**Behcet Bicakci**

*Behcet Bicakci, Lawyer, Life Coach and Author. He has experience in legal and coaching sector and has written several blogs, articles, and a book on self-development.*

**H**ostages of Memory by Haitham Hussein is a captivating novel that seamlessly blends fantasy and reality. While the characters are fictional, the setting, life conditions, and historical events portrayed in the book are rooted in reality. The narrative delves into the lives of people living under the oppressive rule of political leaders, showcasing the natural consequences of a failed, corrupted, and fearful society. Through the experiences of the characters, the author provides profound life lessons that explore themes such as trust, greed, hope, fearlessness, betrayal, friendship, intimacy, and more.

## Humanity in all its messiness and timelessness

One of the central characters in the story is Khatune, a woman who arrives in a town with her two children shrouded in secrecy. Her mysterious past and hidden secrets pique the curiosity of the townspeople, but she remains tight-lipped about her origins. The suspense surrounding her character builds until the moment she is shot, revealing her true story to her grandson before she passes. This narrative element sets the stage for a compelling exploration of trust and the consequences of keeping secrets.

Trust and greed play a significant role in the book, particularly through the story of two brothers who grow up under difficult life circumstances and save money to start a successful business together. Their unwavering support and trust in each other led to their initial success. However, as their greed grows, it ultimately leads to the downfall of their business and the erosion of their trust. This narrative arc is a cautionary tale, highlighting how unchecked greed can destroy even the strongest bonds and cause disappointment and separation in the end.

Throughout the book, the characters exem-

plify the power of hope, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Despite knowing that Sayre, a woman that the brothers encounter who cannot bear children, Khatune prays for her and her non-existent offspring. This portrayal underscores the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity for hope, even in situations where the desired outcome seems impossible.

Fearlessness is another theme explored in Hostages of Memory. One character, a woman, fearlessly traverses treacherous mountains at night, declaring herself as "the woman of these mountains." The day and the night are the same for me," she says. Her unwavering determination and refusal to succumb to fear make her a strong and inspiring figure while her actions speak to the power of determination and ambition in achieving one's goals.

Betrayal is a recurring theme in the novel, with characters not hesitating to betray one another for personal gain. The story of Princess Marya serves as a stark example of this, as she betrays her own father and city for the love of a greedy warlord. This narrative thread demonstrates the devastating consequences of betrayal and the notion that those who betray one person will not hesitate to betray others.

The story is portrayed as follows: "He remembered some of the stories of Princess Marya, who betrayed her father and came to a secret agreement with a warlord who then attacked and occupied her city. But the warlord captured her and tied her hair to the tail of his horse, dragging her behind him through the streets of Mardin and then leaving her corpse to be plundered by his soldiers. 'One who betrays her father and her family,' he said, 'will not hesitate to betray anyone.'"

Friendship is also explored in Hostages of Memory, with the reunion of Khatune and

her long-lost friend in the village of Dare after 25 years. Despite the passage of time and the events that have transpired, their friendship endures, highlighting the timeless nature of true friendship and the unwavering support friends can provide.

Intimacy is portrayed through the experiences of Ahme, one of the main characters who marries the daughter of an imam (priest). The depiction of their first-night experience captures the range of emotions, including excitement, fear, and worry, that accompany such intimate moments between newlywed couples.

## History and society in Mardin

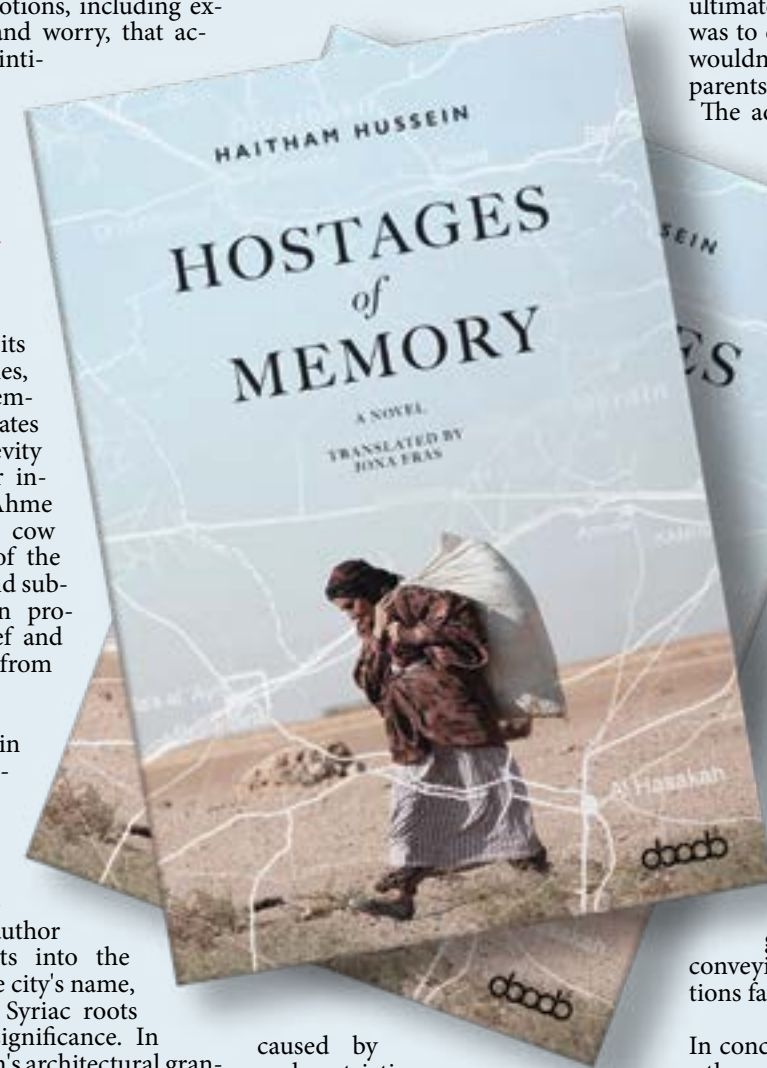
In addition to its serious themes, Hostages of Memory incorporates moments of levity and humor. For instance, when Ahme encounters a cow in the middle of the night, his fear and subsequent reaction provide comic relief and evoke laughter from the reader.

The city of Mardin serves as a prominent backdrop in the novel, with its rich history and symbolic significance. The author provides insights into the etymology of the city's name, highlighting its Syriac roots and historical significance. In addition, Mardin's architectural grandeur and strategic location are vividly described, painting a vivid picture of its beauty and fortifications.

The book also touches upon historical events, such as the Korean War and its impact on people's lives. The repercussions of war, including soldiers returning home with newfound wealth and the dangers it attracts, are explored. This provides a thought-provoking examination of the aftermath of war and the complexities it intro-

duces into people's lives.

Borders and their divisive nature are another focal point in the book. The author's view on borders as imprisoning hearts and minds, cutting off connections, and impeding reconnection is powerfully expressed. The consequences of closed borders, as depicted in the limited hours allowed for families to visit across the Turkish-Syrian border, highlight the inhumanity and pain



caused by such restrictions.

Women's experiences in this particular region are portrayed with sensitivity, shedding light on their limited agency, heavy burdens, and societal expectations. They are depicted as the backbone of their communities, shouldering numerous responsibilities while often having limited say in their own lives. The advice given by women to their children reflects their hopes for a better future and their desire to spare their children the hard-

ships that they endured.

The situation is explained in the book as follows: "It was women who took on this task – as they took on many others – of putting out all the different foods on the table. In these lands, it was always women who were the last to go to sleep and first to rise, the last to eat and the first to slaughter, as if they were the natural-born leaders of the people. Women's daily toil was surely a form of resistance and their ultimate cause, and their first concern was to educate their children so they wouldn't repeat the mistakes of their parents and their ancestors.

The advice they gave to their children, along with their husbands, was spontaneous and sincere: 'we don't want you to live a life like ours'; 'we don't want you to suffer what we have suffered and still do'; 'we want you to achieve what others before you have failed to do'; 'we've lived in want and misery, and we'll give our lives so you won't have to do the same.'"

Proverbs are skillfully employed throughout the book, offering concise and impactful expressions of wisdom. One such proverb, "No one can climb the steps of Mardin other than the donkeys of Mardin!" encapsulates the city's reliance on donkeys for transporting goods while metaphorically conveying the challenges and limitations faced by its inhabitants.

In conclusion, *Hostages of Memory* is a thought-provoking and emotionally resonant novel. The seamless blend of fantasy and reality creates a compelling narrative that explores themes of trust and greed, hope, fearlessness, betrayal, friendship, intimacy, and more. The vividly depicted setting of Mardin and the historical events it encompasses add depth and context to the story. Through the lives of its characters, the book imparts valuable life lessons and insights that will leave a lasting impact on readers. ■



## Erbil's Unique History



**Christopher Tilley**

*Dr Christopher Tilley is a historian, land economist, and chartered surveyor who has taught at King's College, University of London and now advises governments, businesses, and other organizations on strategic planning. He is Managing Director at Portman Gate Advisory Ltd, a professional Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, a Member of the Royal Historical Society, and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.*

Erbil is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world – and quite possibly the oldest. The city's ancient Citadel, now at the center of the modern capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), has a history that is both long and unique. Archaeologists have found pottery fragments showing people lived on the mound when the earliest cities were built in Mesopotamia during the Sumerian period.

The immense antiquity of the city, which archaeological evidence suggests has been lived in for six thousand years – an astounding length of time spanning much of the length of known human civilization – gives the modern city of Erbil, and the whole of Kurdistan, a globally important asset, which could be of significant value to the future development of the city and the KRI. UNESCO added the Erbil Citadel to its World Heritage list in 2014, placing it in the company of some of the most famous sites in the world, such as the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt.

The name Erbil first appears in the historical record in cuneiform tablets produced over 4,000 years ago, as the University of Cambridge Assyriologist John MacGinnis has shown in his wonderful book on the subject. Erbil's location on the plain west of the Zagros Mountain range and east of the Tigris River placed it at the crossroads between Iran and Central Asia on the one hand and the Mediterranean on the other. A meeting point of cultures, Erbil has long been on the frontier in the clashes of some of the greatest empires in history – at various times the Citadel mound has been under the control of the Sumerian, Assyrian, Seleucid, Parthian, Roman, Persian, Abbasid, Mongol, Ottoman, and British em-

pires among others.

### Erbil's heritage is a key asset for its future

As both a historian and strategy consultant with a specialization in, among other things, investment and economic development, I have spent many years thinking about the value of heritage, both in terms of its historical significance and as a driver of economic growth. As the Kurdistan Regional Government seeks to diversify its economy beyond oil and gas, the ancient Citadel of Erbil stands to be a major driver of growth. First, and most obviously, there is tourism, identified by the Kurdistan Board of Investment as a priority in strengthening the country's economic infrastructure.

The Erbil Citadel and the Kurdistan Region already attract large and growing numbers of tourists, enticed by its beautiful countryside, pleasant climate, political stability, and security. According to government statistics, there were 6 million tourist arrivals to the KRI in 2022 and 4 million in 2021, a significant increase from 3.15 million in 2019 before the Covid-19 pandemic. Between June 2019 and February 2022, the tourism sector received \$7.12 billion in investment, accounting for almost two thirds (64%) of all investment in the KRI during that period. As the revitalization of the Erbil Citadel continues, sensitive restoration and rehabilitation of the site's buildings will make it more accessible and even more attractive to visitors. Having such a globally significant landmark at its center also gives Erbil the potential to attract tourists from much further afield and makes the city one of the pre-eminent destinations in the Middle East.



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

A scenic view of Erbil Citadel in Kurdistan Region



## The ‘economics of uniqueness’

But the value of the Citadel to the future of the Kurdistan Region and the city goes beyond tourism. Studies across the world have shown heritage to be a catalyst for much wider social and economic benefits.

Heritage assets on the scale of the Citadel contribute more to the economy than simple direct financial revenues.

They enhance the wider well-being and self-esteem of a city’s inhabitants. The physical prominence of the great mound at the city center, from which the road system emanates in concentric circles, serves constantly to remind all Kurdistanis and visitors alike of the continuing link to the ancient past. Few modern capitals, or cities of Erbil’s size in Europe and the Middle East, share this continuity. It helps put Erbil alongside Damascus or Rome, neither of which remains a major commercial center but are

nevertheless famous worldwide, and serves, alongside the many other important heritage assets in the KRI, to magnify Kurdistan’s reputation across the world.

And this is where the Citadel is part of Kurdistan’s trump card in sustaining itself as an effective economy and proud society going forward. The cultural capital generated by a revitalized Citadel has the potential to be a key driver of future economic development and cultural prestige.

As the world becomes more focused on knowledge-based industries, innovation is crucial to the emergence of high-value businesses in any economy. One encouraging aspect of the Kurdistan Region’s economic diversification agenda is the support for innovation-led businesses that draw on knowledge and ideas to develop new technologies, methods, and business models to boost growth. From AI to biotechnology, from digitization to e-commerce, the need to attract and retain talent is a major challenge for

any economy. Talented graduates, leading academics, and successful entrepreneurs need reasons to stay in a place.

In a world that is ever more globalized, spectacular heritage assets such as the Citadel of Erbil serve to differentiate places. Research by the World Bank and others has shown that there is a strong correlation between high cultural capital and innovation. The best minds can live and work anywhere in the world – they want to

be in attractive environments. They want to be stimulated culturally and intellectually. The KRI is putting huge effort into making the country one of the best places for innovative entrepreneurs to develop and for investors to enter the market. The Citadel adds an indescribable dimension to all this and helps make Kurdistan one of the most desirable destinations to visit, live, work, and do business in the region. ■

Photo: Sabr Dri





## Deir Maryam Al-Adhra Harmony and Education in Sulaymaniyah



Kakalaw Abdulla

*Kakalaw Abdulla, an independent journalist residing in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, has made significant contributions to numerous local and international media platforms. He specializes in reporting on political, economic, and social matters within the Kurdistan region.*



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat

Finding the oldest monastery in Sulaymaniyah, the second largest city in Iraqi Kurdistan, can become quite exhausting owing to the fact that it is located in the heart of the city amidst intricate and narrow alleys in the historic Sabunkaran neighborhood. But upon arrival at the destination, it becomes evident that the remarkable Deir Maryam al-Adhra (Virgin Mary) monastery captures attention with



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat

its captivating allure and renovated appearance. The presence of a prominent, large cross reaffirms the visitor's certainty that they have indeed reached the right place. Entering the building is quite something else; there are children, teenagers, and young people involved in a range of activities. It is a church not like any other in a Muslim-majority city. Deir Maryam Al-Adhra holds events, conferences, and educational activities for all different ages with all religions and denominations: Christians, Muslims, and Yazidis are all present without any religious discrimination.

"There is something important here: no one talks about religion, and there are no religious discriminations whatsoever," said Marwa Nuri, a student participating in an English course at the church.

Marwa, 30, is a Muslim who has been going to the monastery for over a year now. She expressed her joy about her time spent at the Deir Maryam al-Adhra while reiterating that "no one in the church's administration likes to talk about religions because there are people who come from different backgrounds, and they don't want them to think that they are somehow being lured to convert to Christianity." This is one of the main missions of the monastery following 2012 when it became a monastery church for the Al-Khalil community, a community who promotes closer relations between Christians and Muslims.

The monastery was almost abandoned before that, but after 2012 several peace and coexistence initiatives emerged following the monastery's integration into the Al-Khalil community, which was founded by the Italian Jesuit Paolo Dall'Oglio in 1991 in Syria. Father Dall'Oglio was kid-

in education, focusing on teaching English, Arabic, and Kurdish languages so that we can facilitate communication between Arabs, Kurds, and other ethnicities with different religions," said Nejah Ahmed Emam, assistant to Father Jens, the minister of the monastery.

The monastery only receives a limited entry fee for its language courses compared to institutions that provide the same training in Sulaymaniyah.

"We only pay 15,000 Iraqi Dinars (\$12) for a language course while I have friends from other famous institution who paid \$400-\$600 for the same amount of study," Marwa said. "It's not about money. I have learned more here than my friends who have paid that much. Our teachers are magnificent and respect us a lot while being very friendly," she added.

Emam, who is also the head of the Al-Khalil project and a Muslim, explained that the idea became concrete and effectively took shape after 2014, when ISIS took over large swathes of land in Iraq and Syria.

"When ISIS came, so many refugees from Iraq and Syria fled to cities in the Kurdistan region and some of them came here to Sulaymaniyah. So, we thought that to ease communica-

tion between them, we should launch language courses, and the other goal was to create an understanding and coexistence between Christians and others from other religions, namely



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat

napped in 2013 in Raqqa, Syria and is still missing.

"Here we have organizational activities and we launch initiatives, mainly





Islam,” she added.

Most who sought refuge in the church were Chaldean

to cities in Iraq. The community in Iraq is divided into fourteen sects, with Chaldean being the majority at over 80%.



Christians and, from 2014 to 2017, the church managed to support and offer hospitality to more than 250 Christians, divided across more than 50 families.

we came to Sulaymaniyah, where we feel safe and have no problems regarding our religion. The people in Sulaymaniyah respect minorities and treat us normally,” said Diana.

Many of them have now either sought asylum abroad, returned home, or moved to other parts of the Kurdistan region, but a small portion still remains in Sulaymaniyah. According to data provided by the church, nearly two to three thousand Christians live in the city now, which is a small portion of the whole population spread across the region that numbers around 300,000.

Most of the Christian community in Iraq now lives in the region, as they feel safer compared

According to the U.S. State Department's annual report about freedom of religion in Iraq, minorities including Christians have more freedom of religion in the Kurdistan region than they do in Iraq.

Diana Khalid, a 17-year-old Christian working in the church, said that she and her family came to Sulaymaniyah after 2014 and felt safe and secure.

“After 2014, we relocated to Ankawa in Erbil... And then

Abdelmassih Yousef, another Christian who has been working as a communications officer in the church for almost 30 years, reiterated that they have seen no religious discrimination, but sometimes the government can create obstacles for their activities.

“The people of Sulaymaniyah are very kind and mindful about religions and don't discriminate, but the governorate interferes in our work, saying that we have to obtain confirmation from the security forces and Ministry of Education when holding even a small event or a course for people, especially refugees and displaced people,” Yousef Added.

The monastery encompasses a variety of structures and facilities, blending both ancient and contemporary elements, all interconnected by a cloister and passageway over three floors. It has a large prayer room, an adult library containing more than 500 books, a library for children, classrooms, and office rooms for employees.

“We gather in the prayer room to do our praying on Fridays and also on Sundays. The number is close to seven to ten people, but on ceremonial days, more people come here to pray,” said Khdir Yaqoob, a receptionist in the church.

The church was built in 1862 when the Christian population in Sulaymaniyah grew gradually to more than one hundred families. It was built by Christian philanthropists headed by Al-Shamas Yalda, a Christian businessman originally from Sanandaj, Iran. He was the father-in-law of Karim Alaka, a well-known public figure and also a businessman in Sulaymaniyah back then.

The main entrance of the monastery

with a sign in Kurdish and Arabic languages that says, “Maryam Al-Adhra Monastery, founded in 1862” (Kurdistan Chronicle/Kakalaw Abdulla)

The preservation and upkeep of this living heritage, as well as the implementation of various initiatives and endeavors, are supported by numerous civil society and religious organizations from Iraq and Europe.



Emam explained that with the help of international and local organizations, they had managed to link their English courses to the Cambridge English Test after students had successfully completed their three levels of English at the church. She also mentioned that they had associations with universities within Jesuit Worldwide Learning, a Catholic society that owns numerous universities around the world.

Students in the church who become participants in this worldwide learning network have the opportunity to study five different topics of their choice, namely graphic design, creative writing, social work, eco-tourism, and peace leadership. They also get certificates at the end of each training as if “they were abroad studying a short course,” Emam added.

The monastery used to have a school, but it is now closed due to financial reasons. In the library, however, students can attend weekly reading sessions followed by “healthy discussions aimed at promoting co-existence and peace”, said Eman.

What is striking is that Father Jens would not preach for Christianity in his own church and, even if someone wanted to convert to Christianity, he would challenge the person not to do so.

“I am a Muslim and no one has ever tried to convince me to convert to Christianity,” Emam said. “Father Jens discourages those who come and want to convert. He says to them, ‘Why do you want to convert when you have a good religion of your own which is one of the Abrahamic religions?’ He debates with them, and only if he's convinced that the person truly studied Christianity, he's willing to help and point them to another church to convert,” she explained.

Just before Emam explained all this, Abdelmassih jokingly said, “Only Father Jens and I are Christians in this church,” pointing to the fact that most of 30-40 employees in the Deir Maryam Al-Adhra are Muslims peacefully going about their business in the historic church. ■



## Ancient Town Emerges as Center for Tourism



**Wladimir van Wilgenburg**

*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.*

### AKRE

an ancient town with millennia of rich history and cultural heritage, could emerge as a potential future hub for tourism in the Kurdistan Region. The town, a bit over one hour's drive from the capital of Erbil, was built on the side of a mountain range by the Kurdish Prince Zand in 580 B.C.

Akre and its countryside boast a remarkable array of temples, caves, statues, waterfalls, and old buildings. The town's culinary delights and agricultural products include ice cream, rice, figs, and other local produce. Meanwhile, its rich heritage showcases religious coexistence, adding to its historical and cultural allure.

"Akre has been a homeland for different religious groups, including Jews, Christians, and Muslims. These communities have been living here in peace. They never fought each other," Kaywan Kadhim Abdulrahman, the female owner of the traditional Kurdish Xanedan restaurant, told Kurdish Chronicle.

The Akre region also has a Zoroastrian temple, a synagogue, old churches, and the shrine of the Sufi Sheikh Abdul Aziz Gailani, where dervishes perform religious ceremonies and dances.

"If they have disagreements or conflicts, they have developed their own mechanisms to resolve them. There are currently no Jews left in Akre and very few Christians but they are respected by the rest of the people from Akre," she added.

### The capital of Newroz

Akre is derived from the Kurdish word *agir* meaning fire. During the annual Newroz celebrations on March 21, locals adorned with fire torches descend from the majestic mountains surrounding the town. This captivating tradition, accompanied by a dazzling firework show, embodies the spirit of Newroz, creating a mesmerizing spectacle in Akre.

Tariq Aqrawi, the former Ambassador of Iraq to Austria and a prominent figure in Akre, highlights the long-standing tradition of Newroz celebrations in the town. He mentions that even during the oppressive rule of the Baath regime, "young people went to the mountains and celebrated secretly."

However, significant changes occurred after the establishment of a no-fly zone by Western coalition partners in 1991 to safeguard the Kurds from Saddam's regime. The subsequent free elections in Kurdistan and the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government in 1992 transformed the way that Newroz was celebrated in Akre.

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi





Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi



A captivating view of Akre in Kurdistan Region

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

“After 1992, it became very free,” Ambassador Aqravi said. “It became a very big celebration, unlike other towns, with torches in the mountains. Just as people call Suleimani the capital of culture, Akrawis call Akre the capital of Newroz. Because it is really special.”

Due to the vibrant and beautiful celebrations in the town, Akre attracts visitors from far and wide.

“Every year, there are thousands of people who come from different places to visit Akre on the eve of Newroz,” restaurant owner Abdulrahman said. “There are also foreign tourists who visit from the United States, Canada, Spain, Australia, and the Netherlands, in addition to internal tourists from Erbil, Duhok, and Zakho.”

Diana, a Hungarian tourist who visited Akre, describes on her website how she walked up through the narrow alleys of Akre to the castle on the top of the Kale mountain overlooking the town. “The castle is just a ruin, but the landscape is incredible there,” she wrote.

### Building tourism infrastructure

Abdulrahman and her husband opened the Xanedan restaurant to benefit from the boom in tourism. The restaurant offers local food and sometimes also has performances by local musicians. “My husband and I were thinking of building this restaurant, a place that would offer breakfast, lunch and dinner,” she said.

“There were restaurants in Akre but nothing as traditional as Xanedan – other restaurants were not offering breakfast. We wanted to come up with something new and different in Akre

since our area is full of homemade foods.”

Another famous restaurant is Qalia Akre (Akre castle), which offers a traditional cooked sheep meat called kalya. Moreover, Akre has a famous local ice cream shop dating to 1958, selling ice cream made from locally produced milk.

Akre also boasts abundant water resources and is home to the renowned Sipa waterfall located near the center of the town as well as the breathtaking Sile waterfall in the countryside. Moreover, Akre’s children all have learned to swim in the local pond of Kani Zark.

Ambassador Aqravi fondly reminisces about his childhood, recalling a time when the Sipa waterfall received very few visitors, mostly consisting of locals from Akre. “When I was child, the waterfall had almost no visitors.”

“Only people from Akre visited the waterfall. It was very nice, and there were no buildings around it,” Ambassador Aqravi said.

However, after the fall of Saddam, “mass tourism started from southern Iraq, Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul; they came with buses,” Ambassador Aqravi said. The waterfall is now surrounded by several restaurants, an artificial cave, and local shops that sell local products.

Situated just outside Akre, the Gali Zanta valley has also undergone a remarkable transformation into a bustling tourist hotspot. The area is replete with numerous tourism resorts that cater to visitors seeking refreshing swimming spots to escape the summer heat.

Also many Kurdish tourists visit Akre

for short trips for its beautiful scenery. “The road is very easy from Erbil to Akre. Some people come to have lunch in Akre, and take some pictures.”

However, Ambassador Aqravi said tourism also created problems such as heavy traffic in the town and created a shortage of parking. “They have to solve these problems as soon as possible in order not to destroy the old town,” he said. “Too many roads and streets could destroy the old town.”

He added that the Kurdish town of Mardin in Türkiye could be an example for the development of Akre. “It’s very nice, they kept the old buildings, restored everything, and there is a lot of tourism. We hope for such support.”

Another issue is the lack of hotels. “For tourism you need hotels but you cannot find a good hotel in Akre. That’s why some foreigners are happy to come to my house and sleep there,” he added.

Abdulrahman added that there are now people in Akre thinking “how to turn their homes into hotels. My cousin is also planning to open a traditional hotel in Akre.”

Therefore, with its breathtaking mountain scenery, remarkable architecture and history, captivating waterfalls, and vibrant Newroz celebrations, Akre offers a compelling allure as a flourishing tourism destination.

However, further renovations, the addition of hotels, and the resolution of traffic issues are needed to fully unlock its potential. Akre stands poised to thrive in tourism, awaiting the necessary enhancements to accommodate and enchant visitors from near and far. ■



# HISTORY

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**Dwin**

## The Hometown of Saladin

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Kurdistan Chronicle

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*Saladin Ayoubi, a Kurdish Muslim,  
made an indelible mark as the first  
Sultan of Egypt and Syria and founder  
of the Ayoubi dynasty*



As you leave Pirmam, which lies 31 kilometers northeast of Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, a hidden gem awaits you. A narrow side street on the left side of the main street winds its way through the villages of Armawa and Zrgos. After driving for about ten minutes through Zrgos, a magnificent sight emerges: a ruined stone castle perched atop a mountain on the left with a historical graveyard on the right. Welcome to Dwin, the ancestral home of the family of Saladin Ayoubi, a formidable historical figure.

Saladin Ayoubi, a Kurdish Muslim, made an indelible mark as the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria and founder of the Ayoubi dynasty. Leading the Muslim and Arab opposition against the European Crusaders in the Levant, Saladin's sultanate spanned Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Hejaz, and Yemen. One of his most significant victories came at the Battle of Hattin, where his forces triumphed over the Crusaders and thereafter freed Palestine after 88 years of

occupation.

Internationally and historically, Dwin remains less well known, with limited information available about the village or city. However, local literature sheds light on Saladin's family life and the remarkable deeds they accomplished.

Notably, Abdul Khaleq Sarsam, a Kurdish historian, authored a book exploring Saladin's family, their way of life, and the Zarzary tribe to which they belonged. Sarsam speculates that the castle in Dwin might have belonged to Saladin's grandfather, Jalaladdin.

The castle's foundations and parts of its walls, built with sturdy mountain rocks, stand as a testament to its significance and long history. Positioned atop a hill, it commands a strategic vantage point, effectively guarding the road in both directions. Its primary purpose was to oversee and

protect the village nestled below the mountain along the river. Remarkably, remnants of the village can still be found, offering a glimpse into the ancestral homeland of Saladin's grandfather.

Adjacent to the castle, on the right side of the road, lies an historical graveyard. Here, tombstones of various eras can be observed, some bearing inscriptions with others remaining blank. Among the graves are relics harkening back to the Zoroastrian religion of the 6th century. Symbolic signs of the sun, dagger, and sword grace these graves, representing the

core tenets of Zoroastrianism. And the graves beside the rock fence date to Saladin's era. Notably, one of these graves is said to potentially belong to Saladin's grandfather, adding an air of mystique to the surroundings.

Furthermore, another section of the graveyard, dating back only 200 years, bears witness to more recent history. Some of these graves have elaborate inscriptions, such as the "Kurdish fighter inscription."

The castle, which covers approximately one square kilometer, was built during the 10th century by the Prin-

cedom of Soran. It served then as the principality's capital, giving rise to its name, Dwin, which means "capital."

Visitors can delve into the secrets of Saladin Ayoubi's heritage by exploring the wonders of Dwin. The commanding presence of the castle and the enigmatic graveyard create an atmosphere of historical intrigue. The allure of this ancient site is undeniable, whether contemplating the castle's origins or attempting to solve the mystery surrounding Saladin's grandfather's grave. ■

“ Remarkably, remnants of the village can still be found, offering a glimpse into the ancestral homeland of Saladin's grandfather ”



# CULTURE



Qassim Khidhir

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

## Erbil's School of Tolerance

“

The Erbil *Museum of Educational Archives* demonstrates that Kurds were not only good fighters, but also good educators

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Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

Erbil's *Museum of Educational Archives*, located near the citadel in the city center, provides a remarkable glimpse into the advanced educational standards of the past.

A sense of surprise washes over visitors as they walk through the classrooms of the first primary school in Erbil. Built a century ago, its facilities were truly avant-garde at the time: it had its own movie theater, musical band, theater team, and even a sports team. Vintage photographs on the school's walls are protected by framed glass and depict the neat and disciplined students who attended this pioneering institution. They all wore the same uniform and participated enthusiastically in various school-organized outdoor activities, such as camping, woodcraft, hiking, backpacking, and sports.

Known as Erbil Al-Uwla, the school

holds the honor of being the first official state school in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region. Prior to its establishment, the region only had religious schools known as *madrasas*.

### Dedication and generosity

After the establishment of Iraq and the coronation of King Faisal I (1883-1933), the decision was made to construct schools in major cities throughout the country. The first school in Erbil was established in 1923 within the walls of the historical citadel. Due to its limited space, Ahmed Naji, a respected figure in Erbil who graduated from a military school in Istanbul, went to King Faisal I requesting funds for a new school building. The king responded positively, allocating funds as well as 845 square meters of land near the citadel for its construction.

The building, consisting of two floors with 13 classrooms, started taking shape. Unfortunately, the funds ran out before construction could be completed. According to Mr. Umed, the museum director Ahmed Naji was undeterred and sought additional financial support from Baghdad. Yet his approaches went unanswered. In a remarkable display of dedication and generosity, he thus decided to sell his own land and property to ensure the school's completion. Finally, in 1928, the school opened its doors, becoming a beacon of knowledge and opportunity for generations to come. It continued to serve the community until closing in 2005.

In addition to being the driving force behind the school's establishment, Ahmed Naji, due to his education, dedication, and benevolence, became the school's first headmaster. His remarkable efforts played a pivotal role in the development of Erbil's educa-



tional landscape and nurturing the city's young minds. Today, the *Museum of Educational Archives* stands as a testament to Erbil's rich educational heritage, reminding visitors of the city's commitment to excellence and tolerance throughout history.

### A reflection of Erbil's historical diversity

While most teachers and students were Kurdish Muslims, there were also Christian, Jewish, Turkmen, and Arab teachers and students, cultivating a spirit of coexistence and inclusivity that defines the Kurdistan Region.

Several classrooms within the museum honor the contributions of Christian and Jewish teachers. Mr. Jamil Zayto's classroom, for example, was a well-known Christian educator. Another classroom is dedicated to Mr. Daniel Qassab, an Erbil-born Jewish artist who taught art and painting. Mr. Daniel, also known as Meir Uzeir Katsav in Hebrew, went on to become a teacher at Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts in 1948 but was deported to Israel in the 1950s by the Iraqi government due to his religious background. Before leaving Erbil, he inspired a number of art teachers who carried on his legacy.

Mr. Daniel was also well-known for his film sketches. These were carried out by two people as they walked through the bazaar informing people

about the films that would be shown that week.

There is also a classroom dedicated to the female teachers and students who taught and studied at the school. It was named after Mrs. Shukria Jiawok (1918-2004), Erbil's first female student and teacher. She graduated from Baghdad's College of Teachers in 1936, breaking down gender barriers and paving the way for future generations of female educators.

Another classroom honors Mr. Abdullah Aziz, a science teacher who later became the school's headmaster and was an accomplished photographer who diligently documented the school's activities over the years in addition to his educational role.

While the majority of the teachers were from Erbil, a few came from Mosul to teach Arabic. Mr. Umed, the museum's director, relayed to Kurdistan Chronicle some fascinating stories about the teachers during an exclusive interview. He related an incident involving Mr. Munir Sa'ati, a Mosul-based Arab teacher who had taught Arabic for a decade. Despite his Arab heritage, he was so fluent in Kurdish that none of the students realized he was Arab until he retired and returned to Mosul.

Another fascinating story involves an Indian engineer who worked on the Erbil railway in the 1930s, when the city had its own railway and train station. Due to the school's lack of an

English language teacher, this engineer volunteered for many years to teach English, leaving a lasting impression on his students.

For all these reasons and more, the *Erbil Museum of Educational Archives* stands as a reminder of the city's commitment to embracing diversity and fostering an inclusive learning environment.

### The museum needs urgent care

The *Erbil Museum of Educational Archives*, founded in 2014 with the support of the Kurdistan Regional Government, is Iraq's only educational museum. Despite its importance, the museum requires immediate attention, modernization, and collection-management training.

The museum's director Mr. Umed emphasizes the importance of staff training in various aspects of museum operations, as handling, cataloging, documenting, and preserving valuable collections are all part of the job. Staff must be trained in other critical areas such as inventory management, proper techniques for handling objects, storage practices, and preventative conservation measures. Furthermore, the museum lacks adequate air conditioning, with the majority of classrooms lacking this necessary feature. Better lighting equipment is also required to improve the visitor experience.

Mr. Umed, who attended Erbil Al-Uwla in the 1980s, also wants to connect the Erbil museum with other educational museums around the world.

Nowadays, a steady stream of visitors comes to the museum every day, including people with a personal connection to the school. Children and grandchildren of former students and teachers frequent the museum, cherishing their ancestors' memories. Furthermore, tourists from the Kurdistan Region and other parts of Iraq who visit Erbil make the museum part of their itineraries. ■



# ART

## Exploring the Work of Ahmet Güneştekin

Mevlüt Oğuz

Mevlüt Oğuz born in 1987 in Batman's Hasankeyf, Mevlüt Oğuz is a journalist, poet, and activist working in the field of civil society and culture and arts, who resides in Istanbul. He he is a member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Kurdish PEN affiliated to International PEN, and the Istanbul branch of the Human Rights Association (IHD).

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Mevlüt Oğuz

**Mevlüt Oğuz** born in 1987 in Batman's Hasankeyf, Mevlüt Oğuz is a journalist, poet, and activist working in the field of civil society and culture and arts, who resides in Istanbul. He is a member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Kurdish PEN affiliated to International PEN, and the Istanbul branch of the Human Rights Association (İHD).



Originally from Batman, Türkiye, Ahmet Güneştekin is now a renowned artist in Istanbul, where he operates from his own Güneştekin Art Studio in Beyoğlu. In addition to the many books and articles written about him, Güneştekin has been featured in several catalogs, with his art also being the subject of numerous scientific and artistic theses. His works have been showcased in prestigious galleries such as the Marlborough Gallery, the Santa Maria Della Pietà, the Galerie Michael Schultz, and the Pilevneli. He became well-known in the field of contemporary art in Türkiye and across the world with his artistic productions including *Sun Road*, *The Chamber of Immortality*, *The Alphabet*

This interview with Güneştekin explores his artistic journey, his exhibitions, his upcoming plans, and his ideas on the evolution of contemporary art.

### “I have adopted an interdisciplinary approach”

*Kurdistan Chronicle (KC): You are the son of a family from Batman, Türkiye, and you now speak to the world with your artistic productions. How has this city and your family shaped your work?*

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** When I think about how time has

is the oldest temple of humanity. This process, which I deepened with field studies, extended to making stylistic experiments in my first workshop that I opened in Beyoğlu. I started to interpret mythology with contemporary art forms. I have also adopted an interdisciplinary approach while contemplating and working on pieces. My relationship with the surface I work with, my artistic production, and my way of thinking emerged from here. The world I was born in and what its people have given me will always be

revolving around the sun, embedded in the circularity of the horizon. One must look passionately at the same planets and stars at different times, think of their similar forms, wonder about the existence of other suns, and always imagine that a larger circle is possible. This is how I can describe my most basic relationship with the sun. Circularity constitutes the basic organizational form of many primary monumental structures scattered all over the world. For example, in my sculptures in the *Sunstone Series* that

to do by processing natural stone formations is to reveal the materiality, essence, and identity of the stone, and I can do this by bringing it closer to the sun.

### “Contemporary art and mythology share a similar language”

*KC: We see sections from Kurdish, Anatolian, and Greek mythology in your work. What is the relationship*

An artwork by Ahmet Güneştekin is installed on the historic fortifications of Diyarbakir, Turkey



of *Memory*, *Memory Chamber*, and *Infidel Quarter*. He is currently preparing to open an exhibition in Venice next year either as part of the biennial or simultaneously alongside the event. In 2024, the Moscow Museum of Modern Art will also exhibit his work, while the art refinery, which is under construction in the Urla district of İzmir and will operate under the Güneştekin Foundation, is planning to be fully operational this year.

Speaking to *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Güneştekin shares that Lalish is one of the most important references of his work, saying, “I collect sounds and words from my own time. I’m interested in lost pasts, lost lives, and lost people that great histories arrogantly ignore.”

shaped me, I return to the city and people of my childhood. It was there that my story begins, where I first started to perceive the world of sound as created by *dengbêj*\*\* performances. I always thought of the world as a connected whole. When I looked at the examples of prehistoric artistic production across different geographies, the similarities that I saw confirmed this thought. I also aimed to look at these common denominators that transcend time. A work of art should be able to withstand the erosion of time. Therefore, I sought to transform my experiences and my own resources into artistic forms that would capture this essence. I began the search from my own world, from the playgrounds of my childhood, the *dengbêjs*, and later the sacred places such as Lalish and Göbeklitepe, which

with me wherever I go.

*KC: The sun motif stands out in most of your works; I can even say that it is like your signature. We Kurds attribute holiness to the sun. This can be seen in the flag of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, which depicts a sun with 21 rays. What would you like to say about the bond you have with the sun and the sun motifs in your work?*

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** We live on a globe

I have been working on recently, I refer to megalithic structures with circular appearance, which I interpret as temples representing the sun. I look at these structures as faith spaces designed in the shape of the sun. This is the origin of the spiral elements that you see as forms in my work. The sun showed me the way to connect the rituals of primeval times with modern times. Maybe that’s why I look for monumental artifacts made of the oldest stones. I accept the materials of the world as they are. What I want

### between mythology and art?

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** Contemporary art and mythology share a similar language. Contemporary art either encodes or decodes meanings, just like myths do. Mythology is as much a method as it is stories of our search for meaning. For this reason, the variables that connect myth and artistic production work through symbols. I produce with what I can carry from these tales to today. Myths always demand reinterpretation according to



today's ideas. Thanks to this flexibility, they can be adapted to any time, context, or culture. In my opinion, this deconstruction that characterizes myth enables people to connect with their subconscious memory today, as it did in the past, and derives its power to convey meaning from here. That's why studies of mythology can belong to every moment, not just their own moment, encouraging one to reflect on languages and reminiscences that are shared collectively.

**KC:** You have made canvas paintings, ceramics, installations, sound installations, and video art. So, in terms of contemporary art, did you use so many different forms to avoid repetition or is there another reason for this?

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** I think that the field of interpretation emerges because of the compromise between light and matter. This is where elements of abstraction and myth enter the patterns in my work. I want these relationships to continue when I apply my artistic practice to a completely different set of materials. I am constantly looking towards applications that expand the range of acceptable artistic materials beyond traditional materials. Let's look at the works in the *Memory Chamber* exhibition that opened in Diyarbakır and the exhibition policy that was applied. We arranged the layout of the works in five main sections. In the first part, installations titled *Lost Alphabet*, *You Weren't Here*, and *Man Is Not a Flying Bird* were exhibited, in the second section, *Memory Hill*, and in the third section, a compilation titled *No.5* consisting of neon letters. Four words glow in four different neon colors on the walls of a dark tunnel with a narrow, low ceiling. The sound installation titled *How are you?*, which can be heard along the tunnel, is linked with this work as well. In the

two rooms at the end of the tunnel, the videos *Memory and Language* are shown. After the *Decay* video shown at the end of the tunnel, the space opens to an area at the top of the Goat Bastion, where the installation of the same name is displayed. The light and sound scenarios we applied here aim to bring these works that I completed in different environments closer together, show how they overlap with current memory politics, and create counter-images

to mainstream narratives. Here I wanted to create a non-verbal thought experience. I used whatever environment and tools were appropriate for this. The variety of materials and mediums I choose create the difference among my works, but it does not change the fundamental trajectory of the art I produce.

**“Memory is full of cracks, selective, produces silences, and embedded in current political relations as a field of struggle.”**

**KC:** The names of your last two exhibitions are *Memory Chamber* and

*del Quarter*, Mıgırdiç Margosyan tells the reader about his childhood in this neighborhood in Diyarbakır where non-Muslims once lived. I can say that this naming is valid for all neighborhoods of Anatolia where non-Muslims live. I built the exhibition on the concept of inclusive multiculturalism

to the past and how to establish an experience-laden view. I think that memory is full of cracks, selective, produces silences, and embedded in current political relations as a field of struggle. Forgetting is as much a part of power relations as remembering. It is very difficult to categorize the so-

cial events that are the sources of trauma in the geography we live in. But you must start somewhere. Working on exhibitions that focus on interrupted social memory, such as the *Memory Chamber* and *Infidel Quarter*, is an effort to establish such a connection with the past.

**KC:** There are those who like your work, others who dislike it, and even those who criticize you harshly. What do you think causes your art to be so loved and criticized at the same time?

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** I collect sounds and words from my own time. I'm interested in lost pasts, lost lives, and lost people that great histories arrogantly ignore. For example, while the *Memory Chamber* exhibitions brought people with different ideas together, some of their implicit conflicts were made more visible. Each exhibition has its own specific context. I started working on this exhibition by asking the question of who will decide how the past will be remembered. We need to talk and narrate a past that has not yet been resolved and has not experienced any confrontation. Everything that happens disappears when not expressed. The works exhibited in the *Memory Chamber* witness an absence and tell



An artwork by Ahmet Güneştekin pays tribute to deceased refugees

***Infidel Quarter. Why did you choose these names? What kind of relationship do you have with memory? Also, what is this Infidel Quarter, where is it and who lives there?***

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** In the novel *Infidel*

as described by Margosyan. This concept does not mean living side by side without touching each other, but the acceptance of the cultural practices of different groups by the wider culture. While working, I mostly think about how to connect the present

remembered. We need to talk and narrate a past that has not yet been resolved and has not experienced any confrontation. Everything that happens disappears when not expressed. The works exhibited in the *Memory Chamber* witness an absence and tell





An artwork by Ahmet Güneştekin honors deceased refugees

a history born out of this absence. For me it was a work spanning the last twenty years. The exhibition was a place of encounter where I wanted to show the way to hear the voices of those who would otherwise remain unheard and forgotten. For this reason, I find it natural that the works I produce are the subject of criticism. It's unavoidable when you do things that are hard to think about but need to be discussed. I thought that my works in the *Memory Chamber* exhibition might open a way to confront an unresolved history. I think that all the discussions and criticisms that developed around the exhibition contributed to this effort in every way.

### “Lalish is an important reference of my work”

**KC:** *Your works have been exhibited in important galleries such as the Marlborough and the Pilevneli. Did you also have an exhibition in Southern Kurdistan (the KRI)? If so, how was the response of our people to your work?*

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** In the past, I was invited to several culture and art platforms, for film screenings too, but it was not possible to work on a comprehensive exhibition as I wanted it to be. I went to the Duhok Film Festival as a jury member and for the screenings of my films. There I planned as many research-oriented trips as possible. I have

visited the holy temples of Yazidis in Lalish many times. It has been one of the important references of my work. The snake figure you see on the relief at the entrance of the *Chamber of Immortality* represents the black snake figure on the right side of the temple door.

**KC:** *When you compare your exhibitions abroad with your exhibitions in Türkiye, how does the reception differ?*

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** Based on my observations, I can say that my exhibitions in Türkiye have a multinational audience like those abroad. The audience has a very attentive, open-minded, and questioning outlook. Contemporary art exhibitions are places that are constantly under construction, where different meanings and narratives are produced with each exhibition and new screening; they want to disturb the peace of dominant narratives. I want to be able to establish a space for a genuine encounter with the other, a contact area where objects as well as intangible stories can circulate. For example, I know that many objects in exhibitions on migration accompany people at a short but very important moment in their lives. In my works on migration, I see both people and objects as producers of common experience. Therefore, while working, my priority has been to encourage different forms of en-

counter, of revealing the exclusionary practices that continue. In conclusion, the comments have shown that this community of work, in which I have worked in a variety of mediums and formats, can foster multi-sensory experiences.

**KC:** *In your opinion, what is the current state of contemporary art in Kurdistan, Türkiye, and around the world, and how will the rise of artificial intelligence affect its health?*

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** Freedom of expression, the richness of the language of expression, as well as the intertwining of all disciplines, define contemporary art no matter where it is practiced. Today, we see that the main approach in all arts is the ability to act within the boundaries of each other. The idea comes first. According to the suitability of the concept to be conveyed, the material and the expression are formed. In parallel with this, I can say that the approach in art production in Türkiye has been shifting from traditional materials and methods to conceptual studies for a very long time. We have a dynamic art world where artists who can develop an original and new language stand out. In recent years, important thresholds have been crossed not only in art production, but also in meeting and interacting with the audience. We

see a cultural space transforming with the opening of major exhibitions, museums, and biennials. On the other hand, the artistic idea we know is beginning to evolve towards new concepts that have emerged with advanced technological developments. Recent developments allow artists to construct their creations based on phenomena such as algorithms and artificial intelligence. What will be the space that the digitalized culture will reach? Is it merely aiming to reach the ideal of becoming more and more superhuman? Is it all about transcending the world that limits creativity and imagination? Will it be possible to explore new and endless possibilities with an algorithm, and what will we gain from recreating the human both conceptually and mentally? Discussions are developing around these questions. In my opinion, trying to conceptualize artificial intelligence as an artist's brain makes the concept of subjectivity, which is very important for today's art, debatable. In every age, man has used the possibilities of the period he is in to overcome his biological limits. Man acted with the urge to experience every possibility in the field of art. Of course, it would be exciting if this emerging new possibility would expand our traditional ideas, understandings, and even perceptions of the world.

**KC:** *Which projects are you busy with currently? We would appreciate it if you could inform us about your future projects.*

**Ahmet Güneştekin:** We are working to open an exhibition in Venice next year as part of the biennial or simultaneously with it. In 2024, the Moscow Museum of Modern Art will exhibit my works. We are building an art refinery in Izmir's Urla district, which will operate under the Güneştekin Foundation. In addition to these, there may be some exhibitions planned for the Asia Pacific region, which are still developing.

**\*\*Dengbêj:** Dengbêj is a Kurdish music genre or a singer of the music genre dengbêj. Dengbêjs are singing storytellers. The word deng means voice and bej means to sing. ■





## Mano Khalil's *Neighbours* Reflection on Human Dignity



**Baker Shwani**

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

"Neighbours," directed by Mano Khalil, is a thought-provoking drama-fiction film that explores the theme of human dignity. Taking place in a village on the Syrian-Turkish border in Western Kurdistan during the 1980s, the movie presents a diverse and harmonious community consisting of Muslim Kurds, Yazidis, Jews, and Christians.

The residents of a village on the Syrian-Turkish border in Western Kurdistan, who include Muslim Kurds, Yazidis, and some Jewish and Christian families, live a harsh life of daily struggle but one that is without problems, hatred, or violence until the day a racist, fascist teacher is transferred to the village school and begins penetrating the various groups and ethnicities and spreading bigotry and distrust among the village's neighbors. The six-year-old Kurdish boy Sero experiences his first school year in an Arab school and watches his small world radically overturned by an absurd variant of nationalism. In multi-colored Syria, a Syria of Kurdish, Ara, Armenian and Jewish nations, village school teachers prohibit children from speaking Kurdish and force them to express their love and affection for the Syrian Ba'ath regime, Hafez Al-Assad, the Ba'ath Party, and the Arab nation. Humorous yet serious, the film explores themes of childhood while providing light moments nestled between dark drama and dictatorship.



This is a summary of *Neighbours*, the film by Swiss-based Kurdish film director Mano Khalil based on his experiences living in Syria 25 years ago. After releasing "The Swallow" in 2016 and attracting a sizeable following, *Neighbours* is Khalil's latest production and has been screened in Switzerland, Europe, and other countries around the world over the past two years. It has won several awards, with dozens of blogs and articles having been written about it in

different European languages across many popular online newspapers, journals, and websites.

*Neighbours* is set in Western Kurdistan in the 1980s under the rule of the Syrian Ba'ath regime, at a time when the state is seeking to eradicate the language, culture, and traditions of the Kurdish people and stir up conflict between the followers of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Yazidism. During these dark, oppressive, and tyrannical days, the six-year-old Sero, a Kurd, has a heart free from guile and evil and full of hope, while he eagerly awaits for his village to be connected to the electricity grid so that he can watch cartoons. Meanwhile, he is also waiting for the teacher to arrive at his school to teach him how to read and about the world outside his village. But Sero's imagination is swiftly destroyed, as his life turns into mess under the grating pressure of the Syrian regime.





*Neighbours* is the first film set in Syria and in Kurdish cinema to depict the racist policy of the Syrian Ba'ath regime against the Kurdish people over the past 60 years. In doing so, it expertly draws attention to a dark period of history for the Kurds who lived under this centralized, cruel system.

The director’s journey

Director Mano Khalil presents a series of topics and events to the audience in *Neighbours* but, as he pointed out in several media briefings, the content of the film can be summarized in two words: human dignity. All other terms – respect, sacrifice, love, brotherhood, and coexistence – are but narrow streams and creeks flowing into the broad river of the human spirit, which is the dignity of man. Humans may experience difficulties or other unsolvable dilemmas and then forget the pain over time, but nothing can compensate for the loss of dignity. From this point of view, Khalil accentuates a fundamental theme of human life in this film, the need to respect people's different backgrounds and beliefs in religion, culture, politics, social status, and nationality.

The basis for the film emerged in the mid-1980s, when Khalil was a student at the College of History and Law in Damascus and recorded his impressions and the film’s scenario. Then, in 1986, Mano moved to Czechoslovakia to study filmmaking and cinematography. Having escaped from what he felt was a large, dark and closed prison, he inhaled and absorbed the breeze of freedom for the first time in his life. Shortly after his move, he realized that respect and human dignity form the basic principles of human society. This led him to compare the Czechoslovakian and Syrian communities, and as a result of his new perspectives, he repeatedly re-evaluated and reviewed the content of the film’s script and filled in the gaps, while dreaming of having an opportunity to make a cinematic film for the whole of humanity.

After two and a half decades of directing many films, all of which have

attracted the attention of the audience and the cinematic and cultural centers of countries like Switzerland and the whole Europe, Khalil gained the experience and courage to direct, produce, and film *Neighbours*.

In planning where to shoot the film, Khalil first targeted a village between western Kurdistan (Syria) and northern Kurdistan (Türkiye), which residents of both sides call Sarkhat and Binkhat. But after careful and diligent planning, he realized that taking a group of 100 people to western Kurdistan and providing them with accommodation and daily necessities would be an enormous expense. He thus shifted to building a village in the Kurdistan Region similar to one in the Jazira region of western Kurdistan. In an interview, Khalil takes pride in the professionalism of the film’s



actors. Jay Abdo, Mazen Al- Natour, Jalal al-Tawil, Syrian Brazilian actress Tuna Dwek, and Kurdish actors such as Ahmed Zirek, Ismail Zagros, Bangen Ali and Heval Naif are among his main crew. He is especially impressed with the exceptional performance of six-year-old Sarmad Khalil, who plays Sero.

Finding the appropriate clothing and accessories for 1980s western Kurdistan was another huge challenge for the production staff, but after a year of research and preparation, the staff managed to bring 3,000 pieces of representative items from Europe to the

filming site in the Kurdistan Region.

Mano Khalil

Cameraman, director, and screenwriter Mano Khalil was born in 1964 in Qamishli, western Kurdistan. He studied History and Law at the University of Damascus from 1981 to 1984 and the art of directing in the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts at Prague University in Czechoslovakia from 1987 to 1994. After completing his studies, he first worked as an independent freelance cameraman for Czech television and later in Slovakia. Khalil has been living in Switzerland since 1996 and founded the Frame Film company in 2012. In 1998, he directed his first film called *Triumph of Iron* using simple techniques and a low cost of only 66

Swiss francs. In 2000, this film was awarded The Solothurn Film Festival of Switzerland and was nominated for the Swiss Film Award that was broadcast on official Swiss television that year. Before *Triumph of Iron*, Khalil directed and produced a number of documentaries. The documentary film *Al Anfal: In the Name of Allah, Baath and Saddam* (Al-Anfal – im Namen von Allah, Baath und Saddam), which Mano produced for Swiss TV in 2005, was an effective reason to introduce the crime of the Anfal genocide to European audiences. ■

A Selection of Mano Khalil’s Filmography

My God, 1990, 20-minute short film for Czechoslovakia TV.

The Place Where God Sleeps, 1992, 30-minute documentary for Czechoslovakia TV.

Cinema Eye, 1995, 20-minute documentary for Slovak TV.

Triumph of Iron, 1998, 30-minute short film.

Bunte Träume, 2003, 52-minute film, produced by Khalil, SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen.

Al Anfal: In the Name of Allah, Baath and Saddam\ Al-Anfal – “im Namen von Allah, Baath und Saddam, 2005, documentary.

David der Tolhildan, 2006, 54-minute documentary, produced

by Khalil, SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, RTS Radio Télévision Suisse, RSI Radiotelevisione svizzera.

My Prison, My Home, 2009, 33-minute documentary.

Our Garden of Eden, 2010, 97-minute documentary, Produced by Khalil, SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, RTS Radio Télévision Suisse, RSI Radiotelevisione svizzera, 3sat Zürich.

The Beekeeper, 2013, 107-minute documentary.

The Swallow\Die Schwalbe, 102-minute fiction film.

Hafis & Mara, 2018, 88-minute documentary.

Neighbours, 2021, 124-minute fiction film.







KARLA

## MUSIC

### The Melodious Voice Echoing the Heart of Kurdistan



Khoshawi  
Muhammad

*Khoshawi Muhammad is a journalist with extensive experience in media and press. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Sociology, a Master's degree in Political Sociology and Relationship, and a PhD in Theory, Methodology, and the History of Sociology. He has also served as a correspondent for multiple Kurdish news media operating primarily in Russia.*



In a distant land far from her ancestral home, a remarkable Kurdish singer and actress has captured the hearts of many with her soulful voice and heartfelt songs. Zarifa Pashaevna Mgoyan, known by her stage name Zara, recently released her first Kurdish album titled Klama Dilê Min, meaning The Word of My Heart. This collection of ten tracks is a testament to her deep attachment to her country and her people's sorrows and pains. Zara's captivating voice transcends borders and languages, garnering her thousands of fans worldwide.

"I have always dreamed of recording an album in my native language," Zara told Kurdistan Chronicle in an interview. "I have declared many times that this album is a tribute to my parents and ancestors. From my early childhood, I listened to Kurdish songs on cassettes, while my parents sang them. The dream and desire to recreate and explore such familiar sounds has always been within me."

Although Zara rose to fame primarily through her Russian music, she has never forgotten her Kurdish roots. Proudly proclaiming her Kurdish identity on stage and at international concerts, Zara's passion for her heritage shines through in her songs. Her dedication to charitable and humanitarian work led to her recognition as an Ambassador of Peace by UNESCO in 2016. The Russian Federation also honored her with the title of Merited Artist that year.

"Wherever we are, we must remember our country," Zara explained. "I have longed to record an album in Kurdish for a significant time. Singing in my mother tongue has always been my dream since I began singing at the age of twelve. It is essential to sing from the heart and soul, not solely because we are Kurds. When I sang in Kurdish five years ago, I received praise from all over the world."

## Getting to a Kurdish album

Zara's musical journey began at a young age, with her first stu-



dio album released when she was just twelve years old. Over the years, she has released more than ten albums, captivating audiences worldwide. In 2017, her Kurdish album became a reality, thanks to the support and collaboration of renowned word music star Yasmine Levy. Zara's album features remarkable songs like "Dayê", "Keça Kurdim", "Welatê min", and "Emanê", with a duet with Shivan Perwer.

"I started my journey with the Kurdish album in 2017," Zara recounts, "and then, I fortunately met the incredible singer Yasmine Levy, a world music star, with whom I became close friends. I shared with her that I had dreamt of recording a Kurdish album. She supported me and said she would help me along the journey!"

Beyond her remarkable vocal talent, Zara is a skilled pianist, having graduated with honors from a music school where she studied piano. Her musical abilities and diverse influences have shaped her artistic journey, leading her to become a prominent Kurdish-Russian artist. When asked about her favorite Kurdish singers, she fondly recalls the impact of Shivan Perwer and Ibrahim Tatlis on her musical upbringing.

"For as long as I can remember, the voice of Shivan Perwer has been heard in our house," Zara stated. "This is the first artist who introduced me to Kurdish music. His voice has always been very free, revolutionary, and deep, and the compositions are filled with such soul and pain. Later, I got acquainted with the music of Ibrahim Tatlis, getting lost amongst his timbre and amazing voice."

As a UNESCO Ambassador for Peace, Zara has used her platform to shed light on Kurdish culture and heritage internationally. Through her performances on various stages, including at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris, she highlights the importance of preserving cultural diversity and person-

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Although Zara rose to fame primarily through her Russian music, she has never forgotten her Kurdish roots  
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al identity.

"UNESCO is not involved in politics," Zara continued. "The organization implements the ideas of sustainable development in the field of culture,



Russian President Putin presents an award to Zara during a ceremony at the Kremlin

science, and education through international cooperation. In my speeches, I have always focused on preserving cultural diversity and allowing individuals to express their best inner selves. I proudly introduce the Kurdish culture to audiences worldwide, sharing the depth and richness of this ancient people."

## Coming to Kurdistan

Although Zara has yet to visit Kurd-

istan, the land of her ancestors, her heart yearns to return. With a big festival on the horizon during which many Kurdish artists will perform, she eagerly anticipates the event and the gathering of her compatriots.

"I have never been to Kurdistan, but I dream of going there," Zara shares. "Very soon, there will be a big festival in which many Kurdish artists will perform. Not far from the festival's location is the city of Van [southeastern of Türkiye], where my grandmother lived. I feel a certain excitement, a special thrill, and happiness about this event! More than a hundred thousand of my compatriots will gather there."

As her popularity soars in Kurdistan following the release of her recent Kurdish album, Zara plans to hold a concert at the festival, where she will perform songs from her album, delighting her audience and strengthening her connection to her Kurdish heritage.

Reflecting on her artistic journey, Zara humbly acknowledges the significance of the love and support she receives from her listeners and fans. She believes that this is the true measure of her success and the impact of her music.

"None of the numerous international awards can compare with the love of the listeners and fans," Zara asserts. "This is the most important evaluation of your work. For this reason, I sing! I really want what I do to penetrate into the

hearts of people, helping and supporting them in both the most joyful and the most difficult moments."

As Zara's musical career continues to evolve, she embraces the global reach of her recent work and the opportunity to touch the lives of people from different countries and cultures. With her unwavering commitment to her roots, powerful voice, and captivating performances, Zara remains a true Kurdish artist and an ambassador of love, unity, and cultural heritage. ■





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Harem's work not only captures the undeniable beauty of these regions but also unveils the emotional depths and everyday narratives that lie within them

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## Capturing the Essence of Kurdistan and China

Kurdistan Chronicle



landscapes and rich cultural tapestries of Kurdistan and China. Harem's work not only captures the undeniable beauty of these regions but also unveils the emotional depths and everyday narratives that lie within them.

Since 2012, Harem has embarked on a relentless journey, immersing himself in different corners of Kurdistan and China. His extensive travels have allowed him to witness and document the diverse cultures, traditions, and ways of life that exist within these regions. From the majestic mountains and serene lakes to the bustling markets and intimate human interactions,

Harem has the remarkable ability to freeze moments in time, preserving their essence forever.

Harem's portfolio boasts an impressive array of photographs that have garnered recognition and admiration from prestigious photography organizations worldwide. His artistic prowess has been celebrated by institutions such as the Image Colleague Society (ICS) in the United States and the Young Photographers of the World, where his work has been exhibited and honored with well-deserved awards. Such accolades are a testament to his exceptional talent and the emotional impact his photography has on viewers.

### The emotive power of photography

For Harem, photography is far more than a mere hobby or

In the realm of photography, some artists possess an innate ability to breathe life into their images, transcending the mere visual representation of their subjects. Harem, a talented 27-year-old Kurdish photographer based in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, is one such individual. Through his lens, he has embarked on a captivating exploration, documenting the breathtaking



form of self-expression. It is a powerful medium through which he communicates and evokes profound emotions. He believes that capturing an image is about more than just freezing a moment in time; it is about encapsulating the essence of a place, person, or event and eliciting a response from the viewer. Every meticulously crafted photograph tells a story, provokes curiosity, and stirs the depths of human emotions.

Emotion is the cornerstone of Harem's creative process. His photographs are imbued with a distinct energy that resonates with audiences, drawing them into the narrative and inviting them to experience the captured moments for themselves. Through his lens, he finds solace, liberation, and purpose. Photography

becomes a conduit for him to truly live life and engage with the world around him.

In Harem's artistry, there is a profound understanding that photography holds transformative power. It possesses the ability to transcend the mundane and connect people, cultures, and experiences. His work serves as a bridge, inviting viewers to delve into the souls of Kurdistan and China, unveiling the hidden gems and stories that lie within their landscapes and people.

As Harem continues his photographic journey, his dedication to capturing the beauty and depth of Kurdistan and China remains unwavering. Through his lens, he shares the vibrant and intricate tapestries of these

regions, painting a vivid picture that transcends borders and cultural differences. With each click of the shutter, Harem invites us to embrace the emotions, stories, and shared humanity that reside within the frames of his photographs.

In the world of photography, Harem's artistry is a shining example of how images can move beyond the confines of a frame and ignite our souls. Through his unwavering dedication to capturing the essence of Kurdistan and China, Harem has left an indelible mark on the realm of photography, reminding us all of the power and beauty that can be found within a single, carefully composed photograph. ■





# The Addition of Sorani Kurdish to Google Translate



**Bokan Jeff**

*Bokan Jeff is a Google Crowdsourced community builder for Iraq and Kurdistan Region, and Google Crowdsourced influencer.*

In May 2022, Google Translate added Sorani Kurdish as one of 24 new languages to its translation service, a major milestone for the Kurdish people who have long been striving for sovereignty and recognition.

Sorani Kurdish is the second most widely spoken dialect of Kurdish, with roughly over 12 million speakers in Iran and Iraq. It is also the official language of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The addition of Sorani to Google Translate will make it easier for Kurdish speakers to communicate with the rest of the world and help promote Kurdish culture and identity.

## Political and cultural significance

The Kurdish people have a long and rich history. They have their own language, culture, and national identity. However, they have never had a state of their own and have been subjected to oppression and discrimination.

In recent years, the Kurdish people have made significant progress in their struggle for self-determination. The Kurdistan Region has achieved a high degree of autonomy in Iraq, and Kurdish forces played a major role in the fight against ISIS. The Kurdish people are now more hopeful than ever that they will one day achieve their dream of an independent state. The addition of Sorani to Google Translate is

“It is a sign that the world is finally starting to pay attention to the Kurdish people and their struggle for self-determination”

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important for cultural reasons. Kurdish culture is rich and diverse and will now be more accessible to a wider audience. Google Translate will help to do this by making it easier for people to read and understand Kurdish literature, music, and other cultural artifacts.

The addition of Sorani is also a way to promote the Kurdish people. By making their language more accessible, Google is helping to raise awareness of the Kurdish people and their culture, which can help break down stereotypes and promote understanding between different cultures.

## Communication and information access

Specifically, the addition of Sorani can bring the following direct benefits:

Help Kurdish speakers access information and communicate with the rest of the world, which can help Kurdish people to learn about their rights and advocate for them.

thus a significant step towards Kurdish sovereignty. It will help to break down language barriers and promote Kurdish culture and identity. It is a sign that the world is finally starting to pay attention to the Kurdish people and their struggle for self-determination.

In addition to its political significance, the inclusion of Sorani is

Enable Kurdish people to access education and employment opportunities, for instance to study in other countries and to find jobs in international companies.

Aid in the preservation of Kurdish culture and heritage, helping Kurdish people maintain their identity and pass on their culture to future generations.

Enhance political representation by making it easier for Kurdish people to communicate with their elected officials and make their voices heard. Overall, the addition of Sorani to Google Translate can be a powerful tool for promoting the rights of the Kurdish nation, making Kurdish language and culture more accessible and helping Kurdish people to connect with each other, to learn about their rights, and to advocate for them.

## Sorani and tourism

The addition of Sorani to Google Translate also brings the potential to push people to visit the Kurdistan region from abroad and southern Iraq because it will be easier to communicate with locals and to learn about the region's culture and history.

In recent years, the Kurdistan region has become a popular tourist destination for several reasons, including its beautiful scenery, rich history, and welcoming people. However, the language barrier remains a major challenge, and many tourists who are interested in visiting the region are

hesitant to do so because they do not speak Kurdish.

With Sorani on Google Translate, the Kurdistan region can become a more accessible and attractive destination for travelers from all over the world. This also applies to visitors from southern Iraq, many of whom are of Kurdish descent and may be interested in learning more about their Kurdish heritage. Google Translate can provide them with greater access

to Kurdish language content, including news articles, travel guides, and cultural resources. All this ultimately helps promote understanding and unity between the Kurdish people of north and south Iraq.

## First Stage

In 2015, Kurdish Sorani was added to the Google Translate community after two years of hard work. I was thrilled



Photo: Omar Halabjawi



to see the language finally added to the service.

I have always been passionate about Kurdish culture and language and wanted to do something to help promote it. I knew that adding Sorani to Google Translate would make it easier for Kurdish speakers to communicate with others around the world, and I was determined to make it happen.

In 2017, I met the U.S. consul in Halabja, Mr. Steve Fagin, at the Halabja monument. We discussed the project, and I talked to him about the victimization of the Kurdish nation, such as the Halabja chemical attack and the Anfal campaign. On the other hand, I discussed problems of using Sorani, such as low resource data, keyboard challenges including for Arabic, word differences, and more. Mr. Fagin was very interested and offered his support, saying that he would do everything he could to help promote Sorani and Kurdish culture.

I left this meeting hopeful that Mr. Fagin would help me find a solution to the problems that we faced. I waited anxiously for two months until finally I received an email from J. Marburg from the General Affairs office at the U.S. consulate, who said that he had been able to find a way to help with the project. They connected me to the Google Translate team in the United States, and I had several meetings with them, explaining the victimization of the Kurdish nation and the aforementioned technical challenges of incorporating Sorani.

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With Sorani on Google Translate, the Kurdistan region can become a more accessible and attractive destination for travelers from all over the world  
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influencer.

In these meetings, I discussed the importance of adding Sorani to Google Translate and the challenges that Kurdish speakers face when trying to communicate with others

around the world. I also provided feedback on how Google could improve its Kurdish translation services. Moreover, the data that I translated and validated was used to train Google's machine learning algorithms to translate Kurdish text more accurately. In 2019, Google invited me to their office in Singapore to meet with the Google Translate and Google Crowdsource teams. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the invitation was withdrawn.

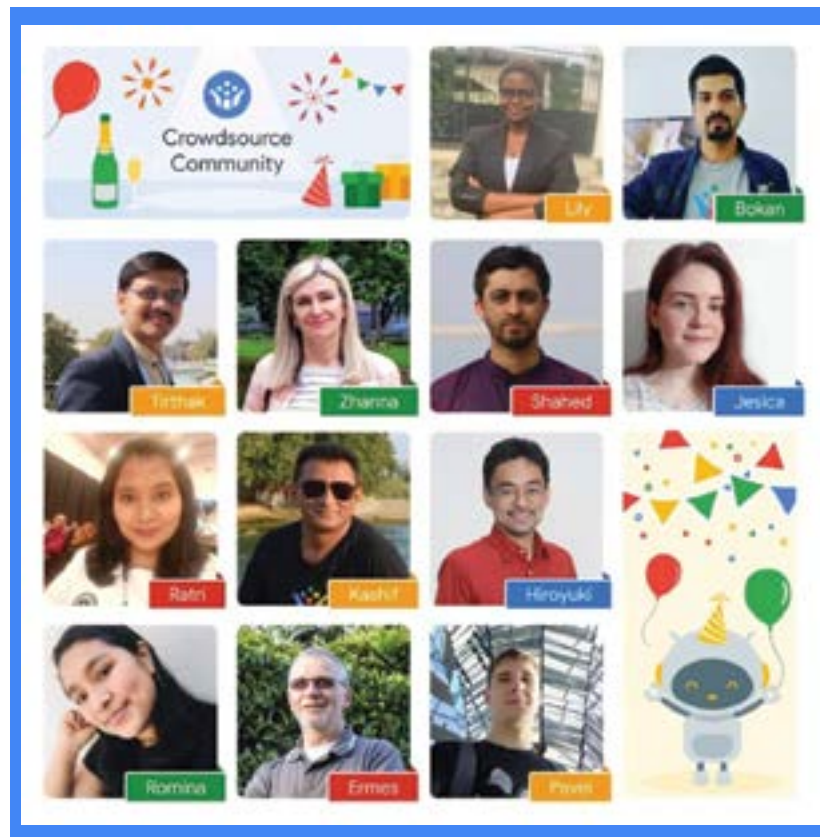
I was disappointed, as I had been

looking forward to meeting with the teams and learning more about their work. I was also hoping to use the trip

## Second stage

Google has a crowdsourcing platform, Crowdsource, that seeks to improve a host of Google services through the user-facing training of different algorithms. It was released for the Android operating system on the Google Play store on August 29, 2016, but did not include Kurdish Sorani. However, after a lot of hard work and meetings with Google, Kurdish Sorani was finally added to the app on May 31, 2019.

After this, Google requested that I create a community in Iraq. I was excited to accept this challenge and worked hard to build a community of Kurdish speakers who were interested in contributing to Google's translation project, conducting over 20 online meetings as a community builder for Iraq. Thanks to these efforts, the Google Translate team appointed me as an



as an opportunity to promote Kurdish culture and language. Nevertheless, I am grateful to Google for inviting me in the first place and recognize that the invitation was a recognition of the work that I have done to promote Kurdish culture and language. I am also hopeful that the invitation will be extended again in the future.

Most importantly, I never gave up. Every meeting was simply moved online. I worked continuously on the

neer in the United States sent me a message, saying, "I have good news for you. Over the next 30 hours, I will release the first beta translation model result for Kurdish Sorani."

I was overjoyed. I couldn't believe that my dream was going to come true. I waited impatiently for the next 30 hours. Finally, when the time came, I opened the website and clicked on the link to the beta translation model, on which I would work for the next year. Working on the Sorani translation project for so many years was a labor of love, but it was also incredibly challenging. The Kurdish language is complex, and there are many dialects that can be difficult to translate. I had to learn more about the language and culture than I ever knew before to create, alongside the engineers and experts, a translation model that was ac-

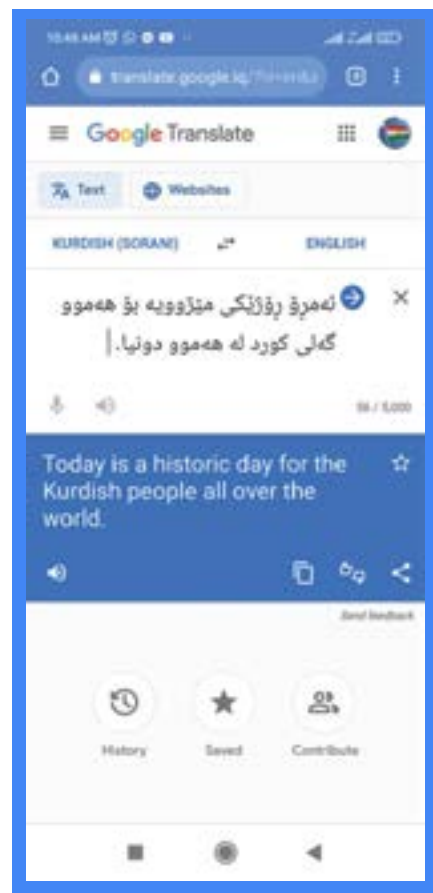
After working for over seven years and translating and validating over 1,300,000 pieces of data to add Sorani to Google Translate, the U.S. consulate asked me for a meeting on March 16, 2022, in Halabja. U.S. Consul Robert Paladino and Gina Cabrera visited Halabja to discuss the project, and they told me that Google had finally decided to add Kurdish Sorani as a tribute to the victims of the Halabja chemical attack, the Anfal campaign, and Kurdish victimization in general.

## Next steps and further online enhancements

Google has now added Sorani to camera, picture, document, text, and website sections, which are major milestones for the Kurdish community, but I am determined to continue working to enhance the accessibility of Sorani online in the following ways: Improve the quality and quantity of Sorani content on the Internet and make it easier for people to find this content online.

Add Sorani to other Google products, including to Google Search, Google Maps, and other Google products. Implement a Kurdish voice system to Google Translate.

I want to extend my appreciation to the U.S. Consulate General in Erbil, the Google offices in the United States, Japan, India, and Singapore, and those who motivated me and helped me even with one word throughout all phases of this process.



project for years and then, one night in 2021 at 3:30 AM, a Google engi-

curate and reliable and that accounted for cultural sensitivity.





KURDISTAN RUGBY

## A Sporting Phenomenon on the Rise



# RUGBY



Ayar Rasool

*Ayar Rasool is an acclaimed producer of short films and documentaries, who has been in collaboration with media agencies such as AppleTV, Netflix, and HBO. His projects have garnered critical acclaim, marked by numerous Emmy and BAFTA nominations, as well as a local distinctions.*

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The Kurdistan Rugby Team have fostered connections that enable Kurdish players to participate in regional and international competitions

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Rugby, a sport renowned for its intensity, physicality, and camaraderie, is rapidly gaining popularity worldwide. While traditionally associated with countries like England, New Zealand, and South Africa, rugby has found an unexpected home in the Kurdistan Region, where it has attracted a remarkable surge in interest and participation and a growing number of enthusiasts embracing the sport with passion and determination.

### The growth of rugby in the Kurdistan Region

The rise of rugby in the Kurdistan Region can be attributed to several factors, including the region's strong sporting culture, its thirst for new athletic challenges, and the introduction of the sport by dedicated individuals. One pivotal influence in the region's rugby growth has been the Kurdistan Rugby Team, which was established in 2013 and has played a crucial role in promoting the sport, providing training opportunities, and organiz-

ing tournaments. Actively collaborating with international rugby bodies, the Kurdistan Rugby Team have fostered connections that enable Kurdish players to participate in regional and international competitions.

Foreign coaches and players have also significantly contributed to the growth of rugby in the region. These individuals have volunteered their time and expertise, not only sharing their knowledge but also helping establish rugby clubs, organize training sessions, and support the development of young Kurdish players.

### Positive impact on the community

The increasing popularity of rugby in the Kurdistan Region has had a positive impact on the local community in numerous ways. Firstly, it has created a platform for cultural exchange and understanding. Rugby, renowned for its inclusivity and respect for diverse backgrounds, has brought together people from different ethnicities, re-

ligions, and social backgrounds. This shared passion for the sport has fostered a sense of unity and strengthened community bonds.

Moreover, rugby has provided Kurdish youth with an avenue to engage in physical activity and adopt a healthier lifestyle. The sport promotes teamwork, discipline, and perseverance, imparting valuable life skills that extend beyond the field. Rugby's emphasis on fair play and respect has also contributed to the development of moral values among its players, shaping them into responsible and well-rounded individuals.

### Tournaments

The Kurdistan Rugby team showcased their skills and determination by participating in the Dubai 7s International Social Tournament in 2015, 2016, and 2018. Their involvement in these prestigious events highlighted their growing presence in the international rugby scene.

Moreover, they made history by ar-

ranging and participating in the first-ever rugby match in Kurdistan and Iraq on April 20, 2019. The match was a remarkable moment for Kurdish rugby, as they faced off against the Iraqi Rugby Association. The Kurdistan Rugby team delivered an outstanding performance, securing a convincing victory with a score of 25-5. This triumph marked a significant milestone for rugby development in the region and showcased the team's talent and dedication.

### The future of rugby in the Kurdistan Region

With the growing enthusiasm and commitment to rugby in the Kurdistan Region, the future of the sport looks promising. Increased participation at the grassroots level and the continuous support from the Kurdistan Rugby Team indicate a strong foundation for sustained growth.

To ensure the sport's development, it is crucial to provide adequate resources and infrastructure. Contin-

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Rugby, renowned for its inclusivity and respect for diverse backgrounds, has brought together people from different ethnicities, religions, and social backgrounds  
”

competitions, enabling Kurdish players to showcase their skills on a global stage.

Promoting rugby within schools and educational institutions is also essential. It introduces the sport to a wider audience and creates a sustainable pathway for young athletes to pur-

sue their passion. Encouraging the involvement of girls and women in rugby is equally important to ensure inclusivity and gender equality within the sport.

The rise of rugby in the Kurdistan Region highlights the power of sport in bringing people together, fostering community spirit, and empowering individuals. The unique blend of physicality, strategy, and teamwork that rugby offers has captured the hearts of Kurdish athletes and fans alike.

As rugby continues to gain momentum in the region, it has the potential to become a significant cultural and sporting phenomenon. By nurturing its growth, providing opportunities for participation, and embracing the sport's values, the Kurdistan Region is poised to make a lasting impact on the global rugby community while reaping the benefits of this remarkable sport at home. ■





## Racing with Pride



**Sardar Sattar**

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

In the world of motorsports, speed, precision, and unyielding determination to cross the finish line first are the ingredients that forge a champion. But for Isaac Tutumlu, the goal – ever since he entered the racetrack – was not just to see the checkered flag waved but to fly the Kurdistan flag.

Tutumlu is a Spanish-Kurdish race car driver with many international titles. Born and raised in Barcelona by a Spanish mother and a Türkiye-born Kurdish father, Tutumlu has always

felt a strong connection to his Kurdish identity. His passion for car racing was formed early in life. Despite his parents' objection to the risky sport, he never wavered in his passion and worked hard to enter the international circuit and win acclaim.

Tutumlu started his racing career at the Karting Championships. After progressing in auto racing, he joined the Mitzette Series in 2007 and proved his skills on the track. The following year Tutumlu cemented his reputation as a rising star by

winning the Catalunya Touring Car Championship. In 2009 he then took up grand touring (GT) racing, competing in prestigious championships such as the Porsche Supercup, where he demonstrated his skills in five races in addition to the International GT Open and the Spanish GT Championship.

In 2011, the Kurdish-Spanish driver took on a new challenge by entering the Superstars series, driving a BMW M3 for respected Spanish team Campos Racing. Though his season







was brief, limited to the opening three quarters, he made an incredible impact. Later that year, Tutumlu returned to the Porsche Super Cup, continuing to showcase his talent and commitment to the sport.

Asked about his greatest achievements during an exclusive interview with Kurdistan Chronicle, Tutumlu

proudly stated that the turning point in his professional career came in 2011, when he crossed the finish line with his Porsche GT3R painted in the colors of the Kurdistan flag.

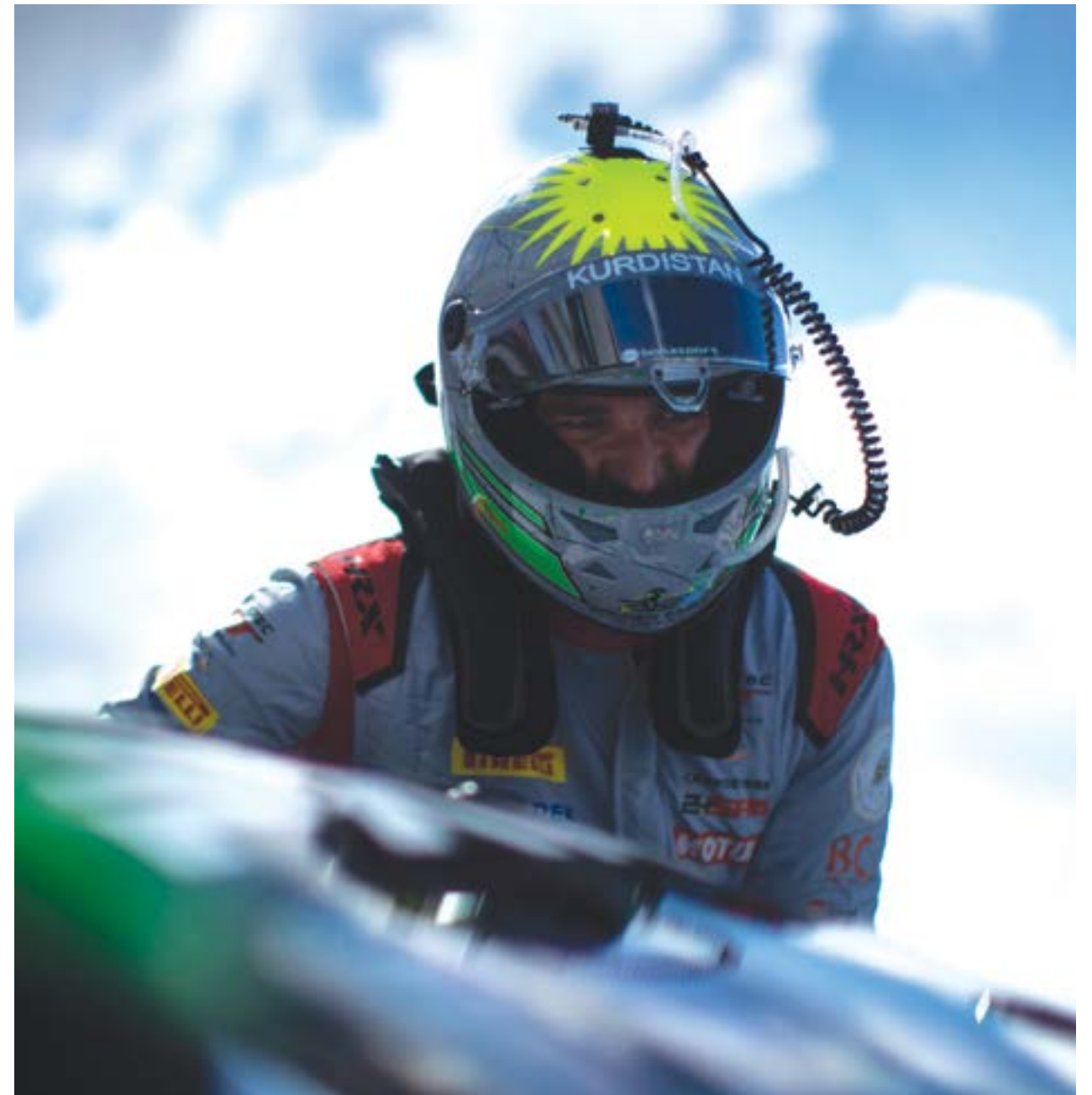
However, making this dream come true was no easy task. The first steps were taken in the summer of 2011, when he visited the Kurdistan Region

for the first time. He describes his feelings after landing in Erbil as “moments of joy and pride” that were followed by a warm reception by Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani. This meeting, as recalled by Tutumlu, marked the beginning of a new era in his professional career. President Barzani enthusiastically welcomed his idea to establish the Kurdistan Racing Team and hoist the Kurdistan flag on international podiums.

But those efforts were met with multiple rejections for political reasons. Race organizers were reluctant to allow teams registered under the name and flag of Kurdistan “because Kurdistan is not an independent state, and it might provoke political backlash,” the Kurdish driver explained. Therefore, the team was initially named Barzani Racing Team to honor the Kurdish leader’s support for the promotion of Kurdistan on international stages.

One thing that Tutumlu has learned from his experiences on the racetrack is that determination is the key to success, and just like when he is at the wheel of a race car, the Kurdish driver grew determined to paint his car in the colors of the Kurdistan flag one day.

Finally, the moment came – Tutum-



lu whizzed past the finish line in a Porsche GT3R emblazoned with a yellow sun and the red-white-green Kurdistan flag to top the Spanish Championship Iber GT. It soon became the headline of many prominent Kurdish newspapers and websites and, obviously, opened a new chapter in Tutumlu’s life.

“Between 2011 and 2014, we had to race under the name of Barzani Racing Team because we were told that the name of Kurdistan could trigger conflicts with Iran, Iraq, Türkiye and

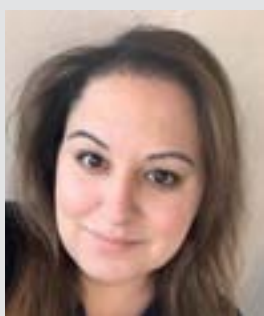
Syria. Nevertheless, we put the Kurdistan flag on our cars and named the team after Barzani until 2019, when we finally received approval to rename the team as Kurdistan Racing Team,” Tutumlu explained.

Since that day, Tutumlu has gained international fame for his performances and significant achievements and titles on the track, which include the Spanish GT Championship (2012), the International GT Open (2013), the Dubai 24 Hours and International GT Open (2014), the DMV GTC

Championship (2019), and the World Championship (2022-2023). Tutumlu might be considered as an exceptionally skilled driver, but he is not alone in his ambition of statehood for an independent Kurdistan. The largest stateless nation in the world is known for its resilience and determination to never give up the cause of securing its legitimate rights. Tutumlu has nonetheless set an example as a sportsman and patriotic Kurd from whom future generations will learn that fighting for one’s people does not have to occur only through politics. ■



# Turning Dreams into Reality



**Aveen Howrami**

*Aveen Howrami is an American Kurdish activist with a decade of experience in the education field. She has provided assistance to numerous local NGOs, schools, and educational institutions in their internationalization efforts and technical expertise.*

**T**he inspirational journey of a Kurdish girl who shattered athletic records and is setting her sights even higher.

Fresh from her triumph at the West Asian Athletics Championships (WAAC) in Doha, Marwa Khailani returned to her family with a new WAAC record in the hammer throw.

As she basks in the glory of her achievements, she yearns to share her pride with her loved ones and seeks to delve deeper into her family roots, driven by the desire to win more medals and set new records. Marwa has always been a firm believer in pursuing her dreams, stating, "Whatever I have dreamed, I have relentlessly pursued and achieved."

Now, she aspires to extend her ambitions beyond personal success and hopes to inspire others to embrace challenges and achieve greatness. Confidently, she proclaims, "Having broken records in Iraq, the Gulf countries, and Asia, my ultimate dream is to establish a world record in the hammer throw."

## From Baghdad with love

Born in 2001 amidst challenging circumstances in the vibrant city of Baghdad, Marwa's family has resided there for a significant period. She graduated from the College of Sports Sciences at Baghdad University and attests, "My family has been my unwavering support system right from the start." Despite their enduring dream of returning to their ancestral homeland in the Kurdistan Region, political circumstances have blocked

their plans.

Marwa expresses gratitude for her family's unwavering belief in her and acknowledges their pride in her achievements. When asked about the most influential support that she has received on her path to success, she proudly asserts, "I have been my own staunchest supporter. Even during the toughest times, I have nurtured and believed in my own soul."

Marwa emphasizes that sports have never hindered her pursuit of a normal life but instead serve as a powerful catalyst for achieving greater things. She reveals, "In fact, sports have been instrumental in my academic success, motivating me to excel in my studies and earn a degree."

Her hammer throw of 47.95 meters at the WAAC was the culmination of her dominance of the event in Iraq over the past six years.

Radiating with pride, Marwa declared her love for her nation after clinching the title with a record-breaking throw. The resounding support and overwhelming joy she received from her nation, relatives in the Kurdistan Region, and her tribe and family members filled her with immense happiness and pride.

Marwa's sporting journey has seen her compete at the World Athletics Championships in Russia, securing a commendable seventh-place finish, and claim the top spot at the Asian Athletics Championships and Arab Athletics Championships in Tunisia, where

“

Now, she aspires to extend her ambitions beyond personal success and hopes to inspire others to embrace challenges and achieve greatness

”







Reflecting on her siblings, she says, "Some of them pursue athletic endeavors, while others work in the media." Marwa admits to being an ardent fan of the Iraqi national football team, describing them as "the happiness of the people."

Shaping character with athletics

Longing to reside in the Kurdistan Region alongside her relatives, Marwa unabashedly expresses the overwhelming love and respect she felt following her accomplishments. "After experiencing the tremendous support and affection from the people of the Kurdistan Region during my last visit, I yearn to make it my home," she reveals.

Having ventured into sports at the age of 11, she initially gravitated towards the hammer throw because of

her affinity for competitive sports. Marwa now encourages women and girls to embrace athletics as a means to shape their personalities. She firmly believes that even women who may be overweight or lack an athletic physique can still engage in athletics and thrive.

Marwa's dreams are as grand as her achievements. The pursuit of her aspirations and turning them into reality have become an inseparable part of her character. Brimming with ambition, she asserts, "I am an incredibly ambitious girl. Each day brings renewed aspirations, and there are no limits to what I can achieve."

Marwa envisions herself becoming a world champion and yearns to leave an indelible mark on history. With conviction, she concludes, "I aim to create a legacy that will be forever remembered." ■







An exceptional photography exhibition, showcasing the work of acclaimed Kurdish photographer Younes Mohammed, has made its way to Nashville, Tennessee, and Washington, D.C. Born in Dohuk and currently based in Erbil, Mohammed's powerful imagery captures the essence of the Kurdish struggle and the resilience of its people. This article explores the significance of the exhibition, highlighting its locations and the remarkable stories behind the photographs.

### A journey of passion and perseverance

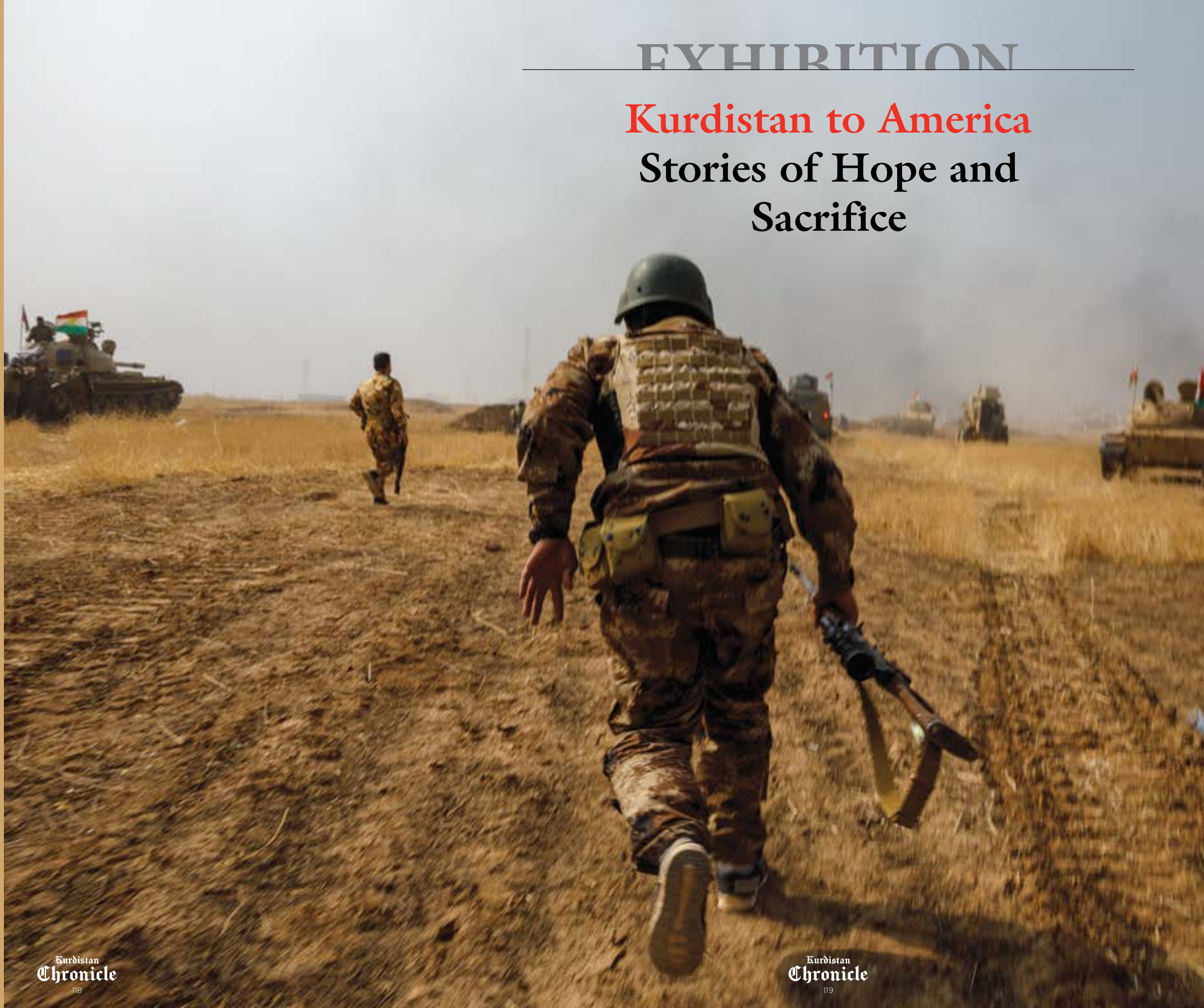
Younes Mohammed's lifelong passion for photography has endured despite the challenges presented by the turbulent history of the region. Born in 1968, Mohammed's family left the Kurdistan Region in 1974, seeking refuge in Iran. While there, he pursued his education and earned an MBA from Tehran University, but his true calling was always behind the lens, and he dedicated himself to capturing the human experience through his photography.

### International acclaim

Younes Mohammed's talent and dedication have been recognized and celebrated on an international scale. His photographs have

# EXHIBITION

## Kurdistan to America Stories of Hope and Sacrifice





received awards in various countries, including France, Germany, Hungary, Indonesia, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK, and the United States. His work has resonated with audiences around the world, shedding light on the struggle for freedom and the sacrifices that it demands.

"Kurdistan to America: Stories of hope and sacrifice"

The exhibition in the United States, titled "Kurdistan to America: Stories of Hope and Sacrifice," serves as a testament to the indomitable spirit of the Kurdish people. Through his lens, Mohammed documents the daily lives of ordinary individuals, weaving a tapestry of love, sacrifice, courage, and friendship. His photographs not only capture the unique beauty of Kurdistan but also convey universal themes of human resilience and the pursuit of freedom.

Exhibition locations

Over the course of eight days in June, the exhibition was featured in two prominent locations. On Thursday, June 22 and Friday, June 23, it graced the mezzanine of the Nashville Metropolitan Courthouse, inviting visitors to immerse themselves in the captivating imagery. From there, the exhibition it moved to Washington, D.C., where it was showcased on the first-floor foyer of the Rayburn House Office Building of the U.S. Congress on Wednes-

day, June 28. Finally, on Thursday, June 29, it appeared at the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Representation in Washington, where it created a platform for dialogue and cultural exchange.

Sponsors and supporters

The exhibition was made possible through the support of several organizations. Spirit of America, a Washington D.C.-based non-profit organization (NGO), stands as a long-time friend and sponsor of Younes Mohammed's work, working alongside troops and diplomats to promote shared values and improve lives. Kurdish Professionals, a Nashville-based NGO, Justice for Kurds, and the KRG Representation in Washington also lent their support, recognizing the significance of the exhibition for fostering understanding and appreciation of Kurdish culture and heritage.

"Kurdistan to America: Stories of Hope and Sacrifice" offers a glimpse into the rich tapestry of Kurdish life as captured through the lens of Younes Mohammed. Through his extraordinary talent and passion, he showcases the enduring spirit and resilience of the Kurdish people, while also highlighting the universal human experience. Featuring the exhibition in Nashville and Washington, D.C. served as a bridge between cultures, inviting visitors to witness and appreciate the struggles, hopes, and sacrifices that shape our collective journey.







## Kajal Kajal Ahmad Ahmad

Translated by Nahro Zagros

### Departure from Earth Terra Firma

When my eruption occurred,  
my hair took on the form of the equator,  
a band encircling the span of the Earth.  
For the reaches of the southern pole,  
I donned a humble pair of socks  
and a turban woven for my spirit and soul.  
The Earth grew weary, longing for my departure,  
yearning to shed me like old clothes.  
But to the helpful strands of your beard I clung and resisted,  
and you dropped me from the Earth's surface.  
I transformed into a star above,  
now having my own atmosphere filled with love,  
where my population exceeds that of Earth.

### جیا بوونهوه له زهوی

که ته قیমেوه  
وهک هیلای ئیستیوا پرچم  
بوو به پشتینی کهمهری زهوی!  
بۆ بهسته لهکی خوارووش خۆم کرده  
جووتی گۆرهویی.  
له داوی رۆحم بۆ بهسته لهکی  
ژوو رو کلاو و جامانه م چنی.  
خاک لیم بیزار بوو،  
ویستی دامالای وهکو پالتوی کۆن  
خۆم به رهحمهتی ریشتا ههلواسی!  
له تۆپی زهمین بهرتدادهوه  
باوهشی گهردوون!!  
هه ره له ئاسمانا بووم به ئهستیره.  
ئیسنا مه دار و عهشقی خۆم ههیه و  
له زهویش زیاتر خه لکم تیا دهژی!!!





Squirrels are known for their playful nature, often engaging with humans when they feel safe and unthreatened, seeking friendship. They belong to a diverse family consisting of numerous species. One such species is the Caucasian Squirrel, a sizable squirrel that primarily resides in trees and steep mountain sides. It can be found in various regions of Kurdistan, particularly in the Zagros Mountains. In terms of physical characteristics, the Caucasian squirrel typically measures between 20 to 30 centimeters in length and can weigh anywhere from 200 to 1000 grams.







<b>+300</b> EMPLOYEES	<b>+12</b> OPERATIVE BRANCHES ACROSS IRAQ & BEYOND	<b>+1,5M</b> ANNUAL TRAVELERS	<b>+350</b> CORPORATE CLIENTS	<b>+10000</b> SUB-AGENCIES	<b>+160</b> COUNTRIES	<b>+1M</b> SOMO FOLLOWERS	<b>∞</b> TRAVEL MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS
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