

Kurdistan Chronicle

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December 2023 Volume 1 Issue 11



**KURDISTAN ADDS
APPLES AS AN
AGRICULTURAL
EXPORT**



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Photo: Arkan Walat Zhere

Kurdistan Chronicle

A Reflection of the Kurdish Spirit

As we wrap up 2023, *Kurdistan Chronicle* proudly releases its 11th issue, which coincides with several key events whose effects are expected to reach beyond the Kurdistan Region. We are also proud of having remained resilient and consistent in the face of technical challenges and releasing our magazine every month on time.

Over the past year, *Kurdistan Chronicle* introduced itself as a new window to showcase the Kurdistan Region to the outside world, while relating scores of success stories of Kurdish people across the world. Besides the differences that these people have made in their host communities, their successes had failed to garner fair representation in a Kurdish publication. Instead, they were often portrayed as icons with little consideration for their Kurdish roots. We at *Kurdistan Chronicle* build an objective platform that relates these stories and show their protagonists as an example of qualified Kurdish professionals who flourished when they were given the opportunity in their respective fields and endeavors.

When we were preparing our 1st issue in early 2023, many believed that physical magazines belonged in the dustbin of history, with digital devices rendering paper publications superfluous. However, our fast success has proved these claims miscast. Once, during a meeting at our offices, a foreign diplomat in the Kurdistan Region said: "I feel the spirit of the Kurdish people when I hold *Kurdistan Chronicle* in my hands."

In this edition of *Kurdistan Chronicle*, we publish a selection of insightful and informative articles ranging from politics, economy, and diplomacy to history, culture, and the arts. With a new layout in this very special issue, we hope to introduce a new dimension of Kurdistan to the outside world.

Our 11th issue also coincides with two important events: COP28 in Dubai and World Economic Forum in Davos. The former brought world leaders together in early December to discuss the pressing challenges that our world faces due to the heightening challenge of climate change. In his interactions with his international counterparts at COP28, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour

Barzani reiterated the Kurdistan Region's dedication to actively contributing to global initiatives aimed at mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Meanwhile, at the World Economic Forum in January, the Kurdish leader is expected to remind the international community that the Kurdistan Region has been, and will remain, a factor for stability. This was evident when the economic shockwaves of the Russia-Ukraine War posed a threat to global food security. During that challenging period, the Kurdistan Region surpassed expectations by extending a helping hand to the world's food basket, expressing readiness to supply regional markets with essential food items available in Kurdistan.

The past year also set a milestone in the Kurdistan Region's economic growth, after several agricultural products were exported to the international markets for the first time in the region's history. This initiative stemmed from a comprehensive plan devised by the KRG to diversify the economy and reduce its dependence on oil. After notable shipments of pomegranates, potatoes, honey, and apples from various regions of Kurdistan graced the shelves of both Gulf and European supermarkets, demand has significantly increased. In response, the Kurdistan Region is now working to expand both the size and diversity of its exports, hoping to export up to 1 million tons of potato in 2024.

Finally, it must be noted that with the large number of success stories, fascinating opinion and feature articles, and the different events happening in the region, we at the editorial board of *Kurdistan Chronicle* decided to print this issue with an expanded page count. We hope it provides you with an interesting read over your holidays.

Kurdistan Chronicle wishes you a happy and prosperous year in 2024. ●

Botan Jahseen

TIMELINE

DECEMBER 2023

December 1

- PM Masrour Barzani arrived in Dubai where he met with world leaders at COP28.

December 2

- The US expressed concern over increased attacks against its forces in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq.
- The Kurdistan Region exported its first-ever honey shipment to the Gulf.

December 4

- The US CENTCOM confirmed the killing of five Iraqi Shia militiamen in an airstrike in Kirkuk.

December 5

- Marking the 16 days of activism against violence on women, the KRG reiterated its commitment to empowering women.

December 7

- Paula Ganly, Australian Ambassador to Iraq, visited Erbil to discuss strengthening relations.
- Foreign ambassadors, consul generals, and representatives visited Erbil to join PM Masrour Barzani for a Christmas-New Year dinner.

December 8

- An explosive-laden drone hit a civilian building in Erbil with no casualties. A fire breakout at a building in Soran killed 14 people and injured several others.

December 10

- Senior advisors from the US-led Coalition met with Peshmerga commanders to discuss reform and unification of the Peshmerga.

December 11

- Marking the 71st anniversary of the Kurdistan Women's Union, PM Barzani reaffirmed his government's commitment to protecting women's rights.
- PM Barzani welcomed Greece's new Consul General to Erbil, Nikolaos Stergioula, to discuss relations.
- Kurdistan Region Interior Minister Rebar Ahmad met with the Iraqi prime minister in Baghdad to discuss elections.
- Radu Dobri, the Romanian Ambassador to Iraq, visited Erbil to discuss strengthening bilateral ties.

December 12

- Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Iraq and Jordan, Aidarbek Toumatov, visited Erbil to discuss bilateral ties.
- A senior UK military delegation met with the Peshmerga Minister to renew the

commitment to supporting the Kurdistan Region.

December 14

- A KRG delegation, led by Interior Minister Rebar Ahmad, traveled to Geneva to take part in the Global Refugee Forum 2023.

December 15

- A new report by the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC) stated that nearly 1 million IDPs and refugees are still in the Kurdistan Region.
- US-led Coalition Commander General Michael Ecker visited Erbil to discuss Peshmerga reforms.

December 16

- The US Congress showed support for the deployment of a defense system to the Kurdistan Region.
- Yezidis filed a lawsuit against the French cement maker Lafarge.

December 17

- Kurds across the world celebrated Kurdistan Flag Day.
- UN Special Representative for Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, visited Erbil, where he discussed provincial elections with PM Barzani.

December 18

- PM Barzani arrived in Kuwait to extend condolences over the passing of Emir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Sabah.

December 20

- Victoria Nuland, the Under Secretary of State of the United States, visited Erbil to reaffirm Washington's support for Erbil.
- The Kurdistan Region exported its first-ever shipment of Barwari Apple to Qatar.

December 21

- PM Barzani joined the 9th congress of the Kurdistan Women's Union to reaffirm his cabinet's commitment to empowering women across government sectors.
- Madan Gopal, Indian Consul General in Erbil, met with President Masoud Barzani to discuss strengthening tech and cultural ties with Kurdistan.

December 23

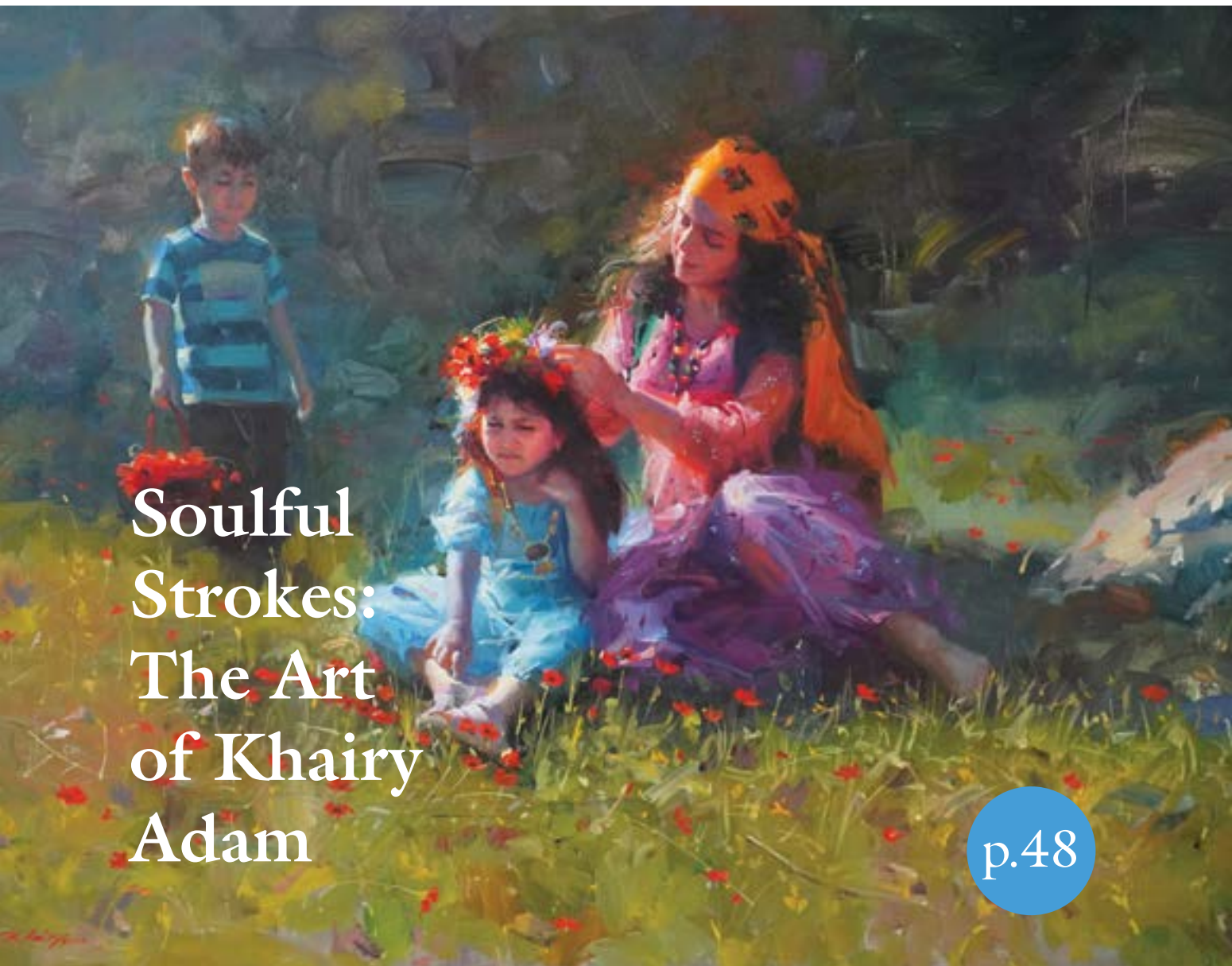
- Turkey extended the airspace ban for flights to and from Sulaymaniyah airport.
- General Pierre Schill, Chief of Staff of the French Army, visited Erbil to discuss military cooperation.

December 24

- Kurdish leaders extended best wishes for Christmas and the year 2024.

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The Art of Khairy Adam**

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Barwari Apples Kurdistan's Fruitful Economic Renaissance



Shamal Abdulla

Shamal Abdulla is a journalist with 18 years of experience in the field. He has held a number of prestigious positions, including news director at Kurdistan 24 and the editor-in-chief of BasNews.

Recognizing the need for a more diversified economy that relies less on revenues from producing crude oil, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) opened a new chapter in its economic strategy by exporting the first-ever shipment of apples to the international markets in December 2023. Directly overseen by the Prime Minister's Office of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the KRG Ministry of Agriculture, the inaugural shipment, weighing 500 tons, was dispatched to Qatar via air freight.

The initiative marks a leap forward in the economic growth of the KRI, which struggles with the reluctance of the Iraqi federal government to address decades-long oil and budgetary disputes. It also comes six months after the suspension of Kurdistan oil exports, the largest portion of the KRG's an-

nual budget, and thus adds an additional source of revenue.

The pioneer shipment

Attending a ceremony at the Erbil International Airport while loading the outbound cargo, KRG Agriculture Minister Begard Talabani said that the strategic plan aims at empowering local farmers, increasing production, identifying international markets, and promoting economic diversity within the region.

The minister also noted that the export of apples to Qatar is “just the begin-

ning, and the process will continue.” She emphasized that the next objective in the export push is to involve the active participation of 10 local farmers, ideally creating 600 jobs.

Kurdistan's agricultural portfolio

In a groundbreaking initiative on April 12, 2022, the Kurdistan Region marked its first venture into non-oil exports by sending pomegranates to Gulf countries and France. Subsequently, there has been a notable surge in demand for Kurdish potatoes, with about 90% being shipped to the UAE since August 2023. This has also piqued the interest of other Gulf nations, including Saudi Arabia.

In another case, the introduction of Kurdistan honey into Qatar's market on November 29, 2023, showcased how the Beekeepers Network Association harnessed effective strategic branding efforts to realize a substantial boost in profits for local businesses.

Celebrating the achievements after a long quest to secure international markets for Kurdish products, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani wrote on December 21, 2023, on his official X account: “We delivered on our promise.” He pledged to remain committed to the KRG's strategic plan of economic diversification and finding more markets for Kurdish products.



The first truckload of Kurdistan's Barwari apple preparing to head to Qatar.

Beyond the orchards

As part of his cabinet's agenda, Prime Minister Barzani first announced its ambitious plans for exporting agricultural products back in 2019 when he took office. Later, he introduced several groundbreaking measures to support local farmers, including the allocation of government funds to facilitate the adoption of modern agricultural technologies, the implementation of training programs to help farmers transition to modern farming methods, and the establishment of food industrial zones dedicated to the procurement of locally grown products.

“Kurdistan's agriculture has untold potential.



Photo: Star Ahmad



Photos: Star Ahmad

We want to see Halabja pomegranates compete globally, and apples in the Berwari valley exported. Walnuts from Hawraman, tahini from Amedi, figs of Akre, and other products, each of these tells its own story in new markets. And we can do it,” Prime Minister Barzani said in a statement dated June 13, 2023.

The Kurdish prime minister’s vision, however, was not limited to domestic reforms. He was, in fact, looking for a larger market for top-notch Kurdish products.

At the 2023 World Economic Forum in Davos, he actively engaged with business leaders to explore potential markets for premium-grade pomegranates, apples, grapes, and honey.

He specifically promoted Barwari apples during his meeting with the Majid Al Futtaim Group, which owns the chain of Carrefour Market stores in Iraq and across the Gulf States.

Furthermore, during a meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Prime Minister Barzani underscored the success of Kurdistan’s first agriculture export to the UAE, noting that the KRI is helping its neighbors meet their food security needs.

“This delivery is just the beginning,” he stressed.

Barwari’s apple bounty

Barwari is a mountainous region located in the Hakkari mountains span-

ning the KRI and southeastern Turkey. The region’s population consists of Assyrians and Kurds. Historically, Barwari was home to a Jewish community until its migration to Israel in 1951.

The region is presently divided into northern Barwari in Turkey and southern Barwari in the KRI. Nestled amid fertile lands and blessed with a favorable climate, the region cultivates a diverse range of agricultural products. Barwari apples, of which between 350,000 and 450,000 tons are produced annually, is its most famous product. ●

COP28

Kurdistan Emerges as a Key Player in COP28's Global Spotlight



Marewan Hawramy

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

In a display of international recognition and camaraderie, Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani was warmly received by prominent figures during the second day of the Dubai COP28 Global Climate Action Summit. Among those extending their greetings were the President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and UN General Secretary António Guterres. The exchange of pleasantries highlighted the growing importance of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) on the global stage and its commitment to addressing critical challenges facing humanity, as well as Prime Minister Barzani's diplomatic achievements.

Engaging in meaningful dialogue

The Dubai COP28, the 28th edition of the UN Climate Change Conference, took place from November 30 to December 12 at Expo City in Dubai, UAE. The conference, officially known as the Conference of the Parties of the UN-FCCC, serves as an annual platform for participating governments to collaboratively formulate policies to restrict global temperature increases and devise strategies to adapt to climate change consequences. The COP conferences, initiated in 1992, play a crucial role in international dialogue and decision-making on climate-related issues.





PM Barzani and King Charles of the United Kingdom at COP28.



PM Barzani and meets with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan at COP28.



PM Barzani and French President Emmanuel Macron at COP28.



PM Barzani and UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan at COP28.



PM Barzani and Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani at COP28.



PM Barzani and President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, at COP28.



PM Barzani and UN Secretary-General António Guterres at COP28.



PM Barzani and John Kerry, US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, at COP28.



PM Barzani and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, at COP28.



PM Barzani and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa at COP28.



PM Barzani and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev at COP28.



PM Barzani and Mukesh Dhirubhai Ambani, a top Indian businessman and investor, at COP28.

Prime Minister Barzani seized the opportunity to engage in dialogues with notable global leaders, emphasizing the significance of cooperative efforts to tackle pressing issues related to climate change. Notable figures included King Charles, the President of the EU Commission, John Kerry, the Prince of Qatar, and several European Prime Ministers. These high-profile interactions served as a testament to Kurdistan's active role in international affairs and its dedication to fostering collaboration in the face of the existential crisis posed by climate change.

The warm reception and the subsequent dialogues underscored both the ongoing diplomatic endeavors of Prime Minister Barzani and the importance of the KRI's involvement in global initiatives, particularly concerning challenges that transcend national borders. As the world grapples with the urgent need for sustainable solutions to combat climate change, Kurdistan's active participation in the summit signals a commitment to being part of the collective global effort to address this critical issue.

A commitment to change

The conclusion of COP28 marked a pivotal agreement signaling the end of the fossil fuel era. The accord laid the foundation for a rapid, fair, and equitable transition with substantial emissions reductions and increased financial support. Representatives from nearly 200 parties reached a landmark decision on the inaugural "global stocktake," intensifying climate action to maintain the global temperature limit of 1.5°C within reach. This collective effort underscored a shared commitment to addressing climate change and set the stage for a transformative shift towards a more sustainable future on a global scale.

The presence of Prime Minister Barzani at the COP28 summit not only symbolized the KRI's commitment to global collaboration but also highlighted its dedication to actively contributing to efforts aimed at mitigating the impacts of the existential crisis that is climate change. By engaging in meaningful discussions with world leaders, Prime Minister Barzani demonstrated the KRI's proactive stance in finding innovative solutions and fostering international cooperation to address the challenges posed by climate change. ●



PM Masrour Barzani and Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani among other Kurdish and Iraqi leaders at COP28.

Photo: Farhad Ahmad

Kurdistan's Progress and Charting Future Paths at Davos 2024

Kurdistan Chronicle

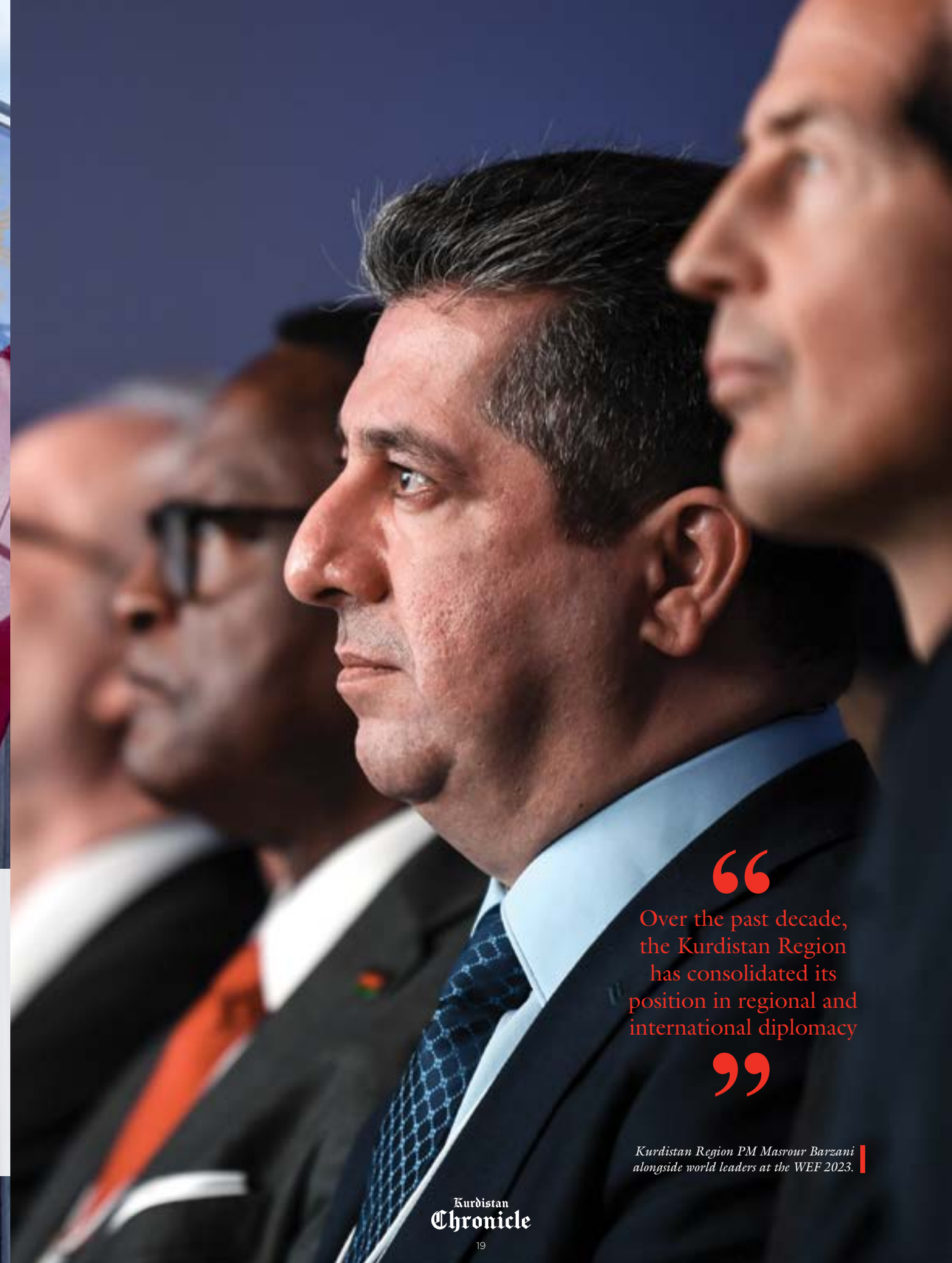
Leaders from government, business, and civil society convene every year at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos to discuss current global challenges and develop a unified approach to overcoming them. The 54th annual forum is scheduled to occur January 15-19, 2024, and is centered around the theme of "Rebuilding Trust."

This event will welcome over 100 governments, all major international organizations, and 1,000 of the forum's partners, as well as civil society leaders, experts, youth representatives, social entrepreneurs, and news outlets. Among them are Kurdish leaders who represent the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and share a commitment to collective

efforts in the face of pressing global challenges.

Climate and biodiversity crises, artificial intelligence, the war in Ukraine, and concerns over cost of living are among the main topics that world leaders will discuss this year.

Like last year, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani is leading the Kurdistan Region delegation to the 2024 WEF, where he will once again engage with world political leaders, business people, and leaders of non-governmental organizations during the five-day event to discuss his government's commitment to economic diversification through developing sectors including agriculture and industry.



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Over the past decade,
the Kurdistan Region
has consolidated its
position in regional and
international diplomacy

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*Kurdistan Region PM Masrour Barzani
alongside world leaders at the WEF 2023.*

Kurdistan's engagement in global discussions

Since 1988, the Swiss ski resort of Davos has hosted an annual convergence of global leaders, providing a crucial international space for discussions spanning the realms of the global economy, politics, education, and social and environmental issues.

Over the years, the Kurdistan Region has strategically utilized the Davos platform to articulate its increasing commitment to fostering global security. This commitment is manifested through active participation in humanitarian efforts and the promotion of peacebuilding initiatives, particularly in regions marred by conflict.

The Kurdistan Region's presence at Davos is particularly noteworthy given its tumultuous recent history. Despite the challenges, the region persists in evolving as a significant player in international politics. This evolution is evident through its diplomatic engagements and the cultivation of robust regional relationships, underscoring its growing influence on the global stage.

Where Kurdistan stands

Over the past decade, the Kurdistan Region has consolidated its position in regional and international diplomacy, especially since its remarkable role in spearheading the war against ISIS. Throughout the war, Kurdish *peshmerga* forces sacrificed over 1,000 brave warriors but saved millions of lives.

This chapter of Kurdish history renewed discussion among world and regional powers about the necessity of supporting the Kurds to maintain their momentum in anti-terrorism efforts. Meanwhile, the hospitality of the Kurdistan Region toward nearly two million refugees and internally displaced persons underlined the importance of their respected seat at the international table.

The Kurdistan Region has also demon-

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The Kurdistan Region has also demonstrated unwavering commitment to democratic principles
”

strated unwavering commitment to democratic principles, even in the face of numerous challenges that emerged since 2003, when it achieved autonomy within Iraq's federal structure following the downfall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime. Since then, the region has not only emerged as a beacon of hope but has also played a crucial role in fostering stability and economic prosperity in Iraq and the broader Middle East.

The establishment of a no-fly zone over the Kurdistan Region, as mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 688 on April 5, 1991, served as a foundational moment for Kurdish autonomy. Since then, the region has consistently held successful democratic elections characterized by the peaceful participation of multiple political parties.

Simultaneously, the KRG has taken proactive measures to accelerate economic development. This includes substantial investment in infrastructure projects such as airports and roads, comprehensive reforms within the *peshmerga*, the establishment of world-class universities, and the institutionalization of the government. These initiatives collectively aim to enhance living standards within the region while actively attracting foreign investment.

Kurdistan at the 2023 WEF

During the 2023 WEF, Prime Minister Barzani met with scores of leaders from around the world, including the United States, UK, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Greece, Poland,



Austria, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Bahrain, and Oman.

His discussions, including those with business leaders and private sector representatives, revolved around enhancing economic ties between the Kurdistan Region and various nations across the Middle East, Europe, and the globe. The focal point of these talks was not only the development of robust economic relations but also effective collaboration in other areas of potential cooperation. The emphasis was on promoting stability within Iraq while concurrently advancing shared development objectives through strategic investments in infrastructure projects and collaborative ventures that would yield mutual benefits.

Overall, the Kurdistan Region's participation in the WEF demonstrates Erbil's commitment to securing a firm foothold in regional and international diplomacy. The Kurdistan Region has repeatedly asserted that it seeks to be part of the solution in the region, not part of the problem.

Upon his departure from Davos last year, Prime Minister Barzani wrote on his official X feed: "Thank you for another productive forum #wef23. We'll report our progress next year." He is expected to return to the Swiss resort to bring forth a range of topics for extended discussions with international partners, aiming to elevate cooperation to new heights. ●



Kurdistan Region Prime Minister greeting UK's former Prime Minister Tony Blair at the World Economic Forum, 2023.



PM Masrouf Barzani taking part in a special session titled "Empowering Europe's Industry" organized by Belgian PM Alexander De Croo at the World Economic Forum, 2023.

Fostering Democracy The Kurdistan Region's Electoral Journey



Handren M. Salih

Handren M. Salih, Chairman of the Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission (IHERC) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Elections are the cornerstone of any democratic society, pivotal in shaping governance, fostering peace, and empowering citizens.

In the Middle East, the journey toward genuine democratic elections in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) commenced after it was liberated from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in 1992. This marked a historic milestone, witnessing the region's inaugural democratic parliamentary elections and paving the way for subsequent municipal polls.

Between 2005 and 2018, the KRI conducted pivotal elections, including parliamentary and provincial council elections in 2005, parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2013, regional elections for provincial councils in 2014, the referendum on the KRI's independence in 2017, and parliamentary elections in 2018. These elections were pivotal in shaping the region's democratic landscape.

Central to this electoral process was the implementation of a semi-open list proportional system, ensuring diverse representation across political, geographical, and ideological spectrums within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Parliament. This system empowers voters to select their preferred candidates, reinforcing democratic principles.

To ensure the integrity and fairness of these elections, the KRG established the Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission (IHERC) through Law No. 4 of 2014. Unlike other electoral authorities, the IHERC's mandate is focused on upholding international standards, fostering stakeholder confidence, and conducting transparent and credible elections.

In tandem with these electoral advancements, the KRG enacted the Political Parties Law in 1993, which facilitated the establishment and regulation of new political entities, alongside promoting the growth



A view of the Kurdistan Parliament plenary.

Photo: Safin Hamid



A Kurdish man poses for the camera after casting his vote in the Kurdistan Parliament election on September 30, 2023.

Photo: Safin Hamid

of civil society organizations.

The pillars of the KRG's political system – legislative, executive, and electoral frameworks; legal entities; political parties; and civil society organizations – sustain the region's governance. Ensuring the authenticity of elections remains paramount, guaranteeing peaceful, violence-free, and impartial processes, thereby safeguarding voter freedom and the secrecy of their ballots.

Despite these advancements, raising the bar to meet international standards in free and fair elections requires concerted efforts in the following areas:

Regulating political party finances: Implementing legislation to oversee election expenditures by political parties, defining income sources, and setting clear spending limits for campaign propaganda are critical for upholding election integrity.

Enhancing women's representation: Reserving 30% of council seats exclu-

sively for women candidates could significantly increase female participation, departing from the current model where 30% of candidates on political lists must be women.

National civic awareness campaign: Launching a comprehensive campaign to bolster participation across all societal segments, especially among women as independent candidates and voters, is pivotal for inclusive elections.

Reforming electoral laws: Adapting electoral laws to align with societal and technological advancements ensures continued relevance and fairness in the electoral process.

Strengthening collaboration: Bolstering ties between the media, political entities, governmental bodies, legal institutions, civil society organizations, and citizens is crucial for a robust democratic ecosystem.

Scheduled elections: Enshrining fixed election dates every four years through

legislation brings predictability and stability to the electoral calendar.

The IHERC requires further development, financial support, comprehensive training, and transparent adoption of electoral technology as well as global best practices. Strengthening collaboration between electoral bodies within and beyond the region is essential to address the challenges encountered during electoral processes.

Lastly, preparing for the referendum on the Constitution of the KRI signifies a pivotal step toward democratic principles, especially those entwined with the elections and governance in the region.

In essence, elections in the Kurdistan Region symbolize progress towards democratic ideals. While commendable strides have been made, continuous refinement, adherence to international standards, and proactive measures are imperative for an inclusive and robust democratic process. ●

United States Bolsters Kurdistan's Defense



Robin Bell

Robin Bell is a specialist in marketing, logistics and supply chains with experience in over 35 countries – mainly developing markets. CEO of consultancy Graydon Lloyd, he is an Advisor to Valuechain, UK (Cloud based Network & Supply Chain Portals) and Kadme (Big Data & AI specialists), Norway.

The 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), recently passed by the U.S. Congress, carries a pivotal provision focused on bolstering the defenses of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) *peshmerga* forces against the persistent threat of missile and drone attacks. This development comes in response to the region's vulnerability, having faced repeated assaults from neighboring Iran and Iran-backed militias in recent years, when the KRI lacked the support of effective defense mechanisms.

The legislative provision, having received approval from both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate on December 14, is poised for U.S. President Joe Biden's signature. It places a compelling obligation on the secretaries of defense and state to devise a comprehensive plan by February 1, 2024 aimed at equipping and training both Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish *peshmerga* to effectively defend against missile, rocket, and unmanned-system attacks. The envisaged implementation of this plan is expected within 90 days of its development.

The urgency of this provision is underscored by the escalating attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, particularly at the Erbil International Airport (EIA) in the capital of the KRI. These attacks have been a recurring phenomenon since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas War in October. Notably, EIA experienced rocket fire even before the current Gaza conflict, with the first attack in September 2020.

These assaults serve as strategic signals from militias to the United States, showcasing their capabilities to target troops

within the secure boundaries of the Kurdistan Region. While some attacks have directly threatened U.S. troops and civilians, including an explosive drone incident on October 26, 2023, and a rocket barrage in February 2021, others have underscored the potential for collateral damage, such as the drone crash into an unfinished residential building in Erbil on December 8.

The significance of the KRI is underscored in the article, with militias directly targeting civilian areas, exemplified by the ballistic missile strike on Erbil in March 2022. Additionally,

security challenges in the region are compounded by Iranian attacks on dissidents in the Koya region and a substantial cross-border aerial assault in September 2022.

While U.S. troops at EIA may continue utilizing short-range C-RAM systems for point defense, the provision in the NDAA recognizes the necessity for broader air defenses to safeguard Iraqi Kurds. In considering potential systems, it is speculated that the United States may provide short- to medium-range options tailored to counter militia rocket and drone threats. ●



Peshmerga soldiers standing next to US-made military vehicles donated to the Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Safin Hamid

The KRG's Water Reserve Enhancements: Spotlight on Duhok



Farhad Mohammed

Farhad Mohammed
 Director of Water Dams
 Directorate in Duhok
 Governorate – Kurdistan
 Region of Iraq

In a rare alignment, global crises have forged unity among nations to combat a common threat. The specter of climate change, born from a convergence of natural and human-induced events, has compelled world leaders, politicians, and capitalists to confront this pressing issue. Among the most vulnerable nations stands Iraq, and within its bounds, the Kurdistan Region grapples with the far-reaching consequences. Over 100 areas in Iraq have borne witness to devastating natural disasters due to this environmental shift.

A priority for the Ninth Cabinet

In the nascent days of the Ninth Cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a resounding focus emerged on the preservation and strategic management of water resources. This commitment has remained unwavering ever since.

Duhok Governorate, endowed with abundant water resources, previously suffered from an absence of adequate in-

COMPLETED & UNDER-CONSTRUCTION			
DAMS	PROJECT PROGRESS	BUDGET	CAPACITY
KHINIS DAM	100%	USD 6.9 m	7 million cubic meters
SBNAI DAM	50%	USD 6 m	6 million cubic meters
BANDAWA DAM	48%	USD 5.7 m	6 million cubic meters

Photo: Star Ahmad

frastructure for water storage until the advent of the Ninth Cabinet in 2019. The region's landscape hosts an intricate network of rivers and tributaries, prominently featuring the Tigris River as its primary conduit, originating in Turkey and demarcating the Zakho Independent Administration. The Tigris bifurcates into two vital rivers: the Khabur River, an amalgam of the Hazel, Zreza, and Spnit Khabur rivers nestled between Zakho and Duhok; and the Great Zab River, comprising the Riye Shin, Zab, Zinta, Khazir, and Gumel Rivers.

Duhok Governorate predominantly relies on two pivotal water sources: snow and rainfall, which have exhibited a concerning decline in recent years, posing a substantial threat to both surface and groundwater levels; and springs and rivers, with approximately 763 springs succumbing to dryness due to prolonged drought. Mismanagement of these invaluable resources, exacerbated by economic and political factors, has further compounded the challenges faced.

Preceding the establishment of the KRG's Ninth Cabinet, Duhok Governorate housed several dams and ponds: the Duhok Dam, boasting a capacity of 52 million cubic meters (mcm); the Keshkan Dam with a capacity of 1.2 mcm; and approximately 40 to 45 smaller ponds serving multifarious purposes.

The KRG demonstrated swift recognition of the impending threat of water scarcity and promptly prioritized water conservation. KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani underscored their focused short- and long-term strategies for water preservation and management. During the Ninth Cabinet's tenure, a range of proactive measures have come to fruition.

New developments

The first new water storage project, Khins Dam, was completed within a year and a half at a cost of 9.2 billion Iraqi dinars and stores 7 mcm. Meanwhile, Sbnai Dam, allocated a budget of 8 billion Iraqi dinars, was 50% completed as of the end of 2023, with a capacity exceeding 6 mcm and benefiting nearly 10 villages in the Amedi district. Lastly, Galiye Bandawa Dam, constructed at a cost of 7.5 billion Iraqi dinars, was 48% complete as of the end of 2023. Additionally, the Duhok Dam underwent a rehabilitation project, investing 441 million Iraqi dinars and achieving 90% completion as of the end of 2023.

These dams, drawing from snowfall, rainfall, and river resources, substantially bolstered Duhok's water storage capacity, which was previously at 53 mcm and is now poised to increase storage by over 20 mcm. Consequently, the Ninth Cabinet catalyzed enhanced agricultural production, elevated freshwater levels, and fortified groundwater resources over a span of four years. Further initiatives led to the establishment

of 57 ponds across the province, amplifying the benefits for numerous villages and agricultural communities.

Future plans

The KRG's blueprint encompasses a comprehensive master plan for small-, medium, and large-scale dam constructions. Notable planned projects include Bakurman Dam, with a projected capacity of 430 mcm; Derelok-Rashava Dam, with

a projected capacity of 457 mcm, situated on the Khazir River; and Passe Dam, with a projected capacity of 77 mcm, located on the Khaburi River. These ambitious projects, primarily aimed at electricity generation, agriculture, and tourism, promise to harness river resources for the region's advantage.

Upon the complete realization of the KRG's water storage plan for Duhok Governorate, the region's water supply autonomy is anticipated to soar. The projected surge in water storage capacity, from 53 mcm to over 1 billion cubic meters, signifies a monumental leap forward in addressing water security.

This remarkable transformation stands as a testament to the meticulous planning and resolute actions undertaken by the KRG in fortifying the governorate against the looming threat of water scarcity. ●



Photo: Star Ahmad

Meet the Kurdish Quantum Scientist



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.

Ebrahim Karimi, a professor in the Department of Physics at the University of Ottawa who hails from Saqqez in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran), was recently awarded the Royal Society of Canada’s prestigious Rutherford Memorial Medal. Educated at Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Karimi’s journey has taken him to various corners of the world, ultimately leading him to Canada, where he now teaches and conducts scientific research.

The Rutherford Memorial Medal



morial Medal is awarded annually by the Royal Society of Canada to recognize exceptional contributions in physics and chemistry. Named after renowned scientist Ernest Rutherford, who won the first Nobel Prize in Chemistry, this award is a testament to Karimi’s groundbreaking work in his field.

Growing up amid the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s has shaped Karimi’s perspective on science and its potential to help communities facing adversity. Reflecting upon his childhood experiences, he recounted how witnessing bombs being dropped on his hometown inspired him to explore natural phenomena as a means of understanding and contributing positively to our world.

Karimi believes that, despite the challenges that children face growing up in Kurdistan or other conflict-torn regions such as the Middle East, they should remain hopeful about their futures. If they remain curious, put themselves on the right path and are supported by mentors along the way, there is so much they can achieve.

“There are bright futures if you stay on the right track, if you have the right ingredients and the right teachers,” Karimi said in an interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

Quantum communications

Karimi explained his groundbreaking work in the fascinating world of quantum physics. With his team at the University of Ottawa, Karimi has made significant contributions to quantum communication, microscopy, and photonics.

Karimi’s interest in quantum photonics began with a desire to comprehend the smallest particles in our universe. He explains that everything we encounter is made up of these elementary particles. Photons, for example, are thought to be the smallest units of light. The quantum world operates under differ-

“ Growing up amid the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s has shaped Karimi’s perspective on science and its potential to help communities facing adversity



ent rules than our classical world. In it, objects behave according to probability and no definite reality exists.

“In our classical world, I can run into a wall and be stopped,” says Karimi. “But in the quantum realm, quantum objects, e.g., electrons, can potentially pass through barriers like walls with a certain probability.” Such phenomena challenge our perception of reality and raise profound questions about how we understand existence itself.

Karimi’s team has explored this enigmatic world by harnessing photons for secure communication purposes. Unlike traditional methods, which rely on complex mathematical calculations that

are vulnerable to cybersecurity breaches, their approach utilizes principles from quantum physics to create impenetrable communication channels.

One notable achievement was their development of underwater quantum communication techniques. By transferring information between two objects underwater, in free space, or through fiber optic cables without compromising security or speed, they created new avenues for global connectivity.

Another breakthrough was their cre-

ation of a revolutionary tool called a “quantum microscope.” Traditional imaging methods often involve harmful radiation such as X-rays that pose health risks when used frequently. However, using an interaction-free ghost-imaging technique developed experimentally by Karimi’s team, researchers can detect objects without causing any damage – allowing for safer imaging practices.

“We wanted to see if it was possible to observe an object without interacting with it,” explains Karimi “And we succeeded! This technique allows us to detect objects in different places simultaneously.”

When asked about the practical applications of their work, Karimi noted that Canada is already home to numerous startups and companies dedicated to exploring quantum communication, sensing, and computing. His team helps advance quantum theory through experiments in their research laboratories.

Visitors to Karimi's lab are treated to breathtaking demonstrations of cutting-edge technologies like quantum ghost imaging. Even prominent figures from politics and academia have been amazed by the possibilities unlocked through these breakthroughs.

A glimpse into the future

Karimi shed light on how this innovative field is set to revolutionize various aspects of daily life soon.

"The quantum technology market is projected to reach a staggering \$100 billion by 2040," Karimi revealed. With such immense potential, it comes as no surprise that countries worldwide are investing heavily in their

national quantum strategies. Canada alone has committed \$360 million towards quantum technologies in 2022, while Germany independently invested a whopping \$2 billion.

Karimi emphasized that the world is on the brink of what he calls "quantum revolution 2.0" – a new era that will transform communication, sensing, and computation.

Just as the world moved from bulky radios and televisions to small portable devices and wired connections to Wi-Fi networks and witnessed advancements like 5G and 6G technologies, quantum technology promises unprecedented capabilities.

Quantum computing stands out as one of the most promising advancements within this realm. Companies like IBM and Google already possess functional prototypes capable of performing certain mathematical tasks efficiently and rapidly.

This breakthrough becomes even more significant when considering areas like healthcare.

With access to quantum computers, doctors could tailor treatments at an individ-



ual level based on precise information about how medications interact with specific bodies.

The benefits extend beyond computing power, as secure communication also takes center stage in this transformative era. While traditional communication systems may fall prey to hackers armed with powerful computers, quantum mechanics introduces unparalleled security measures through its "no-cloning theorem." Information sent via secure quantum channels cannot be copied without introducing errors, making it virtually impenetrable to malicious attacks.

Another intriguing aspect that Karimi highlighted is quantum sensing. Quantum radars and microscopes offer heightened accuracy, enabling us to detect even the tiniest objects without causing any damage. These unparalleled advancements in technology are poised to reshape industries ranging from defense and healthcare to manufacturing and more.

However, as he embarks on this groundbreaking journey, ethical considerations loom large. Karimi stressed the importance of determining who should have access to such powerful technologies. Issues surrounding secure communication access and potential misuse highlight the need for a robust ethical framework that guides scientists' actions in this new frontier.

Scientific talent and Kurdistan's future

Karimi discussed his vision for advancing research and education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). He emphasized the importance of an independent university system in promoting scientific progress, and believes that

universities should be allowed to make their own decisions, while the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research should prioritize various fields, particularly research science. He also suggests connecting the research and development sectors to encourage collaboration between academia and industry.



Professor Ebrahim Karimi receiving the Rutherford Memorial Medal from the Royal Society of Canada on 20 Nov. 2023.

Karimi cited his colleague, the University of Ottawa's Vice President of Research and Innovation, who stated, "Talent is a new currency."

Karimi is adamant that the Kurdistan Regional Government should support talented Kurds who have yet to be discovered by academic institutions or other organizations.

Meanwhile, he believes that the KRI is "on the right track" to development and prosperity.

He gave two key pieces of advice to young Kurdish talents: "Think freely without being limited by financial constraints," because ideas are often born out of creative thinking rather than material resources, and "Never give up," because success does not come easily but requires perseverance.

Karimi's conversation with *Kurdistan Chronicle* also touched upon primary and secondary education in the KRI, and he stressed the importance of instilling a love for science among students at an early age. He believes primary education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' lives beyond just scientific knowledge, fostering critical

thinking skills that are needed throughout one's lifetime.

Concerning the situation in Iran following the 2022 protests and the death of a young Iranian-Kurdish girl, Jina Amini (Mahsa Amini), Karimi expressed his dissatisfaction with the Iranian governments that have oppressed their own people. He believes that scientists have a responsibility to stand with the people rather than with dictatorial regimes.

In response to recent protests and violence in Iran, he raised funds for affected families and urged scientists worldwide to be mindful of how their work is used by those in power.

"Dictatorships are temporary; a brighter future awaits the Middle East, where borders will no longer hinder progress and individuals will be able to exercise their rights regardless of location," Karimi concluded. ●

Kurdish Entrepreneur Shines on BBC's 100 Women List



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 a world that often looks for inspiration and change-makers, Basima Abdulrahman, a Baghdad-born Kurd, has emerged as a beacon of success. Her recent inclusion in the BBC's prestigious 100 Women list for 2023 tells us

ed to green building, demonstrating Abdulrahman's commitment to rebuilding her homeland sustainably.

"Our mission is to make smart green solutions trustable, accessible, and profitable.



about not only her significant individual accomplishments but also the transformative power she holds in pressing for environmental solutions.

A visionary entrepreneur

At the helm of KESK, an environmental solutions company that specializes in green building design and renewable energy, Abdulrahman is more than a mere businesswoman – she is a visionary. Founded in the aftermath of the advent of ISIS in 2014, KESK became Iraq's first initiative dedicat-

And our vision is to make the green way, the easy way," Abdulrahman told Kurdistan Chronicle during an interview. "We aim to increase energy efficiency, reduce carbon emissions, and create opportunities for economic development through our projects. Empowering communities by providing clean energy access while simultaneously fostering environmental sustainability lies at the heart of our vision."

A seat at the global table

The BBC's 100 Women list, established in

2013, has been a platform for recognizing women who have played pivotal roles in shaping the 21st century. Abdulrahman now joins the ranks of past luminaries like Michelle Obama, Amal Clooney, and Huda Kattan. Her selection reflects a global acknowledgment of her efforts to ensure that current

“Discovering that I was selected for BBC's 100 Women list was incredibly humbling and thrilling”

building practices do not compromise the well-being of future generations.

"Discovering that I was selected for BBC's 100 Women list was incredibly humbling and thrilling. It was a moment of validation for the hard work and dedication we've put into promoting renewable energy and advocating for greater inclusivity in a male-dominated industry. More importantly, it reinforced the significance of our mission and the need to continue pushing boundaries and effecting positive change," Abdulrahman said.

Asked about the factors that she thinks that contributed to this remarkable recognition, Abdulrahman named various factors, including her team's unwavering dedication to fostering sustainable solutions in the renewable energy sector, and their initiatives fo- cused not only

on innovation but also on creating meaningful impact within their communities.

"Our efforts to empower women in STEM fields and promote gender diversity within the industry were also a crucial aspect that garnered attention," she added.

From conflict to creation

Abdulrahman's journey is rooted in a deep concern for the environment and a desire to mitigate the impact of climate change. Her commitment to green building centers on creating structures that consume less energy, produce less waste, and provide a healthy indoor environment.

Born in Baghdad and raised in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Abdulrahman's path to entrepreneurship was unconventional. The turmoil of the Iraqi conflict drove her family to the KRI in 2006, where she discovered her Kurdish heritage and developed a passion for mathematics and physics, diverging from her family's initial push towards a medical career.

"Growing up in Iraq, I witnessed the challenges posed by traditional energy sources and their impact on the environment. I was determined to be part of the solution, despite the struggles and societal norms that often discourage women from pursuing careers in STEM fields," Abdulrahman explained.

Abdulrahman's global outlook is evident in her educational journey. A recipient of a Fulbright scholarship, she pursued a master's degree in structural and civil engineering at Auburn University in the United States. Her exposure to green building concepts during her time in the United States laid the foundation for what

would become KESK upon her return to Iraq.

Returning to Iraq in 2015, Abdulrahman worked as a structural engineer for the UN before embarking on her entrepreneurial path. KESK, founded in 2017, is both a consultancy and a commitment to sustainable architecture that combines modern technologies with traditional building methods.

Asked about any events or experiences that led her to her current direction in her personal and professional lives, Abdulrahman said that witnessing firsthand the envi-

ron- mental challenges faced by her community in the KRI and Iraq was

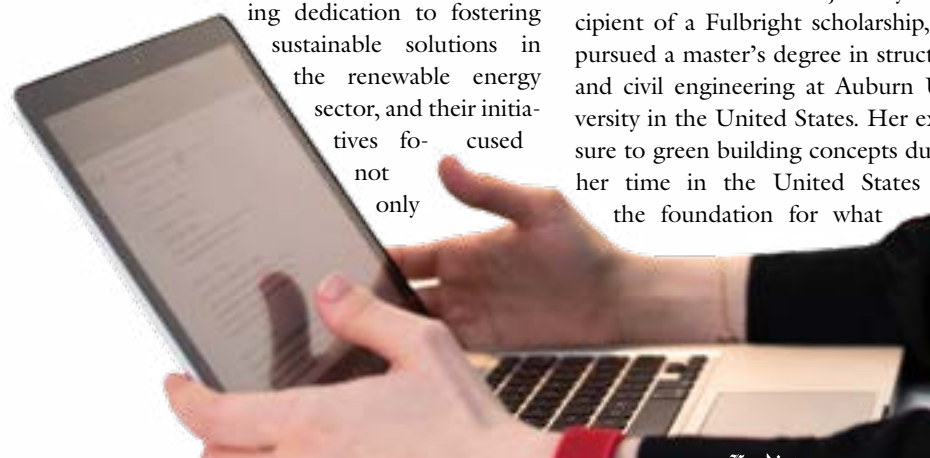


Photo: The Carrier Women's Initiative



Photo: The Cartier Women's Initiative

pivotal. These challenges ranged from air and water pollution to the detrimental effects of unsustainable energy practices. These experiences instilled in her an early awareness of the interconnectedness between human actions and environmental consequences.

Furthermore, learning about the impact of climate change and its potential long-term consequences on both the environment and society profoundly transformed her perspective.

“It became evident that addressing these issues wasn’t just a choice but a responsibility – one that required immediate action,” she added.

Recognition and awards

Abdulrahman’s inspiring mission has not gone unnoticed. In 2021, she was recognized as the Cartier Women’s Initiative laureate in the Middle East, receiving \$100,000 in prize money. In 2023 her company won the ExpoLive Global

Innovation award, a \$50,000 prize. This acknowledgment, coupled with her recent inclusion in the BBC’s 100 Women list, underscores the international impact of her work.

A woman leading change

As a woman operating in the male-dominated fields of tech-enabled businesses and green energy, Abdulrahman faces challenges. However, her approach is rooted in resilience and preparedness. She emphasizes the importance of being qualified and prepared to shatter prejudices and misconceptions.

“I have encountered several challenges, both unique to my gender and inherent in driving transformative initiatives,” Abdulrahman pointed out.

As for gender bias, she explained that in a predominantly male-dominated industry, facing gender bias and stereotypes can be a significant struggle. From subtle discrimination to

overt challenges in accessing resources, funding, and networking opportunities, according to Abdulrahman, overcoming these biases requires resilience and continuous effort.

“In our region, there is a lack of trust in female entrepreneurs,” she pointed out.

The Kurdish entrepreneur identified resistance towards change in established industries as the second challenge that she has had to overcome. Advocating for renewable energy and sustainable

markets where men are traditionally dominant.

One of the examples of how she contributes to women’s empowerment is through creating employment opportunities. Within her company, she prioritizes hiring and empowering women by providing equal employment opportunities. She also actively seeks to recruit and train women in various roles, from technical positions to leadership roles, fostering an inclusive work environment.

able development not just in the KRI but throughout Iraq. Her focus is on innovative solutions and staying relevant in an ever-changing landscape.

“In the green energy sector, my company and I look forward to growing, innovating, and advocating for positive change. We’re committed to leading renewable energy projects, promoting sustainability, and shaping a greener future for Iraq and Kurdistan. We are in the process of building a complete ecosystem for renewable energy in Iraq, including providing solar energy



practices might encounter pushback from those who favor conventional energy sources due to financial interests or a lack of awareness, she explained.

Empowering future generations

Abdulrahman’s success extends beyond her individual achievements. She actively engages in discussions about sustainability, advocates for green solutions, and emphasizes the economic benefits of embracing environmentally friendly practices. She has also dedicated herself to mentoring and encouraging more women to break through barriers in

Additionally, Abdulrahman participates in talks and sessions dedicated to emerging woman entrepreneurs to share knowledge and experiences of how to navigate through the entrepreneurship journey as women, especially in STEM fields.

Last but not least, she leads one-on-one mentorships for women professionals to guide them through specific career choices and ventures.

The future looks green

As KESK expands its operations, Abdulrahman envisions a future where the company is at the forefront of sustain-

hardware and software solutions as well as a carbon offset monetization facility to help our clients make additional revenues from investing in solar energy through trading carbon credits,” she explained before concluding the interview.

Amid the present global challenges, Basima Abdulrahman stands as a testament to the power of vision, determination, and a commitment to create positive change. Marked with recognition at international forums, her journey is an inspiration to aspiring entrepreneurs, especially women, to carve their own path and contribute to a greener and more sustainable future. ●

The Kurdish Wheatear A Jewel of Kurdistan's Skies



Derya KILIÇ

Derya KILIÇ is a PhD candidate at Sorbonne University with nearly a decade of experience in media and journalism. She contributes articles focused on politics, media, culture, and history to various international journals.

A species, beyond embodying the inherent traits of the area it inhabits, can serve as a symbol of the socio-political and historical context of its region, encapsulating the nuances of its climate and the human populace. The Kurdish wheatear, as a bird indigenous to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), not only epitomizes the ecological richness of its habitat but also serves as an indicator of the implications of climate change through its historical record.

Also known as the Kurdistan wheatear, *Oenanthe xanthopyrma* has been the subject of extensive research. Its nomenclature in early British sources is attributed to its prevalence in four distinct regions in Kurdistan, with mountainous terrain serving as its natural habitat.

Alternate appellations include chestnut-rumped wheatear, red-rumped wheatear, or red-tailed wheatear, the latter of which was formerly considered a subspecies of this bird but is now regarded as a separate species. The red-tailed wheatear builds its nest in the mountainous regions that are inhabited by Kurdish peoples and thus inadvertently delineates the geographical extent of Kurdistan.

Research for war, espionage, and diplomacy

The first scientific research on the Kurdish wheatear dates to the 19th century. It was first described in 1833 by two German naturalists and ornithologists, Wilhelm Hemprich and Christian Gottfried Ehrenberg during their research in Lebanon and Egypt. In addition, according to Jean Rolin's book *Le traquet kurde*, which was published in 2018 and won the Alexandre-Vialatte Award, the bird was captured in Sudan in March 1874 by British ornithologist and businessman Henry Seebohm. Rolin's archive research also reveals that more research was carried out on this bird in the British Empire than anywhere else. It is thus thanks to Rolin, a French journalist, that we know so much about this bird's history and importance.

In fact, it was a development in France that inspired Rolin to undertake his research in the first place. In the spring of 2015, amateur ornithologist Alex Clamens spotted a small male Kurdish wheatear on the summit of the Puy de Dôme in France – the first time he had observed the bird. Indeed, it had never been seen in Europe before.

In fact, no one knows how the bird ended

up 2,700 kilometers away from Kurdistan. The fact that it was alone, however, was unsurprising, as Kurdish wheatears usually live alone, except during the breeding period.

Interestingly, *Le traquet kurde* illustrated, in exemplary fashion, how the study of the Kurdish wheatear transformed into a subject of multifaceted inquiry that transformed into a focal point for

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The first scientific research on the Kurdish wheatear dates to the 19th century
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strategic considerations encompassing “war, espionage, and diplomacy” by British high-ranking officials and military personnel. In this context, Rolin interweaves references to diverse geographical locations, including Puy de Dôme, Turkey, Iraq, and Kurdistan, establishing intricate connections between British Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, Thomas Edward Lawrence – more commonly known as Lawrence



of Arabia – and ornithology. In other words, the book serves to shed light on British imperial history, how Kurdistan was viewed from London, and how important British historical figures researched the bird.

The narrative unfolds as the protagonist encounters notable figures in British imperial history such as Lawrence, St. John Philby, Wilfred Thesiger, Percy Cox, Edmund Allenby, and Major Robert Ernest Cheesman. While the Kurds

conducted the most extensive ornithological research. Between 1922 and 1948, he compiled a study of the birds he encountered during his service in his book *Birds of Arabe*, including the Kurdish wheatear, which he called the red-tailed wheatear.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that Cox, the British High Commissioner to Iraq, and Major Cheesman, captured a Kurdish wheatear from Duhok in 1892 and brought it to England, where it is cur-

Kurdistan is known for its high mountains and harsh climate, which matches Rolin’s description of the bird’s activities. “[The red-tailed wheatear] prefers dry, steppe climates, especially high-altitude plains and generally mountainous regions. It prefers steppes and suitable formations such as hollows and cracks in bare lands. In winter, it rarely chooses areas with desert characteristics, but most of its nests are rocky cliffs and bushes in arid lands. It has a list of insects, mainly ants, and feeds by



are familiar with Cox and Allenby for reasons beyond ornithology, these individuals, in an alternative capacity, contributed to avian research and observation in the region, which was integral to British intelligence efforts. The avian inquiry at present thus serves to illuminate the nuanced history of Kurdistan throughout the colonial period and the two World Wars.

As explained in *Le traquet kurde*, of the individuals mentioned, Meinertzhagen

recently on display in the avian collection at the Tring Museum in London.

Appearance and behavior

The most prominent characteristics of the Kurdish wheatear are its size, weight, and color. Its length is between 10-20 centimeters, and it weighs 20-25 grams, while the nomenclature of red-tailed wheatear is attributed to the distinctive crimson hue of its tail plumage.

digging and stirring up arid soils, grabbing insects and larvae. It hunts mostly by diving over a rock where it perches. It crushes and swallows the insect larvae it grabs from the plant by hitting the soil with its beak.”

Typically exhibiting solitary behavior, the red-tailed wheatear engages in bipedal locomotion characterized by an undulating trajectory, intermittently executing downward movements of its tail, as stated by Rolin. During flight,



the avian species maintains a predominantly closed tail configuration. It displays a predilection for habitats marked by rocky outcrops. The avian vocalization is chiefly characterized by the incorporation of imitative elements.

The transient territories utilized during migratory periods are actively defended by both male and female specimens against intrusions by other avian species. The nesting sites exhibit an intertwined architectural configuration, fostering a collaborative and interconnected relationship with neighboring habitats.

During its breeding season, the Kurdish wheatear, indigenous to Kurdistan, is most often seen in Choman, Halgurd, Diyarbakir, Gaziantep, and prominent mountainous regions including Nemrut, Shirin, and Tarsus.

Migration and destination

According to the book *Robins and Chats* by Peter Clement and Chris

Rose, the Kurdish wheatear spends the winter months in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf and returns to Kurdistan in April for the breeding season. In gener-

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The Kurdish wheatear spends the winter months in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf and returns to Kurdistan in April for the breeding season
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al, it “migrates in large numbers, winters in east Africa and south-west Asia. In its wintering grounds it occurs from October to February or mid-March,” according to Clement and Rose.

Meanwhile, ornithologists active during World War I discovered that the bird was found in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Western Sahara, and Yemen. In addition, research being carried out in Israel today has yielded observations of the bird, stating that “the Kurdish wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna* is a rare winterer in Israel but in some winters several are present, offering the chance to learn about them.”

And of course, France can now be included on the list of the bird’s destinations, which must be considered in the context of climate change. To confirm such ideas, the migration patterns of the Kurdish wheatear should be analyzed in depth, and within the framework of these investigations, necessary steps should be taken to ensure its survival in Kurdistan. Leaving the region poses a great danger to these special birds, adding another important reason for stronger initiatives to prevent climate change and protect the natural diversity of Kurdistan. ●

Hoshyar Ali Kurdistan's Heroic Mine Clearer



Peshraw Mahdi

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

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is distinguished by its rugged landscapes and a conflict-ridden history. However, a recurring menace looms large among these challenges: landmines, which are leftovers of past conflicts that continue to imperil lives. In this context, Hoshyar Ali's life stands out as a symbol of tenacity and unshakable commitment. His story goes beyond the usual hero's journey, forging a path defined by altruism, dedication, and an unrelenting spirit in saving lives within the KRI.

Early life

Born in the tranquil village of Biawela in Halabja province, Hoshyar Ali's childhood resonated with the innocence of youthful joys, particularly his love for football and dreams of sporting triumphs. Yet the tranquility of his upbringing was disrupted by the ravages of war. Hoshyar's life took an unexpected turn from the football field to the front lines, propelled by a profound sense of Kurdish identity and a fervent desire to protect his people's rights.

Hoshyar embarked on his journey into mine clearance over three decades ago, sparked by a growing awareness of the perilous threat posed by landmines in his community. It was in 1989, the year he embarked on this mission, that tragedy struck. A landmine explosion claimed his right leg, an excruciating sacrifice that failed to break his resolute spirit. Undeterred by this devastating loss, he persisted in his mission, only to suffer another grievous blow in 1994, losing his left leg to another landmine explosion. Despite these harrowing setbacks, Hoshyar's resolve remained unshakable.

The weight of loss and continued service

War extracted a heavy toll on Hoshyar. The aspiring footballer experienced personal tragedies, including the loss of his two sons. His eldest son, Barez, died in a tragic landmine incident at the age of 17. Nevertheless, Hoshyar persisted in his mission, actively participating in the fight against ISIS in southern Kirkuk in 2015, courageously defusing bombs planted by extremist militants.

Hoshyar's roots trace back to the profound Kurdish heritage of Halabja and the Hawraman area. His marriage to Gelas in 1989 was overshadowed by subsequent tragedies, including the loss of his sons. Furthermore, his mother, a witness to the liberation of Kirkuk in 1991, passed away before Hoshyar's return from the front lines, where he served as a member of the *peshmerga*. Hoshyar's legacy extended far beyond personal losses; he guided *peshmerga* forces through treacherous terrains, confronting mine explosions in the mountainous regions of Garmian and Khoshko.

Recognition and legacy

Hoshyar's significant contributions to mine clearance and the protection of life are immortalized throughout the KRI. The village of Kuri Gapla stands as a poignant testament to his herculean endeavors. Renamed "Hoshyari" in honor of his relentless efforts to clear it of deadly mines, the village's new name echoes the deep gratitude and reverence of its inhabitants for his selfless sacrifices.

Hoshyar's legacy extends beyond Kuri Gapla. The Penjwen District stands adorned with numerous reminders of his indomitable spirit and courage. Schools, hospitals, mosques, police stations, and even a border gate bear his name, a profound acknowledgment of his exceptional service and dedication. His impact resonates not just in physical locations but in the hearts and lives of countless individuals who have been touched by his unwavering commit-

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A landmine explosion claimed his right leg, an excruciating sacrifice that failed to break his resolute spirit
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ment to the safety and well-being of the community. The renaming of these places not only commemorates his efforts but serves as a perpetual reminder of the resilience and bravery that continue to define Hoshyar Ali's legacy in Kurdistan.

Acts of bravery

Hoshyar Ali's valor and commitment



Hoshyar Ali, defusing landmines he has collected from a minefield in Halabja. |

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi

extended beyond the realms of professional duty, as evidenced by a gripping incident that unfolded during an illegal border crossing to Iran. In a perilous moment teetering on the brink of tragedy, his wife Gelas unwittingly stepped onto a concealed landmine. Displaying remarkable composure and swift action born from years of expertise, Hoshyar detected the lurking danger beneath her feet.

In a heart-stopping moment, Hoshyar's instincts and mine clearance expertise came to the fore. With steely determination and unwavering focus, he meticulously defused the hidden explosive device, averting what could have been a catastrophic and irreparable loss. His selfless act of heroism not only spared his beloved wife's life but also stood as a testament to Hoshyar's commitment to protecting and pre-

Starting his mine clearance mission following training in Ahvaz, Iran, Hoshyar has so far defused more than 2 million landmines and improvised explosive devices, rescued 182 people from minefields, cleared 104 villages of landmines, successfully demined 540 square kilometers of land, and conducted mine awareness campaigns at approximately 700 schools in the KRI, according to local authorities. Remarkably, much of his extraordinary work has been achieved without the use of his legs.

A call to vigilance

The Kurdistan Region remains riddled with landmines, particularly along the border with Iran, remnants of the Iran-



Hoshyar Ali posing for the camera with his prosthetic legs.

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi

serving lives, even in the most perilous of circumstances. The daily struggle

Hoshyar's routine epitomizes a courageous dance with danger. Every day, he ventures into villages, confronting the specter of death as he painstakingly removes landmines. His prosthetic legs, acquired through a journey to Japan facilitated by Japanese non-governmental organization Peace Winds Japan, empower him to fulfill his mission with a determination that transcends mere duty. Despite grappling with mobility challenges and the enduring weight of profound personal tragedies, Hoshyar remains committed to safeguarding lives and ensuring the safety of others.

Iraq War of 1980-1988. Despite the conflict's conclusion 35 years ago, approximately half of the landmines placed during that time persist. Iraq has the highest landmine concentration of any country in the world, covering a staggering 650 million square meters, with nearly half of this threat within the KRI.

Between 2019-2023, the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency achieved the clearance of over 5 million square meters of minefields in the KRI, according to a statement from the Kurdistan Regional Government. Despite the haunting scars of personal tragedies and the daily mobility challenges that he faces, Hoshyar remains resolute. His earnest plea to the



Hoshyar Ali playing football with his son, with his prosthetic legs set as goalposts.

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi

people reverberates: "When you walk through the mountains of Kurdistan, be vigilant, for hidden around every corner may lie the silent specter of a bomb."

Hoshyar Ali's life and work transcend mere duty. They represent the resilience of the Kurdish spirit, earning him immense respect and adoration from the people. His bravery has safe-

guarded countless lives, including that of his wife Gelas, serving as a poignant reminder of the profound impact of an individual's unwavering dedication amid adversity. ●



Hoshyar Ali with his family.

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi

Ahmet Kaya

A Dream of Peace



Mevlüt Oğuz

Mevlüt Oğuz is a journalist, poet, and activist working in the fields of civil society, culture, and the arts. 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).

On February 11, 1999, at the Magazine Journalists Association award ceremony in Turkey, the musician Ahmet Kaya proclaimed his intention to produce a song in Kurdish. For this, he was widely condemned by Turkish people including celebrities, which prompted him to go

In the following interview, Kurdistan Chronicle explored what Ahmet Kaya was like as a father, his feelings about literature, his relationship to the Kurdish language, his dreams for Kurdistan and the world.

“He spent his days in exile heartbroken”



Ahmet Kaya and his daughter Melis Kaya. |

into self-exile in Paris, where he died on November 16, 2000. His work, however, continues to be talked about today in the worlds of art, politics, culture, and academy in Turkey and in Kurdistan. People have written several articles, theses, and books about him, and dedicated songs to him. We all have memories, feelings, and ideas about Ahmet Kaya, but on the 23rd anniversary of his death, we wanted to hear about him from his daughter Melis Kaya, who works on human rights and cultural diplomacy as a member of civil society in France.

Kurdistan Chronicle (KC): We know that your late father, Ahmet Kaya, was a great musician who was appreciated by various segments of society. His albums broke sales records, and his songs were at the top of the charts. Despite this fact, he was condemned for his Kurdish identity and desire to sing in Kurdish, went into exile, and passed away at a very young age. You also experienced this exile with him. What did exile mean to him, and to you?

Melis Kaya (MK): Living in exile is certainly different for everyone. For some, it is a process of self-reconstruction, and for others, it is a price and grief too heavy to bear. Artists must constantly nourish their emotional world in order to produce. Some people only get their inspiration from the land they were born in, and it was the same for my father. A tremendous longing, a feeling of deprivation. It’s also a reset, in every sense. Your life changes overnight just because you say you are Kurdish. You are being bashed. You start your life over again as a nobody, in a country you don’t know. You are no longer the famous Ahmet Kaya on the street. Forget everything you know, the exile says, now you are only responsible for your survival. Unfortunately, my father could not bear all the hatred directed

towards him and the exile that was deemed necessary. He spent his days in exile heartbroken, wanting to say, “as a Kurd, I wrote and sang songs for you in your language for years, but I wish I could sing one more in my own language.”

KC: Have you ever visited Southern Kurdistan (the Kurdistan Region of Iraq)?

MK: I visited Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah many times. I toured the Doli Balisan region, visited memory centers, martyrs’ cemeteries and other cemeteries. Of course, I will visit again at the first opportunity.

KC: Ahmet Kaya looked tough on the outside but also fatherly. What kind of

a father and what kind of a person was he, what did he enjoy doing?

MK: He was an extremely humorous, liberal, relaxed, and affectionate father. He enjoyed sharing. In his private life, he was truly the opposite of the harsh protest image known to the outside world. He had a few hobbies. He used to make wooden carvings in his workshop. For example, he loved playing computer games. He loved animals very much. We had dogs, birds, and fish. One day, on Eid al-Adha, he bought a sheep and brought it home. He told us, “the sheep looks very sad, I can’t have it slaughtered.” Since he could not bring himself to slaughter the sheep, we fed it in the garden for a very long time.



Melis Kaya, the daughter of renowned Kurdish artist Ahmet Kaya. |

KC: What is your fondest memory of him? How do you remember him?

MK: There are so many memories. He would play games with me and help me with my homework. He never neglected his family even during the busiest times. I think my father was a very special person. He was very kind-hearted, too conscientious for this world. That's how I remember him the most. I have never known a more kind-hearted person than him in my life.

“He really wanted to learn Kurdish”

KC: As far as I know, other than Xoşnaw Têlo's Karwan, he has not recorded any Kurdish songs professionally. Did he speak Kurdish at home and in daily life? What kind of bond did he have with the Kurdish language?

MK: As you know, my father is the child of a family that migrated to the west of Turkey. He lived part of his childhood and youth in Istanbul. His bond with his mother tongue was already broken at that point. He really wanted to learn Kurdish though. The thing that made him feel incomplete in life was not being able to speak his native language. He always carried the pain of this in his heart, and of course he felt a little anger towards the system. If he knew Kurdish, he would have sung beautiful songs. When he was exiled in Paris, he hired a private tutor and started learning Kurdish.

KC: He composed songs from the poems of Yusuf Hayaloğlu, Orhan Kotan, Ahmet Arif, Can Yücel, Atilla İlhan, Hasan Hüseyin Korkmazgil, Enver Gökçe, Nevzat Çelik, Ahmet



Melis Kaya at a young age pictured next to her parents. |

Erhan, Sabahattin Ali and many others. How did he feel about poetry?

MK: He had a special bond with poetry. He also wrote poems and composed them into songs. In addition to the poems of all these valuable poets, he also has many songs that he himself wrote.

“He dreamed of a Kurdistan and a world where peace prevailed”

KC: What were his dreams for Kurdistan and the world?

MK: Ahmet Kaya had a dream of Kurdistan and a world where peace prevailed. He dreamed of and struggled for a system without separations or divisions, where freedom of expression and free will would be respected, and politics would be a tool rather than a goal. You can hear the traces of this search and struggle in his music.

KC: How does it feel to be the daughter of a musician? Are you also interested in making music?



| Ahmet Kaya playing and singing for his beloved daughter.

MK: I grew up with music and art. This contributed a lot to me, giving me many different perspectives of the world. I played classical piano for several years, but I am not a professional musician and do not plan to be.

KC: Everyone has a favorite Ahmet Kaya song, which is your favorite album or song?

MK: I really can't choose. I guess I have different favorite songs for every mood and every emotion. Whatever emotion I'm feeling at that moment, I turn on the song of that emo-

tion and listen to it. Each song of his is unique and very special.

KC: The Kurdish Institute of Paris has an extensive archive of materials about the Kurds. Is Kurdistan Chronicle also available there?

MK: I attach great importance to the Kurdish print media and conventional media. Kurdistan Chronicle reaches us regularly and as a reader, I would like to congratulate the entire team. I wish you success with every issue you prepare.

About Melis Kaya

Born in Istanbul in 1987, Melis Kaya graduated from Istanbul Bilgi University Faculty of Communication in 2009. She went to Paris that same year. She studied French at Sorbonne University and completed her master's degree at the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS). She studied human rights and cultural diplomacy practices in the field of civil society and translated articles from French to Turkish and English. The articles she wrote were published in Agos newspaper, published in Turkish and Armenian. As a member of civil society, she currently works on Kurdish society, language, culture, and domestic and foreign diplomacy. ●

Soulful Strokes

The Art of Khairy Adam

Kurdistan Chronicle

Within the alluring landscapes of Kurdish art, one visionary brings tradition and cultural identity to life with his brushstrokes: Khairy Adam. By telling visual stories of resilience and cultural heritage in his native country and beyond, Adam's artwork showcases the untold stories of Kurdish culture, crafting a vibrant dialogue between history and modernity.

Born in the heartland of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in 1981, Adam's artistic journey began at the Institute of Fine Arts in Duhok in 1996. His quest

for mastery led him through the corridors of knowledge, culminating in a diploma in painting in 2001. He went on to earn a bachelor's degree in painting from the College of Fine Arts at Salahaddin University in Erbil in 2004. But his academic odyssey did not end there; in 2015, Adam achieved a milestone by attaining a master's degree in contemporary realism as a figurative artist from the esteemed Academy of Art University in San Francisco.

A primary subject matter for Adam's artwork is the Kurdish woman, beautifully encapsulated in his portrayal of

traditional Kurdish attire. His paintings serve as a visual symphony, harmonizing the relationship between women and their garments in a way that speaks volumes about heritage, societal roles, and emotional nuance.

"In my art, I aim to do more than merely capture the external beauty of Kurdish women. I strive to unveil the silent conversations woven within the threads of their traditional outfits, revealing the soulful resonance of Kurdish heritage," Adam told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

His work delves into the unspoken lan





Khairy Adam standing next to one of his artworks named "Nawroz"

guage of these dresses, capturing their aesthetic allure and the intimate connection between attire and individual expression.

"Many artists depict the tragedies that have marked our history. I choose instead to illuminate the enduring beauty of Kurdish culture, offering viewers a beacon of hope and admiration," Adam explained.

Adam's dedication to preserving and showcasing Kurdish elements in art is not confined to his canvases. As an educator, he is a guiding light, nurturing aspiring artists to infuse their creations with the Kurdish essence, thereby imprinting a unique Kurdish identity on the global art scene.

His accolades and exhibitions, spanning prestigious galleries in the KRI and international venues like the Carrousel du Louvre in Paris, attest to the universality and acclaim of his artistry. Noteworthy among his admirers are top regional and international officials and leaders, drawn to the profound depth of Adam's portrayal of Kurdistan's heritage. His art

has garnered praise from influential figures, underscoring its universal appeal and the resonance it holds across diverse cultural landscapes.

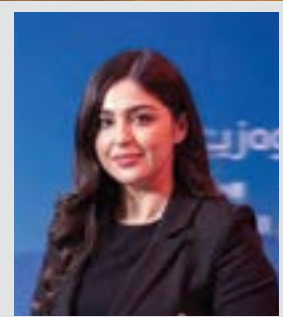
Through solo exhibitions in Duhok and San Francisco and a plethora of group exhibitions worldwide, Adam's art has served to connect cultures and foster understanding through the universal language of creativity.

His canvas is not just a medium; it represents the resilience, beauty, and hope embedded in the culture of Kurdistan. With each stroke, Adam paints a vivid ode to the spirit of the KRI, inviting the world to witness the captivating story told through the threads of tradition.

In the realm where art serves as a universal language, Khairy Adam's paintings serve as lyrical verses, singing the untold stories of Kurdistan. His brush dances with the spirit of his homeland, painting a vivid mosaic that transcends borders, inviting all to embrace the rich tapestry of Kurdish heritage and the timeless elegance it embodies. ●

GOVERNANCE

Unlocking Progress The Vitality of Governance Networks in the KRI



Prusha Wria Faraj

Prusha Wria Faraj is a Public Relations Professional with a Master of Science in Public Administration from Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Nestled in the heart of the Middle East, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) shines as a beacon of hope and resilience. This semi-autonomous region, with its rich history and diverse population, provides an inspiring testament to the power of governance networks in fostering development and overcoming challenges. These networks have played a pivotal role in shaping the region's transformation into a thriving and prosperous entity.

The power of governance networks

At the core of the KRI's remarkable journey lies an intricate web of governance networks that function as the connective tissue uniting government agencies, organizations, and individuals, forging a cohesive and purpose-driven entity. Their role is nothing short of transformative.

In a region marked by historical diversity and its associated challenges, governance networks have emerged as the linchpin of progress. By facilitating collaboration among diverse actors, these networks have streamlined the decision-making process and policy implementation. This efficiency has been pivotal in guiding the region toward its current state of prosperity.

A distinguishing feature of these governance networks is their adaptability, as they have consistently evolved to meet the demands of a changing landscape. When the KRI was faced with regional instability and the looming threat of extremist groups, they proved adept at addressing these formidable challenges, swiftly forging collaborations with international actors that fortified security efforts and fostered regional stability.

The profound impact of governance networks extends beyond security, with their role as enablers of economic resilience becoming increasingly evident. Public-private partnerships have evolved into a cornerstone of the region's economic progress, with governance networks facilitating these partnerships and resulting in a surge of investments across key sectors, including energy, transportation, healthcare, and education.

The most compelling result of the power of these networks is observable in the enhanced infrastructure, stimulated economic growth, and improved public services. The synergy between government entities, private businesses, and civil society organizations, all facilitated by governance networks, has unlocked the region's potential for economic prosperity. This transformation has materialized in the modern infrastructure, business growth, and improved accessibility to quality healthcare and education, collectively contributing to the overall development of the KRI.

Cultural diversity, another hallmark of the region, further exemplifies the power of governance networks. Home to various ethnic groups, including Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and Assyrians, the KRI sees its diversity as a catalyst for social cohesion and progress. Governance networks have adeptly navigated this diverse landscape, fostering inclusivity and participatory decision-making. They have thus nurtured the harmonious coexistence of these different communities, reinforcing the region's commitment to unity through diversity.

Amid this cultural mosaic, the KRI is making significant strides in embracing innovation. This dynamic environment has paved the way for transformative initiatives and campaigns aligned with the region's progressive agenda. As governance networks

continue to facilitate this environment of innovation, the region is transitioning from an importer to an exporter, leveraging diplomacy to enable this shift. Local products are now exported to Gulf countries, marking the region's entry into international markets and boosting domestic production.

A vision for the future

Looking forward, the KRI maintains its unwavering commitment to sustained development and prosperity. Governance networks will continue to play a central role in advancing this vision, fostering transparency, inclusivity, and accountability. Vital to this mission is the streamlining of bureaucratic processes and ensuring the efficient functioning of governance networks, which will address pressing issues such as economic diversification and infrastructure development.

Considering the region's focus on continued growth, my role as a public relations officer at the Office of Initiatives and Communications (OIC) takes on even greater significance. My academic background in international studies and public administration, with a specialization in managing complex governance networks, has endowed me with a profound understanding of the intricate dynamics of governance.

Within the OIC, my primary objective is to enhance the coordination and facilitation of communication among a diverse spectrum of stakeholders. This multifaceted role involves ensuring the seamless flow of information and cultivating an environment conducive to collaborative decision-making processes. As we harness the collective power of governance networks, the region is not only thriving today but also stands poised to build a brighter tomorrow.

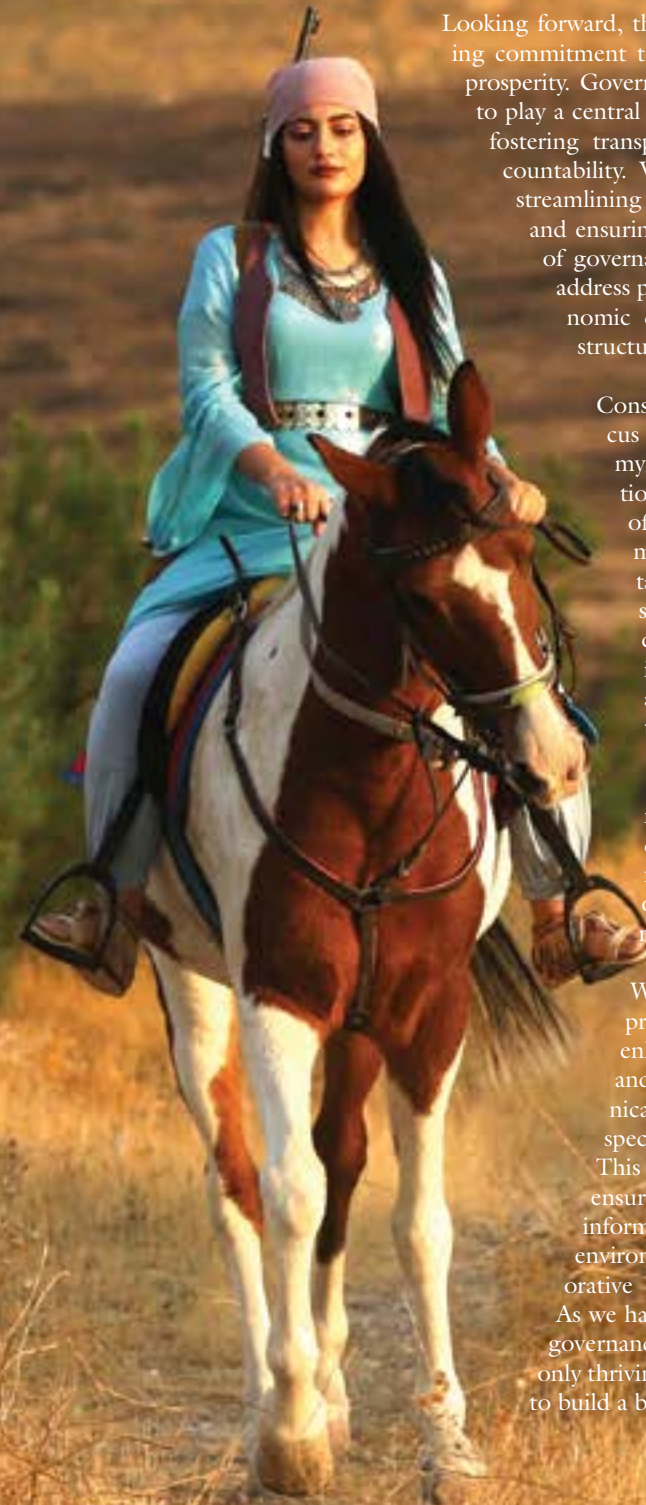


Photo: Safin Hamid

Mesopotamian Medicine Congresses



Husen Bektas

Prof. Dr. Husen Bektas is a professor at the Hannover Medical School (MHH) and head physician of the Clinic for General, Visceral and Oncological Surgery at the Klinikum Bremen-Mitte. He is chairman of the board of the S.A.Z. Children Welfare Organization. He is one of the initiators of the Mesopotamian Medicine Congress.

The history of the Kurdish people has been marked by centuries of fragmentation. The Kurds lack national consciousness. Even now, in the 21st century, the Kurds have not managed to become a nation.

The states that divided up the land of the Kurds among themselves after World War I – with the help of the victorious European powers – contributed to this state by doing everything to prevent the development of a national consciousness. With centuries of experience in state leadership, they understood exactly how to prevent the unification of the Kurds. In addition to the feudal structures in Kurdish society, they exploited religious differences in order to prevent unification using to the principle of “divide and rule.”

Thus, the Kurds numbering about 45 million people, are the largest people in the world without their own state. They are divided, expelled, enslaved, and turned against their own people. As the Turkish sociologist Dr. Ismail Besikci says, “The Kurds do not even have the status of a colony. The colonies are considerably better off than the Kurds because they have their own land with their own borders, their ethnicity, their language and their culture accepted and officially recognized, which is not the case with the Kurds.”

In the 21st century, it should be possible for academic and intellectual Kurds to come together for professional exchange

and cooperation without political goals. Doctors are best suited for this because of the nature of their profession, as they are required to stand up for the preservation and restoration of human health without distinction of religion, nationality, race, party affiliation, or social position.

Based on this principle, some colleagues and I convened in 2008 to determine whether we could organize a purely scientific, professional congress among Kurdish doctors. The goal was to invite Kurdish doctors from all parts of Kurdistan and around the world, as well as those living in regions mainly inhabited by Kurds in the Middle East.

As a group of about 10 doctors from Europe and from Northern Kurdistan, we travelled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and met with the medical associations in Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. After exchanging ideas, we agreed to organize the first medical congress under the name “Mesopotamian Health Days.” We deliberately chose the term Mesopotamia in order to integrate all the ethnic groups that have been living together in the region for centuries and even millennia. To date we have held nine Mesopotamian Medicine Congresses throughout the region and the world.

First Congress

The first congress under the name Rojen Tendrustiyê Mezopotamyayê, or “Mesopotamian Health Days,” was held in Diyarbakir from October 22-24, 2009. Organized by the Diyarbakir Medical Association with the active support of the Turkish Medical Association, the opening ceremony took place in the district of Sur within the historical city walls of Diyarbakir. The congress was hosted by the Cegerxwin Youth Culture and Arts Center. About 200 doctors and scientists attended the congress. There were 30 lectures in Kurdish, Turkish, and English, with simultaneous translation provided. About 50% of the lectures were given in Kurdish.

The congress was a highlight in the lives of many Kurdish doctors. An elderly Kurdish doctor from Armenia made



the four-day journey to Diyarbakir and was deeply moved when he heard the first lectures in Kurdish. A Kurdish doctor from Iran and Syria could only arrive by illegally crossing the Turkish border at night, because otherwise he would not have been allowed to attend the congress. Some attendees put their lives at risk. The press was represented in large numbers and there was continuous coverage over the two days, because it was the first medical congress held in the Kurdish language.

Second Congress

The second congress was held under the name Rojen Tendrustiyên Mezopotamyayê II, or “Mesopotamian Health Days II,” on October 14-16, 2010 in Diyarbakir. About 300 doctors and



scientists from all parts of Kurdistan and around the world participated. The attendees decided to rename the congress the “Mesopotamian Medicine Congress.”

Third Congress

The third congress took place under the name “Mesopotamian Medicine Congress III” on October 28-29, 2011, in Duhok, KRI. The congress was organized by the Duhok Directorate General of Health. The opening statement was made by then-KRI President Masoud Barzani. More than 600 participants from all regions of Kurdistan and around the world took part in this congress. Scientists and doctors even travelled from the United States and Japan to attend.



Fourth Congress

The fourth congress under the name “Mesopotamian Medicine Congress IV” took place in Diyarbakir on June 8-9, 2012, welcoming around 400 participants.

Fifth Congress

The fifth congress under the name “Mesopotamian Medicine Congress V” took place on March 13-16, 2013 in Sulaymaniyah in the KRI and featured around 500 participants. We held this congress on the 25th anniversary of the Halabja poison gas attack, so it was very moving as its main theme was war crimes.



Sixth Congress

The sixth congress took place under the name “Mesopotamian Medicine Congress VI” on May 15-17, 2014 in Mardin, Turkey at Mardin Ar-



tuklu University and featured about 400 participants. Again, many doctors from Syria and Iran were present. Due to the fact that many Assyrians live in Mardin, a session was held in Syriac Chaldean. Kurdish doctors from Syria could only arrive by illegally crossing the Turkish border at night. Some of them suffered serious injuries, as shown in the pictures below, and put their lives at risk. This underlines the importance of the congress for every Kurdish doctor.

A colleague from Syria suffered injuries to her face and hands during the border crossing from Syria to Turkey in order to be able to participate in the congress in Mardin in 2014.

Seventh Congress

The seventh congress was held in Van, Turkey, from June 4-6, 2015, with about 400 participants attending. Here we held a session in



Armenian, as the city of Van was originally inhabited by many Armenians.

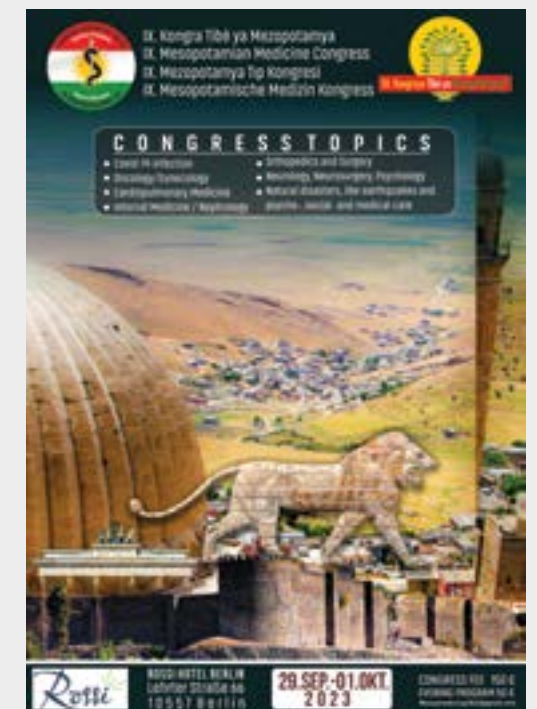
The main topic of the congress was the ISIS attack on the Yezidi Kurds in Sinjar, which left 400,000 people as refugees, and the ISIS attack on the city of Kobane in Syria. Many doctors from Syria travelled across the Turkish border overnight to attend the conference. Many of their colleagues were arrested, and many arrived in Van with injuries.

Eighth Congress

The eighth congress was held after a break of four years due to the war in the KRI. It took place on June 22, 2019 at Duhok University with the International Congress of Psychology Staff About 300 participants took part.

Ninth Congress

After a break of four years because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the ninth congress took place in Berlin in 2023 with 150 participants. The decision to hold the conference abroad was due to the general political situation in the KRI, and Berlin was deemed particularly suitable because about 2 million Kurds live in Germany and about 1,000 doctors of Kurdish origin are active there. As expected, many colleagues from Kurdistan could not easily travel to Berlin because of visa regulations or financial constraints. However, it was important for us to hold the congress, even if it was only symbolic, to ensure continuity in our mission. ●



Kurdistan
Chronicle

2023
TOP STORIES





NEW INVESTMENT ERA

PM Barzani's Speech at the Launch of Invest Kurdistan

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 with the 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.

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 Kurdistan Region's market. We have made tangible progress to remove legal and bureaucratic 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 harness 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.

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.

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 closely 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. ●



The Will to Fight

ERNIE AUDINO *Senior Fellow at the Gold Institute of International Strategy.*



The Western world's most influential thinker on war, Carl von Clausewitz, observed that the value of the objective determines the magnitude and the duration of any war any nation will wage in its pursuit.

Kurds know this especially well, as suc-

cessive surrounding regimes, seeking to eliminate Kurdish power from the Middle East, have left them with few options and no objective more valuable than survival.

This well-explains the generational, bone-deep, Kurdish unwillingness to submit that the world has come to critically rely upon in the modern wars against Saddam Hussein, Ansar al Islam, al Qaeda, ISIS and other enemies of humanity. Victory against these evils was not possible without the *peshmerga*.

American soldiers saw this in early 2003 when politicians refused to allow the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division overland access into Iraq from the north. This presented a serious, operational problem for the Coalition, as without an avenue of approach threatening Baghdad from the north, the Iraqi Army would not be forced to fight in two directions simultaneously and instead could commit its combat power south to confront Coalition troops entering from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The Kurds offered a solution. *Peshmerga* and other Kurdish elements covertly readied airstrips in and around Hawler to receive American special forces and task-organized mechanized units. Once on the ground, both were important, of course, but the presence of mechanized units appeared to Saddam as an immediate threat of a combined Kurdish and

American advance on Baghdad from the north, something even Saddam's most incompetent generals could not ignore.

Consequently, the Iraqi Army was forced to keep a significant portion of its combat power oriented north and unavailable to oppose Coalition troops in the south. The result – after barely three weeks of combat, the Iraqi Army was destroyed, and Baghdad was in Coalition hands.

“

The more that enemies attempt to tighten the noose, the greater the Kurds will value their survival and freedom

”

American soldiers also saw this in March of the same year during Operation Viking Hammer, when a handful of U.S. Army special forces and CIA agents linked up with a brigade's worth of *peshmerga* and supported their offensive against al-Qaeda allies based in Beyara, Gulp, Sargat and Khormal. In less than a week, Ansar al Islam and its nascent chemical weapons capability were destroyed, and the group's plans to inspire a jihadi insurgency across portions of Kurdistan were immediately ended.

The world saw this, too, starting in the summer of 2014 when ISIS erupted across Sunni Arab portions of Iraq, and the Iraqi Army ran away en masse. ISIS then raced to within 100 km of the Iranian border, nearly splitting the country in two, but they were stopped cold by the stubborn resistance of *peshmerga* near Jawlawla.

Although the Iraqi Army chose to flee, the *peshmerga* chose to fight. They stepped forward to quickly establish a front of 1,000 kilometers and then fought against ISIS, month after month, as the world's main effort in the War to Defend Humanity. Consequently, the black flag of ISIS never fluttered over even a centimeter of Kurdish-controlled soil, and ISIS is now destroyed in Iraq and beyond.

These are modern examples of the Kurds' tenacity in the face

of grave threats to their survival and freedom, but they are nothing new.

On 16 May 1982 in the tiny village of Hemek, eleven men from the 4th Jeb-ari kert of the 57th Segermar unit were surrounded by an entire Iraqi Army brigade reinforced with helicopters, artillery, a special forces battalion, and a jaash unit. The Kurds refused to surrender.

When the smoke cleared a day later, the Iraqis withdrew, and eight fearless

later the Iraqi brigade was destroyed, Baghdad humiliated, and Mam Izzet honored forever after as the Lion of Handrin.

But this history goes much deeper. Xenophon chronicled the Greek expedition into Persia in 401 BC and wrote that the Greeks lost more men in seven days fighting against the Kurds in the Zagros Mountains than they lost in two months fighting the Persians.

Nearly two thousand years before this,

These historic events and countless more shaped the foundation for the very capable *peshmerga* of today. That's a very good thing, because the very capable *peshmerga* of today, who stand tall in the face of their age-old dilemma: enemies who surround them like wolves.

The Kurds' modern enemies, of course, augment their military levers with economic and diplomatic levers in their effort to undermine Kurdish power, but one thing remains certain – the more



peshmerga emerged from the rubble. Around their fighting positions they found the bodies of more than two hundred Iraqi soldiers left behind by their fleeing comrades.

In early May of 1966 at the foot of Handrin Mountain, Mam Izzet and a few hundred *peshmerga* stood against an entire Iraqi Army brigade reinforced with artillery and close air support. At 3pm that day, he thought he would never see his family again. A few hours

Sargon, King of Akkad, conquered the plains of Mesopotamia and ruled from the shores of the Persian Gulf and across the basins of modern Iraq, but he failed to establish enduring control over the highland tribes of the Zagros Mountains. When Akkad fell two hundred years later, the King of Uruk, Utu-Hegal, struggled continuously against these same tribes, referring to them as “the stinging serpent of the mountains.”

those enemies attempt to tighten the noose, the greater the Kurds value their survival and freedom. Ask Clausewitz what that might mean.

Ernie Audino, Brigadier General, US Army (Retired), is a Senior Fellow at the Gold Institute of International Strategy. He is the only US general to have previously served a full year in Iraq as chief combat advisor embedded in a *peshmerga* brigade. ●



Kurdistan (Still) Matters

From the War on Terror to Great Power Competition

TILL “BAZ” PAASCHE *a German security expert, holding a PhD in geography.*



With the War on Terror having been phased out in Iraq in 2017 after the Battle for Mosul, it seemed that the Kurdistan Region faded from the West’s collective geopolitical attention. The focus shifted to NATO’s eastern flank and

Taiwan, with US foreign policy makers seemingly relieved to have finally left

As it stands, the Kurdistan Region is also the United States’ only success story in Iraq after decades of failed foreign policies and thousands of US and British combat deaths. Yet, given the indecisiveness of the United States and Europe towards the Kurdistan Region, it is on the verge of sliding beyond Western political influence, with Russia, Iran and Turkey all competing to control Kurdistan.

KURDISTAN

Iraq and its complicated legacy behind. Arguably, this was a mistake.

The Kurdistan Region in Iraq and beyond remains of geostrategic importance in the new age of great power competition. It is here that

Russian/Iranian proxies and US patrols meet face-to-face with loosely defined rules of engagement. It is here where largely untapped oil- and gas fields lie that can contribute to Europe’s ongoing energy-diversification project. It is here where the United States can still block a complete Iranian Shia Crescent and contribute to regional security.

Right now, the United States and Europe are at a crossroads. Either the Kurdistan Region is declared a vital partner and stabilized with political and economic deals or the emerging Russian-Iranian axis will increase its hold over the region and ultimately replace the United States as its hegemon. If the United States and Europe decide to hold up their end of a long, historically grounded deal and acknowledge their responsibilities towards the Kurds, there is a simple solution for how it can be accomplished without a large military footprint.

While Western loyalties are often fleeting, many Kurds still have a genuinely positive attitude towards the United States, the UK, and their armed forces. In all three US-led interventions in Iraq in 1991, 2003, and 2014, Kurdish *peshmerga* forces were exceptionally loyal partners on the ground. Again, unlike in other theaters, no US soldiers died in combat in the Kurdistan Region.

In recent history, the bond between the Kurds and the US military goes back to the 1990s, when Saddam Hussain took revenge on the Kurds and Shia Arabs for their uprising in the aftermath of the Gulf War, during which a US-led alliance had liberated Kuwait from aggressive Iraqi forces. With Saddam’s

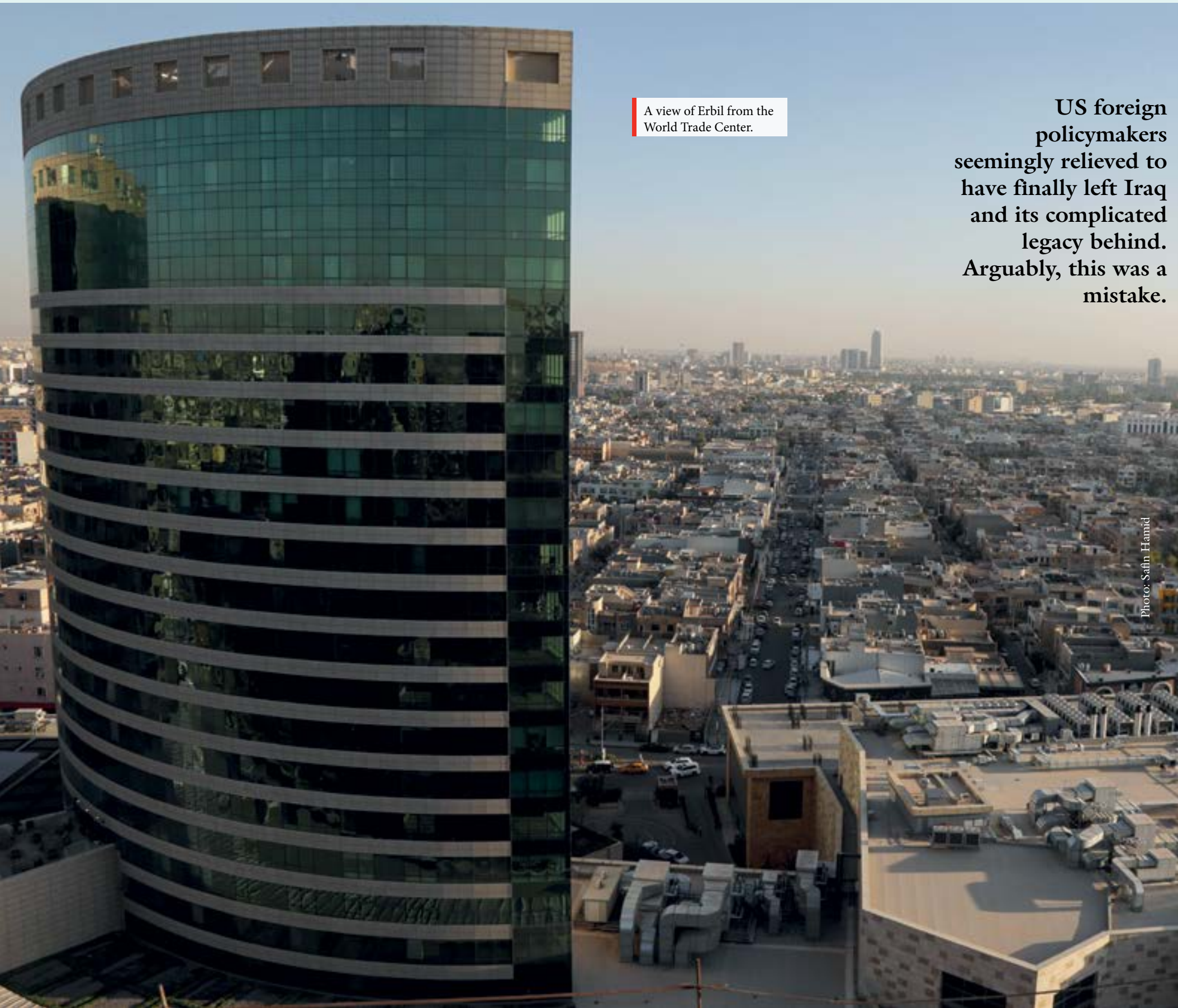
Organized by two main Kurdish political parties, *peshmerga* forces quickly evicted Saddam’s army first from the Kurdish mountain strongholds and then their cities. Humiliated globally after his defeat by the US air force, Saddam turned on the Kurds and brutally crushed the uprising in an attempt to re-consolidate power over his country. The lightly armored Kurdish fighters could not hold the lines against Iraq’s tanks and helicopter gunships, and soon hundreds of thousands of civilians were fleeing the cities into the mountains, their historic haven.

Responding to the quickly escalating humanitarian crisis in 1991, the United States,

tain passes for the Iraqi tanks, which then had to advance without aircover. Thus, enabled by the patrolling US and British jets, the *peshmerga* liberated the Zagros mountains without asking the West for any charity or ground forces. All the Kurds needed was for the United States to hold its promise and keep Saddam’s feared helicopters on the ground. Free for the first time in decades, the refugee communities in the rugged Kurdish heartland became the nucleus for Kurdistan’s first democratic structures, which later evolved into the current Kurdish parliament in Erbil.

army weakened by US and British jets and inspired by President George W. Bush’s call for a popular uprising against the hated Iraqi dictator, the Kurds in the north of the country rolled out an armed insurgency.

Britain and France introduced a no-fly zone that kept Saddam’s helicopter gunships grounded. Using shoulder-held anti-tank weapons and mines, the *peshmerga* were able to close the first moun-



A view of Erbil from the World Trade Center.

US foreign policymakers seemingly relieved to have finally left Iraq and its complicated legacy behind. Arguably, this was a mistake.

Photo: Safin Hamid

United States as its hegemon. While Western loyalties are often fleeting, many Kurds still have a genuinely positive attitude towards the United States, the UK, and their armed forces

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US foreign policy makers seemingly relieved to have finally left Iraq and its com

In 2003, US ground forces and *peshmerga* eventually liberated Kurdish cities from Saddam's Iraqi rule, and continually holding its protective hand over Kurdistan, the United States helped to extend the space in which Kurdish democracy could grow. Acknowledging the value of its Kurdish allies, the US hegemon formalized Kurdish autonomy in the post-2003 Iraqi constitution, laying out steps to resolve tensions with the Iran-controlled central government in Baghdad that center around the status of oil-rich Kirkuk and the distribution of Iraq's oil revenue among the nation's different ethnic groups. The problem was, with America's premature withdrawal in 2011, those policies were never implemented and institutionalized. Consequently, the economic situation in the Kurdistan Region unraveled soon after the US withdrawal, and the Kurds have remained disenfranchised from Baghdad ever since.

Beginning in 2013, the central government in Baghdad withheld much of the Kurdish portion of Iraq's oil revenues. Suddenly left with no budget to provide services or pay salaries, the Kurdistan Region plummeted into a severe economic crisis that is leaving a generation without prospects and is making political progress impossible. Although the US military enabled the initiation of Kurdish democracy, its hasty withdrawal left this democratization project on life support.

The United States' and Europe's gateway to Kurdistan is their historic connection to Kurdish democracy and the discourse of political autonomy and federalism that the US helped craft in 2003. Instead of enforcing their own version of democracy, the United States simply created space in which the Kurds could launch their own organically grown democratization.

By committing to a partnership with the Kurdistan Region, the United States would not need to deploy a large military force. It only needs to keep the promises regarding Kurdish autonomy. If that is impossible because the United States has lost its influence in Baghdad, oil- and gas-based deals can make up for the lost budget, creating a win-win situation.

In return, the United States gets a sustainable partnership and keeps a strong foothold in the Middle East. With Iran and Turkey expanding aggressively and Saudi Arabia flirting with China, America does not have many such partners left in the Middle East. Yet, given the inevitable confrontation between Israel and Iran, it cannot ignore the Middle East quite yet. ●



Mustafa Barzani's Plea to De Gaulle Cease Arming Iraq

NAHRO ZAGROS *Editor-in-Chief of Kurdistan Chronicle.*



Throughout modern history, Kurdish leaders have consistently forged strong ties with their French counterparts to convey their political aspirations.

This practice stems from the legendary Mustafa Barzani, the renowned Kurdish nationalist leader, who was the first to establish a line of communication and appeal to the French for support, urging them not to supply arms to Iraq in the late 1960s.

In the tumultuous year of 1968, the geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East were shifting and, on February 8, Barzani penned a heartfelt letter to French President Charles de Gaulle, imploring him to reconsider France's decision to arm Iraq. This historic letter reflected Barzani's deep concerns about the dire consequences of such a move for the Kurdish people.

In his plea, Barzani made the letter personal and passionate: "General, allow an old man, who has been fighting since his youth for the freedom and dignity of his people, to send you this supreme appeal."

He went on to argue that sending arms to Iraq without acknowledging its brutal treatment of the Kurdish people "would only lead to still further destruction of our country and to the massacre of our women and children."

This pivotal moment in history sheds light on Barzani's astute foresight and unwavering commitment to Kurdish aspirations. Let us delve into the details of this remarkable letter and its implications.

Barzani's concerns

Mustafa Barzani recognized the precarious nature of Iraq's

political landscape and its implications for the Kurdish people. In his letter, he highlighted the Iraqi regime's history of discrimination and oppression against the Kurds and expressed his concerns about the potential escalation of violence and suppression if Iraq were to be further armed.

Barzani argued that bolstering the military capabilities of the Iraqi government would ultimately exacerbate the already strained relationship between the Arab-dominated Iraqi regime and the Kurdish population. An increase in arms, he maintained, would embolden the Iraqi government to intensify its repressive policies and endanger the lives and aspirations of the Kurdish people.

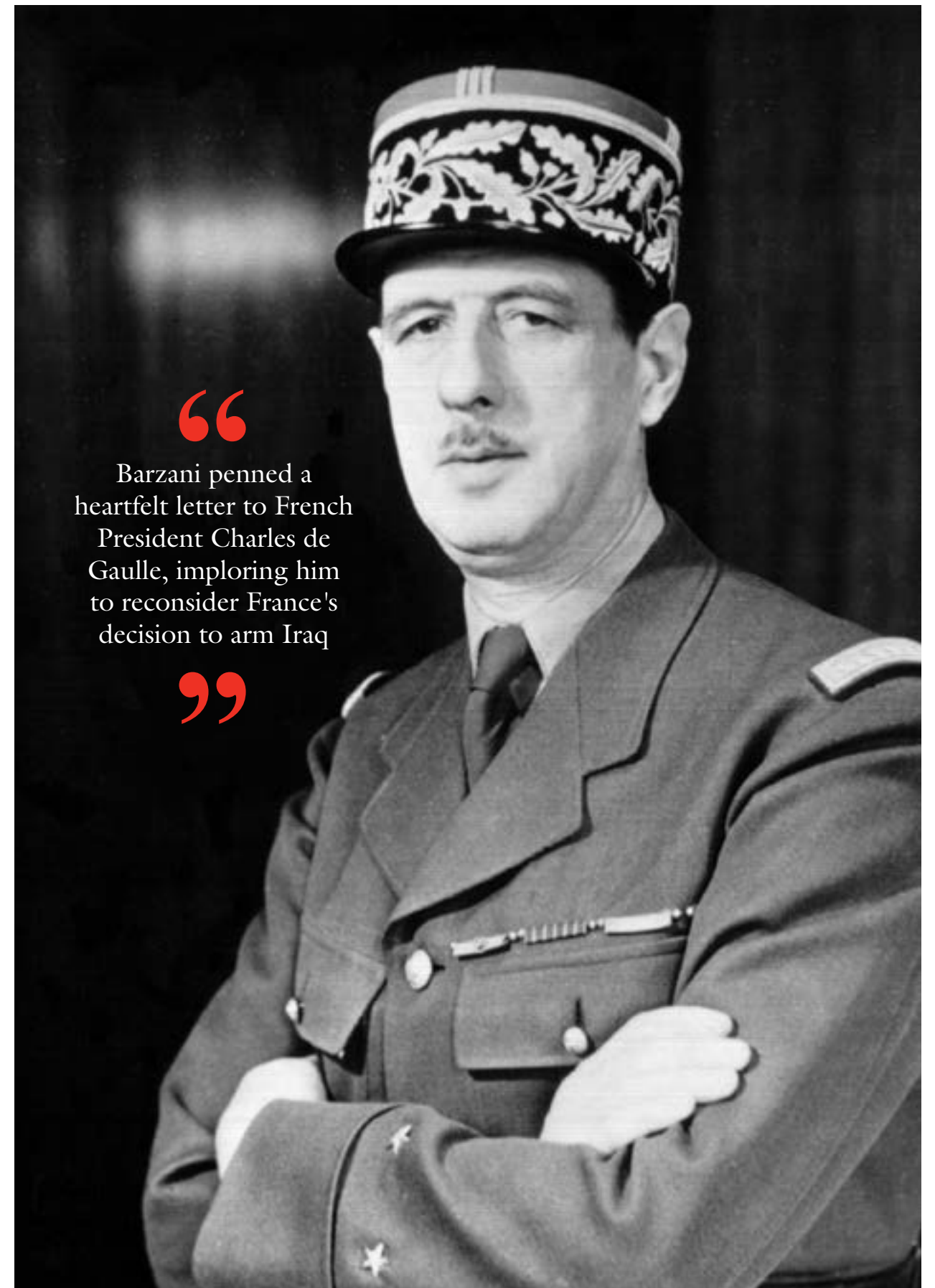
Kurdish aspirations and the geopolitical context

Barzani's plea to de Gaulle should be understood within the broader context of the Kurdish struggle for self-determination. The Kurdish people long yearned for an independent state, and Barzani was a fervent advocate for their cause. He recognized that the balance of power in the region directly shaped the prospects for Kurdish autonomy.

During the Cold War, the Middle East was a battleground for influence between the Soviet Union and the United States. The Iraqi government under Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Qasim, and later under President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, aligned itself with the Soviet Union, which sought to expand its sphere of influence in the region. Barzani understood that the Soviet Union's military support for Iraq would tip the balance against the Kurdish people, potentially derailing their aspirations for self-rule.

Barzani's appeal to de Gaulle

In his letter, Barzani thus appealed to de Gaulle, one of the most prominent leaders in post-World War II Europe, for



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Barzani penned a heartfelt letter to French President Charles de Gaulle, imploring him to reconsider France's decision to arm Iraq

Former French President Charles de Gaulle.

assistance: "General, you did not fail to denounce the Vietnam war; I am sure the fate of the Kurdish people is not less dear to you than that of the Vietnamese."

He implored the French president to reconsider France's military support for Iraq and highlighted the historical friendship between the Kurdish people and France. Here Barzani's letter seems

to imply that France showed support for Kurdish self-determination during the Treaty of Sèvres negotiations in 1920.

Barzani expressed the Kurdish people's deep admiration for France's democratic principles and their desire to establish a democratic society in Kurdistan: "... you are President of France, the very nation that gave the world the idea of

political freedom and the right of all people to self-determination."

He deeply believed that French support for the Kurdish cause would align with France's values and contribute to stability and peace in the region.

Outcome and legacy

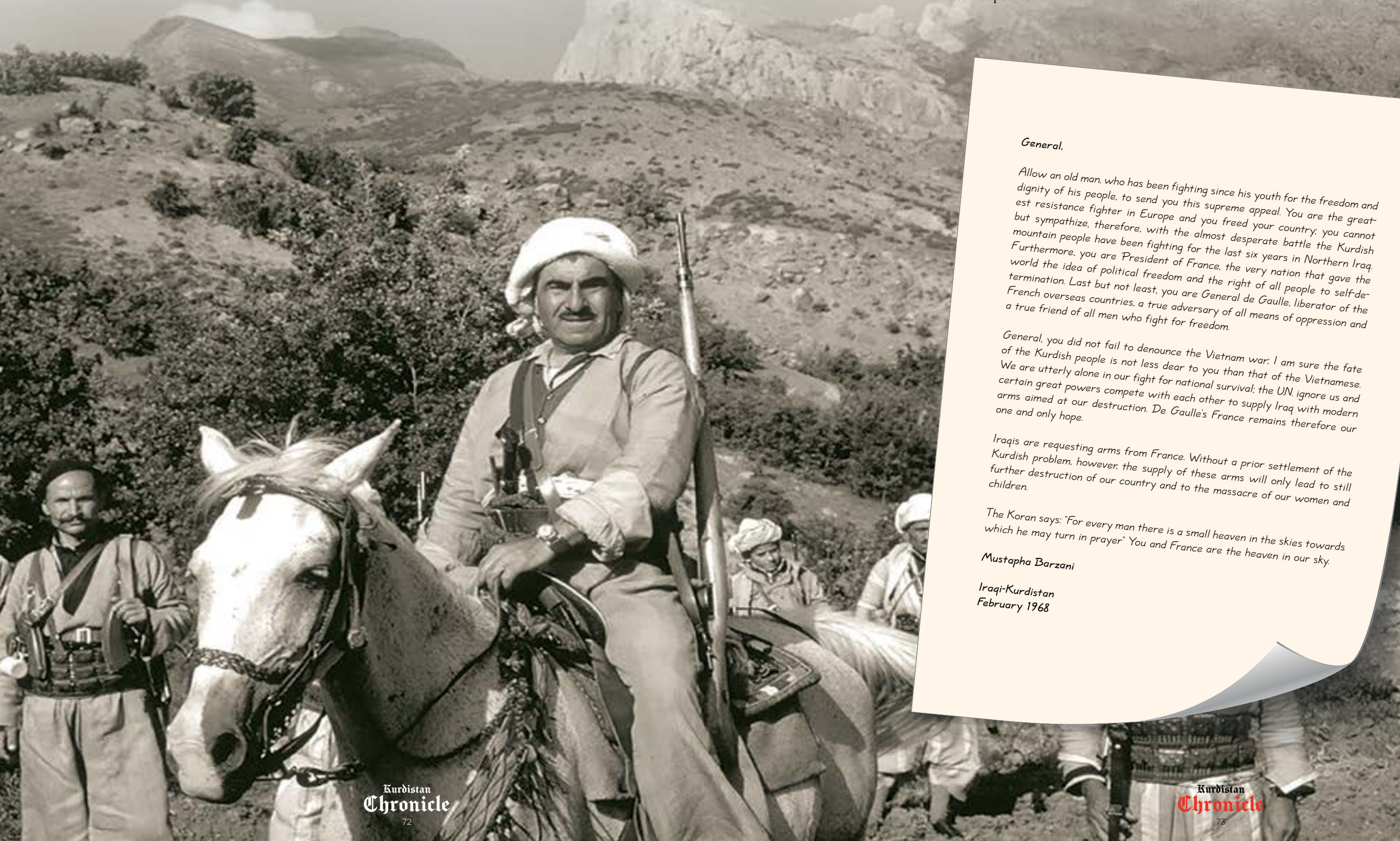
After Barzani's letter, many prominent

French figures issued statements appealing to de Gaulle to halt France's supply of weapons to Iraq or to send the arms on the condition that the Iraqi army would not use them against the Kurdish population. Among these figures were the novelist M. Francois Mauriac, a Gaullist deputy M. Leo Hamon, and M. Wladimir d'Ormesson, who was Director General of the French state's radio and television service.

Barzani's letter helped to raise interna-

tional awareness about the Kurdish struggle for self-determination. It also exemplified his tireless efforts to seek support and build alliances for the Kurdish cause.

Ultimately, the path towards Kurdish autonomy was fraught with challenges and setbacks. However, Barzani's steadfast leadership and determination paved the way for future generations to continue the struggle. ●



General,

Allow an old man, who has been fighting since his youth for the freedom and dignity of his people, to send you this supreme appeal. You are the greatest resistance fighter in Europe and you freed your country; you cannot but sympathize, therefore, with the almost desperate battle the Kurdish mountain people have been fighting for the last six years in Northern Iraq. Furthermore, you are President of France, the very nation that gave the world the idea of political freedom and the right of all people to self-determination. Last but not least, you are General de Gaulle, liberator of the French overseas countries, a true adversary of all means of oppression and a true friend of all men who fight for freedom.

General, you did not fail to denounce the Vietnam war; I am sure the fate of the Kurdish people is not less dear to you than that of the Vietnamese. We are utterly alone in our fight for national survival; the UN, ignore us and certain great powers compete with each other to supply Iraq with modern arms aimed at our destruction. De Gaulle's France remains therefore our one and only hope.

Iraqis are requesting arms from France. Without a prior settlement of the Kurdish problem, however, the supply of these arms will only lead to still further destruction of our country and to the massacre of our women and children.

The Koran says: "For every man there is a small heaven in the skies towards which he may turn in prayer" You and France are the heaven in our sky.

Mustapha Barzani

*Iraqi-Kurdistan
February 1968*

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Barzani argued that bolstering the military capabilities of the Iraqi government would ultimately exacerbate the already strained relationship between the Arab-dominated Iraqi regime and the Kurdish population
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The Plight of Syrian Kurds Refugees, Exiles, and Hope Amidst Hardship

MOHAMMAD DARGALAYI *Photographer and Journalist*



The Kurds have endured immense suffering under successive dictators in Syria, including during the hardships that afflicted the entire nation following the 2011 revolution. Despite the liberation of their hometowns from the Islamic State (ISIS), many

Syrian Kurds still find themselves displaced. This unfortunate situation is often attributed to the current governing authorities in Syrian Kurdistan, referred to as “the brothers.”

When violence erupted in 2011, thousands of Syrian Kurds migrated to Europe, while a larger number sought refuge in the Kurdistan Region. Yet, even though ISIS has been defeated on the ground, most Syrian Kurdish refugees are hesitant to return. In fact, the flow of refugees from Syrian Kurdistan to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has not ceased, primarily due to the military governance imposed by Kurdish factions in the region.

According to the Joint Crisis Coordination Center (JCC) of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), there are currently 20,641 refugee families totaling 92,184 individuals, who reside in camps and host communities within the Kurdistan Region.

Missing home but scared to return

A Kurdish journalist and political activist from Syria, identified by the initials S.D. for security reasons, left Qamishli in northeast Syria in 2018 with hopes of finding a more promising future in Germany, where he could freely engage in activism. In a recent interview, S.D. revealed that he continues to publish articles under a pseudonym due to concerns for the safety of his family, who remain in Syrian Kurdistan.

Presently, Syrian Kurdistan is governed by the Autonomous

Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), an operational political entity led by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes fighters associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The governing parties face frequent criticism for human rights violations, the use of child soldiers, limited democracy, and restricted political freedom beyond the ideologies of the PKK.

According to S.D., the armed forces and governing political parties in Syrian Kurdistan have severely restricted political activism, causing numerous activists to seek escape routes with little hope of ever returning home. This unfortunate reality transforms refugees into exiles, exacerbating the challenges of living apart from home and family.

Most of these exiles still reside in the Kurdistan Region. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) reports that most Syrian refugees arrived in the Kurdistan Region between 2010 and 2014, coinciding with the onset of the conflict in Syria. The year 2013 saw the highest reported influx of refugees.

However, not all Syrian refugees live within the camps of the Kurdistan Region. After almost a decade of residing in the region, nearly half of the refugee population has integrated into local communities. According to the JCC, a total of 49,000 Syrian refugee households currently live in host communities outside the camps. This means that out of the total 246,810 Syrian refugees, approximately 154,626 individuals have chosen to make their homes in the towns and cities of the Kurdistan Region, with Duhok and Erbil being the primary locations.

“Our homeland is Rojava; we grew up there. It's what we love the most,” said Amina, a Syrian refugee residing in Domiz Camp in the Kurdistan Region. “We can't return due to the dire situation there. Our children have grown up, and if we return, they will be forced into compulsory military service.”

Living under the AANES

The local Kurdish authority in Syrian Kurdistan is often criticized for its military-like rule and the repeated accusations of recruiting child soldiers and committing human rights violations. In 2019, after facing extensive pressure and criticism, the SDF finally signed an agreement with the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, to cease and prevent the recruitment of children as soldiers. How-

The YPG must immediately demobilize children in its ranks and cease recruiting children.” The report also highlighted that these recruited children are mostly taken from vulnerable families residing in displacement camps under the YPG’s control.

Abdullah, another Syrian Kurdish refugee living in Domiz Camp in Duhok, expressed his longing to have one more chance to meet his mother again. Playing a musical instrument and singing a melancholic melody, Abdullah shared, “Life in a refugee camp is challenging, but we still prefer it over returning to Syria. The political and security situa-

ceived to be affiliated with political parties opposing the PYD or AANES. The detainees included opposition members, civil society activists, and media workers.”

While opposition political parties are strictly limited, if not excluded, from influencing the region's policies and administration, many of them consistently call for an end to the violations committed by the PYD. Their primary focus remains on the release of their imprisoned members held in PYD prisons. However, this plea has received little response due to the ruling parties'



■ Kurdish refugees who escaped ISIS but are prevented from returning to their homes by current conflict in their region.

ever, reports indicate that this practice has not yet been eradicated, as armed groups affiliated with the PKK continue to enlist children under the age of 18 for military training and deployment to conflict zones.

A report by Human Rights Watch, released three months after the agreement was signed, stated, “Despite pledges to stop the practice, the YPG [the PKK-affiliated People's Protection Units] has recruited children, including girls, and utilized them in hostilities.

tion there is difficult, and the economy has made life extremely challenging for its citizens.”

Despite strong military cooperation between the US-led Coalition and the Kurdish-led SDF in their joint fight against ISIS, a recent Human Rights Report by the US State Department criticized the local Syrian Kurdish authorities for their human rights violations. The 2023 report pointed out that: “the SDF continued to unlawfully detain individuals affiliated with or per-

refusal to demonstrate any flexibility, leading to failed attempts to revive the “Kurd-Kurd Dialogue” in Syria.

Despite enduring ongoing hardships, Syrian refugees have not lost hope. They believe that a brighter future will eventually allow them to return to their homes and reunite with their families. However, this can only be realized when there is no longer a fear of imposed ideologies and economic conditions improve. ●

Photo: Safin Hamid



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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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

**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. ●*

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

A view of Felaw Pond and Sakran Mountain in the background, Choman, Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Sabr Dri



Potato Revolution

Kurdistan Chronicle

Land that has borne witness to millennia of farming, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is experiencing a renaissance in its agricultural sector, and at the forefront of this resurgence stands the KH Company. Established in 2009, the company has not only reshaped Kurdistan's agribusiness landscape, but also acted as a bridge between Dutch expertise and regional resources, resulting in a transformation that has captivated both local and global audiences.

As a symbol of unity and collaboration, KH Company draws its name from the fusion of "Kurdistan" and "Holland." This union wasn't just symbolic; it was an embodiment of a mission to infuse the region's farming practices with

Dutch ingenuity. The journey started after the company invited Hang Maye and Hugo Mol, two prominent Dutch farmers, to the KRI. The combination of their extensive experience and Kurdistan's fertile soil is igniting a revolution in the region's agricultural sector.

The cornerstone of this endeavor is the potato, a seemingly humble crop that holds the key to a multitude of positive changes. In partnership with the Dutch company HZPC,

KH Company imported 200 tons of potato seeds. With the support of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Ministry of Agriculture, this venture catalyzed a staggering increase in potato production – from a meager 2,000 tons to an

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The annual income
from potato production
for the KRI's populace
is estimated at a
substantial \$500 million

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Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

B Bashar Mushir Goran, CEO of KH Company, during an interview with Kurdistan Chronicle

astonishing 650,000 tons. This numerical leap, while important in increasing production, also represented a substantial stride toward food security, self-sufficiency, and economic growth.

The impact reverberated far beyond the fields. In a region where agriculture and livelihoods are intimately connected, the surge in potato production has translated into tangible improvements in the lives of the local population. Employment opportunities have burgeoned, curbing unemployment rates and providing a sense of purpose to thousands.

As Bashar Mushir Goran, the CEO of KH Company, elucidated, “The expansion of potato cultivation also created job opportunities for over 40,000 unemployed individuals.” The result? A marked decline in crime rates, transforming the social fabric of various communities in the region.

Data tells a compelling tale: the annual income from potato production for the KRI’s populace is estimated at a substantial \$500 million, directly impacting the lives of all those engaged in the industry. KH Company, initially comprising 100 permanent employees and 35 agricultural engineers, expands exponentially during the potato harvest season, welcoming up to 25,000 seasonal workers. In the CEO’s factory

alone, 500 workers labor daily during this crucial period, highlighting the magnitude of the endeavor.

A pivotal contributor to KH Company’s success has been the steady support of the KRG. Against the backdrop of geopolitical challenges, the government’s dedication to agricultural development has been pivotal. Its strategic vision, spanning agriculture, industry, and tourism, has steered the region toward a future of prosperity and self-reliance. The partnership between the KRG, KH Company, and the Dutch Consulate has exemplified the importance of harmonious collaboration.

New markets

The company’s transformation extends beyond potato cultivation. The upcoming French fries factory, meat-production factories, and onion-slicing factory embody the company’s commitment to elevating the region’s agricultural prowess. These endeavors, along with the construction of state-of-the-art cold storage warehouses, aim to bolster production and ensure the availability of quality products throughout the year, even during periods of scarcity.

However, KH Company’s accomplishments are not confined to local markets. The journey of Kurdistan’s potatoes from local fields to foreign lands

is one of determination and resilience. Overcoming obstacles such as closed borders and logistical challenges, the KRG’s collaboration with the Iraqi central government has facilitated the export of potatoes to markets beyond Iraq’s borders. The removal of barriers has paved the way for the KRI’s finest produce to grace the tables of countries like the UAE. “Compared to other countries’ potato products, Kurdistan potatoes are the best potatoes in the Middle East in terms of quality,” Goran explains, pointing to the demand for locally grown yellow potatoes.

The impact does not end with potatoes. In line with Goran’s vision, KH Company’s agricultural success story is a template for the cultivation of other crops, such as onions, grapes, apples, pomegranates, and corn. This vision echoes a historical reality, with the KRI

having supplied 70% of Iraq’s agricultural needs until geopolitical challenges disrupted the equation. Now, fueled by governmental support and innovative partnerships, the region’s agriculture sector is poised to flourish anew.

As climate change exerts its influence on global agriculture, KH Company has embraced innovation to adapt and thrive. With water consumption a critical concern, the company has introduced advanced irrigation methods such as the drip system, pivot system, and steamer, technologies that optimize water usage and elevate the efficiency of crop cultivation, setting a precedent for sustainable practices in the region.

The company’s efforts are underpinned by a resounding commitment to elevate the KRI’s agriculture to meet international standards. With Dutch assistance,

extending from training programs to skill enhancement, the company has not only achieved parity with international quality but also greatly increased production efficiency. As more farmers gain expertise and knowledge, the cycle of progress becomes self-sustaining, demonstrating that shared knowledge has the power to revolutionize entire industries.

The work of KH Company captures the potential of a region that, despite challenges, is determined to carve its path to prosperity. With steadfast collaboration and an unshakable commitment to high quality, Kurdistan’s agriculture is on the cusp of a golden era, symbolized not simply by the hue of its potatoes but by the transformation of a land that has rediscovered its roots, embracing modernity while staying true to its heritage. ●



Photo: Halmat Omar



Savoring the Taste of Rashmiri Grapes

NASIH ALI KHAYAT is a renowned photojournalist and recipient of multiple international awards.



In the picturesque mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) grows a grape unlike any other in the world, a precious gem among the vines: the Rashmiri grape. This distinctive black Kurdish grape stands apart from all others, carrying with it the spirit of a people who have worked their lands for generations, shaping their dreams into fruitful harvests. It is a story that has long awaited a global audience and a tale that promises to captivate the palates of the world.

In the heart of Sharbazher, a northern district of Sulaymaniyah Governorate, a visionary farmer named Abdulkarim Mustafa Abdullah tends to his vines. Abdulkarim, a hardworking soul, represents the beating heart of a

region where agriculture is both a way of life and an enduring tradition passed down through generations.

He shares his dream with a twinkle in his eye, “Once in the fruit market in Sulaymaniyah, I challenged anyone to bring me a grape as beautiful and fine as mine, and I would give him \$10,000. One of my dreams is to deliver my products to world markets, which will benefit not only me but also our country.”

His dream resonates with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which has been tirelessly working to find international markets for its agricultural treasures. In 2022, the pomegranate products of Halabja and Zakho were exported to the UAE for the first time. In 2023, Kurdistan’s renowned potatoes found their way to the UAE and other Gulf countries, delighting international food brands with their exceptional quality.

Environmental challenges

Abdulkarim’s journey is not one paved by modern machinery or technological shortcuts. It is a story of persistence, manual labor, and a profound connection to the land. “Every year in the spring, we cut our vines, harvest, and hire workers. My vineyard is 30 acres, so it needs more people. After that, we clean our fields and plow them. Since our area is mountainous, we still use animals to plow. Most of our work is manual, in other words. We use less

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One of my dreams is to deliver my products to world markets, which will benefit not only me but also our country.
”



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat

equipment because of the location of our fields.”

The journey of Rashmiri grapes from bud to fruition is a seasonal spectacle. Abdulkarim explains, “Our crops ripen in the summer and in early August. Then we start harvesting and selling our crops. The grapes grown in the high mountains ripen in early September. However, there are some special grape varieties that ripen later. The black grapes, which are very famous and very good, ripen in October.”

Climate change has posed challenges in the KRI, as it has worldwide, impacting the region's weather patterns and harvest cycles. “Production has decreased over the past two years due to late cold and early rains,” the Kurdish farmer explained.

“Despite the problem of irregular seasons, we produced 40 tons of grapes last year. We sold 25 tons to private markets and shops. We will store the other 15 tons after turning them into raisins and other consumable products,” he states.

Untapped potential

The vineyards are located in mountains where the highest annual temperature reaches 35°C. With proper support and investment, Abdulkarim believes that production can be increased significantly. “When I started in 1997, it was a small vineyard. Every year, it grows, and the vines become more productive, so in the coming years, we will improve our production.

Local markets are already enchanted by the exquisite taste and freshness of Rashmiri grapes. Abdulkarim affirms, “We sell our products locally because they are very special and we produce them well, and because they reach markets quickly and freshly, so we have a special market and customers.”

Recently, KRG Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources, Begard Talabani, recognized Abdulkarim as an “exemplary farmer” and pledged to support his aspirations.

What sets Rashmiri grapes apart is the unique climate and soil in the KRI. “Because of the climate and the fertility of the soil, the varieties of grapes are very good,” Abdulkarim proudly states. “For example, Rashmiri grapes are different from the grapes of other countries in terms of taste and composition. Rashmiri grapes are famous in the Sharbazher area, and we can say that this type of grape is only available in Kurdistan, and its identity is Kurdish.”

The potential of Rashmiri grapes is immense, yet untapped. If these exceptional grapes were to find their way to international markets, their reputation would undoubtedly soar. Abdulkarim envisions a brighter future, saying, “If this road is opened, we will be able to export at least one ton of such grapes daily from our village alone.”

But he has an even bigger dream – a juice factory. “Come and take advantage of this product and set up a private factory for it,” Abdulkarim passionately appeals to foreign investors. With a factory, grape production could surge to new heights.

Kurdistan's Rashmiri grapes stand out for their exceptional taste and are a testament to the region's agricultural prowess. With distinctive flavors nurtured by the area's unique climate and soil, they have the potential to become a global sensation when given the support and recognition they deserve. The future of Rashmiri grapes will be interesting to follow, with real promise to captivate the palates of people from every corner of the world. ●



Photo: Nash Ali Xayat

A dedicated Kurdish farmer diligently tending to his vineyard



Kurdistan Innovation Institute (KII) Investing in Ideas

SARBAZ N. OTHMAN *Deputy Chair of Board of Directors and Co-CEO of KII.*



At certain points throughout the history, stories from Kurdistan have made global headlines, but these have mostly been about tragedies the Kurds faced or braveries they demonstrated. This nation, however, has other stories to tell now – stories of brilliant, innovative minds coming together to make our world a better place.

Having regularly met with young women and men from around Kurdistan and learning about their ideas, passions, and dreams, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani wanted to unlock the remarkable potential of his people and initiated the establishment of Kurdistan’s first innovation institute in 2021. A year later, the Kurdistan Innovation Institute (KII) is a center where, as the prime minister once said, creativity is enhanced, knowledge is distilled, and innovation is rewarded.

During the institute’s official launch ceremony in November 2022, PM Barzani, who is also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of KII, underscored that the institute will be tailored specifically to the youth of Kurdistan, providing them with the tools and environment to help them pursue their ideas.

At the same event, examples of several past Kurdish innovators were introduced – a man who developed his German-made Opel sedan into an electric car in his own yard only a few years after Tesla introduced its first product, a young developer who introduced the first Kurdish keyboard for IOS operating systems years before Apple Company added the keyboard to its system, and a group of students who built the first face-recognition system compatible with the facial features of the Kurdish people.

“Anyone who dares to innovate, who wants to devote their time to research and entrepreneurship and the development

of technology, will be welcome here,” PM Barzani said during his speech. “Our people have earned the right to think big. I say to you here today that we will support ideas that introduce new technologies to make sure that we - in the KRG - can respond to the needs of the public quickly.”

KII’s primary goal is to support people who have innovative ideas, helping them connect and create together, and ultimately contribute to a more developed society and more sustainable economy. At KII, experienced business developers, internationally recognized inventors, prominent investors, and skillful engineers work hand in hand to accomplish this mission.

While the idea of the institute originates from PM Barzani’s aspirations for developing Kurdistan, several tough challenges also contributed to pressing for the creation of such a facility. First, the region enjoys a large young population with 62.9% under the age of 30. It has remarkable natural resources, fertile arable lands, a well-educated young generation, and an open attitude towards the outside world.

Yet some key developmental factors are missing that require an institute like KII to act. For instance, locally manufactured goods are very limited both in volume and variety, which has left the

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We at KII work not only to develop innovative ideas into business models but to foster the culture of innovation. We encourage our educational system to dream beyond theoretical methods and adopt a rather practical approach in order to contribute to a more sustainable development of Kurdistan

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region heavily dependent on imported materials to supply local markets. For example, according to a recent study, nearly 80% of the materials in the region’s construction market alone are imported from neighboring countries and beyond. The remaining 20% of local products, however, struggle to compete with imported materials.

This issue is not unique to Kurdistan, as Iraq struggles with the same challenge. According to the Iraqi Federation of Industries, outdated methods and old technologies, a lack of innovation, and a lack of expertise are the key factors contributing to the limited capacity of the manufacturing sector.

However, infrastructural challenges were not the sole reason for KII’s establishment. Many innovators have long struggled to actualize their ideas due to the lack of an organizational support that could connect them with key players, an essential aspect of innovation. KII is now filling this gap with an innovation model that connects innovators with these players and ultimately helps the Kurdistan Region realize a more forward-looking and sustainable economy that embraces new technologies and harnesses contemporary business trends.

KII Innovation Model and Its Key Players

KII’s organizational structure and mission have been designed to lead, manage, and carefully craft the context for successful innovation. It guides an innovator from the idea to a well-functioning prototype, a business model, investment, and finally mass production. KII’s innovation model is backed by a



PM Masrour Barzani speaking at a ceremony launching KII in Erbil (14 Nov. 2022).

robust network of academics, public officials, bankers, product development experts, engineers, regulatory experts, and more.

There are three integral players in KII's innovation model:

Government: Prime Minister Masrour Barzani seized the initiative to establish KII so that the government will drive the innovation model and determine the development areas that the institute will prioritize. The government will even build production facilities if innovator's idea proves to be a game changer.

Academia: Universities and academic research centers are the second most important player in KII's innovation model as they gather, disseminate, and push the boundaries of knowledge. KII will actively share knowledge with universities in Kurdistan and connect them with the other key players to create an environment where innovators can develop their ideas scientifically.

Industries: Manufacturing is central to the innovation model. KII has opened its own workshop replete with electrical and mechanical labs in which innovators can build prototypes after their applications are accepted. Additionally, KII cooperates with national and international manufacturing partners for the provision of services unavailable within the capacity of the facility.

Development Areas

At KII, any innovative, future-oriented, and potentially promising idea is welcome. Outfitted with a user-friendly portal in three languages (Kurdish, English, and Arabic), innovators can submit their ideas under a relevant category, such as human welfare, smart cities, housewares, sustainable energy, health, transportation, IT, fashion, automation, and others. Each application will be then reviewed by a specialized evaluation committee to proceed to the next stage, if it is deemed promising.

KII Science Park

The Kurdistan Innovation Institute will also build a state-of-the-art science park to create a purpose-built cluster of office spaces, labs, workrooms, meeting areas, and sports and accommodation facilities designed to support research and development in science and technology. The park's primary goal, which is also reflected in its modern architectural design, is to create an environment for innovators, researchers, academics, investors, and government institutions to easily interact without bureaucratic procedures.

The facility will be built on a 200,000 square-meter piece of land in one of the most strategic areas of the capital Erbil. Renowned international architects have introduced the most advanced technologies, so the gigantic project will rely on clean energy to operate and demonstrate the will for the development of the Kurdistan Region. Once the physical facility is ready, Kurdistan will take another step towards becoming one of the most attractive locations for researchers, innovators, and investors not only from the region, but also from around the world. ●





Haunting Moments

War Against ISIS



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.



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



The Spirit of the Kurds Hope for the World

STEPHEN MANSFIELD, *a New York Times Bestselling author, global speaker, and speaker coach.*



They ought to be among the most bitter people on earth. They would be justified in withdrawing into insular communities seething with resentment and rage. They are, after all, among the most betrayed people in history. Yet they are blessedly free of these poisons and exhibit such open-heartedness, forgiveness, and hospitality as to offer hope in a tumultuous world.

The world's nearly forty million Kurds—the largest group of people on earth without their own homeland—have certainly known their sufferings. After centuries of war and abuse came the betrayals by the Western powers in the wake of World War I.

Later, there were the persecutions of the Iraqi regimes and Turkey's genocidal policies. Then came Saddam Hussein, and the gassings of Halabja, as well as the collusion of European and American corporations in a host of atrocities. The bigotry often faced by the Kurdish diaspora only added to these agonies. Injustices reached to the heavens.

Surprisingly, though, the Kurdish people of the world—after all they have endured—are devoted to being among the most richly hospitable people on earth.

Sacrifice and steely action

Nowhere is this largeness of heart more evident than in the realm of religion. Though the Kurds are a 95% Muslim people, they have shown kindness to faiths they might understandably have regarded as enemies. The Kurds, having been the victims of religious treachery themselves, have instead offered a welcoming hand.

A visit to Iraqi Kurdistan reveals how much this is true. In the halls of the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil, one finds offices devoted to the welfare of Christians and Yezidis as well as Muslims. Mullahs attending to government business

stop to warmly greet the Christian visitor. A visiting team of rabbis from Jerusalem receive the same cordial welcome.

This Kurdish graciousness extends far beyond mere ceremony and Middle Eastern hospitality. It has, at times, taken the form of sacrifice and steely action.

During the dark days of the ascent of ISIS, Iraqi Kurdistan welcomed tens of thousands of Christian refugees. Christians worldwide celebrated this Kurdish heroism, and even the Pope expressed his gratitude. Lives were saved. A faith, despite its persecutors, lived on. The Kurds, in the grandness of their spirit, made this possible. It was the warmth and power of Kurdistan on the rise.

A global spirit

Yet it is not just in Iraq that Kurds have crossed religious lines before a watching world. In Nashville, Tennessee—the U.S. city with the largest Kurdish population—a Christian pastor's wife has fallen gravely ill. The news reaches the Kurdish community. They remember this pastor. He was there when many of them arrived in Nashville to escape the devastations of Saddam Hussein. He and his church served the beleaguered Kurds and befriended them. The Kurds of Nashville now remember their friend. He has honored them by serving them. They will do the same.

Food begins arriving at the pastor's home—food cooked in Kurdish homes and restaurants. Kurdish friends begin to offer help—to provide transportation for a family member or care for the family's yard or to do anything to relieve the current suffering. News of this outpouring of love and devotion spreads throughout the city. Even national news outlets speak of it. Once again in our time, Kurdish graciousness, Kurdish generosity, and a uniquely Kurdish sense of honor have prevailed. And lives are changed.

The world takes note: Kurdistan is recreating itself around the world—in London and in Berlin, in Geneva and in Istanbul.

This magnificent Kurdish spirit, this largeness of heart and tenderness of soul, is not just the stuff of quickly forgotten tales. It is instead a reason to hope. It is a message to the world. There are a people on the rise. They are the glorious Kurds. They have suffered. They have been tested. They have risen

from ashes to offer their valiant spirit to the world. We can hope with them that not only the Middle East, that not only the broader world, but that one day a Kurdish homeland will be filled with their sense of honor, their gift for hos-

pitality, and their divine grace of compassion. Thank God for the Kurds. Thank God for the presence of Kurdistan among us. May their spirit continue to rise and ennoble us all. ●

Surprisingly, though, the Kurdish people of the world—after all they have endured—are devoted to being among the most richly hospitable people on earth.



Photo: Safin Hamid



Heart and Reason Choosing to Live in Kurdistan

BENOIT DREVET *French freelance journalist covering Iraq and the Middle East.*



For me, a 32-year-old French, born and raised in Lyon, experiencing Kurdistan was like opening a gift package after having tried for a long time to analyze its contents through its wrapping paper. As a French journalist based in Erbil, I am the correspondent in Iraq for the French media outlets Radio France and La Croix and for Swiss radio. I chose Erbil rather than Baghdad and will explain why. From my point of view, I made the right choice.

I first thought of moving to Erbil in 2014. As a now 32-year-old French journalist passionate about the Middle East, the city was then a stronghold for journalists following the war against ISIS and particularly the battle of Mosul. Life intervened, but finally I set foot here for the first time at the end of September 2021.

Working with the French Center for Research on Iraq (CFRI), of which I am now the communications manager, we were organizing a conference. My first surprise was seeing so many Kurdish flags and an almost total absence of Iraqi flags, which are systematically accompanied by Kurdish colors when they do appear.

Here, there was no need for an Iraqi visa – instead, a visa for the autonomous region was available at Erbil International Airport. I quickly realized that it was a quasi-state. Borders, regional government, local police, locally financed *peshmerga* fighters, and of course different Kurdish dialects overshadowed the Iraqi Arabic in the street. Even the phone plans are local and designed for the region. I thought I was setting foot in Iraq but felt like I was arriving in a country that is literally nowhere to be found on any of the world's maps.

A sometimes-hard-but-fascinating multimillennial history

Fast forward to May 2022, and I am back in the Kurdistan

Region for the CFRI. We are organizing a youth camp to build social cohesion and coexistence in the mountains near the village of Barzan, a two-hour drive north of Erbil. The landscapes are majestic. I feel like I am in the Provencal Alps in the south of France.

It is the historical land of the Barzani, the family that occupies a central place in the Kurdistan Regional Government of today. It is also where a dark story occurred: the genocide of 8,000 Barzanis by the Iraqi state in the 1980s, a tragedy that resembles so many others experienced by the Kurds since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. I see that the Kurdistan Region appears on the right track of development and relative stability compared to the Middle East and Iraq.

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My dream is to become a journalist in the Middle East, and my choice is made: I will start in Kurdistan

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My dream is to become a journalist in the Middle East, and my choice is made: I will start in Kurdistan. There, I find a comfort of life that is much closer to the expectations of the average European because the city is dotted with modern residences and buildings.

Although Erbil has lost its historical charm, its multi-millennial history is visible in the heart of the region's economic and political capital, with the city built around its great citadel (Qalat), which is said to have been continuously inhabited for longer than anywhere in the world.

This city, spreading out across an arid plain, is teeming with

life and represents a strategic crossroads for any journalist interested in northern Mesopotamia. It is near Mosul, its heritage and culture under reconstruction; Kirkuk, a land of oil disputed between Baghdad and Kurdistan; Sinjar, the land of the Yezidis on the road to Rojava, the Syrian-Kurdish region; Turkey to the north; and Iran and Syria to the east.

Erbil is at the crossroads of the large Kurdish region divided between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Fatally, this region is replete with interesting journalistic subjects, and so many great peoples and empires have passed through here. Erbil occupies a strategic place in the diplomacy of the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Turkey, Iran, Germany and France for good reason.

The choice of security

I quickly realize that Erbil is the real refuge for non-government organizations (NGOs) in the region. The city is full of foreigners, especially in the Christian part of Ankawa (Erbil), and it is perfectly safe to walk around at night. Petty and medium crime is invisible.

In the tourist areas, most of the hotels, cafes, restaurants, and bars (yes, in Erbil, you can easily find them) have nothing to envy France. The teahouses, bazaars, and minarets reflect the special Middle Eastern atmosphere in which one quickly feels at home.

When my family or friends were worried about me going to Iraq, I was quick to point out that Kurdistan was not quite Iraq in terms of lifestyle and feel. Of course, there are conflicts in the region, but they are focused on specific places and groups, so that they go unnoticed to those uninterested.

While I am not naive to the omnipresent surveillance and to having a private life that is notoriously more controlled than in my home country of France, I also recognize that the roots of chaos arrive faster than we can foresee without this control.

In my job, I have yet to witness any type of abuse; at most, I have experienced reinforced security measures in trying to access certain sensitive subjects. It is sometimes frustrating, but I can work freely without feeling unsafe.

The culture of hospitality and mutual support

As far as culture is concerned, it is both related to and different from that of the Arabs, Persians, and Turks. There is not one language but many dialects from Sorani to Badini (Kurmandji), which makes the task of learning the local language more complex, but a foreigner can also get by easily in Erbil speaking English. Arabic, however, remains a must-have.

This society loves music and dance, which incorporates Arabic, Persian, and Turkish influences but also has its own Kurdish codes. Its minority components – notably Arab, Christian, and Yezidi but also Kurdish-Iranian and Kurdish-Turkish – allow it to be enriched by different Middle Eastern cultures.

Finally, I would like to end on the warm welcome that I have received from the region's inhabitants, which is incomparable. Here, people live for each other, and mutual aid is a sacred value. Can one imagine strangers inviting you to a restaurant and not wanting to let you pay the bill in France? Here, this is common.

Networking, an essential component for journalism, is, therefore, a blessing. The goodness of the people matches the beautiful landscapes seen on the horizon of Kurdistan's mountains.

I know that the Kurdistan Region is unfinished surprising me in the good sense of the word. I plan to settle here for a while and who knows: perhaps we - you the good reader and I – might have the opportunity to meet, exchange experiences and impressions, and share a good tea or a delicious Shawarma. ●





Connecting Kurdistan

120-meter Ring Road

- The 120-meter ring road, which encircles Erbil, is one of the Kurdistan Regional Government's key strategic projects.
- The 37-kilometer-long ring road project cost USD 440 million.
- The project was built in phases, with the last part completed in December 2019.
- With no traffic lights and a speed restriction of 110 kilometres per hour, cars can complete a loop of the 37-kilometre ring road in about 20 minutes.

150-meter Ring Road

- The 150-meter ring road project is a 70-kilometre-long highway that encircles Erbil.
- The project seeks to assist commuters from Erbil's suburbs and surrounding towns to avoid traffic congestion in the city center.
- Erbil is already circled by five ring roads -the 30-meter, 40-meter, 60-meter, 100-meter, and 120-meter ring roads - with this project being the last.
- The 150-meter ring road is being built by Hemn Group, a major local construction company, with about 2,000 employees.
- The total cost is USD 700 million, and construction will take place in stages.
- The project includes eight overpasses, seven underpasses, and five car lanes on either side, which will be connected to a service road.
- With its addition to Erbil's concentric circle road network, the city would continue to live up to its spider city nickname, as seen from above. ●

A bird-eye view of the 150-Meter Ring Road in Erbil



Beautiful History of Religious Freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

NADINE MAENZA

President of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Secretariat.



Photo: Safin Hamid

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The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has a long and beautiful history of pluralism, making it a bright spot for religious coexistence among countries that have some of the worst religious freedom in the world

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As religious freedom continues to deteriorate around the world and geopolitical trends change, it has never been more important for international partners to support the KRG so that it can remain a refuge for religious and ethnic minorities and all who seek peace and security

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In addition to its stunning mountains and landscapes, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has a long and beautiful history of pluralism, making it a bright spot for religious coexistence among countries that have some of the worst religious freedom in the world.

Even as Iraq’s religious and ethnic minority populations have declined as they struggled with growing sectarianism, the people of the KRI have instead sought to cultivate a flourishing society with a mosaic of religious communities including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Yezidis, Zoroastrians, Baha’is, Sabeen Mandaean, Kaka’is, and others.

Many of the region’s most ancient communities, including the Yezidis, the Syriac-Assyrian-Chaldean Christians, the Kaka’is, and others can trace their roots in these lands back centuries and in some cases millennia. Considering the intense hardships that they have faced in recent decades, for many it is within the KRI where a remnant of these communities lies.

Protecting religious minorities

Instead, it is important that we also highlight and support communities with surprisingly positive contributions – like Taiwan, Northeast Syria, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq – so they can continue to be safe places for religious minorities and all who want to live in peace. The societies that they have created benefit all who are seeking stability in these otherwise tumultuous regions. They deserve widespread international support and honest encouragement to continue their efforts.

The area under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is in stark contrast to the countries it borders – Iran, Turkey, and Syria – especially in its support of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

For instance, the Baha’i community traces its history in the

KRI back 170 years. While Baha’is are illegal in the rest of Iraq and terribly persecuted in neighboring Iran, the KRG has openly supported them and protected their right to gather, worship, and participate in society.

USCIRF reported that the region “continued to be a crucial safe destination for Iraqis displaced from elsewhere in the country, and the KRG’s extension of greater municipal representation for religious and ethnic components is commendable.” It also applauded KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani’s October 2021 declaration to make Ankawa, a Christian area in Erbil, a district allowing largely Syriac-Assyrian-Chaldean residents the ability to oversee their local affairs.

Concrete actions

When ISIS swept through Iraq and Syria in 2014, the KRI was able to protect its borders while generously accepting over 2 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing both the Syrian Civil War and the ISIS’s genocidal campaign primarily targeting Yezidis, Syriac-Assyrian-Chaldean Christians, Shia’s, and other religious and ethnic minorities with horrific atrocities.

The massive influx of people desperate for safety boosted the KRI’s population by one-third and was a heavy burden economically. Even now, the region continues to host approximately one million refugees and IDPs, including over 175,000 still living in camps eight years after fleeing ISIS.

With the United Nations set to pull out of Iraq to focus on Ukraine and other newer war-torn areas, the KRG will need the support of the international community. Only then can we ensure that Yezidis, Syriac-Assyrian-Chaldeans, and others still displaced can fully recover from the genocide and either return to their homes or resettling in the KRI or abroad if returning is not a safe or viable option.

Fortunately, I have been able to visit the KRI fre-

quently over the years and have developed great friendships with those from various religious and ethnic communities. I understand the difficulties that can arise in this complicated region and appreciate the open door to government officials to share and dialogue about potential solutions. It is vital that the needs and concerns of these communities continue to be shared honestly and that concrete actions are taken by both government and civil society actors to address these concerns.

In February, I had the honor of moderating a Religious Freedom Roundtable

at the Erbil Forum 2023 co-hosted by the IRF Secretariat, Rudaw Research, and the Seed Foundation. It was encouraging to see Muslim leaders from both the Sunni and Shia tradition, as well as Yezidi, Syriac, Assyrian, and Chaldean Christian leaders, as well as others, engage in robust dialogue about issues of common concern.

The KRG has been proactive in seeking to develop religious literacy, expand education, and nurture multi-faith dialogue to bolster their pluralistic society. Civil society organizations play a vital role in advancing the rights of all

their diverse communities, including through a regular IRF roundtable, and in connecting to the global network of roundtables and other national and international partners.

As religious freedom continues to deteriorate around the world and geopolitical trends change, it has never been more important for international partners to support the KRG so that it can remain a refuge for religious and ethnic minorities and all who seek peace and security. ●



Assyrians celebrating the Akitu spring festival in the Kurdistan Region.



Kurdistan Region Welcomes Chaldean Church Leader

WLADIMIR VAN WILGENBURG, *Dutch journalist and analyst based in Kurdistan.*



“the decision of the Iraqi president was wrong and not legal”.

Patriarch Louis Sako



President Masoud Barzani receiving a group of Christian leaders in Erbil.

On July 21, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani warmly welcomed the Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael Sako to Erbil, “the capital of peaceful coexistence for all religions.”

“The Kurdistan Region and the alchemy of coexistence that thrives here are sources of pride to us all. We condemn the treatment directed towards the Patriarch,” PM Masrour Barzani tweeted.

On July 12, Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked Decree 147, an executive order issued by former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani in 2013 that had recognized the appointment of Cardi-

nal Sako as the head (patriarch) of the Chaldean Catholic Church, arguing that the appointment was unconstitutional.

“This decree was issued by the former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani in 2013 after the election of his beatitude the Patriarch,” Ano Jawhar Abdoka, KRG Minister of Transportation and Communications and Representative of Christians told online new platform *White House in Arabic*.

“This decision taken by the Iraqi president will weaken the legal status of the patriarch, especially upon the Chaldean church properties, and threaten the patriarch’s status in the Iraqi communi-

ty. These decrees were issued since the time of the Abbasid Caliphate, the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of Iraq, and the Iraqi Republic in 1958 and until the present.”

Following his arrival in Erbil in late July, the Chaldean Patriarch met with several senior Kurdish leaders, including KRG President Nechirvan Barzani and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) President Masoud Barzani, who expressed hope that the decision would be revoked and justice would prevail.

Amir Othman, Director of Religious Coexistence Section at the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that

“the patriarch views the Kurdistan Region as the only place in Iraq that would safeguard Christians and their dignity.”

“The Christians consider the Kurdistan Region a secure haven amidst the political and religious conflicts entangling Iraq, prompting them to choose to relocate there. We, in the Kurdistan Region, promote peaceful coexistence and wish for it to be a haven for every individual, irrespective of their religion.” During the meeting with President Masoud Barzani, Patriarch Louis Sako expressed gratitude for the respect and appreciation shown by the Kurdistan Region towards religious figures of different faiths and expressed his appreciation for the culture of coexistence in Kurdistan.

Patriarch Louis Sako criticized the decision by Iraqi President Rashid “as a wrong and dangerous decision that harmed Christians and contradicted the principles of coexistence and reconciliation.”

Michael Knights, fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policies (WINEP), told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that Kurdistan has since 1992 been a haven for those fleeing repression in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. “Kurdish people are famous for their hosting of refugees and now we see the most senior Christian religious figure among them.”

“Kurdistan is only a haven if Kurdish courts and security forces can protect the refugees from being seized and taken to Iraq or other countries. Exiles like Patriarch Sakho have put their full trust in the hospitality and protection of Iraqi Kurds,” Knights added.

The Christian community in Iraq has experienced a drastic decline in numbers, plummeting from 1.5 million before 2003 to a mere 150,000 in 2023, predominantly concentrated in the Kurdistan Region.

Patriarch Sako told *Kurdistan Chroni-*

cle in an interview after a very busy Sunday Mass in a Church in Ankawa that the decision of the Iraqi president “was wrong” and not “legal”.

“He not only offended the Chaldean community, but all Christians. This is a kind of persecution.”

Churchgoers in Ankawa warmly welcomed the Cardinal Sako, hugging and kissing him. “Here (in Erbil) people are very nice around me, they are around me, celebrating the mass. The church is full. They are very concerned about this decision and are showing me their support,” Sako said.

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Following his arrival in Erbil in late July, the Chaldean Patriarch met with several senior Kurdish leaders, including KRG President Nechirvan Barzani and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) President Masoud Barzani

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Sako also said that he was warmly welcomed by officials of the Kurdistan government, such as the head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Masoud Barzani, president Nechirvan Barzani, PM Masrour Barzani, and other ministers. “They showed me their support and solidarity.

The Chaldean Patriarch called on the international community to push the Iraqi government “to renew my decree.”

On July 18 U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller also expressed his worries about the harassment of Cardinal Sako. “We look forward to his safe return,” he said.

“We are concerned that the cardinal’s position as a respected leader of the church is under attack from a number of quarters, in particular a militia leader who is sanctioned under the Global Magnitsky Act,” he said in reference to Rayan al-Kildani, the leader of a Christian Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) faction called the Babylon Movement, which was sanctioned by the U.S. government in 2019.

“We have engaged directly with the Iraqi Government to make our concerns clear,” he added.

Rayan al-Kildani, the head of the Babylon Movement and the Iran-backed Babylon Brigades armed group has been attempting to become a leader of the Christians in Iraq. He currently controls four of the five seats reserved for Christian MPs in the Iraqi Parliament after the most recent elections. He has also extended his influence and control in the Nineveh Plains, causing distress among Christians and leading to protests. He hopes to further expand his reach into the Christian communities in the Kurdistan Region.

Cardinal Sako has consistently voiced his strong disapproval of Rayan al-Kildani, alleging him to be appropriating assets belonging to the Chaldean Church and confiscating land of Christians in the Nineveh Plains, while failing to genuinely represent the Christian community. There are indications that the Iraqi President’s choice might have been influenced by al-Kildani’s influence.

Cardinal Sako told *Kurdistan Chronicle* it is clear al-Kildani is behind the Iraqi President’s decision, with the goal “to silence me and also to put the hand on the properties of Christians.”

In May, eleven European countries and



PM Masrour Barzani affirmed their support for Cardinal Sako, after he faced such attacks. Therefore, the removal of his position by the Iraqi President was viewed as a move influenced by al-Kildani.

However, the Office of the President of Iraq defended its decision and refused to revoke the decision, arguing this would be unconstitutional, and summoned the U.S. Ambassador in Baghdad.

“The Iraqi Government’s actions against Cardinal Louis Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, sends a dangerous message about the status of Christians and other religious communities in Iraq,” Nadine Maenza, the President of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Secretariat, told *Kurdistan Chronicle*, who recently met Sako in Erbil.

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The Christians consider the Kurdistan Region a secure haven amidst the political and religious conflicts entangling Iraq

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“President Rashid should immediately reinstate Decree 147 and make it clear that all religious communities are welcome and have equal standing in the country.”

She also added that it is encouraging to see that the KRG welcomed “Cardinal Sako to Erbil and offers him support and refuge.”

“If the Patriarch chooses to continue living in Kurdistan, he has every right to do so, and we will provide our full support. The Kurdistan Region is a constitutional part of Iraq, and our policies aim to ensure a secure environment for all individuals seeking to work freely here,” KRG official Amir Othman added. “We hold no conflict with any group in Iraq and strive for enduring peaceful coexistence in our communities.”

In an open letter, Cardinal Sako has vowed to stay in Erbil until the end of Iraqi President Rashid’s term in October 2026. ●



The Status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region

ARCHBISHOP BASHAR M. WARDA, *Chaldean Catholic cleric and the current Archbishop of Erbil.*



A commentary on the status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq must begin with a recognition that much of the historical Christian lands in northern Iraq continue to exist in a disputed status, the sovereignty of which remains undetermined between the central Iraqi Government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil.

In particular, the Christian towns and lands of the Nineveh Plain remain highly problematic. The ongoing lack of resolution on this matter colors all discussion for the Christians in northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, and the many areas of concern stemming from it cannot be minimized. Overall, the issue of security, especially in the Nineveh Plain, remains a fundamental concern for Christians.

A center for Christianity in Iraq

Nevertheless, certain conclusions can be drawn from the recent experience of the Christians living in the undisputed areas of the Kurdistan Region, primarily in the greater Erbil region. This population at present includes not only the indigenous (pre-2014) residents, but also the internally displaced persons (IDP) Christians of Nineveh, who fled to the safety of the Kurdistan Region after the ISIS attacks of 2014. Altogether, this represents well more than 150,000 Christians, making it the single largest center of Christianity remaining in greater Iraq.

Important to note here is the willingness of the KRG leadership to consistently engage in acts of public solidarity with the Christian population. These examples of tolerance and respect are of great significance. Moreover, especially in the aftermath of the ISIS war, continued vigilance and leadership must be shown at all levels of government to ensure that hateful ideologies are not allowed any space to take root. The Christians in the Kurdistan Region will continue to look closely for unwavering support in this area.

From faith comes service

Fundamentally, the future of Christians in the Kurdistan Region rests on the freedom to practice their faith. Here, we must acknowledge that the KRG has protected the freedom for communities to practice and live their faith openly. Since the crisis in 2014, new churches, schools and health clinics have opened, and a new university was established, the Catholic University in Erbil. At the same time, the KRG allowed Christians to administer and manage the humanitarian needs of their displaced families in various sites throughout the greater Erbil region and provided land and security to support the efforts of the Church. In all these cases, the KRG



Important to note here is the willingness of the KRG leadership to consistently engage in acts of public solidarity with the Christian population



has allowed for the building and operation to take place in a manner that respects and supports Christian traditions and beliefs.

This ability to practice one's faith in real terms is of critical importance if Christianity is to have a meaningful future in the Kurdistan Region and greater Iraq. In stating this, we refer to the historical role of Christians as peacebuilders, especially in the field of education and health care. These roles are fundamental to Christian identity worldwide, and nowhere more so than in Kurdistan. The value of these Christian roles to the greater community, including all other faiths, is well established.



“The KRG allowed Christians to administer and manage the humanitarian needs of their displaced families in various sites throughout the greater Erbil region and provided land and security to support the efforts of the Church”



However, the ability to provide this critical role, as peacebuilders, educators and health care professionals, is for Christians ultimately based upon the ability to live out their faith. For it is from their faith that their service-based view of the world originates. Thus, without freedom to practice their faith, Christians are essentially denied the ability to live out their lives of service to others.

The future of Christians in the Kurdistan Region

Assuming the greater community of the Kurdistan Region values these contributions, as we hope and believe they do, how can we gauge the potential future for the Christians now living there?

Key to the ongoing viability of any community is economic stability. Can people find jobs? Can they support their families? In this, it is important to understand that the Christian communities of the greater Erbil region have been accepting IDPs not merely since 2014, but for much of the prior decade, as many Christians were forced to leave the persecution that had become so widespread in southern Iraq. Indeed, as of 2010, over 3,000 displaced Christian families in Erbil had already been forced to flee violence elsewhere in Iraq.

Since 2014, the number of Christian IDP families in Erbil has increased by more than 10,000 additional families. As we look to the coming year, these numbers remain fluid, with many seeking to return to their former homes in the Nineveh Plain. Yet a significant number of these families may choose to stay in the greater Erbil region for the foreseeable future.

Whether they ultimately choose to stay in the Kurdistan Region or join the diaspora of Iraqi Christians across the world will largely depend upon the region's economic prospects. This in turn will depend upon the leadership shown by both the public and private sectors in providing opportunity and access for all segments of the population, including Christians.

Culture and education

Another key factor in determining the future of Christians will be the quality of education that can be provided to the young generations. In this, we hope that the Christians will play an important role in the reforms that must take place in the field of higher education if the Kurdistan Region and Iraq are to take their proper places in the modern world. The holdover paradigms from the centrally controlled educational system of former governments must be

replaced by a new era of flexibility and internationally competitive excellence in education. While this is a matter of great concern for Christians, it no doubt speaks to the concerns of all in the Kurdistan Region.

In closing, we remind the world that the Christians of northern Iraq have lived here for nearly two thousand years. These are ancient people with a unique and important culture, who pray that they will be able to stay in their historic homeland, recover from a long history of persecution, and live in peace with their neighbors. After this painful and violent history, the future for Christians in Iraq today rests not so much on the actions that they might take, but by in power in Baghdad and Erbil and outside powers whose foreign policy decisions have so often ignored the consequences for Christians and other threatened minorities.

In these times, Christians stand ready to participate as full citizens with equal rights in a proper sovereign government legitimately chosen by the people, in which valid measures of local autonomy are sufficient to ensure that the historical demography and cultures of the region are protected. ●





QASSIM KHIDHIR, *Kurdish journalist and media developer.*

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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... since 1990
Works as GP in London
On 13 July 2019 cycled 5500km
from London to Erbil, arrived on
17 July 2019



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 of-

ficial 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 educational 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 Uzear 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. ●



Raban Boya One Shrine, Two Faiths

Kurdistan Chronicle

In the heart of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where the winds whisper stories of a vibrant past, there lies an extraordinary monument to religious coexistence that transcends borders, cultures, and faiths. This remarkable narrative unfolds at the foot of Mount Safin in a valley overlooking the Shaqlawa district. Here, Muslims and Christians come together to worship at a sacred shrine, known as Sheikh Wso Rahman to the former and Raban Boya to the latter.

A history of religious coexistence is a point of pride for the people of the KRI, but the story of Raban Boya offers a rare glimpse into a harmony that is unmatched elsewhere in the world. In a cave hewn at an elevation of 1,070 meters in the mountains, this shrine serves as a sanctuary for the two religious communities. It was officially recognized as a historical site in 1945, and a road leading to the shrine was constructed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2005. Today, this hallowed place sees Christians and Muslims alike gather for

prayer and pilgrimage, with a surge in Christian visitors occurring two weeks after Easter.

Centuries of shared experiences

Sbi Matthew Khorani, the president of the Shaqlawa Christian Youth Development Organization, sheds light on the rich history of Christianity in the district. With around 170 Christian families residing in the area – most of them Chaldeans – the roots of Christianity here date back several centuries before the advent of Islam. Raban Boya, located at the foot of Mount Safin, has been a sacred site since the early Christian era. A testament to this enduring history is the presence of an ancient church and cemetery in close proximity to the shrine, underscoring the shared history of Shaqlawa’s diverse inhabitants.

Sbi Matthew elaborates on Raban Boya’s significance: “In our country, they call him Raben Biya, but his name is known as Raban Boya among the people. Mar Qardag, the chief of Deir in the book *Shahda al-Sharq*,

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Women seeking the blessing of children, come to this stone within the cave, believing that God would grant their requests

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A breathtaking view encompassing Raban Boya on Mount Safin, with Shaqlawa in the picturesque background

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

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In 1987, a tragic incident orchestrated by the Baathist regime claimed the lives of 23 individuals in Shaqlawa, where Christians and Muslim Kurds perished together

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Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

A warm welcome awaits at the entrance of Raban Boya

called him Raban Beri. He was a Christian who lived and worshipped there, eventually dying and being buried within the cave. According to local beliefs, those seeking miracles, especially women seeking the blessing of children, come to this stone within the cave, believing that God would grant their requests.”

One of the most awe-inspiring aspects of this coexistence is the annual visitation by Christians from all over Iraq, and in recent years, even from other countries. They gather to worship and connect with their faith, side by side with their Muslim friends, who refer to the shrine as Sheikh Wso Rahman. The mutual respect, the shared sacred space, and the ability to pray together make this coexistence in Shaqlawa a unique and beautiful example for the world to behold.

Mullah Sami Mohammed, the preacher of the mosque in the Betrama neighborhood of Shaqlawa, emphasizes the profound respect and acceptance that underpin this coexistence. In Islam, living harmoniously with Christians is not just normal but deeply cherished. Residents of Shaqlawa seamlessly blend their lives, transcending religious boundaries, and living in such harmony that one’s religion often remains unknown to neighbors. This is a testament to the strength of the bonds forged through centuries of shared experiences. “Muslims visit this shrine, especially those who seek miracles, like those who desire children,” Mullah Sami explained. “Historical sources reveal that a Muslim named Sheikh Wso Abdul Rahman lived and worshipped there for many years. This valley and shrine have become a holy place for Muslims as well.”

Shaped by tolerance

The beauty of this coexistence in Shaqlawa is not limited to shared worship; it extends to the realm of the departed. Muslims and Christians share a common cemetery, underscoring the deep bonds that have united them for generations.

Shaqlawa, a district that belongs to Erbil province and is in the northeastern part of Erbil, is home to a population

of 26,261 people. This multicultural community, which once also included Jews, maintains a tradition of peaceful coexistence and acceptance that spans generations.

Mullah Sami shares a poignant tradition that epitomizes this profound coexistence – the recitation of the Quran during Christian funerals. In the face of grief, the religious boundaries blur, and a beautiful unity is forged. He says, “There is no fixed time for Muslims to visit the shrine. They can visit it whenever they want. We have often gone there together with the priest, and each of us has prayed in our own religion.”

In the eyes of Mullah Sami, this harmonious coexistence aligns with the beautiful message of the Prophet Mohammed, which calls for the protection and respect of the People of the Book, reinforcing the need for understanding and acceptance. “I pray that this coexistence continues to thrive, becoming even more beautiful,” he adds. “I am thankful to the KRG and its President Nechirvan Barzani for their attention to this sacred coexistence, and I hope that Shaqlawa can be recognized as a symbol of unity in the region.”

Mayor of Shaqlawa Karwan Karim Khan emphasized the history of tolerance that has shaped the very essence of the city. Shaqlawa has a rich and diverse history, where individuals from various backgrounds have grown up side by side, often without even knowing the faith of their playmates. This culture of coexistence has become deeply ingrained in the minds of the Kurdish people and forms the foundation of political culture in the KRI.

This culture of tolerance finds its historical roots in the late 19th century, a time when visionary thinkers like Sheikh Abdulsalam Barzani and Mar Shamoun emerged. Sheikh Abdulsalam Barzani (1887 - 1914), a prominent leader of one of the initial Kurdish uprisings against the Ottomans in present-day Iraqi Kurdistan, shared a deep friendship with Mar Shamoun, the leader of Kurdistan's Christian community. Mar Shamoun was affectionately known as "Sheikh al-Nasara" by the Christian population. These concepts find resonance in the sentiments of mystics

and poets such as Safi Hirani, who professed unwavering allegiance to the church through his poetic expressions.

Even in the face of mortality, the threads of harmony and unity persistently endure. In 1987, a tragic incident orchestrated by the Baathist regime claimed the lives of 23 individuals in Shaqlawa, where Christians and Muslim Kurds perished together. Remarkably, Christian remains were interred in Muslim cemeteries, in observance of Islamic traditions, reaffirming the bonds of coexistence even in death

Unity in diversity

This rich tapestry of coexistence forms an integral part of the Kurdish identity, with a deep-seated commitment to peaceful and civilized living. The Kurds, having experienced discrimination and forced assimilation, now seek independence and autonomy. Christians, too, have shown unwavering support for the Kurdish independence movement, signing covenants of brotherhood and freedom with their Kurdish brethren. The cultural heritage of coexistence is a precious asset that both communities in Shaqlawa seek to protect and preserve. The local government aims to create an environment where Kurds and Chaldeans can together reap the benefits of this unique harmony, thereby contributing to the economic well-being of the city.

In a world often marred by religious strife, the story of Raban Boya in Shaqlawa stands as a beacon of hope, a symbol of unity that transcends boundaries and faiths.

With shared cemeteries, a history of common rituals in times of sorrow, and the deep-rooted bonds of brotherhood and unity, Shaqlawa embodies a beautiful example of interfaith harmony. As we listen to the stories whispered by the winds in this serene valley, we can only hope that the beautiful coexistence in Shaqlawa continues to flourish, a true example of unity in diversity. And, as Mullah Sami Mohammed aptly wished, may Shaqlawa serve as the capital of coexistence in the KRI and a shining beacon for the world to follow. ●



Kakai People Hidden Practices and Struggle for Recognition

OMAR AZIZ, *Photographer and journalist from Halabja.*



This story delves into the captivating narrative of the Kakai Kurds, also known as Kakais or Ahl-e Haqq. As a religious minority residing predominantly in the Kurdistan regions of Iraq and Iran, they uphold a unique and ancient belief system that intricately weaves together components of Islam, Zoroastrianism, and ancient Mesopotamian traditions. Renowned for their syncretic faith, the Kakais embrace mystical practices and engage in spiritual rituals that are shrouded in secrecy, offering a glimpse into their enigmatic and deeply rooted cultural heritage.

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During the ceremony, the Kakais visit sacred sites and shrines in addition to exchanging dairy products and livestock. Families also practice reconciliation and exchange visits, as well as provide grain, wheat, and food for birds and animals

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Rangin Marf, 45, looks more stylish in her Kurdish outfit and a cap. With a soft smile, she talks about the pot of yogurt in front of her, which she had brought to the Masti Qalati (the Castle of Yogurt) ceremony in Hawar village.

The Masti Qalati ceremony, also known as the Giving Day

ceremony, is a significant occasion for the Kakai religious community. Held annually in May, it has religious and social significance for the Kakais who live in the Hawraman Lhon region, specifically in the villages of Hawar, Hawarakon, and Daratwe in Halabja province.

"Masti Qalati (Giving Day) is a special and important occasion for us Kakais, so we prepare ourselves in the most beautiful way," says Rangin.

As members of the syncretic religion, Kakais are also known as Ahl-e Haqq or People of the Truth, found in Kirkuk, Halabja, Nineveh, and Iranian Kurdistan. The Qalate ritual, so named because it takes place in the Qalate area overlooking the shrine of Mir Askandar, a respected Kakai religious figure from the past, entails a meeting of Kakai people who bring milk and other crops for contribution. As a result, it's known as the Castle of Yogurt.

During the ceremony, the Kakais visit sacred sites and shrines in addition to exchanging dairy products and livestock. Families also practice reconciliation and exchange visits, as well as provide grain, wheat, and food for birds and animals.

Rangin notes that the ceremony used to be held exclusively in Qalate due to the small number of Kakai households in the three villages. However, with the increase in the Kakai population, the ceremony now is held in Hawar village as it attracts Kakais from Halabja and other cities, as well as some Muslims.

Concealed practices

Apart from Masti Qalate, the Kakais have other religious ceremonies, although they are not openly celebrated.

Ako Shaweis, a 53-year-old Kakai, reveals that religious events are held in hidden locations known as Jam Khana among the Kakai community. The reasoning behind this concealment



Photo: Omar Aziz

A Kurdish Kakai man in traditional attire.



A woman participating in the Kakai traditional festival

is that they believe religion is a private matter between individuals and their God that does not require public disclosure.

According to Ako, the Kakais believe that the more hidden and concealed the religious ceremonies are, the more acceptable they become, strengthening the relationship between individuals and their God.

The historical oppression faced by minorities justifies the Kakais' choice to keep their ceremonies secret. Ako highlights the importance of concealment in avoiding rivalry and probable persecution from the majority religion. As he puts it, "These rituals have always been kept secret, and Kakais have the right to do so because minorities have always been oppressed. To avoid such persecution, these rituals should be performed

in secret, as they are intended for God, not for humans."

Ako goes on to say that the Kakais are a marginalized group in their own country. "In this country, the Kakais are an oppressed class. This, I believe, is in part due to the Kakais' inability to communicate their demands to the government. At the same time, I believe the Shiites and Islamic groups have sought to avoid portraying the Kakais as a distinct branch of Islam."

Although there are no accurate statistics on the Kakai population, the head of the Mithra Organization for the Development and Culture of Yarsani Kakais estimates that there are 120,000 Kakais living in Iraq and the Kurdistan region. Even though the Kakais are Kurdish, it is noteworthy that 70% of them reside outside the administration of the Kur-

istan Regional Government.

Rajab Asi, also known as Rajab Kakai, the president of the Mithra Organization for Yarsani Development and Culture, states that Kakais have no barriers in practicing their beliefs in the disputed areas between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region. These locations include the Bainan villages in Nineveh province, the villages of Daquq in the south of Kirkuk province, and Khanaqin in the north of Diyala province.

Ongoing threats

Kakais are free to practice their faith within the confines of their homes. However, Rajab stated that extremist groups in the region continue to pose a threat to Kakais.

Rajab categorizes these radical orga-

nizations into two sorts. The first comprises of radical Salafi factions that despise the Kakais and reject anyone with opposing ideas. The second category comprises the Iraqi Shiite political parties, which Rajab considers to be more dangerous. They aggressively encourage Kakais to convert to Shiism and engage in confrontations with Kurds and Sunnis, even if they do not resort to physical violence. Rajab emphasizes that these Shiite political groupings endanger not just the Kakais but also Kurdish national security.

The threats towards Kakais escalated significantly after the Kurdish independence referendum in 2017. As a result, Kakais were forced to evacuate a village in Khanaqin and eleven villages in the western Daquq district of southern Kirkuk province. Rajab attributes these threats to political and security motives, citing the expansion of Shiite influence in these areas as a concern.

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The threats towards Kakais escalated significantly after the Kurdish independence referendum in 2017

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Rangin, a participant in the Masti Qalate ritual, emphasizes her strong desire for Kakais to be recognized as an independent religion in the Kurdistan Region and Iraqi constitutions.

"As Kakais, we wish that Kakais be recognized as an independent faith in the constitutions of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq; this is not only my wish but that of every Kakai," said Rangin. ●



A Kurdish Kakai man dressed in traditional attire.



Embracing Linguistic Diversity

Kurdistan Chronicle



Photo: Shaima Bayez

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq takes great pride in fostering a society where all religious and ethnic communities have the right to life without discrimination. Among the many factors contributing to this unique coexistence is the right to study in one's own language, a practice that has been widely embraced in the region. As a result, various communities, including the Turkmen and Syriac, cherish the opportunity to preserve their mother tongue and enrich the fabric of Kurdish education.

Sabah Salih, Head of Turkmen Education in the Ministry of Education of the Kurdistan Regional Government, highlighted the significance of education in the mother tongue, calling it a fundamental right outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

According to Salih, the first Turkmen school was established in 1993, following a decision made by then-President Ma-soud Barzani. This decision was an essential step towards providing Turkmen children with an education that honors their cultural identity. "We are very happy that our children are educated in their mother tongue and learn to decide freely and enthusiastically which language to study," Salih stated. He further emphasized that the curriculum in Turkmen schools is the same as the Kurdish curriculum, but thoughtfully translated into Turkish to ensure an inclusive learning experience.

Similarly, the Syriac community has been empowered by the Kurdistan Region's commitment to promoting its language and heritage. Sabah Anton, head of Syriac primary and secondary education in the Ministry of Education of the Kurd-

istan Regional Government, expressed gratitude for the exclusive Syriac education process offered in the region. "What has been done for us here has not been done for us in any other country in the region," Anton remarked.

He highlighted the significance of mother tongue education, stating, "Mother tongue is a legitimate right of every nation. We are happy that our children are studying in their mother tongue here. This is why the Syriac language remains alive as an ancient nation of the Kurdistan Region."

Ivan Jane, a father and head of the Assyrian Cultural Center in Diyana district, Erbil province, expressed immense joy that his children are educated in their mother tongue. "It is scientifically proven that children should learn in their mother tongue from childhood, so that they can comprehend as much information as possible," Jane stated.

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Mother tongue is a
legitimate right of every
nation
”

Reflecting on the past, he noted the oppressive practices imposed by previous Iraqi regimes, forcing the Syriac community to learn Arabic, which led to cultural disconnection. However, in the Kurdistan Region, Ivan Jane finds hope and inclusivity, stating, "What is happening in the Kurdistan Region is that we have no problems. We have never felt treated differently."

Multilingual education reinforces coexistence

The spirit of coexistence in the Kurdistan Region is celebrated as unparalleled, where children from different linguistic and religious backgrounds often study side by side. Sabah Anton

Educational institutions for Assyrian and Turkmen communities in Erbil



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

shares a heartening example, revealing how many Kurdish Muslim children in Ankawa also study in Syriac and fluently speak the language. "The history of this coexistence goes back thousands of years in the Kurdistan Region. This is a sign of mutual acceptance," Anton remarked. He further expressed appreciation for the KRG cabinet's respectful approach towards other ethnic groups and religions, fostering an environment of harmony and acceptance.

Kurdish nation in other parts of Greater Kurdistan, where speaking in the mother tongue has been met with great obstacles. In the Kurdistan Region, this right is not only valued but nurtured, creating an environment that honors and empowers other nations within its borders, granting them the precious gift of linguistic freedom and cultural preservation. ●

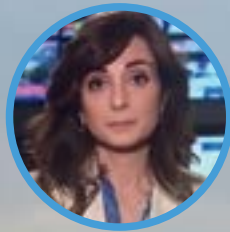
Education in the Kurdistan Region A Snapshot

- Total number of schools: 6,816
- Total number of students: 1,755,775
- Total number of teachers: 120,009
- Total number of employees: 36,310
- Number of Syriac schools: 25
- Number of Turkmen schools: 18
- Number of Arabic schools: 116
- Number of Kurdish schools: 6,629
- Number of students studying Syriac: 3,218
- Number of students studying Turkmen: 2,399
- Number of students studying Arabic: 35,061



Erbil Rich with History, Replete with Opportunity

TANYA GOUDSOUZIAN, *journalist, author and editor specializing in Afghanistan and Iraq affairs.*



“

Erbil is a wonderful *mélange* of the old and the new. Thousands of years going back to the fifth millennium BC, through the pre-Islamic era, and up to modern times reveals today’s Erbil as a city that does not bury its heritage but proudly displays it instead

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“Nobody knows much about the Kurds,” my editor had told me flippantly.

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I was among a few journalists who had managed to enter the country as the war approached. It wasn’t Baghdad, but it was a part of Iraq about which little news was being reported in the mainstream media, especially after the No-Fly Zone had been imposed following Saddam Hussein’s defeat in the 1991 Gulf War. The zone had permitted the establishment of the auton-

A Glimpse of Erbil from the Jalil Khayat mosque.

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

onomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), but it had also left the cities under its jurisdiction walled in and isolated from the world. My assignment was to gauge the mood among the Kurds in the run-up to the invasion.

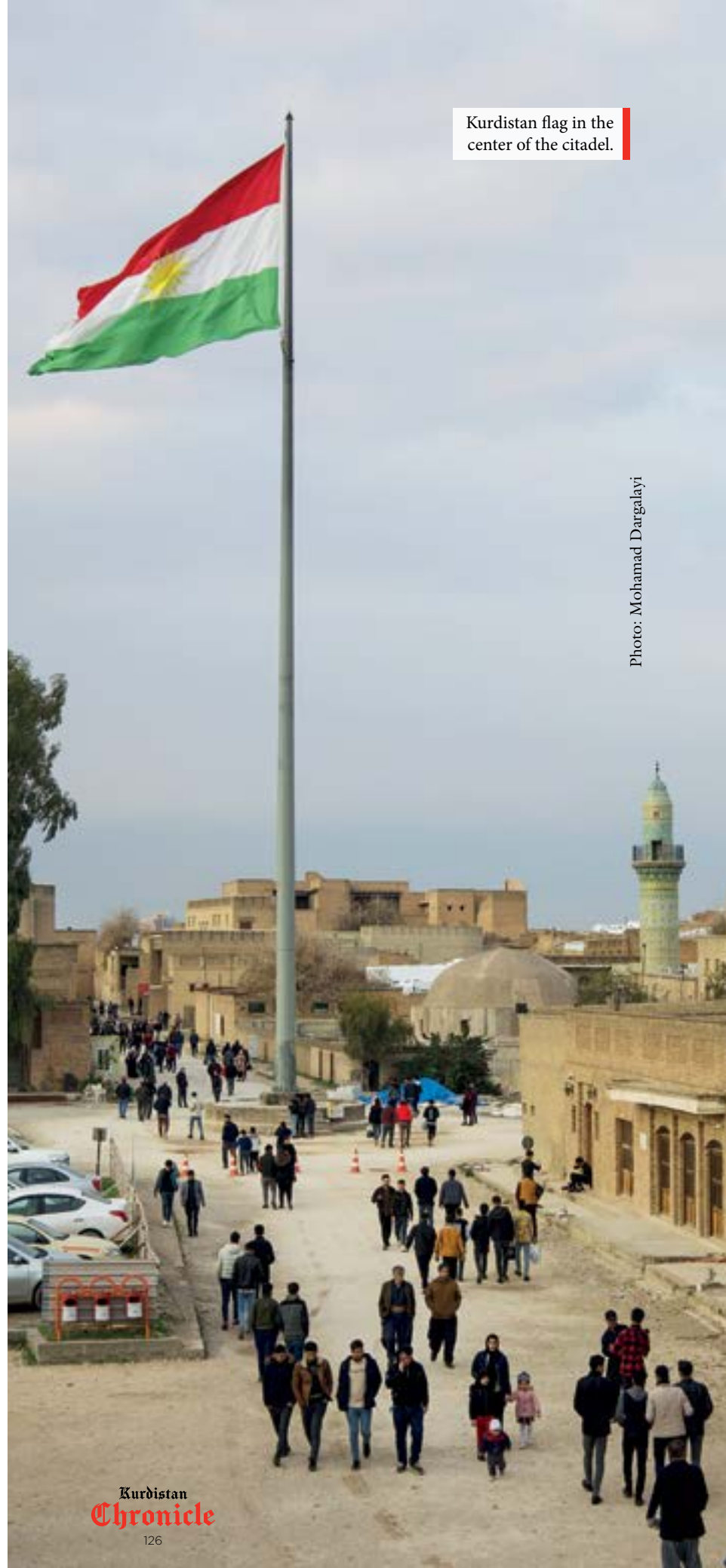
“Nobody knows much about the Kurds,” my editor had told me flip-pantly. “Let’s humanize them. Find out what they eat, whether they go to the cinema, what they think of the upcoming U.S. invasion,” he instructed.

I spoke to a cross section of Kurds, including shopkeepers in the bazaars, truck drivers, communists, former political prisoners, survivors of the 1988 Halabja chemical attack, *peshmerga* commanders, and civil society activists. The optimism was unanimous. The U.S. must invade, and Saddam Hussein must go, along with the crippling sanctions that had so cruelly impeded progress in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region. For the Kurds, the war represented hope for a temptingly better future.

Erbil, also called “Hawler” by the Kurds, is an ancient city with an estimated population of around 1,600,000. It had always been an important regional trade center, with roads to Turkey, Iran, and Syria. The famous Hamilton Road constructed under British rule in 1928-32 by Archibald M. Hamilton runs from Erbil through the mountains to the Iranian border.

I stayed at the Chwar Chra Hotel, which at the time was the hotel of choice for most foreign journalists, politicians, and aid workers. It provided good security, clean rooms, and fewer power cuts than elsewhere. Under Iraqi rule after World War I and during the Kurdish struggle against Saddam in the 1970s, Erbil’s infrastructure had largely been neglected. Even after the establishment of the KRG, Erbil continued to suffer economically due to the economic blockade imposed upon it by Saddam and to the UN sanctions against Iraq.

The Chwar Chra boasted a restaurant that served succulent local dishes but



Kurdistan flag in the center of the citadel.

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

was also a meeting place for the Who’s Who of Erbil. More importantly, the name of the establishment commemorated the short-lived ‘Mahabad’ Republic in Iranian Kurdistan, a tragic chapter of Kurdish history that offered foreigners a first glimpse into the Kurdish psyche. While Kurds looked to the future with hope, they would never forget the past.

In 1945, with backing from the Soviet Union, Kurdish politician and jurist Qazi Muhammed had founded the first ever independent Kurdish state in the city of Mahabad in Iran. Mustafa Barzani was appointed Minister of Defense and commander of the republic’s army. When Iranian forces engaged the forces of the Republic of Mahabad, Barzani quickly proved his reputation, as his forces inflicted defeats on the Iranian divisions and were one of the few who did not surrender or defect to the advancing Iranian forces.

However, less than a year later, in December 1946, Iranian forces invaded the city and hanged Qazi Muhammed and his colleagues in the now iconic Chwar Chra square. Barzani and his followers managed to evade capture by finding refuge first in Armenia, later in Azerbaijan. After spending periods of time across the Soviet Union, he returned to Iraq and engaged in numerous insurgencies against Baghdad.

At the time of my first visit to Erbil in January 2003, Barzani’s son Massoud was heading the Kurdistan Democratic Party that he had co-founded with Qazi Muhammed. I interviewed him then.

“We are not thinking of participating in the war because we are focusing on the day after the regime changes,” he told me. “For several reasons, it would be very difficult for us to take part in this war. We don’t intend to move our troops outside of Kurdish-ruled areas, and within this region, there are no targets for us to hit.”

By the time of my second visit to Erbil in the winter of 2005, Massoud Bar-

zani had been elected as the President of the Kurdistan Region and it was, as he put it, “the day after the regime change.” Saddam was gone, the Baath party was destroyed, and it was finally time to build. Fortunes flowed into the Kurdish region, mostly from the Gulf countries and Turkey. Kurdish-administered northern Iraq was a blank slate, and risk-taking entrepreneurs from around the world were parachuting in. Soon, there would be two new airports, several new housing projects, shopping malls, five-star hotels, and Western fast-food chains.

Today, the presidency of the Kurdistan Region is held by Mustafa’s grandson, Nechirvan Barzani, while Massoud’s son Masrour Barzani is Prime Minister. In a nod to cross-Kurdish alliance, Qubad Talabani from neighboring Sulimaniyah is Deputy Prime Minister.

Traveling to Erbil no longer entails crossing the Tigris by speedboat or long car drives, as Erbil International Airport is now on par with global standards, with a VIP lounge offering croissants, cappuccinos, and Levantine treats like manakish and lahmajoon.

With much of the construction nearly complete, Erbil now boasts a skyline fit for any self-respecting Gulf country. High-end housing complexes, sushi bars, franchise fast-food restaurants such as Hardee’s and KFC, and other shops are found throughout the city, as are international hotel chains such as Rotana and Divan (Marriott and Hilton are set to open in the near future as well). The favorite spots of European expats include a German beer garden and a restaurant in the hip section of Ainkawa.

But though Erbil residents look back with pride on their recent days of struggle and triumph, there is far more history in Erbil dating to the fifth millennium BC. At the heart of the city lies the ancient Citadel of Erbil and the Mudhafaria Minaret.

The earliest historical reference to the

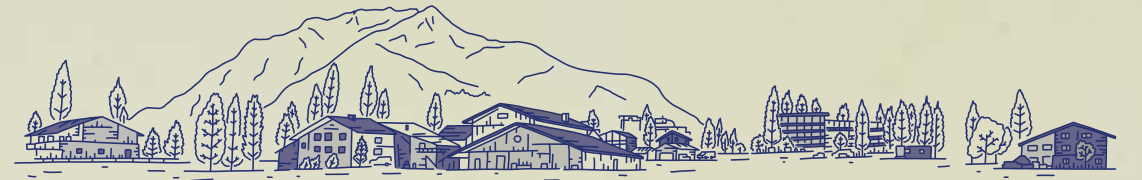
I was among a few journalists who had managed to enter the country as the war approached.

region dates to the Third Dynasty of Ur of Sumer, when King Shulgi mentioned the city of Urbilum. Over the millennia, Erbil has been ruled by such empires as the Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medians, and Achaemenids and then later by the Sassanid Persians, Greeks, Parthians, Arabs, and Ottomans.

In fact, Erbil was already an ancient city when in 331 BCE Alexander the Great defeated the Persian king Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela, also known as the Battle of Arbela (Erbil) in 331 BCE, ending the Achaemenid Empire and leading to the downfall of Darius.

Visitors to Erbil’s archeological museum will find a large collection of pre-Islamic artefacts, particularly the art of Mesopotamia. The city is also a center for archaeological projects in the area and was designated as Arab Tourism Capital 2014 by the Arab Council of Tourism. In July 2014, the Citadel of Erbil was inscribed as a World Heritage Site.

As cities go, Erbil is a wonderful mélange of the old and the new. Thousands of years going back to the fifth millennium BC, through the pre-Islamic era, and up to modern times reveals today’s Erbil as a city that does not bury its heritage but proudly displays it instead. It is rich with history, replete with opportunity, and ready to compete with other first-rate cities around the region. ●



IRAQ'S OIL HISTORY How Kurdistan Was Wronged?

expert in Petroleum and Biogeosciences **KAMAL KOLO**



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 Française des Pétroles (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. 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 explo-

ration in Kurdistan, even during periods of peace.

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

The current school of thought emphasizes 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 Kurd-

istan 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. ●



Wojtek

Heroic Kurdish Bear WWII's Paws of Valor

BAKER SHWANI, *Kurdish journalist, writer and translator based in Germany.*



In the annals of history, tales of courage and valor have often been woven around extraordinary men and women. Yet there are rare instances where an unexpected hero emerges from the most unlikely of places, and in the case of Wojtek the soldier bear, this hero hailed from the peaks of the rugged mountains of Kurdistan.

Born in 1942 amidst the turmoil of World War II, Wojtek's story transcends borders and speaks to the unbreakable bonds that can form between man and beast. In the early days of the war, when Germany's relentless aggression spread across Europe, hope flickered in the darkness, as Poland found an ally in Britain and a leader in Władysław Anders. Together, they forged the Polish Army's Second Corps, seeking to defy the Nazi onslaught.

Finding Wojtek

As fate would have it, the path of the Polish Army led them to the Kurdish city of Hamadan in western Iran, which is part of *Rojhilat*, Kurdish for Eastern Kurdistan. In this remote corner of the world, a touching encounter unfolded between a group of Polish soldiers and a small bear cub. The Kurdish child who offered this gift could hardly have foreseen the profound impact the bear would have on the course of history.

The soldiers embraced the cub with



open arms, affectionately naming him "Wojtek," a Polish moniker for a happy warrior. The camaraderie between Wojtek and his newfound comrades knew no bounds. Nurtured on a diet of milk and honey, he was later introduced to fruit, marmalade, honey, and syrup, often receiving beer as a reward, which soon became his favorite beverage.

Additionally, he developed a surprising affinity for smoking (or consuming) cigarettes and relished sipping coffee in the mornings. With his endearing habits and playful antics, Wojtek's presence amidst the troops became a powerful symbol of unity and hope, bringing moments of respite and joy amidst the chaos of war.

Becoming a soldier

When the decision to move from Egypt to southern Italy was made, Wojtek faced a challenge: military regulations prohibited animals from boarding the ships. Determined not to leave their loyal companion behind, the Polish soldiers made an unprecedented move: they officially enlisted Wojtek as a soldier, granting him the rank of private and later promoting him to corporal. Thus, the legend of Wojtek, the soldier bear, was forever etched into history.

Throughout the war, Wojtek's endearing spirit and intelligence shone through. He endeared himself to all he encountered, imitating soldiers and assisting in moving crates of ammunition during the fierce Battle of Monte Cassino in Italy. His unwavering dedication earned him the admiration of visiting Allied generals and statesmen, turning him into a celebrity on the battlefield.

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In Poland, Britain, and Italy,
sculptures, statues, and plaques
were unveiled in honor of the
Kurdish bear's remarkable
contribution to history

”



the battlegrounds of Europe, he remained in the hearts of those who had fought alongside him.

Years passed, and in December 1963, Wojtek departed this world, leaving behind a legacy that surpassed his bear-sized frame. At the age of 21, he had grown to nearly 500 kg and stood over 1.8 meters tall, a living testament to the strength of spirit that defies boundaries.

The impact of Wojtek's incredible journey extended far beyond his lifetime. The 22nd Artillery Supply Company of the Polish Army, forever moved by his courage, changed their artillery logo to depict a bear carrying a shell, a poignant tribute to their beloved companion.

In the years that followed, Wojtek's memory continued to be cherished. In Poland, Britain, and Italy, sculptures, statues, and plaques were unveiled in

honor of the Kurdish bear's remarkable contribution to history. His story became a symbol of unity, a testament to the bonds that form between individuals, regardless of species or origin.

Decades may have passed since Wojtek's journey began, yet his tale endures as a reminder that the unlikely of friendships can flourish in times of turmoil. Through his courage, loyalty, and unwavering spirit, Wojtek remains an indelible thread in the rich tapestry of World War II history. As long as his memory lives on, so too does the message of hope and unity that he embodied, a message that will forever resonate with generations to come.

In the end, it was not only the Polish soldiers who found solace and inspiration in Wojtek's presence; it was the world. And so, we honor the memory of this extraordinary Kurdish bear who became a symbol of resilience and camaraderie, forever etched in the annals of time.

Wojtek's enduring legacy

- Numerous tributes honor the soldier bear, with a plaque gracing the Imperial War Museum in London, a sculpture



Unveiling of the statue of Wojtek "the Soldier Bear" and his keeper by the Wojtek Memorial Trust in Edinburgh on November 7, 2015

crafted by David Harding at the Sikorski Museum in London, and a wooden sculpture nestled in Weelsby Woods, Grimsby, UK.

- In 2013, the Kraków city council granted permission for a statue of Wojtek to be erected in Jordan Park, Kraków. On the momentous occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino on May 18, 2014, the statue was unveiled and served as a poignant symbol of remembrance.

- In 2013, the City of Edinburgh Council also approved the creation of a bronze statue of Wojtek that was skillfully sculpted by Alan Beattie Herriot and situated in West Princes Street Gardens, Edinburgh. Depicting the soldier bear walking alongside a fellow Polish Army soldier, the statue was unveiled in 2015. An accompanying relief tells the tale of Wojtek's remarkable journey from Egypt to Scotland alongside the Polish Army.

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The Kurdish child who offered this gift could hardly have foreseen the profound impact the bear would have on the course of history
”

- In 2016, a touching tribute was unveiled in Duns, Scottish Borders, where Wojtek had once been stationed at Winfield Camp in 1946, alongside Polish troops. This statue, gifted by the Polish town of Żagań, Duns' twin town, was revealed on April 26, 2016, exactly 72 years after the significant Battle of

Monte Cassino, in which Wojtek and Polish forces played a vital role.

- In 2017, Poznań, Poland, bestowed a heartfelt honor by naming a street after Wojtek. Now known as ulica Kaprala Wojtka (Corporal Wojtek Street), this thoroughfare leads to the Poznań New Zoo, a place that holds a special significance for Wojtek's memory.

- September 2018 marked the unveiling of a wooden statue dedicated to Wojtek at the Poznań New Zoo, made possible by the generous funding of Krystyna Wieczorek, the author of a notable Polish book chronicling Wojtek's life.

- Lastly, in May 2019, a majestic marble statue of Wojtek was unveiled in Cassino, Italy, a touching tribute to the profound impact he had on the lives of those who fought alongside him during the war. ●



The Hamilton Road

The Story of One Man's Efforts to Connect Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle

In the rugged terrain of Kurdistan, where mountains and valleys often separate villages and towns, transportation has always been a challenge. New Zealand's civil engineer Archibald Hamilton was tasked in 1928 by the British, who controlled and created Iraq after the fall of the Ottoman empire, to build a road from Erbil through the mountains and valleys of Kurdistan to the Iranian border in Haji Omeran.

In the book, *Road Through Kurdistan*, Hamilton describes how he was transferred to Kurdistan to build the 185-km road in four years, the aim of "pacification of the Kurdish tribes-people and for the introduction of (Iraqi) Government influence urgently demanded roadbuilding."

"It was a thrilling prospect from every point of view," he wrote. "The road would be a romantic one, for it would pass through mountains where roadbuilding has never been attempted by any past civilizations, owing partly due to technical difficulties, but mainly due to the intractable character of the inhabitants."

Nevertheless, Hamilton felt sympathy for the Kurds since his own ancestors in Scotland "were little different in their customs and rules...We had built a road which, it was hoped, would not only assist in trade between Persia and Iraq, but would also carry peaceful administration into this most remote corner of the kingdom," he wrote in his memoir.

The road was supposed to be known as the Rawanduz road, but was later named after Hamilton. Initially, when Hamilton arrived in Rawanduz, he wrote that he knew "little about the country or the people, and I could speak no Kurdish at all." However, he "reveled in the mountain scenery and the invigorating air."

In Rawanduz today, close to one of the stunning valleys where Hamilton once worked, stands a newly refurbished statue that commemorates his achievements.

The statue includes a quote from Hamilton, who acknowledged the Kurdish people's warmth and hospitality, stating that "you will not find people who love flowers

"It was a thrilling prospect from every point of view," he wrote

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The Hamilton Road in Kurdistan serves as a testament to Mr. Hamilton's commitment to uniting the region and improving the lives of its residents
 ”

and spring more than the Kurdish people."

During his four-year expedition, Hamilton triumphed over illness, local conflicts, and bureaucratic hurdles to construct one of the most vital roads in the region. With the aid of 1,000 laborers, hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds and fluent in multiple languages, he accomplished this impressive feat.

Over time, Hamilton Road took shape, snaking its way through the mountains and valleys of Kurdistan to the Iranian border. This was also done with the help of local Kurdish

tribesmen and elites, including the Kurdish Chieftain Ismail Beg from Rawanduz, who helped him because he thought that Kurdistan would never prosper without roads.

Nonetheless, they held diverging opinions on the direction Iraq should take. Hamilton believed that the Kurds should be integrated into a democratic Iraq, whereas the Kurdish chieftain mistrusted Baghdad and advocated for Kurdistan to serve as a neutral, inviolable (and independent) state, akin to Switzerland's position in Europe.

On the contrary, Ismail Beg com-

plained that the Kurds were split among three countries - Arabs, Persians, and Turks - who had little concern for the Kurdish people's well-being. He cited instances of mistreatment of Kurds by Arabs, Persians, and Turks to support his claim. The distrust between Arabs and Kurds that existed during Hamilton's era persists to this day.

Despite their disagreements, the Kurdish chieftain Ismail Beg shared his vision with Hamilton for Kurdistan to become one of Asia's most appealing tourist destinations. "They'd come afar for the scenery and the hunting and mountain-climbing and

winter sports and they would love our spring flowers," he told Hamilton.

Today, this vision has become a reality in part. The stunning mountainous landscape of Kurdistan draws domestic tourists who traverse the Hamilton Road from Erbil and stay in nearby hotels.

"Despite the limited tools available at that time, the road played a crucial role in trade between Iraq and Iran, as well as attracting tourists from all over the world today," said Rekan Rasoul, the founder of the hiking group Rock ur Bones, who frequently uses the Hamilton Road to bring hikers to the area.



Photo archive: Halgord Jundiayani

ty. From the beginning of the road all the way to the Iranian border, there are numerous cabins, hotels, motels, and villas for rent, generating significant income for locals."

Ali Beg waterfall, where Hamilton established a camp and resided for two years, now captivates thousands of visitors from across Iraq, particularly during the scorching summer season and religious festival of Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan.

Moreover, tour guides often organize trips for foreign travelers along the Hamilton Road to Rawanduz, which has become a popular attraction.

During the spring of 2012, Aaron, a globetrotter, embarked on a journey along the Hamilton Road to appreciate the captivating valleys. In his travel blog, he expresses wonder at the road's impressive engineering and highlights that it not only serves a strategic purpose but also boasts a magnificent display of nature's beauty.

"Not only was it a strategic route but the mere fact that this road exists through such dramatic scenery is really an engineering marvel!" he wrote on his travel blog.

In addition, the Hamilton Road now facilitates the travel of sizable groups of local mountain hikers to nearby peaks such as the Halgurd Mountains, which

are among the tallest in Kurdistan.

To sum up, the Hamilton Road in Kurdistan serves as a testament to Mr. Hamilton's commitment to uniting the region and improving the lives of its residents. Despite the road's initial construction by the British to control Kurdish tribes, it has now become essential in facilitating transportation, commerce, and promoting local tourism, aligning with the vision of Hamilton's dear friend, Ismail Beg.

Sadik Dealzi, a resident of Choman, a town located near the Hamilton Road and the Iranian border, who lived abroad and is knowledgeable about the area, also recalled how Hamilton's grandson and daughter visited the Kurdistan Region in 2009 or 2010.

According to Dealzi, while it is true that Hamilton's construction of the road was intended to subdue the Kurdish people on behalf of the British Empire, it has also had positive effects.

"We (local people) have greatly benefited from this road as it has brought about positive changes. People situated on the road are now more educated and are able to strengthen their economy."

"The road is important; we will never forget what Hamilton did 100 years ago." ●



Photo archive: Halgord Jundiayani

"The waterfalls and hiking trails along the road make it easier to access the base or starting point. Moreover, the road provides access to archaeological and undiscovered sites on both sides, and its construction made it easier for geologists to study the area," he told the *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

"Besides the scenic views and waterfalls, the section between Khalifan and Rawanduz has several caves that can serve as natural shelters for overnight camping for both tourists and locals, with easy access from all sides and safe-

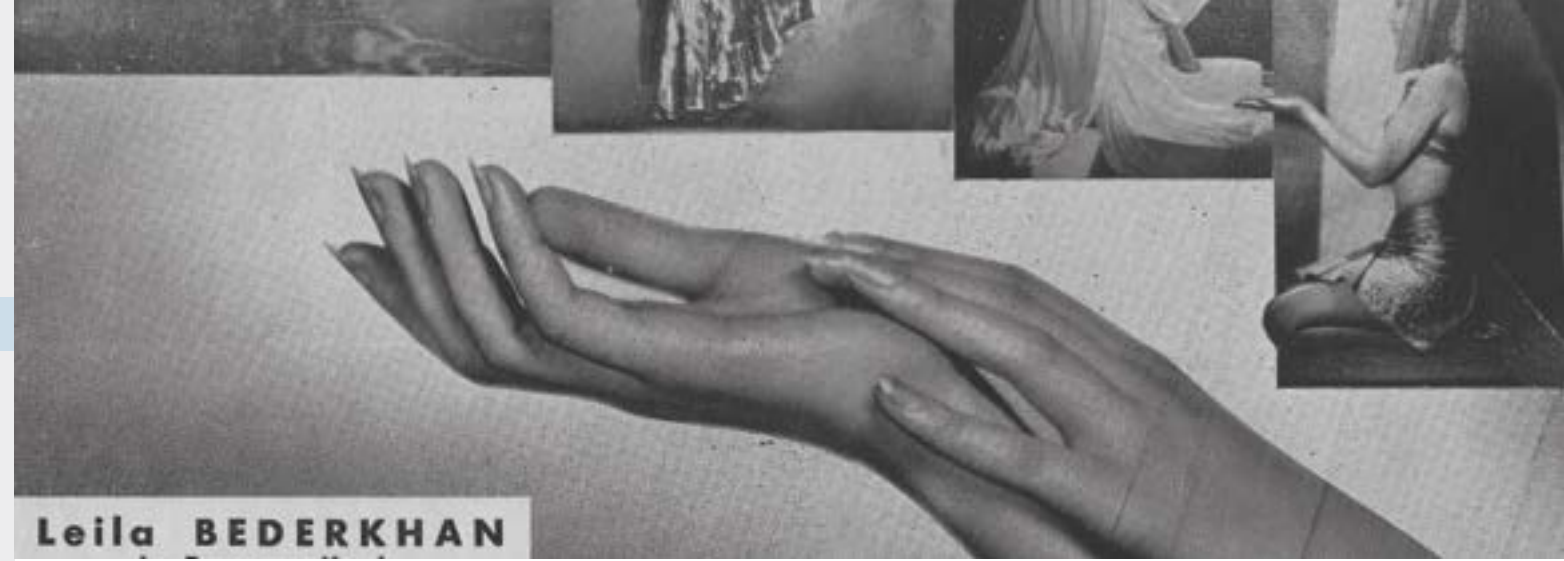
Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi



Leila

The Kurdish Princess Who Once Captivated Western Theater

Kurdistan Chronicle



Western journalists dubbed her “Leila of a Thousand and One Nights,” “The Princess Carrying the Perfumes of Eastern Nights,” “The Bright Moon of Oriental Nights,” but most commonly “The Kurdish Princess and the Princess of Dancing.”

Leila Bederkhan, born in Istanbul in 1903, was the daughter of Abdulrazzaq Bederkhan and Henriette Ornik, a Romanian Jewish dentist. Her father was a descendant of Bederkhan, a legendary Kurdish leader and ruler of the Cizera Botan Emirate in modern-day Turkey’s southeast.

Leila and her mother fled Istanbul for Egypt when she was a baby after her parents divorced. She never saw her father again because he was involved in Ottoman disputes and later started a movement to establish an independent Kurdistan.

When she was 14, she moved from Egypt to Vienna and then to Paris, where she remained ever since. She would dance in Europe, free of family and religious constraints, drawing inspiration from her glamorous past and refashioning her cultural heritage.

Leila developed her own unique dance style, her own oriental creations. She was famous for her long arms and once stated that “hands are more expressive than feet in dancing.” Her fingers and arms were described by journalists as having “calligraphy from an ancient Arabic manuscript.”

Leila’s stylized dances incorporated elements from Persia, Egypt, India, Assyrian, and Yezidi cultures as well as Zarathustrian of Mesopotamia and Kurdistan.

Leila went on to become a famous artist in the 1920s and 1930s. When she was dancing, she was world famous; there



Photos: Avesta Archive

were many female dancers on stage, but few who danced on both sides of the Atlantic. She performed in the United States and Canada, as well as India, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Europe, including the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Romania, and Sweden. Her debut performance at The Town Hall in New York was featured in the New York Times on March 4, 1931.



Photo: Avesta Archive

Her arrival in New York made headlines, and her image appeared in newspapers and on newsreels.

Newspapers dubbed her as “The Dancing Princess” and “The Kurdish Princess.”

The highlight of Leila’s trip to America was a tulip. John T. Scheepers introduced a new tulip named for Princess Bederkhan at the international flower show in New York in 1931, as Kurdistan is one of the tulip’s original habitats.

Leila also became the first modern-day woman to dance before the Sphinx in Egypt during the reign of King Farouk.

The ballet of the leading Italian music composer Ottorino Respighi, “Belkis, Regina di Saba,” featured the Kurdish princess as “Belkis.” Belkis was one of Respighi’s most ambitious stage works, with an enormous orchestra that included unusual instruments like sitars and wind machines, off-stage brass, a chorus, several vocal soloists, and a narrator who told the legendary story in verse.

“Leila was a heroine and courageous”

Leyla Safiye, a Turkish author, is the only one who has written books about Leila Bederkhan. Inspired by her namesake, Safiye started researching and learning about Bederkhan in the 1990s. In her English-language book, Safiye describes Leila as a heroine and advocator for women empowerment.

“I admire Leila for standing on her own two feet and saying what she thinks; she was a witty, intellectual, and courageous woman. Many people admired her, and not just for her dancing. She was a strong supporter of women’s empowerment and equality with men,” Safiye told the *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

“During the Second World War, she helped Jewish female dancers all over Europe escape the Nazis and provided them with shelter,” Safiye added. “She was an advocate for female dancers; she performed in an Indian temple to support female dancers who had lost their reputation and were being treated as prostitutes. She was a pioneer in making Eastern/exotic/interpretive dance respectful.”

In her interviews with Western media, Bederkhan said a woman has the right to shape her own life



Photo: Avesta Archive

Armenian, but she always insisted she was Kurdish, even when nobody really knew much about the Kurds.

“In that sense, one could say that through her dancing and interviews, she put the word Kurd in the global media,” said Safiye.

Leila is a popular Kurdish name. Many Kurds recognize Bederkhan’s name but know little about her. There is only one video of her on the Internet, less than a minute long, in which she performs a snake dance.

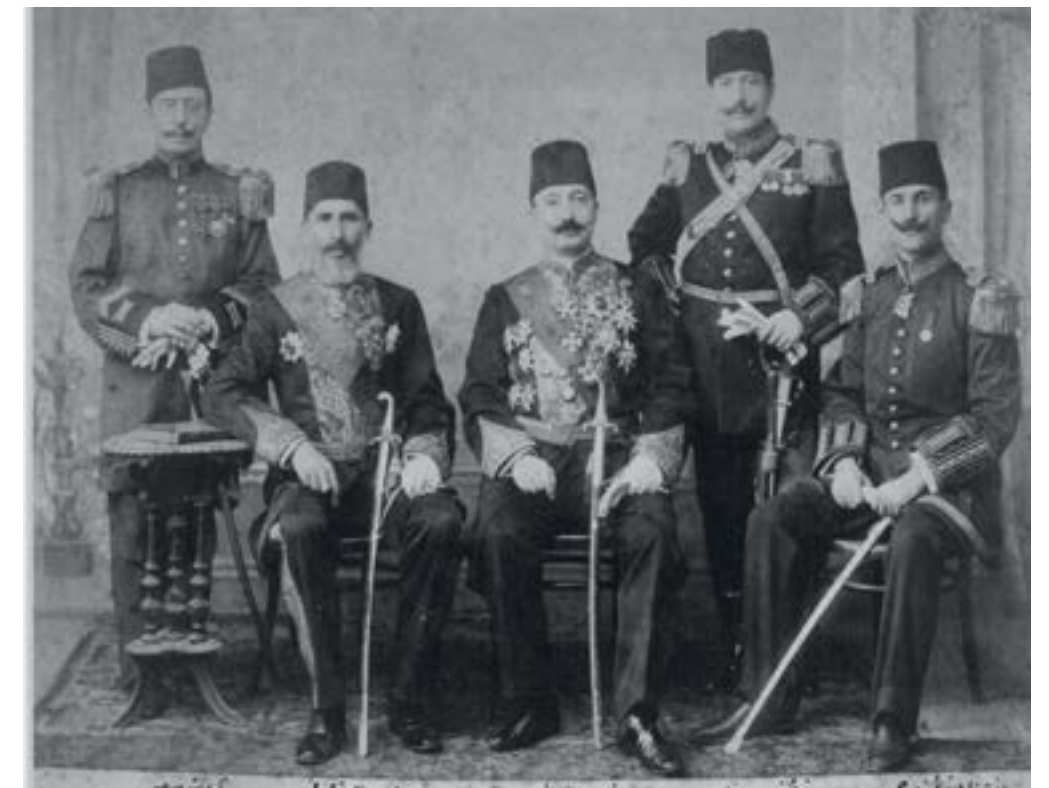
Despite having danced on both sides of the Atlantic, Leila had never had the opportunity to dance in her homeland. ●

as a man has the same right to shape his. She was disappointed that women could not make full use of their rights and would give up on their careers once married.

“When she was young, Leila seemed to harbor a wise old woman within. Being an outsider sharpened one’s ability to see more clearly,” said Safiye.

The Kurdish Princess is so important to Safiye that she named both her daughter and granddaughter Leila.

Leila always went by her given name and title whenever she performed. Many mistook her for being Persian, Turkish, or



Abdulrazzaq Bederkhan, Leyla Bederkhan’s father



Jerwan Aqueduct Resurrecting a Lost Legacy

Kurdistan Chronicle



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

An aerial view captures the remnants of the ancient Jerwan Aqueduct

Deep in the heart of Kurdistan lies an extraordinary engineering marvel that has stood the test of time for over three millennia: the Jerwan Aqueduct. Considered one of the oldest aqueducts in the world, the Jerwan Aqueduct, located near Shekhan district in Duhok province, boasts a creative and ingenious architectural design that continues to intrigue historians and archeologists to this day. Built by the Assyrian King Sanharib

over 3,000 years ago, this ancient structure served not only as a vital water source but also as a testament to the power and grandeur of the Assyrian Empire.

Unveiling the architectural wonder

The Jerwan Aqueduct's architectural design is nothing short of fascinating. In an era devoid of modern technology, ap-

proximately two million stones were painstakingly extracted from the surrounding mountains and meticulously arranged in a geometrical manner to ensure stability. The aqueduct stretches an impressive 280 meters in length and 22 meters in width and stands at height of 9 meters. While still in operation, the aqueduct's engineering ingenuity allowed it to collect water until it overflowed or was released through the thirteen floodgates, making it a reliable water source for the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, Ninawa (also spelled as Nineveh), and the surrounding regions.

iform texts inscribed on the stones, King Sanharib intended to bring water from Khanis to the aqueduct's location to appease the Assyrian god Assur. The aqueduct's construction took 15 months of non-stop work, making it one of King Sanharib's most significant legacies.

Lost and found: The rediscovery of Jerwan

The story of Jerwan remained shrouded in mystery for many years until foreign archeologists began to unveil its secrets.

covered the area, hindering further investigations.

Later on in 1904, renowned English archeologist Leonard William King also visited the site. Despite dedicated efforts, he was also unable to fully unravel the aqueduct's story. It was not until 1913 that Professor Walter Bakhman of Germany, in collaboration with other foreign archeologists, began to conduct thorough investigations that ultimately revealed the architectural design and purpose of the Jerwan Aqueduct.

King Sanharib's ambitious project

The historical significance of the Jerwan Aqueduct is deeply rooted in the ambition of its builder, King Sanharib. According to the translated cune-

In 1845, the first recorded discovery of Jerwan occurred when British archeologist Austen Henry Layard encountered the site but could not ascertain its purpose. Subsequent visits by other foreign archeologists also yielded no definitive answers due to the dense forests that

The revelation of the inscribed stones

The inscribed stones at Jerwan serve as valuable artifacts, revealing crucial information about the aqueduct's history and significance. The texts are classified

into four groups — Text A, which contains remarks about King Sanharib's power and rule; Text B, which describes the construction of the aqueduct; and Texts C and D, which both praise King Sanharib for building the aqueduct and how Asur god assisted him in realizing this ambitious project.

have transformed into a deserted and dry wasteland. Unfortunately, many stones from the aqueduct were taken by locals to build houses and fences, further eroding its historical legacy.

Jerwan's legacy and decline

Jerwan Aqueduct's historical importance extends beyond its role as a water source for the Assyrian capital. The aqueduct served numerous areas and villages, providing them with life-sustaining water. Today, Jerwan's rich history lies almost forgotten, and its once-prosperous surroundings



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

■ Cuneiform inscription on Jerwan Aqueduct Stones

Preserving ancient heritage

As we are amazed by the architectural wonder of the Jerwan Aqueduct, it serves as a reminder of the need to protect and preserve our ancient heritage. Urgent action is required to prevent further degradation of this remarkable site and raise awareness about its historical significance. The responsibility lies with both the government and local communities to safeguard this precious piece of history.

The Jerwan Aqueduct stands as a testament to the ingenuity and engineering prowess of ancient civilizations. With its rich history dating back thousands of years, this architectural marvel holds a wealth of knowledge waiting to be explored. As we uncover the secrets of our past, we should also strive to protect and cherish these invaluable sites of our heritage, ensuring that future generations can marvel at the wonders of our ancient ancestors and learn from the lessons of history. ●



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

■ Cuneiform inscription on Jerwan Aqueduct Stones



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi



Dwin The Hometown of Saladin

Kurdistan Chronicle

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



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

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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, ef-

fectively 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 Principality 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.



Mandela and the Kurds

WURIA KARADAGHY, *Development Management Consultant working with UNDP.*



On February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela was set free after spending 27 years in different prisons in South Africa. He spent 18 of those years in the infamous Robben Island Prison near Cape Town.

Apartheid is the Afrikaans name given to the policy of racial segregation instituted by the white-ruled South African nationalist party that enforced the separation of the white South African minority and black South African majority populations. Instituted in 1948, apartheid came to an end in the early 1990s in a series of steps that led to the formation of a democratic government in 1994.

In July 1990, I was appointed by the UN to work as technical expert in Peru. However, the project never took place due to the fragile security situation in Peru. I received another posting to work in Lesotho, in southern Africa.

I arrived in Maseru, the capital city, on July 27, in the middle of a cold and snowy winter. Two weeks later I became ill and was taken to a hospital in Bloemfontein in South Africa. The hospital that I was admitted to was only for white South Africans. The doctor who removed three stones from my kidney was from Cuba. He cursed Fidel Castro and his communist regime because they were supporting the uprising of the black community in South Africa led by Nelson Mandela.

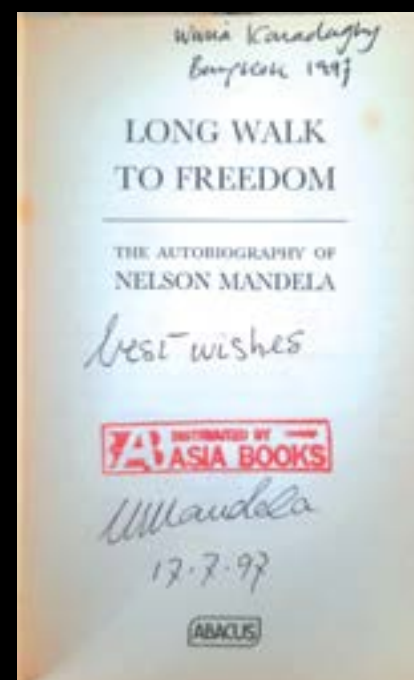
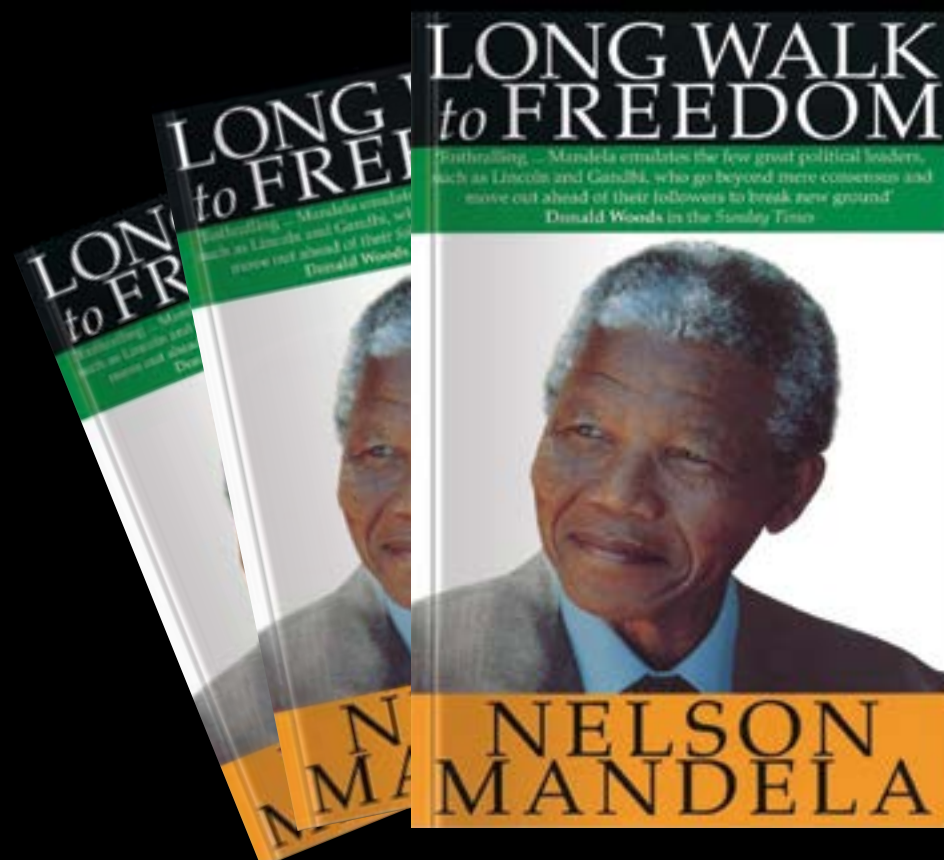


Wuria Karadaghy striking a pose next to a statue of Nelson Mandela

I spent one week in the hospital and was appalled at the way the staff talked about black communities. I was told that black people were not allowed to purchase property in Bloemfontein. In addition, while they were allowed to work in the city, they had to leave it before 6 pm and find their way back to their townships. I encountered



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I introduced myself as a Kurd from Kurdistan, and Mandela asked about the situation of the Kurds
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“ Having had the privilege of meeting him remains one of the greatest honors of my life

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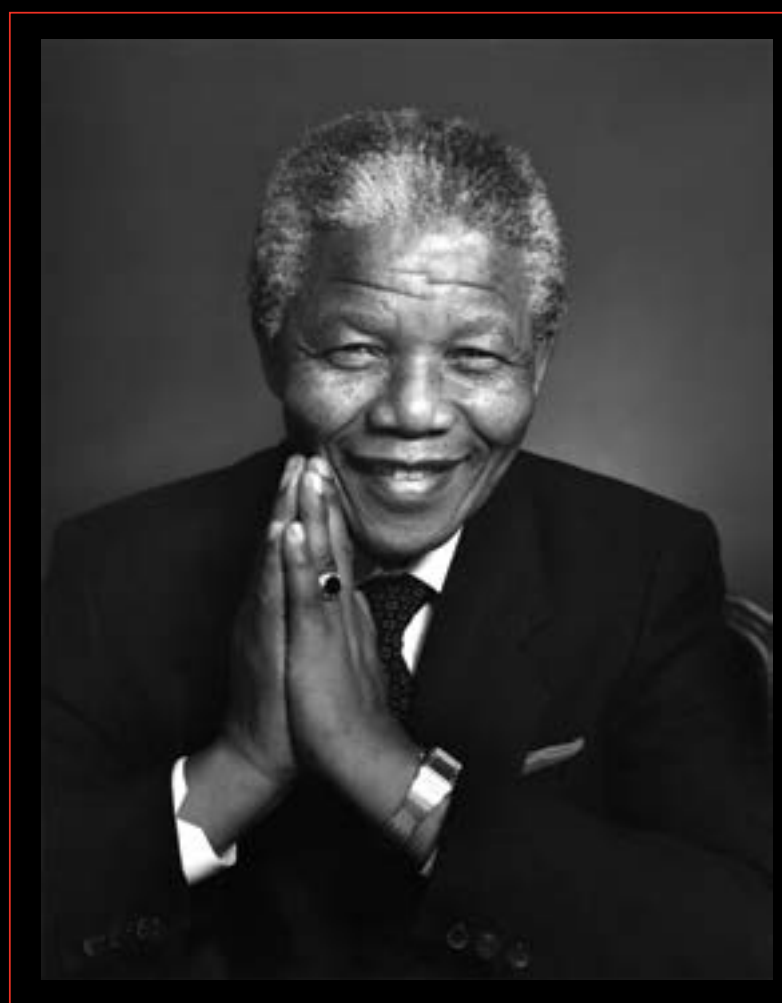
other, varying aspects of racial segregation in train stations, swimming pools, and hotels.

A general election was held in South Africa between April 26 and 29, 1994. The election was the first in which citizens of all races were allowed to take part and was conducted under the direction of the Independent Electoral Commission. I was part of the monitoring team in QwaQwa, an area in the eastern part of South Africa bordering Lesotho.

On May 10, 1994, Nelson Mandela became the first black president of the country. Through a co-worker of mine, the sister of Limpho Hani, who was the wife of political leader Chris Hani, I got the opportunity to meet President Mandela in June 1994 at the African National Congress (ANC) headquarters in Pretoria. Chris Hani was the leader of the South African Communist Party and the leader of the armed wing of the ANC. He was later assassinated in April 1993.

I introduced myself as a Kurd from Kurdistan, and Mandela asked about the situation of the Kurds. I briefed him about it, and he responded that the Kurds will reach their aim. He added: you and I may not witness that day, but a new generation will come and enjoy freedom. I informed him how I participated in a demonstration in The Hague, The Netherlands in October 1976 supporting the Soweto uprising in South Africa, where many students were killed, and I was beaten by the pro-apartheid group in The Netherlands. In the end I told him: you are such an inspiration for the world.

On July 17, 1997, I was invited to a state dinner hosted by the Thai Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok where President Mandela and his 15-member delegation were present. I wanted to take the opportunity to greet him and ask him to sign his book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, but was stopped by his security guards. However, he asked his secretary to let me through since he knew me from our meeting at the ANC office in Pretoria. He asked me what I was doing in Bangkok. I responded that I was helping low-income communities build houses. He signed the book and



said to me that it was for my people.

In 1999, while based in Kosovo, I received an invitation from the ANC to participate in a celebration of the new millennium on Robben Island, where Mandela had spent 18 years in a single cell. Many local and international guests were invited for the event, including famous artists. Mandela's symbolic 'flame of hope' was to be passed by him to the new president, Thabo Mbeki. Mandela would then ask Mbeki to pass the flame to the new generation.

I reached Cape Town quite late and missed the last boat to Robben Island. I tried my best to explain that I had been invited and showed my UN passport, but the security guard would not allow any more boats to depart due to security rules. At this point, I saw a woman surrounded by many people asking for her autograph and picture. I asked, who is that woman? I learned that she was the world-famous South

African singer Mariam Makeba, known as Mama Africa.

Maria had been an opponent of apartheid in South Africa. I introduced myself and informed her that I had attended her concert in The Hague in July 1984. She was happy and told me that she had missed the last boat to attend the party. However, the ANC sent her a special boat to take her to the island. She asked me to join her, which I did. She was welcomed as a hero by the authorities, and I took the opportunity to greet President Mandela once again.

Mandela, a legend both in life and now in his passing, unquestionably exemplified the essence of a genuine global leader. Having had the privilege of meeting him remains one of the greatest honors of my life. While the world mourns his absence, his enduring contributions to the causes of human dignity and freedom ensure that his legacy will endure for eternity. ●



Kurdistan's Window to the Stars

SABIR SALIH, *Journalist based in Erbil.*



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

Korek Observatory on the summit of Korek Mountain in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Nestled amid the craggy splendor of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), perched atop rugged Mount Korek, lies a testament to human ambition and scientific ingenuity, all with a touch of cosmic wonder. The Korek Observatory, a celestial gem in the Kurdistan Region, serves as a beacon of curiosity and a symbol of resilience in the face of adversity. Here, in this remote corner of the world, the stars whisper their secrets to astronomers who venture to unlock the mysteries of the universe.

Hogir Chato, a Kurdish astronomer and President of the Kurdistan Astronomical Association, regales us with the remarkable history of the Korek Observatory. Now abandoned, this impressive scientific institution traces its origins to the early 1970s, when Iraqi President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr gathered a group of scholars to explore the cosmos. The dream was daring: to construct an astronomical observatory in Iraq that could rival the best in the world. With a whopping \$170 million allocated for the project, this ambitious endeavor aimed for the stars.

Chato stated that the project involved global collaboration, with scientific teams from the Soviet Union, Egypt, and the United States converging on Iraq to assess potential sites. The observatory was initially intended to be called the Iraqi National Astronomical Observatory. As the teams embarked on an extensive survey, they faced inclement weather as they

considered various locations, including Mount Sinjar, at an elevation of 1,500 meters. However, the unpredictable forces of nature led them to Mount Korek, some 2,127 meters above sea level.

Following exhaustive research, the astronomers discovered that Mount Korek was indeed a celestial paradise, boasting 250 to 252 clear nights each year. In the realm of astronomy, such clarity is a treasure beyond compare, according to Chato. The choice was clear: Mount Korek was destined to become a hub for astronomical exploration. The crystal-clear skies over Mount Korek provide a glimpse into a world where celestial bodies reveal their secrets without the hindrance of light pollution or atmospheric interference.

Astronomy and more

The Korek Observatory is not merely an astronomical edifice; it is a comprehensive scientific complex divided into multiple parts. The scientific complex is divided into three sections, with two optical telescopes beckoning stargazers and a radio observatory receiving waves imperceptible to the human senses. Chato stated that the complex also features residential units, museums, tunnels connecting departments, a science club, a gym, a games hall, a science laboratory, and an administrative department. Every structure adheres to international standards, thanks to German companies Friedrich Krupp, Liebherr, and Zeiss.

One of the crown jewels of the observatory is a reflecting telescope with a diameter of three and a half meters. In 1983, it ranked thirteenth globally in terms of size. Manufactured by ZEISS, the Korek mirror, weighing a colossal five tons, exemplifies precision and quality.

The dome cradling the telescope spans 15 meters in diameter and 18 meters in height. Inside, various laboratories facilitate image capture and analysis, making it an astronomical laboratory of unparalleled capacity.

A smaller dome houses a telescope with a 1.25-meter mirror diameter, with a dome the size of a three-story building. The third part of the project, the radio telescope, has the capacity to capture millimeter waves and sound waves from the cosmos. It was built by was created by Coupe and Mann. At 30 meters in diameter, it was a mammoth of its time.

Hope for renewal

Tragically, the dreams that soared among the stars were grounded by the harsh realities of war. In 1985, during the Iran-Iraq War, the project was struck by three missiles, causing severe damage to the radio telescope. Despite these setbacks, the legacy of the Korek Observatory lives on, a testament to human resilience and to the limitless curiosity of the human spirit.

In the early 2000s, a glimmer of hope emerged. American astronomer Mike Simmons, founder of Astronomers Without Borders, visited the observatory, capturing its essence in a January 2007 article in *Scientific American* titled “Seeing Stars in Iraq.” Simmons’ hope was that this astronomical haven could be restored to its former glory, fostering a renaissance of scientific inquiry in the region.

Yet, the road to revival is not without its challenges. Chato and his team have worked to garner support from both Iraqi scholars and government authorities, but political differences have often impeded progress. The renovation project requires an estimated \$35 to \$40 million to breathe new life into the observatory, with the potential to transform Erbil into a global hub for astronomy.

The Korek Observatory remains a symbol of perseverance and an invitation for the world to join hands in unlocking the mysteries of the universe. As it stands on the precipice of revival, this celestial gem in the heart of the KRI offers an opportunity to foster scientific tourism, encourage global collaboration, and inspire the next generation of astronomers.

In the shadow of Mount Korek, the stars whisper their secrets, waiting for the day when humanity will return to gaze upon the cosmos once more. ●



Korek Observatory on the summit of Korek Mountain in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq



Polo in Kurdish History and Culture

GHYAS EDDEN HUSSEIN *is working at Famer Center for Ottoman researches and translations.*



The game of polo, chogan in Persian and gog in Kurdish, has its origins in Central Asia with roots in Iran dating to the period from the sixth century BC to the first century AD. It was initially a training game for cavalry units, particularly for the king's guard or other elite troops, and was considered a miniature battle by

the war-like tribesmen who played it with as many as 100 people on each team.

Over time, it became a popular national sport in Persia. Historical records reveal that even the queen and her ladies engaged King Khosrow II Parviz and his courtiers in the sixth century AD. Ferdowsi, the famous Iranian epic poet, gave several accounts of the royal chogan matches in his epic Shahnameh in the 9th century AD.

Polo also spread to other countries such as Arabia, Tibet, China, and Japan. It reached its peak of popularity in Persia during the Sassanid Empire (224-651 AD), where it was a favorite pastime of the ruling classes. It was also popular in the courts of the Kurdish principalities for centuries.

Polo in Kurdish courts

In the Middle Ages, polo spread from Persia to Byzantium. During the Islamic period, it spread among the Ayyubids and Mamluks in both Egypt and the Levant, where the elite preferred it to any other games. It is known that famous sultans, such as Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi and al-Zahir Baybars, played polo and encourage it to be played in their courts.

Playing polo was dangerous and often resulted in the death of players. One such story about the death of Najm al-Din Ayyub, the father of the sultan Salah al-Din, was narrated by Ibn Wasil al-Humaydi. "Najm al-Din was fond of playing with the ball and running with it, so everyone who saw him in this state would estimate that he would not die except from falling off a horse." And that's what happened!

POLO

Polo in Kurdistan



Meanwhile, Imam Ibn Kathir tells us that “Nur al-Din brought Salah al-Din close and made him one of his close companions, and he would not separate from him, either when he was present or when he was traveling, because he was handsome and good at playing with the ball.”

The Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi (1611-1682) in his book *Siyahatnameh*, offers a vivid description of polo among Kurds during his third visit to Bitlis Castle. When Çelebi saw the Chogan Court near the Sharaf Khan Mosque, he saw mounted soldiers and knights of the “Ruzki” tribe, who used to come there to show off their skills in chogan and galloping.

He exaggeratedly elaborated that there are stone pillars at either end of the field, where two teams of a thousand knights each knight holding a mallet of wood faced off against each other from opposing ends. They placed a round wooden ball the size of a human head in the middle of the field, and when the band began to play and the rhythm of the drums reached its apex, a man from each side would rush forward on horseback, trying to hit the ball towards his own goal. Another also rushed forward to hit the ball rolling towards his team’s goal, and the ball then reached another knight, who hit it while it was in the air, and so on. The two armies fought, trying to hit the poor ball until it shattered into many pieces. Ultimately, one of them succeeded, and the losing team prepared a feast for the winners.

Polo was an amazing sight, and a great occasion to test fortitude, patience, and horsemanship. Sometimes it happened that the wands missed and hit the horse’s legs, causing the poor pony or mare to become limp. But horses were so well trained that they chased the ball like cats after a mouse.

The game was also an excellent military

exercise, although sometimes it degenerated into a real, blood-spilled battle for the ball. After the end of the game, the number of times that one of the two teams could bring the ball to his own goal are counted according to an agreed-upon number, say five or ten.

This equestrian sport is a favorite in both Kurdistan and Iran.

Polo among Kurdish nomads

Mahmoud Bayazidi (1797-1867?), in a letter to the Russian orientalist Alexander Jabba on the customs and traditions



of the nomadic Kurds, mentioned another type of polo called hoal. He related how in the afternoons, the youth and the boys from the summer camps all gathered and played in front of the houses to play hoal or compete in running. On the other side, Diaa al-Din al-Maqdisi, the author of the dictionary of al-Hadiyah al-Hamidiyah, defined hoal as a game for boys, each of whom

takes a stick and hits a ball among them.

My elder neighbors have related to me that a game called hoali was still being played on foot among villagers in the rural areas of the city of Kobani in the 1950s. As children, we also played a simple version of it in our backyards.

Here, we must distinguish between the term chogan meaning “mallet, playing stick” and hoal meaning “ball.”

On the other hand, Zeynelabidin Zinar, a modern author, details a game called gog in his book *Mirate*, explaining that there are two variations of this game: infantry gog and cavalry gog.

Infantry gog uses the ball (gog) and racket (kasho). The gog is made of sheep’s wool and ranges in size from a pigeon’s egg to a turkey’s egg. The kasho spans six lengths and has a handle at the top and a wide bottom for receiving the ball. The field (meydan) is flat and in the middle is a small hole (hochk), around which a large and wide circle is drawn and guarded by one player from one of two teams. While one team tries to get the ball into the hole, the other works to block them from doing so and batting the ball away outside that circle.

Cavalry gog, on the other hand, is played by horsemen with mallets and takes two forms. The first is like infantry gog, but the ball is larger, and the mallets are longer. The second differs in the size of the meydan, which is larger and rectangular in shape. On each side

is a goal with a length of 15 to 20 meters, guarded by one player. The ball is placed in the middle of the field, and a team wins if the ball enters the opposing goal several times.

Polo in Kurdish literature

Kurdish men of letters have also re-

ferred to polo in their poetic works, employing its terms and tools to express overwhelming emotions and the sense of submission, according to the doctrine of fatalism, to the will of the beloved or the divine. To elucidate this, we only have to look closely at the collection of Mulla Ahmed Jiziri (1570-1640) from Shirnakh to find the vocabulary of this sport in its two types, chogan and hoal, scattered in the folds of his divan. In one of his ghazals, he utilizes the ball, racket, mallet, and field, describing how he surrenders to the beloved’s will:

د فَرْمَانِ قَوْسْتَايِمِ – د بِنْدَا خَدَمَتِي دَا يِمِ
وَكِي گَوِي بِي سَرِ وِيَا يِمِ – هَمَانِ لِيَدِي تُو چَوَكَانِي
لَبَرُ چَوَكَانِ وَكَاشَوِيَانِ – زُ دَرَبَا تَرَكِ وَهَنْدَوِيَانِ
دِيَازِمِ هَرْوَكِي گَوِيَانِ – دَمَا أَوْ تِينِه مِيدَانِي

I am standing awaiting the orders in service, like a ball without a top or foot (a metaphor for surrender) so you can hit it instantly with the mallet. I run like balls before mallets and rackets, before the hits of Turks and Indians (a metaphor for the eyelashes), when they enter the field.

And in describing his beloved’s beautiful countenance and murderous, intoxicating looks, he says:

تَخْتِي د مِيژ وَبِگَلَرَانِ – مِيدَانِ جُو قَا گَوِي گَرَانِ
أَصْلَانِ وَجَوْتِي مِي خُورَانِ – مِي دَانِ شَرَابَا سَاغَرِي

The throne of princes and lords has also become a meydan on which those chasing the gog play with their wands (a metaphor for the movement of sideburns around the mole). Lions and a pair of drinking companions (a metaphor for the eyes) have wine served to them from the cup.

While describing the divine being in another poem, Jiziri refers to the movement of the universe run by the infinite Creator, saying:

چَوَكَانِ بَايِي لَا مَكَانِ – فُلُكَا فُلُكَا قَائِمِ سَكَانِ
تَشْبِيهِي گَوِي دَا بَرِ شَكَانِ – هَرِ بِي سَكُونِ وَسَكْنِه دَا

The chogan of the wind of nowhere struck the firm ship of the universe, its rudder and its leg like a gog, so it is always restless and unstable.

He also mentions the sport of hoal in different places in his divan, as in this line where he makes metaphors about his beloved’s hair swinging across her face:

مِيژ وَكُرْمَانِجِ لِهَوْلَانِ قَدَرَكِ وَسَتَائِنِه – لِي د نِيغِي بِنَفْ وَنِيْبِ عَرَبِ هَاتْتِه جَنْگِ

Princes and Kurmanjs (Kurds) with their armies have stood on the fields of hoal, and the ranks of Arab armies have come to war in the middle.

كُو دَلَبَرُ هَاتْتِه فَيِي بُولِي – زُبُرُ پُرِ هُنِ كَتْنِ چَوْلِي
زُ قَنْجَانِ كُو رَفَانْدِ هَوْلِي – زُ مَحْبُوبَانِ بَرِنِ نَرْدِه

In another poem, he directly mentions his beloved saying:

When the beloved descended to this path, many had gone mad into the wilderness, and she thus overpowered other beauties by snatching the balls (lovers) and defeating them in the game of dice (love).

From Jiziri we turn to Sheikh Ahmed Khani (1651-1707) from Hakkari in his romantic epic “Mem û Zîn” (Mam and Zin), where we find the terms of the game used in an amazing way to describe lovers on the feast of Nowruz. Khani says:

بِي خُورَسِ هِنَكِ, هِنَكِ د سَرَكُورِ – كَاشُو زُ پِيَا نِ سَرِ وَكِي هَوْلِ

Some of them are barefoot and others bareheaded. Feet are like rackets and heads like balls; that is, they are so low that their heads almost touch their feet.

In his description of the hunting trip of Prince Zaidin, Khani says:

چَوَكَانِ د دَسْتِ دِگَلِ گِيَا لَانِ – هَا فَيْتِنِه گَرْدَنِي غَزَا لَانِ

They carried mallets alongside canes and threw them on the necks of deer. When Khani mentions the efforts of Mam’s best friend Tajdin and his two brothers to ask Prince Zaidin to release Mam, Zain’s lover, from prison, Tajdin sends a messenger who tells the prince quoting from Tajdin saying:

هَرُ چَارُ سَرِي د مَه وَكِي گَوِ – چَوَكَانِ اِرَادَتَا وَيِي كَاشُو

The heads of the four of us (Tajdin, his brothers and Mam) are like balls in front of the mallet of his will.

Polo in folk stories

The game of gog i.e hoal is mentioned in the lyric love story “Fatima Salih Agha,” which is narrated and sung by many folk singers like Rifat Dari. In the story, the game becomes the reason for the long journey of Mohammed, the son of the Hauska tribe’s prince, who seeks the beautiful Fatima, the daughter of a tribal prince called Salih Agha from Rawandiz.

The scene opens on a young man, the only son of his old mother, who goes out with his racket (kasho) to play gog with other young men from the tribe. He is accidentally hit on the waist with the ball by the prince’s son and falls to the ground suffering from serious injury. His mother starts wailing and, unable to curse the prince’s son, she tries to humiliate him by questioning who he thought he was being such a swaggerer among his fellow tribesmen, as if he was Fatima’s suitor. ●



Fakhria Elia's Homegrown Delight in Kurdistan

The art of Wine

Kurdistan Chronicle

This is the story of a woman who achieved fame by crafting exquisite wines in one of the most enchanting towns in the Kurdistan Region.

Nestled in the picturesque town of Shaqlawa, just a 40-km drive from Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, lies a hidden gem that has been captivating wine enthusiasts for decades. Fakhria Elia, a 76-year-old winemaker, who greets visitors with a warm smile adorning her face, has gained fame throughout Kurdistan and Iraq for her exquisite homemade wine. What sets her wine apart is not only its exceptional quality but also the fact that it is made entirely from grapes cultivated in her own vineyard.

As we entered Fakhria Elia's humble abode, as always, she greeted us with a warm smile and invited us into her house, which boasts a backyard overlooking a breathtaking valley overseen by the majestic Mount Safeen. In one corner of her



Photo: Safin Hamid

backyard, several wooden barrels stand proudly, a testament to the nearly 50 years that she has spent perfecting her craft.

A local craft

Recalling her early days of winemaking, Elia revealed that she used to produce wine by placing the grapes on a cloth and crushing them with her own feet. It was a laborious yet enjoyable

The art of Wine

process that added a personal touch to her creations.

However, as the years went by and her children noticed the toll of ageing on their beloved matriarch, they decided to modernize her winemaking operation, ensuring that her passion would continue to thrive.

Elia's vineyard, situated just across from her home on a sloping hill, now benefits from modern winemaking equipment. With these new tools at her disposal, she can uphold her commitment to excellence and create wines that require an average aging period of seven years. Holding up a sealed bottle of her renowned Shaqlawa wine, she explained, "If you seek a decent wine, then seven years should suffice."

Elia's wine can be found not only in the family's adjacent liquor store but also in selected stores and bars across Erbil and other cities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite belonging to a Christian minority in a predominantly Muslim region, Elia and her family have never felt unsafe running a business that goes against the conservative beliefs of some.

Alcohol in Iraq

Although alcohol production is typically associated with Christians, other non-Muslims, and non-practicing Muslims in the Kurdistan Region, Fakhria Elia and her family's unwavering dedication to crafting exceptional wine has garnered widespread admiration from individuals of various backgrounds and beliefs. Fakhria believes that the commitment to quality and the art of winemaking transcends religious boundaries, captivating the hearts and palates of people from all walks of life.

In March, the Iraqi government implemented a ban on the production, export, and import of alcohol throughout the country. However, this ban does not extend to the Kurdistan Region.

As a result, Elia sees an opportunity to expand her sales beyond Kurdistan and Iraq, particularly given the challenging economic conditions in the region. She dreams of exporting her wine to countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, from which she has received on-demand requests from enthusiastic customers.

Passion and perseverance

With pride in her voice, Elia expressed her desire to see her wine become a product that everyone in the region can be proud of. Her determination to produce exceptional wine, coupled with her unwavering dedication to her craft, serves as an inspiration to wine lovers and entrepreneurs alike.

Fakhria Elia's story is, moreover, a testament to the power of passion, perseverance, and the ability to overcome societal barriers to create something truly remarkable.

Fakhria aspires to persist in crafting exceptional wine while imparting her wisdom to future generations. However, amidst her generous sharing of her winemaking expertise, there was one intriguing secret she held close to her heart, and the hidden ingredient that imparts a unique hue to her wine: a mysterious soaking stone.

Fakhria's resolute commitment and passion for winemaking have magnetized individuals from diverse regions, including the Kurdistan Region, to visit her town. In this enchanting place, they not only explore the intricacies of wine production but also unravel the profound Christian heritage of Shaqlawa.

Witnessing its transformation into a thriving multicultural center within the Kurdistan Region creates a captivating experience for visitors from all walks of life. ●

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What sets her wine apart is not only its exceptional quality but also the fact that it is made entirely from grapes cultivated in her own vineyard

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Photos: Safin Hamid



Pishdar

Kurdistan's Mightiest Dog Breed

Kurdistan Chronicle

Iraqi Kurds hold a deep sense of pride in the Pishdar dog or Kurdish Mastiff, a remarkable breed that traces its roots to the rugged terrain of the Pishdar district near the Iranian border. Bearing a resemblance to the English Mastiff and the Turkish Kangal, the Pishdar is celebrated for its sheer size, extraordinary strength, and unmatched courage. Males of this breed can tower up to 90 centimeters in height and tip the scales at a staggering 80 kilograms, boasting a life expectancy of 10 to 13 years.

Pishdars are valuable animals in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), particularly in mountainous areas, with prices for some exceeding \$10,000. They are frequently used as livestock guardians and in combat sports.

Ahmed Nabi, a Kurdish shepherd, shared his story while tending to his flock of sheep within the rocky confines of the Pishdar district, two formidable Pishdars at his side. He described the immense danger posed by the local wildlife, including wolves, bears, and foxes, and how owning a Pishdar is a matter of life and death in this unforgiving landscape. "The Pishdar is very strong and fearless; it is not afraid of anything, not even a pack of wolves," he proudly stated.

He emphasized that Pishdars work tirelessly, sleeping during the day and staying awake at night, solely dedicating themselves to safeguarding the sheep and their shepherd. Ahmed recounted a recent encounter where his two Pishdars valiantly repelled three raiding wolves that ventured too close. "Basically, if you don't have a Pishdar, you can't be a shepherd here," he explains.

However, having a Pishdar dog is not easy for a shepherd like Ahmed because they are so expensive and most shepherds cannot afford them. Moreover, their numbers are decreasing, as Iranians travel to Pishdar to buy them for dog-fighting competitions in which gambling is involved.

"We either have to get a puppy, which is less expensive, breed them ourselves, or borrow them from other people, because otherwise it is too expensive for us," Ahmed explained.

Deep roots

Some historians refer to the Pishdar dog as the Assyrian Shepherd, tracing the breed back to the Assyrian Empire. There are, after all, Assyrian inscriptions and clay tablets that depict a type of dog that resembles the Pishdar and describe it as the best friend of humans. Some of the inscriptions depict the dog fighting a lion.

Kardost Hasan, 27, is from Ranya, which is near Pishdar district. He has had a strong attachment to Pishdar dogs since he was a child. He currently has 11 dogs, the names of which include Shera Sor (Red Lion), Qoza (Handsome), Ruta (Naked), and Shina (Blue).

He describes the dogs as calm and obedient, but always on high alert for any danger and ready to charge if they sense it.

He explained that Pishdars are not suitable as pets in a home or an apartment because they need to run at least 10 kilometers every day. For this reason, he keeps all his dogs at his farm outside of Ranya and takes them every day to run and swim at Ranya Lake, which is only a few hundred meters from his farm.

According to Kardost, the names of Pishdar breeds that are popular today include Qassab, Saphira, and Ismail Nouradini, which is the name of a village in Pishdar.

Kardost also engages his dogs in dog fighting once or twice a year, and Shera Sor (Red Lion) has never been defeated.

When questioned about the ethics and legality of dog fighting, Kardost responded, "Dog fighting has been a part of Pishdar culture for centuries; the people of Pishdar can't accept if they hear there is a dog not only in the KRI but also in neighboring countries that is braver than the Pishdar; once they hear that, they set a fighting date."

High stakes

Despite being prohibited in the KRI, dog fighting in Pishdar occurs monthly during the fall and winter months. Around 2,000 people gather to witness these contests, which are more popular in Pishdar than football. For the people here, dog fighting is not about gambling or money; it is about pride and determining whose dog is the better fighter.

an villages, whose large flocks of sheep require protection from wolves.

He expressed concern over the rise in Iranian purchases, warning that if the trend continues there will soon be very few Pishdar dogs left in the district. He urges authorities to intervene and prohibit their sale to Iran.

There is a strong belief among the people of Pishdar that if someone sells

Kardost claimed that he has never sold any of his Pishdars, preferring to gift them to friends and family. During the summer, he also allows shepherds to borrow them, not least because it benefits the dogs' health as they thrive in the cool mountain climate.

He also highlighted the problem of thieves. Since Pishdars fetch such high prices, one cannot leave their dog unattended because it will be stolen. One



Witness a man training a Pishdar dog, a fascinating display of canine skills

According to Kardost, Iranians have purchased increasing numbers of Pishdars in recent years, often to compete in dog fighting that includes gambling because large sums of money are involved. Others are purchased for Irani-

a Pishdar dog, something terrible will happen to that person. Nevertheless, the number of people selling them continues to increase.

of his puppies was stolen and his friend also lost one, which he later discovered was in Iran. Thankfully, with the assistance of police, the thief was detained, and the dog was returned to its owner. ●



The Journey of an American University in Kurdistan

RANDALL RHODES is the President of the American University in Kurdistan, Duhok.



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

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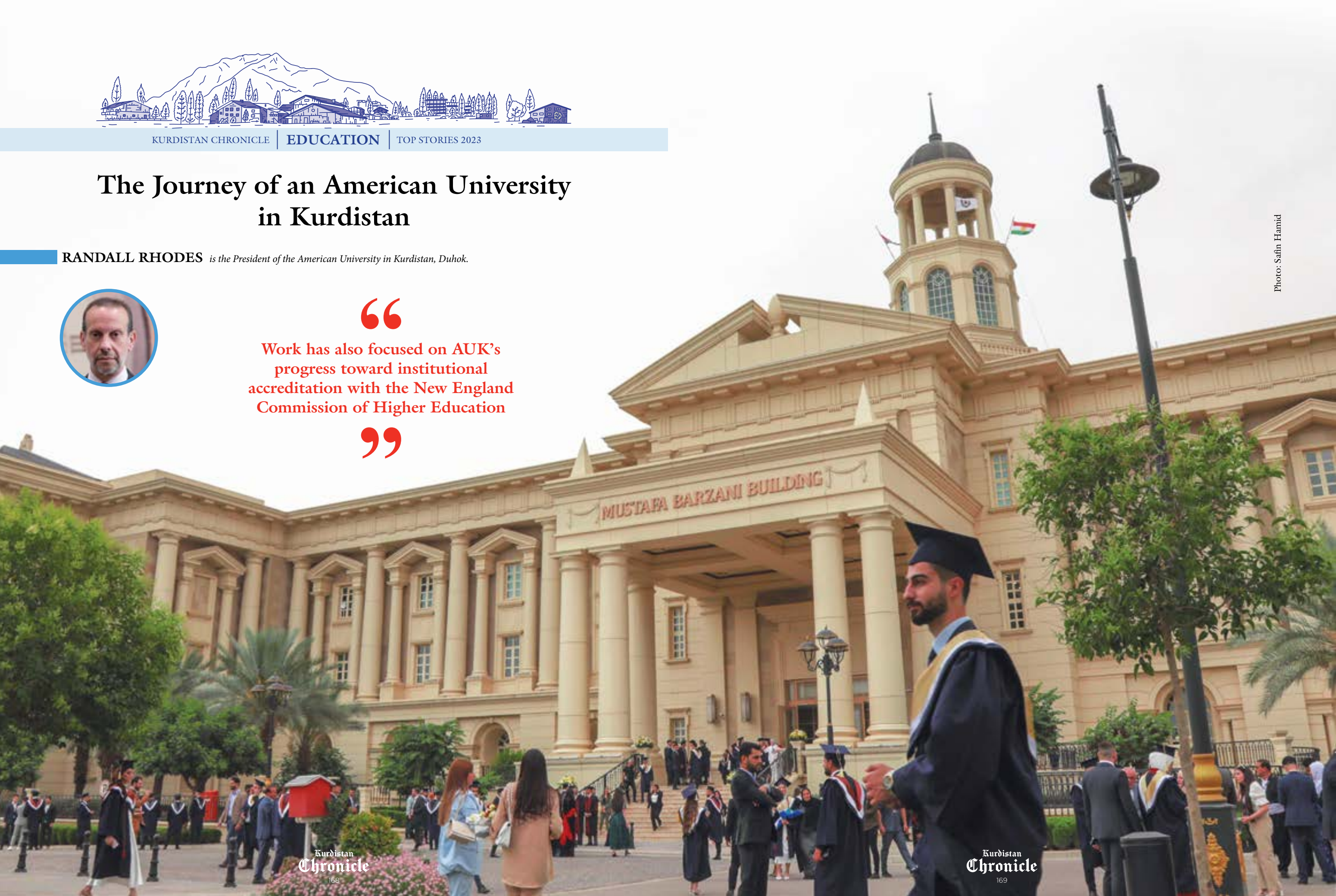


Photo: Safin Hamid



Photo: Sabr Dri

PM Barzani joins AUK students for their graduation photo

Founded in 2014 as a non-profit institution of higher learning by Masrouf 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 road-

maps 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, human 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



Barzani Charity Foundation Bringing Hope, Building Pride

KARZAN NOORI is Administrative Board Member and Program Planning Manager at the Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF).



On 6th February 2023, a massive earthquake hit south of Turkey and northwest of Syria, leaving over 55,000 people killed, more than 135,000 injured, and many more homeless and desperate for help. As the world watched in shock, one organization

quickly sprang into action to provide aid and support to the affected people. The Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF), a non-profit humanitarian organization based in the Kurdistan Region, immediately mobilized its resources to respond to the disaster and help its neighbors.

The BCF has a long history of providing humanitarian aid to those in need. Established in 2005, the foundation's mission is to provide assistance to vulnerable groups, such as orphans, widows, and people affected by natural disasters. The BCF has an impressive track record of delivering aid quickly and efficiently, and its response to the earthquake in Turkey and Syria was no exception.

Early hours in the morning on the tragic February 6th, Kurdistan Region Prime Minister H.E Masrour Barzani, also the founder and chairman of Board of Founders of BCF, ordered government institutions and the BCF to mobilize all their resources and deliver immediate humanitarian assistance to those affected by the quake over the border. The BCF teams, composed of doctors, nurses, engineers and rescuers, joined large convoys of ambulances and trucks carrying goods to Turkey and Syria.

According to the BCF, the foundation has provided aid to over 610,551 people affected by the earthquake for both Türkiye and Syria. This included the distribution of 23,600 food packages, preparing 364,863 hot meals, 59,969 blankets and mattresses, 16,552 medical packages, 15,478 pieces

of clothes, 4286 tents, 8,500 formula milk, over 100 construction trucks to rescue, 9333 heating stoves, 2160 seat of bread, distribution of 27 tons of coal, 94,950 kitchen and hygiene kits and 55,085 sets of drinking water. The BCF also set up mobile medical clinics to provide healthcare services to those in need while its rescuers joined the local and international teams to save those trapped under the rubbles for days of non-stop search operations. Additionally, the foundation provided financial assistance to families who lost their homes or livelihoods in the earthquake.

The BCF's response to the earthquake in Turkey and Syria highlights the foundation's commitment to humanitarianism and the welfare of people in need. Despite the ongoing military conflicts and political tensions in the region, the BCF did not hesitate to provide aid to its neighbors. In fact, according to BCF President Musa Ahmad, the arrival of the Kurdish rescuers in Turkey and Syria as the first responders was because "the Kurdistan Region did not waste time on calculations so to donate only what exceeds its needs, but it reacted quickly to share what was already needed at home." In the face of this tragedy, the BCF's response was a shining example of how individuals and organizations can make a positive difference in times of crisis. The BCF's commitment to providing aid and support to vulnerable groups, regardless of nationality or political affiliation, is a testament to the organization's values and principles.

But that's not all. A government-led campaign across the Kurdistan Region was well received by people who did not hesitate to donate everything within their means, from their own jackets to food, blankets, and cash. Kurds are known for this sense of hospitality and generosity towards others. It is not uncommon for Kurdish families to open their homes to others and provide them with food, shelter, and warm hospitality. This culture of kindness and hospitality has now extended beyond the Kurdish borders and is evident in the

BCF overseeing the rescue operation at a site in southeast Turkey after the devastating earthquake in February 2023.



Photo: Farhad Belbas

BCF's response to the earthquake in Turkey and Syria.

What made these massive campaigns unique is that they were not influenced by political agendas, but rather driven by a genuine desire to help people in need. This kind of compassion and selflessness is what makes the Kurdish people a truly exceptional nation.

It is also important to note that the Kurds themselves have faced many challenges and struggles throughout their history. They have been subject to discrimination, oppression, and violence, yet they have always maintained a sense of resilience and determination. Despite their own struggles, the Kurds have always been quick to help others in need.

Welcoming the first responders home after weeks of humanitarian work in Turkey, Prime Minister H.E Masrour Barzani pointed out that while the Kurds have received many generous assistances in the past, they were familiar with the sense of bliss a giver feels, but it was felt firsthand this time through the BCF's campaign.

"There have been many times we were in need, too. Other people opened their doors for us. We knew how blissful their works were. And now that we helped other people, it showed that we will never forget their help at those difficult times."

The BCF's response to the earthquake in Turkey is a reminder of the importance of humanitarianism and the need for people to come together in times of crisis. The BCF's efforts to provide aid and support to those affected by the earthquake are an inspiration to all of us, and a testament to the resilience and compassion of the Kurdish people. ●

A Museum of History and Emotion

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

AMED DEMIRHAN MLIS, MADR is the General Manager/Director of Barzani National Memorial.



On 30 November 1970, a journalist from the Los Angeles Times asked Mustafa Barzani to describe what qualities define a leader, to which he responded, “A leader should be judged by what he has done for his people.” The diverse quality and quantity of visitors to the Barzani National Memorial (BNM) reflect this sentiment: the people of Kurdistan appreciate what Barzani did for his nation.

Kurdistan is one of the oldest nations in the world. In the greater Middle East of the 760s, there were only two nations with their current names, Kurdistan and Arabistan, as seen in the Ottoman map of the early Abbasid era below.

However, the Treaty of Lausanne, signed

on July 24, 1923, by the victors of World War I, legally and politically eliminated the Kurds and Kurdistan from the face of the earth for the first time in history.

Since then, Kurdish patriotism became criminalized by the states that were established on the lands of the Kurds, and the Kurds have been subject to mass murder, imprisonment, deportation, and persecution, with “no friends but mountains.” After many years of fighting and struggle, on March 11, 1970, Mustafa Barzani finally forced legal and political recognition for Kurdistan with an agreement for autonomy with the state of Iraq.

Since BNM opened on May 11, 2023, it has been over-

whelmed by visitors from across greater Kurdistan and the diaspora and by diplomats and international delegations. It has remained open every day except the first day of the Eid holiday and is scientifically organized according to the best international practices of museum curation.

In the main entrance to the museum, a mosaic mural presents the liberation movements led by the Barzanis, includ-



Mehmet, E. (1911/12). *Tarih-i umumî ve Osmanî atlası. Mekteb-i Harbiye Matbaası, İstanbul = General History and the Ottoman Atlas. Published by Ottoman Military Printing Press İstanbul.*



Barzani with the Head of the Reference and Bibliographic Department of the V.I. Lenin State Library of the Soviet Union in Moscow after visiting the International Scientific Center – Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna on December 10, 1960. (Report on the visit of Chairman of the Kurdistan Democratic Party Mustafa Muhammad al-Barzani to the USSR (1960, December 11). *Ogonyok*. 1960. No 50. P.7)

ing Sheik Abdulsalam Barzani (1903), Sheik Ahmed, and Mustafa Barzani, all of which aimed for the peaceful co-existence of ethnic and religious diversity in Kurdistan, environmental protection, women's freedom, and social justice for all. These murals thus set the stage for the rest of the museum's presentation of Kurdistan and how the Barzani movements were at the vanguard of freedom and social justice.

After the mural, visitors learn a short history of Kurdistan and Barzani, which is based on scientific methods using official international documents. After that, they watch a 20-minute documentary film on the liberation movements before entering a part of the museum that presents photos of the movements' leadership and its major events, as well



Just A Small War

A little known war is raging in the rugged mountains of Northern Iraq. But Mullah Mustafa Barzani (top) relaxes with a book in his mountain hide-out while Iraqi President Abdul Salam Aref (below) wrestles with problem and prepares a major offensive.

Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (May 11, 1965) News of the World in Pictures (p. 14) Chicago, IL, United States.

as the personal artifacts of Mustafa Barzani and Idris Barzani.

From here, visitors move to a gallery that displays the weapons through the liberation struggle from Sheik Abdulselam to Mustafa Barzani. In addition, a gallery displays photos of the massacres and crimes committed against the people of Kurdistan and humanity. In the second section of this gallery, there are portraits of the leaders of the major Kurdish resistance movements and in the third section, various photos of historical sites in Kurdistan. Finally, the visitors see the cars used by Kurdistan's leaders.

Emotional outpourings from visitors

Most visitors express their admiration for the museum and are proud that Kurdistan has built such a great institution. Many pray for the founders of the museum.

Some are overwhelmed by emotion and pray and cry when they enter and see Mustafa Barzani photos. These occurrences become quite emotional for us as museum staff, and handling them is our biggest challenge but also one of the most rewarding. Some of their sentimental attachments, respect, and regard for Mustafa Barzani extend beyond imagination.

For instance, some visit the museum before going to Mecca for their pilgrimage, making Barzani their first stop on their journey. Another group visited after they had completed their pilgrimage, making Barzani the final step of their pilgrimage.

The other day a highly educated group of religious women from the Qadari sect of Islam visited the museum and played their duffs (framed drums) while singing hymns for Barzani. It was quite emotional and spiritual, and they played and sang in the museum's private meeting room.

Others who might have been part of the Barzanis' peshmarga or belong to *peshmerga* families and have grown up hearing of the legend of Barzani, will display similar emotional reactions. Nevertheless, regardless of religion and political orientation, most patriots of Kurdistan consider Barzan their Mecca and Barzani their national hero.

Mostly, visitors feel happy and further enlightened by learning more about the history of Kurdistan and Barzani from their visit. Regardless of educational level, every visitor learns something new and frequently they express their gratitude.

In its first two months, more than 30,000 people from all walks of life have visited BNM. Considering the population of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the museum's location, BNM had more visitors per capita than the Nelson Mandela Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa, (NAMANYA, M. (2023, June 19). A day at Nelson Mandela museum) or the Madurai Gandhi Museum in India. (The Times of India (2022, May 22. Footfall at Madurai Gandhi museum)

We are proud of this early success and remain open to welcome all visitors to this vital part of the history of Kurdistan. ●

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Since BNM opened on May 11, 2023, it has been overwhelmed by visitors from across greater Kurdistan and the diaspora and by diplomats and international delegations

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Kurdish Refugee to Dutch Police Chief

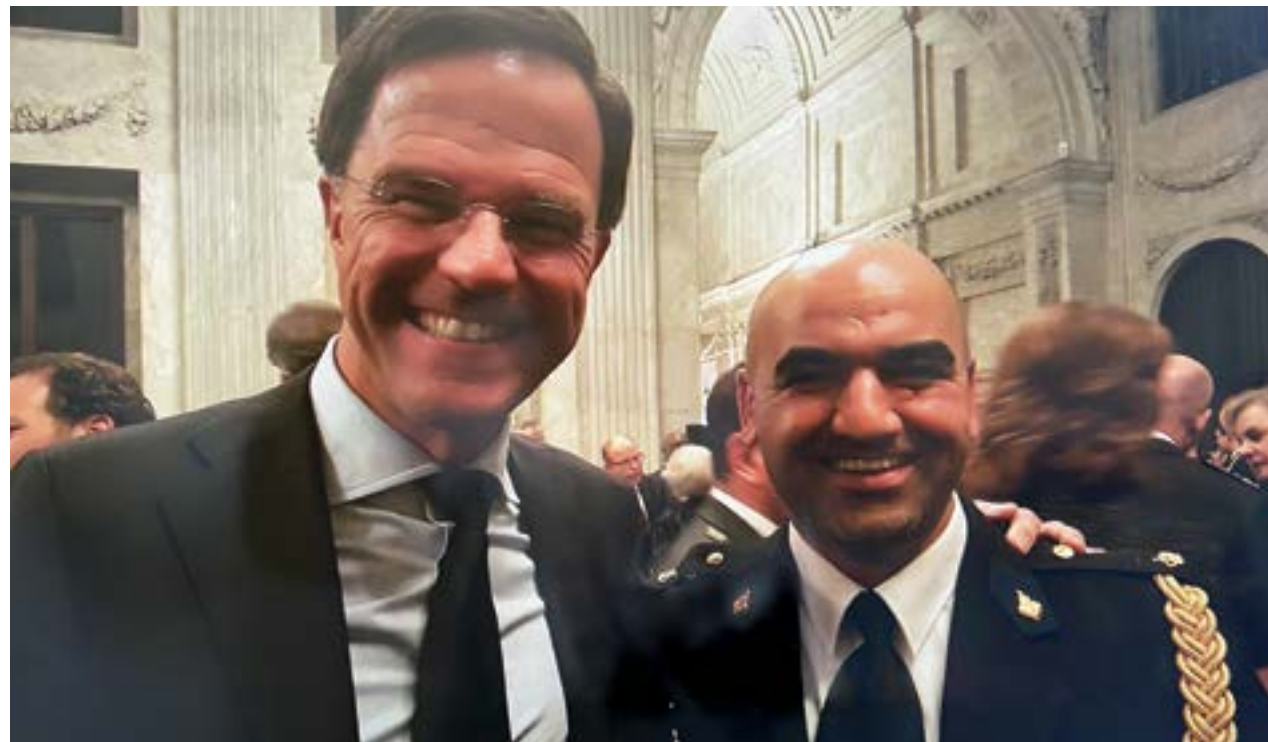
Kurdistan Chronicle

On May 1, 2023, Saman Hassan was appointed police sector head of the North and East Gelderland district in the Netherlands, a remarkable achievement for someone who was granted asylum in the country in 1998.

“I came to the Netherlands from Sulaymaniyah when I was 24 years old. I grew up in Kurdistan, finished secondary

(KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). I never believed in the civil war or actively participated in it. Therefore, I decided to leave.”

Hassan initially wanted to go to Europe and ended up in the Netherlands through a smuggler. “At the time, I knew very little about the country except for Friesian cows.”



■ Saman Hassan captured alongside Mark Rutte, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands

school there, and joined the *Asayish* (the Kurdish security and intelligence agency),” Hassan told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

“I worked as an *Asayish* officer in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Halabja, Soran, and Ranya from 1993 to 1997, when the civil war escalated between the Kurdistan Democratic Party

In the Netherlands, he ended up in the province of Groningen near the German border. “A journalist once interviewed me and asked about my vision for the future and my aspirations in the Netherlands. I responded by expressing my desire to work with the police in a few years, with the aim of making a positive contribution to society.

My ultimate goal was to hold a leadership position and make a meaningful impact on people’s lives.”

A few years later, Hassan approached the mayor of Groningen and chief of the police in Friesland to seek assistance in applying for a job with the Dutch police. “At that time, I did not possess Dutch nationality, and I was awaiting the issuance of my Dutch passport. To ensure my acceptance into the police force, I devised a plan and also engaged in work related to socio-legal services. Interestingly, the region I currently lead is the same area where I sought asylum back in 1998.”

“It was a long and challenging journey as it took me five to six years to obtain a residency permit after years of hard work and completing my education. Once I finally secured my residency permit and obtained Dutch nationality, I had the necessary documentation to fulfill my dream of joining the police force. In 2007, this dream became a reality when I was accepted into the police academy,” he added.

Integration not assimilation

During his interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Hassan took care to share a perspective that he believed could be helpful for Dutch Kurds. “Kurds sometimes think that if they come to Europe they will lose their own identity, culture, and values. I am proof that those two worlds can coexist perfectly. I told myself early that I have to respect Dutch rules and values.”

“I fled Kurdistan, so this is my house; I had to follow its rules and values. It’s about integration, not assimilation,” he said.

Nonetheless, he noted that a significant portion of Kurds, upon their arrival in the Netherlands, harbor concerns about preserving their identity and tend to adhere to outdated, conservative values.

“Some Dutch Kurds aspire to return to Kurdistan one day and often hold onto their Kurdish identity and traditions rather than embracing Dutch norms

and values. However, this mindset can lead to difficulties in integrating into Dutch society and finding long-term happiness here, as many ultimately do not return to Kurdistan,” he warned.

“They resist letting their daughters go swimming or allowing their wives to shop alone, adhering to norms that have even evolved in Kurdistan itself,” he pointed out.

However, Hassan also emphasized that this phenomenon is not unique, as Dutch individuals exhibit similar behavior when they migrate to Africa, Australia, or America. “Upon one’s migration to the Netherlands, it is crucial to prioritize the immediate embrace of Dutch norms, values, and the language as integral components of your life,” he advised.

Hassan also married a Dutch woman, who he met during his student days and with whom he now has two children. “My wife has been to Kurdistan at least 16 to 17 times, with my family-in-law and children also visiting.”

“It’s about integration, not assimilation”

“I spent 24 years of my life in Kurdistan and another 23 years in the Netherlands. I make two trips to Kurdistan every year, during which I have undertaken numerous projects for the police and various organizations that are funded by my own resources and driven by my passion. To this day, I continue to contribute in various ways,” he said.

He emphasized the significance of understanding that integration into Dutch society does not entail forfeiting one’s Kurdish identity. “It’s important to note that one doesn’t exclude the other. My advice to Kurds living in the Netherlands is to prioritize learning the language and completing their educa-

tion. This provides them with the ability to make informed decisions about their future.”

“If you choose not to pursue a path like mine, you can always consider returning to Kurdistan. In fact, I could have also returned and pursued a career in Kurdistan,” he added. “It’s essential to strike a balance between preserving your heritage and embracing the culture of your host country.”

Royal invite

Due to his achievements, Hassan received an invitation from the Dutch royal family to attend a Christmas reception in 2016. “The selection criteria are not disclosed, but they do mention that individuals are chosen for their contributions to the Dutch state and for my work in promoting diversity, addressing the refugee crisis, and tackling radicalization.”

During the reception, he had the privilege of meeting Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, members of the cabinet, and leaders of various political parties in the Dutch parliament.

In addition, the entire royal family graced the event, including Dutch King Willem-Alexander, Queen Máxima, and other family members.

“We engaged in numerous discussions, and I had a particularly meaningful conversation with Mark Rutte about Kurdistan; he was remarkably well-informed. Such experiences are truly rare.”

Hassan, now with several years of experience in the police, is currently in charge of leading police operations in 22 different municipalities. Additionally, he has received offers to assume the role of a mayor.

Speaking about his future, he stated, “I am uncertain about my career path ahead, but with 18 years of experience in the police, I continue to find it fulfilling. Although I’ve been approached several times to enter politics, I have declined those offers because my passion lies in continuing my work in the police.” ●



A Robe for the Pope

Kurdistan Chronicle

In the city of Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) resides a remarkable artist whose creativity transcends borders. Shanaz Jamal, an artist, fashion designer, and advocate for recycling, has emerged as a local sensation and gained international recognition. Her journey has been defined by her dedication to preserving Kurdish heritage, promoting religious tolerance, and conveying powerful messages through her art and fashion.

Her artwork can be found in homes, cafes, and government buildings, including the White House. When top foreign officials and dignitaries visit the KRI, Kurdish officials gift them with Shanaz's artwork.

Kurdistan Chronicle recently met Shanaz in Sulaymaniyah to discuss her upcoming projects and her meeting with Pope Francis.

One pivotal moment that propelled Shanaz into the international spotlight came in 2019 when she met Pope Francis at the Vatican. The catalyst for this recognition was the making of a robe adorned with symbols representing the eight religions in the KRI: Islam, Christianity, Yezidism, Mandaeism, Yarsanism, Zoroastrianism, the Bahá'í Faith, and Judaism.

Shanaz explained that her original plan was to create eight

pieces of art representing all the faiths in the KRI, with the intention of uniting their representatives within a mosque or a church and gifting them these artistic embodiments of unity. A friend's suggestion, however, reshaped this vision to combine the eight works and incorporate other Kurdish symbols into a single robe destined for Pope Francis.



It took Shanaz 19 months to finish the robe. Its back was embellished with 5,000 beads and precious stones, each representing a life lost in the tragic chemical attack in Halabja. On the front, 182,000 beads and stones represented the victims of the Saddam Hussein regime's genocidal atrocities against the Iraqi Kurdish population from 1983 to 1988.

In addition, the robe was elegantly embroidered with religious symbols such as the cross, the crescent, Zoroastrianism's winged emblem, the Star of David, and the sun and temples revered by the Yezidis. These collectively captured the Kurdish people's enduring spirit and unwavering faith despite relentless persecution.

Meeting Pope Francis was a dream for Shanaz. "I could not believe it when I received the invitation. I met his holiness and put the robe around his shoulders; he was impressed by its beauty and all the symbols on the robe," she recalled.



Shanaz Jamal gifting her handmade robe to Pope Francis in Vatican (October 2019)

Photo: Safin Hamid

Shanaz's artistic journey is deeply intertwined with her love for Kurdish culture. She draws inspiration from traditional rugs, carpets, and clothing, aiming to transform them into artistic expressions that echo the rich heritage of her homeland. Her childhood memories of her mother sewing Kurdish women's attire and her grandmother crafting handmade *klash* – a kind of traditional footwear – from cotton and cowhide have left an indelible mark on her creative path.

"Through my art and fashion pieces, I want to show the world that Kurdish culture, its beautiful designs, the ability of Kurdish women, and the importance of religious coexistence in the Kurdistan Region," she explained.

Shanaz believes she must act as a cultural ambassador of the KRI, stitching together stories of peace and diversity.

She also stated that she is currently working on a project to create art for several world leaders.

"There are some messages I'd like to convey to some world leaders, but I'd like to convey them through art," she

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One pivotal moment that propelled Shanaz into the international spotlight came in 2019 when she met Pope Francis at the Vatican
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said, declining to specify what kind of art she intends to make or to which world leaders she will give them.

The project is in motion, and Shanaz hopes to travel soon to Europe to meet the first of the world leaders.

Meanwhile, she hopes one day to be able to open her permanent gallery in Kurdistan to the public.

"I want to establish an international Kurdish brand for clothing, women's accessories, and recycled arts made from rugs and carpets embellished with

precious stones and beads," she said.

She also encourages the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to establish cultural centers within KRG representatives to familiarize the world with Kurdish cultures and arts and provide an opportunity for Kurdish designers to introduce their work to the world.

The KRG has 14 international offices – most notably in the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Iran – and none of them has a cultural center.

Besides working as artist, Shanaz spends her free time volunteering at prisons in the KRI to support inmates.

Shanaz donates some of the money that she earns to organize music concerts and film screenings inside prisons, as well as workshops teaching inmates how to make women's bags.

"I just want the inmates to see some of the good things that are going on outside the prison walls," Shanaz said. ●



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The Melodious Voice Echoing the Heart of Kurdistan

Kurdish journalist based in Moscow. KHOSHAWI MUHAMMAD



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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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Zara performing with Andrea Bocelli in Moscow, November 24, 2016.

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 studio album released when she was just twelve years old. Over the years, she has released more than ten albums, captivating audiences world-

wide. In 2017, her Kurdish album became a reality, thanks to the support and collaboration of renowned world music star Yasmine Levy. Zara's album features remarkable songs like "Dayê", "Keça Kurdim", "Welatê min", and "Emane", 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 personal identity.

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

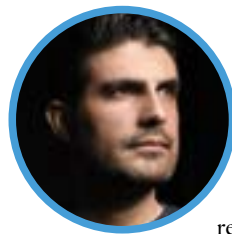
As Zara's musical career continues to evolve, she embraces the global reach of her recent work and the opportunity to touch the lives of people from different countries and cultures. With her unwavering commitment to her roots, powerful voice, and captivating performances, Zara remains a true Kurdish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



Hani Mojtahedy

A Voice of Hope in Exile

HIWA SELAH is both a journalist and a musician, having also served as the head of the Music Department at the Fine Arts Institute in Rwanda.



In the heart of the ever-resilient Kurdish community, a courageous and pioneering figure has emerged whose voice resonates with the

echoes of conflict and the call for unity. Hani Mojtahedy, a name that has become synonymous with bravery, has not only captured the attention of her fellow Kurds but also enraptured audiences worldwide with her profound story and captivating melodies.

Born in Sanandaj, a city nestled in eastern Kurdistan (Rojhilat) within northwestern Iran, Hani's journey as a singer began in 2000. Her path was far from conventional, shaped by haunting memories of religious figures and Sufi chants. She was raised in the sanctuary of her grandfather's home, where spiritual gatherings echoed with the dhikir, a kind of ritual prayer, and the timeless melodies of the Sufis. This ethereal atmosphere infused young Hani with a sense of purpose, laying the foundation for her remarkable musical odyssey.

A harmonious heritage

Hani's artistic lineage can be traced back to her mother, whose poignant and impassioned voice instilled within Hani a burning desire to sing freely. The constraints of tradition and circumstance had shackled her mother's voice, a fate Hani was determined to transcend. Her mother's untold longing to express herself through song became a

catalyst for Hani's pursuit of a voice unburdened by limitations.

Reflecting on her youth, Hani fondly recalls the influence of her uncle, an ardent admirer of the late Kurdish vocalist Ali Merdan. This familial connection further fueled her musical aspirations, intertwining her destiny with the threads of Kurdish musical heritage.

War, resilience, and unyielding identity

Hani's childhood unfolded amid the backdrop of conflict, where the sounds of bombs and artillery played a discordant symphony. Her earliest memories are marked by the sight of her mother's bloodied hands, treating wounds amid the chaos of war. These formative experiences forged an indomitable strength within her, propelling her toward a life of purpose.

Her mother's enduring lessons during those tumultuous times left an indelible mark on Hani's consciousness. The mantra that "Kurds do not live for themselves when they are born" became her guiding philosophy. This unwavering commitment to collective well-being and unity became the cornerstone of her identity, even as she carved her path as a singer and artist.

A musical ambassador in exile

In 2004, Hani embarked on a new chapter,



“Hani's childhood unfolded amid the backdrop of conflict, where the sounds of bombs and artillery played a discordant symphony

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leaving behind her homeland for Germany. Her exile was a conscious choice driven by the yearning to amplify the voice of her divided nation on the global stage. Through her music, Hani sought to showcase the creative prowess and innate talent of Kurdish women, shattering preconceived notions and crossing cultural boundaries.

Hani's musical spectrum expanded as she collaborated with German and other Western musicians, melding Kurdish melodies with diverse styles. Her partnership with these musicians was not merely transactional; it was fueled by their genuine appreciation for her sound and the message she conveyed. This collaboration is at the heart of the electronic album *Hazhirok*, a mosaic of her childhood memories set to an evocative canvas of sound.

The call of Kurdistan

Hani's devotion to her homeland is unwavering, evident in her performances, where the national songs and the name Kurdistan are constant companions. She remains resolute in the face of criticism, seeing her music as a steadfast beacon against oppression. Hani's melodies are not just songs; they are anthems of resistance, testaments to the enduring spirit of a people yearning for self-determination.

In recent years, Hani extended her artistic reach into the world of cinema, acting in Turaj Aslani's film *Be Nishtiman*. This cinematic endeavor connected her with fellow Kurdish artists from all four corners of Kurdistan, amplifying her commitment to sharing the narratives of her people with a global audience.

Looking ahead

When speaking with Hani, one cannot help but be swept up by her hopes and dreams for the future. Her heart swells with aspirations for the Kurdish youth, encouraging them to embrace self-confidence, pursue education, and reach for the stars. Her vision for Kurdistan is one where progress in music, art, and science becomes a hallmark of a vibrant and thriving society.

Hani Mojtahedy's story is one of resilience, inspiration, and unwavering commitment to her identity and her people. Her melodies bridge continents, cultures, and hearts, weaving a tapestry that honors her heritage and kindles a flame of hope for a brighter future. In an ever-changing world, Hani's music remains a steadfast reminder of the power of the human spirit and the unbreakable bonds of community. ●



“
Hani Mojtahedy's story is one of resilience, inspiration, and unwavering commitment to her identity and her people
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Hani Mojtahedy



Mountains of Kurdistan The Switzerland of the Middle East for Hiking

Kurdistan Chronicle

Many people around the world visit mountains for a unique opportunity to get in touch with nature and think deeply about themselves. Mountains can also be places where farming and raising herd animals is the main source of income.

For Kurds, however, a mountain signifies far more than a physical elevation change.

Mountains are existential to Kurdish people, as they have historically been vital to their revolts against tyrants. The Kurds have an old saying that they “have no friends except

the mountains.” Another goes, “Kurds’ home ends where the mountains end.”

Kurdistan mountain names are popular names for Kurdish children, including Halgurd, Safeen, Mateen, Shereen, Zagros, and Bestoon.

The mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan are quite jagged and rocky with lots of valleys where rivers wind and waterfalls reside.

The Kurds’ connection to their mountainous terrain never seems to change no matter how much Kurdish society

evolves. Yet, with relative peace and stability since 2003, the Kurds discovered that their attachment to the mountains extended beyond survival and recreation, as mountaineering and hiking have grown in popularity in recent years.

Spring and autumn are ideal seasons for hikers to trek in the Kurdistan mountains. Rock climbing and caving are growing rapidly in popularity, but professional mountaineering is still in its early stages.

Kurdistan has several 3500-meter peaks, and has become a stepping stone for professional mountaineers to train and gain experience before attempting to climb larger mountains in other countries.

Ari Othman and his wife Hawzhin have climbed Kyrgyzstan’s Lenin and the Himalayas’ Manaslu and describe the burgeoning scene in Kurdistan.



“Rock climbing is growing in Kurdistan. We have more than 20 climbing routes in Erbil’s Safeen Mountain and even more in Sulemani’s Hazar Merd Mountain. Many climbers participate in advanced climbing, such as multi-pitch climbing,” Ari Othman said.

Othman, on the other hand, explained

that the lack of good mountaineering and climbing teaching organizations has caused Kurdish mountaineers to lag professionally. As a result, mountaineers lack the basic skills required to climb difficult and technical routes, particularly during the cold seasons, while mountain rescues are scarce.



A group of hikers in the mountains of Soran, Kurdistan Region

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Kurdistan has several
3500-meter peaks

There were only about 10-20
hikers in 2015, but now we have
over 100 hiking groups with
over 7,000 members.

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“If a climber becomes lost or injured, the situation can rapidly escalate into a life-threatening one. Though most of the mountains in Kurdistan have cell phone coverage, calling for emergency services only connects you to the police, who are woefully unprepared for such a situation,” Othamn added.

“There were only about 10-20 hikers in 2015, but now we have over 100 hiking groups with over 7,000 members,” Othman concluded.

Most hikers avoid the riskier areas, especially those with dormant landmines. During the 1980s, the former Iraqi regime planted thousands of explosives in the Kurdistan Region and other disputed territories to impede Iranian troop advances, particularly along the two countries’ shared border.

In addition to connecting with nature and savoring Kurdistan’s breathtaking scenery, hiking in Kurdistan allows you to experience the rich and welcoming Kurdish culture, none more special than in its mountain communities.

Rock Climbing

Halgurd Mountain

Mount Halgurd is the most recognizable and the highest peak in the country at altitude 3606m, Fresh mineral water running down the mountain springs and so many nomads living in the mountain lowlands.

Sakran Mountain

Sakran mountain is considered as the most technical mountain to climb in the region, it requires advanced mountaineering skills like ice axe and ropes. One of the most striking things about Sakran is its crater lake, located right on the summit. After one or two days of climbing, the moment that you reach the summit, the wondrous nature in front of you will make you forget how tired you are of climbing.



Barzan

Protecting and maintaining the aspects of wildlife is a must for people’s lifestyles in Kurdistan’s mountainous Barzan area. Traditions remain valuable even in the wake of modern agriculture with traditional habits going back a century. Locals prioritize the safety of wildlife from recreational hunters, including threats from mountain goats who are not deterred by people’s presence.

Some of the activities that are becoming more common include; Rafting and kayaking are some of the most popular activities, prompted by the increased interest in outdoor recreational activities, rafting has become widespread as well. The beautiful river in Barzan, has attracted the frequent participation of locals and tourists. ●





Horses in Kurdistan

From Ancient Warfare to Modern Equestrianism

Kurdistan Chronicle

The human domestication of animals in the Zagros region, which covers most of the areas inhabited by the Kurds, goes back thousands of years. Among the inhabitants of these lands, Kassites, who controlled Babylonia after the fall of the Old Babylonian Empire (c. 1531 BC to c. 1155 BC), are believed to be among the first people to breed horses.

Besides using horses for transportation, Kassites also needed these agile animals for the many battles they fought with their neighbors. They nurtured horses and taught their children to ride them. Later, due to their unique physical structure, Kassites horses were also exported throughout Mesopotamia.

Horse breeding was further developed in later periods of the first millennium B.C. Historical stone engravings and carvings of horses from the reigns of the Medes, Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids survive today that indicate the importance of horses in daily life, including among the Kurds.

Besides its unique physical structure, the Kurdish horse

breed is known for its beauty and strength. The breed originates from the Kurdish areas of Iran, where the mountainous topography and moderately cold climate sculpted a unique horse population that is resistant to harsh environmental conditions.

Horses and the Kurdish revolutions

Kurds, as the largest stateless nation in the world, have constantly been subject to the brutality by those who have ruled their lands. However, they repeatedly refused to accept such oppression and revolted from time to time to fight for their rights.

Horse breeding in Kurdistan might carry a different meaning than in other parts of the world. After all, horses were integral parts of Kurdish revolutions, during which the animal was the basic means of transporting weapons and mobilizing fighters. Horses, after all, were always part of the daily lives of the nomadic communities in Kurdistan and are obviously the best option for guerrilla fighting in the harsh environment of Kurdistan's mountains.





but difficult passage to the Soviet Union. This journey, led by General Mustafa Barzani, was made possible by the horses carrying them, their weapons, and their families.

Later, during the two landmark revolutions of the Kurds in Iraq, the Aylul and Gulan revolutions, horses were once again pivotal in the struggle, traveling from mountain to mountain carrying fighters, weapons, food, and other equipment for the *peshmerga* forces.

Kurdish legendary leader Mustafa Barzani is known as one of the prominent figures in modern Kurdish history who, almost always, owned a stud farm of his favorite horses. He appears in many black-and-white photographs riding a white horse.

The tradition that he established lives on today for many in the Barzan area of the Kurdistan Region. They have protected the genetics of General Mustafa Barzani's horse and hope to get the breed officially registered in the Horse Encyclopedia as the Barzan horse.

Horse riding in Kurdistan

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime in 2003, the economy of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq began to develop quickly. This, obviously, has had a remarkable impact on the lifestyle of the very people who were subject to multiple massacres over the past few decades.

Equestrian championships and events to select the most elegant horses are common practices today in Kurdistan, and several horse clubs now convene those interested in horse riding both as a professional sporting game and entertainment.

In 1946, when the first Republic of Kurdistan was founded in the Iranian Kurdish city of Mahabad, horses were part of the army and appear in authentic documentary films marching with fighters on their backs. After the republic fell before its first anniversary, hundreds of Kurdish fighters found a safe



Photo: Safim Hamid



Horse riding championships in Erbil

Photo: Safim Hamid

Today, Erbil is home to one of the most professional horse clubs in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Karwan Barzani, manager of the Erbil International Equestrian Club, spoke to *Kurdistan Chronicle* in an exclusive interview to explain about the current situation of horse breeding in the Kurdistan Region. He explained that initial steps to introduce equestrianism as a professional sport were taken in 2008, when they founded a small club in the mountainous areas of Barzan, northeast of Erbil. The efforts received enough attention from the public that the founders began considering establishing an international club in Erbil in 2013.

Today, the Erbil International Equestrian Club attracts horse riders from around the Kurdistan Region, Iraq and the world for championships in steeplechase and flat racing. However, according to Karwan Barzani, challenges remain in introducing the Kurdish horse breed to international championships outside of Iraq due to a ban on transferring horses from Iraq to other countries. "Animal diseases and the violent natural environments in Iraq are the main reasons why other countries

do not allow horses from Iraq and the Kurdistan Region to be transferred and introduced into events," Barzani added.

As horse riding booms both as a professional sport and personal hobby, the prices of horses are also rising. Sattar Ahmed, a Kurdish horse breeder in Erbil, says that the price for a horse can run as high as 8,500 USD. He further explained that Arabian horses are the most popular and most expensive horses in the Kurdistan Region market, followed by other different breeds of French horses. The Kurdish breed, however, does not compete in price as it is often used for transportation and farming in rural areas.

With equestrianism growing in the Kurdistan Region, a new market has certainly emerged and created more jobs. According to the official statistics in 2022, 239 horses were imported from other countries to the Kurdistan Region. To monitor the process and prevent any disease outbreaks, authorities enforce strict veterinarian regulations at border crossings and airports.

Horses in Kurdish culture

Despite the relatively modern and high living standards in today's Kurdistan Region, horses remain part of the culture. Many couples use horses in their wedding ceremonies to follow their ancestors' traditions. In the old days, the family of a bride would carry their daughter and her belongings on the backs of horses to meet the family of a groom midway, from where the groom would take the bride and walk ahead of the bride's horse. While it remains an important practice in Kurdish wedding rituals, some might argue that it also reflects a patriarchal culture in which men dominate the family.

Finally, in Kurdish literature, there are countless stories and poetries in which horses play a central and structural role, while horses also carry specific meanings in Kurdish oneiromancy, denoting happiness, prosperity, wealth, achievement, and peace, some qualities that Kurds, as a nation, have been chasing for decades, if not centuries. ●



The Story of Dalkurd FF An Interview with Founder Ramazan Kızıl

ALI FIKRI IŞIK,
experienced journalist and writer.



Ramazan Kızıl

was born in 1958 in the village of Girêmêra in the Nusaybin district of Mardin, Turkey. He served as the headman (mukhtar) of the same village for two terms, which is where his nickname “Mukhtar” comes from. In the early 1990s, he was forced to immigrate to Sweden for political reasons. He took an active role in Kurdish politics in Sweden for a long time. In 2004, he and his friends founded DalKurd FF in the Börlänge locality of the Dalarna region. His team completed the first five stages of the Swedish league as champions every season and was promoted to the Ettan (third division) in 2010 and then to the Superettan (second division) in 2014. In the 2016-2017 season, DalKurd played its way up to the Allsvenskan (first division) but was relegated that season. DalKurd currently continues to compete in the Ettan.



Ramazan Kızıl, Co-founder of DalKurd FF

DalKurd FF, commonly known as DalKurd, is a Swedish football club based in Uppsala. The club plays in the Ettan Norra, the third division of Swedish professional football. It was founded on September 26, 2004, by members of the Kurdish diaspora in Börlänge, Dalarna.

On November 24, 2017, Dalkurd moved their senior team operations to Uppsala, some 140 kilometers south-east of Börlänge. DalKurd FF is affil-

iated with Upplands Fotbollförbund (Uppland Football Association).

The club started in 2004 as a social project that would offer activities for the youth of Börlänge. IK Brage helped finance the project. In the club’s first season, the average age of the players was 17 years. At its founding, the club’s chairman Ramazan Kızıl had high expectations for the players and an ultimate goal of taking the club to the professional levels of the Swedish league. DalKurd won every division that they

participated in from their inaugural season in 2005 to 2009. Owing to this success, the club received considerable media attention both in Sweden and abroad.

Ramazan Kızıl is the most iconic character of Kurdish football. In the purest and most precise sense of the word, Kızıl gave his character to DalKurd football club, which he founded and manages. He achieved all this in a country where the language, culture and traditions were foreign to him. But



there was no way that his story could have been formed any other way: he was a Kurd in Sweden, and DalKurd's fate depended on his character.

Q: I want to start with a classic question in reverse. Anybody would want to know "how" you did it. And you are not someone who keeps success a secret. Based on your experience, what did you find most difficult while trying to achieve this success?

A: We knew what we didn't know. This statement may be too Socratic, but when we were structuring DalKurd, that was exactly our situation. We didn't know, and we started out by making a decision that affirmed our state of not knowing. The first sentence that we wrote in the club's decision book was: "We, the DalKurd board of directors, do not know football." As the entire board of directors, without exception, we considered it our first duty and responsibility to learn and understand this game.

Q: This was quite exceptional, as the most prominent feature of the Kurdish national character is our ability to normalize even the things we don't know by saying "I know". You went beyond this character and even documented that your ignorance, right?

A: Right. We did what was necessary in this state of not knowing. For two years we participated in the training activities of the Swedish Football Association and addressed our need to know. We had a purpose and a belief. Our purpose was to protect Kurdish youth in Sweden from joining the criminal wave – and football offered an excellent solution. Our belief was that the confidence that Kurdish youth would acquire would help them achieve great things later, if given the opportunity.

Q: What do you think was the guarantee of success for the first six seasons?

A: Actually, this question has a very simple answer. We had to tire out these young people during the day to keep



them away from the nightlife, so that when the training was over, none of them would want to go out. This understanding, which has no scientific value in terms of training techniques, produced results. The team was in seriously good shape while the players refrained from their nightlife activities. Accompanied by a simple game plan, this situation naturally led to six years of uninterrupted success.

Q: If my memory serves me correctly, you remained stuck in Ettan (third

division) for quite a while? Would you like to say something about the reasons for this?

A: We became popular after being champions for six seasons in a row. We had solved a series of problems, made a series of unknowns known, were much more experienced, and were working much harder. But the success shook our balance a little. We had become a well-known club in the Swedish public. We were involved in social responsibility projects and new offers were coming in all the time. We started to appear in

the Swedish press frequently. Of course, this situation was very interesting, and this interest, I must admit, did distract us. Everyone wanted a piece of this success. Of course, the success belonged to all of us, and we showed flexibility to make sure that everyone enjoyed feeling proud of it, but after a while, the distraction caused some problems. Nevertheless, we, as a club, were able to bounce back and make it to Superettan (second division) only a few years later.

Q: Do you have any regrets?

A: I wish I hadn't accepted his request to move to Uppsala. After we moved, we had a disagreement and decided to go our separate ways. After this separation, it became clearer what we had lost. The problems that DalKurd is experiencing today are mainly those still affected by the consequences of this story, and things are unfortunately getting worse.

Thank you. ●



A Sporting Phenomenon on the Rise

AYAR RASOOL *documentary and short film producer.*



KURDISTAN RUGBY



RUGBY

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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 organizing 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, religions, 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 arranging 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

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can offer valuable guidance, training programs, and access to 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 pursue 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. ●



Championing American Football Through Kurdish Grit and Passion

Kurdistan Chronicle

the world, is well educated about his homeland, his people, and what it takes to be a Kurd. Mr. Ali, Alan's father, took it upon himself to instill the Kurdish spirit, culture, and history in his son and raise him in a way so that, later in life, the resilient spirit of his half Kurdish side would help him become one of the most outstanding American football players.

From Texas to the NFL

Alan's passion for American football became evident to his family when he was only seven years old. From that tender age, everyone was certain about his bright future, and he knew he would find his way to excellence. Eighteen years later, in May 2023, Alan joined the NFL after signing a contract with the Minnesota Vikings, a remarkable achievement for any football player.

However, it was not an easy journey. Before reaching the top league, Alan proved his talent in college playing at both Southern Methodist University (SMU) and Texas Christian University (TCU). At the latter, he earned the prestigious honor of First Team All-Big 12, a testament to his skills and hard work. His college football journey included participating in the College Football Playoffs and the National Championship Game, where he played in front of millions of fans, displaying the prowess of a determined athlete.

In an exclusive interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Alan was asked about his plans to introduce American football to Kurdistan. He explained that he planned to visit his homeland again next year and aims to organize a free youth football camp to teach children the ins and outs of the sport.

First time in Kurdistan

Alan visited Kurdistan for the very first time ten years ago. He described the initial moments in his ancestral land as astonishing and unfor

“ Alan Ali's story is all about diversity, dedication, hard work, and a strong connection to Kurdistan

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A patriotic American with proud roots in Kurdistan

Alan Ali's story is all about diversity, dedication, hard work, and a strong connection to Kurdistan. His father, who hails from Halabja, made his way to America in the early 1990s to pursue higher education, where he eventually met and married Alan's American mother. The result of this union is a patriotic American who is proud of his Kurdish roots and misses no chances to highlight his background inside and outside of his professional life.

Alan, like many second-generation Kurdish migrants around

gettable. "I loved every minute of being in Kurdistan. The Kurdish people I met there were some of the kindest and most genuine people I have ever met," he said.

What stunned him the most, however, was the fact that Ahmadi Gate at the renowned Citadel of Erbil was named after his great-great-grandfather, as his grandmother was originally from Erbil.

Proudly hoisting the Kurdistan flag

Alan's pride in his Kurdish identity is evident on and off the field. During various games across the United States, he has been seen wrapping the Kurdistan flag around himself to celebrate victories. In this act, as he said, he shows that he is proud of being a Kurd while carrying a message of unity and representation. In a country where many might not recognize the word "Kurdistan," Alan takes every opportunity to raise awareness about the Kurds, their painful past, and their prosperous future.

"Basically, I want to let people know that I am proud to be a Kurd and that it is an honor to be able to carry that flag," he explained.

Inspiring the next generation

Being one of the first, if not the very first, Kurdish-American football player in the NFL comes with great responsibilities, which Alan well acknowledges. He hopes that he has what it takes to become a source of inspiration for the young generation to follow their dreams relentlessly while remaining proud of their background. He firmly believes that hard work,

self-belief, and a strong connection to one's roots can propel individuals to achieve their dreams, just as they did for him.

Alan Ali's story is more than just a tale of sporting triumph; it is a powerful narrative of bridging cultures and celebrating one's heritage on a global stage. From the plains of Texas to the mountains of Kurdistan, Alan's journey exemplifies the potential for success and recognition that lies within all Kurds worldwide.

As he proudly carries the Kurdish flag on the gridirons of the NFL, Alan Ali proves that no matter how far one may be from their homeland, their heart can still beat strongly for their roots. ●

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Alan Ali proudly posing with the Kurdistan flag at an NFL game



Klitschko's Inspiring Visit to Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle

Long before he indulged his passion for human rights advocacy, Wladimir Klitschko was already a global boxing sensation. In 2011, he made a memorable visit to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) that, despite the many years since then, it still worth revisiting in light of his current role in peace advocacy in Ukraine.

From boxing ring to the frontline

Born in 1976, Wladimir Klitschko is a prominent former professional boxer from Ukraine who competed from 1996 to 2017, leaving an indelible mark on the sport's international arenas. He held the world heavyweight championship twice and collected a number of titles, including the unified WBA (Super), IBF, WBO, IBO, and Ring magazine titles. Klitschko's boxing prowess was unparalleled.

Known for his exceptional knockout power, he wielded a formidable arsenal, featuring a strong jab, straight right hand, and left hook. His quick hand speed, combined with remarkable footwork and mobility, defied the norm for heavyweight boxers.

While he faced setbacks in his early years, he transformed under the supervision of legendary trainer Emanuel Steward, transitioning from an aggressive puncher to a defensively adept box-

er. Alongside his brother Vitali Klitschko, he dominated the heavyweight division during the "Klitschko Era" from 2004 to 2015.

His fights commanded a massive global TV audience and his legacy includes records for the longest cumulative heavyweight title reign and the most fighters beaten for the world heavyweight championship. Inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 2021, Klitschko's impact on the sport remains legendary.

Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, Wladimir Klitschko joined the Kyiv Territorial Defense Brigade, a military reserve component of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Both he and his brother, who has been Mayor



Wladimir Klitschko presents a signed boxing glove as a gesture of goodwill to President Masoud Barzani.



From left: Saadi Barwari, Wladimir Klitschko, Aleksandr Onyshenko, Salib Sarwar Pedawi, Sarwar Pedawi

of Kyiv since 2014, pledged to fight to protect the capital of Ukraine. Meanwhile, they took advantage of their fame and influence to raise funds for the defense lines and advocate international military support for their country.

The visit to Kurdistan

On October 20, 2011, Wladimir Klitschko arrived in Erbil on a private jet. His visit was organized by prominent Kurdish figure Sarwar Pedawi. During the visit, Klitschko met with President Masoud Barzani and Masrour Barzani, the incumbent prime minister of the KRI who then served as the chancellor of the Kurdistan Region Security Council.

The official Facebook page of the Klitschko brothers confirmed Wladimir's visit to Kurdistan in a statement featuring his photograph next to President Masoud Barzani: "In the capital Erbil, Klitschko met president Masoud Barzani. Different topics regarding economy, politics and sports were dis-

cussed. During the visit hostilities with the Turkish army were discussed. He expressed his regret and hope that the conflict would be solved diplomatically in the future," the online statement read.

Saadi Barwari told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that the Ukrainian champion's first impression of the Kurdistan Region was uplifting as he did not expect his destination to be a safe region with a fairly developed society.

Klitschko sympathized with the Kurds for the difficulties they have experienced throughout history. Despite his wild spirit in the boxing ring, he has been involved in international charity campaigns since 2002, when he was named UNESCO Champion for Sport. He is among only 15 living athletes that have received this title.

During his meeting with President Barzani, as recalled by Sarwar Pedawi, the Kurdish leader touched upon the

historic relations between Kurds and Ukrainians in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In the days following the fall of the Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad, hundreds of fighters joined Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani in relocating to the former Soviet Union. Some Kurdish fighters settled in today's Ukraine and studied, worked, and even married there. This long history, and the fact that there are people in the Kurdistan Region who carry Kurdish-Ukrainian blood in their veins surprised Klitschko. He praised the resilient Kurdish spirit, something that he channels today in his military life.

In Wladimir Klitschko we find a remarkable blend of strength and compassion. His visit to the Kurdistan Region both revealed his appreciation for the region's resilience and foreshadowed his unwavering commitment to humanitarian efforts on a global scale. ●



Kurdistan's Brown Bear

Wildlife refers to the non-domesticated and uncultivated animals and plants inhabiting natural environments. The wildlife of Kurdistan is exceptionally diverse and unique, characterized by a wide range of species exclusive to the mountainous ecosystem of the region. These creatures are preserved with the utmost care through strict laws, regulations, and culture.

Among the notable inhabitants of the Kurdistan wilderness is the "brown bear," a variety that appears lighter in color compared to other types of

brown bears found elsewhere. Its hue is a mixture of brown and gray with a dark stripe running down its back and legs. The brown bears living in Kurdistan have one especially unique trait: white claws.

The region's male brown bear is between 100 to 140 cm in height and can weigh nearly 250 kg. Notably, the Syrian brown bear is commonly associated with this type of bear but is predominantly in the Kurdish areas extending along the Zagros Mountain range in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.



Abdullah Goran



*A Kurd and a bag of tobacco,
a handful of raisins and a gun
Then a rock
And let the whole world come*



Photo: Harem Sewasi

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi