


# Kurdistan Chronicle

ENDLESS TRIUMPH  
GENERAL BARZANI'S LEGACY





Photo: Abdullah Gardi

 The scenic Gomaspan Dam outside Erbil.



# EDITORIAL

## March

### A Tapestry of Kurdish History and Heritage

The month of March in the Kurdish calendar brims with significant events, commemorations, tragedies, and triumphs. One of the most poignant moments in Kurdish history was the tragic chemical attack on civilians in Halabja and its vicinity in 1988 that were unfurled on the Kurds in the closing months of the Iran-Iraq War. On March 16, Halabja's residents woke to a horrifying and indiscriminate onslaught of mustard gas and other nerve agents from Iraqi aircraft that killed over 5,000 innocent people. In this edition of *Kurdistan Chronicle*, we explore special reports and articles recounting the Halabja tragedy.



Nahro Zagros

March 1 marks the occasion to remember the esteemed leader of the Kurds, General Mustafa Barzani, who passed away in 1979. Kurds both in the Kurdistan Region, neighboring countries, and around the world honor this day, acknowledging Barzani as the visionary behind Kurdish liberation and the vanguard of the modern Kurdish struggle for freedom. General Barzani's legacy epitomized humanism, freedom, and peace for all individuals, irrespective of faith or nationality. As in previous years, multitudes across the Kurdistan Region paid homage to him this year, with thousands visiting his resting place and museum in his hometown of Barzan. In this issue, we feature an article about Barzani and shine light on a chess tournament held in Erbil in his memory. General Barzani was a passionate chess player throughout his life.

Meanwhile, March 11, 1970, marked a significant milestone after years of armed conflict between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish population striving for recognition, freedom, and democracy. A ceasefire agreement signed on that day had granted autonomous rights to Iraq's Kurds, but the Algiers Agreement, signed on March 6, 1975, between Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran, dealt a severe blow. Saddam conceded control over the Shatt al-Arab waterway to Iran, leading to the withdrawal of Iranian support for the peshmerga, thereby allowing the Iraqi army to crush Kurdish resistance. Moreover, the Iraqi regime intensified its campaign of Arabization of Kurdish regions, resulting in the death and displacement of thousands of peshmerga fighters and civilians.

Another pivotal historical moment came in 1991, with the Kurdish uprising against Saddam's regime following the Gulf War. It marked the first instance in history where Kurdish towns and cities were liberated from Saddam's oppression, culminating in the liberation of Kirkuk on March 20.

Finally, March also holds profound significance for Kurds worldwide as they celebrated Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, which aligns with the vernal equinox and thus usually falls on or around March 21. Newroz symbolizes Kurdish resilience in the face of adversity and serves as a testament to solidarity amidst political, economic, and social challenges. This year, celebrations reverberated across the Kurdistan Region, with Akre, the capital of Newroz, taking center stage. On the eve of Newroz, thousands lit torches in a procession to the mountaintop in Akre on March 21, heralding the year 2,724 in the Kurdish calendar. These torchbearers hailed not only from the Kurdistan Region but also from Kurdish territories in Iran, Syria, and Turkey.

While the world observed International Theatre Day on March 27, this issue features an article on the first Kurdish theatre play that was held in Chicago in 1893 as part of the World's Columbian Exposition. Though history cannot be rewritten, this discovery indisputably validates the existence of Kurdish theater dating to at least to the late nineteenth century, serving as a catalyst for further research into this rich and undiscovered cultural heritage. ●

# TIMELINE

## MARCH 2024

**March 1** • PM Barzani met with White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Washington. • People in Kurdistan commemorated the 45th anniversary of the passing of Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani.

**March 2** • Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani engaged in discussions with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, during the Antalya Diplomacy Forum sidelines. • PM Barzani held talks with Brian Nelson, the US Treasury's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, in Washington to address KRG's financial reforms. • PM Barzani advocated for increased investment in Kurdistan at a special reception hosted by the US Chamber of Commerce.

**March 3** • The Kurdistan Region Presidency designated June 10, 2024, as the parliamentary election day.

**March 4** • Christians in the Kurdistan Region voiced their dissent against a ruling by the Iraqi supreme federal court, which nullified quota seats at the Kurdistan parliament. • President Masoud Barzani met with Australian Ambassador to Iraq Glenn Miles in Erbil, emphasizing the integral role of minorities within Kurdistan. • Iraqi PM Muhammad Shia' al-Sudani visited Sinjar.

**March 5** • Kurdistan observed the 33rd anniversary of the 1991 uprising against the Saddam's Baath regime. • The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) denounced recent rulings by the Iraqi supreme federal court concerning quota seats and the election system, labeling it as interference in Kurdistan's internal affairs.

**March 6** • US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Taylor paid a visit to Kurdistan, engaging in discussions with Kurdish leaders. • Azerbaijani Ambassador to Iraq, Nasir Mammadov, held talks in Erbil regarding regional developments with Kurdish leaders.

• PM Barzani also disclosed his upcoming meeting with former US President George W. Bush, expressing gratitude for his enduring support for the people of Kurdistan.

**March 8** • International Women's Day was observed in the Kurdistan Region, with leaders emphasizing the significant role of women in the decades-long struggle for Kurdish freedom.

**March 9** • The Kurdistan Region Peshmerga Minister unveiled a comprehensive plan for the establishment of a fully unified Peshmerga forces by September 2026.

**March 11** • The Kurdistan Region celebrated the 54th anniversary of the signing of the first autonomy agreement.

**March 12** • In response to the Iraqi top court's ruling on quota seats, multiple Christian parties in Kurdistan announced their decision to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections.

**March 13** • British Ambassador to Iraq, Stephen Hitchen, visited Erbil and engaged in discussions with Kurdish leaders regarding the upcoming Kurdistan general elections and the anticipated challenges surrounding the vote system.

**March 14** • The Kurdistan Shura Council issued its first reaction to recent rulings by Iraq's top court, condemning them as violations against the Constitution and the rule of law.

**March 16** • As the Kurdistan Region remembered the victims of the Halabja Chemical Attack, Kurdish leaders reiterated their call to Baghdad for compensation for the affected individuals and communities.

**March 18** • The KDP declared its abstention from the upcoming Kurdistan parliamentary elections on March 18. • PM Barzani engaged with Christian Ritscher, the Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability Da'esh/ISIS (UNITAD), discussing global efforts to pursue ISIS criminals. • Multiple Turkmen parties announced their intention to boycott the elections.

**March 19** • Flash floods in Duhok led to two fatalities and extensive damage to numerous homes. • PM Barzani held discussions with Tobias Lindner, Minister of State at Germany's Federal Foreign Office, focusing on the elections, bilateral relations, and regional developments. • PM Barzani reiterated the Kurdistan fair and just elections during Iraq Maurizio Greganti.

**March 20** • PM Barzani met with a delegation from the Iraqi Council Speaker Mohsen Al-Mandalawi, stressing the importance of respecting Iraq's federal system. • President transparent elections during a meeting with US Ambassador to Iraq Alina L. Romanowski, sadors, consul generals, and foreign

**March 21** • Numerous ambassadors gathered in Akre to celebrate Newroz, the Kurdish new year.

**March 25** • Marking one year since the suspension of oil exports from the Kurdistan region, which has resulted in an \$11 billion financial loss.

**March 27** • UK Ambassador, Stephen Hitchen, visited Erbil for the second time in two weeks, discussing election challenges with Kurdish leaders.

**March 28** • A Kurdistan Regional Government delegation traveled to Rome on to meet with Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto and Deputy Foreign Minister Edmundo Cirielli, aiming to strengthen bilateral ties.

**March 30** • US Ambassador to Iraq, Alina Romanowski, visited Erbil for the second time in less than two weeks, engaging with Kurdish leaders to discuss election matters.

**March 31** • Kurdish leaders highlighted the culture of peaceful coexistence in their Easter messages.








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## Akre's Timeless Tribute to *Newroz*

Kurdistan Chronicle







Photo: Sahr Dri

PM Masrour Barzani delivering a speech at a special reception for Newroz attended by foreign diplomats in Acre (March 20, 2024).



Photo: Sahr Dri

PM Barzani joined by foreign diplomats for Newroz celebration in Acre (March 20, 2024).



Photo: Farhad Ahmad

PM Barzani ignites the symbolic Newroz fire during a poignant ceremony in Acre (March 20, 2024.)

The historical city of Acre, nestled in Duhok Governorate in the Kurdistan Region and revered as the epicenter of *Newroz* festivities, glimmered with vibrant fireworks on the evening of Wednesday, March 20, drawing tens of thousands to revel in the Kurdish New Year celebrations. Marking the onset of spring, *Newroz* is a time-honored tradition intertwining cultural jubilation with the spring equinox, and is observed from March 21 to April 1.

Despite inclement weather that included cold winds and rain, a staggering 75,000 individuals, alongside representatives from 40 nations, congregated in Acre to partake in this year's *Newroz* revelry, graced by the presence of Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani.

Before the festivities commenced, organizers revealed their arrangement of approximately 2724 torches. This count symbolizes the year 2724 in the Kurdish calendar, commencing on March 21. These torches were carried by young individuals originating not only from the Kurdistan Region but also from Kurdish regions in Iran, Syria, and Turkey.

In his address, Prime Minister Barzani articulated the uniqueness of Acre's celebration, envisioning its ascendancy as the focal point for *Newroz* festivities in Kurdistan and beyond.

Amidst the pyrotechnic displays, a colossal Kurdistan flag unfurled atop Acre's peaks, symbolizing unity and pride.





Photo: Safin Hamid

■ A gentleman dons traditional Kurdish attire with the Kurdistan flag as his backdrop (March 20, 2024).

Akre’s significance resonates deeply with the Kurdish people, as it serves as the starting point for the age-old tradition of igniting fires to herald the New Year on spring’s inaugural day.

The festivities in Akre traditionally encompass torch-lit

processions up the mountains, culminating in a grandiose fireworks spectacle synchronized with music as celebrants descend from the peaks. Locals, particularly children, contribute to the jubilant ambiance with their own fireworks displays, while many adorn themselves in traditional Kurdish attire and picnic amid the breathtaking scenery.

Akre’s allure extends beyond its *Newroz* festivities. Its picturesque setting, nestled amid three mountains, and its architectural marvels, characterized by historic houses perched atop each other, evoke a mesmerizing charm. With a rich tapestry of history dating back to ancient times,

Akre’s cultural mosaic reflects its diverse past, encompassing Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, an amalgamation that continues to this day, enriching the town’s identity. ●



## Echoes of Liberation Celebrating the 1991 Kurdish Uprising



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.

On March 5, 1991, the Kurdish Uprising (*Raperin in Kurdish*) ignited in the wake of the Gulf War. This proved to be a watershed moment, as Kurdish leaders rallied the Kurdish population in northern Iraq to revolt against Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime.

The city of Ranya in the Sulaymaniyah Governorate served as the epicenter of the

the Iraqi state in the 1920s. With historic roots stretching back centuries, Kurdish communities faced discrimination and violence, forced assimilation, cultural suppression, displacement, and genocide. Basic human rights, including the freedom to speak their language, practice their faith, and engage in politics, were systematically denied.

Under Saddam's dictatorship, Kurds bore



Remembering the Kurdish uprising against the Baath Regime (March 1991).

movement, which proved to be a pivotal chapter in the Kurdish struggle for autonomy and self-determination. After enduring years of persecution under Saddam's rule – as well as under previous regimes in Baghdad – frustrations at the endemic neglect of Kurdish aspirations for recognition and autonomy rose to a boiling point.

The Kurds have endured persecution and marginalization since the foundation of

the brunt of his vicious oppression. In the late 1980s, the regime perpetrated a genocidal campaign against Kurds, claiming the lives of more than 182,000 innocent people. The most infamous event in this campaign, the 1988 Halabja chemical attack, resulted in the deaths of 8,000 civilians.

### A brief taste of freedom

The 1991 uprising erupted with skirmish-



Saddam Hussein's image obliterated after the uprising, along with seized Iraqi tanks in Erbil in March 1991.

“In the 1980s, the regime perpetrated a genocidal campaign against Kurds, claiming the lives of more than 182,000 innocent people”



Erbil's liberation from the Baath Regime celebrated by jubilant women.

es between Kurdish insurgents and Iraqi forces in and around Ranya before rapidly engulfing the whole of the Kurdistan Region. Town after town joined the fray in solidarity. What began as localized resistance swiftly snowballed, with Kurdish fighters wresting control of numerous cities and towns from Iraqi forces. Scenes of jubilation erupted as citizens, long oppressed, regained control of their destinies.

By March 21, every corner of Kurdistan had tasted freedom. The euphoria was short-lived, however, as the Iraqi regime retaliated ferociously, unleashing a brutal military crackdown that saw the use of helicopter gunships, tanks, and chemical weaponry to crush the uprising.

Thousands of Kurdish civilians died, and over a million were displaced, seeking refuge in the mountains and neighboring countries to evade Saddam's wrath. The international response was sluggish, with concerns over regional stability paralyzing action. In response to the ensuing humanitarian crisis, the United States and other Western allies established a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, offering some reprieve until Saddam's regime fell in 2003.

### A legacy of persistence

March 5 is now celebrated annually among Kurds worldwide as Liberation Day, a poignant reminder that freedom exacts a price and that the fight against injustice must endure. Reflecting on this history of resistance and carrying forth its legacy ensures collective resilience.

Today, Kurds and Kurdistan people persist in their quest for autonomy and recognition of their rights in Iraq and beyond. The Kurdistan Regional Government, established in 1992, has been instrumental in fostering the political and economic development of the Kurdistan Region.

Despite ongoing challenges, the Kurdish struggle continues to inspire global solidarity, reaffirming the universal rights of all people to live with dignity, freedom, and peace. ●



## Armenian President Pays Historic Visit to Kurdistan Region

Kurdistan Chronicle

After visiting Baghdad, Armenian President Vahagn Khachaturyan visited Erbil on February 29 for the first time and was received by Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani. He also met with President Masoud Barzani and Kurdistan Regional President Nechirvan Barzani, and visited the Armenian Church of the Holy Cross in Erbil.

“This was a historical visit and will definitely serve as a positive incentive for strengthening relations between Armenia and the Kurdistan Region,” Andranik Harutyunyan, acting Chief of Mission of the Consulate General of the Republic of Armenia, told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

“President Khachaturyan’s visit was met with warm reception and kind hospitality, for which I would like to express my appreciation to the authorities of the Kurdistan Region.”

The Kurdistan Region Presidency said in a readout of the meeting that President Khachaturyan and Kurdistan Region’s President Nechirvan Barzani discussed opportunities to develop Armenian relations with Iraq and the Kurdistan Region in the areas of commerce, investment, the private sector, health-care and tourism.

They also highlighted the opportunities for direct flights between Armenia and Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

Prior to his visit to the Kurdistan Region, President Vahagn Khachaturyan also met with KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani on January 18 on the sidelines of the Davos Forum.

“The Kurdistan Region and Armenia share a common goal: peace and stability for our peoples and the region,” Prime Minister Barzani said in a post on X on January 18.

This was a historical visit and will definitely serve as a positive incentive for strengthening relations between Armenia and the Kurdistan Region

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”



President Masoud Barzani (Right) meets with Vahagn Khachaturyan, President of the Republic of Armenia (Left) on February 29, 2024.

Photo: Adnan Barzani

The Consulate General of Armenia was first opened in Erbil in 2021. Since then, relations between Armenia and the Kurdistan Region have blossomed, focusing on trade as well as economic, cultural, educational, scientific, and humanitarian activities, with the consulate organizing several events in the Kurdistan Region.

For instance, the Diplomatic School of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia has conducted three consecutive annual training programs for the junior officials of various governmental agencies of the Kurdistan Region. Moreover, the Consulate General, in cooperation with the KRG Ministry of Culture and Youth, organized two exhibitions in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah featuring archive documents and historical photographs of Kurds, Yezidis, and Assyrians living in Armenia.

“Armenia also makes practi-

cal efforts to assist in the preservation and recovery of the ancient manuscripts held in the Digital Center of Oriental Manuscripts (CNMO) in Erbil,” Harutyunyan added. Currently, Armenian experts from the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts are conducting the third training course for CNMO staff.

Armenia has also worked on creating cooperation between Kurdish and Armenian universities and academic centers. As part of this initiative, two academic visits were conducted by Armenian professors of Kurdology to the Kurdistan Region, where they held lectures at several universities and the Academy of science.

Additionally, in 2022 the Government of Armenia provided humanitarian assistance to the Yezidi internally displaced persons in the Kurdistan Region in cooperation with the Barzani Charity Foundation.

### Economic partnership

Harutyunyan said that Armenia attaches particular importance to developing economic relations with the Kurdistan Region.

“Within the delegation





of the Armenian President, a business group representing different sectors arrived in Erbil and held meetings with the KRG Minister of Trade and Industry, as well as with the newly elected boards of the Erbil Chamber of Commerce and Industry.”

President Khachaturyan also visited the ancient Erbil citadel, including its famous Textile Museum. In the citadel, he was guided by the Head of the High Commission for Erbil Citadel Revitalization Nehad Latif Qoja and Erbil Governor Omed Khoshnaw.

“Both Kurds and Armenians are committed to protecting minority rights and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity in their countries,” Qoja posted on X.

Cultural ties

There are an estimated 3,000 Armenians across the Kurdistan Region, including 1,000 Armenians in Zakho.

The Kurdistan Region Constitution recognizes Armenians as an ethnic component, which gives them the right to have access to education in the Armenian language, and reserves one seat in the Kurdistan Region Parliament for Armenians.

However, on February 23, the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq abolished 11 minority quota seats in the Kurdistan Region Parliament, including the one seat for Armenians.

“In the Kurdistan Region, Armenians can freely practice their faith and enjoy all rights necessary to preserve their identity. Five Armenian churches operate in the Kurdistan Region. I would like to express our gratitude to the authorities of the KRG for the care they have shown towards our compatriots,” Harutyunyan said.

The Erbil Governorate in a press release also said President Khachaturyan “expressed gratitude for the KRG’s efforts in fostering a peaceful atmosphere that promotes tolerance and



Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani welcomes Armenian counterpart Vahagn Khachaturyan (February 29, 2024).

harmonious coexistence among various sects and religions.”

The KRG authorities and the local community have also focused on preserving Armenian churches in the Kurdistan Region. The Church of the Holy Cross in Ankawa, a district of Erbil, was opened in April in 2019, with a total area of 5,309 square meters. Moreover, an Armenian church in Zakho is being rebuilt with the help of the KRG and will most likely open in the spring of 2024.

During his visit, President Khachatu-

ryan visited the Church of the Holy Cross, accompanied by Bishop Os-hakan Gulgulyan, Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Church of Iraq, as well as a number of high level officials from the Kurdistan Region.

“It should be noted that the Armenian church was built with the financial support of the authorities of the Kurdistan Region. President Khachaturyan toured the church and laid a wreath at the memorial dedicated to the victims of the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire,” Harutyunyan added. President Khachaturyan also met with

representatives of the Armenian community.

“During the meeting, President Khachaturyan presented in detail the general situation and developments in Armenia’s internal and foreign policy and economic and public life, had conversation with the attendees, and answered numerous questions,” Harutyunyan said.

He underlined that the questions mainly covered relations between Armenia and the Kurdistan Region, as

well as the political and economic situation in Armenia.

“It was a unique opportunity for our compatriots to meet President Khachaturyan and be directly informed about the current situation in Armenia,” Harutyunyan added.

There is a large Kurdish community living in Armenia, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan congratulated the community on Newroz. “May this beautiful spring holiday bring happiness to our en-

tire Kurdish community,” he said on March 21.

“The visit of President Khachaturyan aimed to further deepen cooperation and contribute to exploring new avenues for collaboration in high-tech industry, green energy, healthcare, and digital management. I am confident that through joint efforts our cooperation will deepen and develop in various sectors. There is a mutual readiness to enlarge the collaboration,” Harutyunyan concluded. ●



## Survivors Still Searching for Lost Children

Kurdistan Chronicle

Shawnm Abdullah Mohammad lost two young children – a two-year-old daughter and a one-year-old son – and five siblings in the chemical attack on the Kurdish city of Halabja by Saddam Hussein’s forces on March 16, 1988.

Shawnm recounted her story to *Kurdistan Chronicle*, detailing how she was rushed to a hospital in Sulaymaniyah two days before the attack due to pregnancy complications. She left her children with her sisters and brothers. On March 15, the day before the chemical attack, she heard rumors inside the hospital that the Iraqi army was gathering to attack Halabja. However, she never imagined the Iraqi regime would resort to chemical weapons.

“I spent the worst night of my life at the hospital,” Shawnm said. “The whole night I was thinking about my two kids, who I had left in Halabja, as well as my sisters and brothers.”

On the day of the attack, Shawnm gave birth. She witnessed a large number of Iraqi military helicopters and warplanes flying towards Halabja from Sulaymaniyah. “I was weak, lost, and hopeless. I could not do anything on that day,” she said.

Since the attack Shawnm has been searching for her lost loved ones. Since that day, she has had no information on the whereabouts of her children and siblings. They have simply vanished.

Some of the children in Halabja were taken to Iran and adopted by Iranian families. Shawnm traveled to Iran three times to search for her children, hoping they might be among those adopted. Unfortunately, her efforts have so far been unsuccessful.

On one occasion, she was shown a cemetery in Kermanshah, Iran, and told that all the people buried there were from Halabja. However, with

“In 2018, Shawnm established a non-profit organization to help locate the children of Halabja who have been missing since the attack



A Halabja chemical attack survivor holds an ID, searching for her missing child.

Photo: Omer Aziz





Photo: Safin Hamid

A poignant scene unfolds as a Halabja chemical attack survivor walks amidst the graves in Halabja cemetery.



no way to identify the graves, she has no idea if any of them contain the remains of her children.

March 2024 marks the 36th anniversary of the chemical attack on Halabja and the 21st anniversary of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime by the U.S.-led coalition forces in 2003.

The Halabja chemical attack occurred between March 15-19, 1988, during the Iran-Iraq War. Iraqi government forces used chemical weapons against the city, killing 5,000 people – half of them children – and wounding many hundreds more.

The wounded people are still suffering from the long-term effects of the attack. Some are paralyzed for life, while others suffer from chronic coughing and other health problems. They are essentially living a slow death.

In 2018, Shawnm established a non-profit organization to help locate the children of Halabja who have been missing since the attack. There are 74 families from Halabja who are still searching for their children. A total of 211 children are unaccounted for, with only 18 having been found so far.

Shawnm emphasizes the need for a DNA testing laboratory in the Kurdistan Region. This would allow for matching the DNA of those who claim to be from Halabja with the DNA of the families who are still searching for their children after 36 years. Unfortunately, such a lab does not currently exist in the Kurdistan Region, making the situation even more difficult for these families.

Shawnm recently attended a conference held in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, entitled From Genocide to Life. She argued that such conferences should be held in Baghdad to educate Iraqi officials about the genocides and suffering endured by the Kurdish people.

A few years ago, Shawnm was invited to a government meeting in Baghdad.

She attempted to speak about the Halabja genocide as a mother who had lost two children. However, she was met with resistance and told that the Halabja genocide was in the past and there was no need to discuss it.

“I became angry,” Shawnm said. “I told them that maybe it is the past for you, but for us Kurds, it will never be in the past because we are still living with this pain.”

She added that the Iraqi government has done nothing to compensate the city and people of Halabja for the devastation they suffered.

She concluded that Kurds are still facing genocide every day in Iran and Turkey, where Kurdish civilians are targeted by missiles and drones only because they are Kurds.

**Survivors seek justice from chemical suppliers**

Ayad Ismail, a prominent lawyer in both Kurdish genocide cases at the Iraqi High Tribunal and the case seeking compensation for victims of the Halabja chemical attack, announced that his team has compiled considerable evidence against German, French, and Dutch companies that allegedly supplied Saddam Hussein’s regime with the chemical materials and formulas necessary to produce chemical weapons.

“We have gathered enough evidence,” Ismail declared, “and we will soon publish it in a book.”

He firmly believes these foreign corporations were fully aware that the Iraqi government was not purchasing these chemicals for agricultural purposes. The extreme secrecy surrounding these deals, Ismail argues, exposes their true purpose: the production of chemical weapons.

The lawyer expressed a deep sense of shame when visiting Halabja and meeting with the families of the attack’s victims. “Not enough has been



Photo: Sefin Hamid

done to alleviate their suffering,” he lamented.

Ismail further criticized the Iraqi government for its inaction in searching for the children who went missing during the attack. He underscored the vast number of people involved in the Halabja tragedy, including those who ordered the attack and the companies that aided Saddam in acquiring the chemical weapons. Yet, Ismail pointed out, only four suspects have been detained since Saddam’s fall.

**To prevent future genocides**

Speaking at the From Genocide to

Life conference, Dr. A.R. Sriskanda Rajah, a scholar of Tamil origin, shed light on the parallels between the Kurdish struggle for self-determination and the fight for Tamil rights in Sri Lanka. Both minority groups, the Kurds and the Tamils, have faced systematic oppression and violence at the hands of their respective governments.

Dr. Rajah was born in Sri Lanka but was forced to flee with his family in 1992, as the violent conflict between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil rebels escalated.

He emphasized the concept of bio-

politics, a theoretical framework that examines how states attempt to regulate and control their populations. He argued that both the Iraqi and Sri Lankan governments have sought to create homogenous populations, viewing the distinct cultural identities of the Kurds and Tamils, respectively, as a threat that, according to Dr. Rajah, ultimately led to devastating consequences: “genocide at the extreme end.”

The chemical attack against the Kurds in Halabja was downplayed by the West at the time. Dr. Rajah told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that a similar pattern occurred in the Sri Lankan

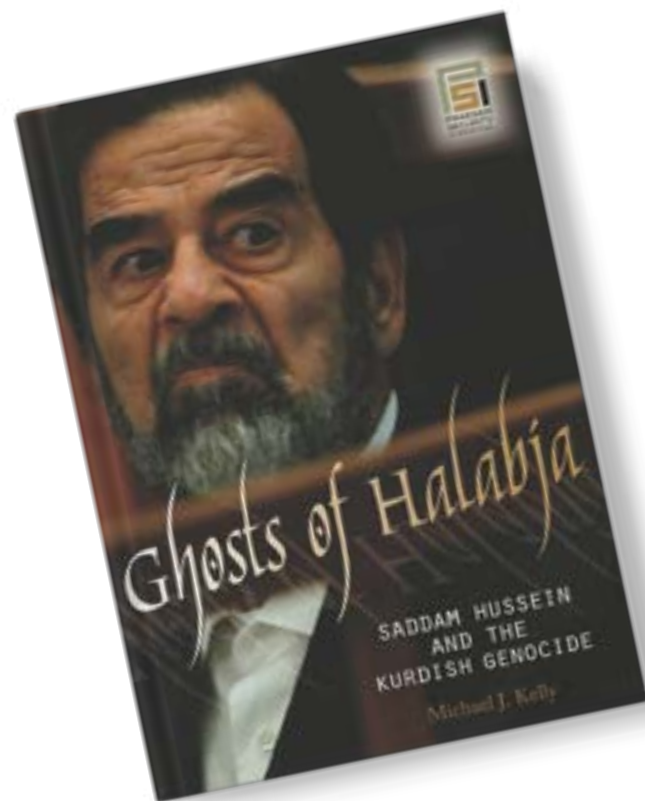
conflict, where the government’s brutal suppression of the Tamil people was largely ignored by the international community. He argues that this silence is not accidental, but rather a deliberate strategy, based on the West’s geopolitical interests.

He mentioned that the international community cannot promise that Kurds will not face another genocide in the future; the only assurance for the Kurds is to establish robust self-defense mechanisms, including a strong unified army and their own state. ●



## *Ghosts of Halabja* A Conversation with Author Michael Kelly

Kurdistan Chronicle



I met Professor Michael Kelly, author of *Ghosts of Halabja: Saddam Hussein and the Kurdish Genocide*, for the first time at an event hosted by the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C., on March 18, 2024. The event commemorated the 36th anniversary of the 1988 Halabja

chemical attack, which was carried out by the former Ba'ath regime under the direct order of Saddam Hussein.

Kelly is currently coordinating the International and Comparative Law Program at Creighton University School of Law, but in the early 2000s, he conducted



Professor Michael Kelly (right) receives a copy of Kurdistan Chronicle magazine in Washington, D.C.

fieldwork on genocide in Iraq and provided consultation to the Kurdish Regional Government on federalism and other constitutional issues.

During the panel discussion titled “36 Years of Pursuing Accountability and Justice,” Kelly highlighted the atrocities endured by the Kurdish people under the Ba'ath regime. Although the panel only allowed limited time, the book delves into the details of these events.

During a break from the panel, I had the opportunity to chat with Kelly, and he emphasized that accountability for the genocide has not been achieved. Saddam Hussein escaped trial, he noted, and while the state of Iraq acknowledged the genocide, it has failed to take effective action. He stressed the importance of Iraq compensating the victims and taking responsibility.

As Kelly pointed out, there were two principal perpetrators of the genocide. One was Saddam Hussein, whose trial was left unfinished, allowing him to evade accountability. The other was the state of Iraq, which admit-

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Kelly extensively  
discusses the history of  
the Kurdish genocide  
and how it was not  
adequately addressed by  
Saddam Hussein's trial

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ted the genocide occurred but lacked an effective legal apparatus and enforcement mechanism to prosecute its guilt. Holding the state accountable involves making it acknowledge its role in the atrocity and providing compensation to the survivors, which should be done even 36 years after the genocide.

In his book, Kelly extensively discusses the history of the Kurdish genocide and how it was not adequately addressed by Saddam Hussein's trial. While Saddam Hussein's execution marked the end of his oppressive rule and brought some justice for the

crimes committed against Iraq's Shi'a population, it did not serve justice to the Kurds.

As Kelly highlights, the Kurds have faced ongoing adversity since the end of World War I, when their right to their own homeland was denied, resulting in their division across Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. However, during Hussein's 24-year reign, the Kurds suffered frequent injustices. Between 1987 and 1989, Hussein unleashed genocide, destroying over 2,000 villages and killing at least 50,000 Kurds.

As his dictatorship came to an end, the Kurds anticipated holding Saddam Hussein accountable, but they were sidelined by the Iraqi High Tribunal, the Iraqi government, and the U.S. government. While the Shi'a celebrated their victory, the Kurds were left without resolution, as Hussein's death absolved him of all charges related to the Kurds. The international community turned its back on the Kurdish genocide and seemed to deny them the justice they deserved. ●





Hawkar Sabir, a Halabja chemical attack survivor, surrounded by medicine packages that sustained him over the years.

# HALABJA

## Enduring the Tragedy Halabja's Chemical Legacy

*A heart-wrenching portrait of Hawkar Sabir, a victim of  
the chemical attack on Halabja.*

Kurdistan Chronicle

Hawkar Sabir gasps for air, his damaged lungs working at a mere 15% of their capacity. Every four months, a pack of medication offers a temporary reprieve from the constant struggle to breathe. A single, brutal truth hangs heavy: a lung transplant is his only hope.

But Sabir is a fighter. Married with three children, he refuses to succumb to despair.

In 1988, the final throes of the Iran-Iraq War unleashed a horror forever etched into Kurdish memory. Chemical weapons, rained down on the Kurdish city of Halabja by the Ba'ath regime led by Saddam Hussein, killed 5,000 people, mostly women and children. Sabir is one of the many left to bear the scars.

"There's no cure," he rasps, "except to replace my lungs. These meds just fight off the shortness of breath for a while."

Sabir is far from alone. Countless others bear the invisible wounds of that attack.

Each day, Sabir's life is a constant battle.

An artificial respirator becomes his unwelcome companion, dictating his every move. The joy of simple work, of providing for his family, is a distant memory. His wife's teaching salary is their lifeline, a bitter truth for a man who longs to be the provider.

The list of medications is a testament to his suffering: chest expanders, eye drops, skin treatments, and even psychiatric drugs to manage the anger simmering beneath the surface. The chemical attack stole not just his breath, but a part of who he was.

His condition also drove him to sell the family house, a desperate gamble for survival. Winter's icy grip and shortness of breath meant no car could reach them in their old home. Now they are closer to the hospital, but at a heavy cost.

The true weight of his burden lies not in the physical limitations, but in the stolen moments of fatherhood.

"I can't touch my kids," Sabir whispers, his voice thick with emotion. "I can't hold them close, like any father should. It



Photos: Peshraw Mahdavi





Photos: Peshraw Mahdi

*Hawkar Sabir displays the medicine packages he has relied on for years as a survivor of the Halabja chemical attack.*

feels wrong.” Social interactions are a source of anxiety, leaving him feeling like an outsider in his own world.

Medical reports paint a grim picture – 85% of his lungs are non-functional, demanding that he spend at least 17 hours a day hooked up to oxygen tanks. This has been his reality for 36 years.

There are brief flickers of hope. Kamil Abdulqadir, another victim, found success with a lung transplant in Germany. “I’ve applied to the Kurdistan Region’s Ministry of Health to receive similar medical support,” Sabir says. “But the financial crisis...” His voice trails off.

He and his oxygen machine are inseparable companions, a constant reminder of his limitations. The simple joys of life – buying his children clothes, taking them to the park – are a cruel mirage. Sleep is often elusive, haunted by the phantom sensation of suffocation.

Sabir’s dream is a stark reminder of what he has lost – the ability to breathe freely, to be a father, to simply exist without the constant hum of his lifeline. With every ragged breath, he yearns for the day he can discard the oxygen mask, to finally inhale the sweet air of freedom, and to fulfill the most basic human desire: to simply live. ●



## Surviving Halabja Yerevan Saeed's Story

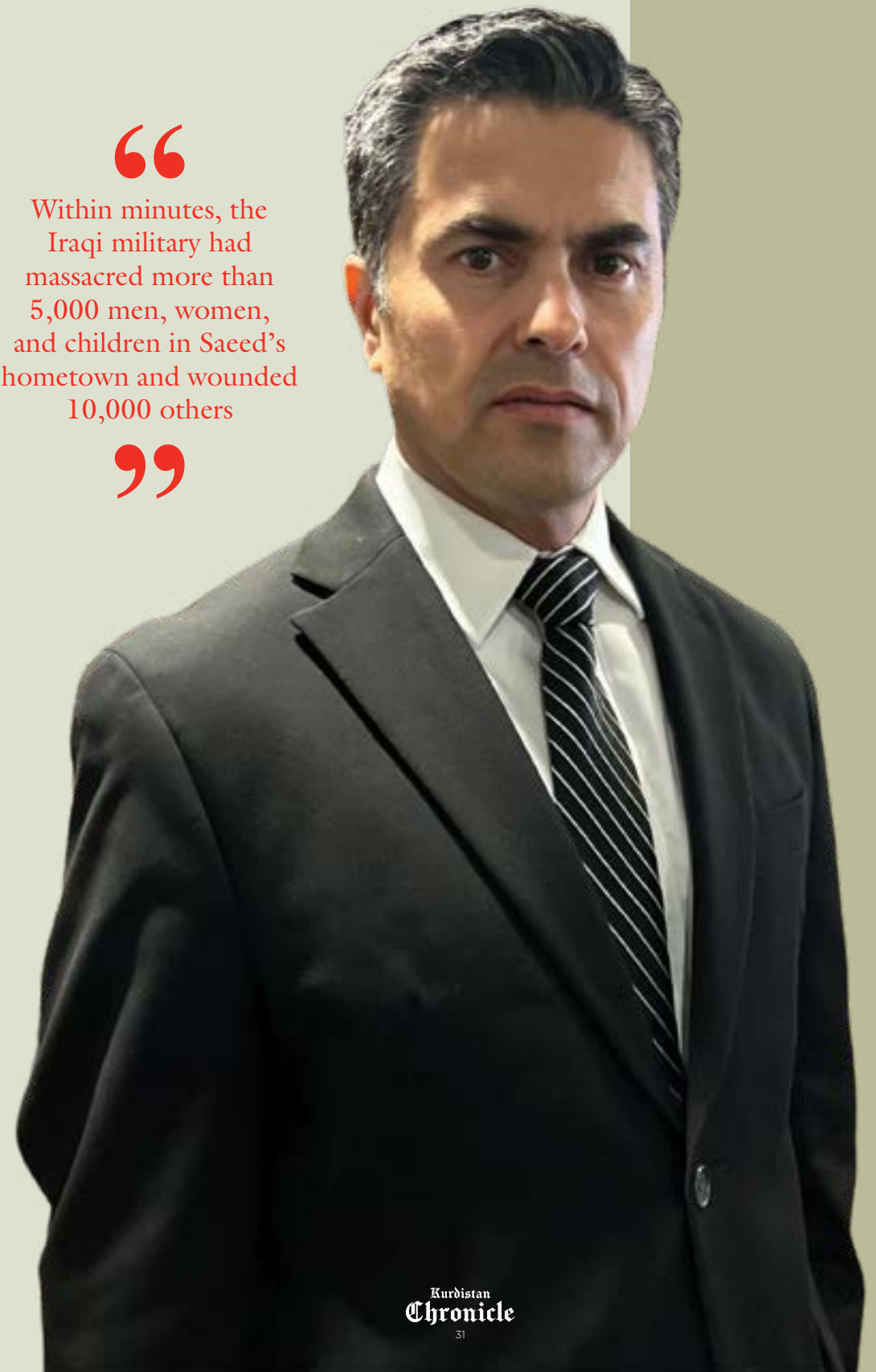
Kurdistan Chronicle

*As a survivor of the Halabja chemical attack, international war, civil war, and displacement forced me to be a refugee four times – three of them before I even turned eleven.*



Yerevan Saeed speaks at the 36th Anniversary Commemoration of the Halabja Genocide, hosted at the American University School of International Service (March 18, 2024).

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Within minutes, the  
Iraqi military had  
massacred more than  
5,000 men, women,  
and children in Saeed's  
hometown and wounded  
10,000 others  
”





When Yerevan Saeed, Barzani Scholar in Residence at American University (AU) and Director of the Global Kurdish Initiative for Peace, started telling his story, everyone at the Founders Room at AU – School of International Services (SIS), gazed into his eyes, which were full of hope for the future.

Saeed’s story, summarized in the epigraph above, is similar to that of millions of Kurds, echoing the experiences of the people of Halabja and those who endured the Ba’ath regime’s genocidal campaigns across the Kurdistan Region. On March 16, 1988, the former Iraqi regime unleashed an unspeakable atrocity upon the city of Halabja, bombarding the civilian population with chemical weapons in defiance of international law. Within minutes, the Iraqi military had massacred more than 5,000 men, women, and children in Saeed’s hometown and wounded 10,000 others.

To illustrate the scale of the atrocity, Saeed shared a scene from *The Achilles Trap* by U.S. author and journalist Steve Coll, an account of the complicated dynamics of U.S.-Iraq relations: Saeed’s grandfather was among the dead. His fa-

“After Iraq’s atrocity in Halabja, Rick Francona, the Defense Intelligence Agency liaison to the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad at the time, confronted an Iraqi pilot.

’Why did you drop chemical weapons on your own people?’ asked Francona.

’They’re not my own people,’ answered the Iraqi pilot. ’They’re Kurds.’



ther lost more than 20 members of his extended family, including his aunts and cousins; some of his relatives were wounded, and many of Saeed’s childhood friends were killed.

Saeed was eight at that time. Under the cover of darkness on the evening of March 15, 1988, he and his family departed from Halabja for their village, located just outside the city. After a 45-minute walk alongside many other families, they arrived and settled in.

In the dead of night, Yerevan and his brothers were awakened from their sleep to embark on the second leg of their journey to the caves in the mountains encircling Halabja. Despite the biting cold and the risk of minefields, they traversed rough and unfriendly terrain to seek refuge in the caves. Shortly before dawn, they reached their destination – caves nestled between two mountains – with little food to spare.

When the first light approached, the air was filled with the ominous sounds of Iraqi fighter jets and bombs. These were napalm bombs aimed at intimidating people into seeking shelter in their basements. Subsequently, Iraqi fighter jets dropped chemical bombs, leading to the tragic demise of many who had sought refuge in these basements.

The chemical attack was relentless and widespread. As many attempted to flee the town, Iraqi fighter jets dropped gas bombs on the main roads, resulting in the deaths and injuries of hundreds of individuals desperately trying to escape.

Despite the tragedies, today Halabja is thriving, its vibrant spring greenery pulsating with life more fiercely than ever.

“We are more daring in expressing our views than we have ever been,” Saeed said. “We remain as resilient as ever, with forgiveness in our hearts.”

“  
Today Halabja is famous for its pomegranates and pure honey and home to one of the most educated populations in the Kurdistan Region

”  
Today Halabja is famous for its pomegranates and pure honey and home to one of the most educated populations in the Kurdistan Region. Its independent spirit reigns supreme, as it has become an epicenter of resilience and hope and a paradise of peaceful coexistence. Religious coexistence between Muslims, Jews, and other minorities like the Kaka’i has long been a feature of life in Halabja. Currently 350 Arab families live there, including some families from Tikrit, Saddam Hussein’s hometown. The people of Halabja have welcomed and embraced them.

### Commemorating Halabja

As the director of the Global Kurdish Initiative for Peace, Saeed hosted an event at the SIS on March 18, 2024, to commemorate the 36th anniversary of the 1988 Halabja chemical attack. The event saw the participation of notable speakers, including U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen, who sent a video message expressing his solidarity with the victims of the attack.

During the event, Senator Van Hollen related his experience visiting the Iraq-Turkey border in October 1988 with his college friend Peter Galbraith, a long-time advocate for the Kurdish people. They encountered thousands of Kurdish refugees who had fled from Iraq to Turkey to escape Saddam’s brutal assault. The atrocities committed by the Ba’ath regime were extensively documented.

Treefa Aziz, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Representative to the United States, spoke about the

efforts of the KRG to garner international recognition of the Halabja attack as a genocide. She mentioned that five countries – Canada, Norway, South Korea, Sweden, and the UK – have already recognized the Halabja genocide. As Aziz told *Kurdistan Chronicle*, the KRG’s goal is to continue to commemorate the attack not only to remember it, but also to push for greater reconciliation and compensation for victims through international recognition so that an attack like this genocide never happens again.

Steve Bitner, Director of the Office of Iraq Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, extended his condolences on behalf of the U.S. government, emphasizing the importance of remembering the tragedy. After that, the U.S. State Department - Near Eastern Affairs posted on social media platform X commemorating the horrible atrocities inflicted on the people of Halabja. “Today’s commemoration reminds us of the victims and their families, as well as the significance of all that the Iraqi Kurdistan Region has achieved in the decades since.”

The event also featured a panel discussion titled “36 Years of Pursuing Accountability and Justice,” moderated by Jeffrey Bachman, Chair of the Department of Peace, Human Rights, and Cultural Relations at SIS. The panelists included Michael Kelly, author of *Ghosts of Halabja: Saddam Hussein and the Kurdish Genocide*, and Professor Mohammed Ihsan, former Minister for Human Rights in the Kurdistan Region.

Professor Ihsan highlighted the atrocities that the Kurds faced under Saddam’s regime and explained that the post-Saddam era is even more dire, with millions of Kurds facing hunger and hardship under the new rule in Iraq. Overall, the event served as a platform to commemorate the Halabja chemical attack, advocate for recognition and justice, and shed light on the ongoing struggles faced by the Kurdish people. ●



## The Netherlands Benefits From a Stronger *Peshmerga*

Colonel Bart Kouwenberg serves as a military advisor for the Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Erbil and works on *peshmerga* reform. “It’s always hard, and you miss your family, but if you have to go somewhere for six months, Erbil is the best place to be,” Kouwenberg told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. “I also meet the most wonderful people and love Kurdish food.”

Kouwenberg underscored how one can really feel the enthusiasm for *peshmerga* reform among the Kurdish population. “A couple of weeks ago we gave the *peshmerga* course for about 60 students, and there was so much energy and enthusiasm. They’re so proud of their country.”

Importantly, he said that he feels a strong connection to the Kurdish people. “I feel like I’m a little bit Kurdish already, having lived here for five months now.”

Noting that he had a different impression about the natural environment of the Kurdistan Region before arriving, Kouwenberg said, “if you asked me two years ago, it would have been a very different story. When you think of Iraq, your initial impression probably isn’t that it’s very green. Last week, I went to the Korek Mountains and was in the snow.”

Furthermore, Kouwenberg advocated for the Dutch government to extend the duration of the advisory missions for his position to one year, arguing that six months is too short to understand a complex political situation.

“The political environment but also the other countries surrounding the Kurdistan region can be quite difficult to fully comprehend. So I also wrote to my government that maybe a year will be better than six months.”

### “There are many varieties of Iraq”

In discussing his daily life, Kouwenberg mentioned that he drives his car and walks around the streets visiting shops, all while dressed in his uniform, something that because of protocols is not possible in Baghdad. “I don’t feel like a target, a feeling I also convey to my family, who trusts my judgment in this sense. So, I feel safe,” he shared.

“That is why I expressed to my government a lot of times the differences within Iraq. So you cannot compare Baghdad to the Kurdish region. We have many colleagues and diplomats visiting from Baghdad who notice the freedom of movement here in the Kurdistan Region. The ability to travel anywhere by car, you can walk on the streets, and go to restaurants.”



**Wladimir van Wilgenburg**

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



Photo: Sabir Salih

Colonel Bart Kouwenberg interviewed at Kurdistan Chronicle’s Erbil headquarters.



The travel advice of the Netherlands’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs distinguishes between the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and the rest of Iraq, marking the Kurdistan Region as orange, where essential travel is permitted when necessary, unlike the rest of Iraq, where citizens are advised not to travel to.

Last year, the Dutch military deployed 145 additional soldiers to Baghdad to support the NATO mission and will take over the command of the NATO mission in May. This while the 120 Dutch troops that were previously based in Erbil under OIR, have left, leaving 5 Dutch soldiers in the Kurdistan Region.

“We are with less Dutch military now in the Kurdistan re-

Unit under the command of the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs.

The *peshmerga* made massive sacrifices in the fight against ISIS, with 1,800 personnel losing their lives and 10,369 suffering injuries.

As part of the *peshmerga* reform program, the MAG has 28 projects; some completed by the *peshmerga* themselves, and others with the help of Western military advisors. To be sure, political differences between the two ruling Kurdish parties have slowed the reform process, according to a recent report from the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Defense.



Photo: Sabir Salih

Another glimpse of Colonel Bart Kouwenberg during his interview at Kurdistan Chronicle’s Erbil headquarters.

gion. But I try to stress (to the Dutch government) that we have to help all of Iraq, which also means to keep an eye on the Kurdish region in our military support,” Kouwenberg said.

The Netherlands, Germany, the UK, and the United States are part of the Military Advisory Group (MAG) that works on uniting the partisan Patriotic Union of Kurdistan’s (PUK) 70s Unit and the Kurdistan Democratic Party’s 80s

“The Kurds are the best in the world when it comes to hospitality or friendliness. So, having lived with the Kurdish people, I also really want the best for them,” Kouwenberg added. “Sometimes it’s such a shame that they essentially are fighting each other instead of uniting and making the region stronger, and that’s something that hurts me. I just want the best for them.”

He underscores how crucial the quest is to find the politi-

cal will to unify the *peshmerga*. “Without the political support to reform the *Peshmerga*, it will never happen.”

However, he added, “we are hearing positive signals. It seems everybody is willing to reform, at least in word,” he added.

The Inspector General’s report said that in November 2023, Shores Ismail, Minister of *Peshmerga* Affairs, returned to his position after more than a year out of office due to tensions with PUK leader. “There were too many situations in which people said, we cannot do it now, because there is no minister,” Kouwenberg said. “So, it really helps to have the minister in place now.”

Kouwenberg also noted that he meets with his U.S. colleagues every week about the state of the reform process. “They have been quite positive about it, and believe a lot of progress has been made. Things are even better than last year and the year before.”

Meanwhile, U.S. Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Sasha Baker met with Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani on February 29 and discussed the reform program as outlined in the September 2022 memorandum signed by the KRG and the U.S. Department of Defense.

Kouwenberg underscored how the reform process is also affected by developments across the Middle East, such as the war in Gaza and the cutting of salaries to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq by Baghdad. “Everything is interconnected. If people are not being paid their salaries that also affects the *peshmerga*. It’s their family. They will have different things to worry about than your single line of accounting for the *peshmerga* reform project.”

#### Air defense

On January 15, 2024, an Iranian ballistic missile attack struck the home of Kurdish businessman Peshraw Dizay-

ee in Erbil, killing four civilians, including a child with dual Dutch-Iraqi nationalities. Iranian proxies have also targeted U.S. military bases in the Kurdistan Region, including near the Erbil airport, endangering the lives of civilians.

Dutch Foreign Minister Hanke Bruins Slot strongly condemned the attack and spoke to her Iranian counterpart.

“It was really sad and hit close to home for my colleagues and me because one of the deceased was a Dutch citizen,” Kouwenberg said.

He added that the Dutch Consul-General Jaco Beerends closely interacted with The Hague, keeping the Dutch Foreign Ministry of Affairs well informed about what was happening in the Kurdistan Region.

“The *peshmerga* made massive sacrifices in the fight against ISIS, with 1,800 personnel losing their lives and 10,369 suffering injuries

“We definitely had some strong words with Iran. Even now we have the documents that the Dutch citizen was deceased, so there is no reason for Iran to deny what happened,” Kouwenberg added.

After the Iranian attack, more voices in the Kurdistan Region called on the United States to provide air defenses to the Kurdistan Region. According to the recently approved 2024 U.S. National Defense Authorization Act,

the

United States will develop a plan to equip Iraqi and Kurdish forces with equipment to defend against such attacks.

Kouwenberg said that the MAG has already received requests to provide air defense systems to the Kurdistan Region.

“Of course, you want your people to be safe, but air defense is mainly there to protect the (Erbil) military base (at the airport) now, **not the city**. We know that there’s a project going on in Iraq to provide for those air defense systems.”

He added that the Kurdistan Region should make the case for Baghdad to provide air defense systems. “They’re also responsible to protect the country as a whole.”

Kouwenberg underlined also that the Netherlands wants a “strong and stable Kurdistan region”, but is also working on other things, such as water management and agriculture, so that the region “flourishes and gives people a good life.”

“The military is only one of the things that helps make a region stable, so we try to do the best we can on economic matters as well.”

With only five weeks left in his stay, Kouwenberg admits to wanting to stay longer. “I realize that a part of me wants to stay here. Of course, I want to go home to see my wife and children, but a part of me wants to stay here because it’s just a great place to be.” ●



## Judge Zebari's Resignation A Warning Signal for Iraq's Judicial System and Federalism

Kurdistan Chronicle

*Judge Dr. Abdul Rahman Suleiman Zebari, a respected figure within the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq, has submitted his resignation letter. In this letter, he expresses his deep concerns regarding the court's departure from the principles of federalism as delineated in the Federal Constitution. With an extensive background in constitutional law and three decades of judicial experience, Judge Zebari has consistently demonstrated his dedication to safeguarding the rights and privileges of all citizens, with particular attention to those of the Kurdistan Region. His resignation serves as a stark reminder of the politicization of Iraq's judicial system and the tendency of authorities in Baghdad to undermine federalism and the Iraqi constitution. The following statement is his resignation.*

Dear distinguished Heads of Federal Authorities,

Distinguished Heads of Kurdistan Region Authorities,

Esteemed Citizens of Iraq, particularly in the Kurdistan Region,

May the peace, blessings, and mercy of God be upon you...

Nearly three years ago, I began my tenure as a judge and founding member of the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq. Holding a doctoral degree in constitutional law – with a specific academic focus reflected in my doctoral thesis titled *Judicial Authority in the Federal System - A Comparative*

*Study* – and 30 years of service in the judiciary, I have diligently fulfilled my role as a representative of the Kurdistan Region in accordance with Article 3(II) of Federal Supreme Court Law No. 30 of 2005, as amended by Article 1 of Law No. 25 of 2021, known as the First Amendment to the Federal Supreme Court Law, which introduced the provision for “regional representation.”

Throughout my service in the court, I have utilized my professional and academic expertise to consolidate the components of the democratic system in Iraq. A primary objective of mine has been to contribute to the consolidation and safeguarding of the foundations of the federal system. Federalism is fundamentally rooted in the equita-



Judge Dr. Abdul Rahman Suleiman Zebari.



Photo: Peshraw Mahdi



ble distribution of power between federal institutions at all levels, as well as the institutions and authorities of the Kurdistan Region.

It is noteworthy that the Kurdistan Region stands as the sole region formed and constitutionally recognized since the inception of the 2005 Constitution of the Republic of Iraq (hereafter 'the Federal Constitution'). Indeed, Kurdistan

It's widely acknowledged that the Federal Constitution serves as the social contract and a politically sacred document upon which the new Iraq was established following the overthrow of the previous authoritarian regime. All components of the Iraqi populace participated in its drafting and subsequent approval, recognizing it as embodying the essential rights and entitlements of all constituents. Adherence to the provisions and principles of this constitution is deemed vital for ensuring Iraq's unity as a federal state, as explicitly stated in the preamble of the Federal Constitution.

tion-al rights of the Kurdistan Region in particular, given my role as its representative, as stipulated in the aforementioned article.

However, after nearly three years in this position and observing the successive decisions of the Federal Supreme Court in its new composition, I have arrived at the personal realization that my presence and continuity as a judge



existed even before the Federal Constitution came into effect, serving as a testament to the enduring struggle, sacrifices, and tragedies of the people in the region, including their uprising in 1991.

Personally, I have endeavoured to be the most effective representative and advocate for the rights and entitlements of all constituents of Iraq, as well as the institutions of the federal state in general, and the constitu-

in the court do not fully serve the intended purpose of this role, which is to contribute to upholding the principles and foundations outlined in the Federal Constitution.

Specifically, I find myself in a position where my efforts and professional expertise have become inadequate in achieving the objective of safeguarding the interests of the Kurdistan Region as a constitutionally recognized entity, as delineated in numerous articles of the Federal Constitution. Perhaps the most significant factors contributing to this realization include the following:

Through my service and observation, I have noticed a trend in successive court decisions towards a gradual regression to the principles of a centralized system of governance. This trend involves a gradual departure from the foundational principles of the federal system, as outlined in Article 110 of the Federal Constitution. Specifically, there has been an expansion in the scope of the exclusive powers granted to federal authorities at the expense of the powers allocated to regions or governorates not organized into a region or to the joint powers mentioned in subsequent articles.

Constitutional courts in all political systems that adopt the federal structure serve as a means for protecting and consolidating this system. They ensure the balance between federal authorities and the authorities of states or regions, preventing any level of government from overstepping its powers. The term "Federal" in the court's name originally relates to the federal system explicitly endorsed by the Constitution, particularly in Articles 1 and 116. Furthermore, it is logical that the Constitutional Court, in any country, prioritizes safeguarding the authorities of regions or states over federal authorities. This prioritization stems from the fact that federal authorities, due to their nature and powers, naturally hold a stronger position than regional authorities. However, as mentioned above, I have observed the opposite trend.

The Federal Constitution is considered a rigid constitution, carefully crafted by its constitutional legislators, who established complex procedures for its amendment. This was done to safeguard the agreed-upon constitutional principles and the rights of all parties, components, and

levels of government. However, what I have observed in the orientations and decisions of the Federal Supreme Court and its interpretations of the Federal Constitution in many instances is concerning. There seems to be a tendency towards broad interpretations that deviate from the context, potentially reaching the level of constitutional amendment. Such actions violate numerous constitutional principles, including the federal principle and the principle of the separation of powers. Consequently, this trend has led to the erosion of the Constitution's significance and meaning.

Given the absence of new legislation for the Federal Supreme Court – as required by Article 92 of the Constitution – the provisions of the amended Federal Supreme Court Law No. 30 of 2005, enacted before the Federal Consti-

tution came into force, remain in effect. Those provisions concern the court's composition and voting mechanism through the issuance of rulings and decisions, most of which are made by majority vote. Consequently, the representation of the Kurdistan Region constituting only two judges among the total of nine court members, lacks the numerical significance to prevent decisions and rulings perceived as violating the Region's rights and constitution-

al entity. This renders their representation of the Region practically ineffective. At most, they can express dissenting opinions. Our firm establishment of constitutional and legal opposition to numerous rulings and decisions, as mentioned earlier, has had little practical impact since decisions can be made by majority rather than consensus.

For all the aforementioned reasons and driven by my sense of responsibility towards the people of the Kurdistan Region in all its components, as well as its institutions and constitutional entity, I hereby declare my resignation from membership in the Federal Supreme Court. The circumstances I have outlined have rendered it impossible to fulfil the objectives for which I assumed this position and to influence the court's direction as previously described. ●



Judge Jassim Al-Amiri, President of the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq.



# Commemorating the Birth of General Mustafa Barzani



**Richard Eagleton**

*is on the board of the Kurdistan Film Commission and is the son of the esteemed late US ambassador, William Eagleton. William was renowned for his fervent leadership and staunch advocacy for Kurdish Rights.*

March 14 is a significant date for Kurdish people around the globe as they honor the memory of Mustafa Barzani, a towering figure in Kurdish history and the struggle for national liberation.

Born on March 14, 1903, in the village of Barzan, situated at the crossroads of modern-day Iran, Turkey, and the Kurdistan Region, Barzani's life was marked by resilience and an unwavering dedication to his people's cause.

From a young age, Barzani faced the harsh realities of oppression, as he and his mother were unjustly imprisoned by the Ottoman Empire when he was just three years old. Hailing from a family with a longstanding commitment to advocating for Kurdish rights, Barzani's destiny seemed intertwined with the fate of his people.

In 1919, at the age of 16, Barzani joined Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji's revolution, marking the beginning of his lifelong commitment to the Kurdish struggle. A year later, he was entrusted by his older brother, Sheikh Ahmed Barzani, with the pivotal task of forging alliances with Sheikh Said of Piran in Northern Kurdistan (southeastern Turkey). Despite facing numerous exiles and challenges, Mustafa Barzani remained undeterred, always returning to the forefront of the fight for Kurdish rights.

Barzani's leadership truly came to the fore in 1946, when Qazi Mohammad declared the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan in Mahabad in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran). Assuming the role of Chief of Staff of the Mahabad Army, Barzani became a central figure in the nascent state's defense. However, the dream of an independent Kurdistan was short-lived, as the republic collapsed a year later, leading Barzani and his followers to seek refuge in the Soviet Union.

“Barzani's leadership truly came to the fore in 1946, when Qazi Mohammad declared the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan”

During his 12-year sojourn in the Soviet Union, Barzani continued his military pursuits and delved into learning the intricacies of diplomacy and governance. Fluent in Russian, he leveraged his time in exile to build international networks and bolster the Kurdish cause on the global stage.

**Return to Kurdistan**

Barzani's return to Kurdistan in 1958 marked a new chapter in the struggle for Kurdish autonomy. Under his leadership, Kurdish pressure compelled the Iraqi government to concede to some of their demands in 1970, including the recognition of Kurdish autonomy and rights, such as education in their native language. However, the promise of autonomy was also short-lived, as the Iraqi government renegeed on its commitments by signing the Algiers Agreement with Iran in 1975.



**General Mustafa Barzani.**





Until his passing in March 1979, Barzani remained the epitome of Kurdish resistance, both politically and militarily. Barzani passed away in Washington, D.C., on March 1, 1979 while seeking medical treatment in the United States.

Initially laid to rest in Oshnavieh in Eastern Kurdistan, his body was later relocated to his ancestral village following the 1991 Kurdish uprising, a testament to his enduring legacy as a symbol of Kurdish resilience and the quest for self-determination.

Beyond his death, Barzani's legacy continues to inspire generations of Kurds in the ongoing struggle for Kurdish rights and recognition on the global stage. His life is truly a testament to the indomitable spirit of the Kurdish people and their unwavering resolve in the face of adversity. ●





## “Knights of the East”

### Diplomats, Kurdology, and Russian-Kurdish Relations



*Rubin Maxim Olegovich  
is the Consul General of the  
Russian Federation in the  
Kurdistan Region.*

The Kurds are one of the Middle East’s oldest ethnic groups. Their long history, however, is full of tragic events that have strongly influenced their identity, including their culture, traditions, and language. This unique identity has, in turn, prompted researchers, politicians, culturologists, linguists, and non-specialists from all parts of the world, including Russia, to take significant interest in the Kurds.

The establishment of Russian Kurdology, or Kurdish studies, dates to 1797, when the Asian Affairs Department was added to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which focused on relations with Kurds living both within the Russian Empire and outside it. At that time, the Kurds occupied an important part of Russia’s international political agenda.

Then, during the first half of the 19th century, the region of Transcaucasia, or the South Caucasus, joined the Empire and was home to a large Kurdish population, which intensified the development of Russian-Kurdish relations across many spheres of life. The Kurds became the object of numerous scholarly studies, and an ethnic group considered worth communicating and developing constructive cooperative ties with. In the Russian Empire’s 1897 census, the Kurdish population was estimated at 99,000.

Meanwhile, Soviet ethnologist Aristova Tatyana writing in the mid-1900s noted that the Kurds residing in Russia were loyal to authorities, especially after the Russians became their liberators

during World War I. Throughout the war, many Kurds enthusiastically enlisted in the ranks of the Russian Army, showing courage in fierce battles. At the same time, many Yezidi Kurds were forced to flee to Armenia and Georgia during the war to escape political, religious, and ethnic cleansing.

#### Emergence of Russian Kurdology

The history of Russian-Kurdish relations is long and complicated, yet it has been constantly infused with a spirit of empathy and friendliness. Since the Kurds were a part of the Russian state and there had been continuous interaction at various stages of Russia’s historical develop-

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The establishment of  
Russian Kurdology, or  
Kurdish studies, dates to  
1797

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ment, the Kurds attracted the attention of many scholars whose works formed the basis of Kurdology.

The foundation of Russian Kurdology rests on the works of major research-





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During the early days of Russian Kurdology, many diplomats devoted time and energy to studying the Kurds in Russia and cultivating Russian-Kurdish relations

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ers, explorers, and orientalists such as William Dittel, Vasily Bartold, Peter Lerch, Nikolay Marr, Margarita Rudenko, Zara Yusupova, and others. However, the father of Russian Kurdology was Joseph Orbeli, a Soviet-Armenian orientalist, academician, and author of the most valuable works on the history of Kurdish culture, literature, and language. Orbeli called the Kurds the “Knights of the East” for their courage, stamina, and strong sense of justice.

However, how could researchers who were geographically so far away from Kurds obtain such detailed information about them? Russian diplomats were certainly vital in gathering scholarly information, and they were credited for this work in the Ottoman and Persian Empires. During the early days of Russian Kurdology, many diplomats devoted time and energy to studying the Kurds in Russia and cultivating Russian-Kurdish relations. Moreover, with territorial expansion, increasingly more Kurds found them-

selves living in Russia. For example, a “Kurdistan district” was identified in 1923 in the newly established Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, which was also known as “Red Kurdistan.”

Since Russian diplomats closely communicated with Kurds, they managed to collect and save the most valuable pieces of Kurdish literature and record authentic Kurdish folklore, having heard the stories directly from native speakers. Diplomatic officers were also the first to master the Kurdish

language, helping to consolidate the most important information that undergirds Russian research on Kurds. As a result, many important pieces of Kurdish literature in its original language were saved and are now housed at the Russian National Library.

August Zhaba was one such diplomat who made a great contribution to development of Russian-Kurdish relations and Kurdology itself. One of the first graduates of the Educational Department of Oriental Languages in the Asian Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhaba not only had a noteworthy diplomatic career, but also contributed to Kurdology, primarily through publishing the first Kurdish-French dictionary in 1879. His collection of manuscripts in the Kurdish language, including his translation of the famous Sharafnama, is incredibly rich and valuable.

#### Vladimir Minorsky

Diplomat and scholar Vladimir Minorsky is perhaps the most outstanding Russian diplomat-orientalist of the 20th century. During his service at the Russian Embassy in the Persian Empire, Minorsky made significant contributions to demarcating the Ottoman-Iranian border as a representative of Russia in the so-called Commission of Four, which included Ottoman, Iranian, British and Russian officials. So significant was his role that in February 1914 this border was named the Minorsky Line in his honor. Despite his demanding diplomatic routine, Minorsky managed to find time to publish his studies of Kurdish culture. In

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Today, 70,000-90,000 Kurds live in the Russian Federation

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1911, he published his first article, which was dedicated to the study of the religious and philosophical doctrine of Yarsanism, or Ahl-e Haqq (People of Truth).

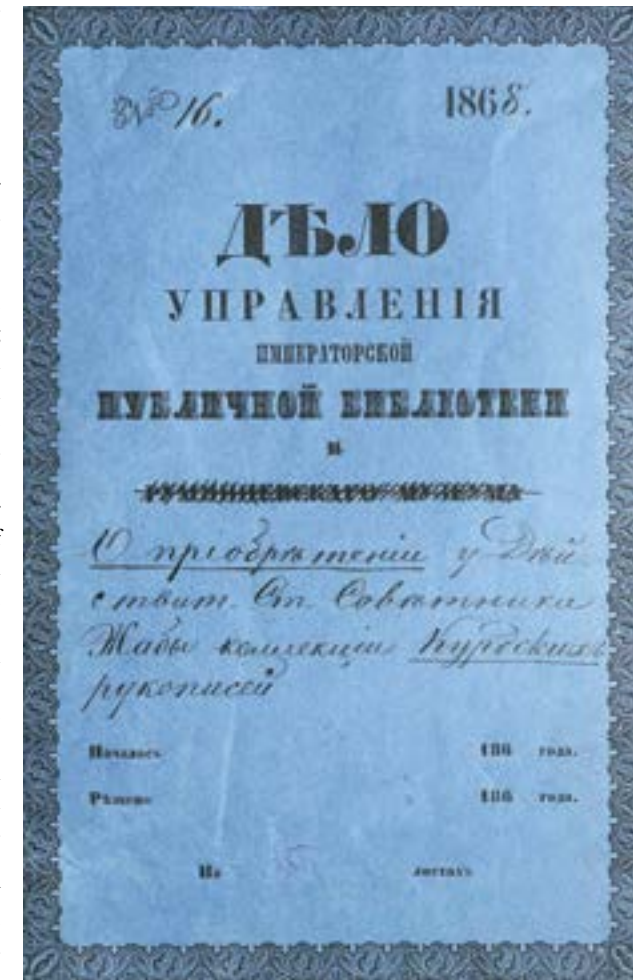
After this publication, Minorsky became famous not only as an orientalist, but also as a friend of the Kurdish people. He studied Kurdish archaeology, history, and culture for many

years, collecting vast amounts of sources. He later published one of his most important studies, The Kurds: Notes and Impressions, in 1915 and developed one of the most popular ethnic theories of Kurdish origin.

Minorsky’s contribution to Kurdology, as well as to the development of sustainable ties between Russia and Kurdistan, was profound. Fluent in several dialects of the Kurdish language, he worked tirelessly to consolidate this valuable knowledge into a series of works dedicated to the literature and history of Kurds. He also actively popularized the Kurdish language and literature in Russia and abroad.

From the late 1700s onwards, the activities of Russian diplomats opened new possibilities for researchers to study the mysterious “knights of the East.” Through quotidian and often tedious scholarly work imbued with fidelity to their sources and a commitment to their diplomatic craft in all its meaning, they cultivated and strengthened relations between different nations and ethnicities based upon mutual respect, patience, and support.

Kurdology studies, moreover, remain important in modern Russia, with Kurdish history, linguistics, culture, economics, politics, and society an ongoing focus for Russian academicians and researchers. Today, 70,000-90,000 Kurds live in the Russian Federation, where they are able to access information about their culture, language, and ethnic identity, helping to safeguard their heritage. ●





## The Mandaean Sabians An Ancient Faith Finds a Home in Kurdistan



*Qassim Khidhir*

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

Along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in southern Iraq, a religious minority cloaked in white performs ritualistic baptisms in the flowing waters. These are the Mandaean Sabians, an ancient community steeped in tradition and a unique understanding of faith.

The term Sabian derives from the Mandaic word saba, meaning “baptized” or “immersed.” Mandaean, on the other hand, comes from manda, signifying “knowledge.” Therefore, Mandaean Sabians translates to “those baptized with the knowledge of God.”

Southern Iraq, once known as lower Mesopotamia, is the historical homeland of the Mandaeans.

Monotheism is central to their beliefs. God is referred to as the Great Life or the Eternal Life in their sacred text, the *Ginza Raba* (*The Great Treasure*). They trace the lineage of their prophets back to Adam, the first human and teacher, followed by Seth (Sherel in Mandaic), then Sam, the son of Noah. Their last prophet is Yahya, the son of Zekariya, whose is mentioned in Bible as John the Baptist and in the Quran as Prophet Yahya bin Zekariya. Also, the Sabians are mentioned in the Quran alongside the Jews, the Christians, and the Zoroastrians as *ahl al-kitâb*, or “people of the book.”

The *Ginza Raba*, a 600-page text, serves as their holy book. It is divided into two parts. The first section delves into creation, the struggle between good and evil, and the journey of the soul into Adam’s body. It also includes prayers, religious practices, and theological principles. The second section focuses on the soul’s fate, exploring reward and punishment in the afterlife.

Mandaic, the native language of the Mandaeans, is an Eastern Aramaic language with roots in the Semitic family. Notably, all their religious texts are written in Mandaic, with their alphabet mirroring the cyclical nature of their beliefs – it begins and ends with the letter “alef,” symbolizing the return to origins.

For millennia, the Mandaeans have distinguished themselves through their exquisite jewelry making, a skill that has become their cultural hallmark. With a long history and unique beliefs, the Mandaeans are a community where faith, tradition, and artistry flow together like the very rivers that cradle their ancient civilization.

### Finding a safe haven in the Kurdistan Region

Since U.S.-led coalition forces deposed Saddam Hussein in 2003, many Mandaeans have fled sectarian violence and instability in southern Iraq and sought safety in the Kurdistan Region, known for its relative peace and tolerance.



*Photo: Safin Hamid*





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Some families who  
immigrated to Europe  
are returning, mainly to  
Kurdistan, because they  
fear their children will  
lose their culture

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Photo: Sefin Hamid



This sense of security led to the establishment of the Mandaean Culture Association in Erbil in 2007. Alongside a temple, the association provides a space for Mandaeans to practice their rituals, celebrate holidays, and engage in cultural activities. They have even taken steps to connect with Kurdish society, printing a booklet in Kurdish that explains their beliefs, rituals, language, and customs.

“We found Kurdistan to be a safe haven,” said Faiza Diab Sarhan, Vice President of the Mandaean Culture Association and a prominent member of the Mandaean community in Kurdistan. “The Kurdish people are tolerant toward other religion and ethnicity groups,” she added.

According to Sarhan, who also serves on the Board of Directors of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities Network, “around 750 Mandaeans now call Kurdistan home, with the majority residing in Erbil, the region’s capital.”

In Iraq, there are around 20,000 Mandaeans, the majority of whom dwell in Baghdad.

However, this is a fraction of the community’s pre-2003 size. Sarhan estimates that before the 2003 liberation, there were roughly 70,000 Mandaeans in Iraq. Sadly, due to violence and discrimination, a third of the community has fled the country altogether.

Despite the challenges, Sarhan expresses hope for the future of Mandaeans in Iraq. “There is no encouragement for emigration among the Mandaeans,” she said. “In fact, some families who immigrated to Europe are returning, mainly to Kurdistan, because they fear their children will lose their culture.”

However, significant hurdles remain. She highlights the seizure of Mandaean lands in Baghdad and southern Iraq by armed militias, a tactic used to alter the demographics of these areas. She also criticizes Article 26 of Iraq’s Unified National Card Law, passed in 2015. This law mandates that the religion of a minor be changed to Islam if one parent converts, a clear violation of the rights of non-Muslim minorities. Sarhan, along with others, advocates for amending this law, allowing children to choose their faith upon reaching adulthood.

“Our biggest fear, however, is not feeling safe in our own country,” she lamented.

Beyond security concerns, language preservation is another pressing issue. With only one school in all of Iraq dedicated to teaching Mandaic, the Mandaeans’ ancient language, Sarhan hopes the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will establish a school in Erbil to serve the community’s educational needs.

Looking toward the future, Sarhan expresses a desire for increased support from the KRG. She advocates for equal rights for Mandaeans and the opening of university doors to students from across Iraq.

“We feel safe in Kurdistan and want to build our future here,” Faiza concluded. ●



Photo: Safin Hamid



## Re-visualizing Sulaymaniyah as a Woman-Friendly City



**Shazin Jaf**

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

**A**s a young girl living in Sulaymaniyah, I loved the city. However, the feeling was not reciprocated. I believe that the reason for this is the city's design, which is not women-friendly and thus does not allow women to feel comfortable being themselves.

In this article, I aim to visualize a city that women can identify with, where they can express themselves, grow, and feel like they belong. In a November 2023 report, the UN Women's Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls global initiative highlighted four key points that could potentially make a city more women-friendly:

- Accessibility to essential services such as healthcare, education, and social support.
- Diverse job opportunities that empower women economically.
- High-quality amenities, including transportation, housing, and safety measures.
- Access to mechanisms that guarantee their rights when they are exposed to violence.

No developed city can become smart and stable if at least half of its population does not feel comfortable. We need to start including women in the design and construction of urban spaces so that we can create more comprehensive and thoughtful blueprints for cities. This starts by engaging female professionals across disciplines – including architects, engineers, researchers, activists, and policymakers – to achieve inclusive urban design.

In this article I argue that, by prioritizing women's needs, Sulaymaniyah can enhance daily life for its female residents, fostering a more equitable and vibrant

cityscape. Recognized as the Kurdistan Region's capital of culture, Sulaymaniyah's potential as a women-friendly city can be fulfilled by developing a number of key elements.

### Freedom of movement

I want to start with transportation, which poses significant challenges for various demographic groups within Sulaymaniyah. Consider a young female student, a mother with a stroller, an older woman unable to walk long distances, or even an individual who does not want to rely on a personal vehicle because of the environmental impact. To start with, reliance on public transport becomes paramount for those unable to afford personal vehicles or consistent taxi services. However, the current state of Sulaymaniyah's transportation system fails to support these individuals adequately. Primarily, the absence of a tracking system leaves commuters unaware of bus arrival times, forcing them to wait for an indefinite amount of time. Moreover, buses lack accommodations for women with strollers or disabilities, rendering access difficult or impossible. Women working late hours encounter additional obstacles since public transport ceases operating in the late evenings, often leaving them stranded. Moreover, pervasive issues of sexual harassment in bus stations compound their safety concerns.

Addressing these shortcomings is imperative. Implementing a reliable tracking system would enhance predictability and convenience for commuters, while adapting buses to accommodate strollers and wheelchairs would improve accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges.



*Photo: Darroon Qaradaghi*





Photos: Daroon Qarnadaghi

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Addressing these  
shortcomings is  
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Extending public transport operating hours would provide essential late-night travel options. Crucially, measures to combat sexual harassment must be prioritized to ensure the safety and security of all passengers. Improving Sulaymaniyah’s public transport system would benefit women commuters and contribute to broader societal goals of inclusivity and accessibility.

Enhancing security in public spaces is also vital. For instance, Sulaymaniyah’s parks lack adequate lighting, deterring women from activities like jogging or yoga in the early morning or evenings. Insufficient pedestrian-friendly lighting exacerbates safety concerns. Street and park lighting primarily caters to vehicles, neglecting pedestrian safety. Introducing security cameras and adjusting lighting to prioritize pedestrian visibility would foster a safer environment for all residents, particularly women, and encourage more active use of public spaces.

To unlock the complete potential of public spaces, tangible inclusion is imperative. Downtown areas, as quintessential public spaces, cater to all individuals. Women, for instance, can relish their quality time by engaging in activities like shopping, socializing with friends, or spending time with their children. Implementing pedestrian-friendly initiatives with ample greenery and seating not only fosters a welcoming environment, but also encourages women to embrace outdoor activities, thereby advancing inclusivity.

### Empowering women

One element that is paramount to combating the marginalization of women is the inclusion of gender equality in education. Integrating discussions and lessons on gender equality can, above all, reduce perceptions of women as “others” and proactively foster inclusivity, thus empowering women within the community. On the topic of equality, boosting the presence of women in the local economy is crucial. Currently, men vastly outnumber women and dominate the business landscape, limiting opportunities for women. Empowering women-owned businesses not only expands job prospects but also diversifies the product offerings on the market, fostering a more equitable business landscape in the city.

Accommodation is another significant factor when making a city women-friendly. Simply





Photo: Darroon Qaradaghi

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Encouraging dialogue  
is essential to shape the  
vision – and practical  
design – of our city for  
women

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put, Sulaymaniyah must prioritize housing solutions for women living independently, which includes those working in the city, orphaned, separated, or widowed. Municipalities should develop housing tailored to their needs, such as apartments or houses with different designs. Additionally, implementing rent and housing market price controls ensures affordability and security, particularly for vulnerable groups like female orphans over 18 years old. Addressing these housing concerns fosters stability and support for women navigating independent living situations.

Following the rule of the “15-minute city” – an urban planning concept aimed at providing cities with basic services (e.g. schools, groceries, malls, parks, etc.) within a 15-minute walk of residential spaces – not only decreases traffic, but also reduces stress and strengthens the bond women have with the city. Increasing the number of public restrooms is an attendant issue, as insufficient facilities pose challenges for women in Sulaymaniyah by disregarding the unpredictability of menstrual cycles. Finding a place to change becomes arduous, leading to impromptu purchases for access to changing rooms. For women with urine incontinence, the shopping experience becomes exceedingly difficult. Addressing this issue is vital for ensuring basic dignity and comfort for all women in public spaces.

Lastly, let me discuss the visibility of women. Despite their substantial historical contributions to Sulaymaniyah, statues and murals predominantly feature men. On the other hand, cities like Barcelona in Spain have led initiatives to highlight women’s roles through statues, museum exhibitions, and even street names. Emulating such efforts can ensure equal recognition of women’s contributions in shaping Sulaymaniyah’s history and society, fostering inclusivity and gender equality in public spaces.

In conclusion, encouraging dialogue is essential to shape the vision – and practical design – of our city for women. The municipality should harness the talents of Kurdish women, creating a network across various fields, an initiative that will not only enhance the city, but also empower women.

Ultimately, this project will be a significant achievement for Sulaymaniyah, transforming it into the first city in Kurdistan and the Middle East to become a women-friendly city. ●



## Explores Themes of Diaspora and Identity



**Haima Askari**

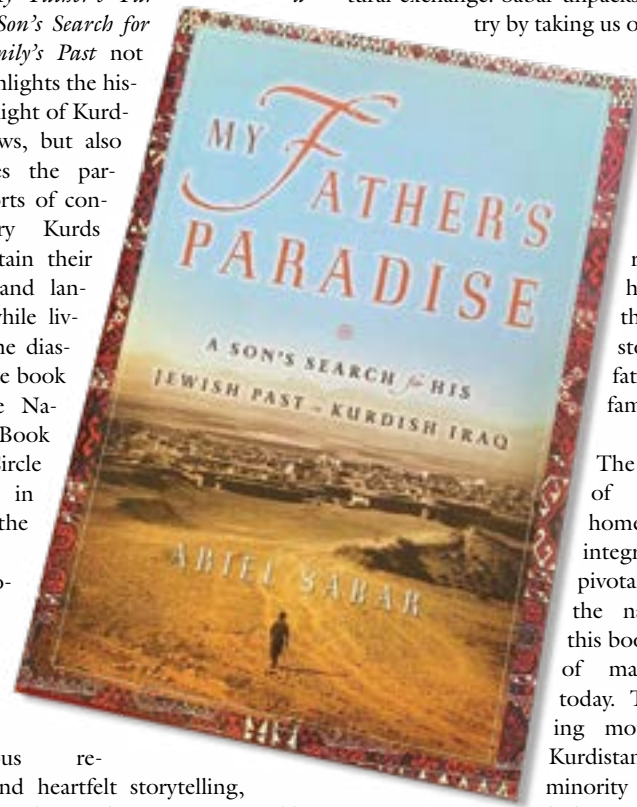
is a D.C.-based consultant, facilitates collaboration among diverse religious and cultural groups. With a rich multicultural background, he's worked in the German Parliament and conducted research with Amazigh tribes in Morocco.

Diaspora and identity are especially pertinent concepts to the Jews of Kurdistan but they are also familiar to the two million Kurds living abroad. In retracing his father's journey from the vibrant streets of Zakho to the academic halls of the United States, Ariel Sabar's 2008 book *My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Family's Past* not only highlights the historical plight of Kurdistan Jews, but also elucidates the parallel efforts of contemporary Kurds to maintain their culture and language while living in the diaspora. The book won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2008 in the category of Autobiography.

Sabar, through meticulous research and heartfelt storytelling, transports the reader to 1940s Zakho through the perspective of his father, Yona Beh Sabagha. The author diligently sets the scene for the narrative by providing a history of the biblical relevance of Jewish heritage in the Kurdistan Region, where the rugged mountains have sheltered Kurdish Jews for over 2,700 years. Sabar also addresses the historical scarcity

of Kurdish Jewish literature through his expressive writing and tone, which illustrate the rich tapestry of life in Zakho. Perched on the Khabur River, Zakho was home to Jews, Muslims, and Christians, who long lived harmoniously in a complex web of mutual dependence and cultural exchange. Sabar unpacks this tapestry by taking us on a journey that spans a century and multiple continents, delicately weaving regional history with the personal stories of his father and family.

The themes of diaspora, homeland, and integration are pivotal to both the narrative of this book and lives of many Kurds today. The towering mountains of Kurdistan have kept minority groups including the Kurdistan Jews safe for hundreds of years, and Sabar highlights how this sense of security was compromised as nationalist and sectarian conflicts erupted in the region in the mid-20th century. The author's father undergoes multiple stages of personal transformation linked to the forced diaspora of his community, from emigrating



from Iraq to seeking safety in Israel, as legal and social discrimination increasingly target Jewish communities in Iraq. Afterwards, Yona quickly realizes that to preserve the unique identity of Kurdish Jews, he needs to pursue his academic career in the United States, where he eventually settles.

### Language as a lifeline

Identity, particularly through the lens of language, is another key theme of this book. Alongside providing safety from early warring empires, the mountains of Kurdistan



Ariel Sabar (left) introduces his book "My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Family's Past".

provided another crucial component to the uniqueness of Kurdistan Jews: seclusion. While Jews in the rest of Iraq ultimately adopted the Arabic of their neighbors, Kurdistan Jews spoke Aramaic among themselves, which had been the common language of the Middle East for over 2,000 years. Language thus emerges as a vital identity marker in these remote Jewish villages, where inhabitants clung to Aramaic as they clung to their lives.

"Language was their lifeline to a time and place that no longer was," Sabar notes in discussing the Kurds of Zakho.

For instance, his father Yona, as one of the last remaining native speakers of neo-Aramaic, leaves his family and close friends in the Kurdish neighborhood of Jerusalem for the United States, where he ultimately becomes a guardian of a language on the verge of extinction. Yona enters the world of academia in order to document and preserve this vital link to his childhood memories of a rich and diverse Kurdistan.

The themes of diaspora and identity are core elements of Sabar's exploration of the plight of Kurdistan Jews, and

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Zakho was home to Jews, Muslims, and Christians, who long lived harmoniously in a complex web of mutual dependence and cultural exchange

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these questions inherently resonate with contemporary Kurds who struggle to preserve their identity, culture, and language – even within their homelands.

As a Kurdish refugee living in the United States, *My Father's Paradise* echoes my own personal experience of living in diaspora, as I also felt a renewed sense of inspiration of the diverse potential of Kurdistan. In recent years, Kurdistan has come to serve as a beacon of hope for over a million displaced peoples from neighboring countries fleeing conflict and religious or cultural persecution. Another role that Kurdistan can fill is to strive to embody the indigenous diversity represented in Sabar's depictions of Zakho, a land where those of different faiths, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds can coexist and foster a sense of unity, where differences empower rather than embitter.



Ariel Sabar (left) signs his book during a ceremony.

Sabar's portrayal of the Zakho of yesteryear is an example of the possibility of peaceful coexistence, and so desperately needed in these times of distrust and violence. ●



## Kurdistan Through the Eyes of Americans



**Goran Shakhawan**

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

**M**y recently published book *America in the Eyes of an Immigrant* is currently available in Kurdish. I plan on translating it into English soon. While presenting the book in various cities throughout the Kurdistan Region, I introduced U.S. history and culture to audiences, relating how the country's founders or "founding fathers" built the nation, created its unique political structures, and fought for independence.

The main character in the book is a stateless Kurdish immigrant to the United States who asks himself many questions: what obstacles did the Americans face to achieve independence, and – considering their long pursuit of independence – do they really empathize with stateless nations like Kurdistan? The main character seeks to find answers to these questions throughout the course of the book.

After researching and writing the book, I wanted to flip the script, as I was curious how Americans saw Kurdistan. In February 2024, I held a seminar at a high school in New Hampshire about Kurds and their struggles and was pleasantly surprised to discover that many of the students were eager to learn about Kurdish culture, including its traditional foods. I also discovered that many Americans, especially in academia, are eager to learn more about the Kurds, and was given the chance to speak with political analysts, social science

scholars, and university students who focus on Middle East politics, specifically the Kurdish issue, at the University of New Hampshire (UNH).

### Understanding Kurdistan

When I asked Michael Cole, a Ph.D. candidate at the McCormick School of Policy and Global Studies and an adjunct lecturer in the Department of Political Science and International Affairs at UNH, about when he had first learned about the Kurds, he immediately mentioned the 1988 Anfal Campaign, which he described as one of the most brutal examples of state-sponsored violence and genocide in modern history.

Cole had actually first learned about the Kurdish people and their struggle for statehood after the September 11 attacks and has since dedicated himself to learning about the Middle East

and its history. He believes that recognizing the Kurds as the largest minority without a nation requires the urgent need for dialogue, diplomacy, and respect for minority rights in addressing conflicts and promoting stability, security, and justice in the region.

During our conversation he pointed out that the lack of a unified Kurdish state has resulted in severe challenges for the Kurdish people, including political marginalization, cultural suppression, and brutal

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Kurdistan Chronicle's US Edition on display outside the White House in Washington, D.C.

atrocities such as the Anfal Campaign.

At UNH, many undergraduate students study foreign languages, including Arabic, with a focus on Middle East politics. When I first met Sullivan Kimball, an undergraduate studying political science and Arabic, he expressed a strong desire to learn the Kurdish language. He emphasized that understanding Kurdistan and the Kurdish people is crucial for understanding the future of the region. Sullivan described the Kurds as long-term allies of the United States in the region and acknowledged that Kurdish issues are often poorly understood in the United States. “The United

States professes to support the Kurds but has sometimes abandoned them when faced with difficulties in the past,” he said.

Sullivan mentioned the 1991 Iraqi uprisings as one such time when U.S. support had been withheld at a critical moment. He also mentioned the U.S. withdrawal from Syria in 2019, which left the Kurds at the mercy of Turkey. Finally, after a moment of silence, he noted, “After the 2017 Kurdistan Region independence referendum, the United States only offered tepid, neutral words.”

Many academics have similarly ex-

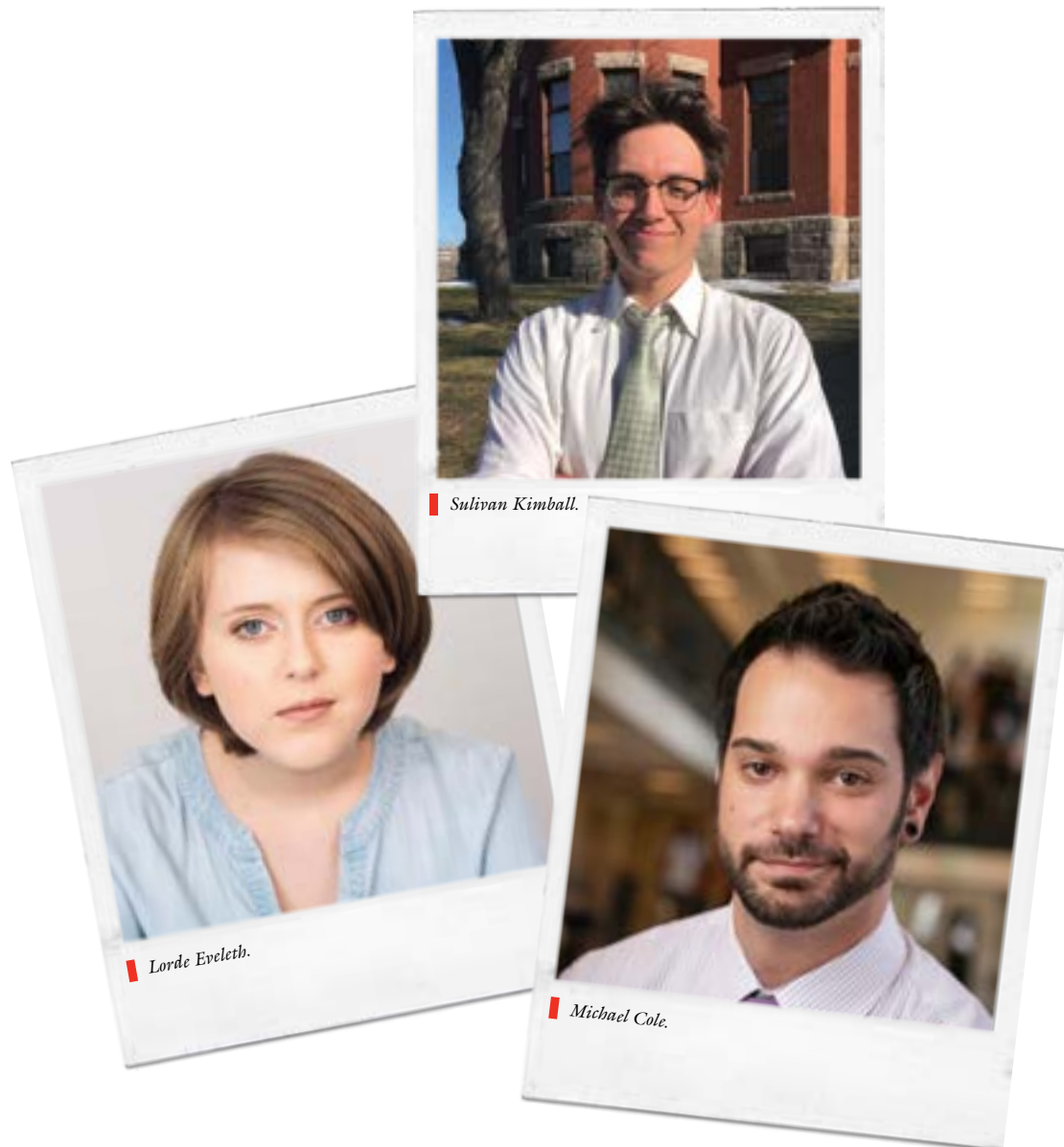
pressed their dissatisfaction with U.S. foreign policy, especially concerning the Kurds.

According to Sullivan, the United States needs to support the Kurdish people's right to autonomy, as he believed that the Kurdish issue will continue to cause instability in the region if it is not properly addressed in democratic fashion.

### Why no state?

Lorde Eveleth, a first-year political science student and aspiring diplomat specializing in Middle Eastern affairs at UNH, also shared that she first





Sullivan Kimball.

Lorde Eveleth.

Michael Cole.

learned of the Kurds four years earlier in her high school world history class. Lorde believed that being the largest minority without a nation presents significant challenges, as it becomes harder to maintain cultural identity when living in different countries.

She emphasized the often-overlooked issue of assimilation, even in countries like the United States, which is known for its cultural diversity. During our conversation about the culture and identity of the Kurdish nation, I asked Lorde why the Kurdish issue has become so problematic. She explained that neighboring countries oppose the idea of a Kurdish state, creating a hostile environment that blocks its formation.

Her response reminded me of my early days in primary

school, when I would ask my history teacher about the problematic nature of Kurdish independence for Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

He would simply reply, “they were afraid of the breakup of their own countries.”

Finally, I asked Lorde for her thoughts about an old project that U.S. President Joe Biden, then a U.S. Senator serving on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had proposed: dividing Iraq into three separate regions: Kurdish, Shi’a, and Sunni. Lorde responded that it could be possible one day but would need widespread support. However, she expressed concern about the power of militia groups to undermine the will of the government and complicate the implementation of such a proposal. ●



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## A Special Guest Every Month!

### Season 5 - Episode 3



### Delovan Barwari

Host

Delovan Barwari is the Director of Public and Academic Affairs at the KRG Representation in the US.



### David Romano

Guest

Prof. Romano is the Chair of the Thomas G. Strong Chair in Middle East Politics at Missouri State University.

In this episode, the two delve into the impact of the conflict between Israel and Iran on Kurdistan and Iraq, as well as the Erbil-Baghdad disputes, with a special focus on the Iraqi Supreme Court rulings. They also discuss avenues for US intervention to mitigate these disputes. Dr. Romano also shares personal reflections on his experiences visiting Kurdistan.



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Podcast also available at [pod.link/KurdistaninAmerica](https://pod.link/KurdistaninAmerica)



## Newspapers and Magazines in Diyarbakir During the Late Ottoman Period



**Ahmet Çakmak**

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

*In memory of Ali Emiri Efendi*

The ancient city of Diyarbakir, also known as Amid, Kara Amid, Amed, or *Diyarbakir*, was one of the few places outside of Istanbul where Westernization movements were most intense during the last two centuries of Ottoman rule. It is possible to find traces of the political and social structure of this process in newspapers and magazines published by the government, non-governmental institutions, and individuals.

During the reign of Mahmud II (1808-1839), the Ottoman state government system was abolished and provinces, *sanjaks*, districts, townships, and villages were created because of radical changes in the administrative structure. In 1864, with the Danube Province Regulation, printing houses were established by decree in 21 provinces, which replaced the states, and each province began to publish its own official newspaper. Just before then, we see that printing houses were established in every province to print provincial annals known as *salname* to spread official news, and these printing houses turned into the newspapers we are familiar with today.

Press activities, which intensified with newspapers being printed in Istanbul and Izmir, flourished. The first newspaper in today's Diyarbakir, *Diyarbakir*, was printed on August 3, 1869, having been founded by the governor of the period, Hatunoglu Kurt Ismail Pasha. Printed in Turkish, Armenian and Arabic, its main

purpose was to educate the public on matters of local importance and to announce educational activities in the province.

The new ideas that Ibrahim Sinasi Efendi derived from Western literature – including the structure of the news article, new punctuation marks, the writing of the first script for theater – was implemented contemporaneously in Diyarbakir and

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The first newspaper in today's Diyarbakir, *Diyarbakir*, was printed on August 3, 1869

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in Istanbul. The first editorial staff of *Diyarbakir* included Said Pasha, Ziya Gokalp's father Mehmet Tevfik Efendi, Talat Efendi, and Said Pasha's son Suleyman Nazif. Handed over to the private sector in 1931, *Diyarbakir* ceased publication in 1963 but was the longest-running local newspaper of its time.

The first book published in Diyarbakir was a selection of 111 pages from the works of Ahmet Sait Pasha of Diyarbakir. The work, called *Divançe-i Es'ar*, was published in Ottoman Turkish in 1871.

Another notable book published in Ottoman Turkish was Ahmede Xasi's Kurdish-language *Mawlid*, a religious text that was published in the same printing house in 1899.

### Pre-republic period (1885-1920)

With the Ottoman Empire's declaration of the Second Constitutional Monarchy in 1908, many newspapers and magazines began to be published within the scope of the efforts of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) to account for the wide diversity of peoples living in the empire and to expand their individual freedoms. This expansion, which proceeded in accordance with the political and cultural understanding of both the government and minority groups, took place both in the cultural center of Istanbul and in the provinces. Political, social, and cultural issues of that period were covered by weekly, fortnightly, or monthly newspapers. Early on, newspapers took on the function of *risale-i mevkute*, or magazines as they are called today. Over time, these two types of publications naturally diverged from each other.

The first private newspaper printed in Diyarbakir's provincial printing house was *Peyman*, which was published as four pages on June 29, 1909. Its publisher and manager was Mirikitza-de Sukru Efendi. The editor-in-chief of this newspaper was Mehmet Ziya Gokalp, one of the representatives of the CUP in Diyarbakir province, who wrote articles under pseudonyms such as Tevfik Sadad, Huseyin Vadad, Mehmet Mehdi, Mehmet and Na'il. While the first issues described the problems of the city, over time, under the influence of Gokalp, the paper's focus gradually shifted towards pan-Turkism. Other topics discussed in the newspaper included the practices of Abdulhamid II and his situation after being dethroned, the unrest in Crete, the condition of the Ottoman navy, social and cultural activities in the province of Diyarbakir, the impact of the Second Constitutional Monar-

chy in Diyarbakir, and various other issues.

This newspaper published 36 issues in total. The 12th issue included Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's 1927 speech Nutuk in Kurdish. In the same period,

sion to publish in Turkish, Kurdish, and other languages. It was printed weekly between 1911 and 1915 with the tag "Ottoman publication," and published 142 issues in total.

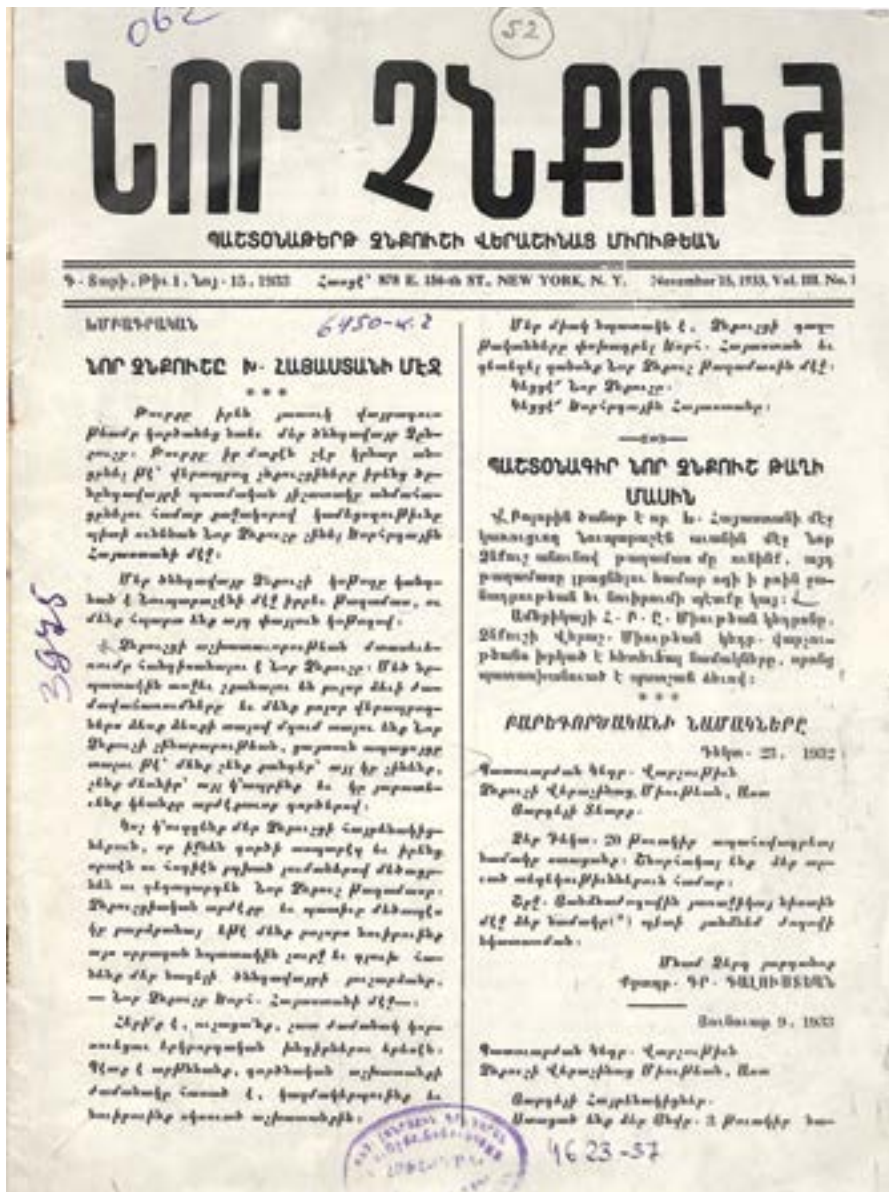
Between July 16, 1910 and July 27,



the newspaper Dicle began publishing as well, having received a license at the same time as *Peyman*. The manager of Dicle was Attarzade Hakkı Efendi, and the newspaper obtained permis-

1912, *Kawkab Madenbo* (*Eastern Star*) – considered to be the first newspaper of the Assyrians in Diyarbakir – was printed in the Arabic alphabet and the Jacobite dialect of Syr-





iac, as well as in Turkish and Kurdish. The editor-in-chief, Naum Faiq of Alipasa, was a pioneer of the Assyrian enlightenment who was born in Diyarbakir in 1868 and died in the U.S. state of New Jersey in 1930. This newspaper was published fortnightly, in eight-page issues, and was the media outlet of the *intibah*, or renaissance, association that was established in the city. This association and media outlet published articles focusing on the cultural, social, and ethnic problems of the Assyrian community. It aimed to find solutions, prepare the Assyrian community for the new century, and reduce linguistic and cultural disunity between Assyrians in the diaspora and Assyrians in the homeland.

As editor-in-chief, Naum Faiq wrote an article in Turkish

in the newspaper's first issue. While explaining why they could not call the newspaper a magazine, he mentioned that they had to publish it in newspaper form due to lack of resources and the technical inadequacy of the printing house. In the same article, he explained the importance of freedom, justice, and consciousness to individuals and communities living within the borders of the Ottoman state. The concepts of brotherhood, unity, and equality were also highlighted in the newspaper, which published 27 issues in its first year and 16 issues in its second year.

The newspaper *Sifuro* was first printed in 1912 in the *Sifuro* printing house, which marked a continuation of Assyrian journalism. The owner and manager of the publication was Bisar Hilmi. Arranged on double columns, the news-

paper consisted of eight pages in the Ottoman and Turkish languages and included articles on Assyrian culture, history, and art, but was closed in 1914 following the unsolved murder of Hilmi outside the city.

### Armenian periodicals

Periodicals about the city published by Armenians – another important group that resided in the city – both in Diyarbakir and outside of Turkey, are as follows, in chronological order:

*Iravunk/Le Droit (Law)*, published in Varna, Bulgaria in 1885, was a national and political newspaper published every three days by Takvor Papazian and edited by Hagop Mavian. It defended the rights of Ottoman Armenians and suggested the example of Bulgaria for the freedom struggle of Armenians. The newspaper also published research on Armenian history, literature, and culture, and protested when the government closed Armenian schools. In addition, the paper made facsimiles from the Armenian press. It was published in Armenian and French and was delivered to Ohannes Keshishian in Diyarbakir, although it was banned from entering *memalik-i sahane* (the sultan's property).

A single issue of *Azadutyun (Independence)* was published in Diyarbakir in 1890.

A single issue of *Angakh Dikris (Independent Tigris)* was published in Diyarbakir in 1909.

*Azad Khosh (Free Word)* was published in Diyarbakir in 1909 and edited by Azarig Kaloian.

*Dikris (Dicle)* was published as a weekly newspaper by Vahan Dabbaghian in Diyarbakir in 1910.

*Tsolker (Reflections/Glow)* was published by Vahan Dabbaghian as a fortnightly newspaper in Diyarbakir in 1910.

*Trutsig Garmir Dedrag (Red Notebook Brochure)* was a magazine published in Diyarbakir in 1913.

*Dikris (Tigris)* was published in New York in 1918-1931 and in Jersey City in 1932-1935. It was a publication of the Tigranakert/Diyarbakir Armenian Compatriotic and Reconstruction Union, founded in 1917 to address the problems of Armenians. The union collected aid for the “New Diyarbakir” settlement in Armenia.

*Nor Dikranagerd (New Diyarbakir)* was published in Brooklyn, New York, in 1918-1940. Another Tigranakert/Diyarbakir Armenian Compatriotic and Reconstruction Union publication, it was edited by Yeghishe Debashian, and later H. Isdambolian.



*Nor Cinkus (Yeni Cungus)* was a Cinkus Reconstruction Union publication published in New York in 1931-1935. Cungus, a district of Elazig, was later joined with Diyarbakir.

*Dikris (Tigris)* was published in Aleppo in 1946 as an annual publication of the Aleppo Regional Board of the Diyarbakir Association.

Six issues of *Amid-i Sevda* were published fortnightly in the Ottoman language in 1909. It was published by Sukru Amidi and later by Ali Emiri Efendi. It was a scientific, social, and literary newspaper, more like a magazine than a newspaper. In addition to history and literature, it included Ali Emiri Efendi's articles about the history of Diyarbakir and his advice to young people.

The beautiful city of Diyarbakir, which has experienced the riches of multiculturalism in language, politics, literature, and social life from its ancient history to more recent periods, is making its name known to the world again by entering the democratic struggle together with its people – although unfortunately with less multiculturalism. Diyarbakir proves that it is a city of culture, as it was in the past, with its poets, writers, painters, and actors. To this day, the adventure of culture and art magazines in our ancient city continues in a lonely but hopeful way. ●



## One Misses Their Mother Tongue



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).

*“One misses their mother tongue. We, the Kurds, are basically in exile in our homeland. Not only our land but also our language has been taken away from us. In Turkey, where nearly 20 million Kurds live, the number of people who can read and write in Kurdish can only be counted in the thousands. This shame is not ours, but the state’s.”*

Burhan Sonmez, a Kurdish writer from the municipality of Haymana in Ankara, Turkey, was recently elected President of PEN International, a global association of writers based in London. To date, he has written five novels in Turkish, which all have been translated into nearly 50 languages in more than 40 countries.

Sonmez studied law at university and started his career as a lawyer before becoming Editor-in-Chief of Ayrıntı Publishing, one of the leading Turkish publishing houses. He has received numerous national and international awards, including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development Literature Prize and the Vaclav Havel Library Foundation’s “Disturbing the Peace” Award. Sonmez, whose articles have been published in reputable newspapers such as La Repubblica, Der Spiegel, and The Guardian, currently lectures on human rights and English literature at Cambridge University and gives seminars in different parts of the world. His latest novel – the first he has written in Kurdish – Evindaren Franz K. (Franz K.’s Lovers) was published in Diyarbakir by Lis Editions.

Kurdistan Chronicle sat down with Sonmez to discuss his perspectives on Kurdish literacy, impressions on Kurdish liter-

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Not only our land, but also our language has been taken from us

”

ature, his work at PEN, and his “return” to his native language in writing Franz K.’s Lovers, a development greeted with great excitement among the Kurdish literature circles as an encouraging example for Kurds writing in other languages.

*Kurdistan Chronicle (KC): The novels you wrote in Turkish have been translated into nearly 50 languages in 40 different countries. After five novels, you returned to your native language, Kurdish, with a powerful story. Can you tell us about your Kurdish reading and writing adventure and what motivated you to author a novel in Kurdish?*

Burhan Sonmez (BS): I learned Kurdish in our village, within my family, so it was nothing more than a spoken language, as we did not have the opportunity to learn the written language. Kurdish was forbidden, and the compulsory language



Burhan Sönmez.



in education was Turkish. Once I reached middle age, I started reading Kurdish texts and improving my grammar. It's never too late for some things in life!

With this feeling, I intended to write a novel in Kurdish. I've had this desire for years but wasn't sure which book to start with. While I was working on this novel, I felt that the time had come, and I started writing in Kurdish. One misses their mother tongue. We, the Kurds, are basically in exile in our homeland. Not only our land, but also our language has been taken away from us. In Turkey, where nearly 20 million Kurds live, the number of people who can read and write in Kurdish can only be counted in the thousands.

*guages. There are many other examples. As a bilingual writer, could you share your views on this subject?*

BS: The feeling this situation creates in people is strange. Ours is different from, for example, the situation of an immigrant who knows Turkish but writes in German, or an academic who knows Italian and writes in English. Those languages are liberated languages; the transition from one to another is always free. In our case, our language was banned. It was forbidden to return to that language, and the only option was to leave it and join other languages, mainly Turkish, Arabic, or Persian. That's why the 'other' language in a Kurd's mind has always been his own language. In every Turk-

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The world doesn't see  
us, only our wounds  
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■ Mevlüt Oğuz (left) and Burhan Sönmez.

This shame is not ours, but the state's. If the state isn't giving up this policy of oppression and denial, we must do our own work and protect our language.

*KC: The journey of writers who return to their native language has always intrigued me. For example, although Kateb Yacine and Aime Cesaire knew French very well, they eventually returned to their native languages, with Yacine writing in Algerian Arabic and Cesaire in Martinique Creole. Samuel Beckett himself translated other books that he wrote in French or English into other lan-*

ish novel I wrote, Kurdish words and images always seeped into the text. Unlike the transition between two liberated languages, we can talk about a transition between two different languages that can be characterized as a master and a slave. The reality of this and the psychology it brings to us is unique.

*KC: Central Anatolia has its own dialect of Kurdish, which I find melodious. When I speak with you and listen to your past interviews, I can hear that melodious Central Anatolian Kurdish. Despite this, you chose to write in*

*standard Kurdish. Why? Are we going to hear any of this dialect in your future novels?*

BS: I thought about this, too, and am aware that the Kurdish I use is the standard dialect. The main reason for this was that while learning and improving Kurdish grammar, I felt like a student and stuck to what I learned. The Kurdish dialect of my hometown is different, and I dream of writing a novel in my own dialect one day. I don't know how long it will take, but dreams are meant to be realized.

*KC: In a previous interview, you said, 'I read my first Kurdish book when I was 35.' What have you read since then? What contributed to your Kurdish being so deep and rich?*

BS: When I first went into exile, I embraced English because the basic condition for living in the UK was to learn this language. Recently, I have read books in Kurdish rather than Turkish and English. The internet was also of great help, as I followed online publications and articles. These days, I have a special interest in reading novels written in Kurdish by young writers.

*KC: You are an avid reader of Kurdish literature. What impression do you have when you read it?*

BS: I am excited by the language used by the young generation because I see that they are not simply content with trying to establish a unique literary language, but are also trying to develop the Kurdish language that they already use in their own creative way. I have heard some people critique this path, saying: 'You can't even understand each other, Kurdish is different in every region, how will you create a national language?' I think this signifies our uniqueness. A language that is compressed into a single form and whose other interpretations are cut out, in my opinion, sterilizes itself. However, if Kurdish can preserve and develop the richness of its local dialects, this would be an important step. Look at the Norwegian writer Jon

Fosse, who won the Nobel Prize in literature last year. He was able to become a world-class literary figure with the books he wrote in the minority dialect of Norway.

*KC: The last time we met, you purchased Kurdish translations of several world classics from the bookstore. What do you read besides the classics?*

BS: I try to read as many novels as I can, old and new. Apart from that, I read in my own areas of interest. For example, I like to read about history, archaeology, astronomy, and philosophy.

*KC: When I heard about your Kurdish novel Franz K.'s Lovers, the name caught my attention, and as someone who loves Kafka, the more I read it, the more it drew me in. I liked it very much. How did you determine the name and the content of your novels? Why Kafka and Europe in a Kurdish novel?*

BS: In my previous novels, I wrote stories about the events in Turkey and, of course, the problems faced by the Kurds. When I was writing in

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I am excited by the  
language used by the  
young generation  
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Kurdish for the first time, I made a special effort not to talk about these problems. Kurds have a reputation all over the world for being a suffering people. The world doesn't see us, only our wounds. It doesn't see our soul because our wounded body is at the forefront. While I was writing in my own language, I did not want to reveal my wounds to anyone. Instead, I wanted to sail out into the world and write about a subject that seemed to

belong to others. I wrote about the effects of the '68 youth movements in Europe and the literature of Franz Kafka. When my book is published in other languages, I want everyone to read about these topics from a novel that is originally written in Kurdish.

*KC: How did Turkish writers and scholars react to you writing in Kurdish? Did anyone encourage you, or did you receive criticism?*

BS: I can't say I'm very encouraged. On the contrary, while I was writing the book, everyone asked me, 'Why are you writing in Kurdish?' There were even some negative reactions after the book was published, which was what I expected, but I don't want to talk about that. After all, we know the society we live in and the state of our country, so nothing surprises us.

*KC: As a Kurdish writer, you were elected as the new President of PEN International on the 100th anniversary of its establishment, and you are still the president. I remember when you were elected, you gave part of your speech in Kurdish. What kind of work have you done in this position? Could you share your observations and experiences?*

BS: We do so much that it is impossible for me to summarize, but I can draw a general framework. We have around 130 PEN centers and around 40,000 members around the world. As the world's largest international writers organization, our core work is on freedom of expression. In other words, we defend and support writers who are under pressure. During the military coup in Myanmar, the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan, or the wars in Ukraine, Gaza, or Eritrea – in other words, in the problems that arise all over the world – writers, journalists, and intellectuals, like everyone else, become victims and suffer the wrath of their states. That's where we come into play. Turkey and Kurdistan are among the places where we work most intensively. Unfortunately, our region has endless troubles. ●



## Kurdistan's Booming Olive Industry



Omar Aziz

is a journalist and videographer from Halabja, specializing in Kurdish media since 2012. With a media degree and a passion for storytelling, he captures impactful moments and sheds light on important issues through his work.

The aroma of freshly pressed olive oil is wafting across the Kurdistan Region, a sign of a burgeoning industry taking root. This article explores the rise of olive cultivation in the region, delving into the experiences of Kurdish farmers who are embracing this new crop, the operations of a leading olive oil factory striving for quality and growth, and the potential of olive production as a valuable export.

### Kurdish farmers embrace olive cultivation

Abdullah Sadiq, a 60-year-old farmer from the district of Sharazoor, is an active driver of the growing popularity of olive cultivation in the Kurdistan Region. He has grown olives for two decades, having planted 60 olive trees around his house specifically for oil production. According to Abdullah, olives have a long history in the region, but recent years have seen a renewed interest in their cultivation due to several factors. Unlike other crops, olive trees require minimal care, can withstand harsh weather conditions, and are exempt from import duties.

Sadiq finds olive trees to be not only low maintenance, but also resilient. He proudly shares that his olive trees yield around 500 kilograms of olives annually, with the olive harvest season in Kurdistan stretches from October 15 to January 15 each year. Farmers cultivate two distinct types of olives: one variety specifically suited for oil production and another for eating.

Zahir Ali, a 62-year-old farmer from Sulaymaniyah, exemplifies the region's shifting agricultural landscape. Traditionally, Ali focused on cultivating pomegranates

and figs. However, recognizing the potential of olives, he has recently established an olive nursery, a clear indication of the growing interest in olive cultivation among Kurdish farmers.

### Climate change and the appeal of olives

Olive trees, known for their longevity, were historically abundant in Western Kurdistan (northern Syria). Due to climate change, some farmers in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have begun planting olive trees, recognizing their potential.

“The facility achieves a remarkable daily output of 120 tons”

Burhan Ahmad, a farmer from Kirkuk, highlights the multifaceted value of olives and olive oil, emphasizing not only the culinary benefits but also the medicinal properties of these products.

Ahmad is particularly enthusiastic about the future of olive cultivation in Kurdistan. He recently planted 70 olive trees and has witnessed a steady increase in their yields year after year. He believes that Kurdish farmers should embrace olive cultivation for export, considering the region's untouched natural environment and the minimal use of pesticides in



Photo: Omar Aziz









Photos: Omar Aziz

the growing process, which translates to high-quality olive oil.

### From harvest to production

After harvesting their olives, Kurdish farmers use some for personal consumption and the rest for oil production at facilities like the Rasan olive oil factory. Established in 2018 by the Halabja Group, Rasan aims to contribute to the local economy by producing Kurdish olive oil. During the olive season, farmers from various cities across the Kurdistan Region deliver their harvest to the factory. While 60% of the olives processed by Rasan are sourced locally, the remaining 40% are imported from neighboring countries like Syria, Iran, and Turkey.

At 34 years old, Payam Saywan, the director of the Rasan factory, asserts its status as Iraq's foremost olive oil producer in terms of volume. The facility achieves a remarkable daily output of 120 tons and possesses an annual capacity reaching 150,000 liters. Emphasizing quality, Rasan prioritizes stringent quality control measures, subjecting each batch of olive oil to thorough testing for indicators such as peroxide value, pyrroline, and oxidation prior to market distribution.

Rasan's olive oil is distributed throughout Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, and the factory has recently made inroads into the international market, exporting their products to Germany and the UK. Negotiations are underway to begin exporting to Norway as well.

Accordingly, the factory has witnessed a substantial increase in sales, from 27,000 liters in the first year to a projected 150,000 liters this year, indicating high customer satisfaction with the quality of their olive oil.

### Growth and sustainability

So far, Rasan has successfully exported 10 tons of olive oil abroad, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has played a crucial role in facilitating these exports and promoting the product internationally. The factory directly employs 25 individuals and indirectly benefits an

additional 100 people, contributing to the region's economic development.

While olive production among Kurdish farmers has increased significantly, it still falls short of meeting the factory's demand. To address this gap, Rasan has established a modern olive tree nursery, focusing on two specific olive tree varieties carefully selected for their high yield and suitability to the region's climate. By marketing these high-quality trees, Rasan believes that it can eliminate the need for olive imports, creating a self-sustaining olive production cycle within the Kurdistan Region.

Kurdish farmers are not blind to the ease of olive cultivation and its potential as an export crop, similar to other agricultural products grown in the region. They acknowledge that the region's climate is remarkably conducive for olive growth, comparable to neighboring Syria, which has a long history of olive production.

At the same time, farmers like Abdullah Sadiq believe that widespread adoption of olive cultivation can not only diversify their income, but also establish the Kurdistan Region as a prominent exporter of high-quality olive oil, leveraging the region's untouched natural environment and minimal use of chemicals.

### Challenges and the road ahead

Despite the promising outlook, the burgeoning olive industry in Kurdistan faces challenges. Meeting the increasing demand for olives from factories like Rasan remains a key hurdle. Additionally, ensuring the long-term sustainability of olive groves requires careful management practices to prevent soil erosion and promote biodiversity.

However, Kurdish farmers and the Rasan olive oil factory, along with the support of the KRG, are demonstrating a deep commitment to overcoming these challenges. Through collaborative efforts, they are fostering a thriving olive industry that has the potential to become a valuable source of income for Kurdish farmers and establish the Kurdistan Region as a significant player in the global olive oil market. ●



## Capture the Essences of Kurdistan's Mountains



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

Picture soaps that transcend mere cleansing, instead serving as aromatic tributes to a distinctive locale. Enter Shler Abdulsalam, a 32-year-old Kurdish visionary hailing from the picturesque city of Rawanduz in the Kurdistan Region. With a smile as radiant as her aspirations, she has transformed her love for her homeland's natural splendor into a flourishing enterprise, birthing her very own brand: 'Shler's Natural Products'. Forget synthetic fragrances and industrial chemicals; Abdulsalam's ingredients are a love letter to Kurdistan's flora – berries, oats, rosemary, aloe vera, even local honey – with each bar a miniature tapestry of the landscape.

### From classroom to cauldron

Abdulsalam's journey has not been a conventional one. Though she holds a degree in arts and geography, her heart longed for a more practical, impactful pursuit. Driven by a desire to empower women through natural beauty, she enrolled in a government-authorized course on cosmetics and natural treatments. That one year not only equipped her with essential skills, but also with three internationally recognized certificates, solidifying her qualifications and igniting her confidence.

Abdulsalam's soaps are more than just sudsy squares; they are tributes to nature's bounty. "The first lesson of the course was, of course, making soap," she recounts with a glint in her eyes, "and I thought, 'If that's the hardest, let's start there!'"

And start she did, handpicking 99% of her ingredients directly from Kurdistan's rich soil. "Some herbs, like basil, have

been used in our homes for generations for fragrance and flavor," she explains. "I consult botanists to help choose the right ingredients, ensuring each creation caters to specific skin or hair needs."

### Empowering others, one bar at a time

Abdulsalam's ambition is clear in her product development process. "Many doctors have helped me as well," she beams, "so the results are amazing!" She consults cosmetologists and dermatologists to create therapeutic products, personally testing them first. "I know what's in them," she declares with unwavering confidence, "so I'm not afraid."

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Abdulsalam's success is  
not confined to her cozy  
shop-factory  
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This personalized approach, combined with her rigorous testing, has yielded impressive results, earning her the trust and loyalty of customers who have experienced firsthand the transformative power of her creations.

Abdulsalam's success is not confined to her cozy shop-factory. Social media has become her digital marketplace, connecting her with customers beyond the Kurd-

Shler Abdulsalam in her traditional Kurdish costumes holding one of her products.



Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi





istan Region. But her aspirations soar even higher. “Exporting my Kurdish brand to the world,” she declares with quiet determination, “is a dream I actively pursue.” Sharing the magic of her homeland with a wider audience is a driving force that demonstrates her unwavering belief in the power of Kurdish nature and her own resilience.

Abdulsalam’s story resonates as a story of a young woman who dared to dream big. Even as a child, she never shied away from challenges, embracing each experience as a stepping stone to success. “One of my dreams was to own a Kurdish brand,” she shares with a smile, “so I finished the course with great enthusiasm and started working. My dream came true!”

Abdulsalam’s ultimate dream? Starting and running a Kurdish restaurant

that showcases her people’s culinary heritage. But no matter what path she takes, one thing remains constant: her unwavering dedication to quality, her love for her land, and her desire to empower others. “There’s no difference between men and women among the Kurds,” she declares with pride, “and that’s the reason for my success. My family has been incredibly supportive throughout my journey. They have given me all kinds of freedom and encouraged me to chase my dreams. That support has been invaluable, and I am so grateful for them.”

### A name rooted in nature

Abdulsalam’s first name, Shler, also holds special significance. The Kurdish name for the *fritillaria imperialis* flower, also known as the crown imperial or imperial fritillary, is native to Kurdistan and blooms with vibrant

colors, embodying the beauty and resilience of the land.

In choosing this name (Shler’s Natural Products) for her brand, Abdulsalam not only pays homage to her heritage, but also emphasizes the natural essence and unique origin of her products. As she confects her dreams into reality, one handcrafted bar at a time, she furnishes a legacy of empowerment for herself, her community, and her beloved Kurdistan.

Her story reminds us that success can blossom in unexpected places, if fueled by passion, dedication, and a deep connection to our roots. Shler’s Kurdish soap symphony is just beginning, and its melody promises to resonate far beyond the borders of her homeland, inspiring others to embrace their own mellifluous journeys and carve their own unique paths. ●



## The Art of Adornment A Closer Look at Kurdish Tattooing Practices



*Sabr Salih*

*is a journalist based in the  
Kurdistan Region.*

The practice of adorning the face and body with tattoos holds deep roots in Kurdish culture, echoing ancient beliefs and traditions through symbolic designs.

Throughout history, individuals have sought to embellish their bodies with intricate patterns, lines, and symbols, each carrying its own significance. In Kurdish culture, this tradition, often referred to as *daq*, *kutan*, or *naqsh*, holds particular importance, especially among women, who adorned themselves with tattoos for various purposes, ranging from religious symbolism to expressions of love and protection against malevolent forces.

The tradition of tattooing has endured across several Kurdish regions for centuries. Girls typically received these tattoos during childhood, typically between the ages of 8 and 12. Some women bore these tattoos as scars from their youth, while men, although less commonly, adorned their hands or necks with tattoos, avoiding facial tattoos altogether.

Historically, the process of tattooing involved piercing the skin with a needle, often combined with a mixture of substances such as vinegar, ash, and even milk, which is believed to ensure the permanence of the tattoo. Interestingly, it was also believed that the use of milk from a pregnant woman would guarantee the longevity of the tattoo.

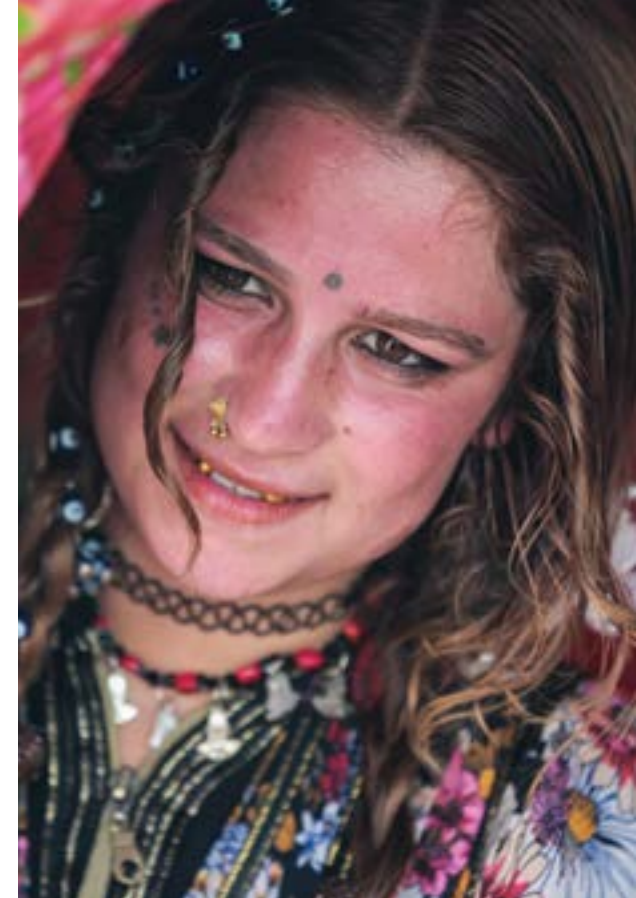
The origins of daq tattoos trace back millennia, making it challenging to pinpoint an exact inception date. Some sources suggest a history dating back 10,000 years, linking the practice to ancient religious rituals and



*Photo: Murrat Ayneli*

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The origins of daq  
tattoos trace back  
millennia  
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“The tradition of Kurdish tattooing is deeply intertwined with Zoroastrianism and Yezidi religious practices”



tribal affiliations. Across Kurdish-populated areas like Urfa, Diyarbakir, Qamishli, Sinjar, Mosul, Afrin, and Ruha, the prevalence of these tattoos is evident, reflecting a rich cultural heritage.

The tradition of Kurdish tattooing is deeply intertwined with Zoroastrianism and Yezidi religious practices. It serves as a means of identification, with different symbols denoting tribal affiliations, regions, and religious beliefs. British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard documented the existence of these tattoos during his travels in Kurdistan and Mesopotamia in the mid-1850s, noting their significance in distinguishing individuals, particularly among the noble classes.

Accounts of Kurdish tattooing are also documented in various historical texts, including *Inked: Tattoos and Body Art around the World* by Margo DeMello, published in 2014 by Bloomsbury Publishing UK, which shed further light on the significance of these practices within Kurdish society. While historically more prevalent among women, tattoos were not exclusive to one gender, with examples found among men as well.

Beyond Kurdish culture, similar tattooing practices are observed among neighboring communities such as Arabs, Turkmen, and the Dom, underscoring the cultural exchange and shared traditions in the region. Additionally, parallels can be drawn with Amazigh women in North Africa, who also embrace tattooing as a form of cultural expression.

The intricate designs and symbols of Kurdish tattoos carry deep meaning, reflecting desires for protection, love, fertility, and beauty. Each symbol holds significance within its cultural context, serving as a testament to the rich tapestry of Kurdish heritage and tradition. From the eye symbol warding off malevolent forces to the tree of life symbolizing eternal life and fertility, each tattoo tells a unique story, preserving centuries of cultural legacy and identity. ●



# RECOGNITION

## KOICA Staff Member Wins International Recognition



Shame Bayiz

is a Kurdish journalist and correspondent for Kurdistan24 TV.

**M**udhafar Yousif Hamad, Logistics Officer at the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) Office in Erbil, has achieved a remarkable feat by securing the top position in a performance competition held among all 47 KOICA overseas offices worldwide.

ees from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) through training courses in South Korea.

Since 2005, Hamad has diligently served as a logistics officer at the Consulate of the Republic of Korea and the KOICA Office in Erbil. His unwavering dedication has significantly contributed to realizing the



**Mudhafar Yousif Hamad, recipient of the KOICA award (middle), accepts the award.**

KOICA is a pivotal South Korean governmental organization responsible for executing the country's humanitarian aid, technical assistance, and developmental programs. Since its establishment in 2004, KOICA has spearheaded various strategic projects, benefiting thousands of employ-

goals and vision of KOICA and the South Korean Government in the Kurdistan Region.

Hamad's exemplary service spanning over 19 years has garnered him numerous accolades and honors from the Republic of



Korea. Recognized as a stalwart and capable individual, he has emerged as a crucial bridge between the Kurdistan Region and South Korea, facilitating the implementation of several service projects by KOICA in the region.

On February 22, 2024, in a ceremony attended by Consul General of the Republic of Korea in Erbil Seungcheol

“  
Hamad's home  
is adorned with  
memorabilia of his  
journey  
”

Lim, Resident Representative of KOICA in Erbil Kim Seokber, President of the KOICA Alumni Association in Kurdistan Dr. Mahdi Noraden, and esteemed experts and directors from the public and private sectors, KOICA honored Hamad for his outstanding contributions. His selection as the top performer among 47 countries underscores his exceptional skills, expertise, and unwavering commitment to his work, bringing immense pride to himself and the Kurdistan Region.

Born in 1981 in Erbil, Hamad first

encountered Korean culture in 2006 when he forged friendships with Korean citizens, marking the beginning of a lasting bond. His extensive network, cultivated over nearly two decades of collaboration, has bridged gaps between ordinary citizens and facilitated partnerships with senior South Korean figures, paving the way for substantial grants and projects in the Kurdistan Region.

Reflecting on his bond with South Korea, Hamad recounts an anecdote from 2006 when he decided to include his Korean friends and colleagues in his wedding celebration. Despite initial familial reservations rooted in cultural norms, Hamad's mother, Galawezh, supported his decision. Inviting 15 Korean colleagues proved to be a pivotal moment, fostering mutual respect and understanding between the two cultures. This gesture not only earned admiration from family and acquaintances but also led to an enduring friendship between Hamad and his Korean counterparts.

Hamad's home is adorned with memorabilia of his journey, showcasing a myriad of certificates and honors, testimony to the strength of his relationship with the Republic of Korea. His affinity for Korean cuisine, evident in his daily meals, further underscores the depth of his connection with Korean culture. ●





## Kurdish Theatrical Expression at 1893 Chicago World's Fair



**Baker Schwani**

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

The World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, remains a landmark event in 19th-century history. This prestigious expo, which presented innovations in fields like economics, culture, and science, holds significance for the Kurdish community due to the remarkable performance of a Kurdish play titled *Kurds and Kurdistan* (Ottoman *Kurdistan*). This ahistorical event offers valuable insights into the early trajectory of Kurdish theater and invites artists and scholars to revisit its shared past.

### Commemorating Columbus, showcasing diversity

Marking the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' voyage to the Americas, the United States hosted the Chicago International Exhibition, which attracted the participation of nations far and wide. The Ottoman Empire, with a significant Kurdish and Druze representation, joined the event. The Ottoman exhibition featured a restaurant, cafe, theater, and several musical groups.

The official invitation, extended in February 1891, led to the Ottoman Empire forming a commission tasked with creating an "Ottoman village" for the expo. Saadullah Efendi, an owner of an import business at the time, was put in charge of the project, while Jewish engineer Robert Louis Levy designed the village, which included a mosque, theater, and banquet hall that could accommodate 2,500 guests. Notably, the theater had to adhere to specific rules, as plays deemed offensive to Muslim women or Ottoman national dignity were prohibited.

This occasion marked the Ottoman Empire's debut in an international theater exhibition. Notably, Lebanese Christian artist Pierre Butros Antonius oversaw the participating troupes, recruiting 65 actors from across the empire, including several Kurds. Unfortunately, information about their specific origins remains unavailable.

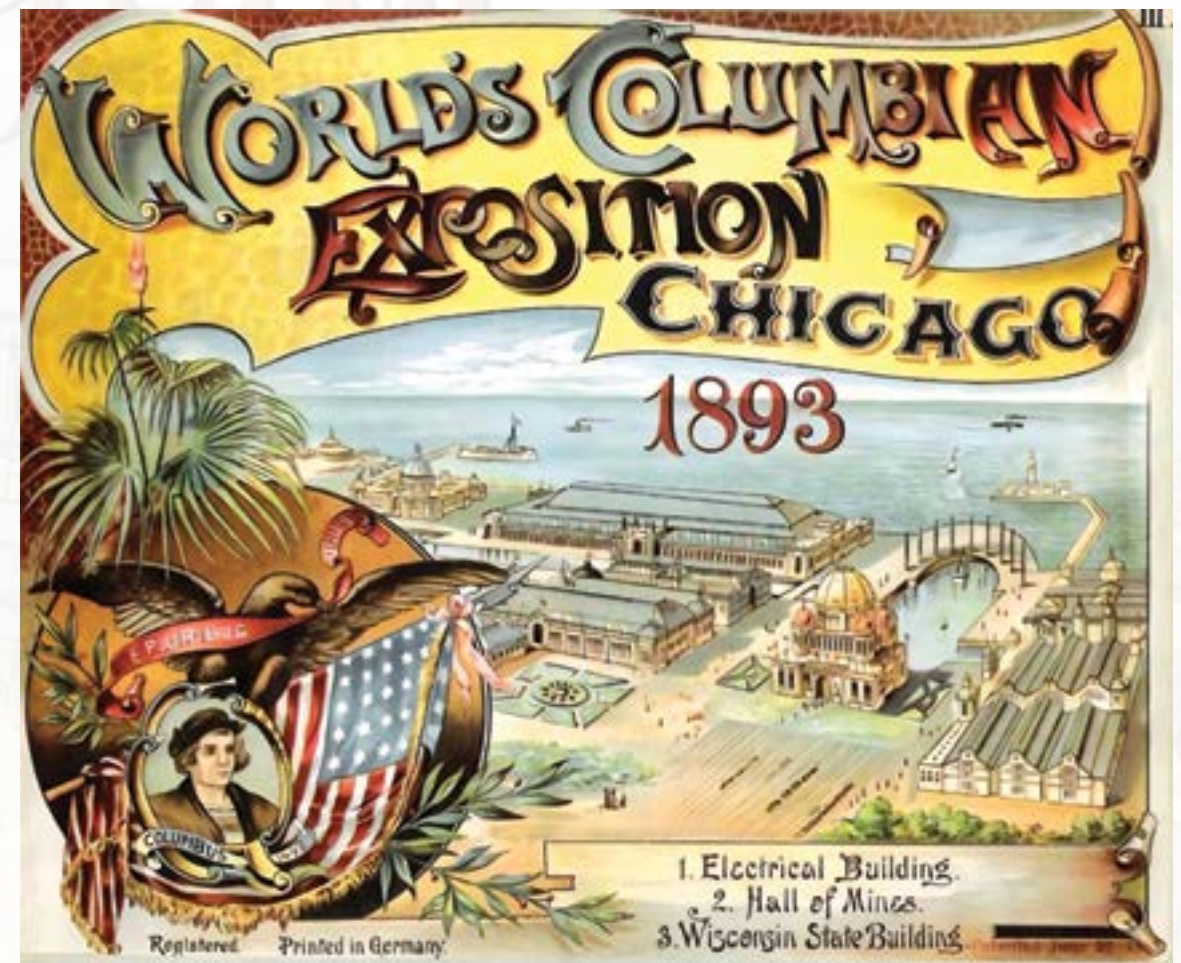
The *Scrapbook of the World's Columbian Exposition*, preserved in Chicago archives, sheds light on the diverse ethnicities within the Ottoman delegation. It differentiates Kurdish actors from Druze counterparts based on their turbans and labels the Kurdish group's performance as "The Kurdish Drama." The magazine provides a synopsis of the play:

The *Scrapbook of the World's Columbian Exposition*, preserved in Chicago archives, sheds light on the diverse ethnicities within the Ottoman delegation

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The sizeable Kurdish presence in the exhibition attracted media attention

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## OVERTURE, SONG AND MUSIC

### ACT I.

The play opens with a company of Kurds showcasing their daily lives, including eating, drinking, weaving stockings, spinning, and other amusements. Hassan appears, looking for his uncle Fayyad, who has run away with his wife and daughter, as he refuses to give Hassan his daughter in marriage.

### ACT II.

The second act opens with Fayyad, in his tent with his wife and daughter, complaining of the trouble that his daughter has made for him. One of his shepherds appears out of nowhere, pursued by a group of Arabs, who have attacked him and stolen his sheep. The Arabs attack Fayyad's tent, abduct his wife and daughter, and rob him of all his goods. While bemoaning his misfortunes, Fayyad is overheard by Hassan and agrees to consent to marry his daughter to Hassan if he catches the Arabs, rescues the women, and recover the stolen property. Hassan collects his warriors and follows through, returning victorious with Zahra, Karima, and many captives. Their return is celebrated by fencing, dancing, singing, and more.

### ACT III.

The marriage is celebrated with great festivities and all kinds of dances from the Ottoman Empire, including the Quadrille, Damascus, Zeybek, Constantinople, and Thessalonian.



### Beyond the stage

The sizeable Kurdish presence in the exhibition attracted media attention. The same publication provided information about Kurdish culture and geography, such as the following text presenting the traditional clothing of a Kurdish shepherd:

### The Shepherd

This is the costume of a shepherd of Kurdistan, which is famous in all the East. The shepherd is large and good with sheep, which can be differentiated from American sheep by their large tails, which weight between 15 and 30 pounds. The sheep get accustomed to following the shepherd as soon as he puts on his felt coat and calls them; if they see the coat, immediately they follow. Oftentimes strangers deceive them by wearing this coat, and they follow them instead. The shepherd has the rod and staff; the former to defend and protect the sheep, the latter to guide them gently. The Prophet David spoke in the Psalms in the language of a shepherd, as in Psalm 23, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The shepherd also a sling with which he can hurl stones long distances, the same kind of sling used by the Prophet David when he killed Goliath. For provisions, he uses a sack of kid's leather to keep it fresh; he smokes a pipe and puts his tobacco in a bag hung in his belt.



Learning about the Ottoman Empire's involvement in presenting Kurdish theater troupes and plays over 130 years ago raises thought-provoking questions. One wonders how Kurdish language, art, and literature might have evolved had Turkey continued on this path. While history cannot be rewritten, this discovery undeniably establishes the existence of Kurdish theater dating back at least this far in history. This knowledge can serve as a catalyst for further research and exploration of this rich cultural expression.



# A Journey Through Time and Memory

Kurdistan Chronicle

Shamal Saadullah's artistic journey is a captivating exploration of time, history, and the human condition. Like a sculptor meticulously shaping clay, Saadullah takes fragments of various artistic movements and melds them with his own vision, forging a unique style.

His artistic career began in 2007 when he graduated from the Erbil Institute of Fine Arts. There he had honed his academic skills, building a technical foundation that would influence his artistic expression for years to come. However, Saadullah was not content with mere technical mastery. He craved a space for freedom, a canvas where vibrant colors and diverse materials could dance together, reflecting the ever-changing world around him.

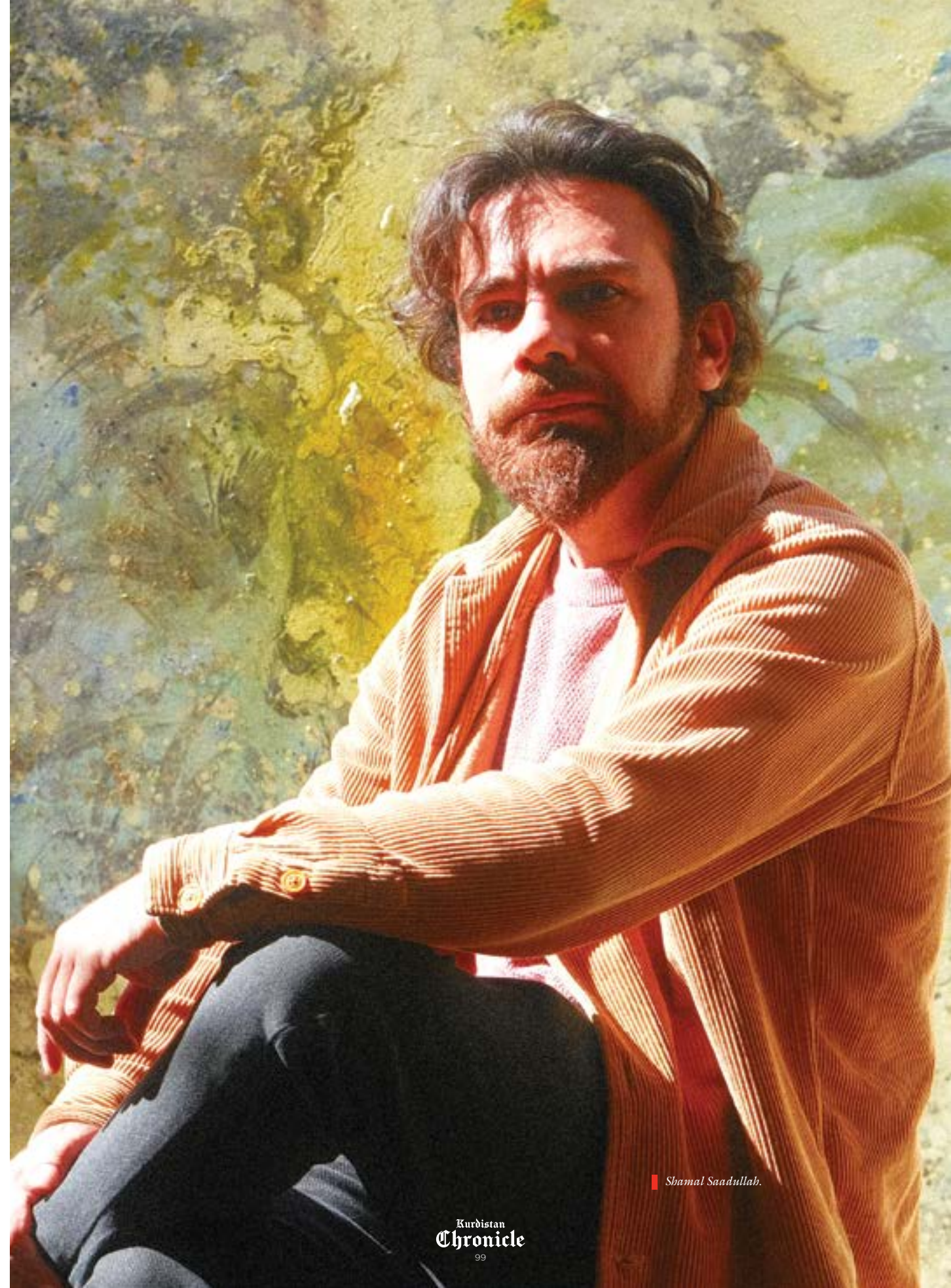
This yearning for expression led him to explore a profound theme: the relentless march of time. It became a mirror reflecting his own contemplation on the

ever-shifting sands of history and the mysteries of life and death that bind us all. His work captures a potent mix of personal anxieties and a broader sense of unease, a collective fear embedded in the very fabric of human existence across cultures.

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Shamal Saadullah's art  
is a powerful testament  
to the human capacity  
to grapple with the  
complexities of existence  
”

Saadullah's artistic choices are deliberate that weave a visual narrative, inviting viewers to confront the harsh realities with which he himself has grappled. For four years, he poured his creative energy into a series titled “Dastan,” a visual tapestry depicting the timeless stories of humanity from its origins. This exploration of human history has offered him a vast canvas for thought and a chance to delve into the core of existence.

His artistic trajectory, however, took an unexpected turn with Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This act of violence became an unwelcome muse,



Shamal Saadullah.



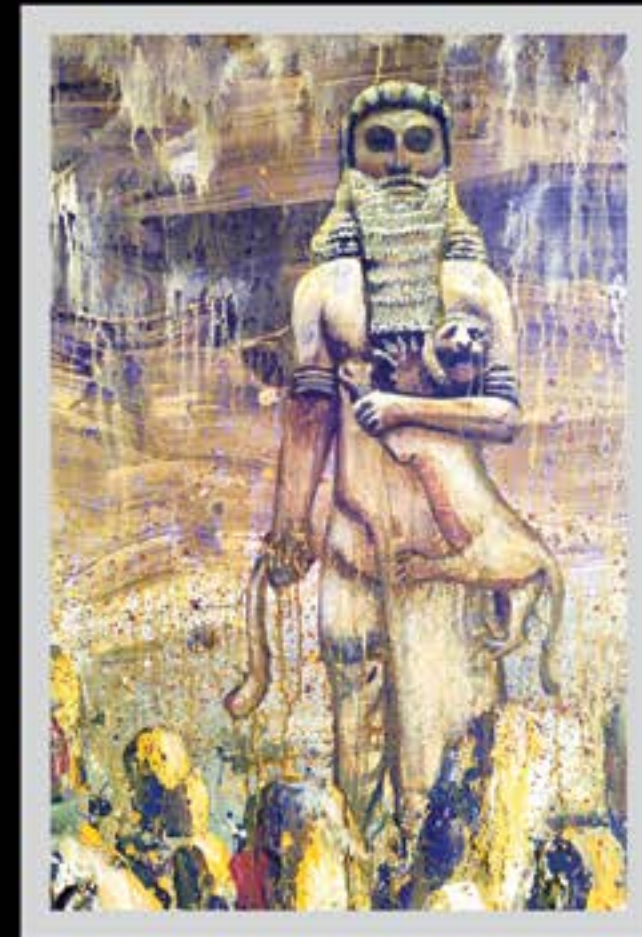


Photo: Crush Model Studio

ing a new, potent theme to the forefront of his work: the ominous shapes of giant mushrooms, symbolic of the atom's destructive power. His latest series, titled "Atom," confronts us with the unnerving possibility of our present becoming humanity's final chapter. Through his art, Saadullah portrays the visceral fear of utter destruction, a chilling premonition of the Earth, our home, succumbing to its ultimate demise.

Shamal Saadullah's art is a powerful testament to the human capacity to grapple with the complexities of existence. It is a poignant reminder of our shared past, the uncertainties of the present, and the ever-present shadow of what may lie ahead. ●



## Style and Sustainability at New York Fashion Week



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

**G**ela Wesh, born Gelawesh Sharifi, a visionary Kurdish designer from Mahabad in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran), has firmly established her presence in the global fashion arena. By showcasing her commitment to unique and sustainable designs, she made waves at the February 2024 New York Fashion Week, leaving a lasting impression on the runway.

Starting her fashion journey at just 13 years old, Wesh has meticulously perfected her craft, leading to the creation of her eponymous brand, Gela Wesh, which is celebrated for its unparalleled creativity and steadfast dedication to eco-friendly practices.

Holding a bachelor's degree in Fashion and Costume Design from New York University, Wesh seamlessly incorporates environmental sustainability into the core of her brand. "I use real ostrich feathers because they are environmentally friendly, allowing me to create distinctive designs without generating new waste," she affirmed, emphasizing her dedication to eco-conscious fashion.

### Feathers, femininity, and freedom

Her brand name, Gela Wesh, is more than a label; it encapsulates her essence. "I divided my birth name, Gelawesh, to name my brand," Wesh explained. "I wanted to

keep the name because it's Kurdish."

"I use feathers because they symbolize freedom," explained Wesh. Her unique process involves designing dresses, selecting fabrics, and adding the final touch of hand-sewn feathers.

For Wesh, feathers are a symbol of femininity, beauty, and freedom, sparking her love affair with this intricate element. By embracing such elements, she seeks to redefine femininity, challenge norms, and empower women worldwide with her distinctive designs

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Gela Wesh  
symbolizes style,  
confidence, and  
vitality for the  
modern woman  
”

As a Kurdish fashion designer, Wesh brings a fresh perspective to the global fashion stage and serves as an ambassador for sustainability in an industry often criticized for its environmental impact. With her eco-friendly designs and distinctive aesthetic, she shapes the narrative of fashion, proving that style and sustainability can seamlessly coexist on the runway.

Beyond her participation in the prestigious New York Fashion Week, her presence extends to various global shows and performances. Her creations as a costume technician have graced Las Vegas and Broadway productions such as Hamilton, The Lion King, and & Juliet. Additionally, she has played a pivotal role in crafting numerous accessories for television programs and dramas in Los Angeles.

The pinnacle of Wesh's success came when her creations adorned the red carpets of the Golden Globes and the Oscars



Photo: Lorena Spada









years ago, marking a significant milestone for the designer. Film stars now proudly wear her designs, a testament to their allure and the designer's prominence.

Gela Wesh symbolizes style, confidence, and vitality for the modern woman. The brand's designs cater to those who dare to be different, embrace their uniqueness, and are unafraid to make a statement.

Whether couture creations, limited ready-to-wear collections, or exclusive tailored pieces, Gela Wesh provides a platform for empowered, bold, and daring women to express their individuality through fashion. These values and beliefs form the foundation of Gela Wesh, which champions the freedom to express oneself through fashion in a world where societal expectations can stifle creativity. ●



## Kardo Razzazi

### A Rise in the Swedish Spotlight



**Riband Kurd**

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

The ascent to stardom of Kurdish-Swedish actor Kardo Razzazi stands as a testament to the success story of yet another Kurdish refugee. Born in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1985, Kardo emerged into the world just months after his parents Nasser Razzazi, a renowned singer, and Merziye Feriqi (who passed away in 2005), a prominent Kurdish singer, were exiled from Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran)

Razzazi has gained prominence in recent years for his roles in numerous Swedish and European films and television series. He gave a standout performance in the 2023 film *The Abyss*, which was released on Netflix and quickly became one of the world's most-watched films.

In 2005, at the urging of his mother, Razzazi enrolled in a theater institute in Stockholm and completed a specialized one-year course on acting. Subsequently, in 2008, he was admitted to the Malmö Theater Academy, from which he graduated in 2011. Since then, he has showcased his talents in productions in Stockholm and across other Swedish cities.

In 2017, Kardo unveiled his first theatrical endeavor, *One Man Show*, which centered around his life experiences. In this deeply personal performance, he reflected on his life's pivotal moments, notably the sudden passing of his mother, which profoundly impacted him and his family. He also delved into aspects of his father's life. This production debuted again in 2018 at the Stockholm City Theater.

Expressing his lifelong passion for acting in films, Razzazi transitioned fully into film and cinema in 2018 when the op-

portunity presented itself and has since appeared in over 22 films and dramas. Notably, he takes tremendous pride in his role in the Finnish film *Peacemaker*, in which he portrayed a character named Diyar Amedi.

In the 2022 German film *Rhinegold*, Razzazi portrayed Iqbal Hajbi, a role that held particular significance for him due to Hajbi's real-life connection as an old friend of his father Nasser. Razzazi expressed his delight in the project and desire to collaborate with the director, Fatih Akin, again in the future.

He took a leading role in the recently released Netflix film *The Abyss*, which enjoyed significant viewership worldwide, even reaching the Kurdistan Region. Razzazi revealed how he was approached by the production company after auditions, and he expressed his immense happiness at being part of a film that he viewed as not merely depicting the tragedy of a mine's collapse but also delving into intricacies of family dynamics.

Reflecting on the artistic ambiance of his upbringing in Sweden, Razzazi reminisced, "Since childhood, our home has always been filled with music, poetry, and literature." He recalled notable figures like the Kurdish folklore music band The Kamkars and the renowned poet Sherko Bekas visiting their home, fostering a rich cultural environment.

Razzazi attributed much of his artistic identity to his mother's insistence on speaking Kurdish at home, recalling how she would admonish him and his siblings for speaking Swedish, thus nurturing his appreciation for Kurdish songs and music.

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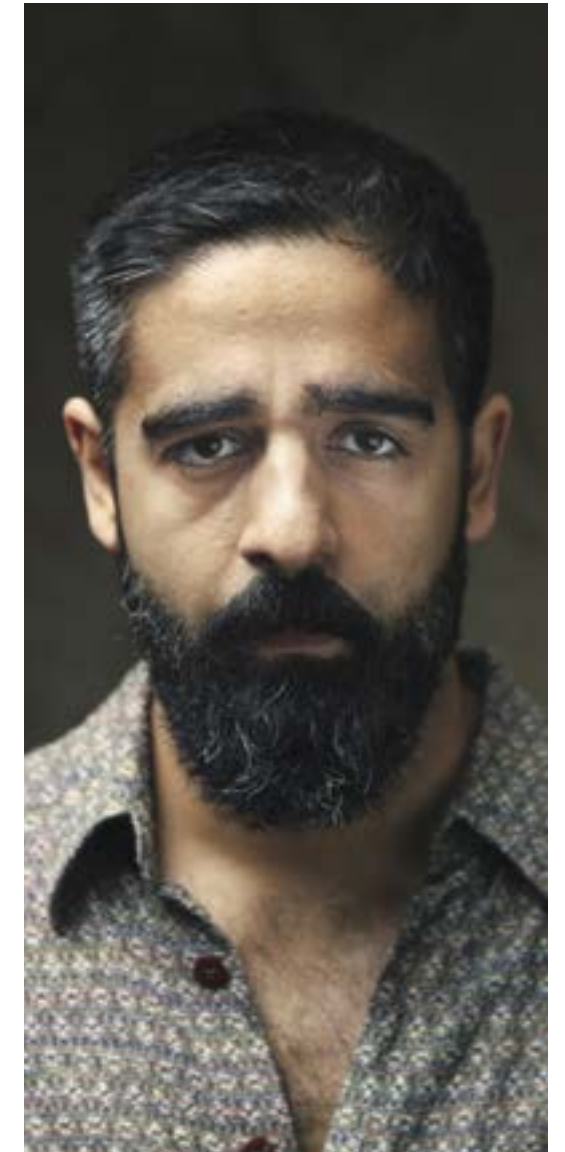
Razzazi transitioned fully into film and cinema in 2018

”



**Kardo Razzazi.**





He expressed a desire to contribute to Kurdish cinema and reconnect with his cultural roots by collaborating with Kurdish filmmakers.

In European societies, individuals from immigrant and refugee backgrounds often encounter obstacles in securing employment opportunities and establishing themselves. Razzazi acknowledged that he faced similar challenges due to his non-Swedish background, remarking that it took him 15 years to land his first leading role in a film.

Looking ahead, Razzazi has just finished his latest role in a Swedish crime series, marking his debut as the lead actor in a television series. With filming wrapped up, audiences can anticipate its release in the coming months. ●



## Erbil Hosts 3<sup>rd</sup> Barzani International Chess Championship

Kurdistan Chronicle



Barzani International Chess Championship.



Kurdistan Region's Interior Minister Reber Ahmed attends the championship.



Awarding ceremony of the Barzani International Chess Championship.





Photo: Sabir Salih

A glimpse of the 3rd Barzani International Chess Championship in Erbil.

March holds a special significance for Kurds, commemorating both the birth and passing of Kurdish liberation leader General Mustafa Barzani. This year, the occasion of his birthday was also marked by the 3rd Barzani International Chess Championship, held in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region.

The tournament, overseen by the Iraqi Chess Federation and registered with the Asian Chess Federation, brought together a diverse group of local and international players. Chess, a strategic game enjoyed worldwide by all ages, was the perfect platform to celebrate Barzani's own fondness for the game.

The competition featured a total of 106 participants of various ages and genders. Each match was a fast-paced battle of intellect, played over nine rounds with a time control of five minutes and three additional seconds per move. This year's event marked a departure from the previous two tournaments, which were held in the Barzan region. The 3rd Barzani International Chess Championship took place at the Erbil Equestrian Club, offering a grand venue for the competition.

Mustafa Barzani was a known chess enthusiast, often playing during his leisure time and encouraging others to do the same. Establishing a legacy that recognizes his passion for the game extends beyond the tournament itself. The Kurdistan Region is currently considering a project to incorporate chess into the educational curriculum, fostering strategic thinking in future generations from young ages.

The 3rd Barzani International Chess Championship was a collaborative effort, held under the auspices of the Barzani Charity Foundation and with the cooperation of the Khanzad Chess Club. Notably, the tournament welcomed back participants from the previous years, fostering a sense of community and continuity within the competitive chess scene. ●



## The Kurdish Chess Champion



**Zagros Nanakali**

*is a writer and sports journalist based in the Kurdistan Region. With over three decades of experience, he has authored four books on sports and contributed numerous articles to the field.*

**F**irmesk Wirya Qaneh, a name synonymous with Kurdish chess excellence, has carved a remarkable path in the sport. Born in 1965 in Langa Deh village near Sulaymaniyah, Firmesk's life is interwoven with chess and cultural pride.

Firmesk was born just two months after the passing of her grandfather Qaneh, a renowned Kurdish poet. Her name, which means "tear" in Kurdish, reflects the deep sorrow her father felt. This poignant connection would foreshadow Firmesk's own strength and resilience.

Firmesk's aptitude for chess blossomed under her father's watchful eye. He ignited her passion for the game, and a local tournament presented the perfect opportunity for her to test her skills. Despite entering on a whim, Firmesk stunned everyone by defeating the Iraqi national runner-up, Zhian Jamal. This unexpected victory marked the beginning of her extraordinary chess journey.

### National champion and international recognition

Firmesk's talent shone brightly. She secured numerous titles, reigning as the Iraqi Chess Champion for an impressive eleven years (1980-1992). In 1979, she officially joined the National Chess Team of Iraq, and her exceptional performance continued. In 1984, she participated in

the Chess Olympiad in Greece, achieving a commendable 47th world ranking and the top position among contenders from Arab countries.

A historic triumph awaited Firmesk in 1985. She became the first Kurdish woman to win a gold medal at the Arab Chess Championship in Casablanca, Morocco. This victory, however, was not without controversy. Media outlets initially ques-

tioned her ethnicity, highlighting the challenges faced by Kurdish athletes. Despite these hurdles, Firmesk persevered, her determination unwavering.

Firmesk's cultural heritage remained a source of immense pride. In 1987, she broke barriers by be-

coming the first woman to compete in the Asian Chess Championship while adorned in traditional Kurdish attire. This bold act not only showcased her cultural identity, but also challenged societal norms.

### War and a return to glory

The outbreak of the Gulf War in 1990 forced Firmesk to take a hiatus from competitive chess, but her passion remained undimmed. In 1999, she, along with her sisters Khatuzin and Chinar, made a triumphant return to the National Chess Team of Iraq. Their exceptional performance at the 1999 Arab Games secured them individual and team gold medals, a testament to their enduring talent.



**Firmesk Wirya adorned with championship medals.**





Firmsk Wirya at a young age.



Firmsk Wirya proudly displays her championship medals.



A copy of an Arabic newspaper reporting Firmsk Wirya's championship.



In 2000, she drew against the legendary world chess champion Anatoly Karpov, a feat that solidified her reputation as a formidable player. Throughout her career, she has garnered a total of seven medals in international events, including five gold medals, a silver medal, and a bronze medal.

Firmsk's dedication transcends competition. She has held various leadership positions, including the President of the Khanzad Chess Club and the Director of Women's Activities in the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Culture and Youth. She continues to contribute to the chess community by serving as an international chess referee and a chess instructor at Cambridge International School.

Firmsk Wirya Qaneh is a true champion. Her unwavering spirit, exceptional talent, and steadfast cultural pride have left an indelible mark on the world of chess. Her story serves as an inspiration to aspiring chess players everywhere, demonstrating the power of dedication and perseverance in achieving one's dreams. ●



# MARTIAL-ARTS

## Reviving the Ancient Ninja Arts in Kurdistan



**Pesbraw Mahdi**

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

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By promoting physical and mental well-being, these unique training centers are sure to continue attracting students across the Kurdistan Region  
”

Photo: Pesbraw Mahdi





Photos: Peshraw Mahdi



The martial arts of the ninja, a figure with roots in 15th century Japan, has found a unique home in the Kurdistan Region.

Originally a form of combat employed by Japanese clans, the techniques of ninjitsu have evolved into a respected sporting discipline. For several years now, training centers dedicated to this practice have flourished in the Kurdistan Region.

Penjwen and Sulaymaniyah boast the only two facilities of their kind in the entire region. Established in 2017, the Ninja School in Kurdistan now serves over 200 students, both male and female.

These dedicated centers have provided uninterrupted training for seven years, overcoming various challenges along the way. Their success has earned them the distinction of being the sole providers of ninjitsu instruction in Iraq.

Reband Karim, a coach and supervisor, has seen an increasing demand for ninjitsu schools across Kurdistan. “Following the success of our schools in Penjwen and Sulaymaniyah, we’ve been approached by numerous cities and towns seeking to establish their own centers,” he explains. “Our

goal is to serve all of Kurdistan in the realm of sports.”

Karim emphasizes the apolitical nature of the program. “We are independent of any party or individual,” he clarifies. “The techniques of the ninja are not a tool for war, but a means of physical empowerment.”

According to Karim, students begin by learning two core principles: tolerance and respect. Those striving to become true ninjas must master five additional fundamentals: concentration, ability, balance, flexibility, and speed. Training sessions are typically held two to three days a week.

Karim highlights the benefits of training in snow, citing improved balance and overall muscle engagement. This method, he explains, enhances cardiovascular health, mental fortitude, and lung capacity, while also promoting weight loss. Training in mud and snow, he adds, strengthens the immune system due to exposure to various bacteria and minerals.

The Ninja School in Kurdistan presents a fascinating example of a traditional martial arts finding new life in a modern context. By promoting physical and mental well-being, these unique training centers are sure to continue attracting students across the Kurdistan Region. ●





By Hiesen Silêvani

Translated by Nahro Zagros

## My Love

My love,  
Don't press me  
To part ways,  
To seek another's affection.  
For you understand,  
My love,  
The echoes of partridges  
Resounding in the mountains,  
The fate of fish  
Beyond the water's embrace.





The Kurdistan Region boasts a diverse landscape of mountains, valleys, lakes, and rivers, hosting various bird species. Among these are the iconic kingfishers, including the pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*), known for its striking black and white plumage. With a length of around 25 cm and distinctive features like black

breast bands and a tidy crest, these medium-sized birds are widespread in Africa and Asia. Males can be identified by double chest stripes, while females have a single broken stripe. Sociable and vocal, pied kingfishers are known for their distinctive high-pitched calls. They typically nest in large groups and have a lifespan of around 4 years.



#### Characteristics

Size: 25 cm	Wing Span: 45 - 47 cm	Life Expectancy: 4 years	Weight: 70 - 110 g
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Christians celebrate the Akitu festival in Dubok, Kurdistan Region (April 1, 2024).



