

Kurdistan Chronicle



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A Test of Democracy

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is gearing up for a pivotal national election in October. This election is not just a routine political exercise but a significant milestone that will test the resilience of democracy and the rule of law in a region facing multiple challenges, both internally and externally.

striving to maintain autonomy while also securing necessary support and recognition.

Domestically, the relationship between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government in Baghdad remains a central and contentious issue. The majority of the challenges currently facing the Kurdistan Region are rooted in this fraught relationship, particularly the ongoing difficulties in implementing the Iraqi constitution of 2005.

Regionally, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq finds itself in a precarious position, balancing relationships with neighboring powers, each with its own interests and influences. The ongoing conflict between regional powers, particularly exacerbated by the recent Gaza-Israel war that erupted on October 7, has added another layer of complexity to the political environment. Internationally, the region continues to navigate its ties with global powers,

Although this constitution was overwhelmingly approved by the Iraqi people, its full implementation has been consistently obstructed by various factors, most notably the influence of powerful militias within Iraq. These militias, often backed by regional or sectarian interests, pose a significant challenge to the authority of the federal government and, by extension, to the KRG's efforts to secure the rights and autonomy guaranteed by the constitution.

One of the most pressing issues stemming from this strained relationship is the persistent problem of salary payments for government employees in the Kurdistan Region. Every month, obstacles—often created by external forces—delay the disbursement of salaries, causing significant hardship for thousands of workers. Recently, these militias have escalated their tactics by threatening oil fields within the Kurdistan Region, an act of aggression that under-

scores the volatile and hostile environment in which the KRG operates.

Amidst these challenges, the election in October is therefore seen as a crucial opportunity for the Kurdistan Region to assert its democratic principles and push for greater adherence to the rule of law. It will serve as a litmus test for the region's ability to navigate its complex political landscape, manage internal divisions, and engage constructively with Baghdad. Moreover, the election will be a reflection of the KRG's commitment to advancing democracy, not just as a political ideal, but as a practical means of addressing the region's challenges.

As the Kurdistan Region moves closer to the election, the outcome will have significant implications for its

future. A successful election would strengthen the KRG's hand in negotiations with Baghdad, provide a mandate for addressing internal issues, and reinforce the region's democratic credentials on the international stage.

Kurdistan Chronicle Issue 18

In this issue of the *Kurdistan Chronicle*, a diverse collection of insightful articles from various authors explores different facets of Kurdish culture and society. Notable among them is an article on Germany's support for the Peshmerga, highlighting how the Peshmerga has been a crucial ally to Western nations over the past decades. Another significant piece commemorates the 78th anniversary of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Written by a renowned Turkish sociologist,

it emphasizes the importance of the KDP, not only as the first Kurdish national party in history but also as a symbol of hope for Kurds across Greater Kurdistan.

Additionally, Sardar Sattar provides an in-depth analysis of a UNDP report, shedding light on the significant strides the Kurdistan Region has made in combating corruption. This report, produced by a prominent international organization, underscores the Kurdistan Region's growing recognition and credibility on the global stage.

These articles, along with other contributions in this issue from a wide array of writers and thinkers, offer unique and profound perspectives that celebrate the dynamic spirit, rich cultural heritage, and intellectual vibrancy of the Kurdish people. ●



Marewan Hawramy

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Strategy for Food Security



Sardar Sattar

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



■ A view of Qushtapa Silo in Erbil Governorate



Photos: Farhad Ahmad



In June 2024, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) inaugurated a 40,000-ton silo in Erbil's Qushtapa district and laid the foundation stone for a similar silo in Halabja, reaffirming its commitment to supporting farmers and reviving agriculture in the Kurdistan Region.

The Kurdistan Region enjoys a vast area suitable for farming with access to water resources.

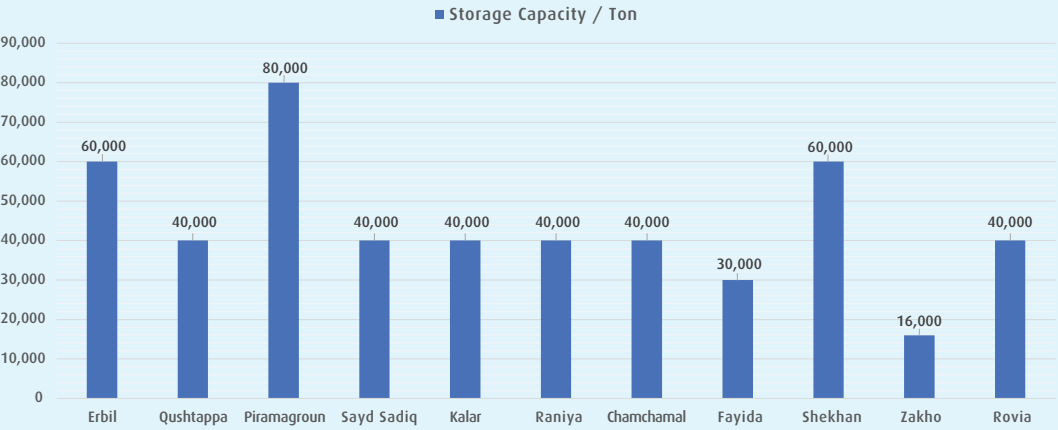
According to data from the KRG Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources, the Kurdistan Region boasts 1,696,816 hectares of arable land, together with 56,542 hectares of orchards. Fed by five main rivers, these farmlands produce more than 2.5 million tons of crop every year.

With that said, the KRG's Ninth Cabinet aims to develop its industrial infrastructure

■ Sacks of wheat on display during the inauguration ceremony of Qushtapa Silo

Photo: Sabr Dri

Storage Capacity of Silos in the Kurdistan Region



Source: Ministry of Trade and Industry, Kurdistan Regional Government

to enable the rapid development of its agriculture sector. Prime Minister Masrour Barzani promised in his inaugural speech back in 2019 to spearhead the revival of agriculture and, in line with that, develop industrial infrastructure while also finding markets abroad.

A key element in a country’s food security is its storage capacity, namely the silos that store and preserve vital grains for long periods of time. According to the Ministry of Trade

and Industry, there are 11 silos in the Kurdistan Region with a total storage capacity of 486,000 tons, supported by several dozen bunkers and special warehouses capable of storing over 373,000 tons of grain for shorter periods of time.

Food security strategy

To discuss the topic, *Kurdistan Chronicle* sat down with Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry Sarwar Kamal Hawari. He explained that the

KRG has taken the harder – but more strategically sustainable – route to secure a better future for the region’s food security.

According to Hawari, the KRG has put into action a comprehensive plan to move away from importing food products and instead rely on local products in the long run.

“Food security generally can be achieved in two ways: you either send huge amounts of cash abroad to im-

port food products, or you develop your own agriculture sector to meet the local demand and, ideally, export to foreign markets. The latter is the option that the KRG has chosen,” the deputy minister explained.

Construction of silos

Since the inauguration of the KRG Ninth Cabinet, three silos have been constructed with a total budget of over \$40 million. Built in Qushtapa, Kalar, and Rovia, the silos can store 120,000 tons of grain every year.

“Since Prime Minister Barzani laid the foundation stone of the Halabja silo in June, we have completed 25% of the storage facility. In Zakho, we are finalizing the design phase to build an additional silo in order to boost storage capacity in the area,” Hawari explained.

The locations designated for silo construction lie primarily on the major plains of the Kurdistan Region, where fertile land allows for increased cultivation. Among these areas are the Shahrizor and Rovia plains, respectively located in the Sulaymaniyah and Duhok governorates.

Statistics obtained by *Kurdistan Chronicle* show that out of 11 silos,

four are located in Duhok, five in Sulaymaniyah, and two in Erbil Governorate, in line with the distribution of major agricultural areas in the Kurdistan Region.

Hawari noted that the long-term plan is to develop the Kurdistan Region into an agricultural producer that is not only economically self sufficient but also serves as the food basket for the wider region.

“Economic development has a multiplier effect. We are building more and more silos equipped with modern technologies, which means farmers can produce more and food factories can flourish, too,” Hawari said, highlighting the strategic importance of the KRG’s plans with regard to silo construction.

Agriculture: a top priority for the KRG

“Agriculture is the backbone of the Kurdistan Region’s economy, and we want our farmers to be assured that their products are not wasted,” Prime Minister Barzani said last June while delivering a speech during the inaugural ceremony for the Qushtapa Silo, some 20 kilometers south of Erbil.

“We will support the farmers of the

Kurdistan Region in every way and, with the cooperation of the private sector, we will work to promote and develop the food industry,” the Kurdish leader added.

On a separate note, the KRG initiated the region’s first non-oil exports in 2023. The products shipped to the Gulf countries, the UK, and several EU destinations were mainly agricultural produce, including honey, pomegranates, and apples.

The exports are aligned with the KRG’s plan to diversify the economy and rely less on oil exports, which are frequently challenged by political disputes with Baghdad.

Last year at the Atlantic Council Global Energy Forum, Prime Minister Barzani pointed out that his cabinet has been taking constructive steps to diversify the Kurdistan Region’s economy, in a way that gives the nation a buffer against the uncertainty of global energy prices.

“This diversification – focused principally on the agricultural, manufacturing, and services sectors – will be in addition to our energy sector, not an alternative,” the Kurdish leader added. ●

Silos Completed by the Ninth Cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

Province	City	Budget (IQD)	Storage Capacity (Ton)
Erbil	Qushtappa	21,276,520,000	40,000
Sulaymaniyah	Kalar	20,662,327,000	40,000
Duhok	Bardarash (Rovia)	17,948,700,000	40,000
Total		59,887,547,000	120,000

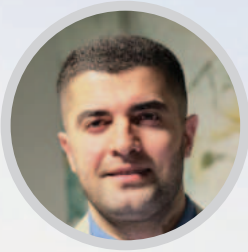
Source: Ministry of Trade and Industry, Kurdistan Regional Government

Land Resources / Hectares

Arable Land		Forestry		Orchards		Rangelands 1,734,443
Rain fed 1,368,388	Irrigated 328,428	Natural 954,755	Man-made 8,868	Rain fed 23,918	Irrigated 32,624	
Total: 4,451,424						

Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources, Kurdistan Regional Government

Advancing Agriculture, Supporting Women



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.

The Ninth Cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has steadfastly prioritized the agricultural sector. After being sworn in in 2019, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani delivered a speech in front of the Kurdistan Region Parliament, where he underlined the importance of the sector, stating that “the agricultural sector will be one of our main priorities, as we will introduce new methods, advanced machinery, and expanded knowledge of scientific methods to improve quality across the sector.”

Prime Minister Barzani also highlighted the importance of harnessing the region’s

water resources to their full potential. “We will work to exploit our water resources by building dams and sources of sustainable energy,” he said. “This will help preserve our water for agriculture, prevent desertification, and increase green spaces.”

I had the opportunity to meet with KRG Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources Begard Talabani, one of three women who are serving in Prime Minister Barzani’s cabinet, while in Washington, D.C. and discuss the accomplishments of the Ninth Cabinet in these areas and more.

“The agricultural sector is indeed one of the top priorities of the Ninth Cabinet, and we have been able to develop a strategy to bolster both the agriculture and water sectors in the Kurdistan Region, particularly when it concerns climate change,” Talabani said.

Mitigating drought

The specter of drought hangs over the Kurdistan Region, and Talabani acknowledged that the government had taken serious measures to prepare for this possibility. “Climate change has had a damaging impact on Iraq,” she said. “In order to protect the Kurdistan Region from drought, the government has plans to build several dams in each city and town throughout the region.”

There are currently 23 dams and 118 ponds in the Kurdistan Region, with the Ninth Cabinet having built six of the dams and eight of the ponds. Moreover, 40 ponds are currently under construction. In 2024 alone, these dams were able to reclaim more than three billion cubic meters of water and have greatly benefited society in other ways by generating electricity, providing irrigation, and supporting tourism, as well as many other purposes.

The KRG, in collaboration with UNICEF, has also taken comprehensive measures to conserve water and prevent the effects of drought, including the launch of the ‘cooperative ponds’ program, which provides farmers with financial and technical support to build ponds for preserving

rainwater. The initiative, which aims to reduce water shortages and mitigate the impact of drought, is considered a matter of national urgency. The ponds will help prevent floods, as well as produce a significant source of water for agriculture, irrigation, and tourism.

Boosting agricultural exports

In addition to defensive measures against climate challeng-



Kurdistan Regional Government Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources Begard Talabani

Photo: Goran Shakhawan



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ A young girl in Kurdish attire collecting potatoes on a farm

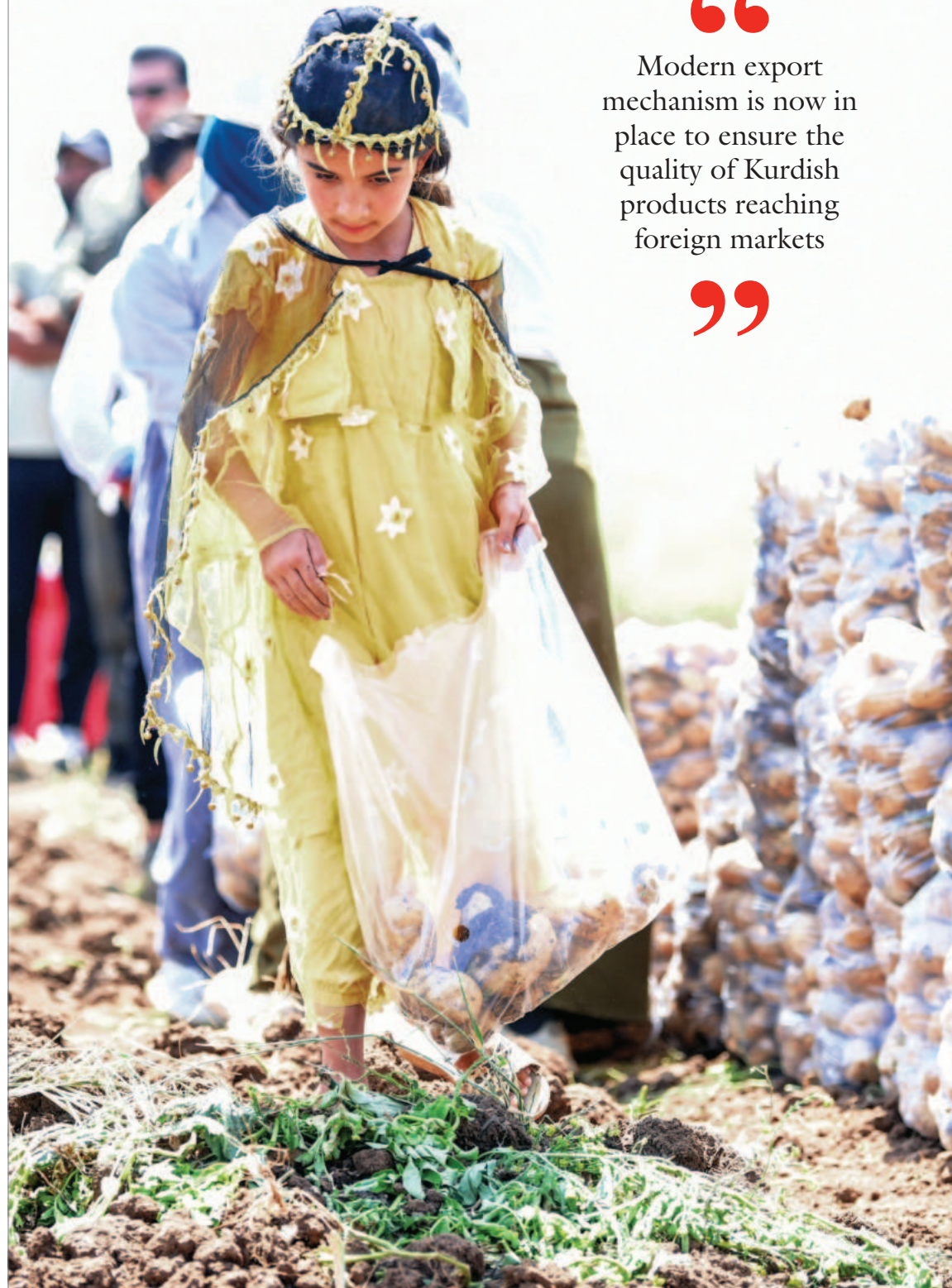


Photo: Sabr Dri

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Modern export
mechanism is now in
place to ensure the
quality of Kurdish
products reaching
foreign markets
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es, Talabani emphasized the efforts of the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources in collaboration with the Kurdistan Agriculture Export Initiative (KAEI) under the Prime Minister's Office to enhance the marketing of farmers products abroad. She pointed out that a modern export mechanism is now in place to ensure the quality of Kurdish products reaching foreign markets, part of an effort

the first ever export of a product from the Kurdistan Region, namely pomegranates, to Gulf and European markets. The KRG also exported apples, grapes, and honey to foreign markets from 2023.

At the time, Prime Minister Barzani remarked that the export of pomegranates marked only the beginning of the export of various other prod-



Photo: Goran Shakhman

■ Minister Talabani reading Kurdistan Chronicle during an event in the United States

to safeguard the reputation of Kurdish brands in international markets.

The KAEI, launched in 2022, is central to the KRG's progressive reform agenda to diversify the economy and boost the agricultural sector of the Kurdistan Region. Its efforts led to

ucts, acknowledging the significance of oil and gas revenues but cautioning that these resources are finite. "What will we do when these revenues run out?" he asked, advocating for early investment in the agricultural sector as a vital income stream for the country.

"After pomegranates, the region has exported rice, tahini, apples, tomatoes, potatoes, and sumac (flowering plants that belong to the genus Rhus) to Gulf and European countries, and is now exporting eggs and chickens to the UAE," Talabani elaborated.

In Talabani's view, the Ninth Cabinet is the first in the KRG's history to export such significant volumes of agricultural produce abroad.

Role of women

On July 23, 2024, KRG representatives in Washington, D.C. organized a congressional briefing entitled "Empowering Change: Women Shaping Peace and Security in the Kurdistan Region" at the U.S. Congress. There, Talabani was a guest speaker and touched on the role of women in the Kurdistan Region and in government, drawing on her experience as a member of the Kurdistan Parliament during the Fourth Term (2013-2017) and as the first woman in history to serve as secretary of the Kurdistan Parliament.

In her speech at the U.S. Congress, Talabani highlighted the role of women in government, mentioning that three women are currently serving in the Ninth Cabinet for the first time in the KRG's history. She also pointed out that the judicial branch is currently made up of 270 judges, of whom 69 are women. Similarly, of the 204 attorneys general, 59 are also women.

Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Region has 369 non-governmental organizations that focus mainly on women's issues.

In her role leading the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources, Talabani is committed to helping women business owners overcome the challenges that women still face. In this regard, she underscored the importance of implementing a law that grants women the right to land ownership, a right previously only granted to men. ●

U.S., Germany Continue Support for *Peshmerga*

Kurdistan Chronicle

In a video message in Kurdish and English on August 18, the newly appointed U.S. Consul General in Erbil Steve Bitner underlined that the United States is looking to build strong security cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

"This is part of our shared key commitment to build a professional and capable force to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. By working together, we can address persistent security threats to the United States, the Kurdistan Region, Iraq, and the rest

of the region," Bitner said.

Bitner and the newly appointed commander of the anti-ISIS Coalition, U.S. Major General Kevin Leahy, also met with the KRG President Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, and Minister of *Peshmerga* Affairs Shores Ismail in mid-August.

The U.S. Consulate General in a post on X on August 23 said they "reaffirm our shared commitment to maintaining Iraq's security and underscore the importance of continuing *peshmerga* reform efforts."

Photo: Omed Walari



Photo: Omed Walati

■ U.S. Consul General alongside Kurdish and American commanders during a ceremony to deliver weapons to peshmerga forces

Meanwhile, on August 22, Prime Minister Barzani welcomed Leahy, congratulating him on his new position and reaffirming the Kurdistan Region's continued support of the United States and its allies.

Leahy, who is responsible for the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, emphasized the importance of cooperation and the value of the joint struggle of the Kurdistan Region and the United States.

The progress in the unification of *peshmerga* forces and the reforms related to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA) were another topic of discussion during the meeting.

The United States, the UK, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands are part of the multi-national advisory group that supports the *peshmerga* reform project to create a united *peshmerga* force.

According to a report from the Pentagon's Inspector General published on August 1, coalition advisors are working with the MoPA to implement a four-year reform plan agreed upon between the U.S. Department of Defense and KRG.

A key element of the reform plan is the transfer of all forces belonging to the two biggest political parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the

Kurdistan Democratic Party– to the command of the MoPA by September 2016.

Bolstering *peshmerga* capabilities

The United States and Germany in the month of August provided weapons and equipment to the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, demonstrating the ongoing support of coalition countries in strengthening the *peshmerga*'s capabilities.

During a ceremony on August 6, several lightweight 105-mm howitzers were provided to the First and Second Support Forces Command of the MoPA by the United States.

In a post on X, the U.S. Consulate-

“The United States, the UK, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands are part of the multi-national advisory group that supports the *peshmerga* reform project

During the ceremony, MoPA Chief of Staff Issa Ozer also underlined that the *peshmerga* continue to need

to prevent the resurgence of ISIS and terrorism in the region,” he said.

During the event, the outgoing U.S. Consul General Mark Stroh stated that these weapons will improve “the military capabilities of *peshmerga* forces to ensure public security and defeat ISIS.”

Moreover, the German Armed Forces on August 15 handed over 400 backpacks with high-quality medical materiel, six forklifts, and four lift trucks for material handling to the MoPA. This was in addition to providing several hundred meters of shelf systems for the main warehouse of the *peshmerga*.

A three-week "train the trainer" course was previously conducted by



Photo: Omed Walati

■ A 105-mm Howitzer delivered to the *peshmerga*



Photo: Omed Walati

■ Kurdistan Regional Government Minister of Peshmerga Affairs Shoresb Ismail delivering a speech

General said that this move marks a significant milestone in building the capacity of the *peshmerga* forces. “This weaponry will enhance the *peshmerga* forces’ collective security capabilities to ensure the enduring Iraqi-led defeat of ISIS.”

the support of the U.S.-led coalition in terms of weapons, logistics, and training.

He emphasized that the *peshmerga* have been the frontline force against ISIS, leading the charge in defeating the most significant terrorist threat. “Ongoing military support is essential

the German Mobile Medical Training Team to support the use of the backpacks. Additionally, the shelf systems, forklifts, and lift trucks are intended to enhance storage conditions and improve material handling for the *Peshmerga* forces.

The German Armed Forces have supported the *peshmerga* since 2015 during the fight against ISIS, noted Commander of the German Armed Forces in Erbil Colonel Lars Persikowski during the handover ceremony on August 15.

“German support to the *peshmerga* became most visible with the hand-

over of the MILAN anti-tank missiles; additionally, assault rifles, like the G-36, as well as armored vehicles, like the DINGO, helped the *peshmerga* successfully defeat ISIS terrorists,” he said.

In 2014, then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to supply the *peshmerga* with G-36 rifles and MI-

LAN anti-tank missiles, which were effective in stopping ISIS armored vehicles.

However, Colonel Persikowski warned that the fight against ISIS is not over, despite their territorial defeat in Iraq in December 2017.

“The ideology is still alive. ISIS must

be prevented from regaining the ability to endanger peace in this region. Therefore, the German Armed Forces – as part of the U.S.-led coalition – continue to support the KRG by enhancing the capabilities of the Kurdish Armed Forces under the MoPA,” he stated.

He also underlined that the German Armed Forces have implemented various projects in Kurdistan and will

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The German Armed Forces have supported the *peshmerga* since 2015 during the fight against ISIS
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continue to carry out new ones. This is part of the Enable and Enhance Initiatives that have been coordinated by Germany’s Federal Ministry of Defense and Federal Foreign Office.

The German Armed Forces say that these initiatives make it possible to provide material support, infrastructure measures, training, and advisory activities for the *peshmerga*.

■ Military cargo trucks carrying the recently delivered artillery to the *peshmerga*

Additionally, Germany’s Consulate General in Erbil on July 4 announced that the MoPA and German Armed Forces had launched a joint project worth \$3.2 million in Erbil.

Pentagon Press Secretary Major General Pat Ryder told reporters on August 20 that Iraqi security forces writ large, which includes the *peshmerga*, have played a vital role in terms of reducing the threat that ISIS poses.

“But as we’ve seen in places like Afghanistan, left unchecked, ISIS can start to make a resurgence. And so again, we’ll continue to work with our Iraqi partners, our *peshmerga* partners to address this threat.” ●

Reconstructing Iraq's Forces



Riband Saadallah

is a professional photographer and seasoned journalist. He is a member of the Union of Journalists in Finland.

Babaker Shawkat B. Zebari currently serves as a senior military advisor to Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani; however, he was the Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Army from 2004 to 2015. He recently sat down with *Kurdistan Chronicle* to reflect on the challenges of forming a new Iraqi army after 2003, as well as the current state of the Iraqi army and the security threats facing Iraq.

In 2003, a U.S. and British delegation visited Erbil, and then-Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani tasked Zebari with overseeing this effort under coalition supervision. Zebari recalls how the nascent army's headquarters was in the kindergarten of Saddam Hussein's grandchildren and consisted of a hall, two rooms, and a bathroom. Despite these humble beginnings, the new Iraqi army took shape, and Zebari served as its Chief of Staff for over a decade.

"When we first arrived in Baghdad, the ministry was empty except for Dr. Ali Al-lawi. I brought a regiment from Kurdistan, including Fadhil Barwari's Kurdish regiment, which formed the core of the new Iraqi army. The Americans provided significant assistance," Zebari explained.

Forces and weapons

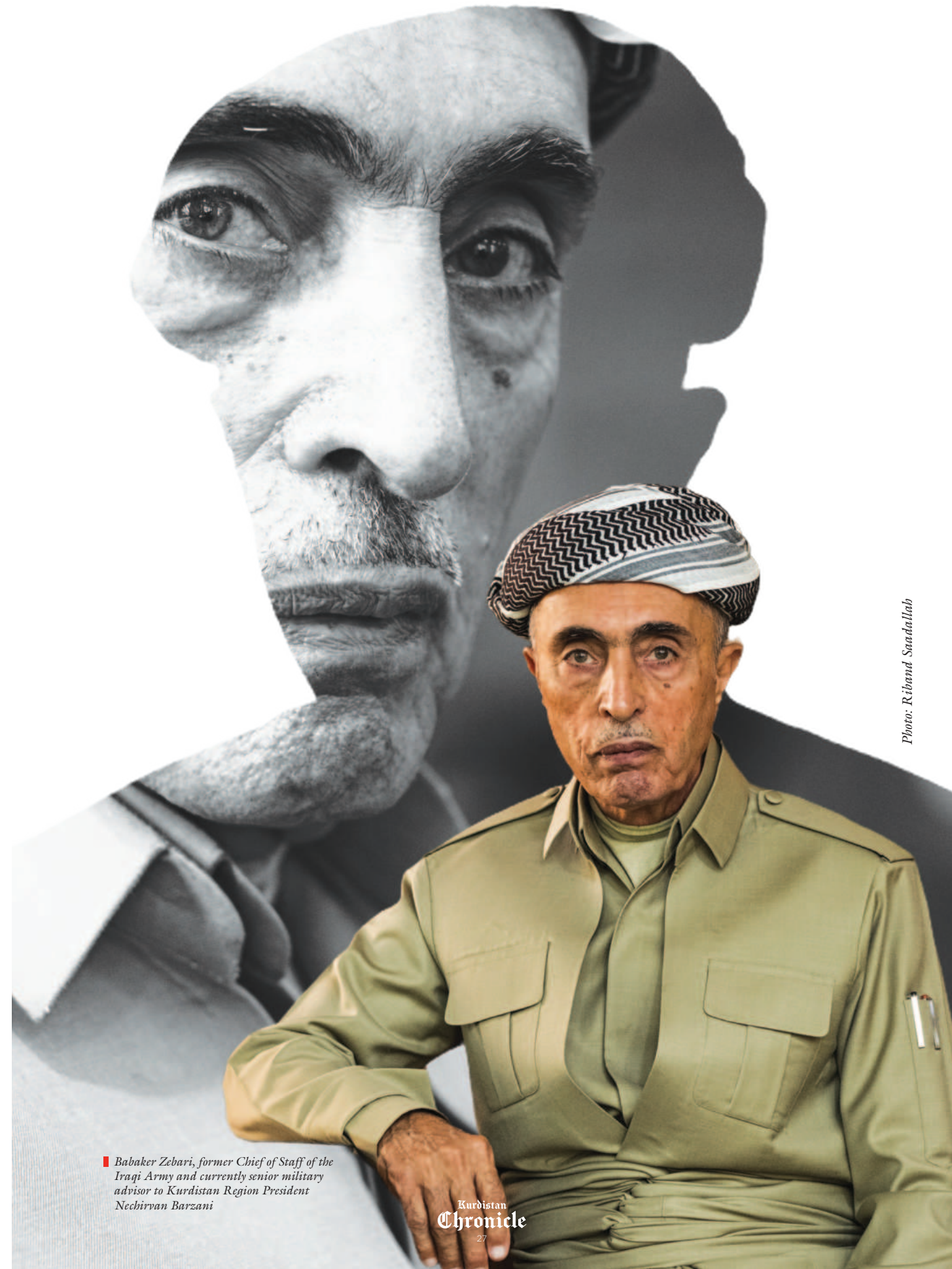
Contrary to popular belief, Zebari asserts that the former Iraqi army disbanded itself before U.S. troops arrived. "The United

States merely signed the death certificate. Commanders had fled, soldiers had deserted, and civilians had looted military bases," he said. Zebari believed, however, that the United States exacerbated the situation by permitting looting, which resulted in the removal of explosives, weapons, and other material from the bases.

Despite the obstacles posed by the Ba'ath eradication law, the new Iraqi army relied heavily on officers from the disbanded army who had not participated in the Ba'ath regime's crimes. Approximately 2,000 young officers, including some from the Republican Guard and both Sunni and Shi'a Arabs, were recruited.

Ever since Iraq's liberation in 2003, critics and some factions have called for the complete withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces, a move Zebari deems foolish, arguing that coalition forces provide crucial intelligence and advanced weaponry to Iraq, among other benefits. He recounted how once a British Defense Secretary joked about wanting the United States to invade the UK so that it too could receive similar military aid, highlighting the absurdity of Iraq rejecting such support.

Zebari, a 1970 graduate of the Baghdad Military Academy and former artillery battalion commander in Jordan, left the Iraqi army in 1973 due to Ba'ath regime atrocities against Kurds. He lamented that despite the peshmerga being part of the



Babaker Zebari, former Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Army and currently senior military advisor to Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani

Photo: Riband Saadallah

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When Kurdistan is attacked by drones, the peshmerga have no anti-drone weapons, and Iraq is unwilling to allocate any to them

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Credit: U.S. Department of Defense

■ Babaker Zebari greeting Martin E. Dempsey, retired U.S. Army General and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at the Defense Ministry in Baghdad (March 9, 2015)



Iraqi armed forces, they faced numerous obstacles in acquiring weapons. Iraq has consistently refused to arm the peshmerga, leaving them defenseless against attacks.

“When Kurdistan is attacked by drones, the peshmerga have no anti-drone weapons, and Iraq is unwilling to allocate any to them,” Zebari said. He criticized the coalition’s non-interference stance, noting that Iraq’s reluctance to arm the peshmerga weakens Kurdish defenses.

New threats to Iraq

In late July, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) released ISIS fighters in Syria, which alarms Zebari. He warned that Syria might face a renewed threat, exacerbated by the presence of Turkish, Russian, and Iranian forces. Zebari is convinced the SDF could not have taken this step without external support that possibly aims to further destabilize Syria.

Zebari cautioned that if the released ISIS militants were to enter Iraq, they would pose a severe threat, especially in the Diyala and Anbar governorates. Despite ISIS’s weakened state, it still has support within Iraq. For instance, Zebari noted that some individuals live normal lives by day but become ISIS fighters at night.

The decline of Kurdish and Sunni Arab representation in the Iraqi army is another threat to security. Originally, political leaders agreed that the army would be composed of 25% Sunni Arabs, 20% Kurds, 45% Shi’a Arabs, and 10% from other groups. However, since Zebari’s departure in 2015, the Kurdish share has fallen to only 3%. Sunni Arab representation has also decreased significantly. Zebari underscored that while he was in office, the Kurdish share in the Iraqi army remained secure. However, since then, key positions traditionally held by Kurds have not been filled by Kurdish personnel, undermining Kurdish representation and influence in the military. ●

Bridging Business and Diplomacy Between the Netherlands and Kurdistan



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.

In an interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, the Netherlands' Ambassador to Iraq Hans Sandee said that the Dutch-Kurdish community plays a vital entrepreneurial role in the private sector in the Kurdistan Region.

There are reportedly 6,000 Dutch Kurds living in the Kurdistan Region, and several small and medium-sized collaborative projects have been created by Kurdish and Dutch companies, including in the dairy and potato industry, in recent years.

This development aligns with the plans of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Ninth Cabinet to diversify the economy and reduce the region's dependence on oil.

Sandee said that in many cases, Dutch Kurds are not only involved in the private sector in the Kurdistan Region, but are also pursuing business opportunities in the Netherlands.

"They play a very positive and constructive role. For this reason, I label them as quasi-ambassadors for the Netherlands in Kurdistan; conversely, the Kurds are like ambassadors of Kurdistan in the Nether-

lands as well. I see that as a win-win situation."

Sandee also said that there are different ways that the Netherlands can support Kurdistan, including in the fields of trade, agriculture, and water management.

"There is direct support, for instance from the Consulate General, which closely cooperates with the KRG on several economic topics, and also addresses different types of trade requests from both Kurdish and Dutch businesses," he said.

Moreover, Sandee said that there is "cooperation from the government in terms of supporting projects and programs, developing the private sector, and providing training opportunities."

Agricultural agreement

Ambassador Sandee added that there has been an overarching agricultural cooperation framework between the Netherlands and the Kurdistan Region from July 2021. "Under that framework, there are all kinds of ways in which we can bolster entrepreneurship across Kurdish society," he said.

Hans Sandee, Ambassador of the Netherlands to Iraq



■ Hans Sandee, Ambassador of the Netherlands to Iraq

Photos: Sabir Salih

The Netherlands, it should be noted, also cooperates with the Kurdistan Region through academia.

“You probably know that there are many other institutions of higher learning dealing with agriculture. For instance, Wageningen University helps us with knowledge transfer. They provide methods and techniques that are useful for agriculture across societies, most notably to make agriculture more climate resilient and less dependent on water usage.”

The Netherlands, internationally recognized as a leader in water management and agriculture, provides expertise and climate-resilient seeds to Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, with the Dutch championing technologies like drip irrigation that minimize water usage.

“There are many ways through which we support water management in both the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, both at the federal level and at the provincial level, for instance in Basra.”

Climate awareness

Still, Ambassador Sandee highlighted that much can be done in the Kurdistan Region to raise awareness about the issue of water scarcity.

“People in Iraq still use water to clean roads, and a lot of water is being used for unnecessary purposes. Therefore, awareness and advocacy are important priorities for us at the Embassy and Consulate General.”

He also emphasized that Iraq needs to adopt innovative techniques to improve its water management. “Considering the population growth in Iraq, it is patent that there will not be enough water,” he said.

Therefore, he argues that Iraq

should focus on sustainable and renewable energy and water usage, and the Netherlands is ready to provide knowledge and expertise in these areas.

Supporting Yezidis

The Netherlands has also supported projects that benefit the Yezidi Kurds in Iraq, especially in areas such as mine clearance, humanitarian support, and accountability. In July 2021, the Dutch Parliament recognized the crimes of ISIS against the Yezidi Kurds as genocide; many Yezidis now live in the Netherlands.

“It’s important to highlight that we have many policies and projects that benefit Yezidis and other groups that were the victims of

“
The Dutch Parliament recognized the crimes of ISIS against the Yezidi Kurds as genocide
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ISIS crimes,” Sandee said. “In general, we provide significant support to those in internally displaced person (IDP) camps, and work to help them return to and reintegrate into their places of origin.”

As an example, he noted that the Netherlands supports mine clearance projects in Iraq, which enable IDPs to return to their areas and invest in agriculture in these areas. “I have seen great projects, and I know it’s possible due to demining activities.”

“At the same time, we also find it crucial that there is accountability

for past crimes and that they do not go unpunished. Therefore, we support the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by ISIS (UNITAD),” he added.

“Unfortunately, UNITAD will leave Iraq, but the effort to bring perpetrators of these atrocities to justice will continue both in and outside Iraq,” he continued. “It is something that we will have to continue to explore, waiting to see how the talks between UNITAD and the Iraqi government progress, how the responsibilities will be shared, and what role interested countries like the Netherlands can play in the future.”

Sandee emphasized the importance of evidence gathering for Dutch courts, as many Dutch ISIS fighters and women have faced trials in the Netherlands. “There is interest from the Netherlands to continue,” he said.

The newly appointed Dutch government is also considering an initiative to establish an international tribunal for prosecuting ISIS crimes.

In October 2020, Baghdad and Erbil signed the UN-backed Sinjar Agreement with the goal of stabilizing the situation in Sinjar, but so far it has not been implemented. The Dutch authorities are monitoring the agreement’s implementation by local and federal authorities.

Sandee underlined that people will not return to Sinjar unless there is real security, housing, and education for the younger generation. “We recognize that the government is doing its fair share, but more should be done. We call on the government on all levels to assure security, which is the precondition for people to return to their homes.” ●

The Yezidi Genocide Ten Years On, Still an Open Wound

Kurdistan Chronicle

On August 3, the Yezidis in the Kurdistan Region and across the globe commemorated the 10th anniversary of the ISIS genocide against their religious group. As in previous years, multiple events were organized to raise international awareness about the plight of the Yezidis, who continue to suffer from the consequences of the atrocities committed by ISIS despite a decade having passed.

On August 3, 2014, ISIS militants overran the predominantly Yezidi town of Sinjar – located some 130 kilometers to the west of Mosul in north of Iraq – and abducted thousands of women and children after executing thousands of men.

The fall of Sinjar came less than a month after the Iraqi Army escaped the frontlines in Mosul, where ISIS later declared its so-called Caliphate. Almost everyone in Iraq and Syria

was a target for ISIS, but the extremist group specifically aimed its ruthless war machine at the Yezidis for their faith, labeling them “infidels” to justify the mass expulsions, enslavement of women, and many other horrific crimes that it committed against them.

According to official data obtained from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a total of 6,417 Yezidis, mostly women and children, were abducted by ISIS, out of whom the fate of 2,596 remains unknown.

An ongoing grief

Besides thousands of mass executions and widespread enslavement, ISIS also displaced nearly 400,000 Yezidis, the majority of whom found refuge in the Kurdistan Region with others migrating to other countries. Despite 10 years having passed, many displaced Yezidi families still prefer the



■ Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein speaking during the Yazidi Genocide Anniversary event in Germany



■ Kurdistan Regional Government Interior Minister Rebar Ahmed Khalid speaking during the Yazidi Genocide Anniversary event in Germany on August 3, 2024



■ An event hosted by the Central Advisory Council of Yazidis in Germany to remember the victims of the ISIS genocide against the Yazidis

camps in the Kurdistan Region over returning to their homes in Sinjar, often citing a persistent lack of security as the reason.

Fourteen months after its fall, Sinjar was liberated from ISIS by the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces in November 2015. Since then, the strategic town has fallen under the control of various armed groups, mainly those affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Iran-backed Shi'a militia groups that are accused of seeking to advance their own political interests rather than creating a safe home for the Yazidis.

The current situation in Sinjar has also

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The current situation in Sinjar has also worried the international community and human rights advocates across the globe
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genocide against the Yazidis, the Central Advisory Council of Yazidis



worried the international community and human rights advocates across the globe. In hopes of addressing the ongoing security crisis in Sinjar, the UN brokered an agreement between the KRG and the Federal Government of Iraq in 2020 to address the remaining security and administrative challenges in Sinjar. However, the aforementioned armed groups continue to inhibit Erbil and Baghdad from implementing the agreement.

Remembering the victims, vowing to support

On the 10th anniversary of the ISIS

in Germany hosted an event with the participation of several prominent politicians, including Iraq's Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, KRG Minister of Interior Rebar Ahmad Khalid, and various German lawmakers.

Hussein honored the victims of the genocide in a speech and reaffirmed Iraq's commitment to the Yazidis. He highlighted Iraq's Yazidi Survivors Law No. (8) of 2021, which is a national legal source for achieving justice, providing reparations, and recognizing the crime as genocide.

The top diplomat went on to commend the KRG for its concerted ef-

forts in cooperation with the federal government to protect the Yazidis and address the humanitarian challenges they face, noting that the region has hosted them since the first day of the horrors they faced, providing them with safe shelter and other life necessities. He also thanked the Kurdistan Region for its effective contribution to searching for those who were kidnapped and returning them to their families.

Later, Khalid delivered a speech in which he reminded the audience of the sacrifices that the Kurdish *peshmerga* made to liberate Sinjar from ISIS in 2015, noting that nearly 500 fighters gave their life during the Sinjar battle.

He also highlighted a financial support program recently announced by KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, which will provide monthly allowances to 3,000 women and girls who survived the atrocities committed by ISIS.

Khalid, however, warned of the prolonged failure to put into action the 2020 Sinjar Agreement, emphasizing that the suffering of the Yazidis would continue unless stable conditions in the area allow them to return safely to their homes.

“The agreement is made to normalize the situation in Sinjar; that can be done by ensuring stability, security, civil administration, reconstruction, and the provision of public services. This way the Yazidis can be encouraged to finally return to their homes,” the Kurdish official pointed out. “However, the Sinjar Agreement is yet to be implemented, and the region remains unstable.”

Citing continued instability and the lack of a civil administration under the rule of multiple armed groups in Sinjar, Khalid called on the German government to avoid the forced deportation of Yazidi migrants to Sinjar, where their security cannot be guaranteed in the current environment. ●

IDPs and Refugees A Struggle for Survival and Stability

Kurdistan Chronicle



Photo: Rebaz Sian

Children posing for the camera behind a torn tent at an IDP camp in the Kurdistan Region

The lives of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in the Kurdistan Region are harsh and disheartening. In IDP and refugee camps, most residents live in tents that fail to protect them from the winter cold and summer heat. This situation is particularly difficult for women and children, who lack basic services and entertainment.

Each tent shelters the story of a life they did not choose. For children in

the camps, riding mini motorcycles and playing football and hide-and-seek are their only sources of joy. They see no glimmer of hope for their future, nor any signs of reconstruction or peace in the areas from which they fled.

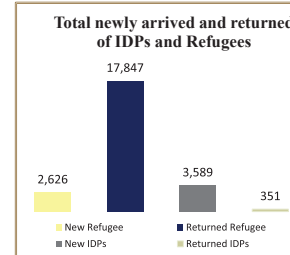
Following the rise of ISIS in 2014, hundreds of thousands of IDPs from various parts of Iraqi relocated to the Kurdistan Region. Additionally, the dire situation in Syria drove hundreds

of thousands of refugees to Kurdistan, where they settled in camps, cities, and communities.

Yet, over seven years since the defeat of ISIS in Iraq, dozens of refugee and IDP camps remain in the Kurdistan Region, housing tens of thousands of families who are unwilling to return due to the lack of security and services in their areas of origin.

Internally Displaced Persons and Refugee Population in the Kurdistan Region

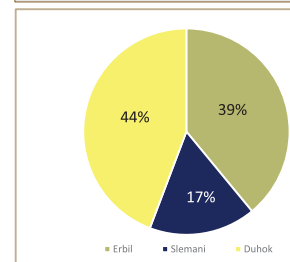
N	Total no. of IDPs	Total no. of Refugees	Total no. IDPs and Refugees
Individuals	723,114	279,175	1,002,289
Families	129,833	82,151	211,984



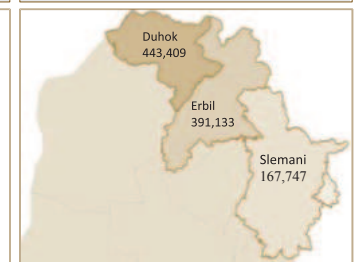
Total refugees in the Kurdistan Region people

Syrians	260,594 people
Turkish	7,972 people
Iranian	8,653 people
Palestinians	863 people
Others	1,093 people

% of total IDPs and refugee in the Kurdistan Region



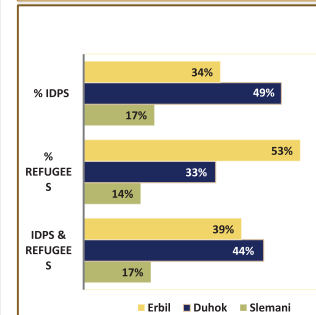
Geographical Distribution of IDPs and Refugees



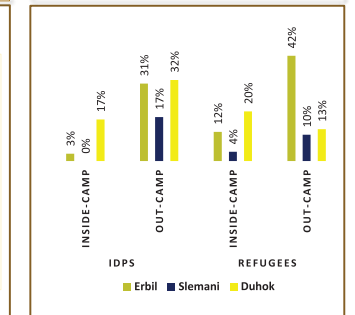
Geographical Distribution of IDPs and Refugees in KRI

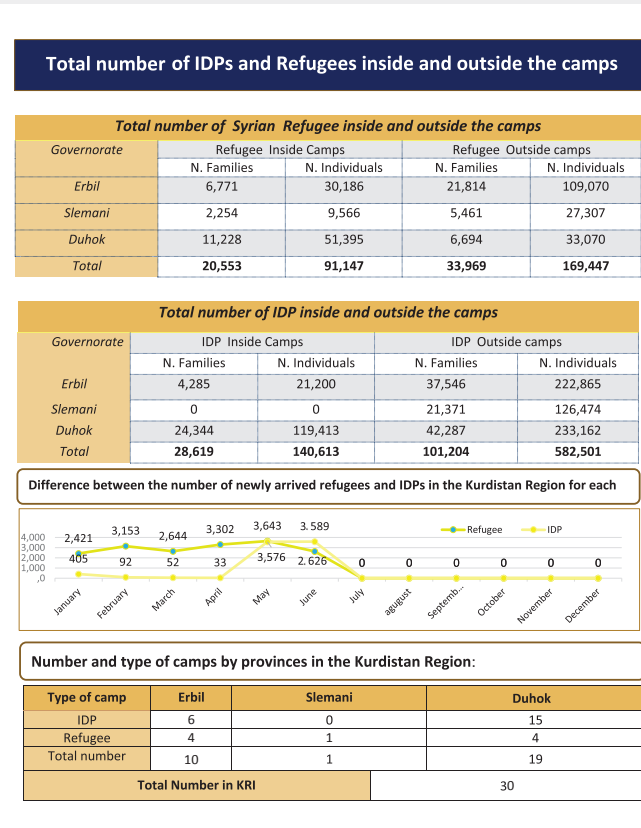
Refugee	Family	Individual	IDP	Family	Individual
Erbil	28,534	139,256	Erbil	41,831	244,065
Slemani	7,715	36,873	Slemani	21,371	126,474
Duhok	17,922	84,465	Duhok	66,631	352,575
Total	54,171	260,594	Total	129,833	723,114

Number of IDPs in each province in the Kurdistan Region



% of total Refugees (inside and outside the camp)





A staggering situation

The number of IDPs and refugees in the Kurdistan Region has exceeded two million, surpassing the local population in provinces like Duhok. Despite the fall of ISIS, the hope for rebuilding and establishing security and peace in these areas remains unfulfilled, leaving many preferring camp life over unstable conditions without essential services.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), despite facing budget cuts and ISIS attacks, has shouldered the burden of providing as many services as possible to IDPs and refugees. International leaders, including Pope Francis, have praised Kurdistan for its hospitality and support.

According to the KRG’s 2024 Humanitarian Situation Report No. 7, the latest statistics are as follows:

Number of Camps: There are 30 IDP and refugee camps in Kurdistan: 19 in Duhok, 10 in Erbil, and one in Sulaymaniyah.

Current Population: Over one million refugees live in the Kurdistan Region.

Families in Camps:

- Erbil: 11,056 families (51,386 people)
- Duhok: 35,557 families (170,808 people)
- Sulaymaniyah: 2,256 families (9,566 people)

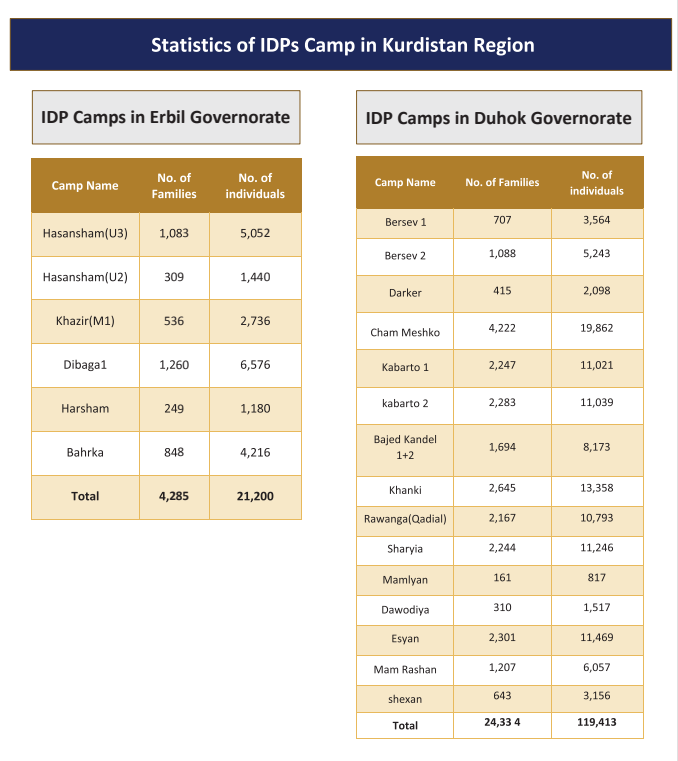
Families Outside Camps:

- Erbil: 60,360 families (331,935 people)
- Duhok: 48,981 families (266,232 people)
- Sulaymaniyah: 26,832 families (153,781 people)

The KRG needs \$938 million annually to meet the needs of IDPs and refugees. Meanwhile, the Iraqi federal government has decided to close all IDP camps by July 30, offering each returning family four million Iraqi dinars (approximately \$3,000).

What will happen?

This decision has caused concern among IDPs, especially those from Sinjar, who feel their homeland lacks the necessary conditions for a normal life. Many areas remain unsafe due to landmines, the presence of ISIS sleeper cells,



and a lack of essential services. The KRG has assured IDPs that they are free to return or remain in the camps, without any compulsion.

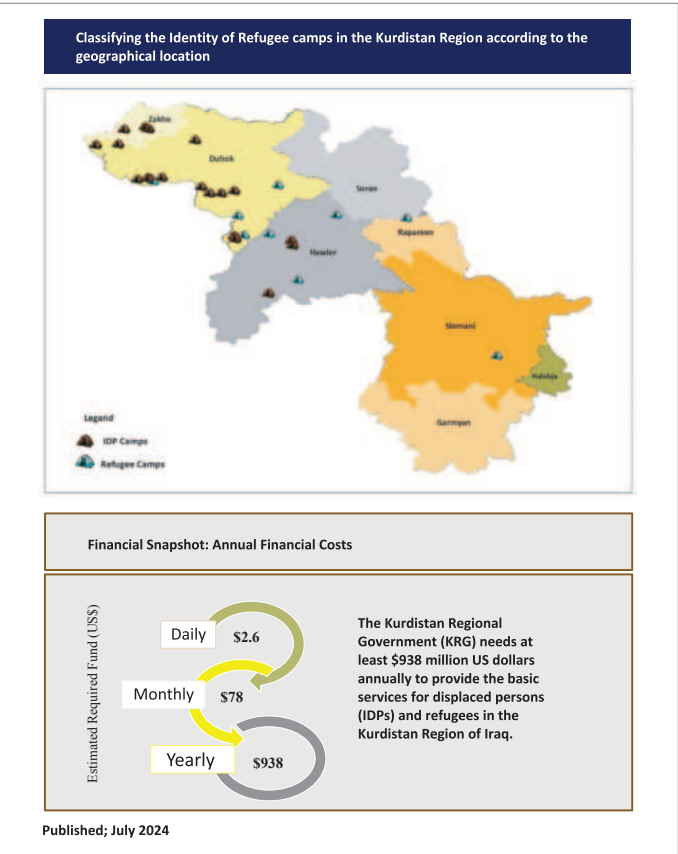
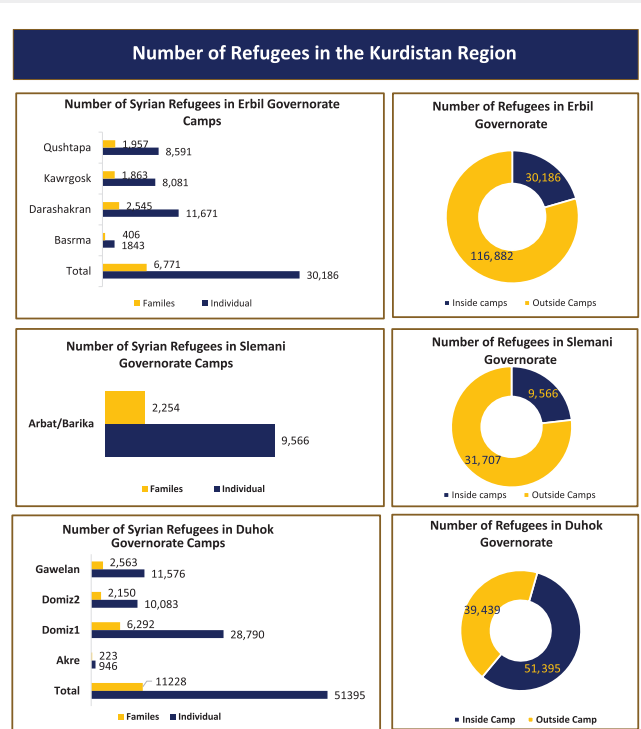
However, the Iraqi federal government has also pressured organizations to reduce their aid, with a 70% decrease in assistance. Currently, the KRG funds and coordinates key services provided to the camps, including garbage collection, water supply, education, and health.

During the conflict with ISIS and other instances of regional violence, the Kurdish people have demonstrated remarkable hospitality and support, making Kurdistan a refuge for nearly two million IDPs and refugees. This hospitality has been recognized globally, with Pope Francis visiting Kurdistan in 2021 and holding a major religious ceremony in Erbil, expressing gratitude to the Kurdish people and the KRG.

In recent months, IDPs have been hesitant about the Iraqi federal government’s forced return deadline of July 30. However, the KRG Minster of Interior Rebar Ahmed Khalid emphasized that IDPs are free to decide, and KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani has pressured the Iraqi federal government to reconsider its decision. The KRG has submitted several proposals to the Iraqi federal government to improve the living conditions of IDPs.

The future of IDPs and refugees in the Kurdistan Region remains uncertain and precarious. Despite the KRG's efforts to provide essential services and support, the immense financial burden and lack of international aid make it challenging to sustain these efforts. The Iraqi federal government's decision to close IDP camps and the insufficient support for returning families exacerbate the situation, leaving many IDPs and refugees in limbo.

Without significant international intervention and a committed effort from the Iraqi government to improve security and services in the areas of origin, the prospect for a stable and dignified life for IDPs and refugees remains bleak. The international community must step up its support, both financially and diplomatically, to ensure that these vulnerable populations are not abandoned. The resilience and hospitality of the Kurdish people should be matched by a global commitment to aid and reconstruction, providing a glimmer of hope for a better future for IDPs and refugees in Kurdistan. ●



Where Kurdistan Stands in UNDP Corruption Report?

Kurdistan Chronicle



Credit: UNDP Iraq



Credit: UNDP Iraq

■ Auke Lootsma, UNDP Representative in Iraq, announcing the report's findings during an event in Erbil

A recent Trial Monitoring Report by the UN Development Program (UNDP) on grand corruption cases across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq highlights substantial progress by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in combating corruption and offers comprehensive insights into the region's judicial proceedings.

Corruption-prone sectors and judicial improvements

Released on August 18, 2024, the 48-page report details the monitoring of over 100 cases from November 2022 to December 2023, along with 50 verdicts issued between 2016 and 2022. It covers court hearings in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok,

“The UNDP report indicates significant progress in the exclusion of corruption-related cases from the general amnesty regime”

focusing on major corruption cases, including those involving high monetary thresholds, high-ranking officials, and cases of public interest or those against informants and anti-corruption advocates.

The report is the product of its col-

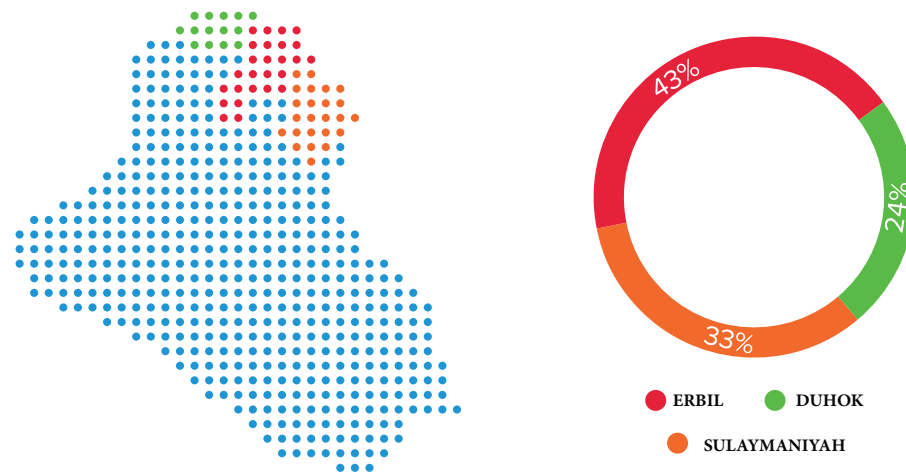
laboration with the Human Rights Office of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Judicial Council of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

According to the report, the KRG's Ministry of Finance and Economy (25%), the Ministry of Electricity (18%), and the Municipal Councils (17%) have been the government sectors most affected by grand corruption. Key findings of the report also reveal an increase in convictions compared to acquittals, though the rate of conviction for high-level defendants remains low, with few senior government officials being charged.

Furthermore, the UNDP report indicates significant progress in the ex-

CORRUPTION CASES ACROSS THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

CASES BY GOVERNORATE



clusion of corruption-related cases from the general amnesty regime. There has also been a notable reduction in trials conducted in absentia as well as a rise in felonies related to intentional damage through abuse of public office, reflecting the judiciary's progress in advancing anti-corruption efforts. However, the report notes a concerning lack of civil society organizations attending trials as third parties, even though legal provisions allow their presence.

Corruption in low-ranking offices

The UNDP report compares corruption cases by the level of the defendant's position in the KRG and the Iraqi Federal Government, noting a major difference: whereas the former records all corruption cases in lower government positions, the latter sees more high-ranking officials involved in corruption cases.

"At the federal level, the courts witnessed major corruption cases involving high-ranking officials,

including members of parliament, ministers, deputy ministers, and governors. In contrast, the number of public government employees in the [Kurdistan Region] significantly increased, representing more than 50% of the total cases monitored and reviewed, indicating that accountability for corruption is still largely concentrated at the lower government levels," the report reveals.

Joining hands to combat corruption

Speaking at the launch event for the report, UNDP Representative in Iraq Auke Lootsma underscored that the report can help unify efforts for curbing corruption in the Kurdistan Region.

"This critical report, the culmination of our joint efforts, represents a significant milestone in our collective quest for enhanced transparency and justice. We stand ready to collaborate to address the recommendations of the report," Lootsma said on the UNDP's website.

As the UN funded the report, EU Ambassador to Iraq Thomas Seiler also delivered a video message during the event, noting that the findings of the report would help craft multilateral efforts to devise proper strategies to combat corruption.

"The Trial Monitoring report offers a very deep insight into how investigations are led and how trials are conducted. Its recommendations will guide us in refining our strategies and enhancing anti-corruption measures," Seiler pointed out.

During the event, Judge Abdel Gabar Aziz Hassan, the head of Judicial Council of the Kurdistan Region, also highlighted the report's importance for judiciary reforms in the Kurdistan Region.

"While proving our dedication against corruption, the report also provides us with an opportunity to advance

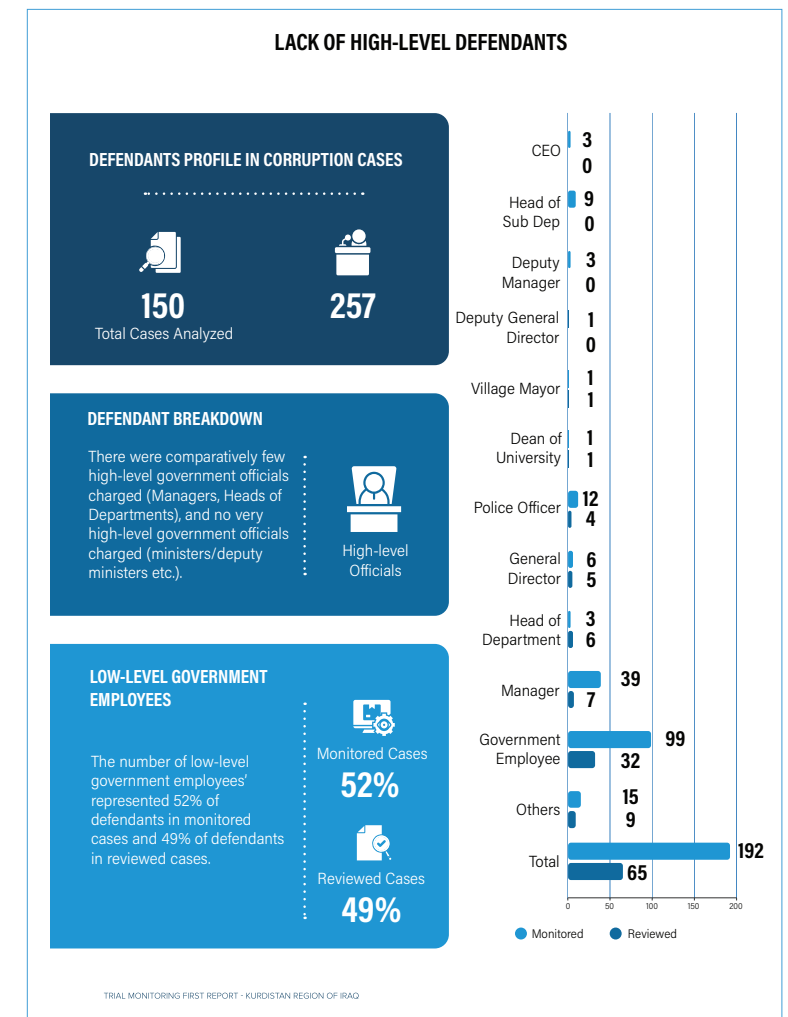
our committed practices towards a more transparent and accountable judiciary system," the Kurdish official stressed.

Recommended reforms

The report urges the KRG, the Judicial Council, the Bar Association, civil society, and the international community to implement proposed anti-cor-

protect whistleblowers and victims. It also calls for limiting institutional discretion in withdrawing damage claims and strengthening oversight in corruption-affected sectors.

Further recommendations include reforms to criminal procedures to enhance investigative capabilities, the implementation of an electronic case management system, and the



ruption reforms. These include the establishment of specialized courts for major corruption cases, the modernization of the penal code to address issues such as private sector bribery, and the enactment of legislation to

standardization of sentencing. Additionally, the report highlights the importance of reinforcing the financial independence of the Public Prosecutor's Office and supporting civil society in anti-corruption initiatives. ●

Advancing Democracy and Media Freedom



Peshawa Hawramani
is the Spokesperson for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).



■ Kurdistan Region Spokesperson Peshawa Hawrami (middle) and Representative to the U.S. Treefa Aziz (left) at the U.S. Department of State

Credit: KRG



Credit: KRG

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq continues to solidify its reputation as a bastion of democracy and freedom in the Middle East. Recognizing the pivotal role that media and transparent communication play in democratic governance, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has initiated efforts to strengthen the relationships between journalists and the spokespersons, media directors, and communication teams within its ministries, government departments, and agencies. These efforts underscore the KRG's commitment to creating an environment where information flows freely and accurately to the public, thereby enhancing transparency and accountability.

As part of this initiative, the KRG, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of State, organized a specialized training program for key government personnel. Over 10 spokespersons from various KRG ministries participated in the prestigious International Visitor Leadership Program. From July 27 to August 8, 2024, these spokespersons travelled to the United States, visiting Washington, D.C., Georgia, and Minnesota. The program aimed to expose KRG representatives to best practices in media relations, public diplomacy, and government communication.

During their time in the United States,

the delegation engaged with several high-ranking officials, notable figures, and academic institutions. Meetings were held with Aaron Newton, Iraq Desk Officer at the U.S. Department of State; Nikki Softness, Director of Iraq and Syria Affairs at the U.S. National Security Council; Vedant Patel, Principal Deputy Spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State, and his media team; as well as Parris Glendening, former Governor of Maryland. These interactions provided the KRG spokespersons with valuable insights into how the U.S. government manages its communication strategies and engages with both domestic and international media.

“Beyond media freedom, the Kurdistan Region stands out as a model of stability and coexistence in a region”

In these discussions, the KRG delegation consistently emphasized that “the KRG is fully committed to enhancing the capabilities of its me-

dia staff, fostering an environment conducive to providing information to journalists, and expanding freedom of expression and democracy.” This message resonated throughout their meetings, reflecting the KRG's broader goals of strengthening its democratic institutions and ensuring that its citizens have access to free and independent media.

The political dialogue between the KRG delegation and U.S. officials covered a range of critical issues. These included the Kurdistan Region's relationship with the U.S. government, the challenges related to salaries for Kurdistan Region employees, the importance of media freedom, the upcoming elections in the region, the resumption of oil exports, and the ongoing negotiations with the federal government regarding the Kurdistan Region's budget and salaries. These topics are central to the KRG's efforts to maintain stability and prosperity in the region, and the discussions highlighted the importance of continued cooperation between the Kurdistan Region and the United States.

The delegation also made a strong case for the Kurdistan Region as a leader in media freedom in the Middle East. They highlighted the absence of barriers to free media and independent journalism in the region, pointing out that the Kurdistan Re-



Credit: KRG

■ Kurdistan Regional Government Representative to the U.S. Treefa Aziz welcoming the delegation of KRG spokespersons to her office in Washington, D.C.



Credit: KRG



gion is home to dozens of free television and radio stations, thousands of websites, and numerous official social media pages. This vibrant media landscape is a testament to the KRG's commitment to fostering a free press and ensuring that citizens have access to diverse sources of information.

Beyond media freedom, the Kurdistan Region stands out as a model of stability and coexistence in a region often characterized by conflict and division. Despite the ongoing instability in the broader Middle East, political conflicts, and tensions in neighboring countries, the Kurdistan Region remains a peaceful haven for its people. This peace is not only enjoyed by the local population, but also by the political, diplomatic, and military forces residing in the region, including coalition forces. These forces, alongside the *pesh-merga* – the official army of the region – play a crucial role in protecting citizens and confronting terrorist threats.

The KRG delegation proudly shared these achievements during its visit to the United States, emphasizing the Kurdistan Region's unique position as a beacon of democracy, freedom, and stability in the Middle East. The KRG's commitment to these principles continues to inspire hope for its future, as it strives to build a more prosperous and democratic society for all its citizens. ●

Leading the Kurdish Struggle for Liberation



İsmail Beşikçi

is a Turkish sociologist, philosopher, and writer. He has served 17 years in prison on propaganda charges stemming from his writings about the Kurds in Middle East.

78 YEARS

This milestone invites reflection on the KDP's pivotal role in the Kurdish struggle for national freedom, a journey that follows in the footsteps of influential figures such as Abdul Salam Barzani (1864-1914) and Muhammad Barzani (died 1903). The fight for Kurdish rights and autonomy has been championed by notable leaders including Sheikh Ahmed Barzani (1896-1969) and General Mustafa Barzani (1903-1979), whose contributions laid the groundwork for future generations. The struggle persisted through the leadership of Idris Barzani (1944-1987), Masoud Barzani (born 1946), Nechirvan Barzani (born 1966), and Masrour Barzani (born 1969), each playing a significant role in advancing the aspirations of the Kurdish people.

The Iraqi branch of the KDP was founded on August 16, 1946, in Mahabad under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani. Before that, Iran's branch of the KDP was

The Iraqi branch of the KDP was founded on August 16, 1946, in Mahabad under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani



Sheikh Ahmad Barzani (left) and Mustafa Barzani (right) in Baghdad, 1958



■ Accompanied by several Kurdish political leaders, then-President Masoud Barzani joins a public rally ahead of the 2017 Kurdistan Independence Referendum.

founded on August 25, 1945, also in Mahabad. The KDP has been influential in the social and political life of the Kurds, with various factions bearing the name *Kurdistan Democratic Party* emerging since its establishment.

An interconnected political movement

This political movement has closely influenced the political history of Iraq, Türkiye, Iran, and Syria. For example, the Kurdish movement carried out by the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan heavily

influenced the military coups and coup attempts carried out in Türkiye on May 27, 1960, March 12, 1971, September 12, 1980, and February 28, 1997. I believe that these coups took place so that the development of Kurdish autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan would not affect Northern Kurdistan (southeastern Türkiye).

On July 14, 1958, a military coup unfolded in Iraq as Colonel Abdul-Karim Qasim and his associates dismantled the royal regime. The violent upheaval resulted in the lynching of 19 officials, including King Faisal

II and Prime Minister Nuri Said, who were brutally killed in the streets. Following the coup, the plotters proclaimed the establishment of a republican government. Shortly thereafter, Qasim introduced a provisional constitution that recognized the Iraqi populace as comprising both Arabs and Kurds. In a significant move, he invited General Barzani – who had been exiled in Russia – back to Iraq along with his *peshmerga* forces.

This led to the legalization of the KDP, which subsequently participated in the new government. These de-

velopments were pivotal in prompting the military coup that occurred on May 27, 1960, in Türkiye, which curbed any influence these changes might have on the country's Kurdish population. On the morning of May 27, 486 Kurds in Türkiye were detained, including prominent figures such as sheikhs, tribal leaders, landowners, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and students. These individuals were imprisoned in a camp in Sivas as part of operations aimed at instilling fear within the Kurdish community.

In discussions surrounding the May 27 military coup, Turkish universi-

ties, media outlets, writers, and intellectuals have largely overlooked this perspective. Instead, they tend to focus on student protests and the government's loss of control. Given that references to Kurds and Kurdistan are often marginalized or denied in discourse, it is unsurprising that developments in Iraqi Kurdistan are rarely cited as factors contributing to the military coup.

On March 11, 1970, General Barzani, president of the KDP, and Saddam Hussein, Deputy Chairman of the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council, formalized an autonomy

agreement for Kurdistan, which encompassed the provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok within the designated autonomous region. Additionally, it addressed *territories that were excluded from Kurdistan*. This development was a significant factor leading to the military intervention in Türkiye on March 12, 1971, to curb the influence of the autonomy process in Iraqi Kurdistan on Kurds in Türkiye.

In subsequent years, the Kurdish movement spearheaded by the KDP continued to shape events among the Kurds in Türkiye. The KDP's influ-



■ Former President Masoud Barzani joining the peshmerga at a young age

Photo: Nasib Ali Khayat

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Throughout the genocidal Anfal campaign, which began in 1982, the KDP faced immense adversity
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Photo: Nasib Ali Kuriyat

Large crowd gathering in Sulaymaniyah in preparation for the independence referendum in 2017

ence was particularly notable during its collaboration with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

Throughout the genocidal Anfal campaign, which began in 1982, the KDP faced immense adversity. In a tragic event that year, 8,000 Barzani men were forcibly taken from Iraqi Kurdistan and buried alive in the deserts of Basra. This dark chap-

ter lasted until late 1988, marked by horrific incidents such as the chemical attack on Halabja on March 16, 1988, which resulted in the suffocation of countless Kurds. Overall, approximately 182,000 Kurdish lives were lost during this genocide. Despite these harrowing circumstances, the KDP adeptly navigated this crisis while striving to safeguard itself and its community.

The harsh reality of escape from Kurdistan

News reports frequently highlight the perilous journeys undertaken by individuals fleeing Kurdistan for European nations. These escapes come at a significant cost, as human traffickers impose exorbitant fees on those seeking a better life. The journey is fraught with challenges, including the risk of

drowning at sea, becoming lost, facing humiliation at border crossings, and suffering from hunger, thirst, and extreme temperatures. Tragically, many lose their lives in these desperate attempts.

Despite these dangers, the exodus persists. Kurds often sacrifice their possessions and even their loved ones to the networks of traffickers. Even for those who manage to reach

their desired European destination, it is a stark reality that they may not find the conditions they hoped for; in fact, living conditions in Kurdistan may be more favorable than what awaits them abroad.

This phenomenon may stem from a lack of developed Kurdish national consciousness among the Kurds. It is striking that despite decades of dedicated struggle since the 1960s,

this sense of identity remains underdeveloped.

In light of this situation, the Kurdistan Regional Government bears a significant responsibility. It must implement educational programs aimed at fostering awareness of Kurdish heritage and identity across all levels of schooling. Bringing these initiatives to fruition is essential. ●

The Day General Barzani Gifted Me a Map of Kurdistan



Celile Celil

Celile Celil is Kurdish academic researcher from Armenia. Born in 1935, he is considered one of the most prolific researchers in Kurdish folklore. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he migrated to Vienna and established The Kurdish Library.

In the summer of 1958, a group of history students at Yerevan University in Armenia prepared to travel to Moscow and Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) at the end of the academic year. This official trip was intended to allow the students to acquaint themselves with these historical cities.

My brother Ordixan had been living in Leningrad for a year, studying in the Kurdish Studies Department of the renowned Institute of Oriental Studies as a research assistant. He was engaged in writing a doctoral thesis on the Kurdish epic poem *Dimdim Castle* (*Xane Cengzerin*).

In 1960s, Professor Qanate Kurdoyev had taken over the leadership of the Kurdish Studies Department, succeeding the academician Joseph Abgarovich Orbeli. Kurdoyev had met with the late leader General Mustafa Barzani during an academic trip to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. During their conversation, Barzani informed Kurdoyev that there were folk singers (*dengbêj*) among his brave five hundred fighters who were singing the epic of *Dimdim Castle*.

“Barzani has moved to Moscow,” Kurdoyev said. “Approach him and get the

addresses of those folk singers residing in Uzbekistan, so that you can communicate with them and hear from them.” He then provided Barzani’s phone number, and Ordixan started preparing to travel to Moscow. When he heard that I was also traveling to Moscow, we agreed to meet in the Soviet capital.

Meanwhile, my mother, who had not seen Ordixan for a year, was eager to accompany me upon learning about my travel plans.

“

Upon arriving in Moscow, Ordixan endeavored to arrange a meeting with Barzani

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Meeting in Moscow

Upon arriving in Moscow, Ordixan endeavored to arrange a meeting with Barzani. Leaving my mother at home, we went out to call the general from a phonebooth. Barzani had been expecting to hear from Ordixan, as Kurdoyev had written to him ahead of time. After exchanging greetings, my brother said, “My esteemed brother and mother have come to Moscow, and they wish to meet you if it’s convenient.”

“Come now,” Barzani replied immediately.

Ordixan noted the address, and we quickly returned home, but our mother was not there. Some colleagues informed us that some students had taken her to the city



■ General Mustafa Barzani

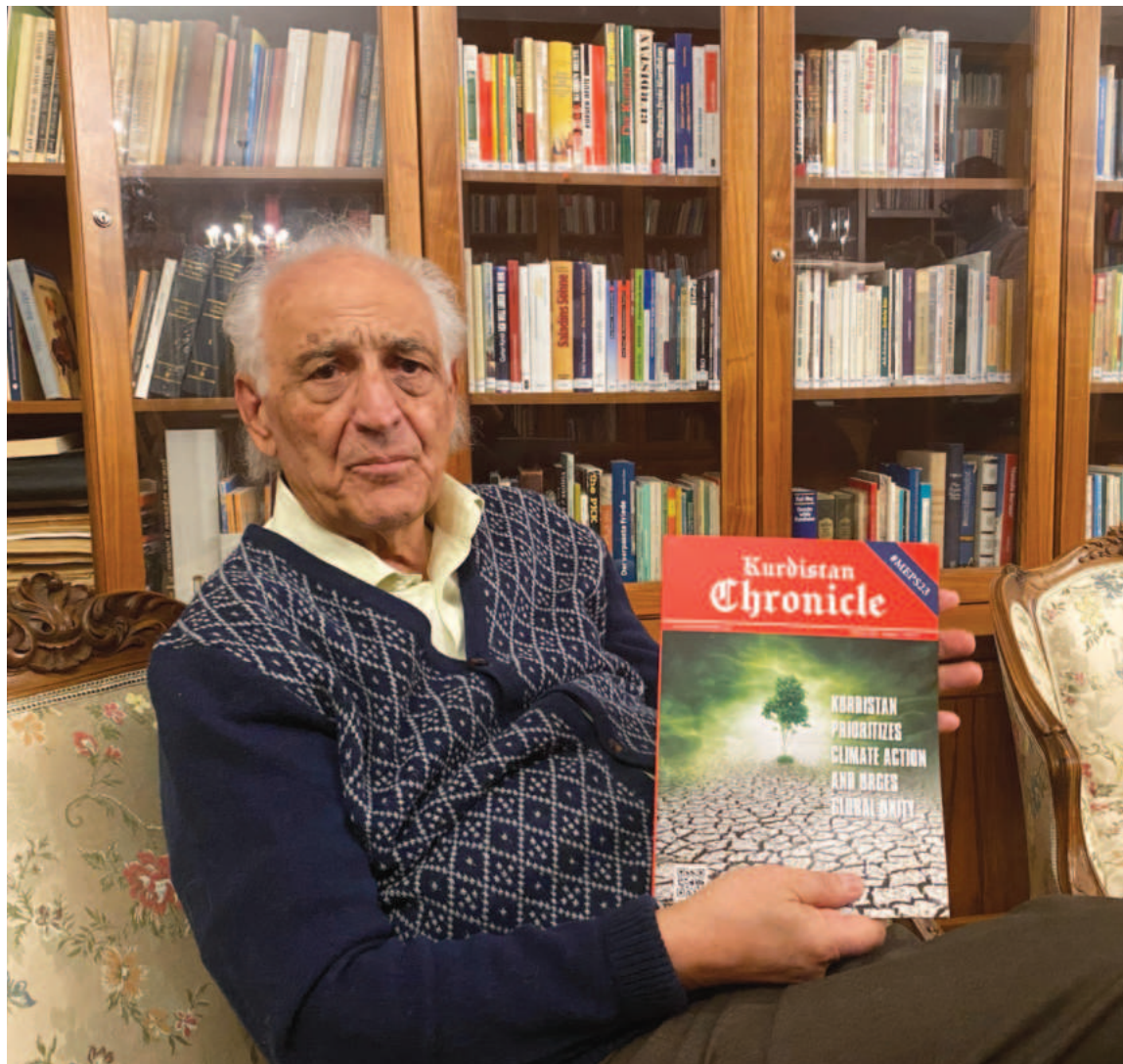


Photo: Jan Dost

■ Celile Celil holding a copy of Kurdistan Chronicle in his personal library in Germany

for a stroll when they saw her alone. Ordixan and I had to leave without her.

We arrived at a multi-story building where important guests stayed and took the elevator to his floor. Exiting, we saw an open door, were greeted in Kurdish, and invited to enter by several Kurdish men.

Barzani appeared. When he saw that our mother was not with us, he asked, “Where is my sister?” My brother Ordixan told him what had happened. He smiled and said gently, “You acted according to the Kurmanji customs

(meaning you did not care much about having your mother accompany you).”

Eventually, we convinced him that our story really was the truth.

A precious memento

The late leader and Ordixan sat on chairs, while I took a seat on a sofa with a map of Kurdistan hanging on the wall behind me. After exchanging pleasantries, their conversation shifted to Ordixan’s thesis, and Barzani provided the names of some of the singers he knew.

While they were engrossed in conversation, I turned around and stared at the map hanging on the wall. Measuring 90 centimeters by 48 cm, it represented Kurdistan. Barzani realized that I was looking at the picture with love and sorrow. “What a beautiful map!” I said.

Seeing my amazement, the general called one of the fighters and said, “Take this map off the wall.”

I understood that his words carried special meaning. “I want to give it to you,” he said.



Photo: Jan Dost

■ Celile Celil recalling the map that he received from Mustafa Barzani decades ago

“ That bright and special day became deeply engraved in my memory ”

I felt embarrassed and regretted my admiration for the map. “I accept your gift, but many guests come to visit you; wouldn’t it be better to leave the map in its place?” I countered.

“Don’t worry; we have many copies,” he said. Seeing I was unconvinced, he turned to the fighter and said, “Go and get the maps.” He indeed returned with a bundle containing several copies.

I had received an unparalleled gift that has since then been incredibly dear to my heart.

“Send my regards to your father,” Barzani said, upon leaving. My father had met him once in Yerevan, when he had come to Armenia to visit the Kurdish community there.

I carried my precious gift away, a map expertly and skillfully drawn, with deep feelings of gratitude. The map delineated the borders of Kurdistan,

as well as the geographical distribution of the Kurdish people in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Anatolia. It was the first time I had seen a map of Kurdistan that had been drawn with such precision, accuracy, and craftsmanship.

That bright and special day became deeply engraved in my memory. Now, in Vienna, the map hangs on the wall of Casimê Celil’s library, where visitors admire it, along with the late General Barzani and Kurdistan. ●

Kosovo and Kurdistan Divergent Paths to Self-Determination



Shad Dana

is a recent Politics & International Relations graduate from Royal Holloway, University of London. As an active member of Chatham House, he has a strong focus on Middle Eastern politics, particularly Kurdish affairs.

A few months ago, at the British think tank Chatham House, I had the opportunity to ask Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti a question centered around the Kurdish quest for self-determination, drawing parallels with Kosovo's journey towards independence and international recognition. I aimed to understand his government's stance on the Kurdish cause given their similar circumstances.

Kurti pointed out that Kosovo's path to independence emerged from Yugoslavia's violent disintegration. Although Kosovo was not among Yugoslavia's six original constituent republics, it nonetheless occupied one of eight seats within the Presidency of Yugoslavia, a collective head of state. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, Kosovo came under Serbian control, experiencing several stages that Kurti identified as "Apartheid," "National Liberation Struggle," and "Genocide." Concluding his remarks, he stated, "As a Social Democrat, I want freedom for people; I want equality for all; however, I don't think you can 'copy-paste' one case onto another."

In 1945, the Autonomous Region of Kosovo and Metohija emerged as a politi-

cal unit within Serbia, one of Yugoslavia's six republics. Kosovo progressively gained more autonomy, with the official name of the province changed in 1968 to the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo and then being granted more significant levels of autonomy in 1974. However, the escalation of tensions in the 1980s, especially after Josip Broz Tito's death, undeniably weakened Kosovo's autonomy. In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic ignited ethnic tensions and violence followed, resulting in the 1998-1999 conflict between Ser-

bian forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army. NATO's subsequent intervention in 1999 led to a UN-administered interim government. Kosovo later declared independence in 2008, which was recognized by over 100 countries except for Serbia, Russia, and China. Despite various challenges, Kosovo aims for European integration and maintains strong ties with the United States, UK, Türkiye, and Albania.

Different contexts

The Kurdish and Kosovan causes are both rooted in the pursuit of self-determination but differ significantly in several ways. Geographically, Kurdistan finds itself spread across four countries (Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Türkiye) and encompass-

es a substantially larger area and population compared to Kosovo, whose territory is claimed by only one other country (Serbia). The Kurdish population, estimated to be between 50 to 60 million, is much larger than Kosovo's 1.9 million people.

Furthermore, unlike Kosovo, which declared its independence from Serbia in 2008 and has since gained partial international recognition, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's 2017 independence referendum did not result in recognized sovereignty, instead leading to conflict and airport closures. The Kurdish struggle for self-determination spans over a century, marked by numerous uprisings and conflicts. In contrast, the Kosovan quest for independence, while quite

“As of 2024, relations between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Republic of Kosovo are nonexistent, primarily due to Baghdad not recognizing Kosovo as a sovereign state”

intense during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, did not share the same historical longevity.

While one cannot “copy-paste one case into another,” Kurti did not provide a direct and appropriate response, failing to mention Kurds or Kurdistan once in his remarks. His response can be summarized as an overview of the history of Kosovo followed by a general statement on the right of self-determination for all peoples.

One potential reason could be Turkish influence. The ties between Türkiye and Kosovo are strong, with both sharing cultural, religious, ethnic, and historical connections. The commander of the Kosovo Force, a NATO-led peacekeeping mission, is Oz-



A mockup of flags of the Kurdistan Region and Kosovo



Credit: Chatham House

■ Albin Kurti, Prime Minister of Kosovo (second from left), participating in a panel discussion hosted by Chatham House on February 13, 2024



■ An old map of Kosovo



■ A map by Mohammed al-Kashgari, referring to Kurdistan as “the land of Kurds”

kan Ulutas from the Turkish Armed Forces, who became Major General in 2023. Economically, Kosovo relies on Turkish imports, with figures reaching 12% as of this year. The Turkish community in Kosovo is represented in the Kosovan Assembly by two minority seats, both occupied by the Turkish Democratic Party of Kosovo, known for its Turkish nationalist leanings.

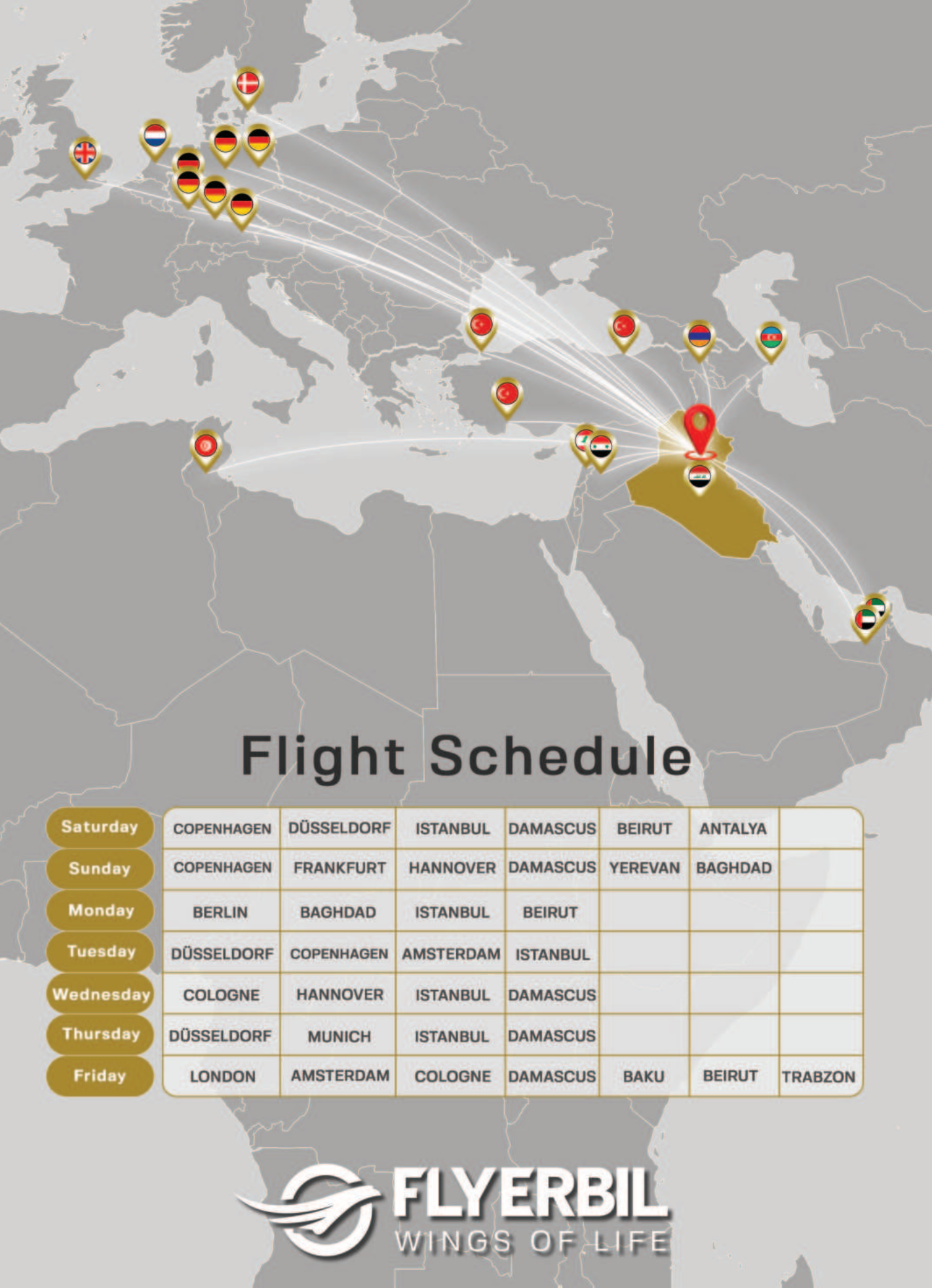
In 2018, Kosovo banned a musical

event titled “Freedom to Kurdistan,” which was scheduled to take place in Pristina, the capital. The prohibition was due to concerns that the event would serve as a platform for spreading “terrorist propaganda” on behalf of the PKK and the People’s Protection Units, both outlawed by Türkiye.

Kurti belongs to the Self-Determination Movement (Vetevendosje), a social-democratic political party in

Kosovo. Prior to the 2017 independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region, Visar Ymeri, who led Vetevendosje before Kurti, expressed support for Kurdish sovereignty, saying that the Kurds are one of the largest nations without a state.

As of 2024, relations between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Republic of Kosovo are nonexistent, primarily due to Baghdad not recognizing Kosovo as a sovereign state. ●



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House of Mercy A Vision of Peace



Basil Al-Khatib

is an Iraqi journalist based in the Kurdistan Region.

Archbishop Yousif Thomas Mirkis holds an unwavering commitment to alleviating human suffering, empowering people to confront challenges, and transforming adversity into opportunities for pioneering projects. The Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah graciously shared his insights during a meeting at the Mar Youssef Church in the Bakhtiari neighborhood of Sulaymaniyah. Joined by Father Ayman Hormuz Aziz, the church's pastor, he reflected on the current state of Christians in the governorate, the challenges faced by the church, and the impactful projects they have undertaken.

House of Mercy

In an act of kindness, a woman brought her grandfather, who was afflicted with Alzheimer's, to Mar Youssef Church. This simple gesture planted the seed for a groundbreaking humanitarian initiative: the House of Mercy. Archbishop Yousif, inspired by the woman's plight and the broader tragedy of thousands suffering from Alzheimer's, spearheaded the creation of a sanctuary for the afflicted. What began as a response to one family's need has grown into a five-story hospital,

dedicated not only to Alzheimer's patients, but also to children with autism.

Archbishop Yousif recounts how the project came to life: "The idea of the House of Mercy was born from this case. In 2014, I contacted Dr. Aso Faridoun Ali Amin, the then-governor of Sulaymaniyah, to request a plot of land for the hospital, which was thankfully granted. French architect Bernard Geyler generously agreed to design the hospital and donated the proceeds from his house sale to fund it. Then, Archbishop Yousif enlisted the help of engineer Qasim Ibrahim Hafez from Kirkuk to prepare the detailed plans, and engineer Dylan Latif Boulos was tasked with the implementation. Furthermore, a specialized nursing staff was brought in from India."

"Since its inception in 2017, the House of Mercy has evolved into a beacon of hope: a medical center specializing in the care of the elderly – particularly Alzheimer's patients – and children with autism. The center offers its services to all in need, regardless of religion or background," Archbishop Yousif adds.

"The hope that a new outlook



■ Archbishop Yousif Thomas Mirkis leading a mass in Sulaymaniyah

on peace, solidarity, and brotherhood will emerge within this mixture of sects and groups that form Iraq – especially since every human being, regardless of their background, feels pain – is the most valuable project,” he explains.

Innovative solutions to societal dilemmas

The House of Mercy stands as a testament to Archbishop Yousif’s innovative approach to addressing societal challenges. Among his many achievements is the transformation of the Christian cemetery in Sulaymaniyah into a green oasis. He fenced off the area, built a small church, and established a home for a Christian family to maintain and protect it.

Similar efforts were undertaken in Kirkuk, where residents were on the verge of abandoning the Christian neighborhood. Archbishop Yousif’s initiatives included building a community hall, leading a large-scale afforestation campaign in collaboration with the city’s top nursery owner and local youth, and constructing a well and water tank for irrigation. In his pursuit of sustainability, Archbishop Yousif also expanded the use of solar energy systems to reduce reliance on traditional power sources, thereby lowering costs, conserving fuel, and protecting the environment.

The Christian community in Sulaymaniyah

Reflecting on the Christian presence in Sulaymaniyah, Archbishop Yousif notes that the community, which has been in the region for 234 years, now consists of no more than 200 families, down from nearly 800 before the dis-

chase wheat, which he then distributed to the poor and needy. This legacy, along with the generous care provided by the people of the province and the relevant authorities, has cemented their esteemed standing in the community.

Karim Alaka, whose full name was Abdul Karim Elias Boulos Ibrahim, was known as a merchant who embodied chivalry, generosity, honesty, and trustworthiness. In 1922, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji appointed him as the Minister of Finance in his government. The local authorities in Sulaymaniyah honored his legacy by naming the street in front of his house Karim Alaka Street and the school on that street Karim Alaka School.

Archbishop Yousif also notes the historical significance of Kirkuk, which was home to the second oldest church after the one in Kokhe, in the Madain area south of Baghdad. This church, established in 113 AD, had a bishopric headed by Bishop Theocritus – a Greek name meaning “the power of God” – and oversaw a vast area extending from Erbil to Sanandaj in Iran. The Archbishop expresses hope that archaeological excavations will continue to uncover Christian antiquities in Kurdistan, particularly believing that the church discovered by a joint French-Iraqi mission in the Bazian area west of Sulaymaniyah in 2011 is the oldest Christian site in the Kurdistan Region.



Archbishop Yousif Thomas Mirkis performing prayers during a mass in Sulaymaniyah

“Coexistence is the only option for building a just society that includes everyone”

Archbishop Yousif Thomas Mirkis





■ Archbishop Yousif Thomas Mirkis joined by Christians for a mass in Sulaymaniyah

Positive treatment and the spirit of solidarity

Archbishop Yousif emphasizes the Church's commitment to caring for displaced Christians, managing their needs, and encouraging them to remain in Iraq. He credits the compassionate nature of the Kurdish people for the care Christians receive in Sulaymaniyah and the Kurdistan Region as a whole. Having faced persecution, injustice, and displacement themselves, the Kurds share a deep sense of empathy with the Christian community, which has fostered a bond of solidarity and cooperation. The Bishop reflects on this mutual support by saying that "every stranger is a relative to other strangers," highlighting the strong connection that has developed between the two communities.

The Archbishop also commends the positive treatment that Christians have received from the Kurdistan Region authorities. He acknowledges that this treatment has brought a sense of peace and security to the

Christian community. "When Christians came to Kurdistan," he notes, "they were treated as if they were Kurds, which allowed their communities to flourish, especially in Ankawa, Erbil, where they now have their own churches, schools, and universities."

"It is no exaggeration to say that the situation of Christians in the Kurdistan Region is better than in the rest of the Middle East," he adds.

Confusing identity and belonging

Addressing the broader situation in Iraq, Archbishop Yousif draws a parallel between the current conditions and those of European countries between the World Wars, particularly highlighting the confusion between identity and belonging. He argues that while identity is often anchored in a past filled with myths and superstitions, belonging should be forward-looking, with a focus on the future.

The Archbishop calls for a reassessment of old myths and narratives, urging people to abandon those that are divisive or obsolete and to focus instead on building a better future. "Violence is a disease," he asserts, "and it is sick societies that resort to violence."

To address problems and meet challenges, he advocates for a just constitution and an impartial judiciary, free from ideological influence. He laments that some still cling to outdated ideologies and sectarianism, stressing that competence should be the guiding principle in governance. "Put the right man in the right place," he says, "to tackle the numerous challenges facing the country, such as desertification."

The Archbishop reflects on countries that, just a century ago, were suffering from backwardness and hunger but have since become models of progress and development, with their citizens now enjoying a high standard of living. He emphasizes the importance



■ Christians joining a Sunday mass in Sulaymaniyah

of positive thinking and the need to promote individuals with experience and competence. To paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt, "instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle," he advises, encouraging proactive efforts to foster growth and improvement.

A plea to the majority

Archbishop Yousif firmly rejects the notion of Christians being a "minority" in Iraq, asserting that they are one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, with roots in the region dating back to ancient times, as evidenced by archaeological discoveries. He underscores the importance of protecting coexistence and diversity, emphasizing that the future can be better than the past if these values are upheld. The Bishop also envisions the Kurdistan Region serving as a model of coexistence for other regions.

The Bishop makes a passionate appeal to those who exploit the concept of the majority to dominate and

impose their will. He also warns that Iraq will not progress unless corruption is eradicated, competence is prioritized, and fanaticism is rejected.

Archbishop Yousif's message is one of hope, urging positive thinking and focusing on the future and new generations as essential steps for overcoming the challenges ahead, including environmental ones. He calls on everyone to recognize that the era of fanaticism and rigid ideologies has ended and that the future lies in belonging rather than clinging to outdated beliefs.

Advocating for the separation of religion and state, he believes that harmony among Iraq's diverse communities is possible. "Coexistence is the only option for building a just society that includes everyone," he concludes.

About Youssef Toma

Born on June 21, 1949, in Mosul, Yousif Thomas Mirkis is an Iraqi

Chaldean Catholic priest who has served as the Archbishop of the Chaldean Church of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah since January 24, 2014. He is also a journalist and human rights activist. Archbishop Yousif studied at the Seminary of Saint John in Mosul from 1962 to 1971, later joining the Dominican Order and completing his studies in Paris. There, he earned a DEA in anthropology from the University of Nanterre and a doctorate in dogmatic theology from the University of Strasbourg.

Ordained as a priest in Mosul on March 26, 1980, Archbishop Yousif contributed to the founding of the Pontifical College of Babylon, where he also taught. From 1995 to 2014, he served as editor-in-chief of the magazine Christian Thought and has published numerous works and over 700 articles. He also oversaw the publication of the first Catholic edition of the New Testament and the Psalms in the Sorani dialect of Kurdish. Archbishop Yousif is fluent in Arabic, Chaldean, French, and English. ●

A U.S. Professor's Family Adventure in Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle

Dr. David Romano, the Thomas G. Strong Chair in Middle East Politics at Missouri State University in the United States, spent five months – from January to May 2024 – of his sabbatical with his wife Lucy and two children Ben and Hanna in the Kurdistan Region.

“Kurdistan and Kurdish issues have been part of my life for a long time, and I wanted the kids especially to understand a bit more about the place and the people that I spend so much time with,” David explained.

David is a well-known expert on the Kurds who has written several books and articles on the region and its people. Twenty years ago, he and his wife Lucy also spent a year in Kurdistan.

“Lucy had seen Kurdistan, but the kids had never been here.” David said. “It’s also good to get kids in dif-

ferent environments where they have the opportunity to grow and learn.”

Lucy was eager for the visit, but some people warned her not to go. “Right before we came, some people were telling me it was unwise go,” she said. “But when we got here, I felt very safe and was glad that we didn’t chick-

en out. The husband of one of my friends works at the U.S. military air-base as a contractor, and he thought we were crazy. ‘It’s the Wild West,’ he said, and I almost had a panic attack before leaving. However, once we got here, we realized that life is normal and that he’s missing out by sitting in his bunker all day.”

■ The Romano family visiting the remnants of Dvin Castle on the outskirts of Erbil, Kurdistan Region



■ David Romano and his family visiting Dukan Lake in the Kurdistan Region

The freedom of the open road

David typically visits Kurdistan for interviews or conferences. However, this time he rented a car for his five-month stay while serving as a visiting professor at the University of Kurdistan Hewler (UKH). “Anytime we had free time or it was a holiday for the school we could go visit friends and other cities,” he noted.

David and his family took several hiking trips in Akre, Halabja, Barzan, and other areas in Kurdistan, and even went skiing in Mount Korek.

“We were practically the only ones skiing there – there was only one other person. They have two ski lifts, but the second lift, which leads to a steeper run, wasn’t operating. When I asked why, they said that it was because of too much snow accumulation. I thought, isn’t that the point? So, we had to climb to reach the higher run, but it was fun. It was a very beautiful day,” David recalled.

Lucy thinks Kurdistan could do more to promote its nature and heritage and attract foreign tourists. “In some ways I don’t want to advertise it because it’s quite nice going to the archaeological sites like Shanidar Cave and it is not bustling with tourists. But at the same time, you want everyone to know how amazing it is here.”

David also wants to bring students from the United States to Kurdistan, although the administration of his university has thus far rejected the idea. “Before, I used to bring students to Türkiye, including southeastern Türkiye, as well as to Bosnia and other places. If I could get permission for it, it would be a way to make people realize what it’s really like here.”

“The government can work to promote the region for tourists from the rest of Iraq and neighboring countries. That’s something the government could do, but I’m not sure about a government initiative to en-

“
David and his family took several hiking trips in Akre, Halabja, Barzan, and other areas in Kurdistan, and even went skiing in Mount Korek
”

courage Europeans or people from further away to come. That’s something that must occur on a personal level, either by word of mouth, visiting, or making friends with Kurdish people,” David said.

“The best thing the government can do is make sure the standard of things like food and infrastructure is up to par and continue working on security, and the rest of will work itself out.”

David said the real beauty of Kurdistan is in the countryside. “Erbil is a nice city, in terms of restaurants, stories, and services, but the real beauty is outside of Erbil.”

Moreover, he mentioned that conference organizers in the Kurdistan Region could schedule nature outings for conferences in Kurdistan that have foreign visitors and experts. “This could really help represent Kurdistan in its true beauty,” he suggested.

“I was talking about this with another professor, Fabrice Balanche. We went hiking together with the whole family in Barzan,” he said. Balanche had come for a conference on climate at the UKH but then stayed longer to go hiking. “But just about all of his other colleagues who went to the conference only stayed at the conference and then went right home, so they never left Erbil,” he noted.

“The distances are not great in Kurd-

istan and there are so many beautiful walks, hikes, and waterfalls. They really should try to take the opportunity to show people who are visiting for work or conferences to take a half day and go somewhere outside the cities to explore. This could also help the rural economy if it became a widespread practice,” David said.

New connections in the classroom

For education during their five-month stay, David’s children went to a local English school where they also learned Kurdish, Turkish, and Arabic. “The language classes were kind of hard,” admitted his 12-year-old daughter Hanna, who said that she doesn’t speak Kurdish yet.

“They were required to take those language classes, but the teachers understood that they’re only here for five months. So, they didn’t work too hard to get them caught up with the rest of the class,” David said.

Furthermore, Lucy said that her children made friends with not only Kurdish students, but also Turkish and Syrian kids at the school.

David said that his children will now understand the complexities of the region when they go back home. “They’re going to understand some of the complexity just from having been here. They can relate to it personally because they’ve made friends with people from the different groups in Kurdistan,” he reflected.

David added that in the future the kids would love to come back and see the friends they made at school. “I know I will come back at least once a year, but for the rest of the family, it’s hard to say when we’ll have an opportunity like this. I only get sabbatical from my university every seven years.”

However, Lucy seemed more certain. “I’m sure we’ll all come back at some point,” she said. ●

A Potential Crisis for Iraq



Jawan Abdullah
is a Lawyer and member
of Iraqi Parliament,
and Deputy Chairman
of the Human Rights
Committee.

Earlier this month, the Council of Representatives of Iraq reignited debate on amendments to the Personal Status Law of 1959. The first reading of the proposed amendments sparked widespread protests and opposition from legal experts, democracy advocates, and human rights defenders, particularly those championing children's rights.

Introduced by a group of Shi'a members of parliament, the proposed bill has been met with fierce resistance from Kurds, Sunnis, and even some Shi'a women parliamentarians. Critics argue that the amendments contradict existing personal status laws and severely undermine the rights of women and children.

The bill's justification hinges on Article 2, paragraph 1, of the Iraqi constitution, which declares Islam the official religion of Iraq and a primary source of legislation; as well as Article 41, which guarantees religious freedom and the right to personal status according to one's religion, sect, or belief. Proponents claim the bill will empower Iraqis to adhere to their religious customs in personal matters. However, their primary goal is to enshrine the tenets of the Shi'a Ja'fari school of jurisprudence as the legal framework for Shi'a Iraqis, a move that critics contend is incompatible with the norms of the 21st century and requires substantial reform.

A step backward: Religious intolerance and erosion of civil rights

The proposed amendments seek to deepen sectarian divisions in Iraq by granting exclusive authority to men to determine religious affiliation for themselves and their families. Under the bill, the Shi'a Ja'fari school, with its centuries-old traditions, would serve as the basis of jurisprudence for all Shi'a Iraqis. Moreover, it would curtail the judiciary's power, transferring authority over marriage to religious leaders and reducing courts to mere rubber stamps for religious decisions.

Women and children as primary victims

The proposed law poses a grave threat to women and children. It would strip women of the right to choose their religion and subject them to early marriage. While the current law sets the minimum age for marriage at 18, the Ja'fari sect permits marriage for girls as young as nine and boys as young as 15. Scientific evidence, health guidelines, and international human rights standards unequivocally condemn child marriage as harmful and exploitative.

Women would also suffer significant losses in terms of child custody, divorce rights, and property inheritance. The bill would

“ The bill's provisions on child marriage and women's rights could lead to increased rates of domestic violence, child abuse, and human trafficking ”



■ Iraqi women protest changes to the Personal Status Law in Tahrir Square, central Baghdad, on August 8, 2024

Credit: AEP



Photo: Haidar Baya

■ Iraqi parliament members during a voting session in the House of Representatives in Baghdad

reinforce patriarchal power dynamics, prioritizing male interests in all family matters. This directly contradicts humanitarian principles that emphasize the best interests of the child and protect vulnerable individuals.

The rise of religious authority and the decline of justice

By empowering religious institutions to oversee marriage and other personal matters, the bill undermines the role of the judiciary in protecting citizens' rights. In a society where women are often victims of abuse, courts provide a crucial avenue for seeking justice. The proposed changes would leave women and other vulnerable groups at the

mercy of religious authorities, increasing the risk of exploitation and impunity.

Moreover, granting clerics authority to resolve religious and sectarian disputes creates fertile ground for corruption, favoritism, and abuse of power. This shift away from secular legal systems would hinder Iraq's progress and deepen societal divisions.

A recipe for instability and conflict

Iraq is already a deeply divided country plagued by conflict and mistrust. The proposed bill would exacerbate these problems by reinforcing sectarian identities and undermining social cohesion. It would erode the fragile trust be-

tween different communities and create new opportunities for violence and extremism.

Furthermore, the bill's provisions on child marriage and women's rights could lead to increased rates of domestic violence, child abuse, and human trafficking. These factors, combined with the weakening of the rule of law, would create a dangerous environment for all Iraqis.

Dangerous consequences

After presenting the above points, we believe that the passage of this bill will lead to several dangerous consequences, including the following:

1. Women and children would be the most immediate victims, facing a surge in domestic violence, sexual assault, and crime.
2. The bill would reignite sectarian tensions, deepening societal divisions and mistrust.
3. By weakening the judiciary and empowering religious institutions, it would erode the rule of law and leave individual rights vulnerable.
4. The very fabric of Iraqi families could be threatened, with increased risk of divorce and family breakdown. ●

Inside Sulaymaniyah's *Amna Suraka* Museum



Qassim Khidbir

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

■ *A falling statue of Saddam Hussein in the yard of Amna Suraka museum symbolizes the end of the Iraqi dictator.*

Photo: Safin Hamid

In the heart of Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan Region stands the remarkable Amna Suraka museum, also known as the Red Prison. This museum is a somber testament to how Saddam Hussein's secret police persecuted the Kurdish people, serving as a memorial to ensure that the atrocities of Saddam's regime are never forgotten.

When Saddam came to power in Iraq in July 1979, one of his first initiatives was to establish a general security directorate in every Iraqi province. The buildings were designed in East Germany, with Sulaymaniyah being the first Iraqi province to construct one. The project began in secret, with the regime misleading the public by claiming that it was a directorate for agriculture. Construction was completed in 1985, with the prison cells being the final addition. Once the building was finished, the public realized it was a security facility and promptly named it Amna Suraka, or the Red Prison,



■ A reproduction of a torture scene inside cells and torture rooms used by Saddam Hussein's regime between 1986 and 1991, mostly against the Kurds.



■ One of the cells with the blankets.

due to
the buildings'
reddish color.

Amna Suraka became a place
where the regime's rivals and critics –
especially students, Kurdish patriots, and other
dissidents – were imprisoned, tortured, and raped.

According to Amna Suraka's Director Ako Gharib, "not
only the Kurds, but also Arabs and Christians, were tortured at
Amna Suraka."

Inside the prison cells, hundreds of texts were etched into the walls by prisoners,
including names and dates, slogans against the Iraqi regime, and patriotic poems. These
writings served to inform future prisoners that others had endured the same suffering before them.



■ A display of weapons, such as artillery, used in the genocide against the Kurds by Saddam Hussein's fallen regime. During the spring uprising of 1991, this area was excavated because people suspected there was a prison beneath it, but no such finding was made.



■ A reproduction of a torture scene inside cells and torture rooms used by Saddam Hussein's regime between 1986 and 1991, mostly against the Kurds.



■ The museum dedicates a section to the peshmerga victims in the fight against ISIS. This section features portraits of peshmerga and other Kurdish fighters in Syria, along with their remains, including uniforms that still bear blood and other visible scars of war.

A prison repurposed

In March 1991, the people of Kurdistan, backed by Kurdish fighters known as *peshmerga*, rose up against Saddam's regime. Local civilians joined the *peshmerga*, launching a mass assault on all government buildings and detention centers, freeing hundreds of political prisoners. The final and most fortified point of resistance by the Iraqi security forces was Amna Suraka. After over two hours of fierce fighting, the *peshmerga* and civilians took control of the building. By March 8, the entire city was under *peshmerga* control.

Following the liberation of Kurdistan from Saddam's regime, and with the support of veteran Kurdish female

peshmerga Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, Amna Suraka was transformed into a museum. Ahmed, the First Lady of Iraq from 2005 to 2014 and the widow of President Jalal Talabani, played a crucial role in this transformation. The museum opened in 2003 and operates six days a week, free of charge. According to museum data, 59,000 people visited Amna Suraka last year, including school and university students from Kurdistan, 3,000 foreign tourists, and various diplomatic delegations.

Gharib told Kurdistan Chronicle about plans to expand the museum. He has collected around 1,200 handmade Kurdish carpets and rugs from the Kurdistan Region, as well as from Kurdish regions in Syria, Türkiye, and

Iran, and plans to open a Kurdish carpet museum within Amna Suraka. "My aim is to make it the largest carpet museum in the world," said Gharib.

Additionally, work is underway to establish a Museum of Genocides inside Amna Suraka, featuring exhibits on many other genocides around the world, with a special section dedicated to genocides against the Kurdish people, including the Yazidis.

Gharib also disclosed that the office of the general security directorate will be turned into an exhibition of the signatures of Saddam Hussein, his aides, and the generals who used their authority to oppress the Iraqi people and devastate the country. ●

A Pioneer of Kurdish Legacy

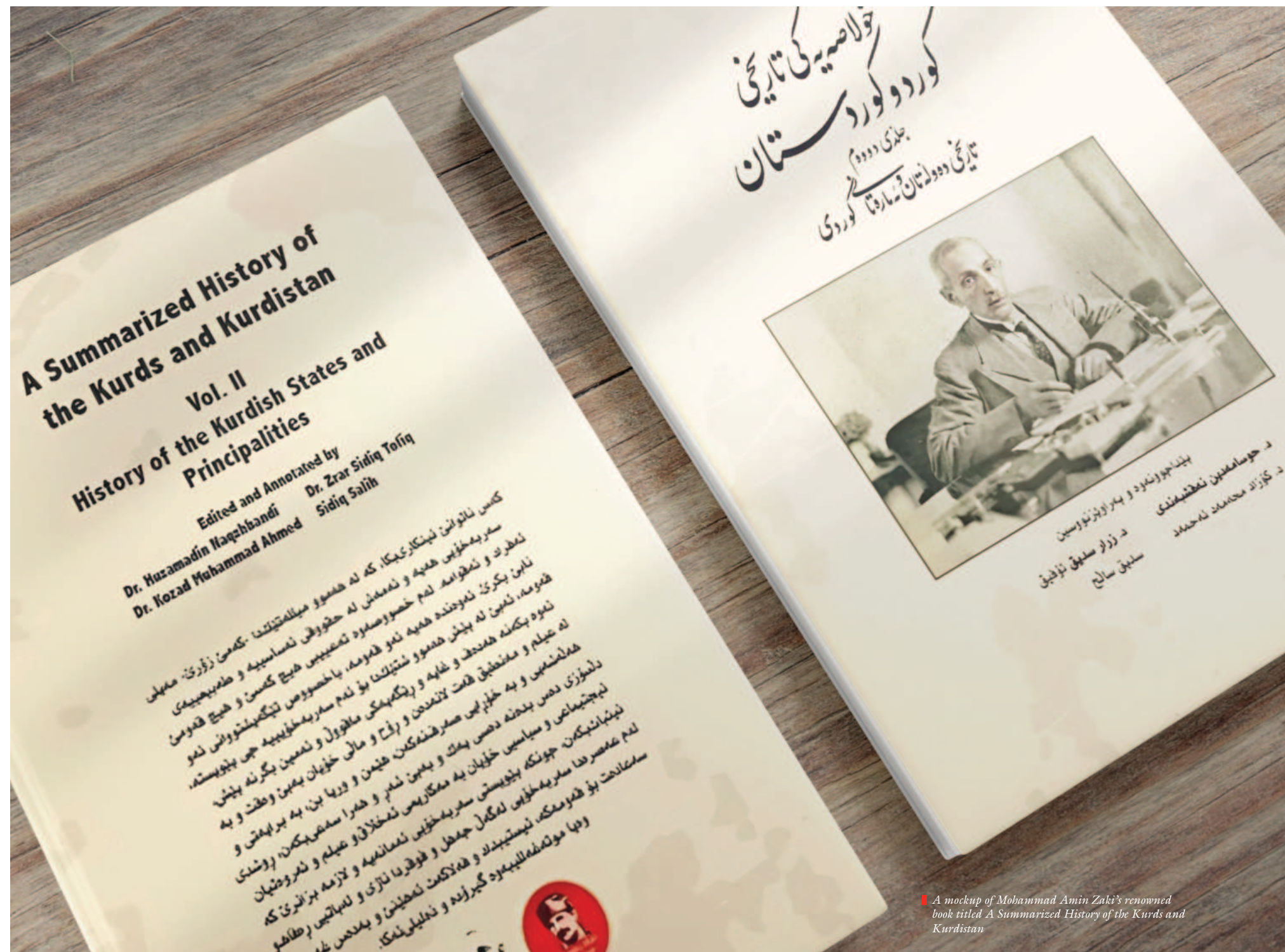


Rafiq Salih

is Director General
of Zheen Center
Publication.

The Kurdish people, an ethnic nation with roots deeply embedded in ancient history, have a storied past that spans thousands of years. From ancient kingdoms to modern struggles for autonomy, the Kurds have faced numerous challenges, including invasions, forced migrations, and political oppression. Despite these hardships, the Kurdish people have maintained their unique language, traditions, and way of life, largely due to the tireless efforts of courageous figures who have dedicated their lives to preserving Kurdish identity.

Muhammad Amin Zaki is one such figure, a towering intellectual and historian whose achievements left an indelible mark on Kurdish culture and history. Born in 1879 in Sulaymaniyah, at a time when Kurdish identity was under threat from various external forces, Zaki devoted his life to documenting the history of the Kurds, their struggles, and their achievements. His work serves as a crucial link between the past and the present, providing future generations with the knowledge and pride needed to continue their people's legacy.



A mockup of Mohammad Amin Zaki's renowned book titled *A Summarized History of the Kurds and Kurdistan*

Patience, gentleness and talent

Zaki’s mother died when he was still a child, after which he contracted a fever that led to chronic rheumatism. The condition would plague him for the rest of his life but did not get in way of his achievements. Zaki attended a *madrasa* (religious school), where he learned to read and write in Persian and studied the Holy Quran. Later, in 1892 he enrolled in the royal official school – the only formal school in Sulaymaniyah at the time – and a year later he advanced to the second grade at the Rushdiyya military school.

His talent for drawing emerged in the third grade, earning him recognition as a skilled painter. From a young age, he also had a deep passion for history and literature, writing numerous poems. However, under the influence of his close friend Haji Tawfiq Pir Mird, whom he met in Istanbul, Zaki shifted his focus from poetry to history.

Zaki was known for his calm demeanor, strong character, generosity, dedication, and loyalty. He was patient, gentle, and talented. He wrote poetry, memorizing and collecting the works of great classical Kurdish poets like Nali. He was also a skilled artist, with two of his beautiful paintings still existing today, possibly making him the first Kurdish visual artist.

Military and political career

In 1898 he graduated from the Military Preparatory School and continued his studies at the Military School in Istanbul. He joined the 6th Ottoman Corps as a captain in 1903 and served as an engineer in the Royal Property Administration. In 1907 he became a topographical officer on the Turkish-Russian Border Planning Commission. During the Balkan Wars in 1912, Zaki served as Second Chief of Staff on the Catalca Front. He later participated in World War I, where he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and served in Iraq.

In 1917, he returned to Istanbul and took on several key military roles. After the war, Zaki became involved in Kurdish political movements, and upon returning to Iraq in 1924, he transitioned into a political career, serving in various ministerial roles during the British mandate, including as Minister of War and Minister of Public Works. He continued to be a prominent political figure until his death in 1948.

Zaki’s career led him through a series of significant military roles and accomplishments, each contributing to his broad understanding of political and strategic affairs. His experiences



■ Mohammad Amin Zaki

across various postings, from the Ottoman Empire to Southern Kurdistan (the Kurdistan Region of Iraq), allowed him to witness and participate in crucial historical events and decisions.

Through his promotions within the military ranks and his eventual return to Sulaymaniyah, Zaki earned prominent political positions, gaining a deeper insight into the workings of governance and international relations. These experiences, combined with his deep-rooted passion for

Kurdish history and culture, uniquely positioned Zaki to become a historian whose work continues to resonate across generations. His comprehensive knowledge and dedication to his people have cemented his legacy as a pivotal figure in Kurdish history, ensuring that the rich tapestry of Kurdish heritage is preserved and celebrated.

Culture, history, and identity

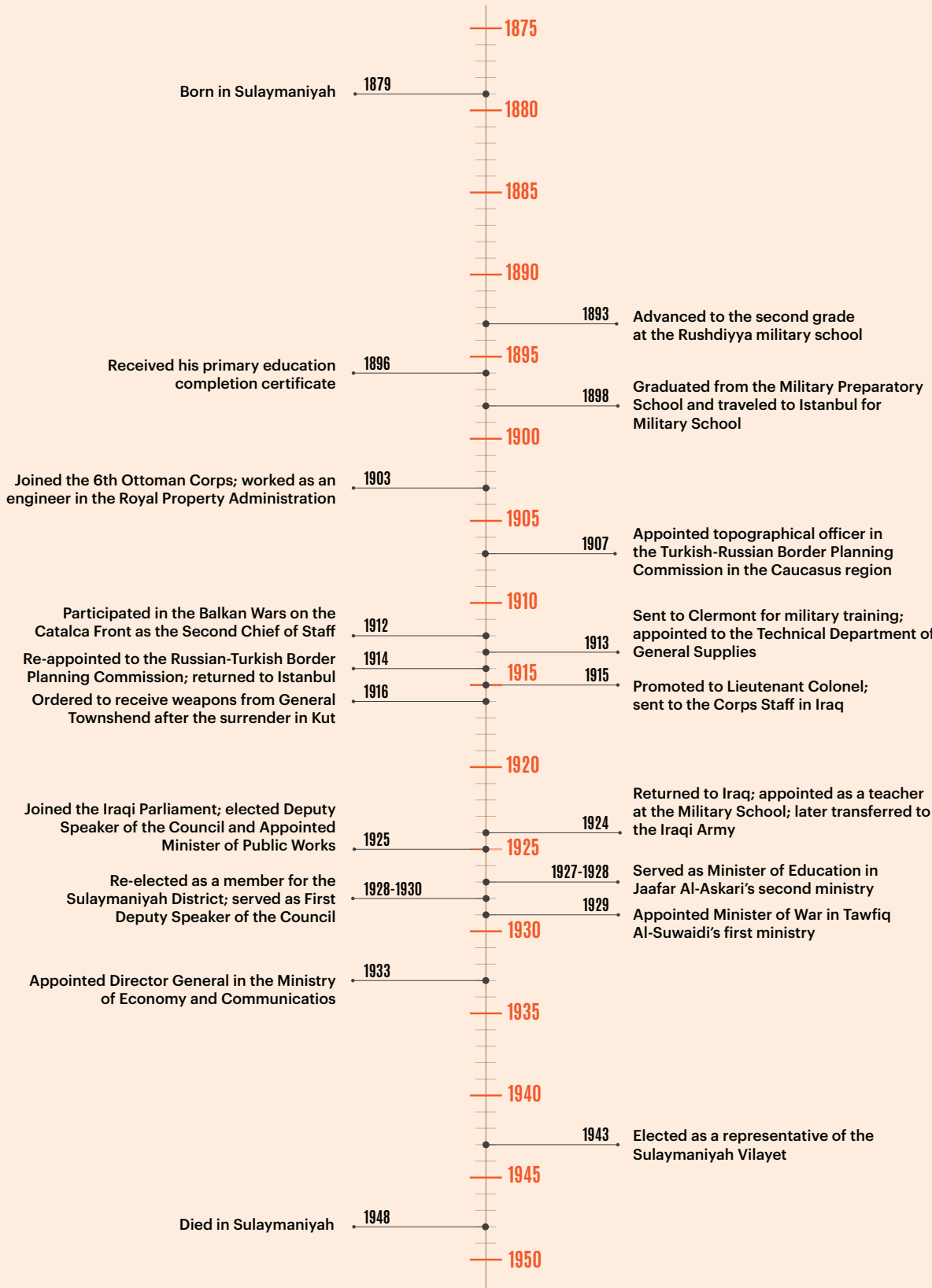
Proud of his Iraqi identity, Zaki was also a staunch defender of Kurdish rights and an advocate of cultural nationalism. He believed in education, economic development, and fostering brotherly relations between Kurds, Arabs, and other minorities as the best path for Kurds to achieve their legitimate rights. He eschewed revolutions and wars with the central government, favoring peaceful progress.

Zaki was a polyglot, fluent in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, English, French, German, and Russian. He is considered the first Kurdish historian after Sharafkhan Bidlisi, who wrote the history of the Kurdish states and emirates in Persian under the title Sharafnama. Zaki’s works on the history of the Kurds and Kurdistan garnered significant attention and even angered the Iranian regime at the time. His contributions to Kurdish historiography remain highly regarded.

The survival of the Kurdish nation through the storms of history is not merely a tale of endurance; it owes much to the sacrifices made by the heroes who stood as the vanguards of Kurdish culture. Zaki, with his dedication to the Kurdish cause, represents the spirit of resistance and intellectualism that has kept the Kurdish identity alive against all odds. His legacy is a symbol of hope and inspiration for all those who strive to preserve their heritage in the face of adversity.

Among Zaki’s many achievements are his written works in Kurdish, Turkish, and Arabic.

LIFE TIMELINE





■ Mohammad Amin Zaki surrounded by his children in Istanbul, 1922



■ Mohammad Amin Zaki and his family, year unknown

Works in Turkish:

1. *Osmanli Ardisi*, Baghdad, 1331 AH
2. *Osmanli Esfar-i Hakanda Tetkikat*, Istanbul, 1336 AH
3. *Irak Nasil Gayb Etti*, Istanbul, 1337 AH
4. *Irak Seferi Hatiralari*, Istanbul, 1337 AH
5. *Osmanli Umumi Harbi, Cephaler ve Vekayi*, Istanbul, 1337 AH
6. *Selman Pak Meydan Muharebesi ve Dig-gerleri*, Istanbul, 1337 AH
7. *Bagdat ve Sok Hadisesi*, Istanbul, 1339 AH
8. *Irak Harbinin Kisa Tarihi*, Istanbul, 1339 AH
9. *Kut'ul Amare Taarruz ve Kusatma-si* (two manuscript volumes in the British Military Archives)
10. *Hayat-i Hatiralar* (three manuscript notebooks, one of which was translated into Arabic)

Works in Kurdish:

1. *Accountability of the Deputy*, Baghdad, 1928
2. *Summary of the History of the Kurds and Kurdistan from the Earliest Times to the Present, Part One, 1931; Part Two, 1937*
3. *Two Futile Attempts*, Baghdad, 1935 (censored by the government for its warn-ings about the consequences of the govern-ment's policy towards the Kurds)
4. *Celebrities of the Kurds and Kurdistan*, two parts; the first part was translated into Arabic by his daughter Sanha and printed in Baghdad, while the second part was trans-lated by the late Muhammad Ali Awni and printed in Cairo in 1947
5. *History of Sulaymaniyah and Its Envi-rons*, Baghdad, 1937, translated into Arabic by Muhammad Jamil Bandi al-Rujbani and printed in Baghdad in 1951, with a second edition in Sulaymaniyah in 2002

Works in Arabic:

1. *A Report on the Iraqi Army*, Baghdad, Government Press, 1929
2. Mir Basra mentions other works by Amin Zaki, including his report on irrigation and tobacco cultivation. Through his efforts, the Tobacco Restriction Department and the Kurdish section of Baghdad Radio were established (with the late Tawfiq Wahbi Bey). ●

Halabja A Chronicle of Endurance and Heritage



Nukhsa Nasib

is a Kurdish politician currently serving as Mayor of Halabja.

Halabja, one of the oldest and most picturesque cities in the Kurdistan Region, boasts a rich history spanning approximately 500 years. The city's origins trace back to settlers from remote villages in the Hawraman region and Eastern Kurdistan (north-western Iran) more broadly. For centuries, the people of Halabja have engaged in agriculture, horticulture, and livestock breeding, with trade playing a lesser yet significant role, particularly along the region's major north-south routes. These routes connected dozens of cities and regions, establishing Halabja as a vital hub for travelers.

Historical significance and growth

Geographically nestled between the Hawraman region and the historical Shahrizor region, Halabja's development began during the Ottoman Empire, particularly following the Battle of Chalderan in 1514. The Ottoman army was temporarily stationed in the city, marking the beginning of Halabja's evolution as a vibrant center of agriculture and horticulture. The influx of people from distant villages and cities further fueled its growth, transforming Halabja into a fertile and prosperous settlement.

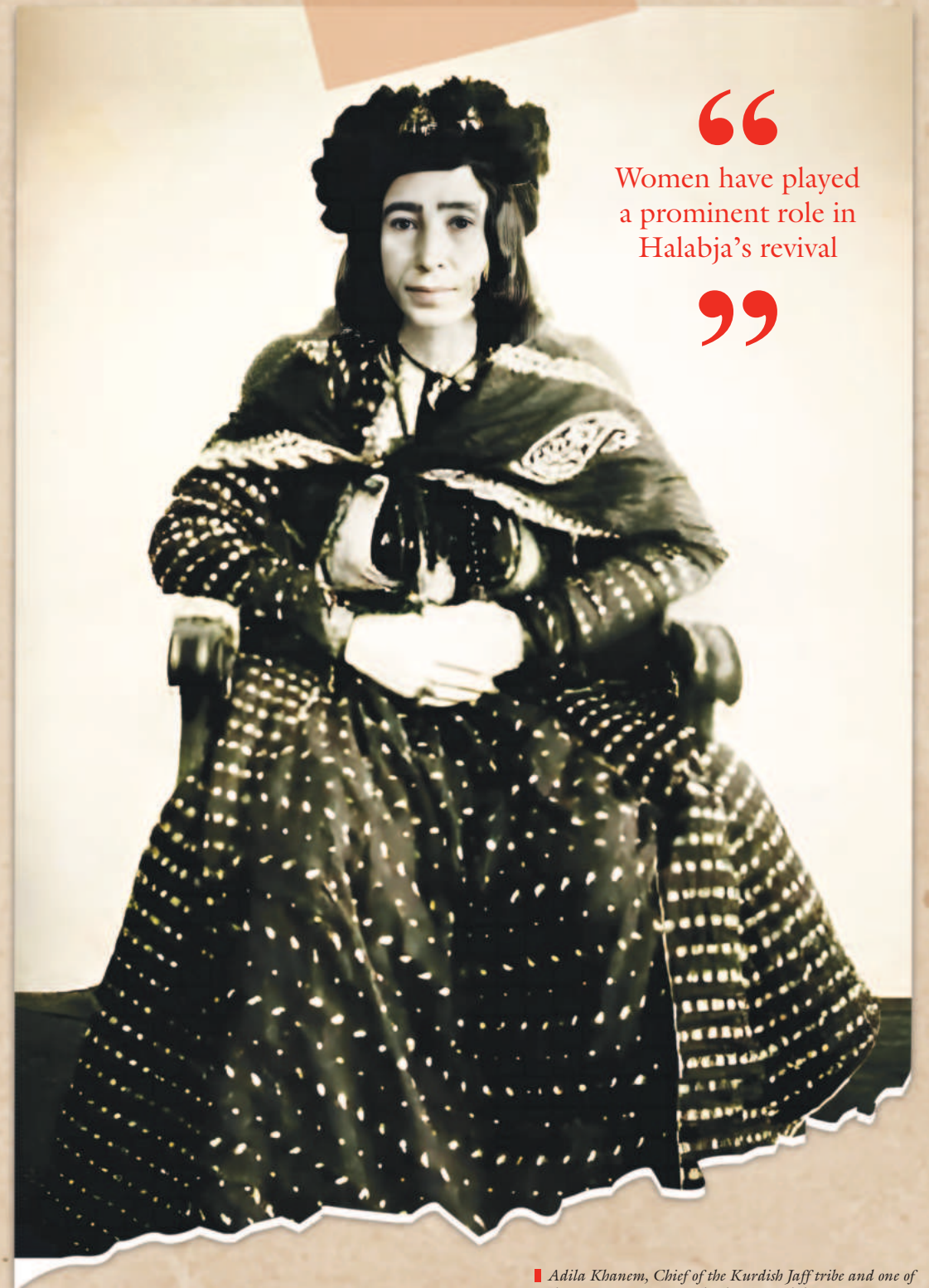
Over time, Halabja became a melting pot of cultures and social classes. Nomads from Hawraman, aristocrats from Jawanro Castle, and influential families from the Ottoman Empire settled in the city, quick-

ly establishing control over its land, water resources, and borders. The city's fertile soil, favorable climate, and abundant water sources made it an ideal location for settlement and agricultural production.

Cultural and intellectual hub

Halabja's strategic location and thriving trade routes attracted numerous scholars, poets, and intellectuals. Throughout history, the city produced notable Kurdish figures such as Sayyid in Tawella (Kurdish poet, 1189-1271), Nali in Shahrizor (Kurdish poet, 1800-1856), Mawlawi Tawagozi (Kurdish poet, 1806-1882), Ahmad Mukhtar Jaff (Kurdish poet and politician, 1898-1935), and many others. Families of scholars, including those of Sheikh Osmani Sirajaddin (Kurdish Sufi and scholar, 1781-1867), Sheikh Baba Rasul, and Abdulaziz Pris, became the bedrock of education for future generations in Halabja.

The city also fostered a rich cultural heritage, with various families contributing to the intellectual and educational landscape. Noble tribes from surrounding regions settled in Halabja, adding to its diverse cultural tapestry. Halabja thus became a model of coexistence, where different religions, ethnicities, and nationalities lived harmoniously. Despite its predominantly Muslim population, the city welcomed Kaka'is (followers of Yarsanism) and Jews, all of whom regarded Halabja as their home.



“
Women have played
a prominent role in
Halabja's revival
”

■ Adila Khanem, Chief of the Kurdish Jaff tribe and one of the first famous woman leaders in Halabja, 1919

Photo: Zhen Center Archive



■ Adila Khanem (left) and Lynette Lindfield Soane, wife of British Major Ely Bannister Soane, in Halabja, 1919

Photo: Zheen Center Archive

Legacy of resistance and resilience

Throughout its history, Halabja has been a stronghold of resistance against oppression. It played a pivotal role in Kurdish revolutions, serving

as a beacon of intellectual and political consciousness. The city was the birthplace of various political ideologies and movements, and its people were at the forefront of the struggle for freedom and land protection. The city's *peshmerga* fighters and political leaders have become symbols of

Kurdish resistance and pride.

Halabja's defiance against subjugation is exemplified by its resistance to various occupations and oppressive regimes, including the Iraqi state. The city endured numerous attacks, deportations, and genocides, most nota-

bly during the 1974 bombing and the subsequent displacement of its people to Iran. Despite these hardships, the city's spirit remained unbroken.

The tragedy of 1988 and international recognition

Halabja's most tragic chapter unfolded on March 16, 1988, when the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein, launched a chemical attack that claimed the lives of over 5,000 peo-

“Today, Halabja is a symbol of Kurdish identity and resilience, known worldwide for its tragic past and vibrant present”



■ Adila Khanem, Ahmed Mukhtar Bag Jaff, and some family members, 1919

ple, including women, children, and the elderly. More than 10,000 others were injured or displaced, fleeing to Iran to escape the devastation. This horrific event cemented Halabja's place in history as a symbol of Kurdish suffering and resilience.

In the wake of the 1991 Kurdish uprising against the Iraqi government, Halabja played a crucial role in the fall of the Ba'ath regime. The city supported the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), contributing representatives to both the government and parliament. With



the liberation of Kurdistan and Iraq by allied forces and the establishment of no-fly zones, Halabja began to rebuild and reclaim its former glory

hub with a governor's office, a central administration, and numerous civil, cultural, and political institutions.

Women have played a prominent role in Halabja's revival, holding key government positions and contributing to the city's administration. The

appointment of a woman politician and lawyer Nuxsha Nasih as mayor in 2016 is a testament to the city's progressive stance on gender equality. Halabja has become a beacon of coexistence, intellectualism, and cultural richness, with its people embracing new ideas, the love of life, and the freedom of expression.

Halabja's future

In recognition of its historical significance and contributions, the KRG and the Iraqi government declared Halabja a province in 2014. The city, which had been a district since the early 1920s, now stands as a province with its own villages, towns, and districts.

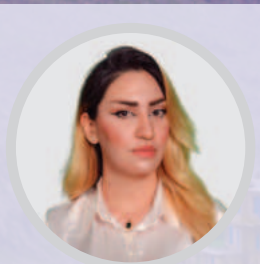
Today, Halabja is a symbol of Kurdish identity and resilience, known worldwide for its tragic past and vibrant present. It is a city where art, literature, thought, and politics flourish, and where the spirit of freedom and progress continues to thrive. The eyes of the world remain fixed on Halabja, as it embodies the hope and determination of the Kurdish people. ●

Renewal and progress

In the years following the liberation, Halabja has experienced significant growth and development. The city has emerged as a center for agriculture, horticulture, livestock, culture, and tourism. It is a thriving, strategic

Photos: Zheen Center Archive

909 Years of *Komsay* Celebration



Fatmah Qasim

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



Photo: Nasib Ali Khayyat

■ A view of Hawraman Takht village. Windows painted in green hue signify that the residence belongs to a sayyid or sufī, whereas a blue hue indicates the house of a sheikh

A rock is a natural body, a hardened non-metallic mass made up of one or more minerals and found in many places. Throughout history, people have used stones for various uses, with some holding greater significance than others. However, there is one stone that reveals its hidden legend every May, known as the “Komsay stone.” Each year in the mountainous region of Hawraman in Rojhilat or Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran), the Komsay ceremony is held after the session of the parliament of Pir Shalyar in mid-spring. This cultural event is considered the second part of the Pir Shalyar festival, encompassing both cultural and religious aspects. It attracts between 20,000 and 25,000 attendees annually.

Pir Shalyar was famous historical figure of the Hawraman region who established the parliament of Pir Shalyar during his time, earning enduring respect from residents. The people of Hawraman celebrate several special occasions and ceremonies in his honor, including the Komsay ceremony, which dates back 909 years. It was established simultaneously with the Pir Shalyar ceremony and complements the annual session of the parliament of Hawraman held in February at the house of Pir Shalyar. The annual Komsay ceremony is organized by members of the parliamentary council of Pir Shalyar.

Komsay consists of two original Hawrami words. The first part, “ko,” means gathering all the lines of Hawraman (Lhon, Zhawaro, and Takht) in one place, and “masai” means learning. Together, they mean “collecting and learning” or “collecting and remembering.”

What happens at the Komsay ceremony?

Hawraman boasts thousands of gardens, as gardening is a longstanding tradition in the region. People use some of the produce for their own food and sell a large portion to support their families. Gardens need water to grow, and although there are several springs and water sources in Hawraman, ponds have been built in front of each spring to collect water. These ponds fill with water at night and are used to water the gardens during the day. However, the water is often insufficient for the many of the garden owners. To distribute this water fairly, the Komsay ceremony is considered a sacred occasion, a 909-year-old tradition that ensures equal water distribution among garden owners.

The ceremony is held annually by the members of the parliamentary council of Pir Shalyar, with important decisions made in several stages.

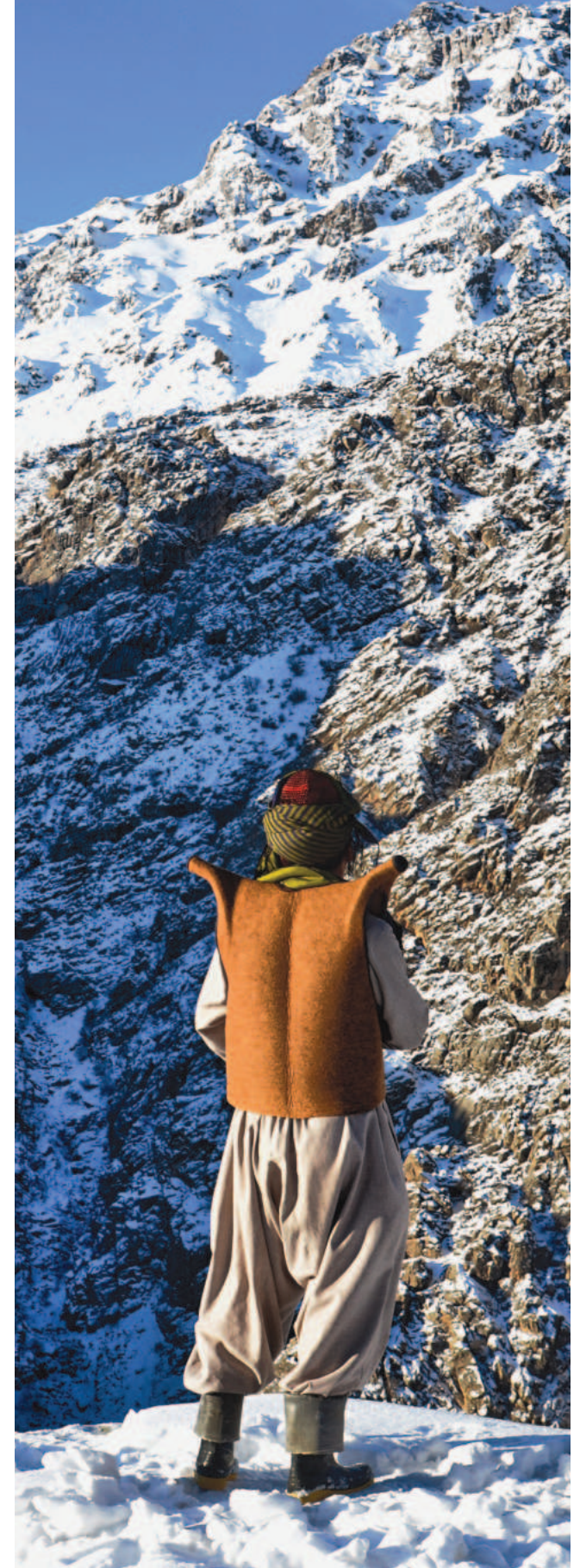
First stage

The Komsay ceremony is held every year on May 5 near the shrine and grave of Pir Shalyar, which is called *Sar Qabran* (cemetery). Early in the morning, garden owners from all five villages of Hawraman (Kamala, Ruawrre, Chami Waisia, Sari Pir, and Hawraman Takht) gather in the presence of parliamentary members, local and foreign guests, poets, writers, journalists, historians, and media outlets.

Before the ceremony, guests gather in Hawraman to participate in the Komsay ceremony and document the event. The imam of the Hawraman mosque near the shrine of Pir Shalyar delivers a speech



“
Young men and women
vote by selecting fruits
representing their candidates
”



Photos: Nasib Ali Kanyat

on peace and coexistence. Council members, well-versed in the number and sizes of gardens around Hawraman, make crucial decisions for the coming agricultural year. Following the discussion, council members distribute water to the garden owners, determining the time and amount of water for the year, which is different year to year. Once garden owners approve of the distribution plan, the breaking of the Komsay stone begins.

Second stage

Breaking the sacred Komsay stone is a significant part of the ceremony. The stone, measuring 90 cm x 60 cm x 20 cm, is white and is located opposite the shrine of Pir Shalyar in Hawraman.

The stone has three notable specialties:

1. If one or more garden owners disagree on the water distribution method, the stone will not be broken, until everyone agrees.
2. The stone, once broken and fragmented, returns to its original size every year.
3. The stone can only be broken on its designated day.

The Komsay stone has been in the same place for centuries; five years ago, a wall was built around it to prevent its disappearance, preserve its cleanliness, and enhance Hawraman's appearance. The stone's enclosure, built with Hawraman stone and cement, measures one meter in height and has a small green iron door, signifying the area's sacred nature. Visitors tie small pieces of green and white cloth to the door when making a wish.

One person from among the residents of the five villages is assigned the task of breaking the stone each year by the imam of the Hawraman mosque. When the stone is broken, only the designated person enters the area, while everyone else watches from outside. The person easily breaks the stone using a hammer, provided all garden owners agree on their water shares. If there is a lack of agreement, the stone will not be broken. The council members address any disagreements, set a new water distribution schedule, and once approved, the stone-breaking resumes. The broken pieces of the stone are distributed to the audience as mementos.

Third stage

On the day of the Komsay ceremony, the same parliamentary session of Pir Shalyar is reenacted in an open circle, informatively and theatrically, to familiarize everyone with the process of council member elections. This performance, called "Zhirla u



■ Dried fruits in a handmade basket serve as voting ballot during Komsay festival



■ A view of the Komsay stone location

Mare," lasts until 1:00 pm. During the ceremony, council members place various dried fruits on stage, a tradition dating back to the Pir Shalyar parliament 909 years ago. Each type of dried fruit represents a candidate. Two weeks before the election, candidates' campaign, and on election day, the chosen dried fruits are placed in a basket in Pir Shalyar's house. Young men and women vote by selecting fruits representing their candidates. The speaker, vice speaker, and council members are elected based on the fruit count.

The use of dried fruits has several purposes, including to highlight environmental friendliness and fruit consumption; to showcase Hawraman's produce and promote fruit exports; to allow guests to taste the fruits, promoting exports through word-of-mouth; and to provide a sacred keepsake for guests.

Fourth stage

At lunchtime, participants hold a picnic in the area. Notably, the majority of people eat *yaprakh* or *dolma*, stuffed leaves and vegetables from Kurdish cultural cuisine. This tradition is deeply ingrained in Hawraman culture.

Some women monitor the ceremony as spectators, while others display and sell their handicrafts, such as necklaces, shawls, carpets, hats, and baskets, to tourists. This practice, originating from Pir Shalyar's time, aims to make Hawraman a tourist and commercial hub, particularly during ceremonies, when the number of tourists is high.

Fifth stage

After lunch, the ceremony concludes with a celebration, where singers, def (a large frame drum) players, and poets perform in both the Sorani and Hawrami Kurdish dialects. The audience, dressed in traditional Kurdish outfits, participate in dancing and celebrating. This celebration aims to introduce Kurdish culture to foreign audiences and provide a platform for emerging artists.

To learn more about the ceremony and celebration, one can consult a yet-to-be released documentary film by Nasih Ali Xayat, a Kurdish photographer who has attended the *Komsay* ceremony annually for over 10 years. Drawn to it on his first visit, he has captured thousands of color photos and videos that were used to create the short documentary film titled Komsay. Xayat's film is part of his larger work, which aims to document Kurdish history and promote Kurdish culture through social media and other platforms. ●

Photos: Nasib Ali Khayat

Photos: Pesbrav Mahdi

Kurdish Broadcasting from Cairo A Pioneering Voice in Exile Media



Mey Dost

is currently pursuing a master's degree in Digital Media Communication at RWTH University in Germany.

All countries have unique media landscapes, but Kurdish media differs from media in other parts of the world for the noteworthy reason that it began in exile. The first Kurdish newspaper, titled Kurdistan, was published in Cairo in 1898, founded by the exiled Kurdish prince, Miqdad Madhat BadrKhan. Kurdistan was the voice of the Kurdish freedom fighters opposing Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II and was followed by others newspapers in various regions of the Ottoman Empire as well as British-occupied Iraq and French-occupied Syria after World War I.

The first Kurdish radio station was also

established outside Kurdistan's borders, with Kurdish-language broadcasts beginning from Yerevan, the capital of Soviet Armenia, in early 1955. The broadcasts were experimental until the station launched regular broadcast programs two years later in 1957, as reported in an Arabic-language article by Kurdish researcher Rohat Alak in the magazine Kurdistan. The duration of Kurdish broadcasts on the radio station in Yerevan was rather short, and it is said that when the late General Mustafa Barzani visited the station before his return from the Soviet Union in 1958, he suggested that the broadcast duration be increased to a full hour from 30 minutes. Nevertheless, despite the broadcasts'

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Broadcasts began with a recitation from the Quran and were followed by the Kurdish national anthem

”

■ The Maspero Television Building, the headquarters of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union



“
The complete archive of the Kurdish section,
including tapes and writings, is still preserved
in the archives of Cairo Radio today
”

■ Broadcasters working at the Cairo Radio Station

brevity, their impact on the Kurdish community worldwide was enormous.

Non-aligned countries and peoples

In the same year, also far from Kurdish territory, another significant Kurd-

ish radio station emerged: the Kurdish section of Cairo Radio, which was inaugurated on June 1 by order of the former President of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser. Journalist Ali Shamdini states that Kurdish politician Abdul Rahman Zabihi, who left Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran) fol-

lowing the collapse of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946, was the one who convinced Kamal Rifaat, a member of the Free Officers movement and a colleague of Nasser, of the necessity of a Kurdish section. Zabihi was in Cairo at the time to attend the 1957 African Asian Peoples' Solidar-

ity Conference, an important event during the Cold War that marked the emergence of unity among the non-aligned countries.

Kurdish politician and former Iraqi president Fuad Masum stated in a televised interview that Nasser ordered the establishment of the Kurdish section as part of Egypt's policy to send messages to the world in various languages. This radio station was not affiliated with Voice of the Arabs, the most notable Egyptian transnational radio station in Arabic.

It is also worth mentioning that Masum was one of the first Kurdish broadcasters and worked in the Kurdish section during his time in Cairo as a student at Al-Azhar University, alongside other broadcasters from various parts of Kurdistan. These included Abdul Wahab Al-Malla, a Kurdish writer from the town of Amuda in Syria known for his book Love and Literature, and Asim Al-Husseini, also from Syria. The work of the Syrian-Kurdish broadcasters in the radio station ended after the dissolution of the United Arab Republic, which lasted from 1958 to 1961. Other notable broadcasters included Taher Baban, Abdullah Maruf from the city of Mariwan, Adnan Haqqi and Othman Nuqrani from Erbil, and Muhammad Ramadan Abdullah from Kirkuk.

Journalist Abdullah Muhammad Khalid Rustam claimed that the Kurdish Radio in Cairo had an inshad (chanting) group that visited the radio headquarters periodically to perform and broadcast some Kurdish national anthems. This group included Fatih Hamawandy, Abdul Hamid Duhoki, and Safwat Baban from Sulaymaniyah, Mustafa Sharif from Mawat, and Adel Saleh Mukhtar from Erbil. Rustam also mentioned that programs were broadcast daily from 4:00-5:00 pm to Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Armenia, and parts of the Soviet Union.

Rustam added that the programs were diverse and included excerpts from

Kurdish literature, songs, poetry, and history, as well political news, listener messages, and more. Broadcasts began with a recitation from the Quran and were followed by the Kurdish national anthem, “Ey Reqib.” Letters poured into the radio from Kurds throughout the region and, due to the large number received daily, the radio's management had to create a daily program called Listener Messages to respond to them and properly engage with their listeners.

Regional challenges

It seems that the inauguration of the station caused problems for the Egyptian government. It is said that Tür-

that the issue reflected the conflict between Nasser's Egypt and the Baghdad Pact, including the Iraqi government of Nuri al-Said, which opposed the United Arab Republic.

Interestingly, Sheikh Omar Wajdi Al-Mardini, who oversaw the Kurdish Riwaq (رواق الأكراد) at Al-Azhar University, was appointed director of the Kurdish section at the radio station.

It is true that the opening of the Kurdish section in the Egyptian radio served Nasser's Egypt, which conflicted with the reactionary forces in the region. However, it is certain that what the Kurdish section presented



■ Qazi Mohammed and the ministerial cabinet of the Kurdistan Republic, 1946. Abdul Rahman Zabihi appears in the second row on the right.

kiye protested the Kurdish section, prompting leader Nasser to summon the Turkish ambassador in Cairo, asking him, “Are there Kurds in Türkiye?” The Turkish ambassador replied, “No.” Nasser rejoined, “Then why is Türkiye protesting a radio station broadcasting in a language of people who do not exist in your country?”

Of course, this story seems more humorous anecdote than historical fact, but it sheds light on the political atmosphere at that time. Some believe

during its 10 years of operation served Kurdish culture and art immensely, and – just as importantly – contributed to strengthening Kurdish-Arab relations in general.

In 1963, Cairo Radio moved from Al-Shurafa Street to the Maspero area on the Nile Corniche, next to the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The complete archive of the Kurdish section, including tapes and writings, is still preserved in the archives of Cairo Radio today. ●

HUSSEIN SMKO

Hussein Smko



Haima Askari

is a consulting professional in Washington D.C. who also serves as the director of the American Kurdish Information Network (AKIN). He is active in interfaith work and has experience working in the German Parliament.

“It was a tough time. I was harassed daily,” Hussein Smko said, recalling his childhood as he pensively strummed on his guitar in his Brooklyn apartment. “The streets of Tairawa [a neighborhood in Erbil] were dangerous, especially for someone like me who wanted to express himself freely.”

Growing up in the post-war haze of Erbil, Smko faced constant threats from street gangs and school bullies while exploring his identity. Supported by his sisters and mother, his childhood in a newly self-governing Kurdistan Region provided rich experiences that fueled his artistic journey. These trials ultimately led him to the cover of *The New York Times* as a prominent dancer on stages in the United States. Amid car bombings and kidnappings, the city ultimately ignited his creative spark.

Kurdistan Chronicle sat down with Smko to reminisce about his roots and what brought him to dance and how his career has evolved.

Kurdistan Chronicle (KC): Can you share a bit more about the moment when you first saw dance as an outlet for your internal struggles? How did it influence

your decision to pursue dance professionally?

Hussein Smko (HS): It was during the 2003 Iraq War; I wasn’t even a teenager at the time yet. One day, I was playing outside with my friends. We spotted a group of American soldiers huddled around their Humvee. My curiosity got the better of me, and I approached them. When I reached them, my curiosity immediately turned into worry – it was a time of war after all, and they were still carrying their rifles. However, one of them pointed at me, and said, ‘watch this.’ I had never seen anything like it before – I thought he broke his arms and legs, as he did the famous hip-hop arm wave. I was mesmerized and kept watching as the soldier started breakdancing. I went home that evening and tried to recreate his movements. It took me two years until I mastered it. That’s when I started my dance crew named Gurgakani Sar Shaqam, the Street Wolves. My new hip-hop crew quickly became popular in the media and started inspiring other young dancers.

KC: As someone who grew up in a region where artistic expression was limited, how did you navigate these challenges to





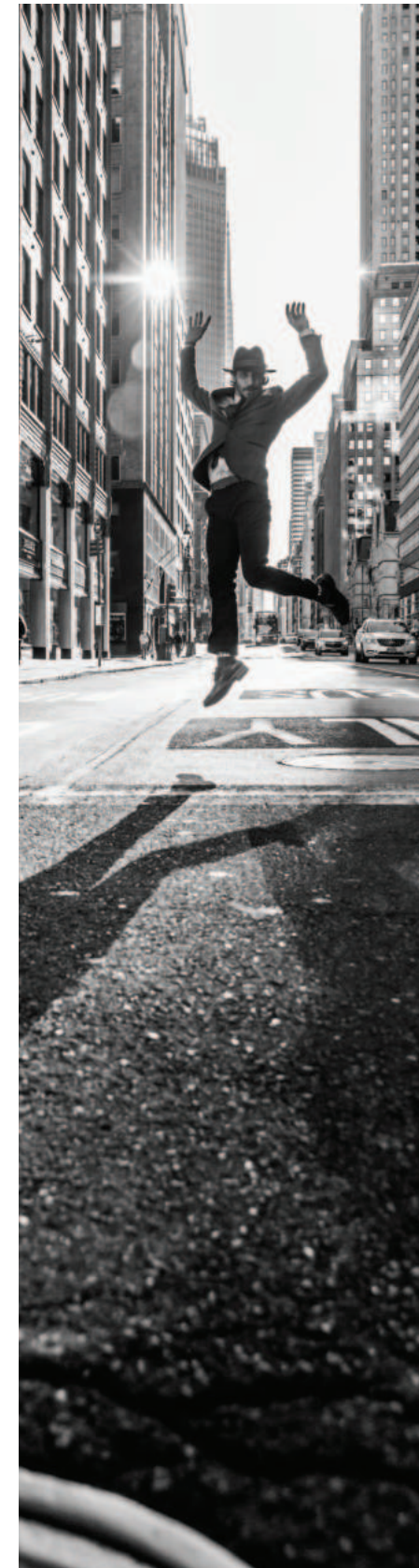
pursue your passion for dance in New York?

HS: I was called a Westerner, a homosexual, and other terrible things for dancing to hip-hop and rap, but I sensed that there was an entire generation of people in Kurdistan who hungered for more knowledge of the arts. My hip-hop crew provided this. I enjoyed teaching others about performance art.

My journey to the United States started by happenstance. ISIS had just started its campaign against the Kurds, and I noticed an incredible sense of unity among us in defending our country. I had planned on joining the fight. One day, a truck came to pick me up to take me to the front lines to prepare to fight off the ISIS attack on Erbil. Before I jumped in, they gave me a handgun, stating that that's all they had since there was a shortage of weapons. I realized I had two choices: go to war with just a handgun, facing certain death, or find another way to fight. That's how my professional career started. Art as an act of resistance to the repression embodied by ISIS. That's what took me to New York City.

KC: *Could you elaborate on a specific instance where you felt your art has helped to combat prejudice and promote cultural understanding?*

HS: I was 14 when the Street Wolves got our big break – our performance was broadcast on *Zagros TV*, and a group of young girls my age must have been watching. They reached out to me, and we organized a dance meet-up in Sami Abdul Rahman Park – we were so excited and filled with newfound passion that we trained there every day! One of the girls, Sophia Miran, later went on to open the Fig Club



in Erbil, a performing arts studio providing a space for a new generation of diverse people to come together and express themselves on stage. They are doing such beautiful work to support up-and-coming dancers find a purpose. I still collaborate with them from time to time; it gives me hope to see them grow!

KC: *In the last couple of years, you have begun transitioning from hip-hop to contemporary dance. What prompted this shift? You recently wrote a play with Kurdistan as a central theme – can you tell me more?*

HS: The more well known my story got, the more I had to expand my style. When sharing my life and my background with others, I had to incorporate the story of Kurdistan as well, which culminated in a play, which was named after my inspiring sister Sarah. All the men in my family had gone to war, and my sister quickly became my closest connection, representing so much of what I saw as crucial. Because of this, I realized my movement had to be accompanied by a script to fully portray the Kurdish struggle, a struggle shared by so many. This project would not have been possible without the invaluable support of Mozaffar Shafeie, an exceptionally talented Kurdish theater director, actor, mentor, and cherished friend. Collaboratively, we wove together dance traditions from diverse cultures to narrate the struggles of the oppressed. For me, this endeavor stands as the culmination of my 30-year journey, including the past eight years spent in New York.

KC: *The character Sarah experiences personal and societal challenges in your script that resonate deeply with Kurdish realities. As a Kurdish artist, what responsibility do you feel in representing these issues on stage?*



HUSSEIN SMKO

HS: I tend not to respect anyone's sensibilities when I am attempting to relay the story of a genocide. What we Kurds have been through shouldn't be censored or watered down – the pain of our people should be felt in all its force. This is the message I portray in my art, a message condemning those oppressive groups that aim to exert control over others. I see my fellow Kurds as partners carrying this message with me. To show the world that our place among the mountains is safe and provides a home to those in need. Go to any part of Kurdistan and see for yourself how helpful and welcoming our people are.

KC: *What advice would you give to young dancers, especially those from conflict-ridden areas or challenging backgrounds like yours, who dream of entering the world of dance?*

HS: This question makes me emotional because I have so many things to say, things I needed to hear when I was younger. My key piece of advice is to seek the nearest place of support, whether that be family or friends but really anyone who understands your potential and wants to see you succeed. Kurdistan is full of potential; people want growth, you only have to find it.

With two cups of coffee and a plastic bag brimming with mulberries between us, Smko continued telling me stories of his past and his time in New York. The person sitting at the table next to us in the café overheard our long conversation and asked, "Kurdistan? I've never heard of that country before." Smko smiled knowingly at me and turned to the man, saying, "Sit with us, let me tell you a little about it."

When introducing my Kurdish identity to non-Kurds, many respond with a statement along the lines of, "I know your people, you all are such great fighters!" While I am not surprised by the reputation that our regional history has given us, I sometimes wonder about the implications of this perception. Of course, we should be proud of our resilience, but are fighting and realpolitik our only tools for global recognition?

Other nations also fight, but they are far better known for their food, music, and scenic landscapes. We, too, have no shortage of these cultural riches. Hussein Smko and other artists like him give me hope that our people will one day be acknowledged for talents beyond fighting – for the beauty of our landscapes, the flavor of our food, and the quality of our artists. ●

Towards a New Life



Peshraw Mahdi

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

Born in 1979, Sarko Rahim Hama Gharib dreamed of playing football when he was a young boy. Growing up in Halabja in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, he balanced his passion for the sport with the responsibilities of helping his father in their family's dry goods store. Life was simple, filled with hope and promise. But fate had a different path in store.

A car accident shattered Sarko's world in 1994, claiming both his legs. In a singular moment, his vibrant life was reduced to a battle for survival. Yet, against all odds, he emerged from the darkness, his spirit unbroken.

Determined to rebuild his life, Sarko embarked on a journey to Jordan in 1999, where he immersed himself in learning Arabic and English. His resilience and determination caught the attention of American friends who helped him to establish a language, music, and computer learning center for Kurdish refugee children in his home in Amman in 2002. This marked the beginning of a remarkable transformation.

"Losing my legs cost me only physical abilities. With heart and hope, I found a world of possibilities," Sarko said.

Returning to his homeland in 2008 after spending time in the United States, Sarko founded a non-governmental organization (NGO) named Baraw Zhiyaneke New, which can be translated as "Towards a New Life." With its headquarters in Halabja, the NGO seeks to empower children with disabilities. What started as a small initiative with 20 children has since blossomed into a sanctuary for over 4,000 children, offering essential services like specialized wheelchairs, therapy, and medical care.

Sarko's infectious optimism and steady compassion have made him a beacon of hope for countless individuals. He has transformed from a victim of circumstance into a champion for the disabled, providing a lifeline to those who had lost hope. His organization offers not just physical aid, but also emotional support, helping to reintegrate people with disabilities into the heart of society.

Towards a New Life has become synon-

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Sarko's life is a powerful
example of human
strength and resilience
”



Photos: Peshraw Mahdi



Photos: Peshraw Mahdi



ymous with resilience and second chances. Through their tireless efforts, the NGO's team have distributed over 26,000 electric wheelchairs to people with disabilities across Iraq and Kurdistan. But the impact extends far beyond numbers – it's about restoring dignity, fostering independence, and creating a world where everyone feels valued.

Sarko's life is a powerful example of human strength and resilience. He proves that even when faced with life's toughest challenges, hope can be a guiding light. His legacy is built on compassion, bravery, and a deep belief in the power of helping others. ●



Discover the Kurdistan in America Podcast
The official podcast of the KRG Representation in the US
Your gateway to the rich ties between Kurdistan and the United States

A Special Guest Every Month!

Discussing Environmental Challenges in Kurdistan



Delovan Barwari

Host

Delovan Barwari is the Director of Academic Affairs and Strategic Initiatives at the KRG Representation in the United States.

Delovan, Rick, and Jihan talk about the critical climate and environmental challenges facing the Kurdistan Region and how the Earth Partnership program can help address them through education. They share details about their project, which is being introduced into the KRG's K-20 education system with two pilot projects, one at the K-12 level and another at the university level.



Rick Hall

Guest

Rick Hall is the Co-Founder and Educational Director of Prairie Rose Agricultural Institute



Jihan Brifki

Guest

Jihan Brifki is the Executive Director of Hanasa Plus



Scan to listen to episode

Podcast also available at pod.link/KurdistaninAmerica

Where Do I Belong in *My Small Land*?



Tala Rostami

is a researcher and has an MA in sociology.

I am a long-time admirer of Japanese cinema and so I was surprised to learn that a substantial Kurdish community lives in Saitama Prefecture, north of Tokyo, and that it has been the main subject of at least two films: a drama and a documentary.

So, when I was looking for a Japanese film to entertain myself over the weekend, I was staggered to discover *My Small Land*, a 2022 film about Kurdish refugees in Japan. Directed by Emma Kawawada, *My Small Land* depicts the life of a Kurdish family seeking asylum. The film focuses on the eldest daughter Sarya, who is optimistically making plans for her future in Tokyo to become a teacher. However, her family's asylum application is rejected, turning their lives upside down. As her family's situation evolves, they must face the harsh reality of life in Japan, struggling not only to make ends meet, but also to preserve their cultural identity. After reading the summary of the film, I was so dubious that I searched for more information that would confirm that it was about Kurds. Admittedly, I never imagined that Kurds would seek asylum in Japan, given the distance and Japan's immigration system. However, the film changed my mind and provided me with more insights about migrants and asylum seekers in Japan, one of my favorite countries.

Language and culture

My Small Land was profoundly moving

and worth watching, as it allowed me to reflect on some of my innermost fears – and perhaps desires – about being a Kurd on screen. Yet I also have some of the portrayals of Kurdish culture did not fully satisfy me.

For instance, there are scenes that did not seem genuine, at least in my experience as a Kurd. First, I was puzzled as to why they were speaking Turkish. While the father was trying to teach Kurdish to the youngest child, the eldest child could not speak Kurdish and both used Turkish for their daily communication with each other. It seems that the director wanted to accentuate that Kurds in Türkiye are not allowed to learn Kurdish in schools and families are forced to speak Turkish instead.

I am a Kurd from Iran. There, we are taught Farsi in schools, but many Kurds, Turks, Arabs and other linguistics minorities are at least bilingual. So, as a member of a generation that spoke Kurdish at home and learned Farsi in schools, I believe it is the parents' choice to teach their children either their native language or the official one.

Proponents might argue that the academic performance of these children could suffer, but I prefer that new generations learn Kurdish at home and accept it as their first language. Language is far more important than, for instance, the allegedly Kurdish practice of praying before a meal, which the father in the film insisted on

“

I am from Kurdistan,
but I am sure you do
not know where it is

”





■ The official poster of the film *My Small Land*

performing, even slapping his daughter for questioning it.

The father's obsession with praying before each meal seemed more like an imitation of the Japanese practice of *Itadakimasu* – a Japanese phrase meant to show respect and gratitude before eating – rather than a part of Kurdish culture. Some people may still thank God for the meal, but not in the way it was shown in the film, and it is not a common practice. It is likely that this was overemphasized to show similarities between Japanese and Kurdish culture and consequently to arouse sympathy and a sense of closeness between cultures.

Despite this criticism, I must admit that, as a Kurd, I have concluded that the portrayal of Kurdish culture by non-Kurdish artists is sometimes fragmented and, therefore, superficial. They often highlight Kurdish dance, music, or the perpetual fight for freedom and hardship. The issue is not the display itself, but how it is presented, which often does not feel genuine to me as a Kurd. It appears as if these elements are shown solely as symbols of Kurdish culture rather than integral parts of the characters' lives. While the intention may be to draw attention to the situation of Kurds, there is still room for improvement in not using cultural elements as mere superfluous decorations.

Envisioning cosmopolitan citizens

Regardless of these concerns, there are several reasons why *My Small Land* was so touching and relatable to me: some of the characters' experiences are common among refugees or minorities with different back-

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When asked where you
are from, you want
to say, for instance,
“Kurdistan” without
further explanation, but
it is not possible

grounds, while others are more specific to those from stateless nations.

One poignant moment was when Sarya is asked, “Where are you from?” This is a question that no one with a complicated background wishes to be asked, as it often leads to comments or gestures based on stereotypes or expectations. Depending on the situ-



■ A still image from the film *My Small Land*

ation, I, like Sarya, have answered differently. Some recognize my Kurdish accent, while others do not. In these cases, I introduce myself as Gilak, Armenian, or a Kurd from Iraq. Having lived in the Tehran for over 20 years, I have yet to become accustomed to questions about my accent, and it remains irritating.

For Sarya and her family, the answer to this question determines their rights and ability to plan for their future. Sarya does her best to fit in and be recognized, but she is still excluded. When she shouts, “Where do I belong?” she expresses the main concern of all people seeking recognition and a sense of belonging, rather than a feeling of exclusion or perhaps in-betweenness.

There is a meaningful dialogue between Sarya and her Japanese friend Sota, during which she explains why she lies about being German and tries to tell him where she is from:

“I am from Kurdistan, but I am sure you do not know where it is.”
“Kurdistan? I really do not know.”
“No one knows.”
“Have you ever been to the World Cup?”
“No, we cannot participate.”
“Isn't your team good?”
“No, it's not about that.”

This situation is familiar to people from stateless nations. When asked where you are from, you want to say, for instance, “Kurdistan” without further explanation, but it is not possible. As a member of a stateless nation, when you introduce yourself by your ethnicity's name, you often have to specify your country, or you may not be recognized.

This can be heartbreaking, especially for those who are seeking freedom.

Frankly, I would like to be optimistic and envision a world where you can be a cosmopolitan citizen, where barriers will be dismantled, and where people can be accepted because of their differences rather than be excluded. ●

Kurdish Chess Star Shines in Moscow Tournament



Khoshawi Muhammad

is a journalist with extensive experience in media and press. He holds a PhD in Theory, Methodology, and the History of Sociology.

In a remarkable achievement for the Kurdish community, nine-year-old Eva Haval Nzarki clinched third place in the rapid chess, or speed chess, competition of a prestigious chess tournament held in Moscow on July 22, 2024. Competing against 171 participants of various ages and skill levels, Eva distinguished herself as the only Kurdish girl in the

nizing chess championships for children. To this day, The Unit of Chess Education has held more than 300 championships, with the main theme being bullet chess and classical chess for the last few years. Although the Unit ensures to serve high-quality competitions, it strives for more than that by creating memorable events that leaves a lasting impression on



■ Eva Haval Nzarki taking part in a chess tournament

competition, earning admiration and recognition for her talent and perseverance.

The tournament was Established in 2004 by the Moscow Chess Federation with the primary goal of orga-

participants, encouraging them to continue pursuing this game. The tournament winners are determined by their rank which is published on Moscow's Chess Federation website. The same website is utilized to publish other evaluation systems. The

determination and focus exhibited by young players such as Eva Nzarki is what pushes such organizations for the better.

Eva's journey in chess began when she was two years old when her grandmother introduced her to the game. Having grown into a dedicated hobby, now her interest is fueled by a deep passion for the game. Chess is more than just a game for Eva; it is a tool that enhances her cognitive abilities and academic performance. Studies have shown that playing chess can improve critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and concentration. "Chess is my favorite game. It develops logic and thinking," Eva explained.

For Eva, the benefits of chess extend beyond the board, positively influencing her studies and overall intellectual growth. "I play chess often, and it has had a positive impact on my studies. Chess is a very interesting game, and I think it's the best. The game is com-

“
Eva's journey in chess
began when she was
two years old when
her grandmother
introduced her to the
game

”

Her dedication to chess is evident, not only in her recent accolade, but also in her continuous effort to improve her skills. For nearly two years, Eva has been honing her abilities at chess academies, preparing herself for both national and international competitions.

Family support and future aspirations Eva's father, who has been a steadfast supporter of her chess endeavors, expressed immense pride in his daugh-

chess tournaments in the future.”

Living in Moscow, Russia, with her family, Eva balances her academic responsibilities as a third-grade student with her rigorous chess training. Her recent success in the tournament is a testament to her hard work, determination, and the unwavering support of her family.

Eva's victory in the Moscow chess tournament was a proud moment for her family and the Kurdish community. Yet, at the same time, her family is not focused on winning or losing but more about getting to witness her personal growth and developing knowledge.

Her story serves as an inspiration to young chess enthusiasts everywhere, highlighting the importance of passion, perseverance, and family support in achieving one's dreams.

As Eva continues to excel in chess, her future in the game looks promising.



■ Eva Haval Nzarki posing for the camera after winning a chess championship

plicated because of its strict rules on how you can perform your moves, which is why it improves the players focus. It also develops players' attention because if you make one mistake, you might lose the whole game.”

ter's success. “She has had a passion for chess since childhood,” he said. “We have been attending chess academies to develop her skills further for the past two years. Our goal is to see her participate in more international

With her talent and dedication, she is poised to make a significant mark in the chess world, bringing pride to her community and paving the way for other young players to follow in her footsteps. ●

The Birth of the Iraqi Kurdistan Football Team



Jamal Karadaghy

is a sports educator, graduated from the University of Baghdad in 1973 and earned a master's in 2001. He contributed to university sports at Koya University from 2006 until his retirement in Erbil in 2014.

In September 1974, at the proposal of the Iraqi Director General of Youth Farhad Awni and with the approval of the Iraqi Secretary-General for Information, Culture and Youth Dara Tawfiq, the Iraqi Kurdistan football team was established. I was assigned to coach the team as a graduate of the College of Sports Education at the University of Baghdad in 1973.

Due to several factors – the lack of a suitable stadium for training, the harsh climate, and the Iraqi aerial bombing campaign being carried out in the Haji Omeran area – we decided to train the team in the city of Oshnavieh, also known as Shino, in Eastern Kurdistan (north-western Iran).

Players from various districts of Kurdistan and Iraq were called to join the team, but the majority were members of the Erbil police football team. Training sessions were conducted at the Shino stadium – near the refugee camps for Kurds who had fled Iraqi airstrikes – with the assistance of the Naqadeh branch of Iran's Red Lion

and Sun Society. A bus was also arranged to transport the team to and from the stadium.

Taking the field

After three months of preparation, with the support and presence of Tawfiq, Awni, and a large crowd of supporters from Kurdish cities and villages from Eastern Kurdistan, three friendly matches were held with the teams of Naqadeh, Mahabad, and Urmia, all of which resulted in victories for the Iraqi Kurdistan football team, with respective scores of 3-0, 1-0, and 2-0. The public supported the team with earnest applause during the matches and took commemorative photographs after them.

Tawfiq and the youth manager Farhad Aouni met at Shino stadium with the team to stress the importance of sporting events as ways to convey the message of coexistence and peace among the peoples of the region and world.

They should be undertaken, he under-

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The most significant lesson from my 40 years of experience is that sport has the capacity to develop self-esteem

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■ Kurdistan National Football Team in Shino, Iranian Kurdistan (1974)

Photo: From Jamal Qaradaghi's Archive



■ Kurdistan National Football Team in Shino, Iranian Kurdistan (1974)



■ Jamal Qaradaghi in his 20s



■ Jamal Qaradaghi (third from left) together with his fellow Peshmerga (1970s)

Photos: From Jamal Qaradaghi's Archive

scored, as an act of love, especially given that the Kurdish people were bearing the brunt of an imposed war waged by Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime. In his statement before the game, Tawfiq emphasized that such sporting events would help demonstrate to the world that we, the Kurds, were keen to choose the ways of peace and respect despite the difficult circumstances and that the conduct in such matches was not aimed so much at winning or losing, but rather at bringing people closer together.

He also thanked the local authorities in the cities of Shino, Naqadeh, Mahabad, and Urmia for the opportunity to conduct these events to prove the legitimacy of our just cause.

The impact of his speech was reflected in the fact that the team's goalkeeper managed to save a penalty kick in the first half of the match against the Mahabad team. The role of the relevant Iranian authorities must also be highlighted as positive. However, as the days and months passed, the organizers felt a growing nationalism stir among the crowd; therefore, they decided to move the team from Kurdish cities to city of Dezful in the south of Iran.

The intervention of politics

After the March 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq, most of the players returned to Iraq, with some emigrating from Iraq and several of them sadly passing away.

In 1975, I returned to Iraq and was assigned to the Department of Sports Education at the University of Sulaymaniyah. Later, I was transferred to the University of Technology in Baghdad as a tennis coach. After the

“
I am proud to be
part of rebuilding our
sport institutions’
infrastructure
”



Photo: From Jamal Qaradaghi's Archive

fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, the security situation deteriorated. I moved to Koya University in the Kurdistan Region, where I became a teacher at the College of Sports Education and a director of the university's Physical Education Department. In 2014, I retired, settling down with my family in Erbil. I submitted a project proposal to the Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Culture and Youth to establish a sports center as a model training camp, like the training camps in Europe, but unfortunately this proposal did not advance.

The most significant lesson from my 40 years of experience is that sport has the capacity to develop self-esteem, regulate and strengthen behavior and habits, forge leadership and communication skills, cultivate patience, and develop resilience when things do not go as hoped or planned.

Many people, especially Kurdish children, do not view themselves as leaders, but sports has the power to instill in us the skills that define them: empathy, communication, the ability to listen, awareness of others' strengths, positive reinforcement, and methodical planning in the pursuit of goals.

After three decades of working in Baghdad under the regime of Saddam Hussein and being prevented from serving the Kurdish community, I am delighted to now work at universities in the Kurdistan Region, where I can contribute to serving the Kurdish community in an academic capacity. I am proud to be part of rebuilding our sport institutions' infrastructure and hope that we will participate in international sports competitions so that we can carry a message of peace to the world through sports. ●

If You Wish

*If you wish
To truly understand,
Spend a night in my village,
And see for yourself.*

*If you seek
To grasp death's essence,
Gaze upon the burdened bags of wonders,
Brimming with the scent of burning memories.*

*If you long
To know love,
To cleanse the bitterness of the East from your soul,
Beware, for even the stars may tremble in fear.*

*If you yearn
To know my homeland,
You must first unlock the gates of fire and sun,
And behold the seven vibrant colors of resilient people
Soaring before your eyes.*

Translated by Nahro Zagros

Berken Bereh



Berken Bereh, a distinguished modern Kurdish poet, was born in Şırnak (Kurdish: Şirnex) in 1954. His poetry frequently appears in well-known Kurdish magazines with wide readership. To date, Bereh has published six collections of poetry.

Goitered Gazelle

(Gazella Subgutturosa)

The goitered gazelle, or black-tailed gazelle, resides on the limestone plateaus, sand dunes, and gravel plains of the Kurdistan Region. Its name, meaning “full below the throat,” refers to the polygynous male having an enlarged neck and throat during the early winter mating season. Herds migrate seasonally, traveling between 10 and 30 km every day in winter but much shorter distances in summer.

Mesopotamia was long home to large herds, with evidence that desert kites were used to capture them roughly 6,000 years ago. Rock art in Jordan also suggests that they were slaughtered ritually.

Today, goitered gazelles are threatened by poachers, but the police and environmental authorities of the Kurdistan Region are severely punishing such activities.



Scientific classification	
Domain: Eukaryota	Family: Bovidae
Kingdom: Animalia	Subfamily: Antilopinae
Phylum: Chordata	Tribe: Antilopini
Class: Mammalia	Genus: Gazella
Order: Artiodactyla	Species: G. subgutturosa



Mohammed Ghafoor Majeed

Mr. Mohammad Khoshnaw founded Das Food Industries in 2020. He is the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Erbil-based manufacturing compound, which is the largest wheat-based food production factory in Iraq.

His leadership ensured Das Food Industries great success despite the company's young portfolio.

He has been essential to developing Iraq's wheat trade, quickly becoming a leading figure in the wheat trade both in Iraq and the region.

DAS is a subsidiary of Khoshnaw Company, which is well known for its successful businesses for more than four decades.



Das Food Industries

DAS Food Industries comprises of 2 flour millings with a capacity of 2000 tons per day, 2 bulgur mills with a capacity of 400 tons per day, a seed preparation factory with a capacity of 120 tons per day and a 400 tons per day feed mill, in addition to grain storage and handling facility with capacity of 100,000 tons.

In second phase, DAS will have more factories for pasta, biscuit, cakes, rice mill, maize mill, and more storage capacity.

This ambitious project is absolutely vital for the agri-industry's growth in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, and hence the farmers benefit immensely, it also provides employment for the younger generation. The company's main goal is to restore the most substantial local capital that was sent abroad up to now in an effort to revitalize the local economy through high-quality local products.



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Success in Diversity



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