

Kurdistan Chronicle

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His Majesty's Birthday Ceremony

As part of the longstanding and historic relations between our two countries, we at Sardar Trading Agencies were honored to celebrate the birthday of His Majesty King Charles III. This occasion held great significance, symbolizing not only the strong ties of friendship and cooperation between our nations but also the shared values and mutual respect that have shaped our enduring partnership. On that special day, we extended our heartfelt congratulations to the United Kingdom and its people, expressing our pride in the achievements and leadership of His Majesty. We also took the opportunity to send our best wishes for His Majesty's continued health, happiness, and success in his reign, with the hope that our relationship would continue to flourish for many years to come.





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The Future of the U.S.-KRG Relationship is Bright

This fall, both the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the United States successfully conducted free and fair elections. With former President Donald Trump set to return to the Oval Office in January, many Kurds may wonder how the U.S.-Kurdistan relationship will evolve. If history is any guide, Kurdistan can anticipate a continuation of a robust and mutually beneficial partnership.

The relationship between the United States and the Kurdistan Region is built on a foundation that transcends political administrations, reflecting shared ide-

als of peace, stability, economic prosperity, and the defense of global democracy. This enduring bond has consistently supported Kurdistan's efforts to enhance its governance framework, driven economic growth, and enriched cultural exchanges between our communities.

During his first term, President Trump demonstrated steadfast support for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). His administration collaborated closely with *peshmerga* forces to defeat ISIS territorially, combating the extremism that threatened regional and global stability. As concerns about an ISIS resurgence and ongoing regional tensions persist, we hope that the incoming administration will continue to maintain strong security cooperation with Kurdistan.

Furthermore, President-elect Trump's emphasis on energy independence aligns with the Kurdistan Re-

gion's priorities. Resolving the ongoing oil-export impasse will be key to unlocking the full potential of Kurdistan's natural resources, driving economic growth, and strengthening the U.S.-KRG energy partnership.

In addition to strengthening relations with the new administration, fostering strong ties with the new U.S. Congress will be essential. The KRG is committed to engaging with lawmakers from both parties to ensure continued bipartisan support for the region. By connecting with key congressional leaders and committees, the KRG aims to advocate for policies that promote stability, economic development, and security cooperation. These efforts will not only reinforce the U.S.-KRG

partnership, but also highlight Kurdistan's role as a vital ally in advancing shared regional and global interests.

In the coming new year, the KRG looks forward to hosting high-level U.S. delegations and visiting Washington to engage in productive dialogue – exchanges that will reinforce shared objectives and allow for collaborative discussions.

As Kurdistan navigates the challenges ahead, it can take confidence in the enduring partnership with Washington. With strong bilateral ties, Kurds can look forward to continued collaboration to advance a brighter future for the Kurdistan Region and the broader region. ●



Treefa Aziz

Kurdistan Regional
Government
Representative to
the United States of
America.

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MEPS Forum Advancing Middle East Peace Through Dialogue

Kurdistan Chronicle

From November 19 to 23, 2024, the Middle East Peace and Security (MEPS) Forum called “The Paradox of Peace in the Middle East” took place in Duhok. The forum aimed to address the region’s most pressing challenges.

“We convene at a defining moment for the Middle East. I look forward to the next two days of constructive dialogue and exchanges of views,” Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani posted on X.

“I trust that all viewpoints and decisions developed during these two days will be made available to decision-makers in the Kurdistan Region, Iraq, and the broader region for their benefit and consideration,” Prime Minister Barzani said in a welcoming address on November 22.

“This marks the fifth time that this conference has been hosted by the American University in Duhok (AUK). I commend the organizers and hope we can continue to expand and enhance this forum in the years ahead.”



■ A panel titled “The Paradox of Peace in the Middle East” at the MEPS Forum (November 19, 2024).



■ Kurdish, Iraqi, and foreign political leaders at the MEPS Forum (November 19, 2024).



■ Prime Minister Masrour Barzani speaking during a special session at the MEPS Forum (November 19, 2024).

**Notable participants,
forward-thinking ideas**

This year’s MEPS Forum featured prominent leaders, including President Masoud Barzani, Iraqi President Latif Rashid, Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, and former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

The forum also welcomed experienced Western diplomats, such as Stephen Hitchen, the UK Ambassador to Iraq; Patricia Haslach, former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia and Assistant Secretary of State; Jon Wilks, former UK Ambassador to Iraq, Qatar, and Oman; and Steven Bitner, U.S. Consul General in Erbil, alongside esteemed academic experts.

Amy Austin Holmes, an expert in international affairs at Texas A&M’s Bush School of Government and Public Service in Washington, D.C.,

told Kurdistan Chronicle at the sidelines of the event that the MEPS Forum “is happening now at a crucial time in the Middle East, where efforts for defining peace are needed more than ever.”

“I was impressed by the panel and the comments by former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, that he hopes to pursue the peace process in Türkiye and that the role the Kurdistan Region plays is vitally important. I think that’s a good sign,” Holmes said.

In an interview with Kurdistan Chronicle on the sidelines of the MEPS Forum, Davutoglu said that he hopes that one day President Masoud Barzani will come back to Türkiye to lend support to a new peace process with the Kurds. “We should work for that. We can come to Erbil, and he can come to Diyarbakir. There is no difference,” Davutoglu said.

At the forum, Prime Minister Barza-

ni also underlined that the Kurdistan Region has good economic and trade relations with Türkiye. “We have a good understanding of the security situation in the region. We are encouraged that Türkiye is seeking peaceful ways to resolve the issues in the region. For this reason, I can describe our relations with Türkiye as good.”

A special community

Christine Cheng, a Senior Lecturer in War Studies at King’s College London, thanked the AUK for creating a space for dialogue at the MEPS Forum. “You have been absolutely fantastic hosts, every time I come to MEPS, I have been warmly welcomed by everyone in Kurdistan.”

“I want to thank you Honar Issa for putting all this together, Ranj Alaaldin, and of course Prime Minister Barzani for all his investment, time, energy, and presence, which allows us to have this kind of dialogue. You



■ Hoshyar Zebari, KDP politburo member and former Foreign Minister of Iraq, arriving at MEPS Forum (November 2024)

have created something very special. I have said this to a lot of people, not only here, but also back in the UK where I teach.”

Issa, Chair of the MEPS Forum, said in his closing remarks that the forum was “delighted to welcome back so many of our most loyal participants this year and to see so many new colleagues join this community of ours.”

“I’m proud to stand here today and declare that the MEPS Forum has once again exceeded our expectations, with the diversity of the participants and the expertise that they bring as well as the quality and depth of the discussions that unfold.”

He underlined that insightful discussions, thought provoking debates, and rigorous analysis are crucial to addressing the most pressing challenges facing the Middle East at large.

The forum also included workshops organized in collaboration with Harvard University, Cambridge University, the Atlantic Council, Wilton Park, and the Crisis Response Council.

“The MEPS Forum was established for the purpose of bridging the gap between decision-makers and the wider community of experts, scholars, and practitioners, and challenging conventional thoughts and wisdom on the Middle East at large,” he concluded.

Convening ground

Howard Shatz, a senior economist at RAND and a professor at the Pardee RAND Graduate School, told Kurdistan Chronicle that MEPS had a very interesting program this year, as in past years.

“The program is excellent, the speak-

ers are excellent, but I think what’s most important and what makes MEPS so attractive is that it serves as a convening area. Anyone from inside and outside the region can come, creating opportunities for Americans to meet with Russians or people of Iranian origin to meet with people from throughout Iraq and elsewhere. It’s an opportunity for people throughout the Middle East to convene with each other on neutral ground.”

Shatz further underlined the importance of MEPS being held in the Kurdistan Region. “It’s a reminder about the incredible diversity of the region. We do not need to make this a uniform region – there are many different people here, all with different goals and desires – and so for peace truly to be forged, these different goals and desires need to be recognized.” ●



■ A panel discussion during the MEPS forum in Dubok, Kurdistan Region (November 2024)

The Iraqi Census and the Kurdistan Region



Hemin Baban

is a Kurdish journalist who has worked for a number of local and international media institutions.

The official Iraqi census conducted in November 2024 confirmed that the population of the Kurdistan Region has reached more than 6.37 million, which constitutes 14% of the population of Iraq.

Iraq conducted its last comprehensive census in 1987; since then, official federal government institutions have relied on estimated numbers and data collected from different entities such as the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Trade, which has created problems and inaccuracies.

After preparations and a few postponements, the federal government in cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), conducted the census in November – the first in more than two decades after the fall of the former regime.

The latest census is the tenth to include all governorates since the creation of the post-colonial Iraqi state in 1921.

Breaking down the numbers

The head of the population census and statistics department at the Kurdistan Region Statistics Office, Guhdar Mohammed, told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that the initial results of the census conducted last month showed that the population of the Kurdistan Region had reached 6,370,668 people.

Mohammed pointed out that “1,379,163 households were registered, while the av-

erage family size is about 4.6 people, and the population growth rate is at 2.8%,” and added that “the number of males reached 3,200,506, or 50.24% of the total population, while the number of females was 3,170,162, or 49.76%.”

He also stated that “the percentage of urban residents reached 84%, while the percentage of residents in rural areas was 16%.” Meanwhile, the census showed that the Kurdistan Region has 2,028,037 housing units.

In terms of the head of households, census data shows that families headed by women constitute 11.86% of the total, while families headed by men amounted to 88.14%.

Displaced Kurds return to their hometowns

According to Mohammed, there has been a decrease in the official population figures of the Kurdistan Region because the census did not include the population of disputed Kurdish territories.

These areas include parts of the Shekhan district, the Faida sub-district of the Simele district in Dohuk Governorate, the Makhmur district in Erbil, and the Koks and Nogol districts in Sulaymaniyah Governorate, along with many villages affiliated with the Chamchamal district.

Mohammed also referred to “the return of large numbers of residents of the Kurdistan Region to their original areas within

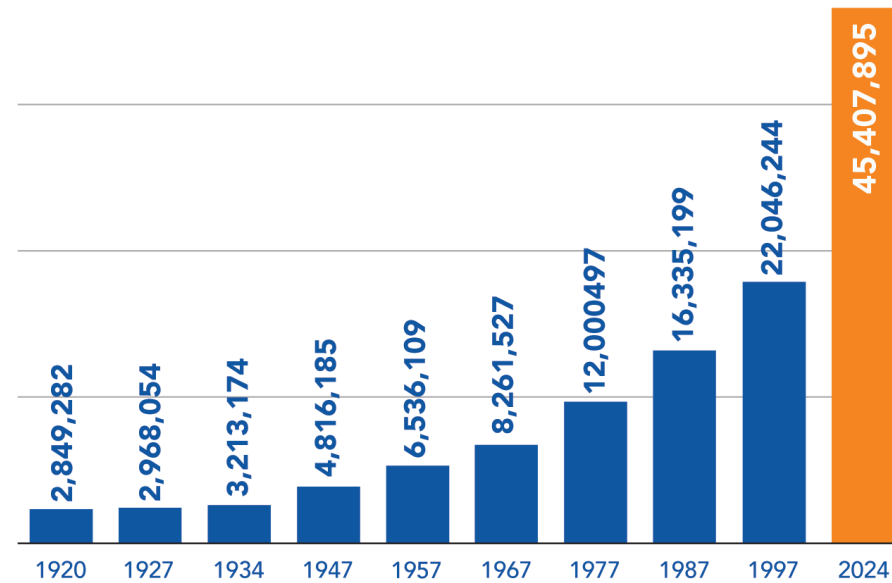


Photo: Mohammad Shrvani

■ A census taker sitting next to a woman filling out her census data form in Erbil (November 20, 2024).

Iraq Population Growth

1920-2024



the disputed territories, as defined by Article 140 of the Constitution and that including the Kirkuk and Saladin Governorates, and the Makhmur district, as well as other districts and areas.”

Prior to the census, the Kurdistan Region Statistics Office estimated that the population of the region included more than 6.69 million people, excluding internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.

The KRG’s latest reports indicate that there are 962,000 IDPs and refugees in the region, consisting of 680,000 IDPs and 282,000 refugees, 263,000 of whom are Syrians.

Increase in budget and share of seats in parliament

According to the preliminary results of the national census, the Kurdistan Region’s population is 14% of the total population of Iraq. This result refuted the allegations of the federal government that its share of the budget should be 12.6% only – a figure

produced prior to the collection of official census data. This percentage was officiated for the region’s share of the federal budget for the fiscal years 2023, 2024, and 2025.

“The budget is calculated based on data from the federal ministries of planning and trade,” Mohammed notes. Thus, the percentage will change in upcoming budgets to 14% based on the results of the general population census, which will also apply to the share of the number of seats in the federal parliament.

In total, based on the Kurdistan Statistics Office’s calculations, the percentage of the budget should be more than 14%, if the disputed areas were included.

Regarding the population growth in the Kurdistan Region compared to the rest of Iraq, Mohammed seemed concerned and urged for “developing plans and programs to encourage young people to marry and bear more children.” He believes that “the economic and social conditions

and openness to the world have had an impact on changing the view of young people and married couples toward having fewer children, and many of them are satisfied with smaller families, which has led to a decrease in the number of members per family.”

A young population

The recent census also uncovered many interesting figures related to the Kurdistan Region’s large youth population. This data can help provide services and resources based on the needs of the population. Additionally, it is significant for the formation of both healthcare and economic policy and can help in developing roadmaps for a better future.

According to the initial results of the census, the Kurdistan Region recorded a high percentage of young people of working age.

Some 63.7% of the region’s population is of working age; in the field of statistics, the youth population of a country measuring at least 60% of the

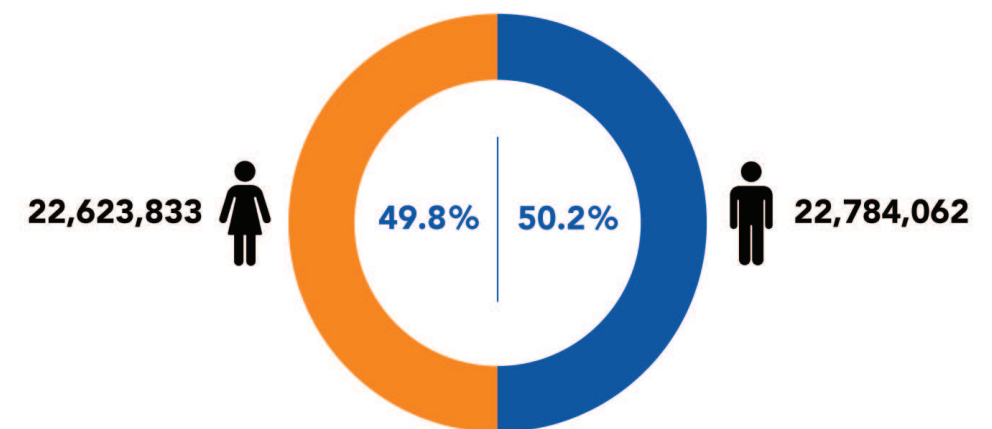


A census taker entering data during a field survey in Erbil (November 20, 2024).

Photo: Mohamad Shmami

Iraq Population

Male and Female Distribution



Head of Household



Population Distribution

Accross Urban and Rural Areas

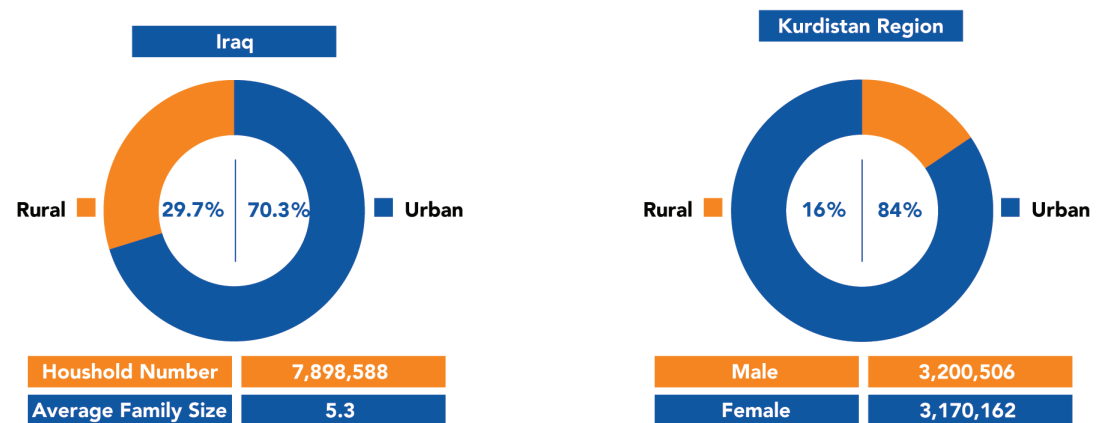


Photo: Mohamad Shwani

■ A census taker speaking to a woman in Erbil (November 20, 2024).



Photo: Mohamad Shwani

■ A woman sharing family documents during the Iraqi national census (November 20, 2024).

total is considered a positive indicator of economic growth potential.

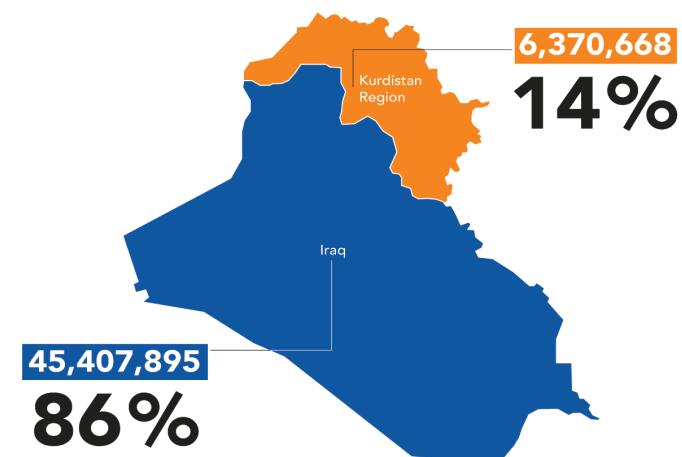
Mohammed stated that “the region’s

percentage of young people exceeds that of the rest of Iraq, and it reached the window required by statistics in 2021.” This allows the government

to develop plans to benefit from its youth and employ them in a better way to harness their productive capacities.

Kurdistan Region Population

2024



Below 15 Years Old	36.1 %
Between 15-64	60.2 %
Above 64 Years Old	3.7 %

The census shows that the population of Iraq is 45,407,895 people, including foreigners and refugees. The percentage of females reached 49.8% of the population, while the percentage of males reached 50.1%.

The percentage of the population of working age – that is, between the ages of 15 and 64 – is 60.2% for all of Iraq.

According to the results, the family size in Iraq reached 5.3 individuals, while the annual population growth rate was at 2.3%.

The census may provide more accurate figures than were previously used, but there are many unresolved issues relating to the disputed areas, displaced Iraqis, and Iraqis in the diaspora, many of whom have fled or migrated due to lack of reconciliation or critical services, political matters, social unrest, climate change and sectarianism, leading to demographic changes across the war-torn country. ●

Optimism About Incoming Trump Administration



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.

As U.S. President-elect Donald Trump prepares his new administration for a return to the White House on January 20, 2025, following his election victory on November 5, 2024, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is looking to expand its partnership with the United States.

On November 23, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani expressed his optimism about a new administration during the 2024 Middle East Peace and Security Forum (MEPS 24).

"We have experience with the previous Trump administration," Prime Minister Barzani said. "We are hoping that the new administration is going to maintain good relations with Iraq and especially with the Kurdistan Region, which has been a very credible partner to the United States in fighting against terrorism, promoting peace, and championing the values and principles that we share."

However, he said it is too early to decide how the new administration will play out. "We have to wait until the whole cabinet is picked and decided, but we definitely have friends among the people who we hear are being considered for prominent roles in the next administration."

"I would like to be optimistic," he said about the future Trump administration.

Friends of the Kurds

The "friends" who Prime Minister Bar-

zani referred to could potentially include Florida Senator Marco Rubio, Trump's nominee for Secretary of State, and Florida Representative Michael Waltz, whom Trump is considering for the role of National Security Advisor.

“There is a pretty strong relationship between the United States and the Kurdistan Region, and Baghdad should follow the Kurdish example and not back militias

In May 2016, Rubio met with Masrour Barzani, who was then serving as Security Council Advisor, and discussed U.S.-Kurdish bilateral relations. Then, on January 5, 2020, after the Iraqi Parliament called for the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq, Rubio ruminated on X, "maybe it's time for a fully independent Kurdistan."

Meanwhile, Waltz, a member of the Kurdish Caucus in the U.S. Congress, has recently signaled his support for the Kurds on several occasions, urging Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Su-



Prime Minister Masrour Barzani (middle), U.S. Ambassador Alina Romanowski (right), and U.S. Consul General Steve Bitner (left) at the U.S. Independence Day ceremony in Erbil (November 4, 2024).

dani to immediately resume Kurdish oil exports in June 2023 and strongly criticizing the treatment of the Iraqi Kurds by Baghdad in a letter to the Biden Administration in September 2023. In March 2024, along with other U.S. officials, he hosted Prime Minister Barzani during his visit to the United States.

Andrew Tabler, a Syria specialist at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy think-tank, who was senior adviser on U.S.-Syria policy during the Trump administration, told Kurdistan Chronicle that anyone who has participated in the war on terror, will see "that Kurdistan is an ally of the United States. The *peshmerga* fought very

bravely across the region with our [U.S.] special forces."

Commenting on Waltz's background in the special forces, Tabler added, "he's going to be appreciative of that."

Policy uncertainty

However, Tabler underlined that it remains unclear exactly what the foreign policy of the incoming Trump administration will be towards the Kurds, noting that the United States will wind down its anti-ISIS coalition mission in Iraq by 2025 and transition towards a bilateral relation, which raises the question of what role

the Kurdistan Region will play in the future.

"There are a diversity of views in the government and the incoming administration about how to craft a foreign policy. I think this administration is going to be an interesting mix of focusing on domestic politics but at the same time avoiding foreign policy entanglements."

Dr. David Romano, a Thomas G. Strong Professor of Middle East Politics at Missouri State University in the United States, added that "no one is very certain about what the Trump administration's policy towards the Kurds will be."

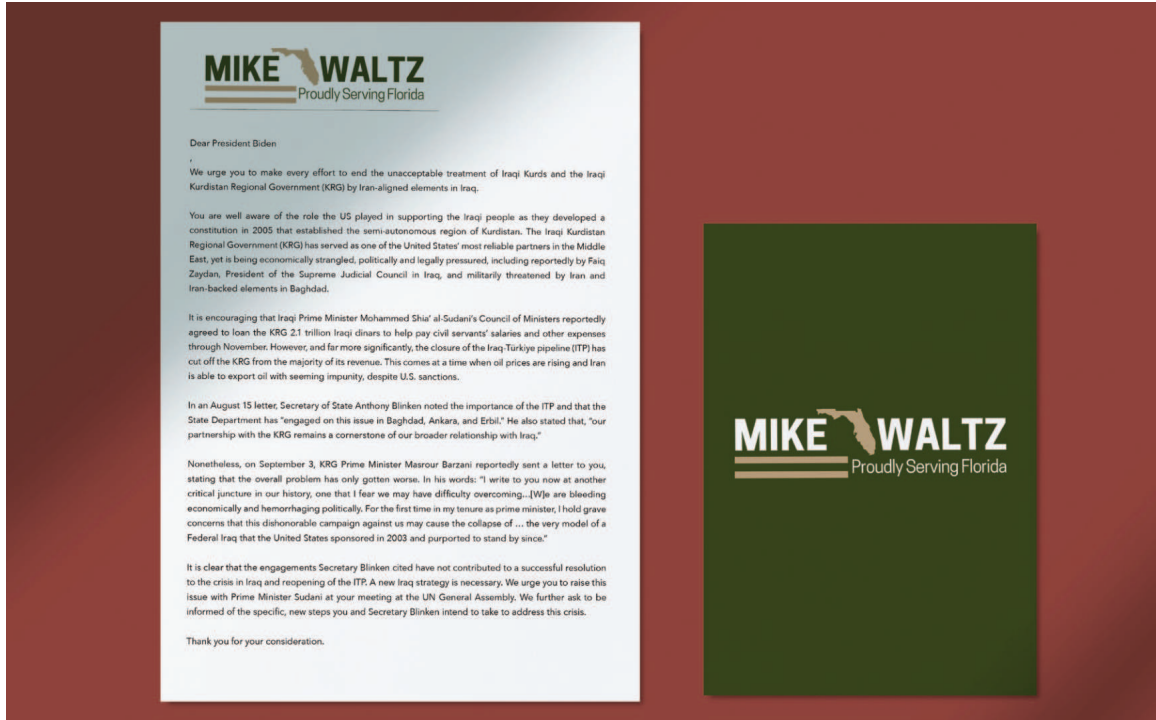


■ Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani and U.S. President-Elect Donald Trump chatting during the reopening ceremony for Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris (December 7, 2024).



■ Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with U.S. Senators, Members of Congress, and other government officials during his visit to Washington D.C. (March 1, 2024).

Photo: Farhad Ahmad



■ A letter from U.S. Representative Mike Waltz to President Biden supporting the Kurdistan Region against the pressures imposed by Baghdad.

“I think some Kurds remain hopeful regarding Trump; however, he does not hesitate to break from past policies or standard operating procedures of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. While this could hurt Kurds, it could also benefit them if Trump abandons the U.S. preference for strong central governments in other states.”

Patricia M. Haslach, Former U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia and Assistant Secretary of State, underlined in an interview with Kurdistan Chronicle that “there is a pretty strong relationship” between the United States and the Kurdistan Region and recommended that Baghdad should follow the Kurdish example and not back militias.

Avoiding conflict

Howard J. Shatz, a senior economist at U.S. think-tank RAND and professor at the Pardee RAND Graduate School, noted that it is unclear whether the administration has a

well-defined policy towards the Kurdistan Region.

“I think there’s a strong drive to avoid conflict and nurture peaceful relations that privilege strong commercial relations and business development. I think this is as far as anyone can predict, since policy is still being formulated. We will have to see who gets appointed to the key positions and take it from there.”

In a post on X made on November 23, Prime Minister Barzani underlined that Iraq should stay out of the conflict in the Middle East.

“I hope that there will be peaceful solutions to every ongoing conflict. However that’s achieved, I believe it will serve the people of those countries that are suffering from the ongoing wars now,” Prime Minister Barzani said at MEPS 24. “We have to wait and see, but in any case, we do believe that peace is going to be better than war.”

Rich Outzen, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council in Türkiye who was a member of the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Staff during Trump’s presidency from 2016 to 2018, told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that the organizing principle of the second Trump Administration in the Middle East will be clarity about taking care of the United States’ friends and allies.

Moreover, he argued that a new Trump administration will deter “those who have committed themselves to reversing the U.S.-led security order in the region.”

“The KRI (Kurdistan Region of Iraq) has a long-standing history of being the most democratic force in Iraq and of supporting our network of regional allies. The Trump foreign policy team will be good for friends of the United States in the region: Israel, Türkiye, the KRI, and our Gulf allies. It will force a recalculation by those counting on U.S. disinterest in the region, especially in Tehran.” ●

The Stakes of the Second Trump Presidency for Energy and Climate in Kurdistan



John V. Bowlus

is a researcher and lecturer at Kadir Has University in Istanbul and has written widely about energy security, transit, geopolitics, and transitions from a contemporary and historical perspective. He is also the Editor of Kurdistan Chronicle.

On November 5, the United States elected Donald Trump – a leader with whom the world has ample familiarity from his first presidency from 2017 to 2021 – in decisive fashion as its 47th president.

Like any U.S. president, Trump will face considerable constraints in domestic policy, with Congress, the Supreme Court, and the vast array of government bureaucracies limiting his power. It is in foreign policy, however, where Trump will have far more influence.

The stakes of a second Trump presidency for the Kurdistan Region are thus real, with security naturally topping the list of areas where Trump's foreign policy could most dramatically affect life on the ground. Yet security is also the most difficult to predict, as this will depend largely on the actions of other states in the region.

Moreover, significant changes to U.S. foreign policy are rare – according to a 2024 report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace entitled “Strategic Change in U.S. Foreign Policy” – because of inertia. After examining five historical case studies, the report noted that, “absent major external shocks, strategic change remains very difficult in U.S. foreign policy, where policies are often highly institutionalized and supported by many interests and groups in Congress, the different government bureaucracies, the expert community, and the broader public.”

For these reasons, rather than opine on the political ramifications of a Trump presidency for the Kurdistan Region and the Middle East, it is more helpful to focus on two specific areas of U.S. foreign policy that affect the global economy and international stability and will affect the Kurdistan Region: energy and climate.

Long a vital component of the global energy system as an oil exporter, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has also made serious commitments in recent years to bolstering its production of clean energy resources and implementing policies to address climate change. Given the close relationship between the United States and the Kurdistan Region, the new leadership in Washington will likely shape Erbil's trajectories in energy and climate.

More price than the president

In fossil fuels, Trump's longstanding rhetoric and policies reveal an unequivocal backing of expanding U.S. production, and he has pledged to tear down environmental regulations put in place by the Biden Administration to achieve this end.

But Trump's goals are consistent with U.S. domestic and foreign oil and gas policy since the start of the shale boom in the late 2000s, and arguably for the past 100 years: produce as much as possible and create export markets through either positive commercial energy diplomacy or through coercive measures like sanctions, so long as U.S. domestic supplies are secure.



■ U.S. President-Elect Donald Trump



■ *Kurdish men fishing in Sirwan River, Kurdistan Region.*

Photos: Peshraw Mahdi

“
This global energy divide,
undergirded by U.S.-
China trade barriers,
will inhibit the energy
transition but should
not dissuade the KRG
from advancing along its
current path in energy to
diversify away from oil
”

More importantly, the global price of oil, driven by global supply and demand balances, is the ultimate arbiter of U.S. oil-production levels, with geopolitical events and global economic trends capable of throwing the market into disarray. Currently, the oil market is oversupplied, causing the price to soften. In response, the alliance of oil producers in OPEC+ are extending their voluntary production cuts into 2025 lest the market becomes flooded and prompts the price to fall more dramatically.

Gas illustrates similar market constraints for the United States as oil. Trump says he will lift the Biden Administration’s pause on liquefied natural gas (LNG)-export permitting upon entering office, but the pause was initiated because of the overcapacity of U.S. LNG export facilities and concerns about the future ability of overseas markets to import increased U.S. supplies.

At best, Trump may juice U.S. production at the margins through removing emissions-reducing regulations and champion sanctions on U.S. geopolitical rivals like Iran and Venezuela to create more market share for U.S. exports. These dynamics should encourage the KRG to continue its ongoing policies and commitments to diversify away from reliance on oil-export revenues.

Climate change

On the surface, Trump’s most discouraging foreign energy policy is his aversion to international climate agreements. Symbolically, his first act as president in 2017 was to remove the United States from the Paris Agreement, and he remains broadly antipathetic toward global engagements, seeking to steer an “America First” policy.

However, the world is undergoing an energy transition for its own reasons, regardless of U.S. predilections. Increasing clean energy production remains an imperative for all countries be-



■ *An oil refinery plant in the Kurdistan Region.*

Photo: Safin Hamid

cause fossil fuel-accelerated environmental degradation is threatening their societies, economies, and livelihoods – and fossil fuel imports are both expensive and insecure.

Moreover, market forces, aided by falling prices for solar and wind power, will continue to encourage the energy transition, a fact that the United States itself demonstrates. For instance, U.S. solar power production will increase by 63% from 2023 to 2025, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, while the U.S. state of Texas – a traditional powerhouse in oil – now accounts for over 27% of total wind-capacity generation in the entire country. Nuclear power and carbon capture technologies have also attracted significant investment in recent years.

Largely through tax incentives, the Biden Administration’s Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) is investing nearly \$400 billion into wind, solar, battery power, and electric vehicles. Trump may try to roll back some of these incentives, but many of the Republican Party’s members of Congress come from states where the IRA has been a bounty in creating jobs and jumpstarting clean energy industries. They are unlikely to support a full repeal of the legislation.

Meanwhile, major oil and gas companies are incentivized to reduce emissions to meet the carbon border adjustment mechanism standards for oil and petrochemicals in Europe, the United States’ most important export market.

China and trade

There is an inherent contradiction in U.S. energy strategy that hinders the energy transition: tariffs on China. First instituted during Trump’s first president, the Biden Administration instituted new tariffs on China in May 2024 that hiked rates from 7.5% to 25% on batteries, 0% to

25% on critical minerals, 25% to 50% on solar cells, and a whopping 25% to 100% on electric vehicles. During his campaign, Trump floated the idea of a 60% tariff on all Chinese goods and vowed to wield tariffs more broadly once in office.

Given China’s dominance in producing clean energy technologies and processing critical minerals, it is doubtful that the United States can bolster its own manufacturing capabilities alongside those of its allies to help meet the world’s climate goals.

With trade wars becoming the primary manifestations of the broader geo-economic competition between the United States and China, the fate of the energy transition hangs in the balance. While a thaw in U.S.-China relations could rebuild the former supply chains of global trade that powered the 2000s and 2010s, this prospect is unlikely under Trump for many reasons, not least because energy is at the heart of the U.S.-China competition.

At this stage, the world is divided into two large energy blocks: the U.S.-Gulf-Russia fossil fuel-producing block that wants to extend the use of oil and gas in the global energy system, on the one hand; and the China-EU clean energy-championing and fossil fuel-importing block that seeks to use cheaper, cleaner resources that are domestically generated.

This global energy divide, undergirded by U.S.-China trade barriers, will inhibit the energy transition but should not dissuade the KRG from advancing along its current path in energy to diversify away from oil, develop gas, and champion clean energy while taking aggressive steps to make its environment more resilient to the rising dangers of climate change. ●

PARTNERSHIP

KRG and UK Team Up to Target Smuggling Gangs



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.



The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has joined an agreement with the UK and Iraqi federal government to enhance border security and combat human trafficking, a deal aimed at addressing illegal migration to the UK.

The deal was signed during a three-day visit by UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper to Baghdad and Erbil in late November 2024. In the Kurdistan Region's capital, Secretary Cooper met with Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, and other relevant ministers.

Agreement content

During her visit, Secretary Cooper signed a joint statement on border security: a first-of-its-kind agreement with Iraq that sets out the commitments of both countries to work more closely in tackling people smuggling and bolstering border security, including a statement by the Home Office noting that the UK government has pledged £200,000 to support projects in the Kurdistan Region that will enhance capabilities concerning irregular migration and border security.

Secretary Cooper also signed a declaration of intent,



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Prime Minister Masrour Barzani receiving UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper in Erbil (November 28, 2024).

through which the UK and Iraq will build on operational and bilateral co-operation on serious organized crime, including organized immigration crime, narcotics, modern slavery and human trafficking, and illicit finance.

As part of this, communications campaigns will be launched in both Iraq and the Kurdistan Region to counter the misinformation and myths that people smugglers post online.

Furthermore, Secretary Cooper signed a joint statement on migration that includes further work on the returns of people who have no right to be in the UK – where returns are currently very slow – and the continued provision of reintegration programs to support returnees.

“Central to the statements agreed

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We have a partnership
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serious organized crime

”
today is a commitment from the UK, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region to international and humanitarian law and commitments to international human rights standards,” a statement from

the Home Office said, emphasizing that that agreements represent the biggest operational package to tackle serious organized crime and people smuggling between the UK, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region.

“There are smuggler gangs profiting from dangerous small boat crossings whose operations stretch back through northern France, Germany, across Europe, to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and beyond. Organized criminals operate across borders, so law enforcement needs to operate across borders too,” Secretary Cooper said in a separate statement. “I want to thank my hosts for their hospitality. This is an important new partnership between the UK government, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region to build security and keep people safe.”



Photo: KRP

■ UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper meeting with Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani in Erbil (November 28, 2024).

KRG is on board

Following his meeting with Secretary Cooper on November 28, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani described the UK as a “valued partner” of the Kurdistan Region. Commenting on the agreements, he pointed out that they have reinforced shared responsibilities to fight organized crime and address immigration challenges.

Exchanging views on regional developments and the KRG’s role in security and stability of the region, Secretary Cooper stressed that the UK views the Kurdistan Region “as an important strategic partner in countering terrorism and security challenges,” a statement on the KRG’s official website said.

In her meeting with Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani,

the two officials focused on strengthening relations between Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, and the UK. They emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts in various sectors, particularly in security cooperation and combating organized crime, illegal migration, human trafficking, money laundering, and cybercrime, according to a statement by the President’s Office.

Following the official meetings, Secretary Cooper visited the historical Citadel of Erbil, where she recorded a video message to highlight the achievements of her visit. She noted that the UK has had partnerships with the KRG in the past, but the new agreements were to create a roadmap for future collaboration.

“We have a partnership that goes back through many years; but this is about

a partnership for the future and the work that we’re going to do together to tackle serious organized crime, particularly the smuggling and trafficking gangs that undermine border security and put lives at risk. We’ve had some important discussions with Kurdistan authorities here about what we need to do together to tackle those criminal gangs,” the Home Secretary said.

The Home Office statement also noted that this international collaboration marks a shift in the UK government’s approach to tackling irregular migration. Through the Border Security Command, the UK is developing a whole system approach to tackling irregular migration, including arming UK law enforcement with the powers it needs, working bilaterally on cross-border cooperation, and ensuring law enforcement across borders are working together. ●

Kurdistan-France A Diplomatic Vision



Qassim Khidhir

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

Last month, Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, hosted a special event to celebrate the 100th birthday of Madame Danielle Mitterrand, the late First Lady of France and a true friend of the Kurdish people. Fondly remembered as the “Mother of the Kurds,” her enduring legacy was honored through heartfelt speeches, cultural exhibitions, and the screening of a documentary about her extraordinary life.

The event brought together prominent Kurdish and French dignitaries, including President Masoud Barzani, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, France’s Ambassador to Iraq Patrick Durel, and Emmanuel Poilane, Secretary General of the Danielle Mitterrand Foundation, together with Frederic Tissot, the first French Consul General in Kurdistan, and Yann Braem, the French Consul General. This gathering highlighted Mitterrand’s profound contributions to the Kurdish cause and her lasting impact on the Kurdistan Region.

On this occasion, *Kurdistan Chronicle* sat down with Braem for an exclusive interview, in which he shared his thoughts on Mitterrand’s legacy and explored the strong ties between France and the Kurdistan Region in politics, business, and culture.

Heart and soul

Braem reflected on Mitterrand’s relentless efforts to put Kurdistan on France’s foreign policy map, particularly following the

1988 Halabja massacre. At a time when many ignored the atrocities, Mitterrand spoke out, drawing global attention to the Kurdish struggle.

“Danielle Mitterrand fought for Kurdistan with her heart and soul. Her courage and compassion continue to inspire us,” said Braem.

“
France has always been
a steadfast friend of
Kurdistan
”

He described Mitterrand’s connection to Kurdistan as deeply personal. She worked for Kurdish unity, supported education, and championed democracy. Using her position as France’s First Lady, she gave voice to the Kurdish people’s fight for freedom and dignity.

Braem emphasized France’s lasting commitment to the Kurdistan Region, underscoring decades of partnership in education, culture, politics, and economic development.

“France has always been a steadfast friend of Kurdistan,” he said. “The bond between our peoples is unique, rooted in

■ Yann Braem, French Consul General in Erbil.



Photo: Sajfin Hamid



■ Former President of France Francois Mitterrand and First Lady Danielle Mitterrand.

history, and continues to grow. I see it every day here, and it's echoed in France, where the Kurdish people hold a special place in the hearts of the French."

Politically, Braem noted the close ties between Kurdish and French leaders. "President Emmanuel Macron and other French officials regularly engage with Kurdish leaders, reflecting the continued dialogue and trust between them," he said. He also pointed to economic and cultural collaborations, including Erbil and Paris being sister cities.

Braem also mentioned the two French schools in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah that are named after Danielle Mitterrand, which uphold French education standards and honor her legacy.

"France is committed to working across all fronts – political, security, cultural, economic, and educational – to strengthen this special partnership," he added.

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I love exploring the
mountains in Akre,
Barzan, Sulaymaniyah,
and beyond
”

When asked how Mitterrand might view Kurdistan today, Braem said, "She would see both progress and challenges. Her message would be simple: Keep striving for unity, democracy, and education. She believed freedom without education is incomplete, and that belief continues to guide our efforts in the region."

Economic cooperation

Economic ties between France and the Kurdistan Region are strong and diverse, with significant potential for further growth. French investments in

the Kurdistan Region, estimated at \$3 billion in stock, cover key sectors such as the construction, infrastructure, agriculture, retail, and agro-food industries. Notable projects include the Lafarge cement factory, Danone food company, and Carrefour's extensive retail network, which sources much of its fresh produce – fruits and vegetables – from local Kurdish farmers.

"French businesses are not just investing, they're becoming part of the local economy, creating jobs, and enhancing expertise," said the Consul General.

He emphasized that these investments are about more than financial returns. "For me, this partnership is about building a better future together," he added.

Agriculture stands out as an area of immense opportunity. "Kurdish produce is of exceptional quality, and the agricultural sector has real export potential," the Consul General said. France, a global leader in the food

and agriculture industries, could play a vital role in helping the region process and package its produce for international markets. Kurdish participation in the prestigious SIAL food exhibition in Paris this year was a step toward making that vision a reality.

France is also playing a role in the Kurdistan Region's infrastructure development. Companies like Artelia have contributed to water management and dam projects. "Sustainable infrastructure, smart cities, and renewable energy are key areas where French companies can make a big impact," said Braem.

In September, France hosted a major economic forum in Paris to connect Kurdish and French businesses. Organized in collaboration with the Kurdistan Regional Government's Board of Investment and French business association MEDEF, the forum aimed to strengthen partnerships. "The best way to deepen ties is through direct collaboration between businesses," he explained. Four Kurdish ministers went to Paris on this occasion.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain, such as the lack of direct flights between the Kurdistan Region and France. "I would be the happiest man in the world if I could fly directly from Erbil to Paris," he said with a smile.

Culture and heritage collaboration

Cultural ties between France and Kurdistan are also thriving, with institutions like the French Institute in Erbil serving as vital bridges for collaboration. These efforts enrich the region's cultural and educational landscape, creating a dynamic exchange. As the Consul General ex-

plained, France's role is not just about showcasing its own culture, but creating a dialogue with Kurdistan.

"Our mission is to intertwine French and Kurdish cultures in every event," Braem added.

Language is another vital component of this connection. The French Institute offers courses and certifications that have become highly popular among students and professionals. At the same time, French schools in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah provide multilingual education in Kurdish, French, Arabic, and English. "These schools are gateways to the world," the Consul General explained, adding, "Our graduates are thriving, with many



■ Kurdistan and French flags at a ceremony where peshmerga commanders laid a wreath for the unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe monument in Paris.

continuing their studies in France, where they benefit from an affordable and world-class university system."

Further strengthening these ties, a "French Corner" was inaugurated on December 2 at the University of Kurdistan Hewler in Erbil, giving students access to resources and opportunities in France.

France's contribution to preserving Kurdistan's archaeological heritage is equally noteworthy. The French Institute of the Near East, based in Erbil, collaborates with local teams on excavations at the Erbil Citadel, a

site of immense historical significance. In Amedi, a picturesque town rich in history, French and Kurdish experts are working together to protect its multi-religious heritage under a project supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Alif Foundation.

"Amedi is a jewel of shared history," Braem said. "Its layers of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Zoroastrian influences tell a story of coexistence that must be preserved for future generations."

These restoration projects are not only safeguarding history, but also promoting economic growth through tourism. "We aim to protect these cultural treasures while making them accessible to the world," the Consul General added. "This careful balance ensures both preservation and progress."

Braem concluded the interview by expressing gratitude for his role in Kurdistan. "Being the Consul General here is a blessing," he said. "In every house, every office, with anyone I meet, I've encountered amazing friendliness and a genuine willingness to collaborate."

It's remarkable how deeply rooted our ties are, whether it's our shared struggles against ISIS or the values we hold dear – freedom, democracy, and the role of women in society."

He also spoke of his admiration for Kurdistan's breathtaking landscapes. "I love exploring the mountains in Akre, Barzan, Sulaymaniyah, and beyond. I haven't seen everything yet, but I look forward to discovering more," he said. "I'm a hiker, and walking in these mountains is part of my plan for the coming months. The natural beauty here is unparalleled." ●

Remembering Madame Danielle Mitterrand



Nazand Begikhani
is an accomplished
academic, poet, and
lecturer.

This is Nazand Begikhani's tribute, read at Madame Danielle Mitterrand's centenary in Erbil on November 12, 2024, honors her lifelong dedication to Kurdish rights and human rights advocacy. Madame Mitterrand supported Kurdish struggle, Kurdish refugees, organized international conferences, and worked against honor-based violence. She championed unity, education, and diplomacy, urging Kurds to prioritize democracy, human rights, and reconciliation. Her compassion for the oppressed, environmental advocacy, and vision for Kurdish peace continue to inspire, making her centenary a lasting reminder of her contributions.



Credit: Yazid Tizi / Alain Lasfargues (1992)

■ Danielle Mitterrand (1992)



■ Danielle Mitterrand

Credit: Kenji-Baptiste Oikawa (File)



Photo: Farhad Almad

■ A ceremony in Erbil honoring Madame Danielle Mitterrand, marking the centenary of her birth (November 14, 2024).

I am honored to join you all here in Erbil in the presence of President Masoud Barzani, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, and Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani as we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of our spiritual mother, Madame Danielle Mitterrand.

I had the pleasure of meeting the First Lady of France for the first time in 1990. At the time I was a political asylum seeker and a student at the Sorbonne in France. From the first meeting, she embraced me without knowing my background, not knowing that I was once a prisoner and that two of my *peshmerga* brothers had been shot by the Ba'ath regime. Since then, she treated me very kindly, like her own daughter.

For 21 years, in addition to our collaboration with the Kurdish Institute of Paris, we have worked directly with Madame Mitterrand and her Foundation France-Libertés. My first collaboration with her was to help – together with Dr Frederic Tissot – Kurdish refugees from Bahdinan whom Madame Mitterrand had invited to France after the 1988 Halabja chemical weapons attack and the Anfal Campaign that targeted thousands of Kurds in what is now the Kurdistan Region.

We also participated in the organization of international conferences on Kurds in Moscow, Paris, and Washington, all within the framework of various activities that were held by the Kurdish Institute of Paris and Madame Mitterrand's foundation. In addition, I interviewed her twice for the local media, the first in 1995 and the latter in 2009, during the election campaigns in the Kurdistan Region.

“
Madame Mitterrand believed in the experience, wisdom, and personality of Masoud Barzani in easing tensions, reorganizing the Kurdish homeland, and establishing peace through dialogue
”

Madame Mitterrand was the main engine of defending Kurdish rights and promoting Kurdish diplomacy in the West. The Kurdish Institute of Paris, led by Dr. Kendal Nazan, also played a major role in these activities. In fact, it was Nezan with film director Yilmaz Gunay, who initiated the first contact with Madame Mitterrand and established the strong Kurdish-French relations that continue today.

Madame Mitterrand was a human rights defender, a champion of the oppressed and the poor, a supporter of prisoners, artists and writers; she was an environmentalist, an opponent of violence and war, and a balanced and wise feminist as well. In 2001, together with the Kurdish Institute of Paris, we organized the first international conference on combating so-called 'honor killings'. We invited representatives from all four corners of Kurdistan through the French Minis-



■ President Masoud Barzani, accompanied by Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, French Ambassador and French Consul General, visiting a photo exhibition commemorating Madame Danielle Mitterrand (November 14, 2024).

Photo: Farhad Ahmad

try of Foreign Affairs. She provided us with all assistance in terms of providing visas and facilitating the travel of representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government to the conference, which at the time was not easy for holders of an Iraqi passport.

Kurdistan was her second homeland and was always close to her heart. Her biggest concern was education; thus, the opening of schools here in the Kurdistan Region was very important to her. She believed in the potential of the younger generation and the future of our children.

What hurt Madame Mitterrand the most was fratricidal warfare and civil war. I can say that it caused as much pain as the chemical attacks on Halabja. She believed that during Anfal, the chemical attacks, and the revolution, she had more legitimacy to defend the rights of the Kurdish people. But when the Kurds killed each other and destroyed what they had achieved,

they lost that legitimacy. This hurt her deeply and she always said that the key to resolving the issue was through not only diplomatic and international efforts, but also the unity and reconciliation of Kurdish forces and the promotion of the principles of democracy, human rights, and peaceful coexistence.

She was against the civil war, saying that the Kurds must use the tools of democracy and respect for human rights and women's rights to oblige the world to recognize them. Therefore, she was very optimistic about the elections in the Kurdistan Region, saying that they would pave the way for reconciliation between Kurdish parties.

If Madame Mitterrand were alive today, she would sit down with the leaders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party and speak to us all. She would

have told them: Put aside narrow interests and do not forget your history, the *peshmerga* struggle, Anfal and the chemical attacks. Put the interests of your nation above everything and come together immediately to form a strong and united government based on competence and shared expertise. Have confidence in women's abilities, reactivate your parliament, rebuild your economy and never fight each other again.

Madame Mitterrand believed in the experience, wisdom, and personality of Masoud Barzani in easing tensions, reorganizing the Kurdish homeland, and establishing peace through dialogue. The centenary of Madame Mitterrand's birth should be an incentive to achieve the goals of this great queen for a better future for the Kurds and Kurdistan.

May peace be on the soul of Madame Danielle Mitterrand. ●

Honoring Godmother of Kurdish Studies

Kurdistan Chronicle



Credit: Frédérique Le Brun

■ Professor Joyce Blau.

Joyce Blau, an Egyptian-born French linguist renowned for her expertise in Kurdish language and literature – and thus known as the ‘Godmother of Kurdish Studies’ – passed away on October 24 at the age of 92. In honor of her monumental career, she was honored by several senior Kurdish leaders and experts on Kurds.

Martin van Bruinessen, Emeritus Professor at Utrecht University in the Netherlands and a leading author on the Kurds known for his seminal work *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that Blau was an activist and a scholar strongly committed to supporting the Kurdish struggle for self-determination and protecting Kurdish culture.

“Born into a Jewish family in Egypt, Blau was involved in efforts to bring Palestinians and Jews together during the struggles for decolonization and workers’ rights. Exiled to France in 1955, she remained politically active within the solidarity movement centered around the struggles for national liberation,” he said.

“This is how she first encountered the Kurdish movement, namely through the Kurdish lawyer, politician, and writer Kamuran Bedirxan, whose student she became. Blau’s first publication was a book on the Kurdish question, published in Brussels in 1963. Later, many studies of Kurdish language and literature followed.”



■ Professor Joyce Blau during the opening ceremony of a library named after her at the historical citadel of Erbil (May 13, 2023).

“She succeeded Bedirxan as professor of Kurdish language and civilization,” van Bruinessen noted, “and was for a long time the only professor in Europe who taught about the Kurds. She used this position to help Kurds who were exiled in France for political reasons. For instance, she offered the politician Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou and the human rights lawyer Mehmet Ali Aslan positions as her teaching assistants. Several generations of scholars in Europe are indebted to her.”

A go-between for France and Kurdistan

France’s Consul General in Erbil Yann Braem told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that Blau played an important role in the field of Kurdish studies in France, especially with her PhD thesis on the dialects of Amedi and Sinjar.

She also headed the Kurdish Studies department of the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) and contributed to creating scholarship about the Kurdish language and Kurdish civilization. “From an intellectual perspective, she has really paved the way for a lot of researchers to deepen our knowledge of Kurdish society,” Braem said.

The French photographer Edith Maubec, the wife of the famous French journalist Paul Maubec who also goes by

the pen name Chris Kutschera, was someone who Blau helped with her extensive knowledge of Kurdish affairs.

Maubec remembered her as an optimistic person and a problem-solver with a strong character. “She knew everything about Kurds. When I was writing captions for my photographs, and I forgot someone, I always asked Joyce, and she immediately knew the answer,” she told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

Nazand Begikhani, Vincent Wright Chair and Visiting Professor at Sciences Po Paris and General Secretary of the Kurdish Institute of Paris (KIP), added that Blau was an expert in Kurdish language and literature and taught several generations of students, including foreigners and second generations of Kurdish youth in the diaspora.

“She was a very kind and intelligent woman with a sense of humor and lots of positive energy. She was a dear friend and became family for many exiled Kurds in Paris, who left their homeland and family behind,” Begikhani added. “After her retirement from INALCO, where she taught, she worked at the KIP on a voluntary basis and was a board member and treasurer for more than two decades.”

KIP was founded by Yilmaz Gunay and Kendal Nezan in 1984. It is the oldest Kurdish institute in the West and has



■ Professor Joyce Blau (photo dated March 18, 1984).

served as an embassy for the Kurds from the four parts of Kurdistan. “KIP has played a vital role in strengthening the relationship between France and Kurdistan,” Braem said.

“They have been instrumental in mobilizing Kurdish and French decision makers, intellectuals, researchers, academics, and people of influence. Dan-

ielle Mitterrand, for instance, was very close to Nezan, so Blau participated in these very important endeavors of KIP.”

Emmanuel Poilane, Secretary of the Danielle Mitterrand Foundation, said that he worked closely with Blau for more than 15 years. “She was the go-between for France and Kurdis-

tan. She and Nezan were key figures in the relations between France and Kurdistan.”

Serving Kurdish language, literature, and culture

Braem remembers meeting her on the 40th anniversary of the KIP. “She still had duties at KIP, and I had contacts with her. Her passing has been a big shock for all of us who are interested in the Kurdish issue.”

“We can see that also from the number of people who have paid tribute to her memory during the different ceremonies that took place in Paris this month. The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, for example, was present during the burial ceremony. So, it’s a testimony to her legacy and all the work that she had done to ensure that Kurdish issues were present on the France intellectual and political scene,” Braem said.

Last year, on May 13, the Joyce Blau Library was inaugurated at the French Institute for the Near East by the French Consulate General in Erbil, in the presence of Kurdish officials and herself.

“The naming of the library was a testimony of the consideration that French academics have in relation to all the work she has been doing and to her contribution to scientific studies on the Kurdish language and Kurdish society.”

“I extend my deepest condolences to the family, relatives, friends, and acquaintances of Professor Joyce Blau,” Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani said in a condolence statement on October 25.

“Ms. Joyce Blau was a loyal friend to the Kurdistan people, who through her work, research, and publications, served the Kurdish language, literature, and culture,” Prime Minister Barzani concluded. ●

Advancing Human Rights in the Kurdistan Region



Dindar Zebari

is the Kurdistan Regional Government's Coordinator for International Advocacy.

The Office of the Coordinator for International Advocacy (OCIA) plays a pivotal role in promoting human rights, good governance, and international cooperation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Operating under the presidency of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Council of Ministers, OCIA ensures that the KRG adheres to international human rights treaties while driving essential reforms within regional governance frameworks.

At the core of its mandate, OCIA collaborates with various KRG ministries and agencies to address critical human rights challenges, safeguarding the rights and dignity of people in the region. It also serves as the Kurdistan Region's primary channel for engaging with international human rights mechanisms, ensuring regional practices align with global standards.

This engagement not only reflects the KRG's commitment to human rights, but also reinforces its standing as a partner in global efforts to promote peace and social justice.

Beyond advocacy, OCIA monitors KRG institutions to ensure compliance with international human rights standards, working closely with them by tracking progress, identifying areas for improvement, and championing transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. This oversight is critical to fostering a governance system that prioritizes equity, inclusion, and the protection of fundamental freedoms.

Accountability, advocacy, and oversight

OCIA's multifaceted approach underscores its significance as a bridge between international norms and local practices. It facilitates the KRG's involvement in international advocacy campaigns, reviews reports from global bodies, and ensures regional policies align with Iraq's international obligations. By fostering awareness in the KRG's institutions about global legislative implications, the office strengthens transparency and enhances governance practices in areas such as public freedoms and minority rights.

One of OCIA's key areas of work involves human rights advocacy and oversight, where it ensures that KRG institutions comply with international human rights laws and treaty obligations. This includes actively engaging with international mechanisms such as the UN and regional human rights organizations to ensure the Kurdistan Region remains accountable for its human rights practices.

The office also works to strengthen the rule of law and governance by promoting legislative reforms that address both local and global human rights concerns. Good governance initiatives focus on transparency, accountability, and ensuring the protection of the rights of marginalized communities, including refugees, minorities, and people with disabilities.

Another central responsibility of OCIA is its coordination for the recognition

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ISIS atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities, particularly the Yazidis, are recognized internationally as genocide
”



of ISIS crimes as genocide, where it works closely with the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by ISIS. This involves ensuring that ISIS atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities, particularly the Yazidis, are recognized internationally as genocide. The office has been at the forefront of supporting initiatives aimed at bringing perpetrators to justice and providing reparations to victims of ISIS violence. In line with this, OCIA coordinates efforts to investigate enforced disappearances and torture cases that occurred during ISIS's occupation of the region.

OCIA is also heavily involved in monitoring and reporting on human rights conditions in the Kurdistan Region, evaluating the KRG's progress in fulfilling its human rights commitments and ensuring that the government remains transparent and accountable in its human rights practices. The office also facilitates communication between the KRG and international human rights bodies, providing insights into national practices and policies and advocating for necessary reforms to ensure the protection of fundamental rights.

In the area of advocacy for vulnerable groups, OCIA's work is multifaceted. It prioritizes the rights of women, minorities, and internally displaced persons, advocating for legal frameworks and policies that protect their rights. The office also works to advance freedom of expression and supports media rights, ensuring that journalists and media workers can operate freely without fear of repression. Additionally, OCIA supports for the rights of foreign workers, pushing for better labor protections and combating exploitative practices.

Capacity building

OCIA enhances capacities on other serious issues. For example, it addresses human trafficking through collaborative efforts with national and international partners by advocating for

stronger legal frameworks to prevent trafficking and improving the support systems available for victims. It also provides policy recommendations on enhancing labor rights and addressing social justice issues, with a particular focus on integrating these concerns into the broader governance framework of the Kurdistan Region.

Meanwhile, OCIA also engages in capacity-building efforts within the KRG by organizing training programs for government officials, legislators, and civil society actors. These programs focus on raising awareness of international human rights norms, helping to integrate these standards into the policymaking processes. By fostering knowledge exchange between KRG officials and their international counterparts, OCIA helps the region implement best practices in governance and human rights.

“The KRG sets a model for balancing regional priorities with international obligations”

One of OCIA's strategic priorities is ensuring the ratification of international treaties by Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, particularly in areas related to human rights and humanitarian law. The office provides consultations on how to align national and regional policies with global standards and advocates for the implementation of multilateral agreements such as the Universal Periodic Review process. It works to ensure that Iraq, as a signatory to various international human rights conventions, adheres to its commitments and integrates international obligations into domestic law.

Finally, OCIA contributes to regional and national platforms focused on governance, human rights, and humanitarian responses. The office regularly participates in dialogues with regional partners to ensure that the KRG's human rights priorities are integrated into broader regional discussions. These engagements help position the Kurdistan Region as a responsible actor in the region's human rights landscape, while also enhancing cooperation with neighboring countries and international organizations.

2021-2025 plan

On September 15, 2021, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers approved the KRG's Human Rights Action Plan (2021-2025), underscoring the importance of human rights and the implementation of international recommendations directed at the region. This is a key element of the KRG's reform agenda.

The plan has been meticulously crafted and endorsed by the judiciary, the Presidency of the Kurdistan Region, the Presidency of the Parliament, the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq, civil society, non-governmental organizations, diplomatic missions in the region and the National Committee for Writing the Report of the Agreements Ratified by Iraq.

Encouragingly, the majority of the recommendations outlined in the plan have been implemented in recent years, including the enactment of laws, policies, and concrete steps in the Kurdistan Region, particularly in areas of law protecting the rights of communities and combating domestic violence, the Children's Rights Protection Act, and the Journalism Act, among others. As of May 2024, the number of implemented recommendations rose to 171, while the number of recommendations still to be implemented decreased to 127, with 102 recommendations in the implementation stage. The rate of implementation has increased, with 42.8% of recommendations fully im-

A view of downtown Erbil.



Photo: Riband Saadalla



■ A barbershop inside a refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Safin Hamid

plemented and 25.5% under active implementation.

Leaders in human rights

OCIA has been integral to the Kurdistan Region's efforts to foster human rights progress. The conference commemorating the 76th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, held on December 3, 2024 in Erbil, was one of many conferences organized by the OCIA. These events are held regularly, either annually or upon the completion of significant missions. In addition to large-scale conferences, OCIA conducts seasonal workshops, roundtable gatherings, and semi-conferences, creating numerous opportunities for dialogue and engagement with international and regional stakeholders.

These events not only provide a platform to discuss the KRG's human rights progress, but also focus on addressing ongoing challenges.

The conference reaffirmed the commitment of the Kurdistan Region's authorities to human rights and sustainable development, emphasizing the importance of collaboration with international and regional partners. It also highlighted the KRG's achievements, including its leadership in finalizing the Human Rights Action Plan and its contributions to advancing governance reforms and fostering regional stability.

The Kurdistan Region's authorities have established themselves as leaders in the promotion of human rights, transparency, and international cooperation. Their comprehensive approach to advocacy and reform demonstrates a steadfast commitment to aligning the region with global standards while addressing local challenges. As they continue their mission, the KRG sets a model for balancing regional priorities with international obligations, paving the way for a more equitable and just future. ●

Moorhead, Minnesota DMV Offers Written Tests in Kurdish

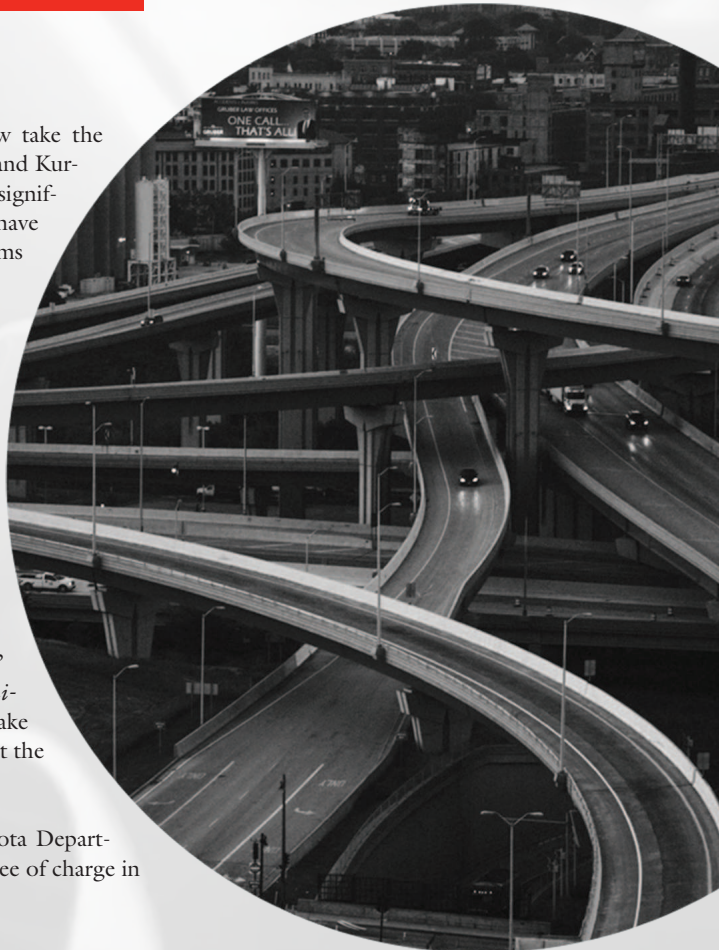
Kurdistan Chronicle

Kurdish residents in Moorhead, Minnesota can now take the written test for a driver's license in both the Sorani and Kurmanji dialects of Kurdish. This change comes as a significant relief for members of the Kurdish community, who have faced challenges in obtaining permits due to the written exams being available only in English.

Minnesota State Senator Rob Kupec commended the Moorhead Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) for its implementation of a new law designed to enhance accessibility for non-English speaking drivers. The law allows written driver's license tests to be conducted in multiple languages and permits the presence of interpreters, ensuring that new U.S. residents can navigate the licensing process more easily.

"We want the drivers on our roads to be safe and qualified as they go about their lives, and drivers can prove this by taking and passing the tests necessary to get their license," said Senator Kupec in a statement sent to *Kurdistan Chronicle*. "Now, we are making it easier for new Minnesotans to take these tests by providing language services that will help meet the needs of our diverse community."

Passed earlier this year, the law mandates that the Minnesota Department of Public Safety provide equivalent testing materials free of charge in



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It is unlikely that there is another state in the United States where individuals can take the driving test in Kurdish

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Photo: Tom Barrett / Unsplash



non-English languages that are spoken by at least 20% of the total number of transactions or office visits at DMV locations. This initiative is particularly beneficial for communities with large immigrant populations, facilitating access to the tests required for obtaining a driver's license.

Community advocacy at its finest

Jihan Brifki, a Kurdish activist and advocate for the community, expressed relief at the change. "The Kurdish community has faced challenges in obtaining permits due to the written exams being available only in English," she explained.

Brifki took the initiative to meet with Senator Kupec to discuss these issues, leading to a swift resolution. "Thanks to his diligent work, the matter was resolved in less than a month," Brifki remarked. With the new provisions in place, interpreters are available at local DMV stations to

assist those who may struggle with reading or writing in English.

Minnesota is home to a large Kurdish population, with between 4,000 and 5,000 Kurds living in Moorhead. Brifki noted that the city is a welcoming community that continues to attract new Kurdish residents.

For Brifki and other Kurds in the state, this development represents a significant milestone. "It is unlikely that there is another state in the United States where individuals can take the driving test in Kurdish," she noted. "It underscores the importance of advocating for our community's needs. We hope to see more achievements like this in the future."

This new law not only enhances accessibility, but also strengthens the integration of diverse communities into the fabric of Minnesota, ensuring that all residents have the opportunity to participate fully in society. ●

INCLUSION

One Driver's License at a Time



Senator Rob Kupec
Minnesota State Senator

Minnesota is known for its 10,000 lakes, cold winters, and Scandinavian heritage – our football team, after all, is called the Vikings.

But Minnesota is also home to many other cultures. For example, we have the largest Hmong population in the United States. The Hmong are an ethnic group with ancient roots in China who began arriving in Minnesota in 1975 as refugees from the wars in Laos. Additionally, Latinos now account for 6% of the population of the state.

As a State Senator I represent Moorhead, Minnesota and the areas around it. Combined with our neighbor on the North Dakota side of the border, Fargo, we have a Kurdish population of well over 1,000. Kurds began coming to the area in the early 1990s after the first Gulf War and continue to arrive.

Our area has been a refugee resettlement area for quite some time. There are over 40 languages spoken in the Moorhead School District. Our unemployment rate is usually well below the national average, and we have a shortage of workers. Combine that with a relatively low cost of living and you have an attractive place to begin a new life in the United States.

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I hope that other states will follow Minnesota's lead and make tests available to different communities in their states

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We want our new neighbors to become an integral part of our community, and a big part of that is the ability to get a driver's license. We had heard from many groups around the state that some new Americans were having trouble with the written driver's test in English. So, last year the legislature passed a law allowing the Commissioner of the Department of Public Safety to provide written materials such as applications, forms, letters, notices, or any documents necessary in a language other than English, if the commissioner determines that a substantial number of non-English speaking people use the services at a particular driver's license office.

This past August, Jihan Brifiki, a Moorhead Kurdish com-

munity leader, reached out to me to see if we could get tests in the Kurmanji and Sorani dialects in the Moorhead office. I was able to put her in touch with the appropriate individual at the state level and within one month we had the tests available at the Moorhead office.

We want the drivers on our roads to be safe and qualified as they go about their lives, and drivers can prove this by taking and passing the tests necessary to get their licenses. Making it easier for all Minnesotans to take these tests by providing language services will help meet the needs of our diverse community. I hope that other states will follow Minnesota's lead and make tests available to different communities in their states. ●

AGRICULTURE

Halabja's Pomegranate Revival



Pesbraw Mahdi

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



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Halabja, once a victim of war and chemical weapons smelling like apples, has flourished with its focus on pomegranates, showcasing the city's resilience and continuity in the face of challenges

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Photos: Pesbraw Mahdi



■ *The Halabja Pomegranate Festival, November 2024.*



■ U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski and U.S. Consul General in Erbil Steven Bitner visiting a local fruit store in Halabja.

The history of the city of Halabja is rich in events both happy and tragic. The city has sacrificed much, but these sacrifices have led to freedom and prosperity. One event serves as a celebration of this past alongside the future: the annual pomegranate festival.

Held in the first week of November in Halabja Park and Games' City, the Tenth Pomegranate Festival was a bustling success, with reports of more than 80,000 tourists visiting Halabja Governorate on the first day of the festival. According to the General Directorate of Tourism of Halabja, about 300,000 tourists and visitors in total attended the festival over the course of three days, spending some 1.5 billion Iraqi dinars.

Meanwhile, over 700 farmers, gardeners, vendors, and craftswomen – in addition to about 150 shops – participated, selling handicrafts as well as produce. Additionally, more than 200 vendors offered Kurdish delicacies, including pomegranate products, nuts, honey, and dried fruit.

Agricultural activities in the Kurdistan Region have increased during tenure of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ninth Cabinet, and Halabja's annual pomegranate festival is one prominent example of this. The festival is in collaboration with the General Directorate of Agriculture of Halabja within the framework of the KRG.

Fruitful Halabja

The Kurdistan Region boasts fertile soil and a favorable climate for agriculture and is one of the oldest agricultural regions in the world. The village of Charmo near Chamchamal stands out as the oldest recorded site with evidence of wheat cultivation, dating back approximately 7,000 years.

The different climatic characteristics from one area to another has fostered the cultivation of a variety of crops, vegetables, and agricultural products in the region, and each area is known for its specialty.

Halabja is known for its plentiful varieties of fruit, especially pomegran-

ates. Due to the large number of agricultural products grown in the area, Halabja has become an agricultural hotspot.

The festival, of course, would not happen without the hard work of farmers and gardeners. One of the leading farmers in the region is Hamid Ismail, owner of Kurdistan Farm. He produces pomegranates and a number of other crops. "This year's pomegranate crop was juicy and special," Ismail explained.

He also emphasized the importance of this festival for the marketing of local products. "This festival is a wonderful opportunity for us to sell their products to new customers and help them reach other cities in Kurdistan and Iraq," he said.

Chia Qasim, Director General of Tourism of Halabja, noted that the farmers' marketing techniques have changed over the years. Typically, the farmers transport their products to warehouses, from which they are then distributed to other governorates. However, farmers have begun selling



■ A woman in Kurdish attire posing with pomegranates during the Halabja Pomegranate Festival.

Photos: Peshraw Mahdi



■ A local fruit store in Halabja.

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi

their products to the tourists visiting Halabja in a kind of agro-tourism exchange.

Qasim explained that Halabja has created an advisory board of experts and advisors working in the Council of Ministers to ensure that the governorate’s products reach consumers in Iraq and even worldwide. Halabja’s renowned domestic agricultural products, dairy products, handicrafts, and dried food crops are all in great demand, and attract tourists both locally and internationally.

The city’s annual pomegranate festival has certainly bolstered Halabja’s notoriety and reputation, making it a local and regional destination, with some visitors coming from abroad. The U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Alina

Romanowski, and Consul General in Erbil Steven Bitner, accompanied by the Governor of Halabja and several other political and diplomatic figures, visited the festival in November 2024, expressing their admiration for the quality and taste of the products of Kurdish farms.

This influx of visitors benefits the economy of the governorate during the festival, while the visitors benefit from the chance to sample a buffet of heavenly flavors.

The popularity of the festival has also led to new job opportunities for locals and revitalized the tourism sector in the governorate. The city’s residents take this festival seriously because whenever it is held, all the streets, shops, and markets of Halabja are

packed with visitors and tourists.

Reaching new markets

This year, the area experienced increased agricultural production, and both Halabja residents and festival organizers want to expand the market for their products. To achieve this, they are positioning the festival as an eco-tourism event capable of powering an economic revival for the area as a whole.

The KRG has undoubtedly put great effort toward marketing Kurdish agricultural products to international markets in recent years. These include initiatives to support local bazaars and open up new international markets for Kurdish products. There have

been other steps taken to market local products and improve their quality through collaboration with and support for local farmers and business.

Qasim hopes that the government will continue the path of the Ninth Cabinet and its vision of exporting Kurdistan’s fruit and other agricultural products. “I hope they will expand this area to include not only local products of Halabja, but also honey and potatoes, which may not require extensive work. These domestic products are produced in large quantities and there is a need for a market to sell them.”

Qasim also believes that this can deliver a positive message to the world through pomegranates, Duhok strawberries, mountain honey, Akre’s fa-

mous figs, and Taqtaq’s domestic agricultural products.

There is considerable demand abroad for Kurdistan’s products, as they are organic and are traditionally grown without the use of harmful substances. Such practices makes these domestic products stand out in terms of their nutritional benefit, taste, and color.

Farmers like Ismail appreciate the steps taken by the KRG to find markets for their products, especially the pomegranates. They vow that such support will encourage them to increase domestic production in the coming years.

Indeed, farmers from the other side of the border in Eastern Kurdistan

(northwestern Iran) have also begun to exhibit their products in the festival.

The organizers of the festival also expect much more interest and participation in the future. Administrative officials are working toward improving and expanding the venue of the festival in the future, as well as building the necessary facilities for tourists. The Halabja Pomegranate Festival has helped establish a modern tradition of economic transaction in the area. Halabja, once a victim of war and chemical weapons smelling like apples, has flourished with its focus on pomegranates, showcasing the city’s resilience and continuity in the face of challenges. ●

Duhok's Honey Harmed by War

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According to locals, honey production in Duhok Governorate has halved in the past two years mostly due to the ongoing conflict between Türkiye and the PKK

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Riyadh Al-Hamadany

is an Iraqi journalist who has worked with numerous local and international media outlets.



Photos: Riyad Al-Hamadany

A misty shadow casts over daily life in Duhok Governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, as beekeepers face a silent threat to their livelihood and heritage. In recent years, honey production in the area has witnessed a sharp decline due to the profound impact of the ongoing Turkish military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Jaafar Ali, a prominent beekeeper in the area, narrates a heartbreaking story of losing the source of his livelihood. "The beehives we used to tend in the areas outside the district center were hit by the bombardment of planes and obliterated. I have lost more than 200 beehives so far, and only 50 remain." These words sum up the suffering of an entire sector of society, who have been forced to flee their villages on the border in search of safety. The slopes of Mount Matin house dozens of Turkish military posts, showing the proliferation of the conflict there. Behind this mountain lies Ali's village as well as many others, now empty as though haunted by ghosts: "We cannot go there because of the bombings," Ali adds sadly. "We left a large group of beehives in the village, some of which were burned by fire and others destroyed by shelling."

Official statistics reveal the scale of the tragedy, indicating that 95% of the villages in the town of Deraluk alone have been forcibly evacuated. This heartbreaking situation extends to most villages in the border areas of Duhok Governorate, where residents have lost their homes, properties, and livelihoods.



■ Jaafar Ali, a Kurdish beekeeper from Duhok.

Not very long ago, the fertile mountainous areas of Amedi and its surroundings were ideal habitats for beekeeping, producing an abundant supply of high-quality honey. "We were free to move from one place to another," Ali says. "But now people are forced to leave their villages and move their hives inside residential complexes and closer to their houses."

The numbers underscore the destruction. According to official statistics, until 2023, Duhok Governorate produced about 350 tons of honey annually. Since then, nearly 50 Kurdish beekeepers have lost their lives, and vast areas of mountain farms have been burned by PKK members, destroying lands that grow the flowers that bees depend on for food.

A tragic testimony

In a scene that reflects the tragedy of war and its repercussions on the lives of civilians, beekeepers in northeastern Duhok find themselves trapped in a life of fear and restrictions, as armed conflicts between the PKK and the Turkish military have turned their lives and livelihoods upside down.

In a special interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, a beekeeper tells his story, preferring to remain anonymous for fear of revenge by PKK members. "Our situation is very bad," he says with regret. "We cannot take our bees to the places we want, to their natural

environment, where there are many flowers and plants."

"We can't go there because of the PKK presence," he explains. "It has been about 10 years since we were banned from entering those areas."

"Please don't take any pictures of me," he adds. "I don't want the PKK to know that I made a statement against them to any media outlet." This fear reflects the psychological pressure that locals are under.

"We're not even allowed to go there," he says, pointing to a nearby area. "It's very close, isn't it? But we can't go because the Turkish military will target the PKK at any moment, with PKK members hiding in the farms that we have abandoned."

"The area has become a prison for us, especially in the Amedi area and its two towns, Deraluk and Shiladze. I swear, you could say that we live in a prison here," he pleads.

According to locals, honey production in Duhok Governorate has halved in the past two years mostly due to the ongoing conflict between Türkiye and the PKK. Beekeepers near Amedi have been forced to move their hives from the mountains to nearby villages, reducing the quality and quantity of their production. This situation threatens not only the honey industry but also the social and economic fabric of local communities. The slopes of Mount Gara and Mount Matin were once ideal habitats for beekeeping, but the ongoing shelling has forced beekeepers to move to the residential complexes of Shiladze and Deraluk.

Beekeepers face significant challenges as they try to preserve their profession and heritage; the sweet story of their mountain honey has turned bitter due to conflict. This crisis highlights the urgent need for peaceful solutions that ensure the safety of civilians and allow them to freely resume their economic activities. ●

A Tale of Triumph and Tenacity



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.

Dr. Hiro Khoshnaw was born in Erbil, the capital and historic heart of the Kurdistan Region. She is the daughter of Ali Abdullah, one of the founders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Akleema Jalizada, the daughter of the renowned Great Mullah (Malay Gawra in Kurdish) of Koy Sanjaq—a prominent town in Erbil Governorate, also known as Koye, located about 75 km east of Erbil. Following an illustrious medical career, Dr. Khoshnaw now serves as the president of the London-based Kurdistan Medical and Scientific Federation (KMSF). She recently spoke exclusively with *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

A childhood of relocating and adapting

Khoshnaw started off by reminiscing about her early life. She spent most of her early childhood years in Erbil and Koy Sanjaq. “My father was a member of the KDP’s policymaking committee and an active advocate for the Kurdish cause. As a result, we moved from one place to another to avoid imprisonment by the Ba’ath party. In 1968 we moved to Baghdad and lived with the family of my maternal uncle, Masoud Mohammad Jalizada, for a while,” she shared.

She started her primary school in Baghdad. “I remember those days,” she said. “I didn’t speak Arabic, the formal language taught in school, and like many other Kurdish students, I was bullied by

some of the Arabic-speaking students. Fortunately, I picked up the language very quickly and soon became one of the top students in my class.”

In March 1970, a peace agreement was signed between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish forces. As a result, Khoshnaw’s father was able to join the family in Baghdad. “It was the first time that we were all together as a family; my father, my mother, my brother, my sister and I. My father became the editor-in-chief for the newspaper *al-Taakhi*,” she said.

In 1971, Khoshnaw’s father was appointed the governor of the Sulaymaniyah Governorate, which led the family to move there. Here, Khoshnaw continued her education. She recalls fond memories from those days, describing the city as a very lively city with friendly and sociable people. “I am still in contact with my best friend from those days. My brother and I continued our education at an Arabic school in Sulaymaniyah. My late mother taught us the Kurdish alphabet at home, which is how we learnt to read and write in Kurdish,” she said.

In March 1974, with the conflict between the Iraqi government and Kurdish forces restarting, Khoshnaw’s family left Sulaymaniyah and joined her father in the mountains of Choman and Nawprdan, currently lies in the Erbil Governorate, which was known as the capital of the September Revolution. A few months later, her family, along with a few other



Dr. Hiro Khoshnaw

■ Dr. Hero Khoshnaw

Kurdish families, fled Kurdistan to escape the increasingly vicious attacks by the Iraqi army, seeking refuge in Iran.

Iran and the UK

After the 1975 collapse of the Kurdish uprising, they stayed in Iran until 1990. Initially they lived in Urmia in West Azerbaijan Province before relocating to Karaj, near Tehran.

In Iran, Khoshnaw was once again faced with the challenges of adapting to a new language and culture. “I remember the first days of secondary school in Urmia, when I had a fantastic math teacher who was very supportive and encouraging. With her support, I became confident and was able to progress. By the time I reached high school, I had mastered Farsi and the other subjects to the extent that in the final year I achieved the highest grade in all eight baccalaureate subjects and became the top student in the entire country,” she told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

In 1984, Khoshnaw took the university entrance exam and was offered a place at the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, graduating in 1990. But life as a refugee in Iran was full of challenges and uncertainty, and after completing her internship in Iran, she moved to the UK to pursue a career in medicine.

After passing the Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board examination – the successful completion of which is mandatory for overseas doctors to practice medicine in the UK – she started her first job in the National Health Service (NHS) in August 1992 as a junior doctor. Then, in 1995, she started her higher specialist training in general internal and geriatric medicine. In December 2000, she obtained the Certificate of Completion of Specialist Training and in April 2001 she became a consultant physician and geriatrician at the Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust,

in Guildford, Surrey, where she currently resides.

Importance of Kurdish family

Khoshnaw credits her career success to her family, especially her parents. She describes her mother as “the kindest person one could imagine.” A devoted mother and a loyal wife, she was also a selfless sister and sincere friend who had great passion for reading. Although her mother never attended university, she was well educated through her own self-directed learning. “She was an inspiration, and I think my passion for reading and learning came from her. She loved children and influenced all the Kurdish community around her as a role model for ‘a perfect mother’,” she said.

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One of our main goals within KMSF is to promote Kurdish identity, culture, and language among the new generation of Kurdish youth in the UK
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Although Khoshnaw’s father was often absent in the early years of her childhood, she described him as “a wonderful dad.” Despite his busy schedule and extended responsibilities, he always made sure that he had time for his children. “I remember in my early days of secondary school in Iran, he helped me a lot with my math lessons. He was a passionate Kurd, who believed in equality and justice. He taught us to be brave, proud, and

honest, and not to fear challenges in life,” she recalled.

As a child she was fortunate to be surrounded by her extended family. Her maternal aunt, Najiba Jalizada, lived with them for a few years and was notably the first Kurdish girl to attend school in Koy Sanjaq in the 1920s. “What was unique about my aunt is that her father, Malay Gawra, sent her to a boy’s school, as there was no schools for girls in those days. She had a strong personality, was full of confidence, and immersed herself in books and journals. She was also a strong advocate for women’s rights,” Khoshnaw said.

Meanwhile, her uncle, the famous Masoud Mohammed Jalizada, was a well-known writer and philosopher. Khoshnaw described him as very kind with a great sense of humor. “In my father’s absence, he was a great support to my family.”

I asked Khoshnaw how being a stateless Kurd and her academic journey affected her professional success. “I believe that the challenges that I have been through as a Kurd since childhood have given me resilience and strength. Learning new languages and adapting to different cultures have broadened my horizons and enhanced my ability to cope with change. I learned to be ambitious, but also realistic and flexible. I believe hard work pays off, and this has been my motto throughout my life,” she shared. “Success is often the result of sustained effort rather than luck or talent alone.”

Supporting Kurdish doctors and medical professionals

Khoshnaw has always been proud of being a Kurd and used every opportunity to promote her Kurdish identity, history, and culture. “This has been the drive for me to act as a mentor and coach for a few Kurdish doctors in the UK and in Kurdistan. On a wider scale, I have also been very sup-

portive of international medical graduates seeking a career in the UK,” she added.

Khoshnaw’s special interest is medical education. Parallel to her role as a clinician, she has pursued this interest by taking on educator roles at local, regional, and national levels. She is currently the Director of Medical Education at the Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust, an examiner for the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians Exam, and a fellow of the Academy of Medical Educators.

Khoshnaw is also an Honorary Visiting Associate Professor in Medical Education at the School of Medicine at the University of Kurdistan Hewler (UKH). She is keen on being more involved with improving medical education and training in Kurdistan and passionate about transforming health services in Kurdistan. “I believe this could be achieved through investing in public health services, enhancing payments and rewards for doctors and health care professions working in the public sector, and creating a robust regulatory system within the public and private health sectors. The current health system in Kurdistan and in Iraq as a whole, is ‘doctor-centered’ not ‘patient-centered’, which is contrary to my experience in the NHS,” she highlighted.

The Kurdistan Medical and Scientific Federation

I recently participated in “The Health and Success Conference” on behalf of *Kurdistan Chronicle* team in London, which was organized by KMSF. Khoshnaw is currently the Chair of the KMSF Board. Through this federation, Khoshnaw and her team aim to

■ Dr. Hero Khoshnaw

Photo: Goran Shakhawan



■ Dr. Hero Khoshnaw and her father Ali Abdullah.



■ Dr. Hero Khoshnaw and her children.



have a more structured approach in supporting Kurdish doctors and professionals in the UK and to celebrate Kurdish identity.

KMSF was established in 1988, initially under a different name, the Kurdish Scientific and Medical Association. Over the years, it has undergone changes to meet the demand of the growing number of Kurdish medical and scientific professionals in the UK. Khoshnaw joined the organization in 2000 and was elected as a board member soon thereafter. She has been the board's chair now for several years.

Today, KMSF has become the voice of Kurdish doctors, healthcare professionals, academics, scientists, and postgraduate certificate holders residing outside of Kurdistan. Their mission is to promote cooperation, unity, and excellence among their members while advancing healthcare standards and scientific research in the Kurdistan Region.

Through networking, support, and collaborative initiatives, KMSF provides valuable resources and opportunities to its members. "We organize conferences, seminars, and research projects, fostering knowledge exchange and career development. We also organize social events aiming at fundraising to support cancer care hospitals in Kurdistan," Khoshnaw related.

When asked about her plans to leverage her expertise to enhance the healthcare system in the Kurdistan Region or to build connections supporting healthcare initiatives through KMSF, Dr. Khoshnaw shared that she has been collaborating with medical schools in Kurdistan since 1997. Her efforts began with collecting books, journals, and teaching materials during the years of the embargo on the Kurdistan Region in the 1990s.

However, since 2001, Khoshnaw has visited Kurdistan regularly as an external examiner for medical schools and

has delivered lectures and workshops to help schools develop their faculty. "I supported Hewler Medical University to develop their education department. More recently, I have been involved in the design and delivery of a postgraduate degree in medical education at the School of Medicine at UKH," she said.

Her ultimate aim is to return to Kurdistan permanently and devote her time to medical education and improving health services in Kurdistan, drawing on her experience with the NHS.

Kurdish community in London

While I was in London, I could not help but notice how active the Kurdish community was, and was eager to know the secret behind this. I also

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Khoshnaw's success story is inspirational for many younger Kurds in Kurdistan and abroad
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observed that the new Kurdish generation born abroad were so familiar with Kurdish culture and language.

I asked Khoshnaw about this, and she highlighted that the Kurdish community in the UK has a wealth of talent and expertise. "In recent years, KMSF has focused on bringing together this valuable resource through networking, effective communication, and organizing high quality seminars, to celebrate the success and achievements of Kurdish talent," she said.

All KMSF activities are organized and delivered on a voluntary basis, which reflects the dedication and commitment of their members and executive board. Its aim is to raise awareness

in Kurdistan of this largely unrecognized and underutilized resource and to build bridges between Kurdistan and the medical and scientific community in the UK.

"One of our main goals within KMSF is to promote Kurdish identity, culture, and language among the new generation of Kurdish youth in the UK. Without our language, we will not survive," she exclaimed.

Khoshnaw has also contributed to several schools in London and other parts of England, where the Kurdish language is being taught to children by Kurdish speaking teachers.

Outside of medicine, Khoshnaw strives to maintain a good work-life balance. "I always make time for family and friends. My nephew Bayad and my two nieces, Bayan and Neyan, are the joy of my life, and I try to spend as much time as possible with them. I enjoy travelling and learning about new cultures as well, and I am very organized with booking my annual leave in advance," she said.

"I also enjoy reading poetry and listening to music. Cooking wasn't my passion to start with, but now I use it as a means of relaxation and mindfulness. Also, nothing is more relaxing than sitting on a comfortable sofa, watching a good movie with a cup of tea," she added.

Khoshnaw's success story is inspirational for many younger Kurds in Kurdistan and abroad. When I asked her what her advice for young people was, she replied that, "wherever they reside, they should be proud of their Kurdish identity, believe in themselves, and be confident about their capabilities. With the right attitude and hard work, they can overcome barriers and succeed. The next generation is the hope for a better future for our nation, so be passionate about introducing new ideas and implementing change. And, as Mahatma Gandhi said, 'Be the change you wish to see in the world'," she shared. ●

Nation Building and Language Planning



*Dilan Majid Rostam
is an Assistant Professor at
the University of Duhok,
Kurdistan Region.*

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), established in 1992, has grown into a significant political entity in the Middle East, governing a region home to around 4-5 million Kurds. Despite sharing a common identity and culture, the Kurds speak a variety of dialects, presenting a linguistic challenge in terms of education and language planning. While scholars have long called for a unified Kurdish writing system to bridge dialectal divides, the search for the “superior dialect” and “preferred writing system” has become a politically charged issue, complicating efforts to standardize the language.

In the northern areas of the Kurdistan Region, dialects like Behdini, Surci, Ezidxani and Hekari are spoken, while in central regions, dialects such as Sorani Mukri, Germiyani, Xoshnaw, Pijhder, Pirani, Wermawe, and Hewleri dominate. The southern areas of the Kurdistan Region are home to dialects like Bajelani, Kelhuri and Gorani, and others, such as Hewrami and Shabaki in the Mosul area, are spoken in distinct pockets. This linguistic diversity poses a major challenge for language planning.

The thorny issues of standardization

The debate over Kurdish language standardization began in the aftermath of World War I, when the fall of the Ottoman Empire gave rise to new nation-states, each adhering to the European notion of “one nation, one people, one language.”

As Kurdish leaders pushed for self-determination, language became a political tool. Scholars like Cecil J. Edmonds argued for a unified Kurdish dialect, advocating Babani, the dialect spoken around Sulaymaniyah, to serve as the basis for a standard Kurdish language.

Efforts to codify Kurdish and develop a standardized writing system were numerous between 1918 and 1933, but in Iraqi Kurdistan the Arabic script won the battle based on religious and political grounds. More recently, in 2008, Kurdish intellectuals called for Sorani to be recognized as the official language of the Kurdistan Region, reigniting the debate. This mirrors the language battles of the early 20th century, when Kurdish language planning became entangled in political agendas rather than focusing on linguistic solutions that could unify the diverse dialects.

Whether the reform of Kurdish language to better serve its speakers helps the disparate segments of the Kurdish nation converge, however, is independent of the logistics of physically constructing and legitimately establishing the geographical boundaries for a country called Kurdistan. The creation of a Kurdish nation-state depends on legal, constitutional, and political processes – not solely on language reform.

The role of language in Kurdish identity Contrary to some nationalist arguments, a nation does not require a single language to exist. The Kurdish people, with their rich cultural and linguistic diver-



Photo: Nasib Ali Khayat



Photo: Levi meir clancy / Unsplash

sity, have maintained their identity for centuries. Many Kurds no longer speak their ancestral language due to pressures from the states that govern their regions. Nevertheless, language remains a crucial tool for uniting a people, and for Kurds, preserving and fostering the Kurdish language is essential to maintaining a cohesive national identity.

The Kurdish language ultimately requires a practical language policy that embraces its dialectal diversity while facilitating broader communication. This would involve promoting all Kurdish dialects while adopting a unified writing system. A successful language plan would need to respect the unique character of Kurdish society, which is defined by its pluricentric language and demographic diversity. The KRG has an opportunity, for the first time in history, to oversee its own language planning. Establishing a capable institution to handle this process is crucial. Kurdish language planners should not fear revising past decisions, as the language planning experience in Kurdistan is relatively young. Kurds can learn from other nations' successes and failures in language policy, such as the Turk-speaking countries of Central Asia

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By focusing on practical solutions that benefit all Kurdish speakers, the KRG can develop a language policy that celebrates the diversity of the Kurdish nation while fostering greater cohesion
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including Türkiye, which, in September 2024, adopted a unified Latin based alphabet to enhance communication across dialects.

A unified writing system

The current Kurdish writing systems present various challenges, such as a lack of cross-dialectal usage and international IT-based standards. To overcome these obstacles, I propose a Kurdish Unified Alphabet (KUAL), based on the International ISO-8859-

1 standard, which would allow for the seamless use of Kurdish across different dialects and electronic media.

The KUAL builds on existing Latin-based Kurdish writing systems while introducing minor changes to make the alphabet more flexible and suitable for all Kurdish dialects. By adopting this system, Kurds would be able to write in their own dialects while using a common alphabet that bridges the linguistic gaps between them. Articles written in any Kurdish dialect could be labelled accordingly, fostering curiosity and understanding across dialects.

A unified alphabet would not only make communication more efficient, but also promote national unity. Kurdish media, for example, could play a significant role in this effort by adopting the unified alphabet and promoting common vocabulary, while respecting dialectal differences.

Avoiding a political battlefield

Unfortunately, the debate over Kurdish language reform has often been dominated by political considerations rather than linguistic practicality.



Photo: Levi meir clancy / Unsplash

■ Kurdistan flag flying high in the ancient citadel of Erbil.

Some argue for maintaining the Arabic script, viewing it as a symbol of religious identity, while others champion the Latin-based script as a marker of Kurdish national identity. Both perspectives miss the point: an alphabet is a tool for communication, not a battleground for national symbolism.

Prominent scholars, both Kurdish and non-Kurdish, such as Taufiq Wahby, Cecil J. Edmonds, David Neil MacKenzie, Bedir Khan, Abdull Rahman Haji Ma'ref, Vladimir Minorsky, Amir Hassanpour, and Jamal Nebez, long supported the adoption of a Latin-based alphabet for Kurdish. If not for the political pressures in the aftermath of World War I, Kurds might have adopted a Latin script much earlier. The choice of alphabet should be based on functionality and practicality, not political or cultural biases.

The way forward

A reformed and unified Kurdish writing system like KUAL offers a practical solution to the challenges posed by Kurdish linguistic diversity. By adopting a common alphabet that accommodates all dialects, Kurds can improve communication within their community while preserving the richness of their language. At the same time, the media, and education systems should promote a flexible and inclusive approach to language use, encouraging understanding and unity across dialects.

Language planning is an essential component of nation building, but it should not be politicized. By focusing on practical solutions that benefit all Kurdish speakers, the KRG can develop a language policy that celebrates the diversity of the Kurdish nation while fostering greater cohesion. ●

The Healing Generation



Chris Bowers

is the former UK Consulate General in the Kurdistan Region and has been working on KRI for more than a decade.

The November issue of Kurdistan Chronicle featured a story about the training in cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) being delivered by the Oxford Cognitive Therapy Centre, a part of Oxford University, to 30 trainees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. CBT is the most internationally researched and most effective form of ‘talking cure’ therapy and is endorsed by the World Health Organization as the ‘go-to’ treatment for most mental health patients.

As a follow up, this article recounts the experiences of two successful trainees in the Oxford program, Dyari Hama Amin and Vana Jabar. Their experiences have unlocked insights that resonate across Kurdistan in light of the challenges that the region has been faced with. The two trainees explain what they have learned through the training, what mental health means for them, and its importance to Kurdish society.

Intergenerational trauma

Amin’s interest in mental health started at a very young age, namely during the upheaval of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. “One of my earliest memories is waking up early in the morning, and everything around me was in total chaos. I asked my family, ‘What’s going on?’ They told me, ‘well, there’s a possibility that our city will come under attack from chemical weapons.’ We decided to stay. It was an extremely vivid experience,” Amin recalled.

“My father was going around trying to plug windows, and everyone was doing something,” he related. “I often look back on this, especially when my parents would act anxiously, when they would be overprotective, when they would put an overemphasis on us eating because they’d been through the embargo [in the 1990s, during the international sanctions on Iraq] and knowing what it was like not having enough food.

“Understanding the connection between what my parents had been through, their thoughts and emotions, and then how they behaved with me was what triggered my interest in psychology. Later, one of my cousins told me about her struggles with depression, which made me interested in using psychology to help people in a clinical setting,” Amin explained.

Amin underscored that many Kurds of his generation have faced the same hardships, which further motivated his interest in studying how CBT can help heal intergenerational trauma with trauma-informed therapy.

Meanwhile, Jabar has been working with internally displaced people who fled ISIS into Kurdistan. She agrees that trauma can be passed through generations and that many younger people can feel the impact of the trauma that their parents went through.

Her own mother shows clear anxiety, which is derived from her previous traumatic experiences. “She’s always scared

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The trainees were also surprised and impressed by the effort the Oxford trainers would exert to contextualize CBT to a Kurdistan setting

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that something bad will happen or I will die and as a result, she’s always calling me and asking where I am, have I reached my location, am I safe, and so on,” Jabar explained.

Amin and Jabar consider themselves part of what they call the “Healing Generation,” but agree that it can be hard to treat and heal their parents’ generation given all the trauma that they have experienced.

Many of Amin’s clients are affected by their own trauma, with depression and anxiety and other issues flowing from that of their parents. However, the newer generations who experienced the post-1990s and post-2003 traumas are more open to therapy and more committed to the process, according to him. These younger generations talk about mental health or seeing a therapist as something quite normal, as it should be.

CBT in a local context

When Jabar heard about the Oxford-led CBT course she remembered thinking that it would be “magical” to be able to advance her studies in psychology. Initially afraid that the trainers would only talk to or at them, she quickly realized that she was mistaken. The course offered ample time and space for the students to practice their skills and techniques and increased the trainees’ competence, enabling them to practice therapy more comfortably, ethically, and capably.

Ultimately, the course expanded the tools in their therapeutic toolbox.

The trainees were also surprised and impressed by the effort the Oxford trainers would exert to contextualize CBT to a Kurdistan setting, by referencing Zakho Bridge or Kurdish food, for example, and in listening to the trainees’ perspective. The trainers would say, “we know CBT, but in terms of your local context, you know better, you are the experts,” according to Amin and Jabar.

All the trainees received many hours of supervision with Oxford tutors so they could discuss their own clients and cases. “My supervisor was great. He would say, ‘We don’t want to change who you are. We don’t want to change your background. We don’t want to change your approach. We’re just trying to help you to learn something new and integrate it into your practice.’ And I always appreciated that because it allows for a smooth process,” Amin said.

Both Jabar and Amin agreed that, despite the challenges of healing the traumas of their parents’ generation, a lot is changing for their generation, with people much more aware about mental health and how to improve it. Jabar attributed this to a greater understanding of mental health due to greater access to outside thought. Her own father was reticent about her studying psychology, saying that there was no future in that field, but he changed his mind once he understood the difference that Jabar and her colleagues were making.

Nevertheless, there is a long way still to go, and there is a dearth of qualified therapists working in the Kurdistan Region.

Jabar gave an example of something that had happened on the day of our interview. One of her friends had called from a hospital, having seen a young man with thirty degree burns on his body. Of course, he needed



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Trauma can be passed
through generations
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urgent therapy given how “broken” he would be, and given Kurdish society’s occasional reluctance to speak openly about suicide. But at that hospital, there was no social worker or psychologist to help the distressed young man in his hours of need.

Beyond wanting the Oxford training to continue to grow and expand the number of therapists, Jabar would like

to see mental health awareness increase in schools in the Kurdistan Region. Moreover, she would like to become a supervisor of other therapists. Meanwhile, Amin wants to continue working in his current practice, branch out into teaching therapy to other residents in the region, and conduct academic research to deepen his understanding of the field. ●

A Journey Through Language, Love, and Learning in China

Kurdistan Chronicle

Tesh Sharif, a Kurd from the UK, moved to China in order to learn Chinese. Eventually marrying a Chinese woman, they now have three children, two girls and a boy. A language teacher by trade, Sharif is currently the Research and Development Director for Kido Kindergarten and Daycare in China.

“Twelve years ago, after returning to the UK from Kurdistan, I realized that life wasn’t as fulfilling as it had been in Erbil, whether in terms of disposable income, work-life balance, or the chance to build something from nothing. I wanted to recapture that feeling,” Sharif told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

Shared values

“The biggest challenge I set for myself was to move to a country with a completely different culture, language, and writing system. I started from the bottom, earning about 10% of what I made in Erbil, and slowly worked my way up. Surprisingly, I found that Chinese cultural values aren’t so different from Kurdish ones. At the core, both cultures emphasize respect for the family and working hard to ensure the next generation does better. That understanding helped me gain respect in the Chinese community early on,” he said.

In the beginning his family was quite concerned about him being so far away, in a place none of them could relate to.

“The only connection to China in my family was my brother’s Kung Fu club in London, where he developed a deep respect for Chinese culture through martial arts.

But they knew that if something were to happen to me here, it would be hard for them to help.

“That said, I’ve also had many clients from Kurdistan who trust me to handle their business dealings in China. Being Kurdish and fluent in both Kurdish and Chinese makes it easier for me to negotiate discounts and priority purchases, so I’m often trusted in that regard,” Sharif added.

Immersed in languages

Furthermore, as a bilingual speaker of Kurdish and English, picking up a third language was not too difficult for Sharif. “That said, I know many foreigners in China who have been here longer than I have and still haven’t learned the language.

“The key difference for me is that I spend a lot of time with Chinese people who don’t speak English. It’s easy to stick to your own kind when you move to a new country, but I

made a point not to do that. I’ve seen many Kurdish families in the UK stay within their own communities, and even after 10-15 years, they still struggle with English. I was determined to avoid that, and it has paid off.”

Sharif also married a Chinese woman after living there for five years. “I don’t have another frame of reference for marriage in a different context, but being married in a country that places such a high value on family is very fulfilling,” he said.

“Having a family here, far from my own parents and siblings, is a source of comfort. I do worry about missing out on my nieces and nephews growing up, but technology helps bridge that gap – we’re only a video call away.”

Currently, he is teaching his children both English and Chinese. “Once

they’ve mastered those, I plan to introduce them to Kurdish, Arabic, and French. With these languages, they’ll be able to navigate most parts of the world with ease.”

Media fame

Sharif’s unique story also gained attention from the Chinese media, especially his passion for Chinese opera.

“I’ve always had a passion for the performing arts, and when the chance came to learn a specific form of Chinese opera unique to my city, I jumped at it. I didn’t realize how difficult it was to master – even by local standards – but it came fairly naturally to me. When the national television station heard about it, they did a thorough background check and eventually began offering me screen time,” he said.

“In the past month alone, I’ve appeared on local and national news platforms over 15 times, and I’ve been told my performances have been viewed over five million times. While that seemed unbelievable at first, I remembered that China has a population of over 1.4 billion people. Appearing on CCTV is a matter of great pride, especially for a foreigner.”

Chinese-Kurdish bridges

Sharif also noted that in his job as a language teacher, he has started incorporating Kurdish culture into his lessons. “Teaching about Newroz to people who generally have no knowledge of it was fascinating – they had so many questions. That said, I’m cautious about discussing anything related to separatism in China, so I steer clear of Kurdish political topics.”

He also stated that Chinese people do



Tesh Sharif during an event with children in China.



■ Tesh Sharif with his family.



■ Tesh Sharif speaking on a panel in China.

“
There is so much that Kurdistan can learn from
China’s approach to education, and I hope to
serve as a bridge between the two cultures
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not often ask about his Kurdish background. “People are generally more interested in how well I’ve integrated into the local culture rather than my background.

“As the culture and communications ambassador for my local district in

China, my ultimate goal is to work with the government of Kurdistan to introduce a system of childhood education modeled after the Chinese system into Kurdish society,” he added.

“There is so much that Kurdistan can learn from China’s approach to edu-

cation, and I hope to serve as a bridge between the two cultures, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. Getting established in China hasn’t been straightforward, but it’s been an invaluable learning journey,” he concluded. ●

Transforming Kurdish Regions Through Economic and Cultural Connectivity



Halo Hassan Saeed

Halo Hassan Saeed is a writer and journalist, a member of the International Union of Journalists, and the author of two books on the People's Republic of China.

Announced by China's President Xi Jinping in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains a major global development strategy aimed at enhancing regional ties and economic globalization, covering more than 60 countries from China to Europe, including areas with a significant Kurdish population.

Historically, predominantly Kurdish regions in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Türkiye (hereafter, Kurdish regions) have faced many challenges, including political instability and economic hardship. However, the BRI carries the promise of reviving these areas by improving infrastructure, creating jobs, and stimulating economic growth. Increased communication and investment will strengthen Kurdish economic independence and political influence. Culturally, these projects will also promote greater unity and exchange and allow Kurdish culture to develop on a global stage.

Regional and global connectivity

At its core, the BRI will enhance commerce and bolster economic growth by building new infrastructure projects in Kurdish regions and opening new trade routes to international markets.

This economic boom is already transforming domestic industries from agriculture to manufacturing, developing new trade links with China, and creating new business opportunities. Investment in transportation and logistics can facilitate the entry and exit of goods from Kurdish regions, attracting foreign investment and promoting domestic trade. But the BRI is not just about building roads and railways; it will help cultivate political stability, cultural exchange, economic development, and commercial growth in Kurdish regions. As these areas continue to integrate into this vast network, China, a major



global player, has consistently advocated for peacekeeping, promoted development, and nurtured a better international system.

With the BRI's aim of boosting global trade and stimulating economic growth across Asia and beyond, the project presents a unique and significant promise to improve the socio-economic landscape for the Kurds, who are divided across Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Türkiye. Suffering from underdevelopment due to prolonged conflict and political instability, Kurdish regions can tap into Chinese investment to build and upgrade roads, railways, and other vital transport and communication infrastructure, which could facilitate trade and the movement of goods and people and help the Kurdish regions integrate more effectively into global trade networks. Moreover, being part of the BRI could facilitate Kurdish regions becoming important transit points for the movement of goods between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, a strategic positioning that could lead to increased business activity, job creation, and economic diversification.

Cross-regional interactions

The ancient Silk Road, a historic trade network that connected China to the Mediterranean, played an important role in the economic, social, and cultural development of the areas it passed through for centuries, bringing prosperity to the regions along its route, building housing and services, and establishing a developed inter-regional commercial system. As a meeting point for people and merchants from different countries, it also facilitated social contacts, bargaining, interaction, and cultural exchange. Artworks, crafts, paintings, music, and information from different cultures were exchanged. The Silk Road also stimulated the spread of religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism to new lands, contributing to religious diversity and

syncretism along its route.

There were two main routes of the ancient Silk Road, with the overland route being the most trafficked. Divided into a northern route used in summer and a southern route used in winter, the overland route formed the basis of the deep historical heritage of the Silk Road. The other route was the Sea Road. Established during the Han Dynasty, it revolutionized trade between China and the Roman Empire, connecting India, South Asia, North Africa, and the Red Sea.

The ancient Silk Road was of immense importance to the Kurds, play-

“China’s economic and infrastructure projects in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye have already positively affected Kurdish communities and the broader geopolitical dynamics in the region

ing a significant role as a trade route and a cultural bridge that had a great impact on economic, social, and cultural development. This led to the development of trading centers and markets, creating economic opportunities and prosperity and establishing Kurdistan’s strategic position along the Silk Road as a bustling trading center. This, in turn, facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas between different civilizations, as Kurdish regions became a nexus of multiple trade routes.

The ancient Silk Road was also a

source of income for the Kurdish emirates. After the weakening of the Abbasid Dynasty, the caliphs could no longer control remote areas of their empire, especially the mountainous regions in the north. In Urmia, a Kurdish principality called Sedqiyah was established from 770-827 AD, and in the plains of Shahrizor, the Is-hani took control of the region from 912-961 AD. This gave Kurdish families the opportunity to rule themselves. With the arrival of the Seljuk Empire and the defeat of the Buyid dynasty, Kurdish regions became more autonomous. Several governments were formed under the Seljuks, with Kurdish emirates extending from the southern Caspian Sea to the Arabian Sea.

Pillars of the BRI

The modern version of the Silk Road, the BRI, thus marks the beginning of China’s extensive relations with the Middle East. Although the Kurdish regions themselves are not directly part of the initiative, infrastructure projects and economic partnerships in neighboring countries are already enhancing the importance of Kurdish communities and improving geopolitical dynamics. Below are the five main pillars of the BRI.

1. Upgrading Infrastructure

The BRI aims to enhance connectivity through infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, ports, and energy pipelines. While most of these projects are concentrated in countries such as Türkiye, Iran, and Iraq, their completion could improve transportation networks and trade routes that would indirectly benefit the Kurdish regions.

Transport: Improved transport infrastructure facilitates the movement of goods and people, which can boost economic growth and regional integration.

Energy distribution: Energy projects, including oil and gas pipelines, enhance energy security and promote economic cooperation. Kurdistan’s

large oil and gas reserves are potential beneficiaries of such projects.

2. Trade and Investment

Focusing on trade and investment, the BRI can create opportunities for economic development and foreign investment in the Kurdish regions, especially in sectors such as energy, construction, and communications. Foreign direct investment: Chinese companies involved in BRI projects can provide investment opportunities in Kurdish regions, contributing to job creation and infrastructure development.

Trade routes: The development of new trade routes under the BRI will facilitate increased trade between Kurdish regions and neighboring countries, as well as with China.

3. Geopolitical Implications

Regional stability: Enhanced connectivity and economic development promoted by the BRI can contribute to regional stability by addressing social and economic disparities and enhancing cooperation among countries. However, geopolitical tensions in the region may create obstacles to achieving these goals.



Topographic map of the Belt and Road Initiative

The BRI encourages economic cooperation and integration, which can reduce tensions and enhance peace-building efforts between countries, especially those with Kurdish populations.

4. Diplomatic Relations

Balancing interests: China’s policy of non-interference guides its approach to sensitive political issues involving Kurdish communities, as it seeks to maintain stability and positive relations with the countries participating in the BRI.

Soft power and influence: Chinese economic investments and infrastructure projects under the BRI can enhance its soft power and influence in the region, which may influence the dynamics of Kurdish politics and regional geopolitics.

5. Cultural and Social Exchange

While the BRI primarily focuses on economic and infrastructure development, it also works to promote cultural and people-to-people exchanges between participating countries. The cultural interactions facilitated by the initiative may contribute to increased understanding and cooperation be-

tween Chinese and Kurdish communities.

Educational and cultural programs: The BRI supports initiatives such as academic exchanges, language programs, and cultural events, which can promote mutual understanding and strengthen ties between Chinese and Kurdish regions.

Tourism and heritage preservation: Cultural sites in Kurdish regions may benefit from increased tourism resulting from improved infrastructure and connectivity and thus contribute to local economies and cultural preservation efforts.

While the Kurdish regions themselves are not a direct part of the BRI, China’s economic and infrastructure projects in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye have already positively affected Kurdish communities and the broader geopolitical dynamics in the region. The future of Kurdish-Chinese relations is influenced by various factors, including economic interests, geopolitical dynamics, regional stability, and cultural exchange, all of which can be enhanced with the BRI. ●

Kurdish Roots Nusrat Bhutto and Pakistan's Political Legacy



Muhammad Ali Al-Suwirki Al-Kurdi

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

Nusrat Bhutto was the First Lady of Pakistan from 1973 to 1977, during the rule of her husband, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. She succeeded him as head of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) from 1979 to 1983. She was also the mother of Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated in 2007.

Nusrat was born on September 21, 1929, to the wealthy Kurdish Isfahani Hariri family, who resided in the city of Isfahan in Iran. Her father, a businessman, settled in Karachi, Pakistan, and the family had built a wide network of businessmen throughout the subcontinent before the partition of India in 1947.

Her mother, Fatima Al-Mahouzi, was nine years old when she married Nusrat's father, Mirza Al-Sabounji. Her father was educated and an avid traveler. He went to India for tourism and found that the soap industry there was flourishing and generating huge profits. He later returned to Iran and asked his wife to accompany him, which she reluctantly did.

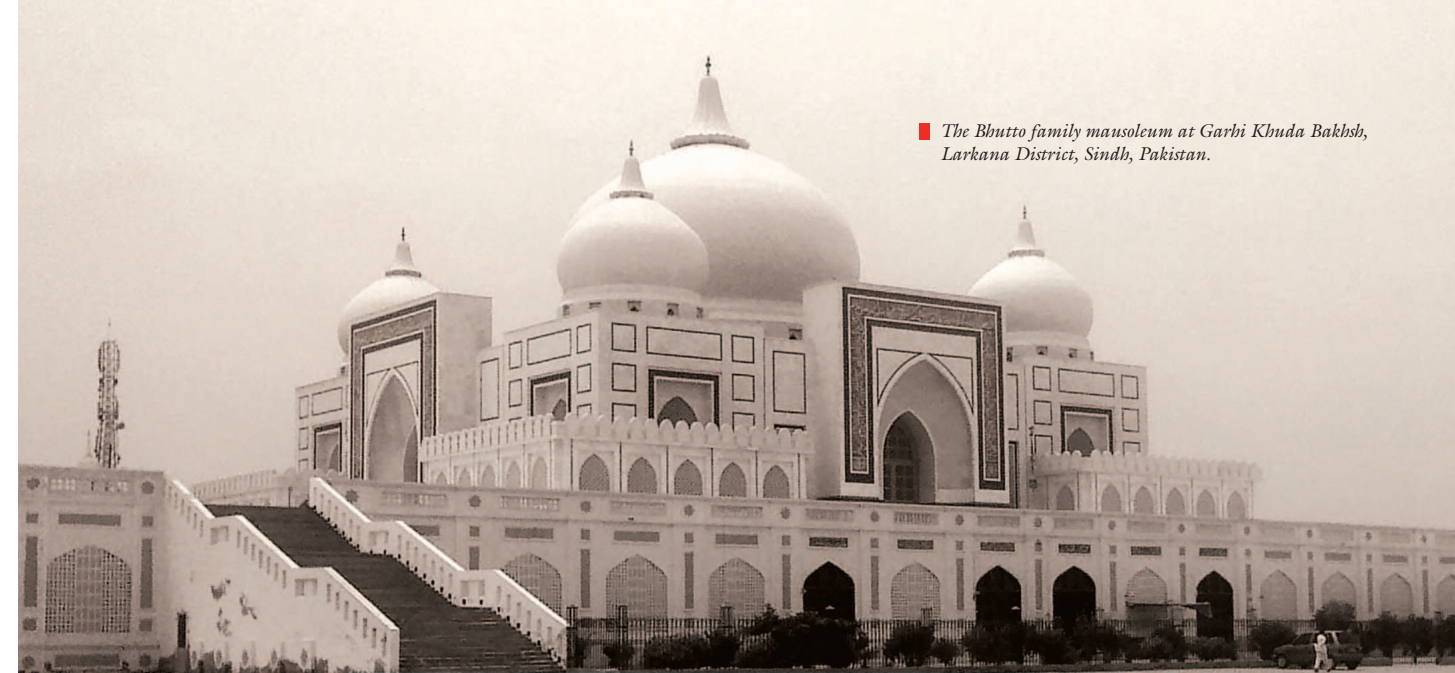
Nusrat loved studying and science, so she went to Pakistan to study engineering. There, she met and fell in love with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, before he was a famous leader in Pakistan. He asked for her hand in marriage, but her father refused to let her marry a Pakistani. There is a story that claims that Bhutto imagined Nusrat in the palace of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in Tehran when he met her, as he was so

impressed by her elegance, and proposed to her immediately.

After the death of her father, Nusrat insisted on marrying Ali Bhutto. The wedding, held on September 8, 1958, in the presence of her family, was grand and royal, and the marriage was a happy one. Nusrat lived in a spacious and luxurious palace, with mirrors plated with gold and precious stones. It was a dream come true,

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I consider myself Kurdish
because my mother is of
Kurdish origin, and my
mother played a major role
in my father becoming the
prime minister of Pakistan

and she had two daughters, Benazir and Sanam, and two sons, Shah Nawaz and Murtaza. The sons resembled their father in wisdom and leadership, but they differed with each other politically and both met tragic ends. Shah Nawaz died of poisoning in France in 1985, and Murtaza was killed during clashes with the Pakistani police under mysterious circumstances in 1996.



■ The Bhutto family mausoleum at Garbi Khuda Bakhsh, Larkana District, Sindh, Pakistan.



■ Nusrat Bhutto.



■ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Begum Nusrat Bhutto.

After the execution of her husband – then the prime minister of Pakistan – in 1979, she chaired the PPP until 1986, with her daughter Benazir assisting her. A member of the Socialist International, the party had its headquarters in Islamabad, and its stronghold was in the Sindh province in the southern part of the country, as well as the Punjab province in the east. Later, Nusrat was elected as a member of the Pakistani parliament for two terms. In the 1980s, Nusrat left Pakistan for the UAE, as she was suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

The tragedies of politics

In many ways, Nusrat's tragic story is not very different from the story of the Kurdish people. She faced severe

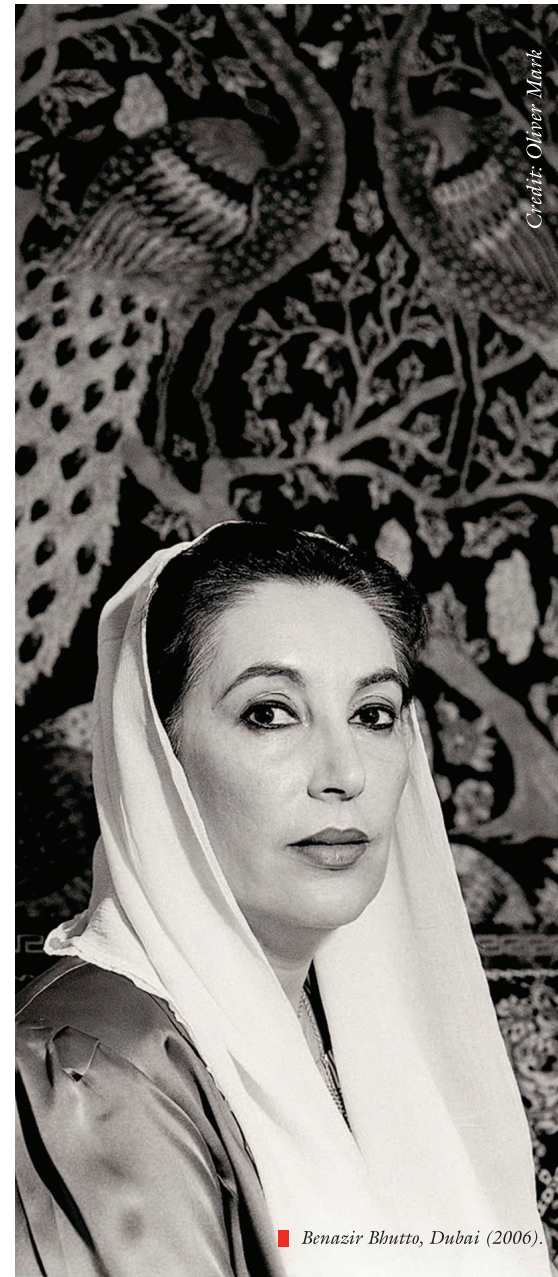
shocks and traumas through which she persevered, starting with the execution of her husband Zulfikar, the assassination of her two sons, and then her daughter Benazir in 2007.

Her family was characterized by stubbornness, defiance, and insistence on achieving their objectives, even if the price was their lives. In this way, we can describe Nusrat as the "Khansa" of sad Pakistan. Both her husband and her three children paid a heavy price for leading the wave of tumultuous politics in a country known for political unrest and its complex social and economic conditions.

On March 22, 2010, Asif Ali Zardari, then-co-chairman of the PPP, the former President of Pakistan, and Bena-

zir's widower, stated that: "Begum Nusrat Bhutto was a great woman, a national treasure, not only because she was the woman behind two of our country's greatest leaders, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto."

Nusrat died in Dubai, on Sunday, October 23, 2011. Her body was taken to the town of Garhi Khuda Bakhsh in the southern province of Sindh. Thousands of mourners led by Zardari and senior state officials laid flowers on the grave of the Bhutto family after prayers in Pakistan's largest mosque. She was buried next to her husband Zulfikar in the family cemetery.



■ Benazir Bhutto, Dubai (2006).

Benazir Bhutto

Nusrat's daughter Benazir became interested in politics at a young age, which paved the way for her future career. She went on to become the first – and youngest-ever – woman to hold a position of leadership in a Muslim-majority country and was one of the most famous political leaders in modern times. Born in Karachi on June 21, 1953, Benazir married Zardari in 1987 right before the general elections. He later became the 11th President of Pakistan and the head of the PPP after Benazir was assassinated in December 2007.

Benazir was influenced by her father Zulfikar's ideology and Western lifestyle throughout her life and especially in her education. She was considered an advocate of democracy and human rights. After completing her studies at Harvard University in the United States and Oxford University in the UK, she returned to Pakistan in 1977, shortly before the coup against her father led by Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, which ended with his execution in 1979. She remained under house arrest before leaving Pakistan to spend ten years in exile.

Benazir returned to Pakistan after Zia-ul-Haq was killed in a plane crash in 1988 and assumed leadership of the PPP, a party founded by her father. Her coalition won a slight majority in the general elections, making her the first woman in a Muslim country to hold the position of Prime Minister on December 1, 1988. Her government faced many economic problems, which led to political opponents accusing her and her husband – then the Minister of Foreign Affairs – of corruption and abuse of power. Her government fell in August 1990, and her husband was sentenced to three years in prison from 1990 to 1993.

Three years later, Benazir was able to return to the prime minister's office after winning the October 1993 elections. However, her government was overthrown for the second time in 1996 after renewed accusations of bribery and corruption against her husband. She then lived in exile, moving between the UK and the UAE, and was banned from entering the country because she did not appear for a court appearance in 2002.

A pardon was later issued by President Pervez Musharraf, which enabled her to return to Pakistan. On October 18, 2007, she returned to Karachi to lead the PPP in the general elections, carrying the banner of returning the country to the civilian rule. On the very day of her return, she survived an assassination attempt.

Two months later, on December 27, 2007, she was once again targeted during a procession after leaving an election conference for her supporters. She was killed by a bullet to the neck and another to the chest.

Besides her political career, Benazir is known for her 1989 book *Daughter of Destiny*. She also won the Bruno Kreisky Prize for Human Rights in 1988.

Benazir was influenced by her mother Nusrat and considered herself Kurdish, as she revealed during a press conference when she attended the Socialist International Conference in Rome on July 21, 2003. "I consider myself Kurdish because my mother is of Kurdish origin, and my mother played a major role in my father becoming the prime minister of Pakistan. I naturally became very interested in the problems of the Kurdish people, and their problems will not be solved except through democracy and peace." ●

Kurdistan Joins UN Mountain Partnership



Mohammad Dargalayi

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

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The Kurdistan Region
is positioning itself as
a model for mountain
community resilience

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In a groundbreaking move, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has joined the UN’s Mountain Partnership, positioning itself at the forefront of global environmental conservation and community resilience.

On International Mountain Day, December 11, 2024, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officially announced its membership in this prestigious alliance, marking a significant milestone in its commitment to sustainable development and climate action.

For the Kurds, mountains are more than just geographical features – they are the very backbone of their identity. As the popular saying in the Kurdish community goes, “Kurds have no friends but the mountains,” highlighting the deep cultural connection between the people and their rugged terrain.

Stretching to an impressive 3,611 meters above sea level, Kurdistan’s mountainous landscape is not just breathtaking but strategically crucial. The region’s diverse topography and rich water resources make it a potential powerhouse for agriculture and tourism.

Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi



Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, Senior Advisor to KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani for Foreign Affairs and Climate Change, emphasized the critical nature of this partnership. “Our mountains are integral to our identity, culture, and heritage,” she stated. “Climate change threatens them and their communities. We are committed to their protection and sustainable development.”

The Mountain Partnership, established in 2002, brings together governments and organizations worldwide to address environmental challenges in mountainous regions. By 2030, the alliance aims to:

- empower mountain communities;
- increase investment in sustainable development;
- protect biodiversity; and
- ensure the economic well-being of mountain inhabitants.

Kurdistan cares about climate

The Kurdistan Region has already been making waves on the international stage in addressing climate change and environmental sustainability. At the COP29 conference in Azerbaijan in November, the Kurdish delegation participated in



crucial discussions about mountain glaciers, the impact of climate change, and the Paris Agreement’s temperature goals.

Mountains are not just scenic landscapes – they are critical ecosystems. They not only cover 27% of our planet's land and sustain 15% of the global population, but also supply a substantial 60-80% of the world's freshwater, which is crucial for agriculture, energy production, and human existence. Moreover, mountains harbor half of the world’s biodiversity hotspots; in Kurdistan, they are home to unique species like snow leopards and alpine flowers.

By tapping into youth participation and innovative solutions like smart agriculture and advanced technologies, the Kurdistan Region is positioning itself as a model for mountain community resilience.

As global temperatures rise and environmental challenges mount, initiatives like the Mountain Partnership offer a beacon of hope, proving that local action can drive global change.

The journey has just begun, and the mountains of Kurdistan stand as silent witnesses to a promising future. ●

Photos: Mohammed Dargalayi



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Engaging Conversations Every Month!

Inside the Lincoln-Duhok Sister City Initiative A Conversation with Working Group Members



Delovan Barwari

Host

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

This episode explores the Lincoln-Duhok Sister City initiative, a citizen-to-citizen partnership addressing education, healthcare, cultural exchange, and community development. Host Delovan Barwari and four guests from Lincoln’s Yazidi and Kurdish community, all part of the working group, discuss the project’s goals and emphasize the vital role of unity for its success.



Dr. Falah Nayif Rashoka

Guest

Dr. Falah Nayif Rashoka is an Assistant Professor at Creighton University. He holds a PhD in Nutrition and Health Sciences.



Dr. Hadi Pir

Guest

Dr. Hadi Pir is an academic and an advocate for community development. He holds a PhD in Education.



Ms. Layla Younis

Guest

Ms. Layla Younis is an International Development professional.



Mr. Haroon AlHayder

Guest

Mr. Haroon AlHayder is a graduate student and teaching assistant at UNL.



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The *Peshmerga* Who Sang for His Country



Jan Dost

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

In a long journey filled with artistic and political struggle, the Kurdish artist Hassan Sharif has achieved many milestones that formed his artistic career, some of which were related to fighting for the cause of his country and people.

Together with his passionate voice and his dedication to his culture, Sharif blends the melodies of the *tanbur* with the echoes of the mountains. Starting in 1987, he has served on the frontline of the Kurdish cause, fighting with his vocal cords and musical instrument in the ranks of the *peshmerga*. In a sense, his artistic journey has been inseparable from his time spent in the mountains defending the honor and dignity of his people.

In an interview conducted by writer Jan Dost for the magazine *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Sharif related the precise details of his life, from childhood to the climax of his artistic career in the diaspora in Europe. Sharif revealed the influences that helped turn his musical voice into a voice for his homeland. He also touched upon his hope for freedom, his concern for his people, and his dream of returning to embrace his homeland, Kurdistan.

Singing linked to struggle

Sharif rose to fame by writing songs that draw from Kurdish literature, including classic and contemporary poetry. He begins the interview by talking about the “golden period” of his life, when his passion for his homeland and the persecution practiced by the former regime toward his

people led him to join the *peshmerga* in 1987.

“

Hassan Sharif's songs aim not only to chronicle the events of the resistance, but also to serve an expression of Kurdish identity

”

Propelled by the spirit of the Gulan Revolution sweeping through Kurdistan, he began to perform patriotic songs that aroused the enthusiasm of the Kurdish people. He did not carry a weapon into battle, but the *tanbur* was his constant companion. As part of the first branch of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, he and his comrades founded the Peshraw Band, which produced songs of struggle and hope despite limited resources. Sharif recounts how that period, despite its harshness, was full of freedom and solidarity among the ranks of the Kurdish people under the umbrella of the National Democratic Front, known in Kurdish as the JUD.

Singing is linked to struggle, says Sharif, making the art a means of documenting



Hassan Sharif

HASSAN SHARIF

the suffering of his people. He believes that singing is not just entertainment, but rather an essential part of Kurdish identity and an echo of the ongoing struggle of the Kurdish people. To him it tells the story of a nation that has suffered greatly from injustice and oppression. He also believes singing was and still is a noble activity that expresses the aspirations of the Kurds for freedom and dignity.

Sharif recalls when he discovered his passion for music as a child. Rhythm had been in his heart since he was quite young. He was greatly influenced by his family, many of whom were skilled singers – especially his mother, who had a tender voice that resembled Miryam Khan’s. As a child, he used to make basic musical instruments himself and try to imitate the melodies he heard at local popular celebrations and weddings.

“

As a *peshmerga* artist and singer, Sharif carries the message of his people through his songs

”

“Kurdish singing is like a colorful carpet, with many patterns and styles. This diversity is part of its beauty,” he explains. “I have always tried to perform different types of songs, including Sufi songs, but in my own style,” he explains. “I think it is important to preserve old songs, such as the classical songs written by Kurdish poets such as Feqiye Teyran and Melaye Ciziri.”

Sharif says that the goal is to attract young people to listen to classical poets and believes that this diversity of songs gives him a special pleasure; “our Kurdish singing art is like a colorful mosaic.”

Between Europe and Kurdistan

After his *peshmerga* days, Sharif found a haven in Europe that allowed him to develop his artistic experience. He reiterates that Western democracy has taught him a lot, including the value of human freedom and the significance of the environment. He describes Sweden as his second home, where all human and national rights are preserved, and where he has been able to tour to perform his songs in many places.

However, he still longs for his homeland, and the dream of returning to Kurdistan is always in his heart. “The expatriate remains attached to his homeland and the fragrance of

its soil,” Sharif says.

His career has allowed him to connect to the Kurdish diaspora through his concerts in various countries. However, he notes a clear difference between Europe and Kurdistan in terms of the atmosphere of concerts; in Kurdistan, where art is part of daily life, concerts are full of warmth and intimacy. He points to the recent increase in music festivals in the region, and hopes that this culture of listening will spread among the Kurds. Sharif believes that a small audience that listens well is better than a large audience that does not listen.

Art and politics



Sharif says that the relationship between art and politics should function as a “unifying factor.” He also points out that art should be a platform for the aspirations of the Kurdish people and an instrument for peace and building bridges between peoples. During his *peshmerga* days, Sharif explains, his music connected art and politics by “raising the morale of the *peshmerga* and telling the world about Kurdish struggle and fight for freedom.”

Hassan Sharif’s songs aim not only to chronicle the events of the resistance, but also to serve an expression of Kurdish



identity. They relate the history of the Kurdish struggle, both before and after the formation of the Kurdistan Region. “If politics are necessary in art, then let it be of a humane and unifying nature and let us all work for the betterment of our people,” he says.

One of his most famous songs is *Lalish*, which describes the Kurdish Yezidi culture and its role in preserving the homeland. Written by the poet Adib Jalki, the song was widely admired in Kurdish society and won several awards. For instance, Sharif’s video clip *Lalish* won first place in Zakho in the field of directing and photography in 2006.

Sharif is especially fond of Bhutanese (*Jazira*) songs, including the songs of the Hakkari and Sarhad areas, because they have roots in his culture. For him, they carry the fragrance of the past and the richness of heritage. He states that he has been influenced by classical singers such as Maryam Khan and Mohammed Arif Jizrawi, in addition to revolutionary Kurdish singers such as Shivan Parwar and Mohammed Sheikho, who inspired him to write his political songs.

When asked about the song that represents his art the most, he replies, “it is difficult to pinpoint a specific song, but the album *Av w Av*, which includes a philosophical poem by the classical Kurdish poet Faqi Teyran, is one of my favorite albums.”

As a *peshmerga* artist and singer, Sharif carries the message of his people through his songs. He remains one of the most prominent Kurdish performers and has served the Kurdish cause with his music, an example of an artist who has not separated himself from the concerns of his own people, but rather has made his art into a platform for all of their suffering and hopes.

Kurdistan Chronicle’s interview with him was not just a discussion of art, but rather a living testimony to the continuous struggle and determination of the Kurdish artist to communicate his message in the face of political and social challenges. ●

Road to Erbil Crossing Cultures in Music

Kurdistan Chronicle

As the lights dimmed in the Cologne, Germany, concert hall, a hush fell over the crowd. The audience sat in anticipation, filling every seat. Moments later, the first notes filled the air – a mix of Kurdish melodies and Western rhythms that sparked a feeling of both nostalgia and discovery. The audience soon responded with enthusiasm, some Kurdish attendees even moving to dance, reviving a piece of home in the heart of Germany. This was no ordinary concert series. Named “Road to Erbil,” the event gathered ten Kurdish musicians and European artists for three performances in Cologne, Dusseldorf, and Wuppertal, showcasing a unique blend of Eastern and Western music traditions.

Organized by the Goethe Institute in Iraq, the concerts were not just about music. For Mutaz Abdulrahman, the Goethe Institute of Iraq’s Library and Information Department head and the event coordinator, they represented a vision of cultural exchange that had been growing over four years of the Goethe Institute’s work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. “Our goal was to foster collaboration between European and Kurdish musicians,” said Abdulrahman. “By connecting these talents, we’re helping to build a foundation for future cooperation. How they continue is up to them, but we’re committed to supporting these kinds of partnerships.”

A bouquet of flowers

For the Kurdish musicians, the concerts offered an opportunity to introduce their heritage to new audiences. Reman Salar, a 23-year-old violinist from Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, spoke about how much the experience meant to him. “It was my first time in Germany and performing in this setting,” he shared, expressing his gratitude to the Goethe Institute. “I’m so thankful for this chance. It was a wonderful blend of Western



■ Artists performing during the Road to Erbil Concert in Cologne, Germany.



Photos: Safin Hamid



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ German clarinetist Annette Maye

and Kurdish music. We need more opportunities like this to show Kurdish music to the world.”

Growing up in a family steeped in music – his father, a respected violinist, was his first influence – Salar felt he was representing generations of Kurdish musical heritage. “The violin was the first instrument I heard,” he recalled, “my father often played at home.” Now a student at the College of Fine Arts in Erbil, Salar hopes that more Kurdish musicians will document their knowledge to make Kurdish music a subject of study worldwide.

Dana Muhiaddin, who is from Sulaymaniyah and plays the tar, a long-necked instrument from the flute family, believes the concerts were not only a chance to perform, but also to share a piece of Kurdish culture that goes beyond words.

“When Kurdish music blends with music from other cultures, we create a bridge that allows others to understand our heritage more deeply,” the Kurdish musician said. “We’re sharing our spirit, our spirituality, with those who value our culture and art.” Muhiaddin sees poetry and mu-



■ A scene from Road to Erbil Concert in Cologne, Germany.

Photo: Safin Hamid



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ A scene from Road to Erbil Concert in Cologne, Germany.

sic as inseparable elements, both channels through which Kurds can convey a message to the world. “It’s like sharing a bouquet of flowers – a colorful piece of who we are.”

For Michel Godard, a French avant-garde jazz musician playing the serpent – a historical brass instrument – it was a return to a culture he had previously encountered in the Kurdistan Region. “Two years ago, in Sulaymaniyah, we had a fantastic experience working with Kurdish musicians,” he recalled. “Even though we may not always speak the same language, music connects us. Dana and I, for instance, communicate without words; we play and understand each other’s souls.”

Godard described Kurdish music as distinct and specific, separate from the Arabic music tradition. For him, learning Kurdish music was a journey into microtonal sounds and rhythms he seldom encountered elsewhere. “There’s a richness in Kurdish music,” he noted, “with its quarter tones and maqams, that allows for an emotional depth you can’t reach in Western music.”

Lasting European-Kurdish exchange

The concert series’ roots lay in the efforts of Annette Maye, a renowned German clarinetist and the Artistic Director of the Multiphonics Festival. Her two visits to Kurdistan in 2022 and 2023 sparked the idea of “Road to Erbil,” a way to bring Kurdish music and culture to German stages. “I came back from Kurdistan inspired,” she explained. “It was clear I wanted to create something lasting. Seeing the exchange between European and Kurdish musicians

sparked ideas in my playing and their approach, too. I knew we had to continue.”

Maye noted that the live encounters offered a connection that could not be replicated online. “We came not as teachers, but as friends,” she said. “Bringing our music to Kurdistan changed us, and we wanted to bring that experience here to Germany.”

Throughout the concerts, audiences were drawn into a world of mixed rhythms, quarter tones, and melismatic phrasing – a way of singing that makes even a five-note melody sound like it holds countless notes. “Kurdish music,” Maye reflected, “has a unique way of touching the audience. The rhythms and accents aren’t what we’re used to in European music; they bring so much energy. It’s like every note is alive.” For her, these elements of Kurdish music have enriched her as a musician and composer. “After almost 30 years of listening to Middle Eastern music, it’s part of me now.”

By the time the last concert ended, the “Road to Erbil” series had become more than a showcase of music. It was a reminder that culture and creativity can connect people, carrying shared emotions across borders and backgrounds. As Salar, the young violinist, said “Music is not just sound, it’s a language, a history, and a way of keeping our culture alive.” And through every note played and every dance that broke out, these concerts offered a reminder that, even thousands of miles away, music could bring people closer to the heart of Kurdistan. ●

Storytelling and the House of the *Dengbej*



Ahmet Çakmak

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

Cities serve as vital mirrors reflecting the identities of their societies. Each urban area is defined by a network of open and closed structures – essentially, spaces that shape our experiences. The Turkish term *mekan*, from the Arabic root, encapsulates notions of space, locality, and the environment we inhabit. The English term "space" intriguingly encompasses both dimensions of time and place, highlighting its multifaceted significance in our understanding of the universe. Throughout history, humanity's fascination with spaces has been profound; they have consistently occupied a central role in the human experience.

Across cultures, space is also imbued with sacred significance, enveloping both individuals and communities into its spiritual dimensions. While beliefs, customs, and geographical contexts influence how spaces are designed and perceived from one society to another, the fundamental importance of spatial concepts remains constant. The interplay between an individual and their environment unfolds on a nuanced level, intricately tied to the geography that defines their existence. This relationship not only shapes personal identity, but also influences collective societal narratives.

While spaces are integral to human existence, they can also serve as canvases for our aspirations and dominion. Humans possess a consciousness that enables them to perceive their surroundings, define their position within these environments, and navigate through them. The essence

of cultural spaces – how they come into being and evolve – reflects their identities. Furthermore, the transformations observed in these spaces often mirror broader social changes, illustrating how our physical environments are intertwined with cultural dynamics.

Preserving oral folk heritage

Fredric Jameson astutely observed that "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time." This profound insight underscores the vital role that the concept of space plays not only in human existence, but also in storytelling. It is both natural and essential for artists to incorporate space into their works. While characters and events form the backbone of fictional narratives, it is space that organizes, shapes, and enriches these elements, creating a cohesive tapestry of interactions and associations.

In 2007, the House of the *Dengbej* (*Dengbejler Evi*) opened its doors in a stunning 18th- and 19th-century bay-windowed townhouse, a testament to traditional architecture located in the historical old town of Diyarbakir. Established as part of an EU-funded initiative by the Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality and leased from the city's Chamber of Architects, this cultural center aims to preserve the *dengbej* tradition – a vital aspect of Kurdish musical heritage that represents a living oral folk culture. The term *dengbej* is a Kurdish term composed of the words *deng*



A Kurdish man singing at the House of Dengbej in Diyarbakir.

(voice) and *bej* (present tense of *gotin*, to tell). According to Yasar Kemal, the *dengbej* is a person who recites epics in a professional way. The institution seeks to keep this rich tradition alive by striving to engage younger generations, nurturing talented individuals who aspire to master the art of *dengbej* storytelling. Through workshops and performances, House of the *Dengbej* serves as a bridge between past and present, ensuring that this unique cultural expression continues to flourish.

In a groundbreaking initiative, House of the *Dengbej* established a collaboration with 40 memory carriers, forty *dengbejan* – individuals who are the custodians of the Kurdish oral tradition. This project aims to unite these vocal narrators, who have preserved the rich tapestry of Kurdish culture for millennia, and to ensure that their invaluable stories are passed on to younger generations. The endeavor seeks to document the living memories of these cultural custodians and to transcribe the legacies of those who have passed on.

Researcher and writer Hilmi Akyol has meticulously compiled this wealth of knowledge in his three-volume work titled *Dengbej u Cirok-bejen Amede*. This collection honors 5,000 years of Kurdish literature, history, and culture, featuring the lives and tales of notable figures such as Sakiro, Kazo, Huseyne Fare, Seyitxane Boyaxci, and Mihemedene Nyasi. Their *kilam* (songs), *stran* (poems), and *cirok* (stories) are now preserved for future generations.

The *dengbejan* of our time: Felekas (born 1947), Eli-

ye Qerejdaxi (1963), Hesene Silbe (1958), Ibrahime Piriki (1958), Arife Hezroyi (1970), Cemale Nenyasi (1954), Erebe Suti (1943), Kereme Semo (1947), Fesihe Pasuri (1972), Mihemed Deriki (1953), Ramazane Tembeli (1963), Zaza Said (1962), Dervis Nurullah (1964), Mihemed Qerejdaxi (1973), Sadiqe Terki (1971), Mihemed Tepe (1955), Tahsine Pasuri (1946), Meytullahe Meclasari (1949), and Yemlixane Pasure (1978).

A cultural sanctuary

Every day except Monday, at least four *dengbejan* gather to passionately share the rich tapestry of their ancient heritage with visitors from both near and far. These skilled storytellers draw upon thousands of years of tradition,

“ In this vibrant cultural house, enthusiasts of *dengbej* have the unique opportunity to request permission to share their songs during intermissions accompanied by tea service ”

showcasing their unique talents and the wisdom imparted on them by their masters. Among these dedicated artists are Alicane Pasure and Hesene Silbe, who – despite facing health challenges – continue to embody the spirit of this cultural legacy. Their commitment not only preserves history, but also connects diverse audiences to the profound narratives that define their identity.

In this vibrant cultural house, en-



Photo: İsmayıl Yıldız

thusiasts of *dengbej* have the unique opportunity to request permission to share their songs during intermissions accompanied by tea service. Nestled in the historic city of Diyarbakir, the venue’s essential services such as electricity and water are provided by the municipality. Since the venue’s inception, *dengbej* performers have received a modest monthly salary from the municipality that recogniz-

es their invaluable contribution to the city’s cultural tapestry. During winter months, the expansive hall transforms into a cozy *divanhane*, or banquet hall, while visitors are hosted in the enchanting courtyard during the dummer. Here, the gentle flow of water harmonizes with birdsong, and an ornamental pool surrounded by fragrant flowers creates a serene atmosphere. The cool stones, refreshed

by well water, add to the charm of this cultural sanctuary.

Nestled on Melik Ahmet Street, just off the path to Urfa Kapi, lies the enchanting House of the *Dengbej*. To find it, simply take the second left before reaching the historic Behram Pasha Mosque, a masterpiece designed by Mimar Sinan. Locals will gladly guide you there. The courtyard,

adorned with vibrant flowers and lush trees, features a serene stone pool that beckons visitors with its tranquil essence. Here, the echoes of centuries past resonate through a language long silenced, inviting listeners to reconnect with cherished traditions. This expansive space serves as a sanctuary for reflection and creativity.

May our aspirations remain vibrant as

we cultivate more spaces that preserve time and amplify the sounds of our shared heritage.

Let our hope remain vibrant, expanding the realms that capture time and the melodies they hold.

May we reflect on our reality, igniting our imagination and inspiring new possibilities. ●

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* Comes to the Silver Screen



Kaveen Shkearvan

is an interpreter and translator based in Erbil, the Kurdistan Region.

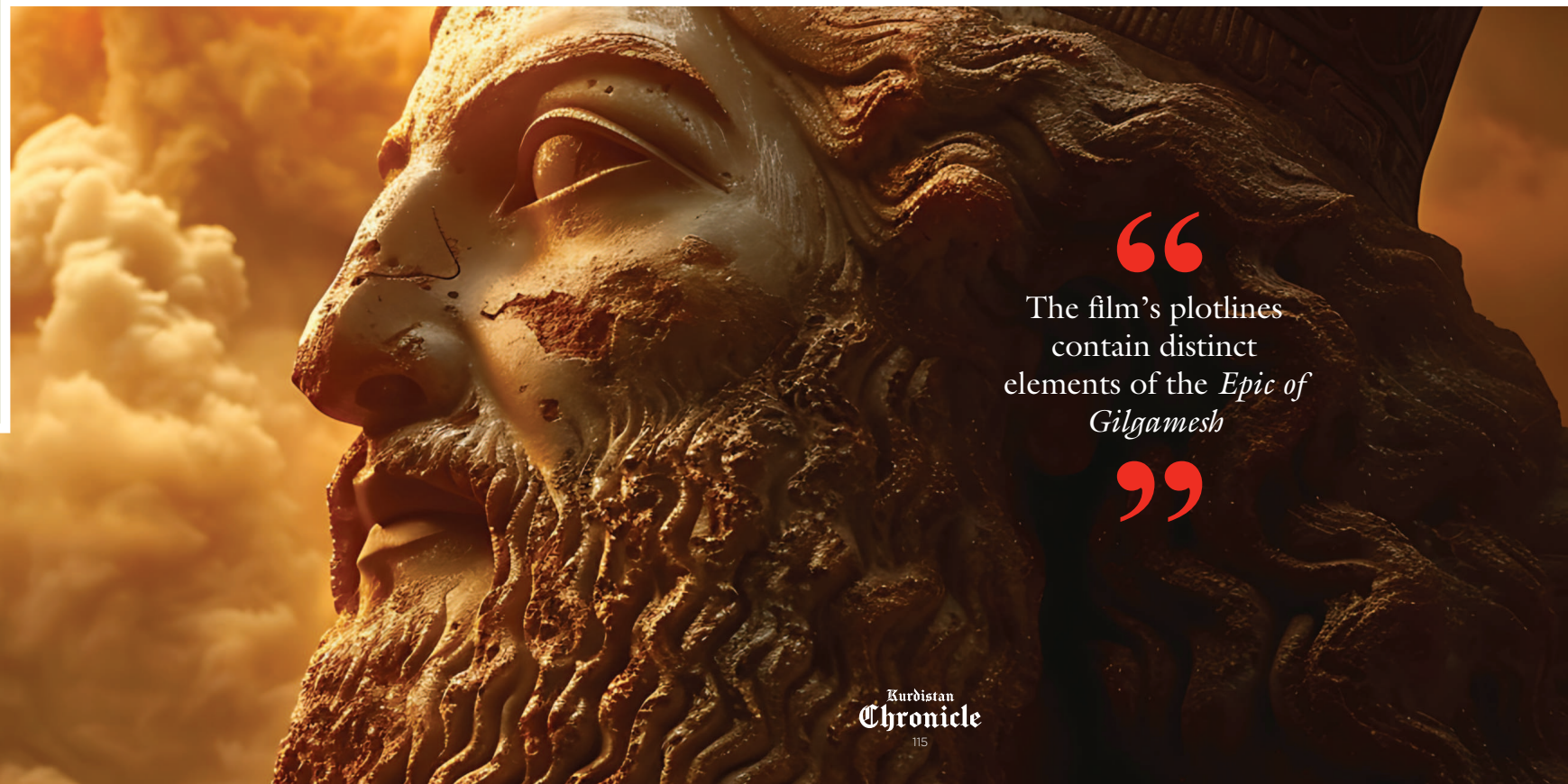
Estimated to have been written between 2100 and 1200 BC, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the oldest poetic histories to be passed down to today. The story was first documented through the excavations of British archaeologists in the 1850s, who unearthed 15,000 fragments of Assyrian cuneiform tablets in Nineveh, the site of the Royal Library of the 7th century BC Assyrian King Ashurbanipal. These fragments were then compiled and translated in the 1870s, helping to bring the epic to light.

The tablets in Ashurbanipal's library also contained tablets in many other languages, making it an invaluable source for learning about the beliefs of our distant ancestors. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* relates the adventures of the king of the city of Uruk, Gilgamesh, who is thought to date to the Third Dynasty of Ur. Described as "two-thirds god and one-third man," the king possessed power and beauty beyond that of any other human, making him the perfect protagonist for this timeless story.

These elements and more inspired Kurdish filmmaker Karzan Kardozi to return from the United States to Kurdistan in 2022 to create a visual adaptation for a modern audience called *Where is Gilgamesh?* Despite a limited budget, the dedication and hard work of Kardozi and a team of five brought the movie to fruition, presenting this epic tale to a new generation of film goers.



Still image from *Where is Gilgamesh?*



“The film’s plotlines contain distinct elements of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*”



A modern crime story

In what critics describe as film noire, Kardozi centers the story around the heist of the tablet of Gilgamesh from a museum. The film begins with the mother of the main character Govan seeking assistance from Haji Hazo, a mullah who specializes in exorcisms and crafting talismans based on Islamic traditions. Concerned about her son, who works as a museum guard, she requests a talisman to help him get married, sharing personal details about him with Hazo.

Govan's life is then turned upside down by an anonymous telephone caller, who demands that he steal the tablet in exchange for his now kidnapped mother. He proceeds successfully in the operation but enjoins his friend Akam to accompany him when he meets the dangerous gang for the handoff. The leader of the gang turns out to be Hazo, and Govan receives a beating for bringing Akam with him, while the gang disappears with the tablet.

The film narrative then shifts to Govan's new determination to return the tablet to its rightful place. When he and Akam go to confront Hazo, a clash results in Hazo's death, forcing the friends to flee the city, which, in turn, results in Akam's death. Govan also learns that Hazo had been acting under the orders of his boss, Aveen, and her father, who become the focus of his new quest. On the run again, Govan encounters a truck driver who offers him comfort and wisdom, saying "everyone searches for something, but few of them find it." Despite these words of warning, Govan continues, unaware of what fate has in store for him.

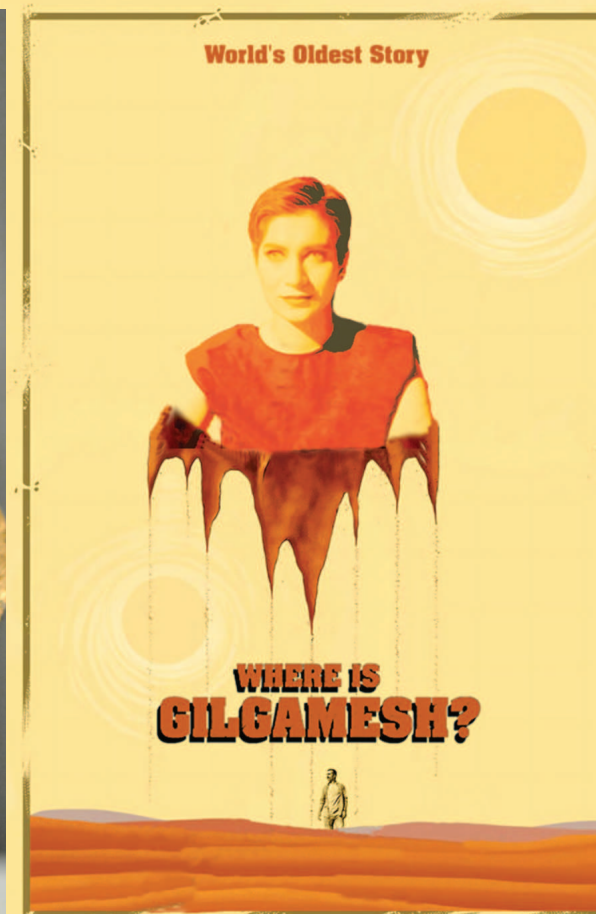
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Karzan made this choice to portray how the modern individual is constantly hustling, while bringing to life the yearning inside us for the peace of simpler times

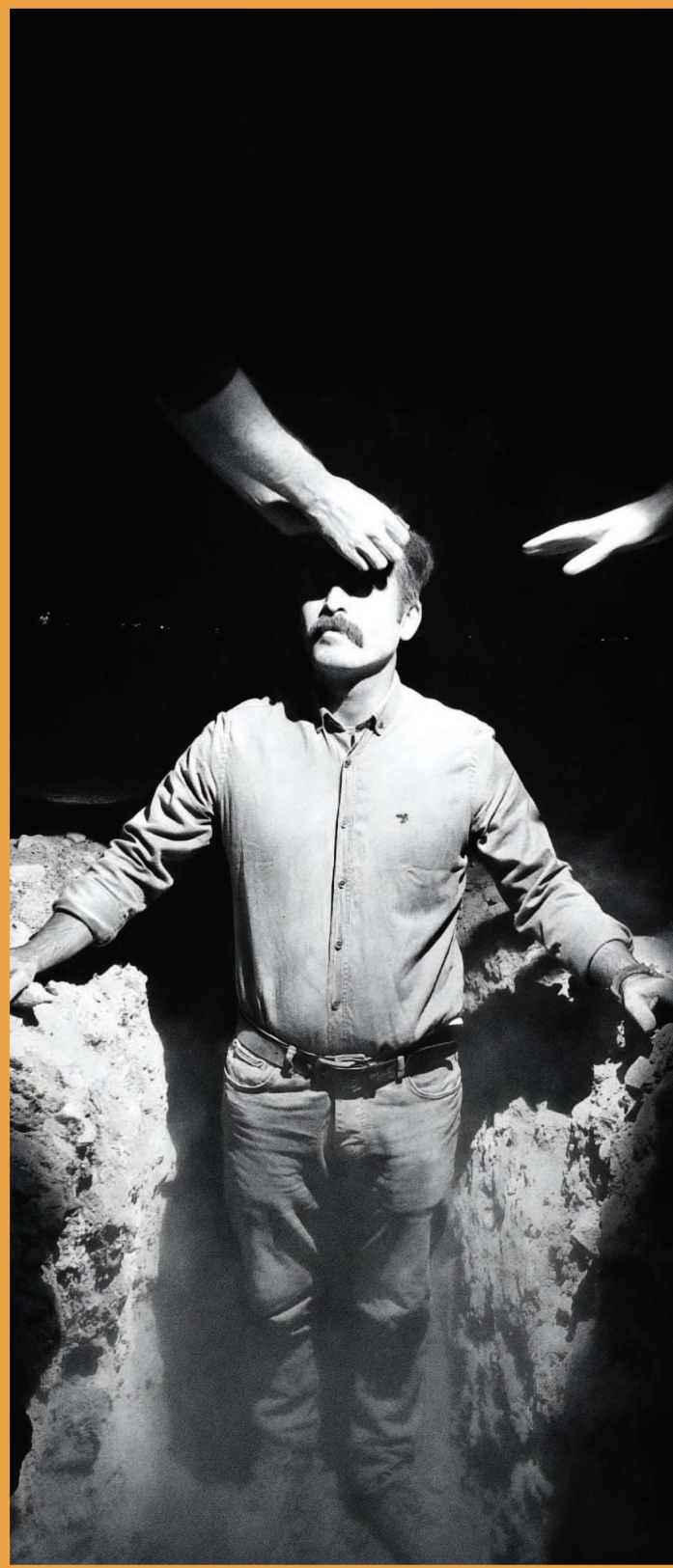
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■ Tablet V of the Epic of Gilgamesh,
Sulaymaniyah Museum, Kurdistan Region



■ Poster of the film *Where is Gilgamesh?*



■ Still image from *Where is Gilgamesh?*

Connecting the dots

While there are major differences between the film and the original epic, the film's plotlines contain distinct elements of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. For instance, the opening scene draws a parallel to the moment when Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, seeks the protection of Shamash, the ancient Mesopotamian sun god, for her son as he embarks on his journey to confront Humbaba – the fearsome guardian of the forest where no human being should enter. In the film, the role of Humbaba is assumed by a character named Haji Hazo, a businessman operating in the black market, symbolizing a place forbidden to the ordinary person.

Character development provides a source of rich parallels between the epic and the film. In the epic, Gilgamesh is on a quest for immortality and seeks to revive his dear friend, Enkidu, while Govan seeks both the lost tablet and vengeance for the death of his friend Akam. Meanwhile, Enkidu lives among the animals in the forest, and Akam is portrayed as living on a farm. Finally, in the epic, Enkidu's life is taken by the gods Ishtar and Enlil, both divine gods of immense power – roles that are mirrored in the film by Aveen and her father, who similarly hold the fate of others in their hands.

The film also builds and parallels the narrative outline of the epic. For instance, Gilgamesh mentions visiting the underworld or diving into the depths of the sea to secure his wish of immortality, and Govan similarly enters the sewers in pursuit of his goal. Also, in the epic, Gilgamesh encounters Urshanabi, an ordinary man granted immortality by the gods, who advises Gilgamesh to return to his kingdom and cherish what he has. In the film, this advisory role is fulfilled by the truck driver who counsels Govan after picking him up.

Timeless themes in a contemporary context

Kardozi also emphasizes that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* delves into universal themes, such as human connections, ethical values, common fears, and existential questions.

The film reflects these themes by bringing them into a modern context, particularly highlighting a pressing issue in the Middle East: the undervaluation of historical artifacts. Many of these treasures are relegated to private collections and subsequently forgotten, a metaphor for the region's disregard of its cultural heritage. Additionally, the film touches on themes of friendship, the meaning of life, and the complex interplay between good and evil, demonstrating its alignment with the timeless concerns explored in the ancient narrative.

The film's length – which is slightly shorter than most films at 90 minutes – necessitates the loss of some contextual elements, making certain scenes challenging to interpret. Fortunately, our questions were answered in an interview by *Kurdistan Chronicle* with the filmmaker, offering deeper insight into the intended narrative.

For instance, after Akam's death, Govan drives off, and a peaceful image of an island with birds and a beach appears, only to be abruptly destroyed by a nuclear explosion as Aveen's face emerges. This sequence visually conveys Govan's emotional turmoil, his initial calm – as represented by the tranquil island – is suddenly shattered by explosive rage.

The writer's portrayal of Govan's psychological transformation mirrors the awakening and shift in perspective experienced by Gilgamesh. While Gilgamesh returns from his journey wiser, Govan gradually loses his sanity. Karzan

able, and they managed to overcome many challenges with creativity. For instance, when professional lighting equipment was unavailable, they made use of natural light and customized LED lights for certain scenes. "The Sony camera we used was of the lowest quality, so we had to use three different lenses to make adjustments," Kardozi noted.

Another issue was time constraints at filming locations. "We could only use the museum between 9:00 am and 11:00 am or 12:00 am, which forced us to rush while filming," he explained. Additionally, Kardozi was responsible for all post-production work – including editing, creating the movie posters, and producing the trailer – as the budget did not allow for hiring additional staff. "I had to do it. It needs to be done if you want to create a movie independently," he stated.

Despite these challenges, some of his favorite moments in



made this choice to portray how the modern individual is constantly hustling, while bringing to life the yearning inside us for the peace of simpler times. This idea is portrayed in the simple scene of Govan being pushed into his grave, from which he rises as a different person.

Filming obstacles

During our interview, Kardozi confirmed that the initial cut was three hours long, but that the film was shortened to one and a half hours for screening in Erbil cinemas. "No cinema in Kurdistan would run a movie that was three hours long," he admitted.

Another major obstacle for Kardozi was a small budget, which meant limited opportunities for retakes or rehearsals and insufficient equipment. However, Kardozi underscored that working with his team was immensely enjoy-

the film came from improvised elements. Kardozi highlighted the final shot featuring children, in which one of them looks down at a skull and says, "This is immortality."

Another improvised moment occurred when construction workers continued working during filming, adding a natural touch that reinforced one of the film's central themes – that life continues, even amid violence and suffering. "In broad daylight, one of the characters was being tortured while others were simply going about their work," Kardozi reflected.

Ultimately, Kardozi sees this film as a learning opportunity. Before concluding the interview, he hinted that his next project would focus on the relationships of five individuals, allowing him to delve deeper into the interpersonal dynamics of his characters. ●



Kurdistan
Purebred
Arabian
Horse Show

In November, Erbil hosted the Kurdistan Pure Bred Arabian Horse Show, with 64 horses from various studs competing for the championship.

Organized by Erbil International Equestrian Club in collaboration with Emirates Arabian Horse Society, the show attracted hundreds of horse enthusiasts from around the Kurdistan Region, Iraq, and beyond.

According to the organizers, the competition arranged the competing horses into ten different groups, allowing horses of different ages to compete. The groups included newborn colts, newborn fillies, yearling colts, yearling fillies, two-to-three-year-old colts, two-to-three-year-old fillies, four-to-six-year-old stallions, four-to-six-year-old mares, stallions seven years or older, and mares seven years or older.

After a competition jury's decision, Nawzad Qadir's horse won this year's championship. Qadir explained in an interview that he has been breeding horses for ten years and that the title of champion has encouraged him to join international championships held in the Gulf countries.

The event was also enhanced by cultural activities that showcase Kurdish culture for the international participants, featuring performances by Kurdish music bands and the Kurdish Peshmerga Cavalry Unit.

Photo: Armin Abdullo



Hazhar

Kurdish writer, poet, lexicographer, linguist, and translator Abdurrahman Sharafkandi, better known by his pen name Hazhar, is one of the most renowned and prolific figures in contemporary Kurdish literature.

Originally from Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran), Hazhar joined the peshmerga in Iraq to fight for the rights of his people against Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime. His deep sense of patriotism is one of the most striking themes that runs through his works.



I am Kurdish

I am Kurdish, whether I roam or am at home,
In the lands of the Arabs, Iran, or Rome.

Whether noble and elegant or poor and alone,
In a towering castle or a crumbling home.

Fearless and free, with a heart that glistens,
Or bound in chains, confined in prison.

Healthy and strong, with energy pleasing,
Or frail and confined, in a hospital, freezing.

Whether sitting on a throne bloodstained,
Or laboring in the fields through hunger and pain.

I am Kurdish, and bound to Kurdistan's soil,
With head and soul ready for sacrifice and toil.

I live as a Kurd, and as a Kurd I'll rest,
Even in the grave, my Kurdish will be blessed.

I'll rise again, a Kurd ever true,
And, beyond life, fight for freedom anew.

Translated by Nahro Zagros

هەر کوردم

هەر کوردم به دهر به دهري یان له مالی خۆم
له خاکی عه ره ب له ئی ران و رۆم

کۆک و پۆشته بم، روت و ره جال بم
کۆشکم ده قات بئ ویرانه مال بم

ئا زا و رزگار بم شادان و خه ندان
یان زه نجیر له مل له سووچی زیندان

ساغ بم جحیل بم بگرم گوئ سوانان
یان زار و نزار له نه خۆشخانان

دانیشم له سه ر ته ختی خونکاری
یان له کۆلانیان بکه م هه زاری

کوردم و له رپی خاکی کوردستان
سه رله پیناوم گیان له سه ر ده ستان

به کوردی ده ژیم به کوردی ده مر م
به کوردی ده ده م وه رامی قه بر م

به کوردی دیسان زیندوو ده بمه وه
له و دونیاش بۆ کورد تی هه لده چمه وه

Eurasian Green Teal (*Anas crecca*)



One of the species of teal that lives on the banks of rivers and lakes in Kurdistan is the Eurasian teal (*Anas crecca*). Also known as the common teal or Eurasian green-winged teal, the Eurasian teal is a widely distributed duck that nests in temperate Siberia and migrates south during the winter months. The Eurasian teal is commonly referred to as the teal, since it is the sole representative of these small dabbling ducks in most of its range. The bird lends its name to the blue-green color known as teal.

It is a very social duck outside of its breeding season and can gather in large groups. It often lives in protected wetlands and subsists on seeds and water-dwelling invertebrates. Because the similarities between the two species, the green-winged teal of North America (*A. carolinensis*) was previously and occasionally is still regarded as a subspecies of *A. crecca*.

Scientific classification

Domain: Eukaryota
Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Aves

Order: Anseriformes
Family: Anatidae
Genus: *Anas*
Species: *A. crecca*



Landmines on Trees

Even though the Iran-Iraq War ended over three decades ago, thousands of civilians in the Kurdistan Region continue to suffer from the hazardous remnants of that deadly conflict. A vast area along the border between the Kurdistan Region and Iran remains full of landmines and unexploded ordnances. Often, these landmines claim lives of villagers or cause devastating limb amputations.

The Kurdistan Region's Mine Action Agency has been working for years to demine these contaminated areas, removing millions of these unexploded ordnances, but the border areas are still far from safe. As a result, villagers have rolled up their sleeves to carefully deal with these landmines. Even walking outside these villages along the border, one will notice landmines on a curious place: tree branches. These are the explosives that villagers have discovered and carefully placed on branches to avoid additional loss of life.



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