

Kurdistan Chronicle

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March

A Defining Month for the Kurds



*Nabro Zagros
is the Editor-in-Chief of
Kurdistan Chronicle.*

March always holds a great significance for the Kurdish people, as it commemorates historic agreements, political shifts, and events of deep cultural importance. This year is no different, but it is amplified by numerous political developments that are reshaping the outlook for Kurds.

Perhaps the most groundbreaking development is the recent agreement between Damascus and the administration in Western Kurdistan (northern Syria), also known as Rojava. For the first time since Syria's inception, Kurdish rights have been officially recognized. While this milestone has been met with widespread optimism, questions remain: will the Syrian regime under Ahmad al-Sharaa genuinely uphold these rights in a post-Assad future?

Meanwhile, in Türkiye, the peace process has taken a dramatic turn. On February 27, Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, called on the Kurdistan Workers' Party to disarm and dissolve. His message has sparked cautious optimism among officials in Türkiye and the international community.

As these events evolve, the Kurdistan Region remains committed to working toward peace and dialogue with both nations. Recent meetings held by President Masoud Barzani with Syrian Democratic Forces Commander Mazloum Abdi and a delegation from Türkiye have reinforced the call for dialogue and reconciliation. As regional tensions fluctuate, the Kurdish leadership remains committed to fostering peace through negotiation and supporting talks between Kurds, Türkiye, and the emerging Syrian administration.

In Iraq, political and economic disputes are intensifying. The dispute over Kurdish oil exports has drawn international attention, with U.S. officials urging Baghdad to strike a balance between sovereignty and economic pragmatism. If Iraq intends to maintain strong bilateral relations with the United States, it must navigate these tensions carefully and limit external influence.

Another dramatic event occurred on March 14, when a U.S. airstrike executed with Iraqi and Kurdish support eliminated ISIS's second-in-command, Abdullah Makki Muslih al-Rifai, also known as Abu Khadijah. U.S. President Donald Trump took to Truth Social, declaring, "PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH," while commending U.S., Iraqi, and Kurdish forces for the joint operation.

Against the backdrop of these transformative events, this issue of Kurdistan Chronicle explores a range of topics – art, mythology, music, craftsmanship, refugee support, sports, and the enduring legacies of influential Kurdish and American leaders – the

entire spectrum of the rich cultural life of the Kurdish people is on display.

Key March events in Kurdish history

March 1: Kurds honor the legacy of General Mustafa Barzani, the father of the Kurdish revolution and a central figure in modern Kurdish politics. Barzani passed away on this day in 1979 in Washington D.C.

March 5: The 1991 uprising against Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime began on this day in Ranya. Spreading rapidly, the peshmerga and hundreds of thousands of Kurdish men and women reclaimed nearly all major cities, paving the way for the Kurdistan Region's first democratic elections in 1992 and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

March 11: This day marks the Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement of 1970, also known as the March Accord, when Baghdad formally recognized the political and cultural

rights of the Kurdish people for the first time.

March 14: This date commemorates the 122nd birthday of General Mustafa Barzani, a key architect of the modern Kurdish struggle for liberation, democracy, and self-determination.

March 16: In a single attack using chemical weapons, the Ba'athist regime killed 5,000 innocent Kurdish men, women, and children in what is known as the 1988 Halabja massacre. This atrocity was part of the Anfal Campaign, which took the lives of 182,000 Kurdish people.

March 20: The 1991 uprisings culminated in the liberation of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, a defining moment in the Kurdish revolutionary movement.






March 21: Newroz! The Kurdish New Year brings joy, color, and tradition, as families gather to participate in vibrant festivities and rituals. Coinciding with the vernal equinox, it is a public holiday in the Kurdistan Region observed over three days. ●

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(*Elanus Caeruleus*)

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Dreaming Big Kurdistan at the World Governments Summit



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.

Widely seen as the beacon of hope in a volatile region, the Kurdistan Region keeps dreaming big for a brighter future. Its leadership embraces learning from others' success stories without merely copying them. To understand better what that might entail, it is useful to look at the engagement of a high-level Kurdish delegation during the three-day World Governments Summit in Dubai.

Held annually in February, the summit brings together governments, international organizations, thought leaders, and private sector leaders from around the globe to foster international cooperation and identify innovative solutions for future challenges, ultimately inspiring and empowering the next generation of governments. The 2025 event convened under the theme Shaping Future Governments.

On February 10, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani arrived in Dubai. Accompanied by a high-level delegation, the Kurdish leader focused on strengthening diplomatic and economic ties between the Kurdistan Region and participating countries, exploring new opportunities for cooperation in trade, investment, economics, and addressing key regional and international developments.

Learning from each other

Through his participation at the World

Governments Summit, Prime Minister Barzani intended to demonstrate his government's commitment to international engagement and to reinforce the Kurdistan Region's position as a key and reliable partner on the global stage, as reported by the Prime Minister's Office.

As part of the summit's program, the Kurdish leader participated in a special panel discussion titled "Navigating Challenges, Embracing Opportunities," emphasizing the importance of international cooperation and the exchange of successful experiences between countries to address common challenges and achieve sustainable development.

Prime Minister Barzani also reiterated how the Kurdistan Region's security and stability have played a crucial role in attracting investment and driving economic growth. He emphasized the government's ongoing efforts to diversify revenue sources and boost the private sector to create job opportunities for young people and reduce over-reliance on public sector employment.

"In order to create jobs, you always need to look at the middle class, you always need to look at the entrepreneurs because these are the people who are providing the greatest number of jobs for those who are looking to work. I don't intend to make the government the only platform to create employees. The private sector can, in fact, help the government reduce the size of the public sector," Prime Min-



■ Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan in Dubai (February 12, 2025)



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani arriving in Dubai to take part in the World Governments Summit 2025 (February 10, 2025)

ister Barzani told the panel moderated by Abdulla Lootah, Director-General of the UAE’s Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority.

Digitization

Regarding digital governance, Prime Minister Barzani underscored that the KRG is committed to digitizing public services to improve transparency, combat corruption, and streamline administrative procedures, ensuring better services for citizens.

“We have a very aggressive reform program for digitalizing our systems, whether it’s public services, the economy, financial institutions, business-to-business commerce, or tradition small businesses,” he stressed. “We are looking at how best we can create systems where citizens can easily deal with life’s daily tasks and obtain the services they need, even in their interactions with the government, without having to go through cumbersome bureaucratic procedures.”

Prime Minister Barzani also emphasized the importance of building a resilient and flexible economy that can adapt to global changes. In this goal, diversifying the Kurdistan Region’s revenue sources and enhancing the private sector are key pillars of the KRG’s long-term economic strategy.

Addressing the Erbil-Baghdad relations, Prime Minister Barzani stated that the KRG is committed to resolving political disputes



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs Mohammad al-Gergawi signing an MoU on the sidelines of the World Governments Summit 2025 in Dubai (February 12, 2025)



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with Odile Renaud-Basso, President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (February 11, 2025)



■ Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani during an exclusive interview with Al-Arabiya TV on the sidelines of the World Governments Summit 2025 (February 14, 2025)

Photo: Farhad Ahmad



■ KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani at the World Governments Summit (February 13, 2025)

Photo: Farhad Ahmad

with the federal government. He reiterated that dialogue and negotiations are the best options for achieving stability and prosperity in Iraq.

Reflecting on the future of the Kurdistan Region, he reaffirmed that despite challenges, the Kurdistan Region remains on a path of progress and prosperity.

Relations with the UAE

While in Dubai, Prime Minister Barzani was also welcomed by Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE. According to the official readout of the meeting, both sides emphasized the importance of strengthening bilateral cooperation and further enhancing friendly KRG-UAE relations across various sectors.

The Kurdish leader later also met with other UAE leaders and regional political figures, including Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum who serves as the Crown Prince of Dubai, the UAE Deputy Prime Minister, and the Minister of Defense. Prime Minister Barzani also met with the health, investment, and interior ministers, as well as the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Before his departure, Prime Minister Barzani also joined the UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs Mohammad Al Gergawi to oversee the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the KRG and the UAE.

The KRG said in a statement following the ceremony that the MoU aims to enhance cooperation through knowledge exchange and governance modernization. The agreement builds upon an existing MoU between the two sides, which is now extended for another five years. It focuses on sharing expertise in governance, leveraging the UAE's advanced experience to improve government affairs, strengthening institutions, and developing human capacity.

"I'm pleased to announce that today at the World Governments Summit 2025 with His Excellency

Mohammad Al Gergawi, we renewed the MoU between the Kurdistan Region and the UAE for another five years, to apply their expertise in reform, public sector, and human resource development," Prime Minister Barzani said after the signing ceremony. ●

Ministry of *Peshmerga* Aims to Increase Female Participation



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.

■ A female *peshmerga* officer during her graduation ceremony



“My experience with female *peshmerga* is that they are mostly very motivated to serve their country, better educated, and very disciplined

”

In a farewell interview on September 27, Dutch Colonel Walter van Bijlevelt told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs (MoPA) aims to increase female participation in the MoPA from 1% to 6%.

“I can live with that aim, because that means that they have to increase at least from 1% to 6%, which is an enormous amount. So if they managed that I would be very happy and impressed.”

“I’m convinced that 50% of all the intellect and knowledge in the Kurdistan Region is kept by women. Every organization should realize that women have a lot of potential, and you have to use that in a proper way. Unfortunately, the MoPA has only 1% female participation. The Ministry realizes this and is willing to work to increase the number of female *peshmerga*.”

The Netherlands, Italy, France, Germany, the UK, and the United States are part of the Multinational Advisory Group (MNAG), which supports the

unification of the partisan Patriotic Union of Kurdistan’s ‘70s’ *peshmerga* units and the Kurdistan Democratic Party’s ‘80s’ units under the command of the MoPA.

One key focus of the Dutch military advisor is gender equality in line with the aims of the Consulate-General of the Netherlands in Erbil, as stated in their four-year plan. “In general, people are very supportive of the idea of male-female equality and of more women participation within the MOPA.”

The Kurdistan Regional Government’s High Council for Women and Development (HCWD) announced on X that it had discussed boosting female participation with the MOPA on July 19, led by HCWD Secretary-General Khanzad Ahmad.

Promoting gender equality

“Almost everyone is supportive of gender equality, but in reality women still make up just 1% of the *peshmerga*. Fortunately, there is a program to in-

crease that number to 6%. The plan is not bad but the tempo is, I think, too slow,” said van Bijlevelt.

“My job as a military advisor and as part of the MNAG is to look for opportunities to speed it up a little bit. By law there is no difference between men and women within the MoPA, but in reality we all know we are not there yet. My experience with female *peshmerga* is that they are mostly very motivated to serve their country, better educated, and very disciplined. I even spoke to a young and inspiring female officer who graduated at the top of her class at the academy.”

Van Bijlevelt also said that female recruitment is challenging because the 70s and 80s are independently adding personnel to the MoPA. This uncoordinated influx makes it difficult to implement a structured recruitment program, especially for women. The activities of the MoPA’s four recruitment centers are still on hold as long as the ministry does not know what troops the 70s and 80s will deliver to the MoPA. Additionally, it faces budgetary challenges because many *pesh-*



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ Female peshmerga officers during their graduation ceremony.

merga need to retire to make space for the new generation.

Van Bijlevelt mentioned that the Netherlands' Consulate-General has begun efforts to support the creation of a female formation in the MoPA and to integrate a female unit from the 70s into this unit. The history of the Kurdistan Region demonstrates that female participation in combat has remained high since the beginning of the 20th century. A good example is the so-called "Sun Battalion," a 100%-female fighting unit lead by Khatoon Khider during the war against ISIS. "So, don't tell me women should not be in a fighting unit," van Bijlevelt said.

He said the goal is to make a regiment where there would be space for women who want to serve in a female unit. "We had to start somewhere, and so we started with this unit located in Sulaymaniyah. Of course, we also created the possibility for women in units in Duhok and Erbil to join the same regiment. So we end up with units in Erbil, in Sulaymaniyah, and

in Duhok. We started with a battalion staff with enough positions for women all over the Kurdistan Region."

He underlined that the idea is to allow women to work in female regiments or choose from various other jobs within the MoPA. In this way, they can choose a safe, all-women unit or pursue other roles. The female regiment serves as a framework to build an operational force of *peshmerga* women.

He added that the gender equality project is part of the 28 reform projects being undertaken by the MoPA and sponsored by the MNAG.

"It's project number 12. There is a project plan that is not yet signed off on, but basically the ideas are okay. I'm very curious about what will happen then, but unfortunately my tour is ending."

Dutch focus on Baghdad

Last year, the Dutch military deployed approximately 250 soldiers to Bag-

dad for the NATO mission and is set to take command in May. Meanwhile, 120 Dutch troops previously in Erbil have left, leaving only five Dutch soldiers in the Kurdistan Region.

"Most of the participation in Iraq from the Netherlands is now focused on Baghdad, so we do not have many trainers from the Netherlands here," van Bijlevelt said. "But sometimes we ask trainers from the Netherlands to come over and conduct training sessions."

He added that last September a training session on project management was held in order to help the MoPA staff with decision-making processes.

The Wall Street Journal reported on September 20 that the United States and Iraq have reached an agreement for the withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign troops from Iraq by the end of 2026, although a small number of U.S. troops will stay, most likely in the Kurdistan Region.

"We have a new situation in the up-

coming few years. We now have six contributing countries in the Kurdistan Region: Italy, France, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, and the United States, as well as a seventh entity within the MNAG, which is Operation Inherent Resolve, or the U.S.-led coalition."

Bilateral agreements

Van Bijlevelt emphasized that this anti-ISIS coalition will gradually be phased out and replaced by bilateral agreements between countries. "That means that, if the Netherlands thinks they should stay in the region, that should be because of a bilateral agreement with Baghdad."

"Every country now is thinking about what would be the best agreement to make with Baghdad," he said. "The new reality demands that there still

be some kind of coordination between countries; otherwise, we will all try to do the same thing, or we will have gaps in our information. So that means the MNAG remains necessary as a coordinating group."

"If you ask me, my advice to the Netherlands' government would be to stay in the Kurdistan Region because of the strategic importance in the Middle East and the good relationship that we have built with the Kurds over the last five decades."

He added that, during his six-month tenure, he saw many people who were willing to contribute to *peshmerga* reform. "Although the tempo is slower than what we would like to see, I'm convinced that we are working in the right direction together with our Kurdish comrades."

However, he said there's a lot of mistrust among several groups within the Kurdistan Region, and within the MoPA. "When politics interferes in an army, it's never a good thing. I hope that the people within MoPA and the 70s and 80s try to keep politics out of the army."

Van Bijlevelt said that he especially enjoyed Kurdish hospitality and friendship with locals. "In a way, the Kurdistan Region is under my skin, meaning part of my heart is now Kurdish, and I consider that a compliment. I will really miss the wonderful people, their hospitality, the region, and the traditions and culture of the Kurdish people. These are the things to remember, rather than focusing on politics. Normal people are great, but politicians often have their own agendas, which can be difficult to handle for us as military advisors." ●

■ A female Peshmerga in the Kurdistan Region.



Photo: Safin Hamid

Kurdistan Still Home to a Quarter of a Million Refugees

In his humble office in Erbil, Jalal al-Abdullah, a Syrian-Kurdish language professor, tells *Kurdistan Chronicle* about his inspiring journey from Qamishli to Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region. A success story that started from scratch, al-Abdullah is a living example of the ability of refugees and their will to rebuild their lives under challenging circumstances.

“I ran a language institute in Qamishli for more than seven years before seeking asylum here,” al-Abdullah recalls in a tone that mixes the bitterness of separation with the hope of a new beginning. The institute offered courses

in six different languages: Arabic, Kurdish, German, Turkish, English, Russian, and Farsi.

2015 was a turning point in al-Abdullah’s life, as that was the year he was forced to take refuge in Erbil. “The first challenge was purely bureaucratic,” al-Abdullah explains, referring to his struggles with identification papers and registration with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). But his extensive academic experience quickly paved the way for him to find opportunities teaching at language institutes for two and a half years, before he decided to switch to

private teaching and focus on Arabic language teaching.

Kurdistan: A haven for 286,000 refugees

According to figures published by the UNHCR in December 2024, the Kurdistan Region hosts 286,171 refugees, which constitutes 85% of the total refugees in Iraq.

According to the UNHCR’s demographic classification, they are distributed as follows: 147,972 males, 138,199 females, 11,101 elderly, and 49,116 youth (15-24 years old), while



Riyadh Al-Hamadany

is journalist and author who has worked at many local and international media institutions.

“The Kurdistan Region is a model for hosting refugees despite economic challenges. We need greater international support to continue providing essential services”



■ A camp for refugees and IDPs in the Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Hemin Baban



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ An influx of refugees escaping ISIS.

women and children constitute the largest segment, at 203,447 people. Regarding geographical distribution, Erbil tops the list of the host cities with 152,535 refugees, followed by Duhok with 91,845, then Sulaymaniyah with 41,791.

What distinguishes Al-Abdullah's experience is his ability to build bridges of communication with his students from different backgrounds. "I succeeded in forming strong relationships with both Arab and Kurdish students," he says, noting that these relationships contributed to enhancing his understanding of the local community as well.

Regarding the refugee experience in the Kurdistan Region, al-Abdullah offers a striking comparison. "Our situation as refugees here is much better than in neighboring countries," he says, praising the services provided in the camps, especially in allowing the teaching of the Syrian curriculum, which helped preserve the educational identity of many refugees.

Al-Abdullah presents a positive perspective on integration into Kurdish society. He states that the beginning was difficult, but with time, many refugees around him became part of the social fabric of the community. He mentioned that the language barrier,

which was a challenge at first, was gradually overcome as the refugees learned the Sorani Kurdish dialect: "Our children who were born and raised here have become fluent in the local dialect," he adds with a smile, estimating the lingual integration rate to be around 50%.

Regarding his future aspirations, al-Abdullah emphasizes his ambition to continuously develop his educational capabilities, especially in light of the sharp decline in the level of education in Syria. He acknowledges that the future holds challenges, but also opportunities.

Land of refuge

"Here I feel safe for the first time in years," says Sara Ahmed, a Syrian refugee living in Dara Shakran camp in Erbil. Despite the difficulty of life in the camp, she notes that the Kurdish people have embraced the refugees as though they were part of their family. Mohammed Ali, a refugee who works in a small shop in Duhok Governorate, also praises the treatment of the Kurdish people. "I lost everything in Syria, but I found a new opportunity here. I was able to start my own busi-

I was scared and alone. Today, I work as an English teacher and help new refugees adapt."

In Domiz camp in Duhok, Abu Karam, 65, says: "Despite the financial challenges facing humanitarian organizations, the people of Kurdistan have never abandoned us. We feel like we are in our second home."

At the end of our field tour, a UNHCR official confirmed that "the Kurdistan Region is a model to be emulated in hosting refugees despite the economic challenges. We need

refugees seeking a dignified and safe life.

The UNHCR explained in its report that the majority of refugees and asylum seekers in the region came from Western Kurdistan (northeastern Syria) and other parts of Syria, numbering some 266,605 people, followed by 9,183 people from Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran) and the rest of Iran, 8,116 people from Türkiye, 1,037 people from Palestine, and 1,230 people from other countries.

Statistics indicate that 20,141 out of



■ Jalal Al-Abdullah.

Photo: Riyadh Al-Hamadany

ness, and my children go to school. We are grateful to the Kurdistan Regional Government."

In Sulaymaniyah, an Iranian refugee named Bahar Hussein tells a similar story: "When I arrived two years ago,

greater international support to continue providing basic services."

These humanitarian stories embody the numbers and statistics, and confirm the humanitarian role of the Kurdistan Region in embracing and welcoming hundreds of thousands of

85,142 refugee families reside in the region's camps. The report revealed that the UNHCR requested \$203.6 million to deal with the crisis of displaced persons and asylum seekers in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region but received only 44% of the requested amount. ●

OPINION

2025

Challenges Facing the Kurdistan Regional Government in 2025



Saman Shali

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The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has faced many political, economic, military, and social challenges since 1992, overcoming some of them and failing to resolve others. In 2025, it faces many internal problems in forming its new government and solving constitutional disputes with the federal government in Baghdad while also managing significant external pressures.

However, the Kurdistan Region remains a focal point for Kurdish aspirations of self-determination and regional influence. With its autonomy underpinned by Iraq's federal system, the KRG faces pivotal political, economic, and diplomatic choices that will shape the region's trajectory and role in an increasingly unstable Middle East.

Political choices: form a new government, deepen federalism, or revisit independence?

Since its establishment in 1992, the KRG has worked to solidify its autonomy within Iraq based on the new Iraqi constitution. The aftermath of the 2017 independence referendum, which saw over-

whelming support from Kurdistan voters but fierce opposition from Baghdad and neighboring countries, underscored the limits of pursuing full sovereignty without international backing. In 2025, the KRG must decide whether to:

1. Pursue power sharing: Negotiations are ongoing following the October 2024 parliamentary elections. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) secured 39 seats, while the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) obtained 23 seats. Despite these results, both parties disagree on the positions to be filled in the new government and thus have delayed its formation. The two parties must work harder to achieve an agreement in 2025, as the delay will cause Kurdistan's people to worry about their choices in the parliamentary elections. Sources indicate that cabinet formation could be postponed until after Iraq's federal elections in late 2025, reflecting the complex political dynamics

■ A view of downtown Erbil, with the famous Machko Teahouse and ancient Erbil Citadel on the right



■ A large flag of Kurdistan being carried by a group of people towards Erbil Citadel during Kurdistan Flag Day

“
Success will depend on visionary leadership, pragmatic decision-making, and the ability to navigate the delicate balance between preserving Kurdistan identity and adapting to a rapidly changing world
”

in the region. This will be devastating for the Kurdistan Region and the allies.

2. Deepen federalism within Iraq: The KRG could strengthen its position by working within Iraq’s federal framework. This position would involve renegotiating revenue-sharing agreements, securing recognition of disputed territories like Kirkuk by implementing Article 140, and leveraging alliances within Iraq’s parliament. This path promises stability in the long run.

3. Reignite the push for independence: While risky, a renewed push for independence could align with shifting regional dynamics or weakened central authority in Baghdad. This path requires careful preparation, international lobbying, and addressing internal divisions to ensure a united front.

Economic strategies: diversification or continued reliance on oil?

The KRG’s economy has long depended on oil exports, which constitute a significant portion of its revenue. This reliance has made the region vulnerable to price fluctuations and disputes with Baghdad over revenue-sharing agreements. In 2025, the KRG faces the following economic choices:

1. Diversification of the economy: Developing sectors like agriculture, industry, tourism, health, education, and renewable energy could reduce dependency on oil. Initiatives to attract foreign investment and support local entrepreneurship would strengthen the economy and provide job opportunities for the region’s youth.

2. Optimizing oil revenues: The KRG could focus on maximizing its oil sector efficiency through better management and negotiations with Baghdad to secure a more favorable revenue-sharing deal. However, this strategy leaves the economy susceptible to global oil market volatility.

3. Regional trade integration: Establishing stronger economic ties with neighboring countries, particularly Türkiye and Iran, could open new markets for KRG goods and services. This approach requires balancing geopolitical considerations and securing trade agreements that do not undermine the KRG’s autonomy.

Photo: Levi Meir Clancy / Unsplash

■ Peshmerga forces celebrating Newroz (New Year) with locals on the front lines (2021)

4. International trade: The KRG must attract international partners to invest in its diverse economy and modernize its industry, agriculture, and tourism sectors. The United States, UK, France, and Germany can play a significant role in rebuilding the region’s infrastructure. The KRG also intends to build a closer partnership with the United States, and has reached out to members of the incoming Trump administration.

Internal challenges

The KRG’s political system has been plagued by division, particularly between the two dominant parties: the KDP and the PUK. This division undermines governance and weakens the region’s ability to present a united front. To strengthen the unity within the new government, it must work to address the following points:

1. Abolish the two regions: The new government must work harder to end the yellow (KDP) and green (PUK) regions so that one strong administration represents the Kurdistan people.

2. Unifying the *peshmarga* forces: It is a critical challenge for the new government to have one force to protect and defend the achievements of the KRG and the *peshmarga*’s sacrifices to protect the region.

3. Annual budget: The KRG must start providing an annual budget to the Kurdistan Parliament to ensure transparency and trust between the people and the government.

4. Employees salaries: The government must solve this issue with the federal government because it affects the performance of employees and the trust between the government and its employees.

5. Fostering internal unity: Strengthening institutions, resolving disputes between the KDP and PUK, and ensuring equitable distribution of power and resources are critical to

maintaining stability and public trust.

6. Maintaining status quo: Continuing with the current *peshmarga* division risks perpetuating inefficiency and eroding public confidence in the KRG’s ability to govern effectively.

7. Public services: The new government must improve and strengthen public services such as electricity, health, education, and higher education, making such services accessible to those with middle and low incomes.

Diplomatic choices: balancing regional and global alliances

The KRG’s geopolitical position is both an asset and a challenge. Surrounded by powerful neighbors with competing interests, the KRG must navigate its relationships carefully along the following lines:

1. Strengthening ties with the United States: The United States has been a key ally of the KRG, particularly in the fight against ISIS. Maintaining this alliance is crucial for security assistance and political support. However, reliance on the United States carries risks if U.S. regional interests wane.

2. Engaging regional powers: Türkiye, a vital trading partner, and Iran, a powerful neighbor, have significant influence over the KRG. Balancing these relationships without compromising federalism remains a delicate task.

3. Pursuing multilateral diplomacy: Broadening diplomatic engagement to include European and Gulf countries could provide the KRG with additional leverage and resources. Building partnerships through cultural and economic initiatives may reduce dependency on any single actor.

Social and cultural aspirations

The region’s identity as a Kurdish

stronghold has been central to its appeal and legitimacy. However, addressing social issues such as youth unemployment, gender inequality, and brain drain is crucial to its future. The choices here include:

1. Investing in education and innovation: Prioritizing education, technology, and cultural development would empower the next generation and preserve Kurdish identity while enabling the region to adapt to global changes.

2. Maintaining traditional structures: Upholding traditional social hierarchies and norms might appeal to conservative factions. However, it risks alienating younger and more progressive segments of society.

3. Investing in the health sector: The government must give the utmost attention to the public health sector to serve the needs of its constituents.

4. Prioritizing human rights: It is critical to invest in human rights, especially those of women and the youth, who represent two-thirds of the population, to ensure a brighter future for our nation.

The KRG faces daunting challenges and rebuilding opportunities. Its choices – whether to deepen autonomy or revive independence, diversify its economy or rely on oil, foster unity or maintain factionalism, and balance alliances or expand its diplomatic horizons – will determine the region’s future. Success will depend on visionary leadership, pragmatic decision-making, and the ability to navigate the delicate balance between preserving Kurdistan identity and adapting to a rapidly changing world. Internal unity remains one of the top priorities of KRG, as such moves will help to gain the people’s support and trust. Whatever its path, the KRG will remain a pivotal player in the Middle East’s complex political and economic tapestry. ●

The Photographer who Witnessed Halabja's Horror



Omar Aziz

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

The chemical bombardment of Halabja through the lens of a Kurdish photographer

Ezzat Shafiq pondered the photographs, remembering the scenes he had witnessed and documented 37 years ago. These photos carry significance for the Kurdish people, for him, and for Halabja, reminding us of the genocide of the Kurds.

As 62-year-old Shafiq shares, the chemical attack on March 16, 1988, on Halabja was especially painful, as he crossed many of the city's streets on that day using his small handheld camera to capture the scenes of the crime committed against the Kurds.

On that harrowing day, the Iraqi Ba'athist

regime bombed Halabja with banned chemical weapons, killing 5,000 civilians and wounding hundreds more. The chemical attacks were such an unprecedented crime that many international photographers and journalists flocked to cover them.

But no photographer was more important than Shafiq, who recalled some of the events leading up to the Halabja massacre. "In 1987, the Ba'ath regime bombed the neighborhood of Kani Ashqan in Halabja. We were displaced and went to Iran after this. We stayed there until the day of the chemical attack on Halabja," he said.

Ezzat Shafiq showing a photo of the aftermath of Halabja massacre



Photo: Omar Aziz



Ezzat Shafiq at the Halabja Cemetery

Photo: Omar Aziz



■ A view of the Monument of Halabja Martyrs

Photo: Omar Aziz

Returning to Halabja

During these years, Shafiq was a *pesh-merga* and worked in the media, so he had some experience with photography. On March 16, 1988, the day Halabja was bombed, he bought a small camera and several rolls of film in Iran and tried to sneak back into Halabja to document the genocide unfolding before the world.

On March 17, 1988, he succeeded, reaching the village of Biyawella, a few minutes from the center of Halabja. The scenes he discovered were too shocking to process; it was his first time seeing bodies lying lifeless in the streets of a newly bombed town. The deaths of people and livestock and the destruction and desolation of the town were overwhelming.

Although he was unable to capture any photos on the first day, he eventually began snapping pictures. “The pictures I took were mostly of houses, streets, and even the cemeteries of the martyrs. I can say that all of them...they were full of pain, but some of them were especially tragic

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Everywhere we went,
the streets were full
of bodies. Some were
half buried in the sand,
others half exposed,
because the planes had
bombed their homes

and traumatizing—like the image of a child on the stairs of their house. The child ran, put their foot on the first step, and fell against the door, dying there,” he said.

He also remembered another scene in which a mother held her child tightly, and they remained inseparable even in death.

The tragedy he witnessed was unthinkable. “Everywhere we went, the streets were full of bodies. Some

were half buried in the sand, others half exposed, because the planes had bombed their homes,” he said. “There was not a single street without bodies. People had run in all directions to escape but were all cut down by chemical weapons. The scenes were deeply moving.”

What distinguishes Shafiq’s work from that of foreign photographers and journalists is that he was more personally affected by the scenes being from Halabja. “When I returned to Halabja, I had no protective equipment or knowledge of the chemicals involved, but I went anyway. Once I arrived, I tried to adapt to the situation. Eventually, they gave me special clothes and gloves,” he said.

Providing historical proof

Shafiq stayed in Halabja for 18 days. In addition to recording the tragic scenes, he and others collected people’s bodies and buried them. However, his health deteriorated because of the effects of the chemical gas, and he returned to Iran. “While we were in Halabja, we went to the village of



Ababayli during the day and stayed there at night. It was a few minutes from the center of Halabja,” he explained.

Although Shafiq’s camera was not high quality, it became an invaluable tool for Halabja. As the only Kurd from Halabja to photograph the aftermath of the attacks, he was able to document the scenes and preserve

them as historical evidence for the future. “The camera I had was small, so it was easy to use. It required film, and I had four 36-exposure rolls and two 12-exposure rolls. I filled them all quickly,” he recalled.

He also mentioned that there were many places that he could not access due to the number of bodies and difficult conditions.

Many remains of the martyrs of Halabja, as well as documents, cameras, and photographs of other photographers and journalists who recorded the crimes of the chemical attack have been preserved. Similarly, Shafiq kept his camera and most of the images he has captured over the past 38 years, preserving this documentation of the chemical attack on Kurdish civilians with the intention of eventually using it as historical proof for the Kurdish nation. “I have taken about 150 to 165 photos, most of which I have not published. Some of them, however, have been published,” he said.

The work of all the photographers and journalists who came to Halabja in the aftermath of the chemical attack and recorded the scenes is vital for the history of the Kurdish people. In recognition of their efforts, a statue has been placed inside the Halabja Monument as a symbol, honoring their work and ensuring they are not forgotten. “It is important for us Kurds to preserve the camera and photos because they are crucial to the history of our people. They are an archive of our people and our city.” ●

A Son, a Father, and the Inspiration of General Mustafa Barzani



Richard Eagleton is the son of the esteemed late US ambassador, William Eagleton. William was renowned for his fervent leadership and staunch advocacy for Kurdish Rights.

My father became fascinated by the Kurds after reading an article by Archie Roosevelt, the only American to visit Qazi Muhammad and the short-lived Republic of Mahabad.

My father was a young diplomat when he began his direct involvement with Kurdistan. After his first posting to Damascus in 1950, he was sent to Beirut to study Kurdish dialects in preparation for an assignment Kirkuk (1954-1955), where he

ran a U.S. interests' section and its library. He spent much of his time exploring the Kurdistan Region, with its wealth of ancient culture and tribes.

In those days, the life of a young diplomatic officer mostly involved visiting local peoples, learning about their ways of life, and gaining as much knowledge as possible about the land they were sent to.

As my father said to me several times,



■ Richard Eagleton, his father and Nephews (2005)



■ Richard Eagleton's family includes Hobart Bosworth, who made the first movie in Los Angeles.



■ Richard Eagleton's maternal great-grandfather Daniel Perkins Bosworth and family (1860s)

when I accompanied him on yearly visits to Kurdistan as well as Baghdad between 2002 and 2006: "Our ability to study a country through direct contact with the locals was an essential part of our training and is now sadly lacking. In situations where security considerations prevent officers from learning directly, they are kept as virtual prisoners behind high walls and locked gates."

This advice was fundamental to my own explorations, which have allowed me such a richness of contact that I can count many friends and brothers in Kurdistan. The Kurds' special qualities of warmth, humor, and depth

“These were difficult times for the Kurdish cause, and my father was sad that he could not alter the policies that were in place

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of humanity have so easily integrated with my own experiences of the world.

Encountering Mahabad

When our family lived in Tabriz, Iran, from 1959 to 1961, my father traveled frequently among the Kurds, particularly to Mahabad, the town where the Kurds had declared their republic in 1946. I was fortunate to accompany him several times at the ages of six and seven, and that experience remains vividly memorable.

My father became in direct contact with General Mustafa Barzani in

1961. It was a pivotal time for the Kurds, as Barzani was seeking U.S. support for Kurdish rights after the many hardships that had begun in the wake of World War I. These struggles had forced the Kurdish people into resistance out of necessity. They had no other choice but to fight for survival.

My father respected Barzani and his careful planning against impossible odds. When he spoke of him to me, it was clear he saw him as an extraordinarily courageous leader, one with charisma and a righteous cause, but also one who lived simply among his people, noticing and caring for even the most humble around him. This is the image of the mythical hero who puts the fate of his companions before his own.

My father researched the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad and gathered whatever photographs and evidence he could find, often hiding them from authorities who would have destroyed both the images and their carrier. During our visits to Mahabad, we slept on iron beds in the garden of the Habibi home, where General Barzani's peshmerga had also stayed in 1946. I gazed up at the immense sky of diamonds, filled with natural, wild wonder.

My father's first contact with General Barzani came in the early summer of 1961 when he was preparing to leave Tabriz. "A Kurd in Mahabad with whom I had discussed the Kurdish Republic of 1946 informed me that he had a message from General Mustafa for the U.S. Government. He wanted us to know that he would be taking military action against the Qasim regime in Baghdad. This would not affect U.S. interests," he said.

The years that followed inevitably brought enormous challenges and divisions, even between friends, but Barzani was always ready to face them.

A special visit in America

When Barzani traveled to the United States in 1976 – where he remained until his death in 1979 – he visited my father with his sons Idris and Masoud. I asked him about that meeting, the photos from which are familiar to so many in Kurdistan.

These were difficult times for the Kurdish cause, and my father was sad that he could not alter the policies that were in place. The visit included an evening at my father's home where

proudly adorns my sister Mary Louise's hand.

My father never recorded more about this visit and what Barzani and his sons discussed, although he later told me that he did not like the attitude of then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger toward the Kurds. After having supported their cause for some years, even providing weapons for their struggle, he later betrayed them, when U.S. interests shifted with the wind!



he and my stepmother Kay hosted these friends and shared memorable moments. Barzani gifted a beautiful precious stone ring to Kay, which now

I spent the last week of my father's life sharing his bedroom in his home in Taos, New Mexico. I had prepared to return to Erbil that very day in January



■ Richard Eagleton in Kurdish clothes, with a photograph behind him showing his father with a Kurdish tribal chief in 1954.

“

General Barzani left behind a great legacy, one of lifelong struggle and sacrifice

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2011, knowing my father was close to leaving the Earth. When I reached Albuquerque airport, my stepmother called to say he had just passed. I had said my farewell and knew that he would have wanted me to keep going without any further delay.

I know that, after 22 years of visits and integrating into Kurdish society and culture, my father was happy that my life was so closely intertwined with those of the Kurds.

For his part, General Barzani left the Earth at his appointed hour in 1979. He left behind a great legacy, one of lifelong struggle and sacrifice. He was faithful to the Kurdish cause right to the end, maintaining his sense of purpose and continuing to encourage all others with his vision of dignity and freedom from oppression.

General Mustafa Barzani remains a great inspiration to those who he left behind in whatever challenges they face. His closest family carries much of this noble responsibility and care for their Kurdish identity, which has been shared with so many of their talented and ingenious brothers and sisters, all moving forward into a new world environment. He reminds us also to respect our forefathers, so as to build a more vitally meaningful world, one that Barzani and all who have died for it would be proud of! ●

Strengthening Partnership Between Kurdistan and Armenia



Sliva Hassan

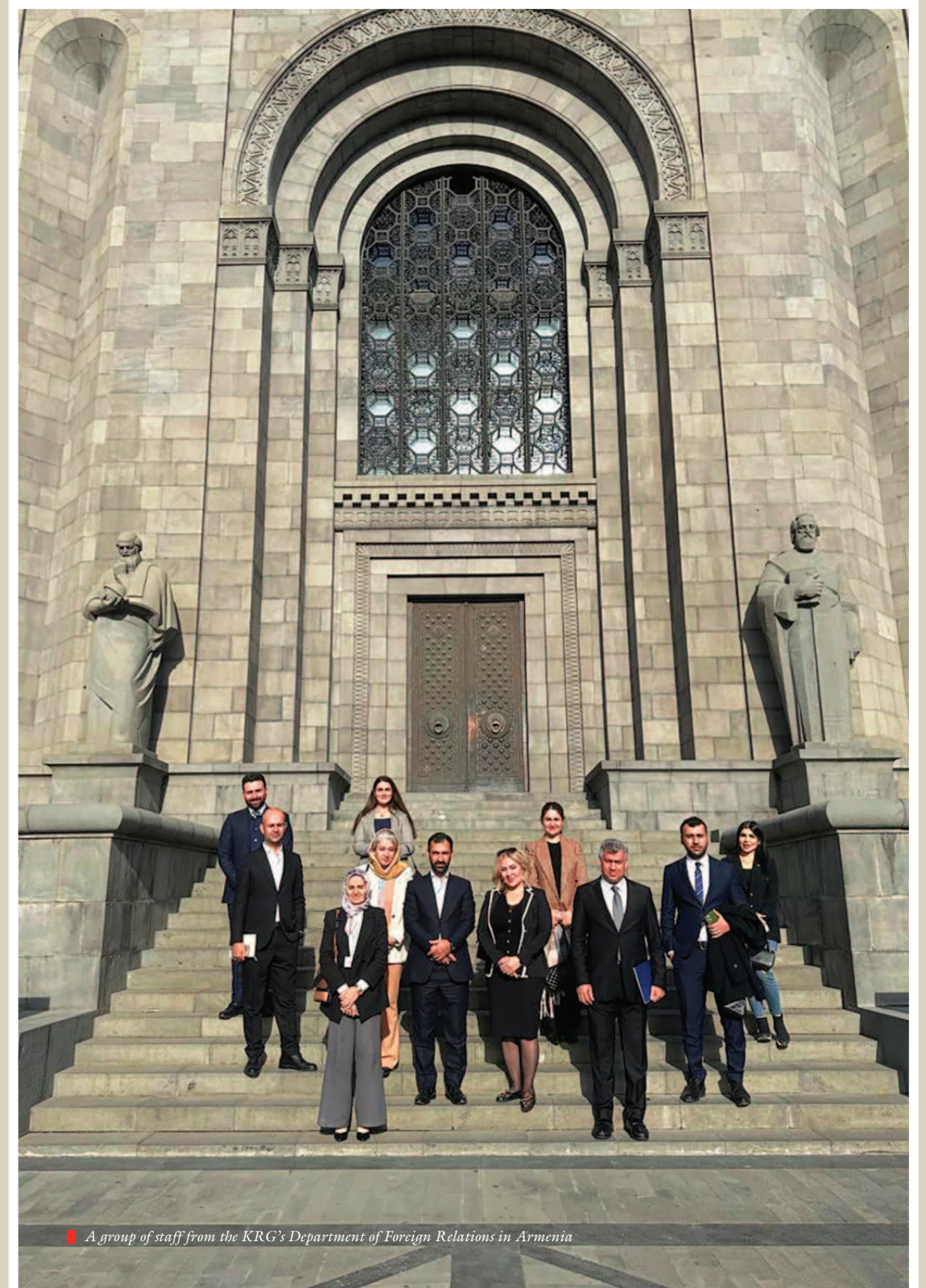
is Head of Scandinavian Division, Directorate of European affairs at the Department of Foreign Relations, Kurdistan Regional Government.

From October 25 to November 8, 2024, a delegation from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) participated in an intensive diplomatic training program in Yerevan, Armenia. Organized by the Diplomatic School of Armenia in collaboration with the KRG's Department of Foreign Relations, the program underscored the growing political and strategic relationship between the two regions. Focused on the political history, security challenges, and geopolitical intricacies of the South Caucasus, the training provided a platform for advancing the KRG's diplomatic engagement in a region defined by its historical volatility and strategic importance.

The program aimed to refine the KRG delegation's diplomatic expertise by examining Armenia's geopolitical approach, its foreign policy priorities, and the enduring influence of historical events, such as the Armenian Genocide, on its modern international relations. Sessions explored Armenia's delicate balancing act in managing relations with neighboring Turkiye and Azerbaijan, and its strategic partnerships with Russia, Iran, and other international actors. Through this lens, the KRG delegation gained a deeper understanding of how a small nation, constrained by geography and regional hostilities, leverages diplomacy to safeguard its sovereignty and assert its influence.

History, politics, and diplomacy

At its core, the training emphasized diplomacy as both an art and a strategic necessity in regions with complex power dynamics. The curriculum delved into Armenia's multilateral strategies for addressing territorial disputes, managing regional security threats, and navigating international forums. By studying Armenia's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its broader geopolitical struggles, the KRG delegation drew parallels to its own challenges in advancing Kurdish interests within Iraq and the wider Middle East.



A group of staff from the KRG's Department of Foreign Relations in Armenia

Photo Courtesy: Department of Foreign Relations, KRG

The program also underscored the critical intersection of history and politics in shaping diplomatic strategies. Armenia's ability to transform the memory of historical trauma into a unifying narrative for its foreign policy resonated deeply with the KRG delegation, whose own history of struggle for autonomy informs its regional and international engagements. The discussions provided valuable insights into the use of historical legacy as a tool for political legitimacy and as a means of building alliances rooted in shared experiences. From a diplomatic perspective, the program highlighted the importance of resilience and adaptability in navigating a rapidly shifting global order. Armenia's strategic foresight in managing external pressures while maintaining internal stability served as a case study in effective diplomacy under challenging circumstances. This balancing act – between securing national interests and engaging in regional collaboration – offered key lessons for the KRG delegation in advancing its own diplomatic objectives.

The insights gained from the training will notably enhance the KRG's ability to engage in complex negotiations, build strategic alliances, and contribute to regional stability. This program marked a significant step in strengthening the KRG-Armenia partnership, further demonstrating the role of diplomacy as a bridge between shared histories and future aspirations. By cultivating mutual understanding and synergy, Armenia and the KRG reaffirm their commitment to navigating the complexities of international politics with strategic vision and a shared purpose.

The relationship between KRG and Armenia is grounded in shared experiences of struggle for self-determination. Both regions have faced displacement, oppression, and the ongoing pursuit of recognition. For Armenia, the history of the Armenian Genocide deeply influences its foreign policy and relations, particularly with Türkiye. Similarly, the KRG's fight for

autonomy within Iraq resonates with Armenia's struggle, creating a natural solidarity between the two peoples. This shared history has fostered a strong diplomatic bond, built on empathy for each other's challenges and aspirations.

The Diplomatic School of Armenia: A bridge for engagement

The Diplomatic School of Armenia, formally known as the Diplomatic School of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, was established in September 2009 by a decree of the government of Armenia. Located in Yerevan, it serves as a hub for fostering expertise in diplomacy, international relations, and global engagement.

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The KRG and Armenia are forging a future defined by peace, mutual respect, and regional harmony

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The school has three primary objectives:

1. Training junior diplomats: Providing specialized training for aspiring diplomats with a university education, preparing them for roles in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

2. Mid-career development: Offering advanced courses and workshops to enhance the skills of diplomats and government officials engaged in international relations.

3. Collaborative research: Partnering with international counterparts to conduct research in areas such as global diplomacy, regional cooperation, and conflict resolution.

The Diplomatic School is central to the growing partnership between the KRG and Armenia. By organizing tailored training programs and workshops, the school equips diplomats from both regions with the skills necessary to address shared challenges in security, economic development, and international diplomacy.

In addition to training, the school facilitates high-level political consultations, business forums, and dialogue on critical regional priorities such as sustainable economic growth, energy collaboration, and democratic governance. These initiatives foster alignment with shared goals, enabling the KRG and Armenia to collaborate effectively on areas of mutual interest.

Through its efforts, the Diplomatic School has become a cornerstone of the KRG-Armenia partnership, promoting not only diplomatic expertise but also mutual understanding and collaboration. By bridging cultures and perspectives, it ensures that both regions are well-prepared to engage in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

High-level diplomatic engagements and strategic alliances

High-level diplomatic engagements between KRG and the government of Armenia have shaped the strategic direction of their relationship. These discussions have covered political, economic, and security matters, resulting in formal agreements that address both regions' shared challenges and promote greater regional peace and stability.

Several strategic areas of partnership underpin the KRG-Armenia alliance, ensuring mutual prosperity and long-term stability.



Photo Courtesy: Department of Foreign Relations, KRG



Photo Courtesy: Department of Foreign Relations, KRG

■ KRG delegation gifting a book published by Kurdistan Chronicle to Vahel Gabrielyan, Director of the Diplomatic School of Armenia

Economic diplomacy and investment

Economic collaboration stands as a cornerstone of the relationship between the KRG and Armenia. Both parties share a commitment to diversifying their economies by prioritizing strategic sectors such as energy, agriculture, technology, and infrastructure.

The Diplomatic School serves as a key facilitator in advancing this vision by organizing trade delegations and business forums that connect Armenian and Kurdish enterprises. These initiatives foster mutual investment opportunities, stimulate economic growth, and promote long-term sustainability in both regions.

Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people relations

Cultural diplomacy is a cornerstone of the KRG-Armenia relationship. Both regions celebrate their rich cultural heritage, and through academic exchanges, art exhibitions, and cultural performances, promote mutual understanding and strengthen social ties. These cultural exchanges play a significant role in building trust and solidarity, which are essential for long-term diplomatic success.

Security collaboration

Armenia and the KRG also face common security challenges, including terrorism, political instability, and external interference. Security engagement, therefore, remains a critical component of their partnership. The Diplomatic School facilitates cooperation on counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and border security, ensuring regional stability and addressing shared vulnerabilities.



Photo Courtesy: Department of Foreign Relations, KRG

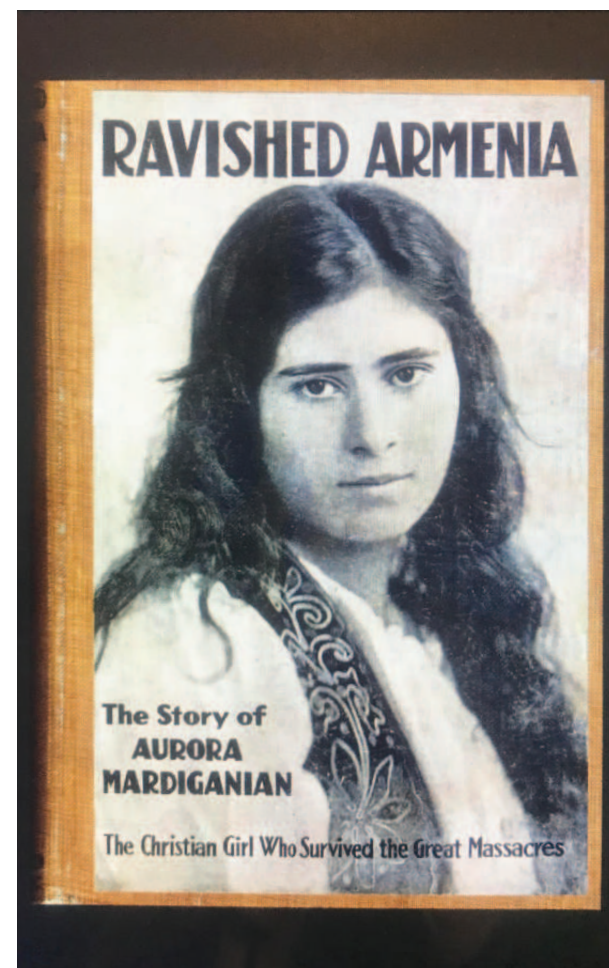


Photo Courtesy: Department of Foreign Relations, KRG

Diplomatic milestone: The opening of Armenia's consulate in Erbil

A key diplomatic milestone in the KRG-Armenia relationship was the opening of Armenia's consulate in Erbil on February 25, 2021. This event marked Armenia's clear commitment to deepening its ties with the KRG. The consulate serves as an operational hub for continued collaboration in political, economic, and security matters, reinforcing Armenia's long-term strategic interest in the Kurdistan Region and its position as an active player in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Looking ahead: A future of partnership and growth

As KRG and Armenia continue to strengthen their diplomatic and strategic ties, the future looks promising. Opportunities for collaboration are expanding in areas such as infrastructure, trade, and diplomacy. The Diplomatic School of Armenia will continue to play a central role in nurturing this relationship, ensuring that both regions are equipped with the diplomatic tools necessary to address emerging challenges.

With growing collaboration, Armenia and the KRG are not only enhancing their own prosperity and security, but are also contributing to the broader stability of the Middle East. The partnership between Armenia and the KRG is a testament to the power of shared history, mutual respect, and strategic diplomacy.

Conclusion: A powerful example of regional engagement

The partnership between Armenia and the KRG stands as a significant example of regional engagement, grounded in shared history and mutual aspirations. Both regions, shaped by their struggles for autonomy and recognition, are collaborating to strengthen their economic, cultural, and security ties. The Diplomatic School of Armenia plays a crucial role in facilitating this evolving relationship, equipping both regions with the tools necessary to navigate global challenges and ensure long-term stability.

Together, the KRG and Armenia are forging a future defined by peace, mutual respect, and regional harmony. Their strengthening partnership serves as a model of constructive engagement among nations united by shared values and aspirations. With a collective vision, they are committed to fostering a more prosperous and secure Middle East. ●



Photo Courtesy: Department of Foreign Relations, KRG

Kurdistan's Pension Reforms



*Cevendra Kumar
is an Indian associate
professor and the head
of the research center at
British International
University, Erbil.*

A clear victory by the incumbent government in the October elections reflects public confidence in the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) vision for a better future. In its previous tenure, the government initiated several economic reforms aimed at revitalizing and diversifying the economy, reducing dependence on oil, and establishing a digital one-stop solution to attract both domestic and foreign investment. This article, however, explores one economic reform that is featured less often in public discourse: pension reforms.

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Making retirement
benefits obligatory is a
win-win economic model
for all stakeholders

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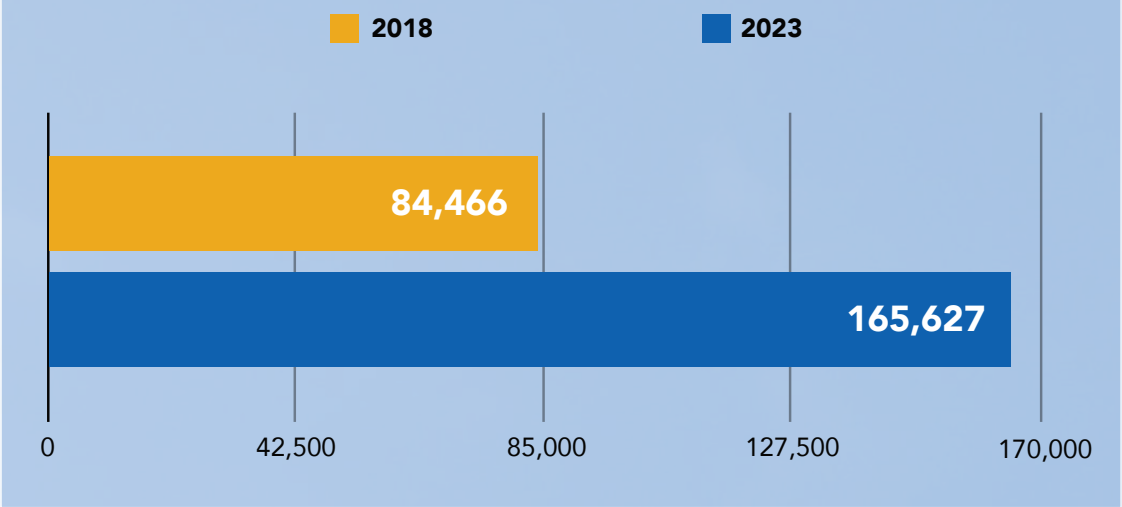
To create a robust labor market – and make private sector jobs attractive – the government initiated consultations to adopt legislation that would be modeled after the Iraqi federal government's Social Security and Pension Law (No. 18 of 2023), which mandates compulsory retirement benefits for private sector employees. While pension benefits are not a new phenomenon in the Kurdistan Region, private and foreign companies are



■ A Kurdish man with his traditional headwear.

Photo: Shivan Harkhi / Unsplash

Kurdistan Regional Government
**Local and foreign employees enrolled
in social security and pension plans**



■ Workers at a construction site.

only requested to provide them on a voluntary basis. Nevertheless, there has been a significant surge in private sector participation in recent years. According to the latest available information in the public domain provided by the KRG Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, the number of local and foreign employees enrolled in social security and pension plans doubled from 84,466 in 2018 to 165,627 by 2023.

A large, young population

Financial security in old age is essential to ensuring that retirees can have similar living standards as they did during their active working lives. There are multiple economic models for financing old age living expenditures. Ideally they fall into three categories: partially or fully employee-sponsored, government-sponsored social security, and self-financed.

The Kurdistan Region has a predominantly young population. While recent statistics from the 2024 Iraqi census are still being counted, data from 2009 indicate a median age of approximately 20.65 years. At the same time, the region has experienced an average birth rate of 2.5 children per woman – a level of 2.1 is needed for an existing population to be replaced – which will ensure that a large, young population will be available to join the labor force in the coming years.

Pension reforms and the provision of compulsory retirement benefits can serve as a strong incentive for the younger population to join the private sector, which typically favors public sector jobs due to their job security and additional benefits, particularly pensions. However, the experience of countries in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia highlights that a significant challenge in expecting the private sector to offer pension benefits to employees is the issue of underreporting. Furthermore, without appropriate incentives for the private sector, there is little justification for disclosing accurate information.

To address this, we need a multi-pronged strategy. To begin with, first and foremost we need an awareness campaign to explain the importance of retirement planning. Introducing retirement planning concepts at universities can effectively prepare the future workforce to understand its importance and ask for such benefits in their employers. Awareness is responsible for creating demand, with initiatives in countries such as Australia, Malaysia, and Tanzania serving as key case studies.

Second, private sector employees typically have higher mobility than public sector employees. Facilitating the seamless transfer of retirement accounts between employers is essential to enhancing their attractiveness.

■ A man reading a newspaper at his local shop.



■ Two Kurdish men relaxing.

Photo: Mohammad Majidi / Unsplash

Simply put, people are rarely keen to manage multiple retirement accounts.

Another important issue is the option for emergency withdrawals from retirement accounts, which is normally only possible at a given age, usually around 60. Countries like India have addressed this issue by introducing a two-tier system, allowing flexibility through Tier 2 accounts for emergency withdrawals while maintaining long-term savings in Tier 1. This option provides a notional cushion during an emergency.

The supply challenge

The features discussed above are essential for addressing demand. However, to make the model workable, it is equally important to address supply-related issues.

On the supply side, mandating private organizations to offer retirement benefits without appropriate incentives may deter compliance and discourage job creation. In fact, stringent measures may lead organizations to avoid creating jobs or to create exploitative jobs.

Considering the economic structure of the region, motivating the private sector to extend retirement benefits to employees will not be straightforward. Drawing lessons from other countries, the Kurdistan Region will need to undergo significant economic reforms. One possible incentive could be providing tax credits for contributions to employees' retirement accounts. However, to offer such incentives, the tax system needs to be reformed, with clear tax brackets introduced. Additionally, the tax system must be transparent and digitized.

Making retirement benefits obligatory is a win-win economic model for all stakeholders. It will create a robust labor market, generate more quality jobs, and motivate the young population to join the private sector. Additionally, it will improve job security, which is expected to increase employee productivity. On the other hand, the accumulation of savings will provide the government with resources to fund large-scale infrastructure projects. ●

HERITAGE

A Christian Village in the Heart of Kurdistan Mountains

Kurdistan Chronicle

Bedyal (also spelled Bediyal), a small village in the Mergasor District in the Erbil Governorate, is one of the oldest Christian settlements in the Barzan area. Its residents, all Christians, have lived in harmony with the predominantly Muslim communities of the area for centuries.

Nestled beneath Shreen Mountain, Bedyal offers striking landscapes and is home to two churches: a modern one built by the Kurdistan Regional Government in 2016 and the historic Mar Georgis (Saint George) Church, which has been a cor-

nerstone of village life for generations.

The wider Soran area also has a significant Christian population, particularly in the Diyana sub-district and in villages such as Hawdiyan, reflecting the region's religious and cultural diversity.

Georges Yohenna, 86, a lifelong resident, said that the village's origins remain unclear. "Our ancestors spoke of Bedyal's long existence, but it's true history has been lost to time," he said, encouraging historians to work on shedding light on the village's past.

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Despite its hardships,
Bedyal remains a village
of resilience and cultural
unity
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■ The village of Bedyal in the Barzan area

BEDYAL

Photo: Karwan Chiyayi



Photo: Karwan Chiyayi

■ The entrance to the new church of Bedyal



Photo: Karwan Chiyayi

■ The entrance to Mar Georgis Church Bedyal



Photo: Karwan Chiyayi

■ Inside Mar Georgis Church in Bedyal

Forced displacement and survival

Bedyal's history includes notable periods of suffering and displacement. The displacement of Bedyal's residents began in 1975, following the collapse of the Kurdish revolt, known as the Eylul Revolution, and continued into the late 1980s. Many were relocated to Diyana, Goratu, and other areas.

In one particularly cruel episode, Odisho Yohenna and Khoshaba Yohenna, two residents of Bedyal, were arrested in August 1983 and later

buried alive in a desert in southern Iraq. Their only offense, according to villagers, was wearing the red turban, a symbol of the Barzani tribes.

During the Ba'ath regime's genocidal campaigns against the Kurdish population and the Kurdish liberation movement between 1986 and 1988, many villagers were also forcibly removed from their homes.

Music, dance, and shared traditions

Despite its hardships, Bedyal remains a village of resilience and cultural uni-

ty. Its people maintain close ties with neighboring Muslim villages, including Kani Bot, Biye, and Bekhshash, celebrating religious and cultural occasions together, such as Christmas, Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha.

Community traditions are deeply rooted in music and dance. The shimshal, a traditional flute, plays a central role in burial ceremonies that are often performed by musicians like Mam Safat from Kani Bot and Benyamin from Bedyal. At weddings, villagers join in the halparke, a Kurdish dance, and exchange gifts with the newly-weds. ●

Olivier Weber's Reflection on Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle



French writer and novelist Olivier Weber's *Si je t'oublie Kurdistan* is a treasure, a meticulously crafted work of nonfiction that analyzes the Kurdish people's struggle for freedom amid the wider movements of democratic transformation in the Middle East.

During his field research in Syria and Iraq, Weber met with numerous members of the *peshmerga* forces, describing them as freedom fighters and so-called 'death fighters' – the term can best be translated as "those who face death" – and providing an in-depth and comprehensive account of their experiences of the struggle for Kurdish freedom, particularly in the recent fight against ISIS.

In addition to highlighting the role of the *peshmerga*, the book also sheds light on the wider spectrum of resistance forces. Weber characterizes Kurdish society as a "laboratory" for human rights in the Middle East, due to its efforts to champion democracy, minority rights, and gender equality. He also underscores the frequent abandonment of the Kurdish people by the international community, emphasizing the imperative of granting them the recognition and support they rightfully deserve on the global stage.

The monograph pays particular attention to the Kurds' epic resistance against the terrorist group ISIS. We-

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The book invites readers to bear witness to the resilience of the Kurdish people and to reassess their cause

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ber provides a detailed account of the critical role played by the *peshmerga* and the People's Protection Units (YPG) in the fight against ISIS in the Kurdistan Region, Syria, and Iraq – a fight that has cost the lives of 13,700 Kurdish fighters. The author places this heroic resistance in a historical and social context and analyzes it through a global lens.

A struggle grounded in universal values

Published in November 2020 by Editions de l'Aube, *Si je t'oublie Kurdistan* is 128 pages long. Written in French, the book is available in both print and digital formats, and serves as a valuable reference for scholars and readers seeking to understand the Kurdish people's struggle for freedom, democratic aspirations in the Middle East, and processes of social transformation.

In *Si je t'oublie Kurdistan*, Weber conducts an in-depth analysis of the Kurds' struggles for identity, freedom, and international recognition, masterfully interweaving historical context with personal narratives. Drawing on his experiences as a war correspondent, Weber vividly portrays the resilience of the Kurdish people and the challenges they have faced. In doing so, the book transcends the perception of Kurdistan as merely a geopolitical issue, instead presenting it as a reflection of universal values such as human rights, democracy, and equality.

Weber frames the Kurdish struggle not solely as a regional issue, but as an international human rights concern, enriching his narrative with observations and interviews. In the process, he highlights the Kurdish efforts to develop a social model grounded in universal values, including respect for minority rights, gender equality, and democratic values. The role of women in this struggle stands out, demonstrating Kurdish society's unwavering commitment to freedom and equality. By placing the Kurdish struggle within a universal framework, the work posits that Kurdistan could function as a "laboratory" for democracy and human rights in the Middle East.

“A cry for freedom”

The Kurds' efforts to reconstruct the historical memory of Mesopotamia



■ Olivier Weber.



■ A man holding the flag of Kurdistan.

reflect not only their desire to preserve their identity, but also their aspiration to contribute to a vision of a peaceful Middle East. Weber critiques the inconsistent support from the West for the Kurdish cause, referencing a Kurdish proverb: “We have no friends but the mountains.” In this context, he scrutinizes the West’s failure to provide sustainable support to the Kurdish people, while simultaneously highlighting their steadfast determination in pursuing self-determination. Weber poignantly describes the Kurdish efforts as a “cry for freedom” in the face of violence and oppression.

In addition to focusing on the Kurdish people’s political struggles, Weber’s monograph offers an in-depth examination of their rich cultural heritage and practices of social solidarity. The traditional values, art, and collective resilience of the Kurdish people emerge as fundamental

elements in understanding their endurance in the face of adversity. In this respect, the work transcends the boundaries of a mere documentary, becoming a tribute to the historical memory and cultural heritage of the Kurds.

Si je t’oublie Kurdistan is an indispensable resource for those seeking to understand the historical and contemporary struggles of the Kurdish people. Olivier Weber demonstrates that the Kurds’ fight is not only for a geographical identity, but also for universal values such as democracy, equality, and human rights. The book invites readers to bear witness to the resilience of the Kurdish people and to reassess their cause and, with his sensitivity and powerful narrative, Weber transforms this work into an emotional and intellectual journey. ●

An American Craftsman's Love for Kurdistan



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

For Andrew Billy, a 46-year-old craftsman from the U.S. state of Georgia, life took an unexpected turn when his destiny directed his path to the mountains of Kurdistan. What began as a leap of faith has become a five-year chronicle of discovery, meaningful relationships, and a deep sense of belonging to none other than Rawanduz, a city in the Soran District.

"I remember being in prayer one day, and I felt the Lord speak to my heart," Billy recalls. "He said, 'I want you to go to Iraq.' At the time, I didn't know much about the region, but I started research-

ing and discovered Kurdistan. It felt like a door opening to a place I was meant to be."

A new home in Rawanduz

Billy's first encounter with Kurdistan came from a photograph he found online of a group of elderly Kurdish men sitting on a stone wall, framed by the breathtaking mountains of Rawanduz. "The beauty of the landscape spoke to my heart," he says. "When I saw the caption 'Kurdish men in Rawanduz,' I knew that was where I needed to go."



Since arriving in 2020, Billy has built a life engrossed in craftsmanship and community. Drawing on skills he inherited from his father, he runs a woodwork shop where he creates custom pieces and mentors local apprentices. "My father was a craftsman, and I think I inherited his gift for working with my hands," Billy explains. "It's a blessing to be able to pass that on to others here."

His shop has become a hub of creativity and cultural exchange helped by locals Steeve and Danial, who have worked alongside him for years. "We've built more than furniture here," Billy says. "We've built relationships. These aren't just co-workers – they're lifelong friends." Another coworker and friend, Dawud, runs a second shop in Erbil.

Billy's journey has not been without its ups and downs. Running a business in a foreign country requires adaptability and patience. "Some days, we don't get a day off," he admits. "But it's worth it. At the end of the day, when a customer smiles and says, 'This is better than I imagined,' it's incredibly rewarding."

■ Andrew Billy

Embracing Kurdish culture

Billy's journey has been marked by a deep respect for Kurdish culture. From learning the language to trying traditional dishes like *kebab*, *kifta spi*, and *dolma*, he has immersed himself in the rhythms of daily life. "I believe it's important to speak the language of the place you live in," he says. "It shows respect and helps you connect with people on a deeper level."

His efforts to learn Kurdish have been supported by friends and language teachers. "At first, I had a language teacher who taught me the basics," Billy shares. "Then I took a crash course in Erbil. But the best lessons come from daily conversations with the guys at the shop and the people I meet on the street."

One of his fondest memories is hosting a Thanksgiving dinner for his Kurdish friends. "I told them, 'My family is far away in America, but here in Rawanduz, you are my family,'" Billy shares. "We had a big meal together, laughed, and gave thanks for the blessings in our lives. It was a special moment."

■ Andrew Billy looking over Rawanduz from his workshop balcony

Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi



■ Andrew Billy in his workshop in Rawanduz

Challenges and hope for the future

While Billy's experience in Kurdistan has been overwhelmingly positive, he acknowledges the challenges faced by many young Kurds. "A lot of young people feel discouraged because of the lack of opportunities," he says. "They want to build families, buy homes, and pursue their dreams, but they often feel stuck."

Billy encourages them to look for opportunities closer to home. "Kurdistan is a beautiful place to live and raise a family," he says. "Sometimes, when you're surrounded by beauty, you forget to see it. But if you take the time to look, you'll find that there's so much potential here."

He also emphasizes the importance of faith and patience. "I believe that when we align our lives with God's plan, things fall into place," Billy reflects. "It's not about doing what we want – it's about doing what He wants. That's where true peace and purpose are found."

A heart divided between two worlds

As Billy approaches his 47th birthday, he reflects on the unique bond he shares with both the US and Kurdistan. "I often tell people that half my heart is in America, and half is here in Kurdistan," he says. "It's like I've found a second home – a place where I feel loved and accepted."

Billy's appreciation for Kurdish culture goes beyond its strong family values. "In America, there's been a lot of confusion around gender and family roles," he observes. "But here in Kurdistan, there's a clear structure that prioritizes family and respect. I really admire that."

He also notes the warmth and hospitality of smaller communities like Rawanduz. "In bigger cities, people might pass you on the street without saying a word," Billy says. "But here, everyone greets you. They say, '*Bayani bash, cho-ni*?' It's so welcoming."



■ Andrew Billy in his workshop in Rawanduz

A life of service and purpose

For Billy, his work is more than a business – it is a way to serve others. "I'm not here to chase money," he says. "I'm here to share the love of Christ and help people in whatever way I can. That's what gives my life meaning."

His faith is the cornerstone of his journey. "I believe God brought me here for a reason," Billy explains. "He gave me a specific love for the Kurdish people, and I feel blessed to be able to share that love through my work and relationships."

Billy's story is a testament to the transformative power of stepping outside one's comfort zone and embracing a new culture. His journey highlights the importance of cultural understanding by building bridges between different worlds through respect and curiosity, in addition to how faith and service can lead to finding purpose in serving others and trusting in a higher plan.

The journey has also given Billy resilience and hope, with which he encourages others to see the beauty and opportunity around them, even in challenging circumstances.

Toward the future

As he looks to the future, Billy remains hopeful about finding a life partner who shares his values. "I'm still single, but I believe God has someone special for me," he says. "Kurdish women are respectful, kind, and family-oriented. Those are qualities I admire."

For now, Billy is focused on living in the moment and cherishing the relationships he has built. "Life is about more than money or success," he reflects. "It's about love, service, and making a difference in the lives of others. That's what I've found here in Kurdistan."

For Andrew Billy, Kurdistan is more than a destination – it is a testament to the power of faith, friendship, and the beauty of finding family in unexpected places. ●

Rising from the Ashes A Tobacco Factory Becomes a Creative Hub



Savan Abdulrahman

is the editor-in-chief at DidiMn, a Kurdish cultural website. Concurrently, she is engaged in a research project on the origins of masculinity in her role as a research assistant at the American University in Iraq, Sulaymaniyah, and also collaborating on this project with the London School of Economics (LSE).

Sprawling across 25 acres in the heart of Sulaymaniyah, the cultural capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Sulaymaniyah Cigarette Factory has been transformed into a creative space for artists and emerging talents who dream of a brighter future for arts and culture in Kurdistan.

Established in 1956, the Sulaymaniyah Cigarette Factory, or Tobacco Purifying Factory, became fully operational in 1961, providing jobs for nearly 2,500 families. After producing cigarettes and purified tobacco for over 40 years and having a significant economic impact on the city, it was closed in 2003 due to an increase in foreign products entering the market.

Since closing, the factory's buildings were under threat of being acquired by private commercial interests, until artists and intellectuals in Sulaymaniyah united to preserve this historic site in 2019. Thanks to their efforts, the factory was officially transferred from the KRG's Ministry of Industry to the Ministry of Culture (*Roshnibiri*) that year and has since been operated as a nonprofit under the name Sulaymaniyah Culture Factory.

Today, the Culture Factory stands as a foundation for arts and culture in the city.

Collaboration across the arts

Stepping into this historic space, visitors are greeted by a relaxing atmosphere, distinct from the city's daily hustle. The

beauty of its buildings, the wide alleys that make it perfect for strolling, small art studios to explore, and a cozy café for a cup of coffee or tea all create a welcoming and inspiring space for creativity and ideas.

Chenar Nzar, an artist and head of administration at the Culture Factory, shares how he helped develop the factory's artistic alleys and create a peaceful space for young artists to establish their studios.

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The Sulaymaniyah Culture
Factory envisions itself as
a revolutionary cultural
alternative
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“When I first came to the factory, I was given a space to work on my artistic projects,” Nzar said. “I personally funded the renovation of three art studios. Later, I was invited to join the board of management. Since then, we have been working collectively to advance this cultural project. Our fight was to turn this place into a reality. Now that it is, it needs continuity.” The Cultural Factory aims to transform this Sulaymaniyah landmark into an economically viable center for culture and creativity, bringing together the city's ar-



A wall of the Sulaymaniyah Cigarette Factory after being transformed into a creative space for arts and culture

Photo: Nash Ali Xayyat



■ Sulaymaniyah Cigarette Factory after being transformed into a creative space for arts and culture



■ Entrance to Sulaymaniyah Cigarette Factory

Photo: Nash Ali Xayat

tistic and cultural communities under one roof.

International artists and organizations have collaborated with the factory on various occasions. Currently, the factory hosts exhibitions, a filmmaking space, an indoor rock-climbing facility, climate change initiatives, innovation hubs, seminar halls, handicraft workshops, photography studios, and heritage centers. Additionally, the public can use the space for theater performances, festivals, concerts, film productions, and more. “Aside from the ongoing projects, there are 47 artistic proposals that are waiting for space,” Nzar remarked.

Connecting Sulaymaniyah to the world

Despite political upheavals and the displacement of communities due to decades of dictatorship, war, and conflict, Sulaymaniyah has proven resilient. The city has successfully maintained its diversity and championed peaceful coexistence, as it is home to various religious, ethnic, and migrant

communities. The Culture Factory aims to reflect and elevate cultural productions that represent this mosaic of Kurdish society.

Artists are at the heart of the factory. The process of joining the community is smooth, supported by an administrative board dedicated to helping artists stand on their own two feet. As Khabat Marif, the general manager of the factory, often says, “own an artistic project, and we’ve got your back.” “This space must be actively used by artists and creatives,” Nzar said. “If not, in the future, the project could be auctioned off for residential development. However, as long as artistic activities continue here, no one can take it away.”

At the beginning of 2019, a collaborative effort among Sulaymaniyah’s artists led to the creation of a master plan for the future of this historic site. The plan carefully outlined potential developments, including an information center, a library, multiple exhibition halls, a cinema, artist residencies, music and festival venues, central

parks, and a museum.

“If this master plan is realized, the factory will become one of the most unique cultural projects of all time,” Nzar added.

The Sulaymaniyah Culture Factory envisions itself as a revolutionary cultural alternative. “Ultimately, our goal is to transform the Culture Factory into a space that inspires both established and emerging artists, creatives, and innovators to produce high-caliber work,” Nzar said. “This can be achieved by networking regionally and internationally, connecting Sulaymaniyah with the rest of the world.”

Every creative and tourist is welcome to visit the factory and immerse themselves in its artistic atmosphere. Together, the people of Sulaymaniyah are working to build an artistic community in what was once an abandoned tobacco factory and announce the future of culture rising from the ashes. ●

Jimmy Carter's Legacy of Peace, Human Rights, and the Kurds



Ronahi Hasan

is an award-winning bilingual journalist and documentary filmmaker based in the UK. She has worked with BBC, Channel 4, and major Western and Arab media outlets.

The passing in late December of Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States, resonated deeply in the Middle East, where his unwavering dedication to resolving conflicts and championing the oppressed has left an indelible mark. For the Kurdish people, Carter's advocacy for human rights was a profound source of inspiration for their struggle and a beacon of hope in a turbulent Middle East.

Carter's presidency came during a transformative period in regional politics, which included upheavals in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia as well as the second oil-price spike following the Iranian Revolution, all amid the U.S.-Soviet geopolitical rivalry known as the Cold War. Despite these challenges, Carter's crowning achievement, the Camp David Accords of 1978, led to the historic peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979. Through tireless mediation, Carter brought together Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, facilitating bold concessions on both sides.

Post-presidential legacy

Carter's activities after leaving the pres-

idency reflect a similar commitment to peace. In a speech delivered on the 20th anniversary of the Accords at the University of Maryland in 1998, he articulated his enduring optimism for the Middle East. "Anyone dealing with the Middle East has to be an optimist. I know that Israeli mothers want peace, and Palestinian mothers want peace. The obstacles are the politicians who lack the courage to honor the prayers of the mothers. Those of us who have demonstrated interest in the peace process must remain involved,

“Both leaders have shown an ability to turn adversity into opportunities for harmony and progress”

whether mighty or not. All of us have some degree of influence.”

“He is a great man. His legacy after the presidency far outweighs his four years in office,” said Professor Saad Eddin Ibrahim during an interview in 2023 before he

passed away. Ibrahim was a renowned sociologist and human rights advocate from the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo.

Ibrahim emphasized Carter's unparalleled contributions to humanity. “After leaving the White House, Carter dedicated his life to fighting disease, fostering peace, and advocating for democracy. This determination cemented his place as a transformative figure. The Camp David Accords, an



Portrait of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter

achievement ahead of its time, faced criticism but laid the groundwork for future peace efforts in the Middle East. Great men like Carter and Sadat may be misunderstood in their lifetimes, but history will honor their achievements.”

Ibrahim’s respect for Carter was evident in a selfless act during his own imprisonment in Egypt. While incarcerated, Ibrahim learned that he had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. However, upon discovering that Carter was also a candidate, he requested the withdrawal of his nomination. “Carter was far more deserving,” Ibrahim said. “His dedication to eradicating diseases and promoting peace speaks louder than words.”

Connection to the Kurds

For decades, the Kurds have exemplified resilience in their struggle for autonomy and recognition, and Carter’s unwavering commitment to human rights resonates deeply with

“As the Kurds honor Carter’s legacy, they remind the world of the timeless importance of justice, peace, and human rights”

their fight against oppression and terrorism, particularly in Syria and Iraq. The Kurds’ valiant resistance against threats to their autonomy – often at great personal cost – embodies the democratic values that Carter championed. His legacy serves as a reminder of the moral imperative to support such efforts.

Ibrahim’s advocacy for peace extended to addressing the rights of ethnic minorities in the Middle East. At a conference hosted by the Ibn Khaldun Center, he brought together Kurdish leaders, including Kurdistan President and leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party Masoud Barzani and the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, to discuss these challenges. Reflecting on the event, Ibrahim advocated for Kurdish rights, even supporting their right to an independent state.

Kurdistan President Masoud Barzani has continually worked to bridge divides among Kurdish factions. Notably, he recently invited Mazloum Abdi, the commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, to Erbil to foster conciliation with other Kurdish parties. This initiative underscores Barzani’s commitment to unity and stability within the Kurdish region, reflecting his broader vision for peace. In a recent interview with *Shams TV* in Erbil, President Masoud Barzani



President Masoud Barzani meeting with then-U.S. President George W. Bush at the White House (October 25, 2005)

Photo Courtesy: Barzani Headquarters Website



U.S. President Carter addressing a Joint Session of the U.S. Congress (September 18, 1978)

delivered a message of reassurance to the Kurds in Western Kurdistan (northeastern Syria) and across the broader region. Emphasizing his role as a stabilizing force, Barzani’s leadership mirrors Carter’s in that he evinces a steadfast commitment to peace and coexistence in one of the world’s most volatile regions. Both leaders have shown an ability to turn adversity into opportunities for harmony and progress.

Carter’s deep interest in the Middle East stemmed from his belief in the transformative power of diplomacy. Ibrahim recounted how Carter, upon hearing Sadat’s speech expressing a willingness for peace, personally reached out to Begin, initiating the journey to Camp David.

“Carter ensured the agreement was equitable,” Ibrahim noted. “He fostered collaboration despite immense

challenges, creating a working peace camp of Egyptians, Israelis, and Americans. This legacy continues through initiatives like the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, where Carter’s and Sadat’s contributions are celebrated.”

Humanity and humility

Ibrahim also shared a touching memory of Carter’s respect for family. “At the Carter Center, every meal saw his mother seated at the head of the table. As an Arab, this gesture resonated deeply with me, reflecting Carter’s humility and values.” Ibrahim also praised Carter’s wife Rosalynn for her unwavering support and warmth.

As the world confronts rising authoritarianism and threats to democracy, Carter’s life serves as a guide for today’s leaders. His tireless work for

peace and human rights underscores the necessity of international solidarity, particularly for the Kurds, who continue to uphold shared values that stand in opposition to terrorism and extremism.

Ibrahim had kind words for this great leader. “I hope the last weeks or months of Carter’s life will be celebrated. The world carries immense appreciation and gratitude for his role as a public figure and a man of peace and democracy,” he said.

As the Kurds honor Carter’s legacy, they remind the world of the timeless importance of justice, peace, and human rights. It is a call to action for leaders to uphold these principles and support those who fight for freedom and equality – just as Carter did throughout his remarkable life. ●

Crossing from Hell Surviving Sednaya Prison



Jan Dost

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

The regime of Bashar al-Assad has fallen, marking the end of a dark era in Syria's modern history under the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. TV screens broadcast chilling scenes of fighters smashing the locks of the most notorious prison Syria has ever known – Sednaya.

Often referred to as the “human slaughterhouse,” Sednaya held thousands of Syrian citizens from all backgrounds, as well as detainees from neighboring countries. Survivors have recounted horrifying stories about this Ba'athist prison, which was no less brutal than Nazi camps or the infamous prisons of the former Iraqi Ba'ath regime, such as Abu Ghraib Prison.

Early days of the revolution

“When the revolution in Syria broke out in 2011, we mobilized to ensure that the first demonstrations took place in Qamishli, Amuda, or Afrin. We wanted them to start in Kurdish areas due to the Kurds' deep-seated resentment toward Assad's regime,” says activist Shibal Ibrahim, who endured months of brutal detention in the infamous Sednaya Prison.

“Even before the revolution, there was immense pressure due to the heavy presence of Syrian security forces in the governorate, including elements dispatched from Damascus to the Kurdish regions

Kurdish figures, tribal leaders, and political parties that played a role in mobiliz-



Families with missing relatives searching inside Sednaya Prison after the fall of the Assad regime (December 9, 2024).

ing the Kurdish street,” he explains, recounting the early days of the Syrian uprising and the involvement of Kurdish youth.

Ibrahim clarifies that the security forces that arrived in the Kurdish areas carried two messages: the first was a veiled threat warning Kurds against organizing protests or taking any action against Assad’s regime, and the second, according to him, was an attempt to appease the Kurds, a tactic the regime often resorted to when feeling threatened.

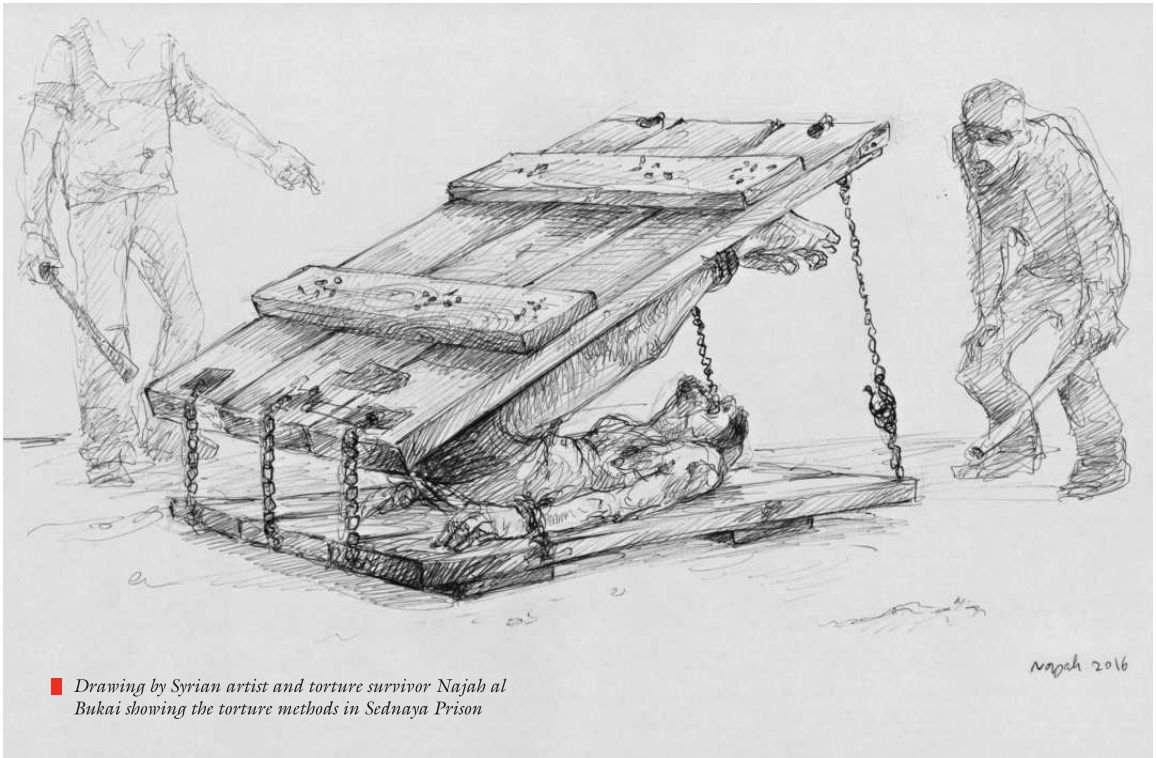
Newroz in 2011, the regime attempted to win over the Kurds by sending a security delegation to extend holiday greetings,” he recounts. However, Ibrahim insists that this move was nothing more than “a cheap political ploy by the Assad regime.”

Discussing the early days of the revolution, including the formation of coordination committees – youth groups organizing anti-regime protests – he clarifies: “I wasn’t among the founders of these committees, but on my own initiative, I invited many to join a gathering scheduled

olutionary movement. According to Ibrahim, this was due to “the years of suffering under the regime’s oppressive policies toward the Kurds in Syria.”

The arrest

Shibal Ibrahim recalls the circumstances of his arrest due to his activism, describing it as a kidnapping without any legal warrant: “The Air Force Intelligence arrested me in Qamishli on September 22, 2011.” From Qamishli to al-Hasakah, then to Deir ez-Zor, Mezzeh Airport, the Air



■ Drawing by Syrian artist and torture survivor Najah al Bukai showing the torture methods in Sednaya Prison

Having endured harrowing days of torture after his arrest in 2011, the activist shares his account with Kurdistan in Arabic through a series of voice messages detailing the early Kurdish youth movement against the regime. “On March 15, 2011, after the sit-in organized by families of detainees, civil society activists, and artists in Damascus, we began to sense the winds of change. On March 18, the first demonstration erupted in Daraa, and soon, protests started spreading. In

for March 25, 2011, to announce the ‘March Coordination Committee.’ Unfortunately, very few attended.”

The former activist and political prisoner adds that from that day forward, he never missed a protest, eventually being assigned the role of General Supervisor of Kurdish Youth Coordination Committees in Qamishli. Syrian Kurds embraced the new movement and integrated it into their cities, aligning with the broader Syrian rev-

Force Intelligence Directorate, Bab Tuma (also controlled by Air Force Intelligence), Qaboun Military Police Prison, and finally, Sednaya – Ibrahim endured a nightmarish journey through the hands of the regime’s brutal enforcers.

The treatment was, unsurprisingly, extremely harsh. The torturers “took pleasure in tormenting detainees through every imaginable method... They even competed to see who

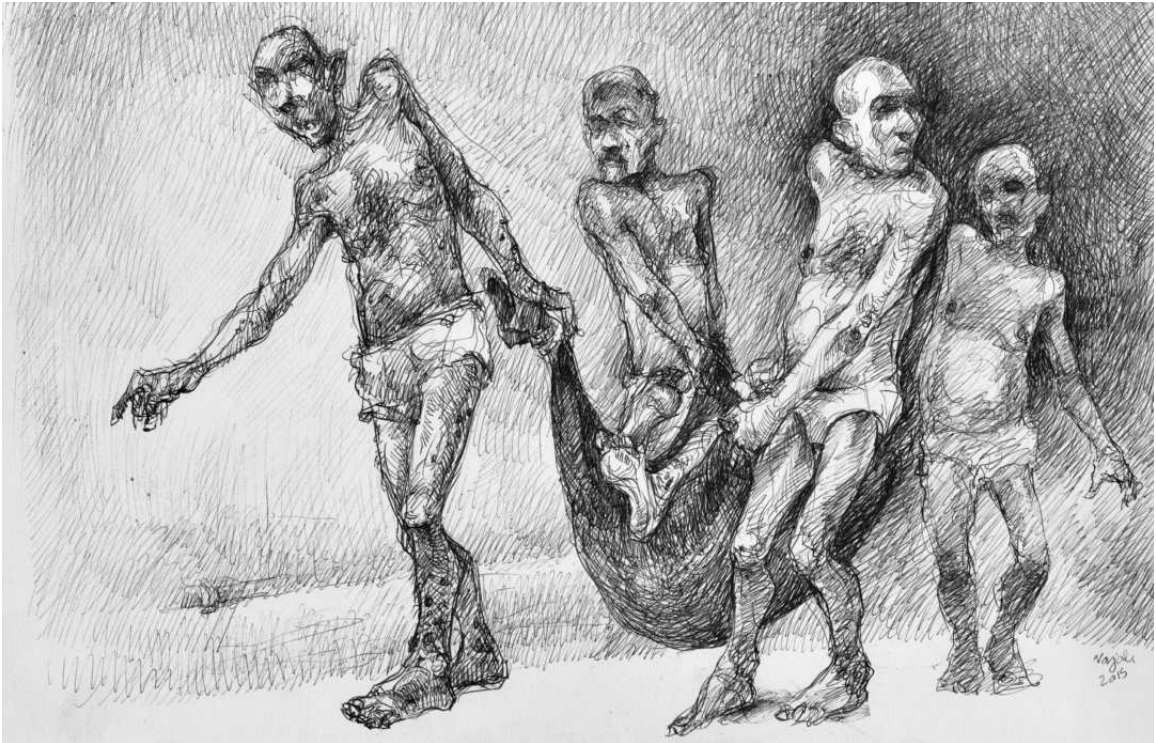


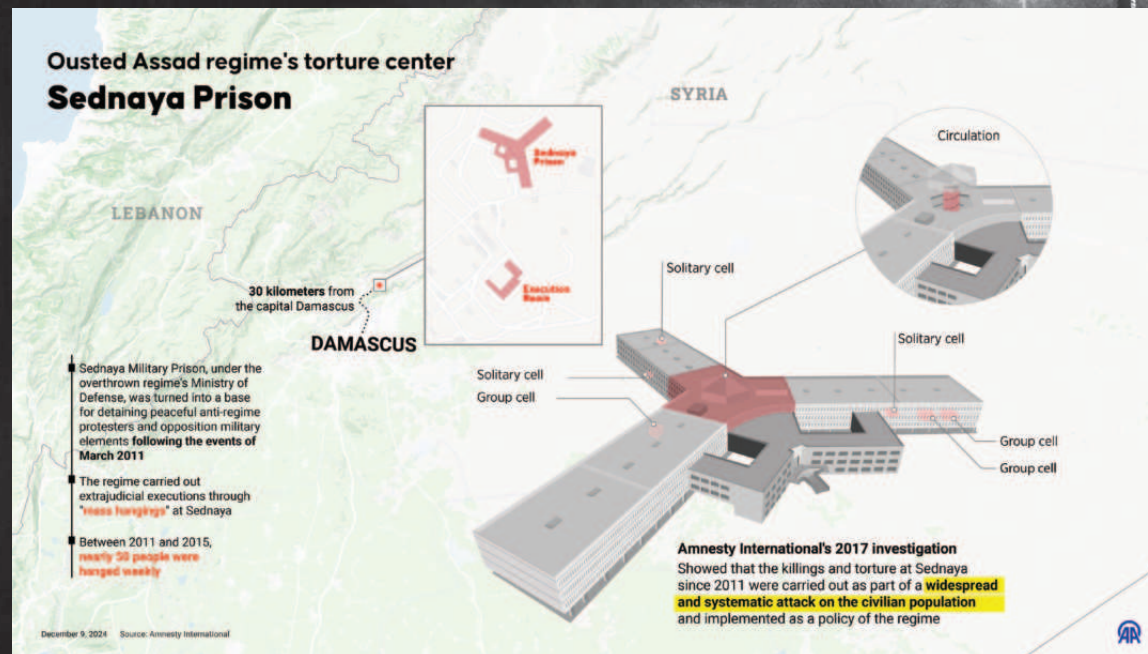
could inflict the worst forms of torture, proving their loyalty to Assad’s regime.”

“The prison guards had absolute au-

thority to carry out any form of torture,” Ibrahim says. “If a detainee died under their hands, there was no accountability – on the contrary, they were often rewarded.”

Regarding the number of detainees, Ibrahim estimates that “more than a thousand people were arrested daily. The security branches became so overcrowded that there was no space





“
I recounted my personal
experience in Crossing
from Hell to draw
the world’s attention,
particularly human
rights organizations
”



Photo: Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images

■ Aerial view of Sednaya Prison one day after the fall of the Assad regime

left for the swelling numbers of detainees.”

According to his testimony, which aligns with numerous other accounts,

the Assad regime resorted to placing detainees in public spaces such as sports stadiums and even candy factories, giving security forces free rein to act as they pleased.

Crossing from Hell

Crossing from Hell is a narrative documenting the harrowing experience of Kurdish youth activist Shibal Ibra-

him. It offers a glimpse into the inhumane and terrifying conditions endured by detainees in Sednaya Prison – conditions the world only became

world’s attention, particularly human rights organizations, to the extent of the torture taking place inside these prisons,” he says.



■ Sarah Abdel Hamid al-A'ami holds photos of her four brothers who went missing after being accused of terrorism under the Assad regime.

Photo Courtesy: Claire Harbage/NPR

explains. “However, years later, after the release of the Caesar photos and other evidence, I decided to document my experience in this novel.”

“They never stopped torturing me from the moment of my arrest until my release,” he asserts. He also reveals that General Suhayl al-Hasan, who was then the head of Air Force Intelligence investigations, personally oversaw interrogations. Known as one of the regime’s most ruthless enforcers, al-Hasan was responsible for the Ghouta massacre and has a history of crimes against humanity.

“The Air Force Intelligence branch is like a five-star hotel compared to Sednaya Prison,” he continues with anguish. “People thought I was exaggerating when I described what happens in Sednaya, but after the regime fell and prisoners were freed, the world was shocked by the horrors they witnessed. What people saw on their screens – I lived through it, in all its terror, for a year and a half.” ●

fully revealed after the regime’s fall on December 8 last year.

“I recounted my personal experience in Crossing from Hell to draw the

The book was published long after Ibrahim’s release. “I didn’t want to cause the mothers of detainees additional pain by revealing the brutal conditions inside these prisons,” he

12 Years in Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle

■ Sookie Hong



Sookie Hong, a Korean-American university lecturer, businesswoman, and promoter of Korea-Kurdistan relations, shares her journey of living and working in the Kurdistan Region for 12 years.

Sookie Hong never imagined that a trip to Syria in 2008 would change the course of her life. While exploring Damascus and Aleppo, she encountered Kurdish people for the first time. Over cups of tea, laughter, and heartfelt conversations, a deep connection was forged.

“We didn’t share the same language, but we communicated heart to heart,” she recalls. “I felt an immediate connection between Koreans and Kurds, as both have histories of struggle, resilience, and longing for independence.”

This sense of kinship stayed with her even after she returned to the United States, where she spent two decades studying and later working at Samsung and Korean Air. However, over time, she and her husband began to question their daily routine.

“Life in America was work, sleep, repeat. We wanted something more meaningful,” she says.

That longing for purpose led them to make a bold decision—to leave behind their stable corporate jobs and move to the Kurdistan Region for what was supposed to be a two-year volunteer program. But fate intervened in an unexpected way.

Just before their departure in 2013, Sookie’s husband, Jay, underwent a routine health check. The results were shocking: he had colon cancer.

“Because of our decision to move to Kurdistan, we caught the cancer early. That decision saved his life,” Sookie reflects. What was meant to be an act of giving turned into an act of receiving – Kurdistan, in a way, had already given them a second chance at life.

Despite the health scare, they followed through with their plans and arrived in Erbil in August 2013. Their first impression? “It was too hot,” she laughs. But the warmth of the people soon outweighed the heat of the summer sun.

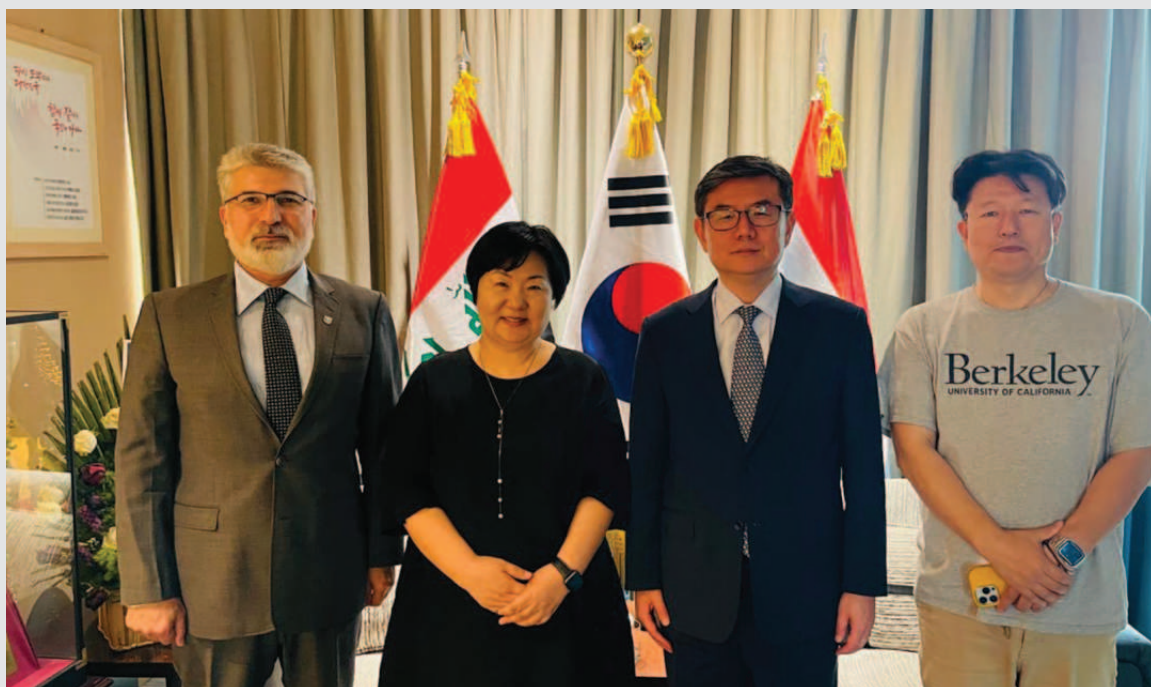


Photo Courtesy: Sookie Hong

■ Sookie Hong with the Korean Consul General in Erbil

Determined to immerse themselves in Kurdish culture, they chose to live in a traditional neighborhood rather than an expatriate community.

“We wanted to experience Kurdistan fully, not as outsiders,” she explains.

Their neighbors welcomed them with open arms, bringing them food, checking in on them, and treating them like family.

Immediately, Sookie started teaching economics at SABIS University in Erbil and later at the University of Kurdistan Hewler.

Her two children, who were nine and ten years old at the time, quickly adapted to life in Kurdistan. They attended local schools, made lifelong friendships, and embraced the culture.

“They felt at home here, playing in the streets, learning Kurdish words, and forming bonds with neighbors,” Sookie recalls. Even after they moved abroad for university, Kurdistan remained close to their hearts.

“When Jay and I visited San Francisco to see our children, we all went out for brunch. My son ordered shawarma at a brunch café. There were plenty of fancier options, but that was the only thing he wanted,” she laughs. “That’s how much this place shaped them.”

Connecting Kurdistan with Korea

What started as a temporary move gradually evolved into a long-term mission.

Today, Sookie is the founder and CEO of Global Expert, a compa-

ny that imports high-quality Korean food into Kurdistan. The venture was born almost accidentally.

“I was organizing a Korean festival, and I realized there was a demand for authentic Korean food,” she recalls. “One conversation led to another, and before I knew it, I was importing Korean goods.”

Her business, which distributes products to major supermarkets across Kurdistan and Iraq, has faced numerous challenges, from bureaucratic hurdles to strict import regulations. However, Sookie remains hopeful about the future of commerce in the region.

“Kurdistan has a strong, young workforce. With the right policies, it could attract more international companies,” she says.



■ Sookie Hong

But Sookie’s contributions to Kurdistan extend far beyond business. She also founded the Center for Korean Studies in Kurdistan, a hub for academic exchange between Kurdish and Korean institutions.

Through the center, she has facilitated student exchange programs, cultural events, and online lectures from Korean professors. She is particularly touched by the growing enthusiasm among Kurdish students for learning the Korean language.

“They don’t learn Korean for job opportunities – they learn it out of pure passion, their love for Korea,” she notes.

For her, the deep cultural connection between Koreans and Kurds goes beyond language.

“Both our people have a concept of

jeong – a deep, unspoken warmth that connects hearts beyond words,” she explains.

She also sees parallels in their histories. “Like the Kurdish *peshmerga*, Korea had its own righteous army fighting for independence. We understand what it means to long for a homeland.”

Her experience in Kurdistan has only deepened her appreciation for the region’s beauty and heritage. She has explored the mountains of Barzan, the monasteries of Nineveh, and the ancient town of Amedi.

“People should know Kurdistan is not just history and politics – it is breathtakingly beautiful,” she says.

Despite the challenges of running a business in Kurdistan, from regulatory complexities to bureaucratic inef-

iciencies, Sookie is here to stay. She envisions expanding her educational initiatives and mentoring the next generation of Kurdish entrepreneurs.

“My goal is to return to teaching economics full-time and shape the young generations of Kurdistan,” she says.

Looking back, what started as a two-year mission has now turned into a lifelong calling. She remains deeply committed to her adopted homeland.

To the young people of Kurdistan, she offers one powerful message: “Do not leave Kurdistan. If you cannot succeed here, you will not succeed anywhere. Build something meaningful in your own land.”

For Sookie Hong, Kurdistan is no longer just a place she moved to – it is home. ●

Photo Courtesy: Sookie Hong

Zagros Mountains Decoding the Earth's Interior



*Dr. Renas Ismael
Koshnaw*

*is a postdoctoral
researcher at Georg-
August-University
Göttingen, Germany.*

Beneath the rugged peaks of the Zagros Mountains in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a dramatic geological process is unfolding – one that connects the Earth's surface to its deep interior.

An international research team led by Renas Koshnaw has uncovered evidence that the Neotethys oceanic plate, which

once lay between the Arabian and Eurasian continents, is breaking apart several hundreds of kilometers below the surface. This discovery sheds light on how mountain ranges form and could help locate valuable natural resources and understand earthquake risks in a broader context. The findings were recently published in the European Geosciences Union's journal *Solid Earth*.

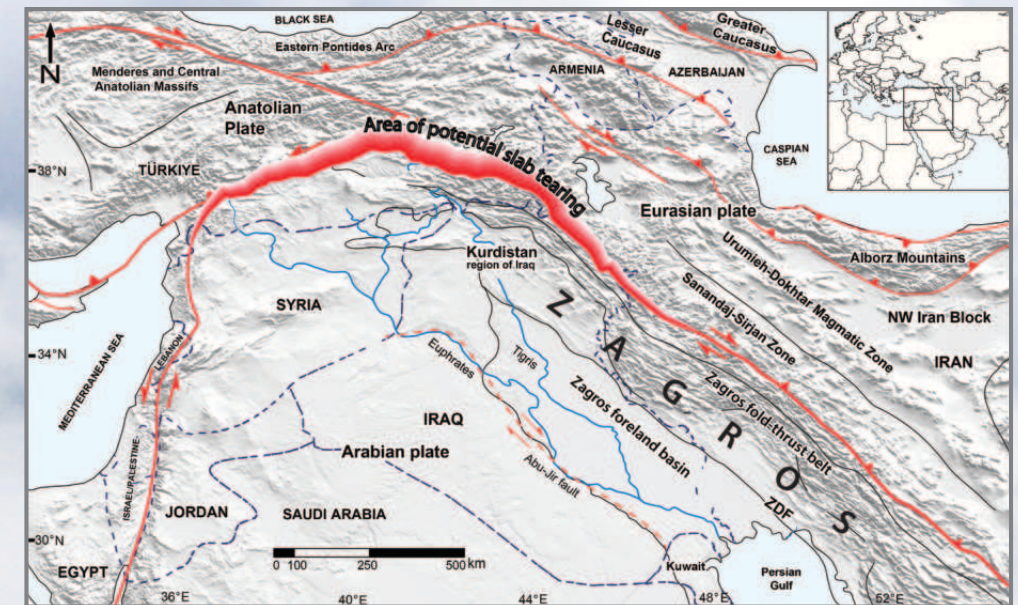


Photo Courtesy: Renas Ismael Koshnaw



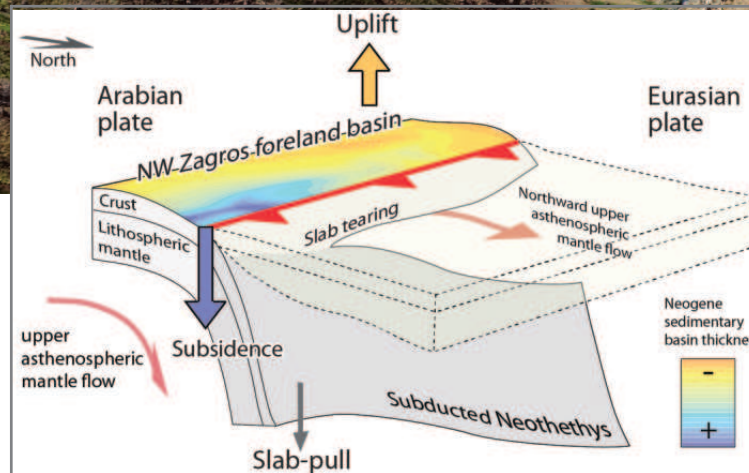
Photo Courtesy: Reims Ismail Koshnaw

Subduction and sinking plates

When continents collide over millions of years, the oceanic plate between them is forced downward into the Earth’s mantle. This process, known as subduction, eventually leads to the formation of towering mountain ranges as the edges of the continents crumple and rise.

The Zagros Mountains, stretching across Kurdish areas in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, are a product of the ongoing collision between the Arabian and Eurasian plates. Over time, the immense weight of these mountains causes the Earth’s surface to bend downward, creating depressions that fill with sediment eroded from the peaks. This is how regions like Mesopotamia, the fertile plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, were formed.

The research team found that the weight of the Zagros Mountains



alone cannot explain the unusually deep depression – at a depth of 3 to 4 kilometers – of Mesopotamia that has formed over the past 20 million years.

“Given the moderate topography in the northwestern Zagros, it was surprising to find such a thick accumulation of sediment in the southeast, suggesting that something else is pulling the region downward,” said Koshnaw, the lead author of the study and a researcher at the University of Gottingen, who is currently working at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. The team’s research revealed that the additional downward force comes from the sinking Neotethys oceanic

plate, which is still attached to the Arabian plate. As this dense oceanic plate descends into the mantle, it pulls the overlying crust downward, creating space for more sediment to accumulate.

However, in the northwestern part of the study area, in Turkey, the depression becomes shallower, indicating that the oceanic plate has broken off in this region. This detachment relieves the downward pull, allowing the Earth’s surface to rebound upward. “When the oceanic plate detaches, the surface above it rises, while areas where the plate is still attached continue to sink,” explained Koshnaw.

A dynamic planet

The study of the Zagros Mountains provides a rare glimpse into the dynamic processes occurring hundreds of kilometers below the Earth’s surface. By combining geological evidence from the Zagros Mountains with deep-earth imaging techniques, the researchers were able to reconstruct the configuration of the Neotethys oceanic plate and gauge its influence on surface geology. This approach explains the unusual thickness of sediment in the region and highlights the deep connection between the Earth’s interior and exterior. “This research shows how dynamic our planet is. The processes happening deep below the surface have a direct impact on the landscape we see today,” said Koshnaw.

Understanding the relationship between the Earth’s interior and surface has practical applications. For example, the study’s findings can help scientists better assess earthquake risks in the Middle East. Earthquakes oc-

cur when rocks along faults – fractures in the Earth’s crust – shift suddenly. By mapping the large-scale geological configuration of the region deep inside Earth, researchers can identify areas where significant faults are likely to form.

The research also has implications for locating natural resources. The thick sediment deposits in the southeastern Zagros region could serve as reservoirs for geothermal energy, but taking more geological factors into consideration is necessary before reasonable conclusions can be reached.

A methodological breakthrough

The study’s approach, combining surface geology with deep-earth imaging, can be applied to other mountain ranges around the world. Similar processes of plate detachment have been suggested beneath the Alps and the Himalayas, but these hypotheses are primarily based on deep-earth images.

The Zagros Mountains, with their well-preserved rock record, provide a unique opportunity to study these processes in detail. “Our research can serve as a roadmap for detecting slab detachment in other regions,” said Koshnaw. “By understanding how the Earth’s rigid outer shell functions, we can unlock new insights into the planet’s evolution and its resources.”

The breaking of the Neotethys oceanic plate beneath the northwestern Zagros Mountains is a reminder of the dynamic forces shaping our planet. This research not only deepens our understanding of Earth’s geological processes, but also provides valuable tools for addressing practical challenges, from earthquake prediction to resource exploration.

As scientists continue to unravel the mysteries of the Earth’s interior, studies like this one will play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the planet we call home. ●

Kurdish Survival Vocabulary



Safin Mohammed

is an English Language Instructor currently working for Amideast Iraq/Erbil. He has over three years of experience in teaching English.

Have you ever traveled to a place where they speak a language that is entirely unfamiliar to you? A language that sounds like a series of connected sounds because you don't understand it? How did that make you feel? Now imagine how much easier and more rewarding your experience would be if you knew even a few basic expressions – greetings, common phrases, or names of everyday items – in the local language. These simple words can open doors, earn smiles, and perhaps even get you a discount. The answer to the question of whether such knowledge makes a difference is often a resounding “yes.”

Survival vocabulary includes essential expressions and words that allow visitors, foreigners, or expatriates to communicate basic ideas in a local language with minimal effort. Paul Nation, a prominent linguist and emeritus professor at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, has contributed significantly to developing survival vocabulary lists. His specialization revolves around vocabulary acquisition, teaching, and learning. The university has dedicated a whole platform to display Nation's resources and publications, including survival vocabulary for approximately 20 languages.

As an English teacher, I always find myself utilizing Nation's resources in my classes. One day, while exploring them, the idea of adding survival vocabulary for Sorani Kurdish crossed my mind. Kurdistan, with its breathtaking nature, unparalleled

“
The Kurdish survival vocabulary syllabus offers learners not only a practical tool, but also a way to connect more deeply with the culture and people of Kurdistan
”

hospitality, and rich cultural heritage, draws countless tourists every year. Additionally, many foreigners and expatriates live and work in Kurdistan for multiple purposes and interact daily with native Kurdish speakers. Therefore, this realization inspired me to take action to ensure that visitors to Kurdistan have a resource they can use to learn the language.

An exceptional team

In July 2024, I assembled a dedicated team to create a Kurdish survival vocabulary syllabus. After receiving confirmation from Nation, the work began in earnest. The team included my current supervisor at Amideast Iraq in Erbil, Khalid Ibrahim, as a project supervisor; my former college professor, Twana Hamid, as a phonetic





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transcription editor; my former supervisor, Ghareeb Salih, as a translation editor; two of my colleagues, Ali Yaseen and Shad Mahmood, as proofreaders; one of my students at the Catholic University in Erbil, Darya Dilshad, as a voice-over artist; and me, as the writer.

For approximately five months, we worked tirelessly to ensure the syllabus was both professional and user-friendly. What we believe sets it apart is its inclusion of audio recordings for each Kurdish expression. This feature addresses the challenges posed by the Sorani Kurdish script, which might be unfamiliar to many learners with no prior knowledge of the Arabic alphabet. The audio tracks feature native Kurdish speakers to enable learners to hear correct pronunciation and practice effectively. Each expression is also hyperlinked to its corresponding audio track, meaning that individual audio tracks can be accessed by clicking on the Kurdish expression. To further enhance accessibility, we included visual support, cultural expectations and explanations, and phonetic transcriptions that mainly rely on a PhD dissertation, *The Prosodic Phonology of Central Kurdish*, written by the same scholar who was responsible for editing the phonetic transcriptions of the syllabus: Twana Hamid. The syllabus is generally designed for learners with little or no prior knowledge of Kurdish, making it an excellent starting point.

“It looks like you have done a very careful and thorough job on this,” Nation remarked when reviewing the completed syllabus. Today, the Kurdish survival vocabulary syllabus can be accessed, free of charge, on Nation’s Resources platform on Victoria University of Wellington’s website. The QR code provided at the bottom of the page will take the reader directly to the syllabus after scanning it.

One effective technique for mastering these expressions is the Vocabulary Flashcard method. Learners can create

small cards, writing the Kurdish expression on one side – perhaps accompanied with a drawing or putting the Kurdish word in a sentence for context – and the translation on the other. It does not matter what other language the learner translates the Kurdish expression to, what matters is that the learner will remember the meaning of the Kurdish expression, or know how to say it. After creating some cards, it is important to practice regularly by first looking at the Kurdish expression and then the translation – if the learner was not sure about the meaning – until the learner

has acquired the word or expression. This method aids memory retention and helps learners recognize and use new words confidently.

Talking to the heart

The publication of a project that makes the Kurdish language so accessible brings us immense joy. Now, visitors and learners have a reliable resource through which they can acquire basic Sorani Kurdish expressions. Whether they are exploring Kurdistan’s vibrant markets, nature, cities, or simply greeting locals, they can now connect more meaningfully through language.

Furthermore, one of my lifelong goals is to try to make education accessible to all, especially where and when it is most necessary. This project, made possible by the exceptional team I was fortunate enough to work with, exemplifies my commitment to that mission. I remain steadfast in expanding educational access

and promoting the Kurdish language.

As Nelson Mandela once said, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” The Kurdish survival vocabulary syllabus offers learners not only a practical tool, but also a way to connect more deeply with the culture and people of Kurdistan. It can make their journey richer, more enjoyable, and perhaps even more rewarding – with occasional discounts along the way! ●

PDF	24.6KB	Balinese survival vocabulary
PDF	12.9KB	Chuuk (Truk) survival vocabulary
PDF	12.9KB	Danish survival vocabulary
PDF	18.6KB	Dutch survival vocabulary
PDF	56.6KB	English survival vocabulary
PDF	20.4KB	French survival vocabulary
PDF	13.3KB	German survival vocabulary
PDF	14.4KB	Greek survival vocabulary
PDF	11.0KB	Hebrew survival vocabulary
PDF	12.9KB	Indonesian survival vocabulary
PDF	13.0KB	Italian survival vocabulary
PDF	13.3KB	Japanese survival vocabulary
PDF	214.0KB	Korean survival vocabulary
PDF	569.2KB	Kurdish survival vocabulary
PDF	120.5KB	Mandarin survival vocabulary
PDF	12.3KB	Norwegian survival vocabulary
PDF	471.0KB	Polish survival vocabulary
PDF	12.8KB	Portuguese survival vocabulary
PDF	21.8KB	Russian survival vocabulary
PDF	13.2KB	Samoan survival vocabulary
PDF	13.2KB	Spanish survival vocabulary
PDF	12.6KB	Swedish survival vocabulary
PDF	118.4KB	Turkish survival vocabulary
PDF	12.2KB	Tuvaluan survival vocabulary

Illustrations Inspired by Kurdish Culture

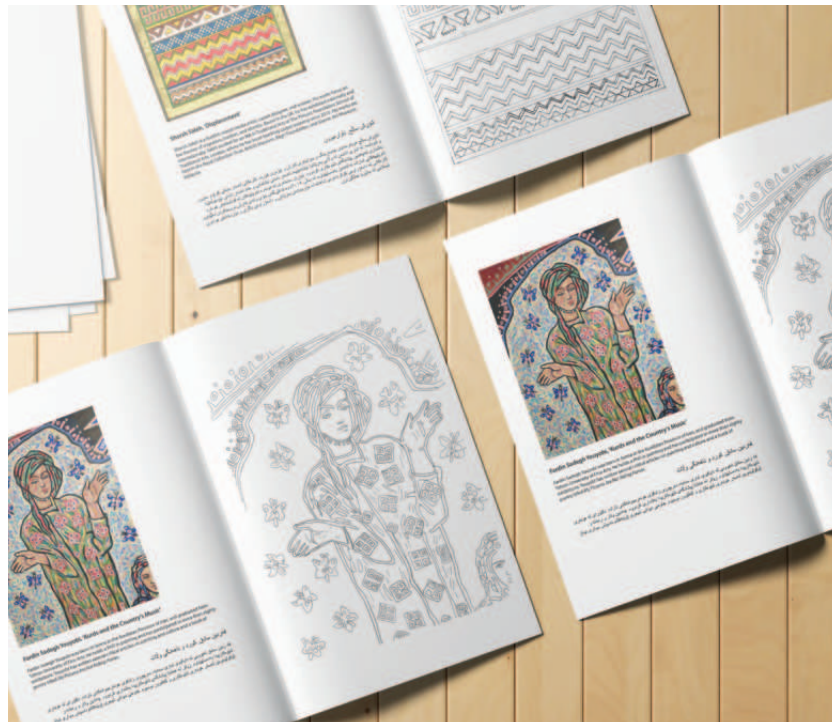


Della Murad

is the artistic director of the Gulan Charity.

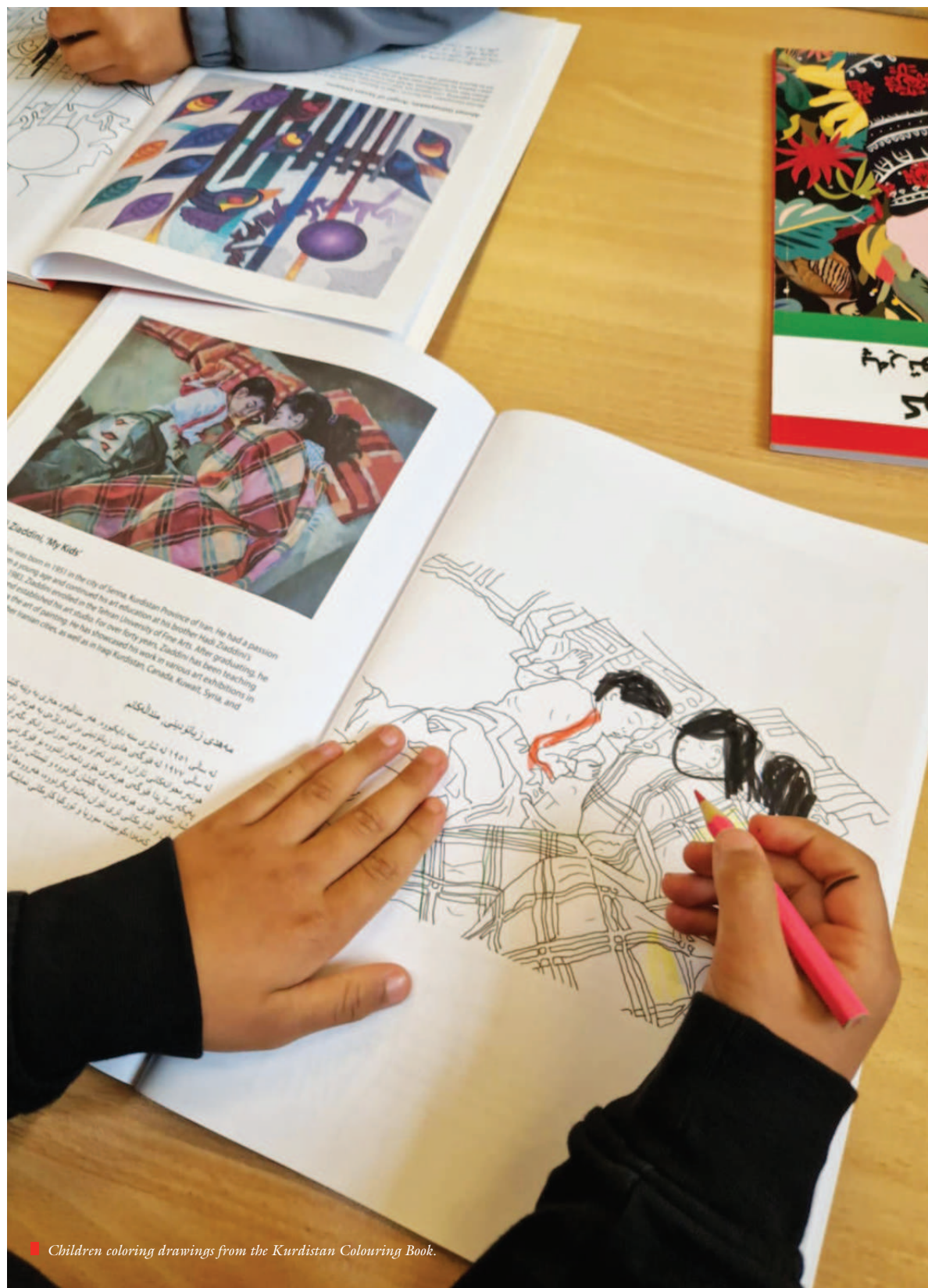
Gulan, a UK-registered charity founded in 2008 to promote Kurdish heritage and culture, has recently launched two innovative coloring books for children. Developed by Della Murad (Artistic Director), Mariwan Jalal (Art Consultant), and Richard Wilding (Creative Director), the books aim to foster a deeper connection to Kurdish history, art, and traditions among young readers.

The first book features illustrations inspired by iconic Kurdish landmarks and traditional Kurdish costumes. Landmarks include the historic Erbil Citadel, the Delal Bridge in Zakho, and the sacred Yezidi shrines at Lalish. Each illustration is accompanied by descriptions in both English and Kurdish, helping children and their families become familiar with some of the most significant sites in Kurdish culture while also learning about traditional Kurdish attire.



■ Inside pages of the Kurdistan Colouring Book





Children coloring drawings from the Kurdistan Colouring Book.



Children coloring drawings from the Kurdistan Colouring Book.



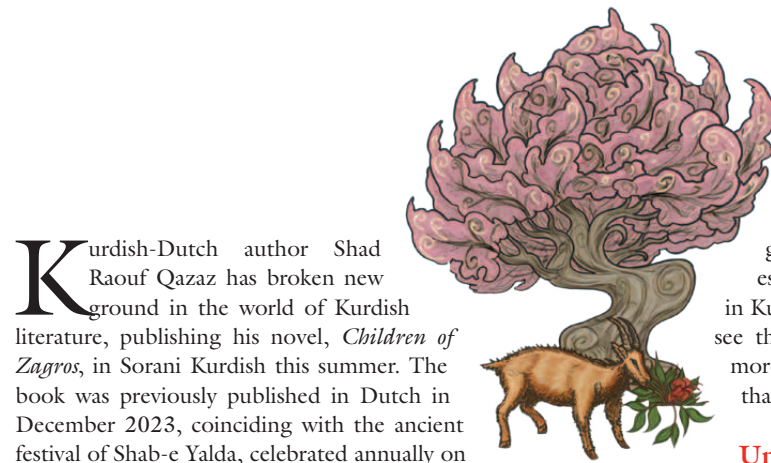
The second book highlights the work of talented Kurdish artists, showcasing their personal interpretations of Kurdistan. By sharing these unique artistic visions, Gulan aims to celebrate Kurdish artistry and offer children an opportunity to view their cultural heritage through the eyes of these creative individuals.

The books have been warmly received, becoming popular resources in Kurdish language schools in both the UK and the Kurdistan Region. They have also been used in workshops across the UK, engaging children in a hands-on exploration of Kurdish culture.

To the best of our knowledge, no similar coloring books focusing on Kurdish heritage and culture have been produced for children before. Gulan is proud to lead this initiative, blending education, art, and cultural preservation in a way that resonates with young minds and their families. ●

A Journey Through Kurdish Mythology

Kurdistan Chronicle



Kurdish-Dutch author Shad Raouf Qazaz has broken new ground in the world of Kurdish literature, publishing his novel, *Children of Zagros*, in Sorani Kurdish this summer. The book was previously published in Dutch in December 2023, coinciding with the ancient festival of Shab-e Yalda, celebrated annually on the winter solstice, when Qazaz visited Sulaymaniyah and Erbil to promote the book.

“The story is a specific drama that explores Kurdish folklore and mythology,” Qazaz explained. “But I couldn’t write it in Kurdish, because I grew up in the Netherlands, and my language skills weren’t sufficient for research or writing in the language. However, it’s important that the story returns to the Kurdish language and can reach Kurdish people in Kurdistan. This is the goal of my return to Kurdistan – to bring the story home.”

Children of Zagros is a captivating story that brings Kurdish culture, myths, and folklore to life. This epic journey of self-discovery also reveals a world of dark secrets and dormant powers.

“I’ve read a lot about who the Kurds are and their history. My father, Azad Qazaz, is a well-known author on Kurdish psycho-politics, but when I was young, I wasn’t really interested in Kurdish history,” Qazaz said. “As I

grew older, however, my curiosity grew, especially after having spent my early years in Kurdistan. Many Kurds in the Netherlands see themselves as Kurdish-Dutch, but I felt more Kurdish than Dutch, except for the fact that I lived there and spoke the language.”

Unearthing myths and folklore

Untangling the origins of stories and beliefs becomes challenging in a part of the world where ethnicities have blurred and narratives have intermixed over millennia. “Over the years, I investigated and researched Kurdish history and mythology. At first, I was motivated by the goal of finding an original Kurdish mythology or cosmology, but this was quite naive, as I discovered that the further one goes back in time, the more difficult it becomes to separate Kurdish mythology and folklore from those of other ethnicities. For instance, terms like *azdiha*, meaning dragon, can be found in Pakistan, while stories from Anatolia aren’t necessarily sourced to being Kurdish,” he said.

Qazaz’s drive to unearth stories about Kurdish culture and history has propelled his journey as an author. “When I encountered these stories and myths, I thought I could create something meaningful from them or reveal something that had been forgotten. In general, people are becoming more interested in mythology – Norse mythology, for ex-



وهه گهێر: ئازاد قهزاز



Photo Courtesy: Shad Rauf

■ Shad Rouf gifting copies of his book to Jort-Pieter Posthumus, Deputy Consul General of the Netherlands in Erbil.



■ A screenshot of the Children of Zagros website.



■ A mockup of the Dutch edition of Children of Zagros.

ample – so why not in Kurdish mythology? I wanted to present our mythology in a new form, as a modern story for adults. This was a journey to my roots and an attempt to give old stories a fresh look.”

During his visit to the Kurdistan Region, Qazaz met with Jort Posthumus, Deputy Consul General of the Netherlands, on August 18. “We discussed the complexities of the region and the importance of the Netherlands’ continued support for the Kurdistan Region to flourish,” he posted on X.

“The Dutch Consulate was very supportive and appreciated the novel. They saw it as a sign of the strong relationship between the Netherlands and the Kurds,” Qazaz said.

“The Netherlands has been active in the Kurdistan Region for a long time, and as a Kurd in the Netherlands, having the opportunity and knowledge to research and write this book is a testament to that strong relationship. I gifted a Dutch copy and a Kurdish copy to the consulate in Erbil,” he told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

Qazaz also noted that after the Kurd-

ish versions are published and available in stores, he will work on an English version, which he plans to finish this year or by early 2025.

“There are many Kurds who don’t speak Dutch well, and I want to reach not only Kurds, but also people worldwide who love folklore. The plan is to start with English, followed by Kurdish Kurmanji, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian.”

Children of Zagros is available for purchase at zarokanizagros.com. ●

Origins of Kurdish Melody in Oriental Music

Kurdistan Chronicle

The path to musical fame was not always clear to Mustafa Abbas Ali, a renowned conductor and music teacher in Iraq. Growing up in an artistic family, he developed a passion for drawing at a young age, leading to numerous exhibitions. However, a pivotal moment occurred during his middle school years when many of his paintings mysteriously vanished from an exhibition. Later, he discovered that some of these works were being displayed at the Ministry of Culture and Information, with one even gracing the office of the minister.

The living dead

The first twist of fate saw him enroll at the Institute of Musical Studies in Baghdad, where he simultaneously became both a student and a teacher. This unique position enabled him to hone his skills and eventually rise to prominence as a distinguished musician, leading numerous oriental ensembles and orchestras. A second, more harrowing, twist occurred when Mustafa was kidnapped by a militia group. He was held captive for an entire year, enduring severe torture that left him with broken bones and a dislocated shoulder. His family, believing him lost forever, even posted his obituary on the wall of their home in Baghdad in Al-Jidida, a neighborhood in the southeastern part of the capital.

A third twist came when a former acquaintance, visiting the prison to secure the release of his brother, was stunned to find Mustafa alive. His acquaintance was so surprised to see Mustafa, who looked as if he had emerged from the wild, that he fainted. Upon regaining consciousness, he exclaimed, "Aren't you dead? Your obituary still hangs on

the wall of your home." Mustafa was eventually released after a ransom was paid.

The fourth and final twist of fate occurred in 2005, when the same militia group attacked his home once again, offering him a grim ultimatum: death for him and his family or exile. Mustafa chose to leave, seeking refuge in the Kurdistan Region. This area – a sanctuary for hundreds of thousands of Iraqis escaping the sectarian violence and brutal militias of central and southern Iraq – became his new home. He settled in Sulaymaniyah, where he began a new chapter in his life, almost entirely from scratch.

In Sulaymaniyah, Mustafa experienced yet another fateful encounter – this time on a public bus – with his former teacher from the Institute of Musical Studies, Majid Abdul Razzaq. Astounded by Mustafa's story, Majid invited him to teach at the Institute of Fine Arts in Sulaymaniyah. Today, Mustafa Abbas Ali is a celebrated musician, composer, and orchestra conductor. We met him at

Mali Muzik, the House of Music, where he recounted his extraordinary journey in the world of music.

The Kurdish roots of Eastern musical terms

Maestro Mustafa Abbas Ali began his tenure at the Institute of Fine Arts in Sulaymaniyah in 2006, leading the Sulaymaniyah Orchestra from 2006 to 2016. During this time, he conducted both Eastern and Western compositions and led several other musical ensembles. "It was during this period that I delved deeply into Kurdish music, uncovering

Mustafa Abbas Ali



the Kurdish origins of many musical terms previously believed to be Turkish or Persian,” Mustafa said. “For instance, I noted that the term *dad bi dad*, used in maqam to describe an unjust ruler, is distinctly Kurdish.”

This revelation sparked his curiosity about the origins of maqam and oriental instruments, prompting him to learn the Kurdish language in its various dialects. He points out that the first step in this regard “was to study the origins of Arabian music and other musical sources.”

One of his key discoveries was the Kurdish origin of many terms thought to be Persian. The word *basta*, traditionally interpreted as “link” in Persian, actually holds a more accurate meaning in Kurdish, where it refers to a song or tune. Similarly, the maqam *suznak*, often translated as “burnt” in Persian, more accurately signifies “affection” in Kurdish. Additionally, while some Arabs claim that the word *rast*, referring to a maqam in music, is of Persian origin, meaning “straight,” and others suggest it derives from the Arabic word *rasd*, which was later simplified by the Turks to *rast*, the term carries a different meaning in Kurdish. In Kurdish, *rast* means “truth,” and some sources even trace it to the word *ra*, meaning “the beginning of the path.” In oriental music, the *rast* maqam is considered the foundational or starting point, making the Kurdish interpretation – “truth” – more closely aligned with its musical significance.

The Kurdish Ziryab

Mustafa also posits that the illustrious musician Ziryab, often celebrated for his contributions to Andalusian music, was of Kurdish origin, born in Mosul. The name Ziryab, he explained, means “golden water” in Kurdish. Ziryab’s teacher, Ibrahim al-Mawsili, was also Kurdish and is credited with founding the first music institute in Islamic history, as documented in the book *Collecting Jewels in Salt and Anecdotes* by Abu Ishaq Ibrahim bin Ali

al-Husri al-Qayrawani.

Mustafa further theorizes that “any instrument with three strings in the oriental tradition likely has Kurdish origins. The tanbur, the oldest stringed instrument in Mesopotamia, originally featured three strings. The Kurds later developed another instrument, the *barbat*, which had a larger soundbox and a skin-covered resonator. Ziryab, in a significant innovation, added a fourth string and replaced the skin with wood, thus creating the oud. When he introduced the oud to Andalusia, Europeans adapted it into the lute, an instrument that played a crucial role during the Baroque period. This eventually evolved into what we now recognize as the modern guitar.”

Zoroastrianism and the significance of three strings

Discussing the significance of the three strings in instruments such as the tanbur, Mustafa traced their origins to Zoroastrianism, a religion that revered music and espoused a triadic principle of good deeds, good words, and sound thoughts. He mentioned that the spike fiddle invented by the Kurds, initially had three strings before a fourth was added. Traditionally, the spike fiddle was crafted from walnut wood, and its Kurdish name, *ke-man*, means “bow.” In ancient sources, the instrument was referred to as *kewan ja*, meaning “the instrument played with a bow.”

The distinctiveness of Kurdish music

Exploring the differences between Kurdish, Arab, and Western music, Mustafa highlighted that Eastern music typically includes quarter tones, in contrast to the half tones characteristic of Western music. Eastern music comprises seven main scales, each of which branches into over a hundred sub-scales, while Western music features only two main scales, further divided into three sub-scales, totaling five.

He emphasized that the uniqueness of Kurdish music lies in the quarter tones, or *koma*, of its sounds. Kurdish music is “remarkably diverse, reflecting the variety of Kurdish regions and dialects, each with its unique musical influence.” Pure Kurdish music is rare and is primarily employed in traditional dances. Kurdish singing, which includes forms such as *Lauk*, *Hairan*, *Bayt*, *Siya Chamaneh* or *Siya Jamana*, and *Horeh*, serves to narrate epic or emotional tales, thereby preserving Kurdish cultural heritage.

Mustafa also noted that Kurdish music is distinguished by its fast rhythms and complex meters, which differ significantly from other musical traditions. Some of these rhythms, such as *georgina* 5/8, and the 7/8, 6/8, 5/8, and 9/8 meters, have been adopted by Arab, Persian, and Turkish music but are of Kurdish origin.

New endeavors

Discussing his current projects, Mustafa revealed that he is working on recording Kurdish and Arabic compositions on the violin, accompanied by an orchestra. He also hinted at an ambitious project that seeks to blend the voice of a renowned, late Iraqi singer with Kurdish music – a vision he is determined to bring to fruition.

Currently, Mustafa is teaching music at the British International School of Sulaymaniyah. He also manages the *Mali Muzik* Center, the House of Music, located in the Al-Raya area in central Sulaymaniyah, where he teaches both Eastern and Western music. As the conductor of the *Mali Muzik* Orchestra, he has arranged several Kurdish musical works for orchestral performance. His compositional achievements include soundtracks for various Iraqi and Kurdish productions, such as the series *Love and War*, *Zaman Haeran*, *Awlad Al-Hajj*, and the Kurdish short film *Tony Baba*. ●

A Kurdish Tale of Beauty and Tragedy



Zagros Nanakali

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

In Kurdistan, where the mountains whisper ancient tales and the rivers carry the echoes of history, people still tell the story of a young girl whose life became a symbol of beauty, tragedy, and the enduring spirit of the Kurdish people. Known as Kchi Kafirros, or “the Straw Seller,” her story has been etched into the collective memory of the Kurds, not just as a tale of sorrow, but as symbol of the resilience of a people who have faced countless adversities.

In the 1930s, a young Kurdish girl’s life was forever changed when she was abducted by a British soldier in Erbil, Kurdistan. Her story, shrouded in mystery and intrigue, has captivated the imaginations of Kurds for generations.

The enigmatic figure of Kchi Kafirros

Kchi Kafirros, whose full name was Xecic Jum’a Mevlud Sekak, was born in 1920 in the village of Gangachin, in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran). By the age of 12, she had already become a figure of fascination all around. Her story, often shrouded in mystery, has been passed down through generations, each retelling adding layers of depth and emotion to her legacy; a woman like no other, whose beauty had no match anywhere in the world, captivating the hearts of locals, foreigners, and colonizers alike.

The name Kchi Kafirros was not just a nickname; it was a reflection of her family’s livelihood. Her father, Jum’a, ran a small shop in Erbil where he sold straw and other basic

■ A rendition of Kchi Kafirros by an unknown artist.



■ A rendition of Kchi Kafirros by an unknown artist.

goods. The family – having fled their village due to political turmoil and the aftermath of the execution of the Kurdish leader Simko Shikak – settled in Erbil, where they struggled to rebuild their lives. Kafirros, along with her twin brother Mahmud, became the center of her father’s world.

The abduction: A tale of injustice

In 1934, tragedy struck. Kafirros was abducted near the lodge (*tekiye*) of Sheikh Abdulkarim in Erbil. Witnesses reported that she was taken by British officers who were stationed in Iraq during the British Mandate. The abduction was not random; it was a calculated act of power and control. Kafirros’ beauty had caught the attention of a high-ranking British officer, who had repeatedly attempted to persuade her family with offers of wealth and status. When her father, Jum’a, refused to trade his daughter’s dignity for material gain, the officer resorted to force.

The abduction of Kafirros sent shockwaves through the community. Her father, devastated and powerless, sought justice through the local authorities, but to no avail. Months later, he was informed that Kafirros had been taken to Britain, far beyond his reach. The loss of his daughter broke Jum’a, and he passed away five years later, his heart heavy with grief and unanswered questions.

The symbolism of Kchi Kafirros

Kafirros’ story transcends her individual tragedy. She became a symbol of the Kurdish struggle against oppression and injustice. A photograph of her circulated widely in Kurdistan following her abduction. The photograph, which depicted her in traditional Kurdish attire, with her striking features and bright eyes, became the epitome of beauty, mystery, and resilience.

Her story also highlights the intersection of gender, power, and colonialism; a female underage colonized ‘subject’ being harassed and kidnapped by their colonial occupiers. Kafirros’ abduction was not just a personal tragedy; it was a reflection of the broader struggles faced by Kurdish women, who have often been caught in the crossfire of political and social unrest at a time when maps were drawn to serve the ethnic groups loyal to colonial powers. Her story resembles the experiences of countless Kurdish women who have struggled and fought to preserve their dignity and identity in the face of occupation and colonization of their homeland.

“Her story resembles the experiences of countless Kurdish women who have struggled and fought to preserve their dignity and identity in the face of occupation and colonization of their homeland”

The legacy of Kchi Kafirros

Kafirros’ legacy lives on in the hearts and minds of the Kurdish people. Her story has been often reflected upon in various Kurdish literary works, as well as in art and folklore. In 2012, a play titled Bent Meidi (The Daughter of Meidi) was performed, drawing inspiration from her life. The play, while fictionalized, captured the essence of her story and the broader themes of love, loss, and resistance.

Her family, too, has kept her memory alive. Sherzed Mahmud, Kafirros’ nephew, shared detailed accounts of her life, painting a vivid picture of a young girl who was full of life and promise. In particular, she worked to help her father, through whom she hoped for a better life and protection; a father who chose displacement and dislocation to provide for his family and protect them from persecution. Mahmud spoke of her love for traditional Kurdish foods like kifte, her preference for red dresses decorated with gold needlework, and her restless and determined spirit in the face of difficulties the family had faced.

A call for remembrance

Today, Kchi Kafirros remains a touching symbol for the Kurdish people. Her story is a call to remember the countless individuals who have suffered in the pursuit of justice and freedom under occupation and colonization. It is also a call to honor the women who have shaped Kurdish history, often at great personal cost, reiterating how difficult it is to have individual sovereignty without ethnic and national sovereignty.

According to Mahmud, “Kafirros was a symbol of our people’s strength and beauty.” Her story is our story, and it should never be forgotten.

As we think about Kafirros’ story, we are reminded of the necessity of conserving our cultural legacy and the stories that define us. Her legacy calls us to address historical injustices and work toward a future in which such tragedies do not occur again.

We still know nothing about her perspective in the story. No trace remains of her whereabouts. Her destiny and aspirations were silenced by the injustices of humankind, byproducts of colonialism and patriarchy, and the intersection of a hellish experience of being in the wrong place and time. ●



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.

Klash A Cultural and Creative Footwear Made to Last

Photo: Pesbraw Mahdi

■ Kurdish women knitting klash, traditional Kurdish footwear



■ The *klash*, a traditional Kurdish shoe

The Hawrami *klash*, a traditional Kurdish shoe, is more than mere traditional footwear. Shaped by Kurdish people's deep-rooted connection to their environment and nature, the shoe has evolved into a modern fashion choice and an enduring symbol of Kurdish cultural heritage, craftsmanship, and identity.

Originating from the Hawraman region in Eastern Kurdistan (north-western Iran), the history of *klash* making reaches back over 1,500 years. Historically worn by males and females alike, over time the *klash* has become a symbol of both local and national pride when paired with traditional Kurdish clothing during festivals, weddings, and other cultural events. Additionally, *klash* have become the symbol of local entrepreneurship and a good source of income. Its multi-purpose use and durability have made it a mainstay in the daily lives of the Kurdish people throughout the four seasons of Kurdistan.

To Hawrami locals, *klash* production is not simply labor, business, and craft; it is an art form passed down from one generation to another. Each pair tells a story of the region's history, the skill of its makers, and the resilience of its people. Surprisingly, despite the challenges of modernization, the *klash* has local and international markets, with it even being sold in large international bazaars in the Kurdish diaspora.

Traditional and modern, local and international

The *klash* stands out from contemporary shoe brands and footwear because of its distinctive ambidextrous design and functionality. Not having a left or right side allows the wearer to use either shoe on either foot, making it incredibly versatile and practical – and more importantly, feet-friendly.

Additionally, the *klash* has elements that are made entirely from eco-friendly natural materials, such as wool, cotton, and leather. Biodegradable and eco-friendly, these materials make the *klash* an environmentally sustainable choice.

The shoes are also comfortable and durable. While soft and flexible, they are also sturdy and withstand years of use. They are also easy to clean, making the *klash* a practical choice for everyday wear.

Culturally and aesthetically, the *klash* reflects rich artistic traditions of the Kurdish people. Even though it remains deeply rooted in tradition, it has evolved to meet the demands of modern fashion. It is available in a wide range of colors and designs that match various tastes and preferences. From classic white and blue to bold reds and yellows, there is now a *klash* for every occasion, as modern trends have increased the popularity of the traditional Hawrami design.

Wasta Abubakr Tawellayi, an experienced *klash*-maker from Hawraman, was an innovator in *klash* design. In the early 20th century, Abubakr (1901-1984) revolutionized the craft by introducing new techniques and materials, such as silk thread and reinforced soles. His designs not only enhanced the shoe's durability, but also elevated its aesthetic appeal, making it a sought-after item both locally and internationally.

A labor of love

The process of making the shoe is complex and time-consuming, requiring exceptional skill and patience. Each pair goes through several stages of production, involving multiple shoe-makers that each handle a specific aspect of the process.

The material preparation first consists of dying and preparing the wool and cotton for weaving, which requires precision as well as attention to detail

week to complete, depending on the complexity of the design and the experience of shoemaker. Despite the difficulties of this hand-woven and handmade shoe, the shoemakers take great pride in their work, knowing that each pair is a testament to their skill and dedication.

A symbol of Kurdish identity

The *klash* has gained popularity beyond the borders of Kurdistan in recent years, and globalization has

even modern fabrics, making them suitable for a wider audience. Despite these innovations, the essence of the *klash* remains unchanged, as it continues to manifest the spirit of Kurdish culture and tradition.

Nevertheless, the craft faces several challenges, including the decline in the number of skilled shoemakers and the rising cost of materials. These factors are directing younger people to pursue more profitable professions. There is, however, hope for the future

holidays, religious ceremonies, and marriages. Since the shoe represents luck and prosperity, it is also a common gift among Kurds.

At the same time, its durability makes it common choice for people in rural areas. Its natural materials offer comfort in a variety of weather conditions and its robust shape makes it perfect for lengthy walks. Many young people in urban areas have even made the *klash* a fashion statement by adding it to their contemporary collections.

establish new domestic and foreign markets, aiming to increase sales and guarantee the sustainability of the craft by positioning the *klash* as a distinctive and superior product.

The future of the *klash*

As the *klash* evolves, it is essential to strike a balance between innovation and tradition. While new designs and approaches can help it reach a larger audience, preserving the ancient techniques and principles that

Hawrami *klash* is more than a shoe; it represents resilience, ingenuity, and ethnic pride. From its humble origins in the mountains of Kurdistan to its place on the global stage, the *klash* has withstood the test of time, adapting to changing trends while remaining true to its roots. As we celebrate the shoe’s artistry and craftsmanship, we also honor the rich cultural heritage of the Kurdish people, ensuring this timeless tradition continues to thrive for generations to come.



A man knitting *klash* in his local store in the Hawraman area of Kurdistan

to make sure the colors match. The upper part of the shoe is woven by hand using a traditional loom, which involves creating unique shapes and designs. The shoe’s sole, on the other hand, is made from layers of compressed wool or leather, which are stitched together to create a durable base. The finishing touches – decorative needlework and stitching – are then added to the upper part to the sole.

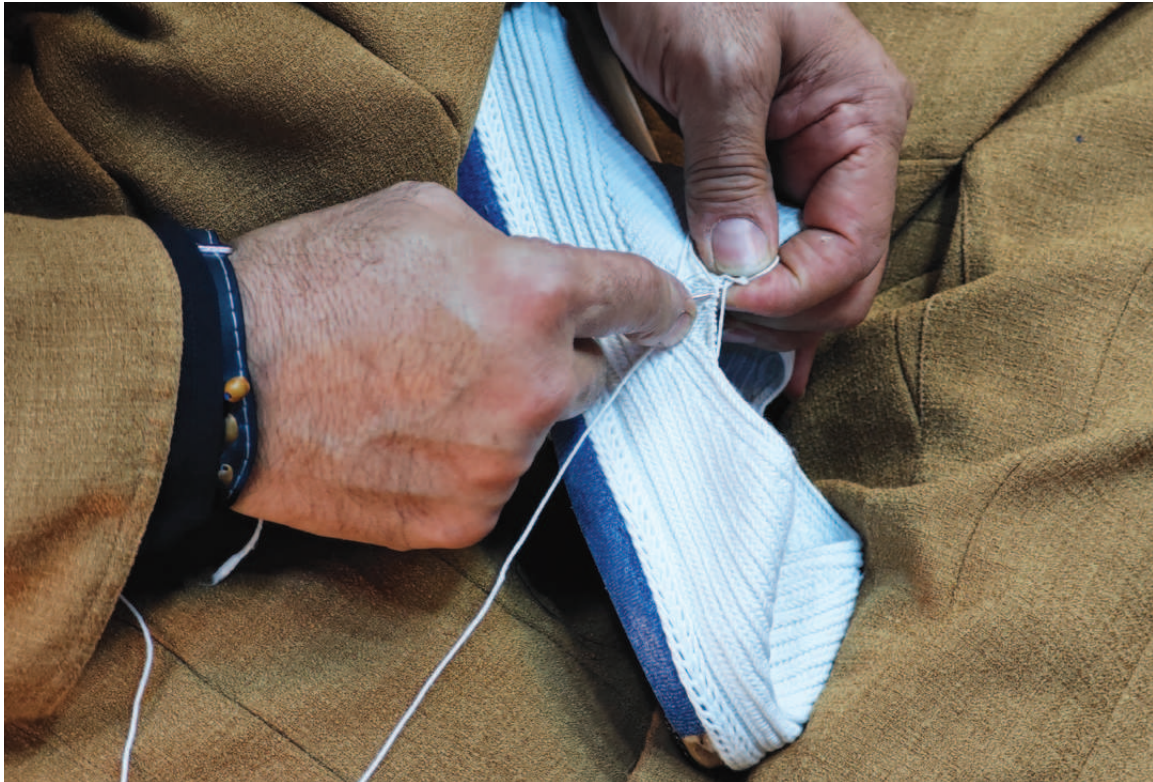
The entire process can take about one

made it easier to reach markets beyond the region. With its expanded reach, it has become a symbol of Kurdish identity and pride, with many Kurds living abroad wear *klash* during cultural events and celebrations, showcasing their heritage to the world. This has led to increased popularity and demand as well as the emergence of new designs and styles, blending traditional footwear brands with contemporary fashion trends. Modern designs often incorporate elements such as metallic threads and

as several organizations and individuals are working to preserve and promote the art of *klash* making through workshops, exhibitions, and cultural festivals, aiming to raise awareness about the cultural and historical significance of the *klash* and to inspire a new generation of *klash* makers.

Social and economic impact

The cultural significance of the *klash* means that it is frequently worn at significant life events, including national



Klash being crafted

In the Hawraman area, production is a significant economic activity. Sales provide livelihoods for many families and, since both men and women can find work in the trade, the community as a whole has become more economically empowered.

However, *klash* makers have faced difficulties due to the growing cost of materials as well as the drop in demand for handcrafted goods. As a result, some have begun looking to

define its uniqueness is equally important. One way to achieve this is by integrating the *klash* into modern fashion while maintaining its cultural significance. For example, designers can work with traditional artisans to create contemporary renditions that appeal to younger generations. At the same time, efforts should be made to chronicle and preserve the traditional skills and stories behind the shoe, so that they are not lost to history.

Whether worn during a celebratory event or as a symbol of ethnic identity, the *klash* exemplifies the Kurdish people’s enduring spirit and unwavering commitment to their homeland and traditions. By preserving and promoting this unique craft, we not only support artisans in sustaining their livelihoods, but also safeguard a cultural history as vibrant and enduring as the people who created it. ●

Photo: Pesbram Mahdi

Photo: Pesbram Mahdi

Musician Defends Her People

Kurdistan Chronicle

It is perhaps no surprise that Narin Feqe, who has family ties to Cizre in eastern Turkey but was born in Derik, Western Kurdistan (northern Syria), has become a celebrated Kurdish singer. After all, Feqe comes from a family deeply rooted in music, with her grandfather Ehmed and father Judi both possessing powerful and melodious voices and becoming renowned for their renditions of Kurdish folk songs.

Feqe's deep love for Kurdish folk music stems from her upbringing in her family home, where music was an inseparable part of life. The melodies and artistry resonated through every room and echoed off the walls, creating an atmosphere where music was always present.

Cizre: a musical place

Feqe's life follows a similar path as that of many Kurds who were forced abroad during the harrowing events of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite moving from Western Kurdistan (northern Syria) to Stockholm, Sweden in 1990, she carries on a family tradition of preserving and passing down the folk songs of Cizre, where her grandparents were from. As part of a campaign carried out by Turkey that targeted Kurds and Christians in 1940 amid World War II, they were pushed to migrate to Western Kurdistan, where Feqe was born. Her family was later able to return to Cizre.

Feqe's father Judi was profoundly influenced by a woman named Miriama Gewre, who had an exceptional voice and

sang an extensive repertoire of ancient Kurdish folk songs. Gewre had fled Northern Kurdistan (southeastern Turkey), and Feqe's grandparents had taken her in, offering her a home for many years. Her presence left a significant impact on Judi, inspiring him to begin singing old Kurdish folk songs at the age of 11 with Gewre's encouragement and support.

Cizre has long had a profound influence on Kurdish folk music, culture, and literature. Feqe's grandfather, Ehmed Feqe, and Miriama Gewre introduced renowned folk songs to Derik, leaving behind a musical legacy that endures. While her grandfather has passed away, the tradition lives on through Feqe's father, who continues to perform both traditional and contemporary Kurdish folk music.

In fact, Judi often reminisces about the memorable evenings in Derik, where celebrated singers such as Mihemed Arif Ciziri, Hesen Ciziri, Mihemed Sexo, and Seid Yusif gathered with him and his father, filling the air with their enchanting music.

Key moments

From a young age, Feqe has held a deep love and passion for her Kurdish identity and the Kurdish language, but she shares two vivid memories that shaped her music career and identity – stories she recounted publicly for the first time for *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

One of her earliest memories is being struck on the hands

“

Feqe has produced numerous songs throughout her career, and owns the rights to nearly 40 of her self-produced works

”

■ Narin Feqe



■ Narin Feqe

with a ruler by Syrian teachers after she had whispered in Kurdish at her school desk. She still recalls the pain of those punishments, but they also became a source of resilience, shaping her into the strong individual she is today. Moreover, she continued to speak Kurdish with her friends during recess and after school. At home in Derik, her family made it a point to ensure that Kurdish was the only language spoken, reinforcing the importance of their mother tongue.

Another powerful memory Feqe holds close is from Newroz (Kurdish New Year) in 1986 in Ain Diwar, when her grandmother whispered in her ear, “Narin, we are Kurds, and we are proud of our identity. Don’t forget it.”

These two pivotal moments – the harsh lessons at school and her grandmother’s heartfelt words on Newroz – have deeply shaped Feqe’s spirit, inspiring and guiding her throughout her musical journey.

Music as resistance

At the age of seven, Feqe began to develop her love for music and singing – her father had already discovered her talent for music as a child. Coming from a musically talented family, she managed to capture the hearts of the Kurdish people with her beautiful voice. Since the start of her career in the early 2000s, her father has been her unwavering pillar of support. Feqe sang her first song, *Dilbere*, alongside her father.

Following the song’s breakthrough success, Feqe continued studying music and piano. She won a Kurdish song competition in 2003 in Stockholm, securing first place among Kurdish youth. The jury, which included the renowned Kurdish artist Sivan Perwer, Dilshad Mihemed Said, and the artist Leila Fariqi, selected her as the winner.

After this success and receiving tremendous support from her commu-

nity, her career took off. From the outset, Feqe decided that her music would center on supporting the Kurdish people through powerful lyrics and captivating melodies. Thus, music has become a form of resistance – a means to highlight the oppression of the Kurds, to advocate for the right to speak the Kurdish language, and to champion women’s rights. Her music has always been a vehicle for conveying powerful messages, particularly when addressing significant social and political issues.

Adjacent to her musical career, Feqe also studied law, earning her master’s degree in International Public Law in 2008 in Stockholm. The messages in her songs are thus deeply influenced by her academic background, as well as by the injustice and the struggles faced by the Kurdish people. In Feqe’s view, music should evoke emotions, resonate deeply, and guide its listeners. Throughout her life, during her education, and in her current role as a case officer at the Swedish Migration Agency, she has witnessed moments of both profound sorrow and joy.

A distinctive style

Feqe highlights traditional Kurdish music, blending it with modern sensibilities through powerful lyrics and messages addressing oppression, freedom for Kurds, the right to speak the Kurdish language, women’s rights, and love. For her, music has always been a medium for spreading important messages. Her best-known songs include “*Hevi*” (“Hope”), “*Zimane Daye*” (“Mother’s Language”), and “*Jin Jiyan e*” (“Woman is Life”), as well as many others about Kurdistan.

Her approach to art has always been to forge her own path, developing a distinctive style that sets her apart. With modern musical technology and the creation of music videos, she has managed to accomplish what the legendary Kurdish artists Meryem Xan, Ayse San, and Gulbahar could not, particularly to deliver a clear message about women’s rights to a Kurdish

audience. This is especially evident in “*Hevi*,” released in 2009 with lyrics and melody by Memo Seyda, and “*Jin Jiyan e*,” written by Edib Chalki and released in 2020.

Feqe has produced numerous songs throughout her career, and owns the rights to nearly 40 of her self-produced works. Many of these songs are accompanied by meaningful music videos.

Connecting with her homeland

One of the biggest challenges of pursuing a music career in Europe is being far from one’s homeland and community, which engenders a sense of grief. Additionally, before embarking on major music projects, financial challenges have proven to be a significant hurdle.

Two significant milestones in Feqe’s career include her performance in *Shingal*, a symphony composed by the renowned Kurdish composer Dilshad Mihemed Said. This remarkable piece was performed in 2015 with the Czech National Symphony Orchestra and featured Kurdish artists from across all parts of Kurdistan. The text for *Shingal* was written by the songwriter and author Edib Chalki. The second milestone was *Welat*, written by Selahattin Demirtas and arranged by the World Orchestra led by Grzech Piotrowski in Poland in 2024. Feqe was invited to represent Western Kurdistan alongside artists from across Kurdistan.

With over 20 years of active involvement in music, Feqe’s goal has always been to offer her audience the very best – to advance music with heartfelt lyrics, captivating melodies, and meaningful music videos. Her love for Kurdish identity, her dedication to preserving and promoting the Kurdish language, and the unwavering support of her people and listeners continue to inspire her to create music that resonates deeply with her audience. ●

How a Kurdish Club is Redefining Iraqi Football



Qassim Khidhir

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

The atmosphere at Zakho International Stadium was electric. Though the stadium officially has 20,000 seats, nearly twice that number of fans were packed together to watch their team face Al-Najaf Sports Club. A sea of red and white erupted as Gustavo Henrique scored in the 41st minute. The roar echoed through the mountains, a symbol of Zakho FC's incredible rise in Iraqi football.

For the fans, this was more than just a goal – it was another step toward cementing Zakho FC's place among Iraq's football elite.

As of the end of February, Zakho FC was

at the top of the Iraq Stars League, maintaining a strong lead over its competitors.

A river runs through it

Match days in Zakho are nothing short of a festival. Hours before kick-off, the streets fill with supporters chanting and waving flags.

The club claims that between 40,000 and 60,000 fans attend each match – sometimes triple the stadium's capacity. The passion and energy of Zakho's fans have drawn comparisons to some of the most dedicated football communities in the world.



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ Talal al-Bloushi, the Qatari coach of Zakho FC



Photo: Azad Zoom

■ Zakho FC fans



Zakho FC team

Photo: Azad Zoom

ZAKHO FC



Photo: Safin Hamid

Iraq Stars League

As of March 2025

2024-25 ▾

Club	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts	Last 5
1 Zakho	23	13	7	3	40	19	21	46	✓ - ✓ ✓ ✓ -
2 Al-Zawraa	23	13	7	3	31	17	14	46	- - ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
3 Al-Shorta	20	11	8	1	34	14	20	41	- ✓ - ✓ ✓ ✓
4 Al-Quwa Al-J...	22	11	5	6	24	20	4	38	✓ ✓ ✓ ✗ ✓ -
5 Duhok	19	10	4	5	26	17	9	34	✓ - ✓ ✓ ✓ ✗
6 Al Talaba	21	10	4	7	17	13	4	34	✓ ✗ - ✗ ✗ ✗
7 Naft Maysan	22	9	5	8	26	26	0	32	✗ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✗
8 Al-Qasim	22	8	8	6	24	21	3	32	✓ ✗ ✓ ✓ - ✗
9 Erbil	22	9	5	8	31	34	-3	32	✗ ✗ - ✓ ✓ ✗
10 Al-Karma	22	8	6	8	27	22	5	30	- ✓ ✓ ✓ ✗ ✓
11 Al-Naft	22	7	9	6	13	12	1	30	✓ ✗ - - - -
12 Newroz	22	8	6	8	29	26	3	30	✓ ✓ ✓ - ✓ ✓ ✗
13 Al-Karkh	23	8	5	10	23	27	-4	29	✓ ✓ ✓ ✗ ✓ -
14 Al Najaf	23	7	8	8	24	19	5	29	- - - ✗ ✓ ✓ ✗
15 Al-Kahraba	23	6	9	8	19	23	-4	27	- ✗ ✓ ✓ ✗ -
16 Al-Mina'a	23	6	6	11	21	27	-6	24	✗ ✗ - ✗ ✓ ✓
17 Naft Al-Basra	21	6	4	11	16	27	-11	22	✓ ✓ ✗ - - -
18 Karbalaa	22	3	7	12	12	29	-17	16	✗ ✗ ✗ ✗ - -
19 Diyala	23	2	8	13	18	39	-21	14	✗ - ✗ ✓ - -
20 Al-Hedood	22	4	1	17	22	45	-23	13	✗ ✗ ✓ ✗ ✗ ✗

Last 5 matches
✓ Win
- Draw
✗ Loss

Founded in 1987 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Zakho FC is known as ‘The Sons of Khabur,’ named after the Khabur River running through the city. Once a small regional club, it has grown into a powerhouse in Iraqi football.

The man leading this transformation is Talal al-Bloushi, the first-ever Qatari coach in Iraq. Since taking over, he has guided Zakho FC to the top of the Iraq Stars League.

Zakho’s fan dedication is legendary. Just a few months ago, two die-hard supporters walked 65 km to attend an away match against Duhok. Their devotion has deeply impressed al-Bloushi, who turned down international coaching offers to stay in Zakho.

“I’m honored to be Iraq’s first Qatari coach,” he told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. “The energy in this stadium is unlike anything in Iraqi football.”

Al-Bloushi, a former Qatari national team player, was appointed as Zakho’s head coach in August 2023 on a two-season contract. He has fully embraced the city and its fans. “I feel their love everywhere I go, whether in the market or on the streets. I will fight until the last moment to make these fans happy.”

He admitted receiving two coaching offers from international clubs but chose to stay in Zakho because of the deep bond he has formed with the team and the city. “I decided to stay because I felt great love in my first year. I can’t walk away from this love. I want to achieve something special for this club and this city.”

Iraqi football on the rise

Since arriving in Iraq, al-Bloushi has seen major improvements in the country’s football scene.

“When I first came, the facilities were different from what I was used to in Qatar,” he said. “But I’ve seen great progress. Referees are improving, organization is getting better, and under Federation President Adnan Dirjal, Iraqi football is moving in the right direction.”

He believes the growing number of foreign coaches in the league is helping its development. “This season, we have coaches from different Arab and European countries, which is a good thing. The more diverse ideas we have, the more the league will improve,” al-Bloushi noted.

With Zakho’s rapid rise, every team in the league now sees them as a serious threat.

“The competition is tough. From first to eighth place, the points difference is small. Every team considers beating Zakho a huge achievement,” al-Bloushi said. “The challenges are increasing, but that’s football. The key is to turn pressure into motivation.”

Al-Bloushi’s ambitions go beyond short-term success. Together with Zakho FC Director Ammar Abdul-Hussein, he is working on building a youth development program that could shape the future of Kurdish football.

“We’re not just building a strong first team; we’re creating a legacy,” he said. “Young players need proper training, and we’re laying the foundation for that.”

The club is investing in scouting, training, and infrastructure to ensure Zakho FC remains a strong force for years to come.

Zakho’s rise is about more than just football – it represents the growing football culture in the Kurdistan Region. Fans see the club’s success as a source of pride for their city. One passionate supporter, Himdad Bosali, summed it up best: “We were born to be in high places.”

As for his message to the fans, al-Bloushi was clear: “Zakho fans are number one, and I have great love for them.” ●



■ Zakho FC Stadium

Photo: Azad Zoom

The Kurdish Wheatear



Elif Gün

is a PhD student at National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (Inalco), Paris.

The Kurdish Wheatear (Le Traquet kurde) by Jean Rolin is an impressive work. Published in January 2018, the book begins with the unexpected observation of the Kurdish wheatear (*Oenanthe xanthopyrma*) at the summit of Puy de Dome in France during the spring of 2015. This event profoundly affects the narrator – the bird is rarely seen in that part of the world – leading him on a journey to trace the story of this rare bird.

The story spans from the meadows of Hertfordshire in England to the mountains of northern Iraq. Along the way, the narrator recalls notable figures of the British

Empire, such as T. E. Lawrence (popularly known as Lawrence of Arabia), St. John Philby (the father of spy Kim Philby), and explorer Wilfred Thesiger. Thus, the book merges ornithology, history, and geopolitics, offering a richly reflective narrative shaped by serendipity while exploring the author's intellectual world.

Rolin's vivid descriptive abilities powerfully draw readers into this extraordinary journey, presenting a multi-layered narrative based on birdwatching but enriched with profound historical, geographical, and political dimensions. The central premise of the novel is the observation of



A mockup of the book *Le traquet kurde*.



Kurdish wheatear.

the Kurdish wheatear, typically native to Kurdish geography, on Puy de Dome. This remarkable incident transcends a mere ornithological discovery, enabling the author to construct a narrative enriched with field research into the bird's natural habitat and historical inquiries.

The first dimension of the work focuses on the Kurdish wheatear's biological and geographical context – that is, Eastern, Northern, and Western Kurdistan – which functions not only as the bird's habitat, but also as a symbolic representation of the Kurdish geography. As the author examines the bird's presence in these regions, he simultaneously asks questions about the region's social and political structures. For instance, the author's use of the term "Eastern Anatolia" instead of "Turkish Kurdistan" highlights the ongoing political debates over the nomenclature of the area.

The second dimension of the work interrogates the relationship between ornithology and colonialism. While examining British ornithological collections, the author

adopts a critical perspective on how the British Empire reinforced its dominance through the study of birds. In this context, the acquisition of rare species like the Kurdish wheatear for scientific collections is portrayed not merely as a scientific endeavor, but as an epistemological tool of the colonial era. For instance, the fact that Iraq's first British governor, Percy Cox, was an ornithologist, or that General Allenby engaged in birdwatching demonstrates how the collection and documentation of such species could also be read as a display of power.

Another noteworthy aspect of the work reevaluates the historical significance of ornithology through the roles of individual figures in the narrative. Characters such as Major Richard Meinertzhagen, who stood at the intersection of science and colonial representation, unveil the connection between ornithology and violence through colonialism. Meinertzhagen's presence in the narrative highlights the intersection of science and power, while intersecting accounts of historical figures like Lawrence of Arabia reveal that orni-

thology was not merely a natural science, but also a colonial practice.

Le Traquet kurde uses the unexpected appearance of the Kurdish wheatear in France as a starting point to offer a multi-layered analysis integrating natural science, history, geography, and politics. The bird's habitat, unique to

Kurdish geography, becomes an allegory for the region's cultural and political context, while the practice of ornithology is scrutinized at the crossroads of imperialism and scientific knowledge. In this sense, the work is not merely a story about birdwatching, but a multifaceted cultural and historical examination. ●

“
The bird's habitat, unique
to Kurdish geography,
becomes an allegory for
the region's cultural and
political context
”



■ *Kurdish wheatear.*

POETRY



Tawfeq Mahmoud Hamza

known as Piramerd (1867–1950) was a Kurdish poet, writer, novelist and journalist.

Today is the new day of the year, Newroz is here,
An ancient Kurdish celebration, full of joy and cheer.

For many years, the flower of our hope had wilted until last year,
When the blood of youth bloomed, a spring rebuilt.

That red hue rose high in the hills of Kurdistan,
Carrying a message of hope to both far and near lands.

Newroz sparked a fire that lit up our hearts,
The youth marched with love, towards death.

From the land's peaks, the sun shines bright,
The blood of martyrs paints the sky at twilight.

Until now, no history has told such a tale,
Where women's chests become shields against bullets' hail.

No tears are needed for the martyrs of the land,
They do not perish; they live in the people's hearts.

Translated by Nahro Zagros

ئەم پۆزی سالی تازهیه، نه‌ورۆزه، هاته‌وه

جەژنیکی کۆنی کوردە بەخۆشی و بەهاته‌وه

چەند سال گۆلی هیوای ئیمه پێ پەست بوو تا کو پار

هەر خوینی لاوه‌کان بوو گۆلی ئالی نه‌وبه‌هار

ئەو پەنگه سووره بوو که له ئاسۆی بلندی کورد

مژده‌ی به‌یانی بۆ گه‌لی دوور و نزیک ئەبرد

نه‌ورۆز بوو ئاگرێکی وه‌های خسته جهرگه‌وه

لاوان به‌ عەشق ئەچوون به‌ به‌ره‌و پیری مه‌رگه‌وه

وا پۆز هه‌لات له‌ به‌نده‌نی به‌رزی ولاته‌وه

خوینی شه‌هیده‌ پەنگی شه‌فه‌ق شه‌وق ئەداته‌وه

تا ئیسته‌ رووی نه‌داوه له‌ تاریخی میله‌تا

قه‌لخانی گولله‌ سنگی کچان بێ له‌ هه‌لمه‌تا

پێی ناوی بۆ شه‌هیدی وه‌ته‌ن شیوه‌ن و گرین

نامرن ئەوانه‌ وا له‌ دلی میله‌تا ئەژین



Black-Winged Kite

(*Elanus Caeruleus*)

The Kurdistan Region is a fabulous place for birdwatching, as its diverse landscapes and mixed climates support a wide range of bird species. This is especially the case for birds of prey, which can be seen hunting across Kurdistan. The region is also rich in “four-season” birds, those that reside in their environs throughout the year.

One such bird in Kurdistan is the black-winged kite (*Elanus caeruleus*), which is sometimes called the black-shouldered

kite. It is truly a beautiful and striking bird of prey! Relatively small, with a distinctive black wing pattern and a pale gray or white body, black-winged kites are found in various parts of the world, including Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Known for their agility and speed, black-winged kites feed on small mammals, insects, and other invertebrates and are recognized by their shrill, high-pitched calls. They can live around 15 years.

Length: 30-35 cm.

Wingspan: 77-92 cm.

Weight: male 205-285 g, female 220-340 g.

Scientific classification

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

Order: Accipitriformes
Family: Accipitridae
Genus: *Elanus*
Species: *E. caeruleus*



Kurdistan

The Heart of the
Middle East



Gomi Bekodiyan, Erbil Governorate,
Kurdistan Region **36.545, 44.980**

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