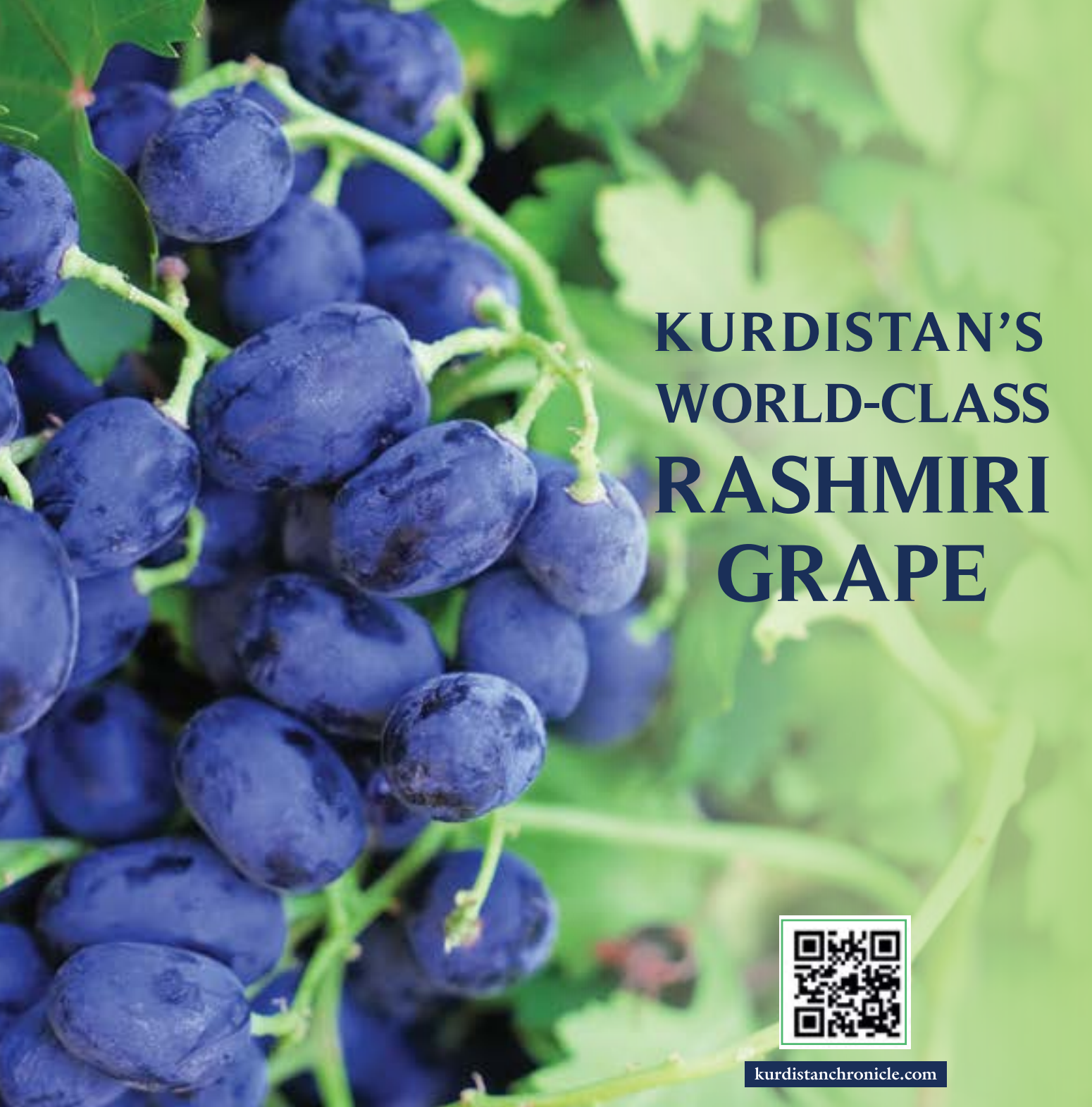


# Kurdistan Chronicle

[www.kurdistanchronicle.com](http://www.kurdistanchronicle.com)

September 2023 Volume 1 Issue 8



## KURDISTAN'S WORLD-CLASS RASHMIRI GRAPE



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## Global Implications and Regional Stability



Botan Tahseen

The cessation of oil exports from the Kurdistan Region to Türkiye since February 2023 has sparked a severe economic crisis in the autonomous region and cast a persistent shadow of supply risk over the global energy market. This multifaceted crisis is a direct consequence of ongoing disputes between Iraq and Türkiye concerning the flow of oil from the KRI, exacerbated by internal political conflicts within Iraq.

If the issue remains unresolved, it has the potential to evolve into a global supply shortage reminiscent of the oil embargo imposed by the Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (except Iraq and Libya) in 1973-1974 and the loss of supply during the Iranian Revolution in 1979, both of which triggered dramatic spikes in the price of oil that cascaded across the global economy. With the world already facing a tight energy market since 2021 that was then exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the loss of oil flows from the KRI to Türkiye and the global market would worsen an already tenuous supply-demand balance.

The consequences of this deadlock are keenly felt by all parties involved, including Iraq, the KRI, and Türkiye. The United States has stepped in, urging all parties to put aside their differences and resume oil exports. History serves as a stark reminder that global conflicts over oil resources, as seen during World War I, can lead to disastrous outcomes, especially in times of heightened geopolitical tension.

Over the course of the past century, it has become increasingly evident that the stability and security of the Middle East are intrinsically linked to the Kurdish question. Without a resolution that recognizes and

safeguards Kurdish rights, lasting stability in the region remains elusive.

For the past three decades, the KRI has served as a beacon of stability and prosperity in a region often marred by volatility. Despite its challenging geopolitical surroundings, the KRI has maintained positive relations with neighboring countries, including Türkiye, Syria, Iran, and other parts of Iraq. Notably, the KRI continues to provide refuge for over a million internally displaced persons and refugees, solidifying its reputation as the only secure and thriving enclave within Iraq.

Recent assessments of governance in Iraq have consistently ranked it among the lowest performers in the world. Excluding the KRI, Iraq grapples with woefully inadequate public services, a lack of access to clean water, and limited employment opportunities for its citizens. Despite Iraq's substantial oil wealth, the mismanagement of resources has resulted in widespread public suffering.

In stark contrast, the KRI, as underscored by Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, operates on a mere 5% of the total Iraqi budget and yet consistently demonstrates both prosperity and security. "The Iraqi federal government controls 95% of Iraq's revenues, yet it hasn't succeeded in improving public services. With only 5% of the revenues, we have far outperformed Iraq in terms of the services we provide."

This patent contrast in governance and performance highlights the pressing need for a resolution to the ongoing disputes, not simply for the sake of the KRI but for the stability of the entire region and the global energy market. ●

# TIMELINE

SEPTEMBER 2023

### September 2

- Kurdish protests over the closure of the Kirkuk-Erbil highway led to a violent response from Iraqi forces, resulting in several civilian casualties.

### September 3

- Kurdish leaders denounced a decision by the Supreme Iraqi Federal court that prevented the reopening of the KDP headquarters in Kirkuk.

### September 4

- PM Masrour Barzani welcomed a delegation from the Canadian Parliament to discuss bilateral relations and disputes with Baghdad.

### September 5

- Following tensions in Kirkuk, the United States urged Baghdad to work towards implementing Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution.

### September 6

- President Masoud Barzani received a high-ranking delegation of Iraqi Sunni leaders.

### September 9

- Outgoing Korean Consul General Cho Kijoung bid farewell to PM Masrour Barzani during their meeting.
- In a historic ceremony, the governor of Erbil and the mayor of Nashville officially signed a sisterhood agreement between the two cities.

### September 10

- Harvard University announced the introduction of a Kurdish language course for doctoral students, marking the first of its kind.

### September 11

- US and Iranian ambassadors separately met with PM Masrour Barzani to discuss disputes between Erbil and Baghdad.
- A Saudi delegation, led by the Deputy Minister of Investment, met with PM Masrour Barzani to discuss tourism and agricultural cooperation.

### September 13

- PM Masrour Barzani joined students at a school in Erbil to announce the beginning of the new school year.

- The Kurdistan Regional Government and the International Finance Corporation signed an agreement on economic cooperation.
- Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg visited Erbil and held discussions with Kurdish leaders to strengthen bilateral ties.

### September 14

- PM Masrour Barzani traveled to Baghdad to meet with his Iraqi counterpart and senior political leaders to discuss financial disputes.

### September 16

- British Ambassador to Iraq Stephen Hitchen met with PM Masrour Barzani to discuss financial disputes between Erbil and Baghdad.
- The Kurdistan Region announced the capture of an ISIS Emir involved in several terrorist attacks.

### September 19

- The United States welcomed the "positive dialogue" between Erbil and Baghdad aimed at resolving financial disputes.

### September 21

- Major General Joel Vowell, the Commander of Combined Joint Task Force of Operation Inherent Resolve, met with PM Masrour Barzani in Erbil to discuss Peshmerga reforms.

### September 25

- Kurdistan celebrates the anniversary of the historic 2017 independence referendum.
- Outgoing UK Consul General Rosy Cave bid farewell to President Masoud Barzani.

### September 27

- PM Masrour Barzani ordered the government to provide assistance to those affected by a tragic wedding fire incident in Hamdaniyah, declaring a 3-day mourning period.

### September 28

- A delegation from the Romanian Senate visited Erbil.

### September 30

- PM Masrour Barzani met with Head of UNAMI Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert to discuss the upcoming elections in the Kurdistan Region.





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# INITIATIVE

## Bloom Project Supporting SMEs

Kurdistan Chronicle

On Monday, September 25, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani introduced a groundbreaking initiative known as Project Bloom, or Geshanewe in Kurdish, that is designed to provide financial support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Accompanied by high-ranking officials from the KRG and foreign diplomats stationed in Erbil, Prime Minister Barzani unveiled this ambitious endeavor.

In his announcement, Prime Minister Barzani expressed his satisfaction in presenting the KRG's Project Bloom, emphasizing its role in disbursing commercial loans to SMEs. These loans will be facilitated through private banking institutions, ushering in a new era of economic opportunity for the region.

Project Bloom aligns with the government's strategic agenda to foster business growth and bolster the private sector. In recent years, the private sector has collaborated closely with the public sector, contributing significantly to the development of the KRI's economic infrastructure. Prime Minister Barzani underscored the importance of SMEs, revealing that they account for approximately 50% of all economic transactions and workforce participation in the region, a statistic supported by research data.

The lack of access to financial resources has long posed a formidable hurdle for businesses and trade in the KRI, preventing entrepreneurs from expanding their enterprises. Recognizing this challenge, Prime Minister Barzani reiterated the government's commitment to addressing it.

PM Masrour Barzani (left) and US Consul General to Erbil Mark Stroh (right) at the launch ceremony of Project Bloom on September 25, 2023



Photo: Sabr Dri

Since the inception of the KRG's Ninth Cabinet, there has been a concerted effort to support both the banking sector and SMEs. This collaborative approach aims to create a conducive environment for economic diversification, laying the foundation for sustained growth. Oversight for Project Bloom is vested in the KRG Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. During the initial stage, the government assigns a budget of 2.5 US dollars. Every prospective project applicant has the opportunity to secure loans of up to 150 million Iraqi dinars (approximately 113 US dollars), which will be provided to small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) proprietors.

Business proprietors seeking access to these loans can initiate the application process through a dedicated digital portal, streamlining the application procedure. Prime Minister Barzani underscored the historic significance of this initiative, marking the first time that the KRG has offered loans to business owners through entrepreneurial partnerships and

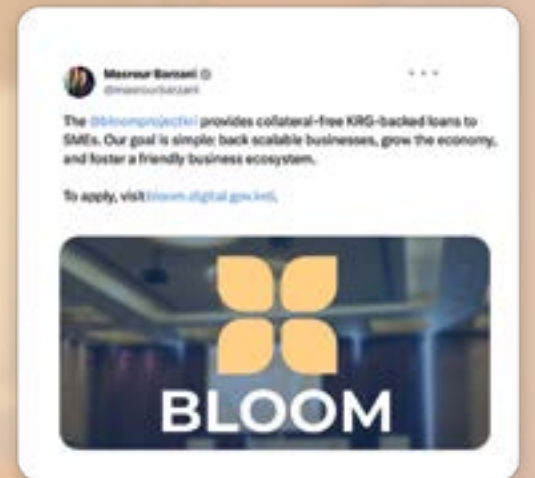
private banks, enabling them to expand their operations professionally.

The Prime Minister conveyed his heartfelt appreciation for the unwavering dedication of the

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Project Bloom aligns with the government's strategic agenda to foster business growth and bolster the private sector  
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Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, his dedicated team, as well as the enterprising private banks that are actively contributing to the realization of Project Bloom. This initiative holds the promise of breathing new life into the entrepreneurial landscape of the KRI, fostering economic growth, and enhancing the livelihoods of its citizens.

On his X page, Prime Minister Barzani enthusiastically celebrated the project as a revolutionary endeavor.







**An excerpt from the PM's speech  
to journalists on June 20, 2022**

*"Can you name any services in Iraqi cities that are better than those in the [Kurdistan] Region?"*

*The Iraqi federal government controls 95% of Iraq's revenues yet it hasn't succeeded in enhancing public services. With only 5% of the revenues, we are far ahead of Iraq in terms of the services we provide. Despite all the challenges, Kurdistan continues to be a haven for millions of people from Iraq who see it as a safe place. That is why they come to Kurdistan. If the situation is better in Iraq, why do people from other parts of Iraq come to the Kurdistan Region?"*

Prime Minister Masrour Barzani  
Kurdistan Regional Government

PM Barzani delivering a speech at the Project Bloom launch ceremony on September 25, 2023



## A Federal Vision Path to Stability



Amina Zikri

*Amina Zikri is a Kurdish politician, member of the Political Bureau of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and former member of the Kurdistan Parliament.*

Throughout the history of the Kurdish liberation movement, spanning various stages of struggle and defense, our unwavering commitment has been to secure the legitimate rights of the Kurdish people. Whether in armed conflict or negotiations, we have never compromised. President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) from 2005 to 2017 and the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) Masoud Barzani, a pivotal figure in the Kurdistan liberation movement, consistently stressed the importance of upholding the rights of the Kurdish people and safeguarding their dignity. In alignment with this vision, the KDP remains dedicated to protecting Kurdish territory and the rights of the Kurdish people across political, economic, and cultural domains. Our endeavors have encompassed political, civil, and armed struggles, with the Autonomy Agreement of March 11, 1970, serving as compelling evidence of our commitment.

Since 2003, the political landscape of the liberation movement has undergone a profound transformation. With the complete dismantling of the Ba'ath regime, the Kurdish struggle shifted from armed conflict to political and legal battles – a significant transition. This transformation carried unique sensitivities, especially as the region developed its institutional identity. Upon liberation, Iraq faced internal divisions and religious conflicts that necessitated cautious engagement. The Kurdish forces, despite their firm belief in the right to self-determination and independence, adopted a pragmatic approach, participating in the establishment of a new federal Iraq. Kurdish unity and discourse proved instrumental in successfully navigating this new and delicate phase.



“

Masoud Barzani, a pivotal figure in the Kurdistan liberation movement, consistently stressed the importance of upholding the rights of the Kurdish people and safeguarding their dignity

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*Kurdish and Arab citizens adorned in traditional attire proudly displaying the Kurdistan National flag*

Photo: Safin Hamid



Our people have skillfully pursued their political and legal battles, securing their rights in the constitution. However, twenty years later, successive Iraqi administrations have interfered in the internal affairs of our region. The achievements, which resulted from the united efforts of Kurdish leaders and forces, are now in jeopardy. Some elements within the federal government are actively working to sideline the Kurdistan Region and hinder its progress. It's worth noting that there have been 55 articles in the constitution pertaining to the Kurdistan Region, yet its rights have been disregarded. It is crucial to acknowledge that the foundation of federal Iraq is based on voluntary unification, a principle firmly embedded in the current Iraqi Constitution.

There is a grave plan afoot to dismantle the articles related to federal principles, jeopardizing the very existence of Iraq's federal system. While budgetary matters and salaries are important, it is imperative to remember that the Kurds have numerous other issues and constitutional rights that require resolute defense.

### The Kurdish quest for justice: decoding Article 140

Kurdish areas outside of the KRI, including Sinjar, Badra and Jasan, endured tremendous hardships during the Ba'ath regime's Arabization process and the infamous Anfal campaign in Kurdistan. Despite these adversities, the Kurds opted for a constitutional, legal, and democratic approach to determine the fate of these areas. Article 140 obliges the Iraqi government to normalize the situation in Kirkuk and other non-Kurdish areas, restore displaced populations to their original homes, conduct accurate censuses, and define administrative boundaries that hark back to the Baathist era.

A referendum on the fate of Kurds in these areas should be conducted. Regrettably, rather than normalizing the situation, the Iraqi government has attacked Kurdish villagers. Instead of facilitating the return of displaced individuals, they have established the Iraqi

Counter Terrorism Service, also as the Golden Division, and once again evicted Kurdish farmers from their ancestral lands. For six years the city of Kirkuk was governed by an Arab official, against the will of its people.

### Judging the federal court: unpacking its legal landscape

The Federal Court is considered the cornerstone of democratic values and upholds the foundational principles of federalism in countries with a federal structure. However, Article 92, Paragraph 2 of the constitution mandates the establishment of a Supreme Court in Iraq following the adoption of a court law, which requires a two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives.

Nevertheless, the current court was established by coalition authorities on May 17, 2005, predating the ratification of the constitution later that year. Furthermore, in 2019, Article 92 was amended, and the law was passed with a simple majority, a violation of the constitution. Presently, this court has become a platform to curtail the constitutional rights of the people of the KRI, aiding the Iraqi government in wresting away the region's rights. It is bewildering that a court established outside constitutional protocol arbitrates the constitutionality of laws and behaviors.

### Empowering regions: the role of regional councils

A fundamental pillar of a federal state is the presence of a council representing regions of varying sizes, with equal representation for all regions. This arrangement ensures that smaller regions are not marginalized within the general assembly, safeguarding their interests. For example, during the formation of small states in the United States in 1787, the Philadelphia Congress envisaged their participation in a body known as the Senate.

In the constitution, the law on state administration temporarily vested this power in the Presidency Council of Iraq, presided over by a Kurd with a

Shi'a and a Sunni deputy. This configuration was devised to reflect the three primary ethnic and religious communities in Iraq. Consequently, if a law was passed by a majority of Kurds, Shi'as, or Sunnis, the Council possessed the authority to veto it. This veto right was exercised numerous times. However, the constitution, as per Article 65, assigned the Council the responsibility to pass essential laws and decisions for this purpose. Nonetheless, 17 years have passed without allowing the Council to prevent the use of unjust majorities against any ethnic or religious group.

The Council also serves as a robust instrument for safeguarding the KRI, its institutions, and the rights of its people. According to Article 119 of the constitution, any province or group of provinces can form a new region with the

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For six years the  
city of Kirkuk was  
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approval of two-thirds of the provincial council or 10% of the province's voters. Initially, Article 18 of the constitution mandated that the Iraqi parliament pass a law within six months outlining the procedures for creating new regions. This law was never enacted, and after 17 years, there are still ongoing attempts to establish regions like the Sunni Regions or the Basra Regions. These efforts, however, have been consistently thwarted by the central government. Furthermore, there are constant endeavors to undermine the KRI, the sole federal region in Iraq.

### Salaries, oil, and the peshmerga: navigating fiscal frontiers

A fundamental characteristic of a fed-



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The budget for  
the Peshmerga, an  
integral part of the  
Iraqi armed forces,  
was never delivered  
to the Region  
”

eral system is the equitable distribution of power and wealth among regions and the federal authority. What sets the federal system apart from autonomy is the political and economic authority that regions possess. The KRI, as an integral part of Iraq, holds rights and shares in the budget and salaries, as stipulated in paragraph 3 of Article 121 of the constitution. However, the Iraqi government violated this article in early 2009. As a result, the region's share was allocated annually in the federal budget, but the federal government withheld these rights in various sectors, including dams, electricity, water, and medicine.

Moreover, the budget for the *peshmerga*, an integral part of the Iraqi armed forces, was never delivered to the region. This unexplained refusal

exacerbated the deficit and budgetary shortfalls in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Shockingly, the federal government violated Article 9(b) of the constitution, which prohibits the formation of militias outside the Iraqi military, by establishing the *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization Forces) and allocating significant funds to them. To this day, the *Hashd* continues to receive a share of the budget. It is perplexing that the *peshmerga* is labeled a militia when discussing their budget, while *Hashd al-Shaabi* escapes the same characterization. Was it not the *peshmerga* who defended Iraq against ISIS before the formation of the *Hashd*? Did they not create a safe haven for current Iraqi leaders during those tumultuous times?

As President Barzani aptly stated, a na-

tion that fails to rely on its own capabilities is perpetually at risk of destruction. Public support is most effective when our will is strong. The region must shift its current policies and mobilize political parties to pressure Iraq to establish federal institutions in line with the constitution. This constitution hinges on genuine intercommunity partnerships, equilibrium, and coordination. Iraq should prioritize political and social stability, protect the rights of communities, adhere to the principles of a federal government, establish regional councils, and uphold the constitution.

The KRI has consistently been a refuge for those fleeing turmoil in the region, championing democracy, freedom, and coexistence. It is the responsibility of the international community to safeguard the existence of the KRI. ●



## Cross Purposes for U.S. Involvement in Kurdistan



Rich Outzen

*Rich Outzen, a retired colonel with 30 years of U.S. Army service, now serves as a geopolitical consultant. He's also a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and the Jamestown Foundation, focusing on Middle East and Central Asia policy and strategy*

The long struggle of the Kurdish people for self-rule yielded a significant achievement in 1992 with the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). U.S. policy played a central role in the struggle by investing in a model of governance that is Western-oriented, moderate, economically responsible, and pragmatic.

The result was decades of prosperity, stability, and positive relations with the international community, critically so with its northern neighbor Türkiye. Ironically, U.S. policy now threatens to undermine that accomplishment by promoting the rise of a very different model and remaining passive, as antagonistic actors in Baghdad and Tehran seek to destabilize the KRI.

The new U.S. approach involves militarily strengthening the People's Defense Units (YPG), which currently operates in the Kurdish-majority regions of Syria. This is evidenced by U.S. military officials escorting YPG leaders from Syria to Iraq and beyond, and sustaining massive funding and logistical support to the YPG well after the fall of ISIS in Syria. This sustained and regionally expanding military support could serve to favor Iran and antagonize Türkiye, which views the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), itself recognized as a terrorist group by the United

**“Kurds in Iraq have a unique history and a long-standing struggle that differs from Kurdish aspirations in Syria, Iran, and Türkiye**

**”**

of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Gorran Movement, to other groups in the name of Kurdish unity. The search for unity is grounded in good intentions: to decrease strife in majority-Kurdish areas, hasten reform, and strengthen Kurdish negotiating positions in relation to Baghdad or other players.

Yet the manner of progress towards unity matters greatly. The successful KRG formula of economic openness, effective security control, Western investment, and positive, pragmatic relations with Ankara must provide the basic framework. Support for other, more controversial groups threatens to make the KRI more dependent on Baghdad and Tehran, which undermines the successes of the KRG leadership.

Over the past decade, the PUK has managed the eastern half of the KRI. However, as the United States scales back its presence in the region, Iran might seek to widen its own influence, given the shared border. U.S. policy at present calls for taking the keys of Kurdish autonomy from its only

ed States, Türkiye and a number of European countries.

The new model also involves pushing for concessions from the successful existing model of the KRG in Erbil, which currently enjoys support from a coalition consisting



PM Barzani warmly greeting Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during their meeting in Ankara on June 20, 2023

successful practitioner and handing them to groups that have not demonstrated that they share the aims of the KRG formula described above.

Strengthening Kurdish groups with differing aims and methods than the KRG while demanding that Erbil reconcile with those antagonistic partners has contributed to a growing sense of frustration and danger in Erbil. While the Barzani-led KDP favors unity theoretically and rhetorically, experience inclines it not to approach the process naively.

Some in Washington call for an end to U.S. assistance to Erbil, though none yet argue for an end to military subsidies to the YPG. In fact, Washington seems inclined to speak of “the Kurds” when it is referring to the YPG, as if they, and not the KRG, are long-time political allies of the United States.

During the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011, Syria President Bashar al-Assad granted wide latitude to the YPG to fight both ISIS and anti-Assad opposition groups. This resulted in the expansion of YPG control over Kurdish areas in northern Syria, the end of a ceasefire with Türkiye, and a U.S. decision to instrumentalize this capable and confident force in lieu of a major U.S. deployment in Syria. Senior U.S. officials asserted that the relationship would be “temporary, tactical, and transaction-

al.” Nearly a decade later and given the expanding political and military support for the YPG across the region, the assertion is unconvincing.

One key question remains: has the YPG become less radical, more legitimate, or more inclined to collaborate with political rivals and neighboring states? If either had occurred, it might indicate that U.S. attempts to promote them regionally were a reward for moderation and adaptation. Yet neither appears to be true. In fact, continued U.S. support threatens KRG-Turkish cooperation. While Kurdish unity is important, it should be promoted through moderate, political means rather than an ideologically radical movement that the KRI's northern neighbor Türkiye deems as dangerous.

The Kurdish issue varies across different regions. Kurds in Iraq have a unique history and a long-standing struggle that differs from Kurdish aspirations in Syria, Iran, and Türkiye. The United States should thus recognize these distinctions and tailor its strategy accordingly, while also showing respect for these differences.

It is not clear that U.S. officials appreciate the significant differences of ideology, capability, legitimacy, and viability that should inform such a process. Further, the United States seems to be driving a convergence between certain

Kurdish groups and Iran that threatens to spill over into regional dynamics and could undermine strong ties between Erbil and Ankara. Iran is pursuing a clear game to divide the Kurds, weaken the pro-Western KRG, and re-establish proxy control over northern Iraq; the new U.S. model has no answer for this.

The ultimate context for this intra-Kurdish process – with a poorly-informed, but highly influential U.S. role – is the escalating campaign against Kurdish autonomy by Baghdad and Tehran. This gambit is part of a very old game played by regional states to weaken Kurdish power centers when they prosper through ties to other regional states and extra-regional powers.

Empowered by the cutoff of Kurdish oil exports and budget revenue, the anti-KRG game has reached a level of threat sufficient to prompt a personal letter from Prime Minister Masrour Barzani to U.S. President Joe Biden, warning of the possible collapse of the KRG, which would strengthen Iran and perhaps even Russia as they rush to fill the resulting power vacuum. The United States needs a more sophisticated political strategy to oppose this, one that goes beyond the imperative of unity at any cost and extends to strengthening the core of Kurdish autonomy against external threats. ●



# TRAGEDY

## Wedding Fire Claims over 100 Lives

*A devastating fire ignited by fireworks at an event hall in Hamdaniya on September 26, resulting in the tragic loss of over 100 lives during a crowded wedding ceremony, with at least 150 others sustaining injuries. The Kurdistan Region responded with immediate aid and support, while authorities launched investigations into the incident.*

### Kurdistan Chronicle

In a heart-wrenching turn of events, a devastating fire ignited by fireworks during a joyous wedding ceremony at an event hall in Hamdaniya on September 26 resulted in the tragic loss of over 100 lives. This horrific incident, which also left at least 150 individuals injured, has sent shockwaves through the local community and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

The wedding ceremony turned into a nightmare when fireworks intended to add to the festive atmosphere sparked a fire that quickly spread throughout the event hall. With many guests in attendance, chaos ensued as people tried to escape the rapidly intensifying blaze. Despite the heroic efforts of first responders and brave individuals who rushed to the scene to help, the scale of the tragedy was immense.

Hamdaniya is situated in the northeastern part of the Nineveh Governorate, 35 kilometers from Mosul, and falls under the authority of the Iraqi Government rather than the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

The immediate response from the KRG was marked by a surge of aid and support. Emergency services, including firefighters and medical teams, rushed to the scene to contain the fire and provide medical assistance to the injured. The local community rallied together, offering shelter, food, and comfort to those affected by this devastating incident.

At the time of the incident, the region swiftly mobilized its resources, opening all hospitals and medical facilities to provide aid to the injured. Meanwhile, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani issued directives for all medical personnel and hospital doctors to offer their assistance to the victims.





Photo: Sabr Dri

PM Barzani (second from the right) offering his condolences to the victims of the Hamdaniyah fire incident at Erbil Emergency Hospital on September 30, 2023



Photo: Safin Hamid

Christian religious leaders visiting the site of the Hamdaniyah wedding fire incident on September 27, 2023, to show their support

KRG authorities also wasted no time in launching a comprehensive investigation into the incident. Preliminary reports suggest that there may have been lapses in safety protocols and oversight regarding the use of fireworks at the event. It is imperative to determine the exact causes and contributing factors to prevent such a tragedy from happening again in the future. The KRG declared a three-day period of mourning in solidarity with the victims of the tragic incident, according to a statement by KRG spokesperson Peshmawa Hawramani. In a message posted on X (formerly Twitter), Hawramani mentioned that the government would extend additional medical assistance to the victims.

In response to the tragedy, the Kurdistan Region Security Council reported the arrest of Samir Sulaiman, the owner of the banquet hall in Hamdaniya, following an arrest warrant being issued by the federal government.

The fire was seemingly ignited by fireworks during a Christian wedding celebration. Authorities acknowledged that flammable building materials contributed to the disaster, adding that they had detained staff from the wedding hall as part of their ongoing investigation.

Chaldean Patriarch Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako described the devastating blaze that en-

gulfed the wedding hall in Hamdaniya, a predominantly Christian area also known as Qaraqosh or Bakhdida, as a "complete and total catastrophe." Speaking at the funeral proceedings for the victims at the Hamdaniya cemetery, Sako expressed the profound pain caused by the catastrophe, highlighting that it marked the first such tragedy in the past two decades.

KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani visited an emergency hospital in Erbil where victims of the fire were being treated. In addition to the urgent medical that the KRG provided, PM Barzani expressed condolences to the victims' families and commended the efforts of the KRG's Ministry of Health and the medical teams involved in the treatment of the victims. He also emphasized the importance of a thorough investigation into the incident and noted the gravity of the disaster.

Iraq Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani also ordered an official investigation into the fire and instructed the officials from Iraq's Ministries of Interior and Health to provide relief and support through an online statement from his office.

The UN mission to Iraq also expressed its condolences over the tragic fire, conveying its deep shock and sorrow at the significant loss of life and injuries caused by the incident. ●



# The Fragmentation of Iraq

## Historical Factors and Current Challenges



Entifadh Qanbar

*Entifadh Qanbar holds the roles of founder and president of two 501(c)(3) non-profit entities in the United States: Future Foundation and the Kurdish Protection Action Committee (KPAC)*

Modern Iraq – the borders of which were drawn by British colonialism in 1921 – is vastly different from the ancient Iraq described in history books. The British merged various regions into modern Iraq, resulting in a non-homogeneous entity without historical ties to ancient Iraq.

Iraq transitioned from the Ottoman Empire's backwardness to a modernized state under British colonial rule, with three key pillars: a strong military, semi-functional democratic institutions including a parliament, and King Faisal I. The political system was based on an alliance of two major components, the Kurds and Sunni Arabs, with the Shi'a population remaining marginalized as a legacy of the Ottoman era. As a result, the British envisioned a stable Iraq based primarily on the Sunni-Kurdish alliance.

This Sunni-Kurdish alliance appeared to be effective at first. King Faisal hoped to gain the Shi'a majority's support for the new Iraqi state. Minorities such as Jews and Christians coexisted with the general Iraqi population and were active in state administration.

However, several issues plagued this political system, stemming from structural flaws in Iraq's formation and evolving Middle Eastern politics. The addition of territories such as Mosul, Basra, and Kurdistan caused friction and separatist aspirations, undermining the initial balance. Furthermore, the British established the Iraqi army alongside the state, leading to a lack of loyalty among officers, whose allegiance to the Iraqi state was uncertain. The king's non-Iraqi origins further complicated matters.

### Enter Arab nationalism

European nationalism and militarization influenced Middle Eastern politics in the 1930s, giving rise to Arab chauvinism in Iraq, particularly within the military. Arab nationalist officers targeted Kurds, causing a schism in the Sunni-Kurdish alliance and undermining the legitimacy of the Iraqi state. This shift resulted in numerous coup attempts, the first of which was carried out in 1935 by Iraqi officer Bakr Sidqi.

As a result of their growing marginal-

ization, the Kurds began organizing, leading to conflict with the Iraqi Army. The military's determination to overthrow the monarchy was fueled by the British suppression of an anti-British, Nazi-backed Iraqi Army coup d'état in 1941 and the restoration of the monarchy by the British and the execution of the coup's leaders thereafter.

The establishment of Israel in 1948 led to a surge in Arab nationalist movements, which advocated for the overthrow of monarchies and the rise of military regimes across the region. The

successful 1953 Free Officers Movement in Egypt, spearheaded by charismatic leader Gamal Abdul Nasser, inspired Iraqi officers to overthrow the monarchy in 1958, marking the end of the Sunni-Kurdish alliance.

From 1921 to 2003, Iraq experienced 10 coup attempts, some successful and others not. The most significant was the Ba'ath Party coup in 1968, which transformed Iraq from a military authoritarian state into a totalitarian regime. The Ba'ath regime targeted dissidents, particularly in Kurdistan, where





most Iraqi opposition movements were based.

Saddam Hussein’s ascension to power in 1979 amplified Baghdad’s oppression. During the Iran-Iraq War, attacks on Kurdistan increased, culminating in the 1988 Anfal campaign, which killed an estimated 180,000 Kurds and destroyed 6,000 villages. Hussein’s disastrous invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War triggered mass migration, resulting in the establishment of a no-fly zone in 1991 and a de facto semi-independent Kurdish state until 2003.

Wars and embargoes

The 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the UN embargo highlighted Iraq’s status as a failing state. Recognizing Iraq’s precarious situation, the United States and the West sought a democratic solution in Iraq that would allow majority rule. Despite Shi’a majority in the country, the United States hesitated to support the community due to concerns about its connection to Iran. Iraqi politician Ahmad Chalabi convinced U.S. policymakers that the Shi’a could become U.S. allies, diverting attention from Iran. The 9/11 attacks spurred the United States to support more tolerant forms of Islam, with Chalabi portraying Shi’a Islam in this light, arguing that the Shi’a, having been historically oppressed by Sunni regimes and extremist Arab states, could be a key ally.

However, two obstacles remained. First, as an exile, Chalabi lacked a substantial popular base in Iraq. Second, Washington questioned Shi’a loyalty, fearing that after Saddam’s fall, they would align with Iran. Because of the Kurds’ widespread acceptance in the West and their control of an autonomous region, they emerged as ideal guarantors.

The Kurds were critical of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and subsequent federal template for regime change; without the Kurds, it might not have happened. Federalism, which would disperse power and oil wealth away from Baghdad, was viewed as a solution to Iraq's problem of centralization and a means of preventing dictatorship.

The Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 marked a breakthrough for the Iraqi opposition. Despite setbacks like “Dual Containment,” which temporarily ended confrontation with Saddam’s regime, the act laid the foundation for regime change. Chalabi and the Kurds played pivotal roles in securing this resolution.

After the 2003 liberation, U.S. officials in Baghdad underestimated Iraq’s political complexity, and the decision to declare an occupation in May 2003 gave legitimacy to terrorist attacks. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) remained peaceful, but the rest of Iraq plunged into chaos. The focus therefore shifted from reconstruction to force protection and counterterrorism.

A federal future?

The Iraqi constitution was drafted in the Baghdad home of former KRG President Masoud Barzani and was a significant milestone. Despite challenges, the Shi’a-Kurdish alliance



Photo: Safin Hamid

held, and the constitution endorsed federalism. Meanwhile, the KRI served as a model for the entire country, allowing for an easy transformation of provinces into federal states and the granting regional control over future oil fields. The constitution gained legitimacy through its diverse writers, endorsement by the marja’ (high-ranking Shi’a religious clerics in Najaf), and a direct popular referendum.

However, the constitution faced internal and external opposition. Ba’athists and terrorists saw it as a threat, while Iran sought to undermine it. The focus of the Shi’a leadership shifted from Kurdish allies to adversaries, eroding the political matrix. The political system became dysfunctional, with

democracy reduced to vote counting and meaningless elections. The KRI thrived but faced increased attacks by Iran’s proxies.

Iran's interest in Iraq was twofold: it wanted to (1) suppress ideas of federalism and democracy that might spread to Iran and (2) maintain control of Iraq. President Masoud Barzani emerged as a threat to Iran, not because he was anti-Iran but because he represented an

independent Kurdistan.

In conclusion, Iraq’s fragmentation can be traced back to its formation, marked by a fragile Sunni-Kurdish alliance that quickly dissolved. Multiple coup attempts, external wars, and oppressive regimes characterized its history. The United States and the West sought to address Iraq’s issues through democracy and federalism, with the Kurds playing a crucial role.

However, the political matrix crumbled under Iranian influence and the misunderstandings of U.S. officials. The path forward for Iraq may rely on embracing federalism and recognizing the Kurds’ pivotal role in its stability.

Without federalism and decentralization, Iraq will fragment and eventually cease to exist. ●



## Reflections on *Barzani and the Kurdish Liberation Movement*



Davan Yahya Khalil

Davan Yahya Khalil, a UK-based author and journalist originally from Kurdistan, is a member of the British Association of Journalists. He founded *The New Mail* news site and is known for his significant contributions to the understanding of Kurdistan through books like *"Kurdistan: Genocide and Rebirth," "Kurdistan: The Road to Independence," "The Idea of Kurdistan,"* and *"The Brink of Freedom."*



In the tumultuous landscape of the Middle East, where the history of nations is often defined by struggle and resilience, *Barzani and the Kurdish Liberation Movement* stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of the Kurdish people. Authored by President Masoud Barzani, this fourth edition, spread across two poignant volumes, unveils the transformative period between 1975 and 1990.

President Barzani's narrative delves deeper than the mere retelling of historical events; it serves as an eloquent and profound exploration of the soul of the Kurdish people's struggle for self-determination and justice. Through his mas-

terful use of poignant prose, Barzani weaves together the complex tapestry of the history of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), unveiling the previously untold stories that have shaped the rich mosaic of Kurdistan's identity.

In the context of the Kurdish Liberation Movement, the figures within the Barzani legacy – particularly Idris Barzani (brother of Masoud Barzani) and Mullah Mustafa Barzani (father of Masoud Barzani) – each emerge as distinct legends symbolizing an unwavering commitment to the Kurdish cause. Mullah Mustafa Barzani, a visionary patriarch, played a pivotal role in pursuing Kurdish autonomy and laid the foundation for the ongoing fight for Kurdish rights. Idris Barzani and Mullah Mustafa Barzani experienced losses that reverberated throughout the Kurdish struggle. Idris Barzani's passing left a void in the movement he ardently championed. His involvement in key events showcased his commitment to Kurdish rights. Their legacies stand as a testament to the sacrifices needed for a liberated Kurdistan, solidifying their place in history. It is also essential to acknowledge that Masoud Barzani was not solely a leader; he was also a remarkable *peshmerga* and a formidable fighter.

### The Gulan Revolution

Central to the heart of this captivating literary work is the depiction of the Gulan Revolution, an epochal moment that stands as a cornerstone in the annals of Kurdish history. This pivotal juncture, forever etched in the collective memory, continues to resonate today. Its significance transcends geographical boundaries, infusing a palpable sense of optimism and unwavering determination within the hearts of those who call the KRI home, while also leaving an indelible mark on the global stage.

President Barzani's meticulous attention to even the finest details is a testament to his commitment to historical accuracy and authenticity. Readers are not mere spectators but rather privileged insiders, granted the opportunity to step into the shoes of those who were witnesses to the transformative events of that remarkable era. This im-

mersive journey offers a vantage point from which one can understand the struggles, sacrifices, and triumphs that have paved the way for the Kurdish people's enduring pursuit of justice and selfhood.

At the heart of the book, powerful quotes resonate, acting as flags that remind us of the strong determination and togetherness that have defined the Kurdish people's spirit. One quote stands out: "The men had weapons of honor for the revolution, and the women were responsible for raising children and being patient." Understanding how both men and women played important roles during those tough times, the reader sees how everyone worked together, even though they had different jobs or roles, to make a difference.

As readers embark on the journey through the book's introduction, they are transported back to a pivotal moment in time, one marked by the formidable challenges that followed the setback of the 1975 uprising. As if traveling in a time machine, readers immediately relive the struggles and triumphs of those who dared to reignite the flames of revolution. The story begins with a vivid portrayal of the difficulties that lay ahead, setting the stage for the epic tale of resilience and hope that unfolds. This emphasis on perseverance becomes a rallying cry that echoes through the narrative, igniting a fire in the hearts of readers and encapsulating the essence of the Kurdish struggle.

### The diplomatic dance

President Barzani's insightful analysis of the diplomatic intricacies that unfolded on the global stage unfurls like a map, guiding readers through the labyrinthine corridors of the complex geopolitical web that enshrouded the Kurdish Liberation Movement. In his exploration, he skillfully unravels the multifaceted threads that shaped the movement's trajectory, illuminating the hidden forces that guided its course. These insights gift us a profound comprehension of the challenges faced by the Kurdish people and the significance of their aspirations on the grand stage of global affairs.



The global arena of diplomacy often resembles an elaborate dance, with each move holding the potential to create ripples that extend far and wide. President Barzani’s narrative peels back the layers of this diplomatic choreography, revealing the delicate maneuvers and intricate dynamics that lay beneath the surface.

A spotlight is cast on the intricate dance between superpowers, most notably the United States and the Soviet Union, whose interests and alliances formed a complex backdrop against which the fate of the revolution was poised. This intricate interplay is a testament to the complex tapestry woven as the Kurdish people sought to assert their identity and rights.

At the heart of the narrative lies President Barzani’s invaluable perspective, one that is uniquely enriched by his role as a central figure in these unfolding events. This personal account, drawn from his own journey, infuses the narrative with a sense of authenticity and depth that is unparalleled, granting readers a rare opportunity to step into the shoes of those who shaped this crucial era.

President Barzani’s account, carrying the weight of lived experiences, resonates with a genuineness that is both palpable and compelling. Readers are invited to travel alongside him, experiencing the highs and lows, the challenges and triumphs, in a way that transcends the confines of a traditional historical account. His narrative becomes a bridge, connecting past and present and enabling us to witness the unfolding drama as if we were there.

**A shared goal of freedom**

The historical backdrop of this narrative is the Iran-Iraq War, an eight-year-long conflict that shaped the Kurdish struggle and the quest for self-determination within the broader context of the Middle East. In the poignant words of President Masoud Barzani, “In a forgotten and distant triangle, I wanted to reach the ears of the world, Iran and Iraq, which were two sides of an eight-year war

against each other: We, the Kurds, are in struggle and success, meaning we are alive, we are here, on the land of our ancestors.” Amid the backdrop of a region in turmoil, the Kurdish people’s determination burned even brighter, fueled by the shared goal of freedom.

Embedded within the narrative are the tales of the *peshmerga*, the valiant warriors who stood firm on the front lines of the struggle. Their impressive battles and unyielding courage become central to this narrative. The *peshmerga*’s unwavering commitment to protecting their land and people shapes the narrative’s core, reflecting the indomitable spirit of the Kurdish people.

The book pays homage to the Gulan Revolution as an embodiment of courage and resilience. The willingness of young individuals to take up arms in defense of their land and people attests to the unwavering dedication that fueled the revolution’s flame. It is a poignant reminder that, even in the face of adversity, the human spirit has the power to triumph over the darkest of circumstances.

*Barzani and the Kurdish Liberation Movement* is more than a historical account; it is a call to remember and reflect on the struggles of a people who refused to be silenced. It is a reminder that the pages of history are not mere records of the past, but a source of inspiration that shapes the present and guides the future. As we delve into the intricate tapestry of this narrative, we come to understand that the Kurdish journey is not just one of survival but of resilience, hope, and the unbreakable spirit of a nation.

In a world marred by conflict and division, *Barzani and the Kurdish Liberation Movement* is a a reminder that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, the flame of hope can illuminate the path toward a better future. As President Barzani’s narrative unfolds, it invites us not only to remember the past but also to honor the legacy of those who fought for a liberated Kurdistan – a legacy that continues to inspire us all. ●



Photo: Safin Hamid

President Masoud Barzani exploring the 15th Erbil International Book Fair on March 8, 2023



## Mandela and the Kurds



**Wuria Karadaghy**

*Wuria Karadaghy is a former UNDP Regional Manager in Central Asia with 26 years of experience working in 15 countries, now serves as a Development Management Consultant, leveraging their expertise to support various development initiatives.*

**O**n February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela was set free after spending 27 years in different prisons in South Africa. He spent 18 of those years in the infamous Robben Island Prison near Cape Town.

Apartheid is the Afrikaans name given to the policy of racial segregation instituted by the white-ruled South African nationalist party that enforced the separation of the white South African minority and black South African majority populations. Instituted in 1948, apartheid came to an end in the early 1990s in a series of steps that led to the formation of a democratic government in 1994.

In July 1990, I was appointed by the UN to work as technical expert in Peru. However, the project never took place due to the fragile security situation in Peru. I received another posting to work in Lesotho, in southern Africa.

I arrived in Maseru, the capital city, on July 27, in the middle of a cold and snowy winter. Two weeks later I became ill and was taken to a hospital in Bloemfontein in South Africa. The hospital that I was admitted to was only for white South Africans. The doctor who removed three stones from my kidney was from Cuba. He cursed Fidel Castro and his communist regime because they were supporting the uprising of the black community in South Africa led by Nelson Mandela.



*Wuria Karadaghy striking a pose next to a statue of Nelson Mandela*

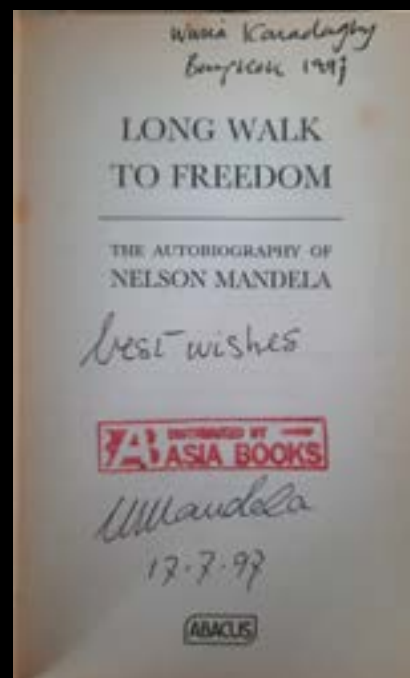
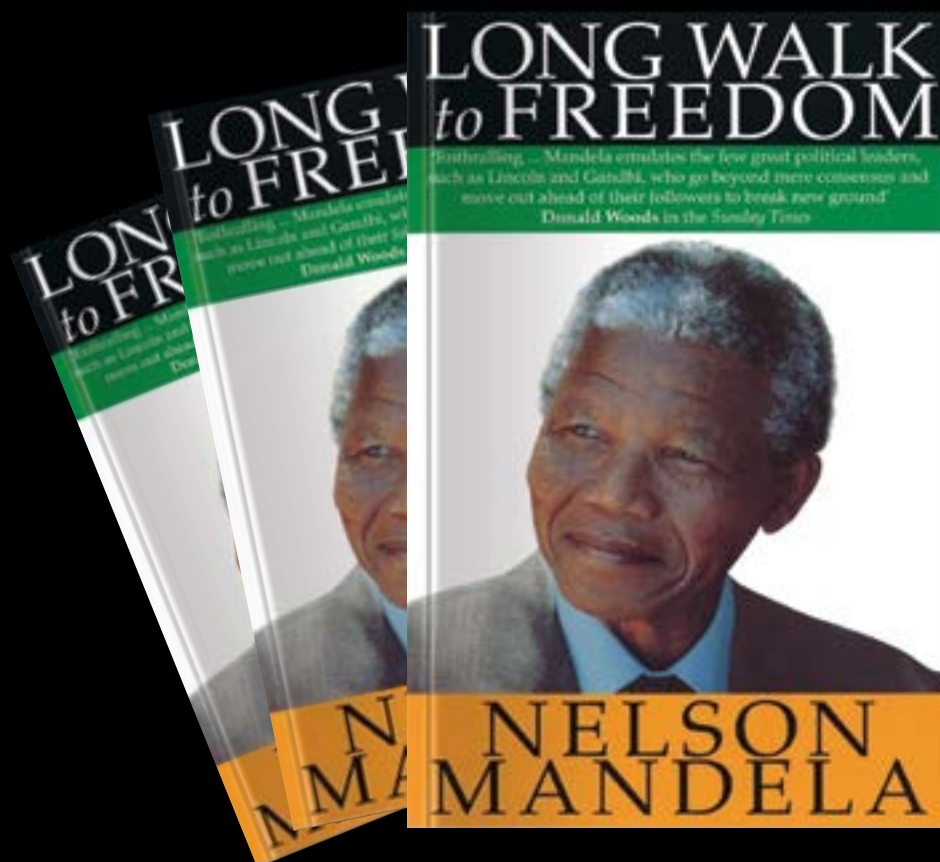
I spent one week in the hospital and was appalled at the way the staff talked about black communities. I was told that black people were not allowed to purchase property in Bloemfontein. In addition, while they were allowed to work in the city, they had to leave it before 6 pm and find their way back to their townships. I encountered

“ I introduced myself as a Kurd from Kurdistan, and Mandela asked about the situation of the Kurds

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“ Having had the privilege of meeting him remains one of the greatest honors of my life

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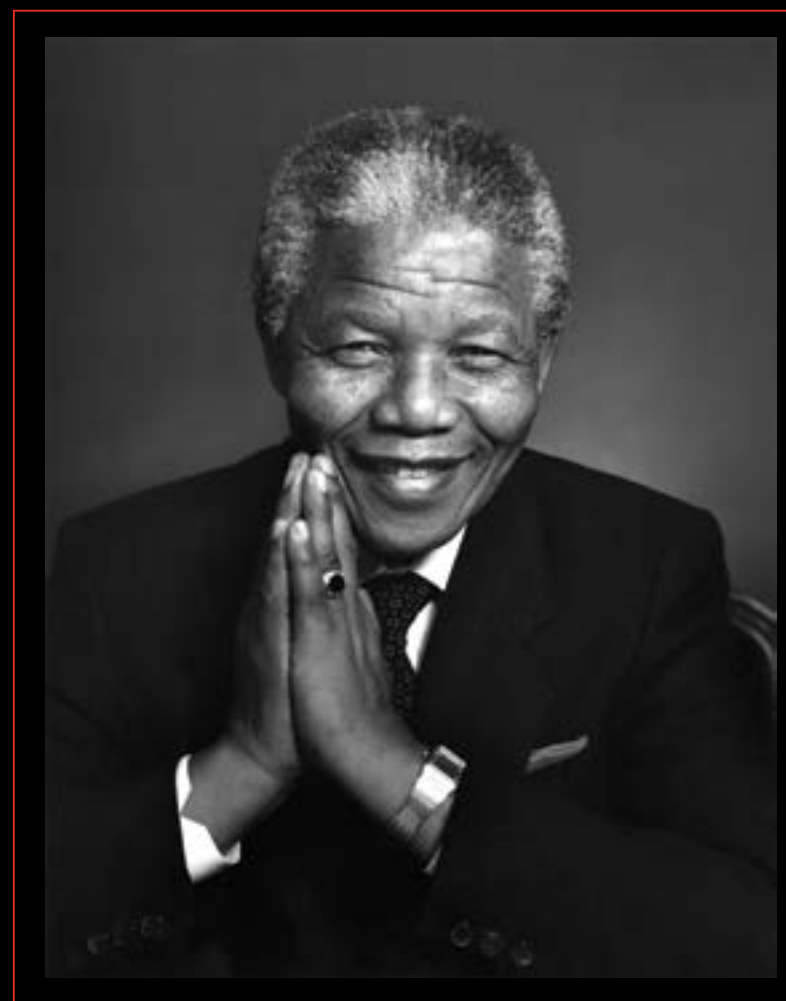
other, varying aspects of racial segregation in train stations, swimming pools, and hotels.

A general election was held in South Africa between April 26 and 29, 1994. The election was the first in which citizens of all races were allowed to take part and was conducted under the direction of the Independent Electoral Commission. I was part of the monitoring team in QwaQwa, an area in the eastern part of South Africa bordering Lesotho.

On May 10, 1994, Nelson Mandela became the first black president of the country. Through a co-worker of mine, the sister of Limpho Hani, who was the wife of political leader Chris Hani, I got the opportunity to meet President Mandela in June 1994 at the African National Congress (ANC) headquarters in Pretoria. Chris Hani was the leader of the South African Communist Party and the leader of the armed wing of the ANC. He was later assassinated in April 1993.

I introduced myself as a Kurd from Kurdistan, and Mandela asked about the situation of the Kurds. I briefed him about it, and he responded that the Kurds will reach their aim. He added: you and I may not witness that day, but a new generation will come and enjoy freedom. I informed him how I participated in a demonstration in The Hague, The Netherlands in October 1976 supporting the Soweto uprising in South Africa, where many students were killed, and I was beaten by the pro-apartheid group in The Netherlands. In the end I told him: you are such an inspiration for the world.

On July 17, 1997, I was invited to a state dinner hosted by the Thai Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok where President Mandela and his 15-member delegation were present. I wanted to take the opportunity to greet him and ask him to sign his book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, but was stopped by his security guards. However, he asked his secretary to let me through since he knew me from our meeting at the ANC office in Pretoria. He asked me what I was doing in Bangkok. I responded that I was helping low-income communities build houses. He signed the book and



said to me that it was for my people.

In 1999, while based in Kosovo, I received an invitation from the ANC to participate in a celebration of the new millennium on Robben Island, where Mandela had spent 18 years in a single cell. Many local and international guests were invited for the event, including famous artists. Mandela's symbolic 'flame of hope' was to be passed by him to the new president, Thabo Mbeki. Mandela would then ask Mbeki to pass the flame to the new generation.

I reached Cape Town quite late and missed the last boat to Robben Island. I tried my best to explain that I had been invited and showed my UN passport, but the security guard would not allow any more boats to depart due to security rules. At this point, I saw a woman surrounded by many people asking for her autograph and picture. I asked, who is that woman? I learned that she was the world-famous South

African singer Mariam Makeba, known as Mama Africa.

Maria had been an opponent of apartheid in South Africa. I introduced myself and informed her that I had attended her concert in The Hague in July 1984. She was happy and told me that she had missed the last boat to attend the party. However, the ANC sent her a special boat to take her to the island. She asked me to join her, which I did. She was welcomed as a hero by the authorities, and I took the opportunity to greet President Mandela once again.

Mandela, a legend both in life and now in his passing, unquestionably exemplified the essence of a genuine global leader. Having had the privilege of meeting him remains one of the greatest honors of my life. While the world mourns his absence, his enduring contributions to the causes of human dignity and freedom ensure that his legacy will endure for eternity. ●



## Transforming Zakho



Gohdar Shekho

*Gohdar Shekho is the governor of Zakho.*

“Notably, Zakho’s emergence as a peaceful border town has enticed visitors to explore its natural and cultural treasures”

*A captivating view of the Khabour river embankment after its transformation into a vibrant tourist destination*





Photo: Mohammed Majid

President Masoud Barzani's visit to the Khabour river embankment, accompanied by local officials, on August 20, 2023

As the head of the Zakho independent administration, I am honored to share the remarkable transformation that has taken place in our beloved city over the past two years. This transformation was made possible through a collective effort and the unwavering support of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Together, we have witnessed a revolution of prosperity that has touched every facet of life in Zakho.

## Revolutionizing infrastructure

One of the cornerstones of our rejuvenation efforts has been a comprehensive infrastructure overhaul. Quality roads are essential for the well-being of any community, a fact that we recognized. With the generous support of the KRG and the dedication of our administra-

tion, we have successfully revamped approximately 80% of our city's streets and roads. Before this undertaking, an alarming 65% of these were unpaved. The revitalization of Zakho goes beyond our streets and roads, encompassing water, sewage, and other essential services. The transformation of our city's landscape is owed to the relentless work of the Zakho administration, working closely with Prime Minister Barzani.

## Enhancing healthcare and education

In Zakho, we have focused on elevating the standards of healthcare and education. Our healthcare facilities, including Zakho General Teaching Hospital and Zakho Emergency Hospital, have been renovated and equipped with cutting-edge medical facilities. Notably, we have renovated nine health centers and

established new ones, including the essential Batifa General Hospital and the Children's Hospital in Zakho, to ensure that our residents have access to world-class healthcare within their city.

In the realm of education, Zakho's schools have also undergone a significant transformation. We have constructed six new schools, with plans for three more in the near future. Additionally, 39 schools have been renovated, ensuring that our students have access to quality education. We have also launched teacher training programs to elevate the standard of education in our region.

## Unlocking tourism potential

Zakho's strategic location makes it an ideal hub for tourism. The region boasts numerous tourist and archaeo-



Photo: Mohammed Majid

An awe-inspiring aerial perspective of the Khabour river, the historic Dalal bridge, and the charming Zakho embankment

logical sites, including the iconic Delal Bridge, Sharanish Waterfall, Surya Waterfall, Bhare Cave, and the enchanting city of Zakho itself. A comprehensive effort to restore, expand, and promote these sites is underway, attracting tourists from across Iraq.

Notably, Zakho's emergence as a peaceful border town has enticed visitors to explore its natural and cultural treasures. By deploying *peshmerga* forces and Iraqi border guards to maintain stability in the region, the city has become an oasis of calm, luring tourists from far and wide.

The resulting increase in tourism has spurred growth in the hospitality and service sectors, creating new opportunities for businesses and residents alike. This surge in economic activity has prompted the Zakho administration to focus even more on developing the tourism sector, welcoming investment from both local and foreign sources. Agricultural excellence and industrial progress

Zakho is renowned for its agricultural products, including wheat, apples, pomegranates, strawberries, figs, and more. The KRG has played a pivot-

al role in exporting these products to international markets, starting with pomegranates. An exciting development is the forthcoming UAE-backed agricultural project, which includes the construction of an agricultural research center. This initiative will empower local farmers to enhance crop quality and explore innovative irrigation methods.

Furthermore, an industrial zone spanning 800 acres is set to be established in Zakho, further boosting job opportunities and domestic production in the administration. As a crucial trade point between neighboring countries, Zakho is poised to become a vital industrial and economic center.

## A bright future

The future of Zakho is filled with promise thanks to its strategic location, innovative projects, and strong leadership. The city's transformation is a testament to the determination of its administration, the unwavering support of the KRG, and the vision of Prime Minister Barzani.

In just two years, over 200 diverse projects have been initiated in Zakho, with more than 60% already completed. The

city is not only a shining example of development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) but also an attractive oppor-

**“ Zakho's transformation reveals what can be achieved when leadership, vision, and commitment align in pursuit of progress and prosperity ”**

tunity for both local and foreign investors. Its prospects continue to expand, making Zakho a beacon of progress that other regions in the KRI and beyond can aspire to emulate.

Zakho's transformation reveals what can be achieved when leadership, vision, and commitment align in pursuit of progress and prosperity. ●



## Celebrating Pir Shalyar

**P**ir Shalyar is a unique holiday observed by the Hawrami people. This annual celebration takes place during the winter season, in the three weeks flanking the 40th day of winter, a date that aligns with the first Wednesday of February in the Gregorian Calendar. The hub of these activities is the capital city of the Hawraman Region, (aka Uraman Takht), in Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran).

At the core of the Pir Shalyar celebration lies a parliamentary-style gathering. Despite the swelling numbers of attendees each year, the event's historical underpinnings remain unaltered, captivating the local populace. A vivid documentation of the ceremony – particularly the parliamentary proceedings – is undertaken by the people of Hawraman, who capture photos and videos of each stage.

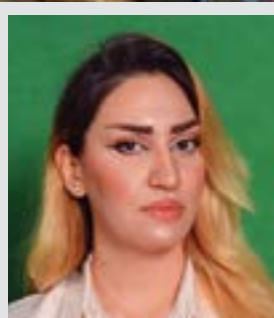
Geographically, Hawraman is a captivating region defined by its mountainous landscapes and appeal to tourists.

Positioned across the northern section of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Eastern Kurdis-

tan, the bulk of Hawraman lies within Iran. This region has safeguarded its cultural heritage and authenticity throughout history.

Hawraman is compartmentalized into three distinct areas. The first, Lehon, spans from Zalm village in the KRI to Shamshir village near Javanrud in Eastern Kurdistan. It is famous for the singers that call the area home. The second, Takht, is almost entirely situated in Eastern Kurdistan, extending from Dezli to Hajji. It is home to a number of famous poets, mullahs, and scholars. The third, Zhawaro, is also mainly in Eastern Kurdistan. Stretching from Qalaji to Palngani Garmaser, this area was historically largely inhabited by traders.

The visual impression of Hawraman from a distance unveils a unique feature – the doors and windows of houses in the region are



**Fatmah Qasim Habib**

*Fatmah Qasim Habib is a journalist, artist, poet, and art designer who has organized numerous art exhibitions in both the Kurdistan Region and international locations*

*Enchanting Pir Shalyar rituals during the annual ceremony in Hawraman Takht, Iranian Kurdistan*





A Kurdish woman from Hawraman skillfully spinning her spindle to craft wool into fine thread

adorned with two distinct colors, each symbolizing different designations. A green hue signifies that the residence belongs to a Sayyid or a Sufi, whereas a blue hue indicates the house of a sheikh.

### Pir Shalyar's dwelling

The central figure in the Pir Shalyar celebration is Pir Shalyar, a venerable sage and one of the most esteemed historical figures in Hawraman. His influence earned him reverence and sainthood among the people of the region. With great foresight, Pir Shalyar established the first tribal assembly in Hawraman, a pivotal accomplishment that has stood the test of time. Historical accounts suggest that this assembly dates back over 907 years and is often referred to as “Yan and Pir.”

During his time, Pir Shalyar transformed his residence into an assembly point, where the diverse tribes of Hawraman convened to deliberate and address communal issues. This enduring legacy has enabled the inhabitants of the region to preserve their cultural heritage and traditions. On the first Wednesday of February of each year, the people of Hawraman faithfully recreate the Pir Shalyar celebration. The next day, the first Thursday of February, marks the convening of a parliamentary session at Pir Shalyar's former residence. Although Pir Shalyar passed away many years ago, his wisdom endures, and his title is perpetuated across generations. The parliamentary proceedings continue in the same location, known as Pir Shalyar's assembly, featuring the participation of all Hawraman tribes.

Nestled among the oldest and most historically significant structures in Hawraman, Pir Shalyar's residence stands as a testament to time. Comprising a room measuring five meters in width and nine meters in length, the walls are crafted from mud, the ceiling from wood, and the floor is composed of earth. Surrounding the room are shelves on all four sides, functioning as platforms for tribal assemblies. Each tribe occupies its designated space within this assem-





Exquisite pieces of traditional Hawraman attire showcased for admiration



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat



bly. While the frequency of parliamentary sessions fluctuates annually, there are instances when nearly 1,000 individuals partake. Essential renovations, carried out using traditional methods, maintain the house's structural integrity. Beyond festival days, the assembly draws both local and foreign visitors, serving as a significant tourist attraction and hosting the annual parliamentary session.

Stages of the Pir Shalyar celebration

The first stage of the celebration, known as Claw Rochna, occurs during the winter season on the first Wednesday of February. Between six and seven in the morning, children age one to 10 from the five villages of Uraman Takht (Kamaale, Rohri, Uraman Takht, Sarpir, Chamay Weysyan) embark on a cheerful Claw Rochna procession. In return, they receive gifts like sweets, nuts, and dried fruits.

The second stage is known as sacrifice (tadhia) or slaughter. On the same Wednesday, between eight in the morning and 12 noon, most households in Uraman Takht partake in the sacrifice of sheep, goats, and cows in front of Pir Shalyar's home. The meat pot in which the sacrificed animals are prepared is shared with guests, tourists, and local residents throughout the celebration. As a symbol of Pir Shalyar's teachings, this stage underscores the necessity of sacrifice in pursuing life's aspirations. Achieving personal goals often demands relinquishing something else.

The third stage involves the Kurdish dabke dance and drumming. In the early evening on Wednesday, Hawrami men and guests gather before Pir Shalyar's dwelling for drumming, Sufi dances, and contemplative remembrance. The festivities persist until the maghrib, or dusk, call to prayer. This act symbolizes unity, a collective effort fostering peace and joy. The week concludes with a parliamentary session, where tribal elections shape the parliamentary council.

The fourth stage of the festival occurs on the second day, which is the first

Thursday of February. Local women showcase handcrafted treasures in front of their homes, selling these crafts to tourists over the course of a week. There are also guided tours of historical sites for tourists, while the afternoon sees the resurgence of dance and drumming.

Pir Shalyar attracts tourists to the region, giving the women a chance to market their handicrafts and portraying Uraman Takht as a vibrant commercial hub.

The next stage of the festival is the Assembly Session. Following the call to prayer in the evening, all tribes convene at Pir Shalyar's residence for a parliamentary session. The agenda encompasses reviewing the past year's issues and electing a new advisory council. Initially, representatives are chosen from four tribes to form a four-member council through consensus. The session spans around two hours, comprising discussions, dinner, and elections.

The final stage of the festival, the Trbe Ceremony, occurs on the second Friday of February. Trbe translates to "justice and equality" in the Hawrami language. At seven in the morning, male heads of household from Uraman Takht offer four loaves of bread at Pir Shalyar's grave. The council members then collect diverse bread types – including cornbread, wheat bread, and barley bread – from the people and distribute four loaves to each individual. A shared remembrance culminates in a communal meal of bread and yogurt.

This practice offers a taste of the diet of less-privileged people to the wealthy, and vice versa, fostering empathy. If families face difficulties, the council members and affluent individuals collaborate to find solutions.

These six stages of the Pir Shalyar festival unfold each year. Notably, days prior to the event, individuals from various countries assemble in Uraman Takht, including ordinary folk, tourists, journalists, and photographers. Their objective is to witness, record, and report on the festival, preserving its essence for posterity. ●



A skilled Kurdish craftsman crafting a wicker basket, preserving the cherished traditions of Hawraman

Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat



## Navigating Today's Storms with the Kurdish Spirit

“

I look around me and recognize that the narratives of hardship, survival, and optimism that my father told me are sewn into the fabric of our Kurdish identity

”



Sazan M. Mandalawi

*Sazan M. Mandalawi is a consultant, pursuing her passion in youth education.*





As a boy, I was a few years older than my own son is now when my father started telling me stories before bedtime of his days with the *peshmerga*. That is how I grew up. The stories of my childhood all had the same moral – tales of a people who, despite all odds, managed to maintain their culture and homeland.

Today, the nest that I call Kurdistan, a nest that the generation before us built one twig at a time and that is soaked in the blood of our martyrs, remains fragile. Yet I have chosen to raise my children here.

As I sit to write down my thoughts, anger, irritation, and intense resentment fill me. My native Kurdistan is going through yet another difficult time because the Iraqi central government in Baghdad is withholding the salaries of civil servants for the third consecutive month.

I look around me and recognize that the narratives of hardship, survival, and optimism that my father told me are sewn into the fabric of our Kurdish identity and, in the middle of this upheaval, I cannot help but reflect on them.

The current situation, of course, is a setback for our hopes, dreams, and objectives. It serves as a reminder that if we fail to live according to the lessons of those stories from my childhood and lose belief in that spirit, vultures will come and take our little nest, as simple and unfortunate as that is.

We inherited this capacity for endurance and perseverance from the previous generation. Most Kurdish families, including my own, have lost track of how many times they have been forced to flee, or have packed their belongings in anticipation of fleeing. After each such episode, somehow, they begin the process of rebuilding from scratch. Time after time.

Their tales are filled with accounts of a constant battle for survival, losing all they treasured, spending days in the harsh mountains, and escaping danger, yet they are a monument to the inner *peshmerga* spirit. Amazingly, these families continually find the willpower to start over. Is their ability to endure such unimaginable situations due to a natural ability, their optimistic nature, or the *peshmerga* spirit that flows through their veins? Who among us in this world could bear such merciless hardship? Dearest reader, how would you cope?

I, along with most of those in my generation, carry a spark from the *peshmerga* spirit, that unquenchable flame that has powered generations of Kurdish fighters, a legacy of bravery and steadfast dedication to safeguarding our homeland and its people. The *peshmerga* spirit is about carrying the burden of protecting our homeland despite overwhelming odds, not simply about carrying weapons.

My father and his generation played a unique combination of roles. On the same mountain he was a fighter by night and an educator for young children by day. Every Kurd may relate to this tale of tenacity and unwavering faith in a better tomorrow.

I wonder, as I look to the future, will the flame of the Kurd-

ish spirit continue to burn as brightly in the hearts of the next generation? Will they endure the challenges we currently confront to protect the nest that we have painfully built through years of struggle and sacrifice?

I like to believe they will. Because hope is profoundly etched in our DNA, just as our Kurdish spirit is. The frustration we are now experiencing is only a passing storm, but our parents' memories and stories and the legacy of our hope for better times are helping each struggling household get through this current storm, one day at a time.

Kurdistan perseveres in the face of hardship. The Kurdish soul has endured, having been forged in the fire of history. We have survived many storms as a people, and we will also survive this one. The frustrations of today will pass, and our heartfelt desire for a better tomorrow will survive. I still like



Photo: Safin Hamid

to believe that one day, in my lifetime, I will hear a sincere apology. And if that does not happen, then I am still determined for my children to grow up in their nest in Kurdistan.

As for us, we are, after all, sons and daughters of the *peshmerga* spirit and the blood of martyrs. ●

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# Returning and Diaspora Kurdistani Professionals Catalysts for Progress



Biza Barzo

*Biza Barzo is an academic and policy consultant with over a decade of experience working in strategic positions in government and international institutions.*

The ongoing transformation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is a noteworthy phenomenon, encompassing changes in its social and economic landscape and the active involvement of its young professionals. The shifting dynamics of political and economic fluctuations in the region demonstrate that the movement of people – including those leaving Kurdistan and those returning to it – is more than just an intriguing trend; it signifies the emergence of a new generation of leaders, innovators, and agents of progress.

Young professionals, including returnees and diaspora Kurdistanis, have contributed significantly to shaping the region's present and future. Throughout its history, this region, which has often been characterized by turmoil and conflict, has seen its population dispersed around the world in pursuit of better opportunities and greater safety. Whether they return to their homeland or remain part of Kurdistan's diaspora, dedicated professionals are reversing the brain drain phenomenon and actively applying their skills, knowledge, and determination to address the challenges faced by the region.

Their commitment stands as a testament to their unwavering belief in the Kurdistan Region's untapped potential and their fervent desire to be catalysts for transformation within their own communities. This commitment is deeply rooted in their shared history and cultural heritage, as well as a powerful love for this precious land.

Most Kurdistanis families can recount stories of ancestors who made extraordinary sacrifices for the land they cherish,

and these stories have been passed down through generations, leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of its people and fostering a profound connection to their homeland. The cultural heri-

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”

tage of the Kurdistan Region, moreover, is intricately woven into its stories, music, and traditions. These elements not only define its identity but also serve as a wellspring of inspiration for its people, regardless of where they reside.

Whether in the Kurdistan Region itself or in far-flung corners of the world, passionate innovators, professionals, writers, and other talented individuals from various sectors continually grapple with a fundamental question: "What can I do for my beloved Kurdistan?" This question serves as a driving force, propelling them to excel in their chosen fields and fueling their unwavering dedication to the betterment of their homeland.

These individuals represent a diverse spectrum of vocations, from tech experts wishing to drive digitalization in the region, to health care practitioners supporting breakthroughs in medicine, engineers designing sustainable infrastructure to ensure a bright future, experts influencing policy making across strategic domains, and educators imparting knowledge to the next generation to innovators using their creative talents to drive progress. Despite their varying fields, they share a common goal: to make a meaningful contribution to the prosperity of the Kurdistan Region. Even in the most challenging moments and crises, we witness

ever, their actions are motivated by personal gain as well as their profound love for their roots, enabling them to transcend geographical boundaries, linguistic barriers, and cultural divides. In the heart of most Kurdistanis, whether they reside in the Kurdistan Region or abroad, beats a desire to witness their homeland thrive. This shared aspiration unites Kurdistanis worldwide, forging a collective dream of a prosperous and harmonious Kurdistan where the sacrifices of their ancestors are honored through progress and prosperity.

Some return to the Kurdistan Region, dedicating themselves to contributing

Region and the rest of the world.

The story of young Kurdish professionals is borne out of a deep-rooted connection to their homeland. Like any other story, there are ups and downs along the way, but there continues to be a guiding light deep inside all of our spirits. It is a narrative of individuals who, regardless of their location, remain committed to the betterment of the Kurdistan Region.

As they continue their journeys through life, they carry the voices of their ancestors, the melodies of their music, and the tales of their homeland with them.



*Euphoric students joyfully tossing their caps into the air in a traditional celebration during their graduation ceremony*

how the sense of ownership serves as a source of inspiration for these groups of individuals, motivating them to come together to gather resources and volunteer their skills, energy, and dedication to alleviate the hardships.

The dedication of the diaspora and returnees often necessitates significant personal sacrifices, including leaving behind their homes and families. How-

ever, their actions are motivated by personal gain as well as their profound love for their roots, enabling them to transcend geographical boundaries, linguistic barriers, and cultural divides. In the heart of most Kurdistanis, whether they reside in the Kurdistan Region or abroad, beats a desire to witness their homeland thrive. This shared aspiration unites Kurdistanis worldwide, forging a collective dream of a prosperous and harmonious Kurdistan where the sacrifices of their ancestors are honored through progress and prosperity.

Their love for the Kurdistan Region is reflected in their daily lives, with each contributing uniquely and meaningfully, working diligently toward a brighter future. The transformative effect of these dedicated young professionals is a story that resonates not only within the borders of the Kurdistan Region but also across the international stage. ●



## Kurdish Refugee to Dutch Police Chief



Wladimir van Wilgenburg

*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.*

**O**n May 1, 2023, Saman Hassan was appointed police sector head of the North and East Gelderland district in the Netherlands, a remarkable achievement for someone who was granted asylum in the country in 1998.

"I came to the Netherlands from Sulaymaniyah when I was 24 years old. I grew up in Kurdistan, finished secondary school

ic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). I never believed in the civil war or actively participated in it. Therefore, I decided to leave."

Hassan initially wanted to go to Europe and ended up in the Netherlands through a smuggler. "At the time, I knew very little about the country except for Friesian cows."



**I** Saman Hassan captured alongside Mark Rutte, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands

there, and joined the *Asayish* (the Kurdish security and intelligence agency)," Hassan told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

"I worked as an *Asayish* officer in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Halabja, Soran, and Ranya from 1993 to 1997, when the civil war escalated between the Kurdistan Democrat-

In the Netherlands, he ended up in the province of Groningen near the German border. "A journalist once interviewed me and asked about my vision for the future and my aspirations in the Netherlands. I responded by expressing my desire to work with the police in a few years, with the aim of making a positive contribution to society.





My ultimate goal was to hold a leadership position and make a meaningful impact on people’s lives.”

A few years later, Hassan approached the mayor of Groningen and chief of the police in Friesland to seek assistance in applying for a job with the Dutch police. “At that time, I did not possess Dutch nationality, and I was awaiting the issuance of my Dutch passport. To ensure my acceptance into the police force, I devised a plan and also engaged in work related to socio-legal services. Interestingly, the region I currently lead is the same area where I sought asylum back in 1998.”

“It was a long and challenging journey as it took me five to six years to obtain a residency permit after years of hard work and completing my education. Once I finally secured my residency permit and obtained Dutch nationality, I had the necessary documentation to fulfill my dream of joining the police force. In 2007, this dream became a reality when I was accepted into the police academy,” he added.

**Integration not assimilation**

During his interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Hassan took care to share a perspective that he believed could be helpful for Dutch Kurds. “Kurds sometimes think that if they come to Europe they will lose their own identity, culture, and values. I am proof that those two worlds can coexist perfectly. I told myself early that I have to respect Dutch rules and values.”

“I fled Kurdistan, so this is my house; I had to follow its rules and values. It’s about integration, not assimilation,” he said.

Nonetheless, he noted that a significant portion of Kurds, upon their arrival in the Netherlands, harbor concerns about preserving their identity and tend to adhere to outdated, conservative values.

“Some Dutch Kurds aspire to return to Kurdistan one day and often hold onto their Kurdish identity and traditions rather than embracing Dutch norms

and values. However, this mindset can lead to difficulties in integrating into Dutch society and finding long-term happiness here, as many ultimately do not return to Kurdistan,” he warned.

“They resist letting their daughters go swimming or allowing their wives to shop alone, adhering to norms that have even evolved in Kurdistan itself,” he pointed out.

However, Hassan also emphasized that this phenomenon is not unique, as Dutch individuals exhibit similar behavior when they migrate to Africa, Australia, or America. “Upon one’s migration to the Netherlands, it is crucial to prioritize the immediate embrace of Dutch norms, values, and the language as integral components of your life,” he advised.

Hassan also married a Dutch woman, who he met during his student days and with whom he now has two chil-

“It’s about integration, not assimilation”

dren. “My wife has been to Kurdistan at least 16 to 17 times, with my family-in-law and children also visiting.”

“I spent 24 years of my life in Kurdistan and another 23 years in the Netherlands. I make two trips to Kurdistan every year, during which I have undertaken numerous projects for the police and various organizations that are funded by my own resources and driven by my passion. To this day, I continue to contribute in various ways,” he said.

He emphasized the significance of understanding that integration into Dutch society does not entail forfeiting one’s Kurdish identity. “It’s important to note that one doesn’t exclude the other. My advice to Kurds living in the Netherlands is to prioritize learning the language and completing their educa-

tion. This provides them with the ability to make informed decisions about their future.”

“If you choose not to pursue a path like mine, you can always consider returning to Kurdistan. In fact, I could have also returned and pursued a career in Kurdistan,” he added. “It’s essential to strike a balance between preserving your heritage and embracing the culture of your host country.”

**Royal invite**

Due to his achievements, Hassan received an invitation from the Dutch royal family to attend a Christmas reception in 2016. “The selection criteria are not disclosed, but they do mention that individuals are chosen for their contributions to the Dutch state and for my work in promoting diversity, addressing the refugee crisis, and tackling radicalization.”

During the reception, he had the privilege of meeting Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, members of the cabinet, and leaders of various political parties in the Dutch parliament. In addition, the entire royal family graced the event, including Dutch King Willem-Alexander, Queen Máxima, and other family members.

“We engaged in numerous discussions, and I had a particularly meaningful conversation with Mark Rutte about Kurdistan; he was remarkably well-informed. Such experiences are truly rare.”

Hassan, now with several years of experience in the police, is currently in charge of leading police operations in 22 different municipalities. Additionally, he has received offers to assume the role of a mayor.

Speaking about his future, he stated, “I am uncertain about my career path ahead, but with 18 years of experience in the police, I continue to find it fulfilling. Although I’ve been approached several times to enter politics, I have declined those offers because my passion lies in continuing my work in the police.” ●

“Due to his achievements, Hassan received an invitation from the Dutch royal family to attend a Christmas reception in 2016”





## MUSIAD

# Strengthening Trade Between Türkiye and Kurdistan



Sabr Salih

*Sabr Salih is a journalist based in the Kurdistan Region.*

In a move aimed at strengthening economic ties, Türkiye's Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD), a distinguished and influential chamber of commerce, recently opened a branch in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). This event signifies a shared commitment to enhancing relations and boosting trade between Iraq and Türkiye.

MUSIAD has forged a rich history since its establishment in 1990 and has consistently played a pivotal role in shaping Türkiye's economic landscape. The organization's significant reach extends beyond Türkiye, making it an influential bridge to the world. As the Erbil branch opens its doors, it offers new opportunities for the KRI while further bolstering MUSIAD's economic and political influence in the region.

Mahmut Asmali, President of MUSIAD, highlighted on his official X (formerly known as Twitter) account the potential for the Erbil branch to serve as a vital conduit that deepens trade connections between Iraq and Türkiye.

"We believe that our Erbil branch will serve as an important bridge for the trade of both countries," said Asmali, extending his congratulations to Erbil Branch President Anwar Abdullah and the new board of directors and wishing them success in their work.

In an interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Abdullah outlined his vision for MUSIAD's role in Iraq, emphasizing the integration of local businessmen and industrialists into the International Business Forum (IBF), which can facilitate their participation in

international forums and further enhance economic cooperation.

The inauguration of the Erbil branch was conducted under the direct supervision of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, with the participation of other key KRG ministers and officials. This high-level involvement underscores the KRG's enthusiasm for this collaboration, demonstrating its commitment to fostering robust economic ties



Mahmut Asmali, the President of MUSIAD

with Türkiye and realizing mutual prosperity.

The KRI has been a key partner for Turkish businesses, hosting 1,414 Turkish companies across various sectors. The Ibrahim Khalil international border crossing serves as a vital conduit for trade in food, clothing, construction materials, and oil.

The Erbil branch's opening aims to boost economic collaboration, benefiting the KRI, Iraq, and Türkiye. This expansion can foster economic growth and nurture increased domestic production, aligning with the KRG's strategy to promote economic growth through exporting local products.

Kamal Muslim, KRG Minister of Trade and Industry, expressed optimism about the Erbil branch's potential to strengthen trade relations and enhance economic cooperation between the two nations.

The opening of MUSIAD's Erbil branch was greeted with hope and anticipation, reflecting the collective aspiration for a fruitful partnership.

Erbil's strategic location as Iraq's commercial hub plays a pivotal role in facilitating the transit of goods from Türkiye to the rest of Iraq. The region's stability, security, and enduring peace make it a reliable and preferred route for trade. ●



*The launch ceremony of MUSIAD Erbil branch on September 27, 2023*



## Kurdistan's Gas and Global Energy Aspirations

*In an insightful conversation with Kurdistan Chronicle, Unigaz Holding CEO Mahmoud Sidani discusses the company's remarkable 70-year journey from a small gas station in Lebanon to a global player. Sidani underscores the vital role of natural gas in Kurdistan's future, boosting economic investment and elevating the region's profile in the global energy arena.*

*Amidst evolving energy challenges worldwide, Sidani envisions Kurdistan as a potential gas supplier once it meets domestic demand and builds energy infrastructure in collaboration with the private sector.*

Kurdistan Chronicle



Mahmoud Sidani,  
the CEO of Unigaz Holding



Photo: Safin Hamid

**Kurdistan Chronicle (KC):** Could you please introduce yourself and share the story of Unigaz Holding in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and beyond?

**Mahmoud Sidani (MS):** Certainly, thank you for having me. I am Mahmoud Sidani, CEO of Unigaz Holding. Unigaz's journey began almost 70 years ago as a family business in Lebanon that was established as a modest gas station. Today, I am proud to say that Unigaz is expanding globally as a leading company in the liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) sector, operating in over twenty countries across Africa and the Middle East.

**KC:** What is the level and volume of natural gas in the KRI, and do you consider it a significant energy source for the region?

**MS:** Natural gas indeed holds great importance as an energy source for the future of Kurdistan. It could spur economic investment for the region and position Kurdistan on the global energy map. Crescent Petroleum - Dana Gas produces around 500 million cubic feet of natural gas. This resource can cater to the internal energy needs of Kurdistan and potentially be exported to neigh-

boring countries, especially considering the heightened demand due to global events.

**KC:** Are Kurdistan's natural gas reserves primarily intended for domestic consumption, or do you foresee the possibility of exporting them?

**MS:** Currently, natural gas production in the KRI meets local energy requirements, particularly for electricity generation. However, if production increases, priority will be given to fulfilling other domestic demands. With the necessary investments and development in the gas sector, Kurdistan could emerge as a significant energy source for the region. The KRI's role in developing natural gas fields positions it as a pioneer, with the potential to be a valuable resource in the medium and long term for the region.

**KC:** Can you provide insights into the schedule for the natural gas pipeline project?

**MS:** The natural gas pipeline project to supply households in the region is a strategic focus for the Kurdistan government. They are strongly dedicated to developing the gas sector, including





Photo: Safin Hamid



delivering gas to residential areas. This initiative will positively affect various sectors, including oil refining and electricity. Considering that Kurdistan relies on electricity for heating during the winter, in addition to white oil and gasoline, this project could alleviate the financial burden on the government and contribute to environmental improvement by transitioning to gas, known for its high-combustion efficiency.

**KC:** *What is the expected timeline for the project's completion?*

**MS:** The commencement and completion timeline for a project of this magnitude depends on several factors. One of the primary challenges is the need for more appropriate legislation in the KRI. Drawing from our global expertise and presence in numerous countries, such projects often necessitate collaboration between the public and private sectors. Governments may need more knowledge and financial resources to independently execute such projects. Hence, involving the private sector can enhance operational efficiency and ensure the project's sustainability, as practiced by most countries worldwide.

**KC:** *Could you provide an estimated cost for the project?*

**MS:** The cost for a project of this scale

could reach hundreds of millions of dollars, based on our experiences in other countries where we've operated. In substantial investments, cooperation between the public and private sectors becomes indispensable. The actual cost will vary based on project scope, design, and the diverse proposals for distributing natural gas to households.

**KC:** *How do you assess the role of the regional government in supporting foreign companies like Unigaz?*

**MS:** From a technical perspective, the regional government has continued to show strong support for the business sector, with a steady focus on empowering the private sector. It's important to acknowledge that the world faces financial and economic challenges on a global scale, and no region is entirely immune to international crises. Nonetheless, the government's prudent approach has aided in mitigating their impacts, and foreign companies like Unigaz have observed this positive trend.

**KC:** *What is your vision regarding the expected direction of energy usage in future residential buildings in the KRI, particularly concerning LPG systems?*

**MS:** Looking ahead to the Kurdistan Region's future, we envision a signifi-

cant shift towards enhancing the convenience and safety of energy usage in residential buildings. We aim to introduce centralized LPG systems in every residential community, and this step holds great promise. Firstly, centralized LPG distribution aligns perfectly with our commitment to user-friendliness and maintenance. Residents will no longer need to be concerned about individual safety and maintenance matters, as the centralized system ensures regular and secure LPG delivery to their homes. Secondly, the successful implementation of this vision requires the formulation of comprehensive policies and guidelines. The Civil Defense Authority plays a crucial role by collaborating to establish installation guidelines and ensuring proper system maintenance. It's encouraging to note that progress has already been initiated. Lastly, addressing the regulation of LPG tank placement necessitates active involvement from relevant authorities in determining permitted and restricted areas. The responsible leaders will be pivotal in identifying suitable locations for LPG tank installations. This involves carefully assessing safety, accessibility, and urban planning considerations. By closely collaborating with local governments and urban development planners, we can ensure that the positioning of LPG tanks harmonizes with public infrastructure. ●



## Savoring the Taste of Rashmiri Grapes



Nasih Ali Khayat

*Nasih Ali Khayat is a renowned photojournalist and recipient of multiple international awards.*

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

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

Abdulkarim, a hardworking soul, represents the beating heart of a

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

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

“

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

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

### Environmental challenges

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

Photo: Nasih Ali Khayat



equipment because of the location of our fields.”

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

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

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

### Untapped potential

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat

*A dedicated Kurdish farmer diligently tending to his vineyard*



## Siegfried Martsch The Man Who Stood by Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle

Siegfried Martsch, also known as Siggı Barzani, was more than just a name to the Kurdish people; he was a symbol of unwavering support and friendship. His journey and legacy have been laid to rest beneath an oak tree in Bedyal, a Christian village located in the picturesque Barzan area of Erbil Governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). A marble bench overlooking the tranquil landscapes of Barzan and the Rezan River now serves as a poignant reminder of his enduring presence in the region.

Siggı, a former German politician and humanitarian, passed away in February 2022 at the age of 68. His final wish was a testament to the deep bond he had forged with the Kurdish people: to have his ashes divided between Germany and Kurdistan, his first and second homes.

Christina Martsch, Siggı's widow, explained the significance of the chosen location for his interment, saying, "This was his favorite area in Kurdistan." In September 2023, Christina and her youngest son, Paul Jonas, made the journey to the KRI and joined her son Horst and his wife Arayish, who reside in Erbil, to lay Siggı's remaining ashes to rest and pay tribute to him among his Kurdish friends.

Siggı Martsch was a well-known figure in German politics, notably as a founding member of the Green Party in North Rhine-Westphalia. In 1989, he assumed leadership of the party in the state and, from 1990 to 2000, served as a member of the North Rhine-Westphalia Assembly.

It was in 1991 that Siggı first encountered the plight of the Kurdish people during the mass exodus of 1.5 million Iraqi Kurds escaping Saddam Hussein's brutality into the mountains along the borders with Iran and Türkiye. This pivotal moment sparked his lifelong commitment to their cause.

In the same year, Siggı set out on a journey to the Kurdistan Region, crossing through Türkiye with a convoy of trucks loaded with essential aid, including food and medicine, for the stranded Kurds on the Turkish border. His wife Christi-

na joined him in a second convoy two months later, further solidifying their dedication to the Kurdish people.

Siggı and Christina both came from families in Germany that had been displaced and suffered during the Second World War. Their shared activism, particularly their



anti-war stance during the Vietnam War, brought them together in Bochum in the western part of Germany, Siggı's hometown, and their deep commitment to assisting those in need was evident throughout their work in Europe,

“  
Siggı dedicated the majority  
of his time to Kurdistan  
”



The esteemed Siegfried Martsch,  
celebrated for his contributions





(L-R) Arayish Barzinjee-Martsch (daughter-in-law), Christina Martsch (wife), Horst Martsch (son)

Africa, and Palestine.

When asked about Siggis initial awareness of the suffering of the Kurdish people, Christina recalled, “No, no one in Germany spoke about Halabja, the Iraqi Kurdish city that came under chemical attack and resulted in the death of 5,000 civilians, or Saddam's atrocities; we knew little about the Kurdish cause, mostly about Kurds in Türkiye.”

Throughout the 1990s, while the Kurdistan Region was grappling with sanctions, Siggis organized numerous aid convoys, brought German medical professionals to treat the sick, and contributed to building hospitals and homes for villagers in need.

Siggis dedicated the majority of his time to Kurdistan, with his wife and three children frequently visiting to better understand his work and the reason for his prolonged absences. Being away from Germany posed challenges, but he found support among fellow politicians who recognized the importance of Germany's humanitarian aid to the Kurds.

“We never took a normal vacation; we always went to Kurdistan,” said Christina.

After Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, Siggis returned to sup-

“  
Siggis Martsch was a well-known figure in German politics, notably as a founding member of the Green Party in North Rhine-Westphalia  
”

port the reconstruction of Kurdistan. Then, in 2005, Christina retired early from her career as a psychologist to join her husband. Together, they worked to establish a Kurdish-German cultural center and played vital roles in the foundation of the German School in Erbil, the capital of the KRI. Additionally, they facilitated an exchange program between doctors from Kurdistan and the German city of Hamburg.

Siggis and his family continued to reside in Kurdistan until 2014, when his deteriorating health necessitated a return to Germany for treatment.

“After returning to Germany, he always wanted to visit Kurdistan before losing his sight, but his health prevented him from doing so,” lamented Christina.

Reflecting on the infrastructure developments in Kurdistan since 2003, Christina marveled at the transformation. She recounted, “When I arrived in 2005, there were only a few hours of electricity, problems with drinking water, and sewage issues. Now, I can't believe all these developments; it is astonishing.”

While acknowledging the progress, Christina emphasized the importance of involving the people in decision-making pro-



(1991) L-R: Hoshyar Zebari, Fazil Mirani, Masoud Barzani, Siggis Martsch



September 2023, Bedyal Village, Shirin Mountain, Barzan Governorate

cesses and reiterated the ongoing need for international assistance in the Kurdistan region.

“Kurdistan should be known outside its borders,” she stated. “Europe has forgotten it. There was a spotlight on it during the war against ISIS, but now it is gone. In the Middle East, the KRI is the most diverse, tolerant, and peaceful place when it comes to coexistence among different religious and ethnic groups.”

In Bedyal, Siggis spirit lives on. On September 17th, what would have been his 70th birthday, his family created a garden around his burial site. In a heartwarming gesture, the people of Bedyal assured the family that they need not worry, as they would tend to the garden in the years to come, ensuring that Siggis friendship thrives in the soil of Kurdistan. ●



# COEXISTENCE

## Raban Boya One Shrine, Two Faiths



**Mohammad  
Dargalayi**

*Mohammad Dargalayi is a journalist and photographer with 13 years of experience. He is a member of IFJ Global.*

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

Boya to the latter.

A history of religious coexistence is a point of pride for the people of the KRI, but the story of Raban Boya offers a rare glimpse into a harmony that is unmatched elsewhere in the world. In a cave hewn at an elevation of 1,070 meters in the mountains, this shrine serves as a sanctuary for the two religious communities. It was officially recognized as a historical site in 1945, and a

road leading to the shrine was constructed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2005. Today, this hallowed place sees Christians and Muslims alike gather for prayer and pilgrimage, with a surge in Christian visitors occurring two weeks after Easter.

### Centuries of shared experiences

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

the shared history of Shaqlawa's diverse inhabitants.

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

“

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

”

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

*Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi*



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

”

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

A warm welcome awaits at  
the entrance of Raban Boya

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

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

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

### Shaped by tolerance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Unity in diversity

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

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

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



## Shanidar Cave Unveiling the Ancient Mysteries of Kurdistan



Tala Rostami

*Tala Rostami is a researcher and has an MA in sociology.*

Nestled in the picturesque landscape of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Shanidar Cave stands as a silent sentinel of time, guarding the secrets of our distant past. This cave, located in the Zagros Mountains, has been a rich source of archaeological discoveries, shedding light on the lives of early humans who once sought refuge within its rocky embrace. With a history spanning tens of thousands of years, Shanidar Cave remains a treasure trove of knowledge for archaeologists and a captivating destination for history enthusiasts.

The KRI boasts a wealth of historical and prehistorical sites dating back to the earliest periods of human existence on our planet. Among the numerous historical sites in this region, Shanidar Cave holds a special place. This remarkable archaeological site, known for its association with Neanderthals, was first explored by Ralph Solecki (1917-2019) and a team from Columbia University.

Within the depths of Shanidar Cave, archaeologists unearthed the remains of 10 Neanderthals. These ancient individuals were discovered within a Mousterian layer, which also yielded a treasure trove of artifacts, including hundreds of stone tools like points, side-scrapers, and flakes, as well as animal bones from species such as wild goats and spur-thighed tortoises.

The initial nine Neanderthal skeletons, identified as Shanidar 1-9, were excavated between 1957 and 1961 by Ralph Solecki and his team from Columbia University. Shanidar 3's skeleton is now housed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The others (Shanidar 1, 2, and 4-9) were originally kept in Iraq and might have been lost during the tumultuous events of the 2003 invasion. Nevertheless, casts and replicas of these specimens are still preserved at the Smithsonian.

In 2006, while examining the Smithsonian's collection of faunal bones from the site, Melinda Zeder made a groundbreaking discovery: leg and foot bones belonging to a previously unknown Neanderthal individual, now referred to as Shanidar 10. This find added a new chapter to the already fascinating story of Shanidar Cave, expanding our knowledge of the ancient individuals who once sought shelter within its rocky chambers.

### A geological wonder

Shanidar Cave is renowned not only for its historical significance but also for its geological splendor. Situated in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains, this limestone cave system offers a spectacular blend of subterranean chambers, awe-inspiring stalactites, and dramatic rock formations. The cave's natural beauty serves as a stark contrast to the ancient relics it conceals, making it a fascinating destina-

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

“

The cave's natural beauty serves as a stark contrast to the ancient relics it conceals, making it a fascinating destination for both scientists and adventure seekers

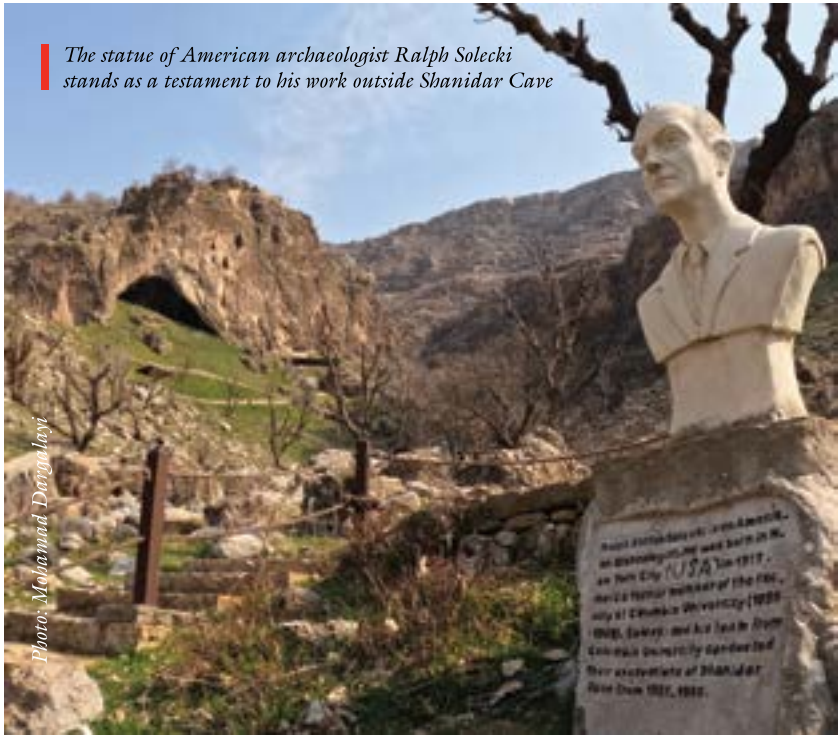
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A glimpse into the historic Neanderthal site of Shanidar Cave





A commemorative plaque stands in tribute, set against the awe-inspiring backdrop of Shanidar Cave



The statue of American archaeologist Ralph Solecki stands as a testament to his work outside Shanidar Cave

Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi

tion for both scientists and adventure seekers.

### Ancient inhabitants

What sets Shanidar Cave apart from other archaeological sites is its association with the Neanderthals, our closest relatives in the evolutionary chain. The cave has yielded a remarkable collection of Neanderthal remains, offering invaluable insights into their way of life. Among the most significant finds is the Shanidar 1 skeleton, which revealed evidence of a Neanderthal who had lived for several decades despite suffering severe injuries, a testament to the care and compassion of their community.

### Neanderthal burials

One of the most poignant discoveries in Shanidar Cave is the evidence of ritualistic Neanderthal burials. Archaeologists have unearthed several individuals interred with items like flowers and herbs, suggesting a deep cultural significance attached to these burials. This revelation challenges previous notions of Neanderthals as primitive beings and hints at their capacity for symbolic thought and ritualistic behavior.

### Tool production and hunting

Furthermore, the archaeological discoveries at Shanidar Cave have shed light on the sophisticated skills and adaptability of its ancient inhabitants. The stone tools found in the cave reveal a remarkable level of craftsmanship and ingenuity, showcasing their ability to fashion sharp blades, spearheads, and cutting implements from the available resources. These tools were not only used for hunting but also for various day-to-day tasks, from butchering game to shaping other materials.

The evidence of hunting activities goes beyond just the tools, as researchers have also uncovered the remnants of ancient campfires, which provide insights into the cooking techniques and dietary preferences of the people who once called this cave home. The bones of large game animals show signs of butchery, indicating that these early humans were skilled at extracting valuable resources from their prey.

Moreover, the presence of certain plant remains in the cave suggests that the inhabitants of Shanidar were not solely reliant on hunting for sustenance. They likely gathered edible plants and engaged in a diversified subsistence strat-

egy, demonstrating a level of resourcefulness that allowed them to thrive in a challenging environment.

### Preservation and research

The collaborative efforts to safeguard Shanidar Cave and its historical significance extend beyond preservation alone. The Kurdistan Regional Government, in partnership with academic institutions and global organizations, has taken steps to physically protect the site and to promote educational and research initiatives.

Furthermore, ongoing research and excavations at Shanidar Cave continue to provide a wealth of data that transcends the boundaries of national and academic interests. International teams of archaeologists, anthropologists, and geologists collaborate to unearth new discoveries, analyze findings, and share knowledge with the global scientific community. This cooperative approach

“  
Shanidar Cave stands  
as a silent sentinel of  
time, guarding the  
secrets of our distant  
past  
”

not only enhances our understanding of human history but also strengthens the bonds of international collaboration and cultural exchange.

### Visiting Shanidar Cave

For those captivated by the enchantment of Shanidar Cave, it is vital to acknowledge and honor its profound historical and ecological importance. The cave is generally open to the public, providing an opportunity for visitors to delve into its storied past and gain insights into ongoing research efforts. ●



## Nashwan Khalo Brushstrokes of Hope



Louai Esyani

*Louai Esyani works as a media correspondent at Same TV and is also an active member of the Lalish Cultural Center.*

As the district of Sinjar struggles to rebuild after the genocide perpetrated by ISIS in 2014, one young artist is using the power of his creativity to rewrite the narrative of his homeland. Nashwan Khalo Rafi, a Sinjar native, has transformed his heart-wrenching experiences into a series of compelling paintings that testify to the enduring spirit of his people and their yearning for a better future.

In Sinjar, Kurdish Yezidis, Christians, and Muslims live side by side in harmony, a symbol of unity in a region often scarred by division. Yet this peaceful coexistence was brutally shattered by the onslaught of ISIS in 2014. Nashwan, like countless others, was forced to flee the horrors, leaving behind his beloved homeland. Nashwan's journey as an artist started when he was a young boy with a penchant for painting scenes of beauty in Sinjar. Now he dedicates his art to reflecting the anguish of his people. In his words, "Before ISIS, we painted pictures of beauty; after them, we paint pictures of pain and suffering."



Amid the destruction and despair, Nashwan has found solace in his art. He started painting to process the trauma, documenting the horrors of the Yezidi genocide and expressing his longing for a peaceful homeland. "We witnessed this tragedy and crime against humanity. ISIS attacked and tortured and killed thousands of our people, including women and children, making our lives bitter," he recalled.

Nashwan's art is not merely a medium for his own catharsis. He hopes that it can help bear witness to the atrocities committed against his people. His paintings convey the depth of his suffering, his family's pain, and his community's anguish to a global audience.

To date, Nashwan has created over 400 paintings, dedicating 50 of them to the Yezidi genocide. He has held eight exhibitions across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, using his art to ensure that the tragedies of his people will not fade into obscurity. His work serves as a powerful reminder that the wounds of Sinjar remain unhealed, even as the years pass.



Photos: Louai Esyani

Nashwan Khalo passionately engrossed in creating one of his captivating paintings

While his art speaks volumes, Nashwan's aspirations extend beyond the canvas. He dreams of helping his people and contributing to a world where such tragedies are a thing of the past. "I don't want my people or anyone else in the world to suffer the same fate as

was signed that aimed to restore peace and security in Sinjar. It called for the expulsion of all illegal forces from the town, including fighters affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and paved the way for the return of

came to an end, he shared his deepest aspiration, one that has been delayed by political and military conflict. "I wish that our people could return to their homes freely, that Sinjar could be rebuilt, and that we could show its beauty to the world. Allow the children of

“  
In Sinjar, Kurdish  
Yezidis, Christians,  
and Muslims live side  
by side in harmony, a  
symbol of unity in a  
region often scarred by  
division

”

us. It is a duty on all of our shoulders," he asserts.

Nashwan's wishes are not far-fetched. In October 2020, an agreement between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Government



over 150,000 Yezidi refugees currently living in camps supervised by the UN to their homes.

Despite international support for this agreement, its implementation has been painfully slow. The Yezidis, including Nashwan, continue to wait for the day when they can return to their homes, rebuild Sinjar, and once again reveal its beauty to the world. As our conversation with Nashwan

Sinjar to see paintings of happiness, not sickness, disaster, and genocide." Nashwan Khalo Rafi's art reflects the enduring spirit of the Yezidi people, who, despite their suffering, continue to hope for a brighter future. His brushstrokes, like the strength of his people, paint a path towards adaptability, healing, and the restoration of a peaceful Sinjar, where coexistence and unity can once again flourish. ●



# FESTIVAL

## Kurdish Film Festival in New York



Myles B. Caggins

*Myles B. Caggins III is a retired U.S. Army colonel, founded Words Warriors LLC for language services in the Kurdistan Region. He's a senior fellow at the New Lines Institute, specializing in public information warfare and U.S.-Kurdish relations, also serving on nonprofit boards.*





New York City is gearing up for a unique cultural experience, as the New York Kurdish Film Festival announces its much-anticipated 7th edition, from October 20 to 26, 2023. This extraordinary event will showcase the cinematic achievements of Kurdistan and its global diaspora, spotlighting 17 exceptional films created by talented filmmakers who share the rich tapestry of Kurdish heritage.

Marking an essential moment in history, this year's festival has been strategically timed to honor the enduring spirit of Kurdish resistance, commemorating 100 years since the Lausanne Treaty. The treaty resulted in the division of Kurdistan among Türkiye and the mandates of Great Britain and France, which later became the countries of Iraq and Syria,

respectively. This remarkable gathering aims to spread awareness and celebrate the indomitable will of the Kurdish people, who have resisted oppression despite historical injustices.

The film festival will be held at the historic Village East by Angelika theater in the East Village of Manhattan in New York City. Designed in the Moorish Revival style, the theater was built in 1926. Since 1991, it has been operated by the Angelika Film Center as a seven-screen multiplex. The theater is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

## A journey through Kurdish culture and history

Spanning a wide spectrum of genres, the festival will fea-

ture documentaries, dramas, and short films; live Kurdish music; a program for children; and a *govend* – traditional Kurdish circle dancing – performance. A Kurdish-American novelist will also give a talk on his new book, and attendees will be treated to Kurdish cuisine. With a dedicated focus on unearthing the essence of Kurdish culture, history, and the ongoing struggle for freedom, this event promises to be a transformative cultural journey.

The opening night of the festival will feature the screening of the poignant film *The Pasha, My Mother, and I*. This evocative creation by filmmaker Nevine Gerits pays homage to her mother, Pervin, who hailed from a noble Kurdish family and dedicated her life to tireless activism in pursuit of Kurdish freedom. Through the film, viewers will gain intimate insights into Pervin's journey, making it a deeply personal and historically significant experience. Nevine will also join the festival for an audience discussion.

Beyond the opening film, the festival boasts an array of compelling cinematic works. Filmmakers hailing from Western Kurdistan (northern Syria), like Rêger Azad Kaya, Sevinaz Evdike, and Manal Masri will present the films *When the Seedlings Grow*, *The Wedding Parade*, and *Touching Freedom*, respectively. From Northern Kurdistan (southeastern Türkiye), a powerful documentary titled *Tearing Walls Down* sheds light on several imprisoned Kurdish women politicians, while *The Wheel* by Metîn Ewr memorializes an episode of Kurdish resistance in the early 1990s. Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran) will also contribute films, including *Hope* by Mozghan Kavousi, an accomplished activist venturing into directing for the first time. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), also known as Southern Kurdistan, will be well represented with films like *The Hole in the Wall* by Bilal Korkut, offering an insightful exploration of different facets of Kurdish life. Other filmmakers from the KRI have been invited to travel to New York City to participate in person.

Several directors will offer question-and-answer sessions after their films are shown, either live or via Zoom.



The film festival selection committee and volunteers represent the entire Kurdish diaspora, as well as American friends of the Kurdish community. The New York Kurdish Cultural Center, the parent organization of the film festival, worked with the U.S. Consulate General Erbil for cultural visa processing for official invitees.

“I am inspired by the dedication and efforts of both the New York Kurdish Cultural Center and the Film Committee. Their commitment to curate and present this extraordinary display of Kurdish artistry in one of the world's artistic hubs, New York City, is remarkable. This endeavor transcends mere event organization; it is a labor of love that introduces the rich tapestry of Kurdish culture to a diverse and global audience,” said Yuksel Serindag, Board Member of the New York Kurdish Cultural Center.

## Founder's vision

The founder of the New York Kurdish Film Festival, Xeyal Qertel, a Kurdish woman from Türkiye, expressed her vision for the festival, stating, “Our goal is to ensure audiences in New York City are exposed to Kurdish film, culture, and the resilience of our people. Through the power of cinema and cultural events, we hope to shed light on the beauty of the Kurdish identity and the struggle to preserve it.”

As the curtain rises on the 7th New York Kurdish Film Festival, the city's cultural landscape will expand significantly. This week-long celebration of Kurdish heritage and artistic innovation will be an inclusive event, open to all who are eager to witness the kaleidoscope of Kurdish culture.





Friday, October 20

### Theater 1

6:00-7:00 pm / Opening reception  
7:00-7:10 pm / Opening remarks by executive director Xeyal Qertel  
7:10-7:30 pm / Koma *Govend* (dance), with DJ Durry and Osman Mirwais  
7:30 pm / Film: *The Pasha, My Mother, and I* (Documentary, Belgium, 83 min)  
8:45-9:00 pm / Q&A with director Nevine Gerits (appearing in person), hosted by Xeyal Qertel  
9:00-10:00 pm / Community gathering in reception area



Saturday, October 21

### Theater 1

2:00 pm / Doors open  
2:00-3:00 pm / Program for children (storytelling, games, dance, Kurdish language, history, gifts)  
3:00-3:15 pm / Film: Laboratory No. 2 (Documentary, Türkiye and Iran, 16 min.)  
3:15-3:30 pm / Live Kurdish music with Osman Mirwais  
3:45-5:05 pm / Film: *Touching Freedom* (Fiction, Sweden, 71 min.)  
5:15-6:20 pm / Film: *When the Seedlings Grow* (Fiction, Syria, 83 min.)  
6:20-6:30 pm / Q&A with director Rêger Azad Kaya (via Zoom)  
6:45-7:00 pm / Break  
7:00-7:15 pm / Film: The Wheel (Fiction, Türkiye, 14 min.)  
7:15-7:26 pm / Film: The Witching Hour (Fiction, Iran, 11 min.)  
7:30 pm / Film: Soft as Metal (Documentary, Sweden, 28 min.)

Tuesday, October 24

### Theater 2

6:30 pm / Doors open  
7:00 pm / Film: I Turn Off the Lights (Fiction, Iran, 14 min.)  
7:15-8:30 pm / Film: I Had Seeded Pomegranate for You (Fiction, Iran, 78 min.)

Wednesday, October 25

### Theater 2

6:30 pm / Doors open  
6:45-7:00 pm / Film: Hope (Fiction, Iran, 15 min.)  
7:00-7:15 pm / Q&A (to be announced)  
7:15-8:30 pm / Film: *The Hole in the Wall* (Fiction, Türkiye, 76 min.)  
8:30-9:00 pm / Q&A (to be announced)

Sunday, October 22

### Theater 2

3:00 pm / Doors open  
3:30-3:55 pm / Film: Seven Symphonies of the Zagros (Documentary, Iran, 24 min.)  
4:00-4:15 pm / Film: The Address (Fiction, Türkiye, 16 min.)  
4:30-5:30 pm / Book talk with Dr. Zaid Brifkani (in person), introduced by Janet Biehl  
5:30-6:00 pm / Break  
6:00-6:50 pm / Film: *Tearing Walls Down* (Documentary, Türkiye, 50 min.)  
7:20-8:00 pm / Q&A with directors Hebûn Polat and Şerif Çiçek

Monday, October 23

### Theater 2

6:30 pm / Doors open  
7:00-8:00 pm / Workshop: “The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking” with Azad Azizyan and Natalie Bullock Brown  
8:15-8:30 pm / Film: Things Unheard Of (Fiction, Türkiye, 15 min.)  
8:30-9 pm / Film: The Land of Buried Women (Documentary, Türkiye, 16 min.)

Thursday, October 26

### Theater 2

6:30 pm / Doors open  
6:45 pm / Film: *The Wedding Parade* (Fiction, Syria, 70 min.)  
8:00-9:00 pm / Live music with DJ Durry and Osman Mirwais and closing reception





## A Serene Teahouse Amidst Turbulent Borders



Omar Aziz

*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.*



*Experience the charm of Mam Darwish as he pours tea at his inviting border teahouse*

The taste of Mam Darwish's tea, brewed over a charcoal fire in the wooded mountains evokes the beauty of the border between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Iranian Kurdistan. Mam Darwish makes tourists forget the bitterness of life for a while by offering them sweet tea.

Mam Darwish's tea house is located in the orchards of Byara district in Halabja Governorate. A stream of water that runs through the tea house divides it between two countries, Iraq and Iran, where customers from both sides of the border come and sit across from each other to sip a sweet tea and relax.



“

A stream of water that runs through the tea house divides it between two countries, Iraq and Iran, where customers from both sides of the border come and sit across from each other to sip a sweet tea and relax

”



One of the most notable features of the tea house is that tourists from the KRI and Iranian Kurdistan can visit the tea house without visas to drink tea and take photos. It is open daily from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm, serving tea as well as cold beverages in the summer and hot milk in the winter.

“Three years ago, I established this tea house, which sits right on the border between the KRI and Iranian Kurdistan, with only a stream as the dividing line,” Mam Darwish said with pride. “Tourists often inquire whether we accept Iraqi currency or Iranian currency. We accept only Iraqi currency, yet even

Mam Darwish's tea house lies in the historical region known as the Hawraman region, which is a mountainous area shared between Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, with the majority of the region located in Iran. In 2021, UNESCO added the Iranian area of Hawraman to the World Heritage List.

The Hawrami people, a Kurdish tribe dating to around 3000 BC, have inhabited this rugged terrain within the Zagros Mountains for centuries. They speak a distinctive Kurdish dialect and are celebrated for their self-sufficiency, crafting their own clothing, shoes, and tools. The region boasts bountiful wal-



if our Iranian visitors lack Iraqi currency, we do not charge them; they can enjoy their tea for free, as the value of the Iranian currency makes it a bit expensive for them,” he added.

Despite the border that officially separates the people of Byara and Hanagar-mala, residents from both sides have been enjoying visa-free visits to share moments of both joy and sorrow since the border was first drawn a century ago.

nut, pomegranate, and mulberry trees, annually drawing thousands of visitors to its cultural festivals.

Mam Darwish explained that there have been no security issues for tourists who have visited the tea house thus far, and that border security on both sides has been very cooperative.

“Sometimes tourists from both sides



A glimpse of the charming and humble teahouse owned by Mam Darwish

call me ahead of time to see if the tea house is open and if they can come without a problem,” said Mam Darwish.

However, when it comes to tea, Kurds from Iraq and Iran have two distinct preferences, according to Mam Darwish. Iraqi Kurds prefer dark and thick tea, while Iranian Kurds prefer light tea.

As she sipped hot tea, Truska Ali, 23, of

Sulaymaniyah city, KRI, told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that she was visiting Mam Darwish's tea house for the fifth time, previously with her family and now with her friends.

“Everything is beautiful here, the weather and landscape. It is it is a pleasant feeling. You can cross the border and enter the territory of Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran) without any difficulties or obstacles,” she said.

Sipan Hajji, 30, a Kurdish refugee from Syria living in the KRI, was sitting at the tea house with his friends. He said what drew him to the place was the beauty of the area and the simplicity of the tea house, which is entirely made of wood.

“When you see these scenes, you feel that Kurdistan is very beautiful and has beautiful nature,” said Sipan.

While washing the tea cups, Mam Darwish expressed his delight that his tea house is now well known on both sides of the border. He stated that he intends to expand his business and open a restaurant next year, so that tourists can enjoy a nice breakfast that includes locally made cheese, honey, yogurt, and bread. ●

Photos: Omar Aziz



# HERITAGE

## The Resilience of Kurdish Coffee



Keremo

*Keremo is a renowned authority in the realm of Kurdish theatre, hailing from Diyarbakir, Türkiye. His extensive body of work comprises 23 published books in Kurdish, and he has also produced 18 captivating documentaries covering a wide array of cultural endeavors*



Photo: Safin Hamid

As I strolled through the captivating streets of Stockholm, Sweden, my anticipation was palpable – not just to meet Kurdish intellectuals but to discover a hidden treasure from the depths of history. The journey led me to the Kurdish Exile Museum nestled in the heart of the city, which became the repository of revelations about a beverage that once graced the lips of Europe: Kurdish Coffee.

The owner of the museum, Goran Candan, warmly welcomed me, gifting a picture that would kindle my curiosity. Framed with sweetness, the image depicted a coffee package, a portal to a bygone era. The aromatic brew that once danced upon the tongues of Europeans as “Kurdish Coffee” traveled through time, drawing me into its narrative.

Approximately two centuries ago, this coffee was a sensation, adorned with its Kurdish heritage and sold across the European markets. It was a drink that whispered stories of the past, a tangible connection to history. The charm of “chicorée au Kurde,” as it was known in France from 1830 to 1930, bewitched Europe and took its rightful place in the hearts of its inhabitants.

The imagery on the package resonated with

the spirit of the Kurdish people. The depicted Kurdish warrior, hailing from the 15th century, was painted by European travelers in the 17th century and revealed the roots of Kurdish coffee, a heritage intertwined with valor and tradition.

But beneath the surface of this story lies a deeper history, a saga woven with both bitterness and sweetness. “*Mokka* (mocha) was the most consumed drink in Bedlis, a Kurdish city in southeastern Türkiye, in 1838. The people loved this drink,” recounts James Brant, the British consul who served in the Kurdish city of Erzurum in Türkiye in 1836-1840. Such testimonies illuminate the profound connection that coffee held within Kurdish communities, a connection that spanned centuries and cultures.

### Appropriating coffee

However, as the 20th century dawned and the Turkish state emerged, a cloud of policies veiled the vibrant heritage of the Kurdish people. Denial and destruction became systematic tools, targeting not only the people but also their cultural values, traditions, and customs. The rich tapestry of the Kurds was threatened, and the intricate threads of Kurdish coffee faced unravelling.



Amidst the historical turmoil, the ‘women’s coffee’ of the Kurds was unjustly renamed as the *menengiç* coffee of the Turks. Also known as *kizwan* (terebinth) coffee, the drink’s heritage is traced to the Kurdish cities of Diyarbakir, Bedlis, Adiyaman, Mardin, Riha,

notably in France, where the journey of coffee began in earnest in 1654. However, the roots of Kurdish coffee extend even further into history, beyond the shores of Europe. The epic tale of *Mem and Zin* penned by Ahmed Khani in 1600 and sung through gener-

Even in the face of change, traces of Kurdish coffee-trading companies lingered, like the French company Marcel Godaro, whose packages of *kizwan* coffee bore the inscription “Kurdish coffee,” a testament to its origin. The brew was more than a beverage; it was

Kurdish coffee was unjustly stripped away, rebranded as *Türk kahvesi* (Turkish coffee). This renaming was an act of cultural appropriation that denied the Kurds the rightful ownership of their cultural legacy. The poignant truth was that Kurdish coffee had existed for a millennium, interwoven within the fabric of Kurdish songs, stories, manuscripts, and poems that echoed through centuries.

Presently, the Kurdish people are rekindling their connection with their coffee-drinking heritage, cultivating coffee from the *kizwan* tree. In 2013, however, the very coffee that held a central role in Kurdish culture was inscribed in UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage as an element of Turkish culture. This injustice serves as a poignant reminder that while the essence of the brew has remained unaltered, the story surrounding it has been manipulated.

### From Kurdistan with coffee

Goran Candan, a native of the city of Diyarbakir – known as Amed in Kurdish – shared insights into both the art of coffee and Kurdish music. His passion echoed through the stories he told, bridging the gap between past and present, culture and coffee.

The Kurdish Exile Museum in Stockholm is a testament to resilience, curated over decades by Candan with the support of Kurdish writers and intellectuals. This repository holds over a thousand historical artifacts, each narrating a piece of the Kurdish tale. It stands as a living link to the past, fostering a bridge between generations.

As the scent of history lingered in the air, I reflected on the profound journey that led me to this moment. The untold saga of Kurdish coffee whispered to me, an intimate secret revealed against the backdrop of a museum that dared to preserve the essence of a people.

Kurdish coffee, once embraced by Europe and nurtured by centuries of tradition, was unjustly robbed of its name. In the hushed tones of a forgotten label, in the brave strokes of a warrior’s

portrait, and in the revival of *kizwan* coffee, the story of a people emerges – resilient, proud, and deserving of recognition.

“  
Kurdish coffee had its own romantic code, a way for potential lovers to communicate their feelings without uttering a word  
”

But the history of Kurdish coffee is not just a tale of European enchantment. It is also one of intimate rituals and distinct flavors. Allow me to take you back

would prepare his coffee with sugar, infusing it with the sweetness of her sentiments. However, if her heart remained untouched, a dash of salt would find its way into the brew, gently communicating her lack of interest.

Moreover, the tale of coffee extends to the embrace of nature’s bounty. In the 1960s, the inhabitants of Mardin embarked on a journey, returning with Brazilian coffee. Comparisons arose between the Brazilian brew, affectionately known as “berü” or berry, and the ancestral Kurdish coffee. The villagers marveled at the uncanny resemblance, drawing a link between the two worlds bridged by the humble coffee bean.

As I savored these historical nuances, the story of the label spoke even louder. On this label, a hand-drawn image encapsulated the essence of time – between 1850 and 1930 in France – when the coffee carried the label of a Kurdish warrior, a timeless emblem of courage. It was this warrior who embodied the spirit of a drink brewed with valor and



to the heart of Kurdistan, where coffee transcends taste and becomes a means of communication.

Kurdish coffee had its own romantic code, a way for potential lovers to communicate their feelings without uttering a word. In the olden days, in Kurdistan, when marriages were arranged, coffee became a method to transmit secret messages. If a young woman wished to express her fondness for a suitor, she

served with legacy.

Even as the world sips on *Türk kahvesi*, let us remember that history holds a name untold – Kurdish coffee. As the aroma of freshly brewed coffee intertwines with the winds of change, the story of a people, their resilience, and their heritage lives on, as timeless as the echoes of a warrior’s footsteps. ●



Photo: Safin Hamid

Erzerom, and Batman. By the 20th century, it had made its journey to European markets and was embraced by the continent’s elites. This, in turn, led to its production within Europe, most

ations intertwined the custom of Kurdish coffee with the everyday language of the people. The legacy of this brew was undeniable, carried by the warriors and poets of Kurdish heritage.

a mark of identity.

Yet, history took an unexpected turn. Following the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, the identity of



## Uniting Hearts Through Melody

Kurdistan Chronicle

In the heart of Kurdistan, a young musical sensation has emerged, captivating audiences worldwide with her mesmerizing voice and soulful performances. Sana Barznji, a gifted Kurdish female singer, has taken the music industry by storm, breaking down cultural barriers and empowering her community through her talent and determination. With her unique blend of traditional Kurdish melodies and contemporary sounds, Sana has become a beacon of hope and inspiration for youth in the region.





Sana Barznji mesmerizing the audience with her performance during a concert in Erbil on July 12, 2023

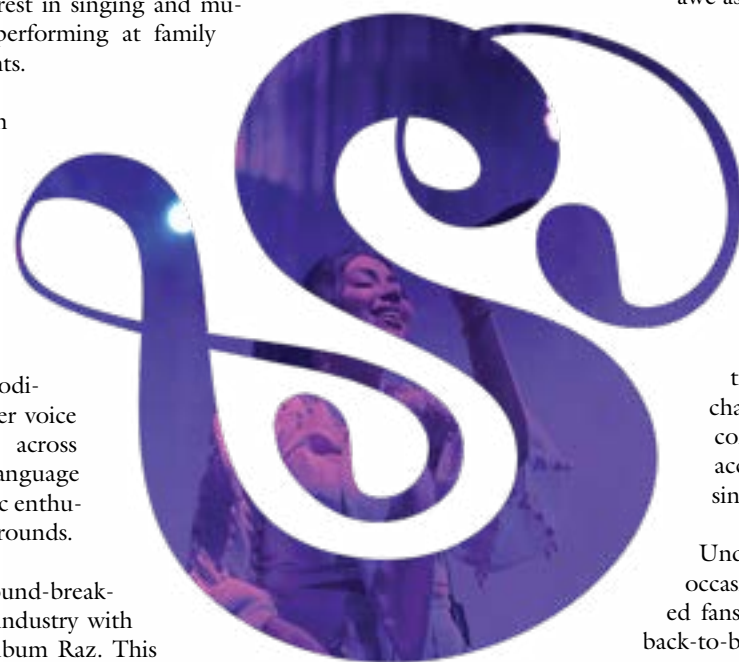
## Early life and passion for music

Sana Barznji was born in the city of Saqz in Iranian Kurdistan, where she grew up surrounded by a rich tapestry of Kurdish culture and music. From an early age, she showed a profound interest in singing and musical expression, often performing at family gatherings and local events.

Sana's journey to stardom took an unexpected turn when she decided to share her music on social media platforms. Her captivating voice quickly gained traction, and soon, she became a viral sensation. The melodious and soft power of her voice resonated with people across borders, transcending language barriers and uniting music enthusiasts from diverse backgrounds.

In 2020, Sana made a ground-breaking debut in the music industry with the release of her first album Raz. This stellar work swiftly ascended to the top of musical charts across media platforms and garnered immense popularity on TV and radio stations throughout Kurdistan. Raz became an instant hit, cementing Sana's position as a rising star in the region.

With the resounding success of her album, Sana's musical career soared to new heights. She embarked on a thrilling journey, taking her talent to various cities in the Kurdistan Region. Her live performances attracted fervent crowds, and her mesmerizing voice left audiences in awe as she toured the region.



In a defining moment for her career, she held a highly anticipated concert in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, on July 12, 2023. The response was overwhelming, with tickets selling out in record time. Such was the demand for her enchanting melodies that the concert venue could not accommodate everyone in a single show.

Undeterred, Sana rose to the occasion and treated her devoted fans to not just one but two back-to-back performances on the same evening. The dedication of her attendees was undeniable, as the concert hall brimmed with an enthusiastic and captivated audience.

Sana's ability to connect with her fans through her music and

performances has undoubtedly contributed to her unparalleled success. As she continues to ascend in her musical journey, there is no doubt that she will leave an indelible mark on the world of music, transcending boundaries and touching the hearts of many more admirers worldwide.

## Cultural bridge through music

One of Sana's most remarkable achievements has been her ability to create a cultural bridge between Kurdistan and the world. By blending traditional Kurdish tunes with contemporary styles of acoustic guitar, she brings the essence of her homeland to diverse audiences, fostering understanding and appreciation for Kurdish culture.

Meanwhile, her willingness to experiment with different genres, incorporating elements of pop, rock, and jazz into her music, has allowed Sana to attract a diverse fan base beyond the Kurdish diaspora. In doing so, she has become a symbol of intercultural exchange, breaking stereotypes and fostering harmony in an increasingly interconnected world.

## Empowering youth

Sana Barznji's success as a young Kurdish female singer has been a source of empowerment for countless aspiring musicians, especially young girls, in the region. She has defied societal norms and proved that with determination and talent, dreams can turn into reality. Her journey serves as an inspiration for others to pursue their passions fearlessly and unapologetically.

Beyond her musical endeavors, Sana is deeply committed to humanitarian causes and advocacy work. She actively partic-

ipates in charitable initiatives aimed at improving the lives of disadvantaged communities in Kurdistan, particularly children and women. Through her philanthropic efforts, she strives to create a positive impact and foster a sense of social responsibility among her followers.

Sana Barznji has emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the world of music. With her soulful voice and dedication to preserving and promoting Kurdish culture, she has become

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Sana Barznji's success as a young Kurdish female singer has been a source of empowerment for countless aspiring musicians, especially young girls, in the region

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an ambassador for her community, bridging cultures and inspiring countless individuals worldwide. As her melodious journey continues to unfold, one can only anticipate greater heights of success and greater positive change brought about by this extraordinary artist. ●





## Bringing a Mix of Culture and Nature



Huda Sarhang

*Huda Sarhang, born in 1992 in the small town of Khanaqin. She holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Politics and International Relations from the University of Kurdistan Hawler.*



**M**y name is Huda Sarhang Abdulrahman. I am originally from Erbil and am the founder of Lala Candles.

I was born in a small town of Kurdistan in Khanaqin and lived all my life in Erbil. I am the fruit of a multiethnic union of my Kurdish father and my Turkmen mother. Due to this union, I was lucky to learn Ar-

abic and Turkish in addition to my mother tongue Kurdish. I obtained BA and MA degrees in Politics and International Relations from the University of Kurdistan Hawler, which helped me develop a strong character with high ambitions and dreams for my life and community.

During school and after my graduation I

worked in various positions for several national and international organizations. Before leaving corporate life, I was working for the British Council in Erbil and gained tremendous experience in learning how to manage time, people, and projects. I consider this time as a training for my next journey of starting Lala Candles.

### The Machko candle

I am a lover of culture and history and consider myself a proud Kurd; therefore, I have always wanted to do something that reflects the love I have for Kurdistan. I used to travel a lot when I was a student and in my past corporate life, and on many occasions I wanted to bring nice souvenirs to the foreigners that I would meet abroad to tell stories of my roots and culture. However, it was a huge challenge to find high quality, locally handmade gifts that reflect the depth and richness of Kurdistan. Here is where my story of Lala Candles began.

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I am the fruit of a multiethnic union of my Kurdish father and my Turkmen mother

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In 2017, while I was working on the final draft of my MA thesis on the para-diplomacy of the KRG, I focused on the importance of culture and was inspired to launch something along these lines. As a lover of candles, I wanted to mix culture and nature. One day by chance while I was sitting with my husband in the Machko tea shop located under the citadel in Erbil having a tea and was inspired to make candles inside the tea glass with little cultural elements of Kurdistan. I named it the Machko candle.

Little did I know then that this would mark the beginning of my journey to establish the first candle-making busi-



ness startup in the Kurdistan Region. With the support of my family and husband, I was able to take serious steps to realize this dream. Taking various online courses on the science of candle making, reading countless books and other secondary research, finding the right suppliers from around the world, and experimenting with wax and different oils and colors to make a locally handmade candle that tells a story gave me incredible joy and filled my heart with excitement. The pride I had – and

still have every day – for making such products is priceless. Starting on the stove of my kitchen while working full-time, doing my MA research, and balancing my personal and marriage lives was a challenge but looking back on it today, I say to myself, “it was worth it, well done.”

### Growing the enterprise

I approached university students, local markets, and most of the diplomatic



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I have always wanted to do something that reflects the love I have for Kurdistan

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missions and consulates to talk about Lala Candles and share my story with them. This led us to be noticed by many entities, media outlets, and officials in the region. I was also interviewed by different media channels in Kurdistan, Iraq, Qatar, UK, Australia, and the United States.

In 2019 we received the first bulk order made by the deputy prime minister of the KRG, and the candles were gifted as Kurdish New Year's gifts to all the diplomatic missions and consulates in the Kurdistan Region. From here our business took a different path, as many large orders were received from big startups in Kurdistan, including a 5,000-candle order from Lezzoo company. We also became the main supplier for the Mr. Erbil candle line and fulfilled large orders for KOREK Telecom with 1,000 candles as well as for energy and oil companies and other consulates in Kurdistan.

In 2020, I opened my first independent working studio outside the walls of my cozy home. Today Lala Candles is an officially registered brand in the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Operating from a little warm studio in Er-



bil, we offer candles inspired by culture and nature to promote Kurdistan and proudly produce ideas that are worth seeing inside the citadel. Through our official website, customers can directly reach us and place their orders. We also offer two amazing services of white labeling candles for companies and big institutions, as well as a unique experience of candle-making workshops for groups in our studio in Erbil. With a strong team of three, we achieved this success slowly over five years.

### Looking forward

My dream is to grow Lala Candles and I have short- and long-term goals to do so. Locally, I want to see my high quality, locally handmade candles, which are inspired by culture and nature, on shelves inside the citadel of Erbil, available for tourists to easily purchase and take a piece of their memories of Kurdistan home with them.

Many foreigners visit Qalat, hoping to find a souvenir shop to purchase something of high quality but they are not able to find us there. Therefore, I will not rest until I make this come true. I strongly believe that Lala Candles' products deserve to be represented there and for foreigners to have easy access to buy them inside the citadel.

Regionally, and as a long-term goal, I am aiming to enter the Gulf markets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as there is a large potential for my business to flourish, and to participate in events and markets in Dubai.

Our culture and nature are beautiful and should be highlighted in soft, creative, and artistic ways. I believe art speaks louder than words and so do Lala Candles. As a young and energetic Kurdish woman, it is my responsibility to tell foreigners and guests of Kurdistan about this beauty through art. ●





## Lewy's Encounter with Kurdish Melodies



Baker Shwani

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

In the vibrant musical landscape of the 19th century, as European orchestras captivated audiences with their virtuosic performances, a remarkable meeting unfolded between the Austrian pianist Richard Lewy and a Kurdish Yezidi elder whose name is lost to history. This extraordinary encounter not only bridged cultures but also helped unveil the hidden treasures of Kurdish music to new audiences.

On January 30, 1850, the German music newspaper *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung* chronicled in its 39th issue the success of the St. Petersburg University Orchestra's concert series, which was conducted by the renowned violin maestro Ludwig Schuberth and featured Austrian, German, and Russian artists.

Audiences were especially excited for the return of Austrian pianist Richard Lewy

ly returned from Istanbul. The visit was a golden opportunity to perform at the Sultan's palace, where the Sultan presented his guest with a prize of joy and a musical gift consisting of forty Turkish melodies on paper, that probably consists of little more than *janitscharenmusik* (music of the *janissaries* [elite Ottoman troops]) – a musical style embraced by classical European composers that was often modelled on the



songs of Ottoman military bands – that fills the world with noise.”

After this disparaging comment, the newspaper's account takes a different turn: “Mr. Lewy also met an old Yezidi man, who had migrated to Istanbul from Kurdistan, on the eve of his return to Germany and in whom Levi found a true musical gem.

“Kurdish melodies are some of the oldest to survive to this day

(1827-1883), who had been invited by the Ottoman Sultan to give a series of concerts in Istanbul.

Anticipating Lewy's return, the German newspaper wrote: “Pianist Lewy recent-



From him, Lewy learned the melody of a *maqam*, which is quite different from other Eastern melodies and is well sung because of its richness. Kurdish melodies are some of the oldest to survive to this day.”

### Music and the Orientalists

This historic moment occurred during the 19th century, a period when Western Orientalists were undertaking extensive research and exploration into Kurdish language, *literature*, music, history, and ethnology. Among these scholars was English archaeologist and linguist Claudius James Rich (1787-1821), who ventured into the Kurdistan of Iraq in 1820. There, he bore witness to a multitude of Kurdish musicians and singers, captivated by their melodies, including those of the Yezidi Kurds.

Another prominent figure was archaeologist Austen Henry Layard (1817-

“Kurdish music stood out not just for its enchanting melodies but also for the profound themes interwoven into its verses

1894), who received an invitation in 1849 while excavating in Mosul to attend the grand Ezidkhan festival at Lalish, a holy religious Yezidi site located in Duhok province of the Kurdistan Region. Layard recounted his journey to the village of Ba'adre, the hometown of Sheikh Nasser and Hussein Beg, where he encountered a community marked

by their peacefulness and hospitality. He described in detailed the festival as an event that drew participants from Sinjar to the borders of the Caucasus, culminating in a mesmerizing spectacle of music, torches, and Kurdish songs, which resonated deep into the night.

Karl Georg Theodor Kotschy (1813-1866), an Austrian botanist, embarked on a mission to collect plant species near Amedi in the Kurdistan Region's Duhok Province in 1841. During this expedition, he was similarly captivated by Kurdish songs and music, remarking:

“I will never forget the influence of the Kurdish music and songs I heard in 1841 in the Gara area near Amedi, north of Duhok. I had been living among the Arabs for five years and had never heard a clean melody. One day, I found two boys in the Gara Mountains who were known as two famous singers. When we came down from the mountains, these two young men sang songs that came from the heart and

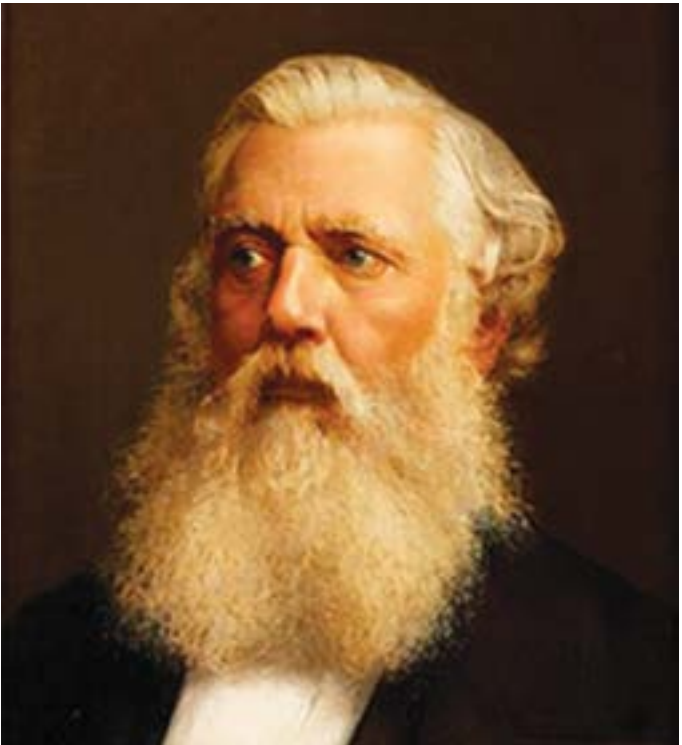




Front and inside pages of Neue Berliner Musikzeitung newspaper no. 5, dated January 30, 1850



British Assyriologist, business agent, traveler, and antiquarian scholar Claudius James Rich



British Assyriologist, traveler, cuneiformist, and art historian Sir Austen Henry Layard

soul. Many people are afraid of these Kurds, but if you know how to treat them, you will find that they are actually sincere and hospitable people.”

The observations of these Orientalists provided valuable insights into Kurdish songs and music and found their way into European calendars and encyclopedias. In 1837, the Viennese literary calendar *Jahrbücher der Literatur* made note of the Kurdish affinity for music characterized by a melancholic tone. In this retelling, some of the songs bore a striking resemblance to the tunes of Venetian sailors, a testament to their universal app



Austrian botanist and explorer Theodor Kotschy

## The power of music to bridge cultures

Kurdish music stood out not just for its enchanting melodies but also for the profound themes interwoven into its verses. European researchers marveled at the harmony between musicality and the messages they conveyed. Love songs coexisted alongside narratives of historical and social significance, speaking to the depth and richness of the long-standing Kurdish musical tradition.

The encounter between Richard Lewy and the Yezidi elder serves as a poignant example of the power of cultural exchange to transcend borders and time and the enduring power of music to inspire and bring together people from diverse backgrounds. As we celebrate the legacy of this encounter, we also honor the depth and richness of Kurdish music, a treasure trove of melodies and stories awaiting to be discovered by the world. ●

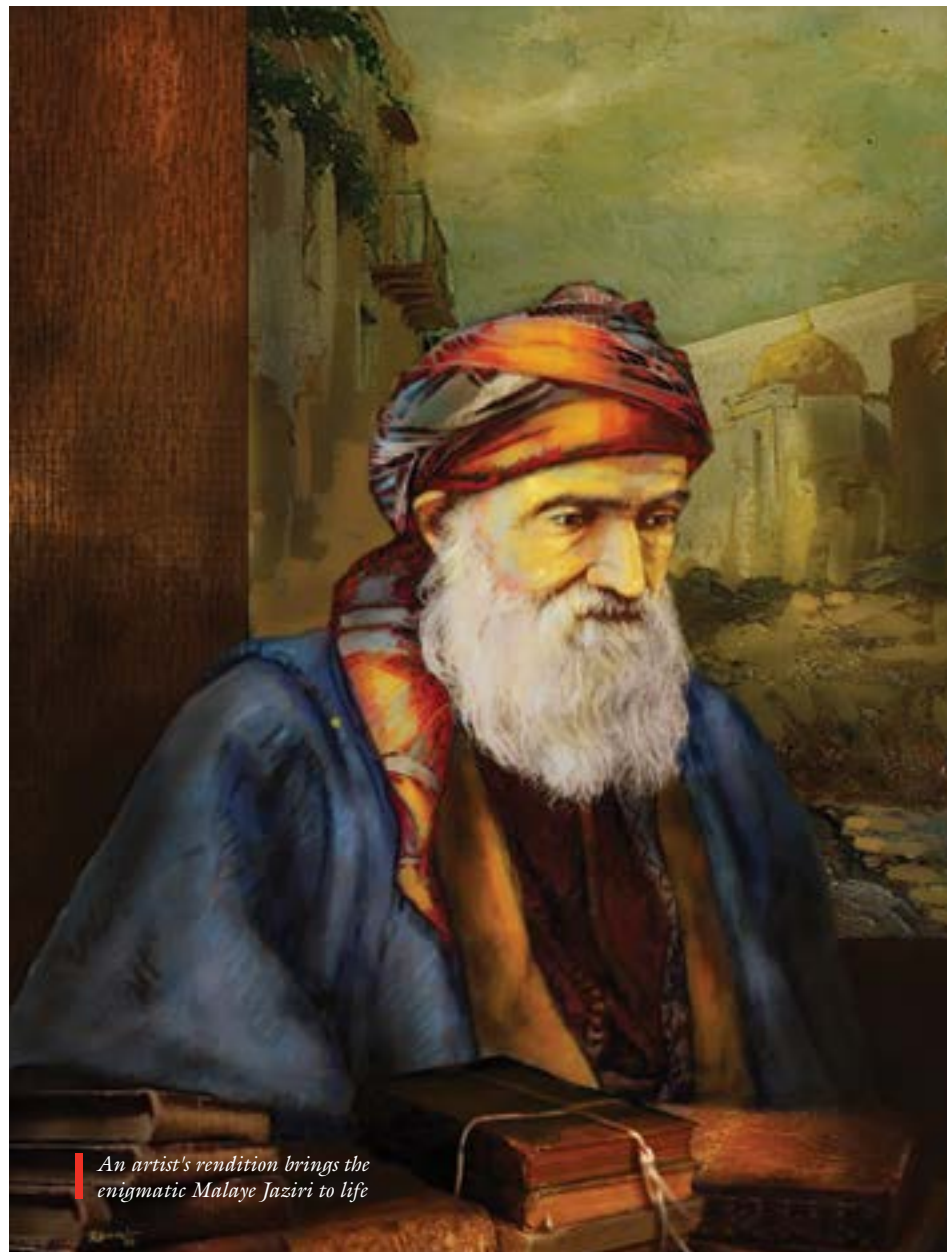


## Music in the Poetry of Malaye Jaziri



Memo Seyda

*Memo Seyda is a Syrian Kurdish songwriter, ethnomusicology PhD student, and a seasoned contributor to Kurdish music research, migration studies, documentaries, and translation*



*An artist's rendition brings the enigmatic Malaye Jaziri to life*



*A musician playing the kamancheh, captured in an oil on canvas painting from the Qajar Iran period*

The Kurdish classical poets were more than mere versifiers who penned and recited poems during evening gatherings; their poetry also bore the marks of a deep engagement with the prevailing intellectual fields of their era, including astronomy, philosophy, mysticism, and religion. This depth also extended to the poets' musical skill, which was more than an intellectual addendum and was manifested through their ability to play various musical instruments, their knowledge of musical modes (*maqams*) and vocalization, and more.

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Malaye Jaziri (1570-1640) stands out among these polymath poets

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Malaye Jaziri (1570-1640) stands out among these polymath poets. The Kurdish poet and Sufi resided in Cizre in the Botan Emirate of the Ottoman Empire during the 17th century. His most notable literary contribution was his collection of poems titled “*Dîwan*/Divan,” a compilation that encompassed genres such as *ghazal*, *qasîde*, *na’t*, and *rubai* arranged according to alphabetical order in Arabic. In his poems, Jaziri adopted three pen names: “Mela,” “Ahmed,” and “Nişanî,” with the latter carrying connotations related to Sufism.

### A synthesis of influences

Although earlier poets like Ali Hariri (1009-1080) contributed to Kurdish literature, Jaziri established the foundations of Kurdish classical poetry. His literary persona was shaped by three significant factors: his religious and mystical perspective; his exposure to the works of renowned classical poets like Hafez al-Shirazi, Saadi al-Shirazi, and Mevlana Jami; and the rich cultural backdrop of the 16th and 17th centuries.

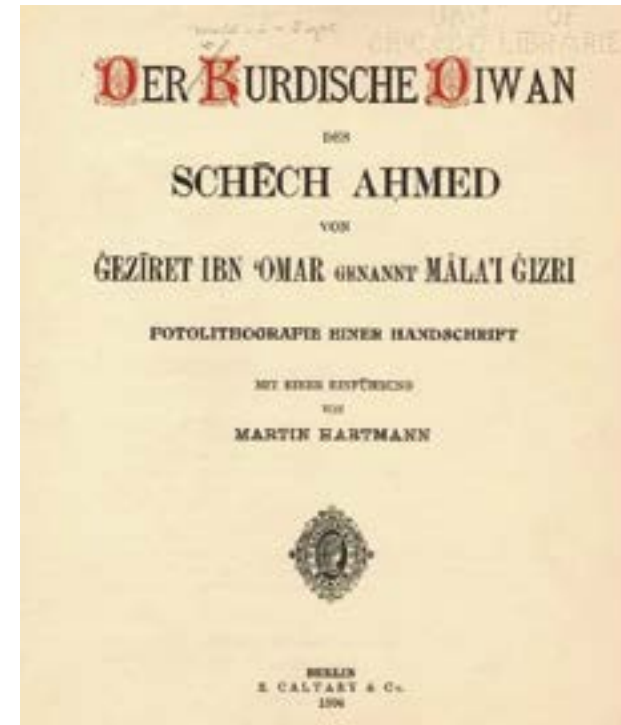




Two exquisite pages from Jaziri's poetry, a treasure of Kurdish culture



A serene resting place for the revered Kurdish poet Malaye Jaziri



The first page of Jaziri's poetry Diwan, published by Martin Hartmann in Berlin, preserving the rich literary heritage

Jaziri's literary identity is characterized by a synthesis of languages and influences. Despite the palpable influence of Persian poetry on his work, his language was not exclusively Persian, as demonstrated by his embrace of the Otto-



man context. While he draws inspiration from Persian, Jaziri blends Kurdish, Arabic, and even Turkish elements into his writing, showcasing the diversity of his cultural palette.

Aside from the captivating lyrical and melodic qualities of Jaziri's poetry, his verses occasionally delve into musical themes, interweaving references to musical events, instruments, and melodies. For instance, in the opening verse of one poem, the voice of a singer merges with the sounds of a musical instrument called *çeng* (harp), gradually escalating until it reaches a symbolic reference point, the astrological sign of Cancer. This work of poetry encapsulates the interplay

between musical elements and celestial imagery.

Jaziri's work also evokes other musical instruments such as the *ruûd* and *ûd*, illustrating their use in expressions of love. The poet's verses resound with instrument names like *ney*, *qanûn*, *rebab*, and *çing-i çing* (castanets), revealing an immersive musical atmosphere.

## Melody and rhythm

Although Jaziri's poetry doesn't explicitly employ musical terminology like *maqams* in the manner of Ahmad Khani (1650-1707), there are glimpses of a sophisticated musical culture within his verses. In one verse, Jaziri beckons Mala to perform a *ghazal* beyond conventional boundaries, accompanied by the rhythm of tambourines and the resonance of the *çeng*. This suggests a nuanced familiarity with musical aesthetics and practices.

“Aside from the captivating lyrical and melodic qualities of Jaziri's poetry, his verses occasionally delve into musical themes

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Furthermore, the concepts of *reqs* (dance) and *sema* (a spiritual dance) frequently recur in Jaziri's poems. He interprets *sema* as the mystical dance of Sufis, a means to experience divine rhythms within the heart. Notably, Sufism and its accompanying practices were the subjects of lively discourse in the Ottoman cultural milieu of the 17th century.

Jaziri's poetic legacy extends beyond mere poetic expression. His verses resonate with the echoes of intricate knowledge, music, and spirituality. By exploring Jaziri's work, we glean insight into the complex interplay between culture, language, and artistry during a pivotal era in Ottoman history.

Although Khani appears to possess a deeper understanding of terms, tones, and musical instruments compared to Jaziri, the music and rhythm present in Jaziri's poems suggest an organic musical spirit. This stands in contrast to Khani, who can be considered endowed with musical logic. The same can be said of their overall literary style; Khani embraces a clear nationalist project using literary and artistic tools, whereas Jaziri adopts an aesthetic project with less defined nationalist intentions.

Perhaps this is why many musicians are more inclined to compose and sing Jaziri's poems rather than Khani's. Jaziri's poetry exudes a musical quality full of melody and rhythm that appeals to musicians. ●



## Norah Hussein Illuminating Kurdish Poetry



Goran Shakhawan

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

Norah Hussein, a poet and activist, was born in 1991, the year of the Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein. She is of Kurdish descent, but her family was displaced to Denmark at a very young age because of political persecution against her parents. She graduated from Zahle University College (currently called

Although Norah's mother language is Kurdish, she is most comfortable writing her poetry in English, as it is considered an international language and her verses about the history, culture, and struggles of the Kurdish nation would reach many more readers.

When I asked Norah how she felt when she visits the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and her hometown, she replied without hesitation "Kurdistan gives me a sense of healing and identity that has a special place in my heart." After taking a deep breath she continues, "I have always felt very restless. Like I belong to nowhere and to nothing. That all changes when I am in Kurdistan; I actually feel a sense of belonging, like I am finally home."

### An unplanned journey

Norah's passion for writing goes back to her early days of visiting the library and walking down the aisles searching for a book, novella, poem, character in a story, or anything that she could relate to or find herself in. "I never could find anything I connected with. I continually questioned why that was and knew I wanted to change that for the next generation of young brown Middle Eastern girls." This is why she chose to put a picture of herself on the front page of her book. She continued, "I want that little girl walking around the library to find herself in me, something I never experienced growing up."

Norah's journey to becoming a poet was rather sudden. It was not something she had planned or prepared for. Her inspiration and courage to become a poet came



Campus Carlsberg, the newest college within the University College Copenhagen) and has been working with dyslexic children for over seven years. "My grandparents were illiterate, and they never knew the wonderful gift of reading books or writing stories, so I made it a goal of my own to teach as many as I could to read and write," she said.





from a life-changing trip she took to Greece back in 2018. Her magical experience on that trip was a turning point that allowed her to develop a passion for poetry.

It would only be a couple years later, in 2021, that she would publish her debut *Poetic Pulse*. She has since performed at many poetry recitals, presenting her poems, life, book, and journey to becoming a poet. “Right now, I am touring around Denmark on my latest show, ‘Transgenerational Trauma,’ where I take my audience in for a poetic performance about this subject,” she explained.

Norah writes contemporary poetry. Her poems contain no rhymes, punctuation or commas – the same manner the poems come to her mind.



## Unexpected Love

With the many scars on my soul  
I felt completely prepared  
for another huge storm to come  
I knew how to heal an open wound  
and how to stitch it with hope  
leaving the pain to dry out  
resting my mind  
in the imagination of peace  
and withhold my strength  
knowing it is my weakness too  
I stood with my shield of experience  
ready to face life  
yet the only thing  
I was not prepared for  
was you

## Seeking to heal

Norah and her family are originally from Halabja, which is located in the KRI close to the Iranian border. On March 16, 1988, the former dictator of Iraq, Saddam Hussain launched a chemical attack on Halabja, resulting in the massacre of thousands of civilians. Norah’s family miraculously survived the attacks, but the scars of war are still embedded in their hearts and minds. Her mother still has nightmares 35 years after the atrocities.

When I asked Norah how her personal experiences and feelings surrounding the chemical attacks have influenced her poetry, she replied with tears in her eyes. “The atrocities of war are an ongoing theme in my poetry.” Despite fleeing their home country and immigrating to Europe, Norah’s

parents continue to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder to this day. This is another topic that Norah has addressed in her poetry with the intent of helping people who are going through similar situations heal.

## Past Poets

Within these peaceful four walls  
I practice the pen  
while I listen to the mother of my words  
as she tells me which roads  
she has cleansed of war  
for me to carry in this torch of light  
through this paper

## Art in a transitory age

A whole generation of new poets have shot to fame through social media like Instagram. Likewise, Norah thanks social

media for her growing popularity. It has played a pivotal role in her career. From the very beginning the literature community has shown genuine interest in her poetry, she said. “People from all over the world have been encouraging me and that has definitely given me the fuel to get through many obstacles during challenging times.”

Often, when actors, singers, or poets are exposed to a new culture, it has an evident effect on their art. Similarly, Norah’s poetry is also influenced by other cultures. As she mentions, living abroad and traveling to different countries has given her a more nuanced perspective on life.

“Europe and the Middle East have two very different mind-sets. People are more reserved in Europe. The weather is much colder, but the Middle East is the exact opposite.

People enjoy talking to strangers.” For Norah, both regions have their advantages and disadvantages. “I like the Middle Eastern hospitality, but I also admire the liberty and independence that women have in the Western world,” she said.

Norah’s story is mostly depicted through her poetry. She believes that poetry has a healing power, and that it connects people. Cultural understanding, struggle, and sacrifice can all clearly be depicted through poetry. “Words always matter; through words we can shape minds, hearts, and souls.”

Since she is a survivor of war, Kurdish history has played an important role in shaping her poetry. Moreover, Kurdish culture draws much inspiration from nature, love, and tragedy, all of which in turn have influenced her. Her book, *Poetic Pulse*, encompasses grief, trauma, healing, and love, and depicts the experience of being a child of refugee parents and finding strength and perseverance in that.

“I discover my purpose through writing. I hope the readers will do the same, find their purpose in all they have been through and turn it in to greatness,” she reflected.

## Past Lives

This time everything has changed  
we breathe in a different era  
a period associated with everything but love  
yet it did not keep me  
from searching for you  
I recognized the previous stories  
I read from your eyes  
a sudden feeling of nostalgia  
fell over me  
a memoir of remembrance  
of us in previous eras  
I recalled the memories  
of all my past lives with you

though the times have changed  
throughout all the centuries  
my love for you  
has always remained the same

According to Norah, poems can help, guide, nurture, support, motivate, encourage, and assist her readers. “My aim is to bring joy to those who are heartbroken, bring peace to those in chaos and hope to the hopeless.”

When asked which piece of her writing meant the most to her, she replied, “‘Hearing love,’ which was translated into Kurdish and sung by Kurdish singer Chya Mohamed, has a beautiful place in my heart.”

## Hearing love

I asked the sun  
to shower the city with light  
for you to find me  
I asked the moon  
to cover my bed with stars  
for you to lay next to me  
I asked the rhythm of my heart  
to play its melody  
for you to hear my love

On inspiration

Women, particularly artists in Middle Eastern societies, must overcome many obstacles to prove themselves. Norah’s case is not any different, but she is rebellious and has faced societal norms head-on. “I am a manifest of freedom and will make sure that the next generation of girls won’t have to go through what I went through to become who I am.”

## Native Tongue

Though my mother tongue  
has been abandoned for decades  
my native tongue continues to rise  
in between my words  
as I slowly begin to speak loud enough  
for the next generations to hear the echoes  
of a language still not forgotten

Most writers take inspiration from other authors and instill it into their work. As for Norah, Jalal al-Din Rumi has played a significant role in shaping her poetry. She is inspired by his great precision and beautiful quotes. “He is truly my soul-mate poet.”

She is also moved by Enheduanna, who has been celebrated as the earliest known author in world history. “I feel a true connection to her, and I am truly moved by her passion for writing,” she said.

Finally, when asked what advice she would give to aspiring poets who come from marginalized or oppressed backgrounds, she recommended three points that played a role in her success. First, find likeminded people, people that have the same dreams and goals as you. Second, have courage to share your poems with others. Lastly, don’t take no for an answer. ●



# Pishdar

## Kurdistan's Mightiest Dog Breed



**Qassim Khidhir**

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



Photo: Safin Hamid

Witness a man training a Pishdar dog, a fascinating display of canine skills

Iraqi Kurds hold a deep sense of pride in the Pishdar dog or Kurdish Mastiff, a remarkable breed that traces its roots to the rugged terrain of the Pishdar district near the Iranian border. Bearing a resemblance to the English Mastiff and the Turkish Kangal, the Pishdar is celebrated for its sheer size, extraordinary strength, and unmatched courage. Males of this breed can tower up to 90 centimeters in height and tip the scales at a staggering 80 kilograms, boasting a life expectancy of 10 to 13 years.

Pishdars are valuable animals in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), particularly in mountainous areas, with prices for some exceeding \$10,000. They are frequently used as livestock guardians and in combat sports. Ahmed Nabi, a Kurdish shepherd, shared his story while tending to his flock of sheep within the rocky confines of the Pishdar district, two formidable Pishdars at his side. He described the immense danger

posed by the local wildlife, including wolves, bears, and foxes, and how owning a Pishdar is a matter of life and death in this unforgiving landscape. "The Pishdar is very strong and fearless; it is not afraid of anything, not even a pack of wolves," he proudly stated.

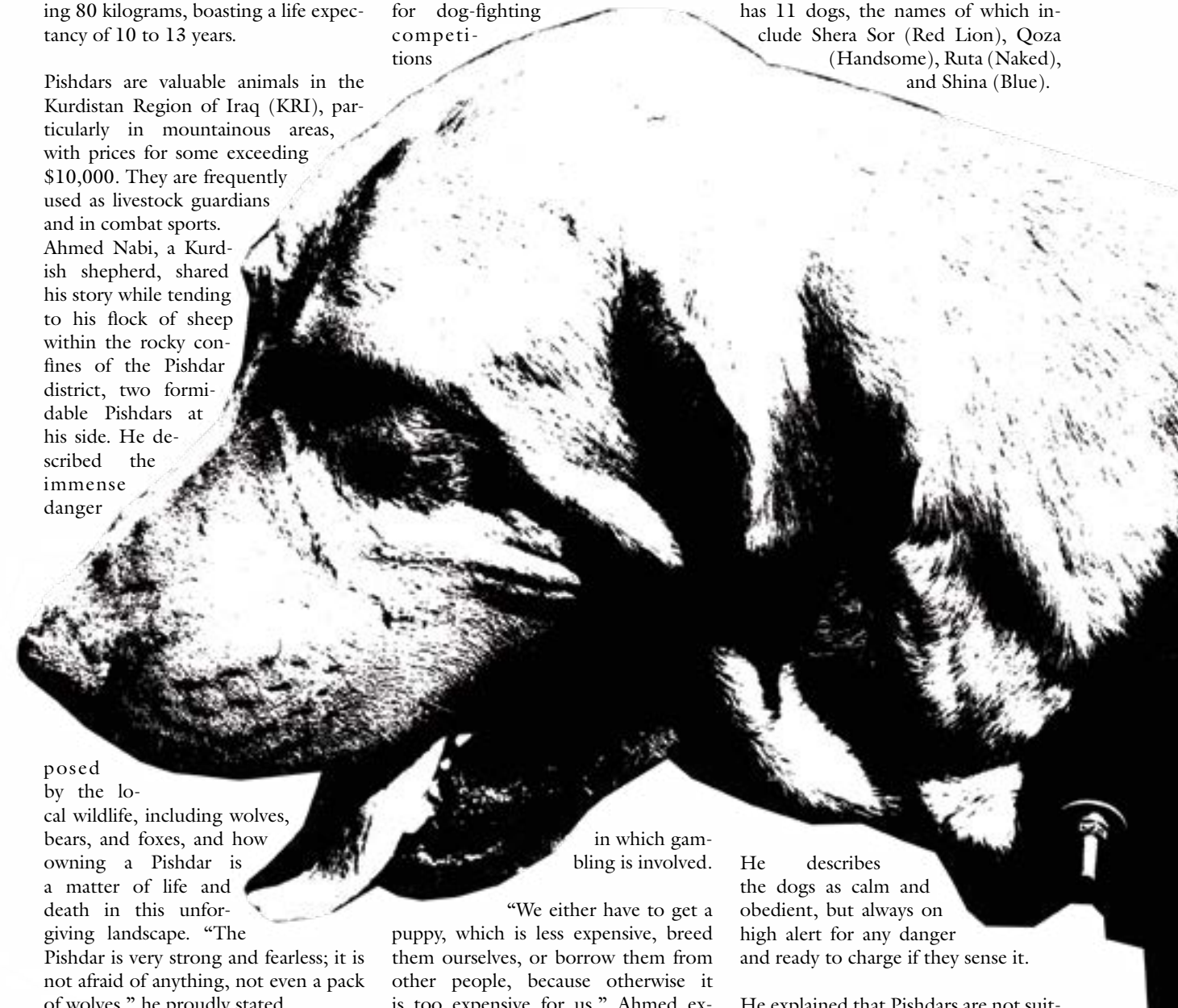
He emphasized that Pishdars work tirelessly, sleeping during the day and staying awake at night, solely dedicating themselves to safeguarding the sheep and their shepherd. Ahmed recount-

ed a recent encounter where his two Pishdars valiantly repelled three raiding wolves that ventured too close. "Basically, if you don't have a Pishdar, you can't be a shepherd here," he explains.

However, having a Pishdar dog is not easy for a shepherd like Ahmed because they are so expensive and most shepherds cannot afford them. Moreover, their numbers are decreasing, as Iranians travel to Pishdar to buy them for dog-fighting competitions

the breed back to the Assyrian Empire. There are, after all, Assyrian inscriptions and clay tablets that depict a type of dog that resembles the Pishdar and describe it as the best friend of humans. Some of the inscriptions depict the dog fighting a lion.

Kardost Hasan, 27, is from Ranya, which is near Pishdar district. He has had a strong attachment to Pishdar dogs since he was a child. He currently has 11 dogs, the names of which include Shera Sor (Red Lion), Qoza (Handsome), Ruta (Naked), and Shina (Blue).



in which gambling is involved.

"We either have to get a puppy, which is less expensive, breed them ourselves, or borrow them from other people, because otherwise it is too expensive for us," Ahmed explained.

### Deep roots

Some historians refer to the Pishdar dog as the Assyrian Shepherd, tracing

He describes the dogs as calm and obedient, but always on high alert for any danger and ready to charge if they sense it.

He explained that Pishdars are not suitable as pets in a home or an apartment because they need to run at least 10 kilometers every day. For this reason, he keeps all his dogs at his farm outside of Ranya and takes them every day to run and swim at Ranya Lake, which is only





“  
Pishdars are valuable  
animals in the  
Kurdistan Region,  
particularly in  
mountainous areas  
”

Photo: Salin Hamid

*A man imparts valuable instructions to a Pishdar dog,  
demonstrating the bond between man and beast*

a few hundred meters from his farm.

According to Kardost, the names of Pishdar breeds that are popular today include Qassab, Saphira, and Ismail Nouradini, which is the name of a village in Pishdar.

Kardost also engages his dogs in dog fighting once or twice a year, and Shera Sor (Red Lion) has never been defeated.

When questioned about the ethics and legality of dog fighting, Kardost responded, “Dog fighting has been a part of Pishdar culture for centuries; the people of Pishdar can’t accept if they hear there is a dog not only in the KRI but also in neighboring countries that is braver than the Pishdar; once they hear that, they set a fighting date.”

### High stakes

Despite being prohibited in the KRI, dog fighting in Pishdar occurs monthly during the fall and winter months. Around 2,000 people gather to witness these contests, which are more popular in Pishdar than football. For the people here, dog fighting is not about gambling or money; it is about pride and determining whose dog is the better fighter.

According to Kardost, Iranians have purchased increasing numbers of Pishdars in recent years, often to compete in dog fighting that includes gambling because large sums of money are involved. Others are purchased for Iranian villages, whose large flocks of sheep require protection from wolves.

He expressed concern over the rise in Iranian purchases, warning that if the trend continues there will soon be very few Pishdar dogs left in the district. He urges authorities to intervene and prohibit their sale to Iran.

There is a strong belief among the people of Pishdar that if someone sells a Pishdar dog, something terrible will happen to that person. Nevertheless, the number of people selling them continues to increase.

Kardost claimed that he has never sold any of his Pishdars, preferring to gift them to friends and family. During the summer, he also allows shepherds to borrow them, not least because it benefits the dogs’ health as they thrive in the cool mountain climate.

He also highlighted the problem of thieves. Since Pishdars fetch such high prices, one cannot leave their dog unattended because it will be stolen. One of his puppies was stolen and his friend also lost one, which he later discovered was in Iran. Thankfully, with the assistance of police, the thief was detained, and the dog was returned to its owner. ●





## POETRY

### Abubakr Karwani



*As the golden leaves of autumn gently descend,  
it doesn't herald the demise of the trees.  
When winter's snow blankets the mountain peaks,  
it doesn't imply the mountains are ageing.  
When Kurds are confronted with death,  
they see it as the ultimate reprieve from their foes.  
And yet they persist, alive and thriving.*

که پایزان  
قژی زهردی هه‌لده‌وه‌ری  
واتای مردنی دره‌خت نییه  
که به زستان  
به‌فر لوتکه‌ی داده‌پۆشی  
مانای پیری  
چیای به‌رزو سه‌خت نییه  
کاتێک کوردیش  
ناسۆی مهرگی  
نیشان ده‌درج  
پرسه‌ی هه‌موو  
چه‌للاده‌کانی ده‌بینی  
خۆی نامری

Translated by Nahro Zagros

Erbil's Hariri Stadium teeming with people during  
a monumental rally in support of the Kurdistan  
Independence Referendum in September 2017



# Buzzard



Sabr Dri

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is home to four species of buzzards, which are well suited to the region's mountainous terrain. One of them, the long-legged buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*), is a raptor that resides in parts of Eurasia, North Africa, Southeastern Europe, East Africa, and the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. Despite its size and power, the long-legged buzzard is generally considered a sluggish raptor. However, it boasts a wide distribution and a stable population, earning it the designation of "Least Concern" from the International Union for Conservation of Nature. The long-legged buzzard ranks among the largest members of the *Buteo* genus, with a length ranging from 50 to 66 centimeters and a wingspan of 112 to 163 cm. Females average 1.3 kilograms and tend to be larger than males, who typically weigh around 1.1 kg.







Photo: Mohammed Majid

■ *Yezidi children find solace at an IDP camp in the Kurdistan Region, their resilience shining through*





## PEYKERÎ WELAT

ARTISTIC MASTERPIECE LOCATED AT THE HEART OF THE EMPIRE WORLD PROJECT, SPECIFICALLY ON WELAT STREET, EACH PIECE OF IT IS RICH IN MEANING

## THE FALCON

THE GLORY OF THE PESHMARGA WARRIORS WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES TO THE FREEDOM OF THE KURDISH PEOPLE

## THE MARTON

A MAJESTICALLY POISED KURDISH WOMAN APPEARS ON TOP OF THE STATUE, WHO SYMBOLIZES THE MOTHERLAND AND SHOWS STRENGTH AND TRIUMPH IN RISING ABOVE THE STRUGGLES OF ITS PEOPLE

## THE SPIRAL

THE NEW GENERATION THAT WILL PRESERVE THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL INHERITANCE OF THE KURDISH PEOPLE

## THE CITADEL

THE BASE REPRESENTS THE HISTORICAL "ERBIL CITADEL", IT IS A LEGACY THAT SHOWS THE BRILLIANCE OF THE KURDS



Peyster Welat  
Rinkay  
Peshmarga Wajid Agha Statue  
19-4-2019

