

Kurdistan Chronicle

#MEPS23

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**KURDISTAN
PRIORITIZES
CLIMATE ACTION
AND URGES
GLOBAL UNITY**



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Photo: Peshraw Mahdi

Kurdistan Will Play Its Role in Confronting Climate Change



Masrour Barzani

The Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

This year's Middle East Peace and Security (MEPS) Forum is taking place at a pivotal moment, both for the world as a whole and for the Middle East in particular. The unfolding challenges in the region have far-reaching implications that extend well beyond its borders.

While we must continue to engage with the brittle nature of regional geopolitics, we must also turn our attention to issues that transcend them and which pose a threat to our very existence.

Foremost among these challenges is climate change, the uncontrolled warming of our planet that could, in our lifetimes, change how and where we live and force populations from their lands in greater numbers than in times of war.

The data on our warming planet is stark; particularly so for our neighborhood where predicted increases in temperature in some of the hottest parts of the globe will likely make parts of our region uninhabitable, causing mass migration to other parts of the world. The Paris Agreement on climate change last decade determined that an expected 1.5-degree Celsius increase in global temperatures equates roughly to a 3.5-degree Celsius increase in the Middle East. Rising temperatures mean changing climate patterns, which in turn threaten water security, the snowpack,

which is vital to our needs, and the viability of crops that sustain our peoples.

The so-called fertile crescent, rich in alluvial soils and nutrients, which has been the food basket of our region for millennia, is under threat. If our crops fail, due to increasing heat, decreasing rain, diminishing soil quality - or a combination of any of these factors - our ability to provide for our people is reduced.

We, as a people and an integral part of our region must play a part. Global gatherings on climate change have been prescient in identifying the threat to humanity, but perhaps not as effective in facilitating solutions. There are two levels to the way forward. The first is well identified, and rests on major industrialized nations reducing carbon emissions to prescribed targets. But immediate action must be taken on the micro level, in regions such as ours, where we have been scrambling to understand the scale of the challenge. That changes now.

In addition to reducing our dependence on old energy, my government plans to introduce other steps that could slow a descent into a climate abyss. We plan to capture more flared gas and reduce our dependence on plastic wrappings, which block our rivers and other ecosystems. We encourage the capture and use of solar energy and other green energy, which we aim to introduce to our grid.

And I propose another step - reforestation. The fragile landscapes of Kurdistan once looked very different. Over the centuries, our forests have been harvested by our ancestors for subsistence needs. Wars have also been used as a pretext to cut down trees and disrupt entire ecosystems. There is no reason that they cannot be restored to the lush natural beauty of yes-

teryear. In fact, there is every reason they should be. Forests create microclimates, which can significantly lower temperatures, creating ecosystems inside them, and changing climates nearby. Many of you will have walked through Sami Abdulrahman Park in Erbil, where even during the height of summer, the temperature there is up to five degrees cooler than outside the park. That effect on multiple hilltops and valleys across Kurdistan could be transformative. I encourage local organizations to take steps to address this campaign and will have more to say on this as a Government in coming months.

While the Kurdistan Regional Government is committed to shouldering its responsibilities and contributing to ongoing international efforts, it must be acknowledged that no individual initiative can make a tangible impact on climate change. Failure to act is not an option.

Studies suggest that by 2050, more than 1.2 billion people will have left their homelands where the impacts of climate change and natural disasters will have made life nearly impossible. Since the worst-affected parts of the world are said to be in Africa and the Middle East, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is expected to be a transition corridor if not a destination.

Such mass migration could also have devastating economic repercussions on host communities. The mooted numbers of migrants could be far larger than any previous exoduses the world has witnessed.

The government and people of the Kurdistan Region have previously demonstrated their capability to handle such challenges. In 2014, when faced with the emergence of ISIS, 2 million refugees and internally displaced people sought





refuge among us. We have accommodated large communities and addressed their needs with the support of the international community.

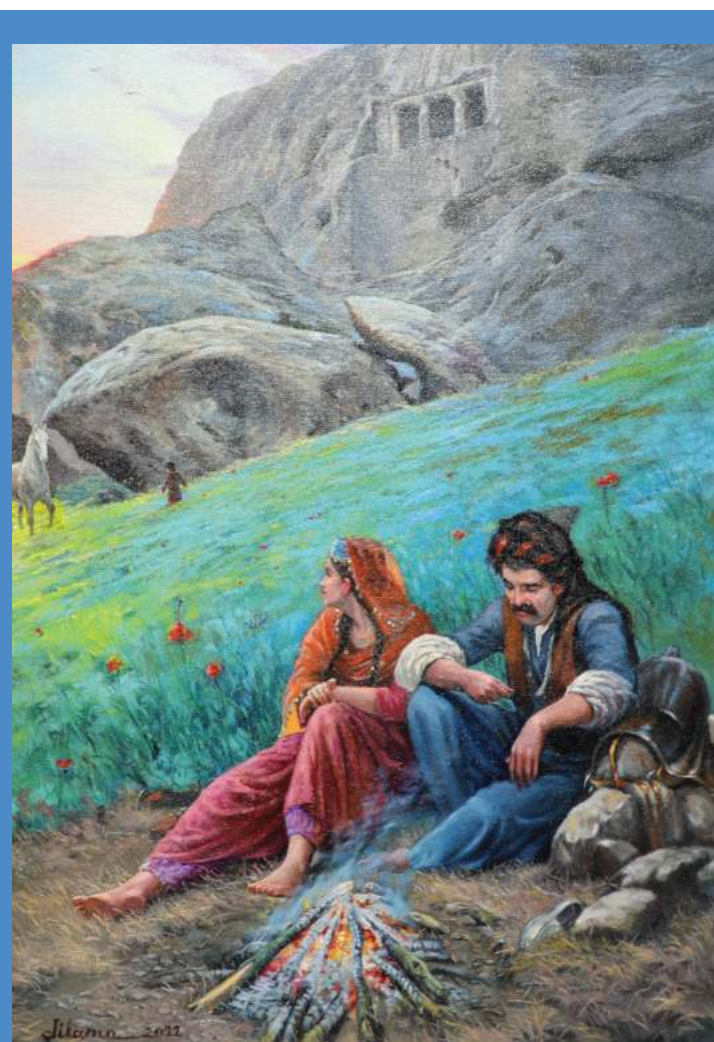
While this offers a template for how to handle migration crises, the scale of expected future problems will dwarf current capacities. This gap must be bridged, first by an understanding of what lies ahead and secondly by a global willingness to collaborate on solutions before the problems become insurmountable.

We have taken steps to consolidate food security. The KRG has placed agriculture at the forefront of our priorities, and we aim to become a source of fruit and vegetables for neighbors who face desertification and food security challenges.

We also recognize the imperative of water security. To this end, we are building multiple dams and reservoirs. These public works are designed to safeguard water resources for the Kurdistan Region and provide relief to downstream areas in Iraq where relentless drought has already forced numerous families to seek new homes. On clean energy, my government provides special incentives for environmentally friendly projects aimed at mitigating the impacts on our air, water, and soil.

I would like to reemphasize this: addressing climate change requires collective action. Therefore, it is imperative that we establish an international coalition - to harness our combined capabilities and confront this challenge as a collaboration. Past experience of collective efforts, such as the war against ISIS, have been effective. History will show that the defeat of ISIS was a battle. We are now fighting a war for our peoples' very survival. ☀

	
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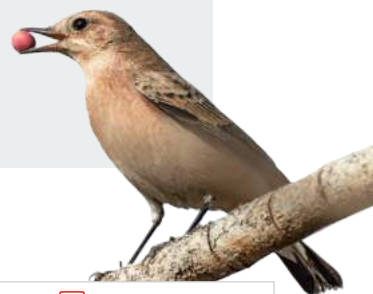
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MEPS

Middle East
Peace and Security
Forum

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American University of Kurdistan (AUK)





Advancing Middle East Peace and Security The 4th Annual MEPS Forum

HUNER ISSA *Secretary of the Board of Trustees, AUK*



The Middle East Peace and Security (MEPS) Forum is set to mark its fourth annual gathering at the esteemed American University of

Kurdistan (AUK). This forum serves as a dedicated platform for fostering constructive discourse on the key issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It brings together influential stakeholders from Erbil, Baghdad, the broader region, and the international community, creating a dynamic environment for addressing critical challenges and shaping the future of the region. Building on the resounding success of last year's event, which saw the participation of over 400 delegates and representatives from more than 80 countries, this year's forum is poised to delve into several pivotal areas of focus.

Regional peace and security

Central to the mission of the MEPS Forum is the promotion of discussions surrounding regional peace and security. In a region marked by a history of conflict and a complex geopolitical landscape, the importance of establishing stable and secure conditions cannot be overstated. The presence of esteemed scholars and influential leaders allows for active participation in shaping regional security strategies and advancing cooperation with neighboring countries. This cooperation is indispensable for addressing shared security threats and ensuring the stability of the region.



This plaque was unveiled by
President Masoud Barzani
On 14 March 2016
To mark the opening of the
General Mulla Mustafa Barzani Building
In memory of the national father of Kurdistan

Photo: Safin Hamid

Climate change

Another pressing issue that the MEPS Forum addresses is climate change. Climate change is not merely a global concern; it has wide-ranging implications for the (MENA) region, including potential environmental and security challenges. Participation in the forum signifies a commitment to addressing climate change and an acknowledgment of the intrinsic connection between environmental concerns and regional stability.

Good governance and federalism

The importance of good governance and effective federalism cannot be understated in the context of Iraq's political stability and economic development. The MEPS Forum provides

a valuable platform for exchanging insights, learning from international best practices, and sharing Iraq's experiences in implementing federalism and improving governance. These discussions contribute to the development of sound governance structures and promote political stability in the region.

Economy

Economic development is paramount to the prosperity and security of (MENA) region. The MEPS Forum offers a unique opportunity to explore investment prospects, encourage economic partnerships, and showcase Iraq's vast economic potential. The participation of influential leaders and scholars at the forum can help attract international investment, demonstrating Iraq's commitment to economic growth and contributing to the overall peace and stability of the region.

International and local dignitaries

The MEPS Forum serves as a magnet for a distinguished assembly of international and local dignitaries. The presence of prominent figures, including leaders Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and leaders from European and regional countries such as United Kingdom, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates fosters diplomatic discussions, strengthens relations with key international partners, and creates an invaluable opportunity for dialogue with regional leaders. These interactions are essential in shaping the future of the region and encouraging international cooperation.

Promotion of the KRI's interests

Additionally, the MEPS Forum serves as a platform to articulate the KRI's interests and concerns on these critical issues directly to a global audience. It provides a voice to advocate for the KRI's position on regional peace, climate change, governance, and economic development, thus contributing to its pivotal role in shaping regional policies.

Conclusion

The 4th annual MEPS Forum at AUK promises to be a momentous event in the ongoing efforts to advance peace, security, and prosperity in (MENA) region. By convening influential stakeholders, promoting dialogue on crucial issues, and advocating for regional cooperation, the forum is a beacon of hope in a region where concerns about stability and security remain paramount. With its diverse range of topics, distinguished attendees, and commitment to positive change, the MEPS Forum is a testament to the potential for peace and progress in this dynamic and crucial part of the world. ●



MEPS

A Catalyst for Peace and Stability

TYLER FISHER *Professor of anthropology and researcher at the University of Central Florida*



In the heart of Duhok, nestled amid the vibrant landscape of the Kurdistan

Region of Iraq (KRI), the American

University of Kurdistan (AUK) stands as a beacon of intellectual rigor and a platform for addressing the pressing issues of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

AUK's commitment to fostering peace and stability in the Middle East goes beyond its educational mandate. The university has emerged as a vital venue for official and non-official initiatives, rigorous intellectual debates, and comprehensive policy analyses, all aimed at addressing the complex web of political, economic, and socio-economic challenges in Iraq and the broader Middle East.

Since its inception in 2019, the Middle East Peace and Stability (MEPS) Forum hosted by AUK has become a pivotal annual event, creating a platform for leaders, policymakers, academics, and experts from around the globe to engage in discussions on peace and security issues in the Middle East.

Annual summit for candid discussion

The MEPS Forum serves as an annual summit dedicated to candid and in-depth discussion on the most press-

ing issues facing the MENA region, acting as a bridge that connects senior decision-makers in Erbil, Baghdad, the broader Middle East, Europe, the United States, and China. The importance of these discussions lies in their capacity to provide fresh perspectives, promote cross-cultural understanding, and cultivate solutions to the region's most vexing problems.

Inclusive approach to conflict resolution

The forum operates with an inclusive approach, encouraging open dialogue and academic research that have the potential to yield effective conflict resolution strategies. By bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and fields of expertise, it facilitates a synergy of ideas and initiatives that contributes to the goal of lasting peace and security in the Middle East.

Strong partnerships for a global impact

To bolster its mission, the MEPS Forum has established strategic partnerships with institutions of global repute, including the United States Institute of Peace, Oxford University, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Crisis Response Council, and the Middle East Institute. These partnerships amplify the forum's influence, allowing it to harness the collective wisdom of experts and organizations with a vested interest in peace and stability in the Middle East.

A catalyst for regional stability

MEPS has emerged as a critical venue for addressing regional security challenges. With its location in the KRI, the forum provides a unique platform for leaders and experts to discuss issues of paramount importance in the Middle East. By facilitating dialogue between key stakeholders, it also plays a crucial role in charting a course towards regional stability.

Global perspectives

What sets MEPS apart is its ability to

bring together a global community of leaders and experts. Beyond local and regional discussions, MEPS provides a space for global leaders to offer their perspectives on complex international issues. This inclusive approach promotes a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of peace and security.

Track record of achievements

Over the years, MEPS Forum has demonstrated its effectiveness in addressing critical security and peace challenges. By fostering dialogue that leads

to actionable solutions, the forum has played a role in shaping policies and initiatives aimed at maintaining peace in the Middle East.

Sustaining stability through dialogue

In a region that has been marred by conflict and security concerns, MEPS stands as a beacon of hope. Its ongoing commitment to dialogue and problem-solving demonstrates that peace and security can be achieved through continued cooperation and understanding. ●



A panel at MEPS 2021 with the participation of International panelists. |

Photo: AUK



Constructive Dialogue and Collaborative Cooperation

BIZA BARZO *Public Relations and Policy Consultant*



The Middle East has long been

marred by conflict and unrest, with far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond the region itself. Achieving sustainable peace in this complex and diverse part of the world remains a global imperative.

One essential approach to resolving these conflicts and fostering peace is through establishing constructive dialogue and collaborative cooperations. Today, global challenges have yet again evolved and intensified, further underscoring the importance of peace building in the Middle East. The threats that emanate from fragile states continue to be the primary drivers of violent conflict in the region. These states face complex challenges, such as governance deficits, social inequalities and economic disparities, which fuel instability and turmoil. Meanwhile, the rise of global and regional competition is extending and exacerbating violent conflicts in these fragile states. The Middle East, being a nexus of geopolitical rivalries, is especially susceptible to the spillover effects of such competition, which can inflame existing tensions.

In this context, global threats that require greater international cooperation are increasing and deepening just as the international systems that enable this cooperation are under heightened strain. The Middle East, with its strategic significance and history of conflicts, is at the forefront of these global challenges. As tensions persist and evolve, the need for collaborative efforts

to address the root causes of conflict, promote reconciliation, and build sustainable peace becomes ever more critical.

The Middle East has also long been a focal point of global attention due to its geopolitical significance, rich cultural heritage, and vast energy resources. However, the region's history is also marked by persistent conflicts and geopolitical rivalries. The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East have demonstrated the "butterfly effect," where disturbances in one part of the region can have cascading consequences far beyond its borders. These conflicts affect global energy markets, migration patterns, and even international security. As a result, timely and comprehensive discussions on the impact of Middle Eastern conflicts are of critical importance. The past decade has witnessed the region grappling with numerous conflicts, including the Syrian civil war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Yemeni crisis. These conflicts have far-reaching implications, affecting not only the immediate parties involved but also regional stability and international security.

The Middle East Peace and Security (MEPS) Forum serves as a vital platform for addressing these issues. It brings together diverse stakeholders, including civil society representatives, local and federal government officials, academics, researchers, and the international community. This collaborative approach enables the sharing of insights and perspectives, which is essential for developing effective strategies to tackle the challenges facing the Middle East.

This year's MEPS Forum focuses on sev-

eral critical topics, among which are addressing ongoing conflicts and unrest in the Middle East and promoting good governance. Although the notion of good governance is a universal aspiration, achieving it is a complex process that requires political, economic, and social reforms. Iraq, in particular, has faced challenges in establishing a sustainable system of governance. The MEPS Forum provides an opportunity to evaluate the progress and prospects of Iraq's governance, shedding light on areas that require improvement. As a stable Iraq is vital for regional peace,

addressing governance issues in the country is imperative. These topics are closely intertwined with and bear significance on the region's future stability.

One distinctive aspect of the MEPS Forum is its location in Duhok within the picturesque Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The breathtaking mountain views and the scenic beauty of the KRI provide an inspiring setting for productive dialogues and negotiations and encourages participants to collaborate effectively, fostering a conducive atmosphere for dialogue and cooperation.

In a world marked by uncertainty and conflicts, the MEPS Forum serves as a beacon of hope, uniting diverse stakeholders to address pressing issues in the Middle East, Iraq, and the KRI. By addressing the ripple effects of conflicts and emphasizing good governance, the MEPS Forum can shape the future of this critical region. Participants not only engage in discussions but also experience the region's beauty, reinforcing the idea that peace is attainable through dialogue and cooperation. ●



A panel at MEPS 2021 with the participation of Kurdish and Iraqi politicians |

Photo: AUK



Kurdistan Ready to Power Up Climate Diplomacy Through Collaboration with Counterparts

BAYAN SAMI ABDUL RAHMAN *Senior Advisor to PM Barzani for Foreign Affairs and Climate Change*



Confronting climate change poses a formidable challenge, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where the impact of increasing temperatures, persistent droughts, frequent floods, and reduced river flows, partly influenced by neighboring actions, can be daunting. However, a burgeoning global movement is emerging, emphasizing the importance of local climate initiatives and acknowledging the crucial contributions of autonomous nations, federal regions, and megacities in achieving the Paris Agreement's objectives. It is also recognized that individuals, communities, non-governmental organizations, and businesses can be empowered to take action at the grassroots level.

The KRI is well-positioned to play a role in addressing climate change, not only for its own people but also for fellow Iraqis, and to connect with other regions and megacities in the Middle East and around the world to become part of the answer to a global problem.

Critical challenges

Iraq is widely recognized as one of the most water-stressed countries in the world. Thousands of people in southern Iraq have already been forced to leave their homes due to droughts that have derailed their livelihoods. Agricultural decline and crop failures are becoming more frequent. About 40% of Iraq is affected by desertification, leading to more frequent and intense dust storms. Iraq is the fifth-most vulnerable country to climate change and the 39th-most water-stressed, according to the UN.

While the situation in the KRI is less dire, the region also faces grave challenges. For example, underground water levels in Erbil have decreased by 500 meters in the past two decades, from 200 meters in 2003 to an alarming 700 meters last year.

KRG climate action

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been proactive in mitigating and adapting to climate change. Under the leadership of KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, the KRG has already built ponds, dams, and reservoirs, and has plans for more to advance the agricultural sector and supply sources of clean energy. Prime Minister Barzani has called on the Iraqi federal government to support these projects, which also benefit parts of Iraq beyond the KRI.

The KRG is committed to minimizing gas flaring from its oil fields. The Garmian power plant, a 165-megawatt station, already utilizes flared-gas recovery from the Hasira oil wells to produce electricity.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Barzani laid the foundation stone for a 25-MW solar power plant and, last month, he inaugurated an asphalt recycling factory in Erbil, the first of its kind in the KRI and Iraq.

The KRG's Ninth Cabinet has its sights on many more projects, including forestation as a means to protect ecosystems and promote biodiversity while also providing livelihoods to local residents.

Nimble solutions

Actions such as these by a growing network of cities and regions collaborating on climate change have made the world take notice. A summit will be held within the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai in December to bring subnational leaders into the process.

The COP28 Local Climate Action Summit will gather leaders of regions, governors, and mayors, who are increasingly essential in helping national governments reach emissions targets and net-zero ambitions while building resilient economies and societies.

Federal regions such as the Kurdistan Region, devolved na-

tions such as Scotland, or states such as California, are often closer to the challenges that climate change presents and can be nimbler at finding solutions than national governments.

Network of alliances

The groundwork toward this summit began many years ago with an expanding network of alliances of regions and megacities that decided they could better serve their citizens by proactively seeking solutions themselves, rather than waiting for action from their national governments.

The Under2 Coalition was founded in

lonia, Scotland, and Quebec.

The Under2 Coalition says that it brings together 260 governments representing 1.75 billion people and 50% of the global economy.

Meanwhile, Climate Mayors is a bipartisan network that covers nearly 60 million U.S. citizens. In addition to providing local climate leadership, the organization says that it builds political will for U.S. and global climate action. Hundreds of its members have committed their cities to the Paris Agreement. Another example is the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, a network of about 100 mayors from the world's leading cities that are united in action-

regions, states, and cities are collaborating to scale up their resources, work towards common climate financing initiatives, power up their punch in climate diplomacy, and share best practices.

National governments need their cities, states, and regional governments to act, if they are to reach their climate targets. The UN Development Program estimates that up to 80% of the adaptation and mitigation actions necessary to tackle climate change will be implemented at the subnational or local level of governance.

A combination of visionary leadership, ambition, and practical solutions makes

A view of Sami Abdul Rahman Park in Erbil, Kurdistan Region |

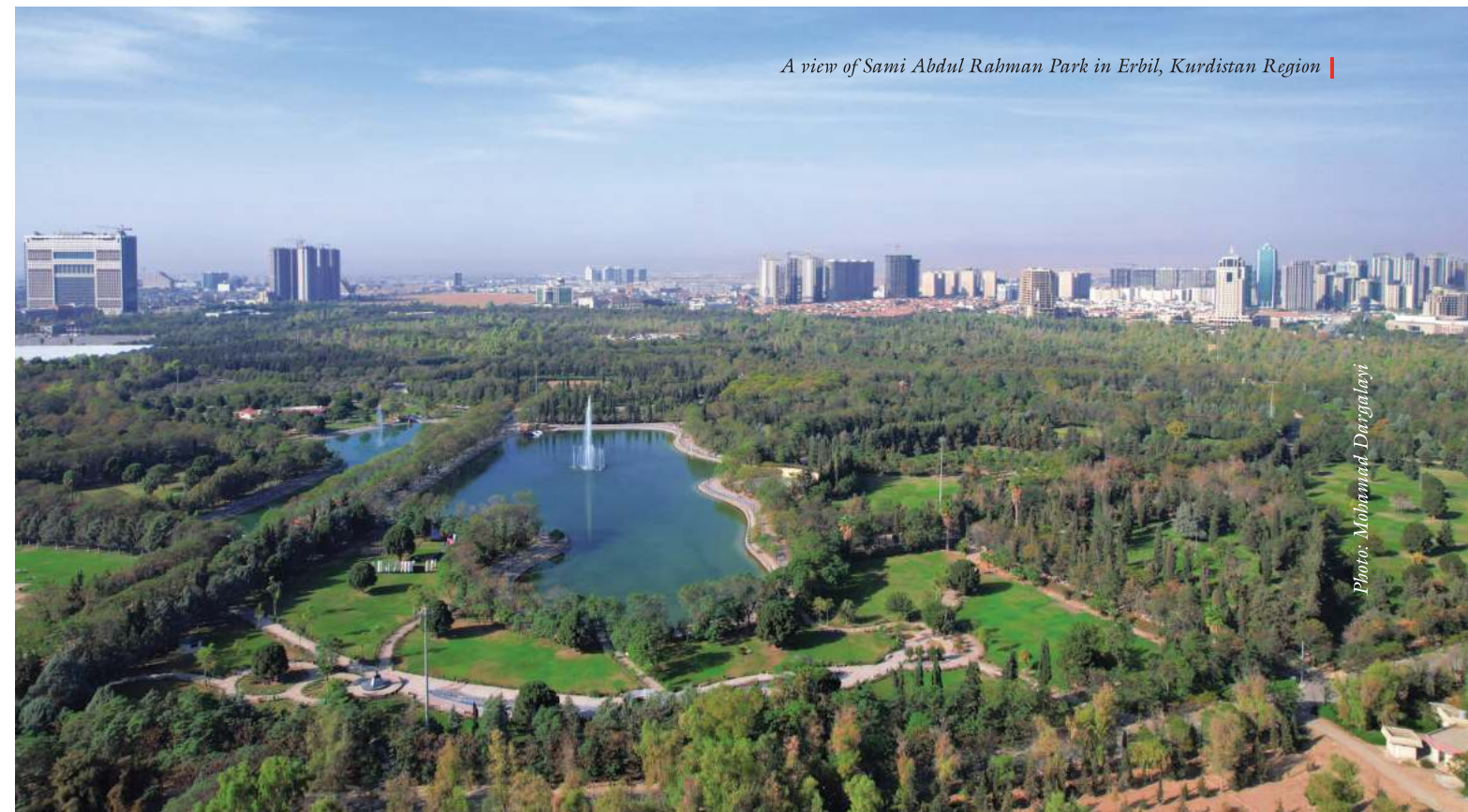


Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

2015 by the U.S. state of California and the German state of Baden-Württemberg, along with 10 other signatories. The coalition sees itself as a "community of state and regional climate leaders." Over the past eight years, more than 100 states and regions have joined them and made key commitments toward emissions reductions. Among its members are Ararat in Armenia, the Association of Regions of Morocco, Cata-

to confront the climate crisis. Founded in 2005, the C40 World Mayors Summit in Buenos Aires last year was the organization's largest gathering of mayors, with over 200 cities participating. Among its members are London, Hong Kong, Amman, and Dubai.

Power up their punch

These and many other alliances of re-

the difference. The KRI has that combination and is ready to be the regional agenda-setter for climate action. It is assessing the steps that it has taken so far while also looking ahead toward a strategy to see our people into a future where they are better equipped to face climate change ●



Practical Approach to Tackling Climate Change

ABDULRAHMAN SADIQ *The Head of the KRG's Board of Environmental Protection and Improvement*



As the world grapples with the pressing issue of climate change, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has emerged as a proactive player in addressing environmental challenges. In a bid to bolster these efforts and bring global attention to the matter, the American University of Kurdistan (AUK) is gearing up to host the annual Middle East Peace and Stability (MEPS) Forum. This three-day event, slated for November 19-21, will bring together local and regional officials, decision-makers, and experts to delve into climate change in the region and strategies for mitigating its impact.

The KRI's environmental initiatives are spearheaded by the Board of Environmental Protection and Improvement, under the guidance of the Iraqi Ministry of Environment and the High Committee on Climate Change in the KRI. This high-level committee, led by the Board of Environmental Protection and Improvement, comprises representatives from various ministries and departments, all united in their shared commitment to combat climate change. Together, they have identified specific responsibilities for each ministry and department, aimed at reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change.

To further strengthen the region's commitment to tackling climate change, the Council of Ministers approved the establishment of the Climate Change Department within the Board of Environmental Protection and Improvement. This dedicated department is a response to the growing global attention to climate change, reflecting the KRI's determination to contribute to the international effort to combat this global challenge.

In 2021, the Board of Environmental Protection and Improvement of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), in partnership with the Iraqi Ministry of Environment and the United Nations Development Program, engaged in a high-level workshop. The objective was to evaluate Iraq's requirement for the Iraqi National Shares Document (NDC), a joint commitment by Iraq and the KRI to tackle the challenges posed

by climate change during the period from 2021 to 2030. Among the central aims delineated in this document are:

1. Reducing emissions: Iraq and the KRI aim to reduce GHG emissions by 1%-2% through domestic efforts.
2. International assistance: A more ambitious goal is to reduce GHG emissions by 15% with international assistance.
3. Financial support: Iraq is seeking financial assistance, including for the KRI, from the Green Climate Fund to the tune of \$100 billion over a decade.
4. Clean energy production: Iraq plans to produce 12 gigawatts of electricity from clean energy sources by 2030.

The KRI's environmental efforts extend beyond policy and strategy. The region has engaged in extensive meetings with the Iraqi Ministry of Environment to activate and implement the obligations outlined in the NDC. These efforts are geared towards achieving UN Sustainable Development Goal 1, eradicating poverty, and Goal 13, supporting those adversely affected by climate change.

International organizations are also called upon to support the KRI by providing environmentally friendly technologies and promoting the use of renewable and other clean energy sources. The region is eager to learn from the experiences of developed countries in areas like smart agriculture and economic diversification.

Additionally, the KRI is keen on environmental investment, offering opportunities for foreign companies to participate in projects aimed at reducing or mitigating the impacts of climate change. These projects encompass a wide range of sectors: electricity generation from solar, hydro, and wind; sustainable public transportation; green construction; the establishment of green banks; green jobs; natural reserves; biodiversity protection; and initiatives for youth and women, such as those related to climate change mitigation.

Urban greening projects and the expansion of green spaces, oil refining projects with cutting-edge green technology, and collaborations between the public and private sectors in clean

energy production are also part of the region's forward-thinking strategies. The transition from a linear economy to a circular economy is a significant step forward in ensuring sustainability.

Looking ahead, the KRI is committed to several key initiatives to combat climate change:

1. **Education:** Improving climate change education processes and programs, fostering a deeper understanding of environmental issues.
2. **Media:** Increasing climate change awareness through various programs.
3. **Health:** Raising awareness about diseases linked to climate change and the importance of public health.

4. **Security:** Recognizing the fight against climate change, drought, and desertification as a vital part of national security.

5. **Agriculture:** Prioritizing food security, promoting local products, and advancing smart agriculture practices.

6. **Energy:** Enhancing energy production from clean and sustainable sources.

7. **Water:** Focusing on water collection, efficient distribution, and waste reduction.

8. **Economics:** Transforming the economy from old practices to a sustainable, robust, and diversified model.

9. **Investment:** Encouraging green investment and environmentally friendly

projects, all while respecting environmental conditions.

10. **Higher education and research:** Expanding departments focused on environmental sciences and nurturing research related to the effects of climate change.

To conclude, the KRI is taking significant strides in combating climate change, with a comprehensive strategy that includes policy frameworks, international collaboration, and proactive projects across various sectors. The region's dedication to sustainability, along with its emphasis on education, awareness, and research, signals a promising future in the fight against climate change. As the MEPS Forum approaches, the world will be watching to see the KRI's contributions to the global effort to combat this pressing issue. ●

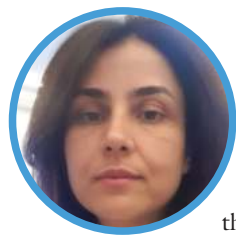


Photo: Fedbray Mahdi



The American University of Kurdistan Fostering Excellence in Higher Education

SAMAL ERFANI *Professor of Anthropology and Researcher*



Nestled in the picturesque landscapes of Duhok, a city in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the American University of Kurdistan (AUK) stands as a beacon of hope and progress for higher education in the region.

AUK was founded by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani as a non-profit institution of higher learning. It has rapidly gained recognition for its commitment to providing quality education and promoting intellectual growth and cultural diversity through the pursuit of growth, adherence to time-honored values, and dedication to making an impact on the KRI and the world.

The story of AUK's inception is a testament to the vision of its founders. Recognizing the potential for higher education to transform lives and the broader society, AUK was established to bridge the gap between the region's potential and the opportunities available to its youth. The university's mission is to provide a world-class education while nurturing critical thinking, civic responsibility, and a global perspective.

Situated in Duhok, AUK is a testament to the power of education to transform lives and communities. With its devotion to academic excellence, cultural diversity, global partnerships, and community engagement, AUK is rapidly establishing itself as a higher education hub in the Middle East. As it continues to grow and evolve, the AUK stands as a shining example of progress and hope for the future.

Mission

AUK's mission is to be at the forefront of preparing future generations of leaders by delivering a high-quality American-style education that combines curricular and co-curricular excellence. This approach focuses on the pursuit of transformative knowledge, innovative research, ethical community service, respect for inclusion and diversity, global connectedness, and the promotion of life-long learning. Ultimately, AUK's mission is anchored in its dedication to

fostering economic, environmental, social, and political advancement on a regional, national, and global scale.

Vision

AUK's vision is to ascend to a position of global recognition as a premier institution not only in the Middle East but also on the international stage. This recognition will be earned through cultivation of academic excellence, nurturing of creativity, and engagement in the highest caliber of applied scientific research.

The university aspires to be a beacon of educational brilliance, offering its students a world-class learning experience that equips them with the knowledge, skills, and values



Tanya Goudsouzian and Entifadh Qanbar taking part at MEPS Forum in Duhok.

necessary to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world. By continuously pushing the boundaries of research and intellectual innovation, the university thus seeks to contribute to the betterment of society and the advancement of knowledge.

AUK's vision is not limited to mere academic pursuits; it includes a desire to make a global impact. The institution aims to be an influential agent of change, working toward a future where its graduates are not only leaders in their respective fields but also catalysts for positive transformation in their communities, nations, and the world at large.

In the pursuit of its vision, AUK is dedicated to maintaining the highest standards of excellence, thus serving as a model of educational and research innovation for others to follow. Through its unwavering devotion to these ideals, AUK is poised to make substantial contributions to the fields of education, research, and service.

Academic excellence

AUK offers a range of undergraduate and graduate programs across various disciplines, including business administration, information technology, engineering, social sciences, and human-

ities. These programs are designed to meet international standards, and the university is dedicated to continuous improvement in curriculum and pedagogy.

One of AUK's strengths lies in its distinguished faculty. The institution boasts a team of highly qualified and experienced educators, many of whom have international experience in teaching and research. This blend of local and global expertise ensures that students receive a well-rounded education.

Cultural diversity

AUK's student body is a vibrant tapestry of diverse backgrounds, reflecting the university's commitment to fostering cultural exchange and understanding. Students from various regions and countries come together to learn and grow, contributing to a rich and dynamic learning environment.

This cultural diversity is celebrated through events and activities that showcase the traditions, customs, and talents of the AUK community. It not only broadens students' horizons but also prepares them for a globalized world where cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural communication are essential skills. State-of-the-art facilities

AUK takes pride in providing its students with world-class facilities that support their academic pursuits. The university's campus boasts modern classrooms, well-equipped laboratories, a comprehensive library, and recreational spaces. AUK's commitment to infrastructure development is a testament to its dedication to fostering a conducive learning environment.

Global partnerships and opportunities To further enhance the educational experience, AUK has cultivated strong ties with institutions and organizations worldwide. These partnerships enable students to engage in exchange programs, research collaborations, and internship opportunities in various countries, broadening their global perspectives and boosting their career prospects.

Community engagement

AUK recognizes the importance of giving back to the community. Through various outreach programs, the university is actively involved in initiatives that aim to uplift, engage with, and support local communities. This devotion to social responsibility helps students develop a sense of civic duty and prepares them to make meaningful contributions to society. ●



Bernard Kouchner (left) and Peter Galbraith (right) at MEPS 2021



The U.S. State Department Extends \$15 Million Support to the AUK

AVEEN HOWRAMI *Liaison, Kurdistan Chronicle*



For nearly a decade, the American University of Kurdistan (AUK), located in Duhok, has been unwavering in its commitment to the pursuit of excellence. This commitment isn't solely directed toward its students but extends to the entire region. The challenge of implementing an American-style education system in the country comes with its known difficulties, but year after year, the dedicated team at AUK has managed to overcome these hurdles.

and trust from international education programs, particularly when it comes to securing grants. The U.S. Department of State (DOS) recognized this need and initiated the Support to American-Style Higher Education in Iraq grant program. AUK has received a total of four grants amounting to \$15 million through this program.

AUK has consistently demonstrated remarkable progress in its American curriculum programs, thanks to its partnerships with several U.S.-based universities, including James Madison University, Wayne State University, University of Florida, and Middle Tennessee State University.

Realizing any vision of higher education requires support In October 2020, AUK was awarded its first DOS grant of

\$4 million. The announcement took place at the Mustafa Barzani campus in the presence of the former U.S. Consul General of Erbil Rob Waller and AUK president Dr. Randall Rhodes. In September 2021, a second grant of \$4.75 million was bestowed upon AUK. Shortly after, the university hosted the first International Nursing Conference in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The funds were used to focus on the U.S. accreditation process, establish the Grant Management Office, and develop the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Lab to meet the standards of the American-Based Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN). This lab played a pivotal role in the Nursing Program, which had begun in the fall of 2020.

In December 2022, AUK was granted a third DOS grant of \$2.55 million, which enabled the university to provide 44 student scholarships, with a specific focus on female students and those from minority groups. The multimedia lab and campus radio station were also established, enhancing the campus environment with elements typical of

American universities, promoting freedom of expression.

Investing in the future

AUK's latest endeavor is the introduction of the country's first Artificial Intelligence (AI) Technological Lab, which is expected to be instrumental in research and development for upcoming projects in the KRI. The university will also receive support from the recently awarded fourth grant from the ongoing DOS program, totaling \$3.75 million. This grant will primarily focus on 49 new student scholarships, female empowerment programs, and further collaborations with U.S.-based universities.

The Support to American-Style Higher Education in Iraq grant program, offered by the U.S. Department of State, has been an invaluable source of support not only for AUK but also for other local higher education institutions. As seen over the years, AUK remains steadfast in its mission to adopt and adapt U.S. practices, delivering Amer-

ican-style professional education to all students in the country.

AUK has declared its dedication to preparing future generations of leaders through curricular and co-curricular excellence, emphasizing American-style education that focuses on transformative knowledge, innovative research, ethical community service, inclusion and diversity, global connectedness, and lifelong learning. This mission aims to drive economic, environmental, social, and political advancement at regional, national, and global levels.

Moreover, AUK has gained recognition as the host of the First Middle East Peace and Security Forum, which held its first meeting in November 2019. The MEPS Forum has established partnerships with prestigious institutions such as the United States Institute of Peace, Oxford University, the Carnegie Corporation, the Crisis Response Council, and the Middle East Institute. This year marks the fifth gathering of the forum, further solidifying AUK's commitment to fostering dialogue and understanding in the region. ●



Prime Minister Masrour Barzani posing with AUK students and volunteers during MEPS Forum in 2021.



Commitment to a Cleaner Environment

Kurdistan Chronicle

Iraq is facing a severe climate crisis, making it one of the most vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change. The crisis is characterized by water and food insecurity due to reduced precipitation, higher temperatures, and mismanagement. Upstream dams in Turkey and Iran have significantly reduced the flow of water into the country, exacerbating the problem.

Iraq is classified by the UN as the fifth most vulnerable coun-

Government (KRG) announced several green investment initiatives under the banner “Safe Environment – Sustainable Development.”

“My government has no higher priority than the preservation and protection of our environment. In the past two years we have launched some bold initiatives. We have pivoted from diesel to clean gas. We have revised waste collection practices and introduced new waste treatment plants,” said KRG

KURDISTAN REGION AGRICULTURAL LAND

Province	Arable Land Area / Dunam		Orchard Area / Dunam		Forest Area / Dunam	
	Rainfed	Irrigated	Rainfed	Irrigated	Artificial	Natural
Erbil	2,322,580	214,568	24,250	23,728	8,988	543,032
Slemani	930,800	832,876	53,159	89,728	15,980	570,496
Halabja					1,905	36,512
Duhok	1,019,568	119,896	32,723	25,370	8,068	1,221,037
Garmiyan	1,200,604	146,372	11,465	1,141	531	136,444
Total	5,473,552	1,313,712	121,597	140,327	35,472	2,507,521

try to climate change, with temperatures increasing two to seven times faster than the global average. In 2020 and 2021, the country experienced the driest rainy seasons in 40 years, leading to a 29% and 73% decrease in the flow of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, respectively.

Desertification is on the rise due to the climate crisis, unregulated land and water use, and reduced river flows caused by upstream dams. Sandstorms have become a prevalent issue, affecting public health, and there is a growing need to plant more trees and transition to renewable energy to combat these extreme weather events.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) recognizes climate change as a top priority. In 2022, the Kurdistan Regional

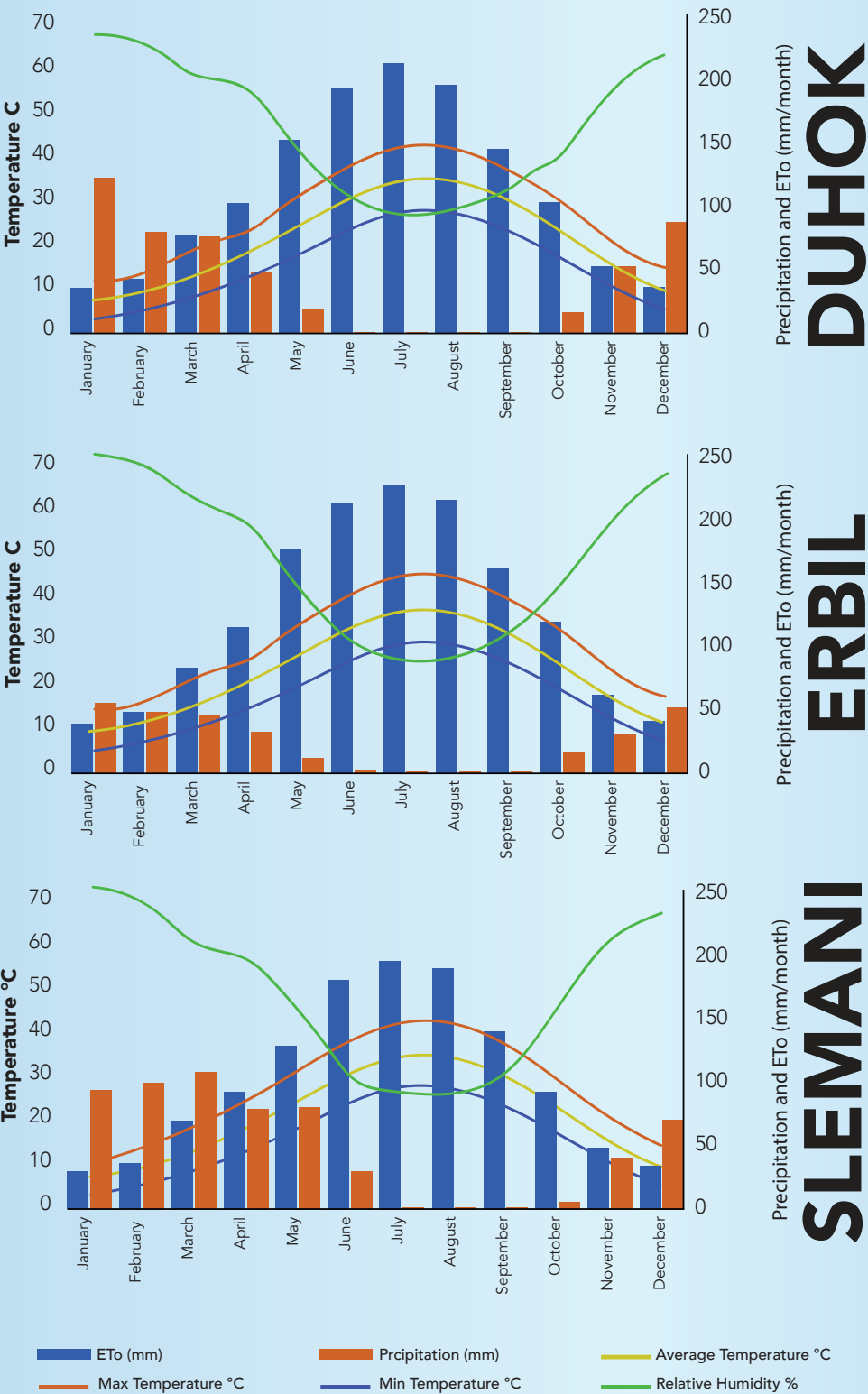
Prime Minister Masrour Barzani at the Green Investment Conference in 2022.

Prime Minister Barzani emphasized that his government is ready to work with local and international partners to create a more sustainable future for the region, and leave a cleaner and safer world for the younger generations.

Turning waste gas into electricity

The Ninth Cabinet of the KRG has taken a commendable step towards reducing the environmental impact of waste gas by harnessing it to generate electricity from oil wells. A stand-out achievement is the Garmian waste-gas-to-power-plant, a 165-megawatt facility that effectively recovers flare gas from

Monthly precipitation, relative humidity, potential evaporation, maximum, minimum, and mean temperature at Duhok (DU), Erbil (ER), Sulaimaniyah (SU), and surrounding areas recorded between 1998 and 2017.



the Hasira oil wells to generate electricity. This transformative project, completed in 2021, has also provided job opportunities for 118 local residents.

Spanning 35, 000 square meters of land, the power plant comprises 180 generators and 45 converters. Each generator has a capacity of 0.9 MW, resulting in a daily estimated production of 100 MW. Efforts are underway to further increase this output.

By implementing eco-friendly policies, the Ninth Cabinet has demonstrated its unwavering commitment to curbing the detrimental effects of waste gas on the environment. Beyond the environmental benefits, this project ensures an improved supply of electricity for the residents of Garmian.

When it comes to natural gas flaring, Russia stands as the world's largest culprit, burning off 24.9 billion cubic meters per year as of 2020 according to World Bank data, with Iraq following closely behind with 17.4 billion cubic meters. However, analysis reveals that Iraq's population, on average, lives much closer to flaring sites than Russia's.

The World Bank's October 2018 Global Gas Flaring Tracker found that the number of people in Iraq living within a 1-km radius of more than 10 flaring events was 1.2 million. In Russia, only 275,000 people experienced the same level of exposure. The reason for this discrepancy lies in the geographical placement of these flaring sites. Russia's oil refineries are often in

remote locations, spread out across arctic tundra. In Iraq and the KRI, however, major cities and towns are more commonly situated close to the flares, leaving their populations at greater risk of exposure.

Approximately 70% of Iraq's natural gas is lost to flaring, which, in many cases, involves burning off gas that could have been used during the winter if it had been stored ahead of time. The health risks associated with flaring are significant, including asthma, allergies, lung fibrosis, and stillbirths, but the communities who live near the flares are most frightened by the risk of can-

tired as their red blood cell count decreases. Bruising and bleeding become more common, with healing taking longer.

The Garmian power plant project is proof that structural changes are not only possible but also economically viable. The plant sustains itself by using gas it would otherwise have flared, reducing maintenance costs.

Focusing on clean energy

This year, the KRG laid the foundation for the first solar power plant in Erbil Governorate. The KRG's Ministry of Electricity said that "the power station will be the largest solar plant in the Kurdistan Region and the whole of Iraq."

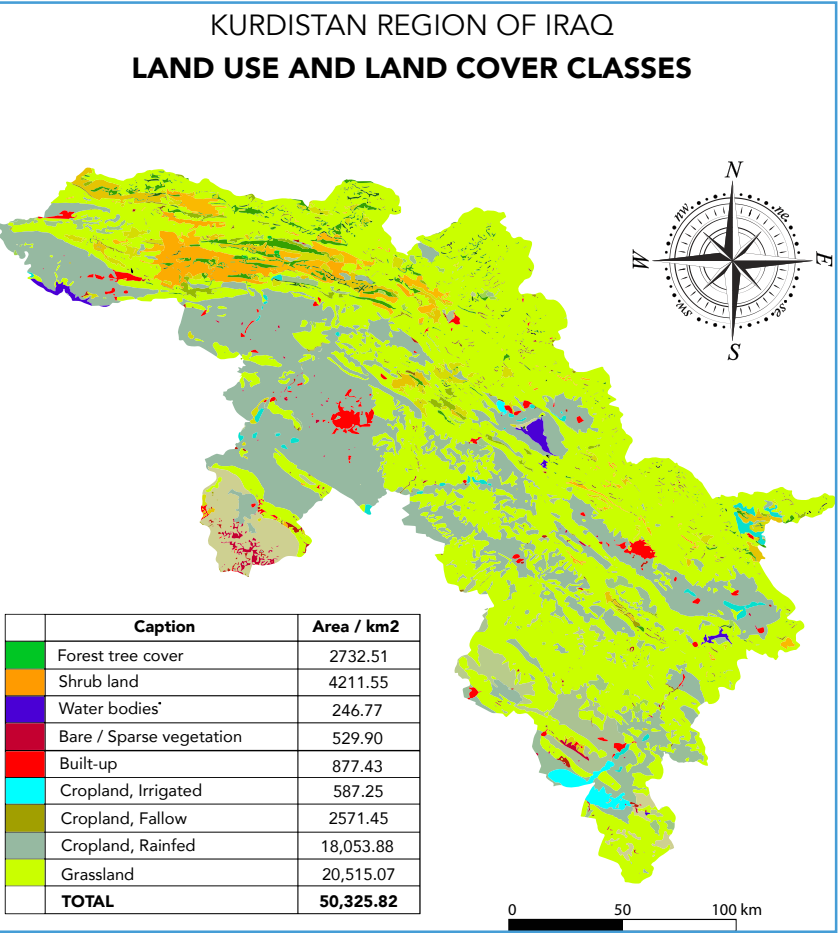
The environmentally friendly power station, which is located in Minara, outskirts of Erbil city, is expected to produce 25 MW of electricity and will be connected to the national energy network.

The KRG plans to increase the amount of electricity coming from solar energy by constructing other similar projects.

Built on 590 dunam (21.6 acre) of land, the project is expected to be completed in

one year at an estimated cost of \$100 million.

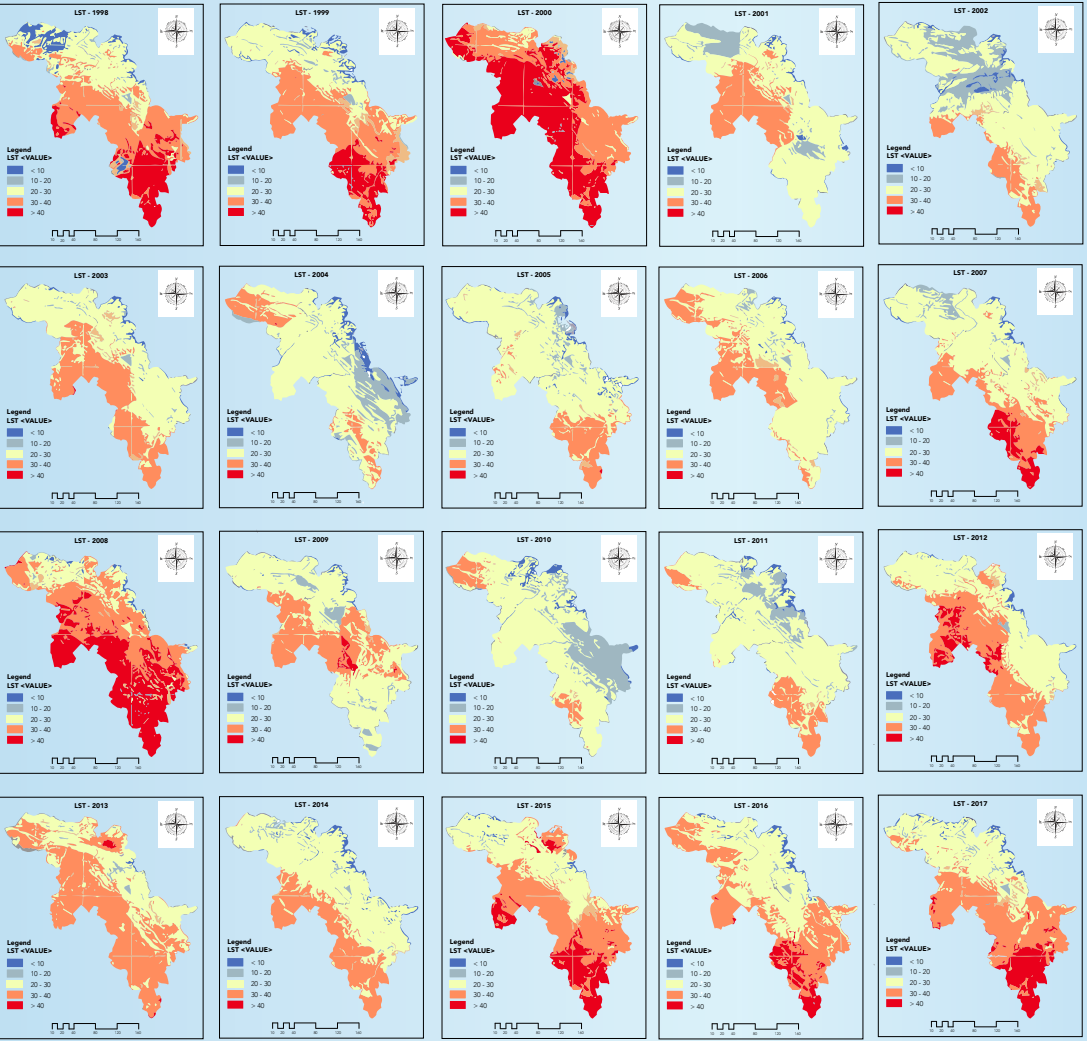
There are currently two solar power plants in the KRI and the government has decided to build an additional power station in Soran Independent Administration with a budget of 235 bil-



cer. Several chemicals released through flaring, such as benzene, are identified by the American Cancer Society as carcinogens, substances that promote the formation of cancer.

Long-term exposure to benzene can cause damage to bone marrow. Those exposed may feel increasingly weak and

KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ
Drought Severity Categories based on LST Index in Years 1998–2017



lion Iraqi dinars and a capacity of 100 MW.

The KRG's efforts to increase the use of solar power could boost awareness of green technology and renewable energy in general, as well as agricultural technology.

Recycling

In October of this year, the KRG inaugurated the country's first asphalt recycling plant in Erbil. It has a capacity of 160 tons per hour and can mix up to 30% discarded asphalt.

"From today, excavated asphalt across Erbil province will be recycled, protecting the environment and reducing

emissions," announced Prime Minister Barzani.

In an interview with the Department of Media and Information, the Director of Road Maintenance in Erbil Emad Mohammad Amin highlighted that "the project involves pulverizing asphalt by grinding down the existing road surfaces, allowing us to reuse it for new road construction. It is environmentally friendly, emitting no dust, smoke, or CO2 gas." He added that "this pioneering initiative has the capability to produce 2,000 tons of tar daily. In its initial phase, we will use the recycled asphalt in the construction of the Erbil-Qushtapa road."

Henceforth, asphalt and other existing

road materials will be milled and transported to the Erbil factory for recycling, contributing to both environmental preservation and reduced asphalt production costs.

Rawezh Rasoul, an engineer at the factory, emphasized that "this project is not only eco-friendly but also cost-effective, consuming less fuel than the traditional method. Additionally, it boasts a remarkable hourly production capacity of 200 tons of tar."

The KRG is firmly dedicated to further developing the industrial sector, establishing modern factories that are both productive and environmentally sustainable, thus safeguarding the region's environment and economic prosperity.



Finding a Way Forward A Survivor's Story from ISIS

QASSIM KHIDHIR *Journalist and Media Developer*



Shireen Khairo Khudaïda, 29, found herself facing a seemingly simple yet profoundly unsettling question when she arrived at the American University of Kurdistan (AUK). The application form asked her about her hobbies and her aspirations for the next four years. This question brought tears to her eyes.

Shireen, who had endured the horrors of ISIS, wondered if she even had a hobby or a future. Her thoughts remained consumed by the fate of her father and sister. Overwhelmed with emotion, she explained, "I felt like I was sleeping, and this question woke me up." After some reflection, she recalled that, before the dark days of ISIS, she had taken joy in reading, particularly poetry. So, she wrote down "reading and poetry."

Shireen's life took an unexpected turn when she was accepted to study business management at AUK in the city of Duhok, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). This opportunity marked a fresh start for her. Both the faculty at the university and her fellow students welcomed her with open arms, offering the support and inspiration she needed to continue her education.

"During my captivity, I was judged, cursed, and tortured, but at AUK, everyone was nice to me, and they made me feel safe inside the university, which was a total shock," Shireen expressed with happiness.

Shireen recounted the harrowing events of August 3, 2014, when her family attempted to escape from Sinjar, fleeing from ISIS. However, they were stopped at a junction by a vehicle. Soon, an influx of vehicles encircled them and other Yezidi families. The ISIS militants, dressed in Taliban-style uniforms with long beards, separated the men and instructed the women to remain inside the car.

"We couldn't flee because they were armed. They took all the men away, including my father, placed them on their knees, and ordered them to raise their hands; this was the

last time I saw my father," Shireen explained.

ISIS took all the women and children to a school in Tal Afar, Nineveh Governorate, where Shireen endured three long and painful years in captivity. "It didn't feel like three years; it felt like forever, like it would last forever," said Shireen.

Shireen finally managed to escape during the liberation of Mosul in 2017, but upon her return, was met with the devastating news that her father was still missing and that one of her sisters remained in the grips of ISIS. It was only a year later that her sister was rescued from captivity in Syria.

Fulfilling her father's dream

Shireen's father was a bright student in his youth, despite being unable to complete his education due to his family's financial constraints. He had a remarkable command of languages, speaking Kurdish, Arabic, English, and Aramaic. Throughout their lives, he instilled in his children the importance of never giving up on their education.

Upon Shireen's return from captivity, she was determined to fulfill her father's dream. Her high school teachers informed her about an opportunity at AUK and encouraged her to apply. Shireen had the choice between two scholarships, one in business management and the other in international relations, and she felt a stronger connection to business management.

She stated that once she was admitted to AUK, everyone at the university demonstrated their willingness to support her and encourage her to continue her education.

When Kurdistan Chronicle asked Shireen for her advice to other survivors of trauma and conflict who are seeking to rebuild their lives and pursue an education, she responded with a resolute message for girls like herself across the world: "Do not give up."

"Sometimes life is so difficult; there were times I felt I could not go on. But then I realized that life is a mixture of happiness and pain; we can't separate pain from life," Shireen said. Shireen continues to search for her father's remains. A mass

grave of Yezidi men has been uncovered at the same location where ISIS separated Shireen from her father. She aspires to create a cemetery for those found there.

Shireen is set to graduate from AUK the coming summer and wishes to dedicate her graduation as a tribute to her father's spirit.

"My father is with me every step of my life, and I know on my graduation day, he would be very proud of me," she concluded.

Shireen Khairo at the AUK library |



Photo: Safin Hamid

Kurdistan's Water and Climate Change

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi



Kamal Kolo

Dr. Kamal Kolo, based in Erbil, serves as a distinguished professor specializing in Petroleum and Biogeosciences at Soran University. Alongside his noteworthy scientific endeavors, he has contributed to the literary world with several authored and co-authored books.

A view of the Sirwan River in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, dried up due to Iranian dam constructions upstream

Climate change is significantly damaging Iraq’s environment, economy, and society. Considered the world’s fifth-most vulnerable country to climate change, Iraq is prone to violent climatic phenomena such as extreme and sustained high temperatures, drought, and frequent sand and dust storms and floods. The increasing prevalence of such phenomena, alongside desertification and salinization, have undermined Iraq’s agricultural sector, which has been in decline for some time. Climate change in Iraq is not only hurting the agricultural sector but is threatening fundamental human rights, creating barriers to economic growth, and undermining social stability. Iraq’s environmental and energy challenges directly affect its overall stability.

Iraq’s climate is mainly characterized as continental and sub-tropical semi-arid, except for the mountainous Kurdistan Re-

gion of Iraq (KRI) in the north, which has a Mediterranean climate. As such, around 92% of Iraqi land is threatened by desertification, with temperatures increasing seven times faster than the global average.

Climate change-driven water scarcity is the country’s foremost environmental concern, with the Water Stress Index predicting that Iraq will experience severe drought, extreme heat, and a toxic environment by 2040. Rising temperatures, drought, and declining precipitation have resulted in a 20% decline in the country’s water supply, which in turn has reduced real GDP by up to 4% (roughly \$6.6 billion) and placed stress on the country’s fragile water management systems. The agricultural sector is the country’s largest water consumer and has experienced declining crop yields and reduced productivity as a result. Climate change has, moreover, led to poorer water quality, greater soil salinity, and higher

levels of air pollution, further exacerbating the country’s environmental challenges.

Water scarcity and rising temperatures are likely to trigger population migration, with people forced to relocate in order to survive. In 2021 alone, approximately 20,000 people were displaced due to water scarcity, a phenomenon that potentially threatens over 7 million Iraqis. Water scarcity is also likely to lead to conflict over water resources, exacerbating existing tensions and creating new ones.

Despite its mountainous climate, rising

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Climate change-driven
water scarcity is the
country’s foremost
environmental concern

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temperatures and water scarcity are also
forecast to severely impact the KRI.

The region increasingly suffers from floods in winter and water scarcity in summer, with groundwater levels falling precipitously. Appropriately, climate change is listed as a top threat to the KRI and Iraq in general, with resource scarcity and migration representing critical challenges.

Meanwhile, climate change forecasts indicate that Iraq will endure more extensive dry periods that result in the rapid depletion of groundwater. The air temperature in Kurdistan is typically high, but the years 2021-2023 were the warmest on record, with temperatures topping 44°C, a level that has not been



Photos: Peshraw Mahdi

recorded in the last 100 years. These scorching temperatures have caused crop failures that have reduced the output of wheat and other cereal crops by over 50%.

Mitigation measures

Sustainable agricultural policy in the KRI and Iraq requires a comprehensive approach that holistically addresses the challenges facing the entire region. Some possible measures include strengthening water management and governance systems, promoting renewable energy solutions, improving the management of strategic resources, and supporting businesses to develop climate-smart innovations. Other measures include adopting a national strategy for adaptation and mitigation, encouraging closer citizen involvement in water

management, and preventing the overexploitation of aquifers through excessive pumping. Additionally, policies can be formulated to protect domestic products against competition from imports from neighboring countries.

Several government agencies and international partners are implementing projects to reverse the deleterious effects of climate change. The Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources (MoAWR) is responsible for developing government policy on food security and supporting investment in agriculture as a key sector of the economy. There are several examples of successful sustainable agriculture in the KRI and Iraq. The International Fund for Agricultural Development has invested in upgrading irrigation infrastructure, improving food security and nutrition, and reducing poverty by increas-

ing farm and off-farm incomes, while the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and its partners continue to boost agricultural livelihoods in Nineveh, with a focus on inclusive development of the value chains of key agricultural commodities. The FAO has also implemented a wheat improvement package jointly with the MoAWR and the EU that has improved productivity and may promote further food security. Meanwhile, the International Trade Centre has developed sustainable development strategies to transform Iraq's tomato and poultry industries, which aim to contribute to national development goals of food security, inclusive growth, and job creation, particularly for women and youth.

Additionally, some private firms in the KRI are accelerating their production of agricultural equipment, and the promotion of renewable energy in Iraq and the KRI is driving the

development of services producing renewable energy technologies. Finally, the KRI has implemented hydroponic agriculture, with one example being Al-Hayane Farm, which utilizes hydroponic technology and aquaponics to significantly reduce water usage and promote sustainable agriculture.

The United States Agency for International Development is also working with the government of Iraq, the private sector, and affected communities to mitigate the impact of climate change by strengthening water management and governance systems, promoting renewable energy solutions, improving management of strategic resources, and supporting businesses developing climate-smart innovations. The Kurdistan Regional Government has also recognized the need to address climate change and resource scarcity, and the migration they could trigger as critical challenges. ●

Photos: Yuns Mohamad & Peshraw Mahdi



Dams in Kurdistan A Blueprint for Water Security and Economic Growth

Kurdistan Chronicle

Dams, those gigantic structures that hold back water and thus save human communities from flooding, are one of the most useful manmade structures in history. They not only transform arid deserts into fertile fields, but also bolster agricultural irrigation, provide a supply of potable water, generate electricity, create industrial applications, and foster tourism development.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the government has long acknowledged the challenging future ahead. As the clear and present dangers of climate change and global warming become a reality in Iraq and the Middle East, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has made a commitment to developing strategies to secure the future of its people, the foremost of which is the construction of dams and reservoirs. This KRI is home to some of the oldest dams and aqueducts in the world. Only in the KRI can one find remnants of dams and aqueducts that were built 2,700 years ago. With those

non-functional structures today serving only as treasures of history, the growing population in the KRI needs a combination of strategic planning and modern technology to prepare for future environmental risks.

Since its inauguration in 2019, the KRG's Ninth Cabinet has completed the construction of four dams and is currently working on 13 more across the KRI. Among the dams that are under construction is the Gomaspan Dam, which lies just outside Erbil. According to the engineers who designed it, Gomaspan Dam will become the third largest in the KRI, behind the Dukan and Darbandikhan dams.

An investment in progress

As of October 2023, the construction of the Gomaspan Dam was 60% complete, and the dam is anticipated to commence water-storage operations by mid-2024, according to Abdul-

“This KRI is home to some of the oldest dams and aqueducts in the world”

Gomaspan dam under construction in Erbil in 2023

lah Gardi, the CEO of the construction company overseeing the project.

With a projected storage capacity of 115 million cubic meters, Gomaspan is poised to significantly transform the region. Upon completion, it will play a pivotal role in elevating underground water levels, which has been a major concern for the Kurdish policymakers in recent years. According to local authorities, the dam is set to provide a steady supply of water for approximately 16,000 square meters of agricultural land, facilitating the expansion of agriculture and fish farming. This aligns with another strategic plan of the Ninth Cabinet: boosting agriculture so that the region can diversify its economy away from oil exports.

The entire Gomaspan project involves an estimated budget of 95 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately \$ 64 million). Notably, it has already generated job opportunities for 300 engineers, technicians, and construction workers. According to

government officials, the KRG is proud of the fact that over 75% of the technical manpower behind the dam's construction comes from local experts and technicians.

The construction of the dam utilizes reinforced cement concrete, a widely preferred material in the construction industry due to its exceptional durability, robustness, cost-effectiveness, and various other benefits. Gomaspan, a massive structure measuring 513.67 meters in length and towering at a height of 69.25 meters, is anticipated to gather a staggering of 47,839,000 cubic meters of water annually.

Additionally, there are plans to develop touristic projects in the stunning natural area around the dam. Given the fact that it is easily accessible for Erbil residents, this area could become a popular attraction for those seeking to spend the weekends away from the crowded city.

Gomaspan, a massive structure measuring 513.67 meters in length and towering at a height of 69.25 meters, is anticipated to annually gather a staggering volume of 47,839,000 cubic meters of water

A water-secure future

Over the past two decades, the KRG has approved the construction of 18 dams in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Garmian governorates, of which 14 are already operational and the remaining four are expected to start operating in the near future. These dams collectively offer a storage capacity of 80.76 million cubic meters of water.

In Erbil, five dams have been completed (Jali, Degala, Hamamok, Kudala, and Chamrga); Sulaymaniyah boasts four (Shewasor, Hashazin, Chami Smor, and Dewana); Duhok has two (Bedohy and Khanas); and Garmian features seven (Bawa Shaswar, Hassan Kanosh, Horaw, Qadir Karam, Awa Spi, and Turajar). The 14 operational dams cost 108 billion Iraqi dinars in total (approximately \$72 million), and the remaining four will cost 21 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately \$14 million).

Among the 18 completed dams, the Ninth Cabinet was responsible for the construction of four: Chamrga in Erbil, Dewana in Sulaymaniyah, Khanas in Duhok, and Turajar

in Garmian. These projects, totaling 45 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately \$30 million), contributed storage capacity of 29.1 million cubic meters of water.

Backed by funding secured from previous cabinets, the KRG's Ninth Cabinet also initiated the construction of 13 dams across the KRI that are now nearing completion. Once finished, they will increase the region's water supply by 269 million cubic meters. Of these 13 dams, four are in Erbil, three in Sulaymaniyah, two in Duhok, two in Garmian, and three in Kurdistan areas outside the Kurdistan Region. Collectively, they constitute an investment of 553 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately \$369 million).

Finally, the KRG has allocated 21 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately \$14 million) for the design and surveying of 41 dams, along with 967 million Iraqi dinars (approximately \$645,000) for the design of an additional six dams. These investments are intended to pave the way for future infrastructure development and water resource management projects. ●

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

Gomaspan dam under construction in Erbil in 2023

Launching First Asphalt Recycling Plant

Kurdistan Chronicle

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Working in tandem with the newly established recycling plant, it can produce 150-160 tons of asphalt per hour

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In October 2023, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) launched an advanced asphalt recycling factory, the first such project in Iraq, and one that speaks to the regional government's commitment to modernizing its infrastructure in line with current technological advancements and environmental protection standards.

According to international best practices, road construction projects are evaluated according to several principles. First and foremost, the road's engineering is scrutinized to ensure its structural quality. Second, safety measures are woven into the design and implemented along the road to ensure the well-being of all those who travel on it. In recent decades, another pivotal dimension has emerged as a critical principle for such evaluations: the project's environmental impact.

Roads, a vital means of connecting communities, must now be constructed with the utmost consideration for their ecological footprint, ensuring that their development not only serves people's immediate needs but also safeguards the delicate

balance of our planet's natural system. That is, governments must recognize that infrastructure projects should harmonize with, rather than disrupt, the environment.

Building technical capacity

Acknowledging its responsibilities not only to the people of the KRI but also the environment, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has initiated a pioneering asphalt recycling project, despite its already challenging financial situation.

During a ceremony on October 17, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani announced that the Asphalt recycling project is capable of recycling 160 tons of discarded asphalt per hour and mixing it with up to 30% new asphalt to pave the roads under construction across Erbil Governorate.

Dr. Agreen Abdullah, KRG Deputy Minister of Construction and Housing, who spoke to *Kurdistan Chronicle* at the inauguration of the plant, noted that Erbil's asphalt production factory, which has been supplying road construction in



Asphalt Recycling Plant in Erbil, Kurdistan Region, on Oct. 17, 2023

the KRI for years, has a production capacity of 200 tons per hour. Working in tandem with the newly established recycling plant, it can produce 150-160 tons of recycled asphalt per hour.

“Asphalt recycling comes with a technical challenge that not every country would feel confident to take on. In the KRI, our technical capacity for road construction has witnessed remarkable progress in recent years, keeping pace with the latest international innovations and standards,” Dr. Abdullah said.

Delivering a speech during the ceremony, Prime Minister Barzani emphasized that the asphalt recycling plant project underscores the KRG’s commitment to environmental protection and economic reform. Whereas the old practice of carelessly dumping discarded asphalt harmed the environment, the new approach is not only eco-friendly but also economically advantageous.

For this pivotal project to materialize,

Dr. Abdullah explained that his team worked with international experts to train a group of operators at the plant in accordance with international standards. This knowledge transfer has bolstered the government’s human capacity to further enhance the quality of its projects and laid the groundwork for duplicating the project across the KRI’s governorates.

The economic case for recycling

This project contributes to the economical aspect of road construction in the KRI. According to a feasibility study, the plant helps reduce the cost of road-paving projects by at least 15%. This will allow the KRG to save financial resources for more road projects across the region.

With this initial project focusing exclusively on Erbil’s roads, Prime Minister Barzani has unveiled the government’s

broader vision to replicate these factories in every province within the KRI. To this end, he called upon the private sector to undertake similar ventures, thereby repurposing previously discarded materials. The KRG’s dedication to a comprehensive environmental program aimed at serving the environment in every possible way was also reaffirmed by Prime Minister Barzani.

Since taking office in July 2019, roads and infrastructural projects have been a central focus for Prime Minister Barzani. On the fourth anniversary of the Ninth Cabinet, statistics showed that the largest number of projects fulfilled within the past four years across all sectors were those related to road construction or renovation, with 1,015 road projects carried out during this period. The second largest number of projects was carried out in the water management sector, with 615, and the third largest was in the energy sector, with 473. ●



Prime Minister Masrour Barzani launching the Asphalt Recycling Plant in Erbil on Oct. 17, 2023

Photo: Sabir Dri

A Vision for Navigating Challenges



Peshawa Hawramani

Peshawa Hawramani is the Spokesperson for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). He previously served as a member of Kurdistan Parliament.

In the heart of the Middle East, amid the complexities of geopolitics and historical adversity, a remarkable story of resilience and unyielding determination is unfolding. It is the story of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a place where leaders are navigating challenges with unwavering resolve, illuminating a path toward a brighter future.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), led by its strong-willed and visionary Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, stands as a beacon of commitment to the principles of democracy and collaboration. Our transformative journey involves the reform of administrative structures and the strengthening of the foundations of good governance. While these efforts may present temporary challenges, they are fundamental for the long-term realization of a democratic and prosperous nation. It is in the face of these challenges that the true strength of the KRI's leadership shines through, demonstrating their determination to steer the region in the right direction.

The Kurdish people, situated in a turbulent corner of the world and shaped by a complex historical context, have faced numerous external and internal challenges, each carrying profound consequences. From enduring chemical attacks and genocidal campaigns like Anfal to confronting the harsh trials of forced displacement and political oppression, the region's history is marked by trials that have tested its resolve time and again. Yet, it is this very history that has forged the unwavering determination of the KRI's leadership, propelling them forward on the path toward genuine democratic governance and self-determination.

Throughout this journey, the KRI has become a crucible of unity and resilience. Its rich cultural heritage has been both a source of strength and identity. The government's tireless efforts to preserve and celebrate this cultural mosaic have yielded remarkable progress in education, literature, and artistic expression. Communities

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As the region continues its pursuit of justice, accountability, and cultural revival, it stands as a shining example of peaceful coexistence among diverse communities

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have also joined forces, breathing new life into their traditions and contributing to the vibrant tapestry of Kurdistan's cultural identity.

As the region continues its pursuit of

justice, accountability, and cultural revival, it stands as a shining example of peaceful coexistence among diverse communities. Despite the lingering scars of past tragedies and conflicts, the region and its people are resolute in their commitment to the path of stability and reconciliation. They firmly reject violence, seeking common ground and prioritizing the establishment of a constitutional framework, respect for human rights, and the pursuit of economic development.

The KRI is known for its unique cultural diversity and steadfast dedication to democratic values. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the region receives the support that it requires within the framework of Iraq's

unity to advance constitutional reform, foster development, and bolster security. Today, more than ever before, the KRI, with its hopeful future, cherishes the support of its partners. Its pursuit of sustainable development, the rule of law, and the well-being of its people testifies to the region's cultural richness and the unwavering determination of its leadership.

In a region often defined by turmoil, the KRI shines as a beacon of hope – a place where resilience and vision will undoubtedly lead its people toward a brighter and more secure future. The world should take notice of this remarkable journey and stand in solidarity with the KRI as it paves the way toward prosperity and democracy. ●



Photo: Star Ahmad

Strengthening Türkiye-KRG Relations A Shared Path Toward Prosperity



Memet Mevlüt Yakut

Memet Mevlüt Yakut is the Consul General of Türkiye in Erbil.



Prime Minister Masrour Barzani receiving Turkish Consul General Memet Mevlüt Yakut in Erbil on Dec. 4, 2022

Photo: Sabr Dri

I feel privileged to have represented my country, Türkiye, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) since November 2022. Since its creation in 2010, the General Consulate of Türkiye in Erbil has contributed to building robust and cooperative relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) across various fields. However, our relations with the KRI began long before 2010.

Türkiye's partnership with the KRG not only holds historical significance but also promises a brighter future for both sides. This partnership, however, is not limited to economic and trade spheres; it also reflects a deep cultural connection between the Turkish people and our brothers and sisters in the KRI.

This article reflects on the growth of these vital ties and the highlights of our

collaborative efforts.

Commercial ties

The commercial bond between Türkiye and the KRG has been an integral part of the steadily growing relations between Türkiye and Iraq. According to recent data, the bilateral trade volume between Türkiye and Iraq has continued to surge, reaching a historic record of \$24 billion in 2022.

Iraq has always been one of Türkiye's top trading partners. A considerable part of this trade is with the KRI, with the region constituting an inroad to Iraq for the Turkish business community.

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Türkiye's partnership with the KRG not only holds historical significance but also promises a brighter future for both sides

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Trade statistics reveal the diversified nature of our economic engagement. We observe a thriving exchange of goods, with exports and imports covering a broad spectrum of industries. Türkiye exports a wide range of goods to the KRI, including food products, construction materials, furniture, and machinery. We are looking forward to diversifying and expanding our trade relations in the future.

The Habur/Ibrahim Khalil border gate

One of the vital lifelines that sustains the thriving relationship between Türkiye and the KRG is the Habur/Ibrahim Khalil border gate. This strategic



President Masoud Barzani (right) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (left)

link enables the efficient flow of goods, services, and people, and thus creates a vibrant economic corridor.

Year after year, this border crossing witnesses an impressive volume of trade, facilitating the exchange of goods and commodities valued at billions of dollars. With state-of-the-art infrastructure, streamlined customs procedures, and a commitment to international standards, Habur/Ibrahim Khalil has become a model for border management.

It is, however, more than just a point of exchange. The border gate symbolizes the ease with which both sides conduct business, reinforcing the message that Türkiye and the KRG are partners on a journey of progress and prosperity. The success of Habur/Ibrahim Khalil is a result of harmonious efforts from both sides, allowing commerce to flourish and spurring development in the KRI.

Although Habur/Ibrahim Khalil is the main artery for our economic and trade relations, we need to increase the number of such crossings to manage our vast interactions across the border more efficiently. We have thus opened the Uzunlu-Sar Zerri and Derecik-Zet border crossings in recent years. With additional efforts to open additional crossings, we can further promote our partnership in a way that benefits Iraq, the KRI, and Türkiye.

Investment relations

Investment is another cornerstone of our relations with the KRG. In recent years, a large number of Turkish companies have invested significantly in various sectors, ranging from infrastructure and housing to energy, thus contributing to the economic development of the KRI. Over nearly 15 years, Turkish construction companies have invested over \$6 billion, contributing to job creation and prosperity for the people in the region.

These investments have spurred economic growth and fostered stronger cultural ties and people-to-people relations. The KRI has thus become a significant destination for Turkish entrepreneurs who are seeking new avenues for expansion, showcasing Türkiye's faith in the region's potential.

Energy cooperation

Energy cooperation between Türkiye and the KRG has long been a focal point of our relationship, with the export of Kurdish oil to international markets via Türkiye bolstering the KRI's economy and contributing to international energy security. Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Alparslan Bayraktar recently announced that the Kirkuk-Cey-

han oil pipeline is ready for operations after a six-month suspension following the devastating earthquake in Türkiye this year. We hope that the current disputes between Baghdad and Erbil are resolved soon in a sustainable manner so that oil will flow again through the pipeline. We are also maintaining our engagement with Baghdad regarding this issue.

The Development Road Project

The Development Road Project (DRP) is a strategic infrastructure project that will connect Türkiye and Iraq to their neighbors and the rest of the world through a network of roads, railways, and pipelines. A more efficient and cost-effective route for transportation will promote regional integration and cooperation and create thousands of jobs during the construction and operation phases.

Türkiye is a natural partner in this project, and we firmly believe that once realized, the DRP will create a win-win situation for Iraq, the KRI, and Türkiye.

Facing common challenges

One of the most compelling aspects of the Türkiye-KRG relationship is our shared geography and the opportunities it presents. However, this brings with it the responsibility to eradicate common security challenges, most prominently the terrorist attacks committed by the PKK.

Unfortunately, for decades the PKK terrorists had found refuge in Iraq and the KRI, constantly threatening the national security of Türkiye and posing a challenge for the security and stability of Iraq and the KRI. Only when PKK elements are uprooted from Iraqi territories can Iraq, the KRI, and Türkiye realize the true potential in our relations.



Turkish Consul General Memet Mevlut Yakut (right) meeting with BCF President Musa Ahmad to thank the Kurdish organization for its humanitarian response to the earthquake in Turkey on Feb. 23, 2023

In short, our common future is intertwined, and our success in facing common challenges will be essential toward ensuring regional stability and prosperity.

The path forward

As we celebrate the centenary of the founding of the Turkish Republic, we must reflect on our past accomplishments and look to the future to further enhance our relations. To this end, there is a clear need to continue strengthening the infrastructure connectivity between Iraq, the KRI, and Türkiye. We will continue to support initiatives aiming at facilitating our bilateral trade relations as well as transit trade to other regions, especially to the Gulf and Europe.

Moreover, diversifying the sectors for investment presents an exciting prospect. Encouraging Turkish businesses to explore opportunities in fields such as renewable energy, e-trade, health care and medical technologies, financial technology, and banking will not only boost the KRI's development but also reaffirm Türkiye's status as a key partner.

Resilient bonds in trying times

The resilient bonds between Türkiye and the KRG are not just confined to prosperity but extend to support in times of adversity. It is worth recalling the touching solidarity shown by the KRG following the devastating earthquake that struck Türkiye on February 6, 2023. The KRG swiftly offered assistance, sending relief teams and aid to the affected areas. This gesture of compassion went beyond a diplomatic or official response and reflected our deep and genuine friendship. As Türkiye has helped our Kurdish friends in Iraq in the past on multiple occasions, we appreciated similar sentiments that prevail in the KRI and the solidarity that was demonstrated after the "disaster of the century" in Türkiye.

In conclusion, the Türkiye-KRG relationship is a shining example of how two sides can achieve prosperity and stability through cooperation across various fields. With a shared geography and a common future, Türkiye and the KRG are poised to continue reaping the benefits of this multifaceted cooperation. ●

An Exclusive Interview Japan's Role in Kurdistan's Development

Kurdistan Chronicle

As the third largest economy in the world, Japan undoubtedly plays a significant role in the countries where it is involved. Japan's diplomatic history with Iraq dates to 1939, when it opened its legation in Baghdad. This relationship deepened over the years, with the legation being upgraded to an embassy in 1960. Despite a temporary cessation of embassy functions in 1991 due to the Gulf War, Japan recognized the Iraqi Interim Government in 2004, and opened a consular office in Erbil in 2017.

Japan and Iraq have significant trade relations, with 58 billion yen of trade volume between the two countries, according to 2020 statistics from the Japanese Ministry of Finance. Moreover, Japan has been a substantial contributor to Iraq's reconstruction, pledging \$5 billion in financial assistance in 2003, providing grant, yen loan, humanitarian assistance, and debt reduction, totaling around \$18.7 billion. This underscores Japan's strong commitment to Iraq's development and stability.

In an exclusive interview with the Japanese Ambassador to Iraq, Futoshi Matsumoto, Kurdistan Chronicle delved into his insights on the evolving dynamics of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the growing potential for collaboration between Kurdistan and Japan, and his observations on the region's transformation over the years. Below is the transcript of Ambassador Matsumoto's interview with Kurdistan Chronicle that has been edited for length and clarity.

Kurdistan Chronicle (KC): When was your first visit to the KRI and what was your first impression?

Futoshi Matsumoto (FM): My first visit to the KRI, particularly Erbil, was sometime in late 2016. At that time, I was based in Beirut and Damascus and had a chance to visit Erbil. Then I came last year after I assumed my position in Baghdad as Ambassador of Japan to Iraq. During those six years, I observed many developments in Kurdistan. Also, the younger generation assume important positions in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Therefore, my impression about change in Kurdistan is that

it has happened quickly. Old timers are fading, and the new generation is coming. There is obviously a much younger population here in the KRI, so we shouldn't expect things to move at a very slow pace like in Japan, where we have a rather mature population. Here change happens every day, be it positive or negative.

While visiting universities across the KRI, I see very talented young people who are aspiring for their future. Many of them speak foreign languages, some even spoke a little Japanese. The important point here is how these people will find real opportunities. Some may go abroad to find success, but at the same time I can see that some Kurdish nationals who lived abroad for years are now returning to join the public or private sector. So, I'd say that there is a certain dynamism here, particularly among young people. That is the point that I'm betting on for the future development of the society.

This is about human capacity. The KRI should support the growth of its human capacity by providing job opportunities and appropriate training, as well as basic and higher education. Recently I attended the completion ceremony of a school building built by a Japanese non-governmental organization called IVY, which is dedicated to the internally displaced persons who were forced to flee their homes by ISIS. What I can see in the KRI is that public schools are not as strong as they should be, which is something I learned after speaking to many educators and the KRG Minister of Education. I believe that upgrading the level of the education sector is critical for the society to develop.

I'm always emphasizing that education is not only necessary for its own sake, but also for future economic growth. Without educated people, you cannot advance your private sector. I visited Toyota's Iraq office here in Erbil. They have provided numerous trainings to their staff to improve the provision of services to their customers, which has been quite effective.

KC: What cultural similarities exist between Kurdistan and Japan?

FM: We both respect older people. Society here is a sort of tribal society, so if you see the tribal chief or a religious lead-



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

Futoshi Matsumoto, Ambassador of Japan to Iraq



Futoshi Matsumoto, Ambassador of Japan to Iraq

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

er, normally people respect them. In both societies, you should listen to what your father tells you because he is older than you. In Western societies, for instance, a simple reason like age is not enough to obligate you to show respect.

Another thing that Japanese and Kurds share is reservedness or modesty when it comes to expressing your feelings or emotions.

KC: *How would you describe the current state of Japan-Kurdistan relations and what is the significance of these relations?*

FM: To be frank, I feel like there is a lot to be done. Six years ago, due to ISIS, this region was inaccessible to ordinary people. But now there is, finally, relative stability. For this reason, we see Japanese Toyota, or Sumitomo Corporation, to be exact, is stationed here for the distribution of many Japanese products. This is a good sign. But a more stable and predictable political situation is needed for further Japanese investment to come. Businesses prefer to invest in more stable environments. If there are risks or a high level of unpredictability, they aren't willing to invest.

I spoke with a Kurdish businessman who recently returned from Sweden. If the rest of the Kurdish businessmen are ready to return to Kurdistan and invest their money here, obviously more Japanese companies will come.

In Japan, we did the post-war reconstruction after 1945 with our own hands. Nobody emigrated to other countries. But your people emigrated to Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, and never returned. In the case of Japan, all the Japanese returned and rebuilt the country. So, you need a sense of nationalism and stability for people to return.

KC: *Don't you think that stability, especially in this very complex part of the Middle East, is often affected by external factors rather than internal ones?*

FM: That's fully agreeable. But there is too much tendency on the side of the locals to blame others without making their own efforts to shape the situation. When it comes to economic policy, there is a lot to do here.

KC: *What areas offer the greatest potential for Kurdistan and Japan to develop further cooperation?*

FM: Even during my visits to Kurdish universities, I find academic exchange very useful because Kurdistan has very high-level students, and there is an eagerness for academic exchange. Maybe that's an area towards more efforts could be directed.

Currently, we are working on giving more concessional loans through Baghdad to several projects in Kurdistan, which would help Japanese companies building infrastructure. For example, the KRI's water supply network was upgraded by Japanese companies through concessional loans. Currently we are in talks with the KRG for the second phase of the sewage system in Erbil. If we increase the amount and number of loans, it will pave the way for bringing more Japanese companies to the region to support building infrastructure.

Meanwhile, we are also providing technical support in certain areas. For instance, we are sending experts to the Kurdistan agriculture research center to identify exportable agricultural materials, training antiquity experts for the preservation of antiquities, and exploring ways to promote tourism in the KRI in conjunction with our cooperation with the Directorate General of Antiquities and Heritage.

In addition, we recently completed the Deralok Dam in Duhok Governorate, a project financed and supervised by the Japan International Cooperation Agency. ●

Combating the Use of Drugs



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.

On October 15, 2023, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Office of the Coordinator for International Advocacy hosted the first anti-narcotics conference in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The conference aimed to discuss efforts to increase international cooperation to combat narcotics as well as

tighten domestic measures limiting illicit trade and consumption.

KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani delivered a speech in which he emphasized the importance of tackling drug crimes collectively, describing the spread of narcotics and psychoactive drugs as one of the most “perilous phenomena of our time.”

The KRG is working diligently to combat this threat, making earnest efforts to eradicate it and prevent its spread. For this purpose, Legislation No. 1 of 2020, “Combating Drugs and Psychoactive Substances in the Kurdistan Region,” was enacted. According to Prime Minister Barzani, “this legislation obliges all relevant institutions in the region to coordinate and collabo-



Drug incineration by Kurdistan Region's department of anti-narcotics

Photo: Safin Hamid

rate on its implementation.”

Prime Minister Barzani compared the threat of psychoactive drugs to the threat of terrorism facing the KRI.

“The KRI faces hostility in multiple ways, and one of the most dangerous methods is through the spread of psychoactive drugs. These substances are used covertly and overtly against the region to distort our society and harm the health and potential of our youth. It is imperative to confront this threat vigorously because the dangers posed by psychoactive drugs are no less than those posed by terrorism,” Prime Minister Barzani said.

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”

“Mafias and smugglers have made the KRI a target for their nefarious plans, attempting to exploit our region’s geography as a gateway to smuggle drugs to other areas. They employ various methods to achieve this, leading to a rise in drug addiction in our region. It is therefore imperative for relevant KRG institutions to forcefully tackle these smugglers and thwart their treacherous intentions,” Prime Minister Barzani added.

Prime Minister Barzani also mentioned the security vacuum in the disputed territories of Article 140, also known as “Kurdistan Areas Outside the control of the KRG.” Furthermore, the presence of militant groups on the border between the KRI and neighboring countries contributes to instability and

hinders the ability of the KRG security forces to combat drug traffickers.

“Unfortunately, some of these militant groups are involved in drug trafficking themselves,” Barzani said.

ing drug traffickers and in treating and rehabilitating addicts,” he said.

Alarming figures and regional cooperation

Drug trafficking and use in the KRI



The Anti-narcotics Conference organized by the KRG's Office of the Coordinator for International Advocacy on Oct. 15, 2023

Prime Minister Barzani called for local and international collaboration to address the root causes of what he described as “an epidemic.”

“To rehabilitate drug addicts and reintegrate them into society, the KRG is working to build an addiction rehabilitation center. We urge the private sector to assist the government in combat-

and Iraq have seen a concerning increase since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Recent statistics paint a grim picture, posing a significant threat to society.

Kwestan Mohammed, the KRG Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, unveiled alarming figures for 2023: 1,097

individuals in the KRI were convicted of drug use and trafficking charges, with 74 women and 1,023 men among them. Of these, 480 were traffickers, and 617 were drug addicts.

In late August, a significant drug bust in Erbil resulted in the seizure of over

phasized the importance of a united effort to combat drug trafficking in the country. He highlighted close cooperation between his ministry and other government ministries and their counterparts in the KRG. This includes initiatives such as training camps to bolster the ability of security forces to

boring countries to combat this issue, mentioning upcoming operations that would have a significant impact on drug traffickers.

“A few days ago, we detained an international smuggler and, through his guidance, we were able to reach the drug manufacturing factory in southern Iraq,” al-Shammari said.

He also discussed border security, mentioning a significant allocation of funds to build police stations on the border with Iran, particularly in Sulaymaniyah. He highlighted that improved border control measures, including the installation of towers along the borders with Iran, Syria, and other regions, have been effective.

“The Iraqi-Syrian border is 620 kilometers long and is better secured because of the fences that have been installed. We are continuing to build concrete walls, with 70 km currently constructed,” said al-Shammari.

Nasrollah Rashnoudi, Iran’s Consul General in Erbil, stated at the conference that Iran has always demonstrated its willingness to coordinate and assist regional countries in their efforts to combat the opioid epidemic.

Rashnoudi also stated that smugglers frequently target children and that “we must fight them in every way possible.”

Meanwhile, Mark Stroh, U.S. Consul General in Erbil, stated that the U.S. government has published a strategy for combating Captagon trafficking, which includes supporting law enforcement operations, implementing economic sanctions, assisting regional partners, and leveraging diplomatic engagement in the fight against drug trafficking and consumption.

According to Stroh, the United States is concerned about the effects of Captagon and other drugs on the health, economy, and social welfare of the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and the KRI. ●

100 kilograms of narcotics, including Captagon pills, crystal methamphetamine, and heroin. Captagon pills, an amphetamine-like stimulant also known as fenethylline, are among the most widely trafficked drugs in Iraq, with many believed to originate in war-torn Syria.

Iraq’s Minister of Interior Lieutenant General Abdul-Amir al-Shammari em-

combat drug trafficking and educational workshops aimed at raising awareness about the dangers of drug use and psychotropic substances.

During an interview with Al-Arabiya and Al-Hadath networks following the conference, al-Shammari revealed that drugs come from Iran and Syria through linked networks. He stressed the need for coordination with neigh-

40 Years of the Kurdish Institute in Paris



Jan Dost

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

Founded in February 1983, the Kurdish Institute of Paris (KIP) is an independent, non-political, secular organization that supports Kurdish intellectuals and artists from different horizons as well as Western specialists on Kurdistan.

Forty years ago in Paris, KIP was founded with one mission at its core: to promote Kurdish culture beyond the borders of Kurdistan.

KIP seeks to preserve the Kurdish community's linguistic, historical, and cultural identity, helping Kurdish immigrants integrate into their European host communities, and raising awareness about Kurds, their culture, homeland, and current circumstances among the broader public in France and beyond.

In an exclusive interview, *Kurdistan Chronicle* spoke with Dr. Kendal Nezan, a respect-

ed Kurdish nuclear physicist and president of KIP about the fascinating journey of the institute, its achievements, and its plans for the future.

***Kurdistan Chronicle (KC):** This is the 40th anniversary of KIP, which has played a remarkable role in promoting Kurdish culture on an international level. Could you tell us about the birth of the institute, the ideas behind it, and why such an organization was necessary back then?*

Kendal Nezan (KN): KIP was established in February 1983 at a time when the Kurdish people were undergoing one of the darkest periods in their history. The Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein's war against the Iraqi Kurds, Ayatollah Khomeini's war against the Iranian Kurds, and the terrible military coup of September 1980 in Turkey all led to the influx of tens of thousands of Kurdish asylum seekers to Europe and France. The Kurdish resistance became divided, frag-



(Left to right): Dr. Kendal Nezan, President Masoud Barzani, and Jalal Talabani at a dining reception in Paris in 1993

Photo: Avesta Archive



Dr. Kendal Nezan



Photo: Avesta Archive

■ Dr. Kendal Nezan joining Kurdish politicians at a parliament session in Kurdistan

mented, and inaudible in Europe.

It was against this backdrop that we founded KIP with filmmaker Yilmaz Guney, who had just won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for his film Yol, and a dozen other Kurdish intellectuals and artists from all parts of Kurdistan. Among the founders were Cigerxwin, Hejar, Taufiq Wahby, Ismet Cheriff Vanly, Nureddin Zaza, Qanate Kurdo, Heciyê Cindi, the painter Remzi, Ordixane Celil, and Osman Sabri. By bringing these great figures, we wanted to give the Kurdish people a glimmer of hope and become a symbol of Kurdish moral unity. Later, around a hundred other Kurdish, French, and Western intellectuals and artists joined the institute's ranks, including Dr. Joyce Blau, Dr. Najmiddin Karim, Dr. Fuad Hussein, Dr. Abbas Vali, Sivan Perwer, and Mehmed Uzun.

KC: *KIP is deeply involved in diplomacy, working like a Kurdish embassy in the French capital. To what extent has*

it contributed to strengthening relations between Kurdistan and France? How did you manage to attract so many top French politicians to the Kurdish cause?

KN: At the outset, our activities focused on welcoming and guiding our Kurdish compatriots who were seeking asylum and setting up a documentation center to help journalists learn about the situation of the Kurdish people. At the time, the institute was the only permanent independent Kurdish structure open to the public.

Thanks to its interactions with the French and Western media, it soon became well known in political circles, first in Europe, later in the United States and Soviet Union. The support of personalities such as Danielle Mitterrand, the wife of then-French President François Mitterrand; Dr. Bernard Kouchner, former French Minister of Foreign and European Affairs; Jack Lang, former French Minister of Culture; and Swedish politician Pierre Schori, has helped us enormously



Photo: Avesta Archive

■ (Left to right): Leyla Zana, Kurdish politician from Turkey, Danielle Mitterrand, late French First Lady, and Dr. Kendal Nezan

and opened many doors.

As spokespeople for a people without a voice on the international stage and without an embassy or recognized political representation, we mobilized our energy and our Western friends to promote international public opinion in favor of the Kurdish cause. After the gassing of Halabja, we organized an international conference in Paris in October 1989, with the support of the French government, to internationalize the Kurdish question. For the first time, representatives of all Kurdish political parties without exception were brought together, along with delegations from 32 countries. The U.S. del-

cisive role during the Kurdish exodus of 1991 in influencing the U.S. decision to support UN Resolution 688 and create a safe haven for Iraqi Kurds. The late Dr. Najmaddin Karim, Vice President of KIP at the time, and U.S. diplomat Peter Galbraith played an important role in our activities in the United States.

In July 1990, we also organized a three-day international conference in Moscow through the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, with the support of President Gorbachev. Over 1,400 Kurdish delegates from nine Soviet republics attended the conference, the stated aim of which was de-

Soviet decision to support UN Resolution 688. President Gorbachev and his wife Raissa had been made aware of the Kurdish question by Danielle Mitterrand and were sympathetic to the aspirations of the Kurdish people.

In the field of lobbying, among many other activities which, for lack of space, cannot be described here, let us mention the International Appeal for the Defense of Kurdish Culture in Turkey signed by a thousand personalities from several countries, including 24 Nobel Prize laureates, some 15 American senators, Winnie Mandela, and Danielle Mitterrand. Published in major Western newspapers, including



Photo: Avesta Archive

■ (Left to right): Kendal Nezan, Lionel Jospin, and Bernard Kouchner, in Paris in 1989

egation was led by Senator Clairborne Pell, the then-Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; the Soviet delegation included Yelena Bonner, the wife of physicist Andrei Sakharov, Kurdish academics Nadir Nadirov and Shakire Miho, and the historian Manvel Gasratjan.

On February 27, 1991, we organized a conference in the U.S. Senate on the future of the Kurds after the Gulf War, attended by Kurdish leaders such as Jalal Talabani, Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, Hoshiyar Zebari, Adnan Mufti and eight leading U.S. Senators including Edward Kennedy, Clairborne Pell, John Kerry, Paul Simon, and Nancy Pelosi. This "Kurdish lobby" played a de-

termining the status and future of the Kurds in the Soviet Union. We worked with the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs to invite some twenty Kurdish political figures, including Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, Dr. Mahmoud Othman, Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi, and Aziz Mohammed, former Secretary General of the Iraqi Communist Party. On the sidelines of the conference, President Mikhail Gorbachev's diplomatic adviser, Yevgeny Primakov, who later became Prime Minister, held a lengthy meeting with the Iraqi Kurdish leaders. This conference, publicized in the Soviet press, raised awareness of the plight of the Kurdish people in Iraq among the public and Soviet politicians. I believe it played an important role in the

Le Monde, International Herald Tribune, The Guardian, and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, as well as Turkish newspapers in June 1988. the appeal had a major impact in Turkey, where President Turgut Ozal finally abolished the laws in 1991 that had banned the use of the Kurdish language and publications in Kurdish and about Kurds. KIP also popularized the cause of the Kurdish deputies imprisoned in Turkey in 1994 by creating an international defense committee chaired exceptionally by President François Mitterrand. As a result of this campaign, the European Parliament awarded its prestigious Sakharov Prize to Kurdish MP Leyla Zana, who was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.



(From left): Abdullah Hasanzadeh, Bernard Kouchner, and Kendal Nezan at Kurdish Institute of Paris in 1989

Few people remember that it was KIP that organized the first conference in Oslo in June 1995, in partnership with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to seek a political settlement to the Kurdish question in Turkey. In 2008, we also launched an appeal for a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish question in Turkey, signed by a thousand Kurdish personalities from all political and cultural walks of life, including mayors, members of parliament, and intellectuals. This appeal, published in the international press, created a public debate on the subject in Europe and Turkey, and served as the basis for the peace process later launched between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a process which, despite the announced Dolmabahce protocol agreement, has not yet come to fruition.

KC: *The institute's website states that many foreign intellectuals and artists over the years have joined KIP's Sponsorship Committee and advanced its mission. On the list, the name Simone de Beauvoir caught my attention. Could you explain more about her role and that of others who have offered you a helping hand?*

KN: Before KIP was founded, as a young student I set up a France-Kurdistan Association with writer Gerard Chaliand and a few friends to inform the French public about the Kurdish cause. We began by meeting leading French intellectuals, raising their awareness and gaining their support. This is how I met Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who agreed to be part of our Sponsorship Committee and gave us very useful advice and media contacts to publicize the Kurdish cause. Among other activities, the association has published a collective work entitled *People Without A Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, which has been translated into ten languages.

KC: *Since the very beginning, you have always tried to keep an equal distance from Kurdish political parties and stay out of their disputes to remain impartial. Yet the institute has managed to play an important role in promoting the Kurdish cause. How did you manage that?*

KN: KIP is an NGO, an initiative of independent Kurdish citizens. We want to have the best possible relations with all Kurdish political parties which, in their diversity, are indispensable to Kurdish political life. But we do not want any party or government to control KIP. Likewise, we have refused to enter into any relationship with any state that oppresses its Kurdish population or any non-democratic state. It is this independence that ensures the institute's credibility with institutions and public opinion. As probably the first independent Kurdish NGO in history, we have sometimes been met with incomprehension on the part of certain Kurdish partners, but our independence is now accepted.

KC: *It goes without saying that KIP has contributed massively to Kurdish culture and literature. Your institute has published or supported the publication of countless books and prints Kurmanji magazine. How do these cultural publications make an impact, especially among the French scholars who study Kurdistan?*

KN: Our work in the field of language has made a major contribution to the standardization and revival of Kurmanji. Since 1987, we have been bringing Kurdish writers and linguists together twice a year for a week-long linguistic seminar. The vocabulary of the various Kurdish languages is systematically collected and translated into English, French, and Turkish. We also propose terminologies for the various do-

main of modern life to make Kurmanji a rich, modern language. This work is published in the Kurmanji magazine, which has 68 issues published to date, and translated into Turkish by the institute of Kurdish Grammar founded by Celadet Ali Bedir Khan and Roger Lescot. This has enabled the Kurds of Turkey, as well as those of Syria, Lebanon, and the Caucasus, to have a largely standardized language currently used by almost all Kurdish media. In 2017, we also published a Kurdish-French Dictionary with 85,000 entries, a Kurdish-Turkish version of which is due to appear in 2024. KIP has also supported seminars on the Kirdki-Dimilki dialect, also known as Zazaki.

as it was in the 1980s and 1990s. How do you see your institute today?

KN: Over the past 40 years, the world has changed a great deal. The Middle East has undergone upheavals, and Kurdistan has changed too. In the age of the Internet, satellite TV, and smartphones, KIP is adapting its missions. Iraqi Kurdistan has become a quasi-state, hosting some thirty consulates with its own representations abroad, and we are delighted by this. Rojava also has some representation here and there. In this context, the institute's diplomatic action, or rather its public and cultural diplomacy, is becoming less visible and less publicized, except in times of crisis like the war against ISIS

of Culture Jack Lang, diplomats, and well-known intellectuals attended the Institute's 40th anniversary celebration in the magnificent salons of Paris City Hall.

With its modest financial means, KIP continues to pursue its basic missions: a library for students, researchers, and journalists from all over the world; the publication of monthly newsletters in French and English, with 462 issues to date; reviews and books; artistic activities such as painting and photography exhibitions; Kurmanji seminars; and a program to train Kurdish secular elites in French universities. This program has trained over 540 Kurdish students to date from all regions of Kurdistan,



Kendal Nezan (ninth from left) enjoying a Kurdish dance next to Zadina Shekir and Ando Childergusbi in 1988

In addition, we have published numerous books and journals, including *Hêvî*, *Studia Kurdica*, and *Etudes Kurdes* and have amassed the richest Kurdish library abroad, with over 12,000 monographs in 25 languages, tens of thousands of documents, newspaper collections, music archives, and video archives, attracting researchers from all over the world, including China, Japan, Australia, Mexico, and Brazil. More than a million pages of our library's books and archives are digitized and, for the most part, available online at bnk.institutkurde.org.

KC: *Some people may believe that after four decades, KIP is no longer as active*

in 2014-2015.

After the Turkish incursion of Afrin, for example, the French National Assembly voted unanimously in favor of a resolution condemning it as a violation of international law at the suggestion of the institute. It is very rare for a resolution to be passed unanimously, and it was a great moral success for the Kurdish population, even if it did not change the situation on the ground.

More recently, on April 4, 2023, a host of celebrities, including former President François Hollande, former Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo, former Minister

the Caucasus, and Khorasan, many of whom have gone on to become university professors, engineers, lawyers, filmmakers, and diplomats. There are 25 PhD students from Turkey and Iran currently enrolled in the program, including 17 women. KIP has always given priority to the education of women, whose emancipation is fundamental to building a free and democratic future.

With greater financial resources, we could have invested more in building a more informed and better organized Kurdish diaspora, which numbers over two million and could play a major role in the building of a free and democratic future for the Kurdish people. ●

Schmidt's Wisdom on Iraq and the Kurds



Nahro Zagros

Nahro Zagros is the Editor-in-Chief of Kurdistan Chronicle and a Senior Fellow at Gold Institute for International Strategy in Washington, D.C.

In geopolitics, some voices echo across the ages. Dana Adams Schmidt, a distinguished journalist and former correspondent for *The New York Times*, penned a letter to British Colonel Wallace A. Lyon in 1966 that contained an uncanny relevance to contemporary events. Schmidt's assertion that Iraq's prosperity is intertwined with the Kurds rather than in

after World War I, had an unparalleled understanding of the region's complexities. Amid the withdrawal of Ottoman troops and the establishment of a provisional administration, Lyon recognized the Kurds' aspirations for self-rule. He passionately championed their cause, asserting that Iraq's stability hinged on acknowledging the Kurdish issue and granting autonomy



Dana Adams Schmidt with the late Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani in the mountains of Kurdistan, the 1960s

opposition to them rings with a poignant veracity. As we revisit Schmidt's letter and Lyon's legacy, it becomes painfully apparent that the lessons they highlighted six decades ago have yet to be heeded.

Historical context

Colonel Lyon, appointed as the British representative in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1918

to the Kurds.

Schmidt's significance in the Kurdish struggle cannot be understated. Covering the First Iraqi-Kurdish War, also known as the Aylul revolts, during the 1960s, he cultivated a close relationship with Kurdish leaders, becoming a confidant and chronicler of their brave fight for autonomy. Schmidt's book on the courage of Kurdish freedom



Dana Adams Schmidt with the late Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani playing chess, 1974

fighters, *Journey Among Brave Men*, vividly portrays the sacrifices made in their struggles in the mountains of Kurdistan.

Schmidt's letter to Colonel Lyon in 1966, written while he was stationed in London as a correspondent, resonated deeply with Lyon's own convictions. The letter's core tenet emphasized that collaboration with the Kurds rather than adversarial policies against them offered the best path to Iraq's stability. It was an endorsement of Lyon's decades-long endeavor to advocate for Kurdish rights and autonomy.

Broken commitments

Over the span of the last 70 years, a disheartening pattern has unfolded in Iraq's political landscape: central governments in Baghdad have consistently made pledges to address the concerns of the Kurdish population but have, more often than not, failed to translate these assurances into meaningful actions. This recurring cycle of unfulfilled

promises has cast a shadow over the relationship between the central government and the Kurdish community.

“ Collaboration with the Kurds rather than adversarial policies against them offered the best path to Iraq's stability ”

One of the central factors contributing to this cycle of broken commitments, especially since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, has been the persistent and acrimonious disputes that have characterized Iraq's post-liberation era. These disputes encompass a range of critical

issues, each of which plays a role in perpetuating the instability that has marred the nation's progress.

Power-sharing arrangements have been a major point of contention, as various political factions and ethnic groups have sought a voice in Iraq's governance structure. The promise of equitable representation has often fallen short of expectations, leading to feelings of marginalization and distrust. This failure to effectively distribute political influence has further fueled the perception among the Kurdish population that their concerns are not being adequately addressed within Iraq's broader political framework.

Similarly, the allocation of revenue and resources, particularly from Iraq's significant oil reserves, has been a source of tension between the central government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The lack of a transparent and mutually beneficial revenue-sharing system has deepened economic dispar-

ities and exacerbated grievances, which in turn has hindered overall development and fed the broader narrative of unmet promises.

“
Iraq’s history is punctuated by instances where commitments have been made with great optimism, only to be later reneged upon or inadequately implemented
”

Disputed territories – areas where ownership is claimed by both the central government and the Kurdish authorities – are another obstacle to stability. These disagreements have sparked localized conflicts and created an environment of uncertainty, preventing the nation from fully moving past its legacy of discord.

Cultural rights also play a pivotal role in this cycle of unfulfilled promises. The Kurdish community, as one of the main components of Iraq, has sought to safeguard its unique cultural identity within Iraq’s diverse landscape. Yet challenges related to language policies, educational curriculum, and the preservation of cultural heritage have often remained unresolved, further deepening the sense of dissatisfaction and estrangement.

A slow erosion of rights and unity

These factors have led to the initial hopes of stability and unity following Iraq’s liberation in 2003 being dashed. The cycle of pledges followed by unfulfilled actions has instead bred a sense of

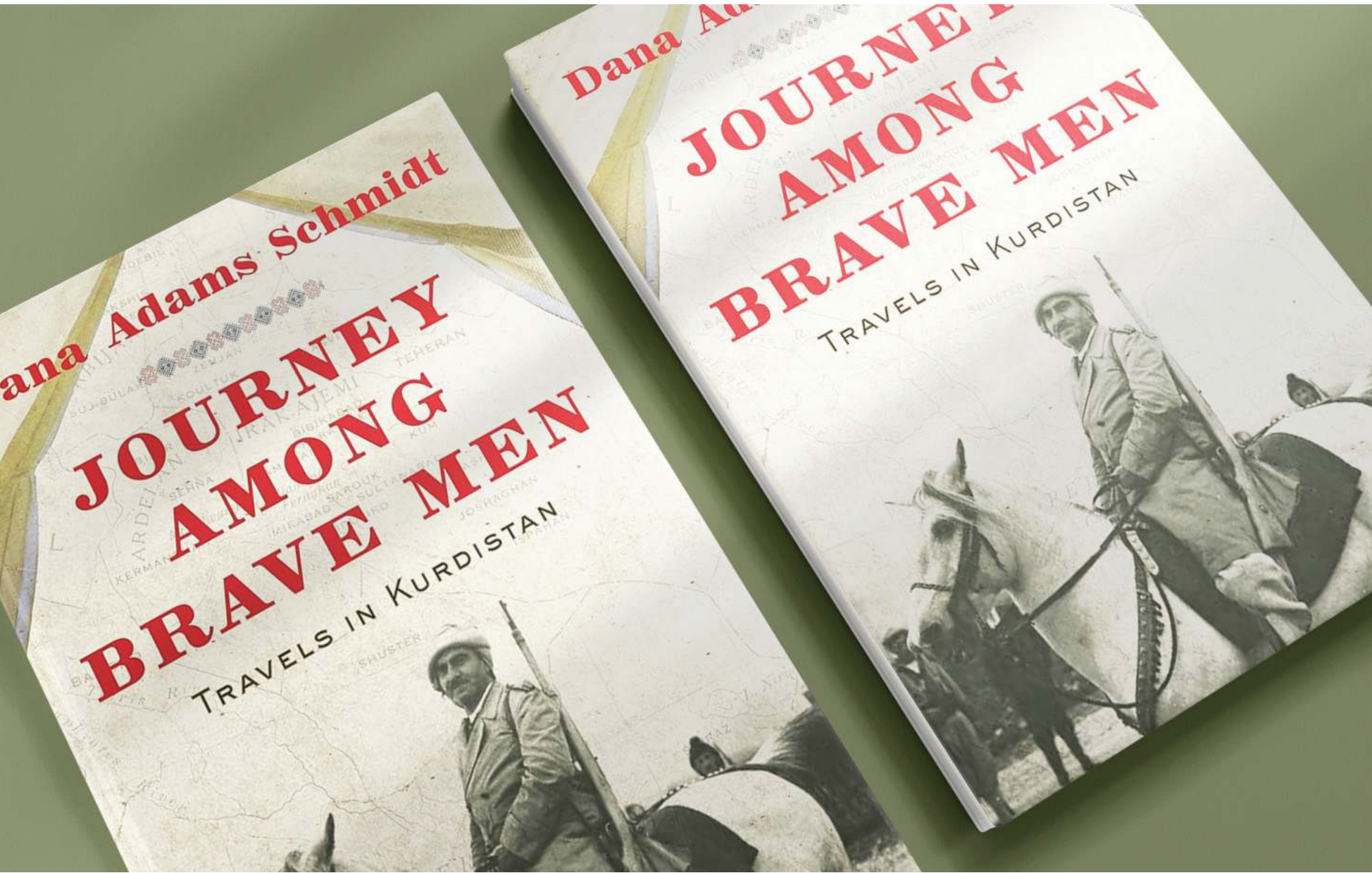
disillusionment and mistrust among the Kurdish population, making it increasingly challenging to forge a cohesive national identity.

In 1991, when the Kurds were granted protection following the establishment of a no-fly zone with UN Resolution 688, they formed a secure enclave where they held their inaugural democratic elections in 1992. This led to the KRI becoming a base for Iraqi opposition parties to establish their presence. Notably, without the KRI playing the role of safe haven, both Shi’a and Sunni opposition factions would not have been able to establish their bases of support against Saddam Hussein’s regime.

Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Kurds again played a pivotal role in the overthrow of Saddam. Moreover, they were instrumental in crafting the new Iraqi constitution. Many critical Kurdish rights were successfully incorporated into the constitution, encompassing the KRI’s share of revenue, disputed territories, acknowledgment of the Kurdish genocide, and various other entitlements.

However, since 2005 the Kurds have witnessed the erosion of their rights within Iraq, as constitutionally defined safeguards for the KRI have been largely disregarded. This disregard has manifested in attempts by Iraq to undermine the KRI’s stability and weaken its economy. Even though the KRI is the only prosperous area within Iraq, Baghdad seems intent on destabilizing its economic foundations.

The failure to address Kurdish concerns within Iraq not only poses challenges for the federal government of Iraq but also impacts the entirety of the Iraqi population. The strained relationship between the KRI and Iraq’s central government could potentially result in further devastation, thereby echoing historical patterns of conflict and destruction.



A new path forward

The latest accord inked in early April 2023 between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Federal Government marks a significant turning point, representing an earnest endeavor to bridge divergences and bring about the conclusion of longstanding hostilities. It reveals, in other words, a path toward mutual understanding and has the potential to reshape the dynamics of their relationship, promising a departure from the historical animosities that have plagued their interactions.

By addressing key issues such as power-sharing, resource allocation, and cultural rights, the accord also acknowledges the importance of inclusive governance and equitable distribution. In doing so, it seeks to establish a foundation for cooperation and coexistence that has, until now, been largely elusive. Nevertheless, it is prudent to approach it with a measure of skepticism. Iraq’s history is punctuated by instances where commitments have been made with great optimism, only to be later reneged upon or inadequately implemented. This history of unfulfilled promises casts a shadow of doubt over

the current agreement’s potential for enduring success. The Kurdish population and international observers alike are naturally wary, given that past experiences have left a trail of disillusionment and broken trust.

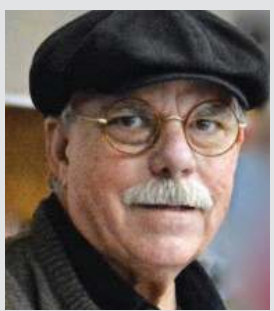
Reckoning with history

As we reflect on Schmidt’s timeless insights and Colonel Lyon’s unyielding advocacy, we must confront a painful reality. The cycle of neglecting the Kurds’ legitimate aspirations has perpetuated conflict and instability, casting a shadow over Iraq’s potential prosper-

ity. Schmidt’s words serve as a reminder that unity, diversity, and cooperation are the cornerstones of a thriving nation.

Iraq’s destiny lies not in alienating its Kurdish population, but in embracing their contributions and aspirations. Schmidt’s letter and Lyon’s legacy compel us to ask whether Iraq will finally learn from history or remain ensnared in the perils of repeating it. Only through genuine collaboration, understanding, and shared aspirations can Iraq truly flourish as a diverse and unified nation. ●

Unbelievable Kurdistan



Douglas Layton

Dr. Douglas Layton is an American author, businessman, and champion of human rights in the Middle East. He has spent much of his last 25 years working in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He has worked for the U.S. State Department as Country Director of one of the largest healthcare projects ever undertaken in Kurdistan.



Photo: Safin Hamid



■ Kurdistan Tour Guide 2015-2016' by Dr. Douglas Layton

I have been leading fellow adventurers for nearly half a century to explore over 100 countries. While all of these places have been fascinating, none has sparked the imagination quite like Kurdistan. Those who have joined me on these expeditions have hailed from countries as diverse as the United States, Mongolia, and others too numerous to mention. They have come from sundry backgrounds: doctors, professors, journalists, filmmakers, or just the curious who want to experience firsthand the wonders of the world.

In January 1992, I led the first post-Gulf War tour into Kurdistan. The group consisted primarily of medical professionals from the United States who were keen to experience unique

cultures and historical sites but were also kind enough to attend to the medical needs of Kurds who had suffered from Saddam's brutality. My philosophy has always embodied one principle: take away the fantastic experiences that the region offers; leave something behind that makes it a little better off than when we found it.

Kurdistan: The Other Iraq

After the 2003 Iraq War, I believed that Kurdistan would become the premier tour destination in the Middle East. With financial assistance from the Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, I conceived and launched what became the largest public relations campaign in the his-

tory of Kurdistan and remains so today. I titled it "Kurdistan: The *Other Iraq*."

Many told me no one would ever come to Iraq as a tourist. "Perhaps not," I replied. "But they will come to the other Iraq." Kurdistan has excellent security, incredible scenery, a warm and welcoming people, and, together with the rest of Iraq, more historical and archeological sites than any other country. The campaign met with tremendous success, garnering more than half a million search engine hits to our website along with a quarter of a million downloads of a three-part mini documentary series highlighting the history, scenery, and culture of Kurdistan.

In the wake of the campaign, I founded the region's first inwardly focused tour company, initially named The Other Iraq Tours. This enterprise eventually morphed into what it is today, *Explore Mesopotamia* – a locally based corporation serving many of the world's largest and most prestigious adventure travel companies. Within two years of the company's founding, National Geographic named Kurdistan among the top 20 destinations in the world. *The New York Times* and *USA Today* followed suit. Kurdistan became famous, and the number of visitors began to grow. Those who called me crazy soon added "like a fox" to the end of that statement.

Persevering through thick and thin

Some copied our model but disappeared when ISIS showed up. Tourism went from booming to zero overnight. I recall those around me who said that, while it had been a good run, it was time to pack up and go home. However, "quit" is not in my lexicon. It was a perfect time to write and publish the first-ever comprehensive *Guide to Kurdistan*. People again thought I was crazy – a tour guide in the middle of a war?

We approached the region's corpora-

tions and convinced them that Kurdistan was now famous for standing up to ISIS – the modern-day David defeating Goliath – and that it was a perfect time to tell the world the story of this land. *CNN*, *BBC*, and *Fox News* were highlighting the status of the Kurds' battle against ISIS on a daily basis. What an opportunity to point out that Kurdistan was not merely a band of indefatigable *peshmerga*, but also a land of snow-covered mountains, lakes, and streams, featuring the oldest continuously inhabited city on earth, Erbil, the oldest aqueduct bridge ruin in history at Jerwan, the center of the ancient Yezidi faith at Lalish, the oldest monasteries in the world... The list goes on and on.

“
This war will end
like all the others,
and “Unbelievable
Kurdistan” will remain
one of the most
fascinating destinations
in the world
”

Forward-thinking companies in Kurdistan rose to the occasion and made *Kurdistan Guide* a wildly successful endeavor with distribution in over 50 countries. When the war with ISIS ended, *Explore Mesopotamia* was once again the undisputed leader of the tour industry in the Kurdistan Region. Others, of course, have unofficially popped up again, but overseas travel companies who depend on experience and steadfastness have relied on us since our inception decades ago and will continue to do so.

The Covid-19 pandemic again ended the emulators, but we held on. We took the downtime the pandemic necessitated to train new guides and expand our business. Why? Simple. I have learned

two things through the six wars I have experienced and all the epidemics and pandemics I have encountered: 1) people die during these tough times, and 2) the tough times always end. If one can survive and find the opportunity amid the crisis, we can become stronger than when the crisis began. It is an old principle articulated by the philosopher Nietzsche. It is also a principle employed by the Kurds throughout their tumultuous history. Many have tried to eradicate the Kurds, the most recent attempt being the would-be genocide perpetrated by Saddam. But the Kurds survived and prospered. So did *Explore Mesopotamia*.

Looking ahead

Now, we face a new crisis. The war between Israel and Hamas is raging, with the potential to spark a wider conflict. Tourism is suffering. Scheduled tours are being canceled or postponed indefinitely as adventurers are in a wait-and-see mode. Most easy-come, easy-go entities will close their doors again. We will not.

I have been yearning to produce and publish a new *Guide to Kurdistan* (Edition II) and a comprehensive full-color *Guide to South Iraq*. The projects are underway, and my staff is focusing on this history-making project. We will continue to run tours as our more adventurous clients desire. Kurdistan is as safe now as it has been in previous years. If it ceases to be safe, we will suspend the tours, but only until the storm has passed. Regardless of what others do, we will emerge, as always, more vital than ever – just like the Kurds.

I cannot wait to hold the new guidebooks in my hand, with a publication date set for the summer of 2025. This war will end like all the others, and “Unbelievable Kurdistan” will remain one of the most fascinating destinations in the world. After all, what lover of history and diverse cultures would pass up the chance to visit the cradle of civilization? ●

The Diplomat with a Philanthropic Mission



Sardar Sattar

Sardar Sattar is a translator and journalist based in the Kurdistan Region. He has an MA in English Studies from the University of Lodz, Poland. He has translated several books and political literature into Kurdish and English. He writes regularly for local and international newspapers and journals.

While politics might evoke controversy for most people, there is one exceptional politician who defies these stereotypes: Ziyad Raoof, the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) representative to Poland, who is not just a diplomat but also a well-known philanthropist, humanitarian, and cultural advocate. Raoof's life story embodies resilience, compassion, and a profound dedication to cultural exchange. Raised in a family deeply engaged in national liberation movements and advocacy for democracy in Iraq, his life has been marked by both hardship and an unwavering commitment to making the world a better place for all.

A family shaped by struggle

Raoof's journey begins in Erbil, the current capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). He was born into a family of educators, for whom a large bookshelf in the living room played a significant role in the upbringing of the children. Raoof inherited a legacy of advocating for democracy and human rights,



Ziyad Raoof, Kurdistan Regional Government's Representative to Poland



Ziyad Raoof, KRG Representative to Poland, pictured during his youth, surrounded by cherished family and friends

including those of the Kurds, who had suffered drastically under the rule of different oppressive regimes in Iraq. His father faced imprisonment multiple times as a result of his support for the freedom of Kurdistan. During the 1940s, he was at the forefront of the Kurdish freedom movement, for which he was sentenced to five years in prison in the 1950s.

Raoof's mother was equally passionate about education, freedom, democracy, and women's rights. As an active journalist, she wrote on women's rights in Kurdistan, making her mark through contributions to newspapers like *Tariq al-Shaab*. The young Ziyad Raoof thus grew up surrounded by inspiring role models.

Speaking to *Kurdistan Chronicle* during an exclusive interview, Raoof explained how his family's involvement in liberation movements inspired him to dedicate his life to the Kurdish cause. This path, however, was fraught with risks, leading to his arrest in 1977, when he was just a student. Following his release, he fled to Turkey and eventually found a way to continue his education in Moscow, where he studied law.

Arriving in Poland

In 1986, Raoof made his way to Poland, embarking on a journey that would forever connect him with the Polish people and culture.

Upon his arrival, he discovered a vibrant Kurdish diaspora community. Many Kurds had come to the country in the 1960s and 1970s for university studies, as during that time Poland offered generous scholarships to students from Iraq and Kurdistan. These students became actively involved in politics, organizing events to raise awareness about the plight of the Kurds in Iraq.

Raoof believes that the early Kurdish diaspora community played a crucial role in introducing Polish society to Kurdish culture and identity. During this time,

the first Kurdish book, *Kurdistan and the Kurds* by Abdulrahman Qasemlou, was translated and published in Poland, serving as a pivotal resource for researchers and those interested in understanding the Kurdish cause.

A philanthropist-diplomat

In addition to being a diplomat, Raoof is a philanthropist who tirelessly advocates for human rights, cultural exchange, and peace, with his charity work in Poland garnering recognition and numerous awards. He emphasizes the importance of giving back when others need help, a principle deeply ingrained in his upbringing.

"I will always remember 1991, when millions of Kurdish civilians were stuck in harsh conditions in the mountains bordering Iran and Turkey because of the brutality of the Ba'ath regime. During those days, despite experiencing serious economic hardship themselves, Polish people rushed to help the Kurds. I always feel that I owe Poland something and have to reciprocate their generosity," Raoof explained.

After witnessing the Polish people's remarkable humanitarian response to the

crisis faced by the Kurds, Raoof decided to establish the first Kurdish-Polish Association, which is still active today in Krakow, with a mission of enhancing cultural relations between Kurdistan and Poland.

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Krakow

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"My work does not strictly benefit Kurds. I believe that culture knows no boundaries and that cultural preservation, no matter its origin, is the responsibility of all. That's the reason why I am involved in so many cultural activities in Poland and in other countries around the world," Raoof explained.



(Left to right): Ziyad Raoof, KRG Representative to Poland, Marek Belka, former Prime Minister of Poland, and Nechirvan Barzani, former Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region, in 2005



Ziyad Raoof, KRG Representative to Poland, pictured during humanitarian aid collection, cultural activities, and demonstrations

Cultural preservation

Raoof's commitment extends beyond humanitarian efforts to the preservation of cultural and architectural landmarks in Poland. Utilizing his financial success from a business that he launched in the early 1990s, he invested in restoring historic buildings, some of which are 300 to 400 years old. These buildings have been transformed into tourist attractions, cultural institutions, conference centers, and traditional hotels or restaurants. Today, they attest to Poland's rich history.

And that's not all. Ziyad Raoof is also an art collector, owning many pieces of art from Kurdistan and around the world. Many museums and art galleries in Poland have reached out to him to ask to borrow artwork for public display, something that Raoof will always respond to with positive enthusiasm.

In 2003, when the KRG had yet to open its official representation office in Poland, Raoof brought together many Kurdish artists, intellectuals, and activists to participate in a festival dedicated to Kurdish culture, art, and history. One segment of the festival was an exhibition of contemporary Kurdish art in Krakow. Later that year, the exhibition was awarded the prestigious title of "Exhibition of the Year" by Poland's Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

Raoof believes that the Kurdish people and Polish people share historical parallels that offer valuable lessons. Poland's history, marked by occupation and division, mirrors the Kurdish experience in many ways. Despite being divided for over a century, the Polish people preserved their national identity, language, and culture, ultimately regaining independence and building a strong nation. "This tells us that no matter how much a nation is oppressed or divided, if cultural identity is kept alive, there is always a high likelihood of prevailing against adversaries," Raoof said.

Acknowledgments and awards

The spirit of this Kurdish diplomat, coupled with the contributions that he has made to Polish society, have secured Raoof a distinguished position in Poland and among Polish intellectuals. In 2003, Raoof was given the title of "2002 Mecenat Kultury Krakowa" – translated as Patron of Krakow Culture. The award is given annually to individuals who have contributed significantly to cultural promotion in the former Polish capital.

Later, in 2017, he was also honored with the prestigious Małopolska Award for his contribution to the country since arriving in 1986. "During the award ceremony, the Voivode of Małopolska expressed gratitude and said that the award was for my service to my community in Poland," Raoof said during the interview.

Most recently, Raoof was granted the title of "Krakow Ambassador of Multiculturalism 2020." The title was first established in 2018 by the Krakow City Council to award individuals, groups, or organizations actively involved in intercultural dialogue in Krakow. It recognizes activities and initiatives aimed at promoting cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity as well as the integration of Krakow's foreign residents.

Last but not least, at the invitation of the Polish Minister of Culture, Raoof served for two terms as council member of the Polish National Museum. Later, he joined the council of the Krakow Museum to play a significant role in organizing many landmark events in the country, including international conferences, symposiums, and exhibitions where Kurdish artists and scholars had a chance to partake.

Kurdistan-Poland relations

The history of diplomatic relations between Kurdistan and Poland holds paramount significance. The KRG opened

its representation office in Warsaw in 2004, just one year after Iraq was liberated from the Ba'ath regime.

In 2005, Polish Prime Minister Marek Belka, accompanied by Minister of Foreign Affairs Adam Rotfeld, Minister of National Defense Jerzy Szmajdziński, and Minister of Culture Waldemar Dąbrowski, made a historic visit to the KRI, laying a strong foundation for future diplomatic relations.

As Raoof explained, this marked the first visit by the prime minister of a foreign nation to the KRI, which paved the way for many other world leaders to visit and establish relations with the KRG.

According to the KRG representative, current relations between the KRI and Poland are growing quickly, particularly in the fields of education and trade. Poland has become one of the main destinations for many Kurdish students seeking to pursue higher education, and universities from both countries closely cooperate for academic exchange.

Raoof believes that Poland's transition to a new political and economic system in the early 1990s has resulted in its rapid development, offering valuable lessons for the KRI's own path to progress. Poland's history resonate with the Kurdish struggle, making it a natural partner in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation.

Today's bond between Poland and the KRI owes its strength to Ziyad Raoof and those who have done their best to reciprocate the generosity of Poland toward the Kurds during hard times. Raoof has not only contributed to the cultural and humanitarian landscape of Poland but has also actively engaged in building bridges of understanding and cooperation between the two nations.

Ziyad Raoof's life story, deeply rooted in advocacy for culture, freedom, and peace, serves as an inspiring example of how one individual can make a significant impact on the world. ●



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Kurdistan's Fallen Crosses



Goran Shakhawan

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

For two long years, the cross laid on the ground, a symbol of the destruction caused by ISIS.

However, on one fateful day in November 2016, a group of *peshmerga* soldiers decided to take matters into their own hands. One of them, Arkan Saeed, carried the cross on his back, defying the dangers that lay ahead. As he shared his story with me, I could hear the emotion in his voice. "This is a day that I will forever be proud of," he said.

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In February 2020, Prime Minister Barzani visited the Vatican and presented Pope Francis with the picture of Arkan restoring the cross in Bashiqa

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As I eagerly awaited to hear more from him, there was a moment of silence on his end and soon I realized that I could hear him crying. He continued, "These are tears of joy."

Arkan had risked his life not once, but twice in an attempt to restore the cross as

ISIS snipers shot at him. Nevertheless, he persevered, and the iconic photograph of him carrying the cross became a symbol of hope and defiance in the face of adversity. The photo was presented to Pope Francis by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani during his most recent visit to the Vatican.

Zerevani forces, led by Lieutenant Bahjat Selki, undertook the operation to restore the cross. They were the first to enter Bashiqa, Nineveh, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Despite numerous bombs planted inside

the church, their mission was clear and promising: to restore the church and bring peace and coexistence back to the region. With unwavering determination, they placed the cross on the roof of the church and rang the bell, a powerful symbol of unity and resilience.

"Before ISIS, Muslims, Christians, and Yezidis lived as brothers amongst each other. Today we are going to bring back that harmony," said Arkan.

Thus, for the first time since the defeat of ISIS, the church bell would ring over Bashiqa – a town renowned for its his-

tory of religious coexistence before it was overrun by ISIS, who killed many Christians and Yezidis and destroyed all the holy temples.

In February 2020, Prime Minister Barzani visited the Vatican and presented Pope Francis with the picture of Arkan restoring the cross in Bashiqa. This symbolic gesture highlighted the immense destruction that ISIS had caused to the Christian community in the region and honored the thousands of *peshmerga* who had sacrificed their lives to restore the peace.



A group of Kurdish Peshmerga fighters reinstalling a cross on a church in Bashiqa after liberating the town from the Islamic State (ISIS) in November 2016

Photo: Nzar Mekail



A group of Kurdish Peshmerga fighters carrying a cross to reinstall it on a church in Bashiqa after liberating the town from the Islamic State (ISIS) in November 2016

Photo: Nzar Mekail

With 42 churches destroyed in Mosul and 43 in the Nineveh plain, the road to recovery was long and arduous. Many Christians had been displaced, unable to return to their homes due to the lack of security. But the restoration of the cross by *peshmerga* fighters served as a beacon of hope, a reminder that faith and resilience can help people overcome even the darkest of times.

Roots of coexistence in the KRI

The KRI has a long history of coexistence and religious tolerance not seen in other parts of Iraq and Middle East. For decades, Kurds themselves belong to diverse religions, with people practicing different faiths regularly living in the same village or town. I remember

my grandfather mentioning how there was once a Kaka'i (Yarsani) butcher who lived in Darband (150 kilometers northeast Erbil) village of Balakayati district in the 1980s. Even though the majority of the residents in the area were Muslim, this man lived among them like a brother until he passed away.

There were also many Jews and Christians who lived in the area for many years.

There is a Jewish cemetery in Balakayti district, signifying the freedom of religion that has historically existed there. Some places in that area were also given Christian names. For example, in Nawanda village, there are two areas called Sar-dêr and Bin-dêr, with the

work dêr meaning “church” in Kurdish. The elder from this area recounted that a thriving Christian community once lived there, exercising their faith without constraints.

As opposed to other areas in the Middle East, Kurdistan’s historical legacy is one of the major elements fostering this peaceful coexistence. Kurds have a long history of respecting harmony and religious and ethnic diversity. The preservation of amicable relations has been greatly aided by this cultural heritage, a strong feeling of community, and mutual respect.

On the contrary, ethnic and religious groups have experienced many atrocities in Iraq. Christians, who made up an estimated 1.5 million of Iraq’s population before 2003, have faced many forms of violence and became targets in a series of attacks. This forced most Christians to flee to the KRI, which became a safe haven for them. Many others left the country altogether, which has led to a major decline in the number of Christians residing in Iraq today. Moreover, Yezidis, a religious group indigenous to Kurdistan, also faced genocide and atrocities at the hands of ISIS. The Yezidis who did not manage to flee to the KRI were subjected to mass killings, rape, and sexual enslavement.

The coexistent model in the KRG

Coexistence and diversity are fundamental principles that shape KRG policy. The KRG has implemented initiatives that promote and protect religious freedom and minority rights. The government recognizes the importance of creating an inclusive society where all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs, can live and thrive in peace. This is clearly evident in the region’s educational system, as schools prioritize teaching tolerance, respect, and understanding from a young age. By instilling these values early, they cultivate a culture of acceptance and appreciation for different religions. This emphasis on

education as a means to foster harmony has played a significant role in shaping the region’s tolerant society.

Moreover, unlike many other regions, KRG officials reject the term “minority” when referring to ethnic and religious groups. Instead, they prefer to acknowledge them as integral and equal components of society. In 2015, the KRG Parliament passed a groundbreaking law aimed at ensuring political and cultural empowerment for minority groups, which was a significant milestone in recognizing and protecting the rights of these communities.

Despite the majority of the KRI’s population being followers of Islam, the Ministry of Endorsements and Religious Affairs has established a department for all religious groups, including Jews, Muslims, Yezidi, Kaka'i (Yarsani), Christians, and Zoroastrians. This remarkable initiative makes the KRG the only Muslim-majority government that officially protects the rights of all religious groups in the Middle East.

Furthermore, the commitment to diversity and coexistence is evident within the government itself, as the KRG works to ensure that minority groups are represented in key positions. This practice not only reflects the government’s dedication to inclusivity but also ensures that the voices and perspectives of all communities are heard and considered.

The roots of coexistence in the KRI run deep, with a rich history of diverse ethnic and religious communities living side by side. Despite external challenges and conflicts, the region has managed to foster a sense of mutual respect and tolerance among its inhabitants. The KRG’s commitment to inclusivity and cultural diversity has promoted a peaceful coexistence between different religious groups, allowing them to freely practice their faiths without fear of persecution. This legacy serves as a testament to the resilience and unity of the people of the KRI. ●

Safekeeping National Memory



Kakalaw Abdulla

Kakalaw Abdulla, an independent journalist residing in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, has made significant contributions to numerous local and international media platforms. He specializes in reporting on political, economic, and social matters within the Kurdistan Region.

At the Zhin Center, a non-profit foundation dedicated to preserving Kurdish history and heritage, no stone is left unturned and every detail matters.

The center serves as a historical repository of the political, social, cultural, and intellectual life of Kurdistan, and as it claims, is “the guardian of [the Kurdish] national memory,” said Rafiq Salih, the director of the Zhin Center and one of its founders. “We collect every document and evidence related to Kurds, and, although our center is based in Sulaymaniyah, it belongs to all people from the four parts of Kurdistan,” the director underscored.

A meticulous craft

The center employs an extensive and meticulous procedure to safeguard historical documents, utilizing a range of specialized steps, such as scanning, micro-filming, conservation, and restoration, to maintain a library of manuscripts, photos, audio and video recordings, and written records pertaining to Kurdish heritage. Its collection contains books and documents that date

to the 19th and 20th centuries or even earlier.

Within the manuscript department, the primary objective is to acquire historical documents penned by renowned Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Kurdish authors and subsequently compile bibliographies and indexes for these manuscripts, ensuring that each piece is accu-

rately categorized within its respective collection.

“We do this because we want to know what the manuscript is about, which field it can be classified as, who wrote it, who re-wrote it, how many pages it has, and how old it is,” said Ali Wahab, the head of the department.

While a significant portion of the manuscripts revolve around Islamic history and sciences, due to the profound geopolitical impact of Islam on Kurdistan, there is a diverse array of subjects covered within these documents, including the fields of medicine, astronomy, engineering, philosophy, and literature.

Literature also occupies a significant



Artifacts and historical photos on display at Zhin Center



■ The entrance of Zhin Center

place in the collection. Notably, the center houses the works of renowned Kurdish writers such as Rafiq Hilmi, Najma-deen Mala, Piramerd, Taufiq Wahby, Sheikh Mohammed Khal, and Abdul Karim Mudarris.

“In addition to these works, we have the divans of Nali and Mahwi, which were re-written by some famous writers. We have some unique *kashkols* – anthologies – of Kurdish, Persian, and Turkish poems, and one of them is 700 pages. We have a copy of Mahmud Pasha’s *kashkol*, which was written before 1900,” said Wahab.

According to the center’s records, there are a total of 1,388 manuscripts distributed across 800 volumes stored within *Zhin*’s facilities. A notable portion of these date back 250 to 300 years, with some exceptionally rare ones dating as far back as 400 years.

The manuscript department operates in close collaboration with two other departments: the scanning department and the conservation and restoration department. The initial step involves sending the manuscripts to the conservation and restoration department, a specialized laboratory staffed by trained professionals. There, the manuscripts undergo meticulous cleaning and restoration to address any damage caused

by previous mishandling or improper storage.

Next, the manuscripts are transferred to the scanning department, where they are scanned for online accessibility. This technique has been developed by the center to facilitate convenient access for researchers and academics, allowing them to easily retrieve and utilize these valuable manuscripts for their scholarly work and papers.

Passionate about the past

Wahab, aged 29, initially started as a volunteer at the Zhin Center in 2017 and subsequently transitioned to a full-time employee. During his university days, he made regular visits to the facility to obtain specific documents and manuscripts for his academic research in Islamic studies at the University of Sulaimani.

“After meeting some of the people at the center, they recognized my potential and thought I could be useful, as I have been passionate about history in general and the history of Kurds and Kurdish scholars since I was a child. That’s why they loved me and gave me this job, and I still continue with passion because what I do is crucial for generations to

come,” said Wahab.

The center was quite small when it opened in 2004 in a small house in Sulaymaniyah. It was founded by Rafiq Salih and his brother Sidiq, who now manages the center’s publication and examination departments.

“It’s common practice here that when an establishment is founded, it should

It also pays homage to *Zhin* magazine, which was published in Istanbul in 1918-1919 in both Kurdish and Turkish. Additionally, it honors *Zhin* newspaper, founded by Piramerd, a celebrated Kurdish poet and journalist, in Sulaymaniyah in 1939. The newspaper continued to be published even after his passing, running until 1963 with a total of 1,714 issues.

He believes that the center’s library is one of the richest in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), containing 70,000-80,000 titles in Kurdish, Turkish, Persian, Arabic, English, and other European languages, most of which have been digitized. “We give priority to digitizing old books from the 19th century through the 1980s to preserve them and so that people can access



■ A staff digitizing historic documents at Zhin Center

have a large number of employees so that it can be recognized as a prominent foundation. But we thought differently. We began very modestly, with the aspiration that we must continue. So, we started in a rented house, and our core duty was just publishing books,” said Rafiq Salih.

The center’s name is rich with meaning. In Kurdish, *zhin* signifies being, existence, or the essence of life. Naming the center *Zhin* is symbolic of its mission to breathe new life into old books and other significant materials.

A digital repository

It was not until 2009 that the center had its breakthrough. The Sulaymaniyah municipality provided it with its current four-story building, which has a big library consisting of four categories: the core collection, the periodicals collection, the rare books collection, and the personal collections of renowned Kurdish and Iraqi scholars.

“To be honest, it is the government’s duty to try to preserve Kurdish history, but we took it upon ourselves,” said Salih.

them. Up until now, we have managed to digitize more than 1,000 Kurdish books,” said Salih.

Among the center’s extensive collection there are crucial historical records and documents related to the Kurdish people. These include materials on the Kurdish revolutions in the 19th and 20th centuries across all four parts of Kurdistan (Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria); documents from Kurdish political parties; Ba’ath party records; and notably, documents from the Ottoman Empire, which governed Kurdish terri-



Historic books going under a process of restoration at Zhin Center

ories for over five centuries.

The records department maintains written documents, photo, audio, and video materials. Kirmanj Zinar, 25, is an employee whose responsibility is to organize and collect written documents.

The documents undergo the same procedure as the manuscripts and Zinar's role is to categorize these materials according to their respective categories. This systematic categorization process ensures that the documents are well-organized and can be readily retrieved when needed by researchers.

"We have managed to collect documents from 1900 to 2003, and the oldest one is an official decree from the Ottoman Empire to important Kurdish individuals," said Zinar. "We also have documents related to British rule in Iraq and the history of the country from the monarchy to the republican system. All these documents were either collected by the center or were received from important families in the KRI."

Zinar joined the center's team in 2020 after graduating from the history department at the University of Sulaymaniyah in 2019. He explains that his work at the center is closely aligned with his academic background, and this fuels his pas-

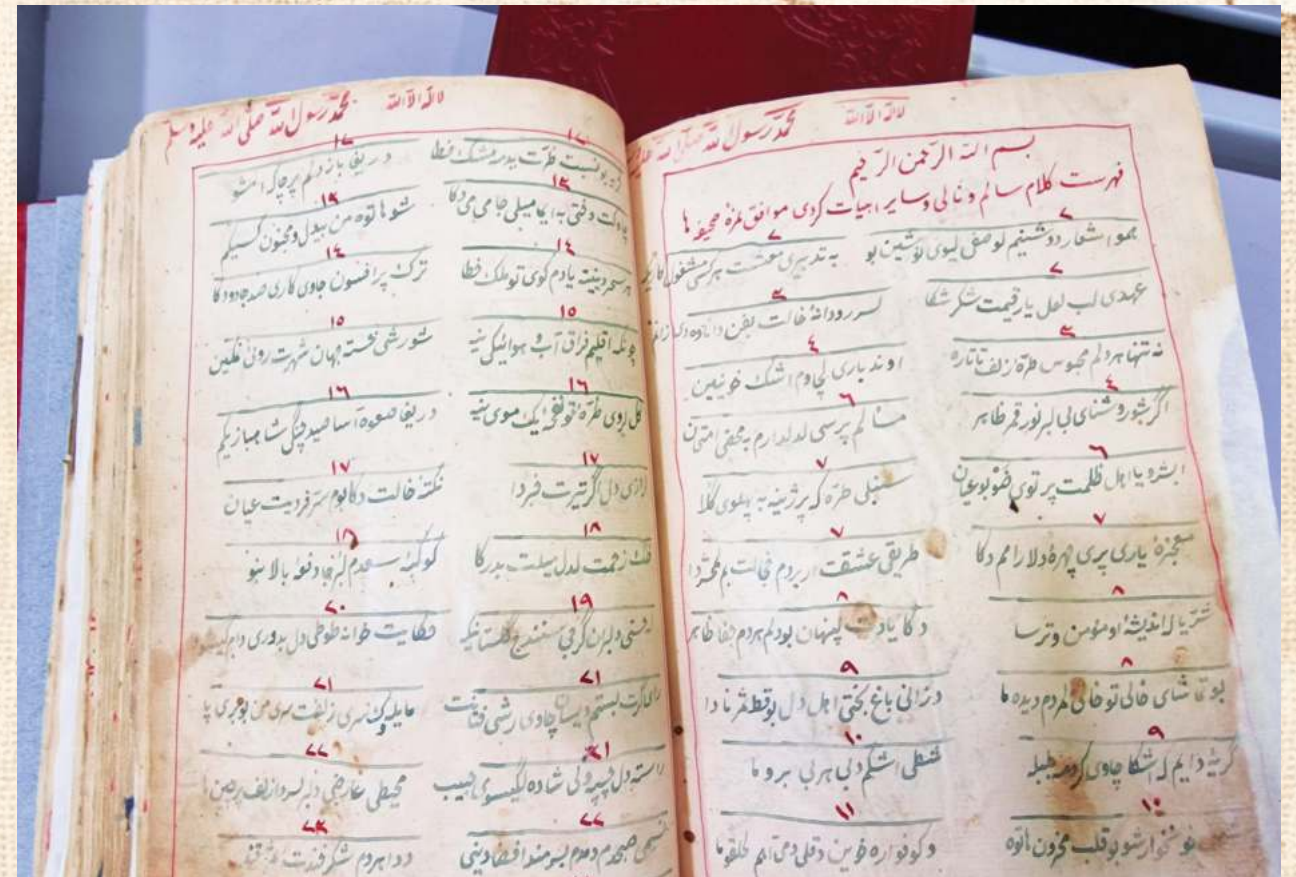
sion for his daily work. He believes that he is contributing to a greater purpose – safeguarding Kurdish heritage.

Synergistic teamwork

Chia Sidiq, 30, is another employee working at the center and is responsible for collecting audio, photo, and video materials through which she identifies important cultural and political figures. These materials can be VHS videos, cassettes, or photographic films. There are 700-800 photographs kept in the department.

"I analyze every detail from every picture or video so that I can identify Kurdish political figures who could not be recognized in other videos or pictures. So, every material has importance," said Sidiq.

The center employs just 15 individuals and has been consistently receiving a monthly government grant of approximately 15 million Iraqi dinars (equivalent to \$9,500). Although this funding was totally cut from 2014 to 2018 due to the economic crisis affecting the KRI, the center managed to endure this setback thanks to its prudent management and previously saved funds. The center has also garnered support



An old transcript preserved at Zhin Center.

from individuals through donations Sulaymaniyah.

and has benefited from facility renovations provided by various governmental figures, among them the governor of

Rafiq Salih firmly believes that the center's success hinges on the synergy of

teamwork and sound management. He envisions expanding the center's activities in the future to accommodate a workforce in the hundreds, a goal he is confident can be achieved when the center broadens its operations. This goal also aligns with his conviction that a facility should have the appropriate number of employees commensurate with its operational needs.

"The key to our success is that every employee works the equivalent of four to five individuals in collaboration with an effective management team. With the expansion of our work and the improvement of our financial status, we would very much like to see 200 to 300 people work here to collectively restore and preserve our nation's history," said Salih. ●



Old devices preserved at Zhin Center as part of the assets of the organization

Wonders of Kurdish Architecture



Azad Ahmed Ali

Dr. Azad Ahmed Ali is a distinguished engineer with a Ph.D from Aleppo University. His extensive publications within his field have solidified his reputation as a leading expert in his domain

Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

“

Kurdish architecture, nevertheless, can be regarded as a melting pot that combines elements of all the ancient and ancestral ethnic groups that have resided on the foothills of the Zagros and Taurus Mountains

”

A view of a building dedicated to the Textile Museum at Erbil Citadel

As architecture visually voices the artistic traits of peoples' heritage, it is a significant indicator of the cultural roots of nations on the one hand and their modernity and development on the other.

This significance also hinges on the idea that architecture incarnates the physical makeup of human societies and establishes the manmade ecosystem. Similarly, it represents the by-product of stability and prosperity.

Architecture is, thus, part and parcel of the identity of a people. It can be highly influenced by the local climate, interactively molding both social and natural environments. Consequently, the interrelation of the climate and constructive elements lays the foundation for the physical and cultural identity of antique societies.

The Kurds are among the most ancient communities in the Middle East and have maintained a distinct cultural identity for millennia, during which they have built unique architectural structures that have further added to their identity. Kurdish architecture, nevertheless, can be regarded as a melting pot that combines elements of all the ancient and ancestral ethnic groups that have resided on the foothills of the Zagros and Taurus Mountains.

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The cultural heritage and ancient communities of the Kurds have enriched the architecture of Kurdistan, producing unique and exquisite architectural patterns

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One reference that can be made to the architecture that the Kurds inherited is the architectural composite of the Halaf culture. With the aid of archaeological criteria, the distribution of Halaf pottery and the distribution of ethnic Kurds today are a near-perfect match. In this respect, the Halaf culture developed an architectural style known as the key model or *tholoi* lodgings, where dwellings lined up around stone-lined streets in large settlements more sophisticated than most of the nearby villages that preceded them.

By the end of the second millennium BC, Hurrian-Mittani heritage dominated the architectural landscape of the region. During this period, the architecture of villages was different from that in the cities that had been erected on the banks of rivers. Cities had walls surrounding a palace, representing the center of the worldly rule, and a pantheon, representing the center of the godly rule, as evidenced in the capital Urkesh, located between the modern day Qamishli and Amuda now.



A view of a Kurdish village in Hawraman, Iranian Kurdistan

Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat

The rise of the Medes at their capital Ecbatana (modern-day Hamadan) in 727 BC coincided with the fall of the Hurrian kingdom. This led to a tectonic shift in Kurdish architecture, during which new elements and components were added. It is assumed that the Median Kingdom was a founding state of the Kurdish civilization, introducing key architectural elements.

The capital Ecbatana represented the urban peculiarity of ancient Kurdish communities, which was manifested in the lack of interest in temples and religious establishments, with warehouses built in their stead.

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus described the structure and architectural make-up of Ecbatana as follows: “The Medes [...] built the city with impregnable walls reaching the sky in spiral circles, one on top of another. The land on which the city was built, a high hill, was somewhat suitable for this scheme.”

Following Herodotus, the Roman geographer Strabo pointed out the skill of Kurdish craftsmen and builders in building castles and fortresses, or even war machines: “Near the Euphrates are the ‘Corduani’ regions known as ‘Carduchi’ by the Greeks, and their cities were: Sarisa, Satalka, and Pinaka, a powerful fortress with three Acropolis surrounded by a fort.”

After the Arab-Islamic invasion, Muslim historians underpinned the urban and architectural richness throughout Kurdistan. The first city was Anbar, a key center of the Sasanian Empire, not to mention Diyarbakir, Mardin, and Kermanshah.

The cultural heritage and ancient communities of the Kurds have enriched the architecture of Kurdistan, producing unique and exquisite architectural patterns. For the purpose of brevity, the characteristics of architecture in Kurdistan can be minimally classified as follows:

The social classification framework:

1. Widespread pre-urban rural architecture
2. Urban architecture emerging from the rural and surpassing it functionally

Classification by geography and topography:

1. Plains architecture
2. Mountain architecture

An architectural and urban style that branched out from the latter has been described as defensive architecture. This style reflects the nature of old Kurdish communities, who were prepared to defend their land against invasion. Defensive architecture can, then, be divided into forts and castles, and fortified walled cities such as the city of Diyarbakir and Erbil. (The name of the ancient Kurdish tower has been translated into several European languages, including into German as *burg*.)

The abundance of local building materials also enriched the Kurdish architectural style. Mud houses made of clay blocks were built in the Hurrian-Mittanni region in the second millennium BC. Examples of this style built about a century ago can be found in the modern cities of Sulaymaniyah and Qamishli.

Stone materials, however, have been used in building cities in the foothills, as well as fences and forts in places such as Mardin in Turkey and Akre in Iraq. It is also possible to establish a system of classification according to the shape of the architectural parts.

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Kurdish architecture has adapted to allow for construction on the slopes and foothills of the mountains

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Roofs in Kurdish architecture are flat and durable, constructed of wood and mud rotated by a rolling banger, especially in the mountainous areas. Roofs can also be used as a service area due to the limited space in the foothills, as is the case in Hawraman.

Other key elements of Kurdish architecture include southern-facing facades with wide openings to let in sunlight on cold days and the use of stone and marble of all kinds. Kurdish houses built on the plains typically center around a small fireplace – as opposed to an oven in cold mountainous areas – that can be used as a heated bed on cold winter nights. Overall, Kurdish architecture has adapted to allow for construction on the slopes and foothills of the mountains.

In conclusion, architecture in Kurdistan has maintained its functional and aesthetic characteristics throughout the millennia, while religious and social influences have played a significant role in its development. ●

ASTRONOMY

Kurdistan's Window to the Stars



Sabir Salih

Sabir Salih is a journalist based in the Kurdistan Region.

Korek Observatory on the summit of Korek Mountain in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Nestled amid the craggy splendor of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), perched atop rugged Mount Korek, lies a testament to human ambition and scientific ingenuity, all with a touch of cosmic wonder. The Korek Observatory, a celestial gem in the Kurdistan Region, serves as a beacon of curiosity and a symbol of resilience in the face of adversity. Here, in this remote corner of the world, the stars whisper their secrets to astronomers who venture to unlock the mysteries of the universe.

Hogir Chato, a Kurdish astronomer and President of the Kurdistan Astronomical Association, regales us with the remarkable history of the Korek Observatory. Now abandoned, this impressive scientific institution traces its origins to the early 1970s, when Iraqi President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr gathered a group of scholars to explore the cosmos. The dream was daring: to construct an astronomical observatory in Iraq that could rival the best in the world. With a whopping \$170 million allocated for the project, this ambitious endeavor aimed for the stars.

Chato stated that the project involved global collaboration, with scientific teams from the Soviet Union, Egypt, and the United States converging on Iraq to assess potential sites. The observatory was initially intended to be called the Iraqi National Astronomical Observatory. As the teams embarked on an extensive survey, they faced inclement weather as they

considered various locations, including Mount Sinjar, at an elevation of 1,500 meters. However, the unpredictable forces of nature led them to Mount Korek, some 2,127 meters above sea level.

Following exhaustive research, the astronomers discovered that Mount Korek was indeed a celestial paradise, boasting 250 to 252 clear nights each year. In the realm of astronomy, such clarity is a treasure beyond compare, according to Chato. The choice was clear: Mount Korek was destined to become a hub for astronomical exploration. The crystal-clear skies over Mount Korek provide a glimpse into a world where celestial bodies reveal their secrets without the hindrance of light pollution or atmospheric interference.

Astronomy and more

The Korek Observatory is not merely an astronomical edifice; it is a comprehensive scientific complex divided into multiple parts. The scientific complex is divided into three sections, with two optical telescopes beckoning stargazers and a radio observatory receiving waves imperceptible to the human senses. Chato stated that the complex also features residential units, museums, tunnels connecting departments, a science club, a gym, a games hall, a science laboratory, and an administrative department. Every structure adheres to international standards, thanks to German companies Friedrich Krupp, Liebherr, and Zeiss.

One of the crown jewels of the observatory is a reflecting telescope with a diameter of three and a half meters. In 1983, it ranked thirteenth globally in terms of size. Manufactured by ZEISS, the Korek mirror, weighing a colossal five tons, exemplifies precision and quality.

The dome cradling the telescope spans 15 meters in diameter and 18 meters in height. Inside, various laboratories facilitate image capture and analysis, making it an astronomical laboratory of unparalleled capacity.

A smaller dome houses a telescope with a 1.25-meter mirror diameter, with a dome the size of a three-story building. The third part of the project, the radio telescope, has the capacity to capture millimeter waves and sound waves from the cosmos. It was built by was created by Coupe and Mann. At 30 meters in diameter, it was a mammoth of its time.

Hope for renewal

Tragically, the dreams that soared among the stars were grounded by the harsh realities of war. In 1985, during the Iran-Iraq War, the project was struck by three missiles, causing severe damage to the radio telescope. Despite these setbacks, the legacy of the Korek Observatory lives on, a testament to human resilience and to the limitless curiosity of the human spirit.

In the early 2000s, a glimmer of hope emerged. American astronomer Mike Simmons, founder of Astronomers Without Borders, visited the observatory, capturing its essence in a January 2007 article in Scientific American titled “Seeing Stars in Iraq.” Simmons’ hope was that this astronomical haven could be restored to its former glory, fostering a renaissance of scientific inquiry in the region.

Yet, the road to revival is not without its challenges. Chato and his team have worked to garner support from both Iraqi scholars and government authorities, but political differences have often impeded progress. The renovation project requires an estimated \$35 to \$40 million to breathe new life into the observatory, with the potential to transform Erbil into a global hub for astronomy.

The Korek Observatory remains a symbol of perseverance and an invitation for the world to join hands in unlocking the mysteries of the universe. As it stands on the precipice of revival, this celestial gem in the heart of the KRI offers an opportunity to foster scientific tourism, encourage global collaboration, and inspire the next generation of astronomers.

In the shadow of Mount Korek, the stars whisper their secrets, waiting for the day when humanity will return to gaze upon the cosmos once more. ●



Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi

Korek Observatory on the summit of Korek Mountain in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq ■

A Russian Woman's Journey to Kurdistan



Safar Jajoki

Safar Jajoki is a journalist with the Khabt Daily Newspaper since 2007. He is based in Erbil, and is a member of the Kurdish Writers Union.



Naype Buyuk posing for the camera next to a monument decorated with the Kurdistan Flag

The bittersweet tales of Kurdistan's struggle for freedom are etched into the annals of history. While these stories are myriad, one woman's life encapsulates the profound sacrifices made for a nation's independence. On the 65th anniversary of the return of General Mustafa Barzani's *peshmerga* comrades from the Soviet Union to Iraq and Kurdistan, Naype Buyuk, a Russian woman who lived through it all – and whose life was intimately intertwined with the Kurdish struggle – talked about her journey with *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

The 500

On May 18, 1947, General Mustafa Barzani, the national leader of the Kurdish liberation movement, and his comrades embarked on a journey that would come to symbolize a momentous chapter in the ongoing struggle for Kurdish independence. This expedition, known as the Epic of Aras, derived its name from the river that the group had to cross to reach the Soviet Union. Popularly referred to as "the 500," Barzani and his *peshmerga* commenced

their arduous trek from Mahabad city, the capital of the then-Republic of Mahabad in the Kurdish populated area of Iran known as Eastern Kurdistan.

and Turkey, ultimately ending in the Soviet Union, where they sought asylum. This remarkable journey, marked by exile from their occupied homeland, constituted a pivotal juncture in the



Naype Buyuk pictured with her children at a young age

Their grueling 53-day odyssey led them through the challenging terrain straddling the modern nations of Iraq, Iran,

broader struggle for Kurdish liberation, ensuring the continued momentum of the Kurdish national movement.



Omar Agha Dolamari (Peshmerga veteran) and Ali Mustafa Layluki (Naype's husband)

The return journey was equally as arduous and momentous.

“I was just a young woman from Crimea, unaware of the monumental journey that awaited me. When I married Ali Mustafa Leloki-Dolamari [one of Barzani’s comrades], little did I know that his comradeship with General Mustafa Barzani would shape my life,” Naype recalled.

She vividly recalls the sense of patriotism and unity among Barzani’s comrades. Despite their exile, they were bound by a shared vision of a free Kurdistan. “In those days, they helped each other and never lost their will and courage. They were patriotic, loyal, and freedom-loving people,” Naype said, reminiscing about the solidarity of the Kurdish fighters in the Soviet Union.

An emotional return

In 1958 Naype’s life took a significant turn when the 500 received a message from General Mustafa Barzani himself, summoning them back to Kurdistan. With excitement and hope, they embarked on their journey back home. Naype’s family, among others, boarded the ship Grossia and, 16 days later, they arrived in Basra, Iraq. Welcomed by enthusiastic crowds, they were in the company of renowned figures, their journey representing a crucial moment in the Kurdish struggle.

Their return was an emotional experience. “We arrived in Basra, and people from all walks of life came to welcome us. General Barzani welcomed us all in Baghdad and shook hands with all the comrades. It was an unforgettable mo-



Naype Buyuk together with a group of Russian women

The dedication of these individuals knew no bounds, as they faced adversity, hunger, and cold in their quest for a liberated homeland. “We endured cold, hunger, happiness, and sorrow together, always under the guidance of the late Barzani,” Naype explained.

“When General Mustafa Barzani commanded us to return to Kurdistan and told us about the living conditions there, it was a turning point in our lives. We knew we had to go back,” Naype added.

ment for all of us,” Naype recalled, the glint of nostalgia in her eyes.

In 1960, they were granted houses in Erbil, allowing them to start rebuilding their lives. Her husband Ali then joined the *peshmerga* during the Great September (Eylul) Revolution of 1961.

However, their return was not without trials. In 1963, Naype – along with 22 other Russian women and 65 children – was detained for six months by the Iraqi National Guard in Erbil. Despite the ordeal, they persevered, and their release was secured through various channels, including writing a letter to the Russian Embassy.



In the following years, they faced many challenges, including adapting to life in the Kurdistan Region, raising their children, and embracing a new culture. They gradually learned the Kurdish language, with Naype taking the initiative to learn alongside her children.

“Those were challenging times, but we were determined not to give up. We kept our spirits high, even in prison,” Naype said.

Six Russian women returned to their homeland, while the rest, including Naype, chose to remain in Kurdistan. “Our commitment to the Kurdish struggle was unyielding. We had chosen the difficult path for Kurdistan and

A group of Peshmerga veterans and their families reuniting years after their return from the former Soviet Union

never looked back,” she said.

“In my heart, I always remember General Barzani and the noble 500. I remember that they chose the difficult path for Kurdistan and am grateful to have witnessed the fruits of their struggle,” Naype said.

Naype’s story is a testament to the resilience and commitment of individuals who were ready to sacrifice their personal comfort for a greater cause. Throughout her life, she held steadfast to the enduring spirit of the Kurdish people and the pursuit of an independent Kurdistan. ●



EDUCATION

Inspiring Education in Kurdistan



Mewan Dolamari

Mewan Dolamari is Journalist, MA in International Studies at the University of Kurdistan - Hewler (UKH).



Seminar Hall



A view of Vision Library at the Catholic University of Erbil

#CUE

On September 20, 2023, a grand opening ceremony unfolded at the Catholic University of Erbil (CUE), signifying the inauguration of a new public library: Vision Library – CUE. This remarkable project, funded by Vision Education, a pioneering local firm dedicated to transforming the educational landscape in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). This project serves not only to foster education but also exemplify the region’s unity and cultural diversity.

The event brought together a presti-

spanning a vast area of 2,650 square meters, with 2,195 square meters allocated for its internal space. This architectural marvel was thoughtfully designed to accommodate up to 600 readers daily, further emphasizing its role as a hub for academic exploration and intellectual discourse.

The library’s collection is a treasure trove, boasting a capacity for 20,000 books and academic resources, including textbooks and references spanning various fields, such as medicine, science, and technology as well as social studies and the humanities. Notably,

viding an entryway to a vast array of scholarly resources.

To cater to the unique needs of students and academics, the library features three private study rooms, ideal for postgraduate students and academic staff or for facilitating individual meetings between students and their mentors. The library also houses a large multipurpose hall with a 128-person capacity that can host educational activities and meetings.

Architecturally, the Vision Library – CUE is nothing short of spectacular,



The Opening Ceremony of the Vision Library - CUE, September 20, 2023

gious gathering of senior officials from both within and beyond the KRI, including representatives of various religious groups, diplomats, writers, academics, and students. It symbolized the commencement of a remarkable journey toward intellectual empowerment, enlightenment, and the paramount importance of knowledge and peaceful coexistence.

A vision turned reality

The Vision Library – CUE project was an ambitious undertaking, executed between July 15, 2021, and August 1, 2022. Vision Education’s investment manifested in a state-of-the-art library

the collection extends to encompass works detailing the diverse religious, cultural, and historical aspects of Iraqi and Kurdish societies. Contributions from prominent figures, societies, and religious leaders have fortified the library’s holdings, and the expectation is that more generous donations will continue to enrich its offerings.

The Vision Library – CUE proudly embraces the digital age as well print materials. The library includes a number of internet-connected laptops with access to the Vision Library electronic system and several vital subscriptions to digital libraries, such as JSTOR, IEEE, Research4Life, and EBSCOhost, pro-

with its design, structure, and organization creating an inspiring atmosphere for study and reading. To ensure a conducive environment for learning, the library is equipped with continuous electricity, lighting, air conditioning, and internet access. While the main reading and study areas maintain a no-food, no-drinks policy, a canteen and coffee machines are conveniently available nearby.

The library opens its arms to CUE students and academic staff, as well as those from other universities in the KRI and Iraq. Importantly, it is open to the public, welcoming individuals from the community to partake in the wealth

of knowledge it offers. Operating five days a week, from 8:00 am to 8:00 pm – with the schedule to be expanded soon – the library aligns seamlessly with the CUE’s commitment to diversity and peaceful coexistence, warmly inviting students, academics, and people of varying religious, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

Keynote addresses steal spotlight

At the inauguration ceremony, the audience was treated to a series of enlightening speeches, each reflecting the values of unity and education, and the enduring power of knowledge. Among the notable speakers were Archbishop Bashar Warda, CUE Chancellor and Chairman of the Board of Trustees; Dr. Abdulfattah Abdulrazaq, Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG); and Sara Salahaddin Mustafa, CEO of Vision Education. Archbishop Warda opened the event with a heartfelt address, emphasizing the transformative power of knowledge. He conveyed his belief that Vision Library – CUE would be a beacon of light, not only for students but for the entire population of the KRI and Iraq. He also took a moment to thank KRG President Nechirvan Barzani for his generous support to the university through Vision Education.

“We are establishing a library with roots as deep as our common heritage. Vision Library – CUE is the next step in preserving and protecting our vision in an educated future for our people. It is very appropriate that this vision would come from Kurdistan these days and spread all over Iraq,” Archbishop Warda said. “May Vision Library – CUE be a bright light for our students and the people of Kurdistan and Iraq as a whole.”

Dr. Abdulrazaq lauded Vision Education for its role in the project.

“I commend the voluntary initiative of Vision Education Company for building such a state-of-art public library in the KRI, and most of all, at the CUE, where today the representative of all religious groups, not only Christians, are gathered, emphasizing the strength of

peaceful coexistence in the region. Vision Education has realized great and impactful initiatives in education and the higher education sector in such a short span of time since its establishment,” the Kurdish deputy minister emphasized.

Finally, Mustafa extended her gratitude to everyone who had contributed to the project’s realization and reiterated the significance of knowledge and education in shaping a brighter future for the KRI. She honored the sacrifices of Kurdish writers and their unwavering dedication to preserving the Kurdish language and identity and highlighted Vision Education’s commitment to supporting students as well as its collaborative efforts with universities and schools in the region. She concluded with an invitation for further support to enrich the Vision Library through book donations.

“Our youth have withstood many hardships, and they have always pushed through the challenges, even though most of these challenges were the products of the decisions of the previous generations. The Kurdish youth are smart, talented, and skilled. Therefore, we are obligated to provide them with support and a healthy learning environment. Let’s trust them,” she continued. “At Vision Education, we strongly believe that education is the foundation for building a country. We invest in those organizations that are leaders in social change through strengthening the individuals in our society. Today, our presence at the CUE is living proof of this truth. This project is one of the most important outcomes of Vision Education.”

Mustafa also thanked Vision Education Chairman Idris Nechirvan Barzani, stating that his vision for the future of Kurdistan inspires the team and his endless support is a source of encouragement for the company.

The Vision Library – CUE stands as a testament to the transformative power of education and knowledge. This visionary initiative by Vision Education is a bridge to a brighter, more informed future for the people of the KRI and a model for educational progress and

unity, which transcends borders and inspires us all.

Vision Education: catalyst for educational advancement

Vision Education, the driving force behind this monumental project, is a local trailblazer in the education sector of the KRI. Founded in 2018 in Erbil, its vision revolves around instigating positive change through education. The company’s mission encompasses supporting educational institutions and empowering individuals, enabling them to become responsible citizens capable of catalyzing constructive transformations within their communities.

In the realm of higher education, Vision Education has played a pivotal role in supporting numerous public and private universities in the KRI, including the University of Kurdistan - Hewler (UKH), the CUE, the University of Zakho, and the Salahaddin University - Erbil. The company has also been instrumental in awarding hundreds of scholarships to students, ensuring their continued educational journey and, ultimately, their contributions to the nation.

Beyond universities, Vision Education’s footprint extends to primary and secondary education by constructing and renovating many public schools, creating a nurturing learning environment for the youth, who are the future of the region.

In a recent momentous collaborative effort, Vision Education partnered with the KRG Ministry of Education to deliver requested necessities to over 500 public schools in the Soran Autonomous Administration area, directly impacting more than 65,000 students. The company’s commitment to the cause of education and the profound influence it exerts on the future of the KRI is truly awe-inspiring. This unyielding dedication resonates through every facet of their work, leaving an indelible mark on the educational landscape and the aspirations of the entire region. ●

Gulf Countries Show Interest in Kurdish Potatoes



Mohammad Dargalayi

Mohammad Dargalayi is a journalist and photographer with 13 years of experience. He is a member of International Federation of Journalists.

In an exciting development, the fertile lands of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) are putting the region on the international agricultural map, with the KRI now becoming the source of choice for a culinary favorite: potatoes.

Fresh from its successful exports in exporting agricultural products to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has struck yet another deal, this time with Saudi Arabia, to supply 3,000 tons of premium potatoes to the Kingdom. As of October 23, the first batch, weighing 250 tons, departed from Erbil for Riyadh, marking a significant milestone in Kurdish agricultural expansion.

This recent move highlights the rising prominence of the KRI's agricultural sector and underscores the KRG's commitment to fostering international trade partnerships. As foreign demand for the KRI's bountiful produce grows, so do the opportunities for local businesses, especially those in the agriculture industry.

International markets

Aura Company, a key player in Kurdish agriculture and agricultural product warehousing, has already been making strides in exporting Kurdish potatoes. Owner Haji Sabir describes the company's journey into international markets, which began with potato exports to the UAE.

Working alongside relevant government agencies from the UAE and the KRG, Aura Company initially secured a 5,000-ton potato contract, which later expanded to 9,500 tons.

To ensure seamless exports to the UAE, Aura Company took the strategic step of establishing its own warehouse in the region, which has helped address potential

“Working alongside relevant government agencies from the UAE and the KRG, Aura Company initially secured a 5,000-ton potato contract, which later expanded to 9,500 tons”

challenges associated with product transportation, ensuring a steady supply of fresh Kurdish potatoes to the UAE market.

Quality matters

As the demand for Kurdish potatoes continues to rise, Saudi Arabia has emerged as the second international destination for this delectable export. A new contract has been inked between Aura Company and a Saudi partner, with the backing and coordination of the Saudi government, to import 3,000 tons of potatoes. The chosen variety, known as “artificial Hermes,” has been particularly favored for its exceptional quality.



Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi

“Quality matters, and our products speak for themselves,” says Haji Sabir. “The artificial Hermes variety has garnered significant attention in Saudi Arabia, which has already received 350 tons. Their enthusiasm has kept us busy, and they are eager to know just how much we can export daily.”

The potatoes requested by Saudi Arabia are not limited to the artificial Hermes. To meet different culinary demands, the Kingdom has also placed orders for the Vontan and Babylon potato varieties, which are experiencing a supply shortage. The exports, as per the agreement, will continue until November 15 of this year.



Future prospects

One cannot help but marvel at the exciting prospects unfolding in the KRI’s agricultural landscape. With a steady stream of orders from international markets and the opportunity to showcase the rich variety of potatoes and other produce grown in the region, the agricultural sector is poised for continued growth and success.

The price of Kurdish potatoes heading to Saudi Arabia currently stands between \$350 and \$400 per ton, a competitive and attractive rate for these high-quality products. As these exports gain momentum, it is only a matter of time before other countries come to appreciate the agricultural treasures that Kurdistan has to offer.

Foreigners keen to savor the rich, fertile flavors of the KRI through its premium potatoes are in for a treat. In these humble spuds, one can taste the future of Kurdistan’s flourishing agricultural industry. ●



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

Preparations underway for the first shipment of Kurdistan potato export to Saudi Arabia

Kobanê Wine

A Toast to Kurdistan

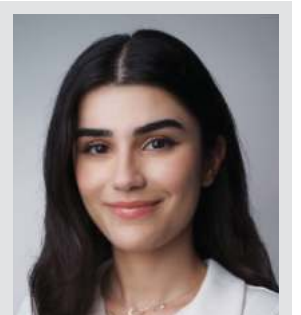


One of the more mysterious elements of Kurdish culture to foreigners is how alcohol consumption is permitted in a largely Muslim society and how locals view the practice. This nuanced relationship dates back hundreds of years.

In the book *Kurdish Customs and Traditions* by the 19th-century Kurdish sociologist Mela Mahmud Bazidi (1779-1863), the author discusses Kurdish drinking culture. Bazidi notes that it was not a Kurdish

custom to consume wine. However, due to interactions between young Kurds and Turks, wine consumption started to become more common.

According to Bazidi, some young Kurds adopted this custom to bridge the cultural gap with Turks. It is worth noting that this practice was still relatively rare and not widespread. Bazidi's research found that only one in 1,000 young people in Kurdistan consumed alcohol. Interestingly, he described how this figure used to be even



Mey Dost

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

lower, and that even the Christian community in Kurdistan displayed low levels of alcohol consumption.

These insights shed light on an interesting aspect of the late 19th century, when wine drinking gradually made its way into Kurdish society. Bazidi’s analysis contextualizes this phenomenon, suggesting that lower-status societies often admire dominant cultures and aspire to emulate them.

Insights from a Kurdish wine maker in Germany

On several occasions while attending film festivals in Germany, my attention was drawn to a young Kurdish man who stood at a booth offering wine to festivalgoers. Heval Akil, the visionary behind the Kobanê wine-making project, works along with a German woman named Conny, the sales manager, to promote this unique product at Kurdish cultural events. The last time I encountered him was at the fourth Kobani Film Festival in Bochum. It left me pondering the situation – how could a Kurdish individual, within the framework of their Muslim identity, engage in such an endeavor?

Motivated by curiosity, I struck up a conversation with Akil. I asked him, “Why dive into the unusual world of wine selling, especially when it’s practically unheard of among Kurds?”

With confidence, he replied: “You see, our culture is quite renowned worldwide, and people are familiar with it here in Germany. Our bottles make wonderful gifts, and Kurds living in Europe have a deep appreciation for what we offer. So, why not introduce a product like this to the market?”



His response intrigued me, so I asked him more questions, which eventually morphed into an agreement to carry on our exchange in writing. Thus, a casual conversation turned into an interview and together we set out to unravel the origins, methods, and motivations behind this unique project.

or religious pressures holding them back from enjoying our unique beverage. That’s why our product is available to everyone, and we fully respect the choices of those who decide not to partake, no matter their reasons.

Mey Dost (MD): Why did you choose the name Kobanê?

Heval Akil (HA): Every nation has a right to take pride in its cities. As a Kurdish nation, let us cherish the legendary honor and the remarkable victory in Kobani by the peshmerga. We hold our heads high, filled with pride for the triumph of the Kurds in Kobani.

MD: Did you consider Muslim Kurds and their criticisms when founding your brand?

HA: We know that Kurdish society is a Muslim society, but there are also Kurds who do not belong to any religion. When it comes to Kurds in Europe, they have more freedom to live life in their way, without the weight of societal



MD: Where can I find your wine on the market?

HA: Our wine reaches the market through various channels, primarily at festivals, nighttime entertainment venues, and cultural events. We eagerly accept invitations from event organizers who wish to support our product, even if it means overcoming our fatigue. We support every Kurdish product and talent, and we at Kobanê Wine have organized activities like design and art exhibitions, creating a space for aspiring Kurdish youth to showcase their talents. Our goal is to foster unwavering support within our community.

MD: How do you produce your wine? Where do you get the grapes from?

HA: We craft our wine using a blend of two exquisite grape varieties: the renowned Riesling and the robust Dornfelder grapes sourced from the picturesque vineyards nestled along the scenic banks of the Moselle River in southern Germany. Our winemaking process begins at the factory, where these grapes are meticulously pressed, expertly bottled, and thoughtfully labeled. Once

prepared, our wine embarks on a journey via truck, making its way to our network of 21 restaurants, bars, and stores scattered throughout Germany. In the same way, our website serves as a platform through which customers can place their orders. We’ve established a comprehensive online store where we catalog and share all our expertise and product offerings.

MD: Is your target market primarily within Germany, catering to German residents?

HA: Certainly not. While we operate extensively in Germany, we ship our products across all of Europe upon request. And, given the opportunity, we aspire to expand our distribution to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as well.

MD: Your wine carries a Kurdish name, yet it’s made from grapes sourced outside of Kurdistan. Have you ever considered using Kurdish grapes as the foundation of your product? Regions like Mardin, Behdinan, and other areas in Kurdistan boast some of the world’s finest grapevines.

HA: Of course, we’ve been contemplating diversifying our grape sources beyond Dornfelder and Riesling. To that end, we’ve initiated a project to cultivate fruit trees in our village of Baxçe in Western Kurdistan (northern Syria), located to the south of Qamishli. This endeavor is undoubtedly a lengthy undertaking, mainly due to equipment limitations, but it’s our foremost aspiration. Our aim is to proudly label our product as “Made in Kurdistan.” We’re also exploring a similar venture in the southern part of Kurdistan, and details will become clearer in the future.

MD: Do you not have concerns about competition with other companies in the same industry?

HA: No, we embrace competition with confidence. We are committed to quality and take pride in the fact that everyone who tries our product finds it enjoyable. Positive feedback consistently fuels our drive to improve and expand. Additionally, the vibrant colors of our product, mirroring the Kurdish flag in green, red, and yellow, resonate deeply within the hearts of Kurds, evoking a sense of joy and connection. ●

CHARITY

Gulan Charity Showcases Halabja's Golden Days



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, UK.

The Gulan Charity was established in 2009 with the primary goal of celebrating and preserving Kurdish culture within the UK.

"We believe that Kurdish identity, culture, and history is something to be valued and celebrated by all, quite separate from any contemporary political differences," Gulan's Creative Director Richard Wilding told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

It operates independently of any political associations and actively organizes a variety of cultural events such as exhibitions and fashion shows in the UK, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and internationally.

Della Murad, Gulan's Artistic Director, added that "the charity was established to promote Kurdish art and culture, and hosts a wide array of events spanning art, culture, music, and poetry, including events and exhibitions that have highlighted the culture of the Yezidis, Christians, and Jews of Kurdistan. We have successfully invited numerous individuals to partake in our initiatives with the



Art installation by Mariwan Jalal and the AUK



aim of building bridges between artists in Kurdistan and in the diaspora.”

“Through culture, we can introduce our history”

Murad highlighted the importance of cultural diplomacy. “For instance, when

In 2009, Gulan held the *Runaki* Festival – meaning light in Kurdish – at St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London, which aimed to help a wide range of people see Kurdish culture in a new light.

“The 2009 *Runaki* Festival showed our



Illustrated Talk by Gulan's creative director Richard Wilding

we did a fashion show in Dubai many years ago, there was a Lebanese journalist,” Murad said. “I spoke there about the Anfal genocide and the horrendous long-lasting impact it had on the Kurdish people. After the event, the Lebanese journalist cried. She told me she never knew about the genocide.”

Murad also underlined that Gulan is not focused only on Kurds in the UK. “The charity serves Kurds worldwide. We organized a fashion show in Dubai and have also hosted exhibitions here in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.”

She added that “our primary areas of focus are the UK and the KRI, but we are open to organizing exhibitions elsewhere.” For instance, Gulan sent several Kurdish artists to Italy to take part in the Venice Biennale festival.

British friends the beauty and richness of Kurdistan’s heritage, by introducing them to our artists, fashions, history, music, and cuisine,” Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, former Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) representative to the UK, said at the time.

Introducing Kurdistan to non-Kurds

Murad also said that when Gulan started its events, “Kurdish culture did not attract a lot of interest, if it was not in the realm of music or dance.”

Gradually, the charity managed to introduce many UK Members of Parliament to Kurdish culture. “At that time, Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman was the KRG representative to the UK and was very in-

terested in the arts, and because of her support, we had many visitors from the UK Parliament,” she said.

Moreover, three of Gulan’s trustees are non-Kurds. “Those relationships also helped to bring non-Kurds to our events. In our database, there are many non-Kurds, and we always send out invitations,” Murad added.

Gulan also helped to introduce Yezidi culture to people in London a few years before the ISIS genocide against them in 2014. “At that time, many people didn’t know that Yezidis were Kurds,” Murad noted.

“Unfortunately, we always seemed to be introducing our people to the world through genocides or other horrific acts of violence inflicted on us, whether it

others, and Gulan has organized events on the history of the Christians, Fails Kurds, Jews, and other minorities in the KRI.

Gulan and Halabja

The name Gulan itself comes from a region in Halabja. “I am from Halabja, and Gulan is the most beautiful area there,” Murad shared. “We used to go for picnics to Gulan, which was situated on a hill. It was so beautiful; it was the main reason for me to choose Gulan as the name for the charity.”

She also added that, sadly, many of the people who died during the tragic Halabja chemical attack in 1988 were buried in Gulan.

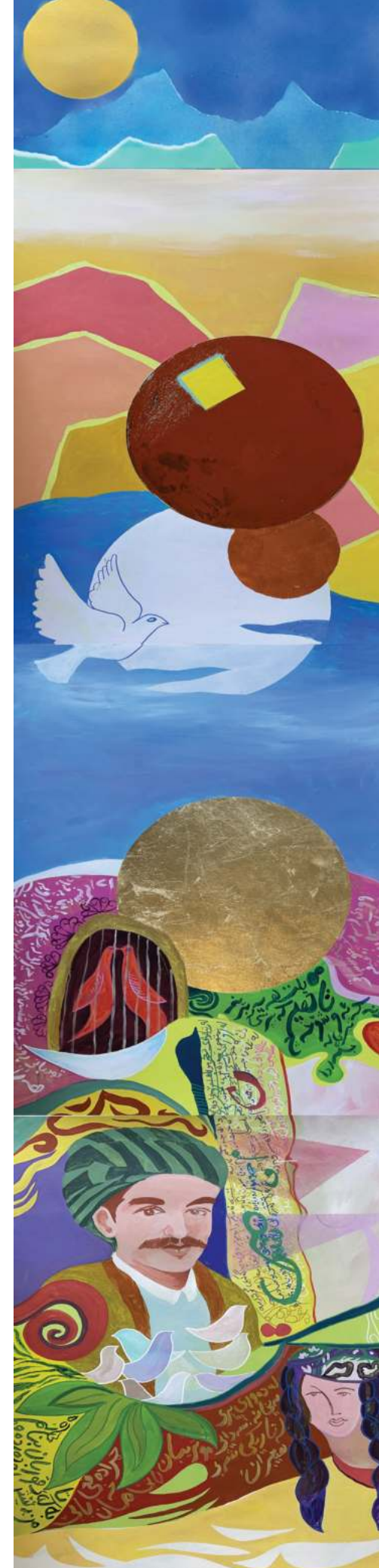


Gulan's Artistic Director Della Murad and Gulan's Creative Director Richard Wilding with Gulan Trustees Sarah Panizzo and David Carrington

was Halabja, the Yezidi genocide, or the tragic military attacks on Qamishli and Afrin,” she remarked.

Murad also underscored how important it is to show Kurdistan’s diversity to

Therefore, she said it seemed only right and fitting that Gulan finally organized the exhibition “Halabja in the Golden Days” at the American University of Kurdistan, Duhok from October 18 to



23, 2023 to pay homage to its namesake.

Introducing Halabja to Duhok

“With this project, we hoped to demonstrate that there is much more to Halabja than just the terrible events of 1988. We wanted to show the great diversity of culture that existed before Anfal and build support for a cultural renaissance in Halabja,” Wildling told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

the two places,” Murad added. “I spoke with so many people in Duhok who didn’t know anything about Halabja, its poets, and its life – they only remember the chemical attacks.”

Paris of Kurdistan

Moreover, Murad added that people only know about Halabja because of the chemical attack. “We are trying to do this to do justice to the people who lived and contributed to a vibrant Halabja during this era – a time of prosperity and peace.”



Poetry event in the AUK library

“We brought this exhibition to Duhok because we believe it is important that different parts of the KRI share and celebrate each other’s history and culture. We wanted to remind a new generation of the beauty and significance of Halabja’s past days,” he added.

“If we would have done it in Sulaymaniyah or Erbil, people would already know the history of Halabja. But in Duhok, it helped build a bridge between

She mentioned that in the past, Halabja had the reputation of being the “Paris of Kurdistan,” renowned for its culture, music, fashion, and cuisine, recalling a time when a colleague had reservations about being posted to Halabja.

The education official reassured Murad’s colleague, saying, “Halabja is the Paris of Kurdistan. Anyone who drinks the water of Halabja stays.” ●



Breathing New Life into Kurdish History



Tariq Karezi

Tariq Karezi is a prolific Kurdish writer, translator, and journalist whose career started in the early 1980s. He has authored and translated numerous books, and his influence is felt through his work in over 20 Kurdish and Arabic newspapers. He has contributed to more than 120 publications with articles mainly on culture, history, language, and literature.



Kurdish artist Zbilamo, next to his Dimdim Castle painting at the Erbil exhibition hosted by Kurdistan Chronicle on Nov. 14, 2023

Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi

Iraj Qaderi Azar, known by his artistic pseudonym Zhilemo, has traveled with a trove of dozens of paintings and sketches from Mahabad – once the capital of the Republic of Kurdistan, a country established in 1946 in northwestern Iran – to Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Over the years, surrounding nations and superpowers have stolen as much of Kurdish sovereignty and achievements as they could, or at least distorted or obscured them. Referring to his nation’s shrouded history, Zhilmo’s mission is clear: “I want to breathe new life into Kurdish history.”

Zhilemo spent his childhood years outside of Kurdistan, making him unfamiliar with his homeland’s language, culture, and art. After completing his university education, he found himself employed as a petrochemical engineer at a refinery in Isfahan, the historic capital of the Safavid Empire.

“Once, I made the decision to familiarize myself with the written Kurdish language. I carried the poetry collection *Naley Judai* by Kurdish poet Hemin Mukriyani with me to Isfahan, and I must admit, reading the poems was a difficult challenge,” he recounted. “However, I refused to give up. Having already delved into the works of classical Persian poets such as Hafiz, Saadi, and Firdawsi, I recognized the importance of acquainting myself with my native language and culture.”

“I have spoken Kurdish since I was a child,” he continued, taking a deep breath. “But it was difficult for me to read in Kurdish. I worked hard and learned to read Kurdish by reading Hemin poems. Within Hemin’s literary works, there resides a treasure trove of Kurdish tales and folklore, many of which I had no prior knowledge of,” Zhilemo observed.

Exploring one’s hidden cultural heritage can be a deeply emotional journey, a sentiment colorfully reflected during the *Dimdim Castle* exhibition hosted at the Media Hall in Erbil. The event, which was sponsored by Mam u Zeen Cultural Center and *Kurdistan Chronicle*, showcased a collection of paintings and graphic works by Zhilemo.

As visitors looked upon his art, they were invited to turn the pages of the book of Zhilemo’s life and dive into his emotions. When confronted with the culture of his homeland, words failed him. In that emotional moment, he couldn’t help but reflect on his nation’s bitter and plundered history, and how painful it is to be separated from one’s roots.

Zhilemo explained, “Hemin’s book of poems served as my inspiration to seek out the richness of Kurdish history and culture. It was as if I had been living in an isolated desert, ignorant of the cultural wealth that surrounded me.”

“Do you aim to compensate for your alienation from your nation’s culture through art?” I asked.

He seemed pleased with the question, responding with conviction. “I want to breathe life into the Kurdish past, rekin-

dling the fire of a history that lies hidden beneath the ashes.”

Engaging with our roots

Many Kurdish artists believe they should not be cut off from global artistic trends. As a result, they find themselves surfing the waves of globalization, engaging in debates about modernity and postmodernism, all in an attempt to align with changing trends. This kind of artistic journey is characterized by a steady influx of influences from the West to the East throughout

The exhibition featured a series of graphic sketches and dozens of oil paintings, creating an atmosphere within the Media Hall that pulsed with vibrant colors and dynamic shapes. The exhibition resonated so much with the feelings of Erbil residents that the exhibition hall saw a steady flow of visitors all week, with some staying for more than two hours. People find it fascinating to read the pages of a nation’s history through the art of painting and witness stories of love and heroism in color and shape, so the exhibition was a flying success.

“I’ve returned to my artistic roots. I’ll let my hands, fingers, brushes, and paint hang together,” Zhilamo confidently stated. “What you see is the end result. In each of these works I have given my 100% in all aspects: ideas, techniques, figures, sketches, composition, color, shape, and harmony. No matter what I do, the gender balance does not always reach the level I want. In some paintings, one gender receives higher marks than the other. I can feel the flaws, or rather the imperfections, in each painting, but I can’t push any further than I have,” he concluded.



A group of pupils at the Erbil Exhibition of Zhilamo hosted by Kurdistan Chronicle on Nov. 14, 2023

Photo: Mohammad Dargalayi

the 20th century, which has continued well into the third millennium.

However, Zhilamo believes that this way of engaging with the art world obscures the work itself. “I believe that returning to one’s self, to one’s heritage, is the origin of art. As member of a Kurdish nation, we need to become acquainted with our identity more than any other nation, and through this engagement with our roots, we need to introduce a beautiful and static discourse to our nations, near and far.”

“I don’t follow any specific art style, and I haven’t pursued formal academic studies in art,” Zhilamo explained. “For the past five years, I’ve been immersed in the world of professional painting. I began by reading art books, but I soon realized that they were limiting my creativity. Yes, they provide valuable insights into painting techniques and art principles, but I had the impression that these books were unintentionally nudging my artistic inclinations in an undesired direction.”

The story of Dimdim

The exhibition bore the title *Dimdim Castle*, a poignant reference to a historical symbol of Kurdish resistance in the quest for freedom and independence. This historical episode unfolded in the early 16th century when a Kurdish emir named Amir Khan Lepzerin wished to establish a great state for the Kurds, thereby liberating his people from the rule of the Safavid and Ottoman empires.



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

In pursuit of his vision, Amir Khan set about restoring *Dimdim Castle*, an ancient Sasanian fortress located west of Lake Urmia. Within the fortress, he built a formidable council, palaces, buildings, markets, and streets. When the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas learned of Amir Khan's ambitions, he dispatched an army to crush the ruler's dreams.

However, in an initial clash, Shah Abbas's forces faced defeat at the hands of Amir Khan's determined warriors. In response, Shah Abbas himself led a substantial army to besiege *Dimdim Castle* for a grueling three months. Despite their dire circumstances, he was unable to conquer it.

During the siege, Shah Abbas' forces discovered a vital source of drinking water for the fortress, which had been hidden underground and emerged from a nearby mountain. To break the spirit of Amir Khan and his valiant warriors, Shah Abbas cut off the supply. Indeed, the warriors' resistance gradually dwindled, and when Shah Abbas' army finally broke through the castle's defenses, not a single Kurdish warrior surrendered. Instead, they fought with unwavering heroism, remaining firm until the end. The battle concluded with the tragic death of Amir Khan.

The story of Dimdim is an example of resistance against the superpowers that have risen around Kurdistan and attacked the Kurdish homeland. The tale inspired both the title of Zhilemo's exhibition and the largest painting in it. Zhilemo tells the story of the Battle of

Dimdim in great detail in this painting, a story unparalleled in the history of many nations.

“
Zhilemo spent his
childhood years outside
of Kurdistan, making
him unfamiliar with his
homeland's language,
culture, and art
”



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi



Photo: Mohamad Dargalayi

The artist has referenced many other Kurdish stories in this exhibition, some of which are love stories, a popular genre among Kurdish writers.

One of the paintings that garnered significant attention from exhibition-goers depicted the legendary Kurdish leader, Mustafa Barzani, and his heroic fighters as they crossed the Aras River into the Soviet Union in the wake of the fall of the Republic of Kurdistan in 1946. Following the dissolution of the Republic, Barzani and his fighters engaged in a fierce three-month-long battle against the Shah of Iran's forces before retreating from Iranian Kurdistan to Iraqi Kurdistan. Amid the looming threat of attack from the UK's Royal Air Force and the armies of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, Barzani and his steadfast companions adamantly refused to surrender.

Against all odds, Barzani and his companions embarked on a 32-day march to the Soviet Union. Just as Amir Khan Lepzerin and his warriors had refused to yield, Mustafa Barzani and his comrades stood their ground. Although this decision put the 500 Kurdish fighters led by Mustafa Barzani in the crosshairs of the armies of three states, neither Barzani nor his fighters were afraid. Instead, Barzani had his warriors cross the Aras River, finally crossing himself once they had made it. The story of crossing the Aras is depicted beautifully in Zhilemo's painting.

The artist keeps his word, rekindling his country's history, to illuminate it in motionless language. ●

From Erbil to Glory



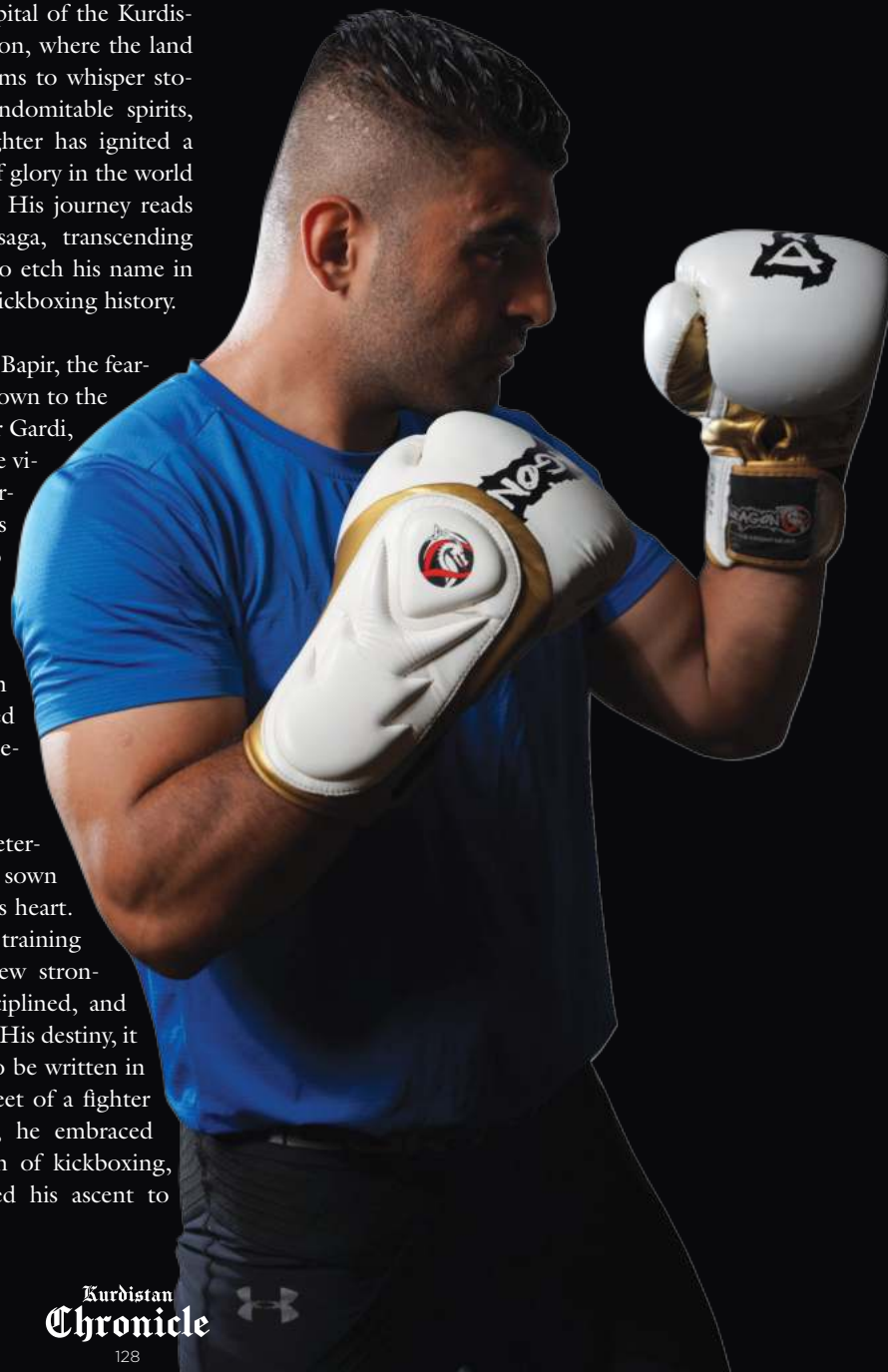
Roza Gardi

Roza Gardi is a journalist and photographer with six years experience in the field.

In the capital of the Kurdistan Region, where the land itself seems to whisper stories of indomitable spirits, one young fighter has ignited a blazing path of glory in the world of kickboxing. His journey reads like an epic saga, transcending mere dreams to etch his name in the annals of kickboxing history.

Hakar Hazhar Bapir, the fearless warrior known to the world as Hakar Gardi, was born in the vibrant city of Erbil in 1998. His journey into the world of combat sports commenced in 2009 when he first stepped onto the taekwondo mat.

The seed of determination was sown deep within his heart. With every training session, he grew stronger, more disciplined, and more focused. His destiny, it seemed, was to be written in the fists and feet of a fighter and, in 2014, he embraced the fiery realm of kickboxing, which launched his ascent to greatness.



Global sensation

As a fresh face in the world of kickboxing, Hakar's journey was nothing short of meteoric. "I dipped my toes into the tournament waters in early 2015," Hakar recounts with the fire of ambition in his eyes. "My first taste of victory came at the Erbil boxing tournament, where I clinched the champion's title not once, but twice."

But this was only the beginning. Hakar's odyssey quickly transcended borders. He soared to the pinnacle of the

sport, claiming first place not only in Iraq but twice at the prestigious Iranian boxing championship. His victories extended to a number of international arenas, with the flag of Kurdistan flying high in Iraq, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. His meteoric rise was marked by the accumulation of an impressive nine international belts, showcasing his prowess on the global stage.

In 2020, Hakar reached the zenith of his journey, securing his first championship belt, an honor he defended successfully in 2021. In 2022, he made history

by triumphing in the KRI, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. Hakar Gardi was now a global sensation, a relentless force in the world of kickboxing.

Mixed martial arts

But Hakar's story goes beyond the confines of a single discipline. In 2019, he ventured into the world of mixed martial arts (MMA), where he displayed his versatility and unwavering dedication. In 2020, he achieved a milestone that had never been reached before, becoming the first fighter in Iraq and the KRI



Hakar Hazhar posing for the camera next to his champion belts



to claim the MMA title, solidifying his status as a multi-faceted athlete.

Hakar reached a new stage of his career in 2022, when he fearlessly ventured into the Asian Championship Super Hero Fight Night in Afghanistan, competing against formidable warriors from the KRI, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Against all odds, he emerged victorious, hoisting the championship belt high, a symbol of his unwavering resolve and exceptional skill.

This year, Haker's journey led him to Baghdad, where he faced off against opponents from all around the region. It was this stunning performance that caught the discerning eyes of the World Kickboxing and Karate Association (WKA), ultimately leading to his selection to compete against the world. Then, at the WKA's 2023 World Championships in Indonesia in June, Haker defied all expectations by finishing in second place, earning him international recognition and respect.

Representing Kurdistan

Hakar's path to victory was far from easy. He faced countless obstacles and challenges as he fought to represent Kurdistan on the global stage. "Many times, when I participated in tournaments, I wanted to participate as a Kurd to represent Kurdistan, not as an Iraqi. This has caused me problems many times," Haker reveals. But his unyielding commitment to his heritage and identity compelled him to stand firm in the face of adversity.

One of the most remarkable instances occurred in Afghanistan, where he was asked to fight under the Iraqi flag. Haker refused,

making it abundantly clear that he would only compete as a Kurd representing Kurdistan. After intense negotiations, he won the right to raise the Kurdistan flag, an emblem of his identity and unwavering determination.

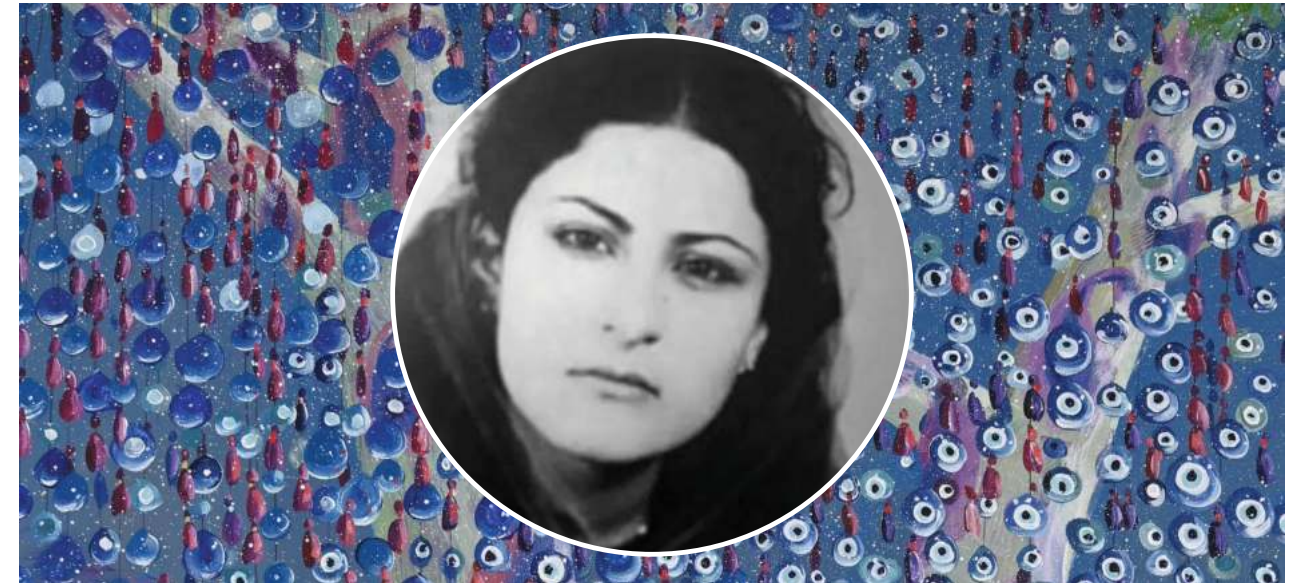
Hakar's journey has ignited a fire in the hearts of young athletes in the KRI, who now look up to him as a living legend. He hopes to inspire them and to demonstrate that dreams are attainable with dedication and hard work.

As he looks to the future, Haker's vision remains unwavering. "My dream is to always uphold the Kurdish name, the name of Kurdistan, and the sacred Kurdistan flag. Just as my father, who is *peshmerga*, tries to protect the country with his life, I will serve my country by winning titles."

He dreams of ascending to the pinnacle of kickboxing and securing a contract with Glory Kickboxing, one of the most prestigious K-1 kickboxing companies in the world. His message to the world is resounding: "I want to tell every Kurd and the whole world that as a Kurd, I have achieved what I wanted, and my dreams and hopes will never die. I have always said that success is not given but achieved, and I am sure I will achieve it."

In Haker we find the embodiment of the indomitable spirit of the Kurdish people and a symbol of courage in the face of adversity. As he continues his relentless pursuit of greatness, he carries the dreams and aspirations of his homeland, Kurdistan, in his heart, representing the true essence of a champion. Haker Gardi has become a name that reverberates around the world, a beacon of inspiration for those who dare to dream and fight for their place in history. ●

POETRY



Zhila Husseyni

1964-1996

Translated by Nahro Zagros

My desolate heart transforms into a setar
When your affectionate touch
Strums its strings.
In that instance, recalling your departure
Strikes my weary heart,
And the melancholic tune resounds,
Unleashing a fresh poem from within.

دلی تهنگم سیتاریکه
کاتێ پهنجهی خۆشهویستیت
تالی کهزیهی تاسهکانی ته‌بزوینی
لهو سانه‌دا، یادی دووریت
دلی ماندووی ته‌له‌رزینی
ئاوازی خهم لی ئه‌دات و
پر به زاری شیعریکی نوێ ته‌چریکینی



Photo: Safin Hamid

The 10th Erbil International Marathon held on Oct. 17, 2023



**The
western black-
eared wheatear
(*Oenanthe hispanica*)**

is a small migratory passerine bird, frequently encountered in the Kurdistan Region, particularly during the terebinth-tree season. Previously grouped within the thrush family Turdidae, it has since been reclassified as an Old-World flycatcher (family Muscicapidae). It was also once considered the same species as the eastern black-eared wheatear, a classification still upheld by certain authorities.

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Photo: Peshraw Mahdi