

Kurdistan Chronicle

www.kurdistanchronicle.com

November 2023 Volume 1 Issue 10

**RECOVERING
OAK FORESTS
TO COMBAT
CLIMATE
CHANGE**



kurdistanchronicle.com

Honoring Barzani's Love for Chess



Kurdistan's Vital Role

Insights from MEPS 2023 Forum



Nahro Zagros

In November, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) hosted the Middle East Peace and Security 2023 (MEPS 2023) Forum, allowing a gathering of global and national leaders, academics, members of influential think tanks, and influential scholars to engage in extensive discussions on the critical challenges facing the Middle East and North Africa. With over 800 high-level experts in attendance, MEPS 2023 featured keynote and plenary speakers such as KRG President Nechirvan Barzani, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, in addition to panels on specific topics and challenges including climate change. Additional panel discussions on the topic of climate change at MEPS 2023 fostered a more comprehensive exploration of potential strategies and initiatives for what is a truly global challenge.

In his speech, Prime Minister Barzani also emphasized the pressing challenge of climate change, urging global leaders to unite in a collective commitment towards finding viable solutions. Furthermore, during an interview with Maryam Moshiri, Chief Presenter at the BBC, Prime Minister Barzani addressed the topic of historical conflicts in the region and expressed his concerns about its current ones, highlighting the weariness of the region's people to ongoing wars and voicing hope for the establishment of peaceful solutions. While focus is directed elsewhere, most notably Gaza, he underscored the importance of not overlooking the difficulties faced by the Kurdish people, drawing parallels between the global support for the two-state solution in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the aspirations of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, most notably that the Iraqi government in Baghdad

honor its responsibilities as laid out in the country's constitution.

Key among these concerns are the unresolved issues between Erbil and Baghdad over energy, disputed territories, and Kurdistan's share of the national revenue. Many panelists shared their concerns about the biased position taken by the Iraqi Supreme Court and how such actions could derail Iraq's progress, leading to more chaos and instability in the country.

Additionally, the forum highlighted the importance of the relationship between the United States and the Kurdistan Region in promoting stability, not only within Iraq but across the broader regional landscape. Several panelists discussed the evolving priorities of the United States in the Middle East, which are raising concerns among the Kurds, who have traditionally held a pro-U.S. stance. The potential vulnerability of the Kurds in a region steeped in anti-U.S. sentiment, which stems from the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East, was highlighted as an additional point of concern. Due to its strategic importance in the Middle East, the stability of the KRI is integral to regional security. The United States thus has a vested interest in safeguarding the Kurdish people, who have consistently proven to be steadfast allies in a tumultuous region.

Readers of this issue of *Kurdistan Chronicle* can look forward to a special report on the MEPS 2023 Forum, highlighting KRG Prime Minister Barzani's interview and former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's speech. Both discussions centered on the pivotal role of the Kurdistan Region in ensuring regional security and stability, emphasizing the imperative for the world not to take for granted the importance of the Kurds and Kurdistan in this regard. ●

TIMELINE

NOVEMBER 2023

November 1

- PM Masrour Barzani welcomed Kathy Bunka, the newly appointed Canadian Ambassador to Iraq.
- Alina Romanowski, the US Ambassador to Iraq, visited Erbil and held discussions with PM Masrour Barzani on Erbil-Baghdad relations.

November 2

- The ninth Pomegranate Festival commenced in Halabja.
- A delegation led by the US-led Coalition visited Erbil to engage in discussions with Kurdish counterparts regarding Peshmerga reforms.

November 3

- A drone attack was intercepted over a US military base in Harir, Erbil province.

November 5

- PM Masrour Barzani welcomed Al-Ittihad Club to Erbil.

November 6

- Three drone attacks were intercepted over the US military base in Erbil.

November 7

- Over 170 Yezidi Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) voluntarily left Duhok Camp to return to Sinjar.

November 8

- Kurdistan Region's Interior Minister visited London, meeting with senior officials to discuss security and humanitarian challenges.
- The Pomegranate Festival in Erbil began to promote local products.
- Kurdistan announced the export of 100 tons of pomegranates to EU markets.

November 9

- The US base in Harir, Erbil province, was attacked with two explosive-laden drones.
- Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia al-Sudani arrived in Erbil to meet with Kurdish leaders and discuss Erbil-Baghdad disputes.
- A large shipment of illicit drugs was seized in a joint operation by Kurdish and Iraqi forces.
- The US military base in Harir, Erbil province, came under a drone attack.

November 11

- A fresh explosive-laden drone attack on the US military base in Harir caused material damage.
- PM Masrour Barzani received British Ambassador to Iraq Stephen Hitchen to discuss the protection of foreign missions amid increasing attacks.

November 12

- In a meeting with Iraq's Oil Minister Hayan Abdel-Ghani, PM Masrour Barzani reaffirmed KRG's readiness to resume oil exports.

November 13

- Qatar's Consul General to Erbil Hussein bin Ali Al Fadala met with PM Masrour Barzani to discuss strengthening bilateral ties.

November 14

- Approximately 400 Yezidi IDPs voluntarily left Zakho camps to return to Sinjar.
- The Construct Iraq 2023 Expo was inaugurated in Erbil by PM Masrour Barzani.

November 15

- Peshmerga and Iraqi Army conducted a joint operation against ISIS remnants near the Syrian border.
- Volker Perthes, Head of the Independent Strategic Review Team (ISRT) from the United Nations, and PM Masrour Barzani met to discuss the UN's role in addressing challenges in Iraq.

November 17

- The US military base in Kurdistan Region's Harir came under a new drone attack.

November 18

- Iraqi Defense Minister Sabbath Mohammed Saeed Abbasi met with President Masoud Barzani to discuss ongoing anti-terrorism operations.

November 19

- PM Masrour Barzani laid the foundation stone for an industrial zone and recycling plant in Zakho.

November 20

- The 2023 Middle East Peace and Security Forum officially kicked off in Duhok, where leaders from around the world convened to discuss pressing regional challenges.
- Former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson arrived in Kurdistan to take part in the 2023 Middle East Peace and Security (MEPS) forum.

November 21

- Kurdish scholar Prof. Ebrahim Karimi was honored with the prestigious Rutherford Memorial Medal in physics.

November 22

- Marshal Sammy Sampson, the UK's Senior Military Advisor for MENA, visited Erbil to discuss military cooperation with Kurdish leaders.

November 25

- On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, PM Masrour Barzani reaffirmed his government's commitment to support women's rights.

November 26

- The Iraqi Army attacked Kurdish villages in the disputed Kirkuk province and arrested several civilian farmers.

November 27

- In a meeting with Turkish Ambassador to Iraq Ali Reza Guney, PM Masrour Barzani stressed the importance of resuming Kurdistan oil exports.

November 28

- The Iraqi Federal Court rejected a plea demanding timely payment of KRG employees' salaries.

November 29

- PM Masrour Barzani received the Japanese Ambassador to discuss ways to enhance economic cooperation.
- France's new Consul General to Erbil Yann Braem arrived in Erbil and met with senior Kurdish officials.
- Kurdistan began exporting the first shipments of honey to Qatar.
- Peshmerga and Iraqi Army carried out an anti-ISIS operation in the areas around Makhmour.

November 30

- PM Masrour Barzani attended COP28 in the UAE and noted in a statement that failure to act on climate change is not an option for the international community.



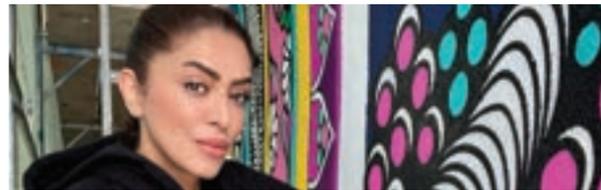
Mandali's Clove Dates

50



64

The Kingdom of Iraq and Shaikh Mahmoud Barzanji's Kingdom of Kurdistan



"My art is always very personal"

98



Honoring Barzani's Love for Chess

114



Mountain Trail Invites Explorers 72

CONTENTS

NOVEMBER 2023

6-11	A Bridge Between Experts, Scholars and Decision Makers	44-49	Recovering Oak Forests to Combat Climate Change
12-15	Reflections on the UK's Shared Struggles with Kurdistan	50-53	Mandali's Clove Dates
16-19	Charting a Course for Peace and Progress A Conversation with PM Barzani	54-59	Armenians Rebuild Centuries-Old Church
20-23	Pioneering Economic Transformation	60-63	A Finnish Journalist's Affection for Kurdistan
24-27	An Outlook on Turkey-Kurdistan Trade	64-67	The Kingdom of Iraq and Shaikh Mahmoud Barzanji's Kingdom of Kurdistan
28-31	Beacon of Hope, Bastion of Harmony	68-71	Revisiting Salim Barakat's <i>What About Rachel, the Jewish Lady?</i>
32-35	Enhancing Road Safety	72-77	Mountain Trail Invites Explorers
36-37	Pomegranate Industry	78-79	Kurdish Doctor Makes Strides in Human Heart Cell Regeneration
38-43	The Sacred Fruit of Kurdistan	80-81	The Crucial Role of Youth Diplomats
		82-85	Representation Through Laughter
		86-89	Zak Moradi's Kurdish-Irish Reflections
		90-92	Narratives of Empowerment
		94-96	The Emergence of AI
		98-103	"My art is always very personal"
		104-109	Lost Paintings of "Devil Man"
		110-113	A Beauty Queen's View of Kurdistan
		114-117	Honoring Barzani's Love for Chess
		118-121	Victory at World Championship Finale
		122-123	Poetry: Abbas Abdullah Yousif
		124-125	Wildlife



info@kurdistanchronicle.com

Publishers: Botan Tahseen
Marewan Nasraddin Hawramy
Editor in Chief: Nahro Zagros
Managing Editor: Shamal Abdulla
Editor: John Bowlus

Co-author: Jan Dost
Senior Reporter: Sardar Sattar
Graphic Designer: Hilal Çelik
Features: Qassim Khidhir

Photograph Editor: Safin Hamid
Photographers: Sabr Dri
Mohamad Dargalayi
Liaison: Aveen Howrami

Kurdistan Chronicle Kurdistan Chronicle Kurdistan Chronicle Kurdistan Chronicle Kurdistan Chronicle

MEPS23

MEPS Forum

A Bridge Between Experts,
Scholars and Decision Makers

Kurdistan Chronicle

MEPS

#MEPS23

From November 19-21, the Middle East Peace and Security (MEPS) Forum 2023 was held at the American University of Kurdistan (AUK) in Duhok, with the support of *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

“The agenda put together by the conference organizers does not shy away from a formidable array of issues faced by us all,” Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani said during the event.

“Topics such as climate change, mass migration, extremism and its drivers, sustainability, and systems of governance are all up for debate. And I would expect that some of the dis-

ing the perspectives of key stakeholders, including the Arab Gulf states, Iran, and Turkey.

Moreover, Prime Minister Barzani underlined that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is located in a very strategic part of the world. “We have Turkey, we have Iran, we have the rest of Iraq and Syria, the whole Middle East. We are basically the glue. We are connecting all these different communities and thousands of years of history and different cultures together.”

“So, I think that we as the Kurds, instead of being elements of separation or destabilization, we want to unite the region. We want to bring more stability to the region. We want to be

and the Middle East are all at great risk from the challenges of water scarcity, rising temperatures and desertification, among other things,” Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, Senior Advisor to Prime Minister Barzani for Foreign Affairs and Climate Change and former KRG Representative to the United States, told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. “We need to have an open dialogue to raise public awareness, highlight the problems facing us, and give credit where credit is due to those who are taking action. MEPS was an excellent platform for this.”

MEPS Forum are how societies communicate, both internally and across the world. “It’s a feedback mechanism and a communication mechanism where ideas can be tested, new ones can be generated, old ones can be re-evaluated, confirmed, or discounted.”

This year, the forum hosted speakers, diplomats, and guests from over 80 countries, and had prominent keynote speakers and guests such as former UK Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Boris Johnson, Prime Minister Barzani, KRG

communicate to the world what problems the Kurdistan Region is facing,” Professor Romano said.

“This isn’t just about sending or receiving a message. It’s about understanding and bringing people from abroad here to the KRI to see this situation and speak with people from here, which is a really important thing to do. These events cost money, of course, and it’s hard to see money being spent when a lot of people are without their salaries and so forth. But it’s part of the survival



Duhok, Kurdistan Region, serves as the venue for the Middle East Peace and Security Forum (November 19, 2023).

Photo: Mohamad Shwani

cussions here will inform decision making and policy choices. For that is the test of gatherings such as this – how the intellectual heft displayed here can help drive meaningful outcomes.”

Building upon the conferences of previous years, MEPS Forum 2023 focused on the dynamics of great power competition in the Middle East and the prospects for peace in the region.

Discussions delved into the roles of the United States, Europe, and China in the region, as well as the future of Iraq. Additionally, there was a focus on the Gaza conflict, explor-

the beacon of development and progress and democracy, and these sorts of conferences are to show the world that we are different and we can be better.”

Climate focus

Moreover, this year’s conference there was extra focus on climate change, due to the UN Climate Change conference in the UAE starting on November 30 and the climate challenges that the KRI and Iraq are facing today.

“The MEPS Forum was right to choose climate change as one of the key topics for debate this year. The KRI, Iraq,

“It’s important for our people to know the scale of the challenges facing us but also to know that the KRG isn’t standing still and is taking steps to tackle the risks,” she added.

A meeting of minds

Dr. David Romano, Thomas G. Strong Professor of Middle East Politics at Missouri State University, told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that events such as the

President Nechirvan Barzani, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, and First Deputy Speaker of Iraq’s Parliament Muhsin Al-Mandalawi.

“It is actually more important than we might realize, in the sense that for the leadership here in Kurdistan, for instance, to understand and communicate, understand how the world sees the situation here, understand what advice the world is offering, what’s good advice, what’s bad advice, but also to

strategy for the KRI,” he concluded.

Ibrahim Dogus, Labor Party councilor of Lambeth in London, also told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that these forums are happening as there is growing conflict in the Middle East on different fronts, “whether it’s Israel and Palestine, or whether it’s Baghdad and the KRI.”

“So I think having these forums and making sure that you get people from all over the world with an interest in the

region is quite important. It's my first time and it won't be the last, so I'll be back here next year. Hopefully we'll be aiming at organizing more functions and sessions to build bridges between the KRI and the UK."

Showcasing Kurdistan

Moreover, the forum was a showcase of Kurdish unity, with senior officials from both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) attending. Both KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani and PUK President Bafel Talabani attended the forum this year

Kurdistan Region has also been a democratic success."

Dr. Randall Rhodes, President of AUK, told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that the event is also important now that today many people "get their information from social media and other online resources that are unsavory and without verification."

"It's extremely important to bring international experts, academics, diplomats, government officials, to Kurdistan, for face-to-face dialogue, so we can discuss in an accurate, realistic, and verifiable manner the realities of our current situation

Kurdistan Chronicle that "holding the MEPS conference in the Kurdistan Region illustrates the KRI's commitment to openness, transparency, and constructive dialogue. By welcoming global leaders, policy makers, and business leaders to its doorstep, Kurdistan demonstrates its dedication to building relationships based on mutual respect and shared understanding."

"Furthermore, hosting the forum in

discussions and empowers Kurdistan to shape its own narrative on the international stage. In fact, it is the bridge that strengthens the Kurdistan Region's relationship with the international community and amplifies its voice on the global stage."

Bridging ideas

In his closing remarks at the MEPS Forum, Dr. Honar Issa, Secretary of

enable candid discussions and address the most pressing challenges to peace and stability in Middle East by going beyond conventional knowledge and wisdom, particularly when it came to Iraq and its future."

"MEPS Forum is a bridge between experts, scholars, and decision makers, as well as a safe space for thinkers to engage with each other, to agree and disagree, and to find compromises when



MEPS Forum attendees include Kurdish leaders, foreign diplomats, and dignitaries from across the globe (November 20, 2023).

Photo: Mohamad Shwani

for the first time.

"One of the MEPS Forum's most notable achievements is the demonstrated unity among political parties, particularly the PUK, KDP, and other parties. They sit together, showcasing a cohesive front for Kurdish unity," Chiya Hamid Sharif, fifth-term KDP member of Parliament, told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

"Furthermore, the forum plays a pivotal role in promoting the economic and political success of the KRI in the Middle East. While there has been focus on Egypt and Turkey, the

with the Middle East."

Joel Rayburn, former U.S. Special Envoy for Syria, told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that the crisis in Gaza did not dominate the forum, unlike the IISS Manama Dialogue in Bahrain, and more topics were discussed. "It looks like the Manama Dialogue became the Gaza Dialogue. It kind of crowded all the other issues out of that space, but here that didn't happen. So, I think this is good."

Treefa Aziz, KRG Representative to the United States, told

the KRI provides a unique opportunity for participants to witness the region's dynamism firsthand. It showcases the region's achievements, challenges, and aspirations, thereby enabling participants to gain valuable insights into the intricacies of Kurdistan's geopolitical landscape."

"Lastly, bringing the MEPS Forum to the KRI decentralizes diplomatic dis-

AUK's Board of Trustees, also expressed special appreciation to *Kurdistan Chronicle* and *Kurdistan 24* as the event's media sponsors.

"The imperative of bringing together policymakers, scholars, and experts in his tumultuous times for the Middle East cannot be overstated," Dr. Issa said. "We had a vision for MEPS Forum when we initiated the first dialogue in 2019: to develop a platform that would

it comes the most contentious issues and topics. These are the sacred ideals that constitute the guiding principle for MEPS Forum."

Dr. Issa also thanked the Chairman of AUK's Board of Trustees, Prime Minister Barzani, for shaping the identity of AUK. "It is his forward-thinking vision that has underpinned the successful functioning of AUK." ●

Reflections on the UK's Shared Struggles with Kurdistan

In November, Boris Johnson, the former British Prime Minister, took part in the Middle East Peace and Security (MEPS) Forum 2023 in the Kurdistan Region. The event, hosted at the American University of Kurdistan in Dubok, saw Johnson leading a panel discussion and delivering a speech. His presence highlighted his commitment to the Kurdistan Region, emphasizing the significance of multilateral dialogues in addressing the intricate challenges facing not only the Kurdistan Region but also the broader Middle East and the world. During his speech and subsequent discussion with Ranj Alaadin, Johnson reflected on his 2015 visit to Kurdistan as the Mayor of London, coinciding with the peak of the war against ISIS. He also discussed his efforts to advocate for Kurdistan during his tenure as the UK's Prime Minister.

Kurdistan Chronicle



Photo: Mohamad Shwani

Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivers a speech at the MEPS Forum in Dubok (November 20, 2023).



Photo: Mohamad Shwani

PM Masrour Barzani welcomes former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson at the MEPS Forum in Dubok (November 20, 2023).

Solidarity then and now

In his opening address, Johnson reminisced about the reasons behind his trip back in 2015, citing the threat of terrorism that he felt was present in the UK – and London in particular – as well as in the KRI. “In London, we were facing the same challenge from people who were infected by the same nihilist ideology (as ISIS) and killing innocent people in appalling terrorist attacks, bombings, and stabbings,” he said.

The former prime minister underlined the significance of the *peshmerga*'s battle against ISIS, emphasizing that it was not merely a regional conflict but a collective struggle against a common enemy. “Young Londoners were even going to Iraq and Syria to join this evil death cult ISIS. They were being radicalized by these people in their rooms at home in the UK, so your fight was our fight, and your war was our war,” he said.

Johnson also recounted a moment when, against the advice of his advisors in the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, he posed with an AK-47 during a visit to a military camp near Erbil. This symbolic gesture aimed to express his support for the *peshmerga*'s mission and his shared commitment to overcoming the challenges posed by ISIS. “I want to express my deepest gratitude once again. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks for your heroism, the heroism of the Kurdish armed forces, the *peshmerga*.”

The 2015 visit thus formed an enduring bond between the UK and the Kurdish people that continues today, underscoring how the fight against terrorism, and for human rights and economic freedom, transcends borders and requires collaborative efforts from the international community.

Economic freedom and progress

Johnson then turned to a discussion of global uncertainties both political and economic, arguing that the collective defense of the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, and human rights were under threat from those willing to commit atrocities against innocent people. He reflected on how the atrocities committed against the Kurds in 1991, among other such tragedies, had prompted the British government under John Major to propose the creation of safe havens, which was a vital step for the KRI to emerge today as a defender of the values that he shares and a growing, open economy. “I think it's really grown from then and it's incredible for me to come here and see modern Kurdistan, to wake up in an absolutely colossal hotel room, so big that I couldn't find the bedroom.”

Johnson highlighted other economic successes, including the proactive reforms – most notably in digital banking – that Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani has advanced.

Referencing the ongoing challenges for Erbil in navigating its relations with Baghdad, Johnson emphasized the importance of fair solutions that respect the rights and aspirations of the Kurdish people. “Any excessive attempt to centralize and not to respect those rights will only be deeply counter-productive, so it's vitally important that we stick up for the rights of Kurdistan and its economic freedom,” Johnson said.

Again, Johnson reminisced about his 2015 visit, when he had visited the showroom of the British car company Jaguar and, to market the company's Land Rovers, drove one out into Erbil traffic against the recommendations of his security detail. The progress between then and now was staggering. “There are now more than 200 British companies doing business in the KRI, and our trade is up 83% year-on-year,” Johnson highlighted, also mentioning the sale of 22 tons of pomegranates to the UK last year.

The future of Kurdistan

Following his speech, Johnson fielded a series of questions from Ranj Alaaldin, the director of Crisis Response Council and a former foreign policy analyst at the Brookings Institution, regarding the challenges confronting the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) within the framework of global politics. In this segment of the program, Johnson highlighted the unfavorable legacy of Western involvement in Iraq, particularly critiquing the ill-advised decisions to intervene in 2003 and subsequently withdraw in 2011. He also discussed the repercussions of the West's subsequent shift in focus towards Asia.

Yet, expressing a preference for U.S. leadership over other potential global hegemony like China or Russia, Johnson posed the question of how to get the United States to assume its responsibilities more eagerly. “We're seeing an America that is not willing to act, and a failure of leadership or an absence of leadership is worse sometimes than firm leadership. All human institutions involve a leader, and global politics is no exception.”

In light of China's expanding presence in the KRI and the Middle East, Johnson expressed a preference that the United States and its Western allies engage with China rather than divide into a polarizing cold war, as the two blocs are linked like “Siamese twins.” Nevertheless, he urged the region to continue to court Western investment rather than “commercial dependency” on China.



PM Masrour Barzani presents a box of Kurdistan pomegranates to former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (November 20, 2023).

Photo: Sabr Dri

In this context, Johnson highlighted the KRI's commitment to advancing green energy and technologies through programs and initiatives, which Prime Minister Barzani also emphasized in his introductory remarks. “The commercial benefits of going green and switching to renewable technologies, with all the jobs that they can create, is fantastic.”

As a closing question, Johnson was asked whether he would recognize an independent Kurdish state, in the hypothetical scenario in which he becomes prime minister once again. After another dose of characteristic humor, in which he said that the possibility of his re-election was as likely as him being reincarnated as an olive, Johnson said, “I'm going to be backing Kurdistan for the reasons I outlined today. Irrespec-

tive of the path that Kurdistan chooses, you have our support in the UK, and the constitutional issues within Iraq need to be properly resected to represent your legitimate aspirations.”

“If I have one message to convey today, it is this: the UK, as long as I have anything to do with it and beyond, will steadfastly stand by Kurdistan,” Johnson said. ●

Charting a Course for Peace and Progress A Conversation with PM Barzani

The 2023 Middle East Peace and Security Forum (MEPS 23) in Dohuk provided an opportunity for regional and international leaders and stakeholders to sit down and discuss the potential for lasting peace, sustainability, and collaboration in a pivotal part of the world, all against the backdrop of the diversity, tolerance, and security that is championed in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Amid these key conversations, Maryam Moshiri, chief presenter at the BBC, sat down with Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani to discuss a range of issues, from the international community's relationship with the KRI to the role that youth and women have in helping the region continue to develop and thrive.



Tyler Fisher

Tyler Fisher is a researcher and professor of anthropology at the University of Central Florida.

Looking inward and outward

To begin the interview, Moshiri mentioned the ongoing conflict in Gaza and asked what role Iraq can or should play in presenting a solution. Prime Minister Barzani touched on the region's history of conflict, and his hope that the KRI can help provide humanitarian aid. "We are very tired of wars, and we hope that there will be an end to the war and peaceful solutions are going to be introduced," he said, underlining the importance of following up promises with action. "Slogans are not going to help the people in need of medicine, food, and security. The best action would be to provide assistance to the people in need."

Pivoting to the topic of internal politics, Prime Minister Barzani reiterated the importance of maintaining a federal state in Iraq and delegating power and rights equally to each region, as stipulated in the Iraqi constitution. "Kurdistan has done everything that is required by the constitution, but we've never enjoyed the rights that we

have in the constitution," the Prime Minister said.

Regarding the region's evolving relationship with international players, especially the United States and China, Prime Minister Barzani emphasized the need for economic collaboration. "We would like them to be more engaged on an economic level. We welcome everyone who wants to expand the relations with our region and to help develop our economy."

He also underlined the positive relations between the UK and the KRI, highlighting the economic opportunities that the KRI has for UK investors.

Economic development

Moshiri and the prime minister also discussed the resumption of oil exports from the KRI. While the KRG is ready to export oil, more support is needed from the federal government. "Once contracts are respected and once the federal government pays these IOCs [international oil companies], then there is oil to be exported," Prime Minister

Barzani explained.

However, the Kurdistan Region is looking beyond oil to fuel its continued economic development. "We have many other areas that we can develop and diversify our economy and increase

of finance. "I would like to call this a revolution in transforming Kurdistan because it's not just about diversification of the economy, but it's also about digitizing our systems and services," Prime Minister Barzani explained. He announced that the government aims

honey, grapes are being exported to the Gulf. We are looking at building dams to produce more electricity, so hydroelectric power is on the agenda, but also solar energy and natural gas instead of oil," the Prime Minister said.

PM Masrour Barzani joins Maryam Moshiri for a special session at the MEPS Forum in Dohuk (November 21, 2023).



Photo: Mohamad Shwani

our sources of revenue," Prime Minister Barzani explained. "I have invested in agriculture, industry, tourism. I'm also looking at how we can improve our education and health systems."

He underlined the importance of embracing technology and digitalization, both in the public sphere and in the private sector, especially in terms

to have one million public employees enrolled in its My Account digital banking initiative by the end of 2024, and that some 1,000 ATMs are being installed around the region to support banking activities.

Agriculture and green energy represent other key components of diversification in the KRI. "Pomegranates, apples,

Shaping the future

When asked about combatting corruption, Prime Minister Barzani explained that it is not just a matter of identifying and punishing the guilty, but about improving transparency and effectiveness in governance. This involves "respecting citizens, cutting bureaucracy, and providing fast services to them," he

said. He also emphasized the importance of equality, honesty and justice. “You need to give services to people regardless of who they are and their rank and their origin and their race. Everybody must be served equally.”

When asked about the role of youth in the KRI and Iraq, he noted the prominence of young people in the KRG administration. “The youth are the future of this country. I’m a firm believer that we need to empower the youth and young talent. In my office, I now have a staff of about 60-70 very talented young people from different regions. These will be the drivers behind the engine of reform and transformation in Kurdistan.”

Moshiri also touched upon the role of women. In response, the Prime Minister noted the importance of a change in mentality. “We need women to be more engaged. It’s a cultural thing, and I think there is a change of the mindset of our own people that needs to be more supportive of women engagement in society.”

He emphasized that, while improving infrastructure and transport connectivity in rural areas has the potential to improve opportunities for women in those communities, the KRG is limited by a lack of funding and support from Baghdad.

When discussing minority rights in Iraq and the KRI, the Prime Minister reframed the question. “It’s not about the majority and minority; it’s about the diversity of communities and religions and ethnicities. We have different communities in Kurdistan, and they all enjoy the same rights,” he said.

The KRI hosts 1 million internally displaced people from other parts of Iraq and about 250,000 refugees from neighboring countries, emphasizing the welcoming nature of the



The MEPS Forum in Duhok gathers senior Kurdish officials, foreign diplomats, and business leaders (November 21, 2023).

Photo: Mohamad Shwani

region and its deep-rooted respect for diversity. He also highlighted the plight of the Yazidi people displaced by ISIS. “They have all the right to go back, but they need to go back with dignity. They have to go back victorious.”

Building a vision

When asked about freedom of speech and the role of journalists in the KRI, the prime minister highlighted the responsibility journalists have to their country’s future. “Journalists here in Kurdistan are very active. And they’re very influential. They have the rights to express, to criticize, and I hope

that most of their criticism would help us build Kurdistan, learn from our mistakes and realize shortcomings to have a positive impact on the decisions that we make.”

Lastly, he explained his long-term vision for Kurdistan: “I want to see citizens be the center of attention for every government, mine or after me,” he emphasized. “I would like to see time have value. I would like to see bureau-

cracy stop. I would like to see everyone getting a fair and equal opportunity. I want to see people in Kurdistan serve as the model for others to look up to. I can share my views and ideas with my colleagues, but I need every single citizen of Kurdistan to help me achieve that goal.”

In closing, Moshiri asked about the importance of holding the MEPS Forum in the Kurdistan Region. Prime Min-

ister Barzanui cited the KRI’s central location and the stabilizing role that the Kurdish people aim to play in the Middle East. “We as the Kurds, instead of being elements of separation or destabilization, want to unite the region. We want to bring more stability to the region. We want to be the beacon of development and progress and democracy, and these sorts of conferences show the world that we are different and we can be better.” ●

Pioneering Economic Transformation



Sherzad Ahmed Shahab

Sherzad Ahmed Shahab is a PhD candidate in Financial Economics, School of Economics, Finance, and Banking, Northern University of Malaysia.

In the heart of the Middle East, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has embarked on a transformative economic journey through the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Strategically positioned in Dohuk, Batifa, Shaqlawa, and Chamchamal, these SEZs are proving instrumental in driving economic growth, fostering innovation, and attracting both domestic and foreign investment.

Through economic development programs and the vision of KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, the industrial sector is of great importance in supporting economic growth and improving the standard of living for all citizens in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Currently, the KRG operates four industrial zones and plans to establish 16 new SEZs throughout the region. The KRG is seeking investors to develop and operate these zones, aiming to reduce reliance on imported goods, increase exports, and eliminate dependence on oil and gas.

SEZs are business parks that have been given legal independence to enhance their management. Businesses operating in SEZs benefit from distinct labor rules, streamlined government restrictions, special visa rights, and exclusive tax benefits. This makes it possible for companies to operate in developing markets without encountering the typical issues present in such markets.

Unleashing economic potential

The KRI's SEZs are carefully designed to unleash the region's economic potential by

providing a business-friendly environment. Investors, whether local entrepreneurs or international corporations, are lured by a host of incentives, including tax breaks, simplified regulatory processes, and streamlined customs procedures. This approach aims to position the KRI as an attractive investment destination for those seeking a foothold in a region with a rapidly expanding market.

“
Investors, whether local entrepreneurs or international corporations, are lured by a host of incentives, including tax breaks, simplified regulatory processes, and streamlined customs procedures
”

Diverse sectors, one vision: A key strength of the KRI's SEZs lies in their diversity. Instead of concentrating on a single industry, these zones embrace a multi-sectoral approach. From technology and manufacturing to logistics and tourism, the SEZs cater to a broad spectrum of businesses. This not only enhances the resilience of the region's economy but also contributes to the development of a well-rounded business ecosystem.



Photo: Safin Hamid

Technicians engaged in drilling an oil well.



Photo: Safin Hamid

Erbil as hub of innovation: Among the SEZs, Erbil stands out as a shining example of success. With its modern infrastructure and strategic location, Erbil has become a hub for innovation and entrepreneurship. The Erbil SEZ, established in 1999, has attracted companies from various sectors, creating a vibrant business community that thrives on collaboration and cross-industry synergies.

Building bridges through trade: SEZs play a pivotal role in building bridges through trade. By facilitating international commerce, they strengthen economic ties between the KRI and the global market. The KRG's commit-

ment to creating an open and accessible business environment fosters a climate where businesses can flourish, creating a win-win situation for both local and international partners.

Overcoming challenges with resilience: The KRI's journey in establishing SEZs has not been without challenges. Despite objections from Baghdad, the Erbil governorate has successfully signed contracts with 42 oil companies from 17 countries, showcasing resilience in the face of geopolitical uncertainties and economic fluctuations. As recently as 2014, KRG officials optimistically predicted exports of 1 million barrels annually.

Unlocking Kurdistan as an economic powerhouse

As the KRI's SEZs continue to evolve, the region is poised for sustained economic growth. The KRG's focus on innovation, inclusivity, and sustainable development is laying the foundation for a prosperous future, and the SEZs aid in economic diversification and position the region as a key player in the global economic landscape.

On Tuesday, October 31, 2023, Prime Minister Barzani inaugurated the Fabyab Factory in Erbil, which specializes in cardboard packaging products. At the

inauguration, he expressed his vision for the importance of regional progress and development and stated that the KRI is demonstrating that economic success can be achieved through strategic planning, innovation, and a commitment to building bridges with the international community.

Industrial sector development: The industrial sector has emerged as a focal point for growth in the KRI, leveraging its abundant natural resources, particularly in oil and gas. The KRG is actively working to promote industrial growth, recognizing its potential to drive economic prosperity and create jobs.

Initiatives for industrial growth: The KRG's commitment to industrial development is evident through its creation of SEZs aimed at attracting investment. Still in its early stages, the KRG envisions making the industrial sector a major component of the economy. Plans include the development of new industrial zones and investment in key areas such as petrochemicals, construction materials, textiles, and various light and heavy manufacturing industries.

Operational industrial projects: The KRI currently hosts operational industrial projects that contribute significantly to the local market and export products to other parts of Iraq. Notable examples include the Erbil Steel Company, the Lafarge (Bazian) Cement Factory, the Mass Steel & Cement Factories, Awamedica for pharmaceutical products, and Al-Hayat (Pepsi) for beverages, showcasing the region's potential for industrial growth.

Data and figures

- Oil Production: 450,000 b/d (45 billion barrels of oil reserves).
- Natural Gas Production: 452 mmscf/d (200 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves).
- Industrial Zones: Four operational zones with 16 SEZs under development.
- Industrial Projects: Investment licenses given to 283 industrial projects with a total capital of \$23 billion since 2006.
- Labor Force: 2.5 million (Over 58% of the population is between the ages of 15 and 60).

Investment opportunities in the industrial sector

The KRI presents a multitude of investment opportunities in the industrial sector, spanning various domains.

Petrochemicals: Leveraging substantial oil and gas reserves, the KRI aims to become a leading supplier of petrochemical products derived from natural gas. Proposed projects include ammonia, urea, petrochemical products production plants, and ethylene and propylene production facilities.

Construction Materials: The construction materials industry is thriving, featuring steel structure and profile factories, aluminum profile factories, cement factories, and more. These ventures contribute to meeting local needs and meeting the region's demands for economic development.

Textiles: The textile industry, with opportunities ranging from clothing manufacturing to rug and carpet production, presents a dynamic sector for investment. The region's skilled workforce and available resources make it an attractive hub for textile-related ventures.

Miscellaneous Industries: Beyond the abovementioned sectors, the KRI offers investment prospects in various industries such as automotive assembly, agricultural equipment, battery manufacturing, consumer electronics, and recycling facilities. These industries respond to market demands and exhibit high growth potential.

To sum up, the KRI is unlocking its potential as an economic powerhouse through a strategic focus on both SEZs and industrial sector development. The region's commitment to diversification, innovation, and international collaboration positions it as a key player in the global economic landscape. The KRI is not just a region with economic potential; it is actively demonstrating that success is achievable through forward-thinking planning, innovation, and a commitment to building bridges with the international community. ●

An Outlook on Turkey-Kurdistan Trade



Sevda Kaplan

Sevda Kaplan is a Dicle University Physical Education graduate who has been a journalist since 1993. With a background in presenting and TV reporting, she notably held a six-year term as vice president of the Journalists Association. Alongside her ongoing journalism career, she has authored two novels in the Kurdish language.



In a recent interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Mehmet Kaya, Chairman of the Diyarbakir Chamber of Commerce and Industry, evaluated the current state of commercial relations between Diyarbakir and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). He shared his ideas and suggestions for improving them and actualizing their promise in the near term.

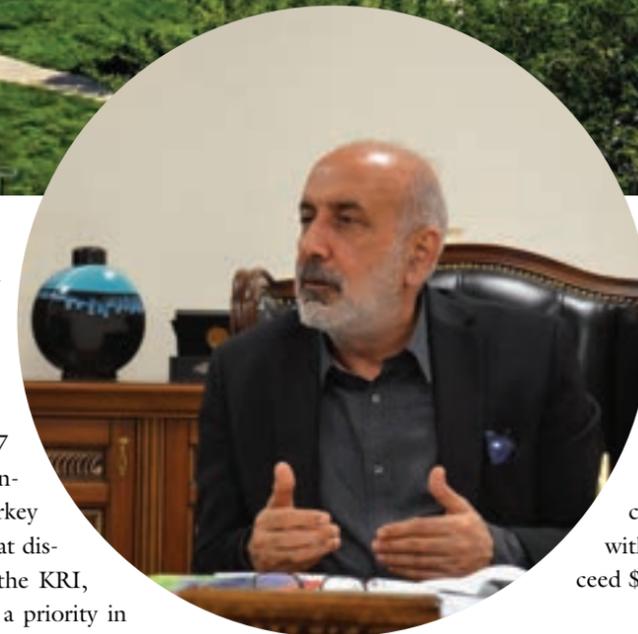
Pointing out the immense commercial potential of the KRI for Turkey's trade activities, Kaya stated that the close ties of brotherhood and language that are nurtured by being neighbors are the primary sources for this latent potential.

Missed opportunities

Underscoring the importance of commercial developments for Turkey and the KRI, Kaya referred to the fact that export figures have essentially remained the same since the 2010s. "We have the same trade figures today as we did ten years ago. While the KRI is growing its share of Iraq's national income, Turkey's market share has remained stagnant, with the figures even declining for a period. Unfortunately, this was not a process that Turkey managed well." Kaya stated that all countries can have problems with other countries from time to time, emphasizing that this is a common occurrence, but that countries should have

different understandings and methods for neighbors, as they know them more intimately.

Mentioning how the 2017 Kurdistan Region independence referendum led Turkey to start a political process that disrupted trade relations with the KRI, Kaya said that Iran became a priority in that process and the focus shifted away from the KRI's market. The chairman explained how the central government picked erroneous political fights with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in order to dominate across all domains, from customs to airports. As a result, trade with Turkey was blocked, products coming from



Turkey were boycotted, and taxes were imposed.

"Looking back now, you can see that there was an opportunity that Turkey missed. If the process had been managed correctly, Turkey's trade volume with Iraq today would easily exceed \$50 billion," said the Chairman.

Turkey-KRI trade was undermined because of excessive security policies and an external security strategy that was "similar to the survival strategy of the 1990s." Explaining that the persistent failure to build a second customs gate was impairing Turkey's trade with the KRI, Kaya noted that these developments could have helped prevent the eco-



The headquarters of the Diyarbakir Chamber of Commerce and Industries.

“

The more we increase trade and relations with our Kurdish brothers, the better the relations between Turkey and Iraq and Turkey and the KRI will be

”

conomic crisis that Turkey is experiencing today.

“We need to learn lessons from what happened,” said Kaya. “In other words, even if there are crises in this region from time to time, we should not disrupt the methods that will ensure that both societies grown their abilities to meet their needs through symbiotic commercial relations.”

“The more we increase trade and relations with our Kurdish brothers, the better the relations between Turkey and Iraq and Turkey and the KRI will be, and they will become countries that protect each other,” he continued. “When I met with KRG officials in 2015, they spoke highly of Turkey. However, Turkey’s extremely harsh reaction after the referendum changed that perception, and they began to feel that Turkey was not their friend. It is essential to calculate the potential outcomes of actions and learn from mistakes,” Kaya concluded.

Commercial partners

Pointing out the potential for mutual economic gain for both Turkey and the KRI, Kaya noted that KRG President Nechirvan Barzani, Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Turkey Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan all agree that it is possible to establish good relations. “Turkey should abandon its nationalist logic. After all, every region has its own conditions, and it is necessary to approach the situation by respecting those conditions. The strict nationalist mentality in foreign policy should disappear and should never return. I think this is the most important lesson to be learned,” he said.

“If you cannot sell goods to your neighbors, you cannot sell anything to the world,” Kaya said, arguing that Turkey should work on to find ways to increase trade with Iraq, the KRI, and all its neighbors to the south. Kaya also explained that Turkey can make roughly 10% profit from sales to Europe but up to 90% from the KRI, and described the KRI as Turkey’s “commercial partner,” noting that a significant portion of the brands in the region come from Turkey.

“Today, the development of economic relations is the most important method for guarding against the deterioration of political relations, which applies around the world. For example, the EU tries to safeguard each member’s trade regimes and work quickly to resolve political instability and become intermediaries. Relations between Turkey and the KRI should be the same,” he said, adding that countries should prioritize contributing to strengthening democracy and trade



Erbil Governor Omed Khoshmaw leads a delegation from the Kurdistan Region visiting the Diyarbakir Chamber of Commerce and Industries (March 25, 2023).

Photo: Elyas Barzani

in other countries. The primary way to achieve this is to eliminate the “survival problem in one’s head.”

The second way is to increase the number of commercially accessible areas. Kaya believes that at least two more customs gates are needed between the KRI and Turkey and underlined that these should be connected to the KRI’s commercial channels and compatible with Turkey’s axis of trade, which include being close to a port. “We shouldn’t open a new customs gate just for the sake of opening one. The ones that are open today contribute to border trade, but they are not enough, and we should aim for larger volumes,” said Kaya, noting that Turkey’s current maximum trailer truck capacity is 4,000 per day but could reach 15,000.

“If your Kurdish brother is satisfied, he will be friends with you. If you support your Kurdish brother, he will support you. We need to learn and teach this well. Democracy, diplomatic relations, and trade should all be exemplary,” said Kaya. “We should also be aligning our laws more closely and carry out stud-

“

Many investors from Turkey are investing in the KRI, especially in the food and construction sectors

”

ies on how to minimize trade-related problems, from customs rules to taxation, so that they can be solved more expediently. The ombudsman method, for instance, can be introduced, which is a necessary aspect of trade.”

Kaya underscored that the problems that business people experience in Turkey or the KRI should be handled by a system that is above the court, and asserted that it would be beneficial to create common commercial language, all of which could reduce conflict. Creating compatible financial transactions was another area that Kaya highlighted, arguing that a joint study should be

carried out on this issue. While people should be prevented from carrying un-registered money, a system is also needed for them to easily repatriate their earnings, he maintained.

The chairman concluded by highlighting the role of investment in fostering commercial relations. “I would also like to add that Turkey is an attractive center for investors in Kurdistan. Many investors from Turkey are investing in the KRI, especially in the food and construction sectors. But there are also Iraqi and Kurdish investors in Turkey who were born and raised in Kurdistan. Turkey is an important gateway for them to expand their businesses to the world. Turkey has a population of 86 million and does most of its trade with Europe.”

“We need to develop collaborations that will enable Kurdish capital and Kurdish business people to come and do business here (in Turkey) easily,” Kaya concluded. ●

Beacon of Hope, Bastion of Harmony



Vahal Ali

Vahal Ali is the Director of Communications in President Barzani's office.

Although Kurdistan literally means “the land of Kurds,” this specific geography is home to a diverse group of people from different ethnic backgrounds. Throughout the region’s turbulent history, the inhabitants of Kurdistan have been subject to discrimination, brutality, and oppression by different powers, yet they have emerged victorious through resilience, unity, and perseverance.

In Kurdistan, tolerance, coexistence, and peace are not just cultural norms; they are inherent qualities as profound as the majestic mountainous landscape that defines this region. Unlike many places where laws and regulations are needed to enforce tolerance between people of different faiths and eth-

nicities, the Kurds embody these principles naturally. These qualities also echo in the name of Kurdish soldiers, *peshmerga*, often translated as “those who face death.”

The guardians

The *peshmerga* have gained recognition for their unwavering commitment and fearless spirit, driven by a cause that goes beyond politics. However, with the emergence of ISIS, they showcased unparalleled courage as they willingly sacrificed their lives to defend others, regardless of their faith and ethnicity. These brave men and women spearheaded a massive international coalition until they reclaimed every inch of the land taken by ISIS, even areas not historically and formally part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

These stories echo the days after the liberation of Iraq in 2003. Back then, there was consideration given to dissolving the *peshmerga*. President Masoud Barzani strongly objected, emphasizing that the *peshmerga*, having not been established by decree, could not be dissolved by one either.

Today, the KRI is a testament to the profound sacrifices made by its people, the blood they offered, and the tears they shed. It emerged from the pain of hundreds of thousands of martyrs, the anguish of countless mothers, and the enduring resilience exhibited during decades of systematic oppression.

The homeland

The sufferings of these people, their endurance during extremely challenging times, and the sacrifices of the men and women of this homeland have always been undertaken because the dream of Kurdistan outlives everyone, a dream that is as real as life itself.

The KRI stands as a beacon of hope in the Middle East and is often referred to as “the other Iraq” by Western politicians. The people of Kurdistan take pride in their unique history, traditions, and culture, while also embracing the principles of advanced societies. They have seamlessly adapted to the modern world, looking ahead with optimism.

The hope

However, as we take pride in what has been achieved, we



Kurdish Peshmerga forces on military vehicles adorned with the Kurdistan flag.



A dam under construction in Erbil, Kurdistan Region.



Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers at their graduation ceremony.

Photo: Safin Hamid

“
In Kurdistan, tolerance, coexistence, and peace are not just cultural norms; they are inherent qualities as profound as the majestic mountainous landscape that defines this region
”



Photo: Star Ahmad

also remain cautious of the challenges that threaten the very existence of Kurdistan and its peoples. Since 2005, the KRI, as a constitutional political entity in Iraq, has had many ups and downs in its relations with the Iraqi federal government, including neglect of Article 140 of Iraq’s constitution, financial differences, oil disputes, and budgetary difficulties, to name just a few. Amid the unfolding of new regional conflicts in the Middle East, the Kurds are waiting to see whether these conflicts exert a direct or indirect impact on their own circumstances.

With all that said, the KRI boasts friends around the world who recognize the suffering, sacrifices, and basic rights of the region’s people. These friends are happy to see Kurdistan prevailing and growing stronger. As for our adversaries, there will come a day when they too will realize that Kurdistan’s sustained existence is not just an undeniable fact, but that it also aligns with the aspirations of all freedom-loving peoples in the Middle East who champion diversity and liberalism. ●

Enhancing Road Safety



Shamal Abdulla

Shamal Abdulla is a journalist with 18 years of experience in the field. He has held a number of prestigious positions, including news director at Kurdistan 24 and the editor-in-chief of BasNews.

In a commendable effort to prioritize road safety and organization, the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Traffic Engineering Directorate, under the Erbil Traffic Directorate, has taken significant steps to improve traffic conditions and reduce accidents.

In an interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Delan Abdulla Omer, Director of the Traffic Engineering Directorate, shared insights into the transformative measures implemented to enhance road safety and traffic. The Traffic Engineering Directorate plays

“Under the KRG’s Ninth Cabinet, a historic shift has focused government resources on the critical field of traffic management, allowing the KRG Ministry of Interior to be proactive in addressing traffic control in cities and autonomous administrations.”

a pivotal role in ensuring safe traffic circulation for all road users. By employing advanced engineering techniques, it focuses on installing various safety measures, including iron safety springs, traffic signs, street mapping, traffic signals, crossing

bridges, cycle paths, and more. This comprehensive approach aims to create a secure environment for drivers and pedestrians alike.

Delan underscored the directorate’s commitment to international standards, stating, “In our pursuit of excellence, we rely on Iraqi, American, and British standards, ensuring that our work aligns with global best practices.”

Under the KRG’s Ninth Cabinet, a historic shift has focused government resources on the critical field of traffic management, allowing the KRG Ministry of Interior to be proactive in addressing traffic control in cities and autonomous administrations.

Meanwhile, the decision to carry out street paving with local employees marked a departure from the previous reliance on foreign and private sector

companies and has resulted in more cost-effective solutions that create job opportunities for local people.

“To elevate our capabilities, the Ministry of Interior provided state-of-the-art equipment and conducted training courses for our local employees, aligning their skills with global standards,” Delan said, emphasizing the improvement in the quality of work and the overall beautification of Erbil, whose



Road engineers and technicians mark roads in Erbil as part of the government’s campaign to enhance road safety measures.



Delan Abdulla, Director of Erbil Traffic Engineering, leads her team and interacts with locals.



traffic engineering is now on par with that of developed countries.

Learning from the experiences of Germany and Turkey, especially in terms of street paving, she envisions incorporating techniques and technologies from Gulf countries in future projects. Collaborations with international development organizations such as the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the Japan International Cooperation

Agency (JICA) have been vital in formulating and assisting with the master plan for Erbil.

In a bid to make Erbil more inclusive, the directorate has also undertaken efforts to cater to people with disabilities, including specialized parking lots and pedestrian crossing bridges, marking a significant step towards creating an accessible urban environment for all.

Delan laid out the directorate's future goals: "Our vision includes the installation of additional necessary signage, the construction of pedestrian crossing bridges, the reduction of speeding near schools and kindergartens through pedestrian crossings and speed bumps, the use of concrete barriers for two-way streets, the mapping of outdoor roads that lack adequate lighting, and the strategic placement of concrete barriers and iron springs to minimize damage from traffic accidents."

In short, the KRG's Traffic Engineering Directorate is making remarkable strides in transforming Erbil into a model city for traffic organization and safety. The collaborative efforts, adherence to international standards, and forward-looking initiatives indicate that it will continue to work to improve road-safety conditions and enhance life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. ●

Pomegranate Industry



Islam Yousif

Islam Yousif is a distinguished senior journalist in the Kurdistan Region.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is steadily making strides in expanding its agricultural sector and fortifying its presence in international markets, particularly through the export of pomegranates. With an eye on European markets, the KRI continues its successful export trajectory, with plans underway to ship 1,000 tons this year.

Idris Anwar, the proprietor of an export company, disclosed that the initial phase saw 110 tons of pomegranates dispatched to the UK and France. Notably, 65% of this batch originated from farms in Halabja, while the remaining 35% came from Zakho. Anwar confirmed that exports are set to continue their momentum until the target of 1,000 tons is achieved.

“The Office of the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been instrumental in facilitating our direct export initiatives, actively carving out markets and streamlining procedures,” Anwar remarked.

The surge in pomegranate exports has amplified farmers’ enthusiasm, prompting a renewed focus on enhancing production. Salman Mohammed, Director General of Agriculture of Zakho, hailed the government’s pivotal role in uplifting the agricultural sector, citing the export initiatives as a catalyst for tangible progress.

The strategic export orientation aligns with the KRG’s agenda, emphasizing the promotion and commercialization of the KRI’s agricultural products in foreign markets. Notably, the involvement of 60 farmers from Halabja Governorate and 30 farmers from Zakho underscores the collec-

“

The strategic export orientation aligns with the KRG’s agenda, emphasizing the promotion and commercialization of the KRI’s agricultural products in foreign markets

”

tive effort driving the overseas exportation of pomegranates and pomegranate-related products.

Hosni Mohammed, a farmer from Zakho, expressed satisfaction with the quality of this year’s crop, highlighting plans to leverage trade networks for export opportunities in Europe. “Our cultivation practices emphasize natural methods, abstaining from chemical usage. Proper irrigation, tailored to soil conditions, is pivotal,” Mohammed emphasized.

Anticipations are high as two local companies are facilitating the export of pomegranates to the UK and France, with projections of reaching 1,000 tons by the end of 2023. The scale of cultivation speaks volumes: Halabja Governorate’s 1,000 hectares produce 30,000 tons annually, while 400 hectares in Zakho yield an annual production of 14,000 tons. In the KRI, pomegranate prices hover around 1,500 Iraqi dinars per kilogram.

The advances made by the KRI in exporting pomegranates not only signify economic growth, but also notably underscore the region’s commitment to sustainable agriculture and global market integration. ●



Photo: Star Ahmed

POMEGRANATE

The Sacred Fruit of Kurdistan



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.

Kurdish poets have long likened their lovers' bosom to the pomegranate fruit. For example, in his classic love poem, *Mem û Zîn*, Ahmed Khani (1650-1707) likened the pomegranate fruit he saw in the garden of the Kurdish prince, Zain al-Din, in Botan to a girl's bosom. Of course, there is a wealth of poetry in the same vein written by other poets across Kurdistan, as well as close similes in Kurdish folk songs. The cheeks are even called *hinarên rû* (literal meaning "pomegranate face") in Northern Kurdistan (southeastern Turkey), a symbol of radiance and vitality.

In addition to the pomegranate being referenced in poems and folk songs, it has, as an autumn fruit, enjoyed an important place in Kurdish society. What is the story of the pomegranate and why celebrate such a fruit? Let us start with Halabja, which was subject to the full brutality of the former Ba'athist dictatorial regime, and has now become a symbol of love, benevolence, fertility, and growth.

On November 2, 2022, the Ninth Halabja Pomegranate Festival was launched, which attracted the participation of 600 farmers, with 720 stalls and booths provided for farmers, orchard owners, and merchants to display the products of their farms and trees.

During the closing press conference of the festival, Director General of Tourism

in Halabja Governorate Chia Qasim, announced that 270,000 tourists had visited the governorate to attend the ninth edition of the festival. Over the course of three days, Qasim indicated that crops worth 1.35 billion Iraqi dinars (\$850,000) had been sold.

Statistics from the first day of the festival also showed that 35,200 tourists visited Halabja Governorate through the Zameqi and Darshish border gates with Iran and another 35,000 visited from Halabja center, amounting to 70,200 people in total.

As for the statistics from the second day, the same two checkpoints recorded 85,000 tourists crossing into Halabja Governorate, compared to the total number of visitors, which was 120,000.

This may not be a surprise to those in the region, as the pome-

granate in Kurdistan exhibits some characteristics that make it better than the other types grown elsewhere. It is rather large, has large seeds, and its surrounding arils are full of juice. The taste varies between sweet, sour, and umami. Pomegranate molasses, which is made from a high concentration of the finest juice, gives salads an unmatched taste. I remember buying a bottle of pomegranate molasses from the border town of Tawila in 2015 at what I thought was a high price, but when I used it, I found that it was well worth it thanks to its high quality and wonderful taste.

The story of the pomegranate

Cultures in Mesopotamia have grown the pomegranate since antiquity. The book *Dirasat u Bubuth (Studies and Research)*, which includes articles written by the Iraqi archaeologist Taha Baqir (1912-1984), states that ancient cuneiform tablets discuss the pomegranate, known as *narmu* in Sumerian.

We can note here that the Sumerian name is close to the fruit's Kurdish names that are used today: *hanar*, *anar*, and *nar*. Likewise, the Sumerian word is linked to the Arabic word for pomegranate, *rumaan*, where the letters are almost the same but rendered in a different order.

Pomegranate is a Kurdistan fruit par excellence. Its cultivation areas are scattered throughout the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), especially in Halabja, Horama, and Sharazur. The Kurds take a keen interest in this fruit, growing it in their homes and farms. Many make a refreshing beverage from it or add its dried seeds to some dishes; others manufacture pomegranate molasses, which can be used in cooking and salads. Pomegranate peel powder is also used in tanning hides (*mashik* in Kurdish) and leather.

This fruit is sacred in both Yarsanism and Islam. When I was a child, I used to make sure not to waste a single seed when I ate pomegranate. As our elders would tell us, "there is no pomegranate on earth without a pomegranate seed

from paradise in it," basing their claim on a hadith ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad.

The word "pomegranate" is mentioned three times in the holy Qur'an. In the Ar-Rahman Surah, there is a description of Paradise: "Therein will be fruits and dates and pomegranates." This is where the idea – that in every pomegranate lies a single pomegranate seed of paradise - originated.

In Yarsanism, there is a story about the virgin Dada Sara, daughter of Pir Michael. One day she was cleaning the religious meeting place, or *cemxane*. People at the gathering had eaten pomegranates, so she had found an errant seed on the ground. She picked it up and ate it because she believed it was



Photo: Peshraw Mahdi



A woman in traditional Kurdish attire sells pomegranates at the 9th Halabja Pomegranate Festival (November 2, 2023).

Photo: Peshraw Mahdi



Photo: Peshraw Mahdi



The renowned painting by English artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, created in 1874.

sacred and should not be left on the ground. After a while, Sara became pregnant and gave birth to a child, whom she named Bawa Yadgar. Still the people doubted her virginity, so Sultan Sahak asked them to throw the child into a *tandir* oven and leave him for three days to test Sara's purity. After three days had passed, they opened the oven and saw the child was still alive and not burned.

In ancient paintings and sculptures from West Asia, the cradle of the pomegranate, we find portraits of kings and clergymen holding either pomegranate flowers, its fruits, or even branches ending in small pomegranate fruits. Some believe that the crowns of kings are nothing but an imitation of a pomegranate, with multiple triangles pointing upward.

The Greeks knew about the pomegranate in the eighth century BC, as it was mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*. In his book *Das Granatapfel Buch*, Bernd Brunner states the fruit was closely linked to the goddess Aphrodite in Greek mythology. Legend has it that Paris gave Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, a pomegranate as a sign that she was the winner in the beauty contest between her, Hera, and Athena. It is said that Aphrodite subsequently planted a pomegranate tree in Cyprus. There are other Greek myths linked to pomegranates, such as the myth of Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, but there is not enough space here to tell it.

Studies show that the pomegranate tree arrived in Spain with the Arabs in the eighth century AD. Granada, therefore, was named in reference to the pomegranate trees that were planted there. In the Middle Ages, the pomegranate was considered by Christians to be a symbol of virginity and purity. In Boticelli's 1497 painting, *The Madonna of the Pomegranate*, the baby Jesus sits on her lap, holding a ripe pomegranate.

A symbol of Kurdistan

One year ago, pomegranates were the subject of a phone call between Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, where they discussed ways to strengthen bilateral relations, especially with regard to trade and investment.

Prime Minister Barzani also thanked President Al Nahyan for the strong support, cooperation, and coordination shown by Emirati officials in supporting the export of agricultural products, especially pomegranates, to the UAE and other Gulf countries. Mr. Barzani confirmed in the same phone call that the KRI can play an important role in providing food security in cooperation with the countries of the region. He also indicated that the export of pomegranates represents an stepping stone to the export of other agricultural products, including apple, grapes, and honey.

Yes, the Kurdistan pomegranate can play a pivotal role in strengthening relations between the peoples of the region and may become, like olives, a symbol of peace and love. This fruit has become a product that represents Kurdistan in global markets and will be present on the tables of restaurants and home kitchens around the world. Tons of this product have already been exported to the UK and France, and the volume of pomegranate exports from the KRI has reached 100 tons, with a target of 1,000 tons by the end of the year, as stated on the KRG official account on the X platform, formerly known as Twitter.

This is all thanks to the KRG government, which has adopted projects related to this fruit, providing support for farmers' projects as well as encouraging investors to open factories to manufacture pomegranate molasses and export it to global markets. ●



“

One year ago, pomegranates were the subject of a phone call between Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan

”

Recovering Oak Forests to Combat Climate Change



Delband Rawanduzi

Delband Rawanduzi is an activist and environmental journalist in the Kurdistan Region. She achieved the 2021 Guan Eden Grant Program award for safeguarding villages and restoring forests.

Within the context of addressing the issue of climate change, all proposed solutions are invariably aimed at establishing a mechanism for the sequestration and absorption of potent greenhouse gases, including but not limited to CO₂ and methane. Notably, afforestation and the preservation of existing forested areas are recognized as pivotal strategies that ameliorate the accumulation of these heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere.

Among the myriad trees that inhabit our planet, oak trees hold a position of particular significance due to their widespread presence, comprising a diverse array of approximately 450 distinct species. Notably, within the geographical confines of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a distinct subset of five types of oak trees has been officially acknowledged.

Biodiversity and adaptability

Oak trees are recognized for their soil conservation properties, as a mature oak has the capacity to absorb approximately 21 kilograms of CO₂ annually. Moreover, the efficacy of CO₂ absorption by these trees tends to increase as they advance in age. Oak trees have a preeminent role in the ecosystems of the KRI's forests and the expansive Zagros Mountain range. Indeed, the presence and longevity of oaks within these ecosystems are pivotal, as they significantly influence the viability of all plant species and fauna inhabiting forested areas. Consequently, the presence of oak trees is of paramount importance in preserving biodiversity within these forests.

The robust capacity of oak tree roots to efficiently extract moisture from the soil renders them instrumental in safeguarding soil moisture, thus significantly contributing to the preservation of food security and agricultural sustainability. Notably, the data furnished by the Kurdistan Regional Government Board of Environmental Protection and Improvement reveals the prevalence of oak trees within the region's forests, accounting for up to 93% of the total forested area in the KRI. This data underscores the critical importance of both forest preservation and the deliberate establishment of artificial forests as indispensable measures to maintain and enhance the ecological integrity and agricultural stability of the region.

Notwithstanding the inherently slow growth rate characteristic of oak trees, their prevalence as the native tree species within the environmental context of the KRI equips them with a remarkable adaptability to a diverse range of climatic conditions. This adaptability is underscored by their capacity to thrive and proliferate at varying elevations, particularly within the altitude range of 400 to 2,000 meters above sea level, thus contributing to their widespread presence and growth within the region.

Cataloguing and planting oaks

Dr. Saman Abdulrahman, Director of the Kurdistan Botanical Foundation (KBF), has emphasized that the process of surveying and data collection represents a scientifically advanced endeavor aimed at addressing the challenges posed by climate change. Reflecting upon the inception of the KBF in 2013 and its concerted efforts to survey

“

Oak trees have a preeminent role in the ecosystems of the KRI's forests and the expansive Zagros Mountain range

”

Kurdistan botanical foundation team in front of an oak tree in the mountains of Kurdistan.



the entirety of the region's landscape and mountainous terrain, Dr. Abdulrahman articulated his longstanding aspiration that such comprehensive surveying activities would be integrated into official governmental initiatives. Observing the diligent and concentrated efforts of the Ninth Cabinet towards this crucial matter, he is now confident that the foundation has been laid for a significant scientific undertaking in Sulaymaniyah.

Dr. Abdulrahman's expertise spans over two decades of dedicated research on the KRI's plant life, which has been conducted in close collaboration with a multidisciplinary scientific team within the institute, encompassing a spectrum of specialized fields. To date, the institute's collective endeavors have resulted in the comprehensive surveying of the region's notable mountain ranges, including Qaradagh, Hawraman, Ezmar, Goizha, Halgurd, and Sakran, further underscoring the institute's invaluable contributions to the scientific understanding

and conservation of regional flora.

The Recovering the Wild initiative, which aims to preserve the oak forests within the KRI, assumes a position of utmost significance and strategic importance. This endeavor is conducted under the auspices of

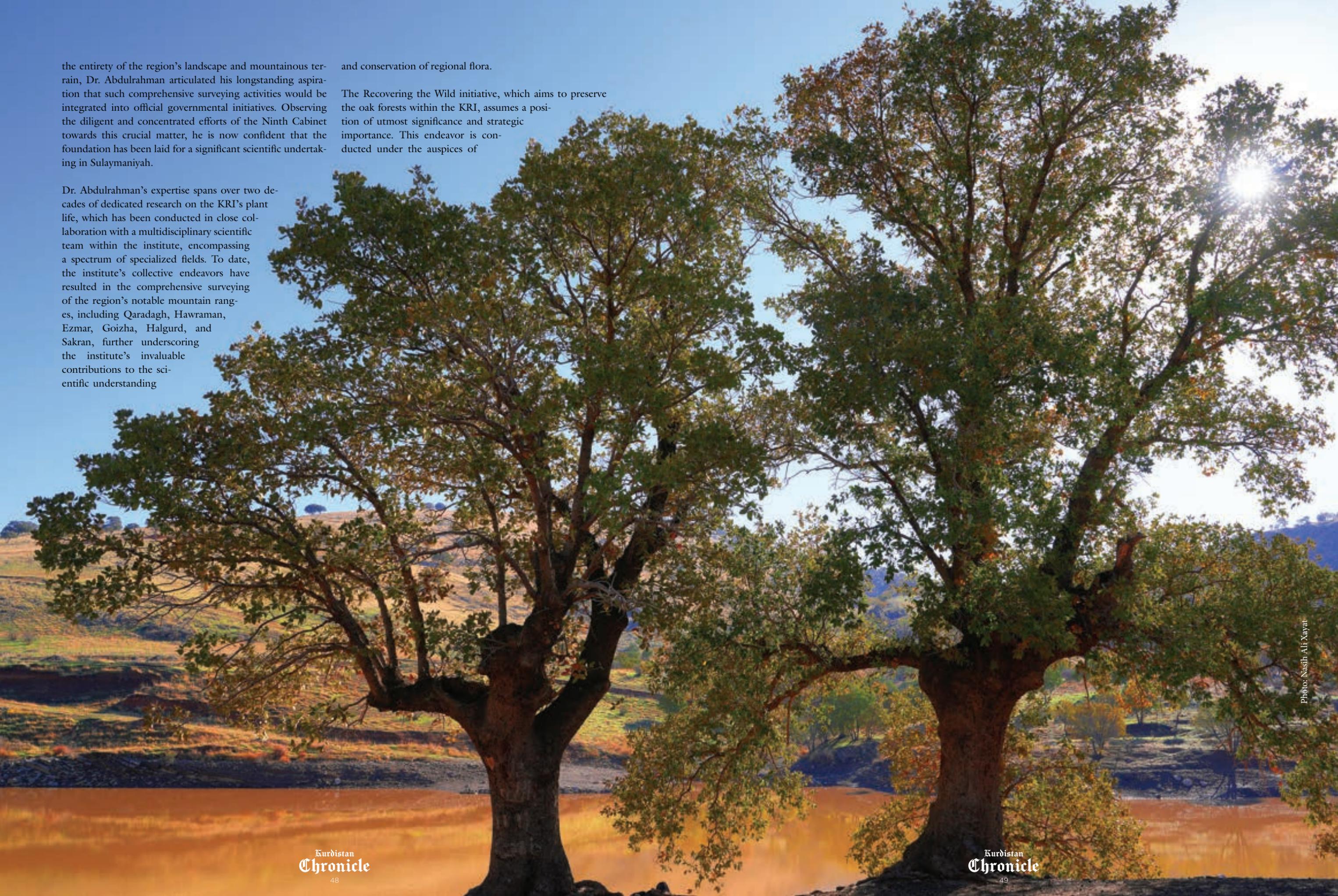


Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat



Dr. Nariman hanging a warning sign on the Caucasian oak tree.

the Kurdistan Botanical Foundation, in conjunction with collaborative efforts involving the American University of Iraq in Sulaymaniyah and the Botanic Gardens Conservation International. Importantly, the project has received financial support from the esteemed National Geographic Society.

Considerable efforts have been dedicated to the comprehensive survey and preservation of oak tree forests within the KRI through a project that encompasses the meticulous identification of oak tree species, their collection, and the implementation of measures to augment their population. Additionally, a discerning examination of the various factors that pose threats to the continued existence of these oak forests has been undertaken.

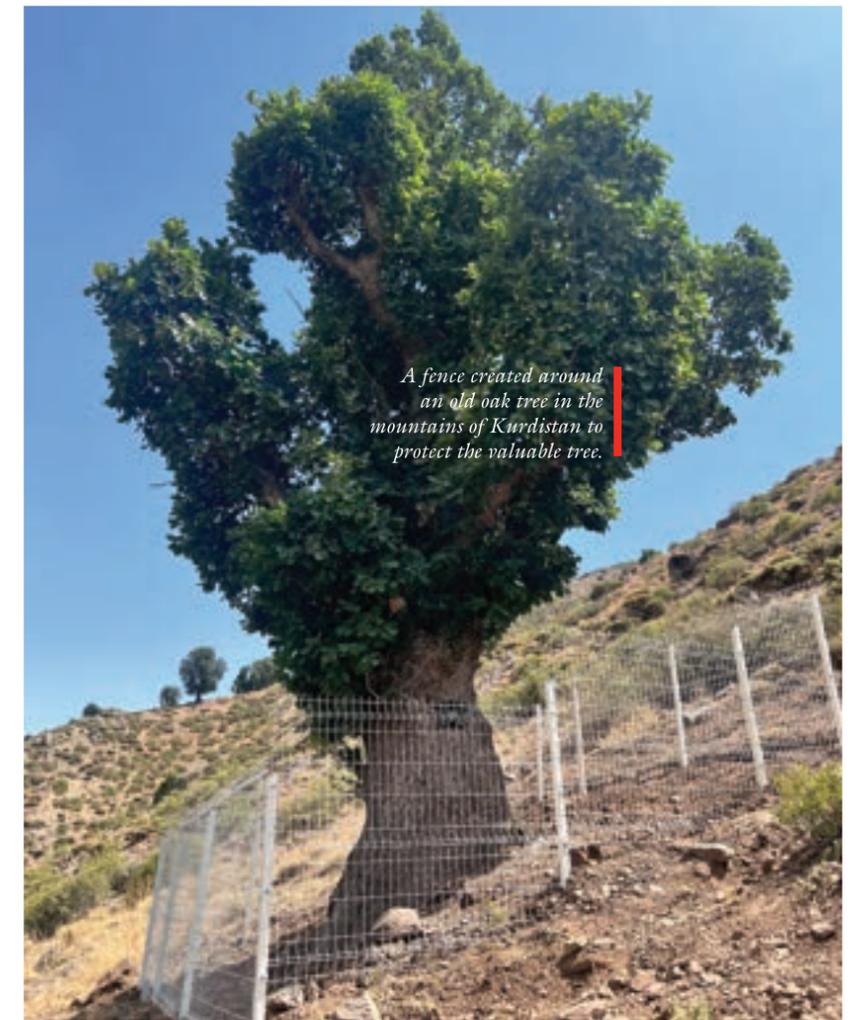
Under the guidance of Dr. Nariman Ahmed, the project was launched in spring 2021 and is projected to conclude in autumn 2023. Notably, within the framework of this project, a precise taxonomy has revealed the existence of five distinct oak tree species, including *Quercus aegilops*, *Quercus libani*, *Quercus infectoria*, *Quercus macranthera*, and mix between *infectoria* and *macranthera*. Each of these oak tree varieties exhibits unique growth characteristics and features. Notably, *macranthera*, or the Caucasian Oak – locally referred to as *shaadar* or “the king

tree” – has been identified as a species facing the threat of extinction. Regrettably, only a limited number of these trees remain, confined to the Hassan

Bag Mountain in the Soran District.

Fortunately, this species of oak tree, distinguished by its exceptional aesthetic appeal and can reach a height of up to 20 meters, has garnered popular acclaim. In a concerted effort to bolster their population, protective enclosures have been erected around these endangered specimens, and distinctive markers were affixed to them as of Sep-

tember 2023, with the aim of gathering their progeny for the purpose of extensive planting in the forthcoming year. ●



A fence created around an old oak tree in the mountains of Kurdistan to protect the valuable tree.

Mandali's Clove Dates



Fatima Qassem

Fatima Qassem is a journalist, artist, poet, and art designer who has organized numerous art exhibitions in both the Kurdistan Region and international locations.

Dates, those luscious fruits cradled by palm trees, have been cherished throughout history for their unparalleled nutritional richness and associated health benefits. Across the ages, these delectable fruits have become an indispensable part of daily life. Within the rich tapestry of date varieties, 'Black Clove' or 'Golden Black' dates speak to the Kurdish heritage in the city of Mandali, boasting a taste so unique that it has earned international acclaim.

Mandali

Nestled along the Iraq-Iran border, Mandali stands as a Kurdish city within disputed territories. Despite its predominantly Kurdish population, the city is a melting pot, with significant Arab and Turkmen communities. Spanning 58,400 hectares, with 36,000 hectares devoted to agriculture, Mandali showcases orchards adorned with traditional mud walls, some dating back 200 years. These historic mud walls, weathered but resilient, contribute to the city's timeless charm, harmonizing perfectly with the majestic date palms that grace its orchards.

The enigma of Black Clove dates

Cultivated exclusively in Mandali, the Black Clove date is a marvel distinguished by its cone-shaped form, averaging 2 centimeters in length and width. What sets this variety apart is not just its physical attributes, but also its inherent sweetness, making it a culinary gem suitable even for those with health conditions like diabetes. With only 15% of the fruit constituting the pit, the re-

maining 85% is a delectable treat. The name "black gold" is aptly bestowed, reflecting both its distinct clove flavor and scarcity. Despite attempts to cultivate the fruit elsewhere, Mandali retains its status as the sole sanctuary for the Black Clove date, owing to its sandy, well-drained soil and a climate uniquely conducive to their growth.

Culinary significance and cultural traditions

Consumed fresh and dried, the dark purple fresh dates and dark black dry dates are emblematic of Mandali's culinary identity. While dry Black Clove dates are not preferred for syrup production due to their high cost and dark color, they hold a special place in Iraqi households. Beyond mere sustenance, they are offered to guests as an alternative to chocolate, a tradition deeply ingrained in Mandali's cultural fabric.

Historical decline and resilient revival

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an increase in the cultivation of palm trees, including the prized Black Clove date trees, in Mandali. However, the onset of war in the 1980s led to a period of decline marked by displacement, water scarcity, orchard burnings, and neglect. The repercussions were felt for 35 years, with clove date production coming to a halt. It was not until 2000, with the return of residents and the infusion of modern agricultural practices, that the cultivation of Black Clove dates experienced a revival. By 2010, Mandali's orchards were once again teeming with life, yielding a remarkable 70% increase in date production compared to previous years.



Photo: Nash Ali Xayat

A man harvests dates from a farm in Mandali.



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat



Photo: Nasih Ali Xayat

Cultivation and economic significance

The cultivation of Black Clove dates is a meticulous journey from planting to harvest. Fossils, or seedlings, are separated from mother palm trees at the age of 4 to 5 years, ensuring a comprehensive root system for a successful cultivation rate of 100%. Carefully planted in soil, these palm trees start bearing fruit after five years, with mature trees capable of producing between 100 to 175 kg of dates annually. The annual pollination process, occurring from March to April, is a crucial phase in the

lifecycle of Black Clove date palms. The dates change colors, from green to dark purple and finally to dark black, reaching their peak ripeness by October.

Economic value and future prospects

Beyond their culinary allure, Mandali's date palms also provide leaves that play a crucial role in sustaining traditional crafts. Collected from December to February, these dried leaves find new life as mats, baskets, brooms, fans, and even essential components for housing. Looking ahead, orchard owners

in Mandali envision a promising future for the Black Clove date industry. By 2030, they anticipate an average annual production exceeding 15 tons, a testament to their commitment to preserving their cultural heritage and culinary excellence.

In the heart of Mandali, where the past intertwines with the present, the story of Black Clove dates unfolds—a story of resilience, cultural pride, and culinary mastery. As the city looks toward the future, it does so with the determination to safeguard its heritage and share the unique flavors of Black Clove dates with the world. ●

Armenians Rebuild Centuries-Old Church



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.

“
Armenians in Zakho have worked for two decades to gain support for rebuilding their cherished church

”

The front gate of the Armenian Church in Zakho, Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Safin Hamid



A view of the churchyard of the Armenian Church in Zakho, Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Safin Hamid

As you walk down the narrow alleys of Zakho's old quarter, a city in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) located just a few kilometers from the Turkish border, a striking sight unfolds before you: an Armenian church.

Adorned with orange and black volcanic stones recently imported from Armenia exclusively for its construction and crowned with four-pointed domes, the church is decorated both inside and outside with a carved Armenian cross known as a *khachkar*, an symbol of everlasting celestial life, and grapes, which represent agriculture, hospitality, and prosperity.

The church's restoration, initiated in 2021, has been a collaborative effort involving the Hungarian governmental agency Hungary Helps, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and contributions from the Armenian and Kurdish Muslim communities.

A harmonious blend of cultures is evident in the workforce

that is laboring tirelessly on the church's restoration. Armenians, Kurdish Muslims and Yezidi Kurds, are working with shared dedication to complete the project by the spring of 2024.

Dawood Mardirosian, the head of the Administrative Council of Armenians in Zakho, is leading the initiative with a clear passion. As he walks toward the church, he expresses, "We have brought a small part of Armenia to the Kurdistan Region."

Dawood mentioned that Armenians in Zakho have worked for two decades to gain support for rebuilding their cherished church, and at last, their dream has materialized. The newly reconstructed church not only serves as a place of worship but also houses a hall for youth activities as well as a museum preserving the rich heritage of Zakho's Armenian community, whose history spans over a century.

"This church is very important for us, not only for Armenians in Zakho, but for all Armenians in Kurdistan; it will

“ Upon reaching Zakho, the Armenians found protection among Zakho notables and the local populace ”



Monument commemorating the 100 years since the Armenian genocide.

Photo: Safin Hamid

become the identity of Armenians in Kurdistan," said Dawood, adding that the old church was not built according to traditional Armenian church design and architecture.

The Armenian Genocide, the systematic killing and deportation of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in 1915, resulted in the death of approximately

1.5 million Armenians. During this time, many Armenians living in villages and towns near the Turkey-Iraq border fled to Zakho. There, a Kurdish notable, Mohammed Beg Shemdin Agha, used his power and wealth to shelter and protect the Armenians.

A Muslim, Mohammed Beg also gave the Armenians a plot of land on which

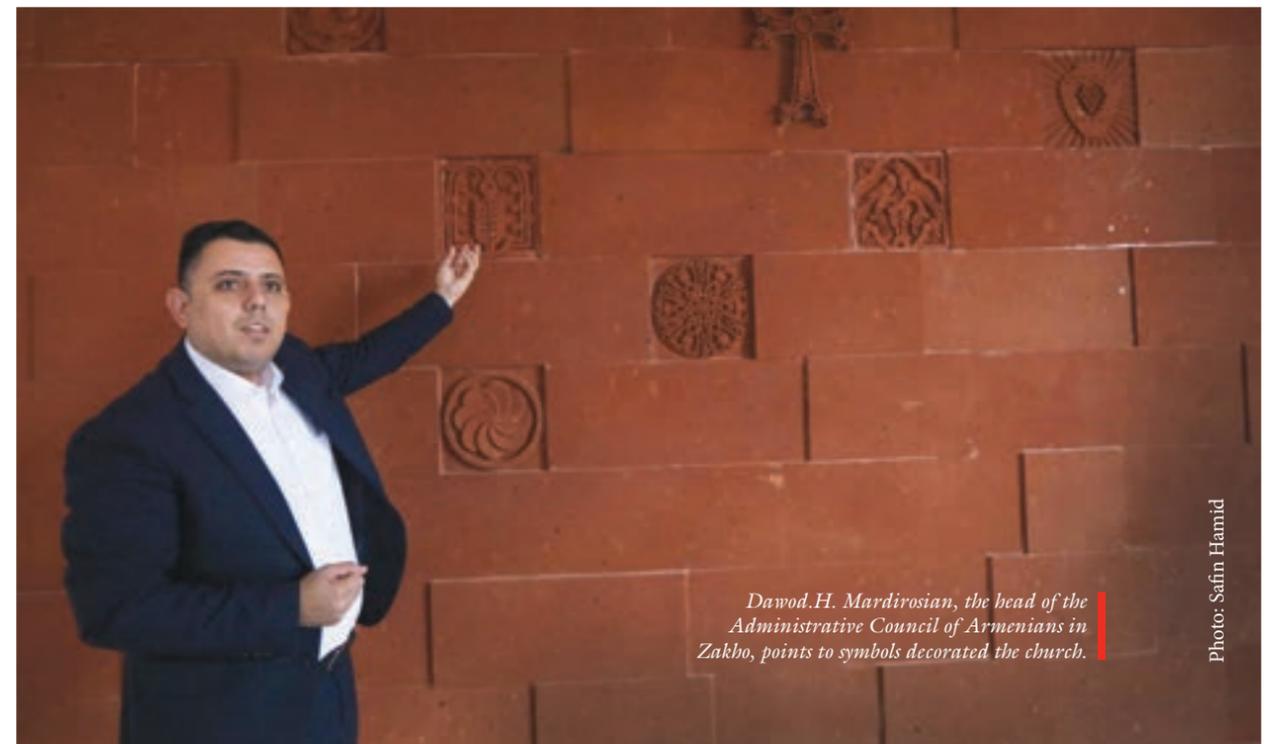
to build a church, and the new church is being rebuilt on the same plot of land. The reconstruction thus echoes this historical continuity.

Dawood estimates that approximately 1,000 Armenians live in Zakho and around 3,000 across the KRI. The size of the community has grown since 2014, when ISIS attacked Mosul, which prompted Armenians to seek safety in the KRI.

The KRI's constitution recognizes Armenians as an ethnic component, provides the right to mother-tongue education in the Armenian language, and reserves one seat in parliament for

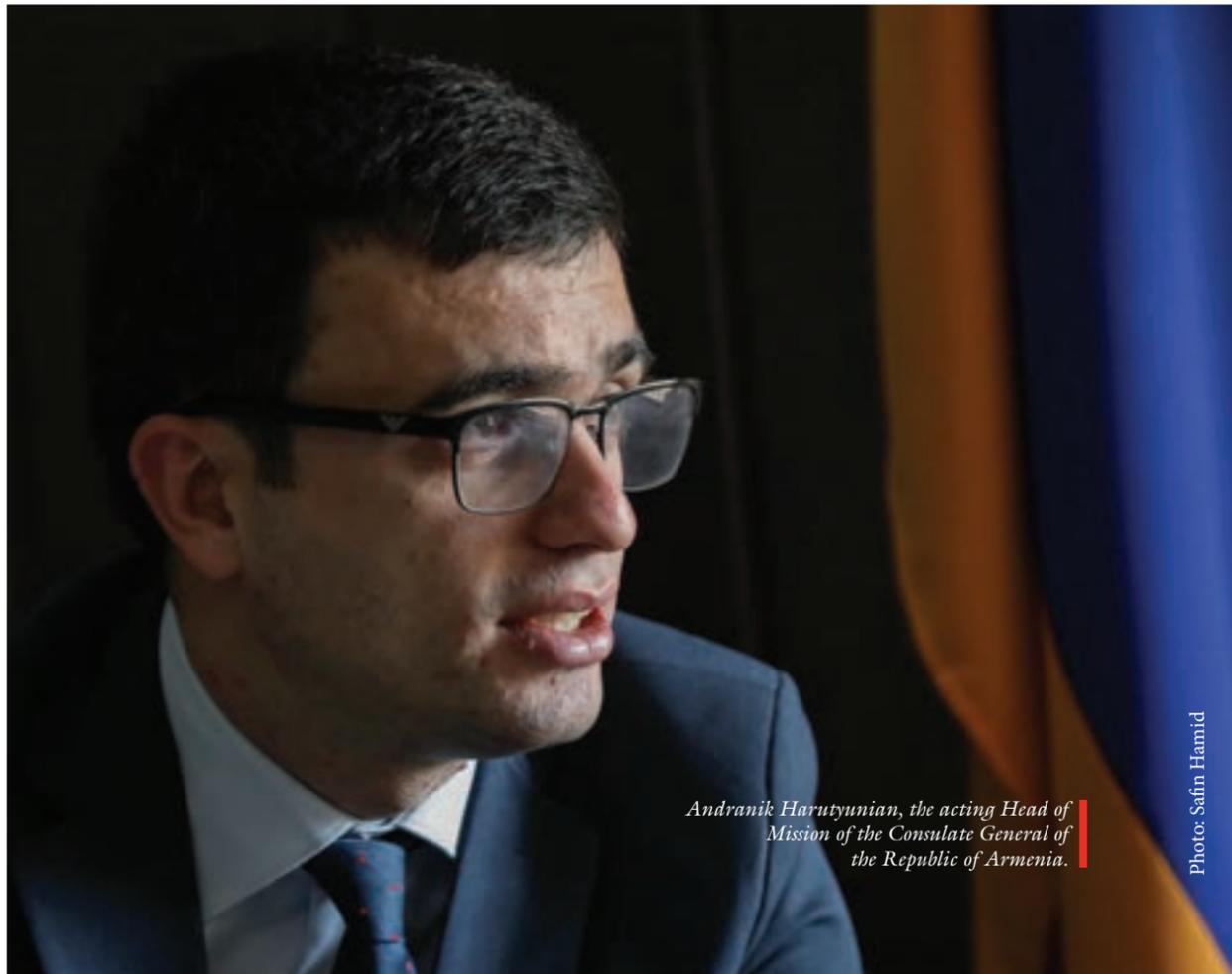
“ Armenians and Kurds have a deep bond ”

Armenians. There are five Armenian churches in the KRI – four in Duhok province, and one in Erbil.



Dawod.H. Mardirosian, the head of the Administrative Council of Armenians in Zakho, points to symbols decorated the church.

Photo: Safin Hamid



Andranik Harutyunian, the acting Head of Mission of the Consulate General of the Republic of Armenia.

Photo: Safin Hamid

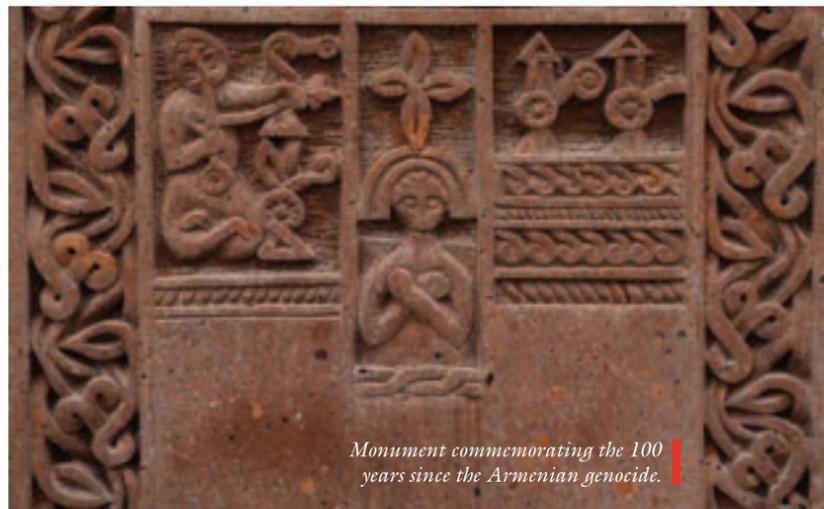
As a third-generation Armenian in Zakho, Dawood highlights three pivotal elements that make a thriving Armenian community in the KRI: a church, an Armenian school preserving the language, and an Armenian cultural center. In this reconstructed church, the community finds a place of worship and a sanctuary embodying their identity, resilience, and the shared history of diverse communities in Kurdistan.

Beyond coexistence

Avzrog, an Armenian village located 20 kilometers from Zakho, is home to 45 Armenian families. Nersik Gharib and his wife were sitting in their lush garden, surrounded by orange and pomegranate trees. Nersik, dressed in traditional Kurdish attire, sipped his coffee and recalled how the Kurdish people protected his family in 1915.

When Ottoman soldiers pursued the Armenians in 1915, he said, the Kurdish people helped his family and many other Armenian families cross into Iraq with their sheep. Upon reaching Zakho, the Armenians found protection

among Zakho notables and the local populace. Nersik shared that his family – originally nomadic shepherders in Julamerk, now known as Hakkari – freely traversed the borders between Turkey and Iraq before 1921, when the border did not exist.



Monument commemorating the 100 years since the Armenian genocide.

Photo: Safin Hamid



Nersik Gharib and his wife sitting at their home in Avzrouk, Armenian village in Zakho.

Photo: Safin Hamid

“Armenians and Kurds have a deep bond; we coexisted in Julamerk for more than a century, sharing clothing, cuisine, and cultures. My father and grandfather could even communicate in Kurdish,” Nersik elaborated.

After settling in Zakho, Armenians contributed to society as shepherders, farmers, and craftsmen in the production of *Shal u Shepk* (traditional Kurdish clothing). This age-old craft uses soft goat fur and continues to thrive thanks to Armenians, with a single garment costing between \$800 and \$1,600.

Today, Armenians have diversified their roles, working as general managers, bank executives, and officers in the *peshmerga*.

Nersik, father to three sons and four daughters, proudly noted that one of his sons serves as *peshmerga*. All his children bear Kurdish names, a choice influenced by Nersik’s enduring friend-

ship with a Kurdish family who shared similar names.

“The relationship between Armenians and Kurds is beyond coexistence; it is passion,” Nersik affirmed.

Nersik was able to travel to Armenia for the first time a few years ago, just before the Covid-19 pandemic. He found the Armenian weather pleasant and the country lovely. He expressed increased satisfaction with the opening of the Armenian consulate in Erbil, the capital of the KRI, in 2021. A direct flight between Erbil and Yerevan further facilitates cultural exchange, attracting both Armenians and Kurds for tourism due to geographical proximity and cultural similarities.

Andranik Harutyunyan, the acting Head of Mission of the Consulate General of the Republic of Armenia, spoke positively about the Armenian presence

in the KRI. “It’s a beautiful coexistence, Armenians feel safe here. We are grateful to the authorities of the KRI for their treatment of our Armenian compatriots,” he said.

The consulate actively supports the Armenian community’s efforts to preserve their ethnic identity, including providing books to Armenian schools. Humanitarian aid has also been extended to Armenian and Yezidi families displaced by ISIS atrocities.

“Armenia is committed to assisting Armenians in need worldwide,” Andranik stated.

In Avzrog, Nersik remains optimistic about the future of Armenians in the KRI. Simultaneously, he hopes for increased efforts from the KRG and the Republic of Armenia to safeguard the language and identity of Armenians residing in Kurdistan. ●

A Finnish Journalist's Affection for Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle

In early August 1990, Finnish journalist Marja Baumgartner traveled to Lalish, the holiest temple of the Yezidis, which is located in a mountain valley in Shekhan, Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Her visit was at the invitation of the Yezidis, a Kurdish-speaking religious minority living in Nineveh and Duhok governorates. Little did she know that the tumultuous events unfolding in the region would soon turn her world upside down.

While Marja was at Lalish, Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein made a fateful move to invade Kuwait. In the wake of this shocking development, Iraq swiftly closed its borders and airports, effectively trapping anyone – particularly Europeans – within the country. Marja, along with many other foreigners, found herself stranded in Iraq, with no immediate means of escape.

As she returned to her Baghdad hotel, Marja could not help but notice the growing number of foreigners who, like her, were confined to the hotel lobby, their freedom of movement severely restricted. Faced with the grim reality of her situation, Marja decided to make the most of her time by documenting the stories that were unfolding around her.

She went to Al Anbar Governorate in western Iraq to meet with Iranian children who were prisoners of war. She accompanied these young prisoners to Khanaqin, a city situated on the Iraq-Iran border, to witness the exchange of prisoners between the two countries.

Marja's next attempt to leave Iraq led her to the city of Zakho, located on the Turkish border. However, her hopes were

dashed once again as the border with Turkey was also sealed shut, denying her passage to safety.

“
Her fascination with the Kurdish people dates to her childhood, when she read the adventure novel *Through Wild Kurdistan* by German author Karl May

She then returned to Baghdad, where Iraqi officials informed her that Hussein wanted to meet with her. Marja is still unsure whether he wanted to meet with her alone or with other journalists. She refused because she disliked the dictator.

As she recalled, “I said I’m sorry, I’m sick, I can’t come, I told them it’s dangerous for him as well, he might get sick,” describing her excuse for declining the invitation.

”
Marja ended up being stuck in Iraq for five weeks before a German plane arrived to pick up stranded Europeans. She recalled that the plane was so full that four people sat in three seats.

Passion for Kurdistan

Marja, who now lives in Switzerland, worked as a freelance journalist for publications in both Finland and Switzerland. Her trip to Iraq began in 1989, when she arrived in Baghdad. She decided to travel to what is now the KRI to interact with the Kurds and the Yezidis.

Her fascination with the Kurdish people dates to her childhood, when she read the adventure novel *Through Wild Kurdistan* by German author Karl May. As a journalist, her deepened after interviewing a Kurdish man from Turkey in Switzerland who regaled her with fascinating stories about the Kurds and the Yezidis. This encounter sparked a passion in Marja, inspiring her to pursue additional storytelling op-



Finnish journalist Marja Baumgartner.



portunities centered on Kurdish people.

Marja encountered a significant hurdle when she tried to reach the Kurdistan Region: at the time, the Iraqi government strictly prohibited foreign journalists from traveling to Kurdistan to engage with the Kurds and Yezidis.

Despite that, she set out for Mosul in northern Iraq, and from there, she traveled to Sinjar, where she sought to meet with the Yezidis. The Yezidis, on the other hand, warned her about the dangers

posed by her presence in the region – and her intention to document their stories – if the Iraqi government became aware of her activities.

During the Gulf War in 1991, Iraqi Kurds rose up against Saddam’s rule and were able to defeat the Iraqi army and establish their own autonomous region. Since then, Marja has visited the KRI almost every year.

However, due to Saddam’s embargo on the KRI, traveling to the region was difficult. From Baghdad, she had to go to

took control of Mosul. She was in Finland at the time, watching TV, when she saw Vian Dakhil, the only Yezidi Kurd in the Iraqi Parliament, crying and pleading for international help for the Yezidis, who were being slaughtered by ISIS. Marja knew Vian because she used to stay at her house when she was in Kurdistan.

Immediately, she returned to the KRI and began collecting donations from Finnish women all over the world to help Yezidis who had been displaced by ISIS attacks.



The cover page of Marja Baumgartner’s book titled ‘Universumin Orvot’ in Finnish.

Jordan, then Syria, then Turkey, and finally the KRI. It took her two weeks to travel from Baghdad to Erbil, the capital of the KRI, a trip that normally takes four hours.

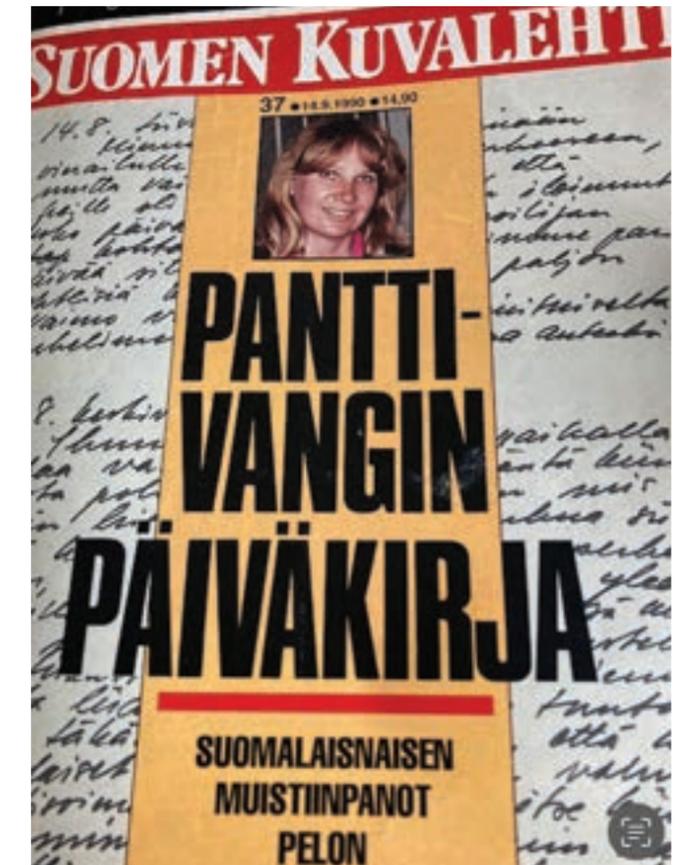
“What can I say, I like adventures,” she chuckled.

Orphans of the Universe

Marja did not visit KRI from 2005 until 2014, when ISIS

“It wasn’t a lot of money, but we did a lot with it,” she explained.

Marja has written two books about Iraq and the Kurds. Her first, In the Land of Saddam and Fairytales, was published in 1992 and is about her trips to Iraq and the stories she encountered there. Her second book, Orphans of the Universe, about Kurds and Yezidis, was released in 2019. Marja said she took inspiration from a quote by legendary Kurdish



leader Mustafa Barzani for the title of her second book.

She is currently working on her third book about Kurdish women throughout history.

Describing the Kurdish people, she affectionately characterizes them as “lovely people.” She highlights their curiosity about life, openness to meet-

ing new people, and the immense importance they place on family bonds. She recalls, “No one bothered me in Kurdistan; I was free, I only encountered friendliness.”

Marja believes that Kurdish women are making progress toward greater independence, though she wants to see them take even more initiative for

themselves. She contends that, compared to women in the rest of Iraq, Kurdish women have forged significant inroads in this regard.

Marja ended her interview by urging Kurds to “stay together, be united, and never forget their dreams.” ●

The Kingdom of Iraq and Shaikh Mahmoud Barzanji's Kingdom of Kurdistan

Richard Wilding describes the appointment of Emir Faisal as King of the newly created state of Iraq in 1921 and Shaikh Mahmoud's declaration of an independent Kingdom of Kurdistan in 1922.



Richard Wilding

Richard Wilding produces award winning exhibitions, films and books that explore the history and heritage of Kurdistan and other regions of the Middle East.

Since 2012, Richard has been Creative Director of Gulan, a charity which promotes Kurdish culture in the UK. In 2021, he was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, London.

Richard is currently producing a film about Shaikh Mahmoud and 100 years of Kurdish / British relations.

During the First World War, the British government agreed to recognize Arab independence after the war in exchange for the Sharif of Mecca and his Hashemite family launching an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire. The Sharif obliged and Arab forces, led by his second son Faisal, expelled the Ottomans from the Hejaz (now in Saudi Arabia), in a campaign later romanticized by T.E. Lawrence.

After the war, Britain sought to counter Ottoman claims to the disputed Mosul vilayet (province) by appointing Shaikh Mahmoud Barzanji as hukmdar (ruler) in Sulaymaniyah. Finding the restrictions placed upon

him by the British too severe, Mahmoud led a Kurdish uprising. He was captured and sentenced to death, which was later reduced to 10 years of imprisonment, and he was exiled to India.

Partitioning the Ottoman Empire

In January 1919, Emir Faisal led an Arab delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. With the support of Gertrude Bell and other influential British "Arabists", Faisal argued for the establishment of independent emirates for Arab regions previously ruled by the Ottoman Empire.



The Arabian Commission to the Peace Conference at Versailles, including Emir Faisal and T. E. Lawrence, 22nd January 1919

Faisal was proclaimed king by the Syrian National Congress in Damascus on March 8, 1920. However, his reign in Syria was to last just four months. At the San Remo Conference in April 1920, the League of Nations Mandate for Syria was allocated to France and the Mandate for Mesopotamia to Britain, reflecting the earlier secret Sykes-Picot Agreement. Faisal's dream of an independent Arab kingdom of Syria thus ended in July 1920, when the French ejected him from Damascus. The British, especially T.E. Lawrence, believed that Britain had reneged on its promises to the Hashemite family and, in effect, owed Faisal a kingdom.

On August 10, 1920, despite rapidly decreasing power and legitimacy back



Treaty of Sèvres, 10th August 1920

home in Turkey, the Ottoman Grand Vizier signed the Treaty of Sèvres with the Allied powers, finalizing plans for the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire. The treaty included provisions for an independent Kurdish state, re-

flecting earlier British plans drawn up in 1918. However, these terms stirred hostility back home in Turkey where, amid the nationalist revolt led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the treaty's signatories were stripped of their citizenship.



Group including Winston Churchill, Gertrude Bell and T.E. Lawrence in front of the sphinx and pyramids during the Cairo Conference, 1921
Gertrude Bell / Newcastle University

From the end of 1918 until 1921, the situation in Iraq remained dangerously unstable. The British military administration were seen as infidels by the Shi'a majority and by many Sunnis, who regretted no longer being under the Ottoman Caliphate. In 1920, a revolt began in Baghdad and spread to Shi'a areas in the south. Its demands were independence from British rule and the creation of an Arab government.

In March 1921, Winston Churchill, then British Secretary of State for the Colonies, convened a conference in Cairo. The British government, alarmed by the unrest in Iraq, agreed to support the fugitive Faisal as candidate for a newly created throne of Iraq. The British hoped that Faisal, as a direct descendant of the Prophet, would be granted sufficient legitimacy by the Arabs, but as an outsider in Iraq he was

also weak enough to remain compliant to British interests. On August 23, after a referendum in which the affirmative vote was officially returned as 96%, Faisal was proclaimed King.

The dissenting 4% was chiefly accounted for by Kirkuk, where the Turks favored a ruler to be chosen from the Ottoman dynasty, and the Kurds asked for a Kurdish administration. The liwa (district) of Sulaymaniyah refused to participate in the referendum, and no representative from either liwa attended the accession ceremonies.

Amid rebellion, Mahmoud reenters the scene

After the Treaty of Sèvres, the Turks redoubled their efforts to impress upon

the inhabitants of the Mosul vilayet that the treaty was not worth the paper it was written on. There were threats of invasion, warnings to "traitors", and, above all, the religious appeal for loyalty to the Sultan, who was also Caliph.

The Turkish government had given one of their agents, Ramzi Bey, the title of Kaymakam of Rawanduz and dispatched him to the district. On his arrival towards the end of May, he gave assurances of the imminent arrival of large Turkish reinforcements, with whose help Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, and Erbil were to be wrested from the British. He was followed in the middle of June by Colonel Ali Shefiq, popularly known as Özdemir ("pure iron"), who was to play the leading role in inciting rebellion among the Kurdish tribes.

At the end of May, the Turkish incitement triggered a revolt by the Hamawand tribe led by Kerim-i Fattah Beg, who had joined Mahmoud in the Kurdish uprising of 1919. On June 18, British officers Captain Bond

“
The rapturous reception quickly erased Mahmoud's memory of the limits imposed upon him by the British
”

and Captain Makant were killed by the Hamawand in the Bazian Pass, which was reported as a treacherous murder in British newspapers.

By this time, Mahmoud had already been brought back from India by the British to Kuwait. The logical development was a decision to return him to Sulaymaniyah to dampen the growing Kurdish rebellion. In return, Mahmoud promised to prevent the Turks from



Shaikh Mahmoud
Chris Kutschera Archive / The PhotoLibrary of Kurdistan

entering the liwa of Sulaymaniyah. He also accepted the condition that he would on no account interfere in the affairs of Kirkuk and Erbil.

Mahmoud left Baghdad for Kirkuk by train on September 20, 1922. When he reached the railhead four miles from Kifri the next morning, hundreds of horsemen from the local tribes invaded the station, shouting and waving banners.

They dragged the skeikh away in triumph before an official deputation from Sulaymaniyah could give their speeches of welcome.

The rapturous reception quickly erased Mahmoud's memory of the limits imposed upon him by the British. He reached Sulaymaniyah on September 30 and was greeted as ruler of an independent Kurdistan.

The local press emphasized that Major Noel, who had been appointed by the British as Liaison Officer, was nothing more than a Consul to serve as a go-between with the High Commissioner. On October 10, 1922, a decree "given in Sulaymaniyah the capital of Kurdistan" announced the formation of a cabinet, and in November, Mahmoud assumed the title of king. ●



King Faisal I of Iraq

Revisiting Salim Barakat's *What About Rachel, the Jewish Lady?*



Kameran Hudsch

Kameran Hudsch is a Syrian Kurd, who has resided in Germany since 1996. He has served as a lecturer at various German universities and has translated over 30 books from German and Kurdish into Arabic.

Salim Barakat is a Syrian-Kurdish writer who writes in Arabic and is well known for leaving a unique mark on contemporary Arabic literature, especially in both poetry and novels. He has published many anthologies of poems and novels since the early 1970s, and his works have been translated into many languages. Arab critics consider Barakat to be the best author to write in Arabic to date because of his captivating and powerful style and language. Now 72 years old, Barakat started writing poetry and published his first poetry anthology at an early age. He then quickly caught the attention of critics in Lebanon and Syria, who heralded the birth of a poet who would have a lasting impact on the future.

With his famous 1985 novel *Jurists of Darkness*, Barakat was ushered through the grandest gateway of writing novels, and his other novels soon appeared in successive publications until they amounted to nearly thirty in total. Many of his novels are set in the Kurdish community in Syria and offer rich panoramic scenes from the writer's life, which is closely linked to the development of the Syrian-Kurdish community in the 1960s. Other novels relate to contemporary Kurdish history, including *Al-Rish*, which touches upon several of the Kurdish uprisings in the 20th century.

Salim Barakat lived a life of struggle, moving from one exile to another. From Beirut to Nicosia, and finally to Sweden, where

he now lives in total solitude away from all sorts of communication, he devoted himself to writing and developing his creative career in stable circumstances.

Diversity disrupted

In this article, Kameran Hoj, the Kurdish translator and critic, discusses one of Barakat's most recent novels, *The Roaring of Shadows in Zenobia's Gardens*, which casts light on the dark moments of suppression that puncture the co-existent community of different races, religions, and ethnicities that lives in Qamishli. Every now and again, Barakat ventures into writing about the northern region of Syria (Western Kurdistan). Diversity is at its heart, yet brutality has long tyrannized and dominated this region; so many regimes only want eternal totalitarianism, ignoring the cultural and social mosaic that resides there.

“Many of his novels are set in the Kurdish community in Syria”

As in his biography, *What About Rachel, the Jewish Lady?* begins with a question imbued with violence: “How long will this war last?” The question is posed by a child, Musa, the narrator of the story. It is asked not because he is interested in major issues, but rather because he has the right to live his usual life, contrary to orders that deprive him of the life he deserves. Musa, who is addicted to Western films, wants to watch Charlie Chaplin's *Gold Rush*, while the Six-Day War rescues his brother, Kayhat, from having to attend his hateful school.





The cover page of Salim Barakat's book titled 'What About Rachel, the Jewish Lady'.

The Osi family, consisting of a husband, two children, and a fetus, lives in a neighborhood where people of diverse races, religions, and ethnicities live in peace and harmony. It has become a place with a strong foundation because it includes Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews, all in a city named Qamishli. The specter of war hovers over the city "with the deployment of intelligence personnel with their pistols visible under loose shirts" and the closure of "shops in the Jewish Quarter since the first outbreak of the news of the war"

Barakat sketches the lives of his characters, which intertwine just as the city streets intertwine with its residents. Osi,

“
Barakat sketches the lives of his characters, which intertwine just as the city streets intertwine with its residents
”

undocumented, with no records proving his identity with the state because of new regulations by new rulers, works at an electricity company and listens to

the news of the war on his radio. The heart of his eldest son, Kayhat, is fixated on getting closer to Lina, Rachel the Jewish lady's daughter; "from that day, when the first warm and resonant string of the harp of his young blood shook, Kayhat had tasked himself with the matter of purchasing from Rachel's shop."

Kayhat finds an opportunity to provide his services on a Saturday to the family, along with two of his friends, a Christian and an Arab, after hearing from them that Jews stop doing everything on their Sabbath, or holy day, and need someone to help them fulfill their chores. But when he knocks on the door of Ms. Rachel, an intelligence offi-

cer confronts him and interrogates him if he were a Jew. When Kayhat responds that he is Kurdish, we are immersed in an ironic cinematic scene, mixed with astonishment and condemnation, where Kayhat is "pale, disappointed by his poor intuition that got him into trouble."

"There will be no American films in Syria, lad"

But the changes that disrupt this easy life do not stop for Kayhat, who asks Katia, his Christian neighbor, about the meaning of Farid Al-Atrash's song, "We Have Been Brothers, Cross and Crescent," after hearing it. She replies, "Our country is our mother. We are brothers and sisters."

"What about Ms. Rachel? Why didn't Farid Al-Atrash's song find her a place between the Crescent and the Cross?" Kayhat asked her. "She is Jewish, and they are the killers of Christ," she replies.

When Kayhat pays Rachel a visit to help her avoid committing taboos by working on the Sabbath, he notes the depth of the tragedy that has befallen her: "Kayhat felt a sting in his heart: there is something broken in the air. The war left a scattering of glass shatters above and below everything".

After the victory of the voice, however "the army was defeated...Places, terrain, and parts of the sky were cut off from the map of the Arab lands". Musa, who is Osi's son, believes that he is the greatest victor and will go to cinemas again with his brother, but he is shocked by a victory of a different kind. In front of the Sheherazad Summer Cinema, they discover a new bill-

board advertising a movie named *One Thousand and One Nights*, starring the "screen monster," Farid Shawqi. So, the Charlie Chaplin film will not be on, because "there will be no American films in Syria, lad". Instead, "like stones thrown from the sky by birds in flocks, as compensation for Western films, there will be Indian films in cinemas".

A love lost

After the war, the character wearing "the red fez" appears carrying a notebook



Yazi Nabum, a Jewish woman from Qamishli, Syrian Kurdistan.

"with the addresses of many houses in the neighborhood, along with their population numbers. He duly checks for the presence of its owners". Kayhat is then surprised when Benjamin visits Rachel's house with a Bedouin named Nabhan, who claims that he will help them on Saturdays. This leaves Kayhat in bewilderment, after "the name of a person from the Tay clan is mentioned in the disappearance of Jews, who has

connections in the state intelligence".

Kayhat, who is afraid of losing Lina, feels jealous of Nabhan and decides to declare his love to her. He asks his Jewish friends to write the word "I love you" in Hebrew so he can finally deliver the message to Lina, who is out of his reach:

"When will you reply to my messages, Lina?" Kayhat asks.

"What messages, Kayhat? When did you send it?" she replies.

"I haven't sent it yet, Lina," he says".

Meanwhile, Osi is fired from the electricity company because his son Musa writes on the blackboard at school "Long live Charlie Chaplin, leader of the One Nation Cinema", and the art teacher is fired from work because a student reports him.

When Kayhat finally pulls himself together to reveal his feelings to Lina, he goes to her house and discovers "three men from state intelligence with their shirts drawn over their pistols wearing black glasses. The red fez man. Three men and a woman who are clearly Jewish in appearance, and the young Bedouin Nabhan. They were all in front of Rachel's open gate".

It seems that Nabhan worked to smuggle the family out of Syria. Kayhat is devastated. He puts the paper on which he wrote "I love you" in Hebrew in his mouth and turns it into chewing gum, perhaps out of fear of the intelligence services lurking around him. He buries it like a loving fetus, just as a mother buries her fetus in an unknown manner after a miscarriage, and throws it in the dirt, so the novel ends with: "Kayhat cried." ●

TRANSFORMATION

Mountain Trail Invites Explorers



Lawin Mohammad

Lawin Mohammad is the Co-founder of Zagros Mountain Trail, holds a BA in English Literature from Damascus University.

“
Our vision was to create a lasting legacy, instilling a sense of pride and ownership in the local population and establishing a platform for the protection of culture and the environment
”

A group of Kurdish and foreign mountaineers walk through the mountains of Kurdistan to identify the ZMT path.



“Can you help me translate? I want to ask the shepherd where this trail leads.”

This was the query posed to me by Leon McCarron, a Northern Irish adventurer, filmmaker, and author, during our time at the Mosul Gate in Amedi, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where we were filming a documentary on the majestic landscapes of Kurdistan. It was a simple question, but one that marked the inception of a remarkable, multi-year journey.

The Mountain Trail is a long-distance hiking trail that weaves across the KRI. It is the first of its kind, and its purpose is to foster connections between individuals from diverse backgrounds, whether local or international, while immersing travelers in the richness of the local culture and landscape. It aspires to create economic opportu-

nities in rural areas, and to establish the Kurdistan Region as one of the most exciting destinations in the Middle East for outdoor tourism. Beyond that, it serves as a platform to support the local community and narrate the unique history of the region.

My encounter with Leon in 2016, alongside the Kurdish filmmaker Miran Dizayee, and later, in 2019, the British photojournalist Emily Garthwaite, marked the genesis of our expedition. We embarked on a quest to unearth the ancient paths of the region. Our vision was to create a lasting legacy, instilling a sense of pride and ownership in the local population and establishing a platform for the protection of culture and the environment.

Since that day at the Mosul Gate, we have scouted over 1,500 kilometers of

walking paths in the KRI. This has resulted in a continuous 215-km route, with more than 50 culturally and historically significant sites and over 40 breathtaking spots in nature. We have meticulously curated a network of homestay hosts and local guides to represent the vibrant community of this region.

Every endeavor requires assets, and in our case, it was the warmth and hospitality of the Kurdish people, the unparalleled beauty of the landscape, and the deep-rooted historical ties between the Kurds and their mountains. These very mountains, which have safeguarded us throughout history, now beckon us to safeguard them in return through hiking and preservation. As a Kurd residing in these lands, I have gleaned fresh insights with every step I take in the mountains of Kurdistan. This expe-



Soran Governor leads a group of people walking the ZMT path ahead of the official announcement of the trail.

rience has been profoundly fascinating for me. It leaves me pondering what it must be like for foreigners who are not acquainted with these lands and their people.

A labor of love

In October 2023, the Zagros Mountain Trail was officially launched, unveiling detailed information on all 13 stages, allowing hikers to access data encompassing distance, elevation, difficulty, and contact information for our local guides and homestays.

During the launch event, Leon remarked on the importance of these trails:

“Trails offer a unique means to foster economic prosperity in rural areas while championing the protection of environmental and cultural heritage. They bring people together in a safe and welcoming space and serve as a conduit to introduce a destination to the world. A successful trail is inclusive for all. Trails

can also aid regions with a history of conflict and tragedy in moving toward a new narrative of hope, opportunity, and community. We designed the Zagros Mountain Trail with these ideals in

mind, and now we are thrilled to share it with the world. It has been the utmost privilege of my career to contribute to this endeavor.”

Emily also shared her sentiments, emphasizing her love for the project and the region:

“I take immense pride in being part of the Zagros Mountain Trail. My involvement since 2019 led me to fall in love with Kurdistan, prompting my decision to relocate, work, and live in this enchanting region. I initially fell in love with its mountains, a sentiment I believe many share when they first encounter Kurdistan.”

The trail’s evolution has been bolstered by the unwavering support of the Abraham Path Initiative, an international non-governmental organization dedicated to developing walking trails across the Middle East, which is a founding partner of this project and has played an integral role in its growth.

“
The trail’s evolution has been bolstered by the unwavering support of the Abraham Path Initiative, an international non-governmental organization dedicated to developing walking trails across the Middle East
”



Photo: Leon McCarron



Photo: Leon McCarron

A scenic view of Dargala village in Soran, Kurdistan Region.



The historic Bahdinan Gate in Amedi, Duhok province, Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Leon McCarron

Community-based, experiential tourism

Executive Director of the Abraham Path Initiative Anisa Mehdi articulated the importance of this endeavor:

“Our collaborative efforts represent the vanguard of a burgeoning segment in the tourism industry: community-based, experiential tourism. It brings job opportunities, such as guiding and homestay hosting, to generations of families. This type of tourism ushers in income and hope ‘off the beaten path.’ It fosters new friendships.”

Miran emphasized the project’s role in the region:

“This project belongs to the residents of the KRI, and its benefits extend far beyond us. Therefore, we appeal to the Kurdistan Regional Government to extend their support so we can expand our initiatives across Kurdistan and establish more trails in the region.”

Head of the Soran Independent Administration Halgurd Sheikh Najib, who sponsored the launch event for the Zagros Mountain Trail, underscored the significance of such projects:

“From the day that we heard about the Zagros Mountain Trail we decided to support it because this project aims to boost tourism and create economic opportunities in our region by changing

how we view our mountains. We are transforming them from being shelters and a place to flee from war into popular hiking destinations, which has the potential to reshape our country’s landscape and people’s perceptions.”

I take pride in our achievements thus far and envision the Zagros Mountain Trail as the foundation for the creation of numerous other trails, as the breathtaking beauty of Kurdistan cannot be encapsulated in just one trail. This region undoubtedly holds the potential for the development of more strategic trails, inviting explorers to witness its magnificent landscapes. ●

Kurdish Doctor Makes Strides in Human Heart Cell Regeneration



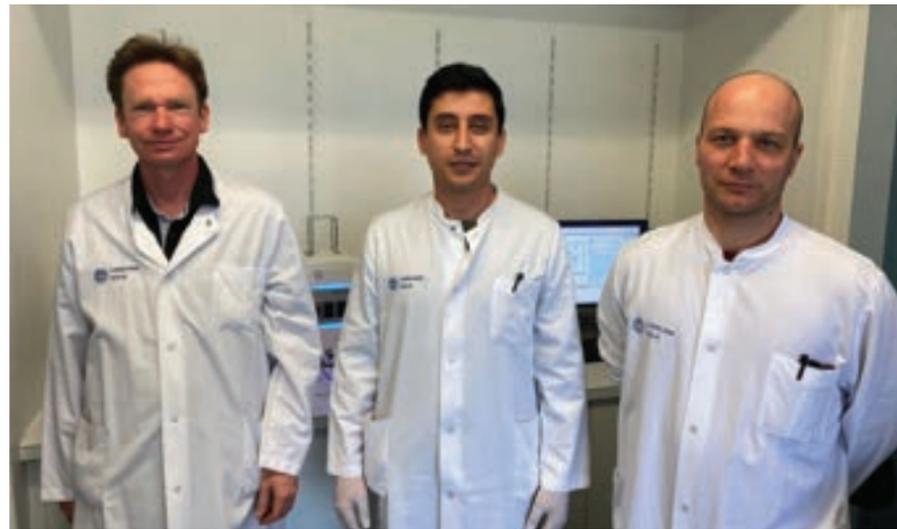
Mohammad Dargalayi

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

A groundbreaking medical research project is underway in Germany, led by Dr. Sarkawt Hamademin, a distinguished medical researcher and professor at Soran University, in collaboration with a team of foreign researchers. Their collective effort focuses on the remarkable undertaking of regenerating human heart cells, marking a significant step forward in the field of regenerative medicine.

In a recent interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Dr. Hamademin shed light on the am-

bitious undertaking. “Our research aims to regenerate human heart cells through the cultivation of human stem cells in a laboratory setting, transforming these stem cells into the primary capillary cells found within the human heart,” he explained.



Dr. Sarkawt Hamademin (middle) among his colleagues at a hospital lab.

back to 2016, when the team achieved a breakthrough in cultivating high-quality stem cells in substantial quantities. Subsequently, they embarked on the process of steering the growth of these cells towards becoming human heart cells. The results of their laborious work were published in the prestigious scientific journal *Theranostics*, further affirming the significance of their endeavor.

The inception of this project can be traced

The tangible outcomes of their research in recent months were made evident through a demonstration of laboratory-engineered

heart tissue contraction and deceleration.

Dr. Hamademin emphasized the immense importance of the research. “This project is monumental in several ways. Firstly, we initially endeavored to regenerate stem cells in a laboratory setting, a feat that took approximately one year to achieve. Subse-

quently, we moved on to the regeneration of human heart cells in significant quantities, encompassing a variety of human heart cell types,” he reported. “Our work was published in a highly regarded international scientific journal, prominently mentioning Soran University and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.”

“Furthermore, our work is progressing towards regenerating human blood vessel cells, specifically endocytin cells,” Dr. Hamademin added. “This aspect of our research is currently in the printing stage and is expected to be published in the upcoming months.”

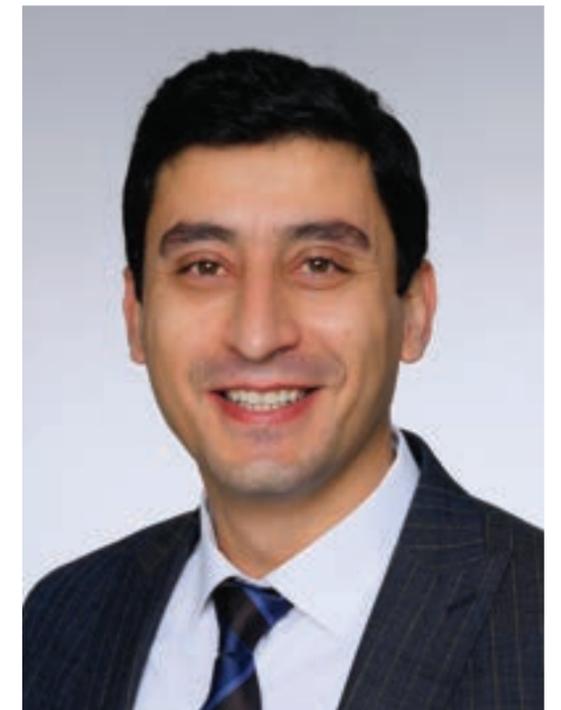
Revolutionizing regenerative medicine

The Kurdish researcher underscored the broad implications of this pioneering project. “It will significantly enhance our understanding of human heart cells and blood vessels. Secondly, it provides a valuable means of testing new drugs without resorting to human or animal trials, thereby addressing ethical and philosophical concerns associated with scientific research. This development holds the potential to eliminate the need for aborted fetuses or animal testing in medical experiments. And finally, in the future, it may pave the way for the direct implantation of cells or lab-engineered tissues into the hearts of stroke patients, potentially reducing or even eliminating the consequences of heart attacks.”

The far-reaching impact of this research becomes even more evident when considering the rising prevalence of heart disease. Dr.

Hamademin underscored that, “given the expected increase in the number of people suffering from heart diseases in the coming years, this technology promises to be a game-changer for researchers and healthcare professionals in their quest for innovative treatments. Those with heart disease, particularly heart attack survivors, are poised to be the primary beneficiaries. Furthermore, it offers research institutions an alternative approach to scientific investigations, minimizing reliance on human and animal subjects, thereby contributing to environmental sustainability and aligning with the principles of nature preservation and animal rights.”

As Dr. Hamademin and his international team continue their groundbreaking work, their efforts hold the promise of revolutionizing the field of regenerative medicine, ushering in a new era of medical research and treatment possibilities. Their dedication to advancing science while upholding ethical standards positions them as pioneers in the quest for healthier hearts and improved medical research practices. ●



Dr. Sarkawt Hamademin completed his primary, secondary, and high school education in Rawandiz, Erbil Governorate. He earned a bachelor's degree in biology from the College of Science Education at Salabaddin University and went on to earn a master's degree in biology from the College of Science, Salabaddin University. His educational journey culminated in a Ph.D. in Medical Physiology and Regenerative Medicine, which he obtained from the Center of Physiology and Pathophysiology within the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Cologne in Germany.



The Crucial Role of Youth Diplomats



Tara Shwani

Tara Shwani is an expert in Community Development, Political Analysis, and Grants Management.

In the dynamic landscape of global affairs, the role of youth diplomats from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is becoming increasingly pivotal. With the world facing multifaceted challenges, the emergence of these young Kurdish diplomats who are actively participating in international conferences has not only garnered attention but has also highlighted the potential for nurturing global advocates from this region. By providing a platform for the representation of the region's interests and perspectives, these young diplomats are shaping a new narrative and contributing to the discourse on pressing global and regional issues.

The KRI marked a significant milestone in 2021 with the establishment of its first Model UN (MUN) in the city of Soran, generously funded by the international community. This pioneering initiative laid the foundation for the region's youth to actively engage in diplomatic simulations and gain valuable insights into global affairs. Subsequently, numerous delegates from the KRI participated in prestigious international conferences, notably the Youth Assembly in New York, leaving a lasting impression in both 2022 and 2023.

“As the Secretary General for the National Model United Nations Association, which held the first MUN conference in Iraq last year, I was inspired by the young delegates who are advocating for the importance of diplomacy, negotiation, and political participation,”

The significance of youth diplomats from the KRI lies in their ability to bridge cultural gaps and advocate for their region on an international stage. The region's rich history and cultural heritage, moreover, provide a unique backdrop for the development of these youth diplomats. By drawing upon its diverse cultural elements and historical

“

Active engagement of youth diplomats from the KRI in international conferences serves as a catalyst for promoting cross-cultural exchange and collaboration, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse global perspectives

”

experiences, these diplomats bring a nuanced perspective to global conversations, contributing to a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to addressing global challenges. Their ability to navigate complex international relations while remaining rooted in the values and aspirations of their region also showcases the potential for Kurdish youth to emerge as global advocates and bridge-builders in an increasingly interconnected world.

Acknowledging the lack of proper avenues for Kurdish youth to express their diplomatic aspirations and concerns, local authorities must prioritize substantial investment in establishing MUN meetings and events and facilitating the participation of young delegates in international conferences and affairs. These initiatives help cultivate the next generation of leaders and foster inclusivity, amplifying the diverse voices of Kurdish youth on the global stage and nurturing their confidence and empowerment.

Moreover, increased government support



Professor Tyler Fisher from the University of Central Florida joins Model UN students at Soran University, Kurdistan in 2021.

for the active engagement of youth diplomats from the KRI in international conferences serves as a catalyst for

underscores the commitment to nurturing globally conscious leaders but also positions the KRI as a proactive participant

contributions to the international diplomatic arena.



Experience the Model UN session held at Soran University in 2021.

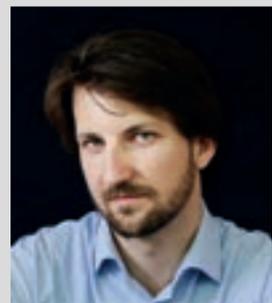
promoting cross-cultural exchange and collaboration, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse global perspectives. This strategic investment not only un-

derstands the global dialogue on critical issues, shaping a more empowered, inclusive, and globally aware Kurdish youth ready to make a profound impact through its

The KRI's potential to foster a generation of global advocates has never been greater, due to the region's unique geopolitical position and its role as a cultural crossroads. As Kurdish diplomats engage in international conferences, they serve as ambassadors not only for their region but also for the values of peace, cooperation, and understanding that the KRI embodies.

By leveraging their unique cultural perspective, diplomatic dexterity, and commitment to tranquility and collaboration, these young leaders represent their region's voices and endeavor to foster a more comprehensive and transformative global community. As they strive to make their mark on the international stage, the impact of Kurdish youth diplomats in shaping the trajectory of global diplomacy and fostering mutual understanding will undoubtedly continue to resonate on a global scale. ●

Representation Through Laughter



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.

KAE CURD

British-Kurdish stand-up comedian and writer Kae Kurd has made a name for himself in the UK as the only professional Kurdish stand-up comedian.

He has worked on various UK programs such as Live at The Apollo (BBC 2), Mock the Week (BBC 2), Celebrity MasterChef (BBC 1), The Apprentice: You're Fired (BBC 2), and Richard Osman's House of Games. He is now working on Big Brother.

His debut stand-up special Kurd Your Enthusiasm received over 200,000 views on YouTube. In 2021, he embarked on his Spoken Kurd tour and, on November 3, he performed the UK tour Kurd Immunity for 2023, concluding at the London Eventim Apollo, where he entertained a fully booked stage with an audience of 3,000 people.

A British thing

"It's mainly just a play on words – spoken word, spoken Kurd, herd immunity, Kurd immunity," he told *Kurdistan Chronicle*, explaining the names of his tours. "It's mostly a British thing, puns and rhyming words. It brings a little smile to people's faces and it's easier to name a tour like that before I've written a show," he added.

Kae Kurd was born in Saqqez in Eastern Kurdistan (north-western Iran) in 1990, after his parents left Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1988, fleeing the genocidal Anfal Campaign against the Kurds. He came to the UK with his family



Kae Kurd (right) at the Apollo.

“ He is now regularly being broadcast on BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Comedy Central, and YouTube ”



six months after he was born.

As a young boy, Kae Kurd did not want to be a comedian but had a natural drawing to the stage. “When I was younger, I was always the child that was in school plays. I would always volunteer to do presentations in front of the school and talk at school assemblies. Even in Kurdish school I always wanted to be the person doing the presentations or being part of the choir. Looking back, I guess I always liked being in the limelight.”

Later, he started hosting live music and poetry nights. “Later, I did a few comedy gigs, and I liked the idea of doing comedy and the buzz that I got from it. I didn’t really take it seriously up until about 2014, when I thought about doing it as a career, and by 2019 it was my full-time job.”

Proud parents

His Kurdish parents at first did not like him becoming a comedian. “Of course, they wanted me to do a traditional job. It was out of love though. When you’re a parent you want the best for your child and the entertainment industry is incredibly competitive and hard to succeed in. They wanted something that was stable and respected; I can’t blame them.”

However, Kae Kurd said that, as with anything in life – though especially in the arts – “you have to believe in your ability and ambition. You have to be quite resilient in order to succeed.”

Today his parents are proud of him and his success. During his recent performance at Hammersmith Apollo, his mother came on stage in traditional Kurdish dress and hugged him.

“It was the first time my parents had come to watch me perform. It was at the Hammersmith Apollo, which is an incredibly historic venue. If you look at the list of people that have played that venue it’s usually people with a much larger profiles than mine, people that appear on TV regularly and household names.”

“I was incredibly privileged to be able to sell out the venue, and my parents coming was very overwhelming and emotional. They both told me they were proud of me. I think for them to see my name in lights at the front was a big moment. Seeing over 3,000 people there for me and the size of the venue, it really made them go, ‘Wow, all this is for our son’.”

Diverse fans

Kae Kurd’s performances have attracted a mixed audience. “I probably have one of the most diverse crowds in comedy. It depends on the city I’m in. In some cities it’s mainly white British people, in others it’s a mix. In London, it’s white, black, South Asian, Kurdish, old, young, middle age. You get everything, and I’m quite proud of that.”

“Although my identity is central to who I am, my comedy and work

transcends that. I think it’s important that you can be funny for as many people as possible. The funnier you are, the more people know who you are and by virtue of that, more people know who the Kurds are and what a Kurd is,” he added.

“I don’t cater to just one sort of audience, as that wouldn’t be smart. If you were a businessman selling a product, like say hamburgers, you wouldn’t just say ‘I’m just going to sell these to Kurds.’ You’d try to sell to as many people as possible. Same thing with art,” Kurd said.

In 2011, he tweeted that he aspired to perform live at the BBC stand-up comedy show, filmed at the Hammersmith Apollo Theatre in West London. Then, in 2019, he accomplished just that, and he is now regularly being broadcast on BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Comedy Central, and YouTube.



Moreover, he is involved in writing for TV shows. “I like doing that. I would love to get involved in more acting. I am growing my fan base and trying to do better tours, but I am mainly focusing on being a better writer and a better performer and seeing where the future takes me.”

“I’d love to be doing films, but I try to just enjoy the moment with everything I do. Putting pressure on yourself to keep doing stuff can stifle you, as you end up always thinking about what’s next and not how well you’re doing.”

Kae Kurd also thinks that the Kurds are a very funny people, but in general Kurdistan lacks a prevalent culture of stand-up comedy. “I don’t know if stand-up comedy in Kurdish will catch on because I think our culture is a bit different. In the UK we use humor in many different ways and contexts, so comedic actors are very popular – and for good reason,” he said.

However, he said that he would like to do a show in Kurdistan in the future. “Never say never. I think definitely at one point it could happen,” he concluded. ●

Zak Moradi's Kurdish-Irish Reflections



Rahim Rashidi

Rahim Rashidi, a Washington DC-based Kurdish journalist, is widely recognized as "Mr. Kurd." He is focused on Kurdish affairs in Kurdistan and abroad.

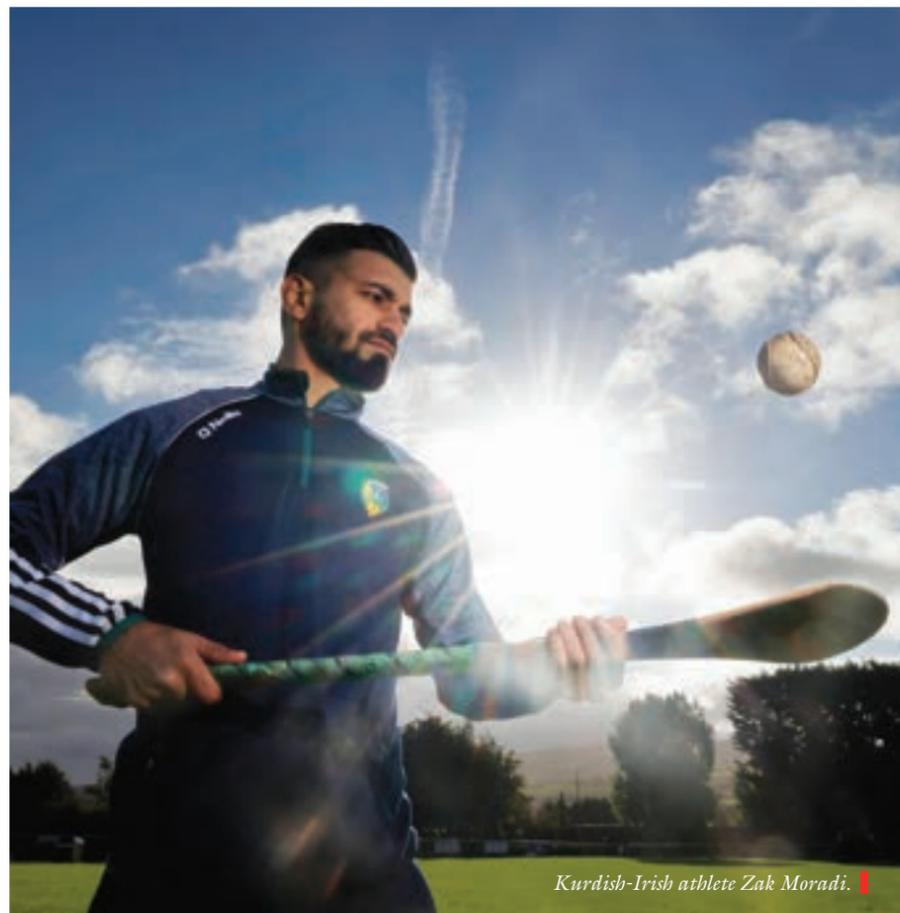
Allow me to introduce Zmna-ko Moradi, who goes by Zak, a Kurdish-Irish athlete hailing from the city of Sarpol-e Zahab in Kermanshah province of northwestern Iran.

Zak's family was forced to flee their ancestral homeland in eastern Kurdistan (Iran), and found themselves in the Al Tash refugee camp in the devastated city of Ramadi, Iraq, where Zak was born in 1991 during the Gulf War. Zak and his family

later moved to Ireland in 2002 as part of a program overseen by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

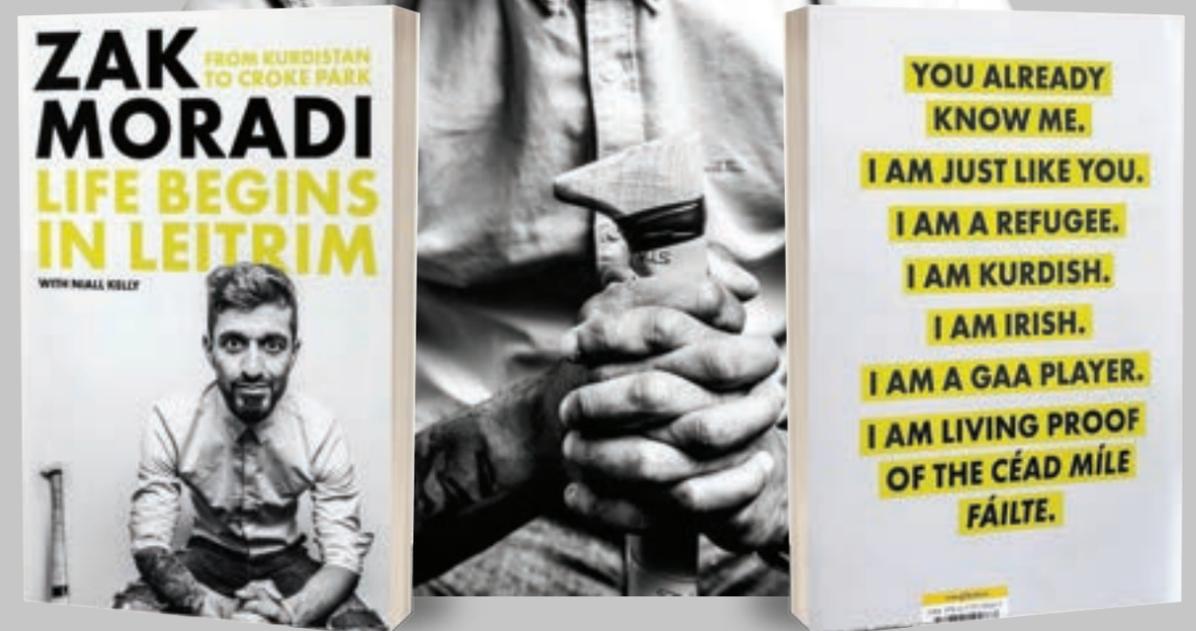
There, in the town of Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim, he fell in love with the ancient Gaelic sport of hurling through the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club St. Mary's Kiltoghert. Gaelic hurling has a longstanding importance in Irish culture and is still highly popular in Ireland today.

We are now able to learn more about Zak's



Kurdish-Irish athlete Zak Moradi.

Zak Moradi





life as a refugee, human being, and athlete thanks to a recently published biography ghostwritten by Niall Kelly called *Life Begins in Leitrim: From Kurdistan to Croke Park*. The title's reference to Croke Park – one of Europe's largest Gaelic games stadiums, Ireland's national stadium, and the headquarters of the GAA – captures how high Zak has risen in hurling.

Religion and humanity

Life Begins in Leitrim presents an amalgamation of the different periods of Zak's life. In addition to sports, Zak's successes and talents are presented through topics such as war, peace, humanity, love, and friendship, as well as his longing for his homeland and his

“
In the town of Carrickon-Shannon, County Leitrim, he fell in love with the ancient Gaelic sport of hurling through the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club St. Mary's Kiltoghert
 ”

adaptation to life in Ireland. Through these themes, the reader perceives not only the complex challenges faced by those who are displaced, but also the benefits of stability and security.

Despite all the success that Zak has achieved and the love he has for his home country of Ireland, he still longs for the day when his homeland becomes an official country for the Kurds.

“I have been recognized in the Republic of Ireland because they believe in unity, respect other people regardless of race and religion, and are aware of how religion affects people,” he writes. “They have separated religion from the daily aspects of their lives.”

“I call on the Kurdish nation and on

the new generation in particular to stop sacrificing themselves to religion,” Zak implores. “We can be Kurdish without the taboos and prohibitions that some religions put on us.

“As Kurds, we have had our own religion and beliefs for more than 1,000 years. We must preserve our roots, educate ourselves, and teach our descendants faith, but do so for the sake of unity and humanity, rather than attaching our thoughts to the domes of religions,” he continues.

“We have traditions, dances, music, songs, literature, and more – why not honor our own background and culture?” he asks.

An Irish formation

Life Begins in Leitrim is an intermingling of stories from Zak's early child-

hood and later years, overlaid with a number of flashbacks to the obstacles and setbacks that he experienced through displacement and war.

“
Following the publication of the book, Zak's life became a popular topic in the Irish media
 ”

Through various narratives, such as his travels in Ireland's wide green spaces, he presents to the reader the essence of



the feelings and principles that are nearest and dearest to his heart: caring and respect for others, safety, integrity, honesty, openness, and, of course, sport.

Following the publication of the book, Zak's life became a popular topic in the Irish media, gracing the headlines of newspapers, magazines, blogs, websites, and online podcasts. A documentary about Zak's life is currently in pre-production.

As a result of this attention, Zak became a prominent figure in Ireland's Kurdish community, as he emphasizes a blend of his Kurdish heritage and adopted Irish culture in his biography. “I have a second country. I have become a useful individual for both the Kurdish and the Irish communities,” he says.

In capturing Zak's journey and growth, we see how he has developed a deeper awareness of the sorrows and wounds of Kurdish history, but also its bright spots. Moreover, in beautiful language, he captures how grateful Kurdistan is to Ireland, its people, its culture, and its support.

In many ways, Zak's life is a dream that speaks in simple language about being human and living a life as a contributing citizen of a foreign country while longing for home. As the events in *Life Begins in Leitrim* oscillate between past and present, between Ireland and Kurdistan, he beautifully depicts two cultures, two dreams, two names, and two geographies. ●

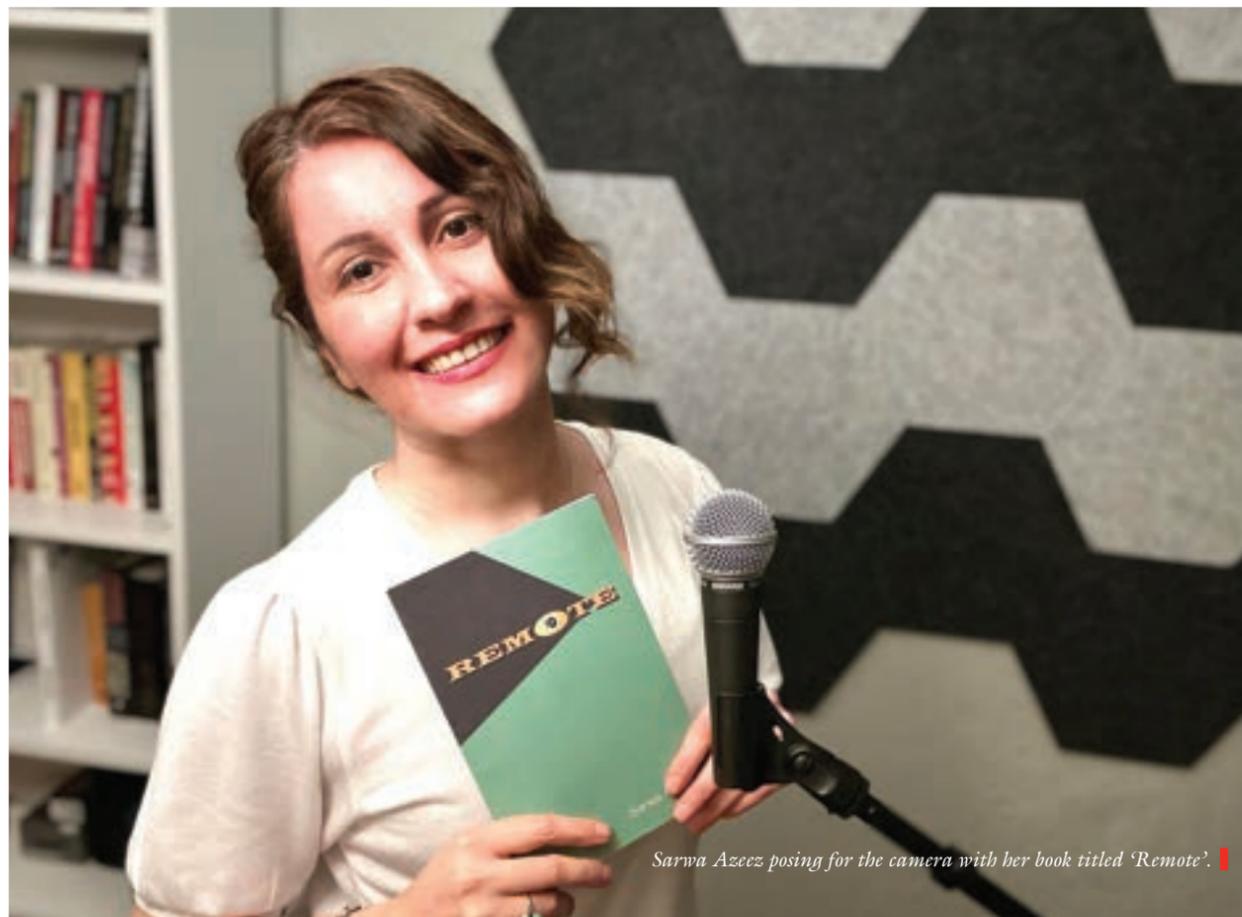
Narratives of Empowerment

Kurdistan Chronicle

Sarwa's journey began when she first encountered the captivating scent of books at a tender age, establishing a connection with the enigmatic stories harbored within their pages. Following the Gulf War and the subsequent Kurdish Uprising in 1991, however, acquiring books became a considerable challenge.

Fortunately, fate favored Sarwa, as her two aunts were fer-

vent readers and captivating poets. Immersed in Kurdish literature, they frequently recited verses addressing freedom, conflict, and the role of women to friends and family. Until the age of eight, Sarwa's understanding of her aunt's poems remained vague, yet she sensed the passionate anger underlying their words. These verses ignited her memories of visits to their homes, where she eagerly plucked children's poetry books from their shelves.



Sarwa Azeez posing for the camera with her book titled 'Remote'.



Sarwa Azeez among international winners of the Fulbright Scholarship in the US.

Poetry as a refuge

Upon her arrival in the United States for her second master's degree in creative writing, Sarwa encountered inquiries from professors and friends regarding her decision to pursue poetry. While born of curiosity, these questions prompted her to reflect on the profound challenges she had faced in her home country – a post-conflict, patriarchal society where even composing a poem could jeopardize not only one's reputation but also one's life.

Poetry became a refuge for Sarwa, a hidden attic where she could safeguard thoughts deemed too precarious to openly express in her conservative and close-knit community. It thus served as a sanctuary for ideas that carried inherent risks within her society.

“
Sarwa's understanding
of her aunt's poems
remained vague, yet she
sensed the passionate
anger underlying their
words

”
During her formative adolescent years, Sarwa grappled with a profound sense of exclusion and disorientation. The stifling constraints imposed by family and society overwhelmed her naturally adventurous spirit. Although her mind yearned for unexplored horizons, her

body felt confined, trapped by societal norms. This disconnect between her mind and body left her restless.

However, a turning point arrived, bringing with it an epiphany. She realized the necessity of liberating herself from the rigid traditions and norms that constrained her. Her yearning for freedom extended beyond her mind; her body, too, longed to venture beyond its comfort zone and confront its deepest fears.

Activism and collective knowledge

This revelation ignited a journey of self-discovery, where Sarwa sought pathways to break free and carve a trail that resonated with her true essence. Her first courageous step involved join-



ing a cultural center for women when she was 20. As a young activist, she engaged in workshops and seminars to raise awareness about gender-based violence and discrimination in her post-war community.

Years later, she participated in a project aimed at collecting narratives from Kurdish women, titled “Many Women, Many Words.” The project provided survivors of Saddam Hussein’s genocidal Anfal Campaign against the Kurds the opportunity to recount their lives in their own voices. By revisiting these traumatic experiences, Sarwa recognized the importance of preserving and providing access to collective knowledge.

Much of Sarwa’s writing delves into her reflections on a traumatic childhood in the post-war Kurdistan Region. The war had a profound impact on Kurdish children, leaving them emotionally detached from their parents and vulnerable. Amid the devastation, these children sought solace by creating makeshift play areas among the ruins of their neighborhoods and schools, using the remnants of war. Through her poetry, Sarwa endeavors to capture the world of children grappling with the challenge of rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of conflict.

“

Through her transformative experiences in the United States, Sarwa embarked on an exploration that unveiled the multifaceted meanings of “home

”

Sharing experience through writing

Sarwa’s writings have been published in numerous international journals and publications. Her work strives to inspire the community to stand against gender-based violence and advocate for equal and healthy relationships. She believes that activism

can take on various forms, including artistic expression and creativity. She emphasizes the power of sharing experiences through writing as a potent means to convey narratives, exchange personal encounters, and address global imbalances, ultimately working towards eliminating gender disparities and the underlying systemic causes.

Through her transformative experiences in the United States, Sarwa embarked on an exploration that unveiled the multifaceted meanings of “home.” This experience expanded her creative perspectives and provided insight into how displaced individuals, including herself, perceive their new surroundings. Lastly, living and studying abroad allowed Sarwa to connect with her emotions more deeply and share her experiences with poets from diverse nationalities. ●



Explore the Kurdistan in America Podcast!



The Official Podcast of the Kurdistan Regional Government Representation in the United States

Discover the Kurdistan in America Podcast, your gateway to the rich relationship between Kurdistan and the United States, hosted by Delovan Barwari, Director of Public and Academic Affairs at the KRG Representation.

Our central mission is to uncover the depth and significance of this rich bond.

Fourth Season Extravaganza: Join us as we celebrate the fourth season of our English-language podcast, with fresh insights and engaging stories, released monthly.

Diverse Topics, Singular Passion: From art and culture to security, politics, humanitarian affairs, and the economy, our podcast explores it all.

A History of Excellence: Proudly featured in Welp Magazine’s 20 Best Government Relations Podcasts of 2021, we remain committed to delivering top-notch content and fostering engagement.

Join the Conversation. Deepen the Connection. Listen to the Kurdistan in America Podcast today!

For further details and to access our episodes, visit the Kurdistan in America Podcast on popular platforms including Buzzsprout, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, iHeart, and more.

Follow us on social media @KRG_USA

Listen to stories shaping our global future through the Kurdish perspective.



The Emergence of AI



Dania Albanaa

Dania Albanaa is a consultant at TMC, brings over a decade of experience in data analytics and digital transformation initiatives across Italy, Spain, Belgium, and Portugal.

Back in 2017, when I started my master's in data science at Bologna Business School in Italy, the hype was centered around data science. A few years earlier, *Harvard Business Review* had published an popular article titled "Data Scientist: The Sexiest Job of the 21st Century," which explained why data scientists would become the next big thing.

This still makes perfect sense, as we are living in an era where approximately 330 million terabytes of data are created each day. According to explodingtopics.com, it is projected that 181 zettabytes of data will be generated by 2025, a 300% increase from 2020 levels.

The world needed to make sense of all the data that was being generated, which birthed the profession of the data scientist. As I continued my studies, I attended many events where big companies outlined what the future would look like in the Big Data era and how technologies would evolve in the Internet of Things and the coming revolution of Industry 4.0.

Globalizing data

During an evening session that we held recently, we were joined by Enrico Cereda, the CEO of IBM Italy, who discussed artificial intelligence (AI) and Watson – IBM Research's creation that runs on DeepQA software. Watson was engineered to respond to queries formulated in natural language. The presentation was enthralling; however, towards the end, I vividly recall a moment when my attention drifted, and my thoughts flew back to my homeland in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). I couldn't

help but wonder, what about us? Can we even keep pace with the rapid evolution of technology? We seem to lag considerably behind in this new age of data-driven decision-making; in fact, our processes are so antiquated that many remain undigitized, reliant on paper. This realization struck me with both sadness and a jarring sense of reality, causing me to question our nation's capacity to catch up. It even cast doubt on my pursuit of a degree in data science.

Fast forward to late 2022, when OpenAI released the first version of ChatGPT to the public, which gained significant popularity for its ability to interact in a conversational manner. The launch of ChatGPT-4 in early 2023 further increased its popularity, offering even more refined capabilities and nuanced understanding. The base model of ChatGPT is a large language model (LLM). One of the foundational papers that introduced the transformer model, which underpins modern LLMs, is "Attention Is All You Need" by Vaswani et al., which was published in June 2017.

However, it was only in early 2023 that LLMs and generative AI gained popularity, as people could finally interact with a ChatGPT that had been fine-tuned to understand and generate human-like text, enabling it to carry out conversations, answer questions, and perform a variety of language-based tasks, even writing articles with multiple versions. Who knows, this article might even be written by AI. The hype around AI grew, as people could finally not only read about it but also use it. Thus, you can hear news about the impact of AI and how it could replace humans in many sectors and how jobs in the future will not be performed as we know them today.

On the other hand, I could hear people express their beliefs that this hype is premature, convinced that the impact of AI will never reach us in the KRI because we are so behind. This sentiment instantly reminded me of how I felt back in 2017.

Digitizing Kurdistan

So, the question remains, are we in Kurdistan too far behind on AI? If I had asked myself in 2017, I would have immediately said yes, but what about now? As a tech person, the first thing I did was conduct some research on the internet to find answers, and one of the first things that I found was a statement from Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani regarding his aims for digital transformation and a paperless government by 2025.

"At the start of the Ninth Cabinet, one of my government's main priorities was to grant the Department of Information Technology a strong mandate to lead and deliver on Kurdistan's digital transformation. I remain deeply committed to the objectives of this strategy and will continue to prioritize its implementation."

Before we go further, however, we need to ask ourselves: what does it take to achieve digital transformation?

Based on my experience, digital transformation requires not only building digital infrastructure but also securing financial support and fostering citizen engagement. To my knowledge, all three elements are present in our government's strategy. In early September 2022, Prime Minister Barzani officially launched the first data center in the KRI. This critical move is central to the Ninth Cabinet's strategy for digital transformation and

represents a significant step toward the centralization and sovereignty of data in the region.

This pivotal action laid the foundation for numerous other strategic initiatives, including MyAccount. Aimed at steering the KRI towards a cashless economy, the KRG began the digitization of salary processes for over one million public sector beneficiaries starting in September 2023.

Furthermore, the KRG has introduced an online platform (business.digital.gov.krd) to simplify and expedite the busi-

ness-registration process. This initiative aims to reduce costs and streamline procedures and presents an economical and time-saving method of registration. Additionally, the portal reduces the cost of registration by 80% and aids in the registration of company names and the protection of trademarks.

Citizen engagement

Nevertheless, the existence of digital infrastructure and financial support alone may prove inadequate if not complemented by active citizen engagement.



A robot on display at the 2023 HITEX exhibition in Erbil.

Photo: Elyas Barzani

ness-registration process. This initiative aims to reduce costs and streamline procedures and presents an economical and time-saving method of registration. Additionally, the portal reduces the cost of registration by 80% and aids in the registration of company names and the protection of trademarks.

One could argue that investment in the

This responsibility falls on all of us, as it reflects our willingness to invest time and effort to keep pace with global technological advancements and to participate actively in this progress.

Equally important is the role of the education sector in fostering an environment conducive to research and creativity. In line with this, I recently came across uplifting news: the Amer-



Visitors at the 2023 HITEX exhibition in Erbil.

Photo: Elyas Barzani

ican University of Kurdistan (AUK) received a \$3.75 million grant from the U.S. Department of State through a grant program called “Support to American-Style Higher Education in Iraq,” which includes scholarships for incoming students. One of the primary goals of this program is to promote sustainable and innovative technologies through the establishment of an Artificial Intelligence Lab that will serve as a dedicated hub for research and development.

It is also worth mentioning that, as you read this article, MEPS 2023 is taking place in Duhok – a premier forum dedicated to peace and stability in the Middle East. Since its inception in 2019, the MEPS Forum has been an annual summit, providing a space for candid discussions on the most pressing issues facing the Middle East and North Africa. And, appropriately, one of the main topics at MEPS 2023 is advancements in AI in the Middle East.

Daring to innovate

Now, back to the pivotal question: can we in the KRI ride the AI wave and be part of the hype?

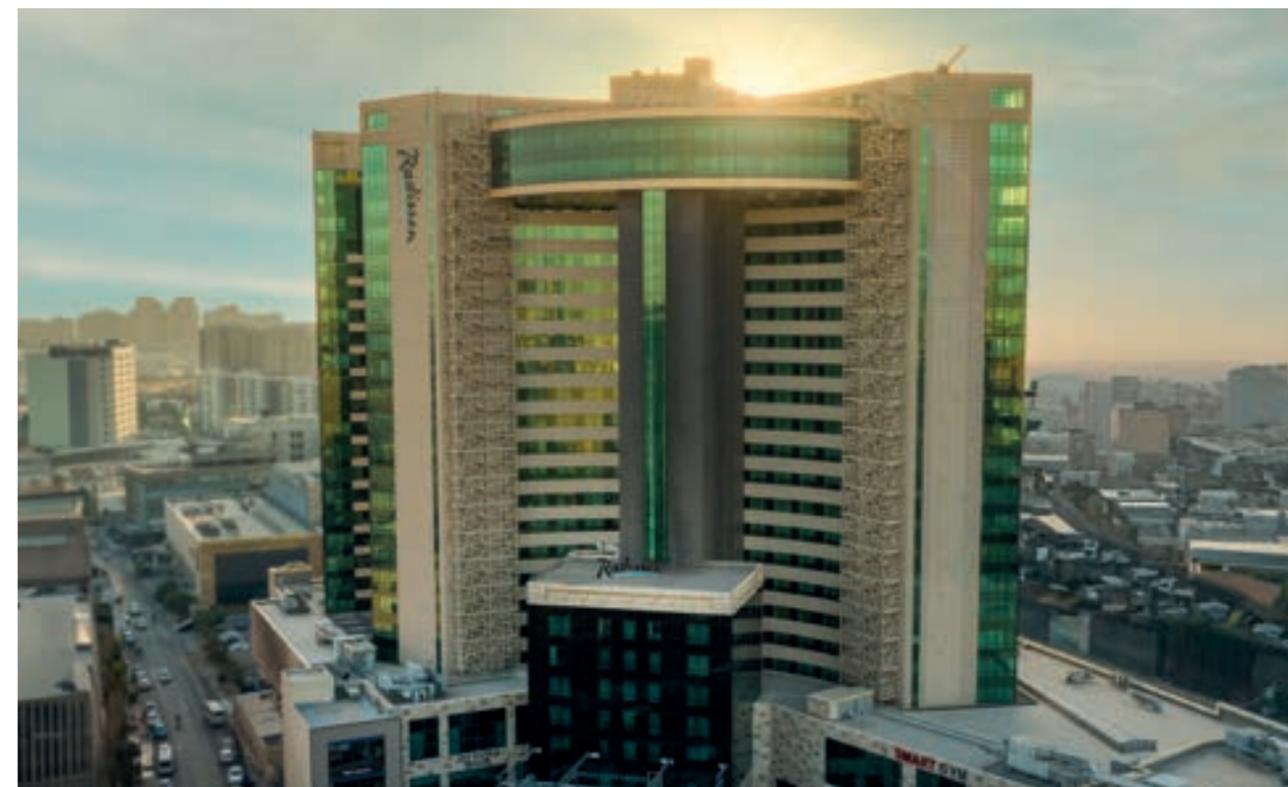
With the KRG’s commitment to digital transformation over the last four years, especially in the realm of digital transformation, and the growing individual interest in this sector within the KRI, it seems we are on the right path to harnessing AI’s potential. Although it is true that we are at the initial stages, the light at the end of the tunnel is already visible.

Now is the ideal moment to invest in oneself and in the AI sector in the KRI, where the government is laying the groundwork for a digital government, encouraging investment, and fostering individual creativity. This is exemplified by initiatives such as the Kurdistan Innovation Institution. The establishment of the innovation house, as articulated by the Prime Minister, is “specifically tailored to our youth, providing the equipment and financing necessary to pursue their ideas,” and it is a place that welcomes “anyone who dares to innovate, who wants to devote their time to research and entrepreneurship, and the development of technology.”

The excitement around AI is palpable, and with all the necessary components in place, we can be a significant part of this movement. So, let us embrace it. ●

Radisson

FIND YOUR
BALANCE



EXPERIENCE THE HEART OF HOSPITALITY

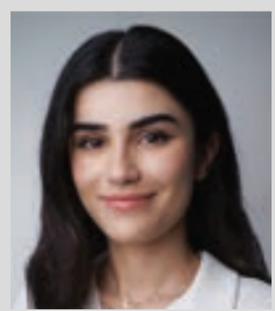
For the first time in Erbil, Kurdistan, Iraq, one of the top leading worldwide hotel brand Radisson has now opened. Indulge in an exquisite dining journey at The Bistro, direct access to Gulan Mall for an unmatched shopping experience and direct access to the Gym.

SIMPLY DELIGHTFUL

RADISSON HOTEL & RESIDENCES ERBIL
GULAN STREET, ANKAWA INTERSECTION NO: 2163/40 ,44001 ERBIL IRAQ

T +964 66 210 1234, E INFO.ERBIL@RADISSON.COM
RADISSONHOTELS.COM/RADISSON

“My art is always very personal”



Mey Dost

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

Q&A

“
As a woman, I would not have been able to create this kind of art in Iran
”



Kurdpoor

Born in the city of Bukan in the Kurdish part of Iran, Gita Kurdpoor moved to Minsk, Belarus with her family at the age of two. Six years later, she finally arrived in Berlin, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Growing up in a liberal household, Gita was brought up to be an independent and, above all, self-confident woman.

The Kurdish artist has always been greatly interested in the beauty or the uniqueness of things. An eye for the specific and the particular in the trivial has propelled her to delve deeper into art as she grew up. As a young woman, she first worked as a make-up artist and enjoyed various successes in the industry, including the launch of her own make-up show.

But she wanted more than just making people feel more beautiful or self-confident. At the beginning of her thirties, she decided to turn her back on the often-superficial work in the beauty industry.

Life as an artist at subsistence level has motivated Gita to continue working on herself and to strengthen her art. Giving up is not an option for her.

Gita's art is often understood as oriental or even religious, and she would like to distance herself from these perceptions. Gita does not accept any limitation in this regard: she chooses her colors and motives intuitively and does not follow specifications or guidelines. She uses the colors she feels. Life,



A building illuminated with a pattern created by Gita.



Gita's art illuminates the landmark Fernsehturm Berlin.



A building painted by Gita. |

not just her own, is unpredictable and multifaceted, which is an aspect she wants to reflect in her art.

Gita's inspiration has always been her own emotions and experiences. Everyone sees something different in a picture. This is good and important because everyone brings a different emotion, a different point of view, and a different story. Art is in the eye of the beholder. And Gita is happy when her art moves.

Kurdistan Chronicle caught up with Gita Kurdpoor recently to discuss her artwork, her recent success in being featured in the Festival of Lights 2023 in Berlin, and her process.

Kurdistan Chronicle (KC): You participated in the Festival of Lights 2023 in Berlin. Tell us about this experience. Have you had similar experiences in the past?

Gita Kurdpoor (GK): I participated for the first time in the Festival of Lights in Berlin in 2022 and was able to show my art on the Berlin TV Tower. That was great. I didn't know for a long time whether I would be part of the festival again this year. When I learned that, after gracing the city's landmark, my art would be featured on the beautiful and imposing Berlin Cathedral, I was of course even more pleased and considered it a great honor.

KC: How did you feel seeing your artwork projected on the Berlin Cathedral?

GK: My art is always very personal and, even though all my drawings are usually given a name, this time I was unsure about exhibiting pictures without a name. I wanted people to just let the images work on them. For my part, I was overwhelmed. It's a huge difference to see your work on a piece of paper or on an iPad compared to on a building of that size. Of course, I was proud, but at first I just thought, "wow." And I was and am grateful that they trusted me to do that. The beauty of art is always in the eye of the beholder, but if no one supports you in getting your art seen, then it doesn't matter how it is. This project allowed me to reach a lot of people, who could see my art and that of other artists, which is great.

KC: You are known to be interested in drawing mandalas, and there are many walls decorated with your mandalas. What is the secret of your interest in this delicate art, which requires such great concentration?

GK: Yes indeed. But since I'm very detailed-oriented, mandalas are never a burden for me. A challenge for sure, but I am happy to accept it. I once had a client who praised my mandalas and suggested I do something like them as a mural. But such a round circle on such a large wall, I think that's

rather impossible. It'll probably be more of an egg.

What can I say? If it doesn't work, it doesn't exist. On my next commission I painted several circles, mandalas, on several walls. There was no egg – they were all round.

I discovered the idea of placing my art on the walls of houses in 2020. I am very fortunate that the residents of the houses were always very friendly, open, and yes, grateful for my work.

KC: They usually say that Kurds are fond of colors. Is this true? Do your Kurdish roots influence your artistic style?

GK: Let me put it differently: I would not say that my fondness for colors is exclusively tied to my Kurdish roots. My parents' loving upbringing, cosmopolitanism, and decision to leave their homeland for a life of freedom gave me the opportunity to become an artist. If my parents hadn't left their homeland, I wouldn't be where I am today. My art is free, and my style is free and emotional.

As a woman, I would not have been able to create this kind of art in Iran. My art on the walls of houses is a form of expression that I would not have been able to execute there. I would say my parents' Kurdish spirit is in all my pictures. But for me the colorfulness itself or the interest in colors is not exclusively Kurdish.

KC: You wrote on your personal website that "my inspiration has always been my own feelings and experiences." Can you tell us about the process of transforming feelings into tangible art and acrylic images on canvas? What prompted you to choose your distinctive style?

GK: I really can't verbalize how I express my emotions in my pictures in detail. People who are very close to me often recognize the phase that I am in by the pictures I draw. I often only real-



Gita while painting one of her artworks on a wall. |

ize what I have actually processed after I complete a work. This is intuitive. I let myself go completely and focus on the work. But it's so much more. It also often requires discipline.

There's nothing romantic about working on a canvas for 12-14 hours a day for up to three consecutive weeks or driving to four walls of houses that are 20 meters high and 13 meters wide for four weeks in a row, where I spray and paint behind a tarpaulin every day from 7:00 am until it gets dark or it is over 30°C outside. It is indeed physically demanding and always a challenge. You have a set amount of time, so it doesn't matter if you get sick during that time: you only have four weeks to finish. And that's why you work. With angina, with fever, whatever. But I love it with every fiber of my being.

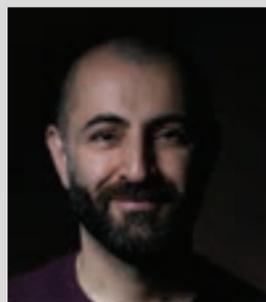
Just like everyone else, I sometimes have situations in my life that paralyze, preoccupy, or make me angry or sad, and I don't always have the strength

to sit down and create a picture. Overcoming these blockages and continuing to work is like anyone who doesn't feel like going to the office or to work. And I also have to make sure that, as mentioned before, my work is seen.

That means I go out, meet people, introduce myself to potential partners, design brochures with my team, network at events, and show myself a lot so that they notice me and my art. I live from it. This is how I pay my rent. My life. It's not always glamorous and colorful. It is often tough and sad. Many people forget that. That sounds more negative than I mean it. I'm very grateful. I love my work, but it is also a hard road. That's why I'm happy about projects like the Festival of Lights, or when my art is shown at exhibitions.

When people recognize me in front of my projected image on the Berlin Cathedral and congratulate me and are happy about my art, then I know that I'm doing the right thing. ●

Lost Paintings of “Devil Man”



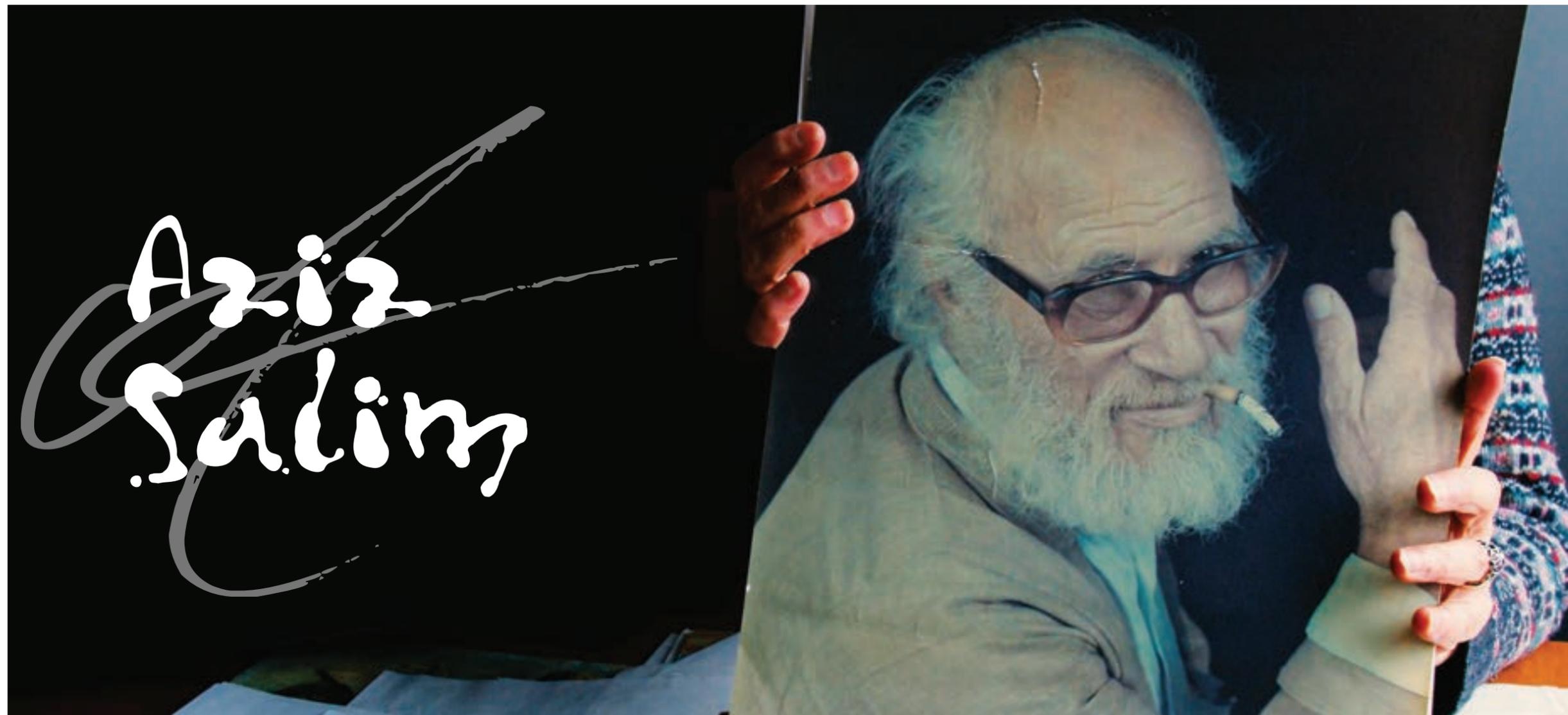
Riband Kurd

Riband Kurd is a professional photographer and journalist. Recognized as a member of the Union of Journalists in Finland, he currently contributes to MTV.

Aziz Salim (1917-2003)

In researching Aziz Salim I feel I have unearthed the life of an extraordinary artist.

His narrative brims with vivid transformations, each chapter defined by a new city or country, representing a life in constant flux and perpetual motion.



Aziz Salim’s saga spans the early 20th century to the early 21st, marked by extensive voyages across Europe and the former Soviet Union. Among Kurdish artists, he stands as a unique figure, having crossed paths with the legendary Spanish painter Pablo Picasso in France. Notably, his artwork was displayed on the walls of General Charles de Gaulle’s dining room within the headquarters of the Free French Army – an unparalleled feat.

Following his mid-20th century exhibitions in European galleries, Aziz Salim claimed that some of his artwork was archived in prestigious institutions like

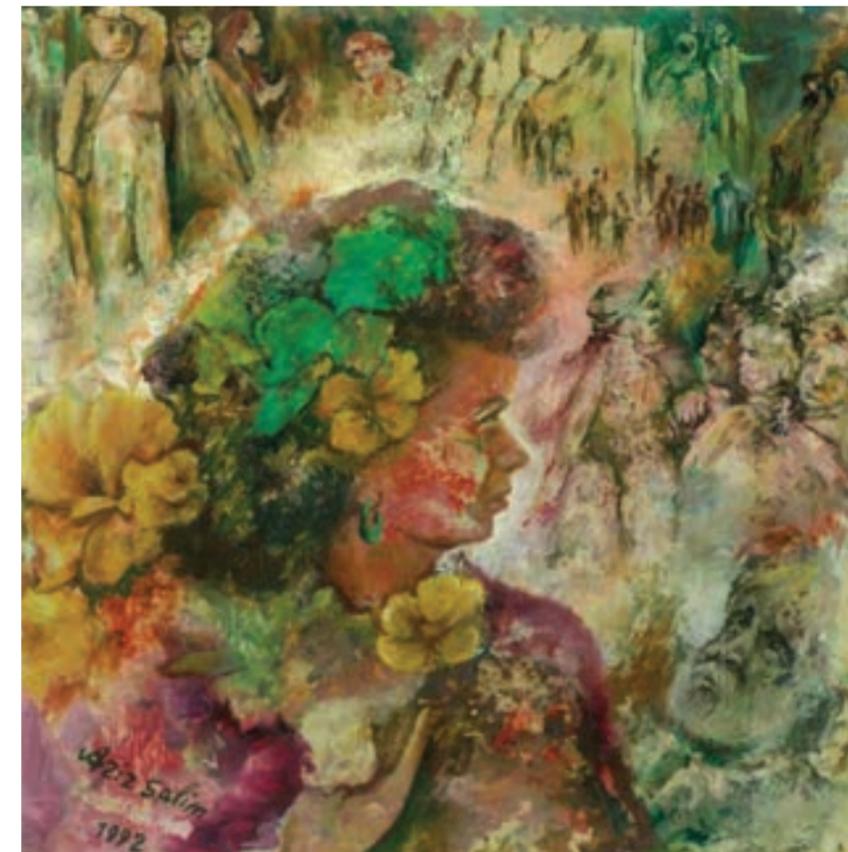
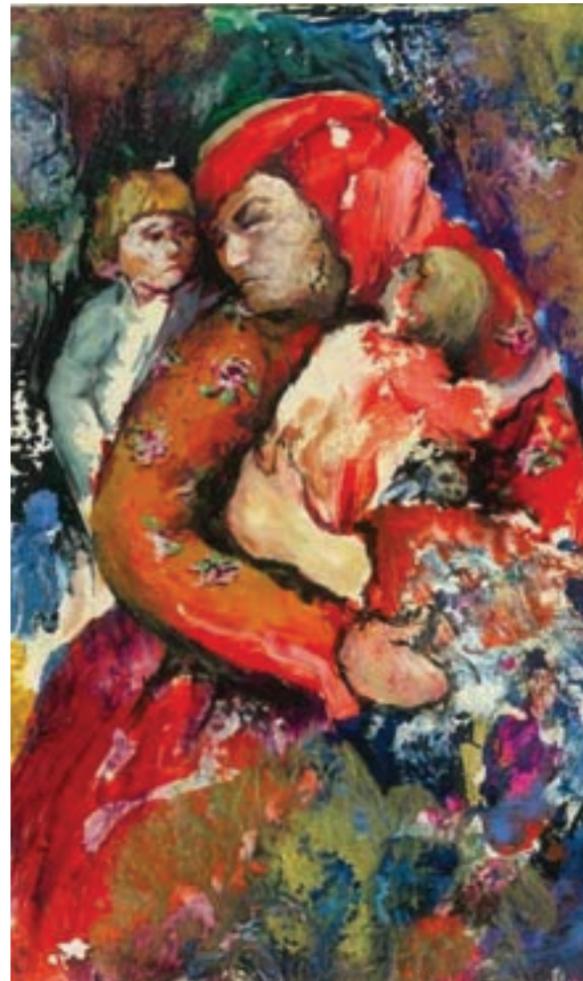
the Louvre in Paris, Amsterdam Museum, and the Academy of Visual Arts in

“
Among Kurdish artists,
he stands as a unique
figure
”

Frankfurt. However, the confirmation of this remains pending.

The birth of a rebellious artist

Aziz Salim’s journey began in 1917 in the village of Waisi, in what is now Sulaymaniyah Governorate of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). His artistic inclination was clear from the age of six, when he began sketching on the walls of the village with chalk. Supported by his father in a time when art education in Kurdistan was rudimentary, Aziz attempted to hold his maiden exhibition in Sulaymaniyah at the age of 16, only to face obstruction. Undeterred by adversity, he staged an impromptu showcase in the Sheikh Jaafar Cemetery and



met with resistance from local clerics, who branded him a “devil man.” Despite this setback, his persistence prevailed, leading to an unimpeded exhibition at the Ibn Khaldun School in Erbil in 1936 – an inaugural milestone in Erbil’s artistic history.

Embracing globalization

Aziz’s cosmopolitan inclinations, spurred by his Azerbaijani mother from Tehran, influenced his relocation to Azerbaijan, marking his first steps toward painting a global canvas. In 1943, his exhibition at Baku’s Krafis Gallery was a testament to this cosmopolitan spirit. Aziz reportedly saw his Kurdish and Azerbaijani roots as one and the same, establishing a deep-rooted connection between the two cultures.

Subsequent travels through Iran, Turkey, and Syria cemented his ties with artists from these regions.

Insights from his wife

Pawan Ali Abdulqadir, born in 1951 in Shaqlawa, became Aziz Salim’s second wife after the tragic assassination of his first spouse in 1979 in Iran, an event that left Aziz severely injured.

Pawan, sharing anecdotes about the artist’s life, revealed a deep emotional connection to Aziz’s paintings and manuscripts. Reflecting on their life together, she unveiled Aziz’s unwavering commitment to creativity until his final days, with the aging artist painting relentlessly amid the aroma of cigarettes.

Aziz Salim relocated to Finland in 1995 at the age of 78, with his family following suit in 1997. He was diagnosed with a terminal illness in 2002. Determined to spend his final days in Erbil, he requested to return to his homeland on the recommendation of then-Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani. He entrusted

his paintings to the KRG Ministry of Culture and Youth, envisioning a museum in his honor someday. Pawan now preserves 30 original paintings alongside palettes, sketches, and an unfinished masterpiece – a testament to Aziz’s enigmatic and imaginative persona.

European encounters

Aziz’s European sojourn in 1949 saw a flurry of exhibitions in cities such as Paris, Amsterdam, and Frankfurt. His encounters included a brief conversation with Pablo Picasso in which he

presented himself as an oriental artist. Reports suggest significant acquisitions by notable figures like Rene Mayer, then French Finance Minister, who reportedly gifted Aziz’s painting *The Dead Speak to General Charles de Gaulle*, although confirmation of this transaction remains elusive.

Various accounts highlight that Aziz’s artworks were archived in prestigious museums across Amsterdam, London, Washington, D.C., Rio de Janeiro, and beyond. His artistic oeuvre extended across 42 solo exhibitions and nearly 60 collaborative showcases, depicting

an evolution from Western influences to a personalized fusion of styles.

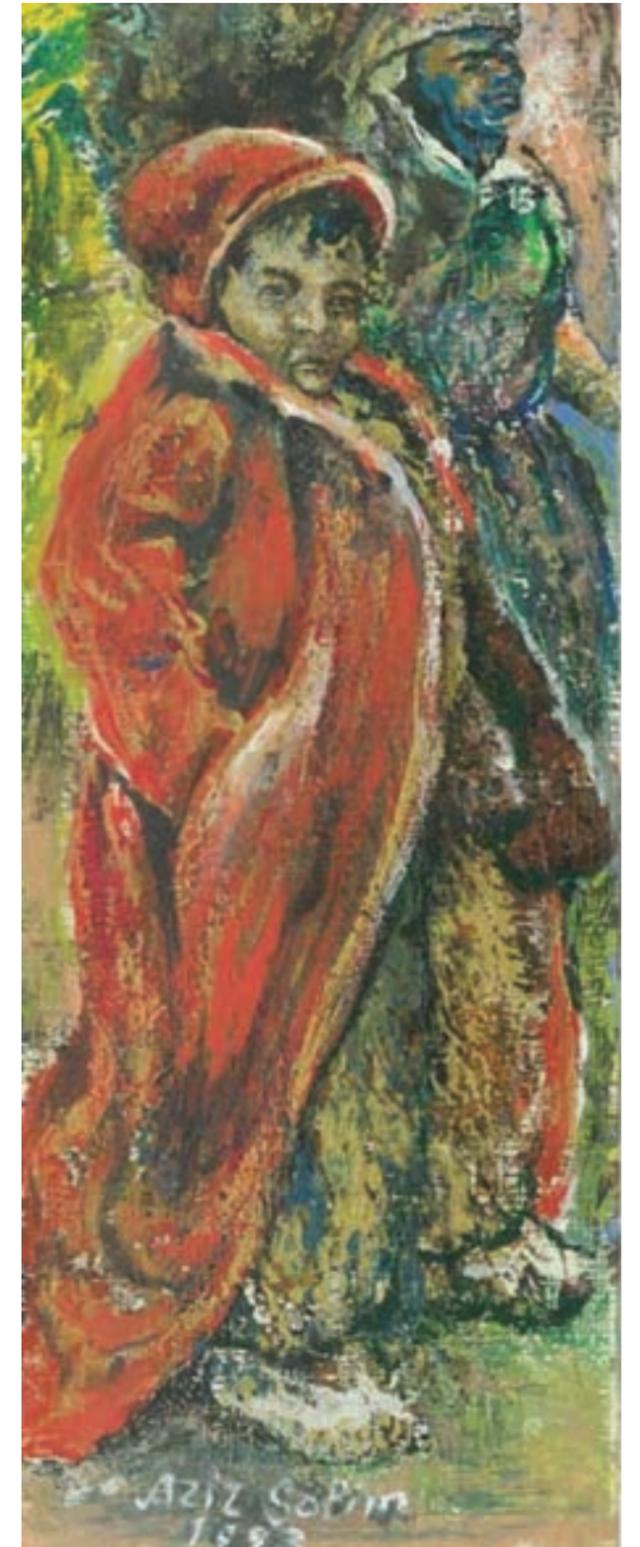
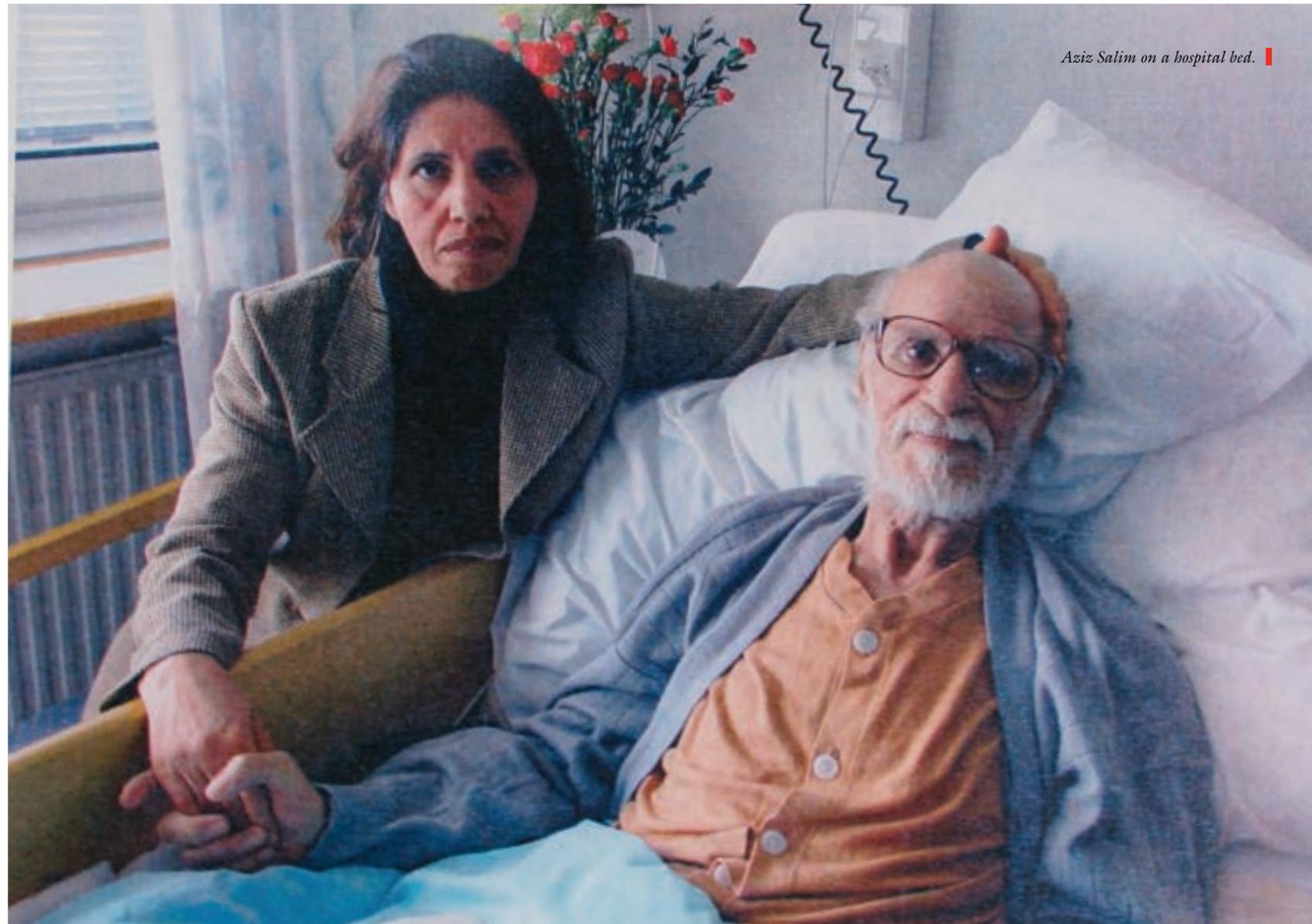
Artistic legacy and final strokes

Aziz Salim’s artistic evolution bore the imprints of cubism, surrealism, and a global style that transcended cultural boundaries. His canvases mirrored life’s myriad emotions, forming a vivid juxtaposition of joyous celebration and poignant fatigue, resonating with influences from international maestros like Gustav Klimt and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

Remarkably, at the age of 80, Aziz embarked on a new chapter in Finland, staging exhibitions that captivated the Finnish artist Carl-Gustav Lilus. His final showcase in Pori, Finland, unveiled paintings teeming with life, indicative of Aziz’s en-

during creative fervor.

Yet, mysteries loom over the fate of his missing artworks, which were stolen from exhibitions in Shaqlawa and Pori, leaving an enigmatic void in Aziz Salim’s artistic legacy. ●



PROFILE

A Beauty Queen's View of Kurdistan



Hiwa Selah

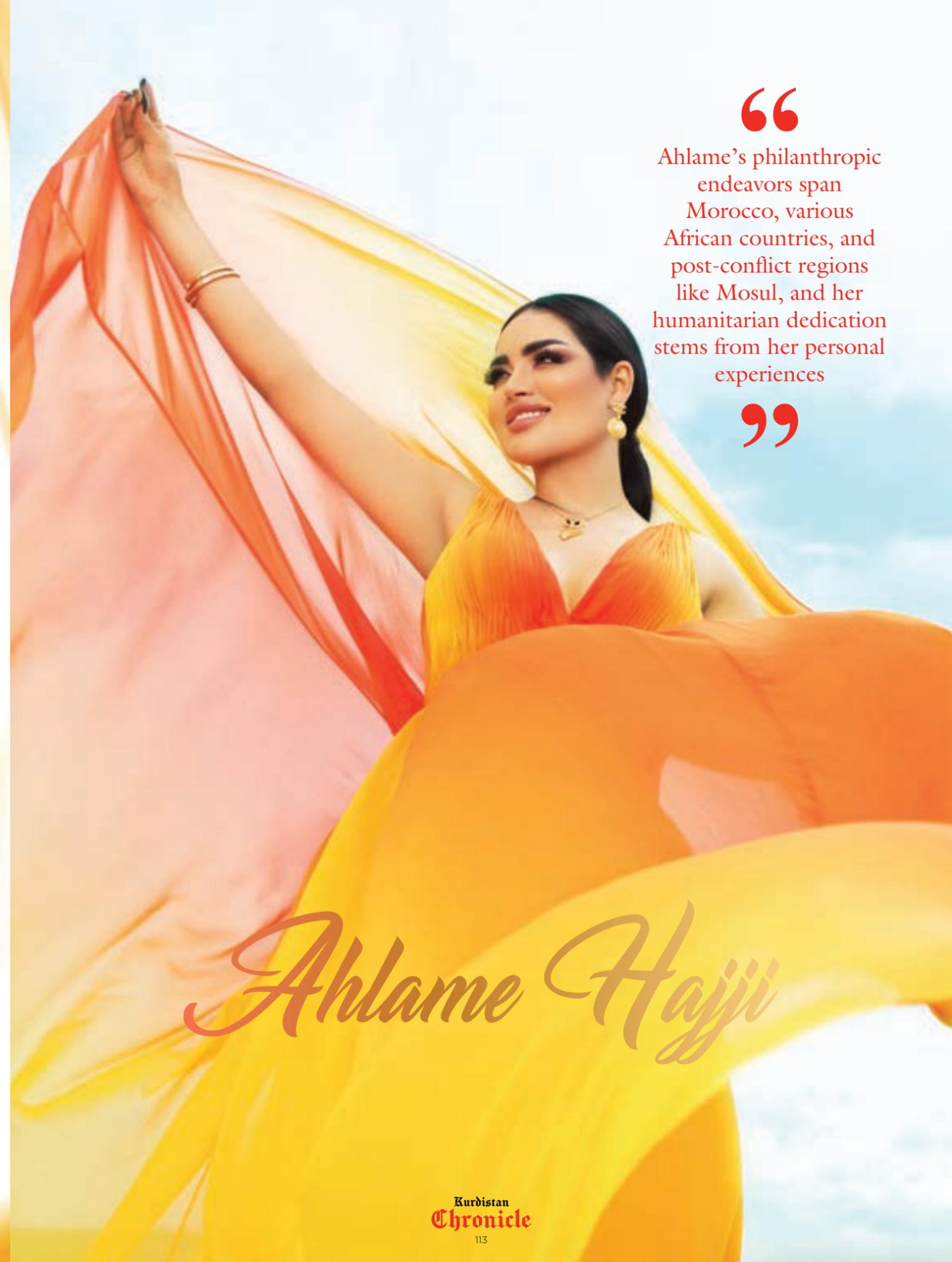
Hiwa Selah is both a journalist and a musician, having also served as the head of the Music Department at the Fine Arts Institute in Rwanda.

Ahlame Hajji has climbed to prominence in the world of beauty pageants, winning three coveted international titles: Miss Middle East 2011, Miss Asia 2016, and Miss Globe 2016. Yet, her story is not merely a tale of tiaras and spotlights; it is a narrative of diverse experiences and profound commitment. In an engaging conversation with Ahlame, we delve into her life's journey, her deep connection to Erbil, and her unwavering dedication to humanitarian endeavors.

Ahlame's unique heritage reflects her multicultural background, as she has an Iraqi mother and a Moroccan father. Holding French citizenship, she studied economics at a French university. The journey that led her to Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), was far from premeditated – it was serendipity.

"I participated in a big festival [in the KRI]," Ahlame explains, "After that, I fell in love with Erbil and its people." This love, she says, is rooted in the traditions and clothing styles shared by the Kurdish and Moroccan cultures.

Her attachment to Erbil runs deep, transcending the familiarity of cultural parallels. Ahlame's praise is not reserved for Erbil alone; it ex-



“Ahlame's philanthropic endeavors span Morocco, various African countries, and post-conflict regions like Mosul, and her humanitarian dedication stems from her personal experiences

”

Ahlame Hajji



tends to the Kurdish people, their warmth, hospitality, and genuine respect for foreigners. “My love and attachment to Erbil is due to several reasons,” she notes, “including its hospitable people, who respect foreigners, and the security and stability in the Kurdistan Region.”

Ahlame’s observations span beyond the city’s streets to its societal fabric. She commends the peaceful coexistence among diverse religious communities in Erbil and across the KRI. “There is no difference between Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Christians, and Yezidis,” she points out. “They all live in peace and brotherhood and have equal rights and duties, which is a great pride for Kurdistan.”

Her admiration for Kurdish women is heartfelt. “I have read and heard a lot about the lives of Kurdish women and the tragedies that they have suffered,” Ahlame says. “This is an experience that deserves respect and praise.” She acknowledges the strength and resilience of Kurdish women who have persevered through life’s hardships, balancing their roles as housewives while striving for a better future.

Culinary experiences are another part of what draw’s Ahlame to Erbil. After several years in the city, she fondly reminisces about the Erbil Dolma, a dish that has left an enduring impression on her palate. “I have eaten all kinds of Kurdish food –especially the Erbil Dolma, which I will never forget,” she admits.

Humanitarian dedication

Beyond her pageant and culinary interests, Ahlame is deeply involved in humanitarian work. She founded Children’s Dreams, an organization headquartered in Paris and dedicated to supporting underprivileged children worldwide. “One of my passions is helping children, wherever they are,” she says.

Ahlame’s philanthropic endeavors span Morocco, various African countries, and post-conflict regions like Mosul, and her humanitarian dedication stems from her personal experiences. “Many of the terrible scenes we see in our daily lives now make me cry,” she admits, particularly the suffering of refugee children caught in wars they did not initiate. Her visits to refugee and internally displaced people (IDP) camps have left a profound impact on her, reinforcing her commitment to make a difference.

As a jury member of the Miss Iraq pageant, Ahlame sees her role as an honor and an opportunity to inspire optimism. “It is a wonderful experience, especially after the difficult situation that Iraq has gone through in recent years,” she says.

In addition to her humanitarian work, Ahlame has discovered that she has a talent for comedy. “A true actor is one who can excel in all roles,” she explains, “I felt I would succeed in

comedy as well.” She eagerly anticipates sharing more laughter with her fans during Ramadan 2024.

Ahlame’s career has encompassed both acting and media work, enabling her to connect with diverse cultures and art forms. “I like acting more and it has helped me learn about myself,” she says. With her passion for her craft and a wealth of experience, she looks forward to bringing more memorable performances to the screen.

Ahlame Hajji stands as a multifaceted personality, whose pageant achievements align seamlessly with her unwavering commitment to humanitarian causes. Her deep connection to Erbil, her dedication to children, and her versatile talents make her a remarkable figure who continues to make a positive impact on both national and international stages. ●



Honoring Barzani's Love for Chess



Sabir Salih

Sabir Salih is a journalist based in the Kurdistan Region.

In September 2023 the Barzan area of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) hosted the second Barzani International Chess Championship, a testament to the enduring legacy of the game in this area. Chess holds a special importance among the people of Barzan, resonating across generations as a beloved pastime.

Notably, Mustafa Barzani, the revered liberation leader of the Kurdish people, found solace and strategic stimulation in chess, often engaging in matches during moments of respite or alongside fellow leaders and friends. His prowess and use of chess strategies during defensive battles against invaders have been immortalized at the Barzani National Memorial.

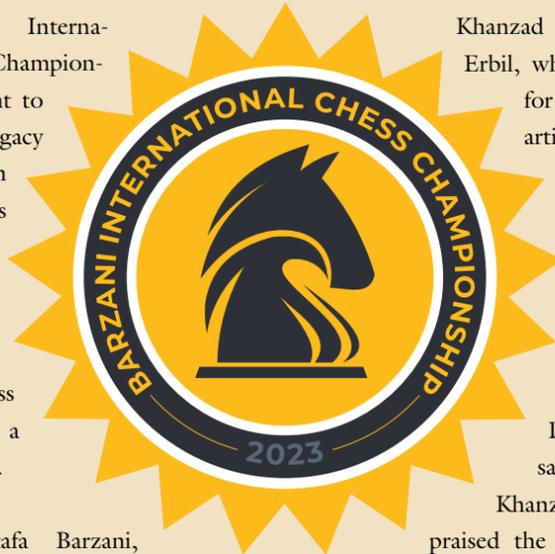
This summer, the inaugural international chess tournament in the Barzan area, aptly named the Barzani Championship, paid homage to Barzani's passion for the game and sought to perpetuate his name. The World Chess Federation oversaw this momentous event, attracting both local players

and international participants. Organized under the auspices of the Barzani Charity Foundation with support from the Khanzad Chess Club in Erbil, which is renowned for its academic and artistic contributions to the game, the tournament aimed to elevate chess's status and prowess.

Dilzar Hama-saleh, President of Khanzad Chess Club, praised the players' abilities, noting their high level of play while emphasizing the potential for further artistic and academic development.

A pivotal catalyst

This tournament marked a significant transition, evolving from a local affair to an international spectacle. With 50 players in attendance, including the president of the Iraqi Chess Federation and the secretary of the Asian Chess Federation, it gained international recognition under the vigilant eye of the World Chess Federation. Matches adhered to international standards, spanning five rounds in a Swiss-style format, with each match allocated 10 minutes.



Kurdish legendary leader Mustafa Barzani playing chess (1973).



■ Dana Adam Schmidt with the late Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani playing chess, 1974



The jury overseeing the Barzani International Chess Championship (18 August 2023) ■



■ Organizers preparing awards for winners of the 2nd Barzani International Chess Championship (18 August 2023)

Stringent supervision by referees ensured fairness and compliance.

“This tournament serves as a pivotal catalyst for the game’s expansion. Efforts are underway to introduce chess into secondary school curricula in the upcoming academic year,” Hamasaleh said.

A cultural legacy

Chess, which traces its origins to the sixth century BC and is rooted in ancient Indian lore, enjoys global acclaim, boasting millions of aficionados worldwide. The KRI, too, fervently embrac-

es the game, nurturing chess players through established clubs, training programs, and competitive events.

The Barzani International Chess Tournament is poised to become a recurring fixture in the KRI’s calendar. Notably, 20 players from the recent tournament received official recognition from the World Chess Federation, paving the way for future ratings by the esteemed body.

Karwan Barzani, the tournament organizer, expressed an unwavering commitment to expand its reach, highlighting its role in showcasing Kurdish

talent and advancing chess within the region. “The tournament bears a sacred name, and we aim to further amplify its significance.”

Preparations are underway for the third tournament, which will seek an even more extensive global presence, with organizers aspiring to draw over 100 players from 20 countries to the Barzan area. Dilzar Hamasaleh underscored Mustafa Barzani’s advocacy for Kurdish peshmerga fighters to take up chess, symbolizing an endeavor to revive a cultural legacy and reignite a passion for the game among the populace. ●

Victory at World Championship Finale

Kurdistan Chronicle



Isac Tutumlu (second from right) poses for the camera with members of the Kurdistan Racing Team. |



The Spanish-Kurdish race driver Isaac Tutumlu finished first at the 2023 GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup Pro-Am Cup with the Rinaldi-run Ferrari 296 GT3 on October 2 in Barcelona, Spain, alongside Samantha Tan and Lorcan Hanafin, as part of the Kurdistan Racing Team.

“What an amazing home round! It was a perfect race, dominating our Pro-Am Class Cup with a lights-to-flag win,” Tutumlu said in a press release.

“We always kept our strong pace as we perfectly managed our tire wear and degradation. As a result of warm temperatures, other teams cooked their tires, but we stayed in shape during the three-hour race.”

“It is an incredible feeling to secure the first win of the Kurdistan Racing Team in such a competitive world-class series in front of my family and friends,” explained Tutumlu.

In 2019, his team also won the DMV GTC Championship in Hockenheim, Germany.

“This marks the first occasion that the Kurdistan Racing Team has emerged victorious in a World Championship,” he added.

“I also want to thank the three companies sponsoring the Kurdistan Racing Team this season, which are GEG Reklam, Korek Telekom, and Northlight Holding.”

Tutumlu added that the Kurdistan Racing Team has no more races planned for this year, after wrapping up the 2023 GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup season at Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya.

“We are now working on next year’s program, which needs to be

clarified in the upcoming weeks or months. Hopefully, we will get the support needed to compete again worldwide and win once again for our country.”

Tutumlu was raised by his Catalan mother and Kurdish father from Turkey, Bayram Tutumlu, in Barcelona, Spain. His father was an influential football agent.

Despite his parent’s objections, Tutumlu pursued his passion for racing, breaking into the international circuit and winning numerous international titles.

Originally,

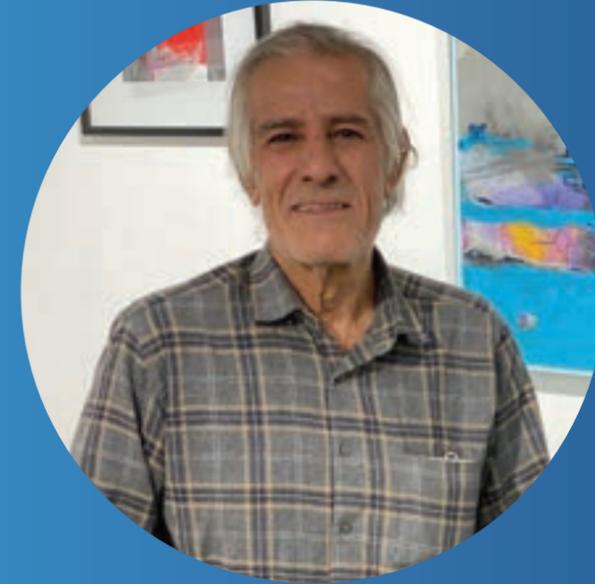
the team was known as the Barzani Racing Team due to concerns surrounding the use of the name “Kurdistan,” which were rooted in potential objections from countries like Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria that oppose Kurdish statehood.

Nonetheless, in 2019, the name Kurdistan Racing Team was officially adopted, propelling the name Kurdistan onto the international GT racing stage.

“We put the Kurdistan flag on our cars and named the team after Bar-

zani until 2019, when we finally received approval to rename the team as Kurdistan Racing Team,” Tutumlu told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. ●





Abbas Abdullah Yousif

Translated by Nahro Zagros

He cried,
As they denied him the money,
For a movie night out.
Then, an aged sage with a weathered face shared wisdom:
Dream and to paint those dreams at night,
In the day, dreams display their innate colors.
Dreams, he said, are the silver screen for the humble.

گريا ...
پارهيان تهواو نه دايع
بچيته سينهما.
پيره ميژديكي ده موچاو رږوياني پيگوت:
خهونان بيينه،
به شهو رهنكاوه نكيان بكه،
به رۆژ خويان رهنكاوه نكن.
خهون سينهماي ههژارانه.

**Kurdistan's
diverse landscape
hosts the see-see partridge
(*Ammoperdix griseogularis*),**

a gamebird that can be found in regions from Kurdistan to Pakistan. Measuring 22-25 cm and weighing 182-238 grams, it feeds on berries, leaves, seeds, flies, ants, and beetles. Recognizable by its whistled *hwit-hwit-hwit* song, the see-see partridge prefers dry, hilly terrain, nesting with 8-16 eggs in ground scrapes. With a sandy-brown appearance, distinctive head patterns differentiate males and females. Typically seen in pairs or small flocks, it can also form larger groups and has a preference for running over flying when disturbed.

SABR DRI





فصل
سنة

Photo: Harem Sewaisi