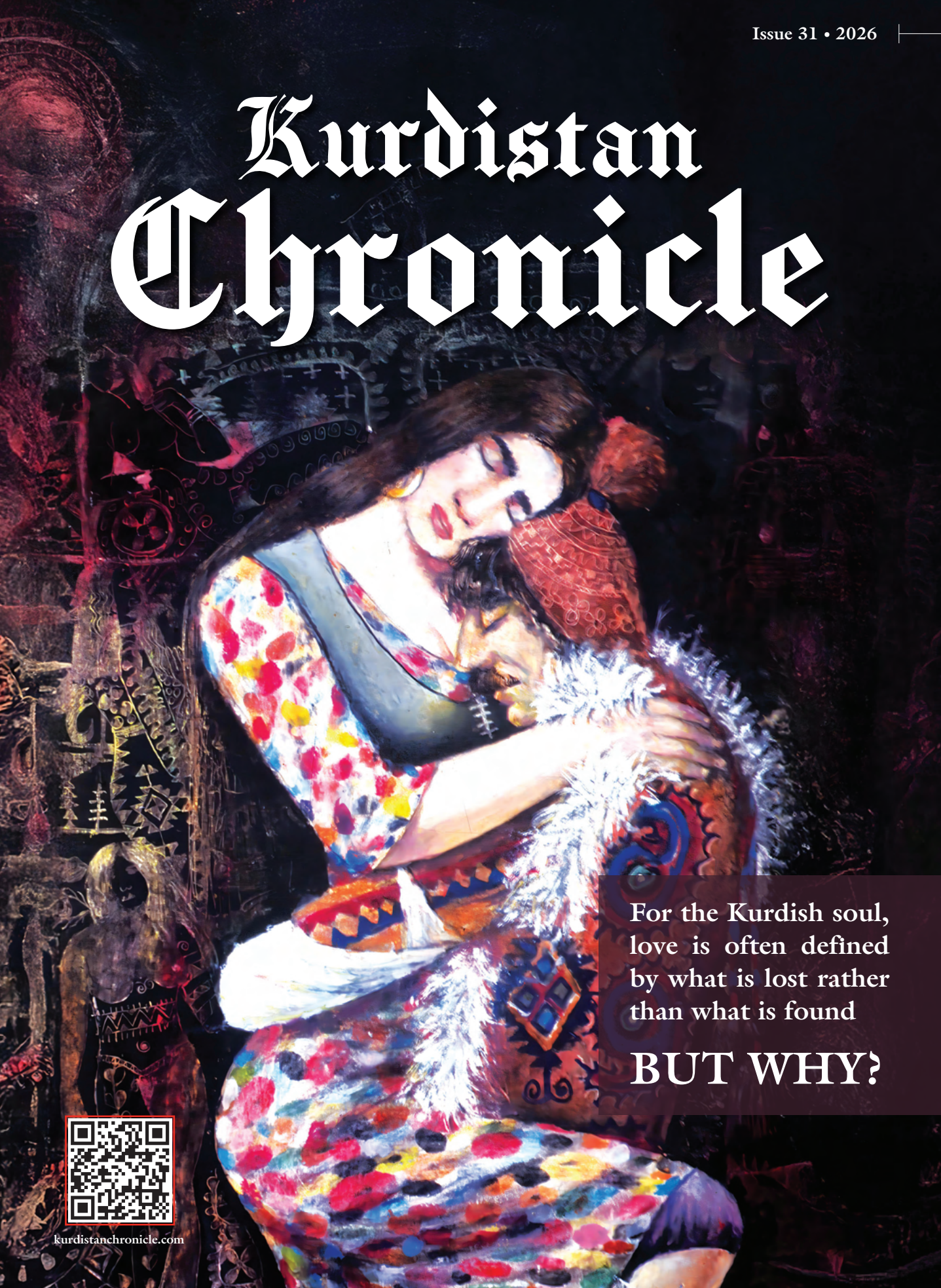


Kurdistan Chronicle

The background of the cover is a dark, textured painting. It depicts a woman with long dark hair, wearing a vibrant dress with a multi-colored floral pattern (red, yellow, blue, and white). She is holding a young child close to her face. The child is wearing a red headscarf and a white garment with a blue and red pattern. In the lower-left corner, there is a small, dark, stylized figure of a person. The overall mood is somber and evocative.

For the Kurdish soul,
love is often defined
by what is lost rather
than what is found

BUT WHY?



Hanging Gardens of Babylon Park in Erbil

The predominantly Christian district of Ankawa in Erbil is now home to a unique green space named after the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Built on an area of 60,000 square meters, the park was inaugurated by Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, who highlighted Ankawa in his inaugural speech as “the symbol of coexistence” between different religious communities.

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon Park includes a 415-meter elevated walkway, an artificial hill standing 6 meters high, and a 70-meter pedestrian tunnel. Nearly 25,000 trees have been planted throughout the park, while 30,000 square

meters are covered with green lawns.

It also features a 700-meter jogging and sports track, a dedicated events area, and two water fountains, each covering more than 500 square meters. Among its many attractions is the world’s tallest flagpole flying the Kurdistan flag, standing 63 meters high.

The park is named after one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which, according to historical sources, were built by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II for his wife Amytis, who was from Media—the homeland of the Medes, regarded as the ancestors of the Kurds.

Photo courtesy of the KRG



For Peace Holding the Middle Ground

The Middle East has faced immense political and security upheaval over the past few months, with its repercussions reaching beyond the region. The conflict involving Iran, the United States, and Israel quickly became one of the greatest challenges to regional stability in recent years, with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz viewed by some as modern-day Pearl Harbor — a potential turning point for the modern history of the Middle East.

Despite determined efforts to remain neutral, the Kurdistan Region became a primary target of Iran and its proxy militias. According to the Community Peacemaker Teams – Iraqi Kurdistan (CPT-IK), over the course of the conflict, more than 750 drones and missiles were fired at military and civilian targets, with the Kurdistan Re-



Botan Tahseen
is the Publisher of
Kurdistan Chronicle
Magazine.

gion becoming the second-most frequent noncombatant target of Iranian strikes after the UAE.

And yet the leaders of the Kurdistan Region remained firm in their position of impartiality while continuing to call for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, emphasizing peace and stability as the foundations of development and long-term progress. That conviction is rooted in historical experience. The Kurds have paid an enormous price for war and violence, but their perseverance has helped them flourish whenever peace has prevailed.

Few people understand the costs of war more intimately than the Kurds. Decades of conflict have reinforced the belief that moderation and long-term stability offer the strongest foundation for lasting development. That

approach has increasingly shaped the Kurdistan Region's regional and international engagement, positioning it as a stakeholder in cooperation rather than confrontation.

The Kurdistan Regional Government, led by Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, has translated these policies into action. With the inauguration of the new government in Iraq last month, Kurdish leaders visited Baghdad to reaffirm their commitment to a strong partnership aimed at resolving longstanding disputes between Erbil and Baghdad. Many political observers viewed the visit as a Kurdish contribution to Iraq's broader stability.

Further, a recent visit by Tom Barrack, the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy to

Iraq and Syria and U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye, was widely interpreted as reaffirming Washington's support for greater regional stability, with the rights and dignity of all religious and ethnic components maintained.

Before his visit, Ambassador Barrack suggested that Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria would be central to the Middle East's future stability. His remarks also underscored a broader reality: lasting regional peace is difficult to imagine without meaningful progress on the Kurdish question, which remains one of the Middle East's most consequential unresolved issues.

This issue of *Kurdistan Chronicle* reflects that same spirit. Articles on the early translation of the Gospels into

Syriac in Erbil and the selection of Erbil as the seat of the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East illustrate the region's long tradition of religious coexistence.

Alongside this human diversity, Kurdistan is also home to remarkable biodiversity. Field research documents the prey-caching behavior of a breeding female leopard in the Zagros Mountains — the first such record in Iraq and evidence that the endangered subspecies still survives and breeds in the Kurdistan Region.

Together, the stories in this issue present a Kurdistan committed to diversity, human rights, shared progress, and a future built on stability rather than conflict. ●



Sounds
of Memory
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Kurdistan Chronicle Kurdistan Chronicle Kurdistan Chronicle Kurdistan Chronicle Kurdistan Chronicle

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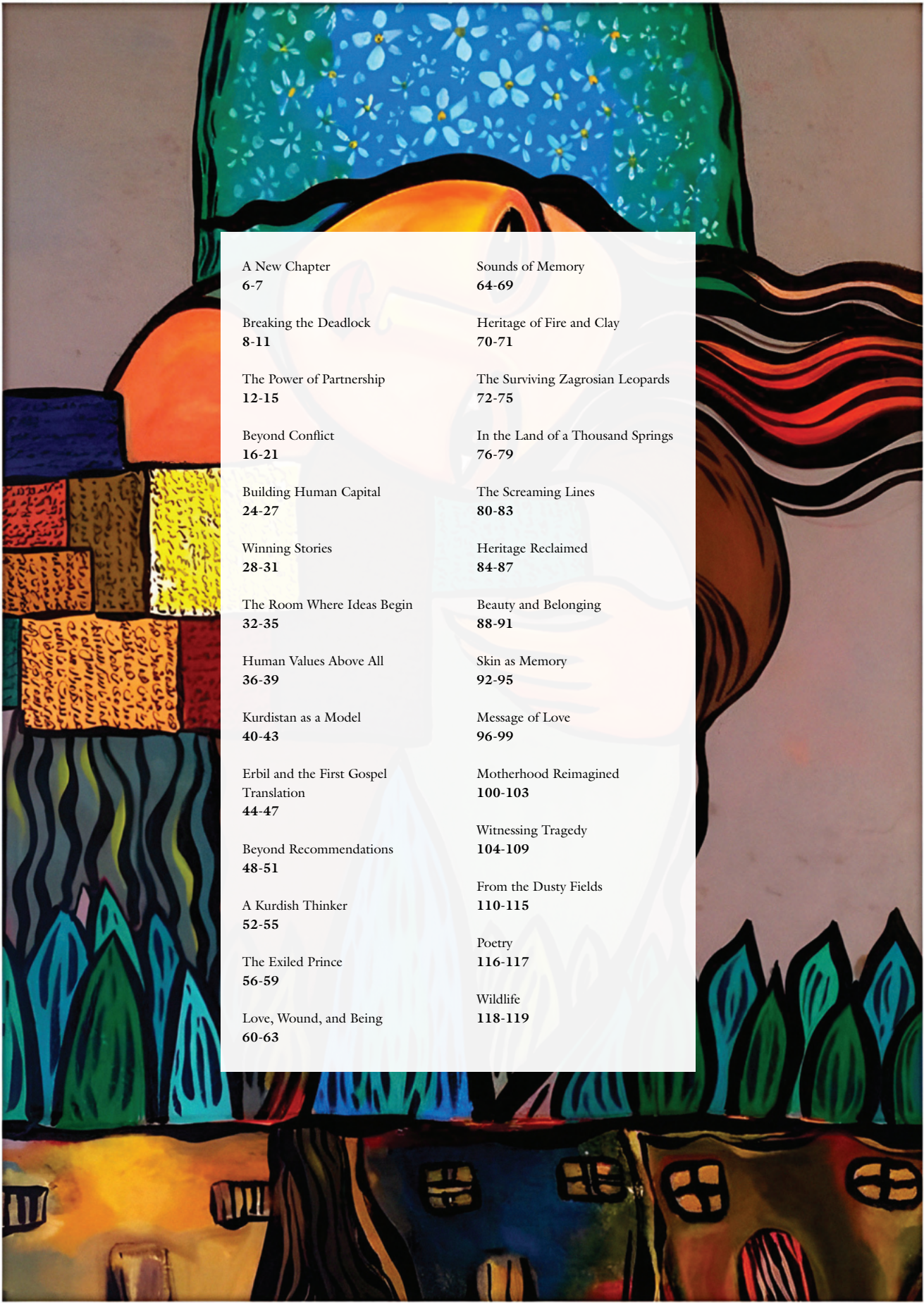
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Photo courtesy of the Barzani Headquarters

■ President Masoud Barzani receiving Tom Barrack, U.S. Special Presidential Envoy to Iraq and Syria and U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye, June 16, 2026.

A New Chapter

Iraq sits at the crossroads of the Middle East, and it is an essential component in carrying out America's national security interests in the region



Treefa Aziz

KRG Representative to the United States.

At a time of significant geopolitical uncertainty across the Middle East, sustained American engagement with Iraq remains essential to advancing regional stability, countering shared security threats, and protecting long-term strategic interests. With the appointment of Tom Barrack as the U.S. Special Envoy to Iraq and his recent visit to both Baghdad and Erbil, the United States has once more reaffirmed its strong commitment to Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

Special Envoy Barrack's visit underscores an important dynamic: Iraq sits at the crossroads of the Middle East, and it is an essential component in carrying out America's national security interests in the region. Goals like combating terrorism, preventing regional instability, strengthening economic ties, and promoting a more secure and prosperous Middle East can be achieved through close dialogue and partnership.

Within this framework, the Kurdistan Region plays a unique and indispensable role. For decades, the Kurdistan Region has been one of America's most reliable partners in the Middle East, from the fight against ISIS to humanitarian efforts and regional security cooperation. The Kurdistan Region has consistently demonstrated its commitment to working with the United States in pursuit of peace and stability, and that commitment remains ironclad.

US Special Envoy Barrack's visit to the Kurdistan Region was about more than responding to immediate security challenges. It was an opportunity to explore new pathways for a stronger U.S.-Kurdistan partnership that contributes to a broader vision of

a stable, inclusive, and economically connected Iraq.

Right now, there are many opportunities for deeper U.S.-Kurdistan collaboration, including in energy, trade, education, technology, and private-sector investment. Expanding these partnerships will benefit the people of the Kurdistan Region and U.S. national interests by fostering economic growth, energy security, and regional resilience. More broadly, greater U.S.-Kurdistan partnership will position the region as a constructive force within Iraq and beyond.

The relationship between the United States and the Kurdistan Region has endured because it is built on trust, shared values, and a commitment

to a common future. As the Middle East faces growing challenges, strong partnerships with reliable allies remain one of America's greatest assets. The Kurdistan Region has consistently demonstrated its role as a steadfast partner, advancing regional security, stability, and prosperity.

The appointment of Special Envoy Tom Barrack and his engagement with the Kurdistan Region provide an opportunity to further strengthen this partnership. Through continued cooperation among the United States, Kurdistan, and Iraq, we can help build a more stable, secure, and prosperous future that benefits Americans and Kurds alike. ●

Breaking the Deadlock

Prime Minister Barzani's visit to Baghdad underscores Erbil's commitment to resolving its long-standing disputes with the federal government



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.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 during Operation Iraqi Freedom, relations between Erbil and Baghdad have been defined by recurring disputes over power, resources, and the meaning of federalism. While Kurdish leaders have sought greater implementation of Iraq's constitutional framework, successive governments in Baghdad have often favored a more centralized approach.

Nearly every new cabinet formation in Baghdad has reopened the same unresolved questions: budget transfers, public-sector salaries, energy policy, disputed territories, and the balance of authority between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region. Kurdish leaders have consistently argued that these disputes should be resolved through Iraq's constitutional and federal framework.



Flags of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

Photo: Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Dominique A. Pinciro / Via DoD



Photo courtesy of the KRG

■ KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with Iraqi counterpart Ali Faalih al-Zaidi in Baghdad, May 23, 2026.

The Latest Round of Talks

Most recently, Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani attended the appointment ceremony for Iraqi Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi. Then, a few days later, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani led a delegation to Baghdad and held meetings with key leaders on May 23 and 24. The visits renewed hopes that the two sides might finally make progress on a familiar list of disputes, including Article 140, public-sector salaries, energy legislation, budget allocations, and border management.

In a joint statement, Iraqi Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi stated that “we are all partners in this country and it is our

duty to resolve the issues and reach an agreement to serve all citizens and components equally.” KRG Prime Minister Barzani, meanwhile, reiterated the need to resolve outstanding disputes, stating that “the resolution of the issues between the KRG and the Federal Government must be fundamental and based on the constitution as well as respect for the federal framework of the Kurdistan Region.”

Prime Minister Barzani also met with Haibat al-Halbousi, Speaker of the Iraqi Council of Representatives. The two emphasized adherence to the constitution and the need for legislation that protects the rights of Iraq’s ethnic and religious communities while benefiting all citizens.

In a separate meeting with Faiq Zidan, President of the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council, discussions focused on constitutional implementation, the federal system, and legal mechanisms for resolving outstanding disputes between Erbil and Baghdad. According to the council’s statement, the two also discussed addressing public needs through constitutional and legal institutions.

Pressing the Opposition

During Prime Minister Barzani’s stay in Baghdad, Iraqi and Kurdish media fully covered each development. He also met with political figures who have traditionally opposed Kurdish constitutional demands, using the visit to press for dialogue across Iraq’s



Photo courtesy of the KRG

■ Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council chief Faiq Zidan in Baghdad, May 23, 2026.

political spectrum.

Toward the end of his visit, Prime Minister Barzani held a press conference to reiterate the constitutional rights of the Kurdistan Region. Since 2014, disputes between Erbil and Baghdad have repeatedly delayed payments to KRG employees and members of the Peshmerga, making it one of the most politically sensitive aspects of the relationship. He expressed his hope that salary payments would not again fall victim to political deadlock.

“We have discussed strategic matters with Iraqi officials, emphasizing that the Kurdistan Region must be given the constitutional opportunity to increase petroleum and non-petroleum revenues, so that it can have a better

role in fulfilling its share in the federal government,” Prime Minister Barzani said. “Our current full concentration is on finding a workable mechanism between the KRG and the federal government; we are looking toward the future, not the past.”

A Symbol of Brotherhood

To conclude his visit, several Iraqi tribal leaders visited KRG Prime Minister Barzani in a special welcoming ceremony and gifted him a 100-year-old Brno rifle. A prestigious traditional gift, the Brno rifle signifies respect, trust, and unity among the Arab community in Iraq. The Arab sheikhs also reiterated their support for the demands and rights of the Kurdish people.

“Kurdistan will always be your home as it has always been; its door is always open to you in times of both joy and hardship,” Prime Minister Barzani told the Arab sheikhs. “From the time of Mullah Mustafā Barzani to today, we have worked to preserve this friendship and brotherhood. In the future we will likewise act in the interest of all Iraq and the progress of all its components alike.”

Yet the visit demonstrated Erbil’s continued effort to pursue its goals through constitutional and political channels, while underscoring how many of the core disputes between Erbil and Baghdad remain unresolved more than two decades after the fall of Saddam Hussein. ●

The Power of Partnership

The role of international agencies in development and building strong infrastructure for a better future

Photo: Mohammad Shwani



■ An aerial view of Sami Abdul Rahman Park in Erbil, with the city's rapidly expanding modern district in the background.



Nwa Kheder Kareem

is a writer with an interest in international cooperation, development initiatives, and diplomacy.

International agencies play a vital role in fostering international cooperation, supporting sustainable development, and strengthening relations between countries. Operating with the backing of their respective governments, these institutions promote mutual understanding and bolster bilateral ties. Through devel-

opment projects, technical assistance, educational programs, scholarships, cultural initiatives, and knowledge-sharing activities, they help build long-term partnerships and create opportunities for collaboration among governments, international organizations, academia, civil society, and the private sector.

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), German Agency for International Cooperation, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, Expertise France, the French Institute, and the Goethe Institute are a few examples

of international agencies active in the Kurdistan Region. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Department of Foreign Relations serves as the principal facilitator between international government agencies, government-supported institutions, and KRG entities. Through dialogue

with diplomatic missions, international organizations, and government partners, it helps identify areas of cooperation, advances development initiatives, and strengthens institutional cooperation aligned with the Kurdistan Region's priorities. The Department also serves as a bridge between



Photo courtesy of Goethe Institute

■ A cultural activity hosted by the Goethe Institute and the French Institute at the ancient Erbil Citadel.

international partners and local institutions, facilitating effective communication and long-term collaboration.

The work of these agencies and institutions also supports the foreign policy objectives of their respective countries by encouraging stability, sustainable development, economic cooperation, and intercultural dialogue. Through these efforts, they contribute to the effective use of soft power while responding to local development priorities and needs.

The impact of these development partnerships is evident throughout the Kurdistan Region. Their contributions have advanced education, healthcare, heritage preservation, economic and social progress, and cultural exchange.

Education and Knowledge Partnerships

KOICA has played a significant role in advancing education in the Kurd-

istan Region. In cooperation with the KRG, KOICA supported the establishment of a model school in Erbil and teacher training centers aimed at enhancing educational quality and professional development. The project reflects the strong partnership between South Korea and the Kurdistan Region, as well as their shared commitment to improving the education sector.

Another notable contribution by KOICA involved the reconstruction and modernization of the Erbil Public Library. The project revitalized an important educational and cultural landmark by incorporating elements of Korean architectural design, including the library's entrance gate, symbolizing the friendship and cooperation between South Korea and the Kurdistan Region.

Beyond education, international government-supported institutions have also contributed to preserving the Kurdistan Region's heritage while fostering international exchange. A

notable example is the establishment of the German-French Joint Cultural Institute at the Erbil Citadel through the cooperation of the French Institute and the Goethe Institute. The institute serves as a platform for cultural dialogue, language learning, artistic exchange, and academic cooperation, further strengthening ties between the Kurdistan Region, France, and Germany. During the foundation stone ceremony, attended by Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani, the project was highlighted as a symbol of friendship and international collaboration.

Infrastructure and Development

Another significant example of development cooperation is the Erbil Wastewater Treatment Plant Project, supported by JICA. The first phase of the project, valued at approximately \$195 million, aims to improve sanitation services, protect public health, reduce environmental pollution, and



■ Rizgari Educational Complex, built by KOICA as part of South Korea's development program in the Kurdistan Region.

Photo courtesy of KOICA

facilitate the sustainable management of water resources. Once completed, the project will bolster groundwater protection, agricultural irrigation, and the reuse of treated water for green areas. The initiative reflects the long-standing partnership between JICA and the KRG in advancing critical infrastructure and sustainable development in the Kurdistan Region.

The presence of these organizations has strengthened cooperation with government entities and local partners, improved institutional capacity, and facilitated the transfer of knowledge and expertise across multiple sectors. Their engagement has advanced local development priorities while fostering professional growth, innovation, and international collaboration.

The continued presence of international government agencies and international development institutions in the Kurdistan Region reflects the region's stability, openness, and commitment to international engagement. Through infrastructure, education, culture, and technical assistance, these institutions have contributed to the Kurdistan Region's progress while helping demonstrate its commitment to peace, coexistence, and partnership with the international community. ●

Beyond Conflict

Kurdistan's experience offers valuable lessons for regional stability and development



Haydar Kamalifar
Founder of Kurdistan
Development & Futures
Institute, Vancouver,
Canada.

After more than a century shaped by war, ideological conflict, and rentier political systems, the Middle East is entering a period of profound transformation. It is not a choice, but rather the result of strong pressures and the clear failure of past systems of governance. The rentier economic structures that relied on hydrocarbons and sustained many states in the region are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. At the same time, the global system can no longer sustain the cost of long-term instability in the region. Under these conditions, Middle Eastern states face mounting pressure to reform or risk gradual marginalization.

At this point, the main question is no longer whether reform will happen, but who will lead it and how it will be

carried out. If development continues through authoritarian systems, rentier economic structures, or simply copying from other contexts, it will not create lasting stability. It will only compound old problems.

Kurdistan's Unexpected Strengths

Lasting development requires new actors, new institutional thinking, and new forms of governance. In this context, the Kurdistan Region has a real historical opportunity to help shape part of this transformation. Its potential has increasingly attracted the attention of outside powers, particularly Europe and the United States.

Kurdistan is a land shaped by the crises of the Middle

Photo: Star Ahmad

East, bearing in its collective memory a century of instability, political division, and social resistance. Yet the same conditions that were once seen as weaknesses may now become a foundation for overcoming these challenges.

Maintaining connections across bor-

ders, managing relations with multiple power centers, and protecting coexistence have quietly built real strength. Adaptability and resilience forged through struggle may become strategic advantages in a region searching for more sustainable political and economic models. The future Middle East will favor those able to

turn experiences of crisis into new models of stability, reform, and cooperation.

A New Kind of Power

The Middle East is slowly entering an era where power is being redefined. Political influence increasingly

rests on economic productivity, while economic success depends on innovation, knowledge, and adaptability. Influence in this emerging order will depend less on military power or ideology than on the ability to address problems such as water shortages, energy transition, urban growth, youth employment, improving education,

reducing violence, democratic progress, and connection to global networks.

The Kurdistan Region can become one of the few places that not only understands these challenges, but also has real experience in dealing with them.

In the 21st-century Middle East, any actor capable of building networks of trust, exchange, and cooperation will play a key role in building the future. In this context, Kurdistan can act as a bridge between markets, a conduit for knowledge exchange, a link between cultures, and a space for peaceful and democratic coexistence. In this way,





Photo: Firaswaad/ Pexels

Kurdistan does not need to compete with regional powers but can support cooperation between them.

This role does not require full political unity — only the capacity to build and sustain cooperation across Kurdistan’s internal divisions. The future Middle East will be shaped by actors who can adapt. If Kurdistan can transform its experience — both successes and failures — into actionable knowledge, it can become a natural reference for development discussions in the region.

The emerging Middle East also needs a new conception of human dignity grounded not only in resistance, but in the capacity to build a better life, create institutions, and move forward

with reform. Kurdistan’s history of suffering gives it moral credibility, while its experience of reconstruction gives it practical relevance. This combination of experience and action can help it take on a formative role in the region today.

A Shared Future

In this view, the relationship between Kurdistan and the Middle East is based on a shared destiny. Kurdistan’s development cannot be separated from that of the region, which will remain incomplete without the participation of actors like the Kurdistan Region. That shared stake can become the foundation of a regional order built on cooperation rather than conflict.

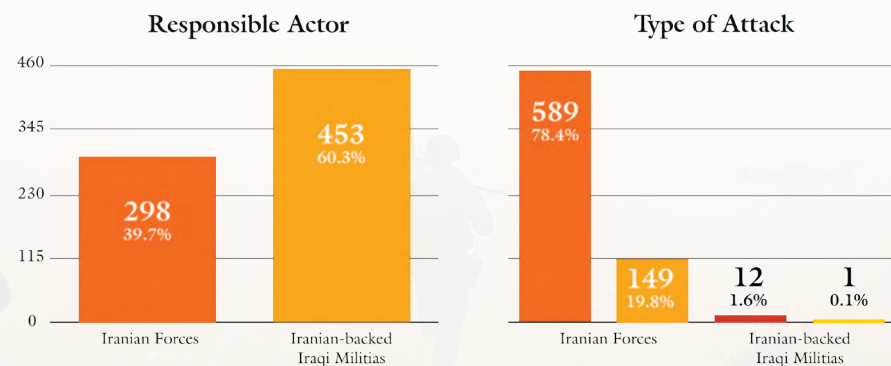
In the end, Kurdistan and the Middle East are on the same path, moving from a century of war to a century of building, from survival politics to future-focused governance, and from closed identities to open and active roles. If Kurdistan can navigate this change with awareness and responsibility, it can shape its own future and contribute to broader regional solutions.

This responsibility falls on the current generation. The region’s future will depend on political forces capable of prioritizing institution-building, economic reform, and regional cooperation over ideological rivalry and zero-sum conflict. Kurdistan can be one of them — if it has the courage to choose the future. ●

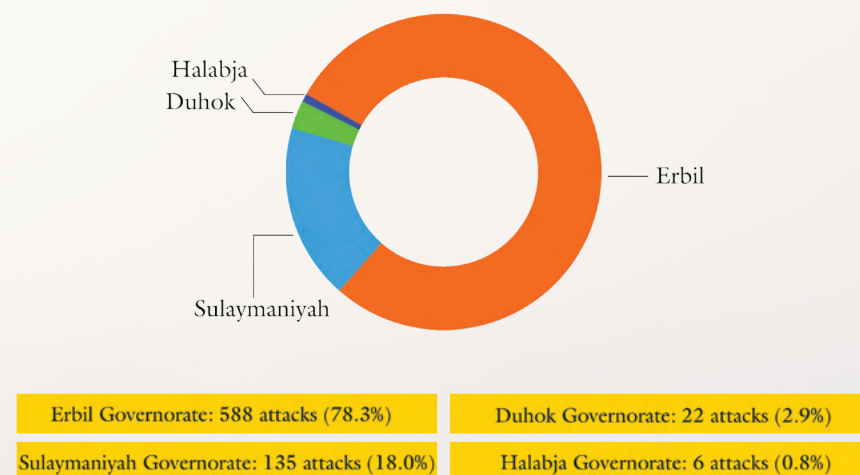


Iran-Linked Attacks on the Kurdistan Region

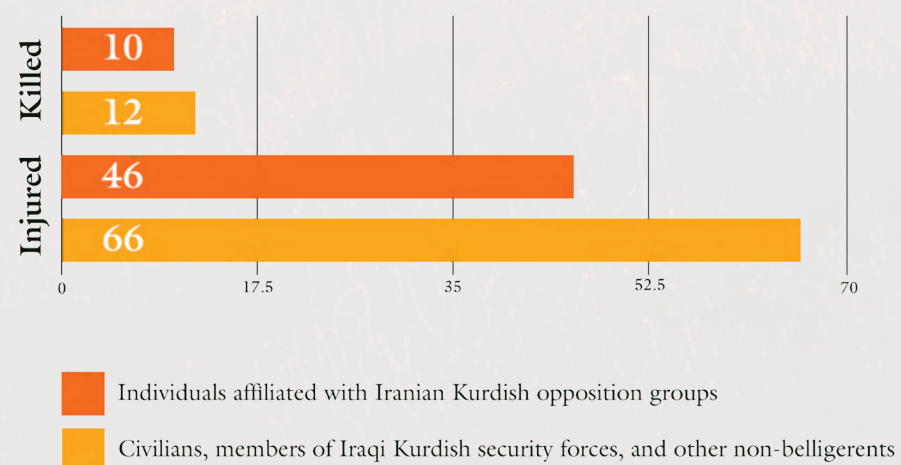
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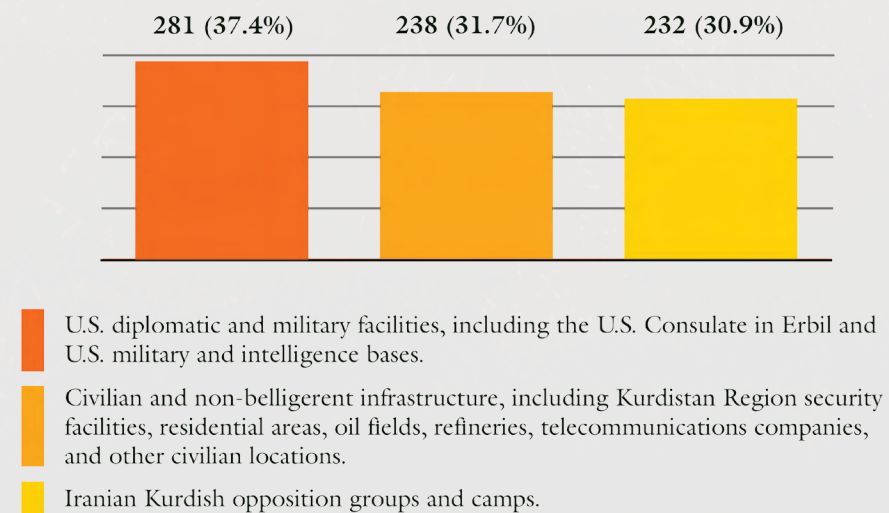
Geographic Distribution of Attacks



Casualties



Targeted Locations



Building Human Capital

Inside the Kurdistan Region's drive to transform education



Asrin Hasbemy

is a Master's student in Economics of Global Risk at Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany.

Since taking office in 2019, the Ninth Cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has prioritized education as a cornerstone of its long-term development strategy, investing in educational services across the region.

To align with contemporary international standards, the KRG Ministry of Education has digitalized its systems and updated the educational framework. According to the KRG's Department of Media and Information, 3,000 schools have been renovated, 629 additional classrooms have been constructed, and 214 new schools

have been built, with 43 schools and kindergartens currently under construction. Furthermore, two universities and 21 colleges have been established, including the opening of 143 different science departments across Kurdistan's universities. More importantly, returns to schooling have increased, and thousands of previously out-of-school children have been brought back into the education system.

The Kurdistan Region Parliament has also played an active institutional role by enacting the Law on the Council for the Trust of Education, Higher Education Institu-

tions and Programs, and Law No. 13 of 2022 on Education and Training, which was enacted to regulate and elevate educational standards across the region. In addition, the government has introduced tuition fee waivers for eligible students in higher education, as well as fee reductions at private universities and institutions to promote greater development opportunities for citizens.

The Kurdistan Accrediting Association for Education

In June 2022, the Kurdistan Region Parliament approved the establishment of the Kurdistan Accrediting

Association for Education (KAAE) with the KRG Ministry of Education and the KRG Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to achieve the government's objectives of enhancing educational quality and accountability. It constitutes a pragmatic institutional initiative aimed at fostering a culture of continuous development and transparency within the education sector.

The KAAE consists of a High Council, Board of Trustees, Advisory Board, and a professional staff dedicated to advancing institutional excellence. The organization brings together distinguished members from government, education, and the ac-

ademic community to serve on its governing bodies, providing strategic oversight and practical guidance on accreditation effectiveness. These governing bodies provide expertise in quality assurance and help guide

Implementing Accreditation Standards

the ongoing development of KAAE's programs and services. KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani serves as chair of both the High Council and the Board of Trustees, bringing a broader vision to the core values of the KAAE: transparency, continuous improvement, academic excellence, and accountability.

To strengthen oversight, the KAAE operates through two distinct bodies: the Commission on Higher Education (CHE), which ensures universities meet established quality stan-



KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani chairs the inaugural meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Kurdistan Accrediting Association for Education, September 11, 2024.

Association for Education (KAAE) as a national body reflecting the government's efforts to modernize and strengthen the education system in the Kurdistan Region. Since then, the KAAE has worked in collaboration

academic community to serve on its governing bodies, providing strategic oversight and practical guidance on accreditation effectiveness. These governing bodies provide expertise in quality assurance and help guide

dards; and the Commission on K-12, which oversees excellence in schools from early childhood through grade 12.

In October 2025, the KAAE issued



CHE standards covering key domains, including institutional mission and objectives, governance, academic programs, student services, teaching and learning capacity, institutional resources, integrity, and transparency. The K-12 standards framework has been developed in collaboration

with the Middle States Association Commission on Elementary and Secondary Schools. This partnership allows schools to implement appropriate plans to enhance student performance, strengthen institutional capacity, and prepare students for future academic and professional suc-

cess. The KAAE is conducting K-12 Readiness and Needs Assessment field visits in the Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja governorates.

The KAAE also conducts workshops and seminars to introduce accreditation standards and strategic plan-

ning to universities and institutions. This reflects the KRG's strategy to strengthen human capital through educational development.

In pursuit of its long-term strategy, the KAAE collaborates with national and international bodies, academic

transparent, high-quality, and impactful education system. In collaboration with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), the KAAE delivered a series of webinars focused on program learning outcomes and institutional strategic planning and accountability, highlighting

continues to generate significant economic and social returns worldwide, strategic international partnerships remain essential to advancing educational development in the Kurdistan Region.

These efforts reflect a broader recog-



■ Graduation ceremony at the American University of Kurdistan, Duhok.

Photo: Sofin Hamid



Photo: Tina Miroshnichenko / Pexels

networks, and development organizations to ensure that its initiatives align with international best practices while strengthening institutional capacity.

Furthermore, the KAAE welcomes partnerships with organizations that align with its vision of fostering a

the role of accreditation liaison officers and peer evaluators.

In January 2026, the KAAE presented a joint session with the MSCHE at the Council for Higher Education Accreditation Conference titled: Global Partners, Local Impact. As education

tion that education is among the most productive investments a government can make. Together, they position the Kurdistan Region as an increasingly attractive destination for institutions and partners seeking to contribute to the development of its human capital. ●

Winning Stories

Kurdistan Chronicle is recognized by the Religion Communicators Council for the second year in a row

Kurdistan Chronicle

Kurdistan Chronicle has been honored with two prestigious awards in the United States: The Award of Excellence and the Award of Merit from the U.S.-based Religion Communicators Council (RCC). The publication won the Award of Excellence for the first time last year, making it the first print media outlet from the Middle East to win the distinction in the award's 70-year history.

The Wilbur Awards are the top honor presented by the RCC, recognizing outstanding work in the communication of religious issues, values, and themes in secular media. According to RCC classifications, the Award of Excellence is granted to submissions of exceptional quality deemed unquestionably worthy of recognition, while the Award of Merit acknowledges work of notable merit. The RCC has presented the awards annually since 1949.

The awards were presented during the RCC's annual convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, held from April 15–18, 2026, featuring panels with distinguished speakers and bringing together participants from around the world under the title "Coming Together: Charting Our Course." *Kurdistan Chronicle* stood alongside esteemed organizations such as NBC, The Epoch Times, the Associated Press, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and NPR.

In the category of Written Works: Magazine, the Award of Excellence was given to "The Story of Iraq's Jews" by Hemin Baban. This piece recounts the harrowing history of Iraqi Jews, particularly highlighting their experiences

during a violent assault in June 1941 known as the Farhud. During this tragic event, 179 Jews were killed, and many homes and businesses were destroyed. The article underscores the resilience of the Jewish community in Iraq and serves as a poignant reminder of their significant but often overlooked history.

The Award of Merit was given to "Kurdistan's Fallen Crosses" by Goran Shakhawan, which describes how Kurdish Peshmerga reinstated a cross on a church in Bashiqa, northeastern Mosul, Iraq, after liberating the town from ISIS. The symbolic picture of the event, presented to Pope Francis by Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, illustrates the immense destruction caused by ISIS and the ongoing efforts to restore peace and religious coexistence in the region.

"We congratulate *Kurdistan Chronicle* on being honored with an Award of Excellence for the second year in a row," Brad Pomerance, Wilbur Awards Coordinator for RCC, said.

"In selecting our Wilbur Honorees, our judges evaluate content, creativity, execution, and results, but the ultimate criterion is excellence in communication about faith and religion," Pomerance told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. "Each entry in the Wilbur Awards is judged by three experienced media professionals."

Kurdistan Chronicle's article "The Prophet Nahum: A Symbol of Religious Coexistence in Kurdistan," also writ-



ten by Hemin Baban, received the Award of Excellence in 2025. This piece exemplifies the magazine’s commitment to bridging cultural divides and promoting the shared values of the Kurdistan Region’s diverse communities.

“For more than seven decades, the RCC’s Wilbur Awards have honored

outstanding storytelling in secular media that explores faith, values, and the human spirit,” Ryan Koch, president of the RCC’s Board of Governors, told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. “This year’s honorees carry that remarkable legacy forward with creativity, insight, and conviction.

“The Wilbur Awards ceremony is al-

ways an uplifting reminder of how meaningful, well-crafted communication can foster understanding among people of all beliefs,” Koch added. “I encourage anyone in media or communications to join us in celebrating the power of these inspiring stories.” Rabbi Eric Greenberg, who has spent decades working in interfaith relations, praised *Kurdistan Chronicle* for



its ability to bring different cultures and traditions together, noting that fostering genuine understanding between communities is more vital than ever. That sentiment was echoed by RCC board member Kathy Williams, who welcomed the publication’s third

award from the organization. “We aren’t just celebrating a trophy,” Williams said. “We’re celebrating the real collaboration and mutual respect that this publication stands for. It’s exactly the kind of journalism that actually brings people together.”

The RCC announced the 2026 Wilbur Award recipients on March 10, recognizing exceptional work across secular media fields including print and online journalism, book publishing, podcasts, radio, television, and film. ●

The Room Where Ideas Begin

The Kurdistan Innovation Institute aims to transform education by converting classrooms into innovation labs



Sharif Ahmad

is a youth advocate currently serving as Communications Associate at the Kurdistan Innovation Institute.

Before it became an Innovation Lab, it was just a room.

Tucked away in one of Erbil's public schools, the space had no special meaning for students. It stood quietly in the background of daily education.

Then the room changed. Tables were arranged for teamwork. Robotics kits, computers, and learning materials arrived. Teachers were trained, and a new innovation curriculum was introduced. The once-empty room became a hub of activity: students leaning over projects, asking why something worked, trying again when it failed, and discovering that a lesson could be hands-on.



For the Kurdistan Innovation Institute (KII), this transformation is at the heart of the School Innovation Program.

With the support of the Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Education and the Erbil General Directorate of Education, the program began its pilot phase in Erbil with nine public schools and one center for students with autism. Dedicated Innovation Labs were created for hands-on learning in science, technology, design, teamwork, and problem-solving. Following positive feedback from the Ministry, teachers, and parents, the

with mechanics and hydraulics, develop simple software, and learn to identify problems before designing solutions. They also learn to divide roles, test, improve, and explain what they have made.

Dr. Azad Najar, CEO of KII, says the institute was shaped by the conviction that innovation must begin early. "To rise as a nation, we need to increase the number of innovators," he explains. "We wanted to create a system through which we can systematically increase the number of innovators, creators, and people who think outside the box."

Aveen Ahmed, KII's School Innovation Project Manager, saw the clearest impact at schools where hands-on experimentation was still new. "One of the moments I felt the program was really working was in schools like Bnar and Mem," she says. "When students saw something simple, like an LED turning on after they connected it themselves, their reaction showed that learning had become real for them."

Nooralhuda Suliman, KII's senior trainer, notes the importance of creating dedicated spaces for innovation. "The program was not simply about



■ KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani observes student-led projects at KII's Innovation Lab at Aram Public School, Erbil, October 2025.

model is expected to expand to 125 additional schools, most of them public. The program is built on the belief that innovation is a latent skill in every child, and that the right environment can bring it out.

Inside the Labs

Inside the labs, students build circuits, explore robotics, experiment

That conviction led KII to develop its own innovation curriculum, teaching students how ideas move from imagination into action.

The program required careful preparation: schools were selected, teachers trained, and unused rooms transformed into Innovation Labs. KII teams supported every stage of implementation.

placing tools inside schools," she says. "It was about creating a full learning environment where teachers and students could use those tools with purpose."

What Teachers Noticed

For teachers, the labs have changed the rhythm of the classroom. Sawza Mustafa, a teacher at Majidi School,



Photo: Shwan Karkuki

Teachers from the first KII Innovation Lab cohort take part in pilot-phase training, December 2025.

found that students who were quiet during normal lessons came alive when asked to build or test something. “Some students don’t lack curiosity,” she says. “They simply need the right space to show it.” The change was not

limited to when school was in session. “What impressed me most was seeing students take innovation home. They worked with their parents, built projects voluntarily, and brought them back to school.”

In a short time, students built projects ranging from a home security system to a smart clothes-drying rack. Bayan Khalid, a participating teacher from Mam School, says the lab gave students a different way to learn. “Some



Photo: Shwan Karkuki

Dr. Azad Najar engages with students presenting projects developed through KII’s School Innovation Program, April 2026.



Photo: Shwan Karkuki

Students at Chamchamal School are presented with Arduino kits inside their newly equipped Innovation Lab, February 2026.

students understand better when they can see, touch, build, and test,” she says. “This program gave them that opportunity.”

Aya Shawkat, a participating teacher from the Aran Center for Children with Special Needs, found that her own role shifted inside the lab. “We were not only explaining the lesson. We were guiding students through questions, mistakes, teamwork, and improvement.” For Darin, a student on the autism spectrum at Aran Center, the value is straightforward: “I enjoy the Innovation Lab because I love making new things with my hands.”

Beyond the Classroom

The program has also extended to families. Bafirin Yusif, mother of a

student at Bnar School, noticed a clear change at home. Before the lab opened, her son spent most of his time playing soccer. Now, he is eager to make things and recently built a hydraulic jack. “He keeps talking at home about the projects they make at school,” she says. “I really hope the Innovation Lab becomes a fixed part of all schools.”

Another parent, Nihaya Muzafar, saw a similar shift after her daughter built a smart door in the lab. “Her father, brother, and I now enjoy helping her turn her ideas into working projects,” she says. “It has even helped us spend less time on social media.” She adds that the lab encourages teamwork and hopes innovation becomes an official course.

The enthusiasm has not ended with the school year. Some parents, teachers, and students have asked for the Innovation Lab to continue during the summer break. For KII, this is a strong sign that the program has become something students associate with curiosity, confidence, and creation.

Najar compares the approach to planting young trees in a large garden. “If we go to schools, we can multiply the number of innovators by a thousand in the future,” he says.

The room that once stood unused now serves a different purpose. Inside, students are not only learning about the future. They are already building it. ●

Human Values Above All

A vision for coexistence in a region where embracing one another is the path forward



Mar Awa III

Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East.

In a world increasingly marked by division and uncertainty, the principle that human values stand above all differences remains not only relevant but essential. This vision calls for building societies grounded in dignity, mutual respect, and genuine coexistence — principles that must move beyond rhetoric and become a daily practice.

Coexistence is not a ready-made formula or a declaration that can simply be signed and filed away. It is a continuous process that requires a genuine will, honesty in dialogue, and a readiness to cooperate. It is a daily practice, an ongoing conversation, and a commitment we must renew each morning. True coexistence demands that we look past superficial grievances and engage with the genuine will to understand and respect one another. It requires honesty in dialogue to discuss difficult truths without dissolving into conflict, and the readiness to cooperate on shared goals, proving that our common interests are stronger than our separate identities.

This continuous nature demands a shift in how we approach these efforts. We must recognize that initiatives must be long-term, not just “seasonal actions” — because building trust requires time, sustainability, and resources. A sudden surge of activity before an election or a holiday, followed by silence, is not a strategy for peace. Trust is built incrementally, through consistent and sustained engagement. It requires sufficient resources

— not only financial, but intellectual and human — and a commitment to sustainability so programs outlive their initial funding cycles. We are laying a foundation, and a solid foundation is built slowly, brick by patient brick.

Cultivating the Garden of Diversity

To build a better future, we must cultivate the minds of the next generation. That is why education and raising awareness about the value of diversity and pluralism are essential. Schools, universities, and media play an important role in shaping a generation that respects differences. The classroom is the first diverse society a child encounters, and it must be a mirror of the world we wish to build. We must actively counter the isolation and prejudice that can take root early on.

The responsibility of education extends beyond the mere recognition of differences; it must move toward the celebration of pluralism and multiculturalism.

To this end, curricula should promote coexistence and respect for others, so that students learn from an early age to see pluralism as a positive reality. We must teach our children not to just tolerate differences — as if they were a burden — but to recognize that diversity is a vital strength, an enrichment of our shared cultural, economic, and intellectual life. Curricula that embed these principles en-

sure that the next generation views the mosaic of their society with pride, not suspicion.

This message must also resonate throughout the wider community, ensuring that society recognizes that differences in religion and ethnicity do not justify discrimination. Access to justice, employment, education, and security cannot be conditional on one’s background. Discrimination is an attack on the foundational contract of society and weakens the collective for the sake of an exclusionary

few. Every single member of this society has an inalienable right to human dignity granted by God our Creator, and that right must be upheld without exception.

To put this principle into action, we must empower the structures of dialogue and partnership. I urge us to support civil society organizations that include representatives of different ethnicities and religions, so they can serve as platforms for continuous dialogue, cooperation, and shared development initiatives. These organi-

zations serve as engines of grassroots change. They translate high-level policy into local action, creating spaces where neighbors and co-citizens — not just officials — can sit down together to build trust and to cooperate in practical projects that better our communities in various spheres of human society and life. They prove that we are capable of working together for mutual benefit.

Furthermore, we must universally strengthen the principle of shared social responsibility: every individual,



Photo: Hemin Baban



Photo credit: Vatican Media

■ Pope Leo XIV receives Mar Awa III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, October 27, 2025.

regardless of background, should feel like a partner in building society, protecting the rights of others, and contributing to collective development. When individuals feel that their voice is heard and that their contribution is valued, they invest themselves in the fate of the collective. This sense of partnership is the antidote to alienation and radicalization. When we protect the rights of others, we are, in fact, protecting the very principle that guarantees our own rights. In other words, we are all accountable for the well-being of the whole.

The Power of Collective Memory and Media

The sense of partnership we seek to build is inextricably linked to our understanding of the past. To move forward together, we must acknowledge a history that is often complex, sometimes painful, but always shared.

This leads us to the critical need for documenting the shared history of different components of society, through books, research, archives, exhibitions, and documentaries, to remind everyone that they are part of a common history. History is often taught through a single, selective lens. We must open the archives and commission research on the moments of collaboration, the shared cultural threads, and the collective struggles that have involved all our communities. When we realize that our ancestors fought side-by-side, worked side-by-side, and built the nation together, the manufactured divisions of the present begin to crumble.

The same principle of a shared narrative must be embraced by our contemporary communicators. We should actively encourage local media to produce programs and documentary films about coexistence, community histories, and social diversity to

promote understanding and empathy. Media has the power to either divide or unite. It can feed prejudice through sensationalism, or it can build bridges through storytelling. Let us support journalists and producers who choose the latter — who tell the stories of everyday cooperation, who showcase the richness of different cultural practices, and who create empathy by showing the human being behind the ethnic or religious label.

To reinforce this, we must also encourage educational or cultural initiatives that reflect this shared heritage, reinforcing a collective identity and reducing cultural isolation. Festivals, joint art projects, co-curated museum exhibits, and cross-community sports events can all serve this purpose. These initiatives are not passive history lessons; they are active, joyful experiences that demonstrate our common humanity and create a collective identity that is inclusive and



■ A painting by Kurdish artist Adam Khayri depicts men and women in traditional dress, illustrating the cultural and religious diversity of the Kurdistan Region.

stronger than any single component alone. They allow us to celebrate our differences while acknowledging our fundamental unity.

The creation of a culture of coexistence requires an all-of-society approach — that is, a grand alliance of institutions, leaders, and citizens.

A Collective Commitment to the Future

The final necessary step is the institutionalization of our commitment. We must move beyond good intentions and establish concrete mechanisms for action and policy development.

Specifically, we must strengthen cooperation between authorities, institutions, civil society, and religious components to develop policies that promote coexistence and combat discrimination. When all sectors of society are aligned on a common vi-

sion, then progress is inevitable. This means collaborative policy-making that ensures laws are not only free from discrimination, but actively promote equity and inclusion in every sphere of society.

Furthermore, representation matters profoundly. It is vital that we enhance the participation of representatives from all components in local governments and decision-making positions. When diverse voices are present at the decision-making table, policies are more just, more effective, and more representative of the society they are designed to serve. Inclusion in governance is not a courtesy; it is a necessity for legitimate and stable rule.

We do recognize the immense influence of moral authority. We must involve religious and academic leaders in awareness efforts, as they have a strong influence on society and can promote a culture of respect and

coexistence. These leaders hold the deepest trust of their communities. Their clear, consistent messages condemning hate, promoting mutual respect, and underscoring the universal human values shared by all our major faiths and ethical systems are indispensable in forming hearts and minds.

In the end, the measure of any society is not in its differences, but in how it rises above them. The true test of our humanity lies in our ability to uphold the dignity of every person, without exception. If we are to build a future worthy of the generations to come, we must move beyond words and transform our principles into lasting action. A just and peaceful society is not given; it is built, day by day, through courage, responsibility, and unwavering commitment. Only when human values stand above all differences can we build a future that is not merely shared but truly united, resilient, and enduring. ●

Kurdistan as a Model

Religious diversity can serve as an example for a pluralistic society



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It is early in the morning and cold winds blow through Erbil, a sign that the city is not yet fully awake. The shop doors slide open in succession. The air is filled with the fragrance of fresh bread. Faint footsteps can be heard on the pavement. A group of people walks through a park. For those who live here, this is not a surprise; the call to prayer from a nearby mosque can be heard in the background, mingling with the almost simultaneous ringing of a church bell — the familiar sounds of everyday life.

In recent decades, war and migration have torn at the social fabric of Middle Eastern countries, bringing political instability. In many areas, ethnic and religious differences have exacerbated divisions, not eased them. But things are not the same in the Kurdistan Region. Here, diversity is not merely a political slogan.

It is woven into everyday life, bringing people of different backgrounds together in cities such as Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Halabja. Kurds share public spaces with Arabs, Turkmen, and Assyrians; Sunni and Shi'a Muslims live alongside Yazidis, Christians, and Yar-

sanis. They attend the same schools, live in the same neighborhoods, and share the same marketplaces. This is not solely the result of proximity. Over time, a sense of familiarity develops — an invisible yet essential element of coexistence. These patterns should come as no surprise. Before there were any modern political institutions, communities in the Kurdistan Region were functionally dependent on one another. Working together was essential; these relationships sustained social harmony during hardship. In sociology, such a relationship is known as “organic solidarity.” In essence, organic solidarity refers to the unity created through interdependence. This form of solidarity became institutionalized in the Kurdistan Region after 1991, with the incorporation of laws and institutions to protect various communities and give institutional expression to diversity. While these measures did not establish coexistence, they reinforced it and provided a more defined framework for its maintenance.

The real test came later, particularly amid the growth of ISIS, when many in Syria and Iraq were displaced and sought refuge in the Kurdistan Region. The influx of refugees and internally

■ The entrance to the Jalil Khayat Mosque in Erbil.



Photo: Firasmaad / Pixels



■ Christians gathering outside a church in Erbil to celebrate Palm Sunday.



■ Iraqi Kurdish Mandaeans participate in the Golden Baptism ritual, May 18, 2022.



■ Yazidi women in traditional dress celebrating the Red Wednesday festival in Lalish, Kurdistan Region.

displaced persons strained public services and infrastructure, but it also revealed something significant. Communities across the Kurdistan Region were largely able to maintain social cohesion while welcoming newcomers. The strength of a society is reflected in its acceptance of others, especially in times of stress.

None of the above implies that everything is ideal. Coexistence is not an inevitability or a foregone conclusion. Like anywhere else, the Kurdistan Region continues to face challenges. Political tensions and economic hardships can exacerbate old divisions and create new ones. Sometimes the distance between groups widens rather than narrows.

For this reason, coexistence is an ongoing process that requires more than legislation or institutions. It is reflected in how people speak to one another, in what children learn in school, and in how issues are

discussed in the public arena. These details may seem small but shape daily life in profound ways. There are differences here, of course, but this model is worth understanding.

The real question is: how do people live with these differences without constant conflict? How can a population respect diversity while sharing the same spaces, routines, and responsibilities? The call to prayer and the ringing of a church bell might appear ordinary, but it reflects the underlying principles that govern everyday life.

Even in times of conflict, life cannot be suspended. Individuals live within a shared social environment. At the end of the day, coexistence is not a matter of public statements or policies; it is evident in the everyday interactions that sustain community life. That may be the greatest attribute of social coexistence: it is ever-present, yet easy to overlook. ●

Erbil and the First Gospel Translation

Around 1,800 years ago, Jesus' words were first translated in the heart of Kurdistan



Andrew Wilkinson

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Today, the Christian Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — have been translated into over 1,800 languages. This accomplishment means that 99% of the world's population can now read accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ in a language they understand. These Bible translations have profoundly shaped world history; modern English, for example, has been deeply influenced by the 1611 King James Bible translation. What few people realize is that this vast translation effort likely began around 1,800 years ago in Erbil.

Back in the 2nd century AD, Erbil was known as Arbela, the capital of the kingdom of Adiabene. This kingdom existed between the two superpowers of the day: Rome to the West and Parthia to the East. Its culture reflected its position as a crossroads between the East and the West, with names discovered from this period reflecting a unique blend of Semitic, Persian, and Greek influences.

A native of Adiabene named Tatian traveled West to Rome, where he was shocked by the idol worship he encountered there. Eventually, Tatian became

■ *A group of men and children in traditional Kurdish dress outside the main gate of Erbil Citadel, 1932.*

a Christian, studying under the prominent early Christian leader Justin Martyr. Tatian appears to have developed strict religious views that eventually caused friction with the Christian community in Rome. Whether for these reasons or others, he returned to his homeland, likely settling back in Arbela.

Diatessaron

Upon his return, Tatian began his most influential work: the *Diatessaron*. At the time, the four Christian Gospels were only available in Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire. While Jesus himself likely spoke Aramaic during his ministry, the Gospel accounts had been written in Greek for the wider Mediterranean world. However, the most common language in Arbela and Adiabene was an Eastern form of Aramaic called Syriac. This language is the ancient form of what Kurdistan’s Assyrians and Chaldeans still speak today.

In the *Diatessaron*, Tatian sought to make the words of Jesus accessible to the people of his homeland in their own language. He decided to translate these books into Syriac, but he also took a unique approach. Rather than translating four separate books, Tatian harmonized the content of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John into a single, continuous narrative. This is why his work is called the *Diatessaron*, which literally means “through four.”

While his choice of a paraphrased harmony rather than a direct translation was, and is, controversial, it proved to be extremely popular. The *Diatessaron* remained the primary Gospel text for Syriac speakers for the next 200 years. Copies spread across the Parthian empire and beyond. Some scholars believe that when early Islamic sources speak of



A picture of a new Kalhuri Kurdish translation of the Gospel of Luke.



Early Christian commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron.



Map of Adiabene in 200 CE.



Bust of Justin Martyr, Tatian’s mentor.

one Injil, rather than four, this single-volume tradition may be the reason: the tribes of Arabia likely knew the Gospels through Tatian’s harmony rather than four separate books.

Tatian’s work was immensely significant. It made Jesus’ words accessible to the entire Syriac-speaking world, reaching from Egypt to India and into Central Asia. It also played a part in the remarkable spread of Syriac Christianity, which in turn had fascinating historical consequences, such as influencing the written script later developed for the Mongols.

Crucially, Tatian’s work stands out as the very first example in history of a written Gospel translation. Countless translators have followed in his footsteps, leading many centuries later to the Sorani, Behdini, and Kurmanji versions that are available today. This effort continues, evidenced by recent translations such as a new Kalhuri Kurdish translation of the Gospel of Luke.

Where did it all start? Likely right here, in old Arbela. This legacy remains largely unknown today. Christians worldwide will undoubtedly continue their passion for translating the words of Jesus. After all, the complete Bible itself was originally written in three different languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. As a collection of tens of ancient books, it’s full of dozens of loan words from other languages, such as Old Persian. Christianity has therefore been intertwined with translation from its earliest centuries.

In the meantime, it is fitting to celebrate the beginning of this story. There is a strong case to be made that the very first time the words of Jesus were translated and compiled in another language, it happened 1,800 years ago, right here in Kurdistan. ●

Beyond Recommendations

A firm commitment and a clear vision for advancing human rights



Payam Zahir

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In May 2026, government officials, diplomats, UN representatives, and civil society organizations gathered in Erbil for the first Annual Panorama Conference on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). More than just a discussion of human rights policy, the conference served as a progress report on the Kurdistan Region's efforts to implement international recommendations — and a reminder of the challenges that remain.

The gathering came at a pivotal moment.

While the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has received recognition for progress in areas such as minority protection, women's rights, and support for displaced communities, international organizations continue to raise concerns about media freedom, legal reform, and institutional accountability. Throughout the conference, participants returned to a central question: how can human rights commitments be translated into measurable change?

Understanding the UPR

Established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2006, the UPR evaluates the human rights record of every UN member state every four and a half years. Governments present reports on progress and challenges, while UN agencies, civil society organizations, and member states provide additional assessments and recommendations. Iraq has participated in the process since its creation, with the Kurdistan Region contributing as part of the Iraqi delegation since 2010.

Three themes emerged repeatedly throughout the conference: improving coordination between institutions, broadening participation from civil society and international partners, and translating recommendations into measurable reforms.

Progress and Remaining Challenges

Much of the discussion focused on

balancing recognition of recent progress with acknowledgment of unresolved challenges. In his address, KRG Coordinator for International Advocacy Dindar Zebar highlighted the KRG's reforms related to women's rights, children's rights, freedom of expression, and protections for vulnerable groups under the vision of the Ninth Cabinet. He also pointed to international recognition of efforts to suspend the death penalty, support minority communities, and strengthen protections for women and persons with disabilities.

A key metric presented during the conference was the implementation rate of international recommendations, which reached 62.3% by 2025, reflecting significant progress during the previous review cycle.

International partners broadly welcomed the 62.3% figure but stressed that concerns remain, particularly around media freedom, violence against women, and civil society protections. The EU, which has support-

ed programs protecting journalists and human rights defenders in the region, reaffirmed its commitment to democratic development. At the same time, it emphasized that progress on internally displaced persons, religious coexistence, and media pluralism, while genuine, remains incomplete.

UNDP's deputy resident representative framed the underlying stakes most directly, arguing that the UPR's value lies not in reporting but in improvements to justice, public services, inclusion, and equal opportunity. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) underscored the importance of implementation while praising the KRG's willingness to acknowledge both achievements and remaining shortcomings. For LWF representatives, open dialogue between government institutions, civil society, and international partners remains essential to advancing human rights protections.

Several participants stressed that no single institution can implement human rights reforms alone and called

Photo: Montedhar / Pexels



Photo Courtesy of the KRG Office of the Coordinator for International Advocacy

■ Officials at the first Annual Panorama Conference on the Universal Periodic Review, Erbil, May 2026.

for deeper cooperation between government agencies, civil society groups, and international partners.

Human Rights in Practice

Panel discussions examined the practical obstacles to implementing human rights recommendations. Participants discussed the relationship between governance, security, economic de-

velopment, and institutional reform, contending that sustainable human rights progress depends on effective public institutions and long-term stability.

Speakers also highlighted the practical dimensions of reform, including protections for foreign workers, media freedoms, investment promotion, and regional stability. Several participants

argued that sustainable economic growth and human rights progress are mutually reinforcing, not competing, objectives.

Discussions also highlighted the Kurdistan Region's continued role in hosting refugees and internally displaced persons. Representatives from UNICEF, UNODC, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and other organizations



■ Government officials and NGO representatives during a panel discussion at the Annual Panorama Conference on the Universal Periodic Review, Erbil, May 2026.

discussed refugee protection, disability inclusion, women's and children's rights, and the need for stronger institutional capacity.

Obstacles to Reform

Despite signs of progress, participants identified several structural obstacles that continue to impede implementation. Coordination gaps between federal and regional authorities remain a persistent challenge, particularly where responsibilities overlap. Delays in legislative reform and inconsistencies between domestic laws and international standards also continue to complicate implementation efforts.

Participants further noted that financial constraints, limited technical resources, and weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation systems have made sustained progress more difficult. Several speakers argued that institutional capacity, rather than political commitment alone, may be the defining challenge of the current UPR cycle.

Many participants argued that the next phase of the UPR process will be defined less by new commitments than by the ability of institutions to implement existing ones. Priorities identified for the 2025–2029 cycle included judicial reform, stronger protections for women and minorities, environmental governance, improved accountability mechanisms, and closer coordination between Baghdad and Erbil.

Conclusion

The significance of the first Panorama Conference lay not in the number of recommendations discussed, but in the growing recognition that implementation is now the central challenge. The question now is whether institutions possess the resources, coordination, and political will necessary to turn commitments into lasting reforms. The conference underscored a simple reality: human rights progress is no longer being measured by promises alone, but by results. ●



■ Statue of Najiba-khan Jalil Zada, the first girl to enroll in a public school in the Kurdistan Region and a fierce advocate for Kurdish rights and women's rights.

Photo: Levi Meir Clancy / Via Unsplash

A Kurdish Thinker

In memory of Faruq Rafiq, whose unanswered questions outlived him



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FARUQ RAFIQ



The Kurdish philosophy researcher and writer Faruq Rafiq passed away at his home in Erbil on April 28, 2026. His passing marks the end of a life devoted to intellectual and philosophical inquiry, but not the end of the questions he raised.

Rafiq studied and taught philosophy in Canada before returning to the Kurdistan Region. He later served as editor-in-chief of *Awez*, a philosophy journal, and taught classical Greek philosophy with a focus on Plato and Aristotle.

His writing mixed philosophy with politics and literature. His published works include *Pax Americana*, *Communal Concerns*, *The Reconciliation of Mind and Love*, *In the Hour Before Midnight*, and *Philosophy and Life*.

Beyond academia, Rafiq became one of the Kurdistan Region's most recognizable public intellectuals, engaging audiences through radio, television, newspapers, and journals. Yet his influence stemmed not from ideological certainty but from constant self-examination and revision. Over the years he drew criticism from across ideological divides, yet he never hesitated to engage political questions when he believed philosophical inquiry demanded it. What remained consistent was his opposition to ethnocentric thinking and his belief that philosophy should serve as a tool for confronting injustice.

Mysticism or Nuclear Power?

In a remarkable philosophical encounter, Rafiq questioned the Iranian political scientist, author, and reformist commentator Sadegh Zibakalam Mofrad, who stated that Kurds should return to mysticism – a field in which several Kurdish intellectuals were particularly influential during the Middle Ages. This position divided the public. Supporters pointed to the role of religion in the public domain, while detractors were angered that a political scientist would hint at a different pathway for a nation still battling for survival and recognition.

Rafiq approached the argument pragmatically, questioning why Kurds should be encouraged to retreat into mysticism by a commentator from a state where Kurds continue to struggle for recognition.

He asked whether it is logical for the Kurds to seek a return to mysticism while Iran is advancing its military capabilities: “Zibakalam has said that it is better for the Kurds to engage in mysticism... Why? Should you be engaged in making nuclear weapons while we engage in mysticism?”

Rafiq was not dismissing mysticism itself. Rather, he argued that Kurds should not be encouraged to embrace mysticism while neighboring states pursued military, political, and technological power. The question reflected both



Family and friends gather outside the Kurdistan Chronicle headquarters for a ceremony before the burial of Faruq Rafiq, April 28, 2026.

Photo: Safin Hamid

Rafiq's wit and his concern that such rhetoric could misdirect a people still struggling for recognition and political rights.

Power and Cultural Influence

States shaped by colonial histories often reproduce hierarchies through soft power and indirect politics. In Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, the character Obierika observes: “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” Here the African novelist highlights the way colonialism can subtly change reality.

What makes Zibakalam Mofrad's statement more political is his position as a member of the dominant ethnic group in his country. For Rafiq, the issue was not mysticism itself but the unequal distribution of power behind the recommendation. From a postcolonial perspective, suggestions about what a marginalized people should prioritize often carry assumptions about who is permitted to pursue power and who is expected to remain content with culture, spirituality, or tradition.

Historically, when a society is both divided and under political influence, its collective identity weakens from systematic pressure from the ethnocentric nation-state. Kurds in the Middle East have faced several waves of colonization and have similarly been marginalized within state systems dominated by Arab, Turkish, and Persian national frameworks.

Rafiq and Mysticism

Despite his criticism of Zibakalam Mofrad's argument, Rafiq was not opposed to mysticism. Instead, he opposed narratives designed to distract Kurdish people with mysticism while their aspirations, rights, and desires were being suppressed. He clearly understood the importance of Kurdish mystical traditions within religious life. However, Rafiq believed that questions of power ultimately shaped political outcomes in the Middle East.

Rafiq's work serves as a warning about how dominant powers distract oppressed populations with ideologies that pose no threat to their systems. His objection was never to spirituality itself, but to the suggestion that oppressed peoples should focus on spiritual fulfillment while others accumulated political, military, and economic power. In that sense, the questions he raised continue to resonate long after his passing. ●



A large crowd gathers in Erbil to honor the memory of Faruq Rafiq, June 8, 2026.

Photo: Safin Hamid

The Exiled Prince

Kamaram Badrkhan and the enduring grief of two loves that never faded



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is a Kurdish journalist
based in Erbil.*

In 1975, Kurdish politician Dara Attar visited Kamaram Badrkhan in his modest apartment in Paris's Saint-Germain district. The aging intellectual, nearing 80, was struggling to contain his grief. After several moments of silence, Badrkhan spoke words that would remain with Attar forever: "I have lost two lovers, wife and Kurdistan, and I have lost them both in a single week."

Attar's visit came shortly after the March 1975 signing of the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran. For much of the previous decade, Iran had supported Mustafa Barzani's Kurdish movement, providing a vital lifeline in its struggle against Baghdad. The agreement abruptly ended that support in exchange for Iraqi concessions on the Shatt al-Arab waterway, helping bring the Kurdish revolt to collapse. For many Kurds, it was remembered as a profound betrayal. At the time, Badrkhan was also mourning the death of his wife, Natalia.

Natalia had been his companion through decades of exile, welcoming visitors and supporting his intellectual and political work. Her death compounded the despair he felt following the collapse of Kurdish hopes after the Algiers Agreement.

"I knocked for a long time before Kamaram finally opened the door," Attar later recalled of the encounter. "He looked pale." Attar remembered Badrkhan as a man carrying two inseparable wounds: the loss of his life partner and what he saw as

the betrayal of a nation. In his final years, he lived in deep sorrow, struggling to reconcile either loss.

A Life Devoted to Kurdistan

Badrkhan was born in Istanbul in 1895 into the Badrkhan family, one of the most influential families in modern Kurdish political history. The family had been forcibly moved to the city in 1879 due to their efforts to free Kurdistan from oppression under the Ottoman Empire.

He began his studies in law, but the rise of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk forced him and his brothers into exile in Europe, where he earned a doctorate from the University of Leipzig. The Badrkhan family was not allowed back into modern-day Türkiye until 1967.

Badrkhan remained closely engaged with Kurdish affairs throughout his years in exile. During the Ağrı Uprising in 1930, he secretly returned to Kurdish regions of Türkiye before later settling in Beirut, where he practiced law and founded a Kurdish school.

He was also active in *Khoyibun* (Selfhood), which was a Kurdish nationalist organization established in 1927. It is best known for leading the Ararat Revolt against Türkiye, with Ihsan Nuri Pasha serving as the rebellion's military commander. The organization cooperated closely with Armenian nationalists and drew support from both Kurdish and Ar-

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In 1970, Badrkhan and his wife visited Iraqi Kurdistan following the autonomy agreement between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish movement. After decades in exile, he was welcomed by Mustafa Barzani as both a prince and a representative of one of the families most closely associated with the Kurdish national cause

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Kamaram Badrkhan.



■ Historic photograph of Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani (left), Kamaran Badrkhan (right), and Franso Hariri (center), 1970.

menian activists. Khoybûn operated throughout Kurdistan and among Kurdish communities abroad until it was dissolved in 1946.

Moreover, he published newspapers in Kurdish and French, Roja Nu and Ster, and broadcast Kurdish news from the Lebanese national radio station.

In Paris, while teaching at the Sorbonne, Badrkhan became an important intermediary between Kurdish intellectual life and European scholarship. He spoke Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic, German, and French and published numerous essays, articles, and poems, as well as literary and political research. His Kurdish-French dictionary became one of the most important

linguistic resources produced by the Kurdish diaspora and reflected his belief that preserving language was inseparable from preserving national identity.

In 1970, Badrkhan and his wife visited Iraqi Kurdistan following the autonomy agreement between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish



■ Emin Ali Badrkhan together with his children, Kamaran and Jaladat, in Syria.



■ Kamaran Badrkhan with a group of colleagues at Sorbonne, France, 1960.

movement. For a man who had spent much of his life in exile, the visit carried deep symbolic significance. Mustafa Barzani welcomed him as both a prince and a representative of one of the families most closely associated with the Kurdish national movement. Before his death in December 1978, Badrkhan arranged to have his body

donated to medical science in France. The exiled prince had lived a life shaped by intellectual work, political activism, and decades spent advocating for Kurdish rights far from his homeland.

His legacy represents a generation of Kurdish intellectuals who carried

their national aspirations into exile. With his tears that day in Paris, Badrkhan was mourning more than the loss of his wife and homeland. He was giving voice to a lifetime of exile, struggle, and deferred hope shared by generations of Kurdish intellectuals and activists. ●

LOVE, WOUND AND BEING

Why Kurdish thought understands love through absence



Bilal Sambur

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In the deep currents of Kurdish thought, love is the inner voice of existence, the first call the soul hears in darkness, and the search for meaning emerging from absence. Love becomes an ontological rupture, a psychological opening, a historical wound, and a poetic form of resistance. The Kurdish soul often understands love through absence rather than fulfillment — in this way, love becomes the attempt of a fragmented world to reassemble itself.

In the poetry of Melayê Cizîrî, love is not a feeling descending from heaven to earth, but a flame rising from earth to-

ward heaven. In his poetry, the beloved becomes the visible form of truth itself. The lover turns inward, falling into his own existence, learning to burn within the limits of his own being. In Cizîrî's world, love becomes a primordial vibration that carries existence itself. Knowledge comes through thinking, but also through spiritual burning, because truth is sometimes revealed not in the silence of reason, but in the fire of the soul.

In the works of Ehmedê Xanî, love acquires a historical, social, and tragic dimension. Seen through this lens, *Mem û Zîn* is the record of a people's incom-



A painting by Rostam Aghala



A painting by Rostam Aghala

pleteness, a geography's fragmentation, and a soul's inability to reach its own wholeness. Here, love becomes the language of collective absence rather than individual happiness. The impossibility of union between Mem and Zin is the wounding of meaning, justice, and unity itself. Love thus becomes an embodiment of collective pain.

In this sense, absence is not a flaw in the Kurdish metaphysics of love; it is its defining feature. Human beings think because they are incomplete. The self does not gain depth through satisfaction, but through its rupture by love. Psychologically, this is the confrontation of the self with its own limits. Love cracks the shell of the ego and brings forth everything hidden within: longing, fear, trust, loss, hope, and even pain. In Kurdish thought, love reveals the wound at the core of every human being.

Love, Being, and Philosophical Dialogue

From this perspective, a parallel with Martin Heidegger becomes visible. For Heidegger, being is not a collection of entities but an unfolding disclosure; human existence lives within this openness. In Kurdish poetic metaphysics, being also unfolds, but through love. This openness resonates with affect and imagery rather than remaining an abstract ontological field. Being becomes visible through the experience of being loved. Love becomes the ontological climate in which being itself becomes perceptible.

For Baruch Spinoza, love leads to the serene joy of knowledge. The unity between God and Nature expresses itself as necessity, producing intellectual peace. In the Kurdish metaphysics of love, however, unity is never serene. Unity exists, but it is incomplete; it is seen but never grasped, felt but never possessed. Where Spinoza's wholeness emerges from rational order, Kurdish wholeness emerges from fragmentation. Love begins with a wound rather than completion.

Sufism offers the closest parallel to this vision. The idea of being as manifestation, the human as mirror, and love as the path to truth strongly echoes Kurdish poetic thought. Here, Kurdish language, both expressive and generative, becomes the very home of being. Metaphor becomes a vehicle for expressing

truths that can only be spoken through rupture, ambiguity, and poetic intensity.

Love After Modernity

From a modern lens, however, this metaphysical horizon fractures. Being shifts from revelation to history, from poetry to analysis, and from love to questions of identity, trauma, and struggle. This transformation is both a loss and an awakening. The cosmic weight of love diminishes, but its psychological depth intensifies. Love becomes entangled with memory, collective suffering, and ethical responsibility. It no longer belongs solely to the metaphysical realm, but enters history.

Here, Friedrich Nietzsche marks a crucial threshold. In Nietzsche's tragic world, life is not grounded in fixed meanings; values must be created, and meaning must be continuously reconstituted. Kurdish thought resonates with this tragic horizon, yet it experiences it differently. In Nietzsche, destruction leads to creative power; in Kurdish thought, destruction preserves the wound. Where Nietzsche turns tragedy into strength, Kurdish metaphysics turns it into longing. One creates values from loss; the other carries meaning through loss.

Thus, the secularization of love in modern Kurdish thought is not the death of love, but its transformation. Love expands into memory, justice, identity, and solidarity. In this reading, *Mem û Zîn* is both a love epic and a text of collective consciousness and historical fragmentation. Love survives, but no longer as a central cosmic force; instead, it becomes a subtle presence within language, memory, and ethical persistence.

Ultimately, in Kurdish thought, love remains the deepest voice of being. It is sometimes divine manifestation, sometimes historical rupture, sometimes psychological lack, and sometimes a silent resistance embedded in poetry. For the Kurdish human being, love is a mirror that forces one to reexamine oneself and the world. In that mirror, one sees both self and loss, both longing and dignity, both wound and vitality. Perhaps this thought is best captured in a single idea: in Kurdish thought, love is not just a wound in the human heart; it is the deepest trace through which being becomes visible. ●



A painting by Rostam Aghala

Sounds of Memory

For the Kurds, the *bilûl* is a profound symbol of history, religion, and tradition



Qassim Khidbir

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

The air inside the valley of Lalish is filled with the scent of burning olive oil as a *qawwal* — a hereditary Yezidi religious musician dressed in white — enters a stone courtyard carrying a wooden flute.

Before the *qawwal* plays a single note, a young boy approaches, lowers his head, and gently kisses the polished wood.

To many visitors, this may look like a simple act of respect toward a musical instrument. But for the Yezidis, the flute carries a much deeper significance. It is connected to one of the oldest stories of creation and to the relationship between the human soul and the divine.

“Before the creation of man, the flute existed,” says Marwan Hussein Alo, a Yezidi religious figure from Khatare, the largest Yezidi village in Iraq, located in Duhok Governorate.

According to Yezidi belief, after God created Adam’s body from the four elements — earth, water, air, and fire — the human soul refused to enter the body. It was only when the sound of the flute spread through creation that the soul accepted its place.

“For us, the flute was the first food for the human soul,” Alo explains. “It is the bridge between our physical existence and the spiritual world.”

■ *A Kurdish shepherd plays the traditional bilûl (flute) among his flock on Halgurd Mountain. For generations, the instrument’s melancholic, long notes have echoed through these open landscapes, serving as the musical identity of Kurdish mountain life.*

Photo: Safin Hamid



■ "Sometimes when I play it, I feel like it makes me older," says flute maker Ridwan Khalil. Tracing an elusive history that dates back centuries, Khalil crafts traditional seven-holed flutes that connect ancient Kurdish heritage with the contemporary melodies of today.

Photo: Safin Hamid

For the Yezidis, the flute represents the connection between life, faith, and the unseen world.

But this connection is much older and wider than one community. Across Kurdistan, the flute has existed for generations in different forms and under different names, including *bilûl*, *shimshal*, and *shabab*.

For many Kurds, the flute belongs to the mountains. It is the sound of shepherds, open landscapes, loneliness, and memory. Its long, emotional notes often carry a sense of longing that has become part of Kurdish musical identity.

Ridwan Khalil, a Kurdish Syrian musician and flute maker now living in Erbil, says tracing the exact history of the flute is difficult.

"It is not easy to say exactly when and where the flute first appeared," he explains. "There is no clear evidence that tells us the exact date or the original place of the instrument."

The earliest forms of the Kurdish *bilûl* were created from natural materials.



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ Yezidi musicians perform with the traditional wooden shabab (flute) and daf (frame drum) in a stone courtyard. Passed down through generations, these sacred melodies act as a spiritual bridge between the physical world and the divine, filling the valley with a sound that carries the community's deepest memories.

“The original name of the instrument is *bilûl*,” Khalil says. “In Kurdish, *bilûl* refers to a pipe made from bone or natural reed.”

According to Khalil, early versions were often made from the bones of large birds. Over time, musicians began using other materials, including different types of wood and metal.

Today, he makes *bilûl* mainly from apricot wood and iron, continuing a craft that has been passed down for generations.

Archaeological discoveries suggest that flute traditions have existed in this region for centuries. In 2021, researchers discovered a bone flute at Zerzevan Castle in Diyarbakır, in Northern Kurdistan (southeastern Türkiye). The instrument was dated to around 1,600 years ago, showing that people in the region were making and playing flutes during the late Roman period.

The Kurdish *bilûl* also carries its own symbolism. Traditionally, the flute has seven holes.

“Many people believe the seven holes are connected to the seven heavens and the seven days of the week,” Khalil says.

But beyond its design, he says the true power of the instrument comes from its sound.

“Most Kurdish melodies played on the *bilûl* are melancholic,” he says with a smile. “Sometimes when I play it, I feel like it makes me older.”

The melancholy of the music reflects a deeper relationship between the instrument and Kurdish life — one shaped by mountains, migration, hardship, and memory.

For Khalil, this connection began at home. His father was also a flute player and believed the instrument had a special power.

“My father used to say that when he played the flute, the sheep would sit around him and not move,” Khalil recalls.

Stories like this are common among Kurdish musicians, who often describe the flute as an almost magical instrument. Among many communities, especially the Yezidis, it is treated with deep respect.

One of the most famous *bilûl* players was Qala Mara, a Kurdish musician from Iran who died in 2009. He was known for his extraordinary breath control and the long melodies he could create.

“He could play for hours without stopping,” Khalil says.

Qala Mara learned the flute as a child while working as a shepherd, becoming part of a tradition where music was passed down through everyday life rather than formal institutions.

Sacred Music

Among the Yezidis, this instrument takes on an especially spiritual role.



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ “Just as a person is purified, the flute is prepared before it carries the sound,” explains Yezidi researcher Dawoud Murad Khatari. Khatari documents the rigorous traditions of the *Qawwals*, including the ceremonial washing of the sacred flute in the waters of Kaniya Spi (the White Spring) in Lalish.

The men who preserve the religious flute tradition are the *qawwals*, a hereditary group of religious reciters and musicians.

According to Dawoud Murad Khatari, a renowned Yezidi researcher, the word *qawwal* is commonly thought to mean “reciter” or “one who speaks eloquently.” However, he believes the term may have much older roots.

“I believe it is an ancient term connected to the Sumerian word qalo,” Khatari says.

Becoming a *qawwal* requires years of study. Although the role is passed through family lines, young men must learn religious traditions, oral histories, and musical practices before they can perform.

The importance of the flute is evident

in how it is treated.

Qawwals cannot play the instrument at ordinary gatherings. When kept in a Yezidi home, the flute is wrapped in clean cloth and placed in a respected location.

Before ceremonies, it is prepared through ritual washing.

“It is dipped into the waters of Kaniya Spi, the White Spring, in Lalish,” Khatari explains. “Just as a person is purified, the flute is prepared before it is played.”

The flute accompanies Yezidis through some of life’s most important moments. It is heard during religious celebrations but also during mourning.

When someone dies, the sound of the

flute follows the funeral procession to the cemetery. Its sad melody continues to accompany families as they remember those they have lost.

In a rapidly changing world, the Kurdish flute remains a connection between past and present. It carries the voices of shepherds, musicians, believers, and generations who found meaning in its sound.

Back in Lalish, as the *qawwal* raises the flute to his lips, the courtyard falls silent. The melody drifts through the stone paths of the valley and into the surrounding mountains.

For those gathered there, every note carries memory. Within its sound are stories of faith, shepherds, ancestors, and an ancient tradition that continues to endure. ●



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ “Before the creation of man, the flute existed,” explains Yezidi religious figure Marwan Hussein Alo. For the Yezidi community, the wooden *shabab* is far more than a musical instrument; it represents a profound, ancient connection between humanity, faith, and the divine.

Heritage of Fire and Clay

The ancient clay tandoor not only preserves the traditional flavors of Kurdish baking but also passes down generations-old craftsmanship and cultural heritage



Aram Sherko

is a Kurdish journalist from Kirkuk.

From Kirkuk, clay ovens, also known as tandoors, continue a tradition stretching back thousands of years — one that also reflects a quiet shift in who carries it forward.

At a time when electric and automatic ovens dominate markets, homes, and kitch-

ens, Kirkuk still preserves its ancient tradition of baking bread in clay ovens. This tradition carries the taste of history and a deeply rooted cultural identity. In Kirkuk, clay ovens are not merely objects for daily use — they are symbols of cultural heritage, representing a legacy preserved by generations of locals from a civilization

that may even predate the Sumerians and Babylonians.

From Babylon to Kirkuk

The history of clay ovens dates back thousands of years. Their use expanded significantly during the Ottoman period, spreading from households into bazaars and shops. This tradition has been passed down through generations, with its original techniques largely intact.

One of the most notable recent transformations is a shift in who practices the craft. Historically, oven-making was considered “women’s work,” but that has changed in the past 25 years. Today, men in Kirkuk undertake this detailed and physically demanding

trade. The survival of this tradition now rests on the shoulders of fathers and sons — even though it was preserved for centuries by mothers and daughters.

A Living Tradition, From Kirkuk to Europe

The clay oven’s staying power lies in its simplicity and natural materials. Clay and hay — the main components — are readily available locally. Additionally, the bread traditionally made in clay ovens, known as naan, contains no additives: only flour, water, and salt. The quick baking process and the distinctive aroma, often described as the “smell of the old house,” set naan apart from mass-produced bread. Many also believe it is

more nutritious, owing to the natural heat of the clay.

Though not captured in official trade statistics, Kirkuk’s tandoors have quietly crossed borders. They are now exported to Kurdish and Iraqi diaspora communities across Europe — a reflection of the deep cultural attachment people maintain to their roots regardless of where they live.

In old villages and towns alike, the clay oven remains a center of warmth and gathering, a symbol of togetherness that modern appliances have not displaced. For the people of Kirkuk, it continues to hold its full cultural and historical weight. ●

■ Clay tandoor factory in Kirkuk.

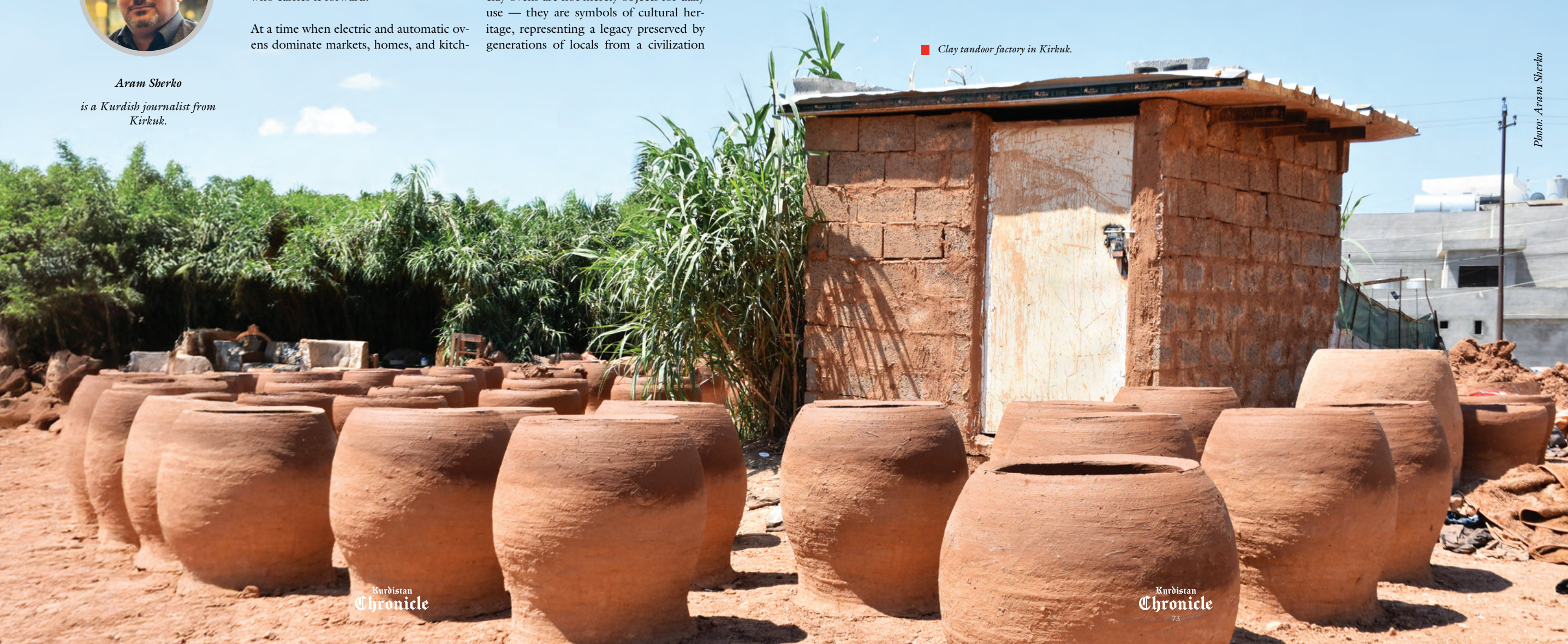


Photo: Aram Sherko

The Surviving Zagrosian Leopards

The first documented evidence of prey-caching by a breeding female leopard in Kurdistan



Hana Raza
is founder of Leopards
Beyond Borders.



Babaz Farooq Ali
is a wildlife expert and
conservationist with over 15
years of experience.



Nabaz Horeni
has spent more than 20 years
studying and documenting
wildlife.

Leopards Beyond Borders

On April 3, 2025, on Bamo Mountain, Mazhar Hamid, a local man foraging for wild plants, came face to face with one of the Kurdistan Region's rarest and most elusive animals: the Zagrosian leopard.

The leopard did not attack. It did not stand its ground. It fled.

What it left behind, however, would become one of the most important wildlife discoveries ever documented in the Kurdistan Region: the carefully concealed carcass of a male bezoar goat, hidden in a rocky shelter.

For conservationists from Leopards Beyond Borders, the discovery was more than just evidence of a successful hunt. It was the first documented case in Iraq of prey-caching behavior by a leopard — and the animal responsible was no ordinary individual. She was “Kurdistan,” the only known breeding female leopard documented in Iraq to date.

A Female Called “Kurdistan”

For several years, camera traps placed across the rugged Zagros Mountains had quietly recorded the movements of a female leopard whose story had become central to hopes for the species' survival in the region.

In 2022, early footage suggested she might be pregnant. Months later, the suspicion was confirmed when she appeared with two cubs: a male later named Hiwa

and a female named Nishtiman. The following year, only one cub was recorded. Then, in 2025, she was filmed again showing signs of pregnancy.

In a landscape where leopards survive in small, fragmented populations, such evidence is extraordinary. It suggests that parts of the Kurdistan Region still support a breeding leopard population.

The Discovery in Bamo

Now, the leopard named Kurdistan has revealed another rare chapter in her hidden life.

The story began unexpectedly in April 2025, when Hamid encountered her. When he approached the rocky shelter where Kurdistan had been resting, he found the carcass of the wild goat. It had not been left exposed. Instead, it had been deliberately hidden beneath stones and vegetation — a classic sign of a predator protecting its kill.

The next morning, the Leopards Beyond Borders team visited the site. The evidence was clear. The goat, estimated to be between two and three years old, had been killed by a precise bite to the throat. Only a small portion of the carcass had been eaten, suggesting she may have been disturbed before finishing.

The behavior is known as prey caching. Leopards and other large carnivores sometimes conceal their kills to protect them from scavengers and return to feed over several days. Though documented





Photo credit Babez Farooq Ali

■ “Kurdistan”, the female leopard at the center of this story.

elsewhere in the animal’s range, this was the first time that prey caching had been recorded in Iraq.

To confirm what had happened, the team installed a camera trap near the site.

That night, Kurdistan returned.

The camera footage showed the leopard returning twice to the cached carcass. She fed once in the early evening for 43 minutes, and again later that night for 33 minutes. By the following day, only remains were left, and she did not return. The footage allowed the team to identify her clearly as Kurdistan, the same female previously recorded with cubs. From this single observation, the team gained several important insights. The

evidence suggested that Kurdistan had hunted the goat herself, targeting a healthy animal rather than a weak or dying one. A single wild goat was enough to sustain the female leopard through several feeding sessions and, based on the remains and feeding pattern, the team estimated that she consumed roughly 18 to 25 kilograms of meat over four to five feeding bouts.

For a species so rarely seen, every detail matters.

Rethinking the Leopard

In many communities, leopards are feared as threats to people and livestock. Such misperceptions can have deadly consequences, leading to retaliation and the killing of animals already struggling to survive.

But the Bamo encounter tells a different story.

When confronted by a human at close range, Kurdistan did not attack. Instead, she retreated immediately, abandoning both her shelter and her kill. Her response reflected what researchers and conservationists have long observed: leopards are highly elusive animals that generally avoid people whenever possible — a reality that, more widely understood, could mean the difference between coexistence and retaliation.

Why This Matters

The significance of this discovery extends far beyond a single carcass in a rocky shelter.



Photo credit Babez Farooq Ali

■ Close-up of the carcass concealed under vegetation.

Kurdistan’s repeated reproduction suggests that parts of the Kurdistan Region’s mountainous landscapes still provide the conditions leopards need to survive and breed. The presence of bezoar goats, though increasingly scarce, confirms that essential prey species remain. The documented caching behavior also reveals the complex pressures of the ecosystem, where a predator must secure food, avoid scavengers, and navigate the growing presence of humans.

Protecting these animals is not only about saving a single species. It is about protecting an entire mountain ecosystem — the prey, the predators, the habitats, and the communities that share the landscape with them.



Photo credit Babez Farooq Ali

■ Kill site inspection in Bamo Mountain; cached prey concealed under vegetation.

As Leopards Beyond Borders continues its conservation work, each new record strengthens the case for formal protection of these habitats. Each image, track, and observation adds to the evidence that these mountains still hold life worth saving.

Yet the species’ future remains uncertain.

Kurdistan, the female at the center of this story, is now estimated to be eight to nine years old. She likely has only a few breeding years remaining. With age, her strength, dominance, and hunting ability will inevitably decline. Her future — and the future of any cubs she may still raise — depends on whether the landscape around her remains safe enough to sustain them.



Photo credit Babez Farooq Ali

■ Leopard revisiting the kill site on the second night to continue feeding.

A Species on the Edge

The leopard subspecies found in the Kurdistan Region, *Panthera pardus tulliana*, is classified as endangered and has disappeared from large parts of its historical range. In the Kurdistan Region, it survives only in small, fragmented populations across the Zagros Mountains.

Scientific studies and field observations show that bezoar goats and wild boar form the backbone of the leopard’s diet. Conserving these prey species is therefore essential to the leopard’s survival.

The discovery in Bamo offers a rare and intimate glimpse into the life of one female leopard. It reveals her as a hunter, a mother, a survivor, and a symbol of what remains possible in the Kurdistan Region’s wild mountains.

A single hidden kill revealed a story much larger than itself. Kurdistan’s leopards are still here, and there is still a chance to protect them. ●

In the Land of a Thousand Springs

A contemplation of the
silent architecture of
survival and memory

Kurdistan Chronicle

Nesreen Barwari's memoir, *In the Land of a Thousand Springs*, is the story of a Kurdish woman whose life became inseparable from the major upheavals of modern Iraq. Born in Baghdad in 1967, Barwari came of age amid the Iran-Iraq War, the Anfal Campaign, and the displacement of the Gulf War years — a backdrop of loss and survival that shaped not only her identity but her sense of purpose. Education carried her from Baghdad to Harvard, and when she returned to Kurdistan, she channeled her experiences into advocacy and community building on both local and international stages.

The book interweaves personal memoir with political and social history to tell a tale of collective and individual resilience. It stands as a testament to the power of storytelling, the ongoing Kurdish quest for identity and recognition, and the shaping force of culture and identity in Barwari's life.

In the Land of a Thousand Springs is not solely concerned with the events it recounts. It also explores the challenging task of preserving one's identity within landscapes altered by violence, displacement, and return.

Central to the memoir is the understanding of memory as inheritance rather than mere recollection. Through stories handed down from mother to child, the endurance of family bonds under extraordinary strain, and the pursuit of education as a form of agency, the narrative portrays survival as both intimate and profoundly collective. The journey — from Baghdad through war and exile to international activism — reveals a life shaped by history yet guided by a refusal to be defined by it.

Written over several years of reflection, this book underwent a progressive transformation until the urgency of documenting these experiences became undeniable. Even now, as it reaches readers, the author's relationship with these memories continues to evolve.



Barwari's memoir emerged from the necessity to confront complex questions of power, identity, and belonging. Through this work, the author seeks to create a space where private experience can be thoughtfully woven into a broader human dialogue, and where ambiguity can be tolerated rather than resolved.

The book is available on Amazon in English, Kurdish, and Arabic. All proceeds go toward supporting children with special needs in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

About the Author

Barwari, a Kurdish leader from Iraq, has served in various roles in the Iraqi federal government, the Kurdistan Regional Government, the UN, and a variety of academic institutions and non-profit organizations over the past three decades.

Her work has significantly influenced the private, public, non-profit, and academic sectors in Iraq, particularly in the fields of conflict resolution, peacebuilding, good governance, humanitarian relief, trauma recovery, and education. She has been recognized as one of ten Outstanding Women in the Arab World by The Arab League, named a Global Young Leader by the World Economic Forum, and honored by the UN for her service to vulnerable groups in Iraq.

In addition to her public service, she is a painter whose work draws inspiration from themes of renewal rooted in her homeland of Kurdistan, where flowers bloom and waters flow from thousands of springs. She also has a passion for music and nature. ●

“

In the Land of a Thousand Springs explores the challenging task of preserving one's identity within landscapes altered by violence, displacement, and return

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The Screaming Lines

Reading the wall carvings in the notorious Nugra Salman Prison



Hama Hashim

is a Kurdish artist and writer based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region.



■ *A Kurdish woman mourning lost family members outside Nugra Salman Prison.*

Throughout history, tyranny has sought to silence its victims through numbers, statistics, and institutionalized violence. Yet the walls of one of the most infamous prisons in contemporary Iraqi history — Nugra Salman — became silent witnesses to the unimaginable. In the late 1980s, when the Ba’ath regime’s Anfal campaign subjected Kurds to genocidal violence, a different arena of resistance emerged. There, inside the death-laden halls, two children, Zarê and Dara, carved a testament of survival using the most primitive of tools: the handle of a spoon.

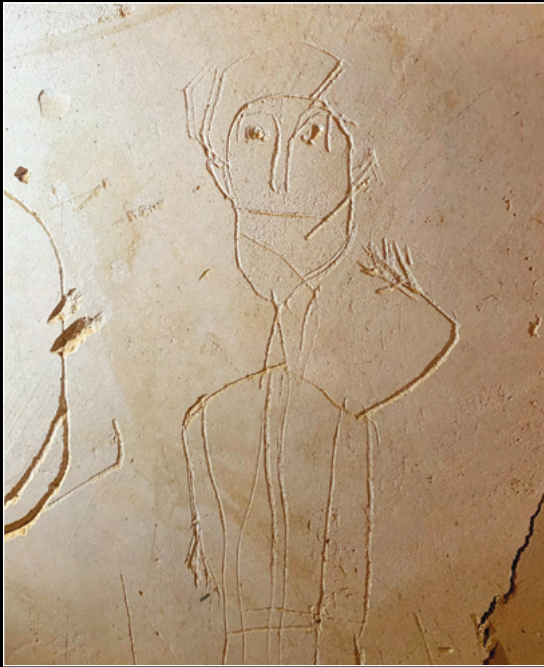
This article provides a psychological and semiotic reading of the lines and drawings the children left behind on the walls of Nugra Salman — lines that became enduring records of suffering, memory, and survival.

An Affirmation of Existence

When a human being is cast into an environment of total confinement and erasure — an environment stripped of all fundamental rights — the act of “leaving a mark” becomes a profound psychological defense mechanism. By carving into the prison wall with the handle of a spoon, Zarê and Dara were, in essence, screaming: “We are here; we are not yet dead!”

The carving of their names alongside words like “Kurdistan” or “Nugra Salman Prison” in trembling yet deeply meaningful letters represents a fierce psychological struggle to preserve identity. In a place where human beings were reduced to mere numbers destined for annihilation,

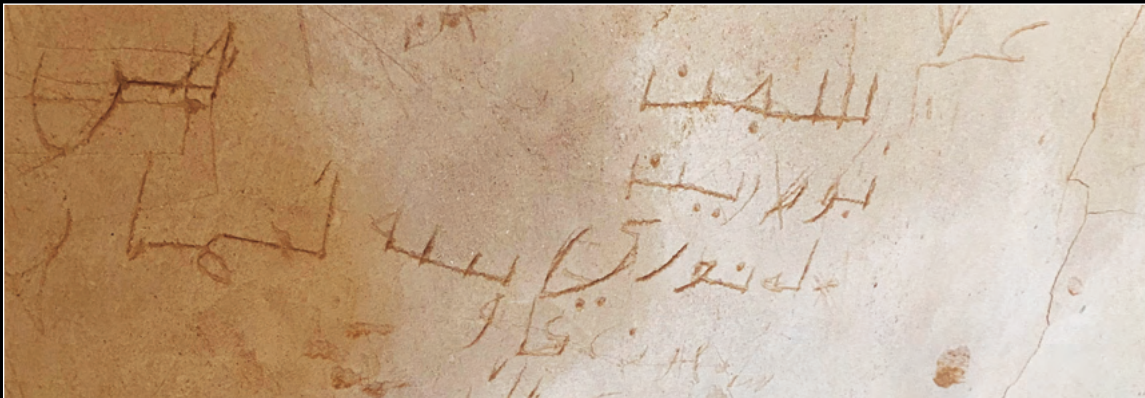
Photo courtesy of the author



■ Wall carvings in Nugra Salman Prison.



Photo courtesy of the author



these two children returned to the most fundamental human instinct: evoking their names and identity as a defense against the void of erasure.

Terrified Eyes and Merciless Guards

Among the documented drawings, a helmeted figure appears: the image of a guard or a soldier of the regime. What strikes the viewer is the manner in which the eyes are drawn. They have been carved with a distinct violence, with lines resembling tears or blood.

This reflects a psychological state known as hypervigilance — a chronic terror born of continuous, predatory surveillance. The child felt, intimately, that they were perpetually under the glare of a cruel and merciless eye. By defacing the eyes on the wall, the children enacted a form of symbolic retaliation, a purge of that internalized terror. Consequently, the bodies in the other drawings are rendered weak, thin, and devoid of detail, manifesting psychological shock and a sense of physical helplessness when measured against the monolithic power of the prison.

The Anfal Bus: A Mobile Cage

While a child in a safe environment draws cars and buses to evoke adventure, school, and play, for Zarê and Dara, the bus became a profoundly tragic symbol. The rendering of a massive bus with numerous windows and dense, tangled lines depicts the actual vehicles that transported them to the prison.

In their minds, these buses became “mobile cages” — apparatuses that marked the violent separation from their villages, homes, and orchards,



■ Survivors visit the abandoned Nugra Salman Prison to mourn their lost loved ones.

Photo courtesy of the author

and the beginning of their descent into this hell of no return. The bus here is not a means of transportation; it is an omen of forced displacement and death.

The Ferris Wheel: Flight into Memory

The most painful, yet beautiful, drawing on this wall is the depiction of a Ferris wheel. How does a child, amid the thirst, starvation, and mortal terror of Nugra Salman, bring themselves to draw a Ferris wheel?

This suggests that the child’s mind

took refuge in another psychological defense mechanism known as regression — a retreat to safer, happier times. Amid the darkness of the dungeon, the child’s imagination escaped back to the amusement park, to play, to the very freedom that had been violently stolen from them. The Ferris wheel represents a yearning that no prison or guard could ever extinguish.

Lines of Hope

The lines that Zarê and Dara carved with the handle of a spoon into the walls of Nugra Salman are no mere scratches. They are a profound ex-

pression of the human spirit, testifying to an immeasurable human cost. This wall represents an outburst of imagination and a child’s defiance when faced with the concrete indifference of the prison.

It is our duty as writers, artists, and human beings to preserve these remnants. We must protect them not only as forensic evidence of a crime, but as testimony to its heavy historical and psychological toll. These lines remain one of the most intimate expressions of Anfal’s human tragedy within the consciousness of the Kurdish child. ●

Heritage Reclaimed

Dalal Hassane's journey bridges diaspora, identity, and culture



Goran Shakhawan

is a Kurdish-American journalist overseeing the U.S. Desk at *Kurdistan Chronicle*. He holds an MA in political science from the University of New Hampshire and has worked for various Kurdish outlets, including *Kurdistan24* in Erbil and Washington, D.C. He is also the author of several books in Kurdish.

At the Kurdish Film Festival in Chicago — an event sponsored by *Kurdistan Chronicle* — I met a young woman and her mother who stopped at our display table. They picked up a magazine and began a conversation; the mother spoke in fluent Kurdish, while the daughter, who introduced herself as Dalal, spoke in English.

Dalal Hassane was born and raised in Chicago to a Kurdish mother from Halabja and a Syrian father from Jableh. She is currently a fourth-year student at Harvard University, specializing in History and Literature with a focus on the modern Middle East. Her senior thesis explores memory and the senses in Iraqi and Kurdish literature, focusing specifically on Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree* and Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*.

In both Kurdish and Arabic, the name Dalal carries a beautiful weight, meaning “beloved” and “cherished” in Kurdish and “pampered” and “spoiled” in Arabic.

I was curious to know how she navigates her identity, being raised in the United States within a dual Kurdish and Arab heritage. “I would say that I identify as Kurdish and Syrian first and foremost, because it is these identities that have built my conception of self against the backdrop of a political context that is so heavily focused on othering the region

from which my family hails,” Dalal answered without hesitation.

Though she grew up in a multilingual household, she only learned Arabic and English, as these were the common languages between her parents. However, this delay in fluency of Kurdish did not deter Dalal from learning about her mother's experiences in Kurdistan and spreading awareness in her own communities in the United States. Her mother made it a priority to teach Dalal Kurdish history through the stories of her childhood, which immensely impacted Dalal's own conception of identity and commitment to Kurdish studies in an academic context.

A Language Finds Its Place

In her first semester at Harvard, Dalal immediately enrolled in Arabic courses, but she was disappointed to find that no Kurdish language classes were offered. Determined to change that, she reached out to the Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations department.

“I wanted to explore the possibility of offering a course in the future, and they were incredibly supportive and willing to help,” Dalal said.

Over the next year, Dalal worked closely with the department to identify qualified academics nearby. By the spring of her freshman year, her advocacy paid off: Sorani Kurdish officially appeared in the course catalog for the following term,

making her the first student to study the language at Harvard.

Dalal emphasized that the course filled a long-standing gap at the university. “I've had conversations with professors who highlighted the significance of offering Kurdish, especially since there had been interest in the past, but it was never made a reality,” she noted. “When it was first offered, the interest primarily came from graduate students studying the modern Middle East and heritage students — those with a familial or cultural connection to Kurdish communities.”

The program has only grown since then. “In my second and third years, the class progressed to the Intermediate and Advanced levels,” Dalal said. “As I graduate, the course will begin a new cycle in the fall, with an Elementary level class being offered again.”

For Dalal, Kurdish identity has been pivotal in shaping the person she is today, teaching her the importance of memory and oral storytelling in preserving experiences left at the margins of dominant historical narratives. “People often immediately assume that I am a passive product of Arabization because I did not grow up speaking Kurdish, but this perspective neglects the years-long efforts of connecting with my Kurdish roots through my mother's stories, literature in translation, and engagements with media and cultural production produced by and for Kurdish communities.”

Her Kurdish and Arab identities exist in tandem, “not



Dalal Hassane celebrating her graduation from Harvard.

Photo courtesy of the author





■ Shelan displaying her handcrafted Kurdish jewelry.

Photo courtesy of the author

in opposition to one another.” It is precisely because of these dual identities, she emphasized, that she has been exposed to the power of art and culture in the preservation of memory. “One of the first poems my parents both introduced me to was Mahmoud Darwish’s ‘The Kurd Has Only the Wind,’ which Darwish dedicated to his friend, Kurdish poet Salim Barakat. There is one line in particular that will forever resonate with me:

‘With language, you overcame identity, I told the Kurd, with language you took revenge on absence.’

“It is because of works like this, cou-

pled with my parents’ teachings, that I continue to learn Kurdish to ‘take revenge on absence,’” Dalal said.

Her Mother’s Hands

Dalal’s mother, Shelan Fatah, has maintained a lifelong passion for jewelry. Though displacement once forced her to pause her craft, she picked it back up when Dalal began researching Kurdish jewelry for an event at Harvard.

Dalal explains that a few years ago, during the spring of her freshman year, one of her friends — the organizer of the Bazaar at the Arab Con-

ference at Harvard — asked if Dalal and her mother wanted to sell jewelry there. “This marked my mother’s ‘debut’ as a business, if you will,” Dalal said.

Back in the 1990s, during her teenage years, Shelan used to handcraft jewelry and accessories, selling them at the Qaysari Naqib market in the city of Sulaymaniyah. “It was one of my most beloved hobbies,” she recalled.

For Shelan, her craft is deeply tied to her identity. “To me, Kurdistan represents resistance and power, and it is our martyrs who make it the most beautiful land in the world,” she said.

“When I look at our mountains, I see the enduring resistance of the Kurdish people. When I see the scarves, and how we wave as we dance, I feel a sense of life, freedom, and happiness.” She infuses that profound love for her homeland into her creations. “Through my work, I try to teach the importance of Kurdish culture in the simplest of ways — especially through our traditions and the beautiful teachings of our ancestors.”

Shelan’s jewelry incorporates motifs and designs rooted in Kurdish heritage, including the bright blue *kuzhaka*, pomegranate seed charms, sun charms, and handmade beads sourced in Kurdistan. She blends these motifs with contemporary designs she continues to experiment with, and says her goal is “to share the beauty and power of Kurdish culture with those who wear my jewelry.”

Beyond the aesthetic, her jewelry reflects the beauty of Kurdistan’s nature while telling the history of the Halabja massacre. Shelan still remembers 1984, when her family left Sulaymaniyah and went to the Ahmadawa Mountains to stay with the Peshmerga and experienced the beauty of Kurdistan’s mountains and waterfalls for the first time. Like most Kurds in Iraq who faced displacement multiple times, her family eventually ended up in Halabja. By 1988, when Halabja was hit by chemical weapons from the Iraqi Ba’athist regime, she fled to Iran. These memories — and her family’s connection to Halabja — are what she hopes to embody in her jewelry.

Now, Shelan feels at ease knowing

that through her guidance, Dalal has become much more familiar with the Kurdish cause. Shelan continues to advocate for Kurds through her business, where she showcases the rich history of Kurdish people. At every market where they sell, “I have incredibly special conversations with people who exhibit curiosity in my work, which serves as a constant reminder of why this work is important.”

A First Return

Dalal has visited the Kurdistan Region twice. Her first trip in 2021 was also her mother’s first time back in 23 years. “The moment we landed in

and cousins for the first time and witnessed her mother embracing them after more than two decades apart.

Nothing compared to the moment she first beheld Azmar Mountain. For Dalal, the feeling of being in a home that felt both unfamiliar and deeply rooted was transformative. “This was a turning point in my relationship to Kurdistan,” she said. “It was when I began to take my language journey seriously and reconnect with my culture through art and history.”

After graduation, Dalal plans to spend time in the Middle East and Kurdistan, working on research related to cultural production and heritage preservation. “I hope to pursue a PhD and become a scholar of Kurdish and Arab literature, with a focus on Kurdish cultural production during and after the Anfal Campaign,” she explained. She aims to bring Kurdish literature and history to the forefront of academic work on the modern Middle East, moving them beyond the footnotes and margins. “Once I master Kurdish, I also hope to become a literary translator and share Kurdish works with an English-speaking audience, including those in the diaspora who, like me, did not grow up speaking Kurdish as their first language.”



■ Azmar Jewelry showcasing Kurdish heritage.

Photo courtesy of the author

Erbil, everything seemed to fall into place,” Dalal recalled. “I heard people speaking the language of my ancestors, greeting one another with the phrases and words that have touched my heart since I was a child.” They traveled by car to Sulaymaniyah, where Dalal met her mother’s aunt

For Dalal, this journey is deeply personal. “I hope one day to live in a world in which my identity as a Kurdish-Arab woman in the diaspora is not viewed as a contradiction, but rather as a testament to the beauty of difference.” ●

Beauty and Belonging

How Sazan Amin turned her hometown dialect into a powerful personal brand

Kurdistan Chronicle



Sazan Amin, a cosmetologist and businesswoman from Erbil, built her following on social media around an unusual strength: she speaks in the distinct Kurdish dialect of her hometown. People were surprised that someone raised in Europe spoke it so fluently — and in a media environment shaped by more standardized forms of speech, that local authenticity helped her audience grow into one of the largest in Kurdistan’s beauty industry.

Language Loyalty

Sazan was born in the Shorsh neighborhood in Erbil in 1984, to a Barzinji father and a Dizayee mother, before immigrating to Denmark with her family in 1990. Growing up as part of the Kurdish diaspora, she could easily have drifted from her mother tongue — but her father made sure that didn’t happen. Kurdish, and specifically the dialect of Erbil, was the only language permitted at home.

“My father would not allow us to speak Danish at home. That is why we speak Kurdish so well,” she told *Kurdistan Chronicle* in an exclusive interview.





Photo: Riband Saadallah

This insistence would shape her online persona decades later. When Sazan began posting videos on Snapchat in 2013, she greeted her followers in the dialect of Erbil — and the response surprised even her. Relatives and friends who knew she had spent most of her life in Denmark were struck by how naturally she spoke it. "I am proud of our local dialect," she said. Using it became her signature, and a key factor in her reach across both Kurdistan and the diaspora.

In addition to Kurdish, she speaks Arabic, English, Danish, and Swedish — a range that reflects both her background and the international aspirations of her brand.

Diasporic communities often assimilate into the languages of their host countries over time, losing touch with their heritage. For Sazan, her father's insistence on Kurdish at home proved to be anything but a limitation — it became the foundation of her public identity that later made her famous online.

Her path there was equally unconventional. What began as a childhood interest gradually became serious enough to pull her away from a stable medical career. Before cosmetology, Sazan spent nearly a decade working in dentistry. Soon after getting married, she made the decision to change course. The transition wasn't easy — she struggled to afford the course fees — but with her husband's support she committed fully.

"If it hadn't been for my husband's help, I would never have made it."

She was always the first to arrive and the last to leave, and within six months had her certification and a clear sense of direction.

From Kurdistan to Denmark and Back

Sazan launched an eyelash brand that became the foundation for a broader product line. She now offers over 40 cosmetic products available online and in markets across the Kurdistan Region, and teaches cosmetology courses offering internationally recognized certificates. Her training courses draw students from across the region, many of them women looking to enter the beauty industry professionally.

Sazan's products are manufactured in Germany, Denmark, and Italy, and distributed locally through her Kurd-

istan-based company. She is currently planning to open branches in Baghdad and the UAE.

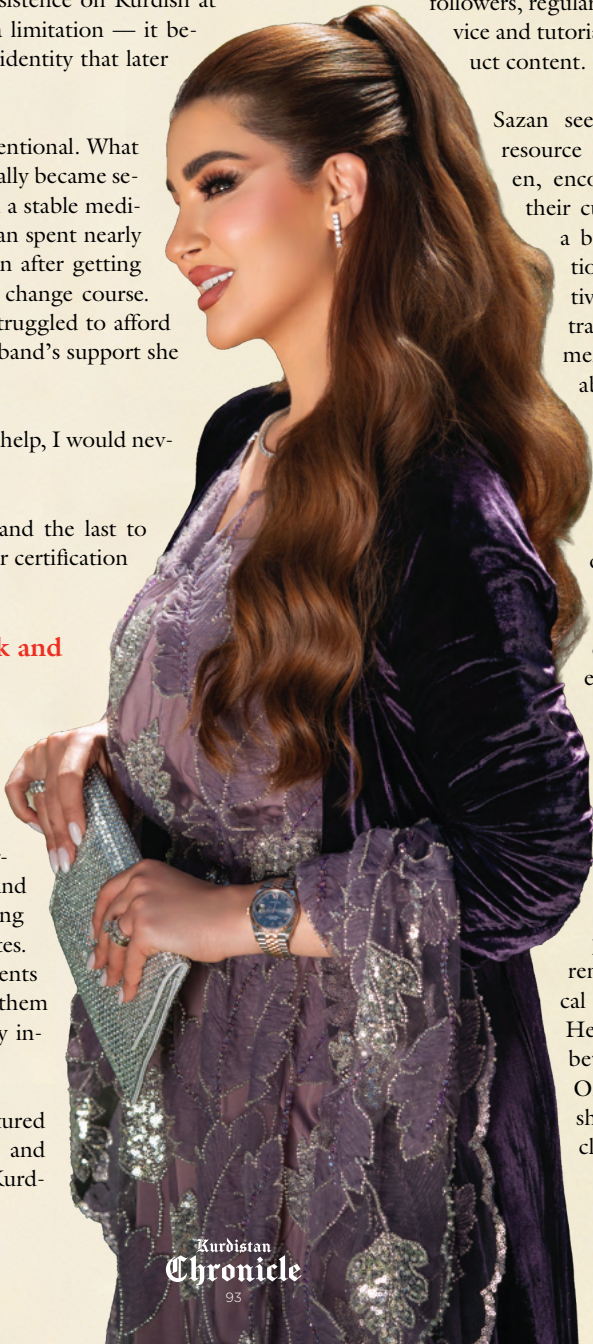
Her daily routine reflects the demands of running an international brand from a base in Denmark. She reserves time each morning for emails and social media, and switches off her phone between 11pm and 6am. She is also deliberate about the tone of her online presence: when tragedy strikes in Kurdistan or elsewhere, she steps back from content entirely. "It is vital to know — God forbid, if something were to happen in our Kurdistan — I would not sit, put on makeup, and listen to music on such occasions."

Supporting Her Sisters

Beyond business, she takes a hands-on approach with her followers, regularly sharing skincare advice and tutorials alongside her product content.

Sazan sees her platform as a resource for Kurdish women, encouraging them to see their cultural identity not as a barrier to global ambitions but as a distinctive strength. She offers training courses and mentorship and is direct about what drives her: "I want to support women so that they can stand on their feet without disregarding Kurdish traditions, because every woman with self-respect and confidence can accomplish whatever she wants."

In many ways, her success reflects a broader shift within Kurdish society itself: the growing confidence of women building public careers while remaining rooted in local identity and tradition. Her story makes the case better than any slogan. Originality, she has shown, is not an obstacle — it is the point. ●



Skin as Memory

The enduring symbolism of Kurdish women's traditional tattoos



Janin Riegow-Can

lives and works as a primary school teacher in Berlin, Germany. She studied linguistics and literary studies, and her work continues to be shaped by a strong interest in language as a carrier of meaning. She shares a deep bond with Kurdistan — a connection of the heart she has come to know through its people, stories, and traditions. And for her, this journey is far from over.

On the faces of elderly women in the villages around Mardin, Diyarbakır, and Şanlıurfa in south-eastern Türkiye, a very particular script can be read: small dots on the chin, star patterns on the hands, suns on the forehead. These markings — known in Kurdish as dêq (دەق) — are a traditional form of tattooing, practiced especially in the Kurdish regions of Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

The word dêq derives from the Aramaic Dyoyo (ܕܝܝܐ), meaning “to pierce” or “to puncture” — a reminder that this tradition emerged in a space where cultures, languages, and religions have overlapped for millennia. The practice predates the spread of both Christianity and Islam and is rooted in local cosmologies. It is not ornament in any modern sense of the word. It is better read as a language in its own right: held by women, transmitted by women, and inscribed onto women's bodies.

The Language of Dêq

Traditional dêq ink is made from a mixture of soot and the breast milk of a woman who has given birth to a daughter, sometimes combined with herbs or ox bile. The tattoo is applied by piercing the skin with a needle dipped in the ink. This practice was carried out by women, for women — on the hands, the chest, and the face — and often began in early life, with mothers tattooing their daughters, and girls imitating the patterns of their elders.

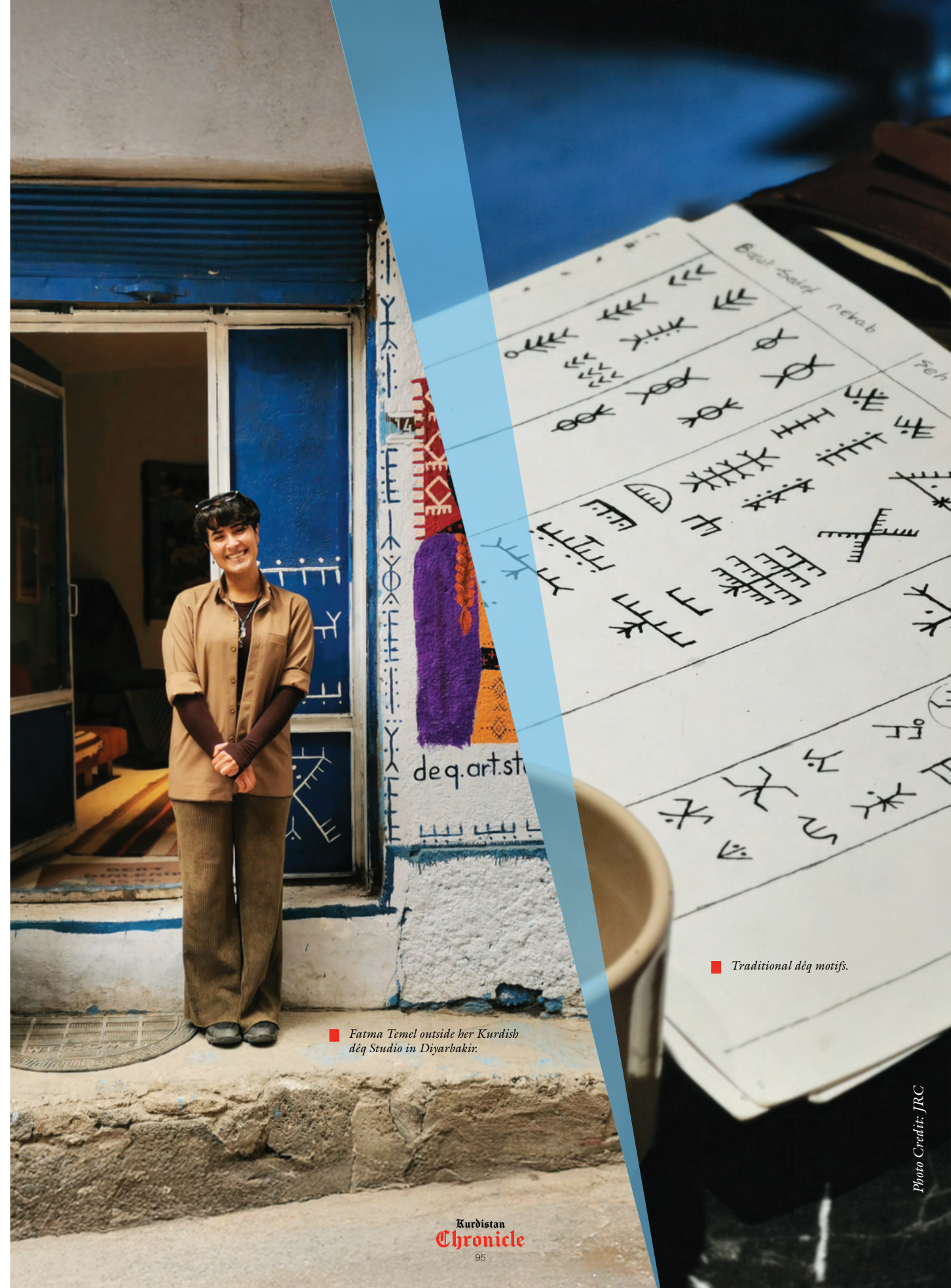
The French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan, during expeditions through Asia Minor in 1895, observed that older women sometimes had dêq across their entire bodies. In the 1950s, the American anthropologist Henry Field confirmed similar findings in the Kurdish heartland and Kermanshah.

Dêq is not arbitrary decoration. Each motif carries meaning, and its placement on the body shades that meaning further. The motifs are nature-derived — simplified representations of the Sun, Moon, stars, plants, and animals — rendered in a highly linear, geometric style. These same symbols appear in architecture, on grave-stones, and in carpets and embroidery: the body is merely one medium within a single, cross-cultural system of signs.

Many motifs are associated with specific meanings: the Sun — the most beloved dêq motif — stands for purity and new beginnings. Circles are associated with fertility; crosses with protection against evil spirits; diamonds with strength. The V-sign on the chin was a marker of tribal affiliation. The comb represents beauty.

Dêq may thus be read as a woman's cosmological diary: what she sought to protect, whom she loved, to which tribe she belonged, and what she hoped to receive from the spirit world.

Whereas people today are tattooed for decorative or commemorative purposes, dêq was traditionally performed to petition the gods for abundance, protection,



Traditional dêq motifs.

Fatma Temel outside her Kurdish dêq Studio in Diyarbakir.

and fertility — long before the spread of monotheistic religions. The Kurdish anthropologist Ahmet Yavuklu has described dêq as a traditional form of worship.

Facial dêq were believed to ward off evil spirits, promote health, and foster fertility. Specific patterns were believed to have healing properties: dots at the sides of the forehead were thought to protect against headaches. Women had themselves tattooed during pregnancy to ease childbirth and protect the child. Among Yezidi Kurdish women, dêq carried even greater weight, constituting a central element of religious expression.

Decline and Revival

The history of dêq is also a history of silencing. Over the course of the 20th century, the practice became progressively less widespread — the result of the stigmatization of Kurdish identity in parts of the region, migration, urbanization, and the growing influence of Islamic currents that discourage tattooing as haram. Some women had their tattoos removed or concealed them out of shame.

Safi Haso, a woman from the village of Girik near Kobane in northern Syria, told photo-journalist Jodi Hilton: “We are probably the last generation to have tattoos. All Kurdish women had them.”

But the silence is breaking — most loudly within the diaspora.

Tattoo artist Elu, who grew up in western Germany in a Kurdish-Alevi family from eastern Anatolia, first encountered dêq about ten years ago, when the tradition was on the verge of extinction. She spent months reading and translating across several languages and traveling to parts of Kurdistan to learn from community elders. Now living in Lisbon, she has described dêq as a means of spiritually reconnecting with her roots. Together with activist Çiler Kılıç, she has spent years working on a crowdfunded documentary about the last women bearing traditional tattoos from Dêrsim.

In Türkiye, something is stirring as

well. Fatma Temel, a young woman in her late twenties, opened a small dêq studio in November 2021 in the historic Sur district of Diyarbakır — one of the few artists actively preserving this ancient tattooing culture. The most popular motif among her clients, most of them young Kurds, is the Sun.

For Elu, a dêq today is a cultural tool “to build bridges between generations and over geographic distances. While there are many personal reasons why Kurdish people practice dêq, there is a collective desire to reclaim this almost-vanished tradition as a form of self-identification.”

In a context where Kurdish identity has been suppressed across generations, dêq is more than cultural memory — it is resistance.

An Alphabet Older Than Any Written Language

What accounts for the power of these motifs? Part of the answer may lie in their antiquity. The sun, moon, star, diamond, circle, and serpent appear across cultures and centuries, carrying meanings that transcend any single tradition. Carl Jung might have called such recurring images archetypes, describing them as “primordial images” of the collective unconscious and depicting them as already inscribed within us. The Sun stands for vital force among Kurds as among ancient Egyptians, the Celts, the peoples of the Andes. The V-sign appears on potsherds from the Neolithic.

Dêq is thus simultaneously particular and universal: a local practice that uses soot and breast milk to write humanity’s oldest questions into the skin — Who am I? Where do I come from? What protects me?

I, too, have been caught in the spell of this language, not as a Kurdish woman or carrier of familial memory, but as someone moved by the power of these signs. Dêq has reminded me that bodies are repositories of memory, and that certain symbols are so deeply anchored within us that they require no translation.

Janin Riegow-Can lives and works as a primary school teacher in Berlin, Germany. She studied linguistics and literary studies, and her work continues to be shaped by a strong interest in language as a carrier of meaning. She shares a deep bond with Kurdistan — a connection of the heart she has come to know through its people, stories, and traditions. And for her, this journey is far from over. ●

■ Fatma Temel working in her studio in Diyarbakır.

Photo Credit: JRC

■ Traditional dêq motifs.

Photo Credit: JRC

Message of Love

Color, light, and the language of imagery in Rebwar Said's art



Nazand Begikhani

*Poet and Lecturer,
Sciences Po, Paris.*

Rebwar Said's paintings are distinguished by an interplay of chromatic intensity, figurative symbolism, and narrative resonance. Color, line, figure, and gesture serve simultaneously as aesthetic and conceptual elements.

His figures often appear suspended between gravity and flight, inhabiting a space that oscillates between the real and the imagined. Their bodies rarely remain static: limbs extend, eyes gaze outward or inward, and hands perform expressive gestures that suggest communication beyond speech. In this sense, Said's canvases establish a visual field where figuration functions less as representation than as symbolic and emotional dialogue.

Said's artistic practice has been shaped by three formative phases: his early creative experiences in Kurdistan; the years spent among the Peshmerga in the mountains; and the later period of displacement, exile, and artistic development in Europe, particularly in France and the UK. These experiences continue to shape his visual language.

From an early age, Said experimented with carving, engraving, and assembling objects from modest materials, cultivating a sensitivity to form, texture, and structure that remains visible in the composition of his paintings. His canvases retain a tactile, mosaic-like quality, with visual fragments assembled into cohesive compositions.

The period spent with the Peshmerga profoundly shaped his artistic vision. Living among the Peshmerga exposed Said to conflict, uncertainty, and the deaths of friends and comrades. Rather than depicting these experiences directly, he translated them into a symbolic vocabulary of absence, memory, and suspended movement.

In this context, painting becomes a form of visual testimony. Said's figures appear animated by an inner vitality that resists the finality of death, embodying not simply individuals but the persistence of memory and human aspiration. Through color, line, movement, and symbolic arrangement, lived experience becomes a layered visual narrative.



Exile forms another critical dimension of Said's practice, placing him within a broader transnational artistic dialogue. European artistic environments expanded his formal vocabulary without weakening his distinct cultural grounding.

Despite this international context, Kurdish cultural motifs remain integral to Said's visual vocabulary. The rich colors associated with Kurdish textiles, the incorporation of calligraphic elements and the presence of symbolic patterns rooted in ancient traditions all contribute to the distinctive character of his work. Rather than expressing nostalgia, these motifs function as living components of a contemporary artistic language that situates Kurdish visual culture within a global framework.

Message of Love: The Feminine as Symbolic Center

A defining characteristic of Said's paintings is the balance between figuration and abstraction. His figures occupy an intermediate space where the body becomes a site of psychological and philosophical inquiry. Faces express introspection and vulnerability, while elongated hands serve as instruments of communication, mediating between inner emotion and external reality.

This visual language finds one of its clearest expressions in *Message of Love*, a painting that centers on a female figure whose presence structures the entire composition. Her face, rendered in warm tonalities of crimson and rose, emerges against a cooler blue-grey background, producing a chromatic contrast that remains balanced and contemplative. The figure may be interpreted as Shem, the beloved of the Kurdish poet Weli Dêwana, but Said moves be-

yond illustration. Rather than depicting the poet, he centers the woman who inspired his verse. Dêwana appears only through the calligraphic verses encircling Shem's neck like a necklace, integrating poetry and image into a unified whole. She becomes not merely the beloved, but the source of artistic creation itself.

Such an interpretation also invites reflection on how women have been represented in literary traditions.



In many poetic narratives, although depicted as a muse, the female figure remains passive and silent, existing primarily through the voice of the male poet. Said's composition subtly reverses this dynamic. By placing Shem at the center of the visual narrative, the artist restores her presence as an active and defining force within the story.

The composition of *Message of Love* reinforces these conceptual interpretations. The area surrounding Shem is composed of abstract patterns that recall

the intricate designs of Kurdish textiles. These forms create a luminous quality reminiscent of stained-glass windows, suggesting a transcendent or celestial environment.

In contrast, the lower section of the painting introduces a darker and more constricted visual register. Three black-and-yellow squares initially appear abstract before revealing distorted faces marked by anguish, recalling *The Scream* by Edvard Munch. They suggest confinement and social surveillance, while the open sky above Shem symbolizes freedom and transcendence.

Chromatic Structure and Artistic Synthesis

Said's work resists affiliation with any single stylistic movement, combining realism, abstraction, geometric forms reminiscent of Cubism, and decorative motifs drawn from ancient Eastern mosaics.

Certain aspects of his imagery — particularly the sensation of weightless figures and a dreamlike narrative space — recall the poetic visual universe associated with Marc Chagall. Yet Said remains distinct through his integration of Kurdish cultural references with themes of memory and displacement.



His doctoral training at Middlesex University also informed a sophisticated understanding of color theory. In Said's paintings, the interplay of warm and cool tones creates visual contrast while suggesting a symbolic reconciliation of opposing forces, producing a quiet but unmistakable sense of musicality.

This interplay echoes philosophical frameworks such as Yin and Yang, in which balance emerges through the dynam-

ic coexistence of contrasting energies. In Said's work, color thus becomes both an aesthetic and metaphysical principle.

Message of Love encapsulates many of the central concerns that define Rebwar Said's artistic practice: the intersection of poetry, music, and image; the negotiation between memory and imagination; and the persistent search for freedom within conditions of constraint.

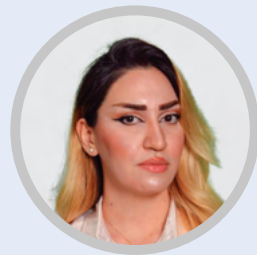
Although Said is also a poet, painting offers the fullest expression of his artistic imagination. His canvases become visual poems in which color, line, gesture, and symbol converge into a reflective meditation on the human condition.

Note: This article was originally published in *Kurdish* in two parts in Rexney Chawder on September 19 and 26, 2016. ●



Motherhood Reimagined

How childbirth shaped Sakar Sleman's artistic language



Fatima Qasim Habib

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

In 2006, while pregnant with her first child, Kurdish artist Sakar Sleman found herself experiencing the world differently. Questions about creation, pain, transformation, and the female body began to occupy her thoughts. What began as a personal experience would eventually shape a body of work centered on motherhood, birth, and women's experiences.

"The experience was transformative. I would say creativity kicked in while I was pregnant in 2006 and later underwent the painful experience of natural childbirth," Sleman tells *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

Motherhood

When speaking about her work, Sleman describes motherhood as an artistic language through which she explores persistence, creativity, and womanhood.



■ Sakar Sleman at her personal gallery.



Photos: Nasib Ali Xayat



Photos: Nasib Ali Xayat

Drawing on her experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, she created a series of 28 works divided into three categories: birth-date portraits, pregnancy figures, and abdominal C-sections. Most were executed in pencil on craft paper, while two were produced on leather. The series emerged from what she describes as a mysterious and transformative period of her life, one that prompted questions about creation, pain, endurance, and womanhood.

“Later, in 2014, I created a land-art exhibition on Goizha Mountain along the Sulaymaniyah-Sitak road using natural stones, which extended for 75 meters and was designed to gradually merge with nature; only 10% remains today,” she says.

For Sleman, the project was also an artistic experiment. By placing pregnancy and childbirth at the center of her work, she sought to bring experiences often confined to the private sphere into public artistic expression.



From Kurdistan to the International Stage

Growing up in Sulaymaniyah, Sleman showed interest in art from an early age. She graduated from the Fine Arts Institute in Sulaymaniyah in 2001 before earning a degree in painting from the College of Fine Arts at the University of Sulaymaniyah in 2005.

Seeking to develop her artistic practice, she moved to the UK in 2012 to study at INTO Newcastle University. She later received a scholarship from the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, Poland, further connecting her to international artistic circles.



Photo: Nasib Ali Xayat

In 2017, Sleman was selected to participate in the 57th Venice Biennale, where she represented the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Alongside her portrait work, she exhibited pieces inspired by motherhood, pregnancy, and land art. For an artist whose work draws heavily on personal experience, the exhibition provided an opportunity to present deeply personal themes on one of the world’s most prominent contemporary art stages.

The Bricks of Amna Suraka

Sleman’s engagement with memory and women’s experiences extends beyond painting. In 2014, after visiting the Amna Suraka Museum in Sulaymaniyah — once one of the Ba’ath regime’s most notorious prisons — she developed an installation inspired by the site’s history.

Using broken bricks collected from the former prison, she constructed a 12-meter wall dedicated to women who had suffered there. The installa-

tion incorporated symbols associated with female prisoners and featured the names of more than 800 women affected by repression under the Ba’ath regime.

“As a living manifesto, I created a 12-meter wall of broken bricks with symbols and the identities of women tortured there,” Sleman explains. “Many of the imprisoned women were sexually assaulted, and some of them even gave birth to children whose fathers are still unknown. In this way, the museum became not only a symbol of torture, but also a testament to a generation whose fathers were never identified.”

Art, Memory, and Preservation

Sleman’s interest in preservation extends beyond painting and installation art. In 2017, she became involved in the restoration of a historic bathhouse in Kifri dating back more than a century. The abandoned structure was renovated and transformed into an art gallery known as Kimash. Sleman later exhibited her work there, using the project both to preserve a historic site and to create a new space for artistic expression in Kifri.

The project reflected a recurring theme in her work: the belief that art can preserve what might otherwise disappear, whether historical sites, collective memories, or overlooked aspects of everyday life. Sleman cites the British artist Richard Long, known for incorporating natural elements into his work, as one of her influences.

Today, she continues to work across a range of mediums, including painting, photography, performance, video, and land art, often focusing on women’s experiences and social issues. Despite an increasingly diverse artistic practice, she remains guided by the same curiosity and sense of exploration that first emerged during her experience of motherhood. ●

Witnessing Tragedy

Ed Kashi's journey through Kurdistan's defining stories



Hemn Baban Rahim

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

While working on a long-term project in Northern Ireland in the early 1990s, Ed Kashi first encountered the story of the Kurds. What began as professional curiosity about the world's largest stateless nation — for a photographer who had spent four decades documenting social and political issues across the globe — would grow into a three-decade commitment to documenting Kurdish life across the Middle East and eventually lead him back to his own family's history as Iraqi Jews.

The Three-Decade Journey

Over the years, Kashi came to see the Kurds as one of the Middle East's most

important, and most overlooked, peoples. He was particularly struck by the contrast between their treatment by regional states and the hospitality he encountered during his travels. "I've seen how they continually are mistreated and discriminated against by the Arabs and Turks, used and then discarded by foreign powers," he said. Yet his experiences across Kurdistan and among Kurdish diaspora communities left a different impression: "The Kurds are one of the most welcoming and tolerant peoples in the region."

Kashi attributes these qualities to the depth of Kurdish history and culture. He describes the Kurds as a "vital part of the history of Western civilization" and of the



Photo: Ed Kashi

Students study Kurdish history — a subject previously forbidden under Iraqi rule — in a bomb-damaged school in Penjwen, Kurdistan Region, 1991.



Photo: Ed Kashi

A Kurdish Peshmerga fighter after the Gulf War in Yemensli Camp, Iraq, November 11, 1991.



■ *Kurdish refugees sit by the side of the road in Zakho, Kurdistan Region, on May 4, 1991.*

Middle East more broadly, while noting that they have often been victims of both history and modern geopolitics.

Despite the region’s challenges, Kashi sees reasons for optimism in the Kurdistan Region’s relative stability, economic development, and social openness. In particular, he points to the role of women in public life as a sign of progress. “I see more freedom for women, which is critical to building a strong society,” he said.

Discovering the Past

Kashi’s work among the Kurds became more than a professional project. In many ways, it also became a journey into his own past.

His father died when he was only 10 years old, leaving much of the family’s history untold. As the son of Iraqi Jews who had been forced to leave their homeland, Kashi grew up in the United States largely disconnected from that part of his heritage. It was

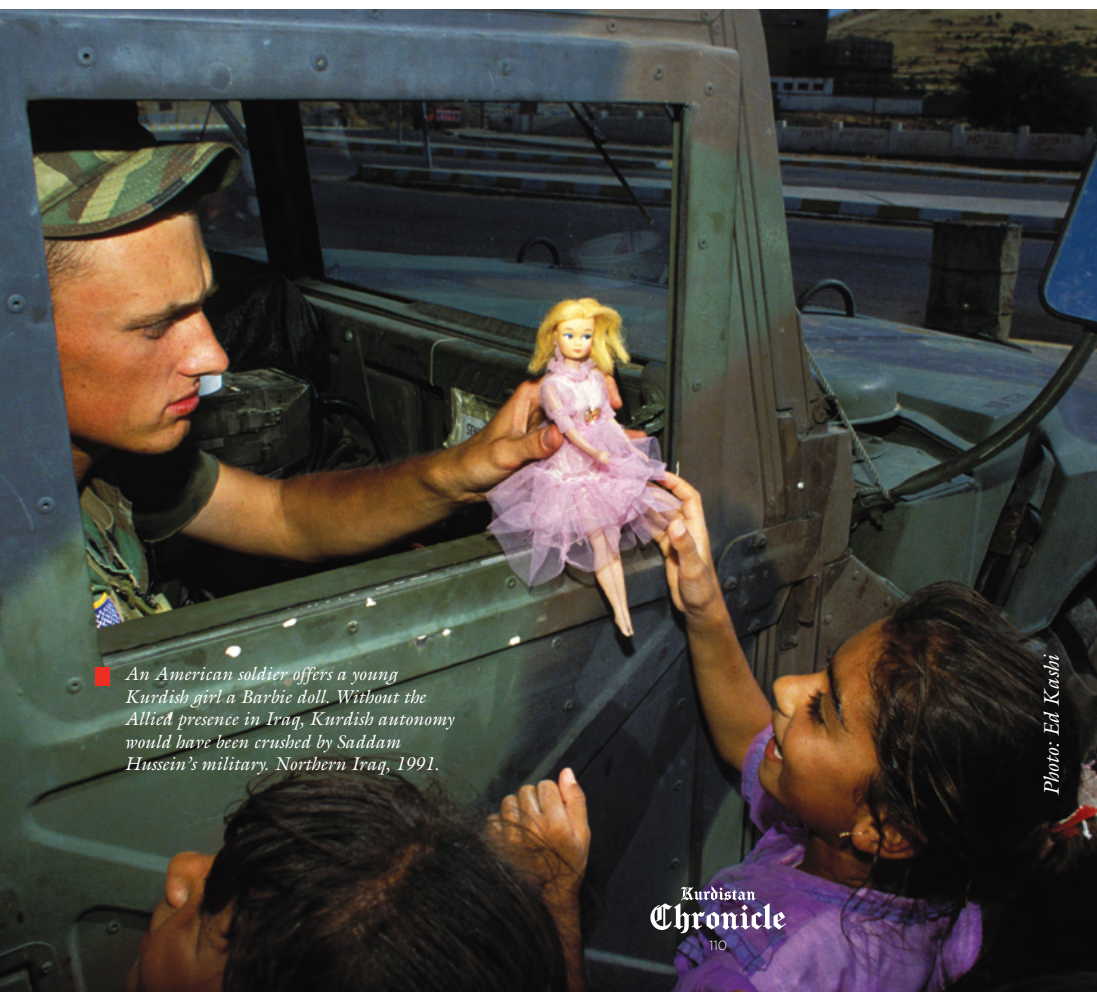
only through his travels in Kurdistan and the wider region that he began to understand what had been lost.

“We were forced out of Iraq due to political and religious discrimination and violence,” he recalled. “Growing up in America, I was far removed from that reality until I traveled to the region for my work on the Kurds in my early 30s. That is where my education of my past started.”

Some of Kashi’s most enduring memories of Kurdistan are tied to that pro-



■ Ed Kashi, who photographed the plight of the Kurds in 1991.



■ An American soldier offers a young Kurdish girl a Barbie doll. Without the Allied presence in Iraq, Kurdish autonomy would have been crushed by Saddam Hussein's military. Northern Iraq, 1991.

Photo: Ed Kashi

cess of discovery. He recalls crossing into Iraq from Türkiye through the Zagros Mountains with a Kurdish guide for the first time, an experience he describes as both moving and profound. His work in the region produced some of his most important images, including a photograph of a

ders Bleed, has become a resource for Kurds seeking to understand their own history — a fact he finds meaningful. “I am honored to have been able to contribute to the story of the Kurds,” he said. He also notes, with some irony, that relatively few Kurdish photographers have been able

He believes photography and storytelling can help illuminate unfamiliar realities, spark curiosity, and foster empathy toward the “other.”

His attention has increasingly turned to global challenges such as climate change — but he continues to re-



■ A Kurdish family huddles around a fire for warmth in Penjwin, Iraq on December 17, 1991.

Photo: Ed Kashi

Kurdish woman on trial in Diyarbakir, which he considers one of the defining images from his decades of work on Kurdish issues.

When The Borders Bleed

Kashi's 1994 book, *When the Bor-*

to document that story themselves, many having lived in exile or worked under severe political constraints.

For Kashi, the camera has been more than a tool for recording events. It has served as a means of understanding people, places, and ultimately himself.

gard his work on the Kurds as one of the defining chapters of a four-decade career. “The camera has made me much richer, more enlightened, and experienced in the ways of the world,” he said, “but in some ways saturated with other people's trauma and histories.” ●

From the Dusty Fields

The Real Madrid Foundation brings Kurdish children's dreams to life



Riband Saadallah

is a professional photographer and seasoned journalist. He is a member of the Union of Journalists in Finland.

For decades, football in Kurdistan was played in open fields, schoolyards, and neighborhood streets. Children — some barefoot, some in sandals — chased worn footballs across cracked ground, dreaming of victory and crowded stadiums long before they imagined professional careers.

Those dreams now have a new address. On May 8, the Real Madrid Foundation officially launched its Educational Football Program in Erbil, enrolling boys and girls up to the age of 17 in a structured

training program housed in a large indoor facility called Arena. More than 800 children registered in the program's first month.

The Real Madrid Foundation, one of the world's best-known youth football development organizations, operates training academies across Europe, Latin America, and Asia. Its arrival in Erbil is thanks to the efforts of Jasim Qasim, a 33-year-old engineer who grew up in Manchester before returning to Kurdistan with a long-held ambition: to undertake "an import-



Photo: Sahr Salih



Photo: Sahr Salih



Photo: Sabr Salih

■ Jasim Qasim.



Photo: Sabr Salih

■ Juan José Miguel.



ant and innovative project that serves my own people.”

A Coach Who Has Seen the World

Leading the training program is Juan José Miguel, a 55-year-old former professional who played in Spain’s top division before

transitioning into coaching. His path to Erbil was an unlikely one. After retiring from playing, he ran academies in Mumbai and Bangalore affiliated with Boca Juniors and Arsenal, then spent years working with youth programs in Bahrain and across the Gulf.

He has seen a lot of football fields in a lot

of countries. What he found in Erbil surprised him.

“I recall my childhood, playing with children in our neighborhood,” he said. “The interest, the love, the passion of children here — it is self-evident.”

Miguel says the hunger he sees in them is not something coaching can create; it is already there from the beginning. The city itself has caught him off guard. Though he rarely ventured outdoors during his time in Bahrain,

Miguel now walks Erbil’s streets freely. “I do not feel like I am in the Middle East,” he said. “I honestly believe I am in a European city.”

A Dream Brought Home

Students are grouped according to age and skill level and may remain in the program until they turn 18. Qasim says additional coaches will join the team as the program grows, with the goal of advancing football across the region. Fees are charged for training and registration, though Qasim

says the economic circumstances of Kurdish families are taken into account.

The ambitions extend beyond the training ground. Miguel is clear that the foundation’s mission is not purely athletic: “We are here to help children better understand life and grow up healthy, whether or not they become successful in football. At the end of the day, what matters most is that we coach and train capable individuals,” he told *Kurdistan Chronicle*. He added that the foundation will help those

who do show exceptional ability secure contracts at leading local and European clubs.

From Dusty Fields to the Global Stage

The Real Madrid Foundation’s arrival in Erbil is, on the surface, a straightforward story of a global sports brand expanding its footprint. But on the ground, inside Arena, it represents something more significant.

For generations, football has occu-

pied a special place in Kurdish society. Talent has never been in short supply, but opportunities have often been limited by infrastructure, resources, and access to professional development. The Educational Football Program seeks to narrow that gap by connecting local players to internationally recognized training methods and pathways.

The children who register here grew up playing the same way Kurdish kids always have: in schoolyards, on street corners, and in open fields outside Bharka, Binaslaw, and Setaqan. What

has changed is the support structure surrounding those ambitions. Professional coaching, modern facilities, and exposure to global football networks now exist much closer to home.

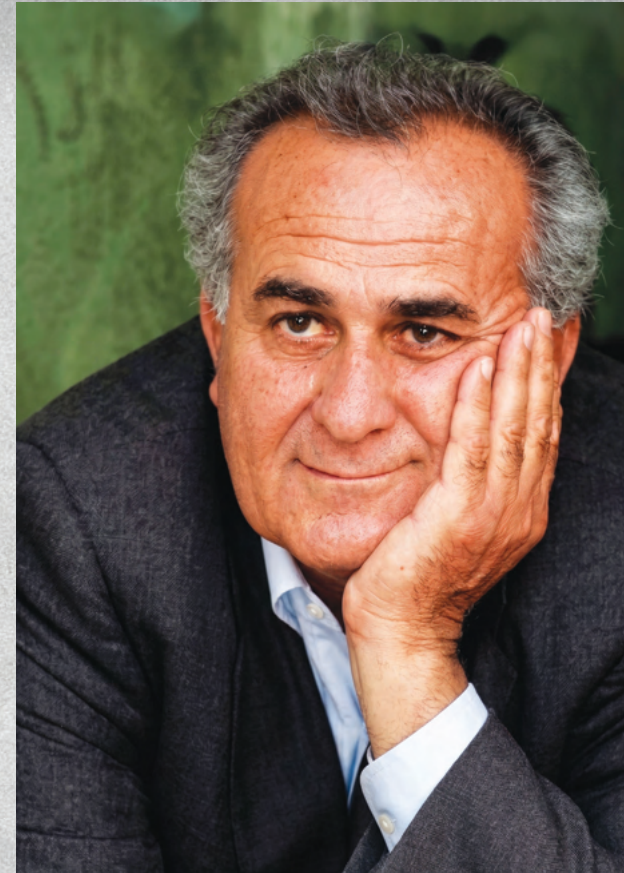
That may be the most significant contribution the Real Madrid Foundation can make in Kurdistan. Not every child who enters Arena will become a professional footballer. But the program offers the chance for young people to develop their talents in an environment that treats their aspirations as worthy of investment. ●



POETRY

Under the Statue of Martin
My roots lead me back
to Slovak soil.
Part of my blood is urban,
and part belongs to the northern plains.
At times, I stand at God's doorstep,
at times, within the house of Satan.
At times I am a wild creature of the mountains,
at times, a prisoner in human hands.

Translated by Nahro Zagros



Karim Dashti

Karim Dashti (born 1955) is a Kurdish writer and poet from Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. His works, including poetry and novelas, have been translated into English and Arabic.

Photo: Bnwnake / Pixels



SHIKRA (TACHYSPIZA BADIA)

The shikra is a compact bird of prey measuring 26 to 30 cm in length. Like other hawks in the *Tachyspiza* group, it has short, rounded wings and a relatively long, narrow tail. Adults have grey upperparts and whitish underparts with fine rufous barring, which becomes lighter toward the lower belly. The thighs are whitish, and a narrow dark stripe runs down the center of the throat.

Males and females differ noticeably in appearance. Males typically have a red iris and uniform grey upperparts, while females tend to have brownish upperparts, heavier barring on the underparts, and a yellowish-orange iris. Females are also slightly larger than males.

The shikra is widely distributed across Asia and parts of Africa. In Asia, its range extends from the southern Caucasus and the Middle East across the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia and southern China. In Africa, it is found across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, from Senegal in the west to Ethiopia and Somalia in the east. Although widespread elsewhere, it remains an uncommon sight in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, making each observation noteworthy for local birdwatchers and wildlife photographers.

Scientific name: Tachyspiza badia

Length: About 26-30 cm (10-12 inches)

Diet: Small birds, lizards, rodents, large insects, and occasionally frogs

Habitat: Woodlands, farmland, gardens, parks, and urban areas

Flight style: Fast and agile, capable of sudden turns while pursuing prey through dense vegetation





The Zakho *Şal û Şepik* Festival

In June 2026, Zakho hosted the fourth Şal û Şepik Festival to promote the rich tradition of Kurdish clothing that has survived for centuries.

Attended by President Masoud Barzani, the annual festival showcases a wide range of cultural, artistic, and academic activities aimed at promoting Kurdish heritage and traditional fashion.



Barbizin Mountain
Kurdistan

