

## *Chapter 2*

# **Keeping the Kurdistan Flame Alive Abroad**

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Over the past few decades, Kurdistan's diaspora communities have made significant contributions to their homeland, particularly in raising awareness among the media and political elites, gathering support from the international community, facilitating foreign direct investment (FDI), and bringing expertise and education back to the Kurdistan Region. Kurdistan's diaspora<sup>1</sup> is a product of discrimination, political persecution, war and displacement. Having fled unspeakable atrocities and the destruction of their homes, many Kurds, Christians, and other Kurdistanis found new lives in the West. Although they forcibly resided outside their homeland, they have developed a strong Kurdistanis group consciousness and identity in the diaspora, based on their shared memories of trauma and loss but also on the shared political aspiration and emotional hope of returning to their homeland at some point. The diaspora communities that formed have played an instrumental role making the question of Kurdistan an international political subject and contributing to the success of the Kurdistan Region, by providing a bridge between Kurdistan and the West, where most have settled.

### **Brief History**

Iraqi Kurdistan's diaspora is spread throughout the world. Although no reliable statistics on the diaspora population exist, the number is probably on the order of several hundred thousand. They are spread most predominantly throughout Europe, North America, and Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief account is focused on the Iraqi Kurdistan diaspora and the role that it plays in regards to Iraqi Kurdistan. On many occasions, diaspora communities from every part of Kurdistan have contributed to the same struggle and continue to do so. This article is not an exhaustive study of Kurdish diaspora activities, and omissions are by no means meant to minimize the contributions of Kurdistanis from other parts of Kurdistan. It is my hope that the diaspora will continue to be studied and written about, to memorialize the critical role that millions of diaspora Kurds, Christians, and Yezidis from other parts of Kurdistan play in support of their homeland.

Most of the diaspora from Iraqi Kurdistan fled as refugees from the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein. The first major wave left in the mid-1970s, after the collapse of the autonomy agreement that resulted in the bombing and destruction of villages by the Iraqi military. In the United States, more than 200 Kurds that fled this violence settled in Nashville, Tennessee. Today, the city boasts more than 10,000 Kurdish residents, the largest Kurdish population in the U.S. At around the same time, Britain, Sweden, and other European countries also received refugees, initially in small numbers, but today there are hundreds of thousands of Kurds living across Europe. In Sweden, Kurdish is third-most spoken language after Swedish and English.

Later refugee flows also correspond to the waves of violence and cycles of genocide that have characterized Iraq. The Iran-Iraq war, which raged from 1980 to 1988, forced thousands to flee artillery shelling, chemical bombardment, and conscription into Saddam's army. The attack on Halabja and the brutal, eight-stage Anfal Campaign in the late 1980s, which destroyed more than 4,500 villages and saw 182,000 civilians murdered, sent hundreds of thousands more to seek refuge abroad. Anyone who could find a way to reach the shores of Europe or make it to North America or Australia did so. Today, major Kurdistan diaspora communities can be found throughout the United States, in Tennessee, California, Michigan, Nebraska, Texas, Virginia, New York, and Arizona. Europe hosts the largest populations in Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, Norway, Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands, and other countries; their ethnic and religious makeup reflects the diversity of Kurdistan. Melbourne and Sydney in Australia and Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver in Canada also host several thousand Kurds.

### **1950s–2003: The Birth of the Diaspora**

Ever since the first waves of refugees from Iraqi Kurdistan began arriving in Europe and North America, they raised awareness of a number of issues through activism and advocacy. Over the years, the diaspora has played an increasingly critical role in lobbying their host governments, garnering media attention for issues, and connecting Westerners with people on the ground in Kurdistan to gather information.

The seeds of Kurdish political activism in Europe and North America were planted the 1950s with the establishment of the Kurdish Students Society in Europe (KSSE), based in Germany. Through the following decades,

the KSSE organized rallies, produced publications to educate the European public about the Kurdish struggle, and met with European leaders.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1970s, many Kurdish political parties began appointing representatives in key capitals around the world. Some of those representatives who were active in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, returned home to take leading roles in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, including Hoshiyar Zebari, who was the Kurdistan Democratic Party representative overseas and became Iraq's foreign minister, and Barham Salih, who was the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) representative and became the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) prime minister.

In addition to political parties, community and cultural associations, such as the Kurdish Cultural Center in London in 1985, the Federation of Kurdish Associations in Sweden in 1981, and the Institut Kurde in Paris in 1983, were also founded. The latter was founded by Dr. Kendal Nezan, a Kurd from Turkey and a nuclear physicist by training. The Kurdish institute in Paris was a dynamo of activism at every level, from the grassroots to the senior levels of the French government. For years, many academics focusing on Kurdish issues have passed through the Kurdish language course or have used the institute's substantial library. The Institut has also engaged with senior French leadership, including Danielle, the wife of French President François Mitterrand, who played a central role<sup>3</sup> in France's relationship with Kurdistan,<sup>4</sup> and who is still revered in Kurdistan today.<sup>5</sup>

Although the diaspora was active prior to 1988, the genocidal Anfal Campaign and the chemical bombardment of Halabja sharpened their focus. After the attack on Halabja, more than a dozen Kurds and Chaldean Christians from around the United States held a hunger strike in front of the United Nations (UN) in New York City. Driven by the grief and desperation of the time, a swell of support was generated in capitals and cities throughout the world, where thousands of Kurds came out to demonstrate against the Ba'athist crimes. In North America, this led to the foundation

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<sup>2</sup> "İsmet Şerif Vanlı Biography." *Kurdistanica*. Accessed August 10, 2017. <http://www.kurdistanica.com/?q=book/export/html/12>.

<sup>3</sup> "Danielle Mitterrand et les Kurdes." Mitterrand. January 14, 2013. <http://www.mitterrand.fr/Danielle-Mitterrand-et-les-Kurdes.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "Danielle Mitterrand et les Kurdes." Youtube. January 3, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWbTf9UVONM>.

<sup>5</sup> "Danielle Mitterrand." *Kurd1*. December 26, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0evXOhRcEU>.

of the Kurdish National Congress of North America, which organized to unite Kurds throughout the continent to provide a unified voice in support of Kurdish political independence. The organization held its 27<sup>th</sup> annual congress in Michigan in 2016.

One of the major achievements of this time was the visit of Congressional staffers Peter Galbraith (who later became Ambassador to Croatia) and Chris Van Hollen (currently Senator from Maryland) to Iraqi Kurdistan. Following their visit, they drafted the Prevention of Genocide Act,<sup>6</sup> which prevented Iraq from obtaining military equipment and international financing, as well as the sanctioning of the sale of Iraqi oil to the United States, in direct response to the Halabja attacks. The Act passed in the Senate but not in the House of Representatives.

The years during and immediately following the Anfal campaign saw drastically increased refugee flows from Iraqi Kurdistan. By the early 1990s, the infrastructure put in place and the experience forged in the 1980s, combined with the increased number of diaspora communities, brought about a critical mass of activists ready and able to engage local communities, members of the press, congressional and parliamentary representatives, and even those at the highest levels of government.

In several European countries in the 1980s and 1990s, Kurdish organizations were established to promote the Kurdish language, community cohesion and support to newly arrived refugee families. Because of the suppression of Kurdish identity, these organizations led the celebration of Kurdish holidays, and viewed themselves as the keepers of *Kurdayati* (“Kurdishness”).

In 1991, the Ba’athist regime again attacked Kurdistan, this time to crush an uprising that first started in Ranya, and later spread throughout Iraqi Kurdistan. Fearing chemical attacks, an estimated two million Kurds fled to the mountainous borders of Turkey and Iran, triggering an extraordinary humanitarian crisis.

Again, Kurdish activists worldwide jumped to action. In the U.K., there were hunger strikes and protests in front of the U.S. Embassy; the United States was leading the coalition against Saddam Hussein following his invasion of Kuwait, and U.S. President George H.W. Bush had encouraged the people of Iraq to rise up against the dictator. Kurdish activists stormed

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<sup>6</sup> “H.R.5271 - Prevention of Genocide Act of 1988.” Congress.gov. Accessed August 10, 2017. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/5271>.

and occupied the Iraqi Embassy in London. A group of Kurds in Britain, including Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, then a medical doctor and now heading an Erbil-based think tank, met with Margaret Thatcher, who then strongly advocated for humanitarian support to the refugees.<sup>7</sup> In the U.S., demonstrators and hunger strikers took to the streets in Washington DC, Nashville TN, Dallas TX, San Diego CA, and other cities.

Kurdish activism extended beyond demonstrations; members of the community abroad were instrumental in providing information to journalists, connecting them with people on the ground, and helping them safely pass to Kurdistan to report, at a time when Iraq was closed to the world. They also provided support to humanitarian organizations like *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, who arrived in Iran to treat refugees and later established bases throughout Iraq.

The media coverage of the plight of Kurdish refugees triggered worldwide support to a level Kurdistan had never seen. Fundraising initiatives such as the “Simple Truth” concert campaign<sup>8</sup> with major international music artists raised awareness and money—“Simple Truth” alone raised 15 million dollars.<sup>9</sup>

But the most important outcome of Kurdish diaspora lobbying contributed to the decision to launch (the U.S.-led) Operation Provide Comfort and (U.K.-led) Operation Haven,<sup>10</sup> in which American, British, French, Turkish, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch military and humanitarian assets were deployed to provide protection and supplies for the refugees. The operation saved the lives of thousands of people and is considered to be one of the most successful military-humanitarian missions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later, Operation Northern Watch helped return hundreds of thousands of refugees to their homes and provided the space for the first elections in the KRI's history to be held in 1992, which led to the formation of the Kurdistan Assembly and ultimately the Kurdistan Regional Government.

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<sup>7</sup> “Dlawer Ala'Aldeen asks Thatcher to intervene in Kurdistan.” Youtube. April 3, 1991. Accessed August 10, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOnT9iucOGE>.

<sup>8</sup> “MTV Simple Truth Kurdish Relief Concert.” MTV. June 10, 2008. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-7\\_g3aEO6g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-7_g3aEO6g).

<sup>9</sup> “The Simple Truth: A Concert for Kurdish Refugees.” IMDB. May 12, 1991. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1055314/>.

<sup>10</sup> Rudd, Gordon W. Humanitarian Intervention: Assisting the Iraqi Kurds in Operation Provide Comfort. 1991. [http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/humanitarian\\_intervention/index.html](http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/humanitarian_intervention/index.html)

The fervor on 1991 extended beyond the initial exigency. The 1990s were dark times for every part of Kurdistan: in Turkey, Syria, and Iran, Kurdish identity was forbidden and brutally suppressed. Diaspora Kurdish activists from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria banded together and were extremely active in raising awareness of the oppression of their people. Local organizations continued to form, such as the Washington Kurdish Institute, the American Kurdish Information Network, the Kurdish Human Rights Project in the U.K. and the Kurdish library in Sweden to educate the Western public and facilitate academic and media engagement on Kurdish issues. Representation offices of Kurdish political parties grew to serve the diaspora communities and better communicate with American and European governments, reflective of the importance that these partnerships had become in only a few short years.

Activism in those days was dangerous. The Ba'athist regime was known to beat up or even murder activists, both inside and outside of Iraq. Their agents would take pictures at demonstrations, and if a protestor had family back in Iraq, they would often be in trouble. Saddam's agents also tried to assassinate leading Kurdish and Iraqi dissidents who lived in Europe.

## 2003: Liberation and Self-Rule in Kurdistan

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime brought the people of Iraqi Kurdistan an unprecedented opportunity to prosper. In 2006, the structures of autonomy built in the 1990s, which had been party-based, were unified into the Kurdistan Regional Government.<sup>11</sup> This peaceful settlement between parties that had been at war only ten years prior, set the foundation for democracy and prosperity in the Kurdistan Region.

In the years that followed, the KRG and the Kurdistan Parliament began building institutions. One of these institutions, the Department of Foreign Relations<sup>12</sup> began establishing representations around the world. Until this day, these representations serve *de facto* as the embassies of the KRG, processing paperwork for the diaspora community and working with the host governments. They play an advocacy role in conducting more formalized public relations, business promotion, and organizational

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<sup>11</sup> "Agreement on the Reunification of the two administrations in the Kurdistan Region." Niqash. January 23, 2006. <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/1122/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Official Order - Kurdistan Regional Government." KRG Cabinet. January 25, 2009. [http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/Official\\_order\\_25\\_Jan\\_09\\_2009\\_06\\_04\\_h19m0s19.pdf](http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/Official_order_25_Jan_09_2009_06_04_h19m0s19.pdf).

support for local diaspora communities. They also work to build greater cultural, political, economic, and educational ties between institutions in the Kurdistan Region and their respective countries. It is worth noting that the representation offices are mostly staffed by Kurdish diaspora. Some offices pre-dated the Department of Foreign Relations, and were formalized following the ratification of the Iraqi constitution. During this period, many Kurds who lived in the diaspora returned to Kurdistan, bringing their expertise, networks, and access to Western capital resources. Kurdish academic Dr. Janroj Yilmaz Keles found that this is driven by an emotional and political desire to participate in the prosperity and reconstruction of Kurdistan, as well as by economic incentives.<sup>13</sup>

In the years 2005–15, Kurdistan saw an influx of 442 million dollars from the United States alone. More than 70 percent of those investments (315 million dollars) were part of local partnerships<sup>14</sup>—Kurdish-Americans undoubtedly played their part in facilitating much of this, either at the executive or implementation levels. Other sectors have grown substantially with vision, expertise, and investment from the diaspora. A number of Kurdish academics based in Britain envisioned the creation of the University of Kurdistan-Hawler, and The American University of Iraq-Sulaimani was a project of former Prime Minister Barham Salih, a British-educated Kurd who sought to bring world-class higher education to the Kurdistan Region. This was followed in 2016 with the American University of Kurdistan, inaugurated through the leadership and investment of Kurdistan Region Security Council Chancellor Masrour Barzani, who lived for several years in the United States and was educated at the American University in Washington, D.C.

In exile, many diaspora Kurdistanis took full advantage of the educational and economic opportunities that their new home countries had to offer; such opportunities were not given to those living under Saddam. In the 1990s, Kurdistan Region was out of the grasp of Saddam but suffering still from the effects of genocide, civil war and economic hardship. Many Kurds abroad supported their families back home with remittances. After the liberation of Iraq in 2003, many decided to return to Kurdistan, bringing with them the knowledge, skills, and capital that they had acquired over time.

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<sup>13</sup> Keles, Janroj Yilmaz. “Returning Home “ Transnational mobility and social networks among highly skilled British- Kurdish young people.” Accessed August 11, 2017. [https://www.academia.edu/27726243/\\_Returning\\_Home\\_Transnational\\_mobility\\_and\\_social\\_networks\\_among\\_highly\\_skilled\\_British-Kurdish\\_young\\_people](https://www.academia.edu/27726243/_Returning_Home_Transnational_mobility_and_social_networks_among_highly_skilled_British-Kurdish_young_people).

<sup>14</sup> Board of Investment

The KRG includes many officials that have lived or been educated abroad. Qubad Talabani, who grew up in the U.K., later served as the Representative to the United States and today is the Deputy Prime Minister. Dr. Ashti Hawrami was educated in petroleum engineering in Scotland, worked in the U.K. oil sector, and later returned to help develop Kurdistan's oil and gas sector from scratch. After retiring from a prestigious career as a neurosurgeon in Washington, D.C., Dr. Najmaldin Karim returned to run for the governorship of his home city Kirkuk. Dr. Ali Sindi received a Master's in Public Administration from Harvard University and today serves as the Minister of Planning.

## 2014 and Today

The year 2014 marked a revitalization of advocacy by Kurdistan's diaspora communities. Yet again, the Kurdistan Region was under threat, this time by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS.

In August 2014, ISIS attacked Iraqi Kurdistan, threatening to reach Erbil and beginning a genocide against the Yezidis and other minorities in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain. In September, the Kurdish city of Kobani in Syrian Kurdistan (commonly called "Rojava" came under siege from the terrorist group.

As diaspora communities reeled from the shock, they were energized, once again taking to the streets of cities around the world to demonstrate. In North America, Kurdish Muslims, Yezidis, Christians, and others traveled to Washington to rally in front of the White House and speak with their Congressional representatives. Social media also played a significant role in engaging young Americans and Europeans to support the cause. And again, social and advocacy organizations popped up to provide support to newly arrived refugees, deliver humanitarian aid to those in need, and bring more attention to the genocide and war.

Iraqi Kurdistan will vote in a referendum on independence on September 25, 2017. It will mark the next step towards the realization of the dreams of millions of people, in Kurdistan and in the diaspora, who struggled for independence. Critically, even those in the diaspora are expected to be able to vote,<sup>15</sup> underscoring the important role that they have played over many years.

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<sup>15</sup> Dolamari, Mewan. "Diaspora Kurds to participate in Kurdistan referendum via e-voting: Commission." K24. August 11, 2017. <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/972ea419-6250-4333-87a7-bd44f0cbacde>.



## **Future Role for Kurdistan's Diaspora**

The decades have seen swells of support and activism from Kurdistan's diaspora. The ferocity of the demonstrators and the issues that they support have reflected on the environment in the Kurdistan Region, bringing uncertainty and the struggle for survival. Over time, as diaspora populations became more entrenched their host countries, their abilities and effectiveness in advocating for the Kurdistan Region grew in reach and in depth.

Many communities have made a transition from a status of exile from oppression to advocacy, lobbying and integration within their host countries. Perhaps among the most salient are the Armenian and Lebanese<sup>16</sup> communities. The Lebanese have integrated into different societies where they live to such an extent that several leading political figures in Latin America have been of Lebanese descent. Some of the world's most famous names in business and entertainment are originally Lebanese, including Carlos Ghosn, chairman of Renault-Nissan, and actress Salma Hayek. This integration into different societies arguably helps sustain the home country through a support network.

The Armenian diaspora, particularly those based in the United States, successfully merge popular support from the community with targeted lobbying campaigns in Congress and at state level. They also reflect depth beyond the political sphere, with cultural organizations, professional associations and networks, and diaspora members attaining positions of power within their host governments.

## **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

In the coming years, it will be important for Iraqi Kurdistan's diaspora to make a transition from a status of exile from oppression to advocacy. They have already started to do so. Nadhim Zahawi, a British Iraqi-Kurd is now a member of parliament in the U.K. In Sweden, six Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan are members of parliament, while Darin Zanyar, a Kurd born to Iraqi Kurdish parents is among Sweden's most popular singers.<sup>17</sup> There are highly successful entrepreneurs, doctors, and scientists of Iraqi

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<sup>16</sup> A critical difference; the Lebanese diaspora (8-14 million in total) far outnumber their brethren in Lebanon (four million). <http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/lebanon/lebanon-contemplates-a-new-citizenship-law-1.1621325>

<sup>17</sup> Dolamari, Mewan. "Darin: Jag m dde piss." *Aftonbladet*. September 22, 2008. <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nojesbladet/article11518751.ab>.

Kurdish origin across the West. Among the wider Kurdish diaspora community, including those from Turkey, Iran and Syria, there are many well-known names, including Hamdi Ulukaya, a Kurd from Turkey and a renowned businessman and philanthropist in the United States. The KRG has a central role to play in the evolution of the diaspora. One recommendation is for the KRG to inaugurate a Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, to provide guidance and support for diaspora communities and cultural activities. Such a ministry or department could also be a point of contact for community members looking to work in the Kurdistan Region, provide expertise from afar, or move back permanently to the region.

The diaspora community also needs to find a greater role for the younger generation who were born abroad, and may not speak the Kurdish language very well, but whose sense of patriotism and passion remains strong. Their internet and social media skills, their language ability and natural assimilation with their host countries can all be assets for Kurdistan while also providing them with a sense of belonging and pride.

The following poem was written in 1960 by Adnan Khudadad, a Kurd in Munich and one of the early members of the KSSE, shortly before his untimely death in a car accident. It was published in the KSSE journal "Kurdistan."<sup>18</sup> Even today, the poem captures the longing for the homeland of Kurds in exile, and the desire of diaspora Kurds to serve their nation.

### **To My Son**

My son,  
 Do you see what lies yonder,  
 On the mountain peaks,  
 In the plains  
 And the valley beds?  
 The riches of Kurdistan!  
 But  
 Do you see what else there lies  
 Beyond the mountains,  
 Even beyond the borders?  
 There a tyrant rules  
 Who plunders our riches,  
 Draining the lifeblood of our people.

<sup>18</sup> KSSE. *Kurdistan*, p.12. <http://www.kurdipedia.org/files/relatedfiles/2014/100973/0007.PDF?ver=131074565486758646>

<sup>19</sup> Adnan Khudadad, Munich, June 20, 1960.

My son,  
You have both seen and heard,  
But no matter!  
The people shall prevail,  
So rise, my son!  
Give me my trusty blade  
That I may go to join our brave brothers,  
To carry the fight to the border  
And to shatter these shackles.  
If you hear the machine-gun's rattle  
And I am late in returning  
Run to your dear mother's side  
And tell her, 'Mother dear,  
My father has joined the martyrs for Kurdistan'

