



The Diaspora, The Return

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Iraqi Kurdistan is in the midst of a yearslong, climate change-impacted drought. What responsibility do returning Kurds have to their homeland?

Sitting at an Iraqi restaurant in London, Miran Hassan reaches across with his *khubz*, a type of flatbread, helping himself to the salads spread across the table. The 24-year-old was born and raised in London, but ask him where he is from and he'll say he's Kurdish. Hassan has traveled to Kurdistan more times than he can remember and has worked in the region's capital city, Erbil. His family owns property in the eastern part of the province.

Miran's family is one of many middle class Kurdish families who, despite residing in Europe, have not lost sight of their homeland.

"Damascus is sweet, but the homeland is sweeter," a Kurdish proverb **states**. And Diane King, a University of Kentucky professor with a specialization in Kurdistan, reflects: "I have heard people invoke this saying with reference to points much farther afield, such as London or San Diego, cities with significant Kurdish populations."

Many Kurds fled Iraqi Kurdistan after the violence perpetrated against them by Saddam Hussein in the 1970s, with the bulk of them resettling in Europe. Since the 1990s, these displaced Kurds have started returning, many hoping that Iraqi Kurdistan will gain its independence. While some Kurds have moved back, others make frequent pilgrimages to their homeland, feeling strong ties with the land, its culture and its history. Some maintain their primary residences in Europe for financial and other reasons, but their diasporic yearning has prompted many to invest in vacation homes in the region.

As Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, a postdoctoral fellow at Complutense University of Madrid **explained**, "instead of a returning diaspora, alternative forms of diasporic circulation

among the members of the Kurdish Diaspora have developed.” He noted that the process developed after 2003 in what many Kurds refer to as “liberation” from Saddam Hussein.

While there is no census of the Kurdish diaspora, the **Council of Foreign Relations** estimates there are 2 million Kurds outside of Kurdistan, the majority of whom are in Europe. This figure includes Kurds from the ancestral Kurdistan region, which spans portions of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria.

For many Kurds who choose to remain in the diaspora, “visiting Kurdistan has become a part of our everyday. There are many families who stay there for six months” and travel back and forth, Akkaya wrote.



A summer home development near Sulaymaniyah.

“My dad has his own two story villa (in Kurdistan),” Hassan said. “My mum, she has one. My sister and her husband have one next to us. That whole row of villas near my mum’s belong to our extended family.” He describes the villas in eastern Kurdistan as havens from city life. “My dad has eight acres of land all covered in pomegranate and peach trees. There’s also a swimming pool,” he said. Some of his neighbors even have vineyards.

These orchards and swimming pools are not atypical. The land receives constant irrigation, Hassan said, speaking both of his family’s and broader practices, because people don’t want to return to dead trees and no fruit. Caretakers are employed to tend to the property year round.



A summer villa in Kore City has a water tank and a pool which is filling by hose.

Iraq is experiencing the most severe drought in 900 years, **according to NASA**, like **Syria and Jordan**, and the drought is just one element of the problem. Education about water management is lacking, and neither Kurdistan nor Iraq has the infrastructure to efficiently manage their water. All this is compounded by the fact that water has become a political weapon between Turkey, Iran and Iraq, leaving Kurdistan's future dependent on its long term water strategy.

And so, this community, which loves its homeland deeply, is doing it long-term harm. The irrigation and the swimming pools use a staggering amount of water in a region where water is quickly becoming its **most precious commodity**.

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Hawbeer Ahmed Othman, known by friends and family as Dostan, left the region as a young adult to seek new opportunities. He lived among diasporic Kurds around Europe, always maintaining ties to his homeland. Now 34, he has returned home to a region called Sulaymaniyah, and, standing under the summer sky, reflects on the contradiction of diaspora Kurds draining the land they love.

"It's a question that applied to me and to Miran's dad," he tells weather.com, referring to the overuse of resources. There are two sides of Sulaymaniyah, he explains: "On the south side, between Dukan and Suli," an affectionate shorthand for Sulaymaniyah, "there's an area called Mergaban. It's a great valley between two mountains and people have built their summer houses — some call them a pension house. They plant trees, they build a house. It is a



Dostan overlooks the garden at his summer home near Sulaymaniyah. He runs oil field consulting and import/export businesses in Kurdistan, Poland and Germany.

good, big place for picnic and for relax and playing cards.”

Financial opportunities in Iraqi Kurdistan have increased, according to 2013 data from the Kurdish Board of Investment, and the nominal GDP grew from 4.4 billion Iraqi dinars in 2004 to

28.3 billion in 2011, according to the World Bank. Holiday homes in the valleys of the Sulaymaniyah province became popular middle and upper middle class investments, and both local and diasporic Kurds treat the Dukan Valley in eastern Sulaymaniyah and nearby Lake Dukan as a place to summer.



Lake Dukan and Dukan Dam.

But they don't live there. Hassan's father is at his villa "maybe two or three days in a fortnight ... and only in the summer." When Professor King last visited in 2016, she "saw a lot of second homes being built in the mountains. It really struck me."

Hassan's father's villa has a well. So does his mother's. And his sisters'. And his aunties'. "People just dig wells," Hassan explains. Are the the wells regulated? Hassan laughs, "no." There was no regulation until 2011 when, in Hassan's words, the government "was like, 'People are taking water from the ground and there's not enough left for the cities!'"

Now, the government issues licenses to dig wells. However, “there are no restrictions or terms to the license. It is just a fee and then you’re free to dig,” Hassan said. Acquiring a permit comes down to knowing the right people and one’s ability to pay the 2 to 3 million dinar (\$1,700 to \$2,500) fee.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources reported 39,208 wells in 2011, Alessandro Tinti **wrote** in a policy report. According to the General Directorate of Water Resources, cited by Tinti, the total number of wells has peaked at about 46,000. It is unclear if and how the report accounts for illegal wells.



A construction worker digs an illegal well, which resembles a metal canister, in a summer home development near Sulaymaniyah.

The KRG in Erbil and federal government in Baghdad co-manage the water in Kurdistan, with the federal government subsidizing all water in Iraq. The size of the subsidy is based on square footage, not residents. A 200 meter house is about 10,000 Iraqi dinars a month paid directly to the Kurdish government, said Ari Mamshae, a staffer in former Kurdish President Masoud Barzani’s office.

The government provides a set amount of water to households. Deliveries fill domestic water tanks, often located on the roof of a house. “If we run out before we next fill up, that’s that,” Mamshae said. The next refill depends on rainfall and government accountability.

Water availability, access and sanitation in Iraq are all below international standards. Furthermore, water resources are increasingly under stress due to both climate change and bureaucratic mismanagement, according to **analysts**.

As the KRG **wrote**, “We do not have adequate estimates of our groundwater resources. In fact, we do not have a full study of our water resources, so we face a very high risk of mismanaging our water supplies and especially of depleting our groundwater.”

Corruption plays a role, too. Bribes are required for business in Iraq, **writes** Erlend Paasche, a post-doctoral fellow at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, “even if one has *wasta*,” a term that roughly means nepotism.

Paasche, who researched Kurdish diaspora return from Europe to Kurdistan, said that “grand corruption, typically involving high-level decision-makers and large sums of money, is widely considered a serious problem in the KRG. A Gallup public opinion poll from 2013 found that 81 percent of respondents in Iraqi Kurdistan agree that corruption is widespread throughout the KRG.”



A man washes the sidewalk in front of a restaurant in Erbil.

Wealthy individuals — be they full time residents or not — can legally buy more water, explains Pshitwan al Dawoudi, a communications manager at a Swedish NGO in Erbil. If someone can't afford to purchase more water, they'll dig illegal wells — especially if located in the countryside. “If the well dries up, which they do, you (dig) another one. This isn't a secret. It's how it's done,” he says.

These unregulated wells further shrink the groundwater table. “In Dukan, you used to be able to get water at 70 meters (230 feet), now you have to go way deeper,” Hassan says.

Water waste also plagues major cities. “People in Erbil wash their homes with hoses ... They’ll even clean the sidewalks!” Mamshae noted, and added after a pause, “it’s all I’ve ever seen.”

For local and diasporic Kurds, water represents freedom. Professor King explained that “in a lot of different places in the world, you’ve had poverty followed by wealth, and then environmental concern that is expressed by outsiders: ‘Oh, you can’t have swimming pools,’ or ‘You can’t water your sidewalk.’ People who used to be in poverty who hear that say, ‘I’m sorry I’m not willing to accept that, I’m busy swimming in my pool that I never thought I’d have.’ It is an emotional response, and, in some ways, a response of gratitude.



Lahega Carwash in Erbil. Owner Majid Blbas, 37, uses approximately 25,000 liters of water per day washing roughly 100 cars. He says the business is better than the oil business “I’m selling water.”



A man waters the street in Kore City while a child looks on smiling.

“I sat with a government official who started crying over this issue,” she remembers. “They can’t raise the issue ... It’s hard to be an activist in a zone where people are finally able to breathe after genocide.”

While Kurdistan has more water than most of Iraq, it too is at risk. A **study** by Jos Lelieveld, director of the atmospheric chemistry department at the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry, found that the Middle East will likely be impacted by climate change resulting in more intense and frequent droughts. The worst stretch to date was from 2007-2008, when there was a 50 percent decrease in precipitation over a portion of Kurdistan and a 62 percent **reduced vegetated area**.

Rivers and lakes that used to be filled two decades ago are now dry.

“There is a river surrounding the area of Erbil called Qalaq,” al Dawoudi said. “There’s a larger bridge meant to be used to cross the river safely, but there’s no water down there.”

Jwat Heni Harki, 43 has lived in Qalaq along where the Great Zab River flows for his entire life. He serves as a member of the Peshmerga, the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan, and fought against ISIS in the four years they had a presence in the region.



Mosul Old City is crumbling after coalition airstrikes to drive out ISIS militants. A combination of the airstrikes and ISIS tunnel digging have destroyed the city's water supply system.

When ISIS' threat subsided, he had tried to revert back to his agrarian beginnings in order support his eight children. "We had a lot of animals," Harki told weather.com. "But we had to sell them all for really cheap last year because we didn't have enough water to give them and we thought they'd die." Harki can also no longer grow tomatoes on his land, which once grew abundantly.

"Now, I am an employee," he says. "We (my brother and I) no longer farm."

When asked if he thinks his children will ever farm on the family lands, he laughs sadly. "It is impossible to live that life of farming anymore," he says. "We will never get that life back."



Jwat Heni Harki, 43 was born and has lived along the Great Zab River his whole life. In his lifetime, he's watched the river's water slowly disappear.

“We just try to survive,” he says, as there is no longer enough water — not for livestock, not for farming and not even for people.

“North of Erbil, there used to be a huge river in the Bastora Valley,” explains Balin Zrar, a 42-year-old tour guide in Kurdistan. “You can see the bedrocks ... but it’s completely dry.



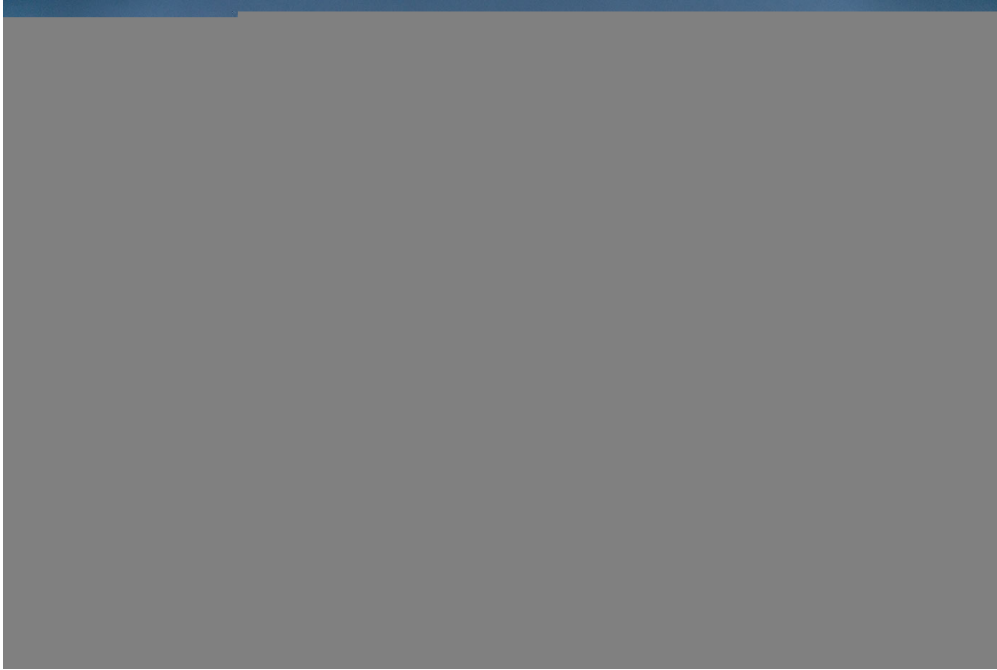
Balin Zrar stands in front of his family's land in Bastora Valley.

There is not a drop of water.” Zrar reflects on his childhood home, farmlands which used to be arable and are now dry. “It used to have spring in front of it (all year),” he says. “Now, the spring only exists in the winter.”

Rainfall provides 30 percent of Iraq’s water. The rest is drawn from the transboundary rivers **between** Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. Five main rivers provide 75 percent of the water to Iraqi Kurdistan.

As the KRG **reported**: “We are fortunate to have water resources ... including such rivers as the Tigris, the Great Zab, the Little Zab ... along with rainfall and groundwater, including natural springs.” But it is not enough. “I can’t remember when exactly I noted it, but (during a trip six or eight years ago), I noticed, ‘Oh my gosh, there’s not enough

water,” Professor King reflects. “In 2016, it was really concerning.”



A dry riverbed is photographed in Bastora Valley.

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Earlier this year, Iran **cut the water** from the Little Zab River which flows through Kurdistan to Baghdad, and from **42 smaller rivers** that flow into Iraq, according Iraqi Foreign Ministry spokesperson Ahmed Mahjoob. Iran also temporarily cut the water flowing from the Little Zab in 2017, which led KRG officials to restrict the flow of water into Iraq.

Which leaves Kurdistan at the center of what Iraq’s water minister **called** in May an impending water crisis — and possibly conflict — between Iraq, Turkey and Iran.

The situation is escalating. Iran and Turkey constructed dams on the Euphrates and the Tigris, preventing the stream of water into Iraqi borders and reducing the water entering Iraq by more than 40 percent, according to a recent **report**. “Last year, Iran cut the flow of the Little Zab because they were building more dams,” Salem Najd Mohammed, the director of hydrology at Lake Dukan, told weather.com.

This negatively impacted water availability in all of Sulaymaniyah, as more than 60 percent of the lake’s water comes from Iran, Mohammed, who is also a geologist with Dam Directory of Dukan, explained, meaning that everyone in the region depending on the lake for water is now suffering. Mohammed noted that if they received average or

above average amounts of rainfall, the cut wouldn't be as significant, but because of the drought "it is devastating."

This isn't the first time Kurdistan is at the center of water wars. In 1975, Saddam Hussein and Iran's Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlav signed the Algiers Water Agreement in which Iraq relinquished claims to the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, in exchange for Iran to cease its support of an independent Kurdistan.

Near Qalat Dizeh, on Kurdistan's border with Iran, an excavator builds a temporary small dam in order to slow the flow of the Lesser Zab River, which has been significantly reduced. Iran has recently cut the flow of the Lesser Zab, resulting in panic in Kurdistan and Iraq.

"Water is a political weapon," explains Magnus Norell, an adjunct scholar at the Washington Institute. "Kurdistan is landlocked. They're very dependent on their neighbors," says Norell, who is also a senior policy advisor at the European Foundation for Democracy. "That will continue to be the case. You are where you are. You can't escape political geography."

Boys play in the Tigris River in Mosul, a city that Kurds remember as part of ancestral Kurdistan which is now under Iraqi government once more. After Turkey shut off water supply to northern Iraq, levels in the Tigris have dropped drastically.

“There’s a lack of strategic thinking here overall.”

Kurds are not oblivious to the ongoing tensions. “Iran and Turkey have threatened Iraq’s water,” Dostan says speaking to weather.com from his home in Suli. “They use water as a political card. They need the water.”

Rainwater catchment barrels are seen in Mosul Old City. A combination of coalition airstrikes and ISIS tunnel digging have destroyed the city’s water supply system.

But Kurdistan is also not taking initiative regarding water, he implies.

“Not enough irrigation has been put in place to use that water. Look at the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan now,” he says, noting that even in Kurdistan — which has more freshwater than southern Iraq — there aren’t sustainable irrigation systems, let alone plans (or funds) for construction.

He empathizes with how the Turks and Iranians perceive this: If there’s leftover drinking water flowing all the way to the Gulf, “that means something’s not right,” as it should be used by people.

University of Kentucky's King argues that water will spark wars in the region. "It may give the Kurds extra leverage," she says, "but it might also mean they're the brunt of more violence from Baghdad and Ankara, (as) the water flows through the Kurdish mountains. That is either a blessing or a curse."

Shiyma Fadeo Aziz from the Alentisar neighborhood of eastern Mosul was displaced by fighting between ISIS and Iraqi forces. When this photo was taken, she had lived in the camp for one month with her two boys, aged six and eight, and two girls, aged nine and 10. Water pipes in the city were destroyed during the fighting and ISIS occupation, and the Iraqi government, now in control of Mosul, hasn't fixed the supply since the city's liberation from ISIS in July 2017.

Some in Kurdistan are considering this reality. Sarkawt Shamsulddin, former journalist turned Iraqi Parliament member with the New Generation party, told weather.com over WhatsApp that "water ... can strengthen (Kurdistan's) position ... over 50 percent of Iraq's water comes from Kurdistan. If the KRG builds more dams, it could secure future water share, but it can also use it as an influence in Baghdad," he says, alluding to Kurdistan's **ongoing struggle for independence**.

Water scarcity is known to be a major contributor for human migration, having led to mass movement of peoples all over, from **Oceania to Puerto Rico, Somalia to California**. But every Kurd who spoke to weather.com said that having fled once, they would never leave their homeland again by choice, no matter what happens to the water in Kurdistan.

For people like Dostan, life continues — with or without ample water.

"My father used to say when I was a kid that the next war (will be) over water," Dostan recalls. "We used to say what

are you talking about,” he says, remembering his siblings and cousins giggling when his father said such things near Lake Dukan, then brimming.

“Now I know.”

Darband-i Rania pass at the top of Lake Dukan is seen above.

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