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One man, two cultures

Last year, after 24 years in exile, I returned to Iraqi Kurdistan to visit my family for *Newroz,* the Kurdish New Year celebrations. I wanted to go there to reflect on the experiences of my life, which have led me from Iran, to Iraq, and finally to Switzerland. I would like to share with you a brief summary of my path out of my homeland.

By Taimoor Aliassi | The 19th-century Kurdish poet Nali describes exile as 'a dark place', 'prison', 'tragedy' and 'treason'. On the other hand, Nali portrays Kurdistan as 'a light-filled and sacred place', 'the motherland' and 'a place of loyalty'.

Another Kurdish writer, Ali Bakhtiar, wrote in 2005 that "the sentiment that results from the tragedy of exile is a source of revolt and of the development of a critical outlook". Exile must give us a sense of understanding the essence of the world, and of the country that we left. It must permit us to discover a new world.

From Iran to Switzerland

I have lived in Switzerland for 14 years. I left Kurdistan in Iran, like thousands of other Kurds, following the declaration of a 'sacred war' in 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini against the Kurdish people. From Iran I went to Iraqi Kurdistan, where I had to learn Arabic at school. In Iran, I had learned Farsi at school. At home, however, we always spoke Kurdish.

In 1986, the Iran-Iraq War intensified and Saddam Hussein's regime transferred my family to a refugee camp south of Baghdad, near Fallujah. It was a desert, completely different from the mountains of Kurdistan.

In the refugee camp in Iraq, I lived with thousands of other Kurds. I met my wife, and my daughter and my son were born in the camp. In the camp, I worked as a community health worker and a translator for the UNHCR, because I could speak English.

After the first Gulf War, the UNHCR gave my family and me refugee papers. I then travelled to Switzerland with my wife and our two children. We lived in a refugee centre in Gersau, Canton Schwyz.

After three months of German classes, I realised that the German I learned in class was not the German that people spoke on the street. I decided to go to Geneva to learn French and establish my life there.

Currently, I'm in the final stages of my studies at the University of Applied Sciences in Social Affairs, in Geneva, where I live and work. I have the impression that my process of integration has only just begun.

Returning to Kurdistan

According to what I've learned in my social work programme, integration refers to a social, cultural and political process that seeks to establish a sense of unity out of a diverse mix of interests and experiences. Integration is not only a process, but also a goal. The sharing of values, equivalent living conditions and participation in social life are important measure of integration.

After 24 years away from greater Kurdistan, I returned last year to Iraqi Kurdistan to see my family and to celebrate the Kurdish New Year. My family had to come to Iraq from Iran, because I can never return to Iran, for political reasons.

From my first moments there, I was confronted with difficulties that I had not imagined I would face as a Kurd native to the region, and as someone who had followed regional news from afar in Switzerland.

In Switzerland, nearly everything is perfect in terms of organisation and comfort. In Iraqi Kurdistan, even taking a shower or shaving becomes a challenge, because there is always the risk that from one moment to the next the electricity will go out.
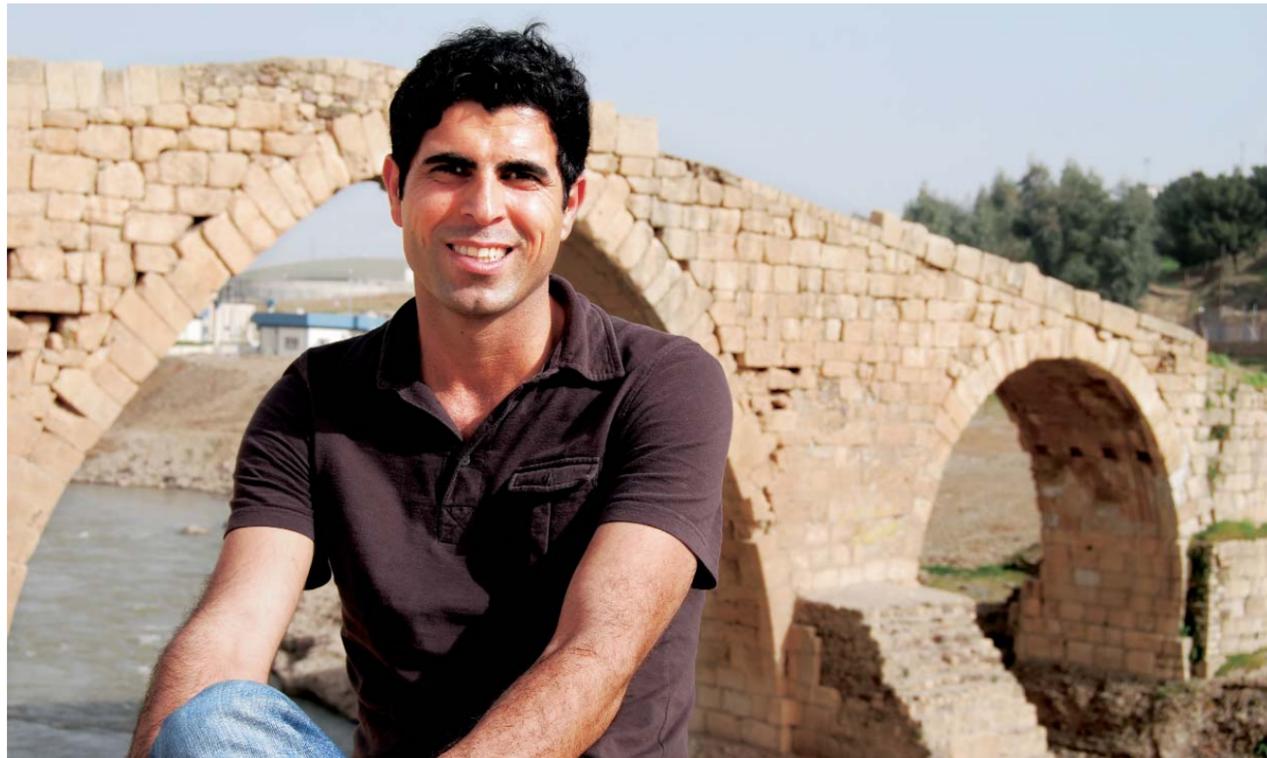
Driving on the road is also challenging, because of the number of people who drive without a license. The number of people killed in auto accidents in Kurdistan is higher than the number of people killed by bomb attacks in Baghdad.
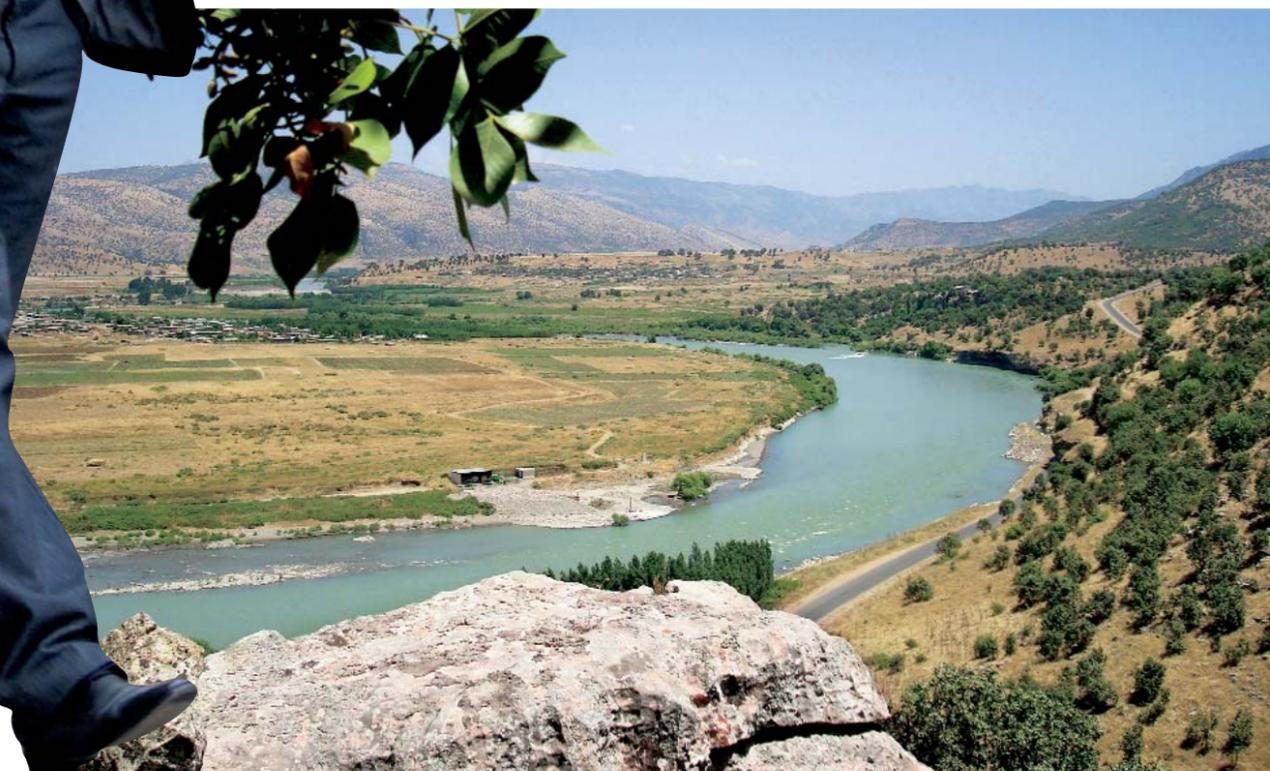
Erbil, the capitol city of Iraqi Kurdistan

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Taimoor enjoying a round of Kurdish tea

Taimoor in front of the Delal bridge, an ancient landmark in the city of XXX

"You are no longer Kurdish"

When I arrived in Erbil, the capitol of Iraqi Kurdistan, I was welcomed by a female Kurdish friend who had lived in Europe and in Kurdistan. We called for a taxi, and I climbed in the back of the taxi with her. All of a sudden, she pushed me and said, "Sit up front with the driver, here we don't sit together!" In the Middle East, men sit with the driver. I had forgotten this tradition.

What followed during my trip was a series of mistakes that stressed me enormously and that I was constantly trying to prevent. Here are a few examples.

In Erbil, I went with a friend to a teahouse. A customer who knew that I lived in Switzerland asked how I liked Erbil. I tried to tell him it was too hot for me using the Kurdish expression: "It's so hot that it kills the goats!"

My friend quickly warned me that I should never use the name of an animal without saying "with my respect" before the animal's name. Since I didn't do this, I had been impolite to the man who had asked me the question and whom I didn't even know.

In Kalar, a very conservative town, a friend invited me to someone else's house. When we arrived, I put out my hand to shake the woman of the house's hand. She refused because she is religious and in this town religious women do not shake hands with men. I was shocked because in the Kurdish culture that I knew from my childhood, a woman could welcome guests and shake their hand.

Another time, I was riding with a villager in a car when he waved two times out the window as if saying hello. I told him there was no one out there to greet. He replied that I was clearly no longer a Kurd, because I had forgotten that in Kurdistan people wave at cemeteries. Kurds, mostly villagers, say that when you pass a cemetery, you must wave to the dead.

During my trip, I had to always be on guard to not make a mistake. In the minds of the people there, I was too direct in asking questions about religion, politics and sex. There are many taboos in Kurdistan. I also observed a predominance and growth of the role of Islam in Kurdish culture. I see this as a decline in the strength of Kurdish traditions.

Becoming Swiss

In Geneva, I feel good. It's comfortable, safe, organised, and it operates under the rule of law. You can always seek recourse if you feel you've experienced injustice.

Obtaining a Swiss passport has increased my personal sense of security. With my C-permit, if I went outside of Switzerland for more than six months without notifying Swiss authorities, I would lose my right to stay in Switzerland.

It's very reassuring to now be a naturalised Swiss, especially since the Swiss People's Party is ever-multiplying the number of initiatives that make the lives of foreigners in Switzerland complicated and vulnerable.

The opportunity to return to Kurdistan and to see how life is there made me want to invest more of myself in the process of integration into Switzerland. This process is not easy and is often confusing.

So, the question I frequently ask myself remains – one that I will never truly be able to answer. Can a person be born in one place, live in another place, and still hold on to two cultures?

Edited and translated
by Julie Schindall