

IRAQ/KURDISTAN

The indiscernible state

by Bruno Zanzottera





Hundreds of new buildings and gigantic projects are being built in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. One of the ambitious projects, Pavilion, will even include a purpose-built lagoon, despite being situated in a semi-desert area.



WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR IRAQI KURDISTAN?

Often defined as a de facto state or a state within a state, the name Kurdistan refers to the large region that spans areas in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq inhabited largely by Kurdish peoples, a population that has never managed to gain its own independence. Nowadays, in each of these nations, the Kurds' lived experience differs substantially.

In Iraq, following the massacres perpetrated by Saddam Hussein and then the war fought by the Peshmerga (Kurdish military forces) against ISIS, the Kurds managed to carve out a portion of the territory that they now govern autonomously. It has its own parliament as well as a tricolour flag with the sun at its centre, symbolizing the promise of a brighter future. Thanks to its relative political stability and control over part of its oil resources, the Iraqi Kurdistan government, under the aegis of the powerful Barzani tribe, harbours dreams of

glory. Just a century ago the ancient citadel in Erbil, which is a UNESCO heritage site, was surrounded by desert: today there are eight-lane motorways, viaducts and brand new roads. Oil revenues have financed a massive wave of building speculation and hundreds of buildings are under construction, grouped into residential centres with evocative names like Empire World or Dream City, archetypal "non-places" protected by armed guards at every entrance.

However, away from the capital the wounds from the various conflicts are still raw. Villages once inhabited by Yazidi and Christian minorities are half-destroyed and abandoned while their former inhabitants still reside in refugee camps. In the Yazidi areas the memories of massacres and kidnappings by the ISIS militias are still present on people's faces, while the Christian community, which until 2003 was estimated to number one and a half million in Iraq, has now shrunk by 95% and continues to decline.

The Nineveh plain near Mosul, where the US-backed Kurds blocked the advance of ISIS, viewed from the Dayro d-Mor Mattai (St. Mathew) Syriac Orthodox monastery.





A young Yazidi man tends to the sacred flame in the cave chapels of the Lalish Temple. Water and oil are used to worship the light and the sun as representations of God.



Youngsters visit the museum dedicated to victims of the chemical attack carried out by Saddam Hussein's forces, on 16 March 1988, in the town of Halabja.



Images of Mas'ud Barzani, the former president of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, can be found everywhere. The presidency has now passed to another member of his family, Nechirvan Barzani.

A modern building in one of the brand new residential centres that are sprouting up all over Erbil, capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. In the background is the Divan luxury hotel.





Erbil. The cleaning of ancient manuscripts conserved in the Martyr Abbot Gabriel Danbow Antonian monastery. All the ancient books were recovered from damaged sanctuaries in other areas of Iraq and transported to this brand new monastery, where they will be restored and added to a digital archive.



Café Machko, below the citadel, is one of the most popular places where Erbil's inhabitants congregate from dusk into the evening.



A displaced old man in the Yazidi village of Sharya. This village, like many others inhabited by the Yazidis, was emptied by Saddam Hussein who wanted to concentrate its inhabitants in the new town of the same name. The original inhabitants never returned but various homes, although half-destroyed, have been occupied by families of Yazidis fleeing their villages on Mount Sinjar during the advance of ISIS and that remain unsafe.

The museum dedicated to the victims of the chemical attack carried out by Saddam Hussein's forces, on 16 March 1988, in the town of Halabja.





Youngsters at the Hansansham refugee camp.



The great Mosque of Jalil Khayat in Erbil reflects the slightly kitsch tastes that feature in much of the city's recent architecture.

A view of the Dukan (or Dokan) reservoir near the town of the same name.





Erbil. One of the brand new residential centres that are sprouting up in the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.



A family of displaced Yazidis in Sharya who fled their village after it was occupied by ISIS. Sharya is a town of 10,000 local inhabitants that also has a camp with 16 thousand displaced people as well as tents pitched more or less everywhere, containing a further 17 thousand internal refugees.



Prayers in the Mosque in Erbil's citadel. Today the citadel is completely uninhabited and has been a UNESCO heritage site since 2014. The mosque is one of the few buildings in the citadel still in use.

Uninhabited homes in the Christian village of Telskuf that was occupied by ISIS and completely abandoned by its inhabitants. Some families have returned but many homes remain either destroyed or abandoned.





Supporters of president Nechirvan Barzani's PDK (Kurdish Democratic Party) parade through the streets in the centre of Erbil.



The entrance to one of the many natural caves that form the Lalish Temple, the most sacred place for the Yazidis. Inside the caves, water and oil are used to worship the light and the sun as representations of God.

The Dayro Mar Mattai (St. Mathew) Orthodox Syriac Monastery. Mar Mattai is one of the world's oldest Christian monasteries, founded in 363 A.D. by the hermit of the same name after his persecution by Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate. Today the monastery provides shelter to families that fled ISIS.





A view of the ancient part of the town of Akre, where people of various different religions – Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews – have always lived together.

