

# Within the Circle of Fear

## Field Notes from Iraqi Kurdistan

FRANCESCA RECCHIA

Living in northern Iraq makes fear a close acquaintance. Expressions such as ‘post-conflict contexts’ or ‘countries in transition to democracy’ are part of daily conversations and evoke a sense of instability, a fragile equilibrium that can crumble at any point. A country that has undergone years of war has to take into account long trails of clearing mine fields, digging mass graves, dealing with trauma, restoring a sense of accountability and allowing processes of reconciliation. The line between success and failure is very fine, the fear of collapse a haunting ghost. Yet the pervasiveness and omnipresence of such a fear transforms it into white noise, and it fades into the background.

In the northwest corner of Kurdistan, in the middle of a ploughed field, lies the oldest intact aqueduct in the world, dating from 700 B.C. With cuneiform writings carved into its stones, the aqueduct at Jerwan is a remarkable piece of human history that both men and boys use today as a hangout spot. They meet there to drink and spray-paint their own version of ‘when a man loves a woman’ on the ancient stones. Still, the place preserves a timeless atmosphere: something eerie, yet peaceful. On the other side of the aqueduct, only a few metres away, lies an empty field where red triangular warning signs indicate the presence of land mines. Neither the drinkers nor the graffiti artists take notice and would surely laugh at anyone’s shock or fear. Like the acrobat who walks on a suspended rope, those who have lived on the verge of a constant disaster assess risk – and consequently fear – on a different scale.

The Federal Region of Kurdistan occupies the strategic area in the north of Iraq; it borders Iran, Turkey and Syria, and possesses one of the largest unexploited oil reservoirs in the world. The Region has had an autonomous government since 1991 and is undergoing a steady process of social, political and economic development. At first glance, the area is safe and politically stable. A closer look reveals a more complex and articulated situation.

As is the case with many developing countries, the dichotomy between rural and urban areas in Kurdistan is dramatic. The global trend of the growing economic divide between the cities and the countryside is accentuated here by the consequences of specific political history. During the 1980s, Saddam Hussein’s attacks mainly targeted villages in the

mountains; within a decade, the Ba'ath regime destroyed more than 4,000 of them with the explicit intention of annihilating logistic support to the *peshmerga* (the Kurdish irregular army). These destructions have displaced thousands of people and seriously disrupted the economy. Since 1991, the Kurdish Regional Government, in collaboration with UN agencies and NGOs, has rebuilt more than 2,000 villages. Yet living conditions there are harsh. Many settlements still lack services, infrastructure and access to resources. Since 2005, both droughts and aggressive water pumping have depleted ancient aquifers, forcing more than 100,000 people to leave their villages.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the majority of these settlements are located in the mountains that mark the borders of Kurdistan and Iraq with neighbouring countries, and are constantly exposed to the uncertainties of regional diplomatic relations. Iran has been shelling the Iraqi mountains since the 1980s. Tensions between the Turkish government and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) mount by the hour, despite official political statements that declare otherwise. Diplomatic relations between Syria and Iraq came to a sudden halt during the summer of 2009 and were never completely restored. The southern border of Kurdistan with the rest of Iraq is a combination of disputed areas (Khanaqin, Kirkuk and Mosul being the main cities), potentially explosive ethnic tensions as well as extensive and unexploited oil fields. If we were to consider Kurdistan as a set of concentric circles, the outermost of them would be a conundrum that defeats any logical argument for a simple solution. From the inner side of the circle, though, the situation appears to be quite different.

The recent access to oil revenue has radically changed the face of Kurdistan. Thousands of Kurds are returning from Europe and the United States, enticed by the economic opportunities in their homeland. The coalition between the two main parties (the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) after years of tension and a civil war (1994-96) guarantees a (convenient) balance and provides political stability. Within the space of two decades, the region has changed from a mainly rural to a fully urbanised one. More than half the four million Kurds currently living in the Federal Region of Kurdistan are distributed among the three main cities (Erbil, Dohuk and Sulemaniya); the capital, Erbil, has a population of 1.3 million.

In 1928, Archibald Hamilton – the engineer who under the British Mandate built the spectacular road that climbs into the mountains to connect Iraq and Iran – described Erbil thus: “Arbil by day towers as a mountain and a landmark, by night its lights shine as a beacon for many miles” (Hamilton, 2004: 49). Eighty years later, Erbil, the Arbela of Alexander the Great, known also as Hawler, still fits Hamilton's depiction both in physical and symbolic terms.

Erbil is promoting its role as capital city through the construction of a multi-faceted identity: it is a goldmine for business people and foreign investors and a safe haven for refugees and internally displaced persons; it is leading the way through massive economic investment in urban development while also betting on its ancient history. Building its present on a combination of mythical past and projection towards the future, Erbil has managed an acrobatic leap to shove both the memories of recent traumas and the discourse of fear to its margins. On the one hand, the city – in collaboration with UNESCO – is trying to have its

Citadel included in the list of World Heritage Sites, it being one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. On the other hand, it is shaping its present (but hopefully not its future, considering the recent financial blows) as a possible next Dubai.<sup>2</sup> Nihad Qoja, the mayor of Erbil, has often referred to the Emirates city as both an emblem of progress and an example to emulate.

This Dubai-dreaming frenzy has now assumed an ironic twist, taking into account the fate of the city itself after the financial and real estate crisis. Still, the parallel is both revealing of the general mood and useful as a tool to analyse the present situation. Oil, real estate speculation, tax free investment and tourism are the magic phrases of the alchemy of the present. The pace of transformation is so fast that it becomes difficult to keep up with what is new. The thirst for opportunity and the excitement of new possibilities mix to produce an intoxicating cocktail.<sup>3</sup>

Marco Polo travelled through Kurdistan in the 12th century and took note of the perennial fire in the oilfields of Kirkuk. Italo Calvino, in a wonderful contemporary rendition of Polo's travels, has the explorer describing Octavia, one of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, to Kublai Khan thus:

If you chose to believe me, good. Now I will tell you how Octavia, the spider-web city is made. There is a precipice between two steep mountains: the city is over the void. [...] Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will last only so long. (Calvino, 1997: 67)

Following years of violence and instability, the present wave of wealth and urban growth in Kurdistan is a vertiginous experience of hopes and promises. Erbil, as the spider-web city over the abyss, prospers and grows in a desperate attempt to turn the future into the present. There is no certainty about tomorrow, as there has never been for the Kurds through decades of war. The scars of Saddam Hussein's 1988 genocide campaign have still not healed; Al-Anfal and Halabja remain a constitutive part of Kurdish identity.<sup>4</sup> The heaviness of the past increases expectations from the current phase of stability: only the present is present. The mask of possibility hides the fear of loss; uncertainty about tomorrow becomes the impetus for a shiny today.

In his essay "Geology of New Fears", Lieven de Cauter introduces his discussion on contemporary (Western) fears by defining fear itself as one of the primordial human drives connected to the survival instinct. He argues that "[w]hen one is constantly able to perceive all possibilities and impossibilities, all dangers and risks, one is likely to become nervous, timorous or just plain scared" (de Cauter, 2004: 117). The likelihood of such an occurrence seems to me contextually specific. Looking at it from Kurdistan, the constant exposure to the fear of all "possibilities and impossibilities" morphs itself into a kind of immunity. Some say that the more you suffer, the more your ability to bear pain grows. Fear possibly works along similar lines. Being aware of all dangers might increase the threshold of what is to be feared.

de Caüter constructs his essay around a list of new fears – Demographic Fear, Economic Fear, Xenophobia, Agoraphobia or Political Fear, Fear of Terrorism. While this catalogue seems to make perfect sense within a Western framework, it loses strength when analysed against the situation in Kurdistan. One of the main differences lies in the discrepancy between abstract collective paranoia and actual physical risk. The leap beyond fear is conceivable when the possibility of danger is so pervasive that it is removed from the picture. Take the Fear of Terrorism, for example. The West hides terror attacks behind discussions of media manipulation, protection of soft targets and color-coded terror alerts. In Kurdistan, the government openly and proudly admits that it's been three years since the last attack. In the West, that would be terrifying information, but here it's comforting.

From the peripheral stand point of this essay, what is at stake is an interesting political counter-strategy. In the West, the public discourse of fear is more and more used as a political device to deploy control and justify the restriction of civil rights and freedoms. Kurdistan shows an opposite trend. It is, in fact, the removal and repression of the discourse of fear from the public domain that becomes the tool to gain political consensus, instill trust and confidence, and attract increasing flows of capital and investment. Following such a shift in geopolitical perspective, it seems to me that it is not quite anger – as de Caüter claims<sup>5</sup> – that emancipates men from fear. Rather, the awareness that the spider-web that holds the city *can only last so long* generates a new conceptualisation. It is not that people are not afraid anymore or that fear has been eliminated. When fear has been so historically engraved in the collective consciousness of a people, it seems to me that its existence is the main reason for its very disappearance.

## Notes

1. I owe Sebastian Meyer this information; Sebastian Meyer, "Kurdistan Karez", <http://www.photoshelter.com/c/sebmeyer/gallery/Kurdistan-Karez/G0000bJBztyjW7ZQ/> (accessed 14 December 2009)
2. Ahmed S. Wali. "Erbil: The Next Dubai". In *Hawler Tribune*, 9 April 2009.
3. *Ibid.* Wali, writing of the year 2008, states, "The cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government has approved a supplementary budget of \$161 million for Erbil, bringing the total for the province's budget to nearly 322 million dollars next year".
4. The 1986-89 military campaign that Saddam led against the Kurds is known as *Al-Anfal*, which literally means 'the spoils of war'. The name is taken from the eighth Sura of the Qu'ran, and refers to the trophy that the Muslims gained against the 'infidels' in 642 in the Battle of Badr. The *Anfal* operation lasted three years and culminated with the chemical attacks on Halabja that killed about 4,000 people within a few hours.
5. "He who is angry is no longer afraid" (de Caüter, 2004).

## References

- Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. (Trans.) William Weaver (Vintage Books, 1997, London).
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- Hamilton, Archibald Milne [1937]. *Road through Kurdistan: Travels in Northern Iraq* (Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2004, London).