

INTRODUCTION TO THE WOMEN

Maria Montessori, the Italian physician and educational leader, wrote, "Establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war."¹ The UNESCO Constitution says, "Since wars begin in the minds of people, it is in the minds of people that the defenses of peace must be constructed."² This text is a collection of images and stories of ordinary people who have gone through some extraordinary hardships. Yet, beauty is revealed in their faces, their hearts, and their words. The information was gathered from both people of Iraqi Kurdistan and those who are fleeing the on-going danger in the south. Women's voices which have often been ignored are at the center of this research. Many of the grandmothers and some of the mothers are illiterate. Many grandmothers and mothers are determined to provide more opportunities for their daughters. Education is opening the horizons of young women, giving them confidence, knowledge, skills, and virtues that can contribute to a better future for their country.

The common people of Iraq have suffered from repeated injustices in the war with Iran from 1980 to 1988 with forced conscriptions, the depletion of resources, female rape, and the pillaging and pollution of the land. Though northern Iraq is often thought of as a Kurdish area, it is a complex mixture of Kurdish, Turkmen, Assyrian, and Arabic people. Desire to control the rich oil fields of Kirkuk over the years brought tension and conflicts among these groups.³



"From the time I opened my eyes, there has been fighting. Mothers have been crying for their husbands and for their children. . . We didn't have a normal childhood. . . We fled to the mountains, but so many died of starvation or were killed. There were weapons over us, sounds all around, and so many died----but God blessed us and helped us through all. God led us to this school," said Pawan Asghar Talib, one of the first girls to enter a Turkish school when it opened in Iraq.

¹ Maria Montessori, Think Exist, accessed March 17, 2012, http://thinkexist.com/quotes/maria_montessori/.

² UNESCO Constitution, 1945, as quoted in Conflict Sensitivity, Peacebuilding & Reconciliation FORUT Policy Paper, April 24, 2007, accessed March 17, 2012. <http://forut.custompublish.com/index.php?id=4450164&showtipform=1&cat=80599>.

³ For more on ethnic groups in Kirkuk, see Ahmed Mohammed M.A. ed. and Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish Question and the 2003 Iraqi War* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc. 2005), 250.



Fortifications, watch towers, and security checks are seen when one enters or leaves the oil-rich area of Kirkuk.

Between 150,000 and 180,000 Kurdish people were massacred by the central Iraqi government in 1988 because they were considered a threat. Usually all the men of military age in an area were killed, leaving behind widows and orphans. Many were massacred in ways that resemble the methods of Nazi death squads and bodies were piled into mass graves.⁴ Iran and Iraq had fought a brutal war for eight years and some of the Kurds sympathized with Iran. In retaliation on March 16, 1988, the Iraqi government sent bombers from Kirkuk who dropped poisonous gas on Halabja (the fourth largest city in the Kurdish region) killing about 5,000 immediately and thousands died after that.⁵ From 1994 to 1998 rival Kurdish tribes sought power and fought with each other. In 2003, as Saddam Hussein lost power, people of this region feared he would use chemical weapons in desperation as had been done at Halabja.

⁴ Adam Jones, "Case Study: The Anfal Campaign (Iraqi Kurdistan), (1988)", June 5, 2010, http://www.gendercide.org/case_anfal.html.

⁵ Kevin McKiernan, *The Kurds, A People in Search of Their Homeland*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 39-40. McKiernan also writes that through out the 1980's the U.S. government was assisting the Iraqi government led by Saddam Hussein by loaning them over \$5 billion to carry on the war with Iran.

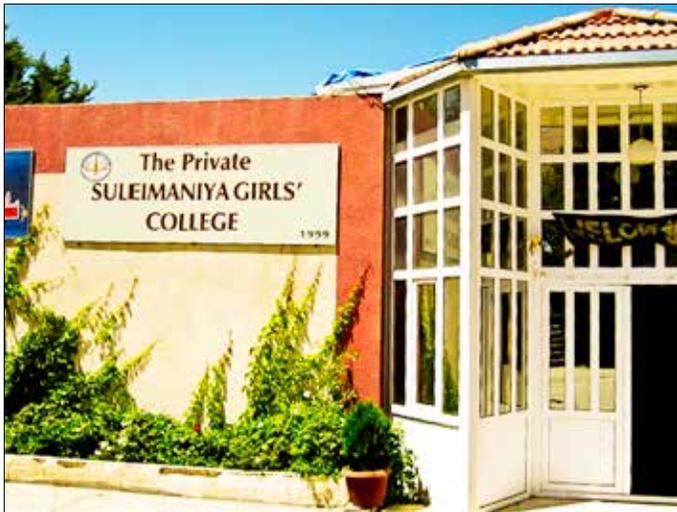


Hero Karim, whose family carried her as a baby away from the deadly gas in Halabja to safety in Iran, walks toward the Halabja Peace Museum and Memorial. The shape is reminiscent of the gas falling. Teachers inspired by Gülen have especially reached out to students whose families were affected by that tragedy.

People anywhere, and especially children, who have lost family members or who have repeatedly seen violence around them, are often traumatized, angry, and distrustful of others. They easily turn to revenge. They often have prejudice and hatred towards others. Politicians can say a conflict is over, but violence may still be raging in the hearts of the people. People in northern Iraq had experienced so much violence.

Turkish Muslims inspired by Fethullah Gülen initiated schools to bring hope and healing in northern Iraq in 1994, just six years after thousands were killed. The network of schools is called the Fezalar Educational Institution. The author's research study in the summer of 2010 sought to learn if or how the Gülen-inspired schools and the hospital were helping to bring stability, justice, and peace to northern Iraq.⁶

⁶ Martha Ann Kirk, *Hope and Healing: Stories from Northern Iraq Where Persons Inspired by Fethullah Gülen Have Been Serving*, Houston: Gülen Institute University of Houston, 2011 and also web published <http://guleninstitute.org/publications/researches/223-hope-and-healing-stories-from-northern-iraq-where-persons-inspired-by-fethullah-guelen-have-been-serving>.



In 2003 when people fled the city fearing that Saddam Husain might use chemical weapons, Turkish administrators taped the windows and hid in the principal's office here. They did not want to leave Iraq because they might not have been able to return.

The study involved persons of different cultures, religions, classes, and economic backgrounds including Kurdish, Arabic, Turkmen, and Syriani⁷ speaking people and also people from countries other than Iraq living there. While more of the people were from Iraqi Kurdistan, there were also people from other parts of Iraq such as Baghdad and Basrah. People who are Sunni Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Shi'a Muslim, Chaldean Catholic, and Mandaean contributed ideas.

Some of the challenges of war-torn Iraq can be seen through the eyes of two persons who work in Turkish schools; one is a person of Kurdish background from Iraqi Kurdistan, Yaseen Arif Hamaameen, and the other is a person of Arab background from the Baghdad area, Dr. Bayan Salim Obaid Al-Numan. One might think that they would be "enemies" in the sense that the Kurds and Arabs have fought against each other. Basically they are humans seeking the wellbeing of their families and all the human family. They both affirm the schools being like islands of peace where people grow in understanding and respect and learn cooperation.

Yaseen Arif Hamaameen was the vice principal of Suleimanya Girls' College in that city in 2010.⁸ Hamaameen said, "These institutions really help Kurdistan because they build bridges between cultures. Turkish people are our neighbors. At the time these schools were opened, there had been so many disagreements between people. These schools have helped build good relations." At first people feared these schools. In 1997 he was vice principal in Sallahadin College. "So many people came to me and asked for information. These Turkish schools seemed strange to them. These schools make a road for people to meet. They make a bridge between world technology and us. For the last five or six years so many of our students have been going abroad to

⁷ Syriani is related to Aramaic the everyday language of Jesus and is spoken by many Christians of the Middle East.

⁸ Yaseen Arif Hamaameen interviewed by Martha Ann Kirk, August 5, 2010.

participate in these schools' scientific activities. They have won medals. For us Iraqis, this is good. This introduces us to people on the outside. We meet people from so many countries. Gülen has a good message, not only for Muslims, Christians, and Jews, but for all humanity. Gülen's books are good bridges."

"I have both an engineering degree and a language degree and I could get a good job in a company. Money is not as important as education. That's why I choose to be here. I am happy to be here with our Turkish brothers and sisters." He explained that his wife is working on a doctorate in linguistics in Erbil. They had recently visited Istanbul, Turkey, and Fatih University there. This led him to compare life for Turkish teachers in Iraq with being in their own country. "Our Turkish brothers and sisters make great sacrifices to help us. We have had many problems in Iraq. There has been dissension between sections. . . . They could live more comfortably in their country. They want to help our children and to share moral education. Scientific education and moral education are like two wings of a bird. That is why I decided to work here."

Hamaameen looked back at his life experience: "In 1986 I was in Halabja and the district of Silwa when the Iranian government raided it. I left that district. I was in prep. Then in 1988 the Iraqi [Ba'ath] government raided Halabja by using chemical weapons. Five thousand people were killed in that raid. Traces of chemical weapons still remain. The Iraqi government raided the Qarady district and took 182,000 people. Some may have been buried alive. Saddam's regime was trying to get rid of any peoples other than the Arabic peoples. In 1988 the Iraq-Iran war stopped. Life was better for two years. Then Iraq started to invade Kuwait. About 75,000 were killed in Kuwait war. Then the U.S. came and more people suffered. After the Arabian Gulf war, from 1994 to 1996 we had a civil war between Barzani (PDK) and Talabani. I was in Erbil University then. The parties were living in the mountains. They came down and were fighting for power. Then there was treason—the Barzani wanted Saddam to help them against the Talibani, so Saddam's forces came to Erbil. After 1996 Barzani were dominating in Erbil. The Talibani held the government in Sulymania and there was no cooperation between the two. In 2003 when the U.S. was in Baghdad, then an agreement was reached between the Barzani and the Talbani. . . . These schools are building bridges between cultures and this is helping."

"A woman making bread" in the Halabja Museum exhibit based on photos of those who died from the chemical weapons, March 16, 1988.



A new building of Ishik University where Dr. Bayan Salim Obaid Al-Numan teaches.



In contrast to Yaseen Arif Hamaameen, a Kurd who had seen the Arab attacks, was Dr. Bayan Salim Obaid Al-Numan, an Arab of Baghdad who felt the pain of on-going violence around them. Al-Numan at Ishik University gave some context of the country and the university. He explained, "I am a professor of Civil Engineering and I came from Baghdad two years ago because things are difficult there and very difficult for professors.⁹ I spent twenty-two years in academic life at the University of Mustansiriya in Baghdad. It is a prestigious school established by the Caliph in the Abbasid period." In January 2007, there were a series of attacks at their university killing 70 and wounding 169. He also spoke of where they lived, "The terrorists in our neighborhood would gather the seventeen year olds. It was not hard to recruit people who have lost fathers. They were using mortar bombs." Though it was hard for his children to leave their friends, the family decided they needed to leave Baghdad. He said, "I applied and got a job at Ishik. I find that the university cares about ethics, knowledge, scientific development, modern technology, lecturing, and social activities. The environment is peaceful."

"Iraq has gone through changes of power—the Turks, the Persians, the Arabs. We are between two rivers and life has been luxurious because we had water.¹⁰ People depended on agriculture. We had so much water and channels where it would flow. Iraq was under the Ottomans, then the British mandate. The kingdom of Faisal I established a good moderate system. After World War II, there was a clash of ideologies, capitalism, communism, and Islamic movements. We had been a very civil society during the kingdom. Military characteristics burden civil society. We have had no time of a real democracy. Dictators make decisions and then war erupts. I was

⁹ Dr. Bayan Salim Obaid Al-Numan interviewed by Martha Ann Kirk, June 29, 2011.

¹⁰ "Land of Two Rivers" is the name of the Iraqi national anthem clearly indicating the value of water in a part of the world with many deserts. "Blessed be the land of the two rivers, A homeland of glorious determination and tolerance."



In Ankawa, a city of almost all Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan, the priest of the Assyrian congregation said that none of his 300 parishioners were from that area. Each had fled danger in other parts of Iraq and settled there. Local Christians shared their church building with them.

seventeen when the war with Iran began. It erupted suddenly and brought down our budget. In every part of the world, if military ideas dominate, then you may have war. So we have had twenty or thirty years of war—from 1980 to 2003. I had to be a soldier for three years, but since I was an engineer, I could work in that area in the military. Usually one has to be a soldier for five years. After three years, I was accepted for an MSC program so I got an educational leave. Then I was appointed to the university and finished my Ph.D.”

Many in Iraq spoke of centuries and centuries of Muslims and Christians being in friendly relationships. When Dr. Bayan Salim Obaid Al-Numan was asked why so many Christians have been attacked in recent years, he shared his point of view, “In Iraq about 3 to 5% are Christians and they are good people. Most are well educated. They have had opportunities. We have many common points. Some people associate them with western powers. That is why they are being targeted. Shia and Sunni have split and that makes us look split. The U.S. aggravated the people here. We are citizens of sects, before we were citizens of a nation. The U.S. cut us in three pieces and has taped us together with a constitution. Before we were one.” He went on to say that Dr. Hanna Batatu, a U.S. professor of Palestinian background who got a doctorate at Harvard University, had written the best modern history of Iraq. Batatu used methods of political sociology adapted from ideas of Max Weber.

Al-Numan added a personal note, “We have two boys and two girls. Now they are in Arabic schools, but next year we will start the smallest child at Ishik [a Turkish school]. I went to a birthday party that they had for the children there. I could see that they do much more for the students than ordinary schools do. The children get knowledge, but they also learn good attitudes. Oriental people appreciate if you really care about them. Iraqis can be severe in relationships, but it is because of our history. We have lived through the quarrels of the Arabs, the Persians, and

the Turkish.” Al-Numan recognized that Ishik University, other Gülen-inspired schools and Sema, the Gülen-inspired hospital in Erbil, bring together people of different religions, and Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and other groups building bridges of human understanding and respect.

Mohammed Ismail was formerly principal of Nilufer Girls School in Erbil. He had also been the religion teacher and Arabic teacher for Nergis Khaled, one of the translators for this research in Iraq. He explained that in 1994 the first Turkish school began there.¹¹ “There was war between two political parties. At first for two years, people did not trust the foreign school. Local people wondered if those who started the schools belonged to the Turkish government and wanted to get control of the area. The Turkish people opened a school with only fifteen students, and now there are over fifteen schools.¹² Both political parties and all people and our government now help us. The government is helping us in many ways giving us buildings, books, and lab equipment. All over Iraq there is free education. Though people have to pay tuition [for the Turkish schools], they want these schools. In 2003 there were rumors that Saddam would use chemical weapons. The Turkish teachers stayed with us. From this we learned the love of these teachers for the soil



Nilufer Girls School was the first Fezalar school for females

of Iraq. These schools became like a bridge. After these opened the way, a Turkish embassy has been opened. Saddam oppressed people, especially the people of Kurdistan. After Saddam was overthrown in 2003, people started fighting because they had not had opportunities to learn of the outside world. We have been giving our students opportunities to go to Turkey and other places. Our schools have modern equipment. Our students have good personalities and are talented. If you educate someone, they have the possibility to develop on their own. In our schools, people from different cultures, nations, and religions respect each other. Teachers look at each student equally. We had two Christian sisters and their family had no money to pay tuition. They received fourteen years of free education. For many years our students have gotten the top scores with outstanding projects.”

¹¹ Muhammed Ismail interviewed by Martha Ann Kirk, August 7, 2010.

¹² The system had expanded to thirty-three schools by mid-2013 according to “Fezalar Educational Institutions Corporate,” Fezalar Action, accessed July 27, 2013, <http://www.fezalaraction.com/corporate.html>.

Ismail continued, "In 1997, I started teaching in these schools as a lecturer. Teachers help students get on the right path. There is a Kurdish expression, 'Teaching is a job of prophets.' We believe this phrase. Teachers are prophets. We give our lives to show people the path. In the morning, my wife asks when I will return home and I say 'I don't know!' At the time of Saddam, people needed development in morality and in science. These schools are important as a source of English and to learn of the outside world. We have many labs. One can click a computer and get information. In this region we were first to get technology and modern methods of teaching. We led the government and private schools to better education. We helped them see the need for development. If people are jobless, then there can be social problems. In the whole region we teach democracy, that all have a right to live. Under tyranny people destroy others' rights. We are producing a new generation."

These comments from Yaseen Arif Hamaameen, Bayan Salim Obaid Al-Numan, and Mohammed Ismail, well-educated and caring men, were typical of what was heard from other people who have observed the Turkish schools in Iraq from the outside or the inside. The schools, sometimes called islands of peace, teach democracy, respect for life, respect for different cultures and religions, compassion, cooperation, and self-confidence, as well as, rigorous academic knowledge and skills. Iraq still has predominantly males in visible leadership roles, but these three men, as others working in the Turkish schools, are encouraging young women to develop as leaders.



Mujda Hashim Rakr is the head inspector and teacher trainer of all the public schools in Erbil, the largest city in the region. She and her husband, also an educational leader, have sent their children to the Turkish schools.

¹²The system had expanded to thirty-three schools by mid-2013 according to "Fezalar Educational Institutions Corporate," Fezalar Action, accessed July 27, 2013, <http://www.fezalaraction.com/corporate.html>.