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In memoriam Kamal Mazhar Ahmad (1937-2021), doyen of Kurdish historians

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Abstract

The Iraqi Kurdish historian Kamal Mazhar Ahmad (1937-2021) was probably one of the best known and most productive historians. He belonged to the first generation of Iraqis to pursue postgraduate studies in the Soviet Union, and when he was allowed to return to Iraq in 1970, he played a crucial role in the institutionalization of academic institutions and disciplines there and acted as an intermediary between Iraqi Kurdish and Soviet academic circles. As a lecturer and later professor at Baghdad University, he trained thousands of (Arab and Kurdish) students.

Keywords: Iraqi Kurdistan; historiography; 20th century history; Kurdish Academy; Kamal Mazhar Ahmad

Abstract in Kurmanji

Bi bîranîna Kemal Mezher Ehmed (1937-2021), duayênê dîroknasên kurd

Dîroknasê Kurd ê Iraqê Kemal Mezher Ehmed (1937-2021), bê guman dîroknasê Kurdan ê herî berbemdar û bi bandor bû. Ew ji neslê emil ê Iraqîyan bû ku li Yekîtiya Sovyetê di asta lîsansa bilind de xwendiyê û, dema ku li sala 1970î destûra vegera li Iraqê vergirt, wî li wir roleke mezin di sazûmaniya babet û sazîyên akademîk de leyst, û her weha navbênkariya derdorên akademîk ên Kurdî-Iraqî û Sovyetî kirîye. Wekê dersdar û, bi pey re, profesor li Zanîngeha Bexdayê, wî bi bezaran xwendekar (hem Ereb hem Kurd) jî perwerde kirine.

Abstract in Sorani

Yadkirdnewey Kemal Mezher Ehmed (1937-2021), diyartirîn mêjûnûse Kurdekan

Mêjûnûsî benawbengî kurd Kemal Mezher Ehmed (1937-2021) yekêk bû le diyartirîn û karîgertirîn mêjûnûsekanî kurd. Yekêk bû le yekemîn newey 'Iraqî ke xwendîni ballay le Yekêti Sovyet be dest bîname. Û katêkê rêgay pêdra bgerrêwe bo 'Iraq le sallî 1970 da, rollêkî karîgerî bîni le be damezrawekirani navende ekadîmyekan û beşê zanîstîyekan lew willate da. Û herweha bû be navendkarêk le nêwan ekadîmanî kurdî 'Iraq û Yekêti Sovyet da. Wekî mamostayekî zanko û paşan wekê profesorêk le Zankoy Bexdad, bezaran xwendekarî kurd û 'erebî perwerde û fêrkirdwe.

Abstract in Zazaki

Seba yadkerdişê Kemal Mezhar Ahmadi (1937-2021), duayênê tarîxnasanê kurdan

Beno ke tarîxnasê kurdanê Iraqî Kemal Mezhar Ahmad (1937-2021) tarîxnasê kurdan o tewr berbemdar û tesirdar bî. O neslê iraqîyan ê verênî ra bî ke Yewiya Sovyetan de perwerdeyê lîsansê berzî wendbî. Wexto ke serra 1970î de destûr dîya ci ke agêro Iraq, uca dezgesazîya beş û enstîtuyanê akademîkan de rolêko elzem ard ca û

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mîyanê akademîsyananê kurdanê Îraqî û Sovyetan de mabênkarîye kerde. Sey dersdayox û dima zêj sey profesore
Unîversîteya Bexdadî, ey bi bezaran wendekarî (ereb û kurdi) perwerde kerdi.

On 16 March of this year the Kurdish historian Kamal Mazhar Ahmad passed away in a hospital in Bonn, Germany. Overruling Covid regulations, the Kurdistan Regional Government had his body flown back to Erbil, where a ceremony was held in the presence of the president of the KRG, Nechirvan Barzani, minister of culture Hama Hama Saeed, and Erbil governor Omid Khoshnaw, before the body was taken to Sulaymani for burial. Dr. Kamal, as he was commonly known, was a much beloved public intellectual, the author of numerous authoritative studies on modern Kurdish history and the teacher and supervisor of several generations of history students. He wrote in Russian, Sorani Kurdish and Arabic, and several of his works were translated into English, Persian, Turkish and Kurmanji Kurdish, making him one of the most widely read historians among Kurds from Turkey, Syria and Iran as well as Iraq.²

Kamal Mazhar was born in the village of Aghjalar near Kirkuk in 1937 as the son of a civil servant. He grew up in a period when the traditional class system was breaking down and social mobility through education was possible. Like many others of similar background, he attended secondary school in Sulaymani, the major centre of Kurdish intellectual culture. Upon graduation, he was one of a smaller number who continued their studies in Baghdad at the Teachers Training College (later renamed College of Education). There he was at the right place at the right time when the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in a military coup in July 1958.

The left-leaning new regime, led by Colonel Abdulkarim Qassem, established friendly relations with the Soviet Union, partnered with the Communist Party and made a number of reconciling gestures towards Iraq's Kurds, promising equal rights and cultural recognition. Mulla Mustafa Barzani and his loyal companions, who had been living in exile in the USSR since 1947, were welcomed back to Iraq and were treated as representatives of the Kurdish people. The first years of the Qassem regime raised expectations of a land reform that would break the power of the large tribal lords and empower the landless and poor peasantry, as well as Kurdish expectations of a degree of self-rule. It took three years for the relations between Qassem and Barzani and other politically active Kurds to deteriorate to the point where armed conflict broke out.

Of more direct importance for Kamal Mazhar was that the Soviet Union offered a number of scholarships for Iraqi students to pursue a doctoral degree there. Upon graduating from the College of Education in 1959 Kamal, who had become a member of the Iraqi Communist Party, was chosen to be one of the Kurdish recipients, together with Ma'ruf Khaznadar, Nasrin Fakhri and Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul. The story of this generation of Soviet-trained Kurdish scholars, their wrestling with Marxist orthodoxy, and the impact of their presence on Soviet Kurdology were highlighted in Nodar Mossaki's obituary of Izzaddin Mustafa Rasul, who had passed away a few months earlier (Mossaki 2021). Like Izzaddin, Kamal ended up in Baku, where he was trained as a historian and prepared a dissertation on the Kurdish movement during the years of the British occupation and mandate (1918-1932). The decision

² Essential information for this brief obituary was provided by Joyce Blau, Jamile Jamil (Cemilê Cemil), Hassan Ghazi, Jabar Kadir (Cebâr Qadir) and Nodar Mossaki.

to concentrate on this period suggests co-ordination with the Moscow-based Russian historian M. S. Lazarev, who had earlier started work on a dissertation focusing on Kurdistan during the preceding quarter century (published as Lazarev 1964, reviewed in Evans 1965). Another Russian historian, N. A. Khalfin, was preparing a study of imperial rivalries in Kurdistan during the 19th century (Khalfin 1963), and the Kurdish scholar from the Armenian SSR, Jalile Jalil (Celilê Celil) was completing his study of Shaykh 'Ubaydullah's uprising in 1880 (Dzhasimovich 1966, reviewed in Evans 1966). In Baku, the Kurdish historian and novelist Rahim Ghazi acted as Kamal's mentor. Rahim, a paternal cousin of Ghazi Mohammad, had been among a group of some fifty students that were sent to Baku by the Kurdistan Republic in April 1946 for military training. After the defeat of the Republic and the public execution of Ghazi Mohammad and other family members, Rahim had decided not to return to Iran and made a career in Baku, writing a dissertation on the history of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Mahabad Republic and becoming one of the founders of the Centre of Kurdish studies at the university.

Kamal completed his dissertation in 1963 and submitted it to the Orientalist section of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (the Institute of Asian and African Peoples) in Moscow. Meanwhile changes had taken place in Iraq that prevented his return. In early 1963 Qassem's government was overthrown in another coup by the Baath party, which banned the Communist Party and fiercely persecuted communists (Tripp 2000: 167-75). Kamal decided to remain in the Soviet Union, upon which Iraq invalidated his passport so that he would be unable to return until much later friendly relations with the Soviet Union were restored.

Kamal's examiners had been favourably impressed by his dissertation, and he was given the opportunity to continue his research to the habilitation (Dr. Nauk) level, a privilege that was granted to only a small proportion of the foreign students. Moreover, the dissertation was published as a book in Baku, which remained Kamal's base (1967). This was by no means his only Russian publication, for he had begun contributing articles on national and class struggles in Kurdistan to various Soviet journals. Most of these publications were offshoots from his ongoing research for the habilitation thesis, which continued the narrative of the original dissertation up to the end of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958. This work came to consist of three volumes of altogether 750 pages (of which the original dissertation was the first volume), which were again submitted to the Soviet Academy of Sciences and examined by three prominent Russian historians, including the Kurdish specialist Naftula Khalfin, "a Soviet historian of unusual ability" according to an observer of the scene (Evans 1966: 68).

Kamal's work was well received by his Soviet colleagues, and especially warm relations of mutual appreciation and support developed between him and Khalfin and Lazarev, as well as his fellow Kurd, Jalile Jalil in Yerevan. Among the first generation of Iraqi Kurdish students in the USSR he was the only historian who gained prominence, and throughout his life he remained the Soviet scholars' preferred Iraqi counterpart.³ Being a foreigner, however, Kamal was not given access to Soviet archives – in those years these were only accessible to Soviet citizens who were party members. The historical narrative and analysis in the habilitation thesis and much of his later work were based on large amounts of published material in English, Arabic and Russian and his personal knowledge of persons and events in Kurdistan.

³ There was another historian among his contemporaries, Kawus Qaftan, who studied in Leningrad and wrote a thesis on the early Barzani revolts under the supervision of Qanatê Kurdo, but he remained relatively unknown (Jabar Kadir, personal communication).

Only much later, during a visit to Great Britain, was he able to carry out actual archival research.

Meanwhile significant changes had taken place in Iraq. The first Baath government was toppled after less than a year by a group of pan-Arab nationalist officers who were equally anti-communist. They were in turn overthrown in 1968 in a coup by another faction of the Baath party. Each new regime, from Qassem onwards, started out with promises to the Kurds but soon ended up fighting them. In the course of the decade, the Kurdish movement succeeded in mobilizing increasing numbers of Kurds behind its demands of cultural rights and political autonomy (Vanly 1970, Jawad 1981). The second Baath regime, led by Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, went further than its predecessors in seeking accommodation with the Kurds and, renouncing on the earlier anti-communism, sought closer alignment with the Soviet Union. On 11 March 1970 a peace agreement was signed between Baghdad and the Kurdish movement, entailing autonomy and Kurdish representation in the central government, recognition of the Kurds as a nationality within Iraq and of their language as one of the two official languages, and official sponsorship of Kurdish education and culture (Vanly 1993: 153-7). In 1972, the regime nationalized the Iraqi Petroleum Company and signed a treaty of friendship and trade agreement with the USSR, completing its realignment in Cold War geopolitics (Tripp 2000: 205-8). Close relations with the USSR were to continue until the Iraq-Iran war.

These developments made it possible for Kamal to return to Iraq. He arrived late in 1970 and found a position as a lecturer in the history department of Baghdad University. It was the beginning of a 37-year teaching career during which he taught thousands of students, most of them Iraqi Arabs. Kurds initially constituted only a small minority among the students at Baghdad University.

Kamal also became involved in the establishment of the Kurdish Academy (Korri Zanyari Kurd), one of the tangible products of the March agreement. Established by law in August 1970 and placed under the Ministry of Education, the Academy had as its task to “revive the Kurdish and Islamic heritage in the sciences, literature and the arts,” to safeguard and develop the Kurdish language, and to publish a scholarly journal and books. The history of Iraq and specifically its Kurdish region was explicitly mentioned as one of the areas of research to be stimulated.⁴ The Academy was run by a committee of some ten people that included Kamal as the only historian, and from whom he was elected as the secretary general. In this function, he was also in charge of relations with the Soviet Academy of Sciences and could distribute a number of scholarships for a new generation to be trained in the USSR.⁵

The Academy’s first publication was a Kurdish translation of the *Sbarafnama* by the poet Hejar, for which Kamal wrote a preface on the place of this important text in Russian and Soviet scholarship (1972). The journal of the Academy, *Govari Korri Zanyari Kurd*, began publication

⁴ The text of the law (in Arabic, with an English summary) can be found in the final pages of the first volume of the Academy’s journal, *Govari Korri Zanyari Kurd* (1973). Periodical reports on the activities of the Academy were published in the journal – the first one by Kamal in his role as secretary general (Mezher 1973). In spite of its considerable output in books and journal articles and its contribution to the standardization of Sorani Kurdish, the Academy and its journal have received little scholarly attention. Amir Hassanpour is, to my knowledge, the only scholar writing in English who briefly discusses its establishment and work on Kurdish linguistics, noting that Kurdish writers had called for a different type of institution, which would uniquely focus on language standardization (Hassanpour 1992: 448-51). The only substantial study of the role of the Academy of which I am aware consists of two recent articles in Kurdish (Salih 2017, 2018), which Jabar Kadir kindly shared with me.

⁵ A group of four Kurdish students, including Kamal’s student at Baghdad University Jabar Kadir, left for Moscow in 1973.

in 1973 and rapidly established itself as an authoritative medium, with lengthy articles in Kurdish and Arabic on various aspects of Kurdish linguistics, literature and – less often – history and society. Appearing annually (initially even twice per year), with an average size of 600 pages, it established a significant corpus of academic literature in Kurdish (mostly but not exclusively Sorani; there were also contributions in Badinani). In spite of the political conflicts of the following decades, the journal kept appearing regularly until 1990.⁶

Kamal contributed a series of articles on Kurdistan during the First World War, which were later published together as the book that is probably his best known work (1975). This work was not derivative of his dissertations, which had dealt with later periods, but obviously was much indebted to his research while in the USSR. Besides memoirs by Iraqi personalities and numerous British sources, he also quotes his Soviet colleagues, who had been able to carry out the archival research that had not been possible for himself. The fifth instalment (in vol. 3 no. 1, 1975) focused on the role of the Kurds in the Armenian massacres.⁷

Kamal was the first Kurdish intellectual to explicitly address the question of Kurdish participation in the genocide. Citing numerous Russian and Armenian sources, he emphasized the active role of many Kurds in the killings and made no attempt to downplay their responsibility and question possible bias of the sources. He also demonstrated, however, that many other Kurds had helped Armenians to save their lives during these years. He placed the massacres in the context of a much longer history of feudal oppression. Although he was personally a nationalist and sympathetic to the struggle of the Kurdish movement, from Shaykh Mahmud to Mulla Mustafa Barzani, he remained true to his Marxist views and fiercely critical of the oppression and inequalities in traditional Kurdish society. It is probably no coincidence that his first publication after his return to Iraq was the Arabic translation of a booklet by the Armenian Kurdish writer Ereb Şemo on feudalism among the Kurds (1971).

Meanwhile the relations between the Baath regime and the Kurdish movement rapidly deteriorated and in March 1974, when the government proclaimed a severely limited form of autonomy, Barzani broke off relations with Baghdad and took up arms to defend the region that the Kurds de facto controlled (Vanly 1993: 153-77). The Kurdish ministers and other representatives in Baghdad were pulled back to the Kurdish region. The Academy remained in Baghdad and continued functioning, but Kamal left the capital for Kurdistan, staying in the “liberated areas” until the end of the uprising in March 1975. Following the defeat, he declined going into exile and decided to return to Baghdad. The government offered an amnesty to the Kurds who had sided with Barzani, and Kamal could resume teaching at the University but no longer was allowed to play a part in the Academy.⁸ Two books that he had prepared before were nonetheless published under the imprint of the Academy, both in Kurdish: the study of the First World War that was already mentioned (1975) was followed by a study of the first Sorani journal, which had been published under British auspices in Baghdad in 1918, *Têgeyîştîni Rastî* (1978). Meanwhile he published a series of popularizing articles in the Arabic-language journal of the KDP, *al-Ta'akbi*, many of them focusing on the Shaykh Sa'îd rebellion in

⁶ Scans of the first twenty volumes (1973-1989) of the *Govarî Korî Zanyarî Kurd* are available online at: <http://www.hewalname.com/ku/?p=1378>.

⁷ A French translation of this essay, incorporated as chapter 5 in the book, was later published by an Armenian history journal (1998).

⁸ Vanly, who visited Baghdad not long after the uprising, presents a vivid image of the precarious position in which Kurds in Baghdad found themselves and the heavy-handed government interference in all Kurdish institutions (1993: 177-87).

Turkey. A quarter century later, these were republished as a book by a Kurdish association in Beirut (1991).

Strengthening his credentials as a historian of Iraq (and not just the Kurds), and probably related to his actual teaching, Kamal's next two publications (1977, 1978), both written in Arabic, concerned an important episode in Iraqi history, generally known in English as "the Iraqi revolt" (Tripp 2000: 40-5), an uprising of the Arab tribes on the middle Euphrates against the British occupation in 1920. These books were at the same time part of his broader project of making Soviet scholarship concerning Iraq accessible to the Iraqi public. He followed this up with a history of the working class and workers' movements in Iraq, focusing especially on oil workers in Kirkuk (1981a), and two general books on the modern history of Iran and Iraq (1985b, 1987). In Kurdish, he wrote a number of popular scientific studies: an essay on the Kurds and history (1983a), a women's history (1981b), a book on the great Russian Orientalist Gordlevski and his observations on the Kurds (1983b), and a collection of previously published articles on Kurdish history (1985a).

By the early 1980s, he had been promoted to full professor, which provided a degree of social and financial security but offered little protection from the hardships to which all Iraqis were subjected: the eight-year war with Iran (1980-88), Saddam's occupation of Kuwait and the US-led war to expel him (1990-91), the international economic boycott through the 1990s and early 2000s, and finally the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the chaos that followed. Baghdad was heavily bombed in 1991 and 2003 and most of its infrastructure destroyed. The 1990s were the most difficult period; although Kamal continued teaching, his salary lost its value so rapidly due to the depreciation of the Iraqi dinar that it was insufficient for survival and had to be supplemented from the sale of the family's modest valuables.

Kamal produced no major new studies during the 1990s but wrote numerous short articles for the Kurdish magazine *Rengin* and devoted much time to two major long-term projects. One concerned the annotated edition of the memoirs of two prominent Kurdish personalities who had played important parts in crucial periods of Iraq's history, the former ministers Ahmad Mokhtar Baban and Fouad Arif (1999-2009; 2013).⁹ The other project, which was to remain uncompleted, was an ambitious multi-volume documentary history of the Kurds in the modern period. One volume was published, in response to the political needs of the moment, as a history of Kirkuk (2004a-b), a rough draft of the second volume exists in handwritten manuscript (Jabar Kadir, personal communication).

The American invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 brought more destruction and suffering but also many new opportunities for the Kurds. The Kurdistan Regional Government was empowered by the new Constitution; Jalal Talabani became Iraq's President. Though Kamal had always remained politically independent, his work as a historian was highly appreciated by both of the Kurdish parties. He probably also perceived his potential usefulness as the Kurds were pressing their claims for control of Kirkuk, and he rapidly completed the first part of his long-projected history of the Kurds, with a special focus on

⁹ Ahmad Mokhtar Baban served brief terms as a minister and finally as Iraq's last Prime Minister under the monarchy; Fouad Arif was Kurdish member of the Free Officers who carried out the 1958 coup and served as a minister (and as a token Kurd) under Qassem as well as Abdurrahman Arif. He continued playing a role under the Baath regime. The second part of the memoirs includes developments since the fall of Saddam.

Kirkuk. It was published by the Regional Government in Arabic as well as English in 2004, and translated into Turkish the following year.¹⁰

Kamal had been struggling with poor health for several years. The changed political circumstances enabled him to go abroad for treatment, with some support from the Kurdish authorities. From mid-2006 to early 2008 he and his wife, Shehla Haidary, lived in Great Britain. Besides medical treatment, he used the opportunity to do research in the British archives and find material for his documentary history of the Kurds. He prepared a collection of these documents, translated into Kurdish, as a two-volume book (2008, 2014).

The return to Iraq was also the moment of his resettlement from Baghdad, where he had lived and taught since 1970, to the Kurdish capital of Erbil. Here he had been elected a member of the Academy of Kurdistan (Korri Zanyari Kurdistan) the previous year.¹¹

Serious health problems forced Kamal to seek treatment in Europe again, this time in Germany. In 2015 he and his wife moved to Bonn, where he was in and out of hospital for the following years. He was not to return to Iraq alive.

Colleagues and friends as well as the general public remember him as a gentle and always helpful scholar but an independent-minded person, a great teacher and a prolific scholar, whose reputation has only grown with the years. His numerous works will long survive him.

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¹⁰ Kamal's book was perhaps too scholarly and too historical to be an effective political instrument. In the same year, the legal scholar Noury Talabany also published a book with the same objective of offering a historical and legal basis for the Kurdish claims on Kirkuk, which may have been more effective because of its focus on recent history (Talebani 2004).

¹¹ The Academy of Kurdistan is not to be confused with the earlier Baghdad-based Kurdish Academy. The latter had in 1978 been downgraded in status to the Kurdish Branch of the Iraqi Academy (Korri Zanyari `Êraq – Destey Kurd) and by the end of the 1980s gradually faded away. The Academy of Kurdistan was established in Erbil in 1997, and was later to change its name to Kurdish Academy (Ekdîmiya Kurd).

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- (1981b). *Afret le mējû da. Kurtebasêki mējûyi û komelayeti* [Woman in history. A brief historical and sociological overview]. Bexda.
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