

KAKA'IS
IN THE
TIME OF
CORONA

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Preface

This booklet documents what the Kaka'i religious community in the district of Daquq, south-east of Kirkuk, has endured from early June to late November 2020 under the COVID-19 pandemic. This booklet is composed of two sections, one in Arabic and one in English, that contain twenty-four authentic journalistic pieces produced by the team of journalists at KirkukNow.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, particularly underprivileged groups such as religious minorities in Iraq. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic has been devastating to religious communities such as the Kaka'i. Members of this community in Daquq are particularly exposed to the effects of COVID-19 due to instability, economic problems and marginalization. Responding swiftly to the needs for the Kaka'i and other religious minorities in Iraq, while ensuring that humanitarian and recovery assistance reaches those most in need, is critical.

It is worth mentioning that this project would not have been possible without the dedicated support from the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID).

I hope this booklet is widely read and the relevant stakeholders benefit from the reliable information produced by journalists to help build an inclusive, democratic, and peaceful Iraq.

Salam Omer

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A FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL KAKA'IS LEFT WITH THREE UNPLEASANT OPTIONS



Kirkuk, Mohammed Aziz, a Kaka'i farmer, has cultivated his farm late due to the nationwide coronavirus lockdown, June 2020. Photo: KirkukNow

The Kaka'i minority in the disputed towns of Daquq and Khanaqin are left with three options: evacuation of their villages, forming a Kaka'i security force, or protection by the special guards of the Iraqi president until security is restored. It is unknown which one of the options will be chosen for their survival in their home regions.

The three options were proposed to the Iraqi President Barham Salih, when he met with a number of Kaka'i figures at the presidential palace in Baghdad.

The meeting took place due to numerous attacks on the Kaka'i minority in Kirkuk's district Daquq and Khanaqin district in Diyala. Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus three months ago, many members of the Kaka'i minority have been killed, faced threats, and their crops set on fire.

Shamsala Goran, who participated in the meeting with the Iraqi president as the representative of Kaka'is in Khanaqin, told KirkukNow: "We explained the threats posed to the Kaka'is in Khanaqin, Daquq and the other disputed areas to the Iraqi president. We told him candidly that if they do not protect our lives and solve the security issue, we would be forced to evacuate our villages."

Beside the option to evacuate their villages, they have proposed two other options to the president, namely "establishing a force consisting of members of the Kaka'i community, or deploying the presidential guards to the Kaka'i areas until security is restored," Goran said.

The insurgent attacks on the Kaka'is in the disputed areas have surged with the outbreak of the novel Corona virus. Security forces are mandated to impose a curfew to contain the spread of the virus. The curfew has been announced since mid-March.



Kirkuk, Kaka'i members are gathering in Ali Saray village after the abduction of a Kaka'i person, 2017. Photo: KirkukNow

Since the outbreak of the virus, 15 members of the Kaka'i community were killed, and eight have been injured in Daquq and Khanaqin, according to numbers recorded by Kaka'is in Sulaimaniya and Halabja.

The Kaka'i community in Sulaimaniya and Halabja issued a statement in which they say that "great damage has been inflicted on the Kaka'is in Daquq and Khanaqin, including burning their farms and destroying the irrigation system of their farms."

"If the targeting of the Kaka'i is not prevented, they will face a massacre," the statement mentions.

Goran added that "the geography of the Kaka'i villages is at the confrontation line between the extremist groups and the security forces. Majority of the villages are located in the disputed areas, the fate of which is still not determined in accordance with the constitution, which makes the attacks possible."

"Since our villages are located in the disputed areas, both the Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga forces could be stationed there based on Article 140 of the constitution. That is better for us, as cooperation will increase and we will be better protected."

Two sources close to the Iraqi president told KirkukNow that President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi are attempting to find a solution for the issues the Kaka'i community face and that they will soon meet to discuss the matter.



One of the sources, who preferred to remain anonymous, said that “deploying presidential guards to the areas is hard and forming a Kaka’i force is beyond the authority of the president, so he and Kadhimî are looking for other solutions.”

Goran further added that “the Iraqi president has comprehensive knowledge on the area and said that he will discuss the situation with the prime minister to try finding a solution.”

“The Iraqi president said that the Kaka’is are an integral part of Iraq and should not be ignored.”

While waiting for such a meeting for a solution to be found, the Kaka’is in the meantime are at risk of losing this year’s agricultural products at their farms and all their efforts and expenses put into them is going to waste.

Mohammad Aziz, a Kaka’i farmer in Haftaghar area in Daquq, told KirkukNow: “Because of the Coronavirus and the security situation, the harvesting season of our products are delayed. For instance, in previous years, when our okra was ready for harvest the price was high. We would get 2,000 Dinars [\$1.66] for a kilogram, but now a kilogram is worth 750 Dinars [\$0.62]. It would be better for us if security is improved and the Coronavirus goes away.”

The Kaka’is do not accuse a specific group for the attacks, but rather call them “a terrorist group.”

The statement calls for a certain mechanism to protect the Kaka’i community in Daquq and Khanaqin, and they hold the federal and regional governments accountable for their protection.

It also urges the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS and human rights organizations to play their roles in their protection.

The Kaka’is have now put their hopes in the promises of the Iraqi president and eagerly await a decision that would lead to the protection of their lives and livelihood.

However, Zyad Sheikh Fahad, chief of one of the Kaka’i tribes in Daquq, said: “Before the Coronavirus outbreak, we informed the Iraqi president about the threats, and they formed a military committee to investigate, but it resulted in nothing.”

“Before the Coronavirus, we were targeted in a few areas, but we are currently targeted in many areas, and the number of the attacks has surged.”

KAKA'I FARMER GOES BANKRUPT THRICE DUE TO DAESH AND COVID-19



Jalil Ibrahim, 50, is a Kaka'i farmer in Daquq. Photo: Mohammed Almas

Jalil Ibrahim, a Kaka'i farmer, has gone bankrupt three times over the course of six years as a result of volatility in local security and political circumstances. "Whatever changes happen, we, the Kaka'i minority, pay the price for it," Ibrahim said.

The Islamic State (IS) attacks in 2014, the emergence of a security vacuum after the Kurdish independence referendum, and the outbreak of COVID-19 have all posed significant threats to Ibrahim and his family's livelihood.

A portion of Ibrahim's agricultural products has gone to waste, because he was unable to harvest them on time due to the enforcement of curfew aimed at containing the spread of the novel Coronavirus. Other portions of his products that aren't ready for harvest yet, may also go to waste.

"I've given up hope of being able to earn an income this year. The coronavirus bankrupted me; whatever changes happen, we, the Kaka'i minority, pay the price for it," claimed Ibrahim as he worked on his farm.

Grain crops are burning in Daquq district

In the same month of last year, Ibrahim would be harvesting his crops and making plans for the next year.

The start of the misfortunes

Jalil Ibrahim, father of four, worked as a farmer and livestock raiser in the Kaka'i village of Ali Saray until 2014.

"We farmed without problems and planted all kinds of vegetables; tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, watermelon, and grains. Traffic issues did not exist, and there was demand for our products. We were happy and did not know what exhaustion was," Ibrahim said.

Ibrahim added that by 2014, he was able to buy a house and a car as he was doing well financially, until the emergence of IS, which reversed this progress.

In mid-2014, most Kaka'i villages in Daquq district were evacuated as IS launched an offensive against Kirkuk. Everything Ibrahim had built over the years was lost when he had to flee his village.

"300 dunams [30 hectares] of land fell under control of IS, which put us at risk of losing our livelihood. Most of us evacuated the village," said Ibrahim, explaining how he went bankrupt the first time. Unable to work on his land, Ibrahim moved to the centre of Daquq district and began working as a labourer.

In 2016, a large Peshmerga force from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was deployed to the disputed areas, including southern Daquq. With Iraqi forces, they retook the Kaka'i villages that had fallen under IS control, paving the way for the return of the Kaka'i villagers.

Ibrahim was one of the farmers who were able to resume farming. From Daquq, he would go to his fields early in the morning and would go back home after sunset.

"IS still posed a threat. My family remained in Daquq for their safety, but I was visiting my farms on a daily basis," he recalled. "I started farming again. I produced a lot and sold it at the market. But that didn't last long either; I abandoned my village once more in 2018."

On 17 October 2017, former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordered the return of Iraqi forces to the disputed territories forcing the Peshmerga forces to retreat, and the consequence of those events created a security vacuum in the areas where the Kaka'i villages are located.

IS militants exploited the security vacuum and attacked the Kaka'i villages. Since then, of the total 15 Kaka'i villages, five have been completely evacuated and three others are about to be.

Ibrahim says that right before the harvest time in 2018, unknown militants burned 13 hectares of his grain crops. And that a few days after that, they destroyed his house and his water well. He adds that one night he was wounded and kidnapped while working his on his field, but managed to escape.

And thus, Ibrahim was forced to abandon his crops and went bankrupt for the second time.

COVID-19 Bankruptcy

Early this year, Ibrahim rented a 25 dunams [2.5 hectares] plot of land to plant grains in Talabani areas near Daquq and again started farming.

"The security situation in these areas was better. I mustered all of my physical and financial strength and spent a large amount of money, but I was confronted by the Coronavirus," Ibrahim said, "I could reach my fields with difficulty; some of them dried up because I was not able to irrigate them on time."

"I could not plant some of my crops on time, which is why they have not grown yet," he added.

After the IS attacks and the post-referendum security vacuum, COVID-19 once again bankrupted Ibrahim, and presented a major threat to the entire Kaka'i community in Daquq.

Before coronavirus, this Kaka'i farmer earned 40 to 50 million dinars (approximately 37,500 USD) annually but "this year," Ibrahim says, "I have not made one dinar."

Ibrahim has left his 300 dunams plot and has lost his house and fish pond. He waits for his crops to grow – the only option he has left as he can longer work as a labourer – and for the economy to improve.

The struggles the Kaka'i minority in Daquq and other areas face have caused the community great anxiety. Their attempts to protect themselves while remaining in their villages have not been successful, as their concerns have gone unaddressed by the government.

The gradual evacuation of the Kaka'i villages may lead to the migration of the entire community from Kirkuk's Daquq district, an area regarded as part of the Kaka'i homeland.

"When I put my head on the pillow," Ibrahim says, "visions of my parched fields appear to me. The coronavirus dried up my life too. This has ruined me and my family."



Ibrahim reported that this month last year, he earned 40 to 50 million Iraqi dinars, but he has earned nothing so far this year. Photo: Mohammed Almas

IRAQI OFFENSIVE AGAINST DAESH BRINGS HOPE OF STABILITY FOR KAKA'I MINORITY



Kirkuk, "Iraqi Heroes" operation aimed at eradicating the remnants of the Islamic State (IS) militants in Daquq district, June 2, 2020. Photo: Soran Mohammed

Kaka'i villagers in southern Kirkuk are faced with security threats and say their life and sources of income are endangered by the insurgent groups. The ability of such groups to escalate violence came as the security forces are mandated to impose complete lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

The security problems, which have stricken fear into religious minority communities over the past several months, follow changes in plans to implement a curfew in the Kirkuk administration with regards to a complete ban on travel inside the city and between administrative units.

In just the past two months of the curfew, at least six insurgent attacks targeting Kaka'i minorities in Daquq, a district of southern Kirkuk, have been recorded. Meanwhile, 145 donums of grain have been burned in the Kaka'i villages of Zanqar and Ali Saray. [Each donum is an area equivalent to 2,500 square meters]

To allay the fear that has gripped the Kaka'i community over the past several months, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, Iraq's new prime minister, visited in Kirkuk to launch a major offensive in south of the city; an offensive that people of the area, particularly the Kaka'i s, have long awaited.

Kadhimi's visit, besides addressing several other important issues such as containing coronavirus, preparations for early elections, combating corruption, and addressing protestors' demands, was intended to launch an offensive to eradicate the "terrorist groups" in Daquq, where the Kaka'i community has been targeted.

In advance of Kadhimi's arrival, preparations for the offensive had been completed, with security forces clearing 17 villages in Kirkuk and Salah ad-Din encompassing an area of 738 square kilometers of Islamic State (IS) remnants.



IT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE EARLIER BEFORE THE EVACUATION OF MANY KAKA'I VILLAGES

The offensive and Kadhimi's visit to Daquq caught Mohammed Ibrahim, a resident of Kaka'i Ali Saray village, by surprise. However, he said, "the operation was conducted late. It could have been done earlier before the evacuation of many Kaka'i villages."

Ibrahim is just one victim of insurgent attacks upon Kaka'i villages. He and one of his relatives remain in Ali Saray village alone, while majority of the villagers have migrated to the center of Daquq district.



Kirkuk, a woman farmer is harvesting tomatoes in a Kakai village, Daquq. Photo: Mohammed Almas

"Such an extensive operation overseen by Kadhimî himself is important to our areas because it targets locations where the attacks against us were launched," he told Kirkuk Now, "Our areas are remote and there were no security forces there."



OUR AREAS ARE REMOTE AND THERE WERE NO SECURITY FORCES THERE

The theater of operations borders the Kaka'i villages in Daquq district, which lies 44 km south of Kirkuk.

Ibrahim hopes that these new measures will restore security to the Kaka'i villages and will allow him access to his agricultural lands, which has been cut off due to the threats from insurgent groups and the curfew.

"We are happy with this operation, which should stabilize our areas."

The announcement of the offensive followed the targeting of Kaka'i farmers' grain harvest by insurgent groups. In just the first three days of June, 44 incidents of arson against grain fields were recorded in Daquq.

According to data Kirkuk Now obtained from Kirkuk's Civil Defense Directorate, 145 donums of wheat and barley have been burned in the Kaka'i villages of Zanqar and Ali Saray.

In the first day of the offensive, nine villages were cleared of Islamic State remnants, 30 bombs, dozens of mines of mines and other explosive materials were seized and a car was detonated.



Kirkuk, Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimî, has landed in Kirkuk military airport, June 2, 2020. Photo: PM media office

Aziz Mohammed, a Kaka'i, said, "We hope that the operation will stabilize our areas and weaken the IS militants. It should continue."

The Kaka'i people live in many areas in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region including Nineveh, Kirkuk, Halabja, Erbil, Khanaqin, and other places in Diyala province. Unconfirmed figures show that the Kaka'i population is estimated at 100 thousand. Five Kaka'i villages out of 15 in Daquq district have been completely evacuated and another three are on the edge of abandonment.

The general commander of the Iraqi Rapid Response Force, Samr Hussein, held a press conference about the operation, stating, "the plan was executed well. The areas and the villages that IS militants were using as a base were cleared. In these areas, [militants] had attacked the security forces and the villagers."



THE PLAN WAS EXECUTED WELL

Kaka'is, like Turkmen, Christians, Ezidis, and other minority communities, were subjected to IS persecution from 2014 to 2017. Many Kaka'i families remain displaced, with 10 percent of the 787 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Kurdistan Region from the Kaka'i, Turkmen, Shabak, and Armenian communities.

The Kaka'i villages in Daquq include Matiq, Na'mat, Shalyar, Arab Koye, Albu Mohammed, Shukr Jayran, Alwat Pasha, Sahshakn, Sai Abbas, Sai Hussein, Hawari Garmanyar, Topzawa, Ali Saray, and Zanqar.

Kadhimî's press office announced that the operation's objective was to "dry up the source of terror in the region," adding that prime minister called upon security forces to protect civilians and their properties.

While the offensive has given renewed hope to Mohammed Ibrahim in Ali Saray village, he wonders if he and other villagers will be compensated for the damage to their crops and the evacuation of Kaka'i villages.

"The offensive alone is not what is important. It is also important the security forces remain in the areas so that we will not be threatened again and will be able to freely access our fields."

COVID-19 SHUTS DOWN CENTURY-OLD POTTERY FACTORY



Safin Jamal, a 65-year-old potter, has shut down his business due to the effects of the coronavirus.
Photo: KirkukNow

COVID-19 has forced a skilled and experienced Kaka'i potter to shut down his business. In addition to the human cost, the coronavirus pandemic has caused a significant number of small businesses in Iraq to close, resulting in the loss of hundreds of jobs.

"May God help me take care of my children; the Coronavirus cost me my job. I will have to work as a construction worker at this age," said Safin Jamal, a 65-year-old potter.

Safin wept as he closed the door of his factory for the first time in its 100 years of existence. He is one of the victims of the economic collapse brought by COVID-19; forced to leave behind not only his job, but a trade he inherited from his ancestors.

Safin is the son of the well-known artisan, Jamal Zain al-Abadin Kaka'i, known as "potter Jamal". They belong to a prominent Kaka'i family that resides in Daquq district, south of Kirkuk province. Jamal opened the pottery factory a century ago but Safin reluctantly closed his business in early June.



WE LOST ALL THE CUSTOMERS; OUR CUSTOMERS WERE MOSTLY FROM CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN IRAQ

"The curfew forced me to close my factory for a month. My children and I resumed work in late May, but we lost all the customers," he said, "our customers were mostly from central and southern Iraq."

The Iraqi government imposed a nationwide lockdown in March to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Safin's factory is located on the Baghdad-Kirkuk road. Many of his customers would purchase his wares as they travelled between the northern, southern, and central Iraqi cities.

Safin, whose family has passed the profession down from one generation to the next over a century, is one of the few craftsmen left in the country. Now Safin fears that his family might permanently give up its trade because of the lockdown.

Safin has a family of six, and they all worked at the factory. His father died in 2018 while working in the factory.



WE CONSIDER THE PROFESSION HOLY AND IMPORTANT BECAUSE ONE OF OUR GRANDFATHER'S DYING WISHES WAS FOR US TO KEEP DOING THIS WORK

"This craft was my father's, grandfather's, and my ancestors' livelihood. We consider the profession holy and important because one of our grandfather's dying wishes was for us to keep doing this work, and that this factory should never be closed down."

Last week, the first coronavirus case was recorded in Daquq. In response, security forces have taken stricter measures, including closing local shops, banning travel outside of the district, and limiting traffic inside its borders.

"We were the first to be affected by the measures, and to such an extent that I had to close my factory because I was just sitting around, staring at my pottery," Safin said, describing how sales of pottery immediately dissipated with the announcement of travel restrictions.

The day he shut down his business, Safin started working as a day labourer to make ends met. Being a labourer is quite challenging for him due to his old age, but he said he is still grateful to find work.



I CRIED A LOT AND BEGGED GOD TO HAVE MERCY ON ME AND MY CHILDREN ON THE DAY I CLOSED MY FACTORY

"I cried a lot and begged God to have mercy on me and my children on the day I closed my factory."

The history of the Kaka'i minority in Daquq can be traced back to antiquity, with its people spread out among 15 villages and cities in the district. The community has suffered greatly during the pandemic as insurgent attacks increased throughout the district and professionals like Safin are forced out of business.

Safin explained that he had participated in pottery exhibitions both inside and outside Iraq.

"The last time my father and I participated in a pottery exhibition was in 2013 in Turkey, where we won the first place."

Safin and his father had sculpted an 18-meter-long clay model of an airplane a few years ago and placed it in front of the factory, attracting many passers-by and drawing more customers into the factory, Safin said.

Hussein Darwish, a close friend of Safin's father, explained that Jamal did not regard the pottery craft as an ordinary one, but had passion and fascination for it, and that Jamal worked as a sculptor and "constantly talked about how he wished to contribute [to art and culture] through his work."

The major problem families like Safin's face is that the government has imposed a lockdown without providing financial relief to business owners. Therefore, they must shoulder two burdens: make a living and protect themselves from infection.

The re-imposition of the lockdown came after a resurgence in coronavirus infections, reaching 17,770 recorded cases with 496 deaths throughout the country.

Safin has not removed his equipment from the factory and says that he follows the news with his children every day, wondering when the pandemic will pass so he can go back to work.

"The end of the coronavirus means restoring our source of income and obeying the will of my grandfather to sustain the profession."



Markana, made at Safin's factory, is used to store drinkable water.
Photo: KirkukNow

MUSIC HELPS KAKAYI FAMILY COPE WITH LOSING MUCH OF THEIR LIVELIHOOD AND HOME CONFINEMENT



Bahman Wali and two of his sons - Photo by Muhammad Almas

At Bahman's home, authentic traditional singing and reciting poetry are interfused with melodies from the lute and Daf (Kurdish frame drum). And his wife makes their home all the more cozier with her skillfully pastries.

Other families think that home confinement due to the Coronavirus is causing them psychological distress, but not this Kakayi family.

Bahman's family stress that whatever they might lose due to the pandemic, they will not allow themselves to lose their art skills. That is why since the pandemic has hit Iraq, they spend more time on their art.

63-year-old Bahman Wali, a Kakayi resident of Daquq, says that in this way they protect themselves from the Coronavirus, and at the same time hone their art skills. And besides those benefits, art helps them alleviate the stress they have due to losing their livelihood; their crops.

Bahman has a beautiful voice and is a skillful Maqam singer. One of his sons studies music and plays the Oud (a type of lute); another one of his sons is a Daf player, and the other is a Maqam singer like himself.

During the curfew, the family has spent most of their time honing their skills. "One should not neglect art and preservation of traditions."



Bahman with his eldest son

Since March, Kirkuk administration has issued numerous measures against the spread of the COVID-19, among them was a curfew. The latter came after four persons died of the virus in April.

The measure came hard for many families, but for Bahman (who is both a teacher and farmer) it was a chance to spend time with his family and develop their musical skills.



AT THE BEGINNING, STAYING HOME WAS VERY UNPLEASANT AND UNSETTLING

"At the beginning, staying home was very unpleasant and unsettling. I was saddened by the fact that a part of my crops and groves will die out: when the curfew was enforced, it was time to work the fields." He added that when the curfew was prolonged, "we gave up on this year's harvest, which made us very sad."

When the family was compelled to stay home, they thought they should hone their art skills. "Art should not be neglected, it is food for the soul," he said. Bahman and his sons have been practicing music several hours a day in that period.

"Sometime I would write poetry and recite it to my children, and then we would talk. Other times I would sing a Maqam. This has been good for our mental well-being, because the corona pandemic has had a bad effect on people's psyche," said Bahman, and added "and on top of the hardship of self-isolation, we also grieved the loss of our crops."

Bahman's agricultural fields lie about 10 kilometres from Daquq. It contains groves of apricots, figs, vines and pomegranates. Next to those, every year they would grow cucumber, tomato, courgette, okra, and watermelons. But this year their harvest was halved, says Bahman.

According to government numbers, 20 suicide cases have been registered during three months of curfew alone, and that most of the cases were due to unemployment and domestic violence.

Nawz, the eldest son of Bahman and an art student, told KirkukNow: "Before the spread of the Coronavirus, when I was coming home from college, I would go to the fields with my father and brothers and work there. The closure of school and the curfew made me jaded, but music and art made me forget my sorrows."

MY FATHER WOULD SING ON A DAILY BASIS AS I AND MY BROTHERS WOULD PLAY THE LUTE AND THE DAF, WHICH WOULD MAKE US MENTALLY AT EASE

My father would sing on a daily basis as I and my brothers would play the lute and the Daf, which would make mentally at ease. But I would often feel that my parents were suffering due to the loss of part of our groves, for which they had worked hard for years. But they wouldn't talk about their pain."

According to KirkukNow's inquiries, there are 15 Kakayi villages in the Daquq area. The Kakayi are among the most affected by the pandemic, especially the farmers among them.

Bahman has three sons and a daughter. He praises his wife: "She would not let us be bored. We are now all healthy and in good mental state. We are ready to endure this situation."



THE CORONAVIRUS AND HOME CONFINEMENT TOOK PART OF OUR LIVELIHOOD AND ISOLATED US FROM OUR RELATIVES, BUT WE DIDN'T GIVE UP AND FILLED OUR HOME WITH ART AND LOVE

"The Coronavirus and home confinement took part of our livelihood and distanced us from our relatives, but we didn't give up and filled our home with art and love," Barham said.

Bahman thinks that it is possible for families to take advantage of staying home, and he has found out that one of his sons has talent for playing the Daf, another for lute, and the other has an authentic voice for singing the Maqam, which he can develop.



Kirkuk, July 2020 - Bahman's family collecting this year's harvest
Photo by KirkukNow

KAKAI VETERAN LIVES IN AGONY WITHOUT NECESSARY PAINKILLERS



Almas Azizi 27, a Kakayi youth and a wounded veteran of the ISIS war
Photo by - Muhammad Almas

Every night Almas' sleep is disrupted by the pain caused by the injuries in his back and his dysfunctioning leg, as he neither has painkillers, nor can he travel to towns and cities to see doctors.

There are many scars on the body of this Kaka'i youth; several vertebrae in his spine have been replaced and his left leg is impaired from the knee down.

27-year-old Almas Aziz has lived with agony for nearly six years, but he hasn't been as desperate as he is now, as the COVID-19 and its consequence lockdown have taken almost all the hope he can muster now.

"I live with severe psychological distress, especially now that I have nowhere to turn to due to the Coronavirus. All that is left for me is pain and poverty," said Almas to KirkukNow.

Almas lives in a slum called Ashti in Daquq Subdistrict, 44 km south of Kirkuk City. He is registered as a 'person with disabilities' at the Ministry of Peshmerga of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). At the start of the ISIS war, mid-2014, he was severely injured at the Turkmen-majority village of Bashir (about 20 km south-west of Kirkuk City).



Scars from injuries and subsequent operations on Almas' back and abdomen



THE PAIN IN MY FOOT KEEPS ME AWAKE ALL NIGHT

"The pain in my foot keeps me awake all night. I have become a burden on my mother and my wife," said Almas.

Almas is in need of long-term medical care. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, he would receive his medicines at a public hospital, but that has changed several months ago, as most of the hospitals and medical centres are occupied with dealing with the outbreak.

Most of the medicine he was getting, were painkillers to remedy the pain in his foot and other injuries on his body.

"For the pain in my foot I [would] take Tramadol, which costs 30,000 IQD [\$25.30] in the market, if one can find it. Without it, I can't sleep due to the pain."

Like every injured Peshmerga veteran from the ISIS war, Almas receives a month salary per two months. Due to the financial crisis and low oil prices, KRG is unable to pay full salaries and on time.

According to official numbers from KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga, more than 1,600 Peshmerga soldiers were killed and more than 10,000 were injured in the ISIS war.

After he got wounded, Almas was sent abroad by the Ministry of Peshmerga for an operation to replace eight vertebrae in his spine. But his left foot is still not amputated, despite being empaired.



Najma, mother of wounded Peshmerga veteran Almas sobs as she talks of her son's misfortune



Due to the curfew, I can't travel to Erbil to see my psychiatrist

"Due to the curfew, I can't travel to Erbil to see my psychiatrist, whom I have to see once a week," said Almas.

In an attempt to halt the Coronavirus outbreak, the central government in Baghdad and KRG have both banned travelling between all provinces since March.

Almas has a wife and a child, and his mother lives with them. They all live in an unfinished building without an official deed.

His mother, Najma Tameen, was a tailor working from home before the COVID-19 outbreak. But nowadays she has no customers, which makes it harder for them to get by financially.

"We live in very bad conditions nowadays; the Coronavirus has brought catastrophe upon us."

To help alleviate his son's pain, Najma visits all the hospitals and medical centres in Daquq on a daily basis, hoping to find some Tramadol.

"What else can I do? If I don't do that, who will help him? It kills me when I see him suffer such pain."

Sobbing, Najma explained her daily ordeal to KirkukNow: "Not a place left I haven't been, not a door I haven't knocked... I think people have had enough of me."

Her only wish is for her son to get a permanent cure, so he won't suffer the pain any more.



ALL THAT WE CAN DO NOW IS PRAY AND ASK FOR GOD'S MERCY

"All that we can do now is pray and ask for God's mercy," said Najma.

The measures taken against the COVID-19 outbreak have harmed the Kaka'is in Daquq immensely: from the increase of crime rate as security personnel tasked with enforcing the measures, the dead stop of agriculture and market activities, to treatment deprivation for people like Almas.

Almas uses two crutches to be able to walk. He spends most of his time pacing the courtyard of their house and the street on which it is located. He is mentally exhausted from brooding about his injuries and his pain. "I have come to a point that I am willing to let my foot be amputated without anaesthetics," said Almas.

ISIS AT NIGHT AND CORONAVIRUS AT DAY: KAKA'I VILLAGE UNALLOWED RESPITE



Kirkuk, 2020 – Kaka'i residents of Walad village are displaced due to ISIS attacks
Photo by KirkukNow

The threat of COVID-19 brings back bitter memories from several years back for Sa'd Abbas and his family: once more they will have to abandon their ancestral home and their agricultural fields.

After years of displacement, Sa'd and his brothers had gone back to their village and planted crops and vegetables, hoping to be able to work on them for at least a few hours in day-time.

"Because of the Coronavirus and the curfew [to prevent its spread], we are prevented to go to our village at day-time. That's why most of our products this year have gone to waste."



CORONAVIRUS FOR US WAS THE EQUIVALENT TO ISIS THREATS

"The Coronavirus was for us the equivalent to the threats from ISIS. Once more we feel miserable."

Sa'd and his family hail from the Kaka'i village Walad in Daquq district (44 km south of Kirkuk City). Their village bore the brunt of ISIS attacks in 2014, and it had become a warzone and a hotbed for ISIS activities. That's why the residents abandoned it.

"At the beginning, we had to protect ourselves until some forces arrived in the area and things settled a bit," said Sa'd, who is the village's commissioner.

KRG's Peshmerga forces were stationed at the Kaka'i areas in Daquq mid-2014 until October 2017, when forces under the command of Government in Baghdad forced the Peshmerga out due to the dispute caused by the independence referendum held by KRG.

Sa'd said: "After the Peshmerga retreated and a security vacuum was created, ISIS attacked and we withstood them for nearly 30 minutes. In that battle, my brother Jangiz, who was a veterinary student, was martyred. Another brother of mine was injured."

The increase in attacks and deterioration of security are forcing residents into displacement again. That's the reason Sa'ds family moved from Walad village to Kirkuk City.



Daquq, 2020 – no one is left to take care of the agricultural lands in Walad village
Photo by KirkukNow

Sa'd said: "We preserved our honour and dignity with the blood of our brothers and others relatives, without anyone coming to our rescue. After several incidents, we felt that the threats are increasing and that we must leave."

Of the total of 15 Kaka'i villages in Daquq district, five are completely desolated and three others are about to be.

After being displaced from their homes due to attacks by ISIS militants at night-time, the Kaka'i residents of the Waladi village, whose livelihood consists of farming and raising cattle, would go back to take care of their plants at day-time.

28-year-old Waladi resident Safa Abas is one of those who got wounded by ISIS. She has been trying to keep herself busy with farming in an attempt to erase some of the bad memories, until the COVID-19 outbreak deprived them of the ability to work their lands.



WE ARE STUCK AT HOME, AND ALL THAT IS LEFT TO US IS PAIN AND DEPRESSION

"On top of everything, there is the Coronavirus and curfews. We are stuck at home, and all that is left to us is pain and depression. We are unable to do this year's harvest, all of our summer products go to waste," said Safa.

Safa continued on the effects of the COVID-19: "We've suffered a lot: one of my brothers died in my arms. Farming is our only source of livelihood, but the Coronavirus prevent us from doing that too."

Measures taken against the spread of the COVID-19 virus by the government have immensely harmed the Kaka'is. From decrease of security (due to deployment of police personnel to implement those measures), to the crippling of agriculture and economy.

In Kirkuk Province, a total surface of 100000 hectares of land has been planted with summer produce, according to a statistic by Kirkuk's Agriculture Department.

Another farmer from the village, 34-year-old Dashti Walad, said: "I keep waiting for the day we can go back to our village, because all my childhood memories are made there."

Dashti still had some livestock after he had to leave the village. But during the outbreak it was difficult to go back and forth, and therefore he sold them at low prices. "The Coronavirus brought us a lot of loss," he said.

In an attempt to halt the Coronavirus outbreak, the central government in Baghdad and KRG have both banned travelling between all provinces since March.

Sa'd and his brothers don't want to lose their livelihood after being displaced. They want their safety secured and have the ability to move back to their village.

KAKA'I WOMAN SINGS FOR THE PLIGHT OF HER COMMUNITY



Kirkuk 2020 – Rubar Rashid Kaka'i during recording the video clip of her song "The Cry of the Kaka'is" – Photot by KirkukNow

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Iraqi minorities have tried many peaceful methods to protest and show the level of marginalization they have been subjected to. For a Kaka'i woman is singing perhaps the last resort to convey what the religious minority are going through nowadays in Iraq.

"The Cry of the Kaka'is" is the title of the song Rubar Rashid Kaka'i sings with a winsome voice and a melancholic melody in Kurdish Macho dialect, which the Kaka'i speak.

Rubar's song is a lamentation for victims of extremist groups like ISIS, its predecessors and other extremists among the Kaka'i minority in the last 17 years.

The Kaka'is (or Kakaiyees) are among those who follow Yarsanism, who also call themselves Ahli Haq, which is a largely secretive belief due to persecution. The faith has elements of Islam and some ancient religions like Zoroastrianism. The majority of those who practice Yarsanism are ethnic Kurds who live in Iraq and Iran.



I WANTED TO CONVEY THE LONESOME PLIGHT OF THE KAKAI'S THROUGH THIS SONG

"A lot of disasters happened [to us], and nobody came to help us. I wanted to convey the lonesome plight of the Kaka'is through this song," said Rubar.

Her song has had thousands of views on social media platforms within days and has gained some popularity.

Prior to the release of the video clip, KirkukNow published a short video report on the song, in which Rubar talks about its purpose.

The report and the video of the song had more than 32,000 views on the Facebook of KirkukNow.

An individual named Muhamad Nuri commented under the post: "The Kaka'is in Daquq have always been peaceful and friendly, and they've had a big role in securing the town."

The Kaka'is are viewed as a peaceful community, yet they have been the target of many violent attacks. Only in the last few months (since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak) more than 16 members of the community have been killed. Security forces are mostly occupied with implementing the measures taken to halt the outbreak, and the lax in security is exploited by extremist groups.



KAKA'IS ARE CONSTANTLY BEING MARTYRED BY TERRORIST GROUPS, AND NO IRAQI ENTITY IS DOING ENOUGH TO PROTECT US

33-year-old Rubar told KirkukNow: "The Kaka'is are constantly being martyred by the terrorist groups, and no Iraqi entity is doing enough to protect us."

"Since 2003, the Kaka'is are being martyred, their houses burned, our youths kidnapped, our sacred places blown up, and our graveyards desecrated."

Her song was broadcast on many Iraqi outlets and has attracted some international attention as well.

The US Consulate General in Erbil has posted the song on their Facebook page and wrote: "Although ISIS and other extremist groups target minorities and religious diversity in IKR [Kurdistan Region of Iraq] and Iraq, principles of tolerance and coexistence remain."

The song has so far 42,000 views on the US Consulate page.

Rubar says that the Kaka'is have been abandoned during all events, "that's why we convey the plight of the lonesome Kaka'is to the world, so that everyone knows what we go through in our own land."

Rubar is the first woman to sing in Macho dialect, which is spoken by the Kaka'is exclusively.

"We try to keep that dialect alive."

The video clip of the song was filmed at the historical castle in Kirkuk and includes several scenes of tragic events that occurred in the Kaka'i regions.

Rubar thanked KirkukNow for providing the image material of those events.

For more than two years, KirkukNow has been working on an effort to highlight the plight of the Kaka'is through our reports and video footage. And currently, in collaboration with Minority Rights Group International, we are working on putting our reporting on the community and what they go through in a collection that will be published in English and Arabic at the end of this year.

The idea for the song was inspired by the attacks the Kaka'is suffered recently.

"My brother-in-law, master Luqman Rashid Kaka'i, came up with the idea. My husband has encouraged me a lot, and told me that I should break that taboo [of Kaka'i women singing] and record the song. I love to sing since my childhood."



Rubar is married to a journalist. They have three children and reside in Kirkuk.

On Rubar's YouTube channel, the song's video clip has been viewed more than 5000 times so far. Most of the comments are encouragements and expressions of support for the Kaka'i community.

Muhammad Jaleel, a prominent member of a Sunni Islamist political party in Kirkuk, wrote in a comment: "The Kaka'is in Kirkuk are a symbol of peaceful coexistence, of loyalty and dignified manners. But unfortunately, they have become the victim of wrong politics. They are subjected to murder, displacement and misery."

After preparing the lyrics, the melody and the rest of the song components, Rubar and her fellow artists wanted to film the clip at the Ali-Sara village (a Kaka'i village in Kirkuk's Daquq district), but they weren't allowed.



WE HAD SUBMITTED SEVERAL FORMAL REQUESTS TO BE ALLOWED TO FILM THE CLIP AT THE GRAVEYARD OF THAT VILLAGE, BUT THE SECURITY FORCES DIDN'T ALLOW US

"We had submitted several formal requests to be allowed to film the clip at the graveyard of that village, but the security forces didn't allow us. I want to know why. Our ancestors are buried at that graveyard. Is that how the Iraqi government want to treat us Kaka'is?"

The size of the Kaka'i community in Iraq is estimated to be about 100,000, but their religion is not recognized in the Iraqi constitution.

Rubar has more ambitions now. After seeing the reactions to her first song, she dreams of using art to make the world aware of the plight of her community.

"The good thing is that the song was widely shared among the Kaka'i community and the country too, because it speaks of the marginalization of the Kaka'i," said Rubar.

KAKA'I FAMILY CAN'T AFFORD MORE THAN MODEST BREAK FAST



Kirkuk, 2020 – Payman and three of her daughters having a modest breakfast meal
Photo by Muhammad Almas

Payman's family starts their day with a meagre meal of a bowl of yoghurt and some stale bread. Her four daughters hungrily eye the front door with anticipation of one of the neighbours to bring them food for the day.

"This meal is all we have in the house, we rely on Samaritan for lunch and supper," said the 43-year-old Payman.

Payman's husband, 43-year-old Fayaq Star, heads to a public square in Daquq after breakfast in the hopes of a day's job as a labourer so he can at least make some money to buy food for his family for a few days.

Fayaq had been working in a plastic factory in Kirkuk, but it was closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Currently he can find work as labourer only one or two days a week, earning only \$8,40 to \$12,60 a day. This has been the case for several months.



I FEEL AS IF I DIE EVERY DAY, AS I SEE MY CHILDREN EYEING THE FRONT DOOR IN ANTICIPATION OF A NEIGHBOUR OR A RELATIVE TO GIVE US HANDOUTS

"I feel as if I die every day, as I see my children eyeing the front door in anticipation of a neighbour or a relative to give us handouts," said Fayaq.

The family belongs to the Kaka'i community in Daquq. Until recently, they resided in an unmaintained rented house, for which they had to pay 200,000 Iraqi Dinars (about \$168) per month, which they couldn't afford paying and were evicted from the house.



9-year-old Fatma need an operation for straightening her legs - Photo by Muhammad Almas

When ISIS attacked the region in 2014, Fayaq and his family move to Kirkuk for safety where he started working at the plastic factory. But when the Coronavirus outbreak took place, the factory was closed and he lost his job. And subsequently, they returned to Daquq.

"I couldn't pay the rent for the house in Kirkuk; I was forced to sell our refrigerator, but I couldn't get enough for it, and we were kicked out of the house."

One of the four daughters of Payman and Fayaq has a skeletal abnormality in her legs and can't walk. Both of her legs are crooked and next to constant medical care they need to be operated on.

Fayaq himself and another of their daughters suffer from a liver infection and need medicine for that as well.



I HAVE LOST MY JOB DUE TO THE CORONAVIRUS AND THE LOCKDOWN, WHILE MY CHILDREN NEED MEDICAL TREATMENT

"I have lost my job due to the Coronavirus and the lockdown, while my children need medical treatment and the landlord presses me to pay the rent every now and then. I am ruined and on the brink of becoming homeless," said Fayaq.

And as they feared, the family was evicted from the house in Daquq as well, and they now live in an unfinished house in the Daquq district.

Their eldest daughter is 15. The one with the infliction in her legs is 9-year-old Fatma. The others are 6-year-old Sara and 4-year-old Zaynab.

Their home is almost empty. There is one small TV set in a corner; some thin rugs on the ground; a small empty kitchen with a small refrigerator lent to them temporarily by a neighbour; a small closet in the bedroom.

"I sold our refrigerator and washing machine to pay the rent," said Payman tearfully as she showed the KirkukNow reporter round their house.

Fatma's operation costs nearly \$3,400. But the family also has to pay for the medicine needed for Fayaq and her other daughter's liver infections.

"I am ashamed. But this is the reality I live in. When my husband goes to find work on a daily basis, I beg to God he can find some for the sake of the children," said Payman.

"It is very dreadful when you are having breakfast thinking of lunch and supper and hoping Samaritans bring you food."



NO INCOME, NO AUDIENCE AS COVID-19 LOOMS OVER CALLIGRAPHER'S LIFE



Kirkuk, 2020 – artist Adnan Muhammad Husein Kaka'i honing his skills at home during lockdown
Photo by Muhammad Almas

Instead of warm handshakes and flower bouquets, Adnan gets a few impersonal “likes” on social media for his calligraphy art.

The Coronavirus upsets the art world of Adnan Muhammad: no more art galleries and exhibitions; no more travelling around between cities and towns to showcase his art skills.

“Due to the Coronavirus, we are unable to go to art galleries, we don’t see each other, and our paintings and other works are not exhibited,” Adnan told KirkukNow.

Calligraphy is the sole occupation and source of income for Adnan Kaka'i and his family.

The COVID-19 outbreak in March has caused significant financial difficulties for many Kaka'is in Kirkuk's Daquq district, among them Adnan.

It is the first time that Adnan experiences such a long-term home confinement. Most of his works have been showcased at galleries in Kirkuk and all over Iraq. His art has also helped him broaden his social network.

The measures the authorities have taken to slow down the outbreak of COVID-19, include the closure of art galleries, all sorts of gatherings, curfews and travel restrictions.

“It’s a very unpleasant situation; I am compelled to send my work to exhibition organizers through the internet. And what exhibition? Just something on the internet and social media, instead of a gallery where people can gather.”



Kirkuk, 2020 – artist Adnan Muhammad Husein Kaka'i honing his skills at home during lockdown
Photo by Muhammad Almas

Adnan has been making calligraphy half of his life, starting in early 2000, and still trains to refine his art.

He has travelled abroad, including to Turkey, Syria, UAE and Morocco, and has won numerous awards, among them the Khalil Zahawi Award in 2009. He has obtained an honorary doctorate from the Egyptian Academy for Learning and Development.



THESE CONDITIONS HAVE ALSO AFFECTED MY MENTAL WELL-BEING

“These conditions have also affected my mental well-being, and have caused me significant financial damage, since my livelihood is impeded.”

Adnan has a calligraphy shop, but due to the preventive measures, he hasn’t been able to keep it open.

During the home confinement, Adnan also helped his wife and two children to develop their skills.

Adnan fled to Iran with his family after the Kurdish uprising in 1991. He stayed there for several years and learned the Persian language and Persian calligraphy.

Calligraphy has almost become an occupation for his whole family. His wife and son are fond of it, but his daughter prefers painting.

Huma Gha’ib (39), Adnan’s wife, told KirkukNow: “The lockdown was an opportunity for me to get more acquainted with the art of calligraphy. My husband was a great support in doing this.”



OUR HOME HAS BECOME AN ART SCHOOL, ADNAN BEING THE TEACHER AND US THE STUDENTS

“Our home has become an art school, Adnan being the teacher and us the students. My son is busy with calligraphy and my daughter aspires to become a painter,” added Huma.

The family is looking forward to the end of the pandemic so that they can showcase their works at art galleries.

KAKAI'S MARGINALIZED AND EXCLUDED IN DECISION MAKING PROCESS



Kirkuk, 2020 – a number of Kaka'i residents of Rizgari settlement – Photo by Muhammad Almas

From village administrations to the highest political, military and administrative positions, the Kaka'is don't have representatives they can petition when they need help.

The Kaka'is are in need of representation more than ever, given they are being targeted by religious extremists and the existence of a security vacuum in their areas.

Their troubles are exacerbated during the COVID-19 outbreak, and no government institution is looking into the problems they are facing.



IT IS TIME THAT WE ARE REPRESENTED SO THAT OUR RIGHTS ARE GUARANTEED BY THE AUTHORITIES

Layla Sadiq, a Kaka'i activist, told KirkukNow: "After all the killings, threats, and displacements, it is time that we are represented so that our rights are guaranteed by the authorities."

Layla thinks that lack of representation in the legislative and executive branches of government is among the reasons the problems they face are persisting. And that all their previous efforts to acquire representation have been fruitless.

"The voice of the Kaka'is is unheard. Our loyalty and love for our homeland and country is unappreciated, as we are not deemed deserving a single [government] position."

In all of Iraq, the Kaka'is are not included in the quota system, except at the Halabja Province Administration, which hasn't been set up yet.

The Kaka'is have not won any seats in any of the parliamentary elections, even though they've had numerous candidates in several party-lists.

40-year-old Ziyad Fahd, a notable Kaka'i, told KirkukNow: "Members of the Kaka'i community feel marginalized; they feel the government is discriminating between different components, because they don't have representatives at any administrative and governmental institutions."

In Kaka'i-majority regions administrative posts at municipalities, subdistricts and governmental institutions are not filled by Kaka'is.



Kirkuk, 2020 – two Kaka'i farmers in Daquq district – Photo by KirkukNow

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In Kaka'i-majority regions administrative posts at municipalities, subdistricts and governmental institutions are not filled by Kaka'is.

"The Kaka'is are not included in the making of any political and administrative decisions, even those that involve the fate of the Kaka'is," said Ziyad Fahd, who was a parliamentary candidate in the last election, but didn't obtain the required votes.

He also added: "Security situation in our areas is not good, because the Kaka'is are excluded in matters of security and don't know what is going on: from afar, we hear security forces are moved around, without ever discussing it with the region's residents."

No Kaka'i holds a high position in the army or the various security apparatuses. A Kaka'i unit within the PMU was established in previous years, but it was dismantled due to lack of funding and support.

Ibrahim Mustafa-gha Kaka'i, overall chief of the Kaka'i tribes in Iraq, told KirkukNow: "Since Iraq liberation process [in 2003], we've given more than 300 martyrs, but it hasn't become a serious issue because we haven't had any representative to defend our rights at the right time for our protection."

He opines that the Kaka'i issue has been neglected and that no side has taken any serious steps to help.



HOW MUCH LONGER DO WE HAVE TO ABANDON OUR VILLAGES AND BECOME DISPLACED DUE TO LACK OF SERVICES AND SECURITY

Mustafa-gha complained: "Enough is enough! It is not just to view and treat the Kaka'is as such. How much longer do we have to abandon our villages and become displaced due to lack of services and security?"

The Kaka'is live in several regions of Iraq, mostly in Kirkuk, Diyala, Khanaqin, Erbil and Halabja, but also in Nineveh. They are (unofficially) estimated to be around 100,000. Yet their religion is not recognized in the Iraqi constitution.

Mustafa-gha said that they have submitted a formal request to Iraq's President to be given a number of positions, among them parliamentary provincial seats according to the quota system, and appointing Kaka'i advisors to the Presidency, the prime minister and the parliamentary leadership.

The Kaka'is have tried numerous times to be included in the quota system. Their last attempt was in 2019, but they were disappointed again. They are currently trying to secure a parliamentary seat after the next elections.

But Salam Bahram Kaka'i, a political analyst in Kirkuk, considers the dispersal and geographical distribution of the Kaka'is one of the reasons why their candidates have not obtained the required votes, given that the Iraqi election system is a multi-member constituency.

"If elections are held according to a single-member constituency system, we will doubtlessly win two to 3 parliamentary seats," said Bahram.

"If there was a high-ranking military official in the Iraqi or the Kurdistan Regional government, the security issue in our region would've been resolved by now and we wouldn't be easy targets of violent attacks in all those regions."

The Kaka'is aren't represented in the decision-making echelons of the political parties in Iraq, including those in the Kurdistan Region. Which, explains Bahram, is among the reasons for the lack of political support, which is the basis for position appointments and representation.

AZEEMA'S DREAMS AND HOME GO UP IN SMOKE



Mimi Azeema Kaka'i (74) a resident of Arab Koyie village in Daquq, victim of arson

Sobbing and lamenting, Azeema arrives at her burned down house, and sees her furniture and other possessions destroyed, some turned into charcoal. In a whimpering and melancholic voice, she starts praying and cursing those who burned down her house and consequently forced her out of her ancestral village.

Every now then, she wipes her tears with her scarf and continues lamenting over her burned down house.

"I went to the market for an hour to buy some things. Some nefarious people set the house on fire while I was gone. And by the time I was back, my home was engulfed in flames. I felt like my own body was burning, all I could do was scream," the 74-year-old Azeema Azeema Kaka'i told KirkukNow.

The incident took place on 23 August at the village of Arab Koyie in Daquq District, 44 km south of Kirkuk.

Azeema has been living on her own for the last three years. Her two sons left for Erbil after the events of 16 October 2017, when the Federal Forces forced Peshmerga forces out of the region after the KRG held an Independence Referendum.

But Azeema refused to leave with her sons and stayed behind, alone in her house.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, she has been able to see her sons only on rare occasions due to the lockdowns and curfews.



I HAD MANY MEMORIES OF MY CHILDREN IN THAT HOUSE. THEY TOOK THAT AWAY FROM ME TOO AND BROKE MY HEART

"It was a miserable and lonely life, but I had many memories of my children in that house. They took that away from me too and broke my heart."



By the time a fire engine reached the burning house, most of her furniture, along with her clothing, carpets and blankets were burnt, and two walls had collapsed.

The damage has been estimated to be worth thousands of dollars.

Azeema was forced to leave the village for Erbil to stay with her sons. The assault by ISIS, and years of armed and political conflict hadn't made her leave, but now that her house was burned down, she was finally forced to leave.

Beside being located within the disputed areas, her village, like other Kaka'i villages in Daquq, have been an arena for armed conflicts. And in recent months, there has been an increase in violent attacks by unknown gunmen.



ONE OF THE WINDOWS AT THE BACKSIDE OF THE HOUSE WAS BROKEN AND SOMEONE BROKE IN FROM THERE AND SET THE HOUSE ON FIRE

Kawa Raf'at, one of Azeema's sons who has been living in Erbil for three years, told KirkukNow: "One of the windows at the backside of the house was broken and someone broke in from there and set the house on fire."

Security forces have opened an investigation after Azeema filed a complaint, but no suspect has been found so far.

A source within the security forces told KirkukNow that they don't have any lead so far.

The population of Azeema's village, Arab Koiye, consists of Arabs and Kaka'i Kurds. Before the events of 16 October 2017, there were 75 Kaka'i families living there, but currently only four remain.

"The burning down of my home ruined my life and forced me into displacement. I was never going to leave the house, but fate had other plans in store for me," Azeema said.

After the incident, the Kurdistan Regional Government Minister for Minority Affairs Aydin Maarouf, visited Azeema in Erbil, so that he could write a report on her case and send it to the Federal Government.

"My mother stays with me now, she is very depressed and cries all the time," said Kawa.

Azeema suspects that the burning down of her house is related to the years-long conflict about farmland ownerships between different ethnicities.

Leaving her ancestral village, Azeema feels uprooted and depressed. The past three years, she has been hoping and waiting for her sons to go back to live with her in their home region.

Azeema's livestock and dogs were unharmed in the fire, but she was forced to leave them behind.



Erbil, August 2020 – Aydin Maarouf, KRG minister of Minority Affairs paying a visit to Mimi
Photo from the Ministry PR office

LACK OF WATER THREATENS KAKA'I VILLAGE UNDER COVID-19



Kirkuk, August 2020 – water facilities at the Mateeq village – Photo by Muhammad Almas



As temperatures soar up to 45 degrees (Celsius) in this part of Kirkuk Province, there is no drinking water at a Kaka'i village (Mateeq) in Daquq District.

Residents have to pay tankers 20,000 Dinars (about \$16) every few days for water deliveries, while many can't afford it due to financial difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A well is the main source for water for the village. But the pump has been nonfunctional for a few months, and due to the preventive measures against the spread COVID-19 virus, authorities haven't been able to repair it.



WE LIVE IN BAD CONDITIONS IN THIS HEAT. WATER IS NECESSARY FOR EVERYTHING

"We've been suffering from lack of water for a long time now; we live in bad conditions in this heat. Water is necessary for everything," Sangul Muhammad said.

Sangul is a housewife. She told KirkukNow about the lack of water and other difficulties the Kaka'i community face, most of which are lack of basic services.

She said they have waited long for the government to solve the water issue, but eventually they collected money to replace the pump themselves.

The Mateeq village is located 10 kilometres from the centre of Daquq District. Most of the residents are Kaka'is. In 1982 the villagers were forced out by the Ba'th regime, but after the fall of the regime in 2003 they returned.

Many were displaced again in recent years due to lack of security and the ISIS war. Only 15 families still reside there, but they may also leave due to lack of services.



ON TOP OF LACK OF SECURITY, THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK, WE LACK WATER AND OTHER SERVICES

"On top of lack of security, the Coronavirus outbreak and the lockdown which has made us jobless, we lack water and other services," said 49-year-old Nazim Hameed.

Nazim added that due to the preventive measures they were unable to sell their agricultural products since March.

"Next to bottled water, we buy water [from tankers] every few days, while we don't have any income."

The villagers have requested the government to solve their issue several times, but to no avails.

MEDICAL CENTRE WITH NO PHYSICIAN SERVES 14 VILLAGES



Daquq, September 2020 – no COVID-19 tests available at the Topzawa medical centre – Photo by Karwan Salehi

The topzawa medical centre was built 56 years ago, yet to this day, no physician has been appointed as staff, even though it is the only place residents of 14 Kaka'i-majority villages rely on for medical treatments.

Topzawa is located in Kirkuk's Daquq District. 3,000 villagers rely on the poorly equipped and staffed medical centre.

"Even tests for the Coronavirus are not done here; only at the medical centre in Daquq such tests are available," said Hussein Ali Hamad, the director of the Topzawa medical centre.

Despite a rise in infection numbers of the COVID-19 virus in Kirkuk Province, tests are only at some medical centres available.

Ali told KirkukNow that they can only instruct people with symptoms of the COVID-19 infection about how to self-quarantine.

The medical centre in Topzawa was built in 1964. It was closed down by Saddam's Ba'th regime in the 80's. After 2003 it was reopened.

Ali said: "The medical service provided here is somewhat adequate, especially in providing medicine. But 14 villages rely on this centre which has no doctor."



SOMETIMES PATIENTS HAVE TO TRAVEL TO DAQUQ TO SEE A GYNAECOLOGIST

"We urgently need a doctor, especially a gynaecologist. The staff do more than they are tasked with, but sometimes patients have to travel to Daquq to see a gynaecologist," said one of Topzawa residents Rayhan Nu'man.

The curfews enforced by the authorities as preventive measure since the outbreak of the Coronavirus has been a hurdle for patients to travel in order to see a doctor.

The medical centre has 14 staff members. They provide treatment to an average of 35 patients per day.

Jabir Jubrael Michael, a doctor assistant at the Topzawa medical centre, told KirkukNow: "Our task currently is mainly instructing people on the preventive measures against the Coronavirus. That is done through a mobile team, which tours five days a week."

Michael added that due to contact with patients, two of their staff have contracted the COVID-19 virus and are currently in quarantine.

Lack of medical care is not the only issue the Kaka'i villages in Daquq suffer from; there is also lack of other basic services.

Fatma Hamoud, a Kaka'i resident of the Arab Koiye village, said: "The distance between the medical centre and the villages is long, my daughter-in-law has given birth two months ago, and we still haven't been able to take the baby for vaccination due to the long distance, not having a vehicle and curfews."

There are mobile teams for vaccinating children, but due to the deteriorating security conditions they can't reach every village.

Ali said: "We can't risk the lives of the staff. We are compelled to train a teacher or someone with skills on how to do the vaccination."

There were plans for a hospital to be built in Topzawa, but nothing of that has come to fruition due to the ISIS war.



Daquq, September 2020 – the Topzawa medical centre was built 56 years ago
Photo by Karwan Salehi



Daquq, September 2020 – no COVID-19 tests available at the Topzawa medical centre, the staff can only give instructions on preventive measures – Photo by Karwan Salehi

ZANQR, KAKA'I VILLAGE ON THE VERGE OF DESOLATION



Kirkuk, September 2020 – of a total of 70 families, only 15 remain in Zanqr village – Photo by Karwan Salehi

The village of Zanqr used to be among the bustling Kaka'i villages. Lack of security (until recently), and lack of basic services and unemployment have compelled residents to leave the village.

Of the 70 who used to reside there, there are currently only 15 families left.

"The number of the residents become smaller by the day; some move to other villages, others to Daquq [town] and other places," Hamina Jabbar, a resident of Zanqr, told KirkukNow.



BASIC SERVICES ARE IN AWFUL CONDITIONS

The Kaka'is from Zanqr, like others in the area, have faced displacement three times: once due the ISIS onslaught; second time on 16 October 2017 when Federal Forces expelled Peshmerga Forces out of the disputed areas after the KRG held an independence referendum; third time due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the preventive measures by the authorities against it.

Hamina Jabbar, who endured all of it and remained in the village, said: "Those who have remained have nowhere else to go to, otherwise they would have left a long time ago."

The main occupation of the villagers in the region are agriculture and raising livestock. Due to the curfews imposed by the government as a preventive measure to limit the spread of the Coronavirus, they have not been able to move and sell their products at the markets.



Kirkuk, 2020 – temperature soar to 45 degrees celsius in Zanqr village
Photo by Karwan Salehi

“Basic services are in awful conditions. On some days there is electricity feed for two to five hours, and on other days there is no feed at all,” said Saman Ibrahim.

The electric grid in the region is also very old and worn out, and causes frequent outages.

Saman Hayas criticizes the government and NGOs, and told KirkukNow: “Neither side has been able to provide services, that’s why people are discontent.”

Hayas is content about the current security conditions, unlike in previous months, when the area was under threat of attacks by militants. “Security is under the command of Brigade 45 of the Iraqi army, and they treat people well.”

For years, most of the Daquq District has been a battleground of the war against ISIS. After the events of 16 October 2017 when Federal Forces forced Peshmerga Forces out of disputed areas, the area has been under the control of the Federal Forces.

Hundreds of Kaka’i families are still displaced, most of whom live in poor conditions in IDP camps.

There is only one electricity plant in the entire Daquq District, which doesn’t generate enough power for the whole area.

Luise Fandi, the interim mayor of Daquq, told KirkukNow: “The entire Daquq District, like the rest of Iraq, suffers from the lack of water and electricity.”

Now that travel restrictions have been eased, Fandi says that the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on services is now less than before. He mentions building roads for two Kaka’i villages as examples.

CORONAVIRUS STIFLES SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS GATHERINGS FOR KAKA'IS



Kirkuk, Daquq, Topzawa village – the biggest cemetery of the Kaka'is during the COVID-19 outbreak – Photo: KirkukNow

“We would like it very much if we could once again visit our sacred places to worship and gather for both mourning and celebrations,” said 59-year-old Sami Raf’at. He hopes that the COVID-19 pandemic disappears so that the Kaka’is in Daquq can resume their religious activities and ceremonies.



WE’VE BEEN PRAYING AT HOME ON OUR OWN FOR EIGHT MONTHS

“We’ve been praying at home on our own for eight months,” he added and says that he misses visiting the sacred places and cemeteries, as well as the social gatherings.

At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, Nasradeen Haydari, the religious leader of the Yarsanis (which Kaka’is belong to), forbade all social and religious gatherings for his followers as a preventive measure.

The Kaka’is in Daquq District heeded the call and have halted all social and religious gathering ever since.

The Kaka’is no longer gather at the Zrébar Temple in the Zanqr village to wish for wishes to be granted.

All social gatherings like weddings and birthdays have been halted.

This is one of the social aspects of the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the religious minority, next to the health, economic and security aspects.



Kirkuk, Daquq, Topzawa village – the biggest cemetery of the Kaka’is during the COVID-19 outbreak – Photo: KirkukNow

"We practice social distancing and worship at home to protect our own lives and the lives of others," said Sami.

The Kaka'is (who are also known as Ahli Haq and Yarsani) have three sacred places in Daquq District. The most notable one is the sayid-Zrébar Temple in the Zanqr village south of the District.

The temple was blown up by ISIS in 2017, but was rebuilt by residents from the area the same year.



THE INSTRUCTIONS FROM SAYID-NASRADIN HAYDARI HAD A GOOD EFFECT ON REDUCING THE NUMBER OF RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES

Ibrahim Mustafa-agma, chief of a Kaka'i tribe, also warned members of his tribe from the danger of the COVID-19 at the start, and gave instructions to postpone social events and gatherings in places of worship. He also prohibited shaking hands and kissing the hands of holy men among other things.

The Kaka'is have dozens of shrines across Iraq, the most famous are the Sultan Ishaq in Halabja; sayid-Ibrahim in Baghdad; the sayid-Hayas, baba-Haydar and baba-Yadgar in Nineveh Province; baba-Mahmoud in Khanaqin.

Rajab 'Asi, a Kaka'i activist in Daquq, said: "The instructions from sayid-Nasradin Haydari had a good effect on reducing the number of religious ceremonies."



ALI SARAY LIBRARY DEFIES CORONAVIRUS AND ISIS



Rizgari village, Kirkuk province, 2020 – inside the Ali Saray library –
photo: Muhammad Almas

During the last six years, despite having to deal with the deterioration of security on one hand, and the Corona pandemic on the other, the curators of a library at Ali Saray village have managed to keep it open.

The library, which was established 17 years ago as a personal initiative to serve the residents of the village of Ali Saray and its neighbouring villages (west of the Daquq district), has been able to attract a number of students and others seeking knowledge.

"The Ali Saray public library was established in 2003 as a personal initiative to serve the residents of Ali Saray village and the neighbouring villages in the west of Daquq district. By the summer of 2014, it had a collection of more than three thousand books," said the library's founder, Rajab Asi Kaka'i.

Rajab added that the library has organized more than thirty different events since its existence, including intellectual meetings and poetry sessions at summer nights, workshops, forming a sports team, and providing sources for university students.

Higher lending rate in Corona times

The curators have had the intention to hold various activities this year, such as poetry evenings, intellectual seminars, a sports league for the youths, and to celebrate the Kaka'i poets from the region, like Khalil Munawar and Mulla Abbas Hilmi.

The COVID-19 outbreak, however, has forced people into isolation, and the library's planned activities have been cancelled.



Ali Saray village, Kirkuk province, 2008 – library visitors before its relocation

"The Corona pandemic has affected the library's activities greatly; the library was closed for several months after a curfew was imposed," said one of the library's curators, Ali Hussein (20).

"Despite the strict measures to limit the spread of the Coronavirus, intellectuals kept visiting the library to borrow books. The lending rate went up during the lockdown," said Ali.



DESPITE THE STRICT MEASURES TO LIMIT THE SPREAD OF THE CORONAVIRUS, INTELLECTUALS KEPT VISITING THE LIBRARY TO BORROW BOOKS

About their activities this year, Hussein explains: "We have planned several activities for this year, but none of them went through due to the curfew and the Coronavirus outbreak. We had hoped that we could provide reading and music courses."

University student Hana Raza Kaka'i (27) says that she is fortunate enough to have this library located in her village, as it has been very useful for her. "It was very challenging for students during the lockdown, because it made obtaining sources very difficult."

Defying lack of security

The Coronavirus was not the only problem for the library, as the deteriorating security situation and frequent attacks by gunmen also posed a threat.

When ISIS invaded the southern and western parts of Kirkuk province in August 2014, including the Arab villages near the village of Ali Saray (southwest of Daquq district), the library was closed.

At the request of a number of students and intellectuals, In March 2015 the library was moved to the Kaka'i village Rizgari for safety.



THE RELOCATION OF THE LIBRARY TO THE VILLAGE OF RIZGARI WAS A GOOD STEP. INTELLECTUALS, UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, AND MANY OTHERS ARE HAPPY THAT THE LIBRARY SURVIVED

"The relocation of the library to the village of Rizgari was a good step. Intellectuals, university students, and many others are happy that the library survived; they have access to the sources they need for their studies and research. The library also contributes in raising the intellectual level of the youths in the area," said Bébak Hussein (28), one of the curators.

"Most of the sources I needed to complete my dissertation, I obtained from this library," said Hana Raza, adding that she graduated with distinction thanks to those sources.



Rizgari village, Kirkuk province, October 2020 – Ali Saray library
photo: Muhammad Almas

Hiwa Khalil (23), a resident of Ali Saray, says that the library and the activities the curators have arranged have attracted a lot of Kaka'i intellectuals and youths from a wide area, including Daquq district and Kirkuk City.

Despite the challenges caused by the pandemic and lack of security, the curators have been able to keep the library open for intellectuals, students and seekers of knowledge in the southern region of Kirkuk province, which lacks such libraries.

KAKA'I YOUTH LOSE HOPE IN TIMES OF CORONA



Kirkuk, 2020 – Kaka'i villagers in Daquq – photo: Karwan Salehi

If it wasn't for his reluctance to leave his mother behind, Mariwan would have migrated a long time ago, because he sees no future for youths like himself in his village.

With the COVID-19 outbreak, unemployment and home confinement have once again reignited the thought of migrating in Mariwan's head.

"Due to unemployment, we left our village for the city, and there, the Coronavirus took all from us. That's why I keep thinking about migrating, but my mother's love has prevented me," said Mariwan Hama-Gharib from the Kaka'i village of Ali-Saray in Daquq district.



THERE ISN'T ANY JOB FOR US, AND AS WE ARE IN HOME CONFINEMENT, IT FEELS LIKE BEING IN PRISON AT HOME

"There isn't any job for us, and as we are in home confinement, it feels like being in prison at home."

Mariwan mentions the attacks by ISIS and the deterioration of security which have caused the displacement of a large number of people. "For us, the Kaka'is, life has been difficult, and not only in times of the Coronavirus, but even before that as well."

But despite it all, Mariwan and other Kaka'i youths have been following health instructions to prevent the further spread of the virus.

Mariwan has suggestions for the government in helping rebuild their villages, among them providing loans for small projects, and subsidies for agriculture and farming as incentive.

"Opening a sport centre and libraries are among the many things that can be done for Kaka'i youths," he says, and that a cultural centre at the least should be established, so that the youths can learn about their religion.



Daquq, 2020 – a Kaka'i shop keeper in Daquq – photo: Karwan Salehi

The preventive measures taken by the authorities against the spread of the Coronavirus have had a much bigger negative impact in rural areas as they lack basic services like electricity, access to health services and internet connection.



Our patience runs out

23-year-old Haisam Yusif Muhammad says: “Our patience runs out; sometimes we get bored sitting at home. But we have nowhere to go, that’s why the youths gather in front of my shop and chat.”

Haisam has a small shop in the Zanqir village, which he had to close during the lockdown period.

He told KirkukNow: “There are no jobs left due to the Coronavirus; we can’t even travel to Daquq to seek a job.”

Iraq was already in a prolonged financial crisis before the pandemic, which slowed down the economy even more.

Sarmad Rasheed (29), a resident of the Kaka’i village of Topzawa, is a teacher, he was compelled to open a barber shop because the Kurdistan Regional Government has been paying them their salaries once in two months and with a reduction.

“I opened the shop four years ago, both to earn a living and to spend time.”

He adds: “Unlike in the urban centres, work is slow in the village, and it has become even slower due to the Coronavirus; earning a living has become very difficult these days.”

Schools have not opened yet this year due to the pandemic. The KRG has plans to let all schools, except for 12th graders, give online lessons.



Daquq, 2020 – one of the Kaka’i villages in Daquq - photo: Karwan Salehi

“There are people who can’t even afford paying for a haircut; employment is high, people hang around in front of my shop to chat until the evenings,” said Sarmad Rasheed.

There are more than 70 youths living in the three Kaka’i villages Zanqir, Ali-Saray and Topzawa.

When faced with financial difficulties, the youth used to have two choices: either migrate or join one of the security forces of the KRG or the Federal Government.

KAKA'I KARATE INSTRUCTOR: ONLINE KARATE LESSONS INADEQUATE REPLACEMENT FOR REGULAR PRACTICE



Kirkuk, 2020 – Majid Kaka'i and his daughter Avesta have been training at home for 8 months – photo: Muhammad Almas

Wearing his training suit and black belt, everything is the same as regular classes for Majid except that his students are October not lined in front of him, but watching their instructor's moves on a screen.

39-year-old Majid Flamarz Kaka'i stands before a camera and shows his students how to make the movements through the internet.

Sometimes the video connection hampers or is cut off due to the bad internet service in Kirkuk province, leaving his students disappointed.

Majid has been giving online Karate lessons for eight months now due to the pandemic lockdown. But it still remains very different from regular classes.



LOCKDOWN HAS BEEN A BIG PROBLEM, ESPECIALLY FOR KARATE TRAINING

The lockdown "has been a big problem, especially for Karate training, which requires direct training in a hall," said Majid.

Majid belongs to the Kaka'i community in Daquq, but currently resides in Kirkuk City.

"Our training hall is closed, which has had a very negative impact on me and my students."

Majid didn't stand idle and right from the beginning of the lockdown started giving his students Karate lessons online.

Among the measures taken by the Iraqi government against the spread of the COVID-19 was closing down all sport halls.

Majid has been practicing Karate for 32 years. Giving online lessons was a new experience for him. "[Online] training is not the same as in our hall, but it's better than nothing."

Majid is a trainer at a sports club called Khak and has a black belt. He has more than 100 students in different levels.

"Many of my students have taken part in the online training."

What worries Majid, who previously participated in several local and international tournaments, missing the opportunity to participate in the tournaments due to pandemic, which most of his students dream about.

His own eldest daughter is among his students whom the pandemic prevented from realizing their dreams.

Avesta Majid (13), told KirkukNow: "I have been practicing Karate since I was 10, I have a brown belt. I had high hopes, but the Coronavirus took it all away."

Although she has been training with her father at home, this did not make up for the opportunities she missed.



I HAD BEEN PREPARING TO PARTICIPATE IN THE KURDIS-TAN GIRLS' KARATE CHAMPIONSHIP A LONG TIME

"I had been preparing to participate in the Kurdistan Girls' Karate Championship a long time, in order to get a better place, but the Coronavirus stopped everything and the championship was cancelled."

"We have been practicing several hours a day. Other students would often join online."

She says she is training harder nowadays in order to compensate for the lost time and gain the black belt.

Sozan Wasmi (34), Majid's wife, has been supportive in their daughter's Karate practice at home. "I have been encouraging my daughter a lot. We have adjusted our home environment for the sport so that they don't get discouraged due to the lockdown and the closure of the sports halls."

Sozan says that she too has been practicing Karate with her husband and daughter from time to time.

After eight months, the difficult times for Majid finally passed as the Iraqi government allowed the reopening of sports halls and public places, provided that they adhere to preventive measures and follow health instructions.

But Majid and his students still have to make up for the times they missed and at the same time keep a distance from one another during training.



WE HAVE MISSED A LOT, WE HAVE A SHORT TIME AND MANY TASKS

"The students lag behind for some training lessons, we have missed a lot, we have a short time and many tasks. While following the health instructions, we will try to complete the preparations for the upcoming tournaments in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region," said Majid.



Kirkuk, October 2020 – a training hall at the Khak sport club
photo: Muhammad Almas

Everyday Ghalib wakes up early, wears his traditional attire after having breakfast, and drives towards his village in his decades-old car.

One can recognize the 81-year-old grey-haired man as a Kaka'i just by looking at his attire and his (also grey) long and thick moustache before he speaks in the distinctive dialect of Kurdish that his community is known for speaking in the region.

Ghalib Wali Muhammad speaks as passionately about his ancestral home region as a youth would about his or her love interest. He was compelled to leave his Zanqr several years ago.

"If I don't visit my village each day and see my home, I get depressed and restless."

He has been going back and forth for five years now. Each time he stays in his village for at least an hour before returning to urban life with a broken heart.

Ghalib and his family were displaced in 2015 and settled in the town of Daquq in a time when ISIS militants were on the verge of taking over the Kaka'i regions.



IF I ONLY WALK FOR JUST AN HOUR IN THE VILLAGE ON A DAILY BASIS, THAT MEANS EVERYTHING FOR ME

"If I only walk for just an hour in the village on a daily basis, that means everything for me."

It's not just all of Ghalib's childhood memories that keep taking him back to the village, but also his relatives and others of his age. Whenever he is there, many gather around him to listen to his talks and to reminisce together.



Kirkuk, 2020 – 81-year-old Ghalib Muhammad Wali at his village plucking okras
photo: Muhammad Almas



Kirkuk, 2020 – Ghalib and his pick-up from the 1980s - photo: Muhammad Almas

"During the pandemic and the curfew, I wasn't able to visit my village; I was imprisoned at home. Being idle without visiting the village has made me feel depressed."

He says he tried several times to go to his village during the curfew, but the security forces prevented him.

The distance between his home in Daquq and his village is about 30 km.

"I was tired of this situation, because I left my soul and my life behind in that village, and I am only physically in Daquq. Throughout my life I have never suffered so much sadness as in the several months during the Coronavirus."



THROUGHOUT MY LIFE I HAVE NEVER SUFFERED SO MUCH SADNESS AS IN THE SEVERAL MONTHS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS

He still pines to return to his village, but his children don't let him return.

Ghalib's wife died several years ago. He has eight daughters and one son. He currently lives with three of his daughters. The rest are married, and none of them live in the village.

"We can no longer return to the village, most of its inhabitants have been displaced. So, it will not return to what it was in the past when we lived together with our relatives. Otherwise, everyone desires to go back to their home," said Nasreen (51 years old), one of Ghalib's daughters.



Of 80 families that used to live in Zanqr, only seven remain.

"We were very worried about our father as he would travel back to the village every day. Because my two sisters and I would keep waiting for him to return. But we would not press him [not to go], and sometimes we would even accompany him in his trip to the village," Nasreen added.



WE WERE VERY WORRIED ABOUT OUR FATHER AS HE WOULD TRAVEL BACK TO THE VILLAGE EVERY DAY

Ghalib's inability to travel back to his village has also affected his daughters who have been worried about his state.

Among his fellow villagers, Ghalib is seen as an elder with great life experience, that's why many gather around him whenever he sits to talk.

Saman Ibrahim (50 years old), who still lives in the village, says that they are happy with Ghalib's visits to the village and that they love to hear him talk. They keep eying the road in anticipation of his old pick-up car coming towards the village.

As soon as the curfew was lifted, Ghalib resumed his daily visits to his beloved Zanqr.

If he is not ill or not impeded by something else, regardless of the time of the day, he gets into his old car and drives towards his home.

PANDEMIC BRINGS UNIQUE BUSINESS OF KAKA'I WOMAN TO BRINK OF RUIN



Kirkuk, 2020 – Pirshing Kaka'i sewing at her little market – photo: Muhammad Almas

Pirshing's home nowadays resembles more a bustling bazaar rather than a place of residency: a woman bakes bread in the front yard and cooks in the kitchen; in the other rooms, a number of women are busy sewing clothes, making ornaments and selling them along with textiles.

Part of the front yard of the 200-square-metre house has been turned into a salon for women.

The house that Pirshing has turned into a small market is located in Daquq town, southwest of Kirkuk province. She has dubbed it The Noor Assembly for Women.



I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO EMPLOY POVERTY-STRICKEN SIX WOMEN

"Next to the financial side, my aim for this project was providing job opportunity. I have been able to employ poverty-stricken six women," said the 34-year-old Pirshing Abdulsattar.

Pirshing's project was brought to the brink of total ruin by the preventive measures taken against the spread of the COVID-19 virus as she was forced to close the doors of her small market.

She says closing the market put her and her colleagues in financial difficulties.

Before the outbreak of the Coronavirus, Pirshing had plans to expand her endeavour in order to prove more job opportunities for women.

"There was a need for job opportunities for [unemployed] women who were sitting home, but the Coronavirus destroyed that dream as well."

Pirshing still feels downhearted as a few months has already passed since the general curfew was lifted, yet their revenue is still below half of what they were bringing in before the pandemic hit.

She has been working on her project for years. A few years after she gets married, she starts sewing to assist her husband in earning a livelihood, then opens a salon and later adds the other facets to her little market.

Pirshing hails from the Kaka'i community in Nineveh Plain. She got married at the age of 18 and moved to Daquq.



I WAS THE FIRST WOMAN TO WORK INDEPENDENTLY IN THE CONSERVATIVE MULTI-ETHNIC AND MULTI RELIGIOUS REGION

"I was the first woman to work independently in the conservative multi-ethnic and multi-religious region. I have faced many hurdles and uphill battles until I reached what I have today. But the category of our work, the cleanliness and quality of our cooking and the quality of our products has helped us get a large number of customers," says Pirshing.

Next to the salon and sewing clothes, the little market also functions as a restaurant for customers and also delivers meals.

47-year-old Sabiha Jwamér, who bakes bread at Pirshing's little market, says: "God first, then Pirshing have provided a job opportunity for me. She has been a great help."

The pandemic affected Sabiha immensely as she no longer could work. "We lost our livelihood and our lives became harder." But she is now happy that she has resumed her work and can help provide a livelihood for her family.



THE PANDEMIC SHUT THE DOOR IN OUR FACE

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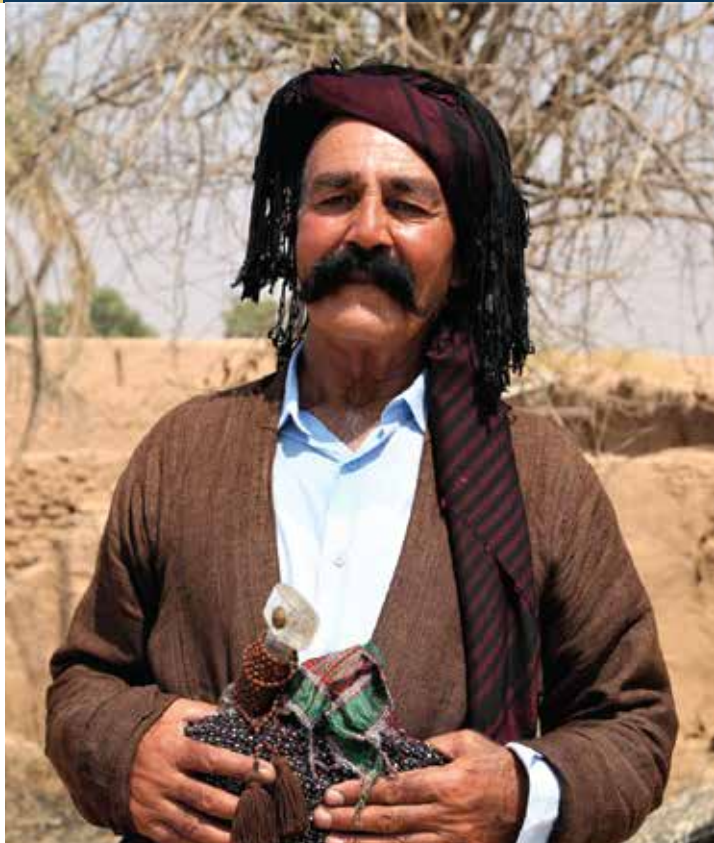
Sara Jalal, who has been an employee of Pirshing for several years, says: "Our operation was going smoothly, and we had enough customers. But the pandemic shut the door in our face; it slowed down our work."

Sara says she and her colleagues are under mental pressure due to the current condition and the slowdown of their work.

But despite the difficulties, Pirshing has no plan to give up and keeps hope for the future and keeps talking to women who come looking for a job.



CHAP WITH DAGGER; PROTAGONIST IN WAR AND PEACE



Kirkuk, October 2020 – a training hall at the Khak sport club
photo: Muhammad Almas

The dagger ‘uncle’ Azeez tucks in his waistband has been in his possession for nearly half a century and has been in his family for “seven generations.”

Azeez is a tall man, and has a thick, pitch-black moustache. Most of the time, he wears traditional Kurdish clothing with a thick waistband.

The handle of his daggers sticks out with a tasbeeh (a string of beads) curled around it.

The age of his dagger is about 200 years.



I HAVE HAD THIS DAGGER FOR 45 YEARS IN MY POSSESSION AND KEPT IT SAFE

“I have had this dagger for 45 years in my possession and kept it safe. I don’t know to whom it will go after me, as I don’t have any children.”

Azeez says that the owning the dagger comes with conditions, the most important is to carry it at all times and wherever one goes.

Azeez himself adheres to that condition and wherever he goes, he carries it with him. He is therefore dubbed “abu-Khanjar,” roughly meaning “the one with a dagger.”

Abu-Khanjar’s full name is Abdul-Azeez Muhammad Kaka’i. He is 63 years old, and belongs to the indigenous Kaka’is of Topzawa village in Kirkuk’s Daquq district. Azeez is the village’s commissioner, and is a notable and beloved figure among his community.

Currently, he uses his social status to encourage people to follow health instruction against the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Like others, Azeez was affected by the pandemic and was not able to sell his farm products this year.

“Most of our products couldn’t be sold and we distributed them among the people in the village.”



MOST OF OUR PRODUCTS COULDN'T BE SOLD AND WE DISTRIBUTED THEM AMONG THE PEOPLE IN THE VILLAGE

"Nobody would buy yoghurt, that's why we churned most of our products into butter."

Unlike normal times, before the pandemic, Azeez does not move around much.

"We have been protecting ourselves, but the rural environment is very clean, unlike the cities, and doesn't pose much danger."

Azeez takes part in almost every social, political, security and administration event in Daquq.

"For tribal reconciliation, or for any misfortune in any tribe, they call me. With dialogue, we resolve their issues."

Azeez has a robust relationship with the security forces in the area. "They respect us, and we respect them."

"Nowadays it is such that when traveling between Topzawa, Zanqr and other villages, they immediately say 'go on abu-Khanjar, pass' at the checkpoints."



THEY IMMEDIATELY SAY 'GO ON ABU-KHANJAR, PASS' AT THE CHECKPOINTS

Azeez's dagger has a name, "Qazween." It was made in Iran and was given to one of his ancestors as a gift.

"I regularly clean the dagger. I take good care of it so that it doesn't get rusted and remain pristine as it is."

Azeez is married and fathered two sons. "God gave us two sons and took them both back. But due to the "immense respect" from people, he has never felt like being without progeny.

There are no candidates to inherit his dagger, that's why his wife will be deciding whom the dagger goes to.

Among the worries of uncle Azeez now is the fate of his dagger; whether it will end up in the hands of someone who will take care of it as has and will get the "abu-Khanjar" title.



Kirkuk, 2020 – inside Pirshing's home that she turned into a market
photo: Muhammad Almas

NO NEED FOR PLACE OF WORSHIP, KAKA'IS CAN WORSHIP WHEREVER, WHENEVER



Kirkuk, 2020 – a Kaka'i villager in one of the villages of Daquq – photo: Karwan Salehi

Members of the Kaka'i community do not have special places for worship like other religions, they can worship in any place and at any time.

For the Kaka'is, religion is more about spirituality than organizing and gathering. But some of them see the lack of places of worship as a kind of neglect for their religion.

"In the philosophy of the Kaka'i religion (Yarsanism), there is more emphasis on the soul, because in any place that is clean, and where non-Kaka'is aren't present, it is possible to perform religious ceremonies," said Rajab Asi (42).

Asi is a Kaka'i from Daquq district (south of Kirkuk) and head of the Mithra, a Yarsani organization. He confirms that they don't have places of worship similar to mosques, churches and temples.



IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE KAKA'I RELIGION (YARSANISM), THERE IS MORE EMPHASIS ON THE SOUL

Conversion to the Kaka'i religion is not possible. And worshipping is mostly done solitary rather than in a group.

"Just as the Muslims face the Qibla or Mecca, and Ezidis Lalish temple, we have Prdêwar where Sultan Sahak is buried. It is a sacred place where people go for pilgrimage," said Rajab.

Prdêwar is located near Du'aw in the town of Nawsoud in the Hawraman region in Kirmashan (Kermanshah) province in Iran.

There are 18 Kaka'i shrines across Iraq, seven of them located in Kirkuk province.

The most famous of them are: sayed-Ibrahim Shrine in Baghdad and the sayed-Baba Yadgar Shrine in Iran, which most Kaka'is visit to pray for curing diseases and fulfilling their wishes.



Nineveh, 2019 – a Kaka'i shrine after restoration – photo: KirkukNow

The Kaka'is are also known as Ahli Haq or Yarsan. They have their own religion but it has not been officially recognized in the Iraqi constitution.

Sami Raf'at, a 57-year-old Kaka'i from Daquq, told KirkukNow: "Kaka'i was not recognized as a separate religion, neither in the Iraqi constitution nor in the constitution of the Kurdistan Region. That's why no entity takes the responsibility of building places of worship for this religion."

Sami believes that having places for worship and religious gatherings is necessary.



THE KAKA'IS ARE A WRONGED AND MARGINALIZED MINORITY

"The Kaka'is are a wronged and marginalized minority. All sides take their turn in exploiting us for their own interests but do nothing for the Kaka'i religion," Sami added.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has had an effect on the followers of the Kaka'i. Although they do not have group rituals and ceremonies, the measures imposed, especially the curfew, prevented them from visiting their shrines, especially their holiest ones which are located in Iran.

There is a gathering hall in Halabja for social events, but in most other places Kaka'i funerals are held at home or in tents.



Daquq, Kirkuk, 2018 – a Kaka'i family at Zanqr village – photo: KirkukNow

Kaka'i is recognized as a religion in the Minorities' Law of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Amir Mawloud, an official at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Kurdistan Regional Government, told KirkukNow: "Kaka'is practice their religion and hold their ceremonies with complete freedom, but we do not meddle in their religious affairs and that is not our business."

And he indicated that there is no statistics on the number of shrines and religious places of Kaka'is. "We deal with their religion from the standpoint of religious freedoms."

Next to Kirkuk province, Kaka'is live in Halabja, Nineveh, Erbil, Khanaqin and other places in Diyala. Their numbers are estimated to be around 100,000.

Followers of the Kaka'i religion believe that "all places are made by God the creator. God is close to pure hearts, and gets closer." This is the reason why places of worship are not essential for them, as Akbar Karim explained to KirkukNow.

50-year-old Karim lives in Halabja and has expertise on his religion. "The soul and one's true intentions are put in the centre, so that they have a positive reflection on society."

SHOULD MOTHER FREE, CHILDREN GROW UP IN FREEDOM: SAMIRA KARIMAT



Samira Muhammad Hussein, aka Samira Karimat, a known women activist in Kirkuk
photo: Samira's Facebook account

A contrarian woman, Samira has spent her life working for social progress and diminishing restrictive social norms so that women can have more rights.

"Thanks to my father who didn't clip my wings and taught me how to fly," Samira wrote in a post on her Facebook page with a picture of herself spreading her arms imitating birds.

Wherever there is an event for promoting women's rights, Samira is present. She often writes the slogans she wants to recite on her palms.



I OFTEN IGNORED THE NORMS OTHER GIRLS WOULD FOLLOW

"I was a contrarian; I often ignored the norms other girls would follow. I always had my own opinions and stances," Samira said.

57-year-old Samira Muhammad Hussein, also known as Samira Karimat, is known and capable women's rights activists in Kirkuk.

"The street means freedom and no boundaries. The street is the arena of activity of someone who can get out of home and showcase their capabilities."



Kirkuk, November 2020 – Samira Karimat – photo: Muhammad Almas

This Kaka'i woman can't not live without taking to the streets. That's why the lockdown and other containment measures against the COVID-19 pandemic dismayed her immensely.

"The Coronavirus had much effect as the various activities in Kirkuk couldn't go on. Those were very unpleasant days."



THE CORONAVIRUS HAD MUCH EFFECT AS THE VARIOUS ACTIVITIES IN KIRKUK COULDN'T GO ON

But Samira resorted to using social media platforms to continue her activities with others. At the same time, she encouraged people to follow the health instructions and help those in need as unemployment spiked during the lockdowns.

"We were active on social media. We had online groups and would work collectively. We established a [chat] group for the Kaka'i ceremonies, which had more than 4,000 Kaka'i members. It was also a platform for better understanding one another and getting to know more people."

According to government officials, the Coronavirus still poses a danger in Iraq, yet most of the containment measures have been lifted.

Samira has three daughters and a son. One of her daughters is a singer who won first place in a talent show.

"I believe when a mother is free, then her children will also grow up in freedom."



MINORITY RIGHTS IN EVERY ASPECT IS VIOLATED

Samira says her husband has assisted her in keeping a balance between working, taking care of her family and continuing with her activism at the same time.

She has worked for five years at a women's rights organization called Rozh and is currently a school director.

Next to women's rights, Samira also fights for the rights of minorities in Iraq. She has taken part in dozens of Kaka'i activities.

"Minority rights in every aspect are violated. That's why I have always tried to amplify their voices."

She says that taking to the street is a great challenge, especially for demanding freedom for women and encouraging them to reject submissiveness.



Kirkuk, Samira at a rally for women's rights – photo: Samira's Facebook page