

Republic of Dreams: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Struggles, and the Future of Iraqi Kurdistan

Nicole F. Watts

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The history of the Kurdish people's struggle for self-government is at the center of Nicole F. Watts's riveting book *Republic of Dreams*.

The modern countries of the Middle East were created when the Age of Empires came to an end during the early twentieth century. But one group of people was never given a country of their own: the Kurds. After decades of government persecution and oppression, the Kurds arrived at a semblance of self-government when they were granted autonomy over the Kurdish parts of Iraq at the end of the Iraq War.

Based in Watts's field research in Iraqi Kurdistan between 2009 and 2024, the book tracks the Kurdish people's changing story. Beginning with Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Iraqi city of Halabja in 1988, it focuses on a few survivors: Ahmed, Mahbubeh, and their children. The family ended up in a refugee camp in Iran. There, Mahbubeh gave birth to her son, Peshawa, whose life story serves as the book's framework. Through him, Watts reflects on events that the Kurdish people had little influence over but which affected them all the same: the Iran-Iraq War; the American invasion of Iraq; the creation of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region; the advances of ISIS; and the political high-stakes game surrounding Kurdish claims to independence.

Written in a literary style, the text blurs the lines between history and hagiography, telling Peshawa's story in the hero's journey style. He traveled across the world to the United States and Dubai before landing in Ireland. And the near-mythological description of his birth underscores the overarching message that history is made up of ordinary people overcoming extraordinary odds.

Republic of Dreams is a history of the Kurdish people told through the heroic efforts of ordinary people who were determined to build lives on their own terms.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (January / February 2025)

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