

#CHANGES NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2024



wadi

DEAR SUPPORTERS, DEAR FRIENDS,

from THOMAS VON DER OSTEN-SACKEN,
Managing director



We sometimes still find it odd and strange to understand that Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq have now become tourist destinations. We are now sometimes contacted by travel organizers who ask whether they can also visit projects on their Iraq tours. For us, Iraq was a country of crises and wars for decades, to which Europeans only came as helpers, journalists or military personnel. Even ten years ago, the idea that it could become a tourist destination would have been absurd. But some things are changing very quickly.

This means: If you are interested, you can now easily plan and book a trip to Iraq. One tip, however: You should avoid

the summer months, as temperatures have already broken the 40C mark at the beginning of June - during a recent project visit to the particularly hot Germian region, the thermometer showed 49C at midday. Climate change is becoming even more noticeable in this region than in Europe. Cairo, Egypt is also reporting almost 50 degrees at the moment and you can't imagine what it means for the millions of desperately poor people there to have to endure such temperatures without air conditioning. Rapidly advancing climate change, which could soon endanger the livelihoods of countless people, was, among other factors, also the reason for our environmental campaign "Keep Kurdistan Green", which we started a decade ago, and we are reporting on its progress in this newsletter, among other things.

When it's so hot on the weekend, you go to the more shady places and one of them is the Azadi (Freedom) Park in Suleymaniah, from which I'm writing you these lines. It's also one of the places where you can see the changes that have taken place over the last decades, as if they were under a magnifying glass.

The large area near the old town was a huge military camp until 1991, when the people of Iraqi Kurdistan were able to free themselves from Saddam Hussein's yoke. The troops with which the dictatorship carried out its brutal repression were stationed here. This is still remembered today by the so-called "Red Building" at the entrance to the park, a former headquarters of Saddam's feared secret

service, which was preserved as the Kurdish militias found it when they conquered it in the spring of 1991. There, visitors can visit the torture chambers, the prison cells in which suspects were crammed together under inhumane conditions, but also learn a lot about the history of the resistance against the Saddam regime.

Iraq is also the country of mass graves: Since the fall of Saddam, new ones have been discovered everywhere in which the army and secret service buried civilians who were shot indiscriminately in the 1980s. A mass grave was even found on the grounds of Azadi Park, now commemorated by a somewhat outdated monument.



THE „RED BUILDING“ IN SULEYMANIAH, A FORMER SECRET SERVICE PRISON

Just a few meters from this monument, a handicrafts market organized by women takes place on weekends, which brings us to the new Iraqi Kurdistan. Here, emphasis has recently been placed on organically grown products, and in countless projects - including ours - economic independence for women is being promoted. Young couples stroll past there, as do families and groups of women. Some people head to Luna Park, to ride pedal boats or roller coasters on an artificial lake.

All of this is possible today because in 2000, two decades ago, the Kurdish administration at the time decided to turn this military site into a public park and give it this beautiful name. What was particularly progressive was that it was declared at the opening that so-called

chaperones were not welcome in this park. Until then, there was no place for young couples who were not yet engaged and married to meet without supervision. An aunt, uncle or other family member always had to be there, and initially guards at the entrances to the park even checked whether visitors were adhering to this rule.

Such times are now a thing of the past, and even if morals are still quite strict, customs have noticeably relaxed. It was also unthinkable back then that women and men would sit mixed together in cafés; There was a strict separation between the family sector and places that were for men only. Today it is a common sight, not only in Azadi Park, to see groups of women sitting alone in cafes until late into the night.



WOMEN'S MARKET IN AZADI PARK

**...THAT CHANGES
FOR THE BETTER
ARE POSSIBLE,
BUT THEY RARELY
MAKE THE
HEADLINES.**

There is a children's festival a little further away, and there are also several playgrounds on site. For the little ones, the story told by the "Red Building" and the memorial to the mass grave is a long-gone past. Even those in their twenties in Suleymaniah can hardly imagine that fear and terror once reigned here, followed by civil war and bitter poverty. This is also a sign of how quickly changes can occur in this part of the world.

And especially in view of all the terrible reports that reach you every day from the Middle East, it is important to keep reminding yourself that changes for the better are possible, but they rarely make the headlines.

Of course, I could now draw a link to the miserable reality in the refugee camps, for example, which continue to exist everywhere and in which, ten years after

the genocide by the Islamic State, hundreds of thousands of Yazidis continue to have to eke out a hopeless existence. I could also point out what it means to have to live in such a camp in these temperatures, but all of this seems very distant when you are spending an afternoon here in Azadi Park.

Below we would like to let three Wadi employees and partners in Iraq and Greece speak about some of the projects we support. You can also find out more about all of our campaigns, programs and projects on our website at any time.

We wish you a nice summer and would like to thank you very much for your support so far...

**...BUT NOT WITHOUT
POINTING OUT THAT YOUR
DONATION MAKES OR COULD
MAKE AN IMPORTANT
DIFFERENCE THIS YEAR TOO.**

#KEEP KURDISTAN GREEN

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION PROJECTS IN NORTHERN IRAQ

For over ten years, Wadi has been supporting various projects and campaigns to protect the environment and resources in northern Iraq. This now also includes three recycling centers. **Shnyar Yadgar** works in the oldest one in Halabja and talks about her experiences in this interview with **Dominik Metzger**.

Can you describe the current situation of waste management in Kurdistan, especially when it comes to plastic waste?

Shnyar: In Iraq and Kurdistan, waste management is a serious problem as the region produces an enormous amount of waste. Iraq is the second country in the world with the highest per capita waste generation. Although the government has commissioned companies to collect plastic waste, their methods are often inadequate: the waste is disposed of in nature or buried in holes and only sporadically covered with soil. This practice is dangerous for both soil and water as it results in the release of chemicals and other toxic compounds into the environ-

ment. Waste collection and sorting systems in Kurdistan and Iraq are inadequate. This waste problem poses a significant environmental threat and is the most important issue that needs to be addressed in Kurdistan. In Halabja in particular, there is no proper recycling center, just an old one, highlighting the urgent need for improved waste disposal infrastructure.

What is the main goal of this recycling project in Kurdistan?

The main goal of the project is to raise awareness about recycling and the dangers of plastic waste. Although the recycling center is too small to collect all of Halabja's plastic waste, the project has had a significant impact on the community. Since the project started 2 ½ years ago, many people, especially children, have started to understand the concept of recycling and are now bringing plastic to our center. This has raised awareness in the community that they can recycle their own waste. The project also aims to educate people about the environmental dangers of plastic waste.



IN THE HALABJA RECYCLING CENTER

Can you describe some of the key activities or initiatives that are part of this project?

The main activities of the project include conducting seminars in schools, hospitals, government institutions, universities and kindergartens. In these seminars, participants learn about the dangers of environmental pollution and how to address these problems, with an emphasis on linking the dangers to their health. In addition to the seminars, collection containers are placed throughout the city and are emptied regularly. The collected plastics are sorted according to different types, e.g. B. PET, HDPE and mixed plastics. We recycle HDPE ourselves, the rest is sold in large quantities to Sulaymani-

yah. The products we make from recycled materials include benches, swings, bowls and clocks. Some of these products are distributed to schools so that students can directly see the results of their recycling efforts.

How has the local community responded to the project so far?

Some people are skeptical about organizations because, based on past experiences, they believe that these organizations take in a lot of money without using it for its intended purpose. However, the younger generation has reacted very positively to the project because they are happy that something is finally being done in the area of environmental



SHNYAR YADGAR
IS WORKING IN
ONE OF THE
WADI-SUPPORTED
RECYCLING CENTERS

protection. On the other hand, some people are unable to deal with pollution because they are worried about being able to feed their family, for example.

How do you work with the locals and how do you ensure that they take part in the project?

At the beginning it was very difficult to motivate people to collect plastic because they didn't understand what we were doing. However, after the first few seminars, people became more receptive and supportive. More and more people came to the recycling center to drop off their waste. The children have become the most important part of the campaign

as they collect most of the plastic waste. In addition, an institute that offers training in electrical engineering invites us to a seminar every time a new training series begins. Children also play a crucial role at home by repeatedly urging their parents to separate the garbage until they finally do so.

Can you share any success stories or positive outcomes from community participation?

Citizens have actively participated in the project, among other things, by requesting collection containers for their respective districts so that they can collect plastic waste locally. There used to be a misconception, about a year and a half ago, that people would collect plastic for me or the recycling center. Back then, only friends or relatives brought plastic to show who it came from. However, this perception has changed over time and today people simply leave their plastic waste at their doorstep, some even do so on a daily basis. This shift indicates a growing understanding in society that by collecting plastic they are helping to keep their own environment clean. Originally, schools required gifts in return for participation in the project, but this attitude has changed.

What were the biggest challenges in implementing this project?

In the initial phase, we faced the challenge that there were no machines for recycling plastic in Kurdistan, so we had to construct our own locally. This pioneering work took time to refine, but we

persevered. Another obstacle was the collection of plastics, which primarily came from schools. Unfortunately, due to political and salary issues, schools were only open for four months this year, resulting in a significant drop in plastic collection. We then adapted our approach and established alternative collection methods to maintain our recycling efforts.

We actively encourage citizens to increase their plastic collection efforts. In addition, we have made strategic changes such as: B. relocating collection containers and transferring responsibilities to local partners to optimize operations.

Are there certain environmental, political or social factors in Kurdistan that influence your work?

Despite the urgency of protecting the environment, many people often prioritize other concerns over this issue. However, from a political point of view, all parties support our project. We even use mosques as platforms for educational work and thus ensure broad social engagement. The key to success lies in the inclusion of all levels of society.

What is it like to be a woman running a recycling center?

A woman who runs a recycling center in Halabja has to overcome many challenges, but also has many opportunities. In our city, many women already have jobs, and some even hold higher official positions. However, there are still outdated ideas in certain circles that view recycling and waste management as unsuitable for women because they are consid-



ered dirty. Additionally, there were instances where my collaboration with three male colleagues attracted negative attention. However, the unwavering support of my family and husband helped me overcome these challenges. Despite the obstacles, I am very proud of my position and the positive impact our recycling efforts have on the community and the environment.

What long-term changes do you hope to achieve from this project?

We hope to get all schools and kindergartens in Halabja on board so that we can spread awareness about environmental issues everywhere. It is important to us that the entire community is educated about environmental pollution. We also hope to set up two or three more recycling centers in Halabja so that all parts of the city can participate. And of course we want to improve our machines and increase the quality of our products. It's always about us getting better at what we do.

What is the most rewarding part of working on this project for you personally?

For me, the most rewarding part of working on this project is witnessing the enthusiasm of the children during our educational work. It makes me proud when I see children actively participating in collecting plastic because I know that we

are having a positive impact on their lives. I am also proud of the diverse composition of our team in the recycling center, where four women and one man work harmoniously together.

I also really enjoy working with the great teams at NWE and Wadi. Before I was just Shnyar, but now I run this center, which is why many young girls look up to me. This change in my life brings me a lot of joy and fulfillment.

YAZIDIS IN IRAQ LESS AND LESS SUPPORT

Oliver M. Piecha spoke to Basma Aldikhi, who has been advocating and caring for Yazidi survivors of the genocide by the Islamic State (IS) for Wadi for ten years. Yazidis who were promised safety and asylum in Germany are being deported to Iraq for some time now. Basma talks to us about the current situation in the camps in the Dohuk area. These deportations prompted Pro Asyl to start a campaign in cooperation with us (Wadi) for a nationwide stop to deportations. For this purpose, we also wrote a longer report on the situation in Iraq, which was published by Pro Asyl in the spring. The conclusion: Even ten years after the genocide, there is no perspective for Yazidis in Iraq. The report can be found at <https://wadi-online.de/2024/04/24/gutachten-zwei-jahre-nach-dem-volkermord-zur-lage-der-jesidinnen-und-jesiden-im-irak/> on our homepage.

Basma, can you briefly describe the focus of your work? Ten years after the genocide, the majority of the displaced Yazidis still live in camps. How has social work with people changed over the years? What are the main problems today?

Basma: Unfortunately, our working conditions have deteriorated significantly. Initially there was a lot of support from aid organizations and the population here in northern Iraq. There was enough food to feed the people in the camps, and there were lessons and fun activities for the children, as well as psychological support to help them deal with trauma. We are talking about a genocide in which people experienced terrible things; many women were raped and mistreated. However, we now receive much less support. The aid organizations have turned to other trouble spots and have moved to Ukraine, for example. With Wadi we work in six dif-



**BASMA ALDIKHI
HAS BEEN
SUPPORTING
YAZIDI SURVIVORS
OF THE GENOCIDE
FOR WADI
FOR TEN YEARS.**

ferent camps. And mothers come to me saying they don't have food for their children or that their child needs medicine that we can't provide. This situation is very difficult for us as helpers ourselves.

A generation is now growing up that grew up in camps and knows no other life. How does permanent life in camps change people?

Basma: If you ask the children where they come from, they answer, from Camp Sharja or Qadia. So you don't even know

where they come from. The origins from the camp, that is their identity. The people in the camps have the feeling that they are being driven out from everywhere and are not accepted by either Kurdistan or Iraq. The children in the camp don't have a home to close the door behind them because they live in tents. School lessons have already been cut and a class consists of 65 students, with a teacher responsible for everything. It is hardly possible to teach the children properly or to really teach them anything.

According to the wishes of the Iraqi central government, the camps with the Yazidis are to be dismantled like all other IDP camps - as early as summer 2024. What do those affected say about this? What do people expect to happen now? In your opinion, are the government's promises - help with resettlement in the Sinjar area, building houses and support there - realistic?

Basma: This decision is very hard and sad for the people in the camps. Their villages are in ruins and there is no longer a home to which they can return. They say that here in the camps we at least have a tent where our children can stay. There is at least some support from aid organizations here. This doesn't exist in Sinjar, where we're supposed to go back. As much as people want to return to their homes, it is still a better choice for them to stay in the camps. The government's promises are not helping people.



CAMP FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED IN NORTHERN IRAQ

If there is no going back to the past, where do the Yazidis go? Where does their future lie? In Iraq, in Germany? Scattered across the globe? What do the Yazidis say in the camps or in Sinjar?

Basma: After these atrocities, there is no turning back for people. Too many were killed, abused and raped. Currently, many women are still held captive by IS. The idea of leading a normal life again is not possible. It doesn't look like there is a future for us Yazidis anywhere. Hardly any attention is paid to us anymore; on

the contrary, we are now being driven out of our refuges.

How are forced returnees from Germany faring? What is their perspective in Iraq? To what extent are the discussions in Germany about deportations an issue for the Yazidi community in Iraq?

Basma: A few weeks ago someone here suffered a stroke at the airport after he arrived. He couldn't believe he had been deported. He didn't know where to go here. He couldn't return to his home vil-

**...THERE IS NO
GUARANTEE OF
SAFETY ANYWHERE.
PEOPLE ALSO FEAR
THAT THE ISLAMISTS
COULD RETURN.**

BASMA ALDIKHI

lage. He couldn't stand it all. Overall, people do not understand how they can be forced to return. Even though there are places in Sinjar where there is no fighting, there is no guarantee of safety anywhere. People also fear that the Islamists could return; They still exist, They just hid. Aside from that, everything they once owned was destroyed. Where exactly should they return to?

What role does “Germany” play for the Yazidi community?

Basma: At the beginning of the genocide, the aid organizations from Germany were the first to come to our aid. And Germany has recognized the Islamic State's attack on us Yazidis as genocide. People called Germany the second Sinjar

because so many Yazidis were taken in there and we received so much support from there. The current decision to deport Yazidis to Iraq hits people even harder. On their way to Germany, Yazidis died, they drowned, and many children died from cold and hunger before they could reach Germany. Now the Yazidis feel once again driven from their home, where they felt safe. Unfortunately, that is the current impression that prevails among people.

Even if others leave and cut back their support, we remain and will continue to provide urgently needed help for Yazidis in Iraq and advocate for their rights as refugees in Germany...

**...THIS IS ALSO POSSIBLE
THANKS TO YOUR DONATION.**

**LESBOS: FROM REFUGEES,
FOR REFUGEES.**

**THE MORIA WHITE HELMETS
ARE CELEBRATING
THEIR FOURTH BIRTHDAY.**

The refugee situation on Lesbos is tense. Although the number of refugees arriving has fallen significantly since the 2015 crisis, thousands of refugees still live on the island. In the overcrowded camps it is difficult to guarantee basic supplies. Making matters worse is the lengthy asylum process, which forces refugees to stay on the island for a long time. This has caused frustration and tension among both refugees and residents of the island. But it's not all bad. Wadi staff **Isis Elgibali** spoke to **Raid Al-Obaid**, representative of the Moria White Helmets, a group of self-organized refugees on Lesbos that Wadi has supported for years and who are one of the very few completely self-organized groups of refugees in Greece.

Can you briefly introduce yourself and the Moria White Helmets?

Raid: My name is Raid Al-Obaid, I am Syrian and came to the island of Lesbos in December 2019. I am a petroleum engineering specialist.

Like everyone else in our organization, we are volunteers. We started 2020 in Camp Moria, and so far we are still there. We are engineers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, mechanics, electricians, carpenters, paramedics, firefighters and much more. We all have a lot of experience. We started with 25 activists in the Moria camp, which burned down. Now we are 45 people in the Kara Tepe camp and we organize many activities. First of all, there is the area of education. We offer courses for children and adults on various topics (reading, foreign languages, mathematics, etc.).



Then we have various so-called „workshops“ where you can learn skills such as bicycle repairs, carpentry and other manual skills. We also have a workshop for men’s hairdressers and one for women’s hairdressers. We also have a sewing workshop. We also organize the camp’s garbage collection, sort the garbage and carry out collection campaigns for plastic and aluminum, which we then have picked up by the appropriate garbage or recycling companies on the island. We are really happy and proud that we have achieved all this over the years, and this shared experience of self-organization gives us strength. We simply see what we are capable of and are also pleased that

the island’s residents, who are themselves suffering from the refugee crisis, notice that refugees themselves are helping to keep the area around the camp clean.

Can you briefly explain to us what the word “self-organization” means to you personally?

Quite simply, it means that we organize ourselves, by ourselves, for ourselves, as refugees asking for international protection here in Greece. We are very happy to organize ourselves and we do not wait for any person or organization to give us tips.

We discuss the things that need to be done together and think about solutions. There is no boss, we are a team. It is important for us to work effectively, share knowledge and quickly solve problems that arise. We don't let others judge what we need and how things should be organized. We are not commodities and we are not livestock. We will not allow ourselves to be condemned to do nothing. We are human beings. Whatever we can do ourselves, we do ourselves. And with a little bit of outside support, we can do almost anything.

How would you advise others, who are going through difficult situations?

We are faced with big problems every day! There are different problems in this camp than in the old camp in Moria that burned down. For example, we have a



RAID AL-OBaid
IS A REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE MORIA WHITE
HELMETS, WHO HAVE
BEEN SUPPORTED
BY WADI SINCE THEIR
FOUNDING.

shortage of water and electricity here, it is also extremely cold in winter, there is a lack of economic opportunities and there is not enough food. We are in constant contact with people throughout the camp and we are working together to alleviate these problems as best and quickly as possible. So I would say: take stock! Think about what resources and skills you have and use that to work together on solutions.

Can you give us an impression of the situation on Lesbos?

Yes, to be honest, the situation in the Kara Tepe 2 camp is not as bad as the old camp in Moria that burned down in September 2020. After the fire we moved to this camp and it is better here, there are containers and tents for families, as well



**...WE ARE REFUGEES,
BUT FIRST AND
FOREMOST WE ARE
HUMAN BEINGS.
WE WANT TO BE SEEN
AS HUMAN BEINGS
AND TREATED WITH
HUMAN DIGNITY.**

RAID AL-OBAID

as tents for individuals. But we see deficits in supply. It's not catastrophic, but very mediocre. There are so many people here now. It is currently extremely hot and there are no air conditioning or fans for people at risk from the heat, such as the elderly, babies or new mothers.

Other things are also not good, such as the way we are treated by the authorities, how they favor some over others and how arbitrarily some applications are accepted and others rejected. We as refugees from various Arab, African countries and Asian countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan have all fled hatred, war and violence. I - as a Syrian - am still at war, and I feel so sad when I

think about my family and my parents and everything I left behind. Imagine being happy and having breakfast with your family, and then you lose a loved one to the war every day until there is no one left at the table. This is the reality for millions of people fleeing war. We ask for a chance at a new life in safety, we don't want clothes, money or anything like that, we just want a chance at a life in safety from war for ourselves and our children.

What solutions do you propose, what paths are you and your fellow members taking to solve problems you see?

As members and volunteers of the Moria White Helmets organization, each of us has skills and expertise. We all had lives, jobs and skills in our home countries before coming here. And we share our technical knowledge and experiences to find solutions to the daily problems we face here in the warehouse. We are also more than happy to share our knowledge and skills outside of camp.

All people, but especially refugees, have rights. Unfortunately, they are often ignored here. This applies especially to the right to education. Most of us here have had their education interrupted due to the wars, especially the children. However, there are not enough lessons in the camp, which is why we have organized various classes ourselves: for children, women and recently also for men.

Furthermore, the lack of supplies and the difficulty of accessing various ser-

vices is a real problem in the camp. We are trying to remedy this too. That's why, for example, bicycles can be repaired in our workshops, there are opportunities to repair clothing and we also have our own hair salons.

Do you feel supported in your work?

There is very little support at the moment, only WADI, Solingen helps and Shower Power are currently supporting us and we thank them for that. We hope that we can find further support for our work in the camp, especially because we see how much money is donated to refugees in Greece and how much is wasted or mis-spent.

If you could give us one thought at the end of this interview, what would it be?

We would simply say: yes, we are refugees, but first and foremost we are human beings. We want to be seen as human beings and treated with human dignity, and we want our human rights to be respected. We would tell the European Union to respect us as people asking for the right to asylum. We all left our respective countries because of violence and war, we just want a chance to live a safe life, to educate our children and a chance to work. We don't ask for money or clothes, as I said before. We just want the chance to live a life without violence. We at the Moria White Helmets are all volunteers, and we are happy to help everyone around us, even if we have limited resources.

Wadi has supported the Moria White Helmets since its inception and we would like to continue to do so in the future.

**PLEASE HELP US WITH A DONATION,
KEYWORD: GREECE**

...BECAUSE ALSO SMALL CHANGES COUNT!

At this point, we would like to once again thank all the institutions, donors, and friends who have supported our work over the years and made it possible.

We kindly ask you to continue standing by our side so that we can further implement our concept of solidarity-based development cooperation. Because we see time and again on the ground: It is the long breath that counts. Change takes time.

w a d i

Publisher:
wadi e.V.
Herborner Straße 62,
60439 Frankfurt/Main
District court Frankfurt, Nr. 0176

The signed contributions reflect
the views of the authors and
not necessarily those of the
editorial team. Photos © wadi e.V.

Up-to-date information at:
www.wadi-online.de

**DONATION ACCOUNT:
POSTBANK FRANKFURT/MAIN
IBAN: DE43 5001 0060 0612 3056 02
BIC: PBNKDEFF**

*Donations are tax-deductible; for amounts up to
300 euros, the deposit receipt is sufficient as proof.*