

## Best of Vancouver 2014: Vancouver provides hope for Kurdish community

As immigrants build lives locally, they dream of an independent homeland.

by CARLITO PABLO on SEP 17, 2014 at 11:00 AM



Vancouver property-development manager Babak Nikraftar is keeping a close eye on the conflict in northern Iraq.

## **BABAK NIKRAFTAR IS** watching what's going on in the Middle East

As a Canadian of Kurdish origin, the 35-year-old property development manager is naturally drawn to events in the region.

Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq are battling members of the Islamic State, an offshoot of al-Qaeda that used to be called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Canada recently entered the fight. The country is deploying elite soldiers to advise and train security forces in the northern part of Iraq—home to a Kurdish autonomous region—on how to stem the IS advance.

With the world's attention riveted on the conflict in this place that Kurds consider to be part of their bigger homeland, Nikraftar sees some hope for a dream that has eluded his people.

"Once this is over, it's going to make the Kurds finally recognized as a nation," Nikraftar told the *Georgia Straight* in an interview at a Burnaby mall.

Kurds are a people from Kurdistan, an oil-rich and mountainous region that crosses the borders of five countries: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia. There is no independent Kurdistan.

According to Kurdish House, a Toronto-based community organization, Kurdistan is about the size of France or Texas. It's as big as Germany and Britain combined.

The association also notes that Kurds are the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East, after Arabs, Persians, and Turks.

"When you have a population of 40-plus million people, but you don't have your own country, and no country—not even the United Nations—recognizes you as a country, it's disheartening," said Nikraftar, who was born in the Kurdistan region of Iran.

According to him, the Kurds were historically part of the Ottoman and Persian empires. When the Ottoman Empire was split up after the First World War, the Middle East was carved up into new states, but none were given to the Kurds.

"Our story is that we're a displaced number of people, who were exposed to a lot of abuse by the regimes and the governments of the countries we were in," Nikraftar said.

In the 2011 census conducted by Statistics Canada, 11,680 people identified themselves as having Kurdish ancestry.

The Kurds are a new community in Canada.

Shwan Chawshin recalled that before the 1990s, there may only have been three Kurdish individuals in Metro Vancouver, including him.

A native of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Chawshin met and married a Canadian in Sweden. "We decided we couldn't go back to Iraq because I was an enemy of Saddam Hussein," Chawshin told the *Straight* in an interview at a café on Commercial Drive, referring to the late Iraqi leader.

According to the Coquitlam resident, western help for Kurdish fighters facing IS members is welcome, but it shouldn't stop there.

"They should solve the Kurdish problem altogether, not look at one part of Kurdistan as their friend, the other part of Kurdistan as not their friend," Chawshin said.

He cited the case of Turkey. This country has the greatest number of Kurds, and it's

a member of NATO. The West considers the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) there a terrorist organization.

Chawshin said that because Turkey is a friend of the West, Kurdish interests in that country are denied. "That's the dark side of western politics," he said.

As a community development worker with the Vancouver-based nonprofit Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities (MOSAIC), Andara Ahmad helps Kurdish women settle into their new lives in Canada.

While many Kurds have come as refugees, the MOSAIC staff member noted that in recent years, a lot have arrived as immigrants sponsored by Canadian relatives.

As someone who grew up and became a teacher in the Kurdistan region of Syria, Ahmad knows what it's like to be a member of a minority people.

"I'm a Kurd person, but all my education was in Arabic," Ahmad told the *Straight* in a phone interview. "I wasn't allowed to speak or go to Kurdish schools."

Behzad Najafi Kermashani owns Solutions Printing, Signs and Awnings Ltd. in Burnaby. The 41-year-old Kurdish man related how he fled from Iran as a young man to escape persecution. He's raising two young children with his wife, who is of Chinese-Malaysian descent.

"I'm grateful I'm in Canada," Kermashani told the *Straight* in an interview at a Burnaby outlet of Waves Coffee House, a B.C.-grown chain founded by Kurdish entrepreneur Kami Rahmati. "I'm safe. My family is safe. We are confident that we can sleep, and know in the morning that we are alive."

According to Kermashani, Canada has become his "second Kurdistan".

Kurdistan and its people have been split up and divided among other nations, but Kermashani noted that borders imposed at the end of the First World War don't mean anything to Kurds.

As Kurds in Canada build a life away from the strife of their native land, they won't forget one thing. As Chawshin put it, "The fight for Kurdistan is still on."

### **Best community event**

Kurds celebrate the New Year's festival Newroz mainly on March 21. It's a whole-day gathering that for the last few years has been held at Barnet Marine Park in Burnaby. There's singing, dancing, and food. Everyone is welcome.

### **Best community media**

KurdTV is broadcast on Shaw Multicultural Channel (Shaw Digital Channel 116) every Tuesday from 4:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturdays from 10:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. The Kurdish- and English-language program features news and community stories.

### **Best youth-oriented organization**

Kurds on Campus seeks to inspire Kurdish youth in their pursuit of higher education. It also organizes various events like the Vancouver Kurdish Film Festival, which took place in August. Last year, it raised funds for refugees in the Kurdistan region of Syria. The group is active on Facebook.

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