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## Better than Baghdad

**After eight years of the war on terror, the last US troops have pulled out of Iraq. Where does new life begin for the country? In Arbil, in the heart of the area populated by the long suppressed Kurdish minority. Porsche, Marriott and Brioni have already arrived. We visit Iraq's secret capital.**

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At night, when the soldiers have come down from their towers with their AK-47s and a silver crescent moon watches over the crumbling fortress, the ancient citadel of Arbil becomes a ghost town. Up in the citadel, Mohammed Qadr Ali closes the door to his little brick hut, switches on the TV and the occupation begins again.

This time it's the hordes of Genghis Khan on the TV attacking the citadel's walls, just a few meters behind Ali's back yard. That was nearly 800 years ago. Things didn't go well for the Mongolian invader: they had to retreat empty-handed.

Alexander the Great was luckier. In 331 BC, he defeated Darius III of Persia near the city. The Battle of Arbela isn't shown on the TV, but it does feature in a painting by none less than Jan Brueghel the Elder.

No sooner did the last Americans leave than a building boom began in the city located at the foot of the ancient citadel. The contrast could hardly be greater: down in the city with its population of over a million, luxury hotels and shopping malls are springing up from nothing. Up on the hill, Mohammed Qadr Ali and his family are holding the fort as the last residents of the citadel.

From the outside, the hill doesn't look like it amounts to much. A sort of layer cake some thirty meters high, containing a few hundred run-down mud huts surrounded by a crumbling wall.

But its roots stretch far back into history. According to UNESCO, the Citadel of Arbil is the oldest continuously inhabited town in the world. Over the course of the last 8,000 years, this remote corner of northern Iraq has been home to Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Romans, Mongols, Arabs and Ottomans.

Mohammed Qadr Ali is a Kurd. He moved to the citadel in 1976. Hundreds of families were crowding into the narrow streets and houses at the time. Their numbers grew continuously as Saddam Hussein began liquidating Kurdish towns on a mass scale and the survivors fled to Arbil, the provincial capital.

By the time the city authorities woke up to the fact that they were letting a unique historical treasure rot before their very eyes, the rich families had long since moved down to the city and built themselves villas.

*[Picture caption:] Arbil. On a hill over the ruins of earlier settlements stands the ancient Citadel of Arbil. In front stretches a newly designed square with fountains and a tower that the taxi drivers call simply "Big Ben".*

The renovation work started last century, but results were mixed. In the 1950s, the medieval mosque was pulled down and replaced with a concrete temple. In 1979, Saddam erected a giant Neo-Babylonian gateway on the south side of the citadel.

The bathing rooms (*hamam*) built in 1775 were renovated from the ground up in 1980; not a stone was left untouched. The squatters in the old villas put down old walls and put up new ones with scant regard for the architectural history of the citadel that was crumbling around them.

*[Map caption:] Estimates put the size of the Kurdish nation at 30-40 million. Most Kurds live in Turkey. The autonomous Kurdistan region in the north of Iraq is home to almost five million Kurds, 1.2 million living in the capital Arbil. In terms of land mass, the Kurdistan region is slightly smaller than Switzerland.*

In 2006 the city authorities decided that urgent action was needed. Within three days, all residents of the citadel were forced to leave, each family receiving USD 4,000 and a house in the suburbs. Only Mohammed Qadr Ali remained. The city authorities had a use for him.

While his wife picks tomatoes in the yard, Mohammed Qadr Ali, dressed in baggy trousers and a cummerbund, sits by an old fig tree, chin in hand, and explains why he had to stay in the citadel. "It wasn't my decision," he says: "It was my duty."

For one thing, there's the enormous gray water tank next to his house, a relic of the British occupiers from the 1920s. The tank needs regular looking after.

But much more importantly for the city's current governors, there was the millennia-long tradition of continuous inhabitation to be upheld. "Isn't it better for a family to be living here rather than some museum curator?" asks Mohammed Qadr Ali, proudly.

The bungalow by the water tank is not particularly comfortable. Not for a family of nine. "But we represent all the people who have lived here over thousands of years," says Ali's oldest son Rebwar enthusiastically, bobbing his little son Reder – the third generation of the family – up and down on his knee.

*My house, my water tank, my citadel.* Eight thousand years of tradition. The Kurds have not always been there: they have a troubled history in the city. But now, for the first time ever, things seem to be looking up.

The road leading to Iraq's future has been freshly leveled and made safe. Travelers journeying from Arbil Airport to the center of the Kurdish city must negotiate concrete barriers, three checkpoints, and change taxis along the way.

The journey continues along open road, past houses tossed like dice between the skeletons of burnt-out buildings. Road signs indicate the way to Baghdad (350 kilometers), Mossul (90 kilometers), Kirkuk (95 kilometers). Names branded on Western minds.

Arbil, by contrast, is hardly known in the West. Friends shrug when told about plans to visit the city. Kurdistan is a name only associated with adventure novels – or news reports.

The German Foreign Office is rather better informed. The security situation? "In Baghdad, any idiot can organize a terror attack," says a German diplomat. "In Mossul, you need to be of average intelligence at least. But in Arbil, you have to be a true professional."

Suddenly there is a rumble somewhere in the distance. A thin column of black smoke rises over the rooftops. At first sight, things don't look too good. But we came here to get beyond the first impressions, to go behind the images of bloodied bodies, burnt-out cars and bearded Iraqi terrorists – images that have flashed across our TV screens since 2003.

Whatever the so-called War on Terror achieved in Iraq in the last eight years, it left a lasting image of devastation in the eyes of Western TV viewers.

We first need to clear our minds of the "fog of war" – the uncertainty and ambiguity that accompany any military engagement. We need to look behind the clichéd images.

Only when the mental fog lifts, in the clear light of an Iraqi December afternoon, can we see that what we're looking at is not some bombed-out lunar landscape but a massive building site.

Kempinski, Marriott, Sheraton, Hilton. On every corner the pneumatic drills are drilling, the mechanical diggers digging. Modern hotel complexes and glittering shopping malls are rising from the ruins. The column of black smoke turns out to be an attack on the environment, not a police station: someone is burning rubbish in their yard again.

"Environmental issues are on the agenda, too," smiles Mayor Nihad Qoja, seated in his big office in Arbil City Hall. He may even introduce deposits on bottles soon. But for the moment he takes a somewhat indulgent attitude toward his compatriots. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks – at least not overnight."

Qoja – a Kurd with a German passport and a Rhineland accent – has been Mayor of Arbil since 2004. He has fired corrupt apparatchiks, created green spaces within the city and even provided his fellow citizens with German garbage cans.

Environmental protection in a country in crisis: What could be more German than that? "It was quite an adjustment for me moving back here," says Qoja. Every three months he goes back to Bonn for two weeks to visit his family.

"People love the Germans here," he says. Yesterday he attended a concert given by a German hip-hop band, along with more than a thousand enthusiastic Iraqi school kids. "Unfortunately, in terms of investment, the Germans rank about average."

*[Pullout text, center column:]*

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*[Picture caption:]*

*Above: Traders at the Kayseri Market at the foot of the 26-meter high citadel. Below: Mohammed Qadr Ali with his grandson. Ali and his family still live in the partially crumbling citadel, allowing Arbil to claim that it is the oldest continuously inhabited town in the world.*

All that is about to change, however. Volkswagen and Audi have already set up shop here. The Arbil Porsche Center is due to open in a few days' time. The window display features a Guards Red 911 Carrera GTS and two Cayenne SUVs – at USD 100,000 apiece.

"People here think that German cars are made by the gods," says the enthusiastic Porsche dealer, who prefers to work in the showroom on Fridays than go to mosque. Not that the imam approves. "But we've got so much to do!"

There are teething difficulties with imports, for example. Out the back of the showroom there are two Cayennes with smashed-in rear windows. Tinted windows are forbidden in Iraq for reasons of security. Rather than waste time explaining the details of the law, the Iraqi customs officer simply took a hammer to the windows. "It doesn't matter," says the Porsche dealer with a smile: "The customer didn't care."

Arbil has a German consulate general, a German school and even a German restaurant: schnitzel, German beer and a sentry box painted black, red and gold – more for decoration than security.

In 2010, as the German economy was going down the drain, the German Trade Office opened at the other end of the city. It features a concrete column on which an Iraqi mason lovingly carved a quotation from Hegel in German: "Man only becomes what he is meant to be through education."

Oil, gas, iron ore: Kurdistan is rich in mineral reserves. Around a quarter of Iraq's economic output comes from the north. Foreign investors pay no income tax or VAT. Work will begin on the Nabucco pipeline in 2013, which will pump thirty billion cubic meters of natural gas to Central Europe each year. There's no shortage of money here – it's specialist knowledge that is in short supply.

"The idiots have built mosques instead of schools," says the Mayor. By "idiots" he means his fellow citizens. Recently, newspapers reported on an elementary school with 58 children in one class, all named Mohammed. "The teacher needed a special code for each child."

Qoja used to be a teacher himself. That was back in 1979, the year Saddam Hussein made himself President and began to terrorize his people, especially the Kurds in the north.

As a young sports teacher, Qoja worked for the resistance. While his relatives fought with the Kurdish Peshmerga in the mountains, he secretly printed flyers criticizing the Ba'ath Party. Two years later his cover was about to be blown. Having been tipped off in time, he fled to Bonn. He studied, making ends meet as an interpreter, waiter and taxi driver. "I even drove Willy Brandt, back in 1985."

Working as a taxi driver in Bonn – at that time capital of West Germany – was like a degree in politics in itself. Living in exile, far from Kurdistan, is perhaps what turned Qoja into the peaceable, pragmatic politician he is today, as determined to rebuild his oppressed country as the Germans were to espouse democracy and the economic miracle after 1945.

But worse was still to come for his compatriots. Tens of thousands of Kurds were killed, displaced or imprisoned during the 1980s during the notorious Anfal campaign. Their villages were gassed by Saddam's troops, then razed to the ground.

In 1991, the Kurds rose up against the Iraqi dictator, who the Americans had left in Baghdad as agreed after the Second Gulf War.

Then intra-Kurdish conflict broke out between Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The KDP took Arbil during the conflict in 1996. The scars made by artillery can still be seen on the main gate into the citadel.

When US troops marched into Iraq in 2003, they set up camp in front of the gates to the city. To this day, Qoja cannot understand why Germany – his country – failed to support America in the war in Iraq, after all that the dictator had done to his people. "Saddam himself was a weapon of mass destruction."

But something remarkable has happened since then. While southern Iraq descends ever further into civil war and terror, the situation in the north is becoming more and more stable every day. In the rest of Iraq, 200 people die as a result of acts of terrorism each month. In Kurdistan, there have been no terrorist attacks since 2007.

The newly extended road from Arbil to Sulaimaniya, passing through Kusanjaq and the Kurdish mountains, goes past one of the biggest cement factories in the Middle East. The plant is working at maximum capacity. This is where the bunker walls and anti-tank obstacles are produced that are used to protect against terrorist attacks in the south.

"Arbil has been safe since 2005," reflects Qoja. That was the year Arbil International Airport was inaugurated, on a site as big as Frankfurt Airport. Lufthansa and Austrian Airlines operate daily flights to the city.

The autonomous region has its own parliament, its own army and even its own flag. It's a sort of *ersatz* state for the Kurds – the biggest stateless nation on earth.

"It's true, our national anthem is too nationalistic," says Mayor Qoja. "We're thinking about changing it. After all, other minority groups live here too." The different groups get along with each other just fine. In the Christian part of the city, Ankawa, the people have Christmas trees in their houses and the Bishop of Arbil doesn't need a bodyguard on his way to church.

*[Map legend:]*

*Autonomous Kurdistan region*

*Area inhabited by Kurds*

*[Picture caption:]*

*Mayor Qoja is busy renovating in the hope of attracting millions of tourists to Arbil.*

The liquor stores and bars of Christian Ankawa are also frequented by Muslim customers. Many women do not cover their heads in public. In Saudi Arabia, Muslim clerics teach that driving turns women into lesbians. In Arbil, by contrast, firms such as *Pink Taxi* with women-only drivers are thriving. The sign on their door reads "Now hiring female drivers".

Last summer, a couple of imams criticized a bill forbidding domestic violence and genital mutilation as being un-Islamic. Kurdish President Massoud Barzani found a clever political solution: he didn't sign the bill into law, but at the same time he

refrained from exercising his veto. As a result, the bill automatically became law a few weeks later.

Things do not always go so smoothly, of course. In December, fanatical youths set fire to liquor stores in the border town of Zaxo after Friday prayers. A few days later, the office of the Islamic party went up in flames in response. This time, the authorities didn't intervene as they had done in summer in Sulaimaniya, when eight demonstrators and two police officers were killed in month-long protests against corruption and bureaucracy.

But it would be hard to imagine an Arab Spring in Kurdistan, where the long winter of discontent ended with the fall of Saddam. The people are all too well aware just how precarious the Kurdish recovery is in the heart of this region in crisis.

"Security comes first, then cleanliness," says Ahmed Majidi, proudly inspecting the spotless driveway of his shopping mall. "In the beginning, I told everyone it was going to be a warehouse," smiles the 61-year-old. Majidi Mall – the first shopping mall in Iraq – opened its doors in 2009 and looks like a space ship from Dubai or Hamburg.

On good days it attracts up to 50,000 shoppers. This afternoon it's not quite so busy. Multimillionaire Majidi gives us the figures himself: a hundred million dollars in construction costs, 70,000 square meters of sales area, 230 meters in length, 400,000 different products. The boutiques on the upper floors are highly exclusive. Iraqis come from as far away as Baghdad to enjoy the delights of Chopard, Zegna, Brioni and Benetton.

*[Picture caption:]*

*Carpet and souvenir store in Arbil market, offering portraits of the family of Kurdish President Barzani alongside pictures of local pop stars and Jesus.*

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Majidi shows us an understated Brioni jacket hanging on the rail. Price: USD 5,500. Who can afford those sorts of prices in Iraq? It's a question Majidi asks himself too sometimes, in his modern office on the top floor of the mall.

Majidi started small. Back in 1977 he was selling material from a four-meter-square lock-up in the bazaar at the foot of the citadel. Just three years later he was making multimillion-dollar profits and doing business around the world.

Now that Saddam is gone, everyone should do as well as Majidi. The Kurds are a self-made people. They have secured themselves a place in the world, here in the ancient city of Arbil, by dint of their own courage, determination and cunning, following thousands of years of being subject to the whims of foreign powers. "In five

years' time, Arbil will have a population of five million. Arbil will become the capital of Iraq."

While Ahmed Majidi studies the plans in his top-floor office for two more shopping malls, a hospital and an amusement park, Mayor Qoja examines a map on the wall of his office at the foot of the old citadel.

The master plan for the city's development shows 11 ring roads encircling the old citadel. The city will have everything a modern metropolis requires: an industrial district, a golf course, luxury apartment blocks, park-and-ride areas, even a motor-racing track and a Museum of Kurdistan designed by star architect Daniel Libeskind.

Up in the citadel, where Mohammed Qadr Ali is the only one left, the old houses will be renovated and boutique hotels, restaurants and traditional workshops will move in.

The computer simulation of the master plan shows a restored citadel hidden behind ultramodern high-rise complexes. An architect's dream of glass and steel, the buildings interchangeable and artificial. The Mayor waves the plans aside. They go too far. We don't want another Dubai here: "That's not our aim. Arbil has history."

Mayor Qoja should know. He was born in the old citadel himself, one of a family of eight living in a tiny house. His father was a car mechanic and proud owner of a Fiat Cinquecento. "It was just the right size to fit through the narrow alleyways." In winter, an oil stove heated the small room where they slept on mattresses on the floor. "Come on, I'll show you."

The modest house is half fallen down now. But the old mulberry tree under which Qoja's parents took the first picture of their newborn son 53 years ago still stands in the courtyard. When Saddam was in power and Qoja was living Germany, he could have no contact with his family in Iraq for reasons of safety. For many years, the photograph was the only memento he had of his native land. "I used to look at it a lot."

When he came back to Iraq for the first time in 2003, he initially couldn't find the house where he was born. The citadel was home to almost a thousand families, mainly refugees from the rest of Iraq. "Finally, I recognized the front door."

Work began to clean up the citadel after the residents were evacuated in 2006. The High Commission for Erbil Citadel Renovation was given a budget of USD 15 million to carry out the most urgent work. Waste and rubble was removed from the streets, support columns erected and the entrance to houses closed off with tape featuring the words "Caution" and little skulls and crossbones. Inside the houses the faded glory of the nineteenth-century Ottoman villas can still be seen through the half darkness: coffered ceilings, stuccowork and richly ornamented recesses for precious objects.

The first Iraqi tourists have already found their way to Arbil. They visit the Carpet Museum that opens its doors during the day in the shade of Mohammed Qadr Ali's water tank. Opposite is a souvenir shop selling antiquities of more recent date.

It even sells plates with a picture of Saddam on them. "For the American tourists," smiles the owner. The Kurds are practical people. They are also optimists. Two weeks ago the last US troops left Iraq. The occupiers are gone, the visitors have yet to arrive.

On the TV in Mohammed Qadr Ali's house in the old citadel, the occupation will also come to an end at some point during the night. The Mongols will accept defeat and retreat before dawn.

Just before seven a.m., the sun casts its first rays over the derelict roofs of the citadel. The last resident gets up, as he does every day, to check that everything is in order.

Isn't it lonely living up here on his own? How much longer will you stay? "Forever," says the old Kurd and gazes over the fig tree, the garden wall and the Kurdish flag flying from the battlements into the distance. "Forever, *in sha'Allah*."

*[Picture caption:]*

*Above: One of the many new areas of construction in Arbil, where cranes and bulldozers are a common sight.*

*Below: Day laborers wait for work by the new Porsche Center.*

*Right: A Kurdish flag flies over derelict houses in the citadel. The red stripes stand for blood that was shed defending the country.*

*[Picture caption:]*

*Oil, construction and retail mogul Ahmed Majidi by his shopping mall in Arbil.*

Malte Herwig, 39, and Simon Norfolk, 48, were stopped by the Iraqi police on the highway for driving 15 km/h over the speed limit. Instead of receiving penalty points, Herwig's driver's license was immediately confiscated. The Kurds in northern Iraq clearly take Germany as a role model – and not just for achieving economic recovery.