

WHAT CAN I DO,
BUT HOPE



Kurdistan

Our research explores the lived experiences, aspirations, and frustrations of Kurdish millennials—often referred to as “Generation 2000”—who have come of age under Kurdish self-rule in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Based on extensive fieldwork, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted between 2018 and 2021, our research offers a rare and vivid portrayal of a generation navigating the tensions of post-conflict recovery, entrenched political stagnation, and mounting economic uncertainty. Unlike their parents, these young Kurds carry no direct memory of Saddam Hussein’s regime, yet they inherit its trauma while facing a new wave of disillusionment under an autonomous, yet increasingly fragile, governance structure.

Moving beyond macro-political narratives, our research foregrounds the voices of youth who stand at the intersection of resilience and resignation. From political disengagement and social frustration to grassroots activism and the psychological toll of brain drain, this study delves into the cultural and structural forces shaping the lives of this young generation. Their stories reveal not only the burdens they bear but also the radical hope and creativity they bring to imagining a different future. Through this comic book, we aim to communicate their realities in a format that is accessible, human-centered, and urgent—inviting readers to engage with the complex and compelling dynamics of youth, identity, and agency in contemporary Kurdistan.



THE KURDISTAN REGION (KRI) IS A SEMI-AUTONOMOUS AREA OF NORTHERN IRAQ. IT WAS ESTABLISHED FOLLOWING THE PERIOD OF WESTERN INTERVENTION IN THE REGION AND THE TOPPLING OF THE BA'ATH REGIME IN 2005.



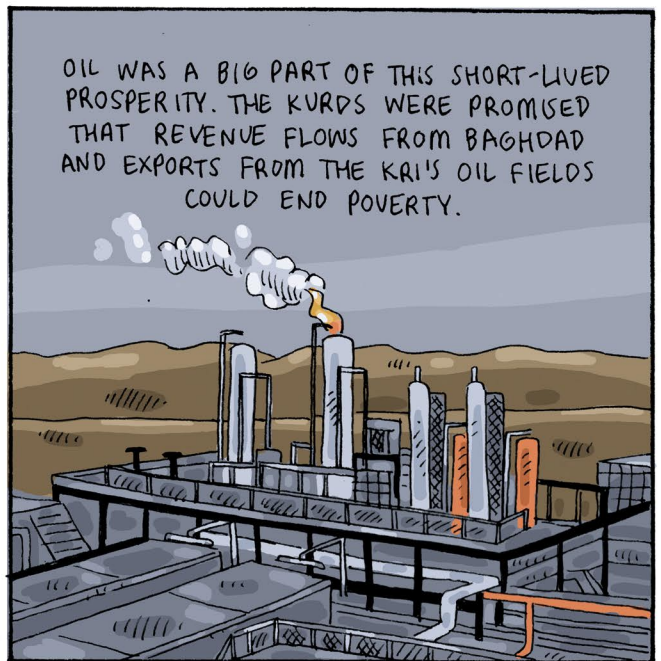
WAR AND ETHNIC CLEANSING UNDER SADDAM HUSSEIN'S BA'ATH REGIME MARK THE HISTORY OF THE KURDISH PEOPLE IN IRAQ.



IN 2003 WHILE THE REST OF IRAQ DESCENDED INTO SECTARIAN STRIFE, THE KRI ENJOYED PEACE AND STABILITY AND STARTED TO FLOURISH.



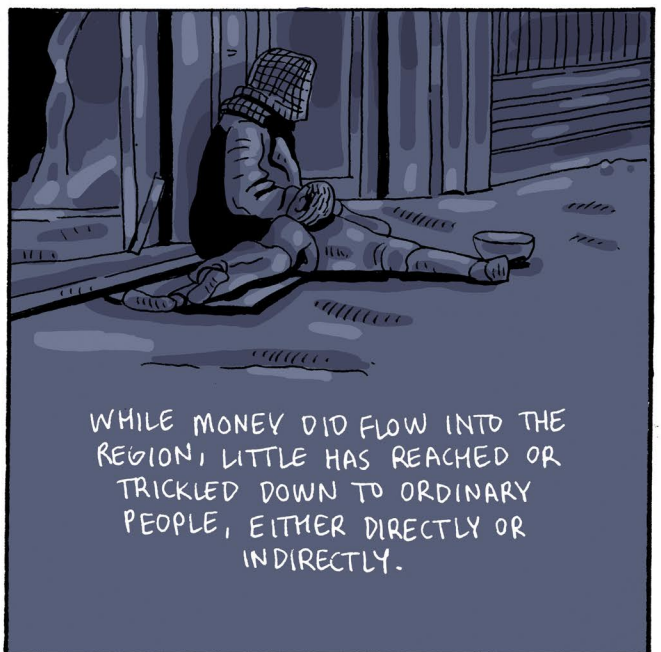
OIL WAS A BIG PART OF THIS SHORT-LIVED PROSPERITY. THE KURDS WERE PROMISED THAT REVENUE FLOWS FROM BAGHDAD AND EXPORTS FROM THE KRI'S OIL FIELDS COULD END POVERTY.



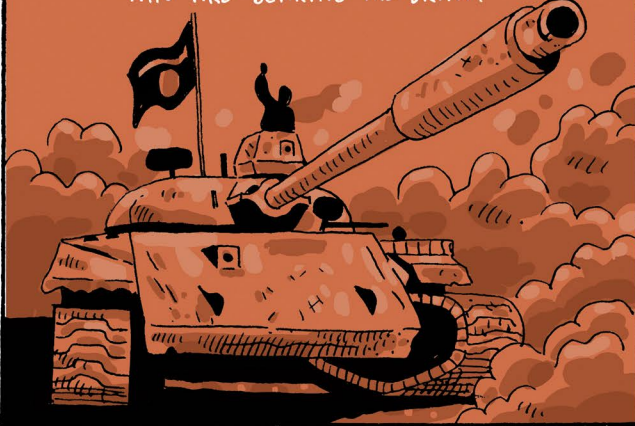
THE NEW OIL WEALTH BEGAN TO FUND INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW KURDISH MIDDLE CLASS, RESULTING IN A TWO-TIER SOCIETY.



WHILE MONEY DID FLOW INTO THE REGION, LITTLE HAS REACHED OR TRICKLED DOWN TO ORDINARY PEOPLE, EITHER DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY.



THE YEARS OF ECONOMIC BOOM TURNED TO BUST IN 2014, TRIGGERED BY THE SHOCKS OF A FALLING OIL PRICE AND THE CONFLICT WITH THE SO-CALLED ISLAMIC STATE (ISIS). THE ECONOMIC RECESSION IS FRUSTRATING AN ENTIRE GENERATION OF KURDISH YOUTH, WHO ARE BEARING THE BRUNT.



THE K.R.I. IS VULNERABLE TO OUTSIDE THREATS AND A GREAT DEGREE OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY. THE FEELING OF INSECURITY NEVER ENDS.



IN COMMON WITH MANY DEVELOPING NATIONS, K.R.I.'S POPULATION IS VERY YOUNG, ALMOST ONE THIRD AGED 15-29, AND A FURTHER 12% AGED 10-14.



THIS CREATES A VERY HIGH DEPENDENCY RATIO, REQUIRING THE GOVERNMENT TO HAVE RELEVANT PROGRAMMES TO MEET THEIR SPECIFIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION NEEDS. BUT RECENT YEARS HAS SEEN A DECLINE IN SOCIAL SERVICES PROVISION.



THIS YOUNG POPULATION STAND ON THE VERGE OF A NEW PHASE IN THEIR LIVES, COMPLETING EDUCATION, FINDING EMPLOYMENT, AND GETTING MARRIED.

THE DESIRE FOR CHANGE AND DEMOCRATISATION HAS LED TO YOUTH ORGANISED ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS. IN DECEMBER 2020, AT LEAST NINE YOUNG PEOPLE WERE KILLED OR INJURED WITHIN ONLY A WEEK OF PROTESTS.



I'M A MEMBER OF WHAT THEY CALL
GENERATION 2000.

APPARENTLY MY GENERATION HAS NO
MEMORY OF DECADES OF REPRESSION
AND VIOLENCE.

WE ARE MEANT TO BE LIVING IN A "POST CONFLICT
LAND" BUT IT DOES NOT ALWAYS FEEL THAT
WAY!

IF THERE IS NO PEACE,
THERE'S NO FUTURE.

THE RULING PARTIES TRY TO SCARE US INTO
KEEPING THE STATUS QUO. THEY ENCOURAGE
US TO THINK OF POLITICS IN ZERO-SUM OR
APOCALYPTIC TERMS. BUT MY GENERATION
IS DISCONNECTED.

THERE IS NO TRUST IN THE RULING PARTIES OR
ANY GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRACY. WE NEED A
REVOLUTION THAT TRANSFORMS THE
EXISTING POLITICAL SYSTEM!



THE GENERATIONAL GAP IS A SERIOUS ISSUE. WE ARE TRAPPED BETWEEN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST OPPRESSION AND THE GLORIOUS REBELLIONS OF THE PAST.



THERE IS THIS FEELING THAT THE OLDER GENERATION EXPECTS YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE "GRATEFUL" FOR WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED. BUT WE DON'T HAVE A DIRECT MEMORY OF THE PAST AND THEIR ASPIRATIONS ARE DIFFERENT TO OURS.



OUR PARENTS DO NOT BELIEVE IN OUR POTENTIAL. THEY DON'T THINK IT CAN GET BETTER THAN THIS. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PATRIOTISM IS DIFFERENT FROM THEIRS. I'M NOT INTERESTED IN WHAT POLITICAL PARTY SOMEONE JOINS, AND I DON'T FEEL ANY PARTICULAR IDENTIFICATION WITH ONE MYSELF.



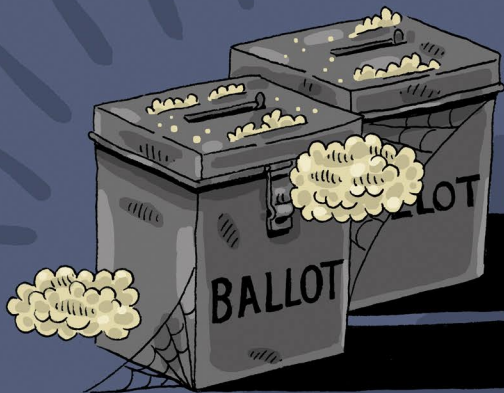
FOR US IT'S ABOUT PUSHING FOR CHANGE AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM TO CREATE A BETTER FUTURE.



THIS HARD-FOUGHT AUTONOMOUS STATUS IS JUST THE BEGINNING FOR US, AND OUR FUTURE DOES NOT LOOK BRIGHT



MOST PEOPLE MY AGE DON'T BELIEVE THAT ELECTIONS WOULD BRING ABOUT CHANGE. POLITICIANS NEVER PRIORITISE YOUNG PEOPLE. THEY HEAR US BUT THEY DO NOT LISTEN TO US.



IT DOESN'T HELP THAT RULING ELITES ARE CORRUPT. THEY ARE WORKING FOR THEIR OWN BENEFIT. THERE IS ALSO A LACK OF SPACE FOR YOUTH TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES FREELY AND MOBILISE FOR CHANGE.



THERE ARE SOME ORGANISATIONS THAT YOU CAN GET INVOLVED WITH, BUT THEY APPEAR TO HAVE LITTLE IMPACT. I GUESS IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE THAT MY PEERS FEEL THAT THEY HAVE TO FOCUS ON TRYING TO "SAVE THEMSELVES" FIRST.



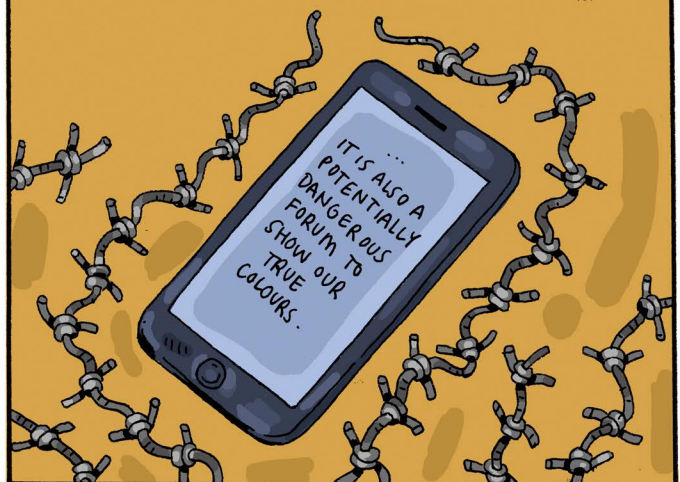
EVEN IF YOU DO TRY AND SPEAK UP YOU CAN'T EASILY SPREAD AWARENESS WITHOUT PARTY INTERFERENCE, THEY WANT TO MONOPOLISE THE PLATFORM.



OUR FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS UNDER THREAT IN THE K.R.I. I AM ALWAYS VERY CAREFUL WHEN I SPEAK; I ASSUME THERE ARE 'PARASTIN' (INTELLIGENCE) AGENTS AMONG SOME OF THE ATTENDEES.



THE LACK OF FREE MEDIA IS AN OBSTACLE TO KNOWING THE TRUTH. IT IS CORRUPT AND PARROTS THE OFFICIAL LINE. ALTHOUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IS A PLACE TO EXPRESS OUR IDEAS...



A young woman with dark skin and a braid is smiling and holding a stack of five books. She is wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt. The background is a library with many bookshelves filled with books of various colors. Five speech bubbles are positioned around her, each containing a line of text.

YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.
THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY WANT.

I FEEL CONFUSED, LOST AND HOPELESS
ALOT OF THE TIME. IT'S EVEN HARDER
IF YOU'RE A WOMAN. THERE'S
PRESSURE AND EXPECTATIONS ON
WOMEN IN OUR SOCIETY.

I WORRY A LOT ABOUT MY EDUCATION AND
EMPLOYMENT. I'VE GOT DREAMS OF MY
FUTURE CAREER AND I HOPE I CAN MAKE IT.

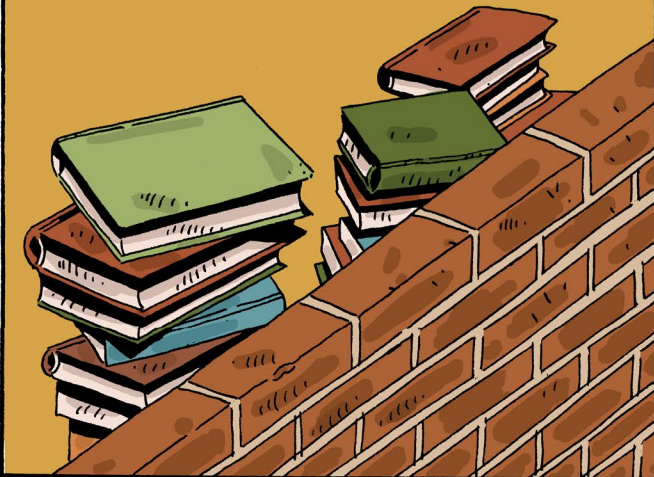
I FIND IT DIFFICULT TO EXPRESS MY THOUGHTS
WITH MY FAMILY, THEY TELL ME, "YOU ARE
A GIRL, THIS IS NOT FOR YOU."

MY BROTHER DOES NOT WANT ME TO
TAKE JUST ANY JOB, HE HAS TO
APPROVE.

OUR FAMILIES WIELD HUGE INFLUENCE OVER US. MY FRIENDS ARE DETERRED FROM EXPRESSING THEMSELVES, OR SPEAKING OPENLY ABOUT THEIR WISHES FOR THE FUTURE OF THEIR COUNTRY AND THEMSELVES.



WE DON'T HAVE GOOD EDUCATION AND CAN'T AFFORD PRIVATE TUITION LIKE SOME. WE CANNOT USE EDUCATION AS A KEY TO FINDING JOBS.



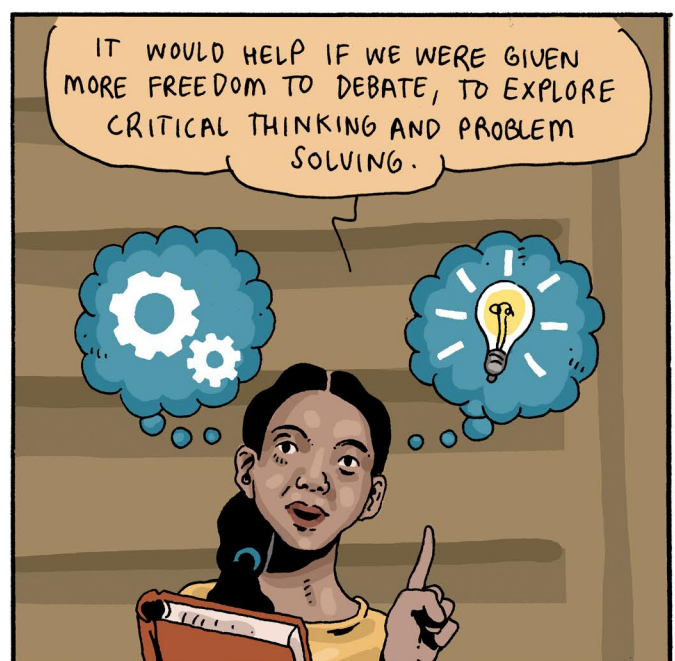
EVEN THOUGH I HAVE BEEN TO UNIVERSITY I'M NOT CERTAIN I HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE I NEED FOR A PROFESSIONAL LIFE. BUT I WORK HARD AS I'D LOVE TO LEARN A LANGUAGE OR COMPUTER SKILLS.

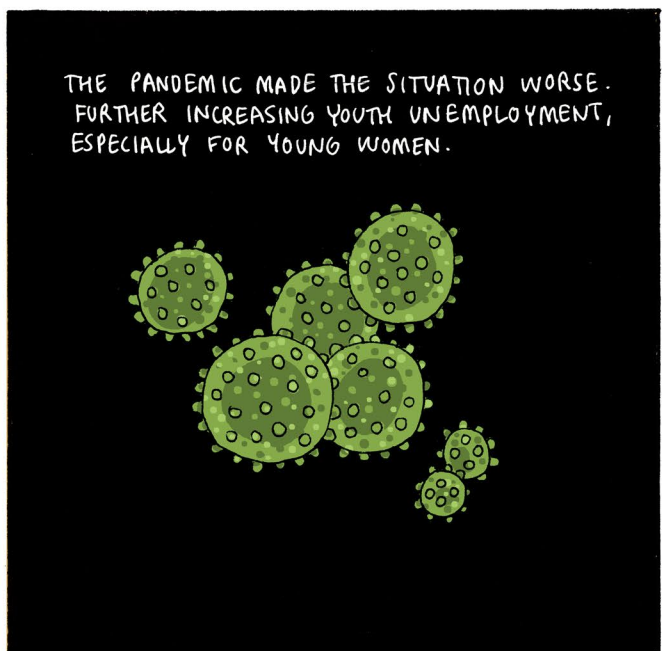
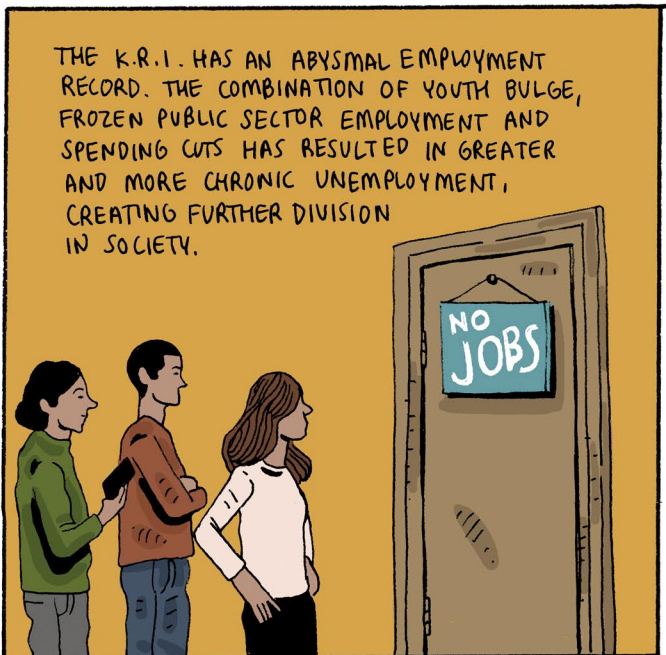


WHAT WE NEED ARE SKILLS THAT ARE RELEVANT FOR THE DIGITISED AGE WE LIVE IN.



IT WOULD HELP IF WE WERE GIVEN MORE FREEDOM TO DEBATE, TO EXPLORE CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING.





SO MANY PEOPLE MY AGE FEEL DISCONTENTED,
EXCLUDED AND MARGINALISED.

WE'RE ALL TRYING TO FIND WAYS TO
SUCCEED, DESPITE THE LACK OF
OPPORTUNITIES.

EVEN THOUGH I GRADUATED TOP
OF MY CLASS, I'M NOT SURE I
WILL FIND A JOB.

I DO NOT KNOW THE RIGHT PEOPLE
WHO CAN HELP ME.

MY COUNTRY IS BUILT ON A SYSTEM
THAT REQUIRES UNWAVERING LOYALTY
AND 'WASTA', OR CONNECTIONS TO
GET JOBS.

I'M PART OF THE 'WAITHOOD'
GENERATION.

THERE'S A LACK OF PROSPECTS AND EMPLOYMENT
OPPORTUNITIES. AND THIS IS COMPOUNDED BY A
LACK OF INTEREST, A BAD ECONOMY AND
A BAD POLITICAL SITUATION.



MY FRIEND GOT DIVORCED RECENTLY BECAUSE OF UNEMPLOYMENT. LOTS OF PEOPLE MY AGE ARE STILL UNMARRIED; THEY DON'T HAVE A SOURCE OF INCOME, DOWRY GOLD OR AN ABILITY TO PAY ALL THE OTHER EXPENSES OF MARRIAGE!



I'M SO FRUSTRATED I WANT TO SHOUT OUT BUT MY FAMILY TELLS ME NOT TO ENGAGE IN ACTIVITIES THAT DEMAND CHANGE FROM GOVERNMENT, BUT AT THE SAME TIME THEY WANT ME TO GET MARRIED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE



I FEEL AS IF I'M TRAPPED BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE.

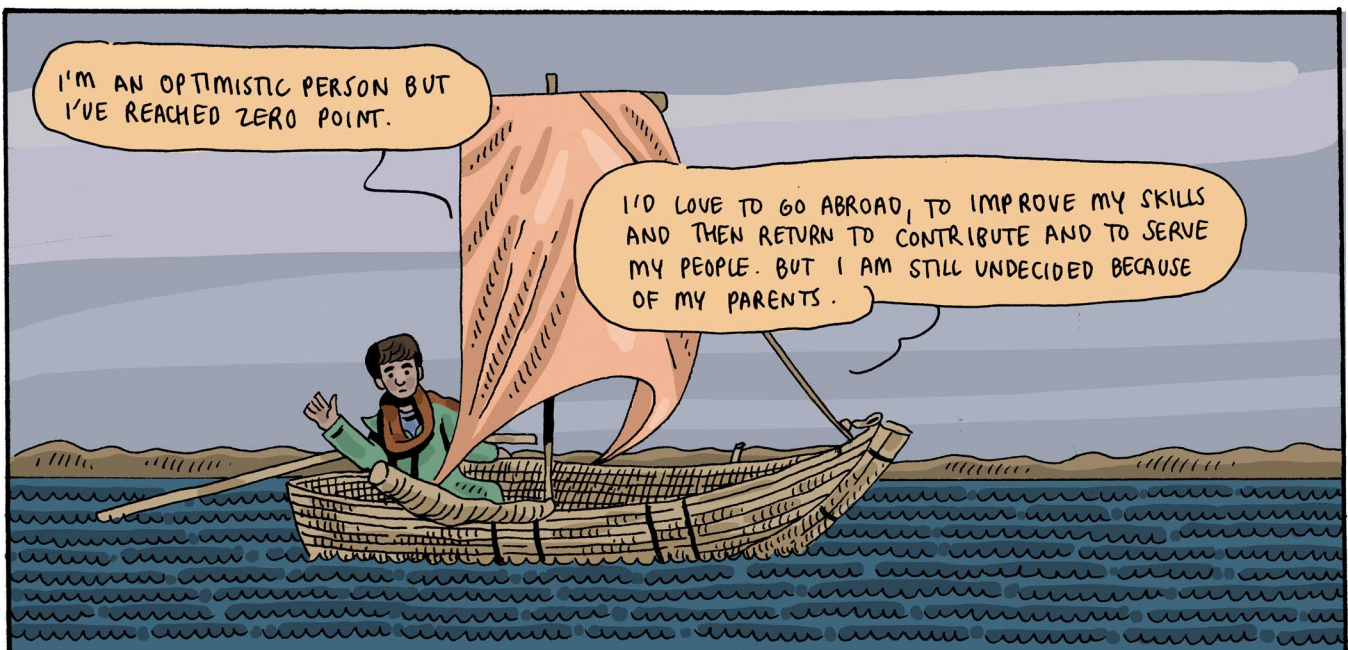


MANY PEOPLE I KNOW HAVE STARTED TALKING ABOUT LEAVING THE COUNTRY. I ALSO DREAM ABOUT MIGRATING, WE'RE CONSTANTLY TOLD THAT WE CAN'T CHANGE REALITY, THAT WE CANNOT FIX IT, THAT IS WHY I WANT TO LEAVE.



I'M AN OPTIMISTIC PERSON BUT I'VE REACHED ZERO POINT.

I'D LOVE TO GO ABROAD, TO IMPROVE MY SKILLS AND THEN RETURN TO CONTRIBUTE AND TO SERVE MY PEOPLE. BUT I AM STILL UNDECIDED BECAUSE OF MY PARENTS.

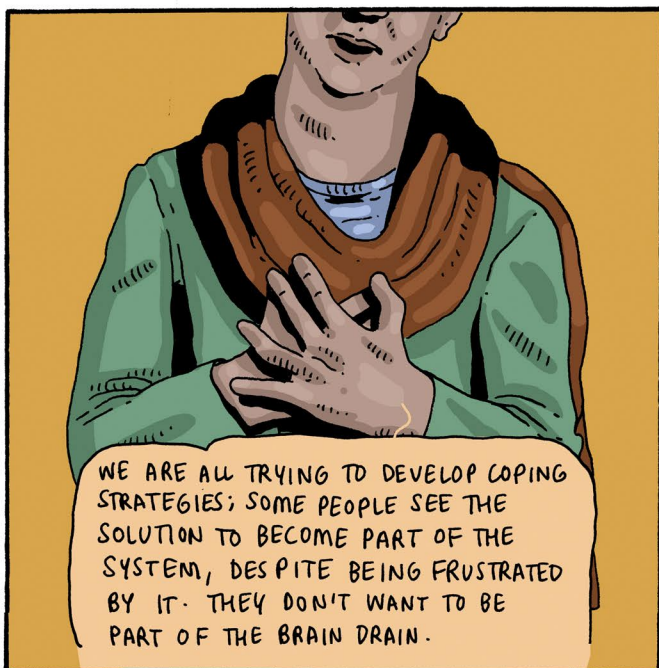


AND THERE ARE RISKS TO LEAVING. LAST YEAR THOUSANDS OF IRAQI'S, MOSTLY FROM K.R.I. FLED THE COUNTRY WITH MANY ENDING UP STRANDED AT THE BELARUS / POLAND BORDER. SOME FROZE TO DEATH!

OTHERS HAVE RISKED THEIR LIVES ON DINGY BOATS CROSSING THE SEAS.



WE ARE ALL TRYING TO DEVELOP COPING STRATEGIES; SOME PEOPLE SEE THE SOLUTION TO BECOME PART OF THE SYSTEM, DESPITE BEING FRUSTRATED BY IT. THEY DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF THE BRAIN DRAIN.



WE ALL PICTURE A BETTER FUTURE FOR KURDISTAN, BUT WE ARE CONFUSED AND CONFLICTED ABOUT HOW TO ACHIEVE IT.



WE WANT THE RULING ELITE TO DELIVER ON THEIR PROMISES OF A GOOD LIFE. BUT TOO OFTEN THEY FOCUS ON "MORE IMPORTANT" POLITICAL ISSUES, SUCH AS DISPUTES WITH BAGHDAD, INDEPENDENCE AND SECURITY.



SINCE K.R.I. IS CONSTANTLY WAITING FOR BETTER DAYS TO COME, OUR "WAITHOOD" IS DESTINED TO BE TIED TO THE "WAITHOOD" OF KURDISTAN, A STATE IN THE MAKING.



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