

# Unifying a Dispersed Archive: The KCAC Archive and the Future of Kurdish Collections

Presenter: Marina Wondrich, Director of Research and Development  
Kurdistan Center for Arts and Culture

*Given on January 26th, 2026 at the MELA-MELCom International Joint Conference*



# About KCAC

*The Kurdistan Center for Arts and Culture (KCAC) is an Erbil-based organization devoted to building the cultural infrastructure for Kurdish arts and heritage preservation.*

*Through programs, archives, and intergenerational stewardship, we activate cultural capacity in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and preserve Kurdish heritage, creating long-term systems that ensure its survival and evolution for generations to come.*

## In This Presentation

- A brief overview of the history of archival collections in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where we operate
- Key challenges facing archival work in the KRI
- Broader structural issues affecting Kurdish archives as a whole
- How our grassroots archival initiative has responded to these challenges
- Our successes and insights three years after our foundation

## Ottoman Period: Beginnings

- Early forms of Kurdish archival preservation:
  - Religious libraries and institutions, especially Sufi lodges – many well-known poets were also attached to these organizations
  - Elite collections connected with emirs (e.g. the Baban library)



*The Grand Mosque and Madrasa of Biyara*



*Items Collected by the Baban Family*





## Post-Autonomy: The Current Landscape

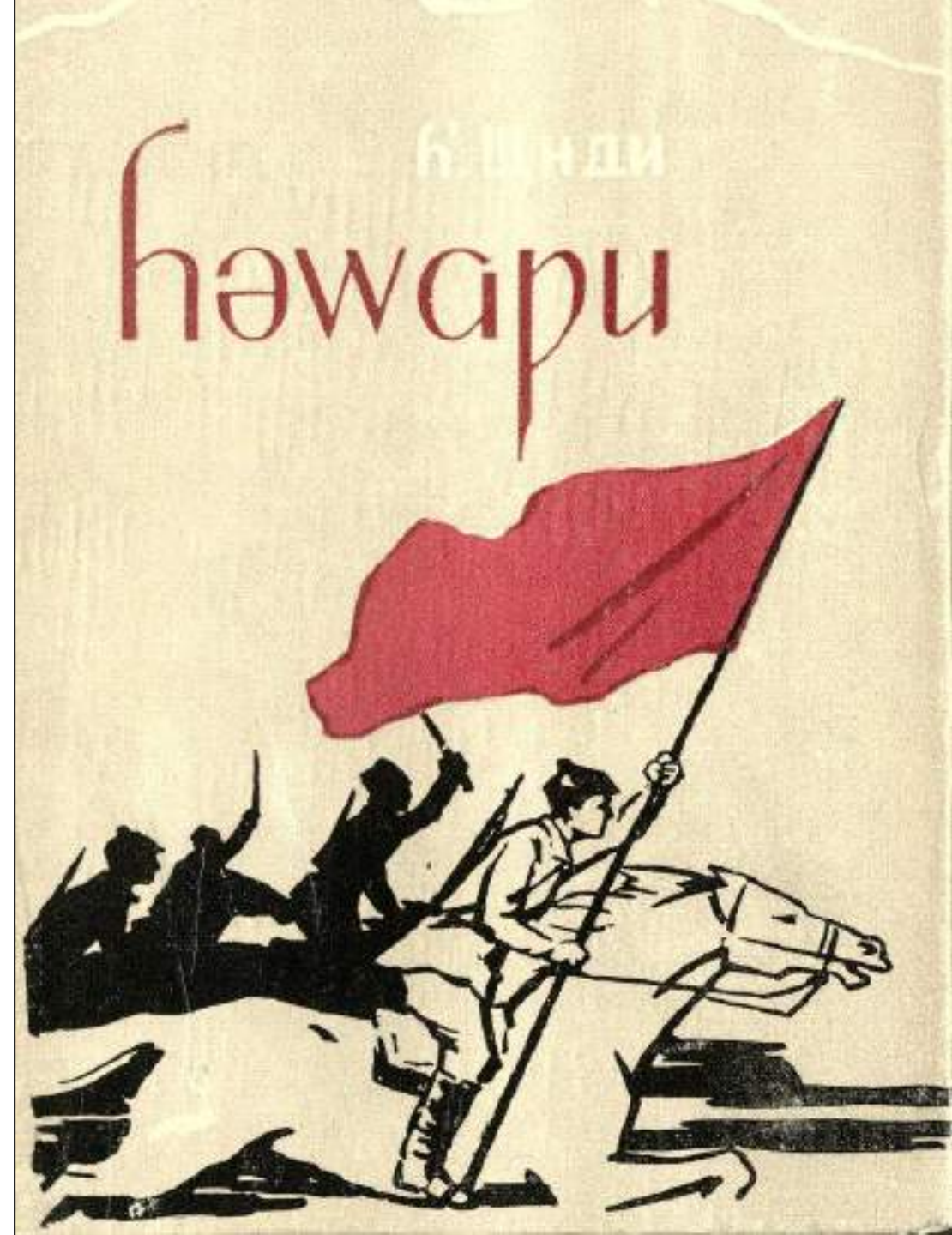
- Modern context of archiving:
  - Political autonomy in the KRI without stable, long-term archival infrastructure
  - Limited preservation policies and funding
  - Absence of library sciences departments in local universities
- Where materials exist today:
  - Private collections and home libraries (often held by scholars or families)
  - Religious institutions
  - Isolated heritage organizations with uncertain funding
  - Diaspora institutions
  - Public and university libraries
- **Key issue:**
  - A vast wealth of materials exists, but they remain disconnected and largely inaccessible without any centralized systems for preservation



## A Broader Issue: Dispersion

- Kurdish populations:
  - Primarily spread across four states
  - Additional communities in the Caucasus and former Soviet regions
  - A large, multi-generational diaspora
- Consequences for archives:
  - Documentary heritage scattered across borders
  - Historically connected tribes and communities divided by state boundaries
  - Difficulty constructing a coherent, holistic Kurdish historical narrative

*Pictured: Hewarî (Echo), a Kurdish-language novel printed in the Cyrillic script centered on the lives of Soviet-era Kurds. Published in Yerevan, 1967.*



# h

• **Summary:**

- Enormous archival wealth in Kurdish collections despite suppression
- However, there is no connected infrastructure to:
  - Protect materials
  - Ensure access
  - Connect scattered materials
  - Encourage new historical research

hemo û remo li gund tèn.  
 tēhliya bindestiye dijwar e.

*tehlîye bîdestiyê dijwar e*

w - W Wan War

*w: W Wan War*

76 77 78 79 80

# x

ë

xa xe xî xû

eë oë êë îë

xar xûz xez kaë

xezal xulam mexel xilik

teëer bëxnik vîxin fîxan

xezalê cû nav baëan.

xunce sil...

*xunce bî...*

g - G

*g: G James Govend*

81 82 83 84 85

• **Key questions:**

- How can a grassroots organization safeguard archives in the absence of state structures protecting cultural property?
- How can scattered collections be brought together to enable a more comprehensive understanding of Kurdish history?

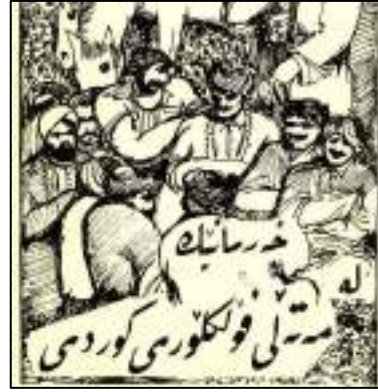
INTRODUCING

## The KCAC Archive

- The largest digital collection of Kurdish archival materials
- Politically neutral and publicly oriented; freely accessible
- Fully searchable via OCR technology
- Scope of the archive:
  - ~200,000 pages digitized
  - 3800 items uploaded through careful selection criteria
  - 60,000 unique users
  - 14 languages represented
    - Including 5 Kurdish dialects across 3 scripts
  - 41 collection sources
    - Including public libraries, religious institutions, private collections, photography studios, universities, research centers



**University of  
Salahaddin**  
Erbil



**Zeytun Public  
Library**  
Erbil



**Jemal Nebez  
Organization**  
Slemani

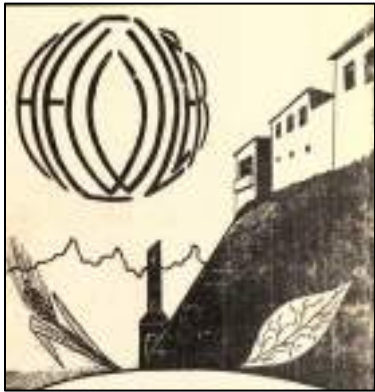


**Halabja Public  
Library**  
Halabja



**Homayon Sahib  
Collection**  
Halabja

*A LOOK AT SOME OF OUR COLLECTIONS*



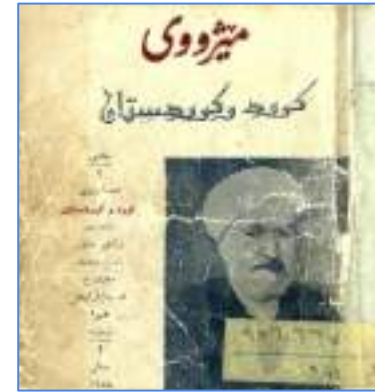
**Adil Mawlawi  
Collection**  
Slemani



**Niyaz Masti  
Collection**  
Erbil



**Mohammed Amin  
Photo Collection**  
Slemani



**Darbandikhan  
Public Library**  
Darbandikhan



**Mullah Aziz Safi  
Hirani Collection**  
Hiran



KCAC ARCHIVE - STRATEGY

## Digitization Unit: Our Process

- Mobile digitization unit:
  - Scanners installed in the back of a van with a small built-in office
  - Optimized for high-volume scanning
- Impact:
  - Reaching remote areas and multiple cities
  - Navigating politically divided regions
  - Building trust with private collectors and institutions
- Methodology:
  - Post-custodial archival model
  - Prioritizing trust and putting the collector first

# Hiran Tekkiye

- On-site digitization using KCAC's mobile unit at the Safi Hirani Tekkiye, Hiran village – a historical collection tied with a significant Kurdish Sufi poet and scholar Safi Hirani (1873-1942)
- 40 fragile manuscripts and books digitized
- Collection survived multiple episodes of destruction during the September Revolution and Anfal campaign; most books were lost
- Materials exhibit significant preservation challenges:
  - Water damage
  - Loose bindings
  - Historical, makeshift repairs
- Post-custodial approach:
  - Digitization conducted on-site
  - Collection remained with its custodians
  - Trust-building through direct engagement
  - Interviews were conducted on site about the history of each item, preserving their story alongside the materials themselves



## Marif Xeznedar Collection

- Archive of Marif Xeznedar (1930–2020), a foundational figure in Kurdish literary theory
- Photographic archive documents a 20th-century Kurdish academic career:
  - Erbil, Baghdad, and research travel across the USSR
- Nearly 600 photographs digitized, including rare images of prominent Kurdish scholars both in the KRI and in the USSR
- Collection preserved on-site as a home library in Erbil, maintained by family custodians
- On-site digitization respects:
  - Original order and context
  - The library's potential as a cultural heritage site - planning future development into a museum



## Archives Beyond Borders

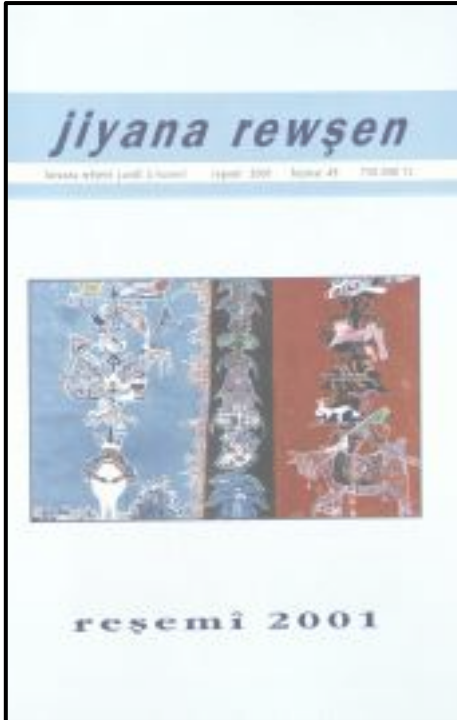
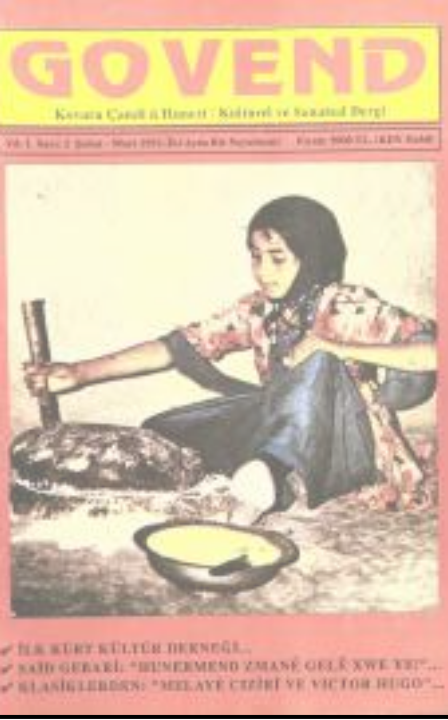
- International cooperation and digital collections management enable the connection of Kurdish archives beyond national borders
- Strategic outreach conducted with Kurdish archives and associations in:
  - Turkey, Syria, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and the diaspora
- Partnership with the İsmail Beşikçi Foundation (Istanbul):
  - Expansion of Kurmancî-dialect collections
  - Translation of the KCAC website into Kurmancî to improve accessibility
  - Digitization of archives
- Active identification of international collections for long-term stewardship:
  - Through acquisition where appropriate
  - Or via collaborative digitization and satellite scanning units



*KCAC Founder and President Barav Barzani with scholar of Kurdish Studies Ismail Beşikçi*



*KCAC Team with Wezîrî Kinyaz, head of the Kinyazî İbrahim Mîrzoyev Foundation in Kazakhstan, and Zaza Kalashov, head of the Ronahi Association of Kurds in Georgia*



IN FOCUS - DIGITIZATION PARTNER

## İsmail Beşikçi Foundation, Istanbul

- Collaboration focused on preservation and digitization of a long-standing scholarly archive
- KCAC supplied digitization equipment and funds and oversees two staff members to operate the digitization unit
- Collection of 12,000 items includes:
  - Published works, articles, research notes, and draft materials previously inaccessible to researchers
  - Extensive correspondence from Kurdish scholars and the Kurdish diaspora
  - Large number of Kurdish and Turkish language periodicals
  - Interview recordings
- Materials document:
  - Transregional intellectual networks
  - The circulation and reception of scholarship on Kurdish issues
- KCAC supports long-term preservation and wider access while respecting foundation custodianship

## Building Bridges for Local Collections

- International, grant-funded archival programs developed with local institutions
- Focus on preservation, cataloging, and digitization of significant manuscript collections
- Active projects:
  - *Ministry of Awqaf Library:*
    - Manuscript cataloging and digitization
    - Supported by British Library Endangered Archives Programme, in partnership with the University of Exeter
  - *Salahaddin University:*
    - Equipment provision and staff training
    - Supported by Polish Aid



Scanning manuscripts at the Ministry of Awqaf



New digitization equipment for Salahaddin Uni



# House of Manuscripts, Araban District

## Erbil's First Center for Kurdish Manuscripts

- Dedicated manuscript house adjacent to the Citadel (UNESCO site)
- Situated in a custom renovated heritage house
- ~700 manuscripts preserved on site, sourced from the at-risk collections of Salahaddin University
- Purpose-built physical preservation:
  - Modern archival storage systems
  - Climate-controlled environment
  - Specialized equipment to protect against fire and theft
- Transition from digital-only access to physical custodianship
- Integrated within KCAC's broader hybrid archival model



- **Impact: beyond the numbers**

- KCAC has helped advocate for the very concept of the archive in the KRI; now receiving serious interest from local government
- In the absence of legal infrastructure, we are mapping the scope of archival collections in the KRI and setting a new standard for documenting and promoting them

- **Community impact**

- Archives and libraries are often limited or inaccessible
- KCAC has expanded access and visibility while also introducing diverse audiences to the value of archives
- Meaningful for younger audiences seeking their own history
- Meaningful for older audiences in need of a home for their collections

# Invitation for Collaboration

- Our collections document:
  - Pivotal historical moments and literary milestones
  - From the 17th century to the present
  - Political, religious, social, and literary histories
- Invitation to the MENA library and archive community:
  - While most of the archive is in Kurdish, many materials are written in:
    - Arabic
    - Persian
    - Ottoman Turkish
  - Explore how these materials might complement or complicate existing historical narratives
- Many of these materials are widely accessible for the first time – **We invite you to explore them with us**