Constituting Histories Through Culture In Iraqi Kurdistan
Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah
University of North Georgia

Abstract: Today, Kurds in Northern Iraq are employing a narrative of the Kurdish nation that bears strong ethnic roots and includes the memory of the victimization of the Kurdish nation. This essay examines the repurposing of the National Museum at Amna Suraka in Iraqi Kurdistan, from its former role as a Ba’ath site for detention, torture and execution, into a site for the preservation of Kurdish history and culture. In doing so, this essay locates the National Museum at Amna Suraka, and its role as a museum for Kurdish history and culture and as a national memorial, within the historical context of the Iraqi state. Such an examination, demonstrates the intersectional nature of the struggle for national identity within Iraqi Kurdish society, non-Kurds outside of Iraqi Kurdistan and for transnational Kurdish publics.

Keywords: Iraq, Kurdistan, National Museum, Amna Suraka, nationalism, Kurds, art

Introduction

In this essay I will consider the National Museum at Amna Suraka located in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan. A thorough examination of this important museum considers the constituent parts of the dominant Kurdish nationalist narrative currently operating in Iraqi Kurdistan. Known locally as “Amna Suraka” (Red Security or Red Prison), the museum was once headquarters to Ba’ath party security officers and the northern division of the Mukhabarat, Iraq’s secret intelligence agency established to detain enemies of the Iraqi State until it was liberated during the raparin (uprising) in 1991. At that time, Kurds in the north of Iraq seized control from the Ba’ath party, which led to the creation of the Kurdish Autonomous Region. Reborn as a Kurdish national memorial, Amna Suraka serves to demarcate national territory and to constitute the Kurdish nation through ties to common ethnic roots and a shared national tragedy that was the Anfal. Museums are products of their political, social, and cultural environments. In turn, museums also influence society’s perceptions of itself.¹ An examination of the National Museum at Amna Suraka reveals a Kurdish national narrative that includes Kurdish rights to cultural identity and homeland as they are equated with human rights. This recognition of the Kurds as special victims resulted in the creation of national rights such as the right to a nation state. Further, an examination of the National Museum at Amna Suraka demonstrates the inter-sectional nature of the struggle for national identity within Iraqi Kurdish society, non-Kurds outside of Iraqi Kurdistan, and for transnational Kurdish publics.

Nationalism is identified as “one of the most powerful forces in the modern world”² even

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¹ Erksine-Loftus, 2013: 11-12.
though notable scholars like Eric Hobsbawm anticipates its demise:\^3

The world history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries . . . will inevitably have to be written as the history of a world which can no longer be contained within the limits of ‘nations’ and ‘nation-states,’ as these used to be defined, either politically, or economically, or culturally, or even linguistically. It will see ‘nation-states’ and ‘nations’ or ethnic/linguistic groups primarily as retreating before, resisting, adapting to, being absorbed, or dislocated by, the new supranational restructuring of the globe.\^4

The surge in nationalist movements in recent decades has been seen as a response to the need to promote collective identities within states and among nations without states, like the Kurds.\^5 Of course, this assumes that nations can exist without states. Nations without a state, together with their nationalism, display a strong cultural and territorial identity that expresses itself as a national character. Scholars have considered nationalism in terms of ideology, the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic aspects as well as in terms of political movements that seek regional autonomy or independence.\^6 Through an investigation of the National Museum at Amna Suraka, we may recognize and consider the deep-level production of culture, which is being done in order to constitute the Kurds both as a nation and nation-state. This type of engagement with Kurdish nationalism and its offspring cultural products will allow us to think about the stakeholders involved in its construction and the potential for conflicts produced by this narrative inside Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Researching The Cultural Products Of Kurdish Nationalism**

In other compositions about the place of art and arts-based perspectives in conflict analysis, I have posited that the literature on art and conflict argues that because of their elicitive nature, arts-based perspectives allow for the sharing of cultural knowledge that both describes and aids the understanding of the process of conflict. Much of the literature demonstrates the effectiveness of arts-based perspectives for the mediation and understanding of conflict in a manner that is elicitive and culturally appropriate. If the old idiom bears itself out, then “a picture is worth a thousand words” and Kurdish art presents an interesting intersection for academic inquiry where

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4  Hobsbawm 1990: 182.
peoples, cultures, and institutions overlap and where identities are performed and contested. Current scholarly literature demonstrates some interesting examples of how the arts and artists feature as social interlocutors to conflict and invite us to delve deeper into the artistic products in Iraq and those found in Iraqi Kurdish culture as they can help us understand “Kurdishness” as it manifests itself in shared consciousness and as collective action.

In turn, arts perspectives possess the unique potential to inform peace-building processes in significant ways and offer new lenses through which to interpret conflicts. However, what is less articulated in the literature on art and conflict is the fact that peace builders working with arts-based perspectives regularly trade in the currency of culture itself. While this may seem to be self-evident, it is an important fact that is not often made explicit. Herein lies the unique value of arts-based perspectives for understanding conflict. Art is a dynamic engagement with the very building blocks of culture, making that which is unconscious, conscious. Arts-based perspectives deal with those particular aspects of a culture where human beings express themselves creatively and interact meaningfully through the visual, written, movement, and aural arts. Said in another way, peace builders working in and with the arts understand the importance of meaning-making within a culture and how that meaning translates into ideas and behaviors, and how all of those things combine to potentially produce moments of conflict. Art, then, becomes a way of tapping into and revealing the unconscious “stuff” of culture.

Research on this topic necessitated fieldwork in the region. Extended fieldwork in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan began with a preliminary field visit from June to July 2013, followed by a longer research trip from June to August 2015. Most recently, and for this essay, fieldwork in Kurdistan’s “capital of Kurdish culture” was conducted beginning in August 2016 as part of a longer project of fieldwork extending through June 2017. The choice of Sulaimani as the primary field site is connected to the city’s long history as a unique center of culture and is uniquely suited for research in the arts. One of the major cities in both the Kurdistan region and in Iraq, Sulaimani has nurtured the writers, actors, poets, painters, and musicians of Kurdistan since its founding. Today, the city has a vibrant cultural scene with an active media, multiple museums, and universities.

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8 Cockrell-Abdullah 2018.
10 Shank and Schirch 2008.
11 Guest 2014: 675.
14 The Kurdish language utilizes both Arabic and Latin scripts. In this chapter, Kurdish words and names are transliterated from Kurdish to the closest spelling in English, without the use of Kurdish diacritics. Transliterated spellings of the same name often have multiple spellings. For example, the Kurdish city of Sulaimani may also appear as “Slemani,” or by its Arabic pronunciation, “Sulaymaniyah.” When quoting another author, spelling remains as it appeared in the original text.
Kurdish Nationalist Discourse

Throughout their history, the Kurds of Iraq have experienced denial of their ethnic identity, with the Iraqi government outlawing forms of Kurdish cultural expression, forcing assimilation, relocation and at the extreme, enacting genocide. No one can deny that since 1991, the Kurds of Iraq have made impressive strides towards developing a stable, democratic and modern region within the state of Iraq.\(^\text{15}\)External aid to the Kurdistan region that followed the first Gulf War opened previously unavailable avenues for development. Aid, at this time, targeted the Kurds as victims of Saddam Hussein, supporting recovery and encouraging development. In contrast to the pre-Gulf War period, where external aid to the Kurdistan region was virtually non-existent, a considerable amount of reconstruction and nation building took place, aided, intentionally or not, by external patronage. This period of international relief to the Kurds, and the stimulus it encouraged, supported the semi-legitimacy of the newly formed Kurdish government and a Kurdish quasi-state in Iraq that was highly dependent on external patronage for its survival.\(^\text{16}\)

“During this period,” notes Natali, “the Kurds conducted elections, created their own government, and engaged in civil society building.” Also at this time, Kurdish officials engaged in identity-reshaping projects that de-Arabized education, administration, and communication systems.\(^\text{17}\) In this manner, the construction of a Kurdish social, political, and ideological space in the Kurdistan Regional Government worked to transform the land into national territory for the Kurds.\(^\text{18}\) Curricula, street signs, and official forms of public communication were changed from Arabic to Kurdish. Television stations, newspapers, and universities were created or reopened, all based on the Kurdish language and history and underlining nationalist themes.\(^\text{19}\)

While there is a historical Kurdish identity, the articulation of Kurdish nationalism is relatively recent, dating to the beginning of the last century.\(^\text{20}\) Respected and widely read scholars of Kurdish Nationalism Martin van Bruinessen (2000), Abbas Vali (1998) and Amir Hassanpour (2003) find that Kurdish nationalism, broadly, is indeed modern and began in the early years of the twentieth century, though Hassanpour suggests it began earlier. At the time when Turkish, Persian, and Arab nationalism began to assert themselves, these national identities defined themselves in part by defining themselves in debate with “relevant Others.”\(^\text{21}\) within these respective states, thus leading to the denial of the ethnic identities of minorities, like the Kurds.\(^\text{22}\) Van Bruinessen explains, “A Kurd in Syria or Iraq is, most obviously, not an Arab, a Kurd in Iran is not an Azeri or a Persian, and a Kurd in Turkey is not a Turk – at least in some situations.”\(^\text{23}\) Authors like Vali (1998) contend that, in turn, a Kurdish nationalist identity

\(^{15}\) Brenneman 2007: 5-6.
\(^{16}\) Natali 2010: 51.
\(^{17}\) Ibid: 29-34 .
\(^{19}\) Natali 2010:34.
\(^{21}\) van Bruinessen 2016, and Anderson 1983.
\(^{23}\) van Bruinessen 2016:2.
emerged as a reaction to the affirmation of official national identities in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria and as reaction to assimilation of the Kurds into these official national identities. Jaffer Sheyholislami’s investigation of Kurdish media discourses in processes of identity formation, through a critical discourse analysis of messages in the Kurdish media, demonstrates that while there is not one single Kurdish identity, within the last decade a strong pan-Kurdish identity has started to emerge alongside several regional identities.

Contemporary Kurdish national identity bears strong ethnic roots. “Kurdayati,” that sense of ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness defined by a shared culture, language, territory, set of symbols, memory and experience as well as future political aspirations, has increasingly constituted the stuff of Kurdish nationalism inside Iraqi Kurdistan and across borders in states where there have historically been Kurdish populations and diasporas since the mid-1990s. Kurdish nationalist discourses tend to historicize the nation and there are numerous myths that concern the origins of the Kurds that validate Kurdish identity. Such primordialist approaches to the nation and nationalism espouse the belief that the Kurds have existed since time immemorial as one nation, and that they have always lived in their geographical homeland, which is Kurdistan. Through the primordialist perspective, the dispersal and disunity among Kurdish groups is explained by the invasion of Kurdish lands and domination of Kurdish peoples by external forces. A Kurdish national identity that began taking shape in dialogue with other nationalisms like Arab or Turkish, that is both fluid and constitutive, runs current with Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as an imagined political community. It also agrees with his understanding of “culture” as the roots of nationalism from which ideas of mutual connection draw their sustenance endowing newly or historically and recently formed traditions with the feeling of the primordial. For Anderson, “culture” is a carefully curated set of symbols, histories, artifacts, and shared memories that are drawn from and engaged in order to form the imagined community of the nation. Such actions are further explained by Fredrik Barth’s work on ethnicity; he focuses on the ongoing negotiations of boundaries between groups of people, which entail social processes of incorporation and exclusion, instead of the notion of cultures and ethnicities as bounded entities and primordial bonds.

To clarify, it should be understood that contemporary Kurdish nationalism is both complex and fluid, drawing upon a number of variables. The roots of contemporary Kurdish nationalism begin as a discourse in relationships with “relevant Others” and in part, defining themselves in debate with those others like Arab, Turkish, and Persian nationalisms of the twentieth century. Creation of a national identity in dialogue with these “relevant Others”

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30 Anderson 1983.
31 Barth 1969.
continues to be significant and that discourse is still relevant today. Such a construction of identity is both informed by and, in turn, influenced by those primordialist notions of identity that are rooted in that sense of ethnic distinctiveness defined by a shared culture, language, territory, set of symbols, and memory.\footnote{This sense of Kurdishness, in dialogue with the national identities of “relevant Others” and paired with the future political aspirations of a Kurdistan independent from the state of Iraq,\footnote{Sheyholislami, J. 2011: 47 Kindle Edition.} has increasingly constituted the stuff of Kurdish nationalism inside Iraqi Kurdistan and across borders in states where there have historically been Kurdish populations and diasporas since the mid-1990s.\footnote{Van Bruinessen 2000.} There is not one single, monolithic Kurdish identity, however within the last decade, a strong pan-Kurdish identity has started to emerge alongside several regional identities;\footnote{Sheyholislami 2011: 181 Kindle Edition.} and these Kurdish national identities increasingly draw upon instances of “collective trauma”\footnote{Mlodoch 2012: 218-219 Kindle Edition.} as a constitutive element of Kurdish nationalist identity.}

The Anfal, the genocide of the Kurdish people committed in northern Iraq between 1986 and 1989, is one such dispersal that forms an important part of a Kurdish shared memory as well as a national symbol. The Anfal is considered a “collective trauma” and an important constitutive element of Kurdish national identity.\footnote{Human Rights Watch’s comprehensive report, “Genocide in Iraq - The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds,” details the systematic and deliberate murder of about 50,000 to 100,000 Kurds in Northern Iraq and demonstrates that the victims were targeted on the basis of their ethnicity.\footnote{https://goo.gl/Y8NcnG.} As Andrea Fischer-Tahir and Karin Mlodoch have found, the acknowledgment of the Anfal as a genocide on both the Iraqi and international level is accorded with high significance, not only among the Kurdish political leadership, but also in academic and public discourse. As such, it must be considered in the light of struggles for significance and power as it forms a constitutive part of the Kurdish nationalist narrative wherein Kurdish culture is equated with Kurdish human rights.\footnote{Equating Kurdish culture and ethnic identity with Kurdish human rights was a feature of the relief phase immediately following the onset of the first Gulf War. In the case of the Kurds of Iraq, there was unprecedented external military, political, and humanitarian intervention from abroad, legitimated by UNSCR 688, in which human rights and humanitarian considerations were to take precedence over Iraqi state sovereignty.\footnote{Natali 2010.} Equating Kurdish culture and ethnic identity with Kurdish human rights also runs current with contemporary notions about the place of culture within human rights and cultural rights as human rights.\footnote{Within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), culture is deeply connected to the conception of a peoples’ identity. Therefore, both culture and identity are universal human rights under the UDHR:}}

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The concept of human rights is bound closely to the belief that culture is precious and central to our identity. The way we are born, live and die is affected by the culture to which we belong, so to take away our cultural heritage is to deny us our identity. At the same time, we can all benefit from our experience of other cultures and we have something to offer them in return. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says ‘everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community’ and by implication, this also means that no-one has the right to dominate, direct or eradicate that culture or impose theirs upon us.\(^{43}\)

The idea of a right to culture has been gradually incorporated into the fabric of human rights law and international discourse, recognized in the UDHR and reaffirmed in international instruments.\(^{44}\) Karin Mlodoch finds that,

Victimhood of both past and current violence, forms a significant part of the argument to legitimate power claims on the national level. In particular, the Anfal and the memory of the Anfal genocide has a high importance for the Kurdish political elite and society in the process of legitimating their claims for autonomy, for power sharing on a national level and for international guarantees of Kurdish rights.\(^{45}\)

Informed by the work of Van Bruinessen, Vali, Hassanpour, as well as Anderson and Barth, it seems reasonable to suggest that since the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq, and the relative stability and freedom that has been encouraged there, there would be a boom in efforts, like the creation of the National Museum at Amna Suraka, that reclaim, preserve, and imagine Kurdish culture. There is, however, virtually no documentation of this or other museums in the Iraqi Kurdistan region and no information about the development of such institutions there. The development of the National Museum at Amna Suraka and the collections held there do seem to parallel patterns seen in museums in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly those museums and collections that reflect cultural and social aspects specific to the region, the interests of ruling families and governmental elites and the projection of nation and national cohesion through the use of soft power.\(^{46}\)

**Amna Suraka And The Kurdish Nation**

Today, the National Museum at Amna Suraka stands not only as a testament to the success of

43 http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/CrossCuttingThemes.aspx.
44 Irina 2011.
the Kurdish uprising in 1991 and the subsequent creation of the autonomous Kurdistan region in Iraq, but also as a memorial to the suffering of the Kurdish people under the Anfal campaign. Construction of the building, known locally as “Amna Suraka” (Red Security or Red Prison), began in September 1979, roughly two months after Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq. From its inception, the so-called “security fort” was designed as a detention center and was headquarters to Ba’ath party security officers and the northern division of the Mukhabarat, Iraq’s secret intelligence agency. “During Ba’athist times,” reads the museum’s brochure written in both Kurdish and English, “this building was a center for controlling the security operations performed to watch the activities of the citizens and monitor the whole publications issued in Sulaimanya.” The building served to detain enemies of the Iraqi State, and individuals brought to this place were subject to horrific tortures and certain death. Today, visitors to the museum are able to tour the complex that includes an art gallery, cinema, archive and activity hall, in addition to halls commemorating the Anfal genocide and collections of Kurdish clothing, rugs, and other cultural artifacts.

Visitors may tour the Amna Suraka complex at no charge. Despite the enticement of free admission, I did not observe many visitors to the museum during my own, numerous visits to the space. Often on these visits, my companion and I would be the only ones touring the floors of cultural artifacts only to be hustled out by a staff member impatient to close the shop for the day. The opposite side of the complex, where the Anfal memorial is housed, seemed to have a bit more traffic than the buildings that housed the clothing, rugs, jewelry, and other material artifacts. Mostly, I observed school groups touring the Anfal memorial part of the museum; but none too often. As luck would have it, my own school, that is to say, the local private school where I used to work as an English teacher, was making a visit to Amna Suraka and I was able to take part in this excursion. During my fieldwork, I lived and worked in the Raparin area of Sulaimani in Qaiwan City. Qaiwan City is a relatively affluent, semi-suburban area situated about fifteen minutes from the city center of Sulaimani. The community of students, teachers, and family members of students at the school in Qaiwan City came from the middle and upper-middle classes of Kurdish society. Many students came from families of newly-wealthy businessmen, university teachers, higher-ranked members of the military, members of parliament, and other government officials—those who dominate institutional aspects of Kurdistan and who intermingled and were interconnected through politics, economics, and even marriage to government elites. At the time of my fieldwork, the public schools were close due to the inability of the government to pay public sector workers, including public school teachers. This means that, by default, the school groups I observed would have been those coming from the private schools operating in the area. Still, had the public schools been open at that time, they were desperately underfunded; and it seems reasonable to assume that there would be greater attendance at the museum from the private schools as they would have greater resources at their disposal to bring their students to the museum. My own school’s visit to Amna Suraka was in connection to the remembrance of the Raparin, the 1991 uprising against the Saddam regime that led to securing the Kurdish Autonomous Region and the creation of the Kurdish Regional Government. Our visit was exclusively to the Anfal memorial and did not include any other

47 National Museum at Amna Suraka brochure.
During my fieldwork in Sulaimani with local visual artists, I participated in a number of events and art shows at the exhibition hall gallery at the National Museum at Amna Suraka and interacted with this museum on several occasions. It should be noted that there are only a handful of public museums or art galleries in Sulaimani, despite the vibrant and busy arts scene that is active in the city. Amna Suraka features as a prominent museum, gallery, and memorial in Sulaimani. While the museum did not seem to gather a large attendance on a day-to-day basis, the number of visitors dramatically increased during events held at the exhibition hall. It was common to see large crowds during the opening day celebration of art exhibits. After the opening day, attendance would significantly decrease to its normal trickle of visitors. Visitors to these events included television crews, local celebrities, local artists, art teachers from the university, foreign visitors (like myself), and friends and family of the artists.

Before 2014, there were more public venues for art exhibition. Since 2014, the Iraqi government has blocked the transfer of revenues to the Kurdish authorities, leaving regional leaders unable to pay the salaries of public sector employees and administrators. This has, in turn, impacted arts and cultural projects in Iraqi Kurdistan. Once the sole or major patron of most artists’ work, today, the government of Iraqi Kurdistan is no longer funding most projects. I have tackled more about the loss of this major patron and the significant change in the relationship between government “patron” and artist “client” in another essay I have written entitled “Transforming Relationships of Power.” Still, in Sulaimani, there are at least two other public museums that hold historical pieces of material culture. First is the Slemani Museum, an archeological museum founded in 1961 whose collections include objects from the greater Mesopotamia region, from the Neolithic to the Ottoman Periods. Second is the Moli Sofi Karim (The House of Sofi Karim), an “old Sulaimani” styled house, roughly 100 years old that is situated in the heart of the grand Bazaar, whose collections include antique objects of clothing, household goods, rugs and textiles, metalwork, and one special room dedicated to singer Karim Kaban, who is rumored to have spent a great deal of time visiting at the historic residence.

In other areas of my work, particularly my work with Kurdish visual artists in Sulaimani, I consider the use of the exhibition hall space, the space of the Amna Suraka museum and the events presented there. I also consider how artists have utilized this space and the alternative spaces where artists are working within the city that challenge the institutionalized inequalities and behavioral scripts that shape how users encounter these spaces. Within the confines of this essay, however, I address the physical transformation of the museum complex as a way to engage in conversation about the claiming and redefinition of Amna Suraka by the Kurds as it forms a part of the Kurdish national narrative. It is this role, as a national memorial, that Amna Suraka serves as an important institution that aids in the maintenance of a Kurdish national narrative that includes Kurdish rights to cultural identity and homeland as they are equated with human rights.
James Clifford’s work on collecting art and cultural artifacts explains that, “Some sort of ‘gathering’ around the self and the group – the assemblage of a material ‘world’, the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not ‘other’ – is probably universal,” but that, “All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self.”48 In addition, Robert J. Kaiser’s work on homeland making finds that, “In the social construction creation of a national homeland, nationalists employ a wide variety of mechanisms to socially construct space and territorialize the nation,” and that “Images, symbolic national landscapes and national monuments are common.”49 Said in another way, the work of Clifford and Kaiser helps us understand how the National Museum at Amna Suraka demarcates the boundaries of a Kurdish national identity, defines national territory, and documents and preserves a Kurdish history that gives permanence to the nation. Clifford and Kaiser also aid us to critically consider the context dependent—with socially constructed narratives at work at the National Museum at Amna Suraka. At the same time, in the case of the Kurds as a marginalized minority in Iraq, nation-building through the use of a national museum wages non-violent conflict.50 Through art and cultural artifacts, the National Museum at Amna Suraka creates a platform that is highly imaginative and provocative, and that raises awareness about issues of social injustice by creating public space to inform and discuss.51 Within the Iraqi state, the National Museum at Amna Suraka shifts the balance of power in a way that allows for the Kurds, as a marginalized group within Iraq, to achieve public recognition and, potentially, greater priority.

At the time of the writing of this article, in 2017, the hateful acts perpetrated at Amna Suraka loom large in the memories of the local Kurdish population. Since 1996, the entire Amna Suraka complex has been transformed from its former purpose under the Ba’ath into a site for the preservation of Kurdish history and culture and for the active maintenance of the memory of the Anfal genocide. The museum’s brochure notes that, “This building saw an active role in working to erase the Kurdish National Identity and to distort their culture.”52 “The Red

50 As described in the Shank and Schirch strategic arts-based peacebuilding approaches.
51 Shank and Schirch 2008: 4.
52 National Museum at Amna Suraka brochure.
Prison” played a significant part in the Anfal campaign that utilized chemical warfare, ground offensives, and settlement destruction in addition to relocation, torture, and imprisonment to exterminate the Kurdish population. Violent reprisal from the Hussein regime followed the first Kurdish uprising during the first Gulf War, subsequently leading to a second Kurdish uprising. During this time, Amna Suraka hosted internally displaced peoples from the Kurdish north of Iraq until 1996. Around that time, with the efforts of Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, wife of former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, and the Newroz Company, the structure began its transformation from house of horrors into the museum that now stands today. Today, the museum continues to be supported with resources from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Talabanis, and the Qaiwan Group.

Approaching Amna Suraka, one notices the high, thick walls of concrete and brick that encircle the entire complex and are topped by seemingly endless miles of barbed wire. The complex stands in sober contrast to the busy shops and lively activity of the cafes and chai hanakan (tea shops) that surround it. Visitors must enter through a portcullis guarded by stone-faced Peshmerga armed with machine guns and side-arms. Passing through the portcullis and entering the complex, visitors are immediately confronted by the buildings that were used for detention, torture, and execution, that are skeletons of their former selves—physically gutted, rundown, and marked by gunfire.

These buildings remain as they were in 1991 when Kurdish forces seized control, marking the very moment when, “it was liberated during the Kurdish uprising.”53 Probably the most well-known symbol of Amna Suraka, the bombed out buildings at the entrance of the museum complex, document a historical moment when, through rebellion, the contemporary boundaries of a Kurdish national territory in Iraq began to take physical shape. At the same time, the husks of these buildings preserve a Kurdish national history that includes violence and genocide as a major part of its national memory.

In contrast to the spaces used for detention, torture, and execution—which remain derelict, physically gutted, rundown, and marked by gunfire—major physical transformations have occurred over other parts of the Amna Suraka complex. These include the exhibition hall, galleries holding artifacts of cultural heritage, the Coffee Net café, galleries commemorating the Anfal genocide and the Museum of Kurdish Freedom Fighters, the cinema, and the library. Along with the entrance to the Amna Suraka museum, another well-recognized attraction in the museum is the Hall of Mirrors. Once a concealed entrance into Amna Suraka, the locals say—used by the Mukhabarat (Iraq’s secret intelligence agency) and by local Kurdish informants, the corridor transformed into a memorial. It has 182,000 pieces of broken mirror set into the walls representing the victims exterminated during the Anfal campaign and 4,500 lights symbolizing the number of Kurdish villages destroyed by the Saddam regime. Much like the wrecked entrance, the Hall of Mirrors preserves a Kurdish national history that includes violence and genocide as a major part of its national memory. The theme of genocide and targeted violence toward the Kurds as an ethnic group reappear several more times throughout the museum.

53 Ibid.
Former dormitories for the Ba’ath security staff are now halls dedicated to the Anfal operations, the “great Exodus of 1991”\textsuperscript{54} and a hall of landmines. The Anfal museum is a long hall adorned with the names and some images of those Kurdish individuals who were killed or who disappeared during the Anfal. The entrance of the hall begins with an assemblage of photos of bodies that were uncovered from mass graves of Kurds killed by the Ba’ath.

While the Anfal is most often associated with the military campaigns that targeted the Kurds, like the mass killing through chemical weapons at Halabja, it is argued that the “Anfalization” of the Kurds includes decades of repression, forced resettlement, and Arabization in addition to direct violence and ethnic cleansing. This can be seen in the series of maps that form central lines running down the length of each wall in the Anfal museum.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
These maps note Kurdish villages, over decades, in Iraq as well as in adjacent territories in Iran and Turkey that were destroyed. In this way, the Anfal museum inside Amna Suraka repeats the theme of genocide and targeted violence toward the Kurds. In addition, through the use of maps documenting atrocities inside Iraq and in neighboring countries of Iran and Turkey, it reinforces the primordialist notion of the Kurds as a people who have been dispersed due to external violence and, more subtly, demonstrates the Kurds as a transnational people with interests inside Iraq and its neighboring countries. Violence leading to dispersal of the Kurds is demonstrated directly in the hall of the “great Exodus of 1991”\(^{55}\) that commemorates the mass migration of Iraqi Kurds after the \emph{raparin} and the reprisals that followed. Images of the suffering of the Kurdish women, children, and the elderly as they fled to Turkey and Iran, hang on the walls, secured behind lines of barbed wire made to look like fences. In the same hall, there is a small corridor through which the visitor passes through to a smaller room that has an ongoing video footage of the exodus. The corridor is large enough for only one or two people to pass through at a time and the floor resembles a wet, muddy ground with footprints, much like the ones in the photos of the people struggling in the rain, dirt, and sorrow. The theme of violence, genocide, and dispersal as important and constitutive elements of the Kurdish national identity and memory dominate the Amna Suraka museum. These elements serve to document social injustice on behalf of the Kurdish nation within the Iraqi state in a way that allows for the Kurds as a marginalized group within the Iraqi state to achieve recognition.

Other spaces in the Amna Suraka museum complex demarcate the boundaries of a Kurdish national identity by documenting and preserving a Kurdish history, not through the memorialization of violence but instead through the presentation and preservation of culture. Some of these spaces include the former Ba’ath “centre for Construction Security” (now the national library); the Museum of Kurdish Freedom Fighters; halls that hold material culture; and the garage, that was once used for the cars of high-ranking Ba’ath officers, and now an exhibition hall for paintings and other educational and cultural projects.\(^{56}\)

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{figure4.jpg}
\caption{The Anfal museum inside Amna Suraka; Photo by Cockrell Abdullah}
\end{figure}

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
During the year I spent in fieldwork in Sulaimani, neither the national library nor the Museum of Kurdish Freedom Fighters were accessible, but the halls holding the artifacts of Kurdish material culture were open and I visited them several times. These halls include numerous rooms filled with samples of beautiful, traditional Kurdish clothing, textiles and rugs, jewelry, and other personal ornaments as well as firearms. In comparison to the Anfal museum and the hall for the “great Exodus of 1991,” these exhibits were organized more as groupings of related items and lacked prior curation that would identify the item or explain its provenance or significance to the collection. Guided tours of the museum are available. However, tours are not publicly advertised, but are known locally through word of mouth. Knowledgeable tour guides are rarely available, though one can almost always find a helpful member of the very small staff to offer guidance. Most of the visits I made to Amna Suraka—except that with the students from the local school where I used to teach—had the help of local informants. The tour guide that directed the school group did not offer additional information about the exhibits apart from what was delivered through the museum’s brochure, limited signage, and didactic panels. On each subsequent visit, different informants I would visit with would contribute their own pieces of knowledge about the museum or the artifacts found there. Informants were able to speak generally about subjects presented there like the “great Exodus of 1991,” the Anfal or generally about Kurdish clothing rugs. I was not able to find anyone who could speak directly about specific pieces presented in the exhibits. It was in this way that I learned that the traditional Kurdish clothing, textiles and rugs, jewelry, ornaments, and firearms were donations to the museum’s collection from local families, and were samples from around Iraqi Kurdistan and from Kurdish areas in Iran and Turkey. This was certainly true in the case of clothing, textiles, and rugs. It was also true of jewelry, personal ornaments and firearms. The firearms reflected predominantly British, German, and Russian influences in the area from roughly around the 1930s through the 1970s. The materials from which the jewelry and personal ornaments were made, and those that adorned certain pieces, included large pieces of coral, cowrie shells, Venetian glass beads, and silver coins. These materials suggest wider historical networks of social commerce and trade that stretched to Europe, East Africa, the Indian Ocean, and Central Asia. Interestingly, the iconic, multi-layered designs of Venetian glass beads are made through a process that has its origins in Mesopotamia. While Marco Polo is often credited with bringing beads from Asia to Italy, exchange of peoples and ideas throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean has been ongoing since ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome. Gazing at the necklaces that included the millefiori beads, it is hard to know whether one is looking at a history of trade that extended to the Mediterranean or a venerable, local, artistic tradition. Lacking adequate information or guidance from knowledgeable staff, these spaces within the museum seem neglected and forgotten in comparison with the organization and attention that is directed at the spaces that memorialize the Anfal. Intended or not, or a result of inadequate funding due to the “economic crisis created by Baghdad” (that is named as the cause of numerous governmental failures to adequately support public services), the lack of detailed curation, in its neglect, serves to gloss over the historical, political, linguistic, geographical, and cultural diversity that is characteristic of Kurdish peoples; thus allowing for a homogenization of Kurdish identity.

57 Coles and Budwig 1997.
that can potentially lead to the marginalization of competing narratives, and a semblance of a cohesive national unity that conceals complexity across social strata and potential disunity within the society.

The Museum Of Modern Art

In other areas of my work about the place of culture in conflict and the intersection of the arts and activism in Iraqi Kurdistan, I have spoken about the development of the Museum of Modern Art, Sulaimani. Here, I would like to briefly talk about the establishment of the Museum of Modern Art and the ideas behind the founding of that institution, as a comparative point to our discussion of the National Museum at Amna Suraka, which further adds insight into the imaging of the Kurdish nation and demonstrates the nationalist schema underpinning Amna Suraka.

The Museum of Modern Art in Sulaimani, also known as the Crossing Museum, is a brainchild of a well-known Kurdish artist, Rebwar Saeed. The museum began as an artistic collaboration between Saeed and artists Edith Henry and Karina Waschko during Saeed’s years as artist-in-exile in France in the early 1990s. Together, these artists created *La Pluie d’Oiseaux* (the Showering of Birds) and later, *L’Association Pluie d’Oiseaux* (the Showering of Birds Association). At inception, the museum began with a donation—a collection of about fifty pieces of artwork donated by artists from all over Europe. This donation was intended to be the foundation upon which the Museum of Modern Art would be built.58 In 1992, at the same time that Kurdistan became an autonomous region inside Iraq, L’Association Pluie d’Oiseaux became more active, organizing several exhibitions in Europe and China. Artists from France, Belgium, Poland, Italy, Sweden, and China collaborated and exchanged works, ultimately including cooperation with the Fine Arts Universities of Lille and Touring France and Middlesex University in London. Saeed explains, “The Crossing Museum would become the permanent home for the art collection, act

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58 Saeed 2012: 106.
as a footbridge (Bridge of Arts) between current art from Europe and the Middle East and create a bond between the cultures of different countries and forms of artistic expression.”59 Later in 1994, Saeed was able to return to Kurdistan and at that time, proposed the idea of the Museum of Modern Art to administrators at the University of Sulaimani who accepted the donated collection where it was first exhibited. The collection was later moved to Erbil, where the entire assemblage was destroyed when violent conflict broke out between rival political parties during the Kurdish civil war.60 Needless to say, this was a severe blow and a set back to the creation of the museum. It would be nearly ten years later, in 2003, when the burgeoning Kurdish Regional Government would finally give their support to the project and set aside a piece of land at Azadi (Freedom) Park, the site of a former Iraqi military garrison. Today, Azadi Park is a popular spot for festivals and recreation. Construction of the museum began in 2004 but would not be completed until 2011. Yet, in 2016 and 2017, at the time of this research, the Museum of Modern Art was structurally unsound, uninhabited, and in a state of severe disrepair.

Museum founder, Rebwar Saeed, has referred to the establishment of the museum as, “The opening, in my homeland, of a window to the world.”61 In his dissertation “Out of Kurdish Soil: The Artwork of Rebwar Rashed and the Museum of Modern Art, Sulaimani,” Saeed discusses the ideas behind the creation of the museum including giving a voice to the Kurds, allowing the world to know more about the genocide of the Kurdish people, and helping create Kurdistan as a modern society. While in the field, I had the opportunity to interview Mamosta Rebwar (Teacher Rebwar) in his office at the University of Sulaimani where we talked about the Museum of Modern Art and generally about Kurdish art. Dr. Saeed is the current Dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Sulaimani and was kind enough to also lend me a number of texts about different Kurdish artists. Unfortunately, my contact with Dr. Saeed was limited to that face-to-face interview and a handful of messages via Facebook.

Saeed begins talking about the museum project by referring to a poem entitled “The Showering of Birds” (Figure 6) as it, “contains the reason for the efforts that followed in the years of exile and the years of return to Kurdistan – culminating in the final realization of the Museum.”62 “The Showering of Birds” poem refers to a 1987 diary entry by Saeed. The poetic, storybook style of entry talks about the use of chemical weapons on the Kurds by the Saddam regime. The chemicals killed human beings, but also devastated the environment, plants and animals alike, causing the birds to fall, rain-like, from the sky. Consequentially, the motif of injured, dying, and falling birds regularly appear in Kurdish visual art, broadly signifying the genocide of the Kurds. The significance of this poem in the creation of the Museum of Modern Art lies at the end of Saeed’s diary entry, “That day I told myself: ‘If I am not like you, a lost story, I promise to tell the moving story of all the Kurdistan birds to all humanity in order that we might understand better the voiceless screams of my grieving country.”63

59 Ibid.
61 Ibid: 104.
63 Saeed 2012: 151
Here, Saeed is talking to one of the dead birds, a victim of the chemical attack. He promises the dead bird that he will give a voice to the voiceless and let the world know about the genocide of the Kurdish people.

Secondly, Saeed explains, “Museums are sadly lacking in this part of the world: there are no permanent venues for exhibiting contemporary art within a radius of 350 km (even Baghdad, though it may put on large exhibitions, has no permanent site for exhibitions of contemporary art). The history and location of this town make it a favorable and highly symbolic place to create a Modern Art Museum.” 64 In this way, the museum becomes a way to “form part of the modern world and develop real exchanges with other culture” 65 and to “contribute to Kurdish cultural identity.” 66 Here, Saeed seems to suggest that having the Museum of Modern Art will help create Kurdistan as a modern society and will allow it to interact with other modern societies.

The work of James Clifford and Robert J. Kaiser—who studied museums; collecting cultural artifacts; 67 and the socially constructed territorialization of the nation, national landscapes, and national monuments 68—helps us to consider how the Museum of Modern Art shapes the boundaries of a Kurdish national identity and territory, while serving to document and preserve a Kurdish culture that gives permanence to the nation. In this same way, we can consider that the National Museum at Amna Suraka also has the potential to become, if it is not

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64 Ibid: 105
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid: 104
67 Clifford 1999.
68 Kaiser 2002.
already, a national monument, and will serve to imagine the Kurdish nation and shape the boundaries of a Kurdish national identity. It further suggests that the imagining of the Kurdish nation has taken a step further—from imagination into concrete nation building.

Considering the potential importance of the Museum of Modern Art as both a space (arrangements and interactions between humans) and place (lived and dynamic location where different people, social agents or powerful actors come together), it is interesting to compare the ideologies behind the National Museum at Amna Suraka and the Museum of Modern Art for some additional insights. As we have noted, the National Museum at Amna Suraka is rooted in the preservation of Kurdish history and dominated by notions of violence, genocide, and dispersal as important and constitutive elements of the Kurdish national identity and memory of the Anfal genocide. These elements, namely, the use of vernacular architecture to display ethnographic collections and the presence of a clear, interpretive message which projects the importance of history and tradition align with Erksine-Loftus’s description of what she refers to as heritage museums in the Arabian Peninsula. Erksine-Loftus goes on to describe such museums and the enactment of heritage revivalism which creates an ethnoscape that allows for “the instilling in a landscape of national meaning, and therefore the possible creation of landscapes of identity...” which, “…with a top-down, didactic approach these and other museums exude a specific, deliberate ‘history’ through the use of western-based museum practices.”

The Museum of Modern Art, by Saeed’s account, seems to share the ideas of preserving and promoting the culture of the Kurdish people. However, the Museum of Modern Art differs from Amna Suraka in that it utilizes “modern art” to present Kurdistan as a progressive, modern society with a high-culture. Let’s consider this point a bit further. Saeed explains the “favorable conditions” under which the museum began to take shape:

In 1991, the government of the Kurdish region of Iraq was set up in Suleimany. It was the first democratically and freely elected government in Iraq, confronted with the huge task of rebuilding the region’s economic, social and educational structure. Despite all the difficulties, artistic life and education have developed, and this renewal has brought with it a desire for venues adapted to these activities, place that match the aspirations of the people to form part of the modern world and develop real exchanges with other cultures.

As I previously mentioned, the Museum of Modern Art began with a collection of artwork donated by European artists, intended to be the foundation upon which the Museum

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69 Ibid.
70 Anderson 1983.
71 Hasso and Salime 2016.
73 Ibid.
74 Saeed 2012: 105.
75 Ibid.
A visit to the current website of *L’Association Pluie d’Oiseaux*, the group of artists who created the collection, shows a number of art projects, one of them, *Le Crossing Museum*. I should note here that the site is entirely in French and that all translations between French and English were conducted by myself. That said, an investigation of the site shows that L’Association has had other arts-based “action internationals” (international actions) in Kurdistan including a small music festival in 2008, a contemporary dance project in 2009, and a number of other arts projects across music, dance, literary, and visual arts genres. The description of the *L’Arbre aux Rubans Qui Parlent* (The Ribbons Tree Who Speaks) project is particularly interesting for our discussion. The full description of the project is rather lengthy. Below, I have included an excerpt of the description in its original French but have highlighted the particular passages of interest for our discussion.


*D’autres encore arrivent…*

Contre la sinistre uniformisation imposée par les extrémistes de « l’État Islamique ».

Contre ces assassins qui prétendent faire régner leur loi tyrannique dans le Nord Irak et Syrie (et bien plus largement !), qui appellent au meurtre et s’attaquent avec une violence rare à toutes les minorités ethniques et religieuses vivant en bonne entente depuis des centaines d’années,…

En soutien et empathie avec les victimes, quelque soit leur croyance et/ou leur ethnie, l’association d’artistes Esta Art (Erbil, Kurdistan d’Irak) demande à La Pluie d’Oiseaux d’organiser en France, en même temps qu’eux, une action symbolique forte, rassembleuse, vivante : *l’arbre aux rubans*

*Ensemble, en lien par retransmissions croisées via internet à Erbil et à Roubaix, à Lille et à Sulaíma, à Dohouk et à Lens… Car ce combat pour la tolérance nous concerne tous.*

*L’arbre aux rubans qui parlent est symbole de vie et de joyeuse diversité. Les rubans de couleur sont comme autant de croyances, de façons d’être car nouer des rubans colorés, des bouts de tissus ou de ficelles à un arbre est une tradition commune aux yézidis, musulmans, chrétiens…*  

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76 Ibid: 106.
77 https://goo.gl/2Wv64N.
78 https://goo.gl/bxJkxQ.
The *L’Arbre aux Rubans Qui Parlent* project talks about refugees fleeing from ISIS in 2014 (first highlighted passage) and, “In support and empathy with the victims, whatever their belief and/or their ethnicity, the association of artists Esta Art (Erbil, Kurdistan of Iraq) asks the Rain of Birds to organize in France, at the same time that they rally a strong symbolic action” (second highlighted passage). Finally, the description asserts the urgency and mission of the project by declaring, “Because this fight for tolerance concerns us all. The tree with talking ribbons is a symbol of life and joyful diversity” (third highlighted passage). I have spent time returning to the connections between the Museum of Modern Art and *L’Association Pluie d’Oiseaux*, to show what both Saeed and *L’Association Pluie d’Oiseaux* refer to as “passerelle des Arts” or “Arts bridges” between Iraqi Kurdistan and Europe. This deep connection to art and artists in Europe on the part of artists in the “academy” in Iraqi Kurdistan, like the founder and Board of Directors of the Modern Museum of Art, is not new and reaches back to the founding of the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq (under the British mandate) when, as early as the 1930s, “The arrival of many Orientalists in Kurdistan (among them archeologists, diplomats, painters) in the early part of the 20th century played an important role. Even though many of them had a political agenda, they left behind an intellectual legacy that included positive influences brought from the West through familiarity with and appreciation of art.”79

During field research in 2016 and 2017, it was found that the majority of the visual and conceptual artists I was working with had ties to the University of Sulaimani, many having graduated from the University of Sulaimani and/or having had the benefit of higher education or having worked abroad, typically in Europe. This “exchange” of art and artists between Iraqi Kurdistan and Europe suggests “an intellectual legacy”80 of art and modernity that is heavily dominated by European notions of these concepts. In turn, it also suggests that the conceptual domain of the Museum of Modern Art in Sulaimani is rooted in these same European notions of art, appreciation of art, and the importance of the museum as a space and place where a nation’s culture is preserved and promoted. This understanding has helped me to decipher a surprising comment that was made by one artist. Early on in the process of my research, this particular artist chuckled a bit when I told him about the work I was doing and said, matter-of-factly that, “There is no Kurdish Art.”81 He went on to explain that the fine arts had come to Iraq from Europe, through the capital city of Baghdad and eventually to the northern cities of Iraqi Kurdistan. John Paul Lederach has found that a people’s “lived histories” encompass the lived experiences that create and reinforce the stories of their collective lives and shared memories.82 While this artist’s comments are in need of further unpacking, they suggest the modern memory of a complex colonial relationship with Europe and Kurdish artists in Iraqi Kurdistan, within the State of Iraq and within a larger world system at play.

The National Museum at Amna Suraka, comparatively, and particularly through emphasis on the memorialization of the suffering of the Kurdish people under the Anfal campaign, demarcates the boundaries of a Kurdish national identity for local and regional publics as well

79  Saeed 2012: 43.
80  Ibid.
81  Can, S. Personal Interview, July 2015.
82  Lederach 2005 and Maiese 2016.
as for non-Kurds outside of Iraqi Kurdistan and for transnational Kurdish publics. In this way, the National Museum at Amna Suraka could be viewed as an arts-based approach that “creates a platform that is highly imaginative and provocative, that raises awareness about issues of social injustice by creating public space to inform and discuss.” 83 Said in another way, the National Museum at Amna Suraka could be viewed as a tool in a larger project that addresses problems of social injustice perpetrated against the Kurds as a nation; but one [project] that attempts, also, to shift the balance of power by transforming relationships and structures, 84 namely to create the Kurds as a nation-state. It is useful to consider Amna Suraka as a cultural tool of nation building—for us to understand Kurdish arguments that legitimate claims for autonomy, power sharing on a national level, and for international guarantees of Kurdish rights. 85

However, that particular interpretation depends heavily upon the audience, or audiences, for whom this message has been created as well as upon the particular publics that must engage with that narrative. I have mentioned other areas of my work wherein I consider how local artists have utilized the space of Amna Suraka to challenge the institutionalized inequalities and behavioral scripts that shape how users encounter these spaces. Particularly, they are emblems of an elite narrative that seeks to transform the land into national territory for the Kurds. 86 In this way, these artists challenge the forms of structural violence—as described in the work of Johan Galtung (1969)—perpetuated through a national narrative. Within the city of Sulaimani and the realm of the roshnbiran, and having artists in the most inclusive sense of the word, but also to include those whom we might think of as the “literati,” the National Museum at Amna Suraka is a high-profile venue. Museums as tools of nation building and for “culturing” the public have been well documented and critiqued in academic scholarship. Sharon J. MacDonald notes that, “The emergence of the nation-state, the public, and the public museum in the late eighteenth century, were intimately bound together.” 87 The work of Christopher J. Steiner on the other hand recognizes “the tremendous distance which can be felt between the symbols of national representation and the nationals who are supposedly being represented.” 88 Timothy Mitchell’s accounts of the Egyptian delegation to the Eighth International Congress of Orientalists visit to the World Exhibition in Paris (1989) and Brackette William’s work “Nationalism and Anthropology” (1989) reveal that gender, class, and ethnicity are implicated in the business of nation building, including those representations of the nation in public works projects and entertainment.

Tragedy dominates the Kurdish historical and national narrative, 89 however, “the ‘truth’ of genocide,” as Hinton and Lewis contend, “often becomes a power-laden tool over which politicians, activists, and the international community wrestle by asserting and contesting representations cobbled together from the often fragmented and clashing memories of survivors,

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84 Shank and Schirch 2008.
86 Kaiser 2002.
87 MacDonald 2003:1.
88 Steiner 1995: 3.
89 Phillips 2015.
perpetrators, witnesses, and bystanders.”90 If we do consider the constituting of a Kurdish nation through the medium of the National Museum at Amna Suraka as something of an arts-based approach, then the question becomes, who is speaking and to whom are these narratives addressed? Andrea Fischer-Tahir’s (2012) work on the concept of genocide as knowledge production within Iraqi Kurdistan finds that during the 1990s, higher-ranking politicians “competed in telling ‘true stories’ about the liberation movement.” These writings often legitimated their own positions of power in the new government of Kurdistan, or sought to question and undermine the authority of others.91

Jaffer Sheyholislami’s investigation of Kurdish media discourses in processes of identity formation demonstrates that Kurdish identity is simultaneously pan-Kurdish, regional, cultural, political, individual, and collective; and within the last decade, a pan-Kurdish identity has started to emerge alongside several regional identities.92 These narratives speak to multiple, complex, and overlapping Kurdish audiences in addition to those in “the West” and Arabs in Iraq. Andrea Fischer-Tahir’s (2012) work on the concept of genocide as knowledge production within Iraqi Kurdistan finds that monographs, essays, articles, and conference papers produced by Kurdish researchers address “the West,” Iraqi Arabs as well as Iraqi Kurds.93 “Papers on the Anfal presented at international conferences and texts published in English primarily address “the West,” maintains Fischer-Tahir. “Like politicians, the researchers tend to prefer ‘meaningful and powerful’ terms such as genocide.” She goes on to say that, “This tendency reflects a number of aspirations: First, for the recognition of the suffering of the Kurds; second, for the recognition of national rights such as the right to a nation state.”94 Secondly, in addressing Iraqi Arabs, Kurdish authors address the suffering of the Kurdish people under the former Iraqi regime and claim recognition as special victims. At the same time, they note that the Anfal was both political and racist.95 Finally, in addressing Iraqi Kurds, Fischer-Tahir finds that, “researchers consider themselves agents with a mission,” and that “knowledge production regarding the topic of the Anfal is both a result and a means of nation building.”96

As a national memorial, Amna Suraka serves to constitute the Kurdish nation through ties to common ethnic roots and a shared national tragedy that was the Anfal. An examination of this important institution reveals a Kurdish national narrative that includes Kurdish rights to cultural identity and homeland as they are equated with human rights, recognition of the Kurds as special victims, and recognition of national rights such as the right to a nation state.

**Conclusion**

This essay has sought to consider the constituent parts of the dominant Kurdish nationalist
narrative through an investigation of the National Museum at Amna Suraka in order that we might peel the skin of this cultural institution to consider the deep-level construction of nation and nation-state that is being conducted through cultural products, like the museum, in Iraqi Kurdistan. This examination reveals a Kurdish national narrative that includes Kurdish rights to cultural identity and homeland as they are equated with human rights, recognition of the Kurds as special victims, and recognition of national rights such as the right to a nation state. The role of this museum seems to be the projection of self internally, as well as the externally, onto the international stage through symbols that suggest national cohesion.97

We can see that cultural products, such as Amna Suraka, are important tools to constitute the Kurds as a nation and nation-state and to demarcate the boundaries of a Kurdish national identity, particularly for non-Kurds outside of Iraqi Kurdistan and for transnational Kurdish publics. Attention to such cultural products reveals the work of nation building, the legitimatization of claims for autonomy and power sharing on a national level and for international guarantees of Kurdish rights.98 This perspective also points to the potential of multiple, possible interpretations of the Kurds as a nation, depending heavily upon the audiences and publics that must engage with that narrative.

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