

The value of the homeland: Land in Duhok, Kurdistan-Iraq, as territory, resource, and landscape

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Drawing from fieldwork in Kurdistan's Duhok Province between 2013 and 2018, this article scrutinizes the notion of "homeland" through a focus on three ways in which land is valued—as territory, resource, and landscape. Territory, control, and sovereignty over land are claimed in the name of an ethnically defined national whole, yet when approaching land as resource and landscape, we see fissures and cracks that nationalist rhetoric obscures. In each of these, spatial and temporal horizons intersect, while the different temporal scales also imply different social actors: those with local roots may invest in land, while outsiders cannot acquire property; those who seek to make a living from agriculture resent policies that privilege extractive industries. The tensions between these dimensions emerge in contestations over who is at home in this land and how they should inhabit and engage with it properly, as extractivist and speculative usages are both desired and uneasily judged to be at odds with more productive or sustainable practices.

Keywords Land; Kurdistan; Iraq; Landscape; Resource; Territory

Cultivating home

On a sunny spring day in March 2015, in a hilly orchard 10 km outside the city of Duhok in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, I made the acquaintance of Haj Hasan.¹ A wiry, deeply tanned man in his seventies, wearing the traditional loose pants, jacket, and rolled headscarf of the region, he was busy pruning vines and maintaining the irrigation system he had constructed. We were introduced by his eldest son, Ahmad, an educator and writer in Duhok. Ahmad had invited me and a few other colleagues to take in the fantastic scenery, see the almond trees in bloom, and enjoy a tea at a nearby viewpoint. With a mix of pride and affection, he presented his father as "a true old farmer who could not live without cultivating his land" (fieldnotes, March 2, 2015).

Whenever we met after that day, Haj Hasan gave me presents: he told me of his experiences growing up in a village in the 1940s and 1950s, of taking mules and donkeys laden with grapes to exchange for grain "among the Arabs" in the south—and he also shared memories of war, loss, and living as a refugee in Iran before finally being able to return home. Homegrown produce from his orchard—green almonds in spring; grapes, nuts, and other fruit in autumn—were inevitably part of his generosity. Yet as Kurdistan slipped deeper into economic and political crisis, Haj Hasan's orchard became a source of tension. The expenses for irrigating, storing, and marketing the produce exceeded the profits that could be made in the market. Cultivating the orchard became a burden on the family finances, which relied mainly on income from a retail shop and salaries (*ma'ash*) from employment in the public sector. In 2016, Haj Hasan's second son, Bilind, asked him to give up cultivation to help lighten the economic burden on the family. But as Ahmad later told me with a chuckle, his father decisively replied that he would rather sell the shop, and his son on top, than give up the orchard.

As I tried to make sense of Haj Hasan's insistence on cultivating his land despite the financial losses, hard work, and familial tensions it involved, I came to understand it as more than personal habit or stubbornness. Considering other testimonies and experiences shared by interlocutors in Kurdistan between 2013 and 2018, in this article, I suggest that his stance can be read as a quiet but critical commentary on wider developments in Iraq's Kurdistan Region. Drawing our attention to divergent and even conflicting ways of valuing land, both material and immaterial, Haj Hasan's orchard and its contested cultivation offer us an insight into the complexities inherent in inhabiting a difficult homeland.

For many who identify as Kurds, the "homeland" (*nishtîman* or *welat*, depending on regional and linguistic context and genre of speech) is an evocative notion, a source of memories and pain, as well as a focus of projections, desires, and mobilization.² Its significance differs depending on geography, political sympathies, and standpoint; yet overall, the political and affective registers associated with Kurdistan (literally the "land of the Kurds") as homeland respond to the complex history of the Middle East, a region that over the last century and a half has seen the rise of nationalisms and, gradually, the emergence of nation-states, but not of a Kurdish nation-state.³ Iraq's Kurdistan Region thus holds particular symbolic significance: while it represents only a part of this elusive homeland and is thus, in nationalist Kurdish discourse, often referred to as "Southern Kurdistan," it has gradually come closest of all to establishing a sovereign Kurdish state.

The notion of the "homeland" has typically been discussed as part of a binary, together with its opposite, "diaspora" (e.g., Berg 2009; Falzon 2003; Karimzad and Cathedral 2018; Winland 2002). Such a perspective pays close attention to transnational dynamics, focusing on practices of home(land) making from a distance and thus attending especially to the first part of the term, "home." The significance of the term's second half, "land," has been much less central to the debate. In contrast, the present article asks how the homeland is engaged by those who are present on its terrain, who navigate everyday life there, rather than those who long for it from a distance. To this end, it scrutinizes divergent, partly contradictory ways of valuing land in the province of Duhok in Iraq's Kurdistan Region.

The article draws on observations and conversations with residents of Duhok Province, the westernmost governorate of Iraq's Kurdistan Region, during intermittent visits lasting from a week to two months between 2013 and 2018. While I was specifically interested in valuations of land in rural areas (a focus reflected in this article), I approached these spaces from the city. I met interlocutors through the facilitation of colleagues at the University of Duhok, many of whom had roots in rural areas. I am grateful to them for introducing me to their rural homes, for putting me in touch with relatives or friends outside the city, and for sharing their own insights and experiences of the transformation in Kurdistan's rural spaces. Further contacts were made through the "German community" of Duhok city (which partly overlapped with the first group): locals who had spent many years in Germany where they had found a place of refuge and, in some cases, a second home after fleeing the region in the 1980s and before returning to Kurdistan in the 2000s. The third group of interlocutors were refugees from Syria, who had come to Kurdistan-Iraq more recently. This community was, in a sense, the most familiar to me, as I had done research in Syria for years and was able to draw on long-standing ties to make contacts. These different networks enabled me to learn about a diversity of experiences and perspectives on Kurdistan as "homeland," including those of locals who had spent all their lives in the region, others who had been exiled to Europe and returned, and recent incomers whose refugee status placed distinct restraints on their ability to appropriate Kurdistan as home.

Both *value* and *land* are polysemic terms, and the breadth of meaning they convey can give rise to contradictions and tensions. The multivalent and shifting category of "value" can refer to monetary and material aspects as well as normative orientation or aesthetic appreciation (Graeber 2001; Miller 2008; Otto and Willerslev 2013; see also Lange et al. 2016). Rather than adopting a stable definition of land value, this article traces dynamics of valuation as they become visible in everyday practices and conversations, bridging, rather than categorically separating, between material and immaterial spheres, between monetary price and "the priceless" (Miller 2008).

“Land” is not a clear-cut, unambiguous category either. The term can be used almost synonymously with various concepts that span a staggering range of relational perspectives, from the very intimate, micro(bial) perspective on land as “soil” to the macro perspective on land as “country.” Within the span of these different perspectives, human engagement with land—representational, practical, material—is manifold, and the meanings and values attributed to it are divergent and varied. Land is the site of home and identity (Ferguson 2013) and is essential for giving and maintaining life itself (Li 2014). In an era of profound environmental transformations and rising anxieties about food security and resources, land has become the object of speculation, investment, and, increasingly, conflict (Borras et al. 2011). Material and symbolic, pragmatic, and normative dimensions intersect in practical attributions and estimations of land value, and as Li (2014) points out in her engagement with the ways in which land is assembled into a resource, considerable work is needed to reduce this plethora of meanings to render land manageable. The multiplicity of affordances, meanings, properties, and qualities inherent to the broad category of “land” can fruitfully be unpacked through the simultaneous application of multiple analytical lenses, as Muenster and Poerting (2016) have shown with their consideration of land as soil, resource, and landscape.

Following these prompts, I suggest that the notion of “homeland” can productively be theorized by bringing together multiple perspectives on land. Specifically, I discuss three distinct but interrelated aspects. The first focuses on land as imagined communal and Kurdish “national” property, in other words, land as territory. The second aspect is the commercial potentiality of land when it is seen as a resource that can generate wealth and prosperity for its inhabitants and owners. The third zooms in on land as landscape—as an ensemble of material and immaterial relations over time. I argue that, though all three angles are co-constitutive of, and inform, each other, their different qualities and temporalities may hinder and complicate the appropriation of Kurdistan as homeland.

Land as territory

I first discuss how claims to land as territory were articulated and framed in what has been referred to as Kurdistan’s “golden decade”: the years between 2003 and 2014. Territory has been discussed extensively in political science as a source and object of conflict (e.g., see Carter 2010; Toft 2014; Walter 2003). In this article, however, I follow Elden’s (2010, 36) lead in approaching territory not as a given category but as a historically contingent, differentiated, and dynamic phenomenon—“territory is a process, not an outcome; ... [it is] continually made and remade.” According to Elden (2010), territory is more than land—although the categories are closely related—and to transform land into territory, considerable representational work is needed. This work typically draws on technologies of power, such as mapping and cartography, legal provisions, and military structures. In this section, I scrutinize how Kurdistan was constructed as a territory through a rhetoric of potential addressed to foreign (Western) audiences, while also echoing and amplifying great expectations domestically.

When I first visited Iraq’s Kurdistan Region in 2013, I was struck by the pervasive sense of optimism and hopeful anticipation expressed by almost everyone I met. It contrasted markedly with what I had experienced in neighboring countries, such as Syria and Jordan. “Kurdistan is the new Dubai” I was frequently told. Echoing a comparison coined by Mas’ud al-Barzani in an interview with the Al-Arabiya television channel in 2006,⁴ this slogan was repeated by locals as well as foreigners (Woolf 2010), expressing widespread hopes for prosperity, wealth, hypermodern lifestyles, and opportunities for consumption (Kuruuzum 2018b; Sama 2015).

This optimistic assessment was grounded in the region’s resource wealth and political shifts, which promised to realize Kurdish nationalist aspirations. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his government by the “Coalition of the Willing” in 2003 had ushered in what has been termed Kurdistan’s “golden decade,” following long years of war and insecurity. Since the beginning of the Kurdish uprising against Baghdad in 1961, government troops and militias allied with them had inflicted violence and destruction on the Kurdish countryside. During the genocidal Anfal campaign of the late 1980s, hundreds of thousands were killed in successive waves of attack, poisoned by chemical

weapons, deported, and forcibly resettled in urban conglomerations. Many fled to neighboring Iran, Turkey, or Europe (Leezenberg 2004). Most villages were destroyed; broad corridors along the Iranian and Turkish borders were declared military zones where living and cultivation were prohibited, and orchards and forests were burned or cut down. After the unilateral establishment of a no-fly zone by the United States, Great Britain, and France north of the thirty-sixth parallel in April 1991, a large-scale return of refugees and reconstruction of Kurdistan began. In 1992, the first parliament of the Kurdistan Region was elected, but internal political tensions, and even armed conflict between the two dominant political parties (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [PUK] and the Kurdistan Democratic Party [KDP]) and others, continued to destabilize the region (Stansfield 2021, 363–67).

With the demise of the Ba’athist regime in 2003, the region seemed to leave these conflicts behind to look forward to a brighter future. In 2005, Kurdistan’s de facto autonomous status was recognized in the Iraqi constitution, giving it the status of a “Region” (Arabic: *iqlīm*; Kurdish: *herême*) within a federal Iraq. Administered through a parliament and government of its own, the Kurdistan Region was constitutionally granted a portion of the Iraqi national budget (fixed at 17% through a process of “haggling”; Mills 2016, 31). With power shared between the two major parties, KDP and PUK, the inner-Kurdish conflicts of the past were effectively swept under the carpet, and many Kurds shared hopes of achieving a greater degree of autonomy, even independence from Iraq, over time (Kuruuzum 2018b; Stansfield 2021, 368–71).

To mobilize international political support and draw in foreign investment, the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) in 2006 launched a large-scale publicity campaign, developed by a Californian public relations firm, that targeted primarily U.S. and Western European audiences. Absent a formally recognized sovereign Kurdish state, it worked to present the Kurdistan Region as a discrete territory by virtue of history, ethnicity, and politics. As the “other Iraq,” the region was mark(et)ed as a safe and stable space, ethnically and historically distinct from the rest of the country. In this “other Iraq,” Americans were “loved,” while “terrorists” were located at a safe distance beyond the region’s boundaries, which were described as secure and impermeable, as they were exclusively controlled by “Kurdish security forces.”⁵

Yet the production of the Kurdistan Region as territory not only included claims to political control. It also worked to present the region as a resource frontier, suggesting that Kurdish sovereignty over this territory, imbued with considerable horizontal and vertical wealth, would bring prosperity to the local population and open golden opportunities for foreign investors.

The spatiality of Kurdish territory was distinctly temporalized. While the bloody sacrifices of past generations, from the victims of Ba’athist oppression to the Peshmerga fighters who had opposed the Iraqi troops, were a constant reference,⁶ the temporal as well as spatial distancing of violence and war was part and parcel of the rhetorical marketing of Kurdistan as an economically not-yet-developed territory promising considerable profit margins to investors. Utopian visions of the future were vital to generating a sense of Kurdistan as a territory with enormous resource potential; yet they were given credence by references to an ancient, even mythical past. Kurdistan’s construction as a place of rich natural possibilities echoed older Orientalist imaginations of a lost Garden of Eden in Mesopotamia, which could be reinstated by a “proper” administration. Such rhetorical figures are reminiscent of arguments that had been made in earlier foreign interventions into Iraq, as Satia (2007) has demonstrated for British policy in Iraq in the early twentieth century. Similar to the case of Iraq’s southern marshlands after 2003, the this-worldly promise of earthly riches resonated with religious overtones (Adriansen 2004; Guarasci 2015). In June 2007, the *New York Times* quoted Herish Muharam, chairperson of the KRG’s Board of Investment, with the words “we’re not saying Kurdistan is heaven. ... But we’re telling investors that Kurdistan can be that heaven” (Semple 2007).

Horizontally, the campaign propagated Kurdistan’s land as a millennia-old site of agriculture, rich in fertile soil and water:

If you look at a map of the whole of Iraq, you see Iraqi Kurdistan would be green on the map and the rest of it brown. They have all the water, so they have a tremendous agricultural capability, but unfortunately, they don't have the food production facilities to turn that potential into an export capability. So right now, there is an awesome opportunity for companies to come in here and help them get these production facilities going. (Kurdistan Development Corporation, n.d.)

Moreover, its landscape of spectacular aesthetic qualities made the region, potentially, an ideal destination for international tourism:

Visitors who come to Iraqi Kurdistan are quick to see that this is a land of possibilities. They admire the crystal-clear rivers and imagine the thriving fisheries waiting to be built there. They go up into some of the most beautiful mountains in the world and wonder how long before resort hotels are filled with hikers and skiers. Investors look at the abundant fields and thriving cities and understand that Kurdistan has become the economic powerhouse for the new Iraq, thanks to the high level of security their region has been able to achieve. (Kurdistan Development Corporation, n.d.)

Vertically, the country's wealth consists of considerable subterranean oil and gas reserves,⁷ although quantifications of the actual extent of reserves below Kurdistan's surface varies. Estimations pronounced by the International Energy Agency, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the Kurdish Ministry of Natural Resources vary widely, ranging from 4 billion to 70 billion barrels of oil in unproved reserves (all these according to Mills 2016, 17). The Kurdish Ministry for Natural Wealth, founded in 2006 as a regional counterpart to the Iraqi Oil Ministry in Baghdad, published reports and maps that depicted the Kurdish territory as an abstractable and licensable surface (Mills 2016, 7ff.). Such visualizations rendered political differences and conflicts equally invisible as other possible obstacles to the extraction of oil and gas, such as unevenly distributed infrastructure or unclear, layered, and contested property claims.

Thus, the transformation of land into territory referenced Kurdistan's qualities as landscape as well as its "resourceness," to use Richardson and Weszkalnys's (2014, 6) term. I will now attend more closely to both aspects, first by turning to the ways in which land was engaged as a resource and then by considering land as landscape.

Land as resource

Following a well-established line of analysis, I take "resource" not as a given but as a relational category that is "made" through representational, legal, and material work. Investigations into the temporal dynamics of such resource-making processes (Limbirt and Ferry 2008) have highlighted the importance of future-oriented affects, be it through hopeful anticipation of coming prosperity (Onneweer 2014) or as anxious foreboding of strife, conflict, and oppression typically associated with the "resource curse" (Weszkalnys 2014).

During Kurdistan's golden decade, it seemed indeed that the future would keep its promises. Compared to other parts of Iraq, security was excellent, and the wealth underlying Kurdistan's spectacular landscapes raised high expectations. The manifold "resourceness" inherent to Kurdistan's territory allowed extractive, distributive, and productive usages. Yet the multiple possibilities it afforded were, in turn, often evaluated in contradictory, sometimes antagonistic terms. An increasing number of foreign companies signed production-sharing contracts (Mills 2016, 7–8). Despite ongoing tensions with Baghdad, revenues from oil exploration were channeled to the population via pensions, salaries, and benefits, which made up more than 50% of the KRG's budget. By 2009, the per capita income in Kurdistan was 200% higher than it was in the rest of Iraq; out of a population of roughly 5.5 million people, 1.4 million received government money (Mills 2016, 27). While locals to the region preferred to work as employees in the public sector and the security forces, labor migrants from abroad, many of them from South Asia, were recruited to build infrastructure and work in industry, domestic service, or other services (Kuruuzum 2018a, esp. 112–16).

Many locals invested their new wealth in the property sector: housing construction boomed, and real estate prices soared primarily in urban, but also in (some) rural, areas (Kuruuzum 2016). In many cases, this was driven by the speculative hope for an even brighter future—people bought land, I was told, because they believed that prices would rise even higher (fieldnotes, April 7, 2014). Investment in rural properties was enhanced by the KRG's policy of “reviving” the rural areas through low-interest loans aimed at rebuilding the villages that had been destroyed almost entirely by the Ba’athist regime before 1991 (Berwari 2013; Fischer-Tahir 2011). Yet the ways in which rural land was valued were changing. The devastating violence of the 1970s and 1980s going hand in hand with forced urbanization, the detrimental effects of the double embargo during the 1990s (international sanctions on Iraq and an internal Iraqi boycott on the Kurdistan Region), and the distributive measures under the Oil for Food program after 1996 have all impacted the agricultural sector profoundly (Bozarslan 2021, 120; Eklund and Lange 2018, 120; Jongerden et al. 2019; Leezenberg 2005, 636; 2006, 162; Natali 2007, 1116–19; Stansfield 2003, 43; Woertz 2019). If, in the mid-1970s, 50% of the population had still lived on agriculture (O’Shea 2004, 139), by 2012, this had been reduced to 9% (Eklund, Abdi, and Islar 2017; Eklund, Persson, and Pilesjö 2015). By 2015, 90% of foodstuffs consumed in Kurdistan were imported from abroad, notably from Iran and Turkey (Abdullah 2015). Rural properties that had been associated with agriculture until the early 2000s were now often used mainly as recreational spaces, serving as holiday homes on weekends and during the summer. In other cases, owners speculatively hoped to develop rural properties in picturesque locations and places of natural beauty for future touristic ventures, such as restaurants. Although there were legal obstacles to transforming agrarian properties into building sites, these were apparently easy to circumvent if one only had good connections to party or state functionaries. The KRG Ministry of Agriculture sought to invigorate the agrarian sector through subsidies and grants for ventures like fish farms, tractors, or irrigation structures. Interlocutors shared anecdotal stories about how these subsidies were appropriated without achieving their purpose, suggesting that it was relatively easy to claim funds for rural investment without actually realizing the projects they were intended to finance.

Yet from 2014 on, the promises of the hopeful years after 2003 were fundamentally called into question. In summer of that year, the fighters of the “Islamic State” had suddenly taken over large parts of northern Iraq, coming within 30 km of Kurdistan’s capital, Erbil, and occupying wide tracts of land, including the city of Mosul, just 60 km from Duhok. The bucolic scenery of Haj Hasan’s orchard was now acoustically disturbed by the sounds, echoed between the hilltops, of artillery from the Mosul front: fighting was no longer a thing of the past but had come close again. Although Haj Hasan dismissed the war with a laugh, his wife, like many others, voiced concern that the hard-earned peace in Kurdistan was suddenly in jeopardy.

The crisis led to an increased influx of refugees from Iraq’s Arab provinces and from the Sinjar Mountains’ Yezidi population, adding to the refugees from Syria who had come into the region since 2012—in Haj Hasan’s small home village alone, a displaced family from Sinjar found shelter in the half-finished villa of one of his sons, while a family of Syrian refugees working first as agricultural laborers, later in construction, rented a house from another family. With an original population of approximately 5.4 million, Kurdistan now hosted more than 1.5 million refugees (Stansfield 2021, 374–75).

Added to the decline of the global oil price since 2014, which severely impacted oil revenues, the sudden unstable security situation led to a large-scale and unexpected exodus of foreign oil companies and investors. Political relations with Baghdad deteriorated further, leading to delays and interruptions in the transfer of Kurdistan’s budget and the protracted, months-long failure of the KRG to pay salaries to state employees (Kuruuzum 2018b; Watts 2021, 398–99; World Bank 2016).

In this situation, many people began to critically reflect on the frictions and contradictions between different ways of valuing and using land. Their criticism, addressing the Kurdish political elite, resonated with an ambivalent mix of caution and complicity. On one hand, Duhok has long been considered one of the strongholds of the KDP, the power basis of the current and past prime ministers and presidents of the Kurdistan Region. On the other

hand, while the political atmosphere in Kurdistan was relatively more liberal when compared to other times and neighboring states, such as Syria, certain subjects—such as corruption—were highly sensitive, as attested by the fate of journalists investigating such matters who had ended up imprisoned or even killed (cf. Watts 2021, 395–96). Interlocutors thus typically voiced criticism of the political elite in very circumspect tones, inevitably taking care not to name specific individuals or even political parties.

The critique addressed two main issues: the nontransparent distribution of profits from oil and gas extraction and the neglect of the agrarian sector. In March 2015, for instance, I was sharing a tea with Cîger, a teacher, and his cousin and brother-in-law Alan. We were sitting in Alan's home in a village two hours north of Duhok city. Alan had recently given up farming his own land (mostly wheat fields), which he now rented out to an agricultural entrepreneur. In addition, he received a salary as a representative of the Farmers' Union. Our conversation revolved around practices and issues in relation to rural land, quickly turning to the difficulties that farmers were facing. Alan hinted at the nontransparent way in which oil revenues were distributed, complaining that he did not receive a proper share of the wealth generated from Kurdistan's subterranean reserves. This critique juxtaposed the resource potential of Kurdish territory to the actual realization of this potential, which fell well short of expectations: the wealth sleeping below the surface of Kurdistan should, Alan and Cîger felt, generate much more prosperity for its inhabitants. Implicitly echoing a logic of resource nationalism (cf. Koch and Perreault 2019), this critical discourse took up nationalist rhetoric promoted by the KRG to mobilize popular support but used it to critically question the policy of economic liberalization that had seemed so promising during the golden decade. This complaint referred to the lack of transparency regarding the actual volume of oil extracted and sold and the distribution of revenues to which all locals of the region should be equally entitled but which, many interlocutors felt, actually benefited only a few. In addition, while oil rents were generally desired, the practical impacts of extracivism were feared, and in some areas, local communities and activists protested against the pollution and expropriation of farmland associated with oil exploration (Tinti 2021, chapter 5).

A second aspect at which this critique hinted was the failure of agrarian policy. Indicating that cultivation could be a source of prosperity and wealth just like oil and gas extraction, Cîger pointed to the example of "Holland," a country that generated a proper national income just by "selling flowers."⁸ Alan concurred that agriculture, if done "rationally," would be just as profitable as oil. After all, he exclaimed, "our soil is solid gold [*axê me hemî zêr e!*]" (interview, March 16, 2015). Yet, as the difficulties faced by smallholder farmers of the region attested, this "gold" was not easily turned profitable (Jongerden et al. 2019; Sama 2020). Many interlocutors commented on the contrast between the perceived richness of the Kurdish soil and the actual difficulties inherent in making a living, let alone a profit, from agriculture. The KRG has named low productivity of smallholder farms as one of the main problems for Kurdish agriculture, looking to agro-industrialization and mechanization as well as increased foreign investment as remedies (Jongerden et al. 2019, 3–4; Ministry of Planning 2013, 29–31). Farmers, however, pointed to marketing issues as their main problem. Interlocutors complained about the lack of infrastructure, such as processing plants for agricultural produce and cold storage facilities, as well as a lack of marketing structures and effective tariffs on imported produce that would protect local cultivators.⁹ Owing to the ongoing tensions and conflicts in Iraq and neighboring countries, farmers spoke of their difficulties in exporting produce even to other regions of Iraq. This was exacerbated by stiff competition from abroad. Local produce, typically grown without much technical support, could not compete with imported goods from Turkey or Iran that were typically produced in large-scale, industrialized agricultural ventures. Interlocutors felt that the KRG should tariff imported produce to protect local producers and darkly hinted at corruption as a possible reason why such protective tariffs were not in place or remained inefficient. Pointing out that the imports from Turkey made the region dependent on the historical "enemy" of Kurdish political aspirations, interlocutors implicitly and sometimes explicitly advocated for self-sufficiency in food production through a discourse that securitized agrarian production.¹⁰ In recent years, irate cultivators in different parts of the region have thus repeatedly expressed their frustration and anger

with the KRG's economic policy by dramatically and publicly destroying their own produce (Dolamari 2020a, 2020b).

Land as landscape

The dissatisfaction interlocutors expressed with Kurdistan's failed economic policies and incomplete and unsatisfactory transformation of land into resource points us to a third perspective on land, which I refer to here as "land as landscape." Although landscapes can in themselves be commodified and turned into resources (Muenster and Poerting 2016, 252–53), the lens of landscape makes land visible not primarily as a detached (if place-bound) economic resource but rather as a site of "dwelling" (Ingold 1993, 2012)—an ensemble of material, social, and cultural relationships, stretching through space and time (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Janowski and Ingold 2012; Luig and von Oppen 1997; Stewart and Strathern 2003). Landscapes can be read as palimpsests on which historically changing social and political formations are superimposed. They bear the material traces of past inhabitants and structures (graves, ruins, buildings, cultivation terraces, centuries-old trees, etc.) and are invested with emotional attachments, memories, and sentiments. Ingold (1993, 2012) emphasizes that people relate to landscapes in representative as well as physical and material ways and thus help to shape them. Humans can articulate claims to a particular territory through physical engagement with its landscape. McKee (2014; see also McKee 2016), for instance, argues that the planting of trees in Palestine/Israel is both staged as a gestural reference to the past and performed as an everyday practice, aimed at demonstrating a historical rootedness and thus a claim to growing in the future on a certain piece of land. Landscapes are forged through physical, as much as representational, engagement with the soil. This engagement may extend to cultivation as much as to consumption—"the metaphysical essence of events, values, practices, and forebears grounded in the 'ancestral soil'" may literally be ingested through the consumption of a landscape's produce (O'Connor 2012, 128).

Yet not only the cultivation but also the consumption and thus physical appropriation of Kurdistan's land and its produce were complicated and fraught with difficulties. The living coinhabited Kurdistan's spectacular landscape with remnants of conflict, violent death, and ruination. These were evident at the material, legal, and socioeconomic levels. Materially, the traces of past violence are inscribed on the landscape by rusty signposts that warn of uncleared minefields; they become visible in ubiquitous, overgrown ruins of destroyed buildings or may emerge through the occasional resurfacing of projectiles and unexploded ordnances that lie buried underground.¹¹ The past of the region is also manifest, in many places, in the unclear and contested nature of property claims and landownership, as property regimes from successive historical phases are layered across each other. Much of the rural land in Iraq had not been cadastered, and use rights were often incongruent with formal property titles, especially where original owners had been displaced or had fled the country (Lange 2016, 212). Indeed, Haj Hasan's very own orchard, from where this article started, was not formally his property—the title deed was held by the family of a religious figure who had left the area, whereas Haj Hasan's claim to ownership lay in his labor and the effort he had invested into cultivating the land.

Locally produced goods were evaluated ambivalently: on one hand, local produce was often referred to in nostalgic terms as having particular "quality" and "taste." A frequently cited example was the famous apples of Berwari Bala, a region in the north of the governorate, which are now notoriously neglected (cf. Lange 2016, 203; Sama 2020, 36).¹² Yet these qualities did not translate into a tangible advantage in the market—when I spoke to traders at Duhok's wholesale agrarian market (*alwa*) in 2018, they explained that it was extremely difficult to sell local produce. Foreign imports were not only sold at a cheaper price but could apparently also look more appealing to many customers. On the occasion of my first visit to Kurdistan, Berivan, a student of history, warned me not to consume local produce, which, she suspected, might be highly polluted. I understood her sentiments not to be grounded in any specific chemical analysis of agricultural products but rather as expressing a profound lack

of trust in Kurdistan's landscape, which has been polluted by ongoing conflict and war. This is reminiscent of Dewachi's (2013) observations on the "toxicity of everyday survival"—he describes how the long-term effects of the wars waged on Iraqi soil seep into all realms of life, not only generating serious illnesses but also eroding social ties, destroying trust, and engendering new anxieties.

If belonging to a landscape can be articulated through cultivating it and consuming its produce, the failure to do so may raise uneasy questions. The neglect of agriculture in favor of an extractivist, oil-based economy was thus critically evaluated not only in economic and political but also in moral and emotional terms. This critique, however, was more than ambivalent: the frequently heard criticism of corrupt structures and practices of the political elite suggested, on one hand, that inequalities and injustices in the distribution of "natural" wealth should be blamed on "them," indicating distant political elites and their failed policies. Yet, at a closer look, many of my interlocutors were themselves part of the transformations they criticized, bringing questions of responsibility much closer to home.

At the family level, the destruction of the Kurdish countryside in the 1970s and 1980s and the decline of the agricultural sector meant that the agrarian ethos embodied by many of the older generation who had survived the Anfal campaign was not shared by their children and grandchildren. Not only had agricultural skills and knowledge not been passed on but lifestyle aspirations and patterns of consumption, too, had fundamentally changed. Many interlocutors' very own family histories and biographies documented the rapid shift from a rural lifestyle to an urban one, from tilling the land to receiving salaries for white-collar work. They, too, used their own networks and relations of acquaintances, kinship, and tribal affiliation to secure official approval for business ventures, get paperwork done, and make money. In this sense, the criticism they articulated also implied a moral self-critique. Alan himself, for instance, who commented on the agrarian policy of the KRG so critically, had become a white-collar employee, receiving a monthly salary as a representative of the Farmers' Union. He acknowledged that he was not entirely comfortable with his transformation from farmer to functionary, admitting that he was too "ashamed" even to speak with the remaining farmers in his district because he had no resources to support them or help them till their fields. He emphasized that the low profitability of farming was the main reason for his decision to give up agriculture, insisting that he would not mind "all the hard work" associated with agriculture if he could only make a profit from it. Struck by the strong emotions engendered by the shift from agriculture to white-collar work, I read his insistence that he *would* work hard if it were only worth the trouble as an implicit reaction to a widespread discourse of laziness that blamed indolence, rather than external structural factors, as the root cause of crisis. This discourse was articulated, for instance, by Seyda Abdalla, an urban intellectual in Duhok who hailed from a landowning family himself but had never actually worked in agriculture. Like many other interlocutors, he attributed the neglect of agriculture to the rents based on oil wealth, adding more general remarks:

The Kurds are lazy in agriculture. ... [Sure], many times we planted, we fled, [the harvest] was destroyed ... but if somebody loves farming, that is no sufficient reason [to give it up]. If it is destroyed a hundred times, you will start over a hundred times. ... The real reason is, this guy has no energy. He doesn't like it. (interview, March 16, 2015)

While Seyda Abdalla's scathing assessment may seem ironic given his actual distance from the day-to-day business of farming (despite the inclusive "we"), his words echoed normative assumptions that were widely shared. Seen in this light, Haj Hasan's quiet persistence in cultivating his orchard and reaping its bounty appears as a practical articulation of a principled moral stance: as a political act of claiming the homeland.

From a diametrically opposed social standpoint, similar sentiments were articulated by a man who, like so many others, had come to the region as an outsider. Hozan had fled to Kurdistan from his native Syria to escape political persecution a few years before the Syrian uprising against Asad. As an ethnic Kurd, he had been admitted into the region, but as a non-Iraqi citizen, he was not entitled to permanently acquire property there. Instead, he

rented plots from local landowners to grow vegetables, constantly expanding to include ever larger fields. Hozan, too, criticized the failings of Kurdish infrastructural and agrarian policy while admitting that it was agriculture that had enabled him to make a living in exile. This, he suggested, was due to his and his family's industriousness and to the agricultural skills and know-how he had acquired in his home country. Having never visited an agricultural college, he disdainfully looked down on locals of the region who—he suggested—were not only too lazy but also too ignorant to plant the right crops for making a profit. Hozan let me know that he and several other Syrian Kurdish farmers who had come to Iraqi Kurdistan as immigrants exchanged experiences and techniques to improve their output but that they would never let local farmers in on their secrets of the trade. He cast doubt on local farmers' commitment to cultivating, and even on their embodied, habitual familiarity with their land, implicitly challenging their privileged position of calling it home (Peace 2005, 499): "They [the local landowners] don't plant [in a serious way]; they plant only wheat. [Successful] cultivation here is that of onions and potatoes" (interview, January 30, 2017). Cultivators from Syria, he said, were more enterprising, trying out other crops and actually investing in amelioration: "We invest. If you don't invest, nothing will come of it." Yet for Hozan, his relation to the land and the crops he planted in it were decided not only by the quality of the soil, his know-how, and the industriousness of his family but also by his own status in the Kurdistan Region. As a foreign national who, despite his Kurdish ethnicity, was not entitled to own property here, he calculated in brief rhythms: the cultivation cycles of the vegetables he planted allowed him to leave at short notice. Although olives or other fruit trees, with which he had had much experience at home in Syria, might have been more profitable, he said that he preferred the short-term investment in vegetables. A tree needs years of work and care to produce a profit; but "we always think that we might return" home (interview, October 23, 2018). Poignantly, I later learned that Hozan had not, in the end, managed to "properly" cultivate Kurdistan's difficult terrain either. One day in 2019, a mutual acquaintance later told me, he and his family suddenly left, leaving behind a mountain of debt. Like so many locals, he, too, had failed to cultivate the homeland that was, for him, a place of exile.

Conclusion

This article approached the notion of the homeland through a threefold lens, asking how land in Duhok governorate, Kurdistan-Iraq, was imagined, inhabited, and engaged as territory, resource, and landscape. Building on multiple ontologies of land, these processes draw on material as well as immaterial registers of value and divergent temporal orientations.¹³ In an effort to construct Iraq's Kurdistan Region as a discrete space, clearly delineated and separated from the rest of Iraq in ethnic, historical, and political terms, the valuation of *land as territory* promoted during Kurdistan's "golden decade" implicitly distanced the violent conflicts of the twentieth century both temporally and spatially. Support for this vision was mobilized, among other things, by reference to the commercial potentialities of this territory, situated in the future and rooted in a mystical past. Yet the horizontal and vertical resource potential of this homeland matters not only for larger political claims (an aspect that has been extensively addressed in the extant international relations literature on territory) but also for very intimate, affective, and personal ways of making oneself at home.

The valuation of *land as resource* was driven by future-oriented temporal affects and orientation. Yet, whereas these were initially optimistic anticipations of a brighter future, the manifold crises engulfing the region in the second decade of the 2000s turned the future-oriented affects toward frustration, hopelessness, and disappointment. The friction between the different temporal orientations inherent in imaginations of land unfolds critical power, making contested valuations of land a medium through which discontent and anxiety about the political trajectory of Iraq's Kurdistan Region and the future of its inhabitants could be focused and expressed.

The forward-looking temporalities associated with land as territory and resource were hindered and called into question by *land as landscape*. Expectations of prosperity and wealth are conveyed through a perspective on land

that foregrounds its material values, detached from social or political ties. But this perspective is contradicted by the complex web of material as well as social and political relations, memories, and affects that are constitutive of landscapes: the resource-based promise of detached profit collides with the entanglements of social relations over time. Land, in this view, is revealed as a matter that does not exist in isolation but rather is dependent on human engagement with it. Where this engagement is lacking—for instance, through a failure to cultivate, denounced as indolence or “laziness”—the homeland-like qualities of land are called into question. Traces of past injuries and unresolved conflicts resurface, making land appear as a resistant and recalcitrant matter whose market-oriented or speculative usage is as problematic as it is desirable.

These complex relations reveal the homeland as comprising rights as well as obligations, hopes, and promises, but also unresolved conflicts, disappointments, and failures. The various ways of inhabiting and valuing Kurdistan-Iraq as homeland also imply different social actors: those with local roots may invest in land, while outsiders could not acquire property; those who sought to make a living from agriculture resented policies that privileged extractive industries. Taking a differentiated perspective on the notion of the homeland thus makes fissures and cracks visible that nationalist rhetoric obscures. As this article demonstrated, the tensions between the manifold dimensions of the homeland emerged in contestations not only over who is at home in this land but also over how the homeland should be properly inhabited and valued.

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Notes

- 1 All personal names and identities of interlocutors cited in this article have been anonymized.
- 2 Kurdish nationalist political movements and parties are of course highly differentiated and often inimical, a complex issue that cannot be discussed in the frame of this article.
- 3 For an overview of the historical background, see McDowall (2021).
- 4 This was taken from a 2006 interview of Barzani with Lebanese journalist Elie Nacouzi, conducted for the TV program *From Iraq*, of the Al-Arabiya television channel. A transcript of the interview was retrieved from *Welatê Me* (<http://www.welateme.net/erebi/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=394>).
- 5 Although these quotes are taken from a CBS *60 Minutes* program aired on February 19, 2007 (<https://www.cbsnews.com/video/the-other-iraq-1/?intcid=CNM-00-10abd1h>), similar perspectives were echoed in pieces published by the *Washington Post* (Sly 2011), the BBC, and other prominent international news outlets. At the time of writing (May 2021), a simple internet search with the term “The Other Iraq” retrieved numerous videos and articles dating from the mid-2000s that echo this narrative.
- 6 See Andrea Fischer-Tahir's (2003, 2012) work on the significance of the concept of “martyrdom” in Iraqi-Kurdish political discourse.
- 7 See Elden (2013) on the significance of verticality for territorial claims.
- 8 Citing the Dutch example here is not coincidental, as the Netherlands has been an active and visible agent in Kurdistan's agrarian sector through development activities such as trainings, investments, and scholarly analysis; see, for example, Jongerden et al. (2019) and Jangiz (2021).
- 9 Markets and profit margins differ according to crop: wheat was usually more profitable than fruit or vegetables, because it was bought at fixed prices by the government (see Eklund and Lange 2018); I was told, however, that even here, the economic crisis led to delayed payments.
- 10 This echoed older Iraqi policy during Ba'athist rule (Woertz 2019; see also Lange 2016, 216).
- 11 Kuruzum (2018a, chap. 2) provides a fascinating account on how war debris is turned into a resource.
- 12 Another example is the imaginary of the “Kurdish chicken” discussed by Fischer-Tahir (2021), who argues that the attribution of “Kurdishness” to particular goods can be invoked to transport nationalist sentiments as well as claims to taste and distinction.

- 13 These multiple ontologies are reflected in the broad lexicon of terms denoting land. A proper analysis of this semantic field is beyond the scope of this article. To mention just a few terms, while the terms *nishtîman* and *welat*, which I translated as “homeland,” were more typically used in formal speech (political rhetoric, songs and poems, etc.), and *waar* could be translated as “tribal territory,” everyday references to “our land” would be made through different words, most commonly *erd*, which also indicates the generic category of “land.” Haj Hasan used the ancient term *akkar* (likely going back to Sumerian roots but today commonly used in Arabic as well) to reference the fields in which he worked as a child but spoke of *milk* (“property” in Arabic) to refer not only to the land owned by his family but also to the fruit trees growing from it. As a legal category, *milk* was in itself highly differentiated (cf. Al-Ossmi and Ahmed 2016). The term *akkar* was also used to denote land detached from social relations, for instance, in advertisements for property sales, whereas *ax* denotes land as soil.

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