



The Kurdistan Mental Health Project

Restoring minds, rebuilding lives:
empowering Kurdistan through mental
health care



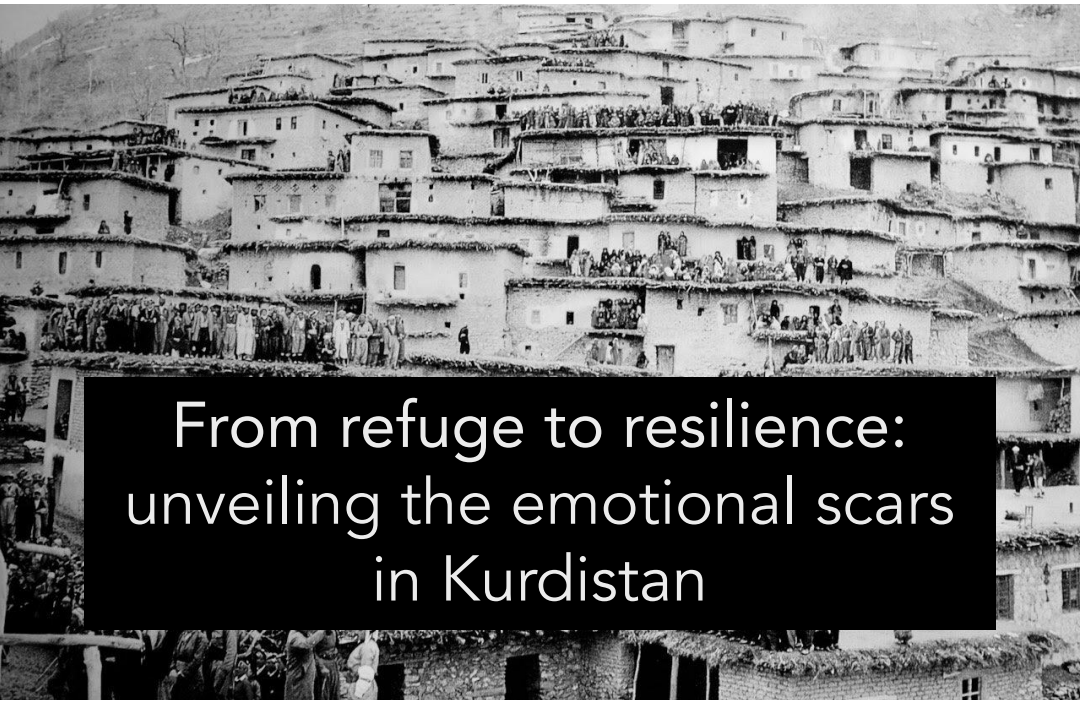
Pioneering mental health in Iraqi Kurdistan

The communities of Iraqi Kurdistan have faced countless struggles over the years, many of which have left people with physical and mental wounds. In a country where mental health services are limited, the aim of the Kurdistan Mental Health Project is to train a new generation of psychologists to help Kurdistan's society deal better with the region's traumatic legacy from decades of conflict.

The Kurdistan Mental Health Project will begin a year's training to international standards for 30 young professional psychologists in new techniques of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This treatment, a core and the most effective therapeutic approach according to extensive research, is almost unknown in the region, where what little psychiatric help there is only tries to cover up such problems through medication.

We have successfully acquired funding for the first two years of the project which has now kicked off the training of the first cadre of therapists, but we now look to secure a medium-term future for the programme. We are open to joint funding approaches across the planned five years.





From refuge to resilience: unveiling the emotional scars in Kurdistan

Photo by Mamwesta Jelal of Roste on Iraq's border with Iran, 1970.

Conflict and trauma have tormented the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) since at least the 1960s. The peoples of this mountainous enclave have suffered repeated wars, including the genocidal Anfal campaign by the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The KRI owes its existence partly to the Western alliance's 1991 decision to protect the Kurds from Saddam's Hussein through the creation of a 'safe haven'. It regained its 1970s constitutional federal status within Iraq after the US-led invasion of 2003.

The region was shaken once more when Islamic State fighters from southern Iraq and Syria attacked deep into its territory in 2014. At the height of that crisis two million people fled to the KRI; the host population is just five million.

Islamic State fighters' policy of sexual assault and torture of Yazidi women and young girls added to KRI's need for psychological as well as physical treatment of their victims.

The KRI government, as well as international humanitarian organisations, struggled to find Kurds who had the right experience, training and expertise to address the Yazidis' deep trauma.

In all, autonomy since 1991 has brought much development compared to Saddam Hussein's policy of razing thousands of villages to the ground. But long-term stability is elusive and there are few institutional safety nets for ordinary citizens. Receiving and offering sanctuary are core to the KRI's recent history and a proud part of its public narrative, but it needs support to remain a safe haven at the main crossroads of the turbulent Middle East.



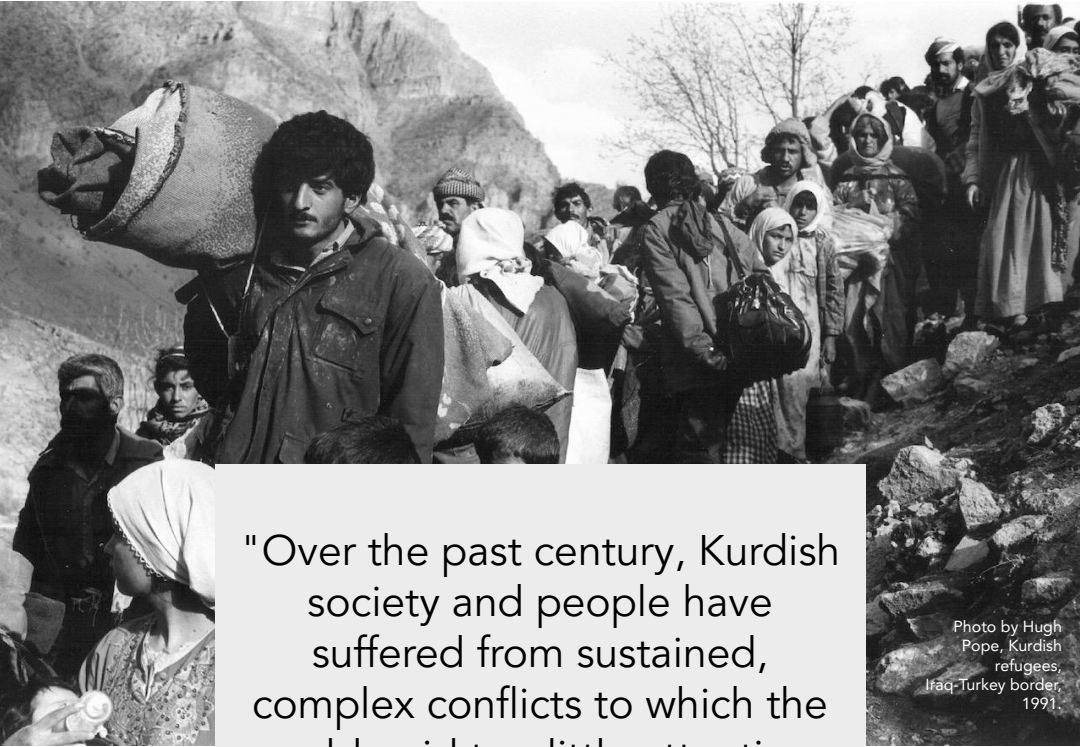


Photo by Hugh Pope, Kurdish refugees, Iraq-Turkey border, 1991.

"Over the past century, Kurdish society and people have suffered from sustained, complex conflicts to which the world paid too little attention. The consequences for Kurds' mental health has been either a taboo or brushed under the carpet."

- Edith Maubec, curator of a major digital archive of photos of Kurdistan and long-standing writer about the region.



Silent suffering: the mental health void in KRI

Psychotherapeutic techniques are in their infancy in the KRI. There was no qualified wellspring of expertise to draw upon from the host community – itself bereft of talking cures despite the Kurds in Iraq suffering historically from physical and psychological trauma. Western societies have only recently begun to make significant progress in matching mental health means to needs and addressing the stigma that holds back many from reaching out. In the KRI, the demands on the emerging governmental structures have been many and the region's coffers variable and as such mental health services have not been the priority, as in much of the Middle East.



Many Kurds suffering from trauma and depression will have sought comfort in their families or religion. There are around two dozen overworked psychiatrists but a paucity of therapeutic offers and lack of integration of mental health into the diagnostic process.

In most donor societies there is growing understanding, backed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and health researchers, that **there is no health without mental health.**

But that realisation and the expectation of increased mental health provision in the West has yet to be fully transferred to how the donor community sees its role in humanitarian and developmental situations around the world. It is now time to act on the understanding that the more a society deploys a full range of therapeutic services to those who suffer trauma, the more resilient it will become.





Partnering with Oxford Cognitive Therapy Centre

We are partnering with [Oxford Cognitive Therapy Centre \(OCTC\)](#), to roll out the first significant introduction of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) into Iraqi Kurdistan.

OCTC is a self-funding agency within the Oxford Health NHS Trust, which provides specialised CBT services, particularly in teaching and training. In collaboration with the University of Oxford, OCTC has 30 years of experience in successfully planning and running a wide variety of CBT courses, adapted to local norms around the world and a wide range of audiences from different professions, including beginners. OCTC's expertise in war-related and other traumas are particularly important to understand the unique circumstances of Iraqi Kurdistan.

*Oxford
Cognitive
Therapy
Centre*



It is for this reason that we have chosen to work together to deliver these essential services to the people of the KRI. Our partners at OCTC will be implementing and supervising the training and assessment of trainees throughout the project.





Training tomorrow's therapists: Kurdistan's mental health initiative

The Kurdish Mental Health Project was designed following extensive consultation with KRI government and officials, academics and stakeholders in psychological treatments. Alongside OCTC we are partnering with in-region training organisation, the [European Technology and Training Centre](#) (ETTC) which will enable the project on the ground.

Founded in 2005, ETTC is a Kurdish and Kurdistan-based non-profit organisation in the city of Erbil that has a successful history of delivering international training programmes.

In coordination with OCTC, ETTC will seek candidates from all parts of the Kurdistan region, either newly graduated psychologists or those already working in the public sector, the private sector and non-profit organisations. ETTC will host the training sessions, represent the project to the Kurdistan Regional Government, seek official recognition of the OCTC certification and communicate the project's progress in KRI media and other platforms.



European Technology and
Training Centre (ETTC)



Committing to change: KR-UK-Impakt's mental health mission

This project is the brainchild of a group of Anglo-Kurdish mental health professionals in the UK who created the charity, KR-UK-Impakt. The organisation identified the need, designed the basic concept of therapeutic training and brought together the key players who could deliver it.

Founded in 2020, KR-UK-Impakt is a group of like-minded professionals committed to improving mental health provision in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The KRI and its people has suffered through decades of trauma, genocide, conflict, forced migration and isolation, but mental health services are in their infancy. We work with people who want to change that, to bring help and support to the people or the KRI who themselves have provided refuge and a sanctuary for others.

Impact monitoring and reporting will be done by a group of volunteer mental health professionals within KR-UK-Impakt including several expatriate Iraqi Kurds in the UK and Chris Bowers, a former UK Consul General in Erbil.



KR-UK-Impakt will coordinate research, monitoring and evaluation and will also lead the effort to build a funding stream for the second phase of the project, which would ideally last a further three-four years to make the project self-sufficient. KR-UK-Impakt will also supply a significant independent audit each year and, after five years, a substantial written evaluation, ideally for external publication.

Find out more at
<https://www.kr-uk-impakt.org/>



An anonymous gift in memory of Kurdish generosity

The gift that allowed the Kurdistan Mental Health Project to start operation was made anonymously in the name of the journalists who chronicled the emergence of Iraqi Kurdistan from decades of darkness. The foundation wished to address a gap in the psychological treatments of their scarcely believable suffering over the past 60 years.



Photo by Hugh Pope, Kurdish refugees, Iraq-Turkey border, 1991

Especially in the years before 2003, the tiny contingent of outside reporters risked their lives to report on the fate of the Kurds under Saddam Hussein's reign of terror. They chronicled the Anfal campaign of genocidal retribution and the gassing of thousands of Kurds in Halabja. The horrors of the Islamist state were to follow, including the terrible fate of the Yezidis.

Rarely, if ever, have journalists enjoyed such total access in hard-pressed wartime. The Kurds got journalists in – and out – of Iraqi Kurdistan at considerable risk to themselves. Kurdish leaders realised that granting reporters near total freedom was their best bet for attracting the holy grail of Western intervention to stave off defeat and more unbridled repression. They laughed at their own mistakes and at those of the reporters. This forged enduring ties that bind.

But the peoples of Kurdistan stayed behind and had to live with the terrible toll of abiding trauma alone. This gift of two years' support for the Kurdistan Mental Health Project is intended as a memento of the very occasional times that Westerners helped rather than hindered the Kurds' long-stifled cause. It is made in the hope that generous donors with deeper pockets will pick up the baton for the necessary following years, and that the success of the program will ultimately convince the Kurdish authorities to take on the responsibility for mental health themselves.



How can you support us?

Donations.

Our five-year programme will train 30 Kurds per year to be able to practise CBT with ongoing clinical supervision. Relevant KRI leaders and ministries are fully briefed and strongly supportive. In later stages, the programme will equip trainers so the project can become self-supporting.

With funding secured for the project's initial two years, our focus now shifts towards securing a lasting future for the programme and garnering ongoing support for this crucial mental health initiative.

Donations may be used to start building up funds for years three to five. If you would like more information about this and how to contribute, please contact us on the email address below.

Contact Us.

Email: contact@kr-uk-impakt.org

Website: <https://www.kr-uk-impakt.org/>

Our Partners.



ETTC: <https://www.ettc-iraq.net/>

OCTC: <https://www.octc.co.uk/>

