



## City profile

## Erbil

Rebwar Ismail Ibrahim<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sabah A. Mushatat<sup>b</sup>, Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> School of Architecture and Built Environment, University of Wolverhampton, RMA Building, City North Campus, Lomas Street, Wolverhampton WV1 1HR, UK<sup>b</sup> School of Energy, Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh EH14 4AS, UK<sup>c</sup> School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering, Queen's University Belfast, David Keir Building, Belfast BT9 5AG, UK

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## ABSTRACT

Erbil (Hawler in Kurdish), is the capital and the largest city of Iraqi Kurdistan. Having been continuously inhabited for about 6000 years, the city has recently been regarded by UNESCO World Heritage as one of the world's oldest urban settlements. The city is witnessing remarkable urban growth and rapid spatial expansion compounded by a dramatic increase in population due to emigration from the countryside and rural areas over the last three decades. Following the changing geopolitical landscape of post-war Iraq, urban changes and socio-political transformation are largely driven by Erbil's growing autonomous status as the capital of northern region of Kurdistan since 2003. This paper explores the layers of historical, spatial and social developments of the contemporary urban context of Kurdistan in general and of Erbil in particular as a reflection of the changing status of the city, as well as the polarization of Iraq and the emergence of neoliberal urbanism. The tension between the global and modern from one side and traditional and authentic from another is ever present and evident in everyday challenges in the planning of the city. In large part, Erbil's built fabric embodies the dichotomy of identity and contests between its past and future, in which the present remains a transition between two disconnected realities.

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## 1. Introduction

After living for decades in unstable conditions, the three northern governorates of Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah, experienced autonomous status and self-management for the first time in 1991 as a consequence of the successful uprising of Iraqi Kurds and the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime (Stansfield, 2003). Erbil, the historical city and the capital of the Northern Province of Kurdistan Iraq, (Fig. 1), is going through fundamental changes due to the influence of political, economic, global, cultural and demographic transformations. Autonomous management of resources and revenues along with economic prosperity have allowed the city to accelerate its reconstruction and development, enjoying more stability and a safer environment in comparison to other cities in Iraq (Yasin, 2011). However, the rise in private investments and intensive planning has been counterproductive when it comes to the built environment of this ancient city. Indifferent modern planning, architecture and the urbanisation of wide streets with high-rise buildings of business establishments have created disarray in the physical

form, in which both old and new, the traditional and the modern appear alien to each other (Nooraddin, 2012).

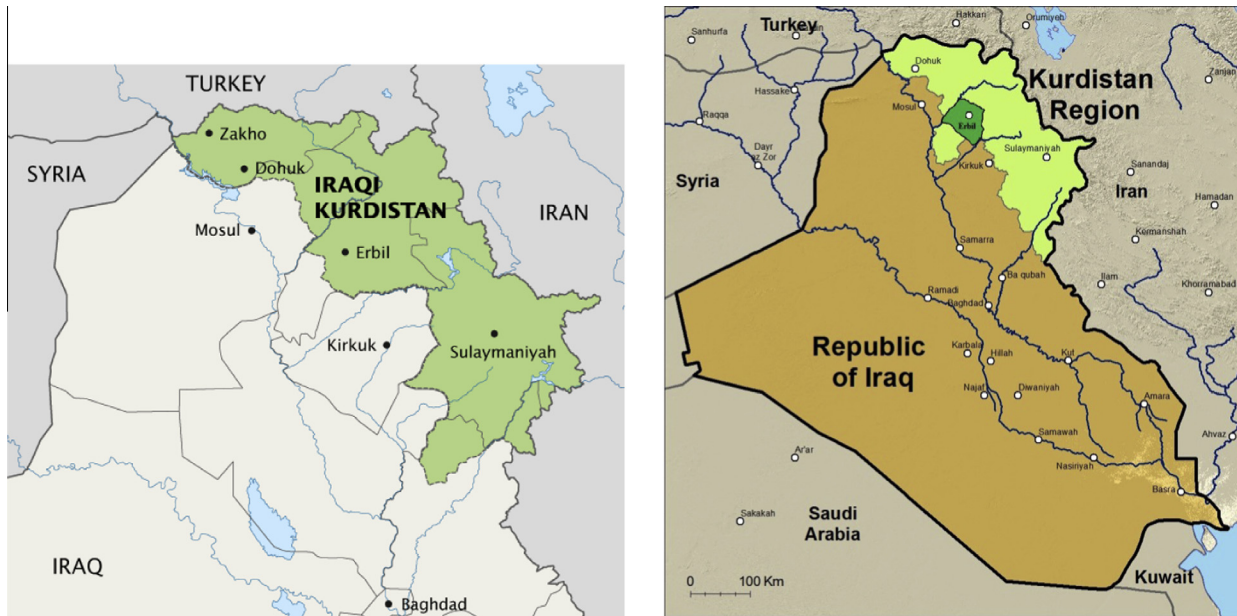
There has been growing dissatisfaction with recent development projects and new compounds around the old city over the lack of planning vision (Ebraheem, 2013). The predominantly unplanned growth has been incidental and does not constitute a sustained approach but that inscribed by unpredictable implications of the growing population and increasing economic assets (Rydin, 2010). This paper explores historical, physical and social layers which accompany those transformations. Although the current urban context of Kurdistan in general and of Erbil in particular is evidently closer to being thought of as a mere production of neoliberal policies, the debate however on globalism and modernism versus traditional and cultural is on-going.

## 2. Narratives of historic developments

The Kurds are one of the oldest nations in the Middle East, distinct from Arab, Persian and Turkish neighbours. Scholars agree that the Kurds are descendants of a mixture of Indo-European people formed from indigenous inhabitants and subsequent immigrants who have settled in the region for more than three thousand years (Gunter, 2011). Their history stretches from 3000 to 400 BC as a period of severe disturbances between Kurdistan and the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [rebwar\\_i@yahoo.com](mailto:rebwar_i@yahoo.com) (R.I. Ibrahim), [smushatat@hotmail.com](mailto:smushatat@hotmail.com) (S.A. Mushatat), [m.gamal@qub.ac.uk](mailto:m.gamal@qub.ac.uk) (M.G. Abdelmonem).



**Fig. 1.** Iraq map showing Kurdistan Region, Erbil and main cities. Source: <http://asorblog.org/2013/11/16/new-explorations-in-the-heart-of-assyria-cities-and-landscapes-on-the-erbil-plain-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/>

neighbouring powers such as the Assyrian and Persian Empires. The Kurds, then known as the Gutis, were able to establish a ruling dynasty in the region between 2250 and 2120 BC. For the next fourteen centuries and after the fall of the Gutis, however, Kurdistan was a scene for military invasions, raids, and destruction as a result of the rivalry between the Ottoman and Persian empires. These conflicts drove the region into social and economic unrest that soon led to the transformation of Kurdistan (Meho, 1997).

Kurdistan, or the land of the Kurds, is located in the strategic and geographic heart of the Middle East where Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and Southern Europe meet. Today it comprises important part of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Azerbaijan. It has long been denied independence, but most scholars describe Kurdistan as the area in which Kurds constitute an ethnic majority (Gharib, 2004). Kurdistan was first divided in 1514 AD between the Ottoman and Persian Empires. Four centuries later, Britain and France further altered the political contours of Kurdistan by dividing the Ottoman Kurdistan into three main parts. The partitioned area consisted of more than 190,000 square miles divided as follows: Turkey (43%), Iran (31%), Iraq (18%), Syria (6%) and the former Soviet Union (2%) (Aziz, 2011).

The city of Erbil is the official capital of the Kurdistan Independent Region and lies about 350 km north of Baghdad and 80 km (50 miles) east of Mosul. The city is located on enormous fertile plains of 15,870 square km known as “Dashti Hawler” between the Great Zab and the Lesser Zab rivers. It has kept the same name throughout history while the tribes in this region, followed the Zoroastrian religion until the appearance of Islam in the seventh century (HCECR, 2012). The first historic record dates back to Neo-Sumerian times when the kings of Ur attacked Erbil from 2094 to 2046 BC and 2046 to 2038 BC, but failed to conquer the city. Erbil was mentioned for the first time in the Sumerian holy writings (about 2000 BC) as ‘Orbelum’ or ‘Urbilum’ and in the Arab and Assyrian texts as ‘Arba-Elu’. The name also refers to Helios, the sun god, making the city a place of worship of the sun (Gharib, 2004). The city was an essential centre of trade and politics. The city linked all the trade routes between different regions in the ancient world. The loss of prominence had occurred in the 13th century when the Mongol, Persian and Turkish

conquest took place. In the following centuries, Erbil was marginalised and in the 19th century the population ranged between 3000 and 6000 inhabitants, mostly living in the ancient fortress, the Qala’a (Sherzad, 1979).

The Castle or the Citadel is known as an authentic example of urban civilisation which developed in the region in the 6th century B.C. This historic heart of Erbil was not a Citadel in the sense of being not only a military/administrative feature, but being the urban core which was incorporated into a single settlement unit with the separately fortified city on the plain. In the centre of the city stood a large market and a variety of public buildings (Aljanabi, 1987). This Citadel was built on layers of archaeological ruins which represented sequential historical settlements with an irregular oval in plan, the crown measuring 430 × 340 m (total area roughly 102,000 m<sup>2</sup>), which rises some 25–32 m (82–105 ft) above the flat (Fig. 2) (KRG, 2009). In the sense of broader temporal and territorial context, the fortress clearly belongs to the large group of Ayyubid/Mamluke urban fortifications; close analogies may be found in the Citadels at Aleppo, Al-Raqqa, Damascus or Cairo (Novacek, 2008).

The tortuous streets of the Citadel, or Qala, were distinguished by their tree-shaped pattern and divided the plot into three districts (or mahallas): the Serai, which was occupied by the wealthier families; the Takiya, area of Sufi houses and dervishes; and the Topkhana, which was resided in by artists and farmers (Fig. 3). The Citadel was considered an independent city with markets, mosques, baths, dispensary and schools (Sherzad, 1979).

### 3. Erbil urban transformation

In spite of the urbanisation and modernisation that has occurred in the city of Erbil over the past few decades, the greater part of the historic fabric of the old Citadel and its architectural heritage are still well-preserved, especially if compared to other World Heritage cities of the Arab World. This reflects the extraordinary role of UNESCO and the Kurdistan Regional Government in maintaining the historical and cultural heritage of Erbil City.

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