

Arabic-Kurdish Language Divide

Author: [Hind al-Saffar](#)

While Arabic and Kurdish are the official languages of Iraq, few Iraqis speak both.

Kawa Ahmed, a teenager dressed in traditional Kurdish clothing, chatted and laughed with his friends while strolling in Sulaimaniyah as a group of Arab tourists snapped pictures of them.

"Supas (thank you in Kurdish)," said Ahmed, drawing a chuckle from one of the visitors.

"Thank you," he said in English, in an attempt to find a language through which both could communicate.

Iraqi Kurdistan has had semi-autonomy from the central Iraqi government since 1991, when Kurds won control of the three northern provinces after decades of oppression. Fifteen years later, a communication gap exists, as the Arab majority in Iraq doesn't speak Kurdish and few Kurds - particularly the younger generation - speak Arabic.

The language divide between the north and the rest of the county has always existed. Kurds were isolated and were the victims of ethnic cleansing under Saddam Hussein's regime, according to international human rights organisations. But the gap is wider today, many experts maintain.

The constitution lists Arabic and Kurdish as the official languages of Iraq, however in most of Iraq, including at many government offices, few can speak and read both languages. In Iraqi Kurdistan, offices usually have Kurdish and, sometimes, English signs, and official documents are often drafted in the native language of the northern region.

The problem is most glaring in oral communication, however. An increasing number of tourists and residents from the rest of Iraq are coming to the north and are shocked that Arabic doesn't get them far.

"I'm so sad because I can't find a common language between us and our Kurdish brothers," said Dunya Hatam, 34, a Baghdad resident who vacationed in Kurdistan. "This makes me feel alienated here."

People in Kurdistan had little interest in teaching their children Arabic while ruled by Saddam's oppressive regime. Older Kurds learned Arabic when they were asked to join the Iraqi army or if they dealt with Arabs before 1991.

There has been some language overlap. Baghdad has long had a large Kurdish community that speaks both languages, and Kurds who lived in - or were forcibly moved to - central or southern Iraq also speak Arabic. While fewer in number, the same is true for some Arabs who turned to Kurdistan to escape violence-torn provinces.

Even though Kurds hold power in Baghdad, the communication barrier has occasionally limited them. Rizgar Amin, the first judge to oversee the trial of Saddam and seven of his deputies, was criticised for not speaking Arabic well.

In parliament, Iraqi Accord Front deputy Azhar al-Samarai said representatives do not need to learn Kurdish because there are translators.

"Most Kurdish parliamentary deputies can speak Arabic, but use in Kurdish [on the national assembly floor] to ensure that they are properly understood," she said.

She indicated that the onus is on Kurds to know Arabic, because it is the language of Islam and enables them to have better relations with Arab citizens.

Linguistic separatism has bolstered those who advocate Kurdish independence.

Latif Qadir, 50-year-old Kurdish civil servant in Baghdad who lived there for more than 20 years, is moving to Sulaimaniyah to escape the violence. He supports Kurdish independence, in part based on the language difference.

"It does not mean that we don't love Iraq, but as a nation that has its own history we have the right to have our own independent state," said Qadir.

However, at the same time, there are signs that Arabs and Kurds are prepared to bridge the linguistic divide.

Luma Hussein, director of the women's NGO al-Noor in Baghdad, said she wants to learn Kurdish because she believes that Kurdistan has more experience in developing civil society organisations.

She and Chiro Sabir, head of the Rasan organisation which defends human rights in Kurdistan, agreed to hold Kurdish and Arabic language courses as a new step toward Arab-Kurdish cooperation in Iraq.

"In the past learning Arabic didn't mean any thing for me," said Sabir. "But after the fall of the regime I wanted to interact with Arab Iraqis so I tried to learn and practice Arabic. It's necessary for us, as a civil society NGO, to connect with all of Iraq."

Ahmed, the teenager, said he too wants to improve his Arabic. He said he was shocked that after he told the Arab tourist thank you in English, she replied in Kurdish, "Not at all."

Hind al-Saffar is a Baghdad-based IWPR trainee journalist.

Location: [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Iraq](#)

Focus: [Iraq](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/arabic-kurdish-language-divide>