Awat

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HAPPY NEWROZ

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Awat Newspaper: Setting Precedent

Whenever a new newspaper is established, the world is made richer by the wealth of knowledge that newspaper disseminates. *Awat*, the new youth-established and -directed newspaper, plans to make the Kurdish society richer by working to set precedent for independent news sources and by giving the youth opportunity to be heard.

Awat staff had observed that in our society very few, if any, truly independent news sources exist. This fact is what makes it hard to trust anything today's media delivers to us; many people have come to realize that almost every bit of news embraced is either far from the truth or tinted to exalt or disgrace an intended individual or group. The common response is to lay down the newspaper or turn off the TV and never to submit to them again.

The staff at *Awat* had also noticed that our society lacks media outlets for the youth. Our youths have next to no chance to express themselves; their willingness to participate in publications and their fiery passions are slain by this privation.

Awat realizes that these two shortcomings – the lack of independent news sources and the incapability of the youth to participate in the media – are slowly destroying the Kurdish media. This newspaper wishes to see change for the better in the Kurdish society so that those two deficiencies may be overcome, but it knows that change should start from within. Therefore, *Awat*, in order to set precedent for true, unbiased Kurdish media, give a voice to the Kurdish youth, and lift up a higher standard of Kurdish journalism, declares itself to be an independent, youth-governed newspaper that emphasizes matters concerning the youth.

Awat appreciates all the tireless efforts of those who believed in its dreams and worked to achieve them while they were still mere dreams.

The purpose of this newspaper in acting as an independent news source is to give back hope to the Kurdish people. *Awat* staff realizes that hope will always prevail and wants to make all its readers realize this as well. For this reason we call our publication *Awat*, which is Kurdish for "hope."

Awat equally regards all political parties, nationalities, ethnicities, religions, and cultures so that everyone, heedless of background and personal affiliation, can participate with *Awat* and contribute to its pages as long as the necessary English skills are demonstrated and the *Awat* Code of Ethics is respected. To uphold the standards of true independence, the *Awat* Code of Ethics guards against moral mistakes, especially disparagement against any particular group or individual in the pages of *Awat*. However, structured criticism pointed at the government as a whole is allowed because the government is every citizen's own.

Since English is the international language, *Awat* utilizes it in print and in all of its communications and documentations. Even though this newspaper does not chiefly use the Kurdish language, it still intends to portray the Kurdish cause: English is used primarily to attract more global attention towards *Awat* activities and goals. English also makes it possible for our brothers and sisters who are either not Kurdish or cannot communicate well in Kurdish to participate in this newspaper.

Awat is still a work in progress; it apologizes beforehand for any inadequacies and aims at perfection with the help of its staff and faithful friends. For that reason, *Awat* staff invites all diligent volunteers to work together for the realization of its goals. *Awat* can be contacted easily by phone and email, and it has made itself available on Facebook and Twitter. The complete contact information can be found in the credits box of every issue.

This newspaper started in the city of Sulaimany because it knows that in order to succeed it has to think big but start small. Hopefully, with the help of loyal contributors, it will be able to reach out farther throughout Kurdistan and Iraq.

Awat wants to set precedent, *Awat* wishes to give back hope, *Awat* works to see change: a newspaper is out, and it is delivered to you in order to make the Kurdish society richer.

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Awat Newspaper

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Awat abides by the rules of press ethics.

Human Rights Watch in Kurdistan and Iraq

Arez T. Sadiq
From Sulaimany, Iraq

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has released several reports regarding the situation in Iraq and the human rights violations that have been committed against the protestors. Human Rights Watch is an independent, international organization that is concerned with safeguarding human rights around the world. In one of the reports released so far, HRW criticizes the government's response to the demonstrations which occurred throughout Iraq, mentioning the incident which occurred on February 17th in Sulaimany that resulted in the death of one person and the wounding of more than 33 others. HRW calls for an immediate, transparent investigation into the shootings that occurred on February 17th, stating that "the Iraqi forces and their commanders have a lot of explaining to do to justify the use of live ammunition on demonstrators."

In another report released on March 7th, HRW harshly criticizes the KRG and accuses its forces of standing by and watching as dozens of masked assailants attacked protestors in Sulaimany and set their tents ablaze. "Security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government can't hide behind thugs to do their dirty work," said a HRW representative. "It is shameful that after decades of repression, Kurds today still don't have the rights and freedoms promised by the KRG, including the right to peaceful protest." In the report, it is also said that more than 15 demonstrators were taken away by the masked assailants. HRW claims that security forces have killed five and injured more than 150 protestors in Sulaimany alone.

Attacks on demonstrators have occurred in other parts of Iraq as well. HRW claims that more than 17 protestors have been killed and at least 250 injured throughout Iraq. In Baghdad, just like in Sulaimany, security forces stood by while masked assailants beat and stabbed several demonstrators. Dozens of journalists and media workers have been arrested or beaten. In the report, the Iraqi government is urged to open an investigation into the killing of the protestors.

In another report unrelated to the recent demonstrations, HRW says regarding the 2003 war that "the women and girls of Iraq have borne the biggest brunt of this conflict and resulting insecurity." Since the 2003 US invasion, the situation for women in Iraq has been worsening. Iraqi women have repeatedly fallen victims of religious extremism, family honor, and trafficking. HRW has also released several reports on female genital mutilation (FGM) in Iraqi Kurdistan and calls for an end to this practice.

Newroz in Sulaimany

A bon re in Sara Square welcomes the Kurdish New Year.

Photo by Erik Aulie

On the 20th of March, people walked around Salim Street and Sara Square with their Kurdish clothes on to celebrate *Newroz*, the Kurdish holiday. Countless numbers of Kurds crowded both Salim Street and Sara Square; Arabs, Persians, and other ethnicities also joined. Walking was difficult because of the large number of people gathered there.

The bonfires were lightened at around four to five o'clock; a sign of the beginning of a new year or a new day as the word "*Newroz*" literally means. People crowded around the fire and felt the coming of a new year; a new year with the hope of a brighter future for Kurdistan.

In the evening, people set off fire balloons to spot and lighten up the sky on Salim Street; this worked out beautifully. The fire balloons were accompanied with a barrage of fireworks and creative activities. The activities consisted of both music and art. Middle Eastern music as well as Western music (rap music being an example) was played. There was also a lot of Kurdish dancing, or *Halparke*, with fast-beat music. In the art section, a dove figure was shaped from sand.

The people enjoyed the activities performed as the evening slowly ticked away. When the people went home from the streets, they prepared for the picnics of the next day. On the 21st of March, the people went on the picnics they usually have on the first day of the Kurdish New Year. The picnics consisted of a lot of Halparke and barbecuing. Despite the bliss most of the Kurdish families enjoyed, some families experienced tragic losses. For example, an eighteen year old guy drowned in the lake of Dukan while several others died in heavy car accidents. Similar events occur every year during Newroz celebrations.

One important thing to notice is that people threw less trash on the ground during their picnics this year than they had done in the previous years, though there still was a considerable amount of trash thrown on the ground.

In this *Newroz*, as was the case in the previous ones, many tourists visited Iraqi Kurdistan to celebrate *Newroz*, Persians being the most prominent example. This tourist-attracting aspect of the holiday is beneficial for Iraqi Kurdistan both economically and socially.

This *Newroz* was celebrated by many different ethnicities in the city of Sulaimany. On the 20th of March, the revelers walked on Salim Street and Sara Square to see the celebration of *Newroz*. And on the 21st, people went on picnics to enjoy the second day of *Newroz* celebrations and the first day of the Kurdish New Year.

A Tornado of Revolutions

Rand Kamaran
From Sulaimany, Iraq

Mohammad Bouazizi set himself on fire on December 17, 2010 in Tunisia because of the humiliation and harassments inflicted on him by a Tunisian municipal official. People triggered by Bouazizi's tragic death began protesting against the corrupt Tunisian government. This protest carried on and became known as the Tunisian Revolution. On January 14, 2011, people succeeded in ousting the then-President of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Bin Ali. This successful revolution generated another revolution in Egypt, which also proved victorious and caused Hosni Mubarak to resign. This tornado of revolutions has since carried on to other Arabic countries such as Libya, Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, and Bahrain.

Ali ruled Tunisia for 23 years during which he constructed a corrupt government; high rate of unemployment and poor living conditions were rampant all over the country. Bin Ali restricted political freedom. Mohammad Bouazizi, a 26-year-old, came from a poor family and worked as a street vendor selling produce. On December 17, 2010 a Tunisian municipal official is said to have insulted Bouazizi in public and had her guards beat him. Feeling his pride was hurt and not being able to tolerate the harassment anymore, Bouazizi went on to self-immolate. It is said that about 5,000 people attended his funeral and promised to avenge his death. He triggered a revolution that united most, if not all, people of Tunisia to throw off the 23-year-lasting regime of Zine El Abidine Bin Ali. On January 14, 2011, as the protesters took control of much of the country, Bin Ali fled to Saudi Arabia. Mohammad Bouazizi sacrificed himself for the freedom of his people and his death started one of the greatest series of revolutions of the modern era.

Motivated by the success of the Tunisian Revolution, Egypt started protesting. Slowly and gradually people began to gather and protest (starting from Tuesday, January 25, 2011) against their corrupt government. They began to rally at *Maidan Al-Tahrir* (Freedom Square) in Cairo and also in other cities. On Friday, January 28, 2011, a huge amount of Egyptian citizens assembled at Freedom Square; the day became known as "Friday of Rage." This revolution carried on into February and each day more people joined the protestors. The government attempted to stop the protests by offering the chance of peaceful negotiations along with a rejuvenation of the government system. These offerings proved useless as the protestors continued gathering at Freedom Square. The government started using military threats to scare its people. These threats were not successful: the people had a lot of ambition for and hope in removing their government, and the military refused to fight against its own people. Finally, on February 11, 2011, Hosni Mubarak resigned from office. Power is now in the hands of the military for at least the next six months until an election for presidency is held.

Overwhelmed by two unprecedented, successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, other Arabic countries began protesting and rioting. Bahrain, Algeria, Yemen, and Libya moved into action and emulated the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. The most significant of these current revolutions that gets the majority of media coverage is the one taking place in Libya. The government threatened to begin fighting its own people if they rebel. It is thought to be the most violent of all the current rebellions because the government has started to attack its people with weaponry, bombarding parts of the country. Revolutions in these countries are still going on and it is believed that, as each day passes by, tensions will increase.

All these rebelling Arabic countries have a series of things in common. The most important of them is that in each country a single regime has been ruling for the last 20 to 40 years. Looking at their living conditions, we can see that these countries have not advanced much under their current (or recently-ousted) regimes. The living conditions of these people are very low compared to the Gross Domestic Product of their counties. On the other hand, the rulers and their families, because of nepotism, have huge amounts of money (billions of dollars) in their investments.

Japan Devastated by Deadly Earthquake and Tsunamis

"More than 15,000 were killed, Millions have been affected by the earthquake and the number is expected to rise."

Arez T. Sadiq
From Sulaimany, Iraq

Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Kyodd

A child and his father are looking at destroyed houses in Sendai, Japan

An 8.9 magnitude earthquake hit the North-East coast of Japan at 2:46 pm local time on March 11th. It is the largest earthquake to hit Japan and the 5th largest earthquake in recorded history. More than 10,000 have been killed and the number is expected to rise. Millions of people have been affected by the earthquake and nearly 450,000 now live in shelters. The earthquake also triggered a series of devastating tsunamis and aftershocks in its aftermath. The tsunamis swept away entire areas and destroyed thousands of homes. In fact, the earthquake was so powerful it moved the main island of Japan by 2.4 meters and shifted earth 10 centimeters on its axis.

Japan lies on the Pacific Ring of Fire. The Ring of Fire is an area where the earth's tectonic plates meet and therefore has the highest rate of volcanic and earthquake activity. Almost 90% of the world's earthquakes happen along this stretch.

After the recent Japanese earthquake, about 20 countries issued tsunami warnings and large numbers of evacuations were carried out. More than 4.4 million houses were left without electricity. At least three nuclear reactor facilities were hit by explosions and a total of eleven reactors were shut down to avoid damage and radiation leaks. Japan, for the first time ever, declared a nuclear emergency. The International Atomic Energy Agency has described the situation as "extremely serious." Large amounts of radiation could get spilled into the environment in case of a nuclear meltdown.

The incident received significant international response. Dozens of countries have proclaimed their support for the Japanese government and several of them began sending support in the form of financial aid, manpower, and equipment. The United States launched Operation *Tomodachi*: a military effort to support the post-earthquake Japan. ("*Tomodachi*" is a Japanese word that means "friend").

The earthquake also had an immediate impact on the financial market, especially the stock market. Markets around the world suffered losses. Even though Japan's economy suffered in short term, economic analysts predict that the earthquake will eventually boost Japan's economy due to increased job availability.

Obama Visits Latin America

Erik Aulie
From Peubla, Mexico

Amid being embroiled in current crises in Libya and Japan, the American president, Barack Obama, has taken time to visit Latin America for five-days in order to reinforce American economic ties with the region. Latin American countries have been vital trading partners with the US since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the 1990's — which expanded free-trade from Canada and America to Mexico. Since then, America has signed various FTAs (Free Trade Agreements) with several other Latin American countries. Underscoring Latin America's unique importance, President Obama admitted that, at times, the US had taken its relationship with the region for granted. Now, however, Obama asserts that, "the future is being forged by the countries and peoples of Latin America […] The world must now recognize Latin America for the dynamic and growing region that it truly is." Also recognized in the American president's speech was the democratic nature of most Latin American countries. Many of them, including Chile — where the president gave his speech — made political transitions from military dictatorship to democracy peacefully. In the 1970's, most Latin American countries were military dictatorships. Now, by contrast, almost all are democracies. At a time when violent revolutions may subsume the Middle East, Obama extolled the region's example political transition.

Obama's trip to South America comes at an important time since now, more than ever, the South American economies are integrated into the world economy. Other countries, especially China, have also been aggressively seeking trade agreements with it. China is already Brazil and Chile's main trading partner. Both China and the US continue to seek stable trading partners in energy resources. Currently, the US imports a third of its oil from Latin America, which is more than it imports from the Middle East. Increased global competition as well as potential continued instability in oil-rich countries makes the United States' need for stable trading partners in Latin America all the more relevant in the coming years.

Overcoming the Single Story

In the Middle East, peace-making can begin over a plate of *fattoush*. Last week I had lunch with three young Iranian friends from opposite ends of the political and ideological spectrum. Had these young men met in Iran they would probably not have become friends. They would have remained within their like-minded communities who share their basic beliefs about politics, life, and religion.

Amo, 22, an engineering major, has very conservative political and religious views; Ali, 20, spends more time learning crass American slang and rap lyrics than thinking about God or politics; and Sevak, 19, an Armenian Christian, plays a very active role in his church communities in both Beirut and Tehran.

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie describes the danger of only listening to the "single story" of the other. Had I only listened to the single story of the Middle East I once knew, I would not have ventured to teach in Kurdistan in 2004, I wouldn't currently be living in Beirut, Lebanon, and I wouldn't have met many of my closest friends from different corners of the entire region.

However, overcoming the single stories and stereotypes we have of others doesn't require leaving family and friends behind. Reconciliation can begin with something as simple as a discussion and sharing a meal.

Here in Beirut, these three Iranian friends can be found playing football, watching movies, studying in the library, and eating bowls of *fattoush* with young Americans. The very small Iranian community at AUB has made these unlikely friends realize that, in spite of their differences, they enjoy spending time together and can even learn from one another.

Elif Shafak, a Turkish author, says, "If you want to destroy something in this life, be it an ache, a blemish, or the human soul, all you need to do is to surround it with thick walls. It will dry up inside. We're born into a certain family, nation, class. But if we have no connection whatsoever with the worlds beyond the one we take for granted, then we too run the risk of drying up inside. Our imagination might shrink. Our hearts might dwindle. And our humanness might wither if we stay for too long inside our cultural cocoons."

As Amo, Ali, Sevak, and I ate our salads and chicken escalopes, we talked about how connecting "with the worlds beyond the one we take for granted" has changed us and made us better people.

Ali, for instance, came to Lebanon with a hatred for Arabs but today considers his roommate, a Lebanese Palestinian, his best friend and has a crush on an Arab classmate. Neither Amo nor Ali had Armenian Christian friends in Iran but have since listened to Sevak share his experience of growing up as a religious minority in a Shiite dominated country.

Kurdistan, once fairly isolated from the rest of the world, has, in the past decade, undergone radical changes. Cities nearly doubled in size, Kurds from the global diaspora returned, world-class hotels built, Arabs migrated north, migrant workers from Ethiopia and Bangladesh came looking for work. The young people of this new Kurdistan need to walk outside the walls of their cultural cocoons and find the other side of the story from their Arab neighbors, Ethiopian maids, members of rival political parties, foreigners, those who have returned from abroad, and those who never left.

Kurdistan will be the better for it. Her young people need to learn to do this without the circumstances that brought Amo, Ali, and Sevak together.

Start small, of course, perhaps with a meal. It is amazing what a plate of *fattoush* can do.

Problem with Education in Kurdistan

Each year thousands of students in Kurdistan graduate from high school without a solid educational foundation, especially in the areas of foreign languages and critical thinking. Who is responsible for this? Who is to blame?

Many people answer straightforwardly: "It's the students' fault." They argue that the abundance of modern technology and freedom have made the current generation of students unwilling to study hard in school. Others simply call the students lazy.

They do make a good point: modern technology and too much freedom have had a bad impact on young students. However, these Kurdish students are not the only young people in the world influenced by this; on the contrary, students in the developed world face this problem on a much larger scale. The logical deduction, according to this argument, must be that the students in the developed countries fare worse than the students of Kurdistan. Of course, that is not the case. This argument fails here.

The argument about laziness does not hold water either because Kurdistan has many outstanding, diligent students. Jeremiah Small, an American teacher in Kurdistan, has taught at the Classical School of the Medes in Sulaimany for over 4 years and sums up his experience with this: "I find Kurdish students highly capable and motivated given the right opportunity and encouragement."

I find it strange that while many Kurdish teachers accuse students of laziness this foreign teacher does not. What is the reason for this?

For the answer, we have to look at Jeremiah's last words in the quote above: "given the right opportunity and encouragement." Do students have "the right opportunity and encouragement" here in Kurdistan? I must sadly say, "No."

"What is the right opportunity then?" some parents might ask. "All this freedom and free education, is this not enough?" Again, I believe the answer is "No."

Changing the current education system is the only way to give the students better opportunities. I know that this sounds radical. Nevertheless, an education system that teaches critical thinking is far more efficient than the current education system which is preoccupied with memorization.

Memorizing information without actually understanding and thinking is simply not learning; for this reason, Europe and the US refrain from education systems that revolve around "blind" memorization.

Our current education system does not allow for much critical thinking; students, therefore, do not want to learn. Likewise, teachers tend to not provide adequate encouragement for their students, contributing to the students' lack of interest in school. As a result, the students enter college without any strength in critical thinking or foreign languages.

The question of blame for this problem is complicated and requires a considerable amount of further discussion. Nevertheless, as I pointed out earlier, "it is the system of education that is most responsible."

The Question of Architectural Heritage

"Preservation, Adaptive Re-Use, and Demolition in relation to the Market"

Richard Pilgrim
From Beirut, Lebanon

Buildings comprise a significant portion of the environments in which we live. Whether homes, schools, restaurants, libraries, mosques, churches, shops, or cafés – a considerable amount of our lives' activities take place *within* architecture.

Much more than mere physical structures, buildings are capable of carrying enormous amounts of meaning; we infuse them with memory, emotion, and significance. These qualities are as much a part of our architecture as the stone, cement, marble, wood, and steel that we use to build the physical dimensions of our buildings. However, they are often not as obvious; they can't be felt or seen hiding between the cracks in the ceiling.

When faced with the question of "old" buildings, we can take one of two sides. We can adopt the popular paradigm and view our buildings as mere physical objects that serve solely functional purposes. Thus, when buildings age and can no longer satisfy those purposes sufficiently, there is no more reason for them to exist – and to destroy and replace them is the logical and viable solution.

On the other hand, we can consider our buildings to be carriers of meaning and significance for the people who utilize them, and who have attached memories and emotions to the otherwise "meaningless" brick and stone. If we approach our "old" buildings with that mindset, it suddenly becomes important to find creative solutions to preserve those memories and meanings – and the destruction of such a building becomes synonymous with the destruction of its significance.

In Kurdistan, as is the case across the region, the market is perhaps the strongest force dictating the production and practice of architecture. Architectural heritage is disappearing rapidly as ambitious (and perhaps greedy) developers eagerly pursue the easiest way to make the most profit. It is almost always cheaper to demolish old buildings and replace them with new, often rather unimaginative, projects than to explore creative ways of preserving them – and this is precisely what happens. In the absence of enforced government regulations or capable organizations, the market rules the construction sector entirely uncensored and unhindered.

However, while the market is definitely a force to be reckoned with, it is not one that leaves us entirely powerless. It is a phenomenon and a process that can be understood, and thus creatively manipulated. Preservation and adaptive re-use are very real and viable alternatives to demolition. There are a myriad of ways in which traditional buildings can be re-designed in order to cater to the needs of the current market. Old hotels can be converted into student housing; cafés can be renovated and expanded; new life can be brought into old buildings in ways that both preserve the decades (or even centuries) worth of memory and meaning, and satisfy contemporary living standards.

Young people across the region are beginning to realize the importance of such an approach to heritage; and are advocating it fervently. While they are in favor of economic and cultural development, many are not willing to pay the price of losing their built history. Take for example the organization "Save Beirut Heritage" in Beirut, Lebanon. They have organized a number of large campaigns complete with concerts and demonstration marches in attempts to save important buildings around the city; and while such attempts are not always successful, they at least raise awareness and communicate to the market the increasing interest in the preservation of such buildings. Architectural schools as well are beginning to address the issue and are encouraging students to think about how to deal with architectural heritage in a way that is both considerate and realistic.

Photo by Richard Pilgrim

Save Beirut Heritage on one of its campaigns.

Creativity is the key. While realism is essential in architectural practice and education, it does not have to result in mindless compliance or a discouraged, fatalistic outlook. More than ever, there is an urgent need for students (architectural and other) in the region to engage the tension between the very real forces of the market and our hopes and convictions as people who value buildings as more than physical structures. There exists still a small window of opportunity for this generation to demonstrate to "the market gone wild" that there is cultural, personal, and even economic interest in preserving our most meaningful and historic buildings; to convince the developers and investors that demolition is not the only option; that our history is not for sale. And this opportunity must be seized.

Diet Coke: The Reality Behind the Lie

Calorie; that's one word we human beings absolutely hate. We hate it because we associate it with the word "fat." According to Dictionary.com, the word "fat" pertains to the richest or best part of something. It is also defined as a lipid or a group of organic compounds that make up necessary parts of the cell such as the plasma membrane. However, when we hear the word "fat," we don't think of the richest part of something or the plasma membranes of our cells… We think saggy legs, hanging bellies, and high cholesterol. It is because of the words "calorie" and "fat" that we find ourselves consistently watching what we eat, drinking "fat-free" milk, using maple syrup instead of sugar, and replacing our fat-invested kebab with vegetables. Funny how two words can alter the lives of human beings in such a big way, right?

While going back and forth from University and going out with friends and family, I have observed that most people in their mission to consume the least amount of calories and sabotage their fear of fat have replaced their favorite soda drink with its "light" or "diet" version. Diet coke, an arguably favorite amongst many, claims to provide the same satisfaction to its consumers as the normal Coca Cola does, but without all the calories. Incredible! We get the same sweet, caramel colored drink depraved of all the things that increase our jeans size. Is diet coke all that it is made out to be, or is it just a far-fetched dream? Is it a lie that sells, a lie that we want to believe? Well, I wasn't going to take anybody's word for it, so I set out on a quest to find out for myself.

Diet Coke consists of carbonated water, caramel color, aspartame (NutraSweet), phosphoric acid, potassium benzoate, natural flavors, citric acid, and caffeine. Let's start out by defining NutraSweet. NutraSweet is a chemical used in place of sugar; it isn't actually sweet, it just tricks your brain into thinking it tastes something sweet. In addition, when heated to a temperature of 86 degrees, NutraSweet breaks down into a chemical called fermaldehyde, which is the same chemical used to preserve dead animals. Yuck, I'm not too sure I want that running through my body. Raised to even higher temperatures, the NutraSweet in Diet Coke can cause methanol poisoning. But wait, it gets even more interesting. NutraSweet is a brain drug; it stimulates carbohydrate cravings in your brain. In fact, the average person who regularly drinks Diet Coke, and then quits, loses around fifteen pounds!

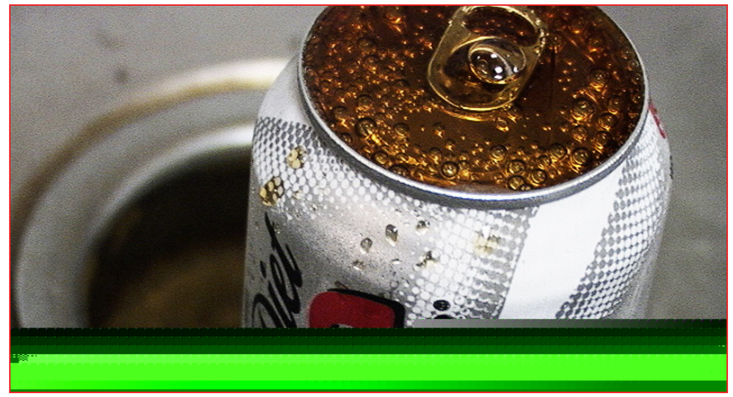

Photo courtesy of creativecommons.org

Even though Diet Coke doesn't technically contain any calories, it causes us to crave and take in more from elsewhere. Wow. If that's not a wakeup call, then I don't know what is.

The idea that we can drink something delicious without gaining weight is appealing to everybody; it is an idea that sells. But if we are not careful, it is also an idea that can be detrimental to our health. The words "fat" and "calorie" strike fear into the hearts of all humans alike, and because of those two words we often find ourselves chasing products like Diet Coke. Consuming too many calories may have its negative effects, but the fear of getting fat should not blind people to other things that cause them harm, such as the NutraSweet in Diet Coke.

Qandil Snowboarding

Jeremiah Small
From Washington, USA

For true?! Snowboarding in Iraq? It's a ridiculous idea really. And so I always thought – so my people back home thought too – Iraq is all hot and sand and stuff, isn't it?

Au contraire, mon frère! The mental image usually conjured of Iraq may be all that, but consider Kurdistan. Here is something like a different country all together. This is what I discovered after beating my way into the Qandil Mountains south of Rawanduz after the last snowfall.

I come from Northwest America where winter sports are all the rage – my years in Alaska had me playing in some of the best back country snowfields in the world. When I left the US to serve the Kurdish people, I figured all my winter hobbies would be sacrificed in the move; and apart from an occasional snowball fight, the last 5 years have been virtually free of any winter activity worth noting.

All that long, cold winter dreariness melted clean away a few weeks ago when I and several friends decided to try our luck and test Kurdistan's ability to precipitate and accumulate. I'd seen movies like *Jani Gel* and *Marooned in Iraq* where the actors trudge through knee-high snow to cross rough mountain passes and figured if they conquered the place in tragedy and later found the place for a movie, I could find and redeem a place for fun. (Actually, my faith that we would discover anything more than a few skiffs of white among a pile of board-and-ski-eating rocks was quite low.)

With low expectations and high hopes, we struck out, leaving Sulaimany before the sun stirred, met up with a few others and the gear we hoped to use in Shaqlawa, and, after tea and a carwash at Gali Ali Beg, arrived in Rawanduz around 10 in the morning. We were a sight for village eyes: 5 foreigners wandering our way off to we didn't know where. Honestly, we didn't know where. A topographical map, a hope for south-side-of-a-mountain snow drift, and wish to steer clear of mine fields were all we had.

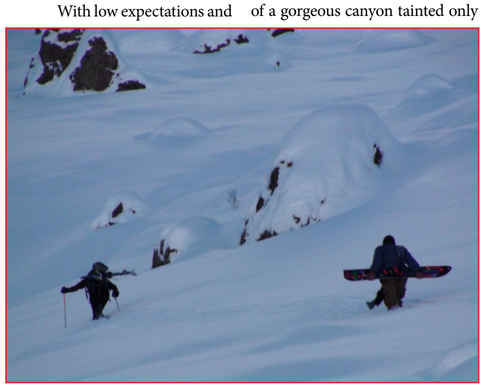

Photo by Andres

Hiking uphill through the snow.

Passing through Rawanduz, we caught sight of a little white and, having seen nothing else promising, decided we may as well enjoy the drive and pursue the end of the road. For a long while we followed the upper edge of a gorgeous canyon tainted only by the absurdity of a garbage truck emptying its tons of waste over the cliff-side into the river below. The preposterous affront to the beauty around us had to be mocked, so we paused our trip for a photo shoot and a few groans over the ruin and contempt of pristine majesty. But it's your land, right? So destroy it if you want to, I thought as we drove on.

Around a few more bends and we found we were shifting into four-wheel-drive and cutting a track through the first inches of a snow which would stop us entirely a couple kilometers on and force us to carry on by foot. Pulling the boots, boards, and skis from the car, we strapped everything to our backs and started the long march in search of a slope. An hour it took us slogging through the first 5 inches, then 8, then 10 in a winter playground of crystalline snow and rivulets of ice snaking over ragged escarpments. As we gaped in awe, we tried to imagine snowmobiles and ski-lifts dotting the hillsides. Would these be a kind of destruction too? I wondered.

We stopped for lunch – kebab and, well, just kebab – then the real work began. At the pass where our snow-covered road bent to wander its way down toward Qaladize, we turned to plow our way up toward a cliff face several hundred meters away and up. The weather was perfect and the sun-sharpened ridges contrasted against an azure sky seemed to burst in a spray of light clouds fanned out to the horizon. The view was breath-taking, but as minutes walking turned into hours hiking, inches of light snow into feet of thick powder, and a plodding traverse turned crawling scramble, I couldn't help but think that all the work was hardly going to pay in equal dividends. We'd spent an hour walking to the lunch stop, and it would be two hours before we reached the point we'd scoped out as a starting point for carving a line. Where was a helicopter when you needed one? I kept thinking, and nearly gave up the climb midway. Still stomping and cutting, stomping and cutting, we created a stairway through snow 5 feet deep. We finally met the top; shaking and sore, I strapped on my board and took a look around. Ridge strung out after ridge, each peaked with snow – these were the mountains that held so much pain and sorrow and turned it all to so much beauty and rugged salvation; this too was an allegory; here a story without words impressed itself on the soul. I tried to do what can't be done and pulled out my camera to capture the moment then turned to the steep in front of me. This was my early morning, my long hours in the car, my aching legs – I dove forward and 2 minutes later and half a kilometer away all the strain and hardship were washed out of mind as I replayed the S-curves and the snow-spray at the turns. A dream had just been realized; the mountains of Iraq were a play land; Kurdistan had winter sports – I had just proved it.