



KURDS' BEST FRIENDS

As a baby, Hana's family fled to the mountains of Kurdistan to escape a brutal regime. As an adult, she returned to create a safe haven for a threatened leopard. This is her stunning story

Ahmed and Nasrin march through a heavy snowstorm. Little Hana, just a few months old, is strapped around her dad's left shoulder. The right is reserved for the Kalashnikov. They need to move. Saddam Hussein's militias are chasing Peshmerga fighters like them, and the only safety is up, up in the mountains of Kurdistan, along the border with Iran. The snow falls so swiftly that their footprints disappear quickly in the metre-thick snowy carpet. Born in 1987, during one of the cruelest offensives against the Kurds, Hana's childhood (and thus, her perception of normality) were destined to be somewhat... out of the ordinary.

You were just a few months old when the above events unfolded. How many times have you heard this story?

So many I can visualise it as if it was yesterday. Unfortunately we don't have that snow anymore, the climate has really changed.

The snow? Climate change wasn't my first thought when I heard the story...

My parents were both Peshmerga fighters who had to escape to the mountains to survive Saddam's raids. My dad was there since 1981. My mother, an activist against the regime, joined him after they married in 1984. That was our "normality": war, being always on the move, ready to fight, the fear of the invisible chemical enemy.

Fortunately you were too little to remember.

Yes but the marks on my skin, and the stories, make it very real. My mum and I were most affected. My skin was burnt, I had blisters, and my mother was blinded for a while, her eyes

"HARDSHIP WAS THE NORM IN THE MOUNTAINS. I WAS A VERY QUIET BABY. AND MUM KNEW HOW TO USE A KALASHNIKOV"

← Persian leopard
Panthera pardus saxicolor.
Photo Vladimir Wrangel/
Shutterstock

← Hana Ahmad Raza

were injured. My father and sister – she was almost two at the time – were less affected, and they say it's because of their lighter complexion. Some respiratory problems were longer lasting however. Nothing serious though.

What was the story that impressed you the most from that first year of your life?

We had to change camp continuously, because the army was after us. Once, when I was seven months old, I was strapped to my dad's back and we were sitting on the back of a truck in the pouring rain at freezing temperatures. At one point the truck had to cross a stream, exceptionally strong because of the rains, and the force of the water carried away the car downstream. We stopped, eventually, against the riverbank. After these long moments of terror my dad had one thought – the baby strapped on his back. I was soaked in icy water, but had not emitted one sound, or moved.

You knew better than to cry?

It was just... different. Hardship was the norm. Mum was a tough one too. She was also trained to use a Kalashnikov.

And you?

Funny you should ask. No, after the first Iraq war (Desert Storm, which ended in February 1991) and the autonomy, Kurdistan was relatively peaceful. My family returned to our house in Sulaimani and I had a "normal" childhood ever since: high school, college, etc. But a few months ago I fired a few shots, just out of curiosity. These weapons have always been in the house. And still are.



But war came again in 2003.

I was in high school. There was the threat that Saddam would use chemical weapons on us Kurds again. Many left their homes for the mountains. My parents decided not to leave this time, and we stayed in town. I remember fear. The fear of chemical weapons. I remember people covering their windows with nylon, taping windows and doors to stop the “invisible enemy”.

That also passed, allowing you to concentrate on your career as a conservationist. Why did you choose biology?

I didn't really. Here the government does it for you, according to your grades. All families wanted their kids to be doctors or architects back then. I wanted to be an architect. But this was probably the best decision my government ever took. Whilst studying biology I fell in love with nature and conservation. I wanted to become a filmmaker, a documentarist. Then in 2009 I got my first job with Nature Iraq (BirdLife in Iraq) through a training course.

Tell us about your current assignment.

I am currently project manager for rehabilitating the habitat of the Persian leopard *Panthera pardus saxicolor*, through the creation of a transboundary peace-park across Kurdistan and Iran. We have not started yet, I am working to get full funding. It's a complex job. We have to determine the range of the leopard and its prey, then create a protected area and compile its management plan.

What's the population?

We don't really know. They are shy and elusive

↑ Kurdistan mountains.
Photo ExploreKurdistan.com



↑ Qara Dag, 2016,
camera-trapped
Persian leopard.
Photo Nature Iraq

**“WE HAVE A SAYING:
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animals. The *saxicolor* subspecies is classified as Endangered on the IUCN Red List. We know they were relatively common in the 50s. Then since the 70s they have been massacred by hunters and shepherds, their habitats destroyed. I have “camera trapped” two individuals since 2011. The last photo is from this year, in February. But we keep hearing reports of leopards being killed.

Is the area secure? What about ISIS?

Generally, Qara Dag is safe. Recently some locals have joined ISIS, which is now present with some undercover small cells. Security forces have advised me not to go in the area after four people were killed. But they assured me all will be over by September. These are just few individuals, ISIS troops are kept in check at the border by Peshmerga. Plus, I really don't want to scare donors away, so the project continues.

But didn't ISIS enter Kurdistan?

Yes – they almost reached our capital, Erbil. But they were taken out. Honestly, that is not the Kurds' main thought at the moment – recession is. Salaries are not being paid for three or five months now, as government money is going into fighting ISIS. People are starving here.

So you feel safe?

It is more dangerous to go to the Iranian border.

Why?

It's just normal. We go in the field with camouflage clothes, and cameras and binoculars. If they spot you they arrest you. It has happened recently to some American tourists.



Okay, time for the obvious question: after your 'adventurous' childhood you decided to go back in the mountains, although as a biologist and not a Peshmerga. Have you thought about it, being 'drawn back' up there?

We have a saying: "The Kurds have no friends but the mountains". We have survived, and won many fights against all regimes that come to conquer our land, because of the mountains. Every Kurd loves the mountains. Plus, clearly I feel emotionally close to them because of my background. The stories I heard from my parents, my mum. And when I am up there, I am at peace, forgetful of all conflicts.

Romantic.

I hate cheesy, I swear. But these places affect me, deeply, I don't know what it is... the beauty? The diversity? It makes me want to protect it. People here just don't care, they trash places, kill the animals. I feel this is on my shoulders.

Do you think of your parents during the war?

When I am not stuck with office work (that I hate) I do camp there for a few days. But the sky is not the same. I remember as a child during power outages we would go sleep on rooftops. I remember staring at the clear sky. Climate change and dust storms are affecting us, so our sky is not as clear as it used to be. The large deserts of Iraq in the south are affecting our climate, leading to desertification, especially after Saddam's regime dried the Mesopotamian Marshes [see page 16], turning them into a desert. Nature Iraq was born to fix that. And after 2003, troops crossing and manouvering in the desert caused dust storms.

↑ Hana working in the field.
Photo Nature Iraq



↑ Hana's family, 1988

"CARING ABOUT NATURE IS CARING ABOUT PEOPLE. WE HAVE A LOT MORE THAN OIL HERE. WE HAVE AMAZING NATURE"

Let me provoke you: with all the problems the Kurds have, why conservation? Do you not care about people?

Caring about nature *is* caring about people. What I do for leopards is not just for the species, but for the local communities where these animals live too. Thriving nature means securing food and water. Healthy nature *is* security. I send my message through protecting animals because I love animals. I love leopards, they're fascinating and beautiful. Bring them back and you bring prosperity. Protected area management that includes local communities and stakeholders generates long-lasting sustainable wealth. We could generate more money than the oil we depend on right now. What happens when the oil runs out? We will starve, and anyway we are starving already. Our deep recession is not caused by ISIS, but by the lack of management of our resources. We must work with government to create protected areas, tourism, preserve our natural resources and by doing so, create income. We have amazing landscapes, but eco-tourism is virtually unknown.

Any reasons for optimism?

Yes! Sightings are increasing and life is coming back in the mountains. Why? Because conservation works! We are working actively with the forestry police, now they are more serious and interested. Back then, they didn't really care. Nowadays they are a lot more effective. They want to actually implement the laws, they confiscate and chase illegal hunters regularly, almost daily now. Every time I go to the field I take one of them with me. I train them, on how to use camera traps and they are getting into it.

Will your project work? This is a border wet with human blood. Will you be able to convince Iranians and Iraqis to cooperate to make sure wildlife can cross it?

Why not? We have a strong local partner, the Kurdistan Botanical Foundation, with very strong knowledge on habitats. In Iran we partner with the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation who has a very good relationship with the Iranian government, which has actively promoted such kind of cooperation with neighbouring countries. We are not addressing the issue of "land ownership", we are simply establishing a wildlife corridor in an area where there is no fighting at the moment (landmines might be a problem, however). The PWHF has already trained our staff and our veterinarians in previous projects and we have a strong, warm relationship with them. Conservation brings people together, we are not the first. We can do it. Now we just need the funding. ■

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