The Levantine–Kurdish Synthesis: How Syrian Refugees Revolutionized The Kurdish Restaurant Scene

By Sherwan Hindreen

Was there anything positive to come out of the Syrian crisis? When thinking of the Syrian Civil War, we are generally reminded of the hundreds of thousands who have died and of the millions that are either displaced or have fled. Naturally, it is hard to think of anything positive or fruitful arising from this calamity. Yet, in the mountain town of Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan, Syrian refugees have alleviated a little of the economic stagnation by bringing with them their regionally famous, unique, and delicious cuisine.

Whatever coverage the Syrian refugee crisis receives from the American media, it usually focuses on Russian-American relations or the refugees crossing into Europe. Consequently, it is easy to forget that the places that have borne most of fallout of the conflict are Syria’s neighbors. Even among those, the attention of the international community is distributed unequally. Iraq, and especially Kurdistan, a country marred by its own war, is perhaps the most ignored.

Kurdistan has been a haven for refugees since the mid 2000s, when tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees escaping sectarian violence in Arab Iraq poured into the mountainous northern region. As the Syrian war unfolded, the number jumped to hundreds of thousands. The rise and expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the subsequent civil war further contributed to the increase in refugees. The pressure these refugees put on the Kurdish government became tangible when the 2014 crash in oil prices ignited a financial crisis in oil-dependent Iraq, and by extension Kurdistan. The budget collapse meant that the government no longer or only sporadically paid civil servants and since the government provides employment to most of the population, the majority of the Kurdish people were now forced make do without a regular income. Unemployment among the youth skyrocketed, and the military engagements with IS weigh heavily on both the Kurdish government and on the people.

In spite of all of this, the general Kurdish attitude towards Syrian refugees has been that of welcome. Of course, it helps that the refugees are overwhelmingly Syrian Kurds. Also, the memory of the 1991 Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein’s regime, in which most of the population of Kurdistan ended up as refugees on the Turkish mountains until an American intervention allowed them to return home, is still fresh in people’s minds. This has helped cultivate compassion for the plight of the Syrians. It also helped that many Syrians have pull their weight by contributing to and developing the Kurdish restaurant scene.

Kurdistan is a mountainous and harsh land. Life has always been rough, and it wasn’t until a few decades ago that the majority of the population became urban. Naturally, the food has always been much simpler and bland compared to the cuisine of the Kurds’ neighbors, whether they were Arabs, Persians, Turks or Armenians. This perhaps explains the rapid rise in the popularity of Syrian foods. Though Iraqi Arabs were familiar with some Syrian dishes known as ‘Levantine starters’, among Iraqi Kurds, Syrian cooking was largely unknown. Famous Syrian dishes like Fetteh, Hummus, Fattoush, Broasted, and Muhammara were unfamiliar and new to Iraqi Kurds. The first Syrian dishes to appear in Kurdistan were street food items like Falafel and Shawarma. Kurdish versions of these dishes existed for a long time, but none could hold a candle to the Syrian originals, and soon the latter took over the street food scene.
One of these Syrian fast food restaurants is Sham, which is the Syrian colloquial name for Damascus, where the owner is from. The restaurant is small, but it has a large base of customers that is made up predominately of local Kurds, but also resident Iraqi Arabs and migrant Syrians. They sell Middle Eastern fast foods like Falafel, Shish Taouk, and Shawarma, and also western ones like Hamburgers. Their most famous item however is Sujuk, a sandwich brought to Kurdistan for the first time by Syrians. Sham’s staff includes Syrians from Aleppo, Qamishli, Homs, and Idlib, among other cities from all over Syria. They also belong to various ethnic and religious communities of Syria, including Arabs, Kurds, Turkomen, and Syriac Christians. When I asked their main chef about the most interesting difference between his Kurdish and Syrian customers, he said: “Onions. People here love onions in everything!”
As the violence in Syria encroached on major urban centers like Aleppo, Syrian restaurateurs escaping the conflict arrived in Kurdistan to reopen their businesses in a safer environment. Kurds have been eating dishes like Kebab and Kibbeh for centuries, but they never made them with ingredients like lemon juice, sumac, yogurt, and pomegranate sauce. Finally, there are the sweets. The Kurdish bazaar now offers delicious new sweets like Syrian Baklava, Basbousa, Kunafeh, Ma’amoul, and Qata’ef. By around 2015, local Kurdish food businesses realized that to compete with the new arrivals they would have to join them. Today, all successful restaurants are staffed with Syrian cooks and waiters. The former ensure that the dishes are properly made and the latter are hired for their experience in Syria. After all, Syrian Kurds used to be the backbone of a flourishing hospitality industry in Damascus.

It is yet unknown when the Syrian crisis will end, or when the millions of refugees will see their abandoned homes again, if ever. But in Kurdistan, some Syrians found repose from the horror that forced them to flee their land in the compassion of the locals, and they managed to build meaningful lives in a country no less turbulent from their own. No one in Kurdistan is worried about the ‘flood’ of Syrian refugees. What they are worried about is which Syrian restaurant to go to for lunch.

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