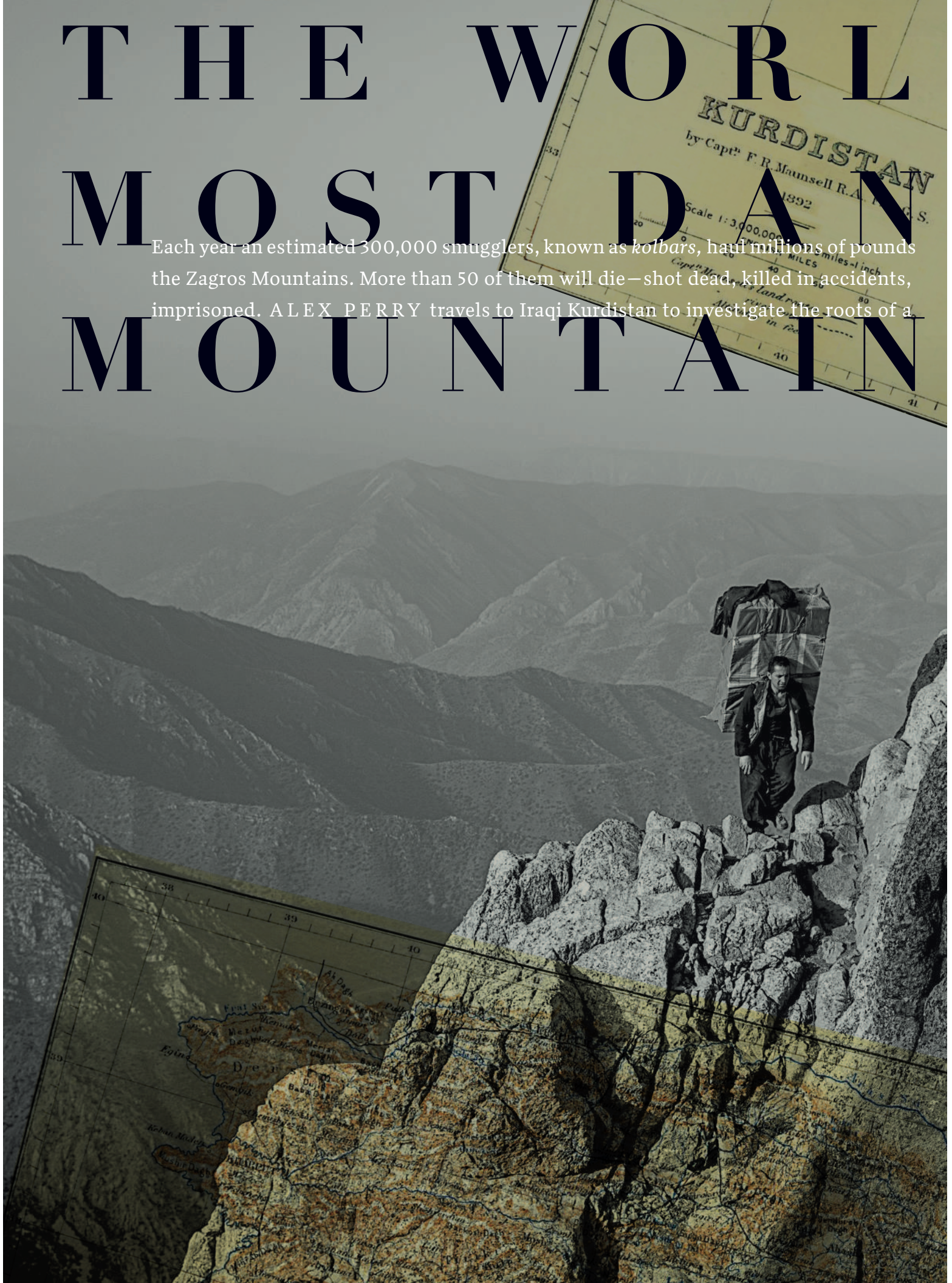


# THE WORLD MOST DANGEROUS MOUNTAIN

Each year an estimated 300,000 smugglers, known as *kolbars*, haul millions of pounds the Zagros Mountains. More than 50 of them will die—shot dead, killed in accidents, imprisoned. ALEX PERRY travels to Iraqi Kurdistan to investigate the roots of a





# D'S

# GEROUS

of contraband from Iraq to Iran over the 14,000-foot peaks of  
or freezing to death—and countless more will be arrested and  
trade that all but defies comprehension.

Significations

Chai	Defile	Kempri	Bridge
Dagh	Stream	Kilisa	Church
Dağ	Mountain	Kish	Mountain
Gent	Valley	Ova	Open Plain
Kent	Castle	Pinar	Spring
Koni	Village	Rud	River
		Su	Mill
		Tura	Mountain

A Kurdish kolbar  
carrying goods along  
the Iran-Iraq border



## PART ONE

HEADING EAST ACROSS Iraqi Kurdistan toward the Zagros Mountains and the border with Iran, we pass from a land of sand and dust into the green prairies of Mesopotamia. For an hour, we cross fields of barley and watermelons, and orchards of figs and pomegranates. Reaching the foothills, we follow a tumbling cloud of swifts, like a hundred tiny crossbows, into a canyon that plunges to the heart of the massif. After a while, the gorge arrives at a natural rock amphitheater enclosing the small frontier town of Tawella. And there, saddling his mules in front of a warehouse just off the bazaar, I find an old highlander in a jacket, cummerbund, baggy trousers, dress shirt, and dress shoes who agrees to tell me about the smuggling.

The boxes his four grown sons are humping from the warehouse are 70-pound air conditioners, the man says. They're wrapping them in gray and orange plastic sacks to keep out the rain and dust, then strapping them four at a time to the mules. Once the animals are loaded, his boys will lead them up a zigzag out of Tawella's ravine. Avoiding border patrols and 40-year-old mines left over from the Iran-Iraq War, they will slip through terraces of walnuts and almonds, then copses of wild oaks and pistachios. Above that will come crevices and caves where Neolithic families once lived, now home to bears, eagles, wolves, and leopards. Above the tree line, the men will risk open ground—first thistly yellow-grass hillside, then shale, then scree. After several hours and 2,000 feet of climbing, they'll reach a patch of bare earth beneath the snowy peaks that the map on their phones will identify as the point where Iraq meets Iran. This is the *bargah*, where Iraqi Kurds hand off their sacks to Iranian Kurds known as *kolbars*, after the Kurdish for "back" (*kol*) and "load" (*bar*). Evading their own patrols and mines, the *kolbars* will lug the loads five hours down their side of the mountain to the town of Nowsud. There they will stack them onto trucks, to be driven through the night to Tehran, arriving in time for the morning market.

The smuggling has its roots in the clumsiness of rulers who for hundreds of years have taken the thousand-mile Zagros range as the boundary between Arabia and Persia but ignored how Kurds live on both sides. Petty

smuggling between cousins has existed here forever. But trade soared after 1991, when the U.S., the UK, and France created a no-fly zone to the west of the mountains to protect Iraqi Kurds from gas attacks by Saddam Hussein. The new area became Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous enclave of five million that today is stable, open for trade, and tolerant of alcohol and sexual freedom. That liberation contrasts with the restricted lives of 84 million Iranians to the east—including eight million Iranian Kurds—who are cut off from the world by international sanctions and Iran's own prohibitive taxes and inhibited by strict laws against alcohol and sex. The chief effect of this juxtaposition, the old man says, has been to ensure that "the Iranians want everything" that the Iraqi Kurds have.

So it seems. Walking around Tawella, I find hundreds of houses built to the same unique design: comfortable villas with balconies and roof gardens on the first floor, overlooking cavernous warehouses at street level. Inside the stockrooms, I spy more air conditioners, plus towering stacks of washing machines, televisions, refrigerators, boxes of tea, cigarettes, pet food, beer, whisky, and lingerie—the secret shopping list of an entire nation. The old man says that on busy days the line of men and mules snaking up the hills can be a mile long. On the Iranian side, where discrimination against Kurds leaves them few alternatives to *kolbar* work, it can be several miles long.

And that's just Tawella. Along the Zagros

lie hundreds of villages and towns devoted to high-altitude smuggling. The Kurdistan Human Rights Network estimates that around 300,000 smugglers per year are humping appliances and contraband over these 14,000-foot peaks, mostly for about \$15 per load, or \$20 to \$25 for Iranian *kolbars* desperate enough to cross the border and make the entire journey themselves. The Iranian parliament puts the value of all that trafficking at \$25 billion, roughly the same as Iraqi Kurdistan's GDP, or the annual trade passing through the Port of Seattle. Later, looking at satellite images of wide, dusty mountain paths, I realize that this is smuggling you can see from space.

The scale of the business ensures its terrible human cost. Iraq's police largely tolerate it, apparently appreciative of the legal precision of Iraqi Kurds who, since most never set foot in Iran, are not technically breaking the law. It's a different story in Iran. Last year its border guards shot dead 43 *kolbars* and injured 151, while arresting untold numbers. (Iran does not publish statistics on *kolbar* detentions, but the frequency with which *kolbars* report them suggests thousands each year.) Those figures were down from 55 and 142, respectively, in 2019, and 71 and 160 in 2018. The violence provides more evidence of Iran's anti-Kurdish racism. It also has a lethal secondary effect: persuading *kolbars* trying to dodge patrols to set out in poor weather or on dangerous routes, leading to dozens more deaths and hundreds more injuries as they fall from steep paths or drown



under loads or step on land mines or perish in snowstorms, such as the five young Kurdish Iranians buried by an avalanche this past January.

To Western ears, a town where old men dress up to go smuggling, in a mountain range called the Zagros, in an imaginary country called Kurdistan, which historians say doubles as an approximation for Eden, can all sound a little unreal. To place this phenomenon in more familiar context, then: several times more people die in the Zagros in a typical year than are killed on all 14 eight-thousand-meter peaks in the Himalayas and Karakoram combined.

The difference between dying in the mountains for glory and dying there for twenty bucks a day should give any climber pause. Just as arresting: the realization that the deathly legends on which the reputations of a K2, a Denali, or an Eiger are built are nothing next to a single season in the Zagros. Half the elevation of the Himalayas, all but unknown to the outside world, almost never summited, these are by far the deadliest mountains on earth.

I INITIALLY HEARD about the Zagros from a Kurdish sniper called Azad Cudi. Azad was telling me about how, 9,000 years ago, the Kurds were the original civilization, the first people to free themselves from the need to hunt and gather through the invention of

## THE IRANIAN PARLIAMENT PUTS THE VALUE OF THE *KOLBAR* TRAFFICKING AT \$25 BILLION, ROUGHLY THE SAME AS IRAQI KURDISTAN'S GDP, OR THE ANNUAL TRADE PASSING THROUGH THE PORT OF SEATTLE.

farming. Those settlements were what the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran called Eden—and anthropologists dubbed the Fertile Crescent—and in time they became the fountainhead of all the language, commerce, art, and science to come. But being first made the Kurds a target for every ambitious successor. Five millennia of conquest and betrayal, by invaders both nearby and from as far away as Europe and Asia, has left the world's estimated 45 million Kurds with just the notion of a nation, divided in cartographic reality between Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Only Iraqi Kurdistan recognizes Kurds as a distinct people, with their own culture and destiny.

All through their persecution, the Kurds have sought sanctuary in the Zagros. Their

bitter motto—"No friends but the mountains"—captures how the valleys became the cradle of Kurdish liberty, and the unchanging rock faces a symbol of their endurance. In those soaring peaks, Azad told me, the Kurds saw all their dreams. "The influence of the mountains," he said, "their heights, the way they *stand*. You get inspired."

Azad, a *nom de guerre* meaning "free" or "freedom," was speaking from experience. Born in Sardasht, an Iranian border town 130 miles north of Tawella, he was conscripted into the Iranian army in 2002, when he was 18. Deployed to a mountain patrol, he was ordered to open fire on a group of PKK guerrillas—Kurdish rebel fighters. Azad refused, deserted, and became an underground activist. When the authorities started looking for him in 2004, he paid a human trafficker to take him to Britain, where he made a new life as a student and a delivery driver in the northern English city of Leeds.

But in 2012, Azad was drawn back to the Middle East by the promise of Rojava, a second enclave that the Kurds were building out amid the Syrian civil war, using ancestral land abandoned by the Assad regime in the country's north. The Kurds' history had taught them that warmongering often went hand in hand with racism, misogyny, and tyranny. Accordingly, they conceived Rojava as explicitly democratic and egalitarian, multiethnic, feminist, and, for good measure, green.

Such progressiveness was anathema to



many of their neighbors, however, and one in particular. When ISIS invaded in 2013, Azad swapped his role as a civil administrator for one as a sharpshooter. His book *Long Shot* focuses on a five-month house-by-house battle in the town of Kobani on the Turkish border in 2014–15, during which he was one of five snipers—three men and two women—who killed nearly 2,000 jihadists. His was the decisive unit in the decisive fight that saved Rojava and turned the tide on what until then had been an unstoppable Islamist advance.

Azad needed help writing *Long Shot*, and for a year I took notes, listened, and asked questions as he relived his memories and paced my study in southern England, until finally I was able to think and write in his

## TO PLACE THIS PHENOMENON IN CONTEXT: SEVERAL TIMES MORE PEOPLE DIE IN THE ZAGROS IN A TYPICAL YEAR THAN ARE KILLED ON ALL 14 EIGHT-THOUSAND-METER PEAKS IN THE HIMALAYAS AND KARAKORAM COMBINED.

voice. I had covered three dozen conflicts, including Iraq, and war was one of the ways we understood each other. Another was mountains. We were both raised to hill walk and had both returned to hiking as adults as a way to cool our minds. I think we looked at mountains the same way: great monuments to steadfastness, existing in deep time, indifferent to our presence; but also agents of our liberty, stimulators of free and high thought, and grand stages on which to interrogate the self. It made sense to me that, after we finished his book, Azad moved not to flat Rojava but to Scotland. Though I too moved onto other places and stories, for months I carried with me Azad's description of escaping Iran on a moonless night, his horse's shoes sending sparks into the abyss as they struck flint on a smuggler's path.

YEARS LATER, when I come across reports about the *kolbars*, I remember Azad's words. Soon I am talking to Hawre, an Iraqi Kurdish journalist in the city of Sulaymaniyah, about walking these ancient paths. (To prevent repercussions, numerous people in this story are identified by first names only.) The idea, I say, would be to tell the story of a

hill people through their highlands, and try to understand what it does to a mountain folk when they start dying in such numbers in those mountains. Several weeks and half a dozen COVID tests later, Hawre and I are in Tawella, digesting our chat with the old smuggler over a glass of tea, when on a hillside above the rooftops we spot a column of men hurrying down through the terraces on a track coming from Iran.

Hawre and I scramble up the trail to position ourselves to intercept the *kolbars* as they start their return trek. Our plan nearly works. A line of 20 *kolbars* soon arrive carrying rectangular loads towering several feet over their heads. They are from Sanandaj, a city a few hours' drive into Iran. Their loads are a combination of machine parts, tea, cigarettes, and textiles, and weigh around 90 pounds each. Not such a bad load, they say. Sometimes they can be twice that.

Just as I am taking in their equipment—harnesses made from bungee cords, ropes, and woven straps, plus headbands, sweatshirts, baggy trousers, and worn sneakers—two Iraqi border guards appear and shoo us all back to Tawella with their Kalashnikovs, warning that we are in range of an Iranian patrol a few hundred yards away. Back in the bazaar, the *kolbars* have time to kill before they set out for Iran again, and they want to talk. Zana

is a 20-year-old college dropout who began working as a *kolbar* two years ago. When I ask him what it's like up in the hills, he pulls out a phone. The *kolbars*, it turns out, have an Instagram page, @kolbari4000, with 35,000 followers. Zana scrolls through pictures of young and middle-aged men huddling around fires below the peaks at dawn, or carrying impossible loads up rock crevasses, or trudging in lines stretching for miles up a mountain pass. "This is no life," sighs Hissam, 20, looking on. Hissam has been a *kolbar* since he was ten. He says that the violence dealt out by Iran's border guards cost him his Muslim faith.

Most of the *kolbars* are wearing earbuds, and many look a little zoned out. When I ask Zana about the physical toll exacted by *kolbar* work, he says that he and his friends habitually rub anesthetic on their joints and muscles, and some use amphetamines and painkillers. Injuries and drugs might explain the behavior of Amanj, 47, who lumbers up, sweating and breathing hard, then drops his pants and tells me to inspect his scarred shins, which he says are held together by plates and screws. I oblige, after which Amanj pulls his pants up, raises a finger in

the air, and gives a brief, staccato speech. "I have been working as a *kolbar* for 30 years!" he exclaims. "Nothing has changed! I have a family of six. I am in debt! We have been living in despair all this time!" Amanj careers off, then remembers something and wheels back around. "Ten people have died in front of me, I swear to God!" he shouts. "Azim was 30 years old! The soldiers took our loads, and Azim refused to give them his! So they shot him in front of me! In Newsud! At eight o'clock in the morning!"

Zana wants me to see a different set of pictures. Here are *kolbars* with shotgun wounds in their stomachs and thighs. Here is a video of an Iranian patrol kicking a *kolbar* unconscious. Here, a picture of a *kolbar* who has been shot dead. Here, one I have seen before: a man hugging the ghostly body of a teenage *kolbar* who has frozen to death in the mountains. Zana stares hard at the picture, then shuts down his phone. One day soon, he's going to walk clean over one of these passes and just keep going, he says, maybe even become a *peshmerga*—a Kurdish mountain fighter.

But not today. Amanj has returned to announce that the coast is clear and it's time to go. As the *kolbars* lift their giant loads, Amanj instructs me: "Show our despair to the world!" He trots up the hill at impossible speed, turns just before he disappears around a corner, and throws his arms wide. "To the world!" he shouts. "To the world!" And he is gone.

THE ENCOUNTER with the *kolbars* has disturbed Hawre. He often writes about the Kurds' plight, but rarely sees such desperation up close. At one point, a young *kolbar* with faraway eyes began tugging at his sleeve. "Uncle, could I ever learn how to read or write?" the boy asked. "Uncle, do you think I can go back to school?" Zana explained that this was Amanj's son. He was once the brightest among them, Zana said, but after he became a *kolbar*, his mind just seemed to slip. Hawre says he gave the boy the equivalent of five dollars. "I mean, really nothing," he says. "Did you see how his face lit up?" Hawre shakes his head.

I realize that for Hawre, and probably for all Kurds, the *kolbars* raise an existential question. If your only friends are the mountains, what happens when they forsake you?

## PART TWO

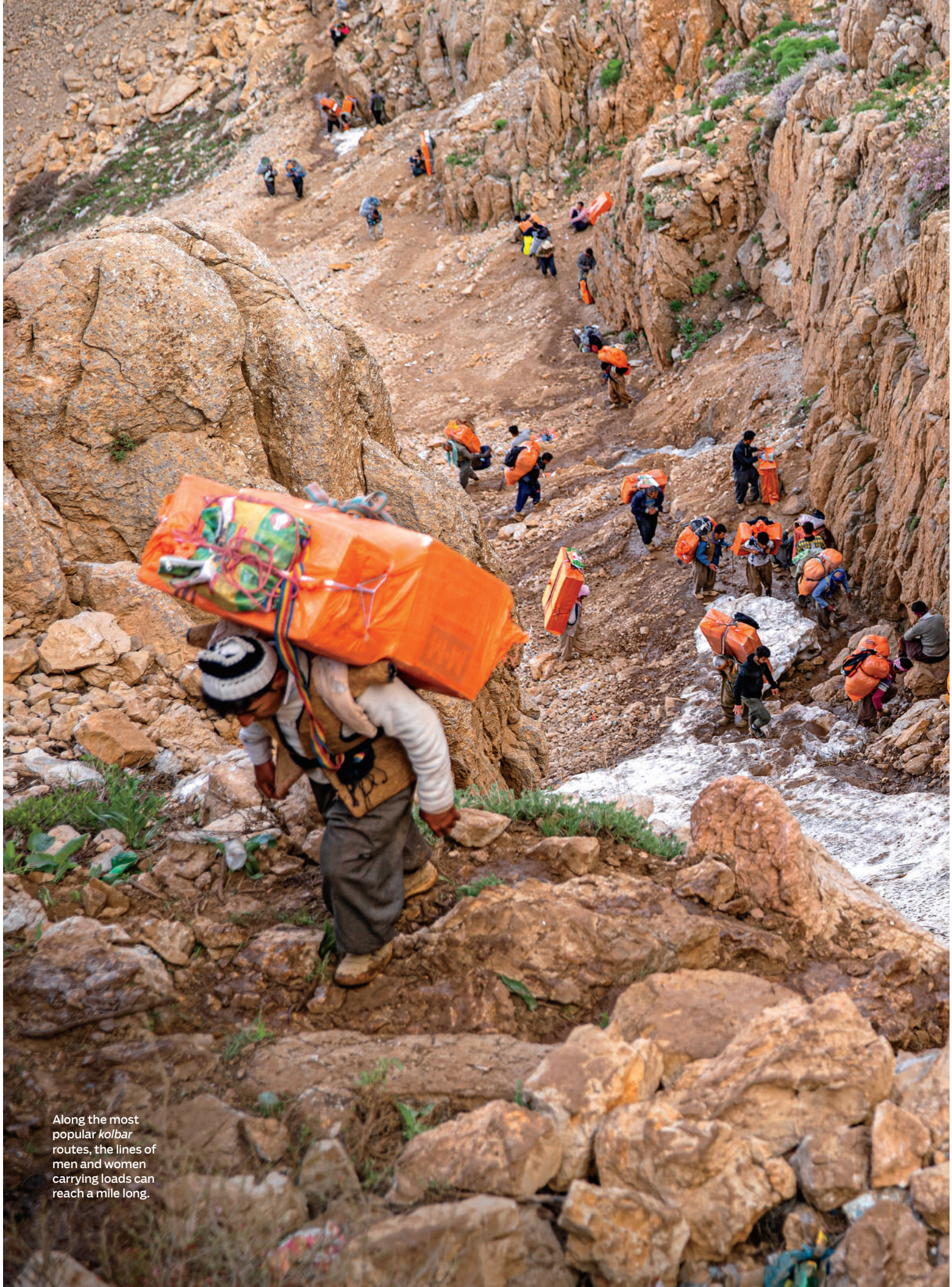
THE NEXT DAY, Hawre and I drive north up the Zagros escarpment. Every few hundred yards, a track splits off from the road and heads up the steep hillside toward Iran.





An elder  
*kolbar* rests  
outside  
Mariwan.





Along the most popular *kolbar* routes, the lines of men and women carrying loads can reach a mile long.







Before long a towering peak comes into view. This is Tateh, a 9,000-foot summit whose broad shoulders and languid arms trace a 15-mile embrace. Running off the ridgeline are a dozen valleys and ravines, many studded with lesser peaks. On the mountain, your view would be confined to whichever gully you had picked, making the terrain impossible even for a hundred patrolmen to control. It is this feature which makes Tateh one of the busiest smuggling routes in all the Zagros.

This much I know from a handful of interviews with Iranian *kolbars* before I traveled to Kurdistan. All were from Mariwan, a town on the other side of Tateh, and each of their accounts was a perfect miniature of

ZANA WANTS ME TO SEE  
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KOLBARS WITH SHOTGUN  
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HERE, A PICTURE OF A  
KOLBAR WHO HAS BEEN  
SHOT DEAD.

suffering. Fereshteh, 65, worked as a *kolbar* for six years after her *peshmerga* husband was shot dead. She used to take her son and daughter with her, but a back injury a few years ago left her unable to work and dependent on neighbors and relatives. Hanar, 82, became a *kolbar* at 66 after her husband died, leaving her with five children. Before old age forced her to stop, she was detained twice and once was nearly washed away by a river. Reza, 35, a father of three, was bringing in pounds of frozen chicken livers one night when a companion stepped on a land mine. The man was killed, a second man lost an ear and an eye, and Reza took three pieces of shrapnel in his right leg, after which he was arrested and jailed for six months. Reza's neighbor was Kawa, 29, a champion middle-distance runner who alternated *kolbar* trips with training. Something about an athlete working as a *kolbar* struck me as especially poignant, and when I asked to hear more, Kawa offered to walk over the mountains to meet me. But he wanted to be sure of picking the right time and route, since he had already

been caught and beaten several times, had seen two friends shot dead, and knew several *kolbars* who could no longer walk, a fate which held a special terror for an athlete. Sherko, 30, a few streets away, lost the lower part of his leg after he was shot by an Iranian patrol. "I used to live in nature, on the tops of mountains," Sherko said. "Now the house is a cell that takes all the joy from life."

Most *kolbars* limited themselves to three or four trips per week. Pay was according to weight of load and distance carried, though the money rarely seemed to top \$25 a trip. On both sides of the border, demand for porters, mules, and *kolbars* was such that age, gender, or disability was no bar to finding work. In my research, I had come across several

photographs of men and women well into their seventies, dwarfed by their loads, trudging through snow. A video I found showed a *kolbar* still working the trails after both of his legs were blown off by a land mine, shuffling over the mountains on his hands and rump. All you had to do to become a trafficker, it seemed, was call one of the many cell numbers circulating in places like Mariwan and Tawella.

The existence of those numbers implies a level of organization, however. So does the volume of trucks and ancient pickups piled high with contraband that Hawre and I are encountering on the roads around Tawella. When we ask around in the tea shops and bazaars, we hear about a variety of bosses:

local entrepreneurs, transport companies, otherwise legitimate import-export operations, politicians' sons. On the Iranian side, a connection to the regime seems crucial. A common complaint concerns Iranian army officers who run their own smuggling rings and are suspected of shooting *kolbars* working for rival outfits—to eliminate the competition, and to drive up the price for their own services. Why the violence, people ask, when there is more than enough business to go around?

WHAT REALLY ANIMATES many of those we meet is the photograph of the frozen boy that Zana showed me. Like Zana, several have it stored on their phones. I first came across it next to articles in the Kurdish press explaining how Farhad Khosravi, 17, and his brother Azad, 21, set out on an overnight *kolbar* trip over Tateh from the village of Ney, outside Mariwan, on December 16, 2019. I track down their companion, Zanyar Kawe, who was 18 at the time and says that even though the mountains were cov-

ered in thick snow and the temperature was well below freezing, it should have been an easy walk. *Kolbars* routinely made the trip over Tateh in winter in nothing more than a hat, a coat, and a scarf, Zanyar said. Besides, the night was so cloudless, "you could have counted the stars."

Initially, the trek went well. Setting out at 1 A.M., Zanyar, Farhad, and Azad made the pass at around 3 A.M. By 4 A.M., they had picked up loads of 90 pounds each and started back. But after taking a break at a cave, Zanyar said, "all of a sudden a snowstorm began. Heavy wind—so strong we could not see in front of us." Azad began feeling unwell. This was a reversal—Azad was a man, while his two companions were barely more than boys—and when the younger pair asked their older companion what was wrong, he would shrug it off, pick up his load, and walk on. But soon he would stop again, and though the precise reason was unclear—"I don't know what has happened to me," Azad kept saying—to Zanyar, it was clear that he was "losing it."

By the time the trio reached the pass for the second time, Farhad and Zanyar were helping Azad carry his pack. When that became impossible, they ditched their loads and tried shouldering his arms. By then, however, Azad was falling every few steps. Picking him up one time, Zanyar noticed that his friend's hands were stiff and that his nose and the left side of his face were black. Whatever else ailed him, with only the thinnest protection in a blizzard above 8,000 feet, Azad was now freezing alive.

Finally, Azad said he couldn't go any farther. The others tried to drag him, without success. As Azad lay on the open ground in the snowstorm, Zanyar and Farhad covered his hands with their jackets, swept the snow from his hair, and wound their scarves around his head. Then Zanyar confronted Farhad. They had to save themselves, he shouted above the storm. Once they were off the mountain, they could send a mule train back for Azad. Farhad shook his head. He was Azad's brother. "I won't leave him, Zanyar!" he shouted. The two boys looked at each other, cried briefly, and then Zanyar set off with Azad's phone, to use once he got a signal. His last sight of the two brothers was of Farhad kneeling next to Azad's motionless body and rubbing it.

Zanyar descended. After a while, the phone rang in his pocket. It was the load's owner, wanting to know where they were. Zanyar described the brothers' condition and location. The man said he would dispatch a search party and instructed Zanyar to continue down. Within half an hour, Zanyar was stripping in the cab of a pickup and





*Kolbar* loads sometimes exceed 100 pounds; above, a meeting point outside Mariwan, where loads get transferred to vehicles





warming himself on the heater. Around him, dozens of Ney men were setting off back up the mountain. They soon found Azad, “heart still beating, but half dead,” Zanyar said. “He passed away on the way.” The rescuers also discovered two other *kolbars* suffering from frostbite, who they carried down, plus three frozen mules, which they left.

There was no sign of Farhad, however. The search parties looked for three days. Finally, a neighbor came across the 17-year-old’s body on the doorstep of a hut at the foot of a mountain several miles away. Blood and broken glass around him suggested that Farhad had fought through the blizzard, only to be defeated by a locked door. Cutting himself when he smashed a window in an attempt to enter, he had collapsed. The picture I had seen was taken minutes after he was found, and showed a friend cradling his iced-over body in the back of an ambulance. Later a doctor would estimate that it had taken Farhad two days to bleed out and freeze to death.

FOR MANY IRANIAN Kurds, *kolbar* work was a source of shame, an admission of their lowly status. But something about the photo, the brothers’ young age—for days, Farhad was widely misreported as 14—and the way they were forced to earn a living transformed their deaths into an explosive shorthand for the Iranian state’s mistreatment of the Kurds. Thousands attended the brothers’ funeral in Ney. Tens of thousands marched through other Kurdish cities, holding up loaves of bread as a symbol of what the brothers had been trying to provide for their families. “Death to the dictators!” they shouted.

The *kolbar* protests were a spontaneous expression of anger. But since they followed weeks of more general anti-government demonstrations, during which the authorities shot dead an estimated 1,500 people, they also showed that the Kurds, at least, were unbowed. Much of that had to do with the connection to the mountains, says Adnan Hassanpour, a chain-smoking, rake-

thin Kurdish activist from Mariwan who Hawre and I meet in a café in Sulaymaniyah. “To a Kurd, when you mention the word *mountain*, it has a very intense symbolic and political identity,” Adnan says. “What comes to mind is fighting back. Resistance.”

Adnan reminds me of something Azad, the sniper, had said—that at heart, the fight for Rojava was a contest of wills. In *Long Shot*, Azad describes how the world re-treated before ISIS, because “it largely accepted the Islamists’ central contention: that no force on earth could match their vengeful, suicidal pathology.” No one except the Kurds. Two thousand homegrown militia fighters in Kobani, Syria, should have been a speed bump to 12,000 jihadists. But if the Islamists’ resolve was like “the swarm of the mob,” Azad said, the Kurds had “the grit of the barnacle.” That was especially true of a sniper like Azad, who fought for years almost entirely on his own. Azad described the self-possession required to be a sniper as nearly superhuman. “Alone you watch, de-





In a typical winter, dozens of *kolbars* will die from exposure to the dangerous and unpredictable conditions.

cide, and act," Azad said. "Alone you end the other man. There are few purer expressions of free will in this world."

Adnan wants the *kolbar* issue to provoke the same adamant autonomy among Iran's Kurds. The link to the mountains makes him optimistic. That's why "the funeral turned into a protest," and the protest "into a movement by the people against the regime," he says. To show me that this is more than talk, a few days later Adnan directs Hawre and me out of Sulaymaniyah on the road to Iran, and then, as we near the mountains, onto a small lane heading into the hills. We climb for several miles before we reach a checkpoint where armed men in baggy olive camouflage check our car and bags, then usher us into a spartan campus of squat, square bungalows with a view of the valley below. This is the main base of Komala, an Iranian-Kurdish Marxist-Leninist guerrilla army, whose fighters sneak in and out of Iran through the Zagros.

Over tea, sweets, and nuts, Omar Elkhazadeh, Komala's 69-year-old secretary-

general, tells me that in half a century as a revolutionary, he has rarely felt more hopeful. Insurrection becomes inevitable when you push a people too far, he says, and Iran's Kurds have been pressed to their limits. "I am confident big changes will happen in Iran," he says.

But even if the *kolbar* issue does spark a rebellion, it's not clear that Komala is the organization to lead it. Its 1,000 men and women may train with AK-47's and RPGs at high altitude, braving extreme cold, land mines, and border patrols to infiltrate Iran. But they never seem to do much once they're there. I struggle to find a single report of a Komala guerrilla firing a shot in anger. For much of the past three decades, they observed a cease-fire. In Washington, Komala is even designated as a lobby group. When I press Omar, he admits that Komala's revolution is not imminent. "We are facing the most dominant and powerful occupier in the region, Iran, a country that all the surrounding countries shake in front of," he says. "The international community and the West don't really recognize us. We don't have money. So our position is not really the strongest."

I'M BEGINNING to think there might be a more fundamental reason why Kurds in Iran won't rise up: because it would violate the essence of being a Kurd.

Hawre has organized a day for Adnan, his girlfriend, and me to visit 2,500-year-old tombs carved into a cliff face outside Sulaymaniyah, along with some nearby caves that were once home to Neanderthals and later used by rebels fighting Saddam Hussein. We finish with a riverside barbecue of goat meat, salad, and flatbread, which Hawre somehow assembles from the trunk of his car. It's the latest kindness in a trip marked by uncommon generosity. When I arrived, a man I barely knew collected me from the airport at 2 A.M., put me up in his spare room, bought me breakfast, and found me a cab to Sulaymaniyah. When I found the national museum there closed for renovations, the director personally drove down and opened up, then refused an entry fee. Being told my money is no good has become a theme of my visits to tea stalls, kebab houses, and sweet shops all over the Zagros.

One day I met Sirwan, a 33-year-old manager of a smuggling warehouse who, between refusing to let me pay for tea and then pressing sweets on me, told me that he started life as a refugee after Saddam gassed his hometown of Halabja, killing thousands, when he was only 16 days old. Despite his hardscrab-

ble beginnings, he taught himself to read and write, then worked his way up the trafficking business. His ambition was to own his own warehouses, maybe even his own legal import-export business. When I remarked on his resilience, he told me that the superior response was empathy. Even with neighbors who "deny our existence, who tell that to our face," Sirwan said, the Kurdish way was to try to "treat the world kindly."

When I describe my encounters with Kurdish consideration to Adnan, he smiles, then frowns. "I don't like this aspect of the Kurds, this kindness," he growls. "People take advantage of us."

Adnan is only half joking. He is also talking about himself. Though he confined himself to nonviolent protest and writing articles, when Adnan was arrested in 2007 and accused of being in contact with Komala, he was sentenced to death. Just days before his execution, the court issued a reprieve, then jailed him until 2017. On his release, he immediately returned to activism. In 2019, with the authorities after him once more, and unwilling to test their resolve a second time, he walked over Tateh into Iraqi Kurdistan.

I wonder at the self-control Adnan needed not to embrace violence. What was it like, counting down the days on death row? I ask. Adnan exhales, then asks if he can answer me in writing. A week later an e-mail arrives. "To many, death means the end of everything," Adnan replies. "With execution, knowing the time you'll die, it feels even harder. But

MOST *KOLBARS* LIMITED  
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for people who are heading to death because of a higher purpose, it can feel different. Before I went to prison, it had been a long time since [life] had a clear meaning to me. After my sentence, death became another part of my thinking. I accepted it as a bitter fact ... giving meaning to my existence."

Death had loomed ahead of Adnan like a mountain. And by confronting it like a mountaineer, he had found a path forward.



## PART THREE

KAWA, THE MIDDLE-distance runner, has asked me to hike up to meet him among the peaks, so Hawre and I head for the village of Sargat, where the routes over Tateh to Iran begin. At the start of the Iraq War in March 2003, when I was crossing into southern Iraq with the U.S. Third Infantry, Sargat became briefly famous as a stronghold for Al Qaeda and its leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Sargat made sense as a jihadist redoubt if your only criteria were that it be Muslim and on a hill. With little local support in an area known for Sufi Islam (as opposed to Al Qaeda's Sunni faith), a U.S.-Kurdish force routed the jihadists in two days.

When Hawre and I stop for a kebab and tea in Byara, a few miles from Sargat, I am given my own lesson in the dangers of presumption. At the next table, a group of students are in animated discussion. Listening in, Hawre says that they are debating Dostoyevsky; one of them, Kaiwan, turns out to have translated five of his novels. When Hawre introduces us, I tell Kaiwan that I am surprised to find a scholar of 19th-century Russian literature here in Byara. He looks puzzled. "Why not?" he says. "It has everything I need."

Hawre and I reach Sargat and set out for the smugglers' paths. By day the mountain looks deserted. But an old villager we pass tells us that at night the route is busier than ever, with thousands of *kolbars* making the trip. The traffic makes border guards on both sides trigger-happy, he says. "The Iraqis will shoot to scare you," he warns. "The Iranians will shoot to kill."

Hawre and I spend a fruitless hour trying to find a way up into heights that are out of sight of an Iraqi border post. Our frustration is intensified by how beautiful the trek looks. The day is sunny and crisp. Rocks 20 miles away are as clear as a draftsman's etching. We've all but given up and are heading back out of Sargat when Hawre spots two men tending to their mules on a hillside above and pulls over. This will be our hike, all 200 yards of it, straight up.

The lead herder, Ismael, is in his early thirties and well traveled. He drove trucks across the Middle East for years, and as a young man spent seven years living and working in Athens, Greece. Since returning to the mountains to start his own family, Ismael has been shot at, watched an Iraqi border guard kill a friend, and seen an Iranian one shoot a *kolbar* clean off the mountain. But he wouldn't be anywhere else but walking his mules—Blackie, Blondie, and Uncle Sport—up and down Tateh four times a week. "I love

the mountains," he says. "I love this village. I love nature." Even when he is not working, he wanders the hills for hours a day. He particularly likes to hike through the night and summit at dawn, listening to birdsong and drinking water from a mountain spring. He calls the valley his "kingdom."

When I phone Azad, the sniper, to tell him how the trip is going, he is bursting with the same enchantment, having just completed his third solo hike of Scotland's 96-mile West Highland Way. "Halfway, you just want to give up," he says. "Then something spiritual happens in this struggle. The scenery, deer, and wild goats—it turns you into

### INSURRECTION BECOMES INEVITABLE WHEN YOU PUSH A PEOPLE TOO FAR, AND ACCORDING TO OMAR ELKHANIZADEH, KOMALA'S 69-YEAR-OLD SECRETARY-GENERAL, IRAN'S KURDS HAVE BEEN PRESSED TO THEIR LIMITS.

something else." I tell Azad that maybe he loves hiking alone so much because it's one of the few occasions when he can use the bristling self-assurance he developed as a sniper. Perhaps that's another thing mountains give us, I say—the confidence to face a towering obstruction and know we will be OK. Azad agrees. Walking in the hills by himself, he says, is what "keeps me alive."

BACK IN THE ZAGROS, as we are saying goodbye to Ismael, Hawre's phone beeps. It's Kawa, texting to say that he's not going to be able to meet us. When we talk to him that night on Zoom, he says that he has snuck out with a friend's phone, leaving his own device switched on somewhere else. Why the subterfuge? we ask. Kawa grins, then asks if he can tell us his story. "Several years ago, I became friends with this girl, Mina," he begins.

Like Kawa, Mina was an athlete—a wrestler—and they met while training at Zagros Stadium. Mina had ambitions to set up her own sports club, and over the two years that they dated, her dream became Kawa's, too. There was one problem. Despite being a Kurd, Mina's father, Raza, worked for Iranian intelligence. Worried that his liberated daughter might damage his position, Raza

killed the sports club idea and told Kawa to stay away from his daughter. Raza's threats didn't work. Kawa and Mina grew closer. They even did a few *kolbar* trips together. "She didn't need the work," Kawa says. "She was just expressing her anger at her father."

Two years ago, Mina announced that she couldn't take it anymore. After a few weeks of planning, she walked over the mountains to Turkey, and from there found her way to Germany. Mina had been in the habit of making short videos of her *kolbar* trips. Once settled in Berlin, with a job as a mixed-martial-arts trainer, she posted her films on Instagram, with accompanying text identifying Raza as her father. Kawa then caught the full force of Raza's fury. "For a year and a half now, Raza is monitoring me," he says. "He watches all my moves, and even my phone is being spied on." That explained the precautions he had taken with the phones. It was also why Kawa had not yet followed Mina to Germany and wasn't able to meet us. "He told me, 'If you leave Iran, consider your family dead,'" Kawa says.

I tell Kawa that his story is like *Romeo and Juliet*. An enraged father and rogue Iranian intelligence officer is standing between him and his love, not to mention some 2,000 miles and a snowy mountain pass strewn with mines, patrolled by racist border guards. Kawa looks briefly perplexed, and stifles a small giggle. I realize that he has been laughing all through his telling of his tale. He seems to get a kick out of the absurdity of it all. "My life couldn't get worse than this," he hoots. "I can never replace her. Until the day I die, I will wait for her. Even if I never meet her again, I will still wait for her. We can never be separated." Kawa laughs again. He is a mountain man with a great obstacle ahead, and that is exactly where he is meant to be. **1**

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR ALEX PERRY  
([@PERRYALEX](#)) WROTE ABOUT  
CORRUPTION IN INTERNATIONAL  
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