MASTER'S THESIS

"They can make you disappear just like that" – Climate Activism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Preface

Today, as the final words of this thesis are being written, is August 3, 2024, exactly ten years after the Islamic State (ISIS) attacked Shingal, a Yazidi town in northern Iraq. August 3, 2014 marks the beginning of the Yazidi genocide, when more than 5,000 Yazidis were killed and more than 7,000 Yazidi women and children were kidnapped, many of whom are still missing today (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2024). I vividly remember the videos of families fleeing through the unbearably hot Iraqi climate in August, seeking refuge in the mountains with no support from anyone until the forces of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) secured an escape corridor for them. Since then, the Kurdish liberation cause has been a central part of my understanding of international solidarity. I became deeply interested in the Democratic Administration of Northeast Syria (DAANES), where Kurds were attempting to create a democratic project in which gender equality and social ecology were central. Despite my long engagement with the topic, I feel almost hesitant to write these words, because I have always struggled with how best to practice solidarity with a community and a place I have never visited without falling into Orientalist projections. This thesis is an attempt to do so.

As a journalist, much of my work in recent years has focused on Turkish (foreign) policy. I wrote about the devastating effects of the earthquake in February 2023, which particularly affected minorities in the country. After the Turkish elections in May 2023, I talked to communities in Austria that are in opposition to the ruling party AKP, and I interviewed people about the consequences of the devastating Turkish airstrikes in DAANES in October 2023. I then also wanted to study the conditions in DAANES in particular academically, as I was interested in how social ecology and gender equality are lived on the ground. How are the ideas of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan put into practice? How do they affect the daily lives of the people in DAANES? This research would have required me to go to North-East-Syria, which is not possible at the moment. The unstable security situation, caused mainly by Turkish military interventions, simply does not allow for such endeavors. Going to the Kurdish parts of Turkey and Iran was also not an option for me. Conducting independent research on Kurdish environmentalism does not seem feasible due to the political situation in both countries. That

left me with the place where the Kurds have the most autonomy: the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

The KRI, and especially Erbil (Kurdish: Hewlêr), is very different from the Kurdish cause I was socialized with. Its tall skyscrapers, often built by Turkish companies with good contacts to the local government, are supposed to remind you of Dubai. There is a constant smell of gasoline in the air – the result of an oil-dependent economy – and the city's rapid development contrasts sharply with the more grassroots and politically charged Kurdish movements I was familiar with. Nevertheless, I immediately became interested in studying the environmental movement there, especially after reading about the region's high vulnerability to climate change. How do people on the ground perceive the problem? And how are they responding to and resisting the destruction of their environment, both from resource extraction and climate change? Fortunately, I was able to connect with a local institution, the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH), where I could conduct a research internship for my project.

The three months I spent at the UKH in Erbil were certainly among the most interesting of my life. During my stay, I encountered at least ten more topics that I would like to either study or report on. Finding good reasons to return, as some of my friends joked. First and foremost, my experience showed me – someone with very fixed political views, perhaps lacking nuance from time to time – how complex reality can be. I met people eager for change, but aware of how little change the almost feudal Barzani family in power would allow. I encountered a Kurdish nationalism in crisis after a failed referendum in 2017, and an economy so ruthless that most people I spoke to simply wanted to go to Europe. I vividly remember random strangers approaching me on the street, asking if I could somehow help them get to Germany. The persistence of these experiences sometimes made me feel at odds with my research topic. The environment, no matter how urgent the situation, was simply not on most people's list of problems. "Water scarcity? I sure care about water scarcity. I mean, I need to wash my G-Class," a dear friend of mine once joked, describing the average attitude in Erbil towards environmental degradation. People simply had other priorities. And the longer I stayed, the more I understood them. Nevertheless, I am convinced my research is relevant, especially as environmental degradation continues at a rapid pace and intersects with so many of the issues

people discussed with me in private conversations: corruption, mismanagement, the presence of foreign actors, to name a few.

The fact that I was able to complete this project at all is due to the support of many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Mathijs van Leeuwen, for his extensive feedback, especially as I felt like a rather demanding student. Your guidance and support, especially your encouragement to trust in my ability to construct the case myself and thus sharpen my analysis, was invaluable. I also owe a lot to Dr. Thomas Schmidinger, my supervisor at the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH), my internship organization in Erbil. Your contacts and extensive knowledge of the region absolutely enriched my work. You also made me feel welcome in Erbil from the very beginning. Special thanks also go to my friend Ajouan, who gave me the idea to go to South Kurdistan. I am more than grateful to have a friend who knows Hewlêr so well that I could share every single experience with you. Every time Bashuri and Rojhelati is written in this thesis, I dedicate it to you, as you are Mahabad's finest, understandably neglecting your Hewlêri heritage. My proofreader Beate also deserves a loud shoutout, this is this the second time I make use of your skills, and you still have not complained once. On a personal level, I would like to thank my family, who encouraged me to go after my interests since I can remember. My mother, my father, my sisters Katharina, Clara and Hanna are the reason I walk around so confidently in this world. I promise you that I will allow you to visit me the next time I am conducting fieldwork.

I would also like to talk about the people to whom this thesis is dedicated: the many friends I made in Erbil. My friend Safaa, who walked with me through Sami Park a billion times, while teaching me Arabic swear words. You refused to let me pay, even though I argued that all our coffees were financed by the Austrian Employment Service (AMS), whose educational sabbatical made it possible for me to go to the Netherlands and Kurdistan. The same warm thanks goes to my friends Hasan, Hazem and May, my little family in Erbil, who tried to keep me from getting food poisoning all the time – but failed. Our chain-smoking conventions, our nights at the Catholic University, our Mondays will always stay dear to me. As Hasan said the day you took me to the airport, "It's not goodbye forever, it's just goodbye for now."

Finally, to Matej, my comrade and partner. As I wrote in the three theses before this one (two BA, one MA, we have come a long way): Nothing would be possible without you anyway.

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Abstract

As climate change continues to worsen global living conditions, recent years have been marked by a surge of climate activism all around the Globe. While activists in the Global North received media as much as academic attention, climate movements in highly vulnerable countries in the Global South remain under-researched. This thesis explores how Iraqi Kurdish climate activists navigate the region's great vulnerability to climate change in combination with political instability, and on-going national liberation efforts. By drawing on eleven semi-structured interviews and employing both political opportunities theory and a climate justice framework, this study finds that although political opportunities are generally limited, the Kurdistan Region's openness to climate discussions allows activists to address climate issues from an "environment-first perspective". In this approach, climate change is addressed without being politicized, and social justice concerns are not integrated. Activists can set meaningful action where the government and infrastructure is largely absent, particularly through practical initiatives, such as recycling, tree planting and awareness raising. This approach contrasts with the often de-colonial strategies employed by groups in the Global South and other parts of Kurdistan, indicating that the mere existence of colonialism does not automatically result in the emergence of decolonial climate activism, particularly when the political opportunity structure does not support such efforts. Further research is required to examine the impact of different Kurdish civic cultures and varying degrees of statehood on the methods and strategies employed in climate activism.

Abbreviations and Locations in Kurdish

DAANES – Democratic Administration of North-East Syria
KRI – Kurdistan Region of Iraq
NSM – New Social Movement
PDK – Kurdistan Democratic Party
PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party
POT – Political Opportunities Theory
PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD – Democratic Union Party

Bakur – North Kurdistan, Turkey
Bashur – South Kurdistan, Iraq
Rojava – West Kurdistan, Syria
Rojhelat – East Kurdistan, Iran

1. Introduction

We are, indisputably, living in a time of ecological crisis. Human made climate change manifests in wildfires crashing places like California, Siberia or Australia (Weston, 2022). It entails floods of a size that affect 15 per cent of the total population of Pakistan (Goldbaum et al., 2022) or damage almost 100.000 homes in Nigeria (Preimium Times, 2022). It is responsible for an increasing amount of hurricanes destroying the coasts of the Americas (United Nations, 2022) and droughts in various parts of Europe (Henley & correspondents, 2022). Some places in North Africa and South West Asia might even become inhabitable due to extreme heat (Vohra, 2022). There is no denial that the climate crisis shapes and transforms the world, we are living in.

While global climate change is escalating, so are protests against it. Recent years have been marked by an increase in climate activism all around the globe. Particularly Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future have shaped the climate change discourses in the Global North. During the September 2019 climate protests, known as the *Global Week for Future,* an estimated four million young people worldwide protested against the ongoing crisis, challenging politicians' unwillingness to combat it (Barclay & Resnick, 2019). However, while these protests have received much attention, the work of activists from the Global South has often been ignored (Unigwe, 2019), despite the fact that it is colonized and indigenous communities in particular that are most affected by climate change. These communities are also on the forefront of the fight against all forms of ecological destruction. On the ground, this manifests particularly in the struggle against the appropriation of their natural resources: in communities fighting the deforestation and occupation of their lands in the Amazon (Etchart, 2017), in groups protecting forests and coastlines in Oceania (Gulliver et al., 2022) , and in neighborhoods protesting Israeli water control in Palestine (McKee, 2021). In these contexts, climate change is often not understood as a singular topic, but instead as an issue deeply intersecting with issues of colonialism, capitalism and racism (Funes, 2022; Voelcker, 2023).

One movement that is convinced that these factors intersect and hence, addresses them in their fight against climate change is the Kurdish environmental movement, particularly in the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria (DAANES), but also in Turkey and

to a lesser extent in Iran. As a stateless community occupied by four countries (Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq), Kurds face not only climate change, but also the deliberate destruction of their environment through militarization, violent conflict and capitalist extraction (Dinc, 2022; Eklund et al., 2021; Hassaniyan & Sohrabi, 2022). As a response to this large amount of "environmental racism" (Dinc, 2022), Kurds have developed their own resistance strategies in which the environmental question is deeply linked to the Kurdish question, stressing that Kurdish liberation also requires ecological liberation (Hunt, 2021). In Iran, Turkey, and Syria, these climate movements have been studied and theorized before, though not extensively (Conde, 2016; Hammy & Miley, 2022; Hassaniyan, 2021). Yet, the climate and ecological movements in the Kurdish part of Iraq – the KRI –, which has been a de facto state since 1991, have been documented even less. The little research that exists considers the existing activism "dutiful environmentalism", hardly questioning mainstream policies and practices (Wiktor-Mach et al., 2023). This research gap is striking, as the UN has identified Iraq as the fifth most vulnerable country to declining water and food availability, as well as high temperatures (UN Environment, 2019). While the concrete impacts of climate change may vary across Iraq's heterogeneous landscape, no region will remain untouched by this development (Rudaw, 2023), making the KRI likely the most environmentally vulnerable part of Kurdistan.

In my thesis, I aim to address this knowledge gap by conducting a detailed analysis of climate activism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KIR). I will focus on how climate activists respond to and navigate the intersection of ecological degradation, political instability and self-determination efforts. I chose to employ a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews. By drawing on political opportunities theory and a climate justice framework, I attempt to understand what strategies the activists employ and what barriers they face – and in what ways their efforts are correspondent to or differ from global environmental justice efforts as much as the Kurdish liberation movement. Through this analysis, I try to identify which political opportunities are available to activists, and in what ways they impact if and how climate change can be connected to other struggles. Hence, I developed the following research question, supported by two sub-questions:

How do climate activists within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) navigate and respond to the interplay of ecological degradation, political instability, and Kurdish self-determination efforts?

- What are the key motivations and strategies employed by climate activists in the KRI to address environmental challenges, and how do these reflect or diverge from broader Kurdish liberation movements and global climate justice efforts?
- How do political constraints and economic dependencies impact the organizational dynamics and effectiveness of climate movements in the KRI?

This project has significant societal and scientific importance. Societally, its importance arises from the urgency of the climate crisis. To effectively combat this crisis, it's critical to understand the strategies of those on the front lines of the struggle; those fighting in places where the effects of climate change are already being felt most intensely. This is relevant for both people fighting locally and solidarity activists from abroad. Local climate activists benefit from an examination of political opportunities as it contributes to the effectiveness and resilience of their movement. With this work, I hope to support activists in navigating their environment more effectively, which in turn can lead to a stronger response to the ecological degradation, the KRI is so rapidly facing. Of course, this does not mean that I, a European researcher, simply come from abroad and tell local activists how to best operate in an environment they know much better than I do. Rather, my work aims to investigate and synthesize data to then give it back to the communities that shared their knowledge with me. At the same time, I aim to transfer this knowledge to international solidarity activists. As the climate crisis can only be tackled internationally, collaboration and exchange between activists around the globe is a necessity. By examining the opportunities and constraints for KRI activists, my project also helps identifying where support is most needed. Thereby, local initiatives can be more effectively supported by climate change activists from abroad.

On a scientific level, my work is even more relevant. As outlined above, I focus on a region on which only little data is available, particularly with regard to social movements like the climate movement. The little research that exists suggests that there is only a minor or no connection between the ecological and Kurdish question in the KRI, even though these views are highly

relevant in neighboring Kurdish regions. With my thesis, I also attempt to understand why that is the case. I seek to further investigate, which factors facilitate or hinder the connection between the fight against climate change and other struggles, particularly the struggle for self-determination. I also attempt to detect, if this also has any consequences on the effectiveness of activism. Hence, I situate environmental activism in the KRI within the broader context of environmental activism in other parts of Kurdistan and the Global South, and thereby examine how environmental movements adapt to different political contexts and systems. As Naomi Klein (2014) has long argued, the fight against climate change is incomplete without addressing the systemic issues that cause it – which is also why an isolated struggle against climate change is often limited in its effects. Hence, understanding, which political opportunities allow or complicate the adoption of frameworks foregrounding the connection between climate change and other political causes is crucial to make climate movements more effective.

In order to do this, I have developed the following structure for my thesis: I begin with my conceptual framework, providing a detailed overview of the current state of POT, its critique, and the relevant debates for my thesis. In this chapter, I also explain why I prefer political opportunity theory over other concepts to conduct my analysis. In addition, I discuss the current most prominent climate activist discourse, climate justice, as part of the conceptual framework chapter. Chapter three is dedicated to my methodology; I will discuss the usefulness of a qualitative research design for my research objective, while also pointing out possible shortcomings. In chapter four, I provide a detailed overview of different forms of environmental activism in all parts of Kurdistan, explaining the political ecology of the KRI as well as the impacts of climate change in the region. In chapter five, I present my findings. I do so by first discussing the inspiration of my interviewees, then talking about their constraints, and finally identifying the opportunities available in the KRI environment. Finally, I conclude my thesis with a reflection on the limitations of my study and give recommendations for future research.

Before proceeding, I need to make some comments regarding terminology in this thesis. I will predominantly rely on the terms Bakur, North-Kurdistan (Turkey); Rojava, West-Kurdistan (Syria); and Rojhelat, East Kurdistan (Iran) to refer to these respective regions. As the Kurdistan

Region of Iraq possesses the highest degree of Kurdish autonomy, I will mainly use the official political name of this entity (or its abbreviation KRI) and Bashur, Southern Kurdistan, in alternation. However, it is crucial to mention that Bashur stretches beyond the KRI's borders. I am drawing on these terms, because I follow Beşikçi's (2004) understanding of Kurdistan as an "internal colony", occupied by Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. These words are an "attempt to decolonize Kurdistan, at least discursively" (Saadi, 2020).

2. Conceptual Framework

To analyze how climate movements operate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, I will utilize a conceptual framework that integrates both political opportunities theory (POT) and a climate justice framework. This chapter starts with an explanation of the history of POT, its core concepts, and shortcomings. The key debate within political opportunities theory, this thesis addresses is POT's favor for *structure* over *agency.* This debate stems from the major criticism that POT operates from a predominantly positivist and structural ontology and epistemology, which may limit its ability to adequately consider the agency of its respective actors. In my thesis, I hence aim to integrate perspectives that emphasize the agency of activists themselves.

Considering discourses and practices of framing are important for social movements to mobilize members, I will also reflect on the most relevant contemporary political discourse in environmental activism: climate justice. Typically, a climate justice framework is used to analyze how environmental degradation intersects with social inequality. Among other things, it highlights how climate change acts as an exacerbator of already existing inequalities (Harlan et al., 2015). In my thesis, this understanding of the term will guide me in chapter 4.3, where I discuss the impact of the climate crisis in the KRI. More importantly, however, I understand climate justice as a discursive strategy used by environmental activists. By analyzing what hinders or facilitates the adoption of such frameworks, my thesis contributes to the growing literature on the role of colonized communities in environmental activism.

2.1 Political Opportunities Theory

Within the broader field of social mobilization theory, there are a number of different arguments which seek to explain why and how social movements form in particular ways. There are branches of the theory that argue that social movements depend on the structure of political opportunity, others that emphasize mobilizing structures, a group's "framing" of the situation, or the group's repertoires of contention (McAdam, 1996). Among all different approaches within social mobilization theories, POT is the most promising to conduct an analysis for this thesis, because it examines how different political environments influence the

emergence, strategies, and outcomes of social movements (Giugni, 2011, p. 272) and thereby synthesizes the different aspects identified by McAdam (1996). Two parts of this synthesis are particularly relevant for my research question: political opportunities themselves and framing strategies.

Before examining in detail how these aspects are conceptualized, it is necessary to define one term that is frequently recurring over the course of this chapter: movement. In general, Snow et al. (2004, p. 6) argue that most definitions of movement can be traced back to at least three of these conceptual axes: "collective or joint action; change-oriented goals or claims; some extra- or non-institutional collective action; some degree of organization; and some degree of temporal continuity". Following these axes, Snow et al. (2004, p. 11) conclude that social movements could be conceptualized as

> collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part.

Having outlined the key components of social movements, it is now necessary to investigate "the options available to social movements" (Bloom, 2014, p. 359), which are generally called the political opportunity structure. According to Meyer and Mikoff, the political opportunity structure operates on the premise that "exogenous factors enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilization, for particular sorts of claims to be advanced rather than others, for particular strategies of influence to be exercised, and for movements to affect mainstream institutional politics and policy" (2004, p. 1457). Researchers have studied the political opportunity structure to account for a variety of outcomes. This includes social movement mobilization (Schock, 1999), the rise of protest cycles (Montagna, 2010), how allies' attitudes influence movement behavior (Corral, 2020), and the dominance of confrontational versus nonconfrontational protest tactics (Kitschelt, 1986).

One of the key theorists within POT was Charles Tilly. Tilly (1978) claims that forms of protest are shaped by broad contextual changes, for instance through the formation of the nation-

state. For him, an opportunity "describes the relationship between the population's interests and the current state of the world around it" (ibid., 1978, p.55). In this sense, opportunity refers to the way in which the interplay of power, repression (alongside facilitation), and the balance of opportunities (as well as threats) shape the available pathways for collective action (Giugni, 2011, p. 272). With this focus on the state, Tilly was among the first to link "regimes" to the development of social movements (della Porta, 2013, p. 1). In general, the notion that the strength or fragility of states affects the strategies of social movements is still central to the study of collective action and revolutions (ibid.). This can manifest in different ways. Various studies (see Kitschelt 1986 or Kriesi et al. 1995), consider, for instance, the way power is divided and organized in society or state as relevant to determine how movements form and change over time. In this sense, they argue that a more efficient government and an independent judiciary can positively affect social movements. An independently working court, for instance, can make it easier it for movements to convey their message (della Porta, 2013, p. 1).

Building on Tilly's foundational ideas, subsequent scholars have expanded and refined POT by further theorizing which opportunities are critical to social movement organization. McAdam's (1982) work on Black insurgency between the 1930s and 1970s was a key stone for this development. He argues that there are four factors which facilitated the mobilization of African Americans: changes in demographics, the intensity of repression, migration trends and economic policies. If such supra-structural contexts are present, state institutions are more receptive to addressing issues of racial justice (quoted in Meyer and Mikoff 2004, p. 1459). In essence, he later came to argue that activists are most effective in leveraging political opportunities when the following conditions are met (McAdams, 1996):

1. The political system is open to conduct activism.
2. Activists are able to influence elite alignment within the state and institutions.
3. Activists are supported by elite allies.
4. The risk of repression is low.

How open a system is varies from state to state. As Kriesi (2004, p. 70f), for instance, argues, there are two types of state systems, decentralized and centralized ones. Decentralized

systems exist in federal countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. Such systems are structured to provide various opportunities for individuals or groups to participate and influence decisions. In contrast, centralized states such as France and Sweden offer fewer regional and local opportunities (ibid). This foundation has also been used to investigate environmental movements. Van der Heijden (1997), for instance, analyzes the institutionalization of environmental movements. He argues that the political opportunity structure of France led to little institutionalization, whereas Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland showed a high degree of institutionalization (ibid.).

While the structure of a state and the correspondent institutionalism of movements plays an important role, so does the dynamic between different social movements and their interactions with institutional powers. The political opportunities framework has been used to analyze various different movements in the last decades. The majority of this analysis focused on left-wing movements (Clayton, 2018; Paige, 1983; Reed, 2019), although the theory has later on also been frequently been used to analyze Islamist movements in the 2000s (Bayat, 2005; Meijer, 2005; Tuğal, 2009). Especially with regard to leftists movements, the literature has always paid attention to their interactions with other movements (Meyer & Whittier, 1994; Zald & McCarthy, 1979) as much as institutional powers in general (Rucht & Neidhardt, 2002; Somma & Medel, 2017). In their work on differences and similarities between left-libertarian movement families in Italy and Germany, della Porta and Rucht (1995) aimed to develop a model to determine which external and internal factors lead to a change in strategies of social movements. One of their findings indicated that "one of the most relevant factors for changes of movement behavior is the attitude of the major left-wing party toward the movements, regardless of whether this party is in power" (ibid., 1995, p. 0). Similar tendencies can be observed in the study of labour movements.

It is, however, not labour movements that have been at the center of POT in recent decades but "new social movements" (NSM). NSMs differ severely from classic labour movements, as they focus primarily on post-material rather than class-based issues (Pichardo, 1997, p. 412). Post-material issues typically focus on identity and culture, including questions of feminism, ecology, civil rights, and gay rights. Most of these movements arose in the 1960s and 1970s (Langman, 2013, p. 517). Foyer and Kervran argue that NSMs are "distinguished from previous

social movements by the higher social status of [their] members, by their identity-based and post-materialist causes, and by the low priority they gave to direct action through extra-institutional means" (2015, p. 223). In general, new social movements aim to transform society over the long term by challenging existing norms (Langman, 2013, p. 516). As ecological movements often reflect such efforts, new social movement theory is a suitable lens to analyze environmentalist activism.

For this thesis, the debate of NSMs in authoritarian settings is relevant (see discussion on the KRI's political ecology, chapter 4.2). While the level of authoritarianism naturally plays a role for the political opportunities available for activists, there are also significant differences between diverging non-democratic systems: One-party regimes, for instance, tend to offer the most opportunities for environmental movements, personalist dictatorships appear to be the least supportive systems, with monarchies and military regimes falling in the middle (Böhmelt, 2014). Yet, the level of democracy and autocracy is not the only determining factor, as research on environmental movements in China and Vietnam demonstrates. Chinese NGOs, for example, can survive provided they avoid making democratic demands. The state allows activities, as long as it can take credit for successes while distancing itself from failures (Spires, 2011). In Vietnam, Nguyen-Van-Quoc et al. (2023, p. 996) found that the way environmental grievances have been politicized can impact the radicalism of movements (ibid.).

While the above-mentioned studies demonstrate the usefulness of linking political opportunities theory to analyze social movements, there have also been various critiques of the theory. One of the key issues for researchers studying political opportunity and protest is to identify "which aspects of the external world" shape the development of social movements (Meyer and Mikoff, 2004, p. 1459). Tarrow (1994, p. 85) attempted to address this criticism by proposing that the "structure of political opportunities" can be defined as "consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure". The point of the critique is twofold: different analysts have different ideas about which opportunity structures are important to consider, and it depends strongly on the context which political opportunities matter. If similar movements are compared, stable societal and governmental characteristics are emphasized. If movements are studied over

time, dynamic factors, such as public policy, are more relevant. Hence, the same terms are often used to describe different phenomena (Meyer and Mikoff, 2004, p. 1459).

Such a vague framework can lead to discrepancies. Della Porta (2013, p. 3) still considers the ambiguity around political opportunities theory as one of its main weaknesses. Gamson and Meyer (1996, p. 275) summarize this string of criticism as such:

> The concept of political opportunity structure is in trouble, in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment – political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliance and policy shifts. […] The essential problem is that everyone who writes about political opportunity structure refers to different variables.

Hence, it is critical to refine the theoretical framework and clearly identify which variables are relevant for which social movement. McAdams (1996, p. 31) argues that conceptual chaos can only be avoided through being “explicit about which dependent variable we are seeking to explain and which dimensions of political opportunity are germane to that explanation”. Recently, this critique has been addressed by singling out the specific contextual conditions relevant to particular movements. For movements on immigrant rights, for instance, the citizenship regime is important, and for movements on unemployment, the welfare state is an important variable (della Porta, 2013, p. 3).

A second significant critique for a case study dealing with Kurdistan is the state-centeredness of POT. According to Burç (2020, p. 323), social movement theory still operates with the underlying assumption that social movements are phenomena that only exist within and in relation to nation-states. In this understanding, the analysis of movements on the state-level is possible, yet, it remains difficult to capture stateless movements, such as the Kurdish movement, whose scope ranges across four nation states (ibid.). The application of political opportunity theory to stateless communities necessitates the development of a more sophisticated theoretical framework, which, in turn, would enhance the theory's inclusivity. Activism by stateless communities could, for instance, increasingly require trans-national collaboration, while having to adapt these efforts to the respective local context (Davies et al.,

2024). This is particularly relevant in the context of climate activism, which inherently practices cooperation at a global level (Hadden, 2014). The KRI would indeed be a relevant case study for such an analysis, because many of its ecological problems stem from outside factors and hence would require trans-national action (see chapter 4.3). Unfortunately, due to the limited scope of a master's thesis, I can only briefly address this debate in the conceptual framework of my thesis and not in the analysis section.

One critique I can, however, address in this thesis is the structural bias of POT. The key argument of this critique is that through its deterministic understanding of reality, POT does not consider the *social construction* of opportunities (della Porta, 2013, p. 3). This regard of external factors alone, without taking the agency of movements into account, results in an incomplete analysis of how social movements develop and operate. Throughout the history of POT, this structural bias is most frequently attributed to the European branch of scholarship within the field. As Giugni (2011, p. 272) claims, many US-American researchers such as the abovementioned Tarrow (1996) or McAdam (1996) have focused on "political *opportunities* in a more dynamic fashion", whereas European researches such as the likewise above-mentioned Kitschelt (1986) or Eisinger (1973) adopted a "more static approach [which] has paid more attention to political opportunity *structures*". Nevertheless, Goodwin and Jasper have been clear in their general criticism, as they consider the political opportunity thesis "not simply tautological, trivial, insufficient, or ambiguous, [but] as an invariant causal hypothesis, just plain wrong" (2004, p. 14 quoted in Giugni, 2011, p.274).

There were some responses to this criticism in the mid-2000s. Giugni (2011) identifies a shift towards an investigation of processes and mechanism over plain structures and conditions. He argues that there are four opportunities to which the literature has not paid enough attention: "discursive opportunities, specific opportunities, perceived opportunities, and dynamic opportunities" (2011, p. 274). Discursive opportunities highlight the agency of movements, which entails that more attention is paid to movement's claims and identities resonate with prevailing public discourses (ibid., 2011, p. 274). Yet, perceived opportunities are even more relevant for this thesis as political opportunities must not only objectively *exist* but also be *recognized* and *seized* by social movements to be effective. If and how people get involved in a movement also depends on how they judge the political opportunities available

(ibid., 2011, p. 277). Della Porta summarizes this as such: Changes in the political opportunity structure only have an impact on a social movement if the movement itself perceives the change as significant; conversely, activists may view closed opportunities as open (2013, p. 3).

In summary, this chapter demonstrated why POT provides me with an appropriate framework to analyze both the opportunities and constraints faced by environmental movements in the KRI. POT enables the analysis of the external political environment as much as the internal dynamics of climate movements. Particularly the latter is important for this thesis, as I have identified a major shortcoming of the theory: its structural bias. Hence, I will use POT from an agent-centered perspective and particularly investigate which opportunities KRI climate activists *consider* open. Using POT in this way fits well with the qualitative research method chosen for this work because it allows me to explore the in-depth motivations of activists. This enables me to detect which strategies activists consider feasible and which political constraints hinder the adaptation of other tactics.

2.2 Discourses and Politics of Climate Justice

In order to be successful, movements have to consider possible framing strategies to resonate with the public. Snow et al. (1986) demonstrate that movement framing occurs when collective actors express their views on the social or political issue at hand, propose solutions, and explain why others should support efforts to improve the respective situation. In their work on the political successes of the US Women's Jury movements, McCammon et al. (2007, p. 726) contend that to fully comprehend why specific frames effectively persuade lawmakers to redefine the law, it is essential to consider both the frame content and the broader context in which framing occurs. They argue — and provide evidence — that the combination of movement frames and the political and cultural environment is crucial to achieve ones desired political goal. The more adaptively movements are able to respond to discursive elements in the broader cultural environment, the higher their chances of influencing lawmakers are (ibid.).

The currently most dominant framework among climate change activists is climate justice (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). This discursive strategy has emerged as a response to one main critique of the contemporary climate movement: That activists have overlooked the unequal

impacts of climate change on different communities and neglected the much greater vulnerability of people in the Global South (Beer, 2022; Mikulewicz, 2020). In addition to that, the success of the concept was also carried by an increasing consensus that technological solutions alone are insufficient in addressing the impacts of climate change (Jafry et al., 2019, p. 2f). In essence, framing ecological degradation in terms of climate justice means politicizing the issue (Chatterton et al., 2013), linking it to issues of human rights, colonialism, and exploitation, while drawing attention to the most marginalized (Dawson, 2010; Fabricant, 2013; Harlan et al., 2015). As my chapter on Kurdish environmentalism will later demonstrate, politicizing the environmental question and connecting it to other causes, such as oppression, exploitation and marginalization is also a key feature of environmental activism in Bakur, Rojava and Rojhelat. Hence, climate justice is a relevant concept to better understand how activists in both Kurdistan and the broader Global South address environmental issues.

As a term used by activists, climate justice was first coined in the 1990s, when a series of ecological movements fought against the fossil fuel industry und criticized the shortcomings of global climate policy (Jafry et al., 2019, p. 2). Ever since, it has become a globally successful framework, now even dominant within the often white and middle-class mainstream environmental movements in the Global North that it originally sought to criticize (Akec, 2019). Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future Sweden, for instance, today adopt a clear climate justice lens that “breaks with attempts to construct climate change as a ‘post-political’ issue” and “generates solidarities between differently located struggles and these solidarities have the potential to shift the terms of debate on climate change” (Chatterton et al., 2013, p. 602). This development is best illustrated by an article written by Greta Thunberg herself, in which she emphasizes what climate justice means to her:

> Advocating for climate justice fundamentally comes from a place of caring about people and their human rights. That means speaking up when people suffer, are forced to flee their homes or are killed – regardless of the cause. It is the same reason why we have always held strikes in solidarity with marginalized groups – including those in Sápmi, Kurdistan, Ukraine and many other places – and their struggles for justice against imperialism and oppression. Our solidarity with Palestine is no different, and

> we refuse to let the public focus shift away from the horrifying human suffering that Palestinians are currently facing (Thunberg, 2023).

As a concept, climate justice is deeply intertwined with other well-known notions of de-colonial climate activism, such as environmentalism of the poor. Environmentalism of the poor has long been used to describe the ways in which people from the Global South struggle against environmental degradation. By drawing on Martinet-Alier (2002), Roy and Hanaček identify environmentalism of the poor as a term that "builds on the premise that the fights for human rights and environment are inseparable" and "refers to the multiple environmental justice movements where the impoverished, marginalized, and Indigenous communities resist against state and businesses carrying out projects of resource extraction, waste disposal and big infrastructure" (2023, p. 305f). As Satheesh argues, this understanding is prominent among environmentalism movements all over the Global South, who often "include social, material and environmental issues in their discourses and action" (2021, p. 51f). Communities engaged in such movements view unequal power dynamics as the primary danger to their environment, identity, and means of living. Consequently, they unite to contest the dominance of the prevailing regime (Pulido, 1996). A speech at the 2009 UN Copenhagen, for instance, illustrates, how marginalized communities from the Global South describe their fight against the climate crisis:

> Climate change is already seriously impacting us. It brings floods, droughts and the outbreak of pests that are all causing harvest failures. I must point out that these harvest failures are something that the farmers did not create. Instead, it is the polluters who caused the emissions who destroy the natural cycles. . . . [W]e will not pay for their mistakes (Saragih, 2009).

While the scope of climate justice is generally understood, establishing a clear and universally accepted definition of the term proves difficult, which is often the case with discourse. As Fairclough (1995, p. 76) argues, discourse is "a particular way of constructing a particular (domain of) social practice". It does more than just depicting social entities and connections; it actively shapes social interactions and contributes to the development of knowledge and belief structures (ibid., 1995). Hence, it can evolve and change over time (see e.g. Gillings &

Dayrell, 2024), while its precise content may be fluid. Still, there are some attempts to grasp what climate justice entails. Schlosberg and Collins (2014, p. 359) argue that climate justice means there is a focus on “local impacts and experience, inequitable vulnerabilities, the importance of community voice, and demands for community sovereignty and functioning”. In essence, the term “recognizes humanity’s responsibility for the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions on the poorest and most vulnerable people in society by critically addressing inequality and promoting transformative approaches to address the root causes of climate change” (Meikle et al., 2016, p. 497). Hence, a climate justice lens sheds light on the fact that countries in the Global South have contributed the least to the climate change, yet, they are affected the most (IPCC, 2022).

While the term has been frequently used by activists in recent years, its adaption by bigger policy makers has been slow. Jafry et al. (2019, p. 3f.) argue that this is because of one key problem surrounding the term: Its progress has been hampered by its anti-establishment origins and the perception among policymakers that it is a divisive issue. This critique is closely related to other forms of climate activism that tries to present itself as “above politics”, not dependent on party politics, often showing only a small degree of politization of the subject (Knudsen, 2016). But such arguments remain flawed, as they underestimate how climate justice serves as an important mobilizing issue for indigenous and marginalized groups worldwide. As a concept, it has the potential to unite and empower instead of dividing communities from each other (Jafry et al., 2019, p. 4). In the past decade, this has become visible all around the globe, from rainforest inhabitants resisting new mega-dams and palm oil expansions to communities in Africa and Latin America opposing land seizures for industrial agriculture and biofuel production. It is also visible in Pacific Islanders challenging the loss of their homes to rising sea levels, and peasant farmers advocating for food sovereignty and fundamental land rights (Tokar, 2019, p. 17). Currently, however, it is still debated whether climate justice can be translated into actionable policies within current economic systems, or whether it should remain primarily within the realm of social activism and academic discourse (Jafry et al., 2019, p. 4).

In my thesis, climate justice is used twofold: Firstly, as an analytical concept to describe the ways in which climate change intersects with Kurdish marginalization (chapter 4). But secondly

– and more profoundly – I understand climate justice as a particular discourse which is employed by climate movements. This understanding concerns the way climate activists as much as policy makers talk about the environment. In order to do so, I opt for the following definition: As a framework for analyzing the effects of climate change, the term climate justice highlights the link between climate change and social inequalities. Hence, it understands climate change as structural violence. As a discursive stategy, the concept has gained prominence in public debates and grassroots campaigns in the last decade, particularly among nonprofit and environmental NGOs. Most of these groups have a politicized understanding of climate change that highlights the unequal impacts of climate change. They point out that these impacts disproportionately affect the poorest and most disadvantaged communities and highlight that the burden of climate change is unequally distributed (Porter et al., 2020, p. 293).

In summary, this chapter explores the development and significance of climate justice as a framing strategy within environmental movements. As it is currently the most dominant discourse among environmental activists worldwide, climate justice allows me to situate climate activism in the KRI among other environmental movements in both Kurdistan and the broader Global South. At the same time, it enables me to examine how climate activism is framed and politicized in the KRI and how it is connected to other issues, such as decolonial liberation efforts. As my chapter on the political ecology of the KRI will later show, climate change has long intersected with Kurdish marginalization in the region. It is therefore relevant to explore whether this also manifests in the movement's tactics.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

As the aim of this thesis is to examine political opportunities from an agent-centered perspective, this approach must be manifested in the methodology as well. Since qualitative research aims to "understand social phenomena in dense form and form the perspective of the actors involved" (ibid., 2021, p. 15) (Prainsack & Pot, 2021, p. 15), this design is best suitable for a thorough exploration of the experiences and thoughts of my interlocutors. It gives me the opportunity to ask detailed and in-depth questions and thereby receive information that quantitative methods might not fully capture.

3.1.1 Data Collection Strategy

I collected the data for this research through semi-structured interviews within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This semi-structured format enables a flexible, yet focused conversation, for which I prepared a set of pre-defined open-ended question but also made use of this format's room for spontaneous probes (Misoch, 2019, p. 13). In order to not exhaust my participants, I opted for about 45 minutes with every interview; most conversations lasted between 35 minutes and one hour, with 40 minutes being the most common duration. Previous research argued that many climate activists in the KRI are based in cities (Wiktor-Mach et al., 2023), therefore Erbil (four interviews), Sulaymaniyah (four interviews), and Duhok (one interview) were chosen primary data collection sites. In addition, I also conducted two interviews in Halabja. Eventually, this led to eleven interviews in total, of which I conducted two online via zoom and the rest in person. Six participants are male, and five participants are female, all of whom are between 23 and 51 years old.

The selection of the respective participants was based on their involvement in climate activism. While I initially planned to speak with informed outsiders as well, I ultimately decided against it for a very practical reason: Most of the people I met who knew something about climate activism in the region were also directly involved in it. Hence, my final selection only includes activists from environmental groups and initiatives within the KRI and NGO workers from organizations working on environmental sustainability and climate change in the region. Nine participants are somehow associated with NGOs, two are part of fully volunteer-based

grassroots initiatives. As is common in qualitative research, I opted for a theoretical sample which helped me to "find out more about the object of research and ultimately be able to grasp it better theoretically" (Prainsack & Pot, 2021, p. 77). Hence, it was not possible to pre-define the number of participants in the study. Instead, I conducted interviews until theoretical saturation was reached and I stopped receiving new information from the participants (ibid.). After approximately ten participants, I realized that the analysis of further interview transcripts would not bring significant new insights (ibid., 2021, p. 148). At the same time, my relatively short research stay – data collection took place in less than three months between 2nd March and 24th May 2024 – did not allow for more interviews.

All interviews were held in English to avoid needing a translator, with the exception of one participant in Halabja (W34), whose colleague offered to translate. I anticipated in advance that language barrier might have an impact on data quality. I am not a native English speaker and neither are my respondents. While most respondents were highly proficient in English, there were two interviews in which the language proficiency of the participants did affect the conversation. These conversations required me to be especially flexible and adapt my questions to the English level of the interlocutors. I also frequently encouraged the participants to seek clarification whenever they were uncertain about a question. Thereby, I was able to minimize the impact of language barriers.

3.1.2 Interview Guideline

Following Misoch (2019, p. 66), an interview guide serves as the "common thread" for gathering qualitative verbal data which is why I thoroughly developed my guide. In order to so, I followed Misoch's recommendations (2019, p. 68), which posit that a proper qualitative interview guide should be organized alongside the following four phases:

- Information Phase: information about the study's goal and confidentiality rules, obtaining consent for interview conduct
- Warm-up Phase: introduction of the interview, asking broad question to overcome possible initial hesitations, creation of a comfortable and open atmosphere

- Main Phase: discussion of key topics, usage of both pre-planned and emerging questions, coverage of all relevant thematic areas
- Conclusion Phase: reflection of the interview, transition back to normal routine

For the creation of my interview guide, this entailed the following broad framework: I began by discussing the goal of my study and going through the information and consent paper again. To overcome difficulties in the beginning, I started with rather easy questions about the individual's background and motivations. I then transitioned to their strategies in conducting activism and closed the main phase with the most sensitive topic, the challenges. I typically ended my interviews with an outlook for the future. However, I also ensured that I did not restrict myself through the interview guideline. If participants talked about something extensively, I ensured they had enough room to address their important points.

3.1.3 Data Analysis Techniques

I analyzed the empirical data by means of a qualitative analysis as developed by Mayring (2010). This analysis involves several steps. Firstly, I developed a clear corpus of the material under analysis: my qualitative interview data. Secondly, I transcribed the recordings in order to conduct my analysis. I used the transcription program Amberscript for this task, and later relistened to the recordings to avoid transcription mistakes. In a next step, the data were analyzed. Mayring (2010) distinguishes three forms of data interpretation: summarization, explication, or structuring. For the focus of this thesis, structuring content analysis is most relevant, in which specific aspects of the material are extracted and evaluated based on predefined categories. Typically, this allows representing the entire content of the text (ibid.); however, for this thesis, redundant information was disregarded.

To properly code the data, I imported them into MAXQDA. As there has been little research on the topic before, I decided to inductively develop the codes. Eventually, this led to organization of the data in the following three main categories:

- C1: Inspiration
- C2: Opportunities
- C3: Challenges

These three categories had several subcategories, all of which were thoroughly defined through the provision of anchor examples and detailed coding rules for each sub-category (ibid., p. 69ff). The following table is an example for the coding guide I used:

Table 1: Coding Guide

Main category	**Sub-category**	**Definition**	**Example**	**Rule**
1. Opportunities	1.1 Type of Activism 1.1.1 Planting	Statements indicating individuals' involvement in planting campaigns.	"So imagine we from the school, we went to university and we planted trees in Zakho university."	A statement falls into the "Planting" category if it describes individuals or groups actively planting vegetation in a specific location.
2. Inspiration	2.1 Family/ Childhood Experiences	Statements indicating that individuals attribute their inspiration for activism to personal experiences within their family or childhood.	"I will show you, uh, the picture of the tree I planted when I was a kid after this then. Because those trees inspired me to create Yak Dar, which means one tree in Kurdish language."	A statement falls in this category if the interlocutors attribute activism inspiration to personal family or childhood events.

3.2 Limitations

While I carefully chose this research design in order to answer my research question, it nevertheless entails several limitations. One of my sub-research questions asks to place the Kurdish environmental movement in the KRI among other Kurdish environmental movements. However, as my research design differs from the methodologies in the studies used in Bakur, Rojava, and Rojhelat, it is impossible to make true comparisons. Instead, I can only draw some more general conclusions. In order to properly compare the different regions, a quantitative

comparative design would be necessary. However, it is not feasible to conduct such a research design within the limited scope of a master's thesis.

Additionally, my sample entails limitations as well. I was only able to talk to people proficient in English, which limited my interviews to well-educated individuals living in cities, often expats who returned to Kurdistan. This means I was not able to include the voices of farmers in remote villages, who might have conducted their own forms of environmental activism and protection of their land. Furthermore, my security protocol, discussed extensively in the next section on ethics, restricted me from traveling to more remote areas due to the volatile security situation. This is especially the case for the border region with Turkey, where trans-border activism might be more likely to occur. Indigenous farmers and peasants often are a cornerstone of climate justice movements in the Global South, also with regard to transnational movements (Claeys & Delgado Pugley, 2017). Hence, this restriction is particularly unfortunate. In addition to that, this respective region is also the one where climate change most heavily intersects with armed conflict, which can have an impact on how people respond to ecological degradation. Further research on climate activism or also climate adaptation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is needed to understand how these groups deal with climate change and how they fight against it.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

As I was coming as a foreigner to the rather complex political landscape of the KRI, it was crucial for me to approach the data collection with sensitivity, thorough planning, and adherence to ethical guidelines. Naturally, I took measures to protect the safety of both myself as a researcher and the participants. While the topic of my research is not particularly sensitive in the KRI and the government typically allows Western researchers to conduct their work, I nevertheless had to ensure that I avoided actions that could cause harm to anybody – either through my presence, but also through the outcomes of my work. Hence, I heavily relied on local knowledge to navigate my research as much as my general movement in Kurdistan (Cramer et al., 2011). Before my research stay was approved, I also developed detailed security guidelines to obtain security clearance from the faculty. Precautions I took included, among other things, avoiding military installations, staying within the cities and establishing a system with regular check-ins with both my institution back home as well as friends and family.

On the ground, I collaborated closely with my internship organization, the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr (UKH) and my contact person Dr. Thomas Schmidinger in particular. Most importantly, I relied on my local contacts to travel around safely by car, as the traffic situation was the sole security danger I experienced, particularly when it came to inter-city travels. Luckily, my contacts could provide me with recommendations for reliable drivers. While in the field, I made only one adjustment to my security protocol after consulting with my supervisor, Dr. Mathijs van Leeuwen. I originally planned to only conduct research in Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. However, I also got two contacts in Halabja and hence also decided to travel there – after receiving security clearance.

In addition, my preparation for fieldwork in a region that the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has classified as Code Orange, which means that travel should only take place "if necessary" (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2024), included an ongoing risk assessment. The attacks of October 7 and the subsequent war on Gaza have also impacted various other Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq and the KRI in particular, which has long been a venue for US-Iran proxy conflicts (Washington Kurdish Institute, 2023). On January 15, 2024, this culminated in the deaths of four civilians when an Iranian ballistic missile targeted a house in Erbil (Human Rights Watch, 2024). During my research stay, which lasted from March to May, the KRI remained fully calm. Only once, the Netherlands closed its consulate in Erbil for two days "due to the possibility of an Iranian attack on Israel" (ANF, 2024). During this time, I remained extra cautious and in close contact with local sources to navigate my movement.

While security was my main ethical concern, it was equally important for me to fully comply with general ethical guidelines in qualitative research. "Confidentiality, anonymity [and] data security" (Misoch, 2019, p. 19) were highly important for my research. This entails that I fully informed my participants about the research's purpose, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time (ibid.). I also implemented rigorous data protection measures to guarantee the safety of my participants. This means that I deleted recordings from my phone device as soon as possible and stored them in a protected folder on my computer. Simultaneously, I anonymized my transcripts to ensure that no inference on the original participants is possible (Berkovic, 2023).

Lastly, my own position as a white researcher coming to the Middle East – and the privilege of this positionality – is something I have to reflect on. In the case of Kurdistan, this is exceptionally relevant. Since their fight against ISIS, Kurds, and Kurdish female fighters in particular, have often been depicted from an Orientalist perspective in the West (Dean, 2019; Yesiltas, 2022). It was hence crucial for me to avoid exoticizing Kurdish struggles. Instead, I aimed to approach my interlocutors with openness and respect. This is also deeply interwoven with the constant reflection of my own biases and assumptions and their potential influence on the research process. In Vienna, I have attended various protests against the Turkish occupation of Northern Syria and have been in close proximity to people engaged in leftist pro-Kurdish activism. This certainly shapes how I understand the Kurdish cause in general. Yet, it also requires me to acknowledge my own point of view and, more importantly, to not impose my believes upon the findings or interpret something into the data simply because I want it to be there.

4. The case – Kurdish Ecologies

4.1 Kurdish Environmentalism

Kurdish groups in Turkey (Bakur), Syria (Rojava) and Iran (Rojhelat) have long approached environmental questions under a climate justice lens, although without specifically using that term. What unites all parts of Kurdistan except Iraq is the fact that Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iran understand the fight against environmental destruction as part of their broader fight for freedom – and that they have responded to their (environmental) oppression even with "cross-border" movements (Conde, 2016). Environmental activism in the region has been studied especially where it has been most prominent: in Turkey (Dinc, 2022; Knudsen, 2016), Syria (Hammy & Miley, 2022; Hunt, 2019) and Iran (Hassaniyan, 2021). In all three countries, forms of disruptive environmental activism were or are present. However, environmentalism as much as any other form of Kurdish civil society is deeply affected by the historical and material context of the respective countries (Jasim, 2022). Hence, this chapter will not only outline the current state of environmental activism in Bakur, Rojava and Rojhelat. I will also briefly discuss political opportunity structures that the Kurdish environmental movement could seize.

The most-studied Kurdish environmental movement is the one in Bakur (North Kurdistan, Turkey). The environmental activism in Bakur is clearly linked to the Kurdish question because it stems from the group's own marginalization. Dinç (2022) argues that as a marginalized group, Kurds in Turkey are hit by environmental degradation harder than dominant groups in the country. Under the guise of accessing natural resources or combating rebellion, Kurdish lands have long been exploited in Turkey (ibid.). This is especially apparent with regard to Turkish water hegemony: For instance, Turkish dam-building projects are framed by oppositional Kurds as "not only seeking to dominate Syria and Iraq on water issues, but the Kurds as well" (Conde, 2016, p. 53). These projects are regarded as "antagonistic to Kurds, but also to the poor, whether Kurdish or not, religious minorities, neighboring states and peoples, and the environment" (ibid., 2016, p. 54). As a response to this, Kurds organized across the borders of Turkey and Syria to fight the project. Knudsen (2016) also argues that environmentalism in Turkey in general heavily intersects with questions of identity and

nationalism – even when it tries to present itself as “post-politics” to the broader society (ibid.).

One concrete example for this form of environmental activism is the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement (MEP), which is composed of activists opposing Turkish dam constructions and describes itself as “work[ing] in the Kurdish autonomous region of North Kurdistan, in Turkey, to integrate ecological principles into the regional movement for political freedom and women’s rights” (Local Futures, 2018). It has evolved from a two-decade-old network of environmental activists into an organization that promotes ecological councils within the framework of democratic confederalism. MEM engages in activism, promotes ecological awareness and develops policies for ecologically sensitive solutions within a solidarity economy. Key issues for the movement include opposing the construction of the Ilisu dam, addressing the environmental impact of the oil industry and fighting deforestation. The movement also aims to inspire by proposing the ecological reconstruction of Kobanê after its destruction by ISIS (Hunt, 2019, p. 8f). In essence, it aims to establish a needs-based system of resource distribution that ensures a minimum standard of living for all (ibid., 2019, 20f). At their core, the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement's initiatives exemplify a broader Kurdish strategy of intertwining environmentalism with political and cultural struggle, a theme that continues and evolves also within other Kurdish regions.

One of these regions is Syria. During the civil war in the country, a political opportunity opened up for self-governance of the Kurdish-inhabited regions. In 2012, the Syrian military withdrew from the Kurdish regions in North-East-Syria, which paved the way for the creation of the first autonomous administrations at the grassroots level, culminating in the formation of the Rojava Cantons as governing bodies in January 2014 (Burç, 2020, p. 327). Environmentalism is a core aspect of this revolution; it dates back to the concept of *social ecology* which was first developed by Murray Bookchin who argued that “nearly every ecological issue is also a social issue” (Bookchin, 2005, p. 32). It was his book *The Ecology of Freedom* that inspired the founder of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, to develop the Kurdish principle of democratic confederalism that extends beyond the nation-state and focuses on three principles: “direct democracy, gender equality and ecological sustainability” (Hunt, 2019, p. 8). By drawing on Öcalan, Hammy and Miley argue that “building an ecological society requires an assault on

hierarchy in all its forms, and the construction of alternative, direct-democratic institutions capable of transcending the system of the capitalist nation-state" (Hammy & Miley, 2022, p. 1). In the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North-East-Syria (DAANES), Rojava, environmentalism is considered part of the administration's ideology. The strive for democratic confederalism in the administration has even been considered "a social revolution with ecology at its heart in a most unpromising context" (Hunt, 2019, p. 7).

Similar ideas are present in Kurdish environmental activism in Rojhelat, the Kurdish part of Iran. The strategies and tactics of Rojhelati Kurds can be considered as "subaltern environmentalism" (Hassaniyan, 2021). It was largely in response to the Iranian state's harmful military, economic and development activities which were threatening the region's natural environment that environmental activism in Rojhelat began in the late 1980s. Equal to the MEP or other Kurdish environmental groups in Bakur and Rojava, Rojhelat's movement aims to raise awareness for environmental issues and promote the principles of direct democracy, gender equality and ecological well-being within a needs-based economy. The activists engaging in these actions face significant repression in Iran (ibid., 2021, p. 944). In June 2023, for instance, three Kurdish environmentalists were detained two days after they attempted to extinguish a fire in the Kosalan Mountains (IranWire, 2023). Nevertheless, Kurdish environmental activism in Iran continues to confront the regime's ecological policies, while equally advocating for Kurdish national rights (Hassaniyan, 2021, p. 944f).

The environmental movements in Rojava (Syria), Bakur (Turkey) and Rojhelat (Iran) are characterized by a number of similarities despite their local idiosyncrasies. In contrast, only little is known about the people engaged in environmental activism in Bashur, Iraqi-Kurdistan. One study, conducted by Wiktor-Mach et al. (2023), argues that Bashuri Kurds rather engage in "dutiful environmentalism". In practice, this looks as follows: Activists do not draw on protests or strikes, but rather follow a non-controversial agenda through NGO work, where they do not challenge existing governmental frames. Activists mostly conduct awareness-raising campaigns and focus on education, but are unable to press for broader societal change. This corresponds with the fact that activists face significant risks, also including state repression, as soon as they are in conflict with powerful local interests, such as the oil industry, or openly criticize the government (ibid.)

4.2 The KRI's Political Ecology

In his book, *Making Political Ecology*, Neumann (2014, p. 9) argues that "the human transformation of natural ecosystems cannot be understood without consideration of the political and economic structures and institutions within which the transformations are embedded". In short, this means that the context of the KRI and its institutions need to be examined in order to make meaningful assertions about climate change and the KRI's environmental movement. A mere description of the KRI's current political landscape falls short, however, if it does not take the colonized status of Kurds into account – even in the Iraqi part of Kurdistan, where Kurds have the biggest autonomy. In Kurdish Studies, considering all of a Kurdistan an "internal colony" has a long tradition. The term was first claimed by Beşikçi (2004) who was inspired by the work of Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, a political activist and Kurdish leader. In his work, Beşikçi (2004) argues that Kurdistan is occupied by four nation-states – Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria – and that the way Kurds have been treated in these countries has put them in a disadvantaged position in each state. This entails that:

> Kurdistan is neither a full nor a semi-colony. The political status of the Kurdish nation is far less than the status of a colony […] there is no doubt that, like most colonized regions, Kurdistan's stores of raw materials, its vast natural wealth in petroleum, copper, coal and phosphate, soil, forests, and water are exploited and marketed for industry (Beşikçi, 2004, p. 19).

Following this understanding, Beşikçi maintains that Kurdistan is "not even a colony". Classic colonies such as Algeria, he argues, typically have both a name and clear land borders. The colonizers as much as the colonized are aware that the respective people exist there. Yet, all these things are not clear for Kurdistan: In Turkey, for instance, the mere existence of Kurds is denied (Beşikçi, 1991). Today, this perspective remains entirely relevant for both Iran and Turkey, where Kurds are devoid of any territorial autonomy. Although Syria and Iraq present varying degrees of Kurdish self-governance, a deeper analysis reaffirms Beşikçi's assertion: Neither Rojava in Syria nor the KRI have an unequivocally delineated territory. "Even in Southern Kurdistan, Kurdistan Regional Government [in Iraq], it is a federation, but we do not know where exactly the borders fall", Beşikçi said in a 2018 talk. "It is your territory, your rule

will reign there, but where? That is an issue of drawing boundaries, that is why we say, Kurdistan is not even a colony, as colonies have established borders” (Beşikçi, 2018). The unified political and military responses of Iran, Iraq and Turkey to the 2017 independence referendum in the KRI have equally demonstrated that the KRI still operates within the framework of an integral or internal colony (Bezwan, 2021, p. 21).

Nevertheless, most scholars describe the current system of the KRI as a “de-facto-state” (see Jüde, 2017; MacQueen, 2015) within the territory of Iraq. The establishment of this de-facto-statehood goes back to 1991 and the aftermath of the Second Gulf War. In 1991, Western Coalition Forces – led by the US and the UK – established a no-fly zone through the Kurdish-inhabited areas of North of Iraq. By means of the no-fly-zone, Iraqi Kurds could be sheltered from Saddam Hussein’s forces in the South and establish their autonomy (The Kurdish Project, n.d.). In the years before, Iraqi-Kurdistan was one of the main venues of the Iraq-Iran war with devastating effects on the Kurdish population. From 1988 to 1989, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi military conducted the "Anfal" operation against the Kurdish population and other non-Arab minorities in Iraq. The aim of this operation was to eradicate these groups and to arabize northern Iraq. Today, the mass killings and destruction have been recognized by the United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway as genocide under the 1948 UN Genocide Convention (KGD, 2022). It is difficult to estimate the numbers of those deported and killed during this time. Human Rights Watch speaks of 50.000 to 100.000 people (Human Rights Watch, 1993), Kurdish sources argue that it was between 180,000 and 200,000 people (KGD, 2022).

After 1991, the region continued to experience instability, political unrest and war. In 1994, a power-sharing agreement between the two main parties of the Kurdistan Region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), broke down, which triggered a civil war and lead to separate administrations in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The conflict continued until 1998, when the PUK and PDK signed the US-brokered Washington Agreement, ending the civil war (The Kurdish Project, n.d.). After the 2003 US invasion, in which the Kurds allied with Western forces, Iraqi Kurdistan gained significant political and economic power, eventually becoming a semi-autonomous region under Iraq's 2005 constitution (Wahab, 2023). During this time, the KRI rapidly grew, it alleviated poverty and

enhanced living standards throughout the country (Salim et al., 2019, p. 41). Yet, it also continued to establish an increasingly vulnerable economic system that is divided into two sectors, an advanced oil-based sector and a very small non-oil sector. The first sector is oil production and oil-related projects, which account for more than 90 percent of exports, government revenues and more than half of gross domestic product (GDP). The second sector includes all non-oil activities, such as agriculture, industry, manufacturing, construction, tourism, trade, and services (Alzobaidee, 2015, p. 6). Its dependence on oil revenues is problematic for the KRI, especially because it fosters the region's dependency on Turkey, one of the key costumers. In addition to that, disputes with Baghdad over oil revenues and falling oil prices after the war against ISIS starting in 2014 further strained the region's economy (Wahab, 2023). Despite its de-facto-statehood, the KRI has struggled to break free from this reliance.

Erbil, the KRI's capital and main economic hub, has long striven towards "Dubaification"(King, 2013, p. 25). Before the surge of ISIS pushed the region towards economic crisis, the city had already attempted to present itself as a "New" or "Second Dubai" for years – attempting to diversify its economy from just an oil-based sector towards tourism and business (Woolf, 2010). This diversification failed; instead, the ruling elites' continuous dependency on oil has weakened civil society and the extractivism of oil is used as a means of social control (Tinti, 2021, p. 153ff). By drawing on Kuruüzüm (2022, p. 39f), Wiktor-Mach et al. (2023, p. 202) argue that the KRI can be characterized as a "capitalist frontier" and a "new resource zone" within the global system. This designation severely limits its ability to explore alternative economic models, particularly in terms of sustainability and reducing dependence on fossil fuels. The region's political leaders in particular have capitalized on this situation, securing profitable contracts and benefiting financially, exemplified by entities such as the Kurdistan Board of Investment (ibid.).

Aside from Kurdistan's oil-based economy, its overall political system is still divided alongside the lines that were developed in the 1990s: The PUK controls the province Sulaymaniyah, and the PDK controls Erbil and Dohuk. As early as 2013, the system within the KRI – especially in the areas controlled by the PDK – has been described as a "managed democracy" (Pollock & Knights, 2013), which is a system that "controls society while providing the appearance of

democracy. Its main characteristics are as follows: a strong presidency and weak institutions and state control of the media; control over elections allows elites to legitimize their decisions and visible short-term effectiveness and long-term inefficiency" (Petrov, 2005). After the PDK-led independence referendum 2017, where the KRI attempted to achieve full independence, democratic practices further declined within both the PDK and the PUK, while the family-based rule within the two parties was strengthened (Crisis Group, 2019). "[O]ne of their major problems is following the political parties' instructions and being incapable of crossing their lines", Hakeem (2017, p. 154) argues. This already demonstrates the limited political opportunities for civil societies in the Kurdistan Region. In general, the referendum of 2017 had a disastrous outcome for the KRI. Its government lost control over various parts of the disputed territories, including important cities such as Kirkuk, and found themselves at odds with almost every global regional and international player – contrary to their belief, they did not receive Western support for their independence, despite their fight against ISIS. At the same time, intra-Kurdish rivalry between the PDK and PUK increased, leaving institutions and parties in crisis (Crisis Group, 2019). Hence, the political landscape in the KRI presents a peculiar case of autocratic tendencies under the guise of democracy, which complicates the work and influence of civil society actors.

4.3 Climate Change in the KRI

The restrictive surroundings for civil society actors – including climate activists – is especially troubling considering the region's vulnerability to climate change. Between 1992 and 2014, the Erbil area alone has seen significant temperature increase in spring and summer, spring also saw a significant decrease in rainfall. As a result of these changes in temperature and rainfall, more than 50% of the area's vegetation cover has been lost, mainly due to the effects of climate change (Khayyat et al., 2020). In other cities in the region, Sulaymaniyah, for instance, average annual temperatures have also risen between 1973 and 2015 – in both summer and in winter (H. Amin Ahmad, 2022). In Erbil, increasing temperatures manifested in almost 50 degrees in summer 2023 (Kurdistan24, 2023). It is more than likely that future summers will experiences similar temperatures. As of June, Iraq's Southern parts are already experiencing a heatwave of about 50 degrees (Kurdistan24, 2024b).

The key problem the Kurdistan region has already faced and is facing more critically in the future is water scarcity. Water scarcity is also the issue where it becomes most evident that the climate crisis in Kurdistan is attributable not only to climatic changes but also to political conflicts and geopolitical claims. The KRI's main water resources all originate in Turkey and Iran – and both countries exercise control over these resources (Abdulrahman, 2018; Williams, 2020). This is profound not only in the Kurdistan Region, but all over Iraq. In a survey conducted across the regions of Anbar, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salahaddin, it was found that 60% of farmers had to either reduce the amount of land they cultivated or cut back on water usage in the 2023 growing season. A significant majority (80%) of those surveyed within the agricultural sectors of Ninewa and Kirkuk reported a necessity to cut back on their food spending in the last year (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023).

Water scarcity in the region can be ascribed to a combination of the climate crisis as much as bureaucratic mismanagement, and the region's complex relationship to Turkey and Iran (Arif, 2023, p. 2). Especially Turkey uses its strategic position as a means to exercise control over the region and position itself as a "dominant power in the Middle East by regulating hydro politics" (Hamidi & Mozdkhah, 2023, p. 36). By building dams that control the flow of water into Syria and Iraq – in areas where Kurds are the majority – Turkey has exposed the two regions to risks that intersect with security, politics and the environment (Golmohammadi, 2021). At the same time, "hydraulic development has formed of the important components of the modernization process in Turkey [and] thereby playing a significant role in its state- and nation-making process" (Conker, 2018, p. 877). Turkish water hegemony is especially visible in the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Güneydogu Anddolu Projesi, GAP). Starting in the 1990s, the GAP was, among other things, used in order to combat the rise of the PKK: Through economic development, the influence of the PKK should have been diminished (Jongerden et al., 2021). These attempts have, however, failed and instead the dam today is "being used as a tool of control and coercion of people and land" (ibid., p. 397). Iran employs similar strategies in order to secure its water resources. As Abbas et al. (2018) demonstrate, the flow of the KRI's main water resource, the Lower Zab, has significantly reduced over recent years and will likely continue to do so in the future. Abdulrahman (2018) goes even further and argues that the Lower Zab has almost completely dried up in recent years due to Iranian dam projects.

At the same time, climate change intersects with armed conflict in the KRI as much as in other parts of Kurdistan. This dates back to the different wars the region underwent in the last few decades. During the Anfal operation, environmental concerns played an important role. As Ahram argues, “efforts to alter the landscape of northern Iraq, especially through hydrological engineering, played a key role in intensifying and escalating killings of Kurds” (2023, p. 2). At the same time, the Anfal was also the continuation of a process to modify the ecology of Iraqi-Kurdistan. After the genocide, various agricultural lands were left behind, soil and water was contaminated because of chemical weapons – this especially affected rural populations. Much of nature was getting so contaminated that it changed rural life permanently because people were simply not able to return due to the large amount of ecological violence (ibid., p.18ff). The Anfal aimed at “civilizing” the resisting Kurds and this “civilizing requires not just changing people, but altering their fundamental relationship with the nature” (ibid, p. 20). Today, similar practices are used in the regular Turkish invasions of the KRI, for instance through the deliberate deforestation of villages (Medya News, 2022). It has long been argued that this destruction of nature is part of the Turkish warfare in Kurdistan, both inside and outside the officially recognized borders of the Turkish state (Kurtay, 2023; Ulukisa, 2024). Ulukisa (2024), for example, claims that the Turkish state deliberately uses fire in places where Kurds, Alevis and other minorities live in Turkey, in order to destroy their livelihood. Kurtay (2023) goes even further when he claims that, “[t]he destruction of nature in Kurdistan is part of the genocidal policy prevailing there”. In recent years, this policy has shifted from the Northern part of Kurdistan further to the Southern part (ibid.).

It is exactly this intersection between armed conflict, ecological degradation and the ongoing fight for liberalization that makes the Kurdish case noteworthy with regard to environmental movements. In essence, this chapter shows that the KRI offers little room for civil society actors and activists. I also demonstrated that the KRI’s heavy dependence on oil revenues hinders sustainable development and exacerbates its vulnerability to climate change. In addition, geopolitical dynamics, particularly the control of water resources by neighboring countries such as Turkey and Iran, further complicate the KRI's environmental and economic stability – and this may also influence activists, potentially limiting their scope of action or prompting them to seek alternative strategies to address these challenges.

5. Findings

In the following chapter, I summarize and describe my findings in detail. Eventually, they are also connected to political opportunities theory and the most dominant narratives in climate activism – globally and in Kurdistan. The chapter begins by discussing the inspirations of the activists, examining what has motivated them to become active and why they continue their work. The second sub-chapter deals with the difficulties and challenges activists face, by focusing on civil society, government and outside players. In the last chapter the political opportunities the respective actors identify and seize are described.

In general, activists make no connection between climate activism and the fight for Kurdish liberation; other factors – women's rights, democracy – also only play minor roles in their work. There are also little to no references to issues such as social justice or human rights, and hence, there is no evidence that ecological degradation is framed within a climate justice framework among Bashuri Kurdish activists. While some of the interviewees acknowledge the importance of these topics, they mostly consciously do not incorporate them in their activism, as they frame their work from an environment-first perspective. This absence of a climate justice perspective can at least partly be ascribed to the fact the political class in the KRI rhetorically commits to fighting climate change. This means that "[o]fficials agree at least to meet and listen to activists" (Wiktor-Mach et al., 2023, p. 212). The interlocutors, hence, make us of this relative openness by refraining from politicizing their fight against climate change. On a personal level, however, many of the activists are aware that regional players such as Turkey and Iran, as well as their own government's corruption, are hindering the fight against climate change.

In terms of their personal motivation, the majority of interlocutors identify the desire to set an example for others as a significant factor, or understand themselves as fighting for a cause that is global and not particularly Kurdish. Growing up close to nature and family also plays an important role in the formation of their environmental consciousness. Sometimes they even seem to see environmental activism as an escape from the harsh realities of everyday life, a way to create space for political action in a context of political oppression. This manifests in their often very practical actions, such as doing grassroots or NGO work that centers activities like plastic collection or cleaning campaigns, while also giving awareness workshops. The

majority of the interlocutors consciously use this perspective, as it enables them to work around the repressive system of the KRI and the various political constraints they face for their activism. Being active on such a local level can give them a sense of agency and the feeling that they are able to make an impact – especially as political opportunities are limited on broader regional or even national levels.

5.1 Inspiration

Bashuri Kurds have various different inspirations for becoming environmental activists. The word *inspiration* has a double meaning here. On the one hand, it refers to the variety of things that interviewees reported as having inspired them to care about the environment, but it also refers to the reasons why they act and stay active despite difficult circumstances. While there are several recurring codes, the categories of (1) becoming role models, (2) global citizenship, (3) family and childhood memories, (4) experiences abroad, and (5) the poor environmental situation in the KRI are the main reasons for interlocutors to become active. Their Kurdish identity plays only a minor role in this context, despite the fact that ecological degradation in the KRI is linked to the oppression and marginalization of Kurds. This suggests that while a climate justice perspective could link environmental issues to broader struggles, the current focus of Kurdish environmental activists remains primarily on immediate environmental concerns, and so do their inspirations for acting.

5.1.1 Example-Setting

Seven interlocutors argue that becoming an example for others serves as a key motivation and inspiration for them. Repeatedly, they report that their work on the environment gives them a sense of personal fulfillment and satisfaction. They particularly stress how important it is for them to inspire children to become environmentalists themselves. Hence, they often consider themselves role models who are influencing others to come and support environmental initiatives. Two interlocutors (INTERVIEW 1, INTERVIEW 4) also refer to themselves as “seeds”, arguing that their ideas spread among others, which gives them a sense of joy and fulfillment and thereby motivates them to remain active as environmentalists. Seeing that others also started to act after being inspired by them serves as a powerful motivator.

> When I started, it's just only me and two, three, four people. No more. But now there's so many people working on it, that make me so happy indeed. Because we are like a seed, we spread. We spread it.
>
> (INTERVIEW 1, 28.03.2024)

> But the thing that was very, very motivating for me was when I go to the streets and a lot of children come to me, they remember me. They say we collect plastic for you. It's like, very, very big thing for me that I can move the pupils. […] And they hugging me, you know, in every, every place. It's like making me so happy.
>
> (INTERVIEW 7, 07.04.2024)

One activist also talks about the special feeling of accomplishment as a motivational tool. Starting an organization and coordinating volunteers to clean up the rivers makes him feel heroic. Thus, doing something for nature gives him a sense of purpose that can be transferred to others who then become active themselves. But this sense of fulfillment may also derive from the limited opportunities for political expression in the KRI, which makes it difficult for the interlocutors to express themselves. As I show in detail in chapter 4.2.3, there is only little room for political activism; hence, finding loopholes in which meaningful action can take place gives the activists a rare moment of agency.

The same participant also says that he tries to make his environmental activities look fun in order to motivate others to come back, and that he gets a sense of joy when this method works. He often organizes his river cleaning activities alongside hikes or swims to motivate people to join him and his group. In this way, he ensures that they become activists themselves and thereby strengthen the environmental movement. INTERVIEW 11 also reports that he attempts to inspire others to become multipliers themselves through fun activities.

> We just tell [the volunteers], like, your participation in that may have a huge impact on the living for these turtles in here and also for the whole nature around there. So if you come, you would also feel good about it. It's just a thing, you know, you have. You go to work for five days a week, but you feel that you have not accomplished anything. But then when you do something for nature voluntarily, then you feel like I'm a fucking hero, you know? Excuse my language.
>
> (INTERVIEW 10, 16.04.2024)

These findings reveal rather individualistic ideas about environmental activism, which might stem from the limited political opportunities available to activists. Because it is difficult to organize in political groups without experiencing repression (chapter 4.2.3), individualistic activities are often the only way to have an impact, even if that impact is just having a clean park. Hence, community-saving or liberating their lands and people only plays a minor role for the interlocutors, as they do not even think this is an achievable option for them. It is also not social or material issues in combination with environmental issues that motivate the interlocutors to become active, as is prominent with other environmentalist groups among colonial populations (see Satheesh 2021, p.51f). There is also no reference to the most marginalized communities effected by climate change, as among climate justice activists (see Porter et al., 2020, p. 293). Instead, they are driven by a sense of personal fulfillment and a desire to inspire others, especially children, to join the environmental cause. In such a limiting political context, this is one of the few ways for participants to feel a sense of agency. On a discursive level, this already demonstrates how much the Kurdish environmental movement in Bashur differs from those in other parts of Kurdistan and the broader Global South.

5.1.2 "Environmentalism and Climate Work to Me Has No Boundary": Global Citizenship

This notion also becomes visible in the second big inspiration for the interlocutors: the idea of being a global citizen, a *human of the world.* Eight interlocutors make statements indicating that this serves as a crucial aspect for them. In essence, the activists' care for the environment does not stem from their Kurdish identity; instead, they argue that environmental activism needs to transcend regional and national borders. In short, caring for the environment is not simply a duty for Kurds, but for all human beings. Some interlocutors also express a sense of global solidarity, in the sense that actions being taking in one part of the world can have a strong impact on other places of the world. They frequently refer to their or other people's humanity and understand environmentalism as a collective human responsibility. This sense of global activism may also stem from the KRI's political system, which makes it difficult for people to organize locally (again, discussed in detail in section 4.2.3). Given the many constraints on local activism, framing climate change as a global phenomenon could be a necessary strategy to provide activists with more room for maneuver.

> So that's why of course, it one big part of it, but not just because you are Kurd, but for you are a part of nature, and you are human, as all the other species and so on.
>
> (INTERVIEW 3, 27.03. 2024)

> And I'm glad somebody like you is studying something like that. It's actually related to all humanities, not just Kurds.
>
> (INTERVIEW 4, 27.03. 2024)

> I was born in Halabja, as you know, four hours away. I've lived all my life away, but I came here four years ago and to me any village is the same. Any land you protect is the same. […] As I said, I can go to Namibia tomorrow and do something. So no, environmentalism and climate work to me has no boundary.
>
> (INTERVIEW 8, 30.03.2024)

As the quotes above demonstrate, nationalistic ideas play no or only a minor role in the environmentalism of the interlocutors. When asked, eight interviewees briefly mentioned their Kurdishness as an inspiration, but not – as is common with other Kurdish environmental movements – by linking the destruction of the environment to their own marginalization, but rather by preserving Kurdistan's beauty. There are also some critical elaborations of the quote "Kurds have no friends but the mountains", where interviewees argue that Kurds currently simply do not take care of the mountains: The mountains actually "don't have any friends but the Kurds either" (INTERVIEW 3), stressing that it is a duty to protect those places that have sheltered you in the past.

> This is actually a part of like, what makes me to be someone who loves this planet. Actually, specifically, it was my country and the nature who I live with. You know, if I didn't solve the beauty of my land, of the beauty of my nature, maybe I will not realize or not get affection to continue something. So yeah, some somehow it did and somehow didn't, but actually there's a part of it.
>
> (INTERVIEW 11, 25.04.2024)

> Kurds are those people who live in this region, in these mountains and the relationship with the nature and so on. Like if you don't have that nature, you don't have that environment, like you are literally erasing yourself. It's like you are gone. If your nature is

> gone, you are gone too. So, for ages, for hundreds of years, for thousands of years, Kurds have taken refuge in the mountain because that was the safe place for them from being killed by the Ottomans, by the Persian Empire, by the all of these things that happened in the past and recently, by the Saddam Hussein regime, by the Baath regime or by ISIS and so on. So, it just doesn't feel right, like something that has helped you to survive all this time, now you are making it disappear or you are destroying it.
>
> (INTERVIEW 3, 27.03. 2024)

In the last statement, INTERVIEW 3 reflects on a sense of betrayal and irony. The mountains that have served as protection in the past are now harmed by the same people they once sheltered. In this sense, the subtext of this quote does link the environmental question to the Kurdish question – by criticizing the very fact that Kurds today no longer make this connection. From this point of view, it is even possible to argue that the environmental question was deliberately separated from the Kurdish question after the emergence of de facto statehood, when the mountains began to play a less important role in the lives of the Bashuri Kurds. In chapter 4.2, I discuss in more detail how the Anfal genocide led to the depopulation of many villages in the mountains, through which the connection between Kurds and their homeland, the places that used to shelter them, was openly destroyed.

This shows that Kurdish environmental activism in Bashur today is very different from activism in Bakur, Rojava, and Rojhelat, where activism is still linked to Kurdish identity. Two interviews argue that this difference can be explained by the different status Kurds have in the KRI. In Turkey or Iran, one interlocutor argues, Kurds have two problems "climate and politic[s]" (INTERVIEW 8). Hence, even if they truly only care about the environment, they are immediately suspected of being in a "political party" (ibid.). This corresponds to Jasim's (2023, p. 16) argument that the Kurds in Iraq, through their de facto autonomy, foreground political aspirations that go beyond the Kurdish question alone.

5.1.3 "Reeds, Birds, Grass, Wheat Fields ": Family and Childhood Experiences

In addition to this idea of global citizenship that transcends nationalistic efforts, interviewees also report that their family and childhood experiences play an important role in their later environmental activism. This refers especially to childhood memories and lasting examples set

by family members, which are central for six activists. Many interviewees mention tender memories of their past, when they were growing up close to nature and recall living near rivers, playing in their streams or caring for animals. These experiences leave them with a deep connection to the natural world. At the same time, they emphasize how they used to witness older generations, such as their grandparents and parents, practicing sustainable lifestyles. This manifests, for example, in the reuse of resources or the maintenance of gardens. These early lessons in environmental stewardship and closeness to nature sparked a lifelong interest in protecting the environment, many interlocutors argue.

> And another thing that affected her is her grandfather and grandmother. She said, like the older generation, when, for example, I look at them how they live it in the villages and they didn't allow to have lots of waste and they reused it. For example, the fruit is the things that they bring it to the visitors. So, she said, this affected me inside my family to be like as them to live environmentally friendly, become an environmental person.
>
> (INTERVIEW 2, 07.04.2024)

> I was a journalist, war reporter for 15 years, and I saw a lot of conflict, destruction of human life, cities, villages, rivers, environmental areas. So, I always cared about those because I come from a farming family. I grew up in a place like this. Reeds, birds, grass, wheat fields.
>
> (INTERVIEW 8, 30.03.2024)

Similar to the chapter on inspiring others, this shows that the inspirations and motivations of Bashuri activists come from their own individual memories and endeavors rather than from political goals. Their commitment to the environment is linked to saving the places they loved as children and trying to preserve them. There is also a lot of nostalgia in the quotes, references to an undisturbed past and possibly even the wish to return to that past. Given the limited opportunities for activism in the current KRI, this nostalgia can be interpreted as a response to their frustration and disillusionment with the present.

5.1.4 Experience Abroad

Another inspiration for the interlocutors is their experience abroad. Three of the four interviewees who were alive during the Anfal genocide and the civil war in the 1990s have

spent several years outside of Kurdistan, as students or refugees. Abroad, they were exposed to Western ecological initiatives, either in the sense of technical advancement or protest tactics. One interviewee, for instance, discusses how his exposure to organized environmental activism in the UK inspired him to return to Kurdistan and apply the knowledge he had gained. Another interlocutor's experience in Australia showed her how differently from the practices in Iraq systematic recycling processes work. Again, this served as an inspiration for her to return with the newly gained knowledge.

> We have it in many countries, but in the UK, in Nottingham, where I come from, it's huge. I just had a big patch of land and I was working with a eco group in Nottingham, and I learned so much from them: how to how to actually raise awareness, how to see all the problems. Like, I didn't know flying is a big problem. For example, I didn't know building the third runway in Heathrow is a big problem for environments. For example, the lifestyle we are in is not helping the environment.
>
> (INTERVIEW 4, 27.03. 2024)

> My journey with environmental activism started when I first landed in Australia, where I saw how systematic the process was for recycling. I saw those bins segregated for organic matter, for cardboard, for, you know, just like Europe, what you see these days. So I said, wow, this is what we need because Iraq is a trash, you know, a trash place.
>
> (INTERVIEW 6, 20.04.2024)

What these statements show is that Kurdish environmentalists in Bashur organize along different lines than those typically employed by colonized nations who resist the destruction of their environment by big corporations and find local solutions to their problems – something that is a significant feature of environmentalism of the poor and climate justice frameworks. Many ecological initiatives I encountered in the interviews, do not organically grow out of local Kurdish society, but rather are inspired by what members of the diaspora observe abroad and try to implement at home. While this diverges from climate justice frameworks, it reveals similarities with Kurdish environmental activism in Bakur, where diaspora networks also sustain ecological movements. As Sowers (2018, p. 34) writes, "transnational linkages between Kurdish communities in Germany and their home towns brought new dynamism to social and environmental movements in Turkey's southeast". Similarly, those diaspora networks also sustain environmental activism in the KRI. As local

activism is restricted, this connection with the diaspora is an important opportunity seized by activists on the ground. Kurds with foreign passports are less restricted by the political system of the KRI, as they can leave the country much more easily in case difficulties occur. They can also offer additional support and resources.

5.1.5 Plastic and No Water: Bad Environmental Situation

Finally, people also report that the difficult state of the Kurdish environment has inspired them to act. This includes returning to formerly intact ecosystems that were destroyed while the interlocutors were abroad. It also includes the visible effects of climate change in Kurdistan and Iraq; when they learned about or saw damaged lands and communities suffering from the effects, which prompted them to act. Encounters with polluted spaces, such as Dukan Lake in Sulaymaniyah, led to feelings of sadness and sometimes shame about the destroyed environment of Kurdistan. This recognition often comes with the realization that the state of the environment in Kurdistan could also have serious consequences for the people living there, especially in terms of their health, as high levels of pollution, for example, correlate with an increased risk of cancer. Such realizations also play an important role in the interlocutors' becoming activists.

> But every day I faced with these thoughts. But this cannot stop me because I know the reality about the how much Kurdistan Region has been affected by climate change and Iraq. So I cannot be a solid person because I know the reality. […] So I can't I can never be a silent person adjusted these global issues.
>
> (INTERVIEW 5, 28.04.2024)

> But we were doing a very hard job because we had one goal. That is saving our community. Saving our city. Because after I started that, I realized, we are living in a very bad situation, which is our pollution. And right now we are living in a very tragic... I mean, I'm so sorry for sharing the tragic situation because, we reached a level that maybe most of the people will get cancer in maybe in five years or less than it.
>
> (INTERVIEW 11, 25.04.2024)

> I visited to Dukan Lake for swimming in the lake. And when I was visiting there, I see a lot of bottles, plastics. I very I was very sad with seeing this and this idea of [the organization] came from, when I saw it [speaks Kurdish].
>
> (INTERVIEW 9, 28.04.2024)

In general, the activists' descriptions of the environmental problems the KRI faces are consistent with those in the literature outlined before. However, the emphasis is nevertheless a bit surprising: Heat, for instance, – the most direct consequence of the changing climate in the KRI and the one that is felt the most during daily life – is never mentioned explicitly. Instead, only its secondary effects, such as dust or desertification, play a role for the interlocutors. In addition to that, two people directly talk about air quality, seven people discuss waste and plastic, and four people name water scarcity as the main environmental problem. Interestingly, health also plays a crucial role for the activists, with six people mentioning it as a fundamental risk that arises from the intersection of climate change, environmental pollution, and mismanagement.

> So I said, wow, this is what we need because Iraq is a trash, you know, a trash place. Really. I mean, look at us. Look at it around us. You see it, right? [points at trash around us] And it shouldn't be like that.
>
> (INTERVIEW 6, 20.04.2024)

> So right now there's a huge crisis going on, like the cancer rates have gone up, the issues with the kidney diseases have gone up and lots of other, like, uh, skin diseases and stuff. So it's all related to the pollution of the water.
>
> (INTERVIEW 3, 27.03. 2024)

The answers show that environmentalists in the KRI sometimes identify different issues as main problems than those researched in the literature. My chapter on climate change in Iraqi Kurdistan predominantly focuses on two things: heat and water scarcity (Abbas et al., 2018; Abdulrahman, 2018; Adamo et al., 2022). However, the interviews reveal that it is rather the directly man-made pollution that is of greater concern to activists, not the sometimes abstract consequences of climate change itself. This is especially the case with the various health hazards that emerge from climate change, including high cancer rates. Situating the activism

of Iraqi Kurds among Middle Eastern environmentalism in general, however, this focus makes sense as health is among the top priorities of activists there (Sowers, 2018).

At the same time, the prevalence of another fully man-made environmental hazard, the immense pollution of the Kurdish-Iraqi environment with plastic and other types of garbage, is fundamental to seven of the conversations, with activists often complaining about the general population's lack of awareness that they, too, are causing the pollution. The stress of water scarcity, which is mentioned by four activists, however, is consistent with the literature. Sometimes, the interlocutors experience serious distress when they start to do further research on the issue. One participant says that after a project on water pollution, he had to take two weeks off, "because it's just so much and I'm really filled with, what we saw and what we experienced" (INTERVIEW 3). Another participant reports that informing the general population about the risks it is facing due to pollution is a source of motivation for him. He argues that if people knew about the effects of air pollution "all of them will be in the streets and they will not go to sleep again, because […] they are dying in silence […]. If they realize that some of the companies are trying to kill them step by step, they will […] maybe start a revolution about that" (INTERVIEW 11).

In essence, the bad environmental situation and the various threats the Kurdistan Region faces are a source of motivation for many of the interlocutors. They see their environment deteriorating and hence decide that it is important for them to become active and do something against it. Especially health hazards and informing people about the effects of their littering and pollution are relevant for the activists. However, as the next chapter shows, when it comes to tackling these issues, they often do not directly address the main polluters: oil companies.

5.2 Challenges

While the previous chapter focuses on the personal inspirations of the activists, the following chapter deals with the challenges the activists face. First, I discuss the problems activists encounter through their peers. This includes the low level of awareness among the general population and the low priority of climate change and the environment among local people. Secondly, I discuss the challenges activists encounter through outside players, particularly Iran

and Turkey. Lastly, I discuss political constraints inside the KRI, mainly focusing on the interests of economic players and the state. Many activists lack direct personal experience with repression but are well aware of such cases in areas unrelated to climate change, including the arrest of individuals, which leads to them practicing pre-emptive compliance. As I will show in chapter 5.3, this also requires the adoption of an environment-first perspective over a climate justice lens. In addition to that, the interlocutors see how (climate) activists in their surrounding countries – including Iraq – are treated, which makes them even more cautious. Interviewees also often cite the high level of corruption in the KRI as a major problem. This corruption correlates with a lot of mismanagement that makes it difficult to address even those issues that could be solved rather easily – such as building recycling factories or cleaning polluted areas.

5.2.1 "People Don't Care": Constraints Through the Local Population

Nine interviewees argue that the key problem is that the local population has little awareness and takes little action against climate change. This is especially evident in the routine disposal of garbage in rivers, which pollutes crucial water sources. At the same time, there is very little concern for recycling or reducing plastic. As a result, public spaces are not maintained and often directly polluted, for example, through picnics where people do not clean up after themselves ("Like [people are] going to a friendly place, have a beautiful picnic, the family having fun and then they go home. They leave all the garbage behind." INTERVIEW 10). In addition to that, activists report a general lack of education, as people often are unaware of the ways their actions can negatively affect the environment. All of these aspects can significantly impact the life and work of climate activists as it leads to people being skeptical about their work and hence sometimes even being dismissive of environmental initiatives.

> But this idea or this thought, you can see in all of Iraq and Kurdistan region that people believe that every single activities or every everything that you do for environment is not your responsibilities, it's government's responsibility.
>
> (INTERVIEW 5, 28.04.2024)

> Look at the toilets and you know the mindset of the people. Go to a public toilet here and you see, the people don't care.
>
> (INTERVIEW 6, 20.04.2024)

These findings correspond with previous research, where it is argued that “an interest in nature protection for its own sake, as well as an awareness of environmental destruction and climate change, is a new phenomenon among Kurds in Bashur” (Wiktor-Mach, 2023, p. 203). There are several possible explanations for this development. Some activists, especially those of the older generation, report statements such as, “Kurds are agrarian in nature” who “were urbanized” (INTERVIEW 6), stressing a deep former connection between Kurds and their environment as much as nature. Yet, this close connection to nature was deliberately severed during the Anfal genocide and the depopulation of approximately 1.200 villages (Leenzenberg, 2004, p. 379). As Ahram (2023, p. 1) argues, Saddam Hussein’s troops were eager to *civilize,* “to tame unruly nature and those who dwelled in it”. The destruction of Kurdish lives and livelihoods in Bashur was so fundamental that a return to their original society became impossible (ibid., 2023, p. 19). These historical traumas can at least partly explain why the formerly close connection to the environment has been fractured over the last decades, making caring for the environment a “new phenomenon” today.

Aside from these historical explanations, the low level of environmental awareness can also be attributed to the prevalence of issues that KRI residents perceive as much more pressing. Five activists argue that climate change is a low priority for most KRI residents, as other issues affect their lives more severely. They mention the failure to meet basic needs, including salaries, electricity, and water. Indeed, many of these problems appear more demanding at first glance, yet particularly the question of energy is deeply connected to climate change. The KRI only provides its residents with six to seven hours of electricity a day, whereas private generators produce energy more than eight hours a day, which is often costly (Mohammed, 2024). In the KRI's hot summers, where many people rely on constant air conditioning, this could become even more problematic in the future as the region continues to heat up. In Southern Iraq, where the effects of heat and climate change are already much more noticeable, power outages and temperatures over 50 degrees have already sparked protests (Menmy, 2024). Therefore, it is important to continue monitoring the issue to see if it potentially leads to a political opportunity structure in the KRI that activists could seize, especially as the heat and electricity situation worsens.

Currently, activists report that people are still more focused on immediate survival and neglect long-term environmental stability. As a result, climate initiatives are sometimes perceived as irrelevant in the face of more pressing issues, and the general population does not really engage with them.

> Bashur, situation [with regard to] the economy, it's so bad. Yeah. That make the people just think about the economy, you know, because there's no enough money for life. So people re like 'You don't have money. Why do you think of environment, you just go and making money. What are you doing with this nonsense'.
>
> (INTERVIEW 1, 28.03.2024)

> For example, these people, that have oil, they don't give the salary to the teachers. So the first problem to the teacher would be salary not environment.
>
> (INTERVIEW 7, 07.04.2024)

This also affects the support interviewees receive from their families and communities, which is often positive on a personal level, yet overall rather limited. Six people report having received negative feedback for their work from their surroundings, encountering skepticism and mockery. Plenty of activists experience being ridiculed for their work or being considered eccentric outsiders, especially because they prioritize their environmental work over economic stability. One word that is particularly often mentioned in this context by activists is "weird" or "crazy". Another issue is that family members and relatives often do not perceive their NGO work as a real occupation. Instead, activists are pressured to seek stable careers with more constant income. This sort of feedback especially affects those activists who conduct volunteer work. As many community members do not understand their work for the environment, they often appear dismissive towards it; especially in the beginning, the activists receive a lot of resistance. Yet, when long-term effects of their work become visible, this skepticism can turn into admiration.

> And I think that at the beginning they all told us that we are crazy. For example, that I went down on the bridge. There was a bridge linking this part of this part from the water stream in there. And then I just went down to, I think there was one turtle that was stuck in one of the plastic bags. I just wanted to help it out. And then there was a woman coming out with a garbage bag, and she looked at me and just. She's just threw all that garbage

> right next to me. And I'm like, I was looking at my friend. She was looking at me like, what the heck?
>
> (INTERVIEW 10, 16.04.2024)

> When I talked to them, they all thought it was a good idea. And they tell me now, many friends say you actually did it, like those local or foreign friends. They say, we remember you talking about going to live in a village, creating a park among insects and rocks, and that. And you are doing it. But when I started it, they thought I was crazy.
>
> (INTERVIEW 8, 30.03.2024)

In essence, this section demonstrates that the biggest problem the activists fight against is the low priority of climate change and environmentalism in the region. One consequence of this is people frequently polluting their surroundings, especially through garbage dumping. The deliberate destruction of the Iraqi Kurds' livelihoods and connection to nature during the Anfal genocide offers a possible explanation for this. Additionally, the poor economic situation leads to people prioritizing dealing with economic issues first rather than focusing on the environment. That economic problems and ecological problems can be connected, is currently absent from this debate. However, as environmental conditions continue to deteriorate, a new political opportunity structure might open for people to connect ecological question to questions of, for instance, energy supply, as already visible in other parts of Iraq.

5.2.2 "Suli Is Controlled by Iranians, Duhok and Erbil Are Controlled by Turks": Outside Influence

"Suleimani is controlled by Iranians. You go to Duhok and Erbil; there it is controlled by Turks" (INTERVIEW 4), an activist argues in an interview, highlighting another problem prevalent in the KRI: the presence and influence of outside actors. Six interviewees consider the presence of these actors problematic for their work. While climate change in general is a global issue, the speakers report that their region is a particular case for geopolitical tensions, which ultimately leaves them with little room for action, as many decisions are made neither at the Kurdish-regional nor national Iraqi level. According to three activists, this is a particular problem in the field of water supply, which Turkey and Iran control. One interviewee even accuses the two countries of "water stealing" (INTERVIEW 3). Simultaneously, Turkey's and

Iran's deliberate destruction of nature, especially the forests, is mentioned by two interviewees. One participant refers to the 30 km buffer zone Turkey attempts to create inside the Kurdistan Region, where Turkey destroys the natural forests "to prevent the revolutionaries from hiding there" (INTERVIEW 3). In addition to that, frequent Turkish airstrikes in the respective areas make it impossible for the interviewees to visit these places of destruction.

> But with dictatorship countries, like, for example, what are you going to do with Turkey? I'm really exhausted because since 2010 I've been keeping my eyes on these guys, you know what they do? Basically, they're going to choke us. We as Iraqi, Iran is doing the same. If they smell you, you are activist or you're doing something against them or something like that, it's really you're going to face big, massive challenges. And again, they are here. Suleimani is controlled by Iranians. You go to Duhok and Erbil, there it is controlled by Turks. And they can finish you anytime. They can, you know, drones everywhere.
>
> (INTERVIEW 4, 27.03. 2024)

> Because right now, in the border of Kurdish, some of the other parts of Kurdistan, yeah, it's politically called Turkey and politically called our land homeland Iraq. Unfortunately, they are cutting down trees and they are destroying our nature and even right now, in my village, which is in that border, the border they are cutting, I mean, trees with a thousand years and with a hundred years. And they are selling those trees. And, I cannot visit those lands, those regions, because, Turkish airstrikes. They will be there and will bomb us. And maybe they will say you are doing some politics jobs and it's dangerous actually. […] Even like you remember that Turkey fires in the forests last year? Like we were praying that someone could finish this fires and we were ready to go there, and help the people to fight the fire. But in the same time, they set fires in our regions and they didn't let people go and save the forest.
>
> (INTERVIEW 11, 25.04.2024)

This demonstrates that Kurds – in order to meaningfully conduct activism – do not solely depend on the political opportunities that are available inside the KRI, but also in Iraq, Iran, or Turkey. This further complicates their action and requires trans-border activism. Yet, as such efforts are not tolerated by Turkey, Iran, or the KRI government itself, it again forces the

activists back into their small local realms in which they can create a difference and have a sense of agency. One activist (INTERVIEW 4) reports having contacts in Syria as well as Turkey and Iran, but he has to keep this connection “a little bit secret” in order to avoid being targeted.

5.2.3 Corruption, Mismanagement, Repression: Constraints Imposed by the Government

While outside actors complicate the work of environmental activists, the political bodies of the KRI add another layer of complexity, with all interviewees discussing some form of problem or challenge related to the government. The most dominant recurring challenges at the government level are mismanagement and corruption, political constraints on activism, and a general lack of action. At the same time, the code “Oil Industry/Economic Interests” is also grouped in this category. While not entirely a government problem, several activists report that the oil industry is deeply intertwined with the government, especially through corruption. In essence, these findings map a very difficult environment for activism that makes it dangerous for people to speak out.

Seven people report that a key issue they face in the KRI is the lack of action from the government, claiming that there is a huge gap between the rhetorical level and the level of practice. While most interlocutors argue that, rhetorically, the government does support them and their work and thinks it is necessary to combat climate change, this rarely translates into action. Speakers claim that the government has been very well informed on the effects of climate change, for instance, through NGOs, sometimes even for decades. There have also been various seminars and awareness-raising activities in recent years (see next chapter) to address climate change and pollution, but no concrete steps have been taken to change this. This frustration extends to specific problems like water pollution or public transport, where there are no treatment plans in place. Overall, the interviewees are very dissatisfied that their government does not act on any level, not even on things that are relatively easy to put into practice.

> So there's a lot of solutions, but the government is not really taking those steps. And it's been 30 years that since this government has been in power. Since 1992, the autonomous

> region had become separate from Iraq. And, uh, it's been 30 years that it's still the same issue.
>
> (INTERVIEW 3, 27.03. 2024)

> But we can't we can't say that any comment or any structure about the public transportations issues. They don’t have any plan about it. I can imagine that they haven't even mentioned this problem during their meetings.
>
> (INTERVIEW 5, 28.04.2024)

> We're used to external funding, even though Iraq is a rich country, but it's been decades that we depend on foreign aid, because our government doesn't do shit. So we have to depend on, on external support so that external support should be extended to climate change activities.
>
> (INTERVIEW 6, 20.04.2024)

Government inaction is deeply intertwined with mismanagement and corruption, a category that eight people say makes their work very difficult. Mismanagement here refers to things such as the general lack of waste management. The speakers agree that it is actually the government’s responsibility to hand out trash cans and ensure that places are not polluted. However, the government mostly neglects cleaning areas – especially outside the city in nature – and does not provide the necessary infrastructure for people to clean themselves. This often leads to residents having to dispose waste near their homes and thereby polluting their immediate surrounding. The more remote a location, the less likely it is that the government actually takes care of cleaning it, one interviewee argues.

> They don't clean in the tourism places. Never I think.
>
> (INTERVIEW 9, 28.04.2024)

This form of mismanagement cannot be separated from a key issue that is a problem at all levels of the KRI: corruption. While not going into detail, many speakers are fed up with the KRI’s political personnel prioritizing financial gain over public welfare and the environment. One participant mentions the government’s response to a crucial waste recycling and sewage treatment project in Sulaymaniyah. This project was blocked by the government because the companies refused to share their profits with them. Another participant recalls the

government questioning their operations and imposing random financial requirements to conduct their recycling activities, also expecting a share of the profits. In other cases, corruption simply prevents things from getting done, or if they do get done, they are not done satisfactorily. In essence, activists criticize that the environment is often exploited solely as a means to generate profit.

> The Green party […] is part of the government. Government [has them only to claim], we have a Green Party for this government, but indeed, they are not doing anything. The corruption won.
>
> (INTERVIEW 1, 28.03.2024)

One reason that corruption is so widespread in the country is attributed to the ways in which the government is intertwined with the economic interests of big business, particularly the oil business, which in turn leads to many political constraints on activism. Ten people argue that the interests of big businesses are a key problem for their work and environmental protection in general. People in the oil industry are often very powerful, and in order to protect their economic interests, activists argue that they obstruct environmental protection initiatives, sometimes even manipulating reports to suit their interests. Among other things, this leads to proposed protected areas being denied approval because they would have opposed oil interests.

Challenging oil companies is said to be almost impossible by the interlocutors, many even report that they are not sure if anybody has every tried it before. Opposing corporate interests can lead to repercussions, including threats or personal attacks, as some interviewees have experienced – while being aware that the government does not support them in such incidents. However, not all interlocutors are fundamentally against the oil industry, which underlines the difficult situation of environmental activists in oil-based economies. While some critique the prevailing belief that petroleum is indispensable for economic stability, others are well aware that oil is the main source of income in Kurdistan and Iraq and hence, they also depend on it, which complicates their work even further.

> Three days before I come, I called a company. The owner was telling me, don't do any action, before you come to me on the phone. Yeah, he told me, don't do any action or

> don't publish anything before coming to me, before you meet me. I felt that he will tell me, I will cut your hands if you say this.
>
> (INTERVIEW 11, 25.04.2024)

> But I think, I think in a level where you stand against the big power could be a little bit problematic. And I am not sure if that would… I, I'm not sure if anybody actually have even done it and gets into the problem at all. I have not heard and I have not heard actually, anyone talking about how this would impact the environment. Also that, I would mention that, because it's also one of the sources of the income. This is where people are a little bit blinded by.
>
> (INTERVIEW 10, 16.04.2024)

These statements are very much in line with Tinti's (2021, p. 153ff) claim that oil is used as a means of social control in the Kurdistan Region. In general, powerful elites in the Kurdistan Region benefit heavily from oil revenues as they also attract foreign interest. These connections are important for places like the KRI, which have not achieved full statehood yet and hence, depend on international networks (Kuruüzüm, 2022). In a place where "a better future hinges on the aspirations for an independent Kurdish state" (Käser & Mahmoud, 2023, p. 25) going against the sole economic revenue that is so tied to full independence (Kuruüzüm, 2022, pp. 31–33) remains difficult. The interlocutors are often aware of their economy's dependency on oil and the limited political opportunities this leaves for them. This also explains why Kurdish environmentalists often do not directly target their state institutions, as it remains hard to fight a "state" when the full aspiration of the community is to eventually become one. The connection between oil and statehood-aspiration makes it also almost impossible to connect the struggle of Kurdish liberation to ecological liberation in Iraqi-Kurdistan. As long as oil remains so heavily connected to statehood, this is an insurmountable contradiction.

In general, the political constraints that activists face range from relatively minor, yet annoying interferences to severe repression and threats. Among the minor issues, activists report that the government refuses to hand out necessary data. However, there are also severe forms of repression, especially when it comes to rather sensitive issues such as oil extraction. Even peaceful environmental campaigns can attract police presence and suspicion, as authorities

might misinterpret environmental activities as protests against broader political issues. Activists are cautious because of what environmental activists in surrounding places have experienced. They mention, for instance, the activist Jassim al-Assadi, who spoke out against an oil refinery in Southern Iraq and was kidnapped for it. Such cases, along with the disappearances of journalists or activists for other causes in the KRI, have made climate activists very wary. This is why many of them employ a form of anticipatory obedience, being well aware of what crossing specific lines might entail for them.

> But at the time in Kurdistan, if you against them, they just push you out of the stage. We tried to find the best way to be in contact with the government at the same time. But, they limited you to work for example, you can't working on the thing, where they pull out the oil. Uh, you [cannot] talk about that. It's very dangerous. […] Of course, if you talk about that, you can lose your job. You can bring you out to somewhere else. You know, they can do so many things. They can do so many things.
>
> (INTERVIEW 1, 28.03.2024)

> The energy, the amount of fight like the style of my fight is different than for example in Canada and UK in here, because here the system is run by a bunch of mafia. They act like a government, but they can make you disappear just like that. If you know. You'll have to be careful, how you fight and how you complain. You will be in danger. All your family as well. So I'm around still because I am careful. And that's why it's very slow. The progress. I cannot push too much more than what we have pushed.
>
> (INTERVIEW 4, 27.03. 2024)

One of McAdam's key arguments is that political activists are most effective in seizing political opportunities when there is only a small risk of repression. As the political system in the KRI heavily reacts towards dissidents, this also has an effect on the number of opportunities that are even available for activists. Alimi argues (2009, p. 232) that repressive political settings make "the ability of the collective actor to seize changes in POS dubious and necessitates a high degree of structuring and disciplining of contention". As the next chapter shows, activists in the KRI do indeed have to make such strategic and disciplined efforts to navigate this political landscape.

5.3 Opportunities

As outlined in the conceptual framework, this thesis aims to use political opportunities theory from an agent perspective rather than a structural one. Consequently, this chapter deals with the political opportunities the interlocutors identified themselves, following Della Porta's (2013, p. 3) argument that it is not solely about which political opportunities are open in general for activists, but also about those opportunities the respective players *consider* open to them. The first opportunity identified by the interlocutors is to engage in a type of activism that addresses gaps left by the government. This includes hands-on campaigns at a grassroots level, focusing on cleaning the environment or planting trees, as well as awareness-raising campaigns and conducting research. On one occasion, activists also identify an opportunity in the application of the KRI's environmental laws, as they are attempting to sue polluters. This, however, is the only example where activists aim to challenge authorities instead of working with them. Secondly, activists practice an environment-first perspective in order to navigate the repressive political system of the KRI. Thereby, many interlocutors make use of the relative openness of discussing climate change with authorities. As these "channels of cooperation are open" (Wiktor-Mach et al, 2023, p. 212), many activists strategically frame issues concerning the environment as apolitical and refuse to make further demands. In this way, they utilize environmental discourse as a tool to engage with the authorities without provoking political backlash. This strategy, however, make the connection to other political causes highly difficult to make.

5.3.1 Type of Activism

The most prevalent form of activism in the KRI is hands-on campaigns that focus on planting trees, promoting recycling, and conducting clean-up campaigns. Such campaigns are mentioned by all but one interviewee. Particularly planting campaigns prove to be a real cornerstone of the environmental movement in the KRI, as five interviewees are either involved in tree planting campaigns or similar activities, for instance, practices related to the creation of gardens. Key projects include the planting of one million oak trees as a means to increase biodiversity, for example. In doing so, activists hope to promote climate resilience. Additionally, self-made recycling centers are a possibility for activists to promote sustainability. Two participants are active in the context of recycling; among other things, they

produce reusable cotton bags to reduce the use of plastic. Lastly, seven activists conduct some sort of clean-up campaigns, ensuring trash is collected in places like tourist spots or rivers.

> And otherwise in February, we had a planting activity in one hour and 40 minutes. We planted 506 trees, oak trees in a very short time. We were planting trees in Zawa Mountain and another one was Duhok Polytechnic University.
>
> (INTERVIEW 11, 25.04.2024)

> And the other thing is that we have the recycling center, we collect the plastics from bins that we inserted in different places in, for example, in the streets and the public places. People could put the plastic bottles in there. And after we collect these plastics, we take it to the recycling center to reuse it again. There, they are just making some house materials and beauty materials for the house.
>
> (INTERVIEW 2, 07.04.2024)

> I came back to Suli and was making a meeting with my friends. Some of my friends, I told them about my idea. I said, I want to clean this place, for example, all of travel places, all tourism places in Kurdistan, but especially Dukan Lake.
>
> (INTERVIEW 9, 28.04.2024)

This prevalence of rather apolitical hands-on campaigns reveals several things. Most prominently, that activists view political opportunities as mostly open at a local grassroots level. Despite Kurdish quasi-autonomy in the KRI, activists struggle to push for change on a Kurdish-regional or Iraqi-national level, which is also expressed in their protest tactics. They are able to relatively freely work for the environment if they, in essence, do the work that the authorities refuse to do, such as providing a functioning trash system. This shows that activists must work within the limits of what the authorities allow and focus on practical, local solutions rather than broader political demands or connection to other political causes. Especially the cleaning campaigns are awarded by government officials, with one interviewee recalling that his group received a "a thank you from the presidency office" (INTERVIEW 10).

Aside from such hands-on campaigns, activists also frequently engage in data collection and other scientific efforts, with six interviewees reporting that they are active in this field. In practice, this technique looks as follows: Activists are involved in field trips, surveys, and threat

assessments to understand environmental conditions and sources of pollution in their region. This form of environmentalism is especially prominent when it comes to water pollution. Most of the activists' research projects regarding rivers involve identifying environmental threats. Sometimes the research also deals with dust pollution or the ecological importance of oak trees. In several cases, the interviewees combine this work with the creation of subsequent action plans in which they explain how the issue could be solved.

> So at that time, my first work in environmental field was research. So, I have started my journey through environmental field or environmental movement by research. And the research was about the dust pollution and how Erbil city has been polluted by the heavy metals.
>
> (INTERVIEW 5, 28.04.2024)

> In 2019, I tried to create research about air pollution and the effects of those factories which are around our city and companies, all the companies that effect our cities.
>
> (INTERVIEW 11, 25.04.2024)

The conclusions drawn from this are very similar to those drawn from the hands-on campaign above. Activists tackle problems that are addressed neither by the government nor by scientists. In doing so, they open up an uncontroversial space, which is a prerequisite for further work. This conclusion corresponds with the general notion among activists that there are many things they cannot implement because the prerequisite is lacking. One participant argues that for Iraq and Kurdistan, a campaign like Just Stop Oil, for instance, "is unrealistic because at the moment, […] some rich countries of the world have access to solar and wind replacement for the power supply, [but] there is a lot of other countries, a lot of other places that don't have this capacity." (INTERVIEW 3). Others are also saying that the environmentalist movement is still in "the phase of planting seeds" (INTERVIEW 4). First, there have to be plans to transform the KRI's economy; then further action can be taken, they argue.

The last part of activism that is very prominent among activists in the KRI is their focus on awareness-raising campaigns. They do so by training journalists as much as giving seminars to children, talking to religious leaders and holding forums. Six interlocutors are somehow involved with activism related to the media, which includes doing environmental journalism

themselves or training journalists to properly report on climate change. In raising awareness, activists make use of both local and international media, especially when it comes to water resources. Some activists also report the usage of social media in order to inform others about their work.

> I have recorded 12 documentaries about the environmental issues in Kurdistan Region and central and south of Iraq for Rudaw Media Network.
>
> (INTERVIEW 5, 28.04.2024)

> I created a YouTube short about a particular bird. It's 40 seconds. And I've done one about the wildlife of Kurdistan. I do that kind of activism. I tweet, I do this kind of work, and I advocate, but not in a protest way or criticize anyone, because here no one stops you from doing anything. So instead of protesting and blah blah blah, go do something.
>
> (INTERVIEW 8, 30.03.2024)

Most prominently, though, activists teach through educational initiatives. Eight interviewees talk about leading some sort of educational campaigns, mostly in schools, in formal institutions, and sometimes in street campaigns. During those campaigns, they discuss sustainable building practices to waste management as much as water conservation. They also frequently talk to students about plastic pollution and biodiversity conservation. Thereby, they aim to create a next generation of locals who are more invested in environmental stewardship. Sometimes, they also talk to community leaders directly, for instance in mosques, in order to make them multipliers.

> I did maybe 300 seminars in those two years. I go to villages, I go to women, I go to man, I go to like every place. Always in my life, when I'm also not in seminar and in other places, I always give the speeches [too]. [I tell them]. don't use it. It's not good. I am like this.
>
> (INTERVIEW 7, 07.04.2024)

> We did some clubs in the school that the teacher lead the students for protecting the environment. Later other schools asked for the same seminars, for workshops and for doing some activity about the environment.
>
> (INTERVIEW 1, 28.03.2024)

In addition, activists are using art to engage in activism, as four people report. In practice, this form of activism can take different forms. For some activists, art was particularly relevant at the beginning of their environmental journey. One woman, for instance, recalls being the first to combine art and activism through photo exhibitions. The interviewees also discuss how they transform stones and other natural materials into artwork to foster environmental stewardship – and eventually also to use the tools in exhibitions to raise environmental awareness. Another activist (INTERVIEW 4) recalls his time abroad when he was part of an activist theatre company, which further strengthened his understanding of the power art has to convince others of his ideas. In essence, activists use different forms of art to bring attention to the environment, including paintings, music, and sculpturing. Sometimes, they also use recycled materials to convey meaning.

> So, first she started by drawing on stones something from nature. The stones, the rocks, the small rocks. And she turned these kinds of rocks with like a paint into something different. And she drew on these. She colored them. And after that, she thought, why I don't I use this, my art, my hobby as something for environment and art together. Something linked to the environment to protect the environment and also use my art ability and these things that they have it in this part to protect the environment and also to follow my hobby in the same time. And also she opened lots of exhibitions in this part.
>
> (INTERVIEW 2, 07.04.2024)

> The environment was very new when I came back and talking about this kind of thing and like teaching artists in here to use garbage for making the art, people were like “okay, weird”. But slowly, slowly it became better.
>
> (INTERVIEW 4, 27.03. 2024)

Viewing an opportunity in choosing art as a strategy is not surprising. In the KRI’s repressive climate, art in general has become a tool for young Kurds to express themselves and their politics. Researching art and feminist activism in the KRI, Kaeser and Mahmoud (2023, p. 1) argue that art serves as a tool for young women to imagine a Kurdistan that is free of gender violence. Young artists often revisit the past and its atrocities, while conceptualizing a free Kurdish identity – one unrestricted by colonial control. However, as with all other avenues of expression that young Kurds identify, there remains a narrow space for such discussions, as the weak Kurdish economy and the failures of the government, as well as the legacy of past

wars, mean that “their space for art and activism remains scarce and their reach limited” (ibid.). This constraint is also evident in the environmental art scene, where artists predominantly use art to foster environmental awareness and activism. Nevertheless, such small opportunities are seized to transport messages.

One slightly more confrontational tactic employed by an activist confirms my earlier assessment that activists are very careful maneuvering their political landscape. The interviewee reports that previously he “has not worked on things like that go against the government” (INTERVIEW 3) and also doesn’t have knowledge of anyone doing that in the past; however, he is currently in the process of taking a very specific case to the court. In 2020, there was a campaign in Sulaymaniyah to save the Sirwan river. This campaign led to the adoption of a new regulation, among other things preventing the continuation of gravel mining in the river. Yet, the owners of the gravel mines are well connected with Kurdish officials “in authority and above authority” (ibid.) and hence, are pushing for a new regulation that suits their interests better. The activist is part of group currently attempting to take this case to court and filing letters of complaints about it, arguing that the KRI’s environmental laws are not insufficient per se, but simply not applied. The activist says that this is a first “experiment” to see if it is possible to go against powerful people and their economic interests. In the long run, it will confirm if “the government is really bad or […]that you can go to the court and win your case if it goes by the law” (ibid.). Indeed, this tactic could set an example for other activists in the KRI and, if successful, could be the first indicator of effective accountability and rule of law in challenging powerful economic interests. This also shows that KRI activists are gradually feeling their way forward, constantly testing where opportunities may exist while dynamically adapting to their given circumstances.

5.3.2 Environment-First Perspective

At present, however, the movement is cautious in its framing. Most interlocutors make statements implying that they employ an environment-first perspective. This means that they find it most promising to frame the issue of climate change as an environmental issue only – one that is not connected to other causes, but presents the cause as “above politics” (Knudsen, 2016). Some interlocutors are intrinsically convinced of this argument. One interviewee, for instance, specifically says that climate issues should not be politicized,

because "if it gets political, it doesn't get solved" (INTERVIEW 8). The participant further argues that the government cannot come after climate activists who focus on the environment only, "because the party line is clear" (ibid.). Indeed, the KRI leadership is relatively open to discussing climate change as long as it does not go against their own (economic) interests. The topic is even frequently addressed by high-ranking ministers themselves, such as Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, who recently stated that "God has given us a beautiful nature and environment; we must protect it and keep it clean for the benefit of future generations" (Kurdistan24, 2024a). This rhetorical commitment allows activists to address questions of climate change by employing environment-only frames. One interlocutor also argues that the "stability" in the KRI makes it less relevant to discuss other things in combination to the environmental cause. This specifically refers to Kurdish liberation efforts.

> Look in Kurdistan, in Bashur, for me, as the activists who work in environmental field, we can make different campaigns from other political activities, who care about Kurd as the case, for example, in MENA region, in Iraq, in Syria. But. In Bakur and Rojava, we can see that activists, they are engaging these two cases together. Environment and Kurd as a case. They are working together at one time. Because I can see that the stability and the security that we have in Bashur is totally different from Bakur and Rojava.
>
> (INTERVIEW5, 28.04.2024)

As opposed to this, three interlocutors argue that the question for their environment intersects with other questions, particularly women's rights. Especially in patriarchal societies, they argue, there is fundamental link between human rights and environmental protection. It is this instance where the personal ideology of the interlocutors is most closely related to climate justice discourses which foreground a connection between human rights and environmental protection (Jafry et al., 2019, p. 3). One interviewee, for instance, says, that empowering women and ensuring that they can participate in decision-making processes can leader to better environmental outcomes. It is also argued that women have a right to a clean environment and hence, it is important for them to protect it.

> But also there's a link, especially when she's working here between women's rights and the environment and how to make women working and having decisions and having

> someone to protect her environment and have a clean environment to live in her right. So there is a link about human rights and environment for her.
>
> (INTERVIEW 5, 28.04.2024)

> I knew, like nearly all peoples as they come, coming from abroad, they are working for environment and also for women.
>
> (INTERVIEW 7, 07.04.2024)

> So basically. Yeah I mean because here it's a patriarchal society. And in addition to that, they don't care about equality as much. You know they don't see climate affecting women. You know as such, they don't understand that, that correlation. Even the women in the past have been part and parcel of agriculture.
>
> (INTERVIEW 6, 20.04.2024)

However, these statements are the exception. Most interviewees do not approach their environmental activism from a climate justice perspective. Moreover, those who do make a direct connection between women's oppression and the environment do not necessarily reflect this understanding in their work and translate it into practice. One interviewee says that she very consciously refrained from politicizing her work and environmentalism as she aims "to be tactful, […] to say things, but say it in a way that doesn't cause problems for me or, you know, people who may work with me" (INTERVIEW 6).

Such depoliticized understandings of the climate crisis and the government's relative openness to climate change issues also explain why interlocutors refrain from using disruptive protest tactics and instead tend to cooperate with the authorities. Eight interlocutors have at least loosely been in contact with the government or collaborated with them. This relationship, however, manifests differently for each person; sometimes it is very close, such as in the case of somebody eventually turning from activist to government advisor. In other cases, people simply meet with government officials to discuss their work and make plans about what should happen in the KRI. One person talks about how sometimes government funding is helpful for them, as local politicians thereby support them creating a prototype of a sewage treatment plan. Another person argues that while he might be supported by politicians, it remains important for him to remain neutral – especially because of the bipartisan structure of the KRI. A third interviewee says that individuals, society, and the

government must work together to address environmental issues effectively and that they consider it their role to bridge the gap between government and civil society.

For some, bridging this gap is particularly important because of the influence of politicians on Kurdish and Iraqi communities. Others talked about their meeting with government officials, in which they facilitated dialogues between the government and the NGO sector. However, the interviewees also stress that there are differences between government officials depending on their mentality towards climate change. Sometimes it is possible to cooperate with officials for better climate change strategies and proposals, in other cases it is not. There are also various practical collaborations with local government bodies present, such as collaboration with the Directorate of Tourism and municipal administrations. This entails obtaining logistical support, like trash transport vehicles, and promising infrastructure improvements, like providing trash cans in neighborhoods. With these examples, outcomes of government partnerships are most visible.

> This is totally wrong because, when it comes to environment, individuals and society have to work with the government because we can't work separately. For example, governments go through another way and society goes through another way. This is totally wrong. That's why I said no, I'm the one who can make a good relation between society and government. So I still continue and I believe in my way.
>
> (INTERVIEW5, 28.04.2024)

> Yeah, [the politicians] are supporting our activities. Okay. For example, they will send trash cars for transporting the trash.
>
> (INTERVIEW 9, 28.04.2024)

> We also were able to get the municipality and also the,… I don't know, I think it was the tourism director in there. And they promised the neighborhood that they will bring up to 50 trash cans to the neighborhood. So they would no longer throw the trash into the water stream. This was a great accomplishment.
>
> (INTERVIEW 10, 16.04.2024)

Wiktor-Mach et al. (2023) identify this form of environmental activism as “dutiful”. According to O’Brien et al. (2018, p. 41f), this form of environmentalism supports existing institutions

but resists practices that are harmful to the environment, such as fossil fuel production and consumerism. In practice, this manifests in the choice of reformist strategies, such as joining political parties or NGOs to advocate for sustainable development. Such an approach typically does not disrupt the root causes of climate change, but it can be used to build skills to eventually engage in more disruptive forms of dissent (ibid.).

Framing environmental questions as questions of the environment only without politicizing it and without a justice-component appears to be a viable strategy for climate activists in the KRI. In fact, activists are following McCammon et al.'s (2007) argument that movements have to respond to discursive elements in their broader environment to be successful. They do respond to the already existing discourse on climate change and strictly remain within this framework in order to be able to foster cooperation with authorities, which eventually also gives the chance to facilitate change from the inside. In the case of environmental NGOs in the Kurdistan Region, this is also a question of their survival. Similar to Spires' (2011) work on environmental NGOs in undemocratic settings, they can remain actors as long as they do not make democratic demands – e.g., through politicizing their causes. As demonstrated above, for some interlocutors, this is a conscious strategic choice, for others it is their own ideological conviction. This difference was also visible during my research. When I discussed the consent form with one participant, he argued that he is not worried at all about the scope of the research, because "it's not political, it's only the environment" (INTERVIEW 10).

What all of this demonstrates is a lack of reference to notions of climate justice that are prominent in other environmental groups, globally and in Kurdistan. Rather than linking the issue of environmental protection to issues of human rights and social justice (della Porta & Parks, 2013) and seeking to collaborate with other activist groups, the climate movement sees a political opportunity in neglecting a climate justice framework and instead adopting an environmental-first perspective. While this strategy allows activists to conduct their work relatively freely, it potentially misses opportunities for the more comprehensive change that is required in the KRI. This lack of combination between the climate movement and other political causes can at least partly be explained by the fact that climate activism is only permitted by authorities as long as a depoliticized framing of it remains intact.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I was interested in how Kurdish environmental activists in the KRI navigate and respond to this interplay of environmental degradation, political instability, and Kurdish aspirations for self-determination. I examined the key motivations and strategies used by activists in a region severely impacted by climate change, while also attempting to situate them within those used by other environmental activists in the Global South and in Kurdistan. I also drew attention to how political constraints and economic dependencies affect the organizational dynamics and efficiency of the climate movement. In order to answer these questions, I collected data through eleven semi-structured interviews with local climate activists, analyzed them though qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2010) and interpreted them using political opportunities theory and a climate justice framework. My findings suggest that Bashuri Kurds do not frame their work in terms of climate justice, i.e. by linking it to questions of social justice or Kurdish self-determination efforts. Rather, they use an environment-first perspective that allows them to navigate the repressive system of the KRI, which is relatively open to discussing climate change but much more restrictive when it comes to making further democratic demands. Activists on the ground particularly seize political opportunities for practical climate work where Kurdish authorities are absent. This entails that the strategies used by Kurdish activists in the KRI greatly diverge from Kurdish environmental movements in Bakur, Rojava and Rojhelat as much as the broader Global South.

In detail, I found the following: When it comes to motivation and inspiration, their Kurdish identity, and thus national liberation efforts, play only a minor role for the interlocutors. People rather report that they see themselves as global citizens who are inspired to care for the environment because they want to preserve their beautiful surroundings, while often talking nostalgically about how their favorite childhood places were destroyed. As political opportunities for activism are limited in the present, this remembrance and longing for an undisturbed past could indicate a sense of disillusionment with the current system. Most interviewees also see themselves as educators, with the goal of raising children to become environmentalists themselves. Others cite the problematic state of the KRI's ecology, its polluted rivers and mountains, as a source of inspiration. It is perhaps striking that many climate activists in the KRI are people who have spent considerate time abroad, either as refugees or students. Their experiences abroad and the technologies they encountered in

places like Canada, or the UK shaped their understanding of environmental activism and inspired them to bring these things back home. This also suggests that local and home-grown responses to climate change may not yet have been developed – or were lost – because the political opportunity structure of the region does not allow for such endeavors. In his work on the environmental perspective on the Anfal operation, the genocide of the Iraqi Kurds in the 1980s, Ahram (2023) writes that one of the Anfal's effects was the deliberate alteration of the relationships between Kurds and their nature. The disconnection from the local Bashuri Kurds to their environment might, hence, also stem from this experience.

Political constraints and economic dependencies have a major impact on the organizational dynamics on the ground, forcing activists to be very strategic. I found three main areas of concern in the interviews: problems posed by the local population, foreign powers, especially Iran and Turkey, and most importantly, the KRI itself. The activists' main concern with the local population is their lack of concern for the environment, which leads to further pollution and also results in the activists' efforts not being taken seriously. For many local Kurds, there are simply many more pressing issues than the climate crisis, especially the poor economic situation. Interestingly, activists seemed to have missed one potential opportunity here, namely the fact that the climate crisis exacerbates these very conditions and hence, could be used as a means to organize around shared grievances. In Southern Iraq, protest have already sparked over lack of energy supply during heat waves (Menmy, 2024). Yet again, this suggests the absence of a climate justice perspective that attempts to link the environmental issue to other, often materialist, causes.

Much more serious constraints, however, stem from the outside influence of Iran and Turkey. Some activists are aware that these countries control, among other things, much of their water resources, which would require cross-border activism. Yet, this international involvement severely limits what is possible in terms of activism. The biggest constraint, however, is the structure of the KRI itself, with activists citing its corruption, mismanagement, and repression as major problems. Political restrictions imposed by KRI officials range from minor interferences, such as denial of important data, to severe repression and threats, particularly over sensitive issues such as oil extraction. As reported by many activists, the oil industry, which is often deeply intertwined with high-ranking KRI officials, is currently

impossible to confront. This atmosphere of intimidation has led many activists to practice anticipatory obedience, avoiding actions that could be perceived as crossing dangerous lines due to the risk of kidnapping or other forms of repression. Overall, this presents a landscape, in which political opportunities are limited for activism in general, and particularly for framing issues in terms of climate justice.

This entails that people can only remain capable of action if they use the openness of the KRI to discuss environmental issues, but refrain from politicizing the cause. They can take meaningful action mainly in places that are neglected by the authorities. In practice, activists seize opportunities where the government is not doing its job. This includes non-confrontational hands-on campaigns such as garbage collection, tree planting, and recycling. They are also active in awareness-raising campaigns, going into schools and training journalists, always foregrounding a strong environmental perspective, not asking for further political demands. Some activists seem to be ideologically convinced of this strategy, while others chose it consciously in order to minimize repression. This makes Kurdish environmental activism in the KRI very different from environmental activism in other parts of Kurdistan, where the Kurdish question for self-determination is deeply linked to the ecological question (see Hunt, 2021 in particular). As already stated above, this also confirms that Bashuri Kurdish activists tend to refrain from framing their issues in terms of climate justice or environmentalism of the poor, as is often done by other environmental activists in the Global South.

At the societal level, these findings are highly relevant. Climate change is likely to worsen living conditions in both Iraq and the KRI, already ranked by the United Nations as the fifth most vulnerable country to climate change (UN Environment, 2019). Water scarcity increased significantly in recent years, many areas, especially rivers, are heavily polluted by waste, and the KRI continues to extract oil despite the consequences for the local population. Understanding how people resist these practices and how they operate in such an environment can increase the effectiveness and resilience of environmental movements within the KRI itself. Considering the prevailing political space, organizations currently better refrain from framing environmental issues in terms of climate justice. In particular, as environmental activism might actually be one of the few issues around which social

mobilization can take place and thereby, serve as a nurturing ground for activism in anticipation of changing opportunities. My data also show where local activists are most in need of support, which is especially the transition away from the KRI's oil-based economy. This knowledge is important for climate change activists in the Global North, who want to assist fellow activists in places with high vulnerability to climate change.

Yet, my broader contribution to the literature is the recognition that marginalization and colonization alone do not directly lead to the inclusion of decolonial perspectives in climate activism as sometimes implied by environmentalism of the poor/ South frameworks (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). The political opportunity structure must facilitate this form of strategic mobilization as visible in Syrian-Kurdistan. Prior to the Syrian civil war, strategic organizing already took place to eventually take advantage of the window of opportunity that opened when the Syrian army withdrew from Kurdish-held areas (Burç, 2020, p. 327). As outlined in this thesis, the political status, landscape and opportunity structure in the KRI highly differs from other parts of Kurdistan which also manifests in the distinctiveness of its environmental movement. One explanation for this could reside in the different civic cultures of the two regions (see Jasim, 2022), the semi-autonomous state of the KRI might also play an important role and so does the promise for full statehood through an oil economy (Kuruüzüm, 2022). As long as Kurdish self-determination in Iraq is imagined as statehood that hinges on the promise of oil (Käser & Mahmoud, 2023), it will remain difficult to connect the question for Kurdish liberation to ecological efforts. Simultaneously, different causes are hard to connect as long as the only possibility for climate activism in the KRI is the opposite of doing that – namely, making use of an environment-first perspective. This can explain, why the fight against climate change is rather isolated in KRI. However, further research is needed to investigate, which other factors, facilitate and hinder the connection between different struggles in the KRI and beyond to eventually develop a much needed climate justice perspective.

Despite *the environment* not being a politicized issue, the overall political sensitivities identified as the main constraints by the interviewees made it extremely difficult to pinpoint underlying political dynamics and my overall research stay was long enough to get them squarely in one picture. This is perhaps the most striking limitation of this study, yet it is not

the only one. While I was fortunate enough to not encounter problems during my data collection period, to have easy access to interviewees, and to not have to adapt my planned research project, there are still significant gaps that highlight the need for further research. To date, there has been little research on environmental activism in the KRI. One study, conducted by Wiktor-Mach et al. (2023, p. 198), found that Iraqi Kurds engage in a "dutiful" form of environmentalism that is “directed at state building and policymaking in a post-conflict state”. As outlined above, my results are consistent with these findings, but much remains unknown after both studies. A key problem with my data is that I did not have access to villages and remote areas due to security concerns and language barriers. I was neither able to talk to farmers protecting their land, who are often at the forefront of environmental struggles (Claeys & Delgado Pugley, 2017), nor to those communities still living in the mountains, who are more aligned with Kurdish liberation ideologies (Ambrosio, 2022). Having access to these places, possibly would have given me a different picture of environmental activism not only within the official KRI territory but all of Bashur. At the same time, my data alone is not sufficient to draw robust comparisons between the KRI and other parts of Kurdistan. My qualitative research only allows me to situate my findings within those of other regions and identify tendencies, but this does not allow for drawing direct comparisons. For future research, comparative studies between different parts of Kurdistan and other conflict-affected areas would provide broader insights. Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct such a study within the limited scope of a master's thesis.

Such broader insight are highly necessary as the climate crisis continues to worsen living conditions, globally, but particularly in vulnerable places like the KRI. There is a need to better explore what can be done to effectively address this challenges. This is an endeavor that is not exclusive to academia but also extends into activism. It remains crucial for people working on climate issues around the world to build stronger alliances and extend global solidarity to activists in the KRI. These individuals are on the front lines of the struggle, escalating tactics would come at a high cost for them. Hence, it is our duty to support them in their fight.

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8. Appendix

<table>
<tr><th>Introduction</th><th>Notes</th></tr>
<tr><td>Research Goal</td><td>The aim of this paper and interview is to find out what strategies and tactics environmental activists in the KRI use, what problems they face, and what political opportunities they see. The answers will be situated within those of other Kurdish and global south environmental movements.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Topics</td><td>• Inspiration
• Strategies and Responses
• Navigating Challenges</td></tr>
<tr><td>Anonymity and confidentiality</td><td>The interview will be anonymized to ensure that you can speak freely. Everything else is mentioned in the informed consent paper that we have discussed in detail advance.

Do you have any further questions regarding the informed consent paper? Is everything clear regarding the study?</td></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Questions</th></tr>
<tr><td>Inspiration</td><td>Can you tell me about your journey into environmental activism within the KRI? Is there a specific event you can recall that made you start becoming invested in the subject?

Was environmentalism a topic that was frequently discussed among your peers?

(What would your friends or family say, when you told them that you would become interested in this topic?)

Can you also share a personal story or experience that motivates you to continue your work in climate activism? (can be something that worked, something that didn’t work)

What would you say is the biggest climate threat, Bashur faces?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Strategies and Responses</td><td>Can you tell me a little bit about the organization your work in/ worked with? What kind of climate activism or advocacy are you doing?</td></tr>
</table>

	Can you talk about one project or one activity in particular? Are there any global environmental movements or philosophies that influence you in your work? Is there any climate movement in (other parts) Kurdistan that influences your activism? Do you also have other political aspirations, (e.g. an independent Kurdistan, democracy)? Is your activism also influenced by your Kurdish identity or the Kurdish struggle for freedom and autonomy?
Navigating Challenges	Can you tell me about a situation, in which you faced a concrete challenge in your activism? What was that challenge? Aside from that, what other barriers can you identify that make your work difficult? Have you ever gotten into trouble with anybody, because of your activism? Authorities, family,..? Does the fact that Kurdistan Region is very dependent on oil somehow influence the way you can conduct climate activism here?
Conclusion	
Closure	Is there anything you would like to add? Transformation back into a normal setting.