



Rania, Duluth's newest sister city

By [Michele Naar-Obed](#) on Feb 20, 2015 at 12:50 p.m.

During a recent month-long trip to our newest sister city Rania, Iraqi Kurdistan, I found our Kurdish sisters and brothers busy with projects and activities filled with compassion, hope and promise even under great calamity and stress.

Throughout the Kurdish region, there are now over one million refugees and displaced people due to the onslaught of the Islamic State group. Rania has taken on its share by offering safety and security to Yezides, Arabs and Christians. I visited a makeshift school in Rania for 61 refugee children from Kobani. I met a volunteer from Rania who works on getting food, books, and clothes to these refugee children so their education might only be minimally disrupted.

I shared a meal with the religious cleric who oversees the main mosque in Rania. He spoke of the struggles that Muslim religious leaders face in overcoming the tarnished image of Islam portrayed by the Islamic State group.

"This is not Islam. This is not what Allah wants," said the soft-spoken and warmhearted Mullah Abdulla Wasman Adim. "This is not what the Prophet Mohammed expected of Muslims practicing their faith. Islam is a religion of peace. The prophet Mohammed brought us the teachings of peace, of justice, of charity, of compassion."

Mullah Abdulla visited Duluth during the 2012 delegation from Rania. He sends messages of peace and goodwill to all of the people he met here, especially to the Benedictine Sisters and the Twin Ports Islamic Center, which hosted dinners and community sharing for him and the other delegates.

I met Kurdish soldiers who defend the Kurdish borders and aim to rid the world of the Islamic State group. A tall order, since there seems to be no end to the Islamic State fighters who are coming in droves, including from Europe and the U.S.

The Kurds are fighting a band of terrorists who have been funded and armed by misguided Western policies of the recent past, such as the U.S. sending weapons to Syrian rebels. Now the Kurdish fighters have to beg for weapons that will at least put them on an even battlefield.

I met with artists, activists, teachers and sports directors, among others, who are honored to be part of the "122 Conversations" art project by artist and Duluth native Anne Labovitz. Through this project, all five of the Duluth Sister Cities will be connected in a very deep and meaningful way. Art has the potential to communicate through the heart and soul, helping us to see each other at a level that transcends differences that separate us as living beings.

We are working very hard on getting four Rania citizens their visas to the U.S., so that their mayor and our mayor can officially and personally sign the Sister City Proclamation and Agreement between Rania and Duluth. Given the current political climate, this is not an

easy task. After meetings with the adviser to the prime minister, the U.S. consulate in Erbil, the governor of Rania Province and the past and current mayors, we are hopeful that visas will be forthcoming and the delegation will arrive in Duluth safely this spring. There will be plenty of opportunity for Duluthians to meet these representatives from Rania.

Last year, Duluth voted to keep former President Dwight Eisenhower's vision of creating an organization that could be the hub of peace and prosperity by creating bonds between people from different cities around the world active and alive. In April 2014, the Duluth City Council voted unanimously to take Rania, Iraqi Kurdistan as its fifth sister city. Given the climate of hostility, fear, intimidation, confusion and misunderstanding between people from both Western and Middle Eastern cultures, it is more important than ever that people of goodwill get to know each other, celebrate diversity and use our different talents and insights for the common good. Thank you to Sister Cities International, the people of Duluth and the people of Rania Iraqi Kurdistan for giving us this opportunity. The world is dying for this.

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