



1532

Francisco Pizarro captures Inca Emperor Atahualpa after a surprise ambush at Cajamarca

1776

British troops capture Fort Washington during American Revolution

1945

Founding of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)

1982

Space Shuttle Columbia completes its 1st operational flight

AFP | Arbil, Iraq

When Iraq's female cycling team snatched bronze and silver medals at a landmark pan-Arab race, it was thanks to athletes from the autonomous Kurdish region.

The country's toughest female competitors, its best-equipped facilities and most experienced coaches are not in the capital Baghdad, but in the Kurdish-majority northern region.

And the three medals won by the Iraqi female cyclists in September at the tournament in Algeria were seen as proof of this sporting prowess in a region that has governed itself since 1991.

The team earned a bronze in the relay race, where three of its four cyclists were Kurdish, and also scooped a bronze and a silver in individual events.

The silver-winning athlete, Mazda Rafiq, hails from the Kurdish region's second city, Sulaimaniyah.

"Since I was a little girl, I've wanted to represent Iraq in a cycling race, and today I was able to do that," said the 20-year-old.

Ms Rafiq, who trains in the region's capital, Erbil, credits her victory to "the support of society and our parents".

Decades ago, all of Iraq's 18 provinces had thriving female athletic scenes, with active clubs in different sports.

But in the 1980s, a series of violent conflicts began, followed by an international embargo that brought development projects to a screeching halt and the rise of militias.

Those factors, combined with growing conservatism in parts of Iraqi society, all chipped away at sports culture for women.

However in the north, relatively insulated from these trends, Kurdish women have enjoyed an athletic awakening -- one that Iraq's clubs and national teams are making use of now.

**'More open'**

A female cycling team in the southern conservative city of Diwaniyah regularly poaches two Kurdish athletes from Sulaimaniyah -- more than 500 kilometres (300 miles) to the north -- for national and regional competitions.

"They are better, and the club knows they'll help them get a better score," said Sajed Salim, of Iraq's Cycling Federation.

One reason for the success of Kurdish female athletes may be the relatively lax social norms in the autonomous region, said Iraq volleyball champion and club coach Randy Metti.



A Kurdish woman plays volleyball at a gym

"Kurdistan is more open to women's sports than the provinces of the south," he said, where traditions and tribal customs restrict how much women and girls can do outside the home.

Metti coaches the Akad Ainkawa women's volleyball team in Arbil three times per week, all year long.

Player Mirna Najeeb brings her seven-month-old daughter to every training session.

"I was advised not to exercise six months after giving birth but I told the whole world that I would start again," she said.

Najeeb and fellow Akad players are regularly called up to Iraq's national team to compete internationally.

"A player has everything here -- mod-

**In Iraq, its toughest female competitors, best-equipped facilities and most experienced coaches are considered to be in the Kurdish-majority northern region. Cycling, volleyball and basketball are all popular -- and successful -- among women in the autonomous Kurdish region. One reason for the success of Kurdish female athletes may be the relatively lax social norms in the autonomous region, says Iraq volleyball champion and club coach Randy Metti**



ern training facilities, interested clubs, and great coaches," she told AFP.

The clubs also enjoy widespread public support and are popular meeting places.

"The fact that they have restaurants and recreational spaces encourages families to come support the female athletes," said Khaled Bashir, a member of Iraq's Volleyball Federation.

That popularity often translates into material support for local clubs, allowing them to pursue more training and keep improving.

Elsewhere in Iraq, teams rely on funds from the ministry of youth and sports, which barely cover basic expenses.

"There are talented athletes everywhere, but they do not emerge in the other provinces because the structures are not the same as those in Kurdistan," said Bashir.

**Dunking across sports**

The numbers speak for themselves.

This year's national volleyball championship brought together "11 female Kurdish teams against four other female teams from the rest of Iraq -- all of them from Baghdad," he said.



Iraqi Kurdish women play volleyball at a gym

Women's basketball, too, has become a hit sport in Iraq thanks to Kurdish athletes -- including all-girl teams in Dohuk, Halabja and Arbil.

The relative calm enjoyed by the region has contributed to their advancement, said the head of Iraq's Basketball Federation, Hussein al-Omeidi.

"That stability in the region's towns when it comes to daily life and to se-

curity is vital to the athletic excellence of our female teams," Omeidi told AFP.

Out of Iraq's seven female basketball clubs, three of them are from the Kurdish region -- a source of pride for female basketball federation member Wassen Hanoun.

"It's an important proportion that really shows how much female Kurdish sports dominate," she said.



Members of the Iraqi national cycling women's team

**GEMSTONE**

**Design, glamour is in Fidda Al-Marzouqi's genes**



**"I create and I design, but obviously every woman has a certain style so you respect the personality that comes in -- her style, the shape of her body, her attitude, what she likes and, accordingly, you get inspired as a designer"**

FIDDA AL-MARZOUQI

look and my friends encouraged that, because I have natural flair -- it's not something I studied -- I should pursue it."

So, Al-Marzouqi hired a team of master cutters, tailors and hand embroiders and set up the brand Cabochon in 2016.

Named after a gemstone that has been shaped and polished as opposed to faceted, the label is known for its elegant evening gowns and fitted looks.

"It's all about femininity. I love history, I love all aspects of design, traveling inspires me," Al-Marzouqi said of her creative process.

However, inspiration and a knack for design will only take you so far in a notoriously competitive industry.

"If you have natural flair at designing or

creating a look, there's the other technical stuff that you're not aware of like running a team of staff, the facts and figures -- that was the challenging part," the designer said, referring to the obstacles she has faced on her journey so far.

But she learnt the ropes and now oversees all aspects of research, design and production and is particularly keen to ensure the women she dresses have the "full Cabochon experience," including "the attention, the care (and) the fit."

"I create and I design, but obviously every woman has a certain style so you respect the personality that comes in -- her style, the shape of her body, her attitude, what she likes and, accordingly, you get inspired as a designer."



A black gown designed by Fidda Al-Marzouqi