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The autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq is witnessing an economic boom, drawing back many exiled Kurds who had fled oppression and now dream of helping to create an independent homeland.

- 5 In Erbil's ancient bazaar, in a city inhabited for 8,000 years, many Kurds now feel more hopeful than ever for the future of their people amid economic gains.

Maam Khalil, who has been making tea in the heart of Erbil's bazaar since 1948, has witnessed seven decades of the Kurdish struggle.

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“God willing, we will be independent. There are many Kurds, 40 million of us, and God willing we will make our own government and have our own state.”

- 15 Khalil's tea shop has hundreds of photos on the walls that show famous visitors - movie stars, politicians, Kurdish heroes.

They tell a history of failed Kurdish alliances in Iraq, of uprisings brutally suppressed, of chemical warfare under Saddam Hussein.

- 20 In all, an estimated 182,000 Kurds were killed. Finally, after the U.S.-led intervention that ousted Hussein in 2003, Khalil said Kurds are free.

No breakaway

25 Still, the Kurdistan Regional Government - KRG - does not have plans to break away from Iraq, said Hemin Hawrami of the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party.

“If Kurds will be regarded as true partners within this democratic constitutional federal Iraq, the Kurdistan region will be part of this Iraq,” he said. “But
30 definitely Kurdistan is not going to be part of any dictatorial Iraq that is not ruled by democracy.”

The KRG estimates GDP growth of more than nine percent this year.

35 It has signed exploration deals with foreign oil giants like ExxonMobil, while building a new million-barrel-per-day pipeline to export the oil via Turkey - angering the Iraqi federal government in Baghdad.

“This is our constitutional right and we want to practice our right, we haven’t
40 asked for anything else,” Hawrami said. “When we are administrating our own oil sector, the revenue is not only for us, the revenue is for all Iraqis.”

Young return

45 As Kurds are increasingly taking an assertive line, their history of oppression is giving way to the optimism of youth.

Fifty-nine percent of the population is under age 25.

50 Among them is Sazan Mandalawi. After living overseas, Mandalawi returned to Erbil this year. She works at a youth program and writes a popular blog.

„There’s this feeling that we need to permanently return,“ she said. „We have no reason to be living abroad. We escaped because we were scared of our lives. Now
55 back home it’s safe, we should go back.”

