

**EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH
ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST MAROUF
MAJID, HEAD OF AYINDA ORGANIZATION
FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

Noor Omer | June 3, 2026

Exclusive
Interview



Note: This interview is conducted as part of iNNOV8's Environmental Awareness Week, a special series examining four critical themes: greenery and afforestation, noise and air pollution, water sustainability, women and climate change. To read iNNOV8's policy brief on the state of greening and afforestation in the Kurdistan Region, click [here](#).

Profile of the Interviewee

Marouf Majid is the founder and Head of Ayinda Organization for Environmental Protection, a position he has held since the organization's establishment in 2013. With 23 years of experience in journalism spanning broadcast, audio, and print media, he is an active member of both the Kurdistan and World Journalists Syndicates. He also brings 18 years of dedicated voluntary environmental work, making him one of the most experienced voices at the intersection of environmental advocacy and media in the Kurdistan Region.

Majid serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Ayinda's Environment* magazine and has authored environmental articles for leading regional publications including *Khabat*, *Kurdistan-i-Nwe*, and *Hawler*, as well as the *Draw Media*. He has supervised six scientific publications in the environmental field and produced a scientific television series on environmental affairs under the title *The Future of the Environment*. He is also the author of the published book *The Future of the Environment: Statistics, Data Analysis, and Risk Assessment*, which examines environmental risks through a data-driven and statistical lens. Majid previously served as Co-Chair of the Board of Environmental Organizations of Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, and currently holds membership on the Supreme Environmental Council of the Kurdistan Region.

Interview Questions & Answers

Question 1: How do you broadly assess environmental affairs, the work of environmental organizations, and environmental policy in the Kurdistan Region?

To provide some context: there are 246 environmental organizations in the Kurdistan Region, and across the broader environmental sector, including water, animal husbandry, and related fields, approximately 460 organizations are active. Beyond these organizations and centers, the financial crisis and the lack of financial support have brought the work of many to a standstill. This is happening at a time when environmental specialists are regularly called upon by media outlets to discuss environmental challenges, yet the frequency of meaningful engagement remains very low, and most organizations find themselves unable to respond adequately.

Not all of these environmental organizations are active. Although the law requires them to submit annual financial reports and renew their administrative licenses, the Kurdistan Regional Government has, in cases of non-compliance, not revoked their operating rights, instead referring matters to the courts to reclaim those licenses. Hundreds of organizations established after 2014 have never even visited the offices of the Organizations Directorate, let alone renewed their administrative licenses.

The primary challenge for the majority of organizations at present is financial support. Since 2013–2014, the KRG has provided funding to organizations only once. Under the law, the Organizations Directorate is required to allocate approximately 15 billion dinars annually to civil organizations. That allocation was made once and then ceased entirely, which led to the dissolution of many organizations that could no longer sustain their operations.

In 2022, together with a group of colleagues, we established a board of environmental organizations at the request of the Board for Environmental Protection and Improvement. I served as co-chair of that board. Based on the official registry of the Organizations Directorate covering the Halabja and Sulaymaniyah governorates, out of a total of 65 environmental organizations, only 16 were reachable. I can say with confidence that, across all of Kurdistan today, the number of genuinely active environmental organizations does not exceed ten.

If the legally mandated funding were disbursed to organizations, many environmental bodies would resume their work. Beyond the financial challenge, another persistent problem is that organizations either fail to renew their operating licenses or are treated uniformly regardless of their level of activity or capacity.

Question 2: From your perspective and field experience, What is the most significant gap between environmental policy announcements and their implementation in the Kurdistan Region?

The Kurdistan Region has no shortage of environmental legislation and there is a reasonably solid legal foundation. However, the environmental laws currently in force date back several years. Environmental Law No. 8 of 2008, for example, requires revision and amendment in light of both domestic and global climate developments. Under the law, a number of conditions are stipulated, for instance, any facility constructed must dedicate at least twenty-five percent of its land area to green space. This is legally binding, but the real question is to what extent the responsible authorities enforce it against those who fail to comply. It is fair to say that very few have actually implemented Law No. 8 of 2008.

Over the past years and continuing today, the region's forests have suffered significant damage from both conflict and climate change. If we are to achieve meaningful green growth, particularly given that the Kurdistan Region's geography makes it a naturally attractive destination for tourism, we must keep pace with change and not fall behind in adapting to it.

Part of the artificial forest cover that exists today dates back to 1974, following the collapse of the September Revolution. The Iraqi government at the time employed approximately 1,000 workers to plant trees as a means of preventing unemployment. If one travels from Qarahanjir to the Hawraman border today, much of that artificial forest is still visible, predominantly pine trees. The question is whether those trees have managed to persist. The answer is largely no; coverage has in fact declined. If we wish to reverse that trend, annual dedicated planting and maintenance campaigns must be carried out even for existing artificial forests. Such campaigns do take place annually, but the protection of forests and green spaces does not meet the required standard, and the deficiencies that are identified have not been adequately addressed.

The impact of climate change has become increasingly visible in recent years, with summer temperatures exceeding fifty degrees Celsius and winter temperatures dropping below zero. The problem of forest loss, therefore, affects both natural and artificial forests in the Kurdistan Region, and neither has been managed with the level of care required.

Question 3: Which government body oversees greening and afforestation projects? Does the Environmental Board implement projects or only monitor them?

Under the law, the Environmental Board is a supervisory body responsible for overseeing environmental projects, it is the primary institution for environmental protection and

monitoring. The mandate for developing and expanding green coverage and forests is divided between two bodies within the KRG: the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources, which has a dedicated Directorate of Forests and Ranges responsible for protecting both natural and artificial forests and for increasing green coverage; and the municipal sector, which includes a Nurseries Directorate overseeing approximately 35 government nurseries producing both fruit-bearing and shade trees. The responsibility for sustaining and prioritizing forests and greening projects therefore rests with the Ministry of Agriculture, not the Environmental Board.

This is regrettable, because the Kurdistan Region had a dedicated Ministry of Environment as of 2008, which was subsequently downgraded to the Environmental Board by 2026. This institutional demotion reflects, in itself, a broader governmental deprioritization of environmental affairs.

At the global level, direct attention to environmental issues is intensifying, with dedicated conferences and high-level dialogues held annually. Even the federal government of Iraq, which previously merged the environment and health portfolios under a single ministry, has in the past two cabinets separated them, signaling greater recognition of environmental matters. The Environmental Board's mandate does not extend to greening; it is limited to environmental monitoring and protection at the regional level.

Green coverage has been addressed with some initiative in previous cabinet cycles. During the cabinet of Dr. Barham Salih, for example, approximately seven million saplings were distributed free of charge to citizens across the Kurdistan Region within a two-year period, with greening campaigns continuing throughout and the Ministry of Municipalities and the Environmental Board participating consistently. Sapling-planting campaigns are important,

but it is equally important to recognize that planting represents only twenty percent of the work. The remaining eighty percent consists of care, sustained maintenance, summer watering, fire protection, and ongoing monitoring against all other threats to greening projects.

For this reason, the Kurdistan Region needs a high-level council comprising clearly defined stakeholders with the mandate to plan and coordinate planting projects. At the national and regional level, campaigns planting millions of saplings are underway, and encouragingly, Erbil has now begun this process. These campaigns can be implemented in a planned and systematic manner, rather than planting a million saplings one year only to see the majority perish the following year.

Nurseries across the region currently produce between one million and two and a half million saplings annually. The primary challenge, therefore, is not the availability of saplings, it is their protection and sustained maintenance. A one-year-old sapling distributed to a citizen, for instance, cannot realistically be expected to thrive without continuous care. Nurseries also face staffing shortages, and there is a tendency to distribute saplings at a high volume precisely because they cannot provide the care required to keep them. This situation has reached the point where even government nurseries may be unable to sustain sapling production in the future. It is important that a portion of the revenue generated from saplings sold commercially be redirected back into government nurseries so that they can continue to operate sustainably.

Question 4: On what basis are tree species selected, and to what extent does species selection account for the geographical conditions of the Kurdistan Region and research on their suitability?

Within the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources, and specifically within the Agriculture Directorate and subsequently the Forests and Ranges Directorate, there is a research unit. These units are responsible for conducting research and establishing criteria for species selection. Historically, it was widely believed that certain species were naturally suited to Kurdistan's environment, oak, pine, and poplar among them. In recent years, however, some of those species long assumed to be unproblematic have shown signs of difficulty in the face of climate change. Similarly, the import of certain species incompatible with Kurdistan's environment has contributed to their early deterioration, umbrella trees, for example, which cannot withstand the winds in parts of Sulaymaniyah, particularly in the Toi Malik and Bazna Malik Mahmoud areas.

It is therefore essential that those responsible for overseeing species selection conduct proper assessments and research-based evaluations to ensure that appropriate species are chosen. Some species are simply not suited to the Kurdistan Region's climate and cannot withstand rising temperatures. In the Kalar area, for instance, any tree planted must be able to tolerate up to sixty degrees Celsius in summer, an exceptionally demanding threshold. The albizzia tree has proven to be one of the most heat-resistant species and has contributed meaningfully to improving green coverage in Kalar.

It is important that certain species and trees be produced domestically, both to reduce costs and to avoid spending resources on imported trees ill-suited to the local climate. In the context of rapidly accelerating global climate change, the selection and designation of appropriate trees for urban environments must become a priority for municipalities,

particularly their parks departments. For areas outside cities, it is possible to return to relying on domestically produced species, including oak, which can be planted from acorns or seedlings, and which has proven highly resilient to climate change and well-adapted to the Kurdistan Region's conditions.

Question 5: Are the tree species currently being planted compatible with water scarcity and climate change? Have they been assessed from the perspective of water requirements?

There is a significant difference in water consumption depending on species type. In recent years, trees have been planted in a largely random manner without adequate consideration of water requirements. In Sulaymaniyah, for example, the relevant authorities removed a number of trees approximately fifteen years old after concluding that they were not suited to the city's climate. If a tree has served its environment for twenty years and a decision is then made to remove it, that represents a serious failure of planning. Commercial interests may also play a role in some of these removals.

One species that has been criticized is the eucalyptus commonly known locally as "qalaim toz," which has been widely accused of depleting groundwater. Research has in fact demonstrated the opposite: it is among the most heat-resistant species and poses no harm to water resources. In one documented case, a eucalyptus grove was planted and a well was drilled to a depth of one hundred meters without reaching water, leading to an unfounded attribution of the water scarcity to the trees. The dissemination of such unfounded claims and the mislabeling of these trees lacks any scientific basis.

Question 6: To what extent do local communities participate in protecting forests and green spaces? How much do citizens value green coverage, and how responsive has the government been to their demands?

Citizens of the Kurdistan Region place considerable value on green spaces, and there is strong public demand for trees, which itself has contributed to the growth of private nurseries across the region. When the KRG has failed to deliver on its greening commitments, citizens have at times taken matters into their own hands. Since 2014, when the budget was curtailed and greening programs declined, citizens began demanding the right to take on greening responsibilities themselves. The absence of a master plan for parks and green spaces has created a situation where people have, out of necessity, planted in front of their own homes, creating an informal patchwork of greenery. If a master plan is eventually introduced and a budget for greening projects restored, the government may very well displace these grassroots efforts, and this is a consequence of the government's own failure to plan, leaving citizens no choice but to green their own neighborhoods and streets.

This reveals that the problem is not solely financial, it reflects a governance and management deficit in the environmental sphere. The government's neglect is visible even within its own public parks, where significant numbers of trees have died due to administrative indifference. Managing these projects requires modern technology and advanced irrigation systems. In Azadi Park, for example, the installation of a modern system would eliminate the problem of desiccation and address the inefficiency and waste of the current irrigation approach. Traditional irrigation methods have caused significant damage to greening projects and artificial forests. During periods of water shortage, some of the companies and entities contracted to provide irrigation have been unable to fulfil their obligations. In some cases, municipal authorities have instructed that only trees, not parks, be watered, which is itself an administrative failure.

Water tanker delivery is an outdated technique; far more advanced methods are available that eliminate the need for tankers entirely. Tankers are themselves a source of environmental pollution through fuel consumption and emissions, and their use should be phased out in favor of modern, advanced alternatives. It is therefore important that the government not only provide financial support for parks and greening and afforestation projects, but also revisit the administrative and managerial dimension, reviewing responsibilities, redistributing budgets, and ensuring that green coverage is maintained and sustained in an equitable manner that accounts for geographical variation and climate change conditions across the region.



ABOUT

Nestled in the mountains of Sulaymaniyah, the Culture Capital of KRI, iNNOV8 Research Center pioneers cutting-edge research and innovation. We aspire for excellence as an independent research center by providing valid, valuable, and timely products to the public. We deliver impactful solutions and contribute to our industry's vibrant and forward-thinking community.

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