

Series Number Fifteen

Iraqi Kurdish War
Photographs 1991 - Essay 2025

Twenty-Three Photographs

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Iraqi Kurdish Uprising - 1991

On my seventh birthday, my father bought me a BB gun and ammunition. My neighborhood best friend, Richard asked me to shoot him in the back one summer afternoon. He assured me that the BB pellet would bounce off his tough skin. He took off his shirt and told me, "Shoot me in the back, Mikey!" He spoke with such authority and assurance with repeated insistence. Even with a "I know I shouldn't do this" reluctance, I aimed and pulled the trigger. The BB lodged just under his skin in the middle of his back. He ran to his parents, screaming, "Mikey, shot me in the back."

War: What do trees or green fields or passing clouds or flying birds know about worry. How much loss can someone endure? In my University World History class our professor asked us on the first day, "How many wars have there been in the last 6000 years? What are the reasons for war and violent conflicts between groups and countries?" Why do insects and animals and communities fight with each other? How can war best be avoided?" World History never calculate or measures the cost of war's emotional trauma.

The 1991 First Gulf War:



The First Gulf War was between Iraq and a coalition of nations including the United States. The Coalition forces defeated Iraq and forced Iraq to retreat from their invasion into Kuwait. Toward the end of the First Gulf War, February, March, 1991 the Kurdish Iraqis as a result of years of systemic brutal repression, rose up against the Iraqi government demanding self-rule and independence. The Iraqi government retaliated against the Kurdish communities. They rounding up the men, women and children for mass executions. Some 400,000 Kurds fled to the mountains in northern Iraq near the border of Turkey.

In February, 1991, I went into northern Iraq as a war journalist representing the San Antonio Express News. I took with me my 8 x 10" large format camera, film plates, clothes and a tent. On a budget, flew to Istanbul, then to Ankara where I obtained a "Turkish War Press Card and Credentials". I took a 950 km bus ride to Diyarbakir, in southeastern Turkey. At an American military base, I got a ride with several war journalist who were traveling overland into Iraq and into fighting area.

A war from a distance is not the same as war close up.

In Zakho, Iraq and the surrounding villages, tens of thousands of fleeing Kurdish families were arriving from the mountains. A Kurdish mother was carrying pillows, blankets and pans on her back. Parents were holding their children. Refugee agencies were setting up tents and medical facilities. The U.S. Marines and a few coalition forces tried to create a temporary safety zone for the frightened refugees. No one was in control.

Even on the hard desert floor, a shoe print leaves an unmistakably trail. Smoke rising from campfires was circling and forming a question mark high above the camp. One woman's hand turned into a waving fist. I watched the sharp blade of the sun resting on the top of the silver mountains before it faded into the earth. I witnessed the compassion of volunteers, relief groups and doctors. The soldiers were so kind. I heard a grandmother coughing. I watched villagers cooking soup. I heard gun fire and explosion of bombs and words that I did not understand. Children everywhere were not playing or laughing, just silent. During the night of cold rain, not everyone had tents. Does melancholy have a favorite song?

I met a French naval officer. His unit was the first to arrive to fight in Iraq. They allowed me to stay with them in their large tent. Twelve of us slept on cots with guards holding rifles outside at night. They were serious and careful. They introduced me to a Kurdish taxi driver. He agreed to take me into the mountains near Duhok. Approaching a check point on an isolated desert road was frightening and arbitrary.

I was invited into tent after tent by Kurdish families. They offered me self-rolled cigarettes and tea heated from campfires. The stories made me cry – would make anyone cry. With an interpreter, the language was slower and more immediately desperate. Like a virus everyone was impacted.

I stayed with one Kurdish family for a full day. A father told me, *"Ten days earlier, the Iraqi army had entered our village. We were ordered to stand outside our house. While we looked on, an Iraqi soldier shot and killed one of my daughters, age seven. He then demanded that we pay for the bullet."* The second daughter that witnessed the atrocity is dressed in white: (See *Kurdish Portrait Three*.)

How can such things happen?

The Kurdish people have their own language and culture. At the end of WWI and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan failed to obtain statehood. An estimated 30 million people of Kurdish ethnicity are spread mostly across southern Turkey, northern Iraq, north and eastern Syria, and Iran.

I remember thinking, “What right do I have to make these photographs? How can I help in some small way?” Maybe, as a witness to the murmur and presence of it all? It was much more difficult to leave Iraq than to get in. A pilot in an Italian helicopter agreed to give me a ride back into Turkey. The sky was wearing a blue velvet vastness. The doors were open and two Italian soldiers with machine guns were positioned at each open door. They flew through the desert and then down along the Tigris River, just above the blue that owned water. They were looking for Iraqi guerrilla soldiers. I wore a radio headphone and listened to the soldiers speaking in Italian. On the helicopter flight back, looking down upon the wide space of land, I saw Kurdish families in brilliant colors walking in straight lines, other times in circles. Their thinking, I can only guess, was somewhere between where they stood and some far distant place I could never imagine.

Photographs – Kurdish Refugees:

The photographs in the Kurdish Iraqi series are made in two separate visual representations.

Part One: Portraits -

Part Two: Toward not Forgetting:

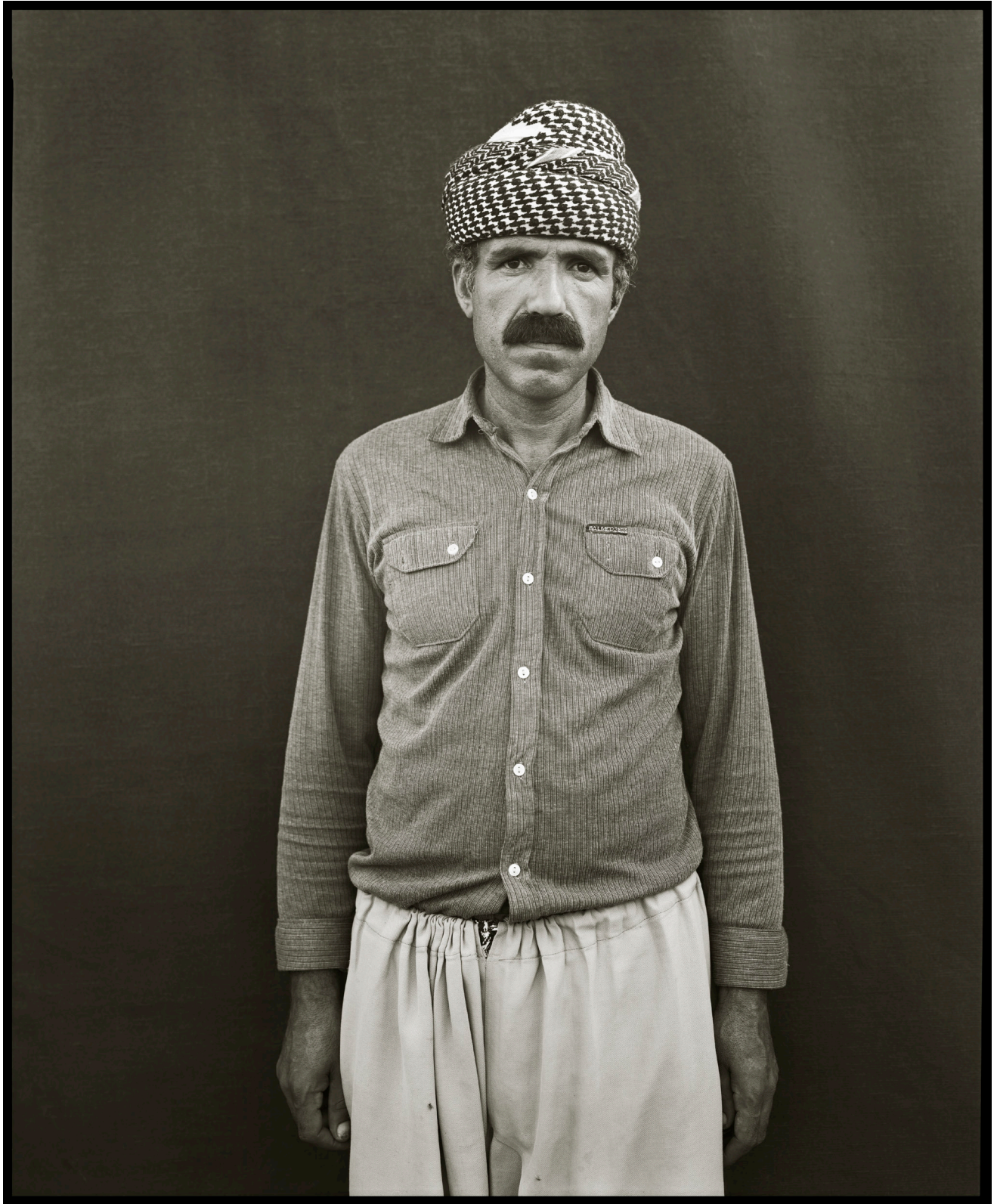
Part One: Portraits - (Fifteen photographs)

Photographs can be thought of as a continuity of touching. Light reflecting off a person travels through the camera lens and lightly touches the negative. Then in a darkroom, light from an enlarger moves through the same negative and touches the photographic paper.

Looking forward or backwards in time is still a measure of looking. A photograph of someone says so little about that person and sometimes the portrait is not that person at all. There is so much more to know. It is the surface of a person, a tiny moment unlike other moments. Each person spent some time before the camera. With an interpreter, we talked around the edges. I used a large 8 x 10” view camera, film plates on a tripod against a clumsy black backdrop. The backdrop is an open letter, an invitation toward the intensity and hardness of imagination, what is not seen but present.



Kurdist Portrait One



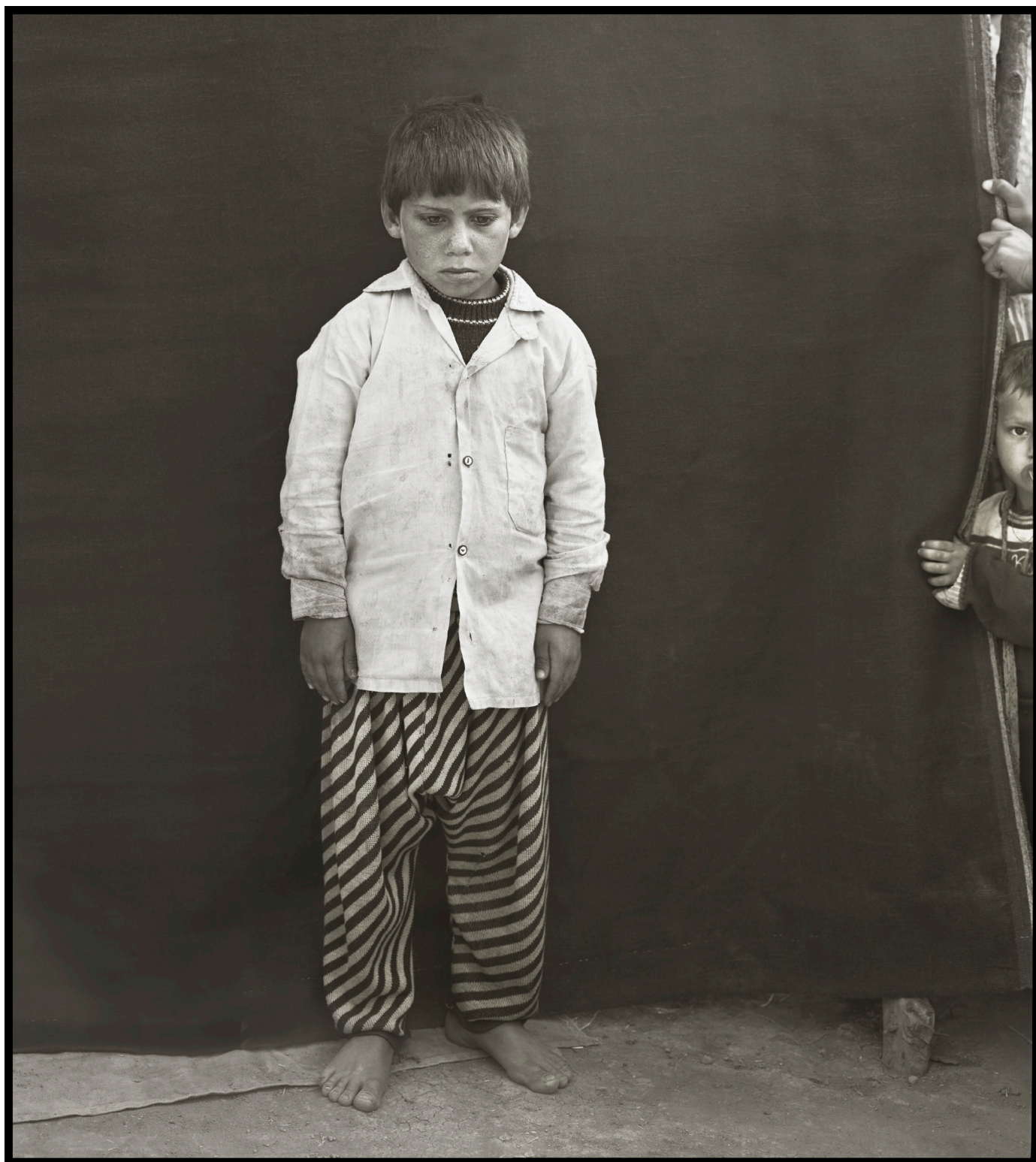
Kurdish Portrait Two



Kurdish Portrait Three



Kurdist Portrait Four



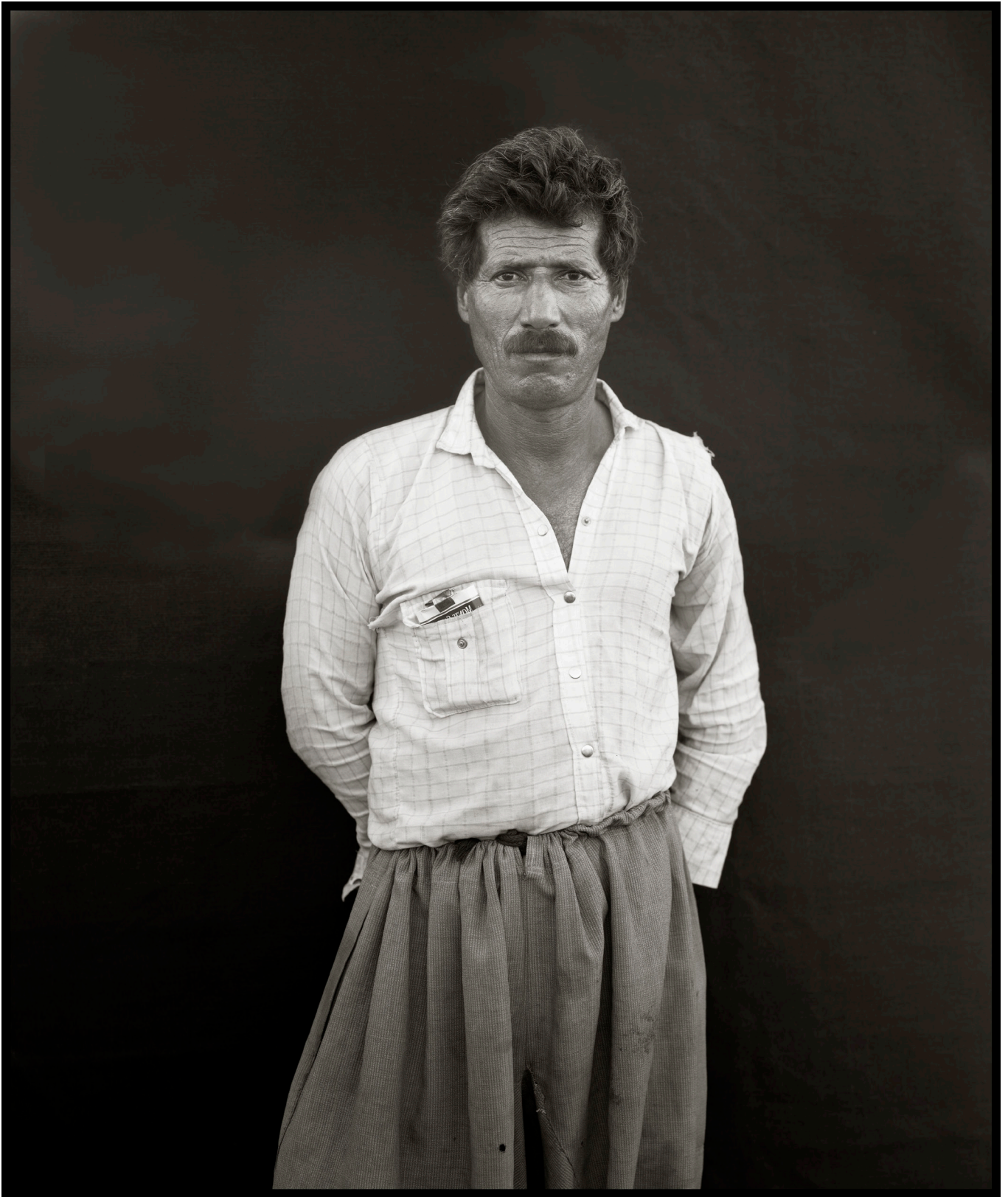
Kurdist Portrait Five



Kurdish Portrait Six



Kurdish Portrait Seven



Kurdist Portrait Eight



Kurdish Portrait Nine



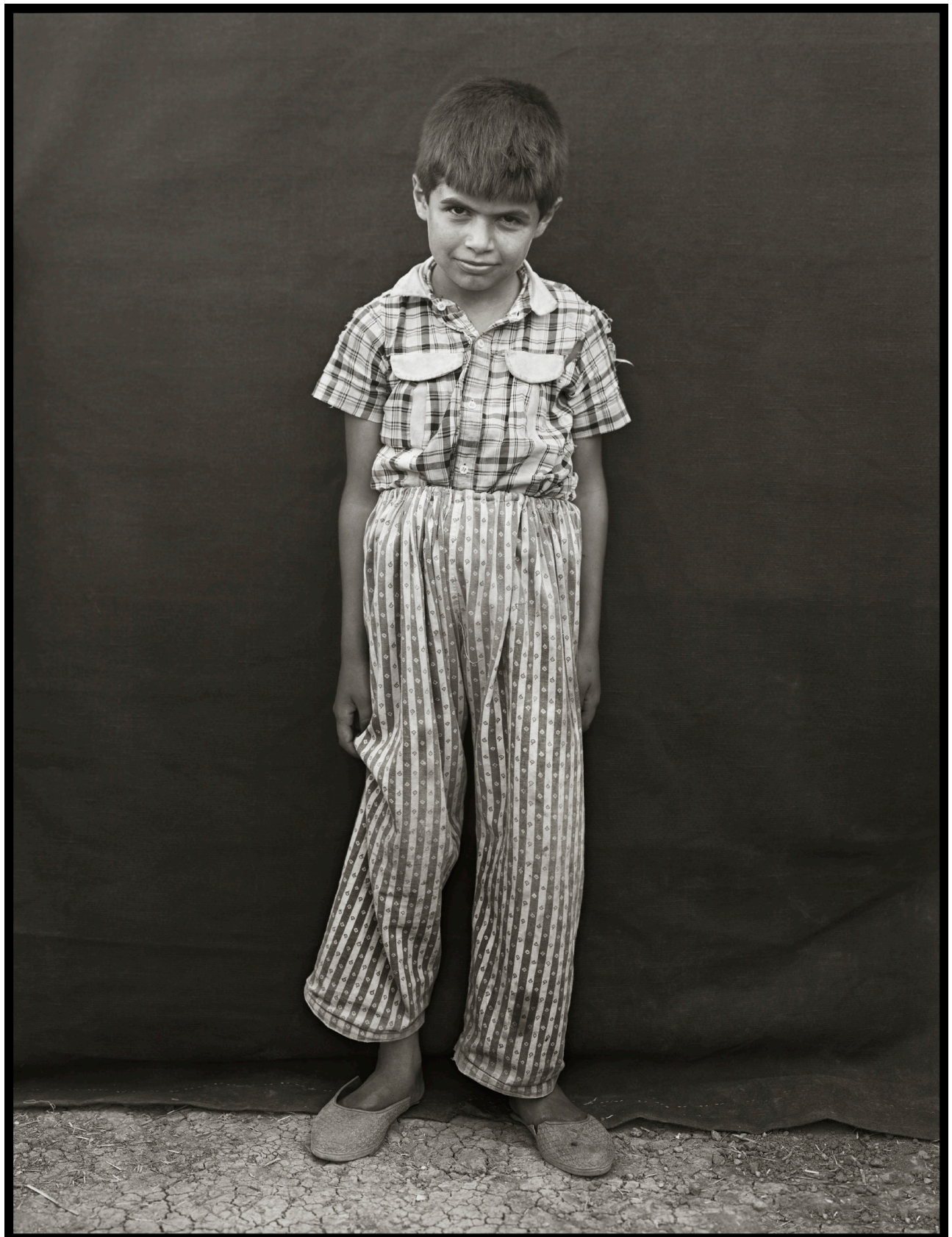
Kurdish Portrait Ten



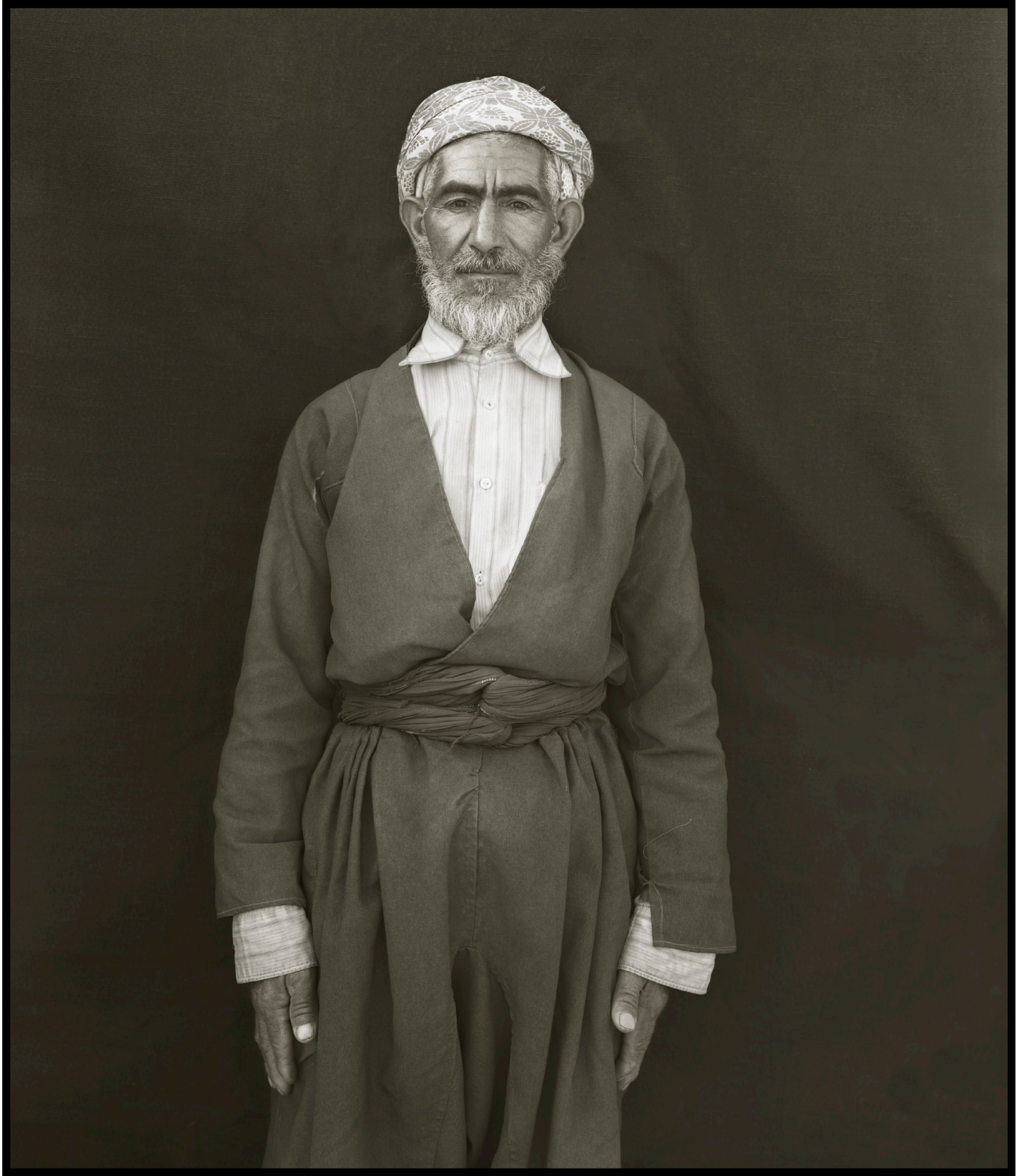
Kurdist Portrait Eleven



Kurdist Portrait Twelve



Kurdist Portrait Thirteen



Kurdish Portrait Fourteen



Kurdish Portrait Fifteen

Part Two: Toward not Forgetting: (Eight photographs)

In the darkroom I turned on the lights while the photograph was still in the development process. Strange pinks and oranges and purple tones emerged on the black and white photographic paper. These images are maps of “then and now”. These photographs point toward a history of: *“Don’t forget who we are”*. Not so much of injury or death or loss but of the ferociousness of present moments. I did not photograph any mile of the scattering of blankets and tents. I did not photograph the bombed-out homes and villages. I did not photograph the anxiety of the land or the always hopeful nature of air. I did not photograph mothers and fathers crying. I did not photograph death or the verbs of war. Others have made those images.



Toward not Forgetting - One



Toward not Forgetting - Two



Toward not Forgetting - Three



Toward not Forgetting - Four



Toward not Forgetting - Five



Toward not Forgetting - Six



Toward not Forgetting - Seven



Toward not Forgetting - Eight