



Where I work Abdulrahman Bamerni

Photographed for *Nature*
by Alice Martins.

This photo was taken in the mountains of Duhok in Iraqi Kurdistan. I'm extracting rock samples that can help us to understand what life looked like here just after the dinosaurs went extinct, more than 65 million years ago. For me, this is more than just research: it's also a way to defy the Islamist terrorist group ISIS, whose members tried to kill me. I'm proud to be here doing this; the pursuit of knowledge is my way of resisting ISIS's extremism.

In 2008, I was studying for my master's degree at the University of Mosul in Iraq. The city was an ISIS stronghold even before the group officially took over. ISIS members heard that I had made friends with some girls. They didn't like that and sent death threats, culminating in an assassination attempt: they put a bomb outside my house. I was seriously hurt; I was in hospital for four months and healed at home for another nine.

The attack made me more determined than ever to carry on with science. I earned my PhD in 2022 and became a geologist at the University of Duhok.

I spent my PhD scouring the Duhok

countryside for an uninterrupted cross section of rock layers that spans several geological ages, from the time before dinosaurs' extinction, through the extinction event itself and into the time when life rebounded, at least 30,000 years later.

In 2020, I made an important discovery in Duhok: a 30-metre cross section containing different layers. I analysed it, but have limited laboratory equipment, so I sent samples to colleagues in Italy for chemical-isotope testing to date the rock layers.

We confirmed that the cross section does span the time frame I'm interested in. This is the first such discovery in Iraq and offers a glimpse of how the dinosaurs' extinction played out here. Embedded in the rock, for example, are fossilized microorganisms, whose relative abundance allows scientists to deduce which life forms existed then.

This discovery is my revenge against those who tried to stop me.

Abdulrahman Bamerni is a geologist at the University of Duhok in Iraq. **Interview by Benjamin Plackett.**