



Iraqi photographer Samira Mazaal speaks during an interview at her studio in the city of Amarah in Iraq's southeastern Maysan province. — AFP photos



Iraqi photographer Samira Mazaal works at her studio.

## Focus on Samira, celebrity snapper of southern Iraq

She's southern Iraq's celebrity photographer, a former political prisoner who has spent more than 60 years behind the lens documenting people and places and defying convention. Samira Mazaal is 77 and still going strong more than half a century after turning to photography to feed her family — because she had no choice.

"Peasants, intellectuals, I've photographed them all," says the mother of two, her black hijab framing a face lined by life. "I have photographed Amarah in all its beauty — I went deep into the marshes," to the south of the city in the floodplain of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Everyone in the area turns to Studio Samira, be it for a passport photograph or to have a couple's portrait taken ahead of their wedding.

She tells how she became the first female photographer in Maysan province aged just 16, despite familial conventions that ruled in the Iraq of the 1960s, and also how political activism led to imprisonment and torture. "My family has never known any other business — we're all photographers," Samira says.

Framed photographs lining the walls bear witness to her trade, in both black and white or in colors faded by time. She has albums of images showing Iraq as it used to be: black-clad women carrying

huge bales balanced on their heads; a smiling peasant woman in a flowery dress, her hair braided, standing near a cow; a mother and child filling a pot with water from the river.

### 'Society can be cruel'

Samira's father was among the first to introduce photography to the province. "I asked him to initiate me into the craft, but he said: 'No, you're too young. You can't — society can be cruel,'" she recalls. But soon circumstances would force him to change his mind. He was rendered blind in a botched operation, and could no longer provide for his family. So Samira had to step in.

She started off using the daguerreotype method of the 1800s that uses silver-plated copper sheets, but then her father sold off some land so she could buy more modern equipment. "My studio became extraordinarily successful," she smiles. "Because I was a young woman, I could take pictures of families." Samira exploited the norms of a conservative society: the male heads of households preferred that a woman photographer, not a man, take the pictures of their wives and daughters. Bassem Al-Subaid is one satisfied client of Studio Samira.

"There isn't a single household in all of Maysan province that doesn't know



Iraqi photographer Samira Mazaal speaks during an interview at her studio.

Samira the photographer," he tells AFP. "My generation got to know Samira when we came to be photographed by her," adds the man in his forties. "It was the previous generation that saw her political activism." In 1963, Iraq was being torn apart by revolutions and bloody crack-downs, and the then adolescent had no idea that a communist tract would put her behind bars.

without a pasted copy of the poster," she boasts. "It wasn't a crime — it's a source of pride."

A picture of herself, which she still has today, made her famous. It shows her lying on a hospital bed after being tortured in a building in Amarah. "I was screaming so hard I thought the whole town would come and save me," she recalls. It was not to be: she spent the next four years, ill and abused, in a Baghdad prison. She was freed after an international campaign that led to pardons for several political prisoners in Iraq.

In 1981, she was again jailed briefly under the rule of then dictator Saddam Hussein. And then again 10 years later over a protest in Amarah against the repercussions of the Gulf War over Kuwait. Like several other women prisoners, she was granted a pardon after just a few months. Today the photographic studio is still welcoming clients, and despite her age, the revolutionary flame still burns brightly in Samira. She hails the October 2019 uprising, sparked by angry young Iraqis seeking to bring those in power to account. "The protesters should have transformed their movement into a massive revolution to root out corruption and the corrupt," Samira says. —AFP



Iraqi photographer Samira Mazaal shows an analog film roll and a memory card.



Iraqi photographer Samira Mazaal speaks during an interview at her studio.



Iraqi photographer Samira Mazaal poses with a framed picture of her on a hospital bed after being tortured in a building in Amarah.



Iraqi photographer Samira Mazaal poses for a picture next to framed images retracing her career during an interview.

### Snorkeller injured in suspected shark attack off English coast

A snorkeller off the coast of southern England has suffered a suspected shark bite, coastguards said on Tuesday, in what appears to be an extremely rare incident. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency said it sent a rescue team to Penzance in Cornwall "to meet a snorkeller who suffered a suspected shark bite" after the accident was reported last Thursday. "It is believed the swimmer suffered a leg injury," the coastguard service said, adding that the snorkeller had been treated by the ambulance service.

A Cornish tour agency that arranges snorkel trips to watch blue sharks confirmed a participant had received first aid after an "incident". Blue sharks which grow to nearly four meters (13 feet) long are summer visitors to UK waters. They are hunters, which migrate through oceans, eating fish and shellfish.

The blue shark is classed as "near threatened" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature because it is hunted for its flesh and fins and also gets caught accidentally in fishing nets. Blue Shark Snorkel Trips, based in Penzance, wrote on Facebook, "We have had an incident." "First aid (was) carried out on the person involved."

"Following advice and assessment from the coastguard, the person walked off the boat and received further treatment ashore," it added. The person injured was not named but the company quoted them as saying it was a "very scary incident" but added, "I don't for a second want this freak event to tarnish the reputation of an already persecuted species." "These occurrences

are extremely rare", the company said. It takes snorkellers to swim with blue sharks 10 to 20 miles offshore, according to its website. It warns that blue sharks are "apex predators" with no natural predators and participants "swim with them knowing there is a risk". —AFP



### Oscars group elects Janet Yang as new president

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences elected film producer Janet Yang as its new president, the group behind the Oscars announced Tuesday. Yang, best known for hits including "The Joy Luck Club" and "The People vs. Larry Flynt," becomes the fourth woman elected to run Hollywood's most elite group of filmmakers, and the first of Asian origin.

Academy members vote for the winners of the Oscars each year, while the group has recently launched a major new Los Angeles film museum which had been decades in the planning. In a statement, Academy CEO Bill Kramer praised in particular Yang's work on "membership recruitment, governance, equity, diversity, and inclusion" among other areas.

"I am thrilled that she is taking on the esteemed role of Academy President and look forward to working closely with her on our shared vision to serve our membership, celebrate the collaborative arts and sciences of motion pictures, and inspire the next generation of filmmakers," he wrote. The Academy has had to navigate multiple controversies in recent years, including accusations of a lack of racial diversity.

Most notably, the group was pummeled with criticism for a dearth of Black Oscar nominees during the #OscarsSoWhite movement, which emerged in 2015. It has since fulfilled a pledge to double the number of women and minority members by 2020, significantly expanding overall membership from around 6,000 to nearly 10,000 in the process. Around 19 percent of Academy members are now from underrepresented ethnic and racial communities. — AFP



Producer Janet Yang arrives at China's first Film Awards, Huading Film Awards, in Hollywood, California. — AFP