

Editorial | Martin van Bruinessen[♦]

The development of a field of studies such as our own, Kurdish studies, depends to a large extent on the existence of an institutional infrastructure of specialised academic departments, libraries, journals, etc. Only very few academic institutions in the world have a well-established tradition of Kurdish studies, and not surprisingly they are found in those countries that have had an imperial interest in Kurdistan: Russia, Great Britain and France. The general marginalisation of area studies in academia in favour of the more strictly discipline-oriented organisation of academic research has affected these established institutions too. The best specialised libraries in Europe are not in universities but in private Kurdish institutes in Paris, Stockholm, Berlin and Vienna, and they were established and funded by members of the Kurdish diaspora with incidental governmental support. The decline of Kurdish area studies in academia was compensated to some extent by the establishment of endowed chairs at various European and North American universities and scholarship programs funded by the Kurdish Regional Government and Kurdish parties of Iraq. The precarious economic situation of Iraqi Kurdistan gives reason for concern about the future of these Kurdish-funded initiatives.

The increased interest of politicians and policy-makers in the Kurds due to their increased political significance in the Middle East has not been translated into a noticeable rise of public research funding earmarked for studies of Kurdish society. There has, however, been a sharp increase in publications on the Kurds by various think tanks and international NGOs. Inevitably, these reports have mainly focused on very contemporary developments and primarily on security-related issues.

Most academic research on Kurdish subjects, in the past few decades, has been carried out at university departments of such disciplines as history, sociology, economics, law, education, geography, migration studies, linguistics, or religious studies, and the scholars concerned have worked in relative isolation from colleagues interested in other but related aspects of Kurdish society. Very few research groups have developed a degree of Kurdish expertise that exceeded the individual research projects. The Kurdish Studies Network

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and this journal serve to some extent as a virtual alternative to the physical institutional infrastructure many of us miss in our direct academic environment.

The emergence of a semi-independent Kurdish region in northern Iraq and the establishment of several new universities in this region, besides the older Salahuddin University in Erbil, appeared to give an institutional boost to Kurdish studies, although most of the investment obviously was directed towards education in other fields and disciplines, and the universities like everything else under the Kurdistan Regional Government became embedded in pervasive patronage relations that made academic independence illusory.

Until very recently, Turkey seemed to be on its way to becoming the most favourable environment for Kurdish studies. Since the taboo on mentioning the Kurds was lifted, there has been a steady stream of publishing on Kurdish history, society and politics, besides an outburst of Kurdish-language publications. More importantly, the AKP government allowed several universities to open departments of Kurdish language and literature. Artuklu University in Mardin, which was especially favoured, recruited to all departments in the humanities and social sciences young scholars who specialised on the peoples and cultures of the region. Several universities, including the most prestigious ones, allowed students to write MA and PhD theses on Kurdish subjects, although this remains a risky career choice. The number of young scholars involved in Kurdish studies in Turkey soon came to exceed that of all other countries. Scholars from Turkey have made numerous contributions to English-language scholarship in Kurdish studies, but the really impressive growth was in Turkish-language scholarship on the Kurds. There are now high-quality specialised journals in Turkish (with occasional contributions in Kurdish) such as the glossy popular history journal *Kürt Tarihi* (Kurdish History) and the social research journal *Toplum ve Kuram* (*Society and Theory*), and the volume of serious books on Kurdish society, history and culture produced by Turkish publishers is truly impressive.

However, the past year has seen dramatic changes in the government's or, more precisely, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's attitude towards the Kurds. Overtures towards a peace process were abruptly suspended and the war against the PKK was resumed with renewed vigour. Independent television and print media were brought under government control, resulting in a silencing of dissident voices. Control of the universities was also tightened, and independent-minded administrators replaced by more trusted persons. As a series of incidents has shown, academic freedom is now under serious threat in Turkey. The best-known affair concerns the persecution of academics who signed a statement condemning the excessive violence with which the army and police suppressed urban uprisings in Kurdish cities. Some of them lost their jobs, others were detained for weeks, many are being harassed and threatened, and all are under investigation for "support of terrorism." As such, this case was nothing to do with Kurdish studies; most of the academics concerned work on different subjects. But it has resulted in a widespread fear in academic circles of being

associated with Kurdish issues; since the beginning of this affair, most universities have been extremely reluctant to touch upon anything related to Kurds and Kurdish. Conferences and lectures were cancelled; scholars have been urged to keep a low profile until the storm blows over. Unfortunately, this may not happen soon. Our colleagues in Turkey deserve our solidarity and moral support.



The articles in this issue show again the wide range of work that is currently being done on Kurdish society, politics, history and culture. All of them concern the Kurds of Turkey but they address very different aspects.

Sheikh `Ubaydullah of Nehri (on the Ottoman-Persian frontier) is best known for the rebellion he led in 1880 and his communications with the American missionary doctor Cochrane, in which he appeared to express nationalist sentiment. In his contribution to this issue, Kamal Soleimani draws attention to an important source for the sheikh's religious and political ideas, which has only recently come to light. It is a literary work in Persian verse that the sheikh left behind, his *Mathnavi*, previously only known in the circle of his family and their close associates. As Soleimani shows, this work offers important insights into the world view of a Kurdish Muslim leader living on the eve of the radical transformation of the Middle East.

The revival of Kurdish as a written language and vehicle of modern communication in Turkey is a remarkable phenomenon that has few if any parallels among non-state languages elsewhere. The status of Kurdish in education and broadcasting has been a matter of contention between the Kurdish movement and the state, with some symbolic gains for the former. The extent to which Kurdish is being spoken in actual everyday communication is, however, an entirely different matter. Sinan Zeyneloğlu, Ibrahim Sirkeci and Yaprak Civelek present in their contribution an analysis of the available demographic data on languages known and spoken and suggest that the actual use of Kurdish has contracted over the past half century, raising questions about the future of Kurdish in spite of its improved legal status.

Thomas McGee's paper on the efforts to bring relief to the people of Kobani has the most direct relevance to the current crisis in Turkish-Kurdish relations. In another relevant contribution, Joost Jongerden, who has published extensively on the PKK before, shares his reflections on research as a form of active engagement with this movement.

In a different mode of literary analysis, inspired by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum's work, Joanna Bocheńska focuses on a short story by a modern Kurmanci author based in Sweden, Hesenê Metê. Her intention is to go beyond the focus on identity and social context that has been predominant in studies of Kurdish literature and explore, in a broader comparative context, how literary works are expressive of moral imaginaries. She takes Hesenê Metê's

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story, in which one of the protagonists is a village guard (*korucu*) and another makes the difficult choice between seeking protection with the Kurdish guerrillas or with the Turkish army, as a point of departure for reflections on ethics and Kurdish moral imagination.

In the following issues we hope to be covering an equally broad range of subjects, as well as maintaining a balance between the different regions of Kurdistan.

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Editors' acknowledgment

We are delighted to publish the latest issue of our journal, a product of a strong collaboration involving numerous authors, reviewers, editors, proof readers and translators. We are indebted to all of our friends and colleagues who made this issue possible and we hope that it will be a useful addition to the growing field of Kurdish studies. Special thanks go to Hashem Ahmadzadeh and Seevan Saeed for translating the abstracts into Kurdish. We are also delighted to welcome on board our new associate editor Djene Rhys Bajalan.