

Editorial

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Kurdish studies have, in the past few decades, come to be established as a respectable field of academic investigation and publication, after long having been as marginal in academia as the Kurds themselves were in the politics of the Middle East. The received wisdom, in many Western academic institutions, was that it was essential to retain access to the “field” and that permits to carry out field research in such pro-Western and relatively accessible countries as Turkey and Iran would continue to be granted as long as scholars stayed away from sensitive issues – and the Kurds were definitely one of the most sensitive of those issues. Turkey and Iran, Iraq and Syria perceived their Kurdish citizens as a major security issue, and scholarly interest in the Kurds aroused suspicions of imperialist meddling in Arab, Persian or Turkish affairs.

The imperialist heritage of Kurdish studies cannot be denied; we owe many of the best early studies of Kurdish language, culture and society to Christian missionaries of various denominations and Russian, British and French consuls and intelligence officers. This is hardly unique to Kurdish studies, however; the same is true of Turkish, Arabic and Iranian studies and of Orientalist knowledge in general. The articles “Kurdistan” and “Kurds” in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, which present an excellent

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overview of the state of the art in the 1920s, were written by the great scholar Vladimir Minorsky, who had been a Russian consul in Tabriz and a member of the international commission that demarcated the Ottoman-Persian border. These articles retain their value as a highly informative introduction to the history of the Kurds and their land. Half a century later, the articles were updated for the second edition of the Encyclopaedia by Father Thomas Bois, the last representative of the missionary scholars of the Kurds.

Bois had earlier written, under the pseudonym of Lucien Rambout, one of the first overviews of Kurdish uprisings and repression in the modern nation states of Turkey, Iran and Iraq (*Les Kurdes et le droit*, 1947). This was a new genre of writing on the Kurds, which came to dominate the literature during the second half of the twentieth century, consisting mostly of popular works written by journalists and travellers, self-styled strategic analysts and human rights activists. More recently, sociologists and political scientists have produced more theoretically informed studies of Kurdish political movements and state policies towards the Kurds. Studies of the Kurdish movement have continued to make up a major portion of Kurdish studies.

The development of academic specialisations depends on the availability of institutional support in the form of funding, specialised teaching and research institutes, libraries and journals. Whereas numerous universities have distinct institutes or departments for Turkish, Iranian, or Arabic and Islamic studies, institutions specialised in Kurdish studies are few and far between – the Oriental section of the Soviet (now: Russian) Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations in Paris were for a long time the only academic institutions with small Kurdish departments. The establishment of a Kurdish Academy of Sciences (*Korî Zanyarî Kurd*, later reduced to Kurdish Branch of the Iraqi Academy of Sciences) in Baghdad after the March 1970 agreement, and the more recent establishment of a Mustafa Barzani chair in Washington DC and a Talabani-funded department in Exeter show the dependence of academic institutionalisation on political factors. Private initiatives, such as the Kurdish Institute of Paris and the Kurdish Libraries of Brooklyn and Stockholm, each with their own publications, have been equally important as institutional support for the development of Kurdish studies. These institutions would not have been possible without the emergence of a well-connected Kurdish diaspora and, in the French and Swedish case, benevolence towards and sympathy with the Kurds among segments of the political elite.

Most of the scholars who wrote dissertations and scholarly articles on Kurdish subjects in the course of the past few decades, however, were not affiliated with one of the specialised departments of Kurdish studies but were educated, or worked, in departments of sociology, anthropology, politics, law, economics, history, linguistics, literature, cultural studies, geography, archaeology or migration studies. This corresponds with a general shift in academia away from area studies towards education and research in one of those disciplinary frames, and with the increased emphasis on theoretically informed

research. One positive aspect of this shift has been the increasing sophistication of at least some recent work on the Kurds; another, the absence of the old political fears of all things Kurdish in departments that are not focussing specifically on the Middle East. The downside, however, has been that most graduate students have had to do their studies without the benefit of regional expertise in their supervisors and their immediate academic surroundings.

Since its establishment, the Kurdish Studies Network (KSN), founded by Welat Zeydanlıoğlu in 2009, has made a great contribution to compensating for this lack of Kurdish expertise in the working environment of most of our colleagues. It has functioned as a virtual institute of Kurdish studies, providing its members with a stimulating environment, a repository of readily available factual knowledge, alerts on new publications and online resources, and a forum for discussion of a broad range of issues related to Kurdish studies. The number of actively participating members is the best indication that, around the world, in numerous universities and a wide range of disciplines, there is now a considerable community of scholars who share an interest in Kurdish studies. The peer-reviewed journal *Kurdish Studies*, which sees the light with this issue, is a logical next step in the institutionalisation of the field of studies and the network, and will offer a more “established” platform for academic communication.

The editors do not want to delimit the subject of Kurdish studies very strictly. The journal invites contributions on Kurdistan and the Kurds, including the religious and ethnic minorities in Kurdistan, relations of the Kurds with neighbouring peoples and states, Kurdish enclaves elsewhere in the Middle East and the modern Kurdish diaspora. Contributions from all academic disciplines are welcome, provided they do not exclusively address narrow specialist issues but reach out to readers of other disciplinary backgrounds. A clear conceptual or theoretical framework is desirable, but the primary aim of the journal is to enable exchange between colleagues of different parts of the world and different academic specialisations who share a general interest in the Kurds and Kurdistan. It is our hope that the journal will be especially useful to the younger generation of scholars, who will be the ones to further raise the intellectual level of Kurdish studies.

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Editors' acknowledgement

We trust this inaugural issue of *Kurdish Studies* will meet the expectations of our varied audiences and will endure to stimulate new and exciting research in this field. We are indebted to our colleagues who have contributed to this issue and all who support the journal by serving on the editorial boards. We also thank our anonymous reviewers who have kindly devoted their time and expertise to make this issue possible. As associate editors, we would like to thank Deniz Ekici and Khalid Khayati who have kindly translated the abstracts into Kurdish. We also thank Gizem Cakir for designing the logos of the Journal and the KSN network. Final thanks are reserved for Naomi Houghton who assisted with the copyediting and proofreading of articles.

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Associate Editors of Kurdish Studies