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INTERVIEW

Establishing a journal, shaping a field: An interview with Dr Welat Zeydanlıoğlu¹

Marlene Schäfers²

Abstract

In this interview, founder and long-time managing editor of Kurdish Studies, Dr Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, tells the story of the journal's establishment and recalls its development to becoming the leading English-speaking journal in the field of Kurdish studies today. He explains the relations between the journal and the Kurdish Studies Network, reflects on the difficulties that the journal has faced over the years, and outlines its major contributions to the field. The interview sheds light not only on the history of a journal but on the development of an entire scholarly field, while sketching the challenges lying ahead.

Keywords: Kurdish studies; Kurdish Studies Network; Kurdish Studies journal

Abstract in Kurmanji

Avakirina kovarekê, şikildana qadekê: Hevpeyvîneke ligel Dr. Welat Zeydanlıoğlu

Di vê hevpeyvînê de, avaker û editore rêvebirinê yê demdirêj ê Kurdish Studiesê, Dr. Welat Zeydanlıoğlu behsa çîroka avakirina kovare dîke û pêşketina wê ya ber bi bîyîna kovara sereke ya îngilîzî di qada Xebatên Kurdî de bi bîr tîne. Ew, têkiliyên di navbera kovare û Kurdish Studies Networkê de rave dike, zehmetiyên ku kovar di nav salan de rûbirû maye nîşan dide û bi kurtasî behsa tenkariyên wê yê girîng ên bo qadê dike. Hevpeyvîn ne tenê dîroka kovarekê, lê herwiha pêşketina tevahiya qadeke zanistî ron dike ligel nexşkirina kêşeyên li pêş.

Abstract in Zazaki

Ronayîşê kovarekê, şekilnayîşê beşêk: Dr. Welat Zeydanlıoğluyî reyde roportaj

Nê roportajî de avanker û sereditore demgerg yê Kurdish Studiesê, Dr. Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, qalê bîkayeya ronayîşê kovare keno û ano vîr ke senî aver şîya enro bîya kovara beşê kurdolojî ya sereke ke îngilîzîkî vejîyena. O têkiliya mabênê kovare û Torra Kurdolojî de îzah keno, zehmetîyê ke kovare serranê peyênan de dîyî, înan nawneno û beşdarîyanê nê warî yê tewr muhîman ser o vîndeno. Roportaj tena tarîxê kovare rê roştî nêdano, la averşîyayîşê pêroyê beşê akademîkî kî ano çîman ver û eynî dem de zehmetîyê ke verê ma der ê, înan teswîr keno.

¹ Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, independent researcher and coordinator of the Kurdish Studies Network (KSN), Sweden.

E-mail: welatzeydan@hotmail.com.

² Marlene Schäfers, Assistant Professor, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Utrecht University, Padualaan 14, 3584 CH Utrecht, the Netherlands. E-mail: e.m.schafers@uu.nl.



Abstract in Sorani

دامەزراندنی ژۆرنالێک، دابڕشتنی بواریک: چاوپێکەوتنێک لەگەڵ دکتۆر وەلات زەیدانلیۆغلو

لەم چاوپێکەوتنەدا، دکتۆر وەلات زەیدانلیۆغلو، دامەزرێنەر و سەرنووسەری درێژخایەنی کارگێڕی کوردیش ستەدیس، چیرۆکی دامەزراندنی ژۆرنالەکە دەگێڕێتەوە و گەشەسەندنەکشی بیردەمخاتەرە کە ئەمەڕۆ بۆتە ژۆرنالێکی پێشەنگی ئینگلیزی زمان لە بواری دێراساتی کوردیدا. ئەو پەڕوونەکانی ئێوان ژۆرنالەکە و تۆری دێراساتی کوردی روون دەکاتەر، ئەو سەختییانەش نیشان دەدات کە لەماوەی سالانی رابردوودا رووبەرەوی ژۆرنالەکە بوونەتەر، وە باس لە بەشدارییە سەرەکییەکانی ژۆرنالەکە لە بواری دەکات. چاوپێکەوتنەکە تەنها تیشک خستەر سەر مێژووی ژۆرنالێک نییە، بەڵکو بۆ سەر گەشەسەندنی تەواوی بواریکی زانستیشە، لە هەمان کاتدا ئەو ئالنگارییانەش دەخاتەر روو کە ڤێنە پێش.

Marlene Schäfers: *Can you tell us about when and how Kurdish Studies was founded? What were your main motivations at the time?*

Welat Zeydanhoğlu: The first idea of the journal was born in 2012 at the World Kurdish Congress (WKC) in Erbil, organised by the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (KRG). Quite a few scholars who were also subscribed to the Kurdish Studies Network (KSN) were present at the five-day event, which aimed to bring together international and local scholars who study Kurdish society, politics, economy, etc. We used that as an occasion to have an informal KSN gathering to meet face to face. At that meeting, I floated the idea for the first time that the field urgently needed a new journal in English which met international scholarly standards, and which was to represent the exciting new research that was being carried out by scholars of Kurdish studies. Pretty much everyone present agreed that this was needed, especially so since the last such journal had ceased to exist several years previously. I think it was that evening or the following day that I was introduced to Professor Ibrahim Sirkeci, who is a known scholar of migration studies and has also written extensively on Kurdish migration, and we got chatting about the idea of a journal, if it was a feasible idea and what could be done about it.

To be honest, it started off as a rather spontaneous brainstorming and we spent the coming days having deeper discussions about different aspects of it. The idea was that I had the connections to the scholarly community and was already running the KSN, while Professor Sirkeci would help out with all other aspects including the database, website, indexing and so on. The only experience I had of the publishing world was that I had published in scholarly journals and was an avid reader of journal articles. It was a bit of a dream of mine to see the foundation of a respectable journal in Kurdish studies. But I would have never dreamt of entering such a project if it was not for the fact that Professor Sirkeci was already running several journals—one of which, *Migration Letters*, a leading journal in the field, stretched back many years—and that he was offering his expertise and know-how of journal management. Once we agreed on the project, we approached Professor Joost Jongerden to join us. He kindly agreed and closely contributed to the journal for many years. Once we got back from Erbil, we worked hard for many months to approach scholars and establish the editorial board. Professor Martin van Bruinessen kindly accepted to be editor-in-chief, and many other established and upcoming scholars have joined the journal's board since then.

My main motivation for the journal was to establish a scholarly outlet that would be as good as other internationally respected journals. As such it was important that it lived up to the academic standards of such journals, whether it came to the peer review process and quality of articles, or the design, presentation, etc. It was also important that it did not lose its “Kurdish character” and was accessible to non-English speaking Kurdish scholars, so from the first issue we translated all abstracts to Kurmanji and Sorani, and later on to Zazaki as well. It was also important for me that the journal would have complete editorial freedom and be a sound forum for scholarly work that was being carried out by scholars both in Kurdistan and across the world. Finally, it was crucial for me that the journal should not be tainted by Kurdish party politics or over-represent a certain part of Kurdistan.

One of several journals that I followed closely (which included journals such as *New Perspectives on Turkey* and *Middle East Studies*) was the well-respected journal *Nations and Nationalism* and this influenced what I was aiming at to quite an extent. The fact that *Nations and Nationalism* is backed by a scholarly association (ASEN); that there are annual ASEN conferences that bring the scholars of the field together; that there is a mailing list for the scholarly community; that there is a database of scholars of nationalism and so on – all these were things I wanted for Kurdish Studies as well.

Schäfers: *How is the Kurdish Studies journal linked to the Kurdish Studies Network (KSN)?*

Zeydanlioğlu: I would say the Kurdish Studies journal is the culmination of a process closely connected to the development of the KSN. Nowadays, however, the journal is more independent, but both the journal and the network keep supporting each other as there is a synergy between the two. Let me explain from the beginning. While doing my MA and PhD at the beginning of the 2000s, I realised that scholars of Kurdish studies were quite fragmented. By that I mean there were constellations of scholars in different locations that did not have much contact with each other or only had loose connections. For example, if an edited volume was to be organised, the guest editors would have a small circle of colleagues or friends they would approach. Calls for papers would not circulate very widely. It was very common to see “the usual names,” so to say, in different projects. There was a disconnectedness and a lack of a forum to keep in touch and get updates on research being carried out, on new publications; basically, about who is who and who is doing what. All the things I mentioned with regards to ASEN were lacking in Kurdish studies. The fragmentation was also fuelled by political, geographical, linguistic, and ideological divisions that were preventing the establishment of independent scholarly forums. When established, they were often not long-lasting.

When doing my PhD, I was trying to bring together the criticism emerging in postcolonial studies and debates surrounding Orientalism and adapt those to Turkey’s nation-building project and the Kurdish question. Postcolonial studies was not as popular back then as it is now in Kurdish studies. In fact, I was seriously struggling to find scholars with whom I could discuss the connection between Orientalism and the representation of the Kurds. My PhD supervisor was an expert on postcolonial studies, but he knew very little about the Kurdish question. Scholars of Kurdish studies I was in touch with did either not have much to say about postcolonialism, or would revert to traditional Marxist arguments. Some Turkish scholars had provided a solid deconstruction of Kemalism in this regard but had left the representation of the Kurdish issue out. Those that focused on the Kurdish issue lacked the postcolonial critique or were not aware of the “postcolonial turn.” The literature in

postcolonial studies itself barely mentioned the Kurds and the Kurdish issue. The brown man's colonialism was really not a priority. Countries such as Turkey with an imperial past of their own that do not fit comfortably in the colonised/coloniser hierarchy were not dealt with properly in my opinion. I was systematically trawling publications and databases to find relevant research and was seriously lacking forums specific to Kurdish studies.

The problem for me became also apparent at the first international Exeter Kurdish Studies Conference. This was in 2009, if I remember correctly. It was an exciting event since not only the establishment of the Centre for Kurdish Studies at Exeter University was something of a revolution in itself, but it was also their first conference—in other words, a very important event for scholars operating in the Western world and beyond. When attending, I realised that quite a few people I knew were not present. When I asked why they had not attended, I was told that they were not aware of the event, which I found very strange. Here you had probably one of the most important annual conferences of the field and people had “not heard about it.” It was there that I mentioned to friends and colleagues the idea of setting up a simple mailing list so we could keep in touch, share ideas, publications, upcoming events and just keep up to date with what was happening. Those I spoke to welcomed it. It was soon after that I set up a Google group and invited everyone I knew to join. I worked relentlessly to promote it and chased people up to join and share, I did this for many years. This also coincided with a time when more and more people were studying the Kurds and became interested in Kurdish affairs. Exciting things were happening, including more conferences that were organised, more books and articles published, more interdisciplinary research carried out. The KSN grew rapidly and evolved into an important free forum for the sharing of information, knowledge, and literature, and I was working very hard trying to keep it as professional and independent as I could. The discussions on the KSN were obviously at times strongly influenced by the turbulent events in the Kurdish world, proving challenging to me as a moderator. A difficult balance had to be struck at times between KSN as a scholarly forum and KSN, as some saw it, as a platform for political activism. At the same time, it was also important for me to provide a democratic and free platform to Kurdish scholars free from hostile and racist attitudes. This meant that I had to protect the KSN members from trolls, bots, and people who joined to spread propaganda. Throughout, my policy as a moderator of KSN has been to make interventions into debates only when absolutely necessary in order not to stifle free speech, and to intervene only when contributions amounted to personal attacks, included abusive language, etc.

This experience with an increasingly flourishing KSN provided a first basis of trust and created a synergy that enabled me to dare taking the step to establish the journal with the help of the scholarly community.

Schäfers: *Thinking back to the motivations with which you set out to found the journal, would you say the journal has achieved its goals?*

Zeydanlıoğlu: For the most part, I would say yes. We have managed to reach and maintain the standards we were aiming for. This has been confirmed through the feedback we have received from our authors and readers and through the citations indexes we have managed to join and be ranked in. I believe we are the longest running international Kurdish studies journal in English. We have published on a wide range of topics and disciplines and collaborated with all kinds of researchers active in the field. Since its launch in 2013, we have dedicated every other issue of our journal to a special issue, which we believe have made

significant contributions to the field. Several of our special issues have become a “must read” for students studying that specific topic. Our articles have won prizes and received special mentions. Moreover, we have made a special effort to support and publish the works of upcoming Kurdish scholars, especially female Kurdish scholars. We have also over the years expanded our editorial board to include more Kurdish scholars and to have equal gender representation. Our peer-review process has been commended by several of our authors for its professionalism and supportive nature. It is important to note that our high standards and robust processes earned us the status as a leading journal ranked among the top quartile of journals, particularly in Cultural Studies and History. It is now indexed and abstracted in many platforms, including Web of Science and Scopus, the most prestigious amongst these platforms. Surely, along with our meticulous editorial work, this achievement was only possible with the constant support of our publisher, Transnational Press London. They have committed to this journal without expecting financial returns.

There are, unfortunately, several areas and topics that we have not managed to publish articles on despite our efforts and commissioning. In this sense, we have been affected by the limitations that are prevalent in the field, with its overt focus on politics. Unfortunately, we also have not managed to publish much on Iranian Kurdistan. This reflects an overall problem of the field, where that part of Kurdistan remains underrepresented. Such realities impact our publications. We are ultimately dependent on scholars who want to publish their work with us, even if we also approach scholars directly and try to commission submissions and special issues. The harsh realities of the academic world with its publish-or-perish culture forces scholars to publish in big corporate journals. Furthermore, a lot of the articles we receive don’t make it through our stringent peer-review process. These and other reasons have resulted in us not being able to cover certain topics. This problem is also connected to another challenge, namely having enough material to choose and plan future journal issues from. This has been a constant challenge for the journal, and something our chief editor, Professor Martin van Bruinessen warned us about from day one. Nonetheless, we have not wanted to lessen our belief in stringent peer review. In fact, I believe that this is one of our biggest contributions to the field of Kurdish studies: publishing a journal that can make a mark on the international knowledge production on the Kurds and Kurdistan and that publishes a level of quality that can compete with the best journals.

Schäfers: *How have the journal and network changed the field of Kurdish Studies?*

Zeydanlıoğlu: Firstly, it has shown longevity that is unfortunately rare in the field. We have had several journals in Kurdish studies in the past, but they have all sadly ceased publishing after a few years. Secondly, we have introduced a lot of new scholars and genuine material to the field over the years. Our special issues ranging from issues of language and literature to diaspora and ethnicity to history and violence have all been guest edited by prominent experts of Kurdish studies, providing important interventions combined with critical introductions to the issues at hand. Our special issue on women and war in Kurdistan as well as single issue articles written on Kurdish women’s issues have all been timely and made their mark on the larger debates. The special issues on Yezidis and Alevis brought forward new concepts, data, and discussions, and were very much welcomed by the scholarly community as well as the communities themselves. Several of our historical articles have dug up important aspects of Kurdish history. Over the years, we have also published several articles on Kurdish literature that I believe have provided rich discussions. Our obituaries of prominent scholars of the

field have played an important role not only in shedding light on specific scholars' work, but also in providing insights into larger developments in Kurdish studies. We have also carried out several interviews with prominent scholars of the field that have been read with great interest.

As I noted previously, I believe we have set a standard that future journals will be compared with. The network, too, has made a huge difference in terms of the connectedness of scholars and keeping up with events and publications. Unfortunately, during the past few years we have had to scale back our ambitions on the KSN-front since we did not have the necessary time or resources given that all our work is based on voluntary commitment. For example, for a long while now we have not had the time to update the extensive bibliography we once maintained of publications in Kurdish studies (although there are currently efforts underway to revive this). Despite this, the KSN still plays an important role in ensuring the scholarly community is well informed of the developments and events taking place in the field, which has always been its core mission.

Schäfers: *What were some of the main challenges you encountered throughout the years?*

Zeydanlıoğlu: The biggest challenge has been to find enough high-quality articles for each issue while also supporting up-coming scholars in bringing their works up to quality, which we believe our readers expect. This has required immense dedication from our editors, reviewers, and proof-readers. I am happy with the support we have been able to provide to the field in this regard. However, this situation obviously reflects broader hierarchies in academia where Kurdish universities are often cut off from the theoretical and scholarly discussions that take place in the “centres of power” in Europe and the US. Kurdish scholars not educated in the West often struggle to make their voices heard and get published in international journals. This is in many ways a question of language, both in the sense of having access to a certain type of conceptual and scholarly language but also in the quite literal sense: scholars from Kurdistan may not always be equipped to write in English with ease, which is a disadvantage when it comes to putting their ideas and arguments across. To try to alleviate at least some of these issues of access, members of our editorial team have held several workshops on academic writing and the scholarly publishing world specifically aimed at scholars based in Kurdistan, and I hope the team can do more of this kind of work in the future. Still, these are obviously small steps, given that scholars in the Kurdish and adjacent regions often lack sufficient financial, institutional, and intellectual support, which inevitably influences the kind of scholarship that can be undertaken. This is not to say that Kurdistan is bereft of good scholars, not at all, but it is to say that, unfortunately, these scholars do not receive the support they deserve, which has a direct impact on how they are able to participate in scholarly debates and bring across their arguments. It is thanks to the amazing team of editors we have that we have managed to keep on top of these challenges, but they remain challenges nonetheless and I sincerely hope that the hierarchies structuring the academic world will be able to shift in the years to come. If the journal could play even just a small part in such a shift, that would be a great achievement.

Schäfers: *How do you think the journal should continue to develop in the future? Do you have any advice for the new editorial team?*

Zeydanlıoğlu: I believe the journal should promote itself much more and make itself more visible. It needs to get much more proactive in commissioning articles, without easing on its

publishing standards. Here, the scholarly community also needs to take its responsibility and support its dedicated independent journal. As mentioned above, the journal should also continue working to bring voices of scholars based in Kurdistan to the scholarly debate and enlarge our horizons beyond the academic landscape dominated by Euro-American institutions. More can also be done to further promote female academics and their work through the journal.