

# **(In)visible spaces and tactics of transnational engagement: A multi-dimensional approach to the Kurdish diaspora<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The Kurdish diaspora has been transnationally active and efficient in terms of raising awareness of the plight of the Kurds in Europe and elsewhere. However, there is a clear need to situate the current analysis of the diaspora in the context of rapidly changing political landscapes that includes both local and global power relations conditioning the diaspora's transnational participation, political mobilisation and action. This special issue contributes to the abundant stream of research by including articles that touch upon various issues regarding Kurdish diasporic behaviour. We hope this will provide new openings for scholars working on the Kurdish diaspora. We present articles from diverse disciplines in social sciences including sociology, anthropology, and political science. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches the analysis related to Kurdish diaspora mobilisation, but also highlights new perspectives emerging from this initiative.

**Keywords:** Kurdish diaspora; Kurdistan; transnational engagement; political mobilisation; belonging.

**Meydanên (ne)diyar û rêbazên çalakvaniya siyasî ya fera-neteweyî: Nîrxandineke pîr-rehendî li ser diyasporaya kurd**

Diyasporaya kurd ji bo bilindkirina asta hişyariya li ser kambaxiya rewşa kurdan li Ewrûpa û li cihine din bi rengê fera-neteweyî çalak û karîger bûye. Lê belê, pêdiviyê berçav bi wê yekê heye ku nîrxandina heyî ya diyasporayê di nav wê çarçoveya dimênên siyasî de bi cih bikin ku bi lez diguhere û ku, bi hewandina pêwendiyên hêzê yên mehilî û gerdûnî, şikl û şertên beşdariya diyasporayê ya navneteweyî û tevger û çalakîyên wê yên siyasî diyar dike. Ev jîmareya taybet a kovarê, bi rêya belavkirina gotarên li ser rehendên cihê yên diyasporaya kurd, li wê pêla adan a vekolînan zêde dike. Em bi hêvî ne ku rê û deriyên nû veke li vekolerên diyasporaya kurd. Em gotarên ji disîplinên cihê yên zanistên civakî pêşkêş dikin, ji wan sosyolojî, antropolojî û zanistên siyasî. Ev boçûna navber-disîplîni nîrxandina çalakvaniya diyasporayê dewlemendtir dike, lê her wiha rê dide peydabûn û geşedana perspektîvên nû li ser wê meydana lêkolînê.

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بەشداری سیاسییانەی رادیکال و تاراوگەیی ناوخۆیی کورد لە تورکیا

ئەم گۆتارە شیکردنەوەیەکە لە سەر مۆبایلێزە کردنی سیاسییانەی تاراوگەیی ناوخۆیی کورد لە دەرەوەی دەڤەرە کوردییەکان لە تورکیا. ئەم لیکۆلنەمیە لە پێشنیازە دموکراتیکە کە دەلێت، تاراوگە پشێوانی لە ئەکثرە سیاسییانە دەکات کە زیاتر رادیکال. ئەم گۆتارە باس دەکات لە مۆبایلێزە کردن لە لایەن پ.ک.ک. وە لە روژاوای تورکیا و ئەم شێوانەی کە ئەم ریکخراوەمیە بە رەچاوکردنیان تۆانیوەتی ناسنامەیی بەرفراوانی کۆمەڵی کوردی ببووژنێت. ئەم لیکۆلنەمیە بەر لەوەی تاونویی روژی چەوساندنە لە لایەن دموکراتیکە بکات و سەرئەنجام بەداتە هەلاوردنی نینتییکی و پەراویز خستنی نابووری-کۆمەڵایەتی لە سەر کۆچبەرە کوردەکانی ئەم سالانەی دوایی، شێوازە مێرووبیەکانی کۆچ کردنی کورد رافە دەکات. لە کۆتاییدا، ئەم گۆتارە پێشنیار دەکات کە هۆکاری بە دەستپێنانی ئەم پشێگیرییە جەماویریەیی پ.ک.ک. لە ناو کوردی روژناوای تورکیا دەرکەوتنە بۆ ئەم ستراتیژیە تایبەتە فەزایی و نایدیۆلۆژیانەی کە ئەم ریکخراوەمیە پەڕموی کردووە، ئەم فاکتەرە بەرێوە ژیانگەییەکان (contextual).

## Introduction

This volume of Kurdish Studies is dedicated to the Kurdish diaspora. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in analysing diaspora mobilisation and transnational organisation of various Kurdish groups from all parts of Kurdistan. Some of this work consists of empirical endeavours to showcase Kurdish diaspora formation, primarily in Europe. Concomitantly, a number of scholars have focused on theorising Kurdish communities' claims-making strategies, transnational (political) activism and long-distance nationalism by using the Kurdish diaspora as a case study. We contribute to this abundant stream of research by including articles that touch upon various issues regarding the diasporic behaviour of Kurds who are one way or another forced to live outside the borders of Kurdistan. We hope this will open new windows for scholars working on the Kurdish diaspora.

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We employ the term “diaspora community” as a general, descriptive term referring to the collectivity formed by Kurdish migrants and their descendants living outside the Kurdish-speaking regions (thus referring to both internal and external diaspora communities in different nation-states, including in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran).<sup>2</sup> Diaspora communities maintain and develop ties and a sense of belonging with the homeland's political or social spheres. The Kurdish diaspora is not a monolithic body. It consists of various groups with divergent ideologies, religious backgrounds and profiles. There are generational, tribal as well as linguistic differences. Therefore, it should be mentioned that when we refer to the diaspora as a whole, we do not underestimate its complexity.

The special issue contains articles from diverse disciplines in social sciences including sociology, anthropology, and political science. The interdisciplinary approach adopted enriches the analysis related to the Kurdish diaspora's mobilisation outside the borders of their homeland, but also aims at

<sup>2</sup> For more analytical definition, please see Sökefeld (2006: 267). He approaches diasporas as “imagined transnational communities”, and elaborates that “there can be no diaspora community without a consciousness of diaspora, in other words, without an idea of shared identity, of common belonging to that group.”

orientating researchers towards new perspectives emerging from this initiative. Some articles are more explorative in nature while others adopt existing theoretical frameworks in analyses on the Kurdish diaspora. The articles touch upon a range of issues that are topical in contemporary societies, including the particularities of the internal and transnational diasporas, expressions of identity and sense-of-belonging, the experience of return and not least, repertoires of political action and behaviour. Furthermore, this special issue presents an interview with Kendal Nezan, the director and founder of the Kurdish Institute in Paris, who sheds light on the current state of affairs concerning the Kurdish movements in Europe.

In the new millennium, we have witnessed the expansion of traditional modes and forms of political participation and their transformation into less conventional means and tactics of political behaviour. One very poignant example of this has been the proliferation of transnational social movements and organisations since the 1990s. Furthermore, social movements and organisations that have previously operated on national or more local bases, have established networks, forms of activism and nodes of solidarity that extend well beyond the nation-states' boundaries. Diaspora organisations are an example par excellence in this regard. Scholars have increasingly focused on various aspects of diaspora formation and mobilisation, combining migration, integration and social movements with the emerging studies on transnationalism (see Vertovec, 2009; Bauböck and Faist, 2010) in the context of emerging intra-state wars and shifts in cultural and political boundaries. Members of diasporas have taken advantage of new sites for societal participation at the local and international level in order to channel political claims-making in a more efficient manner and to strive for greater recognition. Media technologies and digitalisation of societies have greatly affected the emergence of new and innovative venues of transnational mobilisation and resistance among various diaspora communities. As a result of better dissemination of information and improved communication, diasporas now have greater potential to become significant and powerful non-state actors in the global arena interacting between the homeland and hostland.

Dispersed since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century throughout Europe and beyond, the Kurdish diaspora provides ample evidence of complex transnational engagements that diaspora communities and their members continue to foster. The emergence of the diaspora has resulted from an on-going marginalisation and oppression in sending states. As Abbas Vali (1998: 82) has argued, Kurdish nationalism is strongly rooted in the "dialectic of denial and resistance". Martin van Bruinessen (2000: 67), on his part, has stated that "it was the exile that transformed Kurdistan from a vaguely defined geographical entity into a political idea." Over the years in exile, the Kurdish diaspora has been transformed into an organic component of Kurdish policy-making. Diaspora members' collective experiences include memories of oppression,

labour migration, exile and forced displacement; in essence, a constant struggle for survival, identity preservation and its continuous reassertion. Numerous Kurdish migrants, along with their descendants, have retained an attachment to their societies of origin, and maintained a feeling of long-distance nationalism. It is no surprise that diaspora communities have become more and more vocal in efforts to attract attention from European governments, politicians, and civil society groups. This is done in a multiplicity of ways that involve more direct political claims-making as well as more subtle ways of claiming recognition via transnational participation. Research on the Kurdish diaspora so far has documented the community's continued attachment to the homeland; even the second generation is enthusiastic about "giving-back" to a homeland that they have never experienced at first hand (Toivanen, 2014a). The Kurdish diaspora is and has been politically active and efficient in terms of lobbying home and hostland governments. However, there is a clear need to situate the current analysis of the Kurdish diaspora in the context of rapidly changing political landscapes which includes both the local and global power relations shaping diaspora's transnational engagements, political mobilisation and action. In this context, it is possible to evaluate diaspora communities' role as non-state actors and to examine any eventual societal change generated by transnational engagements between the homeland and host society.

We consider it of utmost importance that Kurdish diaspora is studied under careful and continuous scrutiny in the global context of rapidly changing political processes and landscapes. Indeed, the diaspora has been a prominent actor in Kurdish politics for decades and will continue to influence the fate of the Kurdish movements in the Middle East. Furthermore, the case of the Kurdish diaspora can contribute to a better understanding of migrants' continuous transnational engagements and the role of non-state actors in the changing nature of contemporary nation-states. On the basis of these observations, the goal of this special issue is three-fold: a) to contribute to the existing literature on the Kurdish diaspora by providing new insights for further research, b) to expand the theoretical debates regarding diaspora formation and organisation, and c) to present an argument for a more careful analysis of diaspora communities' and their members' visible as well as more invisible transnational engagements in the new global environment.

With this ambitious goal in mind, we set out to discuss the previous body of literature on the Kurdish diaspora and ways to build upon it. We will first briefly outline the background of the Kurdish diaspora formation before moving forward to present a literature review on the topic. In the latter part, we raise some critical questions that we feel deserve further attention. Finally, we will present the content of the special issue.

**The formation of the Kurdish diaspora – a brief overview**

The socio-historical background of the Kurdish diaspora and the particularities of political contexts in four nation-states that led to the formation of Kurdish diaspora in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are very complex (for the history of Kurds in the Soviet states, see Omarkhali, 2013).<sup>3</sup> The minority relations in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria concerning their Kurdish populations have varied from diverse assimilation policies to genocidal measures. The colonial legacies and the division of the Kurdish region by Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, toppled with the fierce nation-state building projects in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, set the political contexts for such minority relations in the region (McDowall, 1996).

The resettlement of Kurdish migrants in diaspora communities dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hassanpour and Mojab, 2005) with scholars, political activists, labour migrants, refugees and others, who left Kurdistan for various reasons. However, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the shifting political circumstances and the oppression directed at the Kurdish minorities led to a change in this respect. Until the mid-1900s, most Kurds coming to Europe were intellectuals and students who wanted further education. A significant number of Kurds who constitute the diaspora today, however, have fled from repressive actions of their respective state of origin.

Large numbers of people from Turkey migrated to Europe as guest workers in the 1960s. It is practically impossible to estimate what proportion of these migrants were actually of Kurdish origin as there are no official statistics regarding this issue (Berruti et al., 2002: 73). There was another later wave of migration after the 1970s due to the political turmoil and chaos in Turkey caused by two coups d'état in 1971 and 1980. Hundreds of Kurds were tortured, kidnapped and/or disappeared in Turkey during this period. Armed clashes between the Turkish army and various Kurdish organisations, most prominent among them being the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), caused further forced migration, both external and internal. Estimates of causalities from violence between Turkey and PKK range from 32,000 to 45,000 (including armed combatants and civilians on both sides) (Zanotti, 2010: 19). Forced deportation from some 3,000 villages created thousands of internally displaced people and refugee flows of more than three million Kurds (Berruti et al., 2002: 161). Indeed, the internal diaspora movements within the Kurdish-speaking regions as well as within and between Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey have been significant and continuous well before the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Alakom, 1998). Unfortunately, there is no reliable census data about people of Kurdish origin in different countries, as Kurds were made invisible in population statistics (Sirkeci, 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> Significant numbers of Kurds are settled in the former republics of the Soviet Union such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. These diaspora groups remain understudied in terms of presence and activism.

However, insightful estimates suggest there are some 30 million Kurds living in historical Kurdistan and regional cities. Approximately half of them live in Turkey (Eccarius-Kelly, 2011: 203).

In Iran, the Kurdish political movements faced oppressive measures after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Kurdish political leaders were assassinated by the regime and many civilians were massacred. Many fled to other countries in the Middle East and some made it to Europe, where a number of activists were assassinated by Iranian agents in Austria, Germany and elsewhere (Berruti et. al., 2002: 162-163). The Iranian state policies against its Kurdish minority have shifted between hostility and compromise with limited tolerance towards expressions of Kurdish identity (Natali, 2005: 158). It has also been argued that the Iranian Kurdish diaspora communities are relatively less mobilised or transnationally less visible compared to Kurds from Iraq and Turkey (Natali, 2007: 201).

The history of Kurds in Iraq is a tragic one, particularly during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They suffered systematic oppression and genocidal attacks under Saddam Hussein's regime. A group of politically active Kurds fled oppression in the mid-1970s, followed by significantly larger numbers in the 1980s (Pelling, 2013: 32) after the Anfal campaign and Halabja massacre that left approximately 7,000-8,000 dead overnight (Wahlbeck, 1999; van Bruinessen, 2000). The aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991 caused additional migration waves from the region with Kurds seeking asylum in Europe. It has to be mentioned that several among them were educated leading members of Kurdish political parties.

Updated sources and Kurdish organisations estimate that around two million Kurds live in Europe, of which one million are in Germany alone.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Berruti and colleagues (2002: 74) estimate that around 60,000 Kurdish refugees in Germany are from Iraq, 4,000 from Iran and 4,000 from Syria. According to another estimate, the number of Kurds in Europe is 250,000 from Iraq, 50,000 from Iran and 15,000 from Syria (Natali, 2007: 198). As it can be seen, different sources provide different estimates and there is no accurate and reliable statistical data on Kurds living outside of Kurdistan. The unreliability of the statistics result from three main factors: (1) many Kurds hold citizenship of their country of birth and therefore do not appear as Kurds in official European statistics, (2) thousands of Kurdish migrants in Europe remain undocumented, and (3) current estimates of the Kurdish population published in studies, or on Kurdish websites, incorporate all Kurds, without giving detailed numbers of people coming from various parts of Kurdistan. Only in countries such as Sweden and Finland, where statistical data is collected according to migrants' native language, can we learn about the numbers that might reflect reality (Ammann, 2005; Eccarius-Kelly,

<sup>4</sup> See for instance: <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/time-kurds/p36547#/> (last accessed 21 October, 2015).

2011; Wahlbeck, 2013). This mirrors the condition of statelessness for the Kurds and creates a gap in the literature when it comes to research about the specificities of their life conditions. We acknowledge that the lack of demographic data creates challenges in contextualising the Kurdish diaspora movements and prevents scholars from assessing underlying factors influencing such movements; the figures of internal and external migration flows of Kurds from the Middle East, the demographic structure of the established diaspora communities and the documentation of experienced discrimination or exclusion on the basis of one's ethnicity. Indeed, the lack of such data leads to a partial understanding of the Kurdish communities and their internal heterogeneity.

### **Research on Kurdish diaspora in the new millennium – tendencies and emerging trends**

Kurdish studies, initially labelled Kurdology, was founded a hundred years ago by Soviet scholars who focused on the history of the Kurdish people and Kurdistan's frontiers, which have remained the core of Kurdish studies ever since. A selective, annotated bibliography on Kurdish studies was compiled by Lokman I. Meho and Kelly L. Maglaughlin in 2001. In the new millennium, Kurdish studies has witnessed new areas of research in which the Kurdish diaspora has become a relevant focus. In-depth studies on the diaspora, particularly in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science and social work, have been rising rapidly since the 1990s. They have provided insights into Kurdish communities' projects of (collective) belonging (Galip, 2014; Toivanen and Kivisto, 2014), engagement in politics (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Emanuelsson, 2005; Grojean 2008; Berkowitz and Mügge, 2014; Dryaz, 2015), and how they are incorporated in different national settings (Wahlbeck, 1999; 2013; Baser, 2015). By contrast, quantitative studies focusing on the Kurdish diaspora communities have been scarce. One notable exception to this is Ibrahim Sirkeci's study (2006), in which he employed a multi-methods approach to explore the emigration of Kurds to Germany.

There are several case studies on the Kurdish diaspora in specific national contexts, especially in Germany (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2001; Grojean, 2008). Such studies also include the works of Betigül Ercan Argun (2003) and Birgit Ammann (2005) and those of Ibrahim Sirkeci (2003; 2007). In the Netherlands, Liza Mügge (2010) completed a study on diaspora politics by examining the evolution of the Kurdish diaspora, its activism and impact on Dutch politics as well as Kurdish relations with other diaspora groups in the hostland. In terms of the German-speaking countries, the first issue of the *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kurdische Studien* (2013), edited by Thomas Schmidinger, shed light on the Kurdish diaspora communities in Austria. Studies on Kurds in Britain have been ample too (King, et. al., 2008; Baser, 2011; Holgate, et. al., 2012). Ipek Demir (2012) has published on the mobilisation of Kurdish communities in Britain, whereas Latif Tas (2014) has investigated legal pluralist mechanisms among Kurdish communities in Britain.

In the Nordic context, studies on the Kurdish community in Sweden have grown in number during the last decade. Minoo Alinia (2004) and Barzoo Eliassi (2010) employ qualitative empirical data to explore questions of identity, belonging and home in the context of the Swedish society. Khalid Khayati and Magnus Dalhstedt (2014) explore the diaspora formation among Kurds in Sweden, whereas Östen Wahlbeck (1999) focuses on the Kurdish communities in Finland and Britain from a comparative perspective. Mari Toivanen (2013, 2014a; 2014b) contributes to the literature on the Kurdish diaspora through her work that deals with young Kurds' sense of belonging and non-belonging in Finland. Besides focusing on particular country cases, Kurdish studies is a highly heterogeneous research field. Indeed, the new millennium has witnessed the emergence of research strands within Kurdish studies focusing on particular thematic entities.

Several studies approach the Kurdish diaspora with a transnational frame of analysis. Indeed, Kurdish studies itself has come to reflect the transnational nature of the studied phenomena. Besides the early publications of Martin van Bruinessen (1998; 1999; 2000) that focused on various transnational aspects of the Kurdish question, the first ample publications in this context have been those by Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2003), Ann-Catrin Emanuelsson (2005) and Ibrahim Sirkeci and Jeffrey Cohen (2005). Østergaard-Nielsen's work was seminal in Kurdish diaspora studies as it focused on the diaspora's political participation in relation to local, national and global political processes, with a specific focus on the Kurdish diaspora activism in Germany. Alternatively, Emanuelsson's work took a transnational perspective rather than a single-country focus and demonstrated the transnational networks that diaspora groups establish also with each other in different European countries. The merit of her work was a focus on Kurdish groups from various parts of Kurdistan linked to a variety of Kurdish political movements, rather than other works that solely focused on the PKK.

Vera Eccarius-Kelly's (2011) book on militant Kurds is a valuable contribution to the literature on the Kurdish diasporas' transnational mobilisation. Not only did it provide an excellent account of the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, but also focused on Kurdish activism in Germany as well as in the EU, from a broader perspective. In general, many studies on the Kurdish diaspora have focused on the PKK and ignored other movements from all parts of Kurdistan (Eccarius-Kelly, 2010; Lyon and Ucarer, 2011; Grojean, 2011). More research is needed on the various movements and how they relate to homeland actors. For example, the role played by diaspora organisations in facilitating peace talks between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yekîtiya Nîştîmanî ya Kurdistanê, PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrat a Kurdistanê, KDP) to stop the internal fighting in mid-1990s, deserves more attention. Similarly, Kurdish diaspora movements from Syria and Iran are particularly understudied. It is also possible to argue that Kurdish communities that live in



Afghanistan, Lebanon or former Soviet countries are pretty much ignored when it comes to studies on the Kurdish Diaspora.

Other studies, such as that of Nevzat Soguk (2008) on “Euro-Kurds” focused on the transnational aspects of communication and media consumption in the European context. Menderes Candan and Uwe Hunger (2008) explored the nation-building processes as they take place in online environments by Kurdish communities. Others focused on how identity formation (Mahmod, 2011; Ekizi, 2014; Toivanen and Kivisto, 2014), language (Sheyholislami, 2010; Haig and Öpengin, 2014; Toivanen, 2014a) and diaspora politics (Ackermann, 2008) are displayed and constructed online. As documented in previous research projects, employing media and occupying new online territories are at times challenging. For instance, Amir Hassanpour (1998), Christian Sinclair and Kevin Smets (2014) focus on the Kurdish media outside Kurdistan and document how these activities are seen as a threat to Turkey’s sovereignty. The Kurdish media and online environments contributed to the proliferation of Kurdish arts, music and cultural expressions. Some nominal works in this regard are composed by Özlem Galip (2014) and Vera Eccarius-Kelly (2011).

Another significant stream of Kurdish studies that has blossomed in recent years belongs to the genre of gender studies. Researchers have contributed to understanding transnational ties between women activists cooperating to further Kurdish women rights both in diaspora and homeland (Mojab, 2006, 2007; Mojab and Gorman, 2007). The specific gender roles in Kurdistan and women’s limited autonomy have been approached by Diane E. King (2014) from the perspective of social and symbolic connections both locally and globally. Begikhani and colleagues (2015) study honour-related violence that is affecting Kurdish women both in Iraqi Kurdistan and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, Umut Erel has dealt with Kurdish migrant mothers in the United Kingdom and their practices of citizenship (2013).

Also comparative work on the Kurdish diaspora communities settled in different nation-states has substantially increased. Östen Wahlbeck’s (1999), Martin Bak Jorgensen’s (2009) and Bahar Baser’s (2015) studies are examples underlining the differing experiences of Kurdish communities in diverse European countries. These comparative studies showed how hostland opportunity structures affect the mobilisation patterns of Kurdish diaspora groups and that scholars need to consider the triadic relationship between the diaspora, the home- and the hostland, as well as the homeland-hostland diplomatic relations, in order to better understand the mechanisms behind diasporic behaviour. A few authors have compared Kurdish diasporic activities to other stateless or conflict generated groups; David Griffiths (2002) compared the Kurdish and Somali diasporas located in London, Bahar Baser and Ashok Swain (2011) compared the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Kurds in terms of statelessness and Ofra Bengio and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

(2013) compared Kurds to Berber communities from Morocco (see also Gambetti, 2009, for comparative research).

Alongside the rise of comparative studies has been the focus on the diaspora's impact on peace-building and democratisation processes in the home countries. Cochrane and colleagues (2009) demonstrated the role the diaspora can play as non-state actor in the political spheres of the countries of settlement. Ahmed Akkaya (2008) concentrated specifically on the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora's contributions to the nation-building process and the development of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Marlies Casier (2010a) focused on Turkey's Kurds' transnational political activism vis-à-vis the EU institutions. Within this emerging strand, what is observed so far is that researchers have increasingly centred on the Kurdish community's mobilisation and strategic activities to achieve political goals with regards to broader state- and nation-building at home and abroad. Kurdish diaspora's role as a non-state actor will be further discussed in the following section.

### **From dispersed diaspora to non-state political actor**

Hassanpour and Mojab (2005) argue that as a result of migration flows, the Kurdish diaspora has contributed in adding a transnational element to the Kurdish nation. Diaspora elements have transmitted the needs and aspirations of the Kurdish nation to the outside world, especially in difficult times, when homeland actors have lacked opportunities due to war, repression and censorship. Indeed, the Kurdish diaspora movement has successfully transformed itself in the last three decades into a political actor via active lobbying, campaigning, and the establishment of Kurdish institutions, associations and networks. More recent events have further raised the awareness about the Kurdish issue, not simply among the general population and politicians in different European countries, but also within the diaspora communities themselves. However, one must bear in mind that the Kurdish diaspora communities display a great heterogeneity in terms of language/dialect, religion, political affiliation and so forth. Thus Kurdish communities in different European countries have distinct particularities that need to be accounted for.

There are strong, active Kurdish communities in countries such as Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, the United Kingdom and even Japan. Each Kurdish diaspora in a specific host country is different from the other in terms of composition and profile of the migrants and asylum seekers, temporal and generational dimensions, and integration levels. For example, the Kurdish community in Germany predominantly consists of Kurds from Turkey that are highly politically mobilised as a result of the political instability in Turkey and the PKK's efforts to raise awareness among Kurds about their identity and rights. In Sweden, we see more intellectually mobilised Kurds, who primarily focus on the development of Kurdish culture and literature. In the United Kingdom, the most active Kurds

are those from Iraq, and they have been documented to be well-integrated into British society (van Bruinessen, 2000; Pelling, 2013).

Van Bruinessen (2000) rightly underlines the impact of exile on one's ethnic identity and how it shapes long-distance nationalism. Indeed, the Kurdish diaspora have maintained an attachment to their homeland through the establishment of social, economic, and political links and networks. Cultural and social events as well as political seminars have paved the way for diaspora gatherings. Traumatic events, such as the Halabja massacre, are remembered in the diaspora and events are regularly organised to commemorate such atrocities. Associations organise annual Newroz festivals and folk dances and music classes are offered as social occasions that help to preserve Kurdish culture in the diaspora. These events not only allow the first generation to retain their attachment and feelings of solidarity to relatives, they also transfer cultural values and traditions to the next generation. New technologies and media (such as smart phones, internet, and e-mail or social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter) increasingly play a vital role in this process and help Kurds remain up-to-date with the course of events in Kurdistan.

Political activism among diaspora Kurds has been present since the formation of diaspora communities, with increasing visibility since the 1970s, especially during times of political turbulence. For instance, Kurdish activists in exile in the United Kingdom and Sweden mobilised immediately for the Kurdish cause after Halabja massacres. As a stateless diaspora without any official political representation at the time, diaspora Kurds used various forms of protest and activism to make their voices heard (Emanuelsson, 2005). Apart from political campaigns, Kurds also sent remittances individually, which helped families and friends to survive violent circumstances (Emanuelsson, 2008; Pelling 2013: 218). Moreover, diaspora members founded several institutions in various European countries such as the Kurdish Institute in Paris, the Kurdish Institute in Brussels and Kurdisches Informations- und Dokumentationszentrum (NAVEND) in Bonn to connect the Kurdish activists with the host society policy-makers. Together with mass protests and mobilisations, such institutions opened up channels for lobbying at the supranational, national and local levels (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Casier, 2011). They have been instrumental in efforts to gain greater visibility for the Kurdish cause in the Middle East.

Transnational engagements are conditioned by several factors, including opportunity structures, mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion and social hierarchies that intertwine at the local, national and global level. Shifting political and institutional landscapes can open up new spaces for transnational engagements, and simultaneously close other ones. With regards to such research topics, a careful scrutiny of global power relations is needed. Hence, the analysis on Kurdish diaspora communities, their transnational engagements and political mobilisation needs to be situated within a

framework that considers local, (trans)national and global power relations affecting the legitimisation process of claims for recognition in the context of rapidly shifting political landscapes. This is particularly important as the Kurdish diaspora is becoming a prominent and visible movement in Europe.

Several events in Iraq such as the Gulf War (concomitant with the end of the Cold War), the Kurdish uprising and the establishment of a safe haven in the north of the country in the 1980s-1990s, created new possibilities for Kurdish diaspora organisations and individuals to get involved in transnational networks. Segments of the Kurdish diaspora with network connections to the main Iraqi Kurdish political organisations made positive contributions as peace-makers to end the internal fighting between the KDP and PUK (1998 Washington Agreement) and discussed future scenarios for a post-Saddam Iraq (Natali, 2007).

The War on Terror and its impact on Kurdish mobilisation, in particular for PKK-affiliated associations that feature on the list of International Terrorist Organisations, has been significant (Baser, 2015; Eccarius-Kelly, 2011; Casier, 2010b). In fact, in his documentary Kevin McKiernan (2001)<sup>5</sup> has argued that the U.S. State Department draws a distinction between the “good Kurds” in Iraqi Kurdistan and the “bad Kurds” in Turkey. More recent events in the Middle East connected to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) [also known as ISIL or the Islamic State (IS)] have produced media discourses in which Kurdish combatants are framed as “freedom fighters”, thus pointing towards a more global set of power relations and media imaginaries. This shows that transnational engagements can also be conditioned in terms of different discursive spaces.

Bahar Baser (2014) examines how political activists returning from exile have contributed to the formation of a de facto state in Iraq. Many Iraqi Kurds returned to take part in the formation of the parliament or to play other administrative roles essential for state-building efforts in the Kurdistan Region. As they were familiar with American or European policy-making, they managed to implement those skills into emerging diplomatic missions of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Knowledge transfer from the diaspora increased the leverage of KRG’s paradiplomacy efforts thanks to the diaspora communities’ role as a bridge between for example European political parties and the governing parties in Kurdistan. Return migration and interactions with Kurdish actors on the ground in Iraqi Kurdistan have been quite essential in this regard. The fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003 introduced new possibilities for Kurdish diaspora communities from Iraq to engage politically, economically and socially by returning temporarily, commuting or eventually returning permanently (Emanuelsson, 2008). Political changes

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<sup>5</sup> The PBS Documentary “Good Kurds, Bad Kurds” (2001), written and directed by Kevin McKiernan, can be accessed via YouTube, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbAGK7WHs2o> (last accessed 21 October, 2015).

awakened the dream of returning for Kurds from Iraq but also provided potential for various activities for Kurds from Iran, Syria and Turkey. Focusing on how diaspora families continuously negotiate material and social needs, a study by Ann-Catrin Emanuelsson (2008) highlighted a complicated return process (see also Akkaya, 2008). Occasionally differences in gender and age group become an issue. Some returned only to depart again when they discovered a disparity between their dreams and the emerging reality. There are several reintegration challenges after many years in exile, as is demonstrated by a comparative study of returning refugees from Finland to Iraqi Kurdistan and Somaliland (Hautaniemi et. al., 2013). The post-return realities and the socioeconomic reintegration process can be experienced in a multitude of ways by returnees, as well as by those who stayed behind (Paasche, forthcoming).

Return movements are not frictionless since they challenge power relations involving complex negotiations. Individual returnees and circulators have limited capability to overcome structural constraints such as legislation, public infrastructures and social insurances (de Haas, 2010). Transnational practices (e.g. financial remittances, staying in touch with relatives by phone, online and by travelling) between Iraqi Kurds in diaspora and the Kurdistan Region have transformed in the aftermath of drastic social changes from extreme violence to high security and economic prosperity (Pelling, 2013). It may be painful for many families in diaspora to realise that relatives back home are becoming wealthier than the emigrants. However, maintaining contact with relatives and sending financial support continues to fill different insurance purposes, including paving the way for a potential return one day.

In the case of mainly pro-PKK Kurds in the diaspora, two main events of the 1990s can be identified as leading to waves of mobilisation and protest. The first is the “dirty war” in Turkey that lasted from 1992 till 1996 and included large-scale village evacuations and the emergence of death squads. The second is the flight of the PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria in 1998 that resulted in his arrest and trial in Turkey in 1999 (Grojean, 2001). Such protests amongst the diaspora were directly determined by interactions between the PKK and the Turkish state and only secondly by political structures in European host countries. Öcalan’s arrest resulted in a broad gathering of Kurdish personalities with different political alignments at the inauguration of a Kurdish National Congress (KNK) initiated by the PKK (van Bruinessen, 2000). As with its precursor, the Kurdish Parliament in Exile (KPE), it never succeeded in creating a pan-Kurdish platform, mainly because of disinterest expressed by the main Iraqi Kurdish parties. The PKK’s guerrilla activities declined in the first years of the new millennium but its parallel strategy to combat Turkish state repression by fundraising and political mobilisation of young diaspora Kurds in Europe strengthened (Eccarius-Kelly, 2011: 168).

In light of the continued difficulties faced by Kurdish parties attempting to enter the Turkish Parliament and tired of the prevailing violence in Turkey, segments of the Kurdish community supported the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) and Prime Minister Erdoğan's "Democratic Initiative" in the 2007 election hoping for cultural and linguistic rights. Undoubtedly, at that time these reforms, including progress on minority rights, were in line with Turkey's aspiration of becoming a member of the European Union. The Kurdish diaspora actively pushed for reforms at the EU level by lobbying European governments locally and EU institutions transnationally (Casier, 2011). The ebb and flow of cease-fire and military confrontations between the Turkish military and PKK forces after mid-2000, however, did not allow substantial improvements in the living conditions of the Kurdish population. Tensions between the AKP and pro-Kurdish political party further escalated when the latter took Kurdish votes from AKP in the 2009 local election. In the meantime, many Kurdish activists were arrested and imprisoned. Since the beginning of the "Democratic Initiative", diaspora Kurds from Turkey were sceptical about the intentions of the AKP government. Some Kurdish organisations decided to build platforms for Kurds in exile to discuss recent developments while others rejected the new reforms all together claiming that the government was just buying time (Baser, 2011). Despite the divergence of opinions regarding developments in Turkey, the diaspora observed Turkish politics closely and synchronised its discourses with their counterparts in the homeland in the hope of becoming a part of this process by constantly producing collective reactions.

By 2010 talks between representatives of Turkish government and PKK in Oslo were seen as a new beginning. While PKK activists were in secret meetings with Turkish officials in Europe, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Development Party's (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP) leaders were given access to PKK's imprisoned leader to broaden the talks. Communication was maintained through Öcalan's meetings with MPs from the BDP as well as his lawyers. He sent several letters to PKK members, KRG President Barzani and Kurds in Turkey as well as to the Kurdish movement's representatives in the diaspora. During these peace talks, Öcalan asked for a "peace conference" organised by the Kurdish diaspora in Brussels, which was held in summer 2013.<sup>6</sup> This can be interpreted as a sign that the Kurdish diaspora was also perceived as a legitimate party (although with a secondary role) in the talks with Turkey. The diaspora played a passive role throughout the peace talks but showed constant support at conferences, demonstrations and seminars that were organised by Kurdish associations in Europe and beyond. During the election campaigns leading up to the June 2015 election, the diaspora worked effectively to support the Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) by recruiting and mobilising dormant Kurdish

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/148121-bruksel-de-baris-ve-demokrasi-konferansi> (last accessed 21 October, 2015).

diaspora members. The diaspora vote played a crucial role for HDP's success in the 2015 election.<sup>7</sup> Current developments show that peace talks have collapsed and fighting between the Turkish armed forces and the PKK has resumed. Subsequently, the Kurdish diaspora will have a shifting role in the near future and might once again become the primary actor to disseminate political messages to wider European audiences and play an advocacy role.

Recent dramatic events in the Middle East have generated new challenges and opportunities for transnational diaspora mobilization, ranging from campaigning via social media, fundraising for displaced people to second-generation Kurds joining the fight against ISIS. The seizure of Kobanê by ISIS and the resulting battles to regain the city gave birth to widespread expressions of solidarity among Kurdish communities in the diaspora with groups such as the KRG's peshmerga, Kurds in Syria and the PKK joining forces. The urgency of the suffering of the Kurds in Syria and the Yezidis in Iraq pushed for wider cooperation and manifested a sense of belonging among Kurdish communities in the diaspora. These issues will certainly be studied by scholars in the years to come.

### **Critical issues and future research**

In the aftermath of the recent political upheavals in the Kurdish regions, we posit that to better understand the multiplicity of the ways that Kurdish diaspora communities engage in political, institutional and societal mechanisms transnationally, we make five interrelated observations that may serve as suggestions for future research;

Firstly, while academic studies related to the Kurdish diaspora are abundant there still remains much to discover about how the Kurdish diaspora develops an autonomous character that is not an exact reflection of the homeland political actors and inhabitants. Surely, there is a need to include a focus on the ever-changing political and social realities of the homeland and how this affects the organisation of the diaspora communities in societies of settlement. In addition to that we need to pay attention to what extent these host societies' institutional and political arrangements impede or facilitate diaspora communities' transnational participation. However, the diaspora's autonomy in terms of determining its own scope and repertoires of action should be kept in mind while designing studies on diaspora mobilisation. While the diaspora takes its inspiration to mobilise from the homeland, there are other factors impacting its choices, roadmaps and needs that shape its social fabric in each different context.

Secondly, we suggest that to gain a comprehensive understanding of the ways the Kurdish diaspora communities and their members engage in claims-

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<sup>7</sup> See Baser, B., "HDP Means Hope to Many in the Upcoming Turkish Elections", Bas News, 6 May, 2015, <http://www.basnews.com/en/news/2015/06/06/hdp-means-hope-to-many-in-the-upcoming-turkish-elections/> (last accessed 21 October, 2015).

making towards recognition, the focus should be on both the more direct political ways of participation as well as on the more subtler and invisible spaces and tactics of contestations that escape the conventional purview of studies on diaspora politics. This means that the members of diaspora communities (not only the communities themselves) participate in claims-making towards recognition that include both more visible forms of political participation (lobbying, long-distance voting, campaigning, etc.) and less visible (subtler) ways of participation like raising awareness, distributing information via social media, mundane everyday practices and activities of solidarity, and so forth. A focus on the second generation and on their transnational (political) engagements towards their parents' countries of departure is vital in this regard. However, it is as important to understand the lack of engagement and disengagement by both first and second generation members of Kurdish diaspora communities.

Thirdly, most of the work we have mentioned above has been conducted by scholars applying qualitative methods, which is valuable in itself. However, this means that research outcomes are largely based on fieldwork experience, interviews with diaspora members and literature review of secondary sources. What is lacking in research literature on Kurdish diaspora are studies that apply multi-methods and/or quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. This would allow us to approach the Kurdish diaspora in a more complex way, provided that these two strands of research would cooperate more closely with each other.

Fourthly, more comparative work is needed in order to better position Kurdish diaspora mobilisation in a wider spectrum of transnational movements. Other stateless diasporas such as the Tamils or Palestinians have been extensively studied and their experience might shed light on the Kurdish case. Other cases such as Armenia, which became an independent state rather recently, and its close ties with its diaspora can be an eye-opening case for Iraqi Kurdistan's independence aspirations. Moreover, Jewish and Armenian diasporas are positive examples of diaspora advocacy for genocide recognition, which could prove useful to the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora vis-à-vis the case of the recognition of Anfal.

Lastly, it is clear that there is a strong emphasis on studies conducted on the Kurdish diaspora in Germany. This is not surprising as such, since the country hosts more or less one million Kurds and it constitutes the centre for PKK mobilisation in Europe. However, for comparative purposes it is essential to conduct research on little known Kurdish diaspora presence and activism in countries like the United States (particularly significant for Iraqi Kurds), Canada, Switzerland, Poland, Italy and Greece.

In the light of these gaps in the literature, we believe that the articles included in this special issue introduce a rich and robust selection of empirical studies that provide both methodological and theoretical insights into the



ways Kurdish diaspora communities' organisation and the variety of trans/national activities they embark on can be approached and understood. Furthermore, our interview with Kendal Nezan provides significant insights into the past and present of the Kurdish Diaspora.

### **Synopsis of the contributions**

The contributions of this special issue of Kurdish Studies address questions such as; how does the Kurdish diaspora influence political processes in the homeland and in the host land? How do the Kurdish diaspora communities make claims for greater recognition in both settings? How are these processes of claims-making and calls for recognition situated at the nexus of more conventional political participation and subtler and more invisible tactics of contestation? Furthermore, the articles included in this special issue have a very strong interdisciplinary focus: the questions outlined above have been approached with cross- and interdisciplinary perspectives that vary from anthropology to sociology, and political science.

The first article of the issue by Francis O'Connor deals with the diaspora community's engagement in radical politics, focusing on PKK mobilisation in Western Turkey. The author makes a convincing theoretical argument for the distinction between passive and active diaspora communities that are transnational and/or trans-regional. O'Connor's contribution also lies in his focus on the internal diaspora by challenging the conventional understanding of homeland: Is western Turkey homeland for the Kurds? Indeed, the concept of internal diasporas challenges the traditional idea of diasporas while at the same time shedding light on the PKK's mass support in the Western part of Turkey. By studying the PKK's mobilisation of Kurdish migrants over time in Western Turkey, the author argues that researchers should focus more on agents of diaspora formation in order to better grasp why diasporas engage in radical political projects before reiterating the idea that they are ill-informed and far away from reality.

The second article by Vera Eccarius-Kelly reflects on the role of Kurdish collective memory as it affirms Kurdishness and rejects the Turkish state's hegemonic histories. By focusing on issues such as expression of identity via an imagined Kurdish museum and focus on memory and emotions, the author combines memory studies with diaspora literature by using the Kurdish experience as a case study. This is not only relevant for underlining the importance of recognition of one's existence as an ethnic group but also the recognition of the right to express and display one's history, identity, and humanity. The author deals with claim-making and agency in a subtler way as she has chosen to interview self-identified "ordinary" Kurds and not leaders of Kurdish organisations. By identifying narrative patterns by diaspora communities in the United States and Germany respectively, she also seeks to trace the role host societies play in identity formation processes. Here she grasps the issue of emerging discourses in diaspora communities potentially

contributing to resolving conflicts in the homeland. This article is an innovative and explorative contribution to this special issue, which presents ideas on a topic that is rather understudied in the literature regarding the Kurdish diaspora.

By using visual anthropological tools to explore her parents' return to Iraqi Kurdistan after twenty years in the Netherlands, the article by Lana Askari contributes with new inroads to migration dynamics and less visible practices in transnational life. The author highlights filming as a form of engagement within participant observation, eliciting multi-layered information and provoking self-perceptions and negotiations not easily communicated through interviews, participant observation and written words. Her article is also a valuable contribution to the literature regarding researcher positionality. Concomitantly, she enriches key theoretical issues in transnational studies such as imaginary homelands; in-between spaces; how movement and immobility inform self-perception; how returnees' experience temporality and how they imagine and (re)negotiate their future in home- and hostland. ISIS's sudden expansion into Iraq six months after her parents' decision to return permanently captures past, present and future re-imaginings of life, war and security. Indeed, their European passports provide the possibility to depart again revealing hierarchies of power in opposition to stayees. We believe this is an important study which is innovative and enables us to understand individual perceptions about the issues of returning to Kurdistan from a second-generation diaspora member's perspective.

The special issue concludes with an interview with Kendal Nezan, the director of the Kurdish Institute in Paris. In the interview Nezan sheds light on the early years of the institute that opened its doors already in 1983. The establishment of the institute was motivated by a will to create a non-partisan public space open for Kurds from all parts of the world as well as to others interested in Kurdish history, language, culture and political situation. Over the years, the institute has organised a great variety of academic and cultural activities, created a library that has served academics working on the Kurdish issue, offered scholarships to Kurdish students, published periodicals on topics related to the Kurdish issue, and so forth. Simultaneously, Nezan explains, the institute has been an important platform to raise awareness of the Kurdish cause in Europe, for instance on the human rights violations carried out against Kurdish populations in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Nezan also points out that the institute has been actively involved in the Kurdish regions, namely in the post-conflict reconstruction of Iraqi Kurdistan. The continued functioning of the institute remains essential and, according to Nezan, not least for the second generation in diaspora to be able to engage in the Kurdish cause. To this end, the institute has been negatively affected by the austerity policies of the French authorities and launched a donation campaign to draw contributions to ensure that it can continue to operate as an

independent institute. “The answer could ultimately come from the Kurdish diaspora”, Kendal Nezan concludes.

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