

XVI Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Cagliari  
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE:** New Directions in Kurdish Studies: Tracing Political, Social, and Cultural Transformations across borders

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** ANDREA NOVELLIS AND NICOLA DEGLI ESPOSTI

**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

The past two decades have witnessed a period of profound transformation in Kurdish politics and society. Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kurds have established the first internationally recognized Kurdish political entity. The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq has since navigated the complex politics of the region and managed its population with semi-authoritarian methods. However, internal political divisions between the KDP and the PUK, along with the constitutional standoff with the Iraqi central government, continue to impact the Iraqi Kurds' quest for complete autonomy. Furthermore, Turkey's and Iran's transnational military operations against the PKK and Kurdish-Iranian groups challenge not only the KRG's sovereignty but also amplify regional tensions. In Erdoğan's Turkey, the Kurds have experienced a decade of relative openness over the past 20 years, followed by a new period of harsh repression. Although local Kurdish political forces have attained an unprecedented level of importance in nationwide Turkish politics, the ongoing mass arrests and removal of elected mayors from legal political parties continue to significantly influence the Kurdish experience in Turkey. In the context of the Syrian civil war, Kurdish forces defeated ISIS and established an autonomous region – now over ten years old – which has experimented with an innovative model of confederal democracy. The drafting of a new Social Contract, with its commitment to gender equality, direct democracy, and ecological sustainability, stands in contrast to the renewed tensions in the Arab-majority areas of the autonomous region. Moreover, renewed Turkish drone campaigns, ongoing low-intensity conflicts with pro-Iran militias, and the looming prospect of a US withdrawal highlight the volatility of the region and the precarious situation of the Syrian Kurds. In Iran, the Kurds have been at the forefront of the movement for democracy, and the Kurdish slogan 'woman, life, freedom' (Jin, Jiyan, Azadî) has become a nationwide symbol in the struggle against the regime, transcending ethnic lines. Yet, the Kurdish movement in Iran continues to face significant repression from the state, with Kurdish activists and dissidents often facing harsh punishments, including the death penalty, under the Iranian judicial system. Thus, despite significant advances, the Kurdish movement remains profoundly divided, and the progress made is always at risk of being suddenly reversed.

This context of deep transformation has led to a blossoming of research in the interdisciplinary field of Kurdish studies. In recent years, Kurdish studies have evolved into a rich, interdisciplinary field. Scholars have focused on the complex political dynamics of Kurdish regions, examining how Kurdish political entities navigate international relations and internal governance. Gender studies have gained prominence, highlighting the significant role of Kurdish women in activism and societal change. Studies of cultural expressions, through film, music, and art, have explored Kurdish identity amidst political and social upheavals. Cultural identity and historical narratives are key themes in Kurdish studies, focusing on how Kurdish identity is expressed through the arts both in their homeland and in the diaspora, and on understanding Kurdish history in broader regional and global contexts. These studies are closely linked with examinations of socio-economic and environmental challenges, shedding light on how Kurdish communities address economic development and ecological sustainability. Additionally, there has been a growing interest in linguistic and educational strategies within Kurdish societies, particularly in preserving cultural heritage in the face of displacement. The intersection of secular and religious dimensions, especially in the study of Kurdish-Islamic interactions, represents a distinctive aspect of the field.

Field-wide conferences, such as the London School of Economics' Kurdish conference, now in its second edition, and the increasing number of publications on the subject, indicate a growing interest and need for a deeper

understanding of Kurdish issues. In Italy, the Italian Network of Kurdish Studies (RISC) was established in 2021 and, in September 2023, organized the first conference on Kurdish studies in the country with the crucial support of SESAMO.

In light of recent academic trends, this panel seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in Kurdish studies. This panel aims to be an opportunity to continue this dialogue, hosting scholars working on innovative aspects of Kurdish politics, history, and society. We welcome paper proposals within these recent trends in the field and across the social sciences and the humanities. The panel invites contributions that not only analyze the current state of Kurdish studies but also propose future directions and possibilities for research. Through this conference, we aim to foster a diverse and dynamic discussion, contributing to the understanding and appreciation of Kurdish studies as a vital and evolving field.

#### **PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS**

Nicola Degli Esposti is a researcher in history and international politics. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics (2020) and is the author of *Nation and Class in the History of the Kurdish Movement* (Palgrave Macmillan 2022). His work has appeared on *Third World Quarterly*, *Middle East Critique*, *Oriente Moderno*, and other journals. Since 2021, he has been a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Padova.

Andrea Novellis is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Studies at NASP - University of Milan, with a focus on rebel governance and power-sharing during civil wars. He is co-founder of the Italian Network for Kurdish Studies (RISC). He has conducted fieldwork in Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He has published on feminism and nationalism in the Kurdish movement, and his work has been presented at various international conferences.

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