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

Chair/discussant:

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DISCUSSANT: Nicola Degli Esposti (University of Padova)

PARTECIPANTI – PARTICIPANTS:

Ozlem Galip (University of Oxford)

Kubra Sagir (EHESS)

Farangis Ghaderi (University of Exeter) and Magid Aziz (independent researcher)

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

New Directions in Kurdish Studies: Tracing Political, Social, and Cultural Transformations across Borders

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.

ABSTRACTS

Art and Gender in Kurdish Studies, by Özlem Belçim Galip, Oxford University

Although there was no research conducted specifically on Kurdish women before the 1980s, the earlier works drew primarily on reports of missionaries or explorers (mainly men, whose access to information about women was largely limited to what male informants knew or were willing to tell), applying deductive reasoning and imagination. In some works, the portrayal of Kurdish society in general, which is described as primitive, patriarchal, and feudal in those works, has affected the portrayal of the gender system, which is described as a rigid one in which men are strictly masculinized and women are feminized in sketchy if not inaccurate pictures of the situation of Kurdish women. In fact, Kurdish women intellectuals who have double or multiple cultural competences, as well as those who have hybrid identities, has contributed to the emergence of a new class of cultural producers who have gained independence from communal institutions or organisations. Furthermore, these women are leading to the advancement of Kurdish artistic and cultural activities both in home regions and in European states and their number has increased dramatically, especially since 2010. This growth has occurred alongside the ever-changing dynamics emerging from the home countries, including the empowerment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the Kurdish European diaspora, easing of the bans on Kurdish language and publications or cultural production, the pro-Kurdish party Dem Party's incorporation with a variety of liberal interest groups both in Turkey and Europe, the impacts of Kurdish women's resistance in Syria and the increasing migration of Kurdish women elites to Europe from Syria since 2011. In this context, Kurdish women from all four Kurdish regions have been involved in film production, radio broadcasts and exhibitions, as well as in the production of a substantial number of books, journals and other publications in both Kurdish and national languages of the European states. Accordingly, in the last decade, there has also been some growing scholarship and studies on the aesthetic and intellectual production of Kurdish women, which leads to the empowerment of women and advancement of gender equality in Kurdish regions and their diaspora. Some samples of such research projects are Wendy Hamelink's (University of Oslo) and Johanna Bochenska's (Jagiellonian University) interdisciplinary research titled "Covert Activism of Kurdish Women: The Image and Affect of Alternative Citizenship", which is rooted in literary studies and cultural anthropology, supported by Norway Grants. This research aims to understand the development, transformation and practice of cultural activism both in Kurdistan and its diaspora. Another research initiated by Isabel Kaser and Houzan Mahmoud, titled "Art and Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan", run under the London School of Economics' (LSE) Middle East Centre's Academic Collaboration with Arab Universities Programme. Kaser and Mahmoud's research focus on the new generation of young artists and women's activists emerged in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In fact, few research or initiatives has also attempted to go beyond the predominant legalistic and political frames and representations of statelessness through art-based approaches

by examining the transnational networking, transnational dynamics, institutionally mobilised and sustained connections amongst Kurdish people. In the context of above information, while drawing a chronology of recent art and culture-related research and those studies utilising art-based approaches, this paper not only aims to explore the growing interest in research projects on art and culture related subjects but it also aims to investigate the impacts of overall contextual and methodological gaps in Kurdish Studies on such new emerging research subjects and projects. Thus, this paper will also critically examine the changing dynamics within research on Kurds', specifically on Kurdish women's, literary, artistic and cultural productions and engagements in both Kurdistan and its diaspora.

From Would-be-state Diplomacy to Rebel Diplomacy: The International Relations and Diplomatic Activities of Kurdish Political Actors, 1908-1938" by Kubra Sagir, EHESS (Paris)

Since the advent of the modern state system, the domains of international relations and diplomacy have evolved as realms predominantly dominated by states. However, amidst this state-centric paradigm, non-state actors have sought to carve out a presence in various ways. Notably, the actors harboring aspirations of statehood, such as Kurdish political actors, have endeavored to establish their footing in the arenas of international relations and diplomacy with the aim of attaining political legitimacy and international recognition. This study delves into the diplomatic activities of Kurdish political actors spanning the period from 1908 to 1938. By partitioning this 30-year span into two distinct phases—pre and post the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne—this analysis examines shifts in international relations, the evolution of diplomatic paradigms, and global power dynamics. Simultaneously, it scrutinizes the strategies and discourses employed by Kurdish political actors, elucidating both hierarchical and non-hierarchical alliances formed by non-state entities. To conduct this research, archival sources from British, French, and Turkish diplomatic archives, along with historical narratives from Kurdish actors were examined. The study draws inspiration from the poignant phrase "no friends but mountains," coined in response to the British "promise" of political status to the Kurds, subsequently perceived as a "betrayal" in the post-World War I era. In particular, the concepts such as "friendship, promise, betrayal, loneliness" within the realm of international relations among non-state actors are dissected through the lens of Kurdish political activities during this critical period.

Kurdish print culture in Mandatory Iraq, by Farangis Ghaderi and Majid Aziz Salih

Publishing Kurdish periodicals was at the heart of political activism in the late Ottoman Empire in Istanbul, but these activities came to an abrupt halt following the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the ban on Kurdish language. Consequently, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon became the new Kurdish political and cultural centres. In mandatory Syria and Lebanon, exiled Kurds from Turkey continued the Kurdish cultural renaissance in the Kurmanji dialect (Tejel 2014). In Iraq Kurdish journals in the Sorani dialect were established for the first time by the British and Kurdish nationalist publications followed. Kurdish print culture in Iraq has, surprisingly, received little scholarly attention. In this paper, which is based on our ongoing archival investigation and close textual analysis of early Sorani periodicals under the British Mandate, we illustrate the significance of Kurdish print culture for both British colonial power and Kurdish nationalist resistance movement as active sites of cultural memory production. Examining the colonial power's intervention in Kurdish cultural production we discuss the contested and conflicting memories of the British Mandate. The periodicals examined are *Têgeystinî Rastî* (Understanding the Truth, 1918-1919) and *Peşkewtin* (Progress, 1920-1922), established by the British, *Rojî Kurdistan* (The Call of Kurdistan, 1922) and *Bangî Heq* (The Call for Justice, 1923), the official journals of the nationalist anti-British movement, and *Jiyan* (Life, 1926-1938).

Syrian Kurdish Alliance Politics: Examining the PYD-KNC Wartime Negotiations Through a Multi-Actor Lens by Andrea Novellis, University of Milan

The study conducts an in-depth exploration of alliance formation dynamics during civil wars, extending beyond prevailing military-centric theories to account for the influence of non-armed actors. Departing from prevailing perspectives, which primarily consider interactions between armed factions, this study posits the significant role of non-armed local entities such as political parties and civil society organisations in shaping these alliances. The specific objective of this research is to understand how these non-armed actors influence alliance formation and stability during civil conflicts. Previous studies focused on the behaviour of rebel groups and the influence of factors such as balance of power, ideology, and foreign sponsors. However, this study hypothesizes that alliance dynamics should be considered as part of a conflict process that includes non-armed non-state actors as key drivers of the process. I test my argument through the analysis of the negotiation process and short-lived alliance between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) during the Syrian Civil War. Through a comprehensive examination of data acquired from interviews with party representatives, analysis of the agreement documents, and an extensive review of secondary sources from academic literature and news reports, the study finds that the complex dynamics of coalition building of the Syrian opposition

parties, the attitude of the Syrian opposition towards the Kurds, the conflict dynamics between Syrian rebel groups, the Syrian government and the Kurds, and the sponsorship of foreign actors all played a significant influence over the PYD-KNC relations. The study seeks to elucidate how the relationship dynamics with the broader Syrian opposition and foreign state and non-state actors significantly influenced the alliance negotiation process. These diverging stances have substantial implications for our understanding of how multiparty alliances form and endure in the midst of civil conflicts. The findings suggest a complex set of factors shaping the formation and dissolution of alliances in civil wars. The analysis reveals the pivotal roles of international actors and political strategies in shaping alliances, while also highlighting how significant events—such as external military threats or unilateral policy decisions—can greatly impact the stability and longevity of such alliances. The study thus demonstrates the importance of non-armed actors in the dynamics of civil conflicts. In conclusion, this research enhances our theoretical understanding of alliance formations in multi-actor civil wars, proposing a comprehensive framework that includes a wider array of actors and processes.

The paradigm of democratic modernity: how to take non-European political philosophies seriously by Davide Grasso, Aix Marseille Université

In recent years, studies on Kurdistan have expanded in an inter-disciplinary way, covering all Kurdish regions and different Kurdish movements. Few contributions, however, have taken seriously the political and, in a broader sense, philosophical theory elaborated by the PKK in the 21st and other Kurdish parties such as the Pjak and Pyd. The paper aims to contribute to the advancement of research in this field by analysing some fundamental notions of the so-called 'new paradigm'. In particular, it will focus on its non-ethnocentric and non-chronocentric notion of democratic modernity. The latter, starting from an idea of domination that overturns the concept of progress proper to classical anthropology and archaeology, deeply deconstructs current ideas of modernity and democracy. The talk will be based on written and oral primary sources (books, conferences, seminars, interviews and journals) and on secondary literature that identifies sometimes underestimated sources of the paradigm. The latter will include, in particular, Vere Gordon Childe, Noah Kramer, Barry K. Gills, André Gunder Frank.

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*, *The Journal of Political Ideologies* and other journals. Since 2021, he has been a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Padova.

Andrea Novellis holds a Ph.D. 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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