

## THE KURDISH DIASPORA: *Transnational Ties, Home, and Politics of Belonging*

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This special issue of *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* is based on an international conference on “Kurdish Migration and Diaspora”, organised by the Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University, 12–14 April 2012. The conference was coordinated by Associate Professor Minoo Alinia who invited Dr Barzoo Eliassi, Dr Khalid Khayati and Adjunct Professor Östen Wahlbeck to join her as editors of this special issue. The editorial work has been chaired by Alinia, but all four issue editors have jointly and equally contributed to the editorial process. In the writing of this particular introductory article, Wahlbeck played a leading role. In this issue, we have chosen to include a selection of articles that discuss the recent developments in the Kurdish diaspora including the significance of the emergence of new generations of youth with a Kurdish background. We believe this selection of articles is of importance both for theoretical contributions to migration and diaspora studies and for shedding light on the current state of the Kurdish diaspora, which constitutes considerable minorities in several European countries. Many of the authors in this issue are themselves researchers with a Kurdish background. The research area of Kurdish Studies has developed significantly, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in Europe during the last decades (cf. Meho & Maglaughlin 2001). A leading scholar in the field, Martin van Bruinessen outlined the development of Kurdish Studies in the following way in his speech at the conference in Uppsala: “Originally a colonial discipline, pioneered by Russian, British and French officials serving their governments’ imperialist projects, the important new contributions to the field are increasingly made by Kurds trained in Western institutions” (Bruinessen 2012). In this context, academic institutions in the Nordic countries have become particularly important for the growing international field of Kurdish Diaspora Studies.

Therefore, we believe that this special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* represents topical issues and some of the most recent research on the Kurdish diaspora. A considerable share of this research has been conducted in the Nordic countries and this special issue will have a clear Nordic focus, with both the research carried out in the Nordic countries and by researchers who for the most are located in the Nordic countries. Among the Nordic countries, Sweden has for a long time been an important site for Kurdish cultural and political activities (cf. Sheikhmous 1990, 1993; Zettervall 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that many of the articles discuss the Swedish context.

The last two decades of Kurdish history can be distinguished as a period when the Kurdish diaspora has become mobilised on a large scale. These developments relate to the importance of transnational ties among contemporary migrant communities. The transnational ties involve multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states (Vertovec 2009). Kurdish transnational communities and Kurdish diasporic spaces are established as an outcome of the intensified Kurdish migration and relationship with the countries of origin and among Kurds settled in different countries around the globe (Wahlbeck 1999; Alinia 2004; Emanuelsson 2005; Khayati 2008; Eliassi 2013). Furthermore, the Kurdish diaspora has played an important role in bringing international attention to the plight of the Kurds, not least in Turkey as the country attempts to become a member of the EU. However, diasporas as complex and dynamic social processes go through continuous change and transformation over time. As diasporic communities and identities are characterised by a ‘triadic relationship’ (Faist 1999: 41) including the home countries, host countries and the transnational

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diaspora communities, any change in the socio-political situation in these points of references imply certain changes in diasporic projects and identities.

Current debates on the configuration of ethnic and racial boundaries in the era of globalisation have refocused academic attention on the concept of diaspora. Diasporas are a transnational social phenomenon where a complex social process can be observed characterised on the one hand by dispersion, dislocation, feelings of social exclusion and a homing desire, and on the other hand – and this is what distinguishes diaspora from exile – by movements, mobilisations and politics for location, “home” making (imaginary or real) and belonging (Alinia 2004).

Diasporas have been defined as expatriate communities that are characterised by their specific relation to a real or imagined homeland (Safran 1991; Cohen 2008). Yet, “homeland” has to be understood as an idea; it is actually dislocation and relocation in relation to an idea of a homeland that characterises the diaspora. Thus, the concept of diaspora has been useful to describe the processes of social organisation, transnational relations and community formation connected to displacement (Wahlbeck 2002). The perception of the “homeland” and the political projects connected to it are often significantly influenced by some type of traumatic collective history, which in various ways can be interpreted by members of the diaspora community. Thus, diasporas can be characterised by a “victim discourse”, which researchers critically need to assess and overcome (cf. Khayati 2008). The “victim discourse” is central in maintaining the politicised aspects of the Kurdish diasporas and can be used to motivate transnational political mobilization (cf. Eliassi 2013). There is also a need to go beyond a territorial and essentialist understanding of diasporas and their homelands to understand the processes of identity formation (Anthias 1998). Diasporas have to be studied not as bounded entities, but rather as claims, projects, political movements and categories of practice (Brubaker 2005).

Diaspora is clearly a complex concept and it can be misused and misunderstood. The concept is sometimes understood as a synonym for ethnicity and nationalism, an assumption based on the ethnic, nationalist and religious conceptions of ethnic particularity that, as Paul Gilroy (1993, 2000) points out, have co-existed with the term. Moreover, the concept is often connected with and defined on the basis of specific experiences and can consequently give rise to the problem that James Clifford (1997) highlights, namely, the slippage between diaspora as a theoretical concept and diaspora discourses. Hence, in order to avoid such problems, as Avtar Brah (1996) notes, there is a need for a historicity of diaspora experiences, that is, “each empirical diaspora must be analysed in its historical specificity” (Brah 1996: 183). In this regard, each diaspora is unique (cf. Werbner 2002). Therefore, since the notion of diaspora alludes to a form of migratory journey, it is of paramount importance to historicise those journeys and processes that impinge on identity formation among different immigrant groups. For example, a comparison of experiences of first and second generations, or of experiences of men and women, shows that they experience differently the old and the new homes, which in turn can lead to divided allegiances. Family, community, home, homeland, belonging and nation need thus to be renegotiated and redefined in the light of dislocations and relocations across different generations, genders, times, spaces and contexts (cf. Radhakrishnan 1996; Eliassi 2013; Toivanen 2013).

Belonging is a concept that can be used to understand the above mentioned social processes, since “belonging is not a static phenomenon but rather a set of processes that are central to the way in which human relationships are conducted” (Skrbiš, Baldassar

& Poynting 2007: 261). Furthermore, Anthias (2006) points out that belonging is not simply about attaining citizenship but also about developing emotional and social bonds with places that are constructed as sites of identification and membership. In this light, the question of “feeling at home” and homeland become important aspects of belonging in which homeland is often loaded with a “poetic and imaginative force” (Stråth 2008: 26). In the context of immigration, ideas about identity, home and belonging cannot evade the centrality of homeland, whether through lived experiences or narratives and acts of memories transmitted across generations among the diaspora (Lindholm Schulz 2003; Mason 2007). Likewise, home not only offers shelter in a physical sense but is also a place where we create and attach personal, political and social meanings. Furthermore, a static understanding of home is often refuted since the dynamic processes of home involve “acts of imagining, creating, unmaking, changing, losing and moving ‘homes’” (Al-Ali & Koser 2002: 6). As Brah (1996) points out, home is both a mythical place for diasporic imaginations as well as a locality of lived experiences. Home is therefore also related to political belonging since it is about the “way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’” (Brah 1996: 192).

Any change in the composition of the diaspora communities will have, as a number of articles in this issue discuss, consequences for the diaspora. The emergence of new generations is one development that undoubtedly will have significant importance. During the last two decades, a whole new generation among the Kurdish diaspora has emerged and with this new hyphenated identities, but also new issues, conflicts and challenges have followed, for instance, regarding gender issues (Eliassi 2013; Alinia 2014). Importantly, during this period, but especially since 2001, the political situation for and attitudes towards non-Western and supposedly Muslim migrant communities in the West has worsened, which has directly affected these groups in multiple ways (cf. Keskinen 2009; Alinia 2011). Within this period, we have also witnessed the change of the political situation of the Kurds in Iraq and to a certain extent in Turkey, which affects the Kurdish diaspora in many ways. Moreover, as the social and political settings in which diaspora groups reside affect the process of diaspora formation and the nature of transnational exchanges among diaspora groups (Wahlbeck 1999; Khayati 2008), the Nordic countries with their historical, political, cultural, economic and social particularities can provide a unique context of analysis for the current issue. However, the issue is not limited to this area of the world, and general aspects of this global diaspora will also be discussed in some of the articles in this issue.

The first article of this special issue by Khalid Khayati and Magnus Dahlstedt (2014) relates to some of the key theoretical issues outlined above. The focus is on the process of diaspora formation among Kurds in Sweden and how it is related to the specific Swedish political context. The article describes the nature of the transnational networks and organisations that Kurds create in Sweden. This description points out that diasporic populations act both outwards, towards the former homeland, and inwards, towards the country of residence. Furthermore, engagement and commitment in one direction do not exclude involvement in other directions (Khayati & Dahlstedt 2014).

The case of young Kurds in Finland is the focus of the article by Mari Toivanen and Peter Kivisto (2014). An analysis of interviews with young Kurds in Finland reveals the range of identity options available to young adult members of this community. The article identifies

and discusses a number of transnational aspects and relations that have an influence on the way that the options are understood by the interviewees. As the interviews reveal, these transnational relations include the use of various types of new information and communication technologies (Toivanen & Kivisto 2014).

The article by Minoo Alinia and Barzoo Eliassi (2014) presents experiences of two different generations among the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden. The focus in the article is on issues of identity, “home(land)” and politics of belonging with regard to generational and temporal aspects. As the article shows, there are clear differences among the older and younger generations with regard to their experiences of being migrants and Kurdish. This has implications for the way they identify themselves as well as their perceptions of home(land) and belonging (Alinia & Eliassi 2014).

The Kurdish diaspora displays a large and diverse cultural production, including literary activities. In the last article of this special issue, Ozlem Galip (2014) points out that a majority of the novels published in Sweden focus on “Kurdistan” as the original “homeland” rather than “Sweden” as the country of settlement. In other words, the Kurdish novelists in Sweden have constructed an idea that Kurdistan constitutes a priority in their discourses. Galip examines in detail three central Kurdish novels to outline the diasporic discourse displayed in Kurdish literature. The article argues that Kurds in the fictional narratives do not feel at “home” in their host country nor can they return to their homeland. The minds of the characters are still engaged with the “homeland” they left behind. Controversies and fragmentation as well as memories and imagining the past become responses to displacement and ways of countering the harsh realities of exile (Galip 2014).

The articles in this special issue together provide an overview of topical research on the Kurdish diaspora. Most studies of transnationalism and the Kurdish diaspora are focused on the first generation. The articles in this issue provide an insight into the processes from a longer time perspective and in relation to later generations as well. The focus is on the Nordic countries, especially Sweden. Still, we believe that the social processes and political dynamics described in these articles have a far more general and universal significance. The social processes connected to the formation and development of diasporas become increasingly topical issues all over the world. These articles provide a much needed deeper insight into the diasporic projects of home making and the role played by transnationalism and politics of belonging among diasporas in general.

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**Minoo Alinia** is Associate Professor of Sociology at Uppsala University. She holds a PhD in sociology and her dissertation on Kurdish diaspora was the first major work on diaspora in Sweden. She has published a number of articles and book chapters on diaspora theory, diasporic identities and mobilisations, everyday racism, gender and migration. She is the author of *Honor and violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013), which is an intersectional critical study of violence in the name of honour. She has also published on the way gender, sexuality and issues of gender equality have been used in racialising discourses on migrants and Muslims in Sweden.

**Barzoo Eliassi** has a PhD in social work and social policy. He is a researcher at International Migration Institute, Oxford University. He is the author of *Contesting Kurdish Identities in Sweden: Quest for Belonging Among Middle Eastern Youth* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013). His latest publication includes ‘Orientalist Social Work: Cultural Otherization of Muslim Immigrants in Sweden’ (in *Journal of Critical Social Work*). He has published on social policy, multiculturalism, statelessness, homeland, ethnic inequality and politics of belonging among Kurds and immigrants in Sweden.

**Khalid Khayati** is a political scientist and holds a PhD in ethnicity. His research is mainly centred on diaspora, transnational relations and the notion of transborder citizenship where the Kurdish populations in Western Europe and especially those in France and Sweden constitute the principal empirical data of the research. Khayati received a DEA (Diplôme d’études approfondies) in political science on Arab & Islam World, at Institut d’Études Politiques, Aix-en-Provence, France in 1998. Currently, he holds a lectureship on Tourism Studies at Department for Studies of Social Change and Culture (ISAK), Linköping University, Sweden. In terms of research, Khayati is likewise collaborating with the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society (REMESO), Linköping University.

**Östen Wahlbeck** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at University of Helsinki. He holds a PhD in Ethnic Relations from the University of Warwick (1997). He is an Adjunct Professor of Sociology at University of Tampere and has been Acting Professor of Sociology at Åbo Akademi University. He is the author of *Kurdish Diasporas* (Macmillan 1999), a number of edited books (including *Debating Multiculturalism in the Nordic Welfare States*, Palgrave 2013, co-edited with Peter Kivisto) as well as numerous articles in the field of international migration and ethnic relations. His research interests include refugee resettlement, diaspora theory, transnationalism, multiculturalism and immigrant integration policies. He has been the project leader of several large research projects in these areas in Finland. Since 1998, he has been a university teacher of general sociology in Finland. This includes teaching undergraduate, postgraduate and research students, including supervision of theses at all levels.

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