



# THE TRANSACTIONALITY OF THE KURDISH FREEDOM MOVEMENT

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP

FIRENZE

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SAGAS DEPARTMENT

UNIVERSITY OF FLORENCE



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UNIVERSITÀ  
DEGLI STUDI  
FIRENZE

**SAGAS**  
DIPARTIMENTO DI STORIA,  
ARCHEOLOGIA, GEOGRAFIA,  
ARTE E SPETTACOLO

**POST-DiD**



# The Transnationality of the Kurdish Freedom Movement

This workshop explores the **transnational nature of the Kurdish Freedom Movement** through an interdisciplinary dialogue. The aim is to deepen our understanding of the spatial dimensions of this movement, which has emerged within a politically challenging and geographically fragmented context, divided by the national borders of states that have often found themselves in military opposition.

The Kurdish Movement's presence along these borders has itself become a source of conflict and repression, affecting the entire material and symbolic space inhabited by the Kurdish population — including natural elements such as forests, rivers, and mountains. For this reason, the area of Kurdistan presents a distinctive **transnational character** that warrants closer examination.

At the same time, the **strategic engagement with Europe** — through the Kurdish diaspora and several institutions in exile — has extended the transnational scope of the Movement, involving the societies of the so-called host countries. This is accompanied by a wider **political appeal**, rooted in a critique of the nation-state and of borders, which places the Movement in dialogue with other political and intellectual currents across Europe and beyond.

The **absence of statehood**, combined with the **critique of the nation-state** and the **transnational dimension** of the Movement, makes the Kurdish Freedom Movement a compelling subject for academic inquiry — one that challenges many of the established categories in both geography and political science.

## Programme

### 9.00-9.30: Institutional Greetings

### 9.30-10.30: Opening Keynote Address

**Pınar Dinç** (Lund University)

*Transboundary Ecologies of War: Destruction, Resistance, and the Quest for Peace*

### 10.30-11.00: Coffee Break

### 11.00-12.15: Panel 1 – Kurdistan

- **Rojda Tuğrul** (Independent artist/researcher, Vienna)  
*Damming the Rivers of Kurdistan: Environmental and Social Impacts*
- **Ronay Bakan** (European University Institute)  
*Perils of International Heritage Regime: Non-state actors go to UNESCO*
- **Davide Grasso** (University of Turin)  
*The Syrian “democratic nation” in theory and practice. Successes, limitations and contradictions of the Arab involvement in the Syrian confederal project*

- **Thomas McGee** (European University Institute)  
*Circulation of Rojava Resistance Discourse between Kurdistan and the Diaspora*

## 12.15-12.45: Q&A

*An accompanying art exhibition by Rojda Tuğrul will also be on display during the workshop.*

## 12.45-14.15: Light Lunch

## 14.15-15.30: Panel 2 – The World

- **Francesco Ventura** (University of Florence)  
*Towards a Conceptualization of Post-Statist Diaspora Diplomacy: The Alliance-Making of the Kurdish Freedom Movement in Europe*
- **İnci Öykü Yener-Roderburg** (Lund University)  
*Pro-Kurdish Parties Abroad: Diaspora Mobilisation in Turkish Elections, 2015–2023*
- **Federico Venturini** (University of Udine)  
*Internationalising the Kurdish question: transnational advocacy, knowledge production and solidarity*
- **Shilan Fuad Hussain** (Institute of Domestic Violence, Religion & Migration, UK)  
*Women at the Centre of Kurdish Freedom Across Borders*

## 15.30-16.00: Q&A

## 16.00-16.30: Coffee Break

## 16.30-17.30: Closing Keynote Address

**Joost Jongerden** (Wageningen University)

*Space and Politics in the Kurdistan Freedom Movement*

## KEYNOTE SPEAKER – 9.30-10.30

### Pınar Dinç

Dr. Pınar Dinç is Associate Professor in Political Science and researcher at the Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University. She is also a research fellow at the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH). Her work focuses on environmental peace and conflict, exploring the nexus of political power, climate change, ecological degradation, authoritarianism, resistance, and migration. She leads the interdisciplinary ECO-Syria project and has coordinated initiatives like Turkey Beyond Borders (2020–2024). Her regional expertise includes Turkey, Syria, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Palestine. A former Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow, she holds a PhD from the London School of Economics. Her research appears in journals such as Ecology and Society, Climate and Development, Environmental Research

Letters and Human Ecology. She co-edited *The Republic of Turkey and its Unresolved Issues – 100 Years and Beyond* (2025) and *Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Resistance in Turkey* (2022). Dr. Dinç frequently contributes expert commentary to international media on Kurdish and Turkish politics, environmental issues, and transboundary conflicts.

### **Transboundary Ecologies of War: Destruction, Resistance, and the Quest for Peace**

This keynote explores how nature becomes both a victim and a site of resistance in protracted conflicts across Kurdistan. Focusing on rivers, forests, and agricultural lands that transcend state borders, it examines how ecological destruction—through dam projects, deforestation, and scorched-earth tactics—has been weaponized in war. At the same time, it highlights the Kurdish freedom movement’s ecological turn, framing environmental justice and sustainability as integral to its transnational struggle. The lecture situates these dynamics within broader debates on conflict ecology and environmental peacebuilding, asking what it means to seek peace in landscapes scarred by war yet rooted in resilience.

### **PANEL 1: Kurdistan – 11.00-12.45**

#### **Rojda Tuğrul**

Rojda Tuğrul is an interdisciplinary artist and researcher whose practice explores identity in relation to space and time. Her early work examined the impacts of war on ecological and cultural heritage within the sociopolitical context of Kurdish territories, investigating how conflict reshapes landscapes, culture, collective memory, and identity. Over time, her practice has expanded to encompass questions of collective cognition and consciousness in both human societies and ecological systems, situating her work at the intersection of environmental and sociopolitical discourse. Alongside her artistic practice, Tuğrul maintains an active academic and research profile. She holds an MSc in Veterinary Science and a PhD in Practice from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Based in Vienna, Austria, she continues to develop projects that bridge art, ecology, and sociopolitical inquiry, fostering dialogue across disciplines.

#### ***Damming the Rivers of Kurdistan: Environmental and Social Impacts***

This presentation, accompanied by the artwork *A Turtle in Ten Seconds*, examines the spatial and memorial transformation of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the context of the ongoing war in Northern Kurdistan. In 2008, the Turkish government announced the initiation of dozens of “Security Dams” projects to be built along the Turkish–Iraqi border, as well as in several valleys in the central region of Northern Kurdistan. This initiative represents the most extensive intervention in rural Kurdish-inhabited territories since the 1990s, when approximately 3,000 Kurdish villages were forcibly evacuated and three million people were displaced as part of a government counterinsurgency campaign aimed at depriving the PKK of logistical support. The construction of these dams would in effect block PKK militants’ entry paths, hinder and restrict their movements, and disrupt the logistical support they receive from locals.

#### **Ronay Bakan**

Ronay Bakan is a Max Weber Postdoctoral Fellow at European University Institute, Italy. She is also an incoming Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Fordham University, US. She holds a PhD from the Johns Hopkins University. Her research interests include urban politics, political violence, and critical methodologies. Contact: [ronay.bakan@eui.eu](mailto:ronay.bakan@eui.eu)

### ***Perils of International Heritage Regime: Non-state actors go to UNESCO***

Global counterinsurgency campaigns employ heritage-making efforts through legal practices and developmentalist strategies to destroy the environment of existing insurgencies while constructing the symbolic and material environment of future wars. This presentation focuses on tangible and non-tangible heritage efforts in the low and high-intensity periods of the civil war between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Turkish state. Centering the heritage-making efforts in Suriçi, a UNESCO World Heritage site, in Northern Kurdistan, I claim three core mechanisms through which the Turkish state weaponizes heritage: (i) legal-institutional restructuring of land, (ii) policing of urban landscapes, and (iii) selective development resulting in displacement, discipline, and co-optation in the conflict-affected heritage-scape. On the other hand, I demonstrate that local epistemic communities, including archeologists, urban planners, and architects, leverage heritage battlespace to challenge such practices through documentation and advocacy at UNESCO. However, the involvement of UNESCO allows the counterinsurgent state to mobilize heritage diplomacy to legitimize counterinsurgency repertoires at the global scale. Overall, I demonstrate that heritage is not merely a noun that points to the presence of historically significant and neutral architectural forms preserved via technical expertise as constructed by the UNESCO constitution. Rather, heritage is a textured site wherein political processes of state violence are introduced and practiced through interactions between local, national, and international scales.

### **Davide Grasso**

Davide Grasso is a researcher in Political Sociology at the University of Turin, where he teaches Sociology of Movements and Political Transition Processes. He teaches Political Sociology at the International University College of Turin, Sociology of the Confederal Commune at the School of Advanced Studies in Critical Theory of Society at the University of Milan-Bicocca, and Social Ecology at the University of Rojava. A member of the UNESCO Chair at the University of Turin, he is currently leading the BorDeMER project (Building a Theory of Cross-Border Democracy to Cope with Emerging Challenges in Europe and Beyond) funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research. He has published essays, articles and research reports on Italian, Syrian, Turkish and Iraqi socio-political movements, on the preservation of cultural heritage in Europe, and on the concepts of institution and community.

### ***The Syrian “democratic nation” in theory and practice. Successes, limitations and contradictions of the Arab involvement in the Syrian confederal project***

The confederal movement is not, or is not supposed to be, merely a “Kurdish” movement or a movement “for the Kurds”. Abdullah Ocalan's writings describe a regional path that transcends the Kurds and Kurdistan. The concept of welat is explained in Jineoloji seminars in Syria as applicable to any national sentiment or identification, from Kurdistan to Turkey to other countries in the Middle East and beyond. It is in this framework that, through the organised dissemination of the new

paradigm, militants insist on building the potential of democratic (co)existence of all linguistic and religious communities in Syria.

The DAANES is a field of application and therefore possible assessment of this paradigm, and of the implementation of the concept of “democratic nation” central to the ideology of the PKK and the PYD. Based on empirical data collected in the DAANES, moreover, it is possible to sketch some conclusions about some of the current contradictions within the confederal movement, partially shedding light on Ocalan's criticism of the PKK cadres in the Perspektif sent to the party in 2025 (part of the so-called “New Manifesto”). The leader states that the movement's ideological adherence to the new paradigm has been indeed insufficient over the past 30 years, calling for the PKK to dissolve.

Based on interviews, focus groups and observations, collected in the framework of BorDeMER research project with representatives of the DAANES Arab communities in the tribal, political and academic spheres, the paper aims to go beyond the state of the art by:

- (1) framing the confederal ideology as one that aims, in principle, at overcoming the scopus of Kurdish politics and to address audiences beyond Kurdistan and the Kurds;
- (2) Reporting data on complaints emerging among interviewees and participants in the research regarding the nature and extent of political involvement of Arab communities in the DAANES structures;
- (3) Critically relating the thus emerging contradictions of new paradigm implementation to the ‘Perspektif’ sent by Ocalan to the PKK on April 20th, 2025.

### **Thomas McGee**

Thomas McGee is an interdisciplinary researcher working at the intersection of legal and social studies of the Middle East, with particular emphasis on Kurdish dynamics in the Syrian context. He is a Max Weber fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, and completed his PhD on “Syria’s Changing Statelessness Landscape: 2011 as Critical Juncture” at Melbourne Law School’s Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness. Thomas has been a Visiting Fellow at the University of Oxford’s Refugee Studies Centre and Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. Thomas is a graduate of the University of Cambridge and holds a Masters in Arab and Islamic Studies from the University of Exeter. Thomas speaks Arabic and Kurdish, and has engaged in practitioner work responding to forced displacement with UNHCR and other humanitarian actors (mostly in the Middle East region). He has previously published on a wide variety of topics (law, human rights, conflict and security, migration and displacement, governance, statelessness and citizenship) in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, International Migration Review, the Tilburg Law Review, Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication, Citizenship Studies, Genocide Studies International and the Kurdish Studies journal. Currently, Thomas is developing his PhD for publication as a monograph.

### ***Circulation of Rojava Resistance Discourse between Kurdistan and the Diaspora***

This paper traces the circulation of discourse about Rojava Resistance (Berxwedan) transnationally within Kurdish diaspora contexts. It considers how rhetoric and discourse on this topic sometimes operates differently within diaspora settings versus the geographic territories of Rojava (western Kurdistan) and northern Syria themselves. This is exemplified by the continued traction of the Rojava Solidarity Movement with diaspora activists while Kurdish-led authorities within northern Syria have

officially distanced themselves from the Rojava project in favour of embracing a more inclusive Syrian Democratic identity since 2015. This shows that mobilisation around the Rojava Resistance narrative has remained powerful in the diaspora contexts irrespective of the pragmatic considerations sometimes necessitated by homeland conditions.

## **PANEL 2: The World – 14.15-16.00**

### **Francesco Ventura**

Francesco Ventura is a fixed-term assistant professor in political geography at the University of Florence. He holds an MA in International Relations from the University of Florence and a PhD in Geography from the University College of Dublin. His main interests concern geographies of diaspora and diaspora diplomacy. After working extensively on the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, his current research project investigates the post-statist diaspora diplomacy of the Kurdish Freedom Movement in Europe. At the University of Florence, he teaches courses in political geography, diaspora studies, cultural and social geography, urban geography, and social sciences methodologies. He also taught at the University College of Dublin and the University of California. He is in the process of publishing his book with Edinburgh University Press and already published articles in the most important international journals of geography, such as the *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, *Geopolitics*, and *Geografiska Annaler*. He is a member of the Rete Italiana di Studi Curdi (RISC, Italian Network of Kurdish Studies).

### ***Towards a Conceptualization of Post-Statist Diaspora Diplomacy: The “Making Alliances” of the Kurdish Freedom Movement in Europe***

Diaspora diplomacy has gained growing scholarly attention over the past decade. Geographers and other social scientists have increasingly sought to conceptualize it as an autonomous field of inquiry, moving beyond its earlier, narrower framing as a mediating force in international conflicts (Boyle & Ho, 2017; Ho & McConnell, 2019; Kennedy, 2022). Recent engagement with public and new diplomacy has opened new avenues for exploring how diasporas act as diplomatic actors in their own right. Diaspora diplomacy invites scholars to rethink conventional distinctions between domestic and foreign policy and to question the territorial assumptions that underpin both diaspora and diplomacy. In doing so, researchers have emphasized polylateral and multidirectional dynamics. The role of the state is thus problematized and provincialized, detaching diplomatic activity from the geographical imaginaries of territorial states. Building on this, the notion of post-statist diaspora diplomacy connects diaspora diplomacy with post-statist geographies (Barrera de la Torre & Ince, 2016; Ince & Barrera de la Torre, 2016, 2024) to explore what happens when the state is not only absent but also no longer represents a desirable political horizon — in contrast to previous legitimizing strategies that mimicked state diplomacy (McConnell et al., 2012). This perspective contributes to a growing body of work that examines diasporas' diplomatic engagements with civil society, political movements, and other stateless communities, seeking to imagine alternatives to statist world politics. This paper conceptualizes post-statist diaspora diplomacy by examining the Kurdish Freedom Movement's diplomatic activity in Europe, with particular attention to an often-overlooked function of diplomacy: alliance-building.

## **Inci Öykü Yener-Roderburg**

Dr Inci Öykü Yener-Roderburg is Postdoctoral Researcher and Project Coordinator for FABRIC at Lund University. Her work bridges political sociology and the study of religion, connecting empirical insights from faith-based actors to broader debates on migration ethics, social inclusion, and the governance of forced migration. She is also interested in transnational political engagement, citizenship, external voting, and qualitative research methods. Within FABRIC, she investigates how faith-based diaspora organisations engage in refugee relief across Europe. She is also developing research on religious literacy in AI systems and interfaith dialogue technologies, aiming to bridge the moral and practical vocabularies of faith-based and secular institutions to foster better coordination and more effective refugee reception. Before starting at LU, she was a lecturer at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics, University of Cologne, offering graduate courses on citizenship, migration, and multiculturalism. And she was awarded a fellowship at the Academy of International Affairs NRW, where she conducted research on the role of faith-based diaspora organisations in elections in both origin and resident countries.

### ***Pro-Kurdish Parties Abroad: Diaspora Mobilisation in Turkish Elections, 2015–2023***

This working paper examines the transnational mobilisation of Turkey's pro-Kurdish parties in Europe, focusing on Turkish elections between 2015 and 2023. While the literature on external voting has expanded to include emigrant voting behaviour and party organisation abroad, it continues to privilege voting eligibility as the primary criterion of political participation. This article challenges that limitation by foregrounding the role of non-voter remote partisans in homeland elections. Drawing on evidence from Kurdish migrant associations and party-linked networks in Germany and France, the study shows how eligible as well as non-eligible Kurds, including former citizens and political refugees, actively participated in electoral processes through lobbying, campaigning, fundraising, and mobilisation on behalf of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the Party of the Greens and the Left Future/Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (Yeşil Sol Parti). These activities were embedded in rooted associational infrastructures that functioned as informal party allies abroad. The article argues that non-voter partisanship constitutes a central yet overlooked dimension of extraterritorial electoral politics, particularly in contexts shaped by ethnic conflict and authoritarian governance. Reconceptualising *external voting* as a broader field of transnational mobilisation offers new insights into diaspora politics, citizenship, and political participation beyond the ballot.

## **Federico Venturini**

Federico Venturini is an activist-researcher trained as a human geographer currently based at the University of Udine (Italy) and working at the intersection of political ecology, social movements, and conflict transformation. His research and activist practice focus on social ecology, waste prevention and Zero Waste strategies, environmental justice, and alternative models of governance grounded in participation. He has been a member of the Advisory Board of the Transnational Institute of Social Ecology since 2013, and the International İmralı Peace Delegation, organized by the Eu Turkey Civic Commission, in 2016, 2017 and 2022. He co-edited with Thomas Jeffrey Miley the

book *Your Freedom and Mine: Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurdish Question in Erdogan's Turkey* and with Emet Degirmenci and Inés Morales the volume *Social Ecology and the Right to the City: Towards Ecological and Democratic Cities*.

### ***Internationalising the Kurdish question: transnational advocacy, knowledge production and solidarity***

This contribution reflects on the role of international engagement and transnational solidarity in the political strategy of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, drawing on first-hand experience as a peace delegate and long-term researcher on the Kurdish question. Based on participation in international delegations and activist research, the contribution examines how Kurdish political actors strategically mobilise external support to counter asymmetrical power relations with the Turkish state and to internationalise what is often framed as a domestic security issue. The analysis focuses on the ways in which diplomatic advocacy, academic legitimacy, civil society networks, and media visibility are used to generate international attention, political pressure, and moral leverage vis-à-vis Turkey. In particular, the contribution explores how international actors—researchers, parliamentarians, NGOs, and solidarity networks—are not merely passive supporters but become embedded within a broader struggle over narratives, legitimacy, and political recognition. From this perspective, internationalisation emerges as a constitutive dimension of Kurdish political praxis rather than a secondary or auxiliary strategy. By situating activist research within peace delegation practices and solidarity initiatives, the contribution also reflects critically on the ambivalent position of the activist-researcher, caught between solidarity, knowledge production, and political responsibility. It argues that external engagement plays a crucial role in challenging state-centric framings of the conflict, exposing human rights violations, and sustaining political space for non-state democratic alternatives promoted by the Kurdish movement. More broadly, the contribution contributes to debates on transnational activism, conflict internationalisation, and the role of knowledge in struggles for self-determination, justice and autonomy.

### **Shilan Fuad Hussain**

Dr. Shilan Fuad Hussain is a Researcher & Analyst dedicated to advancing gender equality and advocating for women's rights. She is an academic expert for the Institute of Domestic Violence, Religion & Migration (UK), a UNESCO Fellow, and Marie Curie Researcher. She is an associate editor for Brill and Routledge. She was previously a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow in Gender Studies and Cultural Analysis (UK), a Visiting Fellow at the Washington Kurdish Institute (U.S.), and a Doctoral Fellow at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (Switzerland).

She has developed a track record in Cultural Analysis alongside Gender Studies. She is an interdisciplinary academic and works on a variety of topics, including: cultural representation, production, and practices; gender-based violence, women's human rights and empowerment; state policies enhancing female equality; FGM, sexuality, arranged/forced marriages; the social impacts of masculinity; and multi-identity in the diaspora, which mirror her published papers. Her current work sits at the intersection of sociology and cultural analysis and its symbiotic relevance to modern society.

### ***Women at the Centre of Kurdish Freedom Across Borders***

This research examines the transnational dimensions of women's central role within the Kurdish Freedom Movement, arguing that women are not merely one component, but its organising force across Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora. The paper centres women's feminist leadership as the condition through which the movement understands freedom, life, and liberation. It situates this analysis within Jin, Jiyan, Azadî (Woman, Life, Freedom) and jineology, a feminist framework developed within the Kurdish women's movement that grounds knowledge in women's collective experience, treated not as abstract theory but as lived political commitment shaping struggle across borders. The Kurdish Freedom Movement's insistence on women's liberation is structural rather than symbolic, sustained through discipline, ethical responsibility, and transnational solidarity linking women in Kurdistan with those in diasporic spaces. These commitments do not circulate as slogans or rhetoric; they bind, compel, and reorder social relations, shaping how the movement is carried, defended, and transformed in material and moral terms. By foregrounding women's leadership, this study rejects accounts that reduce Kurdish women to participants rather than authors of political direction. It demonstrates how Kurdish women's transnational praxis does not export feminism outward, but redefines freedom itself as a collective, uncompromising condition that endures, resists erasure, and demands accountability across borders.

## **KEYNOTE SPEAKER – 16.30-17.30**

### **Joost Jongerden**

Joost Jongerden (PhD) is an Associate Professor at Rural Sociology, Wageningen University, the Netherlands. Trained as a rural sociologist, he has crossed into social movement theory, political science and historical sociology, embracing a kind of disciplinary trespassing. He has worked on forced migration, rural development, and political & violent conflict in the Kurdistan region. His main interest is in the dynamics of dispossession, displacement and conflict and the ways in which people not only respond to the conditions in which they are made vulnerable, but also act upon ideas for creating a better future. He refers to this as Do-it-Yourself Development. He is also Editor in Chief of *The Commentaries*, an open source, non-APC journal, dedicated to publishing analysis, evaluations and assessments of contemporary developments in Turkey, Turkey's role in the MENA region, and Turkey-EU relations. It does so for a broad audience of scholars, policy-makers, professionals and students. The aim of the commentaries is to draw attention to current advances, discuss policies and practices, and to stimulate critical discussion and theoretical reflection.

### ***Space and Politics in the Kurdistan Freedom Movement***

This article advances a relational approach to understanding the transnationalism of the Kurdistan Freedom Movement (KFM). Drawing on Doreen Massey's concepts of *activity space* and *thrown-togetherness*, it reconceptualizes the KFM as constituted through relational practices that are not primarily organized around national territories. The analysis proceeds through three domains – worldmaking, citizenship, and identity – to show how the KFM reimagines political community, enacts forms of citizenship beyond state recognition and formal membership, and mobilizes identity as a site of struggle without reproducing nationalism.