

# On the (Im)possibility of the Kurdish Queer / Hakan Sandal-Wilson

## Abstract

Scattered across four countries in the Middle East, Kurds are one of the largest stateless nations in the world and have long been portrayed as pawns within imperial interventions in the region, both by some sections of the Left as well as within authoritarian right-wing politics. In parallel, a specific vein of postcolonial theory has treated queer/LGBTI+ activism in the region as “alien,” “foreign,” and even as a Trojan horse of imperialism, an idea that has been taken up, again, by sections of the Left as well as right-wing authoritarian politicians. Adopting the doubly illegitimized subject position of the “Kurdish queer” as its point of departure, this article highlights the importance of taking the situated knowledge and political analyses of Kurdish queers seriously to uncover histories of violence as well as the multiple layers of queer, postcolonial, and decolonial imagination. Doing so, the author argues, puts theory and visions of democracy under productive scrutiny, stretching them in critical directions. The article concludes that an investment in or curiosity for Kurdish queer studies is needed to complicate our understanding of the history and politics of the region, as well as how sexuality and conflict are entangled.

**Keywords:** Kurdish queer studies, gender, sexuality, conflict, postcolonial theory

Following the hostile takeover of the respected and indeed “only peer-reviewed academic journal of Kurdish Studies” (Özok-Gündoğan 2023) by a predatory publisher in early 2023, the *Kurdish Studies* journal’s editorial board resigned en masse and began searching for ways to reestablish the journal (van Bruinessen, Schäfers, and Alsancakli 2023). Having been able to secure a home with a new academic publisher, the newly reformed *Kurdish Studies Journal* launched in December 2023 with a special issue titled “Kurdish Queer Studies.” The editorial board’s response to the hostile takeover reminded me of the creative and radical persistence that defines both Kurdish and queer politics: Kurdish political parties, which have been repeatedly shut down by the Turkish state, but have resisted by renaming and restructuring into new parties (Sandal-Wilson 2021b: 568); and LGBTI+ activists, who responded to the banning of the 2016 Istanbul Pride and calls by the police to “disperse” through the subversive reappropriation of the command and its strategic reimagining as “we disperse” (*dağılıyoruz*), so that activists spread throughout the city, reaching “backstreets and different neighborhoods, reading their press release in places that the Pride march had never

reached before” (Bayramoğlu 2021: 185). Mirroring the tactics of these resistance projects in their decision to “disperse” in the face of attack before returning even more energetically in a new space, the editorial board, fittingly, dedicated this inaugural issue of the relaunched *Kurdish Studies Journal* to thinking through the intersection of these two organized political movements.

Not everyone agreed. While the response to the special issue from academic and political circles was overwhelmingly positive, and a launch event with the Kurdish Gender Studies Network in January 2024 drew an appreciative audience from around the world,<sup>1</sup> within a day of the special issue going live online, it generated two comments on social media, which, to my mind, could stand as representatives of the political dynamics that had called into question the legitimacy of Kurdish queer imaginations, preventing their surfacing to date. The first response was an expression of “shock” that this first issue was dedicated to Kurdish queer studies, a disbelief rooted in the conviction that there could be no real connection between this topic—queer studies—and the problems of an occupied country. The other was a rhetorical question wondering whether the journal would critique the Kurds’ relationship with the United States, parroting a broader accusation that the Kurds play the role of puppets of imperialism within the region—an issue that contributors were already alert to and that indeed was the subject of thoughtful reflection within the pages of the special issue (Dirik 2023). Taken together, the two comments and the political positions they represent eviscerate the conditions of possibility for the Kurdish queer as a legitimate subject position in both political discourse and scholarship. But precisely as a result of centering this doubly illegitimized subject position, Kurdish queer studies, I insist, offers up a powerful tool to unravel deeply knotted histories of violence and oppression, and to excavate the multiple layers of queer, postcolonial, and decolonial imagination. Here I focus on what taking the

Kurdish queer subject as a point of departure can bring to our analyses of local, regional, and, finally, global politics.

## **Entanglements in Local Politics**

Queer people in conflict zones, or queer people from racialized and marginalized communities, negotiate their lived experience in relation to their communities as well as broader political contexts and actors. Even if their experiences are acknowledged within their communities, they might hear that it is not yet the right time to raise questions about their struggle. For some leftist groups, for example, the right time for *anything else* is after the revolution. Writing in relation to queer struggles in times of war and conflict, Nadine Naber and Zeina Zaatari (2014: 92) point out that “communities threatened by militarized crises respond with the logic of emergency that inadvertently colludes with this campaign to flatten out social complexity and marginalize those whose experiences do not ‘fit’ in binarized political hierarchies.” As a result, those looking from “outside” these communities or those who use heteronormative tools in research might not even see the struggles with which queer people are engaged, reading social dynamics from their given (Western/heteronormative) lenses instead. But within social life and social organization, the reality is very different. Paying attention to queer struggles in times of conflict can help us “unflatten” our analyses, and it provides a lens to attend to the complexities of social reality. As Naber and Zaatari write: “Asymmetrical systems of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and family are entangled in the historical conditions of transnational capital, empire, and war and necessitate an intersectional approach that refuses to impose false binaries or hierarchies on a complex social reality” (92).

Taking Kurdish queer struggles seriously can similarly “unflatten” our analyses of social and political dynamics at a local level. As part of my own research into Kurdish queer activism, I have observed that activists who understood themselves as “queer/LGBTI+”

activists” also held a number of other commitments within Kurdish political constellations, alongside queer organizing. These commitments included taking an active role in the youth movement, ecology movement, women’s movement, and democratic Islam mobilization, all under the broader umbrella of the Kurdish movement. Kurdish queer activists took part in street protests such as those held in solidarity with Kurdish hunger strikers, without necessarily manifesting their queerness or seeing these commitments as distinguishable from queer/LGBTI+ organizing and politics (Sandal-Wilson 2021a). And they were actively communicating with multiple political actors to increase their reach. A number of activists spoke of the need for the Kurdish movement to take queer struggles more seriously. One of them, a Kurdish trans woman and political activist, told me that queer struggles make the Kurdish struggle more dynamic: queer activists bring in their own visions of liberation, expanding the overall movement’s vision of liberation in new directions and making it more holistic. Taking Kurdish queer people’s situated analyses and entanglements with politics and conditions of conflict suggests the limits of certain liberal frameworks that foreground representation and visibility, which may miss or marginalize calls for more far-reaching social transformation in these contexts. Centering Kurdish queer struggles instead draws our attention to the importance of “theoretical synergies” (Meghji 2022) among queer studies, decoloniality, postcolonial studies, and intersectionality to better understand (queer) politics in the Middle East (Sandal-Wilson 2023).<sup>2</sup>

## **Entanglements in the Region**

Kurdish queer studies also equips us with the tools to better understand the situation of the Kurds within regional politics in the Middle East. Because Kurds are scattered across the Middle East, under Iranian, Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi nationalisms, their experiences in regional and global politics are layered, complicated, and messy—necessitating an equally layered, complicated, and intersectional frame of analysis. No social structure, including

around gender and sexuality, has been left untouched by these histories of nationalism, colonialism, and oppression. Kurdistan was called an “international colony” by sociologist İsmail Beşikci, whose research on the Kurds resulted in his own encounter with state violence through his imprisonment and other repressive legal measures. His analysis has been influential in both scholarship and politics: “Beşikci first analyzed northern Kurdistan as an internal colony of Turkey in the 1980s and then expanded his analysis to Kurdistan as an international colony of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. He stated that such an international colony should not be considered an aggregate of colonial structures since its international character qualitatively changed the content of colonization” (Duruiz 2020).

Extending this analysis of Kurds as forming an “international colony,” Mehmet Kurt (2019) traces the reproduction of patterns within this colonial history in relation to the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government and religious governance, capturing the persistence of this colonial relationship through the conceptual framework of “internal colony.” From these analyses, it is evident that the status (or non-status) of the Kurds necessitates careful analysis in relation to the specific histories and dynamics of the four countries under which they live. This is especially true of analyses of gender and sexuality. Failing to acknowledge how Kurds have experienced international and internal colonization runs the risk of “redirecting the colonial gaze” toward them, even among those engaged in resistance to imperialism and colonialism on other fronts, and can result in uncritical representations of the Kurds as pawns of imperialism—and Kurdish queers as doubly so (Sandal 2017).<sup>3</sup> Kurdish queer studies should not, in my view, gloss over those instances in which Kurds are complicit in upholding colonial dynamics in the region. Rather than replacing one superficial perspective with another, Kurdish queer studies should aim to recover the full range of political and social entanglements of Kurdish queers (Dirik 2023).

## Entanglements in the Global

Finally, Kurdish queer studies has much to offer our analyses of how sexuality and race/ethnicity are entangled on a global stage. Against a reductionist reading of the Middle East as a space defined by intolerance since time immemorial, Kurdish queer studies attends to the ways in which global politics affect local reverberations of hate and queerphobia. Kurdish queer activists are very much aware of these dynamics. An emphasis on global politics, then, helps us disturb exceptionalism around geographies that have historically been stigmatized as homophobic/queerphobic. An example of this can be given through the Newroz celebrations. Newroz, “as a myth, has a crucial role in the construction of the Kurdish political identity” (Aydın 2014: 68), and Newroz celebrations have political significance for the Kurds, and in Turkey (68). These celebrations are often met with state/police violence, and they have been sites for demanding freedom. In Newroz celebrations, in recent years, it has become less surprising to see the rainbow flag unfurled by queer activists, flying alongside the images of historical figures of the Kurdish movements and various Kurdish flags. That doesn’t mean LGBTI+ people or queerness can be easily manifested in the Kurdish public sphere, or that Kurdistan is “LGBTI+ friendly,” if one wanted to use this Western terminology; rather, it highlights the politics of queer struggles and their strategic uses of political spaces. Although queer people have long been met with discrimination at Newroz celebrations, as lawyer and activist Okan Altekin in an interview with the Diyarbakır-based research group bakad told me, Kurdish LGBTI+ activists “did not use to face serious threats during the Newroz celebrations in Amed, which they have been participating in since 2008, [but] in parallel with the rising neofascist discourses in recent years, they were attacked with knives in 2023 just like in 2022, and rainbow flags were torn apart in the Newroz area” (Altekin and Sandal-Wilson 2023: 173). In this case, the local reverberation of a globally ascendant authoritarian politics and anti-gender and anti-LGBTI+

movement operate to flatten—to echo Naber and Zaatari—more complex social and political dynamics, weaken holistic democratic demands raised by Kurdish queers, and strengthen authoritarianism and colonial practices in Turkey. This example, then, highlights the need to understand local gendered and sexual dynamics in relation to anti-gender politics globally and—correspondingly—how the local analyses by queer activists constitute an intervention into and response to global politics. It also challenges the presumed “timelessness” of homophobia/transphobia within stigmatized societies or societies in conflict, and it ties homophobia/transphobia to wider and global politics.

## Conclusion

Queer interventions in Kurdish politics, or “Kurdish queer studies,” opens up complex dialogues capable of addressing a multitude of issues relating not only to sexuality but also to norms, disciplinary tools, consequences of the colonial experience, and more. Discussing possible dialogues between postcolonialism and decoloniality, Avtar Brah (2022: 13) reminds us that “studying the complexity of social reality demands the deployment of multiple theoretical and conceptual tools.” I strongly believe in the value of a specific vein of queer theory that takes processes of racialization/ethnicization and histories of violence seriously (Sandal-Wilson 2023). The experience of Kurdish queers, as well as the concerns of Kurdish queer studies, show us that, in fact, queer studies has a lot to offer in understanding colonial relations and colonized countries when put into conversation with other emancipatory frameworks, and that the Kurdish experience is layered and cannot be easily reduced to, for instance, a Trojan horse for the United States. The special issue by *Kurdish Studies Journal* titled “Kurdish Queer Studies,” then, marks out a site from which we are invited to attend to the complexity of the messy entanglements of gender and sexuality in times of conflict, without shying away from difficult conversations.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. In their article “Contextualizing Kurdish Gender Studies,” Necla Açıık and colleagues (2023: 256) describe the network as a space “to articulate a decolonial feminist discourse deeply rooted in Kurdish women’s lived experiences and histories, while advancing Kurdish gender studies (KGS) as an academic field of inquiry.”
2. Exploring the theoretical synergy between critical race theory and decolonial thought, Meghji (2023: 2) emphasizes that “such a synergy . . . allows us to study social phenomena in a way that captures their global and historical roots while acknowledging their local and national particularities.” Similarly, a synergy between postcolonial theory, queer theory, and decolonial thought can help us attend to the complexities and layers of the Kurdish context vis-à-vis their histories in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, as well as European colonialism via some of these countries, and imperialism.
3. I agree with Dilar Dirik (2023: 189) when she says: “In some contexts, such as in Syria, they [Kurds] are complicit in upholding foreign military presence, oil extraction, and sanctions on civilian populations. Scholarship, historically focused on writing the Kurds into existence, must be able to account for these developments, too, even when resisting reductive readings of Kurds as perpetual pawns of imperialism to divide the region.”
4. The title of this article was inspired by thinking about two pieces in conversation, in addition to my own work. The first is entitled “On the Possibility of Being a Queer Arab,” published in madamasr.com in 2016, and the other is “Kürt LGBT? Yok öyle bir şey!!!” (“Kurdish LGBT? There Is No Such Thing!!!”), published in velvele.net in 2023. Having subsequently encountered a chapter by Ronald Cummings (2019) entitled “On the (im)possibility of black British queer studies” after writing this piece, I found the similarity between the formulation of our titles striking, underlining the need for further transnational conversations.

## References

- Açık, Necla, Berivan Kutlay-Sarıkaya, Farangis Ghaderi, and Gülay Kılıçaslan. 2023. "Contextualizing Kurdish Gender Studies: Decolonial Feminist Knowledge Production and the Genesis of the Kurdish Gender Studies Network." *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1, nos. 1–2: 255–83.
- Altekin, Okan, and Hakan Sandal-Wilson. 2023. "Research for Peace: An Interview with bakad on Kurdish LGBTI+ Experiences, Conflict, Society, and Politics." *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1, nos. 1–2: 167–80.
- Aydın, Delal. 2014. "Mobilising the Kurds in Turkey: Newroz as a myth." In *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation*, edited by Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanlioglu, 68–88. New York: Routledge.
- Bayramoğlu, Yener. 2021. "Remembering Hope: Mediated Queer Futurity and Counterpublics in Turkey's Authoritarian Times." *New Perspectives on Turkey* 64 (April): 173–95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2021.14>.
- Brah, Avtar. 2022. *Decolonial Imaginings: Intersectional Conversations and Contestations*. London: Goldsmith.
- Cummings, Ronald. 2019. "On the (Im)possibility of Black British Queer Studies." In *Locating African European Studies: Interventions, Intersections, Conversations*, edited by F.E. Garrido, C. Koegler, D. Nyangulu, and M.U. Stein, 278–93. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Dirik, Dilar. 2023. "Afterword: Kurdish Queer Studies in Times of Violence." *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1, nos. 1–2: 181–97.

- Duruiz, Deniz. 2020. "Tracing the Conceptual Genealogy of Kurdistan as International Colony." *Middle East Report* 295 (Summer). <https://merip.org/2020/08/tracing-the-conceptual-genealogy-of-kurdistan-as-international-colony/>.
- Kurt, Mehmet. 2019. "'My Muslim Kurdish Brother': Colonial Rule and Islamist Governmentality in the Kurdish Region of Turkey." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 3: 350–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1497757>.
- Meghji, Ali. 2022. "Towards a Theoretical Synergy: Critical Race Theory and Decolonial Thought in Trumpamerica and Brexit Britain." *Current Sociology* 70, no. 5: 647–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392120969764>.
- Meghji, Ali. 2023. *A Critical Synergy: Race, Decoloniality, and World Crises*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Naber, Nadine, and Zeina Zaatari. 2014. "Reframing the War on Terror: Feminist and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Activism in the Context of the 2006 Israeli Invasion of Lebanon." *Cultural Dynamics* 26, no. 1: 91–111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374013510803>.
- Özok-Gündoğan, Nilay. 2023. "Kurdish Studies Journal: The Homeless Journal of an Orphan Field." *Jadaliyya*, March 15. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44879>.
- Sandal, Hakan. 2017. "Redirecting the Colonial Gaze." *OpenDemocracy*, September 23. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/redirecting-colonial-gaze/>.
- Sandal-Wilson, Hakan. 2021a. "The Kurdish LGBTI+ Movement: Strategies and Tactics Towards Radical Democracy." PhD diss., University of Cambridge.
- Sandal-Wilson, Hakan. 2021b. "Social Justice, Conflict, and Protest in Turkey: The Kurdish Issue and LGBTI+Activism." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 88, no. 2: 561–86. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2021.0025>.

Sandal-Wilson, Hakan. 2023. "Kurdish Queer Studies: Constructing and Deconstructing a Field." *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1, nos. 1–2: 255–83.

Van Bruinessen, Martin, Marlene Schäfers, and Sacha Alsancakli. 2023. "Editorial." *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1, nos. 1–2: 3–6. <https://doi.org/10.1163/29502292-00101023>.