

Making a Kurdistan identity in diaspora: Kurdish migrants in Sweden

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Due to political, cultural and economic marginalisation in the Middle East, more than 70,000 Kurds have migrated to Sweden, where they have found a democratic political context in which to live their Kurdish identity. In Sweden, many Kurds have gradually adopted a Kurdistan identity and feel that the national identities of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey do not represent them. The Kurdish diaspora in Sweden is shuttled between experiences of inclusion and exclusion, citizenship rights and ethnic discrimination, belonging and non-belonging. The chapter draws on fieldwork undertaken in Sweden as part of the ODP research project, '(Re)Conceptualising "Stateless Diasporas" in the EU', which examines the formation of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden.

Negotiating multiple identities

Kurds in Sweden have had significant impact on Swedish society and are taking a leading position in framing different societal issues in Sweden. Kurdish debaters and authors like Lawen Mohtadi, Dilsa Demirbag, Mustafa Can and stand-up comedians like Soran Ismail and Özz Nûjen often appear in the public sphere and make interventions on political and social issues. The public action of these Kurdish-Swedish public figures can be viewed as attempts to shape a new national imaginary in Sweden beyond fixed ideas about Swedishness in regard to appearance, culture, history, religion, gender relations, etc. The importance of these Kurdish public figures is related to the fact that they are involved in framing narratives about Swedish identity and experiences of immigrants through their

access to and power in public debates. Yet, their involvement in Sweden's public debates has not made them indifferent toward the political situation of the Kurds. Members of the Kurdish diaspora both underline the democratic political culture that exists in Sweden and the structural and everyday ethnic inequalities that prevent non-European immigrants from enjoying full citizenship rights. Kurdish migrants make a clear distinction between being Swedish on paper and being a real Swede. The immigrant identity is both an imposed identity and an experienced identity since immigrants are reminded by ethnic Swedes in their everyday life about their undesired and sometimes exoticised cultural differences. Many of them experience racial slurs and ethnic discrimination in school, the labour market, housing, and the legal system, to name but a few. Ethnic discrimination strengthens their Kurdish identity and makes them aware of the fact that they are not fully accepted as members of Swedish society.

Another important arena of success for the Kurds is sport. Dalkurd FF is a football club that was founded in 2004 and now plays in the third best football division in Sweden. Although it is a young club, it has become the biggest Swedish football club on Facebook. The Facebook page of Dalkurd's supporters has more than 785,487 likes (as of 11 February 2015). The name Dalkurd is interesting because it connects Kurdish identity with Dalarna, a region in Sweden. This indicates a transnational identity that links Sweden to Kurdistan but also regionalises Kurdish identity in Sweden. Other clubs like Uppsalakurd and Skanekurd have been founded to follow in the footsteps of Dalkurd. Football is a global sport and a field in which Kurds can gain international recognition and visibility, but also represent their suppressed Kurdish identity that has been silenced by the overarching nationalisms in the Middle East.

The shift from 'Kurdish' to 'Kurdistani': constructing a Kurdistani identity in cyberspace

In January 2014, two Kurdish-Swedish youngsters started a Facebook campaign called 'Ez kurdistanî me/Min kurdistanî m' (I am Kurdistani). On their Facebook page, Kurds around the world post their picture, declaring that they are Kurdistanis. Famous Kurdish

artists, poets, public figures and politicians as well as ‘ordinary’ Kurds around the world are participating in this major campaign. When I asked these two youngsters why they started this campaign, one of them said:

We should stop saying that we are Iraqis, Turkish, Iranians and Syrians or saying that we are Iraqi Kurds, Iranian Kurds, Turkish Kurds and Syrian Kurds. We should not accept the definitions from the occupying states and should instead say that we are Kurdistanis, that our homeland is Kurdistan and that it is Kurdistan that unites all Kurds. This will make it easier for us Kurds to identify with each other and feel closer to each other. Look at Palestinians, they never say that they are Israelis, they always say they are Palestinians and want to remain Palestinians. But we Kurds do adopt the definitions from our enemy states and forget our Kurdish identity.

While it is assumed that a Kurdish identity is not attached to a particular territory or geography, a Kurdistani identity is used to create a national imaginary within specific geographical borders in the Middle East. Geography is central to creating a national identity because national identities are usually anchored in territories. For Kurds, territorial identity has been an important part of the struggle for recognition, autonomy and even independence. Many Kurds are well aware that in a world of nation-states, you need to locate your identity on the world map because it is where it is displayed, recognised and represented to the outer world. The campaign ‘I am Kurdistani’ clearly shows that naming is important in the construction of a new national imaginary but it is also central to reclaiming and renaming territories that have been Turkified, Arabised and Persianised and where Kurdish presence has been given a marginal position. The campaign ‘I am Kurdistani’ attempts to disrupt the political geographies that have divided Kurds into four national groups and states. One can not underestimate the power of the diaspora in transforming political identities (e.g. from Iraqi to Kurdistani) and produce new forms of solidarities among Kurds across Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. The lack of a Kurdish state with a united political administration has also impinged on the divisions

existing among Kurds. Therefore it is difficult to talk about a united Kurdish identity because it is impossible to achieve in the context of the current geographical and political divisions. Yet, thanks to information technologies, Kurds are coming closer to each other. They negotiate their Kurdish identities and diversity through social media like Facebook.

The symbolic meanings of Kurdistan Region for the Kurdish diaspora

One of the main issues that different diasporas deal and struggle with is the question of homeland and returning. The emergence of a quasi-Kurdish state in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has made Kurdistan into a safe area for Kurdish migrants where they can live their Kurdishness without being exposed to assimilation policies and ethnic oppression. The construction of airports in Hawler/Erbil and Slemani/Sulaimania has linked Kurdistan to the Kurdish diaspora. Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan visit this region since it is viewed as an unprecedented historical experience but also a break with the domination that Kurds have been exposed to in Iraq. Kurds often remember the painful experiences and the humiliating acts of Turkish border officers when Kurdish diasporans wanted to cross the Ibrahim Khalil border between the Turkish part of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. This was a political context in which they experienced a denial of their Kurdish identity in Turkey. While Turkey represented a geography of denial, the Kurdistan Region symbolised the existence of the Kurds. This Kurdish entity is not only important for Kurds from Iraq but also for Kurds from other parts of Kurdistan. Many of them indicated that a liberated part of Kurdistan sends hope and gives them political inspiration that they could also achieve a similar degree of autonomy and that they could break with the oppressive state structures they were exposed to.

In conclusion, the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden is a product of political and economic deprivation in the Middle East. Thanks to generous Swedish multicultural policies, Kurds can mobilise themselves and engage in homeland politics without being detached from Swedish society. Kurds in diaspora do not want to make a choice between their Kurdish and Swedish identities but instead

want to harmonise them in a symbiotic relationship. For the younger generation, this becomes central to an identity project that can only be understood in its multiplicity. The emergence of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq has enabled Kurds to come closer to their imaginary homeland, Kurdistan. So long as the Kurds are exposed to discriminatory acts in the Middle East, the Kurdish diaspora is likely to remain a politicised diaspora, and invoke a victim narrative in order to motivate transnational political mobilisation. Kurds in Sweden take a leading position in this respect, as many become more and more aware that they did not come to Sweden to fully assimilate or give up their Kurdish identity but rather to continue being Kurdish without suspending their everyday realities in the political, economic, social and cultural life of Sweden. □