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SPECIAL ISSUE/ EDITORIAL

Introduction - Exploring the Kurdish Movement: Power Relations, Historical Dynamics and Theoretical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: This editorial positions Kurdish politics at a turning point initiated by the PKK's 2025 decision to dissolve its armed wing and by concomitant institutional realignments in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Building on feminist, post-colonial, and transnational scholarship, the special issue advances a three-level framework. First, it traces the historically sedimented repertoires of state coercion and colonial governance that define Kurdish political opportunities. Second, it examines the movement's evolving ideological corpus—especially Democratic Modernity and Jineolojî—which articulates a counter-theory of decentralised authority. Third, it analyses the micro-processes of recruitment, activist identity formation, and disciplined internal hierarchy that embed revolutionary ideas in everyday practice. A state-power cluster, an ideology cluster, and a micro-sociology study show the framework's reach. Two cross-cutting themes structure the issue: power, understood as the intersection of coercive sovereignty, revolutionary decentralisation, and intra-movement organisation; and history, viewed simultaneously as a state instrument of closure and a movement resource for alternative futures. Building on the volume's findings, the introduction sketches three forward research paths: (i) a sociology of mobilisation under post-insurgency transition; (ii) a comparative politics agenda on peace settlements, DDR, and autonomy design; and (iii) a political-theory programme probing how post-statist and decolonial imaginaries can be institutionalised.

KEYWORDS: Contentious politics, Decolonial political theory, Democratic confederalism, Kurdish politics, State violence

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1. Introduction: A Critical Juncture and the Fragmentation of Kurdish Politics

The process of dissolving the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), formally initiated in early 2025, marks a decisive inflection point for intra-Kurdish politics and for the wider regional balance. In two symbolic events, on 11 July senior cadres consigned a first tranche of weapons to a controlled fire in the Qandil foothills. The next day President Erdoğan, before the Grand National Assembly, proclaimed the dawn of a “terror-free” Republic. In historical-institutionalist terms, the back-to-back performances constitute a critical juncture, an interval when entrenched institutional and ideological equilibria become unusually plastic and strategic choices can redirect long-term trajectories (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007).

Similar openings in the past have invited sharply divergent responses: cross-border Kurdish networks exploited the Syrian civil war to forge new regional alignments (Güneş and Lowe 2015); Ankara recalibrated domestic institutions around an intensified militarisation of the Kurdish issue (Bozarslan 2017); and successive peace initiatives foundered under the weight of reciprocal mistrust and electoral realpolitik (Çandar 2020). Whether the present conjuncture will yield durable settlement, renewed repression, or an as-yet-unimagined configuration remains indeterminate (Çelik 2025). Grasping that indeterminacy requires stepping back to the longer arc of Kurdish politics, an arc now characterised by proliferating organisational forms, ideological projects, and transnational linkages that have already reconfigured the terrain on which today's choices will play out.

Whereas the Kurdish question was once approached as a singular problem of statelessness within the post-Ottoman order, the Kurdish political field has, in recent decades, fragmented into a range of divergent projects and organizational forms, each advancing distinct claims to self-determination and governance. This is nowhere more evident than in the contrast between the pursuit by the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) of conventional statehood within the Westphalian order and the experiment of “democracy without a state” undertaken by the Kurdish groups inspired by Öcalan's ideology and underway in the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). This landscape of divergent political trajectories, which have come to structure the Kurdish political field as a whole, was further reconfigured by the crucial episodes of 2025. The historic call by Abdullah Öcalan for the PKK to end its four-decade armed struggle, followed by the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in Syria, has fundamentally reconfigured the political and military logic of conflict management that have governed the region for more than a generation. The relationship between the PKK and the ruling forces in the KRG also seems to be evolving in new directions. These events have created a challenge for scholarly analysis of the new era, which is defined by constitutional negotiation in Turkey, the challenges of proto-state consolidation in Iraq, a revolutionary struggle for survival in Syria, and an enduring struggle against the Islamic Republic in Iran for basic rights and recognition.

For decades, the study of Kurdish politics has often been constrained by disciplinary compartmentalisation, with analysis that is frequently dominated by the paradigms of state-centric security studies or which employs a singular lens of ethno-nationalism. While valuable, such approaches risk obscuring the internal ideological dynamism, the complex sociology of activism, and the unique political theories that animate the Kurdish movement from within. This special issue of *Partecipazione e Conflitto* delves directly into this evolving field. It argues that a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary Kurdish movement requires a multi-scalar methodology that systematically connects three distinct but interconnected domains of analysis: (1) the historically sedimented patterns of state power and the colonial repertoires that continue to shape state-Kurdish relations; (2) the Kurdish movement's internal repertoire of ideas, particularly the evolving political theories of Democratic Modernity and Jineolojî; and (3) the micro-dynamics of recruitment, activist identity formation, and sustained, long-term grassroots contentious participation. Accordingly, the articles in this special issue

conceive the Kurdish movement not simply as a regional phenomenon embedded within the broader Middle Eastern crisis of statehood and governance, but as a paradigmatic case for rethinking the dynamics of sociopolitical mobilization, constitutional innovation, and the construction and transformation of political subjectivities in the twenty-first century.

2. The Scholarly Landscape: A Field in Transformation

The study of Kurdish politics has undergone a profound transformation, changing from a field once dominated by singular, often security-focused narratives to a vibrant, theoretically diverse, and increasingly comparative discipline. In response to the dynamic realities on the ground, the contemporary scholarly landscape is defined by several key intellectual trends that provide the essential context for the contributions in this special issue.

First, the field has decisively abandoned monolithic conceptions of a singular “Kurdish question” devoid of internal ideological contradictions. The starkly divergent political trajectories in the two Kurdish-led administrations in Iraqi Kurdistan and North and East Syria have necessitated a comparative approach. Scholars now routinely contrast the conventional, nationalist state-building project of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) with the revolutionary, anti-statist experiment in democratic confederalism being undertaken in Syria (Jongerden 2020; Potiker, 2023; Rasit 2021; Schmidinger 2017, 2020). This comparative approach reveals that there is no single Kurdish concept of the solution to the national question, but rather a spectrum of competing visions of governance and self-determination (Bozarslan 2025; James 2023).

Second, this empirical divergence has been accompanied by a significant theoretical shift. The traditional frameworks of minority rights and ethno-nationalism (Gunter 2005; Ozkirimli 2014), influenced also by Turkey’s EU accession negotiations (Yildiz 2005), are being supplemented, and challenged, by more critical theoretical approaches. Drawing on post-colonial theory, scholars have embraced earlier theoretical debates (as traced by Yegen 2016; Duruiz 2020) and reframed the Kurdish condition not simply as a minority issue but rather as a unique form of “internal colonialism” (Kurt 2021; Kurt and Özok-Gündoğan, 2024). This paradigm is used to analyze the host states’ policies of economic marginalization, cultural erasure, and securitization as structures of colonial governance. More recently, it has been refined into the concept of “inter-subaltern colonialism” (Dirik 2022; Türk and Jongerden, 2024), which captures the specific condition of a stateless people being colonized by post-colonial nation-states that have themselves experienced Western domination. This theoretical shift – to some extent anticipated by analysis of the Kurdish movement itself (Öcalan 2013 Güneser 2021; Beşikçi 2004) – recasts the Kurdish struggle from a quest for inclusion to a project of decolonization.

Parallel to this broader shift, gender has moved from an ancillary to a central analytic category, propelled by both long standing feminist scholarship in international relations and conflict studies (Shepherd 2008; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Alison 2009) and by movement-generated theorising such as Jineolojî (Andrea Wolf Institute 2020). The emergence of the latter (literally “the science of women”) as a foundational political philosophy within the Rojava revolution has captured global academic attention. Scholars have analysed Jineolojî as not merely a brand of feminism, but rather as a comprehensive political theory that posits patriarchy as the root of all social hierarchies, including state and capitalism (Piccardi and Barca 2022; Dirik 2022; Üstündağ 2023; Çetinkaya 2025; Rostampour 2025). This has also prompted a wave of research that critically examines the institutionalization of gender equality, from the mandatory co-chair system in the DAANES to the autonomous women’s organizations that have long developed across the broader Kurdish movement, and the complex ways in which women’s activism navigates both state repression and internal patriarchal norms (Wartmann 2024; Çağlayan 2019; Käser 2021; Al-Ali and Käser 2022; Novellis 2018).

Third, sociological scholarship has pivoted from treating mobilisation as a binary of insurgency at home versus victimhood in exile toward charting a dense, multi-sited ecology of action. Recent work shows how diaspora activists forge transnational infrastructures of citizenship and political agency, circulating funds, frames, and tactical know-how across borders through both digital and embodied networks (Toivanen, 2021; Ventura 2024). Ethnography and research in political sociology now trace how neighbourhood communes, women-run councils, and agro-ecological cooperatives in both North and East Syria and Turkey's Kurdish-majority southeast operate (or have operated) as prefigurative arenas of direct democracy, gender parity, and collective self-reliance (Aslan 2023; Güven 2021; Hoffmann and Matin 2021; Holmes 2024; Grasso 2022; Burç 2020; Duman 2017; Dinç 2020). Parallel studies document an emergent eco-national activism in which environmental justice claims intertwine with calls for self-government and gender equality, creating new repertoires of contention under severe repression (Türk and Jongerden 2024; Hunt 2019; Wiktor Mach, Hajiagha and Hamelink 2024). Together, these strands reposition Kurdish mobilisation as a field of intersecting digital, diasporic, ecological, and grassroots practices rather than a peripheral add-on to armed struggle.

Finally, the field is showing signs of methodological and institutional maturation. There is increasing criticism of the "methodological nationalism" that has historically limited research to within the confines of existing state borders, and a corresponding call for more transnational and comparative research designs (Baser, Toivanen, Zorlu and Duman, 2018). This is supported by the solidification of an institutional architecture as complex and multi-sited as the political field it studies. This architecture now includes dedicated journals like *Kurdish Studies* and *Études Kurdes*, alongside influential university research centers in the West, such as those at Exeter, the London School of Economics, and University of Central Florida. Crucially, this has been matched by the growth of academic hubs within Kurdistan itself, from the established universities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region like UKH to new academic institutions in North and East Syria, such as the University of Rojava. This entire ecosystem is woven together by foundational diaspora institutions like the Kurdish Institute and the Ahmet Kaya Center in Paris and collaborative scholarly networks such as Italy's *Rete italiana di studi curdi* (RISC).

This intellectual and institutional growth, however, faces significant challenges, including a lacuna in the literature created by the persecution of academics in Turkey. The latter severely restricts research on sensitive topics like political violence and radicalization (Doğan and Selenica, 2022). The central paradox of Kurdish Studies today is therefore one of simultaneous construction and deconstruction: the building of an international scholarly field alongside the active dismantling of academic life in one of its primary locations. It is within this rich, complex, and contested scholarly landscape that the contributions to this special issue conduct their analyses. This special issue intends to illuminate these dynamics by moving across three distinct but interconnected levels of analysis. It first examines the macro-level logic of state power that constitute the external environment for Kurdish politics. It then turns inwards to the meso-level of the movement's own ideological and theoretical engine. Finally, it grounds these larger structures in the micro-level sociology of lived activist experience.

3. Architecture of the Special Issue: State Power, Ideological Innovation, and Activist Praxis

The context for any form of Kurdish political mobilization is necessarily defined by the enduring logic of state power, which has historically framed Kurdish aspirations as a problem to be managed, co-opted, or suppressed. The articles in the first section of this special issue explore this external, state-centric stance in light of historical, geopolitical, and post-colonial relations among Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Primavera's study, titled "*Conciliatory, yet Oppressive: the Kurdish Issue in Syria through the Eyes of Ba'thists from Party Foundation to the 8 March Revolution*", provides the historical foundation for this analysis by tracing the formative

ideology of the Syrian Ba'ath party prior to 1963. It reveals the ambivalence at the core of the Syrian state's approach, which was a contradictory blend of inclusive, pan-Arabist rhetoric and a chauvinistic, assimilationist impulse that would come to define its relationship with its Kurdish population for the next half-century. Building on this, Pobedonostseva and Bohdan's "*Strategic Arab-Kurdish Alliance: Syria's Support of Kurdish Organisations during the Cold War*" show how Ba'athist Syria converted ideology into a Cold-War playbook that moved sequentially from the PUK to the KDP and, crucially, to the nascent PKK. Drawing on declassified CIA cables and Soviet, Iranian, and Kurdish memoirs, they trace how Hafez al-Asad first armed and sheltered Iraqi factions to pressure Baghdad, then funnelled the freed-up resources, and Syrian Kurdish recruits, who eventually made up roughly a fifth of PKK ranks, into the Turkish arena as leverage against Ankara. The article exposes a cascading "Kurdish card" strategy in which each alliance (PUK, KDP, PKK) both enabled short-term Syrian goals and seeded long-term legacies of empowerment, dependency, and mistrust that still reverberate across contemporary Kurdish politics. Bringing this analysis of state power into the contemporary era, Tuncer Beyribey's "*Postcolonial Analysis of AKP's Counter-Terrorism Discourse After the June 2015 Elections*" applies the theoretical framework of "internal colonialism" to the Turkish state. Beyribey argues that the AKP's post-2015 "counter-terrorism" discourse is not merely a reactive security policy; it is a productive strategy of governance designed to subjectify the Kurdish population as an internal "other", thereby legitimizing practices of political and military subjugation that echo colonial logic.

While these contributions to the special issue examine the external pressures shaping the Kurdish field, a second cluster of articles turns inwards to dissect the Kurdish movement's internal ideological engine. This section treats the movement's political thought not as a static doctrine, but as a sophisticated and evolving theoretical project. At the most granular level, Grasso's article, "*Authority, Hierarchy and the Commune. A textual analysis of Öcalan and Bookchin in light of the PKK dissolution process*", conducts a micro-analysis of the movement's core political lexicon. By means of a comparative textual reading of Abdullah Öcalan's and Murray Bookchin's writings, it deconstructs the critical distinction between hierarchical domination (what the PKK calls, in Kurmanji, *desthilatdarî* and Öcalan, in Turkish, *iktidar*) and a theorized, non-coercive, functional hierarchy or authority. Framed by historic Öcalan's texts for the PKK's dissolution, Grasso's analysis reveals a deliberate effort to build a new vocabulary for post-statist power, one that distinguishes between oppressive power structures and legitimate, functional hierarchies rooted in the "commune". Adopting a broader lens, Paci's "*Democratic Confederalism and the Theory of History: Historical Ontologies of Political Alternative in Bookchin, Öcalan, and Graeber*" analyzes the philosophical underpinnings of this new lexicon. It argues that the Kurdish movement's belief in the possibility of a radical political alternative is grounded in a unique "historical ontology", a theory of history, influenced by, but distinct from, Bookchin's, which posits a continuous and ineradicable "democratic civilization" co-existing with and exploited by the state. Finally, Giardini's "*Radical Democracy in Translation. Transfeminist Encounters with Kurdish Political Thought, Practices and Struggles*" examines this ideology in motion. The study analyzes how the core tenets of democratic confederalism and *Jineoloji* are being "translated" and adapted by transnational feminist and commons movements in Europe, demonstrating the global resonance and practical application of the Kurdish theoretical project.

These macro-level state pressures and meso-level ideological currents are ultimately grounded in the lived experiences of individuals. Sharifi's "*Streets, Ballots, and Bullets: Kurdish Engagement and Activism*" provides the micro-sociological anchor for this special issue. Drawing on rich biographical interviews with activists in Turkey, it develops an empirical typology of political engagement, distinguishing among "associative", "office", and "professional" activists. Sharifi's study illuminates the diverse motivations, personal trajectories, and varying degrees of ideological commitment that characterize the Kurdish movement on the ground. It thus furnishes a vital, bottom-up perspective on how individuals navigate the immense

pressures of state repression and the powerful attraction of revolutionary ideology. Sharifi's analysis thus serves as an essential bridge by connecting the grand strategies of states and the theoretical frameworks advanced by movement intellectuals with the concrete choices and commitments of the human actors who constitute the Kurdish movement.

Read together, these contributions analyze discrete aspects of the Kurdish political field in order to enter into a dialogue on the foundational concepts of power and history. By moving among different levels of analysis, this special issue aims to foster debate on the very nature of political authority and the role of the past in shaping political possibilities in the present.

4. Cross-Cutting Themes: Power and History in Kurdish Politics

An overarching theme of this special issue revolves around the contested concept of power. The articles exploring the state-centric perspective present power primarily as a coercive, sovereign, and instrumental force. In Beyribey's post-colonial framework, for instance, the Turkish state's power is a continuation of colonial logic of subjugation, which are deployed to subjectify and control a peripheral population. This is complemented by the historical analysis of Syria's Cold War policy, where Kurdish political entities are treated as instruments of a state's geopolitical power projection. This traditional, top-down conception of power stands in stark contrast to the normative project pursued by the Kurdish movement itself. The studies by Giardini and Grasso analyze the movement's deliberate attempt to theorize and practice a radically different, post-statist form of power, one that is decentralized, rooted in social legitimacy, and determined to conceptualize new forms of authority. Yet, this theoretical ideal is complicated by the sociological realities of mobilization. Sharifi's fine-grained study of activists reveals that the movement's most committed cadres operate within a disciplined, hierarchical internal power structure. This collection of studies thus presents power not as a monolithic concept, but as a complex field of contestation where the state's coercive apparatus meets both a revolutionary theory of decentralized self-governance and the realities of disciplined political organization.

A second theme concerns the role of history as a political force. Paci's contribution provides the theoretical anchor for this theme. It analyzes the Kurdish movement's "historical ontology", its foundational belief that the possibility for a "democratic civilization" has always co-existed with and been exploited by the state, so that it provides an immanent and enduring source of political alternatives. This conceptualization of history as a repository of revolutionary potential is implicitly contrasted with the state's use of history as a tool of ideological closure. Primavera's work on the Ba'athist party, for example, demonstrates how a particular historical narrative was constructed to legitimize an assimilationist and centralized state project. Similarly, Beyribey's framework of "internal colonialism" is itself a historical argument, since it posits that contemporary state practices are repetitions of past colonial logic. In both cases, the state deploys history to naturalize its own power and to preclude the very possibility of the alternatives that Paci identifies. Finally, Sharifi's biographical analysis grounds this abstract contest over history in lived experience. For the activists he studies, history is not a remote past but a biographical force; it is the personal or familial encounter with state violence, repression, and dispossession that often serves as the "trigger event" for political commitment, transforming a historical legacy into a personal imperative to act.

Ultimately, by moving across the levels of state power, revolutionary ideology, and lived experience, this special issue offers a more integrated framework in which to understand the Kurdish political landscape. The contributions collectively demonstrate that any singular approach, be it purely geopolitical, theoretical, or sociological, is insufficient to capture the complexity of a movement that simultaneously negotiates with states, builds new political theories, and mobilizes individuals on the ground. The Kurdish political experience, as analyzed in this special issue, emerges as a crucial case for study of the core problematics of contemporary

political science: the nature of sovereignty in a post-Westphalian world, the relationship between armed conflict and democratic politics, and the power of ideology to shape political action.

5. Future Directions: Charting a New Research Agenda in a Transformed Landscape

The contributions to this special issue also provide useful frameworks within which to interpret the new era inaugurated by the political junctures of 2024-2025. The new political realities compel a reorientation of the research agenda, and the articles in this special issue indicate several research trajectories that traverse political sociology, political science, and political theory.

For political sociology, the primary task is to map a social terrain in profound flux, where the relation between ideology and strategy is being reframed due to contentious politics and sociopolitical turns. The current political juncture is not a fixed outcome but a dynamic process defined by the competing possibilities of peace and renewed conflict, integration and resistance. This uncertainty becomes the central object of sociological inquiry. Sharifi's typology of activists provides a useful baseline for a new sociology of mobilization in transition. Should disarmament advance, long-term ethnographic research is needed to understand the difficult transition of militants from clandestine struggle to civil society. Conversely, if negotiations falter, the critical questions shift to the sociology of sustained mobilization under disillusionment. Grasso's paper provides insights into the self-perception of a political organisation facing enormous challenges and the risk of internal schism or political defeat. In Syria, the ongoing negotiations create a fluid social field where the key issue is how its unique multi-ethnic fabric – an alliance forged in war – will be reconfigured. In all contexts, this new era demands thorough analysis of the role of transnational networks in shaping political identity and mobilization, as well as a critical engagement with the methodological constraints on conducting research in repressive environments.

For political science, the central task is about to shift from the analysis of insurgency and conflict management to the study of peace processes, political settlement and institutional design. The potential end of the PKK's armed struggle in Turkey may open a critical new phase, so that future research will have to move beyond security paradigms to grapple with the architecture of an enduring peace. Consequently, necessary will be a new wave of scholarship on comparative constitutionalism that examines models of territorial and non-territorial autonomy that could address Kurdish demands. The historical analyses in this special issue provide a critical theoretical grounding for such an agenda. Primavera's work on the formative ideology of the Syrian Ba'ath furnishes a framework within which to analyze the path dependency of a state's governing rationality, compelling future research to assess whether proposed constitutional reforms actually dismantle these inherited structures of assimilation or merely rebrand them in a new political context. Similarly, the study by Bohdan and Pobedonostseva on Syria's Cold War proxy politics illuminates the deep historical roots of the commitment problem that plagues contemporary negotiations. Their analysis of geopolitical instrumentalization provides a necessary framework within which to investigate what, if any, institutional guarantees could be seen as credible commitments by non-state actors historically treated as disposable foreign policy instruments. Beyribey's application of "internal colonialism" to the Turkish context invites comparative work that tests the framework's utility in understanding whether new constitutional arrangements dismantle or merely rebrand old structures of domination. In Syria, with the DAANES negotiating its future, the key questions revolve around post-conflict state-building. The potential incorporation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into a new national army presents a classic, high-stakes case study in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) that will demand close empirical scrutiny.

Finally, for political theory, the Kurdish experience now offers an unparalleled real-world laboratory in which to test the resilience of revolutionary ideas. The central question no longer simply concerns the theoretical construction of an alternative to the state; it is also about the survival of a post-statist philosophy in direct negotiation with the state. The theoretical explorations by Paci, Giardini, and Grasso raise the question of institutional translation: what are the ruptures and theoretical compromises that emerge when a revolutionary ideology is confronted with the pragmatic demands of state-level governance? Future work should map the collision of Democratic Autonomy with the pragmatics of constitutional engineering. What happens to concepts like "stateless democracy" when they are negotiated within the law of nation-states? How the real-world application of Democratic Confederalism in Rojava challenges, affirms, or forces a revision of core tenets in Western democratic, anarchist, and feminist theory is a question whose answer can force Western theory to confront its own assumptions about the state, sovereignty, and the limits of revolutionary change. Furthermore, the prominence of *Jineolojî* as a core political principle invites a deeper dialogue with global feminist theories on questions of state power and intersectionality.

It is precisely in addressing the complex questions of transition, identity, and power, that the field can prove its importance, producing vital knowledge not just about the Kurdish movement, but also about the possibilities of democratic transformation in the twenty-first century.

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