

## Reflections on the Kurdish diaspora: An interview with Dr Kendal Nezan<sup>1</sup>

Mari Toivanen<sup>▲</sup>

### Abstract

In this interview, Dr Kendal Nezan, the director of the Kurdish Institute in Paris, reflects on the development of the Kurdish diaspora, the current state of affairs concerning Kurdish movements in Europe and the past and present of the Kurdish Institute in Paris, first established in 1983. Nezan notes that the institute has been successful in creating a non-partisan public space open for Kurds from all corners of the world as well as to others interested in Kurdish history, language, culture and politics. Furthermore, the institute has been an important platform to raise awareness about the Kurdish cause in Europe. The continued functioning of the institute remains essential and, according to Nezan, not least for the second generation diaspora to be able to engage for the Kurdish cause. To this end, the institute has been negatively affected by the austerity policies of the French authorities and launched a donation campaign to draw contributions to ensure that it can continue to operate as an independent institute.

**Keywords:** The Kurdish Institute in Paris; Kurdish diaspora; Kurdish identity and activities.

**Toivanen:** You have been the director of the Kurdish institute for the last thirty years or so, a director of the biggest and one of the oldest Kurdish institutes in Europe that represents a diverse population of diaspora Kurds living in France and elsewhere. Its orientation has been rather clear from the beginning: it is a non-political, secular organisation that has not only aimed to maintain and develop Kurdish cultural and linguistic heritage, but also contributed towards raising awareness of the Kurdish people, their culture, history and cause to a wider audience. What was your vision for the institute when it opened its doors in 1983? How would you define the main goals and ambitions of the Kurdish Institute in Paris now, three decades later?

**Nezan:** The Kurdish Institute was created in response to a series of precise and urgent needs that arose in the early 1980s. Kurdistan was suffering simultaneously from the Iraq-Iran War, Khomeini's "holy war" against Iranian Kurds, Saddam Hussein's campaign of destruction in Iraqi Kurdistan

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Kendal Nezan is a French-Kurdish nuclear physicist and director of the Kurdish Institute of Paris since 1983.

<sup>▲</sup> Dr Mari Toivanen, Academy of Finland Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Social Research, University of Turku, Finland; and Postdoctoral Researcher at Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, France. Email: [marito@utu.fi](mailto:marito@utu.fi).

and massive repression in Turkey following the 1980 coup d'état. The latter alone had resulted in the jailing of over 140,000 mainly Kurdish opponents. These acts of violence were driving thousands of Kurdish activists into exile in Western Europe. Many of them had chosen France, where the socialist government, elected in May 1981, had adopted a humane and generous welcoming policy. The two or three small Kurdish associations that existed at the time were unable to meet their duty of solidarity with our compatriots fleeing repression let alone the need to inform public opinion about the Kurdish tragedy taking place. This is why, together with a number of Kurdish intellectuals and artists, we thought of creating a non-partisan public space, open to Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan and to all those, in France or elsewhere, who were interested in the Kurdish people, their culture, history and political situation. By bringing together cultural public figures, representatives of all parts of Kurdistan, we wanted the Kurdish Institute to embody the moral friendship of a Kurdish people torn apart by national borders and divided by political differences. The Kurdish Institute, set up in the capital city of arts and culture that is Paris, aimed at being a centre of hope in that particularly dark period of Kurdish history.

Our aims were multiple and ambitious: to create a Kurdish reference library which would be the kernel for the future Kurdish National Library, to train Kurdish intellectual cadres through a programme of scholarships aimed at young people from all parts of Kurdistan. We also aimed at standardisation and renovation of the Kurmancî and Dimilî dialects, which were in danger of disappearing, and, last but not least, the internationalisation of the Kurdish Question. Thanks to public support, diplomacy and some media campaigns, we aroused the awareness of public opinion in democratic countries. In the absence of any recognised political representation, the Kurdish Institute also acted as an embassy during the 1980s and 1990s, welcoming public figures and delegations going to countries as varied as China, Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States, securing visas for political leaders, artists and Kurdish academics, etc.

In the last three decades the world has greatly changed, the situation in Kurdistan has considerably improved. Iraqi Kurdistan is now virtually an independent state recognised by the international community. The Kurdish Question now enjoys media coverage and remarkable networks of solidarity. Satellite television, the Internet and social media have completely altered people's relations to documentation, information and news. The Kurdish Institute has gradually adapted to these changes. Part of the library stock has been digitalised and put online. Its scholarship programme now only covers Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Syria — those from Iraq are now enjoying considerably more substantial means provided by their own government. In 2009, we launched a Kurdish cultural television channel, KURD1, to enlighten Kurds about their history and cultural heritage, and to expand their minds through films, documentaries and debates. Unfortunately, despite

support in the form of programmes from ARTE (a branch of French television) and 20th Century Fox, we were finally forced to interrupt this exciting adventure due to lack of funding. In Europe, which is going through a financial crisis, it is very difficult for an independent Kurdish cultural institution to survive. Pending the arrival of better days, the Kurdish Institute is now concentrating its efforts on its basic activities: the publication of its monthly bulletin in French and English, which is a unique database of Kurdish history over the last 32 years; continuing its bi-annual linguistic seminars on Kurmancî, which are playing an essential role in the revitalisation of this major Kurdish dialect; the training of Kurdish students; taking part in public debates to encourage the development of a favourable public opinion for a fair and peaceful settlement of the Kurdish Question; the promotion of Kurdish artists and writers in France, etc.

**Toivanen:** The Kurdish institute has hosted a variety of different kinds of activities, ranging from cultural to academic ones. How would you describe the role of the Kurdish institute today in comparison to let's say ten or twenty years ago? Has it changed significantly over time?

**Nezan:** Our academic activities, such as the linguistic seminars, are part of our long-term programme and will continue. For nearly 30 years we have pursued this academic mission of language renewal. Since 2002, we have involved academics from Turkish and Iraqi universities. More recently our experts have also taken part in some specific meetings in Diyarbakir. The Kurdish Institute has organised the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> World Congress of Kurdish Studies in Erbil and Duhok respectively. Here, Kurdish and Western researchers in various areas of social sciences and linguistics presented their work and exchanged their views. We are now preparing the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Congress. Alongside these continuing activities we have had to stop some others like the periodicals HEVI and STUDIA KURDICA, published since the 1980s, since other periodicals have replaced them. The lack of means has forced us to make some difficult choices.

**Toivanen:** It is indeed the most long-standing Kurdish institute in Europe, with a history of 32 years behind it. In your opinion, what role does the institute play as a cultural institute, on the one hand towards the Kurdish communities in the region? And what kind of role has it formulated, on the other hand, towards the wider, non-Kurdish public or the French society?

**Nezan:** For a long time and before the emergence of social media, we played an important role in ensuring that Kurdish communities could make their voice and grievances heard by the French and Western public. For instance, in 1988, when the Kurdish language was banned in Turkey, we launched a petition that was signed by a thousand international personalities. These included two dozen Nobel Prize holders, fifteen US senators and congressmen, MPs from several European countries, recognised writers and artists from Europe, America, Middle East and Africa (for ex. Winnie

Mandela), and published the petition in the international press (*Le Monde*, *Herald Tribune*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*). The petition called for an end to the ban on the Kurdish language and culture in Turkey and sparked much debate at the time. Finally, we were successful and the then Turkish President Turgut Özal abolished these freedom-destroying laws in April 1991.

Similarly, in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Anfal campaigns of deportation and massacres of the Kurdish population were not sufficiently made known to the public. Kurdish political parties were not audible and Iraqi propaganda laid the blame for Halabja on the Iranians. In October 1989, the Kurdish Institute organised an international conference in Paris with the participation of delegations from thirty-two countries, including the United States and the USSR, but also from Scandinavian countries, Germany and the United Kingdom. Highly publicised, this conference was an important step in the internationalisation of the Kurdish question and the start of a Kurdish lobby in Europe and the United States. These solidarity networks would come to play a decisive role during the spring 1991 mass exodus in Iraqi Kurdistan to obtain, at the initiative of France, a “safe haven” protected by Western aviation. This protected area gradually developed into the autonomous Kurdistan region in Iraq. The Kurdish Institute then played a major role in the reconstruction of Iraqi Kurdistan. In Paris we printed 380 000 textbooks in Kurdish that were then sent to Kurdistan. We were able, with the help of western NGOs, to pay the first year of wages of more than 20,000 primary school teachers in order to ensure schooling for children, often in tents. We also provided school supplies as well as clothes and boots etc. to the children.

The Institute also contributed to the organisation of the May 1992 elections to provide Iraqi Kurdistan, until then governed by a front of political parties, with legitimate parliament and government. We dispatched experts and observers on site. To foster the emergence of a democratic culture, we widely disseminated the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, translated for the first time into Kurdish in 1989 by our Institute. This initiative resulted in the creation, first of an Organisation for Human Rights, then of a Ministry of Human Rights. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Bakhtiyar Amin, a former scholarship holder and activist of the Kurdish Institute, became the Minister of Human Rights in Iraq.

Concerning Iranian Kurdistan, we helped to send 200 doctors and nurses to provide healthcare to the peshmerga and the population living in the territory they had liberated. We tried to internationalise the issue of the assassination of Kurdish leaders Abdulrahman Ghassemloo and Sadiq Sherefkandi. These are a few examples, among many others, of the interrelation between the activities of the Kurdish Institute in favour of Kurdish communities and the growing awareness in Europe of the fate of the Kurdish people. As can be seen, we are at the confluence of culture (and its survival), human rights, and international politics.

**Toivanen:** Kurdish diaspora is known to be an exemplary case of a diaspora whose members maintain transnational activities and attachments between the homeland and the hostland. What kind of relations or forms of cooperation does the Kurdish institute foster at the moment towards Kurdistan and the Kurdish people living in the region?

**Nezan:** Our partners there are now universities and NGOs working in the field of human rights. In collaboration we organise seminars, conferences or special events such as the Congress of Kurdish Studies. Some of our former scholarship holders occupy important positions at universities in France, in Kurdistan, but also in Turkey. They play a very active role in this cooperation. We also contribute to the training of academics for Kurdish Studies or social science departments at French universities.

**Toivanen:** Do you think the Kurdish diaspora could have done some things differently in relation to engaging with host state actors? For instance, when we think of the role the Kurdish Institute played in terms of bringing KDP and PUK together, and so forth. What role can the Kurdish Institute play in a potential peace process in Turkey?

**Nezan:** The Kurdish diaspora in Europe formed recently. The first generation, highly politicised, dreamed of returning, and almost lived at the railway station, waiting for an imminent departure, without any structured life project in the diaspora. The associations created in the years 1980-1990 were mostly affiliated with Kurdish political parties whose field of activity was in Kurdistan, and its structural problems probably delayed the emergence of more unifying projects geared toward the host country. The second generation is aware its life is here and not in the homeland of its parents. Those of its members still attached to their Kurdish identity structure their actions in various and often innovative ways here in the diaspora to contribute to a better knowledge of the Kurds and their struggle for freedom. That seems to me quite relevant and promising.

For its part, the Kurdish Institute played a pioneering role in the preparatory stage of the peace process in Turkey. In 1995, together with the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, we organised in Oslo the very first seminar bringing together Kurdish and Turkish personalities to explore the possibilities of a settlement of the Kurdish conflict through dialogue. At the time, the political context was not favourable as the Turkish government was convinced it would “soon defeat” the PKK rebellion. Later, in 2004 and 2008, we gathered around a common platform about a thousand Kurdish personalities representative of all political and cultural tendencies of the Kurdish community in Turkey. Published by the international press (*New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *Herald Tribune*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), their joint appeal contributed to legitimising Kurdish demands in Western opinion. In contrast to the Turkish propaganda prevailing at the time, which claimed that the Kurds wanted the partition of Turkey, the signatories of the appeal were

asking for a peaceful settlement within the framework of Turkey's existing borders. This platform became the basis for the "peace process" initiated later between the Turkish government and the PKK. In our interventions in the media, we of course supported this process with the hope that it would lead to an end of the war that had been raging in Turkish Kurdistan for over thirty years, with its attendant misery and destruction.

**Toivanen:** The Kurdish diaspora communities situated in different European countries also maintain close connection with each other, as documented by an ample body of research. What kind of transnational relations or forms of collaboration does the Institute foster towards other Kurdish diaspora communities in other European countries? We all know of the existence of the Kurdish Library in Stockholm, or Centre for Kurdish Studies at Exeter University in the UK, and so forth... Why has the Kurdish Institute been more successful in France compared to other Kurdish Institutes in Stockholm or Berlin?

**Nezan:** It is fortunate that there are now many Kurdish associations and cultural institutions in Europe and elsewhere. We try to cooperate with those organisations in areas of activities close to ours, in research projects, appeals and petitions, conferences, etc. We have excellent relations with the Centre for Kurdish Studies at Exeter, some researchers of which are affiliated with the Kurdish Institute, as well as with the Kurdish Library in Stockholm, whose director is a prominent member of our Institute and our Kurmancî Language Seminars. Indeed, our two last seminars were held in the Kurdish Library in Stockholm.

**Toivanen:** The diaspora played a big role when opportunities in the homeland were scarce. But now, partially thanks to social media, what happens in Kurdistan finds its way out immediately. Do you think there has been a shift in the role that the diaspora can play nowadays in terms of local developments in Kurdistan? What is the main role of diaspora nowadays, in your opinion?

**Nezan:** The existence of a large Kurdish diaspora in Western democracies is a great opportunity for the Kurdish people. Our youth, trained in Western universities, mastering the languages and codes of Western societies, can contribute in all areas to a better knowledge of the Kurdish people and become a bridge between Kurdistan and the West. Kurds have for too long been handicapped by their shortage of competent elites. This lack of competence is now being filled thanks largely to the diaspora. If well organised, Kurdish diaspora, like the Jewish and Irish ones, can mobilise Western public opinion in favour of the Kurdish people, provide political, diplomatic and media support for the Kurdish cause and bring its expertise to human and economic development projects in Kurdistan.

**Toivanen:** Indeed since the last three decades, we have witnessed the proliferation of Kurdish studies, institutes and cultural centres established by

Kurds living in the diaspora. It is not an overstatement to say that the Kurds have never before been this visible in different sectors of society, in media debates, in research, etc. There are sizeable, yet heterogeneous Kurdish diaspora communities in different European countries. How do you see the Kurdish identity in all of this? Have there been significant changes in the expressions of Kurdish identity and *Kurdayeti* in the last three decades in France and in Europe in general?

**Nezan:** As any identity, Kurdish identity is plural and in evolution. The same applies to the identity of the Kurds in the diaspora. We now have a generation I would call “Euro-Kurdish”. They are European by their training and Kurdish by their ties and family education. Their way of life is an evolutionary compromise between the poles structuring it. Under this Euro-Kurdish identity, there are of course sub-identities: French-Kurdish, German-Kurdish, Swedish-Kurdish etc. This diversity is a real wealth that, if one knows how to use it, could be a powerful factor in attitude change and socio-cultural progress in Kurdistan.

**Toivanen:** What is the role of the younger generations in this regard?

**Nezan:** The new generation can play a role only if there are institutions to keep alive the knowledge of Kurdish language, culture and history. Only young people fully aware of their Kurdish identity and with a sense of belonging to a people suffering from an historical injustice can mobilise to repair it. They can contribute to the struggle of the Kurdish people for freedom, a noble fight henceforth supported by large segments of public opinion and personalities of Western democracies. They have the chance to hold a legitimate and noble cause to defend and fight for, beyond their daily life activities. It belongs to the institutions to channel and coordinate this precious human wealth.

**Toivanen:** The current situation in the Middle East, with the rise of ISIS and the unfolding of the Syrian civil war with all its tragic consequences is unfortunately familiar to all of us. Kurdish forces have gained more public visibility in their efforts to halt the advances made by ISIS in the region. It seems very paradoxical that the Kurdish institute is currently being threatened with closure, whereas one could argue that the institute is now more needed than ever. How do you personally see this somewhat paradoxical situation?

**Nezan:** For several years now, Europe has been facing a serious financial crisis. There have been drastic cuts in public spending across Europe. These budget cuts often impact funding granted to associations and cultural activities. This policy has been rampant in France since the 2008 crisis with some degree of heavy-handedness. Many associations have had to close down. Others are surviving with significantly reduced resources. The Kurdish Institute has also been affected by this policy of austerity. But the French government is aware of the indispensable role of the Kurdish Institute. Several senior political figures, including a former Prime Minister and two

former Foreign Ministers, signed a call for the reinstatement of Kurdish Institute subsidies. During a TV-broadcasted session, the French Parliament paid a unanimous tribute to the work accomplished by the Kurdish Institute of Paris. We are in discussion with the French government to find a solution. The good news is that France wants neither the closure of the Institute nor its transfer to another country. But the risk is to be left with a survival budget without the means to accomplish our missions properly. The answer could ultimately come from the Kurdish diaspora. We want to find one thousand Kurdish benefactors who would agree to pay an annual contribution of 500 euros to ensure the basic budget of the Institute and its independence. This is not an excessive ambition, but we would need some time and the mobilisation of our friends across Europe to achieve it.