

OBITUARY

In Memory of Kadri Yıldırım (Qedrî Yildirim)

(1959 – 2021)

Mehmet Kurt¹

Abstract

This obituary outlines the life and work of Kadri Yıldırım, a prominent Kurdish scholar and the first professor of Kurdish studies in Turkey. It focuses on his early life and medrese education and highlights his contribution to the field of Kurdish studies and his scholarly and political efforts for the Kurdish language to become a language of education in Turkey.

Keywords: Kadri Yıldırım (Qedrî Yildirim); obituary; Turkey; Kurdistan; Kurdish language; Kurdish medrese

Abstract in Kurmanji

Bi bîranîna Qedrî Yildirim (1959-2021)

Ev bîrname xulaseyê jiyana û xebatên Qedrî Yildirim e, ku zanyarê kurd ê mezîna û profesore emil ê kurdnasiyê li Tirkîyê bû. Nivîsar bi taybetî li ser xortaniya wî û perwerdeya wî ya li medreseyan radiweste, digel xebatên wî yê kurdnasiyê û karên wî yê siyasî û zanistî jî bo ku zimanê kurdî bibe zimanekî perwerde li Tirkîyê.

Abstract in Sorani

Le yadî Qadrî Yelldirîm (1959-2021)

Em bîrnameyê bas le jiyana û karekani Qadrî Yelldirîm, zanayekî genvey kurd û yekem profesori lêkolînewey kurdî le Turkiya dekat. Em nûsîne giringî dedat be seretay jiyani û xwendini le medrese û tişk dexate ser destkevtêkanî le bwarî lêkolînewey kurdî û, herweha hevle syasyekani bo be fermîkirdni zmani kurdî lenaweni perwerde û fêrbûn le Turkiya da.

Abstract in Zazaki

Seba yadkerdişê Qedrî Yildirimî (1959-2021)

No nuştêyê yadkerdişê xulasaya cu û keda Qedrî Yildirimî ya ke zanyaro kurdo namdar û Tirkîya de profesore kurdoloji yo verên bî. Nuştêyê de bale dîyena cinya ey a rewê û perwerdeyê ey ê medresan ser. Ser o kî giraniye dîyena beşdarîya kurdoloji û lebatanê ey ê zanistî û siyasîyan ser seba ke kurdekî Tirkîya de bibo zîwanê perwerdeyê.

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Introduction

On 26 March 2021, Prof. Kadri Yıldırım passed away at the age of sixty-two in a hospital in Amed (Diyarbakır) after suffering from a brain haemorrhage. He had been struggling with several health issues in the last decade and was hospitalized in late November 2020 after falling gravely ill with COVID-19. He was an industrious and prolific scholar who authored and translated numerous books, book chapters and articles in the field of Kurdish studies and Arabic language and literature. He became the first-ever professor of Kurdish studies in Turkey and took up important administrative roles in the establishment of the first department of Kurdish at the Institute of Living Languages (Yaşayan Diller Enstitüsü) at Mardin Artuklu University. He is remembered as a hardworking, humble, and kind person by his family, friends, students, and colleagues.

Early Life and Medrese Education

Kadri Yıldırım was born on February 5, 1959, in the village of Şeqlet (Şaklat), once within the administrative district of Lice in Diyarbakır province, but currently tied to the district of Karaz (Kocaköy), also within Diyarbakır. Şeqlet was a big village known for its widespread stockbreeding up until the village was forcibly evacuated during the ‘dirty war’ of the 1990s. Kadri Yıldırım worked as a shepherd looking after the family’s livestock during his childhood years like many other children in his village. His grandfather was a local *mele* (imam) and his father was a farmer raising livestock. Kadri Yıldırım lost his father at the age of twelve, which became an important factor for his educational trajectory. As is common practice in Kurdistan, orphans were sent to medreses by their families to study *ilm* (Islamic sciences) and become a *mele* (imam), and so did little Kadri’s mother.

In 1974, Kadri Yıldırım first attended the medrese in the village of Sergelya (Başalan) in the Çınar district of Diyarbakır, where he received the majority of his medrese education with Seydayê Mele ‘Elî. He then attended several other medreses in the area and studied with locally well-known seydas (medrese teachers). Some of the village medreses he attended and seydas he studied with are as follows: In the village of Sofya (Erler) in the Bismil district of Amed with Seydayê Mele Hesên; in the village of Yuwacix (Yuwacık)² in the Çınar district of Amed with Seydayê Mele Mihemedê Fetlê; in the village of Hecî Îsê (Karpuzlu) near Amed with Seyfûlmulûk Sheikh Muhammad Mehdî, who was one of the khalifs of the Sufi Sheikh Seyda of Cizîr (Cizre); in the village of Girê Sîra (Balpınar) in the province of Êlih (Batman) with Seydayê Mele Hawî; and in the village of Girbareşk (Îkiztepe) in the province of Êlih with Seydayê Mele Evdilbarî. In addition, Kadri Yıldırım briefly studied in the well-known medrese of Tillo in Sêrt (Siirt) and in a medrese located in the Seyrantepe neighbourhood of Amed, where he also concurrently attended the Ziya Gökalp High School and received his high school diploma.

² This is a prominent medrese in the area where many Kurdish scholars studied, including the Kurdish poet and intellectual Seydayê Cigerxwin, the Kurdish Sufi and mudarris Sheikh Mele Mihemedê Arabkendê, and Seydayê Mele Mehmûdê Yuwacixî (Mahmut Çakmak).

The medreses Kadri Yıldırım attended were all what Martin van Bruinessen refers to as vernacular medrese³ in reference to these institutions being mostly located in the Kurdish periphery and rooted in local Kurdish culture and society. Despite the Turkish state's repressive policies after the unification of the education system by the newly established Republic of Turkey in 1924, Kurdish vernacular medreses survived and continued their educational practice, following a curriculum and pedagogy that has been dominant across the Islamic world over the past centuries. At the time when Kadri Yıldırım attended the medrese, from 1974 to the early 1980s, these educational institutions were scattered around the Kurdish region and mostly consisted of small extensions to the village mosque, where a Seyda worked as the imam. These small multi-functioning rooms (called *bucre*, from Arabic *hujra*, 'cell') hosted approximately ten to fifteen *feqîs* (students), whose basic needs were provided by the residents of the village or through the network of the seydas of the medrese. Despite their precarious situation, these medreses functioned as important centres for the transmission of scholastic Islamic knowledge and the preservation of Kurdish literary language and culture. Although many of the medrese texts were in Arabic, the language of instruction was Kurdish and some graduates had a good grasp of Persian as well. The Kurdish poet Cigerxwîn and the authors Mehmet Emin Bozarslan, Zeynelabidin Zinar, and Kadri Yıldırım were among the well-known scholars who graduated from Kurdish medreses in the twentieth century.

Kadri Yıldırım is remembered as a brilliant *feqî* (student), who had a great memorizing aptitude – essential to the medrese training as the main texts of the medrese books are memorized by the *feqîs* – and analytical skills. Seydayê Mele Mustafa Yargı, one of his childhood friends and fellow medrese students, recalls an occasion when Yıldırım corrected his seyda on an issue related to *Tafsîr al-Jalâlayn* authored by Jalal ad-Din al-Mahallî and Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti between 1459 and 1505. Yıldırım's seyda insisted on his interpretation but eventually had to acknowledge his student's take once they referred to the book. Mele Mustafa adds that Kadri Yıldırım was always a hardworking person, who would start working before the first prayer until late evening and had a great self-confidence and high expectations of himself. When Yıldırım learned that Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazanî, the author of one of the essential texts of the medrese curriculum, *Şerh-ul İzzî fi't-Tasrîf* (widely known as Sa'dînî in the Kurdish medreses) wrote this work at the age of sixteen, he immediately set his goal: he aspired to be a Taftazanî of his time as he considered himself no less than this fourteen-century polymath Muslim scholar. Indeed, he was no less than Taftazanî in the sense that Yıldırım, too, became a polymath who published widely on Kurdish language, culture, history, and geography, wrote about Arabic poetry and literature, and translated many books from Arabic to Turkish and Kurdish. In addition to his Arabic, I was personally impressed by his Persian when I observed him on one occasion when he translated several Afghan asylum seekers' testimonies before a

³ Martin van Bruinessen, *The Kurdish Medrese in Republican Turkey: An Institution of Civil Society Caught Between Turkish State and Kurdish Political Movement*, Zahra Institute Annual Lecture [Public Webinar], March 11, 2021.

court in Mardin. His medrese training equipped him with a set of knowledge and skills that enlightened his scholarship and that will yet have to be matched in the following decades.

Academic Career

After graduating from the Kurdish medreses, Kadri Yıldırım worked as a construction worker and in several other temporary jobs in İzmir, where his family resided after his father's death. In 1984, he attended the Siirt Education Institute of Dicle University and graduated in 1986, when he began working as an elementary school teacher in the Patnos district of Agırî (Ağrı) for two years. He got married to Canan Yıldırım in 1987 and continued his primary school teacher position in the next twelve years in Agırî, Êlih (Batman), and Riha (Urfa). In 1994, he started his MA degree in the department of Arabic Language and Literature at Harran University in Riha and obtained his master's degree in 1996. His master's thesis focused on the influence of non-Arab Muslims (Mawali) on Arabic literature and poetry during the first century of the Abbasid Dynasty (750-865). He obtained his PhD degree from the same university in 1998 with his dissertation on the comparison of the context of Islamic and pre-Islamic poetry in the seventh century. In 1999, he was appointed as an assistant professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the Faculty of Theology at Dicle University, where he worked until 2010, first as an assistant professor and later as an associate professor. In 2010, he was appointed as the first-ever professor of Kurdish Studies in the Institute of Living Languages at Mardin Artuklu University.

I met Prof. Kadri Yıldırım as a young theology student in 2000 and along with credited courses in Arabic, I had a chance to study with him privately to finish my medrese training. He taught me the last two books of the classic medrese curriculum, *al-Bahja al-Mardîyya `alâ Alfîyyat Ibn Malik* (an annotated version of a famous text on Arabic syntax, Ibn Malik's *Alfîyya*, composed by al-Suyuti, d. 1505) and *al-Fawa'id al-Diya'îyya* (another work on Arabic syntax, also simply known by the name of its author, Mulla Jami, d. 1492). Besides, he also taught me one of the main reference books of the Hanafi fiqh studied in Turkish institutions, *Al-Ikhtiyar li Ta'lil al-Mukhtar* by Abdullah bin Mahmud al-Mawsili (d. 1284). I would visit him in his office, where we would sit across from each other, as in the medrese, and he would instruct me on the particularities of the text and its grammatical features. He would often give examples from Arabic poetry and tell many anecdotes from Kurdish culture and history to make his point. I was often surprised to see, and always deeply admired, the level of meticulousness in his instruction. He would recite Ibn Malik's *Alfîyya* by heart without demur for a second. He was always kind, humble, and ready to help his students.

In 2010, we would meet once again, this time as I was one of the fifty students who were admitted to the newly opened Institute of Living Languages at Mardin Artuklu University for the summer school in Kurdish language, literature, and culture. This summer program was an opportunity to benefit from Yıldırım's vast knowledge in Kurdish linguistics and literature. In a group consisting mainly of expert linguists, novelists, and intellectuals, we took courses on Kurdish language, its dialects, and linguistic particularities as well as on classical and modern Kurdish literature. The latter module was especially interesting as we had to read and engage with the books written by our classmates, the majority of whom did not really need training but wanted to be a part of this historical moment and receive an official recognition to pursue their career in the field of Kurdish studies in Turkey. The political climate was relatively positive as peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the mainstream Kurdish political

movement in Turkey were going on. It was, indeed, this climate that enabled the opening of such an institution for the first time in the modern history of Turkey.

Kadri Yıldırım, Selim Temo, Abdurrahman Adak, and Hayrullah Acar were among the first people who started teaching at the institute. Yıldırım's first five years between 2010 and 2015 were dedicated to establishing the department, opening the undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Kurdish language and culture, and preparing the first school textbooks in Kurdish (both for Kurmancî and Zazakî dialects) for fifth, sixth, and seventh-grade students, published by the Turkish Ministry of Education. In 2014, Kadri Yıldırım led the transfer of the Kurdish collection of Alexandre Jaba (also known as Auguste Jaba) from St. Petersburg, Russia to the Kurdology Library of Mardin Artuklu University. Several of our classmates from the summer program would also join the team in the following years as instructors and lecturers, but many would be purged when the political climate changed in the mid-2010s. The peace process stalled and finally collapsed; the liberal rector of the university was replaced in 2014 by an ultra-conservative Islamist and Arab supremacist, Ahmet Ağırakça, who oversaw the decline of academic freedom in the university.⁴

Political Career

In 2015, while the Department of Kurdish Language and Literature saw its first undergraduate students graduate, Kadri Yıldırım accepted an offer to run as a candidate representing the province of Sêrt (Siirt) for the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in the June 7, 2015 general elections. His motivation was to work towards policies that would eventually result in the recognition of Kurdish as an official language of education. During the period of election campaigning, then Prime Minister Erdoğan visited the Kurdish cities with a Kurdish translation of the Quran in hand, claiming his party's so-called Kurdish opening would end a century of assimilation and discrimination of the Kurds in Turkey. It turned out that Kadri Yıldırım was asked to edit this Kurdish translation, yet the government rushed publishing the translation without his edits to use it for their election campaigning. The HDP's strategy to include a group of well-known Muslim scholars and activists, most prominently the former state-appointed Mufti of Amed, Nimetullah Aydoğmuş, journalist Hüda Kaya, long-time Islamist politician Altan Tan, and Kadri Yıldırım, challenged the AKP's strategy to utilize religion for electoral success.

The June 2015 elections were an important turning point for the Kurdish electoral politics as the pro-Kurdish HDP for the first time passed the ten per cent threshold and managed to gain 80 out of 550 seats in Turkey's Grand National Assembly (TBMM). This also meant an end to the one-party rule of the Islamist AKP government as they, according to the Constitution, had to form a coalition government. However, the AKP refused to do so and instead ran for a re-election on November 1, 2015. The period in between June and November 2015 turned out to be the beginning of a dark period when the AKP's propaganda machine and its apparatuses started targeting the Kurds to consolidate Turkish nationalist votes. A series of suicide bombings targeted HDP rallies and other meetings of Kurds and sympathizers of the Kurdish movement in Amed, Pirsûs (Suruç), and Ankara. Violent conflict between security forces and the PKK-affiliated Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement

⁴ Ağırakça, who claimed he was appointed to his position by President Erdoğan himself and that this allowed him to rule the university as a personal fiefdom, was himself summarily dismissed by the President in 2019 and replaced by a more moderate person.

(YDG-H) led the Turkish military to engage in large-scale destruction of major Kurdish cities. Up to half a million Kurds were forcibly displaced and thousands of Kurdish civilians lost their lives. The renewed violence contributed to a nationalist reaction among Turkish voters and an election victory for the AKP and its right-wing ally the MHP.

During this period, and especially following the failed military coup attempt in July 2016, most of the advances with regards to recognizing Kurdish language and identity were rolled back and most of the critical Kurdish academic staff at the Institute of Living Languages and other departments at Mardin Artuklu University were purged through emergency decrees. In a speech in the Turkish National Assembly in January 2017, Kadri Yıldırım described this purge as a coup against Kurdology and questioned the contradictions between governmental policies during the peace negotiations and after the conflict reignited. He asserted that the institute and other initiatives had been just a utilitarian move by the government, through which they had hoped to receive electoral support from the Kurds. He referred to a speech made by then Prime Minister Erdoğan, who stated that ‘What Kadri Yıldırım and his team are doing here [at the Kurdish department of Mardin Artuklu University] is revolutionary.’ Yıldırım then asked what happened since this talk that all these academic staff who wrote the school textbooks in Kurdish, which are published by the Ministry of Education, were purged. Yıldırım concluded that on the day of judgement, alongside with the forefathers of the Kurdish language and literature, Ehmedê Xanî, Feqiyê Teyran, and Melayê Cizîrî, he will grab the government authorities by their collars and ask them ‘Did you have no shame that your Ministry of Culture published [Xanî’s] *Mem û Zîn*, but you expelled his grandchildren who taught this book at the Kurdology department?’

It is obvious that Kadri Yıldırım found himself in a violent environment that he did not anticipate when he ran for the elections. In such a conflictual environment, he could not achieve what he initially hoped for and became increasingly critical towards the government’s policies as well as his party’s stance towards the declaration of self-autonomy (*öz yönetim*) across Kurdish districts and towns, which was used as a pretext by the government to increase their repressive and violent practices against Kurdish civilians. In the following general elections in 2018, he did not run for the MP position and returned to Mardin Artuklu University, where he found himself completely alienated. The new infamous rector, Ahmet Ağırakça, had spearheaded the purges against progressive, leftist, and Kurdish academics at the university and replaced them with unqualified Islamists. He also dismissed Yıldırım but was forced to reappoint him when this decision was challenged as there were no legal grounds for dismissal. This time, however, Ağırakça appointed Yıldırım not to the Kurdish Department but to the Department of Arabic Language. Like many other former and current HDP parliamentarians and Kurdish intellectuals, Yıldırım also faced several investigations and indictments that were still ongoing at the time of his death.

Works and Legacy

Kadri Yıldırım's contributions to the field can be divided into three categories. First, his contribution to the field of Kurdish studies with a particular focus on Kurdish linguistics and literature, Kurdish medrese tradition, and scholars, Kurdish society, geography, and Kurdish women. Second, his translation work from Arabic to Turkish and Kurdish and his compilations on issues related to Kurdish history, geography, and people. Lastly, his earlier work on Arabic language, poetry, and literature.

Yıldırım's three-volume book titled *Kürt Medreseleri ve Alimleri (Kurdish Medreses and Scholars, 2018)* is one of the most valuable contributions that he made to the field. In these three volumes on 1368 pages, Yıldırım delves into the history of the Kurdish medreses and scholars in the last millennium using original Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish resources, which makes the book the most comprehensive study on the subject to date. The first volume is divided into two different books. The first book deals with the theory and curriculum of the Kurdish medreses (*Teori ve Müfredat*) and explains the pedagogy of the medrese education, including the books that are studied in the medreses and their authors. In the first book he also focuses on Kurdish women who established medreses or were medrese scholars. The second book of the first volume is dedicated to the medreses of the Kurdish principalities (*Beylik Medreseleri*), whose scholarly influence extended far beyond the boundaries of Kurdistan. The Kurdish principalities did not only establish these great medreses that became a part of a global and cosmopolitan network of learning across the Islamic world, but they also established great libraries and endowments (*vakıf*) that aimed to provide and maintain the needs of the medrese students and teachers. In the second volume (*Tekkelere Bağlı Medreseler*), Yıldırım focuses on the intertwined dynamics of the Sufi medreses after the collapse of the great Kurdish principalities of the Marwanids, Ayyubids, etc. He examines how Sufi medreses, especially those of the Khalidi Naqshbandi branch of Sufism, established a network of great medreses next to their Sufi lodges (*teke/dergah*) and mobilized meles/seydas across Kurdistan. The most prominent among those Sufi medreses/lodges were those in Norşîn, Oxîn, Nehrî, Arvas, Gayda, Biyare, Basret, Zoqayd, Çoxreş, Aktepe, Menzil, Xinûk, Tillo, and Xazna. The last volume (*Cami ve Hücreler*) focuses on the vernacular medreses rooted in the local culture and social organisation of Kurdish villages. In the first chapter of the last volume, Yıldırım delves into the history of the mosque from the early period of Islam and situates mosques as early educational institutions. Then, he continues to examine the little extensions (*bucre*) of these mosques that did not partake in the capital and networks of the great medreses but were so widespread that they created their own vernacular network of scholars and students. In this last volume, Yıldırım greatly benefits from his own experience studying in several of these medreses and introduces a great number of vernacular medreses and their seydas, adding that it is almost impossible to encapsulate all these small educational institutions across Kurdistan. Overall, *The Kurdish Medreses and Scholars* provides a comprehensive analysis of the Kurdish medreses across the four parts of Kurdistan in the last centuries and is an invaluable source for the scholars of Kurds and Kurdistan.

In a similar vein, Kadri Yıldırım wrote several books on the poets Baba Tahirê Uryan, Ehmedê Xanî, and Hecî Qadirê Koyî, through which he seemed to have intended to tell the long history of Kurds and prominent Kurdish scholars, Sufis, poets, and intellectuals in the face of denial and assimilation of the Kurds at the hand of the oppressive nation-states. In his book titled *Ehmedê Xanî'nin Fikir Dünyası (The Intellectual World of Ehmedê Xanî, 2011)*, he examines Xanî's life and work across ten chapters. In these ten chapters, he explores Xanî's biography and work, his understanding of Sufism, love, and cosmology. He then investigates the common themes, objects, and subjects that we come across in Xanî's work, such as music (instruments, maqams, and dances), flora and fauna that Xanî mentions in his work. Yıldırım then proceeds to Xanî's ontology, where he discusses Xanî's engagement with common themes in Islamic theology (*kalâm*). In the ninth chapter, Yıldırım investigates Xanî's unique position and his relation to the Kurdish language and collective identity, whereas he analyses Kurdish folklore (marriage rituals, hunting, Newroz, etc.) in Xanî's work in the last chapter.

In 2019, Yıldırım published a book on Islamic feminism, in which he analysed the work and opinions of around forty different Muslim feminists across a spectrum from moderate to radical and their critiques of patriarchy in Muslim societies. In this book Yıldırım provided many examples of misogyny from *tafsir*, fabricated *hadiths*, and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and took a critical feminist stance to correct wrong interpretations of disputed issues on polygamy, gender equality, divorce rights, and inheritance law in Islam. When he fell ill, Kadri Yıldırım had just completed a two-volume book on Kurdish women, which was published posthumously: *Kürt Kadını (The Kurdish Woman, 2021)*. In this book, his concern was to provide a comprehensive and holistic analysis of Kurdish women (of Sunni, Alevi, Yaresanî/Ehl-î Heqî, Êzîdî, Jewish, and Feylî backgrounds) and to tell the stories of both historical and contemporary Kurdish women who, against all odds, stood up against injustices, took active roles in resistance and rebellions, and became successful scholars, poets, thinkers, writers, musicians, artists, and politicians.

In his scholarly work and his corpus of translations, Kadri Yıldırım introduced Kurdish history, geography, and its great scholars to the Kurdish people, whose agency has been denied by their oppressors. His two books on the history and geography of Rojava and Efrîn, published during the Syrian Civil War in 2015 and 2018, are especially relevant to this concern that drove his scholarly pursuit in the field of Kurdish studies. In these two books, Yıldırım set out to tell the rich and long history of the Kurds in Rojava and Efrîn as a response to those who seek to de-historicize the Kurdish presence in the region. His translation of Muhammed Ali es-Siwerekî el-Kurdî's book *The Kurds of Jordan* (2007), Kemal Mazhar Ahmed's book on Kirkuk and its history, politics, and ethnic structure (2005) and İzeddin Mustafa Resul's book on Xanî and his Mem û Zîn (2007) speak to the same concern. Yıldırım has consistently sought to dedicate his scholarship to the emancipation of the Kurdish people and their struggle for liberation, recognition, and collective rights.

Through his untiring efforts, Kadri Yıldırım has succeeded in becoming the Taftazanî of the Kurds. He wrote and translated a great number of books that each contains an important potential for Kurdish enlightenment and emancipation. He was a scholar of and for his people, one of the last great scholars of the Kurdish medrese. A kind, humble, and industrious man who worked from before sunrise to sunset every day for almost all his life. May he rest in light and may he hold hands with his people and the great Kurdish scholars before him in heaven and dance a *govend* till eternity. *Oxir be Seydayê mezîn!*

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