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## SESAMO Dossier

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**Academic events. The 14th Conference of the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies (SESAMO), *Paths of Resistance in the Middle East and North Africa* (University of Turin, 31 January-2 February 2019)**

### An Overview

**DANIELA MELFA, UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA, AND ROSITA DI PERI, UNIVERSITY OF TURIN**

The 14<sup>th</sup> SESAMO Conference, held at the University of Turin from 31 January to 2 February 2019, had as title *Paths of Resistance in the Middle East and North Africa*. “Resistance” is a pregnant word that may refer to an ethical imperative and a category of analysis. “Resistance” sums up the ethos of those scholars who do not stay indifferent in the face of the predicaments of contemporary world as well as the potential of a device to be kept in the toolbox of researchers. This double nuance underpinned the Conference plenary sessions, namely the SESAMO President’s opening speech, two roundtables (*Academic and media freedom in Turkey. Countermeasures to repression, censorship and authoritarianism; Il lavoro di ricerca: sfide e prospettive*) and a documentary projection (*Footballization* by Stefano Fogliata).

“Resistance” is a ductile word that may mean defensive military action against the invader or offensive cathartic counter-violence as Franz Fanon

pointed out in *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>1</sup> “Resistance” could also be peaceful and unarmed, counting on the power of words and ideas. Moreover, there could be a speechless “resistance” made up of silence and facial expressions as in Marc Garanger’s portraits of Algerian women who, in response to the request to unveil and pose for the identity card, did not show even a frozen smile.<sup>2</sup> Finally, “resistance” should not be understood just as a mere protective response to the adversary’s initiative since it implies the capacity to produce an alternative discourse, to think differently and to take the lead. It has an inventive component that may be observed in captivating utopias, as in the quintessentially creative committed artistic work.

This interdisciplinary and widely inclusive topic has been approached in different ways in the thirty-six panels of the Conference. Topical issues, such as post-revolutionary developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Syrian conflict, attracted panellists’ attention: *Becoming activists in North Africa and the Middle East. Paths of political subjectivation during and after the Uprisings*; *Far from the eyes, far from the agenda? Political parties and activism in the MENA: between innovation, resistance and resilience*; *Trajectories of “resistance”: Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in the Syrian battlefield*.

In a world marked by unbalanced power relations, resistance in the Arab-Muslim region has targeted primarily Western imperialism. Panels have been devoted to anti-Western epistemologies (*Anti-Westernism and intellectual resistance to imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa*), the Ottoman space facing European encroachment (*Ripensare l'imperialismo e l'antimperialismo nello spazio ottomano e post ottomano, 1870-1924*), Arab nationalism (*Che fine ha fatto il nazionalismo arabo?*), foreign affairs (*The Middle East's interaction with Horn of Africa states and the shifting balance of power*) and public debt (*Exploring the role of foreign debt in the MENA crisis of the 1980s*).

At a domestic level, intermediate bodies are expected to play a major role in political mobilisation. This is mainly the case of trade unions (*Lavoro e mobilitazione in Medio Oriente e Nord Africa*) and political parties (*The paradigm of resistance: Tracking the course of the Left in the Middle East and North Africa*). Religious vanguards and groups also provide adepts with a horizon and a community of sense (*A Liberation Theology approach to Jihad; Forme, reti e percorsi di resistenza sufi*). Anyway, a close-up focus on civil society and everyday practices discloses a varied activism from below that spans from the appropriation of urban space to Black anti-racist campaigns. This viewpoint has been the red thread of a series of panels: *Nuove forme di resistenza dal basso in Iran: attori e*

1 Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London, Penguin Books, 2001.

2 Garanger, Marc. *Femmes algériennes 1960*. Paris, Atlantica, 2002.

*prassi; Società civile, mobilitazione dal basso e impegno politico in Israele/Palestina; Trajectories and perspectives of activism and resistance. History from below and subaltern politics in the Middle East and North Africa; Ordinary people, resistance and the politicisation of urban spaces and environment in the MENA region; Urban practices of resistance and contention in Lebanon before and after the civil war; Resistenze e contro-narrazioni intersezionali nel mondo arabo. Prospettive interdisciplinari.*

Literature, art, music and satire are all variations of the “language of refusal”, as Pierre Bourdieu put it.<sup>3</sup> A set of panels focused on this theme: *Language(s) of resistance in the Arab world; The Language of resistance in post-revolutionary Iran; “Resistance is Life”. Paths of resistance in Kurdish arts and literature; Cento anni di resistenza: sulle tracce della letteratura araba resistenziale del Novecento; Le scritture del sé come forza di resistenza; Rethinking resistance in Middle Eastern popular music; Resisting through art: aesthetics forms of defiance in the Middle East and North Africa.*

Since the nineteenth century resistance has taken on a gender character being directed against patriarchy and machismo. A few panels adopted a gender perspective: *Post-1967 gender roles and resistance to authoritarianism in contemporary Syrian literature; Politique, sexualités non-normatives et résistances en Afrique du Nord; Donne, genere e politica nelle società musulmane: verso una rinascita storiografica?* Shifts in mind-set and behaviour are difficult to be produced but, as discussed in the panel *Law as resistance*, the legislative and the judiciary may be drivers of change.

The majority of panels privileged a transversal approach assembling papers related to different countries, while others opted for a delimited geographical focus. The latter includes, *inter alia*, *Percorsi di dissidenza e impegno civile in Turchia dagli anni Ottanta a oggi* and *Actors, practices, and themes of resistance in the history and memory of contemporary Libya (1835-2011)*.

Finally, the category of “resistance” has been applied to the academic field. Theories, methodologies and sources have been scrutinised along with obstacles faced by researchers on the ground: *Challenging narratives of oppression: Middle Eastern Studies and the politics of research; Methodologies of resistance: A Critical Muslim Studies appraisal; Fare archivio, lasciare traccia, avere memoria: fonti sulla resistenza e la subalternità in Medio Oriente e Nord Africa; Resistance and scholarship. What resistance for academics?* Self-reflection is fundamental to the process of research. As Edward Said pointed out, Orientalists may be

3 Bourdieu, Pierre. *Langage et pouvoir symbolique*. Paris, Seuil, 2001.

complicit in the dominant structure of power, but knowledge may prove to be an important means of resistance.<sup>4</sup>

SESAMO Conferences are a regular and eagerly awaited rendezvous for Italian scholars of the Middle East and North Africa. Despite being an Italian network, the multilingual programme bears witness to the international character of these meetings, which are well attended by foreign colleagues and connected to worldwide scholarly debates.

**Report on the Roundtable *Academic and Media Freedom in Turkey. Countermeasures to Repression, Censorship and Authoritarianism***

LEA NOCERA, UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES "L'ORIENTALE"

The roundtable *Academic and media freedom in Turkey. Countermeasures to repression, censorship and authoritarianism* was one of the plenary session events dedicated to current affairs in the 14<sup>th</sup> SESAMO Conference. Organised by myself at the invitation of the scientific committee, its purpose was to debate academic and media freedom in Turkey in recent years and especially in the aftermath of the 2016 attempted coup d'état. In addition, it aimed at drawing attention to resistance as the everyday experience of intellectuals and scholars in Turkey and abroad. The starting point was an analysis of the situation in Turkey where the rise of authoritarianism in recent years has brought about a progressive curtailment of freedom of expression and an erosion of the autonomy of academic institutions. After the failed coup attempt of July 2016 and the implementation of a presidential system, the assault on academic institutions and the media assumed unprecedented dimensions. Hundreds of academics and journalists have faced dismissals, restrictions on their freedom, trial, arrest and exile.

The topics discussed during the roundtable included the situation in the country; the challenges for academics and journalists working in exile; the impact of the repression on the autonomy of research and on the production of knowledge and information; and the role of national and international solidarity networks. Three people were invited to speak and to share their work and experiences: the journalist Fazıla Mat, Turkey contributor and researcher on media freedom in Europe for OBC Transeuropa; Ash Telli Aydemir, Research Fellow at the Locating Media PhD programme of the University of Siegen and supervisor of the project "Mapping Funds: Digital Mapping of Support Networks for at risk scholars"; and İlkay Yılmaz, former Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Political Science at Istanbul University and Associate Fellow at the

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4 Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York, Pantheon, 1978.

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, and signatory of the Academics for Peace petition. At the time of the conference, none of the speakers were living in Turkey and all were engaged in research projects looking at media and academic freedom. Indeed, as was highlighted in the introduction, the question of academics in exile and the presence of a growing Turkish diaspora, based mainly but not exclusively in Europe, has been fundamental for the creation of solidarity networks, both for academics forced into exile and for those not allowed to leave the country.

The assault on academic and media freedom has worsened significantly after the coup attempt, though signs of a deterioration in the governance of universities and in the media environment had already begun to show in previous years. In the words of Fazıla Mat, who presented her *Special dossier on Media Freedom in Turkey*: “Despite this problematic background, the bloody attempted coup that took place in July 2016 represented an unprecedented turning point for Turkey’s media, as well as for its political, economic and socio-cultural landscapes. The country’s media environment was involved in the massive purge carried out during the two-year state of emergency”.<sup>5</sup> The criminalisation of journalists was done in accordance with the letter of the law, because criminal investigations have become the most crucial element of the government’s silencing strategy.<sup>6</sup> In this context, and given the high numbers of arrests, pre-trial detention and court cases involving media workers, she explained that monitoring trials and keeping track of the legal processes has become a fundamental task. International solidarity has also proved to be crucial. Mat mentioned several initiatives launched by the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and the International Press Institute (IPI) as well as temporary relocation programmes for Turkish journalists under threat. Mat also pointed out that social platforms and digitalisation play an important role in breaking the censorship in Turkey, through an increasing number of news programmes or special broadcasts on social and political issues disseminated through social media and podcasts. However, Internet media have not been spared from attacks and censorship and a large number of websites — including Wikipedia — have been permanently blocked.

5 Mat, Fazıla; Vivona, Valentina. *Media Freedom in Turkey. Special Dossier*. Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OCBT)/European Centre for Press & Media Freedom (ECPMF), January 2019, p. 3. Available at: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/content/download/140558/1868793/version/8/file/Media-Freedom-in-Turkey.pdf> [Last access on 28 April 2020].

6 Ivi. 5.

There was a “uniquely authoritarian turn in the governance of universities” as well. Though there is a long tradition of contestation and curtailment of academic freedom in Turkey, after the coup attempt, the repression attained alarming peaks. Fifteen private universities have been closed down by decree laws for alleged links to the coup and as of late 2017, more than 5,800 academics of all ranks and from 118 universities had been dismissed without due process.<sup>7</sup> Many decree laws have targeted a specific group: Academics for Peace (AfP), a network initiated in 2012 to contribute to the Turkish-Kurdish peace negotiations from a scholarly perspective. In January 2016 this organisation signed a petition titled “We will not be party to this crime!”<sup>8</sup> In total, 549 AfP members have been removed from their posts and banned from public service, through dismissal, or forced resignation or retirement.<sup>9</sup> İlkey was one of them and gave detailed information about the judicial situation. However, Yılmaz and her colleagues are adamant in their rejection of any representations of themselves as victims, or any processes of victimisation. In defiance of victimising narratives, sharing their experience has been a way to denounce the repression, to make known the initiatives launched in Turkey and abroad and, not least, to use the opportunity as a general way to rethink academic practices and work, what Yılmaz called the “academic habitus”. She presented the activities of the Solidarity Academies (SoliAcads) and of the Off-University network. The SoliAcads are concrete experiments, in Turkey, to establish an alternative venue for education and scientific research.<sup>10</sup> Founded by dismissed members from AfP, SoliAcads are not only a spatial relocation,

7 Akdeniz, Yaman; Altıparmak, Kerem. *Turkey: Freedom of Expression in Jeopardy*. Pen International, March 2018, p. 39. Available at: [https://www.englishpen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Turkey\\_Freedom\\_of\\_Expression\\_in\\_Jeopardy\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.englishpen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Turkey_Freedom_of_Expression_in_Jeopardy_ENG.pdf) [Last access on 28 April 2020].

8 The petition is available on the Academics for Peace's website: <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/63> [Last access on 29 April 2020]. On Academics for Peace see also: Mat, Fazila. *Creare e praticare la resistenza: la situazione dell'università in Turchia dopo il tentato golpe e il caso degli Accademici per la pace*, OBC Occasional Paper, Giugno 2019. Available at: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/content/download/141726/1904635/version/6/file/Scarica-Creare+e+praticare+la+resistenza.pdf> [Last access on 29 April 2020].

9 The updated judicial situation of AfP is available at: <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/314> [Last access on 29 April 2020].

10 On Solidarity Academies see also: Erdem, Esra; Akin, Kamuran. “Emergent Repertoires of Resistance and Commoning in Higher Education: The Solidarity Academies Movement in Turkey”. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 118, 1 (2019), p. 145-163; and on the specific experience of the Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity, one of the most active SoliAcads: Bakrezer, Güven; Keskin Demirel, Derya; Yeşilyurt, Adem. “In Pursuit of an Alternative Academy: The Case of Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity”. *tripleC*, 16, 1 (2018), p. 234-240.

but a way to rethink academia as a space of critical thinking and knowledge communing. Off-University is a network established for and by persecuted and/or exiled academics from Turkey.<sup>11</sup> It offers an occasion to participate in online education through a distance learning programme — mostly supported and recognised by European institutions — which includes people from all parts of the world who have been forced to give up their work, research or studies due to war or political persecution. In Yılmaz's words SoliAcads and Off-University are trying "to also dismantle other factors limiting academic freedom besides state intervention, such as the commodification of higher education and the political and social fault lines of the hegemonic order inscribed in academic life".

Lastly, Aslı Telli presented the Mapping Funds project, a collaborative digital mapping effort to analyse diversified support networks and funds attributed to at-risk scholars in Turkey.<sup>12</sup> The aim of the project is to generate a route map for scholars and to discuss the role institutions or grassroots movements can play in enhancing open grounds for scientific knowledge. Telli explained that the project is constantly raising sensitive questions concerning, e.g: the respect of confidentiality measures in the collection and evaluation of data; the condition of precariousness connected to the availability of funds, and human dignity for people forced to look for funds.

The roundtable discussion — followed by a stimulating and lively Q&A session — was not only completely coherent with the focus of the SESAMO Conference dedicated to *Paths of resistance in the Middle East and North Africa*, but contributed to debates on the question of academic freedom and more generally of freedom of expression in the MENA region; a topic which deserves attention, awareness and responsiveness by the academic community.

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11 For more information on Off-University see: <https://off-university.com/en-US> [Last access on 29 April 2020].

12 See also: Telli Aydemir, Aslı; Karabulut, Dilek; Gümüş Hazal. *Mapping Funds and Support Networks for At-Risk Scholars: the Case of Turkey*. June 2018. Available on the Mapping Fund's website at the link: <http://mappingfunds.com/en-US/Articles/Detail/Executive-Report-Mapping-Funds-Project-June-2018> [Last access on 29 April 2020].

**Report on the Two-Section Roundtable *The Research Work: Challenges and Perspectives***

**Part 1: Fieldwork, Hyper-Productivity and Psychological Pressure: Coping Strategies among Doctoral Researchers**

**M. STELLA MORGANA, LEIDEN UNIVERSITY**

Isolation, requests for hyper-productivity and overwhelming workloads, along with uncertainty about the future, generate a sense of precariousness and vulnerability among doctoral researchers. Trapped between funding cuts and competition in an increasingly neoliberal academia, those who conduct fieldwork are experiencing even more difficulties. The purpose of the roundtable titled *Fieldwork, hyper-productivity and psychological pressure: coping strategies among early-career researchers*, that I organised and chaired at SESAMO Conference in Turin on 2 February, 2019, was to enhance the debate on an (often) neglected topic, particularly in Italy, despite few exceptions.<sup>13</sup> By bringing together diverse experiences, the discussion explored the psychological implications of research on the field. Furthermore, it tried to analyse several coping strategies employed by PhD candidates. The goal was to start building and trekking new paths of collective resistance against shared sources of anxiety and distress. In particular, it dealt with the search for common coping strategies to keep mental balance in our universities, which are transforming from sites for knowledge production into mere production-oriented workplaces. The roundtable originated from the often silenced and self-censored necessity to turn our attention on this system of production we *de facto* belong to.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the institutions we work in are increasingly inclined to either minimise the suffering from the *culture of speed*<sup>15</sup> imposed to researchers, or to frame the surge in mental breakdowns as being an individual issue. This means that mental health and precariousness are often understood as being utterly disconnected from the working environment.

13 See Palazzi, Franco. "Accademia e Depressione". *Il Tascabile*. 24 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.iltascabile.com/societa/accademia-e-depressione/> [Accessed 13 October 2019]. Peretti, Luca. "Accademia e Depressione?". *Il Lavoro Culturale*. 3 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.lavoroculturale.org/accademia-depressione-replica-palazzi/> [Accessed 13 October 2019].

14 Gill, Rosalind. "Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia". In: *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*. Flood, R.; Gill, R. (eds). London, Routledge, 2009.

15 Berg, Maggie; Seeber, Barbara K. *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016.



Alessandro Tinti, a PhD candidate in International Relations at Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa, opened the discussion by sharing his experience in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where he conducted qualitative field research on the intersections of identity politics and extractive regimes. Tinti exhorted to focus our gazes at research as a simultaneous process of personal and collective discovery. Drawing from his two-year-long ethnographic expertise, he pointed out that the current academic practices to evaluate PhDs' progress are mainly constructed to reward those who apply quantitative methodologies, and therefore, those who better meet the hyper-productivity standards. Indeed, the feeling of being left behind in the competition race, standing for the famous *publish or perish* motto, produces a sense of discouragement. What emerged from Tinti's speech was the direct relation between precarious work contexts on one side, and psychological pressure as a predictor of early-career researchers' mental health issues on the other.

Developing her arguments along the same lines of reasoning, Irene Tuzi — a PhD Candidate in Social Sciences at Sapienza Università di Roma and Humboldt University of Berlin — tightened the focus on university *lacas*. She stressed the harmful combination of two elements: first, the lack of in-depth methodology preparation to face field-related difficulties; second, deficient support that some advisors provide. As her PhD project dealt with the impact of forced displacement on gender roles and gender relations among Syrian families (both in Germany and Lebanon), she had to personally cope with: 1) the challenge of absorbing the discomfort of the people interviewed; 2) research limitations, due to the political context and sensitivity of the topic. These experiences turned into chronic anxiety and stress, that was generated by the impossibility of meeting all approaching deadlines, while experiencing mental exhaustion. Moreover, these feelings were strengthened by a sense of loneliness and isolation coming from both her partner universities.

Furthermore, the roundtable ranged from fieldwork experiences to deadlocks of going back home. Rassa Ghaffari, a PhD student in Sociology at the Università di Milano Bicocca, described the phases she had to pass through when she returned to Milan after researching gender roles' transformations among Tehran's youth for almost one year. She shared the emotional distress she suffered once she had to travel physically, mentally and academically from and to the countries she belongs to, as a holder of both Iranian and Italian citizenship. Ghaffari also warned the audience about the signs of the so-called *reverse culture shock*, that are mainly relegated in private conversations or hidden in university corridors among colleagues. The process of readjusting herself to what had turned to be a stranger context took time and efforts, that she was not ready for. Once again, university as a site of knowledge production and

as a workplace somehow failed to give her support. Beyond a mere exchange focusing on individual and personal experiences, the roundtable opened a broader debate on researchers' wellbeing. First, the importance of graduate students and early career researchers' mental health is often underestimated, albeit this is a shared and very much hidden feeling among academics. Second, gazing at anxiety or depression as being either personal problems or mainly signs of weakness, most universities are trying to face the emerging difficulties with individual counselors. As most of the pressure comes from the fear to fail, this — we argued during the roundtable — is to be regarded through another framework: that of precariousness. The latter, along with the issues raised during our debate, belongs to an increasingly neoliberal model of academia. Therefore, they are collective, not individual. They are political and not merely emotional. In conclusion, we agreed on the urge to push the critique forward and create a space in between methodology courses and psychological tutoring or support.

**Part II: Middle Eastern and North African Studies in Italy:  
A Mapping Project by SESAMO**

**DARIO MICCOLI, CA' FOSCARI, UNIVERSITY OF VENICE**

What is the state of the art of Middle Eastern and North African Studies in the Italian universities? How do scholars work in this field? What are the challenges and opportunities for the future? These are the questions from where SESAMO started a project of mapping Middle Eastern and North African Studies in Italy, presented in a roundtable during the 14<sup>th</sup> SESAMO Conference, held in Turin in January 2019. A few months earlier, in June 2018, SESAMO members — as well as anyone working in the areas represented by the association — were asked to provide, by email and on a voluntary basis, the following data: the university or research institution where one has a permanent or temporary post; his/her academic field (*settore scientifico-disciplinare*) according to the Ministry of Education and Research; the research and teaching areas and the career level. A workinggroup — coordinated by Dario Miccoli, together with Rosita Di Peri (Università di Torino), Matteo Legrenzi (Ca' Foscari Università di Venezia), Daniela Pioppi (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"), Alberto Tonini (Università di Firenze), Massimiliano Trentin (Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna) — elaborated these data, also looking at similar projects conducted in other academic settings: for example the *Livre blanc des études françaises sur le Moyen-Orient et les mondes musulmans*, published in 2014.<sup>16</sup> The data collected, even though they did not give a complete overview,

<sup>16</sup> GIS du CNRS Moyen-Orient et Mondes Musulmans (ed.). *Livre blanc des études françaises sur le Moyen-Orient et les mondes musulmans*. September 2014. Available at: <http://>

allowed to have a clearer picture of Middle Eastern and North African Studies in Italy. Based on that, we can say that 133 scholars are active in this field in the Italian universities and research centres: 74 in the L-OR macro-sector (27 in Arabic and Arab Studies), 28 in the SPS macro-sector (20 in the sectors *Storia e Istituzioni dell'Asia* or *dell'Africa*), about 30 in other macro-sectors ranging from anthropology to economics, from law to geography. As regards the career level, the mapping gives a revealing picture of the recruitment problems of the Italian academia: only 12 full professors, 45 associate professors, 15 fixed-term (*a tempo determinato*) and 22 permanent (*a tempo indeterminato*) researchers, about 30 between adjunct professors and postdoctoral fellows. A rosier picture concerns gender equality: out of 133 scholars, 77 are women and 56 men. 51% work in universities in northern Italy, 19% in central Italy and 30% in the South.

During the roundtable, it was mentioned how SESAMO already in 1999, and always in Turin, had organised a workshop dedicated to the state of the art of Arab-Muslim Studies in Italy, which resulted in the publication of a special issue of the journal *Quaderni Asiatici* in 2001.<sup>17</sup> Since then, many things have changed in the Italian universities and in our areas of study. As we know, in Italy the study of Middle Eastern and North African societies began more than a century ago, with the development of the so-called “Orientalist” disciplines. During the 1980s, 1990s and even more so in the 2000s, the training of “Area” scholars with specialised skills both in terms of languages and of methodology, allowed for a greater diversification of the approaches through which the Middle East and North Africa can be studied. Finally, there have been other changes that played a role in modifying our profession: the Gelmini university reform (2008-2011), the merging of some academic disciplines (*settori scientifico-disciplinari*), the growing number of scholars, especially young ones, who work abroad and — last but not least — the new procedures for the *National Scientific Qualification*. With reference to young researchers, during the roundtable some noted that those who do a PhD on issues related to the Middle East, often are enrolled in doctoral programmes where there are no or few tutors capable of following them from a disciplinary point of view, or of giving help during fieldwork. This, in addition to creating problems to the doctoral students, leads to a marginalisation of the “Area” experts and downplays the relevance and visibility of the research fields in which they work.

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majlis-remomm.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Livre\_blanco\_Orient\_septembre2014.pdf [Accessed 27 May 2020].

17 See the special issue “Giornata di studi sul Mondo arabo-musulmano in Italia (Atti dell'incontro organizzato dalla Società di Studi sul Medio Oriente — SESAMO, Torino, 9 ottobre 1999)”. *Quaderni Asiatici*. 58-59 (2001).

Finally, the discussion underlined the need, for SESAMO and in general for the Italian Middle Eastern Studies, to continue on the path of internationalisation in an increasingly globalised academic world where, however, funds are often very limited. For this reason, it is to be hoped that in the near future Middle Eastern Studies — now divided, in a rigid and partly unnatural way, between a myriad of academic fields — will succeed in obtaining more space in the academia, especially at those top levels that have more chances to intervene on recruitment policies and in the dialogue with the Ministry of University and Research.

Despite the growing importance of the areas with which SESAMO and its members deal, and an increased interest of the general public for the Middle East and North Africa, Middle Eastern Studies are still struggling to be fully recognised. At the same time, even though divided in many sectors and with problems common to other disciplines, the scholars that SESAMO has mapped testify the vivacity of the field and the wish to continue developing it in the years to come.

**REVIEWS. *A Beginners' Guide to the Field of Kurdish Studies***

Francesco Marilungo, PhD at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter

In recent times a surge in interest about the Kurds has been registered both at the non-academic and scholarly level. Crucial events such as the socio-political and military rise of the Kurds in northern Syria, the failed peace-process in Turkey that brought along a recrudescence in the conflict between the PKK and the state or, for example, the outcome and the consequences of the independence referendum in the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq held in 2017, have stimulated a growth of attention on the Kurds and on Kurdish issues. The decade that has just ended has witnessed the expanding importance of regional powers such as Turkey, Iran and the Gulf states in the Middle East, but has also certified the ineludible prominence of the Kurds and of various Kurdish organisations in the complicate regional jigsaw. This has spurred a burgeoning corpus of popular publications on the Kurds, whilst it has solidified, stabilised and refreshed a scholarly corpus that was already thriving in recent years, at least since the early 2000s. Here we would like to mention the most recent and relevant international publications with a broad and general approach, with the aim of providing the essential tools for anyone interested in entering the flourishing field of Kurdish Studies.

In the last five years alone, many valuable academic contributions have been made with crucially important publications. Two multidisciplinary edited

volumes offer undoubtedly the most recent and comprehensive compendium on the field of Kurdish Studies: *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (Oxford University Press, 2017) edited by Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Shareef, and the *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (Routledge, 2018) edited by Michael Gunter. The two volumes (altogether more than a thousand pages) feature in total 68 articles signed by perhaps the most influential and established scholars of the field. Examining these two volumes would allow the novice to familiarise with the imperative names of the contemporary scholarship on the Kurds; together these two publications serve the reader with a sweeping overview of the state of the art. They also shed light over the vast fundamental bibliography that has growingly piled-up in recent years in all different aspects of the field and that represents many different approaches to the matter. A year later, has come out the book *Methodological Approaches in Kurdish Studies: Theoretical and Practical Insights from the Field* (Lexington Books, 2019) edited by Bahar Bahser, Mari Toivanen, Begum Zorlu and Yasin Duman. It collects many contributions and reasons, from many angles and perspectives, about methodologies of fieldwork research in Kurdish areas of Turkey, Iran, Syria, Iraq and diaspora, addressing issues of security and trust with research participants.

Michael Gunter's *The Kurds: A Modern History* (Wiener Publishers, 2016) updates twenty years later the classic on Kurdish history, namely David MacDowall's *A Modern History of the Kurds* (I.B. Tauris, 1996), whilst in the year 2020 the *Cambridge History of the Kurds* edited by Hamit Bozarslan, Veli Yadirgi and Cengiz Gunes is expected to be published. Cengiz Gunes himself has recently provided a quick and agile introduction to the Kurdish political landscape in the framework of the Middle Eastern shifting balances: *The Kurds in a New Middle East: The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict* (Palgrave, 2019).

While the political and geopolitical studies took the lead in the field of Kurdish Studies, recently scholars have also strived to shift the focus on cultural studies. Here we mention *Rediscovering Kurdistan's Cultures and Identities: The Call of the Cricket* (Palgrave, 2018) edited by Joanna Bocheńska, a volume that discusses Kurdish cultural production in many different aspects. In 2015, Özlem Belçim Galip has provided a broad overview of Kurdish literature in kurmanji dialect with *Imagining Kurdistan. Identity, Culture and Society* (I.B. Tauris 2015), looking in particular at the ways in which literature portrays the geographical belonging to the — absent — homeland and following the precious insights provided by a slightly more dated but crucial source of the field: Maria T. O'Shea, *Trapped Between Map & Reality: Geography and Perceptions of Kurdistan* (Routledge, 2004). A similar attention to Kurdish cultural production and imagination has been paid in 2016 by Wendelmoet

Hamelink in the book *The Sung Home. Narrative, Morality and the Kurdish Nation* (Brill, 2016), which focuses on the oral literary tradition of the *deng-bêjs*, the Kurdish singer-poets. Worth quoting on this regard is also the 2016 special issue of the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* entitled “Kurdish Media and Culture in the Shifting Middle East” and edited by Kevin Smets and Ali Fuat Şengül.

The year 2013 has seen the birth of the field-specific journal *Kurdish Studies* that has now reached its 7<sup>th</sup> volume. Worth nothing here are the special issues dedicated to Kurdish linguistics (2014), the Kurdish diaspora (2015), the Yezidis (2016) and the women in Kurdistan (2018). In 2018 Lexington Books has launched a book series entitled *Kurdish Societies, Politics, and International Relations* that has already 6 titles published and 4 scheduled as forthcoming in 2020, with themes ranging from geopolitics to social ethnographies, from media studies to political sciences. This year Brill has also announced the *Brill Kurdish Studies* book series with an interdisciplinary approach to the field but the first title is yet to be announced. In 2019 I.B. Tauris and the LSE Middle East Centre have also inaugurated a collection with already five titles ranging from politics to theatre performance.

Traditionally the bulk of the scholarly attention has generally been devoted to the Turkish and Iraqi parts of the Kurdish inhabited regions; there are several sources about these two specific regions that can be found in the bibliographies of the sources quoted above. However, the political rise of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria since 2012 and the military confrontation between the Kurdish YPG/YPJ armed groups and the so-called Islamic State, have unquestionably contributed to attract the international attention on the Kurdish dossier with a marked focus on the Syrian case. Previously, the historical reference on Syrian Kurdistan was (and in many respects still is) Jordi Tejel's *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Routledge, 2008). The astonishing and in some respects unexpected progress of the Kurds of Syria has brought the historian Michael Gunter to entitle his 2014 book: *Out of Nowhere. The Kurds of Syria in peace and war* (Hurst&Company). Since then other valuable and updated contribution have been made, sometimes published by non-academic publishers but of scientific relevance to the specific field of Syrian Kurdish Studies. We refer here to Thomas Schmidinger's *Rojava. Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds* (Pluto Press, 2018) and *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in the Afrin Region of Rojava* (PM Press, 2018); Harriett Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg's *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

These are only a bunch of recent titles and for obvious reasons of space, many more have been left out. Not to mention the hundreds of articles published in academic journals. However, we believe that moving from these few references, the inquiring reader can find important leads to inform his or her own research.