Chapter

SWEDEN AS A GRAVITATION CENTER FOR THE KURDS – DIAPORA FORMATION AND TRANSNATIONAL RELATIONS

Khalid Khayati*
Linkoping University, Linkoping, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the general social and political conditions of diasporan Kurds in Sweden who have created considerable networks and organizations that function for them not only as a substantial means of integration in their residing society, but also as genuine transnational institutions that aim, in one way or another, to affect the politics of their former homelands. The formation and development of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden depends on two principal factors: the social and political composition of the Kurdish population in Sweden which shows an exceedingly diversified diaspora and the advantageous Swedish political climate which promotes diasporic and transnational activities among the Kurds. Certain scholars regard Sweden as a center of gravity where the development of the Kurdish culture, Kurdish politics and generally speaking the Kurdish identity is considered as a response to those repressive policies that the dominant states have imposed on the Kurds throughout the years. In this regard, the diasporic and transnational

*E-mail: khalid.khayati@liu.se
activities among the Kurds in Sweden partly transfer the Kurdish nationalist movement to a transnational and de-territorial context.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of January 2006 the former Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) Nordic Representative, Taha Barwari, was the host of the first Kurdish Gala in Stockholm. The Gala, which was attended by numerous Kurdish and Swedish celebrities, gave Mr. Barwari an opportunity to appraise not only a group of leading Kurds who for years had been successful in various areas of Swedish life, but also native Swedes who had in many ways taken an interest in the Kurds and publicly promoted their cause.

At this event the famous Swedish actor Gösta Ekman was given an honorary award by the jury of the Gala for “shedding light on a matter which was cast in total darkness until the 1990s and giving the Kurdish people his support when they needed it the most”. Fredrik Malm, former president of the Liberal Youth of Sweden and a parliamentarian deputy at present, was another Swedish personality who was awarded for “his public dedication to the Kurdish question and promoting the Kurdish people’s rights in different arenas with striking empathy and understanding”.

In addition, the jury decided to name the Swedish pop idol Darin Zanyar “Kurd of the Year 2005”, stressing the Kurdish teenager’s conspicuous achievements in the domain of pop music and also his ability to “introduce the Kurds on a new arena and to inspire through his success a whole new generation to take pride in their origins.” The jury noted that Darin Zanyar “carried his Kurdish inheritance with authenticity and simplicity and directed the interest of his audience towards his two countries, Kurdistan and Sweden”. Darin’s award was presented by Morgan Johansson, the former Swedish Minister of Public Health and Social Services.

In his speech to the participants at the Gala, Taha Barwari celebrated the “successful achievements” of Kurds in Sweden and expressed his gratitude to the Swedish friends of Kurdistan: “Tonight we celebrate and honor Kurdistan in Sweden, and Sweden in Kurdistan.”

This Swedish–Kurdish juxtaposition opens up a multidimensional and sophisticated transnational social field. By observing this transnational social field closely we can conclude that Kurdish diaspora in Sweden is a clear expression of the practice of transborder citizenship, as these immigrants live their lives across the borders of two or more nation-states and as they
simultaneously participate in the normative regimes, socio-cultural networks and political processes of Sweden and Kurdistan (Glick Schiller 2005).

The Kurdish Gala, which was praised by several Kurdish websites, radio and TV stations, was not unique. It was one among hundreds of such events that have given expression to the experience of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden living across the borders of two or more nation-states. Hence, the cultural, social and political intersections and interactions of Sweden and Kurdistan create a transnational social space where the process of Kurdish claim-making for “participating in the normative regime, legal and institutional system and political practices” (Pries 1999) gives rise to what Eva Østergaard-Nielsen calls the “dual political agenda” (Østergaard-Nielsen 2000) that the Kurdish diaspora maintain in both Swedish and Kurdish politics.

The establishment of a Kurdish de facto state in northern Iraq has, with its power of attraction, drastically accelerated the process of transnational exchanges and the practice of transborder citizenship among Kurds in Sweden. The nature and the order of these exchanges range from significant political and cultural performances to regular social and economic activities. Diplomacy, political demonstrations, electoral campaigns, commemoration and celebration of specific national days, arrangement of festivals, associative performances, music production, publication of literature, newspapers and reviews, radio and TV broadcasting, cyberspace activities, money remittances, and so forth are among the activities that constitute the observable forms of social relationships and transactions that the Kurdish diaspora population performs in Sweden. The establishment of a direct flight between Stockholm and Irbil greatly facilitates transnational exchanges between the two socio-geographic entities.

Living in Sweden today does not in any way mean that the strongly politicized Kurdish diaspora is away from home. In other words, transnational relationships among diasporan Kurds in Sweden creates a new notion of home, which can be imagined beyond any assimilationist form of state belongingness as it is lived both here and there. This chapter intends therefore to discuss the formation of institutions connected with the diaspora and the emergence of transnational networks and organizations among the Kurds in Sweden. The specific Swedish context has provided positive opportunities for Kurds to build their diaspora organizations and develop their culture and language. A number of leading personalities in political and cultural life have emerged under the specific conditions of diaspora formation in Swedish society.

The Kurdish diasporan population does not constitute a homogeneous group in Sweden, as it displays a tangible diversity and disparity in terms of
origin, political background, social basis, gender, age, religiousness, education level, migration trajectory, duration of settlement, access to the labor market, nature of occupation, housing condition, family situation, and so forth. Like many other immigrant and refugee groups, the Swedish Kurds stand for multifaceted social, cultural and political experiences that may attract the attention of those who wish to carry out sociological studies on this population.

However, these experiences can be negative as well as positive, embracing for instance the position of Kurds in the Swedish labor market and housing areas, and the experience of exclusion, racism and discrimination, as well as the chance to maintain and expand their culture, language and literature, establish their transnational networks. The focus of this chapter will be the positive aspects of the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden.

1. DIASPORAN KURDS IN SWEDEN: ARRIVAL AND SETTLEMENT

The presence of the Kurds on Swedish soil is a new phenomenon. The arrival of the Kurds to Western Europe in general and in Sweden in particular can largely be explained by the experience of modern immigration processes, which essentially follow the classical North–South pattern of immigration. Along with those Kurds who came to Sweden as regular immigrants, a large number of Kurds have arrived in this country as asylum seekers or under family reunion. However, as part of the post-war immigration and refugee influx, many Kurdish immigrants and refugees arrived in Sweden together with many other settled immigrant and refugee populations. They have contributed to the emergence of a new social and political reality in the country. The general conditions of diasporan Kurds in Sweden are both positive and negative as they are subjected to the experiences of social exclusion, ethnic discrimination and xenophobia at the same time as they develop a considerable range of diasporic structures.

The post-war Kurdish immigrants provided needed manpower for the booming industry of Western Europe. Germany was the country that received the largest number of Kurds at that time. As was indicated in previous chapters, the number of Kurds in Germany today is estimated to be 400,000 among the total of over 2 million people originating in Turkey (van Bruinessen 1999: 7).
The first groups of Kurdish immigrants arrived in Sweden after 1965. This group came mainly from Kurdish towns and villages of central Anatolia in Turkey. After the international oil crisis of 1973, which put an end to labor immigration, Kurds continued to arrive in large numbers in Western European countries. This time it was the Kurdish women and children who made use of family reunion to join their husbands and fathers in the new homelands. Furthermore, the arrival of thousands of Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees along with many other refugee groups in Sweden can be seen as a part of Sweden’s post-war history (Berruti et al. 2002: 165).

In 1973 labor immigration to Sweden from non-Scandinavian countries ceased. Accordingly, Sweden entered a new immigration phase, characterized by the arrival of a large number of asylum seekers mainly from Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and also Kurdistan. Throughout the new immigration era, which runs from 1973 until the present day, thousands of people have arrived in Sweden mainly under family reunion, essentially those families whose “pioneers” had been already accepted as refugees (Westin 1993).

Kurdish refugees arrived in Sweden from all parts of Kurdistan and from other areas such as Lebanon and the Caucasus. The first group of Kurdish political refugees came to Sweden after the military coup in Turkey in 1971. The pace of arrival of Kurdish refugees from Turkey accelerated after the state of emergency was declared in 1978 and war broke out in the Kurdish areas in 1984. Kurdish immigrants and refugees from the Turkish part of Kurdistan most probably form the largest group within the Kurdish community in Sweden (Berruti et al. 2002: 166).

The next largest group of Kurdish refugees in Sweden comes from the Iraqi part of Kurdistan. They essentially arrived after the Gulf War and the breakdown of the Iraqi administration in Kurdistan in 1991. The outbreak of the civil war between Kurdish groups in the first half of the 1990s, which coincided with the increasing ease of global communications and contacts and the emergence of well-developed Kurdish transnational networks, is an important factor that facilitated the movement of the Kurdish refugees across the nation-state borders (Berruti et al. 2002: 166).

The arrival of asylum seekers from Iraqi Kurdistan continued during the late 1990s and the first years of the new millennium. Beginning in April 2002, the Swedish government decided that Kurds who originate from the Kurdish autonomous zone in northern Iraq are not considered to be in need of protection in Sweden. However, due to the lack of cooperation of neighboring countries and the fact that the Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq is not internationally recognized as an independent political entity, the rejected
Kurdish asylum seekers could not be sent back to Iraqi Kurdistan. As a result, they were forced to remain either in refugee camps or to live with their relatives throughout the country until further notice from the Swedish National Migration Board.

As for the Kurdish refugees from the Iranian part of Kurdistan, the first group arrived in Sweden at the beginning of 1980s. The Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran and the Iraq–Iran war of 1980–88 were among the factors that forced many Kurds to leave their native villages and towns (cf. Wahlbeck 1999; Alinia 2004; Berruti et al. 2002). As neighboring countries such as Iraq and Turkey were not reliable or safe, many of these Kurds ended up in Europe (van Bruinessen 2000). A considerable number of people who had previously been active in various Kurdish oppositional organizations came to Sweden as quota refugees (Berruti et al. 2002).

Syrian Kurds are less numerous than other Kurdish groups. They have sporadically arrived in Sweden in small numbers since the 1980s. They are motivated to flee Syria mainly by the denial of their citizen rights, forced displacement and the politics of arabization that the Syrian government imposes on the Kurdish population in the country (cf. Wahlbeck 1999; van Bruinessen 2000; Alinia 2004).

Since the host countries of Kurdish immigrants and refugees register them as Iranian, Iraqi, Turkish or Syrian citizens, it is scarcely possible to estimate the true number of Kurds in Sweden. However, according to popular estimates, the number of Kurds is between 60,000 and 70,000. This “statistical invisibility” creates a sense of frustration among the Kurds in the European countries, as many Kurds see their representation in the national statistics of countries of residence as a useful means of identity making, not least because such representation is perceived as a way to distinguish Kurds from Persian, Arabs and Turks.

It is worth stressing that their invisibility in national statistics has also paradoxically functioned as a “line of demarcation” that strengthens the self-assertiveness and diasporic identity among the Kurds. The well-developed Kurdish associative life is a significant indication of the fact that the Kurds’ cultural and political activities do not observe the official lines of nationality that they had to follow prior to their settlement in Sweden.

The majority of Kurds in Sweden reside in larger cities such as Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. However, a significant number of Kurds live in medium-sized cities and towns like Örebro, Linköping, Karlstad, Västerås and Eskilstuna. During recent years, the Kurds have exhibited a
strong tendency to move toward Stockholm, mainly to access the more dynamic labor market in the capital.

2. BEING BOTH HERE AND THERE: SIMULTANEOUS POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

The political effects of transnational connections surrounding contemporary migration also have far-reaching consequences for the Kurds. Millions of Kurds have been on the move, voluntarily or otherwise, both in the Kurdish areas and in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. There has also been a considerable movement of Kurds from the Middle East toward Western Europe, North America, Australia and other parts of the globe (van Bruinessen 1999). In diaspora, Kurds sustain transnational connections that have considerable economic, social, cultural and political effects on their collective lives and on their multiple localities in which they reside. In this respect, Sweden plays a considerable role.

In Sweden, Kurds try through associational activities, radio and TV broadcasting, literature and music production, arrangement of festivals, and so forth to preserve and develop their ethnic and diasporic identity. Transnational activities among Kurds are more conspicuous in Sweden than in other European countries, not only because of the presence of a relatively large and highly educated Kurdish refugee community in this country but also because the Swedish context has so far been especially favorable toward the Kurdish diaspora. At present, after Iraqi Kurdistan Sweden is the country where the most advanced Kurdish cultural activities take place (cf. van Bruinessen 2000; Berruti et al. 2002).

A significant number of authors, novelists, poets, politicians, political leaders, intellectuals, scholars, artists, musicians, singers and journalists have successively arrived in Sweden since the 1970s. Accordingly, the number of Kurdish writers in Sweden has clearly surpassed the number who remains in Kurdistan (Ahmadzadeh 2003). According to Hjertén, the presence of such a Kurdish intelligentsia has created a specific situation where Sweden willy-nilly is now an extended Kurdistan (Hjertén 1994). Today, there are clear indications that the number of Kurds who interact between their former and new societies continues to increase.
For instance, in a supplement from April 27–May 3 2006, the prominent Swedish paper *Dagens Nyheter* devoted many pages to introducing a number of Kurdish celebrities and personalities who appear on TV and radio programs, in the theatre, in artistic and musical shows and also in newspapers and political life in Sweden. “Kurd in the City” was the front-page title of this supplement, in which the reporter Anders Forsström and Sofia Runarsdotter lined up many Kurdish personalities such as Nalin Pekgul, Evin Rubar, Esref Okumus, Öz Nujen, Shan Atci, Zanyar Adami, Darin Zanyar, Sukran Kavak, Zian Zandi, Gulan Avci, Kurdo Baki, Jabar Amin, Dilba Demirbag, Dilsa Demirbag, Lawen Mohtadi, Khalid Saleh, Mustafa Can, and many others, while posing the question of why so many Kurds were in the limelight of the city.

According to the journalists, the Kurdish background of these personalities and their memory and experience of oppression play a considerable role in the “successes they achieved in Sweden”. The reporter repeatedly used the appellation *svenskkurd* (“Swede-Kurd”): perhaps a way to express the joint identity and the translocational positionality (Anthias 2002) of these personalities. It is worth noting that the greater part of them arrived in Sweden at a very young age, many years ago, together with their asylum- or job-seeking parents. By referring to the notion of transborder citizenship one can recognize that the performances of these Kurdish–Swedish elites occur within the frame of sophisticated transnational social fields (Glick Schiller et al. 1999) where their adoption of a double or multiple allegiance beyond the boundaries of a single nation-state enables them to permanently define and redefine their position in Swedish society at the same time as they participate in the general politics of Kurdistan.

The linguistic and cultural activities of diasporan Kurds are considered a compensatory alternative to the literary and cultural deprivation that results from the policy of denial and the censorship that are inflicted on the Kurds in their countries of origin. Thus, the Kurdish cultural revival in Sweden largely follows the dialectical relationship of exclusion–inclusion in the world of broadcasting relating to the “distribution and exercise of linguistic, political and cultural power” prevailing in Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq prior to the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish administration in 1992 (Hassanpour 1998).

Accordingly, the development of Kurdish broadcasting in diaspora is a reaction to majority censorship in the countries of origin (Hassanpour 1998). In other words, the emergence of the first Kurdish satellite television in Europe in 1995 and its struggle for survival against Turkish pressure is an
indication of such a dialectical relationship of denial and resistance (Vali 1998) that comes into view far from the Kurdish homeland in the diaspora. The compensatory attitude of diasporan Kurds toward the Kurdish language and literature can be seen as a part of the process of the ethnicization of political life of diasporan populations in post-industrial societies, appearing mostly within the framework of the so-called practice of long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1998).

Giving shelter to a number of Kurdish TV channels (Aso-Sat, Newroz TV, Komala TV, etc.), several local radios, three major umbrella organizations for cultural activities, three publication centers and a large number of web users, Sweden plays a considerable role in the crystallization of the Kurdish diaspora.

3. KURDISH ASSOCIATIONS IN SWEDEN: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Sweden accommodates a significant proportion of immigrants organized in associations. Currently, there are more than 50 national immigrant organizations and more than 1,000 local associations throughout the country which benefit from a relatively liberal immigrant policy. The principal objectives of Swedish policy with regard to immigrant associations are said to be preserving immigrants’ culture and identity, organizing educational courses and activities for refugees and immigrants and encouraging them to take part in the process of integration and political decision-making (Khayati 1998; Berruti et al. 2002).

Over the years Sweden has built up an allowance system that has made it possible for immigrants and refugees to develop a significant associational life in the country. The immigrant associations that are created on cultural and ethnic lines receive various subsidies from the state and municipalities. Alongside cultural and ethnic associations, a range of religious institutions obtain their share of allowances directly from the state. In addition to official aid, the Islamic associations finance some of their activities from the support that they receive not only from diverse donors but also some Islamic states in the Middle East. Financial support for these associations is estimated to exceed 15 million Swedish kronor a year (Berruti et al. 2002: 170).

The tradition of helping immigrant associations stems from the popular movements (folkrörelser) that characterized most of Sweden’s history in the 20th century. As an important and inherent feature of the nation-making
process in Sweden, the popular movements contributed much to the construction of the Swedish “home of the people” (*folkhemmet*).

The standard social movement was the trade union movement, which was inspired by the ideology of Swedish social democracy. During the construction of the welfare state these movements were an effective means for achieving ideological integration, political socialization and popular mobilization. Since 1975 they have been considered as useful tools for integrating immigrants into the society (see Ålund and Schierup 1991; Mulinari and Neergaard 2004).

As far as the Kurds are concerned, they found a favorable environment for creating and developing their social, ethno-cultural and professional associations. In this respect, groups of Kurdish youth, women, handicapped, writers, musicians, teachers, and so on have since the 1980s made use of this advantageous milieu for promoting their particular interests.

At the national level, there are three important Kurdish umbrella organizations. The Federation of Kurdish Associations in Sweden (*Kurdiska Riksförbundet i Sverige*), with its 42 affiliated associations, was created on the initiative of a number of associations and representatives of Kurdish political parties in 1981. It is the oldest and probably the largest Kurdish organization in the country, and sees itself as religiously and politically independent. Moreover, it considers itself unique, claiming to have 8,500 members representing different political standpoints from all parts of Kurdistan. Another major Kurdish umbrella institution is the Council of Kurdish Associations in Sweden (*Kurdiska Rådet i Sverige*), which was founded in 1994. This institution has more than 20 affiliated associations. The Kurdish Union in Sweden (*Kurdiska Unionen i Sverige*) is a newly constituted organization, which also operates at the national level; it has 25 affiliated associations in different Swedish municipalities (Berruti et al. 2002; Emanuelsson 2005).

The common characteristic of these associations is that they operate simultaneously on two different but correlated activity fields. In the first place, they follow the course of events in different part of Kurdistan and endeavor to reach a level of political mobilization that enables them to promote the so-called “politics of homeland”. For instance, celebrating *Newroz*¹ and other Kurdish cultural events, promoting Kurdish publishing and broadcasting, organizing political demonstrations, creating mixed (Swedish–Kurdish) political and social networks and platforms, carrying out diplomatic visits, attracting the attention of national and local media, and so forth, are among

---

¹ *Newroz* is the Kurdish New Year, which is celebrated on 21 March. More than a simple cultural event, it has been used by Kurds as a political manifestation over the years.
those activities that constitute the performance domains of the Kurdish associations in Sweden.

Simultaneously, they claim that they participate also in the political and social processes of the host country: a claim that they try to legitimize more often than not through maintaining an anti-racist and integrationist discourse and working for the good of the Kurdish people in Sweden. This “dual agenda” (Østergaard-Nielsen 2000) is a manifestation of the far-reaching transborder performances that the Kurdish population undertakes in Sweden. Many diasporan Kurds consider the practice of “long distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998) and participation in the receiving country’s political and social processes as necessary practices for creating a sense of togetherness and a diasporic identity.

As for the inconveniences that Kurdish associations experience in Sweden, it is important to stress that Kurdish social and cultural institutions suffer to a large extent from a lack of conformity and coordination, and from distance and division. For example, the Federation of the Kurdish Associations in Sweden has traditionally been supported by Kurds affiliated to Kurdistan’s Socialist Party and some other small political organizations in Turkey. This group of people has been known for their anti-PKK attitude, which was perhaps a good reason for them to ensure Kurdistan’s Democratic Party of Massoud Barzani continues to influence the organization.

Almost on the opposite side, the Council of Kurdish Associations in Sweden is for the most part dominated by the followers of the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK), while the Kurdish Union in Sweden is almost exclusively constituted of members of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDP-I). Accordingly, the Kurdish associations in Sweden encounter difficulties when it comes to cooperating and arranging mutual festivals. That each political party or association holds its own Newroz celebration (van Bruinessen 2000: 9) is the indication of the associational dispersion that diasporan Kurds experience in Sweden. Newroz is the only major Kurdish events with a global reach that can bring all Kurds together. Another prominent example is the widespread Kurdish uprising in diaspora protesting the capture of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999.

Moreover, the Kurdish associations in Sweden have been criticized for their lack of transparency and of gender equality. Although the Federation of Kurdish Associations in Sweden claims to be the mouthpiece of the Kurds in

---

2 Following the 2006’s split of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDP-I), which occurred in a political/military base in Iraqi Kurdistan, the activities of the Kurdish Union of Sweden were ceased.
Sweden, the majority of the Kurdish immigrants and refugees remain unaffiliated to it. In certain cases, unaffiliated people do not hesitate to turn to alternative organizations. However, the institutional division among diasporan Kurds in Sweden largely reflects the political landscape of the Kurdish homeland, which according to Vali has been highly fragmented during most of the post-war Kurdish national struggle (Vali 1998).

Today, the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq has had a positive effect, more and more diasporan Kurds perceive it as the only “liberated” part of the Kurdish homeland. As a result the institutional tensions among Kurds have been gradually reduced and replaced by a so-called “common sentiment” of togetherness.

A further challenge for the Kurdish associations in Sweden has been the issue of the integration of Kurds in the Swedish society. It has not been easy for them to champion integration. In a highly “ethnicized” and “politicized” (Wahlbeck 1999) associative environment, it is much easier for the Kurdish associations to carry out activities oriented toward their homeland of origin, while their chances of becoming genuine agencies of integration are considerably limited. Concretely, they are not in the position to frame substantial projects on issues, such as unemployment, segregation, and participation in the political processes, discrimination and racism, which affect the daily lives of Kurds in Swedish society. This inconsistency largely arises from the economic control that the Swedish state exercises over the immigrant associations and their activities. In this context, the associations become captive to a kind of “patron–client” relationship, which is inherent the Swedish subsidy system (cf. Ålund 1985; Ålund and Schierup 1991; Khayati 1998).

Moreover, these associations have been blamed for excluding younger people from their leading structures. In response to this inadequacy, younger Kurds have created their own organizations in order to, as they put it, “solve the problem of representation and manage their part of societal duties in their own ways”. The Kurdistan Student Federation in Sweden (KSF) was created in 2004 on the initiative of a number of students, almost exclusively from Iraqi Kurdistan. Currently, the KSF, together with the Social Democratic Students of Sweden (SSF), is working on a project called Baba Gurgur to build a youth center in Iraqi Kurdistan.

WeKurd is another organization that has been created mainly by second-generation Kurdish youths in Sweden from all parts of Kurdistan. This association paid special attention to the Swedish elections of 17 September 2006, particularly by establishing a sort of electoral roll of all Kurdish candidates who stood in the Swedish local, regional and national elections.
Moreover, within the frame of its election project *WeKurd* has sent questionnaires to all Swedish political parties, asking them how they perceive the Kurdish question and its various aspects. These youth associations have included an anti-racist and integrationist discourse in their programs, urging both Kurds and Swedes to work for integration. The *Network of the Young Kurds* is another emerging youth organization that houses nine different Kurdish young associations, while sustain a power presence in the social media, mainly in face book.

Additionally, the Association of Kurdish Students and Academics, the Association of Children’s Friends of Kurdistan, the Association for Kurdistan’s Environment and the Association of Kurdistan’s Hope are examples of other Kurdish formations that also operate within the frame of a “transnational social field” and give expression to the practice of transborder citizenship in various forms.

The above discussion shows that the Kurdish associational experience is not limited to the single act of attracting external attention to the Kurdish problem. It is also a manifestation of the practice of transborder citizenship that Kurds from both first and second generations maintain at the intersection between Sweden and Kurdistan.

4. **Simultaneous Political Participation**

As members of one of the most politicized diasporas in Sweden, Kurds have long displayed a high degree of interest regarding their participation in Sweden’s political processes. Even though it is impossible to establish reliable statistics on this activity, the presence of a relatively high number of Kurds in the country’s 2006 general elections, both as voters and candidates, is suggestive. There were about 33 Kurdish candidates for the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdag*), as many for the county councils, and more than 70 for the municipal councils.

Another Kurdish specificity discernible in these elections was that for the first time the Kurdish candidates at all three levels did not all belong to the leftist political parties. This is in sharp contrast to the organizational discourses and ideological convictions that the Kurdish electoral core has displayed in the country’s previous elections. The emergence of Kurdish candidates from non-leftist political formations has less to do with the so-called “end of ideology” (Nikolaev 1990) than with the discovery of various social, political and economic interests arising from daily life in Sweden.
The political events in the Middle East and the interventions of the United States that many diasporan Kurds in Sweden have observed as beneficial for the Kurdish people and its political movement partly explains the dispersion of interest across various Swedish political parties. Swedish leftist political organizations have shown that they were not very enchanted with the American-led occupation of Iraq. However, the Liberal Party (Folkpartiet) was one of the Swedish political formations that took considerable advantage of this Kurdish “ideological mutation”.

A sort of gender equality and generational shift was also noticeable among the Kurdish candidates. The Kurdish candidates, who consisted largely of women and young people, during election campaigns have made use of various Kurdish communication platforms such as radio and satellite TV stations, websites and chat rooms. Days before the election, the Kurdish satellite TV station Roj arranged an animated debate between three Kurdish candidates from Sweden, where each participant outlined her or his political agenda for Sweden along the lines of their respective political parties while all of them maintained a similar political discourse on Kurdish politics. Generally speaking, the candidates have notably managed to include both a Swedish integrationist and a Kurdish nationalist discourse in their election strategies.

It is worth noting that even in Iraqi Kurdistan ballot boxes were put at the disposal of those Kurdish visitors from Sweden who wanted to vote in the Swedish general elections.

Currently, there are five Kurdish deputies in the Swedish Riksdagen who entered the Parliament following the national elections of 2010. This number indicates a high level of representativeness considering the relatively limited number on the Kurdish diasporic community in Sweden.

Apart from in national elections, the Kurds exhibit other forms of political mobilization in Sweden. For instance, the massive participation of diasporan Kurds in the Iraqi elections, which took place in the end of 2005, is a further indication of how they “politicize” the transnational social fields between several Western societies when it was time to vote for their preferred political platform, the Kurdistan Alliance. On the elections day thousands of Kurds who had settled in several Western societies rushed to the polling stations in order, as many voters put it, “to enjoy their democratic rights in the European countries in order to exert influence on their own political destiny in Iraq”.

The preliminary unofficial results, which were communicated by the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, showed that the Kurdistan Alliance in Sweden had obtained more than 10,000 votes of a total of 18,000 Iraqi voters. The figure for the German Kurds was 19,640, which was the equivalent
of 71 percent of the entire vote of all Iraqis. Similar scores were reported from the Netherlands, where the presence of a strong Kurdish community was a clear guarantee for the Kurdistan Alliance to receive 70 percent of the votes. Participation among the diasporan Kurds in the Iraqi elections can be perceived as particularly strong given that the polling stations were set up in only a few countries and localities. This did not deter the Kurds, who wanted to go to the ballots en masse and by all means of transport from neighboring countries or other remote areas in the Scandinavian countries. In Scandinavia, Sweden was the only host country, with voters coming in from all neighboring countries (Khayati 2006).

The establishment of a Swedish Parliamentary Network for Kurdistan on 24 March 2006 by members of parliament from five Swedish political parties (the Green Party, the Social Democrats, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats and the Left Party) is a further indication of the Kurds’ practice of transborder citizenship in Sweden. At the network’s inaugural meeting, the Swedish MPs made a statement of intent declaring their commitment to Kurdistan’s progress and development. The network declared its intention to support democratic and pluralistic development in Kurdistan, work for closer ties between Sweden and Kurdistan, and promote dialogue, mutual understanding and exchange between Swedish politicians and democratic organizations and individuals from Kurdistan.

The network also declared its political neutrality and its openness to all members of the Swedish Parliament. Moreover, the Swedish Parliamentary Network for Kurdistan stressed that the ties between Sweden and Kurdistan were becoming ever closer. The Nordic Representation of the Kurdistan Regional Government expressed its appreciation of Swedish politicians’ efforts to strengthen these bonds.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter shows that diasporan Kurds in Sweden conceive of their diasporic identity mostly in positive terms while sustaining a more developed form of transnational practices. As for positive experiences among diasporan Kurds in Sweden, two major factors have been cited: the socially and politically diversified Kurdish population in Sweden and the advantageous Swedish political climate, which promotes diasporic institutions and transnational networks among the Kurds.
It has been shown that the multicultural Swedish climate plays a considerable part in assisting the Kurds to build up their diasporic organizations and develop their culture and language. Moreover, as was shown, the strong practice of “long-distance nationalism” and the transnational activities among Swedish Kurds reflects the presence of a relatively large educated Kurdish refugee population in Sweden, among whom the highest cultural activities take place (van Bruinessen 2000). This chapter has also discussed the fact that the Kurdish intelligentsia in Sweden has by means of their diasporic structures facilitated the partial deterritorialization and transnationalization of the Kurdish nationalist movement (cf. Wahlbeck 1999; van Bruinessen 1999; 2000; Emanuelsson 2005). The chapter has also discussed that Sweden has been a place in diaspora where many Kurdish cultural personalities have emerged. As for the presence of diasporan Kurds in Swedish political life, the Kurds display a high level of participation in the Swedish political processes. The prominent examples are the presence of the 33 Kurdish candidates in the 2006 general elections and more than 70 candidates for municipal councils and the entrance of the 5 Kurdish deputies in the Swedish Parliament following the national elections of 2010.

However, in Sweden, diasporan Kurds maintain a highly developed practice of transborder citizenship as they simultaneously participate in both Kurdish and Swedish political processes. Transnational connections between Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora appear to be more developed in Sweden than in any other west European country. Certain scholars like Martin van Bruinessen (1999; 2000) and Hashem Ahmadzadeh (2003) portray Sweden as a center of gravity for Kurdish culture and Kurdish politics.

REFERENCES


