Bahar Baser, *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts: A Comparative Perspective*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, 302 pp., (ISBN-10: 1472425626).

Building on a growing field of studies on Kurdish transnational political activism, Bahar Baser's *Diaspora and Homeland Conflicts* provides us with new insights into the engagements of people from Kurdish and Turkish descent with the ongoing conflict in Turkey. The book focusses particularly on the second generations' engagement in diaspora nationalism, comparing young Kurdish and Turkish activists' perceptions and experiences in Sweden and Germany.

Baser attempts to explain the puzzle as to why it is that second-generation Kurdish and Turkish "migrants" share an interest and a devotion to a political context that they have never experienced at first-hand. Yet, different from the works of Alinia (2004), Khayati (2008) and Eliassi (2013), her work doesn't focus on the question of belonging or the particular identity quests of young European Kurds (or Turks). Instead, Baser looks at how the Turkish-Kurdish conflict affects the interactions between the Turkish and Kurdish diasporas in Sweden and Germany; tries to assess how contentions are "inherited" and "reinterpreted" by the second generation, and what the impact of the hostlands' policies and politics is on the interactions between these diaspora groups.

Baser conducted ethnographic research in both countries, by means of interviews with the politically active German and Swedish Kurds and Turks, as well as participating in the activities of Turkish and Kurdish associational life in both Germany and Sweden. This was combined with an extensive literature review.

Sweden and Germany provide interesting cases, given the countries' differing integration policies, the constellations of their Kurdish and Turkish (immigrant) populations, as well as the divergence in openness vis-à-vis transnational political activism by ethnic minorities. Whereas Sweden has provided a refuge for many intellectually and politically engaged Kurds (from Turkey, but also Iraq, Iran and Syria or the different parts of "Kurdistan"), who entered the country as asylum seekers, and whereas Sweden is home to a relatively small Turkish community (from a working class background), Germany has a very mixed and large population of mainly Turkish and to a lesser extent Kurdish people who settled as labour migrants from the 1960s onwards. This was followed by an influx of Kurdish asylum seekers in the 1980s and 1990s. Approximately 80,000 to 100,000 people (including the second generation) from Turkey are living in Sweden, of which more than half is assumed to be Kurdish. In Germany the number of people from Turkey is estimated to be around 1.6 million. There are no statistics as to the ethnic background of

KURDISH STUDIES ARCHIVE
Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/9789004706590_009

Germany's immigrants from Turkey but Kurds are thought to make up one fourth of the population.

Whereas many second generation Kurds in Sweden were born into politically and/or culturally active families, in Germany many Kurds and Turks were born in apolitical working class families. Some of the young people born into these families became politicised over the course of the armed conflict between Turkey and the *Kurdistan Worker's Party* (PKK), as they lost relatives, saw the arrival of Kurdish refugees and/or were mobilised by (revolutionary) Turkish and Kurdish political parties such as the PKK. In addition to the politicised offspring of the first generation of labor migrants, second generation Kurds (and Turks) 'inherited' the political activism of their parents who sought political asylum in Germany.

Sweden and Germany, Baser shows, are marked by different power asymmetries between the Kurdish and Turkish diasporas. Sweden's multicultural policies allowed Kurdish immigrants to organise themselves politically along ethnic lines, strengthening their culture and language and integrating themselves into different Swedish political parties. This while downplaying the ideological differences amongst themselves, and acting in a more unified way. This is felt threatening for those Swedish Turks who identify strongly with their homeland and believe that Swedish politics are biased towards Turkey's Kurdish question. Indeed, some second generation Turks became politically active in response to the Kurdish diaspora politics in Sweden.

In Germany, Kurdish activists complained of the German authorities' compliance with the Turkish state due to the countries' economic interdependency and they face more difficulties in gaining recognition for their cause. Also, whereas Swedish Kurds assert their Kurdish identity, German Kurds, even those who are politically active, often downplay their Kurdishness in order not to obstruct the economic and societal relations with German Turks. Indeed, Germany is – just like Turkey – characterised by interdependency between people from Turkish and Kurdish descent. Consequently there is also room for joint initiatives, intermarriages and business amongst the two groups.

In Sweden the boundaries between both ethnic groups are drawn much sharper and reconfirmed through the discourses and the behavior of both Turks and Kurds. Thus while the homeland's minority-majority asymmetry is mirrored in the relationships between Kurds and Turks in Germany, it looks as if it has been reversed, in the Swedish case. One important reason for this is the multicultural policy of Sweden, which strengthens the ethnic identities, consequently leading Turks and Kurds to construct their own "ethnic fortresses" (p. 263). Indeed, Sweden encourages the organisation of migrants

along ethnic lines, allowing the main migrant organisations to become powerful interest groups (e.g. delivering block votes for political parties), and penetrate the "hostland's" political system more successfully. In Germany, where no such multicultural policies exist, migrant organisations pursue their own agendas and organise mostly around ideological differences rather than ethnicity. Swedish organisations obtain financial support based on the number of members and youth projects, and are encouraged to cooperate with other groups from the same ethnic background. Consequently they take a softer political tone so as to ensure as many followers as possible and thus increased government support. German organizations do not have such an incentive to pursue a politics-free agenda. The main fault lines between Turks and Kurds in Germany continue to be much more ideological than ethnic, and the mobilisation of groups also reflects the ideological discourses of the homeland political parties active in Germany.

The PKK's mobilisation is meaningful in that regard, as it has refrained from racism vis-à-vis the Turks as such, targeting the Turkish authorities and (para)military instead. That the politicised Kurdish youth in Germany defines itself as *Apocu* or followers of Abdullah Öcalan, rather than Kurdish nationalists, is probably most telling as to the difference between Swedish and German politically active Kurds. Baser also found active members of the Kurdish movement (in Germany) to have many Turkish friends and to identify themselves still as "Turkiyeli", meaning "from Turkey". The second generation interviewees testified of a strong internalisation of the contemporary discourse of HDP's democratic resolution (within the borders of Turkey) and they were found to synchronise their discourses, demands and expectations with the declarations of the PKK, HDP and Öcalan (p. 232). They "tolerate" or "ignore" Turks when they make nationalist comments because they believe Turks "not to be aware of the situation" or "blinded by nationalist ideology" or "ignorant about politics" (p. 234), contrary to the more radical stance of Swedish Kurds vis-à-vis Turkish nationalists.

Baser remarks that "although 50 years have passed and two or three new generations have followed, the Kurds are still perceived by the Turks in Germany as *subjects of the Turkish state*; therefore any demands they make to the German authorities – such as education in the Kurdish language, the right of association, or even matters involving the organisation of festivals – are not well-received by the majority of the Turkish community" (p. 241). They may even be perceived, so she notes, as "separatist acts", while on German territory (p. 241). Kurdish respondents do not feel to be on "equal terms" with Turkish diaspora members, even though they are outside of the homeland.

The majority-minority dynamics continue to play and it is Kurds who complain about the lack of "discursive opportunities" in Germany (like Turks do in Sweden).

An important factor in the perceived limitations for successful lobbying in Germany is the criminalisation of the Kurdish movement, where the Kurdish issue is perceived from a security angle rather than a human rights one, a point that has been most convincingly demonstrated in the work of Olivier Grojean on the differences in perception of the Kurdish movements' activism in Germany and France (Grojean, 2008). 1990s violent attacks by the PKK contributed to this reading of the conflict and the consequent limitation of PKK's space for (legal) political activities in Germany.

Interestingly the size of the Kurdish population in Germany and Sweden does not seem to determine the effectiveness of Kurds' transnational political activism. More concretely, the substantially high number of Kurds in Germany does not translate into more political leverage, whereas in Sweden a relatively small group has managed to set the political agenda. Previous research on Kurdish transnational activism in Belgium, which counts a small number of an estimated 40,000 Kurds, lead to similar conclusions, showing a strong solidarity of Flemish politicians with the Kurdish cause, irrespective of the size of the Kurdish migrant population (Casier, 2011).

Baser argues that in spite of the assumptions that homeland politics is related to unemployment and a lack of integration, it is the more integrated segments of diaspora groups, be they Turkish or Kurdish, that engage in lobbying and persuasion activities. Most of Baser's interviewees in Sweden do not feel discriminated against or alienated by the Swedish society. Yet, it is unclear to which extent we can generalise this finding to all Swedish Kurdish youth: the interviewees in Barzoo Eliassi's research on Kurdish youth in Sweden for example showed discontent vis-à-vis the Swedish society (Eliassi, 2013). From a postcolonial perspective, Eliassi argued that we should understand diaspora nationalism in the light of contemporary racist and nationalist discourses in European countries. His hypothesis might also be relevant in understanding German Turks and Kurds, as both Eliassi's and Baser's study, show that interviewees experienced some form of discrimination and did not feel part of German society.

Baser's book is a welcome publication, as the political worlds of second generation Kurds and Turks in Europe, and the second generation's political activism more generally, deserve much more academic attention. The monograph is informative and provides food for thought. The title might be somewhat misleading though, as it does not reveal that Turkish and Kurdish diasporas are at the core of this book. Also, whereas Baser recognises that the shifting political

situation in the homeland might affect the second generation differently from the first (p. 266), her work does not elaborate consistently on the relationship between the transformations of politics in Turkey (and the region) and the political engagements of second generation Turks and Kurds. Indeed, the political developments and events in Turkey (and the war in Syria and Iraq) that spark the feelings of indignation could be more thoroughly integrated in the analysis. Regardless of these shortcomings, this book is a must read for anyone studying Kurdish and Turkish transnational political activism.

Marlies Casier
Visiting Professor at Ghent University
Marlies.Casier@UGent.be

References

Alinia, M. (2004). *Spaces of Diasporas: Kurdish Identities, Experiences of Otherness and Politics of Belonging*. (Doctoral dissertation). Gothenburg: Gothenburg University.

Casier, M. (2011). Neglected Middle Men? Gatekeepers in Homeland Politics. Case: Flemish Nationalists' Receptivity of the Plight of Turkey's Kurds. *Ethnicities*, 17 (4), 501–521.

Eliassi, B. (2013). *Contesting Kurdish Identities in Sweden: Quest for Belonging among Middle Eastern Youth*. New York: Palgrave.

Khayati, K. (2008). *From Victim Diaspora to Transborder Citizenship? Diaspora Formation and Transnational Relations among Kurds in France and Sweden*. (Doctoral dissertation). Linköping: Linköping University.

Grojean, O. (2008). *La Cause Kurde, de la Turquie vers l'Europe*. (Doctoral dissertation). Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.