The Kurdish Political Studies Program (KPSP) at UCF — the first and only of its kind, has become a vibrant and reputed center of academic learning. We sponsor cutting-edge research by UCF faculty and doctoral students; host visiting scholars from abroad; bring scholars, journalists, political leaders and artists to our campus; offer undergraduate seminars and fellowships; support scholarship on Kurdish politics via our Best Article Award; pursue international collaborations; and inform the American and international public about Kurdish society and politics. I graciously acknowledge the efforts of our advisory board, faculty and students for making these achievements possible.

One of my most rewarding experiences is to observe the flourishing of students conducting research on Kurdish issues. Dr. Clayton Besaw, now a researcher at One Earth Future Foundation in Colorado, graduated from UCF in summer 2018. His doctoral dissertation, involving a series of survey experiments, compared the role of altruistic punishment in how American, German and Kurdish populations respond to violent attacks. Dr. Chris Faulkner, now a visiting faculty member at Centre College in Kentucky, wrote his dissertation about child soldiering. Chris was also the holder of the Minerva-United States Institute of Peace fellowship before his graduation in summer 2019.

It has been three decades since the atrocities committed against Kurdish people during the Anfal operations in Iraq. The violence we witness in contemporary Iraq and Middle East is a somber reminder of the continuing challenges facing Kurdish people in their quest for peaceful and democratic existence. KPSP researchers address these challenges. Doreen Horschig, a doctoral candidate in Security Studies, and I wrote a paper offering a comparative analysis of CW attacks since WWI. Tutku Ayhan, a doctoral candidate in Security Studies, traveled to Dohuk province to conduct research on gender relations among Yezidis, targets of a vicious attack by the self-styled IS in 2014. Jenna Dovydaitis, an undergraduate student, was also in Iraqi Kurdistan in the summer of 2019. She explored the long-term impacts of the chemical weapons attacks that took place in the late 1980s.

We hosted Dr. Haidar Khezri, a linguist and polyglot, as a visiting senior fellow at KPSP during the 2018-19 academic year. Haidar, who was born in a small Kurdish village in Iran, started his position as an Assistant Professor at UCF’s Department of Languages and Literature in August 2019. Dr. Hakan Özoğlu, a historian and faculty member of our research team, spent a year as a Fulbright scholar in Turkey. KPSP also initiated an international research project focusing on the comparative experiences of Kurds and Yezidis. Initial findings of this project were presented in a conference at UCF in Spring 2019 and will be published as an edited book.

In this newsletter, you will find a glimpse of our activities and engagements. We would be thrilled to host you on our beautiful Orlando campus.

GÜNEŞ MURAT TEZÇÜR, PH.D.
Jalal Talabani Chair of Kurdish Political Studies
Director of Kurdish Political Studies Program
DR. NAJMALDIN KARIM FELLOWSHIP
IN KURDISH POLITICAL STUDIES

KPSP sponsors the Dr. Najmaldin Karim Fellowship for undergraduate students at UCF. The fellow is provided a research space conducive to educational and professional development, and conduct a research project related to Kurdish politics, broadly defined, under the supervision of KPSP faculty every spring semester.

2019 Fellow
Jenna Dovydaiteis
Project Title: The Lasting Legacy of Chemical Weapons in Iraqi Kurdistan

2018 Fellow
Margaret Morgan
Project Title: Female Militarization and Women Rights

BEST ARTICLE AWARDS
IN KURDISH POLITICAL STUDIES

This award sponsored by KPSP recognizes the best article in Kurdish Political Studies by a rising scholar during the previous calendar year. The award is open to all articles published in English language peer-reviewed journals, and all social science and humanities disciplines.

2019 Awardees

Selection Committee: Senem Aslan (Bates College), Güneş Murat Tezcür (University of Central Florida), and Metin Yüksel (Hacettepe University).

2018 Fellow

Selection Committee: Senem Aslan (Bates College), Sabri Ateş (Southern Methodist University), and Güneş Murat Tezcür (University of Central Florida).

PROGRAMS & EVENTS
2017 - 2019

CONTEMPORARY KURDISH POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A CONVERSATION WITH AMBERIN ZAMAN
University of Central Florida

KPSP hosted Amberin Zaman, a seasoned journalist with more than twenty years of reporting about the Middle Eastern, Kurdish, Turkish, and Armenian politics for the Economist, the Washington Post, the Daily Telegraph, the Los Angeles Times, and Al-Monitor. Mrs. Zaman, who recently visited Kurdish controlled regions in both Iraq and Syria, shared her view of the dynamics and outcome of the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017.

A VIOLATED TABOO: U.S. RESPONSES TO CHEMICAL WARFARE
University of Central Florida

Thirty years after the attacks in Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan, KPSP, in collaboration with the Intelligence Community Center for Academic Excellence (IC CAE), sponsored a panel on the chemical attacks and U.S. policies. Two distinguished experts, Dr. Lorri Murray and John Gilbert, explored the validity of chemical weapons taboo, U.S. and international reaction to the usage in Iraq and Syria, and ongoing attempts to control and dismantle them.
INEQUALITY AFTER THE TRANSITION
University of Central Florida
KPSP hosted Ekrem Karakoç from Binghamton University who presented his recently published book, *Inequality after the Transition*, which examines the origins, increase and persistence of inequality in new democracies.

"THE EYE CAN SEE FAR, THE HAND IS TOO SHORT TO REACH": ARTIST TALK BY HIWA K
University of Central Florida
Hiwa K, the Berlin-based, internationally renowned artist who was born and raised in Iraqi Kurdistan, gave a guest lecture at UCF, which involved screening of some of his video artworks.

AFTER ISIS: KURDISH SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST
University of Central Florida
This panel invited experts on Kurdish society and politics to discuss the way forward in the region and specifically among the Kurds following the weakening of the Islamic State in the Middle East. Journalist Aliza Marcus, Dr. Bayar Sevdeen from American University of Kurdistan, and Dr. Tyler Fisher from UCF covered topics such as the background leading up to the Iraqi Kurdish referendum, and the U.S.’ relations with Kurds and Yazidis’ experiences in the face of genocidal attacks by ISIS.

BORDERS, IDENTITIES AND REFUGEES: THE KURDISH EXPERIENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST
University of Central Florida
This international conference brought a group of renowned scholars and researchers to UCF campus. It covered various issues related to the Kurdish experience with global salience, including minority-majority relations, constructions of group identities, physical and symbolic borders and refugees.

MAR 01 2019

ZER: FILM SCREENING AND A CONVERSATION WITH THE DIRECTOR
University of Central Florida
KPSP hosted the screening of the movie Zer and a conversation with the director, Kazım Öz, who is one of the leading Kurdish directors of his generation.

NOV 15 2018

FEB 01 2019

APR 23 2018

MAR 01 2019

MAR 01 2019
The establishment of KPSP in fall 2015 has greatly increased interest in Kurdish issues among UCF students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. A group of students actively work with UCF faculty on various aspects of Kurdish politics. They present their findings in international conferences, publish opinion pieces, and write scholarly articles.

Tutku Ayhan
Security Studies, Ph.D. Candidate

Tutku is a doctoral candidate in the Security Studies program at the School of Politics, Security, and International Affairs at UCF. She was also Research Assistant to KPSP for Spring and Summer 2019. She is primarily interested in politics of gender. She is currently working on her dissertation on gender relations among Yazidis, a religious minority in northern Iraq subjected to genocidal attacks in 2014.

“My dissertation looks into the transformation of gender dynamics among Yazidi community after the genocide and the mass displacement. I have had two field visits to the province of Duhok in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to conduct in-depth interviews with displaced Yazidis of Sinjar, Yazidis of Duhok, religious and political leaders, NGO workers and activists. Before the 2014 IS attacks, Yazidis were primarily living in the Sinjar region. Today, the majority of Iraqi Yazidis live in camps throughout the KRG as internally displaced people. Duhok Governorate hosts the biggest number of IDP camps in KRG.

When I arrived in Duhok in May 2018, it was my first time in Kurdistan and I was very excited - and to be honest a little anxious for not knowing what to expect. But my experience has been nothing but inspiring and instructive. Although my research topic is emotionally challenging, each time I sat down with people who shared their stories with me, I was deeply moved by their resilience. I was also amazed to see how multi-ethnic and multi-religious the region is. With so much diversity and history, it’s no surprise Mesopotamia is called the cradle of civilization. I had the chance to visit some of the very ancient Christian, Chaldean and Assyrian temples. Visiting the holiest Yazidi temple in Lalish was something memorable.”

Jenna Dovydaitis
Burnett Honors College Senior

Jenna is a senior in the UCF Burnett Honors College, majoring in political science and biology. In the future, she would like to work at the intersection of public health and international security. She is writing her undergraduate thesis under the supervision of Dr. Güneş Murat Tezcür. The work, titled “The Lasting Legacy of Chemical Weapons in Iraqi Kurdistan,” focuses on the medical and political consequences of the chemical warfare that occurred during Anfal, a Kurdish genocide.

“For my research, I traveled to Kurdistan to conduct interviews in the cities of Erbil, Soran and Halabja. My interview participants included Kurdish politicians, activists, medical professionals and NGO employees. Soran University, a Kurdish public institution, graciously provided guidance and aid for my research, including a translator and transportation. While in Kurdistan, the generosity and hospitality of the Kurdish people were striking to me. During the two weeks of my trip, I was welcomed into the homes of countless Kurds, who were all more than willing to discuss the events and consequences of Anfal on Kurdish society. The experience of traveling abroad for fieldwork was transformative for my research and for my personal understanding, as it was one thing to read about genocide and another to meet those deeply affected by it.

I am extremely grateful to the Kurdish Political Studies Program for providing invaluable guidance, for helping to establish connections with scholars abroad, and for financial support of my project. In the future, I look forward to maintaining connection with KPSP and hope to return to Kurdistan for further research and reunion with newfound friends.”
CHRISTOPHER FAULKNER
Security Studies, Ph.D. ’19
Visiting Assistant Professor at Centre College in Kentucky.

Chris’s dissertation focuses on an issue that is central to International peace and security: child soldiering by both state and non-state actors in violent conflicts. A key finding of his dissertation is that rebels that rely on support from more democratic states are less likely to have children in their rank and file. This suggests that the behavior of powerful and democratic states such as the U.S. could lead to significant declines in the employment of child soldiers in armed conflicts across the world.

In Spring 2019, Chris was awarded with the Order of Pegasus, the highest student award attainable at UCF. He also received a highly competitive fellowship from the United States Institute of Peace (only 18 awarded from an application pool of more than 200). He was a Minerva Research Initiative and United States Institute of Peace Dissertation Write-Up fellow during the 2018-19 academic year.

“KPSP has deepened my knowledge and understanding of Kurdish politics and issues, supported me in the pursuit and development of my research on child soldiering, and has increased my awareness of the many challenges facing groups throughout their political struggles. My experience with KPSP has motivated me to continue to investigate questions related to Kurdish autonomy and political identity both historically and in contemporary times.”

DOREEN HORSCHIG
Security Studies, Ph.D. Candidate

Doreen is a Ph.D. candidate in the Security Studies program at UCF. Her dissertation uses experimental methods to explore causal mechanism of Israeli and U.S. public opinion on the use of extreme methods of force. In particular, she test the conditions under which the robustness of the nuclear weapons taboo is undermined.

“KPSP and my dissertation chair Dr. Tezcür are incredibly valuable resources while I conduct research on issues of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East to understand public opinion on nuclear weapons and international responses to chemical weapons attacks.”

HELIN YILDIZ
International Relations, M.A. (University of Bologna, Italy)

Helin graduated with a master’s degree from the University of Bologna – Italy in Spring 2018. She was a visiting graduate student at KPSP for 2017-18 academic year to conduct research for her master’s final dissertation, which focused on the political governance of the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Syria and its impact on the region.

“Thanks to KPSP, I had access to a wide range of academic sources, original datasets and different perspectives, which I incorporated into my dissertation; I learned how to conduct research in a more objective way.”

MAGGIE MORGAN
Political Science Major

Maggie is an undergraduate student majoring in political science and double minor in writing & rhetoric and terrorism studies. She was the Najmaldin Karim Fellow for the Spring 2018 semester. Maggie is currently working on her honors thesis on the impact of women’s military participation on women’s rights in Kurdish society.

“I have always felt honored to be part of the only academic program in the United States focused on Kurdish issues. Through KPSP, I have been able to meet expert researchers and journalists who have expanded my knowledge and interests. My research has allowed me to gain further insight into the gender roles and politics of Kurdish society.”

ONER YIGIT
Security Studies, Ph.D. Student

Oner Yigit is a Ph.D. student in the Security Studies program. His academic interests include Middle East politics, religion and politics, civil wars, ethnic and religious conflicts and Kurdish politics.

“KPSP provides great opportunities for those who want to explore Kurdish politics and culture. It is a unique program in the U.S. that helps scholars and students to see how diverse Kurdish political groups, culture and people are. Through KPSP, I was also able to connect with academicians whose work I admire.”
ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF TURKEY
Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., December 2017

Tezcür participated in a panel discussion titled “Islam, Democracy, and Dissent in the New Turkey” in the 8th Annual Conference of Turkey organized by the Middle East Institute. The conference featured Turkish, European, and U.S. office-holders, policymakers, and expert analysts from both sides of the Atlantic.

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES ASSOCIATION ANNUAL MEETING
San Antonio, November 2018

Tutku Ayhan, a doctoral student, presented a paper co-authored with Tezcür titled “The Last “Firmans”: Explaining the Anti-Yezidi Violence.” The paper offers a theoretically guided explanation of the motives of both the ISIS and its local supporters in pursuing extreme violence levels of violence against Yezidis. In August 2018, Ayhan and Tezcür presented a paper titled “Fieldwork in a Post-Genocidal Setting: Navigating Ethics, Gender, and Power” at the American Political Science Association annual meeting held in Boston. The paper discusses the challenges they faced during the fieldwork among Yezidis in Iraqi Kurdistan.

UCF ART GALLERY
Orlando, January 2018

Tezcür gave a talk titled “The ‘Orient’ in the ‘West’ and Beyond: Reflections on Contemporary Refugee Politics.” The talk was organized as part of an exhibit titled “Finding Home: The Global Refugee Crisis.”

Malmö University
Sweden, December 2018

Tezcür was a visiting faculty member at the Department of Global Political Studies at Malmö University in December 2018 and January 2019. During his stay, Tezcür delivered a research talk titled “Revisiting the ‘Ancient Hatreds’ Thesis: Explaining the Islamic State’s Campaign against the Yazidis,” was a guest lecturer in an undergraduate seminar on “Enemy Images,” had extensive meetings with faculty and staff and interacted with students.

HALABJA: ECHOES OF GENOCIDE IN KURDISTAN CONFERENCE
Washington, D.C., March 2018

Tezcür participated in a conference that marked the 30th anniversary of the Halabja Genocide at the Newseum. It was organized by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Representation in the United States. He also wrote a piece on the ISIS’ genocide of Yezidis in Sinjar that was published in the conference booklet.

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION (ISA) ANNUAL CONVENTION
Toronto, Canada, March 2019

Doreen Horschig, a doctoral student, presented a paper co-authored with Tezcür titled “A Conditional Taboo: The Use of Chemical Weapons from Colonial Warfare to Civil Wars.” The paper explores the robustness of this regulative norm against chemical weapons through a longer historical approach that investigates the justifications employed in such attacks and international responses in reaction to these attacks.

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF KURDISTAN
Kurdistan Region of Iraq, May 2018

Tezcür gave a guest lecture in a class at American University of Kurdistan (AUK) in the Dohuk province of Kurdistan. He also met with administrators and faculty and explored avenues of greater cooperation between UCF and AUK.

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY WORKSHOP
Israel, July 2019

Tezcür participated in an academic workshop focusing on the history of Arab-Israeli conflict and contemporary issues about Israel, Palestine, and the broader Middle East.

WORLD CONGRESS FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES (WOCMES)
Seville, Spain, July 2018

Tezcür presented a paper in a panel titled Kurdish Studies in Japan at WOCMES. The panel, organized by the Institute of Developing Economies of Japan, also featured Hiroshi Sato, Kohei Inami, and Akiko Yoshioka.

UCF ART GALLERY
Orlando, January 2018

Tezcür gave a talk titled “The ‘Orient’ in the ‘West’ and Beyond: Reflections on Contemporary Refugee Politics.” The talk was organized as part of an exhibit titled “Finding Home: The Global Refugee Crisis.”
In August 2014, the self-styled (IS) staged a coordinated attack against the Yazidis—a Kurdish speaking religious community with historical roots in the Sinjar area of northern Iraq—resulting in mass executions, enslavements, and displacements. Thousands of Yazidis were executed and large numbers of women and children were taken hostage and subsequently sold as slaves. The violence IS executed has been unprecedented even by its own vicious standards. While the Yazidis have historically developed a strong sense of existential threat perception as a marginalized minority, the IS assault has pushed the community to the brink of survival. Most of Sinjar remains inhabitable and many surviving Yazidis continue their existence as displaced people and refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan and Western countries.

After the Last ‘Firman’ is a collaborative project among the University of Central Florida, London School of Economics and Political Science, and the American University of Kurdistan. It brings together scholars from the United States, Iraqi Kurdistan, and the United Kingdom to offer a unique social science perspective on the Yazidi religious community in the wake of genocidal violence. The project addresses a series of questions about three dimensions of Yazidi religion by empirically focusing on the lived experience of Yazidis: (1) the transformation and resiliency of Yazidi beliefs and norms in the wake of the genocidal violence, (2) the evolution of gender relations among the Yazidis in the wake of sexual enslavement of Yazidi women, and (3) the nature of relations between Yazidis and Sunni Arabs and Kurds. While IS atrocities against the Yazidis have received significant media attention, their lingering effects on Yazidis' lives and relations between them remain unexplored.

The international research team conducts dozens of in-depth interviews with Yazidis in Dohuk province of Iraqi Kurdistan to analyze the group's experience. The extensive fieldwork is essential to understand how the aforementioned dimensions will transform the Yazidis as a result of the collective trauma they recently experienced. The project will make a significant contribution to the study of religious minorities and their experiences of violence through a focus on the understudied case of the Yazidis.

The project is funded through an international collaboration grant from the Global Religion Research Initiative (GRRI), the George Washington University, and University of Notre Dame for the expected time frame of May 2018 to May 2019. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of UCF granted approval for the study in April 2018 (SBE-18-13819).