Introducing two colleagues funded by the scholarship program “Science. Lower Saxony. Open to the world” (Ministry of Science and Culture, Lower Saxony, Germany) supporting scholars in precarious personal and academic situations.

At the end of last year, the Ministry of Science and Culture of the federal state of Lower Saxony in Germany announced a scholarship program supporting scholars who are facing precarious and threatening personal and academic situations due to socio-political circumstances in their countries. With the program titled “Science. Lower Saxony. Open to the world”, the government of the federal state of Lower Saxony wants to make a statement in support of “free and open science, global sharing of knowledge and international responsibility” (https://www.mwk.niedersachsen.de/download/120937). The program encourages universities and research organizations in Lower Saxony to apply for joint research projects to be funded for three years together with suitable candidates.

The professorship for qualitative methods held by Gabriele Rosenthal at the Center of Methods at the Georg-August-University of Goettingen (Germany) successfully applied for two scholarships together with our colleagues Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu (Turkey) and Wasey Khalil (Pakistan). As shown below, the scholarship provides an opportunity to conduct research projects based on a biographical approach that focuses on different groupings in the context of the current (forced) migration movements to Germany.

That’s why we thought it would be a good idea to warmly welcome both of them in Goettingen. And we would like to give them both the opportunity to introduce themselves and their projects here.

Sevil Çakır-Kılınçoğlu: Joint project: Life courses, migration experiences and current perspectives of Syrian refugee women in various figurations

I am a PhD candidate in Middle Eastern Studies, at Leiden University, the Netherlands. I worked as a lecturer in the Political Science Program at Middle East Technical University, Northern Cyprus, where I was teaching courses on social movements and the Middle East since 2012 before arriving in Göttingen after getting the “Wissenschaft. Niedersachsen. Weltoffen” scholarship. My research interests revolve around political violence, contentious politics, gender and life history. I am specifically interested in how individuals get involved in high-risk activism in particular and decide to engage in risky or violent activities in general. My dissertation is a comparative study of Iranian and Turkish women who were involved in activities in the ranks of radical leftist organizations during the 1960s and 1970s. My research has been supported by Leiden University Institute for Area Studies and Leiden University Fund.
I have a keen interest in learning languages. As a native speaker of Turkish, and near-native speaker of English and Persian, I have also studied French, Russian, Arabic and German.

In January 2016, I signed a petition and my life changed; it was called "We will not be a party to this crime" and signed by 2,212 scholars who have since then come to be known as "Academics for Peace" in Turkey. The petition aimed to draw attention to the human rights violations committed against the Kurdish population by the political authorities in Turkey and demanded a return to the peace process. Immediately after the publication of the petition, the Turkish government publicly called the signatories "traitors", and the signatories have been targeted and subjected to public lynching, and administrative and criminal investigations. In the meantime, many scholars have been dismissed from their jobs and from public service. As one of the signatories of this petition, I was under the threat of losing personal freedoms and had no prospect of having an academic career in Turkey upon completion of my PhD. Also, I could not focus on writing up my dissertation under the circumstances that I will detail below.

The situation of ‘academics for peace’ has become even worse since the coup attempt in July 2016; the Turkish government declared a state of emergency and began ruling the country through decrees, bypassing parliamentary processes. Since then, nearly 400 ‘academics for peace’ have lost their jobs and hundreds of them have left the country if they were ‘lucky’. Those who were not able to flee on time are stuck because their passports have been cancelled. On top of this, they cannot find jobs at other universities because the government takes active measures to prevent Turkish public and private universities from employing these academics. They are left without any academic job prospects and unable to leave for abroad; a situation commonly referred to in Turkey as “civic death”.

Upon finding out about the “Wissenschaft. Niedersachsen. Weltffnen” Program, I contacted Prof. Gabriele Rosenthal with whom I have many research interests in common. As a PhD candidate, I hope to benefit from her guidance, while working with her in future research projects on violence, socio-political conflicts, collective memory and biographical research. Experienced in academic research and teaching, I would like to continue my career in academia; however, I can also work in NGOs as well as national and international organizations specialized in the areas in which I am experienced.

As a study of women’s participation and experiences in the radical leftist organizations which adopted armed struggle in Turkey and Iran during the 1970s, my dissertation project compares the two cases by employing concepts from social movement studies and the life history method, with gender in mind, in line with relational and processual perspectives. My fieldwork was based on semi-structured life history interviews that I conducted with Turkish and Iranian women living in various countries in Europe including Turkey, Germany, France, and Sweden. During the fieldwork, I acquired practical experience with people from diverse backgrounds, ages and ranks, while exploring various methodological approaches to contextualize and historicize their narratives. For triangulation of my findings from the fieldwork, primary sources, and secondary literature, I studied various approaches to qualitative analysis. Consequently, I have become an ardent believer in the potential of not only interdisciplinary and multi-methods research, but also biographical research, to improve our understanding of various complex social, cultural and political phenomena.

Building on my research interests and experiences, as well as the current research projects of Gabriele Rosenthal, we propose a joint research project that focuses on the life histories and current everyday lives of Syrian refugee women who were able to make it to Europe (more specifically Germany). We would like to investigate their experiences of threat, risk and violence, and the interplay between these experiences and the whole biographical courses of the Syrian refugee women. Especially, we would like to consider the life-histories and lifeworlds of women who were politically active (in the broadest sense) in Syria even before the (civil-)war started and during this war.
Wasey Khalil - PhD Project on “Migration in the context of social transformation and figurations – Perspectives and experiences of Afghan and Pakistani refugees in Germany”

My name is Wasey Ullah Khalil. I am Pakistani, living in Göttingen, Germany. I am seeking protection in Germany. Since October 2015 I have been living in Germany and since January 2016, I have been living in Göttingen.

In Pakistan, I was a PhD student at the University of Peshawar. There I did my research on the topic of “Proxy wars and migration” which led me to interview internally displaced and migrated people. I held interviews with them in person as well as with their families. I additionally got the chance to interview illegalized migrants from Afghanistan in Pakistani camps, which motivated me to work beyond issues concerning internally displaced persons (IDPs) and to expand my research to illegalized migrants. Furthermore, I headed an organization focusing on education in the fields of religion and religious extremism. In 2013 I was forced to leave Pakistan due to a blasphemy case against me there, which meant I couldn’t continue my PhD and my civil engagement because of the threats against my life I encountered there. I fled Pakistan and entered Germany in October 2015 as an asylum seeker.

I joined Georg-August-Universität as a guest student and started attending different lectures and seminars, which boosted my morale and motivated me to get back to my research. I started trying to find a chance to resume or restart my PhD. Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rosenthal gave me that chance by letting me join her as a PhD student at the Centre of Methods for Social Sciences. There, I got a chance to learn more about biographical methods.

Being an asylum seeker, the obstacle to resuming my studies was funding, as I was getting regular pocket money from the local authorities and they weren’t allowed to help me to continue my education. Together with Gabriele Rosenthal and her team, we successfully applied for the above-mentioned program offered by the Ministry for Science and Culture (Lower Saxony) for scholars in danger. After a wait of two months, I got good news from a colleague that my application for the funding had been approved. It was the biggest push for me to go deeper in my research and do the best I can to give something back to the society which helped me when I was in need.

With the scholarship, I’m now able to continue my research in migration studies. **The primary goal of my PhD research is to study families and life histories of illegalized migrants from Afghanistan and Pakistan in Germany.** I want to reconstruct the process of migration: people’s experiences during their migration and the migrants’ current perspectives. In other words, to reconstruct the process that leads people to leave their home country and their subsequent biographical development. The secondary goal of my research is to investigate the effects of migration on the patterns of action and transformation of emotions of the illegalized migrants during their journeys from their respective home countries to Germany. This research will be based on a biographical approach.