

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ks.v8i1.559>

Book Reviews

Michael M. Gunter (ed.), **Routledge Handbook on the Kurds**, *London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 483 pp., (ISBN: 9781138646643)*.

Within a short time of each other, three large edited volumes were published that purport to represent the state of the art in Kurdish Studies and to stand as major works of reference for years to come. The first of these, Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef's *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (London: Hurst, 2018) was reviewed in the previous issue of *Kurdish Studies*. Most recently, Faleh A. Jabar and Renad Mansour's *The Kurds in a Changing Middle East: History, Politics and Representation* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2019) saw the light. It is, regrettably, the last of Faleh's numerous valuable contributions to the field. The volume under review here appears in the *Routledge Handbooks* series and was edited by Michael M. Gunter, who is himself probably the most prolific of today's scholars of Kurdish politics and who persuaded over thirty colleagues to contribute chapters. A fourth broad overview, focusing on history of the Kurds and edited by Hamit Bozarslan, Cengiz Gunes and Veli Yadirgi, is due out at Cambridge University Press soon.

The fact that major publishers are interested in bringing out such inevitably costly books indicates, I believe, not so much the maturity of *Kurdish Studies* as an academic enterprise as the publishers' perception that there is potentially a large non-academic readership for such broad overviews. The Kurds have become significant actors in the Middle East who can no longer be ignored, especially since the rise of ISIS. Many politicians and policymakers, humanitarian workers, asylum lawyers, journalists, the hydrocarbon industry and other investors as well as, who knows, missionaries and tourists must feel the need for reliable, up-to-date, clear and comprehensive information on the Kurds.

In books that address this need, one would not so much expect the presentation of major new research but instead competent and judicious summaries of the state of the art and a balanced coverage of all aspects that could be relevant to stakeholders – including impartial discussion of contentious issues that keep the Kurds divided. Considerations such as this were apparently also on the editor's mind, for in his Introduction he speaks of the "strong need for [a] multidisciplinary Handbook" that will stand as "a definitive overview of as much of *Kurdish Studies* as possible," and



among his contributors we find authors sympathetic to the struggle of the Kurdish movements they studied as well as more sceptical voices.

The volume does cover much ground, both thematically and geographically. Gunter has organised the contributions into twelve sections, of which the first contains overviews of North American and European scholarship on the Kurds. This is followed by clusters of chapters dealing with history up to the 1920s, Kurdish culture, political economy, religion, geopolitics, travel, and women. Together these take up the first half of the book. The second half has a geographical focus, with sections dedicated to the “Kurdish situation” in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, and the Kurdish diaspora.

Most of the authors contributing to this volume are well-known through earlier publications (and several of them also have chapters in one of the other recent overview volumes), but besides established scholars we find also a number of younger scholars still in early stages of their academic careers. Political science is the dominant discipline, but there are also contributions from history, political economy, cultural and literary studies. Although Gunter is himself based in the USA, most of his contributors are not, and besides a large number of UK-based scholars, he appears to have sought a representative geographical distribution. About a third of the authors have a Kurdish background, which reflects the increasing role of Western-educated young Kurdish scholars in the field. Women, however, are under-represented, both among the authors (with only four contributors) and in the chapters, of which only one explicitly addresses gender relations and women’s participation in politics.

The volume opens with concise and helpful overviews of the history and current state of Kurdish Studies in the USA and Europe, by Michael Gunter and Vera Eccarius-Kelly, respectively. Gunter’s chapter is a long list of persons – academics, journalists and Kurdish politician-activists – with brief descriptions of their background and their main publications. The outstanding roles of Wadie Jwaideh and Vera Saeedpour are acknowledged but their names are almost drowned among the many lesser figures mentioned in the interest of comprehensiveness. Of himself, Gunter writes that he was “possibly the first and only Western scholar to meet Abdullah Öcalan (...)” and mentions that the notorious former CIA station chief in Ankara, Paul Henze, had asked him to discover that the PKK was “controlled by the Soviet Union and communist internationalism” and had rejected Gunter’s conclusion that the PKK was “mostly motivated by Kurdish nationalism” (15). Eccarius-Kelly focuses more on institutions and structural factors inhibiting or stimulating the development of Kurdish Studies as an academic enterprise. Due to difficulty of access, there has been no recent field research in Turkish or Iranian Kurdistan, whereas the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and to a lesser extent Rojava have allowed researchers freedom of movement, which is obviously reflected in the

subject matter of recent publications. Through endowed chairs and scholarship programs, the Iraqi Kurdish parties have moreover made a significant contribution to the institutionalisation of Kurdish Studies in Europe (as well as the USA).

The historical section begins with an overview, by Michael Eppel, of the autonomous Kurdish emirates that flourished and were centres of Kurdish arts and literature during the first centuries of Ottoman rule and their demise in the nineteenth century when the empire began to modernise. Eppel discusses Bitlis and Baban as different examples of autonomy, and summarily sketches the events that led to the final defeat of Soran and Botan. Questioning the significance of this history for the later national movement, he suggests that the emirates had on the one hand “constituted a potential nucleus for statehood” but on the other hand due to the perseverance of tribalism and rivalries between emirates were “fundamental obstacles to the dawning of a supra-tribal and supra-emirate Kurdish national sentiment” (45). Hamit Bozarslan reviews some of the same developments – Ottoman modernisation and the demise of the emirates – in his chapter on the nineteenth century, drawing attention to the rise of religious brotherhoods and a new intelligentsia that came to represent Kurdish interests. Ahmet Serdar Akturk continues the narrative with a discussion of the first Kurdish associations and mobilisation of Kurds in the first uprisings in Republican Turkey. The last-named two articles are also useful for their referring to much recent research (unlike Eppel, who neglects mentioning some of the most relevant recent literature). Together, the chapters provide an informative survey of major developments among the Kurds of the Ottoman Empire. One aspect of history sorely missed here is an overview of Persian-Kurdish relations during the Safavid and Qajar periods. The developments in the post-World War One period are discussed country by country in the second half of the volume, but as we shall see below, the Kurds of Iran remain seriously understudied.

The next section, Kurdish culture, is a mixed bag, with two articles on literature, one on cinema, and a quaint plea for linguistic engineering by Michael Chyet (who proposes mutually consistent choices to be made in standardising the Kurmanji and Sorani dialects). Other major aspects of culture such as oral tradition and music are not covered. Michiel Leezenberg contributes an analysis of what is arguably the most important work of Kurdish literature, Ehmedê Xanî’s *Mem û Zîn* (completed in 1693), the reception of this work by Kurds and its elevation to the status of the Kurdish national epic. Leezenberg, who has for years been working on a Dutch translation of *Mem û Zîn*, knows his Xanî and makes apt comments on aspects of the work, notably the mystical dimension, that have been neglected by most earlier scholars. He also provides a helpful overview of scholarship on Xanî and his work, text editions and translations. I noticed one minor lapse here: he does not mention the recent facsimile edition of the

oldest extant manuscript (dated 1752) published by Tehsîn İbrahim Doskî , Mem û Zîna Ehmedê Xanî - danaya `Ezîzê kurê Şîrbarê Mamzêdî ewa li sala 1165 koçî hatiye nivîsîn (Duhok: Spîrêz, 2008), which will be of importance to all future Xanî scholars. Hashem Ahmadzadeh follows up with a broad overview of the development of Kurdish literature from the classical period (16th-17th centuries) to the modern age, tracing the thematic and stylistic changes in poetry and the emergence of new genres. He points at different developments in Kurmanji and Sorani literature and the differential impact of cultural policies of the states controlling parts of Kurdistan, and he draws attention to the crucial role of the diaspora in developing modern Kurdish literature. This is also one of the few chapters in the book to pay explicit attention to the situation of Iranian Kurdistan.

Bahar Şimşek concludes this section with a pioneering article on Kurdish cinema, discussing the specific difficulties of a non-state people to develop a “national” film culture, which have made international festivals and Kurdish film festivals in Europe and North America even more significant as venues. Yılmaz Güney’s *Yol* (The Way, Turkey 1982) and Bahman Ghobadî’s *Zamane Baraye Mastiye Asbha* (A Time for Drunken Horses, Iran 2000), both international award-winning films, initiate an impressive list of forty major films in some variety of Kurdish that reached international audiences. In addition, the government of Iraq’s Kurdistan Region has begun producing movies, mainly for the internal market, and Şimşek lists the first eighteen products (completed in 2009-2017) of this initiative to establish a properly Kurdish film industry.

The section on political economy, a relatively neglected subject in Kurdish Studies, consists of an informative article by David Romano on the oil factor in Iraqi Kurdish politics and an analysis of regional inequality and “de-development” of Turkish Kurdistan by Veli Yadırgı. Romano discusses the dependence of the Kurdistan Region’s rentier economy on oil income, the complex issue of shared control of oil and gas resources between central and regional government (with the distinction between “existing” and “new” fields, the KRG claiming that the Constitution grants them control of the latter), the pipelines that allowed the KRG to export its own oil and gas but also made it highly dependent on Turkey, and the impact of the painful sanctions imposed by Baghdad once the KRG began exporting oil. This chapter is one of very few good overviews of this all-important issue and its international political ramifications. Yadırgı provides a historical overview of Turkey’s economic policies in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia from the establishment of the Republic until 1980. Unfortunately he does not extend the narrative and analysis to more recent years; Özal’s neoliberal reforms in the 1980s, the rise of an Islamic bourgeoisie, also in the Kurdish region, and the policies of the AKP, which sought to solve the Kurdish question by bringing economic growth.

In the section on religion, we find no general overview or in-depth treatment of Islamic traditions or Islamic movements among the Kurds, but four articles focusing on specific, narrow aspects only. Mehmet Gurses discusses the various ways in which the state of Turkey has used Islam – Islamic discourse, religious institutions and official religious education – as a weapon against Kurdish nationalism. Christopher Houston takes a new look at Muslim attitudes towards the Kurdish question in Turkey, as reflected in the press, he compares his reading of three Islamist newspapers in 2017 with similar observations in the 1990s, when he could distinguish between “state Islamist”, “Islamist” and “Kurdish Islamist” discourses and actors. He notes, unsurprisingly, that the critique of state policies and acknowledgement of the Kurdish question he found in the Islamist press two decades ago have given way to uncritical endorsement of the government and condemnation of Kurdish claims as terrorism. Of the changes in Kurdish Islamist discourse and activism, especially after 2015, which would be of most interest to readers, he fails to say anything meaningful.

Mordechai Zaken writes on the Kurdistani Jews and their relations with the Kurdish chieftains who protected and exploited them. This is mainly a summary of his 2003 dissertation on the subject (published by Brill in 2007). Zaken sketches a less idyllic picture of the conditions with which Jews had to cope than we find in some of the earlier literature, and his terse account of the final emigration of virtually all Kurdistani and Iraqi Jews is entirely without nostalgia.

In the most remarkable chapter of this section, and the only one to actually deal with religion, Tyler Fisher and Nahro Zagros discuss the Yezidi ritual of baptism (*mor kirin*) and the relevant beliefs concerning the sacred spring Kaniya Spî in Lalish. Against this background, the authors discuss the ritual purification by rebaptism of women who escaped from capture by ISIS. This is a very interesting paper that presents new, original field research, usefully supplementing the studies by Kreyenbroek and Omarkhali on Yezidi ritual. It might therefore have been published more profitably in a journal or a more specialised book. The more general overview of religion and its role in Kurdish society that one would expect here, on the other hand, is unfortunately lacking.

The section titled “Women” has only one chapter, by Anna Grabolle-Çeliker, who provides a capable overview of the earlier literature on gender relations and women’s activism, supplementing this with judicious observations on more recent developments in women’s activism in all parts of Kurdistan including the increasingly prominent role of women in armed struggle. This is exactly the sort of overview a reader would look for in a book like this. Nonetheless, one would have wished for more than this single chapter, in order to cover certain aspects of women’s roles in more depth.

In the country-by-country part of the book, three chapters are devoted to Turkey and Syria each, four to Iraq, and one to Iran. Gunter has made an effort to juxtapose different viewpoints in each section, some chapters being sympathetic with the Kurdish movements described and others more critical. Cengiz Gunes writes on the travails of the successive “pro-Kurdish” legal parties that have existed since 1993, with an emphasis on the latest of them, the HDP, its remarkable successes in the 2015 elections and the renewed repression to which its leading politicians were exposed. Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya contribute an article on the crucial decade of the 1970s, when the PKK was only one, though the most violent, among a large number of Kurdish parties or associations. They make some interesting observations about the multiple scissions in those other movements, which made them ineffective even before the military coup of 1980 delivered the fatal blow, but they do not appear to appreciate the significant role those movements played in raising public awareness of Kurdish history and identity and in the revival of Kurdish language and culture. They appear to have taken their PKK informants’ narratives at face value and to be unaware of the memoirs and studies that throw a very different light on the period, including recent publications by the Ismail Beşikçi Foundation. Bill Parks finally focuses on the trans-border dimension of Turkey’s Kurdish conflict, noting the importance of Iraqi Kurdistan as a base from which the PKK launched operations in Turkey and the high proportion of Syrian Kurds among the PKK’s guerrillas, as well as Turkey’s numerous military incursions into Iraq and confrontation with Syria.

The section on Iraqi Kurdistan is introduced by a wide-ranging but somewhat rambling essay by Francis Owtram on how the Kurds ended up in a state they do not own: the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, the quest for oil, tribal rebellions, the Barzani uprising, Baathist oppression and the Anfal, international intervention, the safe haven and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the rise of ISIS and the referendum on independence. In a more focused chapter, Liam Anderson discusses various aspects of the so-called disputed territories, the ethnically mixed and oil-rich zone located between the recognised Kurdistan Region and the Arab-majority part of Iraq. He summarily describes the impact of the rise of ISIS, which occupied much of these territories, and the subsequent defeat of ISIS by Kurdish forces (with international support), which seemed to place the KRG in a favourable position regarding the future control of the territories. (The chapter ends before the referendum on independence and the central government’s renewed control.) Michael Rubin contributes a chapter on the rampant corruption in the Kurdistan Region. Rubin, who is one of very few Western observers to have written quite elaborately on this embarrassing but important subject before, gives detailed examples involving the Barzani and Talabani families and their close associates. Corruption is acknowledged as a grave problem by the KRG, reforms and prosecution of

perpetrators have been announced but, as Rubin insists, the measures remain symbolic and well-connected people retain immunity from prosecution even in the worst cases. Kirill Vertyaev concludes this section with an overview of Russian and Soviet scholarship on the Iraqi Kurds and the Kurdish movement as well as the historical relations of the Soviet state and post-Soviet Russia with the Kurds, from Barzani's exile in the Soviet Union to Rosneft's recent investment in oil and gas exploration in the KRG.

Jordi Tejel contributes an adequate and balanced overview of the Kurdish struggle in Syria, from the French Mandate through the various Arab nationalist regimes to the period of PYD-controlled "democratic autonomy." From a perspective sympathetic to the "Apoist" parties PKK and PYD, Michael Knapp sketches the latter's efforts at grassroots organisation and the establishment of self-administration. Too dependent on a small number of interviews with activists of the PYD and affiliated associations, the article remains rather superficial and unsatisfying for the reader who wants to know how "democratic autonomy" works in practice. Eva Savelsberg takes a less enthralled look at the experiment in Rojava and the methods by which PYD achieved and maintained hegemony. She points at refusal to co-operate, let alone share power with the other Kurdish parties (united in the Kurdish National Council in Syria, supported by the Iraqi KDP) and grave human rights violations. Acknowledging the remarkable military, administrative and diplomatic successes of the PYD, she soberly observes that these owed much to US support and restraint by the central government, neither of which was to outlast the defeat of ISIS - an observation that soon proved to be prophetic.

The Kurds of Iran remain the most under-researched; especially the developments on the ground since around 1983, when the leadership of the two major nationalist parties went into exile, remain largely unknown. That situation is reflected in this book. Nader Entessar's chapter here provides some information on events during the Iranian revolution and the views and policies concerning the Kurds of the consecutive Iranian governments, as well as some summary information on internal conflicts and scissions in the KDP-Iran, but remains silent on social, economic, cultural and political developments inside Iranian Kurdistan.

The final section of the book focuses on the diaspora, with a general overview by Östen Wahlbeck, and chapters specifically focusing on the Kurds in Germany and the UK by Vera Eccarius-Kelly and Desmond Fernandes, respectively. These chapters look at patterns of Kurdish migration (labour migration, family reunion, political asylum), self-organisation and political activism. Looking at another aspect of diaspora-homeland relations, Barzoo Eliassi investigates the perceptions and attitudes of Kurds in Sweden and the UK towards the semi-independent Kurdistan Region in Iraq. Eccarius-Kelly's chapter also pays attention to the evolving German attitudes towards the Kurds, and those of Germany's Kurds

towards political processes in Turkey. Together, this section offers much food for thought about the increasing role of the diaspora in Kurdish cultural revival, identity politics and impact on developments on the ground. To which one might add the increasing participation of the diaspora in Kurdish scholarship.

The almost five hundred pages of this volume contain a wealth of information on the Kurds, but the chapters are of uneven scope, depth and quality. The history of the Kurdish movement, from the early twentieth century until the defeat of ISIS, is well covered and there are interesting though partial observations on changes in the political economy and social organisation of Kurdistan. In spite of some very good chapters on culture, religion and social relations, there is little internal coherence in the relevant sections. This makes one wonder for which audience this would be the appropriate book. Kurdish scholars will find a few chapters that provide significant new information or analysis but may already be familiar with much of the material covered in the other chapters. Non-specialists who consult it as a work of reference may find it helpful for contextualising news reports, but those who are in search of a readable introduction to Kurdish history, society and culture may be disappointed by the fragmentary and uneven presentation of basic information.

Martin van Bruinessen, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Kardo Bokani, *Social Communication and Kurdish Political Mobilisation in Turkey*, Balti, Republic of Moldova: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017, 252 pp., (ISBN: 978-3-330-33239-3).

In his admirably readable book on the rise of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), Kardo Bokani calls upon Karl Deutsch's conceptual framework of social communication to argue that processes of national identity formation require a dense network of social communication and physical interaction through which to integrate the individual members of a prospective community or nation into a coherent, existing one. Although heuristic, the author thus relegates the insights of such other leading scholars on nationalism as Ernest Gellner's modernisation and high, shared cultures; Benedict Anderson's imagined communities; and Ernest Renan's daily plebiscite, among many others. However, Deutsch's model does illustrate successfully how a network of communication can be generated through a top-down process directed by states, or through a bottom-up one initiated by other institutions such as mass movements. Furthermore, Bokani also commendably treats what could have been an almost impenetrably complex subject into an understandable and valuable exposition.

The author begins his analysis by asking four basic questions. 1. Why did a coherent and unified Kurdish national movement only emerge so recently despite its ideational origins reaching back into the late 17th century in the

writings of Ehmedê Xanî, who had lamented Kurdish divisions? 2. Why did so many earlier waves of Kurdish mobilisation have so little impact both politically and militarily? 3. The first two queries notwithstanding, why were the Kurdish people largely able to resist efforts by the Turkish state to assimilate them? 4. Why was the PKK able to overcome these earlier patterns of failed Kurdish mobilisation? What distinguished the PKK from previous Kurdish groups in terms of its internal structure and the environment in which it operated? Bokani then proceeds to answer all of them thoroughly and accurately.

In Chapter 1, Bokani presents Deutsch's social communication model of national identity formation to explain how "a developing transport and communication infrastructure helped the Kurdish population overcome the social and cultural divisions that had previously frustrated the processes of national identity formation" (11). The construction of a nation demands a thick network of social communication and material transaction among individuals to make them ready for inclusion in an overall national construct.

In Chapter 2, the author shows how although the Kurds possessed almost all the attributes of nationhood such as territory, language, history, and culture, among others, geographical isolation and divisions prohibited their convergence into nationhood. Until very recently, primitive transportation infrastructures inhibited Deutsch's necessary social communication between the many isolated Kurdish communities. Although true, sole stress on this attribute, ignores how contemporary Kurdish nationalism also rose as a simple reaction to slightly less current Turkish, Arabic, and Iranian nationalisms' attempts to assimilate the Kurds after World War I.

Chapter 3 delves into how Kurdish divisions from the failed revolt of Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri in 1880-1881 to Sayyid Reza's unsuccessful Dersim uprising in 1936-1938 failed because of Kurdish fractionalisation. Thus, even the golden opportunity presented by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I failed to bring about a unified Kurdish nation. The Turkish state's successful divide and rule precepts readily took advantage of this situation, which only began to alter slowly with the rise of modern modes of social communication. Thus, Chapter 4 investigates, among others, how the PKK shifted radically from the classical guerrilla army structure of operating in each member's own locality to clusters of fighters from different areas joined into the same units where they learned about their peers' local cultural particularities and thus to connect better with each other. Successful PKK organisation and leadership also helped overcome traditional Kurdish divisions.

Chapter 5 explains how by the early 1990s, the PKK developed from its mountain highlands and rural areas bases into a mass movement mobilising popular uprisings and celebrations like Newroz in urban areas through

clusters of more modern networks of dense communicative events. The Turkish government's brutal destruction of rural Kurdish villages and deportation to western urban centres in an attempt to assimilate them failed in many cases because so many ethnic Kurds remained isolated from mainstream public life and subject to constant prejudices from majority ethnic Turks. In addition, there were just too many minority ethnic Kurds separated by their linguistic and cultural cleavages and the PKK's strong and continuing campaign of Kurdish ethnic awareness and demands for the state to succeed in its assimilationist campaigns.

Chapter 6 explores the various ways the PKK has extended its collective and communicative activities beyond the Middle East into the Kurdish diasporic community in Europe and elsewhere. The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) – described as the PKK umbrella organisation bringing together numerous affiliated organisations structured according to different levels of PKK control and involvement – counts literally tens of thousands involved in the Kurdish cause to one extent or another. Med-TV and social media also represent a communicative process that revolutionised and strengthened the Kurdish cause overcoming physical barriers and energising the politically passive.

The following Chapter 7 details how these unprecedented modes of communication spread awareness and sympathy against Turkey's capture of the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan in February 1999 not only to the Kurdish community and diaspora but also to the entire world. The PKK's persistence on these matters has created a virtual Kurdish nation far beyond its original, tenuous borders in the Middle East. Thus, the final Chapter 8 concludes that any actual solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey less than some type of genuine internal or external self-determination would fail to solve the Kurdish problem. The author suggests that for the present, the PKK's borderless, confederal model with consociational features constitutes the most viable resolution as it would strike a balance between Turkey's determination to maintain its borders, while granting its ethnic Kurdish population who so desire an avenue for their demands. However, by emphasising that this only represents the most viable solution for now, Bokani implies that it would be the slippery road to possible independence, which in today's world at least would be totally unacceptable to Turkey.

Furthermore, given the failure of a mere advisory referendum on independence held by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq in September 2017, the apparent U.S. desertion of its *de facto* Syrian Kurdish allies in favour of Turkey in October 2019, and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's continuing and increasingly harsh crackdown on the PKK both within and outside of Turkey, one wonders whether the present author is being too optimistic in his projections for the future. On the other hand, given the enormous progress the PKK has made in furthering the Kurdish cause, one cannot easily gainsay Bokani's optimism. Time alone will tell.

At the beginning of his work, the author also offers his readers a short, but useful list of terms in both their Kurdish and Turkish equivalents. A longer such list as well as another one of acronyms would have been even more informative. This reviewer could see little difference between the two maps of Kurdistan in the Middle Ages and contemporary times. Bokani ends his study with a large, informative bibliography, but lacks an index. He writes well and has only a minimal amount of typos. His book offers scholars, policy makers, and the interested lay public an informative analysis of the Kurdish problem in Turkey through the lens of theoretical and communicative insights.

Michael M. Gunter, Tennessee Technological University, United States

Emel Elif Tugdar & Serhun Al, eds., **Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East: Actors, Ideas, and Interests**, Cham: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2018, pp. 235, (ISBN: 978-3319537146).

“Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East” aims to unpack political dynamics in the Kurdistan region in nine contributions, which have to provide the reader insight in Kurdish political affairs across Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria from a comparative perspective. The first chapter “Iraqi Kurdistan’s Statehood Aspirations and Non-Kurdish Actors: The Case of the Turkomans” by Emel Elif Tugdar considers the position of Turkomans in state building in the Kurdistan Region Iraq. The close relation between Turkey and Turkomans is mentioned as a possible obstacle, yet Turkey’s interest in successful state building in the Kurdistan region creates opportunities. The position of the Turkomans in the process of state-building in the Kurdistan Region Iraq will depend on how Turkey will use its bargaining power with the Kurdistan Regional Government, a power which is used to advance economic trade more than politics. In “Kurdish Political Parties in Syria: Past Struggles and Future Expectations” Bekir Halhalli gives an overview of Kurdish political parties from the establishment of the Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party in 1957 to the political landscape today. The author concludes that Kurdish politics in Syria is organised around two blocks dominated by the PKK and KDP, and that struggles between these blocks have weakened the struggle for democracy by Kurds in Syria.

The two chapters are followed by “Human Security Versus National Security: Kurds, Turkey and Syrian Rojava” in which Serhun Al discusses nationalism as a security provider for both states and ethnic groups. Focusing on Turkey mainly, the author argues that pro-Kurdish claim making has posed threats to the territorial integrity and national unity of Turkey. A rights discourse around language and identity, which the author refers to as cultural security, has created a Kurdish comfort zone, yet is perceived by the state as a threat to national unity. “Kurdish Nationalist

Organizations, Neighboring States, and “Ideological Distance” by Michael Wuthrich analyses extra- and cross political relations between Kurdish political parties and heads of neighbouring states. Referring to the concept “ideological distance”, the author argues that there is an unparalleled similarity between the ideologies of Erdoğan and Barzani. Both leaders’ perception of the PKK as a threat to their interests has cemented collaboration. This collaboration between Turkey and the KRG, however, is based on interactions between the heads of state, Erdogan and Barzani, and change in leadership may bring important changes in interactions between Turkey and the KRG. Cenap Çakmak’s “Statehood, Autonomy or Unitary Coexistence” discusses the approaches of various political organisations to self-determination. The author makes a division between three groups of actors and distinguish them from one another on how they define self-determination. First, “Barzani and his aides” (129), who are considered most enthusiastic in promoting an agenda of self-determination, second, “pro-Öcalan HDP” (129) dedicated to the idea of democratic-autonomy and democratic-confederalism, and third the Islamist HÜDA-PAR which promotes rights and freedoms it refers to as “God-given entitlements that do not have to be endorsed by the state” (130). Peace building efforts in Turkey are discussed by Ina Merdjanova in “Islam and the Kurdish Peace Process in Turkey (2013-2015)”. The initial hypothesis of the author was that Islam in Turkey can provide a powerful foundation for a state-driven top-down peace process. However, the author’s findings lead to a different conclusion, namely that the peace process needs to be pursued in a “holistic” way and address all minorities in Turkey through equal rights and inclusive citizenship.

“Ethnic Capital Across Borders and Regional Development” takes a political economy perspective. In this chapter, Serhun Al and Elif Tugdar use the ethnic capital as a potential mechanism in the development of cross-border trade and a cross-border labour market. Umut Kuruuzum discusses the synchronisation of politics and economy in “In Search of Futures: Uncertain Neoliberal Times, Speculations, and the Economic Crisis in Iraqi-Kurdistan”. The author identifies a tension between Kurdish nationalism and neoliberal policies, arguing that a political agenda for independence has been undermined by an agenda of neoliberal entrepreneurship, which made it impossible to create an economically self-sustainable polity. In “The Stateless and Why Some Gain and Others Not: The Case of Iranian Kurdistan” Idris Ahmedi brings us back to the issue of self-determination, analysing the Kurdish national movement in Iran. The author argues that there has not been a genuine recognition of Kurdish rights, and Kurdish aspirations have only been accommodated when the state was relatively weak and suppressed again when the state was strong.

The attractiveness of this edited volume is its interdisciplinary character. To study political dynamics in Kurdistan, the editors have brought together

contributions from the field of political sciences to that of political economy. This results in contributions discussing the main political parties, to that of ethnic capital and cross-border trade, and the role of non-Kurdish groups in state building. However, some of the more challenging propositions remain underdiscussed. For example, the idea that effective state-building in the KRI is in the interests of Turkey (chapter 1), and how this relates to the argument that relations between Turkey and the KRG are built around Erdoğan and Barzani, hence not constructed around institutions, but persons (chapter 4). Another one is how the argument that ethnic capital contributes to the development of an extra-border political economy of Kurdistan relates to the argument of spaces of economic insecurity and uncertainty, or how the argument about the KRI as an economic powerhouse (chapter 7) relates to the boom reversed to a bust with the 2014 financial crisis and the emergence of ISIS (chapter 8). Also, the statement that the demography of the KRI offers an advantage to full independence (chapter 5) needs clarification against the background of the discussion about Kirkuk (chapter 1). In addition, fascinating quotes beg for explanation, such as the statement by a Turkoman politician: “Wherever Kurds are, Turks exists as well”.

Occasionally, the book moves from challenging thoughts to questionable claims, such as the one that the AKP initiated the peace process, or that the AKP’s Islamic Brotherhood project helped to advance the party’s position in the southeast, or that the high ranking of KRG in Turkey’s export lists consolidates ethnic-capital development (169). At times, the narrative is unbalanced, such as the claim that the ENKS is the most inclusive and comprehensive umbrella organisation of Kurdish political parties, while TEV-DEM is cornered as “close to the PKK” (40), or that the political demands of the PKK are reduced to linguistic and cultural rights for the Kurds in Turkey.

“Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East” offers some interesting insights and challenging thoughts, however the editors could have highlighted these ideas, the contradictions and questions that emerge from these contributions in their introduction and bring the authors in a conversation with one another.

Joost Jongerden, Wageningen University, The Netherlands

Christoph Markiewicz, *The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam: Persian Emigres and the Making of Ottoman Sovereignty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 364 pp, (9781108684842).

The establishment of Kurdish Studies as a distinct field has served as a useful antidote to different forms and gradations of political and methodological nationalism that have long informed Turkish, Arab, and Persian Studies, and to the long-standing marginalisation of the Kurdish experience; but

precisely because of this newly gained autonomy, it risks institutionalising its marginal status, and staying aloof from wider perspectives. Within Kurdish Studies, in turn, history, and in particular the history of premodern and early modern past, occupies a relatively marginal position. The focus of most work lies on the modern and contemporary periods, and on the political dimensions of Kurdish nationality.

For these and other reasons, the early modern chronicler and statesman Idrīs Bidlīsī (1457-1520 CE) has not quite received the attention he deserves, even though his historical importance is beyond doubt. As already described in Martin van Bruinessen's *Agha, Shaykh, and State* (1992), it was Bidlīsī who, more than any other actor, persuaded the Kurdish princes in the Ottoman-Safavid marches to pledge allegiance to the Ottomans. Bidlīsī, however, is not only an actor but also a chronicler of this period, having authored, most importantly the voluminous *Hesht behesht* ("Eight Paradises"). Although earlier twentieth-century commentators dismissed the "extravagant elegance" of this work, Charles Melville has more recently stated that Bidlīsī's chronicle "represents a watershed in Ottoman historiographical production, with no match in terms of comprehensiveness or epistolary style" (see e.g. in Lewis & Holt, 1962: 198; Melville, 2012: 483-495). Despite its obvious importance for early modern Ottoman historiography, Bidlīsī's main work has not been published yet. Hence, among scholars of early modern Kurdish history, Idrīs is rather less well known than his late sixteenth-century townsman, Şerefxan Bidlīsī, whose *Şerefnâme* is the most obvious, and the most widely used, primary source for the political history of the region.

Our knowledge of Idrīs and the cultural environment from which he emerged now takes a major leap forward with Christoph Markiewicz's study, *The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam*. This is a revised version of the author's PhD dissertation, which was guided by prominent Ottoman historian Cornell Fleischer, and which received MESA's Malcolm Kerr dissertation award in 2016. It zooms in on the important juncture in early modern times, in which an unstable constellation of local dynasties that replaced each other in quick succession was replaced by three supra-regional empires that were universal in their claim to rule: the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal dynasties; and one may add (and Markiewicz does indeed add) the Timurid dynasty in Central Asia. The Ottoman would prove to be by far the most enduring of these. Markiewicz traces a number of convergences and common developments in these empires, placing his study in what has been known as "connected history:" it systematically explores the transregional connections within a wider shared cultural space that had Islam as the dominant religion and Persian as the dominant language of literate communication and literary education.¹ Perhaps

¹ For a brief introductory statement of this non-Eurocentric "connected history," see Subrahmanyam (1997).

Markiewicz slightly overemphasises the Islamic character of this space, but that is a minor quibble. Such global or connected approaches operate on a rather larger geographical scale than that of the individual state or empire; as a result of this upscaling, they risk dissolving human agency, a risk that has been countered by the rise of “global microhistory,” which focuses on individuals at the interstices of political or civilisational units. Markiewicz, too, locates his study within the latter discipline: a focus on individual intermediaries, he argues, helps us in tracing, and explaining, precisely when and why these interconnections were established and how they functioned.

Bidlîsî was born into a family of scholars with close links to the Messianic Sufi movement of Muhammad Nurbakhsh. There were many such movements active in the region during this period (the Safavî movement, obviously, being the most famous and politically most successful of them). In their use of Ibn ‘Arabi’s monism and in their veneration of Imam ‘Alî, these movements displayed a “confessional ambiguity” (4) that blurred the distinction between Sunnîs and Shi’ites. As a result, political loyalties did not necessarily match sectarian affinity or identity. Markiewicz adds that Bidlîsî, despite his probably Kurdish ethnicity, is “unlikely to have embraced a distinct Kurdish identity”, but rather “viewed himself and the groups around him through the contrasting identities of Turk u Tajik” (32). The latter distinction, he rightly notes, did not really mark an ethnic background: it is neither an ethnic one between population groups or a linguistic one between predominant languages (at this time, for example, the Ottoman Sultan Selim was writing in verse in Persian while his Iranian rival Shah Isma‘il composed propagandistic poems in Turkish); rather, it marks a political and geographical opposition between the Ottoman dynasty in the West and Safavids in the East; but even in this sense, the terms seem rather ambiguous.

In 1502, following Shah Isma‘il’s entrance in Tabriz, Idrîs left for Istanbul, without any of his relatives. He himself subsequently depicted Isma‘il as the personification of tyranny and disorder; Markiewicz interprets this flight in slightly overly psychologising terms, interpreting Bidlîsî’s rather conventionally expressed statements of longing for his loved ones as an indication of a “crisis of conscience” (74), or even a “midlife crisis” (75). Bidlîsî’s stature at the Ottoman court grew rapidly; soon he started work on the *Hesht behesht*, which had been commissioned by Bayezid II. Reportedly, however, the Sultan was not happy with the result, and subsequently had another court-affiliated scholar, Ibn Kemal, better known as Kemalpaşazade, compose another chronicle, in Ottoman Turkish this time. In disillusionment, Bidlîsî withdrew to the Arab peninsula, from where he tried to court Selim’s great rival, Shah Isma‘il, with a panegyric. After Bayezid’s son Selim’s accession to the throne, Bidlîsî returned to Istanbul. The years between 1514 and 1516 were, as Markiewicz rightly observes, the

“pinnacle of his professional career” (126). Because of his intimate knowledge of Eastern lands, Bidlîsî became one of Selim’s most important counsellors in the expedition against Shah Isma‘îl, and following Selim’s victory at Çaldıran, he became the Sultan’s envoy to co-opt the various Kurdish rulers in territory that was now more firmly under Ottoman control. For Kurdish historiography, this period is of particular importance because it marks the incorporation of the majority of Kurdish emirates into the Ottoman Empire, mostly in the form of semi-independent hereditary principalities (*hükümet*); for better or for worse, this constellation remained largely intact until the centralising Tanzimat reforms of the mid-nineteenth century. Bidlîsî was richly rewarded for his services, but was never formally appointed to any government post. He died in Istanbul while working on a versified history of Selim’s rule, the *Selim Şah-Nâme*.²

The second part consists of a more conventional intellectual history of Bidlîsî’s ideas on sovereignty and legitimacy. This section builds, among others, on Vural Genç’s pioneering writings, most of which are unfortunately available in Turkish only.³ Here, Markiewicz aims at a “connected history of political ideology” (291), arguing that Bidlîsî, despite his roots in the Kurdish-inhabited marches, and despite his longstanding residence in and work for the Ottoman empire, drew on a far wider intellectual network. This is less innovative than it may seem; earlier works on Islamic intellectual history have long emphasised the supra-regional influence of, among others, Ibn ‘Arabî’s mysticism, Jalâl al-Dîn al-Dawâni’s ethics, and Ibn Khaldûn’s theory of history. What is new, however, is Markiewicz’s attempt to trace and explain the early modern rise of a new ideal of sacral kingship and universal empire that cannot, or least not entirely, be reduced to the traditional concepts and norms of caliphate and ummah. In late medieval political writing, he argues, new representations and legitimations appear of the ruler as *sahib-qiran* (“lord of auspicious conjunctions”) and *khalîfa-yi ilâhî* (“viceregent of God”).

Importantly, this part also discusses the literary dimensions of the historiography of this period as much as political ideas in the strict sense. Although Bidlîsî’s flowery style was already criticised by near-contemporaries like Mustafa ‘Ali, the *Hesht behesht* must have been quite popular, judging from the large number of manuscripts that have been preserved. The ornate register of Ottoman Turkish that became the norm under Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, Markiewicz argues, was shaped by Bidlîsî’s Persian chancery style (239), and by his use of the Timurid vocabulary of sovereignty (237). Only much later was this style eclipsed by Turkish-language chronicles in a rather simpler register. One of the many

² Published in Turkish translation by Kırılancı (2001).

³ See in particular the published version of Genç’s 2014 dissertation, *Acem’den Rum’a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihçi İdris-i Bidlîsî (1457-1520)* (2019a); the appendix to his work contains a translation of part of the *Hesht Behesht*. In English, see Genç (2019b).

merits of this book is that it poses many new questions, and more emphatically restates others. How did the changing legitimization of universal empire interact with the more mundane if not sordid vicissitudes of patronage (with which Bidlîsî was only all too familiar), and with the legitimization of local rulers? Why and how did Persian remain the main language of courtly correspondence for such a long time, and the main language of literary education for even longer?

Two topics, in particular, would have merited more attention, especially from the perspective of Kurdish Studies: the precise character and development of Bidlîsî's contacts with various Kurdish princes, and his possible role in the persecutions of Qizilbash following the Ottoman victory at Çaldıran; the ferocity of these policies gained Selim the nickname Yavuz, "the grim." Markiewicz is conspicuously silent about these aspects, even though Bidlîsî's *Selimşâhname* seems to be the origin of the oft-repeated (and undoubtedly hyperbolic) claim that on Selim's orders, forty thousand Qizilbash were identified and massacred (For an earlier study, see Sönmez (2012).

Another question that remains open concerns the experience of marginal and/or subaltern individuals and groups. Of necessity, perhaps, Markiewicz's narrative focuses on the ruling elites and the literati aspiring to be near them; but this focus still leaves room for a greater and more systematic attention for provincial rulers, the learned men in the smaller towns and in the countryside, tarîqa members, and peasants – not to mention women. Global microhistory, that is, may yet be fruitfully complemented by a connected social history. Such a social-historical global perspective would be particularly appealing, and promising, for those scholars with a historicising interest in the Kurdish experience.

Michiel Leezenberg, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

References

- Genç, V. (2019a). *Acem'den Rum'a Bir Bürokrat ve Tarihçi İdris-i Bidlîsî (1457-1520)*. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları.
- Genç, V. (2019b). Rethinking İdris-i Bidlîsî: An Iranian bureaucrat and historian between the Shah and the Sultan. *Iranian Studies*, 52(3-4), 425-447.
- Kırlangıç, H. (trans.) (2001). *İdris-i Bidlîsî Selim Şah-Nâme*. Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı.
- Lewis, B. & Holt, P.M (eds.) (1962). *Historians of the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Melville, C. (2012). *Persian Historiography: A History of Persian Literature*. Vol. 10. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Sönmez, E. (2012). *İdris-i Bidlîsî: Ottoman Kurdistan and Islamic Legitimacy*. İstanbul: Libra Kitap.
- Subrahmanyam, S. (1997). Connected histories: Notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia. *Modern Asia Studies*, 31(3): 735-762.
- Van Bruinessen, M. (1992). *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. London: Zed Books.

Thomas Schmidinger, **The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in the Afrin Region of Rojava**, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019, 192 pp. (ISBN: 978-1629636511).

The timeliness and importance of Thomas Schmidinger's *The Battle for the Mountains of the Kurds* cannot be overstated. The book's quick production illustrates the immediacy and urgency of assembling such an important text in the midst of national campaigns against Kurds across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. As a result, the book will inform a wide audience of governmental, political, educational, scholarly, and non-governmental actors. With the ongoing occupation of the Afrin region of Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan/Northern Syria/Western Kurdistan), Schmidinger's book captures the contemporary moment while providing an expansive, thorough, and compelling historiography of the region. *The Battle for the Mountains of the Kurds* foregrounds the complexity, contradictions, and messiness of historical, social, political, economic, and cultural life in Afrin. Through a multidisciplinary methodology, the readers are made aware of the particularity of socio-political life in Afrin as a window to understanding Kurdish histories.

Thomas Schmidinger offers a capacious historiography that underscores the regional Kurdish specificity in the Afrin region of Rojava. The very organisation of this book speaks to an intellectual and political commitment to showcasing the heterogeneity of the Afrin region through ethnicity, religion, language, gender, and governmentality and relation of Afrin to Turkish state-violence. Instead of creating mythical accounts of Rojava and Afrin, this book captures the ways that Afrin was a site for the incredible movement of ideas, goods, and people. Through the case of the Dumi, who are related to the European Roma, Schmidinger disrupts any essentialist readings of the Dumi, Kurds, Turks, and Arabs. Through the critical evaluation of Dumi languages, as Schmidinger shows us on page 5, he extrapolates the cross-pollination between Dumi languages and a wide assortment of Kurdish, Turkish, and Arabic loanwords in the Dumi language, "which is evidence of a long cohabitation with the speakers of these languages in the region." Therefore, we already are witness to how fluid Kurdish languages and identities are by studying thoughtfully this region.

The chapters on "Population and Language," "Religious Communities," and "History" provide a wider socio-historical analysis of the region with specific attention given to the multiplicity of ethnic, religious, and historical actors. Schmidinger illustrates early on the changing forms of governance from prominent tribes to colonial mandates/protectorates to post-colonial nations. Therefore, we are now privy to the constantly changing forms of governance in the area. Such a deep historiography proves important in

enhancing our understandings of belonging and rights that shifted from feudal relations to relations of race and ethnicity managed by the nation-state. Additionally, Schmidinger acknowledges the religious and linguistic diversity in the region that operate as a *modus operandi*, which differs from how the national family is often constructed through exclusion (McClintock, 1995). Therefore, we witness the presence of Yezidism, Alevism, religious minorities, and various sects of Islam (especially Hanafi-influenced Islam). Instead of just showcasing multi-ethnic and multi-religious presence, the book successfully explains how the forms of Kurdish governance provided religious rights and minority protection that the *Baathist* government failed to provide, especially to Yezidis.

After providing readers with a rich, sophisticated social-history of the Afrin region, Thomas Schmidinger launches into the current socio-political climate through the chapters on “Democratic Confederation in the Canton of Afrin,” “Development of the Canton of Afrin from 2012 to 2018,” “Kurdish Enclaves in the Afrin Area,” and “The War against Afrin.” Through these chapters, Schmidinger highlights the origins of Kurdish nationalism in the early 1900s as well as the formation of the major Kurdish parties, their relationship to the Syrian state, as well as ISIS violence and Turkish state violence in Rojava.

Schmidinger further discusses the specificity of political consciousness in the Afrin region. A vibrant Kurdish community emerged since the area was not handed over to Arab settlers like other parts of the region and other parts of Kurdistan. I found it very interesting, refreshing, and useful the analysis that the Kurds in Afrin were not as connected to other Kurdish movements outside of Afrin. Such points emphasise the need to use anti-essentialist paradigms to understanding Kurdish communities. Therefore, we witness how the Party of Democratic Union (PYD) addressed particularly Syrian Kurdish concerns; the PYD did not have the same political goals or principles as the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) in Turkey. Since 2012, Schmidinger explains, the PYD has taken on the obligations of the Syrian state by replacing it while embracing decentralisation. Through such a political shift, we see how democratic confederalism involved instituting various councils/co-councils to include women, Alevis, Yezidis, and Arab Emriti and Bobeni tribes (page 50).

While vying for sovereignty, decentralisation, and regional-local control of affairs, the PYD and its military units (the YPG and YPJ) had to work under the auspices of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in order to receive western military support in the fight against ISIS. These important points in the book underscore the unreliable structures of western support where one’s existence and legitimacy as a nation-state is crucial to secure global, especially western, support. Stateless or internally displaced persons have little political might and support in the global arena. Rather, western states have used the case of Kurds for their own political aims while refusing to

meet the needs of Kurdish communities. This was especially evident with Schmidinger's mention of the constant German arms sales to Turkey. With such fickle, unreliable western support of the Kurdish case for sovereignty and land, the Turkish state has started to amplify its strategies for Kurdish erasure. In this instance, Schmidinger showcases how the Turkish discourse and language of repatriation of "Arab lands" back to Arabs is evidence of settler-colonialism and internal colonialism (Soleimani and Mohammadpour, 2019).

As the horizon in Kurdish Studies expands, I pose some questions to think about where we could take theoretical leaps from *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds*: Here are those questions for the next generation of scholars to tackle: What would a critique of racial hetero-patriarchy tell us about the relationship between nation-states and Kurdish communities? What types of social organisation in the Afrin region both contest and appropriate state forms? How does western colonialism and Arab and Turkish colonialism impact both the language of the state and the language of resistance in Rojava? The YPJ (female protection units) grace the cover of the book. How are the figures and iconicity of the female Kurdish fighter used by Kurdish parties and by the larger imperial and humanitarian-industrial complexes? How does the language of "terrorism" and the "global war on terror" give extra-judicial and military power for Turkish onslaught of Kurdish areas, such as Afrin? What Thomas Schmidinger has produced, as a scholarly monograph and a political act, is a text that will be a central piece for those studying Kurdistan, Kurdish history, Kurdish ethnographies, and Kurdish diasporas. The book challenges essentialist representations of Kurds by highlighting the multiple relations vertically and horizontally to other ethnic, religious, and national actors. With the growth of Kurdish Studies, the book will draw interest from both a scholarly and lay audience. As an anthropologist of Kurdish diasporas, I left feeling very enriched and will use this text as a key resource and teaching tool in my undergraduate classes.

Stanley Thangaraj, City College of New York, United States

References

- McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial Leather*. New York: Routledge.
- Solemani, K. and Mohammadpour, A. (2019). "Can non-Persians speak?" The sovereign's narration of "Iranian identity." *Ethnicities*, 19(5): 925-947.