



BRILL

## *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 Îbrahîm 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 Ghobadi'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. Yadirgi 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.

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