

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 under-discussed. 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.

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