



BRILL

Book Reviews



Thomas Schmidinger, *Krieg und Revolution in Syrisch-Kurdistan: Analysen und Stimmen aus Rojava*, Wien: Mandelbaum, 2014, 262 pp., (ISBN: 978-3-85476-636-0).

For a long time, the districts that are now commonly known as Rojava, Western Kurdistan, were among the least known and least studied parts of Kurdistan. Since the end of the French mandate, much less was written about the Kurds of Syria than those of Turkey, Iraq or even Iran, and it was as if their existence, the specific problems they faced, and the political mobilisation among them were mainly by-products of developments in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan. In general overviews of Kurdish history we may find something about Kurdish nationalist activities of the mandate period, Arabisation policies of the 1960s, and the denial of citizen's rights to a large number of Syrian Kurds, but otherwise they received little attention. This has changed dramatically in the past two years: Syrian Kurds have held the limelight and gained tremendous international sympathy for the Kurdish cause through the heroic defence of Kobanî, by coming to the rescue of the Yezidis of Sinjar in neighbouring Iraq, and by what is billed as an experiment in grassroots democracy, incorporating ethnic and religious minorities on equal terms. In spite of all the press attention, it remains difficult to assess what is really going on in the three Kurdish cantons that together constitute Rojava. Thomas Schmidinger's new book is a helpful aid in making sense of the news.

Schmidinger is an Austrian political scientist and anthropologist as well as an activist working for one of the few foreign NGOs that carry out small relief projects inside Syrian Kurdistan. His involvement with Syrian Kurds in exile goes back several years, but the parts that make the book especially worth reading are based on two recent research trips to Rojava, in January 2013 and February 2014. On the first trip, he was accompanied by a Syrian Kurdish friend living in Austria, whose relatives and acquaintances were affiliated with one of the Kurdish parties hostile to the PYD; the second trip was arranged in co-ordination with the PYD, which also provided guides, giving him exposure to the official PYD vision but nonetheless also allowing him to speak with

groups and individuals critical of the official line. Schmidinger's narrative and analysis of the political developments are complemented by a series of interviews with prominent Kurdish and Christian personalities that take up almost half the book.

In the first part of the book Schmidinger provides the German reader with a good summary of the existing literature on the sociology and history of Syria's Kurds, acknowledging especially the most significant recent studies, Jordi Tejel's *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Routledge 2009) and Harriet Allsopp's *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (I. B. Tauris 2014; reviewed in *Kurdish Studies* 2/2). He describes the complex ethnic and religious composition of the population of the three main regions of Rojava and sketches the history of Syria's Kurds, from the time of the French mandate through the various phases Arab nationalist rule, with their shifting but consistently repressive policies. His description of the extremely fissiparous Syrian Kurdish parties – the original Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria, established in 1957, split into some fifteen parties and factions, as shown in an informative chart at the end of the book – is summary but offers some explanations for these parties' division and relative ineffectiveness. He does not appear to endorse Allsopp's view that the parties had been losing relevance and that the strengthening of nationalist sentiment among the population took place outside and in spite of these parties, but like Allsopp he emphasises the very different character of two more recently established parties that have no historical connection with the KDP-S: the PKK-inspired Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Dêmokrat*, PYD) and the Kurdish Future Movement (*Şepêla Pêşerojê ya Kurdî*). The latter favoured close cooperation with Arab opposition groups to bring down the regime and has been the only Kurdish grouping represented in the Syrian National Council. It was especially strong in Qamishli, the main city of Cezîre, but lost much of its strength after its charismatic leader, Mish'al Temo, was assassinated in 2011. The PYD distinguishes itself as the best organised and most disciplined of the parties, with the strongest armed wing People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG), which enabled it to establish de facto rule over the three regions of Rojava when the regime quietly reduced its presence there.

Of the three Kurdish-inhabited regions of Syria, Cezîre was long the heartland of the Kurdish movement; with the exception of the PYD, all Kurdish parties (including the Future Movement) have their core support there and virtually all of their leaders are from Cezîre. Before Abdullah Öcalan's expulsion from Syria in 1998, the PKK had found local support mainly among the Kurds of Efrîn and Kobanî, and it was in these two zones that the PYD, established in 2003, initially had its strongest support. On the basis of his interviews, Schmidinger

traces the beginnings of the current Kurdish uprising to anti-regime demonstrations in Amûde and other towns of Cezîre in April 2011, which were a direct response to the first Arab protests in Deraa and elsewhere. Several of the Kurdish parties have a historically strong presence in Amûde (which unlike ethnically mixed Qamishli is almost entirely Kurdish), but they played no significant part in these demonstrations, which were the work of small groups of young men that called themselves “Co-ordination Committees” and only in retrospect received some party backing. Schmidinger’s narrative guides the reader through the developments until mid-2014, attempting to do justice to the often contradictory visions of his various interviewees, especially concerning the role of the PYD, which has become the ruling party in all three cantons.

Schmidinger registers complaints and criticisms of rival parties and human rights organisations that accuse the PYD of dictatorial tendencies, torture, imprisonment and summary executions of opponents, secret collaboration with the regime, and forced recruitment of (child) soldiers, but he also notes that the parties united in the Kurdish National Council (sponsored by Massoud Barzani in neighbouring Iraq) as well as the Kurdish Future Movement have themselves refused to take part in the canton administration. He also observes that the PYD has made a significant and partially successful effort to include the non-Kurdish population in the administration. He also gives an impression of the difficult balancing act the PYD must be carrying out in Cezîre, where even parts of the city of Qamishli are still under direct government control or inhabited by (Arab and Armenian) regime loyalists, while ISIS also has active supporters among one Arab tribal group in the canton.

One thing the reader would like to understand better is how the PYD’s confederal democratic autonomy, the canton administration, works in practice and to what extent it allows ordinary people, members as well as non-members of the ruling party, to take part in decisions concerning their lives. The war conditions and the relatively short duration of his stays did not enable the author to actually observe council meetings but his interviews bring out how much everything is in flux. The PYD has very much changed the realities on the ground, with an inevitable impact on the perceptions, actions and discourse of the other political actors and communities. The transcribed interviews at the end of the book, with leading personalities across the political spectrum, present a complex mosaic of social and political forces, interests, ideological positions and aspirations. Schmidinger attempts to engage his interlocutors with critical questions, with varying degrees of success.

The empowerment of women is another important theme in PYD’s discourse, and three of the interviews are with women in leading political and military positions (the PYD co-chair, the prime minister of Efrîn canton, and a

military commander). Unfortunately, these women were even less willing than the male interviewees to say anything beyond standard party propaganda. Not surprisingly, interlocutors without official positions are more forthcoming, and the significance of the change that the PYD represents for women is brought out more clearly in one of the more sympathetic and relaxed interviews in the book, with the chair of a women's NGO in Amûde that emerged as part of the 2011 uprising.

The author's rendering of conflicting narratives without choosing his own truth is an adequate and, no doubt, deliberate way of presenting the complex and rapidly changing realities in Syria's Kurdish regions. It makes this little book preferable to most journalistic accounts that attempt to make sense of the Rojava revolution by reducing it to a single narrative. It will remain an informative resource even when the realities have further changed.

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