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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Kurdish Question in Turkey, Iraq and Beyond

F. MICHAEL WUTHRICH

The fact that a population of an estimated 25 million people, sharing a rich spectrum of culture and linguistic roots and occupying a very blurry – in boundary and ethnic composition – but contiguous geography divided across a number of nations would garner attention from both social scientists and policy makers should be no real surprise. Since Saddam Hussein's *Anfal* campaign against Kurds in Northern Iraq in the late 1980s and particularly following the First Gulf War, the literature on Kurds and Kurdish nationalism has greatly been enriched. In the last several years, a number of books have furthered this literature by addressing the 'Kurdish Question' in whole or in part through engagement with recent developments and theory, and focusing on Kurds located from Turkey and Iraq to Syria and the European diaspora. This review intends to highlight two recent collected works, particularly in regard to their contribution to the literature on Kurds and Kurdish nationalism. One of the two edited volumes, *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, edited by Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden, focuses primarily on Turkey and the country's Kurdish diaspora in Europe, along with a number of variants of Turkish nationalism that dynamically interact with Kurdish nationalism in Turkey.¹ The other work, *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, edited by Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield, is comprised of essays on the 'Kurdish Question' in the four major countries in which Kurds have traditionally had claims for territorial roots: Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria.² Since these works offer a combined total of 24 distinct essays, rather than deal with these sequentially, the major issues and contributions will be discussed along with a number of important remaining gaps in the literature.

While the edited work by Casier and Jongerden also offers chapters on competing Turkish nationalisms stemming from Kemalist and Islamic interpretations by Menderes Çınar and Murat Somer, along with a chapter on border imagery and nationalism by Ferhat Kentel and the 'Turkish diaspora' by Ayhan Kaya, this book's primary contribution comes from its essays addressing various aspects of the 'Kurdish Question' as it relates to Turkey, which comprise a majority of the chapters. Within the portion of the book devoted to Kurdish nationalism, there is a section that addresses how 'the State' and political elites have responded to the issue

of Kurds in Turkey with new analysis from Michael Gunter of the effort that former Prime Minister and President, Turgut Özal, put into the resolution of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey before his untimely demise. This section also includes an interesting but familiar discussion of the changing discourse toward the Kurdish Question by the Turkish state by Mesut Yeğen and another chapter regarding the relationship between the current ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Kurdish Question by Tozun Bahcheli and Sid Noel. Another two key sections, which will be discussed in further detail below, focus on an understanding of the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) and its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, largely derived from organizational documents and the point of view of its leadership, and also the development of Kurdish nationalism and political activism by Kurds in the European diaspora.

The essays brought together by Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield sprang from a conference on 'The Kurdish Policy Initiative' at Chatham House in London in 2007. The works in this volume are of several types: first, a number of essays provide histories (current or extended) of developments between the Kurds and the states in their respective countries that are largely informative in nature, such as a chapter on Kurds in Turkey by Kemal Kirişçi, a chapter on the Kurdistan Regional Government by Gareth Stansfield, a chapter on the Kurds in Iran by Hashem Ahmadzadeh, and a chapter on Kurds in Syria by Robert Lowe. Several other chapters frame their discussion of the Kurds in a particular location through comparison or theory in order to come to a better understanding of the current dynamics. Works from this category that are interesting but will not be addressed below are a work by David Romano that tries to comparatively assess Kurdish communities in each of the four Middle Eastern states, and a chapter by Robert Olson that makes comparisons between the historical context for Kurds in 1918 and that of 2003. Finally, a number of chapters devote their attention primarily to policy formation. Proposals of this sort can be found in a chapter by Stefan Wolff and another by Liam Anderson regarding Iraq, and Michael Gunter writes a final chapter on the prospects for resolution of the Kurdish Question in Iraq and Turkey.

Out of these two collections arise a number of important issues and contributions to scholarship. Key among them is the new perspective on the PKK gleaned from the direct account from Abdullah Öcalan, PKK leaders and documents regarding the development of this organization in the essays by Jongerden and Akkaya.³ This vantage point challenges a number of assumptions about the organization that exist in the literature. One point of emphasis is the assertion that, rather than having developed out of the Kurdish left – and particularly through involvement with the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths (DDKO) – Öcalan and the PKK leadership had 'pure' roots, descending from the Marxist and revolutionary left in Turkey.⁴ The account brought forth by Jongerden and Akkaya establishes the PKK as a derivative of the Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association (ADYÖD), which was established by the Socialist Workers' Party of Turkey.⁵ The authors argue that this demonstrates that 'unlike most Kurdish parties, which adopted a rather conservative outlook and were organized around tribal leaders and structures, the PKK originated from the left in Turkey and drew its leaders, members and militants from the disenfranchised'.⁶

Why is this distinction significant? The ideological roots of the party lead the authors to make a rather unanticipated conclusion that the PKK 'in this respect

should be considered a political party of Turkey'.⁷ This is, of course, extremely problematic, not because the PKK should or should not be considered a political party (in Turkey), but rather ideological roots seem to be irrelevant and neither necessary or sufficient to draw such a conclusion. The determination of whether an organization or association is a political party (in Turkey or elsewhere) should be grounded on other criteria. This assumes that nationalist parties without a Marxist bent or those that emerged solely in a Kurdish environment could not be considered parties, a logic which would suggest, for example, that the Nationalist Action Party, the third largest party in Turkey, is not a party at all. The significance of this information is not even that it confirms a fact (the weight of evidence points to Öcalan's having some connections with both the DDKO and ADYÖD), but that this account of the organization's origins is what its leaders *want* to highlight and have us believe. That party leaders have selected this information as relevant among all possible historical details is intriguing in itself. It seems to place the PKK, by its own intent, into a Turkish national framework rather than outside of or against it, suggesting that its revolutionary claims are ultimately bounded by the existing state and are relevant, not just for Kurds, but for all citizens of Turkey.

The veracity of the framing of the account can be easily questioned on a number of points, however. For example, the claim that all other parties representing Kurds have been conservative in outlook and tribally based is clearly a viewpoint that is less historically true and more self-serving to the identity of the PKK. This selection and reframing of history by the organization also leads the authors to believe, based on PKK accounts and documents, that the legal political parties that have represented Kurds in succession – the People's Labor Party (HEP), the Democracy Party (DEP), the People's Democracy Party (HADEP), the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), the Democratic Society Party (DTP), and now the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) – are actually the 'legal' wing of the PKK party complex,⁸ a problematic assumption that appears at numerous points throughout the chapters in this edited volume. Nonetheless, these statements about the development of the PKK are informative, not for their 'historical' merit per se, but for what it demonstrates in terms of *how* the PKK wants to present itself and what history this organization wants to select, and this particular perspective has largely been absent from the academic literature on the PKK in Turkey. Jongerden and Akkaya's research indicates that the PKK has a strong desire to position itself within the Turkish context in particular, a revelation that would most likely not be anticipated otherwise.

Furthermore, in the following chapter by the same authors, Akkaya and Jongerden's usage of original defence documents and other materials written by Öcalan in the last decade leads to the observation that the imprisoned leader of the PKK has soured on the 'outdated' model of the nation-state, a model he refers to as 'outdated'. In these defence texts, he envisions a 'democratic confederalism' in which numerous 'self-governing bodies throughout Kurdistan' would operate through the autonomy of the citizens of local communities rather than state-based authorities.⁹ While an independent and liberated nation-state for Kurds was the ultimate aim of the organization in its initial stages, Öcalan appears to have come to the conclusion that the nation-state concept itself is antagonistic and destructive to long-standing Kurdish cultural values.¹⁰ This change of objective by one of the three most important Kurdish leaders is of critical importance. While sceptics might claim that

the imprisoned leader is just moderating his rhetoric for his own personal benefit or to cater to Turkish and foreign sympathizers, his justification for the change suggests more than a mere strategic moderation of discourse. He bases his argument against a united Kurdish nation-state on his understanding of elements of Kurdish culture, which he believes collide with a centralized nation-state, be it Kurdish or otherwise. Indeed, this justification for democratic confederalism in Öcalan's defence documents seems directed more toward Kurdish communities than to outside observers. The authors' compilation, translation and interpretation of these documents by Öcalan and the PKK provide new perspectives that should inform both interpretations of the organization's history and ideology and also policy formation in regard to the Kurdish issue, particularly in Turkey.

In regard to the question prompted above related to the nature of the connection between the PKK and the legal parties that have grassroots Kurdish nationalist support in Turkey, Nicole Watts' recent scholarship is particularly illuminating.¹¹ In contrast to the practice of lumping the PKK and Kurdish nationalist political parties together as in a number of chapters in the volume by Casier and Jongerden, Watts' chapter provides careful and nuanced analysis of the tightrope that these legal parties have had to walk. These leftist Kurdish nationalist parties, whose historical origins are independent of the PKK, have been caught between two pressing forces: 'a bifurcated Kurdish electorate that provides no reliable pay-off for moderation', and 'the politics of polarization promoted by Turkish state institutions and representatives as well as the PKK'.¹² Because moderate and religiously-conservative Kurds have typically voted for parties such as the ruling AKP, these Kurdish nationalist parties are left courting a constituency that is largely sympathetic to the PKK. Constant threat of closure (and actual closure) has greatly weakened the parties' social capital relative to the PKK; therefore, the party is currently stuck in a polarized realm in which they are both competing and, in some sense, collaborating with the PKK in order to retain popular support. This constituency dilemma and a lack of legitimacy resources explains how key leaders of these parties, such as Ahmet Türk and Osman Baydemir, whose background and political trajectories are undeniably distinct from the PKK,¹³ have nonetheless appeared to pay lip service at times to the illegal organization and its imprisoned leader, Öcalan. The distinction between a party that has largely been made to compete for a shared constituency with the PKK and a party that is simply the 'legal branch' of the PKK is important in understanding the dynamics of Kurdish political orientations in the region. Furthermore, such careful analysis indicates that, rather than discussing 'the Kurdish movement in Turkey' – i.e. one unified Kurdish nationalist movement – we should be talking about multiple forms and goals (albeit with some overlapping and shared constituencies) under the broad umbrella of Kurdish political mobilization.¹⁴

In addition to these contributions is the in-depth analysis of a topic often passed over or only briefly mentioned in the factors related to the long-standing Kurdish conflict with the state in Turkey, the 'village guards' – i.e. Kurds contracted by the state to police local communities in the Southeast and to fight against the PKK. The chapter by Janet Klein highlights how the existence of these guards has actually become a structural factor, creating a force that essentially fosters the ongoing violent conflict.¹⁵ The state, whose payroll has effectively provided a means of welfare for tens of thousands of Kurds, faces an extremely perilous prospect of

disarming and removing the means of support for these paramilitary guards, whose attitude to the state appears to be ambivalent at best. Both the behaviour of the village guards toward local communities and the prospect of taking away the livelihood of an armed militia appear to be facilitating the maintenance of societal conflict in the Southeast.¹⁶ Klein also sees increased economic investment and trade with the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq as a potential mediating factor in this structural juggernaut, but the dilemma posed by the existence of the village guards seems to be a key observation, which has been missing in most accounts of the ongoing conflict and issues in the south-eastern provinces of Turkey.

Another expansion to the literature on Kurdish nationalism and political movements relates to the international (and particularly European) factor and are found in the chapters by Grojean and Casier in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*, particularly addressing mobilization within the European diaspora, and by Scalbert-Yücel in *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, regarding the institutional impact of the EU on Kurdish political activism in Turkey. Grojean's chapter challenges the existing theories in comparative politics regarding immigrant activism through the analysis of Kurdish political activism in Europe. Rather than explaining Kurdish political mobilization through opportunity structures or the impact of being located in citizenship regimes, Grojean argues that the manifestation of Kurdish political action seemed to be tied to 'the interdependent complex of the Kurdish movement' – i.e. the patterns of protest match events in Turkey more closely than protest patterns in the host countries.¹⁷ A subsequent chapter by Casier in the same volume analyses the relationship between Kurdish nationalist activists in Europe and the European Parliament. Within this study she notes several critical observations regarding the nature of the current relationship between these bodies: first, Kurdish activists have gained the attention of MEPs who represent minority populations in their own country; second, the tendency to find allies among small parties or parties that represent political minorities has caused the Kurdish voice to remain weak in the European Parliament; finally, she notes that 'a lack of openness' among Kurdish activists 'toward critical voices' has limited their ability to engage wider support.¹⁸ In an essay that addresses the impact of the EU and its institutions on Kurdish political activism in Turkey in the Lowe and Stansfield volume, Scalbert-Yücel links the developments in Kurdish language liberalization to the institutional reforms encouraged by the EU, both directly and indirectly. While it might be argued that the policy reforms in Turkey have remained primarily cosmetic, the author claims that the reforms and support from Europe emboldened Kurdish actors to mobilize and actively seek out expanded rights with the knowledge that they had the support of the EU.¹⁹

The chapter by Lowe on the Kurds in Syria, though primarily informative in nature, is nonetheless a significant contribution by the mere fact that an analysis of Kurds in Syria has been brought to the table in a discussion of Kurds in general, a fairly rare event in and of itself.²⁰ Despite a number of structural and historical differences between the political and geographical environment of Kurds in Syria and those in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, Lowe's analysis of developments in Syria allow for interesting comparisons and the opportunity to observe similar trends across these four countries. In light of developments in Syria that have transpired since the publication of this work, the implications of the rebellion (*serhildan*) in 2004,

a potentially galvanizing moment for a Syrian Kurdish national movement, has become ever more salient.

Along with the valuable insights and contributions to the literature on Kurdish nationalism in the various states in which they reside, these works bring up a number of issues that require further thought and deliberation. For example, is it possible to talk about ‘*the* Kurdish movement’? If such a statement is possible, it begs the question of why a presumably united population estimated in the range of 25 million has not achieved its goals. Considering that scholars generally date the emergence of Kurdish nationalist thought from the end of the First World War (at the latest),²¹ why has such a large population – Stefan Wolff notes that the Kurds are the largest non-state nation living in its historical settlement area²² – not attained its presumed goal if indeed Kurds are of one mind, even if we limit this to the level of the Kurdish communities of the separate states, particularly Turkey and Iraq? Considering the attainment of nationhood by much smaller communities over the last century, this is an important issue that must be addressed. Placing the blame for the ‘plight of the Kurds’ simply on missed opportunity and the heavy-handed states in which they reside seems an inadequate explanation that prevents us from carefully examining other factors and forces that might be at work. In this regard, even greater caution in the claims we are making about Kurdishness ‘*Kurdayeti*’ and Kurdish nationalism would be of benefit. The assertion of Lowe and Stansfield at the beginning of their volume – ‘The complexity and variety of *Kurdayeti* (Kurdishness) need to be recognized’ – might be a good starting point for a more careful exploration of all the factors involved.²³

One might also locate another question at the juxtaposition of Kurdish culture, sociopolitical structures and the development of nationalism. In particular, have the traditional vertical and hierarchical sociopolitical structures within Kurdish societies facilitated the development of grassroots Kurdish nationalism – i.e. a diffuse understanding of an imagined Kurdish community – or has it been a prime obstacle? In his chapter on the Kurdish Question, Yeğen argues that ‘since the Kurdish tribe was ... a site of reproduction of Kurdish identity, the [Turkish state policies] that liquidated tribal structures in effect weakened this identity’.²⁴ However, even if the state intended to weaken Kurdish identity, and even though these sociopolitical structures most likely reproduced and maintained a distinct Kurdish culture and identity, is it also possible to argue that Kurdish tribal structure also prevented horizontal linkages to an imagined Kurdish community – i.e. Kurdish nationalism in a ‘modern’ sense – among Kurds in general? Thus, it is not surprising that when Kurdish intellectuals in places like Ankara, Istanbul and Europe began to disseminate a modern and horizontal nationalism concept among Kurds, their first target was the ‘traditional “feudal” tribal structures’ associated with Kurdish society. In this regard, one could argue that, in Turkey, the state and Kurdish nationalists have ironically been engaged in a similar modernizing project for Kurds in the Southeast, targeting many of the same perceived problems, with the hope of very different outcomes. The policies of the Turkish state, however, rather than integrating Kurds in the Southeast into the national framework, have mostly worked to the benefit of the growth of a more horizontal and broad-based Kurdish identity and nationalism. Therefore, a more careful consideration of the role of distinctive sociopolitical structures among Kurds that have both served as a protective

packaging for Kurdish cultural and linguistic social identity and possibly also prevented unification and mobilization of Kurds in a broader sense would be of benefit. A similar structural dilemma appears to be the case, not just in Turkey, but also Iraq, Iran and Syria. Öcalan's change in ultimate aim – a confederation of Kurdish subunits rather than a centrally unified nation-state – also seems to be addressing precisely this structural dilemma.

This brings us to the issue of policy formation. In studies of ethnically-based national movements, there is a danger of maintaining the same teleological assumptions derived from classical modernization theory that there is a necessary and right process of development which begins with an *ethnie* and ends with a centralized nation-state. This ignores the possibility that the current global context might offer other possibilities for governance and the protection of one's cultural and political rights and that members of the group involved may not be of one mind regarding their ultimate good – a complex view that would be extremely useful in the Kurdish case. A teleological vision of national movements in the current context has also led to a tendency to assume an essential homogeneity among the members of such communities. Thus, it has apparently been much easier for Western observers and Kurdish intellectuals far removed from Erbil, Diyarbakir, Mahabad and Qamishli to imagine a unified Kurdish (or pan-Kurdish) community than it has for those living in the lands often associated with Kurdistan. For example, while Yeğen carefully delineates the various approaches and discourses of the Turkish state over time, he holds the idea of 'Kurdish unrest' or 'Kurdish rebellion' as an unvarying constant.²⁵ Even among those Kurds with a strong 'Kurdish' self-identity, their expressed hopes and desires in regard to such issues as identity and governance show a lot of divergence, both within and across time periods, which needs more frequently to be taken into account.

Such oversimplified understandings of 'the Kurds', their ultimate desires, and the nature of their relationship with the states in which they reside could lead to policy formation or recommendations that, though well-intentioned, may benefit very few. For example, Liam Anderson argues that, rather than work for an equitable constitution in Iraq, it is necessary that Kurds be given special treatment (a federacy) that should not be accorded to Sunni or Shiite Arabs.²⁶ This assumes, at the outset, that 'Kurdish interests' are necessarily uniform and oppositional to the other communities in Iraq and will always be (and that simply by their ethnic designation, Kurds are more deserving than other communities in Iraq). Why must the lines of division be based on ethnicity and not on some other category? Why must ethnicity be prioritized over creed, for example? Though conflict has certainly been observed between Kurds and Arabs and between Sunnis and Shiites, should policy makers affirm the rightness of these divisions while at the same time ignoring the intra-ethnic and intra-creedal conflict that is also taking place? The historical ramifications of policy regarding ethnic or creedal power-sharing in Cyprus, Lebanon and Bosnia should not be ignored in the Iraqi case.²⁷ It is only from a continuing of the careful analysis of all the factors and agents involved in resolving the Kurdish Question and assessing the complex desires and needs of Kurdish people (as illustrated by a number of chapters in these collected works) that those who are empowered to resolve the Kurdish question will be able to move forward in directions beneficial to all parties.

Notes

1. M. Casier and J. Jongerden (eds.), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.221. \$133.00, ISBN 978-0415583459 (hardback).
2. R. Lowe and G. Stansfield (eds.), *The Kurdish Policy Imperative* (London: Chatham House, 2010), pp.211. \$24.95, ISBN 978-1862031999 (paper).
3. J. Jongerden and A.H. Akkaya, 'Born from the Left: The Making of the PKK', in Casier and Jongerden (eds.), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*, pp.123–42.
4. For accounts that contradicts this, see M.H. Yavuz, 'Five Stages of the Construction of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol.7, No.3 (2001), p.10; M. Heper, *The State and Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.156. Aliza Marcus's journalistic account of the PKK, largely from their perspective, also connects Öcalan to the DDKO. A. Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University, 2007), p.23.
5. Jongerden and Akkaya, 'Born from the Left', p.127; this connection to the ADYÖD 'AYÖD' has also been made by McDowall. D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p.420. Marcus also shows a later connection with ADYÖD. Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, p.28.
6. *Ibid.*, p.124.
7. *Ibid.*, p.135.
8. *Ibid.*, p.134.
9. A.H. Akkaya and J. Jongerden, 'The PKK in the 2000s: Continuity through Breaks?', in Casier and Jongerden (eds.), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*, pp.152–3, 156–7.
10. *Ibid.*, p.152.
11. N. Watts, 'The Missing Moderate: Legitimacy Resources and pro-Kurdish Party Politics in Turkey', in Lowe and Stansfield (eds.), *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, pp.97–115.
12. *Ibid.*, p.100. This chapter highlights a number of important themes covered in great depth in an excellent recent work by Watts. N. Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2010).
13. *Ibid.*, p.99.
14. Casier and Jongerden, in their introductory chapter, make such a claim for one Kurdish movement spearheaded by Abdullah Öcalan. Casier and Jongerden, *Nationalisms in Turkey*, p.8.
15. J. Klein, 'Turkish Responses to Kurdish Identity Politics: Recent Developments in Historical Perspective', in Lowe and Stansfield (eds.), *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, pp.79–96.
16. *Ibid.*, pp.86–92.
17. O. Grojean, 'Bringing the Organization back in: Pro-Kurdish Protest in Europe', in Casier and Jongerden (eds.), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*, pp.182–96.
18. M. Casier, 'The Politics of Solidarity: The Kurdish Question in the European Parliament', in Casier and Jongerden (eds.), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*, pp.197–217.
19. C. Scalbert-Yücel, 'The "Liberalization" of Turkish Policy towards the Kurdish Language: The Influence of External Actors', in Lowe and Stansfield (eds.), *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, pp.116–29.
20. R. Lowe, 'The *serhildan* and the Kurdish National Story in Syria', in Lowe and Stansfield (eds.), *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, pp.161–79.
21. For one late account, see H. Özoğlu, 'Does Kurdish Nationalism Have a Navel?', in *Symbiotic Antagonisms: Competing Nationalisms in Turkey* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 2011), p.220.
22. S. Wolff, 'The Relationships between States and Non-state Peoples: A Comparative View of the Kurds in Iraq', in Lowe and Stansfield (eds.), *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, p.20.
23. Lowe and Stansfield, *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, p.4.
24. M. Yeğen, 'The Kurdish Question in Turkey: Denial to Recognition', in Casier and Jongerden (eds.), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*, p.73.
25. Yeğen, 'The Kurdish Question in Turkey', pp.67–84.
26. L. Anderson, 'Internationalizing Iraq's Constitutional Dilemma', in Lowe and Stansfield (eds.), *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, p.146.
27. Wolff also proposes an ethnic and creedal-based power-sharing scenario though he writes that 'this need not happen in an ascriptive, Bosnia- or Lebanon-style way, but it can be ensured by way of specific rules of executive formation.' Wolff, 'The Relationship between States and Non-state Peoples,' p.25.