

***THE KURDS OF SYRIA***

***OUT OF NOWHERE:  
THE KURDS OF SYRIA IN PEACE AND WAR***

Michael M. Gunter

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***THE KURDS OF SYRIA: POLITICAL PARTIES AND  
IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST***

Harriet Allsopp

London: I. B. Tauris, 2015

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***LA QUESTION KURDE:  
PASSÉ ET PRÉSENT***

Jordi Tejel Gorgas

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In the midst of the complicated, brutal conflicts ravaging Syria since 2011, there has been a flourishing of interest in the three predominantly Kurdish regions of the country's north, where the Democratic Union Party (hereafter PYD) declared autonomy in 2012 after the Syrian military mostly withdrew. These noncontiguous cantons run along Syria's border with Turkey, with Jazira in the east between Turkey and Iraq, roughly overlapping with the al-Hasaka governorate; Afrin in the west, corresponding more or less with the Afrin district of the Aleppo governorate; and Kobane in the middle, overlapping with parts of the 'Ayn al-'Arab and Jarablus districts of the Aleppo governorate. Together, these three cantons, and increasingly the areas separating them, make up the area that has come to be called Rojava, which in Kurmanji Kurdish means "the West," distinguishing it from the predominantly Kurdish areas of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

This newfound interest in Rojava has taken many forms, from breathless media profiles of US volunteers fighting the self-styled Islamic State (IS) to a cottage industry of leftist and anarchist online pamphleteering touting the democratic, feminist, and/or ecological revolution in Rojava. Much of the recent production surrounding Rojava is focused on the PYD's role in the civil war in Syria and is the product of sensationalism or the zeal of the newly converted, rather than scholarly attention. There has been a particular obsession with female fighters in the Western media, where we read myriad versions of the same article about how shameful it is for militants of the so-called Islamic State to be killed by a woman. These pieces are inevitably illustrated with photographs of young women wearing fatigues and usually carrying weapons. The tenor and quantity of current media coverage of Syrian Kurds contrast with the antebellum coverage of Syria, where they were rarely mentioned at all.

In the academic literature on Syria, Kurdish communities figure only tangentially. Likewise, the literature on Kurdish history, society, and politics has tended to focus much more on the larger communities of Turkey and Iraq than on those in Syria. In this way, Syrian Kurds have traditionally been neglected, with some exceptions, in both the fields of Syrian and Kurdish studies.

During the French Mandate, and under the auspices of the French Institute of Damascus, the soldier-scholars Pierre Rondot and Roger Lescot wrote contemporary cultural and political studies of the Kurdish areas of

northern Syria and collaborated with the Bedirkhan brothers, exiled from Turkey after the Sheikh Said rebellion, to create nationalist Kurmanji-language cultural production, including journals and dictionaries. Between the 1970s and the 2000s, Syrian Kurdish writers actively involved in Kurdish politics in Syria and abroad, such as Ismet Chérif Vanly, Salah Bedredine, Abdulbaset Sieda, and Jawad Mella, produced nationalist works in Arabic, French, and English decrying Ba'thist human rights violations and Arabization policies in Kurdish areas of Syria. But these works were often self-published and not easily accessible. After the failed "Damascus spring" in 2001 and the Qamishli uprising in 2004, international organizations like Human Rights Watch and Kurdish organizations based primarily in Europe conducted a fair amount of research on Syrian Kurds criticizing Syria's Kurdish policy.

Over the last couple of decades, however, there has been a flourishing of rich historical work in French and English on the Mandate period by scholars such as Benjamin White, Nelida Fuccaro, Christian Velud, Seda Altuğ, and Jordi Tejel. Sociological and anthropological research has been rare, with the exception of Paulo Pinto, who has done significant work on Kurdish Sufism. Generally speaking, there is a dearth of fieldwork-based research, which can be blamed on the difficulty of conducting research deemed politically sensitive due to government restrictions on discussing ethnic, sectarian, regional or tribal differences in prewar Syria. And due to the current conflict, we are unfortunately unlikely to see much scholarly work informed by extensive fieldwork in the foreseeable future.

The three books on review, then, offer valuable but different approaches to a field of inquiry that has been relatively inaccessible for all of the reasons listed above. Harriet Allsopp's *The Kurds of Syria* is a relatively detailed history of a complicated web of Kurdish parties. The monograph begins with a list of twenty-one different Kurdish political parties, some of which have identical names, active in early 2014. She makes good use of over a decade of interviews with Kurdish party leaders and members inside Syria and abroad, in conjunction with a collection of party papers and platforms, in order to map out the emergence of traditional Kurdish party politics and their decline between 1957 and the outset of the war in 2011.

After a historical overview of the antecedents to Kurdish party politics in Syria that relies on secondary sources, including Jordi Tejel's excellent *Syria's Kurds* (Routledge, 2009), Allsopp offers an account of the strange

career of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (hereafter PDKS), which gave birth through splits and mergers to dozens of similarly or even identically named parties and various coalitions that make up the constellation of what can be called traditional parties, in the sense that they arose from the party structure that began with the PDKS in 1957. She includes a useful list of parties and their leaders at the time of publication, a roster of pre- and post-2011 party coalitions, and a helpful diagram of party divisions that brings to mind the family tree of the Buendias of Macondo in Gabriel García-Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Lurking behind Allsopp's examination of these parties is the puzzle of why this long-standing history of Kurdish party politics was totally eclipsed in 2012 by the PYD, which was founded only in 2003 by partisans of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Syria after Abdullah Öcalan was expelled from the country in 1998. In other words: why did traditional Kurdish parties fail?

Without getting bogged down in a morass of acronyms, Allsopp lays out her explanation for the decline of traditional party politics in Syrian Kurdistan. Firstly, the parties were operating in the very difficult environment of Ba'thist Syria, where they were technically banned but generally tolerated so long as certain red lines were respected. In practice, this milieu put Kurdish parties in a bind where in order to mediate between the government and Syrian Kurds, they had to maintain a semblance of good relations with the government, which, of course, raised suspicions among the parties' constituents that their representatives had been coopted by security and intelligence services and made any politics or even rhetoric that transgressed the government's red lines impossible.

This structural constraint on traditional parties explains their inefficacy and even their perennial fragmentation, but it does not explain the timing of the crisis, the beginning of which Allsopp dates to 2004. This is the year in which a riot at a football match in Qamishli between Kurdish and Arab fans supporting their respective teams (Qamishli and Dayr al-Zawr) led to the death of ten Kurds after security forces fired on Kurdish supporters. The spontaneous protests that followed, not only in predominantly Kurdish cities but also in Aleppo and Damascus, fueled a nationalist youth movement, but the traditional parties did not support the movement, instead opting for the status quo and attempting to quiet the uprising. Allsopp points to this generational split between the youth and the parties as one of the primary

reasons the parties were in the midst of a crisis of legitimacy and unable to take advantage of the opening that the withdrawal of regime security forces in 2012 offered. Other reasons Allsopp discusses include a withdrawal of Kurdish intellectuals from the parties in the 1990s and an unwillingness or inability to take advantage of newly available communication technologies like the Internet, which only served to increase the visibility of internal party discord. Interparty conflicts were aired online in independent forums while parties' official lines had limited online presence. The reasons Allsopp gives for the failure of the traditional Kurdish parties to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by the current conflict are convincing, although she leaves readers wondering why the PYD managed to be so successful where other parties failed. Here, more detail on the internal dynamics and strategies of the PYD would be a welcome addition, as such information is a crucial part of the puzzle.

Allsopp also devotes considerable attention to the issue of stateless Kurds, who were denaturalized in 1962 after a snap census, the express purpose of which seems to have been to undercount Kurds in order to disqualify them, under new land reforms, from receiving land expropriated from large, predominantly Kurdish estates in Jazira and distributed to peasants. As a result of the rushed census, which offered no recourse for those Kurds who had not been counted, Kurdish-owned lands were reallocated to Arab Syrians, who in many cases were settled there by the state, creating an "Arab belt" to secure the borders with Turkey and Iraq in the 1970s. Stateless Kurds are divided into two categories: those who could not prove their citizenship on the day of the census and were thus classified as "foreigners," and those who were not registered at all and became known as the *maktumin*, which means "concealed" or even "silenced" in Arabic. As Allsopp shows, the implications of statelessness in the domains of property, education, and finance are deep and self-perpetuating, as the status is passed down from one generation to the next.

The case of the stateless forms one of the main grievances with the regime among Syrian Kurds, and one that the parties were unsuccessful in remedying despite periodic talk in Damascus of reviewing citizenship claims. This denaturalizing plays into Ba'thist rhetoric that paints Kurds in Syria as interlopers and migrants to the "Arab nation" from Turkey and Iraq. While it is true that some proportion of Kurds have migrated over

time to what is now Syria from neighboring territories—those fleeing repression by the newly founded Kemalist state after the suppression of the 1925 Shaykh Sa‘id rebellion being the most well known—most Kurds in the region are indigenous, and many migrants predate Syrian independence by decades. This chauvinist rhetoric was ironically aided by an interview given by Abdullah Öcalan in 1996 suggesting that “most of the Kurds of Syria were refugees and migrants from Turkey and that they would benefit from returning there” (40).

Allsopp supplements the discussion of stateless Kurds with original research based on interviews with residents of Zor Ava, a suburban district of Damascus whose Kurdish population includes an unusually high proportion of stateless families. Through this community, she explores some of the political consequences of statelessness, especially in relation to parties whose leadership does not include any stateless Kurds, either for social reasons or because being stateless makes one particularly vulnerable to state intelligences services. This novel avenue of research deserves to be followed.

Within a month of the first protests in 2011 and before Damascus pulled out most of the security services from Kurdish areas in 2012, the Syrian government published Decree 49, allowing “foreign” Kurds, but not the *maktumin*, to apply for citizenship. The process has been fraught with obstacles, however, and some Kurds are furthermore afraid that gaining citizenship might be used against them in the form of wartime military conscription.

Michael Gunter’s slim and absorbing tome, *Out of Nowhere*, offers a different perspective, focusing more on how the Syrian case fits into the regional context of Kurdish politics in Turkey and Iraq. He repeatedly returns to the trope of the “forgotten Kurds” and sets out to provide a readable primer on the community’s background before getting to the current situation. It is impossible to speak of Kurdish politics in Syria without discussing how neighboring Kurdish movements have affected the situation there. After all, the first Kurdish party in Syria, the PDKS, was fashioned after Mustafa Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq, and depending on whom we believe, the strongest party now, the PYD, either is the Syrian branch of the Turkish PKK or was formed by former PKK militants from Syria.

Gunter frames these influences through the concept of competing regional models for Kurdish politics. The first model is that of the KDP, which has benefited from US intervention, first in 1991–1992 and then again in 2003, and has created an autonomous region under Kurdish governance. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq is a state in all but name and these days is seen by many as a model of stability and prosperity, even if it suffered its fair share of internecine violence in the form of a civil war between the forces of Masoud Barzani's KDP and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan between 1994 and 1997. The second model is that of the PKK, which has led a guerilla war with inconclusive results against the Turkish state—from Syria and Lebanon until Öcalan's capture and imprisonment in 1998, and from the isolated Qandil Mountains in Iraq thereafter.

While the framework of two competing projects for Kurdish independence or autonomy is a useful heuristic, Gunter falls short in showing how these competing projects have played out in Syria. The two chapters devoted to the discussion (one for each model) are essentially summaries of Kurdish politics in Iraq and Turkey instead of discussions of how those models have manifested themselves in the rivalry between the constellation of traditional parties influenced by the KDP and the heritor of Öcalan's project, the PYD. This is a missed opportunity, since the Kurdish studies literature has produced many summaries of Kurdish politics in Iraq and Turkey, but very little in-depth work on how those contexts influence events in the Syrian Kurdish sphere. Likewise, his discussion of the United States is almost entirely centered on US policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan and the PKK, with US policy in Syria more generally and toward Syrian Kurds in particular coming almost as an afterthought. Gunter's expertise lies in the Iraqi and Turkish cases, and it periodically shows, since his discussion of the Syrian civil war is muddled at times. For instance, he makes avoidable missteps like mistranslating the name of the al-Qa'ida franchise Jabhat al-Nusra as “the Victory or Liberation Front” and claiming that Salafist groups consider Kurds and Alawites to be *takfiri* and that “al-Nusra supposedly constituted part of the FSA [Free Syrian Army]” (112, 113–14, 114).

Gunter devotes a chapter to the question of women in Rojava, which is an issue where the PYD and PKK seek to distinguish themselves from other Kurdish parties and, perhaps more importantly, Sunni Arab segments of Syrian politics and society. The issue is one that Western media

outlets have latched on to through profiles of female Kurdish militants, or “badass women fighting the Islamic State” as one piece in *Foreign Policy* (September 12, 2014) recently described them. He interestingly lays out the paradox of a party, in this case the PKK, that emphasizes women’s liberation yet “remains largely a male-dominated organisation, especially at its higher levels” (30). He also questions whether the PYD’s gender-balanced cochair model reflects genuine power sharing or tokenism. Again, though, the short discussion suffers from too much concentration on Turkey and Iraq and not enough attention to changing gender dynamics in the Kurdish areas of Syria during wartime.

In some ways, Gunter’s book is a victim of its own timeliness in that several years later scholars are still missing basic but vital details about the dynamics that armed conflict have introduced to Syria. And many important events, especially concerning northern Syria, are unfolding as we watch.

Jordi Tejel is perhaps best known for his excellent monograph on Kurdish history in Syria from the Mandate period to the aftermath of the 2004 Qamishli revolt. In that book, *Syria’s Kurds*, he uses colonial and diplomatic archives in France and the United Kingdom, the archives at the Kurdish Institute in Paris, and Kurmanji-language press and journals to paint the most comprehensive historical account of Kurdish communities in Syria to date. In his latest volume, *La question kurde*, he explicitly continues in the footsteps of Hamit Bozarslan, whose 1997 and 2009 monographs on Kurdish politics have unfortunately not been translated into English. Citing Bozarslan, Tejel writes that his intention is to respond to the former’s invitation to “break with the hypothesis of Kurdish exceptionalism [*singularité*] by including the Kurdish case in global dynamics that researchers and observers cannot avoid” (8, my translation). He wants to escape an ahistorical approach that views the Kurdish question as a perennial struggle between a homogenous Kurdish “minority” and central governments representing monolithic Turkish, Arab, and Persian “majorities” (8). Rather than accepting the minority/majority frame of analysis as a given, he is interested in exploring, in the vein of Benjamin White’s *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East* (Edinburgh UP, 2011), the processes through which these categories are formed. Finally, he is invested in troubling the analysis of minority groups as passive victims: “On the contrary,” he argues, “they influence, directly or indirectly, the political

and social evolution itself of the state, even, or especially, the states that deny their existence" (10).

With these goals in mind, Tejel traces the "Kurdish question" from the beginning of the twentieth century through 2014. He discusses early expressions of Kurdish nationalism, the main international treaties placing the Kurdish question on the international scene, the emerging Kurdish organizations, and British Kurdish policy in the north of Iraq. He connects Kurdish politics in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran through a framework that uses similarities in the newly formed states that Kurds find themselves part of to draw comparisons between the Kurdish politics that develop there. Kurdish communities in Turkey and Iran are subject to authoritarian modernizing projects and have to accommodate themselves to the state-building project, whereas Kurds in Iraq and Syria have departed from contradictory Mandatory policies that ranged from the recognition of Kurds' "national rights" to military repression (e.g., the British bombing of Suleimaniya) in order to attempt to integrate as part of the "nation" (31, 14–15). In a refreshing change, Tejel treats the Syrian and Iranian cases like part of the whole instead of exceptions that stand apart from, or footnotes to be added to, real Kurdish politics in Iraq and Turkey. As such, the Mahabad Republic in Iran and the Jazira independence movement in northern Syria are placed in context next to Shaykh Mahmud's autonomist movement in Suleimaniya in the 1920s under the British Mandate. Likewise, he draws connections between the different zones of Kurdish politics, showing, for instance, how the Barzani Revolt in Iraq in 1961 led to a resurgence of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey and Iran as well as to the Ba'thist "Arab belt" policy in Syria, which in turn led to the dislocation and denaturalization of so many Syrian Kurds.

Another extremely important aspect of this transnational approach is its examination of the way governments in the region have played the "Kurdish card" against each other. Damascus allowed Öcalan's PKK to operate freely in Syria and Lebanon for two decades, while Hafiz al-Asad also allowed Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party to maintain offices in the capital. Likewise, Baghdad gave limited support to the Iranian branch of the KDP throughout the Iran-Iraq War, and Tehran supported Barzani's KDP up until 1974. Now that the Kurdistan Regional Government has become relatively stable, especially in

comparison to postwar Iraq and the period of internece Kurdish battles in the 1990s, the autonomous entity has emerged as a regional player in its own right. Erbil's good relations with Ankara and longstanding links to the PYD's rivals in Syria have put the KRG into competition, if not outright conflict, with the PKK model, as Gunter notes.

Taken together, these books, in conjunction with Tejel's previous monograph, offer readers a better understanding of the current conflict in Syria through a more nuanced understanding of the country's Kurdish communities. As Allsopp mentions in her introduction, even before the war, conducting fieldwork in Syria was extremely difficult and presented ethical problems, since such work can expose interviewees to harm by state intelligence services. This risk has made an understudied topic even less likely to benefit from more scholarly attention. The situation was so difficult, in fact, that her previous book presenting an overview of the political situation of Syrian Kurds had to be published under the pseudonym Harriet Montgomery. Given such past constraints and the difficulty of conducting fieldwork in a wartime environment where Syrians and foreigners alike are routinely targeted for kidnapping or worse, scholarly attention to the Kurdish communities of Syria is especially welcome.

As each of the authors has remarked in turn, the Kurds of Syria remain woefully understudied, but some aspects are more understudied than others. Likely due to the accessibility of archives, the Mandate period and early nationalist publications have received more attention than other areas of interest. With the exception of work on rural Sufi movements, there has been little sociological or anthropological work done to date. The other glaring omission is a study of the PKK decades seen through a more local perspective that does not understand the question as solely or essentially a Turkish story. Estimates vary, but a significant number of PKK militants were actually Syrian, and it is inconceivable that the party's twenty years in the country did not have a significant effect on local dynamics of Kurdish politics in addition to its influence on relations between Ankara and Damascus. Likewise, the PKK's offshoot, the PYD, has been neglected in discussions of Kurdish party politics in the books under review. In addition to the PKK years, the party in its current iteration existed for nine years before dominating the Kurdish political scene and beginning an irredentist territorial project that aims to create a contiguous, autonomous region under

its control. Why has it been so successful? How is that success connected to the long PKK presence in Syria, and what exactly is the relationship between the two parties? How have non-Kurds and other minority communities like the Assyrians, Turkmen, and Armenians reacted to this irredentist project? How will Syrians in other regions react to the PYD's federalist project? It will be difficult to answer these questions while the brutal conflict in Syria continues, but these books point the way forward and help clarify which questions need to be asked.