

Review - The Kurds of Northern Syria

Written by Jordi Tejel

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JORDI TEJEL, FEB 8 2020

The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity, and Conflicts
By Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg
IB Tauris, 2019

For many years the Syrian Kurds, unlike their brethren in Turkey, Iraq and to a lesser extent in Iran, had been rarely featured in the media. This was also true of academic research devoted to Syria, at least until very recently. Many factors accounted for this lacuna, including their relative demographic weakness as well as the lack of an armed political movement in Syria – the Democratic Union Party (PYD) established its military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), only in 2012. This state of affairs changed dramatically by late 2014 as the United States helped the YPG to retake the town of Kobani, which had been under siege by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and, more importantly, as Washington established a military alliance with the Kurdish militias now integrated within the newly established Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) some months later to fight ISIS and put an end to its self-declared Islamic “Caliphate”. The involvement of thousands of ordinary Kurds – men and women – in the struggle against the latter gave good credentials to the YPG and its political project in Northern Syria; that is, *Rojava* or the Democratic Autonomous Administrations (DAA) guided by the principles of “democratic confederalism” as elaborated by Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Subsequently, human rights and alter-globalisation activists, observers, and scholars have turned their attention towards the plight of the Syrian Kurds and the DAA, seen by many as a utopian political project where grassroots aspirations, including that of women and all the ethno-religious groups of the region, could at last find their channel of representation.

Against this background, when US President Donald Trump announced the sudden withdrawal of the United States Armed forces from Northern Syria in early October 2019, thereby allowing Turkey and her proxy Arab militias to attack the YPG fighters, a wave of outrage on social media against Trump’s decision put the Syrian Kurds again at the centre of attention, particularly in the West. How could Washington “betray” the Syrian Kurds after having served so efficiently in the (Western) war against ISIS? How could the American president justify such a dramatic shift by simply arguing that the Kurds had not supported the Allied disembark at Normandy in the final stages of World War II (O’Grady 2019)? Ultimately, who are the Syrian Kurds? What are their aspirations? What is the PYD-led project that emerged in Northern Syria in the aftermath of the Syrian revolt of 2011? Are Turkish claims about PYD-PKK cooperation accurate? And, more generally, what are the prospects for the DAA in the face of increasing regional and national pressures?

Although published before the recent Turkish military intervention to the east of the Euphrates (Operation Peace Spring), the book sheds light on these questions and many others by providing a comprehensive analysis of Kurdish political identity in Syria as well as a nuanced assessment of the quasi-autonomous governance structures, dominated by the PYD in Northern Syria. In order to do so, the authors’ analyses draw on academic works on Syrian Kurds, think-tank and media reports, as well as unparalleled field research conducted between 2014 and 2018 in Europe and the Middle East.

The book is structured in six chapters. The first chapter explores the different layers of Kurdish identity as well as the problems of self-representation and identity among Syria’s Kurds within the *Rojava* region. In so doing, the authors avoid essentializing Kurdish identity or rather Kurdish identities in Syria (p.46). In Chapter Two, Allsopp and van

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Wilgenburg provide a systematic comparison between the two main Kurdish political blocs in Syria: the PYD, on the one hand, and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) made up of a coalition of fourteen political parties related to the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) founded in 1957, on the other. The chapter scrutinizes their ideologies, objectives, political practices and alliance formations, and examines the balances of power between them. The comparison allows the authors to account for their apparent incompatible designs with regard to governance in *Rojava* and the representative structures available to Syrian Kurds. While the former argues for a decisive break from centralized and representative systems to embrace a sort of communal self-organization instead, the latter still favours "bourgeois democracy" (p.73-87).

The following chapter provides a thorough analysis of the organizational structures of *Rojava* and its social and political actors, pertaining to different political factions and backgrounds. In Chapter Four, drawing on interviews with dozens of both party officials and non-affiliated individuals, the authors critically examine the paradoxes of the system implemented by the PYD in Northern Syria as well as the inherent contradictions of any political project between theory and practice.

The fifth chapter delves into the regional and international constraints that the PYD-led administration faces since its establishment in 2012. On the one hand, it examines the transborder Kurdish relations between the PYD and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, led by the Barzani family. The competition between the two camps for the monopoly on Kurdish nationalism has indeed provoked frequent tensions that have been further bolstered by their respective regional allies. While the former has turned around the Iranian-Iraqi-Syrian-Russian axis, the latter has solid relations with Turkey and the United States. The cooperation between the SDF and Washington sealed in 2015 just rendered regional alliances even more complex and uncertain.

Finally, Chapter Six builds upon the previous analyses to suggest future prospects for the DDA and, more broadly, for representation of Kurds in Syria. At the time of the writing of this book, the authors already seemed to suggest that, although consolidation of Kurdish identity and autonomy in Syria could seem unstoppable, the movement toward autonomy could be impeded by the social and political variations that predated the establishment of the DAA as well as by the failings of the various Kurdish organizations operating in Northern Syria (p.215, 217).

"Democratic confederalism" and its limits

E-IR readers will particularly appreciate the last three chapters. For one, the territorial fragmentation and the power vacuum created by the Syrian war has provided a unique opportunity for the elaboration and implementation of new forms of governance that depart from traditional models and challenge IR modernist approaches that hold the (Western) nation-state framework as a universal and indeed inevitable model in international relations. In the PYD-led political system of "democratic autonomy" and "democratic confederalism", the former refers to a re-grounding of the political status of people on the basis of self-government, rather than on peoples' relations with the state. "Democratic confederalism" aims at strengthening local administrative capacities organized in the form of councils at the very local level, of streets and then neighborhoods, through districts/villages and towns/cities to regions. Crucially, the PYD claims that the Kurds, as well as all peoples in the Middle East, should abandon the nation-state system to embrace a kind of communal self-organization, following Murray Bookchin's anarchist theory among other sources of inspiration (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013: 163-185).

While in theory "democratic confederalism" should bring to the fore local concerns and lead to a much more locally rooted Kurdish agenda, the book captures how difficult this effort had been and how the reality on the ground was actually rather different. Here lies one of the most important contributions of this book. Unlike other published works and articles on this topic that are either hagiographic or overly critical, the authors analyse and present both the positive sides and the shortcomings of *Rojava's* governance, tackling even the most problematic aspects. In that regard, criticism of the PYD-led project among Kurdish individuals and opposition political parties has been raised along two main arguments. On the one hand, the integration of the YPG forces within the SDP and subsequent military successes had nevertheless a paradoxical consequence; the PYD leadership had to tone down the Kurdish identity aspirations in order to avoid antagonizing their Arab and Christian counterparts. On the other hand, many Kurds as well as human rights groups criticized the authoritarian tactics of the PYD and other associated

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organizations (p.143-145). In 2016, for instance, the Rojava authorities banned KNC activities in the region. 40 of their offices were closed down and hundreds of KNC members were jailed, albeit for short periods of time.

That being said, and as the authors suggest, one should not forget that the DAA is indeed a model in “becoming” and not a model of “being”. In other words, internal dynamics (intra-Kurdish power relations, alliances with Arab rebel groups) as well as external developments (Turkey’s intervention in Northern Syria, opposing regional alliances with the United States or Russia) have a crucial impact on PYD options and ultimate choices. The recent decision of allowing the KNC to reopen their offices in Northern Syria without requiring permission from the DAA showcases this; having lost much of their territorial and political gains, the PYD is now forced to reengage in serious efforts to cooperate with its Kurdish competitors (Faidhi Dri 2019).

Crucially, the US influence over the SDF in northern Syria and the implementation of Russian, Iranian and Turkish guardianship of de-escalation zones has transformed the Turkish-Syrian border region into a patchwork of spheres of influence (p.194). In that regard, although the United States and Russia are still the big players in the conflict, Turkey keeps a central position within the Syrian crisis. Furthermore, Turkish plans in the border areas suggest that Turkey intends to keep a political, military, and cultural influence over the region in the post-war period, for almost a quarter of Syria’s population is under Turkish control indirectly or directly, including 3.6 million refugees in Turkey. Admittedly, the Turkish position in Northern Syria became stronger between 2017 and 2019, and unless a dramatic shift occurs, no solution in Syria is possible without Turkish cooperation.

One aspect that the authors could have acknowledged further is precisely Turkey’s role in the evolution of *Rojava*’s experience as well as in the future prospects of Northern Syria. For Turkey, *Rojava* is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional issue (Lowe, 2016: 9). In that sense, Turkey’s policies towards the Kurds on Syria are wholly inseparable from domestic Turkish Kurdish policies, as are the two Kurdish populations since the establishment of the Syrian state in the aftermath of World War I. Although there are some similarities to Turkey’s concern over the Kurdistan region of Iraq in the 1990s, *Rojava* is different because of the ideological connections between the YPG and the PKK. A much more comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, particularly after Turkey’s failed “Peace Process” with the PKK in 2015, would have allowed the authors to provide the reader with a deeper insight into the current crisis in Northern Syria.

Researchers and students interested in social movement theory will equally regret the authors’ lack of engagement with the rich academic literature on revolutions and politics in the Middle East. Given the centrality of the PYD-led political project and its governance in the book, it would have been interesting to present a more general discussion about grassroots movements in order to better signal out the particularities as well as the similarities between the Kurdish experience in Northern Syria and other revolutionary projects in the Middle East and beyond. Nevertheless, departing from some of the existing romanticized accounts on *Rojava* in Western sources and based on an important number of interviews, the book provides a nuanced and meticulous study that will remain a valuable guide for scholars, students and observers wishing to better understand the emergence, consolidation and crisis, albeit not necessarily decline, of the DAA in Northern Syria.

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About the author:

Dr Jordi Tejel is currently a Research Professor at the Department of History at the University of Neuchâtel where he leads a project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) on borders and state formation in the Middle East in the interwar period (BORDER). Dr Tejel has extensively published on the Kurdish issue; most notably his book *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009).