

Review – The Great Betrayal: How America Abandoned the Kurds and Lost the Middle East

Written by Zeynep Kaya

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The Great Betrayal: How America Abandoned the Kurds and Lost the Middle East
By David L. Phillips
Bloomsbury, 2018

The Great Betrayal: How America Abandoned the Kurds and Lost the Middle East by David L. Phillips is a book about the political and diplomatic history of the Kurds and tells the story of how the US let the Kurds down and situates this story within a historical and geopolitical context. It covers a long period of history but pays particular attention to the more recent political contexts and conflicts in Iraq and Syria. The book provides interesting insights on the role of Kurdish political actors in the Middle East as important and useful allies to the US and other western states. The book is valuable due to its international perspective on the Kurds. Moreover, the detailed account of the aftermath of the referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, especially on politics and developments in Kirkuk, is impressive, as well as the complexity around Iran's engagement in Iraqi and Kurdish political and military affairs. Having said that, *The Great Betrayal* fails the reader on many accounts. Paul Iddon has provided a very detailed overview of the various errors and misrepresentations appearing in this book, but there are some particular shortcomings which are worth highlighting.

Overall, the book provides a one-sided perspective on many issues without appreciating the complex politics and goals around specific incidents or processes. This selective account leads to gross simplifications and generalisations. For instance, the historical parts of the book, especially the First World War period when Kurdish self-determination was on the agenda, appear to rely on a small number of general books and some erroneous information and analysis. Then the author jumps to Kurdish politics in Iraq in the 1970s but quickly moves to the 1990s and in so doing does not sufficiently elaborate on the period between the First World War and the 1990s. This ultimately leads to a sweeping, selective and haphazard account of a complex history of a large geography. The historical account in the book, as well as some of the interpretations of contemporary events, represents a romanticised view of the Kurdish struggle at times. There is nothing wrong with the author's obvious sympathy towards the Kurds and their desire for statehood. However, this sympathy relies on a one-sided and sometimes erroneous representation of events.

The sections on Iraqi Kurdish politics are more skilfully written and better informed. The interviews with key political actors, especially during and after the independence referendum in September 2017, offer valuable and interesting insights. However, it is hard to say the same for the sections covering Syria. The analysis of Syrian politics overlooks key Kurdish political developments and mainly focuses on the involvement of regional states, the US and Russia in the Syrian Civil War. Moreover, although the parts on Kurdish politics in Iraq and Iraqi politics more broadly are much better researched, the author's interviews were conducted with a small number of a select group of people and do not include other Kurdish and Iraqi actors beyond the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leaderships and the key British and American actors involved in the process of the referendum.

I appreciated the accessible language in the book, which would make it appealing to a wide range of audiences. However, I found the organisation of the author's ideas and the flow of the narrative throughout most of the book

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confusing and ultimately hard to follow. At times, the author jumps from one idea or event to another without sufficient elaboration and without logical or relevant transition. At other times, some events are mentioned a bit randomly and lack the wider context and background essential for understanding them. This leads to superficial points and a jumpy read – this is especially the case for the historical background and the chapters on Syria, Iran and Russia.

The final chapters provide an account of the shortcomings of US policy in the Middle East, which as is pointed out, have been leading to an increasing Russian and Iranian influence in the region. This is certainly an important and valuable discussion to be had. However, not only do these sections appear a bit rushed, but they also omit analysis of how the Kurds fit in these contexts. Most glaringly, Russia's relations with the Kurds in Syria are almost entirely omitted. The book would have benefited from a more effective conclusion to bring the ideas together and to refocus the analysis on the Kurds, rather than ending with a descriptive regional geopolitical projection.

To conclude, I think *The Great Betrayal* covers Kurdish politics from an international and regional perspective. Its detailed examination of the very important referendum process of 2017 through interviews with prominent politicians and the implications of this process on the Kirkuk region are interesting. However, I would recommend that readers, especially those new to Kurdish politics, adopt a critical lens when reading it.

About the author:

Zeynep N. Kaya is a Senior Teaching Fellow at the Department of Development Studies at SOAS and an Academic Associate at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge. She completed her PhD in International Relations at LSE, where she conducted research on the transformation of Kurdish nationalism and territorial identity in an international context. Before moving to SOAS she worked as a Research Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre for six years. Primarily interested in gender, violence, and conflict, she has authored numerous papers and reports on Kurdish politics, as well as on gender, violence and displacement in the Middle East. Her book *Mapping Kurdistan: Territory, Self-Determination and Nationalism* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2020.