

The Issue of the Kurds in Syria: Facts, History and Myth

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Book Title:	The Issue of the Kurds in Syria: Facts, History and Myth
Author:	Multiple Authors.
Place of publication:	Beirut
Year of Publication:	2013
Publisher:	Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies
No. of pages:	193

Introduction

The introduction starts by distinguishing the Syrian revolution from other Arab revolutions (Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen) given the ‘specificity’ of Syrian society, which is an ethnic, religious and sectarian mix. The book explains how the fault lines caused by the politicization of these identities are made forcefully apparent during national crises and present serious risks to the existence of the state and efforts towards national integration formed during the anti-colonial struggle. Accordingly, the Kurdish issue in Syria, argues the book, represents one of the most pressing challenges facing state and society in Syria because it is a problem in which historical and demographic factors intertwine, and because of surrounding regional and international political interactions. These challenges are evident in programs put forward by political forces, parties, or personalities that exploit the reality and difficult path of the Syrian revolution to formulate divisive visions that do not give weight to demographic or geographic facts, but try to replicate cases and models from outside Syria and apply them to the Syrian case.

Divided into three sections, the first part of the book deals with the history of the Kurds in Syria, beginning with the first major Kurdish immigration taking place between 1925 and 1939. It explains how the “Syrian” Kurdish issue was historically a “Turkish” problem whose effects shifted into Syria. The Treaty of Sèvres of 1920 stipulated two separatist projects: the Armenian state and the Kurdish entity, but in 1923 the Kemalists forced the major powers to replace it with the Treaty of Lausanne, which undermined the establishment of a Kurdish entity in southern Turkey. The Kemalists followed policies aspiring for a national melting-pot according to Ataturk’s vision of a Turkish nation state. As a result, the Kurds in Turkey launched 17 uprisings against Ataturk’s policy, all of which failed – crushed and quelled by Ataturk. Each revolution followed with a mass flow of Kurdish migration, with hundreds and thousands heading to Mandate Syria, a migration that was concentrated in Upper Mesopotamia. In parallel with Kurdish immigration, there were also Armenian migrations to Syria that headed for Upper Mesopotamia and inland cities.

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The policies of the French Mandate that sought to “nationalize” sub-identities in Syria are also examined in this first section which describes how France unsuccessfully used the leaders of the Kurdish separatist movement (Khoybun League, known also as Kurdish National) League to establish a Chaldeo-Assyrian, Kurdish, and Arab Bedouin entity in Upper Mesopotamia to undermine national rule. It also reviews the political integration which took place in the post-independence period, when Syrians Kurds (Kurds from the interior) assumed senior leadership positions in the state, in addition to the economic and cultural integration with the inhabitants of the cities they lived in. The book also makes a distinction between the “Kurds from the interior” who integrated into political, economic, and cultural life in Syria and the “Kurds from the margins”, who were influenced post-independence by the Kurdistan influence in Iraq, and subsequently by the “Apoci” (referring to Abdullah Ocalan or Apo) influence in Turkey following the founding of the Kurdistan Workers Party. This section further reflects on other topics, including the extraordinary census, the Arab belt project, and a reform program for Upper Mesopotamia. It concludes with a discussion of the concept of “West Kurdistan” which was coined to describe the identity of local Kurdish communities in the context of the influence of Iraqi Kurdistan nationalism.

The second part of the book focuses on the launching of the Kurdish political movement in Syria in the 1950s with the emergence of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (the *Partiya*) in Damascus in 1957, and the ongoing splits it witnessed, ending in the 1980s with the *Partiya*'s fragmentation into more than eleven parties and movements, heralding a period of fragmentation for the Kurdish party system. The book notes how the Kurdish movement in Syria was inspired by two main influences: the rising Turkish Apoci movement and the emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan in 1992. The Kurdish parties founded under the influence of these two trends are observed, such as the Democratic Union Party, the Yekiti Party, the Kurdish Future Movement, and others. Their political programs, relationships with the nationalist movement, and the overlaps and differences between them are discussed as well as the nationalist proposals in some of the Kurdish parties' programs that talk

of “a historical land of the Kurdish people”, “the right of self-determination”, “federalism,” and so forth. The writers note that the tone of the Kurdish (party) political discourse has become more stridently nationalist in recent years, under the influence of developments in the Iraqi situation and the experience of northern Iraq. The terms “Syrian Kurdistan” and “West Kurdistan” have come into use, with some extreme Kurdish nationalists having described the Arab population of Upper Mesopotamia as “settler herds” – the same description used in the West Bank to describe Zionist settlers.

Part three of the book discusses the role of the Kurds in the Syrian revolution. It looks at youth involvement and the growth of coordinating committees in the face of party reservations towards participation. It maps the alliances between Kurdish parties during the revolution and the establishment of the Kurdish National Council and its relations with the Syrian opposition forces. It then reviews the interventionist role of the President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Massoud Barzani, in combining Kurdish political forces (the Kurdish National Council, the Democratic Union Party, and the People's Assembly of West Kurdistan) at the first and second Erbil conference, in an attempt to integrate them into one political body, “The Supreme Kurdish Authority” to administer the Kurdish areas in Syria, from which the regular army withdrew beginning in August 2012, thereby replicating the experience of Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the conclusion, the book offers insight on how to deal with the “Kurdish issue”. First, it stresses that the Syrian “Kurdish issue” can only be resolved within the framework of a purely Syrian national solution, outside the inventions of “West Kurdistan”, and in a way that sets Syrian Kurds within the context of belonging to Syrian society and its institutionalized state form as the Syrian Arab Republic.

Secondly, it stresses that the Syrian “Kurdish issue” is susceptible to a democratic solution within the framework of what that entails in terms of linguistic, cultural and educational rights. It requires the formulation of curricula that recognize the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Syrian population and the empowerment of all local communities to manage themselves on decentralized lines or according to the modern system of local administration within the framework of a single, unified Syrian Arab state, all

of whose citizens can carve space for themselves and their active and creative development.

Overall, the book is a rigorous objective research attempt on the subject of the Kurds in Syria, one which tries to adopt academic rigor against the prevalent tendency to subject academic research on this issue to ideological attitudes, emotions and political positions. The book draws on a vast array of academic and scholarly works, particularly in its historical part. In its political section the book relies on reports from research centers specialized in Kurdish issues and on Kurdish websites, whether

official party websites or other serious Kurdish sites, particularly publications from the European Center for Kurdish Studies. In this way, the book avoids the prejudices that some extremist writers resort to such as over interpretation or lack of objectivity.

The ACRPS offers this book to researchers and those interested in this subject with the aim of enriching the debate around the issue, to encourage critical reviews, and to develop studies and research based on sound academic foundations, which will contribute to illuminating the Kurdish issue in Syria and touch on sound ways to resolve it.