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Book Reviews

Sebastian Maisel, ed., **The Kurds: an Encyclopedia of Life, Culture, and Society**, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clío, 2018, 376 pp., (978-1-4408-4256-6).

Reference works available on Kurdish history, culture, geography, language and society lacked, until recently, a comprehensive coverage and rather focused on overlapping but different cultural and geographical categories, for example the Islamic World, Middle East, or Arab World. Many of those works study the Kurds mostly from a political perspective and few address the social and cultural aspects. Furthermore, misconceptions about the Kurds dominate public opinion despite their wide media coverage in the West. International interest has grown as the Kurds in the Middle East have become politically more prominent and visible during the last two or three decades. Sebastian Maisel's *The Kurds* comes out as a response to this increasing interest.

General history books on the Kurds have been available since the appearance of Şerefxan Bidlisi's *Şerefname*, a chronical of Kurdish dynasties, in 1596-97. The tradition of writing articles and books that contain general information on the Kurds continued into the twentieth century. Among these works one can include the book length encyclopedia entry on the Kurds by V. Minorsky written for the first edition of *Encyclopedia of Islam* (1913-36), Basile Nikitine's book *Les Kurdes: Étude Sociologique et Historique* [*The Kurds: Sociological and Historical Study*] (Paris, 1956) and Thomas Bois's *Connaissance des Kurdes* [*Knowing the Kurds*] (Beirut, 1965). Meanwhile, dictionaries on Kurdish personalities appeared in Persian, Arabic and Kurdish. Mihemed Emîn Zekî's two volumes *Mashahir al-Kurd wa Kurdistan fi al-Dawr al-Islami* [*Famous Kurds and Kurdistan during Islamic Period*] (Baghdad and Cairo, 1945-1947), Baba Mardukhi Ruhani's three volumes *Tarikh-i Mashahir-i Kurd* [*History of Prominent Kurds*] (Tehran, 1364-66/1985-1987) and Muhammad Ali al-Harki al-Kurdi's eight volumes *al-Maw'su'ah al-Kubra li-Mashahir al-Kurd 'abra al-Tarikh* [*The Great Encyclopedia of the Prominent Kurds through the History*] (Beirut, 2008-2013) are some of major works on Kurdish notables, including scholars, poets, politicians, and literati.

The Kurds were largely ignored in most of the latter half of the twentieth century, in great part due to the denial of their existence by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. By the end of the century, an increase in political activity in the region led to a surge of interest in the Western world.



Dictionaries, encyclopedias and handbooks have appeared in major Western languages, such as Boris James and Jordi Tejel Gorgas's *Les Kurdes en 100 Questions* [*The Kurds in 100 Questions*] (Paris, 2018) and Michael M. Gunter's *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds* (Lanham, MD, 2004). Maisel's encyclopedic work on the Kurds is the latest of such works, combined with the long tradition of reference works covering Kurdish society, culture, politics and history. Compared with other reference works, this book has an unconventional approach towards the subject because it addresses various topics in varying formats. It does not offer conventional A to Z short encyclopedia entries. An expert for a given topic writes a short essay on a theme and the themes vary. They include diverse topics such as food culture, Kurdish diaspora in a Western country or translation of an original document on Kurdish history. This collaborative work features 25 contributors, most of them new generation scholars.

The work is divided into three parts. The first part covers thematic essays on various topics from geography, politics, religion, language, and history to education, literature, gender, media, food, dress, music, and cinema. The section "Origins and History", although somewhat incomplete for the Ottoman period, offers a concise historical background. The twentieth century, especially the period after the First World War, is mostly covered in the sections of "Conflicts and Issues" and "Political Systems and Parties." These three sections comprise political history. This work distinguishes itself due to the excellent historical overviews provided for a wide range of topics on geography, religion, education, literature, settlement, media, and cinema. Under "Geography", social, historical, political and human geography is discussed alongside physical geography. Kurdish tribal structure dominates the section on "Social Organization and Family Life". Non-tribal Kurds are mentioned shortly here whereas urban Kurdish population is mostly covered under "Housing and Settlements". In general, the essays in this part are well written, informative and comprehensive.

The Kurds are dispersed among several Middle Eastern as well as Western countries. The second part is focused on the profile of these Kurdish communities. The populations in Middle Eastern countries are treated as indigenous minority groups, while those in the West are presented as diaspora immigrants. Iran, Iraq, and Syria are well known, besides Turkey, for centuries-old residing Kurdish populations. Less known groups in Russia, Caucasus, Israel, and Lebanon are also covered. Western countries such as Germany, Sweden, France, the United States and Russia, that hold a significant part of Kurdish diaspora, are also treated in individual essays. These essays, depending on the character of the Kurdish population in each country, focus on the historical formation of diaspora and native communities, political parties, prominent individuals, cultural organisations, and their involvement in local and national politics.

Certain important historical and modern documents are translated in the last part of the reference work, organised chronologically and accompanied with an introduction, sources and further reading. Documents range from excerpts from the classical poetry of Ahmed-i Khani to article 140 of the new Iraqi constitution. No work, to my knowledge, brings together such documents on Kurdish history, literature, religion, and politics.

The book successfully combines earlier and current research. The essays are easy to follow, each structured with subtitles. Information boxes on various interesting topics, such as a movie, a musical instrument or certain personalities, can be found throughout the book. The list of suggested reading helps students and researchers deepen research and knowledge on a given topic. However, one may consider that a fourth part, with biographical essays on political, literary, female and historical personalities, could have been added. The part on historical documents could have included more documents. The photos and maps are not sufficient: there is only one demographic map indicating where the majority of Kurdish population exists. More maps could have been added on Kurdish historical, linguistic, religious, tribal, and ethnic diversity. More images on historical architecture, artifacts, as well as drawings from Kurdish artists could have been used. The book's bibliography is inadequate and the sources are not classified according to disciplines or area studies. The glossary of Kurdish words is kept short, spelled out in English orthography but not in modern Kurdish. Nevertheless, this is a very useful reference book for researchers on the Kurds and a sourcebook for undergraduate courses on the Middle East.

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Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş, eds., **Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, Strategy**. *Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 278 pp., (ISBN: 978-3-319-55287-3).*

Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, Strategy is an edited volume focussing mainly on the rise and role of the Islamic State (IS), the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), as well as, to a lesser extent, Al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Syria and Iraq. The two editors and most of the contributors are faculty staff and researchers of the International Relations department at Sakarya University in Turkey. The editors place the significance of the book against a background of a pervasion of the international landscape by non-state armed actors (NSAAs). Defined as an armed group with the capacity to exercise control over a territory in order to achieve a political goal, NSAAs are regarded here as having emerged in the context of inter-state and proxy conflict, this being related to a decline of state structures and the parallel emergence of cross-border ethnic loyalties. In their conclusions to the book, the editors make a plea for strong collaborations

between regional states in order to deal with the threats posed by NSAAs and their international supporters.

In the chapter “The Transformation of the Regional Order and Non-State Armed Actors”, Şaban Kardaş argues that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is facing a restructuring characterised by sectarianism, ethnic mobilisation, social fragmentation and the militarisation of politics. Due to the weakening of states in the region, NSAAs have assumed critical roles, moving beyond the role of proxies and pursuing their own agenda. A main concern of the book is the development of the PYD/YPG into a significant NSAA in the region. In the chapter “Understanding the ‘foreign policy’ of the PYD/YPG as a Non-State Actor in Syria and Beyond”, Berkan Ögür and Zana Baykal try to explain the rise of the PYD/YPG as an exceptional non-state actor in the region. The authors relate the rise of the PYD/YPG to the symbolisation of Kobani for the purpose of developing foreign relations. Moreover, the fight against IS not only yielded foreign ties, but also forged stronger relations between Kurds. In the chapter by Galip Dalay titled “The Kurdish Fight against IS: Realizing the Virtual Kurdistan through Factionalized Politics in a Fragmented Homeland”, the author argues that “historically speaking” it was difficult to talk about a common Kurdish public sphere, but that recent years have witnessed a growing tendency towards trans-border cooperation and unity. This has become possible as a result of the rise of IS, which operated as the Kurds’ constitutive other. Tuncay Kardaş and Murat Yeşiltaş continue this theme in their chapter “Global Politics of Image and the Making of a Legitimate Non-State Armed Actor: Syrian Kurds and ‘the secular West’ in Kobane”. They also argue that in IS, the Kurds have found a new constitutive other through which to define their political identity and which has given rise to a new geopolitical imagination associated with nationhood. Through the construction of the IS-PYD pairing as a barbarism-reason dichotomy, the PYD has been able to shift the security agenda of the United States and the West in their favour.

In the chapter “Path to Become a State”, Ömer Behram Özdemir and Recep Tayyip Gürler discuss the evolution from Jama’at Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad to IS. This is partly attributed to the incorporation of a Ba’athist corps, the “Fedayeen Saddam”, and the emergence of a civil war in Syria creating new operational opportunities. The IS insurgency is defined as the sixth revolt in the following chapter by Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş, “The New Middle East, ISIL and the 6th revolt against the West”. The concept of a “revolt against the West” is borrowed from Hedley Bull’s *The Expansion of International Society* (1985). The authors summarise Bull’s description of the five phases in the revolt against the west’s domination of the world as follows: a struggle for equal sovereignty (legal struggle), an anti-colonial struggle (political struggle), a struggle against white supremacy (racial struggle), a struggle against exploitation and global capitalism (economic struggle) and liberal values and conceptions of human rights

(cultural struggle). The authors analyse IS insurgency as a sixth revolt, defined as a “challenging experiment in state making” (161).

Bilgay Duman and Göktuğ Sönmez discuss the Al-Hasd Al-Shaabi in “An Influential Non-State Actor in the Iraqi Context”, arguing that, fighting on the side of the Iraqi Armed Forces as an important actor in the armed struggle against IS, the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) effectively seized a portion of the state’s area of control. In “Operationalizing the Vision of Building a New Caliphate” by Farhad Rezaei, the IS conception of a coming apocalypse is linked to its desire to gain access to weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear and radiological arms. Tuncay Kardaş and Ömer Behram Özdemir discuss “The Making of European Foreign Fighters” and the role of internet-enabled networks, arguing that for a fight against IS both off-line and online measures are needed. In “What the ISIS Crisis Means for the Middle East”, Burak Kadercan asserts that the rise of IS was an embarrassment for the security community. Stating that the threat IS poses can only be dealt with by taking into consideration the broader crisis in the region, Kadercan argues that the issue should be seen in terms not only of how to fight IS but also of how to deal with that crisis. In their final chapter, the editors of the book start to answer this question with the development of security collaboration between the states in the region.

The book contains some minor inconsistencies, for example in the spelling of names (for example Kobani and Kobane) and the use of abbreviations (NSAA, ANSA, NSA to refer to non-state armed actors) that could have been prevented by a thorough copy-editing. Other inconsistencies are related to contradictory claims or assumptions about NSAAs as both a recent phenomenon and one that has been around for many decades. Furthermore, the geographical focus of the book is much narrower than its title suggests. Concentrating almost exclusively on Syria and Iraq leaves many NSAAs in the Middle East undiscussed. For example, the book does not include a discussion of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the PLO, Hamas, the Mujahideen-e Khalq or, surprisingly, the KDP, PUK and PKK. The limitation of the book is not just geographical, moreover, since it hardly discusses paramilitary militias aligned with the state, with the exception of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The lack of coverage of the militias fighting in Syria alongside Assad or supported by Turkey, for example, is an obvious omission.

In fact, *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East* is written from a Turkish security agenda perspective. Its main concern is the PYD/YPG. Though some of the contributions discuss the genealogy and rise of IS, the main focus is on how IS allegedly helped to create international legitimacy for the PYD/YPG and a common Kurdish political sphere. An important claim is that the emergence of IS helped “the Kurds” to develop a self-image as secular and democratic. This, it is argued, opened up international support for further ethnic mobilisation, resulting in a weakening of the states in the region. The authors attest that the emergence of IS had a unifying effect on the Kurds,

contributing to the emergence of a fragile, though common Kurdish politics. It is against this context of a weakening of the existing state system and the alleged emergence of a common Kurdish political sphere that the editors call for an extraterritorial working system of collective security provisioning in the region. Stronger collaboration between the states in the region, the editors suggest, may counter great power interventions and weaken trans-border loyalties between the Kurds. As such, *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East* reads as a political textbook on how to combat the PYD/YPG.

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Barbara Henning, *Narratives of the History of the Ottoman-Kurdish Bedirhani Family in Imperial and Post-Imperial Contexts: Continuities and Changes*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2018, 756 pp., (ISBN: 9783863095512).

The Bedirxani family has long been a staple name in the politics of Northern Kurdistan due to their contributions to the maintenance of an elite-driven Kurdish nationalist agenda as well as the high visibility of some of their family members. Yet, until recently we lacked academic monographs dedicated to this important family's multi-faceted histories. In addition to the politics of studying the Kurds in Turkey, the family's sheer size and tumultuous history, as well as the multi-sited and multi-language archival research its study requires, posited a colossal task for any researcher. In her recently published doctoral dissertation, Barbara Henning has taken on this challenge. Leaving the story of Bedirxan himself to other scholars, Henning's narrative covers *mir* Bedirxan's numerous progeny and follows them to a number of places including but not limited to Istanbul, Damascus, Beirut, France, Germany, and the mandate Syria.

Despite the relatively short period of four years that went into its making, Henning's multifaceted *Narratives* delivers some impressive results. While her research in the Ottoman archives is limited, in other places she uncovered invaluable documents, including Müveddet Gönensay's memoirs, Abdurrezak Bedirxan's biography in the Georgian National Archives, and the files of Safder, Süreyya, Kamuran, and Celadet in both Ludwig Maimullianus Universitat and the French archives. Following their complicated stories and webbed connections from the 1870s to 1940, Henning analyses how the members of a

cosmopolitan Ottoman bureaucratic elite family—one that was also Kurdish—weathered the storm that brought the end of the Ottoman Empire and birthed the ethno-nationalist Turkish Republic (and the mandate Syria). Henning carefully demonstrates that members of the same family took varying paths and claimed different kinds of identities. This focus also serves as her core argument: the Bedirxanis were an Ottoman family that lived and operated within Ottoman frameworks and networks. On the one hand, this argument provides a much-needed break from the singular take that the Bedirxanis were the harbingers of Kurdish nationalism, on the other hand, in making this novel argument, Henning does not adequately situate their story within broader historical developments in Kurdistan. She also makes the unsupported claim that the Bedirxanis were not prominent before 1820. A cursory look into the Ottoman archives proves otherwise.

Central to the Bedirxani story are two tragic confrontations with the Ottoman state. First, the 1847 defeat of Bedirxan and the permanent banishment of his family from its ancestral land of Bohtan. Second, the 1906 murder of the prefect of Istanbul, Ridvan Pasha, which brought the family to ruin and deprived the Kurds of leadership that might have altered the post-World War I order they found themselves in. Prior to 1906, the Ottoman government carefully managed the family, allowing many of its members to serve as imperial bureaucrats while prohibiting their return to Bohtan due to the fear that they would emerge as a rallying point for the Kurdish population. Following the murder of Ridvan Pasha, the family's fortunes declined. Bedirxani's twelve sons, for example, were expelled from Galatasaray *Mekteb-i Sultanisi* (Galatasaray High School) and exiled from Istanbul with the rest of the family members who held high positions. In the anti-Kurdish campaign that followed, many other Kurds also lost their jobs and were forced from the city. Following the 1908 coup d'état, most of the family returned to Istanbul, but it never recovered its powerful position. Nevertheless, pinning their hopes to the idea of an all-inclusive empire, many Bedirxanis joined the Ottoman war efforts; thirty-two of them lost their lives in the process.

Meticulously analysing the lives of a large number of Bedirxanis, including women and children, Henning effectively shows the very different identity choices made by members of the same family, and the strategies employed to negotiate those choices. Drawing on these case studies, and using a theoretical framework based on memory studies, theories of ethnicity and identity, and qualitative network analysis, Hemming is interested in how self-construction (*ich-konstruktionen*) is contingent and capable of changing conjecturally. She argues that identity is not fixed and that ethnicity is not the most useful concept in understanding social and political behavior at the turn of the century. There was not a uniform Bedirxani, or even Kurdish, identity.

Given the fact that Bedirxan left behind about forty children, this should not come as a surprise. However, Henning argues that it does come as a surprise because of a self-serving aura created by certain members of the family,

especially the brothers Celadet, Süreyya, and Kamuran, who have exaggerated their family's role in early Kurdish uprisings and their subsequent persecution. She is right that not all members of the Bedirxani family suffered the same fate. It is also true that the story of Bedirxani family is larger than that of the Celadet-Kamuran-Süreyya trio, and even of Bedirxan himself. Some (like Cemal Kutay or Vasif Çınar) successfully assimilated or integrated into the Turkish republic, and even claimed the mantle of Turkish nationalism. They were not persecuted but rather emerged as republican elites. Others married into elite families in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey and integrated into those societies. Intent on demystifying Bedirxani accounts of their formative role in the formation of Kurdish nationalism, Henning carefully demonstrates that the family's story is larger than the parts that have been privileged by Kurdish nationalist historiography.

Hemming's published dissertation makes immense contributions to late Ottoman, early republican, and Kurdish historiographies. However, situated in the German tradition of publishing long dissertations, its 756 pages are not for the faint-hearted nor for the non-specialist. With careful editing and perhaps a year or two of revision, the book could have lost some unnecessary weight while gaining in clarity and accuracy. Given the innumerable names, places, etc., mentioned in the book, it would have benefited from an index. Similarly, a family tree and some family photographs would have helped the reader grasp the myriad connections Henning traces. The outdated numerical system used to divide chapters and sub-sections, and the lack of proper introductions and conclusions, makes it difficult at times to follow the lines of argument. An editor versed in Kurdish historiography and a more careful reading of some of the bibliographic sources could have prevented numerous avoidable mistakes. For example, Wadie Jwadih is listed a Kurdish activist-cum-historian (he was from an Iraqi Christian family); Seyyid Taha II is listed as a younger brother of Seyyid Abdulkadir (he was his nephew); Sheikh Ubeydullah is listed as a relative of Seyyid Abdülqadir (he was his father); Izzedin Şir is listed as both a relative and the son of Mir Sevdin; Sherif Pasha's Baban origins are not mentioned and he is classified as one of those who "discovered" his Kurdish origins; Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, who led an important resistance against the British, is slighted as "Mahmud Barzani" who "instigated, a local anti-British rebellion in 1919." Aside from these serious factual errors, several of Henning's arguments, like the ones about 1843 and 1847, and her conclusions about the trio of brothers would definitely raise some serious eyebrows. But this is what a dissertation should be: bold and argumentative.

With its invaluable data on numerous Bedirxanis, Henning's book, among many other things, can be read as a set of stories about statelessness and its dire consequences. It shows that what most of their counterparts do with a sense of freedom and pride, Kurdish intellectuals had to do in secrecy, poverty, and exile, constantly fearing persecution and financial and familial ruin. Many were

left without even a place to be buried in peace. They were, and most still are, hostages, as Süreyya Bedirxan noted.

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Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef, eds, **The Kurdish Question Revisited**. London: C Hurst & Co., 2017, 712 pp., (ISBN-10: 0190687185; ISBN-13: 978-0190687182).

At the time of writing (February 2019), the Kurdish led Syrian Defence Forces' (SDF) battle against ISIS is coming to an end. ISIS' few remaining fighters are surrounded in the Syrian desert town of Baghouz and the demise of its so-called Islamic state is imminent. It should be a moment of unrestrained celebration for the Kurdish people, yet as one threat is close to resolution, ongoing and new ones appear on the horizon: the conflict in the Turkish ruled part of Kurdistan is as entrenched as ever, Afrin remains under Turkish-led occupation and the Turkish government has been openly menacing the other cantons in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria with invasion. The Kurdish region in Iraq remains characterised by economic mismanagement and increasing authoritarianism, while the Kurds in Iran have continued their struggle to little discernible effect, unacknowledged by the international public. The optimism of just a few years ago, with the consolidation of autonomous rule in Rojava, the territorial gains of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the peace process in Turkey has been greatly diminished. These tumultuous recent years have unexpectedly catapulted the Kurdish people into the international limelight, capturing the popular attention of audiences largely uninformed or misinformed of their history and the complexity of the region's political challenges. Accordingly, Stansfield and Shareef's brilliant volume is most timely and will serve as a future guide for all parties interested in understanding contemporary Kurdish politics, history and culture.

To review a book of such size (35 chapters and more than 700 pages) and range is challenging. It is simply not feasible, as is common in many academic reviews of edited books, to summarise all the chapters and reflect on their individual strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, as an anthology of such dimensions will be sought out by readers with very different interests and expectations; my thoughts on it as a reviewer, also naturally reflect my own interests and varying levels of (in)expertise. With that in mind, it is worth stating that my own research has focused on the Kurdish mobilisation since the 1970s in Turkey and my familiarity with the other Kurdish regions and relevant disciplines is relatively speaking, less developed. Nevertheless, it is clear that this volume makes a remarkable contribution to our field. It is written in an accessible style throughout, rendering it the perfect departure point for audiences less familiar with Kurdish issues, yet the depth of the book also makes it a key text for scholars working in the field. It glistens with some of the

most prominent scholars of Kurdish studies, encompassing disciplines as diverse as history (and historiography), religious studies, musicology, literary criticism and political science. I have no doubt, that it will be among the first listed books on future Middle East politics syllabi and will become a key book for scholars and academics, policy makers and the curious public alike, for the foreseeable future.

The book's first general section is very well put together. Tejel's chapter (*New Perspectives on Writing the History of the Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey: A History and State of the Art Assessment*) provides a concise overview of the evolution of Kurdish studies. The chapter only deals with the discipline of history, but similar discipline specific assessments in linguistics, political science, political economy and anthropology would potentially have also been substantial contributions to the volume. Reflecting my own research interests, I immediately sought out David Romano's chapter (*Social Movement Theory and Political Mobilization in Kurdistan*), in which he outlines the use of social movement theories in the field and lists a number of mostly less experienced scholars (myself included) who have applied these methods. Curiously, he also proceeds to use the chapter to offer a defensive review of his own book. This is a little unexpected as his book at the time of writing was more than ten years old (Romano, 2006), and although it has been critiqued to different extents, it is deservedly recognised as a pioneering work and has been extensively cited. It would have been more interesting to hear his views on how the burgeoning social movement literature on violence in the interim (Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner, 2014; della Porta, 2013, inter alios), could potentially enhance our understandings of contemporary conflict dynamics in Kurdistan.

Although, the book is orthodox in structure divided into country specific sections, a hugely satisfying aspect of the volume is that many of the pieces emphasise the continuities and transnational elements of Kurdistan's culture, politics and history. As anticipated, Bengio's chapter (*Separated but Connected: The Synergic Effects in the Kurdistan Sub-System*) focuses precisely on these linkages, but other chapters such as Leezenberg's (*Religion Among the Kurds: Between Naqshbandi Sufism and IS Salafism*), Lowe and Kaya's chapter (*The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship*) and Klein's historical chapter (*Journalism Beyond Borders: The Bedirxhans and the First Kurdish Gazette, 1898–1902*) also unravel the threads binding various facets of the Kurdish experience across externally imposed boundaries. That contributions related to general Kurdish issues and not simply those related to explicitly transnational Kurdish ones (for e.g. diaspora and migration research) have moved beyond the strictures of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) is surely a positive indication of the consolidation of Kurdish studies as a field.

A less satisfying aspect of the volume is that although its genesis was at a workshop at the University of Exeter, thereafter, there appears to have been little dialogue between the chapters. While it may neither be practical nor necessary to share all 35 chapters with all the contributors, it would have likely

made for a more coherent read if at least some of the chapters engaged with one another. To give a concrete example: in Posch's chapter (*Fellow Arians and Muslim Brothers: Iranian Narratives on the Kurds*) he argues that PJAK (*Kurdistan Free Life Party*) forces withdrew from Iran in 2011 because of an accord reached after the senior PKK figure Murat Karayılan was captured by Iranian forces (349). In Grojean's chapter in the same section (326), he explained that PJAK's ceasefire came about because of the PKK's urgent need to support the Kurdish movements after the outbreak of the war in Syria (footnote on page 608). Naturally, there is no obligation to provide a definitive explanation, but the existence of two contradictory explanations for the same event with no acknowledgement of one another, is not ideal.

The section dealing with Kurds in Iran is, simply put, rather weak. It includes only three chapters, two of which, Posch's and Entessar's (*The Kurdish Conundrum and the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979-2003*) cover relatively similar ground. Although, the editors openly acknowledge this weakness (xxix), it skews the balance of the book. Albeit not comparable in quantity to the other Kurdish regions, interesting research is being done on Kurds in Iran (Tezcür and Asadzade, 2018), building upon existing works (Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield, 2010; Yildiz and Taşçı, 2007; Vali, 2014). While this limited focus on Kurds in Iran is common in the field (see Baser et al., 2018), it seems that their marginalisation here is a further opportunity lost. Finally, the section's three authors all use different transliterations of the Kurdish leader Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou's name; Qasimlu (Grojean) Ghassemlou (Entessar) Qasemlou (Posch). This could have been avoided by standardising transliteration of names and places throughout the volume or at least clarifying in a footnote for less familiar readers, that all these names refer to a single individual.

The section concerned with Kurds in Iraq is the largest, numbering 11 chapters. It opens with an excellent account of recent developments related to the disputed territories around Kirkuk and the impact the battle against ISIS has had on the Kurdish region in Iraq (KRI). The other chapters in this section are certainly interesting, albeit somewhat eclectic including very specialised contributions on a gendered perspective of education in the KRI, the role of water management and peace education. In general, this section reads somewhat apolitically. In contrast, in the lamentably short section on Kurds in Syria, Kaya and Lowe openly address the hugely contentious question of the relationship between the PYD and the PKK. Similarly in the section on Kurds in Turkey, Jongerden directly addresses the changing ideology of the PKK (*The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): Radical Democracy and the Right to Self-Determination Beyond the Nation-State*) and Gunes (*Mobilisation of Kurds in Turkey during the 1980s and the 1990s*) looks at PKK and its armed campaign since the 1980s, both highly controversial politicised topics. Yet, in the section on Iraqi Kurds analogously sensitive topics are not covered. There is only passing mention (most explicitly in the chapters by Fischer-Tahrir and Watts) to the bloody civil war between the forces of the KDP (*Kurdistan Democratic Party*) and PUK (*Patriotic Union of*

Kurdistan), and little space is dedicated to how they both fought the PKK at different stages. The Gorran party which has challenged them in recent years also receives similarly limited attention. As somebody with only passing familiarity with academic work on the KRI, it is unclear whether the selected chapters reflect a more practically oriented research field there or if in light of ongoing conflict dynamics, local researchers prioritise less contentious topics? It was also notable that in Isakhan's chapter (*The Iraqi Kurdish Response to the "Islamic State": Political Leverage in Times of Crisis*), the critical role of PKK affiliated forces in the operation to reclaim Sinjar mountain went unacknowledged. Regrettably, the contribution by Mohammed Ihsan (*Arabization as Genocide: The Case of the Disputed Territories of Iraq*) lapses into essentialist language when he states that "For both Shia and Sunnis, the idea of society is strongly linked to religion; and this isolates them from the vision that the Kurds have of society, which must be democratic and, most importantly secular" (387). The casual use of such "ethnic common sense" (Brubaker, 2002) does not reflect the high standards found elsewhere in the book.

In light of the vast heterogeneity of peoples in what is commonly understood as Kurdistan, it would have been interesting if some space had been set aside to address the situation of local non-Kurds. This is particularly relevant in light of the more inclusive discourses inherent in the project of Democratic Confederalism advanced to varying extents by the PKK and PYD (*Democratic Union Party*), as well as the HDP (*Peoples' Democratic Party*), and to a lesser extent also by the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. Although, Zagros' chapter on Yezidis in Armenia (*Kurdish Music in Armenia: The Music of the Yezidis*) is fascinating, the implicit premise in the chapter's title that Yezidis view themselves as Kurdish would be itself worthy of further elaboration. As indeed would some discussion of Kurdish-Armenian and Kurdish-Syriac relations before, during and after the genocides of the early 20th century.

In the introduction, the editors declare their objective to be the creation of a single volume "that attempts to present a comprehensive overview of the multi-faceted Kurdish question, bringing together expertise in an attempt to cover the entirety of the Kurdish-populated areas of the Middle East, and to bring scholars and specialists from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to provide a snapshot not only of the contemporary situation of the Kurds and Kurdistan, but also to present a state-of-the-art collection of chapters that show the strength of the field of Kurdish studies, broadly defined, today"(xxviii). As is similar with many edited volumes, their endeavour has been extremely successful in some regards, particularly in terms of its inter-disciplinarity and the sheer quality of many of the pieces. It was truly a pleasure to read absolute gems of chapters on topics as varied as the cultural politics of the Kurdish movement by Clémence Scalbert-Yücel to the contestation of memory in Halabja by Nicole Watts, amongst many others which covered material wholly unfamiliar to me. On the other hand, its much less successful in covering "the entirety of the Kurdish-populated areas of the Middle East"; the balance

between chapters covering Kurds in Iraq and Turkey simply dwarves those on Kurds in Syria and Iran.

There have been a plethora of edited volumes on Kurdish studies in the last ten years or so (Gunes and Zeydanlıoğlu, 2013; Romano and Gurses, 2014; Tugdar and Al, 2018; Gunter and Ahmed, 2007, inter alios). Davis and Blossey have argued that in an emerging field edited volumes can provide valuable guidance for scholars but that in developed fields “scarcity of literature [...] is seldom a problem” and that “additional edited volumes risk providing the field with little but more stuff to read, unless there is value added in a novel synthesis (Davis and Blossey, 2011: 247–48). If one reflects on the consolidation of Kurdish studies since Meho’s summary of it (1997), the field has truly blossomed, in no small part also because of the contributions of the aforementioned edited volumes. The question that arises for those of us working in the field is should we still consider Kurdish Studies an emerging field? And what role should future edited volumes play in the development of that field? A potential solution is the reinforcement of an existing tendency, the encouragement of volumes with very distinct theoretical approaches and specific questions such as the volume on methodologies of field research (Baser et al., 2018) and the emphasis on spatial dynamics in Kurdish politics (Gambetti and Jongerden, 2015).

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Abbas Amanat, **Iran: A Modern History**, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2017, pp. 1000, (ISBN-10: 0300112548, ISBN-13: 978-0300112542).

Abbas Amanat's new book, *Iran: A Modern History*, is a meticulous analysis of the history of Iran, particularly since the emergence of the Shi'i Safavid Empire (1501-1722). Compared to other respected histories of Iran, Amanat's book distinguishes itself for several reasons. Firstly, the book contains detailed accounts of a range of historical events, shedding light on significant political, cultural, social and economic transformations. For this reason, the book is around 1,200 pages long, painstakingly creating a wide scope for the reader to engage with its ideas and premises, and is written in beautiful and compelling prose. Secondly, *Iran: A Modern History* can be regarded as the most recent historical account of Iran since the early modern times based on previous histories and interdisciplinary research on Iran. It presents a fresh history, raising the bar for further historical research on Iran. Last but not the least, is Amanat's detailed analysis of post-World War II Iran and the era of the White Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s in particular, followed by an engaging assessment of four decades of the Islamic Republic.

The book revolves around Amanat's portrayal of "a delicate sociocultural balance between religion and state" or "socioreligious fabric" shaped by history and preserved by successful ruling dynasties such as the Qajars (1792-1925), ever since the Safavids. For example, Amanat explains, "The Qajar supremacy

in the last decades of the eighteenth century endured in part because of favourable internal and international circumstances, but also because loyalty to Shi'ism contributed to preservation of Iran's socioreligious fabric and the Qajars' reinvented sense of national unity" (32). However, the secular modernity and modernisation pursued by the Pahlavis throughout the twentieth century, as a consequence of which politicised Islam emerged and ended the Pahlavi rule in 1979, dealt a severe blow to that balance (see Epilogue). All this being said, I now present a brief critical reading of some distinguishing aspects of the book, and an assessment of the book's inclusion and exclusion of the Kurds.

In his engaging introduction, Amanat sketches a historical background to Iran until the ascendancy of the Safavids, identifying factors which, according to him, contributed to the preservation of the name and the culture of Iran since the tenth century. The memories of an ancient past endured, after Iran during antiquity was recognised by its neighbouring powers as a political community: "Both Greek and Hebrew portrayals represented ancient Iran as an alternative space, as the land of the Other, which should be dealt with on its own terms" (4). In addition to referring to "Iranshahr as a physical space" (10-15) (i.e. the geographical delineation of the boundaries of ancient Iran), Amanat explained the existence of the centre and peripheries as an old characteristic of Iran:

Even when the structural deficiencies in the Persian model of government were to be overcome by the ruler or his ministers, there were marginal forces outside the state's immediate reach [...] The expediency of coming to terms with peripheral powers, the rooks [chess pieces] of Hafez's [the fourteenth-century lyricist] verse, was generally acknowledged by the Persian central government, which, instead of costly and often ineffective methods of direct rule, resorted to granting khans of the periphery a semiautonomous status (8-9).

However, "Iranians shared distinct cultural memories and religious beliefs, which gave them a degree of communal identity long before the ideologies of nationalism," the most evident of which was "the tenacity of the Persian language as an enduring and yet adaptable means of communication, source of literary efflorescence, and repository of collective memories and shared symbols" (19). Following these claims is a brief overview of the evolution of Persian throughout centuries by various genres, among them the *Shahnamehs*, which "memorialized a national myth" (21), and poetry epitomised by likes of Ferdowsi, Rudaki, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Sa'adi and Hafez, which "occupied a prominent place in the Persian collective memory" (Ibid).

However, despite providing this myriad of evidence, Amanat does not *explicitly* discuss the relation between power and the Persian language. The "Persian cultural renaissance" beginning in the tenth century continued through the medieval period, until the rise in the early modern times of the "gunpowder Empires", a term Amanat borrows from Marshall Hodgson. The Mughal,

Safavid and Ottoman Empires of the early modern times, which were in fact, as Amanat points out, Persianate Empires, marked profound changes. Ferdowsi and Rudaki emerged from the ninth to the eleventh centuries during the powerful Samanid dynasty, which the book presents as the vanguard of the cultural renaissance. This is important, because it is precisely the relation with power which made Persian not only a lingua franca in pre-modern times, but also enabled it to become Iran's national and, then, official language during the formation of modern Iranian nation-state. Ignoring the relation between language and power has historically served the cultural hegemony of Persian in relation to other Iranian cultures, including Kurdish, which are trivialised as "local", and which have literary histories which are considered as less illustrious. Indeed, the duality of official versus local in modern Iran rests on this historical relation between language and power, which also explains, despite the existence of a relatively tenacious Kurdish language, the political inferiority of Kurdish.

The book's discussion of the Safavid Empire is of particular importance. The Safavids shaped the structures of today's Iran, determining the role of state and religion and the relationship between them. From this perspective, modernity and the modern state entailed a fundamental crisis between the two entities. According to Amanat, "Despite staging an earnest liberal movement with urban support, the Iranian constitutionalists never really succeeded in defining the relationship between the religious and the political spheres" (383). There were hostile forces, including the great powers, the Qajar regime and the affiliated clerical conservatives: "The all-embracing assault of these hostile forces demonstrates why the experience of modernity in Iran, and the rest of the Middle East, proved lopsided and inconsistent, and why Iran would witness two other major political upheavals in the course of the twentieth century" (ibid). "Constitutionalists insisted that reforms to the institutions of the state would in no way interfere with Islamic principals [sic] and the requirements of the shari'a, and they repeatedly claimed that *masbruteh* [constitution] was concomitant with the teachings of Islam and its true spirit" (381-2).¹ Despite the Revolution's achievements, however,

there was little effort in earnest to articulate theoretical boundaries of liberal democracy. In other words, Islam as a comprehensive divine order with claims over the individual, the government, and the community was never seriously dealt with in the constitutional period, nor was an effort made to spell out a workable compromise (382).

According to Amanat (Ibid), "A notable exception, however, was Mohammad Hosain Na'ini (1860–1936), a high-ranking jurist then residing in Najaf", who argued in his book that "Constitutionalism is compatible with the teaching of Shi'i Islam."

¹ As Amanat explains (334), "The coinage *masbruteh* in fact meant 'conditional,' denoting the setting of conditions on the power of the sovereign."

While Iran experienced a series of major political events culminating in the military *coup d'état* against the government of Muhammad Musaddeq in 1953 over the nationalisation of the oil industry, the 1960s and 1970s are truly significant in the story of the socio-economic, political and cultural transformations of Iran. In this regard the book does not disappoint its readers, and distinguishes itself from hitherto written histories of Iran by presenting a detailed, gripping analysis of the era of the White Revolution. It covers social, economic, political and cultural aspects of change, and deals with the transformation of the gender order, and the emergence of a culture of dissent in the music and film industries amid the expansion of audio-visual means of communication (see chapters Ten and Eleven). These chapters also deal with the causes of the 1979 Revolution, reviewing the events which resulted in the consolidation of the new Islamic Regime.

Unlike many histories of Iran, the events in revolutionary Kurdistan, the onslaught of the new regime to quell the Kurdish autonomy movement, and the waves of executions of Kurdish activists in the summer of 1979, are discussed at some length in *Iran: A Modern History*. Although the book's account of the events in this period is useful, revolutionary Kurdistan does not achieve its deserved place in such a valuable history of modern Iran. One of the main reasons for this is the dearth of research on Kurdistan during the Revolution, resulting in the false view that the Kurdish movement was "effectively distinguished" (817) by the quelling of the opposition in Iran by late 1983. In later parts of the book, this extends to ignoring the quests of Iran's ethnicities for alternative identity. In this regard, a perfect example is the book's analysis of the 2009 Green Movement. Defying the Iranian state's systematic efforts to construct an Islamic image, "a tenacious quest for alternative identity motivates a vast sector of Iranians, especially urban youth" (906-7). Although this can apply also to the Kurdish urban youth, the overall effort of an ethnic people such as the Iranian Kurds is ignored, and any discussion of why the state has been unable to solve ethnic problems in Iran is avoided. Furthermore, in a discussion of the political organisation the Fada'iyan (founded 1966), the book regrettably claims that "Their advocacy of autonomy for Iran's ethnicities—mostly in the realm of imagination—was theoretically luring but politically *dangerous*, giving an ominous green light to Kurdish, Azarbaijani, Turkmen, Arab, and other dormant *cessation* tendencies" (659. *My emphasis*). In this vague claim, the Kurdish movement is in fact trivialised, being defined as separatist, which has negative connotations in the politics of modern Iran. Represented by different organisations, the Feda'iyan movement, in both theory and practice, has remained an ardent advocate of the Kurds' cultural and political rights.

As Amanat's otherwise excellent book demonstrates, modern histories of Iran do not sufficiently include the histories of the Kurds in that country for methodological and chronological reasons. An Irano-centric approach does not concern itself with detailed analysis of ethnic communities in Iran, while a static

political chronology of events is usually reiterated and followed. Research on the period between the fall of the Kurdish Republic of 1946 and the 1979 Revolution, a period which witnessed the impact of the era of the White Revolution on the Kurdistan region in Iran and a profound socio-economic and cultural transformation of Kurdish society, is extremely limited. Moreover, the post-Revolution Kurdish movement in Iran, which went on vigorously for the next decade, crucially defines, alongside the Iran-Iraq war, the Iran of the 1980s. This re-emerged movement was based on previous experiences, and had been shaped by the social change and transformation of the preceding decades which assume such a central space in Amanat's book. Therefore, the first steps towards a greater inclusion of the Kurds, their society and political and cultural movements, is for the histories of Iran to deal with such methodological and chronological shortcomings, which requires their authors' gaining acquaintance with the Kurdish language.

As a conclusionary remark, *Iran: A Modern History* stands out as a dedicated scholarly effort to present a new modern history of a country the socio-economic, political, cultural and ethnic structures of which continue to attract great scholarly attention. It is an extremely valuable book, which every scholar of Iranian and Kurdish studies should actively engage with. Nevertheless, the relationship between language and power, the central roles of ethnic peoples (including the Kurds) in shaping modern Iran, and their endeavours of the past along with their quests for the future, should be among the most important topics for modern histories of Iran. The inclusion of Iran's Kurdish society, its past and present, contributes to the transformation of perspectives on "Iran" as a historical idea or concept, revealing that as an entity Iran has historically experienced a dynamic, not a static, history, continuously experiencing change and transformation. The "Iran" of the Sasanid Empire (224-651) was not the Iran of today, although both historical facts and myths refer to "peripheries" as a continuous characteristic of Iran. Nor should the Iran of tomorrow remain a centralising, conservative entity with no regard for democratic, non-violent alternatives which are usually dismissed as "separatism" in the politics of modern Iran.

Through the consideration of these factors, Kurdish society is more likely to assume the place it deserves in relevant historical, cultural and political analyses of Iran.

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