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## Kurds and their history: An interview with David McDowall

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### Abstract

This interview with David McDowall records his intellectual quest on the Kurds for over thirty years and his book *A Modern History of the Kurds*. Initially trained as a historian of modern Syria, his interest started when he was asked to write a report on the Kurds as a minority group. He later expanded his research on the Kurds, which culminated in one of the most comprehensive books on the modern history of the Kurds. In this interview he talks about the process of research for his book, the Kurdish national movement, intra-Kurdish relations, the Kurdish diaspora, and the transformation of the Kurdish Question in the last three decades.

**Keywords:** Kurdish history; Kurdish Studies; Kurdish political identity; Kurdistan; Kurdish national movement

### Abstract in Kurmanji

#### Kurd û dîroka wan: Hevpeyvînek li gel David McDowall

Ev hevpeyvîna li gel David McDowall lêgerîna wî ya entelektuel a li ser kurdan a zêdetirî sih salan û kitêba wî *A Modern History of the Kurds* (Dîroka Modern a Kurdan) tîne ber çavan. McDowallê ku pisporê dîroka Sûriyeya modern bû, dema jê hat xwestin ku raporekê li ser kurdan wek komeke kêmar binivîse, eleqeya wî ya li ser dîroka kurdan dest pê kir. Wî paşê lêkolîna xwe ya li ser kurdan berfirehtir kir û ji vê hewla wî yek ji kitêbên herî berfireh ên dîroka modern a kurdan peyda bû. Di vê hevpeyvînê de ew li ser proseya lêkolîna ji bo kitêba xwe, tevgera neteweyî ya kurd, têkiliyên nav-kurdan, diasporaya kurd, veguherîna pirsra kurd a di sê deheyên dawî de diaxive.

### Abstract in Sorani

#### Kurd û mêjuwekeyan: Didarêk legell Deyivd Mekdowall

Em çawpêkewtne legell Deyivd Mekdowall zyatir le sî sall koşşî hizrî ew leser kurd we ktêbekey mêjûy hawçerxî kurd tomar dekat. Sereta wek mêjûnusêk leser suryay hawçerx meşqî pêkra, bayex pêdanî ew katêk destî pêkrid ke daway lêkra raportêk leser kurd wek grupêki kemîne bnusêt. Ew dwatir twêjînewekey leser kurd frawan kird, ke yekêk le ktêbe here giştîgîrekanî mêjûy hawçerxî kurdî lêberhem hat. Lem didareda ew derbarey prosey twêjînewe bo ktêbekey,

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bzûtnewey neteweyî kurd, peywendî nêwkurd, dyasporay kurd û werçerxanî pîrsî kurd le sê deyey rabridûda dedwêt.

### **Abstract in Zazaki**

#### **Kurdî û tarîxê înan: David McDowallî reyde roportaj**

Nê roportajê bi David McDowallî de cigêrayîşo roşnvîrî yê McDowallî yê hîris serran ke kurdan ser o kerdo û kitabê xo *A Modern History of the Kurds* (Tarîxê Kurdan o Modern) qeyd benê. Verî, ey perwerdeyê tarîxnasîya Sûrîyeya moderne dîbî. Wexto ke pers bîyo ke derheqê kêmeteweya kurdan de raporêk binuso, eleqedariya ey dest pêkerda. Dima, ey cigêrayîşê xo yê derheqê kurdan de berd aver ke netîceyê nê cigêrayîşî kitabo tewr hîra derheqê tarîxê kurdan ê modernî de ameyo ra. Nê roportajî de McDowall derheqê prosesê cigêrayîşê kitabê xo, tevgerê neteweyî yê kurdan, têkiliyanê mîyankurdkiyan, dîyasporaya kurdan û vurîyayîşê meseleya kurdan ê hîris serranê peyênan de qisey keno.

## **Introduction**

Twenty-five years ago when David McDowall published his book *A Modern History of the Kurds*, which covers the history of the Kurds from the nineteenth century to the present day, it was acclaimed by many prominent scholars of Kurdish and Middle Eastern Studies as an indispensable work for anyone who wanted to study the Kurds. Regarded by a prominent scholar of modern Kurdish history as a “textbook without a class” (Klein, 2002), McDowall’s work remained in use in the following decades, while the field of Kurdish Studies has thrived. Two further editions followed, the first one in 1997 and the second one in 2004. A new extended version of his book will be released in 2021.

David McDowall studied Islamic history at Oxford University. He remembers, “In the long vacation of 1967 I travelled overland to Turkey and Iran, blithely unaware of the Kurdish ordeal. Reference to ‘Mountain Turks’, alerted me to denial but not more. The heavy militarization of eastern Anatolia should have alerted me that something pretty serious was going on, but I naively swallowed the official line that it was the Soviet threat. In any case, I was obsessed at the time by Seljuq and Ottoman Islamic architecture, not by present-day people.” As a postgraduate McDowall wrote a dissertation on the Syrian Druze revolt against the French Mandate, but found time to travel to Iraq, including travelling to Rawanduz along the famous Hamilton Road. Working for the British Council in Baghdad, he was able to re-visit Kurdistan, following the collapse of the Barzani revolt in spring 1975. Later in the 1970s he worked for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in Beirut, followed by acting as an Oxfam relief worker during Israel’s bloody invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In 1984, he was invited to write on the Lebanese conflict for the

Minority Rights Group. In 1989 he wrote a book on the First Intifada and the struggle for Palestine. In 1991 he wrote a report for the Minority Rights Group concerning the Kurds, during the process of which he realized that there was a real paucity of written material on Kurdistan, and that a fuller general introductory account was desirable. As a result, *A Modern History of the Kurds* appeared in 1996. During the 1990s he also wrote numerous expert witness reports for Kurdish asylum seekers in the UK facing government refusal of their application. McDowall has been able to balance unremunerative writing about the Middle East with revenue-earning projects, for example, writing two cultural background textbooks on Britain for English Language students abroad, which ensured a modest income, and since 1996 writing and self-publishing a series of British landscape books. In 2016 he reverted to updating his history of the Kurds.

During the COVID-19 pandemic many scholars around the world have been forced to move their courses online. As they lost the benefit of holding classes in person, they have become more creative, making each session livelier and more interesting, for instance by inviting the writer of a scholarly work to the virtual classroom. In mid-April 2020, I was asked by a colleague to discuss one of my works in one of his graduate course's online sessions on Kurdish history. David McDowall was invited for another session of the same course, which is how we met. After exchanging several email messages on various topics, he told me that he had been working on a revised version of his book on Kurdish history for several years and was about to conclude it. That is what prompted the idea of an interview, which David McDowall kindly accepted on the condition of conducting it in written form.

**Atmaca:** It seems that you have not written much on Kurds and Kurdistan in the last 15-20 years and now you are back to the topic again. What changes forced you to come back to this much complicated issue after all these years?

**McDowall:** Apart from work on asylum cases which ceased around the year 2002, I had given little or no thought to Kurdistan, and certainly had not thought to writing anything more. However, in August 2016, out of the blue my publisher invited me to lunch, during the course of which he told me, to my surprise, that my book had become – in his words – the ‘go-to book’ on the Kurds. I had had no idea. I was both flattered and alarmed. Having relied so heavily on British archives, but aware of other unexamined European archives, let alone the more important Ottoman archives and other sources in the region, I had thought of my book essentially as a stopgap, until a scholar produced a more rounded and better considered book. However, there's no such thing as a free lunch! I agreed to have a go at updating. It took far longer than I had anticipated, but of course I was blithely unaware of the intricacies of the momentous events that had taken place in Kurdistan

since the beginning of the century. As far as the 2003 invasion of Iraq was concerned, it had occupied my attention only as an activist against it.

**Atmaca:** As you stated, your book is mostly based on British archival material and European secondary sources, though your evaluation of the events is neutral and sometimes sympathetic towards the Kurds. How do you balance that in your work?

**McDowall:** I am not at all sure my work is balanced, but then I'm uncertain what "balanced" precisely means. When I wrote reports for court use in asylum cases I was required to confirm that what I wrote was objectively true. I always refused to do so, and explained why it was an impossible demand. You simply write what you think is right but at the same time remaining constantly aware that what you write is subject to your own ignorance, prejudices, cultural habits of thought and life experience. That is a pretty shaky basis either for "balance" or for objective truth.

**Atmaca:** You place particular emphasis on the role of tribalism in the 20th century Kurdish national movement. To what extent do you see tribalism as having been an obstacle before the Kurdish national movement and transformation of the Kurdish society? What is the state of Kurdish tribes in today's global age? Did Kurdish tribes play any positive role in preserving Kurdish identity, language and culture against assimilation policies?

**McDowall:** Look at the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, where two neo-tribal structures compete to the detriment of the ordinary people of the region. Those loyal to either power group are likely to subordinate the interests of the wider Kurdish community to the immediate interests of their power group. I don't think it is possible to build a national polity on that basis. You cannot develop civil society if these two power groups insist on inserting their controlling fingers into the process. That is the most obvious example. One can only be impressed by the way tribal or kin-group thinking has proved so adaptable as to encrust itself into the heart of the political process. But tribal obligations are also present in economic and social processes. Look at chapter 5 of Anna Grabolle-Çeliker's excellent *Kurdish Life in Contemporary Turkey* (2013) to see how tribes can still greatly influence everyday life. Look at today's Kurdish business magnates, a high proportion hail from the agha class and clearly used that patronage position as a springboard. Even in Kobani and in al-Jazira in Syria (and despite the PYD), many people recognize that their family or tribe is central to their identity, even if it is in a passive rather than active sense.

**Atmaca:** The Republic of Kurdistan, which was led by Qazi Muhammad in 1946 in Mahabad in Iranian Kurdistan, now has been studied in more depth by researchers (Vali, 2011; Koohi-Kamali, 2003). In these studies, the tribalism of Kurds is less emphasized while the role of political factions has

been highlighted as a reason for failure. You also assert that the movement was politically more orderly in terms of its leadership by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) than previous rebellions and that this is why the Iranian government saw this new movement as a great challenge to its centralization policy. What do you mean by its “orderliness”? Weren’t the previous rebellions led by Baban Abdurrahman Pasha, Bedirkhan Beg, Yezdan Sher, Sheikh Ubeydullah, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, Simko Agha, and Sheikh Said orderly?

**McDowall:** With the exception of Sheikh Said, all the other rebels you mention raised the flag of revolt essentially in their own, rather than national interests. They did not, it seems, ask the ideological question: What does it mean to be Kurdish? This was clearly the question posed by the small non-tribal and urban group, Komala-JK, which laid the ideological road to the Mahabad Republic from 1942. The Iranian Kurds declared the Mahabad Republic peacefully in a power vacuum, on the basis of desiring autonomy which could be enshrined in the state constitution. It was essentially a civic movement, even if it fell victim to the tribal elite which monopolised military power. The evolution of ideas leading to Mahabad has been set out masterfully by Abbas Vali in *Kurds and the State in Iran* (2011).

**Atmaca:** Throughout modern history, including today, most Kurdish movements have sought autonomy in various forms, yet their host states have perceived this as an initial step towards independence. Looking back from today to the previous century, why do you think both the demands by Kurdish parties and the responses by respective states have not changed much? What are Kurdish parties doing right, and what are they doing wrong?

**McDowall:** It is important to try to imagine the perspective from the seats of government. In the late nineteenth century, the Ottomans and Qajars were paranoid concerning the fragmentation of their respective states. The Ottomans progressively lost virtually all their European possessions. Modern Turkey’s founders witnessed the later Ottoman losses and then fought a desperate struggle to defeat Turkey’s enemies in 1919-1922. They were understandably paranoid concerning the machinations of the Great Powers and the danger posed by Kurdish rebellions. Or, look at Hashemite Iraq. King Faisal was desperate to include the Kurds because they were Sunni, thereby making up numbers against the Shi’i preponderance. I do not believe that either those Iraqi Arabs who found themselves trying to forge a post-Saddam state or the US welcomed a formalised autonomous Kurdish region, but they were outmanoeuvred by the Kurdish leaders. Yet it serves as a worrying example to governments of the region, whose instincts have always been to ensure centralised control, a reflection of their own sense of insecurity and an historic propensity for territorial fragmentation. As for the

Kurdish peoples, they strike me as having been divided for over a century between autonomists, separatists and those who would rather the whole question of ethnic identity simply disappeared. It has tended to be the separatists who have attracted attention by their military exploits. Mulla Mustafa and Mas'ud Barzani, both seem to have wanted as little to do with Arabs as possible. That comes across in Baghdad as separatist. Öcalan's guerrilla war seemed separatist until after his capture. No one fully trusted his scaled-down ambition of autonomy which he asserted from 1993. Damascus has its own paranoia because it has been used as a cockpit for regional and international struggles ever since its independence in 1946. Rigid centralised control results. In such circumstances, I think it is well nigh impossible both to reassure the governing authority that one is not secessionist while also trying to obtain devolution of administrative powers, let alone political ones. But it is also true that Kurdish parties have sent mixed messages which have more often alarmed rather than reassured central government.

**Atmaca:** You focus a great deal on intra-Kurdish conflicts in the book. How much has Kurdish politics been shaped by intra-Kurdish relations in the 1990s and 2000s and how much of these intra-Kurdish conflicts have been shaped by surrounding states? What is the essential reason that the Kurds cannot unite across borders?

**McDowall:** The relations between the Kurds of Kurdistan as a whole are constrained by the limitations placed on them by these four regional states. As sub-state actors, they are confined by these states' agreement not to allow an independent Kurdish entity (the establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was controversial enough). Yet they need the help of regional or international actors to lever greater space for themselves within whichever political territory they happen to be. They do this by exploiting inter-state tensions, but this comes at a price. In the case of a regional actor, the price they pay is to withdraw any assistance to the Kurdish community within the territory of that actor. They are also in a permanent trap: dependent on sponsors who'll give sufficient support to cause trouble to a neighbouring state but who will always withdraw that support when it ceases to be in their own interest to continue, when, for example, their Kurdish clients become too successful. This equation seems to me pretty much permanent. They are also constrained by the fundamental ideological differences between the PKK and its affiliates on the one hand, and the traditional "nationalists" personified by Clan Barzani. However, I write "nationalist" with inverted commas because a movement led by a solidarity group like kin-group Barzani is always bound to put its own interest above that of the wider Kurdish community, which renders nation building in any modern sense nugatory. There are, of course, contests between different kin, power or

patronage groups in Iraq, Turkey and Syria: the KDP-PUK contest in Iraq is the most obvious, a contest which simmers currently without eruption only because open warfare is in the current interest of neither. But it threatens to erupt at some future date. As Barzani demonstrated in 1996, this contest is sufficiently important that a deal may be cut even with a genocidal regime in order to defeat his rival. One could hardly describe that as in the Kurdish interest. And it is well known that in the PKK war on Ankara, kin-group leaders sometimes chose which side to support on the grounds of which was the more useful one for playing out local clan rivalries. But this feature feeds more generally into the kin-group solidarities of Middle Eastern society with their mix of positive and negative characteristics.

**Atmaca:** In the last part of your book you briefly touch on the Kurdish diaspora in Europe and the rest of the world. What changes have taken place in the last two to three decades in terms of the political, economic, and cultural influence of the diaspora on Kurds both in exile and in their homeland?

**McDowall:** I am ill-qualified to say much. However, the Kurdish diaspora in western Europe has come of age in the sense that individual Kurds have risen within the democratic framework wherein they live and have thus been able to express Kurdish concerns within a political party apparatus and in parliament. Kurds are much more firmly established economically today than they were in the 1990s. Remittances by migrant Kurds in Istanbul began to have significance, I believe, in the early nineteenth century and by the 1870s the evidence shows it had already become important. If you look at the conditions in Kurdistan today, it is clear that there is a high level of dependence on remittances from the diaspora, almost certainly higher than it was twenty years ago. On another tack, I also suspect that Kurdish youth cultures in Europe feed back into Kurdistan, particularly given the infinitely increased powers of penetration of digital media. One of the really interesting questions is what young Kurds think about the politics of “the old guard” which has entrenched and dominated the Kurdish movement for probably too long.

**Atmaca:** Several new studies have appeared on the processes of economic and social change in relation to the Kurds. As you wished for the publication of such studies in the earlier version of your book, do you now consider them sufficient to better understand the Kurds, and did they make you re-evaluate some of your earlier arguments?

**McDowall:** I think you are referring to the foreword of the first edition, where I pointed out that there were things that foreign diplomats would have missed, in particular the processes of economic and social change. In a sense I was wrong, because British and presumably other foreign consuls

wrote assiduously about the economic situation, but I had failed to take note of this or interpret what they had said. Fortunately, we now have in Veli Yadirgi's *The Political Economy of the Kurds of Turkey* (2017) an extraordinarily insightful analysis of the economic history of Turkish Kurdistan. But there is other work too. Look, for example, at Uğur Ümit Üngör's *The Making of Modern Turkey* (2011), and dozens of monographs on a wide range of themes. The exciting thing is the tremendous development of Kurdish studies over the past three decades, something I did not foresee at all, having rather assumed Kurdish studies would remain a minority interest. Studying history always raises new questions, so there will be a constant need for fresh studies as individual scholars ask their own questions and in seeking answers open further avenues of enquiry.

**Atmaca:** In an interview at LSE's Middle East Centre in 2018 you stated that, in the book's revised version, you wanted to touch upon three new topics that were absent in previous editions: Kurds in Syria, gender, and the question of Islam. How do you approach these questions in the new version of your work? Is there any other topic that you wished to cover but you could not?

**McDowall:** I was fortunate to find plenty of help on all three topics:

(i) I had omitted Syria from the first edition principally because I ran out of time and, more to the point, money. I had spent over three years researching and writing it, during which time I relied on my wife's earnings [she also is a writer, but of fiction for young readers, one of which she wrote about Kurdistan under Saddam, entitled *Kiss the Dust* (Laird, 1991, 2017)] and I simply could no longer prevail on her goodwill, it was financially imperative I earned some money. (Those who have published work on the Kurds will know that it generates a risibly small income. This fact occasionally gave rise to the misunderstanding that I was what one academic described as "a gentleman writer". I loved the fantasy: strolling each evening along my herbaceous borders to check that my gardener was earning his keep, but distracted by my butler offering me pre-dinner drinks, before cook served dinner in the dining room. In fact, my wife and I were juggling things in suburbia by taking in lodgers, trying to find revenue-earning ventures to offset those that evidently were not, and as a matter of iron principle, ploughing any surplus into our savings. So, such compliments, while flattering to my status, were wildly untrue.) Syria is interesting because here one sees Kurds in a context where they are always a minority. Traditionally they were performing two main functions: feeding Syria with meat, so there were many drovers moving across the landscape from Kurdistan, but also bullying its people through their mounted armed bands temporarily contracted by the provincial authorities. The cavalry bands were terminated in the mid-nineteenth century, while livestock droving ended with the



establishment of modern state borders. Since the French takeover in 1920, Kurds have paid heavily for their lack of enthusiasm for the Syrian state, a lack of enthusiasm encouraged by France, but also one that was understandable in the face of the Arab search for strength through their own ethnic nationalism.

(ii) As far as Islam is concerned, I had been niggled in 1994-95 by my inability to discover (like almost everyone in Turkey) anything about Kurdish Hizbullah and its programme of assassination. Mehmet Kurt's (2017) outstanding book on this subject revealed how far it had tapped into conservative Muslim society in Kurdistan. But behind this, and behind the Sufi orders which infuse Sunni Kurdish society and continue to be influential, lies a truth affecting almost everyone: religious identity still remains, even for most nationalists, a bedrock. When it comes to family life and marriage, central to virtually everyone's life, very few will cross confessional boundaries. People may not think religion that important, yet it defines core social behaviour. Its significance needs exploring.

(iii) As for the question of gender, there was, it is true, an almost complete absence of material on which to draw by the mid-1990s, but thereby to leave 50 per cent of Kurdistan silent? Oh, dear. Enough said.

**Atmaca:** What was your experience with the sources and historiography on the Kurds back in 1990s and what changes do you see now, as you revise your book, especially for each topic and period?

**McDowall:** I think the two real differences are (i) that now there is a substantial body of meticulously researched work where in the early 1990s there was not; (ii) that there is now a lot of fresh material being drawn from archives and other primary sources from the region, many of which are proving revelatory.

**Atmaca:** Since you studied Palestine as well, what are some of the similarities and differences between the Palestinian and Kurdish questions in the Middle East, in terms of their struggle, aspirations for self-determination and international/regional reactions?

**McDowall:** While both were undoubtedly victims of imperial duplicity, from the very outset Britain intended to deceive and dispossess the Palestinians to implement its Jewish nationalist project, whereas that malign intention had not been present vis-à-vis the Kurds. In what became Iraqi Kurdistan Britain started out with an open mind, but in the absence of a credible unifying Kurdish leader or movement, it progressively abandoned any thoughts of Kurdish independence or autonomy in order to meet its own concerns regarding the governance of Mesopotamia and the safety of its frontier with nationalist Turkey. It was convenient to Britain, and to King

Faisal to incorporate the Kurds. Neither the League nor United Nations ever proposed a Kurdish state, whereas because of the large proportion of Arabs within Mandate Palestine (over 90 per cent of inhabitants in 1920), a Palestinian Arab state was inevitably proposed in the UN Palestine Partition Resolution of November 1947, an acknowledgement of an international responsibility arising from the Mandate. On account of that Mandate, the UN partition plan and the fact that Arabs were by 1947 still roughly two thirds of the population, a clear international responsibility remains regarding Palestine and regarding the conduct of Israel. Furthermore, as a matter of law regarding subsequent events, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Syrian Golan remain Occupied Territory, subject to the (Israeli-disregarded) strictures of the IVth (1949) Geneva Convention. No similar legal stricture applies in any part of Kurdistan, except of course in Turkish-occupied Syrian territory, where Turkey appears to disregard its obligations also. One can argue that Syria excluded from citizenship many of its 8% Kurdish population (though the one fruit Kurds are likely to receive at the end of the civil war is full citizenship for all of them), and indulged in de-development of its Kurdish minority, but this does not in my view compare with the apartheid system in Israeli-occupied territory and the racially discriminatory regulatory regime inside Israel applied to subject Palestinians (who now slightly outnumber Israeli Jews in the whole territory of what was Mandate Palestine). That Kurds are discriminated against in Iran, principally by dint of being Sunni, in Turkey principally because the state cannot bring itself to embrace the Kurdish identity of one fifth of the population, is all true. In both cases Kurds also suffer deliberate de-development. It can also be argued that Kurds have the right of self-determination within "recognised" Kurdish territory. This is a peremptory principle (*jus cogens*) of the international order, acknowledged as such by the international community since the establishment of the UN in 1945, but against that argument opponents might well ask "which Kurds?" and "which territory?" where the answers range from the clear to the opaque. For example, are Alevi Kurds first and foremost Alevi or Kurdish? Besides, Kurds are up against the practical reality that none of the states in which they find themselves will allow them a state of their own, and no army is in prospect to achieve that right on their behalf. Iraqi Kurds obtained formalised autonomy only by extremely skilful footwork in 2003. Palestinians have formally accepted, and it is internationally acknowledged, that "their" territory is now only the 22 percent of Mandate Palestine as occupied by Israeli forces in June 1967. That's the theory: so, on paper Palestinians have much clearer legal rights to self-determination. In practical terms, however, Palestinians are a good deal worse off, because of Israel's progressive colonisation of occupied territory, and because of its apartheid

laws and policies which, in my view, are more damaging to the subject population than are the state policies of governments controlling Kurdistan.

**Atmaca:** As a last question, I would like to adopt the question that you pose in the afterword of the third edition of your book: Did the first decades of the twenty-first century prove a watershed in Kurdish history?

**McDowall:** Yes, I think one can call the beginning of the new millennium a watershed, experienced in differing ways.

The first watershed, I think, is the calamitous triumph (which will perhaps prove short-lived) of market capitalism which has been so devastating for Kurdistan's economy, impoverishing its people. This is even true, I believe, of Iraqi Kurdistan, because the majority have been denied the potential economic benefits of oil revenue through fiscal incompetence and rampant corruption. But elsewhere, in Turkish, Syrian and Iranian Kurdistan the pressures of global market capitalism have rendered Kurds poorer and weaker. One could say this really took off in the 1990s, but let's not quibble over precise dates.

The second watershed concerns Turkey. Whatever else one may think about the AKP, its rise marked the end of Kemalism. Although denial of the Kurds continues, its ideological base has been fundamentally weakened. When I wrote the first edition, I felt more optimistic about the future of Kurds in Turkey than elsewhere, in spite of the brutally oppressive circumstances under which they lived. Despite the massive disappointments and disillusionments of the past two decades, I retain that optimism. Erdoğan will pass, so will the AKP. I believe the emergence of a more liberal political movement in which Kurds can play a part as Kurds (but not as separatists) is a real possibility when the Turkish electorate decides how to repair the damage done by the AKP.

The third watershed concerns Syria. Whatever the outcome of the Syria civil war, something profound has happened within Syria's Kurdish communities and I believe their growth in stature will remain a characteristic of post-civil war Syria. I hope I am not mistaken in thinking that there is no going back to the conditions which prevailed before 2011.

The fourth watershed is the internationally recognised creation of a Kurdish autonomous entity enshrined in Iraq's constitution. This is a first in Kurdish history, and its psychological effect is profound. However, I do not think any similar internationally recognised autonomous or, indeed, independent, Kurdish polities are likely. This entity was achieved through the cunning of Kurdish leaders and their advisors, despite the reluctance not only of Arab Iraq but also of Washington. It represented an exceedingly rare opportunity skilfully to exploit the weaknesses of the other actors. Not only is its

repetition unlikely but I'm afraid I would not place bets on its still being in place in the year 2100 unless it can forge a symbiotic relationship with Baghdad, also bearing in mind that it takes two to tango. To a great extent also, that will depend on the fifth watershed.

The fifth watershed affects all of us: climate change. Whatever effect climate change has – and we are now already seeing its early symptoms – among other things it will devastate many societies. By invading Iraq, creating the conditions for the Islamic State, by promoting market capitalism, by scheming against Iran, by looking for new oilfields, etc., etc., we have, as a species, fiddled while the planet has begun to burn.

David McDowall's revised and updated edition of *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris) will be published on 22 April 2021, price £22.99.

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