Book Review:

*Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics, and Society*


Reviewed by Boris James.

A sigh of relief. What better way to pay tribute to a new book? At last we have found a work of reference on the Kurds of Syria. Far away from the often too global approaches that abandoned the Syrian space, and far also from the studies that focused exclusively on the humanitarian dimension of the question, the author of this monograph, equipped with a strong theoretical background in anthropology and political science, traces the course of an unknown history. This way he ceases the modality of emergence of the Kurdish nationalist mobilization in Syria. The multiplicity of views and approaches allows the author to present complex and sometimes paradoxical historical moments and evolutions, avoiding any rash judgment or essentialism. Jordi Tejel’s work is born of a manifold acknowledgement.

The “Kurdish question” in Syria has always been a marginal issue in contemporary studies. Nevertheless it bears a fundamental importance as the events of this last decade have show. The riots of 2004 have been indeed a violent reminder of its importance. As Tejel indicates, they signaled the transition of the long concealed Kurdish movement to visibility. The author tries to understand this transformation from a long term historical perspective, and therefore returns to the period of the French mandate in Syria—a period that was subject of a former book of his (Tejel 2007). This study is not only a study of the Kurds, but also of an ill-known part of Syria’s history, and permits a review of the scientific approaches of the social and political organization of this country.

Although the book has a chronological outline, at every historical step, and especially in the last four chapters, the complex organization of the Kurdish political field in Syria, the transnational dimension of the question, the handling modes of the Syrian State and the foundation of the Baathist system are all scrutinized. It would be an illusion to believe we could summarize a very dense and accurate book. We will only describe what typifies for the subject, the different periods presented by the author.

The mandate period (1923-1946) is characterized by the absence of a united and identifiable Kurdish group, and by a quadrangular political game between the French Mandate authority, the national bloc (the Arab nationalists), the notables of the ethno-religious minorities and the Kurds at the margin. The Kurds who weren’t granted the same status of autonomy as the other Syrian minorities, became involved in two different movements: one a collaboration with the Christians of Djezireh for recognition of the region’s autonomy. The other, more cultural and based in Damascus and Beirut, surrounded the Kurdish movement of Turkey in exile: the Xoybûn. The ambiguous attitude of France, the internal divisions of the Kurdish notables and tribes, and the distrust of the other minorities and the national bloc prevented the implementation of autonomy in the Djezireh, prevented the constitution of a unified Kurdish movement as well as the undermining of Kemalism in Turkey, which was the main goal of the Xoybûn. On the other hand, these two movements might have constituted the basis of a Kurdish consciousness in Syria. Moreover, the French authorities promoted the integration of the Kurdish element within the police and military institutions of the embryonic Syrian State.

This phenomenon stretches from the Syrian independence to the coming to power of the Ba’ath (1946-1963). However, very soon Syrian police and army were purged of its Kurdish officers. This period is characterized by a rise of the Arab nationalist, great Syrian and communist parties. Syrian politics then moved towards the end of notable politics and the birth of multiple other mobilizations (socialism, trade unionism, etc...). The Kurds, like other minorities, got involved massively in the communist Party. The
Syrian State, suspicious of minorities and especially the Kurds remained very weak until 1957, thus permitting the development of a Kurdish cultural movement. Kurdish nationalism still remained nonexistent, however. It materialized in Syria with the creation of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) in 1957. The party was able to bring together Kurdish notables and socialist Kurdish elements, former members of the Syrian Communist Party that was forbidden during the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) with Egypt. The Kurdish national movement in Syria was born of the beginning of the Kurdish insurrection in Iraq and at the instigation of the KDP of Iraq. Additionally this movement was without the armed struggle (or revendicate independence) that constituted the Barzanist some years later.

From 1957 to 1970, Arab nationalism triumphed, first of all with the establishment of the UAR in 1957, then with the coming to power of the Ba'ath in 1963. This period witnessed the implementation of openly discriminatory policies against the Kurdish group as a whole (Arabization of the toponymy of the Djezireh, establishment of the arab belt in the Dezireh, the withdrawal of the citizenship from 120,000 Kurds, etc). These policies intended to hold the Kurdish national movement (and the Kurdish notables) in check (p. 59). Here the author suggests that the coercion of the State also contributed to the upsurge of the Kurdish national movement in Syria. What would have happened if these policies, exclusively coercive, had continued and if the Ba'ath had had course of ideological purity (socialism and Pan-Arabism) as it did during its first years?

Coming to power in 1970 Hafez al-Asad disengaged with these former policies in handling the “Kurdish issue”. On the one hand Hafez al-Asad’s regime strengthened the symbolical structures of the Ba'athist unanimity, totally excluding the Kurds from the Syrian national imagination (p. 64). On the other hand his regime implemented policies to redistribute resources, co-opt Kurdish individuals and exploit Kurdish military forces (p. 65) in order to widen its political basis, formerly restricted to specific Alawi military circles (p.58, p. 62). In 1976 Hafez al-Asad ended the policies of spoliation against the Kurds in the Djezireh. The regime’s pragmatism also appeared with the exploitation of the problem’s transnational dimension. The alliance with the Kurdish parties of Irak (KDP and PUK) and more specifically with the PKK (p. 82-83), channeled during several years the energy of the Kurds in Syria. This double policy of internal redistribution and external alliance associated with the continued coercion led to a considerable weakening of the Kurdish national movement in Syria. Henceforth, it was characterized with an important fragmentation of the partisan field. Despite this weakness, the author notes that this configuration didn’t prevent the creation of political and social structures in suspende within the Kurdish community in Syria. Jordi Tejel refers to Lisa Wedeen’s work (Wedeen: 1999) to show that these concealed structures formed themselves into the framework of a controlled and codified public expression along with a relatively free private expression as well. In one of the chapters (“The Kurdish response and its margins: ‘dissimulation' of a hidden conflict” p. 82-108) the author shows how a Kurdish cultural, social and political space developed itself at the margin of the official political system, official Islam and official culture. Paulo Pinto’s argument is discussed in detail (Pinto: 2007). It postulates the joint development of Kurdish nationalism and brotherhoods that led to the upsurge of a religious nationalism of the Kurds(p.95), that is to say Sunni brotherhoods with a nationalist complexion or a Kurdish Sufism (“Sufism is the Kurdish Islam” and “Kurdish Sufism is the real Sufism”) (p.99). However J. Tejel suggests without openly taking a position, that this is due to the play of the social agents, the brotherhood field playing with the nationalism, and the nationalist field playing with the brotherhoods. Contrary to the decisive role that P. Pinto gives to that phenomenon, we understand that the brotherhood circles had only a very limited share in the events of 2004, and that the Kurdish political parties whether they defended a hard line or not remain at the initiative of nationalist action in Syria.

In the last chapter the author tries to understand how the balance that Hafez al-Asad established, broke down in 2004. Why did the “Kurdish issue" reached visibility in Syria ? Why also did the agents of the Qamishli uprising resorted to violence? To answer the first question Jordi Tejel explores the political
changes resulting from the coming to power of Bashar al-Asad. He examines these the short, but decisive “spring of Damascus”; the rapprochement between several kurdish parties and the Arab opposition; the emergence of new Kurdish parties (Yekiti-kurd, Azadi, PYD) as well as new political practices (public demonstrations, sit-in, declarations, etc.) and the slight withdrawal of the intelligence services in the Djezireh. To explain the explosion of political violence, the author thoroughly uses the scientific approaches of authors such as Hamit Bozarslan, Charles Tilly, Ted Gurr and gathers all the facts and factors likely to have governed the outburst of the riots in 2004. From the situation born of the American intervention in Irak to the dayrî supporters' provocations during the soccer game that witnessed the beginning of the riots, as well as the role of the notables in negotiating with the state and the regime concerning the subjectivity of the rioters (euphoria or despair).

Jordi Tejel concludes with substantial evidence, with a discussion regarding the possible toughening of the Kurdish national movement in Syria, especially among the youngsters (p. 127).

We are dealing here with a book of reference because it synthesizes several former studies, and provides us with totally new information and original approaches. However, by definition, it can not be exhaustive. Some issues raised in this study deserve further exploration. The social and political organization of the Kurds between 1946 and 1968 remains relatively obscure, although it constitutes the moment of gestation and emergence of an organized Kurdish national movement. In fact, Jordi Tejel’s book will hopefully arouse new studies on the period.

The concept of “dissimulation” is used to describe the development of the Kurdish identity far away from the public sphere. The author draws a parallel between the case of the Kurds in Syria and the argument of Lisa Wedeen according to which in Hafez al-Asad’s Syria, any dissident speech (and thus for J. Tejel the Kurdish nationalist speech) was banished to the private sphere. Individuals could only enjoy relative freedom as long as they publicly “acted as if” they subscribed to the rhetoric of the Syrian State. As far as the Kurds are concerned, is this analysis so relevant? Is the division between public and private speech still as obvious as it seemed? For instance the symbolic link established between Palestine and Kurdistan by the State and the Kurdish political agents doesn’t reveal the desire to impose a certain type of public speech, but rather the willingness to assure the Kurds, the State or the rest of the Syrian population of everybody’s loyalty to the Kurdish or the Palestinian cause. The point was not only to invent and codify a public speech, but also and primarily to convince. Lisa Wedeen’s work raises the question of the possible existence of several levels of intimacy and publicity. Isn’t there also a Kurdish public sphere distinct from the Syrian public sphere, as codified by the State and the agents especially during the New Rûz ? How do Syrian and Kurdish identities adjust within private and public speeches? These will require long field studies to be answered.

In Jordi Tejel’s book another question remains: What is the Kurdish culture in Syria and how is it used in interaction to define the particular features of a « we-group » and to establish ethnic boundaries with the rest of the society (F. Barth)? According to the author and based on Paulo Pinto’s work the ethnic identity of the Kurds of Damascus is not defined by a common language but by lineages and by joint cultural practices like the New Rûz festival (p.103). This assertion, however, doesn’t seem convincing. My opinion is that the Kurds of this city as much as the Kurds of Aleppo, see in the practice of their language a foundation for their Kurdish identity. If one wants at all cost to make a comparison between the specific relationship the Kurds of these two cities have with their native language, one would have to consider the question according to other factors. The Kurds of Damascus whom mainly come from the Syrian Djezireh, speak the forms of Kurmandji known in this region as xerbi, ashitî, ali and koçerî unlike the Kurds of Aleppo who come both from the Djezireh and from the region of Afrîn and Kobanê where different forms of Kurmandji are spoken.
Beyond the question of Arabization—which can be considered generalized within Syria—it would be interesting to see how these linguistic practices and representations shape the Kurdish spaces of identity. And furthermore, how for instance, the xerbi develops into the more commonly spoken Kurmandji language in Syria. Once again one will not be able to skip sound anthropological and sociological field studies.

Despite a few transliteration errors (Asad becomes As’ad et far’ filastin becomes firh filastin) and the absence of chronology that could have helped clarify his points, this book reaches its goal brilliantly. It illustrates the emergence and the diffusion within Syria of the idea that a Kurdish national group exists, and the transition to visible collective political action. This book also permits to cease and to accept the paradoxes peculiar to any study on the political and social organization of a State or national movement. Here, the State according to its organic conception of the Arab nation must reject the Kurds, but for diverse reasons integrates and co-opts them. Additionally, political agents in conflict with the State, use negotiation with it in an authoritarian framework. And finally, the simultaneous presence of numerous « infra-national loyalties » among the Kurds and the existence of a strong Kurdish nationalism exemplify these paradoxes.

In effect, Jordi Tejel has laid the foundations of a framework of reference for many studies to come.

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Bibliography

