Book Review:

_Syria’s Undocumented Kurds_


 Reviewed by Ahmet Serdar Akturk.

In _Suriye’nin Kimlikizleri Kürtler (Syria’s Undocumented Kurds)_), Nevzat Bingöl aims to introduce Turkish readers to the Kurds of Syria. Bingöl is a Kurdish journalist from Turkey’s Kurdish Southeast. His earlier publications deal with Kurdish question in Turkey and the war in Iraq from a journalist’s point of view. In this book, Bingöl tackles the Kurds of Syria who, he argues, are not well known in Turkey. He first focuses on Syrian Kurdish political parties by examining their ideas, their relations with other states and other Kurdish parties - both in Syria and in neighboring countries -, and their methods of political struggle. Second, he presents the citizenship problems that Syrian Kurds have been facing since the “exceptional” census of 1962. The book is mostly based on the author’s extensive interviews with local people, leading Kurdish politicians in Syria, and reports prepared by organizations such as the Syrian Human Rights Association, the Syrian branch of International Human Rights Watch, and the German Federal Parliament.

The author begins with a discussion of the March 2004 riots and reprisals in Qamishli, which brought the Kurds of Syria to the world’s attention. Proving the saying “soccer is war,” the riots began in the Kurdish city of Qamishli in March 2004 during a match between the city team and an Arab team from the nearby city of Deir ez-Zor, and led to a Kurdish uprising against the Syrian regime. The author was in Qamishli at the time, undertaking a yearlong research trip to write this book. He presents multiple and sometimes conflicting theories to explain what happened in Qamishli in March 2004. Throughout the work, Bingöl places those theories in the context of both Syrian national politics and the larger context of regional politics following the invasion of Iraq by the coalition forces in 2003. He also argues that the incidents united the fragmented Kurdish political parties of Syria that at the time lacked popular support among the Syrian Kurds.

As a Kurdish journalist from Turkey, Nevzat Bingöl also questions the indifference of Kurds in Turkey to the Qamishli riots and the heavy-handed Syrian response, especially those in the adjoining Turkish town of Nusaybin, many of whom have relatives across the border in Qamishli. Throughout the book he emphasizes the significance of Syrian Kurdistan as a center of “Kurdish enlightenment” and a “shelter” for Kurdish intellectuals escaping the persecutions in Turkey following the 1925 Shaykh Said Rebellion, the 1931 Ararat Rebellion, and the 1980 military takeover. Comparing the Kurds of Syria to those of Turkey, Bingöl claims that the level of self-consciousness is higher among Syrian Kurds since there is not a sharp urban-rural division in Syrian Kurdistan.

As Bingöl’s title implies, one of the major goals of the book is to draw attention to the Syrian Kurds’ problem of citizenship status. As a result of an “exceptional” census conducted in 1962 in the province al-Hasaka, around 150,000 Kurdish people lost their citizenship based on the government’s claim that they had come to Syria from Turkey before 1945. In the 1962 census, they were registered as _ajanib_ or “foreigners.” The author indicates that some of the Kurdish tribes and families labeled as “foreigners” as a result of this Arabization policy had ironically played a major role in driving the last Ottoman forces out of Syria. To make it worse for the Kurds, some had not even been registered as foreigners and were known as _maktum_ or unregistered – meaning that they effectively have no legal existence. Through case studies based on interviews, Bingöl explains the problems faced by “foreign” and “unregistered” Kurds and their families in owning property, working in government positions, studying at government schools and traveling inside or outside Syria.
Syrian Kurdish political parties constitute the second major subject of the book. Bingöl lists the eight major political parties and their factions: the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, the Kurdish Patriotic Democratic Party of Syria, the Leftist Kurdish Party of Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party, the Kurdish Popular Union Party, the Kurdish Unity Party, the Syrian Kurdish Party, and the Democratic Union Party. He has interviewed officials from each major party regarding their relations with the Syrian government, with other Syrian Kurdish parties, with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and with the Turkish government, as well as their views of the United States. The most striking questions concern the interviewed party officials’ views of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), their methods of struggle, what they think about the armed struggle, and why the Syrian Kurds are still deprived of basic rights despite the fact that Syria has been a “center of consciousness” for the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

Syria hosted Abdullah Öcalan and his militant armed organization, the PKK, between 1978 and 1998. Bingöl tries to discover what the close relations between the Syrian government and the PKK has meant for the Kurds in Syria. Except for the pro-PKK Democratic Union Party, all other parties are critical of the PKK. The party officials believe that the PKK ignores other Kurdish organizations both inside and outside Turkey and do nothing for the rights of Syrian Kurds based on a deal with the Syrian state. There are important anecdotes about the Syrian government’s attempts to cooperate with Turkey-based Kurdish groups against Turkey since the 1950s and how other organizations, such as Kemal Burkay’s Kurdistan Socialist Party (PSK), rejected this. The Kurdish party officials in Syria interviewed by the author imply that the PKK, on the other hand, allied with the Syrian state in order to have a strong base in Syria at the expense of other Kurdish groups.

Although Syria hosted leading Kurdish intellectuals such as Celadet Ali Bedirkhan, Osman Sebri, Cegerkhwin, and Nureddin Zaza, and became the birth place of Kurdish enlightenment in the first half of the 20th century, Kurdish party officials also believe that the current situation for Syrian Kurds is much worse than in neighboring countries, for a number of reasons. First, party officials see the Syrian Baath Party’s stance regarding the political liberties and minorities as an obstacle to the rights of Syrian Kurds. Thus, they cannot be hopeful, despite Bashar Al-Asaad’s statement in 2004 after the Qamishli incidents that “Kurds are one of the basic elements of Syrian Society.” Second, some of the Kurdish interviewees emphasize geographical reasons that weaken the Kurdish national movement in Syria: the scattered nature of Kurdish settlements throughout northern Syria and the absence of the groves and mountains in Syrian Kurdish regions that are vital to the success of the Kurdish struggles in Turkey and Iraq (because they help hide the rebels from the state forces). According to the interviewees, this explains why the armed struggle is not a viable method for the Kurds of Syria.

Despite the repetition of some information throughout the book, Nevzat Bingöl succeeds in his goal of introducing the Kurds of Syria to the Turkish reader who, as the cover of the book shows, used to see Syrian Kurds and their relatives in Turkey twice a year on TV during their reunion for the religious feasts and exchange of gifts over the border. The interviews, as the major source of this book, include very interesting and valuable information for students of the Kurdish national movement in Syria and in Turkey. The album at the end of the book includes photographs of the March 2004 incidents and of leading Kurdish figures in Syria.

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