Studying the Kurds in Syria: Challenges and Opportunities

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The Kurds in Syria offer a fascinating and fertile area for study. It is well known that these people are less well known. This lack of knowledge and the rich complexity of Kurdish society, politics, identity, culture and history make research in this area especially rewarding. The huge problems and deprivation faced by many Kurds in Syria make it particularly urgent to provide greater exposure and improved understanding of contemporary issues. The significance of the additional trans-state dimension of Kurdishness offers a further dynamic aspect for exploration and also takes the researcher into the broader Kurdish milieu.

This article will explore some of the challenges and opportunities facing research on the Kurds in Syria. The observations apply to contemporary political and social studies and are based on personal experiences during six years of intermittent and modest research on the subject.

The lack of existing research and expertise has been a major difficulty for the newcomer to this field. When I first met Kurds in Syria in 2003 I could find very little useful published material relating to them. Neither Syrian nor Kurdish specialists have ever focussed seriously on the Kurds in Syria. Leading names in both areas would remark on the pressing need to start filling the gap. This has much improved by 2010 with the publication of valuable books by Jordi Tejel and Harriet Montgomery and there is now a much stronger body of scholars conducting research, including also Julie Gauthier, Eva Savelsberg, Seda Altug and others. Despite this there still remains a large lacuna in Kurdish studies in Syria, as Jordi Tejel explains elsewhere in this Newsletter in his thorough examination of the existing scholarship.

Primary data is also problematic. Most contemporary political research on Syria faces great constraints but it is especially difficult to acquire data which specifically concerns the Kurdish population. The Syrian state’s deep sensitivities about internal Kurdish matters mean that it declines to either keep or share statistical information in areas including demography, statelessness, migration, education, employment and access to state services. It is very hard, and indeed dangerous, for Kurdish political parties or human rights, social and cultural movements to produce such data but these groups have greatly increased the volume and availability of their materials on human rights, political and cultural issues, mostly through the internet. There is now a considerable number of Syrian Kurdish-run political and human rights websites which are valuable sources for researchers. Many of these are operated from Europe.

The reliability of sources needs to be treated with caution. The Syrian government is, of course, unreliable, although its information (or more often the lack of it) on domestic Kurdish matters does provide a guide to its position. Kurdish sources are also not reliably balanced and can be slanted by a strong Kurdish, or Kurdish nationalist, view. A glaring example is the uncertainty surrounding the number of Kurds living in Syria. Putting to one side the question of how a ‘Kurd’ is defined, we do not know the size of the Kurdish population. I have been given estimates which vary from 1 million (Syrian officials or Syrian Arab sources) to 4 million (some Kurdish sources). A figure of 1.75 – 2 million seems realistic. The number of Kurds who have recently migrated from the Jazira to the main cities is also unclear. Kurdish sources, and some
foreign diplomatic reports, suggest that huge numbers have been forced by poverty to leave the area but it is difficult to assess the accuracy of such claims.

Kurdish sources in Syria can also be problematic because of factionalism and division. The number of Kurdish political parties varies but tends to be higher than 12. The goals, tactics and alliances of these parties can be vague and shifting and often seem to depend upon personalities. More widely, there are varying identity sources for all Kurds in Syria. These are made more complex by the pressure to self-censure or conform in public self-expression in Syria and it is clear that a better understanding of the variety of Kurdish positions within Syria requires a great deal more investigation.

Researchers struggle to gain access in Syria where officials are reluctant or unwilling to discuss the Kurds. It is unrealistic to expect official tolerance of fieldwork exploring Kurdish issues. The mukhabarat take an immediate and intense interest in researchers and the length of time allowed to an individual is variable. Some have managed for periods of months. For others the invitation to leave comes within days. This is particularly so in areas of heavy Kurdish inhabitation such as Qamishli or Hassakeh where foreign visitors are uncommon. Researchers must also consider the risks to people they meet because of the attention this brings. During a visit to Qamishli in June 2009, Kurds with whom I arranged interviews got into trouble. One was prevented from entering my hotel and was interrogated; during dinner with me, another was taken away by the mukhabarat. Others reluctantly would not meet me because of the clear danger this could cause to them and their families. Syrian Arab citizens, such as journalists or human rights activists, who have worked on Kurdish issues, have also received hostile attention from the security services.

Research on the international dimension of the Syrian Kurdish issue has been hampered by a lack of international interest in what has been seen as a minor ethnic group in a country which offers more pressing international concerns relating to Israel, Palestinian groups, Lebanon and Iraq. International awareness of Kurdish issues has been dominated by the more dramatic developments concerning Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, leaving Kurds in Syria (and indeed in Iran) to be of peripheral interest.

There has been much greater international awareness since the troubles in 2004 gave exposure to the seriousness of the Kurdish issue in Syria. There has also been sustained international interest in wider Kurdish issues because of the entrenchment of the KRG and developments in Turkey. This has helped increase the audience and demand for work on Kurds in Syria, from academia, government, human rights and media sources. There are more opportunities for research to be commissioned, presented and published, both from those interested in Syria and those interested in Kurds more widely.

There has been a notable lack of external Kurdish interest in Kurds in Syria. KRG figures make concerned noises in private, but see the Kurdish issue in Syria as less important than their own cause. They are also aware of the relative hopelessness of the situation and of their need not to upset Damascus. The more numerous Kurds in Turkey (with whom most Kurds in Syria share a
common language) are also preoccupied with their own struggle and some, notably in the PKK, see Kurds in Syria as merely a useful source of soldiers for their fight.¹

One external group which does assist research is the Syrian Kurdish diaspora. This has become increasingly organized and active in sharing information and lobbying on behalf of Kurds in Syria. Overseas branches of the political parties, human rights groups and cultural organizations hold meetings, protests and cultural events and, most usefully, have expanded the availability of material through their websites. The quality of this material is improving although it is still subjective.

Studying contemporary issues of the Kurds in Syria remains hampered by many difficulties, but the quality and volume of research and material recently produced by foreign academics and analysts and by Kurds in Syria and in the diaspora provides a much firmer base than was previously available. The problems of primary data and access within Syria are likely to remain acute but increased international awareness and interest may help support further studies. The enthusiasm and appreciation of Syrian Kurds for interest shown by foreign researchers is a great reward. The scale of the problems facing Kurds in Syria and the relative infancy of scholarship in this field provides further encouragement.

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¹ Kurds in Iran are largely separated by distance and their own preoccupations. Kurds in Syria are the only one of the four state-based Kurdish peoples who have not seen their own struggle as pre-eminent. Kurds from Syria have also fought for Kurdish movements in Iraq.