Scholarship on the Kurds in Syria: 
A History and State of the Art Assessment

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The Syrian Kurds are rarely featured in the media. This is also true of academic research dedicated to Syria. Indeed, the Kurdish factor in Syria has been a marginal issue in classic works about the French Mandate in the Levant (Longrigg 1958; Khoury 1987) and the period of independence (Raymond 1980; Hopwood 1988). Moreover, most works on the Kurdish question focus on the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq and, to a lesser degree, Iran. Therefore, for a long period, the Kurdish features in Syria have remained at the margins of social sciences. Despite increasing interest in the Kurdish question in Syria since the riots of 2004 in Qamishli, there remains a dearth of anthropological, historical and political perspectives on the subject. Many factors are responsible for these gaps in information.

In the first place, the emerging academic research on Kurds in Syria was directly related to the French Mandate (1920–46) in the Levant. When the French occupied Damascus in 1920, the colonial power established diverse institutions that were more or less linked with the Serai. One of these institutions was the French Institute in Damascus (FID), founded in 1922. In its beginnings, the FID resembled the classic Orientalist institutes, considered by the critics as “obsolete.” When Robert Montagne became the director of the FID in 1930, he tried to obtain scientific and financial autonomy for the FID from the mandatory authorities. Moreover, he gave a prominence to contemporary dynamics of the Syrian society in order to assure the viability of a modern state (Métral 2004: 217–34). Accordingly, he asked Pierre Rondot and Roger Lescot, two officers but also young scholars, to undertake contemporary studies on Kurds and other Syrian minorities.

1 The first name of the institute was Institut d’art et d’archéologie. See Avez 1993; Trégan 2004: 235–47.

In 1936, Lescot started his fieldwork in Northern Syria among Kurdish Yazidis but his thesis was only published in 1975 (Lescot 1975). In the face of an anti-French movement in the Kur Dagh, Lescot produced a short monograph about the murud movement (Lescot 1940/1988: 101–26), which up today is the only comprehensive study about this social-religious movement. He also worked on the translation of Kurdish stories (Lescot 1940; 1942) and on the elaboration of a Kurdish grammar, which for political reasons related to the World War II and the end of the Mandate was published in 1991.

If their research had solid basis, Rondot and Lescot were more than solely French orientalists dealing with Kurdish affairs. Today, we know that Rondot and Lescot went beyond the parameters of their scientific mission giving precious assistance to the Kurdish intellectuals, especially Jaladat and Kamuran Badirkhan, who had sought refuge in the Levant after the foundation of the Turkish republic in 1923. At the beginning, the Badirkhan brothers were simply “informers” for Rondot. However, from 1932 onwards, Rondot and Lescot became at once observers of, and participants in, the emerging Kurdish cultural movement in the Kurmanji dialect. Thus, for instance, Pierre Rondot worked, with Montagne’s approval, in collaboration with Jaladat Badirkhan on the correction and supervision of the first Kurdish journal in Syria, Hawar (“The Call,” 1932–43). As for Roger Lescot, he collaborated with Kamuran Badirkhan in the drafting of a Kurdish/French dictionary and participated actively in the Kurdish cultural movement, publishing numerous articles in Hawar and Roja Nû (“The New Day,” 1943–46), translating proverbs, stories, and legends. Thus, relations between French orientalists and Kurdish intellectuals evolved eventually, though not without ambiguity, toward friendship and intellectual complicity.2 Nevertheless, given that the French Mandate in the Levant was strongly linked to the presence of the French in the region, the post-mandate viability of the academic research on Kurds in the independent Syria was in jeopardy.

The Years of “Silence”

The departure of French troops from Syrian in 1946 opened the way to a period of social, economic, and political upheaval, which would continue unchecked for nearly two decades. The Kurds, like all other segments of Syrian society, actively participated in these social and political changes including the agricultural “miracle” of the Upper Jazira and the expansion of the Syrian Communist Party. In spite of these achievements, the Kurds remained absent from scholarly production.

On the one hand, scholars—and Syrian elites more generally—considered Syrian Kurds as both a group that could be easily assimilated into an Arab majority environment, and as a peripheral population which played only a marginal role in the evolution of contemporary Syria in contrast to other, more “compact minorities” such as the Druze and the Alawites (Hourani 1947). Thus, if some foreign geographers studied the “miracle” of Upper Jazira, the “Kurdish” element of this region was completely neglected (Gibert and Févret 1953: 1–15/83–100). Also, the lack of a strong political movement was considered proof that Kurdish “identity demands” in Syria were only a reflection of desires of the Kurdish elite.

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2 As Pierre Rondot confessed in 1940 in his private journal, “I played their game, I kept their secrets, I was their accomplice. Their testimony today is my reward” (Blau 2000: 101).
(notables and landowners) due to their loss of power in the face of the socio-economic transformations of the country.

On the other hand, the focus of historians and political scientists on the authoritative role of the state and the ruling family; Arab nationalism; the position of Syria in an international context marked by the Cold War; and the Arab-Israeli conflict attracted the attention of most researchers. As for Syrian scholars and intellectuals, “identity” issues were seen as problematic. In the context of the rise of Pan-Arabism and the conflict with Israel, they were afraid that the study of the Kurdish identity could bring about “political” endeavours by “domestic” and “foreign” enemies.

One can mention other obstacles to the study of the Kurds in Syria in contemporary Syria. Since the 1963 military coup, Syria has been either a “closed terrain” or under heavy surveillance, offering almost no possibility to the researchers to consult archival material. Finally, independent Syrian scholars like Abdullah Hanna have been more concerned with class and subaltern issues (Hanna 1975/8; 2003; 2007) than with “particularist” concerns.

In the face of these dynamics and material constraints, only dissident researchers in exile wrote about Kurds in Syria. The most important author for a long period has been Ismet Cheriff Vanly, a Syrian Kurd who established himself in Switzerland in 1948. Founder of a number of Kurdish committees in exile and the representative in Europe of Mustafa Barzani, leader of the Kurdish revolt (1961–70) in Northern Iraq, Vanly’s works on Kurds in Syria are clearly biased in favour of the Kurds. Between 1966 and 1968, he published several pamphlets in several languages to “break the silence” around the Kurdish issue in Syria and to specifically denounce: 1) the special census of 1962 which resulted in stripping Syria of citizenship from around 120,000 Kurds; and 2) “the Arab belt” (al-Hizam al-Arabi) plan adopted in 1965, which sought to deport the Kurdish peasants living on a strip of land 15 kilometres deep, along the Turkish and Iraqi borders, to the south of the Jazira and replace them with Arab settlers in order to “save Arabism in Jazira” (Vanly 1968; 1968b).

Thanks to his contacts in Syria and Lebanon, Vanly was certainly aware of the state’s policies regarding the Kurds. Nevertheless, his main concerns were political. On the one hand, Vanly contested official propaganda and sought to prove that Kurds were not “foreigners” in the Syrian lands. On the other hand, Vanly advertised Ba’thist human rights violations in Syria (Vanly 1978: 307–19). The picture of Assad’s regime treatment of the Kurds changed, however, in his last published piece on this issue (1992) since both the Syrian government and Vanly maintained good relations with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) at that time. While the author continued to denounce past policies, particularly the special census and the “Arab belt,” Vanly highlighted in his post-script “the new developments in the situation of the Kurds in Syria since May 1990” for the collaboration between Damascus and the PKK strengthened dramatically (Vanly 1992: 168–70). Nevertheless, Vanly neglected the daily life of Syrian Kurds and their strategies of covert resistance.

The “Discovery” of the Kurds in Syria during the 1990s


3 The only non-Kurdish author who tackled this issue was Günter Meyer in his article about rural development and migration in Upper Jazira (1990: 245–78).
valuable don’t pay attention to the Kurdish issue in Syria but focus on the ways in which Sufi brotherhoods in Syria have responded to the challenges of modernity in general and to relations between Sufis and the Syrian regime more specifically.

More recently, Paulo Pinto has tackled not only the importance of Sufism among the Kurds in Syria, but also has offered a fascinating analysis based on his fieldwork in Aleppo and the Kurd Dagh concerning how the territorial basis of these supra-local religious communities can be re-signified as the political basis for religious versions of Kurdish nationalism (Pinto 2004; 2005: 201–24; 2006: 155–71; 2007; 2007b; 2010). However, it remains extremely difficult to conduct a field study in Syria with Kurdish identity as the core of the research since the regime continues—despite some changes—to view Kurdishness as a sign of *fitna*, threatening the cohesion of Syrian society more broadly.

This explains, at least partly, why the study of the period between 1963 and the present has been dominated by the “human rights” literature. Indeed, it is only since the 1990s, as a result of the increasing importance of human rights issues in all countries of the world, that the first complete and detailed studies of the Syrian Kurds have emerged (HRW 1991; HRW 1996; McDowall 1998). These reports offer essential chronological reference points which have been integrated into the majority of later published works. Though valuable, these pieces are less concerned with a deep historical and sociological insight and are more likely to emphasize the Kurds’ status as a “minority” within the Syrian legal framework.

The picture is more nuanced if we consider scholarship on the Mandatory period. The access to the main French archival sources has allowed scholars to elaborate solid accounts of that era. In 1984, Philip S. Khoury wrote an illuminating piece on urban politics in Damascus where Kurdish elites played a significant role (Khoury 1984: 507–40). Christian Velud’s highly original analysis of the colonial policy in Upper Jazira during the 1920s and 1930s (Velud 1987: 161–94; 1991; 1995: 48–69) allowed us to glimpse the daily reality of both urban and rural populations of this “peripheral” Syrian territory where Christians, Arabs and Kurds all lived together, sometimes in conflict and sometimes on good terms. As Velud demonstrates, such conflicts were not always based on ethnicity or religion, but also on territorial and leadership quarrels between “old” – mostly pro-Syrian – and “new” – pro-French – inhabitants of Upper Jazira. Velud’s pieces are thus very useful for tracing the way in which migrants from Turkey integrated into a new political environment. In particular, his depiction of the urbanization of Upper Jazira explains how traditional elites (tribal chiefs, urban notables, religious leaders) reproduced their local power despite dramatic changes (Velud 1986: 85–104; 1991).

Another example of this genre is Nelida Fuccaro’s works. Her deep knowledge of late Ottoman history and access to both French and British archival materials have allowed Fuccaro to provide useful insights into Kurdish communities in modern Syria. In 1997, Fuccaro published a thoughtful article on the Kurdish nationalist movement in Mandatory Syria in which she demonstrated, contrary to the ethnic interpretation of modern Kurdish history (Bedr al-Din 1999; 2003; Seida 2005), that the Kurds under French colonial rule displayed different attitudes towards the new ideas of Kurdish political and cultural self-determination (Fuccaro 1997: 301–26). Fuccaro has developed this argument into two interesting contributions to the reinterpretation of the interwar era, particularly as concerns the question of “identities.” The first (Fuccaro 2003: 206–24), challenges the notion of the quarter as an “ethnic cluster” by examining historical processes of integration of the Kurdish community into the body politic of Damascus. At the same time, she analyzes the emergence of new arenas of public action for the Kurdish community with reference to the emergence of new ideas of class (communism) and community (Syrian

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4 After the crushing of the Shaykh Said revolt (1925) in Turkey, the Ankara government envisaged the deportation of Kurdish tribes toward the west of the country as a means of clearing the Eastern provinces of its “more dangerous” elements. This policy affected also some Christian populations, especially the remaining Armenian elements, while Kurdish circles in Istanbul found themselves forced into exile.
and Kurdish nationalism) during the French mandate. In the second piece (Fuccaro 2004: 579–95), through the comparison between the Kurdish mobilizations in Syria and Iraq under colonial rule, she illustrates the complexity of the question of group loyalties. Fuccaro argues that a study of political mobilization during the mandatory period is impossible if its interpretation hinges on a binary minority/majority opposition (Kurd/Arab) when each of the two groups constitutes a hybrid socio-political entity to begin with.

My reflection on the Kurdish issue in Syria during the French colonial rule has benefited from the revival of studies of the Mandatory period (Méouchy 2002; Mizrahi 2003; Méouchy and Sluglett 2004; Tatchjian 2004; Provence 2005) and the works cited above. In Le mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil (2007) I studied how exiled intellectuals from Turkey contributed to the (re)ethnicization of some segments of the Kurdish communities in the Levant, paying special attention to their doctrine and program. I argued that their doctrine was influenced in particular by two sources: Turkish nationalism and French orientalists who worked for the FID (Tejel 2006; 2007: 326–40; 2008: 117–19).

In my recent works on the Mandatory period, I have argued that, parallel to the role of Western intellectuals in the making of the Kurdish movement in Syria, Upper Jazira witnessed the emergence of other types of nationalism, that were more populist, and therefore less civic, and mirrored broader political developments (Gelvin 1998; Watenpaugh 2002: 325–47). Hence, urban actors (Christian and Kurdish alike) in Upper Jazira reproduced much the same “repertoires of action” as in other Syrian cities (Tejel 2009: 151–73; 2009b: 205–22). In this sense, and paradoxically, I highlighted the emergence of the first autonomist demands in the 1930s which led to the “Syrianization” of political life in Upper Jazira. Echoing these developments, Seda Altug has reflected on the importance of the territorial margins, Upper Jazira in this case, in the definition of the nation-state. Accordingly, the delimitation of the Turkish-Syrian border in the 1920s and 1930s played an important role in the Syrian Arab nationalist discourse, since it served to define not only the territory of the state, but also the groups and populations that had to be excluded (Altug and Thomas White 2010: 91–104).

The Qamishli Revolt its Aftermath

The riots of March 2004 in Qamishli and the subsequent massive mobilizations in the predominantly Kurdish towns and quarters of large cities between 2004 and 2005 encouraged the publication of a series of works and articles of uneven quality in response to the sudden “visibility” of the Kurds in Syria. A number of topics are important for understanding the Kurdish issue in Syria today. In the first place, most authors highlight the opportunities offered to the dissident movements, be it “Kurdish” or “Arab,” by the new political environment since the death of Hafiz al-Asad in 2000, the so-called “Damascus Spring.” Despite its short life, the “Damascus Spring” allowed previously marginal Kurdish forces to bring public actions denouncing the injustices to the Kurds to the Syrian capital (Montgomery 2005; Yildiz 2005; Gauthier 2005: 97–114; Gauthier 2006: 217–31).

Other factors have played a dramatic role in the events of 2004–5. Without under-rating the “identity” aspects of the Kurdish mobilizations, socioeconomic factors have been stressed (Tejel 2007b: 269–76). Finally, the influence of the Iraqi experience – the overthrow of the Ba’thist regime in 2003 and the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq – had an influence on Syrian Kurds (Gambill 2004: 1–4; Gauthier 2005: 97–114; Gauthier 2006: 217–31; Lowe 2006: 1–7).

While most of these accounts are prone to conclude that after the riots of Qamishli, separatist feelings were rapidly fuelled among Kurds in Syria, I (2009c) stress a more nuanced picture. For sure, Kurds in Syria have entered into an era of “visibility” (Tejel 2006: 117–33). In the short term, the return to the
strategy of “dissimulation,” as defined by James C. Scott (1990), seems to be improbable. However, thepacification of the protests led by the Kurdish parties in 2005 was a prelude to the search for a newequilibrium between the Kurdish movement and the Syrian regime. I suggest that between 2005 and2009, the Kurds obtained freedom to create space for the open display of Kurdish identity, while theregime confirmed the selective withdrawal of the state from Kurdish affairs. Finally, it is necessary to payattention to political and social dynamics in Kurdish communities from the time of the construction ofcontemporary Syria to the present in order to understand the current situation.

Pitfalls and Agendas

Finally, I would like to suggest a number of potentially fruitful avenues for future research. As mentionedabove, most works to date on Kurdish issues in Syria has been carried out through the prism of humanrights (see recent reports by AI 2005; Danish Refugee Council 2007; Ziadeh 2009; HRW 2009) and thereis a dearth of research on history as well as aspects of daily life such as the generational factor, dialectcleavages, modes of consumption, the dynamics of the rural exodus, gender issues, land distribution,mixed marriages; and deeper analyses of intra-Kurdish politics. These areas of research are necessary inorder to advance our knowledge of Syria’s Kurds, and eventually to “bridge the gap” between the Kurdsand Syrian society at large.

It may sound banal, but it’s important to remind ourselves that Kurds don’t live as an isolated“community” in Syria. They are in constant contact with other groups and have imbibed Arab-Syrian cultural and political references through education, television, music, and, for men, the army. Ethnic awareness is obviously important for Kurds in Syria. But, this is not the case for all Kurds and, more importantly, ethnic awareness doesn’t require that Kurds live entirely apart from the non-Kurdish communities that are part and parcel of their daily lives. They interact with the state – and its different segments – and with other fragments of the Syrian society. The study of these dimensions requires easieraccess to the field and a collective and interdisciplinary effort. Last but not least, these endeavours wouldrequire that, at least in some cases, scholars master both Kurdish and Arabic in order to access to a wide-range of sources, oral and written.

In sum, Kurdish groups are not only affected by local and national socio-political transformations but alsoby both trans-national dynamics, in regard to their “macro-ethnicity” and changes on the global stage. Theformer include tribal, familial, and religious networks, armed struggles in Turkey and Iraq, and theincreasing autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991. The latter involve a structural crisis, namely the“crisis of difference” in the era of globalization (Balandier 1986: 501). It is necessary that scholars imbedtheir work within terms of references common to all Syrians and to global transformations while simultaneously considering a detailed chronology inscribed in the Kurds’ own reality.

Bibliography


**Electronic References**


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