

Michael M Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, Hurst & Company: London, 2014, 159 p.

Reviewed by Christopher Flaherty

Michael Gunter has much experience writing about the Kurds, and his breadth of knowledge is on display in *Out of Nowhere* - a brief but comprehensive description and analysis of the Kurds of Syria (along with their fellow-nationals in Turkey, Iraq and Iran), and the Kurdish involvement in Syrian politics, from the creation of the modern state to the present (or at least up to 2014, when the book was published). The book is divided into ten chapters: the narrative begins with a summary of the decolonization process in Syria, with special reference to the role of the Kurds, with a number of important Kurdish nationalist figures described. We then move on to an analysis of the anti-Kurd policies of the Syrian Arab government, including the demographic division of once-contiguous Kurdish populations by the so-called Arab Belt (*al-Hizam al-Arabi*) between Syria and its neighbours, Turkey and Iraq. The divided (and therefore ineffective) Kurdish opposition to this process is also described, as is the influence of foreign powers - or more correctly, 'transnational actors', especially given the prominent role of the Kurdish PKK in Syrian Kurdish politics.

Here, the alternative inspirations provided to Syrian Kurds by the examples of the 'radical' PKK and the 'moderate' KRG (i.e., Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government) are also described, as is the influence of the United States' somewhat mutable (to say the least) foreign policy, both towards the Kurds in general and those in Syria in particular. It is in this section (particularly in regard to the proposed US intervention, after Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons in 2013) that Gunter allows some personal feelings to show through - "*Similarly [to arguments supporting intervention in Syria] in the run-up to the war that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003, a war whose slaughter and repercussions are still being felt a decade later, the United States falsely claimed that it had incontrovertible intelligence... It turned out that US intelligence was wrong again or had simply lied to justify going to war...*" (p.86). Such sentiments may be justified (and they are in any case relatively mildly-worded) but they do not fit well with the rest of the book, which (though often sympathetic to the Kurds) is generally objective in tone. One could compare that passage to another on anti-Kurdish moves by the Turkish government, for instance:

"Understandably, Ankara saw the DTK and KCK [the Democratic Society Congress, and the Kurdistan Communities Union] as an attempt to establish an alternative Kurdish government on Turkish soil and continued its wholesale arrests of members of these organisations for terrorism..." (p.126).

After providing himself with a solid foundation in his detailed regional history (in a condensed form, which exposes the reader to a sometimes-bewildering selection of historical events, political personalities and three-letter acronyms), Gunter moves on to build his narrative on contemporary events - though given the massive developments which have occurred since the book was written, perhaps it is already better to say *near*-contemporary. The unprecedented autonomy thrust upon the Syrian Kurds (to use Gunter's expression - p.5) by the collapse of central government control of Kurdish regions in July 2012, and the influence of the ongoing civil war, is considered the '*Prelude*' (as this chapter is called) to greater things - in the book's final chapter, '*The Future*', Gunter speculates as to what these "greater things" might be, examining the political prospects of Syria's Kurds. In short, these prospects are bad, if a total victory is gained by Assad or by his opposition, or more promising, if a stalemate between those combatants

becomes the new ‘normal’ (p.119-121). The future viability of the much-heralded project of ‘democratic autonomy’ is also considered. On this issue, Gunter appears sceptical, pondering what such a state might look like in practice - and more importantly, whether a strong, centralised PYD/PKK would ever allow local councils to assume genuine independence of action: “*Despite its rhetoric, the PYD in action has exuded a strong will to rule and be obeyed...*” (p.127).

A significant undertaking in a short format, *Out of Nowhere* fits a great deal of information into a comparatively small space, and readers will soon find themselves familiar with the alphabet soup of the myriad Kurdish parties – not only household names like the PKK, YPG, PDK, but also rarities to delight the connoisseur, such as the KGK, KNAS, KNK etc. In short, this is an excellent and highly-detailed introduction to the Kurds of Syria and also to their co-nationals in its neighboring countries, and contains much information of use to both newcomers and seasoned Mid-East scholars.

Paradoxically, the biggest selling point of the book (its relevance to contemporary developments in Syria and the wider Middle East) may be its biggest weakness - events have fast overtaken Gunter’s earlier descriptions. In just the most obvious instance, in the years since publication of this text in 2014, ISIS has gone from being just one of a number of competing Islamist groups to a *de facto* state with control of one of Syria’s largest cities – the Kurds of Syria notably engaging them in fierce fighting over the city of Kobane, in an epic of Kurdish resistance which has proved an inspiration to Kurdish nationalism in Syria and abroad. Indeed, at the time of writing ISIS is practically finished as a force in Syria, and a Kurdish referendum on independence (in Iraq) has taken place – what a difference a few years makes! Related matters, such as Turkey’s ambivalent behavior to the Kurds engaging in the fight against ISIS, are areas which Gunter would obviously have included in his book given the chance – indeed, he had the bad luck to publish his book just before a singularly important period in Kurdish history, with ongoing political strife in the KRG being precipitated by its historic (but possibly hubristic) independence referendum. Obviously, one cannot fault the Gunter of 2014 for his inability to prophesy the ascendance and approaching demise of ISIS or other seismic events in Kurdish politics, and a second edition would clearly be welcome to rectify this alone. It might also prove an opportunity to conduct a little copy-editing: the sometimes-inelegant prose of the book can be jarring, often not doing justice to its detailed content, and chapters tend to conclude rather abruptly – Gunter seemingly eager to move on and consume the next topic – whereas a new reader, less familiar with the material than its veteran author, might benefit from a digest of the various themes covered in the chapter’s preceding pages.

However, the sheer conciseness of Gunter’s book has much to recommend it, and even given its partial obsolescence it remains a hugely useful introductory work to those with an interest in the Kurds of Syria, and also to those interested in the political history of the Kurds in its neighboring countries – Turkey in particular, given the profound influence of the PKK on Syrian Kurdish politics. Those seeking to learn about the centralized control structures of the YPG and its PKK backers will find much of interest here, and the book will be of use to anyone who wishes to look behind the surface of the often uncritically-examined ‘democratic autonomy’ project; Gunter’s historical examination of the political and historical context of this movement will be a useful complement to studies which focus more on the ‘disembodied’ ideology of Bookchin and Ocalan.

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