Comparative and State-Centric Approaches to Kurdish Nationalism

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MOHAMMED M.A. AHMED AND MICHAEL GUNTER, EDS. *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism.* California: Mazda Publishers, 2007. xviii + 315 pages, index. Paper US$40 ISBN 1-56859-194-2.

METIN HEPER. *The State and Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. ix + 249 pages, endnotes, bibliography, index. Cloth US$95 ISBN 978-0-333-64628-1.

The State and Kurds in Turkey and *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism* approach the thorny Kurdish question from two opposing perspectives. Metin Heper's *The State and Kurds in Turkey* is a sophisticated Turkish state-centric treatise that challenges the dominant view in the literature, which stipulates that the Kurds in Turkey had been subject to forced assimilation and cultural suppression. Mohammed Ahmed and Michael Gunter's *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism,* on the other hand, offers a comparative analysis of the assimilation-resistance-suppression dynamics in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, approaching the subject through a non-state perspective.

The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism doesn't offer a new perspective to the study of the Kurdish question; it re-iterates the ever-present narrative of Kurdish oppression within Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, albeit with a tighter-knit historical and comparative account. In Chapter 1, Michael Gunter presents an exposition of the origins of modern Kurdish nationalism, while offering a valuable overview of how primordial Assyrian-Kurdish nationalist narrative made its way through the medieval period, discussing

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how Sharaf Khan Bitlisi's *Sharafnama,* Ahmadi Khani's love poem *Mem u Zin* and Kurdish folkloric Dimdim have served as literary bridges that carried the original Kurdish nationalist narrative to nineteenth century ethno-nationalist constructions. In Chapter 2, Hakan Ozoglu discusses the impact of Islam on the formation of a Kurdish identity. Ozoglu takes his analysis back to the accounts of Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir, an Arab historian lived in Mosul and Baghdad, who had provided a narrative of how Kurdish areas were Islamized during the Arab conquests, mentioning that some Kurdish groups preferred being killed instead of converting to Islam. This view is also supported by the accounts of Ibn Jabir al-Baladhuri in his *Kitab Futuh al-Buldan,* where Kurdish resistance against Islam and Arab conquerors were presented in detail. In Chapter 3, Hamit Bozarslan discusses how Kurdish nationalism interacted with Turkish nationalism through the early republican period, arguing essentially that "The Kemalist state had...either denied the very existence of the Kurds...or accepted it, but in an essentialist and social-Darwinist framework" (p. 37). Bozarslan presents two early phases of Kurdish nationalism; first associated with the traditional elite through the Hamidiye Cavalry regiments dominated by tribal notables, and a second one, associated more with the Kurdish intelligentsia of officers and students educated in the secular-modern schools of the Ottoman Empire. Bozarslan indicates that the Turkish War of Independence had been a turning point for Kurdish nationalism, in whose aftermath the Kurdish nationalists that initially supported Mustafa Kemal had to reconsider their positions, many contributing to the early Republican rebellions. Bozarslan also presents two hypotheses regarding the dynamics of resistance and repression between the Turkish state and the Kurds. The first hypothesis stipulates that the Kurdish rebellions had been brutally suppressed by the Kemalist regime, culminating in the state response to the 1937 Dersim rebellion, effectively destroying the foundations of further insurrections. The second hypothesis focuses on the government policy of relocating Kurdish notables (intellectuals, sheiks, tribal leaders) to Western Turkey, removing the ideological leaders of further rebellions and thereby crippling future Kurdish revolts. Finally, the third hypothesis focuses on the ideological dominance of Kemalism "that criminalized Kurdishness and glorified the Turkish being," (p. 46) which rendered the ideals of Kurdish nationalism inaccessible to the Kurdish youth of the republican period. In Chapter 4, Nicole Watts discusses the resistance-repression dynamics in Turkey through the mid-twentieth century, focusing on how Kurdish resistance transformed itself into political activism and interacted with the state through the 1960-1971 period and the two military coups. Watts refers to this period as the rebirth phase of

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Kurdish nationalism, indicating how tribal-rural resistance to the state transformed itself into a left-wing political rhetoric in the urban areas, establishing the predecessor ideology to the PKK. Michael Bishku takes this argument and builds on it in Chapter 5, where he analyzes the resurgence of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey from 1970s, during which time the Kurdish movement was radicalized and led to the emergence of the PKK.

Gareth Stansfield and Shorsh Haji Resool examine Kurdish nationalism in Iraq through 1975-1991 period, when the Kurdish national movement fragmented into different factions competing for the leadership of the resistance against Baghdad. The chapter also discusses the role of the Kurds in the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. In Chapter 7, Liam Anderson discusses the role of political parties in developing Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, discussing the history and policies of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In Chapter 8, Mohammed M.A. Ahmed provides a more recent analysis of the post-Gulf War period in Iraq, showing how the Kurds were saved by the American invasion and how the Kurdish state-building process has accelerated since then. This chapter also provides a valuable account of the post-2005 elections, the formation of the Iraqi Interim Government, and the debates surrounding the Iraqi Constitution. In Chapter 9, Robert Olson expands Ahmed's argument into the theoretical realm, discussing how capitalism and nationalism influenced Kurdish state formation in Iraqi Kurdistan, and how Iraqi Kurdish aspirations have been perceived by Turkey.

In Chapter 10, Farideh Koohi-Kamali focuses on Kurdish nationalism in Iran and presents a historical overview of the Kurdish Republic in Mahabad in the 1940s and the establishment of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iran (KDPI). Nader Entessar then expands the discussion into the post-revolution period in Chapter 11, analyzing how the Islamic Revolution affected Kurdish nationalism and how KDPI interacted with the successive administrations of Khomeini and Khatami. In Chapter 12, William O. Beeman offers an analysis of more recent tensions and ambiguities between Tehran and Iranian Kurds, touching upon how the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent rise of PJAK affect this relationship. In the final chapter, Robert Lowe writes about the changing dynamics of the state's relationship with the Kurds in Syria. Lowe asserts that Kurdish nationalism developed in a slower pace in Syria because of the relatively smaller number of Kurdish population there, as well as the dominance of a very strong pan-Arab identity. Lowe argues that the U.S. invasion of Iraq has created a "Kurdish emboldening" in Syria, causing Kurdish activists and parties to make more pronounced efforts towards recognition and cultural expression.

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Metin Heper's book, *The State and Kurds in Turkey,* offers a much different perspective, however. Through the book, Heper offers a sophisticated challenge to the general scholarly wisdom on the Kurdish question: that the Turkish state had been engaging in deliberate actions to assimilate and subdue its Kurdish population through negative reinforcement, ideological indoctrination and/or the use of force. In this, the book distinguishes between the terms "assimilation" and "non-recognition", stating that non-recognition of an ethnic group doesn't necessarily imply its forced assimilation. To the contrary, Heper argues that Turkish state policy of non-recognition was in fact not assimilation but silent tolerance, which indirectly implied the state's acceptance of its Kurds. In Chapter 2, Heper offers an extended historical survey of what he refers as the multi-ethnic societies Turks had established since their origins in Central Asia, and then in Anatolia, arguing that Turkic states had never sought to rule over an ethnically pure population. His discussion then moves onto the millet system in the Ottoman Empire and the integration of non-Muslim minorities into the Ottoman decision-making and legislature in the late nineteenth century. Then in Chapters 3 and 4, Heper argues that there has always been some distance between the Kurds and the state in the Ottoman Empire, providing historical accounts of how successive Sultans interacted with the Kurdish tribes since the Ottoman conquest of Eastern Anatolia in the early sixteenth century. The chapter then moves onto a discussion of how the Kurdish nationalist strands were perceived by the Ottoman state in late nineteenth century, depicting how Turkish and Kurdish nationalist formulations went hand in hand against the rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II, and how these two movements were influenced by the competing ideologies of Turkism, Ottomanism and Islamism. In Chapter 5, Heper argues that "The Young Turks did not attempt to mold a new identity for the people. Consequently, the society that the Republic inherited had hardly a notion of Turkish identity" (p. 83) in order to challenge the prevalent position in the literature, which posits that Kemalism inherited its nation-building ideology from the Committee of Union and Progress. Instead, Heper argues that Kemalist understanding of nationalism was based on an understanding of common culture, common homeland and the acknowledgement of sub-identities, while emphasizing Turkish citizenship as the overarching political identity overriding clan, tribe, or religious brotherhood affiliations. Chapters 6 and 7 provide an overview of the Turkish state policy on the Kurdish question, emphasizing the aspect of non-recognition instead of forced assimilation.

Heper's study in many ways offers an updated and meticulously constructed version of the well-known Turkish state position on the Kurdish

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question. In that, rather than being a descriptive source on the Kurdish question, it is valuable as long as the reader understands that the study aims to support one position, which is the Turkish state-centric approach. However, the same can be said for Ahmed and Gunter's edited book; that also doesn't aim to present competing perspectives on the narrative of the Kurdish question; it starts by constructing the overarching narrative of the Kurdish question as one of suffering and assimilation. That said, both books are quite valuable and successful in terms of providing a historical account of these two competing narratives. While Ahmed and Gunter's study offers a transnational and historical analysis of how Kurdish nationalist movements were suppressed in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, Heper aims to reformulate a more sophisticated state-centric defense against the allegations of assimilation in Turkish state policy towards its Kurdish population.

Both books offer a good overview of two different historical narratives of the Kurdish question, but neither one aims to, or can provide a balanced and objective position on the matter. Therefore, neither study manages rise above the level of sophisticated advocacy, as opposed to scientific impartiality.

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