

Kerim Yildiz
The Kurds in Iraq : The Past, Present and Future
(London: Pluto Press, 2004, 236pp.)

Martin J. Dent
Identity Politics: Filling the Gap Between Federalism and Independence
(Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004, 232pp.)

The efforts to draft a new constitution for Iraq and to establish a government which gains the support of all major factions have placed a spotlight on the Iraqi Kurds who since October 1991 have a largely autonomous and self-governed zone on the frontier with Turkey. Democratization, power sharing, regional stability and Iraqi territorial integrity are influenced by the status of the Kurds.

The Kurds are a non-Arab population of the Middle East with politically significant minorities in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. As Kerim Yildiz notes “Kurdish identity, however, is not monolithic. While some Kurds believe passionately in the existence of a pan-Kurdish nation, others are bound more closely to other identities, tribal, national or religious.”

Some Kurds have worked for an independent state of Kurdistan which would group together these Kurdish minorities into a Kurdish majority state. The leadership of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria have resisted with armed force such a re-grouping. Thus, many Kurdish leaders have tried to work out meaningful autonomy within current frontiers. As Yildiz stresses “There is no single Kurdish identity, but there are Kurdish identities that defy or transcend borders. Pan-regional relations between the Kurds have always been complex and intimate. The mountain ranges that mark frontiers between nations do not mark breaks in linguistic, cultural or familial continuity. Many of the characteristics of the Iraqi campaign against the Kurds— destruction of villages, displacement of villagers, intimidation, arbitrary detention, unexplained disappearances and military operations against civilian populations — have all been employed by the other regional players.”

Kerim Yildiz concentrates upon the Kurds in Iraq, while Martin Dent deals with the Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Iraq focusing upon forms of autonomy or federal structures for each state. Yildiz who is the Executive Director of the UK-based Kurdish Human Rights Project sets out clearly the aim of his book “This publication is intended to provide an outline of some of the issues affecting the Kurds in Iraq. It provides a brief exploration of the past’s effect on the present, and how both Kurds and the international community may avoid repeating previous mistakes, laying the foundations for an internationally recognised autonomous region committed to pluralistic democracy and human rights.”

However, as Yildiz points out well in a chapter appropriately called “The Kurds have no friends but the mountains”, both Turkey and Iran consider it in their ‘national interest’ to be concerned with the status of Iraqi Kurds as what happens in Iraq may influence policy towards the Kurds in Turkey and Iran. Syria is also concerned but has fewer cards to play in Iraqi politics. Mustafa Barzani, the Iraqi Kurdish leader has recently stated that “our agenda at the moment is for an Iraq that is parliamentary, pluralist, democratic and federal.” This is a clear if difficult program to put into practice. Both books provide useful guidelines to a fast changing scene which needs to be followed closely and, when possible, we need to help those working for a just and pluralistic Iraqi society.

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