



### The Rise and Fall of the Kurdish Project in Northern Syria

#### *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*

by Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg

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264 pages (Kindle edition)

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The book by researcher Harriet Allsopp and journalist Wladimir van Wilgenburg about the Kurds in northern Syria is essential reading for anyone interested in the fate of this minority during Syria's civil war. The Kurds in Syria are a relatively small group compared to the Kurdish minority in Turkey, in Iran, and in Iraq (estimates at the outbreak of the Syrian civil war were that they numbered some two million people). Their percentage of the total population of Syria was small (around 10 percent, similar to the proportion of Kurds in Iran, but significantly lower than the proportion of Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, where they comprise around a fifth of the population). For these and other reasons, and certainly in comparison to the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, the Kurds in Syria have received scant research interest. Allsopp and van Wilgenburg's book helps to fill in the gaps in its discussion of the Kurdish minority over the years since Syria's establishment. However, its more important contribution is the bulk

of the book, which relates to the period after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the different configurations of the autonomous Kurdish entities in northern Syria that developed during the war—from three cantons to a federal entity in the majority of the territory of northern Syria. In this respect, the book follows the rising power of the Kurds in Syria, the peak, and the beginning of the decline.

The first two chapters discuss Kurdish identity and the emergence of the Kurdish political parties. The following two chapters discuss the management style of the Syrian branch of the Kurdish underground (PYD), which became dominant in northern Syria, and identity changes during this period—first and foremost, the strengthening of Kurdish identity. The fifth chapter discusses the involvement of international actors, and the final chapter discusses the feasibility and prospects of continued Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria.

The writers' main argument is that the question of political representation of the Kurds became a “battlefield” in its own right and made it more difficult for them to function. Another important argument is that the Kurds remained trapped between the interests and actions of regional and international actors with contradictory objectives (Kindle edition, location 5658-5673). The Kurdish issue is critical for Turkey, due to internal considerations, and since the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran were assisted in the past by the Kurds in operating against Turkey, they can play the Kurdish card against Ankara again in the future.

Most of the research activity (which included interviews and surveys among the population—at times even while risking the lives of the researchers themselves)—took place between April and August 2016, thus enabling a kind of “freeze-frame shot” of the climactic moments of the Kurdish project in northern Syria. Even though close scrutiny of the project of expanding the autonomous representation of the group, which suffered discrimination and suppression over the years of Syria's existence,

can naturally arouse empathy, the book's writers do not refrain from presenting criticism. Thus the book is far from an idealization of the Kurdish autonomous entities—though this was fairly common in the Western press, as well as in Israeli media—and includes a detached and at times quite detailed account of what occurred in northern Syria from a political standpoint over the years of the Syrian civil war until 2018.

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Given their relatively small demographic weight, from the outset it was not likely that the Kurds in Syria would come close to the level of autonomy of the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq. In part due to ideological considerations of striving for “democratic autonomy,” based on the ideas of Kurdish underground (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan, the representational framework in northern Syria was built such that it is not interested in advancing only the Kurdish population, but rather has a more general agenda, such as advancing gender equality (Kindle edition, location 3239). Over the years of the war, the arrival of displaced people from other parts of Syria, as well as the departure of some of the Kurdish population, further reduced the chances of implementing Kurdish autonomy in the limited ethnic sense (Kindle edition, location 5597).

The book examines the extent of the cooperation between the Kurds and the Assad regime. It is clear that without limited tactical cooperation with the regime, the Kurds would not have achieved what they did with the federal entity in northern Syria (Kindle edition, location 598; 4742). Furthermore, it is not clear what

other possibilities there were for the Kurds in Syria, as there was a broad lack of desire among opposition groups in Syria to allow for political representation for the Kurds as a group in the design of Syria's future, making cooperation with them more difficult. The issue of Kurdish cooperation with the West is also discussed. On the one hand, in order to continue to be relevant for the international coalition that fought against the Islamic State, the Kurds had to expand their territorial control. On the other hand, the more they expanded territorially, the relative weight of the Kurdish population was lower, and resentment among the Kurds increased over issues such as mandatory conscription.

The book delves into the issue of internal disagreements and divisions among the Syrian Kurds. The rifts stemmed in part from the dependence on the competing Kurdish movements outside of Syria and their extensive influence on Kurdish conduct inside Syria—first and foremost the split between supporters of the PKK and supporters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq (Kindle edition, location 5547). In the past, internal divisions among the Kurds led to difficulties in advancing the objective of achieving Kurdish self-determination, and it is not surprising that they were also a source of weakness and of problems among the Kurdish entities in northern Syria. Thus, while the PYD's rule was significant, it was also challenged, including by political parties among the Syrian Kurds that were connected to the KDP.

Turkey too limited the Kurds' ability to carry out extensive autonomous rule over time in northern Syria. The dominance of the PYD in northern Syria, in contrast with the limited influence of the KDP, and in particular that of then-President of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq Masoud Barzani (who was in many respects an ally of Turkey during this period), led to Ankara's concerns regarding the realization of the Kurdish project in all of northern Syria. In order to stop the Kurds, Turkey carried out

three military operations starting in August 2016, in which it first acted to block the Kurdish advancement, and then sought to conquer areas that were already in the hands of the Kurds.

In the long term, it is hard to see how the Kurds can avoid the fate of returning to the status of a disadvantaged minority within Syria. The Kurds would like a solution of a federal framework for the entire country (Kindle edition, location 1996). Assad's opposition to such a framework as a solution to the civil war, along with considerable resistance to this among opposition groups in Syria, makes it difficult to imagine a scenario in which the Kurds can maintain their autonomous status in Syria over time, especially from the moment Assad decides to retake the territories in northern Syria. While the fact that the Kurdish fighters were the leading ground force in the fighting against the Islamic State brought them admiration and assistance from the West, after ISIS was territorially defeated and following pressure from Turkey, they were in effect abandoned by their allies and left at the mercy of the regime.

Not surprisingly, the book does not make reference to aspects related to Israel, since

traditionally most of Israel's connections have been with the Kurds in Iraq, especially with the KDP. Over the course of the Syrian civil war, there were occasional reports of limited humanitarian aid that Israel provided to the Kurds in northern Syria. In October 2019, against the backdrop of the beginning of Operation Peace Spring, a Turkish military operation in northeastern Syria, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke publicly in a way that departed from Israel's prior policy regarding the Kurds in Syria. In his Twitter account, Netanyahu condemned the Turkish attack, warned that ethnic cleansing could occur, and also [said](#) that Israel is ready to provide humanitarian aid to "the gallant Kurdish people." However, this unusual statement should also be understood within the context of the rhetorical clashes between Netanyahu and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, against the backdrop of the deterioration in relations between Turkey and Israel, and presumably there will not be significant Israeli involvement in northern Syria in the foreseeable future.

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