

A Work of Reference on Syria's Kurds Jordi Tejel, Syria s Kurds: History, Politics and Society. New York: Routledge, 2009. 208 pages.

Boris James

▶ **To cite this version:**

Boris James. A Work of Reference on Syria's Kurds Jordi Tejel, Syria s Kurds: History, Politics and Society. New York: Routledge, 2009. 208 pages.. Syrian Studies Association Newsletter, 2011, pp.8, 37-39. halshs-02059618

HAL Id: halshs-02059618
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02059618

Submitted on 6 Mar 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Syrian Studies Association Newsletter
نشرة رابطة الدراسات السورية

Volume XVI No. 1 Spring 2011

News of the Association.....3

Features: ***The Kurds of Syria***

Scholarship: State of the Art.....5

Challenges of Research.....4

Ten Years of Bashar.....6

Sufism among Kurds.....7

Book Reviews.....8

Members of the Board

President **Fred Lawson**

Past President: **Peter Sluglett**

Secretary-Treasurer **Zayde Antrim**

Member at Large **Heghnar Watenpaugh**

Student Member **Hilary Kalmbach**

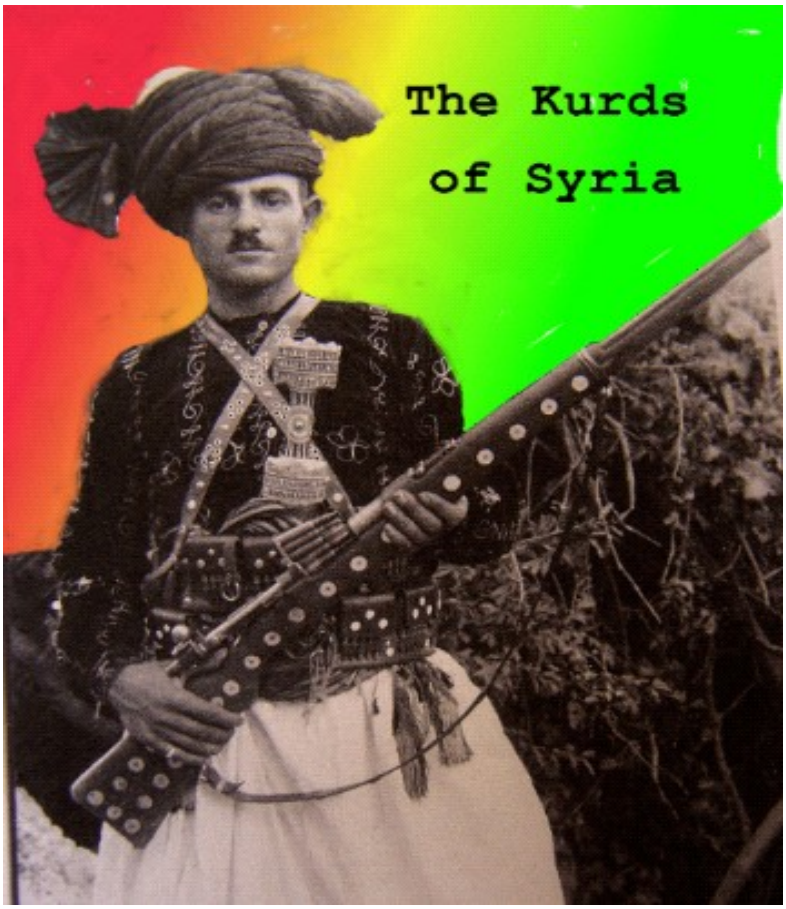
Prize Committee **Steve Tamari**

Webmaster **Hilary Kalmbach**

Newsletter **Andrea Stanton**

Book Reviews **Beverly Levine**

Support the work of the Syrian Studies Association! See page 29 for details on how to join. What is the Syrian Studies Association ? How can I contribute to the newsletter? See page 40. Details of the 2011 article/chapter prize competition are on page 51.



Letter from the President

Those of us who are madly trying to figure out what path Syria is going to take in the post-Jasmine Revolution era can benefit greatly from the activities and output of two new organizations. The Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies sponsored a one-day conference on political and economic developments during the Bashar al-Asad era in late January, which was hosted by the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies at the University of

(Continued on page 2)

Book Review

A Work of Reference on Syria's Kurds

Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 208 pages.

Boris James

A sigh of relief. What better way to pay tribute to a new book? At last we have found a work of reference on the Kurds of Syria. Far away from the often *too* global approaches that abandoned the Syrian space, and far also from the studies that focused exclusively on the humanitarian dimension of the question, the author of this monograph, equipped with a strong theoretical background in anthropology and political science, traces the course of an unknown history. This way he ceases the modality of emergence of the Kurdish nationalist mobilization in Syria. The multiplicity of views and approaches allows the author to present complex and sometimes paradoxical historical moments and evolutions, avoiding any rash judgment or essentialism. Jordi Tejel's work is born of a manifold acknowledgement.

The "Kurdish question" in Syria has always been a marginal issue in contemporary studies. Nevertheless it bears a fundamental importance as the events of this last decade have show. The riots of 2004 have been indeed a violent reminder of its importance. As Tejel indicates, they signaled the transition of the long concealed Kurdish movement to visibility. The author tries to understand this transformation from a long term historical perspective, and therefore returns to the period of the French mandate in Syria—a period that was subject of a former book of his (Tejel 2007). This study is not only a study of the Kurds, but also of an ill-known part of Syria's history, and permits a review of the scientific approaches of the social and political organization of this country.

Although the book has a chronological outline, at every historical step, and especially in the last four chapters, the complex organization of the Kurdish political field in Syria, the transnational dimension of the question, the handling modes of the Syrian State and the foundation of the Baathist system are all scrutinized. It would be an illusion to believe we could summarize a very dense and accurate book. We will only describe what typifies for the subject, the different periods presented by the author.

The mandate period (1923-1946) is characterized by the absence of a united and identifiable Kurdish group, and by a quadrangular political game between the French Mandate authority, the national bloc (the Arab nationalists), the notables of the ethno-religious minorities and the Kurds at the margin. The Kurds who weren't granted the same status of autonomy as the other Syrian minorities, became involved in two different movements: one a collaboration with the Christians of Djezireh for recognition of the region's autonomy. The other, more cultural and based in Damascus and Beirut, surrounded the Kurdish movement of Turkey in exile: the Xoybûn. The ambiguous attitude of France, the internal divisions of the Kurdish notables and tribes, and the distrust of the other minorities and the national bloc prevented the implementation of

(Continued on page 36)

(Continued from page 36)

A Work of Reference

the Djezireh. The regime's pragmatism also appeared with the exploitation of the problem's transnational dimension. The alliance with the Kurdish parties of Irak (KDP and PUK) and more specifically with the PKK (p. 82-83), channeled during several years the energy of the Kurds in Syria. This double policy of internal redistribution and external alliance associated with the continued coercion led to a considerable weakening of the Kurdish national movement in Syria. Henceforth, it was characterized with an important fragmentation of the partisan field. Despite this weakness, the author notes that this configuration didn't prevent the creation of political and social structures in suspense within the Kurdish community in Syria. Jordi Tejel refers to Lisa Wedeen's work (Wedeen: 1999) to show that these concealed structures formed themselves into the framework of a controlled and codified public expression along with a relatively free private expression as well. In one of the chapters ("The Kurdish response and its margins: 'dissimulation' of a hidden conflict" p. 82-108) the author shows how a Kurdish cultural, social and political space developed itself at the margin of the official political system, official Islam and official culture. Paulo Pinto's argument is discussed in detail (Pinto: 2007). It postulates the joint development of Kurdish nationalism and brotherhoods that led to the upsurge of a religious nationalism of the Kurds(p.95), that is to say Sunni brotherhoods with a nationalist complexion or a Kurdish Sufism ("Sufism is the Kurdish Islam" and "Kurdish Sufism is the real Sufism") (p.99). However J. Tejel suggests without openly taking a position, that this is due to the play of the social agents, the brotherhood field playing with the nationalism, and the nationalist field playing with the brotherhoods. Contrary to the decisive role that P. Pinto gives to that phenomenon, we understand that the brotherhood circles had only a very limited share in the events of 2004, and that the Kurdish political parties whether they defended a hard line or not remain at the initiative of nationalist action in Syria.

In the last chapter the author tries to understand how the balance that Hafez al-Asad established, broke down in 2004. Why did the "Kurdish issue" reached visibility in Syria ? Why also did the agents of the Qamishli uprising resorted to violence? To answer the first question Jordi Tejel explores the political changes resulting from the coming to power of Bashar al-Asad. He examines these the short, but decisive "spring of Damascus"; the rapprochement between several kurdish parties and the Arab opposition; the emergence of new Kurdish parties (Yekiti-kurd, Azadî, PYD) as well as new political practices (public demonstrations, sit-in, declarations, etc.) and the slight withdrawal of the intelligence services in the Djezireh. To explain the explosion of political violence, the author thoroughly uses the scientific approaches of authors such as Hamit Bozarslan, Charles Tilly, Ted Gurr and gathers all the facts and factors likely to have governed the outburst of the riots in 2004. From the situation born of the American intervention in Irak to the *dayrî* supporters' provocations during the soccer game that witnessed the beginning of the riots, as well as the role of the notables in negotiating with the state and the regime concerning the subjectivity of the rioters (euphoria or despair).

(Continued on page 38)

(Continued from page 36)

A Work of Reference

the Djezireh. The regime's pragmatism also appeared with the exploitation of the problem's transnational dimension. The alliance with the Kurdish parties of Irak (KDP and PUK) and more specifically with the PKK (p. 82-83), channeled during several years the energy of the Kurds in Syria. This double policy of internal redistribution and external alliance associated with the continued coercion led to a considerable weakening of the Kurdish national movement in Syria. Henceforth, it was characterized with an important fragmentation of the partisan field. Despite this weakness, the author notes that this configuration didn't prevent the creation of political and social structures in suspense within the Kurdish community in Syria. Jordi Tejel refers to Lisa Wedeen's work (Wedeen: 1999) to show that these concealed structures formed themselves into the framework of a controlled and codified public expression along with a relatively free private expression as well. In one of the chapters ("The Kurdish response and its margins: 'dissimulation' of a hidden conflict" p. 82-108) the author shows how a Kurdish cultural, social and political space developed itself at the margin of the official political system, official Islam and official culture. Paulo Pinto's argument is discussed in detail (Pinto: 2007). It postulates the joint development of Kurdish nationalism and brotherhoods that led to the upsurge of a religious nationalism of the Kurds(p.95), that is to say Sunni brotherhoods with a nationalist complexion or a Kurdish Sufism ("Sufism is the Kurdish Islam" and "Kurdish Sufism is the real Sufism") (p.99). However J. Tejel suggests without openly taking a position, that this is due to the play of the social agents, the brotherhood field playing with the nationalism, and the nationalist field playing with the brotherhoods. Contrary to the decisive role that P. Pinto gives to that phenomenon, we understand that the brotherhood circles had only a very limited share in the events of 2004, and that the Kurdish political parties whether they defended a hard line or not remain at the initiative of nationalist action in Syria.

In the last chapter the author tries to understand how the balance that Hafez al-Asad established, broke down in 2004. Why did the "Kurdish issue" reached visibility in Syria ? Why also did the agents of the Qamishli uprising resorted to violence? To answer the first question Jordi Tejel explores the political changes resulting from the coming to power of Bashar al-Asad. He examines these the short, but decisive "spring of Damascus"; the rapprochement between several kurdish parties and the Arab opposition; the emergence of new Kurdish parties (Yekiti-kurd, Azadî, PYD) as well as new political practices (public demonstrations, sit-in, declarations, etc.) and the slight withdrawal of the intelligence services in the Djezireh. To explain the explosion of political violence, the author thoroughly uses the scientific approaches of authors such as Hamit Bozarslan, Charles Tilly, Ted Gurr and gathers all the facts and factors likely to have governed the outburst of the riots in 2004. From the situation born of the American intervention in Irak to the *dayrî* supporters' provocations during the soccer game that witnessed the beginning of the riots, as well as the role of the notables in negotiating with the state and the regime concerning the subjectivity of the rioters (euphoria or despair).

(Continued on page 38)

(Continued from page 37)

A Work of Reference

Jordi Tejel concludes with substantial evidence, with a discussion regarding the possible toughening of the Kurdish national movement in Syria, especially among the youngsters (p. 127).

We are dealing here with a book of reference because it synthesizes several former studies, and provides us with totally new information and original approaches. However, by definition, it can not be exhaustive. Some issues raised in this study deserve further exploration. The social and political organization of the Kurds between 1946 and 1968 remains relatively obscure, although it constitutes the moment of gestation and emergence of an organized Kurdish national movement. In fact, Jordi Tejel's book will hopefully arouse new studies on the period.

The concept of "dissimulation" is used to describe the development of the Kurdish identity far away from the public sphere. The author draws a parallel between the case of the Kurds in Syria and the argument of Lisa Wedeen according to which in Hafez al-Asad's Syria, any dissident speech (and thus for J. Tejel the Kurdish nationalist speech) was banished to the private sphere. Individuals could only enjoy relative freedom as long as they publicly "acted as if" they subscribed to the rhetoric of the Syrian State. As far as the Kurds are concerned, is this analysis so relevant? Is the division between public and private speech still as obvious as it seemed? For instance the symbolic link established between Palestine and Kurdistan by the State and the Kurdish political agents doesn't reveal the desire to impose a certain type of public speech, but rather the willingness to assure the Kurds, the State or the rest of the Syrian population of everybody's loyalty to the Kurdish or the Palestinian cause. The point was not only to invent and codify a public speech, but also and primarily to convince. Lisa Wedeen's work raises the question of the possible existence of several levels of intimacy and publicity. Isn't there also a Kurdish public sphere distinct from the Syrian public sphere, as codified by the State and the agents especially during the New Rûz ? How do Syrian and Kurdish identities adjust within private and public speeches? These will require long field studies to be answered.

In Jordi Tejel's book another question remains: What is the Kurdish culture in Syria and how is it used in interaction to define the particular features of a « we-group » and to establish ethnic boundaries with the rest of the society (F. Barth)? According to the author and based on Paulo Pinto's work the ethnic identity of the Kurds of Damascus is not defined by a common language but by lineages and by joint cultural practices like the New Rûz festival (p.103). This assertion, however, doesn't seem convincing. My opinion is that the Kurds of this city as much as the Kurds of Aleppo, see in the practice of their language a foundation for their Kurdish identity. If one wants at all cost to make a comparison between the specific relationship the Kurds of these two cities have with their native language, one would have to consider the question according to other factors. The Kurds of Damascus whom mainly come from the Syrian Djezireh, speak the forms of Kurmandji known in this region as *xerbî, ashitî, alî* and *koçerî* unlike the Kurds of Aleppo who come

(Continued on page 39)

(Continued from page 38)

A Work of Reference

both from the Djezireh and from the region of Afrîn and Kobanê where different forms of Kurmandjî are spoken.

Beyond the question of Arabization—which can be considered generalized within Syria—it would be interesting to see how these linguistic practices and representations shape the Kurdish spaces of identity. And furthermore, how for instance, the *xerbî* develops into the more commonly spoken Kurmandjî language in Syria. Once again one will not be able to skip sound anthropological and sociological field studies.

Despite a few transliteration errors (Asad becomes As'ad and *far' filastin* becomes *firh filastin*) and the absence of a chronology that could have helped clarify his points, this book reaches its goal brilliantly. It illustrates the emergence and the diffusion within Syria of the idea that a Kurdish national group exists, and the transition to visible collective political action. This book also permits to cease and to accept the paradoxes peculiar to any study on the political and social organization of a State or national movement. Here, the State according to its organic conception of the Arab nation must reject the Kurds, but for diverse reasons integrates and co-opts them. Additionally, political agents in conflict with the State, use negotiation with it in an authoritarian framework. And finally, the simultaneous presence of numerous « infra-national loyalties » among the Kurds and the existence of a strong Kurdish nationalism exemplify these paradoxes.

In effect, Jordi Tejel has laid the foundations of a framework of reference for many studies to come.

Bibliography

Pinto, P., " Soufism ethnicity and religious nationalism in Northern Syria", in *Syrien und die Kurden Vom Osmanischen Reich bis in die Gegenwart*, edited by Siamend Hajo, Carsten. Borck, Eva Savelsberg et Bettina. Kemmerich , Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2008.

Tejel, J., *Le mouvement kurde en exil. Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-46).* Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.

Wedeen, L., *Ambiguities of Domination. Politics Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Boris James teaches medieval Middle Eastern History at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris and is author of Saladin et les Kurdes: perceptions d'un groupe au temps des croisades *(Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006).*