

Reports

PUBLICATIONS

Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

From the Rojava revolution in Syria starting in 2012 to the dynamic and volatile circumstances of the Kurdish populations in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, it is hard to deny the striking role of Kurdish political forces in redefining geopolitics and revolutionary politics in the Middle East. In this context, *The Kurdish Question Revisited* is a timely contribution to the field of Middle Eastern studies and, particularly, of Kurdish studies. The edited volume provides a multidisciplinary analysis of Kurdish politics, history and culture, as well as geopolitics and foreign politics. The goal is to 'present a comprehensive overview of the multi-faceted Kurdish question' (p. xxxiii) by bringing together an array of contributions by intellectuals inside and outside academia. The book has five parts, comprised of 35 chapters, along with an introduction written by the editors, Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef.

Part 1 sets the groundwork for the rest of the volume by touching upon diverse topics from history writing and nation building, religion and identity to nationalist movements, literary works and music in Kurdistan. Jordi Tejel (chap. 1) examines the possibility of writing a non-nationalist history without overlooking the political aspirations of Kurds as a nation, or, as he puts it, the 'Kurdish reality'. Highlighting the hegemony of nationalist narratives in the scholarship on Kurdish history, Tejel offers an alternative historical narrative based on comparative, transnational and global histories to 'advance the knowledge of a pluralistic history of the Kurds, and eventually avoid some of the epistemological dangers presented by the national paradigm' (p. 11). David Romano (chap. 2) and Hamit Bozarslan (chap. 5) look at Kurdish national movement(s). Bozarslan discusses the effects of the geographical settlements of the Kurds across four countries on the ideology and politics of Kurdish national movements. The influence of this geographical division across national borders has led to social, cultural and political plurality in



Kurdish society. Such a unique geopolitical and territorial situation, according to Bozarslan, has required the Kurdish movement to combine the plurality and particularities of Kurdishness with dominant universal ideas and norms of each historical era for legitimising Kurdish national aspirations. Romano's focus on the Kurdish nationalist movement is influenced by social movement theories – an analysis that he had already started elsewhere. He pays particular attention to specific analytical aspects of recent literature on Kurdish nationalist politics and concludes that the scholarship on the Kurdish nationalist movement from the perspective of social movement theories 'has finally moved beyond basic description and is rapidly coming into its own' (p. 31).

Ofra Bengio (chap. 6) takes up the question of the Kurdish land and its division in the twentieth century, arguing that, despite this territorial division, a 'Kurdish sub-system' has managed to evolve and survive independent of the dominant state-system in the Middle East. Bengio analyses the role of the media, Kurdish nationalist movements, Kurdish diaspora and other types of 'trans-border exchanges' that have enabled this Kurdish subsystem. Hakan Özoğlu (chap. 4) engages with the relations between Kurdish national identity and collective memory by underlining the role of 'collective forgetting'. Özoğlu highlights how deliberate forgetting of certain aspects of Kurdish history and literature has facilitated specific narratives of Kurdish identity. Christine Allison (chap. 9) also focuses on the question of collective memory by foregrounding the role of Kurdish folklore as 'a primary source for collective memory and Kurdish history' (p. 115). She traces the role of Kurdish folklore and its mobilisation in the processes of nation building by the Kurdish nationalist movements and the host countries of the Kurds in the region.

Michiel Leezenberg and Diane King also engaged with the topic of religion in Kurdistan. Leezenberg (chap. 3) focuses on the Kurdish articulations of Sufism, namely the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders, as well as the more contemporary influence of Islamist religious trends in Kurdish societies, particularly with respect to a wide spectrum of interpretations of Sunni Islam among the Kurds. King (chap. 8) goes beyond a focus on Islam, pointing to a diversity of religions in Kurdistan and emphasising Kurdistan's relative religious tolerance in comparison to its neighbours. Part 1 ends with discussions on Kurdish literature and music as expressions of sociopolitical conditions of the Kurds. Hashem Ahmadzadeh (chap. 7) examines two early Kurdish fictions, *La Xawma* (1925) by Jamil Saib and *Masalay Wizhdan* (1970) by Ahmad Mukhtar Jaf, while Nahro Zagros (chap. 10) engages with specific characteristics of Yezidi folk music in Armenia.

The rest of the volume is structured around the geographical divisions of the Kurdish society across national borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Part 2 provides a discussion of the Kurdish question in Bakur (Northern Kurdistan, located in Turkey) throughout late Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey. Sabri Ateş (chap. 11) revisits the 1880 rebellion of Sheikh Ubeidullah and frames it as an early Kurdish autonomist movement that sought to unite the Kurds

living within Iranian and Ottoman empires ‘under the umbrella of Ottoman sultan-caliph’ (p. 169). Janet Klein (chap. 12) examines the content of the first Kurdish gazette, *Kurdistan*, published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, arguing that it was not simply a podium to promote Kurdish nationalism. Rather, given the overlapping political, national and class interests of the Bedirkhans (the founders of the gazette) and the Ottoman elites, *Kurdistan* also advanced the modernist vision of The Young Turks and the Bedirkhans’ aspiration to reinstate their family rule in the Ottoman Kurdistan.

Chapters 14, 15 and 16 deal with the vicissitudes of the Turkish government’s approach towards the Kurdish question, leading up to the Turkish-PKK peace process (2013–2015) and its aftermath. Bill Park (chap. 14) and Michael M. Gunter (chap. 16) focus on the policy changes of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party regarding Kurdish issues and recount major events and factors culminating in the peace negotiations and the eventual failure of the peace by mid-2010s. Henri Barkey (chap. 15) examines continuities and changes in the Turkish state’s discourse on Kurds from early stages of the Turkish republic to our present conjuncture. Explicitly and implicitly, all three authors maintain that despite the failure of the peace process, the political force and status of the Kurds in Turkey has reached a point that it is impossible for the Turkish government to restore the older politics of denial and assimilation of the Kurds.

Chapters 13, 17 and 18 address ideological, organisational and cultural transformations of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Cengiz Gunes (chap. 13) and Clémence Scalbert-Yücel (chap. 18) examine the PKK’s discursive and cultural initiatives to consolidate the party’s political programme and cement its hegemony over the Kurdish movement in Turkey. Gunes highlights the PKK’s mobilisation of what he calls ‘the myth of Newroz,’ which centres on ‘the construction of the Medean Empire as the “golden age” of the Kurdish nation’ (p. 194) and the homogeneity and continuity of the Kurds as a nation throughout history. The ‘organizational growth’ of the PKK in both Turkey and diaspora during the 1980s and 1990s, argues Gunes, immensely contributed to the dissemination of the PKK’s myth of resistance. Gunes also touches upon the role of cultural institutions established by the PKK in spreading the Kurdish national identity, but Scalbert-Yücel exclusively and extensively deals with this topic, showing how robust networks of cultural centres, musicians, publishers and art festivals in Turkey and Europe have served as the PKK’s political and ideological apparatuses to elevate its ideology and variant of Kurdish national liberation in Turkey’s Kurdistan and across the greater Kurdistan. Joost Jongerden (chap. 17) provides an analysis of the radical changes in the official ideology of the PKK, particularly the party’s abandoning of its former view of self-determination in the form of an independent Kurdish state and its current emphasis (since the early 2000s) on the notion of democratic confederalism as ‘the right to self-determination on the basis of a critique of the state and nation-state form’ (p. 246).

Part 3 is on Rojava (Western Kurdistan, located in Syria) and the Kurdish political parties in Syria. Consisting of only two chapters, this section reflects the long-standing lack of scholarly attention to the Kurdish question in Syria. Harriet Allsopp (chap. 20) offers a topology of the Kurdish political parties in Syria by classifying them into two major camps: the PKK-affiliated parties and organisations led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and the Kurdish National Council, that is, political parties associated with the ruling Kurdish parties in Iraq. Allsopp links the power rivalries between the two camps and the historical trajectories of these rivalries to power struggles between the PKK on the one hand, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) on the other. Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe (chap. 19) take up the contentious question of the PYD-PKK relationship. By applying a historical approach and mapping the transnational network of political parties and organisations affiliated with the PKK, they treat the PYD as a distinct and independent party in practice, even though it has been heavily influenced by the PKK's ideology.

Part 4 addresses the Kurdish question in Rojhelat (Eastern Kurdistan, located in Iran). Chapters 21 and 22 discuss the relations between Iranian Kurds and the state in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Nader Entessar (chap. 21) lays out major events and developments in the state-Kurds relations in the two decades after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Rejecting the idea that, relative to its predecessor, the Pahlavi regime, the IRI has been more accommodating to ethnic rights, Olivier Grojean (chap. 22) contends that a hierarchy of ethnicities and identities has been sustained throughout the post-revolutionary era in Iran. Yet, far from being static, as he explains, a mixture of political transformations in the centre, changes in the social and political environments of Iran's peripheral provinces and 'exceptional events' (e.g. the 1999 arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and its consequences for the Kurdish movement in Iran) has restructured the ethnic identity hierarchies in Iran. Taking up the question of state's ethnic politics, Walter Posch (chap. 23) examines how modern Iranian states have mobilised narratives of 'common language and ethnic roots' ('Aryanness') and/or 'Islamic brotherhood' (p. 332) to integrate ethnic groups, particularly the Kurds, in a unified, Persian-centric, Iranian identity.

The final Part 5 focuses on the Kurdish question in Bashur (Southern Kurdistan, located in Iraq), providing mostly empirical studies of various aspects of the autonomous Kurdish territory in Iraq. These include topics such as 'Arabization' in the disputed areas (Mohammed Ihsan, chap. 25), higher education (Katherine Ranharter, chap. 26), water politics (Greg Shapland, chap. 27), peace education (Kelsey Shanks, chap. 28), Halabja memorials (Nicole Watts, chap. 32), media (Andrea Fischer-Tahir, chap. 33) and finally, honour-based violence (Nazand Begikhani and Gill Hague, chap. 34). Chapters 24, 29 and 35 explore issues concerning the Kurdish society of Iraq in general and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in particular. Stansfield (chap. 24) details major political and economic developments that involved the KRG

from 2003 to 2016. The growing power of the ruling KDP and PUK in Iraqi Kurdistan (partly because of the growth of gas and oil sector), coupled with the Iraqi's ruling elites' increasing hostility towards the KRG and constant geopolitical security threats posed by the likes of the Islamic State (Daesh), in Stansfield's view, most likely will compel the KRG to actively pursue a 'confederal', instead of a federal, design for the future of Iraq.

Francis Owtram (chap. 35), however, predicts a rather different prospect for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Focusing on the KRI's position in the 2005 Iraqi constitutional referendum and highlighting that 'federalism is potentially both secession constraining and secession inducing' (p. 525), Owtram anticipates that the KRI will eventually secede from Iraq. Profound lack of trust between the Kurds and the Iraqi state in the course of events since 2005 and the vague position of the global powers like the United States in the disputes between the two sides are more proof pointing to the diverging paths of the Iraqi Kurds and Iraqi state. Benjamin Isakhan (chap. 29) outlines the multidimensional response of the KRG to the advance of the Daesh forces. While the KRG leveraged the Daesh onslaught to strengthen ties with Western powers and seize the disputed territories (hence pushing the Iraqi state to enforce Article 14 of the Constitution of Iraq), the defeat of the Daesh, Isakhan states, could mean less foreign military and political support for the KRG, weakening the Kurds' position vis-à-vis Baghdad.

The remaining chapters address the KRI's foreign politics. Renad Mansour (chap. 30) examines the KRG's foreign politics, arguing that given the substate and precarious status of the KRG in Iraq, foreign relations plays a key role in lessening the dependence on the central Iraqi state and furthering the capacities of state building, hence securing legitimacy, both domestically and internationally (p. 450). Shareef (chap. 31) focuses specifically on US-KRI relations, pointing out the strategic partnership between the United States and the Iraqi Kurds following the constitutional recognition of the KRG as a governmental entity in Iraq since 2005. Despite the US manoeuvres around both the Iraqi state and the KRG, Shareef argues that recent strategic changes in US-KRI relations have not been translated into changes in US policy (vision and objectives) towards the KRI.

The Kurdish Question Revisited attempts to cover various aspects of the Kurdish question in its entirety, yet the book only partly achieves this goal. Theoretically, the volume falls short of providing discussions on the complexities and intricacies of the Kurdish question in each host country in the region. Empirically, the volume remains a reflection of the shortcomings of Kurdish studies, as the volume's strength is in its detailed and in-depth analyses of the Kurdish question in Iraq and Turkey, while the parts on Iranian and Syrian Kurdistan remain largely limited in scope and depth. Specific dimensions of the Kurdish question that have not yet been examined in depth by the scholars of the field could have been included in this volume. These include the questions of the Kurdish diaspora (which receives limited attention in the

volume), the colonisation of Kurdistan and the force of anti-Kurdish racism in the modern state system in the Middle East. Despite these shortcomings, *The Kurdish Question Revisited* does offer useful insights and analyses, particularly regarding the Kurdish question in Turkey and Iraq. It also provides up-to-date accounts of the recent developments in the field of Kurdish studies. As such, the volume is a useful resource and starting point for scholars, as well as graduate and undergraduate students interested in Middle Eastern and Kurdish studies.

Behnam Amini, York University

J. R. Osborn, *Letters of Light: Arabic Script in Calligraphy, Print, and Digital Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017)

Letters of Light: Arabic Script in Calligraphy, Print, and Digital Design by J. R. Osborn is an elegantly written account of the technical history of Arabic script from the formalisation of calligraphic tradition in the tenth century to the use of digital Unicode in the twenty-first century. What distinguishes this book from other works on calligraphy and Arabic script in general is its attention to various technologies – handwriting, moveable type and digital fonts – that have developed along and shaped a historical continuum of script transformations. Consequently, *Letters of Light* shifts the emphasis from studying cultural practices surrounding Arabic script (especially the long tradition of aestheticisation of calligraphy) to questions of how Arabic script and technology mediate one another on a practical level. In tandem with recent theories of the effects of material culture on human practice, Osborn shows how Arabic letters do not change independently of the technologies that transmit them. On the contrary, he argues, the letters are designed and constructed as material artefacts contingent upon ideas as much as upon the pens, types and bytes that physically generate them.

Moreover, Arabic script itself is a medium that does not merely act as a transparent holder of content. For that reason, Osborn says, the visual forms of script must be considered every time the letters encounter new techniques of inscription and reproduction. While examining the transition of Arabic letters from handwriting to print to the digital, he asks throughout the book: What features [of Arabic script] can adapt and change to new technologies, and how much should they change? What features cannot change without sacrificing familiarity and recognition? What are the fundamental and essential features of a script's structure? And most importantly, with each shift in the techniques of inscription, he asks, what kind of new messages get generated every time the script adapts to a different technology? However, *Letters of Light* is not simply a chronological account of subsequent innovations and its effects. The important contribution of this book is that it demonstrates how these various techniques of inscription – usually viewed as separate technologies – are in fact enfolded into each other. In order to understand contemporary projects in

digitisation of Arabic script, one must properly place them within the specific scribal and printing histories that not only preceded these projects but continue affecting the digital design today.

Letters of Light emphasises three historical moments in which the effects of the technological mediation of script are especially evident. The book begins with the ‘scribal revolution’ – the emergence of *al-khatt al-mansub*, the system of letter proportions designed in relation to the primary measure of the *nuqta*, a rhomboidal dot created by the width of the pen. Attributed to the calligrapher Ibn Muqlah, this system, based on different sizes of *nuqta* and varying proportional relationships between the letters, helped to produce identifiable scribal styles that communicated the genre, audience or intended role of written messages. It created a scribal canon that was later refined by Ottoman calligraphers. Here, Osborn takes the study of Arabic calligraphy in a new direction. Instead of discussing spirituality and aesthetics of writing (an common approach in scholarship on Arabic script), he analyses the different calligraphic styles grown out of *al-khatt al-mansub* from the point of view of their design that strived to achieve particular artistic effects without sacrificing functionality, identifiability and formalisation. Thus, Osborn’s attention to the practical details of script design foregrounds Arabic writing as a communicative and material practice in addition to its artistic dimension.

The second important moment in the history of Arabic script is its transition to typography – a crucial move from the perspective of font design, during which the aesthetic requirements and characteristics of writing styles are distinctly entangled with the limitation of technology that had been developed to mediate script with a very different structure. Osborn points out that the emergence of Arabic moveable type seriously redefined the relational nature of Arabic letters turning them into a series of discrete, repeatable and reusable forms. Instead of approaching letters as relations of glyphs that assumed their shapes depending on their position in relation to each other, Arab typographers had to concretise the four-form model of isolated, initial, medial and finial variants of letters as distinct metal sorts. As a result, these regularised variants advanced typesetting but at the same time greatly simplified the formal and contextual rules of *al-khatt al-mansub*. Osborn discusses this shift in a broader context of the ‘delay’ in the introduction of printing in the Ottoman Empire and – far from being deterministic – suggests that functionality and communicative benefits of the calligraphic styles effectively contributed to the persistence of scribal technology during the time of economic and political stability. However, with the decline of the Porte, printing and its potential gains became a significant part of discourse of modernisation, thus engendering new discussions about the role and functionality of Arabic script. ‘Much like *al-khatt al-mansub*’, suggests Osborn, ‘movable type entered Ottoman society as an administrative and secular tool’ (p. 10). But this choice also created a situation in which the symbolic associations of script, progress and modern technology trumped purely technical considerations

and the aesthetic traditions of handwriting, leading eventually to the replacement of Arabic script with Latin letters in Turkey and several widely advertised national projects to ‘reform’ the Arabic alphabet in Egypt, both in an attempt to satisfy the purported needs of a modernising society.

The digitisation of Arabic script represents the third transformative moment that, apart from revisiting the issue of reconciliation between the features of Arabic script and the typographic culture, also suggested new possibilities and interpretations. Even simplified forms of Arabic types contained hundreds of metal sorts. So, with the move to the digital, the problem of treating Arabic letters as strings of individual glyphs continued when various types of software, following the Latin model, assigned particular coding sequences to individual Arabic letters, making them incompatible in different digital platforms. The introduction of Unicode, an international standard for encoding all the world’s writing systems, allowed for handling some of the characters and their layers, but it still struggles with fully vocalised and marked Arabic text – such as the Qur’an – that represent all the idiosyncrasies of Arabic script. This difficulty, however, created new answers in the digital environment. One direction has been to design new Arabic font styles that do not try to follow the rules of *al-khatt al-mansub*. Retaining only certain characteristics of Arabic script, these fonts aim at becoming equivalents of the most popular Latin fonts, such as projects promoted by the Khatt Foundation. Another direction is to create specialised software that is not based on one glyph – one coding number system – but instead is fully designed to account for the structure of Arabic script and intends to imitate handwriting, such as Tomas Milo’s DecoType project. Similarly, several specialised programs have been recently released addressing specifically the special features of the Qur’anic text, such as Mushaf Muscat. All these different initiatives, however, are embedded in broader discussions of the social role of script and its various communicative powers that depend on the shape of fonts and their structure.

Letters of Light tells a lucid and compelling story of enmeshments between technology and Arabic script. Yet, Osborn’s book performs another job as well: it successfully de-emphasises the primacy of the Latin alphabet. Most general histories of writing follow a similar pattern that implicitly assumes Latin orthography as the model and ideal of all forms of writing. *Letters of Light* presents a long-duration history of Arabic script with a focus on its internal characteristics and transformations that are different from and independent of the structure and changes in the Latin alphabet. However, the reader need not be familiar with Arabic language in order to follow Osborn’s argument and appreciate the idiosyncratic nature of Arabic script. Because of his accessible and visually evocative writing style, Osborn is able to address a wide audience of those interested in the history of script design, book history, digital culture, typography and visual arts or Middle Eastern history, culture and Islamic art.

CONFERENCE

18th IUAES World Congress, ‘Word (of) Encounters: The Past, Present and Future of Anthropological Knowledge’, Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil, 16–20 July 2018

The International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) in cooperation with the Association of Brazilian Anthropology (ABA) met for its 18th World Congress, entitled ‘World (of) Encounters: The Past, Present and Future of Anthropological Knowledge’, at the Federal University of Santa Catarina in Florianópolis, Brazil. There were 3,000 registered scholars from 94 countries, but 1,621 actually came to the Congress, 478 from the international world and 978 from Brazil. Almost all 32 Scientific Commissions of the IUAES were present with meetings, symposiums or plenaries. There were also 18 ethnographic films, 35 exhibitions, book launches and crafts fair. There were eight special lectures and eight plenaries, and the meetings were called open or closed sessions. They were held in English, Portuguese or Spanish. The Congress was keen to reflect the state of Brazilian anthropology that was against ‘Western Hegemony’, as was reflected in the keynote lecture of Kabengele Munanga, so translations into Portuguese or English were spontaneous for lectures and plenaries. Some sessions were only in English, and some only in Portuguese. Spanish was also used prevalently to accommodate the rest of the South American continent and the Caribbean.

At the end, Croatia and India competed for hosting the 19th World Congress, and India won with overwhelming majority. This year, the IUAES for the first time bestowed prizes of honour to some of its important officials, and eight IUAES members, including the chair of our Commission on the Anthropology of the Middle East, won these honorary prizes. The Congress’s ‘anthropological experiences’ offered opportunities for tourism within the vicinity. The day after the Congress, members could go to an agricultural village some 250 kilometres from Florianópolis. They were onion and tobacco producers, but they also produced their own vegetables, and the day’s lunch menu was from local products cooked by several women who hosted the occasion with their entire families. What made the Congress a real success, besides the quality of papers, keynote speeches and plenaries, was the active and cordial presence of students who were at every corner to respond to our queries and urgent needs; from the airport until the last day, they ensured that we got responses to all we asked, and they were even ready to accompany us to another location of the campus, something which is really rare in all congresses.

As far as our Commission on the Anthropology of the Middle East is concerned, we had a plenary entitled ‘Relevance of Anthropology to the Study of Present Situation in Middle East’ in which Commission members presented short papers on ‘Anthropology in Demythologizing of the Middle East for Contemporary Europe’ (Marcin Brocki), ‘Refugee Crisis in Europe’ (Leonardo Schiocchet), ‘Anthropology and the Syrian Civil War’ (Paulo G. H. R. Pinto),

‘The Show Must Go on’ (Nefissa Naguib) and ‘Children of the Cradle of Civilization’ (Soheila Shahshahani). In addition, we had another session presenting our Commission, and there might be a few new members joining us from the Caribbean and South America. Paulo Pinto, as our regional representative, will now take care of matters related to this subcontinent. Other sessions held by our Commission included ‘Demonizing the “Other”: Stereotypes and Prejudices about Transnational Global Movements’, held by Soheila Shahshahani with Subhadra Channa (Chair of the Commission on Marginalization and Global Apartheid) and jointly chaired by IUAES President Faye Harrison. Nefisa Naguib and Gisele Fonseca Chagas held eight sessions in two days on ‘Art of Living: Anthropological Perspectives on Tastes, Desires and Pleasures’. Leonardo Schiocchet with Paulo Pinto held a session entitled ‘Arab Encounters’. Moreover, Marcin Brocki and Leonardo Schiocchet held book launches.

Soheila Shahshahani, Shahid Beheshti University