

## Book Review

Gunter, Michael *The Kurds Ascending: the Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; 178pp (hardcover), ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60370-7.

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In *The Kurds Ascending*, Michael M. Gunter examines the Kurdish question in Iraq and Turkey. The author starts with a brief historical overview on Kurds: who they are, their origin, and their population. He also discusses the Kurdish nationalism which some scholars trace back to “Sheikh Ubeydullah’s unsuccessful revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1880” (p. 3).

The rest of the book explores Iraqi Kurds, Kurds of Turkey and a very short relevant chapter about Iranian and Syrian Kurds. The second and third Chapters deal with the Iraqi Kurds’ federalism question and the changing dynamics in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq respectively. According to Gunter the best solution to the Kurdish struggle for autonomy and self-determination, within greater Iraq, is federalism. He argues that Quebec in Canada is the best model of federalism for Iraqi Kurds. But of course, this is not an easy goal to achieve: Iraq is inundated with a bevy of contestations, including (in addition to the Kurdish struggles) ethnic and resource conflicts, like the contest between different ethnicities over resource-rich Kirkuk.

Later, the author moves to explain the structure and character of the KRG. Here, he shows positive and negative sides of the KRG such as the works of construction and accelerating besides some major problems of the region such as lack of fuel and electricity, unemployment, etc. These important points make it clear that Gunter has a well knowledge about the Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the following three chapters the case of Kurds in Turkey is discussed, starting with Ocalan’s capture, Turkey’s moves to join EU and finally discussing the deep state in Turkey. In this part the author focuses mostly on the Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s (PKK) subject and its effect in Turkey’s internal and external politics. He starts explaining the Kurdish problem in Turkey after Ocalan’s capture when the PKK members and supporters all around the world especially in Turkey and Europe started a huge wave of demonstrations demanding Ocalan’s release from his prison. The author also recognizes the importance of this case for Turkey’s EU membership because, to be able to enter the EU Turkey has to meet the Copenhagen Criteria of minority rights for its Kurdish citizens and widen its human rights.

So implementing a death sentence in Ocalan's case will be a great obstacle for Turkey to enter EU. That is why Turkey decided to change the death sentence to a life time imprisonment for Ocalan. Gunter states that "Turkish EU membership is depended on solving its Kurdish problem to the satisfaction of EU" (p. 81).

The last chapter about Turkey discusses taming Turkey's deep state; an unofficial state acting besides the government such as the military which influences or intervenes in the process of decision making but in a secretive manner. Chapter 7 of the book explains very briefly the Kurdish question in Iran and Syria. Gunter affirms that although the Kurdish population in Iran is as twice as in Iraq but Kurdish nationalism and movement has not been so successful there due to very strong Iranian state. Despite this the author recognizes that the Iranian Kurds were able to establish Mahabad Republic, the only Kurdish state in the twentieth century by Qazi Mohammed, the state lived for less than a year. Finally the Syrian Kurds, the least in number and the most oppressed by the state have not enjoyed any rights in Syria and most of them are even denied citizenship. However, Gunter notes that "recently in the beginning of 2007 they [i.e. the Kurds] are showing increased signs of national awareness due to the developments of KRG" (p.136). This is likely to send strong message of hope to all Kurdish – irrespective of their domicile – that the Kurdish cause is beginning to yield tangible dividends. By extension, it is also likely to send a message of defiance to states denying Kurdish rights of self-determination or, at least, autonomy. The question is, for how long will Kurds in Iran, Turkey and Syria continue to bear the shackles of internal colonialism? This remains to be seen, but if development in Kurdistan is anything to go by, the Kurdish people are capable to advancing their cause, asserting their rights, developing themselves and building viable institutions and social infrastructure.

The foregoing paragraphs provide a recapitulation of the book. It is imperative to look at the book more critically. One must admit, though, that it is somewhat difficult to find fault in Gunter – a professor's book who has a great knowledge of the Kurdish cause, and has authored five books, several book chapters and journal articles on the Kurdish question. The most significant limitation of *The Kurds Ascending*, perhaps, is Gunter's sympathy for the Kurdish cause which stands in the way of objective analysis. While reading the book one can notice that the author is slightly biased toward Kurds. The author is supporting them and trying to find ways through which the Kurds could achieve their rights and freedoms. This indicates perhaps that the writer is a good friend of Kurds. By logical extension, one can argue that Gunter is anti-Turk and anti-Arab, particularly when he criticizes Arabs' demand for an independent Palestinian state and their rejection of the Kurdish search for a state. Indeed, Gunter makes a humorous criticism about Turkey in the book when he says "the Kurdish New Year's holiday "Newroz" is referred to by the government as "Nevroz"; while ironically, of course, the letter "W" appears on the door of virtually every public toilet in Turkey" (p.101). The author seems to be a very accurate person to notice such an issue: at this point he is very successful in proving Turkey's suspect democratic structure. The author also supported his argument of Turkey's suspect democratic credentials not only toward Kurds but toward anyone who may be acting against Kamalist principles, by giving examples of Merve Kavakci, a member of the Islamist Virtue Party, who was expelled from the parliament for wearing a headscarf, and Oral Calislar, a journalist, who was sentenced to prison as a terrorist because of his critical interview with Ocalan, and some other examples. In short, Professor Gunter is in fact successful in supporting his ideas and in finding appropriate examples.

In fairness, Gunter offers some benign criticisms demonstrating perhaps that being a good friend of the Kurds does not prevent the writer from criticizing Kurds' unacceptable actions. An example can be found in chapter four where Gunter criticizes Ocalan. He recalled that before being arrested Ocalan was calling for independence and a Pan-Kurdish state, but later he changed his words to Kurds getting their legitimate rights within the Turkish state. Despite this, there is a weak analysis on Kurds in Turkey, the writer heavily focused on the PKK and showing it as the only movement representing the Kurdish population of Turkey. The writer has neglected or underestimated the role of other Kurdish parties in Turkey, such as Democratic People's Party which have noticeable influence on Turkish policy.

Another weakness is, while discussing the structure of KRG the author does not criticize KRG's inefficiency and lack of democracy, especially when he enumerates the leaders in the KRG who are mostly coming from the Barzani family or are relatives or offspring of certain families and leaders. So one can say that the author provides a descriptive text explaining KRG's composition rather than critically analyzing the way it has been formed which is typically based on kinship. The author is obviously biased towards the KRG and prefers to show its positive sides more than the negative ones. On the other hand, he does not completely neglect the negative points of the KRG and its failure to provide some basic services for the citizens. Despite his intense familiarity with the Iraqi Kurdistan, the writer does not mention much about minorities in Kurdistan Region like Turkmans, Assyrians, etc who have a significant role in the region.

The title and subtitle of the book give the impression that it is only about Kurds in Iraq and Turkey though in the last chapter the author discusses the Kurdish question in Iran and Syria. So it would be better if the author cancelled the last chapter of the book.

In spite of the foregoing limitations, I agree with David Romano's endorsement on the book's cover which states that "Michael Gunter's book should be of great interest to those previously unfamiliar with the Kurds". The book provides a good explanation of the Kurdish problem in Iraq and Turkey. In addition to being up to date, it can be a good reference material for those who need a firsthand, but grounded, analysis of the Kurdish question. Thus, Gunter's book complements existing work on the Kurdish question especially *A Modern History of the Kurds* by David McDowell (I. B. Tauris Publishing, London, 2004; ISBN: 9781850434160).