

## Jordi Tejel Gorgas: “La Question kurde: Passé et présent.”

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### Book Reviewed

Paris: L'Harmattan; 2014; pp. 144; ISBN 978-2343037226

In recent years, historian Jordi Tejel Gorgas has contributed greatly to the study of Kurdish history. His 2007 monograph, *Le Mouvement kurde de Turquie en exil: Continuités et discontinuités du nationalisme kurde sous le mandat français en Syrie et au Liban (1925-1946)*, examines the activities of Kurdish nationalists from Turkey in French mandatory Syria, while his 2009 book, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, provides an excellent overview of the often forgotten Kurdish population of Syria. Gorgas' latest work, *La Question kurde: Passé et présent*, is broader in scope, presenting the reader with a general historical introduction to the Kurdish question. Although the book is relatively short, the depth and breadth of the narrative is both ambitious and impressive. Within the space of a mere 125 pages (excluding bibliography), the author examines the evolution of the Kurdish question across a wide geographical space from the late nineteenth century to the present day. He thereby encompasses Kurdish inhabited lands in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

*La Question kurde: Passé et présent* is comprised of an introduction and six chronologically organized chapters. In his introduction, Gorgas recognizes the difficult nature of, and risks associated with, overgeneralization regarding the Kurds, a

people of great linguistic and religious diversity. He notes the necessity of striking a “balance between the necessary precautions in the epistemological study of ethnic or national groups—including avoiding the essentialization of groups—and the study of the evolution of the identity, or rather the Kurdish identities” (19). This nuanced approach towards the Kurds and the Kurdish question forms the basis of Gorgas' scholarship and provides a refreshing change from recently published journalistic works, some of which oversimplify Kurdish-related issues.

The book's first chapter opens with the emergence of the Kurdish question in the late Ottoman period, highlighting the role of a new class of Kurdish intellectuals in the development and consolidation of Kurdish identity. However, it is argued that it was not until the end of the Great War and the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire that, at least amongst some of the Ottoman Kurdish elite, Kurdish nationalism came to replace commitment to the Ottoman political order.

The second chapter focuses on the interwar period and on the development of the Kurdish movement in the new nation-states of Turkey and Iran as well as the Kurdish movement in semi-colonial states of French mandatory Syria and the British-dominated Kingdom of Iraq. Regarding

Turkey and Iran, Gorgas highlights the similarities between the two countries' uncompromising approaches to the Kurdish populations: Military repression accompanied by a 'civilizing mission' that cast the Kurds as 'pre-modern' reactionaries. However, whereas in Turkey these policies were largely successful (at least until the 1960s), the 1941 Anglo-Soviet invasion and the subsequent collapse of the Iranian state, provided an opportunity for Kurdish nationalist mobilization and for the emergence of the short-lived Mahabad Republic in 1947. Gorgas contrasts this with developments in Syria and Iraq, where political life was dominated by European imperialism. In particular, he highlights the relationships forged between the European powers and new 'minority' groups (such as the Kurds) in fostering the notion amongst Arab nationalists that Kurdish political mobilization in Syria and Iraq was the result of imperialist intrigues.

In broad terms, the third chapter assesses both developments in Turkey, Iran and Syria as well as some of the broader historical trends—including the decline of European influence and the discrediting of Western style "bourgeois democracy" in the Arab world in the period between 1946 and 1960. However, the chapter focuses primarily on the emergence of

the Kurdish movement in Iraq and, in particular, the dynamics unleashed by the 1958 Iraqi Revolution. Gorgas highlights the shift from a spirit of cooperation between Iraq's revolutionary dictator Abd al-Karim Qassim and Kurdish nationalists in the initial aftermath of the revolution towards a growing antagonism and conflict, which came to a head in 1961 with the outbreak of Iraq's Kurdish revolution. Chapter Four covers the period between 1961 and 1991, a period characterized by "an acceleration of history for the Kurdish national movement ..." (71). According to Gorgas, this acceleration was framed by a number of broad socio-economic changes—rapid urbanization, population growth, increasing access to education, the development of new intellectual groups and the emergence of the youth as a social group in itself—all of which impacted not only the Kurds but all Middle Eastern peoples. As in earlier chapters, the author examines developments across the Kurdish world, including developments amongst the growing Kurdish diaspora in Europe. However, it is the developments in Turkey and Iraq which take center stage. This includes the emergence of left-wing Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (better known by its Kurdish acronym PKK) as well as the Kurdish struggle

in Iraq, which resulted in the Anfal genocide of 1988 and, ultimately, in the establishment of a quasi-independent Kurdish entity in 1992, following the First Gulf War. The penultimate chapter discusses developments between the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq in 1992 and the outbreak of the Second Gulf War in 2003. Gorgas argues that the experience of the Kurds in northern Iraq had serious implications for the Kurdish movement beyond Iraq's boundaries. He points out that the international intervention that allowed for the establishment of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq "created the necessary conditions for the Kurdish question to gain an unprecedented level of visibility" (93). This is particularly apparent when examining the Kurdish movement in Turkey, where the PKK established itself as the hegemonic power in Turkish Kurdistan.

The book's final chapter brings the narrative into contemporary times through a discussion of the events of the last decade (2003-2013). Gorgas identifies this period as marking a "new acceleration of history for the Middle East" (109), one precipitated by the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In narrating this acceleration, the author examines a number of recent events including developments within the Kurdish region of Iraq, the emergence of

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the Kurdish 'peace initiative' in Turkey, political mobilization in Iranian Kurdistan and the emergence of de facto Kurdish autonomy in Syria following the revolution of 2011.

In general terms, *La Question kurde: Passé et présent* offers the reader an excellent overview of the Kurdish question and its historical development. It is readable with Gorgas condensing, what is an extremely complex subject, into a relatively short space without sacrificing depth or nuance. Hence, it will provide both those with a general interest in the Kurdish question as well as Middle East

specialists with an excellent primer on this most fraught and problematic of topics.

### Works Cited

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