

The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in the Afrin Region of Rojava: Book Review

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide a critical review of Thomas Schmidinger's book *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in the Afrin Region of Rojava*. (Translated by Micheal Schiffmann, Preface by Andrej Grubacic, PM press, 2019, 146 pp. ISBN: 978-1-62963-651-1)

1. Introduction

Thomas Schmidinger's book investigates the brief history of Turkey's incursion of Afrin with its Islamists allies in the spring of 2018. Even though the Afrin canton has historically been the home to several different ethnic and religious minorities in Syria, the book's protagonist is a Kurd.

The Turkish policy towards northern Syria was not, as its officials described, a security concern due to the existence of the PKK and its sister movement PYD; in fact, the policy aims to build an annex of Erdogan's irredentist foreign policy based on the ethnic replacement of the Kurd in Afrin with the Turkish-backed jihadists and Turkmens, who might turn it into the Turkish Republic of North Syria.

In the Arab's uprising, the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has been one of the most controversial research subjects among different disciplines of social sciences. Although the geopolitical games between regional and global powers in Syria have been the main focus of international communities during the rise of the ISIS, the Kurdish resistance that centrally depends on male and female fighters who have close ties with the PKK in terms of ideology have become the new research topic. While most of the reports and academic conducts have been dealing with the war itself, some Syrian civil war elements have not been explored in detail. Schmidinger, in his comprehensive book, includes interviews and the historic background of the Afrin, such as the religion and ethnicity. Not only does he show the harmony and diversity of the city of Afrin but also goes beyond present lessons that can be learned and discussed from the battle for Afrin and the possibility of the Turkish Republic of North Syria.³

Schmidinger's book, after presenting the history of the region from the Ottoman period to the modern times, explores the dramatic alterations in the history of the region and, more importantly, elaborates on the multiethnic and multireligious features of the city. The attack of the Turkish army, backed by jihadists, on Afrin in 2018 is argued to be a systematic attack, aiming to end the revolution that was based on democratic confederalism⁴, which, according to the author, was more of an experiment than a revolution. The author is one of the few European researchers to have witnessed the transition and

² Thomas Schmidinger is a political scientist at the university of Vienna, secretary of general of the Austrian Association for Kurdish Studies and the creator of Vienna Kurdish Studies Yearbook, which has several studies on Kurdistan, Iraq, Syria and Kosovo, dealing with political Islam, jihadism and migration.

³ Schmidinger, pp.132.

⁴ Ocalan, pp. 21-33.

transformation of the Afrin canton, destructive consequences of the Turkish attack on the city and the everyday practices of the Rojava revolution.

The book was constructed based on interviews with people from various ethnic, political and religious backgrounds. It briefly looks at the modern history and politics that profoundly impact both the region and the canton of Afrin. The author claims that the Turkish war on the Kurdish region was, in one way or another, planned with the aim to commit ethnic cleansing of the Kurds and create more conflict in the area after NATO and Russia's free pass to Erdogan.⁵ Although the reasons behind the Kurdish forces' withdrawal from Afrin remains unclear, the author argues that, based on his observations and interviews, the forces left the region to prevent more civilian casualties in the area.⁶

Through detailed accounts of the Turkish attack on the region, the book argues that due to the Turkish's unwillingness to the allow journalists and researchers in the canton after seizing the city, severe human rights violation took place in the region.⁷ The research discusses that the Turkish existence is rooted in a long-lasting presence in the region and it aims to change the harmony of the canton by replacing the school curriculum such as making the students salute the Turkish flag.⁸

Further, the book also evaluates the war on Afrin in terms of the differences between rightist and leftist violence and claims that while the YPG put civilian's life before the city's defense, and controversially in the author's views, the international community also has a responsibility towards the Afrin civilians' life.⁹

Schmidinger's book describes the history of Afrin and its transformation before and after the canton's incursion by the Turkish army and the jihadists from the region. Its evidence-based elaborations have huge promises to give a road map to the social scientists, journalists and politicians in understanding the war on Afrin and the diagnosis of the international community's failure regarding the Syrian civil war and conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish state. The difficulty of conducting any research in a war zone makes this book valuable for those who aim to understand the Turkish policy towards the Kurds in Syria and the Rojava revolution, which came about in the catastrophe of the Syrian civil war.

References

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⁵ *ibid*, pp. 104-105.

⁶ *ibid*, pp.106.

⁷ *ibid*, pp. 109.

⁸ *ibid*, pp.110.

⁹*ibid*, pp. 129