

Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis*, St. Martin's Press, New York (1999) 181 pp. \$39.95 Cloth
Reviewed by Francis Sarguis

Some 20 years ago, Michael Gunter spent a year in Turkey as a Fulbright scholar. He has since published a number of articles dealing generally with the Turks, the Armenians and, more recently, with the Kurds. His attention on the Kurdish question intensified following the end of the Gulf War in 1991, and the failed Kurdish uprising which ensued it. Invariably, his writings on the Kurds have also included references to lesser population groups in the region. It is not surprising therefore that, among others, he includes several references to Assyrian Christians, and to the Assyrian Democratic Movement.

This book follows the pattern of previous Gunter books.¹ The author has been a political science professor for thirty years, but his writings – at least as they relate to the Kurds -- probably cannot be characterized solely in scholarly terms. His approach (dotted with interesting but not always essential minutiae) is more akin to that of a journalist; it is as if one might be reading an extensive essay in *The New Yorker* magazine or *The New York Review of Books*. This feeling is reinforced by the book's brevity – a net of 136 pages, once it is shorn of its Notes, Bibliography and Index.

The author explains that his sources are the copious notes collected in his numerous interviews with the characters weaving in and out of the theatric setting known as Iraqi Kurdistan. He provides brief but interesting portraits of the two figures who first come to mind in that region: Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. We learn about their differing social roots, and about their families. These permit a better understanding of their sharply different outlooks on the future of their turf.

In an effort to help us better understand the Kurdish people, Gunter in Chapter 1 reviews the Wigrams' well-worn travel commentaries² set early in the twentieth century. But by his own words (1) Gunter undercuts the import of the Wigrams as a source of Kurdish history:

“Written by a British Christian missionary and his brother who lived and traveled through Kurdistan for ten years during the first decade of the twentieth century, Cradle of Mankind is a treasure trove of insights and stories despite the inherent biases its authors inevitably possessed ... [I]t was written as a paeon to the Christian Assyrians who were ultimately decimated by the Muslims during World War I...”

Whether or not they have actually read the Wigrams' book, Gunter's commentaries will ring familiar to JAAS readers, since his earlier review of that same work appeared in this

¹ Gunter's previous books relating to the present subject include [The Kurds and the Future of Turkey](#), [The Kurds of Iraq: Tragedy and Hope](#) (reviewed in JAAS [1996], Vol. X, No.1, pp.96-99), and [The Kurds in Turkey](#).

² Edgar T.A. and W.A. Wigram, [The Cradle of Mankind: Life in Eastern Kurdistan](#), 2d ed (London: A & C Black, 1922)

publication.³ The Wigrams travelogue, while interesting, relates to the remote mountainous reaches of eastern Turkey. As such, its value would be somewhat limited in shedding light, for example, on the formation of Jalal Talabani, whose origin is traced to the Kirkuk and Suleimaniya region.

Though his focus is on the Kurds, Gunter has occasionally interesting observations about the minorities who live among them. Notwithstanding the amplitude suggested by the title, Gunter's book is really more about north Iraq, rather than Iraq as a whole. Therefore, while one finds several references to the Christian Assyrians, they are considered in limited fashion, since most Assyrians in Iraq do not live in the north. As concerns another minority, the "Yezidis", Wigram views them as another non-Kurdish group, but Gunter explains that "[t]he Yezidis ... are Kurds who still follow an ancient and indigenous, pre-Islamic Kurdish religion" (7).

Wigram describes the Heriki Kurds as a "*horde of human locusts*", seeing them in contrast to the relatively more grounded Barzani Kurds. According to Wigram (who cited some "*old Nestorian priests*"), the Heriki Kurds were Christians once, and early in the 20th century they still carried the head "*of one of the several saints George of Eastern legend ... in a chest.*"

Assyrians who grieve perennially over the inability of their leaders to sign on to a united socio-political program will find similar ineptitude and megalomania at the root of Kurdish disarray. Thus, the travails of the Iraqi National Congress (34) could just as easily be a summation of a scenario common to Assyrians:

"Unity ... proved difficult, ... as 'it was consumed by disputes over who represents whom, what percentage and share should each faction have in the organizations, and what each faction's voting rights are'. By its own admission, the [Iraqi opposition] suffered from 'the Narcissism of parties that numbered in the dozens, each having no more than 10 or 20 members in most cases. The opposition lacked 'a leadership capable of exploiting opportunities, of controlling the means and methods leading to recognizing the rights of the uprising and the opposition, and of representing the opposition before the UN organizations and decision makers.'"

One might see Gunter's effort as heroic and hopeless, both at the same time. He seeks to present some order where none exists, among the hodgepodge of groups and individuals who have participated in or withdrawn from the "Iraqi opposition". But one theme takes center stage, and that is the virulent factionalism between the two major players, the KDP and the PUK. The Kurdish Democratic Party is headed by Masud Barzani, almost as a *droit de seigneur*. Facing him off is the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, headed by Jalal Talabani, mercurial and well-read. Their constant tug of war, a source of great frustration to Western powers, could be mistaken for a larger version of the Assyrian political scene.

Overall, Gunter's book is a useful presentation of the variables which suggest hope as well as doom for the democratic experiment in North Iraq. Following the departure of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi Kurds held democratic elections in July 1992. Their newly-constituted Parliament reserved five of the 105 seats to Christians. This was a generous

allocation, and it went well beyond the size of the Christian population in relation to the whole. Things were looking up, not only for the Kurds but also for the Assyrians. Unfortunately, in the eight years which have since passed, there has been an intermittent but raging civil war between the two Kurdish groups. This tussle for power (and mostly over revenue-sharing) has inevitably made life more uncomfortable for everyone in the region, Assyrians included. Plans for a new election, once contemplated as a cyclical event, have been aborted, falling victim to the feuding. The Washington Accords of recent vintage (between KDP and PUK) held out the hope for a calmer future, but peace within the Iraqi Kurdish family remains elusive. It is interesting that to the West “the peace process” conjures up reconciliation between Jews and various Arabs, whereas in north Iraq it refers primarily to the KDP-PUK feud, and the “normalization of Kurdistan.”

Amid this maelstrom the Assyrian Democratic Movement (Zowaa), whose authority is symbolic rather than real, has attempted to play a constructive role. As an informal mediator between the two main forces, it has tried to foster greater trust and civility between the KDP and the PUK. Zowaa has also reached out beyond the two principal parties. For example, according to a May 2, 2000 Zinda news report, Zowaa met in April with four lesser Kurdish political parties (the Kurdistan Islamic League, the Iraqi Kurdistan Communist Party, the Kurdistan Independent Labor Party, and the Kurdistan National Movement) to discuss the progress of the peace process. A joint statement ensued, expressing dismay at the sluggish implementation of the Washington Accord provisions.

To this reviewer, there is a critical aspect of the Iraqi Kurdish question about which Gunter could have said more, namely, the nature of the Kurdish diaspora and its impact (if any) on the goings-on back home. The Assyrians, while few in north Iraq, number some 200,000 in the U.S. By contrast, it is estimated that there are less than 20,000 Kurds in this country. But a cursory glance at the publicized activities of the two groups reveals that, in contrast to the Assyrians, the Kurdish Americans are very active lobbyists in Washington, and they frequently organize political conferences featuring significant decision-makers. There are two groups who could benefit greatly from the mature example and resourcefulness of Kurdish Americans: The Kurds in north Iraq, but also the Assyrians in the diaspora.