A SHORT HISTORY OF KURDISH PUBLISHING AND PROSPECTS FOR ITS FUTURE

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The people who call themselves Kurds inhabit an area of Asia known as “Kurdistan,” a region that today is divided between Turkey (northern Kurdistan), Iran (eastern Kurdistan), Iraq (southern Kurdistan), and Syria (western Kurdistan), with smaller populations in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Over time, Kurds have contributed to the cultures of many civilisations and empires, but they have also had their own distinct culture and history which can be attested by the number of Kurdish principalities that emerged after the first millennium CE.

In the twentieth century, however, history has not been kind to the Kurds. Although after World War I, the Treaty of Sèvres promised “local autonomy for the land where the Kurd element predominates,”1 the promise of a Kurdish nation was never formalised and the Kurdish population was divided between five states. When the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion against the new Turkish republic was defeated, the Kurdish people saw their national aspirations crushed. In subsequent years, the only significant manifestation of national self-determination occurred in 1946 with the creation of the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in Iran, which lasted less than a year.

In the search for self-determination, what has united the Kurds has been their language (although, as we shall see, for centuries Kurds have not been able to communicate using one common language). While a majority of Kurds have also been united in their embrace of Islam, Kurds pre-date Islam; and also, since the arrival of Islam, there have always been minorities of Alevi Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Yezidi, and, in the twentieth century, secular Kurds. Today, the number of Kurds is estimated at twenty to twenty-five million, making them the largest ethnic group in the world not occupying its own nation state. In the twentieth century, the Kurdish language in every country in which the Kurds live has been subject

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to what can be termed “linguicide,” owing to prohibitions placed on the language and forced assimilation (which makes it difficult to estimate the actual number of Kurdish speakers). Unfortunately this extends to some Kurdish nationalists in northern Iraq, who urge the Kurdish administration there to assimilate Kurdish speakers of, among others, the Kurmanji and Hawrami language varieties.

Despite the number of Kurdish speakers—which places the language as one of the world’s more robust languages—the Kurdish language can be said to balance on a fragile precipice. This fragility is still present, despite self-administration in Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991 and also recent limited relaxations on language laws in Turkey. Moreover, an additional problem for the language is that it is divided into two scripts: Roman and modified Arabic. Mirroring this split is the division between the two major dialect divisions, Sorani (spoken mostly in Iran and Iraq) and Kurmanji (spoken mostly in Turkey and Syria).

In addition, it is also necessary to mention the substantial financial and political obstacles to publishing languages viewed by the majority as inferior and subject to restrictions, and it should also be noted that because Kurds in Iran, Turkey, and Syria cannot study Kurdish in public schools, learning to read Kurdish is a skill that must be acquired in other ways, a situation that affects the widespread distribution of Kurdish materials. Finally, in addition to restrictions on language use, another obstacle to effective publication is government censorship in the countries in which Kurds live.

Nonetheless, despite the difficulties, it is surprising to review the actual number of Kurdish works which have been published, and it is exciting to witness the prospects for the future of Kurdish publishing. Certainly, the revolution in communication technology that includes the Internet and satellite TV has benefited many national minority languages in the world, not just the Kurds. This paper offers a brief history of Kurdish publishing and, more importantly, discusses the prospects for its future. However, because the Kurds remain divided across several countries, this paper must inevitably divide itself likewise, and it must also discuss the situation of Kurdish publishing in the Kurdish diaspora living outside Kurdistan.

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