



Essential Readings on The Left in Kurdistan

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[This Essential Reading is the "Left in Kurdistan" installment of a focused series on "The Left in the Middle East." Encompassing a broad range of entry points to researching and teaching the left, the series emphasizes communist and socialist components, while allowing authors to define the specific parameters of said emphasis in their installment. The Essential Readings series is curated by the Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative (MESPI) team at the Arab Studies Institute. MESPI invites scholars to contribute to our Essential Readings modules by submitting an "Essential Readings" list on a topic/theme pertinent to their research/specialization in Middle East studies. Authors are asked to keep the selection relatively short while providing as much representation/diversity as possible. This difficult task may ultimately leave out numerous works which merit inclusion from different vantage points. Each topic may eventually be addressed by more than one author. Articles such as this will appear permanently on www.MESPI.org and www.Jadaliyya.com. Email us at info@MESPI.org for any inquiries.]

Studies of the Kurds and their struggle for self-determination largely focus on nationalism and ethnic/minority relations within countries that Kurds are divided between (i.e., Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey). Most of these studies associate Kurdish political organizations in a given state to a broader (regional) Kurdish nationalist movement. Therein, many lack an in-depth description and analysis of important divisions (political, social, etc.) in the Kurdish communities across the region, and the ways they could be reflected in the structure and politics of Kurdish political organizations.

Such nuances have become both more visible and more central in the scholarship since the rise of the Rojava Revolution (2012) and the military campaign of Kurdish fighters against the Islamic State (2013–15)—both in Syria. Since then, more scholarly works have also focused on the Left in Kurdistan, its significance in both the history of the Kurdish struggle for self-determination and its realization in today's Rojava (northeast region of Syria). However, there is still a crucial lack of a comprehensive study of the Left in Kurdistan and the historical ground on which the Rojava Revolution has been established.

Below I list some essential readings that give shape to our contemporary understanding of leftist politics and movements in Kurdistan. They are mainly English-language publications. However, I also list a few texts in other languages that are vital to demonstrating the important role of the Left in the Kurdish struggle for self-determination—especially since the 1960s. Here I have included some key texts about the Left in the region to indicate how the Kurdish struggle for self-determination can be situated in the leftist politics and revolutionary movements in those countries where Kurdistan is divided into. In fact, the relationships between the Kurdish struggle for self-determination and the Left in the region, such as in Iran, Turkey, and the Arab Left, were crucial to the development of the contemporary Kurdish movement. The below list gives particular attention to the Rojava Revolution and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), as the most powerful contemporary Kurdish leftist organization and, perhaps, the Middle East. What follows is divided into four themes: the Kurdish movement and the left in the region; the Rojava Revolution; Öcalan and the PKK; and the Kurdish women's movement.

The Kurdish Struggle for Self-Determination and the Left in the Middle East

Leftist ideologies have been the basis of political programs and practices among some of the most active Kurdish political parties. Moreover, many Kurdish parties (especially those in today's Iraqi Kurdistan) were originally founded on the basis of leftist ideologies despite their adoption of a nationalist platform and abandonment of their original radical politics. The class composition of these parties is a topic that has not received much scholarly attention, especially in English.

There are two main tendencies in contemporary Kurdish politics across the region: First, unitary nationalism represented by a number of political organizations that carry the same name of Kurdistan Democratic Party in all four parts of Kurdistan and their aligned smaller parties. Second, democratic confederalism led by an umbrella organization called the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), which includes the PKK and a number of affiliated parties in each part of Kurdistan, such as the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. However, it is important to recognize that there are still a number of other Kurdish political parties that adhere to a socialist agenda under which they propose an alternative for the Kurdish struggle for self-determination. The most important political organization here is the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, which I will talk about below.

In Turkey, the relationship between the Kurdish movement and the Turkish Left has received significant attention. Of particular importance therein is the 1960s revival of Kurdish insurgency

in Turkey and its evolution in the decades after. Hamit Bozarslan's works provide incredibly important resources for this history. One important example here is his introduction for *The Book of Kurdistan's Socialist Left: Selected Documents from the 1960s to the 2000s* [*Kürdistan Sosyalist Solu Kitabı: 60'lardan 2000'lere Seçme Metinler*] (Dipnot Yayınları, 2014), which comprises a collection of historical documents from Kurdish leftist political organizations in Turkey since the 1960s. In his introduction, Bozarslan provides a historical survey with extensive references about the history of the left in all four parts of Kurdistan. One particularly useful source that he references is a massive multi-volume encyclopedia of the left in the world with a focus on Turkey named *The Encyclopedia of Socialism and Social Movements* [*Sosyalizm ve Toplumsal Mücadeleler Ansiklopedisi*] (İletişim Yayınları, 1988). The seventh volume of this series has many entries about the left in Bakur (Northern Kurdistan or the Kurdish region of Turkey). Another essential source is Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden, ed. "Ideological Productions and Transformations: the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Left," special issue of *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2011). The issue features a notable interview with Hamit Bozarslan in which he talks about the history of the left in Turkey in relation to the Kurdish movement in the years before the rise of the PKK in the 1960s and 1970s. Also shedding light on the history of "Marxist Turkish left's engagement with the Kurdish question in Turkey" is Mesut Yeğen, "The Turkish Left and the Kurdish Question," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016): 157–76.

Beyond Turkey, one of the oldest leftist Kurdish political parties is the Revolutionary Association of the Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (commonly referred to as the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan). Formally founded after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the organization has since been fragmented. Many divisions took place in this party based on a shift from leftist politics to Kurdish nationalism, and the only surviving communist section of the original party is called "Komala, the Kurdistan's Organization of the Communist Party of Iran (CPI)." Abbas Vali, *The Forgotten Years of Kurdish Nationalism in Iran* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) explores the formation of the Komala and the 1960s and 1970s rise of the Kurdish Left in Rojhelat (eastern Kurdistan or the Kurdish region of Iran). This book is the second volume in a trilogy by Vali about Kurdish nationalism in Iran, following *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (IB Tauris, 2011), and a forthcoming third volume that covers the Kurdish movement in Iran after the 1979 revolution. Many have studied the Komala party as part of the Kurdish nationalist movement, and there are very few studies in English that have paid a particular attention to this party. One essential reading about the Komala Party that I can suggest here is Sabah Mofidi's "The Left Movement and National Question: From Romanticism to Realism (With a Focus on Komala Organization)," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2016): 20-48.

Also important is the late Amir Hassanpour, well-known for his Marxist and linguistic analysis of Kurdish nationalism. A collection of his writings has recently been published under the title *Essays on Kurds: Historiography, Orality, and Nationalism* (Peter Lang, 2020). Chapter two of this book talks about the "The Absence of Peasant Revolts in the Middle East," calling it "a historiographic myth" and directly critiquing Ervand Abrahamian's *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 1982). Abrahamian's book is an authoritative classic on the modern history of Iran, and provides a meticulous study of the history of Tudeh Party, one of the biggest and most influential leftist parties—not only in Iran but also in the Middle

East region—with a considerable influence on the Kurdish left in Iran. However, it neglects many class struggles in Iran’s periphery, including the 1952–53 peasants’ uprising in the Mukriyan part of the Kurdish region of Iran. Hassanpour’s lifelong research output on the peasants’ uprising of Mukriyan has been published in Kurdish (Sorani) in an article titled “**The Peasants’ Uprisings of Mukriyan in 1952-1953: A Research Project**” [*Raperînê Werzêranî Mukriyan le 1952-1953 da: Projey Lêkolîneweyêk*], *Derwaze* 1 (2017): 94–125 and in a book that was recently published posthumously in Persian titled **The Peasant Uprising of Mukriyan 1952-1953** [شورش دهقانان مَکریان، ۱۳۳۱ – ۱۳۳۲] (Iran Namag, 2021). Another Persian collection of Hassanpour’s writings is *On the New Wave of Communism* [بر فراز موج نوین کمونیسم] (The Iranian Communist Party M.L.M Publications, 2017). This book includes illuminating analyses of some of the major topics in the Kurdish movement and Iranian history from a leftist perspective. I also recommend Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi’s “**Essential Readings on Iranian Socialism and Communism**” that was published by MESPI.

The histories of the left in Başur (Iraqi Kurdistan) and Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) have received less attention than Kurdish regions in Turkey and Iran. References to this history are largely limited to a focus on Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish political parties that started with a leftist tendency. One examples of such parties is the late Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, est. 1975). However, there are two critical works that provide a glimpse at the Kurdish side of the left in Iraq. The first is **Johan Franzén, *Red Star over Iraq: Iraqi Communism before Saddam* (Columbia University Press, 2011)**. This book is an important source as it follows the evolution and spread of the left in Iraq and in relation to the Kurdish question. Chapter three of this book is particularly useful for our purpose as it addresses Kurdish politics during Iraq’s “revolutionary years” of 1958–63 when the Kurdish nationalist movement led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani made a deal with the Iraqi government (at the time led by General Abd Al-Karim Qasim) and, for the first time, Kurds in Iraq enjoyed a relative autonomy and were considered as “Arab’s brothers.” Another work that looks back at the politics of Iraqi Communist Party (one of the oldest communist parties in the region, commonly referred to as “Shûyû’î” شێوێی in Kurdistan) with regard to the Kurdish question in this country is the classic **Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 1989)**. Based on these readings we find out that the Iraqi Communist Party recognized and promised to support Kurdish self-determination in full independence in 1935, just one year after its foundation. The Iraqi Communist Party opened a Kurdish branch in Kurdistan after World War II, leaving a significant mark on the Kurdish society, intelligentsia, and political organizations throughout the twentieth century.

One important aspect of the relationship between the Kurdish movement and the left in the region that is understudied is the relationship between the Kurdish and Palestinian struggles for self-determination. **Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, “The ‘Palestinian Dream’ in the Kurdish Context,” *Kurdish Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 47–63** looks at the history of this relationship, especially in relation to the PKK and the Turkish-Kurdish left. Another article that provides a good overview of this relationship is **Elif Genc, “The Kurdish Movement’s Relationship with the Palestinian Struggle,” *Middle East Report* 295 (Summer 2020)**. The relationship between the renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and the prominent Kurdish poet and writer from Rojava, Salim Barakat, has received surprisingly little attention for its symbolic weight. Darwish, in a poem that he wrote for Barakat, speaks of the common pains of Palestinians and

Kurds and famously says ‘the Kurd has Nothing but the Wind.’ **Abdel Razzaq Takriti**, “**The Kurd and the Wind: The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian–Kurdish Affiliation**,” in *The Politics and Cultural History of the Kurds*, ed. **Amir Harrak** (Peter Lang Publishing, **forthcoming**) beautifully puts the relationship between these two literary giants of the region on display and sheds light on deep and sorrowful stories and histories that connects Kurds and Palestinians to each other.

The Rojava Revolution

Since 2012, the Kurdish movement in Rojava developed an alternative form of social and political organization that relies on the principals of radical democracy, multi-ethnic and multi-faith communities’ coexistence, an economy based on use value and communal and cooperative production, gender liberation, and protection of the ecology. This alternative system follows Abdullah Öcalan’s paradigm of Democratic Confederalism. Many articles, books, book chapters, reports, and documentaries have been produced about the Rojava Revolution in the last few years that celebrate its successes, but there are also readings with a more critical stance that challenge the application of the revolution’s principals on the ground.

The number of books and articles that have recently been published about the Rojava Revolution speak to its importance and its lessons for the Left globally. *Roar Magazine* has offered uniquely strong coverage of the developments in Rojava. A number of articles and reports therein can be found [here](#), including my own “**Rojava Revolution: Building Autonomy in the Middle East**” (July 2014), Thomas Jeffrey Miley and Johanna Riha’s “**Rojava: Only Chance for a Just Peace in the Middle East?**” (2015), and Dilar Dirik’s two articles—“**Building Democracy without the State**” (Spring 2016) and “**Radical Democracy: The First Line Against Fascism**” (Spring 2017).

Dirik, a political sociologist and an activist with the Kurdish Women’s Movement, has been an outspoken voice since the beginning of the Rojava Revolution. Her writings appear in many edited volumes written about Rojava and the Kurdish movement. One of those, **Renée In der Maur and Jonas Staal, ed., *Stateless Democracy* (BAK basis voor actuele kunst, 2015)**, includes accounts of the revolution that are particularly attentive to the Kurdish women’s movement.

There are also some key texts that are essential for the understanding of the theoretical foundations and debates behind the Rojava Revolution. **Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboğa** in *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women’s Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (Pluto Press, 2016) provide an insightful and detailed account of the alternative system of Rojava, filled with the stories of those who are directly involved in the revolution. This book was originally written in German in 2015, and it was translated into English by Janet Biehl with a foreword by the late anthropologist David Graeber. Both Biehl and Graeber have written in support of Rojava. **Graeber’s “Why is the World Ignoring the Revolutionary Kurds in Rojava?” *The Guardian*, 8 October 2014** was crucial in bringing the international left’s attention to Rojava.

Öcalan and the PKK

A renewed PKK-led Kurdish insurgency started in the late 1970s that aimed to establish an independent socialist Kurdistan through Marxist-Leninist thinking and strategy. However, the ideological grounds of the movement experienced a major transformation since the early 2000s. The movement's founding leader, Öcalan, shifted the ideological and political orientation of the party toward an anarchist approach largely inspired by Murray Bookchin. In this new paradigm, the ultimate goal was not to smash the state's power and create an independent state for the Kurds but instead to build alternative and autonomous forms of grassroots social and political organization based on principals of radical democracy. At the same time, Öcalan and the movement were trying to force the Turkish state to negotiate a solution for the Kurdish conflict. Turkish intelligence abducted Öcalan in 1999 in an international conspiracy, and the Turkish government has since held him under solitary confinement conditions in the İmralı Island Prison in Marmara Sea. His connection to the outside world has been extremely limited, but some of his thinking have reached publishers through infrequent meetings with some members of his family and his lawyers. Some of Öcalan's books have been translated into English, including *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilization* (Pluto Press, 2006), *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century* (Transmedia Publishing LTD, 2011), *Prison Writings III: The Road Map to Negotiations* (International Initiative Edition, 2012), and—most importantly—a recently translated book, *The Sociology of Freedom: Manifesto of the Democratic Civilization, Volume III* (PM Press, 2020).

The emergence of the Rojava model has increased interest in discussions of Öcalan's paradigm of Democratic Confederalism. Two recently published edited volumes are important in this discussions: **Thomas Jeffrey Miley and Federico Venturini, ed., *Your Freedom and Mine: Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish Question in Erdogan's Turkey* (Black Rose Books, 2018),** and **International Initiative "Freedom for Öcalan – Peace in Kurdistan," ed., *Building Free Life: Dialogues with Öcalan*, (PM Press, 2020).** Havin Güneşer's forthcoming *The Art of Freedom: A Brief History of the Kurdish Liberation Struggle* (PM Press,) is also a promising essential reading in this area. There are also critical evaluations of Öcalan's ideas. One important article in this regard is **Kamran Matin, "Democratic Confederalism and Societal Multiplicity: A Sympathetic Critique of Abdullah Öcalan's State Theory," *Geopolitics* (2019).**

Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden are two other authors that have also written extensively on the PKK and the shift in the Kurdish movement from Marxist-Leninism toward what they call "an exploration of the concept of democracy." One of their most cited articles is **"Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012): 1-16.** An earlier piece by Akkaya and Jongerden traces the history of the PKK and its establishment back to its roots in the emergence and spread of leftist revolutionary politics and organizing in Turkey: **"Born from the Left: The Making of the PKK," in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden, eds. (Routledge, 2011).**

The Kurdish Women's Movement

After the beginning of the Rojava Revolution, Kurdish women fighters have come to the center of attention of many Western journalists and observers. Many documentaries, reports, and articles stress the significant role Kurdish women play in the Kurdish movement. However, few offer a deep history of the Kurdish women's movement.

One of the most important scholarly works on Kurdish women is **Shahrazad Mojab, ed., *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds* (Mazda Publishers, 2001)**. Its chapters explore different aspects of the social, cultural, and political lives of Kurdish women. A recently published book, **Shahrazad Mojab and Amir Hassanpour, *Women of Kurdistan: A Historical and Bibliographic Study* (Transnational Press London, 2021)**, offers a comprehensive survey of Kurdish women's struggle in the twentieth century through an extensive record of literature, texts, documents, and resources. The book documents a century-long history of Kurdish women's struggles against oppressive gender relations and state violence from a Marxist-feminist perspective. Among the many important figures in the Kurdish women's movement, the PKK's founding member Sakine Cansız, known by the *nom de guerre* Sara, has received significant attention. An agent associated with the Turkish intelligence service assassinated Cansız, along with her two women comrades, in 2013 in Paris. Cansız, who became known as the "Kurdish Rosa Luxemburg," wrote a memoir that has recently been translated by Janet Biehl. This memoir is a trilogy, and two volumes of it have been published so far: ***Sara: My Whole Life Was a Struggle* (Pluto Press, 2018)**, and ***Sara: Prison Memoir of a Kurdish Revolutionary* (Pluto Press, 2019)**. Mojab also has a forthcoming chapter, "Figures of Dissent: Women's Memoirs of Defiance" in **Alison Crosby and Heather Evans, eds., *Remembering and Memorializing Violence: Transnational Feminist Dialogues***, where she engages with the two volumes of Sakine Cansız's memories. Cansız's story could open a window to readers for an in-depth understanding of the Kurdish struggle for self-determination from a Kurdish woman's perspective.

Handan Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) is another important book. It provides a historical reading of the women's role in the Kurdish movement in Northern Kurdistan (Turkey) in part based on an ethnographic study with women involved in the movement. And finally, Dilar Dirik's forthcoming ***The Kurdish Women's Movement: History, Theory, Practice* (Pluto Press, 2021)** is also expected to become an essential contribution to studies of the Kurdish women's movement.

Parting Recommendations

There are certainly many sources that are left out from this list, especially those that are written in other languages. One important genre in the historiography of political movements in Kurdistan, especially among the left, is memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies that are mostly not translated in English. These readings provide invaluable insights into decades of political organizations and sociopolitical dynamics behind them. This list would include memoirs by famous Kurdish intellectuals and politicians such as Musa Anter, Mehdi Zana, Naci Kutlay, Kemal Burkay, Jalal Talabani, Jalil Gadani, Hajar, Karim Hesami, and biographical interview books with Öcalan among many others. Recently, a collection of essays and translations in Kurdish gathered and edited by Hassan Ghazi is ***Revolutionary Organization and Kurdistan***

[*Sazmanî Înqîlabî û Kurdistan* سازمانی نینقیلابی و کوردستان] (Mortazawi Publications, 2020).

This book speaks of a significant period of time in the relationship between the Kurdish movement and the Iranian Left in the final years of the Shah's regime and the early years of the Islamic Republic, especially the relation between the leadership of Kurdish political parties both in Iran and Iraq with an Iranian Maoist group called the Revolutionary Organization that split from the Toudeh Party of Iran in 1964. Other important sources that are left out here are numerous Kurdish leftist political magazines and periodicals that are published in Kurdish and other languages spoken in the region.

With the strong influence of the PKK in Kurdish politics, many journals, political magazines, articles, and special issues in English, Kurdish, and Turkish have been published in Kurdistan, Turkey and around the world that study the Kurdish struggle for self-determination from left-wing, critical, and progressive approaches. More recently, radical democracy and anarchist studies have also been influential in publications about Kurdistan, especially among the new generation of scholars. However, many historical studies of Kurdistan and the Kurdish people still tend to homogenize the history of the Kurds from the perspective of ethnic movements versus nation-states without paying attention to the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions, particularly class-based struggles, within the Kurdish communities in all four parts of Kurdistan. The literature on the Left in Kurdistan is still thin. Nonetheless, the growing number of Kurdish scholar as well as an expanding interest in the Kurdish struggle for self-determination, especially in Rojava, promise an advanced scholarship on sociopolitical and historical studies of the Kurds from leftist and decolonizing perspective and about the Left in Kurdistan.