

Book Review of Schøtt,
Anne Sofie 2021.
*Kurdish Diaspora
Mobilisation in Denmark:
Supporting the Struggle
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BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Kurdish Diaspora Mobilisation in Denmark: Supporting the Struggle in Syria, is a study by Anne Sofie Schøtt that analyses how the Kurdish diaspora in Denmark raised attention and support for Kurds in Syria and how those actions contributed to the identity formation of the Kurdish diaspora members in Denmark.

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In her book *Kurdish Diaspora Mobilisation in Denmark: Supporting the Struggle in Syria*, Anne Sofie Schøtt analyses how the Kurdish diaspora in Denmark raised attention and support for Kurds in Syria and how those actions contributed to the identity formation of the Kurdish diaspora members in Denmark. The time period of study is from the Battle of Kobane in 2014 to the Battle of Afrin in 2018. The study draws upon social movement theory and strategic interactionist theory in relation to identity formation.

The Battle of Kobane placed the Syrian Kurds on the world agenda and made the Kurdish communities worldwide immensely proud of being Kurdish. It was the first major defeat of the Islamic State (IS) and a great victory for the Syrian Kurdish forces. The event mobilised Kurds all over the world from different backgrounds, genders, ages, religions and political views in support of the Kurds in Syria (p. 7; see also [Toivanen 2021: 3](#)). Schøtt analyses how individuals and groups chose to act within a complex transnational setting of competing interests involving a multitude of actors inside and outside Denmark and how it contributed to the re-invention of a Kurdish diaspora identity.

Schøtt's book is divided into four parts. The first part introduces the reader to the events leading up to the tactical alliance between the Democratic Union Party in Syria (PYD), the Syrian Kurdish Protection Units (YPG respectively YPJ), and the international coalition that Denmark participated in. Thereafter, the focus is on constructing the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study and presenting the methodology. The second part explores the political constellations in Syria and how these are reflected in Denmark. The third part analyses the different ways Kurds mobilised in Denmark, and the fourth part is the conclusion.

TO DO IS TO BECOME

In part two of the book, the author demonstrates the complexities of trying to construct a working definition of a diaspora. Schøtt argues that a collective identity should be understood as both fluid and polyform, as well as allow a broad range of expressions. Hence, it would be more useful to speak about collective identities in the plural (p. 37). Findings from other diaspora studies suggest that Schøtt's argument of collective identities could be useful in understanding diasporas better. For instance, Abdile and Pirkkalainen ([2011: 53](#)) have argued that the Somali diaspora in Finland 'is not a homogenous group of people, but consists of different interests and positions' and that not all Somalis in Finland identify with the diaspora. Schøtt's reasoning of collective identities and the possibility to re-invent this identity with new ways of engagement, is in my view, an inclusive and democratic idea. It has the potential of increasing representation within a diaspora and allowing a greater range of opinions and expressions. This in turn, could enable host societies to engage on a larger scale with diasporas in different policy areas in the future.

Schøtt reasons further that a diaspora is not only formed by mobilisation processes, but is constantly re-invented through ongoing processes of negotiation between a multitude of actors. Hence, she sees the Danish Kurdish identity as an 'outcome of strategic interaction on several levels and in several arenas between Kurdish groups and external actors and among and within the Kurdish groups' (p. 48). Schøtt explores the different strategies Kurds use to mobilise support in Denmark and the motivations behind engaging in that action. At the heart of Kurdish identity is the idea that a Kurd is someone who opposes injustice and makes his/her voice heard (p. 147). A further

common denominator for the diverse group of people mobilising in different ways was a sense of urgency and a need to act. Her findings suggest that acting in support of the Kurdish cause individually or collectively maintained and re-created a Kurdish identity in Denmark (p. 221).

Schøtt discovers two competing political ideologies within the diaspora: those in support of the Öcalan movement, who adhere to the ideas of democratic confederalism, and the Kurdistan movement, which strives for an independent Kurdistan. She argues that depending on which movement one supports, the feeling of identification with the Kurdish cause can be linked to a different region than the one the person has ties with (p. 227). Hence, Schøtt introduces a new concept, *alter-territorial identification*, for explaining the possibility of feeling an affiliation and identification with another part of the homeland than the place of origin (p. 38).

Schøtt includes the concept of *diasporas within the diaspora* in her reasoning of diaspora identities. The concept allows for identification with different identities, while still belonging to a particular diaspora. She uses this concept to include the individuals within the Kurdish community who do not identify with any of the traditional political ambitions within the Kurdish diaspora and who instead connect with a global democratic discourse. This is important because there is an emerging new profile of second-generation Kurds who identify as Kurds, are highly educated, but want to act independently and in new ways (p. 107). Toivanen (2021: 172) observes a similar Kurdish group in France.

DIASPORAS—AN ASSET OR A THREAT?

In Chapter 9, the author discusses the ambiguous relationship between the Kurdish diaspora and Danish politicians, authorities and the public. She identifies three main strategies used by the Kurdish diaspora: political activism, legal struggle for military support and charity work, which are analysed in detail in part three of the book. She reaches the conclusion that Denmark proved to be a reluctant host society that allows the Kurdish diaspora freedom of expression.

She identifies four areas of ambiguous recognition for engaging with the Kurdish diaspora. First, Kurds are met with sympathy for their cause by politicians, but their activism seldom leads to any concrete action by the government. Second, the City of Copenhagen welcomes demonstrations and activism in the streets, but the activism is largely met with indifference by the public. Third, Danish foreign policy led to cooperation with Kurdish forces in Syria, but volunteer fighters who joined Kurdish forces in Syria risked a lawsuit upon returning to Denmark. Fourth, this ambiguity was also reflected in the funding of Kurdish associations, where only those associations who promoted integration into Danish society were granted funding. Furthermore, Schøtt discovered that there was no interaction between Kurdish NGO's and traditional humanitarian aid NGOs, which affected their funding possibilities in the long run.

Schøtt brings forth, therefore, that there is still a reluctance to recognise the existence of migrants in society and that there is an unwillingness to recognise that migrants have loyalties that reach beyond the borders of Denmark. This ambiguity is connected to different goals of Danish foreign and domestic policy (p. 223). At the same time, she shows that diasporas are becoming increasingly recognised as active agents that governments seek ways to engage with. As an example of an established and organised initiative, she gives the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora programme (p. 32).

The study develops a broad definition of a diaspora and shows that identity can be negotiated and re-invented by diaspora members with different goals and affiliations. It brings forth that different individuals and groups want to engage in different ways. Schøtt shows that diaspora activism contributes positively towards identity formation and being an active member of Danish society. Kurdish diaspora groups actively used all available means as citizens in Denmark to further their cause. The study shows that following Danish law was seen as essential in order not to harm the cause. As an example, organisers of demonstrations made sure demonstrators followed law and order and educated participants about democracy and democratic values (p. 125).

Schøtt argues that there is a discrepancy between domestic and foreign policy, which leads to an ambiguous relationship between the diaspora and the host society. Further research on how to resolve this ambiguity and discussion on how to engage with diaspora groups in different policy areas would be useful. Missing in the study is the social media dimension. Considering the 'new' cosmopolitan group of young and educated professionals engaging in the action, social media could have been an interesting dimension to explore.

This study is valuable for researchers studying social movements, diaspora engagement and the migration-development nexus. It is also an interesting study for immigrant associations who would like to build a platform for diaspora engagement. It is readable for governments and international organisations who seek new ways to engage with diasporas in different policy areas.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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