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*The Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: A Political History* by  
Zeynel Abidin Besleney (review)

Seteney Shami

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**ZEYNEL ABIDIN BESLENEY, *The Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: A Political History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014). Pp. 204. \$160.00 hardback, \$52.16 e-book. ISBN 9780367869069.**

REVIEWED BY SETENEY SHAMI, Social Science Research Council (NY) and Arab Council for the Social Sciences (Beirut), email: [shami@sscr.org](mailto:shami@sscr.org); [shami@theacss.org](mailto:shami@theacss.org)



This ambitious work is a welcome addition to the small but growing English-language literature on Circassians, whether in their historical homeland of the North Caucasus or in different locations of the diaspora that formed as a result of mass migrations into the Ottoman Empire in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Currently, the Circassian diaspora spreads over Turkey, Jordan, Syria, and Israel as well as Europe and the United States (resulting largely from more recent migrations starting in the mid-twentieth century). Besleney's research focuses on Circassians in Turkey over the period 1864–2011, with a focus on "diaspora politics." The book, therefore, will be of high interest to researchers in Circassian and Caucasian studies as well as cultural activists engaged in these politics. It can also be recommended for historians and sociologists of Turkey. While analyzing the broader Ottoman/Turkish milieu is not the main goal of the book, it is the inevitable landscape and context against which the researcher positions Circassian politics. The book thus indirectly provides a reading of late Ottoman/Republican Turkish politics from the point of view of a group largely hidden in official and academic historiography. In this regard, the references to, and intersections with, Greek, Armenian, Kurdish, and Alevi politics provide brief but interesting comparisons. For the more contemporary period, there are interesting insights into how Turkish state politics as well as regional geopolitics shape the choices and directions of Circassian and other North Caucasian communities in Turkey.

The author's stated aim is to write "...the most comprehensive source to date on the history, structure, political organizations,

established and emerging ideologies and contemporary and future parameters for Circassian diaspora politics in Turkey" (188). This ambition is both the strength and the shortcoming of the work: the author succeeds in opening up many questions and providing important information and insights for both the historical and contemporary periods, but these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered in the course of a single research project or book. The most substantive and gratifying sections of the book are chapters 5 and 6, on "Ideologies and formal organizations in the Circassian diaspora" and "Informal Circassian political organizations in Turkey." These sections enjoy the benefit of the author's in-depth research, including interviews, documentary research (also covering online and media sources), and participant observation. The historical chapters (2, 3, and 4), which rely on secondary sources, are interesting in terms of the genealogy that the author seeks to establish concerning continuities and ruptures in Circassian "diaspora politics," but the historical account of various periods and events begs many questions. The author attempts to give a full description of a 100-year period through a straight chronology. A more engaging approach might have been to select key periods or events (relevant to Circassian politics), review the existing literature, and show where and how a perspective from the Circassian experience would challenge existing narratives and conventional wisdom. This would have also sharpened the specific moments of the genealogy the author is tracing in the *longue durée* of Circassian "diaspora politics."

Analytically, the author sets out his aim as addressing the question, "Is there Circassian diaspora politics in Turkey?" (xiii). Having answered in the affirmative, he asks: How did it come about and evolve? What are the main determinants of its parameters? Who are the main actors? And, what is the impact of globalization, including the information revolution? The concluding chapter gives an excellent summary of the author's arguments concerning these questions and illuminates the analytical thread running through the book. Perhaps the conclusion should be read first as it lays out the main aims and points of the book and clarifies the phases as follows (179-184):

- 1) "The emergence of Circassians as a diaspora is not simply a post-Soviet phenomenon but rather a phenomenon that stretches back to the late Ottoman era. . ." (179). The author argues that the period between 1899-1920 is a "golden era" that

acts as a reference for contemporary organizations and activists and shapes their politics and discourses.

2) The period between 1919–1927 – the transition from Ottoman Empire to Turkish nation-state – is also key as Circassians constituted some of the key players in power struggles between Istanbul (the Sultan) and Ankara (Ataturk). The author argues that the role of some Circassians in the struggles against the emerging Republic led to later stigmatization of the Circassian community and the subsequent closing down of Circassian organizations and the silencing of intelligentsia in cities.

3) The period 1950–1980 saw the emergence of a new diaspora intelligentsia from a new generation of activists who started to migrate to the cities from the countryside. For this group the author deploys the useful term “ambivalent citizens,” originally coined by experts in scholars studying other minority groups in Turkey (180). In discussing this “ambivalence”, the author focuses on two major ideologies: “United Caucasianism” and “Returnism.” The author argues that while these ideologies differed over the political futures available for Circassians, they accepted the existing political entities and states within the Russian Federation. He also argues that while Islamist Groups have a presence among Circassian organizations in Turkey, they have had a limited impact on Circassian diaspora politics.

4) Today, the main energy of diaspora politics lies in the emergence of informal Circassian political groups since 2000. These groupings still interact with the older structures that endure, but rely more effectively on social media, on engagement in the Turkish public sphere, and contest the current political structures in the North Caucasus within the Russian Federation.

This highly interesting narrative and genealogy adds much to our current understanding of Circassian politics in Turkey, the main actors, influences involved, and unfolding changes over time. The narrative speaks to the broader political struggles within which

Circassians envision and shape their futures (Ottomanist/Turkish nationalist; right wing/left wing; Cold War; globalization; and so on). The genealogy shows how the two ends of the twentieth century reflect and refract one another. Thus, the chaotic periods of the formation of the Soviet Union out of the Russian Empire on the one end, and the formation of the Russian Federation out of the Soviet Union on the other, enabled heightened interactions between the homeland in the North Caucasus and the diaspora in Turkey with a significant flow of ideas and influential actors between the two locations. The complicated relationships and interactions between the homeland and the diaspora show the possibilities of what might have been as well as what came to be.

Analytically, Besleney frames his research around the concepts of nation and nationalism, diaspora, and globalization and transnationalism. The author could have returned to these frames in the concluding chapter to tell us how they have been adequate or inadequate in addressing the particularities of the case of Circassians in Turkey. Particularly, the notion of “diaspora politics” could have been sharpened. There is an analytical distinction to be made between politics in the diaspora (shaping relations with the Turkish state and society) and politics of the diaspora (shaping relations with the homeland and with other Circassian communities elsewhere). Besleney’s rich descriptions show us the multiple ways in which these types of politics inform one another, as they diverge and collude. Finally, in reference to the most recent emergent organizations, it might have been interesting to reflect on whether theories of new social movements would be useful in conceptualizing the differences between these groupings and the older structures and ideologies.

As a concluding thought on the importance of the work, it is interesting to examine the bibliography and notes of the book: the study of Circassians and similar groups who straddle borders, nations, cultures, and languages lends itself to the creation of truly transnational and multilingual fields of knowledge. Such knowledge is produced formally through books but also through conferences, blog posts, and journals (such as the multilingual *Journal of Caucasian Studies*, of which Besleney is a founding editor). These efforts, importantly, show the ways in which academia and cultural activism located in different contexts can interact to create subaltern fields of knowledge that question and contest hegemonic understandings of national histories, geopolitics, and cultural identity.