

KURDWATCH●Report 1

The Kurdish policy of the Syrian government and the development of the Kurdish movement since 1920

An overview



KurdWatch is a project of the
European Center for Kurdish Studies
Emser Straße 26
12051 Berlin
Germany

Phone: +49 – 30 – 62 60 70 32
Fax: +49 – 721 – 1 51 30 34 61
info@kurdwatch.org

© KurdWatch 2009

The Kurdish policy of the Syrian government and the development of the Kurdish movement since 1920

An overview

An estimated two million¹ Kurds in Syria constitute the second largest ethnic group next to the Arabs in a total population of around twenty million. They are settled for the most part in three enclaves along the Syrian-Turkish border: 'Afrin (Jabal al-Akrad), 'Ayn al-'Arab (Kobani), and the area of al-Hasakah province known as the Jazirah. This article provides an overview of Syrian government policy towards the Kurds, and of the development of the Kurdish movement in Syria from the beginning of the French mandate (1920) to the present day (2009).

The Kurds under French mandate

For the Ottoman Empire, the First World War ended on October 31, 1918. With the signing of the Armistice of Mudros a day earlier the government was forced to accept occupation by Allied troops. The Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Great Britain and France had already established the spheres of influence of these two Great Powers. At the Conference of San Remo in the spring of 1920, the boundaries between French and British territories were finalized, with France receiving the mandate for Syria and Lebanon. The mandate envisioned a »developed nation« leading a people not yet capable of ruling themselves to independence—on behalf of and supervised by the League of Nations. From the outset, the presence of the mandate power was intended to be temporary. Based in Beirut, its highest representative was the High Commissioner, whose legislative and executive powers bordered on the absolute. Moreover,

1 The figure of two million is extrapolated from information provided by the French mandate power in January 1943 and reflects the general population growth in Syria.

the representatives of the mandate power had the last word on all matters pertaining to foreign relations.

On August 10, 1920, the Peace Treaty of Sèvres reconfirmed the terms agreed to in San Remo. According to this treaty, the northern border between Syria and Turkey stretched from Adana to Jazirat ibn ‘Umar (Cizre); the cities of Mardin, Urfa, Nusaybin, and Jazirat ibn ‘Umar fell within Syrian territory.² Religious conservatives and Turkish nationalists, however, were not prepared to accept this loss of territory. Prior to the signing of the treaty, they formed armed resistance groups and advanced against French troops. With the Treaty of Angora on October 20, 1921, France not only ceded the region of Cilicia, but also large regions of northern Syria such as Marin, Urfa, Jazirat ibn ‘Umar, and ‘Ayntab (Gaziantep). In the years that followed, a French-Turkish border committee was given the task of determining the demarcation between Syria and Turkey along the stretch from Nusaybin to Jazirat ibn ‘Umar. Both the French and the Turks exploited Kurdish tribal leaders in order to bring the region under their control, with alternating success. The border was not conclusively set until 1929.³

The attitude of the Kurds living in Syrian territory towards the mandate power varied from region to region. The first segment of the Kurdish population to come into contact with the French were the Kurds from ‘Afrin—a region that had been taken over with relative ease in 1919. The Kurdish population of Damascus likewise proved loyal to the French. The leading Kurdish families, el-Yûsiv and Şemdin, were critical of Arab nationalism, which threatened their ethnic and clan-based networks. In contrast, the Kurdish tribes in the Jarabulus region and in the Jazirah cooperated in part with the French and in part with Mustafa Kemal’s Turkish troops.⁴

After 1920, Kurdish tribes fled progressively from the Turkish army to the mandated territory. The use of this escape route was intensified particularly after the defeat of the Şêx-Seîd Rebellion (1925) and the deportation of Kurdish tribes from the border region to western Turkey. With French support many of these tribes settled in the Jazirah. The agricultural development of this fertile region took place during the military occupation of

2 Dillemann 1979: 34.

3 Dillemann 1979: 33–58.

4 Tejel 2009: 11–12.

northern Syria in the decade from 1920 to 1930. The development required extensive settlement of the region, including the founding of new trade centers: as of 1919, the traditional marketplaces of the region were on Turkish territory. The cities of al-Hasakah and al-Qamishli, which developed into the commercial centers of the region, were newly founded by the French military administration. By 1932, the majority of the Kurdish population in the Upper Jazirah had become sedentary.⁵

The members of the first Kurdish national association, which had been established under Ottoman rule, fled along with tribal leaders, aghas, and shaykhs to the territory under French mandate. Among them were members of the Bedir-Xan family. In 1927, this nationalistic Kurdish elite founded the organization Xoybûn («be oneself») in Lebanon.⁶ Xoybûn's support for the anti-Kemalist Ararat Uprising, which continued until its defeat (1930), was both diplomatic and military. On the diplomatic level, its members attempted to convince one of the Great Powers to support the Kurdish struggle. On the military level, their efforts in August 1930 to assist the partisans on Ararat by mounting a second front remained unsuccessful. As a result of the defeat and internal disagreements, Xoybûn did not resume contact with the Great Powers, the Allies as well as the Axis, until the Second World War, when they sought political or military support for the establishment of a Kurdish state in Turkey.

After 1930, Xoybûn turned its attention to promoting cultural activities. In particular, the brothers Kamiran and Celadet Bedir-Xan focused on the development of the Kurdish language and the revival of Kurdish literature. With French support, several newspapers were published, and in 1941, a Kurdish-speaking radio program went on air.⁷

One of the difficulties France faced during its mandate was the growing influence of Syrian nationalists, who demanded that France grant Syria its independence. Meanwhile, the French governments of this period wanted, to varying degrees, to preserve their influence in the region. During the «Great Revolt» (1925) against the mandate power, France recruited countless minorities—Kurds, Circassians, Armenians—in order to quell

5 Fuccaro 1997: 303–304.

6 Tejel 2009: 17.

7 Tejel 2009: 20–23.

the rebellion. In addition, minorities were accepted into the regional army, *Les Troupes Spéciales du Levant*.⁸

In the spring of 1924, the mandate power received a series of petitions in which Kurdish activists demanded forms of administrative autonomy for the Kurdish settled regions of the mandated territory. They pointed to the Druze and 'Alawi regions, as well as to the Sanjak of Alexandretta, all of which had been granted a certain degree of autonomy. In April 1924, for instance, Mistefa Şahîn appealed to the mandate power in the name of all Kurdish Berazî tribes living between Jarabulus and Nusaybin, suggesting the creation of a Kurdish state. It was to include, among others, the Kurds of the Jazirah and Jabal al-Akrad. Such a state could serve as a buffer against Turkey and curtail Arab nationalist ambitions.⁹ In May 1924, a petition from delegate Nurî Kandî of Jabal al-Akrad likewise argued in favor of administrative autonomy for all majority Kurdish regions, i.e., for the entire border area between Syria and Turkey.¹⁰ The early petitions resembled each other to the extent that they made no concrete demands regarding specific cultural and political rights of benefit to the Kurdish people.

The character of the petitions to the mandate power changed when Kurdish intellectuals from Turkey established themselves in Syrian mandated territory. After 1928, petitions related to Xoybûn not only contained general demands for autonomy, but also calls for the introduction of Kurdish as the language of instruction in Kurdish regions, the establishment of Kurdish as the second official national language, and the administration of Kurdish regions by local Kurdish officials.¹¹

Only a few years later evidence of yet another change to the petitions became apparent, both in terms of content and of authors. After 1932, and especially between 1936 and 1939, a Kurdish-Christian autonomy movement emerged in the Jazirah. Its goal was autonomous status for the Jazirah. The decision to restrict demands to this region can be traced back to the French official Pierre Terrier. Terrier was stationed in the Jazirah from 1924 to 1927 and, by order of the High Commissioner, subsequently responsible for all issues pertaining to Kurdish-French relations in Syria. Terrier, recognizing the central role that Kurdish refugees could play both

8 McDowall 1998: 7–8.

9 Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 1054: À S.E. le Général Billotte, Commandant la 2^e D, I., Délégué du H.-C. à Alep, [s.l.], le 3 avril 1924.

10 Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 1054: Monsieur le Général Billotte, Commandant la 2^eme Division du Levant et Délégué du Haut-Commissaire en Syrie à Alep, Alep, le 9 mai 1924.

11 Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 571: Pétition à Son Excellence le Haut-Commissaire de la République Française en Syrie et en Liban, le 15 avril 1930.

in the development of the Jazirah and the border dispute with Turkey, established close ties with their tribal leaders. In view of the geographic fragmentation of the Kurdish areas into three separate regions, he saw the creation of an autonomous province that included all three regions as unattainable and thus advised the Kurdish leaders to focus on the Jazirah.¹²

The core demands of the movement were an autonomous status comparable to that of the 'Alawi and Druze or the Sanjak of Alexandretta, the protection by French troops, and the appointment of a French governor accountable to the League of Nations. Cultural and administrative demands, such as the advancement of the Kurdish language in schools and the hiring of Kurdish officials, were also crucial.¹³

On the Kurdish side, the autonomy movement was led by Haco Axa of the Hevêrkan, who had gathered a significant section of the Jazirah Kurdish tribes behind him. Others—including the Pinar Elî and the Deqorî—joined the Syrian nationalists, who had assembled a coalition of landowners and urban notables in the National Bloc. The Syrian-Catholic patriarchal vicar, Bishop Hanna Hebbé, and the mayor of al-Qamishli, Michel Dôme, were the dominant figures on the Christian side. On the other hand, the majority of the Arab tribes in Jazirah were torn between both camps. This is evident, for instance, in the example of the Shammar. While Daham al-Hadi was promoted to local leader of the National Bloc, other tribal leaders sided with the autonomists.¹⁴

It is no coincidence that the autonomy movement came alive in 1936. Three years earlier the negotiations between France and Syria for a gradual implementation of Syrian independence had come to a halt. The successful general strike by Syrian nationalists in April 1936 led to their resumption.¹⁵ The French-Syrian Treaty was signed in the same year. Its terms allowed the National Bloc, which had also won the parliamentary elections of 1936, to dominate Syrian politics until 1939. During this period, the National Bloc sought to consolidate the Arab character of the country and pursued an aggressive policy towards the autonomists. Only when pressured by France did the National Bloc recognize the autonomists' electoral victory in the Jazirah. The governor

12 Tejel 2009: 28–29.

13 For more on the demands of the autonomists, see, for example, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 413: À Son Excellence Monsieur Étienne Flandin, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères (Paris); à Son Excellence le Comte de Martel, Haut-Commissaire de la République Française des États du Levant sous Mandat Français (Paris); à Son Excellence Monsieur Avenol, Secrétaire Général de la Société des Nations (Genève); à Son Excellence Monsieur le Général Commandant Supérieur des Troupes Françaises du Levant (Beyrouth), Haute-Djézireh, Kamechlié, le 5 avril 1936.

14 Tejel 2009: 30–31.

15 Khoury 1987: 458–469.

of al-Hasakah, appointed by the Syrian government in early 1937, was given the explicit task of strengthening the Sunni Arab population by encouraging farmers from Aleppo, Homs, and Hamah to settle in the region. In addition, officials who argued for the autonomy of the Jazirah were dismissed and replaced with others who took a positive stance towards Damascus.¹⁶

Against this background little provocation was needed for the situation to escalate. When Syrian police tried to arrest a leader of the autonomy movement on July 5, 1937, they were met with gunshots. Several days of armed conflict between rebels and the Syrian police followed, and the bazaars of the major cities of the Jazirah were closed. Ultimately, the governor appointed by Damascus and numerous high officials, as well as a large portion of the police force, took to their heels and fled. The autonomists established an alternative local administration in the Jazirah.¹⁷ French officers of the Services Spéciaux supported the so-called »Revolt of 1937«. After the signing of the French-Syrian Treaty they feared a loss of influence in Syria. Their direct opponents in the mandate administration of Jazirah were the officials of the Contrôle Bédoûin, who were endeavoring to mobilize Kurdish and Arab tribes against the Christian population.¹⁸ Their success was evidenced by the massacre of the Christians of 'Amudah in August 1937.¹⁹ Prior to the attack, supporters of the Syrian nationalists had carried out a pan-Islamic campaign among the Kurds of Jazirah. Accordingly, Kurdish tribes were also involved in the attack on the Christian quarter of 'Amudah, which was quelled by the French Air Force. In the aftermath, the participation of Kurdish tribes in the attack led to tension within the Kurdish-Christian alliance. Representatives of the mandate power made it clear to the Christian leaders of the autonomy movement that they would only survive in Syria if they made peace with the Arab-Muslim majority.²⁰

In 1939, the rise of the National Bloc came to an end, at least for the time being. On December 31, 1938, the Syrian parliament rejected the French-Syrian Treaty negotiated in 1936, as it included additional agreements that, among other things, provided for the strengthen-

16 Khoury 1987: 529; Fuccaro 1997: 318.

17 For more on the revolt in Jazirah, see Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Vincennes (SHAT), 4H448, Dossier 8: De l'Inspection des Services Spéciaux de Djézireh Janvier–Avril 1943, »La Révolution de la Djézireh: Juillet–Août 1937«; Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 503: »Mon Crime«, attached to: Le Capitaine Thomas, Inspecteur Adjoint du Mohafazat de Djézireh à Monsieur le Colonel Délégué Adjoint du Haut-Commissaire pour les Territoires de l'Euphrate (Deir-ez-Zor), Hassaché, le 16 septembre 1937.

18 Tejel 2009: 35.

19 For more on the events in 'Amudah, see Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 503: Rapport du Colonel Sarrade, Commandant des Troupes du Territoire de l'Euphrate et Délégué Adjoint du Haut-Commissaire pour le Territoire de l'Euphrate, sur la Rébellion d'Amouda et sa Répression, Deir-ez-Zor, le 30 août 1937; Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Vincennes (SHAT), 4H448, Dossier 8: De l'Inspection des Services Spéciaux de Djézireh Janvier–Avril 1943, »La Révolution de la Djézireh: Juillet–Août 1937«.

20 Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fonds

ing of minority rights.²¹ The government in Damascus resigned in February of 1939. At the beginning of July, the Syrian Parliament was dismissed, the Syrian Constitution suspended, and the Jazirah placed under the immediate control of the French.²²

With the beginning of the Second World War, Turkey, which had already declared itself an opponent of any sort of Kurdish autonomy, became an increasingly important coalition partner for the Allies. Furthermore, the British had gained in influence. In contrast to the French, they were in favor of Syrian independence. At the beginning of June 1941, Great Britain, along with Free France, occupied Syria and Lebanon, where as a result of the Vichy government's ascent to power, a representative of this regime had been appointed High Commissioner. The invasion was accompanied by an explanation, in the course of which de Gaulle promised Syria and Lebanon independence.²³ While France remained responsible for the administration of Syria, Great Britain took responsibility for the military protection of the region. In the Syrian parliamentary elections of July 1943, the Syrian nationalists and the National Bloc once again emerged victorious.²⁴ The new government insisted that the French immediately relinquish their authority²⁵—a demand the mandate power was not prepared to meet. In May 1945, an Arab revolt broke out against the French. Great Britain eventually intervened on the side of Syria. As a result of these events, France withdrew from Syria entirely in the spring of 1946.²⁶ The country became politically independent, but neither autonomy for the Jazirah nor minority rights had been secured.

The years of transition—1946 to 1963

Towards the end of the French mandate, politically active Kurds were classified into three camps: Arab nationalism, communism, and Kurdish nationalism. At the Conference of San Francisco, representatives of the latter camp lobbied in vain for the right of representatives of nations that had not yet achieved independence to speak at international assemblies. This diplomatic failure led to renewed crisis within the Kurdish movement. The goal of pro-Western notables, united in Xoybûn and

Mandat Syrie et Liban, Cabinet Politique 503: Le Délégué P.I. du Haut-Commissaire auprès de la République Syrienne à Monsieur Meyrier, Délégué Général du Haut-Commissaire, Cabinet P, (Beyrouth), Damas, le 6 septembre 1937.

21 Khoury 1987: 490–491.

22 Khoury 1987: 584, 534.

23 Khoury 1987: 591–592.

24 Khoury 1987: 604.

25 Khoury 1987: 613.

26 Khoury 1987: 616–617.

its successor organization, the Kurdish League, founded in 1945, to create an independent Kurdish state aided by one of the Great Powers did not prove feasible. Autonomist demands ceased to play a role on the agenda of Kurdish representatives to the Syrian parliament, and the political influence of the old members of Xoybûn began to wane. More and more young and politically active Kurds turned to the Syrian Communist Party. Founded in 1924, the Communist Party had been led since 1933 by Khalid Bakdash, a Kurd from Damascus. The party made use of Soviet propaganda, which argued that the Soviet Union was the liberator of national minorities, and suggested that Kurdish independence could best be achieved through close cooperation with Moscow.

In independent Syria, the Communist Party was only one of the players that provided competition for the National Bloc, the coalition of urban notables and landowners that had dominated the struggle for independence against the French. Other parties worthy of note are the Syrian Popular Party, which was founded in 1932 and represented Syrian nationalism; the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1945; the Ba‘th Party, founded in 1946 with a pan-Arab socialist ideology. These political players not only pursued new goals, they also knew how to motivate other social classes. The National Bloc and the successor parties that emerged after its disintegration—the National Party, the People’s Party, and the Arab Republican Party—were seen as representatives of the Sunni bourgeoisie and were unattractive to the lower social classes and to members of minority groups such as the Druze, the ‘Alawi, and the Kurds.²⁷

Along with the aforementioned political parties, the army also played a decisive role in post-colonial Syria. The first of many successive military coups took place in 1949. Of the three acting dictators between 1949 and 1954, two had a Kurdish background—Husni az-Za‘im and Adib ash-Shishakli. Az-Za‘im’s personal bodyguard was made up entirely of Kurdish and Circassian soldiers. Moreover, az-Za‘im appointed Muhsin al-Barazi, also of Kurdish origin, prime minister; other Kurds were given high positions in government and the administration. This prompted Arab nationalists to accuse az-Za‘im of installing a Kurdish military regime. Husni az-Za‘im’s

27 Tejel 2009: 39–40.

regime was too short-lived to judge whether he had used ethnic networks to merely stabilize his power or to serve further ambitions.

Adib ash-Shishakli also appointed a Kurd, Fawzi as-Silu, to act as president, prime minister and chief-of-staff; however, this did not prevent him from taking a tough stance on Kurdish cultural activities. Under his rule it was forbidden to give hotels, cafés and movie theaters non-Arabic names. Speaking a language other than Arabic at public events and festivals was likewise forbidden.

Ash-Shishakli's 1954 overthrow was followed by new elections in the same year. Debates about the »right« path for Syria as an Arab country were influenced by the rise of Nasser in Egypt, the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq, and the question of which of the two regimes should become a closer ally. In February 1958, under pressure from the Ba'th Party, Syria allied itself with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR). In the central, authoritarian regime established under Nasser, however, Syrian influence gradually faded. All Syrian political parties, including the Ba'th Party, were forbidden, and the Syrian army was placed under Egyptian command. The political, cultural, and religious activities of ethnic minorities were under strict supervision. Among other things, it was forbidden to play Kurdish music in cafés, and printing or possessing Kurdish language publications was made punishable.²⁸

The increasing aggression of Arab nationalism and the realization that the communists, led by Khalid Bakdash, would not support Kurdish rights, led to the founding of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) in 1957. The KDPS pushed for the recognition of the Kurds as an independent group with cultural rights and criticized the economic underdevelopment of Kurdish regions. At the beginning of 1960, the party was renamed the Democratic Party of Kurdistan in Syria. In August of the same year, the party leadership was arrested and tortured. The party structure was revealed, and within a few days more than 5,000 people had been detained and interrogated. The leaders of the KDPS were charged with separatism and sentenced to prison.²⁹

Dissatisfaction with the decisions made in Cairo led to the so-called »separatist movement«. On Sep-

28 Tejel 2009: 38–46.

29 Tejel 2009: 48–49.

tember 28, 1961 this movement culminated in the re-establishment of Syrian independence and the failure of the United Arab Republic. New elections in December of the same year brought to power conservative forces in the country, which coalesced around the People's Party. Their main concern was the resurrection of the status quo prior to the establishment of the United Arab Republic. The land reform was revoked, as was the nationalization of banks and industry.³⁰

The end of the United Arab Republic did not lead to greater regard for the political, cultural and economic interests of the Kurdish people. Instead, the new provisional constitution, which transformed the »Syrian Republic« into the »Syrian Arab Republic«, made a clear commitment to ethnic homogeneity. Furthermore, Decree No.93 of August 23, 1962 enabled the government to conduct an exceptional census in al-Hasakah province. As a result of the census, which was carried out on October 5, 1962, roughly 120,000 Kurds were stripped of their citizenship and dispossessed. To this day, their descendents remain stateless. The official explanation for the denaturalization was that the Kurds concerned had illegally infiltrated Syria from Turkey and Iraq, thereby threatening the »Arab character« of the country.³¹ In fact, the intention of the mostly arbitrary denaturalization was to stigmatize Kurds as foreigners and rob them of the opportunity to actively take part in shaping Syria's destiny. The success of Mistefa Barzanî's Kurdish revolt in Iraq that same year provided the background to these draconian measures. Damascus feared that the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq could radicalize Kurdish nationalists in Syria and, at worst, lead to a loss of Syrian territory, namely, the predominantly Kurdish settled Jazirah, which bordered the Iraqi-Kurdish region.

The first years of the Ba'ath regime—1963 to 1970

On March 8, 1963, a coalition of officers, including Ba'athists, took power by force in the name of pan-Arab ideals. All »conservative« parties were banned—either because they represented the class of the »exploiters«, the bourgeoisie, or because they followed a religious

30 Hinnebusch 2001: 43.

31 Human Rights Watch 1996: Appendix A.

doctrine. The KDPS fell into the first category. The regime saw it as a party of aghas and notables.³²

In November 1963, Muhammad Talab Hilal, head of security for al-Hasakah, produced a confidential report on national, social and political aspects of the Jazirah. The report fuels racist and anti-Semitic fears and, at the same time, makes use of them. It describes the Kurds as a violent mountain people without history, civilization, language or ethnic origin. It further states: »We must regard the Kurds as a group of people putting all their efforts and everything they possess, into creating their imaginary homeland. They are therefore our enemies, and religious ties notwithstanding, there is no difference between them and Israel, for ›JUDASTAN‹ and ›KURDISTAN‹, so to speak, are of the same species.«³³

As a solution to the Kurdish question, Muhammad Talab Hilal suggested implementing the following twelve-point plan: (1) expulsion of Kurds in the interior; (2) denial of education; (3) return of Kurds whose nationality has not been proven to Turkey; (4) denial of employment opportunities; (5) launch of an anti-Kurdish propaganda campaign; (6) replacement of Kurdish religious dignitaries by Arabs; (7) a policy of »divide and rule« towards Kurds; (8) Arab settlement of Kurdish areas; (9) establishment of a military zone along the Turkish border, settlement of Arabs in and expulsion of Kurds from this region; (10) establishment of collective farms for new Arab settlers; (11) denial to non-Arabic speakers of the right to vote or hold office; (12) denial of Syrian citizenship to non-Arabs desiring to live in the Jazirah.³⁴

The government in Damascus focused on establishing the so-called »Arab belt« along the Iraqi and Turkish borders. A total of 140,000 Kurds from 332 villages were to be deported from an area of land between ten and fifteen kilometers wide, and replaced by Arab settlers. Implementation of the plan, which had been agreed upon in 1965, got under way in 1973. By 1976, a total of around 25,000 Arab families had been settled in al-Hasakah province. However, members of the Kurdish population who resisted the prescribed resettlement were spared expulsion by force.³⁵

32 Tejel 2009: 59.

33 Vanly 1968: 22.

34 Vanly 1968: 27–29.

35 Middle East Watch 1991: 97.

The reign of Hafiz al-Assad

By the time Muhammad Talab Hilal's plans were implemented, Syria had experienced two further military coups. On February 23, 1966, the Ba'th Party became the dominant power in the country, and on November 13, 1973, tension within the leadership culminated in a takeover by General Hafiz al-Assad. Assad weakened the Ba'th Party to his own advantage. The party's fifth regional conference ended the principle of collective leadership and appointed Assad secretary-general. The constitution of 1973 established a presidential system that made the president not only the chief executive but also the supreme commander of the army. Moreover, after 1973, the president was given the power to appoint the vice president, the prime minister, and the cabinet, as well as high officials, judges, and the heads of the intelligence service and the police. Thus the civilian party apparatus and the state both came under control of the military, which, in turn, was under Assad's command. Although the regime established under Assad is not a military one, it is heavily controlled by the military.³⁶

In addition to consolidating his own power, Assad introduced a »turn inward«. Portrayed by the government as the return of Syria to democracy, de facto this move represented the extension of state institutions. Hence the National Progressive Front was formed in 1973, within which legal political parties in Syria are organized to this day. The Ba'th Party platform is a binding guideline for all member parties. Furthermore, the Ba'th Party holds the majority in all committees. The majority of the seats in the Syrian parliament are reserved for the Front—and within the Front, for the Ba'th Party.³⁷ Under Assad, the Ba'thists established mass organizations such as trade unions and professional organizations. Capable of containing social forces, these organizations became instruments of personal enrichment and social control. Independent organizations were forbidden.

Assad further assured his power by filling key positions in the military and intelligence service with a small, primarily 'Alawi, elite. Their influence stemmed from close familial ties and absolute loyalty to the president. On the other hand, Assad left leading positions in

36 Perthes 1990: 238–239, 251.

37 Montgomery 2005: 56–57.

the state and the government to members of the Sunni majority. He further involved the urban Sunni economic elite by granting economic privileges. The economic opening of the country, initiated by Hafiz al-Assad, remained low-profile. A complex private-public network of relationships with patrons and clients developed, in which corruption flourished and the presidential family and its favorites enjoyed the benefits. At the same time, the government was not afraid to use brutality against the opposition—either systematic torture of prisoners or the deployment of armed forces, as in the 1982 revolt of the Muslim Brotherhood. During the bombing of Hamah, thousands were killed and entire quarters destroyed.³⁸ As a result of the emergency legislation in place since 1963, the intelligence services not only had wide-reaching authority, but one that was often overstepped in practice. To this day, the individual offices are directly responsible to the president and maintain a broad-based surveillance network for all sections of society, including the military and the party. Additionally, the offices monitor each other.³⁹

Under Hafiz al-Assad, Arab nationalism became a founding principle of the 1973 constitution, which remains valid today. It became an essential component of political culture, whereas pan-Arab and socialist ideals gradually lost their significance. This meant that all things Kurdish were excluded from official state doctrine, an exclusion that was reflected in the ban or non-admission of Kurdish political parties, as well as in the repression of pro-Kurdish demonstrations and festivals by the security apparatus. Nevertheless, the »illegal« Kurdish parties were allowed to stage activities in a low-key, inconspicuous manner. The regime established regular contact with the leaders of the Kurdish parties. This not only served as surveillance but also led to mistrust within the Kurdish movement, as the extent to which individual parties cooperated with the regime remained unclear. The KDPS had split several times since its foundation in 1957, with schisms persisting to the present day. In the early years, varying loyalties, especially towards the Iraqi-Kurdish parties KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), caused conflict. Today

38 Hinnebusch 2001: 98–103.

39 Perthes 1990: 254.

the source of conflict is rather the attitude towards the Arab opposition or divergent opinions on the form of political action best suited to countering the Syrian state. Personal differences in leadership circles were of great importance and still are.

The Kurdish language—in Syria, the Kurmancî dialect—was criminalized on several levels by decrees in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. As a result the Kurdish names for hundreds of villages in both al-Hasakah province and the ‘Afrin region were replaced by Arabic names. Additional ordinances penalized the use of Kurdish in the workplace. Singing non-Arabic songs at weddings and other festivals was forbidden, as was giving children non-Arabic names. Businesses with non-Arabic names had to be renamed, and stores that sold Kurdish videos or cassettes were closed down. Although the implementation of numerous decrees was inconsistent—the sheer existence of such dictums disciplined the population.⁴⁰

Repression was one method of handling the Kurdish question under Hafiz al-Assad. At the same time Assad endeavored to integrate the Kurdish population into the »national project«, for example, by opening up the Ba‘th Party to (Arabized) non-Arabs. Moreover, the repression of the Kurdish national movement in his own country did not stop Assad from pursuing a pragmatic policy towards the Kurdish movements in Iraq and Turkey, i.e., he supported these movements when relations with their respective governments deemed it opportune. A prime example is his tolerance, even support, for the Turkish-Kurdish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴¹ This policy resulted in the consolidation of transnational relations between the Syrian Kurds and their »brothers« across the border in Iraq and Turkey.

The Kurds under Bashar al-Assad

Bashar al-Assad’s takeover in 2000 raised hopes for change, not only in the West. Although as the son of Hafiz al-Assad he represented continuity, many believed that the young London-educated technocrat might open up the country. In his inaugural address, the president pointed to the need for reforms based

40 For more on the various decrees, see, for example, McDowall 1998: 47–50; Montgomery 2005: 98–100.

41 Montgomery 2005: 131–132; Tejel 2009: 75–77.

on »accountability«, »transparency«, »active participation«, »administrative reform«, »the rule of law«, and »democratic thinking«. According to Assad, the latter was founded on the principle of tolerance of other opinions. Between June 2000 and August 2001, numerous discussion circles were formed to openly discuss topics such as corruption and human-rights abuse, the right to civic co-determination, and the situation of prisoners and exiles. In September 2000, leading intellectuals signed the »Manifesto of the 99«, which called for the repeal of the state of emergency and the emergency laws of 1963, the release of all political prisoners, the return of Syrians from exile, as well as the freedom of speech and of the press. The »Statement of the 1,000« followed in January 2001. Its principal goals were free elections and termination of the Ba'th Party's political monopoly. Finally, in May 2001, the Muslim Brotherhood published the »Charter of National Honor« while in exile in London. The Charter aspired to a modern, democratic Syria and contained the rejection by the opposition party of any form of political violence.⁴² Kurdish parties and activists also took part in the so-called »Damascus Spring«. A group of Kurdish intellectuals founded the »Bedir-Xan Forum« in al-Qamishli and made contact with the Syrian opposition.⁴³

The reaction of the Ba'th regime was initially encouraging. Hundreds of political prisoners, communists and Muslim Brothers among them, were released, and several of the prisons notorious for the brutal treatment of inmates were shut down. By February 2001, however, the Ba'th Party began to accuse activists of weakening and slandering state institutions. Discussion circles were terminated and leading activists arrested. In September 2001, the government replaced the General Law on Printed Matter from 1949 with Decree No. 50, which restricted freedom of the press and extended state censorship of printed materials. Article 16 is directed against the Kurdish people insofar as it limits ownership and management of publishing houses and printing presses to Arab Syrian nationals only.⁴⁴

The Kurdish movement developed independent of Kurdish activists' participation in the »Damascus Spring« and its suppressed vitality. Thus, in 1993, the

42 ICG 2004: 7.

43 Tejel 2009: 110.

44 Montgomery 2005: 101, 103.

Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Yekîî) was founded with the goal of rendering Kurdish political activities more visible. Party activists had already made an appearance a year before its official establishment by hanging posters that criticized government policy towards the stateless in several Syrian cities. Although the political message itself was not new, its public presentation was.⁴⁵ The expulsion of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1998 and the ceasing of public support for the PKK by the Ba‘th regime brought an influx of former PKK officials to its successor party, the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekîî), founded in March 2000. This influx contributed to the radicalization of the party. In the second half of 2002, it finally emerged that the USA was to overthrow the Ba‘th regime in Iraq and that PUK and KDP supported this option. The opportunity for significant improvement in the situation of the Kurds in Iraq and hopes for US intervention in Syria—in the form of military force or the imposition of economic sanctions—led the Yekîî to organize a public pro-Kurdish rally in front of the National Assembly in December 2002. The demands of the demonstrators were moderate. They requested a solution to the Kurdish question in Syria, the recognition of Kurds as a second ethnic group in the constitution and the return of citizenship to the stateless. Nevertheless, the Yekîî had sought public conflict with the government. The street as a domain for public demonstrations had been reserved since the 1980s for the government and the Ba‘th party.

The »overstepping of boundaries« by the Yekîî led to disputes with the other parties in the Syrian-Kurdish party spectrum. The latter justified their absence at demonstrations with the argument that such actions would lead to repression similar to that suffered by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982. In fact, the regime did respond with sanctions, if not with the anticipated brutality. Two leading members of the Yekîî, Merwan Osman and Hesên Salih, were detained and in February 2004 sentenced by the State Security Court in Damascus to fourteen months in prison for separatism.⁴⁶

Between summer 2002 and spring 2004, further demonstrations and rallies took place. The Yekîî took

45 Gauthier 2005: 99.

46 Interview with Merwan Osman, member of the Central Committee of the Yekîî, Berlin, December 6, 2004.

the lead in organizing the rallies. Some of the other Kurdish parties and occasionally Arab members of the opposition and Syrian human-rights organizations also participated.⁴⁷ The protests took on a new quality, however, after a soccer match in al-Qamishli between al-Jihad from al-Qamishli and al-Futuwah from Dayr az-Zawr on March 12, 2004. When unrest in the stadium spilled over into the population, the security forces were unable—or unwilling—to contain the situation. Clashes with security forces led to several casualties during the night. The following day, thousands of demonstrators took part in a procession organized by the Kurdish parties to honor these »martyrs«. Assaults by security forces again led to escalation of the violence. The unrest was not confined to nearby cities such as ‘Amudah, al-Malikiya (Dêrik), and al-Hasakah, but spread as far as the Kurdish enclaves of ‘Afrin and ‘Ayn al-‘Arab. It furthermore mobilized protesters in cities with a significant Kurdish minority, such as Aleppo and Damascus. In the days following the soccer game, the rallies developed a Kurdish-nationalist dynamic and numerous government buildings and symbols of the Ba‘th regime were attacked and destroyed. More than thirty people were killed and several hundred injured. Roughly 2,000 people were detained and tortured, some for several months. The majority were held without being officially charged.⁴⁸

In the aftermath of state intervention during the riots, the Kurdish parties, including the Yekîti, proved to be a calming factor. The mass demonstrations were not a result of party mobilization. Far more crucial was the high degree of politicization among the young men and teenage boys who had grown up with ethnic discrimination, economic marginalization and a rigid sense of morality. Against the backdrop of Kurdish successes in Iraq—on March 8, 2004, the Iraqi transitional constitution was adopted, giving Kurds control of three northern provinces—any provocation was enough for the personal and collective frustrations of these young men to spill over into sometimes violent Kurdish-nationalist protest.

The murder of the Kurdish shaykh, Meşuq Xeznewî, presumably by the Syrian intelligence service, resulted in further mass demonstrations in al-Qamishli at the end

47 For a detailed list, see, for example, Gauthier 2005: 101–104.

48 See Savelsberg & Hajo 2006a: 2; Savelsberg & Hajo 2006b: 3–4; Amnesty International 2005; Montgomery 2005: 27–28; Gauthier 2005: 104–109; Tejel 2009: 115–116.

of May/early June 2005. Xeznewî had served as a mediator between Kurdish and Islamic oppositional forces and cultivated contacts with the West. He had made his first political appearance only a few months before his death.⁴⁹ When the Yekîî and the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Azadî) disregarded a demonstration ban, Kurdish businesses in al-Qamishli, al-Hasakah, and al-Malikiya (Dêrik) were looted.⁵⁰ Even though the intelligence service was blamed for the looting, this development caused tension within the Kurdish party spectrum, with the Yekîî and the Azadî accused of sharing responsibility for it.⁵¹

No mass demonstrations have taken place since the summer of 2005. Public rallies are held at regular intervals, but participation is quite low. They are organized by the Yekîî and the Azadî, with the help of the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the latter maintaining close ties with the PKK. Relations between the Kurdish political parties and the Arab opposition have stabilized. Some of the parties co-signed the Damascus Declaration of October 16, 2005, which presented the common demands of the Syrian opposition. With regard to the Kurdish question, the Damascus Declaration formulates the goal of finding a just and democratic solution »in a manner that guarantees the complete equality of Syrian Kurdish citizens with the other citizens, regarding nationality rights, culture, learning the national language, and the other constitutional, political, social and legal rights on the basis of the unity of the Syrian land and people. Nationality and citizenship rights must be restored to those who have been deprived of them, and the file must be completely settled.«⁵²

Four parties—Yekîî, Azadî, Future Movement, and PYD—did not sign the declaration. Their reservations were due to the absence of a passage referring to the explicit recognition of the Kurds as an independent nation along with the Arabs in Syria.⁵³ Regardless of their differences, the representatives of Kurdish parties are endeavoring to work together more closely. At several meetings abroad, most recently in January 2009 in Cairo, they discussed combining all Kurdish parties into a united front—currently there are three sepa-

49 Amnesty International, »Leading Islamic cleric ›tortured to death‹« (MDE 24/036/2005), June 1, 2005; »Syrian Kurds reject government version of Khaznawi's death«, *Asian News*, June 4, 2005; »Kurds demonstrate in Syria over cleric's death«, AFP, June 5, 2005; »Syrian Kurds demonstrate over missing cleric«, AFP, May 21, 2005; »Bêtirî 20 hezar Kurd ji bo el-Xeznewî derketin kolanên Qamişloyê«, <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2507>.

50 Interview with an informant from al-Malikiyah (Dêrik), Berlin, July 3, 2005. For more on the looting, see also »Kurds in talks with Arab tribes in bid to contain Syria clashes«, AFP, June 6, 2005; »Assad kündigt Reformen an«, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 7, 2005; »Dengê Serhildana duwemîn ji Qamişloyê tê«, June 5, 2005, accessed at <<http://www.rojava.net/ershife%20meha%206e%20sala%202005.htm>>.

51 Li Qamişloyê xwepêşandan«, June 4, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2772>; »Fuad Elîko: Hevbendî û Enî şerê me dikin«, June 7, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2853>; »Ismail Umer: Terorîstan el-Xeznewî kuşt«, June 9, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_

rate party associations. Furthermore, the conference prompted a critical discussion on the substance, strategies and tactics of the parties.⁵⁴

Barack Obama's election victory has changed the attitude of the USA towards Syria. Military intervention and economic sanctions are no longer on the agenda. The easing of circumstances has not contributed to domestic liberalization. Members of the Arab and Kurdish opposition are being arrested on a constant basis—among them, most recently, several leading members of the Yekîti and the Azadî as well as the leader of the Future Movement, Mişel Temo. Currently neither local nor international players are prepared or in a position to force the Syrian regime to enact lasting reforms.

References

- Amnesty International 2005: *Syria. Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic one year after the March 2004 events*. AI Index: MDE 24/002/2005.
- Dillemann, Louis 1979: »Les Français en Haute-Djezireh 1929–1939.« *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 66, p. 33–58.
- Fuccaro, Nelida 1997: »Die Kurden Syriens. Anfänge der nationalen Mobilisierung unter französischer Herrschaft.« In: Carsten Borck, Eva Savelsberg & Siamend Hajo (eds.): *Ethnizität, Nationalismus, Religion und Politik in Kurdistan*. Münster: Lit, p. 301–326.
- Gauthier, Julie 2005: »Les événements de Qamichlo. Irruption de la question kurde en Syrie?« *Études kurdes* 8: *Errance et terre promise. Juifs, Kurdes, Assyro-Chaldéens*, p. 97–114.
- Hinnebusch, Raymond 2001: *Syria. Revolution from above*. London: Routledge.
- Human Rights Watch (eds.) 1996: *Syria. The silenced Kurds*. <<http://hrw.org/reports1996/Syria.html>>.
- International Crisis Group (ICG) 2004: *Syria under Bashar. Domestic policy challenges*. Amman: ICG (ICG Middle East report, 24).
- Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2874>; »Ismail Umer rêjîma Suriyê diparêze û sekretêrê partiya wî destê el-Esed ji xwînê dişo«, June 11, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2892>.
- 52** Tejel 2009: 126–127.
- 53** Interviews with representatives of Kurdish political parties, Cairo, January 22–25, 2009.
- 54** *Dengê Kurd* [ed.: Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî)] 415 (May 2009): 1–2.

- Khoury, Philip S. 1987: *Syria and the French mandate. The politics of Arab nationalism 1920–1945*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- McDowall, David 1998: *The Kurds of Syria*. London: Kurdish Human Rights Project.
- Middle East Watch (ed.) 1991: *Syria unmasked. The suppression of human rights by the Asad regime*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Montgomery, Harriet 2005: *The Kurds of Syria. An existence denied*. Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien.
- Perthes, Volker 1990: *Staat und Gesellschaft in Syrien 1970–1989*. Hamburg: Deutsches Orient-Institut.
- Savelsberg, Eva & Siamend Hajo 2006a: Gutachten für das Verwaltungsgericht Köln, Aktenzeichen 20K6980/04.A, Berlin, 20. August 2006.
- Savelsberg, Eva & Siamend Hajo 2006b: Gutachten für das Verwaltungsgericht Stuttgart, Aktenzeichen A10K10072/05, Berlin, 9. Oktober 2006.
- Tejel, Jordi 2009: *Syria's Kurds. History, politics and society*. London: Routledge.
- Vanly, Ismet Chériff 1968: *The Syrian »Mein Kampf« against the Kurds. Baath thinking reviewed*. Amsterdam: J.S.K.