

Socio-economic and Spiritual-religious Specifics of the Syrian Kurds

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Abstract

This study aims to present the socio-economic and spiritual-religious specifics of the Syrian Kurds. The dominant agrarian livelihood of the “foreign Kurds” stimulates the preservation of the tribal-clan profile of their social structure. This directly reflects on the stability and strong resistance of the specific conservative political culture in which the political center is differentiated, due to non-social parameters. If religion (in a nuanced degree, ethnicity) plays a major role in the formation of the nation-building and state-building process among neighbors, Arabs and Turks, then in the Kurds, especially the Syrians, a similar function is played by the family cell. The main points in the article are: The Syrian Kurds; Armenians and Christians – Assyrians; The specific religious institutions of the Kurds. In conclusion: The main conclusion that can be drawn is that the Kurds in Syria are failing to create a large urban agglomeration, which pushes them to be constantly associated with the agricultural way of life. Even the small towns that were formed did not get a real urban appearance, as their inhabitants had numerous relatives who remained to live in the countryside.

Keywords: socio-economic specifics, spiritual-religious specifics, Syrian Kurds, Armenians and Christians – Assyrians.

1. Introduction

The dominant agrarian livelihood of the “Foreign Kurds” stimulates the preservation of the tribal-clan profile of their social structure. This directly reflects on the stability and strong resistance of the specific conservative political culture in which the political center is differentiated, due to non-social parameters. If religion (in a nuanced degree, ethnicity) plays a major role in the formation of the nation-building and state-building process among neighbors, Arabs and Turks, then in the Kurds, especially the Syrians, a similar function is played by the family cell. The conservative way of eating nourishes and cement for a long time the marginal social environment in which the family and the commune are brought to the fore. The family and the commune, which manage to most successfully optimize the results of agricultural activity, in which the presence of physical strength is a major factor.

On the other hand, pushing religion into the background as a mobilizing factor opens the way to orthodox Islam and more moderate forms of religion such as at turuk as sufia, the sophite orders. The strong display of detribalization and gender equality among the Syrian Kurds

is not a consequence of purposeful public policy, but rather a remnant of the existence of a family cell in which women give their equal share in the final agricultural production. The archaic-conservative tradition is the reason for, de facto, the increased role of women in government, politics and defense, not the accelerated emancipation that Western societies achieve after a long and painful social process.

2. The Syrian Kurds

Among the livelihoods of the majority of Syrian Kurds, the so-called valley agriculture. Due to the uncharted terrain, in the regions of Hasaka and Kobane / Ain al Arab / the production of cereals and cotton is leading, while in Afrin, industrial crops, mostly olive trees. However, thanks to the flat terrain and lush pastures, the oldest livelihood of the local population remains cattle breeding in the first two areas. It is difficult to say whether political or economic reasons prevailed in the relocation of huge Kurdish pastoralists from Turkey to Syria. Within the former Ottoman Empire and before the drawing of the current national borders, the owners of the huge herds sought pasture for them without encountering any difficulties.

They traveled hundreds of kilometers within the territory of the current Syrian Al Jazeera. The tradition has continued since the creation of modern Turkey and mandated Syria. In fact, similar seasonal movements of huge herds, which is one of the main stages of cattle breeding within the former Ottoman Empire, are observed in other provinces, including the Balkans.

3. Kurdish agglomerations

Employment in various branches of agriculture also has an impact on the way of life and socialization of the various masses of the “external Kurds”. Cattle breeding, grain and cotton production, typical of the Hasaka and Kobane regions, support the components of the Bedouin way of life. The situation is different in Afrin, where most people make a living from mountain fruit growing. They build the model of living in agrarian conditions.

The combination of livelihoods and specific terrain does not allow the outer Kurds to historically create large agglomerations and acquire an urban behavior profile.¹ This explains the lack of the appropriate institutional and civic culture and the value system, which are force majeure reasons for the delay of state formation and the collective sense of need for one's own state.

It is an interesting fact that the process of “enclosing” the Kurdish masses in Turkey has been brutally interrupted by the suppression of the Kurdish uprisings by the Kemalists. The latter, building the new Turkish state, slow down the natural and logical social processes characteristic of a certain ethnic group.

Moreover, Turkish nationalists see the socialization of the Kurds in their country and the formation of a civic environment among the Kurds as the engine of constant riots, even though they are led by feudal-tribalist leaders. For the bearers of a kind of civic consciousness and education, formed in the educational institutions of the Ottoman Empire, especially in Istanbul and spread in the large Kurdish agglomerations such as Diyarbakir, Syria is a place of protection. As already noted, the protection of the ethnic minority is strengthened by France's special colonial policy, which emphasizes the rights of oppressed minorities in the former Ottoman state rather than cooperation with the majority, as the rival British Empire did.

¹ Mahmoud, R., Al-Qa'aed al-Ijtima'iyā Lil Azab al-Kurdish as Suriya, / 1 mi2 /, The Social Foundations of the Kurdish Syrian Parties, 1 of 2, Al Jumuria, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/33686>, 12.08.2019.

A classic example in this regard is the family of Hajju aga al Hafirki, who in 1926 settled in the region of Kahtania, east of the town of Kamishli. In the 1950s, he played a major role in socializing and enclosing the Kurdish masses living in the region.²

4. Armenians and Christians – Assyrians

Other minorities, with whom circumstances force them to live together, also play an important role in the socialization of the Syrian Kurds. It is about the Armenians and the Christians – Assyrians. Their religious temples – the churches become an educational and institutional-forming subject, regardless of religious differences. Particularly pronounced is the influence of these two groups in the province of Hasaka, in which Christians are becoming a factor that has contributed to the promotion of a sedentary lifestyle of Kurdish Bedouin pastoralists. Their livelihood and way of life became a role model for the low-status Kurdish masses.

Even more noticeable is the influence of the Armenians on the Kurds in Afrin, who until the mid-1950s accounted for about a third of the city's population and actually gave the settlement its true appearance. The latter dominated not only economically, through traditionally active crafts, but through their leading role in the health, spiritual and cultural institutions of the city.

5. The specific religious institutions of the Kurds

The dominant Islamic religion, the accepted Sunni legal dogmatic school, and the specific religious institutions of the Kurds are also important factors in secularizing and “enclosing” the community. Not so much the Arabs in general as the Turks influence the way the Kurds practice Islam. However, they adopt the Shafi'i doctrine of Sunnism, unlike the Ottoman Sheikh-ul-Islam, which practices the Hanafi legal dogmatic tendency.

On the one hand, this sharply distinguishes them from the Turks, but on the other hand, it brings them closer to the Syrian Arabs, among whom Shafayt is as widespread as Hanafi.

What is interesting in this case is that the minority status of the Kurds pushes them to practice the Islamic religion, according to the ritual and institutional symbolism of the most tolerant legal dogmatic tendency in Sunni Islam, namely Hanafi. This is a fact, although they are collectively followers of Imam Idris al-Shafai, whom Islamic theologians describe as a “centrist” who perceives certain components of a more radical Arab-centric Islam³ (see Chukov & Georgiev, 1997).

Among the Kurds, the Teket and the Sofite orders performed rather social functions, which was the original reason for their appearance. Teketo, an outspoken socio-religious complex that includes not only the mosque but also the madrasa, the students' boarding school, as well as the living quarters for the imam-teacher and his support team, is a kind of irredentist call against the official authorities. The emergence of teketes and sophite orders is an institutional and ideological-organizational irredentist reaction of low-status social groups against the ruling aristocracy in the Islamic State. Such are the minorities who were placed on the deep periphery of

² Auda or Hadith Burhan Galayun an al Kurd fi Suriya, Return to Burhan Galyayun's speech on the Kurds in Syria, Ifaf, www.elaph.com/Web/opinion/2012/4/732072.html?entry, 27.04.2012.

³ For more on the legal dogmatic schools in Islam, see: Chukov, V., & Georgiev, V. (1997). *Philosophy and Theory of Islamic Law*. Publishing house Lik. [Чуков, В, & Георгиев, В. Философия и теория на ислямското право, Издателска къща. Лик].

the Arab-Muslim caliphate, but also later, after the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. It is no coincidence that tekets appeared only in the 15th – 16th centuries.

The Ottoman authorities built teketes almost forcibly in the Kurdish regions in order to exercise strict control. They put at the head of this institution a loyal sheik of power. Often under his leadership, there was a small military unit created by his followers.

In practice, the latter were his students, who were later sent to remote villages to perform the same functions as their teacher. The formed religious elite did not only deal with the clarification of the issues of Islam but also exercised political, economic and social functions. However, according to the genesis of Sunni Islam, the foundation of governing philosophy was based on a kind of “Caesar-Papist” principle. Religion and its institution were subordinate to the state and its institutions. Thus, the Kurdish sheiks logically formed in the tekke obeyed the local secular rulers – tribal rulers.

The point is that the Kurds themselves adopted religion through this instrument. Moreover, like many societies peripheral to central, Arab-centric Islam, such as those in Central Asia, Albania, Mauritania, Sudan, and some African and Asian countries, sophistry has become the dominant form of religion among the Syrian Kurds. This phenomenon intensified greatly between the 1940s and 1960s. This was explained by the entry of communist ideology into Syrian society and in particular the targeted propaganda of the local Communist Party among minority communities.

The egalitarianism preached by the communists ideologically coincided with some of the social ideas of sophistry. The Syrian authorities themselves encouraged this process, as the ideological communist-sophist nonsense opposed Kurdish nationalism and irredentism, which Ba'athist strategists openly call “separatism.” Sophism remains deeply rooted in Kurdish society in Syria, as it models and generates a kind of second-tier (after the tribal factor) political elite. Such are the Khaznaueihi, Abu Musa and other clans, often nominating members of the Syrian parliament.

An exception is the Madrid movement / 1930-1940 / in Afrin / Kardak, led by Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil Say Oglu, a member of the Naqshbandi Order, who studied Islam in Homs and Damascus.⁴ He himself was born in Izmit in 1898 and is of Turkish origin. In 1930, he succeeded in drawing dissatisfied with both the French colonial rule and the large landowners in the region. Stepping on religion, through the slogan of fighting al-kufar, the infidels, they demand the abolition of secular laws. Along with them, purely social demands appear. Such are the removal of the dowry in marriage, the fair distribution of land and others.

The Marids have established close ties with the Syrian national movement. Thanks to him and his constituents, the leader of the tribe, Sheikh Hussein Auni, twice became a member of the national parliament in Damascus (1932 and 1936). Turkey is trying to steer the movement toward purely religious foundations that bring it closer to the essence and platform of the Muslim Brotherhood Islamists.

This is a fact, despite the fact that in Turkey Ataturk is making anti-religious reforms and creating a secular republic. Gradually, the matriarchs transformed into the local, for Afrin, branch of the oldest Islamist movement. Ankara claims to annex Afrin and the region to the Turkish republic. They were dropped when France granted it to the county of Hatay / Escanderun. In 1940, the colonial authorities sent an army unit, including fighter jets, to crush the Maridite revolt. Sheikh Khalil himself fled to Turkey. Despite the disappearance of the organized Madrid

⁴ The word maridin means “followers” or “supporters” in Kurdish.

movement from Afrin, Turkey has created civic movements based on it - the Kurdish Youth Club and the Community of Intellectuals.

Through the aforementioned civilian entities, Ankara is trying to maintain and spread pro-Turkish sentiment among this city, whose ethnic composition is 95% Kurdish. These historical events more than half a century ago gave aspirations and created preconditions for February 2018 for Turkey to carry out the military operation “Olive Branch” with the claim that it gives power to its true owners. The presumption is that the pro-Turkish militia members of the Free Syrian Army are in fact the heirs of the Madrid movement.⁵

Another important factor for the social mobility of Syrian Kurds, operating since the early twentieth century, is the uncertainty of the Turkish-Syrian border. For about two decades, this population did not know what their nationality was. In 1921, the Fraclin-Bouillon Agreement, also known as the Ankara Agreement, was signed between the modern Turkish state and France.⁶

Eventually, the final delineation of the Turkish-Syrian border took place in 1939, when Paris ceded the Hatay / Escanderun district to Ankara. The constant relocation of the border furrow has eroded the effectiveness of the territorial component as part of Kurdish nationalism, but at the same time catalyzed its ethnic element. The ethnoreligious population (Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Assyrians, Jews, Armenians, Turkmen and others) living in these areas felt that the lack of a fixed political boundary stimulated a sedentary lifestyle among some local groups. Bedouin Arabs and constantly migrating Kurds, permanently expelled Assyrian Christians and Armenians were placed in an equally difficult social situation.⁷

6. Conclusion

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that the Kurds in Syria are failing to create a large urban agglomeration, which pushes them to be constantly associated with the agrarian way of life. Even the small towns that are being formed do not get a real urban look, as their inhabitants had numerous relatives who remained to live in the countryside. Such a summary is valid for at least one century.

It was not until the 1950s that the town of Kamishli began to make an exception with a population of over 100,000. Two decades later, Hasaka and Afrin, who make up more than 50 percent of the Kurds, gained the same status. Over time, a belt of settlements was formed, with a population of between 50,000 and 100,000 people such as Kobane, Amuda, Maliki. This feature requires the creation of civil-administrative structures to meet the social needs of the population. Such were schools, cultural centers, cinemas, theaters, numerous restaurants and others. With their appearance, the role of tribal leaders is reduced. The population itself is employed mainly in the industry and services sectors. The role of ecology is also growing significantly.

The 1960s laid the foundations for civic education in Syrian Kurdistan. The first manifestations were in the 20s, but of very modest size. The creation of relatively large cities, and especially the formation and activation of Kurdish national parties, are pushing the civic education process forward. This feature becomes a prerequisite for the flourishing of the so-called. “Kurdish national consciousness”, linking in one educational system the three historical cantons in Syria,

⁵ Karma, A., *Kaifa Astakhdim Turkey al maridi wa al ikhwan fi ikhtirak al mujtamaat al kurdiya*, How Turkey uses Mariditism and the Muslim Brotherhood to infiltrate Kurdish communities, Al Hafriyat, <https://www.hafriyat.com/ar/blog/%D9>, 24.10.2018.

⁶ For more information see the Franco-Turkish agreement from Ankara: http://www.hri.org/docs/FT1921/Franco-Turkish_Pact_1921.pdf, 14.08.2019.

⁷ Mahmoud, R., *Al kawaid al izhtimaiya lil azab*.

namely Al Jazeera, Kobane and Afrin. Such a process was impossible until the long distances along the entire Turkish-Syrian border (almost 900 km) were covered by suitable road arteries. Part of this collective consciousness of the Kurds in Syria was expressed in the knowledge of the Kurds in neighboring Turkey and Iraq. To a large extent, the socialization of the Syrian Kurds as a community was due to the parties.

Such is the case with the first Kurdish political party, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), established in 1957. It is the result of the activity of an initiative committee whose members lived in Al Jazeera, Kobane, Afrin, Damascus and Aleppo.⁸

However, such initiatives were not enough to complete the process of full socialization of the Kurds in Syria. For example, the authorities in Damascus preferred to integrate the Kurdish elite into the already established Syrian one, rather than stimulate the formation of a separate socio-cultural body. Practically, by the beginning of the 19th century, a nation-building Kurdish national culture had failed to emerge in Syria. On the surface of the vast national socio-economic space emerges only the highly relevant political activity, especially in the security sector. Probably the events of 2004 in Kamishli are the factor that strongly mobilizes the civic energy of the Syrian Kurdish community so that for the first time it acts as a single civilian entity.⁹

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⁸ <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/145121>, 23.04.2017.

⁹ It is a clash between football fans of teams from Kamishli and Deyrezor, which acquires an ethnic tone. On 12 March 2004, at the Kamishli Stadium, Arabs raised photos of Saddam Hussein and Kurds raised the flag of Kurdistan. The confrontation lasted six days and spread to Damascus, as well as to neighboring cities between Kurds and local Arab tribes. Kurds attack the ruling Ba'ath party's office in Kamishli and destroy a statue of former President Hafez Assad in the city. Authorities are sending an army to quell the unrest by force. For more information see Humeidi, I., Ahdad al-Kamishli... The events in Kamishli, Ash Sharq al-Arabi, <http://www.asharqalarabi.org.uk/paper/s-akhbar-m-a-q.htm>, 14.03.2004.