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## ***Facing the Ba`th: The Syrian Kurdish Awakening***

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By now, even people with only a cursory knowledge of the Middle East are aware of its Kurdish dimension, thanks to the major challenges posed to the political and socio-cultural order by the Kurdish communities in Iraq and Turkey, and the problematic status of Kurds in Iran. Far less known is the situation, and even the very existence of the Kurdish community of Syria. Syria's Kurds, although constituting between 8 and 15 percent of the population of 22 million, were long ignored by the international community and thus remained a “silent minority” within a state whose governing ideology had always been Arab nationalism. About 300,000 of the Kurds who reside in Syria do not even have Syrian citizenship, and are thus effectively deprived of many civil rights. However, their anonymity appears to be over, as recent domestic and regional developments have focused the spotlight on this long-deprived community.

### **Kurds as the "Internal Enemy"**

Concentrated in the northern provinces of Aleppo, Al-Raqqah and Al-Hasakah, as well as Damascus, Syria's Kurds were not always a

marginalized community. Under the French Mandate (1920-46), they enjoyed more rights than their kinsmen in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, and the pan-Kurdish movement was directed from Damascus. Thousands of Kurdish refugees from Turkey settled in Syria's Jazirah region, between the Tigris and the Euphrates, and were granted Syrian citizenship by the French.

The arrival of independence fundamentally changed the equation. As non-Arabs, the Kurds suffered from harsh policies adopted by successive Arab nationalist governments. In 1962, acting in the shadow of a Kurdish revolt in Iraq, the Syrian government implemented a special census in the Al-Hasakah province for the purpose of weeding out “illegal infiltrators” who had settled in Syria after 1945. As a result, 120,000-150,000 Kurds were stripped of Syrian citizenship. In 1963, Muhammad Talab Hilal, a senior official in the ruling Ba`th Party, produced a secret document designating the Kurds as Syria's “internal enemy” and tendering a 12-point plan to Arabize the Kurdish region. Its objectives included extraditing and transferring Kurds to other regions, depriving them of education and work.[1] As part of the plan, the Arab Belt initiative (1963-76) was undertaken in the 10-15 km.- wide area bordering Turkey and Iraq. Between 60,000-120,000 Kurds were internally displaced and were replaced by thousands of Sunni Arab families, with the official aim being "saving the Arabism of the Jazirah". The Arab Belt, which disrupted transnational links with the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey, later became a model for Ankara and Baghdad in dealing with their own restive Kurdish populations.

From that time forward, Syrian Kurds remained prisoners of Ba`th policies and did not benefit from pan-Kurdish ties. In fact, it was the Syrian government which cultivated ties with Kurdish groups beyond its borders. In the 1970s and 1980s, Syria supported the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraq, and PUK leader Jalal

Talabani maintained an office in Damascus. Until 1998, Syria also sponsored the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey, and Hafiz al-Asad's regime managed to channel the political activism of his own Kurds into fighting alongside the KDP and PKK against Baghdad and Ankara.

Unlike their brethren, the Kurds of Syria had no outside supporters. The Great Powers were not interested in helping Syrian Kurds, and even Syria's regional enemies did not employ the Kurdish card against Damascus, probably because the Syrian Kurds were considered too weak to be of much use. Soon after its inception in 1957, the Syrian Kurdish political movement splintered and has remained divided ever since (with 12 illegal political parties in Syria).

It was only in 1984 that one witnessed the first signs of a Syrian Kurdish awakening, inspired by the PKK's guerrilla war in Turkey. However, Damascus managed to keep discontent in check for two more decades.

### **Getting On the Map: the Qamishli Uprising**

On March 12, 2004, intra-ethnic violence broke out during a football match between Syrian Arab and Kurdish clubs in the city of Al-Qamishli, in Syria's northeast, near the Turkish border. It remains unclear what sparked the violence. Various sources reported the Kurds praising Talabani, Barzani and George Bush Jr., and the Arabs hailing Saddam Hussein. Kurdish unrest soon spread to Al-Hasakah, Amuda, Afrin, Aleppo and Damascus, and Syrian tanks were introduced in the Jazirah. In 2005, further protests ensued at the funeral of the Kurdish shaykh Muhammad (Mahmud) Ma'shuq Khaznawi, who was allegedly assassinated in Damascus.

A number of domestic and regional developments fuelled Kurdish unrest. Firstly, the change of Syrian leadership in 2000 had raised certain hopes. In

2002, Bashar al-Asad became the first Syrian president in 40 years to visit Al-Hasakah, a city with a large Kurdish population. Concurrently, in the spirit of the short-lived “Damascus Spring”, censorship of Kurdish cultural and political activities was relaxed, and Kurdish music and Kurmanji language classes, although technically illegal, proliferated.

Secondly, beginning in 2004, the Kurdish diaspora, which normally focused its supportive efforts on the Kurdish communities in Iraq and Turkey, undertook substantial efforts to publicize the Syrian Kurdish cause. That year, demonstrations in support of Syrian Kurds were held in the city of Diyarbakir (in Turkey's heavily Kurdish southeast region), the predominantly Iraqi Kurdish cities of Irbil and Sulaymaniyya, and several European capitals.[2]

Thirdly, political developments in other parts of greater Kurdistan affected Syrian Kurds. Since 2003, the KDP and PUK had solidified the largely autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government's hold over the Iraqi Kurdish regions, and welcomed and provided support to Syrian Kurdish activities. The situation in Turkish Kurdistan, an old ancestral land for many Syrian Kurds, has further implications in Syria. In 1998, Turkey threatened Damascus with war unless it ceased support for the PKK. This brought relief to Syrian Kurds, whose self-expression had been curtailed by the Damascus-PKK alliance, and the first demands for political autonomy in Syria were not long in coming. More recently, the renewal of PKK violence and Turkish government reprisals in both Turkey and northern Iraq has enhanced sympathies for the PKK among Syrian Kurds, with some of them even joining its ranks.

Finally, Syria was on the defensive vis-a-vis the US and the international community over its support for the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and its alliance

with Hizbullah and Iran. Consequently, Damascus believed that it could not afford a serious crackdown on the Kurds at that time. Meanwhile, key Kurdish parties joined other Syrian opposition groups in signing the 2005 Damascus Declaration demanding political reforms. That same year, in order to decrease international pressure, a presidential pardon was issued to the 2004 rioters and high-ranking officials, including President Bashar al-Asad, made hopeful statements about solving the nationality issue.

### **Whither the Kurds of Syria?**

The younger generation of Syrian Kurds, in particular, feels frustrated that no progress was achieved on the Kurdish nationality question over the course of almost five decades. Descendants of those deprived of citizenship in 1962 remain stateless. Human rights groups and Kurdish organisations report that there are two types of stateless Kurds: about 200,000 classified as *ajanib* (foreigners), who hold special (red) identity cards, and an additional 80,000– 100,000 *maktumin* (unregistered), who possess no government documents and thus no legal identity whatsoever. Stateless Kurds cannot obtain a government job or practice medicine and law, access public health services, open a bank account, obtain property or register a business, enroll in higher education without a security clearance (unavailable to the *maktumin*) or travel outside of Syria.[3]

With the international pressure on Damascus having recently been reduced, the Syrian government has adopted a harsher stance towards Kurdish socio-political activism. During annual celebrations of *Nowruz* (New Year), a holiday which symbolizes Kurdish national identity, Syrian security opened fire at Kurds in Al-Qamishli (2008) and Al-Raqqah (2010). The Syrian Kurdish political leadership is systematically harassed. Thus, in the last three years, senior members of a number of organizations - the *Yekiti* and *Azadi* parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Kurdish Future

Movement - were detained, as were others.[4] Earlier hopes of a Syrian *glasnost*, epitomized by the 2005 promises for citizenship restoration, failed to materialize.

The 2004 uprising brought the Kurds of Syria out of their anonymity and granted them a degree of international visibility. Since then, they have been struggling to maintain their momentum and force Damascus to alter its repressive policies towards them but with little substantive results.

Nevertheless, as they have in the past, Kurdish trans-border mechanisms and influences might again become operative at some point, i.e. the flourishing Kurdish entity in Iraq and the ongoing government-PKK conflict in Turkey may well have spillover effects on the Syrian Kurds.

[1] Muhammad Talab Hilal, "A Study of Al-Jazeera Province from Ethnic, Social and Political Aspects" (Al-Hasakah, 1963), in Jawad Mella, *The Colonial Policy of the Syrian Baath Party in Western Kurdistan* (London, 2006), pp. 63-227.

[2] European Center for Kurdish Studies, "The Al-Qamishli Uprising: The Beginning of a New Era for Syrian Kurds?", *KurdWatch Report No.4* (December 2009).

[3] Refugees International, "Buried Alive: Stateless Kurds in Syria" (January 2006).

[4] Human Rights Watch, "Group Denial; Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria" (2009).

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