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The Forgotten Kurds of Syria

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Overview

Kurdistan, or Land of the Kurds, straddles the mountainous borders in the Middle East where Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria converge. The Kurds famously constitute the largest nation in the world without sovereign status. In recent years, we have frequently heard from the Kurds living in Iraq, Turkey and Iran, whereas those living in Syria had been virtually invisible.

On July 19, 2012, the almost forgotten Kurds of Syria suddenly emerged as a potential game-changer in the Syrian civil war. In an attempt to consolidate their increasingly desperate position, government troops were abruptly pulled out of major Kurdish areas. The Kurds in Syria had suddenly become essentially autonomous, a situation that also immediately affected neighboring Turkey and the virtually independent Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Indeed, the chaos of the Syrian civil war that has been raging since March 2011, along with the precipitous rise of the Kurds in Syria and their bid to become a tipping point, might help change the artificial borders of the Middle East established after World War I by the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Nobody really knows exactly how many Kurds live in Syria. The Kurds have an interest in exaggerating their numbers, while the government undercounts them to deemphasize the size of the issue. Nevertheless, a reasonable estimate is that approximately 10 percent or slightly more than 2.2 million Kurds may live in Syria, a much smaller number than those residing in Turkey, Iraq and Iran.¹ Although the largest ethnic minority in Syria, the Kurds live in three non-contiguous areas and have been much less successfully organized than those in the other countries. For many years, the repressive Syrian government of Hafez Assad also sought to maintain an Arab belt between its Kurds and those in Turkey and Iraq. This Arab belt artificially separated the Kurds in Syria from their ethnic

kin and, in many cases, blood relatives across the border in Turkey and Iraq, uprooting many Syrian Kurds and depriving them of their livelihoods.

Many Kurds in Syria also have been denied Syrian citizenship. In 1962, for example, Decree 93 classified some 120,000 Kurds as *ajanib*, or foreigners, who could not vote, own property or work in government jobs. This status has been inherited and, thus, the number of *ajanib* may now be at 300,000 or more. In addition, some 75,000 other Syrian Kurds became known as *maktoumeen*, or concealed. As such, they have virtually no civil rights and were even worse off than the *ajanib*. Furthermore, a government decree in September 1992 prohibited the registration of children with Kurdish first names. Kurdish cultural centers, bookshops and similar activities have also been banned.

M. Talab Hilal Manuscript

The theoretical justification for these harsh, discriminatory measures was a clandestine treatise written and then published by Lieutenant Muhammed Talab Hilal, the chief of the Syrian security police in the province of Hasaka (Jazira) on November 12, 1963. The title of his manual translated into English as *National, Political and Social Study of the Province of Jazira*. A look at some of this book's main points would be very enlightening as to why many Kurds in Syria feel alienated towards that state.²

* The bells of alarm in Jazira call on [the] Arab conscience to save this region, purify it and rid it of the dirt and historical refuse [the Kurds] of history in order to preserve the riches of this Arab territory (p. 2).

* People such as the Kurds—who have no history, civilization, language or ethnic origin—are prone to committing violence and destruction as are all mountain people (pp. 4-5).

* The Kurdish question advanced by them has become a malignant tumor on the side of the Arab nation and must be removed (p. 6).

* They [the Kurds] are supported by the imperialists since the goals of these Middle East outlaws are similar to their goals (p. 12).

* The imperialists are trying to legitimize the Kurdish question as they legitimized that of the state of Israel (p. 14).

* The Kurdish question is the most dangerous threat to the Arab nation, especially Jazira and northern Iraq. It is evolving as the Zionist movement did before Israel was established. The Jazira Kurds tried to prevent the Syrian army from intervening on behalf of the Arab state of Iraq against [Mulla Mustafa] Barzani (p. 24).

* The Kurds of Turkey live north of the Kurdish belt of Syria. The Kurds of both countries are blood brothers and many of their tribes are spread all over Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. They are ready on horsebacks at the frontiers for the realization of their golden dream of the Kurdish homeland, Kurdistan (pp. 24-26).

* Despite their differences, the Jazira Kurdish tribes are united and inspired by one idea, which is the Kurdish race. This one desire has given them the strength to pursue their national dream of a Kurdish homeland (pp. 26-28).

*The Kurds differ from the Arabs ethnically, psychologically and physiologically (no page numbers listed).

* Though they do not speak an acceptable form of Arabic, the majority of the Muslim ulamas [religious leaders] in the Hasaka province [another name for Jazira] are Kurds; they are conspiring to create their nation under the guise of religion (pp. 38-40).

Although many (but not all) Kurds do dream of an independent Kurdistan and some came to Syria from Turkey after the failed Kurdish uprisings of the 1920s in that country, the Hilal treatise ignores the fact that the borders between Turkey and Syria that now divide the Kurds were only established following WWI. Thus, these borders artificially separated the Kurds just as many Arab nationalists have argued they also artificially separated the Arab nation.

Kurdish Roots in Syria

As testimony to Kurdish roots in Syria, the huge Crusader castle Krak des Chevaliers in the Alawite Mountains between Homs and Tartus is known in English as Castle of the Kurds. Salah al-Din (Saladin), the most famous Kurd of all, is buried in the great mosque in Damascus. Kurd Dagh, or Kurd Mountain, northwest of Aleppo

(also referred to as Afrin after its main city) remains one of the three distinct and separate Kurdish areas in Syria. While Kobani (Ain al-Arab) in the north central area of Syria, and Hasaka (Hesice) or Jazira (Island – in reference to its lying between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers – in the northeastern part of Syria) constitute the other two, separate and distinct Kurdish areas in Syria. Kurd Dagh and Kobani are contiguous to Kurdish-populated areas in Turkey, while part of Hasaka (Jazira) borders Kurdish areas in both Turkey and Iraq in the area the French called le Bec de Canard, or Duck's Beak, in reference to its relatively long, narrow shape that juts between Turkey and Iraq. Indeed, Cizre, once the capital of the Kurdish emirate of Botan and now situated in Turkey, lies only some 20 miles from the Syrian border.

Even more, of course, the Kurds who had come from Turkey and were now living in Syria had been there since the 1920s, when they had been issued identity cards by the then French authorities who ruled Syria as a mandate under the League of Nations. Thus, these Kurds were already Syrian citizens when that state became independent in 1946. Stripping them of their citizenship in 1962 was a clear violation of international law regarding nationality rights in cases of state succession, as well as such internationally legally-binding, human-rights doctrines as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, and International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.³

Given his desperate situation because of the on-going civil war, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad recently offered the Kurds numerous concessions so that they would not join the opposition against him. For now, however, the Kurds have been trying to steer a neutral course between the government and the largely Sunni Arab opposition, as they do not trust either side, especially because the opposition, in part, consists of al-Qaeda affiliated jihadists such as the *Jabhat al-Nusra* (Defense Front) and others who bear no love for the largely secular-minded Kurds.

Endnotes

¹ For further background on the Kurds in Syria, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); and Harriet Montgomery (Allsopp), *The Kurds of Syria: An Existence Denied* (Berlin: Europaisches Zentrum fur Kurdische Studien, 2005).

² The following excerpts were taken from an article published by the late and famous Kurdish scholar Ismet Cheriff Vanly, "The Oppression of the Kurdish People in Syria," in *Kurdish Exodus: From Internal Displacement to Diaspora*, eds. by Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter (Sharon MA: Ahmed Foundation for Kurdish Studies, 2001), pp. 55-56. The page numerals in the text above refer to those in the actual Hilal manuscript which totaled 160 pages. Jazira is the northeastern Syrian province in which the largest number of Kurds lives.

³ For further analysis of these issues, see Peter Malanczuk, *Akehurst's Modern Introduction to International Law*, 7th revised ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 169, 215.

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