Kurds – “External” and “Internal” in Syria, Khaibun’s Organization and “Arab Security Belt” (Security Belt Forces)

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Abstract

This study aims to present the Kurds – “External” and “Internal” in Syria, Khaibun’s Organization and “Arab Security Belt” (Security Belt Forces). During the period 1958-1961, in which Syria became part of the United Arab Republic (UAR), a new migration wave from Turkey to the Arab country was observed. The article analyzes: Kurdish’s migration wave; the principle “The land is on this one, that processes it”; political power; genesis of Syrian Kurds; Khaibun’s Organization and it fate.

Keywords: Kurds, Syria, Kurdish refugees, Arab Security Belt.

1. Introduction

During the period 1958 -1961, in which Syria became part of the United Arab Republic (UAR), a new wave of migration from Turkey to the Arab country was observed. The fertile agricultural lands of northeastern Syria have become a real “Eldorado” for the poor peasants in Turkey. The announced agrarian reform in the United Arab Republic, dictated by the strong aspirations of the new authorities for social justice and the raised socialist slogans, attracted many agricultural workers from neighboring Turkey. Thousands of Turkish Kurds took advantage of the principles of the new state, which made no ethnic distinction between candidates for the acquisition and cultivation of Syrian land. If the latter were of an age that required compulsory three-year military service in Syria, they were happy to join the army. The reason is not only the huge difference in the conditions of service in the Turkish and Syrian armies, but mostly due to the fact that after the barracks they received a military ID. It became a kind of document for a legal claim to stay in the Arab country. This approach to staying in Syria was much safer than looking for two witnesses to prove to the authorities that the migrant candidate was their relative.

2. The Kurdish migration wave

The Kurdish migration wave came under full control during the first two years of the UAR’s existence, as a result of close co-operation between local units of the Interior Ministry and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), established in 1957. This marks the beginning of the modern
Kurdish movement in Syria. In practice, a kind of political deal was made, namely untying the hands of the KDP for active work with the Kurds, including those in Turkey, against the inclusion of the latter in the ideas of power in Damascus. The Voice of the Kurds radio station was even unveiled. The cooperation between the newly formed Kurdish political entity and Damascus’ rulers was short-lived as the KDP gradually changed its attitude towards the Egyptian-Syrian state. Only two years after its official formation, this party was banned by the authorities and the leadership was brought to justice. However, for the first time, a fact was heard in the courtroom that the authorities in Damascus ignored. During his trial, the general secretary of the outlawed party, Nuredin Zaza, formulated the problem with the so-called “Foreigners from Turkey”. He accuses the Syrian state of not granting citizenship to Kurds who migrated from Turkey to Syria for several generations. According to him, there were hundreds of thousands of applications for citizenship. Zaza also accused the institutions of allocating land for dishonest behavior towards the Kurds.

Despite the formalized principle of equality between applicants in the areas south of Hasaka and between Hasaka and Tel Kodjak, preference was given to the Arabs.

The clash was both ethnic and social. The organs that distributed the land gave it to those who cultivated it. Most agricultural workers at the time were from the Arab slap tribe, while in many places it was formally owned by Kurdish sheikhs. In the spirit of socialist propaganda, the authorities in Damascus claimed that the redistribution actually expressed “the social struggle of ordinary Arab peasants against the Kurdish kulaks.” There is no consensus on this controversial topic by various researchers. Authors close to Damascus, such as Ahmed Mardini, claimed that Kurdish peasants also received plots of land if they cultivated them, while pro-Kurdish experts such as Ismet Wiley claimed otherwise.

3. The principle “The land is on this one, that processes it”

After Syria’s withdrawal from the UAR, the content of agrarian reform has changed.

Between 1961-1963, the authorities stopped applying the principle: “The land belongs to the one who cultivates it.” Maaruf Daualibi’s nationalist cabinet in Damascus (1961-1962) replaced the rule of “fair distribution of land” with the law on “fair distribution of the population.” Then the Syrian government decides to implement a new demographic policy. Although the majority of Al-Jazeera villagers had been cultivating the land for years and had Syrian identity documents, the government began to describe them as “Turks”.

The reason for this was their Turkish origin. Tensions between the government and local Kurds escalated when security forces began forcibly removing peasants from their lands. For a very short period of time, Agriculture Minister Saeed Seyed suspended the law due to the possibility of destabilizing the entire country. However, this lasts for a relatively short period of time. On the 16th of April, 1962, the new Prime Minister Beshir al-Azma, who came to power in a coup, continued his moderate policy towards the Kurds. He was a supporter of the ideas of the United Arab Republic and nationalized the Saudi bank Al Ahly. At that time, the first oil deposits were discovered in al Jazeera. Al Azma refused to outsource their exploitation to a joint Saudi-American holding company. His successor as prime minister, Khaled al-Azm (1962-1963), quickly changed the situation. He quickly restored restrictions on the Kurds in al Jazeera. In this light, at the end of 1962, the actual population of the city of Hasaka was 340,000, while the number registered in the official registers was only 305,000.

On 5 October 1962, the government of Prime Minister al-Azm began the so-called “Emergency census” in Hasaka province. The order is related to the annulment of all civil registers of the population in this part of the country compiled so far. The local authorities had to establish the number of both Syrian citizens and “foreigners”. The last category included all persons who
had been entered in the registers after 1945. To that end, the Ministry of the Interior gave the opportunity to all those living in the territory of the province in question to gather evidence of their “legal citizenship” for one month. The latter could not be substantiated by testimony based on family, clan or tribal ties. In this way, all Kurds who emigrated to Syria from Turkey after Syria’s independence became “foreigners.” Most of them had settled along the Syrian-Turkish border, especially between the villages of Ras al-Ain and Maliki, in the extreme northeastern part of the country.\(^{10}\)

The census itself was led by Hasaka Governor Saeed Seyed. The latter was the brother of Jalal Seyed, one of the founders of the Ba’athist Arab Socialist Party and a representative of the nationalist movement in it. Saeed Seyed believed that the UAR’s policy of agrarian reform was tantamount to “stealing land from the Arabs.” The latter, however, allowed “Kurdish Turks” to remain if they changed their status as “land users” into its owners. He hypothesized that Kurdish villagers had illegally leased land from the state. If they wanted to legalize their property and become Syrian citizens, they had to borrow from the National Bank. It was £ 3,000 a year. Thus, a huge loan of about 40,000 pounds was obtained on average for the entire time during which the Kurdish peasants cultivated the land. To this end, a law was passed in February 1962.\(^{11}\)

Logically, the amount proved prohibitive for the Kurds, who were forced to borrow en masse. Their lands became the property of the bank. Due to the stalemate, the authorities were forced to reduce the monetary obligations of the mass-ruined Kurds to 15,000 pounds.

After all, the idea of the government in Damascus was to give priority to the Arab ethnic group in the region far from the capital, regardless of the instruments of state policy. The “extraordinary census” resulted in the government declaring 85,000 people living in Hasaka province as “foreigners – Turks.” This represented 27% of Al-Jazeera’s total population, which turned out to be 302,000.\(^{12}\)

The paradox, however, was that as a result of these measures, prominent Syrian politicians and officers were deprived of Syrian citizenship. Such were former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister-elect Abdel Baki Nizamadin, as well as his brother General Taufik Nizamadin, former Chief of the General Staff of the Syrian Army (1955-1957).\(^{13}\)

The paradox came that members of one family were qualified differently. For example, one brother was a Syrian and the other a Turk.

In early November 1962, Hasake Governor Saeed al-Seyed and Interior Minister Aziz Abdul Kerim wrote a special document on the population of Al Jazeera. The main thesis of the government report is that “the migration of Turkish Kurds is a threat to the stability of Arab Syria.”\(^{14}\)

The practical implementation of this document is a forced Arabization of the region. It includes various measures, namely:

- marking the internal borders of the area by digging trenches;
- the creation of a border police that is “nationally loyal”;
- stimulating the nationalization of lands owned by Kurds;
- increasing the income of the sheikhs of the Arab tribes and attracting members of these tribes to “agrarian reform”;
- the delay in complaints lodged by Kurds related to “agrarian reform” and others.\(^ {15}\)

4. Political power

The political power established after the Ba’athist coup on 8 March 1963 promised that the land would be given to the peasants who cultivated it, whether they were Arabs, Kurds or other
nationalities. However, the leadership of the new ruling party in Hasaka has a different opinion. It drafted a document, the essence of which was “the eradication of the Kurdish population from the Al Jazeera region.” The new element in it is the forcible study of this ethnic group in the interior of the country, not its expulsion to Turkey. The idea was mainly to stop the policy of building new schools and other educational centers in Al Jazeera, to compel Kurds to emigrate to Turkey, and permanently settle in the country, to suppress local Kurds economically by giving priority to Arabs in hiring temporary and permanent workers, pitting some Kurdish clans and tribes against others, settling members of the Arab slap tribe in places close to the border furrow, turning the northernmost parts of Al Jazeera into military front, and not in places suitable for peaceful economic activity, through the creation of military facilities and barracks in which servicemen serve – Arabs, not Kurds and others. The project of creating “armed, collective Arab farms” was interesting. These are detachments of Arabs in the border areas who were not only the owners of the land, but also the only ones who had the right to vote. Practically, the Arabs became complete monopolists of economic and political activity in the region. All other ethnic groups were expelled or marginalized.

The project for the creation of the so-called the “Arab Security Belt” began in 1966. It is directly linked to the construction of the great Euphrates Dam on the Euphrates River by specialists from the former Soviet Union. According to a document prepared by the chairman of the Regional Branch of Peasants, the area of the “belt” in question was over three million decares. Geographically, it was situated between the village of Al-Maliki (Dirık) to the administrative border between the provinces of Hasaka and Raqqa and between the villages of Tel Jalila and Rajan. It was about 300 km long and about ten kilometers wide. In principle, the Kurds who lived there had migrated to Syria from Turkey and Iraq. Their number was about 25,000, who were listed in the registers as “foreigners” because they had no documents from the Syrian state. In a way, they occupied territory that was parallel to the Syrian-Turkish border.

The creation of the huge dam forced the authorities in 1969 to seize the lands of about 20,000 families, forcing them to emigrate down the Euphrates. Moreover, special settlements were built for them, offering them an agrarian way of life organized in the style of the Soviet collective farms. Members of the two Arab tribes, Al-Walid and Bushaaban, flatly refused to leave the region. Then the government forcibly evicted them, but they did not go to Hasaka to the east, but to the southeast to the village of Shamia, in the direction of the Syrian desert. Thus, some of them fell into the so-called “Arabian Belt”, and others went directly to the city of Raqqa. In time, all the Arabs who remained around the Euphrates Dam left their lands, forced by the Damascus authorities. In 1973, it was estimated that about 4,000 Arab families settled in the Arabian belt region, which was about 24,000 people. However, 42 villages were formed in the area in question, with two-thirds being Kurdish and the remaining one-third being Arab. Thus, despite the desire of the authorities in the “Arab belt”, the Arabs remained a minority, as they failed to expel any Kurdish peasants. It is as if in this project two types of nationalism, Arab and Kurdish, collide purely materially. Perhaps the only consequence is the rise of a strong sense of self-preservation and a logical defensive response by the Kurds towards the Arabs for the protection of al-Jazeera’s “bastion”. It is possible that this type of feeling and action is dictated by a similar, catastrophic for them, type of “ethnic cleansing”, realized in Turkey by its rising nationalism. The difference between the two types of nationalism is purely idolatrous. The Turks are Kemalist, while the Arabs are Ba’athist. The Arabs even lost the toponymical battle. The renamed settlements were not accepted by the Kurds and they managed to impose them on the majority of the population, despite their official new names imposed by the authorities. The Arab Security Belt project failed because the Arabs were not numerous enough, even motivated to “melt” their deep-rooted local Kurds. With the arrival of President Hafez Assad in 1969, the repressive policy against the Kurds in question came to an end. This was due to the divergent policies pursued by the two neighboring Ba’athist regimes, the Syrian and the Iraqi. The Syrian head of state was forced to comply with the Kurdish-friendly behavior of his counterpart, Saddam Hussein. The latter encouraged those opposed to the traditional Kurdish parties in northern Iraq through material benefits – public
works, positions in the administration and others. Damascus’ clashes with Ankara have also contributed to the failure of the Arab security belt. The reasons were related to Syria’s challenge to Turkish sovereignty over the province of Haty (Escanderon), as well as tensions over the use of the Tigris and Euphrates waters. The formal end of the project marks the formal embrace between the government in Damascus and the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), which has become an instrument of Syria’s pressure on Turkey.18

5. Genesis of Syrian Kurds

Over time, the genesis of the Syrian Kurds has been profiled into two huge social groups, briefly classified as “internal” and “external”. The criterion of their formation process is not only the time, but also the place where the nucleus consolidates. In these two groups ferments a different way of life, social structure, but also the more important social and political behavior. Among the “internal”, the family behavioral framework was imposed, and hence a relatively greater freedom and range of social contacts. This was typical of the people who lived in the larger settlements. To be clearer, we can define them as “citizens” or “civilized”.

At the same time, their peripheral counterparts or “outer” Kurds adopted the tribalistic behavioral matrix. The periphery has forced them to stay in larger social communities in order to better protect themselves and survive the constant external threats. Moreover, the strong ancestral spirit that dominated the Kurds in Diyarbakir and Bitlis in Turkey, in Sulaymaniyah, Ravandiz, Amadia and Sinjar in Iraq and Ashnay, Arumia and Kermanshah in Iran is carried over into the psyche of the Syrian “foreign” Kurds. Probably retrograde social-power paradigms continue to strongly influence the Kurdish tribal amalgam. It is about the social filling of the former strong Kurdish feudal formations that existed on the territory of modern Turkey, such as in Diyarbakir, Bhutan, Bahdinin and others.

Practically in Syria, regardless of a single ethnic origin, the two Kurdish groups occupy different places in the public, social, cultural, economic and political life of the country. The “inner”, “urban” Kurds are fully integrated into the state institutions of the Arab state. They find their social place among the Syrian middle class, mostly finding its professional field in the circles of traders and entrepreneurs, as well as among civil servants in municipal, state and military institutions.

The “inner” Kurds have long been part of the Syrian statist establishment and in this capacity have contributed to the resistance against French colonialism. In 1920 they were in the forefront in the battle against the army of General Henri Hugo (1876-1946). The latter fulfilled the mandate of the Sykes-Pico Treaty, under which France and Britain divided the Arab Middle East territories of the Ottoman Empire. Before that, they joined the ranks of the Great Syrian Uprising (1925-1927), which the Syrians raised against the French occupation. They became one of the most active Syrian citizens in party politics. It is noteworthy that a significant number of them join opposition parties in power, such as the Syrian Communist Party. One of its wings was even chaired by the Kurdish Khalid Baghdad (1912-1995), ideologically linked to the countries of the former socialist camp.

The “external” Kurds do not participate in and do not go through the mobilization-psychological filter of the cited major socio-political social trials in Syria, which contribute to the formation of a specific political culture and state thinking. Moreover, they themselves are too heterogeneous and do not form a single social body. By the 1920s, approximately half of them practiced a semi-Bedouin lifestyle in Al Jazeera. The other half, mostly living in the Amouda region, live a sedentary life, earning a living. Conservative livelihoods contribute to the resilience of conservative tribal traditions and the low-status social image of this part of the Syrian Kurds. They can rightly be called “peripheral Kurds”, not only because of their mentality and ethno
psychology, but also because of their place of residence on the political map of the Arab country. The remoteness of Al Jazeera, the heart of the “outer” Kurds from the capital Damascus, which is the center not only of the political and spiritual life of the country, is the reason for the low pace of economic development and respectively the relatively low standard of living. The unsatisfactory level of social services and especially the isolation during the winter period due to the bad climatic conditions contribute to the ethno-political differentiation of the region. It is logical that such a type of peripheral socio-economic status should push the locals to turn to other, closer geo-economic centers and to normally receive political ideas and views from them. In the light of these thoughts, it is natural that among the Syrian “peripheral” Kurds, political currents and subjects should emerge that are by their nature predominantly connected with neighboring countries, and not so much of a national character. This feature of Syrian society has been used extensively by the French colonial authorities. The latter have perfectly manipulated the Kurdish peripheral masses, perceiving foreign influence, in order to strike or at least fend off the strong national anti-colonial sentiments and resentments, the source of which were the big cities. In this sense, the “external” peripheral Kurds opposed their compatriots living in the center of the nation-state.

A classic example in this regard is the establishment in 1927 of the organization “Khaybun” (in Kurdish – “be yourself”) in the Lebanese city of Bamhadun, which is 13 km from Beirut. The French colonial authorities formed an anti-Ottoman Kurdish-Armenian irredentist organization. The leader is the Kurdish nationalist Mamduh Selim, and a representative of the Armenian nationalist party, Tashnak Vahan Papazyan, was elected to the leadership along with his colleagues from other Kurdish organizations. The aim of the rebels was to support the revolt in Ararat, which in 1927 declared the Ararat Republic. According to Nelida Fukaro, Khaibun’s creates modern Kurdish nationalism. The majority of Kurdish intellectuals in it have pro-Western views and try to form their own nationalism, but in the same way as the nationalist ideological currents already established in the West. The idea is to adopt the Western form of nationalism and combine it with Kurdish tribalism of existence and way of thinking. Interestingly, the Kurdish creators of Khaibun set foot on religion to attract followers. They succeed even by hybridizing the ethno-religious message with that of another ethnic group and another religion. In this particular case, the political engineering of French colonialism, which is waging war against Turkey, is evident.

The operational plans of the organization in question are interesting. They want to liberate all Kurds in Turkey by bringing them together. At the same time, Al Jazeera, which is located on Syrian territory, is perceived as a huge rear or a kind of command headquarters of the Turkish-Kurdish national liberation movement. Thus, the “foreign” Kurds create a buffer territory that creates an economic and social environment that acts as a springboard for the design and implementation of the politico-military plans of the Kurdish national movement in a neighboring country. In fact, the Khaybun became an outspoken weapon in the hands of France, which until the 1930s fought Ataturk Turkey to fix the border between it and mandated Syria. The entire border, from the city of Jarablus to Dirik, was turned by this organization into a front line in order to ease the pressure on the Republic of Ararat. However, control of the Kurdish rebels is so great that the Khaybun is conducting more combat operations on Turkish territory than on Syrian territory. At the same time, the leaders of the organization are forced to reside in the interior of Syria.

External influence on the structure of the organization should not be exaggerated. It is noteworthy that all Kurds, members of the Khaibun leadership, are part of the former elite of the Ottoman Empire. With the advent of the “modern” Turkish state, they have lost the favor of the authorities, and hence their social status and financial status. Thus, their battle is not only against the state of Ataturk and its army, but is a desire to carry out their own rehabilitation. This is the reason for the collapse of the Kurdish organization, despite initial successes. The strength of the structure is due to their ties to the Kurdish tribes living in the border areas. At the same time,
collective leadership and rapidly emerging personal differences erode the organization. Two pairs of brothers, namely Jaladat and Kamran Badarkhan and Kudri and Akram Jamal Pasha, face each other. In fact, they carry old enmities between two Kurdish clans, dating back to the Ottoman Empire. For example, the former are the successors of the Kurdish rulers of the Emirate of Ben Omar, while the latter are the successors of the Kurdish Emirate of Diyarbakir. Each of the two local dynasties claimed historical leadership of Kurdish society. According to left-wing Kurdish researcher Rustom Mahmoud, the elite composition and the lack of political messages to the socially disintegrating Kurdish agrarian society are among the reasons for the failure of the first-ever Kurdish political movement.\textsuperscript{21}

It can be argued to what extent the thesis is not strongly ideological, applying the analytical methodology of left-wing researchers. It is indisputable, however, that in the present case tribalism and clannishness prevailed over the processes of strict hierarchization of the social structure characteristic of European societies at that time. Even today, almost a century later, tribe, or rather communality, in terms of spirit, behavior, and real status, has influenced the Syrian Kurds.

6. Khaibun’s Organization and its fate

The fate of the Khaybun’s organization shows the contradictory development and the constant ideological and tactical clash between the “internal” and the “external” Kurds. The confrontation is based on the genesis of the ambitions of individual leaders, namely common Kurdish or national (be it Syrian or Turkish). In fact, the opposition has become even more complicated, as tribal frictions generated by the tribalistic social composition of Kurdish society have been at the bottom.

The split between Kutb Kudri Jamil Pasha, on the one hand, and the alliance between the Badarkhan clan and the Huirkiya tribe, led by Haju Aga, who migrated from Turkey to Syria in 1932, on the other, outlined the profiling of parts of the growing Kurdish community in Syria. Two currents are emerging that reflect the nuanced behavior of the Syrian “foreign Kurds”. The former continues to view Turkey as its “homeland” and the latter “Syrians” and succumbs to the policies of the French authorities, who see an end to their colonial presence in Syria. The union of the Badarkhan and Haju aga clans became the material expression of the French aspirations for the creation of regional formations independent of the central government in Damascus. A petition signed by 100 prominent Al Jazeera figures calls for the creation of an “autonomous Kurdish-Christian province under a French mandate” similar to those created in Druzystan and Alawitistan. One of the reasons given is that it is a “group that belongs to the Aryan community and the Kurdish nation and is clearly different from the Syrian citizens from inside the country.” The document also says that if this formation receives “special rule”, its tribes will be indebted to France forever. It is noted that “they will be joined by all residents of the territories along the railway line, leaving Turkey.”\textsuperscript{22} The project received strong support among local Kurds, but ultimately failed as the majority of Christians living in the region boycotted it.

7. Conclusion

The Khaybun’s project is subject to conflicting assessments. Pro-Kurdish authors greet him and speak with sympathy for him. Such is Ristum Mahmoud. He said it was the first political organization set up by Syrian Kurds. This proves the emergence of a growing socio-political consciousness. He defends this thesis, despite the fact that the project was created with an Armenian political party and was implemented outside the national borders of Syria.\textsuperscript{23} At the same time, pro-government and Damascus-loving experts argue that the seeds of Kurdish separatism in Syria were actually visited at the time. Such is the researcher at the Center for Arab Studies and
Policy Studies, Mohamed Barut, author of a detailed study of the Al Jazeera region. Particularly characteristic of Arab nationalist authors is the connection of Al Jazeera with the plans of external, colonial factors. For example, the above-mentioned researcher maintains that Al Jazeera was targeted for the resettlement of Palestinians to Lebanon and Syria after the Peel Commission’s decisions in 1937 to divide British Palestine by intensifying the activities of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Israel and as a result of policy of the United States during the period 1949-1954.

The assessments still remain mutually exclusive. Moreover, the confrontation in scientific and political assessments of Al Jazeera’s condition is intensifying, especially in light of the practically existing independent Syrian Kurdistan, Rojava. At the heart of these two groups of researchers remain differences in the interpretation of the term “local population”. The two ethnic groups, the Kurdish and the Arab, claim not only property but, above all, the exercise of legitimate sovereignty over the same territory.

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1 The United Arab Republic (UAR) is a union between Egypt, ruled by Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Syria, whose president is Shukri al-Qatlî. In the late 1950s, the Syrian political and military elite feared the growing influence of the Syrian Communist Party, chaired by Khalid Baghdash. He seeks unification with Egypt to avoid communist rule. At the same time, the strong bureaucratization and domination of the Egyptians in power quickly severed Egyptian-Syrian ties. On the 28th of September, 1961, the Syrian army staged a coup and declared an end to the UAR. For more information see: Cumhuriya al Arabiya al Mutahida, United Arab Republic, Al Maarifa, https://www.marefa.org/%D8%A7. 11 May 2020.

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