



JANUARY 2006

## The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered

*Robert Lowe, Chatham House*



Demonstrators at funeral, Qamishli, 13 March 2004. © amude.com

- After years of quiet, the Syrian Kurds are now vocal. The gains made by the Kurds in Iraq have given the Kurds in Syria great encouragement and confidence.
- The official ideology of the Syrian Arab Republic is not inclusive of Kurds. The Syrian Kurds suffer from discrimination and repression. Around 300,000 are denied Syrian citizenship.
- Syria is isolated and under international pressure, but domestic opposition is weak. The Kurds offer a rare challenge to the regime.
- Kurdish political parties have struggled to operate but have the potential to attract large support from a community becoming ever more assertive of its identity.
- Serious reforms are required to ease the plight of the Kurds in Syria. Otherwise, despite tight government control, there is likely to be further unrest.

## 2 The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered

The Iraq war of 2003 and subsequent struggle to secure and define the country have had wide implications. Among those most deeply affected have been the Kurds throughout the region and the Syrian government. Syria is struggling to bear the weight of unprecedented international pressure. A jaded regime is under attack from many sides, most threateningly from the UN Security Council's investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Attention turns towards the Syrian opposition, traditionally weak, subdued and disorganized. One of the largest opposition groups, little known until recently, is the Kurds.

The Kurds in the Middle East sense this is a time of opportunity. The first Kurdish government since the short-lived Mahabad Republic of 1946 has been firmly established in northern Iraq, and the substantial gains made by Iraqi Kurds since the fall of Saddam Hussein have given enormous encouragement to Kurds in neighbouring countries. Violence has returned to Kurdish areas of Turkey but EU accession talks offer real hope of improved rights and conditions for Kurds there. There has been unrest recently in Iran and in Syria among Kurds who have gained confidence from developments in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Turkey.

The Kurds of Syria tend to be characterized as 'forgotten' or 'silent' in the subtitles of the few works that have been published on them, because these people have been far less visible than the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq. This all changed after shootings at a football match in Qamishli in March 2004 gave rise to large popular demonstrations and riots and a dramatic upsurge of Kurdish national feeling which surprised the Syrian government and brought the Kurdish issue to the fore in the debate about the future of Syria.

In the wake of these events, and with attention increasingly focused on Syria's battles with the international community, there has been a surge in diplomatic interest and in the production of articles and books on this previously overlooked people. At long last, the Kurds of Syria have been discovered. This paper examines their relationship with the Syrian state, their grievances, their political organization and the important developments of the last two years.

---

### Background

---

The Kurds, and the vaguely defined area often known as Kurdistan, were divided by modern borders established in the 1920s. The limits of control agreed between the French, British and Turks created barriers between Kurds who found themselves living in the new states of Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran. This broke the contiguity of Kurdistan and left three bulges of western Kurdish-inhabited territory cut off from the larger Kurdish body in Turkey and Iraq. A comparatively small number of Kurds became 'Syrians' under the French Mandate and then, from 1946, under Arab-dominated independent Syria.

The number of Kurds in Syria is uncertain as the government declines to keep figures and even the definition of a Kurd is debatable. The likely current population is around 1.75 million, roughly 10% of the

population of Syria. This makes the Kurds by some margin the largest ethnic minority after the Arabs. The Kurds of Syria speak the Kurdish Kurmanji language and the vast majority are Sunnis. They adhere to distinctive Kurdish cultural practices and a shared national story and they identify with and are greatly influenced by fellow Kurds in other countries. They live in large numbers along the borders with Iraq and Turkey with the greatest concentrations in the Jazira in the northeast, Kubani in the north and the Kurd Dagh in the northwest (see map, p.8). There are also sizeable Kurdish populations in Aleppo and Damascus.

---

### The problem of Syrian Arab nationalism

---

Syrian national identity has been a serious problem from the very beginning of the country's independence. The modernity and artificiality of Syria's borders and its multi-ethnic and religious make-up have made identity a complex affair. The struggle for Syrian independence from France was primarily fought in terms not of a 'Syrian' nationalist discourse, but of 'Arab' nationalism. Since 1961 the official name of the country has been the 'Syrian Arab Republic', hence denying recognition of non-Arabs and instead placing Syria at the heart of a broader Arab nation. Pan-Arab nationalism continues to be the official ideology of Syria today and has had severe implications for the non-Arab minorities of Syria, most of all the Kurds.

Syrian Arab attitudes towards Syrian Kurds must be seen within the context of the perceived threat posed by all Kurds to the 'Arab nation', especially given the long and bloody struggle between Kurds and Arab governments in Iraq. This Kurdish 'threat' has been deemed to be far greater than that of Syria's many other minorities. This is demonstrated by the implementation of special restrictions on Kurds which have not been applied to other groups such as the Armenians or Assyrians. Syrian officials have, until very recently, even denied that Kurds exist in Syria; if they do admit it, they like to argue that their real origins lie in Turkey rather than in Syria.

The Syrian government claims that the Kurds have had little cause for complaint and comfortably identify with the Syrian nation because they have been included as full Syrian citizens with equal rights and opportunities to other ethnic or religious groups. This may be true of some Kurds but there is little doubt that most Kurds in Syria are very aware and very proud of being Kurdish, and their understanding of this identity and relationship with the Syrian state is more complex.

Kurds have been excluded from the state ideology and also from individual social and economic advancement, unless they are prepared to become effectively Arabs in all but ethnic origin. This requires abandoning Kurmanji in favour of Arabic and accepting Arab cultural and political values and goals. There have been, and still are, many Kurds in positions of power or influence in Syria and these are often cited by Syrian Arabs as evidence of Kurdish equality and immersion in the state. However, these Kurds tend to be urban and affluent, to speak Arabic rather than

Kurmanji and to be reconciled to the 'Arabness' of their identity. As such they command little respect among the Kurdish population, especially in the north.

---

## State discrimination

---

Official discrimination against the Kurds in Syria dates back to the 1930s, but increased greatly in the 1950s and 1960s during the height of Arab nationalism. The Kurds suffered from a lack of political representation, poor economic development and restrictions on social and cultural expression. Kurdish customs and symbols were attacked, the Kurmanji language was banned from public use and Kurdish music and publications were forbidden. Any opposition activity in Syria has always been extremely difficult and the nascent Kurdish political movement was shattered very quickly as Kurdish parties were banned and its leaders and members arrested and imprisoned.

The state-inspired campaign of Arabization of the Kurds continued in the 1970s under the government of Hafez al-Asad. The 'Arab Belt' was a plan for a cordon sanitaire between Syrian and neighbouring Kurds around the northern and northeastern rim of the Jazira, along the borders with Turkey and Iraq. Kurdish land was confiscated and Kurds told to resettle in the Syrian interior to make way for Arabs. There was also a strong military presence in this cordon and Arab settlements were provided with superior facilities and state benefits to encourage greater economic prosperity. The Syrian government has changed Kurdish place names to Arabic, banned shop signs in Kurmanji and prevented parents from registering their children with Kurdish names. The celebration of the Kurdish New Year festival of Newruz is curtailed, hence this is often a time of increased tension.

Despite the minority Allawi status of the Asad regime under Hafez and Bashar al-Asad, it has maintained the repression of Kurdish political and cultural activity through to the present. Although Arabization is no longer vigorously pursued, the regime remains inseparable from the old Arab nationalist rhetoric which expects cultural assimilation. Kurmanji remains banned from use in education, the public sector or business, in marked contrast to other minority or foreign languages.

---

## Denial of nationality

---

The most pressing issue is the plight of Kurds denied citizenship as a result of an extraordinary census carried out in 1962 in al-Hasaka province in the north-east of Syria, the most densely Kurdish-populated area of the country. The census arbitrarily stripped 120,000–150,000 Kurdish citizens of Syrian citizenship, leaving them, and subsequently their children, denied of basic civil rights and condemned to poverty and discrimination. The official justification was that these Kurds were 'alien infiltrators' from Turkey who had recently crossed into Syria and hence had no entitlement to citizenship.<sup>1</sup> These stateless people became known as the *ajanib* (foreigners). A consider-

able number of Kurds did cross from Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s but others were long present in the area.

Those who failed to take part in the 1962 census or who were born of unions between *ajanib* and Syrian citizens (the government considers these illegal) cannot even be officially registered. These unregistered persons, or *maktoumeen* (literally 'those who are muted'), do not exist in official records and suffer even greater hardship and discrimination than the *ajanib*. In 2004, there were approximately 200,000 registered *ajanib* and 80,000–100,000 *maktoumeen*, although Syrian officials dispute these figures without readily providing their own.<sup>2</sup> These stateless Kurds are not allowed passports, cannot vote or own property and are forbidden as 'foreigners' from working in the public sector and in many professions. They are not entitled to the same education or health care as Syrian citizens, and their lack of the standard Syrian identity card means they cannot receive state benefits, travel internally or stay in a hotel.<sup>3</sup>

---

## The difficulties of opposition

---

These grievances might be expected to give rise to a strong Kurdish political movement, especially considering the strength of these in Turkey and Iraq, but Kurdish opposition in Syria has been notably weak and ineffective. Comparison should also be made with other opposition groups in Syria as there has been very little effective opposition from any group in Syria since the Muslim Brotherhood was crushed in 1982. The Syrian regime has cowed, controlled and tempted figures from all opposition groups through a patron–client system that makes the individual's place within the system very valuable but insecure. Syrian intelligence is highly adept at buying off, infiltrating and coercing opposition groups, making sustained and meaningful political organization extremely difficult and hazardous. The suppression of Kurdish activity is equally applied to all Syrian political opposition and civil society activity.

There has also been disunity among Kurds as traditional ties of loyalty to family and tribe have interplayed with political and ethnic affiliation. Personal differences have added to the rifts, as have the question of the nature and scale of political activity and accusations of collaboration with the authorities. Most Kurdish parties currently advocate a careful and modest approach, focusing on cultural and educational issues and avoiding antagonizing the government. A smaller number are beginning to favour a more radical strategy, arguing that decades of caution have brought little improvement.

Among the many divisions between Syrian Kurds is also a complex sense of identity. Most Kurds are proud of their Kurdishness and a considerable number have fought in Kurdish risings in Iraq and Turkey. Yet a substantial number of Syria's Kurds also see themselves as part of the broad multi-ethnic Syrian nation. Many live in, study in or rely on incomes from the major Syrian cities, serve in the Syrian army and feel some attachment to the wider Syrian community. Some

## 4 The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered

Kurds are undoubtedly wholly wedded to Syria, others are wholly disaffected, while the majority attempt to balance the competing identities of being 'Syrian' and 'Kurdish', or even specifically 'Syrian Kurdish'.

Far from receiving support from the Kurds in neighbouring countries, the Kurdish movement in Syria has been hindered by their activities – a dynamic common to all Kurdish movements. The Iraqi Kurdish parties and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey have distracted Syrian Kurds from the struggle in Syria. These better organized, stronger, more numerous and glamorous groups are viewed as successful and established and have attracted Syrian Kurds in support of their respective causes, with the enthusiastic support of the Syrian government. Neither movement has supported the Kurds in Syria and both have avoided the issue for fear of damaging good relations with the Syrian government. Both the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Iraq have been welcome in Damascus since the 1970s and the PKK was actively encouraged by Syria until 1998.

---

### The Kurdish parties

---

The Kurds have struggled to mobilize through political parties which can present their grievances and campaign for improved rights. The movement has been plagued by divisions since soon after the founding of the first party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party – Syria, in 1957. Despite efforts at unification, it is believed there are thirteen Kurdish parties active in Syria, illegally and mostly in secret, with bewilderingly repetitive nomenclature and transient existence. Some separate parties even share the same names.<sup>4</sup> There are two main coalitions which appear to embrace most of the parties, broadly if loosely, but even Kurdish political leaders seem uncertain of the coalitions' names or make-up.<sup>5</sup> The Kurdish parties clearly command considerable support, especially in the Jazira around Qamishli, but as their illegality means they cannot stand for election and expressions of support are dangerous, it is very hard to gauge the full extent of their popularity.

Provided the parties remain fairly quiet, do not mention any form of self-government or regime change, confine themselves to cultural matters and offer no unified threat, the Syrian government is on the whole prepared to tolerate their existence. In the last four years there have been meetings between Kurdish leaders and state officials, and personal communication is fairly regular and not all hostile. However, the parties know there is a line they may not cross without risk of intimidation and arrest, and in June 2004 they were explicitly informed by the Syrian authorities that all their activities were illegal.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, no party openly calls for independence or dares make mention of a common cause among all Kurds. 'Local autonomy' as established in Iraq or 'self-determination' is the fullest extent of demands.<sup>7</sup> It is notable that none of the parties currently use the sensitive name 'Kurdistan' in their title for fear of official reaction to any suggestion of secession. The

term used since the 1960s has been 'Kurdish'. This allows the parties to claim to be working for Kurdish rights within the framework of the Syrian state. Syrian Kurdish leaders protest their 'Syrian' loyalty and patriotism and argue that their desired reforms would be for the benefit of the whole country.<sup>8</sup>

Given the official Syrian denial of the existence of the Kurdish nation and language, any aspect of Kurdish identity, however limited or cultural, is defined as political. The party programmes are fairly similar; the main focus is on educational and cultural issues, these being the safest and most basic to the survival of Kurdish identity. These include teaching Kurdish language and history, the public use of Kurmanji and the freedom to celebrate Kurdish festivals and music. More adventurous demands are human and civil rights, proper political representation, national recognition of the Kurdish people and language, as in Iraq, and some form of autonomy for Kurdish areas. The parties also call for economic development, especially in the Jazira, and support the plight of the *ajanib* and *maktoumeen*.

The Kurdish parties are fairly consistent in their calls for democracy in Syria, arguing that only through democracy can Kurdish rights be secured. Kurdish groups aim to lift the state of emergency and establish an independent judiciary – aims common to the wider Syrian opposition movement – and were signatories to the Damascus Declaration of 16 October 2005 in which opposition groups and figures called for the establishment of a democratic government and equality for Kurds.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, the Kurds do not have strong links with the weak liberal opposition and do not see this group as capable of instigating real change or holding popular support.<sup>10</sup> A Kurdish alliance with the other main opposition group, the Islamists led by the Muslim Brotherhood, would frighten the regime as this is perhaps the one domestic political development that would pose a serious threat to it. However, this should be considered unlikely as the backgrounds and goals of the two movements are far apart and most Kurds profess support for secularism.

---

### Increased confidence

---

The extent of the troubles which broke out in Kurdish areas of Syria in March 2004 took the authorities by surprise, but there was already evidence over a number of years of a steady increase in Kurdish disaffection and outspokenness. There were periodic protests, confrontations and arrests in the 1980s and 1990s, often on significant days such as Newruz or the anniversary of the al-Hasaka census. The restrictions on the celebration of Newruz led to confrontations in 1986 when crowds gathered in Damascus and Afrin demanding the freedom to observe the festival and were fired upon by police. In 1990 a demonstration by *ajanib* and *maktoumeen* was violently repressed after protestors attempted to present their complaints to the President. These incidents have increased in frequency and scale in recent years, with notably large and bold human rights demonstrations in Damascus and Aleppo in 2002 and 2003.

The death of Hafez al-Asad in 2000 and the relaxed

atmosphere of the 'Damascus Spring' which followed the succession of his son Bashar gave further impetus to Kurdish political activity. Kurdish political organizations were able to meet more openly and increase their activity and support. The regime also relaxed its attitude towards Kurdish publications and music and the burgeoning number of illegal private Kurmanji language classes. Official concern about the problem posed by the Kurds became apparent from several secret meetings between government officials and Kurdish party leaders.

Despite the slight softening of the government's approach in some areas since 2000, it has also maintained and even increased its repression of Kurdish expression and of the Kurdish movement. In Bashar al-Asad's five years in power, Kurdish activists have been repeatedly intimidated and detained while anti-Kurdish rhetoric and restrictions on Kurdish activity remain firmly in place. It seems the regime is prepared to make some conciliatory and positive public statements in an attempt to subdue the Kurds and ease international pressure, but that in practice it is unwilling to countenance any real change. Two leaders of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria (Yekiti Party), Marwan Othman and Hasan Salih, became prominent political prisoners after being arrested in 2002. They were detained for 14 months for organizing a human rights demonstration in Damascus.<sup>11</sup>

The official expulsion of the PKK from Syrian territory in 1998 freed the Syrian Kurds from the complication of PKK presence, but it is developments in Iraq that have been and remain of greatest significance. International intervention in the war of 1991 and the subsequent autonomy gained by Iraqi Kurds were watched closely by Syrian Kurds, who felt more emboldened to articulate their demands. The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and subsequent gains made by the Iraqi Kurds at both regional and national levels have provided massive encouragement. Furthermore, international pressure greatly increased on the isolated Syrian regime on issues of terrorism, the Iraq border and interference in Lebanon, leaving the Syrian government weakened and aware that repression of internal dissent would attract further international condemnation.

The Iraq war of 2003 heightened tension between Kurds and Arabs in Syria as Arabs accused Kurds of treacherously supporting a US-led war against a brother Arab nation. The Kurdish response was more complicated. Many supported the war out of solidarity with the Iraqi Kurds and hatred of Saddam Hussein. George Bush's name has been invoked in slogans, but many Kurds, including the politically active, have little faith in US initiatives in the region and do not see an alliance with the US as the answer to their problems.<sup>12</sup>

For its part, the US, despite its tough rhetoric towards Syria, has adopted a low-key approach to the Syrian Kurds. As an issue on its list of complaints, their situation has fallen well behind Lebanon and the Hariri assassination, the Iraq border and support for terrorism. It is probable that the US does not push the Kurdish issue in Syria because it is concerned about further regional instability and its valued relationship

with Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

Increased international attention on human rights issues has also given confidence to Kurds who have learned to frame their dispute with the state in these terms. In the build-up to the Iraq war, Kurds in Syria held increasingly frequent demonstrations in favour of improved rights and also in support of Kurds in Iraq. The growing Kurdish self-confidence was fuelled by developments in Iraq. On 8 March 2004 the Transitional Administrative Law was agreed, recognizing Kurdish control over the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. This gave great encouragement to the Syrian Kurds and cause for concern to the Syrian authorities. There was talk of federalism in Syria and official alarm about inflamed passions at Newruz on 17 March. Given the scale of arrests in 2002–04 and continued human rights abuses of Kurds, there could be no doubt that Bashar al-Asad's government, despite its more conciliatory language, would not tolerate a domestic challenge to its authority.

---

## The events of 2004–05

---

The trouble which broke out across Kurdish areas of Syria in March 2004 appears to mark the beginning of a new phase in relations between the Kurds and the Syrian authorities. Some Kurds certainly treat the unrest as a major event and refer to it as the *Serhildan* (Uprising). It may be debated whether this tag is accurate but the scale of the demonstrations and violent disturbances clearly indicates a new level of confidence among Kurds. The developments of 2004–05 have been described by commentators as a Kurdish 'awakening' or 'resurgence', but the Kurds were already awake to their identity and this kind of protest was not resurgent but rather quite unprecedented. The demonstrations should instead be seen as a significant step forward in the ongoing emboldening of the Kurds.

The trouble began at a football match in Qamishli in the Jazira on 12 March when hostilities between Kurdish and Arab supporters ended with the security forces shooting dead at least seven Kurds. This was followed by further shootings at their funerals. Thousands demonstrated in Qamishli and in Kurdish areas across Syria – the Jazira, Afrin, Aleppo and Damascus. Some protests turned into riots, government and private property was ransacked and burned and a police station was attacked in Amude. Depictions of Hafez al-Asad were vandalized, the Syrian flag was burned and banners daringly proclaimed 'Free Kurdistan' and 'Intifada until the occupation ends'. *Ajanib* appear to have been especially enthusiastic participants. The Syrian authorities reacted with customary brutality, beating, arresting and imprisoning large numbers of Kurds. The army moved into Kurdish regions in force, tanks and helicopters appeared in Qamishli and a week later calm was restored. It is not known how many Kurds died at the hands of the military and later in custody, but estimates reach around 40 plus over 100 injured. More than 2,000 Kurds were jailed.<sup>14</sup> Five Syrian Arabs also died,

including one policeman.

There are many theories about the origin of the violence. While the Syrian government blamed the outbreak on the Kurds and 'foreign influences' bent on destabilizing the Syrian state, Kurds claim that the violence at the football match was started by Arabs with the encouragement, or at least the connivance, of the authorities, demonstrating that the government was prepared for an incident, or at least content not to prevent it.<sup>15</sup> The stakes were now raised and the Kurds starting using new tactics. The first Kurdish hunger strike took place in 'Adra prison in Damascus in December 2004; it is claimed it was brought to an end through torture.<sup>16</sup>

Unrest flared up again in May–June 2005 after the murder of Sheikh Ma'shuq Khaznawi, a respected religious leader and a Kurd. The details of Khaznawi's death are murky, but he disappeared in Damascus and was tortured and killed. The authorities revealed the whereabouts of his body one month later. They blamed the murder on 'criminal elements' but, among many rumours of responsibility, there is strong suspicion of official involvement. Khaznawi was primarily a religious leader but had recently been making more strident statements about the oppressed Kurdish poor and was becoming closer to the Kurdish parties. He had also met representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood not long before his death.

Sheikh Khaznawi's funeral in Qamishli attracted thousands of people and helped sustain the momentum gathered by the Kurdish opposition the previous year. At a demonstration following the funeral police beat protesters; up to 60 Kurds were arrested and, according to some Kurdish parties, tortured.<sup>17</sup> However, the Syrian authorities were careful not to incite a reaction on the scale of the events of 2004 and they adopted a less confrontational approach overall.

The extent of the involvement of the Kurdish political parties in the unrest remains unclear. It seems unlikely they instigated the trouble, or had much control over the powerful popular mood once it was under way. Most parties strongly condemned the violence and chose not to sustain the demonstrations, with the aim of avoiding a confrontation with the authorities. There was an unprecedented level of popular consensus in the Kurdish community during the troubles but a lack of the political unity essential for forcing any change. During the unrest, the leaders initially liaised with one another, but then issued press statements and dealt with the authorities individually.

---

### Government response

---

Syrian government strategy towards the Kurds appears unsure and reactive. After decades of subduing and ignoring Syrian Kurds while supporting those in Turkey and Iraq, the Syrian regime, divided between hardline nationalists and pragmatic realists, seems uncertain what to do. It appears that the President and others in government are aware that concessions must be made but are not sure how to do it without appearing weak or endangering the whole ideological foundation of

the Arab nationalist Ba'athist state.

The emergence of dissent among the Kurds in 2004 at a time of Syrian weakness and sustained international pressure has forced a note of conciliation. President Bashar al-Asad made an unprecedented visit to the Jazira and admitted the existence of Kurdish people as part of Syria. A presidential pardon was issued in March 2005 for 312 of those still in custody following the events of the previous year. At the Ba'ath Party Congress in June 2005 it was announced that steps would be taken to help the Kurds, but these were not specified. It has been suggested that a Kurdish council will be established to look after the cultural, social and language interests of the Kurdish community 'within the Syrian context'.<sup>18</sup>

The greatest pressure on the government is for the granting of citizenship to the *ajanib* and *maktoumeen*. The Information Minister, Mehdi Daklallah, announced in the summer of 2005 that the government was considering awarding nationality to 120,000 Kurds, and there have been reports of officials visiting *ajanib* and carrying out a census in preparation for this.<sup>19</sup> However, it is not known when this will happen and Syrian officials, including the President, have been promising action ever since the Qamishli troubles. In April 2004, the Defence Minister, Mustafa Tlas, met Kurdish leaders and agreed that citizenship would be granted to 30,000 stateless Kurds, but nothing happened.<sup>20</sup> Kurds point out that such promises have been made and broken many times before, and they may fear that, as ever in Syria, little will actually change. Furthermore, even the largest figure stated by the government, 120,000, is less than half the total number of Kurds without citizenship. Tlas also stated that 'tens of thousands of Kurds have come to Syria from Iraq and Turkey. We have told them (Kurdish leaders) frankly that those who are Syrian will have that nationality recognized, but not the others.'<sup>21</sup>

Violent clashes between Kurds and police in Kubani were reported in August 2005, and arrests and imprisonment of Kurds on political grounds continued throughout the autumn. A demonstration in Damascus in October 2005 demanding citizenship for the stateless was broken up violently by the police. In December 2005, two Kurds were sentenced to two and a half years in prison for affiliation to a secret party and attempting to annex a part of Syria to a foreign state.<sup>22</sup> The ban on political parties remains firmly in place and Kurdish leaders have again been warned that there is a limit to the permissible level of activity. The deepening crisis caused by the UN investigation into Rafiq Hariri's assassination has increased the regime's nervousness and insecurity, making serious reforms unlikely as the government struggles to weather the storm.

---

### Conclusion

---

Syria's Kurds are well aware of Syria's current isolation and are less fearful of the regime than in the past. According to Machal Tammo, a Kurdish leader, 'We have exceeded the culture of fear that the regime planted in us.'<sup>23</sup> There can be no doubting the depth

of exasperation felt by many at the continued failure to end years of discrimination and hardship, and Kurdish nationalism is strengthening. The increased pressure on Syria during the UN investigation has further encouraged Kurdish activism and the continuing development of the autonomous government of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq will remain an inspiring influence. Despite this, the Syrian government retains tight control over internal dissent, and no relaxation of the restrictions on all opposition parties is in prospect.

It was thought that the heavy response to the events of March 2004 might decrease Kurdish activism in the short term, but the reaction to Sheikh Khaznawi's murder shows that the Kurds have not been cowed. The Kurdish issue is crucial to Syrian domestic stability and reforms are required; otherwise this increased level of Kurdish unrest is likely to continue. The Syrian government is in no position to make substantial economic improvements, but there are some signs of willingness to be slightly more conciliatory on cultural issues and to grant citizenship to at least some of the stateless Kurds. However, any real mood for change seems unlikely within a regime whose entire legitimacy is based upon Arab nationalist rhetoric. To grant meaningful concessions to the Kurds would be to endanger the foundations of the state ideology.

It is likely, therefore, that Kurdish national sentiment in Syria will continue to increase in depth and expression. Granting citizenship will not satisfy all Kurdish demands, which include a wish to be recognized as a second nationality and cultural and linguistic freedom. 'There's a kind of anxiety and restlessness now. We are disappointed with all the unfulfilled promises,' according to Hasan Salih, secretary general of the Kurdish Union Party in Syria.<sup>24</sup>

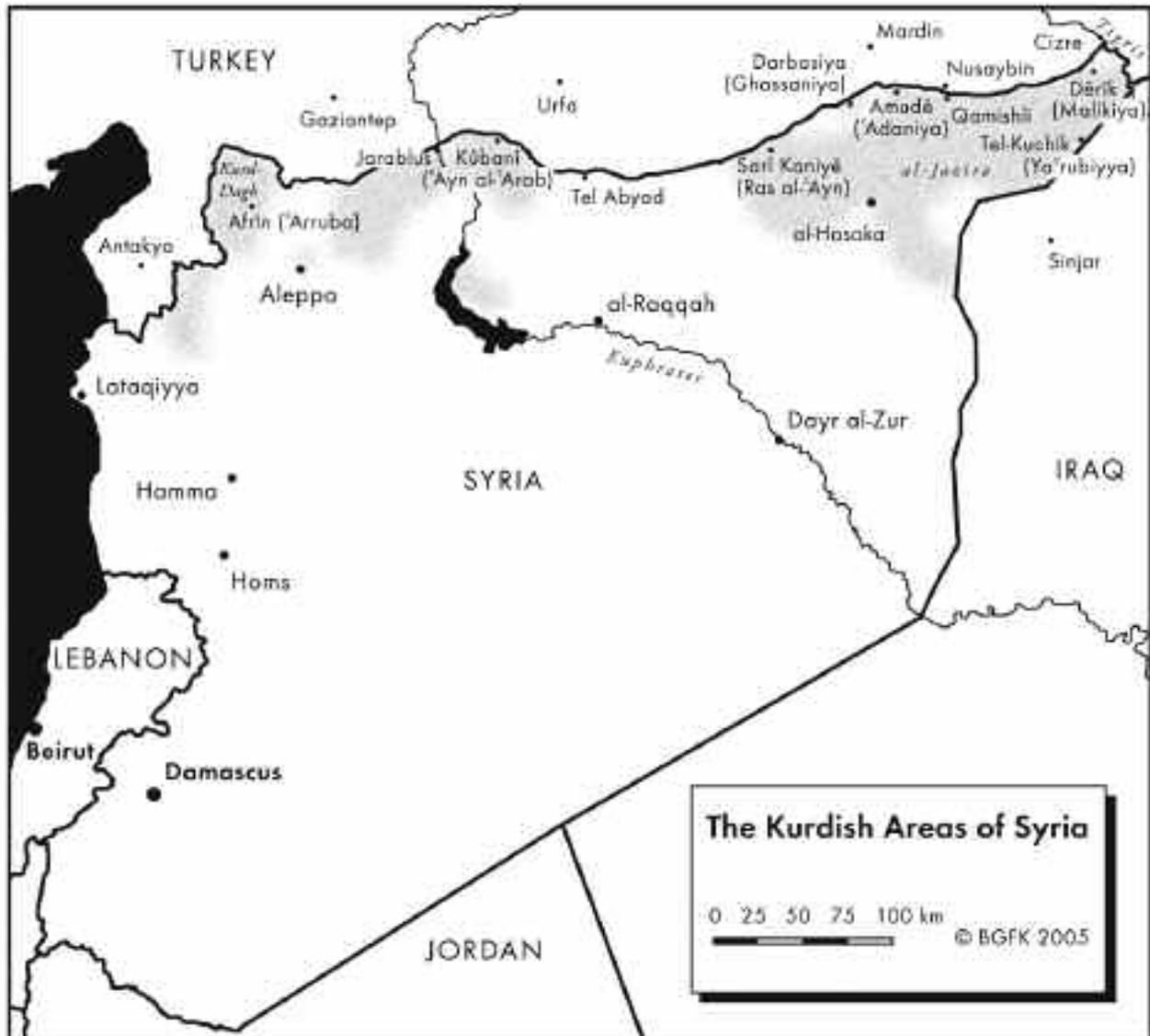
The great unknown is how far the Syrian Kurds will be prepared to press their demands. Currently there is no open discussion, nor perhaps even desire, for independence or Kurdish unification, regardless of whether either would be feasible. Circumstances may change in Syria and in neighbouring countries, but the full extent of Kurdish aims is at present for some measure of autonomy similar to that gained in Iraq. This stands a long way behind more pressing goals – citizenship for the stateless, the lifting of restrictions on Kurmanji and Kurdish culture, and, common to all Syrians, improved economic opportunities. How far the Kurds are willing to fight will to a great extent depend on the nebulous question of how Kurdish they actually feel and whether a natural urge to maintain identity, language and culture develops into a more political nationalist struggle.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Silenced Kurds*, Human Rights Watch, Vol. 8, No. 4, October 1996, Appendix A. Available at [www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm](http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm).
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria – An Existence Denied*, Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, Berlin, 2005, 80.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Silenced Kurds*, 19–23. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria*, 77–89.
- <sup>4</sup> In 2004, two separate parties operated as the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria and two as the Kurdish Left Party in Syria. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria*, Appendix Two.
- <sup>5</sup> Interviews with Kurdish political leaders, Qamishli, July 2005 (names withheld by author).
- <sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2005, Syria*. [www.hrw.org/english/docs/2005/01/13/syria9812.htm](http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2005/01/13/syria9812.htm).
- <sup>7</sup> Interviews, Qamishli, July 2005. Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria*, 116.
- <sup>8</sup> 'The Kurdish people are a main part of Syria', Kurdish leader. Interviews, Qamishli, July 2005. 'Syria is our country but the regime must consider us as Syrian citizens with the same rights as other citizens. We never want to serve as a tool for a foreign power,' interview with Marwan Othman, Kurdish Union Party in Syria, *International Viewpoint*, Autumn 2004. [www.internationalviewpoint.org/article.php3?id\\_article=53](http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/article.php3?id_article=53).
- <sup>9</sup> The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, 16 October 2005. Available in English at [www.faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm](http://www.faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm).
- <sup>10</sup> Interviews, Qamishli, July 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with Marwan Othman, *International Viewpoint*, Autumn 2004.
- <sup>12</sup> During the demonstrations in Qamishli in March 2004 there were calls of support for *Babi Azad* (Father of Freedom – George Bush). Interview with Jawad Mella, President, Western Kurdistan Government in Exile, London, August 2005. Interviews, Qamishli, July 2005.
- <sup>13</sup> Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire*, Brookings, Washington, DC, 2005, 154.
- <sup>14</sup> Interviews, Qamishli, July 2005. *Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic one year after the March 2004 events*, Amnesty International, March 2005. [www.web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE240022005](http://www.web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE240022005).
- <sup>15</sup> Interviews, Qamishli, July 2005.
- <sup>16</sup> Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria*, 122.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Kurdish groups say Syria arrested 60 during protests', *The Daily Star*, 20 June 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibrahim Hamidi, 'Syria's stability may well be in Kurdish hands', *The Daily Star*, 6 May 2005.
- <sup>19</sup> 'Syria: For many Kurds, statelessness remains a way of life', *IRIN*, 20 November 2005. [www.irinnews.org/ME.asp](http://www.irinnews.org/ME.asp).
- <sup>20</sup> 'Syrian Regime Woos Kurds', *Reuters*, 28 April 2004. [www.home.cogeco.ca/~kurdistan3/1-5-04-syria-woos-kurds.htm](http://www.home.cogeco.ca/~kurdistan3/1-5-04-syria-woos-kurds.htm).
- <sup>21</sup> 'Damascus: Hundreds of Kurds released from Syrian jails as the Americans impose sanctions on Syria', *Bulletin de liaison et d'information* No. 230, May 2004, Institut Kurde de Paris. Quoting from *Al Hayat*, 21 May 2004.
- <sup>22</sup> 'Unfair sentences on three Kurds', Syrian Human Rights Committee, 9 December 2005. [www.shrc.org/data/aspx/d0/2470.aspx](http://www.shrc.org/data/aspx/d0/2470.aspx).
- <sup>23</sup> Nicholas Blandford, 'A murder stirs Kurds in Syria', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 16 June 2005.
- <sup>24</sup> Hassan Fattah, 'Kurds, emboldened by Lebanon, rise up in tense Syria', *The New York Times*, 2 July 2005.

Robert Lowe is Manager of the Middle East Programme at Chatham House. He wishes to thank the Kerr-Fry Award Bequest at the University of Edinburgh for its support of this research.

## The Kurdish Areas of Syria



Source: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien - Berliner Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Kurdologie e. V.

Chatham House (The Royal Institute of International Affairs) is an independent body which promotes the rigorous study of international questions and does not express opinions of its own.

The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author.

© The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2006.

This material is offered free of charge for personal and non-commercial use, provided the source is acknowledged. For commercial or any other use, prior written permission must be obtained from the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

In no case may this material be altered, sold or rented.