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### **Between Kurdistan and Damascus: Kurdish Nationalism and Arab State Formation in Syria**

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BETWEEN KURDISTAN AND DAMASCUS: KURDISH NATIONALISM AND ARAB STATE  
FORMATION IN SYRIA

by

ALEXANDER MCKEEVER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New

York

2021

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Between Kurdistan and Damascus: Kurdish Nationalism and Arab State Formation  
in Syria

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle  
Eastern Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of  
Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Between Kurdistan and Damascus: Kurdish Nationalism and Arab State

Formation in Syria

by

Alexander McKeever

Advisor: Ozlem Goner

Since the fall of the Ottoman empire, Kurdish nationalism has developed as an ideology within a regional state system where Kurds lack national representation or recognition. This ideology has manifested itself into a fractured movement where the contemporary state borders that separate the Kurdish population at large have proven to be both a limiting and a creative factor. This thesis examines the history of Kurdish nationalism in Syria with a focus on both the local context as defined by Syria's borders in addition to the broader region, for the politics of Kurds in Syria have clearly been shaped by interactions with the Syrian state as well as the regional Kurdish nationalist movement and interstate dynamics. In order to carry this out, this paper employs a methodological framework largely informed by the work of Hamit Bozarslan.

This theoretical underpinning conceptualizes Kurdish nationalist actors as existing within a broader 'minority sphere' where they interact with each other, various 'state spheres,' and the Kurdish population at large. While manifestations of Kurdish nationalism are informed by interactions with processes of state formation in their local contexts, nationalist actors are also shaped by 'crossborder' communication with the broader Kurdish minority sphere. The degree to which this crossborder dynamic is available to Kurdish nationalist actors largely depends on

regional interstate relations; in periods of status quo borders are strong and penetration is difficult, whereas in periods of interstate conflict borders become porous and states will engage with adjacent Kurdish actors in an effort to undermine rivals.

Using this framework, this paper examines the secondary literature and primary sources relating to the history of the Kurdish movement within Syria, with a focus on three main events and their aftereffects: the 1962 al-Hasakah census, the entrance of the PKK into Syria from Turkey, and the 2004 al-Qamishli uprising. These endeavors further highlight the importance of interstate conflict in strengthening crossborder Kurdish nationalism, but additionally point to how the temporary opening of room for Kurdish nationalist actors to operate creates new dynamics within the local Kurdish minority sphere which the state struggles to address after a status quo reemerges.

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## Introduction

Seeking international recognition on behalf of one of the world's largest stateless ethnolinguistic minorities, the Kurdish nationalist movement has attracted significant scholarly attention over the past half century. The majority of this work has focused on the politics of Kurdish populations residing within the states of Turkey and Iraq. Within these two states, as well as Iran, the Kurdish nationalist movement has repeatedly engaged in armed conflict against the state and achieved varying degrees of autonomy at times, with the current Kurdistan Region of Iraq representing the greatest success in recognized self-rule. Historically an outlier in this regard, Kurdish nationalist activity in Syria has been overshadowed by these neighboring manifestations, both within the regional movement, as well as in terms of international media attention and scholarship.

This neglect can be attributed to demographic considerations and geography. Syria is home to a relatively small portion of the world's Kurds, estimated at around five million out of the total 30 to 40 million. However, Kurds have consistently made up approximately ten percent of the total Syrian population, making them the largest ethnolinguistic minority in the country. Unlike other parts of Kurdistan, Syria's Kurds are geographically dispersed; primarily residing within three distinct regions across the country's north, today most commonly referred to as 'Rojava,' meaning 'the West' in Kurdish. In addition, large Kurdish communities reside with major cities of Syria such as Damascus and Aleppo.

The trajectory of Kurdish nationalist politics within Syria has taken a different shape than adjacent iterations in neighboring states. While nationalist activism was carried out to various degrees in the preceding decades, it wasn't until 1957 that the first Kurdish nationalist political party was formed. Banned by the government within just a year, Kurdish parties have existed

illegally ever since, negotiating the tiny, fluid operating space awarded to them by the state, frequently splintering into little more minute organizations run by individual families. Since coming to power in 1963, the Ba‘th party and the authoritarian grip it's held over the country has obstructed scholarly and media research access to Kurdish communities within Syria and their struggle to secure cultural rights and political representation.

These dynamics have changed dramatically since 2011, as a Kurdish political party seized power within the vacuum of the ensuing civil war and established authority over much of northern Syria. The ‘Rojava’ political project now rivals the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) terms of its position within global Kurdish political imaginations and has far surpassed any successes in achieving brief and localized forms of autonomy in Turkish or Iranian Kurdistan. This new administration, led by the Partîya Yekîtiya Dêmkokrat (PYD), has attracted considerable regional and international attention, and has overseen a rupture from the past as foreign journalists and researchers have gained unprecedented access to Kurdish-populated regions of Syria. Additionally, the proliferation of social media usage has contributed to the creation of a new public sphere, in which a diversity of Syrian Kurdish voices interact with each other, the region, and the world at large.

The rapid rise of the PYD in Syria has led to what some have referred to as a current ‘bifurcation’<sup>1</sup> of regional Kurdish politics. This bifurcation lies between the older ethno-nationalist, state-focused approach to the Kurdish issue, represented most prominently by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the KRI, and the ‘democratic confederalist’ model put forth by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and affiliated parties such as the PYD in Syria. An ideology developed by Abdullah Öcalan, in many ways a response to his 1999 arrest and

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<sup>1</sup> Yasin Sunca, “The Bifurcated Trajectory of Nation Formation in Kurdistan: Democratic Confederalism, Nationalism, and the Crisis of Capitalist Modernity,” *Nations and Nationalism* (2020): 1.

imprisonment by Turkey, democratic confederalism rejects the formation of a Kurdish nation-state in favor of a ‘confederal’ system based on local democratic councils. While ideologically this places the PYD and PKK outside the pantheon of Kurdish nationalist parties, in practice the relationship between the PYD and Kurdish nationalism is more ambiguous. Prior to 2011, the PYD was largely focused on the struggle for Kurdish national rights inside Syria, working alongside the dozens of older nationalist parties. Despite its democratic confederalist ideology, its early war activities occurred solely within Kurdish society and ethnic identity remained a key aspect of the party’s legitimation and mobilization.<sup>2</sup> Since the expansion of the ‘Rojava’ project into non-Kurdish areas and the creation of the Autonomous Administration, party discourse has noticeably shifted away from direct references to Kurdishness, Kurdistan, and even its usage of the name Rojava, instead using the term ‘northern Syria,’<sup>3</sup> to refer to the region. However, limited contemporary studies conducted in the area show that significant support for the PYD and the Autonomous Administration among Kurds in Syria continues to stem from an association of the party with Kurdish identity and its defense of national rights.<sup>4</sup> As of right now, it is too early to form a proper understanding of what effects this will have on Kurdish nationalism and mobilization going forward.

With the success of the Autonomous Administration, achieved largely by the labor of Kurds from Syria, has come accusations labelling it a foreign import imposed on Syrian Kurdistan by outside actors. These denunciations are frequently launched by Kurdish rivals to the PYD, whether local to Syria or from other parts of Kurdistan. Such attacks hinge on the organizational and ideological genealogy of the PYD as the organization which, while formed in

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Allsopp & Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 63, 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

Syria in the early 2000s, was created by members of the PKK and continues to view Abdullah Öcalan as the party's ideological leader. In response, emblematic of the current Kurdish 'bifurcation,' partisans of the PYD will point to their local rivals' long history of organization and financial ties to the Kurdish parties of Iraq. The commonality and saliency of these discursive attacks as well as the intertwined histories of parties within the regional Kurdish nationalist movement raises interesting questions. As representatives of a stateless nationalism existing regionally across several nation-states, Kurdish nationalist actors claim to speak and act on behalf for all Kurds and for Kurdistan. Despite this, when engaged in intra-Kurdish competition, discourses related to authenticity and legitimacy invoked the local, defined largely by the borders imposed by the modern nation-state system with no regard to Kurdish claims. How have manifestations of Kurdish nationalism within Syria been defined by the Syrian context? Are the roles played by Kurdish actors from outside the country's borders external interventions onto the local or internal developments from within the nation? Rather than attempt to find and assign nationalist authenticity and legitimacy to specific Kurdish actors, this paper seeks to interrogate the historical dynamics of Kurdish politics within Syria as members of the movement interacted with the populations they sought to represent, with the processes of Syrian state formation, and with developments located in the wider regional Kurdish nationalist movement as a whole.

As a stateless nationalism operating regionally across several states, the position of Kurdish nationalist politics represents a methodological issue. Analyzing such a movement is complicated by its presence both within a local context, as well as part of a broader intertwined phenomenon, located above and below the modern state borders laying atop Kurdistan. These regional dynamics requires one to move past normative approaches to the study of state-society relations, typically enclosed within the

territorial borders that define the modern state. One cannot work to understanding Kurdish nationalism within Syria without interrogating how the movement and those acting in its name have interacted with and been shaped by the evolving Syrian state over time. Simultaneously, to study these politics without engaging the rich transborder history of Kurdish nationalism would be imposing boundaries on such, ones not recognized by its ideological constituents, while additionally excluding actors, events and ideas that undeniably crossed and reverberated throughout Kurdistan.

To move past this quandary an approach is required that will allow for one to analyze the history of the Kurdish nationalist movement within Syria while maintain a balance between both the local and the regional dynamics. More specifically this means an effort to simultaneously parse out the impacts of the state context, the wider Kurdish world, and the actions of Kurdish political actors and the broad Kurdish public itself. This paper will employ a theoretical framework that does so while examining three pivotal events within the history of the Kurdish movement in Syria. These are the 1962 al-Hasakah census; which left hundreds of thousands of Kurds residing in northern Syria stateless, the entrance of the PKK into Syria from Turkey; permanently altering the nationalist movement in several different ways, and the 2004 al-Qamishli uprising; the first large violently anti-state manifestation of Kurdish nationalism within Syria. Each of these will be contextualized within the stages of Syrian state formation they occurred under and the impact that interactions with such had on these events and on the trajectory of the movement. Furthermore, the regional dimensions of these events will be examined, with a focus on how both other contemporaneous manifestations of Kurdish nationalism outside of Syria and Syrian Kurdistan's position within transborder Kurdish imaginations impacted these developments.

## Methodological Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this paper hinges on a conceptualization laid out by Hamit Bozarslan, who sought to move past analysis of Kurdish nationalism that either examines manifestations of such as completely sequestered within modern borders, or as existing regardless of such. This framework examines cross-border nationalisms through a model consisting of ‘state and minority spheres.’ In the case of Kurdistan, four different state spheres exist, exercising control over the portions of Kurdistan allotted by the series of treaties and agreements that created the post-Ottoman borders. The minority sphere “is not politically defined or instituted and above all, does not enjoy any legal recognition,”<sup>5</sup> but instead a field comprising of Kurdish populations and political actors spread out across these four states. This is often times far from a politically unified entity, as various actors and organizations compete with one another, employing various symbolic configurations, visions of social order, rewards and sanctions, in vying for hegemony within the sphere. The Kurdish minority sphere expands and contracts according to the material and informational porousness of these borders, the success and failure of political actors at nationalist mobilization, and the structural constraints represented by downward pressure from the state spheres.

While Bozarslan highlights the fluid nature of the minority sphere, his work does little to address periods where nationalist mobilization failed to materialize, such as the first half of the twentieth century in Syria. Throughout this era and beyond, Kurdish nationalism competed with other ideologies and political identities mobilized by different actors within the Kurdish minority sphere. To account for periods in which mobilization did not occur or occurred on axes other than Kurdish nationalism, further discussion relating to the politicization of ethnic identity and

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<sup>5</sup> Hamit Bozarslan, *La Question Kurde* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1997), 299.

the development and spread of nationalism is required.

In his critique of the term ‘group’ and its usage as a unit of analysis with regards to the study of ethnicity, race and nation, Rogers Brubaker writes: “‘Group’ functions as a seemingly unproblematic, taken-for-granted concept, apparently in no need of particular scrutiny or explication.”<sup>6</sup> In turn this frequently causes social scientists to treat ‘ethnic groups’ as “internally homogenous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes,”<sup>7</sup> rather than “in terms of practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects and contingent events.”<sup>8</sup> Political mobilization along ethnic lines is not a given, but rather contingent on structural advantages or constraints, actor’s agency, and to what degree ‘groupness’ is self-identified with by proposed members. Rather than simply mapping to an ethnically categorized segment of the population, ethnically framed politics are pursued and carried out by different actors and organizations considering themselves within and representative of this category. These observations speak to both the historically fractured political nature of Bozarslan’s Kurdish minority sphere, as well as the ebbs and flows of mobilization capabilities by nationalist political actors.

While Brubaker’s framework portrays “groupness as a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable,”<sup>9</sup> it is hard to deny an overall historical upward trajectory in terms of global affiliation with a nation. In her work on Kurdish political parties and identity in Syria, Harriet Allsopp writes of the early twenty first century that; “in general, the Kurdish population in Syria

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<sup>6</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “Ethnicity without Groups,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie. European Journal of Sociology*. 43, no. 2 (2002): 163.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

was more nationalistic, more prone to political action and thirsty for change than ever before.”<sup>10</sup> One hundred years prior, in the final decade of the Ottoman empire which most Kurdish populations were subjects of, Kurdish nationalist politics was almost exclusively the domain of educated elite residing in the imperial Istanbul metropole. Nationalism, at its core the idea that humanity is divided into entities entitled nations and that these represent the ideal basis of sovereign political units, did not become the governing principle of Middle Eastern states until the empire’s collapse. As the historical shortcomings of nationalist mobilization both within Syria and across the region are apparent in spite of a growing affinity with Kurdish national identity in the Kurdish minority sphere, additional dynamics must be addressed in order to understand the growth of nationalism occurring, in part, outside the efforts of nationalist organizations.

In his seminal 1983 study, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>11</sup> Anderson posits that all communities larger than a village are ‘imagined,’ as membership does not rest on face-to-face interaction but in the perception that oneself and others belong to a “horizontal comradeship.”<sup>12</sup> The boundaries of a nation are distinct as they represent a defined segment of humanity, unlike ever expansive imagined communities of a universalistic variety. Lastly, “nations dream of being free...the gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.”<sup>13</sup> Anderson’s primary thesis is that the development of the concept of nation and it as the principal bedrock of political authority and organization was both made possible and in turn popularized

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<sup>10</sup> Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2015), 190.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016), 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

by ‘print-capitalism,’ which caused a historically unprecedented proliferation of media printed in vernacular languages. While ‘nation-ness’ is commonly linked to a specific shared linguistic background, “the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect particular solidarities.”<sup>14</sup> While the economic and technological processes Anderson labels as ‘print-capitalism’ are arguably specific to previous centuries, more contemporary “advances in communications technology, especially radio and television, give print allies unavailable a century ago,”<sup>15</sup> only furthering the reach of ideas of nation-ness.

The regional Kurdish population is divided amongst speakers of different dialects, most notable Kurmançî, Soranî, and Zaza, lacking a high degree of mutual intelligibility between one another. Prior to the twentieth century these linguistic populations primarily resided within either the Ottoman or Persian empires. While Kurdish was spoken in daily life and used in a limited extent by poets and local religious scholars, Turkish and Farsi were the primary languages of administrative affairs, and accordingly were far more prevalent in written form. This linguistic hierarchy continued into the post-World War I era within Turkey and Iran, while Arabic, alongside French and English, became the official languages of newly formed mandates of Syria and Iraq, respectively. Kurds across these four nascent states interacted with their respective governments in three different languages. The aforementioned linguistic diversity of Kurdish presented a further obstruction to the spread of any sort of common crossborder vernacular. Additionally, both Turkish and Kurmançî Kurdish came to be written using the Latin rather than Arabic alphabet, further segmenting regional language. Cognizant of the power of language and of Ataturk’s ‘modernization’ reforms with regards to Turkish, certain early Kurdish nationalists did work to standardize Kurdish and spread publications. However, the lack of state backing and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 135.

the high amount of illiteracy amongst Kurdish populations saw the results of such efforts develop incrementally.

Despite this disunity, popular affiliation with the ‘Kurdish nation’ continued to grow over the course the twentieth century. In recent decades, new communication technologies, in particular satellite television and the internet, have had a noticeable effect in inculcating a sense of Kurdishness across state borders. These have given Kurds new spaces to engage one another outside the purview of the state, increasingly independent from the efforts of Kurdish nationalist political actors. This demonstrates that these processes highlighted by Anderson, working to establish the Kurdish minority sphere as a politically salient ‘imagined community’ often become autonomous from top-down attempts at instrumentalization from nationalist political elite.

Undoubtedly related, this period of time globally witnessed the normalization of nation and nationalist discourses leading to these conceptualizations essentially becoming hegemonic in the present. Anderson writes:

the very idea of ‘nation’ is now nestled firmly in virtually all print-languages; and nation-ness is virtually inseparable from political consciousness. In a world in which the national state is the overwhelming norm, all of this means that nations can now be imagined without linguistic communality...out of a general awareness of what modern history has demonstrated to be possible.<sup>16</sup>

In the immediate post-World War I context, international discourse gave the national form

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 135.

significant attraction, particularly among educated elite. Inextricable from the postwar settlements which sought to dictate the fate of former Ottoman territory, Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and the creation of the League of Nations emphasized to many "that nationalism was becoming the language of legitimacy, the idiom through which various social and political battles would be fought."<sup>17</sup> However, while this discourse was significant to the proliferation of Kurdish nationalist organizations in this era, this did not lead to large scale engagement and mobilization within the Kurdish minority sphere.

Subsequently, the concept of a nation has been inculcated within Kurds across Kurdistan through subjection to processes of 'nation-formation' by the states whose sovereignty they reside under. These processes have largely hinged on an exclusionary nationalist ideology which mark Kurds as a national other, outside the national definition of the state. Nation formation includes self-conscious efforts by nationalist policy makers to eradicate Kurdish identity or subsume it within the official national identity of the state, as well as more mundane and routine dynamics including the effects centralized bureaucracy, schooling, and military service can have in emphasizing and reinforcing political and geographic identity. Such experiences normalize and emphasize the frameworks of nation and nation-ness, imbuing these with natural, self-evident properties, while simultaneously highlighting the 'otherness' of a Kurdish identity. As "outsider identities can be understood at the dialectics of national identity constructed through outsiders and an outside identity constructed through a historical consciousness of state violence"<sup>18</sup> the violent approach taken by the Syrian state to Kurdishness in turn gave Kurdish identity increased saliency.

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<sup>17</sup> Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 172.

<sup>18</sup> Ozlem Goner, *Turkish National Identity and Its Outsiders: Memories of State Violence in Dersim* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 86.

As demonstrated, the minority sphere is far from a static entity, but instead has undergone processes of formation, development and reproduction. The same can be observed when examining the configurations of state spheres. The material and discursive forms of the modern state are divergent from their predecessors, as too are its borders; how they're delineated and imposed, and what they signify. The modern state aspires to impose its authority uniformly within its internationally recognized borders. This requires a physical delineation of such borders and attempts to reorient the populations found along them away from previous power configurations and social relations incongruent to these new borders and towards the state itself.

In order to place the Kurdish nationalist movement within both the Syrian and broader Kurdish contexts theoretical conceptualizations of state and society at large would be helpful. One approach to such portrays

...society as a *mélange* of social organization...including the idea of the state as well as many others...[which] offer individuals strategies of personal survival and, for some, strategies of upward mobility. Individual choice among strategies is based on the material incentives and coercion organizations can bring to bear and on the organizations' use of symbols and values concerning how social life should be ordered.<sup>19</sup>

The state is one such social organization, offering its own vision of social ordering. What sets the state apart, particularly in the modern era, is its drive to achieve sovereignty over all other social organizations. Historically, "social control has not been of a piece, but it has frequently been

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<sup>19</sup> Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 49.

highly fragmented through a territory,”<sup>20</sup> through this diversity has declined over time. The development and proliferation of the modern state system has incentivized the state to gain increasing hegemony over the society it claims to represent, both in order to martial resources and manpower to protect itself international and due to the modern state becoming the globally hegemonic form of political ordering. Neither state nor society are static entities, as both constantly undergo “a process of interaction of groupings with one another and with those whose actual behavior they are vying to control or influence,”<sup>21</sup> leading to constant dynamism and reproduction.

The state itself is made up of both material and discursive components that cast forth an image of a unified entity, both set apart from society while claiming to be comprised of and representing it and set apart from other states. This image can be reinforced or contradicted by the practices employed by the state, parts of the state, or individuals claiming state authority. In his work seeking to define the state, Bob Jessop writes that “the core of the state apparatus comprises a distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on the members of a society in the name of their common interest of general will.”<sup>22</sup> Jessop outlines six dimensions of the state, attributes belonging to either the institutional or to the behavioral, with both categories including material and discursive. The former includes the various forms of representation that states claim, how power is distributed within the administration, and how and to what extent intervention is conducted upon society and the economy, while the latter consist of the social base of the state,

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<sup>20</sup> Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 27.

<sup>21</sup> Migdal, *State in Society*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Jessop, *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in Its Place*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 341.

the “practices and projects which define the boundaries of the state system and endow it with a degree of internal unity,”<sup>23</sup> and the discourse employed by the state in defining those they represent. Typically, the institutional dimensions of the state display a degree of continuity while the behavioral are more prone to fluctuation due to strategic decisions made by the “core of the state apparatus.” The behavioral elements, or the practices of the state, often serve “serve to recognize, reinforce, and validate, not only the territorial element of state control, but also the social separation between the state and other social formations in numerous ways,”<sup>24</sup> buttressing state power and contributing to its hegemony in daily life. However, Joel Migdal’s conceptualization highlights that state practices do not always align with the image of the state and can “batter the image of a coherent, controlling state and neutralize the territorial and public-private boundaries.”<sup>25</sup> Behavior that contradicts state discourse can be caused by a number of factors, including international conflict dynamics, which may cause the state to temporarily cede room to different social organizations for strategic purposes.

While these various theories of state are valuable in highlighting the continued reproduction and dynamism of the state, its material as well as discursive components, and convergences and divergences between image and practice, they are inadequate when applied to the case of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria. While an international dynamic is present in such theories, it is at a state-to-state level. State competition drives the state apparatus to seek social hegemony in order to be able to martial resources and mobilize its subjects. But Migdal’s model does not address social organizations existing both within and without his societal vacuum, whose conceptions of social order do not fall neatly within the physical boundaries

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>24</sup> Migdal, *State in Society*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 19.

containing both state and society.

Bozarslan highlights the role of the interstate relations with regards to the conditions of the minority sphere at a given time. When a regional status quo between the states has existed, the borders existing over the Kurdish sphere harden and governments hold significant ability to implement policies directed at their respective populations, causing both a shrinkage in the sphere and a localization of Kurdish nationalist activity. Inversely, the Kurdish sphere has potential to grow when this interstate status quo dissipates. While states can still “implement more or less effective management instruments [such as coercion or limited incorporation] at the ‘internal’ level, ...[they often] find themselves helpless at the ‘regional’ level,”<sup>26</sup> due to tactics employed by rival antagonistic states. This includes the conducting of ‘parallel diplomacy,’ or the engagement with the Kurdish political actors within the borders of rival states. During these periods of interstate conflict borders increase in permeability and the Kurdish cross-border dynamic becomes strong. Nationalist parties engage in this parallel diplomacy, collaborating with states that oppress the Kurdish populations within their own territories, as it is the only form of international recognition available to them, and it benefits them in opening up new financial and human resources to mobilize, representing a rear base for their own local conflict. Through ‘parallel diplomacy,’ Kurdish nationalist actors are able to bypass the structural limitations as represented by the state system, ‘regionalizing’ their activities and their reach to parts of Kurdistan previously off limits. However, this regionalization present contradictions as such actors maintain objectives orientated towards the local context they originated in and are unable to address the political aspirations of other Kurdish populations. While a state centric approach focuses on the relations of a state with its subject populations as well as with one another on the

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<sup>26</sup> Bozarslan, 312.

international stage, this approach put forth by Bozarslan sees actors at all levels as capable of existing within and across borders, interacting with a multitude of actors, including at the international state level.

This paper will examine the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria as part of a fluid ‘minority sphere,’ a field consisting of a host of actors seeking to further their political projects amongst the ‘minority’ population. As nationalists, the actors and organizations within the movement sought to mobilize amongst the Kurds of Syria along the lines of national identity. Existing under the sovereignty of the Syrian state sphere meant the evolution of such was shaped by various periods of Syrian state formation and the broader regional political context these occurred under. While the actions of these actors created a Kurdish nationalist movement, further instilling national identity as a politically salient category within Syria, broader ‘crossborder’ dynamics outside the hands of local actors were also at play. These include the travel or migration of Kurdish nationalist actors from other parts of Kurdistan to Syria, and the flow of intellectual and cultural production. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, despite the ‘recurring failure’<sup>27</sup> of the local Kurdish parties, the Kurdish national identity represented the dominant political identity within the Kurdish minority sphere.

### **The French Mandate of Syria**

The nucleus of the modern Syrian state was formed under French colonial occupation, lasting from the conclusion of the brief 1920 French Syrian war until 1946. This period saw the solidification of Syria’s borders, represented by the separation of Lebanon and the demarcation of Syria from Turkey and Iraq, the gradual centralization of the territory around the city of Damascus, and the developing saliency of amorphous Arab nationalist sentiments, coalescing

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<sup>27</sup> Sunca, 7.

around resistance to French imperialism. French rule was characterized by an underlying tension between the colonial interests of the metropole and the terms of the mandate as awarded to France by the League of Nations. The result of this contradiction, in which colonial policy sought to forestall the potential Syrian independence it was supposed to nurture, meant that “if the French did their best to hinder the development of a ‘nation’ in Syria, they were nonetheless obliged to construct a state.”<sup>28</sup> In order to prevent Arab nationalist (anti-imperialist) state capture, viewed as the greatest potential threat to colonial rule, the French turned to various non-Sunni and non-Arab interlocutors. Primarily this involved enlisting those on the sectarian and economic peripheries in the colonial military, the Armée du Levant, in addition to experiments with awarding local autonomy to geographically compact religious minorities, represented by the Druze and the ‘Alawi.

As was the case within different communities around Syria, politics within Kurdish populated areas “included a variety of interest groups whose cohesion rested on different type of loyalties to family, religious community, tribe, urban quarter and village.”<sup>29</sup> Dispersed by geography and historical origins, Kurds within the French Mandate of Syria interacted and affiliated with a diverse array of political identities. The social relationships and economic activity of Kurdish populations in the northern Jarabulus and northeastern Jazira regions were largely orientated towards settlements now north of the Turkish border, such as Jazira bin ‘Umar, Mardin, Nusaybin, and Urfa, rather than with one another or south towards Damascus. Economic and political life within the northwest Kurd Dagħ (commonly referred to today as *Efrîn*) district had long been intertwined with the city of Aleppo, the focus of commercial activity for the

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<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Nelida Fuccaro, “Minorities and Ethnic Mobilisation: the Kurds in Northern Iraq and Syria.” in *British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Nadine Meouchy, and Peter Sluglett (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 581.

region. Far removed from ‘contiguous Kurdistan,’ the inhabitants of several districts on the western outskirts of Damascus represented the largest urban Kurdish population in Syria. While “40% of the local Kurdish population was entirely Arabicized,”<sup>30</sup> this community’s centuries long martial role within local Ottoman administrations and local rule through clientelism of two key family’s work to demarcate the Kurds of Hayy al-Akrad from other inhabitants of the capital. Speaking to the diverse political identities of these populations in relation to both new and old power configurations, Kurds within Syria were mobilized to various degrees of success by an array of political actors in this period, some in opposition to French rule, others in support. While early manifestations of the Kurdish nationalist movement were present, other examples of Mandate era political activity include but are not limited to; sporadic anti-French revolts mobilized through pan-Islamic discourse with Turkish support, a Sufi-led revolt against local elites in Kurd Dagh, nationwide recruitment into the Syrian Communist Party headed by Damascene Kurd Khalid Bekdash, participation in the Arab nationalist movement against the French, and a French-backed multi-ethnic local autonomous movement in the Jazira.

Most notably, this vast range of mobilizations demonstrates the magnetism of the new state. With Damascus at its center and the French as the sovereign power, political actors within Syria increasingly came to negotiate with or focus their opposition towards the state. Some such actors came to appropriate new political concepts such as national majority and minority when dealing with the French, to secure power within the new system. Early petitions sent by regional elites to the French colonial government demanding autonomy highlight such entrepreneurial and cognizant behavior. For example, in 1924, one such appeal from a Nuri Kandy of Kurd Dagh stressed the role Kurdish autonomy could play in protecting the Mandate by counterbalancing

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<sup>30</sup> Nelida Fuccaro, “Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism in Mandatory Syria: Politics, Culture and Identity,” in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali, 191-217 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 195.

weakening Arab nationalists.<sup>31</sup> While it is difficult if not impossible to parse out many actors' nationalist from material motivations in this period, it is evident that the new geographic and structural reality shaped political activity within the mandate. While many Kurds living in the north of the country experienced rupture from what were now crossborder affiliations, new avenues opened up, and "one potential field for political cooperation was provided by cultural identity."<sup>32</sup>

The primary manifestation of Kurdish nationalism during the French Mandate period was "nurtured primarily among a community of Kurdish emigres who arrived in Syria from Turkey after 1925."<sup>33</sup> This included an assortment of nationalism intellectual elite and tribal elements, fleeing Turkey in the wake of the several failed Kurdish uprisings of this period, beginning with the Sheikh Said rebellion. A number of these figures were instrumental in the 1927 founding of the Xwebûn in Beirut, an association "primarily conceived as the political and propaganda bureau of a military organization, based around Mount Ararat,"<sup>34</sup> who initially focused their attentions on mobilized local tribal support for the rebellion. While the group soon ceased to exist after the Ararat revolt was crushed by the Turkish state in 1930, certain key members of its former leadership turned their attentions to the Kurdish communities within Syria, seeking to cultivate nationalist sentiment. Most notable among these was Jeladet Bedirxan and his brother Kamuran, grandsons of the last emir of Ottoman Kurdish principality of Botan. As armed resistance against the Turkish state had proved futile yet again, the Bedirxan's dedicated themselves to cultural activities. These included the compilation of a Kurdish-French dictionary,

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<sup>31</sup> Jordi Tejel Gorgas, "The Terrier Plan and the Emergence of a Kurdish Policy under the French Mandate in Syria, 1926-1936," *The International Journal of Kurdish studies* 21, no. 1-2 (2007): 99.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, "The Kurds of Damascus in the 1930s: Development of a Politics of Ethnicity," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 6 (2010): 912.

<sup>33</sup> Fuccaro, "Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism," 191.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

and the publication of *Hawar*, a month journal written in Kurmancî using the Latin alphabet, both serving “to standardize the grammar and writing of modern Kurmancî Kurdish, and provided an important common reference for educated Kurds throughout the region.”<sup>35</sup> With its contributors coming from the diverse pool of former Xwebûn leaders, *Hawar* “opened a dialogue among the various strata of Kurdish society in Syria: among the educated classes on the one hand, and between the urban and tribal elites on the other,”<sup>36</sup> putting literate members of Syria’s diverse and disparate Kurdish population in communication with one another in an unprecedented manner.

Highly significant to this paper and discussions of Kurdish nationalism in Syria at large are developments occurring in the northeastern Jazirah district in the mandate era. That this area initially far outside pre-mandate conceptions of geographic Syria was to become “the primary area of Arab-Kurdish tension”<sup>37</sup> within the twentieth century is unsurprising for a number of factors. The broader Jazirah region (Kurdish: *Cizîrê*) refers to the vast areas lying between the Tigris and Euphrates, reaching north and east into present day Turkey and Iraq. Historically, the Jazirah was home to a diverse linguistic and religious communities including Arabs, Kurds, and Syriac Christians. The portion of the Jazirah that was integrated within the French Mandate of Syria did not have a large sedentary population at the time, instead largely populated by nomadic pastoralist Arab and Kurdish tribes, respectively oriented south towards Arabia and north towards Anatolia. During the mandate era, two processes came to define the Jazirah district; sedentarization, including the founding of the modern region’s largest cities, al-Hasakah and al-Qamishli (Kurdish: *Qamişlo*), and refugee flows, both of which were facilitated by the French

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<sup>35</sup> Stefan Winter, “The Other Nahḍah: The Bedirxans, the Millis and the Tribal Roots of Kurdish Nationalism in Syria,” *Oriente Moderno* 86 no. 3 (2006): 464.

<sup>36</sup> Fuccaro, “Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism,” 208.

<sup>37</sup> David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London: IB Tauris, 2004), 467.

administration in various capacities. The later initially involved Armenian and Assyrian Christian refugees created by the Ottoman genocides and the continued by the Turkish republic, though after 1925, Kurds came to numerical dominance within this influx. To the French, these communities represented potential clients and allies, to be used against rising anti-French Arab nationalism. This flow of refugees and the support such communities received by the French soon drew the ire of Arab nationalists in western Syria. Within the nationalist press, vital importance was placed on the region, as articles warning of ‘separatist’ plots, including allegations that “‘Kurdish refugees are working to establish a national home’ in Syria,”<sup>38</sup> drew a clear analogy to the contemporaneous activities of the Zionist movement in Palestine. The first nationalist schemes of demographic change, later a common trend, in the region date back to this area, exemplified by a unimplemented 1931 memorandum written by government minister Muhammad Kurd Ali, calling for Kurds to be “displaced to areas far from the borders of Kurdistan... [and granted] lands around Homs and Aleppo and to integrate them with the Arabs there.”<sup>39</sup> Despite the brief prominence of a Kurdish-Christian autonomist alliance in the late 1930s, which proved unable to mobilize the Kurdish population as whole, these nationalist fears of ‘separatism’ did not materialize and the Jazirah remained part of Syria into independence.

### **Periodization of Syrian State Formation**

Syria attained independence in 1946 with what initially appeared to be a relatively stable domestic political situation. The anti-colonial movement had largely been led by established Sunni urban elite, and French attempts at segmenting Syria’s Arabic-speaking majority by religious affiliation had failed to prevent cross-sectarian nationalism. However, contradictions

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, “Refugees and the Definition of Syria, 1920–1939,” *Past & Present* 235, no. 1 (2017): 155.

<sup>39</sup> “Deprivation of Existence: The Use of Disguised Legalization as a Policy to Seize Property by Successive Governments in Syria,” *Syrians for Truth & Justice*, October 9, 2020, 6.

within the political and economic systems of Syria, as a “semi-liberal oligarchic republic resting on a ‘feudal’ social base”<sup>40</sup> with an increasingly educated populace, served to incubate and soon unleash societal unrest. The first twelve years of Syrian independence was characterized by intense political conflict based on revolving coalitions between the traditional landowning elite and their urban merchant allies desperate to maintain their status, a nascent capitalist class eager to reform social and economic relations along postwar lines, and a handful of progressive elements largely drawing from newly educated middle class provincial youth seeking to mobilize the vast numbers of Syrian peasantry against the elites. Rivalries between competing regional states and the developing bipolarity of the rising Cold War came to be mapped onto Syria’s turbulent domestic politics by the mid 1950s. Eventually, in 1958, when “top-down efforts to construct an inclusive, industrializing social pact failed and pluralist and parliamentary institutions broke down under the strain of severe social conflict,”<sup>41</sup> left wing actors, represented by Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, the Syrian Communist Party and radical elements within the military, initiated the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in which Syria’s sovereignty was subsumed by Nasserist Egypt.

From this point onward, processes of Syrian state formation can be periodized within three general periods. These begin with that of the modernizing authoritarian state, engaging in deeply penetrating, ideologically motivated interventions into society and economy, and lasting through several quite distinct iterations from 1958 to 1970. This is followed by the period of power consolidation as was undertaken by Hafez al-Asad in which regime stability and national security were prioritized over ideological considerations. Finally, as represented by the first

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<sup>40</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2001), 21.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 11.

decade of Bashar al-Asad's rule from 2000 to 2010, the state can be defined as post-populist authoritarianism in which new global economic and political realities lead to a renegotiating of the social pact and a controlled liberalization of the economy. Further elaboration on these periods is required before addressing them in relation to the Kurdish movement within Syria.

These twelve years between 1958 and 1970 are not commonly viewed in terms of continuity for obvious reasons. From 1958 to 1961, Syria was ruled from Cairo as the lesser of the UAR's two regions. All political parties were disbanded and, while Syria had a regional administrative council this sat underneath a national assembly and President Nasser. In September 1961, Syrian sovereignty was restored through a coup carried out by military officers. This put into power the 'Secessionist government,' headed by President Nazim al-Qudsi who sought to reverse populist, left wing legislation passed under the UAR, most notably the Agrarian Reform Laws of 1958. A year and a half later, the Ba'th party came to power in another coup. Over the next seven years the state was controlled by rivaling factions of the left wing Arab nationalist party, as internal contestations within the Ba'th party resulted in an additional coup and several purges.

Much of the historiography covering this period between Syrian independence and Hafez al-Asad fails to piece together a systemic narrative of this turbulent era. Seminal titles in the field, such as Patrick Seale's 1965 *The Struggle for Syria* and Nikolaos Van Dam's 1979 *The Struggle for Power in Syria* approach this through a focus on the personalities and the cliques, comprised of figures sharing sectarian and geographic backgrounds, that seized and lost power over the state in this era. While both are compelling and valuable contributions to the study of the period, the approach put forth in Steven Heydemann's *Authoritarianism in Syria*, probing conflict regarding the creation of a social pact and the impact of such on the development of state

institutions, brings to light certain junctures and continuities that can be lost in a more character-focused analysis. For the purposes of this study, specifically in the relationship between state formation and the Kurdish minority sphere, Heydemann's study is vital. Two related dynamics can be seen throughout UAR, secessionist and pre-Asad Ba'ath governments tying this period together.

The first of these, "the authoritarian and countermobilizational mechanisms and routines established during the [UAR],"<sup>42</sup> subsequently utilized by the secessionists and the Ba'ath governments in order to intervene in society and economy according to their divergent social visions. Despite rhetorical allusions to liberal governance, the secessionist government "sought to impose consent and compel the formation of a social pact through non-democratic means, adopting the same repressive practices as the regime it replaced,"<sup>43</sup> ruling largely through emergency measures and decree. The Ba'ath 'populist authoritarian' model differed from the UAR and secessionists in that it actively sought popular mobilization against Syria's capitalist and landlord classes, the historical antagonists of progressive economic reform. The future success of the Ba'athi project was most directly threatened by the power of these upper segments of society; in the immediate circumstances by "the extent to which capitalists could undermine the party's capacity to reorganize the Syrian political economy through their control over capital and other resources."<sup>44</sup> To address this weakness, the party prioritize the mobilization of controlled class conflict, using authoritarian power to take political control of bodies such as worker and peasant unions and restructure them into hierarchical, pyramidal structures directed by the Ba'ath.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 168.

Secondly, carried out through these “authoritarian...mechanisms and routines,” was a piecemeal but consistent state policy of Arabization, targeting its Kurdish population, the country’s largest non-Arab ethnic minority. These include legislation banning use of and instruction in the Kurdish language, widescale repression of the country’s first Kurdish nationalist party, the 1962 al-Hasakah census, to be discussed later, in addition to policies related to land ownership. Within Syria’s border regions, particularly in al-Hasakah, these Arabization “policies aimed at demographic change [and] maintained an upward trajectory”<sup>45</sup> in their ferocity over time. While the ideological orientation of the state in this period oscillated, all governments from 1958 to 1970 enforced an Arab definition of Syria. This can most evidently be seen in the actions of the secessionist government, despite being formed as a rejection of the UAR’s pan-Arabism, in their christening of the state’s return to sovereignty under the name of the Syrian Arab Republic, maintained to this day. That said, it was not always ideological fervor that dictated Arabization policies, but also fears related to the internal legitimacy and external stability of the state.

The more ideological and unstable tendencies of the 1960s Ba‘th were subjugated by Hafez al-Asad and his so-called ‘Corrective movement.’ Beginning with an intra-party coup in 1970, Asad’s reign lasted until his death thirty years later. This period of state formation was characterized by processes of regime consolidation, centered on “the incorporation of a significant array of interests – the army and the minorities as well as sections of key social forces, including the bourgeoisie, the salaried middle class, the peasantry and the working class, [which] gave the regime a cross-class, urban-rural social based.”<sup>46</sup> While the creation of the Ba‘th populist authoritarian state involved mobilizing the lower and middle classes against the

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<sup>45</sup> “Deprivation of Existence,” 65.

<sup>46</sup> Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 88.

landed elites and capitalists, Asad oversaw a controlled reincorporation of such elites on a limited base. Additionally, the state tapped into existing networks of ordered around tribal and sectarian affiliation, previously deemed ‘reactionary,’ in an effort to expand the regime’s social base. This process of regime consolidation saw the state to maintain a degree of internal control unseen within post-colonial Syria, allowing the state to conduct an assertive foreign policy, challenging their regional rivals on the international stage to unprecedented degrees of success. In relation to this study, this self-confidence and ability allowed the Syrian regime to challenge Turkey and Iraq, in part through engagement in parallel diplomacy with Kurdish actors, when its interests and stability were perceived to be under threat.

As the preeminent Arab ‘Republican Monarchy,’ Hafez al-Asad was succeeded by his son Bashar in 2000. The global context in which Hafez al-Asad’s processes of regime consolidation took place had drastically changed by this point, most notably with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The loss of rent secured through Syria’s Cold War positioning and the declining productivity of “state-led import substituting industrialization”<sup>47</sup> policies placed significant stress the Syrian economy. In response to this new reality, Hafez al-Asad had overseen limited processes of market liberalization towards the end of his reign. Under Bashar al-Asad these would only accelerate as the state came to develop into what has been termed a ‘post-populist authoritarian’ system. Despite the assertions of post-Cold War liberal ideology that market liberalization leads to democratization, such has not come to fruition in many cases examples. In the case of Syria

“the authoritarian state [was] strengthened by access to new revenue sources and the

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<sup>47</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, “Authoritarian Persistence, Democratization Theory and the Middle East: An Overview and Critique,” *Democratization* 13, no. 3 (2006), 383.

incorporation of previously hostile privileged social forces into its coalition;  
incorporation of the latter...[strengthened] the ability of rulers to marginalize (elite statist  
or mass populist) opposition.”<sup>48</sup>

Under Bashar al-Asad, markets were opened and state-owned enterprises were privatized to new regime-connected capitalist elites while cuts to welfare and the gradual disempowerment of the traditional corporatist bodies shrunk the social base of the Ba‘th state. With a new non-negotiated social pact, the regime came to increasingly rely on coercive measures in the face of growing unrest, including its interactions with an increasingly restless Kurdish population. Cracks within the system Hafez al-Asad created based on balancing various segments of society became apparent, exacerbated by the pressure the Syrian state was placed under in the mid-2000s, primarily stemming from the United States and Europe.<sup>49</sup>

The dynamics within these periods of Syrian state formation informed the approach taken by the state when interacting with the Kurdish minority sphere. Arab nationalism was the official state ideology of Syria and discriminatory Arabization policy was carried out against Kurdish populations throughout this fifty-two year stretch of time. Despite this, state impetus was directed by domestic, regional and international pressures as well as the individual agency of those wielding state power. The fluctuations of state policy such dynamics invoked led to periods in which the Kurdish minority sphere and the space in which Kurdish political actors operated within broadened and narrowed. This paper will first address the 1962 al-Hasakah census as the most significant anti-Kurdish discriminatory policy initiative carried out by Damascus during the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 385.

<sup>49</sup> Carsten Wieland, “The Ancien Regime’s Policy Paradox: International Emergence versus Domestic Suppression,” in *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Volume 1, Political Economy and International Relations*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 227-9.

period of nationalist authoritarian state formation.

### **The 1962 al-Hasakah Census**

On October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1962 an extraordinary census was carried out in Syria's northeastern governorate of al-Hasakah, as authorized by special decree No. 93. This was carried out across the province, village by village, in just one day, but the momentous ramifications of this survey continue to linger on for decades. The stated objective of the 1962 al-Hasakah census was to determine who in the province was a legitimate Syrian citizen and who was an illegal alien. This was to be based on the state's newly redefined criteria which required inhabitants to prove residence in the country since 1945. According to the state, this was prompted by large numbers of foreigners from Turkey and Iraq having entered the country and settled down in this border province over the preceding two decades. However, the manner in which the census was carried out and the results that were subsequently enforced have led most observers to suggest other motivations. The census results found 120,000 residents of al-Hasakah, approximately 2.5% of the country's total population according to the 1960 census,<sup>50</sup> to be illegal aliens who were subsequently stripped of their citizenship and left stateless. The affected population was almost exclusive Kurdish and largely resided in close proximity to Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq.

As alluded to earlier, Arab nationalist fears of 'Kurdish separatism' within the Syrian Jazirah only gained further purchase in the post-colonial era. While undoubtedly stoked by the dialectal interactions between the creation of the state of Israel and the increased grip of Arab nationalism on society, local dynamics relating to economic development and population growth gave it increased significance. With the sedentarization of the region beginning under the French

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<sup>50</sup> "Population existed in Syria According to Censuses (1960,1970, 1981, 1994, 2004) and Estimates of their Number in Mid Years 2005-2011," *Syrian Central Statistical Office*, Accessed December 16, 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/20151208140406/http://www.cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2011/Data-Chapter2/TAB-10-2-2011.htm>

Mandate, “agriculture became a more common practice, boosted by the fertility of the region, that receives up to 400 mm of rain”<sup>51</sup> yearly. By the 1950s, “the Jazira had replaced the Hawran as the prime granary and cotton region of Syria...[furthermore] the discovery and exploitation of oil at Qarachuk and Rumaylan”<sup>52</sup> only heightening the region’s importance to the nascent state.

The diverse and fast-growing demographics of the Jazirah gave the state an increased sense of urgency in securing its control over the region. The governorate of al-Hasakah, representing the most agriculturally productive part of the Jazirah, experienced tremendous population growth well into the 1960s. While a 1937 French report to the League of Nations listed the population at an estimated 156,000, it had doubled to 305,000 by 1961.<sup>53</sup> Kurdish immigration played a role in this growth despite the post-colonial state’s termination of France’s refugee-friendly policies, though to what extent this was a factor is unclear in the scholarship. Overall, an increasing amount of the population came to be documented in civil records during this period, due to sedentarization and the expanded capacities of the state, and naturally high population growth was stoked by the region’s agricultural wealth.

It is within this local context that the 1962 al-Hasakah census was decreed and carried out by aforementioned secessionist government. Establishing control over this economically vital region was imperative to the authoritarian state and its modernization projects. Furthermore, for the secessionist government, Arabization efforts in the Jazirah could work to further the state’s Arab legitimacy despite it being the result of the dissolution of the UAR. While Syria existed within a precarious regional situation during the early post-colonial period, a status quo regarding the Kurdish minority sphere existed between itself, Turkey, and Iraq, allowing for

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<sup>51</sup> “Deprivation of Existence,” 19.

<sup>52</sup> McDowall, 476.

<sup>53</sup> McDowall, 470-473.

nationalist centralization efforts to occur without external interference via parallel diplomacy. While the political interests and alignments of the Iraqi and Syrian state had largely diverged at this time, the outbreak of war between Kurds and the Iraqi state in 1961 did not result in Syrian support of the KDP rebels. Instead, this conflict internally motivated the Syrian state to prevent spillover among its Kurdish populations, exemplified by Arabization efforts in the Jazirah, in addition to a short-lived intervention into northern Iraq conducted the year after the al-Hasakah census, on behalf of Baghdad.<sup>54</sup>

The 1962 al-Hasakah census affected a massive number of people, representing roughly 20% of Syria's Kurdish population at the time, in many ways due to a number of likely intentional discrepancies and issues with how it was executed. The day it was to be conducted was unannounced beforehand and caught many people by surprise, with little time to procure required documents. As "the Kurdish populations of this region were mostly rural and many were illiterate and had little contact with any state officials,"<sup>55</sup> many apparently had little idea as to what the ramifications of this survey would be. Furthermore, a significant portion of the rural population at the time were not included in civil registers, did not possess bills or receipts from the state, and worked and resided on land through verbal agreements with landlords. Some reportedly avoided the census takers in order to escape mandatory military service. Outside of these factors, the census was carried out in an arbitrary manner as "brothers from the same families, born in the same Syrian villages, were classified differently... Fathers became foreigners while their sons remained citizens."<sup>56</sup> Notable figures who had long played a role in Syrian politics and government were also among those stripped of their citizenship, including

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<sup>54</sup> Ismet Chériff Vanly, "The Kurds in Syria and Lebanon," in *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*, ed. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Stefan Sperl (London: Routledge, 1992), 153.

<sup>55</sup> Allsopp, 152.

<sup>56</sup> "Syria: The Silenced Kurds," *Human Rights Watch*, October 1996, 14.

“Tawfiq Nizam Eddin, a former Syrian army commander, and his brother Abdel Baky Nizam Eddin, who held several ministerial positions between 1949 and 1957,”<sup>57</sup> the descendants of a founding member of the French Mandate Syrian parliament, as well as family members of Ismail Ibrahim Pasha Malli and Ma‘mo Ibrahimi Pasha Malli, ethnic Kurds who had participated in the Arab campaign against the Ottoman.

Those stripped of the citizenship by the 1962 census fell under either one of two categories; *ajnabi* (plural: *ajanib*) meaning ‘foreigner,’ or *maktoum* (plural: *maktoumin*) meaning ‘concealed.’ The former were subsequently stateless, but their names recorded in a separate civil register, while the latter are those were left completely unregistered by the state. The *ajanib* were supplied identification papers stating “‘He had no name available in the registration lists of Syrian Arabs specific to Hasakeh,’”<sup>58</sup> entitling them to some rights and recognition from the state, though not including travel abroad. Meanwhile, the *maktoumin* were provided no form of identification outside of a letter they must secure written by the local mukhtar and signed by the local police chief, testifying to their identity. As Syrian nationality law dictates that citizenship is awarded patrilineally, a child born to non-citizen father becomes *ajnabi* or *maktoum*, depending on various configurations of parental status, meaning the populations of *ajanib* and *maktoumin* have only grown with time. Recent estimates of exact number of stateless Kurds vary; in a 1996 report on the topic, HRW cited sources listing the total number without citizenship residing within the al-Hasakah province at around 200,000, while information provided to them by the Syrian government stated that the *ajanib* population was 67,465 while the *maktoumin* numbered at 75,000.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile a report conducted in 2018 by

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<sup>57</sup> “Syrian Citizenship Disappeared: How the 1962 Census Destroyed Stateless Kurds’ Lives and Identities,” *Syrians for Truth & Justice*, September 15, 2018, 16.

<sup>58</sup> “Syria: The Silenced Kurds,” 16.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Syrians for Truth & Justice, based on “access to inside information from official sources in the Personal Status Department of al-Hasakah,”<sup>60</sup> listed the *ajanib* at 346,242 and the *maktoumin* at 171,300, as of 2011.

This stateless status has had debilitating effects on generations of Syria’s Kurds. Existence as an *ajnabi* or *maktoum* is one with limited or no access to education past a certain level, many forms of employment, health care, marriage, property ownership, and freedom of movement. The *ajanib* possess some rights due to their registered status but these are still of a quite limited capacity. For example, they are able to enroll in higher education institutes, however, after graduation, ““they were denied the right to obtain a certified university certificate, that cut them off from working in the public sector and from joining union trades.””<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, their position is stigmatize in society overall and their identification papers make obscuring this status impossible. Given the legal status potential future children would carry, marriage prospects are often limited to with those in a similar position. The situation of the *maktoumin* is even more degrading, as they are not guaranteed access to education above a secondary level. Significant numbers of stateless Kurds have left the province seeking opportunities in large cities to the west, but as testified by one *maktoum*, ““the situation outside al-Hasakah was far worse, the employees of government institutions and the ordinary people are not familiar with the maktumeen issue, and when I tell them that I don’t have a Syrian ID, they think I’m a foreigner.””<sup>62</sup> The economic and societal precarity created by the effects of the 1962 census have left large amounts of Syria’s Kurdish population socially alienated and largely preoccupied by matters of survival.

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<sup>60</sup> “Syrian Citizenship Disappeared,” 5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

The effects of the al-Hasakah census, the creation of the Kurdish *ajanib* and *maktoumin* underclass, has become “one of the Kurds’ most enduring grievances against the Syrian state and one of the central pillars of Kurdish political party grievances.”<sup>63</sup> However, the Kurdish nationalist movement has historically struggled to incorporate these stateless Kurds into party mobilization and, as of 2011, no members of this segment of Kurdish society had ever entered leadership positions within any nationalist party. The burdens placed on the *ajanib* and *maktoumin* by the state have meant that “consciousness has easily been dominated by economic issues such as employment, daily income and food,”<sup>64</sup> rather than political activity, serving as an impediment to nationalist mobilization. Furthermore, their disadvantaged legal status has meant that stateless Kurds are often reliant on representatives of the state in securing documents and permissions “in order to maintain their standard of living or improve it.”<sup>65</sup> This exposes individuals to increased coercion and possible cooption by the *mukhabarat*. For example, in testimony published by a Syrian human rights organization, an *ajnabi* press photographer from the al-Hasakah city of Serê Kaniyê (Arabic: *Ras al-‘Ain*) recalls attempting to gain approval from State Security to enroll in education past an intermediate level, “who in turn asked us to be informers and report the news of our neighbours.”<sup>66</sup> According to field research conducted by Harriet Allsopp, knowledge of this dynamic led many Kurds to consider the stateless to be potentially politically compromised. While political participation has been obstructed as a result of legal status, it appears to have had an opposite effect on the political identities of Syria’s stateless Kurds. While the economic results have been limited, “the solidarity and sense of community within Kurdish society has facilitated mechanisms of support for this group that

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<sup>63</sup> Allsopp, 148.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>66</sup> “Syrian Citizenship Disappeared,” 25.

are otherwise absent in Syrian society,”<sup>67</sup> amplifying identification with a Kurdish cultural and political identity.

The effects of the state’s Arabization policies on the Kurdish minority, in particular the creation of the *ajanib* and *maktoumin*, largely resulted in the localization of Kurdish nationalist politics. These policies, first implemented under the period of authoritarian state formation during a period of regional status quo, have come to define relations between the Syrian Arab state sphere and the Kurdish minority sphere that exists in Syria, and are the predominant focal point of local Kurdish nationalist activism. While Kurds as a whole are denied recognition of national rights in Syria, the issue of legal statelessness among a significant portion of the population forces the movement as a whole to maintain that they are part of Syria and aspire to be viewed as such. This localized focus on the Syrian state has constricted local nationalist parties from engaging in whatever limited possibilities of crossborder nationalist mobilization existed and differentiated their platforms from neighboring manifestations of Kurdish nationalism. However, the coercive approach the state applied to the Kurdish minority sphere also worked to instill solidarity and a sense of groupness amongst the Kurdish population, as Arabization addressed these geographically and politically diverse communities within a single ethnic framework.

Up until the present day, these dynamics have come to shape and define the ‘parties of 1957,’ referring to the organizations formed through the splintering and reconfigurations of the original Kurdish nationalist party in Syria, the *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê li Sûriyê* (PDK-S). When the Syrian republic was dissolved into the Nasser-led UAR project in 1958, the PDK-S immediately drew the suspicions and ire of the Arab nationalist state. In 1960, Ministry of the

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<sup>67</sup> Allsopp, 171.

Interior “General Abd al-Hamid Sarraj launched the ‘Great Campaign’...in which more than 5,000 members and supporters of the party were arrested, including the majority of the party leadership.”<sup>68</sup> In the wake of this large-scale repression of the party, fractures emerged within the movement. These initial divisions occurred over framing and strategy; between a left, holding the position that Kurds represented a second nation in Syria, and a right maintaining Kurds were an ethnic minority. While addressing the further splintering of the movement is beyond the scope of this paper, in general it can be stated that as a collective, the imaginations and activities of the ‘parties of 1957’ have been historically oriented towards the Syrian state. While the content of their nationalism employs civilizational and modernizing discourses, these parties have relied on “pre-existing social networks” within Kurdish society, such as tribal affiliations, and the “incorporation of these power relations...worked to maintain social divisions in Kurdish society and to limit the political actions available to these parties.”<sup>69</sup> The Syrian Kurdish political landscape has not been contained within the activities of the localized ‘parties of 1957,’ however, as new highly influential dynamics and orientations were introduced with the entrance and empowerment of the PKK in Syria, during the 1980s.

### **The Entrance of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party into Syria**

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party was founded in the cities of western Turkey in the late 1970s, as part of a broader milieu of radical Turkish and Kurdish leftist organizations proliferating at the time. With the domestic situation appearing ever perilous for the Turkish state, a crackdown on these groups in general was initiated in 1979.<sup>70</sup> A year later, the military would take things into its own hands and launch a coup, the ramifications of which live on in

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<sup>68</sup> Allsopp, 78.

<sup>69</sup> Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 48.

Turkish society to this day. Thousands of leftists and Kurdish nationalists were imprisoned in the 1980s, and the relative political openness of the preceding decades that had allowed such movements to incubate ceased to exist as civil society was brought under the strict control of the military-run state. PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan fled Turkey a year prior to the coup, on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1979. With the PKK was facing increased state repression and the capture of one of the organization's leaders, Öcalan made the decision to cross into Syria. This was facilitated through the familial network of one of the party's members, from the border town of Suruç.<sup>71</sup> Öcalan crossed into the adjacent town of Kobani, the center of one of northern Syria's three Kurdish-populated regions.

While sourcing is relatively scant regarding entirety of the PKK's eighteen-year presence in Syria it's clear that the relationship between the Syrian regime and PKK took several years to develop. Initially, Öcalan struggled to make the connections necessary for the organization's survival. It appears that he was initially motivated to reach out to Palestinian resistance organizations at the time operating in Lebanon; specifically, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). This was facilitated through Öcalan's Syrian Kurdish contacts, who put him in touch with members of the Iraqi Kurdish PUK, whose leadership was at the time based in Syria and Lebanon. Öcalan made his way to Beirut and, by way of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), landed a meeting with the DFLP.<sup>72</sup> This developed into a relationship which allowed for PKK members to be housed and undergo training at the military camps of the DFLP. In turn, in a roundabout way, this gave the PKK access to the Syrian regime, a sponsor of the DFLP at the time. After the 1980 coup, Öcalan sent word to PKK militants still in Turkey, and

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<sup>71</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "The 'Palestinian Dream' in the Kurdish Context," *Kurdish Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 55.

<sup>72</sup> Hannes Černý, *Iraqi Kurdistan, the PKK and International Relations* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 154.

secured passage for them to enter Lebanon by way of Syria.<sup>73</sup> The Syrian state was aware of this Kurdish militant movement operating across its borders the entire time. However, due to the regional and global political situation, Syria looked favorably on a host of international leftist groups and tolerated these developments.

By 1982 it appears that the Öcalan had secured a favorable relationship with the Syrian regime. The second party congress was held at a DFLP camp in Syria's Dar'a governorate,<sup>74</sup> located in the country's south by the Jordanian border. At this point, the PKK had stabilized the disastrous situation it had found itself in following the 1980 Turkish coup. While thousands of its members had been arrested in Turkey, significant amounts of militants had escaped to Syria and by then preparing for war. Launched in 1984, the PKK's successful initiation of its guerilla campaign against Turkey caught the state off guard, increasingly upsetting the security situation implemented in the wake of the 1980 coup.

The success of the Kurdish insurgents demonstrated them to be a valuable asset to Syria in its interstate competition with Turkey. Relations between the two countries had never been particularly cordial largely due to two factors. Syria has never recognized Turkish sovereignty over the coastal Alexandretta (Turkish: *Hatay*) region, part of the Ottoman province of Aleppo and later the Syrian Mandate, which was transferred to Turkey by the French in 1939. Additionally, the Cold War alliances saw Syria and Turkey on opposing sides of global bipolarity, with the former being a key regional ally of the Soviet Union and the latter being a NATO member state. Despite these tensions interstate status quo existed into the 1970s, with Syria being in no position to address the issue of Alexandretta. These conditions changed in 1980 when Turkey announced the GAP (Turkish: *Güneydogu Anadolu Projesi*), a "mega-development

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<sup>73</sup> Marcus, 56.

<sup>74</sup> Akkaya, 61.

project consisting of twenty-two dams and nineteen [hydroelectric power plants] ...on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.”<sup>75</sup> As the Euphrates is the main source of Syria’s overall water supply, irrigating large quantities of country’s agricultural fields, the GAP represented a serious threat to Syria’s water and food security. Through engaging in parallel diplomacy and providing semi-clandestine support of the PKK, the Syrian state saw “an opportunity to force an agreement on the shared waters of the Euphrates and Tigris.”<sup>76</sup> This did indeed lead to a bilateral agreement between the two states regarding the flow of the Euphrates in 1987, though Turkish noncompliance and other issues related to water meant that the interstate conflict would linger for another decade. The partnership settled on between the Syrian state and the PKK was in many ways indicative of Hafez al-Asad’s pragmatic approach to both in external and internal politics, working to strengthen the state sphere in spite of regional and domestic threats.

The PKK proved quite valuable to the state on a domestic level, presenting new opportunities in the state’s approach to the Kurdish minority sphere. While the general tendencies of Hafez al-Asad’s regime consolidation approach to state formation saw a dampening of ideological opposition to domestic opponents in favor of incorporation, this had not occurred with relation to Syria’s Kurdish population. Rather, further Arabization policies were enacted by al-Asad in the early 1970s, most notably the attempt at creating an ‘Arab Belt’ in northern al-Hasakah province, through the settlement of Arab communities from elsewhere in Syria and further dispossession of local Kurds from their properties. However, these state efforts were soon interrupted by rising discontent and the outbreak of insurgency by Islamist actors largely affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. These dynamics peaked in 1982 as exemplified

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<sup>75</sup> Marwa Daoudy, *The Origins of the Syrian Conflict: Climate Change and Human Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 89.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

by the Hama uprising and subsequent massacre conducted by the state's military and security forces. The coercive approach of the Arab state to Syria's Kurdish populations was deprioritized in order to prevent the proliferation of internal dissent. It was in these regards that the PKK represented potential outlet for the country's oppressed Kurdish minority.

Over the course of the 1980s, Syria came to represent much more than a place of refuge from Turkish state repression that it had been when the organization first arrived. Initially facilitated by the wide space awarded to it by the Syrian state, the PKK soon became the preeminent actor inside the local Kurdish minority sphere. Most significant to the organization itself and its conflict with Turkey was the ability to openly recruit from Syria's Kurdish populations. The party proved to have significant appeal to thousands of local Kurdish youth, attributable to a number of factors. Among these were its organized militancy, which had attraction in itself but also "aroused sympathy because it brought the possibility of real political achievements, in contrast to the clandestine activities of other Syrian Kurdish parties, which rarely bore fruit."<sup>77</sup> The charisma of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was another recruitment draw, standing in stark contrast to the infighting-prone leaders of Syrian Kurdish parties. Representative of both this and the leeway given to the party by the state, "portraits of Öcalan...replaced those of Hafiz al-Assad in public spaces such as shops and workplaces."<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, with its Marxist Leninist ideology, the party "promoting gender equality among the Kurdish population in Syria and searched to undermine the basis of the tribal and religious allegiances that formed the basis of the traditional Kurdish political elite."<sup>79</sup> The PKK also reportedly had an understanding with the Syrian state, that its local recruits would be omitted

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<sup>77</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 93.

<sup>78</sup> Tejel, "The Evolution of Kurdish Struggle in Syria: Between Pan-Kurdism and Syrianization, 1920-2016," in *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed. Michael M. Gunter (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 373.

<sup>79</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 94.

from mandatory military service in the Syrian Arab Army,<sup>80</sup> undoubtedly another attractive aspect the party held in the eyes of local Kurdish youth. Through these recruitment endeavors, the make-up of the party's membership came to include a significant Syrian Kurdish contingent. This is reflected in the findings of a 2016 report on the PYD and the PKK in Syria, as

“A noted Kurdish analyst contended that more than one-third of PKK members are Syrian. Another claimed that up to 20 percent of the group's fighters at its base in Qandil, Iraq, are Syrian... Meanwhile, a Western diplomat posited that “a former PKK member is buried in almost every Kurdish village in Syria.”<sup>81</sup>

Emblematic of the importance this recruitment base has played within the PKK, a Syrian Kurd by the name of Fehman Huseyin<sup>82</sup> was appointed head of the party's armed forces in 2007.

Overlapping with its recruitment efforts, the PKK used its privileged position vis-à-vis the state to carry out cultural activism and educational work amongst Syria's Kurdish populations. By the late 1980s, the party maintained offices across the country, locals would interact with “leading cadres of the PKK—up to Abdullah Öcalan— [who were] coming to cities like Tirbespî, Amûde, Dêrik, Kobanî and [Efrîn] to give education programs on Kurdish identity, women's liberation and self-organization.”<sup>83</sup> While Syria's Kurdish parties had long engaged in cultural production and education, the room the PKK was given to maneuver within allowed the party to “very quickly [succeed] in steering Kurdish culture away from the private sphere toward

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<sup>80</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 76.

<sup>81</sup> Barak Barfi, “Ascent of the PYD and the SDF,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 7, 2016, 7.

<sup>82</sup> James Brandon, “The PKK and Syria's Kurds,” *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 5, no. 3 (2007).  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20080917223313/http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370250>

<sup>83</sup> Michael Knapp, “The Roots of Democratic Autonomy in Northern Syria-Rojava,” in *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed. Michael M. Gunter (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 387.

the public arena, using means such as openly celebrating the Newroz festival.”<sup>84</sup> Particularly with the case of Newroz, a holiday marking the beginning of spring, this entrance into the public sphere marked a dramatic shift, as prior to the arrival of the PKK “families would generally celebrate as a group; placing candles in the window of the home was a common practice, symbolic of the fire signaling revolution in traditional folklore.”<sup>85</sup> Kurdish parties like the PDK-S were primarily based in the Jazirah, the primary site of the state’s most vociferous Arabization policies, and had largely neglected Kurd Dagh and Kobanî, the other two regions of Kurdish settlement in northern Syria. The PKK was quite successful in filling this vacuum to the point where, in Kurd Dagh, where “the majority of Newroz celebrations were organized by the PKK and it is reported that their presence and position in the region was so great that effectively controlled the area.”<sup>86</sup> Additionally, during a rare period in which the Ba‘th slightly loosened its control of legislative elections, “six Kurds in Kurd-Dagh openly representing themselves as supporters of the [PKK] were elected to parliament”<sup>87</sup> in May 1990.

Through the alliance between the PKK and the Syrian state under Hafez al-Asad, a product of ‘parallel diplomacy,’ the local Kurdish minority sphere saw a dramatic increase in regionalization. Through the space awarded to it by the state due to overlapping interests with regards to Turkey, PKK activism “led to an increasing awareness of the Kurdish identity in Syria and to the strengthening of the pan-Kurdist ideal by ‘proxy’.”<sup>88</sup> As outlined by Bozarslan, engaging in ‘parallel diplomacy’ for the sake of organization empowerment comes with risks for both the minority sphere and the Kurdish political parties involved. The PKK was acting in Syria

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<sup>84</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 104.

<sup>85</sup> Allsopp, 103.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>87</sup> Vanly, 169.

<sup>88</sup> Tejel, “The Evolution of Kurdish Struggle in Syria,” 374.

under conditions closely watched by the state, whose “primary rule was that [it] could do nothing that threatened Syria’s national integrity.”<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the PKK was prevented from addressing the primary grievances Kurds in Syria held with regards to the state; these being lack of national recognition, the consistent policies of Arabization imposed since 1958, and the related statelessness of hundreds of thousands of Kurds. While the PKK was capable of instilling or expanding upon local sentiments of Kurdishness, and offered an outlet for such, this was in expense of activism on behalf of local conditions. The limitations of ‘parallel diplomacy’ clearly manifested itself for the PKK in 1998, when a détente between Syria and Turkey saw the former turn its back on its non-state allies and eject Öcalan and the organization from its borders, harshly repressing the local membership.

The party’s expulsion from Syria and the subsequent arrest of Abdullah Öcalan temporarily crippled the PKK. Within Syria, the party’s alliance with the state ended overnight and its two-decade long position of privilege was quickly replaced by one of state repression. Kurdish politics in Syria were re-localized, as the regional mobilization conducted by the PKK largely ceased and a regional status quo between Syria, Turkey and Iraq emerged with regards to the Kurdish question. Despite this, the effects of long-term local activism by the PKK would linger on, as Kurdish identity and culture had been brought into the public sphere in unprecedented ways. The regime of new president Bashar al-Asad would soon have to address the ramifications of such within an increasingly unstable domestic and international climate.

### **The 2004 al-Qamishli Uprising**

In March of 2004, an incident occurring at a soccer match in the city of al-Qamishli sparked an unprecedented wave of Kurdish anti-state demonstrations across the country. While

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<sup>89</sup> Marcus, 271.

these protests were soon extinguished by a brutal state repression campaign utilizing deadly force, mass arrests and torture, “the al-Qamishli revolt (*Serhildan*) signified the beginning of a new era for Kurdish populations in Syria.”<sup>90</sup> Building on dynamics emerging within the Kurdish minority sphere over the previous decades, the March 2004 protests represented the first act of spontaneous mass mobilization around Kurdish identity, with little role played by the traditional Kurdish nationalist parties. Furthermore, these events symbolized an overcoming of the geographic and historical divisions which had previously worked to obstruct or conceal Kurdish national sentiment.

On March 12, 2004, the al-Futuwah soccer team from the Arab city of Deir ez-Zour traveled to al-Qamishli to play the local al-Jihad team. Before the match even began clashes broke out between the two fan groups. While it’s unclear what exactly sparked the fighting, reporting at the time “pointed out that [these events], in one way or another, were tightly linked to the ongoing war in the neighboring country, Iraq.”<sup>91</sup> Lying on the Euphrates river close to border, Deir ez-Zour is home to several prominent Arab tribes whose members reside in both Syria and Iraq, traditionally strong supporters of the Ba‘thist regime in Iraq. Rhetoric used by al-Futuwah fans during the fighting made clear references to the situation in the country at the time, following the fall of Saddam Hussein and the Provisionary Constitution awarded Iraqi Kurds autonomy, signed four days prior. Chants referring to Iraqi Sunni stronghold of Fallujah, praising Saddam for his repression of Iraq’s Kurds, and insulting the main Iraqi Kurdish leaders Masoud Barzani and Jal Talabani rang out throughout the day.<sup>92</sup> In response, the local al-Qamishli fans chanting slogans in support of US President George W. Bush. The fighting appears to have been

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<sup>90</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 108.

<sup>91</sup> “Syria: Scars Etched on Memory,” *Syrians for Truth & Justice*, November 4, 2019, 4.

<sup>92</sup> “The »Al-Qamishli Uprising« The beginning of a »new era« for Syrian Kurds?” *Kurdwatch*, December 2009, 5-6.

relatively vicious as al-Futuwah fans managed to smuggle in rocks and sticks, in addition to edged weapons. A rumor that three children had been killed in the fighting, spread by way of the game's radio broadcast, "led many people from the city and the surrounding towns, even from Tirbesipî and 'Amudah, to come to the stadium."<sup>93</sup> Security forces soon arrived and began using live ammunition to empty the stadium and disperse the crowds that had gathered out front. They opened fire on civilians, ultimately resulting in the deaths of six individuals, all Kurds.<sup>94</sup>

Rioting soon broke out as locals reacted viscerally to this news. Quickly the outrage manifested itself against representations of the state. Retelling his experiences of March 12<sup>th</sup>, which began for him with spontaneously joining in a gathered mass, a local *ajnabi* Kurd only seventeen at the time recalls

In the neighborhood were signs associated with the Arab Socialist al-Ba'ath Party and photos of the late president Hafez al-Assad. I remember that we broke the signs down and shredded the photos. And then, we headed towards the granaries, where several policemen were positioned. The people stoned them, but the policemen retaliated with fire. We immediately alienated ourselves from the source of the bullets and headed to the Train Station. The masses were outraged. Many young people stormed the station and brought out a military vehicle, which they said belonged to the Station's director. We rendered the car malfunction. We also turned into pieces the president's photos, in addition to the flags and signs of the al-Ba'ath Party and the state. There were computers also, we shattered these too. We headed to the nearest police station in the al-Antariya next. We let ourselves in the station and there was no personnel inside. The police

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>94</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 115.

uniforms were hanging there, for the policemen have presumably put on civilian clothes and abandoned the station. We sat the station ablaze and went on the main street, from where we headed to the city market.<sup>95</sup>

Several of the demonstrators were killed by security forces that night before the violence subsided. On March 13th, “the bodies of Kurds killed the day before were carried through the streets of al-Qamishli by a crowd of almost 100,000,”<sup>96</sup> initially proceeding peacefully, before security forces again sought to disperse the crowd with live fire. Demonstrations against the state violence, likely intensified by rumors of a massacre, soon burst out in all the major Kurdish towns and cities of the Jazirah, as well as in Kobanî, Efrîn, Aleppo and Damascus, covering all regions with significant Kurdish population. At the university of Damascus, news of the March 12<sup>th</sup> events had already reached Kurdish students the same night. A student at down, originally from a town near the al-Hasakah city of Dêrik remembers

We started watching over how the matter would turn out and decided to take a stand and protest in solidarity with the Kurds and the wounded... It was the first time we held such a protest.<sup>97</sup>

The initial crowds that congregated in al-Qamishli on March 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> were reported represented of the city’s diverse population, including Kurds, Arabs, and Syriac Christians, assembling in mourning and anger over those killed. However, this changed rapidly as “the

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<sup>95</sup> “Syria: Scars Etched on Memory,” 11.

<sup>96</sup> Allsopp, 35.

<sup>97</sup> “Syria: Scars Etched on Memory,” 23.

demonstrations in al-Qamishli and elsewhere took a markedly political turn...[as] the participants brandished Kurdish flags and chanted Kurdish slogans.”<sup>98</sup> In several places, including the cities of Serê Kaniyê and al-Hasakah, some members of local Arab populations joined in the violence on the side of the security forces, clashing with protests and looting Kurdish businesses. By March 16<sup>th</sup>, the demonstrations subsided later in the face of a massive arrest campaign carried out by security services in which an estimate two thousand Kurds were detained. The casualties incurred by civilians at the hands of the states “amounted to no less than 36 dead persons, mostly Kurds, and the injury of more than 160 others.”<sup>99</sup>

The countrywide protests of 2004 were only in part organized by parties. Mobilization, particular in al-Qamishli itself, was largely spontaneous. Testimony collected afterwards from participants demonstrates that many who partook in the demonstrations dwell little on why they did so. A sense of imperativeness and naturalness is conveyed by these interlocutors. Making a distinction between party mobilization and spontaneous ‘ethnic riots,’ Brubaker highlights that in the case of the latter, “much of the actual violence is committed by broader sets of participants acting in relatively spontaneous fashion and in starkly polarized situations characterized by high levels of groupness.”<sup>100</sup> A ‘high level of groupness’ was clearly on display throughout the events of 2004.

As the first violent and spontaneous mobilization of Kurdish nationalism within Syrian history, the al-Qamishli uprising was in many ways a result of the expansion of the Kurdish minority sphere in preceding decades. This expansion largely occurred through party activism in the cultural domain, in addition to an increased connectivity of the Kurdish minority sphere

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<sup>98</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 116.

<sup>99</sup> “Syria: Scars Etched on Memory,” 3.

<sup>100</sup> Brubaker, 172.

across Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran by way of new communications technology. Furthermore, the state Arabization policies, approaching Syria's Kurdish communities unambiguously as Kurds and forcing many to rely on ethnic compatriots to mitigate state pressure, had instilled increased nation identity amongst this population. While the PKK had been forced out of Syria in 1998, its legacy left a long shadow over the Kurdish sphere in Syria, most notably in bringing Kurdish cultural and political activity from the private to the public setting. In the post-PKK era, this was continued by two recently formed parties, Yekîî and the PYD, who, unlike the PKK, conducted this public activism in the face of state repression. The former, at the forefront of this new shape of political engagement was founded on "two pillars: more 'visibility' (publications, campaigning, protesting, demonstrations, assembling, striking) and territorial demands (Syrian Kurdistan),"<sup>101</sup> representing a stark contrast from the older parties which made limited cultural demands regarding Syria's Kurds and did so with clandestine negotiations with the regime. The PYD, the local PKK affiliate formed soon after its departure, maintained the same militant attitude and skill organizational capacities as its parent organization, albeit now oriented towards the Syrian context.

In preceding decades, Syrian Kurdish parties were the sole actors able to collect resources sufficient to carry out Kurdish cultural activities in Syria. These attempts at instilling groupness were always limited in reach by the repressive climate parties operated in. While the PKK's alliance with the state had allowed for a broadening of such, latter developments appear to have had an even greater affect. In 1995 the first Kurdish language satellite television channels were established. Soon, the access to this technology in Syria and the number of channels, based in Europe and later Iraqi Kurdistan, proliferated. Through these channels, many operated by parties

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<sup>101</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 112.

across all of Kurdistan,

the Kurdish population [in Syria] was exposed to a constant stream of news about the Kurdish regions, educational films on Kurdish issues, documentaries, chat shows, Kurdish language programmes, political propaganda and music, all of which stimulated the interest of Syrian Kurds in their heritage and history and culture as well as their desire for political results inside Syria.<sup>102</sup>

Having a similar effect in instilling groupness and expanding the Kurdish imagined community was the introduction of the internet and cell phone technology in the following decade. During the first decade of Bashar al-Asad's rule these technologies were less accessible than satellite television, but particularly affect the youth population more likely to use such, creating an independent Kurdish sphere, largely outside the control of political parties.

The al-Qamishli uprising occurred within a broader landscape of increased opposition activity and ethnic mobilizations across Syria during the first decade of Bashar al-Asad's rule. While the Kurdish case is an outlier in many regards, changes in overall state-society relations overseen by Bashar al-Asad factor in to explaining why this large-scale spontaneous outburst occurred. The withdrawal of the state on its end of the populist authoritarian social contract facilitated a rise in disenfranchisement and grievances within a number of segments within Syrian society, the Kurdish minority sphere being no exception. Additionally, "expectations had climbed when the young president, during his inaugural speech, described a need for reform"<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Allsopp, 187.

<sup>103</sup> Najib Ghabbian, "Contesting Authoritarianism: Opposition Activism under Bashar al-Asad, 2000-2010," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt. Volume 1, Political Economy and International Relations*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 91.

in ambiguous statements, leading to the creation of a number of civil society initiatives and statements calling for democratic reforms signed by a diverse collection of opposition representatives. In al-Qamishli, “a group of Kurdish intellectuals founded the Bedirxan forum and...began to contemplate establishing relations with the representatives of the ‘Syrian opposition.’”<sup>104</sup> This so-called ‘Damascus Spring’ was quickly suppressed by the regime, however opposition activities continued. They bubbled up into the public sphere yet again between 2003 and 2007. This time “energized by the fall of Iraq’s Ba‘thist regime after US intervention, Syrian dissidents mobilized,” opposition activists published the ‘Damascus Declaration’ which called “for a ‘comprehensive and complete democratic transformation’ in Syria from the mukhabarat state to a civilian/democratic state.”<sup>105</sup> Once the external threats to the state from the US and Europe diminished, state repression ratcheted up, successfully demobilizing opposition activity by force. Seeking to gain new state revenues through economic liberalization, Bashar al-Asad’s transition of the state into a post-populist authoritarian created new scales of discontent through revisions to the social pact and early, vague statements of reform by the new president. Through the contracting of the state and the cutting of welfare and subsidies, the system of state-society relations and political management established by Hafez al-Asad began to unravel, leaving coercion to be the primary tool available to the state with regards to social control.

The change in relations between the state-Kurdish relations was compounded by crossborder dynamics, both at a state level and within the Kurdish sphere. By the turn of the century, Syrian relations with both Turkey and Iraq had improved significantly and the context that led Hafez al-Asad to pursue ‘parallel diplomacy’ with Kurdish actors had dissipated. The

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<sup>104</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 110.

<sup>105</sup> Ghabdian, 96.

new regional situation was rocked by the legitimation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's autonomy facilitated by the US invasion of Iraq, but mutual interest in limiting the crossborder impacts of such maintained the status quo on the Kurdish issue between Syria, Turkey and Iran. These reverberations were quite present within the Kurdish minority sphere, as the unprecedented success of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq expanded the possible horizons of Kurdish mobilization. Furthermore, the intense international pressure placed on the Syrian state at the time led many to make the assumption that the regime was in decline, quite possibly under threat of external intervention. While this did not materialize, the US intervention in Iraq and the subsequent creation of a federal state guaranteeing Kurdish autonomy clearly reverberated within Syria's Kurdish and state spheres.

### **Conclusion**

Using Bozarlan's conceptualization of the 'Kurdish issue' as it's methodological framework, this paper has sought to shed light on the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria with regards the local and regional dimensions. The Kurdish minority sphere, the field in which Kurdish populations and political actors operate, exists within four neighboring states. These states have each based their legitimacy and development on nationalist ideologies that exclude Kurdish populations, categorizing them as a national other. When a regional status quo exists, the power of these state spheres can restrict and segment the Kurdish minority sphere, limiting crossborder movement and interactions and the potential for Kurdish nationalist mobilization at a regional level. When this status quo breaks down into interstate conflict, states have proven willing to engage Kurdish political actors that exist below the state level, employing parallel diplomacy in order to weaken their state rivals. The recognition that this awards strengthens Kurdish political actors and can serve to regionalize their actions and broaden the political

imaginings of local Kurdish communities to the regional level. Simultaneously, this largely results in a negation of local Kurdish political activity in the state conducting such diplomacy.

The dynamics of the international stage are not the only forces that constrict or augment the potential for nationalist mobilization within the Kurdish minority sphere. Similar to other ethnic groups in the region and beyond, national identity was not a common axis of political activity prior to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, instead largely superseded by sub-national or supra-national identities based on kinship, geography, or religion. Since then, the Kurdish imagined community has become an increasingly salient focus for political mobilization. This has been inculcated by a number of factors including the activism of nationalist elites, associations and parties, the normalization of the nation-state as the preeminent form of global political organization, state formation as conducted by non-Kurdish nationalists addressing Kurds as a national other, and the increasing crossborder communications between Kurds.

Within the Syrian case, Kurds faced intense policies of Arabization conducted by the nationalist authoritarian state. As potential for mobilization was weakened by state violence, Kurdish populations' focus on economic survival, and a constricting of the crossborder dynamics, the parties of 1957 and their ever-fracturing nature came to be entirely localized in scope. This context shifted with the process of regime consolidation under Hafez al-Asad and the breakdown of the regional status quo. The Kurdish minority sphere expanded as parallel diplomacy conducted by the state gave the PKK the ability to mobilize Kurds in Syria. This era consisted of a regionalization of Kurdish political imaginings in Syria, to the neglect of political activism addressing local grievances, in addition to the unprecedented emergence of a public Kurdish cultural sphere. Parallel diplomacy abruptly ended ushering in a new regional status quo. While the parties of 1957 and the PKK were in poor shape to challenge the state, the

mass mobilization along the axis of Kurdish national identity occurred nonetheless, in a largely spontaneous fashion represented by the 2004 Serhildan. In the context of ambiguous renegotiations of social contract by the post-populist authoritarian state, under great international stress, the 2004 al-Qamishli uprising appeared as a simultaneous regionalization of Kurdish national identity and localization of political activity.

The Kurdish minority sphere in Syria has expanded and contracted overtime due to fluctuations in the power of the state sphere and the interlinked capability of crossborder dynamics from other parts of Kurdistan to penetrate. In 2012, within the context of the Syrian Civil War, the state completely vacated northern Syria, allowing for the greatest enlargement of the Kurdish minority sphere yet. Without having to rely on parallel diplomacy with neighboring states, Kurdish political actors were able to capitalize on the receding of the state and increased crossborder activity, mobilizing the Kurdish population in an unprecedented fashion. While this has greatly amplified the position of Rojava within the regional Kurdish imagination, it remains to be seen what future shifts in regional interstate relations will mean for the Kurdish minority sphere in Syria.

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