

KURDWATCH●Report 4

The »Al-Qamishli Uprising«

The beginning of a »new era«
for Syrian Kurds?



KurdWatch is a project of the
European Center for Kurdish Studies
Emser Straße 26
12051 Berlin
Germany

Phone: +49 – 30 – 62 60 70 32
Fax: +49 – 721 – 1 51 30 34 61
info@kurdwatch.org

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The beginning of a »new era« for Syrian Kurds?

In March 2004 violent mass demonstrations and anti-Syrian rallies took place in the Kurdish regions of Jazirah, 'Afrin (Jabal al-Akrad) and 'Ayn al-'Arab (Kobani), as well as in Aleppo and Damascus. Demonstrations of this magnitude had never before occurred in the history of the Kurds in Syria. The sheer number of demonstrators and the fact that the unrest encompassed all of »Syrian Kurdistan« was new. The reaction of the Syrian state was accordingly harsh—the number of those killed or arrested was unparalleled in comparison with earlier events. Yet another new phenomenon was the coverage in the international media, where Kurdish Internet sites played a significant role in spreading the news, with the help of photographs and films. Additionally, Syrian Kurds experienced a previously unknown degree of solidarity in the Iraqi-Kurdish and Turkish-Kurdish populations. Traditionally, the Syrian Kurds were those engaged in the national movements of their Kurdish neighbors. They held demonstrations to mark the poison gas attack on Iraqi-Kurdish Halabja and to support the release of Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Turkish-Kurdish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and in some cases joined armed movements in Turkey and Iraq. This time, however, countless Iraqi and Turkish Kurds in the European diaspora, as well as in Diyarbakır (Turkey), Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah (Iraq) took part in demonstrations supporting the Syrian Kurds.

The following text reconstructs the events of March 2004 as far as possible. To this end we use media coverage, particularly from Kurdish Internet sites, re-

ports from human rights organizations, interviews with experts and eyewitnesses, and the relevant scholarly analysis of the »Al-Qamishli Uprising«. Where reliable sources disagree, we assess their plausibility and present the individual perspectives. We subsequently analyze why this new complexity of Kurdish protests occurred precisely in the spring of 2004. Finally, we discuss the intermediate consequences for the political development of Kurdish oppositional activities in Syria, as well as those consequences that have endured to the present day.

The Facts

The catalyst for the unrest was a soccer match between the al-Jihad team from al-Qamishli and al-Futuwah, the Arab team from Dayr az-Zawr. The match took place in al-Qamishli on March 12, 2004. While the international media generally spoke of an altercation between the fans of two soccer teams that had spun out of control, eyewitnesses, Kurdish Internet sites, and human rights organizations claimed the events had a political background. Even here versions differed, although there was a consensus on several key points.

Firstly, security measures in the stadium were far less stringent than in comparable situations. However, it is still unclear whether fans of the team from Dayr az-Zawr, unlike those of the al-Qamishli team, were deliberately allowed to enter the stadium without being searched and thus able to smuggle weapons in with them. There is a possibility that they were permitted to enter the stadium without a security check because of their early arrival in al-Qamishli.¹

Secondly, both groups of fans shouted political slogans, one in support of Saddam Hussein, and the other in favor of American President George W. Bush and Iraqi-Kurdish leaders Celal Talebanî und Mesud Barzanî.² The sole element under dispute is the precise moment at which the event became politicized.

Thirdly, a false radio report about the death of three children played a significant role in the escalation of the situation.³

Finally, security forces reacted to the riots with unusual harshness—perhaps under instructions, perhaps

1 The Danish Refugee Council cites an eyewitness who claimed that the Dayr az-Zawr fans were equipped with knives, sticks, stones and other weapons; Danish Refugee Council 2007: 6.

2 See Tejel 2009: 115, Danish Refugee Council 2007: 5–6, Gauthier 2005:104, HRAS 2004a: 2.

3 Even today some authors erroneously assume that people died in the stadium itself: see, for example, Tejel 2009: 115 and Gauthier 2005: 104.

overtaxed. Tear gas and water guns had been used in similar situations, but not live ammunition.⁴

A journalist present in the stadium described the events as follows:

»The fans from Dayr az-Zawr have caused problems this year no matter which city or stadium in Syria they were in. Again and again there were brawls with the home team. Buses were attacked, and cars and street signs were destroyed. The problem was that they arrived at the stadium too early. They weren't sitting where the fans of the guest team were supposed to be. They are supposed to sit away from the home team fans. This time only four or five policemen sat between the fans of the two teams. When the players of the al-Futuwah and al-Jihad teams took to the field to warm up, the al-Futuwah fans shouted ›Falluja, Falluja‹ [an Iraqi city considered a stronghold of Saddam Hussein supporters]. One player was from Falluja. The al-Futuwah fans shouted this in Damascus, in Aleppo, and in Latakia as well. No matter where they were, they shouted ›Falluja‹. We don't know what happened—all of a sudden we saw al-Futuwah fans attacking al-Jihad fans with sticks and stones. Then we heard that three children had died. Three young people from our area came to the journalist who was broadcasting the soccer match live over the radio and told him to announce that three children had died. The announcement led many people from the city and the surrounding towns, even from Tirbesipî and 'Amudah, to come to the stadium. From the window of the press box we saw that there were crowds all around the stadium. It was practically besieged. We soon learned that the announcement wasn't true, that no children had died. People had been injured by stones but no one had died at that point. The situation in the stadium calmed down a bit then. The match was actually supposed to begin. The problem was that stones were now being thrown into the stadium by the crowd outside as well as from the stadium at the crowd outside. The police, the military, and the intelligence service came from

⁴ HRAS 2004a: 1.

all over. The security forces made a mistake. They could have brought things under control with water guns. Instead they began to shoot into the air. The shots frightened people. More and more stones were thrown. It was then that al-Futuwah fans began to insult the Kurds. They yelled, ›Saddam did the right thing with you‹ and insulted Mesud and Talebanî. Some people say there were even video clips of them holding up pictures of Saddam Hussein. I myself didn't see that. Then the al-Jihad fans were maneuvered out of the stadium. The fans from Dayr az-Zawr were protected by the police in the center of the stadium.«⁵

Outside, security forces began to shoot into the crowd. It has never been established to what extent this can be traced back to a command given by the governor of al-Hasakah.⁶ According to an eyewitness, the security forces allowed the situation to escalate:

»At two different places on my way home, I witnessed how the security forces shot at people. One of these places was in the city center. People crossing the street were fired upon. There were young people yelling slogans such as: ›Long live Kurdistan‹, and the security forces attacked them. Our car was almost hit too. I myself saw that some of the dead and wounded had been hit in the back. [...] There was no reason to shoot at people. The security forces claim that the Kurds shot at them. This is completely unfounded. Not even the government has made this claim.«⁷

The next day, March 13, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in al-Qamishli to bury the dead from the night before—a total of nine people. All of the Kurdish parties had agreed on the funeral march. The march itself developed into violent skirmishes:

»I was present at the demonstration on Saturday. It was disciplined at first. There was an agreement the night before between the government and the Kurdish parties. The government promised that the Kurds could hold their funeral in peace and that they

5 Interview with a journalist from al-Qamishli, July 8, 2009.

6 Ebdilhekîm Beşar, chairman of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî), confirms the order to shoot; see »Hudû' hadhar fi'l-Qāmişlî yurāfiq iḥtifaḻāt al-akrād«, March 21, 2004, accessed at <<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2004/03/21/1069.html>>; see also Tejel 2009: 115, Gauthier 2005: 104 and the Danish Refugee Council 2007: 6. In contrast, one eyewitness reports: »The governor is supposed to have said: ›Shoot at the Kurdish sons of bitches.‹ He allegedly said this after his car had been pelted with stones. This is an important point and I spent a lot of time looking into it. So far no one has been able to confirm without doubt that the governor said this or that they heard him say it. I asked several people who were near him, but they were unable to confirm it. A few lawyers, friends of his, asked him again two years ago, but he denied it.« Interview with a lawyer from al-Qamishli, July 6, 2009.

7 Interview with a journalist from al-Qamishli, July 8, 2009.

would back off. In return, the Kurds were to abstain from rioting. And at first this actually worked. I was there from the beginning. The parade began at the Qasimo Mosque. Some of the Kurds praised President Bush as ›Bavê Azad‹ [›father of freedom‹], insulted the President [Bashar al-Assad], and hoisted the Kurdish flag. This can all be seen on video. When we reached Saba‘-Baharat Square, demonstrators threw stones at the statue of Hafiz al-Assad, and some Kurds placed themselves in front of the statue. From afar, from the base of the military security agency, we heard shots for the first time. But they shot into the air. The Kurds prevented the people throwing stones from getting closer to the statue. We then kept walking until we reached the back of al-Qamishli’s city hall. Up to this point, everything was fine. The military and security people were nowhere to be seen, not a single person. They left us alone. Then I went to visit a lawyer friend of mine whose office is near the city hall. The people kept walking. Less than fifteen minutes later a car drove by. The back of the car was open. There were seven or eight people in it. They all were carrying machine guns, their upper bodies were bare and some of them wore headbands. Up until then I had only seen machine guns like the ones they carry in the movies. Like Rambo. There were only a few people in the square when the car drove past. The demonstration had already moved on. The car drove at full speed past these people and the passengers began to fire at them. They shot at everyone regardless. We could see this from the window. They began to shoot before reaching the demonstration and then they shot at the demonstrators. According to Kurdish estimates, twenty-three people died that day.«⁸

During the unrest, demonstrators attacked numerous public buildings. In al-Qamishli, the customs office, the animal feed storage building, and the payment offices for electricity and water were set on fire. Security forces thwarted an attempt to burn down the public grain storage building.⁹ Demonstrators also damaged or destroyed the main railway station, several schools,

⁸ Interview with a journalist from al-Qamishli, July 8, 2009.

⁹ Interview with a lawyer from al-Qahtaniyah (Tirbesipî), October 1, 2009.

cafés, and private cars.¹⁰ Within a short period of time rumors had spread that a massacre was taking place in al-Qamishli, and on the same day solidarity rallies and demonstrations were held in other Kurdish cities, as well as in those with a large Kurdish population. Major damage also occurred in these cities; government institutions in particular were destroyed. In ‘Amudah, the bank, the cultural center, the city hall,¹¹ a police station, a building belonging to the Ba‘th party, and the courthouse were all set on fire. Military vehicles were destroyed by fire and several statues damaged.¹² According to one eyewitness, an employee of the military draft office was able to save the building from destruction by confronting the angry masses shouting »Long live Kurdistan«. ¹³ Skirmishes took place in al-Hasakah between demonstrators and security forces.¹⁴ During demonstrations in al-Malikiyah (Dêrik), several public buildings were attacked and some set on fire. Among them were the office of the Ba‘th party, the city hall, the (at this point empty) police station, a public fertilizer storage building, and a public cultural and educational center. Demonstrators also toppled a statue of former president Hafiz al-Assad.¹⁵ A civilian registration office in ‘Ayn al-‘Arab (Kobanî) was set on fire and demonstrators attempted to free prisoners from local jails.¹⁶ Roughly one thousand people demonstrated in Ra’s al-‘Ayn (Serê Kaniyê), government institutions were attacked and police cars set on fire.¹⁷ In al-Qahtaniyah (Tirbesipî), an elementary school was burned down.¹⁸ Several thousand Kurdish students gathered in Damascus and Aleppo for solidarity rallies.¹⁹ A demonstration march to Omayyad Square in Damascus resulted in violent skirmishes when security forces attacked students; the students responded by throwing stones. Security forces violently disbanded a further demonstration in the Wadi al-Mushari‘ quarter of Damascus. In the ensuing riots, car tires were set on fire, and shops and other properties destroyed.²⁰

On March 14, thousands of Kurds took to the streets in ‘Afrin and ‘Ayn al-‘Arab (Kobanî) resulting in some instances in massive clashes with security forces. In ‘Ayn al-‘Arab a school and a police station were set on fire;²¹ in al-Malikiyah (Dêrik) the military draft office

10 HRAS 2004a: 2.

11 News coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html>.

12 HRAS 2004a: 4.

13 Conversation with the director of a Kurdish website, October 1, 2009.

14 Savelsberg & Hajo 2006a: 2.

15 Savelsberg & Hajo 2006b: 3.

16 Gambil 2004: 4.

17 News coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html>.

18 Interview with a lawyer from al-Qahtaniyah (Tirbesipî), October 1, 2009.

19 News coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html>.

20 HRAS 2004b: 1–2.

21 News coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html>.

was burned down.²² In Damascus students once again protested.²³ On March 16, Syrian security forces in ‘Afrin opened fire when young people were about to publicly commemorate the victims of the poison gas attack on the Iraqi-Kurdish city of Halabja in 1988.²⁴

According to one of our interviewees, television—in this case the PKK station, Roj TV—played a decisive role in mobilizing Kurds outside of al-Qamishli in 2004:

»Here in al-Qamishli the affair was actually over by March 15. But then the government started making arrests. Most of the people were taken from their apartments. Television played a role in mobilization. Partly it agitated people, sometimes it spread the truth and occasionally also untruth. It brought the people outside of al-Qamishli into an uproar.«²⁵

Throughout the unrest, Kurdish businesses in al-Hasakah and al-Qamishli were looted.²⁶ According to some reports security forces tolerated this to an extent, and some members of the security forces were said to have participated in the burning of public buildings.²⁷ There is conflicting information on the question of whether the government armed Arab tribes to support its suppression of the unrest.²⁸

Regardless of whether Arab groups participated in the suppression of the unrest or were exploited by Syrian security forces, it would be a mistake to interpret the conflict as primarily one between Kurds and Arabs.²⁹ On March 15, talks took place between representatives of the Kurdish parties and of the Assyrian population of al-Qamishli, as well as Arab tribal leaders. During these talks the Kurds stressed that there was no ethnic character to the conflict. Instead, it was the result of the Ba‘th policies on Kurds in Syria.³⁰ On March 16, representatives of the Kurdish parties and Arab (human-rights) organizations signed a joint appeal demanding a resolution to the conflict and an end to the unrest in al-Qamishli.³¹ Moreover, Christians and Arabs took part in the funeral march, at least when the protests began in al-Qamishli on March 13.³² Yet at this point in time, the demonstrations began to take on an explicitly Kurdish-national character, reflected in the pro-Kurdish slogans, the carrying of Kurdish flags, and

22 Savelsberg & Hajo 2006b: 4.

23 HRAS 2004b: 1.

24 Society for Threatened Peoples (GfbV): Open letter to the German Foreign Minister, March 17, 2004.

25 Interview with a journalist from al-Qamishli, July 8, 2009.

26 News coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html.

27 Danish Refugee Council 2007: 6.

28 Tejel 2009:115, Gauthier 2005: 105–106, Danish Refugee Council 2007: 6.

29 See, for example, Abdulhamid 2005: 37.

30 News coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html.

31 Tejel 2009: 116.

32 Tejel 2009: 115.

the violence against symbols of state rule (Syrian flags, government buildings and institutions).³³

Even today the number of dead, injured, and arrested is not entirely clear. There is no doubt that some of the figures released during and shortly after the unrest were, in retrospect, too high. We have a list with the names of thirty-two people who died during the unrest. It has been established that approximately two thousand people were arrested,³⁴ although the basis for this figure is unclear. As no organization has an overview of the arrests, it is possible that this figure is based primarily on projections and estimates. The same is true for the number of injured.

Despite the fact that there are no reliable statistics available, it is undisputed that mass demonstrations such as those held by the Kurdish population in Syria in 2004 were unparalleled. Equally unusual was the brutality with which the Syrian security forces acted. This is reflected in the high number of dead, injured and arrested—some of them children,³⁵ the routine use of torture,³⁶ and the stationing of additional soldiers in the Jazirah.³⁷ But why did this escalation of violence occur precisely in March 2004?

The Causes

Representatives of the Syrian government, among them Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, accused »foreign powers« of exploiting problems in the Kurdish region for their own benefit. The official media, meanwhile, describe the unrest as the work of bandits and saboteurs from neighboring countries, controlled from abroad, with the goal of undermining the stability of Syria.³⁸ In light of the fact that the unrest spread almost simultaneously within and beyond the various Kurdish enclaves, this explanatory approach seems implausible.

On the Kurdish side, in contrast, some argued that the Syrian government provoked the riots in order to act with all manner of brutality against the Kurdish population. In particular, the alleged goal was the elimination of the leaders of the Kurdish parties, first and foremost those of the Kurdish Union Party (Yekîti) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). That the victims of

33 Thus, for example, the Syrian flag was replaced by the Kurdish flag on March 13 in 'Amudah; in al-Qamishli, demonstrators carried the Kurdish flag; see news coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html>; »Serhildana 12ê Adarêya Kurdistana Suriyê – Doseya taybetî ya Malpera Amûdê«, no date, accessed at <<http://www.amude.net/serhildan/wene/qamislo/index1.html>>.

34 See, for example, Gauthier 2005: 110.

35 On March 30, 2005, Bashar al-Assad granted amnesty to 312 prisoners who were arrested during the events of al-Qamishli; see »Bayân: Nad'ûha li'l-istiğaba ilâ da'wât al-ħiwâr alati taṭlaquha al-ħaraka al-kurdiya«, March 31, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Beyan_Munteda_deep.php?newsLanguage=Munteda&newsId=1921>. As a result, with the exception of (a few) isolated cases, all those imprisoned were freed within one year of the riots. In some cases court proceedings were still pending; see Danish Refugee Council 2007: 7.

36 Amnesty International 2005: 14–17.

37 A unit of soldiers was stationed in Hîmo (al-Qamishli district) and later transferred to the street leading to Tall Hamis, where a new barracks was built; interview with a journalist from al-Qamishli,

the violence in March 2004 were hardly leading political figures certainly speaks against this assumption. The only certainty is that on March 15, Merwan Osman, Ibrahîm Xelo, Ebdilsemed Xelef, and Mesum Mihemed (leading members of the Yekîtî), as well as Mistefa Cuma (leading member of the Kurdish People's Union Party in Syria) were arrested in al-Qamishli—only to be released a few hours later.³⁹

Following the same logic of international provocation, another explanatory approach claims that the unrest was the result of a power struggle within the Syrian regime, in other words, between certain branches of the intelligence service and groups with close ties to the president. According to this theory, as a result of the growing exclusion of Sunnis from power following Bashar al-Assad's inauguration, the promised reform of the state apparatus and the closing of a number of branches of the intelligence service in the Jazirah since 2001, several groups within the intelligence service in al-Qamishli were intent on proving that the stability of the entire country would be decided there and nowhere else.⁴⁰ Consequently they provoked unrest to bolster their own right to exist. This version suggests that the Kurds were merely victims of a conflict in which they were ultimately not involved:

»It is also claimed that the intelligence service was behind the unrest, since the intelligence services were said to be weakened after Bashar assumed power. They allegedly took the opportunity to prove they were indispensable and sent people out on the streets for provocation. Several public institutions were attacked and we Kurds say that we were not responsible for this. If Kurds were behind the attacks then they had ties to the various intelligence services. It is incomprehensible that Kurds would have set fire to the educational center, the civilian registration office, or their bank. According to information from trusted friends, it was not people from 'Amudah but outsiders who destroyed the statue of the [former] president in 'Amudah. For this reason many Kurds, myself included, think that even if Kurds were responsible for these assaults, the intelligence ser-

Berlin, July 8, 2009. Members of the Republican Guard were transferred to al-Malikiyah (Dêrik). They were stationed along the border to Iraq and Turkey; Tejel 2009: 116.

38 For more on this, see *an-Nahar*, March 18, 2004, »Muwâğihât ġadîda ma' akrâd sûriya – Haddâm yatahim ġihât ħârîġiya«, accessed at <<http://www.beirutletter.com/arabworld/arab122.html>>. In contrast, President Bashar al-Assad has on numerous occasions denied that foreign groups were responsible for the riots in al-Qamishli, the first of which was an interview with the television station al-Jazeera on May 2, 2004; for further details, see »Beşar el-Esed: Kurd beşek bingehîn ji dîroka Suryayê ne«, May 2, 2004, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/kurdi/ersiv_05_04.html>.

39 News coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html>.

40 Tejel 2009: 117.

vice also had a hand in it. Then it could say: ›Without us there is instability, we are essential.«⁴¹

In fact, it seems that the immediate outbreak of the unrest can initially be traced back to a chain of unfortunate circumstances. On the one hand, there was the inability of local security forces to separate rival fans in the stadium and, on the other hand, the error of the journalist who was supposed to comment on the match on the radio and instead announced the unconfirmed deaths of three children. An angry crowd consisting not only of Kurds but also Arabs and Christians gathered in front of the stadium primarily as a result of this announcement. The fans of the al-Jihad soccer team belonged to various ethnic/religious groups; many of the players were Christians. Non-Kurds also feared that their children might be among the dead. In turn, the crowd in front of the stadium provoked the deployment of additional security forces.

The fact that the outrage over the alleged deaths of three children was transformed into anti-Syrian, Kurdish-national rallies during the demonstrations and funeral marches on March 13 could be related to the brutal approach taken by the security forces, who cracked down on demonstrators with disproportional violence after the match. Moreover, the casualties of March 12 were primarily Kurds. Although this may have been a coincidence, it nevertheless led to ethnicization of the conflict. The mostly young men who participated in the mass demonstrations and rioting had grown up with ethnic discrimination. They interpreted this violation by the security forces as an attack on the Kurdish community and reacted with nationalist symbols. Along with ethnic discrimination, the formative influences on these young men were economic marginalization—caused, among other things, by a chronic lack of public investment—and rigid notions of morality that narrowly limited their freedom of action, also in their private lives. All that was needed in March was an excuse to take their quasi ›lifelong« pent-up frustrations to the streets. In this context, eyewitness accounts stating that particularly young men from the poorer districts of al-Qamishli had taken part in the

41 Interview with a journalist from al-Qamishli, July 8, 2009.

protests and stood out as violent⁴² and reports claiming an overrepresentation of stateless Kurds among the demonstrators⁴³ seem entirely plausible.⁴⁴ On the whole, the development of mass demonstrations into violent activities should be seen as the norm rather than the exception. This is especially true for a society in which the possibilities to negotiate conflict are limited and violence not only marks the relationship between the government and the opposition but also enjoys a high degree of legitimacy beyond the original political sphere, as, for example, within the family.⁴⁵ If factions of the intelligence service did attempt to foment unrest, this was fertile ground.

Political developments in Iraq only added to the explosiveness of the situation and its nationalist charge. These developments took on their own dynamic in Syria, both among the Kurds and within the government. The Iraqi transitional constitution had just been signed on March 8, 2004, acknowledging the region in the north of Iraq—which had been de facto administered by the Kurds since the middle of the 1990s—as its own federal state, with far-reaching political responsibilities. This was the preliminary high point in the success story of the Iraqi Kurds, which had begun with the US invasion in the spring of 2003. Whereas in the middle of the 1990s, the leaders of the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), Mesud Barzanî and Celal Talebanî, were still caught in the middle of a relentless civil war, they had now become America's most important regional allies. Northern Iraq, which they had administered for years under a double embargo and without international recognition, advanced to become another, better Iraq where—at least according to its leaders—democracy and human rights prevailed. Celal Talebanî became Iraqi president, Hoşyar Zîbarî, a high-ranking KDP official, became Iraqi foreign minister. Even an independent Iraqi-Kurdish state no longer seemed an impossibility. The fate of the Kurds since the poison gas attack in Halabja in 1988 seemed to have taken a U-turn. This change of circumstances inspired the Kurds in Syria as well—why should they not benefit from developments in a neighboring country?

42 Tejel 2009: 120.

43 Lowe 2006: 5. It is not clear where Lowe obtained this information.

44 As a result of limitations in the area of education and in light of the fact that they are not allowed to own land or real estate, stateless Kurds are above all economically disadvantaged.

45 For the application of socio-scientific theories of violence to the events of al-Qamishli, see Tejel 2009: 118–126.

»Naturally the events in Iraq emboldened the Kurds. Their national sentiment was strengthened. The Kurds are dissatisfied and there is pressure on the entire Syrian population. [...] Many had pent-up anger, they see that the Iraqi Kurds have their own quasi state and that the Kurdish leaders are internationally recognized. Celal Talebanî, who was sentenced to death in Iraq, became Iraqi president. All of this emboldened the Kurds and was, in fact, one reason why many took to the streets.«⁴⁶

Inherent in oppositional action is the hope that change for the better is attainable—without this hope opposition becomes intrinsically senseless. In this respect, the effect of developments in Iraq on the events in al-Qamishli should not be underestimated.⁴⁷

In contrast to the Kurds, the Syrian government was indeed afraid of this domino effect. In spring 2002, faced with the imminent US invasion of Iraq, Bashar al-Assad visited the Jazirah for the first time since taking office. He extended the prospect of repatriation for stateless Kurds to the Kurdish tribal leaders and representatives of Kurdish parties and, at the same time, made an appeal that they come out in favor of »national unity«.⁴⁸ The mass demonstrations in al-Qamishli and other cities only became a threat against the background of Iraqi Kurdistan. In this sense, the toppling of several statues of Hafiz al-Assad had strong symbolic significance and must have evoked the image that had travelled around the world only one year previously: the toppling over of the Saddam Hussein statue by Iraqi demonstrators in Baghdad after the invasion and with the approval of the Americans. This image became a worldwide symbol of the end of Iraqi Ba'th rule. The fact that Kurdish eyewitnesses explicitly mention in their statements that »some demonstrators« at the demonstrations in al-Qamishli on March 13 threw stones at the statue of Hafiz al-Assad but that »the Kurds« had stood in front of it, or that »strangers« and not »people from 'Amudah« were responsible for destroying the statue of the former president in 'Amudah, indicates more than a possible involvement of the intelligence service in the events. It also suggests that these Kurds wanted to

46 Interview with a journalist from al-Qamishli, July 8, 2009.

47 At the time there were even rumors that an American military helicopter had landed in al-Qamishli to intervene on behalf of the Kurds.

48 Abdulhamid 2005: 37.

protect themselves and their people from the charge of intending to topple the Syrian Ba‘th regime in 2004.

It is no coincidence that in their criticism of the Kurds exponents of the opposing side also referred to Iraq. Hence representatives of Arab tribes accused Kurdish parties—in particular the Yekîî—of seeking US intervention in Syria comparable to that in Iraq. Additionally, they alleged that Kurdish parties had exploited the riots after the soccer match to gain solidarity for the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq.⁴⁹ The question arises whether showing portraits of Kurdish leaders Celal Talebanî and Mesud Barzanî—as well as of Abdullah Öcalan—does, in fact, suggest that the »Al-Qamishli Uprising« was more about building solidarity for the Kurdish national movements in Turkey and Iraq. It is precisely these Iraqi-Kurdish references that are ambivalent. On the one hand, demonstrators carrying pictures of Barzanî and Talebanî present themselves as their followers and point to the lack of a universally recognized Syrian-Kurdish leader. On the other hand, Kurdish actors knew only too well how to use the history of Iraqi Kurds to highlight their own »victimhood«. Thus during the funeral ceremonies for the victims of the unrest, several thousand participants sang the song »Helebçe« by the Kurdish singer Şivan Perwer.⁵⁰ »Helebçe« mourns the Iraqi government poison gas attack on the Iraqi-Kurdish city of Halabja in the year 1988, in which around five thousand people died. In this way it was suggested that the Kurds were currently suffering similar persecution in al-Qamishli.⁵¹

Moreover, the above-mentioned accusations by representatives of Arab tribes raise questions about the role of the Kurdish parties. These parties were certainly not the driving force behind the unrest. On March 14 a coalition formed by Syrian-Kurdish parties had called for an end to the protests and rallies and three days of mourning for those who had been killed.⁵² Additionally, the Kurdish parties agreed to cancel the celebrations for the Newroz Festival on March 21 in order to prevent further protest. Instead of public celebrations, solidarity with the »martyrs« of al-Qamishli was to be symbolized by wearing black badges and hanging black

49 Danish Refugee Council 2007: 6.

50 Tejel 2009: 123.

51 Interestingly, even students from the University of Salahaddin in Kurdish-administered northern Iraq drew these parallels when they held a solidarity demonstration under the slogan »Qamishli is Halabja«.

52 News coverage from March 13–18, 2004, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/index_qamislo.html>.

flags on houses.⁵³ The PYD was the only party to break from this consensus and hold an official celebration.⁵⁴

Undoubtedly, the parties could have made another choice. At no other point in time was the potential to mobilize people as high as in March 2004. Continuation and expansion of the protests would have been possible, and the parties could have reached segments of the Kurdish population otherwise inaccessible to them. Instead of taking advantage of this opportunity, the parties confirmed their fundamental loyalty to the Ba‘th regime and President Bashar al-Assad, voting to maintain the status quo, which tolerated them as long as they confined their activities to narrow channels largely invisible to the (international) public.

Accordingly it is not surprising that events in the year 2004 did not lead to political concessions by the government. Although Bashar al-Assad sent a delegation headed by his brother Mahir and defense minister Mustafa Tallas to the Jazirah to meet with representatives of the Kurdish parties, political concessions did not emerge. To this day there has been no official investigation of the unrest—at least none that led to publication of the findings. Moreover, no one in the security forces or in politics has been forced to take responsibility for the numerous dead and injured. The sole consequence to date is that the al-Jihad soccer team is no longer allowed to hold home matches in al-Qamishli. The al-Futuwah team, on the other hand, was not sanctioned.

The Consequences

In June 2005, more than a year after the unrest, mass rallies were again held in al-Qamishli. Some on the Kurdish side described them as a »second uprising«. Closer examination, however, reveals more differences than parallels.

The backdrop to the rallies was the disappearance and subsequent death of the Kurdish shaykh Xesnewî in May 2005. Xesnewî’s political activities and the circumstances of his death suggest that the Syrian intelligence service was responsible. The shaykh, perceived as representing a liberal, enlightened Islam, was considered dangerous by the Syrian government for three primary

53 »Bayān bi-munāsibat nawrūz – ilā ar-rā’ī ul-‘āmm«, March 20, 2004, accessed at <<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=16060>>. The pertinent declaration of the Kurdish parties on March 17, 2004, is quoted here.

54 »Bayān min PYD ilā ar-rā’ī ul-‘āmm ul-kurdī«, Declaration of the PYD on March 23, 2008, released on March 25, 2008 at <http://ar.kurdroj.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=649&Itemid=28>. Here the PYD criticizes the decision of the other parties to abstain from publicly celebrating Newroz in 2003, 2004, and 2008.

reasons: firstly, as a religious dignitary he was in a position to mobilize people. Secondly, he had excellent contacts in Europe—in February and March 2005, shortly before his death, he had lobbied in Germany, Sweden, and Belgium for a positive resolution to the Kurdish question in Syria. Thirdly, Xesnewî attempted to further the relations between the Kurds and the second largest oppositional group in Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁵ Contact between these two groups was minimal; it was believed that the opposition in Syria would be strengthened if the two groups were to grow closer.

Along with his political orientation, the immediate circumstances of Xesnewî's death cast doubt on the Syrian state's explanation that »criminals« were responsible. According to eyewitness accounts, shortly before his death and the handing over of his body to his family by the Syrian intelligence service, Xesnewî was undergoing treatment in hospital, where he was guarded by Syrian security forces.⁵⁶ Other reports claim that the family of the deceased discovered evidence of torture on his body.⁵⁷

On May 15, representatives of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria, Xeyridîn Murad's Kurdish Left Party in Syria, and the Yekîti went before the state security court in Damascus and called for Xesnewî's release. Roughly four hundred people took part in the rally.⁵⁸ Between ten and twenty thousand people came to the rally that followed in al-Qamishli on May 21.⁵⁹ The Yekîti had called for the demonstration.⁶⁰

After Xesnewî's death was made public on June 1, 2005, his body was transferred to al-Qamishli on the same day. To mark this, numerous people gathered for a spontaneous rally that evening.⁶¹ Throughout the following two days, ten thousand people visited the mourning tent for Xesnewî, and demonstrations took place each evening. On June 2, fifteen young people were arrested after protesting loudly in front of the mourning tent and insulting the Syrian government.⁶² Otherwise the events were largely undisturbed. Representatives of the various Syrian-Kurdish parties took part in the demonstrations and visited the mourning tent. Finally, on June 4, the Yekîti and the Kurdish Freedom Party in Syria (Azadî) announced an additional rally for the

55 »Syrian Kurds reject the government version of Khaznawi's death«, *Asian News*, June 4, 2005; »Kurds demonstrate in Syria over cleric's death«, AFP, June 5, 2005.

56 See »Şêx Meeşuq el-Xesnewî di nexweşxaneyê de bû?«, May 31, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2658>.

57 This is indicated in a declaration by Xesnewî's children; see »Bayân ilâ al-ra'î al-'âmm: Naħmil as-sulṭa al-amniya mas'ûliyat taşfiyat wâlidinâ«, June 4, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Beyan_Munteda_deep.php?newsLanguage=Munteda&newsId=2795>.

58 »Li Şamê Kurdan doza serbestberdana gitiyên Kurd kir«, May 15, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2405>.

59 »Syrian Kurds demonstrate over missing cleric«, AFP, May 21, 2005; »Bêtirî 20 hezar Kurd ji bo el-Xeznewî derketin kolanên Qamişloyê«, May 21, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2507>.

60 »Taşrîh hawla tazâhura kurdiya ihtîgâgîya fi Qamişlî«, declaration of Yekîti's central committee on May 21, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Beyan_

following day.⁶³ The rally was also supported in a declaration by the Future Movement.⁶⁴ All other parties, including the PYD, which had originally planned to join the appeal, refrained from calling for more demonstrations. Behind this was a warning from the intelligence service that a continuation of the protests would be met with countermeasures.

»There were no problems at the funeral. It went very well. Many people accompanied the coffin, not only Kurds. For the first three days there were also no problems. The people could speak freely. There were many demonstrations and the people were left alone. On the last day, three parties announced that they wanted to protest in al-Qamishli. All others told the three parties that they would not take part and that they should also not protest. The three parties were Azadî, Yekîtî, and the Future Movement. The government had also said that they were not allowed to go near the city center. By the government I mean the intelligence service.«⁶⁵

Despite the warnings, a further demonstration took place in al-Qamishli on June 5. The intelligence service then actively promoted an escalation of the situation. Members of the Tayy and Shammar Arab tribes were called upon to confront the protesters. During the demonstration, armed civilians, escorted by Syrian security forces attacked Kurdish demonstrators with wooden slats.⁶⁶

»When the demonstrators reached Saba‘-Baharat Square they were fired upon. The government had given Ba‘thists weapons and posted them in the square. They had firearms and sticks, and as soon as the demonstrators reached the square, they began to attack. The police and Ba‘thists. They used machine guns. I saw it with my own eyes.«⁶⁷

According to another report, Arab residents of the city of al-Malikiyah (Dêrik) were encouraged by Syrian security forces to loot Kurdish shops; shops owned by Christians or Arabs, in contrast, were to be spared explicitly. Kurdish shop owners did not dare to stop the looters as they were accompanied by Syrian soldiers.⁶⁸

Munteda_deep.php?newsLanguage=Munteda&newsId=2508>.

61 »Şex Mihemed Meeşuk el-Xeznawî hate Kuştin – Rêjîm dibêje – mucriman – ew Kuştiye û Kurd rêjîma dikin berpirsîyara Kuştina wî û lêkolînên serbixwe dikin.«, June 1, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2663>.

62 »Li Qamişlo dora 15 zarok û ciwanên kurd hatin zindankirin – Komek birîndar«, June 3, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2748>.

63 »Li Qamişlo xwepêşandan«, June 4, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2772>.

64 »Taşrîh: nataqāmūn ma‘ al-masîra alatî satahrūğu qaddan«, June 4, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Beyan_Munteda_deep.php?newsLanguage=Munteda&newsId=2801>.

65 Interview with a lawyer from al-Qamishli, July 6, 2009.

66 »Qamişlo dikele – Rêjîm û Erebbêrîşî Kurdan dikin«, June 5, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2814>.

67 Interview with a lawyer from al-Qamishli, July 6, 2009.

68 Conversation with an informant from al-Malikiyah (Dêrik),

One of our interview partners also reported massive looting in al-Qamishli:

»It was a Saturday or Sunday evening. People, Arabs, were driven in mini-buses to the souk of al-Qamishli and looted the shops there. They only looted Kurdish shops. They knew them. The Kurdish shops were primarily cell-phone shops. The looters were dropped off at the souk where there were loads of cell phone shops, and they stole a lot of cell phones. Some of them were later arrested. [...] This is exactly how it happened. Perhaps one intelligence service encouraged the Arabs to do this and another one arrested them. The secret services don't always coordinate with each other. Friends of ours saw with their own eyes people from the intelligence service accompanying them [the looters].«⁶⁹

The looting was succeeded by serious conflict within the Syrian-Kurdish party landscape. Azadî and Yekîti were accused of provoking the looting with the demonstration on June 5, and thus said to be partly responsible. The chairman of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria, Ismaîl Umer, publicly declared that »terrorist forces« were primarily responsible for Xesnewî's murder and defended President Bashar al-Assad: he should not be held responsible for violations by the security forces.⁷⁰

Although some of the protests in 2005 could be classified as mass demonstrations, there are significant differences compared to events in 2004. Contrary to the previous year, the unrest in 2005 was essentially limited to al-Qamishli—no memorable solidarity rallies took place in other Kurdish cities or abroad. Government tolerance in the case of most protests helped to contain them. No deaths occurred during the demonstrations and the number of people arrested was far less than in the previous year—a total of just over a hundred people are said to have been arrested.⁷¹

Party action represents a further difference to events in 2004: if they consented in 2004 to contain the riots, this was no longer the case by 2005. Rather, opinions differed greatly on how to deal with the intelligence service's ban on demonstrations. A split in the party spectrum gave way to the emergence of a passive wing and

July 3, 2005, Berlin. For more on the looting, see also »Kurds in talks with Arab tribes in bid to contain Syrian clashes«, AFP, June 6, 2005; »Assad kündigt Reformen an«, FAZ, June 7, 2005; »Dengê Serhildana duwemîn ji Qamişloyê tê«, June 5, 2005, accessed at <<http://www.rojava.net/ershife%20meha%206e%20sala%202005.htm>>.

69 Interview with a lawyer from al-Qamishli, July 6, 2009.

70 »Li Qamişloyê xwepêşandan,« June 4, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2772>; »Fuad Elîko: Hevbendi û Enî şerê me dikin,« June 7, 2006, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2853>; »Ismaîl Umer: Terorîstan el-Xesnewî kuşt,« June 9, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2874>; »Ismaîl Umer rejîma Suriyê diparêze û sekretêrê partiya wî destê el-Esed ji xwîne dişo,« June 11, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2892>.

71 »Qamişlo'da olaylar büyüyor,« Mesopotamian News Agency, June 5, 2005, accessed at <<http://www.mhanews.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=16212>>. The names of the 46 people arrested and the 17 who were injured

one that was more active and prepared to accept »limited confrontation« with the state. The split was already evident at the end of the 1990s with the formation of the Yekîî and the reorientation of the PKK in Syria.⁷² The Yekîî, the Azadî, the PYD,⁷³ and—up until the arrest of its chairman—the Future Movement all belong to the active faction. The Future Movement only emerged as a result of events in 2004: founded in mid-2005, it was not originally conceived as yet another traditional party. The idea, prompted by the inadequate response to the mass arrests in 2004, was rather to establish some form of human rights organization.⁷⁴ However, in the meantime, numerous Kurdish human rights associations have been established.⁷⁵ The model for these new organizations was the existing »Arab« organizations. Yet at the same time, the foundation of »Kurdish human rights associations« also entailed the explicit dissociation from the Arab models, which Kurdish activists felt had not always represented them adequately.

The split within the Kurdish party landscape can be explained, on the one hand, as the result of Syrian »divide and rule policies«, through which the regime traditionally seeks to include one section of the Kurdish opposition while persecuting others. On the other hand, the various actions of the parties reflect their diverse political positions, also evident in other contexts, such as in the respective stances on the Damascus Declaration. Nonetheless, these distinctions should not be overestimated. Several voices among the supporters of the Yekîî criticize its strong attachment to the other parties after 2005, making it difficult to distinguish it from the others. At the same time, party representatives—on the initiative of Kurdish and other organizations in Europe—have met in recent years in Cairo and Paris to discuss more effective cooperation. The parties are aware that more than a dozen small parties cannot optimally implement policies in the interests of the Kurdish population, and that the splintering of the party landscape is particularly alienating to the West. As yet, no serious consequences have arisen as a result. It remains to be seen whether the interest in the parties that arose following the »Al-Qamishli Uprising« will abate against this background.

by shots or clubs can be found in the article »Navên girtî û birîndaran,« June 6, 2005, accessed at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2831>. A total of 63 names appears on a list from June 19, 2005; see »Girtiyên kurdi girtîgehên rêjîma Sûriyê de,« accessed at <<http://www.rojava.net/MafeMirovan%20Kurdi.htm>>. Photos of the demonstration on June 5, 2005, can be seen at <http://www.amude.net/Nuce_Kurdi_deep.php?newsLanguage=Kurdi&newsId=2816>.

72 The Yekîî ran on a program of making Kurdish oppositional activities »more visible«, of taking them to the streets. The PKK, for its part, changed its Syrian policy after its chairman, Abdullah Öcalan, was expelled from Syria and Lebanon. If in the past it had made an effort to maintain a sound relationship with the government and denied the existence of a »Kurdish problem« in Syria, in subsequent years, the PKK and its Syrian sub-organizations, such as the PYD, founded in 2003, became some of the most open critics of Ba'ath rule.

73 The PYD, however, plays a special role insofar as its activities were dependent on decisions made by the leaders of the PKK.

74 Conversation with Mişel Temo, summer 2004.

75 The Human Rights Organization in Syria (MAF) was founded on March 19, 2004. The Kurdish

After 2004, the parties attracted attention not only in Europe, but also in the Arab opposition, both in Syria and in exile. Contacts between the groups intensified and led the Kurdish parties to participate in the discussion surrounding the Damascus Declaration. Moreover, exile groups began to take up classic Kurdish demands, build coalitions with Kurdish groups, and include Kurds in leading positions. These groups include Farid al-Ghadiri's Reform Party of Syria, founded in 2001 and based in the USA, and the National Salvation Front of former Syrian vice-president 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, founded in 2006.

No further mass protests have taken place in Syria since the summer of 2005. Party activities resemble those of the years 2002/2003. In addition, »minutes of silence« have gained currency as a political instrument, not merely on the anniversary of the poison gas attack on Halabja but also for current causes such as the protest in February 2009 against the passing of Decree 49.⁷⁶ On the eve of the anniversary of the »Al-Qamishli Uprising« and the murder of Xesnewî, the parties regularly call for candles to be placed in windows; in some years memorial events were held at the graves of the »martyrs« of 2004. The »Al-Qamishli Uprising« in particular has become a reference point for Syrian-Kurdish identity. Al-Qamishli represents the persecution of the Syrian Kurds—but also their ability to resist. Although the Kurdish parties keep the memory of 2004 alive, they have not yet been able to profit from these events politically. They were neither able to expand their base within the Kurdish population—participation in rallies held by the parties has not changed significantly—nor to achieve concessions from the Syrian government.

The repression of politically and culturally active Kurds continues unabated, with numerous arrests and convictions in 2009. Contacts in al-Qamishli describe morale as poor and state repressions as more extreme than in recent years. Members and sympathizers of the PYD, Yekîti, Azadî, and Ebdilhekîm Beşar's Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (el-Partî) are the focus of state persecution. Almost the entire leadership circle of Azadî, for example, is now in prison. The Arab op-

Organization for the Defense of Human Rights and General Freedoms followed on October 27, 2006, and the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights (ar-Rasid) on November 5, 2006. For some time, the PYD has been reporting human rights violations under the abbreviation MAD. However, it confines its reports to PYD members and sympathizers.

76 »Bayân hawla al-ihtiğâğ al-âmm hawla al-marsûm«, March 1, 2009, accessed at <http://amude.net/Beyan_Munteda_deep.php?newsLanguage=Munteda&newsId=7051>. Decree 49 limits the possibility to buy or sell land and real estate in the Syrian border zone.

position is confronted with similar difficulties, as numerous signatories of the Damascus Declaration are also in prison. In contrast, Kurdish participants in the Damascus Declaration have thus far been spared, perhaps with the aim of undermining the fragile relationship between the Kurdish and Arab opposition.

It is difficult to predict the outcome of the situation in the Kurdish regions. Could the Kurdish opposition be included in the existing system if the Syrian government were to invest in Kurdish regions such as the Jazirah, to naturalize stateless Kurds and to provide for cultural rights? There is considerable evidence to show that Kurdish parties would be willing to accept such a »deal« and forgo the fundamental democratization of Syria.⁷⁷ At the moment, however, the Syrian government has not taken any visible steps in this direction.

Would external circumstances similar to those of the year 2004 lead to nationalist mass demonstrations at the current time? One decisive aspect of the riots in 2004 was the hope that developments in Iraq would have a positive impact on Syria, and that perhaps the USA would intervene on behalf of the Kurds. These hopes have been dashed. Barack Obama's efforts to bring Syria back to the negotiating table and put an end to its international isolation is a clear rebuff of intervention from outside. So far this policy has not improved the situation for the Kurdish or Arab opposition. More than Iraq—and more than the policies of the USA—Turkey seems to give reason for hope. According to Kurdish sources, the Turkish foreign minister has called for the naturalization of stateless Kurds in Syria.⁷⁸ Contrary to Iraq, however, where apart from US military support, concrete support from Iraqi-Kurdish leaders also seemed possible, no one believes that Turkey would intervene militarily on behalf of the Syrian Kurds. Moreover, in 2004 and to a certain extent in 2005, when mass looting was initiated, the Kurds experienced the severity with which the state was prepared to confront them. All of this speaks against a new version of the »Al-Qamishli Uprising«. At the same time, the »frustration of the masses« who took to the streets in 2004 should not be underestimated. For the time be-

77 Discussion with representatives of Kurdish parties, Cairo, January 22–25, 2009.

78 Interview with an expert, October 2, 2008.

ing the question of who will channel these masses and in what direction remains on hold.

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